

Hypothesis for my further study of Luther

It is of the utmost importance to understand the distinction Luther makes between "grace" and "gift," and all that he takes the term "gift" to cover.

"[G]race," he says, "must be sharply distinguished from gifts, for only grace is life eternal (Rom 6[:23]), and only wrath is eternal death" (*LW*, 32:229). "These two things [*sc.* "the gift," i.e., "faith," and "the grace of God"] are distinguished in Rom 5[:15]: 'For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.' He calls faith in Christ—which he more often calls a gift—the gift in the grace of one man, for it is given to us through the grace of Christ" (227 f.).

Luther also distinguishes types of "gifts," specifically between "spiritual" and "temporal" gifts (cf., e.g., *LW*, 21: 325). Moreover, he speaks of faith (as in the passage just quoted) as "*the gift*," which is to say, presumably, "*the spiritual gift*" (italics added). The gospel, he says, "teaches and preaches two things, namely, the righteousness and the grace of God. Through righteousness it heals the corruption of nature. This is done by the true righteousness which is the gift of God, namely, faith in Christ. . . . Faith is the gift and inward good which purges the sin to which it is opposed. It is that leaven which is described in the gospel as wholly hidden under three measures of meal [Matt 13:33]. The grace of God, on the other hand, is an outward good, God's favor, the opposite of wrath. . . . Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet not everything is healed through the gift. The gift has been infused, the leaven has been added to the mixture. It works so as to purge away the sin for which a person has already been forgiven, and to drive out the evil guest for whose expulsion permission has been given" (35:227, 229).

But Luther also makes clear beyond any question that there is an immense—one might go so far as to say, *transcendental*—difference between God's grace and God's gifts (also called "good things"), including, presumably,

even "*the gift*" of faith itself. "God's good things are merely [*sic!*] gifts, which last for a season; but His grace and regard are the inheritance, which lasts forever, as St. Paul says in Romans 6:23: 'The grace of God is eternal life.' In giving us the gifts [including (again), presumably, *the gift of faith*] He gives only what is His, but in His grace and His regard of us He gives His very self. In the gifts we touch His hand; but in His gracious regard we receive His heart, spirit, mind, and will. . . . Where God's gracious will is, there are also His gifts; but, on the other hand, where His gifts are, there is not also His gracious will. . . . Thus God would not have His true children put their trust in His goods and gifts, spiritual or temporal, however great they be, but in His grace and in Himself, yet without despising the gifts" (21:324 f.).

I can't but think that, fully thought out, Luther's sharp distinction between "gift" and "grace" leads to something like my sharp distinction between my own subjective immortality and my objective immortality in and through God's love. Clearly, the most that my own subjective survival of death could possibly be, even to the point of my subjective immortality, is, in Luther's sense, a "gift" (or a "good thing"). But, if he is right, all of God's gifts—not excluding, incidentally, *the gift of faith itself*—"last for a season" only, whereas the grace of God alone *is* eternal life. And "God would not have His true children put their trust in His goods and gifts, spiritual or temporal, however great they be, but in His grace and in Himself." If such statements don't require something like my understanding of Christian hope and last things if they're to be taken, as Maurice would say, in their "full length and breadth," I need someone to tell me why.

18 January 2010