

Lutheran Theology

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Lutheran theology is best understood from the writings of Luther himself, Philip Melancthon, and a group of their students in *The Book of Concord* (1580); characteristics of Lutheran theology include emphases on the God's sovereign grace and absolute omnipotence, a distinction between law (command) and gospel (promise) in God's Word, a Christo-centric theology of justification, and a definition of faith that goes beyond simple historical faith.

SUMMARY

The theology of Martin Luther, though it has in name been taken in many different directions since the 16th century, is best understood from the writings of Luther himself, Philip Melancthon, and a group of their students in *The Book of Concord* (1580). The development of Luther's own theology was influenced both by his Ockhamist instructors and Saint Augustine. He continued on their respective emphases on the omnipotence of God and the sovereignty of God's grace. God's Word, and the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel, was also central to Luther's theology of the church and of the Christian life. God's promise of salvation in the gospel rested wholly on the person of Jesus Christ and the nature of Christian faith; for Luther, faith was not simply agreement with the historical facts but a trust which defines the full-orbed human person and receives the freely given righteousness of Christ. The Christian life of obedience flows out of a conviction that one is made righteous by God's pronouncing that Christ's righteousness is now theirs. Luther also greatly emphasized the role of the church in the Christian life and the role of the Word and sacraments within that church.

Theology as practiced by those who claim to be Lutheran has taken many forms in interacting with European culture and with the many other cultures where Lutheran churches sprang up around the world. In the 17th century, Lutheran “Orthodox” theologians departed from Luther’s practice; they conformed to scholastic models that enabled theological exchange across confessional lines. Popular piety at that time reappropriated certain medieval forms, using allegory in preaching and adapting other spiritual emphases from Johannes Tauler and others. In the Enlightenment, some German and Nordic theologians adopted Luther as symbol of rational discourse and personal freedom, but his works were little read and had little or no impact on theological discussion. In the 19th century, Romanticism fostered a revival of early Lutheran thinking, while contemporary positivistic efforts to build kingdom of God on earth again used Luther as little more than a symbol. In the 20th and 21st centuries, Lutheran thinkers have used Luther to promote Dalit theology in India and the theology of the pain of God in Japan (Kazoh Kitamori [1916-1998]). However, Lutheran theology is best understood from the writings of Luther himself and the documents by him, Philip Melanchthon, and a group of their students in *The Book of Concord* (1580).

Sources of Luther’s Theology

Luther’s theology underwent a process of development from the beginning of his theological studies (1508/1509) to about 1520/1521, anchored in his recognition that a biblical view of reality is grounded in relationships, particularly the relationship of the Creator to all creatures, as fundamental for understanding human life. Luther set forth an intensely personal view of God as the Creator, who fashioned all that exists *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) by speaking (Gen. 1). God is a God of conversation and community, who made his human creatures in his own image and desires fellowship with them. Luther absorbed Augustine’s insistence on the unconditional, unearned grace of God a few years later, reflecting his Ockhamist-bred belief that God’s omnipotence is absolute. This grace was not a “habitus” as in scholastic theology but rather God’s attitude of favor, steadfast love, and mercy.

Luther on Sin

Luther often appropriated medieval-scholastic terminology and then deepened their definitions of terms. His own experience of his inability to keep God’s law perfectly had created his perception of personal sinfulness. It led him to define original sin not only as the inherited alienation from God passed down from Adam and Eve but also as the reason that God’s chosen people continue to sin after he returns them to the relationship established by his promise in baptism. Doubt of God’s Word and the resultant defiance of his lordship constituted the original sin in Eden and the source of deviations from obedience to his law in daily life. This radical understanding of sin as all that stems from not “fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things” (Luther’s explanation of the first commandment in his Small Catechism [1529]) supported his teaching of the absolute dependence of sinners on the freely-given grace of God.

Luther on Scripture

God addresses sinners through his Word as it reveals who he is and his will for humankind in Holy Scripture. Luther believed that the Holy Spirit was present with the prophetic and apostolic authors of the Bible as they wrote down God's Word and that he is present with Christians as they read and use Scripture in all subsequent ages. God speaks to his people in two distinct modes, command and promise, or law and gospel. The distinction of these two—the one setting forth God's will for what human beings are to do, his design for human life; the other setting forth God's actions in Jesus Christ in behalf of sinners—served Luther, his colleague Philip Melancthon (who particularly emphasized the use of the distinction in preaching and teaching), and his followers, as a hermeneutical key to proper understanding and application of God's Word.

God's commands help preserve societal order although in doing so, Luther noted, they may provoke deeper rebellion in those who feel their idols threatened, and it may encourage people to rely on their works for justifying themselves in God's sight instead of only serving the neighbor. The most important "use of the law" (a term Luther did not extensively employ) is that which crushed sinful pretensions and makes it clear to sinners that they stand under God's judgment. In this capacity, it calls believers to repentance. Luther did not speak of a third use of the law, but he did put the law to use for the instruction of the repentant who were searching for guidance in making God-pleasing decisions.

Luther on Salvation

God's promise of salvation and escape from sin rests solely on the work of Christ. Luther preached the entire story of Christ's saving work, from the incarnation through his life of teaching and performing miracles in perfect obedience to divine law, to his suffering, death, and resurrection and beyond to his ascension and promised return at the end of the age. When speaking of Christ's atonement and the resultant justification of sinners, the reformer emphasized his death to take away sin and his resurrection to restore righteousness ([Rom. 4:25](#)). His proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection took a variety of forms. He certainly saw Christ's death as vicarious satisfaction of the demand of God's law for the death of the sinner ([Rom. 6:23](#)). Christ has taken the place of sinners and suffered the condemnation to death that they deserve. His sermons and lectures also contain many references to the re-creation that believers experience with the word of forgiveness, makes them reborn members of God's family, reconciled to the Father through Christ ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). His most important treatise on justification bears the title, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520); it anticipates the focus in his explanation of the second article of the Apostles Creed on Christ's liberation of sinners from captivity to the devil, the world, and their own self-centered desires through his resurrection. Forgiveness, new birth, and liberation by Christ make believers his own people, dedicated to living with and for him.

Justification

God's justifying word of forgiveness actually effects the reality of the sinner's existence and identity. That word is more than what modern linguists describe as "performative speech." It is the creative Word that shaped the universe, now invading Satan's realm to reclaim and remake those doubting and defying him into trusting children. Thus, Luther's understanding of "forensic" justification does not function as a legal fiction, regarding sinners "as if" they were righteous. God's regard or way of looking things imputes (accounts, credits; [Rom. 4:3, 6](#)) his divine judgment of sinners; his pronouncing them righteous makes them truly and really righteous because his Word determines what is real.

Faith

Sinners become righteous in God's sight through faith, which Luther defined as distinct from—although embracing—the “historical” faith (*fides*) of medieval theology that viewed faith as recognition of the veracity of the account of Christ's sacrifice for humankind. From Erasmus and Melancthon, Luther learned that Paul's word “faith” (*pistis*) went beyond, though certainly included, that historical faith; it is the trust (*fiducia*) that constitutes human personhood and personality. Trust, he wrote in his Large Catechism, establishes and maintains the relationship between God and human creatures; it lies beyond sinful human capability and is created in human hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit, working through oral, written, and sacramental forms of the gospel message of Christ's work. From his presuppositions as a pupil of Ockhamist-influenced instructors, Luther had no hesitation about believing that God can actually exercise his power through the proclamation of the gospel (Rom. 1:17) and that his Word effects his saving will (Isa. 55:11). Therefore, he looked to God's promise in Scripture, the proclamation of the biblical message, and the bestowal of the promise in connection with external signs in the sacraments, as the Holy Spirit's tools for creating and sustaining righteousness-bestowing trust in Christ.

Righteousness

Trust is the human expression of the core of righteousness in God's sight because it believes and relies upon the promise of forgiveness, liberation, and re-creation on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection. God's pronouncement that a person is righteous convinces believers that they are righteous, and so they strive to act righteously. Luther distinguished two “kinds” of righteousness, viewing the “right” way to be human as having two aspects, or twofold. He labeled the core or foundational righteousness, that is in God's sight, “righteousness from outside us” (*iustitia aliena*) and later “passive righteousness” (*iustitia passiva*). This righteousness constitutes the believer's core identity as God's child, unmerited and bestowed only by his grace through faith in Christ. That righteousness then produces “our own righteousness” (*iustitia propria*) or active righteousness (*iustitia activa*). Expressed in terms of the central theses advanced in *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Christians are lords over all evils because Christ has overcome these evils in their behalf, and they are the servants of people, bonded and bound to the community of humanity by God's command to serve and love the neighbor.

Luther on Christian Living

Luther's understanding of Christian living centered on being motivated by trust in Christ and his pronouncement of righteousness that produces the will to serve God and others. Christian decision-making, he believed, should be guided by God's commands and his callings to positions and functions within the structures of society. He transformed the medieval term “calling” from the designation for God's placing those in religious service—priests, monks, nuns—in their divinely-given assignments to a term that specifies the origin of all Christians's service in the roles and activities of life in the medieval “estates”: the household (including both family and occupational life), society, especially political structures, and the church. Carrying out God's commands within God's callings (and even beyond them when necessary) is the fruit of faith.

Luther urged and admonished his hearers and readers to live this life of new obedience to God regardless of social status. Peasants felt his critique for cheating in the marketplace, as did merchants and artisans. Courtiers and princes had God's wrath proclaimed upon them for their exploitation of their subjects and their perversion of justice.

Yet his awareness of the struggle of every Christian against temptation informed all his presentation of God's Word. Christ had commanded that believers preach repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47), which Luther understood as the application of the condemnation of sin by God's law and the pronouncement of forgiveness by his gospel. The Christian life is to be lived out in that daily rhythm as each day believers find that they have not feared, loved, and trusted God above all else. In the first of his Ninety-five Theses (1517), Luther wrote that the entire life of the Christian is a life of repentance. His developing understanding of confessing sin and receiving God's promise was anchored in God's baptismal action, in which his promise bestows life. His Small Catechism explained the continuing impact of that baptismal promise: that "we were buried with Christ through baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ... that we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:4) "means that 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 that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." This eschatological struggle goes on as God and Satan continue the conflict that Christ's resurrection has already decided but that still plagues believers. The continuation of sin and evil in their lives remains a mystery; Luther avoided trying to answer questions concerning the nature and existence of evil with any other answer than the cross of Christ (Rom. 3:26).

Luther on the Church

Though sometimes accused of being excessively individualistic, Luther placed great importance on the Christian's life in the communion of saints, the church, experienced in the local congregation but woven together with believers of all times and places by the Holy Spirit's "calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying the whole Christian church on earth" (Small Catechism, Apostles Creed). Though he did not develop the term "marks of the church" into a dogmatic category, he used it to describe the church. In accord with Melancthon's Augsburg Confession, which defined the church at its core as "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (Article VII), Luther anchored the church in the use of God's Word by the community of believers. In 1539 he listed eight marks, the first five having to do with the delivery of the promise of the gospel: preaching the Word of God; delivering the promise in the forms of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and formal confession of sin and absolution; the office of the ministry of the Word; then the worship and instruction of the congregation; the cross or suffering and persecution; and the demonstration of love for others. The last was not a distinctive mark of the church since those outside the faith also perform works of love that outwardly conform to God's law, but it does belong to the nature of the Christian community's life together.

Lutheran Theology after Luther

In the Augsburg Confession (1530) and his defense or Apology of the Confession (1531), Melancthon expressed the teaching that he, Luther, and their colleagues were advancing in documents that became hermeneutical keys—secondary authorities—to Scripture for their followers, and the Formula of Concord (1577) completed the authoritative interpretation of Lutheran theology as a formal articulation of the teaching of Lutheran theology and application of the Bible for the life of the church.

FURTHER READING

- *The Book of Concord*
- Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*
- Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*
- Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*
- Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*
- Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*

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