***Counseling Under the Cross: How Martin Luther Applied the Gospel to Daily Life***

**Author Interview Q&A with Dr. Bob Kellemen**

1. **You began and ended your education with Martin Luther. Since he lived some 500 years ago, our listeners might be interested to hear more about that!**

I attended a Lutheran kindergarten. Then, some thirty years later, I completed my PhD dissertation at Kent State University, writing on *Martin Luther as a Case Study in Christian Sustaining, Healing, Reconciling, and Guiding*. And in almost all 14 of my books, I quote Luther. Truly, Luther has been a spiritual companion for my entire life.

1. **In *Counseling Under the Cross*, you say that Martin Luther reformed your life and ministry. How so?**

As for my life, BL (Before Luther) I applied justification to my life—I knew that God the Judge forgave me because of His Son’s death on the cross that paid for my sins. However, I wasn’t really grasping reconciliation. I pictured it like this: The Judge said, “Forgiven!” Then he sent me out of his court room, not wanting me in his life. Luther helped me to grasp reconciliation, which we could picture like this: God the Judge takes off his judge’s robes, puts on his family attire, and, because of Christ, invites me into his family. Because of Luther, I now hear God saying to me not only “Forgiven” but also “Welcome home!”

As for my ministry, people often ask me what biblical counselors most impacted my counseling. I’ll mention modern counselors such as David Powlison, Steve Viars, and Ron Allchin. But then I’ll say that the person who has most influenced how I apply the gospel in counseling is Martin Luther. To learn how…you could read *Counseling Under the Cross*!

1. **Many people, when they think of Martin Luther, think of the great theologian-reformer. Yet you say that it was Luther the pastoral counselor who motivated Luther the reformer. In what way?**

In his own life, Luther struggled to understand how to find peace with God. After many failed attempts at gaining favor with God by works, Luther finally realized the truth of salvation through Christ alone by faith alone through grace alone. He then spent the rest of his life helping others to come to the same saving realization. He nailed his *95 Theses* to the church door in Wittenberg because he had tremendous pastoral concern that people were being led away from grace/faith and led toward works as the means for peace with God.

1. **You explain that Luther struggled greatly with depression, anxiety, fears, and even with what we might today call “OCD.” What were Luther’s struggles like and how did he find peace and hope in the gospel?**

Luther lived in terror that he could never satisfy a holy God—and he could not—in himself. He was tormented daily with fears of death and damnation. When Luther came to realize that Christ already satisfied all of God’s righteous requirements, Luther found the peace he longed for. Luther taught that if we deal with life’s greatest fear/anxiety—whether God accepts us—then we can face all of life’s lesser (but real) anxieties and fears. Grace grants peace.

1. ***Counseling Under the Cross* shares vignettes where Luther ministered to at least three people who by today’s diagnostic labels would be considered “mentally ill.” How did Luther minister to these individuals?**

Luther counseled one person who thought he was a rooster, counseled another person who claimed he was a corpse—dead, and counseled a third person who was a “retentive”—refusing to urinate. Those are hard cases! With all three individuals, Luther followed the model of Ephesians 4:15 by speaking gospel truth in love. Luther applied the gospel of Christ’s grace specifically to their struggles. *And* he did so in the context of Christian community—loving these individuals, expressing compassion, empathy, and care, and engaging the Body of Christ in relationship with these troubled souls.

1. ***Counseling Under the Cross* is filled with scores of vignettes and stories of Luther’s pastoral counsel. Which stories are most meaningful to you?**

It’s almost impossible to choose from among so many stirring examples, so I’ll highlight a “category” of care. In the book, I share numerous vignettes where Luther counseled *grieving* people. We often think of Luther as the fiery reformer. But he also had such a tender heart for hurting people. He encouraged people to grieve honestly, deeply, and candidly. He entered their pain and loss, and then he directed them to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. Grieving people found in Luther a compassionate spiritual comforter.

1. ***Counseling Under the Cross* has scores of direct quotes from Luther’s letters of spiritual counsel. Which quotes of note are most powerful in your thinking?**

This is another difficult question because there are almost 600 direct quotes from Luther in *Counseling Under the Cross*. On my website, I selected 95 Quotes of Note (since Luther had his *95 Theses*). Here are links to those 6 posts:

* Part 1: [15 Martin Luther Quotes on the Sufficiency of Scripture](http://bit.ly/15LutherSuf).
* Part 2: [15 Martin Luther Quotes on Comforting the Suffering](http://bit.ly/15LutherComfort).
* Part 3: [15 Martin Luther Quotes on Looking at Life Through the Lens of the Cross](http://bit.ly/15LutherCross).
* Part 4: [15 Martin Luther Quotes on Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves](http://bit.ly/15LutherGospel).
* Part 5: [*15 Martin Luther Quotes on Growing in Grace*](http://bit.ly/LutherGrace).
* Part 6: [*20 Martin Luther Quotes on Salvation by Faith Alone*](http://bit.ly/LutherFaith).

Here are two of my favorite quotes…

* “You say that the sins which we commit every day offend God, and therefore we are not saints. To this I reply: Mother love is stronger than the filth and scabbiness on a child, and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us. Accordingly, although we are sinners, we do not lose our filial relation on account of our filthiness, nor do we fall from grace on account of our sin.”
* “For who is able to express what a thing it is, when a man is assured in his heart that God neither is nor will be angry with him, but will be forever a merciful and loving Father to him for Christ’s sake? This is indeed a marvelous and incomprehensible liberty, to have the most high and sovereign Majesty so favorable to us. Wherefore, this is an inestimable liberty, that we are made free from the wrath of God forever; and is greater than heaven and earth and all other creatures.”

1. **Martin Luther counseled his mother and his father. What were the issues and how did he minister to his parents?**

It’s always difficult to counsel family members. Yet, Luther counseled his mother and his father with such humility, respect, graciousness, empathy, and care. In most of these vignettes with his parents, Luther was counseling them when they were near their deathbed. He respected their fears, empathized with their feelings, and tenderly reminded them of their gospel hope in Christ.

1. **Luther faced many losses in life, including the loss of a child and the loss of his parents. In *Counseling Under the Cross*, you explain that Luther grieved deeply and that he gave Christians permission to grieve. How so?**

Sometimes we have the false notion that if we are truly spiritual, then we won’t grieve the loss of a loved one. Luther taught that the failure to grieve was actually a sign of a lack of Christlike love. So he commended people for grieving, he gave examples of his own great grief, and most importantly, he shared scriptural examples of holy grief.

1. **One of the most powerful messages of *Counseling Under the Cross* is the four-fold message Luther taught about our salvation in Christ alone. What is that four-fold message and what difference does it make for our lives and ministries today?**

In Christ, the Father says to us, 1.) “Forgiven!” (Justification). 2.) “Welcome home!” (Reconciliation). 3.) “Saint!” (Regeneration). 4.) “Victor!” (Redemption).

What difference does it make? We are to preach the gospel to ourselves every day so that we understand who we are in Christ and so we then live out that newness through Christ. I say it like this in one of my tweet-size chapter summaries:

*Daily behold in Christ’s gospel mirror your gracious Father saying to you:*

*“Forgiven! Welcome home! Saint! Victor!”*

1. **One famous statement about Luther notes that “Sanctification is the art of getting used to your justification.” You don’t believe that is accurate. What then did Luther teach about the Christian life and growth in grace?**

Luther taught:

* “Sanctification is the art of *applying* our justification, reconciliation, regeneration, and redemption to our daily life through faith active in love.”

It isn’t just “let go and let God.” It isn’t just understanding the “gospel indicatives” (what Christ has done). God’s Word calls us to *actively* apply what Christ has *already* done. We are to obey and live out the “gospel imperatives”—the commands to love others—through faith active in love.

1. **If Luther was talking to pastors today, what counsel would he give them about pastoral counseling?**

“Do it!”

We think we are too busy to counsel. We think we are ill-equipped to counsel. We think we should just preach (the pulpit ministry of the Word) and not counsel (the personal ministry of the Word). Luther was busy—and he still counseled. Luther never had a course in “pastoral counseling,” but he still counseled the Word. Luther was a preacher, but he was also a pastoral counselor.

So, “Pastors, just do it! Speak gospel truth in love.”

1. **If Luther was talking to you and me and other Christians today, what would his main message be?**

“Christ.”

He would tell us to live out Colossians 1:28. “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

And, “Christ alone.”

He would tell us to live out the words of Colossians 2:8. “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Luther believed in the sufficiency of Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture. We have all we need for life and godliness through the living Word (Christ) and the written Word (Scriptures). Luther would model for us that God’s Word is rich, robust, and relevant for our daily lives and relationships.

1. **You end each chapter with a tweet-size summary. So, what’s your tweet-size summary of *Counseling Under the Cross*?**

I’d use the sub-title of the book as the foundation for that tweet. Here we go:

*Richly Apply the Gospel to Each Other’s Daily Lives: “Forgiven! Welcome home! Saint! Victor!”*

1. **Where can people learn more about *Counseling Under the Cross*?**

At my RPM Ministries website, I have a [*Counseling Under the Cross* page](http://www.rpmministries.org/writing/counseling-under-the-cross/) that has a dozen free resources. Also, at my RPM Store, people can order an autographed copy of [*Counseling Under the Cross*](http://www.rpmministries.org/store/)at 25% off.