

Mercy in the Reformed Tradition

As part of my background reading on mercy, I have delved into writings from diverse traditions, and recently stumbled on a collection of Lutheran reflections on mercy. The Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church in the USA published this series of 26 articles on mercy, totally over 600 pages, in 2019. The whole series can be downloaded from <https://reporter.lcms.org/2018/mercy-essays-feature-lutheran-theologians-from-reformation-to-today>. Having just read the whole series, along with Timothy Keller's book *Ministries of Mercy*, I am writing some observations here to help me think through how Reformed views on mercy relate to my own emphasis on mercy as a gift of extreme kindness motivated by compassion.

As can be expected with multiple authors, there is more than one voice, even within the Lutheran collection. Although there is broad agreement among the authors, some of the articles show a polemic attitude that clearly seeks to challenge perceived opposition within the Lutheran community. The series consistently draws on the views of Luther and his early followers and builds a foundation for mercy on a Reformed view of scripture, faith, and mission.

Tim Keller is a prominent Presbyterian in the USA and his book (originally released in 1989, though I read the 2017 edition) is largely a practical manual for people facilitating church-based welfare services. That context itself reveals an important standpoint in relation to mercy, implying that the core of how we express mercy is the programmatic delivery of services to the socially disadvantaged.

From these readings, mercy is described in three contexts, which, if not inconsistent with each other, are at least not clearly in unison.

1. Mercy as the source of creation

Martin Luther asserted that the act of creation itself springs from God's goodness and mercy, by which he was primarily emphasising that we were created prior to any merit or worthiness of our own (Bayer 2008, 95). All people have experienced and benefit from God's mercy, because their very creation is the first work of God's mercy.

The fact that God guarantees existence makes him good; the fact that he protects from nothingness makes him merciful. These are thus for Luther the two focal points for his understanding of the faith in God as Creator: his gift-giving 'goodness' and his 'mercy' that protects from evil, even to the point that he rescues from the power of death; not just redemption, but creation itself is a work of mercy by the triune God. (Bayer 2008, 172)

That being the case, mercy must predate creation. To Bayer, "The triune God's entire being is merciful" (Bayer 2019, 4). But that only works if mercy is not a response to misery, for "Insofar as it is a relation of love and mercy to misery, it [mercy] cannot be older than misery itself" (Löhe 1860). Likewise, Tim Keller believes that the first act of mercy was when God provided clothes for Adam and Eve, following the Fall (Keller 2017, 19). If mercy is defined as a response to misery, then mercy can only come into existence after misery, and hence can only be a contingent rather than a necessary attribute of God.

In Catholic discussion, this same contradiction was noted by Daniel Moloney in response to Walter Kasper's claim that mercy is *the* fundamental attribute of God. Says Moloney:

This sounds profound, but does not withstand examination. Mercy is a virtue that requires someone who needs mercy, someone with some sort of sin or other imperfection. The Father is not merciful to the Holy Spirit. He loves the Holy Spirit, but there's nothing imperfect about the Holy Spirit so that he needs the Father's mercy. For mercy to be essential to God, as Kasper holds, it would mean that God could not exist without expressing mercy. But since God does not show mercy to himself, it would not be possible for him to exist without there also being sinners in need of his mercy—and that notion is absurd. (Moloney 2015)

Moloney's resolution of the problem is to position love as the essential attribute of God, and to view mercy as an expression of love towards sinners. This is similar to the approach of John Barclay, who sees grace rather than mercy as an essential attribute of God. To Barclay, grace—a stance of loving favour towards all things—is expressed within the Trinity, but the manifestation of grace in the form of mercy depends on the existence of someone in need external to God (Barclay 2020 as well as pers. comm).

My own definition of mercy—a gift of extreme kindness motivated by compassion—places me on the side of Löhe, Keller, Barclay and Moloney rather than Kasper, Luther and Bayer. Mercy can only be expressed once one has seen someone in need and felt compassion for them. The Christian concept of Trinity sees relationship in the heart of divinity, and in that relational dance sees pure love. Creation too is an expression of God's love, even grace and kindness, but not an example of God's mercy.

Being nit-picky, however, I'd say that mercy was shown prior to the Fall. Mercy is not expressed only towards sin, but any need for which one can feel compassion. Thus, God's love for humanity was shown as mercy in the provision of food to eat, air to breath, and in the creation of Eve to be Adam's companion.

2. Mercy as salvation through Christ

The primary understanding of mercy in Reformed writings is always in the context of sin and salvation. According to one Lutheran scholar:

What is the nature and shape of this mercy? Mercy is the Lord's compassionate action toward sinful human beings in that He does not leave us alone with our sin, forsaking us to death and condemnation, but instead rescues us by His death and resurrection to live with Him. (Pless 2019, 10)

Another notes that "All human misery originates in sin, which is itself the biggest misery" and in that context describes mercy as that form of love which brings consolation, relief, and help in response to misery (Löhe 1860, 3,6).

In Luther's own words: "This is the highest article of our faith, ... that He might be merciful and that He desires to pardon sins for His Son's sake and to save" (quoted in Preus 1984, 4). Thus, the true or greatest form of mercy is evangelism (Löhe 1860, 27), for only when the Gospel is preached can people hear, repent, and be saved.

Yet another Lutheran scholar, while emphasising that the Old Testament challenges any dualism that divorces spiritual from social issues, and encourages the church to show its concern for the needy, can still conclude that "Of course, assisting the poor, working toward fairer wages, lobbying for a more humane way to address immigration, and so on, are not in any way salvatory" (Lessing 2004, 16).

These quotes reflect the standard Reformed, and the contemporary Evangelical, interpretation of the Gospel, in which mercy is fundamentally shown in our spiritual salvation, achieved through the sacrifice of Christ. God's mercy is shown in the unearned "happy exchange" through which Christ bestows righteousness on us. Keller echoes the same belief when he writes:

And the mercy of God is simply this. We must see that all of us are spiritually poor and bankrupt before God (Matt. 5.3), and even when we put on our best moral efforts for God, we appear as beggars clothed in filthy rags (Isa. 64.6). Yet in Jesus Christ, God provided a righteousness for us (Rom. 3:21-22), a wealth straight from the account of the Son of God, who impoverished himself through suffering and death that we might receive it (2 Cor. 8.9). (Keller 2017, 14)

One might ask then, from what does mercy save us? That becomes clear, in Reformed logic, when we follow the thread of Oswald Bayer's view that "God's mercy stands opposite God's wrath" (Bayer 2008, 228). In the same way another Lutheran scholar opposed mercy and justice as follows:

Thus, justice and mercy, the two hands of God, work on the same fallen, sinful being. After the one strikes, the other binds up the wounds made by the first. ... Men for their part become either children of God's mercy or people of His avenging hand. (Löhe 1860, 6)

In Löhe's work, justice is implicitly aligned with wrath and punishment. Whether that is the Biblical depiction of justice we shall take up elsewhere. For now, I only comment on his vision of God: can the God whom Jesus claims loves even God's enemies faithfully be viewed as wounding us in wrath, as a form of punishment, and only then soothing us with mercy? In this vision, mercy does not soften, prevent, or over-rule justice, but merely patches up the damage done by wrath. If so, mercy would be better shown by God restraining that avenging hand rather than binding up the resulting wounds afterwards! Otherwise, we are trapped in a universe with a violent husband who repeatedly beats his wife before repudiating his love for her. As it stands, in the worldview of Bayer and Löhe, the cause of our misery may be sin, but what we need to be saved from is God's wrath.

Part of Lutheran theology is to accept the hiddenness of God while we live on earth. To Luther, this hiddenness is what necessitates our faith, because we cannot understand the visible actions of God in terms of their final purpose. God's actions are veiled.

He hides his eternal kindness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under unrighteousness. It is the supreme step of faith to believe him to be kind who saves so few and condemns so many. ... If I were able for any reason to comprehend how God is merciful and just who shows such wrath and unrighteousness, there would be no place for faith. (Luther's words, quoted in Wingren 1957, 247)

In other words, regardless of how vengeful God appears, in faith we believe God's ultimate purpose is to show mercy. How that can be will remain unclear this side of the grave. We can understand the Law, with its clear logic based on action and consequences: prohibition, violation, judgement, and punishment. But we cannot truly conceive of God's mercy. "The gospel is absolutely, completely incomprehensible. That God rescues one from, and brings one safely through, the deserved judgement is a miracle." (Bayer 2008, 228)

Given that perspective, many Reformed thinkers see a struggle within God. The Japanese Lutheran scholar Kazoh Kitamori makes this explicit in his work *Theology of the Pain of God*.

Kitamori is convinced that God must punish all wrong-doing, and yet he knew he must also account for God's decision to show mercy in verses like Jeremiah 31:20:

*Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child I delight in?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy on him,
says the Lord.*

Since God is “deeply moved”—in Luther’s translation God’s “heart is broken”—Kitamori concludes that God is in pain over an inner conflict. “God who must sentence sinners to death fought with God who wishes to love them” (Kitamori 1958, 21,115). Bayer sees the same sentiment in Hosea 11:8, when God withholds revenge on Ephraim because “My heart recoils within me.” Such verses depict an “inconceivable upheaval that occurs within God himself” (Bayer 2008, xviii).

That Reformed theology leads to such a conflict within the nature of God strikes me as an indication that something is wrong with their understanding of either justice or mercy, or perhaps both. To see justice and mercy as opposed to each other, and consequently to see God as internally conflicted between obligations to both virtues, is radically wrong, that is, wrong at the conceptual root. We see a different concept of God in the life and teachings of Jesus, which highlights a different understanding of justice and mercy. In Jesus we see the visible image of a God in whom justice and mercy are united in the task of reconciling all things in heaven and earth.

3. Mercy as almsgiving and welfare services

Notwithstanding the centrality of spiritual salvation in Reformed thinking, Lutheran writers still find a role for individual Christians and church congregations to assist people with physical needs. The work of Wilhelm Löhe cited above was specifically written to teach women about becoming deaconesses. Standing beside the ministers of the Word are those of the deaconate whose office is bodily mercy through acts of service such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick.

Several documents in the Lutheran series on mercy focus on Biblical injunctions to care for people's physical needs. We are instructed to provide such care in the Old Testament (e.g. Exodus 23:4, Deuteronomy 24:19-21), by Jesus (Matthew 10:8, Luke 10:29-37), Paul (1 Timothy 5:3-5), and warned that the final judgement may depend on whether we have done so (Matthew 25:31-46). This gives some guidance to individuals, but the Bible also illustrates congregational programs of care such as feeding widows (Acts 6:1-7) and taking up financial collections for other churches in need (Acts 11:27-30, 2 Corinthians 8).

From early in church history, individuals have given money into a congregational chest so that the money can be distributed to those in need. Martin Luther gave specific instructions about how such funds should be managed (Luther 1523) and the practice continues to be an important characteristic of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. As I noted earlier, Keller's book is primarily a manual for how churches can manage welfare programs using such funds.

As per Galatians 6:10, many prioritise the use of such funds for the needs of fellow-believers (see for instance Harrison 2002, 9; Walther 2005, 9). A follower of Jesus must wonder, though,

whether the Gospel narratives support that tribalism, or whether Jesus' priority for healing and feeding was towards the 'lost sheep' rather than for those already safe within the fold.

The editor of the Lutheran series on mercy, Matthew Harrison, is a strong advocate for such acts of service, not because they are commanded, but because the church by its nature should be known as a place of mercy (Harrison 2004). Harrison is at pains to position *diakonia* (Greek for service or ministry) as a constituent part of ecclesiology, that is, to integrate acts of loving service into the core mission of the church rather than allow them to be side-lined as a secondary priority (Harrison 2002). The fact that he needs to make a case for that thesis shows there is resistance to the idea within his constituency.

The resistance, I believe, arises from the primacy of mercy-as-salvation discussed in the previous section. If God's ultimate mercy is directed towards eternal life after death, then any mercy directed towards the sufferings of this life are necessarily secondary. My own understanding of mercy, however, is that it is directed equally to any suffering. Both God and people (especially the people who align their lives to God) give with surprising generosity to all, without pre-conditions, and without seeking reward or repayment. Such mercy arises from compassion, which may be prompted by any type of need. Human need is often the result of one's own inadequacy, in which case mercy will be directed towards the relief of guilt and shame. But human need may also result from external abuse, coercion, bondage, slavery, exploitation, in which case mercy will be directed towards bringing freedom. Human need may result from the physical challenges of our environment and our imperfect social systems, in which case mercy will supply food, medicine, housing, and will seek to improve the systemic causes of those challenges. Human need may result from a lack of belonging and identity, in which case mercy will help people in physical or psychological exile to find their way home. The Bible documents each of these categories of human need, and also documents God's merciful interventions that seek their amelioration. Consequently, any approach to mercy that only considers spiritual salvation and fails to include the traditional acts of service and almsgiving is manifestly unbiblical.

The traditional acts of service, however, are far from the whole picture of mercy. The church has always been known for its extensive welfare services: feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, giving clothes to the naked and shelter to the homeless. Such humane responses to physical needs are all valuable and can certainly spring from a posture of mercy, though at times they have been performed out of obligation or to gain some reward. When people give money to a charitable fund, they typically do not know the recipients at all and so can have no direct compassion for them. Even at their best, these forms of charitable service only reflect the sort of goodwill and kindness that is essential in any sustainable society rather than the unexpected extravagance of mercy. They are minimal expressions of human responsibility towards each other and only a dim reflection of God's prodigality.

Instrumentality and Conditionality

Through my readings, authors such as Harrison and Keller clearly find a resistance in their audiences to the claim that enabling people's physical well-being is an essential component of the Gospel. What lies beneath that reluctance in Reformed congregations? I think the conflict is clear within Keller's book.

First, Keller presents a dichotomy between God's mercy and ours. God's mercy is revealed in the extraordinary gift of atonement that aims to reconcile all things in Christ; ours is shown in quite ordinary acts of service to help the poor and needy, especially those who are fellow

believers. That's an uninspiring message, with a very pedestrian outcome only marginally above the basic human maintenance required for any cohesive society.

Even though Keller writes that "Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the *essence* of being a Christian" (Keller 2017, 5), that ministry is not tightly connected to God's work of salvation. Reformed congregations hear repeatedly about God's saving grace and the importance of escaping God's wrath in order to gain eternal life. The spiritual dynamics of sin and salvation are everything; the 'flesh' is at best transitory and at worst an active barrier to that spiritual salvation. So when a Reformed congregation hears, once in a blue moon, that we should also care for people's physical needs, it is rarely embraced as anything but an secondary duty. If we know that spiritual needs far outweigh physical needs and that the Gospel is fundamentally about being saved from the physical to enjoy the spiritual for eternity, then caring for people's physical needs doesn't really make sense.

Keller claims that "Word and deed are equally necessary, mutually interdependent and inseparable ministries, each carried out with the single purpose of the spread of the kingdom of God" (101). I think he really believes that, but without a clearer vision of what "the kingdom of God" means—and on that topic Anabaptists do a far better job than any Reformed thinker—he will continue to struggle uphill to convince Reformed parishioners. A charitable reading of Keller allows that the linkages between God's mercy, our mercy, word, deed, and kingdom all make sense on the basis of some unstated assumptions, but those linkages are not well-argued and that leads inevitably to ambivalence.

Even within *Ministries of Mercy*, Keller repeats the Reformed confusion on this matter. He affirms that caring for the poor (however meagre that is as a demonstration of mercy) is essential. We must meet the full range of people's needs: theological, psychological, social, and physical. Word and deed act symbiotically (110). The church's ministry is two-pronged (41). And yet, the ministry of mercy only addresses the visible, surface-level, 'felt' needs (26) that mask the underlying core needs that are ultimately theological (39). Even the use of 'felt' (always in quotes, as though Keller himself is unhappy with the term) is derogatory, implying that the need is perceived rather than real. The word rather than deed is the ministry that really gets to the root of human need (114).

Mercy is still viewed instrumentally: not primarily as an expression of our compassion (though it is that too, p. 82) but as a means towards the deeper spiritual goal. Deeds are always positioned as inferior to the word. Meeting 'felt' needs is, for Keller, a way for outsiders to come into the church "through the side door" (244, 249). When unbelievers see Christians feeding the hungry, comforting the suffering, supporting the financially and physically weak, their "hearts can be softened to Christ" (40). Consequently, "To every deed ministry, a church must affix a means by which the recipients of ministry will be exposed to a verbal presentation of the gospel" (249).

Keller believes that God's mercy itself is instrumental: "God offers his mercy to rebellious people to make them responsible and whole" (80). Although he firmly believes that mercy from God is not based on the recipient's worth or desert, it is given with post-conditions, that is requirements about how the recipient must respond. "When God's grace first comes to us, it comes unconditionally, regardless of our merits. ... But though God's mercy comes without conditions, it does not *proceed* without conditions!" (91, see also 257)

This conditionality is alien to the example of Jesus. I am sure that Jesus, and God, acts in mercy *with intent*, but an intention is significantly different from a condition. Jesus' miraculous healings, feedings, and declarations of forgiveness are given first and foremost because Jesus

had compassion on the people around him. He met their immediate needs because those needs were important in themselves. No doubt he *hoped* that the recipients would respond with gratitude, and that they might be transformed at a deeply level. But there is no example in the Gospels of Jesus showing mercy and then retracting it or regretting it when the recipient failed to meet any post-conditions.

Final thoughts

There is much in the Reformed understanding of mercy with which I agree. Underlying all three contexts in which the Reformed tradition positions mercy is the principle that mercy is an undeserved gift. I agree. Though mercy is sometimes in the form of forgiveness, and at other times as the relief of physical need, both spring from the love of God. I agree.

I disagree, however, with the Reformed tendency to separate spiritual from physical needs and to elevate the importance of the former above the latter. That dualism inevitably concludes that the mercy of forgiveness is fundamental and that mercy towards other needs is secondary. As is clear from the earlier sections of this essay, I also disagree with the Reformed supposition that the conflict between justice and mercy generates an internal struggle within God over how to satisfy wrath.

A more Biblical view sees humanity holistically and sees God's loving kindness at work equally in deepening our relationship with God, our relationships with each other, and our relationships with the rest of creation. God's mercy provides us air to breath, forgiveness for our failures, medicine for our illnesses, friends and family for companionship. Beyond providing all that is needed for life, God surprises us with grace upon grace, parting the Red Sea so we can escape slavery, bringing dry bones back to life, turning water into wine, and welcoming lost sons with a fatted calf. In Christ, God shows how far that mercy will go. Christ willingly ate with tax collectors, healed lepers, and washed the feet of the one whom he knew would betray him. In these examples, God's mercy is directed towards physical, emotional and social needs, implying that they are just as important as the person's "spiritual" needs.

These examples also show God as being merciful not just to the "elect" but to but those who position themselves as enemies of God. God, who is the father (metaphorically the source) of all compassion, is for us rather than against us, regardless of our disposition towards God. God would rather die at our hands than call down the wrath of heaven on us.

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