

Reaction to “Core Like a Rock: Luther’s Theological Center” by Professor Cherney

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Brothers, before I get into my reaction proper, please pause for a second. We have not just lived to see the 500th anniversary year of Luther’s Reformation, as the beasts and birds alive today also have. As people made new by the Holy Spirit in our baptism, as people in whom the image of God lost thousands of years ago in the Garden of Eden has begun to be restored, we get to participate in the celebration. And today and tomorrow we get to participate in it here at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, an institution that still possesses and appreciates and passes on the heritage at the heart of this celebration. With all the signs of the end in politics, in society, in nature, in the visible church, let not this moment in human history pass us by without breathing a deep sigh of praise and thanksgiving to the God of all the grace, the triune God, the only true God, who has brought us wretches thus far and shown us such an undeserved privilege. This is an Ebenezer memorial like none other. Who are we, and who is our family or our father’s clan, that we should live to see this day, that we should live to gather together here this day, as brothers in, and of, the very Son of God?

I am also honored this afternoon to have been asked to react to Professor Cherney’s paper. I had him as a professor at both Martin Luther College and at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I learned both Greek and Hebrew and took in numerous chapel devotions from him.¹ I also daily grow in appreciation for how he and others taught their students both to hold what has been passed down to us from our fathers in the highest esteem and at the same time to think critically.

However, neither you nor Prof. Cherney want me to stand up here and, in the words of a long-departed Synodical Conference pastor, “give [him] some bungling gush-mush.”² You want me to give an honest-to-goodness reaction.

I will nevertheless begin with the gush-mush.

First, the citations and the bibliography clearly demonstrate that Prof. Cherney, not surprisingly, did his research.

Second, this is an excellent paper on faith. If not only Luther, but Jesus himself praises faith in God’s saints (Mt 8:10; 15:28)—and Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith (Heb 12:2)!—then we present-day confessional Lutherans ought to be better at doing so than we are. Prof. Cherney does a wonderful job leading and enabling us to do so (pp. 13-18). (How many of us haven’t in effect tried to do with Acts 16:31 exactly what the professor rightly condemns on p. 16?) In so doing, he also gives us good, starting-point, practical advice for dealing with people’s doubts (pp. 16-18).

Third, Prof. Cherney, in concert with Luther, exposes the modern encouragements to embrace doubt and the praise of doubt as “an intensifying of one’s relationship with God”³ as the steaming pile of rubbish⁴ they are (pp. 11,17-19).

¹ I distinctly remember him beginning one of his chapel devotions at MLC the same way he began p. 7.

² German: *eine Lobhudelei machen*. Johannes Strieter, *Lebenslauf des Johannes Strieter, Pastor Emeritus* (Cleveland: F. M. F. Leutner, 1905), p. 166.

³ Robert Herguth, “Top Lutheran bishop: If hell exists, ‘I think it’s empty’” in the *Chicago Sun-Times* (7 Sept 2017), <http://chicago.suntimes.com/chicago-politics/elizabeth-eaton-presiding-bishop-evangelical-lutheran-church-in-america-chicago-if-hell-exists-i-think-its-empty-face-to-faith-podcast/>.

⁴ In the NIV84 biblical sense (Php 3:8). If you prefer the NIV11, then it would be a steaming pile of garbage. In the Luther biblical sense, it would be a steaming pile of *Dreck*, and this footnote would be unnecessary.

Fourth, Prof. Cherney equally praises what we in theological terms call objective and subjective justification, and shows us that Luther identified and praised them too (pp. 9-14).

Fifth, Prof. Cherney helps us to brush up on our Latin and German theological vocabulary, and some other Latin phrases besides. New to me was the ablative absolute *mutatis mutandis* (once the necessary substitutions or changes have been made; p. 20).

Sixth, Prof. Cherney's carefully utilized humor makes his paper eminently readable. The story of Derek in footnote 25 (p. 7) almost made me lose my supper the first time I read it. And which of us didn't check an item off our bucket list when we finally read in a symposium paper, "Here there be dragons" (p. 21), perhaps after first adding it to our bucket list just so we could check it off?

There were some admittedly minor and/or nitpicky quibbles I had here or there.

For example, on the top of p. 8, even though Luther had probably reclaimed the gospel before 1517 (as, for instance, his famous April 8, 1516, letter to George Spenclein seems to show), I heartily agree with Luther historian Martin Brecht and think it incorrect to date Luther's "Tower" Experience to a time prior to early 1518 (cf. top of p. 8). Ironically, I think a later dating of that experience is best proved not only by paying close attention to Luther's own accessory details in his later recollections of it, but especially by looking for when Luther starts emphasizing faith, defined as it is in Prof. Cherney's paper, and drawing a direct connection between faith and our possession of the righteousness of God.

And on the top of p. 23, I think it's a little misleading to represent Luther, without qualification, as simply saying that those who receive the Lord's Supper in one kind have not sinned. I would encourage readers to read the entire letter Prof. Cherney cites.⁵

I do want to push back a bit on the bad rap knowledge (*scientia*) gets especially in the first and second parts of the paper (pp. 3-6).⁶ It almost seems like Prof. Cherney wrote these sections as if he were addressing an audience of Thomas Aquinas (cf. pp. 4-5). It seems like he is going to great pains to pull us away from locating faith in the intellect to locating it in the emotions.

In so doing, he seems to be combating a problem that I have never experienced in our circles. My experience, admittedly considerably less than the professor's, has overwhelmingly been that the pastors in our circles understand well that "faith's essential nature [is] trust" (p. 19), "a living, daring confidence in God's grace" (p. 3), and not mere acquisition and logical analysis of facts. Having said that, while Luther's own faith *may* have been primarily seated in the emotions, does that mean everyone's is, or that faith is primarily seated there as a rule?⁷ If it were to be primarily seated in the intellect in a given man, would that automatically mean his faith were somehow less real or living?

⁵ It also wouldn't hurt to read the famous Invocavit sermons Luther preached on the matter after he returned from the Wartburg (*LW* 51:67ff, esp. pp. 90-91).

⁶ This aversion to knowledge also seems to feed the negativity surrounding the syllogism on p. 13. That syllogism may not be how Luther derived his comfort, but I have plenty of empirical ministerial experience and some historical evidence to disprove the paper's claim that such a knowledge-oriented syllogism "has all the emotional *oomph* of a disjoint set algorithm" (p. 13). Note also that Luther was not opposed to using syllogisms like this to drive home spiritual truths, even if he didn't use the particular one Prof. Cherney cites (cf. *Luther's Large Catechism* [St. Louis: CPH, 1978], pp. 119-120).

⁷ The Bible locates faith in the heart (Ro 10:9), but in the Bible, the heart is not merely the seat of the emotions, but of the entire inner life of a person, including the intellect (cf. e.g. 1Sa 14:7; Jb 34:10; Pro 16:1; Mt 15:19; Heb 4:12).

Furthermore, in my opinion, downplaying the role of knowledge in faith is simply not helpful or practical for 21st century gospel ministry. If *theologia est* not just *habitus*, but *habitus practicus*, then I would think we should be more concerned about how faith is treated, not by Thomas Aquinas, but in our day, in our circles, and in the circles in which our members live and move.

The prevailing view of faith in the United States today is, I think, summed up in the recent movie *Gifted*, starring Chris Evans. In one scene, the mathematically “gifted” little girl is talking with her uncle (Chris Evans’ character) on the beach:

“Is there a god?”

“I don’t know.”

“Just tell me.”

“I would if I could, but I don’t know, and neither does anybody else.”

“Roberta [the friendly neighborlady] knows.”

“No. Roberta has faith, and that’s a great thing to have, but *faith is about what you think and feel, not what you know.*”

“What about Jesus?”

“Love that guy. Do what he says.”

“But is he God?”

“I don’t know. I have an opinion, but that’s my opinion; I could be wrong. So why would I screw up yours? *Use your head, but don’t be afraid to believe in things either.*”

What is one of the main problems here? Faith is dissociated from knowledge and from facts.⁸

If Prof. Cherney simply wants us to acknowledge that faith is not *merely* knowledge, then I add a heartfelt “Amen.” But faith also cannot *merely* be “the certainty that God harbors toward me not a single ounce of ire or displeasure,” but must also be that he does so because of the history of Christ from creation, fall, and promise to fulfillment as laid out in the inspired Scriptures. If it is merely emotional confidence without intimate acquaintance with and appropriation of biblical facts, that is the same as faith in today’s ELCA parlance, and that ultimately leads to both universalism⁹ and license.

Not to mention that dissociating knowledge from faith is also not Luther-an. It was Luther who taught us to pray in stanza 2 of his famous Pentecost hymn: “O Lord, keep us from falsehood free; Let Jesus our sole master be, That with a faith *correct and right* We place our trust in him with

⁸ This is also one of the problems in the circles in which Luther himself would be living and moving today, if he were still alive (the circles in which our brothers and sisters in the ELFK live and move). When my wife and I visited the Luther House in Eisenach in 2013, there was a beautiful display of Reformation-period artwork, including biblical scenes representing law and gospel and the means of grace. But beneath this display was an accompanying book, opened to a page titled “*Glaube und Werke*” (Faith and Works). It read, beginning with a paraphrase of Prof. Cherney’s second full blockquote on p. 3: “For Luther, believing meant an affectionate reliance on God, a confidence in him that makes one joyful. Whether or not a Christian regards church doctrines or historical facts as true takes a back seat to this. The one who believes is certain: Jesus has died and risen ‘for me’” (quotation marks original). And lest you think that “Jesus has died and risen” are at least two historical facts connected to Luther’s concept of faith, remember that this was produced by the State Church and they truly want you to read that on the heels of the preceding sentence. Two Easters ago, the chief bishop of one of the branches of the State Church, Gerhard Ulrich, in a public news article described Jesus’ resurrection as his disciples’ perseverance in furthering his commitment to life in spite of the fact that, historically, “Jesus is dead.”

⁹ In the article cited in fn. 3, Bishop Eaton said that there may be a hell, but she thinks it’s empty.

all our might.”¹⁰ It was Luther who began so many of his festival sermons, especially on Christmas and Easter, with “the history.”¹¹ Luther understood that there is a reason that “the Scriptures can use ‘to know’ as a synonym for ‘to believe’” (p. 4). And while “the object of ‘to know’ is generally God or Christ” (*ibid.*), to know God means to know what he has revealed to us about himself in his Word. That’s why sometimes the object of “to know” is a thing, namely “the truth” (1Ti 2:4).

I might also mention that discussing faith primarily in emotional terms really does not give us any easier of a time “discussing the faith of infants or the failing elderly” (p. 5). Babies don’t always demonstrate a glad, bold, and happy emotional state of the soul when I am baptizing them, and many of the failing elderly I have visited show all the emotional gladness, boldness, and happiness of an Easter Island statue, or sometimes even of Walter Matthau.¹²

To be fair to Prof. Cherney, he does say “faith is indeed a ‘knowing,’” “a knowing of a Somebody, not *merely* a something” (p. 4; emphasis added), and he does briefly acknowledge “what [faith] has come to mean in popular parlance” (p. 6). I am pushing back against the *emphasis* in the first two sections more than the *content*. Later in the paper, faith as knowledge starts bleeding all over the place: “Therefore he who believes God when He promises, he who is convinced that God is truthful and will carry out whatever He has promised, is righteous...” (p. 10). “Faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ” (p. 12). “[A] preacher is spreading spiritual death instead of life if he yammers on about ‘faith’ while giving his hearers nothing—or the wrong thing—to put their faith *in...*” (p. 15). And the list could go on (all over p. 17).

Bottom line: I may not be able to explain the intellectual aspect of faith in some believers (or in any) any better than I’m able to describe an infant’s knowledge of his/her mother. But to downplay it and dissociate from it will not prove any more beneficial than acknowledging and wrestling with its nature and role, especially in our day and age.

No one save the inspired writers themselves does a better job of strengthening us with the grace that is in Christ Jesus (cf. 2Ti 2:1) than Martin Luther. With his paper Prof. Cherney has renewed our gratitude for this heritage. He sums up this heritage best in the closing lines, my favorite lines: “Eden may be gone, but God’s promise remains. ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved’ (Acts 16:31). This is most certainly true.”

¹⁰ *O herr behut vor frembder leer / das wir nicht meister suchen meer / Denn Jhesum mit rechten glawben / vnd yhm aus gantzer macht vertrauen* (Erfurt Enchiridion, 1524; cp. CW 176:2). On “*mit rechten glawben*,” cf. the German term *Rechtgläubigkeit*, “orthodoxy.”

¹¹ Weimar Edition of Luther’s Works 23:726 (Christmas); 27:115 (Easter), 186-187 (C); 29:254 (E), 642-646 (C; here Luther says, not for the first time, that almost everyone knows the account fine, but they still lack faith, and so they don’t derive joy from it. The solution? Here’s the history again—and this time, pay attention.); 32:47 (E, though the words “the history” aren’t used), 251 (C); 34/1:271-272 (E morning), 278 (E afternoon); 34/2:501 (C); 36:391 (C); etc.

¹² *Grumpy Old Men* or *Dennis the Menace* version, take your pick.