

The Wittenberg Trail:



From Possibility to Reality

by Dr. Leonard Payton

When you age, all sorts of things go wrong with your body, some of them big, some of them little. But the problems tend to increase in number, especially the little ones, and untended little problems can become big problems.

For all those pesky physical woes, we have physicians —people trained to eliminate or manage our troubles. So, our problems should go away or, at least, be manageable, right? Wrong. Wrong because we cannot merely speak of our ailments as physiological/mechanical problems. "Take this pill four times a day and your problem will be solved." No.

Maybe we aren't sure we want the problem to go away. Maybe the medicine costs too much or does other things to us we don't like. Maybe we don't remember to take the medicine regularly. Maybe our kids are not so anxious to preserve our lives another five or ten years. Maybe they are anxious to preserve our lives at all costs, but we're not sure that they are. And on and on the mind games go, at just the time the mind may be changing as well.

Is it good to have a good internist? Absolutely! But while he can tell you as much as there is to know about your body chemistry, he cannot begin to touch upon the most important things about you and what really makes you tick.

In my years in the Calvinist church, I found the relationship between Calvinist systematic theology and Calvinist pastoral care to be much like the relationship between internal medicine and holistic physical care. Not that Calvinist pastors are pastoral-care failures. They aren't. They just have their limitations.

If the greatest felt need in your life is having an intellectually tight, understandable system, then Lutheranism isn't for you.

Still, when the Calvinist pastor was exercising good pastoral care, he easily set aside his systematic theology. All of this leads me to ask the question, Why have such a system in the first place? A Calvinist pastor who is consistent within his theology cannot begin to touch upon the most important

questions you have. Why? Because those questions are not first and foremost intellectual problems, and Calvinism is intellectual if it is anything. Let's try a few of those questions on for size.

- Q. Does God really love me? (note the angst, not the intellectual curiosity)
- A. Maybe, that is, if you're one of the elect. (note the rational answer not congruent to the angst of the question)
- Q. Am I one of the elect?
- A. Well... maybe. You'll just have to wait and see.
- Q. How can I know if I am one of the elect?
- A. You can get a good indicator of that if you're adding to your virtues (see 2 Peter 1:2-8)
- Q. But doesn't that place my faith in my works rather than in the work of Christ?
- A. (deafening silence)
- Q. What about my kids?
- A. What about them?
- Q. Does God love my kids?
- A. Yes, ...if they're elect.
- Q. But they're baptized. Does that mean anything?
- A. Baptism brings our children into the covenant.
- Q. What's that supposed to mean?
- A. ...that they're in the best place to hear the Word and exercise faith.
- Q. So does God really do anything gracious for them in Baptism?
- A. Only if they're elect.
- Q. But do they receive new life in Christ in Baptism?
- A. Maybe, that is, if they are elect.
- Q. So I can't really know if God's Word is grace for me or damnation?
- A. Right.

We could carry on this exercise. Suffice it to say that for the most agonizing pastoral questions, Calvinism regularly flops *when it is consistent with its theology*. God be praised for loads of inconsistency!

It was within the day-to-day life of Calvinist church staffs that I came to a convinced Lutheran position. This is because church offices are places where real-life, messy problems emerge.

So, what are the differences?

It all begins where you start. Calvinists start with God, more specifically, the glory of God (*In the beginning, God...*, Genesis 1:1). Lutherans start with Christ (*no man comes to the Father but by Me*, John 14:6).

The Calvinist's interpretative key is the Glory of God. This key begins with a philosophical abstraction and extrapolates then to Christ. The Lutheran interpretative key is the person and work of Christ (*No one has ever seen God: He who is from the bosom of the Father has exegeted Him, [ie., has made Him known]*, John 1:18). This key begins with Christ and then looks for whatever He shows us about God, *and no more than that*.

The Calvinist is vitally interested to discover whether or not he is elect, the Lutheran is vitally interested to know if he is in Christ.

Whatever Jesus does not show us about God we do not know.

For the Calvinist, the order of what one knows is 1) God, 2) election, and 3) means of grace. For the Lutheran, the order runs 1) Christ, 2) "in" Christ, that is to say, "means of grace," 3) God, and 4) election.

In very practical terms, this means that while the Calvinist is vitally interested to discover whether or not he is elect, the Lutheran is vitally interested to know if he is in Christ. The Calvinist will be

compelled to look for evidence of his own faith and of changes in his (hopefully) regenerated life. The Lutheran will be compelled to look for what God has done for him in Jesus.

Said more directly, the Calvinist will end up looking to the uncertainty of his own works, while the Lutheran will be looking to the certainty of God's gift.

The difference is certainty. While the Calvinist doctrine of means of grace is normed by his doctrine of election (and therefore made uncertain), the Lutheran doctrine of election is normed by his doctrine of means-of-grace. The Lutheran can say, "I am baptized," and know certainly that God has given him life in Christ. The Calvinist can say, "I am baptized," and only know that he is "in the covenant." The Lutheran has the genuine article. The Calvinist has a lottery ticket. The Lutheran has the reality. The Calvinist has a

The Lutheran system certainly has its downside. For the intellectually insatiable, Lutheranism will not answer questions like: Who is elect, and who isn't? Why are some saved and not others? How can that bread and wine on the altar be the true body and blood of Jesus? There is a host of questions that Lutheranism refuses to answer because the answers are not revealed in Holy Scripture.

If the greatest felt need in your life is having an intellectually tight, understandable system, then Lutheranism isn't for you.

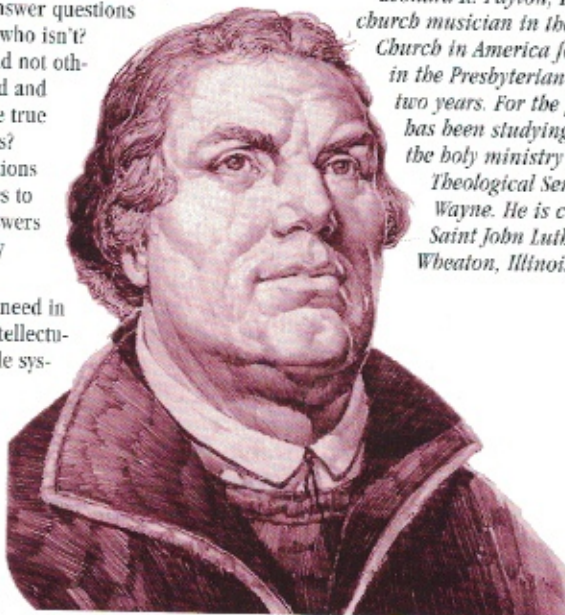
As long as life is sailing along smoothly, it's okay to work the Calvinist system with the same earnestness of a serious hobby. When the messes of life

impose themselves upon you, however, then walk into a Lutheran pastor's study. There you may find a dumpy man, several pounds overweight, with a besetting case of halitosis. At first blush, it might appear that his intellectual and apologetic skills are just two notches up from a half-wit. Don't be misled by these first impressions. Pay close attention. It simply won't occur to him to tell you that Christ

might be for you. In the name and stead of Christ, he will tell you that Jesus *is* for you, and this will most *certainly* be true. In that moment, you will discover that the most important things about you are not what you understand, but rather what God has done for you in Jesus.

So, as so many of our sermons end: *Now the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds IN CHRIST JESUS. Amen.*

The most important things about you are not what you understand, but rather what God has done for you in Jesus.



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