

Steven Kuhl on “Reformation Spirituality”

Colleagues,

Ash Wednesday just happened. Attendance where I serve was stronger than I expected. Was that a response to the times we're in? I wonder. As ever on Ash Wednesday, the liturgy delivered God's response to the times we're in, or more pointedly, to people enmeshed in such times. I hope the ones who checked in managed to catch that. I tried to underscore how the sign of the ashen cross conveys it without words, this astonishing declaration, God talking from both left and right sides of God's mouth, so to speak, emphasis on the words from the right as the ones for us finally to pin our hearts on.

“You are ash, nothing more.” “You are Christ's, nothing less.”

It suddenly crosses my mind to startle people this coming Sunday, the first in Lent, by having somebody daub the ashes on my forehead again just before I step into the pulpit. I'd tell them to keep their eyes on it, remembering that anything and everything they might hear from me aims simply to explicate what the sign is saying. If I really had some nerve, I'd add that if they hadn't heard such explication by the time I was done, they ought to look for another preacher, one who wouldn't dodge her responsibilities and waste their time.

I think this, of course, because I'm a serious Lutheran, and that's how serious Lutherans think, a point that Steven Kuhl is about to reinforce in a two-part entrée, half served up today and half next week. I pass along a talk that Steve gave four weeks ago at the [Siena Retreat Center](#) in Racine, Wisconsin. The center is owned and operated by the Racine Dominicans, a

community of nuns and lay associates who continue, obviously, to take their missional cues from Dominic of Osma, the founder of the order, with honor paid also to Catherine of Siena. To brush up on their stories, see the website. (We Lutherans, so benighted where the medieval church is concerned, would do well to take some moments for that.)

Steve's assignment, handed him by a former student who now runs the Siena Center, was to introduce a largely Catholic audience to "Protestant spirituality." Now there's a wide-open topic if ever there was one. I'll leave it to you to explore what Kuhl the Lutheran did with it. No, you don't get brownie points if you guess in advance that he divided Law and Gospel; though for the Gospel side of his exposition, you'll have to wait till next week.

By the way, I failed to ask Steve if the event at the Siena Center was driven by a desire there to ponder the pending 500th anniversary of the Reformation. I shouldn't be surprised if it was. Those Racine Dominicans are a thoughtful group; again, explore their website. Hans Küng, the heavyweight Swiss theologian, is another Catholic sibling-in-Christ who is paying close attention to the anniversary. He just weighed in, this very day, with [a call to end the Reformation schism](#). You might find that of interest too.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality

by Steven C. Kuhl

1. Let me begin by saying “thank you” to Claire Anderson and the Siena Center for inviting me here to talk about “Reformation Protestant Approaches to Spirituality” and to all of you for coming to listen and engage in discussion. As you can well guess, it is a subject that can in no way be addressed adequately in 90 minutes, so my prayer is that, at the least, I do no harm in trying to do so, and, at best, I shed a little light on this important topic.

The historic moment in which we stand deserves note: the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Of course, we are all aware of the divisions that the Reformation caused in the Western Church – not only between Protestants and Catholics, but also between Protestants. Nevertheless, in spite of those divisions, it did bring all Christians together in the common conviction that *ecclesia semper reformanda est*, “The Church must always be reformed.” The work of reform is not an alien work in the Church of Jesus Christ, but part of the integral and proper work of the Spirit, as integral and proper as confession and forgiveness is in our individual lives. This is true even when differences emerge about what reform should look like. For the words of Paul to the Corinthians stand as true not only for them, but for every age: “For there must be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you is genuine” (1 Corinthians 11:19). Note, Paul’s concern here is not simply to find out who is “right” but who is “genuine,” by which he means openness to being transformed and reconciled in the truth of the gospel. Nevertheless, as we approach the 500th anniversary of the 16th Century Reformation, I think we can *genuinely* say that Catholics and Reformation Protestants are closer in their views on what reform of the church might look like than ever before in our history, thanks in large part to the dialogical spirit that has emerged among us with the ecumenical movement.

Two Preliminary Questions: One about Protestantism, One about Spirituality

2. The first question to be addressed as we begin to discuss the topic of Reformation Protestant approaches to spirituality is what do we mean by Reformation Protestantism? As hinted earlier, it is important to remember that Reformation Protestantism does not refer to a single theological or spiritual tradition, but to at least four distinct interpretations of the Christian faith, typically categorized as Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican. The only reason we speak of "Protestantism" as though it is a single, unified thing is because of the common focus of their "protest" against what they saw as inexcusable abuses and grave errors (errors that contradicted the spirit of Christianity itself, that is, the gospel) in the theology and practice of the medieval Roman Catholic Church of their day. Outside of this commonly held "protest" by Protestants against the institutional church of their day, they also ended up variously agreeing and disagreeing with one another on a host of issues. In other words, it was easier to find agreement in what was wrong with their Roman Catholic Church—and they all loved her as their Church—than to find agreement on how to right it. Therefore, as we attempt to describe the various Protestant approaches to Spirituality, we will also need to attend to these various areas of agreement and disagreement between Protestants.
3. The second question to be addressed has to do with what is meant by "spirituality." In general, it is not a term that Reformation Protestants have typically used in their theological vocabulary. To illustrate the widespread cultural popularity and eclectic meaning of the term

today, one simply needs to browse the section called "spirituality" in your local Barnes & Noble store. As you do you will notice two very different sources behind the meaning of the term, with one source being the Roman Catholic tradition (especially writers like Thomas Merton) and the other source being the so-called New Age Movement.

4. For Roman Catholicism the term "spirituality" is connected to its monastic religious tradition and the attempt of that tradition to break out of its monastic walls and into the sphere of the laity. This accent on a personal lay spirituality, which seeks to deepen one's relationship to God through disciplined spiritual exercise, started already in the 16th Century Reformation era. Of special note in this regard is St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622). As the reformed-minded Catholic Bishop of Geneva, he not only made the practice of spiritual direction to the laity a cornerstone of his episcopal ministry, but sought to expand that ministry to others by publishing a collection of his personal letters and notes on the practice of spiritual direction in a work called "Introduction to the Devout Life." ¹ Its gentle style of spiritual exercises, compared to Ignatius' harsh spirituality, even drew looks from many Protestants, as it focused spirituality on living a charitable life, rather than an austere one.
5. The New Age Movement tends to use the term "spirituality" to contrast itself from "religion," the quintessential example of which is the denominational church with its defined doctrines, organizational regulations, liturgical practices, and ethical norms. Its influence today can be seen in the rapid growth of a new phenomenon called the "Nones," those who describe themselves by the popular aphorism "I am spiritual, but not religious." ² Unlike the Catholic tradition, they are not generally interested in

God-talk per se, but they do believe in a benign, nebulous “spiritual” reality outside the scope of material reality that is important to hook up with for the sake of self-fulfillment. It is caught up intensely in the individualism of our age and tends to be monastic in outlook, identifying human nature with spiritual nature, dissolving the classical distinction between the human creature and the Creator.

6. As different as these two spiritualities are in terms of theological substance and spiritual practice, they nevertheless have a common emphasis in the idea that spirituality is about improving, fulfilling, or realizing our true selves through a deeper connection with the boundless realm of the Spirit or God. This is attained through a methodical practice of spiritual exercise. (Its affinity, I think, to the more secularized remedies offered by the self-help industry is striking.) Two separate images or analogies come to mind for explaining its overall point of view. The first is the physical fitness image. Gaining spiritual fitness is analogous to gaining physical fitness. You get out of it what you put into it, following certain principles that underlie the process. The second is the ladder image. Spiritual methods are like ladders that we use to climb out of this material realm to get closer to the spiritual realm or God. Your spiritual progress is depended not only on your persistent climbing but also on the length of the ladder, the quality of the methods.
7. These are very different images of spirituality from the ones generally held by Reformation Protestants, which I think turns it on its head. Indeed, they are what I would call spiritualities of the law, focused on what we do to get closer to God, and not spiritualities of the gospel, focused on what God does in Christ to get closer (not in

terms of physical distance but endearment) to us. First, in these modern spiritualities there is no sense of a relational problem between God and us that needs reconciliation through a crucified and risen messiah. Second, in the act of reconciliation, God is always the active agent who strengthens us (encourages us in faith) and comes closer to us (through the means of grace). Third, whatever we do is always a generative response to or result of God's reconciling work for us. In general, this is the anti-Pelagian or pro-Augustinian emphasis in Reformation Protestant spirituality. Anyway, I hope what I say below will clarify what I have said summarily here.

Protestant Spirituality and Luther's Aha!

8. Based on what I said above, a Protestant understanding of spirituality will always seem strange compared to the popular understanding of spirituality that permeates our culture. But truth be told, it was also strange for Luther when he was first "struck" by the Spirit and "given" his great insight (a genuine "aha!") that people are made "right" with God not by their doings, but by God's doing in Christ; not by human merit, but by Christ's merits. That insight is really the beginning of Protestant Spirituality because it clarified for Luther, the first Protestant (though he would have never thought of himself as anything but a catholic), the ways in which God works in the world. In Luther's version of Protestant Spirituality it is important to see that God has two distinct – indeed, two contrary – ways of dealing with the world: the way of law and the way of gospel. Through the law, God kills; through the gospel, God makes alive (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6). Through the law, God accuses us of sin, through the gospel God forgives sin. Just as with Augustine, for Luther, this distinction between law and gospel became *the*

theological and spiritual interpretive key for understanding the often confusing and offensive works of God as recorded in Scripture, as practiced in pastoral care, and as experienced in daily life. Since spirituality is not simply about Christian doctrine, but the lived experience of life in the Spirit, it is worthwhile to see how Luther's law/gospel spirituality exhibited itself in his life.

9. If I might be granted a little historical license here, I think it is fair to say that Luther had at least two major experiential "aha's" in his life! The first experience illustrates a spirituality of the law, the second illustrates a spirituality of the gospel, but with this caveat: the first spirituality will be seen for what it is – a killjoy – only in light of the surpassing joy brought by the second.

The Spirituality of the Law and Luther's Thunderstorm Experience

10. The first "aha" moment is Luther's so-called thunderstorm experience, which happened in 1505 when Luther was a young man of 21. Always obedient to his father's wishes, Luther set out from his home in Eisleben to begin his studies in law at the University of Erfurt. On the way he was caught up in a severe thunderstorm. When a bolt of lightning nearly hit him, Luther was overwhelmed with terror. Being a devout Catholic he did as he was taught. He turned to the patron saint of his family's business and bartered with her as his mediator with God. "St. Anne, save me, and I will become a monk." Since Luther survived the experience, he naturally assumed that she had saved him on the terms he set. Therefore, he followed through on his end of the bargain. Instead of going to law school, he entered the Augustinian friary in Erfurt, much to his father's displeasure.

11. In the monastery, young Martin not only strived to be the perfect monk, he also knew he *had* to be the perfect monk. That was the terms of the deal he made with God through his mediator St. Anne. If God was to give him perfect salvation, he would have to give God the perfect monk. After all, the standard is clear: “Be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:48). That standard was emblazoned not only in the most corrupt practices of the church (the vulgar sale of indulgences) but also in its most well-intentioned teachings and practices: alms giving, penances, pilgrimages, the sponsoring of masses, Marian devotions and the veneration of relics. That was the “taken for granted” spirituality of the day.
12. To all outward appearances most of Martin’s superiors and companions thought of him as the perfect monk. Martin even had to confess that when compared to other monks, he was the best. But they did not set the bar – God did. And his scruples told him he did not measure up. To be sure, Luther tried to remedy this by going to confession over and over again and doing all the prescribed penances that were due. But who was he trying to fool? To him all this seemed nothing more than a charade. One day, while in a state of deep angst, Luther’s confessor, Johann von Staupitz, said to him. “Martin, you are making things too hard for yourself. All you need to do is love God.” “Love God!” he said, “I hate God.” For who can love that which you can never satisfy? In spite of all outward appearance, and much to his chagrin, Luther was quite aware that in his heart he was breaking even the number one commandment. And he couldn’t help it.
13. Luther had now come to the breaking point—called *Anfechtung*, or his inner turmoil with God. The spirituality of the law that was set into motion so desperately in his thunderstorm vow was now showing its

true colors. It was not a means of salvation after all. On the contrary, it only confirmed the opposite: that one cannot please God by striving to be pleasing in oneself. God will not let that falsehood stand. Assuming that he could gain God's pleasure and salvation through "monkery," as Luther later called it, was the great error in his thunderstorm experience. The dynamic that was set in motion in that experience was the same dynamic set into motion between God and Israel when God gave them the law through Moses amidst lightning and thunder. The law is not the word of God that comes to us to save us from our sinful selves; it is the word of God that horrifyingly shows us the depth of our imperfection before God.

14. The spirituality of the law comes in many forms. But this much is certain: when taken seriously, as Luther did, it will always lead to despair; and when taken casually, as most often is the case, it will lead to pride. In both cases, God is not pleased. As Paul says, this does not mean that God's word and work of the law is not "holy, just and good" (Rom. 7:12). It's just that it is not "good news" (gospel), not a good word, for sinners. Luther was now experiencing personally what the Bible calls the "wrath of God" and there was nothing he could do about it. This is the spirituality of the law.

-to be continued.