

## Differences between Lutheran Teachings and Classical Reformed Theology

The last selection in the book "Knowing God" (by J. I. Packer) on sonship dealing with assurance makes me want to enter into a somewhat lengthy response. This is one section of the book that I respect, but differ with. Understanding this difference will help understand the main difference between Reformed theology (which most American Protestant churches follow in various forms) and my own Lutheran views.

To me, the basic truth to build theology is the doctrine of justification by faith. The fact that I will stand before God one day to give an account of my life would be terrifying if Christ had not promised that His life would take the place of mine. When I look at my own life, I don't see the holiness, the unselfishness, the zeal for God, and the peace when facing difficult situations that should be there. I know I am going to face judgment and I know I am not just. God has declared that I am just, but I don't feel justified. That is why justification is by faith. We don't awake and say, "I feel justified today". Justification is not by feeling. It is by faith. It is just declared to us and we believe it. Justification is not something we experience here on earth. All the indicators in our life indicate we are falling woefully short.

From the day of the fall, God has indicated that a way has been provided to take care of our sins and restore us to Him. When a person in the nation of Israel saw the sacrifices taking place, he felt his sin against God and his fellow man was taken care of and he was clean again. There were many rules and regulations to regulate the culture of Israel as well as laws regarding a person's relationships to God and his fellow man. When these were broken, the sacrifices provided the forgiveness pointing to the full revelation of the gospel in Christ. Here we see the method of dealing with sin: law and gospel. The word gospel is probably not ideal, since the words like gospel and grace have wider meanings. Gospel is sometimes used to represent the entire Christian message. Law and justification indicate too narrow of an idea. So I will stick with the classic "law and gospel".

In the new testament, we see that the regulations of Israel were dismissed for Christians, but the revelation of what is expected in regard to our relationships with God, other people and the commission to spread the gospel are made sharply clearer. However, even though the form has changed, the point is that this is still law. We will still not perfectly fulfill it (or if we really want to face reality, get anywhere close). However, the new testament makes perfectly clear: Christ has died for our sins and we will stand before God justified. While the division of law and gospel seems simple on the surface, it is not as easy to do as it appears. Luther said, whoever is able to rightly discern the difference between law and gospel, give him the title of Doctor of Theology. For instance, a verse like psalm 103:12 "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." and Ephesians 2:8,9 "for by grace you have saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast." are clearly gospel verses. However, if the reaction to the second verse is "I have been boasting, so I am guilty of sin", the reaction is one of law. The verses of John 14:21 "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me shall be loved by my father, and I will love him, and will disclose myself to him." and I Peter 3:15 "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." are easily identified as law.

However, if the reaction to the John 14:21 is to focus on the love of Christ and to be reminded of the sacrifice he made, then it is possible to see this as gospel. Years ago, in Canada, there were two evangelists who traveled together. One would preach the law and the other would preach the gospel and they had a great impact on those to whom they preached. Many Lutheran preachers will also make sure they incorporate both into each sermon (not 50/50, because it isn't found in those proportions in the old and new testament either; the Bible is mostly law by volume, but the gospel message is accorded the most importance.)

In dealing with people on an individual basis, the person sharing the message of God needs to be sensitive to which of these to speak on. If the person is ignorant of or hostile to the message of God, the person needs to hear law, explaining the reality of God, that God will hold them accountable one day, and that their only way of salvation is Christ. If the person is accepting of these truths, but fearful of judgment, he needs to hear the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. To reverse these messages will not achieve the goal of drawing him to salvation.

Even experienced Christians need to hear and trust the gospel message. "The just shall live by faith". That is why God put the message of the forgiveness throughout His word. That is why two sacraments were instituted to make the word of forgiveness in an individual and physical way, even though they must be believed to be effective.

This truth of justification is the starting point of my theology, the one I protect the most fiercely, and the one that other doctrines must conform to. John Calvin's reformed theology is based on the doctrine of election as the basic starting point. I will give a brief description of this theology: God has from eternity known who will exist and has elected them to salvation not based on anything that they would do. Christ came to die for the sins of the elect only, and not the sins of the whole world. Since salvation is wholly of God, there can be no pride whatsoever in our Christianity, since the whole thing is a work of God, working through circumstances to draw us to him, to change our will which is in rebellion against God to a will that accepts His provision for salvation. Since God alone does this work, He will not call someone to salvation and then let him or her fall to damnation after having experienced salvation. That would be cruel. How do we know we have experienced salvation? It is evident to the Christian by the inner witness of the spirit or by seeing some act of God in sanctification in his life, because God does not act to sanctify the unbeliever. For many the key act of sanctification is their conversion, where many had a radically changed life to point to the power of God. This change had to be worked out by God because it was so significant and so they feel confident that they are right with God. Whenever they sin, they can look back for assurance to their conversion as a sign. Conversion basically becomes what we would call a sacrament to them. To them the concept of adoption as sons is central to their understanding of Christianity. To others, they see the past as a poor sign of the acceptance by God. What if you grew up in a Christian home and when you consciously accepted Christ did not involve a radical outward life change? What if your memory was incorrect? To them, assurance is achieved by an ongoing experience of the power of God, displayed in obvious miracles.

I think the impact of this theology on American Protestantism is obvious. The Puritans were Calvinists and this is not widely held view in American evangelicalism today. Many or most may disagree with Calvin on some points, but most basically adhere to the bulk of this theology. One noted historian, when asked to name the person who was most responsible for the United States

coming to be said it was obviously John Calvin. On an intellectual level, I admire reformed theology. It is brilliantly logical, follows many of the truths set down in scripture, and seeks to give all the glory to God. However, I do not think it fits with scripture. It uses the wrong starting point. The Bible in 2 Corinthians 5:19 and other passages states that Christ died for the sins of the whole world, even though I don't understand why some will be judged someday for their sins (in spite of theological explanations), but the Bible plainly states they will. The reformed doctrine of assurance seems to have great difficulty dealing with the dire warnings about apostasy found in the new testament and especially in Hebrews. In the past we attended an church which basically followed reformed theology. The pastor preached through Hebrews. He was an excellent preacher, and could not overlook the obvious conclusions of parts of Hebrews in one of his sermons. However, by the next Sunday, some of his parishioners who strongly believed in eternal security evidently had some meetings with him to set him straight. However, I think the reformed doctrine of assurance is very close to being accurate in practice. Many people who forget about God only experienced a superficial salvation. But even those who are sincere can have difficulty with this theology. I have a friend who I have seen respond to an evangelistic invitation several times during the course of his life. To me, this points out the problems with this view. By having to look at your own life for assurance, who would not doubt their salvation? Can anyone really believe that God is actually working in your life when you see the wretchedness of pride and self will in your life?

This points out the problem I have with the Reformed doctrine. It takes away from the emphasis on justification by faith that is necessary for even experienced Christians. The fact of looking for evidences of goodness in your own life takes away from the doctrine of having to believe you are just even though you don't feel it. The doctrine of justification was useful to believers in the old and new testaments throughout their lives and not just at the moment at conversion. It is healthy for you to realize that your sin has you teetering on the edge of hell and the only thing preventing this is the work of Christ for you. The doctrine of eternal security basically removes a Christian from considering judgment and justification because he feels he is secure from judgment because of his experience that proves God has adopted him. If the doctrines of justification and adoption seem to contradict at one point, justification must prevail, because adoption is a use of a human experience to explain a work of God. While these comparisons are very useful, they have limitations on how far you can go with their implications. The Bible speaks about the inner witness of the Spirit and the work of sanctification, but they are secondary to justification by faith for assurance of the believer.

Calvin dismissed the idea that baptism and the Lord's Supper carried with it the message of forgiveness. Since obviously not all infants baptized went on to be shown to be part of God's elect, the forgiveness of sins could not be proclaimed to these infants (even though Calvin believed in infant baptism). Communion was not the means to convey forgiveness of sins (although Calvin believed the soul was brought up to heaven and united with Christ in communion). How does a Lutheran deal with assurance? If a Christian has any worries, it is pointed out that God has forgiven their sins and God has the power to keep them (gospel). If a person has turned from God, they hear about the consequences of this (law). This is not as neatly logical or consistent as the reformed doctrine, but I believe it is scriptural.

As to the idea (stated by J. I. Packer) that Luther also believed in the Reformed doctrine of

adoption, I haven't read enough of Luther's writings to know for sure, but I have my doubts. Too many of his beliefs about law and gospel, the sacraments, and justification by faith do not fit with the Reformed interpretation. Even my own views on assurance sound like the Reformed view when I am speaking of the gospel. The difference comes when I speak of it in regards to the law. As a final note, Luther was reaching the end of his life in Germany when Calvin was beginning his ministry in France. Luther had heard of Calvin and read some of his writings. He was impressed and sent Calvin a letter encouraging him. Whether they would have gotten along well if they had lived closer by, I don't know.

[Home:](#)