

Luther and Culture

Response by James M. Kittelson

The presentations of George W. Forell and Helmar Junghans are similar in one respect and dissimilar in another. To take the dissimilarity first: Forell explicitly excludes considering Luther's practical impact upon culture on the grounds that it »would lead us too far afield« to do so. By contrast, Junghans is exercised to defend Luther against the claim that he secularized culture by turning so much of it over to extra-ecclesiastical authorities.

Here the dissimilarity ends and a far greater similarity – even unity – asserts itself. Both insist that in thinking about culture, Luther remained the theologian. Thus, for Forell human beings are partners with God in creating the quality of their corporate existence. For Junghans, in a more explicitly pessimistic evaluation of current culture, the emphasis falls upon Luther the prophet. To both, and in particular in so far as it concerns what we call »high culture« – learning, the arts, and the like – the best culture is that which presents the gospel in the most vivid and compelling way, or is most congenial to efforts to do so. Luther is therefore the social critic with a thoroughly evangelical point of view.

But what about Luther the creator of culture? Should not discussion proceed from what Luther said and thought about culture to what he did about it, and even to whether his actions may have had lasting consequences? Given that his concerns were primarily religious, such discussion should center upon answering one simple question: »What sort of religion did he and his followers create?«

This question can and has been answered in many different ways, most of which, as Junghans argues, are simply anachronistic. Here the thesis is that Luther brought to the common people a tension or polarity to which they had not previously been privy. The polarity is that between true religion as right belief, on the one hand, and true religion as the proper inclination of the heart and of behavior on the other. This tension may be symbolized, although by no means summarized, in the differences between Orthodoxy and Pietism in the Lutheran tradition. The question may be put simply again: »Is religion primari-

ly something one thinks and believes or is it primarily something one feels and does? «

Two points need to be made before proceeding to what Luther did. First, this distinction between belief and behavior, conceived broadly, existed since the very earliest days of the Church, but it was reserved for the learned. Origen, for example, distinguished between the faith and practice that were sufficient for ordinary Christians and the mysteries that could be apprehended only by the select few. Augustine's »credo ut intelligam« summarizes the entire question from one side of it. And the medieval church with its multiplication of practices for the simple and its high theological tradition for the scholastici embodied it. That this last tradition should culminate in the »facere quod in se est«, formulated by the learned for the simple, is a very telling irony.

Additionally, and here is the second preliminary point, it may be argued that before the Reformation this tension or polarity was not apparent to the common person except in the vaguest way, and perhaps intentionally so. But with the Reformation, no longer were the learned alone expected to believe the correct doctrines; now everyone was to know his catechism. Now even the parish clergy was to be educated (that is to know Lutheran doctrine), and they were so educated at Lutheran universities where they learned the gospel through Philipp Melanchthon's loci method. In their ministries they then taught doctrine through their sermons and through the catechism. Even some of the hymns, as well as the art of the period, taught doctrine. The first two verses of Paul Speratus' »Es ist das Heil« make the point clearly:

»Salvation unto us has come / by God's free gift and favor.
Good works cannot avert our doom; / they help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone / who did for all the world atone.
He is our mediator.

Theirs was a false, misleading dream / who thought God's law was given
that sinners might themselves redeem / and by their works gain heaven.
The law is but a mirror bright / to bring the inbred sin to light
that lurks within our nature.«

Here is Lutheran doctrine at the most popular, most accessible level.

Whether this emphasis upon doctrine evoked a positive, popular response need not detain us here. The question is, rather, »What did Luther contribute to it, and therefore to bringing the tension between belief and behavior to the ordinary Christian?«

The answer is nearly everything and almost nothing. On the one hand there can be no question but that Luther's Reformation was rooted in the assertion that true doctrine with respect to all matters essential to salvation could be known, and could be known by all. Surely this is the meaning of his thundrous reply to Desiderius Erasmus: »Spiritus sanctus non scepticus est!«¹ That he wished his ideas to reach the laity as quickly as possible is also evident from his early writings, among which stands notably the »Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for the simple laity«, which is itself not entirely simple. Moreover, he seems to have regarded correct learning as absolutely essential to true reform. In 1518 on his way back from the Heidelberg Disputation he wrote one of his colleagues, »I sincerely believe that it is not possible for the church to be reformed unless the canon law, the decretals, scholastic theology, philosophy, and logic, as they now exist, are absolutely eradicated and other studies instituted.«² True to himself, he included the reform of universities as one of the 27 specific changes that he called upon the Christian nobility to institute in his Address to them of 1520. For Luther, learning, in this case learning true doctrine, was essential to true religion. In fact, it was on just this point that he and the humanists parted company.

Secondly, Luther himself actively promoted methods for making the Reformation happen that in turn tended to stress the role of true doctrine in creating true religion. Contrary to the impression that is frequently fostered by academics in meetings such as this, Luther was an intensely practical man of pastoral concerns, and not just a disembodied intellect that floated above and that criticized cultural reality. It has already been pointed out that he himself was responsible for creating a clergy whose first task both in school and in the parish was to learn and to impart true doctrine. It must be added that, whatever he thought about the theoretical auspices under which they occurred, he followed the visitations, begun in 1527, very closely, as anyone who has read WA Br 4 and 5 can well attest. In early 1529 he in fact declared to Elector John that »Your Electoral Grace can do no better work than the visitation.«³ Surely the writing of both the Small and Large Catechisms that very year came in response to what he learned from the visitations about the miserable level of doctrinal knowledge

1 Cf. WA 18, 605, 32.

2 WA Br 1, 170, 33–36 (74), 9 May 1518.

3 WA Br 5, 3, 20–22 (1371), 9 January 1529.

in the parishes. And what are the catechisms if not religion as knowledge? What else could the repeated catechetical response, »This is most certainly true«, possibly mean?

How then can it be said that Luther also brought »almost nothing« to the modern pendulum-swing between religion of the head and religion of the heart? Simply put, Luther himself did not make this distinction. The preface to the »Large Catechism« is instructive in just this regard. There Luther declared that everyone, even a learned Doctor such as himself, should read the catechism daily. But in this basically intellectual undertaking Luther saw something else happening. »In such reading, conversation, and meditation, the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever newer and greater light and fervor . . . «⁴ For Luther, the Holy Spirit was at work in both mind and heart, and in a coherent way, just as God was at work in all of culture.

The generations that followed and we ourselves do in fact distinguish between intellect and emotion and we do so for reasons that are not yet well understood. In the same manner, in some quarters Luther's cultural legacy can be seen as politically passive, which he was not, or abstractly intellectual, which he also was not, or as narrowly nationalistic or bourgeois or any one of a number of other things that he also was not. Surely, as Forell puts it, he saw Christians and non-Christians as cooperators with God in the creation of culture. Probably, as Junghans puts it, he was first, last, and always, the prophet. Prophets, it seems, were made to be misunderstood, in particular by their own and succeeding cultures. Nonetheless, Luther's real cultural impact may have come at the level of popular religion both in the manner described here and as a result of what he did, as well as of what he thought. This is a question that needs discussion to discover whether it too is »most certainly true«.

4 WA 30 I, 127, 2f.