

Learning from Luther

Martin Luther's Reformation Spirituality

Dale Campbell

Themes in a Missional Spirituality

Charles Ringma – MM688

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Introduction

Luther is best known for his theological contributions to Church History, particularly his strong 'sola' doctrines: *Sola Gratis, Sola Fides, Sola Scriptura*. As we shall see, however, Luther had not only strong theological convictions, but also a deep passion for the wider lived spirituality of the Church. Of his numerous works, many were written in common, non-theological language for the edification of believers.¹ This essay will survey the spirituality of this central figure of the Reformation, as expressed in 1) his reform of key theological doctrines, 2) his conception of the spiritual life, and 3) his prescriptions for spiritual discipline.

Doctrinal Reform

A key question for the Reformation movement, and Luther in particular, became how to discern the authoritative Word of God.² Simply affirming the traditional doctrines of the Catholic Church had proved unscriptural and rigid; humanist appeals to reason were too tentative and cold; and 'enthusiast' (Quaker) emphases on the Spirit were too erratic and unreliable.

Whilst Luther no doubt would have understood this task in terms of listening both to the voice of reason and the voice of the Spirit, his emphasis found the Christ of Scripture as an external objective reference for genuine spirituality. He balanced this with the need for subjective 'mystical eyes' to experience the Word. Experience of rapture and ecstasy qualified the 'true theologian'.³ For Luther, the external objective Word ('Christ for us') must be internalised and be made subjective Flesh ('Christ in us').⁴

In later Lutheranism, this both/and faded into an either/or where the "ordinary, public and objective" were preferred over the "extraordinary, the private-personal and the subjective", and the experiential was split from the rational.⁵ Having noted Luther's theological hermeneutic, we now look at his two key doctrinal distinctives: his 'Theology of the Cross' and his understanding of 'Grace Alone'.

¹ Marc Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation' in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 273.

² Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 379.

³ Bengt Hoffman, 'Lutheran Spirituality' in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, eds. Robin Maas & Gabriel O'Donnell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 146-7.

⁴ Hoffman, 'Lutheran Spirituality', 148, 152.

⁵ *Ibid*, 149-50.

The Theology Of The Cross

Luther was captivated by the Cross of Christ, which he held to be the singular source and reference point for all genuinely Christian theology; as expressed in the Latin phrase: *crux sola est nostra theologia*.⁶ For Luther, reason alone (thus his critique of humanist approaches) produced an expectation of a God who would reveal himself in mighty power and great splendour. He played this rational 'Theology of Glory' off against the surprising 'Theology of the Cross' found in the New Testament.⁷ The Cross was the shocking evidence that God revealed himself in the most unexpected and embarrassing way – through humiliation, weakness, suffering and death.

Grace Alone

Of all the doctrines Luther opposed and reformed, his sharpest opposition was against current theologies of grace.⁸ For Luther, "Discipleship does not make us God's children, but God's adoption of us as children makes us his disciples."⁹ He rejected the doctrine of sanctifying grace, as it seemed to him to negate that the entire work of salvation from beginning to end was solely the work of God.¹⁰ And in rejecting the ability of the church to do works (i.e. indulgences, prayers for the dead) having an effect on people after death, he did away with the doctrine of Purgatory.¹¹

Luther seemed unable to conceive of an amicable relationship between the graceful initiative of God and the need for any necessary change in believer.¹² There was no 'both/and' here: salvation was *either* entirely the work of God *or* entirely the work of man.¹³ There was a 'both/and' concerning final judgment, however. Luther acknowledged and warned his hearers to fear a final judgment according to works, but for him this "fear is not

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), 69-89 *passim*.

⁷ *Ibid*, 70-1; Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III: Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and Anglican Spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), 69-70.

⁸ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 270-1.

⁹ Quoted in Arie de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation*, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 100.

¹⁰ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 68; cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 158-9.

¹¹ Tarald Rasmussen, 'Hell Disarmed? The Function of Hell in Reformation Spirituality', *Numen International Review* 56(2-3): (2009), 372-3.

¹² Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 67.

¹³ *Ibid*, 66.

terror, because it is bound to confidence in the Father.” Christian Faith awaits the last judgment “with fear and with confidence.”¹⁴

The Spiritual Life

These doctrinal convictions shaped Luther’s conception of the Spiritual life. Christianity was to be experienced and lived out of one’s secure relationship with Christ, which held the believer through doubt and ‘darkness’, and enabled the disciple to live in solidarity with the world. This was expressed in terms of two key aspects of Luther’s spirituality: the ‘mystical union’ and the ‘exchanged’ life.¹⁵ To these themes we now turn.

The Mystical Union

Luther’s experience in the particularly rigorous and ascetic Augustinian Hermit monastery had left him with a sensitive conscience of his own, driving a growing concern for the burdened consciences of others.¹⁶ This need for a relieved conscience, together with his emphasis on the ‘total gratuity of salvation’, formed and informed his understanding of the ‘*vita spiritualis*’ (spiritual life) which he saw as life connected to the vine – Christ.¹⁷

Luther expressed this connection in terms of ‘union’ with Christ.¹⁸ This union was a mystical union with Jesus, who was seen as both the ‘historical Christ and *Christus mysticus*’.¹⁹ Luther reacted against some existing traditional and monastic practices, declaring that fasting, festivals, vestments & monasticism were altogether useless without Christ.²⁰ The practices he advocated were certainly mystical, but he critiqued, combined and restated them in terms of his understanding of Scripture and the Gospel.²¹

For Luther, this mystical union is characterised by a particular kind of faith which trusts in spite of experience. He thus spoke of the “darkness of faith” and emphasised the

¹⁴ Lienhard, ‘Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation’, 296.

¹⁵ Ibid, 276-7.

¹⁶ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 63; contra Henry Ganss, ‘Martin Luther’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09438b.htm>, (accessed 16 Jun. 2010); who (drawing on work of Kohler) posits that Luther’s monastic life was peaceful, and that Luther later ‘turned his back’ on the monastery.

¹⁷ Scott Hendrix, ‘Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality’ in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 247-8.

¹⁸ McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 158-9.

¹⁹ Hoffman, ‘Lutheran Spirituality’, 154.

²⁰ Hendrix, ‘Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality’, 248.

²¹ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 69.

need to find God where he has promised to be, even when experience says he isn't there.²² Even suffering was seen as integral to spirituality; though not masochistic self-imposed suffering (as in extreme asceticism), but the suffering which comes with following Christ, which Luther saw as 'imposed by God'.²³

The Exchanged Life

The other theme – inseparable from the theme of union with Christ – is that of the great exchange, in which human sinful nature is exchanged for Christ's perfect nature. For Luther, sin was sin. In opposing traditional distinctions between different kinds of sin, he held that all sin was able both to bring death and to be forgiven.²⁴ The salvation of the individual sinner was absolutely central: "The proper subject of theology is the man accused for his sin and lost, and the God who justifies and saves the sinner. In theology, whatever outside of this subject is researched or disputed is error and poison".²⁵

The Christian, as famously expressed in another Lutheran 'both/and', was '*simul iustice et peccator*' (both saint and sinner).²⁶ Post-conversion life was thus characterised by a persisting tension between the 'old man' (sinner) and the 'new man' (saint).²⁷ The continual struggle to live in this tension was a central aspect of what Luther called the battle against "the flesh, the world and the devil"; all of which deceive the believer into thinking, acting and feeling like the 'old man' rather than the 'new man'.²⁸ Prayer was the battleground where faith trusted in the reality of the great exchange, even in the face of continuing acts of sin.

Solitude & Solidarity

The centrality of the salvation of individual sinners did not hinder but rather led to Luther's emphasis on solidarity with the world. Indeed, for Luther, it is trust in Christ's work for the individual sinner which frees them to do generous service for the neighbour.²⁹ For

²² McGrath, *Roots that Refresh*, 76.

²³ *Ibid*, 80-5.

²⁴ Rasmussen, 'Hell Disarmed?', 373.

²⁵ Quoted in Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 273.

²⁶ Rasmussen, 'Hell Disarmed?', 374.

²⁷ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 294.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 293-4.

²⁹ Jill Raitt, 'European Reformations of Christian Spirituality (1450-1700)' in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 124.

all of his passionate theological work and appreciation for meditation and scholarship, the spiritual life was to be lived in the world. He thus sharply contrasted between *'Lesemeister'* (masters of reading) and *'Lebemeister'* (masters of living).³⁰

In this regard, he was opposed to monasticism – or at least the ascetic, ritualistic and separatist forms of it he had known of.³¹ He advocated the need for solitude, but not at the expense of solidarity with the world and others.³² He had found monastic life characterised by a sacred/secular split, and countered this by declaring all of life to be of spiritual worth; even saying that the person who “loads and hauls manure” is doing a fruitful action.³³ His related doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers, which Luther was the first to clearly express, saw life in world as a necessary part of a holy and spiritual life.³⁴

Reformed Spiritual Disciplines

We turn now to consider how Luther's reformation of doctrine and re-conception of the Spiritual life were expressed in the disciplines he advocated for both personal devotion and corporate expression.

Personal

Prayer. Luther advocated a very structured approach for personal devotion, with specific instructions such as prayers both in the morning and evening, and preferably while kneeling.³⁵ Memorised and repeated prayer was said to be useful, though the repetition was not to be just for sake of it, but rather helpful as a framework to maintain focus on what one was praying.³⁶ And the focus was on prayer to God through Christ, as opposed to any of the Saints or to Mary. It should be noted, however, that Luther not only permitted, but instructed Christians to remember the saints for their example and the strengthening of faith.³⁷

³⁰ Hoffman, 'Lutheran Spirituality', 147.

³¹ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 279.

³² Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 101.

³³ Hendrix, 'Martin Luther's Reformation of Spirituality', 247.

³⁴ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 76.

³⁵ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 288-9.

³⁶ Robin Maas, 'A Simple Way to Pray: Luther's Instructions on the Devotional Use of the Catechism' in *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church*, eds. Robin Maas & Gabriel O'Donnell (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 163.

³⁷ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 289-90.

In addition to banishing prayer to Saints and Mary, Luther's strong emphasis on being Scriptural saw him retain the praying of the 'Our Father' (the Lord's Prayer), as well as praying the Psalms and other Scripture passages.³⁸ Luther described a method of praying the (Apostles') Creed and the (Ten) Commandments in which four "strands" (instruction, thanksgiving, confession, prayer) combined into a "garland" of praise.³⁹ In praying the Commandments (as well as beginning his catechism with them), Luther was 1) bringing to mind our inability to satisfy the Law, and also 2) reversing the traditional principle of '*lex orandi, lex credendi*' (law of praying, law of believing), and rather emphasising that what is believed decides what is prayed.⁴⁰

Corporate

Luther, the notable Father of the Protestant Church, retained many of the basic liturgical forms that many modern Protestants have discarded. Though with revisions in terms of content, he used the Christian calendar, and many of the liturgical elements.⁴¹

Prayer. Many set prayers were adopted by Luther – provided they were not opposed to the teaching of Scripture. He made use of even extra-biblical prayers such as the Kyrie, the Gloria, the Benedictus and the Agnus Dei. He also preserved the use of the "we" for communal prayer.⁴²

Sacraments. Luther retained only three of the seven traditional sacraments (Baptism, the [Lord's] Supper and Penance/Confession), as he saw no "promise of grace" in the other four.⁴³ Of note to modern Protestants will be the fact that Luther allowed Baptism to be conferred upon infants, but with the understanding that it takes effect with faith.⁴⁴ As for Communion, the most significant aspect would be Luther's sharp debate with Zwingli over issue of 'presence'.⁴⁵ Luther retained an understanding of a mystical, but nonetheless 'real' presence in the communion, thus opting for a middle way between the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation and Zwingli's denial of any presence. Luther also revised the traditional conception of penance for a new version consisting of *confessio* and

³⁸ Jill Raitt, 'European Reformations of Christian Spirituality', 124-5; Howard, 305.

³⁹ Maas, 'A Simple Way to Pray', 164-5.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 166.

⁴¹ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 74-5.

⁴² Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 287.

⁴³ Ibid, 275.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 281.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 282; Jill Raitt, 'European Reformations of Christian Spirituality', 125.

absolutio (confession and absolution). Surprisingly to many Protestants, this was still performed by a priest on behalf of God.⁴⁶ Confession was, for Luther, necessary only for sins that “weighed on the conscience”. Later, however, to ensure solemnity, it was required for each to be “questioned on faith and life before communion.”⁴⁷

Preaching. Churches of Reformation characterised by daily ‘offices of the word’ both preaching and lecturing almost every day of the week. Preaching was seen not as merely yet another edifying thing to do, but as “a word in which Jesus Christ was present and through which he acted.”⁴⁸

Hymns. Luther’s liturgical conception of the Choral song was the “most innovating aspect” of Luther’s work, which also played no small role in the spread of his teachings.⁴⁹ Especially noteworthy was his incorporation of many Psalms into hymns and the publishing of a hymn book.⁵⁰

Images. Unlike later Reformation leaders who banned paintings and sculptures, Luther himself found imagery useful and desirable, calling them “preaching for the eyes”. He did, however, criticise some paintings for their content, and admonish some people for improperly using or excessively adoring them.⁵¹

Modern Application

Both Heretic and Father

Before noting the many points at which we can learn from Luther’s Reformation Spirituality, it is wise to remember his shortcomings as well. Grislis provides the wise words of Peter Manns, who (modifying Luther’s language of *simul iustice et peccator*) “puts it best by viewing Luther as both a heretic and a father in the faith – *simul hereticus et Pater in Fide*.”⁵²

Bacik notes that whilst Luther and reformed theology fostered an immensely helpful and much-needed return to biblical theology, he needlessly discarded various practices

⁴⁶ Rasmussen, ‘Hell Disarmed?’, 373.

⁴⁷ Lienhard, ‘Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation’, 284.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 279-80.

⁴⁹ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 75.

⁵⁰ Lienhard, ‘Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation’, 285.

⁵¹ Ibid, 285-6.

⁵² Egil Grislis, ‘The Spirituality of Martin Luther’, *Word & World* 14(4): (1994), 459.

which although edifying were not expressly justified in Scripture.⁵³ Grislis adds that his wholesale condemnation of papists, Jews and fanatics betrays a lack of ability to discern an individual from the groups they were associated with.⁵⁴ Bouyer observes that Luther's work saw him increasingly troubled in spirit, thus leading him ironically in the opposite direction that his first conscience-consoling insight had originally taken him.⁵⁵

Learning from Luther

Finally, there are many positive aspects of Luther's Spirituality to glean insight from. First, Luther's 'Theology of the Cross' is immensely fruitful. McGrath helpfully observes three areas of reference which Luther's cross-shaped spirituality challenges: 1) a "what's in it for me?" approach to spirituality, 2) the "health and wealth" gospel, and 3) experience-oriented attitudes to faith.⁵⁶

Second, his understanding of Grace Alone and Union with Christ offer an much needed anchor for many a Christian who wrestles with their conscience. Lutheran spirituality guides us not to trust in our works, nor in our own belief, but in God's grace in Christ, and in the Spirit who calls us to the Father.⁵⁷ The pardoned sinner, as well as having anchored faith in God's love and acceptance, is also now free to love their neighbour as they genuinely love their own self; daring "to commit themselves in spite of their weaknesses and their failures."⁵⁸

Third, his understanding of the spiritual life, characterised as it is both by a "joyful yes to creation" and an awareness of a "suffering world", can help ground ecological and social action in Scripture.⁵⁹ This emphasis on a lived spirituality resonates with both the Creational themes of Scripture and modern ecological and social concern.

Fourth, modern Christians (particularly non-liturgical Protestants) can benefit from the example of Luther's approach to spiritual disciplines both corporate and personal. The use of liturgical prayers and readings could significantly aid modern services in which much of the content is spontaneous and from-the-hip. Also, Luther's retained understanding of

⁵³ James J. Bacik, *Catholic Spirituality, its History and Challenge* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2002), 18-9.

⁵⁴ Grislis, 'The Spirituality of Martin Luther', 458.

⁵⁵ Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality – Volume III*, 64.

⁵⁶ McGrath, *Roots that Refresh*, 85-7.

⁵⁷ Lienhard, 'Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation', 292.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 295.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 291.

'real presence' avoids making too much or too little of our observance of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁰ And Luther's patterns of personal prayer – such as praying the Creed, and the Psalms and generally not resisting being structured in prayer – would aid many modern prayers who find their own thoughts distracting them away from what they wish to focus on and pray for.

In sum, Luther and his Reformed Spirituality has much to offer modern Christianity. Perhaps most surprisingly, his Scriptural, Cross shaped, Grace honouring, experiential, world-entering, structured and liturgy-affirming approach provides a rich, diverse and faithful set of emphases which should challenge, broaden and sharpen most modern Protestants who would be the first to claim Luther as their own.

⁶⁰ C. Sydney Carter, 'The Reformers' Doctrine of the Holy Communion', *Churchman* 66(2): (1952), *passim*.

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