

What Did We Learn From Luther? Wednesday, September 27, 2017 COR Center
Evening Enrichment 7:00 PM

I will not critique Pastor Lou's presentation, but I will give a response to how people have taken Luther, rightly or wrongly understood him, rightly or wrongly, and whether their understanding is helpful or not.

First of all, I would like to say that one of the basic problems with the time we are talking about, which is the beginning of the sixteenth century, the entire paradigm, that is, **the model in which the society itself was organized with factually breaking apart.** It was breaking apart for many reasons, but the worst thing was that going back to the fourth century the Emperor Theodosius had declared and decreed that the **Catholic faith would be the state religion of the Roman Empire.** And the Church leaders foolishly thought this was a good idea, and it became a Trojan horse. Contrary to some ideas that you might hear, the Church leaders were always the minor partners in this Church/state combination, which actually didn't exist per se. There were civil leaders called the *regnum* and then there were Church leaders called the priesthood, but there was one society. And the whole thing was completely corrupt. It wasn't like there was one part that was corrupt, but **the whole thing was corrupt.** In many ways, according to many historians, the so-called landed aristocracy was more corrupt than anything else.

Now what about the papacy? This papacy becomes a big issue for Luther. Luther often talks about the pope as if he is a very powerful figure. Well at different times through 1500 years popes were very significant, several. There were some periods of time when the pope was the most significant leader in Europe, but not at this time. **At this time under Leo X, who was a Medici, the papacy was actually bankrupt.** That's the reason for the indulgence thing. They were bankrupt; they had no money, **and bankrupt also morally.** And in terms of influence **no one listened to the pope.** There had been a pope, a rather arrogant man, back in the century before who had said all people must be subject to the pope or they will not be saved. And the response to that in Philip the Fair was, "Well not in my kingdom. I'll decide how much of what the pope says will be in force in my kingdom." And gradually that became the rule everywhere except central Italy, where the pope was the king. The pope did not appoint bishops as happens today. **Bishops were appointed by the local princes.** The Archbishop of Mainz for example was the younger brother of the Elector of Brandenburg, and so it goes on. So in a way, **the Church's leadership was co-opted.** It became part of the landed aristocracy. Not many, but some bishops actually were also princes. This is all part of a terrible mess and this is really something that needed to be addressed, and of course no one could address it. So I'm not saying that Luther should've done something; he couldn't. No one could actually. So one of the things we have to realize when we start to deal with this whole issue of the Reformation is **what really needed reform was the entire society of Europe,** and no one had the power to do so except the very people who liked it the way it was, and that included in this case Leo X and most of the princes.

Now some princes banded with Luther, and they did so because that gave them leverage against the Holy Roman Emperor, for example, who was the most powerful of all and many others. **It became a real political battle and religion was used for the sake of getting more power.** That's all part of the whole situation. I don't really think **Luther** actually realized what a low ebb the papacy was or how poor it was. He really **never did oppose the system of German princes,**

and in regard to the peasant uprising, which Pastor Lou mentioned, the result was that Luther became frightened because every renewal program had been destroyed by a radicalism of an almost insane nature. And so when he saw the peasants rise up, he thought his movement would be destroyed by them, and so he urged the princes to destroy the peasants. And so that became a, you might say, crossing the Rubicon of a certain sort of way because he was from then on on the side of the princes and couldn't object to anything they did. **In a sense he implicitly supported the social system that they represented.**

Now **Luther himself had a powerful epiphany at some point in his life.** I don't know enough about him. I have not really read extensively in Luther, but I have read about him. He had some sort of powerful epiphany. This is what motivated his life, but I do think he felt that his epiphany was somehow normative, **that people were supposed to have these powerful graced events.** [To Pastor Lou: Would you agree with that? "Yes, I would."] I don't believe that that's actually true. I think **many Christians** struggle to find grace in their lives. They have to really look for grace and need to be encouraged to do so, and they **don't necessarily have these wonderful experiences, so that's just part of the situation.**

Now he responded to his experience with the famous solas, *sola Scriptura*. Well now how did the tradition of the Church deal with his claim of *sola Scriptura*? Well actually all of the doctors in **the Church** and theologians of mark, all the Fathers, all **said that the Scriptures were primary, but they never used the word "sola."** So primary, yes, but in a sense in the tradition **Scripture and the teaching of the Fathers were put together like it's one fabric.** So the way the Church looked at the Scriptures is that the Scriptures belonged to the body of the Church, which existed over a long period of time and had developed a sort of body of interpretations that should be honored and at least dealt with. Now that doesn't mean there weren't disagreements. For example St. Jerome wrote to St. Augustine and said, "Well it isn't that your interpretation of the Psalms differs from mine and therefore is wrong for I'm nobody. However, your interpretation of the Scriptures disagrees with every Greek speaking Christian since the time of Christ." **So there were disagreements. So it's not that Luther was wrong one hundred per cent, but maybe he could have perhaps couched things a little differently.**

Also at this time there was, I think Pastor Lou mentioned, the Renaissance. Now was **Luther** part of the Renaissance? In a sense he was; in a sense he wasn't. He was very bright. He does this wonderful translation of the Bible into German, and he not only knew the languages, but then he had people read him back what he wanted to translate and he would listen to it, and if it didn't sound just right, if it didn't sound really flowing, he would change it. So **he was really a magnificent translator** and probably the best ever, and he influenced the King James Version as well in terms of the cadences and so on. But the Renaissance was, in a way, worldly. **The Renaissance wanted to integrate science, all kinds of learning, the past, the pagan philosophers, so to speak: Plato, Aristotle,** and so on. Well I don't think **Luther** cared for that. He **wanted something more strictly religious and therefore sola Scriptura,** meaning let's pay attention only to Scripture. Just take your learning from there; you don't need all this other stuff. In fact I believe he made some very negative statements about reason.

Now in our tradition reason is a very important component to the life of faith because we have to discern the work of the Spirit. We have to discern all kinds of things. Well that involves reason. It's reason aided by the Holy Spirit, but it's still reason. So that then was a definite

break with tradition, and perhaps people might consider it a little bit an exaggeration. So sola Scripture.

Then another famous sola was *sola fide*. Okay, well again this is justification by faith. Well if you look in **our tradition**, if you look at Augustine, Aquinas, all the teachers, Fathers and so on, they say **we are justified by faith and Baptism**, which I do believe goes back to St. Paul, **the idea that it's not individualistic. So the critique of Luther was he became too individualistic**, whereas in fact justification has to be by being a member of the community, that we are saved together; we are justified together; we are justified by becoming part of the body of Christ. And furthermore, justification is not the whole of salvation. I don't know if that is what Lutherans teach. [Aside to Pastor Lou: Do you teach that? "It's all over the place." All over the place.] Okay, **well some have interpreted Luther saying that salvation is the same thing as justification, so salvation is just by faith**. Well then many people go to the Scriptures and they say well you can't really hold that because in Matthew 25 where you have the final judgment, the judgment is rendered on regard to whether or not you have performed acts of mercy. "I was hungry, you gave me food. I was thirsty, you gave me drink," and not on faith. **So faith is very important, but then so is hope and love**, and love motivates acts of mercy and works of mercy, so the whole category of works has to be broken apart. You just can't say "works" as a whole. You have to say well there are "works of the law," which St. Paul talks about in Galatians, but then there are works of mercy that Matthew talks about in Chapter 25. So we would try to make a distinction between those two.

Then we have *sola gratia*, another famous term. Again, since he had an overwhelming experience of God, he had a tendency of writing as if well when grace hits you, you will be overwhelmed, and you can forget about free will. It's not a matter of free will. **It's not a matter of what you do at all. It's not about how you respond**.

But then many objected to that saying well that's a little bit overdone because you may have experienced this overwhelming grace, but a lot of people don't, and so should you say *sola gratia*? **Shouldn't you say well it's gratia, yes, definitely that, but also nature because God created nature and nature is good, and we are created in the image and likeness of God and when we desire something good, we are acting according to our nature**. That's the way Thomas Aquinas would talk. And Augustine talked about cooperative grace whereby what we want to do is aided by God's grace. It isn't as if God intervenes and instigates everything. He can inaugurate new things in our lives, as indicated by Luther's experience, but that's not necessarily how things happen. We could have an idea that really is our own sense of rightness and God would support that, and so **Augustine calls that cooperative grace, or gratia cooperans**.

So then finally there's the issue of: **Is salvation universal?** Well in 1 Timothy it says, "**God wills the salvation of all people and desires them to have the truth**." So that would lead us to believe that God's grace is really and truly universal. That it's moved out to everybody, and that it begins with our very conception, so that there is never anyone anywhere who exists without grace. **There is no such thing as living without grace**. There's no such thing as being apart from God in terms of being or doing. The impression taken by some people is that Luther thought that the saved were a smaller group of people, a select group of people, and that the rest were just left since God didn't give them grace. In other words, if you look at the world and you see all kinds of evil, the question is: **Well is there evil because people have turned away from grace or is there evil because God didn't give grace?** Some people reading Luther say that he implies that there is evil

because God didn't grant the grace in the first place since grace is not really resistible. So those are just ways people had of reading him and considering his views to be a little extreme.

So we could say that grace perfects nature. It does not oppose or overcome it. We are fashioned by God in his image and likeness, and when we desire and will what is good, we follow God's design. That's what God intended in the first place, and so grace cooperates with us. *Sola gratia* has been understood, I am not necessarily saying Luther taught this because I don't know enough about him, but I know people have said and people have understood him as saying that it's dismissive of reason, free will, and the goodness of nature. So those are those critiques that people have made and you can take or leave them.