

Lutheran Exceptionalism

A Few Thoughts on What is Unique About the Theology of the Lutheran Church

Here is a simple question: What do Lutherans believe and confess that no one else does? Lutherans have a unique history, unique texts, unique songs, but what is theologically unique about Lutheran teaching?

The answer is simple, but with profound implications. The Lutherans are the only ones who teach that the Holy Spirit works exclusively through the external Word of God and sacraments to create and sustain faith and give salvation. Lutherans believe this. No one else does. This Lutheran uniqueness has profound implications.

The External Word Confessed

The confession of the Holy Spirit working through the external word grows out of the Lutheran understanding of Justification, that a person is declared righteous before God apart from works, but by faith alone. After the great confession of Justification in article four of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon writes:

Article V: Of the Ministry.

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of *Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments* was instituted. *For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given*, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.

They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the *external Word*, through their own preparations and works.¹

First, we note that the Lutherans were meany-pants, condemning someone just because they taught false doctrine. But we might also note, second, that they considered this to be a very important teaching, the way the Holy Spirit gives us saving faith is through the Word and Sacraments.

Luther will make this fantastically plain in his Smalcald Articles (III.VIII.3-7). (This quotation is long but very important.)

And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, *we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word*, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, *i.e.*, spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare.

1 All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from the *Concordia Triglotta*. The text is in the public domain.

For [indeed] the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word.

All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words. Just as also our enthusiasts [at the present day] condemn the outward Word, and nevertheless they themselves are not silent, but they fill the world with their pratings and writings, as though, indeed, the Spirit could not come through the writings and spoken word of the apostles, but [first] through their writings and words he must come. Why [then] do not they also omit their own sermons and writings, until the Spirit Himself come to men, without their writings and before them, as they boast that He has come into them without the preaching of the Scriptures? But of these matters there is not time now to dispute at greater length; we have elsewhere sufficiently urged this subject.

One of the places where Luther discussed this in further length is his delightful *Against the Heavenly Prophets*². He offers the helpful distinction:

So that our readers may better perceive our teaching I shall clearly and broadly describe it. We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But He has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There He has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the Gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as He had once to achieve it, it made no difference to Him whether He distributed it before or after, through His Word, as can easily be proved from Scriptures. (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*, AE 40:213-214)

That's good stuff. Jesus wins forgiveness on the cross, but He gets that forgiveness to us through the Word and Sacraments, and through the Word and Sacraments *alone*.

The External Word Taught

The Lutheran Confessions teach clearly that the Holy Spirit works exclusively through the Word and Sacraments to give faith and salvation, but do the Scriptures teach the same? It is important to know the Biblical basis for such a bold claim. We will offer a hand full of Biblical passages to support this teaching.

Matthew 17:5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."³

2 This writing is one of the writings of Luther that is unconditionally approved by the Lutheran Confessions, See *The Formula of Concord* VII.91.

3 Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

John 6:63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.

John 15:3-5 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 17:17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

Acts 10:44 While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Romans 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Galatians 3:2 Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?

Galatians 3:5 Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith--

Ephesians 1:13 "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in who also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise."

James 1:18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

1 Peter 1:23-25 ...since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

It should be clear from the passages that the Holy Spirit works through the external Word to accomplish His saving purpose.

The External Word Applied

This understanding of the way the Holy Spirit works has a profound impact on all that we do. When we turn to the Lutheran Confessions we find that this understanding of the external Word and Sacraments undergirds, in fact is, the very definition of the church, worship, evangelism, sanctification, spiritual warfare and so many other topics. We will consider the Confessions' confession on two topics of great importance, the church and evangelism.

The Church

Growing out of article five (quoted above), article seven of the Augsburg Confession defines the church:

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: *One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all*, etc. Eph. 4, 5. 6.

Zap! The Church is marked, found, identified by the presence of the external Word (Gospel rightly preached) and the Sacraments (rightly administered). If the church is the collection of believers, then they will be found where the Holy Spirit creates this faith and belief.

Evangelism

Evangelism is the Lord's work through the church to convert unbelievers into the people of God. We are not surprised, then, that the understanding of the external Word and Sacraments lies at the center of the Confessions' understanding of evangelism. Here's a passage from the Formula of Concord (article II.5):

Moreover [On the other side], both the ancient and modern enthusiasts have taught that God converts men, and leads them to the saving knowledge of Christ through His Spirit, without any created means and instrument, that is, without the external preaching and hearing of God's Word.

Against both these parties the pure teachers of the Augsburg Confession have taught and contended that by the fall of our first parents man was so corrupted that in divine things pertaining to our conversion and the salvation of our souls he is by nature blind, that, when the Word of God is preached, he neither does nor can understand it, but regards it as foolishness; also, that he does not of himself draw nigh to God, but is and remains an enemy of God, until he is converted, becomes a believer [is endowed with faith], is regenerated and renewed, by the power of the Holy Ghost through the Word when preached and heard, out of pure grace, without any cooperation of his own.

Or later in the same article (II.48):

For this reason we shall now relate, furthermore, from God's Word how man is converted to God, how and through what means (namely, through the oral Word and the holy Sacraments) the Holy Ghost wants to be efficacious in us, and to work and bestow in our hearts true repentance, faith, and new spiritual power and ability for good, and how we should conduct ourselves towards these means, and [how we should] use them.

To make sure we drive the point home (that means you have to read this passage also, FC II.50-52):

Therefore God, out of His immense goodness and mercy, has His divine eternal Law and His wonderful plan concerning our redemption, namely, the holy, alone-saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, publicly preached; and by this [preaching] collects an eternal Church for Himself from the human race, and works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of sins, and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And by this means, and in no other way, namely, through His holy Word, when men hear it preached or read it, and the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word, God desires to call men to eternal salvation, draw them to Himself, and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them. 1 Cor. 1, 21: *For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.* Acts 10, 5. 6: *Peter shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.* Rom. 10, 17: *Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.* John 17, 17. 20: *Sanctify them by Thy truth; Thy Word is truth, etc. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their Word.* Therefore the eternal Father calls down from heaven concerning His dear Son and concerning all who preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name: *Hear ye Him*, Matt. 17, 5.

Now, all who wish to be saved ought to hear this preaching [of God's Word]. For the preaching and hearing of God's Word are instruments of the Holy Ghost, by, with, and through which He desires to work efficaciously, and to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to do.

The external Word and Sacraments are the exclusive means of the Holy Spirit to convert an unbeliever, and this means that the external Word and Sacrament are the start, center and goal of all of the evangelistic efforts of the Lord's church.

Standing Alone, and A Conclusion

We've made the claim that only the Lutheran Church teaches that the Holy Spirit works through the external Word and Sacraments. Is that true? A simple survey of Christian theology will establish the fact.

Most Protestants (including American Evangelicals, Baptists, etc.) have abandoned the sacraments and replaced them with symbolic ordinances. The Scriptures (in revivalistic fashion) are simply information that needs to be acted upon by our free will.

The Reformed (our closest theological relative) has inherited from Calvin the distinction between the external word and the internal call. They understand the sacraments as "spiritual", whatever that means.

The Roman church places the authority of the church over (or at least on par with, which means over) the Scriptures. The sacraments are not the means of pardon or forgiveness, but means through which the church dispenses God's meritorious-good-work-empowering grace.

And that basically covers them all. There is not a single church out there that understands the work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace.

Could a Lutheran, then, go and ask his Baptist friend for advice on church? On evangelism? But this is a minor point. The major consideration for us is: how might all of our work together as and for the church reflect the bedrock teaching that the Holy Spirit works exclusively through the external Word and Sacraments?

It is in the Word and Sacraments that the Holy Spirit delivers all the gifts and treasures of our Lord Jesus, His blood, His righteousness, His forgiveness and eternal life, and all of our joy and comfort and peace.

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