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## Luther on biblical salvation

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# LUTHER ON BIBLICAL SALVATION: THE HERMENEUTICAL KEY IN HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL

Norvald Yri

This year the world protestant community celebrates the 500th Anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century reformer and champion of justification by faith in Christ alone. Few individuals in history have had such a profound impact on the church's understanding of the gospel. As we think of the significance of Luther today, it is appropriate to ask, particularly here in Africa, whether Luther's understanding of salvation is still relevant.

Some recent voices, claiming to speak for African Christianity, have rejected Luther's view of salvation by faith in Christ alone. In a recent article Samuel G. Kibicho claims that there is salvation outside of Christ through African Traditional Religion.<sup>1</sup> Kibicho, in his article states categorically that "there is full and fully saving revelation in African Religion and in other genuine non-Christian religions and independently of Jesus. Kibicho defines this salvation in terms of fruit of the Spirit, a Spirit present in African religious communities of faith as well as in Christ. Further definition of this salvation includes: love, hope, reverence for life, generosity, courage to be human and to fight against all forces both human and super-human which threatened and endangered human survival and well being.

Characterizing various Christian views of revelation, Kibicho is right in pointing out one (the classical Lutheran) that holds the view that special revelation is given in the Holy Scriptures-culminating in the incarnation of God's Son, Jesus Christ. But Kibicho regrets also this classical Christian position, and he calls for radical re-interpretation of the Christian idea of revelation in such a way that we will agree to "full and fully saving revelation in African Religion and in other genuine non-Christian religions — also independently of Jesus ..."

Kibicho is obviously able to reach such a conclusion because he is defining salvation in terms of "human community of faith." Faith, love and hope in their general secular and religious meanings are of course not denied

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1. Dr. Samuel G. Kibicho, the Department of Religious studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya. See art. In *Africa Theological Journal* Vol. 10 No. 3 pp. 29-37: "The Teaching of African Religion in our Schools and Colleges and the Christian attitude towards this Religion."

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within Christianity. However, Kibicho tends to equate these evidences of faith in human society with the Christian revelation of salvation. And he is doing this without having discussed the Christian hermeneutic as it in particular relates to the understanding of salvation. He is advocating that there is no fundamental and actual difference between salvation in Biblical-Christian terms and salvation in terms of genuine non-Christian religions.

But this is the crucial issue, which I believe it is urgent to discuss. As we do so it will become evident that Christianity claims an understanding of salvation that is different from other religious or secular thought - systems of salvation. The hermeneutics of Martin Luther were not new-they were more a re-statement of a system of hermeneutics that was advocated by Christian Scripture itself, as Luther understood it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Luther's Discovery of the Gospel**

The central question for Luther was simply, how is it possible to have a gracious God? How is it possible for me, a man, by nature an enemy of God to be accepted by him the holy and true God. Luther was a monk in a Church that gave him the following answer: Grace is available for the one who is doing his best. If man is doing his part then God is not unreasonable. But you will never know for sure whether or not you have contributed sufficiently to your salvation.<sup>3</sup>

We have to remember the ecclesiastical context Luther was born into. He was given an understanding of salvation that said "yes" to what God was doing in Christ according to Scripture. However, there was also a "yes" to what God might add of truth through the theological reflections of the Fathers **in addition to** the canonical Scriptures.

For example the perception of Mary without sin and her bodily ascension are dogmas in the Catholic Church today, not based upon "Scripture" but upon "the Fathers."<sup>4</sup>

2. In explaining why God does not carry out his work in men without the word, Luther says that although he could do it without the word, he does not wish to do so. If God would speak without means, as the spiritualists thought he could and if the Spirit were free from the word, he could inspire anything that one might think of. This would mean that some way of salvation other than the gospel of Jesus Christ would have been opened and that God would encounter sinful humanity in some other way than through the humanity and historicity of Jesus to which the word witnesses. But there are no new revelations. Luther's Werke (Weimar, 1883-) Vol. 18, p. 695. Hereafter **WA**, see elaboration in Paul Althaus: **The theology of Martin Luther** (Philadelphia).

See also the Smalcald Articles, WA 245 and The Book of Concord 312 where Luther's view is obvious: No salvation is given except through the external word.

3. The dialogue between Cajetan and Luther 1518, see also M. Chemnitz *Examen Concilii Tridentine* 1565-73, Eng. transl. pp. 465-538.

4. Vatican Council II (1962-65) pp. 60-69.

In fact, Mary and saints are called upon in the Roman Catholic Church in addition to Christ. Mary is called mediatrix (fem. form of mediator, a term applied to Christ), and thus characterized as standing between the people and God.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible to understand the hermeneutics of Luther without being aware of the ecclesiastical context into which he spoke. There existed a hope in man's own efforts — in his own piety — subject to the help of God's grace. The generally accepted theology was saying that God's grace is a power that is able to change sinful man. "Justification" was being used in the meaning of a healing process started off by the grace, and the "gospel" was and is in Roman Catholic official teaching a message that God receives the one who has that righteousness that is being created within man by God's grace. A man is supposed to grow in love of God and good works and thus do his part, then God will look with favour upon the man and his efforts. On this background we understand that terms like gospel and righteousness were frightening words for the honest monk, Luther.

The gospel required faith and love of God in order to be accepted by him. And Luther had been taught that "the righteousness of God" is righteousness by which the righteous God punishes the sinner and the unrighteous. Luther was doing his best in prayer, fasting and studying ... trying to love God and to change his sinful motives. However, Luther discovered that he hated God — and he was far from sure of his own godliness; his conscience was bothered in front of the holy God.

How, then, was Luther brought out of this spiritual slavery into a new world of freedom and spiritual power? It was by a discovery of the central Christian teaching. A new hermeneutical world opened itself up for Luther in such a way that he was led to see and understand God's revelation in Scripture and the meaning of salvation in the history of salvation. In this context did he discover that he had a wrong understanding of the righteousness of God (Rom. 1:17). Studying the letter to the Romans day and night Luther little by little discovered right context of God's righteousness.

It is not God's punishing righteousness demanding righteousness from man himself in front of God. No, God's righteousness is that which he gives. Luther re-discovered that the one who is righteous by faith — without works — he shall live, i.e. be accepted by the holy God.

He found that the gospel is not another requirement — more heavy than the law — the gospel is the proclamation of God's grace based upon the ministry and the person, Jesus Christ. And in this gospel — God is making

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5. Vatican Council II, p. 62

known his righteousness, not because of man's works, but because God himself has finished everything for our salvation in Christ. In other words: salvation in terms of God accepting the lost sinner in front of himself — is based solely upon a righteousness that is outside of man himself, it is "alien" in the sense that it is God's righteousness given in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

By faith, in Christ the sinner receives God's grace for the sake of Jesus Christ who died in the place of the sinner — and who rose again. Luther re-discovered that man's own attempts to bring in salvation in terms of righteousness in front of God cannot but fail — regardless of whether these attempts are based upon religious systems within or outside the church. He had discovered that the law — in all its various requirements and forms — is different from the gospel.<sup>7</sup> In this context the law only shows man that he is lost and unable to contribute to his own salvation in front of God. The gospel, on the other hand, is not a requirement, it is a gift, it gives and it forgives. By the gospel the true faith is being created because this faith takes hold of "God's Lamb", Jesus Christ who carried all the sin of the world, atoned for all the sin and guilt in front of God and thus brought salvation.<sup>7</sup>

Actually, Luther had not discovered a new system of hermeneutics, but he had re-discovered the classical hermeneutics based in the Holy scripture itself. And the understanding of justification, then, as not as such a healing process but as an act of judgment, was found to be the self-testimony of God's special revelation. God himself passes the sentence saying that the guilty, the ungodly, the lost sinner is righteous because of Jesus Christ. The faith makes righteous because it seizes and possesses this treasure — the Christ who is present.<sup>8</sup>

This is the basic issue in the Christian understanding of salvation, and this has been a basic doctrine in the Protestant churches down through the ages. Salvation is not found partly or fully outside of Christ — it is not

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6. Luther has told about this experience several places in his writings perhaps most extensively in the prologue to the collected writings in 1945 in Latin. (Comp, the Smalcald Articles, WA 50,199BC292, also WA 40111335,352 Cf. WA 39,1205 WA 25,330) Luther says that nothing in the article of justification can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed ... on this article rests all that we teach and practice against pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and our adversaries will gain the victory ... The doctrine of justification is the summary of Christian doctrine. It is the unique possession of Christianity and distinguishes our religion from all others. The doctrine of justification preserves the church. If we lose this doctrine, we also lose Christ and the Church ...

7. See Luther 1518. The 95 theses of 1517, in part, th, 62, see ref to Rom 4:15 and 7:5 and 13 and 1 Cor 1:30 (Christ is our righteousness).

8. See all through Luther's Commentary to the Galatians, 1531, faith is grasping [*fides apprehensiva*], and power, WA 391 II.

found independently of the message related to what God has finished in Jesus Christ — independently of all religious efforts of man to justify himself. In fact, no religion tells us what God himself has done in order to save lost man. But God revealed to “prophets and apostles” how he was going to save us. The Christian Church has this prophetic and apostolic word in Holy Scripture. Also Luther emphasized this fact very strongly, it is only from Scripture we get to know the saving message about forgiveness of sins by faith for the sake of Christ. This testimony is evident in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

The reformation theologians used the expression: *notae exclusivae*: the signs that exclude everything else: Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone [*Sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola fide.*] There is no certainty of salvation where anything is placed beside Scripture, Christ and faith in him. As Luther says in a sermon from 1519: Certainty of salvation comes from Scripture, a certainty related to forgiveness of all sins by trusting Christ. This is the background for understanding why it was impossible for Luther and later for Protestant churches — to accept the authority of “Tradition” and pope on a level with Holy Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* and salvation in Christ only, hang together. The Roman Catholic Church on the other hand teaches that the church does not have its certainty concerning the revelation of Christian teaching from Scripture only.

#### CONCLUSION:

It seems timely that Protestant Christianity again be reminded about the implications of the Protestant *notae exclusivae* Scripture should be studied again and again — and we should be concerned to use all available tools for going deeper into its meaning. But our various methods and philosophies should not be regarded as of higher authority than Scripture concerning what it teaches about salvation. The modern ecumenical struggles have shown that a broader base for “unity” that even tends to mean “unity of mankind” — also tends to play down the outstanding importance of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

A systems of hermeneutics that in principle accepts salvation independently of the Christian message will of course be free to postulate any theory as a valid definition of salvation, whether in general secular or religious terminology. Then the Christian means of God’s grace — God’s Word, Baptism and Holy Communion will have no conclusive value. One thing is obvious: the dividing line between different systems of

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9. Smalcald Articles Art II 1537 and Luther resolutions 1518.

10. Denzinger: *Enchiridion* [1854] 1963 and Vat C.II: *De divine revelation* (Revelation of God).

11. I have discussed this development at length. See NovarId Yri: *Quest for Authority: An Investigation of the Quest for Authority within the Ecumenical Movement, 1910 until 1975, and the Evangelical response*, (EPH, Nairobi,) esp. p. 195 ff. comp. The Bible WCC FO pp. 99,81.

hermeneutics is not a geographical line between Europe and Africa. In fact, the time is past when one can divide Western Christianity and African in this way.<sup>12</sup>

The classical Christian view of salvation, then, is that this is not found independently of Jesus Christ. And faith in Christian terms is faith in Jesus Christ as this is created by the Christian message. This attitude is not a Western imperialistic or discriminating attitude. This is what is being understood from God's special revelation in the Judeo-Christian context and culture — a culture that is much 'closer to African *milieu* than European. Man's existential situation as separated from his Creator makes all religious attempts to create his own salvation hopeless. Man had been deprived of his glory in front of the holy God. All "seeking of god" is eventually turned into "mis-seeking" or self-seeking. This is the message Luther rediscovered five centuries ago. It is a message Africa needs to discover now, more than ever.

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12. See from the African viewpoints: Byang H. Kato: *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975) and Tokunboh Adeyemo: *Salvation in African Tradition* (1979), both EPH, Nairobi. African traditional religious worshippers may claim that their gods are agents of the triune God, Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. But their view must be subjected under the searchlight of the Word of God — Jesus Christ alone will stand tall and unique above all other religions (Kato: 122-124).