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Luther, Libertines, and Literature

JEFFREY K. MANN

MARTIN LUTHER HAS LEFT us a problem. There is great appreciation for his theology of salvation through faith alone. However, his radical emphasis on God's grace—which abolishes the despair felt from having to achieve salvation with our own efforts—leaves us with the problem of the potential abuse of this freedom from performing good works. If I can do nothing to facilitate, receive, or maintain my salvation, well, I guess I don't have to do anything. Luther's theology leaves itself wide open for libertinism.

Luther did not simply underestimate this problem; at times he seemed to encourage it outright. In 1535 he wrote, "It is a marvelous thing and unknown to the world to teach Christians to ignore the law and to live before God as though there were no law whatever [sic]. For if you do not ignore the law and thus direct your thoughts to grace as though there were no law but as though there was nothing but grace you cannot be saved."¹

The essential conundrum, which I have written about as the "antinomian question," is this: How do you respond to the professed Christian who makes little effort to be morally upright? After all, she correctly

1. *Luther's Works*, 26.6.

points out that she will be forgiven all her sins of omission and commission if she simply believes. While this type of antinomianism could be expressed in a lifestyle of crass libertinism, more often it involves moral apathy and laziness at a more modest level: Nothing will happen to me if I don't volunteer at Habitat For Humanity. That is to say, this question is not the purview alone of the rare individual who wants to spend his life raping and pillaging, but is a common thought when doing the right thing is not really what I want to do today.

This issue has dogged pastors and theologians from the beginning of the Church. St. Paul needed to respond to those who asked, "Shall we sin, because we are not under the law but under grace?" (Rom 6:15). With Luther and his extreme emphasis on faith alone, and his reticence to speak much of sanctification, casual libertinism became much easier to justify. Why did Luther shout justification and whisper sanctification? The most influential factor was that he believed the Church had failed to deliver the pure gospel. Instead, it beat people down with rules and regulations that left them in despair. The corrective for his time was the message of free grace, not more Law. He condemned works righteousness more strenuously than vice because he believed it to be more dangerous—vice imperils the body, works righteousness endangers the soul.

Luther's *answer* to the antinomian question was clear: Of course good works are important and they should be encouraged! Moreover, where there is genuine faith, there will be genuine acts of love. They are essentially connected. "For as naturally as a tree bears fruit, good works follow upon faith."² And, "Just as there is not fire without heat and smoke, so there is no faith without love."³

Luther was no antinomian. He did not want to preach the gospel alone and let that happy message transform people's lives.⁴ The law is to be preached as well, both before and after conversion. *Lex semper accusat*, the law always accuses. That is, one does not preach the law to the unregenerate alone, but every believer must confront it daily. Luther taught, "The repentance of believers in Christ goes beyond the actual sins and continues through our life until death."⁵

2. *Martin Luther Werke*, 103.285.

3. *Ibid.*, 172.275.

4. Luther rejected this position during the two antinomian controversies with Johann Agricola, Andreas Poach, and Anton Otto. Cf. Richter, *Gesetz und Heil*.

5. *Martin Luther Werke*, 391.350.

Nevertheless, Luther certainly erred on the side of the gospel. As a result, there has been a real difficulty in the history of Lutheranism, where pastors and theologians have sought to respond effectively to the antinomian question without compromising Luther's theology. How do you tell people that they have to do good works, at the same time that you tell them they don't have to do good works?

The challenge boils down to this: A good Lutheran pastor will comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That's a tricky job description if ever there was one. Is it even possible when speaking to a group? Most likely, the reassuring words of the gospel will be gobbled up by the comfortable, while the afflicted will focus on the law of God and all of its demands. As a result of this difficulty, Lutheran church leaders have often followed Luther's example and erred on the side of the gospel, speaking more of grace and forgiveness than moral chastisement. This, of course, makes the lazy libertine life all the easier to slip into.

In 500 years of Lutheran history, there have been two types of replies to the antinomian question. These are logical answers and existential responses. For most of the time that I have worked on this issue, I have focused on logical answers. I am, after all, a hardcore left-hemisphere kind of guy. I like rational, consistent, logical answers to problems. I prefer non-fiction to fiction. I was surprised to hear that *Moby Dick* was a metaphor, and not just a cool story about a whale.

First let us briefly consider a few logical responses: Philipp Melancthon, Luther's right-hand man, was quite concerned with the abuse of Christian freedom, and worked hard on logical responses to this problem. Among his various efforts, he introduced a third use of the law, which instructs believers in how to live their lives. He also warned them that bad behavior has temporal implications. He wrote in his 1555 *Loci Communes*, "Although obedience is for the glory of God, and not principally for fear of punishment, nevertheless God has revealed terrible punishments respecting it, so that we may know his will and earnestly desire to show obedience."⁶ And, of course, good works can bring temporal blessings, as the fourth commandment promises. Melancthon provides us with a good reply to the antinomian question, but it leaves us open to cost-benefit analyses when considering a little walk on the wild side.

Other logical retorts to the antinomian question answered the would-be libertines, but sometimes compromised Luther's theology in

6. Melancthon, *Loci*, 182.

the process. Philipp Jakob Spener is a good example of this. The father of German Pietism did a great deal for spiritual growth among the people of Germany. He strongly encouraged *collegia pietatis*, or conventicle groups, laying the groundwork for what we know today as bible-study groups. And his preaching of the Law made it clear to everyone what was expected of them. However, his theological innovations created some problems.

In order to put the fear of God into the nominal Lutherans of his day, he taught that there are essentially two kinds of sins: sins of weakness (*Schwachheit-sünde*) and sins of malice (*Boßheit-sünde*).⁷ The former are accidental sins, committed without forethought. The latter are intentional and performed without regret. The one is committed by believers and forgiven freely, while the other is the work only of those without true faith. Thus, according to Spener, if you are unapologetically planning your weekends of debauchery, that is a good sign that you do not possess genuine saving faith.

There are a number of problems with this harmatology. First, it stands in stark contrast to Luther's insistence that the redeemed remain complete sinners their whole lives, *simul iustus et peccator*. Additionally, this distinction forces the individual into self-analysis, requiring her to examine her own behavior for a sure sign of God's grace. If her daily conduct includes impious behavior that was not accidental, and did not generate much sorrow, that may very well mean that her faith is insincere and worthless. This stands in stark contrast to Luther's theology which focuses entirely on the work of Christ as the proof of redemption. Luther's theology creates freedom; Spener's enslaves us again, condemning us to lives curved in on ourselves.

The second kind of reply to libertinism is existential. Here we find less explicit theology and more communication with the heart and soul. Rather than offering a logical answer, reply is made through personal connection and inspiration. This seems quite fitting in Christianity, given the example of its founder. Jesus was asked for a definition of who qualifies as a neighbor and responded with a story about a guy getting mugged on the road. He regaled his audience with a tale about fertilizing a fruitless fig tree. He brandished a whip and ran people out of a temple courtyard. The gospels are full of this kind of material. Jesus did not respond to people with legal definitions and theology; he communicated in ways that allowed them to personally appropriate his message.

7. *Philipp Jakob Spener Schriften*, II.2, 172ff.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, is not known as a story-teller; his radical message and its delivery in the sixteenth century were usually direct, as they would strike at the marrow of his audience. However, not all his works were theological treatises full of spit and fire. Luther also spoke tenderly to his parishioners. To communicate his ideas to the laity, he often took a different tack. For example, his appreciation for the fables of Aesop is well known.⁸ When fulfilling his office of pastor in letters and sermons, he understood the value of everyday examples. Citing Marcus Terentius Varro approvingly, he wrote, “[F]or [examples] help one both to understand more clearly and to remember more easily. Otherwise, if the discourse is heard without an example, no matter how suitable and excellent it may be, it does not move the heart as much, and is also not so clear and easily retained. Histories are, therefore, a very precious thing.”⁹

Lutheran theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard adopted the more literary approach in the nineteenth century when trying to communicate the true spirit of Christianity. “My task,” he wrote, “has continually been to provide the existential-corrective by poetically presenting the ideals and inciting people about the established order.”¹⁰ The father of existentialism held the same concern as Spenser, that nominal Christians were abusing the freedom of the gospel. However, his own efforts to combat this mistreatment of Christianity were not theological, *per se*, but personal, directed to the “single individual.” The challenge was to assist people to personally appropriate the truth claims of Christianity. As he famously wrote at the end of *Either/Or*, “[O]nly the truth that builds up is truth for you.”¹¹ That is, we only truly believe—and subsequently act on—that which we have personally appropriated.

According to the Dane, the biggest barrier to spiritual growth is objectification of the truth claims of Christianity. And a primary culprit? Assistant professors. “[T]hose vermin who actually have demolished Christianity, the assistant professors, those noble men who build the tombs of the prophets, objectively recite their teachings, turn the

8. Springer, *Luther's Aesop*.

9. *Luther's Work*, 34.275.

10. *Pap X4 A 15*, as in Søren Kierkegaard's *Journals and Papers*, 1.331.

11. *Either/Or*, 2.354.

suffering and death of the glorious ones into a profit.”¹² After all, “one does not become pious objectively.”¹³

Kierkegaard famously chose indirect communication over direct communication, for most of his life. He wrote of emperors, geese, seducers, and vampire bats, all with the intention of compelling his audience to consider his message for their lives. Through his own parables, and the unique perspectives of his pseudonymity (or polyonymity), he wanted to help his readers internalize the truth claims of Christianity. He wrote, “Christianity is spirit; spirit is inwardness; inwardness is subjectivity; subjectivity is essentially passion, and at its maximum an infinite, personally interested passion for one’s eternal happiness.”¹⁴ For Kierkegaard, the way to deal with the unsanctified lives of his neighbors was to help them deepen their personal faith. This is achieved, not through objective theology, but personal connection. And as Jesus had demonstrated nearly 2000 years prior, indirect communication achieves this quite well.

But this is not really so easy! How do you present a principle, especially to academics, so that it is not categorized, the author pigeon-holed, and the life-changing message reduced to objective knowledge? Kierkegaard did his best, often telling stories in an effort to force his readers to identify with characters. In one particular example, which makes me think of college professors, he wrote, “Like the child who lets his kite go skyward, he lets his knowledge ascend; he finds it interesting, enormously interesting, to watch it, to follow it with his eyes but—it does not lift him up; he remains in the mud, more and more desperately craving the interesting. Therefore, whoever you are, if this in any way is the case with you; shame on you, shame on you, shame on you!”¹⁵

What Kierkegaard was doing, without explicitly stating it (to my knowledge), was responding to libertinism with literature.¹⁶ He wrote inspirationally of love, as well as its poor imitators, in the stories of Agnes and the merman, the king who loved the maiden of low status, and creatures of habit. He taught us ethics through the letters of Judge William, the Knight of Infinite Resignation, and accounts of tragic heroes like

12. *The Moment and Late Writings*, 290–91.

13. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 132.

14. *Ibid.*, 33.

15. *The Moment and Late Writings*, 260–61.

16. This is, of course, until the end of his life when the poet “threw away his guitar” and began to speak quite directly to the people of Copenhagen.

Agamemnon. He communicated the ideal of faith through the account of Abraham and Isaac, as well as the Knight of Faith. He could powerfully present the moral ideal without telling people what they ought to do. The reader could be brought to that conclusion for herself.

Reading through Kierkegaard, one is constantly drawn away from intellectual objectification of theology and back into life in the world. Poetry, legend, parables, and countless examples—sometimes fantastic, sometimes mundane—force the reader to appropriate the material to his situation, to his life. Kierkegaard understood that the more objective the material, the less life-changing; the more subjective, the more transformative. In desiring to communicate the Christian message in a way that transformed lives, he recognized that objective theology was not the most useful gift he could give the world. He needed to be a poet, a “Poet of the Word.”¹⁷

What is noteworthy about the power of literature with regard to the Christian message is its ability to speak the appropriate message in the ears of both the comfortable and the afflicted. As you will recall, Lutheran preachers have a problem: A sermon should contain both law and gospel—requirement and forgiveness. The problem is that while those despairing should hearken to the gospel most closely, and the contented to the law, the opposite often results. The conscience-stricken hear only God’s moral demands while the smug skip ahead to the cheap grace of forgiveness.

With this in mind, we see the value of literature for such a challenge. Literature draws us in and creates identification with certain characters, often ones with whom we relate most closely. The struggles and personalities which resonate with us are what draw us to individuals in the story. As such, different readers may identify with different characters. When I shared the story of the Good Samaritan with my two young sons, it was plain to me that the three of us were identifying with the three different characters: the father, older and younger sons. In our case, this was particularly appropriate, as our counterparts in the story have similar personalities to the three of us. In cases like this, the applicable lesson for the character may then be appropriated by the reader who needs to hear the same message.

This principle, sometimes referred to as “experience-taking,” may help us overcome the preacher’s paradox. The lessons learned by literary

17. Kuethe, “Kierkegaard,” 294–302.

figures translate to those readers with whom there is close identification. According to psychologists Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby, having looked at multiple studies on this topic, it is clear that “experience-taking as an immersive, simulative experience . . . [has] the power to change readers’ self-concepts, behaviors, and attitudes.” Moreover, the evidence is that these changes have a durable effect, being displayed days after the reading event.¹⁸ When paired with a character with whom the reader identifies, positive lessons learned by the character can translate into the life, thought, and actions of the individual. The reader with the afflicted conscience can appropriate the message of grace learned by his literary counterpart. And the smug libertine may likewise learn the lesson of her literary equal.

Of course, a preacher is unable to achieve such a level of identification and experience-taking in the course of a sermon. Kaufman and Libby provide evidence that the more one adopts the identity and mindset of the character, the greater the effect on behavioral changes in the reader.¹⁹ And this takes time—more than fifteen minutes on a Sunday morning. So while a greater appreciation for “story-telling” from the pulpit is a positive lesson for some clergy, it is in the realm of great literature that we may find the greater cure for troubled souls.

In the world of fiction, C. S. Lewis is often cited, and for good reason. Throughout the *Chronicles of Narnia* there is ample opportunity for different readers to identify with different characters. The children of the Pevensie family, with their own distinct personalities, offer such a prospect. The underappreciated Lucy turns out to be an essential element in Aslan’s master plan. Edmund must come to grips with his betrayal of his siblings, and also accept his redemption. Numerous minor characters are presented in these books, individuals whose personal failings are presented in remarkable prose for the readers, along with paths toward deliverance.

Literature can have particular potency with regard to libertinism. It is able to inspire virtuous behavior without an ultimatum. This does not happen through moral instruction, but inspiration. While Lutheran theologians were struggling with whether or not they could teach, “Good works are necessary for salvation,” the Anabaptists were reading the

18. Kaufman and Libby, “Changing Beliefs,” 1–19.

19. Ibid.

stories of their heroes of faith in *Martyrs' Mirror*.²⁰ In the late nineteenth century, orthodox American Lutherans were dissecting the theology of C. F. W. Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. Russian Orthodox readers, on the other hand, were being inspired by the character of Alexei in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. More recently, countless readers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have identified with the nameless human in *The Screwtape Letters*. Known only as "the Patient," his struggle with temptations echoed their own, and led them to overcome these same enticements.

Perhaps as a result of Lutheranism's emphasis on egalitarianism, there has been little celebration of moral heroes. All believers are priests; all human beings remain miserable sinners their entire lives; every Christian is a saint. While the theology may be good, it discourages the elevation of virtuous examples. This is a shame, for the tradition has plenty. Luther was not only a theological genius, he was a man of tremendous courage. He rode into Worms prepared for a brutal end to his life, burned to death at a stake—eventually responding to the emperor with "Here I stand; I can do no other."²¹ His colleague Philipp Melanchthon was likewise a man of great bravery and resolution, despite his reputation for being too timid. It was he who went into the streets to directly confront rioting students—who had earned a reputation for violence and even murder—even when it meant that a pike was brandished in his face.²²

While both courageous, these two men were significantly different from one another in personality. Luther was the "wild boar" who rushed ahead recklessly, often needing to apologize later for his actions. Melanchthon had a tender conscience and was too worried about sinning. He could walk through life as on eggshells. And both had to learn and be corrected by the other. What a wonderful opportunity this friendship has for the gifted writer who could tell their story and inspire generations of readers!

The various written and stage productions of the life of John Newton, who wrote the beloved hymn "Amazing Grace," provide this same opportunity. From slave trader to Christian clergyman, his experience of

20. It was in the sixteenth century that the orthodox Lutherans initially condemned this phrase, after the Majorist Controversy (Cf. Bente, *Historical Introductions*). *Martyr's Mirror*, or *The Bloody Theatre* was published in the seventeenth century, at a time when some Lutheran Pietists were reconsidering this controversial statement.

21. Allegedly.

22. Scheible, "Luther and Melanchthon," 326.

forgiveness and tireless work as an abolitionist convey what is best and most essential in Christianity—the reception of this amazing grace and the active life of faith. And yet, his story is unfamiliar to most parishioners.

This entire literary-theological endeavor is exponentially more important for children, for whom a connection between academic theology and their own lives is rather difficult. C. S. Lewis is again a model of the communication of virtue. He wrote, “Since it is so likely that children will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage.”²³ These tales can become what Northrop Frye called “myths to live by” and “metaphors to live in.”²⁴

Inspiration to virtues of courage, fortitude, generosity, and compassion has been communicated through literature far more effectively than objective treatments of doctrine from the pulpit. And they can do so without compromising Luther’s radical emphasis on grace. The ideal is presented, and it functions quite effectively as the law does in Luther’s theology: to curb society’s excesses, to reflect our own shortcomings, and demonstrate the life of faith.²⁵

During the year I spent in an orthodox Lutheran seminary, I recall hearing one of my hyper-orthodox professors disparage the homiletics department as the “department of storytelling.” While I have as much appreciation for good doctrine as anyone, I find it sad that he placed so little value on the tremendous tool of subjectivity, of indirect communication. Perhaps more than theology, it is storytelling that has the power to transform lives. And on the basis of my reading of the gospels, I suspect Jesus of Nazareth might feel the same.

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23. Lewis, *On Stories*, 39.

24. Frye, *The Double Vision*, 18.

25. The statement above suggests a third use of the law in Luther, a controversial position, but one which I happen to hold. Cf. Engelbrecht, *Friends of the Law*.

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