Reformation ABCs

# S is for “simul iustus et peccator”

Don was my tattoo guy in a small studio on the outskirts of the Delaware town I was then serving. Don is an atheist. I have had some of the most holy and sacred conversations in his chair.

I went in one day and asked for script on my arm that says ‘Simul Iustus et Peccator.’ As I sat down, Don immediately asked, “What’s this mean to you?”

It’s really Lutheran, I replied. Don pressed me for more.

I told him it’s a Latin phrase meaning “Simultaneously Sinner and Saint.”

And that Lutherans believe that we are 100% sinner and 100% saint at the exact same time (and not very good at math apparently). It means that we have to fight against our human sinfulness, Every. Single. Day.

However, by virtue of the cleansing waters of baptism we are justified, righteous, a saint, simply because God claims and loves us as children. No matter what, we are sinner and we are saints, both/and, always.

“But what if..” Nope, sinner and saint. “Or…” Still sinner and saint. Always. We are always going to be sinners, it is a part of us. But we are also always called, claimed, children of God.

“Well,” Don said. That’s something I can get behind.”

Pastor Kelly Pensinger

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# S is for Scandinavian Reformation

Many people in English speaking cultures are likely to think that the Calvinist expression of the Reformation was vastly more successful in spreading than the Lutheran one.

A look at a map of 1560-70 would suggest this was true, with Reformed Protestantism stretching from areas of Poland and Hungary, Switzerland and France, into the Netherlands, England and Scotland. But it was also true that, unlike Calvin’s students or the Jesuits of the Catholic revival, Luther’s sense of mission was not what we today would call “global.” His call was as prophetic reformer to speakers of German. Thousands of them and their descendants would carry Luther’s church beyond Germany into the cities and countryside of eastern Habsburg lands.

Yet there are also whole nations where Luther’s teaching prevailed- in Scandinavia.

As with the rest of northern Europe, university ferment and real politics made room for alternative ways of “being church.” Luther’s northeast German student, successor as pastor of Wittenberg, and confessor Johann Bugenhagen would be sent to Denmark to gain royal support for Luther’s teachings, and a new church order Bugenhagen devised.

Sweden- including most of what today is Finland- was newly independent under Gustav Vasa (Gustav I). With the king’s support, and the leadership of two married priests, Olavus (Olof) Petri- a graduate of Wittenberg- and his brother Laurentis (Lars), later archbishop of Uppsala, the Swedish church adopted Lutheran justification theology and principles, joining them to a modified Catholic church order.

Bugenhagen’s synthesis was applied to Denmark’s territory of Norway. In Iceland, also ruled by Denmark, and a stepping stone to North America, the Scandinavian program of removing Catholic bishops who refused to become Lutheran, nationalizing medieval church lands, and worship in the people’s language was carried out as well. Pastor, schoolmaster and later bishop Gudbrandur Thorlaksson translated the Bible into Old Norse/Icelandic, arguably saving an entire language for popular use. Luther’s expression of the reformation was becoming “global” after all.

The Rev. Edward Godden, Wilmington, Delaware

# S is for Sola….

We call them the “solas”. Are there three, five, or six? And since “sola” means “alone,” why more than one? However, you count them, they offer shorthand summations of our Lutheran theology.

Sola scriptura—scripture alone

Sola gratia—grace alone

Sola fide—faith alone

Solo Christo-Christ alone

Soli Deo gloria—for the glory of God alone

And then… “crux sola est nostra theologia”—the cross alone is our theology (see “theology of the cross,” coming up under T!).

I would suggest that they are different signs of the same sola – by grace alone we are saved; grace is given only through Christ’s life-giving death and resurrection (cross alone); we encounter that event through scripture (Word), our sole source and authority; we apprehend all only through faith, and our knee bends only before this One to whom all honor and glory be given.

An historical caveat on Sola Scriptura: Although Luther is quoted as having said at the Diet of Worms, “I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God,” David Steinmetz has suggested that “sola scriptura generally meant “prima scriptura,” scripture as the final source and norm by which all theological sources and argu-ments are to be judged, not Scripture as the sole source of theological wisdom.” (Quoted in Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, p.673.)

Maybe this reminds us that slogans, even beautiful ones in Latin, can only take us so far.

The Rev. Dianne O. Loufman

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# S is for Small Catechism

In 1528 and 1529 Martin Luther traveled to various congregations in Germany, and was shocked to see the sorry state of preaching and teaching at a local level. Pastors were struggling to preach the gospel and renew the church. Church members were not about to articulate basic tenets of Christian faith. In 1528 Luther preached a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper which formed the basis of the Small and Large Catechisms. The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers was published in 1529 as large posters to be used in schools. Later that year Luther published an illustrated booklet, intended to be used by both pastors and lay people in the home. Eventually, it became incorporated into The Book of Concord, the official confessions of the Lutheran Church. The catechism takes the form of questions one might hear from a child, with straightforward, memorable answers. The Small Catechism became the most widely read text during the Protestant Reformation, and still holds a significant place in Lutheran thought today.

Pastor Kathy Ierien

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd

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# S is for Staupitz, Johann von

Staupitz was Luther’s learned and kindly spiritual father, mentor, and advocate. First, he was dean of theology at the new university in Wittenberg. Next, he was elected vicar of the Augustinian friars in Germany, representing a reforming group within the order that Luther would join in 1505.

In his book On the Love of God, Staupitz wrote, “The spirit is hid beneath the letter; the old law is pregnant with Christ who gives us grace to love God above all things.” But our young friar couldn’t hear the message. Staupitz listened patiently as Luther confessed sin after sin after sin. Staupitz urged, “Look to the wounds of Christ;… it is there the grace of God will appear to you.” It didn’t. Staupitz gave him a mantra: “I am yours; save me” (Psalm 119:94).

In 1511, under a cloister garden pear tree, Staupitz told Luther to earn his doctorate, preach, and become a professor. The next year Staupitz cannily retired, leaving open the Bible chair. Immersed in the tasks of teaching, Luther finally felt the dawning of God’s tender compassion.

Staupitz was repeatedly pressured to silence Luther. Instead he found creative ways to protect both Luther and himself. Like Erasmus, Staupitz prepared the way for reform but would not break with Rome. Before he died, Staupitz wrote, “My love for you is unchanged… We owe much to you, Martin. You have taken us from the pigsty to the pasture of life….I hope you will have good fruit at Wittenberg. My prayers are with you.”

The Rev. Julie Ryan

Retired in Woodridge, Illinois