

TOWARD A REFORMATION WELCOME: LAW, GOSPEL AND THE THREE SOLAS

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This summer at our Synod Assembly, in the midst of much debate, we adopted a welcoming motion, designated in general toward key marginalized sectors within our society. However, what drove the debate and the subsequent motion adopted was the specific inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians. This debate, I believe, occurred in both a restrained and gracious manner, a reality to be celebrated given the passionate and volatile nature of the issue. I view these Kitchener-Waterloo Conference sponsored events as important opportunities for us to engage in fruitful dialogue about the fundamentals of our faith as they impinge pastorally on the practice of welcoming or what is commonly called "Biblical hospitality." One of the strongest convictions I have held since my own seminary days involves this notion, namely the firm belief that the basic Lutheran doctrines of the "*Solas*" find their concrete Biblical base in the practice of radically including the marginalized and scorned of our society. In other words, those our society considers the least stand out, *ipso facto*, as the most important and cherished in the Reign of God.

Let me begin by clarifying exactly what I mean by the Lutheran "*Solas*." Traditionally three have stood out: grace alone (*sola gratia*), faith alone (*sola fide*) and Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*). Standard interpretation of these three involves an articulation which goes something like this: in spite of our profound brokenness and total lack of worth in the eyes of God, God's radical love for us will triumph over this chasm, and we will be brought into God's realm through this love alone — in Christ (*sola gratia*). We receive this free gift by trusting God's promise alone (*sola fide*) and not through any kind of good deeds we might accomplish. Finally, we discover this truth in the inspired sacred Scriptures as the sole authority upon which we depend to hear God's Word (*sola Scriptura*). This more popular view catches rather well the sense of our Lutheran Reformation and its official Confessional documents, but some important nuances are needed to provide a greater accuracy both in terms of content and context. In short, the teachings of both Luther and the Confessions around these three *solas* were more dynamic and nuanced than the static listing of the above three.

First of all, both *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are inexorably linked in an interpersonal dynamic. Rather than being concerned with doctrinal niceties and theoretical correctness, these two *solas* lie at the core of the God-driven action to restore the broken relationship between us and the divine self. Not the thing itself remains critical but rather the healed covenant which overrides the divine-human chasm. The issue is existential not academic. So instead of separating the two *solas* Luther and the Confessions united them into reconciling, dynamic, mirror images of each other. Note the personal language of Article 4 of Philip Melancthon's Augsburg Confession (1530): "It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works,

or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us (Tappert: 30)." According to this most basic of official Lutheran documents we receive this faith as a gift by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit via the channel of the preached Gospel and the sacraments (Article 5, Tappert: 31). And, lest any might not have understood, Article 5 affirmed that this preached Gospel proclaims "that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this." Once again the Augsburg Confession reiterates this foundational dynamic blend of the two *solas*, *gratia* and *fide*. In the Smalcald Articles (1537), another official Confession of our church, Luther himself underscored the central and basic character of the grace/faith interface, of the core teaching of "justification by grace alone through faith alone." On this "first and chief article," Luther insisted that "nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed.... On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost (Part II, Art. 1, Tappert: 292)." ¹

Two other notions needed highlighted in the "*justification by grace through faith*" dynamic. First we need to examine the Law-Gospel dialectic. For Luther and, to a lesser extent, his colleague Melancthon, emphasized less the Law as God's Law in and of itself and more so its impact upon us as the human recipients of that divine gift called the Law. For them the Law impacted differently and served different functions with people depending upon the nature of their relationship with God at any given time. All people fell under the rule of God's Law, whether they were redeemed sinners or not, but this rule manifested itself as a policing function. It served as a check against evil through its power to impose punishment. Thus, the Law served to keep a society orderly and law-abiding; in such a way it performed a civic function. At the same time, Luther underscored that this purpose enforced itself over against the unrighteous. It did nothing to change the internal motivation and thus had no converting power. Its power resided either in its ability to promote personal pride and success or restrain crime over against the desire to commit it. In other words, this civic use of the Law helped us and society function on a strictly moral cost-benefit basis. In this context, our theme of "Welcoming" would be directed to bringing in those who enhance our success and reputation, the rich, the white, the professional, the prominent, the heterosexual, the married couple with 1.9 children. Of course, this purpose of the Law, said Luther, heightens unrighteousness rather than inspiring righteousness. Sin is not removed by the Law operating in this way; it is merely channelled so its manifestations are less destructive.

¹ The key point in this quoted material remains Luther's total commitment to this core teaching and its dynamic. Luther's broadsides against the papacy emerged from a growing awareness of church corruption, German nationalism and Luther's own passionate, often coarse, personality. I am happy to report that, in our day, dialogue, debate, solidarity and mutual action characterize Lutheran-Roman Catholic relationships. Although I remain critical of the current papacy it is a criticism of a brother within the wider Christian Community and not that of some "Anti-Christ" figure.

However, for Luther God's Law served also in the work of redemption and reconciliation. This, he called the "theological use" of the Law. I have called this God's X-Ray, because it exposes the terminal depth of that disease we traditionally call sin. Lutherans taught and teach that sin does not equal mistakes and misdeeds; rather sin describes the fundamental brokenness of our relationship with God that only grace (God's radical love) can repair and restore. In fact, this brokenness is so overwhelming that we remain unaware of how shut off we are from God. Hence, in the dynamic of restoration with the divine, God gives us the backhand of divine love — the Law. The Law reveals to us our terminal state, brings us face to face with our core unworthiness, thus driving us empty and without claim into the arms of radical grace alone. "The chief function or power of the law is to make original sin manifest and show man (sic.) to what utter depths his (sic.) nature has fallen and how corrupt it has become (Part III, Art. 2, Tappert: 303)." With this crushing revelation of our all-encompassing brokenness we are thrown thrashing and flailing into the abyss of despair. At this point God's direct promise of radical love breaks into the picture to rescue us. "To this office of the law the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace in the Gospel (Part III, Art. 3, Tappert: 304). Thus, for Luther, and as we saw earlier in Melancthon, the Gospel was primarily the radical action of God's love offering forgiveness and acceptance free of charge. Indeed this Gospel, said Luther, "offers consolation and forgiveness in more ways than one, for with God there is plenteous redemption." And this gift of full acceptance "comes to us through the Word, the sacraments, and the like (Part III, Art. 3, Tappert: 304)." Thus we come full circle to that same dynamic in Articles 4 and 5 of Melancthon's Augsburg Confession noted earlier.

Finally, in the *grace-faith* dialectic we need to highlight what these Lutheran reformers meant by *faith*. Here, the Augsburg Confession provides us the clarity we need. First, Melancthon described what "saving faith." was not. After making clear that faith itself is not a good work that we do that earns God's grace, he goes on to show that fundamentally it is not believing correct doctrine or the "facts of the faith." "The faith here spoken of is not that possessed by the devil and the ungodly, who also believe the history of Christ's suffering and his resurrection from the dead." Rather, asserted Luther's colleague, "we mean such true faith as believes that we receive grace and forgiveness of sin through Christ (Art. 20, Tappert: 44)." So faith, for the Reformers, meant personal trust and confidence in the radical and redeeming love of God outside of any credentials and goodness on our part. Put succinctly Melancthon affirmed: "The conscience cannot come to rest and peace through works, but only through faith, that is, when it is assured and knows that for Christ's sake it has a gracious God (Art 20, Tappert: 43)." Thus, a Lutheran approach to welcoming, must never depend on character, behaviour, race, gender, sexual orientation; the only condition for welcoming involves no conditions whatsoever. It must emerge as an inclusive embrace for everyone who shows up at our doors. Based on Lutheranism's most foundational dynamic of *sola gratia* no other response but full and inclusive welcoming will do.

The current issue of welcoming, more specifically welcoming same-sex persons without prior stipulations regarding behaviour, impinges on the third Reformation *sola- Sola Scriptura*. Many Christians, especially those within the broad Protestant tradition, take a strong stand against such welcoming people with same-sex orientations on the basis of very specific texts which they argue condemn homosexual behaviour unequivocally. Significant time has been spent in our "Caring Conversations" on the passages oft quoted to highlight the "sin" of homosexuality. Without

questioning the value of such pastoral and scholarly wrestling with such texts I propose to highlight the rather unique way in which the Lutheran Reformation approached sacred writ. More accurately the Lutheran notion of Scripture should be called *Prima Scriptura*, that is, the primacy of using Scripture as an authoritative witness to the Gospel. All the major Protestant reformers believed that Scriptural authority depended on the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit. In other words, without the Spirit correct interpretation of the text was impossible. Of course, this does not provide us with any guarantees about who or who does not control the truth beyond the conviction that the Spirit alone does just that. Scripture itself underscores this elusive quality of authority through the Spirit in that well-known encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus where Jesus says (John 3:8): "The Wind (or Spirit, the same word for both is the Greek word πνεύμα) blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit." Thus, for Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and the other reformers authority lies not in popes or councils but rather in Sacred Scriptures under the guidance of the Spirit.

This view requires discernment by us as thoughtful and faithful Christians. Are there ways to help us in this process of understanding the Bible in an authoritative way. The academic and theological phrase for the means utilized to interpret our sacred texts is called "hermeneutical principles." In providing such tools Luther offered a Reformation uniqueness. For him, the Gospel of God's radical love formed the foundation guideline or lens through which we are called to approach and follow the Biblical texts. Luther owned, in a way far more honest than many Christians then and now, that we give higher priorities to some texts than others, and that we interpret what we believe are less important or difficult to interpret texts by using other texts that we deem more important or central to the faith. Historically, even our most fundamentalist, most literalist, brothers and sisters operate on this basis. Once they say God directly and equally inspired all parts of the Bible and that all have equal authority, they proceed to give precedence to some texts over others in both their faith expressions and their lives. Let me give one example that has been the majority practice of most Christians throughout history: even though the Bible gives overwhelmingly more space to the issue of wealth and its use most Christians, at least since the year 300 C. E., have given far more attention to sexual ethics than economics.

As stated before, however, Luther accepted consciously that Biblical authority and Biblical interpretation depended on that Scriptural core which he called the Gospel, namely his view that we are *justified by grace alone (sola gratia) through faith alone (sola fide)*. He provided very specific points on this in the preface to his translation of the New Testament (1522). First he gave extensive attention to what he meant by his use of the term gospel. In the midst of this he uttered a warning to Scriptural readers: "See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ, or a book of laws and doctrines out of the gospel, as has been done heretofore and as certain prefaces put it.... For the gospel does not expressly demand works of our own by which we become righteous and are saved; indeed it condemns such works. Rather the gospel demands faith in Christ: that he has overcome for us sin, death, and hell, and thus gives us righteousness, life and salvation not through our works (Janz, ed.: 108)." Doing good, following Christ to Luther meant showing "faith by works," that is "that everything [we] live and do is directed to [our] neighbour's profit (Janz, ed.: 108)."

In this context Luther offered practical means whereby the believer might utilize Scripture in service of the gospel. Under the heading "Which Are the True and Noblest Books of the New Testament" he had this to say: "John's Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter's first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books. They ought properly to be the foremost books, and it would be advisable for every Christian to read them first and most.... For in them... you find depicted in masterly fashion how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation. This is the real nature of the gospel as you have heard (Janz, ed.: 109)." Then Luther proceeded to a clearer ranking of better and worse calling John's Gospel "the one, fine, true, and chief gospel, and is far, far to be preferred over the other three and placed high above them. So, too, the epistles of St. Paul and St. Peter far surpass the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke." The epistle of James received a particularly hard treatment by the Reformer: "Therefore, St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it (Janz, ed.: 109)." Indeed, for Luther only a handful of Biblical books stand out as necessary for the Christian: "In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine (Janz, ed.: 109)." That Luther remained solid in this stance becomes clear in that he authorized a repeat publication of this preface a year before his death (1545).

Here, then, we have the Lutheran *solas* as exemplified in both our confessional documents and Luther's twice published Preface to his translation of the New Testament. The chief *SOLA* is that dynamic view of the God-human relationship characterized by the interface of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. Subservient to it and testifying to its promise is *sola* or *prima Scriptura* whose task and authority stands on the basis of its witness and fidelity to the Gospel, namely the proclamation of "*justification by grace alone through faith alone.*" For Lutheranism this means that all statements and actions in our church with respect to welcoming must be based on these convictions and on these convictions alone. In fleshing this out just a bit more let me add two final observations. One, the act of welcoming is a visual and active proclamation of the Gospel, since welcoming requires of the one at our doors absolutely nothing, no credentials at all. When we welcome we act as God's servants, embodying God's radical grace of welcoming everybody without condition. Hence "welcoming" makes alive the Reformation *solas* of the grace-faith dynamic. And secondly the act of welcoming emerges with powerful frequency as a fundamental practice throughout our Bible. The Scriptures of both Testaments emphasize that welcoming is at its most profound when our open arms are extended to the most marginalized within society. On the basis, then, of our Reformation *solas* we are enjoined to build a welcoming position and practice that embodies a radical inclusivity.

REFERENCES

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