

Luther and Humanism

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The Agenda Committee's directives for this paper state: "This paper deals with the humanists at the time of the Reformation and perhaps their predecessors. Your essay will consider their impact on Luther's day and his work, and relationships between Luther and the humanists. It is hoped that your essay will also include an application section which helps the reader to understand and deal with the modern evidences of this old humanism." That is our assignment. We will begin with an overview of humanism from post-apostolic times to the present; then review humanism's role at the time of the Reformation and conclude with some pertinent applicatory observations.

Humanism attempts to answer the question: What does it mean to be human? It seeks to discover and to promote whatever enhances human life. It offers a positive affirmation of life and culture. Secular humanism views the question from a philosophical perspective. Christian humanism views the question from a Christian perspective.

From the post-apostolic age to the time of the Reformation the prevailing humanism in the Western world was a combination of biblical and classical elements. The Renaissance/Reformation era saw the beginning of a parting of the ways between humanism's biblical and classical elements. The Renaissance espoused and promoted the classical view of humanity. The Reformation espoused and promoted the biblical view. The classical view champions man's freedom and his potential to make something of himself. The biblical view asserts man's dependence upon God and his desperate need for divine grace.

Rudolph Bultmann (whom I have probably never quoted before with approval) describes the difference between the classical and biblical views in this manner. Classical humanism, Bultmann says, "expresses the conviction that man by virtue of his spirit is able to shape his life in freedom and to subject to himself the world in which he has to live his life. The Christian faith expresses the conviction that man is not his own master, that the world is an alien country to him, and that he can gain his freedom from the world only with the help of divine grace which is freely given to the world from beyond."ⁱ

Renaissance and Reformation humanism drifted further apart from each other during the age of the Enlightenment. Spurred on by scientific discoveries and by the new man-centered philosophies of the times, man's confidence in his own innate abilities intensified.

With encouragement from Enlightenment thinkers, Renaissance humanism evolved during the past two centuries into the secular brands of humanism, which influence so much of the Western world's contemporary thinking. Reformation humanism did not come through the age of the Enlightenment unscathed. As a consequence it also evolved during the past two centuries into a so-called Christian humanism which today bears little resemblance to Reformation humanism. It is this strand of humanism which will occupy us primarily in this study.

Before we turn to Luther and the humanists of his day, we wish to round out this overview of humanism's evolution to the present by summarizing the secularization process which produced the various types of humanism prevalent today. We will also make an attempt at identifying and describing the varieties of secular humanism which confront us in our world and our work. Perhaps that will help us to avoid the mistake of fundamentalists of the Tim LaHaye type who tend to paint all humanists with the same red brush. (Cf. LaHaye, *The Battle For the Mind*, Revell, 1982)

The gap between the Christian and the secular views of human existence widened gradually from the 18th to the 20th century. Developments in the field of science were a contributory factor. But the drift toward secularization was aided and abetted chiefly by science's affinity for a naturalistic philosophy. Thinking men found supernaturalism to be an outmoded and unnecessary concept. At the same time the industrial revolution

was transforming the focus of human energies and interest, and the social sciences were allying themselves to the natural sciences to contribute their part to the secularization of society.

Auguste Comte († 1857, insane), the French philosopher/mathematician frequently called the father of sociology, and founder of the philosophy of positivism (all knowledge must be scientifically verifiable), was an influential precursor of modern secularism. In his *Positive Philosophy* he propounded the Law of the Three Stages of mental evolution. According to Comte's "Law," human society progresses through 1. a theological stage, 2. a metaphysical stage and moves inevitably toward a third, positive-scientific stage in which a new "religion of humanity," a religion without God, emerges.

By mid 19th century, religion had become superfluous to many of the molders of men's minds. Nietzsche was not the only one to proclaim the death of God. Occupants of the ivory towers did not recoil in horror when Nietzsche asserted that "Christianity is a stain on the history of mankind."

Sociologists, philosophers and scientists had created a vacuum. Secular humanism appeared on the scene to fill it. Without even a shred of modesty, contemporary humanism stands ready to reveal to a world of perennial optimists a schema for preserving humanity from destruction and to teach mankind the humane way to live in a world without God.

Scholars differentiate between four different types of contemporary humanism: academic, scientific, secular, and religious-ethical humanism.

Academic humanism is the type one associates with the humanities division of colleges and universities. It is a modern modified version of Renaissance humanism. It utilizes prose, poetry, philosophy and the arts in its study of mankind.

Scientific humanism seeks to explain all of life by means of physical laws.

Secular humanism is a broad term which includes all atheistic views of human existence such as Marxism and B. F. Skinner's Behaviorism. (Skinner says, "I would define a Humanist as one of those who, because of the environment to which he has been exposed, is concerned for the future of mankind." Skinner advocates the control of human behavior based upon a scientific study of the environment. See *Time*, Oct 10, 1983, p. 42 Behavior)

Religious-ethical humanism is the brand of humanism propounded in the Humanist Manifestos of 1933 and 1973. It "begins with humans not God, nature not deity" (1973 *Manifesto*). Human experience and judgment determine ethics. Ethics are autonomous. "Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves." (1973 *Manifesto*) This is the type of humanism which has drawn so much fire from Christian apologists today. It is not our special interest in this paper.

There are points of similarity as well as differences between the four types of contemporary humanism. All appeal to reason as their dynamic. They all assert man's responsibility for humane conduct. They hold science in high regard and respect it for the part it plays in the humanizing process. They place human happiness (variously defined) at the top of their scale of values. And they all manifest a skeptical, if not hostile, attitude toward any religion which postulates a human relationship to and dependence upon transcendent powers.

In this treatise our interest is in another kind of humanism. The generally accepted term for it is Christian humanism. In a recent offering from Augsburg entitled "Readings in Christian Humanism" the editors offer this definition: "Christian humanism is the interest in human persons and the positive affirmation of human life and culture which stems from the Christian faith. . . . Christian humanism seeks an understanding of the whole range of human experience in the light of God's revelation to humanity in the person and work of Jesus Christ."¹¹

I'm not sure why the author of those words qualifies "God's revelation to humanity" with the phrase "in the person and work of Jesus Christ," instead of God's revelation to humanity in Holy Scripture. Perhaps a clue lies in the list of writers whose readings were chosen for inclusion in the book. The section on the emergence of Christian humanism includes Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Augustine. Petrarch, Erasmus, Luther and Calvin get proper billing in the section on the Renaissance and the Reformation. The post-Reformation section begins

innocently enough with Galileo, Milton, Bunyan and others and concludes with such representatives as Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dorothy Sayers, Gustavo Gutierrez (architect of liberation theology), Chicago's Langdon Gilkey and Martin Luther King. That, I think, says something about the evolution of "Christian" humanism from Luther's time to the present time or from the time of the rediscovery of the gospel to the time of the discarding of the gospel in favor of a socialized substitute.

Since descriptions are usually more helpful than definitions, we offer the following enumeration and description of some of the essential features of Christian humanism.

1. Human nature under God. God created man in his own image. Among other things that means he made man a *personal* being, i.e. having self-consciousness and self-determination. Man is related to God, dependent on him, part of a created order, yet distinct from all other creatures in nature, abilities, purpose for living and destiny.
2. Human sinfulness. Original sin, properly defined as *sine metu Dei et cum concupiscentia*, is a fact of life. Christian humanism reckons with the fact of the universality of sin.
3. An orderly universe. God still governs the world he created. He involves mankind in his governance making us responsible stewards of the created order, and expecting us to live in harmony with nature. We are part of God's *creatio continuata*.
4. Human responsibility. Responsible Christians do not just sit on their hands passively waiting for judgment day. God makes us responsible for our neighbor and for our use of his world. Biblical humanism involves us in a struggle against modern determinists (a la Skinner) which regard humans as-controlled by heredity or by environmental influences.
5. The human will and its freedom in Christ. "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." Ga 5:13.
6. Community. Renaissance humanists (like macho NWC products) gloried in rugged individualism. Luther's Christian humanism gloried in the universal priesthood of believers functioning in community as the body of Christ. According to St. Paul, the task of building up (οἰκοδομή) the community is just as primary and fundamental as that of perfecting (καταρτισμός) the personality of the saints, Eph 4:12-13.
7. Human gifts and talents. A Scripture-oriented humanism sees gifts and talents as God given, to be used, not competitively for self-aggrandizement, but charitably for the benefit of others. 1 Cor 12, Rm 12:3-16
8. History and human destiny. Lutheran Christians practice a humanism which is based on the conviction that all history has a purpose, and that Christ is the key to understanding that purpose, Col 1:17. We live with the confidence that "our times (future) are in God's hands." Our Christian hope is not merely eschatological. It is also a here-and-now hope that does not lose sight of God's plan for the world today. God did not call us to mark time while waiting for his final summons, but to redeem the time by making the most of every opportunity.

If we were to add an additional distinctive feature characteristic of contemporary Christian humanism, it would be the Erasmian/Reformed view of the correspondence of faith and reason. Almost all humanist thinking suffers from an inability or an unwillingness to distinguish between the magisterial and the ministerial use of reason.

The eight features we have listed were as essential to Luther's humanism as they are to ours. Luther heartily endorsed whatever served to advance the cause of an authentic biblical, Christian humanism, and he heartily condemned whatever hindered or obscured that cause. One of his special gifts as the reformer of the church was a remarkable ability to know what called for an endorsement and what called for a condemnation. To appreciate that properly, we need to turn our attention now to a review of the humanism of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Renaissance Humanism

Humanism in Europe, particularly in Italy, was the intellectual and literary phase of the Renaissance. The label humanists attached itself to men whose special interest was the Greek and Roman humanities. The *literae humaniores* (human letters or culture) rather than *literae divinae* (theology, scholastic theology in particular). Humanists regarded the Thomistic scholasticism of the Middle Ages as stifling and decadent. Scholasticism focused too much attention on God and the life to come. Humanists were determined to refocus attention on man as a dignified and noble creature of God and on the proper enjoyment of life in God's world.

The means for molding life in the new humanist pattern was culture, classical Greek and Roman culture. "Classical training and the cultivation of the polite branches of knowledge became paramount in the making of the ideal Renaissance humanist. By the sixteenth century he reveled in the proud privileges and high capabilities that were his, and, equipped with the power of self-determination, he triumphed in a released, even unbridled pursuit of truth. He regarded as the prerogative and duty of man that he bring into activity the totality of his being, that he develop all faculties, all senses to the full, that he assimilate the high-mindedness and nobility of the Greeks, the distinction of the Roman, so that an abundant life here might be his."ⁱⁱⁱ

Humanists possessed a new awareness of the dignity of man as a rational, volitional, emotional being. They were convinced that God put us into this world to use it and to enjoy it, not to isolate ourselves from it in a monastic closet. Humanists did not reject the idea of life after this life. They merely rebelled against the church's advocacy of eternal life as something exclusively eschatological. To live here and now on the high level of the ancients was neither pagan nor anti-Christian, they insisted. Not only ought we to emulate the ancients, we ought to strive to exceed them in living life to the full.

Italy was the place where the Renaissance gentleman came into his own and flourished. The rest of Europe, north Europe especially, was still relatively uncultured, even barbarian, lagging a century and more behind the times.

It would be a mistake to think that Italian humanists, with all their concern for this world and this life, had lost sight of things transcendental. They had no intention of abandoning Christianity or of forsaking the church. They saw classical culture as Christianity's ally, not its enemy. After all, prior to the Middle Ages, Greco-Roman culture had become imbedded in Europe's culture. Western civilization was and is not comprehensible apart from Greco-Roman antiquity. Scholastics had repressed that fact. Humanists were merely seeking to raise it from the subconscious to the conscious mind and to live accordingly. Learning Greek and Latin and reading the classics was the means to their end. Humanists were Baconian in their conviction that "reading maketh a full man."

Italian humanists were legion. A handful played key roles. History designates Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) as the first modern man and father of Renaissance humanism. He is credited with reviving interest in the classics in general and in Plato in particular.

Petrarch's influence led a century later to a radical change in the area of education. In the Middle Ages, education was the privilege of the clergy. The Renaissance changed that. Italian humanists were for the most part urban laymen, notaries, lawyers, clerks, artists, teachers, and writers. The new curriculum included five interrelated disciplines: grammar (i.e. the study of Greek and Latin, for style's sake as well as content) rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy.

Because of Petrarch's affinity for Plato, Italian humanists moved Aristotle into a back seat and brought Plato to the fore. The task of popularizing Plato was assumed by Marsilio Ficino, a patron of Italy's most prominent 14th century citizen, Cosimo de Medici. About the time Luther was born, Ficino published *Theologia Platonica*, an attempt at synthesizing Christ and Plato. He used Plato to demonstrate that it is natural for man to find the highest good in the knowledge and enjoyment of God who is infinite goodness, beauty and truth (and doesn't Jesus teach that too?). He also used Plato to underscore the dignity of the human being and his world (and isn't that also basic to Christian teaching?). A part of Ficino's importance as a humanist lies in the influence his writings had on the humanist's humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam a generation later.

Renaissance humanism's glorification of the dignity of man reached its zenith in the work of one of Ficino's pupils, Pico della Mirandola. Pico was not content with the attempt to synthesize Christian and Platonic thought. He was intent on adding to the synthesis Aristotelian thought, the Hebrew cabala, Arabic, Pythagorean and Zoroastrian learning. His *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is such an extravagant statement that even fellow humanists charged Pico with going beyond the bounds of Christian tradition. North European humanists were turned off by Pico. Humanism was supposed to advance Christian piety, not human deification.

North European Christian Humanism

When after a century and a half the revival of learning spilled out of Italy over the rest of Europe, it took on a different outlook. In northern Europe especially the Christian element was in the foreground. In Italy the revival served to enhance the standing of man in God's world. In Germany it was made to serve the cause of the church in God's world.

The transcendental bonds of the Middle Ages could not be sloughed off readily in Germany since the need for the presence of the Most High in man's heart was at no time stilled. Nor could German genius be persuaded to surrender to purely secularized pursuits with the same relish and alacrity possible to the more nimble Italian spirit. (What a gentle way to characterize the difference between stubborn Germans and volatile Italians. J.G.) Thus it was that in the Late Middle Ages Germany demanded reform in the church far more insistently than did Italy.^{iv}

One reason, perhaps the chief one, for the difference between the German and the Italian outlook on church and life was the dominant influence from the 14th century onward on North Europeans of the Brethren of the Common Life. One word sums up the emphasis and the objective of the Brethren - piety. Brethren schools existed to promulgate the spirit of Thomas a Kempis' *De Imitatione Christi*, one of the best known books in the Christian world in the late 14th and 15th centuries. The Brethren "believed learning to be of little value if it did not endow with purity of heart, humility, and love of one's fellow man." Italian humanists would have choked on such a notion. "Virtually every German humanist of the 15th and 16th centuries either attended or came under the influence of these schools."^v Erasmus was a product of the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Deventer in Holland. The school Luther attended at Magdeburg was likewise a Brethren school.

Germans were open to the new learning spawned in Italy. But they turned to the study of the classics, not for the personal aesthetic enjoyment and enrichment one could derive from them, but because of the help they afforded in the study of original sources of Christian teaching. Free the truth from the shackles of scholasticism by letting the original text be published and read and known! By promoting philological studies and demoting study of the church fathers, humanists were preparing the stage for Luther's dramatic encounter with Eck at Leipzig and for Luther's radical insistence that church fathers and Popes and Councils have erred. How would one know that without being familiar with the source of Christian truth?

Universities were still church related institutions at the beginning of the Reformation era run by monastic orders. But their doors were opening to humanistic thought, just opening, nothing more. There was one exception. Frederick of Saxony founded a university in Wittenberg without obtaining the customary Papal deed, the first such Catholic university in Christendom. Wittenberg was Germany's 15th university. In less than a score of years it became the most highly regarded school in Germany. Significantly, at Luther's urging, Hebrew, Greek and Latin were taught while *traditional* philosophy courses were dropped along with Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The text of Aristotle was studied without the commentaries. Luther chaired the theological faculty, Melancthon the philosophy department. The town counted 2500 regular inhabitants. Enrollment at Wittenberg was as large as the population. Students came from all over Europe (according to Shakespeare, even Hamlet from Denmark). More Latin than German was spoken in Wittenberg. A Polish story (not the ethnic variety) has it that a Polish student left Wittenberg in 1536 after 3 years of study for Nuremberg to learn to speak

German. Wittenberg was the first genuinely humanistic university in Europe. All other universities were still bound by scholastic tradition and the church.

Influential German humanists include Melanchthon's grand uncle, Johannes Reuchlin. He was in his day Germany's first and foremost Hebrew and Greek scholar teaching both languages at Ingolstadt and later at Tuebingen. He was responsible for Melanchthon's appointment at Wittenberg. He published a Hebrew grammar and lexicon which became a standard text for more than a century. He translated portions of the Old Testament. In doing so he exposed the inadequacies of the Vulgate ruffling the feathers of traditional theologians and the Pope in the process. Ida Walz Blayney says of him, "This Greek and Hebrew scholar and thoroughly trained Latinist raised the cry *'ad fontes'* in protest against a comatose dogmatism" and initiated to a nationally conscious Humanism and a revolutionary method of education."^{vi}

Another influential German humanist was Reuchlin's and Luther's friend, Ulrich von Hutten. What Reuchlin sought to accomplish with a scholarly pen Hutten sought to accomplish with a polemical pen. He sought to rally knight, duke and merchant to battle the Roman hierarchy, its legalism, exploitation and oppression. Hutten was an activist with a sharp tongue and a prickly pen, and with a nationalistic zeal. Blayney says of him, "Hutten will live as long as there are those who prefer the *vita activa* to the usual humanistic *vita contemplativa*."^{vii}

Without question, the best known and most widely read humanist of the 16th century was Desiderius Erasmus. "I wish to be called a citizen of the world," he wrote in 1522. He got his wish. He was the consummate humanist. "From 1500 to the 1520's, Erasmus dominated European discussion of religion, classical scholarship, biblical and patristic studies, education, moral and political commentary."^{viii}

He was also a prodigious author. The University of Toronto Press edition of the Collected Works of Erasmus will number 75 volumes when completed. His major goal in writing was to enable all literate Europeans to gain a better knowledge of the classics, sacred and secular. "Erasmus was convinced that the best way to get men to follow Christ was to encourage them to read the basic texts of Christianity, chiefly the New Testament and the writings of the early church Fathers, such as Augustine, Basil, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Jerome and Origen. Erasmus devoted much of his scholarly life to immense editorial labor designed to make these books available in accurate, unadulterated texts."^{ix}

Erasmus' Greek New Testament (1516), the first ever published, was his *magnum opus*. Erasmus was convinced that it was high time to discard the Vulgate, and to base serious biblical studies on the original Greek, especially because of the unreliability of the church's officially sanctioned version. His New Testament was a pioneering effort, far from perfect. Yet it served as the precursor of modern biblical studies in general and of textual criticism in particular. Everyone, from Luther on, used it. It saw at least 60 printings during Erasmus' life and was not superseded until the 19th century.

Erasmus is usually characterized as a gentle, tolerant man. Holbein depicts him that way in his famous portrait of Erasmus. His supporters to this day regard his gentle tolerance as his greatest strength. Luther understandably regarded it as a fundamental weakness. When truth was on the line and strife was in the offing because of it, Erasmus' counsel was to occupy the middle ground. Catholics accused him of being a Lutheran and Lutherans accused him of being a Catholic. Erasmus just smiled. Prominent in his Christian humanism is the idea that the Christian religion is more a matter of ethics than of dogma; how one behaves is more important than what one believes."^x That has an unnerving modern ring to it, doesn't it? And it's not unfair to Erasmus.

Carlton College's Ida Walz Blayney is a writer not at all unsympathetic to Erasmus. But she can be objective. She offers this penetrating analysis of Erasmus. "By fixing the essential import of Christianity in its ethical content and interpreting it in the spirit of antiquity, he failed to comprehend it adequately as a religion of salvation and the source of spiritual freedom. Nor could he experience its absolute ethical demands as did the religious genius of Luther. His wide learning presented to him that all things are justifiable whatever their source, and he became a relativist, widely tolerant. His theology of conciliation lacked the fervent kindling power of the unambiguous solution."^{xi}

Erasmus himself wrote candidly in a letter to Archbishop Warham that he was not inclined to risk his life for the sake of the truth. “Popes and emperors must settle the creeds,” he suggested. “If they settle them well, so much the better; if ill, I shall keep on the safe side.”^{xii} Contrast that with, “Take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife. Let these all be gone; they yet have nothing won. The kingdom ours remaineth.”

Luther As Humanist

And so we come to Luther. The obvious question at this point is: Was Luther a humanist? A. G. Dickens, the English-speaking world’s preeminent Reformation scholar, answered that question in a Birkbeck Lecture at Cambridge University in this way: “If a humanist . . . must derive his inspiration solely or largely from the restoration of ancient pagan values, Luther must be excluded from the tribe...the case is much the same with the question as to whether Luther was a ‘Christian humanist’ or ‘Biblical humanist’. If to qualify for such titles a scholar must emerge from his Biblical studies with the same answers as Erasmus, then Luther would not qualify. Yet in that event neither would Reuchlin, nor Lefevre, nor Zwingli, nor Calvin. And if on the other hand one argues that Luther was interested in substance, the humanists in elegances of style (which some were for reasons of self-aggrandizement - my comment), one is seriously, indeed quite ignorantly, underestimating every major humanist of the age. The *studia humanitatis* meant vastly more than the tricks of Ciceronian Latin.”^{xiii}

Was Luther a humanist? Without question, he was, but not in the strict sense. In a fashion so typical of Luther, he took from humanism whatever served the cause of the gospel and ignored (sometimes even scorned) whatever did not. Dickens offers this observation in answer to the question: “. . . once we free our minds from secular stereotypes of humanism (including Celtis and Hutten!) we should find it easier to establish the relations of both Luther and Lutheranism with the earlier movement. The approach to Scriptures, the habit of revising theology by a new look at the Greek and Hebrew, the triumphant press-campaign culminating in Luther’s German Bible: all these depended upon the application of established humanist techniques to the Biblical texts . . . While the Lutheran movement seems unimaginable without the preexistent German nationalist humanism, the Reformer himself remains equally unimaginable without the preexistent Biblical humanism, and for that matter without humanist modes of appeal to the layman.”^{xiv}

Luther endorsed the watchword of all the humanists, *ad fontes*. For Luther the fountains were primarily the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. He differed with Italian humanists on what the fountains were, and with Erasmian humanists on the purpose for returning to the fountains. Erasmus called for a return to Christian piety to reform the church. Luther called for a return to Christian teaching to reform the church. Both saw the Scriptures as the dynamic for reform. Erasmus put the emphasis on Scriptural ethics, Luther on Scriptural exegesis.

Luther understood that sound exegesis involved much more than just an accurate rendering of Greek and Hebrew words and phrases. He saw exegesis as involving comparative value judgments dependent on a familiarity with the whole of Scripture. Luther’s comprehensive knowledge of the Bible helped to make him the kind of exegete the church had not known for more than a millennium.

In our circles, Luther’s emphasis on the study of biblical languages as necessary tools for exposition is the feature of Luther’s humanism with which we are most familiar. For that reason we choose not to add to the length of this paper with an offering of quotes from Luther on this point. It is one of his favorite themes. And we are indebted to him for it.

A second feature of Luther’s humanism was his attitude toward education, its importance, its sponsorship and its content. Although it was Melanchthon who was designated as the *Praeceptor Germaniae*, it was Luther’s pronouncements on education which made it possible for Melanchthon to earn that honorary title.

Luther’s two most forthright statements on education were “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” 1524 (LW, 45, 437) and his “Sermon on Keeping Children in School” 1530 (LW, 46, 207). His “Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German

Nation” 1520 (LW 44, 123) is chiefly a statement of Luther’s social ethics, but it also has some emphatic things to say about education of a proper kind.

The treatise addressed to the Councilmen declares that a general, public education is necessary both for spiritual and for utilitarian reasons. A good Christian must also be a useful citizen. Luther included girls (45, 368, 370) as well as boys, an idea Erasmus had advocated but never implemented. Luther not only suggested it, he did something about it by inviting Else von Karnitz to open a school for girls in Wittenberg, offering her board and room in his home.^{xv} In this same treatise Luther makes one of his most eloquent pleas for languages on behalf of the study and interpretation of Scripture. “In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages” (45, 359). “We will not long preserve the gospel without the languages” (45, 360). His curriculum suggestions are thoroughly humanistic. “. . . languages and history, singing and music together with the whole of mathematics” (45,369). But he goes beyond any of the humanists of his day in advocating that public education be compulsory for everyone.

Less well known than Luther’s open letter and sermon on education is a letter he wrote on March 29, 1523 to Eobanus Hessus in which he urges Hessus to urge the youth of Erfurt to study rhetoric and poetry, and Luther states his reasons:

Do not give way to your apprehension, lest we Germans become more barbarous than ever because of the decline of letters through our theology. I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore when letters have declined and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless he has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were the John the Baptists. . . . Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.^{xvi}

A third feature of Luther’s humanism, closely related to his views on education, was his positive view of culture. I was reminded of this while watching the PBS television documentary *The German Americans: 300 Years in the New Land*, on October 8. One segment dealt with the uncultured Anabaptists of Pennsylvania (Amish and Mennonites), another segment with the cultured Germans of Watertown, Milwaukee and other places (Carl Schurz, et alii). It was apparent even to non-Germans which ones were Wittenberg-oriented and which ones were Zwickau-oriented.

In Italy humanism’s cultural emphasis was most evident outwardly in Renaissance art and architecture, - in Florence, in the Sistine Chapel, St. Peter’s, and in the magnificent works of Raphael, da Vinci and Michaelangelo, an emphasis which ultimately culminated in the bizarre extremes of the Counter Reformation’s baroque-rococo. It mirrored Italian humanism’s obsession with the dignity of man.

In Luther’s Germany humanism’s cultural emphasis was most evident in the music of the Reformation. According to Luther music took second place only to theology as a gift of God. To be sure Lutheranism had its Albrecht Durer and its Lucas Cranachs. But Lutheranism’s chief cultural contribution was in the area of music, something that could involve God’s people actively in church and home. Luther was more interested in praising God with lutes and hymns than he was in glorifying man with paint brushes and sculptor’s chisel. Luther’s cultural interest culminated two centuries later in the magnificent choral and organ compositions of Bach.

In speaking about Luther and culture, we would be remiss if we did not mention, at least in passing, the almost immeasurable cultural impact of his Bible translation on German language and literature.

A fourth feature of Luther’s humanism was his scheme of social ethics, a scheme uniquely his own. At the heart of Luther’s view was his understanding of the doctrine of the two kingdoms. God rules two realms. They are not separated (in the U. S. Constitution, yes, but in Scripture and in Luther, no), but they must always

be clearly distinguished. They exist over against each other in dialectical tension. One is the church, the communion of saints, which God rules with his right hand - the gospel. The other is the "state" (in the broad sense of the "orders" of creation, i.e. family, political and economic orders) which God rules with his left hand - the law, natural law in particular. Christians, Luther insisted, belong to both kingdoms and thus are as responsible for taking an active part in the affairs of the world as they are for taking an active part in kingdom activities. The left-hand kingdom is only a temporal kingdom. It serves the church primarily by insuring a measure of order in the world so that "The Word of God may not be bound, but have free course, and be preached to the joy and edifying of God's holy people."

The implications of Luther's view of the two kingdoms are broad in scope, and often have not been understood by those who claim Luther as their mentor. It must not be forgotten that God rules both kingdoms. That obligates Christians to display a positive attitude toward the orders of creation, economic and political orders as well as the family.

One consequence of Luther's insight was his insistence that secular authority derives from God. We take that for granted today. But in Luther's day that view was in diametric opposition to the prevailing notion that authority begins with God and extends through the church (i.e. the papacy) to emperors and princes. An important corollary of Luther's insight is his insistence that secular authority rules only the body, but never conscience. "Be not deceived," Luther wrote to Leo in dedicating his tract on Christian Liberty, "by those who pretend that you are lord of the world."^{xvii}

Since secular authority derives from God, secular authorities are responsible to God. Luther sees this as relating to the doctrine of the priesthood of believers and his understanding of vocation. Not only do all Christians have access to God directly without priestly intermediaries, (and that's where we sometimes stop when we propound this doctrine) but all Christians as functioning priests are expected to serve their neighbors.

It is on this point especially that Luther's humanism comes to the fore. He treats the subject almost endlessly. Some examples from his treatise on *Christian Liberty*: "Lastly, we shall also speak of the things which he does toward his neighbor. A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself. To this end he brings his body into subjection that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others." And in another passage that is pure Luther, "I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable and salutary to my neighbor." And one more, "We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ by faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor."^{xviii} That is Luther at his humanistic best.

Luther's emphasis on the need for Christian priests to serve their neighbors in turn leads to the understanding that every honorable occupation is a Christian vocation. The Christian housewife who darns socks and plies her broom performs services no less honorable than the bishop in the pulpit. Luther loved to emphasize that there are not two ranks of Christians, Carthusian types and ordinary types. His denunciations of clericalism and monasticism (e.g. *Against the Falsely So-Called Estate of the Popes and the Bishops*, 1522) had tremendous consequences in the transformation of German society. Protestant territories witnessed the end of a millennium of monasticism and the ushering in of a new humanistic age.

Applicatory Observations

We intend to limit applicatory observations to the four features of Luther's humanism which we have just presented. Luther's emphasis on the importance of the biblical languages was the first of the four. He saw no hope of reforming the church apart from a sound biblical exegesis, and to a degree without putting a faithful translation into the hands of the people. The presupposition for both was the mastery of the biblical languages.

Sound exegesis and faithful translations are matters of continuing importance in the church today. Dogmatics may have acquired the title "queen of the theological disciplines." But if dogmatics is queen,

exegesis is king. In my estimation, one strength of our Synod, ever since the Wauwatosa Gospel days, has been the prominence the Seminary ascribes to exegesis. Whether the prominence we ascribe to it and our proficiency at doing it have always been in tandem with each other is not something I am in a position to determine. I can only say that in the past dozen years students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have been under a proper exegetical influence. They have had the opportunity to imbibe this feature of Luther's humanism. For that we owe our fathers and the God of our fathers a debt of sincere gratitude.

The second influential feature of Luther's humanism was his emphasis on Christian education. In this 500th anniversary year of his birth, we attach no less importance to the need for a thorough Christian education. A 36.5% slice of the synodical budget earmarked for worker training is testimony to that. But that is only part of the picture. Congregations of the synod operate 374 day schools in an effort to accomplish Luther's humanistic objective.

But we would be doing an injustice to the memory of the Reformer of the church if we merely cited some of our strengths and patted ourselves on the backs for perpetuating a proper humanistic tradition in our church today. It is not enough to note how many millions we spend on worker training, and how many millions more on parish education. Luther was more concerned about educational quality than he was about quantity. And if I may dare say so, we may well prize quality education in our midst, but it is one thing to prize it and another to achieve it. It seems to me that the conception of education's purpose and the methods we employ to achieve our educational objectives have some of the earmarks of the scholasticism Luther viewed with such a sense of disdain.

We must be careful not to let education become a sacred cow grazing contentedly beyond the reach of constructive criticism. We must not allow Luther's emphasis on knowing the truth to obscure humanism's other emphasis on doing the truth. If we fill our churches on Sunday mornings with passive church members, many of whom seem quite content with their passivity, an essential element of Christian education as Luther viewed it may not be getting the emphasis it deserves. Just because Erasmus emphasized Christian piety at the expense of orthodox teaching does not mean we are obliged to emphasize orthodox teaching at the expense of Christian piety. But we may unwittingly do that if and when in pulpit and classroom we give the impression that knowing is an end in itself rather than merely a means to an end. Our goal in "making disciples" is as much affective as it is cognitive.

The third feature of Luther's humanism we noted was his positive view of culture. Luther's knowledge of Scriptural anthropology would not allow him to elevate the "dignity of man" to the high pedestal to which Italian humanists had elevated it. But neither would it allow him to degrade (or to de-dignify - if there were such a word) man as the crown of God's creation in austere Anabaptist fashion. And that is something we need to bear in mind as preachers and teachers. Many student sermons I read and heard for a decade were effective in their exposures and denunciations of the old Adam in us. Adjectives abounded - rotten, worthless, good-for-nothing, despicable, miserable sinners. But in general those sermons were much less effective in portraying the new man in Christ as the noble creature that God has made him to be. There is something to be said about the dignity of man in Christ. But for some reason we tend to keep that to a minimum.

And the consequences are evident. We tend in the direction of being cultural dwarfs. A typical WELS-man is probably notable more for his pretzels-and-beer interests than for his cultural interests. It strikes me that this is less true of Scandinavian Lutherans than it is of German Lutherans. We don't wear stove-pipe hats, bib overalls and ride in horse drawn carriages, but in other respects, I think, a streak of Amish-ness shows in us at times.

Another consequence of a view of culture less positive than Luther's view is a lack of appreciation for the musical heritage that is ours in the Lutheran Church. "The History of Christian Church Music" course at the Seminary would be more highly appreciated than it is if we were more imbued with Luther's humanistic spirit than we are. And perhaps congregations would have less difficulty in recruiting choir members. And more pastors might be willing to put the required effort into providing meaningful and edifying variation in the

Sunday morning worship format. The requisite for perpetuating our rich heritage is more than just a modicum of interest in that heritage.

One final applicatory observation concerns itself with the social ethics which derive from Luther's two kingdoms doctrine. We tend to be strong on our theoretical espousal of the two kingdoms doctrine, but weak in our understanding of its implications. We tend to emphasize God's right handed activity almost to the exclusion of his left handed activity. Or we assert properly that God's left hand is operative in the state and then forget that we are part of the state, with a call from God to exercise responsible citizenship.

Would you contend that a Reformation churchman is trespassing on posted territory who circulates treatises on such subjects as "An Exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order That They Lay Aside False Chastity and Assume the True Chastity of Wedlock," or "Trade and Usury"? Of course you would not because you know who the author is. But if under a pseudonym Luther were writing similar treatises on contemporary social issues and publishing them in the Northwestern Lutheran, what do you suppose the responses would be in the letters to the editor column?

Continuing debate about the propriety of a synodical resolution on abortion is one example of our unclarity. So is the position taken by some pastors and lay persons in opposition to Pregnancy Counseling Centers established by WELS Lutherans on the grounds that such Centers are in conflict with orthodox practice.

Some brethren in our fellowship seem to be uncomfortable with any pronouncements on social issues which appear in official synodical publications. Apparently they feel that such statements cross the bounds of the commission the Lord has given his church to preach the gospel. Does Luther also leave them uncomfortable when he says, "It is not right for the government to take a holiday and let sin rule, and for us to say nothing about it."^{xix} and when he then proceeds to have his say at considerable length about governments that let sin rule?

A parting observation needs to be made regarding fundamentalist types who tend to regard all humanism as secular and atheistic. At times they exhibit paranoid tendencies about humanism. One example illustrates the paranoia. Ray E. Martin, in an article in *The Christian School Builder*, warns against the humanistic influence in school encyclopedias. "Encyclopedias are a vital part of many school libraries. . . . (They) represent the philosophies of present day humanists. This is obvious by the bold display of pictures that are used to illustrate paintings, art and sculpture. . . . This makes it important that the materials we place before our children are free from . . . that which would enflame passion." He goes on to advocate pasting the pages of offensive articles together to make them inaccessible, and blotting out inappropriate pictures with magic markers.^{xx}

We prefer social ethics consonant with Luther's humanism. For a refresher course on how Luther's humanism influenced his social ethics, we might profitably reread the four volumes of *Luther's Works* entitled "Christian in Society."

Concluding Postscript

On September 20, a front page headline in *The New York Times* declared, "Lutherans and Catholics in the US Agree on Key Salvation Doctrine." The accompanying article reports on the agreement reached between Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians on the meaning of justification. The article does not say so *expressis verbis*, but the unmistakable conclusion is that Luther has finally emerged as the vindicated one in the conflict.

The summary affirmation "which both Catholics and Lutherans can accept" reads, "Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ."^{xxi}

That is a clear and apparently unequivocal statement. And we thank God for it, as we do for any expression of his truth, regardless of its source. But the statement does not tell the whole story. The introduction to the new document concludes with this observation. "Agreement on this christological affirmation does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith, but it does raise the question, as we shall see, whether the remaining differences on this doctrine need be church-dividing. Our

intent in presenting this statement is to help our churches see how and why they can and should increasingly proclaim together the one, undivided gospel of God's saving mercy in Christ."^{xxii}

The dialogue statement puts humanism into the spotlight again. In the 16th century Erasmus insisted that minor differences were of no great consequence. Luther's positive doctrinal assertions rankled Erasmus. In *The Bondage of the Will* Luther insisted that if you take away assertions, truth is lost.

Now after all these years, Luther supposedly has emerged as the victor. Careful readers of the new agreement know differently. The assertion that the remaining differences need not be "church-dividing" suggests that the "gentle" humanism of Erasmus has prevailed over the biblical humanism of Luther. The fundamental difference between them centered in their attitude toward the authority of the Word. In Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, Luther's conviction regarding the authority of the Word has been sacrificed in favor of an Erasmian view.

So where do we stand today? In Dresden, on the banks of the Elbe, lies a heap of rubble, the remains of a Lutheran Church which fell victim to the firebombing of the city at the end of World War II. On a green expanse of lawn near the street in front of that bombed out hulk stands a bronze statue of Martin Luther, open Bible in hand. Imprinted on the pedestal of that statue are the words of Jesus in Mt 24:35. "*Himmel und Erde werden vergehen; aber meine Worte werden nicht vergehen.*" Luther would say to us today, "*Vergessen Sie dasz nicht!*" and he might well add the exhortation, "*Furchte dich nicht, du kleine Heerde, denn est ist eures Vater's Wohlgefallen, euch das Reich zu geben.*"

Endnotes

ⁱ Rudolph Bultmann, "Humanism and Christianity." Cited by Roger Shinn in *New Directions in Theology Today*, Vol 6, p. 174. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

ⁱⁱ Shaw, Franklin, Kaasa and Buzicky, editors. *Readings in Christian Humanism*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ida Walz Blayney. *The Age of Luther*. New York: Vantage, 1957. p. 20.

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 53.

^v *Luther's Works*. American Edition. 45, 342. cf. Footnote.

^{vi} Blayney, p. 57.

^{vii} *Ibid.* p. 58.

^{viii} Paul Grendler. "In Praise of Erasmus." *The Wilson Quarterly*. Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, Spring, 1983. Vol VIII, No 2. p.100

^{ix} *Ibid.* p. 98.

^x *Readings in Christian Humanism*. p.230

^{xi} Blayney. p. 65.

^{xii} James Anthony Froude, *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, I. New York, 1874. p.83 Quoted by Blayney, p.67. This same compromising spirit is evident in two tracts Erasmus published prior to the Daitribe: *On the Immense Mercy of God*, and *Inquisitio.de Fide*, designed to explain the difference between fundamental and nonfundamental doctrines. Erasmus' intent was that the tracts would underscore the fundamental agreement between Lutherans and Catholics. This mind set helps one to understand Erasmus' contention that the question of the will was a nonessential matter. He simply could not tolerate dogmatic definitions because they promoted exclusiveness, according to Erasmus. cf. "Was Erasmus Responsible for Luther?" *Concordia Theological Journal*. Vol 41, No 4. October 1971, pp. 22-23.

^{xiii} A.G. Dickens. *The German Nation and Martin Luther*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973. From the chapter: "Luther's Debt to Humanism." p. 51.

^{xiv} *Ibid.* pp.51-52.

^{xv} LW 45, 344. footnote.

^{xvi} Smith and Jacobs. *Luther's Correspondence*. Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1918. Vol 2, pp 176-177.

^{xvii} LW 31, 341.

^{xviii} LW 31, 364, 367, 371.

^{xix} LW 44, 103. "Treatise on Good Works." 1520.

^{xx} Ray E. Martin, *Christian School Builder*. Vol 15, no 9. Apr 1983 pp.205-209. Quoted by Martin Marty, "M.E.M.O.," *The Christian Century*, Sept 28, 1983.

^{xxi} Origins. National Conference of Catholic Bishops Documentary Service. "Justification by Faith," by the Lutheran Roman Catholic Dialog Group. Vol 13, No 17. Oct 6, 1973, p.279, para. 4.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 279.