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# Luther the *Seelsorger*

George Kraus

*Seelsorger* is a German word that resists our best attempts to offer a one word equivalent in English. For the purpose of this paper the time-honored and well-known Lutheran term “pastor” for the person, and “pastoral care” for the practice of caring for the spiritual needs of Christ’s people will be used. In the Lutheran tradition it is the pastor who practices the art of giving spiritual guidance and care to God’s people. Luther was no mere academician in the field of theology. He was a practitioner of the theology he proclaimed. In his letters, sermons, lectures, table talks, and interpretations of Scripture we quickly discover a genuine *Seelsorger*, a man of God who cared *about* and cared *for* Christ’s redeemed souls. Luther did not live with his head in clouds of mystical theological abstractions. Rather, he was a warm, loving, caring, humorous and sometimes irascible shepherd of the flock—ready, able and willing to handle precious souls with tenderness, feeling, insight and, when needed, sternness.

## I. The Doctrine of Justification

When one approaches Luther’s theology, he must begin with the main article of the Scriptures—justification by faith. Without an understanding of the centrality of this doctrine one never grasps Luther the *Seelsorger*. For Luther the justification of the sinner is not simply the primary doctrine, but the core of all Christian theology. All theological disciplines and practices emerge from this blessed revelation of God.

Righteousness, or the forgiveness of sins, was at the heart of all of Luther’s theology in doctrine and practice. Commenting on Galatians 2:16 Luther applies the comfort of this epistle of justification to the suffering child of God:

Then whatever there is of cross or suffering to be borne later on is easily sustained. For the yoke that Christ lays upon us is sweet, and His burden is light (Matt 11:30). When sin has been forgiven and the conscience has been liberated from the burden and the sting of sin, then a Christian can bear everything easily. Because everything

within is sweet and pleasant, he willingly does and suffers everything. But when a man goes along in his own righteousness, then whatever he does and suffers is painful and tedious for him, because he is doing it unwillingly [*Lectures on Galatians*].<sup>1</sup>

One quickly notes the centrality of justification to pastoral theology. Everything in life—good and bad—points back to the justification wrought by the Son of God on the cross. It is from this point of view that we perceive Luther the *Seelsorger*.

## II. The Assurance of Salvation

The assurance of salvation because of justification forms the bedrock for pastoral ministry in Luther. In the care of souls the pastor must speak with authority, conviction and certainty in regard to one's salvation. To stand with uncertainty under God's wrath or grace places the soul in a desparate, unstable situation. If the Christian doubts forgiveness, how can he be sure of anything from the Creator and Judge? When a person *knows* that God is his loving Father, that his sins are forgiven, that he already has the gift of everlasting life, then proper, comforting pastoral care may follow:

True faith draws the following conclusion: "God is God for me because He speaks to me. He forgives me my sins. He is not angry with me, just as He promises: 'I am the Lord your God.'" Now search your heart, and ask whether you believe that God is your God, Father, Savior, and Deliverer, who wants to rescue you from sins and from death. If you become aware that you are wavering or uncertain, consider how to correct that doubt through constant use of the Word of God. Accordingly, let us strengthen ourselves against the doubts of the papists, and let us learn that for God the only completely pleasing worship and obedience is faith, that is, to believe and trust our God when He swears so solemnly [*Lectures on Genesis*].<sup>2</sup>

The Christian who stands in doubt of his salvation cannot be sure of God's help in time of trial and trouble. If the Christian questions God's most basic and grandest promise—namely the forgiveness of sins—how can he depend upon God for any other promises? Assurance of salvation for Luther was crucial to healthy soul care.

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### III. The Word of God

A correlative to this assurance of salvation is reliance on the Word of God. The *Seelsorger* must speak from the Word of God. He addresses all human need from God's point of view. The *Seelsorger* confronts the suffering soul with the living God, the Christ, via His living, dynamic Word. For Luther, when Scripture speaks, God speaks.

God's Word is effective and powerful. As a *Seelsorger*, Luther plants both feet firmly in the Word (LC, 100):

Therefore you must continually keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. On the other hand, when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart in its meditations.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the use of the Word is evident in Luther's dealing with Christ's people. The use of God's powerful Word is not optional. All contributing disciplines of the *Seelsorger* must remain subsidiary and qualified by the inscripturated word.

### IV. Caring for Souls

This study of Luther the pastor will touch seven areas of soul-care: cross-bearing, fear, feelings, faithfulness, contentment, death, and eternal life. There are more, but these will give adequate examples of Luther's pastoral application of the Word.

#### A. Cross-Bearing

Bearing a cross should come as no surprise to the child of God. Luther clearly understood the immanence of the cross in the Christian's daily life. He knew well the struggles one has to endure in order to remain loyal to Christ. Cross-bearing is not simply suffering (i.e. cancer, emotional distress, etc.). It is carrying the cross of oppression, persecution and even physical abuse *because of* one's commitment to Christ:

When I lie in bed and am sick, or when a person is put to death by fire, water, or the sword because of his misdeeds,

this is not the cross of Christ. But the shame and persecution endured for righteousness' sake is the cross of Christ. This is why true Christians must be dubbed heretics and evildoers. They must be so condemned, despised, and judged by all that everybody wipes his feet on them [Sermon in Erfurt, October 22, 1522].<sup>4</sup>

Luther wants it clearly understood that crossbearing is primarily a suffering because one carries the name of Jesus. This approach to suffering and evil forces the Christian to develop a different perception of his lot in life. Life is not intended to be a bed of ease for Christ's people. To be Christ's is to be ready to bear a cross.

### B. Fear

Fear is part and parcel of our humanity. If prayer is the Christian's daily breath, then fear is natural man's daily breath. Luther was well aware of this:

The poets fancied that souls were terrified by the bark of Cerberus; but real terror arises when the voice of the wrathful God is heard, that is, when it is felt by the conscience. Then God, who previously was nowhere, is everywhere. Then He who earlier appeared to be asleep hears and sees everything; and His wrath burns, rages, and kills like fire [*Lectures on Genesis*].<sup>5</sup>

Here one is reminded that fear is the result of sin, the product of an evil and rebellious heart:

From this let us learn the real art and skill of extricating ourselves from all distress and fear. To do this, we must first of all take note of our sin, forthwith make a clean breast of it, and confess it. That disposes of the most urgent danger and need. For help must first be brought to the heart; this must be lightened and given air to breathe. Then it is easier to aid the whole person. Thus the conscience must first of all be disencumbered and given room to breathe, and then aid can be found for all trouble. Two things are involved when God's anger strikes, sin and fear. Imprudent hearts cope with this situation incorrectly. They let the sin remain and are intent only on ridding themselves of the fear. That will not profit them, and they must despair [*Lectures on Jonah*].<sup>6</sup>

Luther shows the troubled, fearful Christian that dealing with

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fear leads one first to confession and faith. In short, when one discovers he has nothing to fear from Christ, then he is able to deal with the lesser fears of life and death. Commenting on Isaiah 43:5 Luther writes:

*Fear not for I am with you.* Why does He say: *Fear not?* Because there are fears within and terrors without, the church is a tumult and a frightened people, beset by fear, despair, and sins. For that reason it has the Word, which is the breath of its life, so that it may be consoled by the Word. "Why are you afraid? Don't be afraid. I am with you." The opposite appears to be the case: "I am very far away from you." Since the conscience feels that God is very far away from us, it is necessary for Him to say, "I am with you." These are hidden words. It seems that God is against us and with our opponents, because everything is going well for them. However, their end will be a most wretched one, even though their beginning was most favorable [*Lectures on Isaiah*].<sup>7</sup>

Luther is a sensitive and observant *Seelsorger*. He understands how one feels in the vicissitudes of life. When fear clutches at the heart, Luther is one who grasps its psychological and theological meaning. Luther points the Christian to the ultimate resolution of all fear.

Commenting on Romans 5:1 Luther speaks of the peace of Christ that undergirds life and is the Christian's refuge in time of fear:

Thus Christ is called the Prince of Peace and a Solomon. But note how the apostle places this spiritual peace only after righteousness has preceded it. For first he says, "Since we are justified by faith," and then, "We have peace." . . . Here the perversity of men seeks peace before righteousness and for this reason they do not find peace [*Lectures on Romans*].<sup>8</sup>

Luther instructs fearful and anxious people that they must first look to Christ's righteousness and His victory on the cross. Christ lives! Satan is *already* defeated; *ergo* the Christian will despise him. Fear is real; *Luther* no where denies it; yet the Christian is to understand his victory is already assured. He is to resist fear in Christ's power.

### C. Feelings

Our modern culture encourages us to rely on our feelings: "If it feels good, do it!" Feelings take on theological significance in

different ways. The rise of the enthusiasts in Luther's day is one such occurrence. Christians who verify their faith by their feelings about God offer a special problem to themselves, the unbelieving world, and the church.

Luther understood the feeling of despair, the sense of abandonment, that the child of God could experience:

It is no small comfort, however, to know that grace has not been taken away but is truly immovable and unchangeable, although the awareness and experience of grace is taken away for a time, and dread and fear rush in, discouraging and troubling the spirit. Then man becomes impatient, concludes that he cannot bear the wrath of God, and simply makes a devil out of God [*Lectures on Genesis*].<sup>9</sup>

Luther makes a clear distinction between the *feeling* of the loss of grace and the actual loss of grace. Here the believer does not trust his feelings; but trusts the promises of God in His Word.

Dr. Weller, a friend of Luther's, said during a period of trouble and depression: "The devil is a master at taking hold of us where it hurts the most." To this Luther replied:

Yes, he doesn't learn this from us. He is quite agile. If he hasn't exempted the patriarchs, the prophets, and the Prince of the prophets, Christ, he will not spare us. He can make the oddest syllogisms: 'You have sinned. God is angry with sinners. Therefore despair!' Accordingly we must proceed from the law to the gospel and grasp the article concerning the forgiveness of sins. You are not the only one, dear brother, who suffers from such anguish. Peter admonishes us not to be surprised when the same experience of suffering is required of the brotherhood. Moses, David, and Isaiah suffered much and often. What kind of trials do you suppose David was going through when he composed the psalm, "O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger" (Ps 6:1)? He would rather have died by the sword than to have experienced, these *horrible feelings* against God and of God against him. I believe that confessors have to endure more than martyrs, for day after day they see idolatries, offenses, and sins, the prosperity and security of the godless, and on the other hand the anxieties of the godly who are accounted as sheep for the slaughter [*emphasis added*].<sup>10</sup>

Here, Luther is dealing with a depressed friend who is at the bottom of his emotional life. Note Luther's identification with

Weller's failures in this area of his life and the inclusion of the goodly fellowship of the prophets, not to mention the Prince of the prophets. He identifies the culprit as Satan and reminds his friend no one in this life can escape this reality. The Christian is to learn from those who have preceded him and place his absolute confidence in the promises of Christ, not in his feelings:

A Christian lives on in full, assured hope. He eats, drinks, works, does what he has been commanded to do. Yea, I dare say, he also suffers with joy whatever suffering is placed before him. For his ears hang on the voice and Word of his Shepherd, and he schools himself not to judge by what he experiences and feels but by what the voice and the Word says."<sup>11</sup>

#### D. Faithfulness

Can anyone doubt Luther's commitment to faithfulness to the Gospel? Luther writes in his great Reformation hymn: "Take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife; let these all be gone!"<sup>12</sup> Luther does not follow a theology of glory, but faces the fact that in this world the child of Christ may well lose child, wife, and life because of his faith.

Luther's exposition of Abraham's offering of Isaac provides a perfect example of a faithful servant of the Most High:

This account deserves to have each word carefully examined. Abraham rose early in the morning. He did not delay; he did not argue. Nor did he ask, as Adam did in Paradise: "Why does God give this command?" He listened neither to his flesh nor to the serpent. Indeed, he did not make the matter known even to Sarah; but when he heard God's command, he hastened without any hesitation to carry it out.

This is an extraordinary example and a description of *perfect obedience*, when so suddenly and at one and the same time Abraham thrusts out of sight and does away with everything he used to hold dearest in his life; his home, his wife, and his son who had been so long expected and upon whom such grand promises had been heaped [*Lectures on Genesis*, emphasis added].<sup>13</sup>

The act of Abraham in carrying out God's command is an ex-



traordinary act of obedience and faithfulness to God. Under this kind of pressure any child of God would be greatly tempted not to remain faithful. Luther would have God's people realize that the call to be God's servants demands obedience and faithfulness under the most dire circumstances. Luther is compassionate with people, but demanding. Christ was faithful to us, now we are to remain faithful to Him, no matter the cost.

### E. Contentment

The search for contentment is not a modern phenomenon; people in Luther's day, too, were looking for a better life. Luther dealt with the problem of discontented Christians. Commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, Luther writes:

Daily there have to be many troubles and trials in every house, city, and country. No station in life is free of suffering and pain, both from your own, like your wife and children or household help or subjects, and from the outside, from your neighbors and all sorts of accidental trouble. When a person sees and feels all this, he quickly becomes dissatisfied, and he tires of his way of life, or it makes him impatient, irritated, and profane. If he cannot avoid this trouble or get rid of it, he wants to change his station in life, supposing that everyone else's station and condition are better than his own. After changing around for a long time, he discovers that his situation has progressively deteriorated. A change is a fast and easy thing, but an improvement is a rare and doubtful thing [*The Sermon on the Mount*].<sup>14</sup>

Commenting on Ecclesiastes, Luther writes:

Tranquillity is not attainable except from the Word and work of God. . . . What is condemned is human striving and planning, when we ourselves want or try to create happiness without respect to the will of God.<sup>15</sup>

Contentment is found in obedience to God and His Word, even when our reason and earthly perspective tell us God is mistaken.

### F. Death

For Luther death was not the planned natural end of man; rather, it was caused by sin. Luther did not agree with the morbid Christian who would like to make death an enjoyable affair to which the Christian ought hasten:

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I don't like to see examples of joyful death. On the other hand, I like to see those who tremble and shake and grow pale when they face death and *yet go through*. It was so with the great saints; they were not glad to die. Fear is something natural because death is a punishment, and therefore something sad. According to the spirit one dies willingly, but according to the flesh the saying applies, 'Another will carry you where you do not wish to go' (Jn 21:18). In the Psalms and other histories as in Jeremiah, one sees how eager men were to escape death. 'Beware,' Jeremiah said, 'or you will bring innocent blood upon yourselves' (Jer 26:15). But when Christ said, 'Let this cup pass from me' (Mt 26:39), the meaning was different, for this was the Same who said, 'I have life and death in my hand' (Jn 5:21,24). We are the ones who drew the bloody sweat from him.<sup>16</sup>

One can readily sense Luther's close observation of the act of dying. Luther lived in the real world of flesh and blood. His attitude towards death was not flippant. He understood its horror and the comfort of Christ for the soul who must face this evil. What a relief Luther offers to the individual Christian who may feel guilty because he does not feel he should hasten towards death.

Man faces no worse event in life than death. It is the ultimate curse, disgrace, and loss. Luther counseled his people on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ:

Behold, thus Paul teaches us to defy death through faith in Christ as One who is death's powerful foe, who is resolved to do away with death and exterminate it utterly. And death has richly deserved this from Him, because he attacked and assaulted Christ without cause. He attacked Him with the intent of devouring Him. But death met such a warm reception that his jaws and belly were torn apart. Now he must pay and return all whom he devoured. . . . For here you perceive that Christ is a King for the express purpose of destroying death completely as His enemy [*Commentary on I Corinthians*].<sup>17</sup>

The Christian near death or in bereavement is urged to defy death through faith in the Lord; for Jesus has overcome death on our behalf.

## F. Eternal Life

The comfort the Reformer gave to Christians in the face of death is a clear testimony to his conviction that after the grave there is a crown of life for all who have loved Christ:

For, after all, that is the goal of our faith in Christ, of Baptism, of sermon, and of Sacrament, that we hope for a new life, that we come to Christ, that we rule eternally with Him, delivered from sin, devil, death, and every evil.... For what would it amount to if we had received nothing better from Him than this wretched life and if we relied on Him in vain and suffered all that devil and world can inflict on us, and if He proved a liar with His great promises to us? As St. Paul himself says later: "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied" [*Commentary on I Corinthians*].<sup>18</sup>

Eternal life is our present possession and heaven our final goal. Luther stresses this glorious truth to his parishioners. The resurrection is a key doctrine in the Christian faith; without it there is no Christian faith and no content to the message of the *Seelsorger*:

So you see that it is all-important that this article be firmly maintained among us; for if it begins to totter or is no longer regarded as valid, all the other articles will also be useless and invalid, because all that Christ did in coming to earth and establishing His kingdom in the world was done for the sake of the resurrection and the future life. Where this article, which forms the foundation, the reason, and the aim of all other articles of faith, is overthrown or removed, everything else will also topple and disappear with it. Therefore it is indeed necessary to foster and to fortify this article with diligence [*Commentary on I Corinthians*].<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Luther the *Seelsorger*—pastor, curate, and shepherd of souls—based all his practice of pastoral care on the Word of God. Luther gave direct, Biblical answers to the troublesome questions that plagued his people. He did not simply reflect on the misfortunes he encountered nor practice present-day

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non-directive counselling techniques. He brought God's Word to bear on the issues that faced God's people. This is not a condemnation of the accomplishments of modern psychology, but it does remind the *Seelsorger* where his realm of expertise lies. Theology shapes his practice of psychology and counselling, not *vice versa*. His entire ministry is based upon, formed by, and given content by the Word of God.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *Luther's Works* (American Edition [LW]; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955- ), 26:133.
2. LW 4:149.
3. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 379.
4. St. Louis Edition, 10:1774.
5. LW 2:22.
6. LW 19:63.
7. LW 17:89.
8. LW 25:285.
9. LW 3:8.
10. LW 54:275.
11. Weimar Ausgabe, 52:281.
12. *The Lutheran Hymnal* ( St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), hymn 262, verse 4.
13. LW 4:102-103.
14. LW 21:95.
15. LW 15:29-30.
16. LW 54:65.
17. LW 28:134.
18. LW 28:60.
19. LW 28:150.