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Robert Kolb

Martin Luther on Faithfulness as Fruitfulness

According to Martin Luther, “confirming your calling and election” (2 Pt 1:10) means “that we should confirm our possession of faith and the forgiveness of sin by showing our works, making the tree manifest by means of its fruit and making it evident that it is a sound tree and not a bad one.”¹ The image of the good tree producing good fruit in Matthew 7:16–20 aided Luther in elucidating his belief that faith precedes good works in the Christian life, that truly good works arise out of the re-created person who trusts Christ and therefore has been freed to live a God-pleasing life. He employed this concept in his *Freedom of a Christian*, his exposition of his doctrine of justification composed in 1520,² and repeated it from time to time throughout his preaching and teaching, e.g. in the “Schwabach Articles” prepared in 1529 as a basis for an alliance of evangelical governments. In this document, which served as one basis for the Augsburg Confession, he with his Wittenberg colleagues, confessed that the Holy Spirit creates faith, not like those who have a false faith, a simple delusion or darkness of the heart, “but a new, powerful, vital living being. [This faith] produces much fruit, always does good in relationship with God through praise, thanks, prayer, proclamation, and teaching, and in relationship with the neighbor through love, service, assistance, counsel, giving and suffering all kinds of evil until death.”³

Luther cited Matthew 7:16–20 in support of several key aspects of his call for reform of the church's teaching and practice. Throughout his career it served him in his critique of opponents, both papal⁴ and *Schwärmer*. Of his former colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Luther wrote, “He forces us away from the lofty, necessary, articles of faith to the minor ones, so that we waste time with him and are in danger of forgetting the lofty articles. That can be the first fruit by which we note the character of this tree.”⁵ More often it served to critically assess medieval Christianity and papal foes. His treatment of the Sermon on the Mount in 1530 offered the observation, “A sound tree that bears good fruit” is “one who conducts his life, existence, and behavior according to the Word of God, pure and unadulterated.” Luther criticized those who retreated into humanly devised commands to observe certain kinds of sacred works, a

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reflection of his rejection of the monastic way of life as a superior kind of faithfulness to God. He continued: "To me it does not seem right that a husband or wife, a prince or judge, should be as holy as the one who sneaks off into some corner or the desert. But it will not do for me to decide on the basis of my imagination . . . So stick to the principle that bearing good fruit refers to the kind of life and good works that are in agreement with the Word and the commandment of God." The word supplies the "distinguishing mark and standard" for judging those who claim God's warrant for their way of life, Luther observed with monastics in mind. Saint Paul's message in Romans 13 (1, 8–10) mandated obedience to civil government and practice of mutual love in each person's walk of life. "I will remain with the word, which teaches that such walks of life are good in spite of the fact that there are bad people in them . . . Since the walk of life is good, the works and fruit demanded by it and done according to the word of God must also be right and good."⁶ In his theses "on faith and the law" of 1535 he proposed, "good works must follow faith, yes, not only as an obligation, but they follow spontaneously, just as a good tree is not obligated to produce good fruits but does so spontaneously. Just as good fruits do not make the tree good, so good works do not justify the person. But good works come from the person who has already been justified beforehand by faith . . ."⁷ In combating the accusations of the prominent Roman Catholic prince Duke Heinrich of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel against his own prince, Elector Johann Friedrich of Saxony, during their conflict in 1542, Luther described his elector as "a person whose way and manner of life is modest and honorable, whose tongue is truthful, and whose hand is gentle in helping churches, schools, and the poor, one whose heart is earnest, constant, and true to honor God's Word . . . and his marriage is so pure and praiseworthy that it is a fine example to all princes, nobles, and indeed everyone else." Conceding that Johann Friedrich sometimes drank too much, Luther continued, "you will find nothing but the pure gifts of God and the virtues of a worthy Christian prince and pure, chaste husband. The fruits bear witness to the tree."⁸

Matthew 7:17 also served to bring consolation to sinners who needed to be directed to their fundamental righteousness as God's children. "If an upright person is at the same time righteous in regard to the spirit and sinful in regard to the flesh, actions will reflect the person, the fruit reflects the tree. In so far as the spirit participates in the action, it is good. In so far as the flesh participates in it, it is wicked . . . God evaluates the action on the basis of the person" performing the deed.⁹ Luther regarded fruitfulness and faithfulness as inseparable, like horse and carriage, love and marriage: you cannot have one without the other.

Luther's reflections on the fruitfulness of faithfulness extended to the Christian congregation as well. He lived, of course, in a time when twenty-first-century concepts of "standing on one's own two feet" and "doing it my way" were impossible and, would have been, for a believer like Luther, abhorrent. Not only economic necessity but his reading of all of Scripture implanted deeply in his understanding of God's will for his human creatures the necessity of community and of mutual care and service for the benefit of the other. In his comments on the Sermon on the Mount in 1538 he made clear that the community's light was to shine with good works, which meant

specifically “the exercise, expression, and confession of the teaching of Christ and faith and suffering for its sake.” The community of Christ’s people teaches the biblical message faithfully, stressing faith and aiming to strengthen and preserve it as it testifies to its Lord.¹⁰ The following year, in setting forth the marks by which the church is identified, Luther noted that the church is to be recognized above all by its use of God’s word in oral, written, and sacramental forms and by its “prayer, public, praise, and thanksgiving to God.” The church identifies itself also, though not in a unique way (since false believers may also demonstrate outwardly a certain conformity to God’s commands), honorable behavior in the public sphere as the Holy Spirit produces “fruits from ‘an honest and good heart’” (Lk 8:15).¹¹ Luther’s earlier support (1523) for the “Ordinance of a Common Chest” in the town of Leisnig demonstrates in concrete detail how he expected the community to respond to human need, and the congregation of Christians took part in the civil community in his day. Thus, while not offering a pattern for the Christian congregation’s actual policy or procedures in other cultural settings, he did indicate the kind of concerns which conveyed the love of Christ to the larger community. He wrote the congregation of Leisnig that the gospel had caused Christ to shine into the hearts of its members and led them to follow the example of the apostles in Acts 2 and 4 in providing for human needs. He opposed greed and selfishness that would break the bonds of love in the community.¹² The program of social welfare which he supported included expenditures for the activities of the church, including pastors’ salaries, as well as for the schools and other institutions. It also prescribed disbursements for the aged and infirm among the poor, relief for the unemployable and unemployed, aid to newcomers in the town, all from public funds, at least in part supported by taxes.¹³ In our very different culture and society the task of the congregation of believers continues to be the reflection of his love both in our words of witness to his deliverance and in our deeds that serve him as agents of his providence.

Reflections on Biblical Faithfulness and Fruitfulness

Among the deceiver’s many tricks of the trade that gives him his name is his having people who define meanings (and thus define life), set things that God has designed to be complementary in opposition to each other. To be sure, he mingles meanings that need to be kept separate, but more powerful is his setting in opposition to each other our descriptions, concepts or activities that God fashioned to support and extend one another. The concepts of “faithfulness” and “fruitfulness” provide an example of this.

What is biblical faithfulness? It simply centers on trust in God, who has revealed himself by becoming human, in flesh, bones, blood, and skin, as Jesus of Nazareth. Trust in his saving and re-creating action through death and resurrection—both Christ’s on the cross and from the empty tomb and ours at the baptismal font or in our first clinging to the word of forgiveness—blossoms into trust. This trust counts on his daily and richly providing us with all that we need to support this body and life while he protects us in the face of all evil and danger. In all this we recognize that none

of our efforts could merit or be worthy of what comes from his fatherly goodness and mercy that defines him as God. That means that we actually count on the God who takes interest in falling sparrows and balding heads to be present with us and to accomplish his will. His will includes the extension of his rule in this world, without us but sometimes also graciously with and through us, as Luther taught us to pray in the Small Catechism.¹⁴ When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are faithfully recognizing and counting on the truth of the claim that “God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil, to bring us to himself, and to rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience,” and that to attain this goal “he also gave his Holy Spirit to deliver this to us through his holy Word and to enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power.” We are further praying that through our use of God’s holy word and living of the God-pleasing life we “may remain faithful and grow daily in [the word] and also that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world.”¹⁵

Luther treated the entire Christian life engendered by the trust and faithfulness which the Holy Spirit creates. He fostered that faith and the life it produces through sermons, devotional works, polemical treatises, and other genre throughout his life. The Wittenberg professor clearly outlined God’s expectations for daily living in all corners of Christian service to God and his entire creation. His affirmation of the life of service in the home and in economic activities, in society, and in the worshipping community transformed the definition of “holy orders and walks of life” from that of only those in “sacred” vocations but in all situations in which life transpires.¹⁶

The coming of God’s rule into the lives of believers keeps them faithful, daily growing in his word, “in order that it may find approval and gain followers among other people and advance with power throughout the world” as well as in obedience in all areas of individual lives.¹⁷ He certainly made clear his views on God’s demand that Christians use the word and share the message of Scripture with others, beginning, but not ending, with their own families. In 1522, preaching on 1 Peter 1:3, Luther admonished the Wittenberg congregation, “We have no other reason for living on earth than to be of help to others. If this were not the case, it would be best for God to kill us and let . . . us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe. But he permits us to live here in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he brought us.”¹⁸ A little later his comment on 1 Peter 2:9 urged his hearers to practice their “chief work”: that each believer “proclaims the mighty deed of God to the other, how you have been delivered through him from sin, hell, death, and all affliction, and have been called to eternal life. Thus, you should also teach other people how they, too, come into such light . . . Thus the first and foremost duty we Christians should perform is to proclaim the wonderful deeds of God.”¹⁹ At roughly the same time Luther wrote to latter day followers of John Hus in Bohemia regarding the rights of congregations to evaluate the preaching of the clergy. There he observed, “No one can deny that every Christian possesses God’s Word and is taught and anointed by God to be a priest . . . But if it is true that they have God’s Word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread it . . .

It is certain that a Christian not only has the right and power to teach God's Word but has the duty to do so on pain of losing his soul and of God's disfavor."²⁰

Those who suggest that Luther later abandoned this emphasis on God's calling all the baptized to serve as agents of his proclamation simply have not read the texts. His teaching on the church and on the relationship of the pastoral office and the priesthood of all the baptized shifted in emphasis over the years as new situations arose, but his insistence on the essential and vital role which God has ordained for pastors in the life of his church and on the obligation of all the baptized to give public witness to their faith and to share the gospel with others are present in his writings early and late.²¹ His postil of 1526 affirmed that all the baptized have the power to declare the forgiveness of sins that brings cheer to others.²² His preaching in the 1530s reiterated the point, e.g. in 1537, in a sermon on John 14,²³ and in 1539, while treating Matthew 18.²⁴ Luther counseled his students in 1542 that absolution from "the pastor, or in case of necessity, at the hand of any brother, saves," for every believer is "a servant of God's kingdom and eternal life, the forgiveness of sins and the destruction of hell, in short of the opening of heaven and the kingdom of God."²⁵ This concern for the witness of all the baptized to the gospel of Christ did not disappear with Luther. His impact on the attitudes of his students and other followers can be seen also in the treatment of many of them regarding the naturalness and necessity of the public confession of the faith by all believers.²⁶

Faithfulness to the Great Commissioner spells the death of defensiveness, for it assures us of God's gracious presence in our lives, his commitment to be faithful in preserving us as people of his kingdom. His faithfulness empowers and enlivens our surrender to God's plan and his way of ruling in the world, even when we think we have better solutions for the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of his baptized people than the way he seems to be contending with the problem.

Trees that are faithful in their genuine reliance on God—believers who have confidence that he steers human history, including our own and that of our communities—naturally produce good fruit. They set aside worry about their safety and God's reputation, and they assume the path of the cross, which seems impotent and foolish to the world but is in fact God's way of demonstrating both his wisdom and his power (1 Cor 1:17–2:16). Faithfulness is wrought by the Holy Spirit through the word, and through it he produces his fruit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). This spirit demonstrates the presence of the Holy Spirit, who moves us to give frequent accounts of the hope which fills us and to do so with gentleness and respect for our hearers (1 Pt 3:15). They will not know that we are Christians by our love, even though Luther counted it as a mark of the church—which, to be sure, is not unique to the church, he wrote.²⁷ That is why simply being kind and gentle is not enough, God's kingdom comes through his word, spoken and written and on the Internet, but it cannot be heard without some sense of trust in the trustworthiness of the one who is trying to convey it.

The parable of the Good Shepherd reminds us of two fundamental truths about God's way of working in the world. He goes out to where the lost are and does not

count on them returning to the fold. They need to be fetched home. He counts each one of us as an important statistic in the coming of his kingdom. God is, of course, interested in statistics. Each of those who hear the message from us and see it lived out in our lives is precious to God. Each individual who comes to faith through our witness to Christ is the fruit of the fruit of our faithfulness, the faithfulness that by the Holy Spirit's power produces the fruit of our love, the love that gives witness to God's love in Christ and thus builds trust.

The shepherd went out—did not stay with the fat and happy ninety and nine—to find the lost one. It is remarkable how seldom the gospels report that Jesus was in synagogue or temple. His proclamation went out into the streets and homes. There he found the people who would never have encountered him in the synagogue. There he converted people from the lost and erring into the faithful, so that they could come to hear the word in the synagogue and temple. It is into the world, where the lost are, that Jesus sends his servants to seek and save those outside the faith, as the parable of the banquet and the host who wanted a full house (Mt 22:10, Lk 14:23) demonstrates. Lutherans in North America and Western Europe face the temptation, as cultures around them become more hostile to the Christian tradition that has formed them, to abandon what H. Richard Niebuhr labeled a “Christ and culture in paradox” approach to living within our culture, which is a gift God gives us for our care, and retreating into a “Christ against culture” model.²⁸ That would be a tragic abdication of our calling from God to be the critical voices of God's plan for human living within our culture. The experience of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet period demonstrates that the church can become just as culturally enslaved within its own walls, within its own liturgy and language, as it is when it tries to confront the errors of the culture in the marketplace. Faithfulness counts on the Holy Spirit to support us in the testimony we give individually and corporately in the nooks, crannies, and marketplaces of the larger society.

This suggests that our fruit, like our faith, is dependent on the Holy Spirit, who wants all people to be saved. He brings sinners to trust in Christ through our use of his word “when and where he wills.”²⁹ He welcomes us—depends on us—as his co-workers (1 Cor 3:9), but we dare not think that we are anything other than tools in his hands. There is no synergism of those who convert any more than there is a synergism with those whom the Holy Spirit converts. The mysterious and horrifying phenomenon of a famine of God's word can take place (Am 8:22), but that is the Lord's call. It does not give us license to ignore his sending his church to the nations to make disciples. It is no excuse for lethargy, hesitation, or lackadaisical attitudes toward the urgent ask of witnessing to Christ. The will of the Savior as he left this earth was that repentance and the forgiveness of sins be preached to all nations (Lk 24:47–48), that new disciples be baptized and taught (Mt 28:19), that his church bring repentance through retention of sins and life through forgiveness of sins to others so that believing in Christ, they might have life in his name (Jn 20:22–23, 31). The mission belongs to God, and he entrusts it to our mouths and our hands.

The church in North America today faces challenges unimaginable in Luther's time within a context unimaginable to him. Careful translation of his insights from his

culture to ours nonetheless can serve to move our thinking as congregations of Christ's people to serve as lights on the hill, salt to flavor the society in which he has called us to be his witnesses. In this society, which is losing fundamental habits necessary to well-functioning societal life, especially in the conduct of family life but also in civil discourse and civil concern for the poor and disadvantaged, local congregations, as well as church bodies, are called by the Lord of North America to demonstrate his love and model his concern, even as we share the life-giving promise that liberates those caught in every kind of satanic trap. Without the leaven, light, and salt which those who proclaim the gospel bring, this society has an only ever-dimmer hope because its sense of all that human life can be is steadily narrowing.

This proclamation is thus shaped toward the whole person and toward making communities whole. In his essay in *Inviting Community*, Bruce Hartung sees this challenge as part of the value of empathy: "The community functions together in ministries of care and service, in ministries of strengthening each other, for growing into Christ (Eph 4:15), and for working side by side for the betterment of the larger community and, indeed, for the betterment of humankind. Thus, empathic connection moves from rejoicing and growing in the connection itself toward using those connections in service of the brother and sister."³⁰ In this sense, one of the ways any Christian community bears fruit is in how its care for each other overflows into genuine mutual care for the neighbors and strangers in their midst. This makes the faithful Christian congregation the source of hope not only for eternal life of those around us—which it certainly is—but also the source of hope for the temporal welfare of our land. That is as God wants it to be since our nation, and every nation, belongs to him, and he does not like squatters who claim his property as their own.

The faithful Christian life flourishes in the production of fruits of all kinds. It begins through God's re-creative, absolving word that grounds the believer's entire existence in trust in Jesus Christ and his promise of forgiveness, life, and salvation based on his death and resurrection. That trust shapes a character marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That character generates attitudes that seek to search for neighbors in need, finding them in places where even Samaritans are able to bind wounds and bring healing. These attitudes blossom into action, as we follow our Lord's commands, beginning with the hallowing of his name and the proclamation of his rule. We demonstrate what his name and his rule means in reflecting his image of love and compassion. Those actions create rendezvous with him and other people in the highways and byways of life, above all for him and the lost who need to hear of the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6).

Endnotes

¹ WA 32:423, 17–27, LW 21:149–150.

² WA 7:26–38, LW 31:361.

³ Swabian Articles, 6, BSLK 59, cf. *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 85.

⁴ E.g., WA 30, 3:362, 31–35, LW 34:89.

⁵ WA 18:66, 29–67, 2, LW 40:84.

⁶ WA 32:514, 29/517, 2, LW 21:260–262.

⁷ WA 39, 1:46, 28–34, LW 34:111.

⁸ WA 51:22–548, 5, LW 41:238.

⁹ WA 7:434, 14–18/435, 12–17, LW 32:84.

¹⁰ WA 47:XXXX, LW 21:65–66.

¹¹ WA 50:XXXX, LW 41:164.

¹² WA 12:XXXX, LW 45:169–171.

¹³ WA 12:XXXX, LW 45:176–194.

¹⁴ BSLK 513, BC 356–357.

¹⁵ BSLK 673–674, BC 446–447.

¹⁶ E.g., in his “Household Chart” for the holy orders in his Small Catechism that embraced not only the church but also the household and society, BSLK 523–527, BC 365–367. Common current Roman Catholic usage of the term “vocation” or “calling” continues the medieval restriction of the term to “religious” vocations. In Luther’s view, see “Per mutuum colloquium et consolationem fratrum”: Monastische Züge in Luthers ökumenischer Theologie,” in Christoph Bultmann, Volker Leppin, Andreas Lindner (eds.) *Luther und das monastische Erbe* (Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 2007), 243–68, and Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

¹⁷ BSLK 673–674, BC 446–447.

¹⁸ WA 12:267, 3–7, LW 30:11. See also the translation in Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations. Luther Texts on Missions*, trans. Klaus Detlev Schulz and David Thies (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 20.

¹⁹ WA 12:318, 25/319, 6, LW 30:64–65; Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations*, 20.

²⁰ WA 11:411, 31/413, 6, LW 39:309–310; Stolle, *Church Comes from All Nations*, 21–22.

²¹ See David P. Daniel, “Luther on the Church,” *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, eds. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and L’ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 333–352.

²² Sermon on Matthew 9:1–8, 1526, A 10, 1:412–414, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker 5 (1905; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 209. Cf. *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics*, 1526, WA 19:13–15, LW 36:359.

²³ WA 45:540, 14–23, LW 24:87–88.

²⁴ WA 47:297, 36/298, 14.

²⁵ WA 44:712, 33–36/713, 5–8, LW 8:183; cf. WA 44:95, 41–46, LW 6:128.

²⁶ Jakob Andreae, Nikolaus Selnecker, and Cyriacus Spangenberg provide examples of this although some of their contemporaries did not leave behind a record of similar admonitions, see Robert Kolb, “Late Reformation Lutherans on Mission and Confession,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 20 (2006): 26–43, a translation of “Jeder Christ ist in die Pflicht genommen, Zeugnis vom Glauben abzulegen. Die Verkündigung der Lutheraner in der Spätreformation zu Mission und Bekenntnis,” in *Gottes Wort in der Zeit: verstehen – verkündigen – verbreiten. Festschrift für Volker Stolle*, eds. Werner Klän and Christoph Barnbrock (Münster: LIT, 2005), 127–142.

²⁷ WA 50:643, 6–37, LW 41:166–167.

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951). See the suggestion that his description of Luther’s view should be better titled “Christ and culture in two dimensions,” in Robert Kolb, “Niebuhr’s ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’ Revisited,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 259–279.

²⁹ Augsburg Confession V, BSLK 58, BC 40/41.

³⁰ Bruce Hartung, “Empathy and Community: Inviting Community in the Midst of Cultural Diversity,” *Inviting Community*, eds. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 65–66.