

## COMMENT

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### *Twenty Questions on the Relevance of Luther for Today*

by OSWALD BAYER

*[When asked by local pastors to give them something brief on Luther's significance for today, in light of 2017, Oswald Bayer decided to pose personal questions specific to the pastoral office.]*

“Luther,” as we know, is a world-historical event—culturally, historically, and politically—and should be understood and appreciated as such. Yet this event has primarily religious roots and intentions, a fact that even general history writing also recognizes. The Christian churches, however, especially the Lutheran churches, have a particular interest in these matters since for them the “Luther” event is more than merely an historical event, and the epoch of the Reformation is more than just an epoch like any other. Our way of approaching this event and epoch is bound up rather with the recognition and expectation that it has a normative function to play for the present as well as for the future.

Therefore, it makes sense to distinguish between “Reformation” and “reformational.” Reformation is a general historiographical term for a world-historical phenomenon, including its present impact, while the word reformational refers to something that has that normative function. We see this latter function at work in the rite of ordination to the pastoral office when candidates pledge themselves to the confessions of the church and vow to uphold and defend them.

The question of Luther's relevance for today in the horizon of world history must surely be given the utmost attention precisely for theological reasons. Yet this can only happen in a theologically

responsible fashion if we first become clear about the “reformational” aspect that is involved here. The following questions will assist us to take the first step. They are Luther’s questions that he addresses to me and that I would hardly have heard in all their radicalness and sharpness without him. The theology of Luther and the confessions, which include some authoritative writings of Luther, pose these questions to each and every baptised Christian, but especially to those in the office of the ministry, those who have special responsibility for ministering to people with the divine word. Luther’s relevance and explosiveness will be evident in the answers we give to these questions—questions that include a *norma normata*, which of course always has to be tested against the *norma normans*, the Bible as Holy Scripture (*Book of Concord*, p. 486). They are likely to show that we have not even caught up yet with Luther’s insights, let alone gone beyond them. In fact, our answers will probably show that we have largely lost them and that we will have to recover them anew in our present context.

1. Do you exercise your ministry in the name of—hence on behalf of—the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit for the purpose of sharpening and comforting consciences in view of the final judgment, and so for the purpose of preaching law and gospel?

More specifically:

2. Is Galatians 3:13 (“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”) the pivot of your theological orientation?
3. If so, do you then operate from the notion of the freedom of conscience, which, theologically, is basically the freedom of Christ (freedom from the law, freedom in Christ, freedom to fulfil the law), which, in turn, is to be strictly distinguished from the freedom of conscience, politically, which belongs to the civil realm (*iustitia civilis*), where it cannot be valued too highly?

4. Does the message of the cross make you feel apathetic or does it make you feel that “nowhere to date has there been such a bold inversion of anything quite as horrible, questioning, and questionable,”<sup>1</sup> so that its rejection as something foolish and scandalous (1 Cor. 1:23: “But we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”) is entirely understandable, from a human point of view, even though it is “satanic” all the same (Mark 8:33),
5. while its acceptance as the power and wisdom of God is due to none other than the miracle of the Holy Spirit?
6. In Christology, are you consistently guided by the doctrine of the communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomatum*), according to which the powerless man on the cross is none other than the almighty God, the Lord of glory? (1 Cor. 2:8: “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”)
7. Are you bold to believe and teach that the promise of freedom that you speak in God’s name is God’s own word and that “we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness from the confessor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven” (BC 360)?
8. In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, do you continue to distinguish between God’s promise, which comes before faith, and the prayer of thanksgiving that follows, which is the answer of faith (LW 36:50–51)? Consequently, do you refrain from turning the Lord’s Supper as a whole into a Eucharist, thereby collapsing the katabatic (the downward movement) into the anabatic (the upward movement)?
9. Are you aware that the preaching of the gospel is, or should be, the same speech act as Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper? Do you realize then that it is not meant to inform, demand, or represent, so that it cannot be a statement, appeal, or emotional expression, but that it is meant to promise and to give, and to keep on giving?
10. Do you realize that it is only when you understand that the word is promise and gift that faith can be truly faith?

11. Do you consider the “Torgau formula” to be the criterion for shaping the worship service, according to which nothing else is to happen there except “that our dear Lord himself may speak to us through his holy Word and that we respond to him through prayer and praise” (LW 51:333)?
12. Do you consider, therefore, that the correspondence between word and faith is also the criterion, because “God does not deal with us, nor has he ever dealt with us, otherwise than through the word of promise, and we in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise” (LW 36:42)?
13. Are you comforted by the anti-Donatism—not a cynical but a humble anti-Donatism—that stresses that the validity and efficacy of God’s word “does not rest upon the worthiness of the minister who distributes the Sacrament, nor upon the worthiness of the one who receives it” (BC 596, trans. alt.)?
14. Do you give realistic, emphatic, and detailed expression to those occurrences that contradict the experience of God’s promise so that space is given in the worship service and in other forms of pastoral care for complaint and lament—space for the psalms of complaint and vengeance as well as for the book of Job?
15. Are you fair and honest enough not to deny or suppress spiritual attack (*Anfechtung*) when it comes, but rather to admit it and withstand it—by fleeing to God against the hidden God who leads you into temptation (Gen. 22:1)?
16. Is your theological existence determined by prayer (*oratio*), meditation (*meditatio*), and attack (*tentatio*); that is, by the fact that, driven as you are by *Anfechtung*, you enter prayerfully into Holy Scripture and are interpreted by it, in order that you can interpret it for others who are under spiritual attack, so that they too enter prayerfully into Holy Scripture and are interpreted by it?
17. Are the prayers of the Psalms in particular a part of your everyday life?
18. Is pastoral care constitutive for your theological existence (see question 16) and, therefore, is it characterized by the mutual

conversation and the mutual strengthening of fellow Christians to help them live confidently (BC, 319) in view of the final judgment (see question 1)?

19. Since faith comes through hearing, has the joy of language and concern for it become second nature for you, so that questions of education and culture are vitally important for you?
20. Are you convinced by the fact that the catholicity of the church consists essentially in its intercessions for “everyone” (1 Tim. 2:1), and that it is inevitable that if you come before God with heart and mouth for others, that you will stand before the world with hands and feet for others, for strangers—so that the church’s ministry of service (*diakonia*) is in keeping with its liturgy?

*Translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock; biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Luther’s quotations from Luther’s Works (LW), and The Book of Concord (BC) from the Kolb/Wengert translation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).*

#### NOTES

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), p. 44.