

THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

Key Reformation Insights—a Brief Summary

Readings on the key themes in the Lutheran Reformation are widely available and well documented. See the bibliographies, other summaries, and links. Each theme has long provided the church with fresh and practical insights on the Gospel which is why they remain current and important. The **bolded** phrases and expressions are fairly standard but vary a bit as does the number. This introductory list keeps them to a convenient ten and is in no special order. To tweak your interest, each includes brief comments related to Lutheran higher education and teaching content. For further study and additional themes (such as the three *solas* or the formal and material principles) pursue the additional readings.

1. **The spiritual is not above the material** and the material is not above the spiritual (e.g., incarnation, resurrection, sacraments). This sacramental perspective recognizes God's activity both through his word and in his creation—and through his word at work in his creation by means of Christian disciples as his “earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7). This theme provides three dimensions for how we present our academic disciplines and instructional content.
2. **Biblical anthropology** and the bondage of the will: human will is bound and limited in sin, not free; it is freed only by the Gospel and, then, “from one degree to another.” Students and Christians generally are confused about notions of free will, and our instruction and writing needs to be clarified and informed from our theology as well as from philosophy and the neurosciences. We need an informed and clear Biblical anthropology across all our instruction (Romans, esp. 5 & 6; Luther's book, *The Bondage of the Will*).
3. God addresses us in Scripture with two chief words: **Law and Gospel** and these are not to be confused. What's more, the Lutheran tradition (unlike some other spiritual perspectives) is very cautious about claims that God addresses us in ways other than these two words—ways such as personal inner convictions or special revelations and signs. This distinction creates for us an instructional context open to exploring the temporal value and meaning of all knowledge and, as God's stewards, putting that knowledge to work in the world not merely for its own sake but deliberately to advance opportunities for the Gospel. (See Gal. 1, Rom. 6, and Walther's *Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*.)
4. ***Simul iustus et peccator*** is the Latin expression for “at the same time justified and sinful.” The Christian is simultaneously and paradoxically holy in every way and corrupted by sin. How can this be? Read Romans and Galatians. What does this mean? It means that our learning and instruction is holy work, and it means that our learning and instruction is always limited by our fallen, sinful condition. How does this apply? Our teaching and practice regarding public policy, science, the arts, and all other matters will account for limitations and how God's word addresses those limitations with both the reality of sin and the reality of his grace to acknowledge yet work within those limitations. (Notice the *simul* in that last sentence. This is, in part, why the Lutheran tradition is a challenge, but a manageable challenge.)

5. The Christian possesses **two kinds of righteousness**, both good. We have an alien righteousness given solely by God apart from our works or condition. Thus it is from outside ourselves, that is, “alien”. This righteousness is accomplished for us by Christ, it is real, and it really does make us holy. This alien righteousness then motivates and empowers us for service and activity toward the well-being of our neighbor, and this activity of words and works is called our “proper” righteous—proper (*pro privo*) because Christ’s righteousness for us (*pro nobis*) is for us to extend to others. (See for ex. Phil. 2:1ff.) All of Christian education is a constant acknowledgement and expression of both kinds of righteousness. Because we are *simul peccator* and inclined also toward self-righteousness, Lutheran education is explicit and articulate about both our alien and proper righteousness (our *simul iustus*).
6. **God hidden and revealed:** The God we see in nature is powerful, awesome, and majestic, and we find such descriptions in the Bible (e.g., Gen 1, Job 38, Ps 104, Rom 1). The naïve sinner may be inclined to locate God’s glory in these attributes. But the God of nature is also capricious and threatening--thus the danger of what’s called a theology of glory. The God we see in Jesus is weak, humble, and merciful—“crib, cross, and crypt”—with his majesty mostly hidden (see for ex. Hebr 1 – 2 and all four Gospels). A key theme, then, is the distinction between what God keeps hidden (see Dt. 29:29) and what he reveals not only in nature (referred to as natural theology) but more so in Christ’s grace and mercy (see for ex. Eph 3:1ff). Hidden-and-revealed is another aspect of not restraining but creative tension in the Lutheran tradition. Lutheran higher education can freely explore wherever temporal knowledge may lead without the danger of idolizing that pursuit, confusing it with God’s revelation in Christ, or insisting on harmonizing one with the other.
7. While God remains largely hidden, revealed chiefly in Christ is God’s grace for sinners. And so the Scriptures move us from a theology of glory to **a theology of the cross**. As Paul says in 1 Cor 2:2, “I would know nothing among you except Christ and him crucified.” The Lutheran tradition is grounded in this theology of the cross, and this is our “higher education” for naïve sinners who would reduce faith to sentiment and therapy. A theology of the cross returns us to an incisive study of a Biblical anthropology, the human condition, and how the arts, sciences, and social sciences can express that condition. We then, informed by the Gospel, can consider what God has done about that condition.
8. “The Christian is free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is servant of all, subject to all.” Luther juxtaposes these two maxims near the beginning of his *Treatise on Christian Liberty* in which he sets out an understanding of freedom in stark contrast to the spiritual legalism of his day. But this Gospel insight contrasts just as dramatically with today’s notions about liberty as freedom of choice. **Christian liberty** is not the freedom of enlightened self-interest and choice. It is the freedom from concern for self and the freedom to act for the interests of others even when that action may be costly and perhaps trump the law. (You can see why Paul and Luther were labeled as threats to public order and targeted for assassination.) It is the freedom to no longer live under the law but rather employ that

law or set it aside in ways that benefit the material, social, and spiritual well-being of one's neighbors in ways that can draw them closer to the free grace of God. Lutheran higher education will certainly teach the concepts of the Enlightenment and liberal democracy but always in contrast with Christian liberty.

9. Every Christian has a calling from God to faith and to living out that faith. Though the Wittenberg reformers originally had no aims to dismantle the medieval church's hierarchy, their re-discovery of the doctrine of **vocation** and its implications inevitably had that result. Lutherans today generally understand that vocation does not refer merely to occupation but to their baptismal call, their identity in Christ, and all the roles and stations through which they serve others in this life (1 Pet. 2). But *ecclesia semper reformanda est*—the church is always reforming—and vocation recurs in the church's history as a surprising and disturbing doctrine that discredits hierarchies and oligarchies both secular and ecclesiastic. Some scholars maintain that the Reformation was chiefly a university movement. Be that as it may, Lutheran higher education may rightly be characterized as vocational education.

10. The Christian lives and acts simultaneously in both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. This co-existence is perhaps the most peculiar feature of the Lutheran ethos and is often misunderstood and misrepresented. Yet if you have read this far, you have noticed the both-and, now-and-not-yet simultaneity of the Christian faith. Among the church's great spiritual traditions, Lutheran theology has done much to explore and explain this simultaneity and can articulate a powerful exegesis for how the Gospel penetrates the affairs of this world without confusing or conflating either kingdom. The **two kingdoms doctrine** particularly distinguishes the Lutheran higher tradition as a practical and timely rationale for higher education.