

# Union With Christ

Colleagues,

In case you've not yet heard, there's a new look, a new book,  
in Luther  
research. Here's a review of it FYI.  
Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## **Union With Christ.**

**The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther,  
Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson, eds.  
Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans. 1998.  
ix, 182, paper. [No price listed].**

Every few years the world's Luther scholars get together at the Luther Research Congress to compare notes and talk shop. For the last three of those get-togethers—Heidelberg, Germany ('97), St. Paul, Minnesota ('93), and Oslo, Norway ('88)—Luther interpreters from Finland have been the cause celebret. This volume tells why.

By a fluke at the 1971 meeting (St. Louis) I got on the participant list and now keep getting invited to the next one. Heidelberg was my fourth. 1997 was Melanchthon's 500th birthday year, so he got a lot of attention at the congress. Heidelberg had been his university. A super whiz-kid, he was all of 14 when he got his B.A. there. Seven years later he joined Luther (13 years his senior) on the faculty at Wittenberg. Congress papers

asked: Did he, or did he not, agree with Luther as they became the dynamic duo of the Reformation? What did he teach Luther, and vice versa?

There was other excitement at the 1997 meeting. E.g., for the first time Luther scholars from the People's Republic of China were present—three of them! One said that he was probably the only person in that country of a thousand million people to have an American Edition of Luther's Works. He's now heading up a team to translate Luther's works into Mandarin.

But the big “klatsch” at the Kaffee breaks was about the Finns. Although there has been Finnish Luther Research since the 20s, nobody fussed about it. So what's the fuss now? Politically, within the guild of Luther scholars, the Finns are challenging the Germans who have dominated the field ever since the “Luther-renaissance” got started a century ago. And what is that challenge? Simply put—and very very gently, for they ARE Finns—“You've been reading Luther wrong.”

Substantively they claim to be able to show that beginning already with Karl Holl, the “Einstein” of the Luther-renaissance, German scholarship likes to read Luther through the lenses of Immanuel Kant's German Idealism, and more recently, has been squeezing the reformer into the wine-skins of modern existentialism. It's not that there are no elements in Luther amenable to such readings. There are indeed. Both of these “-isms” have at least one root that goes back to the Reformer. But the miscue comes, they say, where such “modern” readings rule out elements of the Reformer's theology that don't fit the mold. As though, if it doesn't fit my wineskins, it must not be wine. If I can't see it with these Kantian glasses, it doesn't exist.

One prominent element, the center of the Finns' new look at Luther, is ontology, the fancy word for talk about “being.” Both

Kant and the existentialists deemed that to be a no-no for any serious consideration. Ontology asks: What's genuinely present in things that exist, regardless if anybody knows about it or pays any attention to it? Kant had said that we have no access to "being as such," so nobody can say anything about it at all. All we can talk about is how things "appear" to be (the phenomena) when we encounter them. So Kant-tinted scholars heard Luther saying: we can know nothing about God's own self. All we have is the "word" God sends in our direction.

Existentialists in their distinctive way came to the same conclusion. Hence the name for their movement. We can know something about existence, the nitty-gritty of daily-life encounters and experience, but nothing at all about any essences (=ontology) that might lie behind all this. So scholars of this tint found the center of Luther's theology also to be in the Word of God, wherein God encounters us, critiques us, gifts us in mercy, calling us to faith and action—to trust that Word and have our lives transformed by it in the "Sturm und Drang" of daily life existence that we've been thrown into.

True enough, say the Finns, that's not all wrong. But it's not all of Luther. Luther does indeed say that we have "only" the Word of God, and not God's self denuded of such Word. But for Luther, such "words" from God are indeed God's own self, as God encounters us and gives himself to us. God's self is "in" that Word of God. There is no mysterious God behind and distinct from these Wordings of which we haven't the foggiest notion.

The hot potato term in the Finns have tossed into Luther research is "theosis," the Greek word for "divinization," literally, "becoming God." "God became human, so that we humans might become divine," said Athanasius. And he was the architect of the Nicene creed, so he couldn't be all wrong. Besides Athanasius was after all one of Luther's favorite early church

theologians. Irenaeus, also from way back there, said: "Because of his great love [Jesus Christ] was made into that which we are, so that he might bring about that we be what he is." Luther appreciated him too. Theosis is axiomatic in Greek theology of the early church, and it's still honored, still fundamental theology, in Eastern Orthodox churches to this day.

The Finnish Luther scholars got some doses of theosis already back in the 70s when they began dialogues with their Russian Orthodox neighbors across the border to the east. Looking for a point of contact, they asked whether Luther's focus on justification might not correlate with what the Orthodox meant with "theosis." Both sides were pleasantly surprised when the answer came out "yes." Now twenty years later the Finns have published numerous Luther studies to show where and how this correlation—justification is theosis—threads its way through Luther's own theology. Luther's formulation, in *ipsa fide Christus adest* (in faith itself Christ is present), recurs in this volume almost as a motto for the Finns. Luther's own expansion of that sentence says that faith does not merely trust a Christ who is outside, and stays outside of us, but Christ himself enters the person who becomes a believer. And it is not simply our human brother Christ who is present when humans believe. It is the incarnate one—deity and all.

When Christ offers sinners that "joyful exchange," that "sweet swap," it is a "real" exchange. It's ontology. "Being" gets swapped—my sinful human being for Christ's righteous divine being. His death as a sinner verifies that he was indeed bearing within himself sinners' being. If not, death could not have gotten him. The flip side is equally true. In faith itself Christ is present. Faith divinizes the one doing the believing. The "Christ in you" language predicated to believers in the New Testament is not poetic language, but a literal claim, and Luther read it in just that way.

Thus justifying faith is not simple a forensic transaction that occurs outside of the sinner, as though God reckons me to be no sinner, though in reality I still am; as though the only “real” change occurs in the ledger account book that God keeps on me. Not so for Luther, say the Finns. Justifying faith immediately constitutes internal change as well. Christ in us comes simultaneously with believing. That is a colossal change. And that also challenges the (supposed) Lutheran distinction between justification and sanctification, where justification is seen as the external transaction, the forensic record-changing that faith effects, and then sanctification (the interior change) follows as a consequence, linked to the believer’s gratitude for the new forensic fact. No, say the Finns, for Luther the two are simultaneous, basically two sides of the same reality—relational and ontological. A new relation to God and a new being. By faith I’m righteous in God’s sight and in faith Christ’s divine self becomes my own self.

This volume presents the papers given at a June 1996 seminar co-sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology in Northfield, Minnesota. The editors, Braaten and Jenson, who manage the Center, brought the Finns over for conversation after meeting some of them at the 1993 Luther Congress in Minnesota. Good that they did that; even better that they’ve now published the papers for the wider public. Even apart from the solid scholarship and new approaches to Luther, the very names of the scholars are marvels to behold—and mysteries to pronounce. The grand, but not so old, man of the movement is Tuomo Mannermaa. His colleagues include Simo Peura, Antti Raunio, Sammeli Juntunen, and Risto Saarinen.

Fascinating are some of the spin-offs hinted at in this volume. One such is the historical question of rehabilitating Andreas Osiander, erstwhile villain among later 16th century Lutherans. Osiander is chastized in the Formula of Concord (1577) for

fusing justification and sanctification, and debunked in his claim that Brother Martin supported him. Was he right after all ?

Another is the help which such a theosis-friendly Luther might bring to the Lutheran/Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue today. These conversations are currently snarled, maybe even snafued, by the unclarity—some call it fudging on both sides—that has now come to light in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. The JDDJ was supposed to show that both sides were now simpatico on this stumbling block from the 16th century. Are we or aren't we? By ignoring the theosis element in Luther, the Finns suggest, Lutherans in dialogue with Rome lose a marvelous socket for plugging in to the Roman drumbeat that justification is not simply God treating sinners "as though" they were righteous, but that in justifying sinners God's Christ makes us really righteous—punkt!

Four hundred and fifty years ago at Regensburg in south Germany a similar scissors-and-paste attempt was made by Lutherans and Roman Catholics to "get it together" on justification. Melanchthon was the Lutheran leader. They too came up with a "joint declaration," but neither side back home accepted it. We'll never know if theosis would have helped then. We do have a chance to find out if it would now.

There are responses to the Finns in this volume, first from the two editors, then from Bill Lazareth and Dennis Bielfeldt. Bielfeldt especially has some caveats. "Uneasiness" is his gentle word—perhaps his mother is a Finn. I have a question too—about law and gospel. But Bielfeldt's conclusion is mine too. "None of what I say is meant to detract from the creativity and integrity [of this Finnish scholarship]. It is ... the fascinating kind of scholarship that can emerge in a period of creative tension when a new paradigm is struggling to assert

itself. It is good to have new, global questions asked of Luther, for they challenge our own presuppositions and allow us to read the Reformer with new eyes.”

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