

Luther's Exposition of John 17

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In 1528 Luther delivered a series of sermons on the text of John 17, the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus. These sermons were preached weekly from August 8 until October 31 in the city church of Wittenberg. The parish pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, was away seeing to the course of the reform of Braunschweig and Hamburg.¹

The “Preface” for the published edition of these sermons indicates that Luther had approved of their publication under the editorship of his “dear friend” Caspar Cruciger in 1530. Luther offered them to “all the beloved members of Christ” as a “crumb and cup of cold water,” useful for “godly Christians who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”² Subsequently, these sermons appeared in later sixteenth century editions of Luther’s collected works, as well as in more modern collections.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Rev. Henry B. Cole (of Clare Hall, Cambridge) issued a number of volumes of translations of Luther’s writings in English. Volume II of an 1824 edition of

Luther’s Works contains the only English language translation of Cruciger’s edition of Luther’s 1528 series of sermons on John 17.

In 1528 Luther was embroiled in the heat of the controversy with the Swiss reformers regarding the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper and was trying to establish the Reformation within Electoral Saxony on a firmer footing. He published in 1528 his *Great Commentary on the Lord’s Supper* and was also working on the formulations which would produce his two Catechisms in 1529.

The text of John 17 gave Luther occasion to comment on a number of themes:

¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1883-), 28, 70ff. *D. Martin Luthers sammtliche Schriften* (St. Louis, 1880-1910), 8, 745 ff.

² Martin Luther, *Select Works of Martin Luther*, 4 vols. trans. Henry B. Cole (London: T. Bensley, 1824-1826), II, p. 3.

the relationship of Christ to God, the relationship of grace/faith and works, the nature of the unity of the Body of Christ, and Christian sanctification. Although John 17 did not prompt Luther to deal directly with the sacraments and ministry, one can see material relevant to these loci as well in the *Exposition*. Although the Swiss were most often the targets of Luther's polemic during this period of his career, Luther also addressed the papal church, as well as those whom he called "fanatics."

That Jesus prayed aloud, using physical gestures, was interpreted by Luther as a warning against the iconoclastic tendencies of his opponents who disapproved of the use of such "extreme things" in prayer. Luther saw the whole of this prayer as a model and warrant for Christian prayer. Prayer is therefore not optional for believers, for without prayer "faith cannot subsist or endure." Prayer is to consist of three principal parts: that we give honor to God in thanksgiving, that we enumerate before God our knowledge of his blessings, and that we place before God our necessities.

Luther turned next to issues relating to John's concept of glorification. He contrasted the human perception of the death of Christ with the actual effects of Christ's death. The glorification of Christ was accomplished when "the Father raised him again from the dead, laid the devil at his feet, and made him King and Lord over all the creatures."

Luther argued here from a "high" christological position: the Son possesses all the attributes of the Father. Thus, Jesus is that one person by whose preaching the Father is to be known and honored. It is the mission of the Son to proclaim the Father, to make him known, and in this proclamation the Father is glorified. For Luther, the cross is the means of Christ's and God's glorification. The issue of the mutual glorification

of the Father and the Son was one to which Luther would often return in these sermons. The christology of this passage was used by Luther to condemn all who would deny Christ's divinity or oneness with God the Father.

In language anticipating his *Catechisms*, Luther asserted that those who deny to Christ the divinity of the Father or who claim knowledge of God apart from Christ are to be condemned. To find God anywhere else but in Christ was, for Luther, idolatry. Here is how he put it:

And the same is going on today; for everyone forms to himself a God according to his own imagination, under various kinds of false worship of God and each under a form of godliness; not to mention those open and atrocious blasphemies against God with which the world is wholly filled, wherefore, there is the greatest need to pray that the Father may be glorified; that is that he may be known by the preaching of the Gospel, and be thereby honored as he desires and ought to be honored; that all erroneous doctrines and false worshipings of God, together with all human traditions and dreams, may cease and be abolished; and that the Gospel alone may prevail and shine.

In summary, then, Luther proclaimed that God is only known, revealed, and glorified in Christ, the Son. Further, God is only served, thanked, praised, extolled, and magnified in giving glory to Christ. Luther argued that those who would speculate about the hidden nature of God and claim knowledge of God apart from the mediation of Christ were dealing only with a god of their own making.

The theme of the natural unity of the Father and the Son was part of Luther's theological understanding from early on. It is interesting that Luther still preached in such detail his views concerning the

knowledge of God through the mediation of Christ. Again and again, as the text dictated, Luther emphasized this relation.

He treated John 17:3 at great length: "And this is eternal life, that they might know thee, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."

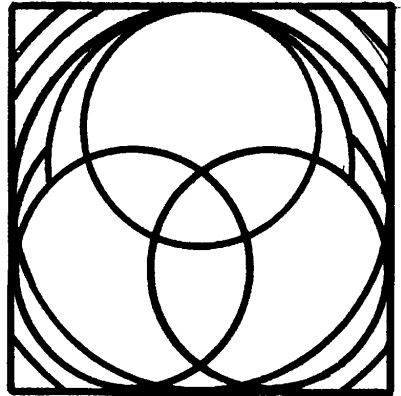
What is eternal life and how does one receive it? Luther answered that human reason cannot understand even the least article of faith without the Word of God. Since it is Christ who makes eternal life possible for believers, and since only God can actually grant eternal life, Christ must be God. Eternal life comes to those who know the Father, through the ministry of the Son.

What is to be understood by "whom thou hast sent"? Luther answered:

Consider thou and fully weigh the reason why Christ came, and what he did for the world—he came down from heaven, and was made man, that he might finish the work which the Father gave him to do (as you will find he himself hereafter saith); that is, that he might take the sins of the whole world upon himself, and might die to blot them out, and to appease the wrath of the Father; and that he might in his own person overcome death and the devil, and redeem us unto himself.

This "sending down" of the Son to and for each of us gives the Christian confidence of the Father's favor. The "sending of the Son" demonstrates God's will and mind, "so as to leave nothing for us to behold but an immeasurable and inexhaustible ocean of love and mercy."

Knowledge of God's love and favor is not a work. Works are things we "do," but knowledge is a thing we "receive." Luther declared those teachers as false who proclaimed a naked knowledge of God outside of Christ. He saw this especially in the



doctrines of the pope and of the monks. Luther wrote: "Here is the point of contention and controversy, wherein we dissent from the doctrine of the pope—he has taken away from us this *Knowledge*, and will not leave it pure and uncorrupted." But Luther further asserted that if the pope would leave this knowledge uncorrupted he would never say one word against him. In light of current discussions between Lutherans and Roman Catholics regarding the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, this remark of Luther's is an instructive assertion.

Luther made a distinction between earthly and heavenly works, based upon their different states and conditions. Our human problem is that we want to offer earthly works when only heavenly works can suffice. Since we cannot provide heavenly works, as only the Christ can offer those heavenly works, earthly works remain null and void for salvation. Because he believed that neither the papists nor the fanatics were willing to rely solely on the knowledge of Christ as the mediator of human salvation, he concluded that both have lost the word and the knowledge together.

At verse 11, Luther followed the text into a new set of ideas. He posed the question, "How comes it to pass that Christ says, 'I go to my Father,' when he must (as God) still be in the world?" Citing writings from the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Psalm 139, Luther affirmed the presence of God throughout creation. If God is so omnipresent, how, then, could Christ say that he was going out of the world? Luther answered:

This question may be answered and in two ways. In one way, according to frothy, human wisdom, that he has ascended upon high, and sits above as in a swallows' nest.... But I, according to the Scripture, give this answer, and say that 'in the world' means to be in its external and sensible state, that is, to enjoy this life which the world enjoys, which is called the natural life in which we eat, drink, sleep, labor, and take care of our families; in a word, in which we make use of the world; and all things necessary unto this life.... Therefore he (Christ) no longer lives a life after the manner of this world; that is, he no longer is in a corporal life, which is to be supported by meat, drink, and other corporal necessities.

In this way Luther argued Christ's "ubiquity," his everywhere-ness. It was with this understanding that Luther countered the Swiss, who insisted that Christ could not be naturally present in the Lord's Supper because he was naturally located in heaven. Luther insisted: "We are to declare and to believe, that God is present wherever you call upon him, in prison, in the waters, in the fire, and in all afflictions and necessities."

The major focus of the sermons rested upon the exposition of the verse "that they may be one as we are." It was a matter of grave concern to Luther that this text had been so distorted by many parties and sects

in the church's history. He cited the Arians, for example, who argued that since no two people share the same essence and nature, therefore Christ and God cannot do so. But Christ argued out of a unity of essence, that just as Christ and God are one "thing," so Christians are to be one "thing." Luther appealed to Paul's "body of Christ" imagery from 1 Corinthians 10 and 12.

When one member of the body is attacked or suffers any ill, spiritual or physical, the whole of the body is there for help and consolation. What keeps this union of Christ's people intact is "by abiding in that Word we have received from Christ. Christ considers whatever happens unto us as happening to him: and he holds that watchful care over us, that neither the world nor the devil can overcome us, nor injure us by any evil however great."

The idea that Christ's unity with his people provides the basis for the unity of the Christian church was much on Luther's mind at this time in his career. It was a central focus of Luther's struggle with the Swiss reformers and formed a large part of his argumentation in his *Great Confession on the Lord's Supper* of 1528.³

The last significant focus of Luther's concern in these sermons was "sanctification." Commenting upon verses 17-18, "Having been justified by the Word of Christ, how is the Christian to live?" Luther answered:

But we say, that we are to hear that word from the mouth of Christ only. He that hears and believes this, has rightly the truth of God which sanctifies without

³ Dennis A. Laskey, "In Faith and Fervent Love: The Concept of *Communio* in Luther's Understanding of the Lord's Supper," unpublished Th.D. dissertation, The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1983.

any hypocritical show: for if you believe his word, then you can hold fast no hope or confidence in your own reason and wisdom, nor in your strength and works; nor can you arrogate to yourself any holiness because of them, as to be able to avail before God. Therefore, those that are of this mind cannot be proud and arrogant; for they can find nothing in themselves, on account of which they can boast. And you see, that unfeigned humility always follows where there is unfeigned faith. And, true patience and love to the fellow believers upon true humility. When we are under the influence of this, we despise no one, we serve and are kind to all; and whatever evil comes upon us, we endure it with a patient mind; we are not wrathful, nor do we revenge injuries, when we meet ingratitude, perfidy, grief, ignoring, and reproach.

Luther beautifully described how good works flow naturally from true knowledge and love of God as ascertained in the word and person of Christ. Our sanctification is precisely that of Christ—he makes holy those who cleave to his holiness.

Although many more treasures might be mined from this exquisite *Esposition*, suffice these selections to indicate the rich-

ness and breadth of Luther's reaction to this text. The biblical text controlled the progress of Luther's arguments, but it did not confine them. In John 17 Luther found the whole of the gospel message as the Word of Christ proclaimed to the world, revealing the nature and will of the Father.

Robert H. Fischer, to whom this essay is dedicated, likes to say of Luther that when you touch any part of his thought you will find all of his thought. Such is certainly true of his *Esposition*. This reading report intends to lead others to mine this writing of Luther, and to discover in Cole's translations further access into the mind of the Reformer.

And this is the reason why Christians, and especially ministers ought to desire a longer life; which we, together with Christ, ought to ask of God for them; for it is of the greatest importance that they should have their lives prolonged as much as possible.... For it is a laborious and arduous task, with all our labors, devotedness, and diligence, to keep the Word among a few; and a wonder it is, that it does not come to destruction utterly, and that all do not go over to the devil together.

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