Ten Theses on the Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms, Contexts, and Challenges

by Niels Henrik Gregersen

Abstract: Although Lutheran theology is a gift to the historic church, Martin Luther’s own views are specifically formulated for their 16th century context. No universal or timeless theological system based upon Luther’s authority should be appealed to. Then theses are here advanced that bridge the 16th and 21st centuries and challenge us to creative construction.

Key Terms: Law and Gospel; Trinity; Word of God; Holy Spirit.

On January 16-20, 2003, more than 100 theologians from all continents will gather at Aarhus University in Denmark to discuss the Future of Lutheran Theology. As one of the main organizers of the global convocation, I have kindly been invited by the Dialog editor to write “a short and provocative article”. It is a privilege and a pleasure for me to do so. But let me state from the beginning that what I’m going to say certainly reflects my own theological thought; it should not be taken as programmatic for the convocation itself.

The point of the Aarhus conference is to create a platform for hearing different voices of Lutheran theology, all of which are likely to influence the future of academic theology. Thus the convocation will include scholars from the left to the main “low church” angle of vision for Lutheran theology to the right and “high church” angle of Evangelical Catholicity. In terms of ecumenical perspectives, the convocation will involve both pro and anti Joint Declaration Lutherans. And last, but not least, the convocation will host Lutherans from the South as well as from the North. For if we were to answer the question of the Future of the Lutheran Churches, we would need to point to Asia and to Africa in particular. Here the Lutheran Churches are growing, sometimes at very high speed, whereas the Lutheran churches in Europe and US are declining at various speeds with only a few exceptions. In this essay, however, my concern is the future of Lutheran theology; and I will here focus on classic Lutheran issues.

It is difficult to predict, especially about the future, said Yogi Berra. But the task of theology is finally not about prognostication and accommodation, but about making decisions about where to go. In so doing, however, it might be wise to address the charisms and contexts of Lutheran tradition, and also challenges to the very idea of a Lutheran theology for today. I shall do so in the form of short theses with likewise brief explanations. Both theses and explanations will be somewhat unguarded.

Niels Henrik Gregersen is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. He is coeditor of The Human Person in Science and Theology (T&T Clark, 2000), and Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue (Eerdmans, 1998). He also serves on the Dialog editorial council.
1. Lutheran theology is gifted by the work of Martin Luther, a charismatic-catholic reformer of the church. Yet no theologian should expect that Luther’s theological work, taken in isolation, can carry the burden of reinvigorating contemporary theology for the Church. Neither should Lutheran theology treat Luther as infallible. He was not.

(a) Realizing the contextual distance between Luther and ourselves is an unavoidable starting point for a future Lutheran theology. But not an easy one. Luther was a uniquely charismatic person, who re-articulated biblical faith in a self-involving way that also involves his readers and disciples. In addition, Luther combined existential bite with a theological vision that pronounced the gospel in a new key, explained Christian belief with doctrinal precision, and reformed the church from within. No wonder Lutherans from the start imitated Luther, almost as an icon of faith. Much against his own intention, Lutherans have even named a church after him. All this, however, should not disguise the distance in world view and mentality between Luther and the 21st century.

(b) Luther’s theology needs to be seen in historical perspective, as evidenced in Luther scholarship for the last 50 years. However, the medieval tradition preceding Luther has often been used as a mere foil against which the radical newness of Luther’s theological decisions were supposed to shine forth. More recent scholarship shows us that this is a historical myth produced by evangelical historians driven by hidden dogmatic agendas. Luther’s theology emerged in the climate of monastic Augustinianism, Ockhamism, and elements of Renaissance thought; and his thinking continued to be saturated by the thought models he learned in his youth. Moreover, where earlier historiography saw modernity as beginning from the age of the Renaissance and Reformation, today’s historiography identifies the shift from Old European to Modern thinking in the period between 1650 and 1750. This means Luther and the Reformation era are now seen as a variety of Late Medieval thinking placed far away from us. For better or worse, Luther was not infallible in his own time. And it would be quite extraordinary, if Luther’s work entails the key to solve all the theological problems of the 21st century.

2. Luther’s awareness of the catholicity of his theology is ubiquitous in all his writings, but particularly emphasized in his later work. However, Luther can be said to have overused Augustinian tradition and correspondingly under-used the Greek Patristic tradition. A future Lutheran theology will have to counterbalance the one-sided Augustinian track of Luther’s thought.

(a) The myth of Luther as the lonely individual, who stood up against the whole tradition, is no longer persuasive. Luther’s theology was nurtured by the tradition he reformed. Alongside all his provocative sharpness and exclusiveness, Luther understood his theology as a gateway to the universal Christian faith (fides catholica).

(b) Historically Luther belongs first and foremost to the Augustinian monastic tradition of ‘practical’ theology, highly critical of scholasticism. There is much to be said for this tradition, and much to be learned from it. But Luther also inherited views from Augustine that made him blind to the other options within Christian orthodox tradition. An example is Luther’s
unqualified adoption of the doctrine of double predestination in *The Bondage of the Will*. For example, Luther read the story of Jacob and Esau in allegiance to Augustinian thought schemes. Luther could not see what the story was about: the difference between a really great blessing from Abraham to Jacob, and a fatherly blessing that was not quite as good to Esau. Instead Luther found a story of the predestination of Jacob to heavenly bliss, and Esau to eternal tortures in hell. Luther’s view of unconditional grace is always expressed against the background of a *massa perditionis*. This assumes the vast majority of the human race is eternally hated by God and will consequently suffer infinite pain endlessly. This is hardly biblical, as was already seen by the fathers of the *Book of Concord*.3

(c) Finnish Luther-research has done much to retrieve important elements of Greek-Orthodox thinking in Luther’s work, especially the motif of the real participation of the believer in the very being of God. This brings back into the doctrine of justification a new emphasis of the activity of the living Christ in the union between him and the believer. Also, the links between the soteriology of deification and the trinitarian conception of God have been clarified.4 We owe much to this new interpretation of Luther. However, the Finnish Luther-research has so far confined itself to historical and semantic interpretations of Luther’s texts. What is needed to supplement this approach is an open discussion of the legitimacy of limits to Luther’s thought that may not be retrievable by mere interpretation. The future of Lutheran theology needs to see Luther’s theology as part of a bigger package, which involves alternative to the Augustinian solutions.

3. Important for the future of Lutheran theology is not only Luther’s systematic theology, but also his practical theology. The liturgical, pastoral and catechetical dimensions of Luther’s theology contain untapped resources for reflection.

(a) Luther’s embeddedness in catholic tradition can be evaluated differently. Some will emphasize Luther as exegete, and see Luther’s theology as always developing in response to particular polemical situations.5 However, one can also see Luther’s theology as growing out of reflections upon the typical or reiterative situations that constitute what it means to become and remain *ein Christenmensch*: listening to the Bible, confession one’s sins, taking refuge in the word of absolution, confessing the creed, rejoicing in God in psalms, praying to God in need, and understanding the Christian faith from within. On this interpretation, the liturgical, the pastoral and the catechetical aspects of Luther’s thinking demand renewed attention. Important is not only Luther’s polemical writings, but so much more his reflections on first-order utterances of Christian faith.6

(b) If one looks into *The German Mass* and other practical writings on the order of the liturgy, one immediately discerns Luther’s insistence on the human freedom to ask for the usefulness of tradition. However, Luther did not divide up things into evangelical essentials and the adiaphora of catholic tradition. Luther knew also that penultimate questions need to be handled with utmost theological sensitivity. The usual dichotomy between fundamentals and variables does not grasp Luther’s approach to tradition. The practical church reforms of the Lutheran Reformation exhibit at least four different approaches to the Christian tradition. (1) What is essential for the church (its *esse*) is not only an abstract minimum of liturgy or doctrine, but all the seven marks of the church: Word, baptism, Eucharist, absolution, ordination, prayer and praise, and the bearing of the cross. (2) What is good for the *esse* of the church though not prescribed by God (the *bene esse* of the church) should be retained as long as it is useful. (3) Then we have the adiaphora of the church (its *non ad esse*) such as garments and incenses; and finally (4) we have those practices that definitely need to be removed from church (the *contra essentiam ecclesiae*), such as the penance system. As is evident from his practical reforms of the mass, Luther’s insistence on the clarity of the gospel is always accompanied by, and mediated by, his instruction to ordinary believers about first-order practices. For these define what it means to be and remain a Christian.7

4. The ‘core’ of Luther’s theology should not be sought in a specific system of ‘Lutheran theology’, nor in the doctrine of justification taken in isolation. Luther’s great discovery that the word of forgiveness is unconditional on the part of God and unconditioned by specific human acts, precedes doctrinal formula.
(a) Lutheran thinking has often been caught up in a theological essentialism, searching for the “kerygma” (Bultmann), “the eternal message” (Tillich), “the essentials”, and so on. This essentialism goes hand in hand with a theological minimalism, which is characterized by a combination of strong general assertions with a correspondingly thin bone of content.

(b) Not even the doctrine of justification with all its exclusives (sola gratia, sola fide) can be treated as a core of Lutheran theology. The meaning of “justification” can only be determined in a wider network of propositions and assumptions. For example, the semantic meaning of Confessio Augustana art. 4 on justification cannot be understood without the doctrine of God and the anthropology that precedes the article (article 1-3), nor without reflection on the church and the sacraments that follows upon it (article 5-15). Neither can the kerygma be understood apart from the parables of Jesus plus the stories of his life, death, and resurrection, plus the promise that we shall participate in his life-story with God. Philosophically speaking, the meaning of the word justification cannot be determined apart from the sentences specifying its contents and contexts, and the sentences cannot be understood apart from the communication situations of which they are part. From a theological perspective, the practical aspects of this insight is very important. The gospel is not a gospel without somebody, “for whom” it can be heard as a gospel. Justification is thus the article on which the church stands and falls in the precise sense that without God’s justification of the sinner everything else is in vain. For all that God has done is in vain, if it does not liberate the sinner today. The article of justification is in this sense the second-order criterion for all theology, but not a doctrine that is the object of belief. The saving power of Christ has to be believed, not a doctrine of justification. Both for the sake of the clarity of the gospel (which is not a doctrine) and for the sake of the explanation of faith (which is a matter of doctrine), a distinction needs to be made between a first-order address of the biblical message and the second-order theological reflection on this message.

(c) The doctrine of justification thus only makes sense as a guide that directs the troubled sinner to seek forgiveness and search for God’s Word of promise. In the Word of absolution, the sign and its meaning coincide. It all happens while being spoken. Luther does not point behind the Word to a hidden God behind the Word, but directs the believer to find God, peace, and blessings in the verbum externum. It should be added to this observation, though, that the meaning of the Word of promise is only unambiguous when it is also used appropriately for this particular purpose (see # 5). A sign means something for somebody in a specific context, as Charles Sanders Peirce said. Without this Sitz im Leben in first-order Christian practices, the doctrine of justification cannot be specified. Luther’s great discovery was not a new theology of justification, but a rediscovery of the plain address of the word of God. In this context, one can talk about the unconditionality of the gospel. The gifts of the Word of God are not dependent on a specific human preparation of one’s mind-set; not dependent on a certain character formation; not dependent on a specific cultivation of church practices; and not dependent on the allegiance to a specific theology of justification. And yet, there are practices involved in the process of approaching the gospel as gospel. These practices cannot be disclaimed as quasi-meritorious; they are part of what it means to be justified by God.

5. The distinction between law and gospel belongs properly to the first-order level of divine address and human response. The law-gospel dialectic should not be abstracted from this concrete situation between the justifying God and the justified human person, and should not be used as a theological principle that structures doctrinal expositions of Christian faith.

(a) The distinction between law and gospel has its objective basis in the fact that the Word of God in scripture uses different forms of address to human beings, the conditional address of requirement (law), and the unconditional utterances of divine promise (gospel). In the case of the law, the logical form is: “if you remember me, then I’ll remember you”. In the case of the gospel, there are no such conditions: “I promise to be your God”, “Come to me, all you who are burdened ... .” However, the distinction between law and gospel can not be abstracted from these concrete divine-human communications. Luther was keenly aware of the fact that even though God speaks a gospel, we often make God’s gospel into a law.
this sense, the very distinction between law and gospel depends on the human reception (without assuming that this is an autonomous act). Or to put it otherwise, the distinction between law and gospel can only be made from the perspective of the gospel as received by faith. Apart from the relation between the gospel and its hearer, there exists no distinction between law and gospel; all will be perceived as law, as part of an ongoing negotiation between God and humanity.

(b) The distinction between law and gospel is necessary in order to safeguard the unconditional character of the gospel itself. However, Luther’s dialectic of law and gospel should not be elevated into a theological principle that structures the interpretation of Christian faith from beginning to end. The law-gospel distinction belongs to a first-order theology of divine-human speech acts, not to the second order reflection of the God-world relation in general. As soon as Luther’s notion of the law is doctrinalized and divided into the two classic functions (the usus civilis in relation to what should be done in the earthly realm, and the usus theologicus that terrifies the consciousness to seek refuge in the gospel), a Lutheran theology faces at least three problems. First, the usus civilis tends to reduce the manifold contents of divine commandment into a generalized principle; what is lost is the sense in which God’s law entails concrete advice about what one should do in order to let life flourish. Second, the usus theologicus is conceived within a logic of terror; what is lost is the sense in which the wrestling with the law is an incentive to discover what actually lies in one’s hands to do, and what lies beyond one’s capacities. Thirdly, a doctrinalized version of the functions of the law cannot express the extent to which the New Testament consistently instructs the believer to act according to his or her belief: “Let the same mind be in you as was in Jesus Christ” (Phil 2).

6. Luther’s rediscovery of the external word of law and gospel presupposes an ontology of divine reality prior to, simultaneous with, and after the proclamation of the Word. Today it is particularly important to recover a notion of God’s presence in the world at large. Luther’s doctrine of the hidden God is a necessary placeholder for an awareness of God’s majestic being, but the identification of the reality of God can only be offered via the doctrine of the Trinity.

(a) Luther’s theology is sometimes treated as a theology of the Word. And rightly so, as we have seen. But Luther’s theology could also be called a theology of the elements. Luther’s Eucharistic theology entails a theology of God’s being in the elements of bread and wine. But Christ, the divine Logos, also inhabits every corner of the universe – as a Chry-st-all, as Luther is saying in a wordplay between the crystal and Christ-in-all. Similarly, Luther’s Eucharistic writings entail what may be termed a social ontology, a conception of the qualified divine presence in actions of loving and sharing with brothers and sisters.

(b) There is nothing new in this insight, since the particular Lutheran doctrine of the being of Christ “in, with, and under” the elements was highlighted already in the Formula of Concord (article X). Luther’s sacramental theology of creation, however, shows the shortcomings of some of the most influential paradigms of Luther research of the last century. An interpretation of Luther in terms of a personalistic ontology (W. Joest), of a relational word-event (G. Ebeling) are not very helpful in this respect. What is needed is a reflection on the relation between Christ and creation. After all, Luther’s sacramental theology seems to suggest that Christ and Spirit share the life of all the creatures, whether or not they share in the life of God. Here is a domain to be explored by the future of Lutheran theology.

(c) Luther’s notion of the hidden God in The Bondage of Will can be seen as a placeholder for a more concrete ontology of divine presence in the world. Luther never developed any such ontology, but he nonetheless both presupposes and affirms a strong view of divine ubiquity. Against some of Luther’s own formulations, however, the hidden God should not be seen as a second divinity lurking somewhere behind the curtains of the revealed God, nor as a mere symbol for the limits of human understanding. The point is exactly that God is and remains the same self-identified God prior to the revelation, simultaneous with revelation, and after it. The sense in which God remains God also apart from God’s relation to humanity is a presupposition of classical metaphysics and of classic Christian thought that needs to be cultivated.
in the future of Lutheran theology. The majesty and loftiness of the divine requires quite some constraints on all too sentimental idols of God.

7. Luther’s doctrine of the Trinity is an explication of Luther’s Christology and serves as the unifying center of Luther’s theology; The doctrine of the Trinity (a) entails Luther’s ontology of Godself in so far as God’s being is revealed, (b) encapsulates Luther’s ontology of the gift that is common both to God’s creative and redemptive work, and (c) articulates the unifying intention between the contrasting speech acts of law and gospel.

(a) Luther did not present any “doctrine” of the hidden God, since the infinite God cannot be circumscribed by finite categories. However, the hidden God serves as a placeholder for the Trinity, the eternal and infinite community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While the hidden God can only be adored because God is beyond communication, the trinitarian God can be praised because Christ is God’s own communication.

(b) Luther’s theology of the Trinity is modeled after the pattern of the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Not only the Son, but also “the Father has given himself to us, with all his creatures” (Large Catechism, explanation to first article). All this has been given us “without any merit or worthiness on my part” (Small Catechism, explanation to first article). In a similar way, the Holy Spirit is conceived as the one who gives by letting all members of the church share in the community of God and saints. “Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses” (Large Catechism, explanation to third article). In all this outer-directed love, however, God is from eternity to eternity self-giving mutual love between Father, Son, and Spirit. The self-identity of God as love precedes and structures God’s self-giving love toward creation. Luther’s theology of the Trinity entails Luther’s theology of glory.

(c) In the light of Luther’s theology of the Trinity it possible to see, why the dialectic between law and gospel should not be accorded a fundamental status in a Lutheran theology. The relation between the hidden God and the Trinity is similar to the relation of the law to the gospel. Only in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity can the role of the hidden God be acknowledged as the temporary placeholder for the appearance of the real God. Thus, there exists no other hidden God than the trinitarian God who takes off the masks of the hidden God, even if only in the mode of faith. Accordingly, the hiddenness of God is a veil that describes our epistemic limitations, not the ontology of God.

Dare we say in the same manner that there exists no divine law in God which was ever disconnected from the gospel? That the Torah ultimately derives from Logos, the Wisdom of God. Could it be that just as there is one loving trinitarian God behind the hidden God, so there is one Word of grace beyond the differentiated speech acts of divine law and gospel? To my knowledge, no text of Luther is saying this. However, if it were the case, one would have to say that there is no part of creation that has not been created with the divine intention of redemption. Luther clearly does not say that. On the contrary, he says that “outside the Christian church (that is, where the gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness.” The reason is again Luther no less than Calvin worked on the Augustinian assumption of the horrible decree of double predestination.

The question for the future of Lutheran theology is whether we should continue Luther’s Augustinianism, or whether we should return to the greater orthodoxy of, say, a Gregory of Nyssa? As for myself, I have answered the question by posing it.

8. A trinitarian theology of the Holy Spirit has not been adequately articulated within classical Lutheran tradition. Usually, the work of the Spirit divides up the work of the Spirit as life-giving Creator and as sanctifying Redeemer. What is needed, however, is a theology of the Holy Spirit that is able to articulate that the vivifying and transforming work of the Spirit is always coordinated for the one and wholehearted purpose of sanctification.

(a) According to classical Lutheran tradition, the Spiritus Creator is everywhere in the universe. This universality of the vivifying Spirit, however, is insufficiently identified with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, which is bound to the Word of God. Even
though there are exceptions from this picture in the writings of Luther, this is by far the dominating picture.

(b) This received view has made it difficult for Lutheran theology to develop a theology of religions, and relate to cultures outside of Christendom. For sure, the heathens would all know about the law of God, but they would not have a clue about the word of gospel. Accordingly, those who happen to live outside the Jewish-Christian civilization will allegedly be lost forever. In the history of Lutheranism, there have been two ways out of this impasse. One way is to enlarge the idea of the divine law into a notion of an “original revelation”, that is, by expanding the notion of creation so as to embody not only the sense of divine law, but also of divine grace (e.g. Emil Brunner). The other way out is to relegate this question to holy silence, to the inscrutable ways of God that will forever be beyond our reach (e.g. Regin Prenter).

(c) I believe that both these proposals are problematic, because they avoid the real issue. Both ways elaborate on the idea of the hidden God, the first by minimizing the epistemic hiddenness, the second by maximizing it. I believe that the way out will be to rethink Luther’s doctrine of the trinitarian God. The crucial point will be that the trinitarian activities are always taking place in peace and mutual agreement (cf. the German term Drei-Einigkeit). Accordingly the work of the Spirit will always integrate the work of creation (by Luther appropriated to the Father) and the work of redemption (by Luther appropriated to the Son). The works of the Spirit are always attuned to both the mind of the Father, from which the Spirit was sent (ex patre), and to the Wisdom of the Son through whom the Spirit is flowing (per filium). Thus the Spirit does nothing which is not in accord with the redemptive will of the eternal Word of God; and yet, the Spirit is not bound to the sermonic Word of God and locked into the walls of the Christian churches. If the latter were the case, there would not be much light for the world outside the old Christendom. To avoid this absurdity, a theology of the Holy Spirit is required that will have to enlarge the horizon of traditional Lutheran theology.

9. Luther’s theology of creation is characterized by an unusual freshness and breadth not found in all traditions. Luther’s doctrine of creation is conceived after the model of justification: life is a radical and unmerited gift, and yet a gift that opens up for divine-human cooperations. In both cases, the received dichotomy between a purely active God and a purely passive creature will need to be transcended.

(a) Luther’s doctrine of creation is multifaceted. In a temporal dimension, not only the beginning of the world is important, but also its preservation from death and evil; conversely, important is not only the continuation of creation, but that the divine blessing continues to effect a blossoming of creation. In the spatial horizon, Luther’s doctrine of creation refers to the fruitful interpenetration between the spheres of nature (sun, moon), of social life (house, spouse, children, work) and of individual existence (body, senses and mind). A strong affirmation of ordinary life is everywhere felt.

The article of creation is rich in phenomena in which God speaks to us – even in a pit of a peach or in the noise of the working place. Accordingly, God’s creation is not something that we need to have a theory about. It speaks to us in the ways things are woven together and develop, independent of philosophical notions of design.

(b) As shown above, however, the first article of faith is inspired from the second and third article of faith. As far as I can see, we find in both cases the same structure of God, first moving all that moves, and then, second, handing over divine powers to the creatures in order to facilitate an array of cooperations between God and creatures. What Luther in all cases denies is free will’s “own powers” and staying “capacities.” Yet what he affirms is that in the co-operation with God human beings are brought to do things beyond their own capacities. Paul co-operates with God when he instructs the Corinthians and build up their community. Also the ungodly co-operate with God, but without their knowledge and “without the grace of the Spirit.” The interesting point is that Luther cannot be adequately described as a simple monergist who says that God does all, and human beings nothing. Whereas for Schleiermacher we can describe the human being as “absolutely dependent” upon God, in Luther, humans are only passive when they are used by God as his instruments. Paradoxically, the more we are united with God, the more we can do. Thus both
regarding creation and regarding justification Luther can, without any hint of fear of self-righteousness, refer to our “own will” and our “own justice.” Luther elaborates an orthodox doctrine of synergism that avoids both a puppet monergism and a modern separation between God and human beings. The more intimate the relation is to God, the more is the human person empowered.

(c) It seems obvious that the same model that Luther developed in the context of justification also has potentials for rethinking a theology of nature. Nature should never be perceived as devoid of God. Rather, the powers of nature are empowered by the presence of the God who finds delight in creating creativity rather than repeating structures.

10. The Future of Lutheran theology will need to overcome the unhealthy dichotomy between “conservative” and “liberal” theology. Lutheran theology has a special motivation for developing a public Christian theology and special resources for doing so.

(a) Much of current theology has been partitioned according to a schema of liberal versus conservative or evangelical, culture-oriented versus church-oriented, modern versus postmodern, and so on. I must admit that I cannot accommodate myself to this schema, and I find it generally stultifying. For example, in the 1950’s the Niebuhr brothers were termed neo-Orthodox, but now, post mortem, they have both been re baptized by many as liberals. Name tags are of course open for discussion, but the church suffers from theological sputtering when speaking about Christian faith in the public square. What is needed, as argued by the late Hans Frei, is to know and to handle the distinction between internal self-descriptions of faith, and external descriptions. For theologians to be able to communicate matters of faith, it is simply necessary that one can speak both the fluid, fast, generalized and superficial language of newspapers and TV, and the ritualized, slow, content-specific and deep language of first-order Christian language.

(b) It seems to me that Lutheran theology is motivated for developing a public theology based on its own resources. Lutherans believe that God’s Word speaks in the vernacular tongue of ordinary language. If God is able to speak in plain American English or Danish, theology should do the same. A theology which speaks in a sectarian self-confident tone should be met with quite some suspicion, for the message of the church is finally not about traditions (new or old), but about the viva vox evangeli. Not about identity formation (old or new), but about living out of the external Word of God. Accordingly, Lutheran tradition has strong leanings against believing that a specific type of philosophy or theological system is quintessential in order to come through with a message. Neither Aristotle, Thomas, Hegel, nor Pannenberg are requisite for understanding what the Christian faith is about. But they may be of help!

(c) It seems that Lutheran traditions are also well equipped for developing public theologies. Lutherans are geared for enduring tensions between internal and external descriptions of the world, and of their own faith. In Luther’s early theology of the cross, we find a principle of contrariety saying, that where the human being experiences humiliation, the theologian of the cross finds the presence of the suffering Christ. But also Luther’s more mature theology of the Word handles the difference between the pedestrian observation that it is “just a human being” who says the word of absolution, and yet she or he does so on behalf of God, and in the presence of God. In this sense, the much criticized two kingdoms doctrine allows the Christian to live in several worlds at the same time, and to endure the differences between them.

The capacity for living with contradiction rather than in neat uniform schemata may be an important stress test of a Lutheran spirituality. Lutheran tradition engages with the world on the assumption Christians are not in possession of ultimate solutions to complex problems in the worlds. One has to try out solutions. One has to listen. In this world, Christians have to develop models of ethics and conviviality that work also, as Martin Luther once said, “in a world where the Christians live far apart from one another.”

As Martin Luther once said ...

Endnotes

1. Recently, this problem has been shown and exemplified by Theo Dietz, Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische
Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 8-11 and 635-642.

2. In his later disputations, Luther repeatedly refers to fides catholica as normative teaching; see for example "Die Disputation de divinitate et huminitate Christi" [1540], W&I 39-II, 92-121, 119 (not translated in LW).

3. As is well-known, already the Formula of Concord (1577) had the courage to clarify and correct Luther's thinking on this point; see: Rüdiger Söderlund, Ex Praevisa Fidei: Zum Verständnis der Prädestinationmale in der lutherischen Orthodoxie (Hannover: Luthersches Verlagshaus, 1983). However, the theological favoritism went unaltered, and the end result of a massa perditioneis was unchanged.

4. The main points are easily accessible in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson eds, Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998).

5. So Leif Grane, “Luther’s Cause”, Lutherjahrbuch 1985 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 46-63; here 62: “A ‘Luther’s theology’, meaning a survey of his ‘doctrine’, or an exposition of this or that, can, therefore, never be in accordance with Luther unless it interprets everything in connection with the precise historical conditions. To say it bluntly: the contents of Luther’s is inseparable from the way and the form. One could be tempted to use Kierkegaard’s expression: the way is all.”

6. There is, of course, nothing new in this interpretation. These aspects have been highlighted in mid 20th century theology, for example in the work of Peter Brunner and Regin Prenter. In Prenter’s case (as well as in my own), this appropriation of Luther is mediated by the profound Danish theologian, historian and educator, N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872).


8. Cf. The important study of Oswald Bayer, Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luther’s Theologie [1971] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), which in detail elaborates how Luther’s theology of the Word overcame the traditional Platonic “hermeneutics of signification”, which the early Luther had inherited from Augustine.


16. De servo arbitrio, W&I 18, 753f; the translation in LW 33 was not available to me.

17. See “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519), LW 31, 297-306, and Regin Prenter’s interpretation in “Luther’s Synergismus?”, Theologie und Gottesdienst (Aarhus: Aros, 1977), where he argues that Luther teaches an orthodox doctrine of synergism.