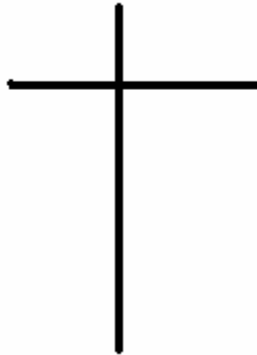


What Does It Mean To Be Lutheran?

1. Introduction: The foundation
2. Justification: It's not about you.
3. Theology of the Cross: Ok, it is about you.
4. Uses of the Laws: Two uses or Three?
5. The Law 2.0: Two Kingdoms, Law and Gospel

Chapter One: Introduction

What makes Lutheran's different is simply this:



Of course, other Christian denominations: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox emphasize the cross, but only Lutherans make this symbol and all that it means the foundation of their faith. This is it: the center, the core. Everything in the Lutheran understanding revolves around it. As the class progresses, how this happens should become clear.

One thing first, to fully understand how the cross is central to Lutheran doctrine and theology, you must approach it from many different directions. Understand its meaning in all the ways it can mean, not simply from one direction. It is the end, as well as the means.

Chapter Two: Justification

It's not about you.

The idea behind this simple statement was first discovered by St. Paul in Romans (Pretty much the whole book, but chapter 3 in particular.) But this thought was largely back-burnered in the first centuries of the church's history as the church worked to stabilize and institutionalize itself, defining Orthodoxy (that is the true faith, as opposed to "heresy," the false faith) as it went.

It was until the 5th century that questions regarding justification and our role therein started to come to the fore. Thus, we have one of the great contests of the history of the church.

Augustine vs. Pelagius

Pelagius taught that God gave us grace and with it the ability to seek him out on our own, to earn our salvation through good works. Thus, it was imperative in order to be saved to live a right and morally perfect life.

To illustrate this, basically this is how Pelagius argues we are saved...



Augustine taught that it was God alone who saves through Christ. He drew this from a reading of Romans, of St. Paul. We are incapable of living a morally perfect life, therefore it is up to God to save us, not us. And save us he does, by sending Jesus Christ to die for us. Thus, Augustine's version of salvation looks like this...



In other words, it's not about us. It's about God. It's about Jesus. It's about the cross.

The major problem with Pelagius' view is what? If we can do it ourselves, then why Jesus? Why the cross? If we can do it ourselves, then the cross is what? Just an unfortunate accident?

Pelagius' view denies the sovereignty of God. Says we are the masters of our own destiny and God is not the master of his. Bit of a problem there. The cross is superfluous to Pelagius. The crucifixion and resurrection didn't need to happen.

But they did happen. And since God is sovereign, they were not accidents. They were meant to happen and the purpose behind their happening was our salvation. God saves, not us. Simply put, Pelagius is WRONG!

The Papacy drew the same conclusion. They affirmed Augustine as right teaching and Pelagianism (named for Pelagius) was declared a heresy. It is false teaching.

But it's the heresy that never dies, the idea that we can earn our salvation. It's too appealing to us, so it keeps coming back.

Fast forward to the 15th century, the Middle Ages, the time of Luther. Despite having declared Pelagianism a heresy, the church was teaching...

- Salvation could be purchased by buying forgiveness from the church. This is the sale of indulgences.
- Acts of penance absolved one of their sins and made them eligible for salvation.
- Adherence and allegiance to the church and its teachings brought salvation.

Note the pattern? It's snuck back in again. Pelagianism was back and better than ever. Obey the rules, do this, do that, buy this indulgence, and you can EARN your salvation.

Thus, begins another great contest of the church...

Luther vs. the Roman Church

Luther argued from Romans, from St. Paul, and from Augustine (he was an Augustinian monk and knew the old saint's teachings well.) Again, he argued that we cannot live a perfectly moral life, therefore it is up to God to save.

The church at that time, led as it was by a series of corrupt popes, was more concerned with power, ambition, and control than right teaching. They argued against Luther, but could not refute properly his argument. Most of their position was based on slander, accusing Luther of disloyalty and heresy for his disobedience. Still with the backing of nobility that was tired of being "controlled" by the Papacy, Luther's views prevailed and so began the Protestant Reformation and the Lutheran church.

Generations later, the Roman Church would affirm much of what Luther had said. Beginning with the Council of Trent and continuing on to recent years (Joint Declaration on Justification, signed in 1999.)

But Pelagianism is still around. Do you hear its teachings today? How often do you hear preachers today proclaim this is how you get to heaven?



Pray this prayer. Believe this doctrine. "Have you read my book? There will be a test."
Accept Jesus. Be born again. Do this. Do that.

IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU.

This is how it really works.



God comes to Earth as Jesus Christ, lives the perfect obedient moral life, and then dies
on a cross for our sins. HE DOES IT ALL.

Our salvation is not dependent upon us. It does not matter what we do or what we have
not done. It's dependent entirely on what God has done for us.

Any doctrine or teaching that says there is something you must do is suspect. Any
doctrine or teaching that places requirements or conditions on salvation is suspect.
Watch out! Pelagius is alive and well.

Case Study: Sin boldly.

Imagine for a moment that you are a woman living in poverty. You get pregnant from
some deadbeat. What do you do?

Abortion vs. Keeping the baby

In a Pelagian system, this is a nightmare choice. Condemn your baby to a life of poverty
and want or condemn your baby to death. Neither is an ideal choice, a good choice. You
cannot proceed without sinning and hurting your chances at salvation. Damned if you
do, damned if you don't.

Luther teaches that since it's all about the cross, we have the freedom to make mistakes and make ill choices. Our salvation is not dependent upon our actions and behavior. Therefore, there is nothing we can do to take it away from us. Just as we cannot earn it, neither can we lose it.

Luther talks about this freedom as the freedom to "sin boldly," the freedom to make mistakes, to sin and yet rely on the forgiveness bought for us in the cross. We have this freedom, because "it's not about us." It's about Jesus and what he's done.

Chapter Three: Theology of the Cross

The bulk of Luther's "cross" doctrine has two foci: one, how to get into the next world, which we spoke of last week, and two, how to live in this world until we get there. The rest of our sessions will look at this second focus in detail. To begin, let us address a basic question.

Where is God?

This may seem at first to be unrelated to our focus, but the relation should become clear shortly.

Where is God? Many churches teach that God is found where there is blessing in this life. God is equated with success, popularity, wealth, and happiness. This is what we call a theology of glory.

One of the elements of this teaching is that God brings these blessings as reward for particular behaviors and attitudes. Conversely, one who has such blessings is doing the right thing.

However, what happens when bad things happen to good people? Many interpret this to mean God punishes wrong action. If you catch a disease, it's because God is punishing you for some sin.

Yet, if that's true, why does evil so often prosper in this world?

Simply put, theology of glory doesn't pass the reality test. The world simply doesn't work this way, despite our insistence that it does or should.

That's not its only flaw. You should start to sense a certain odor right now. Yes, indeed, Pelagius is back from the dead again.



Now it's not about the reward of salvation for works-righteousness, it's about earthly rewards. But it also brings with it the same flaws to Pelagianism that both Augustine and Luther saw.

Once again, we see the Pelagian flaw of ourselves being in control of our destiny and God not in control of His. God is merely a distant figure, bestowing blessing and woe in response to our actions. Bit like a cosmic Santa Claus, giving gifts or coal dependent upon whether we are naughty or nice.

Luther saw these problems and one more. Let's return to our initial question. Where is God? If God is where there is blessing and joy, then He must be absent from the places where there is suffering and despair. But Scripture clearly contradicts this. (e.g. Psalm 23, in fact most of the "lament" Psalms.) In other words, the theology of glory is not Biblical.

There must be another answer. For a hint at what that answer is, I'll direct you to the lyrics of a song by Depeche Mode.

Precious and fragile things
Need special handling
My God what have we done
to you?

Angels with silver wings
Shouldn't know suffering
**I wish I could take the
pain for you**

I pray you learn to trust
Have faith in both of us
And keep room in your
heart for two

We always try to share
The tenderest of care
Now look what we have put
You through...

**If God has a master plan
That only He understands
I hope it's your eyes He's
seeing through**

Things get damaged
Things get broken
I thought we'd manage
But words left unspoken
Left us so brittle
There was so little left to
give

Things get damaged
Things get broken
I thought we'd manage
But words left unspoken
Left us so brittle
There was so little left to
give

Things get damaged
Things get broken
I thought we'd manage
But words left unspoken
Left us so brittle
There was so little left to
give

"Precious" (Emphasis
mine)
Lyrics and music by
Depeche Mode (2005)

This song was written as an apology by the songwriter to his daughter after he and his wife had gotten divorced, certainly a time of great turmoil and pain in any family. The highlighted lyrics point to an idea that Luther would find common cause with: God looking through our eyes, our experiences, at the world.

In fact, that's our answer.



As I stated, the cross is the center of Lutheran thinking, in all the ways it can be interpreted. In Luther's thinking, the cross is not only the means of God's salvation, but also the means by which God looks upon his creation. It is the lens through which he views the human experience.

In other words, the cross is the intersection between the human experience and the divine. There is no cause and effect, reward for good, punishment for evil here. It's experiential. God is united with his creation through the cross.

This is what Lutherans call the theology of the cross. God becomes human to share our experience of this world, and all that goes with it. When we suffer, God suffers with us. When we rejoice, God rejoices with us. God becomes our constant companion, through blessings and woes. There is no place we can go, no experience we can undergo where He will not be by our side.

He can do this because he's "been there." As Jesus Christ, God has experienced first hand the human condition. He's felt joy, happiness, disappointment, pain, physical infirmity, and even death. He's just like us. Not distant, not detached. Intimate, involved. In the middle of everything.

Interestingly, one of the best places to find theology of the cross is in Jewish reflections about the Holocaust. Many authors, in asking "where is God?" point to the ovens, the death chambers, and say "There." And they'd be right.

When it comes to our life in this world, **it is about us** and all that we experience.

Chapter Four: The Law: Two Uses or Three?

By now, you've been steeped in Luther's thinking for a couple of weeks. You've heard about how we achieve salvation, through the grace of God alone and not through our works and good deeds. You've seen how God looks at the world, through the lens of the cross and incarnation, and how He tends to show up in the most unexpected places in our lives. But you've still got a question, one gnawing at you now for a few weeks.

WHAT ABOUT THE LAW?

We're saved by grace. We don't have to do anything. Therefore, why should we?

Well, Luther has an answer for that. Luther and Lutherans have been accused by others of being an *antinomian* heresy for centuries. *Antinomian* means "against the law" in Greek. But it's not true. Luther simply defines the law more narrowly than other Christian traditions. He says there are two uses for the law. His followers then came up with a third use also.

First Use of the Law: The Guide for Good Government

What's the first thing you think of in terms of law? I don't mean necessarily just in terms of religion either.

You think of the laws of the land, of the government. Don't steal. Don't drive over the speed limit. Pay your taxes. The Constitution. The Bill of Rights. Etc.

Many of these laws are based on Judeo-Christian teachings. They are drawn from the Ten Commandments and other parts of Scripture. Luther says therefore that one of the uses of the law is as a guide for government to establish a society in good order.

First Use: To Establish Order

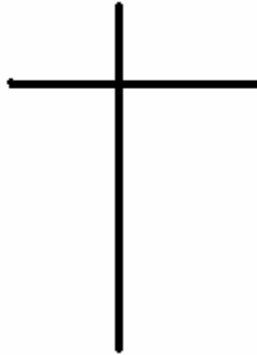
The ultimate goal is to create a society of harmony, peace, and security so that the Gospel may thrive. If one does not have peace, harmony, and security, the Gospel is silenced. You're going to be far more worried about all those other people out there determined to steal, murder, or whatever else to you to go to church. The Gospel abhors anarchy, because the good news cannot be preached or heard in such circumstances.

So, going back to some of our original conclusions. Yes, we're saved by grace. No, we don't have to do anything to earn it. But if we decide to take our new found freedom in Christ as license for hedonism and anarchy, Luther says the government has every right to intervene to maintain public order. He says this power is God-ordained.

In Luther's day, there was peasant uprising. The people took Luther's teachings as that very license, to rise up and revolt against the noble lords who controlled their lives. It's hard to not be sympathetic to serfs who've spent their whole lives in virtual servitude, but when the Princes asked Luther what their response should be, he told them to put down the revolt with force. Tens of thousands died as a result.

Order must be maintained for the sake of the Gospel. That is the first use.

So, now we return again to the cross....



First use essentially says about this: Misbehave and this is where you'll end up. Metaphorically, of course, but the government has the right and the duty to punish criminals when they threaten the public good.

Second Use of the Law: The Mirror of our Souls

If the threat of punishment by authorities and powers is not enough to curb your wanton desires, there is yet another use of the law.

Second Use: Show us our sins.

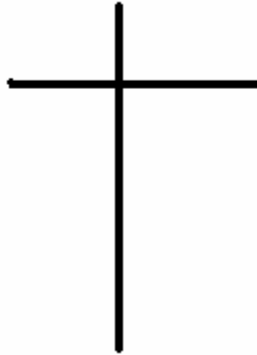
Luther says the law is like an unblemished mirror. It shows us as we truly are. It shows us our sins, the things we have done wrong. The ways in which we have disobeyed and rebelled from God. The ways we have not loved neighbor. The hurt we have inflicted on ourselves and others.

The law provides a reminder of who and what we truly are: Sinners.

Each law, articulated in Scripture, creates an unreachable standard of Good for each one of us. Who among us has murdered? Or stolen? Probably not many of us, but there have been times when we've wanted to. The mirror of the law reminds us of that reality.

It also reminds us that since we are sinners, what we truly deserve is God's wrath and punishment. We've screwed up. There's no way out. We deserve death and hell and nothing more.

Again with the cross...



Second use tells us that we belong on it, that it should be us up there, not Jesus. And yet, it is Jesus and not us who takes the cross and takes on himself the punishment that WE DESERVE. The Son of God dies instead of us.

If that doesn't sober a person of conscience, I don't know what will.

Third Use of the Law: Guide to Holiness

Lutherans are divided on the issue of whether there is also a third use to the Law. Luther himself does not articulate such a use, but those who followed after him did and modern Lutherans continue to be divided on the issue.

Interestingly enough, the one who really took the idea of a third use of the law and ran with it was John Westley. He saw in these Lutheran doctrines a means of using the law to create piety and holiness within people, a "method," as he called it, of sanctification. Hence, the "Methodist" tradition was founded.

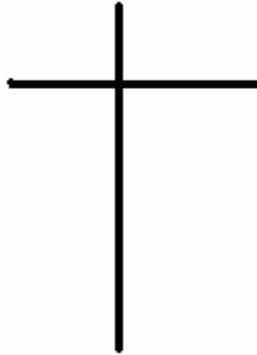
Luther's disciples state that the Third use is simply that the law provides a guide for us in improving ourselves and our relations with our neighbors. It's a code for moral upright pious living.

Third Use: A Guide to Holy Living

The idea here is simple. I can use God's law to become a better person than I am, not because I need to for my salvation, but because I want to. I want to be a better person. I want to serve my neighbors in love and compassion. How do I do that? Well, God outlines a way in his laws.

And what does the law say? As Jesus himself points out, "*Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.*" And what does it mean to love? To give of one's self, their time, their possessions, their good word, whatever.

Turning one last time to the cross...



Third use tells us that you want to do as Jesus did, go to the cross for the love of others. To sacrifice of yourself, perhaps not as dramatically, for the betterment of those you love. To follow where Jesus has led the way. The path of discipleship, Lutheran style.

Not all Lutheran's agree that there is truly a third use of the law. Many say this smacks of another back door for Pelagius, that self-improvement stinks of his hands. Others claim this is merely a modified interpretation of First Use, here we order ourselves to live in harmony with neighbor instead of allowing authorities to do so for us. The debate is ongoing.

Chapter Five – The Law 2.0, the Two Kingdoms.

Last week, we learned how the law has three uses. The first is as a corrective for authorities to enforce and maintain order. These are the laws, often drawn from Scripture, that a government uses to enforce its will on the populace. Don't murder, don't steal, etc. The second use is that law shows us as we truly are, a mirror to show us our sins. When we hear how we are not to do this or that, we must innately recognize that we have often done precisely that. The third use is that the law provides a guide for the Christian person who seeks to live in gratitude for the grace he or she has received. Ok, I'm saved by God's grace, now what? The law provides the answer.

Luther expands these ideas further, to say that there are two authorities in the temporal world. He calls these authorities the **Two Kingdoms**.

The first of these Kingdoms, the Kingdom of the left, the Kingdom of the Sword, is temporal government. It is the authority of Princes and Presidents, courts and the military. Its focus is on the First Use of the Law, on maintaining civil order and obedience. We have already discussed the role of this kingdom at some length last week and that need not be repeated here.

The second of these Kingdoms, the Kingdom of the right, is the church. It is the authority of the pulpit and the altar. Its focus is Second and Third Use of the Law, to hold up the mirror of the law to convict consciences and to guide believers in right living. However, between these two uses there sits the proclamation of the Gospel. Thus, it can be more rightly said that the focus of the Kingdom of the Right is to be about Law-and-Gospel.

And what is **Law-and-Gospel**?

As we said last week, according to its second use, the law reveals to us our sin. It confronts us with our disobedience.

In the shadow of the cross, we recognize that it is we who deserve death and hell for our transgressions, that it should be us up there.

But if that is all that we hear from the church, then we left with no recourse. Law damns us, rightly so, but also provides us no solution to our quandary. As we said, Pelagius was wrong. We cannot earn our salvation, we cannot truly make amends for all the wrong we have done.

There for it is up to God. And God does intervene. God sends Jesus for us. Jesus dies on a cross, rises again, and wins for us our salvation. This is the Gospel, to be saved by God's grace through Christ.

But how do we know this if it is not proclaimed?

Thus, we cannot have one without the other. If the church preaches nothing but the second use of the law, then it leaves us in despair, with no hope of our salvation. The Gospel must be proclaimed so that we know and believe how God gets us out of this mess.

Likewise, too we cannot have the Gospel alone. Grace has no meaning if we do not recognize in ourselves that we are creatures of sin and by all rights should be beyond hope. In other words, if we don't know we need to be saved, what good is it to hear that we are?

This, Luther says is the primary function of the church. To proclaim the Law-and-Gospel for the purpose of showing sinners both that they are saved and what they are saved from. This is accomplished by the reading and study of Scripture, the preaching of the pastor, and the proper use of the Sacraments.

This seems all straightforward. Luther however is adamant that the two kingdoms should not be confused with one another, that each has a distinct and important role in Christian society and that one **should not** attempt to do the job of the other.

Which, of course, is precisely what has happened throughout history.

Luther lived in a time when the Roman church was determined to crush his Reformation by the means of government. At the same time, there were certainly those who would take his preaching on freedom and liberty that God's forgiveness grants as license to disobey and rebel against government authority.

Both of these are misuses of Luther's teach. One, you cannot impose a system of beliefs by force of government. Two, being set free in the Gospel is not license to disrupt the fabric of society.

In a sense, what Luther is proposing in the Two Kingdoms is a scriptural theological basis for the separation of church and state.

However, of all of his ideas, this is the one that has come under the most critique and has evolved the most significantly in the centuries since Luther first outlined it in his writings.

First off, Luther himself occasionally forgot to not have the Two Kingdoms cross into each other's "territory." For instance, late in life, Luther displayed an unpleasant tendency to anti-Semitism. In his most odious writing, "On the Jews and Their Lies," he proposes that the government should punish the Jews for not becoming Christians. Outside the distastefulness (modern Lutherans have disavowed this particular aspect of our founder), it's also clearly a violation of the Two Kingdom doctrine.

But it was a far more profound and horrific act of anti-Semitism that would truly transform Lutheran teaching on this regard. Remember that Lutherans are a predominantly (although not exclusively) a German church. What did the church say when Hitler came on the scene?

Well, sadly, next to nothing. Holding true to the Two Kingdoms, the Lutheran church did very little to oppose the rise of Hitler and the implementation of his "Final Solution." It was not their place, it was argued, for the church to critique the government, even one as vile as the Third Reich.

However, there were those within the church who did question and who did act. Of these, the most famous is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who later took his questioning to a point where he became involved in an assassination plot against Hitler. He was, sadly, caught and executed for his part in the plot. His writings and his life story have made many question the absoluteness of Luther's Two Kingdoms doctrine.

Still, that is not to say that Luther's teachings here are not without their uses. Even today, there are people who would very much like to use the power of government to enforce and impose their religious beliefs on others.

And, thanks to Bonhoeffer and others, Lutherans feel more free to question the authority of government. Like him, we are sometimes compelled to ask what is the Christian to do when the government acts are evil and unjust? A balance must be found and the church's discernment in these regards is an ongoing matter.