

“Simultaneously Sinner and Saint,” a Second Opinion for the ELCA Journal THE LUTHERAN

Colleagues,

Last month's ThTh 634 amounted to an Op Ed to Peter Marty's piece published in the August issue of the ELCA national magazine THE LUTHERAN. It wouldn't have been so vexing if the article had not carried the caption: "A Lutheran Christian Life for Today." For *Luther-an* it was not. Straight Erasmus instead. That August article was the second in an on-going series under that caption in THE LUTHERAN.

Comes now the September issue. This one in the series is "Simultaneously Two People." It focuses on the Siamese-twin character of Christian life using Luther's phrase "simultaneously sinner and saint." Before I got around to doing my own grumbling—for this one irritates too with its off-center presentation of that "Lutheran" predicate—Richard Jungkuntz, Jr. sends me his own Second Opinion. He's done it better than I could. I pass it on to you today.

Is ThTh on the verge of its own Second Opinion series—one a month—as the series continues in THE LUTHERAN?

[These surnames, Marty and Jungkuntz, as some of you know, were prominent during the "Wars of the Missouri Synod" in the previous century where the fathers of Peter and Richard were allies in the struggle. Two tidbits. Jungkuntz, sr. wound up getting sacked (twice!) by Jacob Preus as he stormed to power in the LCMS. Marty, sr. ("safely" employed outside the synod) was commencement speaker for the first Seminex graduating class in

1974.

Both Marty senior and Jungkuntz senior published books on Lutheran theology of baptism during those days, Marty 1962, Jungkuntz 1968. When the Jungkuntz volume went to a second edition, Marty, sr. wrote the foreword. Marty, sr. wrote a book on Luther that was featured in ThTh 296. You can find it at <https://crossings.org/thursday/2004/thur021204.shtml>]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Where’s Luther...?”

The “action step,” if you will, of the column, “Simultaneously Two People”(third in the series of “A Lutheran Christian Way of Life” in THE LUTHERAN), is that we carry around two notes in our pockets – one saying, “You are the apple of my eye;” the other, “I am dust and ashes” – never favoring one pocket over the other (“at our peril”), to remind us that we are completely and at the same time both loving/lousy, saint/sinner, apple/failure, good/bad ... “...WHOLLY REDEEMED/wholly sinful...”

I was glad to see the words “wholly redeemed” in that grab-bag of positive and negative attributes, for if not for those words, “(are)...redeemed” [passive participle], one might think that being “loving,” a “saint,” an “apple in God’s eye,” and “good” are examples of what we are by nature on the “plus side” as Christians – or so it seemed from the column overall. Fortunately, those words, [are] redeemed, give the lie to that kind of thinking, and provide the true meaning and significance behind Luther’s so-called paradoxical Christian identity. That is, they correctly point us in the right direction by placing us on the receiving end of God’s action with respect to our being

“good”; the other positive descriptive adjectives leave the impression that there is something about us that is so, as we are. In that regard, the Christian is no better than (and more often less so) than the non-Christian.

UNfortunately, the column does not tell us, or give us a clue, how it is—why it is – that, as Christians, we ARE redeemed – and therefore “good” in terms of that side of our Christian identity: “wholly saint[s] and wholly sinner[s] at the same time.” And, absent the fleshing out of those words, one is left to conclude that Luther’s great insight was not that we are sometimes one and sometimes the other, or partly one and partly the other, but that we are, paradoxically and contradictory to logical thinking, one hundred percent each at the same time as a matter of course – and that our great challenge is but to recognize that fact, albeit avoiding smugness and self-denigration while doing so.

It’s true that there is something “Lutheran” in an admonition to avoid either smugness or self-denigration with regard to our status before God, but we are not told why this is so, namely, that “think[ing] that this victory is or ought to be complete [in this lifetime] drives either to despair or to pride, i.e., to DISBELIEVING IN THE GOSPEL AS GOD’S TRUE DESCRIPTION OF HIM. ‘Forgive us our trespasses’ is the constant prayer of the believer, not the unbeliever” (from commentary on C.F.W. Walther’s “Gesetz und Evangelium” in “The Orthodox Teacher and the Word of God,” THE CRESSET 25 [March, 1962], p.16, emphasis added).

The “great insight” Luther derived from pondering Romans, then, was not the great paradox that we are both one hundred percent good and one hundred percent bad persons at the same time; that presents an incomplete picture and does not properly distinguish Law and Gospel. Rather, Luther’s insight regarding the “at-one-

ness” of our simultaneous two natures was that, just as a sick man, who (being treated by a doctor) is “both sick and well at the same time... sick in fact, but...well because of the sure promise of the doctor, whom he trusts and who has reckoned him as already cured...,” so too, the Christian is “at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man; a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He has completely cured him. And thus, he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact he is still a sinner...” (LW 25,260). Some important Lutheran concepts here: imputation, promise of God, trust, hope.

[This commentary, from his Lectures on Romans and written between 1515 and 1516, is where the well-known apothegm attributed to Luther, “simul iustus et peccator” (at the same time righteous and a sinner), first occurs – except here Luther has written the reverse: simul peccator et Iustus. It is in his Lectures on Galatians, in 1531, that he writes in the more familiar order, “Sic homo Christianus simul iustus et peccator...” (WA XL(I), 368, 25-26). His other frequently quoted apothegm, “simultaneously saint and sinner,” is also from his Lectures on Galatians, except again, as in Romans, it is reversed, “...simul peccator et Sanctus” (WA XL(I), 368, 8-9).]

Even the very language Luther uses conveys the “grammar” of our paradoxical status: we are actively sinners – sinners “in truth” – while passively righteous/just(ified). In Latin, the nominative suffix -TOR indicates agency (and is evident in many of our English words: actor, senator, janitor, editor, inspector, director, and so on). Thus, to be a PECCATOR (sinner) is to be someone who sins. To be IUSTUS (righteous), on the other hand, is to be thus only in a passive sense, “the adjectival -TUS suffix (indistinguishable in form from the ending of a passive participle) ‘[having] the force of provided with.’ The righteous man, in other words, is not ‘just,’ which no man can be, but

‘justified,’ by God’s act, not by his own” (John C. Leeds, *RENAISSANCE SYNTAX AND SUBJECTIVITY: IDEOLOGICAL CONTENTS OF LATIN AND THE VERNACULAR IN SCOTTISH PROSE CHRONICLES* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010], 26-27). Brian Cummings, in *THE LITERATURE OF THE REFORMATION: GRAMMAR AND GRACE* (Oxford University Press, 2002) has an extended treatment of Luther’s use of active and passive GRAMMATICAL categories in his theological treatment of activity and passivity.

For Luther, then, we are wholly sinners by nature, actively – it is our origin – even though no fault of our own – except that it is! We are wholly saints – righteous/just(ified) – passively, by the grace of God: it is a righteousness given (“imputed”) by God; not imputed willy-nilly, because God is “a nice guy” (to quote Bob Bertram from another context), but imputed through Christ, into whose death and resurrection we have been baptized and whence comes our being MADE righteous—being a “saint” – which is but to be a forgiven sinner. For Lutherans, justification, baptism, forgiveness of sins are all synonyms. In other words, it is through God’s acting in Christ, that is ours by faith, and not because of any character trait with which we may be endowed, that we are saints, are righteous – are “good.” This passivity, this trusting reception of grace (= faith) as the source of our “goodness” – and not something of our own doing or being – was missing from the article, except for that barest hint with the words “(are) wholly redeemed,” where GOD is the agent who says “Yes” to us in Christ; and so, Luther went missing.

Kathryn Kleinhans put it well in an earlier column of *THE LUTHERAN*: “Our dual identity as saints and sinners reminds us that our righteousness always depends on God’s grace, never on our own religious behavior. At the same time, our recognition that sin, while forgiven, remains a powerful force in the world and in ourselves gives us a realistic ability to confront cruelty

and evil, confident that God will have the last word” (“Lutheranism 101: Culture or confession?” THE LUTHERAN, June 2006).

As for the two notes, why not just one note in one pocket – a Luther note, “I’ve been baptized!”– that covers both in the way he intended?

Richard W. D. Jungkuntz