

Response to Luther Research

Colleagues,

[NB: We perpetrated a numbering glitch with last week's ThTh. Dated March 25 we sent it out as #41, but we'd already used that number on our March 18 issue. Thus our March 25 issue really was #42. So make the change if you give any attention to such things. Today's edition is #43.]

The text for today's #43 comes from Carolyn Schneider. We sent out a sermon of hers 2 weeks ago which has elicited good words from some of you. Carolyn is on the Crossings Bd. of Directors, an ELCA pastor, and soon to get her PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary. Thereafter she moves to Texas Lutheran University (Seguin, Texas) to take up a teaching position. Carolyn's a "mish-kid" whose parents, Darlene and Dave Schneider, are nowadays at Enhlahleni Lutheran Seminary in Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa).

In today's ThTh #43 Carolyn responds to my report a few weeks ago [ThTh 38, 25 Feb.] on the Luther Research coming out of Finland these days. Carolyn knows this Finnish scholarship very well from her doctoral work at Princeton. She also is gifted with other competencies as you will see directly.

Peace & Joy at Eastertide!

Ed Schroeder

Hi, Ed,

I really enjoyed reading your Thursday Theology piece about the Finnish Luther research. You had asked beforehand if I would send you my comments on it. Here they are. It was mostly right on, though I would like to firm up a couple of details on Athanasius and Osiander.

It isn't really true that Athanasius was the architect of the Nicene Creed. He may have had a hand in it, but he went to the

Council of Nicaea as a deacon, maybe 30 years old, with his bishop, Alexander. When he succeeded Alexander three years later, however, he certainly became a ferocious defender of the Nicene Creed.

The statement that Athanasius was one of Luther's favorite theologians also needs some elaboration. It was mostly through stories about Athanasius rather than through writings by Athanasius that Luther came to know and like him. Luther also liked writings that he thought were by Athanasius that actually are not, such as the Athanasian Creed (though it is "Athanasian" in content).

On Osiander: Although the Finns are often accused of interpreting Luther in an "Osiandrian" way, they are not actually trying to rehabilitate Osiander. In light of the accusations, however, they are studying Osiander more closely to find out what he really said and what the problem with it really is (and is not), in order to distinguish their project from his. See, for example, Simo Peura's essay, "Gott und Mensch in der Unio. Die Unterschiede im Rechtfertigungsverständnis bei Osiander und Luther." [God and Humankind in Union. The differences in Osiander's and Luther's Understanding of Justification.] This essay was published in "Unio: Gott und Mensch in der nachreformatorischen Theologie." [Union: God and Humankind in Post-reformation Theology] Edited by Matti Repo and Rainer Vinke, 33-61. Helsinki: Suomalainen Teologinen Kirjallisuusseura and Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1996.

You close your review with a question to the Finns – about law and gospel. Here is where my ruminations have brought me on that topic as I have worked through my dissertation ("The Connection between Christ and Christians in Athanasius and Luther").

Does the Finnish work not intensify the work of the Law and the

Gospel? I think it does. Here's why. As Sammeli Juntunen makes clear in his book, "Der Begriff des Nichts bei Luther" ("The Concept of 'Nothing' in Luther"), Luther does not see sin (that which the Law restricts, forbids, punishes, and condemns) as merely a matter of outward behavior, of appearance or phenomenon, nor of an "accident" separable from our real substance. (Thus, sin is more than bad relationships between us, God, and others, for the Aristotelian categories of "accidents" are: quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, having, action, being acted on.) Sin has formed all of us (more on the word "form" later) so that we cannot choose to live without it. It seems to me that the theological implication of this is that, in order for God to destroy sin, God would have to destroy us, the very ones whom God has created with loving hands! So God comes in the flesh to "transfer" us into Christ, whose humanity is capable of dying and being utterly destroyed, and whose divinity is capable of living and creating new life.

From Christ's side, this transference took place his whole life long as he gathered sinners to himself "formally" (that is "medieval-speak" for "really;" it has to do with the essence of one's identity. It also has to do with something's development according to its essence, but that aspect of it will take us off track here; I'll come back to it later) so that he could die as "the only sinner" in the world (as Luther calls Jesus while commenting on Galatians 3:13 in 1535), and could rise up as a new creation. From our side, the transference happens in faith, which is a creation of Christ's own Holy Spirit or "Breath" in us when we absorb the Word of God. This causes us to put ourselves in Christ, so that we may go under with him on the cross, and come up with him in the resurrection, leaving our sin and the Law that stands against it behind. Because of this transference, Luther calls Christ our "alien righteousness," meaning not that Christ with his righteousness is far from us,

but that Christ with his righteousness is ours only by this faithful transference; it is not native to us.

But once we are a new creation in Christ, we do give birth to a righteousness conceived in us by the Holy Spirit. This is our own righteousness, which God gives us as a gift to administer for the good of the world; Luther calls it our “proper righteousness.” Now, here is where we get back to that other aspect of “formally,” the part about identity developing according to its real essence. When Christ identifies with sinners, he ends up by becoming “nothing” on the cross and in the grave under God’s curse because the essence of sin is a deception; it is a lie, a mirage of cruel hope, as Juntunen points out, and God, who is the Truth, reveals it for what it is through the Law and opposes it.

The difference between us and Christ, as Luther explains it in his comments on Psalm 22 [1519-1521], is that Christ is not deceived by sin. He does not participate in it but sees it clearly and “objectively.” So there is a difference between Christ and us with regard to sin. Yet Christ did not WANT to be different from us in that respect, and that is why he has our sin “formally,” as Luther puts it. So Christ assumes our person with its sin and lays aside his prerogatives, going through with his condemnation in our person “formally.”

Because Christ is not only fully human but also fully God, when we identify ourselves with him by faith so that Christ is our Form, then developing according to our Form means growing in a real life, becoming “con-formed” to Christ.

Precisely because Christ is for us at the very deepest level of his and our being, the good news is not only that we have a new understanding, or a new set of values and hope, or a new kind of behavior. We are new beings entirely, now already in Christ by

faith, and in the future by hope in what God is making us in ourselves. And all this inner form takes bodily shape in loving action, just as the Word of God in the flesh was busy loving the world. Then who we are and what we do “rhyme,” to use an expression of Luther’s.

It seems to me that it is just this insistence upon the ontological depth of Luther’s theology that makes the Finnish work so fruitful in intensifying both Law and Gospel. It necessitates Christ, and only Christ will do. Then it makes him really good for us, a sure place in which to set our confidence because we are thoroughly “done” in him, both our old selves and our new selves. Nothing here depends upon our own construal of things. Yet nothing takes place here without touching us, the way God’s finger touched the earth in the beginning. Now, tell me that’s not good news!