

Lecture 5 – Luther’s “Theology of the Cross”

“Human life without knowledge of history is nothing other than a perpetual childhood, nay, a permanent obscurity and darkness.” Philip Melanchthon

“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” Romans 1:17

Background Reading

Gonzalez, chs. 3 and 19, pp. 172-75

Prayer

Luther on Prayer

“We know that our defense lies in prayer alone. We are too weak to resist the devil and his vassals. Let us hold fast to the weapons of the Christian; they enable us to combat the devil. For what has carried off these great victories over the undertakings of our enemies which the devil has used to put us in subjection, if not the prayers of certain pious people who rose up as a rampart to protect us? Our enemies may mock at us. But we shall oppose both them and the devil if we maintain ourselves in prayer and if we persist in it. For we know that when a Christian prays in this way: ‘Dear Father, thy will be done,’ God replies to him, ‘Dear child, yes, it shall be done in spite of the devil and of the whole world.’”

“Prayer is, therefore, a special exercise of faith, and faith makes the prayer so acceptable that either it will be surely granted, or something better than we ask will be given in its stead.”

“A Christian is always praying, whether he is sleeping or waking, for his heart is always praying, and even a little sigh is a great and mighty prayer.”

Prayer from Luther’s colleague, Philip Melanchthon

“Almighty and Holy Spirit, the comforter, pure, living, true—illumine, govern, sanctify me, and confirm my heart and mind in the faith, and in all genuine consolation; preserve and rule over me so that, dwelling in the house of the Lord, all the days of my life, I may behold the Lord and praise him with a joyful spirit, and in union with all the heavenly church. Amen.”

Luther’s “Theology of the Cross”

Jaroslav Pelikan: “If we are to understand Luther’s continuing appeal it must be with his theology that we begin and end” (“The Enduring Relevance of Martin Luther: 500 Years After his Birth,” *New York Times Magazine*, September 18, 1983)

I. The Foundation—“The righteous will live by faith”

Luther—“By the one solid rock we call the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fidei*), we mean that we are redeemed from sin, death and the devil, and are made partakers of life eternal, not by self-help but by outside help, namely by the work of the only-begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ alone” (*sola Christus*).

A. Luther’s search for the meaning of Romans 1:17

1. God’s righteousness = God’s requirement

a. First crisis—the thunderstorm

“I was a good monk, and kept my order so strictly that I could say that if ever a monk could get to heaven through monastic discipline, I was that monk...And yet my conscience would not give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, ‘You didn’t do that right. You weren’t contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.’ The more I tried to remedy an uncertain, weak and troubled

conscience with human traditions, the more I daily found it more uncertain, weaker and more troubled.”

- b. Second crisis—the first mass
“I don’t love God! I hate God!”

2. God’s righteousness = God’s gift

- a. Luther’s lectures on Scripture at the University of Wittenberg 1513-17 (Psalms, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews)
- b. In his study
- c. His writings are “like the sky in springtime, filled with clouds but through which the sun shines from time to time” (Aland, 26)
- d. Third crisis—“the tower experience”
“At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed,’ as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

II. The Center—“The Theology of the Cross” (*Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*)

- A. The theology of glory
- B. The theology of the cross

III. The Method—“*Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*” (*Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings*)

- A. Prayer
- B. Study
- C. Testing or *anfechtung*

“It is living, dying, and even being condemned which makes a theologian—not reading, speculating, and understanding.”

“David must have been plagued by a very fearful devil. He could not have had such profound insights if he had not experienced great assaults.”

IV. Luther’s Small Catechism (“Christianity for Common Folk”)

V. The Augsburg Confession

A. Philip Melancthon (1497-1560)

- 1. Scholarly teacher
- 2. Irenic reformer

Luther—“I am rough, boisterous, stormy, and altogether warlike...I must remove stumps and stones, cut away thistles and thorns, and clear the wild forests, and master Philip comes along softly and gently, sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts which God has abundantly bestowed upon him.”

- 3. Timid and fearful personality

Luther—“Sin boldly!”

“You are worrying yourself sick because you cannot know how or where it will all end. But were you able to understand it all, then I would have nothing to do with this cause!”

- 4. Skillful theologian

Luther—“Philip’s answers are miracles. If Christ deign, he will make many Luthers and a most powerful enemy of scholastic theology, for he knows both their folly and Christ’s rock.” (1519)

- a. Loci Communes (1521)
- b. Augsburg Confession (1530)
 - 1) Presented to Emperor Charles V; introduced by Psalm 119: 46—“I will speak of thy testimonies before kings, and shall not be put to shame.”
 - 2) Elector John of Saxony (“The Constant”)—“I, too, will confess Christ. My electoral hat and ermine have not the worth of the cross of Christ; they remain in the world, this will go with me to the stars.”

Philip Schaff—“the most churchly, the most catholic, and the most conservative creed of Protestantism”
- c. Melancthon’s theological shifts
 - 1) Move toward Erasmus on salvation (synergism)—“The Holy Spirit and the Word are first active in conversion, but the will of man is not wholly inactive; God draws, but draws him who is willing, for man is not a statue” (1555).
 - (2) Move toward Calvin on the Lord’s Supper—“Christ is not present for the sake of the bread, but for the sake of man” (1541)

5. Death

Alexander Smellie: “There are elusive elements in Philip Melancthon. Occasionally he perplexed his contemporaries, and sometimes he disappointed his friends. It is scarcely surprising that, now and then, he is an enigma to us. We are drawn to him irresistibly; we feel his singular graciousness and attraction; but we are not certain that in every instance, we can appreciate his motives or interpret his mind” (*The Reformation in its Literature*, 96).

Questions from Class

What happened to the Augsburg Confession when it was presented to the Emperor?

From where did the control of the Roman Catholic church come to make this all so important?

Why did Melancthon moved away from Luther’s theology? What was Luther’s reaction to Melancthon?

How does Luther respond to the third use of the Law?

Did Melancthon try to breach the gap with Rome?

For Further Study

*For Luther’s theology, see *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (the best one-volume collection of Luther’s most important writings) and Luther’s *Theology of the Cross* (1985) by Alister E. McGrath.

*For Luther’s sermons, see the beautiful selections in *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* and *The Martin Luther Easter Book* (1983), ed. Roland H. Bainton.

*For a tiny but delicious feast of Luther’s sayings, organized under headings from “The Nature of Faith” to “Hope,” see *The Darkness of Faith: Daily Readings with Martin Luther* (1987), ed. James Atkinson.

(“Abraham closed his eyes and hid himself in the darkness of faith, and therein he found light eternal.”)

*For the life of Philip Melancthon, see *Melancthon: The Quiet Reformer* (1958), Clyde L. Manschreck.

A. Read the “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s German Writings.” This important writing from 1539 reveals how Luther saw the task of the student, the preacher, and the theologian. Questions to ask yourself while you read—and when you have finished:

*What is Luther’s attitude toward books? Toward his own books? Is he serious?

*What did Luther think of St. Augustine?

*What are the three requirements for correctly studying theology?

*What is Luther’s antidote to pride in the theologian or preacher?

B. The Augsburg Confession (found in *A History of Christianity: Readings in the History of the Church*, vol. 2, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck, 42-49) was the first major Protestant Confession. A moderate and cautious statement of Lutheran teaching, it was written by Philip Melanchthon and presented to the imperial diet of Augsburg. Here are some questions to guide you in your study of the Augsburg Confession:

- *What would you say is the primary emphasis of the confession?
- *What is “the Lutheran principle” of reform that it sets forth and exemplifies?
- *In a conversation between Udo Middleman and Frank Schaeffer (*The Christian Activist*, March 1996), Middleman says to Schaeffer: “But I would say that, in your article two issues or so ago in *The Christian Activist*, I think you made a mistake in saying the Reformers broke with the past. They broke with the Roman Catholic Church present at that time. They didn’t break with the past.” Judging by the Augsburg Confession, who do you think was right—Middleman or Schaeffer?
- *What teaching of Luther’s is missing from the Augsburg Confession?
- *Are there statements in the confession that you disagree with? What are they?