
9.5 Theses on Earth Stewardship: Lutheran Roots for a New Reformation

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The current ecological crisis and the challenges of addressing climate change call for reformation, within both church and society. In the spirit of the Reformer's public posting on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, I offer these reflections on "Earth Stewardship: Lutheran Roots for A New Reformation" in the form of *9.5 Theses*.¹ In keeping with his original theses, written for academic discourse, most of these incorporate Latin phrases.

#1

Martin Luther understood God's relationship with the world as that of *creatio continua*—"continuing creation." In the *Small Catechism*, his explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed begins by saying, "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties."² Rather than simply saying God exists, this statement brings creation to a personal level. God has created me together with all that exists; I am part of God's creation, connected to all of it. And unlike deists who with the advent of modern science felt the need to push God's activity to the margins—like a clockmaker who wound up the world, set it in motion, and stepped away—Luther and his legacy see *God actively involved* with the world, continuing to create, preserve, provide. Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner describes our role as "*created co-creators*,"³ part of God's creation (as creatures) but also participants with God in the creative process whose original purpose in the garden was to till and keep it (Gen 2:15). But it is a role that carries with it negative as well as positive connotations, as can be seen with the current pronouncement by

1. This paper was first presented on November 3, 2016, in Duluth, Minnesota, at "Luther's Legacy: 500 Years," an event hosted by the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Part of the inspiration for the succinct format came from the ten-point addendum, "Why Lutherans Care for All Creation," in David Rhoads, "Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation," *Seminary Ridge Review* 15, no. 1 (2012): 48–49.

2. Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354.

3. Philip J. Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion, Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

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scientists that we now live in the *anthropocene*. That is, we have entered a new geological epoch where human beings have become a geological force, not only impacting climate but also the earth itself, the chemistry of the oceans and the air—which brings us to the next thesis.

#2

For Luther, Christians are *simul justus et peccator*—"simultaneously saint and sinner." We are a paradox: on the one hand justified by grace through faith, but on the other *captive to sin*. And sin, for Luther, is best described as *cor curvatum in se*, "the heart *turned in* on itself," not only away from God and God's intentions but also away from one's neighbor and the concerns of the world. It is being self-absorbed as if I am all that matters. The concept of sin is both personal/individual and also corporate/social for Luther, and today Lutheran theologians such as Larry Rasmussen talk about "species sin" as a factor in the ecological crisis—the idea of *anthropocentrism*, that all of creation exists for humanity, and other creatures are seen merely as objects and resources for our use, our progress—and we have forgotten our role as stewards, created co-creators.⁴ *Repentance*, therefore, is needed today at all these levels: another turning, *outward* from self toward the other, a process enabled by God's grace.

#3

Luther had a robust understanding of *vocatio*—"vocation": namely, that we are called by God in our work, whatever that work might be. A person didn't need to be a monk or a nun to serve God, but in daily life and in ordinary work God is glorified. Famously, for Luther, this included changing a baby's diapers, but it could also apply to work that farmers, educators, and scientists do

4. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 92–93.

Luther's... understanding of vocation embraces the idea of using all our God-given capacities and knowledge to serve God's purposes, which includes addressing current ecological challenges.

today. Our bishop likes to say the Lutheran church was born out of both the church and the university, and Luther's commitment to public education for both girls and boys and his understanding of vocation embrace the idea of using all our God-given capacities and knowledge to serve God's purposes, which includes addressing current ecological challenges.⁵ *Advocacy*, also rooted in *vocatio*, cries out for justice on behalf of those underrepresented in decision-making, including those living in poverty, future generations, and the rest of the creation.

#4

For Luther, *finitum capax infinitum*—"the finite is capable of bearing the infinite." Lutheran sacramental theology traditionally emphasizes Christ's presence *in, with, and under* the elements, the finite bread and wine are capable of bearing the body and blood of Christ, when accompanied with the word of God. This is how Lutherans articulate Christ's real presence in Holy Communion. But Luther goes further to say Christ's presence in the Eucharist actually testifies to God's presence in the *whole creation*. It is worth reading Luther at length on this point:

God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all, but without His being encompassed and surrounded by it. He is at the same time outside and above all creatures. These are all exceedingly incomprehensible matters; yet they are articles of our faith and are attested clearly and mightily in Holy Scripture. ... For how can reason tolerate it that the Divine Majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, through a grain, within and without, and that, although it is a single Majesty, it nevertheless is entirely in each grain separately, no matter how immeasurably numerous these grains may be? ... And that the same Majesty is so large that neither this world nor a thousand worlds can encompass it and say: "Behold, there it is!" ... His own divine essence can be in all creatures collectively and in each one individually more profoundly, more intimately, more present than the creature is in itself, yet it can be encompassed nowhere and by no one. It encompasses all things and dwells in

5. See Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological and Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

all, but not one thing encompasses it and dwells in it.⁶

Here is a tremendous theological asset for our reflections on faith and earthkeeping: the conviction that God is dwelling *in, with, and under all creation*. It helps recapture a *sacramental* understanding of the natural world in stark contrast to the modern industrial one.

#5

As the above quote also illustrates, God is both revealed and concealed in creation, both present and hidden, behind what Luther called the *larva Dei*—"masks of God." The idea is one of humility before God, that God can't be pinpointed or boxed in by the cosmos or encompassed by any one thing, yet God *hides* himself in the stuff of the earth, in ordinary, everyday life. Here are a few more examples from *Luther's Works*:⁷

- The power of God ... must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf. (*LW* 37:57)
- Therefore, indeed, he must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power. (*LW* 37:58)
- God is entirely present, personally and essentially, in Christ on earth ... in the wilderness ... in the garden, in the field ... (*LW* 37:61)
- [God] wants to be praised for nourishing and cherishing, for He cherishes all creatures. He is not only the Creator, but He is also the Sustainer and Nourisher. (*LW* 5:197)
- God is in all creatures ... in even the smallest flowers! (*LW* 54:327)

Sometimes we may look for God thinking we know where to find him, and at other times God is hiding where we least expect God to be—which brings us to the next thesis.

God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all.

6. Luther, *Daß diese Wort Christi "Das ist mein Leib" noch fest stehen, wider die Schwermgeister* (1527), in WA 23:134.34—23:136.36. English citation in H. Paul Santmire, *Before Nature: A Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 140. Cf. *LW* 37:59–60.

7. Martin Luther et al., *Luther's Works*, American ed., 55 vols. (Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1955).

The cross is the culmination of the movement of the Creator toward all creation... whose capacity for compassion (suffering-with) expands beyond anthropocentric concerns to include the most vulnerable in nature.

#6

In the *theologia cruces*—“theology of the cross”—Luther articulated God’s presence and work especially through the crucified, the godforsaken one on the cross, and thereby *God’s solidarity* in Christ with all who suffer. So God is not only present in sunsets and the miracle of birth, but also in the “groaning of creation” (Rom 8:22). The theology of the cross prevents us from adopting a romantic view of nature and forces us to face the reality of our human-centered, earth-diminishing ways of life. The cross is the culmination of the movement of the Creator toward all creation, a movement that calls also for an *ecclesia cruces*—“a church of the cross”—whose capacity for compassion (suffering-with) expands beyond anthropocentric concerns to include the most vulnerable in nature. As Larry Rasmussen explains,

The moral assumption here is that the farther one is removed from that suffering present in creation, the farther one is from its central moral reality (such distance belongs to theologies of glory). And the closer one is to the suffering of creation, the more difficult it is to refuse participation in that afflicted life, humankind’s or other-kind’s (such intimacy is cross theology).⁸

Here is a helpful insight for the church: freed in Christ to serve the neighbor, we follow Christ into solidarity with the suffering world in order there to participate in its healing.

#7

Throughout his life, Luther sang in worship of the *Salvator mundi*—“Savior of the world.” We think of his time in the Augustinian monastery, and rhythms of prayer life and the church year. At Christmas, celebrating the birth of Christ, the assembly’s response was, “Thou perennial hope of all, thou art come the salvation of the world,” and on Good Friday, “Behold the wood of the cross on which was hung the salvation of the world. Come let us adore”—responses that continue in worship today. As the linchpin between *creation* and *new creation*, Jesus embodies the

redemption he effects for all creation, not only through his resurrection from the dead but also through his incarnate life as fully human—a *mammal* who depended on air, water, soil, climate, sunshine¹⁰—and through his solidarity with the most vulnerable in his ministry, crucifixion, and death. Lutheran scholar David Rhoads puts it this way:

Creation is not a stage or a backdrop on which human redemption is carried out. We have screened creation out of much of our reading of the Bible, where the natural order is an integral part of that which God is seeking to redeem and bring to fulfillment.¹¹

God is not just concerned with human souls, but with the whole creation. And while Luther’s concept of the *Savior of the world* might not have been directly emphasizing this broad redemptive scope, its essence is used in Lutheran prayers today. For example:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts. With them we offer ourselves to your service and dedicate our lives to the *care and redemption of all that you have made*, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.¹²

#8

The Lutheran legacy is one of *semper reformanda*—“always reforming.” Just as Martin Luther was moved by the promise of salvation by grace alone through faith alone to effect significant reforms in and through the sixteenth century church, so also leaders moved by the promise of redemption for all creation are called to work toward significant ecological reform in and through the church today. As Larry Rasmussen observes, the same liberating gospel that challenged “ecclesial systems of bondage” in Luther’s day and offered “creative reform that resisted the corruption of the church” is at work today with a different purpose: “to rally the powers of faith for the long, hard transition from the unsustainable way of life of industrial-technological civilization to a durable future in ecological-technological civilization.”¹³

The widespread and systemic problems of the ecological crisis call for comprehensive transformations—not only in society but also in the church, especially if it is to provide leadership in addressing them. David Rhoads describes worshipping in relationship *with* creation, preaching God’s word for all creation, broadening our social justice concerns to include endangered species and vulnerable ecosystems, and creating communities that are alternatives to

10. Rhoads, “Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation,” 27.

11. *Ibid.*, 8.

12. Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 88. Emphasis added.

13. Larry L. Rasmussen, “Lutheran Sacramental Imagination,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*: par. 17, <http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/42> (accessed December 31, 2014).

8. Larry L. Rasmussen, “Waiting for the Lutherans,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 2 (2010): 94–95.

9. Heinrich Denifle and Raymund Volz, *Luther and Lutherdom, from Original Sources* (Somerset, O.: Torch Press, 1917), 445–446.

consumption and exploitation. Yet he recognizes that the necessary global changes are inextricably linked to personal transformation: “In this new reformation, we need to reform *ourselves*.”¹⁴

———— #9 ————

Some Lutheran scholars today believe the issue of ecological justice has *status confessionis*—“confessional status.” Here it is vital to become familiar with voices lifting up eco-justice from other parts of the globe, particularly the global South, who are most affected by climate change and see the church’s moral responsibility responding to it as becoming a matter of *status confessionis*, a term that elevates an issue to the center of what it means to confess and practice the faith with integrity.¹⁵ As with the Confessing Church in opposition to the Third Reich in Nazi Germany and the response of churches to the injustices of Apartheid in South Africa, the threat of economic injustice and cultural displacement brought about by globalization and climate change is becoming integral to the public witness of the church for the well-being of humanity and creation. As the effects of climate change continue and magnify humanitarian crises as well as ecological ones, will the level of the church’s emphasis on earth stewardship relate to how the faithfulness and relevance of its ministry is perceived?

———— #9.5 ————

When Luther was asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, he is said to have responded, “I would plant an apple tree today.” I make this my *half thesis* because this quotation cannot be found in Luther’s works. Still, it is attributed to him for good reason because he was a man of hope—hope in God’s future. Luther’s was not an escapist theology, but one that was seeking God’s will for *this* world, God’s fulfillment for this world.

Here, finally, we see Lutheran roots for a new reformation: a posture of sober self-examination and recognizing the urgency of the crisis, in faithful dialectic with compassionate energy, long-term vision, and resurrection hope. Faith communities who are willing not only to roll up their sleeves and plant trees, but also who know and are inspired by the God who meets them in the rhythms of death and renewal in their liturgical life and in creation itself, have an important role in this new reformation.

14. Rhoads, “Reflections on a Lutheran Theology of Creation: Foundations for a New Reformation,” 7.

15. E.g., Guillermo Hansen, “Neoliberal Globalization: A Casus Confessionis?,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*, <http://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/698> (accessed December 28, 2015).

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