

*Luther and Evangelism:
Refocusing on Christ*

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Glory be to God alone.

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Introduction

In the world around us, in our large cities or small towns, in our communities, in our homes, and even in *ourselves*, lie surface-level projections of happiness, contentment, or perhaps even peace. These are the masks we wear. We may let a few select people see what is underneath these masks we wear, to who we truly are, but only those we feel we can completely trust, only those we feel safe with.

Who do we turn to for support amidst the utter chaos of our lives? To whom can we bare our souls? Who wipes away the tears from our eyes? Who do we share our frustrations and anger with? Who besides ourselves knows our innermost struggles and secrets? Who knows our truest passion? Who knows our deepest fear?

Perhaps we go to a spouse, a friend, a sibling, or a parent with these joys and sorrows. Perhaps it is someone of a different type of relationship. Perhaps it is a stranger. Or perhaps, we sadly have no such person we can deeply trust. Regardless, we all, at some level, whether consciously or not, desire something we cannot find in these relationships. It is something greater than ourselves, but yet, it is something that we know is intimately involved in who we are. It is the deepest longing of our hearts.

However, the world often distracts us from this inner longing. It tells us to indulge in things that will ultimately not satisfy. We might seek fulfillment in physical pleasure. We might turn to a spouse or "significant other," hoping that sex will bring the connection we so deeply desire. We might seek to escape that longing which haunts us through using drugs, alcohol, or other mind-altering substances. We may physically or emotionally hurt another person because of our own desire for control. We may also seek to find completion and connection in other ways, or we may not see this need for connection in our lives at all, thinking we can only depend on ourselves.

Even within the church, Christians many times become distracted from what we *should* be focused on: the truth of Christ. We live in a pluralistic world of reason and doubt, where truth is questioned every day. This questioning of the truth of faith can cause individuals to become so concentrated on their personal struggles that they lose sight of the big picture; of the main thing: Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

We each have lenses through which we view and understand the world around us. These lenses will be different and diverse for each person. However, by examining the ideas of a reformer named Martin Luther (1483-1586), we can perhaps find a common lens through which to deepen our understanding of an important issue in the church today: evangelism.

Luther lived in a time when the stakes were high. Standing up for what he believed was true resulted in a direct threat to his life. Luther opposed the practices of his day he believed were contrary to the Word of God. He struggled deeply to understand things for himself and to find the truth. Over his lifetime, Luther voiced many concerns about the church of his day. He didn't mince words, either; he told things like they were. Luther accused both the Church and of specific individuals of straying from the true message of the gospel. An examination of Luther's ideas proves them relevant the church today because they can refocus us on the *gospel*, the essential central message of the Christian faith.

The ELCA has recently published an evangelism strategy, *Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision For Evangelism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, which sets forth the ELCA's goals and strategies for present-day evangelism. In 2001, approximately 219 million of 285 million people in North America claimed to be Christian, which amounts to 77%

of us.¹ Statistically speaking, this number looks positive, since it is a large majority of the persons surveyed. Given that the estimated total population of the United States in 2001 was 284,796,887 people², this would mean that approximately 219 million people considered themselves Christians. This number, while a large majority of the population, still leaves 66 *million* non-Christian individuals in the United States *alone*! How can Christians in the United States respond to this statistic?

I will propose an examination of Luther's *christology* (ideas about the person and work of Jesus) and *soteriology* (ideas about how Christ *saves* a person) as lenses through which we might begin to view evangelism in the present day. I will draw parallels between Luther's understanding of who Jesus was and how Christ saves and the ELCA's evangelism strategy. I will also offer a few suggestions as to how, in addition to the central foundation of our faith (the gospel), Luther's ideas can strengthen the witness of the average Christian in the United States to people in their everyday lives. Examining Luther's ideas about christology and soteriology can contribute to evangelism in the ELCA by refocusing people on Christ, the center of the Christian faith.

¹ Kosmin, Barry A., Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar. *American Religious Identification Survey*, (New York: Graduate School and University Center of the City University, 2001), accessed at: http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/key_findings.htm, 21 November 2003.

² U.S. Census Bureau, *State and Country QuickFacts: USA*, accessed at: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>, 21 November 2003.

Chapter One

Introduction

In order to shed light on evangelism, one must first shed light on who we are talking about when we talk about this person called "Jesus." Examining how Luther understood who Jesus was and what he did will shape the way a person shares the gospel with others. One of Luther's ideas that could significantly focus evangelism is his breakthrough on the concept of righteousness. Luther could also contribute to evangelism through his understanding of God as hidden and revealed in the person and work of Jesus.

God's Righteousness

God's righteousness should play a part in present-day evangelism. Knowing about this righteousness, which is foreign to human nature, will help a Christian to more fully understand how unrighteous he or she is without God. Having this understanding can then move one to seek God. When a person finds God, he or she can then turn and share this good news with others.

Luther's breakthrough about God's righteousness, and about how humans are made righteous by God, developed gradually as he learned more and more during his time at the monastery. Luther originally saw God as lawmaker. Christ was his "divine judge,"¹ determining his eternal destiny. As a result of this understanding, Luther acutely felt his own unworthiness in God's eyes. He thought there was no possible way he could justify himself before God. He tried many things, including prayer, Bible study, confession, and other practices, but nothing would take away his feeling of inadequacy before God. At one point, Luther actually hated God. His briefly describes his trouble with God:

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not

¹ McGrath, Alister E., *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1985), 116.

blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?"¹

Luther's *Anfechtung*² plagued him day and night. He felt God's wrath upon him; he knew of no way to relieve this suffering.

Luther saw God's righteousness as something completely *other* than the human conception of the word. God's righteousness is the righteousness people should try to enact, Luther knew, but he knew that no matter how hard he tried, he could not control what he understood as his inner sinful nature. Luther knew that, even though he might have *outwardly* acted righteously (as many monks around him tried to do), he could never become *inwardly* pure. He was constantly battling the evil he felt present within himself. Luther finally had to admit defeat: he could not *make* himself righteous. Compared to the righteousness of Christ, Luther saw how humble his own existence was. Christ's divinity revealed to Luther his utter uncleanness and unworthiness. Luther's idea that Christ's righteousness reveals the complete unrighteousness of people is important to keep as a part of evangelism. In order for a person to desire Christ, one must first realize one's inability to attain this righteousness by one's own efforts.

As he considered his own unworthiness and "unrighteousness," Luther gradually came to the conclusion that "God's righteousness, understood as faithfulness to his promises, is

¹ Luther, Martin, *Luther's Tower Experience: Discovering the True Meaning of Righteousness*, in *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Works (1545)* [*Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe. 1545*, in *Luther's Werke in Auswahl*, v. 4, 6th ed., ed. Otto Clemen (Berlin: de Gruyter. 1967), 421-428], trans. Andrew Thornton (Saint Anselm Abbey, 1983), accessed at: <http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/righteousness.html>, 15 November 2003.

² *Anfechtung* is Luther's word for the suffering and distress he felt at this point in his life, knowing something was not right in his relationship with the Lord. To learn more about *Anfechtung*, see: von Loewenich, Walther, *Martin Luther: the Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 72-82.

demonstrated in the incarnation and death of the Son of God.”¹ To come to this conclusion, Luther described three types of righteousness. The first is known as “works righteousness,” or attempting to make oneself righteous before the law. A person considered righteous in this way would be someone people would label as a “good person.” Any action to make one seem upstanding to one’s peers could be understood as “works righteousness.” This was the type of righteousness the Church of Luther’s day preached; however, Luther believed this righteousness “...was simply not gospel.”²

The second type of righteousness Luther talks about is God’s *alien righteousness*, which he says is completely foreign to human experience or imagination; it is only revealed to humanity through Jesus. Becoming human was the only way God could reveal Godself to humans in a way we could fathom. Luther saw that the righteousness of Christ exposed the “unclean” status of every human being, because seeing Christ as fully righteous will allow individuals to begin to see their own state of unrighteousness. God’s *alien righteousness*, revealed in the person of Jesus, shows people their gaping lack of righteousness, and can motivate them to seek the righteousness only God can give.

For Luther, the third type of righteousness is *proper righteousness*, or God’s active righteousness in the world. This type of righteousness manifests itself in works done as natural responses to the love individuals receive from God. It is a reflection of God’s righteousness as humans experience it. Luther explains that

...our works, if you look at them alone, are sins, and thus sentence of judgment is to be pleaded against by you...but you trust that in Christ, those things are pleasing to God, which are not themselves

¹ McGrath, 107.

² Ibid., 112.

alone able to please... Accordingly, whether you sin or not, you always steadfastly lean upon Christ...¹

Proper righteousness becomes evident as God works through people to reveal God's righteousness in and to the world; though it may be hidden in ways we do not recognize (the crucifixion of Jesus, for example). Luther concluded that "...our life is hidden together with Christ in God...that we might be the righteousness of God..."²

Understanding the fact that no one is naturally righteous is essential to evangelism. Without this recognition, no one will be able to see his or her lack of righteousness, and therefore, will not see the righteousness of God as necessary to eliminate this deficiency. Jesus said it best: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners,"³ meaning that a person who considers him- or herself "good" or "righteous" will not willingly seek the righteousness of Christ. Luther says, "The natural [human] cannot want God to be God. Rather he wants himself to be God, and God not to be God."⁴ Only when people understand the magnitude of their unrighteousness and their inability to correct the situation will they be able to genuinely desire Christ's *alien righteousness*. Desiring the righteousness that only God can give brings a person one step closer to desiring a relationship with the divine.

Who was Jesus?

A person sharing the gospel must have some idea who this Jesus character was and is. Was he simply some guy who went around causing trouble and preaching to a fairly large following in some obscure corner of the Roman Empire? Was he a person at all? How could

¹ Luther, Martin, *Sermon on Threefold Righteousness*, in *Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe Band 2*, (Weimar: Hermann Boehlau, 1884), trans. Rev. Dr. Glen Zweck, 1997, accessed at: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/3formsrt.html> (15 November 2003), 6.

² *Sermon on Threefold Righteousness*, 4.

³ Mk 2:17 (NIV).

⁴ Luther, Martin, *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, in *Luther: Early Theological Works, The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 16, ed. and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 267.

God be human? Why would God *want* to become human? These questions are questions “pre-Christians” often need answered before they will allow themselves to believe in Christ. Since the best way humans can see God is through Jesus, evangelism depends on the presentation of an accurate picture of who this person was and is, this Jesus who Christians claim is truly God and truly human.

Luther gained exposure to one perception of who Jesus was as he began his career as a monk under the influence of the Occamist tradition. This tradition asserted that

...the human nature does not become itself a *persona*, but in the union with the Logos it is realized in a concrete and individual existence...The human nature has not then received a personal being...[It] exists in unique dependence upon its support, which is the Logos.¹

Luther was taught that the person Jesus was not the same as other human beings; that God assumed the *form* of a human, and this form was nothing but a mask for God’s divine being. As Lienhard states, the Occamists believed that “[the] uncreated being of the Logos must be radically distinguished from the created being.”² To accomplish this, the Occamists had to focus not the union of the divine and human, but on their separation. These Catholics had to demonstrate the difference between Jesus and ordinary human beings through emphasizing Jesus’ divine status.

Luther bought into these beliefs in his early years as a monk. He saw Christ as his eternal judge, with the power to welcome him into heaven or condemn him to hell if he didn’t measure up to divine standards. As he investigated the matter, though, Luther came to a different conclusion.

¹ Lienhard, Marc, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes of the Reformer’s Christology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 30.

² Lienhard, 30.

Luther believed that Jesus was fully human. In his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, Luther declared that "...[one] should ascribe to the whole person whatever pertains to one part of the person, because both parts constitute one person."¹ That is, Christ's divinity and humanity together constitute *who* he is, fully human and fully divine.

Luther also said Jesus "...was conceived by the Holy Spirit, without the cooperation of man, and was [born, lived,]...suffered, died, and was buried..."² Furthermore, Luther insisted, "...These [events] are not matters of dispute or contention..."³ That this occurred, as Luther believed it did, is something reason cannot understand. Luther asserted that to understand who Jesus was, Christians must "regard his divinity as extending beyond and above all creatures... [and must assert] his humanity is a created thing..."⁴ To Luther, Jesus' humanity meant "...God and man were one person..."⁵

Why did God become human?

"...if Christ is deprived of His humanity, [his humanity is] lost, on the ground that if He is not real and natural man, He is not our flesh and blood, has nothing in common with us, and we can therefore derive no comfort from Him."⁶ Luther believed God became human to reveal Godself to humanity. Luther's concept of the *posteriora Dei*, or the backside of God, emphasized Luther's idea that "...we are denied a direct knowledge of God,"⁷ but that God allows people to see God from behind. God reveals Godself most clearly in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, becoming human so humans could have a relationship with the divine. God's

¹ Luther, Martin, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 380.

² Ibid., 380.

³ Luther, Martin, *The Smalcald Articles*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 501-502.

⁴ *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, 398.

⁵ Ibid., 398.

⁶ Siggins, 202; LW 46:566, 567.

⁷ McGrath, 149.

human status allows people to interact with God; to physically see, converse with, learn from, and better understand the depth of God's love and compassion for humanity, as well as Christ's willingness to sacrifice everything, even Christ's very life, to get through to humanity and give people access to God. The suffering, dying man on the cross would end the confused and unreliable understanding of God humans possess without knowledge of the person and work of Jesus, McGrath says, because God replaces these conceptions with the true picture of who God is in the death of Jesus on the cross, and his subsequent resurrection from the dead.¹ God became human to reveal Godself to those who believe.

Furthermore, God chose to show God's love for humanity by coming to people where they are to speak to them instead of making them search for God. God calls people to reorient their lives toward God. God became human to offer humanity transformation from within. At the core of evangelism must be this message of God's love, as revealed in Jesus and his death on the cross.

God Hidden, God Revealed

During Luther's contemplation of the human status of Jesus, his understanding of the cross changed dramatically. Luther finally understood that God makes himself known in ways people do not expect. Luther declared the only way God could ever be found was in the cross. Luther realized that God is seen most vividly in suffering, and the time when God suffered most, for all humanity, was on the cross. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross made God visible to humanity.

Of course, our finite status prevents humans from being able to fully grasp the true glory of God, but Luther advocated another strategy: seeing God as hidden and revealed in the cross.

¹ McGrath, 150.

He called the cross the *posteriora Dei*,¹ meaning the backside of God (“the visible and hinder parts of God,”² to use Luther’s words), the picture of God the human mind and heart can encompass. While our human nature limits our perceptive ability of the divine, Luther says, the cross reveals to people the character of God, the nature of God, and many traits of God. For instance, Luther advocated the view that God can best be seen through Christ’s suffering and physical pain. This pain demonstrates the fact that Christ was truly human (because God cannot be *physically* hurt). But since Christ is divine as well as human, the cross also reveals God’s humility in subjecting Godself to this punishment God had no reason to endure and could have evaded.

Luther’s insight into the meaning of the cross led him to believe that “[we] must take hold of this God, not naked but clothed and revealed in His Word; otherwise certain despair will crush us.”³ This statement is one example of Luther’s conception of Jesus as God revealed to humanity, yet still hidden under something. Luther also declared that Christ is “...dressed and clothed in [God’s] Word and promises, so that from the name ‘God’ we cannot exclude Christ...”⁴ In other words, Jesus is God, revealed so that humans can see this divinity, and hidden in the form of a human body, because God’s true image, in all its glory, is far beyond the scope of even the greatest human imagination. Because of this view, that God is so far superior to the human conception of perfection, Luther knew that no person could possibly be righteous

¹ McGrath, 149.

² Luther, Martin. *The Heidelberg Disputation*, in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 278.

³ Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 312.

⁴ LW 12:312.

before God by his or her own efforts. Therefore, he says, "...we all ought to confess that we are sinners, that all our efforts are damnable in the sight of God, and that God alone is righteous."¹

Furthermore, as God is hidden and revealed in the person of Jesus, so God is also hidden and revealed in the world, which has implications for evangelism. Luther observes:

[The] Light makes no progress in the world, even though the world stands in such sore need of Him. For the world is enveloped in darkness, knows nothing of God, is not acquainted with God, and does not fear Him!²

Luther became certain that although Christ descended and ascended in his humanity, his divinity never changed, because "...Christ did not come down or ascend according to his divinity, but according to his humanity."³ This means that God did not surrender God's divinity, but rather, assumed humanity. As a divine being, then, even though he was also fully human, Christ was always righteous. If God's righteousness is understood in the way McGrath describes, the incarnation and death of Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises.⁴

Knowing how God has revealed Godself in the cross can help people today find God in their own lives. It can help many to understand that hidden in the cross, in the horrific suffering and pain Jesus endured hanging from a wooden beam, with nails in his hands and feet, slowly dying of asphyxiation, in this ultimate state of humiliation, is God. When one person communicates this message to another, evangelism occurs. Evangelism must include the message that God died a human death. From there, the message must continue on to what significance Christ's death has, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹ LW 12:350-351.

² Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, vol. 22, *Gospel of St. John*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 32.

³ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, v. 37, *Word and Sacrament III*, "That These Words of Christ, 'This Is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 67.

⁴ McGrath, 107.

The physical death of Jesus is essential to the Christian message. If Jesus were not human, or did not actually die, Christianity would be a hoax. People must believe that Jesus *was* human and *did* die in order for them to believe that Christ can save them.

Summary

Luther's development of a new perspective of God's righteousness, best revealed to humanity in the person and work of Jesus, can inform evangelism in several ways. This chapter has demonstrated that God's righteousness, as well as humanity's limited understanding of it, reveals the unworthiness and inadequacy of every person. It also leads one to desire the *alien righteousness* that only God can give. God became human to reveal Godself to humanity.

However, God reveals Godself in ways humans do not always expect or understand. Luther came to understand God as hidden and revealed in the cross. The cross allows a person to see God in the humiliated man hanging from it. The knowledge that God became human must be foundational for evangelism.

Chapter Two

Introduction

To be an effective evangelist in today's world of reason, a person must not only know about the person and work of Jesus (*christology*), but must also know some things about *soteriology*, or how a person is "saved." Luther would remind us, however, that before we can discuss salvation, we must first understand our need for salvation. Once we understand this need, we can then begin to discuss how this knowledge contributes to evangelism.

Righteousness by Works?

As shown in the Chapter One, God reveals his righteousness to us not only to show us what God is like, but, more importantly, Luther would say, to show us the depth of our own shortcomings. In the *Heidelberg Disputation (1518)*,¹ Luther states, "[...The] Lord humbles us and absolutely terrifies us with the law and the prospect of our sins so that not only in other men's eyes but even in our own we seem to be nothing...[T]his is just what we are, in fact."² The law reveals each person's sins, because no one is able to uphold God's law. God's law accuses us, and makes us see how unworthy we are of anything but punishment from God. Living in the sixteenth century, Luther knew all about this law. Luther struggled to live up to the law, which he saw as "...a hindrance rather than a help."³ When he realized he could not uphold God's law, Luther felt the depth and hopelessness of his own unrighteousness, and suffered what he describes as *Anfechtung*.⁴ Disobeying the law makes us unrighteous according to God's standard. In his *Anfechtung*, however, Luther gradually came to understand the difference

¹ The *Heidelberg Disputation* was a formal debate in which Luther laid out his views on law, righteousness, and the cross. The disputation took place in 1518, at the general meeting of the Augustinian monks in Heidelberg. Luther's ideas had begun to draw opposition from some in the Church, and he was called to defend his position.

² Luther, Martin, *Heidelberg Disputation (1518)*, in *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 283.

³ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴ *Anfechtung* is a state of extreme internal suffering or inner torment Luther battled as he struggled to find a gracious God. Luther felt his sin was too great and that he was not worthy of receiving God's grace, and this struggle tormented his soul. See Chapter 1, Footnote 16.

between the human concept of righteousness (i.e., the idea of acquiring righteousness through works) and true righteousness before God (i.e., possessing God's *alien righteousness*).

According to Luther, the Church of his day endorsed what he called a *theology of glory*. This meant that a person must do *quod in se est* in order to be justified. That is, a person must do "what is in one" to earn justification. In other words, a person is justified because of actions he or she has performed. In his commentary on Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, Forde describes the requirements of this understanding: "Reparation must be made, grace restored, and purging carried out so that return to glory is possible."¹ Forde says that the soul tries to find a home for itself through philosophy; through "...the awakening of the soul to its immortal destiny and, consequently, behavior appropriate thereto – which usually means a purging or shucking off of the flesh and its lusts."²

However, Forde argues, Luther saw through this approach to salvation: "...[T]he thirst for glory or power or wisdom is never satisfied even by the acquisition of it. We always want more—precisely so that we can declare independence from God."³ A present-day example of this situation could be an individual climbing up the corporate ladder. The person works long hours so he or she can earn more money. He or she works to obtain a position at a higher level, so he or she can earn more money. The vicious cycle never ends, because once the person achieves one success, he or she is not satisfied with it for long. We humans always desire independence from God; we desire to do things our own way. We dislike the fact that we must depend on another. A theology of glory encourages us to find our own way and to be

¹ Forde, Gerhard O., *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 6.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 17.

independent, instead of fearing that our actions are evil at their core. It encourages us to trust in ourselves and see our own works as good.

However, as Luther examined the theology of glory, he concluded that:

...to trust in a work about which one ought to fear is to give the glory to oneself and take it away from God, to whom fear is owed in every work...If on the other hand a man is afraid that he is not secure he therefore does not please himself but finds his joy in God.¹

Glorifying ourselves replaces glorifying God, Luther says. We put ourselves in place of God; we try to *become* God. Every time our own egos get in the way of our relationship with the divine, our lack of humility becomes quite a problem. Luther shows that the law serves the purpose of convicting people; it shows us our inadequacy before God. God's action to humble humanity before God serves evangelism in this way: by revealing one's shortcomings, it magnifies one's need for God. When an individual admits this need, he or she will be more likely to accept the gift of God's justification and the offered invitation to beginning a relationship with God.

Justification

This hope Luther refers to arises from the knowledge that God no longer condemns us; we have been justified, or made right with God. By eliminating every hope we can possibly have in ourselves, God invites us to abandon self-trust and self-confidence in order to fully trust God. Trusting God can be a difficult thing, because not only can we not *see* the one we are supposed to trust; we often have trouble trusting even those we *can* see. We often think we can trust only in ourselves.

"Theologically speaking," Forde writes, "[a theology of glory] operates on the assumption that we are not seriously addicted to sin, and that our improvement is both necessary

¹ *Heidelberg Disputation*, 284-285.

and possible.”¹ This is what we would like to think, because it would certainly make the problem seem less daunting; it would seem like something we could fix ourselves. In Luther’s day—and there is no sign that things have changed in 500 years!—many people thought this way. Luther was convinced that the Church functioned according to a theology of glory, and Luther started his career as a monk believing justification came through “self-abasement,”² through begging God for grace.

However, one central issue of this theology troubled Luther. He struggled with the question of how this idea of a righteous God could be “...good news for sinful man.”³ Luther believed that God punishes sinners because we do not measure up to God’s standard of righteousness. Humanity will never be capable of achieving what God requires: complete humility. By ourselves, we will never be able to focus fully on God. We will always have some element of self-reliance within us. We will never freely turn to God, Luther says. Luther concluded that God initiates this relationship with us; God comes to us, not we to God. Righteousness is an “imputed” quality, bestowed on humans by God. God makes justification happen, Luther asserts; humans are completely passive.

In evangelism today, God’s righteousness *is* good news for humanity, because God freely gives God’s righteousness to those who will accept it. Evangelism must present the clear message that justification is the act of God, not in any way the result of a human action. God’s justification eliminates the need to use one’s own efforts to justify oneself. People sharing the gospel must remain conscious that they show others the reasons *why* humans need God’s

¹*On Being a Theologian...*, 16.

²McGrath, Alister E. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1985, 107.

³*Ibid.*, 103.

justification—without it, people will remain unrighteous in God's eyes, and therefore, prohibited from a relationship with God.

Salvation

Luther's based his understanding of salvation on an idea that consisted of a person being united with Christ, or in fellowship with Christ. McGrath observes,

Faith recognizes in the apparent debacle of the cross the means by which God is effecting the salvation of mankind, and faith appropriates this salvation through uniting the believer to Christ in a spiritual union, whereby his righteousness becomes ours.¹

Luther understood salvation as *spiritual union* with Christ. This unity means that God's will becomes one's own. It means that a person lives in constant relationship with the divine. Luther believed that in this relationship between God and humanity, God initiates the relationship and people respond in faith.

The fact that God takes the initiative in God's relationship with humanity is an idea essential to Luther's understanding of salvation. People cannot *achieve* their own salvation, Luther realized, it is a gift from God. Luther saw that this gift could only be accepted by faith. Luther emphasizes this point:

In no other way can [a person] come to God or deal with [God] than through faith. That is to say, the author of salvation is not [a person], by any works of his [or her] own, but God, through [God's] promise...²

The righteousness Luther mentions in the first quote is the *alien righteousness* discussed in Chapter One. Luther's idea that God freely gives us our righteousness reveals much about Luther's approach to salvation. It shows the importance Luther placed on God's promise. The

¹ McGrath, 175.

² Luther, Martin, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 295.

promise of God is intricately connected to salvation and faith. God's promise is the promise of forgiveness, the promise of life and salvation.¹ Luther explains this idea:

For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting [person]...the beginning of our salvation is a faith which clings to the Word of the promising God, who, without any effort on our part, in free and unmerited mercy takes the initiative and offers us the word of his promise.²

Again, Luther stresses the connection between God's promise and faith. The promise comes first, and requires faith to believe in it, which God gives to a person. This promise is a central part of evangelism: it is the good news Christians are called to share. As evangelism takes shape in the twenty-first century, "salvation" could be seen as the acceptance of God's promise, as the relationship God gives to people, by grace alone through faith alone.

By Grace Alone

God's promise can be seen in the context of a relationship between law and gospel. For Luther, the law and the gospel were inseparably bound to each other in a dialectical relationship. "The law can only fulfill its God-intended function," Lohse writes, "when seen in constant contrast with the gospel, just as the gospel is properly preached only in constant contrast to the law."³ The law kills, while the gospel brings life. Despite all our wasted efforts to justify ourselves, Luther realized, mercy lay hidden behind God's wrath. Luther realized both were needed to enact God's promise.

The law exposes our faults and shows us our desperate need for God's grace. When the law accuses us and leaves us hopeless, the gospel brings us the good news of God's grace and

¹ *Babylonian Captivity*, 296.

² *Babylonian Captivity*, 295.

³ Lohse, Bernhard, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 269.

forgiveness. God's grace has meaning because of the underlying accusations of God's law.

According to Luther,

...the law makes sin known, so that when sin is recognized grace is sought and obtained...The law humbles us, grace exalts us. The law works fear and wrath, grace works hope and mercy. Through the knowledge of sin comes humility, and through humility, grace is acquired.¹

Examined against the backdrop of salvation defined as a relationship with the divine as the result of God's promise, the law prevents a person from entering this relationship, because it reveals one's inability to obey the law. A relationship with God demands this type of obedience to the law; it demands that the law be fulfilled. Luther reminds us that by God's grace, the penalty has been paid, and that God extends God's offer of salvation to humanity. However, a person must *accept* God's gift of grace, which can only occur through faith.

Through Faith Alone

Luther asserts "...true righteousness comes into being by believing the words of God with the whole heart..."² *Fides Christe*, or faith in Christ, is, as McGrath says, God's "...divine gift to man, something which man cannot effect for himself."³ Luther explains that "...the authority of God's Word is greater than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it."⁴ Therefore, we must apprehend God's Word in a different way: through faith. To have faith means to accept God's promise. Luther uses the example of having faith in God's promise of forgiveness to those who believe. He emphasizes that God's promises usually have a sign accompanying them to remind people of God's promise. For instance, God's promise of the forgiveness of sins for those who believe is accompanied by a way for people to remember this promise: the Lord's

¹ *Heidelberg Disputation*, 289.

² Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works*, vol. 25, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 410.

³ McGrath, 127.

⁴ *Babylonian Captivity*, 291.

Supper reminds Christians of Jesus' death and resurrection. Faith is necessarily linked with belief and trust in God's promise, according to Luther, because "...without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith."¹

Just as we cannot understand God's gift of grace, so we cannot bring ourselves even to faith through our own power. Faith is a gift God gives, not a state of mind or heart that humans can achieve on our own, Luther says.² Only through faith does God's otherwise hidden righteousness become visible, Luther states, and God's righteousness causes our salvation.³ God's righteousness is revealed in the gospel, heard with ears of faith. God's righteousness is hidden under something its opposite, i.e., a human instead of divine form. Through the person of Jesus, God reveals God's glory. To illustrate this example, how can we possibly believe that God became human, except through faith? Reason tells us this is impossible; reason says that Jesus could have been a man, but not God.

Faith, however, turns reason upside down. Reason cannot fathom how God could become human, or why God would *want* to do such a thing. Our justification, our salvation, must occur through faith, or it cannot occur at all. We are saved, Luther says, because of Jesus' promise to us: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved..."⁴ This belief occurs through faith in God's grace and mercy. Salvation cannot occur without faith.

In today's world of reason, evangelism's results often hinge on whether or not a person is willing to set aside the objections of reason to take hold of faith. Christians must take this into

¹ *Babylonian Captivity*, 298.

² *Ibid.*, 291.

³ *LW* 25:151.

⁴ Mk 16:16 (NIV).

consideration when sharing the gospel, and make clear that salvation is not a matter of human reason. Salvation is a change of heart; it is a person's relationship with the Lord.

Theology of the Cross

As Luther further developed this understanding of salvation, he saw a definite purpose behind the law. "...[God humbles] us in our own eyes and make us despair of ourselves," Luther claimed, "so that in his mercy he may exalt us and make us [people] of hope."¹ Luther reminds us that God "...looks on the heart of [a person] and to his [or her] very inmost being."² God humbles humanity by showing us how completely incapable we are of earning justification for ourselves. Luther began to hold the view that "...it is God, *and God alone*, who moves [a person] to repentance and to a humble acknowledgment of divine judgment."³ He came to understand that people cannot, by their own power, motivate themselves to admit their flawed nature. However, when a person comes to see him- or herself as nothing, he or she can then clearly see his or her need for Christ. When God fills this emptiness with Godself, a person gains hope through God's mercy, freely given in Christ.

Evangelism today can and should help people to see and recognize this need for Christ. Evangelism involves people in an all-encompassing and dynamic story of utter defeat followed by ultimate triumph. Evangelism's central story consists of the utter defeat of good in Christ's death, followed by the ultimate triumph of Christ's resurrection. Evangelism must keep Christ as its focus if it is to remain true to its story.

In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther demonstrates one way of making sure Christ remains central to Christianity. He explains his *theologia crucis*, which is for him the opposite of the Church's "theology of glory. "He is not worth calling a theologian," Luther declares in

¹ *Heidelberg*, 283.

² *Ibid.*, 282.

³ McGrath, 128.

Thesis 19, “who seeks to interpret ‘the invisible things of God’ on the basis of the things which have been created.”¹ This assertion reiterates Luther’s conviction about how God reveals Godself to humanity. If we do not see God first and foremost in the cross, in the suffering and death of Jesus, Luther believes, then thinking we can see the hidden face of God anywhere else is absurd. God reveals Godself in the cross, and based on that revelation, we can perhaps see God in other places, but we must first find God in the cross. Seeing how God works in ways we might not expect can help us to see God at work in our everyday lives.

In his next thesis (Thesis 20), Luther states: “But he is worth calling a theologian who understands the visible and hinder parts of God to mean the passion and the cross.”² This view of God is what Luther calls God’s visible backside, or *posteriora Dei*. The notion that God would reveal Godself on a cross goes against everything one might expect of an omnipotent, omnipresent God. Yet no lightning flashed from heaven; instead, a man convicted a common criminal died a cruel, horrible, prolonged death.³

How could this humiliating death possibly reveal God? Luther would ask why we would question God! The cross is how God chose to reveal God’s passion for God’s children. If one looks through the eyes of faith, a person will see not only Jesus’ death, but he or she will also see the triumph of the resurrection. Without faith, no one will never truly see the hidden righteousness and saving power of God in the cross. Without faith, Christianity becomes a meaningless tradition instead of the expression of an intensely passionate relationship between humans and the Triune God.

¹ Heidelberg, 278.

² Heidelberg, 290.

³ See C. Truman Davis, M.D., A Physician Analyzes the Crucifixion, Arizona Medicine (Arizona Medical Assoc.: March, 1965), accessed at <http://www.evangelicaloutreach.org/crucifix.htm> (12 November 2003).

Furthermore, Luther asserts, “[the] theologian of glory says bad is good and good is bad. The theologian of the cross says what is in fact the truth (i.e., calls them by their proper name).”¹ Luther’s Thesis 21 cuts straight to the heart of the matter. Luther condemned the theologians of glory, who considered doing *quod in se est* a good thing; who sought only the works and glory that accompany the cross, instead of the cross itself. This approach cannot bring anyone to salvation, Luther points out. Instead, it fools people into thinking they must earn their own salvation. It calls sin good. The theologian of the cross, however, speaks truth, by calling the cross the only place God can be found.

Returning to the main problem with the theology of glory, Luther concludes his theology of the cross with Thesis 22: “The sort of wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in known good works simply inflates a man, and renders him both blind and hard.”² Luther said that his contemporaries sought knowledge, but they would never be satisfied simply with the acquisition of wisdom. Luther understood that trying to see the invisible God through human efforts would never succeed. Luther said this attitude must be destroyed. He worried that his contemporaries were becoming blind to and impenetrable by the message of the cross, a message that, as Paul says, “... is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us being saved, it is the power of God.”³

Luther declared that God is the one who acts in salvation, not us. God offers salvation all people, and we can choose to either accept or reject it.⁴ Salvation thus remains entirely the act of God, not the result of human works. Christians must remember that God works through and in

¹ Heidelberg, 291.

² Heidelberg, 292.

³ 1 Cor. 1:18 (NIV).

⁴ Luther, Martin, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 17: *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Philip S. Watson, with B. Drewery (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 289.

us; *we* do not bring about the salvation of anyone, we simply *reflect* the light of Christ to the world.

Summary

Examining Luther's soteriology brings us one step closer to evaluating, improving upon, and enacting present-day evangelism. Today, salvation should still be of utmost concern to Christians. Introducing others to a relationship with the divine is the purpose of evangelism. In order to accomplish this task, Christians must acknowledge that God initiates the relationship with an individual; people sharing the gospel simply serve as instruments through which this message is transmitted. Salvation does not occur because of something *people* do; it results from God's work in the human heart.

The faith Christians need is one of boldness and confidence. We need a faith that words and reason cannot destroy. We need a faith that assures us of God's love. We need a faith that is the foundation and core of our very existence. Most of all, however, Christians need to embrace that relationship with Christ we try to show and explain to others.

Implications for Evangelism

Luther's understanding of salvation, something that occurred by grace through faith, instead of by works, can inform ideas about salvation today. The message of salvation is one that must be central to evangelism. Without this message, why should a person believe in Jesus? How can a person understand the importance and significance of God becoming human if he or she does not recognize his or her own need for salvation? The message of the cross, Luther says, is the one essential thing people should know. This is why his *theologia crucis* rebukes the idea that salvation can be obtained through a person's own action.

Today, many people remain ignorant of the fact that God *did* become human; God *did* die on the cross. Others, who *do* know and believe this, may find it difficult to explain. If the present-day church and the Christians in it stray from the message of salvation, if we stray from the message of the cross, "evangelism" will become something entirely devoid of Christ. To do this would be to remove the main focus of Christianity, which reduces "evangelism" to simply a form of service or obligation, i.e., an action distinct from spreading the gospel.

Luther's understanding of the cross implies that today, as in the past, Christ should be the central focus of evangelism. If Christians lose our focus on the Savior, Christianity becomes, as previously mentioned, nothing more than a human tradition, devoid of a personal relationship with God. It loses that which distinguishes it from all human religions: a Savior. Looking at evangelism today, how can people enact these ideas?

Chapter Three

Introduction

As discussed in Chapter Two, Christians are called to share the good news of God's promise with others. God's promise, believed through faith, can motivate a person to share the gospel. The promise points to Christ; Christ *is* the promise. God's promises of life and salvation are fulfilled in Christ.

Luther knew that Christ was the central focus and fulfillment of God's promise. Through his examination of christology and soteriology, Luther emphasized the centrality of Christ. Luther realized that Christ must be the central message around which everything else is built; Christ must be the foundation people build their lives on. Nothing in his church could be accomplished without Christ as the foundation. Similarly, Christ must be central today, too. Evangelism cannot occur without this foundation. In order for evangelism to have any effect, Christians must make Christ the main thing we preach.

Tradition

The problem in the United States stems from the fact that though many people feel a spiritual hunger, they do not see a resource to feed their yearning. Churches do preach the Word of God faithfully in many situations, but not always in ways that speak to and convict the average person. Especially in my generation, many people who distance themselves from the church do so because its message seems irrelevant to their everyday lives. Though it may be loyal to the Word of God, many people feel worship is antiquated and boring. If the church continues to practice a tradition without making clear the reason behind it, a tradition can lose its ability to speak to people in the present.

Even within the group of people who attend worship on a regular basis, some do so simply out of habit, tradition, or a sense of obligation. To illustrate this point, a conservative

Midwestern American may have trouble with change sometimes, as he or she may (or may not) acknowledge. This reluctance to consider change, though, puts this group of people at risk of losing all that *is* meaningful in the traditions it holds on to. If people do not understand the purpose of the traditions or the meaning in them, the ability of these traditions to effectively communicate the gospel is sacrificed.

Luther's Reformation was not originally meant to be a breakaway from the church; it was meant to help the Church return to its roots in the truth of the Word of God. Luther demanded that the Church evaluate its practices against the Bible. Similarly, Luther's ideas about who Jesus was, what he did, and how he saves us return his readers to the roots of their faith, the truth of the gospel.

Tradition can be extremely valuable, because it reminds the church of its roots. It reminds Christians of the things we believe and why we believe them. For example, the format of the traditional Lutheran Book of Worship Service of Holy Communion (Setting One, Two, *or* Three) contains the basic elements of confession and absolution, prayer, praise, teaching, a confession of faith, and the Lord's Supper. All of these practices are extremely valuable and should not be dismissed or overlooked. Their familiarity offers reassurance of God's love, the sacrifice of Jesus, and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

Luther did not dismiss the value of tradition. He was concerned, however, that some traditions of his time did not hold fast to the word of God. Luther wanted people to refocus on the truth behind the traditions, on the truth of Christ within them. Luther wanted the Church to return to the basics of faith. Today, the situation is slightly different, in that many of the traditions of the present-day church stem from Luther's reforms in the sixteenth century. The value of this heritage rests in the fact that it *does* remind believers of the Christian story. It

reminds believers of the importance of God's Word and our salvation through Christ. It reminds believers why we worship. Our heritage connects us with the rich story of our past and how it applies in present times.

However, tradition can also become stagnant and ineffective if its original purpose is overlooked. The danger inherent in overly relying on tradition lies in the fact that it can become so familiar that people can lose focus on its purpose and importance. This does not happen for all people, but for a significant number of individuals, especially those in my generation, tradition can be stifling. From the viewpoint of many in this group, tradition does not speak to them in the way it does to many people in the older generations. Tradition is often seen as something old and tired and boring by people my age. This perception exists mainly because many individuals in my generation have never understood the meaning of the tradition, and therefore it does not speak to them, or something about the way the tradition is presented and practiced turns members of this group away from it. When traditions are not explained, their meaning, though still present, easily becomes forgotten or ignored.

ELCA Strategy

The ELCA has recently taken steps to stand up for this truth, through adopting an evangelism strategy for the twenty-first century entitled *Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision for Evangelism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. The strategy addresses the spiritual yearning of many Americans; it puts forth ideas to improve and increase evangelism in the United States. The strategy, while a broad overview of the ELCA's goals for coming years, provides enough direction to guide individual synods and congregations, while still allowing each the freedom to decide what will be most effective in their individual communities.

The ELCA strategy defines *evangelism* as "...proclaiming the Good News of Christ crucified and risen, inviting people to faith in God, and welcoming all into the Christian church."¹ This definition holds much potential, and coincides with Luther's priority of keeping Christ as the center of the church. The ELCA's objectives in this strategy include calling the church to prayer, preparing and renewing evangelical leaders, teaching discipleship, and starting and renewing congregations. Other actions the strategy calls for are "witness by all the baptized; lifelong faith formation; justice and mercy for all creation; [and] becoming an antiracist, multicultural church."²

The Praying Church

The ELCA believes "...that God is calling every member and congregation to fervent prayer as a foundation for effective evangelism."³ The strategy refers to Luther's statement: "A Christian without prayer is just as impossible as a living person without a pulse."⁴ Luther emphasized the essential nature of prayer. Prayer must occur in faith, because, as Luther said, "[n]ot a single article of faith would remain if [one] followed the rancor of reason."⁵ Prayer brings both a connection with God and with other Christians. Prayer actively demonstrates Luther's understanding of salvation, because prayer unites a believer with Christ.

The ELCA wants the church to "...pray for renewal that is grounded in the Word."⁶ It also wants congregations and individual members to "renew prayers for friends, neighbors, and family members who are outside the church."⁷ Prayer can also provide a path to personal and

¹ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision For Evangelism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Accessed at: <http://www.elca.org/visionevangelism/ELCAEvangelismStrategyDraft.pdf>, 3 September 2003, 7.

² *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ LW 37:53.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 4.

community-wide renewal. Furthermore, providing resources for teaching, modeling, and mentoring prayer focused on evangelism will serve to "...equip people of faith for this vital task."¹ The ELCA realizes many different types of prayer exist, and each can be effective in different situations. The ELCA also believes its members can learn more about prayer from its ecumenical partners in faith. Finally, the strategy emphasizes that prayer leaders must develop within individual congregations. The ELCA suggests that these leaders be younger individuals, including children, teens, and young adults. Prayer is and will be essential to evangelism as this strategy begins to take root in the ELCA.

Luther's focus on the importance and centrality of Christ to the Christian faith can inform the praying church. By focusing on Christ as Luther emphasizes, a praying church will more fully seek God's will and guidance as it prays. Prayer becomes a person's response to God's initiative in seeking out God's people. Luther said people must pray in the midst of their sins, or they will never pray at all,² meaning that humans will always be sinners, and in order to find God, they must seek God in spite of this condition.

Preparation and Renewal of Evangelical Leaders

To remain "...faithful in its response to God's call to mission and evangelism,"³ the church and Christians within it must "...nurture evangelical leaders under the renewing power of God's Spirit..."⁴ The evangelism strategy qualifies effective evangelical leaders as people who:

...hold Jesus at the heart of their ministry and set about to make disciples in his name; center ministry in effective proclamation of the Gospel...; [and] are courageous, passionate, and contextual

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century*..., 5.

² Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, vol. 12, *Selected Psalms*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955, 314.

³ *Sharing Faith in a New Century*..., 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

leaders who see themselves as witnesses to Jesus Christ and the in-breaking reign of God...¹

in addition to several other qualities listed in the strategy. Having leaders with qualities such as these will greatly impact the effectiveness of evangelism. For example, leaders who put Christ in the center of their lives and ministries will set an example for those around them to follow. Leaders who step forward with courage and passion will ignite these characteristics in others, which will benefit the church and evangelism immensely. Pastors and other leaders in the church who demonstrate passion in evangelism will lead others to do the same.

The ELCA proposes to provide money for evangelism and leadership renewal, as well as to begin a church-wide mentoring program. Mentors will "...assist in the spiritual growth of groups or individuals...[and]...walk with and support leaders and congregations..."² Additionally, the ELCA proposes to train ethnic specific leaders.

Training and renewing quality leaders in the church will be a key factor in the church's ability to thrive in the twenty-first century. Leaders guide and protect Christians in the church. In absence of strong leaders, loyal to God's Word, the people in the church will be more likely to stray from the truth. If ELCA leaders solidly trained in the Word do not arise from my generation, we will be in danger of losing the focus on Christ Luther stressed. Leaders must, as the strategy says, "hold Jesus at the heart of their ministry."³

Without good leadership, people will look for leadership elsewhere, whether in another Christian denomination or in the secular world. Therefore, the ELCA's priority to train strong leaders for the church will be essential to the success of evangelism. As the ELCA focuses on evangelism, leaders must offer encouragement and also spiritually feed evangelists in their

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 5.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

congregations, because without being spiritually fed oneself, it becomes difficult to feed others. Leaders are and will continue to be a source of support for church members who go out into the world with the gospel message.

Leaders set the example for the church, and they must always focus on pointing people away from themselves to Christ. Leaders must have a solid understanding of who Jesus was, as detailed in Chapter One. By focusing on the person and work of Jesus, leaders can become more aware of the example Jesus set for *them*. Understanding *who* Jesus was and is can then help leaders to focus or refocus those they serve on the importance of the Christian story. Ideally, leaders would be so focused on Christ that they reflect Christ more than themselves in their words, actions, and attitudes, in their lives.

Leaders can also help people to see God in the cross. As discussed in Chapter One, Luther understood God as hidden and revealed in the cross of Christ. Leaders can take this understanding and apply it to the world today. Both global and community-specific situations can benefit from people who look for God in them. Searching for God in everyday life will reveal God in unexpected places. Leaders should point people to God revealed in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, because by doing so, they will encourage people to grow in their relationship with God.

Discipleship Training

In addition to training leaders in the church, the ELCA calls the church to “teach people of all ages to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, sent as witnesses to Jesus, in service to others and working for justice and peace in all the earth.”¹ The strategy proposes to invite disciples to “...deepen and broaden their faith practices;”² it calls Christians to spiritual discipline in a

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 7.

² *Ibid.*

variety of ways. Spiritual mentors will play a role in this step; they will assist and train people “to foster spiritual growth toward mature discipleship and witness.”¹ Anti-racism training and ministry to persons with special needs will also play a part in discipleship. As discipleship begins, the ELCA suggests that discipleship and evangelism resources be developed and provided to enhance this process, including the task of making these resources ethnic and language-specific to particular communities across the country. Furthermore, the ELCA wants to “host a variety of inspirational evangelical mass rallies, gatherings, or revivals,”² and to “start new Christian schools and early childhood education centers.”³

This part of the strategy could be informed by Luther’s understanding of God’s righteousness. As explained in Chapter One, knowing about God’s righteousness can help a person to see how fully *unrighteous* he or she is before God, which can motivate him or her to seek God more earnestly. When Christians become aware of God’s *alien righteousness*, and understand that God has freely made them righteous in God’s eyes because of Christ’s death, this knowledge should motivate a person to share it with others (i.e., to evangelize). Furthermore, God’s *proper righteousness* will manifest itself in believers, acting in and through them to reveal God’s face to the secular world as a natural response to God’s love. Discipleship trains Christians to deepen their relationship with the divine in response to the initiative God has already taken in their lives.

Chapter Two discussed Luther’s understanding of salvation as union with Christ. God’s promise and its connection with faith should greatly influence discipleship. As Christians develop their relationship with God, they will come to rely more on God’s promise than their own will, which is evidence of a Christian’s union with God. The spiritual discipline the ELCA

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 7.

² *Ibid.*, 8.

³ *Ibid.*

strategy proposes will play a part in helping Christians to rely on God instead of themselves. Through faith practices like studying Scripture, worship, prayer, service, and witnessing,¹ Christians can grow deeper in relationship with God. Focusing on God's promise within the context of these practices could greatly enhance discipleship of Christians within the ELCA.

Furthermore, discipleship calls Christians to share the gospel with others, to share the message that a relationship with God is made possible by grace alone through faith alone. Understanding God's promise through faith, and living in union with God will not only strengthen a Christian's faith, but it will also strengthen his or her witness to the world around him or her.

Discipleship and growth in faith can also be informed by Luther's theology of the cross. The cross, as explained in Chapter Two, is the place the invisible God makes Godself visible. When Christians look to the cross to see God, God continues to reveal Godself in new ways. The cross best focuses Christians on Christ, and thus serves as the most important message Christians must communicate when sharing the gospel. The cross demonstrates God's incredible love for humanity; it demonstrates how God fulfills God's promise. The cross *is* God's promise.

New Congregations and Congregational Renewal

The ELCA's plan to start and renew congregations aims to "increase the number of ELCA congregations and ministry sites that are growing spiritually and numerically"² by developing a plan for starting new congregations, revitalizing existing congregations. This revitalization will include assessing the current effectiveness of ministry in these congregations and planning ways to reach out to the community of each congregation. Finding alternative

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 7

² *Ibid.*, 8.

funding sources and purchasing “advance church sites”¹ will also be important parts of starting and renewing congregations, as will efforts to make the congregations more up-to-date technologically. Additionally, the ELCA desires to expand its “partnership with the global church and [its] ecumenical partners.”² Furthermore, developing worship resources will be important in renewing the church, the ELCA believes. These worship resources, the evangelism strategy says, should

represent a variety of perspectives and practices regarding worship. Resources developed and worship consultation will be grounded in...the Word and Sacrament...with particular attention to the growing diversity of thought and practice.³

Finally, in addition to using new worship resources to renew worship, the ELCA wants to “strengthen [the relationship] between worship, evangelism, and discipleship ministries.”⁴

Beginning new congregations and renewing existing ones will be perhaps the most visible sign of evangelism within the ELCA in coming years. It will be evidence that evangelism is having an impact, creating a need for more congregations within the ELCA. However, one risk in working toward these goals is that Christians may become so focused on the specific end goals that they lose their focus on the reason these goals were proposed: to spread the good news of Christ. Luther emphasized the fact that Christians must focus first on Christ, in response to God’s initiation of a relationship with us. These goals, while valuable and necessary, also have the potential to become a distraction from the reason *for* evangelism. If this focus becomes secondary, evangelism will not be as effective as it could be. For instance, the evangelism strategy’s goal of starting a specific number of new churches each year, while it may be concrete and practical, suggests that the strategy could become focused in part on human goals, instead of

¹ *Sharing Faith in a New Century...*, 9.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

giving God room to work. Having a concrete goal shows the urgency of the need for evangelism, but this specificity could prove to be a way the strategy may limit God's work in the ELCA. It will be important to remember that numerical goals serve as a motivating factor, not a limiting factor, in evangelism. That is, if the possibility of starting *more* churches becomes apparent, the ELCA should work to provide resources for this to occur.

Focused on Christ and a Christian's relationship with the divine, however, the ELCA's strategy will not encounter this problem. By making Christ their first priority, Christians will reveal Christ through their lives, in the way they interact with others, in the words they speak, and in the love they show.

Summary

As Christians live in the twenty-first century, evangelism will be an important practice. The ELCA has set forth many goals for evangelism in the current time. These goals are a necessary start to improving evangelism efforts by ELCA members in the United States. Informed by Luther's understanding of who Jesus was and is and how salvation works, the strategy can serve to focus Christians on the centrality of Christ in evangelism, and help them to become witnesses to people in their lives through the priority they give to their relationship with Christ.

Conclusions

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One showed how Luther's understanding of *who* Jesus was and the *work* he did can shape evangelism in the United States today. Deepening one's understanding of who Jesus was will shape the way a Christian shares the gospel today. Knowing that God became human and that God reveals Godself to humanity in ways people do not expect or understand will help people to see God in their everyday lives.

Chapter Two examined how Luther's ideas about *how* Christ saves can also strengthen present-day evangelism. By focusing on the message of the cross, Christians will help others to see that God wants to begin or deepen God's relationship with them; that God takes the initiative and seeks them out. Luther held the cross as the central message of Christianity; it was the one thing people should know about. It follows that evangelism should also keep its focus on the cross of Christ and the relationship God wants to have with every person.

Chapter Three explored the ELCA's new evangelism strategy, *Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision for Evangelism in the ELCA*. This strategy, informed by Luther's ideas, has much potential to increase and improve evangelism within the ELCA, as well as to improve the ministry of ELCA congregations to their larger communities.

Analysis

This thesis examines how a small portion of Luther's ideas could apply to a specific present-day evangelism strategy. While the ideas contained herein do not offer overall criticism or endorsement of the ELCA strategy, they emphasize the important foundation which must underlie evangelism in any situation. This foundation, while often seen as implied and understood, must be reemphasized in the church today, because without the foundation of Christ, the church will be unable to stand.

Luther's christology and soteriology provide a common lens with which to examine evangelism. Looking at evangelism through this lens which focuses Christ in its center, a person can see the importance of beginning evangelism with Christ, and continuing to include this understanding of Christ wherever evangelism occurs.

This thesis does not call for any major changes to be made to the ELCA evangelism strategy. However, it does caution that while the strategy has the potential to initiate great progress in evangelism, it also has the potential to become interpreted as a list of goals with specific deadlines, or as an obligation instead of a privilege. It has the potential to become something *we* do instead of something *God* does through us, which could decrease the focus of evangelists on the gospel message. If the focus shifts from Christ, evangelism will no longer fulfill its purpose, which is to spread the gospel. As evangelism by the ELCA increases in the United States in coming years, keeping Christ as the focus will be essential.

The ideas presented in this thesis, on the most basic level, are groundwork for further investigation. This investigation could include how Luther's ideas about Christian freedom, service, or worship, as well as other topics, might influence evangelism today. The ideas presented are not necessarily the *only* interpretation of how Luther's christology and soteriology can apply to evangelism today. However, this interpretation reminds a person that Christ must remain in the center of Christianity and evangelism. With Christ as the central and primary focus of evangelism, the gospel will pierce hearts and bear fruit today and in the future.

In this confusing, pluralistic, and ever-changing world, Luther's ideas can serve to remind Christians of and refocus Christians on the message of the cross. As relationships with Christ deepen, and people become united with God's will and find a firm identity in Christ, Christ's light will shine more brightly through them into the darkness of the world.

Appendix

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