

Some Luther Quotes for the Feast of the Holy Trinity

Colleagues:

[We're still in the afterglow of Bishop Francisco Claver's visit last week. Steve Kuhl, who had just reviewed Claver's book for you (ThTh #572), was here for some of the time. Much of the fun for those of us gathered around was "just listening" to the two of them conduct a Lutheran-Catholic dialog on THE MAKING OF A LOCAL CHURCH. In an email just received Claver tells me: "I'll be writing a comment on Steve's review when I'm free and I'll send it to you when it's done. Nothing much different from what we spoke of there." When it comes to us, we'll pass it on to you. And then maybe Steve's thoughts about those conversations too.]

For this week, still in the octave of the Feast of the Holy Trinity, some bons mots from Luther on that topic.

Excerpted from the devotional booklet "Day by Day We Magnify Thee," pp. 227, 228, 229.

From a sermon on John 3:

"The other feasts in the year wrap our Lord up in the works and wonders which He has done. At Christ's nativity we celebrate that God was made Man, at Easter that He rose from the dead, at Whitsun that He poured out the Holy Ghost and instituted the Church, and so forth, so that all the other feasts of the year speak of our Lord God as He is seen clothed in some work. But this feast shows us how God is in Himself, in His divine nature without any wrappings and works. Here you must soar high above all reason, leaving all creatures far below, and must swing

yourself up and listen only to what God says of Himself, and of His innermost being. In no other way can we know this. And there God's folly and the world's wisdom clash."Therefore we should not dispute about how it can be that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are One God, for it is by its very nature beyond all reason, but it should be enough for us that God speaks thus about Himself and reveals Himself thus in His Word.

"This is a strengthening message, and it should make our hearts joyful towards God. For we see that all three Persons, the whole Godhead, turns Himself to us in order that we poor wretched people should be helped against sin, death, and the devil, that we may be brought to justification, the Kingdom of God, and eternal life."

From The Bondage of the Will:

"This hidden Will should not be investigated but adored, with trembling, as a deep, holy secret of God's High Majesty, which He has reserved to Himself."Thus we must not search God's nature and His hidden will. For therein we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He desire to have anything to do with us. God is at work in many ways which He does not reveal to us in His Word. Likewise He has many intentions which he has not revealed to us in His Word. Therefore we should behold the Word and leave the unfathomable Will alone, for we have received no command about it. For we must direct ourselves in accordance with His Word and not with His unfathomable Will. It behooves us not to seek the high, great, holy secrets of the Majesty who dwells in a light which no one can approach, as Paul says (1 Timothy 6). We should cleave unto God who permits us to draw near to Him, and to Him who was made man, Jesus Christ the crucified (as St. Paul says), in whom are hidden all the

treasures of God's wisdom. For in Him we have superabundantly received all things which we know and which it behooves us to know."

From Table-Talk:

"Why then do we poor wretched people rack our brains over the nature of God, while we yet fail to grasp by faith the rays of the divine promises or comprehend a spark of God's commands and works, both of which He has confirmed with words and mighty works?" Of a truth, we ought to teach of God's unsearchable and unfathomable Will, but to take upon ourselves to understand it is a very dangerous thing, through which we may stumble and break our neck. It is my habit to restrain and direct myself by the word which the Lord Christ spoke to Peter: 'What is that to you? Follow me.' For Peter also disputed and brooded over the works of God, asking in what manner He would deal with another, that is, what might befall John. And again, how He answered Philip when He said (John 14:8): 'Show us the Father,' what did He reply? 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' For Philip, too, was anxious to behold the Majesty and Presence of the Father. And again, even if we knew all these hidden judgments of God, of what use and benefit could it be to us over and above the command and promise of God?

"Yet over and above all things practice faith in God's promises and in the works of His commandments."

What Luther says in these three citations signals several things. 1) The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is most of all doxology—"not to be investigated, but adored." 2) Trinitarian theology is adoration language for speaking about God and have

it come out as Gospel, Good News indeed to be adored.. 3) The fundamental difference between Christian trinitarianism and all forms of undifferentiated monotheism is just that: speaking of God in a way that comes out as Good News.” This is clearly the case with the monotheism of Islam. The confession of Allah as both just and merciful in the Koran is “iffy” Gospel at best. You simply have to do something to trigger Allah’s mercy. And Judaism too with a Messiah not-yet-arrived, has “not yet” a means for coping with the one and only God there is, who continues to “count trespasses,” as one Jesus-era Israelite said. Or in the language of the Hebrew scriptures, who continues “to visit the iniquities of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of commandment-breakers.”

And then finally this one from Luther’s Large Catechism, which gave me my first clue that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is a proposal for “how to talk about God and have it come out sheer Gospel.”

Book of Concord (Tappert edition p.419:63-65)

“In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. He created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us. Moreover, having bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. As we explained before, we could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible Judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.” [Note the sequence reversal. The confession goes “Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” but in our life with God the order is reversed: Holy Spirit brings us to Christ and Christ brings us back to

the God as Abba-father, no longer terrible Judge.]

Which leads to Luther's final note about the Gospel-emptiness of "Christ-less" monotheisms.

Tappert p.419:66

"These articles of the Creed, therefore, divide and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside the Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites, even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

In ecumenical conversations with missiologists where I have cited this paragraph, objections regularly arise about that "wrath and damnation for those who do not have the Lord Christ." Can it really be that bad for those who are "outside the Christian church"? Yet is that any more severe than God "visiting iniquities" in that ancient contract at Mount Sinai referenced above? Or is that any more grim than the closing words in chapter 3 of John's gospel – that same chapter with the famous John 3:16 "God so loved the world" passage at the center of it – "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not listen to the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath"?

But thanks be to God whose trinitarian self-disclosure is sheer gospel!

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder