

Luther's Reading of the Human Condition Robert Kolb

Who am I? What does it mean to be human? On the one hand, those are questions that most people in human history have spent little time thinking over. On most days we take it for granted that we are living a human life, perhaps labeled good or bad, better or worse, but something no one needs to think twice about. Few societies in the world's history have had the luxury of being able to permit individuals to spend a lot of time in introspection. That ours does – indeed seems to revel in it – has not brought us much progress. Introspection is seldom an ultimately entertaining or satisfying art for sinners.

Erik Erikson has identified “identity” as a primary category for assessing what it means to be human and what it means that I am I. His version of human development may or may not have reflected something of North American realities in 1950 when he first published his analysis of our humanity in eight stages; it did in fact create a way of looking at ourselves that shapes our perceptions, and therefore, our realities a half century later. So it is little wonder that theological anthropology has become a major theme for theologians and that we have access to many aspects of biblical teaching through anthropological questions as we try to convey the gospel of Jesus Christ to our North American contemporaries.

Therefore, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to Luther's anthropology. It has been observed that the topic “on the angels” gets more attention in Franz Pieper's dogmatics than “on the human creature.” That reflects a long-standing Lutheran dogmatic tradition in spirit if not always in fact. Most of Lutheran anthropology has focused on the issue of the bondage or freedom of the will (in fact, two quite distinct issues) and has only implicitly treated and not always actually used Luther's definition of humanity in two dimensions, usually called “the two kinds of righteousness.” The parallel hermeneutical principles of the proper distinction of law and gospel and of the two realms have gotten much attention in Lutheran circles, the former in the period following Luther's and Melancthon's deaths and on and off throughout Lutheran history, the latter particularly in the last hundred twenty-five years. “Two kinds of righteousness” was presumed but not always given right of impact among Lutheran theologians.

Luther actually began with three kinds of righteousness, paralleling three definitions of sin. In 1518 and 1519 he composed two treatises, “on three kinds of righteousness” and “on two kinds of righteousness.”¹ It is likely that the former is the prior piece. It outlined three kinds of sin, criminal, actual, and essential, to which corresponded three kinds of righteousness, hypocritical, actual, and essential. In the latter treatise, which appeared probably within x months of the former, the first kind of righteousness, which constituted what he would later label “civic” or “civil” righteousness, the external conformity of those outside faith in Christ to God's plan for human living, disappeared. In fact, Luther encountered probably fewer than a couple dozen people who were not baptized in his entire life, and therefore addressing the external disobedience to God's law, which makes society work better rather than worse, was not a primary concern for him. He wanted to address the baptized, who had been

given essential righteousness, which he labeled “passive” righteousness, or identity as the chosen children of God, and who, he expected, would perform “active” righteousness, that is, new obedience, the fruits of faith.

More than a decade later Luther launched his second series of lectures on Galatians. In introducing the book to his students, the professor commented, “This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits.”² Luther recalled in the autobiographical statement in the preface of volume one of his Latin works that he had come to hate the righteous God who punishes sinners; a secret, perhaps blasphemous anger against God possessed him, and he “raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.”

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I treasured the word that had become the sweetest of all words for me with a love as great as the hatred with which I had previously hated the word „righteousness of God.” Thus that passage in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise.³

This statement places Luther’s rejection of a medieval anthropology that ultimately based their definitions of human identity or righteousness upon human performance, at one critical point or another in the sinner’s coming to terms with his or her sinful expression of humanity in its context. Both his pious upbringing in his home and his university education had convinced him that his performance of God’s law either caused God to give him grace or proved that God had given him grace. In either case he had learned that he was righteous in God’s sight on the basis of his deeds. God had created him in such a way that he was to exercise total responsibility for carrying out God’s will in this world. That put salvation beyond the reach of the super-conscientious, scrupulous Martin Luther. However, even though his Ockhamist instructors had convinced him of the importance of the performance of God’s commands for defining his humanity, they also taught him that God was his omnipotent Creator. Permeating their instruction was

² *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-) [henceforth WA] 40,I:45,24-27; *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986) [henceforth] LW 26:7. For a summary of Luther’s definition of „righteousness,” and bibliography, see Bengt Hägglund, „Gerechtigkeit. VI. Reformations- und Neuzeit,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* XII (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984): 432-434, 440.

³ „Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” 1545, WA 54:186,3-16; LW 34:337.

the dictum of Duns Scotus that William of Ockham had echoed: nothing created has to be accepted by the Creator. The absolute, unconditioned will of God determined all for Scotus, even though he developed a description of the process of salvation that focused on human performance. Nonetheless, Luther gained from this way of thinking significant elements for his concept of God, elements that emphasized his absolute power and his responsibility for all that exists and happens in his creation.

Luther's definition of our humanity as consisting of two distinct but inseparable dimensions, our relation to God and our relation to other creatures, above all human creatures, presumes the absolute distinction between Creator & creature, between God and his human creatures. As creatures human beings can never grasp nor control the Creator: he will be what he wants to be, and he will be the One who defines us and determines what we are to be. Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted the grand offense of Genesis 1 and 2. "In the beginning" God was and was speaking his creation into existence. Behind or beyond that beginning that embraces also the initiation of humanity no human being has ever gone and can never go. God is the almighty Creator, and almighty means that all might and power rest in his hand. Luther insisted that in Jesus Christ we have come to know him as Father, and that his righteousness – that which makes him who he is – is revealed on the cross. And, it turns out, his righteousness is mercy and self-sacrificing love. But letting God be God, and then insisting that the human creature be and remain the human creature, was key to Luther's anthropology.

Jesus defined humanity when in Matthew 22:37-39 he told the rich young man which the most of God's commands for his human creatures is. "Love the Lord your God with all your mind, heart, soul, and strength" might be translated, "fear, love, and trust in God above all things," or "have no other gods before me!" The second element that constitutes humanity is loving other human creatures as ourselves. Luther believed that loving God arises out of the very person we are. It is not something we produce but rather the fundamental trust we have toward that which ultimately and absolutely gives us our identity, our sense of safety or being secure, and our meaning or sense of worth for life. It is the response to God's claim upon us that he has reissued in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is, Luther said, passive righteousness, a righteousness that is total gift. Thus, being a truly human being in God's sight means first of all that he regards us as righteous, that he has identified us as righteous, that our identity rests alone upon his unconditioned and unconditional mercy and love, his joy at having us as his children. Second, it means that we regard him as our God, as our loving heavenly Father, as the one in whom we can put our trust. Our passive righteousness consists in God's regard for us as his people and our regard for him as our God.

Those who have received a new identity in Christ and have had their old identity as sinner put to death are so identified as the children of God, with the result that they live loving neighbors as selves. Parents give children life and identity freely, without condition. Once given, your identity as their child, deposited in your DNA, abides. But parents do have expectations of their children. They count on their children to perform in accord with those expectations. They anticipate and claim fulfillment of their expectations from the actions of their children. To put it in the terminology of the God who likes to talk, from Genesis 1 on, they listen to their parents. In Hebrew שמע means both "hear" and "obey;" in Greek υπακουω is an intensive of ακουω, and in German those who "hören" will certainly "gehörchen." The English word that captures this best

is the word “hearken.” Children of the heavenly Father just naturally hearken to him. That they do not always – the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized – is a major, abiding, preoccupation of Luther throughout his life as reformer, and he never ceased cultivating the life of daily repentance, the repetition of God’s baptismal turning and re-creation of sinners into his children. Repentance involves the restoration of the trust that is the human expression of passive righteousness. It also involves moving God’s reborn children to the active righteousness of new obedience or the fruits of faith.

Four illustrations may help clarify Luther’s distinction of the two dimensions of our humanity. The first is the conversation that your parents had with you nine months before you were born. You remember: when they called you to the kitchen table to offer you conception and birth in return for a promise to clean up your room, help with the dishes and taking out the garbage, and supporting them in their old age. That conversation never happened. That is not the nature of the origin of human life. Parents give the gift of life freely and without condition. But they do have expectations of their children.

Second, do you remember how long the probationary period was that Adam and Eve had, after they had been shaped from the dust of the earth and received the breath of life, to demonstrate that they could do enough of the human things to do well enough to receive the label “human” from God? Six days? Six weeks? Six months? The correct answer, of course, is that there was no probationary period. God made them human apart from any merit or worthiness in them. He did so because he wanted them to be his children. No probationary period to prove their humanity – but indeed expectations for the performance of what God had designated and designed as the human way to live.

A third illustration, from Luther’s Galatians lectures:

As the earth itself does not produce rain and is unable to acquire it by its own strength, worship, and power but receives it only by a heavenly gift from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given to us by God without our work or merit.

As much as the dry earth of itself is able to accomplish and obtain the right and blessed rain, that much can we human creatures accomplish by our own strength and works to obtain that divine, heavenly, and eternal righteousness. Thus we can obtain it only through the free imputation and indescribable gift of God.⁴

That leads the Christian conscience to say,

I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I did have and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine law, and I embrace only the passive righteousness which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins.⁵

Finally, a fourth illustration:

⁴ WA 40,I: 43,18-25; LW 26:6.

⁵ WA 40,I: 42,26-43,15; LW 26:6.

Although by the definition of his own theology Thomas Aquinas had sufficient merit to proceed directly to heaven, without having to work off temporal punishment in purgatory, the Dominican saint dallied along the way, visiting old friends and doing research among those who still had purgatorial satisfactions to discharge there. He arrived at Saint Peter's gate some 272 years after his death, on February 18, 1546. After ascertaining his name, Saint Peter asked Thomas, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" "Because of the grace of God," Thomas answered, ready to explain the concept of prevenient grace should it be necessary. Peter asked instead, "How do I know you have God's grace?" Thomas, who had brought a sack of his good deeds with him, was ready with the proof. "Here are the good works of a lifetime," he explained. "I could have done none of them without God's grace, but in my worship and observation of monastic rules, in my obedience to parents, governors, and superiors, in my concern for the physical well-being and property of others, in my chastity and continence, you can see my righteousness -- grace-assisted as it may be." Since a line was forming behind Thomas, Peter waved him in, certain that Thomas would soon receive a clearer understanding of his own righteousness. The next person in line stepped up. "Name?" "Martin Luther." "Why should I let you into my heaven?" "Because of the grace of God." Peter was in a playful mood, so he went on, "How do I know you have God's grace? Thomas had his works to prove his righteousness, but I don't see that you have brought any proof along that you are righteous." "Works?" Luther exclaimed. "Works? I didn't know I was supposed to bring my works with me! I thought they belonged on earth, with my neighbors. I left them down there." "Well," said Gatekeeper Peter, "how then am I supposed to know that you really have God's grace?" Luther pulled a little, well-worn, oft-read scrap of paper out of his pocket and showed it to Peter. On it were the words, "Martin Luther, baptized, November 11, in the year of our Lord 1483." "You check with Jesus," Luther said. "He will tell you that he has given me the gift of righteousness through his own blood and his own resurrection."⁶

Luther's anthropology rests upon this presumption that the human being has two distinct though inseparable dimensions. Actively, we relate to God through the psychological characteristics of faith, while passively we relate to him as recipients of his gift of the faith that claims him as the God and Father he promises to be in Jesus Christ. Actively, we relate to our fellow human beings with the love that reflects God's love for us and conforms to his plan for being human, while passively we are moved by the Holy Spirit to a life that is sanctified by faith. With this framework for defining our humanity we approach the people whom God has called us to serve.

For discussion:

1. How does this two-dimensional definition of what it means to be human aid us when dealing with those suffering shame because of their being abused as children?

⁶ Cited in toto from Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness. Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 449-466, and *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38-55.

2. How must we answer the apostolic question, “If God is really as gracious as indicated in Romans 3, 4, and 5, cannot Christians sin the more so that grace can abound” in view of God’s creating us in the two dimensions of passive and active righteousness?

3. Does it make any difference whether you have Luther’s view of two kinds of human righteousness or Aquinas’s view of one kind of human righteousness if you, like Aquinas, make sure that God’s grace stands behind the human performance?

4. In 1569 three of the then-future authors of the Formula of Concord composed the following “absolution” for worship in the newly reformed churches of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Identify those elements which speak of passive righteousness and those which speak of active righteousness, and relate each element to the proper distinction of law and gospel:

The Almighty God has been merciful to you and through the merit of the most holy suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, His beloved Son, He forgives you all your sins; and I, as an ordained servant of the Christian church, proclaim to all you who truly repent and who through faith place your trust and minds on the merit of Jesus Christ and who order your lives after the commands and will of God, the forgiveness of all your sin in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. On the contrary, however I say to any impenitent and unbelieving, according to God’s Word and in His name, that God has held your sin against you and this certainly is punished.

5. If you are raising “typical American” teenagers, is it more important for you to be paying attention to their passive righteousness or their active righteousness?