

# Steven Kuhl on “Reformation Spirituality” (Part Two)

Colleagues,

A week ago I sent you the first half of a talk by Steve Kuhl on Reformation ideas about spirituality. Here is the second half. There is much of interest here, even for those of us who think as a matter of course about the distinction between Law and Gospel. For details on where and when Steve presented this, see the introduction to last week’s post.

Speaking of that introduction, it begin with some rumination on Ash Wednesday that included the following summation of what the day’s sign conveys: “You are ash, nothing more. / You are Christ’s, nothing less.” The second line prompted Gary Simpson of Luther Seminary to send a quick one-sentence response:

“As Martin Luther notes, ‘We are Christ(‘s), both with and without the apostrophe’ [with a special thanks to Jaroslav Pelikan’s brilliant translation].”

It took me ten seconds of mulling before I got the point. Most of you will get there in five, I suspect.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

---

**Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality**

by Steven C. Kuhl

Part Two

## **The Spirituality of the Gospel and Luther's Evangelical Breakthrough**

15. When, in 1507, Luther confessed to Johann Staupitz that he hated God, Staupitz did two things. First, he tried to assure Luther that we are forgiven before God by virtue of the blood of Jesus, regardless of what the church taught. Second, as Luther's superior, he ordered Luther to become a Scripture scholar, so he could take over Staupitz's own professorship at the University of Wittenberg. Evidently, deep down, Staupitz believed Luther would find the help he needed in the Bible. As one might expect, Luther poured himself into Scripture with the same intensity he devoted to his monastic commitments. But he also did so armed with the latest scholarly resources made available by a new intellectual movement called the Renaissance. Wary of the way the reigning scholastic method of studies uncritically accepted the contemporary state of affairs as a consistent development of Christian and Roman culture, the Renaissance's battle cry was "back to the sources." The presupposition was clear: "Take nothing for granted, check out the sources yourself." In theology that meant going "back to the Bible" and the patristic sources in their original languages. For Luther that meant learning classical Latin, Greek and Hebrew so he could study the Bible and the works of Augustine in their original language.
16. Luther did exactly as Staupitz commanded him and in 1512 received his doctorate and took the post of Professor of Biblical Studies at the University of Wittenberg. Then, in 1516, it happened. While studying and teaching Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther had his "Gospel Aha," his "eureka" moment, which is usually called his "evangelical breakthrough." As an old man, Luther explained how this

“Aha!” happened. It came while he struggled to understand Romans 1:17, “For the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” At issue was the concept of the “righteousness of God” as Paul uses it in this passage.

17. All of a sudden, “by the mercy of God,” Luther says, he saw everything in context. He had always assumed that the term the “righteousness of God” referred to the demands of God given in the Law for us to fulfill, that is, “an active righteousness.” And since only those who do them perfectly are right with God, the righteousness of God always spelled doom for him. But Paul was not talking about the Law here. He was talking about the Gospel “as the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16). He was talking about another kind of righteousness of God. Here the righteousness of God is a merciful gift that God gives, not a demand that God imposes. It is given on account of Christ, who died and rose for us and is received simply on the basis of faith, that is, by trusting the giver. Luther now came to realize that the Gospel initiated a new kind of spirituality: one that consists, not in doing of the Law, but in trusting the promise, which he summarizes as justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Concerning the Gospel Luther says,

Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through the open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture by memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, (1) the work of God, that is, what God does in us, (2) the power of God, with which he makes us strong, (3) the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, (4) the strength of God, (5) the salvation of God, (6) the

glory of God... Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. (*Luther Works*, vol, 34, 337.)

## **Basic Ingredients in a Lutheran Spirituality**

18. In order to see what this spirituality of the Gospel looks like in Luther's context, one simply needs to study how Luther and his companions set out to reform—or better, reground—church teaching and practice and the Christian life in light of the Gospel “Aha.” It began on October 31, 1517 with Luther's 95 Theses, which explained why the sale of indulgences was contradictory to the Gospel, and reached its climax on June 25, 1530 with the presentation of the Augsburg Confession to Emperor Charles V. This was a comprehensive explanation of how current teaching and practice in the church could be reformed to accord with the Gospel. Following are some basic features that inform Lutheran spirituality.
19. Holy God and sinful humanity are the two poles that form the ellipse of humanity's “natural” spirituality or relation to God, what I've called the spirituality of the Law. This entails a mystery that follows the plotline of Genesis 1-3. God created the world and its human caretakers to live in creative harmony with God, but humanity rebelled and usurped the prerogatives of God for itself. In response, God justly displays his anger and displeasure by imposing on humanity his Law, which functions in two ways. First, it functions “spiritually” by showing humanity the evidence of its rebellion for which it is being sentenced to death. Second, it functions “socially” by restraining or channeling human rebellion for the sake of maintaining some semblance of creativity

and order in God's creation. The root of sin is therefore rebellion against God, a rebellion that reverberates throughout the whole creation. The essence of the law is God's anger rooting out sin, an anger that also reverberates throughout the whole creation.

20. Christ and faith are the two poles that form the ellipse of a spirituality of the Gospel, which, as Lutherans see it, is intended by God to replace our "natural" spirituality, the spirituality of the Law. This also entails a mystery. The spirituality of the Law spells our doom before God, and there is nothing we can do to change that: for God is right and we are wrong. Moreover, God doesn't have to do anything to change it: for he is right and we are wrong. But even more, it would seem that God shouldn't change it, for if he did he would be contradicting what is right. Therein lies the mystery of the Gospel. In deciding to show mercy to sinners God *is* contradicting himself. But in this contradiction lies the reason for God the Father, in corroboration with God the Holy Spirit, to send God the Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us. Jesus is God battling for us against God's own legally sanctioned condemnation of us—this is the meaning of his cross. In winning that battle he wins the right for God to forgive us and to make us children of God and heirs of eternal life—this is the meaning of his resurrection. Since this is pure gift, pure promise, we benefit from it by trusting it, that is, by taking it to heart as true. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Spirit's job is not only to make sure that this "good news" is published everywhere, but also that those who hear it will believe it. Faith in Christ is therefore also a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

21. The Bible plays a central, authoritative role in Luther's spirituality of the Gospel, but not necessarily in the way

that it does in many *sola scriptura* (“scripture alone”) theologies. For Luther, the Bible can be likened to the baby Jesus lying in the manger bed of straw. When reading the Bible it is as important for us to distinguish Law and Gospel as it was for the shepherds to distinguish the manger (consisting of wood and straw) from the baby. The main point of Scripture is to focus us on Christ and his benefits, aka, the Gospel. Lutherans, therefore, tend to read the Bible not as an instruction book about what to do, but as a public proclamation about Christ, and as teaching examples, historical and metaphorical, of the interaction between God’s two ways, Law and Gospel, in the world.

22. The sacraments are not obligations to be done, but means of grace through which God himself comes to us with his promise to forgive us and justify us for Christ’s sake. As such, the only appropriate response is faith. Faith in the promise is analogous to gratitude for a gift. The gift creates/elicits/brings forth the gratitude, the gratitude does not merit the gift. Although the term “sacrament” is usually reserved for Baptism, Holy Communion, and Confession and Absolution, Luther often described five ways in which the Gospel comes to us. Besides these three he also included preaching and the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. The point of Lutheran sacramental theology is that we can know with certainty where, how, and when God is coming to us with grace. Sacraments are the antidotes to any spirituality conceived as an agnostic search for God.
23. Vocation is living by faith in God and love of neighbor in the midst of life’s duties and responsibilities, challenges and opportunities, sorrows and joys, uncertainty and monotony. It means that, no matter where we are in the world, this is where God calls us to be.

Central to a Lutheran spirituality, as it relates to vocation, is the one-way nature of the relationship between faith and good works. Faith produces good works, not the other way around. To the contrary, doing good works can actually strain faith. That is why regular participation in the means of grace is so important. Therefore, in this spirituality of the Gospel, faith in Christ alone defines our relationship to God. Good works and self-discipline define our relationship to our neighbors and ourselves.

24. Prayer is a natural extension of faith and is therefore a very mundane and “non-mystical” feature of the spirituality of the Gospel. Put simply, it is a matter of depending on God for whatever concerns us. Using the Lord’s Prayer as a model, prayer can be likened to our contribution to an everyday conversation with a parent, that is, someone who is not our peer, yet whom we trust implicitly, someone whom we believe knows what we need better than we. Prayer can be formal or informal, individual or corporate, desperate or routine, clumsy or elegant. The point is that prayer is a natural feature of a trusting relationship. If prayer be likened to conversation, then it is only half, my half, of the conversation. The other half would naturally be the Word of God to me. Therefore prayer always presupposes that we take not only the stance of a speaker, but also of a listener. After all, what’s the point in asking if you’re not listening for the response?

### **Other Reformed Movements**

25. To fulfill the assignment, let me say a few, very brief, inadequate words about two other Reformation Protestant movements, Calvinism and the Anabaptists.
26. [Calvinism](#) stands very close to Lutheranism on numerous

issues, especially with regard to its anti-Pelagian emphasis. And yet, there are significant differences. First, while Calvinism affirms “justification by faith alone” as a dictum, it conceives of it very differently than Luther did. This is because of Calvin’s failure to understand the fundamental difference between providence (Law) and promise (Gospel) as exhibited in his doctrines of election and double predestination. Second, while Calvinism regards the sacraments as effective signs, the idea of the real “bodily” presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements, so central to Luther, is replaced by the idea of a “spiritual” or “mystical” feeding by the faithful, by faith, on the ascended body of Christ located in heaven at the right hand of God. These issues are fundamentally Christological in nature and harken back to Luther’s earlier debate with Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg. Third, the core of Calvin’s theology and spirituality is embodied in the axiom, “the chief end of man is to give glory of God.” Under that rubric, Calvin again blunts Luther’s sharp distinction between Law and Gospel, arguing that Law and Gospel are meant to complement, not contradict one another, as means to achieve that end. Finally, Calvin’s spirituality is often described as a “worldly” spirituality. For it is in the course of daily living—hard work, frugality, charitable dealings, and moral restraint—that one glorifies God and, therefore, in the fruits of daily living that one beholds the sign of one’s election.

27. Anabaptists were the most radical of the Protestant reform movements and, as a result, they faced extreme persecution from both Catholics and other Reformation Protestants. In fact, the label “Anabaptist” is a catch-all term for groups of very diverse persuasions. Nevertheless, what they tended to hold in common was a very literal reading

of the Bible and a conviction that true reform of the church meant a return to the literal teachings and practices of the primitive New Testament Church. I'll focus here primarily on the Mennonite version of the Anabaptist tradition.

28. Several beliefs and practices were central for marking Anabaptist (which means "re-baptizers") identity and Anabaptist spirituality. The first mark was "believer's baptism" as opposed to infant baptism. While affirming the slogan "justification by faith," they took "faith" to mean an adult, mature, rational decision to become a follower of Jesus' way of life. Accordingly, the sacraments were not thought of as "effective signs" or means of grace, but as "ordinances" or rituals whereby a believer shows publically his or her pledge to follow Jesus. Baptism was the ordinance by which one made his/her first public profession of faith; the Lord's Supper, viewed as a memorial meal, was the ordinance for identifying those who were deemed faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Those not worthy because of public sin or offense were banned until sufficient repentance was demonstrated. The second mark was "separation from the world" as opposed to an alliance of church and state that had existed since the days of Constantine. Anabaptists did not reject the state as ordained by God to punish evildoers and maintain law and order. But they did reject the use of the power of the state to enforce religious compliance and they reserved the right not to participate in those laws set down by the state that, in their minds, violated the ethics of Christ. The third mark was martyrdom. Anabaptists were convinced that to follow Jesus faithfully could likely lead to persecution and even death. They believed this not only because that was their experience, but because it was the experience of the primitive New Testament and pre-

Constantinian church. Their spirituality focused them on being prepared. In general, the spirituality of the Anabaptist tradition is one of simplicity. They did not adorn their worship with art, ritual, and ornamentation for fear it would detract them from the simple call to follow Christ alone.

29. Although my descriptions of both the Calvinist and Anabaptist traditions are meager at best, I hope that you will have gotten some sense of what was important to them relative to Luther. There is no one Protestant Spirituality. As I end this talk I pray that what I hoped for, at the beginning of it, was realized: namely, that I did no harm, and that a little light has been shed on this important topic.