Key Reformation Themes: A Summary (with attention to Lutheran higher ed ministry)

1. **The spiritual is not superior to the material.**

Different from a common Christian notion that the spiritual and the material are absolutely separate from each other and even hostile to each other, Lutherans recognize God's divine work and blessing in "things visible and invisible" (Nicene Creed). God's work, while mysterious, is nevertheless plain to us in the physical world not only in creation but through Jesus' incarnation and resurrection, and in the sacraments. When Paul writes in Col 1:16, "For in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him; he is before all things and in him all things hold together," Paul is not endorsing pantheism but is saying all things have their being and reason in God. If a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, then all of life is a parable with a spiritual meaning connected to it. As Lutheran teachers, we are surrounded by spiritually loaded incidents and events every day. We can help students learn to see the spiritual intersecting with the secular in all sorts of ways.

2. **Biblical Anthropology and the Freedom and Bondage of the Will**

Christians often speak imprecisely about "free will" as if we all have a will freed from sin and its damage. Lutherans are careful to recognize that the human will apart from the restoring work of the Holy Spirit is tainted by sin and that "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Rom 7:8). A freeing of the will comes only through a trusting relationship with God, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This freeing comes with faith and is completed at our resurrection. (2 Cor 3:18) Apart from this freedom, we have only a limited will. We can choose a brand of clothing, a marriage partner, or to make a charity donation, but we cannot choose for the goodness and righteousness of God in our lives and actions. Students confuse this real freedom with the increasing independence they experience as they get older. Our expressions and practices can help them sort out this confusion.

3. **Two Chief Words: Law and Gospel**

Law and Gospel, of course, apply to everything about the Christian life and about sharing our Christian faith and life with others. One important application of the distinction between Law and Gospel is the difference between legalism and antinomianism. Legalism is the belief and use of God's Law as though laws, rules, regulations, and consequences can solve sin, motivate good behavior, and create Christian community. This amounts to an idolatry of the Law. Antinomianism (Latin, meaning "against rules") is the belief that because God has forgiven us and freed us from the curse of the Law's punishment, we no longer need the Law. This amounts to cheap grace. Young Christians, whatever their age, often seek refuge in these two errors. We can help them avoid these errors by how we devise policy and practice, express and apply community structure and consequences, and how we sustain our relationships with them.

4. ***Simul Iustus et Peccator***

More Latin that translates, "at the same time justified and sinful." This is one the great Biblical paradoxes that characterizes the entire Christian life. The catechism applies it in the ideas of "old Adam" and "new you." We continue to live with our sinful nature and experience its influence until we die. But we simultaneously live as new creations of God despite this continued sinful condition. So Paul declares, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come," (II Cor 5:17) and that, despite our sin, "You must consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus." (Rom 6:11) Young people are used to thinking in one extreme or another, once category or another. We help them recognize both by responding to their inquiries about our life together with that practical theological question: "Why do you want to know?" In other words, who wants to know about this issue--the old Adam or the new you? We need to create and practice community so that young people learn to live with *simul iustus et peccator* as the certainties that enable sinners to live together as the saints of God.

5. **Two Kinds of Righteousness**

All Christians possess two kinds of righteousness, one that is their own and one that is not their own. All young Christians need help in sorting these two out, yet sustaining both of them. Lutherans recognize a **right**eousness that makes our life and relationship with God right, good, and fulfilled. This rightness comes to us as a gift from God and not through any efforts or ideas of our own. Luther called it an alien righteousness coming down from God through Christ in a vertical relationship. We also recognize another **right**eousness that makes our relationship with other people right, good, and worth living. In this horizontal relationship with others, our rightness consists in loving our neighbors as ourselves through our works and actions and pursuing justice, one of God's own attributes. This second righteousness is a kind of "borrowed" righteousness as we use the gift of alien righteousness and extend it to others in our words and deeds. Our practice and policy must always be careful to clearly acknowledge, distinguish, and foster both kinds of righteousness--the first through God's Word and promises, the second through stirring one another up to love and good works. (Hebr 10:23-25)

6. **The Hidden God and the Revealed God**

Through the centuries, many observers have noticed that people are incurably religious, having endless ideas about God and what He is like. All cultures and societies have devised forms for both worshiping and denying God or gods they vaguely sense exist or at least wonder about. Lutherans also have noticed that people constantly speculate about "the hidden God." Most of this speculation, based on guesses and inferences from nature, imagines a God who is majestic, glorious—and threatening. The God revealed to us through Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection unveils a different picture. In Jesus, we see God in weakness, humility, and mercy. While it is true that in Jesus we catch an occasional glimpse of kingdom, power, and glory, we mainly see "crib, cross, and crypt" in the Gospel accounts. This is "the revealed God" of the God-man, Jesus Christ: "Christ and him crucified." Our practice and policy in community are part of God's project to reveal his hiddenness to us not through our speculation and guess work but through the kind of living community that reflect Jesus' own revelation of himself to us characterized by humility, service, and compassion but also altercation. Our opportunities come in the spiritually loaded incidents of ordinary daily event when we begin to examine them for their spiritual implications.

7. **Theology of Cross and Theology of Glory**

Rather than seeing God hidden in suffering and crucifixion, many Christians seek God in the majesty of his creation (Rom 1:20), in the power of nature (Ps 8:3), or the glory and terror of his second coming and judgment (Rev 6:15). While these are certainly Biblical themes, Luther regarded them as secondary to all God was doing through the humiliation and death of Jesus. As Hebrews puts it, "But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." (Hebr 2:9) Not nature and creation, not miraculous events in history or individual lives, not judgment and the close of the age, not any manifestation of power, but the cross--that's the emblem of our theology and our image of God now. We locate God and glory where for all human purposes there can be nothing divine. Our young people, like most people, tend to look for God "in all the wrong places." Lutheran education, then, needs a coarse, splintered, blood-stained cross in every quad and courtyard to which every policy can be nailed.

8. **Christian Liberty**

Early in the Reformation, Luther composed a pair of statements within which he sought to locate all Christian decisions. His couplet has kept thoughtful Christians busy for centuries working out its implications. He began his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* this way:

> The Christian is free lord of all, subject to none.
> The Christian is servant of all, subject to all.

If the Gospel is true—that God's grace actually covers all our sin and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:39)—then the Christian has perfect liberty to choose and act in any way she or he believes is in keeping with God's coming kingdom. Abraham was prepared to slay his own son. Ezra ordered the divorce of Jews who had married non-Jews. John the Baptist engaged in reckless criticism of Herod. Luther quietly sanctioned the bigamy of one of Germany's princes. Bonhoeffer joined in the effort to assassinate Hitler. No action or choice, no matter how misguided or wrong-headed, can cancel the saving power of the Gospel. Paradoxically, that same Christian is also the most humble servant or *doulos* (Greek for slave) to every neighbor. That Christian must make choices and take actions that serve others both temporally and eternally. This Christian liberty, then, is the liberty both to take action and to serve. The Christian is empowered and emboldened to enact this servant liberty by the absolute promise of the Gospel that no work of ours can jeopardize what God has already done for us in Christ. Therefore, Luther declares, "Sin boldly--but believe more boldly still." This kind of Christian ethics is not for the faint of heart, the Biblically illiterate, or the impulsiveness of youth. We need practice and policy for a firm structure of community within which we can then equip young people with a sound understanding of servanthood, a personal knowledge of God's Word, and a bold trust in His promises.

9. **Vocation**

"God gets up every morning and milks the cows." With this peculiar claim, Luther sets out a lynch pin doctrine of the Reformation: the doctrine of vocation. When the farmer milks his cows, he is doing God's work every bit as much as any monk or priest (or Lutheran teacher or pastor). By milking those cows, the farmer provides sustenance for people either to continue their own lives for another day as God's people in service to others; or to live another day and have the opportunity to hear the Gospel and come to faith. So Lutherans insist that every Christian has a vocation, or a calling to faith and Christian living, that vocation ≠ job, and that no vocation—

including church work—is more pleasing to God than any other. Lutherans honor God by honoring all people in all stations of life that provide service, work, care, and respect for others. The smallest child learning her ABCs and the oldest retiree providing care for that child have vocations from God. Lutheran education devises policies that esteem all vocations and promote vocations for students in whatever ways within whatever means that school may have available.

10. **The Two Kingdoms**

There are, in fact, two kingdoms of God, not just one. This also is a lynch pin doctrine of the Reformation. The right-handed kingdom, as Luther called it, is God's kingdom of grace that is ruled by Christ in which the Holy Spirit by the power of the Gospel makes Christians and forms disciples. The left-handed kingdom is God's secular kingdom of the world that is ruled through law by people in various stations of temporal authority to preserve order in a fallen, sinful creation. God has established both kingdoms. Christians in their vocation are called to live simultaneously in both kingdoms, devising ways to interject the come-and coming right-hand kingdom into the left-hand kingdom without confusing or merging the two. This is not easy to do. It calls not for maintaining balance but for sustaining imbalance. Lutheran education must exist and conduct its ministry in both kingdoms. This is not easy to do. We have the difficult task of conducting practice and policy that helps students rightly distinguish and not confuse the two kingdoms even as they must learn to live effectively for God in both, yet with a distinct inclination and direction toward the right-hand kingdom.

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