

## ***Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice***

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**This is one of Luther's earliest hymns, dated to 1523. Since it provides a thematic overview of Luther's Reformation theology in all its original freshness, it rewards careful study. Its singing brings the long "Green Season" to a fitting climax because it recapitulates the entire canonical story from Genesis to Revelation. The following study will be a little longer than normal, since it introduces a number of important topics in Luther's theology, along with current trends in Luther interpretation, which will be taken up in greater detail in future installments.**

**Notes on the Text:** LBW # 299; ELW # 594; WA 35: 423-5. ELW, in an apparent attempt to condense the hymn, omits verse three, which drops the important critique of "free-will." It also combines verses seven and eight, which not only tangles up distinct thoughts but omits what is for Luther the very soul of the joyful exchange in verse eight, the nuptial vow of Christ to the believer, "I am yours and you are mine." For the history of composition and reception, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther's Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 161-72.

### *A Scholarly Debate*

This hymn has been the subject of considerable recent scholarly attention. Oswald Bayer lifts it up in his compelling "re-presentation" of Luther's theology in order to highlight the genuinely *miraculous* nature of God's mercy. God's mercy, according to Bayer's interpretation of Luther, is not an automatic. It's not God's default position, so to speak, on which we can naturally count. It is extraordinary. For mercy costs God dearly. Calling to mind Hosea 11: 8-9, Bayer sees mercy as an "overthrow [German, *Umsturz*] in God himself." In his view, the fifth verse of our hymn, which has God the Father say "to his beloved Son: 'Tis time to have compassion...'," reflects this genuinely miraculous "overthrow," a spontaneous but costly turn in God from wrath to mercy expressed in the sending of the Son to bear away the sin of the world on the cross.

In response to Bayer's impressive interpretation of the hymn, Christine Helmer sought to recast Bayer's "overthrow" by pointing to God's boundless and eternal compassion and thus to avoid depicting God, as Bayer's interpretation seems to allow, as an irrational bundle of contradictory emotions, the fury of wrath turning to mercy without any internal motivation. In that case, why couldn't mercy just as easily turn back into wrath? For Helmer's interpretation of Luther, all God's ways are compassion. Even the human experience of lostness is something reconstructed in hindsight from the new perspective of faith in God's compassion that comes through the gospel. She accomplishes this shift from Bayer's reading by requiring greater attention to the genre of Luther's hymn form as Biblical "remembrance." In the Bible, especially the Psalms, remembrance is not mere recollection of past facts as the way they really were, but the active retrieval of the specific past of God's promise in order to ground present faithfulness; "remembrance" is the interpretative retrieval of the past into the present to fortify the besieged believer under trial. Helmer thus urges that verses two and three, which depict the previous state of believers as lost, helpless and miserable puppets of sin under Satan's dominion, are not recalled as if

they were reporting the previous self's state of self-awareness (let alone God's wrath). Rather verses two and three are constructed as the present self's new interpretation of its former existence apart from knowledge of and trust in God's infinite compassion. This has the effect of recasting the tension between wrath and mercy, which for Bayer is a real tension to be resolved in God Himself. Rather, as all God's ways are compassion, verses two and three represent the believer's retrospective self-interpretation of its previous misery of sin as ignorance of God's love. In verses two and three the believer makes sense of the past from the perspective of her newfound awareness of God's boundless and eternal mercy.

The dispute between the two scholars arises from the hymn's sudden plunge from the joyful call to rejoicing in verse one to the lament of verses two and three. For Bayer, this transition is and must be regarded as inexplicable fact, as inexplicable as the mystery of the origin of sin yet as real as God's wrath that now falls upon it. For Helmer, Bayer's account of the transition from verse one to verse two is not only unintelligible as interpretation of the hymn, but it undermines the key theme of the compassion of God. But if we attend to verse 3 carefully, Luther has us see God in eternity, foreseeing that the cost of creation would be the cross of the Incarnate Son. This glimpse into God's eternal self-determination to be the savior of sinners through Christ unites the concerns of both of these excellent Luther scholars.

Boundless divine compassion from all eternity is indeed for Luther the proper motive and mode of operation in God. Thus for Luther, God undertakes creation with a view to redemption. As Luther put it in the Large Catechism, God has "created us for no other purpose than to redeem us." This is the proper meaning of "predestination" – not some predetermined list of the saved and the damned, but God's self-determination from the beginning to redeem and fulfill the creation through the missions of His Son and Spirit. (Readers may wish to review this Lutheran teaching in Formula of Concord Article XI). The eternal counsel and purpose of God to love us accounts for what Bayer calls the "overthrow" in God – not as if it were a purely temporal reaction of God jerked around by conflicting emotions in reaction to human faith or faithlessness, but rather God's eternally proactive decision to engage in the time of the creature, even to make the sin and woe of the world God's own and, in this just this costly way, to overcome it. The divine transition from wrath to mercy takes place, not in the sense of a fit of passion, but as the passion of love achieving love for what is really against love by the costly way of the incarnation and cross of the Son. Building on the glimpse into the eternal counsel of the Trinity to save in verse three, I have called this the event of "God surpassing God." In Christ we see love's over-achievement, so to say.

### *Corporate Humanity in Adam*

When we turn to the content of verses two and three, we see how they explicate the words we are accustomed to saying at the beginning of the Sunday liturgy: "we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." We modern people, however, are one and all "Pelagians" --those who think that not only are we saved by our "good works" but that "good works" are achieved pretty easily, almost naturally. This attitude is what Reinhold Niebuhr called the "easy conscience of modern man." We think that our good will may be taken for granted; that if we sin, it is mistake and error not betrayal of our common humanity or offense against creation's Lord; and that if perchance we do sin seriously, we are not at

personal fault, since we caught up in the causal nexus which forces us to act badly sometimes. Nothing more offends the easy conscience of this modern person than Luther's emphatic and more or less "catholic" teaching of original sin. Indeed, Luther criticized his contemporary opponents for being soft on Original Sin. They reduced Original Sin to sparks of bodily desire rather than locating it in the highest human powers of will and reason. As a result, they didn't take sin seriously enough!

Original sin – or rather, "inherited sin," as Luther put it, means that we are caught up as heirs in a dysfunctional family legacy going back to Adam; as a result we have before God only evil choices. Were that teaching not severe enough, Luther continues, we become personally responsible in these inevitably evil choices which we make for our own part freely and joyfully. Luther not only takes up the doctrine of original sin from the ecumenical tradition ("in sin my mother bore me," as the verse has us sing), his apocalyptically radical appropriation of it makes the offense even worse – if that is possible! For Luther, as a result, any future "hell" pales in comparison to the present imprisoned and tortured state of the bound and deluded self, as verse three depicts.

Let's clear up a road block to intelligibility here. Luther is speaking of Sin not sins. He is speaking of a spiritual power that captivates our desire -- our love that rightly belongs to God above all and hence for all of God's creatures, our neighbors, as also for ourselves. He is not focusing on various transgressions of visible law, such as the political order is competent to see and judge. He is speaking of God's judgment, from Whom no secrets are hid, not human judgment. This requires a basic distinction in perspectives under which we consider human responsibility, as Gerhard Ebeling taught us, between relations *coram Deo* (before God) and *coram hominibus* (before human beings) or *coram mundo* (before the world). To understand Luther's over-the-top discourse on sinfulness, one must always supply the implied relation: *coram Deo*, in relation to God. For example, if in my rage I raise my fist to strike my offending neighbor but retreat from fear of the consequences, the crime of battery (*coram mundo*) does not occur, even though the sin (*coram Deo*) surely does. Or again, if out of a desire to burnish my reputations for philanthropy I escort the senior citizen across the busy street, the good work for her benefit (*coram mundo*) occurs, but so the does the sin (*coram Deo*) of my pride.

One helpful contemporary way to explicate this distinction is to point out how human judgment has an individualistic bias, which ignores the social web in which the individual is entangled. I may be a courageous soldier – serving in the Nazi *Wehrmacht*. I may be a conscientious tax payer – funding the napalm "bombing of villages to save them" that took place in Vietnam. I may even heroically protest unjust wars – but fail to persuade others to cease and desist because I am unwilling to pay the personal price of genuine resistance. I may be a "moral man" in my personal existence, as Niebuhr explained the easy conscience of modern people, yet an unconscious but willing puppet of an "immoral society." Original sin points to the overwhelming power of this trans-individual, social nexus of human sinfulness, as we say in the Baptismal liturgy: "we are born children of a fallen humanity." On the other hand, before humanity the individual choices we make in the world do matter, even if they are contaminated by sinfulness before God. Some evils are much less than others in society. Recalling the example above of escorting the senior -- how much better for the world to help despite mixed motives than if I abandon the senior citizen to dangerous traffic over scruples about my own impurity!

As offensive as Luther's teaching on sin has been to modernity, Luther's teaching corresponds to more searching contemporary post-modern sensibilities, traumatized as we are today by the failure of the great, secular dreams of human emancipation stemming from the Enlightenment. These are the disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Hitler, Hiroshima and Stalin. Or think, as we do more and more nowadays, of the dark underside of American modernity: the African slave trade, the trail of tears and manifest destiny. As we now face the decline of our nation from its status as the world's sole superpower and as our crippling debt and lack of social justice catch up with us, perhaps we can catch up with Luther. Against the overconfidence of the Enlightenment, Luther knew that human reason does not easily transcend particular interest but rather sells itself to the highest bidder. He foresaw our kind of greedy culture coming, where anything can be bought or sold, that is, where anything can be rationalized by the logic of the market no longer confined to the market but creeping into everything --even religion, which is America is big business!

The Enlightenment critics of traditional European Christendom have every right to be critical, but as Karl Barth often remarked, they are not critical enough to see our modern corruption and its deliverances in Verdun and Stalingrad, Auschwitz and the Killing Fields, terrorism and counter-terrorism – all these as the wrath of God delivering the consequences of our greed and envy back upon us! When we turn to the personal side of contemporary life, the restoration of the “innocence of becoming” that Rousseau and Nietzsche dreamed of seems ever more distant in this tawdry culture of pornographic violence that saturates us. In this perspective, verses 2 and 3 are indeed a veritable revelation of what is *really* going on.

### *Unfree Will*

One of Luther's great discoveries which made such penetrating prophecy possible was how the Platonic tradition with its rationalistic optimism misinterpreted Paul's teaching on the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh (see, for example, Gal. 5:16-26). Platonism cast the human moral conflict *repressively*, that is, as a battle of the mind for supremacy over wayward bodily desires. Overly optimistic in regard to the power of disinterested and innocent reason, and overly puritanical in regard to bodily desire, Platonism blamed the powerful evil body for subverting the weaker but innocent rational soul. But following Augustine, Luther interpreted Paul as meaning that humans sin by virtue of their highest powers, the very ones which distinguish us from the animals, namely will and reason. We *want* to be god without God, and acting *deliberately* on this spiritual desire by the *cunning* imaginations of our minds, we live “according to the flesh,” that is, according to human brain-power and/or muscle-power and not in reliance on God. Nowadays we think that technology is going to save us, as if lack of power, not of love and wisdom and justice were the root of our problems. “Spirit” by contrast is not the human mind; it is not intelligence, which can intelligently design the death factory at Auschwitz just as well as new therapies for treatment of cancer. It is the Spirit of the Father and the Son! *This* Spirit comes upon us from outside the self as the power and personal resolve to rely on God's promise to be our God; the Spirit is the One who led Jesus to Gethsemane and who leads believers to their own new lives of resistance by working the Gethsemane of their own souls.

Thus Luther takes a jaundiced view of our vaunted “free-will.” While Luther affirms the importance of desire or willingness – faith would be false if it were forced, as would sin-- for him, freedom of choice amounts to little more than consumer choice in a Walmart filled with inferior goods. Before God such choices don’t matter when the whole market is rigged by Satan’s manipulation. Thus Luther contrasts the futile choices of “free will” with God’s costly choice in all eternity: “God had seen my wretched state before the world’s foundation...” Verse four introduces the Lutheran view of predestination, as mentioned above: God’s eternal choice or self-determination at the great cost of the Son’s incarnate life and death on the cross to redeem and to heal the lost creature. From this grounding in God’s eternal self-determination, all the other great narrative themes of Luther’s Reformation theology unfold in due course of the hymn: 1) Trinitarian advent (verses 5-6, and again 9), i.e. that God’s coming is the inclusion of the creature in the Trinity’s own eternal life; 2) the Mighty Duel (verse 6) and Joyful Exchange (verse 7-8), i.e. that by His incarnation, Christ triumphed over the devil not merely by power but by right so that by His Word and Spirit, Christ is present in faith to unite with believers (“I am yours and you are mine”) in the specific way of exchanging His innocence for the believer’s sin. In coming installments, we will review each of these motifs in appropriate detail.

By the time Luther composed this hymn, however, the early joy of the Reformation theology was already tempered by the outbreak of “other spirits” than the Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son. Thus the hymn ends with a warning from the lips of Christ: “But watch lest foes with base alloy the heavenly treasure should destroy.” That “base alloy” comes from the confusion of the Holy Spirit with inner voices, personal fantasies, or religious experiences or imaginations. *This* figure of the Biblical narrative, the *Holy Spirit*, drives out the unholy spirits as He drives Jesus to His messianic ministry and destiny; *this* is the *Holy Spirit*, the *Spirit of the Father and the Son*, a *person* not an impersonal power or energy. Luther named this dangerous confusion of the Holy Spirit with our own inner voices “enthusiasm” – literally, presuming to possess God, as if one had swallowed the Holy Spirit, as Luther joked in reference to the dove at Jesus’ baptism, “feathers and all.”

#### **Four-Week Teaching Plan**

Week One: Read the Hymn as a whole and identify the various components: Call to praise (vs. 1), Lament (vs. 2-3), God’s Eternal Plan (vs. 4-5), Its Realization in the Incarnation (vs. 6), Its Proclamation pro me (vs.7-8) and the Gift of the Spirit (vs. 9) who keeps the believer in true faith (vs. 10). Discuss the Bible’s narrative theology, and how this hymn is a recapitulation of the Genesis to Revelation narrative of canonical scripture. Identify the specific accents of Luther’s reformation theology in verses 3 and 7. Raise the interpretative difficulty in the transition from verse 1 to verses 2 and 3.

Week Two: Study Hosea 11. Ask the question whether the prophet’s depiction of God’s “upheaval” is a true divine self-revelation or an anthropomorphic way of talking about God. Explain the positions taken by Bayer, Helmer and Hinlicky.

Week Three: Study Romans 5. Relate this to Luther’s claims in the lament of verses 2 and 3. Ask whether Luther means to recall and report a previous state of mind or whether he paints a picture of the

believer's previous existence, whether he or she knew it or not. Explain the difference between crimes and sin, between sin as an overwhelming power that captivates and sin as transgressions.

Week Four: Study Ephesians 1. How does this connect with Luther's claim in verses 4-5 to give us a glimpse into God's eternal purpose with humanity? Introduce the basic ideas of FC XI.

### **Sermon Outline**

A sermon based on "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice," could be based on Hosea 11, Psalm 136, Ephesians 1 and Mark 10: 23-27. Since this hymn is lengthy and comprehensive, the sermon could step by step re-narrate Luther's recapitulation of the canonical story of the Bible, pointing out that God's compassion in Christ is the key to its plotline and lifting up its consequences for faith to stay close to Christ and rely on the Holy Spirit for Christian living.

### **Select Bibliography for Further Study**

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