

Divinizing the Community: Implications for Luther's Social Ethics from the Finnish School of Luther Interpretation

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Luther's approach to social ethics is not always popular, particularly because it can be read as a defense of the status quo of what can often be understood as sinful social orders. While this reading of Luther has been critiqued, especially throughout the twentieth century, Lutheran theology sometimes remains hesitant to provide a theological warrant for systemic social reformation. This essay sketches just such a warrant, drawing primarily from the insights of the Finnish school of Luther interpretation. Centered as this school is on justification as union with Christ in faith, this essay aims to translate that point into communal application, arguing that the faith of the believing community implies communal unification with Christ and, if that, then also communal participation in the divine life and love. This opens the door for Christ to be the agent of good works by the believing community, which includes communal action for social justice and transformation.

The "new" Finnish interpretation of Luther

The new Finnish interpretation of Luther (also called the Finnish school, or the Mannermaa school, after its founder) has its basis in the insight that Luther's view of justification contains striking similarities to the Orthodox concept of *theosis*. The Finnish Lutheran Church, in conversation with the Russian Orthodox, discovered in Luther's writings an approach to justification and faith that emphasizes unification with Christ, a departure from most scholarship in line with the German Lutheran theological tradition. The Finnish emphasis on Christ's justifying presence in faith as central to Luther's soteriological vision provides fertile theological ground, from which grow implications beyond soteriology itself.¹ This article gleans three main points connected to

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that central emphasis.

First, justification as unification with Christ in faith emphasizes Christ as God's gift and favor. Mannermaa explains that for Luther, Christ as God's gift and favor denotes the real presence of Christ and God's forgiveness.² In being justified by faith, the believer is united with Christ not as with a force or judge that remains external to the believer, but instead as the divine life made really present within the believer. Further, Christ's real presence united to the believer brings with it God's favor; that is, the merciful attitude God has toward the believer that allows her to encounter "not a hostile God, but a merciful and favorable God."³ Both God's gift and favor are aspects of what it means to be united with Christ in faith, namely that the life of the believer is no longer only the believer's. Rather, it is a participation in the divine life, made present through Christ.

Second, Luther's view of Christ present in faith connects justification immediately to sanctification. Mannermaa explains that justification and sanctification are not nearly as separate in Luther's thought as interpreters of Luther would later maintain.⁴ They are two parts of the same process: justification as the unification with Christ in faith, and sanctification as the believer's life moving forward from that event, in which Christ is now the

likewise drawn implications for preaching.

2. Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 57.

3. Simo Puera, "Christ as Favor and Gift (*donum*): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 44.

4. Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 49.

1. For example, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Drinking from the Same Wells with Orthodox and Catholics: Insights from the Finnish Interpretation of Luther's Theology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 (April 2007): 85–96, draws a number of insights from the theological themes of the Finnish school. Richard A. Jensen, "Theosis and Preaching: Implications for Preaching in the Finnish School Research," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31 (December 2004): 432–437, has

source and agent of the believer's good works.⁵ The distinction between justification and sanctification is secondary to the more fundamental fact of salvation: the believer's unification with Christ and incorporation into the divine life.

Third, being united with Christ includes being united in Christ's love with other believers, that is, unification with each other as participants in Christ's love and life.⁶ This goes beyond just a feeling of togetherness as a community of faith; it includes a real sharing in the trials of one's neighbor, whether Christian or not. In Antti Raunio's words, "uniting love becomes concrete in participating in the suffering and need of others," and "the Christian community is not only a spiritual and inner unity, but also realizes itself in working for all who suffer in this world."⁷ Unification with Christ spills over as unification with one's neighbor, if not in exactly the same way as with Christ, then at least as brothers and sisters whom Christ (now active in the believer) loves. Christ present in faith means that Christ is present to the world in and through the believer, uniting the believer to his neighbors in the activity of living out Christ's divine love.

One ought to note that the Finnish school is not without its critics. However, the historical and theological merits of the Finnish school have been debated elsewhere.⁸ While there appears little consensus regarding its validity, the Finnish school's insights have nevertheless proven helpful both in ecumenical and intra-Lutheran contexts.⁹ In the present discussion I appropriate the Finnish school as a hermeneutic, allowing it to frame a discussion of Lutheran communal/social ethics. While the Finnish school does not provide the only legitimate way of interpreting Luther, such a claim is not necessary for reaping theological benefits from the Finnish school. Rather, the Finnish school provides a fresh lens through which to read Luther's social ethics, one that brings into clearer focus an often fuzzy area of Lutheran theology: communal action for social justice and transformation.

Divinizing the community: Communal unity with Christ

Hearing Christ's word preached and celebrating the sacraments—both activities done in the context of the believing

5. Ibid., 49–50.

6. Antti Raunio, "Natural Law and Faith: The Forgotten Foundations of Ethics in Luther's Theology," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 113–120.

7. Ibid., 116, 119.

8. For example, see the critique by Carl R. Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther offered by the Helsinki Circle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 231–244. For a reply, see Robert W. Jenson, "Response to Mark Seifrid, Paul Metzger, and Carl Trueman on Finnish Luther Research," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 245–250.

9. Beyond the insights of Kärkkäinen and Jenson cited above and the inception of conversation between the Finnish school and the Orthodox, Roman Catholic theologians have also begun to engage with the Finnish school. See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2013), 165–203.

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community—are for Luther primary places where the believer encounters and is united with Christ. The main question becomes: if Christ is present in the faith of the believer, that is, if the believer is united with Christ through justification and sanctification in a process analogous to *theosis*, can we not also speak of Christ present in the faith of the community? Would it be too much to claim that the believing community is brought into the divine life in a way similar to the single believer? If this is possible, then the door is open for conceiving of Christ acting in the community as an agent of communal good works in much the same way as Christ is active in the believer as an agent of individual good works. A number of implications follow from this, but first one needs to test the foundational assumption. On the basis of the Finnish school's insights, can we legitimately speak of Christ present as an ethical agent in the faith of the community as we can in the case of the single believer's faith?

One major problem with this leap involves the terms justification and sanctification. These terms were used by Luther primarily for speaking about the single human person, not about the community of the saved. The believer is justified by faith and the church might be thought of as the community of believers, but God does not justify the community *as* the community. The act of faith (itself a gift from God)¹⁰ unites a person with Christ. However, the community is the location of that unification; it is not the primary recipient of justification. This is certainly a hurdle for speaking of unification with Christ as a call to communal action for social justice and transformation, but not an insurmountable one.

First, one cannot overstate the importance of the Finnish school's explanation of justification and sanctification as union with Christ in faith. Such an emphasis moves the soteriological conversation from "being" justified or "being" sanctified to *living* in faith united with Christ. Christ present in faith is the center, and justification and sanctification are words describing what has happened in that center. This is significant, because for Luther a kind of communal faith is at least conceivable. Infants brought to baptism, for example, depend upon the faith of those who present them in order to be unified with Christ. They share in the faith of those who bring them for baptism, because "it is not baptism that justifies or benefits anyone, but it is the faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added."¹¹ For infants brought to baptism, shared faith—unification with Christ alongside and because of the faith of others—is a Christian reality.

10. Martin Luther, "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *LW* 36: 47–62.

11. Ibid., 58–59, 66, 73.

Second, union with Christ in faith includes with it union with others in Christ's love. Without jumbling the terms faith and love, we can nevertheless note that for Luther, Word and sacrament bind believers together. Through preaching the entire community hears the good news, and through Holy Communion each believer participates bodily in the divine life.¹² Such participation, enacted definitively in baptism and repeatedly at the Eucharistic table, unites Christians both with Christ and each other. In being united with Christ, their faith—the faith of Christ now active in them—is the same faith, shared throughout the community.

Another significant issue in translating union with Christ in faith from the personal to the communal is the issue of glorifying the community. Since the Finnish school has been critiqued for ontologizing union with Christ in the faith of the believer,¹³ how much more suspect might it be to ontologize union with Christ in the faith of the community? Would speaking of divinizing the community not move in a clearly anti-Lutheran direction, setting up the community as a necessary intermediary between the believer and Christ?¹⁴ Would it not be a problem to see in the community the kind of unification with Christ that Luther did not think was possible for human social orders, at least on this side of the eschaton? Is this not the problem Lutheran social ethics has often faced, namely running up against what George W. Forell called “the limiting principle of Luther's social ethics,” that is, Luther's conviction that God alone has the solution for human society's problems, so that Christians ought not expect drastic reformation of temporal society?¹⁵

While this issue provides a check against overstating that anything Luther said about the person could also be said about the community, there are two reasons it need not impede the present discussion. First, as Robert Jenson has pointed out, neither the Orthodox notion of *theosis* nor the Finnish school actually claim that unification with Christ includes a transformation of essences (human into the divine, or *vice versa*).¹⁶ Becoming united with Christ in faith does not make humans gods. Speaking of divinization rather means humans being brought into participation

12. This juxtaposition—preaching for the community, and sacraments for the particular believer—can be found in Luther himself. See Martin Luther, “Against the Fanatics,” in *LW* 36: 348.

13. Trueman, 239.

14. Whereas the Finnish school argues that its view of justification can be found directly in Luther, essentially working to preempt later Lutheran theological developments, Luther does not speak plainly of union with Christ as communal. However, I am not convinced that he needs to do so, in order for contemporary Lutherans to take this theological step. As long as it does not contradict Luther's insights, might it not be worthwhile to embrace the action of Christ in and through communities of faith, thereby better embodying the love of God that we have come to know in union with Christ? I would maintain that it certainly is. Christ active in and through the believer need not be exclusive of Christ active in and through the believing community.

15. George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954), 157, 182.

16. Robert Jenson, 246.

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in the divine life.¹⁷ On the level of community, this would mean embodying the divine life *as a community*—something the practice of Holy Communion already anticipates. As a community, being united with Christ through the celebration of Holy Communion and the preaching of the Word needs to include what that process already entails on an individual level, allowing Christ to act as an agent for good works within the community and the community becoming Christ to the world.

Second, if one attempts to speak of union with Christ on a communal level, then one also needs to include Luther's own safeguard against thinking that one is suddenly perfect after being united with Christ as an individual, his notion of *simul iustus et peccator*. If the community is united with Christ in faith, it need not follow that the community is *eo ipso* free of sinful tendencies, any more than a justified believer is incapable of future sinning. The old human remains, struggling against the love of Christ with which she is now united, and there is little reason to think a community of humans united with Christ in faith would fare any differently. Union with Christ does not destroy the old human and replace her with Christ. Union with Christ justifies the human and begins the life of sanctification. Likewise with a believing community, union with Christ means living united with Christ, simultaneously including old sinfulness.

Implications: Where does this leave us?

If the presence of Christ in faith can be thought of as also the presence of Christ in the faith of a believing community, then Christ becomes the agent of good works within that community and in its relationships with other communities. Put another way, the main implication of translating the Finnish school's insight into communal application is that the complex life of sanctification becomes the life of a community *as a community*, rather than only in the lives of the community's individual members. On its own this insight is hardly groundbreaking, but as applied to social ethics, it can shift a Lutheran approach to include, together with the importance of the believer's love of neighbor, the believing community's love of neighbors *as neighboring communities*. Such an approach could recognize and act on the need for communal action toward systemic social reform.¹⁸

17. *Ibid.*, 246–247.

18. This is not to claim that Lutheran communities do not already work to better the societies of which they are a part. What I am aiming for is an additional Lutheran theological warrant for doing so on a systemic, communal level.

To be fair, both Luther and the Lutheran theological tradition have tended to shy away from wholeheartedly embracing concrete social reformation. While there may be a number of reasons for this, three reasons deserve our attention here, insofar as their character shifts when the concept of Christ present in faith includes communal application.

First, there is the issue of Forell's "limiting principle of Luther's social ethics."¹⁹ For Luther, Christians cannot expect complete transformation of social orders into eschatological paradise before the eschaton. Luther is certainly correct in this. However, acknowledging this fact only limits *effects* of communal action for social justice and transformation, not the animating principle in doing so (namely participation in Christ's life and love). Seen as communal, Christ present in faith does for the Christian community what individual justification does for the believer: it unites a sinful human community with the divine life and makes Christ the agent of good works within it. Good works on the part of a community for other communities need not assume a realized eschatology, in order to be an essential embodiment of Christ's justifying presence in faith.

Second, Luther tends to be skeptical of concrete, systemic social reformation due to his insistence that certain social orders are legitimate parts of God's design for the world. This insistence includes a suspicion that the attempt to reform social orders to better reflect the love of God actually turns the Gospel into law. Without delving too deeply into Luther's two kingdoms concept, it is safe to maintain that minimizing systemic sin and oppression is good, and that there are ways of acting as a community toward that end. However, if communities work to transform their environment closer and closer to embodying Christ's life and love, does that not in itself reduce Christ's life and love to law? If good works done united to Christ in faith are the result of freedom *from* the law and *for* love of neighbor, how can communal work for systemic social change not corrupt the Gospel with legalism? Again, one could address this concern by maintaining that systemic social reformation need not connote law any more than personal reformation must do so. If Christ is active in and united with the community, then it is Christ—not the law—that moves the community to reform. Working for communal social justice and transformation is not the same as forcing Christian ethics on non-Christian communities. Union with Christ for the Finnish school means making the sufferings and trials of one's neighbor one's own.²⁰ Extrapolated to communal application, this means taking on the trials of oppressed communities and groups as part of the believing community's life. Communally participating in Christ's love then means working to end that oppression on a

communal level, just as the person Jesus alleviated the suffering of other individuals.

This last point—working to alleviate suffering and oppression—leads to a third reason why Luther is skeptical of communal social action: the danger of social reformation turning into violence and rebellion. It is no secret that Luther despised violent revolution (for example, his response to the Peasants' War²¹), but this does not preclude a Lutheran embrace of systemic social reform. One of the many differences between Luther's context and the contemporary one is that effective social movements can indeed be nonviolent. This is not to suggest that nonviolence is an invention that came after Luther. Certainly, there have been Christians calling for nonviolent social change since early in the tradition.²² There are reasons, however, that histories of nonviolence tend to take their historical examples nearly exclusively from the most recent centuries.²³ Moreover, if the agent of communal work for social reformation is Christ, as would be the case in communities of faith, then engaging in violence to effect social change would contradict the very animating principle of that social change. The life of God is nonviolent, so the believing community's participation in the life of God must also be nonviolent. The believing community, united with Christ in life and love, must act out that life and love communally just as the believer participates in Christ's life and love individually. If union with Christ can be conceived of communally, then so can work for social justice.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Finnish school's emphasis on justification and sanctification as union with Christ can be translated into communal application, particularly application to the communal work for social justice and reformation. I have maintained that Luther has at least a nascent idea of faith as communal. Because this is the case, the door is opened for the concept of communal unification with Christ, which makes possible the translation of individual participation in the divine life and love by the believer into communal participation in that life and love by the believing community. Such participation makes Christ the agent of good works on a communal level, providing a theological warrant for systemic social reformation, something Lutheran theology has traditionally been hesitant about. This article draws implications from the Finnish school that allow Luther's theology to be applicable to a contemporary theological challenge. If Christ present in faith animates the believer in doing good works, then Christ present in the faith of the community animates that community for work toward social justice and reform.

19. Forell, 182.

20. Raunio, 116–118.

21. For example, Martin Luther, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," *LW* 46: 49–56.

22. See Michael G. Long, ed., *Christian Peace and Nonviolence: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011).

23. See Stephen Zunes and Sarah Beth Asher, eds., *Nonviolent Social Movements: A Geographical Perspective* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1999); and Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent Revolutions: Civil Resistance in the late 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University, 2011).