

## Luther on Sin and Salvation: Implications for the Homosexuality Debate.

Pastor Bart Eriksson,  
Wainwright-Irma Lutheran Parish, Wainwright Alberta

One of the most distressing aspects of current homosexuality debates in our church, is the way in which the matters of sin, repentance and salvation are often treated. Martin Luther has even been misused as being a supposed champion of cheap grace. One hears arguments to the effect of: “Everyone is a sinner, therefore we can’t condemn any sinful activity or request repentance from those who do them.”

Of course this cheap grace approach then impacts our discussion of homosexuality as well. There are a number of people who will admit that the Scriptures don’t speak positively of homosexuality or condemn it as sinful. But then this fact is promptly dismissed, again because of a cheap grace approach to sin and salvation. In this essay we will briefly look at Luther’s approach to sin and salvation and then suggest how a more authentic reading of Luther and the confessions could inform our discussion of homosexuality.

Now totally apart from anyone’s opinions on homosexuality or any other issue pro or con, a cheap grace reading of Luther is a huge problem in itself! If one does any serious reading of Luther, it quickly becomes clear that he did not wish to encourage moral laxity. For instance, in his Galatians commentary, Luther writes: “Both groups sin against the Law: those on the right, who want to be justified through the Law, and those on the left, who want to be altogether free of the Law.”<sup>1</sup> A bit later on he adds:

The Law is abused by those who want to excuse Christians from it altogether, .... Today there are many even in our own party who... having been snatched from the tyranny of the pope by the teaching of the Gospel, they imagine that Christian liberty is carnal licence to do whatever they please (1 Peter 2:16)(Romans 2:24).<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these comments in his Galatians lectures, *Luther’s Large and Small Catechisms*, found in *The Book of Concord*, also strongly emphasize the Ten Commandments. Luther composed at least two hymns based on the Ten Commandments,<sup>3</sup> and perhaps most importantly, we have Luther’s writings during the Antinomian Controversy.

Between the years 1537 and 1540, a controversy erupted within the faculty of Wittenberg Seminary. John Agricola, a Wittenberg professor, (and not to be confused with the reformer from Finland also named Agricola) started teaching that the preaching of the law was not necessary. This viewpoint is called antinomianism—which literally means, against the law. The Church regards this kind of thinking as incorrect and obviously hurtful to others.

One of Luther’s conversations where he expressed concern about antinomianism occurred when he was shown statements of Agricola’s which declared the law should not be preached in the church because it does not justify. Luther reacted by endorsing Philip Melancthon’s teachings on the law.

---

<sup>1</sup> LW Vol. 26, p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> LW Vol. 26, p. 344.

<sup>3</sup> LW Vol. 47, p. 109 note 6.

Deeply moved, [Luther] said, “To think that this should be said by our own people even in our lifetime!...Would that we might pay heed to Master Philip! Philip teaches clearly and eloquently about the function of the law. I am inferior to him, although I have also treated this topic clearly in my Galatians....Away with him who claims that transgressors don’t sin against the law.... those wretched fellows neglect the minor premise...that we must struggle daily against the flesh with the help of the Spirit, and that this belongs under the law.”<sup>4</sup>

Luther reacted very sharply to the antinomian arguments, challenging Agricola to several public debates. When Agricola failed to show up, Luther eventually had him removed from the Wittenberg faculty. We still have the texts which Luther himself prepared and delivered at these events. This is an excerpt from the third disputation:

True it is that at the early stage of this movement we began strenuously to teach the gospel and make use of these words which the Antinomians now quote. But the circumstances of that time were very different from those of the present day...To the consciences of men so oppressed, terrified, miserable, anxious, and afflicted, there was no need to inculcate the law...Now however, when the times are very dissimilar..., our Antinomians—those suave theologians—retain our words, our doctrine, the joyful tidings concerning Christ, and wish to preach this alone, not observing that men are other than they were under that hangman, the pope, and have become secure, forward, wicked violators... Such men they confirm and comfort by their doctrine... Our softly singing Antinomians, paying no attention to the change of the times, make men so secure who are of themselves already so secure that they fall away from grace.<sup>5</sup>

One theme that we find in the quote above is the possibility of Christians losing their salvation—falling away from grace. Lutheran thinking down through the years has stressed that it is possible to slide away from salvation and Luther believed this as well. The Lutheran theologians in the first two hundred years after Luther (a period usually referred to as the era of “Lutheran Orthodoxy”) also taught that it was possible for Christians to lose their salvation.<sup>6</sup> The idea that Christians can lose their salvation also shows up in a number of places in the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>7</sup>

Here is one of Luther’s statements from the Smalcald Articles: “It is therefore necessary to know and to teach that when holy people,... fall into open sin (As David fell into adultery, murder and blasphemy), faith and the Spirit have departed from them” (Tappert p. 310).

Now Lutheran theologians haven’t just pulled this notion out of a hat somewhere. The idea of

---

<sup>4</sup> LW Vol. 54, p. 233.

<sup>5</sup> LW Vol.47, pp. 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> Schmid H. *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Trans. Jacobs and Hay Philadelphia: The Lutheran Bookstore. 1876: pp. 459, 482.

<sup>7</sup> Luther’s own Smalcald Articles pp. 308, 310, 315; and in the Formula of Concord Epitome Article IV section 19, p.477, *The Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

that we can lose our salvation is right from the teachings of St. Paul. For example: 1 Cor. 9:27: So that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” And we see other verses with the same idea in Gal. 5:21, 6:7-8; Rom. 6:15-16, 8:9, 8:12-13; and Phil. 2:12, and 3:11,16. In all of these places Paul stresses that a Christian may possibly lose his or her status as a member of the community of salvation by refusing to repent.

Luther reflects on Paul’s teachings in his 1535 Galatians commentary when he writes, “those who sin because of weakness, even if they do it often, will not be denied forgiveness, provided that they rise again and do not persist in their sins; for persistence of sin is worst of all.”<sup>8</sup> He then goes on to say concerning Gal. 5:19:

Different people are tempted in different ways, according to the diversity in their makeup or attitude. One person is subject to graver feelings,... another to more obvious ones, such as sexual desire, anger or hatred. But here Paul demands of us that we walk by the Spirit and resist the flesh. Anyone who yields to his flesh and persists in smugly gratifying its desires should know that he does not belong to Christ; though he may pride himself ever so much on the title “Christian,” he is merely deceiving himself.<sup>9</sup>

The quotes from Luther certainly demonstrate that he not only had no intention to preach or encourage moral laxity but that he also had a firm place for the role of law in the life of the Christian saved by grace. As is evident above, in Luther’s own thinking it is possible for one to lose salvation or fall from grace for wilful and unrepentant disobedience of God’s law. Although, anyone who decides not to persist in sin can of course be restored to grace.

Luther’s teachings on this subject are in perfect agreement with what we see in the Scriptures and in the Lutheran Confessions that we vow to preach by.<sup>10</sup> It is worth remembering that during our ordination services Lutheran pastors are asked to give “no occasion for false security or illusory hope.”

If we are faithful to our Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions and Luther’s teachings (which agree with these other documents), we have to acknowledge that deliberate persistence in sin is not a trivial matter. In addition to hurting ourselves and others, deliberate and persistent sin can cause a breach in our relationship with God—a fall from grace.

We have seen that Luther and the Lutheran Confessions do not have much sympathy for the notion that it is permissible to deliberately persist in sin. Since this is the case, we also then cannot justify the deliberate decision to persist in homosexual behaviour. If we allowed same-sex blessings, we as a church would in effect be saying that deliberate persistence in homosexual sin is acceptable. And if we did this we would be violating our ELCIC constitution and our ordination vows as pastors to teach and preach according to the Scriptures and the Confessions. We may not always like this fact, but this is the reality our situation and the vows that we have taken as pastors. Luther and the Confessions state that one can lose one’s salvation for persisting in sin. This fact then has to inform not just our approach to homosexuality, but to other issues as well.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> LW Vol. 27, p. 81.

<sup>10</sup> *Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1995) 194.