



Why Recall Luther Today?

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There are many reasons why one might want to remember and discuss a Christian theologian who has managed to excite politicians, psychologists, playwrights and even preachers five hundred years after his birth. Most theologians are barely noticed while they are among us and completely forgotten once they are dead. What made Luther such a lasting presence not only in the Christian world but in western culture?

Some reasons for the attention given to Luther in the 20th century are simply wrong. By now it is common knowledge that Luther was not a pioneer of capitalism or nationalism. He did not understand the economic changes caused by the explorations of his age which eventually (much later to be sure) produced modern capitalism. A rudimentary form of venture-capitalism had existed long before Luther and had facilitated both the discoveries of the explorers and the sale of indulgences. Nationalism in the modern sense of the word came into existence centuries after Luther's death. There was no German state in Luther's time. The emperor, who was also the king of Spain, spoke broken German; his Spanish was not much better, and he preferred to speak French. Soldiers in the 16th century were not nationalistic freedom fighters but more like professional football players or hired guns who fought for those employers who could afford their services.

Furthermore, Luther was not a forerunner of Hitler (who unlike Karl Marx was not even nominally "Lutheran") or even an anti-semite. He did express vicious and deplorable anti-Jewish sentiments, precisely because he took the Old Testament and its patriarchs and prophets so very seriously. He felt threatened in the very center of his theology by the rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and by the hopes of his Jewish contemporaries that his critique of the established church might lead to a reexamination of all Christian claims and thus presage the coming of the Messiah.

Thus it appears that some fashionable reasons to remember Luther are wrong. There are others which are at best dubious. The emphasis on Luther as a

religious genius is beside the point, even if the various advocates of this view were more precise as to the exact meaning of the word "genius." Religious geniuses tend to be too idiosyncratic to be long remembered. Since their experience of the divine is so extraordinary, it cannot be replicated by ordinary people, and they are soon forgotten. Like comets they are spectacular to behold but hardly a source of light or aids to navigation.

Not much more can be said in support of "Luther, the German Prophet." Most Germans are embarrassed by all the nonsense written on this topic. This title, indeed, was applied to him,

even during his lifetime, but he observed then, “this haughty title I will henceforth have to assign to myself, to please and oblige my papists and asses,”¹ and promptly called himself something much less pretentious, “a faithful teacher.” Even if the years 1933-1945 could be blotted from memory, the description “German Prophet” tends to obscure our understanding of Luther. He was a German, but what makes him interesting today is the universal appeal of his understanding of the gospel. In fact, the somewhat surprising scope of the celebration of Luther’s birthday by the government of the German Democratic Republic may be a combination of pride in their most famous native son (Marx, after all, was born in what is now the Federal Republic) and an understandable desire to attract western currency to their country from tourists interested in Luther’s legacy. It is hardly “the German Prophet” who attracts all this attention.

None of the significant sayings of Luther is limited in application to Germany. Even his frequent excoriation of German drunkenness might apply more generally than he thought. He did not translate the Bible into the German language because he thought German was more significant than other languages, but because the people he dealt with spoke it. The opinion that Luther’s German Bible is superior to all other translations is a later development which did much to retard the indigenization of the Church of the Augsburg Confession in North America.

Thus it is my claim that the reasons why one might want to recall Luther today are essentially theological—even if they have social and political implications. I would like to mention three that are rather obvious.

I. LAW AND GOSPEL

Luther recognized and reiterated that the church is a creature of God’s Word. This is the message of his hymns and prayers: “Lord, keep us steadfast in Thy Word!” But this Word is a very complex reality. Not only does the term describe the second person of the Trinity, and the proclamation of his work and will, as well as the canon of the Bible, it is both law and gospel, God’s demand and God’s gift. The ability to distinguish between the two makes the theologian. It is equally disastrous to make the law into the gospel, or to make the gospel into a new law. Both are God’s Word. Both have to be proclaimed by God’s people. But if they are confused, the message is perverted and the church degenerates. It

¹Martin Luther, “Dr. Martin Luther’s Warning to His Dear German People,” *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 47.29. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

could be useful to the church and the world to apply Luther’s clarifying distinction to our present situation.

Today fundamentalists and liberals, capitalists and Marxists vie with each other in propagating their particular laws as the liberating message for all people. If we only adopt their particular program, the Kingdom of God or its secular equivalent is bound to come. It is faintly amusing to observe those who yesterday made redemptive claims for their religio-political legalism complain about those who today make similar claims for quite a different set of laws. Yesterday’s proponents of religion in politics are today’s opponents. What both groups have in common is their unjustified trust that their particular political program will save the human race.

There are, indeed, better and worse moral and political agendas. They deserve full and open debate. Luther would suggest the meticulous use of reason in these discussions. It was

because he rejected the claims made by some of his contemporaries, the crusaders on the right and on the left—that gospel answers were available to law questions—that his solutions proved to be so nonideological. As long as this world lasts, human beings will have to be satisfied with provisional answers, subject to revision on the basis of better information. But since there are important differences between the proposed social, political, and cultural programs, one would hope that the agenda lending greater support to the earthly welfare of human beings would be adopted and implemented. To be sure, the Kingdom of God will not be brought in by any of these efforts. It was not ushered in at Wittenberg, as Luther stated frequently, nor in Rome, Geneva, or Constantinople. It is not being realized in Washington or Moscow, Nicaragua or El Salvador, Johannesburg or Harare. This does not mean that there are no significant distinctions between these various efforts. Some are far closer than others to the divine law which all human political systems ought to reflect. But they are all pretentious and even idolatrous if they claim to solve the ultimate problems of human existence.

Luther is so useful to us because his distinction between law and gospel can help us to avoid making redemptive claims for whatever kind of law we cherish. In this sense he may be of service to all of us, Christians and non-Christians, whenever we are tempted to make ultimate claims for our penultimate insights. Since no law—moral, historical, scientific, aesthetic, or even religious—can save us, we will have to be satisfied with less ambitious achievements and leave salvation where Luther left it. It is not subject to manipulation—not even by charismatic personalities or ecclesiastical institutions.

II. THE *SIMUL* PRINCIPLE

Luther's second theological insight of significance for us today was his insistence that Christians are righteous and sinners at the same time. Righteous through faith in Christ (or as he sometimes said "in hope"), they are sinners in fact as long as they live in this world. This notion may be found as early as his commentary on Romans. He maintained it throughout his life. It gave him perspective on all the honors and adulation which came to him from his supporters so that he never forgot that before God we are all beggars. This insight tends to

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relativize all absolute claims human beings are apt to make. It reduces the differences which they establish between themselves to mere insignificance.

We live in an age when all sorts of small differences are being senselessly exaggerated and given metaphysical importance. Good and evil are associated with the distinctions between political and economic systems. The differences between the sexes and races are exalted to a point where virtue and vice depend on pigmentation or genitals. These distinctions are further exacerbated by loyalties to languages, lifestyles, tastes, and traditions. As a result, the human race has been divided into a multitude of camps, each claiming some kind of superiority and blaming their suffering and the suffering of the human race on the diabolic machinations of their opponents. While this attitude may not be new, it has become disruptive and destabilizing in an age when the sheer number of human beings resulting from the population explosion and their close proximity caused by advances in transportation technology make such sentiments more dangerous.

The realization that all human beings are sinners might help to reduce the barriers among

us which we have magnified and embroidered out of all proportion. This path, suggested by Luther, seems more promising than the proposal that we might accept each other as being really good people, or as the popular psychology would have it, as being “O.K.” It is easier to admit that we are all sinners, since this assertion conforms to our experience, than that we are all “good.” We might be willing to make such a claim for ourselves but not equally willing to grant this to others. Luther’s negative approach is actually more promising because it is more credible.

The massive self-righteousness, the overweening pride and arrogance of our age make negotiations and compromise in politics and economics, in international and human relations so difficult. Luther’s emphasis on the pervasiveness and profundity of sin may prove helpful to us, even if some other term has to be used by our anti-theological friends in order to describe the sickness unto death that Christians call sin, which threatens the survival of the race. It is hard to help anybody who is convinced that he or she does not need help. Luther described the bondage of men and women so colorfully because he wanted them to be ready to accept liberation. It was not a counsel of despair or some ingrained pessimism but, in his language, “the proclamation of the law” which would prepare people for the gospel.

Even those who do not share Luther’s confidence that there is a remedy to the sickness of the human race might have to grant that fighting among the patients in the ward which we call our world makes our situation even more desperate. The honest acceptance of our limitations, the reduction of vanity and self-deception is a valuable first step for everybody whatever the cure and even if one believes that such a cure is not available.

Of course, nowhere is this counsel more in order than among the religious communities who have often supplied the most perverse examples of self-righteousness and arrogance. Mere verbal affirmation of human sinfulness is not enough, lest the abject confession of sin becomes the most subtle form of pride.

III. FINITE AS BEARER OF THE INFINITE

But there is a third theological insight submitted by Luther which may help us understand our human predicament at the end of the 20th century. It is the notion undergirding Luther’s Christology, his view of the Scriptures, the Eucharist, and vocation—namely, that the finite is the bearer of the infinite, that God deals with human beings not by some unmediated confrontation but through earthly means. The other side of this same insight is Luther’s conviction that all human creatures are instruments of God’s will.

The Christological dimension is obvious. He sings:

Den aller Weltkreis nie beschloss
Der liegt in Marien’s Schoss
Er ist ein Kindlein worden klein
Der alle Ding erhält allein.

For Luther the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection are all seen as events in time and space, taking place in human history, revealing God’s presence to his people. Luther pushed this emphasis to the barely orthodox extreme of proclaiming the death of God—on the cross. Even in the Small Catechism, written so that children might understand and memorize it,

Luther says, “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary...delivered me and freed me...with his innocent sufferings and death.”² He insisted that Jesus Christ, who is true God, died on the cross. Thus Luther was a very special “Death of God theologian.” The implications of this emphasis upon the significance of the finite as a medium of God’s revelation is clearly seen in the conviction that the bread and wine of Holy Communion are simultaneously the body and blood of Christ, and, perhaps not as clearly to many Lutherans, that the human words of Paul and Peter are the Word of God. No transubstantiation of bread and wine or human word, no apotheosis of the finite, but real presence in, with, and under the human products of bread and wine, language, grammar, and worldview.

Indeed, Luther’s view of the finite as bearer of the infinite explains his much debated understanding of vocation as well. The Christian is the means through which God works in the world. He writes:

Surely we are so named after Christ [Christians], not because He is absent from us, but because He dwells in us, that is, because we believe in Him and are *Christis one to another* and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us.³

God uses human beings to accomplish his purpose. This is true not only in the more obvious area of service to the neighbor, but for Luther the entire world is a divine masquerade in which God’s purpose is accomplished through the witting or unwitting cooperation of human beings. As he stated in *The Bondage of the Will*: “All things even including the ungodly cooperate with God” (*Omnia enim impia illi cooperantur*):⁴

²*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 345.

³Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty,” *Works of Martin Luther* (6 vols.; Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1915-32) 2.339. Italics added.

⁴Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33.242.

He does not work in us without us, because it is for this he has created and preserved us, that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him, whether outside his Kingdom through his general omnipotence, or inside his Kingdom by the special virtue of his Spirit.⁵

What can this possibly mean to us today? We live in a world plagued by the most ancient of all heresies called variously Dualism, Manichaeism, or Gnosticism. While sharply dividing reality into opposing realms—the realm of the spirit or the realm of matter—either one or the other is devalued if not denied. There are those who still follow their prophets Marx or Freud and reject religion and the realm of the spirit as the opiate of the people or hopeless illusion. Others who only yesterday proclaimed science the saviour of the human race are today dreading it as a polluting demon destroying human life and all spiritual values and threatening the abolition of humanity. Theologians are at least marginally involved in this conflict. Some vacillate between the “Death of God” and “the New Polytheism.” The rediscovery and positive evaluation of Gnosticism is a symptom of our time. The veneration of the unfathomable processes of nature

and history, though at first sight contradictory, is ultimately one in the denial of the specific and unique event of Exodus and Golgotha.

Thus Luther speaks to our age. He asks us to examine the much-heralded division of reality carefully and critically, for this theologian of the “Two Kingdoms” never forgot that both kingdoms had but one king, that the right hand and the left hand executed the will of the one head. Even for those who do not accept Luther’s theological axioms, the reexamination of his insistence on the unity of reality might prove helpful. But for those who take his theology seriously, the insight that the finite is the bearer of the infinite is a somber warning against withdrawal, allowing participation and service to the world and its people as service to God.

There is hardly an issue confronting men and women today where Luther’s insights have not some relevance. The distinction between God’s law and gospel allows full cooperation with all men and women everywhere on behalf of their earthly welfare, while at the same time insisting without compromise or reduction on the uniqueness of the gospel of God’s participation in human life and history in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christians everywhere, but particularly in Africa and Asia, are confronted by the question, How is it possible for a Christian to relate openly and positively to a largely non-Christian world? The law allows not only tolerance, which is far too little, but appreciation and utilization of the insights given to all women and men everywhere.

Luther’s insistence on the pervasiveness and persistence of sin warns Christians against an easy identification of themselves, their theologies (even Lutheran theologies), and their institutions with the cause of God and sees all people as equally in need of grace and forgiveness. Negotiation and reconciliation are not only possible but imperative because of our common failure to obey the law written in the hearts of all.

⁵Ibid., 33.243. 342

The finite as the bearer of the infinite applies not only to the classical Christian means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. The awareness of this divine mode of operation could also enable us to see the presence of God in unexpected people and places. The God, who according to Luther, has created and preserved us in order that he might work in us, and we might cooperate with him, may then open our eyes to opportunities to see his works where we have never seen them before.