

God and some theologians: Martin Luther

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My first opportunity to say something about Martin Luther resembled this evening's occasion only in that it happened in a place called Trinity. I was seated at the console of the organ in Trinity Lutheran Church, Moorhead, Minnesota, preparing for a lesson, when there appeared in the organ loft a man who had wandered into the church off the street. After an exchange of pleasantries, he proceeded to ask several questions about the church, the organ and church music. His final query was offered more as a statement of incredulity. Why, he wondered, had so many churches been named after a black guy who had refused to move to the back of a bus? So he had some of the characters in the plot confused, but the awkward exchange demonstrated that even in Minnesota, land of 10,000 lakes and even more Lutherans, it was possible not to know about Martin Luther.

The legacy of the Augustinian monk, priest, university lecturer and biblical scholar is predictably mixed and difficult to establish. To some his work is seen as nothing less than heroic, a man of God sent to purge the Western Church of insidious corruption and errant doctrine and practice. To others, he is known as a rabble-rouser whose insubordination accelerated the fragmentation of institutional Christianity. He has been variously portrayed as bold and brave, rude and polemical, anti-establishment, not anti-establishment enough, progressive, conservative, an unhappy celibate, jolly, a tortured soul, even a victim of chronic constipation (about which a book has been written).¹

What is clear is that Luther felt strongly about the state of the church of his day. It is also clear, on the basis of his writings, that Luther did not intend, at least initially, to separate himself from the institution of which he was so critical. This became increasingly clear as Luther's thought developed over the years and is illustrated, I think, by his famous statement, 'I would rather have pure blood with the Pope than drink mere wine with the enthusiasts'.² His was a reformation considered too extreme both by those whom he initially criticised and by those who came to regret his unwillingness to take things further.

Amongst those within the latter category, that is, those who considered Luther too shy in taking extreme action against the church, is one Andreas Karlstadt. Initially a supporter of Luther and a colleague in the theology faculty at Wittenberg, he became an iconoclastic opponent and strong critic of Luther's conservative reformation.

Following the issuance of a papal death warrant, and having been sent into hiding in the Wartburg Castle, Luther was summoned back to Wittenberg in heavy disguise and under the cloak of darkness in response to Karlstadt. Windows were being smashed out of the churches, statues were being defaced, and the public worship of the church was being disrupted. Luther confronted his former friend, saying that he would as a result of Karlstadt's extreme action demand that more statues be erected. Of course, had Luther been pressed by those on the other side, those demanding the placement of more statues in the church, he may well have advocated their destruction.

¹ *Young Man Luther*, Erik Erickson, 1958.

² *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 37, p. 317.

As a theologian Luther, whom we come to know through his writings, which number about 80,000 pages in the German edition, too easily gets forced into being something which he was not: a systematic theologian. Although most academics would be pleased to have a full complement of eager and bright students to carry on their work, Luther has, since the time of his writing, been burdened by a band of disciples too eager to attempt a neat and orderly way of arranging his every word, the result of which is that modern Lutheranism regularly fails to resemble, and often struggles to account for, the thought of Luther himself. His was a different approach to theology, one which reacted to individual circumstances and was motivated by a need to respond to particular situations and people. His was not an approach which had as its goal the creation of a theological system, such as other reformation theologians would achieve subsequently.

His theology of the eucharist, for example, seems hardly to differ from that of the medieval Church, at least when framed in response to the more radical reformers; equally, his commentary on the nature of Christ's presence in the sacrament can occasionally suggest an almost entirely symbolical interpretation when offered in response to the abuses of the Roman Church. Theology, for Luther, was situational, it was biblical and it was pastoral, and rarely was it to be found arranged according to anything resembling a system.

So, what is the way in to Luther's theology? I would suggest approaching it from the very point which became for Luther the primary theological challenge of his reformation, namely the claim that humankind is justified by faith alone, a claim Luther found clearly articulated in the writings of Saint Paul. How does he understand faith, and how does his idea incorporate (or fail to incorporate) the other side of the equation, that of works; and what is the significance of his understanding?

Luther insisted that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God to whom all the prophets and the apostles had testified, was a God revealed primarily in his hidden-ness – Luther used the Latin *Deus absconditus*. This hidden-ness of God, Luther believed, was to be seen in three primary ways: first, by the way he rules his creation. This is to say that if one, on the basis of simple observance, sees what happens under God's governance, and judges by any available standard, must conclude 'either that God is wicked or that he is not' (does not exist).³ Second, Luther would see God as present, but hidden, in the cross, and in the cross-event. Can the man hanging there help us in our weakness? Finally, God is hidden but present in faith itself. To use Luther's words, 'in faith simply as such, Christ is present'.⁴

What is faith? The question is variously answered: faith is a theological virtue; it is knowledge of God; it is trust. But, as the contemporary Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson points out, Luther would have been hesitant to stop there, because in those instances 'it is the "I" who appear as the subject: I have this virtue; I know Christ; I trust in him'.⁵ Luther would suggest that the faith of which I am the subject is well-described as a 'spreading darkness, which Christ wraps around his dwelling in us just as the Lord spread darkness around his dwelling on Sinai'.⁶ What distinguishes faith from unfaith is what hides behind my virtue and knowledge and trust, the ruling presence in me of one who I am not. Luther understood faith as learning to abide the deepest of God's ways of hiding, in the obscurity of our own souls.

³ WA 18, 784.

⁴ WA 40/I, 228.

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, 'Luther's contemporary theological significance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald K McKim, 2003, p. 281.

⁶ WA 1, 28.

And so, using language nearly identical to that of some of the Greek fathers, Luther could say: 'Everything Christ is and does is present in us and there works with power, so that we are utterly deified, so that we do not have some part or aspect of God, but his entire fullness'.⁷ How similar this is to Athanasius' 'God became man so that man might become God'. It would seem that, according to Luther, simply believing, simply abiding this deepest of God's ways of hiding, ensures that one possesses all the good things that are its content. In this sense, faith equals the entirety of God.

In his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther employed the analogy of a bride and bridegroom. 'Faith', he said, 'unites the soul with Christ just as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this solemn vow ... Christ and the soul become one flesh. And if they are one flesh, there is a true marriage between them – indeed, the most perfect of marriages because human marriages are but a shadow of this one true union. Given the marriage between Christ and the soul, it follows that they hold everything in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the soul that trusts Christ can boast and glory in him since it regards what he has as its own. And it follows that whatever the soul has Christ claims for his own'.⁸ Incidentally, it is not surprising that Bach, a Lutheran, regularly employs in his cantatas dialogue between the human soul and Christ.

Luther's use of the bride – bridegroom analogy shows that he retained, with minor deviations from his medieval philosophical predecessors, the ability to assert that morally and spiritually we are what we hearken to. The believer is the 'good things' heard of in the gospel. In one sense, then, Luther's actual doctrine of justification by faith is nearly the opposite of the doctrine popularly attributed to him. To be 'made righteous by faith', with all this might imply: being free, peaceful, full of grace, does not mean that God decides to accept faith as a substitute for actual virtue.

One is justified by faith, says Luther, simply by hearkening after Christ and desiring to possess all good and godly things; and, in hearkening after such things, one is shaped to what one hears and desires. Justification is without works not because good works are no longer important or required, but because whatever is good in such good works is constantly being formed within the believer, and prior to their actually working. Thus, it makes sense to use the analogy of the faith uniting the soul to Christ as a bride with a bridegroom. As the believer and the object of the believer's belief become one, the two become one personal subject, of the believer's weakness and of Christ's divine righteousness.

But, the full effect of Luther's reappraisal of the relationship between faith and works would be missed if one was to conclude without mentioning what might be the most obvious practical application of Luther's thought, namely his insistence on re-connecting faith and works into an idea of a faithful life of good works lived through Christ but always and entirely on behalf of the neighbour.

According to Luther, the purpose of faith cannot be relegated merely to some hope of heaven or eternal salvation. Faith, which necessarily implies the fullness of God present and active in each human being, is for the purpose of service to others. Through that perfect union of human and divine, the human person takes on all that is God's so that God can redeem all that is human, and this because there is one God who works all things. Faith not only demands service, it implies service; in fact, it cannot be conceived of apart from service; and that service further strengthens the faith which is its source and motivation.

⁷ WA 17/I, 438.

⁸ *The Freedom of a Christian*, tr. Mark D. Tranvik, 2008, Fortress Press, p. 62.

Ultimately, Luther insists that the relationship between faith and works is analogous to that between Christ's divine and human nature (to return to a more ancient conversation). Christ, who is present in faith, who is the full content of faith, is the form who informs works, that is, becomes incarnate and present in them. As he put it in his *Lectures on Galatians*: 'Therefore in theology let faith always be the divinity of works, diffused throughout the works in the same way that the divinity is throughout the humanity of Christ'.⁹

In his *Commentary on Galatians*, he says: 'The Christ who is present in faith informs the works, that is, becomes incarnate in them'.¹⁰ When faith finds its realisation in works, such works become works made into faith, or, as Luther calls them, *opera deificata* – divinised works.¹¹

Reading from the Epistle of James, as we do this evening, is in some ways ironic, as Luther had described the book as an 'epistle of straw', worthy only of exclusion from the canon of scripture. Whatever his reasons for taking such a negative view – and, again, we could appeal to his situation approach to theology – one can find within the book of James much that accords with Luther's understanding of divinised works: works which, done in faith, are the incarnation – the reality – of faith itself.

'What doth it profit though a man say he hath faith, and have not works?' (2: 14). According to Luther, this is a question answered in and by the One who is both the substance of faith and also present and active in the works which flow from faith. 'For as a body without spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also' (James 2: 26).

⁹ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:266.

¹⁰ *Galaterkommentar* (1535), WA 40/1:417, 13

¹¹ WA 40/1:20, 29.