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The Lutheran View of Creation

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INTRODUCTORY

Any attempt to state the Lutheran view on a specific aspect of the Christian faith must be prefaced by a general statement on the nature of Lutheran theology. Even a superficial survey of the writings of Lutheran theologians on such a doctrine as creation shows that there is a wide variety of teaching, all of it, however, proceeding from a clearly definable stance over against the whole body of Christian faith and, specifically, the place of revelation in that faith.

The Lutheran position can be described, not as a specific point from which the theologian proceeds to develop doctrine, but rather as a circle in which he can move about freely, provided that he recognizes the circumference of the circle as an 'out of bounds' warning. At the risk of oversimplification it can be said that all Lutheran formulation of doctrine must proceed from a soteriological interpretation of Scripture as the given Word of God, and a Christological interpretation of it as the living Word of God to men today. These would be the limits within which any particular doctrinal formulation would have to take place. Of the Lutheran Confessions F. E. Mayer says that they 'present all Christian doctrine from the soteriological standpoint, that is, from the meaning each has for our salvation. Each and every doctrine of Christian revelation must be viewed *in actu*, not only *in statu*; it must be within the focus of a real spiritual problem and be presented only in its soteriological significance'.¹

In speaking of the 'formal principle' of Lutheran Theology F. E. Mayer points out that the Lutheran Confessions do not speak specifically of the divine character of the Scriptures. This was due to the fact that they were concerned only with a Christocentric approach to Scripture. 'The Apology points out that "enthusiasts" humanists, and rationalists dissect the Scriptures into individual Bible texts and explain the articles concerning the righteousness of faith in a philosophical and a Jewish manner. But in this atomistic Biblicist manner they actually abolish the doctrine of Christ as Mediator. Without the knowledge of the Gospel the Bible remains a meaningless and useless book. But when the Scriptures are seen as the Gospel, as *evangelium*, the Word of God

¹ F. E. Mayer: *The Religious Bodies of America*, p. 145.

becomes the sanctuary above all sanctuaries, which sanctifies the person and everything he does.²

In a brief survey of the development of the doctrine of creation in the Protestant tradition, Fred Denbeaux emphasizes the value of the Reformation rediscovery of God's redemptive activity. He feels, however, that its inability to find a place for man's natural reason led those who followed the Reformers to make of the Bible a 'compendium of truth, and encyclopedia of the arts and sciences'. 'Truth came to mean the doctrines which logic projected into the Bible. As theologians were unable to sense the Logos in creation, it was inevitable that genuine intellectual activity would be replaced by adherence to the supposedly fixed tenets of the Bible.'³

The more recent concern for the development of a doctrine of creation in Lutheranism is due largely to the writings of Soren Kierkegaard who showed that man can understand Christ only if he first understands himself as a creature.⁴

In the following sections an attempt is made to give a summary of representative Lutheran positions on the doctrine of creation. No effort is made at evaluation or criticism from a personal viewpoint. It is obviously not possible to take into account all Lutheran writers. After a brief summary of the subject in the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century a few selections from more modern Lutheran theologians will be given.

CONFESSIONS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The importance of the Confessions in Lutheranism is emphasized by F. E. Mayer when he states: 'Lutheranism accepts its Confessions as a joint and unanimous reply to God's message in the Scriptures and as the doctrinal norm and standard for its teachers and members.' This loyalty 'to the Confessions is justified only by a personal conviction that they clearly state the Gospel message, which assures the sin-burdened conscience of God's unmerited grace in Christ and correctly portrays the nature and function of the Christian's faith'. The Scriptures are the only source and norm of truth (*norma normans*) for Lutherans. The Confessions are held to be in conformity with Scripture, and in that sense a 'derived' rule and standard 'according to which the preaching in Lutheran Churches is judged (*norma normata*)'.⁵

Outright statements on the doctrine of creation in the Confessions are very few and brief. As stated above, the Reformers were more concerned to restore God's redemptive activity to its central place in Christian belief than to develop a complete body of doctrine. However, the whole viewpoint of the Confessions is that man is a creature and that his existence can

² F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, p. 143 f.

³ *A Handbook of Christian Theology*, ed. Halverson and Cohen, p. 70 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71 f.

⁵ F. E. Mayer, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

only be understood within the framework of the doctrine of creation and of God the Creator. Luther's understanding of the nature of faith led him to insist that the doctrine of creation must also be understood in the light of Christ. The opening word of the Creed, 'I believe', must precede the statement about 'God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth'. The faith of the believer derives from the forgiving and reconciling act of God the Father in Christ as communicated by the Holy Spirit. Creation is, therefore, a Trinitarian doctrine in its very nature and central structure. This confessional insight alone enabled Lutheran theologians to maintain a proper doctrine of creation. Where it was lost, as in the nineteenth century's emphasis on redemption, creation was also slighted.⁶

According to the formal principle of the Reformation the Confessions seek to remain within a Biblical view of creation. They do not try to read into the Biblical view 'an interpretation of reality that is not there, nor to resolve tensions which the Biblical view leaves unresolved'.⁷

The central element in the Confessions' doctrine of creation is their insistence upon the primacy of the divine initiative in the creative act. The concept of *creatio ex nihilo* grows out of this insistence. The three concepts of creation spoken of, e.g. in Isaiah 45, namely, that recorded in Genesis, the creation which goes on even today (*creatio continua*), and the new creation of eschatology, have only God as their agent. The Confessions do not exclude the use of means in their understanding of *ex nihilo*. Creation is not only *ex nihilo*. In treating of the first article in his *Large Catechism* Luther says:

This article deals with creation. We should emphasize the words, 'maker of heaven and earth'. What is meant by these words: 'I believe in God, the Father, Almighty, Maker, etc.'? Answer: I hold and believe that I am a creature of God; that is, that he has given and constantly sustains my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding, and so forth; my food and drink, clothing, means of support, wife and child, servants, house and home, etc. Besides, he makes all creation help provide the comforts and necessities of life—sun, moon, and stars in the heavens, day and night, air, fire, water, the earth and all that it brings forth, birds and fish, beasts, grain and all kinds of produce. Moreover, he gives all physical and temporal blessings—good government, peace, security. Thus we learn from this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything else that has been mentioned or can be mentioned, nor can he by himself preserve any of them, however small and unimportant. All this is comprehended in the word 'Creator'.⁸

⁶ J. Pelikan: *Concordia-Theol. Monthly*, Vol. XXVI (1955), p. 571.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

⁸ Theo. G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, p. 412.

In writing on the first commandment he says:

Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant, and he gives grain and all kinds of fruits from the earth for man's nourishment—things which no creature could produce by himself.⁹

Pelikan summarizes the matter as follows: 'The basic meaning of creation in the Confessions, then, is the priority and initiative of the divine action. But for Christian faith no divine action is separable from the divine action in Jesus Christ, though distinctions may be made for the sake of convenience. Nor can there be any true faith apart from him, not even true faith in the Creator. Therefore the doctrine of creation in the Confessions cannot be relegated to some sort of natural theology, as though everyone understood the first article and only Christians understood the second article. The Confessions concern themselves with the doctrine of creation because it is a Christian doctrine and a Christocentric one. Christ reveals the creation because He is at once Creator and creature. He is thus the revelation of the Creator to the creature, but He is also the revelation of the creature to itself. The Christ of redemption also makes clear the meaning of creation.'¹⁰

This connection between the creation and the new creation in Christ is brought out by many passages of the New Testament. The God who caused the light to shine out of darkness is the same God who, through Jesus Christ, shines in men's hearts (2 Cor. 4:6). The original creative fiat, 'Let there be light', is, so to say, reinforced when the Creator gives the light that enlightens every man coming into the world (John 1:9). When our Lord states, 'I am the light', He identifies His coming and His being with the creative action of God. The origin of the aeons is in the speaking of God (Heb. 11:3), but the God who spoke in the creation and continued to speak in the Prophets has spoken finally in His Son, through whom He also made these aeons (Heb. 1:2). The creation and the new creation both must be understood in the light of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Initiator of both. God in Christ is the Creator.¹¹

The most explicit statements of the Confessions on the doctrine of the Creation are made in connection with the act of reconciliation, as is also the case in the New Testament. In the theology of the Lutheran Confessions creation is to be viewed in the light of Christ, who is called the Book of Life (F.C., Ep. XI, 7:13). 'According to Lutheran confessional theology, the meaning of creation can only be read in this Book if it's to be understood aright.'¹²

⁹ Theo. G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, p. 368.

¹⁰ J. Pelikan, op. cit., p. 574 f.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 575 f.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 577.

VARIOUS ASPECTS OF LUTHERAN TEACHING

We have already quoted some of Luther's own statements from his writings which are included in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. His sermons and exegetical writings also reflect the conviction that God is a reality with whom man must deal in his day-to-day life. In contrast to the conventional picture of his day of God as a great and august person who was widely separated from the works of His creation, Luther pictured God as the ultimate basis for the reality of nature. God lives, moves, and has His being in the world. His sermons are full of expressions which portray the presence of God in the phenomena of nature. The clouds are on the wing like birds; they are the wings of God. God shoots His lightning out of the clouds. He calls a thunderstorm the 'eternal prophets', meaning that even in this time of grace the terrors of God's Law may overtake us in our conscience. Men do not see and acknowledge the works of God in nature because these have become so commonplace. Thus Luther says: 'If God created all other women and children of bone, as He did Eve, and but one woman were able to bear children, I maintain that the whole world, kings and lords, would worship her as a divinity. But that every woman is fruitful, it passes for nothing.'¹³

In his dissertation on the Lord's Supper (1528) Luther speaks of God's relation to nature in the following way: 'It is vulgar and stupid to suppose that God is a huge, fat being who fills the world, similar to a sack of straw filled to the top and beyond . . . We do not put it this way. We do not say that God is such a distended, long, broad, thick, tall, deep being, but that He is a supernatural, inscrutable being able to be present entirely in every small kernel of grain and at the same time in all, above all, and outside all creatures. Nothing is so small that God cannot be still smaller; nothing so broad that God cannot be broader; nothing so narrow that God cannot be narrower.'¹⁴ In the same writing he says: 'But faith realizes that the proposition "in" used here includes over, outside, under, through, through once more, and everywhere. This God is everywhere and nowhere, and thus Christ, who is identical with God, is far, far outside the creatures, just as far outside as God is outside and just as far in, and close to, all creatures as God is.'¹⁵ In a sermon on the sacrament (1526) Luther states that this seemingly manifest God is concealed, since it is not possible to recognize His will merely from His presence. 'For although He is everywhere, in all creatures, and although I could find Him in a stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope (for He surely is there), still He does not want me to look for Him apart from the Word . . . Search for Him where the Word is.

¹³ *Summary on the Psalms*, quoted Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, p. 188.

¹⁴ Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁵ Quoted, *ibid.*, p. 190.

There you will surely find Him. Otherwise you only tempt God and establish idolatry.¹⁶ Nature is not the revelation but only the mask of the omnipresent God, a mask thoroughly permeated by Him.¹⁷

For Luther the meaning of history is that God speaks to us through acts. God is not an abstract formula; He is happening daily and vigorously. This meaning of history is being fulfilled every day when men listen to God's voice with terror and faith.

Luther's explanation to the first article of the Creed shows plainly that creation is something which affects man in his present situation. To the question, What does it mean to say 'I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth?' he answers:

'I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For this I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him.' (S.C.)

As Luther sees it, the whole created world occupies a kind of mediatorial position between God and man. Its manifold orders of life—the prince, the magistrate, the preacher, schoolmaster, the scholar, the father, the mother, the children, the master, the servant—can be described as 'persons and outward veils (*larvae*)', which serve God as 'His instruments by whom He governs and preserves the world'. The *larvae Dei* are the means of a divine confrontation of man. We do not reach God by inferring His existence, nature and attributes from His masks and veils, but God Himself comes to meet us in them—none other than the God who meets us in Christ. Natural man is not able to distinguish between the veils of God and God Himself and therefore is always led to worship the creature instead of the Creator.¹⁸

In his commentary on the Magnificat Luther says that 'even as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues still the same. Even now and unto the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed and living.

¹⁶ Quoted Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, p. 191.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁸ Philip S. Watson: *Let God be God*, p. 79 f., *passim*.

Again, whatever is something precious, honorable, blessed and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched and dying'.¹⁹

In speaking of the length of the original work of creation, in his preface to the sermonic exposition of Genesis in 1524 Luther says: 'When Moses writes that God created heaven and earth and whatever is in them in six days, then let this period continue to have been six days, and do not attempt to devise any comment according to which six days were one day. (Hilary and Augustine seem to have taken this view to enhance God's omnipotence). But if you cannot understand how this could have been done in six days, then grant the Holy Spirit the honor of being more learned than you are. For you are to deal with Scripture in such a way that you bear in mind that God Himself says what is written. But since God is speaking, it is not fitting for you to turn His Word in the direction you wish to go.'²⁰

(To be continued)

¹⁹ *Works of Martin Luther* (Holman ed.), III, p. 127.

²⁰ Weimar edition, 24, p. 19 f.