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All Scripture Is Pure Christ: Luther's Christocentric Interpretation in the Context of Reformation Exegesis

Charles A. Gieschen

As we give thanks for Martin Luther's epic witness to Christ in this momentous 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we who are the spiritual sons and daughters of Luther do well to ask ourselves the question: "What were Luther's central contributions to the life of Christ's church?" There are several important contributions that could be cited in answer to this question. Luther rediscovered the central truth of the Scriptures that we are justified by grace alone because of Christ's work alone and all of this is received through faith alone. Luther challenged the church to return to the Scriptures as the sole source and norm of the Christian faith and life, rather than have tradition as a second source of authority alongside the Scriptures. Luther translated the Bible into German and put it into the hands of people to read and learn. Luther translated and simplified the Latin liturgy and wrote hymns in German in order that the people could understand the truths they were singing in liturgy and hymns. Luther wrote the Small and Large Catechisms as tools to educate Christians in the basic teachings of the Scriptures. Luther brought biblical preaching back into the service as a central activity of worship, emphasizing the proper distinction between law and gospel in proclamation.

As one can easily see, all of Luther's major contributions grew out of his devotion to the Scriptures. What, therefore, especially characterized Luther's interpretation of the Scriptures? It will be argued below that it was his ability to see and read Christ from any text of Scripture, as he explains here.

Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God's and Mary's Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son, Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.¹

¹ Martin Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543): vol. 15, p. 339, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

Luther saw and proclaimed Christ from all the Scriptures, be they the four Gospels or the Epistles, but also Moses and the Prophets, the Psalms, and even Proverbs. Luther stated elsewhere, “God is particularly concerned about our knowledge of the revelation of His Son, as seen throughout the Old and the New Testament. All points to the Son.”² His interpretation has properly been characterized as a christocentric interpretation of the Scriptures. He taught that individual words and phrases are to be interpreted in light of the central reality revealed in the Scriptures, the saving action of Son’s incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return for the redemption for the world.³ It is through Christ, his person and work, that we are to understand all revelation in the Scriptures. This study will demonstrate that the central distinctive of Luther’s approach to the Scriptures is his christocentric interpretation: “All of Scripture . . . is pure Christ.” In doing this, this study will focus primarily on what Luther wrote about scriptural interpretation in his “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543).

I. Jesus in the New Testament as the Hermeneutical Basis of Luther’s Christocentric Interpretation

If one had to pigeonhole Luther into a faculty position at a modern seminary, he would be labeled a Professor of Biblical Theology, specializing in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was the source for much of his teaching and published works. Luther’s christocentric interpretation of the Scriptures was based upon the conviction that the books of the New Testament, especially the four Gospels, function as our interpretative guide for the Old Testament. Knowing the identity of the Lord God of Israel in the Jesus who died and rose again led Luther to see Christ throughout the Old Testament, not merely in messianic prophecies. He even uses the vivid image of the open Old Testament as “the manger” in which we behold Christ.

[The Gospels and Epistles] want themselves to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament so that we might there read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger, that is, how he is comprehended in the writings of the prophets. It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves,

² Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:338.

³ Martin H. Franzmann, “Seven Theses of Reformation Hermeneutics,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1969), 235–246, esp. 235–237.

and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.⁴

The revelation found in the New Testament, especially the ministry of Jesus narrated in the four Gospels, was Luther's starting point for understanding the rest of the Scriptures. When we know the Christ of the Gospels well, then we see and hear him readily elsewhere in the Scriptures. This flesh and blood Jesus who graciously lived and died for the salvation of mankind is the God who acts, speaks, and promises to come in Moses and the Prophets. Luther, known for his polemics, argues that even some Christians who have the New Testament still miss Christ's thoroughgoing presence in both the New and Old Testaments.

We Christians have the meaning and import of the Bible because we have the New Testament, that is, Jesus Christ, who was promised in the Old Testament and who later appeared and brought with Him the light and the true meaning of Scripture For that is the all-important point on which everything depends. Whoever does not have or want to have this Man properly and truly who is called Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom we Christians proclaim, must keep his hands off the Bible—that I advise. He will surely come to naught. The more he studies, the blinder and more stupid he will grow, be he Jew, Tartar, Turk, Christian, or whatever he wants to call himself. Behold, what did the heretical Arians, Pelagians, Manicheans, and innumerable others amongst us Christians lack? What has the pope lacked? Did they not have the sure, clear and powerful Word of the New Testament? What do the factions of our day lack? Do they not have the New Testament clear and reliable enough? If the New Testament had to be translated in accord with each stupid devil's mind, how many New Testaments, do you suppose, we would have to have?⁵

Luther understood that the New Testament is our hermeneutical key to understanding the Old Testament, including seeing not only Christ, but the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament.

That is the doctrine and the belief of the New Testament, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth, David's and the virgin Mary's Son, is true Man and God's natural, eternal Son, one God and three distinct Persons together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. And since David's words in this passage [1 Chr 17:17] amply reflect that meaning in accord with the general usage of the Hebrew tongue, we Christians must not seek or heed any other significance in them but regard this as the only correct one and look upon all other interpretations as worthless

⁴ Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521), AE 35:132. See similar statement in his "Prefaces to the Old Testament" (1523/1545), AE 35:236.

⁵ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:268.

human imagination. The New Testament cannot err, nor can the Old Testament where it harmonizes and agrees with the New Testament.⁶

Such christocentric interpretation is by no means new with Luther; it was done by Jesus and New Testament writers. A vivid example of this interpretation is present at the conclusion of the narrative in John 5. There Jesus speaks to Jews who knew the Old Testament Scriptures very well but did not see him in them: “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of me; and you are unwilling to come to me, in order that you have life” (John 5:39–40). Jesus says here, “these . . . bear witness of me.” Because Jesus is the eternal Son who reveals the Father throughout time, he is the very Lord who spoke to Moses and delivered Israel.⁷ Jesus expresses this in John 5:45–47: “Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, in whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” Citing what John 5:46 says about Moses, Luther explains:

In the first place we want to give Moses, the fountainhead, the source, the father and teacher of all prophets, a hearing. We want to test him to see whether we find him to be a Christian, whether he supports our position, since Christ Himself mentions him by name and says in John 5:46: “Moses wrote of Me.” And if he wrote of Christ, he must, of course, have prophesied and proclaimed Him and enjoined all prophets who followed him to write and to preach of Christ. This they have done diligently, so that all Jews, young and old, know that a Messiah was to come. But Moses lies buried and is hidden from them, and no one knows where he is interred. Therefore we shall authorize and commission two faithful and reliable legates, or ambassadors to look for him, find him, rouse him, and fetch him hither. These two are the evangelist John and the apostle Paul. I wager that these two will hit the mark and not miss. However, I do not want you to forget what I said earlier, namely, that I would like to discuss here the proposition: Whenever the Hebrew text readily yields to harmonize with the New Testament, this is must be the only right interpretation of Scripture. All else, whatever Jews, Hebraists, and anybody else

⁶ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:287.

⁷ See further Charles A. Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology,” *CTQ* 68 (2004): 103–126, and Charles A. Gieschen, “The Descending Son of Man in the Gospel of John: A Polemic against Mystical Ascent to See God,” in *The Open Mind: Essays in Honour of Christopher Rowland*, ed. Jonathan Knight and Kevin Sullivan, Library of New Testament Studies 522 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 105–129.

may babble against this to make it agree with their stippled, tormented, and coerced grammar, we must certainly consider sheer lies.⁸

Luther later draws this succinct conclusion about testimony to the Son's presence and prophecy of his future coming as messiah found in the Books of Moses: "He [Moses] indeed wrote of Christ throughout his entire book, in which he speaks of God and Messiah."⁹ This latter phrase, "God and Messiah," is very important to understanding Luther's approach. He not only understood Christology in the Pentateuch in terms of prophecy ("Messiah"), but also in terms of God's visible and tangible presence ("God").

Luther saw the importance of interpreting everything in Scripture as related to Christ, even where there are no direct references to God or Messiah, such as in all commands that are directed to God's people. We may be tempted to interpret commands in the Scriptures as having little to do with Christ because of applying the law-gospel distinction too quickly in the interpretative process. Listen, however, to what Luther writes on this matter.

Briefly, Christ is the Lord, not the servant, the Lord of the Sabbath, of law, of all things. The Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures. As, for example, 'keep the commandments' must be understood as with Christ commanding, plainly, keep them in Christ or in faith in Christ. 'You shall love the Lord your God' etc., obviously, in Christ or in faith in him, for 'apart from me you can do nothing'. 'Do this and you will live,' of course, 'do it in me,' otherwise you will not be able to do it, but will do the very opposite.¹⁰

Luther did not see Christ merely as a golden thread woven through the Scriptures. This is clear from his pronouncement: "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?"¹¹

II. Luther's Trinitarian Understanding of the Old Testament

A factor that played a significant role in the prominence of Luther's christocentric interpretation was his understanding that the Trinity is reflected in many Old Testament texts.¹² While Luther affirmed the importance of Old Testament

⁸ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:299.

⁹ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:326.

¹⁰ Luther, "Theses Concerning Faith and Law" (1535), AE 34:112.

¹¹ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1526), AE 33:26.

¹² See especially Christine Helmer, "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament," *Modern Theology* 18.1 (January 2002): 49–73. Although focusing less on exegesis of the Old Testament, she developed this line of inquiry further in Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and*

prophecies concerning the coming Christ, he also understood that the Son was central to the revelation of God in the Old Testament. Luther knew that the God who is heard and seen in the Old Testament is heard and seen through the Son. He asserted that the trinitarian revelation by Jesus in the New Testament needs to shape the interpretation of the Old Testament. Not only did Luther take John seriously when he writes that “no one has seen God, the only begotten Son has made him known” (John 1:18), but he took Jesus himself seriously when he says, “not that anyone has seen the Father, except the one who is from the Father, that one has seen the Father” (John 6:46). And he took Paul seriously when he calls the eternal Son “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

With such an understanding from the New Testament, Luther, like many interpreters in the early church, understood appearances of the God of Israel in the Old Testament as appearances of the Son.¹³ He expressed this understanding very forcefully and explicitly, as he does here.

It follows cogently and incontrovertibly that the God who led the children of Israel from Egypt and through the Red Sea, who guided them in the wilderness by means of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, who nourished them with bread from heaven, who performed all the miracles recorded by Moses in his books, again, who brought them into the land of Canaan and there gave them kings and priest and everything, is the very same God, and none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Virgin Mary, whom we Christians call our Lord and God. . . . Likewise, it is He who gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, saying (Ex 20:2, 3), “I am the Lord your God who led you out of Egypt . . . you shall have no other gods before Me.” Yes, Jesus of Nazareth, who died for us on the cross, is the God who says in the First Commandment, “I, the Lord, am your God.” How the Jews and Mohammed would rant if they heard that! Nevertheless, it is true and will eternally remain true. And he who disbelieves this will tremble before this truth and burn forever.¹⁴

Heinrich Bornkamm has observed this emphasis in Luther on the presence of Christ and draws the following conclusion, “Luther’s Old Testament theology was only an application of his faith in the omnipresence of Christ, which, in a special manner, is

Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther’s Works (1523–1546) (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2005).

¹³ For examples in early Christianity, see Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), and Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son before Christ,” 105–126.

¹⁴ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:313–314.

also applied in his doctrine of the sacraments. For Christ is ‘God for us.’ Wherever God turned his face toward men, be it ever so veiled, it was the face of Christ.”¹⁵

This christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament, however, does not mean that Luther only saw and heard the Son in the Old Testament to the exclusion of the other two persons of the Trinity. To the contrary, he lays out his methodology for interpreting testimony to the Father and the Holy Spirit as well as the Son in the Old Testament by looking for textual markers, especially speech between the Father and the Son or speech by one of them about the other.¹⁶

In other words: Let each one take the prophets in hand, read them diligently, and note where the Lord, YHWH, Jesus Christ, speaks distinctively and where He is spoken of. You have now heard that it is He who speaks with Moses on Mount Sinai, who guides Moses and the people, and who performs miracles. And although He does not act alone here, but the Father and the Holy Spirit work with Him and do the same work, He nevertheless reveals Himself in those words and deeds to show that He is a Person distinct from the Father in the one, divine essence. And whoever observes so much in Scripture (which not everybody does) that he notices where one Person speaks of the other, indicating that there are more than one present, will soon discern which is the Person of the Father and which is that of the Son. And if you have mastered the distinction of the Father and the Son, then the distinctive presence of the Holy Spirit is also established immediately.¹⁷

The speech patterns found in some Old Testament texts were the basis for Luther’s christocentric and trinitarian understanding of these texts. The Psalms were an especially rich quarry for finding such speech. Christine Helmer argues that “Luther roots his trinitarian understanding in the grammatical and syntactical features of the royal Psalms. The Psalms’ speech structure renders a trinitarian grammar of transparency.”¹⁸

Luther concluded that if there is a record of the Father speaking to the Son or one of them speaking about the other, then logically the Holy Spirit is also present. Helmer states: “For Luther, access to the inner-trinitarian mystery is granted solely

¹⁵ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 260.

¹⁶ Evidence of this kind of interpretation of the Old Testament as including dialogues between members of the Trinity, sometimes referred to as “prosopological exegesis,” is found in early Christianity; see esp. Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:335–336.

¹⁸ Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” 50.

by the third person of the Trinity.”¹⁹ He expressed his theological rationale for such a trinitarian reading that includes the Holy Spirit in this manner.

We hear before that whenever Scripture speaks of the two persons of the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit, the third person is also present; for it is He who speaks those words through the prophets. Thus a believing heart finds powerful and well-grounded proof and testimony in this passage that God, the omnipotent Creator of heaven and earth, is the one true God, that there can be no other god beside Him, that there are, at the same time, three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit yet in this way, that only the Son became and David’s son.²⁰

A representative example of this approach is Psalm 2, where Luther understands the primary speaker in the psalm to be the heavenly Father speaking to the Son who is the Christ when he says, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7). Luther finds all three persons of the Trinity in these words, even though the Holy Spirit is not mentioned. Luther understands the Holy Spirit to be the one who composed the entire psalm.

Thus we again find two distinct persons here, the Father and the Son; and the Holy Spirit is present although not especially mentioned. It is He who composed and put into words this psalm, introducing the Father and the Son in their own words. Thus the distinctive trinity of person in one indivisible divine essence is professed here together with the fact that the Son is Man and Messiah, just as this is professed in the last words of David. A carnal heart will pass over these words casually or suppose that David composed them in his capacity as a pious man about himself or about others. That is what the blind Jews do.²¹

Luther gives other examples of seeing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in particular texts. He understands words in Isaiah 60 to be the Father speaking about the Son all under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In Is. 60:19–20 we read in like manner: “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; the Lord will be your everlasting Light, and your God will be your Glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting Light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.” Here it is clearly stated that the Lord and our God Himself will be our everlasting Light. Here the one Lord speaks about the other. Indeed, in the entire chapter it is not Isaiah

¹⁹ Helmer, “Luther’s Trinitarian Hermeneutic and the Old Testament,” 54.

²⁰ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:282–283.

²¹ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:279.

who is speaking but the Lord. It is He who says; “The Lord will be your everlasting Light.” Who is the Lord who speaks these words? Without a doubt, God the Father. Who is the Lord of whom He says: “The Lord will be your everlasting Light”? Without a doubt, God the Son, Jesus Christ. For here we find the great name of God, YHWH, which our Bibles print with capital letters, LORD, in contradistinction to the other names. Who is it who speaks these words by the tongue of Isaiah? Without a doubt, God the Holy Spirit, who speaks by the prophets introducing the Person of the Father, who, in turn, speaks of the eternal Light, that is, of His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David and of Mary.²²

Another well-known example of testimony to the Father and the Son in the Old Testament is Genesis 19, the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. “The Lord” (on earth) raining down brimstone and fire “from the Lord out of heaven” in Genesis 19:24 grabbed the attention of many Christian interpreters, including Luther, as evidence for the Trinity with its testimony to two Lords. If there is testimony to at least two of the three persons of the Trinity, according to Luther, the third person is implied.

Whenever in Scripture you find God speaking about God, as if there were two persons, you may boldly assume that three Persons of the Godhead are there indicated. Thus in the passage under discussion we hear the Lord say that the Lord will build a house for David. Likewise we read in Gen. 19:24: “Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.” For the Holy Spirit is no fool or drunkard, who would speak one iota, much less a word, in vain. If the Lord, that is, the Son rains fire and brimstone from the Lord, that is the Father, the Holy Spirit is simultaneously present. It is He who speaks these words by Abraham, or whoever it might be, about the two Lords. And still these three are one Lord, one God, who rains fire and brimstone.²³

Another intriguing example given by Luther concerns the very significant Sinai revelation recorded in Exodus 33. Luther understands the Father as the one speaking to Moses, but it is the Son whom Moses sees when he sees the backside of God in the form of a man walking by him. Here is Luther’s explanation.

Moses continues his report with these words (Ex. 33:21–23): “And the Lord said, ‘Behold, there is a place by Me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while My glory passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and

²² Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:289–290.

²³ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:280.

you shall see my back; but My face shall not be seen.” Here, too, there are two Persons named YHWH speaking. One says: “While My glory passes by.” This is the Father, who speaks of the passing by of His glory, that is, of the Son. And the Son Himself says that it is He who is passing by. As we heard before, this is all said of Christ, God and man, who walked here on earth.²⁴

Luther often looked for something in the text that served as the basis for a trinitarian interpretation that has Christ as the focal content. But what about texts where it is not outwardly clear who is speaking because there is only one speaker whom the text simply identifies as YHWH? In the following excerpt, Luther summarizes his thoughts about the Son being YHWH when it is not apparent in the text that two different persons of the Trinity are speaking or acting.

But where the Person does not clearly identify itself by speaking and apparently only one Person is involved, you may follow the rule given above and be assured that you are not going wrong when you interpret the name YHWH to refers to our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s Son. A fine illustration for this is Is. 50:1: “Thus says the Lord: Where is your mother’s bill of divorce, with which I put her away?” Here the word “Lord” designates the Person of the Son, although His Person is not distinctively mentioned. Thus it is interpreted by Lyra and also by others. I was very pleased many years ago to see Lyra write so definitely: “Thus saith the Lord,’ that is Jesus Christ.” And if you read the entire chapter following this verse (for Isaiah is not uttering a single word here, but all is spoken by the Lord), it will be found that the Person of the Son, Jesus Christ, is talking here, and not only according to His deity but also His humanity. For He says (Is. 50:6): “I gave My back to the smiters, and My cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I hid not My face from shame and spitting. For the Lord God helps Me, etc.” Read the whole chapter, and you will discover that it is God the Lord who suffers and receives help from the Lord God. This is proof that Christ is true God and man.²⁵

These examples from Luther of reading Christ or even the full Trinity from Old Testament texts are illustrative and by no means exhaustive. He advocates for such a Christological interpretation very strongly, as visible in these words.

I believe that we are given examples of this type to spur us on to seek Christ in Scripture, since He is assuredly God and Creator together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus anyone who affirms that Christ is He who created heaven and earth is certainly not mistaken. And yet we must diligently look for the

²⁴ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:329–330.

²⁵ Luther, “Treatise on the Last Words of David” (1543), AE 15:336–337.

distinctive revelations pertaining to the Person of the Son and carefully examine the words that indicate and reveal His Person.²⁶

Obviously, we should not stop with Moses, for just as the New Testament helps us to interpret the Old Testament, we must lead people forward to see that the Son's words and work in the Old Testament climax in the incarnate Christ of the New Testament who was crucified, died, and rose again on the third day. Jesus not only revealed YHWH to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but gave the ultimate revelation of who YHWH truly is by mounting the cross and giving his life for the life of the world. He is the very Jesus whose work continues in our lives through the means of grace. Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament never stopped at the time of the text and original author; he interpreted the text in light of the revelation of Jesus in the New Testament and the ongoing revelation of Jesus in the sacramental life of the church. Read his Genesis commentaries.²⁷ There Luther is interpreting Genesis, but the Christ of the New Testament and the Christ of the sacramental life of the church is on page after page of his interpretation.

III. Luther's Christocentricity in the Context of Reformation Exegesis

Much is said of Luther's rejection of the medieval four-fold sense of scripture and return to the historical or literal sense of the text, but in this he was by no means a trailblazer.²⁸ This had been happening in a fairly widespread manner in the centuries prior to Luther with exegetes upon whom he was dependent. Scott Hendrix observes that there was an effort during the high Middle Ages to recover focus on the literal sense, pointing to examples such as the school of St. Victor in northern France, Nicholas of Lyra, Thomas Aquinas, Jacob Peres of Valencia, and Jacques Lefèvre.²⁹ These latter two late-medieval exegetes influenced Luther's Christological interpretation of Psalms.³⁰ A christological interpretation of the Old Testament, therefore, is by no mean new to the scene with Luther, but he is certainly the major exegete who furthered such an exegetical approach during the Reformation period.

Unlike medieval exegetes who reverted to allegory to read spiritual meaning out of texts and like some of his predecessors, one of Luther's major contributions to Reformation exegesis was his ability to read spiritual meaning, especially testimony to Christ and his saving work, out of historical or literal sense of the text. He used

²⁶ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:337.

²⁷ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–1545), AE 1–8.

²⁸ This is widely acknowledged by scholars; e.g., Randall C. Gleason, "'Letter' and 'Spirit' in Luther's Hermeneutics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157 (2000): 468–485.

²⁹ Scott H. Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 232.

³⁰ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," 232.

the history and grammar of the text to express this meaning, rather than offering an interpretation that was edifying but had no direct relationship to the history or grammar of the text. Hendrix summarizes Luther's interpretative approach in contrast to others.

For Luther himself, however, the appropriate interpretation of a text lay neither in the recovery of the unique literal sense nor in the unfolding of multi-level meanings, but in the discovery of the legitimate meaning, based on grammatical and historical analysis, informed by theological reflection, and applied to one's own life and the church of the present.³¹

Within the wider context of Reformation exegesis, it is important also to contrast Luther with Reformed exegetes. Heinrich Bornkamm notes the distinctiveness of Luther's interpretation of the Old Testament by emphasizing that it was christocentric, not merely characterized by christological prophecy.³² Bornkamm's distinction between christological prophecy and the christocentricity of Luther's exegesis is a window to understand different trajectories in Reformation exegesis. Contemporary Reformed interpreters, like John Calvin, who focused on the historical or literal sense of the text certainly had christological interpretation in the sense of emphasizing that the Old Testament was pointing forward to the coming of Christ.³³ Luther, however, interpreted Christ as the eternal son who is the YHWH speaking and acting in the Old Testament. To see and hear God in the Old Testament is to see and hear the Jesus who was crucified, risen, and present in the preached word and the sacraments.

G. Sujin Pak's study of the interpretation of messianic psalms by Luther, Bucer, and Calvin, helpfully illustrates the contrast between Reformation exegetes when it comes to christocentric interpretation.³⁴ Pak notes that Luther continues the late medieval focus on Christological exegesis, but Calvin focuses primarily on interpreting the messianic psalms in light of David as the primary referent. Pak offers this conclusion to his extensive comparison.

In the context of prior Christian readings of these eight Psalms, Calvin makes a number of surprising exegetical shifts. Although he does interpret portions of most of these Psalms in reference to Christ, he give much more limited and less frequent Christological readings. In some key places, such as the interpretations of Psalms 8 and 16, he actually explicitly rejects the Christol-

³¹ Hendrix, "Luther Against the Background of the History of Biblical Interpretation," 238.

³² Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 263.

³³ See especially G. Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁴ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*. Luther is discussed on 31–53 and Calvin on 77–101.

ogical reading of the Psalm. Furthermore, he not only breaks with the prominence given to these Psalms in Christian exegesis as literal prophecies of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension but also does not use these Psalms to teach the doctrines of Trinity and the two natures of Christ. . . . Calvin's primary interpretations of these Psalms are readings through the person of David that bring comfort and teach true Protestant piety (over and against Roman Catholic piety) and expound upon the doctrines of the goodness of god, election, and divine providence.³⁵

In contrast to Luther's reading of these messianic Psalms as prophecies of Christ's passion that teach about the Trinity and two natures of Christ, Calvin and Bucer focused on how they teach the beneficence of God, election, faith and Christian piety.³⁶ Pak notes that recognition of this difference in Old Testament exegesis among Reformation exegetes drew the attention of others in subsequent decades, notably the Lutheran Aedigius Hunnius who labeled such exegesis that steered clear of Christology as "the Judaizing Calvin."³⁷ This charge came in part because Calvin and Reformed exegetes who followed him often drew on Jewish exegesis for the Old Testament interpretation, as noted by Stephen Burnett: "This humanist concern for historical context was a clear break from traditional Christian interpretation of these texts and raised the specter of Judaizing, particularly when Calvin and other Reformed interpreters made extensive use of Jewish biblical commentaries."³⁸

IV. Conclusion

Christocentric interpretation is not a science; it is an art taught by the Holy Spirit as seen practiced by Jesus, the apostles, and later interpreters like Martin Luther. Luther is known for his dictum that you cannot properly interpret the *verba* of a given text unless you interpret it in light of the *res* or central teaching of the Scriptures, namely God's saving work in Christ.³⁹ The understanding that one is to read the central reality of Christ and his saving work out of all of the Scriptures is found in these words of Luther.

³⁵ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 99–100.

³⁶ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 101.

³⁷ Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 103–124.

³⁸ Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning*, Library of the Written Word 19 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 119.

³⁹ For example, this approach of Luther is discussed as the first thesis in Franzmann, "Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics," 235–237.

And God is particularly concerned about our knowledge of the revelation of His Son, as seen throughout the Old and the New Testament. All points to the Son. For Scripture is given for the sake of the Messiah, or Woman's Seed, who is to remedy all that the serpent has corrupted, to remove sin, death, and wrath, to restore innocence, life, paradise, and heaven.⁴⁰

Luther's christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament should encourage us in our own christocentric interpretation. Luther readily admits that he has not said the last word on these matters, as he makes clear on more than one occasion.

Others can and will, I hope, improve on this and diligently seek and find the Lord Jesus in the Hebrew Old Testament; for He lets Himself be found there very readily, especially in the Psalter and in Isaiah. Try it according to the rule given above, and I am sure that you will agree with me and thank God.⁴¹

Let this be my translation and exposition of David's last words according to my own views. May God grant that our theologians boldly apply themselves to the study of Hebrew and retrieve the Bible for us from those rascally thieves. And may they improve on my work. They must not become captive to the rabbis and their tortured grammar and false interpretation. Then we will again find and recognize our dear Lord and Savior clearly and distinctly in Scripture. To Him, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory and honor in eternity. Amen.⁴²

How, therefore, are we, the spiritual sons of Luther, to express Christ from any given portion of the Scriptures? Four suggestions are offered here, most of which are reflected in Luther's own exegetical practice.

First, interpret the content of every text in light of the Christ event. Always keep in mind that God's actions and words in history and in the Scriptures are grounded in the central act of God for humanity: the Son's incarnation, life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and return for the salvation of the world (the Christ Event). The Gospels, where the mystery of God's love in Christ is revealed, help us to interpret all the rest of the Scriptures. Therefore, the grace that God shows before the Christ Event (e.g., to the patriarchs and Israel) or after the Christ Event (e.g., to the Church) is grounded in the Christ Event. God could not have loved and forgiven Adam and Eve, he cannot love and forgive us in the here and now, apart from the atonement offered in time by Jesus Christ. The gospel proclamation in any text is none other than Christ; where you hear the gospel in the Scriptures, there is also the person and work of Christ. Do not only speak of God's love and forgiveness from a

⁴⁰ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:338.

⁴¹ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:344.

⁴² Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:352.

text, but use it to proclaim explicitly Christ whose atoning work at the cross is the basis for this love and forgiveness all through history. Do not ever tire of this proclamation; it is the very lifeline that sinners long to receive Lord's Day after Lord's Day, even day after day.

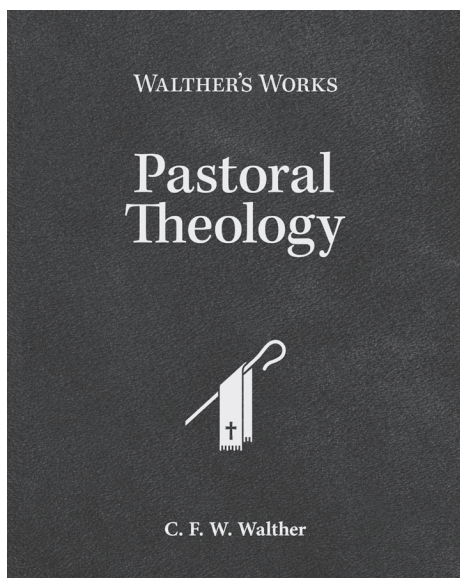
Second, interpret the Old Testament with attention to the presence of the Son as well as the promise of his coming as the messiah. The visible image of YHWH throughout the Old Testament is the Son (John 1:18). Thus one does not encounter the Father in the Old Testament and the Son in the New Testament, but the Son is central to the revelation of the Triune God throughout time, especially since the fall and until the last day. Not only is the Son present with his people, but he also promises that he will come at the end of the ages to deliver the world from sin. The promises of his coming are found in various messianic prophecies as well as in prophetic patterns involving individuals, institutions, and events that reflect Christ (typology). As Luther stated, the Son is throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, not merely in a few scattered prophecies.

Third, interpret every text in its broader context, especially if it lacks explicit christological content. Lectionary readings used for sermons do not exist in isolation from one another; they are meant to be interpreted in the context of the book from which they are taken and also from the wider context of all of God's revelation given in the Scriptures. Therefore, we must sometimes make the implicit christological content of each text explicit from the wider context.

Fourth, unite your proclamation of the Christ present in the Scriptures with the Christ that your congregation is receiving sacramentally in the church. He is the one and same Christ, Lord of all history. Luther was a master of this kind of pointed application of biblical texts. Much like Jesus helped the Emmaus disciples learn that the Old Testament Scriptures spoke of him, we help our congregations learn that the Jesus of the Scriptures is he who continues to be truly present in his church, those baptized into him, with the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The goal of this study was to demonstrate that christocentricity was the central distinctive of Luther's interpretative approach to the Scriptures. It concludes, therefore, with Luther's profound pronouncement from start of this study: "Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ."⁴³

⁴³ Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), AE 15:339.



**NEW TESTAMENT
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—From Chapter One



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Luther's Contributions to Commentary Writing: Philemon as a Test Case

John G. Nordling

In June 2003, I embarked on a summer sabbatical to finish writing a commentary on Philemon.¹ As part of the process of bringing conclusion to the Philemon project, I added Luther citations to the mix: I had access to the original fifty-five volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works² for this task. There were the fourteen pages of Luther's lectures on Philemon to incorporate into my treatment³ and the eleven references to Philemon in the Index volume of Luther's Works.⁴ These initial references primed the pump, so to speak, and soon I was saturating my rapidly expanding Philemon files with many Luther citations. I count 112 citations of the American Edition of Luther's Works and 14 more of the Weimar Edition in the Index of Passages in my commentary.⁵

Why use Luther citations, and how did they influence my own writing of the commentary? After doing my own translation and exegesis of the letter, I felt it necessary to examine my own and others' insights against the backdrop of Luther. The Concordia Commentary Series is supposed to be a *Lutheran* project, after all, so it might be expected that this series showcase Luther's exegetical insights, if any. Most of the eighteen commentaries read in the preparation of my own were of the Reformed, Evangelical, or historical-critical persuasion,⁶ so Luther's insights balanced nicely the insights of scholars formed by the likes of John Calvin, Rudolf

¹ It was awarded by the sabbatical committee of the College of Arts and Sciences, Baylor University, Waco, Texas. I acknowledge grateful receipt of this grant (and several others) in John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), xv.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86). Hereinafter cited as AE.

³ The *Lectures on Philemon* appear in AE 29:91–105.

⁴ AE 55:454.

⁵ See Nordling, *Philemon*, 373.

⁶ Here are a few (by no means all!) of the critical commentaries I consulted in my own writing of *Philemon* for the Concordia Commentary Series: Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon*, Papyrologische

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Bultmann, Karl Barth, and others. Naturally, the Luther material is dated: the reformer delivered his exegetical lectures on Philemon a bit less than five hundred years ago.⁷ But as anyone knows who reads Luther, the reformer's writing is direct, pertinent, and reveals Christ and the gospel in surprisingly fresh and unexpected ways. What usually happened during final revisions, then, was that I would run across a choice Luther morsel and know precisely where to place it in files approaching completion on my computer hard drive. What I was looking for in particular were Luther chunks that rounded off my own treatments—or, better yet, effected a bridge between arid exegesis and the day-to-day life of the pastors I hoped would be using my commentary in parish ministry.

In what follows, then, some selective examples will be shared where Luther helped me to complete—and, I think, improve—the Philemon commentary. I shall begin, first, with a *crux interpretum* (“interpreters’ crux,” i.e., difficult passage) on which I labored for the better part of a summer in the initial stages of the project. Luther helped resolve the difficulty appropriately, and I shall share some of the ways he sharpened my exegesis. Second, I shall share Luther’s insights on select passages in Philemon that shed light on the pastoral office—or, indeed, provide a unique solace for pastors. Third, I shall provide an example from my emerging commentary on Philippians where it appears that Luther shall again enrich my understanding of another key letter by Paul.

I. Luther’s Help with a Difficult Passage

In Philemon 6, Paul expresses the content of his prayers: that Philemon’s “participation in the faith may become effective in the realization of all the good that is among us in Christ [ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῇς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν].”⁸ It is important to see, first, that the clause

Kommentare zum Neuen Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Victor A. Bartling, *Commentary on 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000); David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). For further examples, see the bibliography in Nordling, *Philemon*, xxxiii–liii.

⁷ The timetable Luther apparently followed in his lectures on Philemon was to cover Phlm 1–6 on December 16, 1527; Phlm 7–16 on December 17; and Phlm 17–24 on December 18. See AE 29:x; Nordling, *Philemon*, 287n27.

⁸ This is the translation provided in Nordling, *Philemon*, 187. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this article are my own.

marker *ὅπως* does not signal purpose here⁹ but rather demarcates an object clause that specifies the content of Paul's prayers that are implicit in the noun for "prayers" at the end of verse 4.¹⁰ Hence, the thought progression proceeds as follows:

... making remembrance of you in my *prayers* [ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου, v. 4b] ... [*my prayers*] that [*ὅπως*, v. 6a] your participation in the faith [ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου, v. 6a] may become effective in the realization of all the good that is among us in Christ.¹¹

So what might the words "your participation in the faith [ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου, v. 6a]" mean? The question is vital, because if *ὅπως* is indeed an object clause (and not purpose), the words reveal just what Paul was praying about while "giving thanks" to God and "remembering" Philemon during what one imagines was a stressful, though amazingly productive, imprisonment. In the commentary I suggest that Paul likely wrote Philemon while imprisoned in Rome in the mid- to late fifties AD, literally chained to a soldier (Acts 28:16, 20), yet the apostle would have been in a position to receive and interact with visitors (such as the Jewish legation that came to him, Acts 28:17–28), and could preach the kingdom of God and teach about the Lord Jesus Christ for two whole years "without hindrance" (ἀκωλύτως, Acts 28:30–31).¹²

Many interpreters maintain that by "fellowship of your faith," Paul referred to the "kindly deeds of charity which spring from your [Philemon's] faith."¹³ To them, the passage seems parallel to Galatians 5:6: "faith working through love [πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη]"—and, to be sure, both passages share two key words: "faith" (πίστις), and the description that such faith was "effective" (ἐνεργής, Phlm 6) or the

⁹ Contra Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939), 55; Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, 96.

¹⁰ C. F. D. Moule, ed., *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 142; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 193n18; Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 250.

¹¹ In Nordling, *Philemon*, 189.

¹² Philemon can confidently be dated to within a decade (AD 53–63). See Nordling, *Philemon*, 5n14. For my preference for Rome as the place where Paul wrote Philemon (as opposed to Ephesus or Caesarea Maritima), see Nordling, *Philemon*, 7–8. That Paul was imprisoned during the writing of Philemon is established by such internal considerations as verse 1a: "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus [Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ]." See also verse 9b: "being such a one as Paul, an old man and now indeed also a prisoner of Christ Jesus [ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ]." Paul is called a δέσμιος ("prisoner") also in Acts 23:18; 25:14, 27; 28:17.

¹³ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1879), 335. Similar is the statement by Marvin R. Vincent: "Your faith imparting its virtue through your deeds of love;" see *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1897), 180.

cognate “working” (ἐνεργουμένη, Gal 5:6). It is simply assumed by these interpreters—who are generally of the Evangelical persuasion—that the word πίστις (“faith”) refers to Philemon’s subjective faith in Christ (*fides qua creditur*) and so κοινωνία (“fellowship, participation”) must consist of Philemon’s charity in forgiving Onesimus and possibly releasing him for further service to Paul.¹⁴

However, ἡ κοινωνία and its cognates usually pattern with a genitive of the “thing shared”—that is, with an objective genitive.¹⁵ Many New Testament examples establish the fact that, as a matter of Greek grammar, ἡ κοινωνία in Philemon 6 should pattern with objective (and not subjective) genitives:

- God has called us “into the *fellowship* with his Son [εἰς κοινωνίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ]” (1 Cor 1:9).
- “the *fellowship* with the Holy Spirit [ἡ κοινωνία τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος]” (2 Cor 13:14 ESV; 13:13 in the Greek New Testament).
- The cup is “a *communion* with the blood of Christ [κοινωνία ἐστὶν τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ]” (1 Cor 10:16a).
- The bread is “a *communion* with the body of Christ [κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστὶν]” (1 Cor 10:16b).
- Paul describes the Gentile offering as a “*sharing* in this ministry to the saints [τὴν κοινωνίαν τῆς διακονίας τῆς εἰς τοὺς ἁγίους]” (2 Cor 8:4).
- Paul experienced the “*fellowship* of his [Christ’s] sufferings [κοινωνίαν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ]” (Phil 3:10; cf. 2 Cor 1:7b; Heb 10:33).
- Those who eat the sacrifices are “*partakers* in the altar [κοινωνοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου]” (1 Cor 10:18).¹⁶

These objective genitives, then—and many more can be provided¹⁷—argue against the common Evangelical interpretation, which forces the phrase to mean “the generosity which results from [or] which is the expression of, your faith.”¹⁸ No: Paul’s assiduous prayers were for Philemon’s “participation in the faith,” whatever that phrase meant originally. Since, however, the expression occurs nowhere else in

¹⁴ For this, see especially Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 161, and Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 194.

¹⁵ J. Y. Campbell, “KOINΩNIA and Its Cognates in the New Testament,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 51, no. 4 (1932): 358, 373, 380.

¹⁶ Emphases mine.

¹⁷ See the remaining references in Nordling, *Philemon*, 206n110. For numerous extra-biblical examples, see 205–206n106.

¹⁸ With respect to which Campbell states (“KOINΩNIA,” 371), “No ordinary Greek reader would ever have understood the phrase in this way, and . . . the resultant interpretation has nothing to commend it.”

the New Testament, I directed my attention to that little word “faith” (πίστις). I began to notice that “faith” in the New Testament does not always have to mean Philemon’s personal faith as a Christian (*fides qua creditur*)—his subjective faith in Christ—as the word is commonly assumed nearly everywhere. Πίστις can mean in the New Testament “that which is believed, [that is, the] *body of faith/belief/teaching*.”¹⁹ Passages where “faith” holds this objective meaning include the following:

- “. . . *the faith* once for all delivered to the saints [τῇ ἀπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἀγίοις πίστει]” (Jude 3);
- “Many of the company of the priests were obedient to *the faith* [ὁπῆκουον τῇ πίστει]” (Acts 6:7);
- “. . . exhorting them [the disciples] to continue in *the faith* [ἐμμένειν τῇ πίστει]” (Acts 14:22); and
- “He [Paul] who once persecuted us is now preaching *the faith* [εὐαγγελίζεται τὴν πίστιν] he once tried to destroy” (Gal 1:23).²⁰

In light of these passages—and again, more can be provided²¹—I saw that Paul’s fervent prayer must have been for the corporate, even sacramental dimensions of Philemon’s faith. This is where Luther’s contribution greatly aided my own coming to terms with the difficult passage. First, there was Luther’s translation of the phrase, which boldly states what is only latent in the Greek text: *dein glaube den wir mit einander haben* = “your faith, which we have in common.”²² Second, Luther’s emphasis on the fuller dimensions of the words “the realization of all the good that is among us in Christ [ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν]” (Phlm 6b). On the rambling, yet highly salvific phrase, Luther opines,

This is what I have often said, and it is a topic that deserves to be emphasized: that Christian doctrine is to be set forth often . . . so that it is the most important thing among Christians that they grow in the knowledge of Jesus, as Peter also says [allusion to 2 Pet 3:18] . . . This is the most important thing we do and hear throughout our lives, because this knowledge is being opposed by

¹⁹ Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3, original emphasis. Hereafter BDAG.

²⁰ Emphases mine.

²¹ See also Rom 1:5; Eph 4:13; 1 Tim 4:1; 4:6; 2 Tim 3:8.

²² Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Deutsche Bibel*, vol. 7 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1931), 295.

sin, a weak conscience, and death; Satan frightens and persecutes it, and the heretics undermine it . . . One has to grow up into this knowledge.²³

Hence, as a result of my own exegetical labors, greatly aided by the contributions of others and enriched by Luther's old lecture notes, I concluded that the obscure passage revealed Paul's pressing concerns for the vitality of the word and the sacraments in the congregational assembly for which he prayed. The very gospel was at stake, and Paul's concern was for the efficacy of the word in Philemon's congregation during the difficult times that followed Onesimus's theft and flight. Paul's highest concern was that the gospel would predominate in this troubled congregation as Christians there came increasingly to possess "the realization of all the good that is among us in Christ" (Phlm 6b). This "realization of all the good" is what every congregation possesses through the preaching of Christ crucified and reception of the evangelical sacraments, and this salvific operation was under assault on account of the disruption that Onesimus' theft and flight caused in Philemon's house church, as we see in all too many troubled congregations yet today. Just this was what Paul was praying for so assiduously—as I argued in my commentary—every time he was "remembering" Philemon in his prayers (*μνείαν σου ποιούμενος*) and "hearing" (*ἀκούων*) of Philemon's love and faith, which apparently were everyday occurrences during Paul's imprisonment.²⁴ No other commentary quite puts matters thus, and I have Luther largely to thank for helping me to see it this way.

II. Luther's Insights on the Pastoral Office

As most students of Luther know, the reformer has had much to say about the office of the holy ministry, and I was able to sample a small portion of this abundance while completing the Philemon project. I found an especially appropriate Luther quote that pertained to the beginning of the Thanksgiving formula, where Paul writes, "I thank my God always [*εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε*], making remembrance of you [*μνείαν σου ποιούμενος*] in my prayers, hearing [*ἀκούων*] of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints" (Phlm 4–5).²⁵ Some commentators expressed reservations about Paul's statement that he kept "hearing" (*ἀκούων*) positive reports regarding

²³ Luther "Lectures on Philemon" (1527), AE 29:97.

²⁴ The present tense of the participles "remembering" and "hearing" reveal ongoing (or progressive) activity. Under "Progressive *Aktionsart*" in Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 136, see the following definition: "A verb depicts a process or action in progress. This may occur when imperfective aspect combines with any lexeme that is not punctiliar or stative and when the context allows progression."

²⁵ As translated in Nordling, *Philemon*, 187.

Philemon's love and faith. Since the source is not divulged directly, a few have argued—implausibly, I think—that Paul's use of the verb *hear* was a mere signpost, indicating that the apostle had no firsthand knowledge of the letter's recipient, Philemon.²⁶ This argument, however, ignores the fact that in verse 19b, Paul writes that Philemon owed him [Paul] his very self—a statement implying that some earlier meeting between the apostle and Philemon evidently occurred, resulting in the conversion of the latter;²⁷ and it overlooks the fact that the participle ἀκούων appears in the present tense, indicating ongoing activity.²⁸ So Paul could well have had, during his imprisonment, current and up-to-date reports regarding Philemon and the situation unfolding in the congregation that met in Philemon's house (see “your house [οἶκόν σου],” v. 2b). Epaphras, whom Paul mentions at the end of the letter (v. 23a), represents one likely source, because he was the apostle's “beloved fellow servant” and the “faithful minister of Christ” on behalf of the Colossians (Col 1:7–8; cf. 4:12). Another source could well have been Onesimus himself, who, in spite of his illegal activities, likely gave Paul an at least grudgingly positive account of his master's faith and Christian commitments. Here again is a place where Luther put a nice finish on my own exegetical labors—plus, as an added bonus, paid tribute to those rare faithful pastors about whom one hears good things in ministry. Luther develops the joyful satisfaction Paul received when, amid the rigors of imprisonment, he kept hearing reports concerning Philemon's love and faith. Luther continues:

Paul had suffered from false prophets and . . . heard that many were forsaking the faith and . . . stirring up heresies and sects, just as is happening to us. It is a rare thing to hear [of] a preacher who is constant in the Word. But if we hear [of] one, this is a cause for prayer and thanksgiving. The very nature of the Gospel of the Spirit produces this in us. So we are trained by hearing evil everywhere to give thanks when we hear something good. *I thank*, so that things may remain as I have heard.²⁹

²⁶ Martin (*Colossians and Philemon*, 160) on the basis of Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1953) ad loc.; and Heinrich Greeven, “Prüfung der Thesen von J. Knox zum Philemonbrief,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 79 (1954): 376.

²⁷ I argue in my commentary (*Philemon*, 21) that Philemon, visiting Ephesus on business, could well have been among the “all” who heard one or more of Paul's lectures—either among the Jews at the synagogue for three months (μῆνας τρεῖς διαλεγόμενος, Acts 19:8) or among the disciples at the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two years (τοῦτο . . . ἐγένετο ἐπὶ ἑτῇ δύο, Acts 19:10). For more on the same possibility, see Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 31; and John G. Nordling, “Philemon in the Context of Paul's Travels,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 74 (2010): 293–294.

²⁸ See note 24 above.

²⁹ Luther, “Lectures on Philemon” (1527), AE 29:95–96 (emphasis original).

Near the end of the letter's main body,³⁰ Paul anticipates what obstacle would prevent Philemon from extending forgiveness to Onesimus, namely, Philemon's considerable loss of property and goods as a result of Onesimus's theft and flight. Such loss is hinted at in the highly suggestive conditional phrase, "And if he has wronged you in any way [εἰ δέ τι ἡδίκησέν σε] or owes you anything [ἢ ὀφείλει] . . ." (Phlm 18a).³¹ By shifting Onesimus's infidelities to a conditional clause ("if . . ."), Paul mollifies Philemon's anger and pain by directing that slave master's attention to Paul's much more important promise to make amends:

- "Charge this to my account [τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα, v. 18b]"; and
- "I, Paul, write with my own hand [ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί]: 'I will repay [ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω, v. 19a]'."

Paul's promise to make amends has led interpreters to speculate just how the apostle assumed the damages caused by Onesimus, most of which safely can be sidestepped here.³² Paul's usual habit, however, was to bear the entire cost of the apostolic ministry himself, by plying his skills as a tentmaker (σκηνοποιός, Acts 18:3) and supporting himself vocationally, no matter how wretched his personal circumstances probably were as a result.³³ At times, he tapped other sources of income too, as when, for example, Epaphroditus revived the apostle by bringing gifts from Christians at Philippi (Phil 2:25, 30; 4:18). Perhaps the written promise in Philemon indicates Paul's expectation that "the Lord would provide" the apostle with what he needed in the matter at hand, just as he always had.³⁴ In any event, Paul's paying Onesimus's damages in full would model for the congregations the apostle's famous self-sufficiency: "His pay was to receive no pay. His work was between him and God; he would not be paid for it."³⁵

Such explanations still do not fully account for the *theological* significance of the repayment, however. Paul would not have located himself so centrally in the

³⁰ Most scholars (e.g., see Nordling, *Philemon*, vi–vii) divide Philemon as follows: The Salutation (vv. 1–3); The Thanksgiving (vv. 4–7); The Main Body (vv. 8–22); The Final Greeting and Blessing of Grace (vv. 23–25).

³¹ For the use of the verbs ἀδικέω ("I wrong") and ὀφείλω ("I owe") in documentary papyri designating the illegal activities of persons who refuse to pay debts and so incur criminal prosecution, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 261–262nn8–9; and John G. Nordling, "The Gospel in Philemon," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 73–74nn10–12.

³² For some of these possibilities, see Nordling, *Philemon*, 272–273.

³³ "Paul's trade . . . also provided him with his principal means of livelihood, though never with enough to make him anything but a poor man and sometimes not even with that much, so that hunger and thirst and cold were at times his lot" (Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980], 67–68).

³⁴ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 220.

³⁵ P. W. Barnett, "Tentmaking," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 927.

recompense of Onesimus's debt were not his very person intended somehow to serve Philemon and the congregation as a kind of blank check.³⁶ Not only were his written obligations (vv. 18–19a) significant,³⁷ but so, too, the fact that the apostle expected to receive hospitality from Philemon and the congregation at his upcoming visit (v. 22a). In my commentary, I suggest that the two ideas—Paul's repayment and visit—are in fact related: arguably the primary purpose of Paul's visit alluded to in verse 22a was for the apostle to deliver a generous recompense to Philemon and the congregation and so fulfill the pledge of verse 19a. Paul's repayment to Philemon would be analogous to the way the apostle drummed up a collection among the Gentile Christians to deliver an impressive gift “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26).³⁸ Or might Paul have desired to become resident for a time in Philemon's abode for the purpose of impressing the richness of the gospel on Philemon and the other working Christians whom Onesimus had impoverished by his theft and flight? Consider that God's greater gifts usually are of a nonfinancial kind: Christ appears beggarly to sinners,³⁹ yet a poor pastor who baptizes and preaches Christ crucified brings the inestimable wealth of forgiveness and salvation to many. Here, then, is another place where Luther's awareness of the often despised and impoverished pastoral office helped derive more evangelical benefit from Paul's letter to Philemon than was otherwise possible. Luther continues:

If I had gone . . . and seen and heard a poor pastor baptizing and preaching, and if I had been assured: “This is the place: here God is speaking through the voice of the preacher who brings God's Word”—I would have said: “Well, I have been duped! I see only a pastor.” We should like to have God speak to us in His majesty. But I advise you not to run hither and yon for this. . . . Christ says: “You do not know the gift” [Jn 4:10]. We recognize neither the Word nor the Person of Christ, but we take offense at His humble and weak humanity.

³⁶ Note the concentration of first person singular forms in Paul's specific promise to make amends: “I, Paul [ἐγὼ Παῦλος], write with my own hand [τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ]: ‘I will repay [ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω]’ ” (Phlm 19a). Nowhere else in the epistle does Paul so powerfully concentrate his literary presence. He does, however, emphasize his own person in verses 1, 9, and 20 of the letter. See figure 10, “Paul's Literary Presence,” in Nordling, *Philemon*, 302.

³⁷ “With this ‘receipt,’ Philemon could have required damages of Paul in the courts” (Barth and Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, 483).

³⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 110. For the collection of money for distressed Christians in Jerusalem, see Rom 15:25–28; 1 Cor 16:1–4; and 2 Cor 8:1–15.

³⁹ “The Lord is poor; He does not possess a single heller [a small coin worth less than a penny]; and women follow in His train to support Him [Luke 8:2–3]. But since He does not own a single heller, how is it possible for him to impart anything to others?” (Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 1–4* [1537–1540], AE 22:466).

When God wants to speak and deal with us, He does not avail Himself of an angel but of parents, of the pastor, or of my neighbor.⁴⁰

If the impending visit consisted in a kind of residency in Philemon's house church, then the apostle doubtless presented himself as the type of "poor pastor" (to paraphrase Luther) who would have been content to proclaim nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified—just as Paul had preached during an analogous residency at Corinth.⁴¹ The point of the apostle's anticipated visit would have been to drive home the incalculable wealth of Christ and the gospel on impoverished Philemon and the others. In the person of Paul, the apostle and "prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Phlm 1a), Christ himself would visit them.⁴² The apostle's crushing poverty would make many rich⁴³ and so more than cover Onesimus's damages. This recompense from Paul would mimic—however imperfectly—the atoning sacrifice of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended, who paid off all our debts to God the Father. Luther says it best in his perhaps most oft-quoted exposition of Paul's letter to Philemon:

What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights [Phil 2:7] and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus[es] if we believe.⁴⁴

Another pastoral application Luther provides is his tendency to see in Paul—and other bearers of apostolic office—servile qualities. That is to say, as Paul and other bearers of this office served their respective constituencies, they rather resembled slaves in Greco-Roman antiquity. This point is difficult for moderns to grasp—even for pastors—so I shall warm to the theme gradually.

The commentary series editors wanted my *Philemon* to help modern Christians adopt a properly biblical understanding of slavery—rather than, as so often happens,

⁴⁰ Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of John 1–4" (1537–1540), AE 22:526–527.

⁴¹ During Paul's eighteen months in Corinth, he focused the congregation's attention on the message of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). See Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 84.

⁴² "Even if Christ did no more than greet us, it would be a treasure above all treasures; it would be honor and treasure enough. He has another treasure in store for us, however, which He reveals when He brings us forgiveness of sin and redemption from death, devil, and hell, when He transforms us into heavenly people and illumines our hearts. We can never express the value of this treasure adequately. We shall always fall short of recognizing it fully and of esteeming it as we really and truly should" (Luther, AE 22:527). Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 275n84.

⁴³ Paul describes the ministry of himself and his co-workers (2 Cor 6:1–12) as "poor men [πτωχοί], yet making many rich [πολλοὺς δὲ πλουτίζοντες]" (v. 10).

⁴⁴ Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament" (1534), AE 35:390. Cited twice in Nordling, *Philemon*, 156n31 and 232n46. Also in Nordling, "The Gospel in Philemon," 80.

allow the lens of nineteenth-century antebellum slavery in the American South (a racist and an exploitive system if ever there was one) to distort one's appreciation of the many biblical passages that feature slaves.⁴⁵ Basically I argued that the type of slavery operative in Greco-Roman antiquity when Paul wrote the letter to Philemon did not necessarily have the same baggage moderns typically bring with them when they see the word *slave* in the canonical New Testament (see preceding footnote); thus, in my commentary's introduction,⁴⁶ I point out that the ancient world Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus inhabited was a world quite unlike our own. Ancient slavery was arguably a morally ambiguous institution (neither completely good nor uniformly bad, but quite simply the place where the enslaved rendered services in society). There were significant differences between ancient and modern (antebellum) slavery to consider, as well as the fact that New Testament slavery needs to be appreciated theologically (on account of its pertinence to Christian vocation), and not simply historically—although a historical appreciation of slavery as it actually existed in the first century AD is greatly preferable to one that “reads in” insights drawn from our own nation's legacy of slavery and its bitter aftermath.⁴⁷ My investigations seemed relevant at the time, because Onesimus had indubitably been a slave⁴⁸ and research continues to favor the idea that Onesimus had been a runaway (Gk: *δραπέτης* -ου, m.; Lat: *fugitivus* -i, m.), despite much scholarly reaction to the contrary.⁴⁹ This survey demonstrates that the letter to Philemon has been

⁴⁵ For some scholarship that approaches Philemon from sensitivities forged by African American servile experiences, see Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon*, The New Testament in Context (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); and especially, Matthew V. Johnson, James A. Noel, and Demetrius K. Williams, eds., *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, Paul in Critical Context Series (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012). For a representative selection of a few of the many passages in the New Testament that feature slaves and slavery, see Matt 18:23–35; Matt 24:45–51 // Luke 12:42–48; Matt 25:14–30 // Luke 19:12–27; Luke 16:1–8; 1 Cor 7:20–24; Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22–25; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; Phlm; 1 Pet 2:18–21.

⁴⁶ See “Slavery in Ancient Society” and “Theological Implications of Slavery in the New Testament” in Nordling, *Philemon*, 39–108 and 109–139, respectively.

⁴⁷ I develop this latter point at greater length in “Christ Leavens Culture: St. Paul on Slavery,” *Concordia Journal* 24.1 (1998): 43–52; and “A More Positive View of Slavery: Establishing Servile Identity in the Christian Assemblies,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19.1 (2009): 63–84.

⁴⁸ The word *δοῦλος* -ου, m. (“slave”) is twice used in the letter to describe Onesimus (“no longer as a slave but more than a slave [οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ’ ὑπὲρ δοῦλον],” v. 16a ESV), a fact that ought forever to lay to rest Callahan's argument that Onesimus really was not a slave at all but Philemon's estranged brother (to be sure, Paul also refers to Onesimus as a “beloved brother” [ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητὸν] in v. 16). See Callahan, *Embassy of Philemon*, 11, 30, 50, 69–70 and my critical review in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 64 (2000): 249–252.

⁴⁹ See the scholarship engaged in my two articles on this topic, namely, “*Onesimus Fugitivus*: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (1991): 97–119; and “Some Matters Favoring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon,” *Neotestamentica* 44.1 (2010): 85–121.

for me something much more than a casual research interest. Indeed, I think that little Philemon—no more than a scrap from Paul’s otherwise voluminous correspondence—holds the potential of exerting a more salubrious influence on pastors and their respective congregations than the letter’s diminutive size might otherwise suggest.

Were those pastors or elders explicitly identified as such in the New Testament church (e.g., Acts 14:23; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1–2) in any way associated with slavery? This question nagged at me while writing the commentary, though I never took up the matter directly. Still, I think that at least some of the men appointed by Paul and his representatives for authorized service in the church could well have been slaves (or of servile extraction),⁵⁰ and that this possibility holds implications for the pastoral office still today. Consider, for example, how many of Jesus’ parables feature slaves: the unmerciful slave (Matt 18:23–35); the slave entrusted with supervision (Matt 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–48); the parables of slaves entrusted with talents (Matt 25:14–30) or of minas (Luke 19:11–27); the unjust steward—likely a slave—(Luke 16:1–8),⁵¹ and others too numerous to engage here.⁵² Their ubiquity could indicate that Jesus pitched his parables before small and great—that is, before slaves and their masters, before non-elites and the fully franchised.⁵³ Pastors still preach these parables today before entire congregations to accentuate various points of Christian life and doctrine. The assumption seems to be that such parables are relevant for all the assembled, irrespective of vocation—not simply those singled out for particular service.

⁵⁰ In general, the progression assumed in Roman society was (in the order of occurrence) slavery, manumission, “freed” status, and then the enjoyment of increasingly significant levels of wealth, familial pedigree, and influence (*auctoritas*). See, Nordling, *Philemon*, 83; idem, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 68.

⁵¹ See Nordling, *Philemon*, 81. Also, “the οἰκονόμος of the parable is probably a slave,” Mary Ann Beavis, “Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 49.

⁵² Some additional parables that feature approximately the same superior-subordinate relationships are the master and his slaves in the parable of the tares among the wheat (Matt 13:24–30); the man who commands his doorkeeper to stay awake (Mark 13:33–37); the slaves waiting for their master to come from the wedding feast (Luke 12:35–38); the master of the house and those excluded (Luke 13:25–30); the slaves who confess their unworthiness (Luke 17:7–10); the king who sends his slaves to invite guests to his son’s wedding feast (Matt 22:1–14); and the bridegroom and her ten virgins (Matt 25:1–13). The patient husbandman (Mark 4:26–29), too, may be a highly placed slave.

⁵³ I attempted to make this point in the commentary (see *Philemon*, 54). As for slavery itself, Jesus seems to have accepted it as a fact of his environment. See Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton, “The Apostle Paul and the Roman Law of Slavery,” in Paul Robinson Coleman-Norton, ed., *Studies in Roman Economic and Social History in Honor of Allan Chester Johnson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 158–159; S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:68; Nordling, “Christ Leavens Culture,” 43–44n2.

Nevertheless, a fair number of the stories feature upwardly tending slaves whose service resembles—at least superficially—pastoral ministry. For example, in the parable of the slave entrusted with supervision (Matt 24:45–51; Luke 12:42–48), it was not an impoverished drudge whom the master would come upon at the unexpected hour, “cut to pieces” (διχοτομήσει, Matt 24:51), and demote to the level of a flatterer (Matt 24:51) for beating up on the other slaves and acting like a drunkard (Matt 24:49). In fact, he was a high-level slave (δοῦλος, Matt 24:45, 46, 48, 50) who had enjoyed the master’s complete confidence—the one, in fact, whom the master set over his entire household to give to the other slaves their food at the proper time (τοῦ δοῦναι αὐτοῖς τὴν τροφήν ἐν καιρῷ, Matt 24:45). Luther supposed this turn-of-phrase “food at the proper time” pertained directly to the preaching office, and in elaborating on it, he draws in several other New Testament passages that regard this activity in approximately the same way:

Scripture makes all of us equal priests, as has been said, but the churchly priesthood which we now separate from laymen in the whole world, and which alone we call priesthood, is called “ministry” [*ministerium*], “servitude” [*servitus*], “dispensation” [*dispensatio*], “episcopate” [*episcopatus*], and “presbytery” [*presbyterium*] in Scripture. Nowhere is it called “priesthood” [*sacerdocium* (sic)] or “spiritual” [*spiritualis*]. . . . St. Paul says to St. Timothy, “A servant of God [δοῦλον . . . κυρίου] must not be quarrelsome” [II Tim 2:24]. Here he calls Timothy a servant of God in the special sense of preaching and spiritually leading the people. Again, in II Corinthians [11:23], “If they are servants of Christ [διάκονοι Χριστοῦ] so am I.” And in I Corinthians 4[:1], “Dear brethren, we do not want people to regard us as more than servants of Christ [ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ] and stewards [οἰκονόμους] of his spiritual goods.” And Christ, in Matthew 24[:45–51] talks much about the same stewards.⁵⁴

I think it safe to say that while the underlying warning against faithlessness pertains to every Christian irrespective of vocation, the particular task of giving to the other slaves their “food at the proper time” holds implications for the office of the holy ministry especially. Luther perceived it thus, as has been shown, and so did Walther who relates the task of distribution to the distinctive law-gospel preaching that pastors are charged to do in Christian congregations.⁵⁵ Then consider the more

⁵⁴ Luther, “Answer to the Hyperchristian Book” (1521), AE 39:154; WA 7:630. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 55n97.

⁵⁵ E.g., on Luke 12:42, (the faithful and wise steward) Walther states: “Two things are here required of a good householder. In the first place, he must at the proper time furnish the servants in his house and the children everything that they need; in the second place, he must give to each individual his due portion, exactly what he or she needs. If a steward were to do no more than bring out of his larder and cellar all that is in them and put it on a pile, he would not act wisely; the children, probably, would grab large portions, and the rest might not get anything. He must give

enterprising slaves to whom the talents/minas are entrusted (Matt 25:14–30; Luke 19:12–27). That a wealthy businessman, before leaving on a commercial venture, should entrust slaves with so much money and responsibility may seem strange to us; but “slaves could fill an enormous range of functions, including positions involving onerous duties, political influence, and relatively high social esteem.”⁵⁶ A moment’s reflection suggests that Beavis’s description could suit any number of modern pastors to a tee. Usually the master’s rewards go to quite humble slaves who, though faithful, otherwise have not much to commend them. Thus the master’s favorable response to the slave whose investment garnered two talents (“Well done, thou good and faithful slave [Εὖ, δοῦλε ἀγαθὲ καὶ πιστέ],” Matt 25:23) is exactly the same as the acclamation expended on the one whose investment added five talents (Matt 25:21). Compare the similar (though not completely identical) responses in the Lukan parallel (Luke 19:17, 19). In commenting on the latter, Just emphasizes that not the slaves themselves, but the gifts of the kingdom—God’s word and sacraments—produce the increase.⁵⁷ Both Luther⁵⁸ and Walther⁵⁹ supposed that the master’s commendation in Matt 25:21 pertains in a special way to those pastors who suffer in their ministries on account of their unflinching devotion to Christ and his word. So Luther opines,

If I were to write about the burdens of the preacher as I have experienced them and as I know them, I would scare everybody off. For a good preacher must be committed to this, that nothing is dearer to him than Christ and the life to

to each the right quantity, according to the amount of work that he has done. When children are at the table with adults, he would be foolish to set meat and wine before children and milk and light food before adults. But how difficult it is to perceive that these very mistakes are often made in sermons! A preacher must not throw all doctrines in a jumble before his hearers, just as they come into his mind, but cut for each of his hearers a portion such as he needs. He is to be like an apothecary, who must give that medicine to the sick which is for the *particular* ailment with which they are afflicted. In the same manner a preacher must give to each of his hearers his due: he must see to it that secure, care-free, and willful sinners hear the thunderings of the Law, contrite sinners, however, the sweet voice of the Savior’s grace. That is what it means to give to each hearer his due.” See C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 33. (See also p. 52.)

⁵⁶ Beavis, “Ancient Slavery,” 40. Cited in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 405.

⁵⁷ Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 733.

⁵⁸ Luther, “Lectures on 1 Timothy” (1527–1528), AE 28:282; “Lectures on Titus” (1527), AE 29:64.

⁵⁹ *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 267, 307.

come, and that when this life is gone Christ will say to all, "Come to me, son. [You have been my dear and faithful servant]." ⁶⁰

III. Postscript: On to Philippians!

I am now writing a commentary on Philippians. Though quite brief as Pauline epistles go, Philippians still is four times longer than Philemon and so reveals much more of the apostle's mind and struggle amid prevailing conditions that I am just beginning to understand.⁶¹ Of course, I have not yet had opportunity to review Luther's interactions with Philippians in any systematic way, so the single example provided here came about quite fortuitously—a shot in the dark, one might say.

After the epistolary thanksgiving (Phil 1:3–11), Paul sets about reassuring the Philippians that his imprisonment has in fact "advanced the gospel" (Phil 1:12), as he puts it, which could have been a tough sell since the Philippians were supporting the apostle's ministry financially (see Phil 1:5; 2:25, 30; 4:18) and would have been more than a little concerned about the imprisonment itself. There are those who believe the Philippians had "backed a bad horse" financially, in that, far from proclaiming good news, Paul was now languishing in prison and so prevented from preaching directly—a situation that could have violated Paul's partnership with the Philippians (see Phil 1:5).⁶² Nevertheless, Paul claims in this section that his imprisonment in Christ has become "manifest among the whole praetorian and to all the rest" (Phil 1:13), and that "more of the brethren—confident in [Paul's] imprisonment in the Lord—dare the more abundantly to speak the word without fear . . . some indeed . . . out of envy and strife, and some out of good will" (Phil 1:14–15).

What intrigues one about the latter passage is Paul's emphasis on the gospel's advance (in spite of many obstacles) and the christological preaching amid the imprisonment—to wit, that Christ was being proclaimed in the vicinity of Paul's imprisonment (Rome?) despite contentious proclaimers who had it out for Paul and were trying to "resurrect trouble" (θλῖψιν ἐγείρειν) for him amid the imprisonment

⁶⁰ Luther, "Table Talk no. 453 recorded by Veit Dietrich" (1531–1533), AE 54:73–74. The text in brackets came from a later variant by John Aurifaber. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 56.

⁶¹ Two recent contributions quite helpful in this regard are Hans Dieter Betz, *Studies in Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 343 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); and Joseph A. Marchal, ed., *The People beside Paul: The Philippian Assembly and History from Below*, Early Christianity and Its Literature (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

⁶² So, e.g., Brian J. Capper, "Paul's Dispute with Philippi: Understanding Paul's Argument in Phil 1–2 from His Thanks in 4:10–20," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 49.3 (1993): 209; G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2009), 67.

(Phil 1:17).⁶³ Paul seems to be saying in this section that his very imprisonment was a kind of christological sermon for the soldiers who guarded him, “all the rest” (including the friendly and rival preachers mentioned in Phil 1:13, 15–17), and particularly the Philippians to “hear,” if they had ears to hear. The letter claims repeatedly that suffering for Christ is at the heart of the Christian experience: first, the Philippians themselves have been granted the privilege “not only to believe in him [Christ] but also to suffer for his sake [καὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ πάσχειν]” (Phil 1:29); second, the Christ hymn highlights Jesus’ humility and self-emptying even to the point of death, “even death on a cross [μέχρι . . . δὲ σταυροῦ]” (Phil 2:8); third, Paul writes of “losing everything [τὰ πάντα ἐζημιώθην]” (Phil 3:8), regarding everything as “dung [ῥηγοῦμαι σκύβαλα]” (Phil 3:8), and “being conformed to [Jesus’] death [συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ]” (Phil 3:10); and finally, Paul maintains—with a touch of humor?—that he has “learned [ἔμαθον],” “knows how [οἶδα . . . οἶδα],” and has even “become an initiate [μεμύημαι]” at “being content and hungering [καὶ χορτάζεσθαι καὶ πεινᾶν]” and “abounding and being at a loss [καὶ περισσεύειν καὶ ὑστερεῖσθαι]” (Phil 4:11–12). Such snatches enable one to reconstruct with sufficient clarity the tremendous christological preaching that undoubtedly attended Paul’s imprisonment, both from Paul’s lips himself as he made a “defense and confirmation of the gospel [ἐν τῇ ἀπολογίᾳ καὶ βεβαιώσει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου]” (Phil 1:7) before the imperial authorities, and from those preachers—whether favorably disposed to him or not (Phil 1:15–18)—who “dare[d] the more abundantly to speak the word without fear” (Phil 1:14).

Hence, what must have been impressed on Paul more than almost anything else amid the bleak imprisonment was a sense of his own weakness and passivity—something many pastors feel still today. Rather than get down in the dumps or yield to despair, however, Paul seems to have trusted God’s word more than anything else and been in relatively high spirits. Paul’s attitude would seem to suggest that he was possessed of Luther’s insight that a preacher of the word holds the *ius verbi* (right to speak) if not the *executio* (power to accomplish) thereof.⁶⁴ Preachers amid difficult situations, therefore, are at some liberty to adopt an air of lighthearted nonchalance while waiting patiently for the word to do its work in the manner God intends. While

⁶³ The verb *ἐγείρω* (“to raise”) is associated with the resurrection of the dead, especially Jesus’ resurrection (John 12:1, 9, 17; Acts 3:15; 4:10; 13:30; Rom 4:24; 8:11 [twice]; 10:9; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; 1 Thess 1:10; Heb 11:19; 1 Pet 1:21; see BDAG 6, s.v. *ἐγείρω*). If *ἐγείρω* possesses this technical meaning here (BDAG does not classify this passage), Paul makes a light-hearted witticism at the expense of the rival preachers: “They are *resurrecting* trouble for me in my bonds!” Paul was not above resorting to “dumb jokes” or occasional crudities (see Nordling, “Some Matters Favoring,” 111, on 1 Cor 4:15; 2 Cor 11:19–20; Gal 4:15, 19; 5:12; Phil 3:2). The play would be an indication of the apostle’s high spirits amid the imprisonment.

⁶⁴ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:76.

having to deal with the idolatrous mass at Wittenberg, Luther realized that he could not simply abolish it by force, for a change in the hearts of the people had to come about freely without compulsion. Still, he could preach the word vigorously under the circumstances, teach it, write it, and trust everything to its effect. Here Luther uses himself as an object lesson, a tactic Paul resorts to more than once:⁶⁵

Take myself as an example[, exclaims Luther]. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip [Melanchthon] and [Nicholas von] Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.⁶⁶

Then Luther elaborates on the “folly” of fomenting trouble and of bringing “great bloodshed upon Germany.”⁶⁷ He could, indeed, have “started such a game” that not even the emperor would have been safe. But such would have gone against the word of God. My sense is that the imprisoned Paul found himself amid circumstances that were greatly straitened when compared to Luther's.⁶⁸ Like Luther, however—and, indeed, like many preachers still today—Paul was in a position to wield the word potently (as evidenced by his very writing of the letter) and to represent Christ mightily before the imperial authorities and those soldiers who oversaw his imprisonment. Paul may, indeed, have been enchained, “But the word of God is not bound [ἀλλὰ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ οὐ δέδεται]!” (2 Tim 2:9 ESV).

IV. Conclusion

This article could have focused on those passages in my Philemon commentary that feature Luther's insights on prayer,⁶⁹ the blessed holy cross,⁷⁰ the doctrine of

⁶⁵ See 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:7, 9.

⁶⁶ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77.

⁶⁷ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77–78.

⁶⁸ For physical descriptions of Paul's imprisonment at Rome (where I believe Paul was located when he wrote Philippians [see Acts 28:16–31]), see J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, rev. ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 7–19; and Brian M. Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, vol. 3 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 177–189.

⁶⁹ Luther, “Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount” (1532), AE 21:142–143; “Concerning the Ministry” (1523), 40:31. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 195n53; and 294n56, respectively.

⁷⁰ Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 65. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 109–110n5.

vocation,⁷¹ the office of the keys,⁷² the estate of marriage,⁷³ or any of a number of other topics my commentary takes up. However, focusing attention on how Luther helped resolve a difficult exegetical issue in Philemon and his insights on the pastoral office in Paul's shortest letter provided more than enough material for what appears here, with plenty left over for another day.

With respect to the one Luther citation that pertains to Philippians, I know there will be much more to cite as I get deeper into the project.⁷⁴ It was gratifying to use Luther's frustrations in dealing with the idolatrous mass at Wittenberg to explicate better the sense of weakness Paul undoubtedly felt during his own imprisonment while awaiting an audience with the emperor's representative in Rome, I believe, sometime in the mid- first century AD—an audience that would determine the apostle's living or dying (Phil 1:21). And so I hope Paul and Luther's good humor in preaching Christ crucified, risen, and ascended amid difficult circumstances will encourage pastors still today who do the same in their respective ministries under the cross.

⁷¹ Luther, "Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount" (1532)AE 21:32. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 137n188.

⁷² *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), 18. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 104n406.

⁷³ Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John 14–16" (1537–1540), AE 24:377. Cited in Nordling, *Philemon*, 138n199.

⁷⁴ Thanks go to Scott Bruzek and John Pless who directed me to the location of the passage regarding Wittenberg beer.

My Soul Magnifies the Lord: Luther's Hermeneutic of Humility

Arthur A. Just Jr.

The story of the Reformation cannot be told without recognizing that Martin Luther was first and foremost a biblical scholar, a professor of the Bible at Wittenberg, whose lectures on the Psalms and on the books of Romans and Galatians led him to recognize the need for radical changes in the church catholic. The Reformation reformed how the Scriptures were being interpreted, and Luther's clear-eyed hermeneutic of justification by grace through faith was the battering ram that opened the Scriptures to reveal Christ as the primary context of both the Old and New Testaments.

It seems appropriate that an examination of Luther's contributions to Reformation exegesis include a contemplation of his magisterial treatise on Mary's Magnificat in Luke's gospel. Written in 1521, it closely follows three famous treatises of 1520: *To the Christian Nobility* on social reform, the *Babylonian Captivity* on the sacraments, and *Freedom of a Christian* on Christian life.¹ Luther wrote his treatise on the Magnificat to Prince John Frederick, the son of Elector John of Saxony and nephew of Frederick the Wise, as an expression of gratitude to the young duke upon receiving a letter of support from him. Luther had just received the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* that would lead to his excommunication from the church. The young seventeen-year-old prince encouraged Luther to keep on preaching, teaching, and writing, which, of course, Luther did. These were stressful days for Luther, and one of his many virtues was his capacity to continue to preach, teach, and write under great duress, even while physically sick, even during bouts of depression. Luther wrote this treatise between November 1520 and September 1521, during which time he was distracted by such events as the Diet of Worms, his excommunication, and his abduction by Frederick the Wise to the Wartburg, where he took refuge. These were trying times, indeed, for Luther!

Luther's treatise on the Magnificat opens up many possibilities for comment and reflection. Some use this treatise to encourage, even promote, a higher form of Mariology among Lutherans since it is here that Luther affirms the perpetual

¹ Kenneth Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)" in *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 214.

virginity of Mary and her sinlessness.² Luther even appears to invoke her at the beginning and the end of the treatise. In Luther's dedication:

May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom, profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw therefrom wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven. To this may God help us. Amen.³

In Luther's concluding words:

We pray God to give us a right understanding of this Magnificat, an understanding that consists not merely in brilliant words, but in glowing life in body and soul. May Christ grant us this through the intercession and for the sake of His dear Mother Mary. Amen.⁴

As tempting as it might be to devote time to unpacking whether this commentary "should be viewed as a catholic work or as a Reformation work," or whether this shows "Luther as a medieval theologian whose Mariology, typical of the age, was lost in later Lutheranism,"⁵ I will resist this temptation. Those who are interested in this perspective can examine an evenhanded essay by Donal Flanagan in which he deconstructs Luther's Mariology from his Roman Catholic perspective and concludes that Luther's exposition of the Magnificat demonstrates an effort to "purify and renew" the traditional Marian piety Luther inherited from his medieval training as an Augustinian monk.⁶ Flanagan comments about Luther's invocation of Mary in the dedication and conclusion of his treatise on the Magnificat, cited above, in this manner:

Luther here [in the dedication] clearly speaks of the tender Mother of God obtaining wisdom for him. He prays that she may do so. He does so, however, as if to avoid any misunderstanding of her role, and in a short and significant

² Martin Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521): vol. 21, pp. 295–355, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE: "She does not want you to come to her, but through her to God" (323); "Mary also freely ascribes all to God's grace, not to her merit. For though she was without sin, yet that grace was far too great for her to deserve it in any way" (327); "We ought to call upon her, that for her sake God may grant and do what we request. Thus also all other saints are to be invoked, so that the work may be every way God's alone" (329).

³ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:298.

⁴ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:355.

⁵ Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 214.

⁶ Donal Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat* (Wallington, Surrey: The Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2001), 17.

sentence at the end of his prayer: "To this may God help us. Amen." This is presumably to ensure that people see Mary's role correctly and understand that any gift is God's gift, not hers.

The last sentences in the Commentary use equally clear words in speaking of the intercession of Mary, but again this intercession is not something which Luther views or even writes about in isolation. The marian invocation is set within a prayer directed to God, and Christ is explicitly named as the one who is to grant the favour asked—a right understanding of the Magnificat.⁷

There is also a temptation to engage in the current debate concerning whether this is Elizabeth's canticle or Mary's.⁸ I will resist the temptation to address this fully as well. But in my commentary on Luther's hermeneutic of humility, I will affirm my belief that this is Mary's song. It is, therefore, this theme—Luther's hermeneutic of humility—to which we now turn.

I. Did Luther Have a Hermeneutic?

"Did Luther have a hermeneutic?" This question is worth asking. Kenneth Hagan, who opens up for us Luther's way of interpreting the Scriptures, suggests that Luther did not have a hermeneutic:

Technically, Luther did not have a hermeneutic because hermeneutics is a nineteenth-century discipline that presupposes the distance of the biblical text and the need for the interpreter to bridge the gap and make any interpretive moves necessary to bring the text into modern linguistic jargon understandable in post-Enlightenment philosophy.⁹

For Luther, Scripture could not be removed from its place in the liturgical life of his church. Luther may not have had a hermeneutic as it is defined today, but he did have an approach to Scripture that was theological, pastoral, and that could not be divorced from his life in the church as preacher, teacher, and writer. Mickey Mattox describes Luther's approach to Scripture this way:

[Luther] always encountered the text as a baptized Christian. Charged with responsibility for preaching on a regular basis (usually several times each week), biblical exegesis remained for him a spiritual exercise performed in service to God and the church, a task for which one was fitted by the Holy Spirit

⁷ Flanagan, *Luther on the Magnificat*, 16.

⁸ See Jeffrey Kloha, "Elizabeth's Magnificat (Luke 1:46)," in *Texts and Traditions: Essays in Honour of J. Keith Elliott*, ed. Peter Doble and Jeffrey Kloha (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2014), 200–219.

⁹ Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 218.

and by a living faith, given in baptism. . . . His classroom exposition slowly evolved from monastic meditation on the “sacred page” (*sacra pagina*)—in which prayer and exegesis were inseparable—toward something more akin to modern university lectures. . . . The consistent linkage between prayer and Scripture is one of the important links between Luther’s biblical interpretation and the patristic traditions of “spiritual exegesis.”¹⁰

Is it possible to have a hermeneutic when there is no distance from the interpreter and the sacred page of Holy Writ as was the case with Luther? To approach the Scriptures as holy, as intended for preaching and teaching in the context of the church’s life, to come to the Scriptures in prayer, meditation, and temptation (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*) is to come in faith, as a baptized believer seeking theological meaning from a sacred page that speaks directly to the heart.¹¹ Luther’s discipline of the sacred page “goes counter to much of modern effort to see Luther as the first Enlightenment figure.”¹² With respect to how Luther approached the Scriptures, he continues the tradition in which he was nurtured as an Augustinian monk. Such a discipline is both pastoral and theological, which is why many today who yearn to return *ad fontes* find in Luther a refreshing approach to the art of interpretation. Kenneth Hagen summarizes it this way:

It is often assumed that Luther ended the medieval approach to the Bible and started the modern methods, but Luther approached Scripture in a manner appropriate to what the document is (*sacra pagina*). Luther did not superimpose his agenda onto Scripture; he took out and applied the message of Scripture as he claimed to do and thus was consistent with the grammar and vocabulary of Scripture.¹³

¹⁰ Mickey L. Mattox, “Luther, Martin,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kenneth J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 471–472.

¹¹ See Mattox, “Luther, Martin,” 472, who also accents both the *sacra pagina* and *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*: “Asked how to pray, Luther showed his indebtedness to the *sacra pagina*, instinctively directing the questioner to the Bible. Prayer is human address to God, centered in the Spirit-inspired application of all one’s powers to the biblical text, searching for authentic spiritual illumination. This illumination is inevitably followed, however, by testing, the trials faced by the struggling Christian. These trials drive one back to prayer, back to the text, and so on, in a lifelong cycle of prayer, meditation, and temptation (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*). As the Holy Spirit works in unfailing agreement with Christ, the Word of God, so spiritual experience is tethered to the word in Holy Scripture.”

¹² Hagen, “Luther, Martin (1483–1546),” 219.

¹³ Hagen, “Luther, Martin (1483–1546),” 215. He adds this: “What the scholastics separated— theology and commentary on Scripture—Luther sought to bring together again along the lines of *sacra pagina*. Scripture alone is the sole authority for the church, the disciple of theology and the life of faith. Luther continued the call for the reform of the church on the basis of Scripture. Every office and activity in the church falls under the judgment of Scripture. God has revealed all that we

This movement back to a “Lutheran” approach to Scripture that is premodern, even patristic, has characterized the interpretive approach to the “sacred page” of several who teach at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.¹⁴ This movement gave birth to the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ACCS)¹⁵ and now the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (RCS).¹⁶ The recovery of an organic biblical theology from our patristic roots in the ACCS and our Reformation roots in the RCS is an attempt to return to the exegesis of our spiritual fathers in the church. As editors of these commentaries, our goal was simple: to compile in one volume the consensual exegesis of the church. Much of the best exegetical commentary comes from pastoral writings, particularly the sermons, homilies, letters, and catechetical lectures of the church fathers, for the exegesis of both the early church and our Reformation fathers was pastoral and theological.

Over twenty years ago, Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson compiled a series of essays entitled *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, and their concern still obtains today, especially as we celebrate our Reformation heritage in 2017, and even more, in a culture that is losing its moorings to the biblical faith. As they asserted,

What needs to be claimed for the church is the Bible as authoritative Scripture. There is loss of confidence in the ability of the church to read the Bible through the eyes of its own faith and in light of its own exegetical and liturgical traditions.¹⁷

Here Luther can show us the way with this “discipline of the sacred page” that is practiced in communities of faith that gather around font, pulpit, and altar to be hearers of the word, to pray, to receive Christ’s body and blood, and that are led by pastors whose hermeneutic in preparing for preaching is *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.¹⁸ Aidan Kavanagh captures how the Bible, to be interpreted as it was intended to be interpreted, must be seen as first and foremost “the sacred page”

need to know about God in Christ. Theology must be biblical theology; any other kind is human invention.”

¹⁴ For example, see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 206, where in the catch of fish and Peter’s call in Luke 5:1–11, the “boat” represents the church, in keeping with Luther’s allegorization of the miracle.

¹⁵ For example, see Arthur A. Just Jr., ed., *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 89.

¹⁶ For example, see Beth Kreitzer, ed., *Luke*, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 113.

¹⁷ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), x.

¹⁸ See Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther’s Writings” (1539), AE 34:285–287.

written for communities that believe Christ is present bodily as the word is read, preached, and celebrated:

The Word gets *written* within communities that regard the Word worshipfully. This means that rather than being Scripture's stepchild, worship is Scripture's home. Thus worship is not merely a function of Scripture; together, both Scripture and worship are a function of the Word spoken and received. Neither Scripture nor worship is *about* God; they are *of* God, each in its own proper way. They are strictly correlative; neither can exist without the other. To take a lead from Luther, if the authority of Scripture arises from its being the cradle in which Christ lies, then Christian worship is, in Samuel Terrien's phrase, the liturgy of the Word that pervades the Scriptures and is incarnate in the living Christ. And what Christ is by nature, his Body the church is by grace, particularly in its worship, where his Spirit flourishes.¹⁹

The expression *sacra pagina*, "discipline of the sacred page," not only captures Luther's approach to the Scriptures, but it also leads us to consider how this is to be the very hermeneutic we are to use in our own exegesis. But what does this "discipline of the sacred page" look like? Having argued that Luther does not have a hermeneutic in the modern sense of the term, it would be misguided to try and list Luther's hermeneutical principles. Kenneth Hagen, who, with Mickey Mattox, repeatedly uses the language of "sacred page," summarizes the major themes of Luther's exegesis:

Luther was concerned to place the Bible in the center of everything: church, theology and especially preaching . . . The Reformation was a movement of the Word: Christ, Scripture and preaching—in that order. . . . Luther was pre-modern; he continued the general medieval understanding of interpretation as commentary, annotation and exposition. . . . Luther emphasized that Scripture is its own interpreter. . . . The doctrine of justification by faith is the criterion by which all other doctrines, offices and practices in the church are judged. . . . Basic to Luther's understanding of Scripture was his distinction between law and gospel. . . . The center of Scripture for Luther is Christ, present in both the Old and New Testaments. . . . Luther's distinction is his construction of Scripture as containing a single testament (will, promise) of Christ. . . . The word *testament* is a short summary of all God's grace fulfilled in Christ.

¹⁹ Aidan Kavanagh, "Scriptural Word and Liturgical Worship," in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, 131–132 (emphasis Kavanagh). He says a similar thing in *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo, 1978), xiii: "The written texts of the Christian bible, as they emerged, entered into worship patterns that were already established—especially in the synagogal, paschal, and domestic usages of Judaism which the earliest Christians continued to employ even as they began to fill them with a new content. The liturgy is scripture's home rather than its stepchild, and the Hebrew and Christian bibles were the Church's first liturgical books."

... Promise, one ingredient in the category of testament, is God's announcement of redemption. ... The second ingredient in testament is Luther's theology of the Word. The Word is the dynamic manifestation of the person of God. ... The third part of Luther's testament theology is a theology of the cross. ... The fourth aspect of Luther's theology of testament is grace. Grace for Luther is unilateral gift. ... The fifth [and final] aspect of testament is faith or trust in the inheritance.²⁰

Hagen's summary captures all the great themes in Luther's exegesis that became the foundation for how Lutherans interpret the Scriptures.

II. The *Sensus Literalis* Is Christ

One aspect of Luther's interpretive approach to the sacred page that we have not accented thus far is his desire to get at the *sensus literalis* of the text, its one intended meaning, especially for the first-century audience. This accent of *sensus literalis* in Luther goes back to Aquinas and the scholastic method of interpreting the Bible. Terence Keegan, a Roman Catholic, points out the ramifications of the scholastic accent on the literal meaning of the text in his *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*. In the process, Keegan comments on our own hermeneutical world:

St. Thomas' insistence on the literal sense excluded allegorical interpretation but did not exclude recognizing that the Bible often employs metaphorical or figurative language. When the language used is figurative, then the literal sense is the figurative sense. As a result, the literal sense was much richer than a sense that could be derived simply from a literal reading of the text. So rich was the literal sense for St. Thomas that it could only be discovered when the Scriptures were read in the light of the traditions of the Church.

Scholastic theology left the Christian world with a single-minded concern for the literal, historical sense of Scripture, a concern which remains manifest among most Christians right up to the present day. Scholastic theology had another, less fortunate, consequence. The rigorous methodology developed under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy eventually degenerated into the practice of proof-texting, searching the Scriptures for texts whose literal sense supports or proves doctrines that one accepts independent of their scriptural foundation, a practice which likewise continues to the present day.²¹

²⁰ Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 215–218.

²¹ Terence Keegan, *Interpreting the Bible: A Popular Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 17.

Luther embraced this richer, deeper sense of the literal meaning of the text that read the Scriptures in the context of the church's life, that is, in the discipline of the "sacred page," which is one way of thinking of the tradition. Luther was no scholastic, and even a casual reading of Luther's exegesis shows that he did not apply a rigid hermeneutical method to the text, even though as a biblical scholar and a linguist, fluent in the biblical languages, his exegesis always flowed out of the grammar of the "sacred page." Mickey Mattox affirms this as well as Luther's christological and ecclesial sensibilities in his comments on Luther's interpretive method, especially in his translation of Scripture:

Luther also insisted that interpretation centers on the plain meaning of the text (*sensus literalis*). Understanding requires attention to biblical languages and to history, a conviction he shared with other early modern biblical humanists. Indeed, working with the Wittenberg translation team, what he called his "Sanhedrin," he translated the entire Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German, a process that necessitated careful attention to grammar and history in order to discern the sense of the text. However, translation, and with it interpretation, is a distinctively Christian task, a work of the Spirit and of the mind shaped by Christian truth. Grammatical and historical knowledge alone are insufficient. Translation and interpretation depend on understanding not only the words of Scripture (*verba*) but also the substance (*res scripturae sacrae*). The reader dare not bracket out Christian beliefs when grappling with a difficult text, either for translation or for interpretation.

Luther often spoke negatively of allegorical interpretation, but his own exegesis remained strikingly sensitive to allegorical and tropological resonances in Scripture, particularly those that could be applied to Christ and faith. The *sensus literalis* is Christ, for the Scriptures are the "swaddling cloths" in which the Christ-child is laid. Interpretation is Christocentric because the text unfailingly witnesses to the redemption accomplished by Christ.²²

III. Luther's Hermeneutic of Humility

So what does this have to do with Mary's Magnificat and Luther's hermeneutic of humility? It is in *The Magnificat* from 1521, written during the troubled days of

²² Mattox, "Luther, Martin," 472. See also Hagen, "Luther, Martin (1483–1546)," 217, who affirms that the *sensus literalis* for Luther was Christ: "Luther's response to the various senses of meaning in the Middle Ages (fourfold, double-literal) was that Scripture has one simple sense (most often, Christ). Or Luther will talk about the grammatical sense as the meaning of the text, that the grammatical meaning and theological meaning are the same. Luther availed himself of humanist scholarship and was a part of a late medieval trend to highlight (once again) the christological meaning of a text. Luther also used allegory, not to establish a doctrine but to embellish it. He also used the other spiritual senses."

the Diet of Worms, excommunication, and hiding at the Wartburg, where we see Luther's understanding that the *sensus literalis* of Mary's words is Christ. The substance of Scripture, its *res scripturae sacrae*, is found in Mary's low estate, her nothingness, her humility. Luther's "hermeneutic" of humility is forged in this treatise to Prince John Frederick. The key, then, to Luther's interpretation of the "sacred page" is that the *sensus literalis* of the text is Christ and the theology of the cross.

Mary's Magnificat responds to the praise of Elizabeth by declaring "that all the glory is due to God: this is the theme of the *Magnificat*."²³ In good Hebraic synonymous parallelism, Mary sings that her soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Savior. Beginning with the highest of doxologies, Mary teaches us the reason we were created: to praise God. "Theology is Doxology. Theology must sing,"²⁴ said Martin Franzmann, and that is what Mary does as she announces the great themes of Luke's gospel in her hymn that praises God for his mighty acts of salvation. Dare we say that this is Mary's hermeneutic, that theology is doxology, that theology must sing? The Lord is magnified because the births of Jesus and John are interpreted as acts of mercy. Perhaps this is what Luther means when he describes the threefold purpose of the Magnificat:

Just as a book title indicates what is the contents of the book, so this word "magnifies" is used by Mary to indicate what her hymn of praise is to be about, namely, the great works and deeds of God, for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth. We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; *for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her*.²⁵

That last line—"for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her"—is why this cannot be Elizabeth's canticle.²⁶ For all that might be said about

²³ John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 73.

²⁴ Martin H. Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 92.

²⁵ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:306 (emphasis added).

²⁶ The issue that the Magnificat is Elizabeth's and not Mary's has been promulgated by Jeffrey Kloha in his essay "Elizabeth's Magnificat (Luke 1:46)." He makes a case that the original text simply had *καὶ ἔπεν* (which very well may be the original reading), that Elizabeth is grammatically the natural antecedent, that Mary was added because of a growing Mariology within the church, and that there is more textual support for Elizabeth than many admit (especially Irenaeus and Nicetas of Remesiana, on whom Kloha wrote his doctoral thesis). Kloha does acknowledge that the textual evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of Mary. The best reason to take Elizabeth is because it is the more difficult reading. He makes a case stylistically, as well, which is the strength of his article. The weakest part of his argument is an attempt to demonstrate within Luke's gospel that Elizabeth is the better choice thematically and theologically. What he misses is Luke's portrayal of Mary as Israel, temple, and ark. In fact, an underlying concern throughout the essay is his concern

Luther's traditional, medieval Marian piety, he understands that in Luke's gospel, Mary personifies Israel, she is the first catechumen, she is the church. Even more, Luther would resonate with Luke's portrayal of Mary first as Israel, then as the temple, and finally as the ark of the covenant.

This portrayal of Mary as Israel, temple, and ark is in service to Luke's greater themes—that there has been a shift in the locale of God's presence from the temple in Jerusalem and the word in the synagogue to the virgin Mary because of what is now present in her womb—Jesus, the Great One, Son of the Most High, King over the house of David and Jacob, the Holy One, Son of God. These are the various designations the angel Gabriel uses to catechize Mary about the child begotten in her. This invasive act in her womb, through her ear by the voice of Gabriel and the Spirit of God, causes Mary to sing a hymn that praises God precisely because the child in her womb is the greatest demonstration of God's "hermeneutic of humility."

This is Luke's theme of the Great Reversal, where God breaks what is whole and makes whole what is broken.²⁷ The infancy narrative proclaims the full ramification of the incarnation for the cosmos, and how the Christ child and his messianic program comes to make all things new in all humbleness and poverty and suffering. This is why the Magnificat could never be Elizabeth's hymn. For only Mary, the mother of God, the personification of Israel and the personification of the church, could announce that Jesus comes to scatter the arrogant in the imagination of their hearts, to pull down the mighty from their thrones, to exalt those of low degree, to fill the hungry with good things, to send the rich away empty. To see these acts of reversal as expressions of God's mercy is at the heart of Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, for, as he says, "How can one know God better than in the works in which He is most Himself?"²⁸

In the humility of the child in Mary's womb, God restores man back to himself in mercy. Thus, for Luther, the interpretation of the Magnificat must be christological, as it centers on how God enters our cosmos in order to bring us back into communion with him through the fleshly, bodily presence of Christ in a grand act of reversal on the cross and then in the cruciform lives of those who daily take up that cross and follow him. Our way back to God is "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ), in humility, through his body, conceived in the mother of God who, in bearing the child in her womb, is Israel, temple, and ark. What other reason does she have to magnify the Lord, to rejoice in God her Savior? As Luther said, "She sang it not for

for the elevation of Mary, and that to place Elizabeth as the singer of the song counters a Mariology that he believes led to the designation of this canticle as Marian.

²⁷ Cf. Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:299.

²⁸ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:332.

herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her,” which is what we do as the church when we gather to praise God in evening prayer.

Mary as Israel, Temple, and Ark

Luke describes his gospel as a systematic narrative whose purpose is kerygmatic. His first demonstration of both its systematic and its kerygmatic character is in his development of Mary as the corporate personality of Israel.

Mary is first alerted to the radical change in her life when the angel Gabriel greets her in Nazareth. The exact form of the greeting addressed to Mary in Luke 1:28 is χαῖρε (rejoice), addressed to the “daughter of Zion” twice in the Septuagint (Zeph 3:14 and Zech 9:9).²⁹ John McHugh notes that “the imperative form χαῖρε, far from being a conventional greeting, always refers to the joy attendant on the deliverance of Israel; wherever it occurs, it is a translation of a Hebrew verb meaning ‘Rejoice greatly!’”³⁰ McHugh goes on to note that

[Zephaniah] envisages the day of salvation as already begun, and calls upon the Daughter of Zion to rejoice with all her heart, not to fear, because the Lord is with her, as her king and saviour. This is exactly the message of the angel in Lk 1:28–33: Luke envisages the two Annunciations as the dawning of the day of salvation (Lk 1:77–79), and Gabriel therefore tells Mary to rejoice, not to fear, because the Lord is with her, and because she will bear within her womb a son who will be the king of Israel and its saviour.³¹

The second element of Gabriel's tripartite greeting (Luke 1:28) is the statement that Mary is κεχαριτωμένη, “She who has been shown grace, she who has been favored.” The Vulgate's rendering, *gratia plena*, “full of grace,” even if “full” is overstated, may be rightly understood in the sense of “unmerited grace received from God,” but the *passive* Greek participle and the context are abused if interpreted as “grace now available to give others.” As Lenski says, “Mary is a vessel to receive, not a fountain to dispense.”³² Equally wrong would be “grace merited.” Luther's

²⁹ The only other two occurrences of χαῖρε in the LXX are in Joel: θάρσει, γῆ, χαῖρε καὶ εὐφραίνου (2:21), where τέκνα Σιών appears in 2:23, and in Lamentations, where the daughter of Edom is told to rejoice (in irony?) in 4:21 and the daughter of Zion is addressed in 4:22 (cf. H. Conzelmann, χαίρω κτλ., in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976], 9:367). Therefore all the occurrences in the LXX of this form of the imperative are at least in proximity to the theme of the daughter of Zion.

³⁰ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 38–39. He cites Isa 66:10, 14; Jer 31:13 (38:13); Bar 4:37; Hab 3:18; Zech 4:10; 10:7.

³¹ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 41–42.

³² R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, reprint 1961), 62.

treatise on the Magnificat makes this abundantly clear, even as he embraces a traditional Marian piety:

Mary also freely ascribes all to God's grace, not to her merit. For though she was without sin, yet that grace was far too great for her to deserve it in any way. How should a creature deserve to become the Mother of God? Though certain scribblers make much ado about her worthiness for such motherhood, I prefer to believe her rather than them.³³

The third and final part of the angel's initial greeting, "The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28), is the first in a series of statements about the presence of God with his people. The Lord is with Mary (Luke 1:28) in two senses. He will come upon her and overshadow her, and the presence of the Lord will be in her womb. The new era of salvation begins with the conception of Jesus in Mary by the gracious action of God upon Mary, who finds favor with God—not due to any superiority over other women or any merit in God's estimation, but simply because of God's good pleasure (cf. Luke 10:21). Thus, the angel says, "Rejoice," for Israel—humanity—is now to be reborn through the Son in Mary's womb. The Lord is with Mary; he is with his church. Mary is the new Israel.

After Mary hears the word of the angel and conceives the child in Luke 1:35, the angel tells her that what she has conceived in her womb "will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35, my translation). What first strikes us is that this child is the "Son of God," balancing the first designation by the angel calling him Jesus, which, we know from Matthew's Gospel means "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). What we sometimes miss is the title *holy*. God is holy. He dwells in the temple, in the Holy of Holies. Mary's womb is now the *sanctum sanctorum*, "the Holy of Holies" because the shift in the locale of God's presence is complete. God is present in the temple in Jerusalem and he is also present in the temple of Mary's womb in Nazareth. Mary knows this, which is why she sings, "The Mighty One has done great things to me, and holy is his name" (Luke 1:49, my translation).

John McHugh notes an interesting series of parallels between Mary's journey to the hill country of Judah and the movement of the ark of the covenant to the same locale on its way to Jerusalem. In these parallels, Luke is showing that Mary, as a temporary and portable vessel housing the immanent presence of the true God, fulfills the purpose of the ark of the covenant:

The two stories open with the statement that David and Mary "arose and made a journey" (2 Sam 6:2; Lk 1:39) up into the hill country, into the land of Judah. On arrival, both the Ark and Mary are greeted with "shouts" of joy (2 Sam 6:12,

³³ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:327.

15; Lk 1:42, 44). The verb used for Elizabeth's greeting in Lk 1:42 (ἀνεφώνησεν) is, in the Septuagint, used only in connection with liturgical ceremonies centred round the Ark; it is best translated as "*intoned*." The Ark, on its way to Jerusalem, was taken into the house of Obededom, and became a source of blessing for his house (2 Sam 6:10–12); Mary's entry into the house of Elizabeth is also seen as a source of blessing for the house (Lk 1:41, 43–4). David, in terror at the untouchable holiness of the Ark, cried out: "How shall the Ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam 6:9); Elizabeth, in awe before the mother of her Lord, says, "Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:43). Finally, we read that "the Ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obededom three months" (2 Sam 6:11), and that Mary stayed with Elizabeth "about three months" (Lk 1:56).³⁴

The Magnificat is Mary's response to this extraordinary reality she now knows about herself because of the child in her womb: she is Israel, temple, and ark. Such sentiments became embedded in the liturgy and piety of the ancient church, as is reflected in this hymn to Mary by Theophanes, a hymnographer and bishop of Nicaea from AD 842–845, in his Canon of Annunciation:

Theotokos: The descent of the Holy Spirit has purified my soul; it has sanctified my body; it has made me a temple containing God, a divinely adorned tabernacle, a living sanctuary and the pure mother of life.

The angel: I see you as a lamp with many lights; a bridal chamber made by God! Spotless maiden, as an ark of gold, receive now the gift of the law, who through you has been pleased to deliver humankind's corrupted nature!³⁵

When the infant Lord comes to his temple, Simeon prophecies to Mary: "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign spoken against, and of you yourself, through your soul a sword will go, in order that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34–35).³⁶ There are three interpretations of the sword passing through Mary's soul (καὶ σοῦ αὐτῆς τὴν ψυχὴν διελεύσεται ῥομφαία). One interpretation accents Mary's sorrow at the crucifixion of her son. Another brings out the idea that she (like the other disciples) has misunderstood Jesus' destiny.³⁷ The more likely possibility, corresponding with

³⁴ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 62.

³⁵ Arthur A. Just Jr., ed, *Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press: 2003), 19.

³⁶ Translation mine; see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 114.

³⁷ Cf. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 1992), 117, and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX*, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 429–430, who state both interpretations, but opt for the second.

Luke's earlier portrayal of Mary as the personification of Israel, sees the sword as God's revelation in Jesus' words and deeds throughout his ministry:

The meaning of Simeon's prophecy, therefore, is that the word of revelation brought by Jesus will pass through Israel like a sword, and will compel men to reveal their secret thoughts. Thus, just as Jesus will fulfil the prophecy of Is 49:6 by being "light bringing revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk 2:32), so he will fulfil the role assigned to the Servant of Yahweh in Is 49:2, for his message will be felt as a sharp sword.³⁸

This interpretation clarifies Luke's statement in 2:35 that a sword will go thorough Mary's soul "in order that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (*ὅπως ἂν ἀποκαλυφθῶσιν ἐκ πολλῶν καρδιῶν διαλογισμοί*; my translation). If the sword piercing Mary refers only to her own sufferings or misunderstandings, it is hard to see how this will reveal the thoughts of many hearts. However, if the sword is Jesus' preaching, which pierces "Israel"—represented here by one Israelite woman, Mary—then the statement makes perfect sense. Throughout Luke's gospel, the thoughts of many continue to be revealed because of their reactions to Jesus and his proclamation.³⁹ Mary the woman, as a part of Israel and as the mother of Jesus, will feel the pain of Jesus' words and his crucifixion. Like every other participant in Jesus' life, Mary, Israelite and mother, will experience sharp pain because of Jesus' teaching and death. From this moment on, the preaching of Jesus, his sword of revelation, will go through Israel by first going through Mary, who anticipates the suffering of the New Israel.

He has regarded with favor the low estate of his servant

Simeon's prophecy of Jesus' death and rejection is the ultimate manifestation of Jesus' humility. But the "hermeneutic of humility" that prepares for this moment of Simeon's prophecy of Jesus' humiliation is first announced by Mary in the Magnificat. This "hermeneutic" is captured by Luther on the first page of his commentary on the Magnificat with these two sayings:

God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, *break what is whole and make whole what is broken*.

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues

³⁸ McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 109. See his discussion on 106–112.

³⁹ Again, McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*: "The sword which passed through Israel was the preaching of Jesus: it brought about the downfall of many, because it compelled men to reveal their secret thoughts" (112).

unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work; no creature can produce anything out of nothing.⁴⁰

The heart of this hermeneutic of humility is in Luther's insistence on translating ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν as "low estate" or "nothingness."

St. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are."

In this way He turns the world with all its wisdom and power into foolishness and gives us another wisdom and power. Since, then, it is His manner to regard things that are in the depths and disregarded, I have rendered the word "humility" with "nothingness" or "low estate." This, therefore, is what Mary means: "God has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble, and mighty queen, the daughter of princes and great lords.

"He might have found the daughter of Annas or of Caiaphas, who held the highest position in the land. But He let His pure and gracious eyes light on me and used so poor and despised a maiden, in order that no one might glory in His presence, as though he were worthy of this, and that I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and not at all my merit or worthiness."⁴¹

Mary so internalizes this hermeneutic of humility, nothingness, and low estate, that the rest of her hymn manifests how this is at the heart of the gospel, at the heart of the theology of the cross. The humility of Mary's low estate anticipates the total humiliation of her son on the cross, where he enters the lowest of all estates. In shame and utter humiliation, he makes full identification with our nothingness by taking into himself our rebellion and our sin, giving meaning to those in the world whose lives are already defined by humility and suffering.

Lowliness is the theme of the second part of Mary's hymn. She is "the spokesman of the 'lowly.'"⁴² In a magnificent chiasmic structure, the center of the chiasm

⁴⁰ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:299 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Luther, "The Magnificat" (1521), AE 21:314.

⁴² McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, 74. See also his final comments on the Magnificat: "Thus, in the Magnificat, Mary begins by voicing the praise and gratitude of Israel in

emphasizes the theme of lowliness, or the Great Reversal. This is accented by the frame of mercy, described in Luke 1:50 as mercy for the generations of those who fear him (the “Holy” One), and in Luke 1:54b–55 as God’s remembrance of mercy, which was continually given to Israel’s fathers, particularly Abraham, whose seed would culminate in Mary’s child. Mercy is a theme of the infancy narrative, particularly of the first two hymns, for Zechariah will use similar language in the Benedictus (Luke 1:72) to describe God’s general salvific action for Israel, “To do mercy with our fathers and to remember his holy covenant” (my translation). Jesus comes as the merciful and compassionate Messiah and not as a God of vengeance.⁴³

The center of the chiasm, however, gives specifics on how this mercy expresses itself in the lives of the people of God. Within Luke 1:52–53, there is another chiasm that accents God’s principle of the Great Reversal. As we have already heard Luther say, “God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, *break what is whole and make whole what is broken*.”⁴⁴ Mary herself, a servant of the Lord (Luke 1:48a) and personification of Israel, is the pattern for all those of low estate whom God visits with his merciful presence and raises up as an act of pure grace: God has exalted the humble (Luke 1:52b) and the hungry he has filled with good things (Luke 1:53a). Here in the Magnificat, Mary announces the hermeneutic of humility, the theology of the cross, the Great Reversal: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11; cf. 18:14).

Jesus is the ultimate reversal of God as the Creator come to his creation as one of us in humility and poverty. As the Father exalted Jesus in his humility, so now Jesus will exalt those of low estate. This is what Simeon prophesied to Mary, that her child Jesus “is destined for the fall and resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign to be spoken against” (Luke 2:34, my translation), and what Jesus prophesied to the scribes and chief priests when he cited Psalm 118:22, “What, therefore, is this that is written, ‘The stone that the builders rejected, this has become the head of the corner’? Everyone who falls on that stone will be dashed to pieces; on whomsoever it falls, it will crush him” (Luke 20:17–18, my translation). Luther affirms this: “Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work

Messianic days (vv. 46–50); then she reflects that God has sent this salvation not to those whom the world esteems, but to the lowly, in whom the spiritual destiny of Israel was centred from the time of Jeremiah, i.e., from the end of monarchial times (vv. 51–3); and finally her thoughts move back further still, to the very beginning of Israel’s history, and she sees her virginal conception as the final accomplishment of the promises made to Abraham himself (vv. 54–5). Just as Abraham, one man, had received the promises at the beginning on behalf of the entire nation, so one woman, Mary, received fulfillment of those promises on behalf of the nation at the end of time” (78–79).

⁴³ One of the major points in his Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16–30) and in his response to John and his disciples as to whether he is “the Coming One” (Luke 7:18–35, my translation).

⁴⁴ Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:299 (emphasis added).

and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil.”⁴⁵ This is the language of Jesus’ beatitudes and woes (Luke 6:20–26) and the nature of his ministry as he goes to the sick and sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes) instead of the healthy and self-righteous (Pharisees and chief priests). Jesus’ entire ministry of table fellowship shows a hermeneutic of humility. When he sits down with tax collectors and sinners, with the five thousand, with the Twelve at the Last Supper, with the Emmaus disciples after the resurrection, the presence of God at table with the hungry fills them with good things. Jesus, the humble child in the womb of this humble servant, shows God’s hospitality to the world by coming to those who expect it least and bringing them salvation.

All of this begins with Mary, without whom there would be no incarnation, no humiliation, no cross, no resurrection. This understanding was embraced by Luther in the Reformation even as it should be with us today. She is, in Luther’s words, “The foremost example of the grace of God,”⁴⁶ and her song, with tiny unborn Jesus in her womb, still throughout the church goes on and on.

⁴⁵ Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:340.

⁴⁶ Luther, “The Magnificat” (1521), AE 21:340.



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The Gravity of the Divine Word: Commentators and the Corinthian Correspondence in the Reformation Era¹

Scott M. Manetsch

In the final decade of the sixteenth century, a Dutch artist named Carel Allardt produced an engraving entitled “The Balance” which presented visual justification for the Protestant doctrine of Scripture’s supreme authority (*sola Scriptura*). The engraving is framed by two groups of church leaders. On the left side is pictured the pope, seated on his sacred throne, surrounded by an assembly of Catholic clergymen, including cardinals, an archbishop, an acolyte, and various priests and monks, several of whom are equipped with crucifixes, a bell, or rosary beads. On the right side of the frame stands a group of evangelical reformers, four of whom are recognizable as Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin. In a gallery behind them are seated four noblemen, examining and discussing what appears to be the Holy Scripture. At the center of the engraving—commanding the reader’s attention—is a balance, with plates suspended from either end. The Bible that sits on the right-hand plate far outweighs the papal tiara, the papal keys, as well as a Catholic book (perhaps Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*?) which rest atop the left-hand plate—despite the desperate efforts of two monks to counteract the gravity of the divine word. The emotive force and meaning of “The Balance” is clear: the message of Scripture, as taught by the Protestants, far outweighs the authority of the pope and every Catholic tradition.²

I. The Gravity of the Divine Word

What Allardt communicated through the visual arts was announced regularly from Protestant pulpits and articulated in Protestant polemical and confessional works during the early modern period. The Holy Scripture, being God’s revealed word, must serve as the standard or norm by which all the church’s doctrines and practices are evaluated. “Pious and good souls,” wrote Luther in 1534, are “captive to the authority of Scripture as the Word of divine truth” and “cannot believe what

¹ Portions of this essay have been adapted from my introduction to the *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: 1 Corinthians*, ed. Scott Manetsch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

² Allardt’s engraving and other versions of “The Balance” are found in Émile Doumergue, *Iconographie Calvinienne* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel & Compagnie, 1909), 183–185.

is taught in manifest contradiction to the Scriptures.”³ Five years later, John Calvin repeated this theme: “The Scripture is like a Lydian stone, by which [the Church] tests all doctrines.” Indeed, “all controversies should be decided by the Word.”⁴ The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was thereafter inscribed into most Protestant confessional statements, including the Second Helvetic Confession, penned by Heinrich Bullinger in 1566: “Therefore, in controversies of religion or matters of faith, we cannot admit any other judge than God Himself, pronouncing by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what to be avoided.”⁵

This commitment to scriptural authority brought with it entailments that proved crucial for Protestant faith and practice. Protestant scholars produced exegetical aids and Scripture commentaries as well as new vernacular translations of the Bible. Protestant ministers devoted their lives to the careful study of Holy Scripture and proclaimed its message through sermon, sacrament, and catechism. Protestant laypeople were now expected to be attentive consumers of God’s word as they attended sermons, sang metrical psalms, and memorized their catechetical lessons.

Protestant biblical scholarship in the sixteenth century was in large part the beneficiary of a pedagogical program known as northern humanism, which prioritized the mastery of the humane letters (*studia humanitatis*), the recovery of ancient texts, and the careful study of the Bible in its original languages of Hebrew and Greek. Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, Calvin, and other Protestant reformers believed that the careful study of the Christian Scriptures, in their original languages, was necessary for recovering the Christian gospel and achieving the reformation of the church. Sacred philology was seen as necessary for, though subservient to, evangelical theology. Luther put the matter most clearly:

In proportion then as we value the gospel, let us zealously hold to the languages. For it was not without purpose that God caused his Scriptures to be set down in these two languages alone—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New in

³ Martin Luther, preface to Antonius Corvinus, *How Far Erasmus’ Recently Published Plan for ‘Mending the Peace of the Church’ Should Be Followed While a Council Is Being Organized* (1534), AE 60:63. For development of this theme in Luther’s writings, see Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 276–282.

⁴ Calvin, *Letter to Sadoletto*, in John C. Olin, ed., *A Reformation Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), 61, 86; *Ioannis Calvini opera omnia quae supersunt*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss, vol. 5 (Brunsvigae: C. A. Schwetschke, 1866), 393, 410.

⁵ Cited in Joel Beeke and Sinclair Ferguson, eds., *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 16.

Greek. Now if God did not despise them but chose them above all others for his word, then we too ought to honor them above all others.⁶

Believing that this linguistic return *ad fontes* was a precondition for church renewal, Luther and his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg instituted curricular reforms in 1518 requiring students to study the Greek and Hebrew text of Scripture. This practice became commonplace in other evangelical gymnasia, academies, and universities during the generations that followed. At the same time, Protestant churchmen published a variety of exegetical aids, including Greek and Hebrew grammars, concordances, commentaries, texts on hermeneutics, and word-books to assist pastors as they interpreted God's word. More important still, evangelical scholars, drawing upon their knowledge of the biblical languages as well as the scholarship of Catholic humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, produced a virtual flood of vernacular translations of the Bible that challenged the monopoly of the Latin Vulgate version. By the end of the sixteenth century, new (and improved) versions of the Bible had appeared in Arabic, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Portuguese, and Spanish.⁷ Between 1534 and 1620, Wittenberg printers released around 100 editions of Luther's complete German Bible (1534) in folio, quarto, and octavo formats, totaling around 200,000 copies.⁸ French translations of Scripture achieved a similar degree of popularity. Between 1550 and 1600 more than eighty editions of the complete French Bible, and another eighty editions of the French New Testament, were produced by Genevan printers alone.⁹ The full impact of this tsunami of "Protestant" Bibles is impossible to measure, but undoubtedly it intensified criticisms of the traditional church and punctuated evangelical calls for reform of church and society in accordance with Scripture. Already in 1522, Luther's arch-nemesis, the Catholic polemicist Johannes Cochlaeus, recognized the danger posed to the Catholic laity by these vernacular Bibles:

⁶ Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools" (1524): vol. 45, pp. 358–359, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE. The relationship between sacred philology and evangelical theology is explored by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible: The Bible of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 23–28.

⁷ See Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 49–62.

⁸ M. H. Black, "The Printed Bible," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 432.

⁹ Bettye Thomas Chambers, *Bibliography of French Bibles*, vol. 1, *Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century French-Language Editions of the Scriptures* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1983).

Luther's New Testament was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. Some committed it to memory, and carried it about in their bosom. In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity.¹⁰

It is with good reason, then, that historian Irena Backus has argued that biblical exegesis became "the chief purveyor" of Protestant doctrine—and, we might add, a primary agent of religious change.¹¹

The Protestants' commitment to biblical authority helped transform the job description of evangelical clergymen. Whereas medieval Catholicism emphasized the priest's sacral role as a dispenser of salvific grace through the sacraments of the church, Protestants elevated the biblical office of Christian minister, whose chief responsibility was to preach and teach the word of God through sermon, sacraments, and catechism.¹² By championing a word-centered ministry, the reformers believed that they were following the example of Jesus and his apostles as well as obeying St. Paul's injunction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season." As Luther noted, "The ministry of the New Testament is not engraved on dead tablets of stone; rather it sounds in a living voice." For, "the church is not a pen house, but a mouth house."¹³ Calvin echoed this assessment: "For God there is nothing higher than preaching the gospel, because it is the means to lead people to salvation."¹⁴ The Protestant commitment to preaching caused many of them to reorder sacred space, particularly in areas influenced by the reforms of Zwingli and Calvin. In place of the altar, the pulpit now commanded the central focus of public worship, raised above the congregation so that all might hear and see the preacher. Many reformed cities also introduced benches to parish

¹⁰ Cochlaeus, *De Actis et Scriptis M. Lutheri ad Ann. 1522*, cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 350.

¹¹ Irena Backus, "Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegesis," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, vol. 1, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 154. Hereafter cited as OER.

¹² See R. Emmet McLaughlin, "The Making of the Protestant Pastor: The Theological Foundations of a Clerical Estate," in *The Protestant Clergy of Early Modern Europe*, ed. C. Scott Dixon and Luise Schorn-Schütte (London: Palgrave, 2003), 60–78; and, Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5–6.

¹³ Quoted in A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 90.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Supplementa Calviniana: Sermons inédits*, vol. 8, *Sermones in Acta Apostolorum*, cap. 1–7, eds. Willem Balke and Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1994), 210.

churches so that the gathered congregation might listen more attentively to their pastor's sermon. Parish life was restructured in other significant ways. In most Protestant cities, preaching services were conducted every day of the week to ensure that the Christian faithful understood and obeyed Holy Writ. For example, in Wittenberg, which boasted two city churches and around 2,000 people, Luther and his colleagues established nine preaching services per week: three sermons on Sunday, and one sermon each weekday morning. On Sundays the ministers preached from the Pauline epistles and the Gospels; during weekdays, the ministers preached successively through books of the Old and New Testaments, as well as from Luther's Catechism. A similar regimen was established in Calvin's Geneva (with a population of around 12,000–16,000 people), where six to nine reformed ministers preached around thirty-three sermons per week in the city's three parish churches.¹⁵ In a social context where the majority of men and women could neither read nor write, the Protestant pulpit served as the single most important medium for communicating the evangelical message to townspeople and country folk.¹⁶

II. Commentaries, Commentators, and Paul's Corinthian Correspondence

One of the primary ways that humanist biblical scholarship was transmitted to evangelical pulpits was through exegetical commentaries. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Protestant scholars produced hundreds of biblical commentaries covering every verse of the Scripture canon. These commentaries were never intended to supplant the authority of Holy Writ. Rather, their purpose was to clarify the meaning of the biblical text, usually in conversation with the interpretation of church fathers from the past. Most Reformation commentators would thus have agreed with the ancient biblical scholar Jerome, who stated that the task of exegesis is "to explain what has been said by others and make clear in plain language what has been written obscurely."¹⁷ Commentaries during the Reformation era appeared in a variety of literary forms and genres, occupying a continuum from terse philological comments with little theological analysis to extensive theological reflection with minimal attention paid to grammar or syntax. Exegetical studies on the biblical text were entitled variously as "commentaries" (*commentarii*),

¹⁵ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 148–149.

¹⁶ Robert Scribner has estimated that literacy in sixteenth-century Germany may have been no higher than four to five percent. See Scribner, *The German Reformation* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1986), 19–20.

¹⁷ Quoted in Kenneth Hagen, "What did the term *Commentarius* mean to sixteenth-century theologians?" in *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse: Actes du troisième colloque international sur l'histoire de l'exégèse biblique au XVI^e siècle*, ed. Irena Backus and Francis Higman (Geneva: Droz, 1990), 19.

“paraphrases” (*paraphrases*), “annotations” (*annotationes*, *annotatiunculae*), “lectures” or “sermons” (*enarrationes*), and “explanations” (*explicationes*), though this nomenclature never constituted hard-and-fast literary categories in the sixteenth century. Rich exegetical insight was also presented in published sermon collections (*sermones*) and sermon outlines (*postillae*) as well as moral discourses.¹⁸ Taken together, this substantial deposit of exegetical literature justifies the claim that the Reformation era was one of the most prolific ages of commentary-writing in the history of the Christian Church.

Paul’s two epistles to the Corinthian church attracted the attention of many early modern interpreters. More than forty-five different Protestant authors wrote commentaries on 1 Corinthians before 1650; another forty Protestant churchmen wrote exegetical works on 2 Corinthians during this same period.¹⁹ Lutheran churchmen who commented on 1 and 2 Corinthians included the Wittenberg humanist and reformer Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), the Wittenberg preacher and pastor Johannes Bugenhagen (1485–1558), the pastor, theologian, and superintendent of Lutheran churches at Jena and Leipzig, Nikolaus Selnecker (1530–1592), Gnesio-Lutheran theologians Tilemann Hesshus (1527–1588) and Cyriacus Spangenberg (1528–1604), and David Chytraeus (1531–1600), an author of the Formula of Concord. Although Martin Luther never produced a comprehensive study of the epistles to the Corinthians, he did publish brief commentaries on 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Corinthians 15.²⁰

Reformed authors on the continent and in England also found the Corinthian correspondence to be fertile soil for interpretation and comment. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, noteworthy studies of these epistles were produced by the Zurich theologian Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531), as well as his successors Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), and Rudolf Gwalther (1519–1586). In Geneva, the reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), his colleague Theodore Beza (1519–1605), and their successor Jean Diodati (1576–1649) all wrote commentaries or annotations on 1 and 2 Corinthians, as did the Bernese biblical scholar Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563) and the Dutch theologian Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564). In a similar fashion, Reformed Protestants or “Puritans” in England also published popular exegetical studies on these biblical

¹⁸ See Hagen, “What did the term *Commentarius* mean to sixteenth-century theologians?”; Irena Backus, “Bible: Hermeneutics and Exegesis,” in *OER*, 1:158. The popularity of postil collections among sixteenth-century Lutherans and Catholics has recently been established by John M. Frymire, in his fine book *Primacy of the Postils*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

¹⁹ This number includes commentaries on the entire New Testament, commentaries on the Pauline Epistles, and discrete commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 7 (1523), AE 28:1–56; 1 Corinthians 15 (1532–1533), AE 28:57–213.

books, as seen in the commentaries of David Dickson (1583?–1663) and John Trapp (1601–1669), as well as the marginal notes that appeared in the *Geneva Bible* (1560) and the *English Annotations* (1645).

What is missing from this impressive inventory of commentators, however, are so-called Radical Protestant and Anabaptist authors. As has frequently been noted, few Radical and Anabaptist leaders had either the humanistic training or the unhurried leisure and physical safety to produce substantial exegetical works.²¹ Nevertheless, in their polemical and catechetical writings, Anabaptist and Radical church leaders such as Balthasar Hubmaier (1480/85–1528), Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541), Hans Denck (1500?–1527), and Menno Simons (1496?–1561) offered occasional, yet penetrating comments on passages in 1 and 2 Corinthians that intersected their distinctive theological and practical concerns, such as pacifism, the Lord's Supper, free church ecclesiology, and the prohibition of Baptism for those who could not confess Christian faith.

The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians occupied a strategic theological and polemical place for Protestant exegetes in the early modern period. Though these two epistles lacked the dogmatic structure of the book of Romans, they addressed many doctrines that were of cardinal importance to the reformers, including justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers, Christian liberty, the relationship between Law and Gospel, and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. At the same time, Protestant interpreters found ammunition in Paul's epistle to combat Catholic practices and doctrines which they deplored, such as papal supremacy, mandatory clerical celibacy, purgatory, works righteousness, and praying to images. To a significant degree, then, Paul's Corinthian correspondence was located along the confessional fault line separating Protestants from Catholics, and Protestants from one another. Luther himself recognized the importance of these biblical books for Christians of his own day: "These Corinthians may well be an example for our people in these days," he noted, "who also certainly need an epistle of this kind."²²

III. Protestant Commentators and Premodern Exegesis

In a now famous article published in 1980, Professor David Steinmetz of Duke Divinity School challenged what he perceived as the hegemony of modern historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation, arguing instead for what he claimed to be the "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis."²³ In the decades since

²¹ Speaking of sixteenth-century Anabaptists, Irena Backus notes, "there was no school of 'dissident' exegesis." See Backus, "Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Exegesis," in *OER*, 1:157.

²² Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament" (1522), *AE* 35:380–381.

²³ David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27–38.

the publication of his provocative essay, Steinmetz and a cadre of his former students, along with a company of European scholars, have produced a substantial body of literature that has explored the landscape of biblical scholarship during the Reformation era in an effort to map out the distinctive character of early Protestant exegesis.²⁴ These scholars have challenged the popular assumption that Reformation exegetes, in their methods and concerns, anticipated and were in substantial continuity with modern critical biblical scholarship.²⁵ To be sure, early Protestant commentators such as Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and W. Musculus did depart from medieval patterns by challenging the monopoly of the ancient Vulgate and adopting more rigorous philological and rhetorical tools of biblical analysis which decried fanciful allegories and placed a greater emphasis on the literal sense of the sacred text. Nevertheless, as Steinmetz and his colleagues have demonstrated, early Protestant interpreters shared a view of the Bible and its significance that was fundamentally traditional or pre-modern in at least four ways.²⁶

First, in contrast to the approach of modern higher critical exegetes, the reformers (along with their medieval predecessors) believed that the “story” of the Bible resided in the text of Scripture, not behind it or in front of it. Consequently, the Bible’s central message was to be found in the literal or grammatical sense of the text, as illumined by the Holy Spirit.

Second, Protestant commentators, in agreement with patristic and medieval exegetes, assumed the unity of the biblical canon by virtue of its divine authorship and purpose. Consequently, the meaning of a particular text was to be found, not by identifying the discrete *Sitz im Leben* of the pericope, but by considering its scope and purpose within the larger scope and purpose of the divinely-inspired canon of Scripture.

Third, Protestant biblical scholars, along with other pre-modern exegetes, understood the intended audience of the Bible’s message to be not only the historical

²⁴ This research was presented in and stimulated by three international colloquies devoted to the history of Reformation exegesis held in Geneva (1976), Durham, North Carolina (1982), and Geneva (1988). The published papers of these conferences appeared in three separate volumes: Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel, eds., *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVI siècle* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1978); David Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990); and, Irena Backus and Francis Higman, eds., *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990).

²⁵ Nineteenth-century scholars such as Frederic William Farrar popularized the view that Luther and other Protestant reformers stood at the headwaters of modern critical exegesis. See Farrar, *The History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan, 1886).

²⁶ Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335–345. This discussion summarizes the conclusions of Muller and Thompson, 340–342.

community addressed in the biblical text itself, but also the contemporary community of believers. Hence, as they interpreted Scripture, Luther and his colleagues believed that they were not merely studying a relic of the past, but discovering God's timeless word for the church of their day.

Fourth, Protestant commentators assumed that fruitful biblical interpretation must be conducted in conversation with Christian believers past and present. Hence, while the reformers affirmed the unique authority and clarity of Scripture, and as they insisted that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture (*analogia Scripturae*), they recognized the value of consulting the scholarship of patristic and medieval exegetes—not only as apologetic foils, but also as faithful guides to interpreting God's word.

By way of summary, then, early Protestant commentators affirmed the divine authority of the canonical Scripture, and believed that its message of salvation and instruction in Christian discipleship was relevant for believers of every age. The correct understanding of Scripture was the gift of the Holy Spirit, made available through careful attention to the grammar and letter of the sacred text, in collaboration with the Christian interpretive tradition.

It is not the purpose of this essay to assess the relative strengths or weaknesses of modern higher critical biblical scholarship—much less to defend the so-called “superiority of pre-critical exegesis.” (Although I do think that aspects of pre-modern exegesis can and should enrich modern biblical scholarship.) Rather, this brief survey of central commitments and assumptions shared by early Protestant exegetes provides a necessary frame of reference within which to explore Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians in greater detail.

IV. Reformation Commentaries on Paul's Corinthian Correspondence

This essay will highlight five key features of Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians: Commentaries and Hermeneutics, Commentaries and the Christian Tradition, Commentaries and Christian Theology, Commentaries and Pastoral Formation, and Commentaries and Spiritual Devotion.

Commentaries and Hermeneutics

The Apostle Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6—“the letter kills but the spirit gives life”—served as a classical locus in the history of Christian biblical interpretation. The early Christian theologian Origen argued that in this verse Paul was giving an interpretive key for unlocking the deeper meaning of Holy Scripture: “the letter,” he believed, referred to the grammatical or natural sense of the text; “the spirit” spoke of the allegorical meaning of the text. Consequently, for Origen, the

allegorical or figurative meaning that lay behind the “bare letter” of Scripture constituted a deeper source of spiritual insight and life-giving truth. Drawing upon and adapting Origen’s dialectic of letter-spirit, John Cassian in the fourth century proposed the fourfold division of Scripture into the literal, allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical senses. This so-called *quadriga* was thereafter popularized in the famous mnemonic distich: “The letter teaches what has happened, allegory what one believes, the moral meaning what one does, and anagogy where one is going.”²⁷ This spiritual or allegorical approach to exegesis served as a governing paradigm for most biblical interpreters in the Catholic West during the Middle Ages, although a handful of medieval commentators such as Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Lyra forged new paths by emphasizing the primacy of the literal sense in their biblical scholarship.

In the sixteenth century, Protestant exegetes launched a frontal assault on the medieval *quadriga* and what they perceived as arbitrary treatments of the biblical text that ignored or twisted Scripture’s literal meaning. As early as 1516, Luther criticized as a “scholastic game” the exercise of dividing Scripture into its literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical senses.²⁸ Similarly, Melanchthon argued that medieval interpreters, through their gratuitous use of allegory, had transformed the apostolic letters into sophistical nonsense.²⁹ Calvin, in his comments on 2 Corinthians 3:6, refuted Origen’s exegesis of this passage and argued that allegorical readings of Scripture had been disastrous for the Church. “This error has been the source of many evils. Not only did it open the way for the corruption of the natural meaning of Scripture but also set up boldness in allegorizing as the chief exegetical virtue. Thus many of the ancients without any restraint played all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro.”³⁰ Sharp attacks against medieval exegesis like these are found aplenty in Protestant commentaries in the sixteenth century—but that does not mean that Protestant exegetes rejected *all* allegorical or spiritual interpretations of the biblical text. They recognized, of course, that New Testament authors occasionally provided allegorical readings of Old Testament historical events and persons, as seen, for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1–10 and Galatians 4:21–31. Moreover, did not Paul encourage Christians in 1

²⁷ “Littera gesta docet, / quid credas allegoria, / Moralis quid agas, / quo tendas anagogia.” This precise formulation appears to have been first coined by Augustinus of Dacia (d. 1285). See Karlfried Froehlich, “Johannes Trithemius on the Fourfold Sense of Scripture,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 40–42.

²⁸ See Karlfried Froehlich, “Johannes Trithemius on the Fourfold Sense of Scripture,” 41–42.

²⁹ See Timothy Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon’s 1522 Annotations on Romans,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 126.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 196), 10:43. Hereafter abbreviated as CNTC.

Corinthians 13:2 to “understand all mysteries”? Luther took this to mean the gift of discerning the “hidden, secret meaning underneath the external meaning of the histories.”³¹ What was needed, then, were hermeneutical guidelines to govern allegorical and figurative interpretations so that they remained subservient to the grammatical or literal meaning of the Scripture. One popular approach, proposed by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75) in his influential book *Key of Sacred Scripture* (1567), was to limit allegorical readings to cases where Scripture presents a falsity, or where the grammatical sense of Scripture produces an absurdity, or where the literal sense conflicts with sound doctrine or proper morality.³² We see this interpretive approach at work in W. Musculus’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:32, a passage where Paul reports that he “fought with beasts in Ephesus.” Since the book of Acts never describes Paul being subject to such mortal danger, should this passage instead be interpreted figuratively—that the *Ephesians* were like wild beasts in their treatment of Paul? Musculus rejected this figurative reading, reminding his audience that “metaphorical interpretations ought not to be rashly foisted on the plain meaning of a passage unless one is forced to do so by absurdity, by impossibility, or by the clear error of the plain meaning.” In the present case, Musculus concluded, one must affirm “the simple and plain meaning of the words in this passage”—namely, that Paul did indeed confront ferocious animals in the arena at Ephesus.³³

Protestant commentators adopted other hermeneutical principles to govern their use of allegories and figurative interpretations. Though allegories might be useful for illustrating and adorning biblical truths, they must never serve as a basis for Christian doctrine. As Calvin insisted, “Allegories ought not to go beyond the limits set by the rule of Scripture, let alone suffice as the foundation for any doctrines.”³⁴ So too, allegories must be interpreted in light of the analogy of faith, that is, the broader message of Scripture and Christian teaching. In his commentary

³¹ Martin Luther, *Church Postil* (1525), sermon for Quinquagesima on 1 Corinthians 13, AE 76:340. Johann Spangenberg interpreted this verse in a similar fashion. See his *Postilla Teütsch. Für die jungen Christen Knaben und Meidlin in Fragstück verfasst Von dem fürnembsten Festen durch das ganze Jar* (Augsburg: Valentin Othmar, 1547), 4:128v (= Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace: The Chief Parts of Scripture Explained in Questions and Answers*, trans. Matthew Carver [St. Louis: Concordia, 2014], 99).

³² Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible*, 35. Flacius Illyricus’s book was entitled *Clavis Scripturae S. seu de Sermone Sacrarum Literarum* (Basel: Ioannes Oporinus, 1567).

³³ Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii* (N.p., 1566), 672–673.

³⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.v.19, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 339. In a similar fashion, Luther argued that “For figures and interpretations are not a sufficient basis for our faith. Faith must first be based on clear Scripture, simply understood according to the sound and meaning of the words.” *Christmas Postil* (1522), sermon for the Sunday after Christmas on Luke 2:33–40, in AE 75:419.

on Genesis 9:17–19, Luther defended Nicholas of Lyra and his literal reading of Scripture, and then laid down this rule for governing allegories: “[W]herever you want to make use of allegories, do this: follow closely the analogy of faith, that is, adapt them to Christ, the church, faith, and the ministry of the Word. In this way it will come to pass that even though the allegories may not be altogether fitting, they nevertheless do not depart from the faith.”³⁵ The practical application of the principle of the analogy of faith is illustrated in Tilemann Hesshus’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:14, a passage in which Paul states that children of Christian parents “are holy” by virtue of a believing father or mother. In treating this cryptic verse, Hesshus sharply rejected the interpretation of John Calvin, who had argued that children of believers are made holy in the womb and exempt from the curse as a result of the covenant made by God to Abraham and his seed. Hesshus responded: “But this interpretation is very far from Paul’s intention, and does not accord with the analogy of faith. For the whole of sacred Scripture testifies that all children of both the saints and the wicked are born slaves to sin and under the curse of the law.” Hesshus proceeded to fortify his conclusion by quoting five biblical texts in support of his interpretation.³⁶

Despite their suspicions of excessive allegorizing, most Protestant exegetes recognized that various levels of spiritual meaning were embedded in the Bible’s literal sense that provided Christological insights, spoke of Christian morality, or pointed to the believer’s future hope. In other words, early Protestant interpreters folded traditional features of spiritual exegesis—especially tropology (“how should I live?”) and anagogy (“what may I hope for?”)—back into the literal meaning of the text, albeit in a fashion controlled by the grammar, history, and canonical location of the passage, as well as by the analogy of faith. Hence, the “literal” interpretation of Scripture required attentiveness not only to philology, history, and the author’s intent, but also to the figures, tropes, types, metaphors, parables, and analogies found in the sacred text. The traditional *quadriga*, though frequently vilified, was never entirely abandoned.

At the same time, one can observe significant variations among the reformers in the extent to which they found spiritual meaning within the literal sense of

³⁵ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–1536), AE 2:164 (WA 42:377). For discussion on Luther’s use of the analogy of faith in his exegesis, see Mickey Mattox, “Luther’s Interpretation of Scripture: Biblical Understanding in Trinitarian Shape,” in *The Substance of the Faith: Luther’s Doctrinal Theology for Today*, ed. Dennis Bielfeldt, Mickey Mattox, and Paul Hinlicky (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 19–27.

³⁶ Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios* (Jena: Ernst von Gera, 1573), fol. 106r–107r. Hesshus is responding to this statement in Calvin’s Commentary on 1 Corinthians (see CNTC 9:149): “But the fact that the apostle ascribes a special privilege to the children of believers here has its source in the blessing of the covenant, by whose intervention the curse of nature is destroyed, and also those who were by nature unclean are consecrated to God by His grace.”

Scripture. Luther, for example, believed that the chief purpose of Scripture was to lead people to Christ. This insight, along with his law-gospel hermeneutic, formed the theological matrix within which he interpreted the literal or grammatical sense of Scripture.³⁷ Wolfgang Musculus was equally committed to the spiritual and christological meaning of the text. After careful grammatical and literary analysis, Musculus sought what he sometimes called the “mystical meaning” of the Scripture passage, exploring how it revealed Christ, established piety and good works, and nurtured Christian hope.³⁸ Philip Melancthon, by contrast, employed rhetorical analysis to determine the structure and primary purpose of Paul’s epistles, and then focused on major theological topics in the text that shed light on its exegetical, theological, and practical meaning. John Calvin’s hermeneutic was characterized by lucid brevity (*perspicua brevitatem*) and interpretive restraint as he sought to expose the mind of the biblical author through careful philological and theological analysis of the letter of Scripture. Calvin reserved treatment of more detailed theological and practical topics for his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. What this illustrates, then, is that Protestant interpreters employed various degrees of exegetical restraint when exploring the spiritual or christological meaning of Scripture—but none of them were advocates of bare literalism or philological obscurantism. Holy Scripture was the church’s book, and through its literal sense the Holy Spirit supplied a rich reservoir of doctrine, moral instruction, and eschatological insights to Christians of every age.

Commentaries and the Christian Tradition

Protestant biblical scholars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century who commented on 1 and 2 Corinthians did so in conversation with Christian interpreters from the past and present. Richard Muller and John Thompson are certainly correct when they argue that early Protestant biblical interpretation was never “a conversation between a lonely exegete and a hermetically sealed text.”³⁹ Collaboration occurred at every stage in the interpretive process. The majority of early Protestant commentators, including Luther, Melancthon, W. Musculus,

³⁷ See Mark Thompson, “Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Medieval Through the Reformation Periods*, eds. Alan Hauser and Duane Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 299–318; Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Oswald Bayer, “Luther as an Interpreter of Scripture,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, ed. Donald Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73–85.

³⁸ Craig S. Farmer, “Wolfgang Musculus’s Commentary on John,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*, ed. Muller and Thompson, 220–222; Reinhard Bodenmann, *Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563): Destin d’un autodidacte lorrain au siècle des Réformes* (Geneva: Droz, 2000).

³⁹ Muller and Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis,” 342.

Vermigli, and Bullinger, depended on Erasmus's *Novum Instrumentum* (with its fresh Latin translation of the Greek text) as the textual base for their exegetical work.⁴⁰ Other exegetes, like Calvin or Beza, relied upon their own Latin translations—but even they maintained a lively dialogue with Erasmus's formidable biblical scholarship. Calvin, for example, mentioned Erasmus by name nearly fifty times in his commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, usually to correct what he perceived as the humanist's mistranslations of the Greek text.

Protestant commentators on 1 and 2 Corinthians were heavily indebted to the biblical and theological inheritance of the fathers of the early Christian church. They looked to patristic sources to achieve two strategic purposes: to understand better the biblical text, and to demonstrate that Protestant interpretation was faithful to Scripture and consistent with the best of the orthodox Christian tradition. The patristic authors that Protestant commentators most frequently cited with approval were Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Theophylact⁴¹—with Chrysostom and Augustine being the most popular. For sixteenth-century Protestant commentators, Augustine was the model of a Christian bishop and preacher who faithfully articulated the doctrine of grace. Lutheran exegetes such as David Chytraeus and Hesshus even numbered Augustine in the ranks of the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther, each of whom possessed a unique endowment of spiritual wisdom, speech, and Christian knowledge.⁴² At the same time, several Protestant commentators did not hesitate to criticize what they saw as Augustine's theological errors, especially his defense of infant communion and his teaching that sexual intercourse in marriage is only free from sin when it is practiced for the sake of bearing children.⁴³ In their theological comments, Protestant exegetes frequently discussed the trinitarian and christological debates of the early Christian church, condemning heretics such as Marcion, Origen, Arius, Eutyches, Sabellius, and Pelagius. Many of them were also critical of Jerome, whom they judged “more

⁴⁰ For a critical edition of Erasmus's Greek and Latin versions of 1 and 2 Cor, see *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami. Recognita et Adnotatione Critica Instructa Notisque Illustrata*, ed. Andrew Brown (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), 6/3:187–446.

⁴¹ Theophylact was the eleventh-century bishop of Ochryda, Bulgaria, who wrote influential commentaries on the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Pauline epistles, and the Minor Prophets. Reformation commentators mistook him for an early church father.

⁴² See Chytraeus, *Dispositio epistolarum, quae diebus dominicis et aliis in ecclesia usitate populo proponi solent* (Wittenberg, 1563), 382–383; Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios & proposita piae iuventuti in Academia Ienensi* (Jena: Ernst von Gera, 1573), 11v.

⁴³ See Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 3:398; Vermigli, *In Selectissimam Priorem ad Corinthios Epistolam . . . Commentarii* (Zurich: Froschouer, 1551), 152v.

superstitious than devout”—a contentious man whose teachings on human sexuality and remarriage blatantly contradicted Scripture.⁴⁴ Indeed, had it not been for Augustine, stated Hesshus, this “hot-tempered and impatient man” would have “instigated great conflicts in the church.”⁴⁵

Though sixteenth-century Protestant exegetes frequently cited patristic sources to justify their previous exegetical conclusions, this does not mean that they did not also learn from them. When treating the thorniest of interpretative questions, Protestant commentators regularly looked to the early church fathers for assistance. This is illustrated in what is probably the most difficult exegetical conundrum found in the Corinthian correspondence—what does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 15:29 when he speaks of people “being baptized on behalf of the dead”? The exegetical problems are fourfold. How is one to understand the meaning of the word “baptized”? How should the Greek preposition *ὑπέρ* be rendered? What does Paul intend by the “dead” (*νεκροί*)? And, does Paul approve of this practice or not? Early Christian authors proposed a variety of interpretive options, including the following: First, Chrysostom reported that the second-century heretic Marcion had used this passage to justify the baptism of the corpses of his followers who had not received baptism. Second, Tertullian and Ambrose argued that Paul was speaking of a practice (of which he disapproved) whereby living believers received baptism vicariously for deceased Christians who had died unbaptized. Third, Cyprian understood this passage to refer to the popular custom where believers deferred baptism until their death was imminent—that is, until they were considered no better than dead. Fourth, Chrysostom and Theophylact proposed that Paul was speaking of the symbolism of baptism itself—that believers are baptized into death, even as they will one day be raised to life in the future resurrection.

Reformation commentators rehearsed, assessed, and critiqued these various interpretive options—and sometimes proposed new ones of their own. Calvin and John Donne followed Cyprian’s explanation that the “dead” were those who faced imminent death.⁴⁶ Luther and Melanchthon argued that Paul was speaking of an early (undocumented) custom of baptizing believers in cemeteries among or over the graves of the dead, as a vivid testimony of the future resurrection.⁴⁷ Zwingli, following Tertullian, believed this passage was an allusion to vicarious baptisms of

⁴⁴ See Melanchthon, *Annotations on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. John Patrick Donnelly (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), 92; Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 195–196.

⁴⁵ See Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 289v–291r.

⁴⁶ CNTC 9:329–330; Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 7:206–209.

⁴⁷ Luther, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15” (1534), AE 28:149–151.

Christians on behalf of deceased believers.⁴⁸ While sympathetic to Zwingli's interpretation, Bullinger concluded that Paul was alluding to ancient pagan rituals in which corpses were washed or sprinkled before interment.⁴⁹ The editors of the *English Annotations* argued that Paul was employing the word "baptism" as a metaphor for persecution—hence, the hope of the resurrection was demonstrated by believers embracing suffering on behalf of Christ and the martyrs.⁵⁰ John Trapp recommended this view as well.⁵¹ As for Hesshus, he took a different track altogether. After reviewing in detail the traditional interpretations of this verse, he admitted his uncertainty, and then launched into an attack on the papal practice of sprinkling holy water on graves.⁵² Although it is not always clear whether the reformers' access to the early church fathers was direct or indirect, nevertheless their exegetical work took seriously the Christian tradition and engaged in a lively conversation with it.

Protestant commentators also read and borrowed from the exegetical insights of their contemporaries, although frequently this dependence remains cloaked to the modern reader. In their commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians, Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, W. Musculus, Vermigli, and Diodati make virtually no reference to contemporary scholarship, though textual clues indicate that they were in substantial dialogue with other Protestant exegetes. The commentators occasionally attacked contemporary theological opponents by name, but this was more the exception than the rule. An illustration of how Protestant interpreters engaged the exegetical work of other Protestants is seen in their treatment of the curious Aramaic words *Marana tha* in 1 Corinthians 16:22. On this singular occasion, Calvin divulged his exegetical conversation partners in some detail: "Now Bullinger has pointed out, on the authority of Theodore Bibliander, that in Aramaic, *Maharamata* is the same as the Hebrew חֶרֶם (*chērem*, i.e. ban, curse): and Wolfgang Capito, that man of blessed memory, once gave me collaboration of that."⁵³ Tilemann Hesshus, in his exegesis of this verse, also understood *Marana tha* as a banning formula. He too cited the biblical scholarship of Bibliander and Capito, along with Paul of Burgos (1351–1435), in support of this view.⁵⁴ Wolfgang Musculus, on the other hand, informed his readers that his interpretation of this passage was based on the exegesis

⁴⁸ Zwingli, *Annotatiunculae per Leonem, ex ore Zvinglii in utranque Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolam publice exponentis conceptae* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1528), 131–132.

⁴⁹ Bullinger, *In Priorem ad Corinthios Epistolam Commentarius* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1549), 246–247.

⁵⁰ Downname, ed., *The English Annotations*, 2nd ed. (London: John Legatt, 1651), EE4v–EE5r.

⁵¹ Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition Upon All the Books of the New Testament* (London: R.W., 1656), 699.

⁵² Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 668.

⁵³ CNTC 9:357–358.

⁵⁴ Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, fol. 371r–372r.

of Peter Martyr Vermigli—a man “especially well trained in the sacred Scripture.”⁵⁵ What this illustration suggests is that early Protestant exegetes read one another’s work, and learned from one another—even if they did not always cite one another.

Commentaries and Christian Theology

It comes as no surprise that Protestant commentaries were written within a particular confessional tradition with the goal of defining and defending particular theological perspectives. Commentaries written by Lutherans, the Reformed, or English Puritans bear a family resemblance in their doctrinal concerns and practical applications of the biblical text. Hence, the theme of Law-Gospel, which serves as the central theological topic of Melancthon’s *Annotations on 1 Corinthians*, is prominent in the commentaries of other Lutheran interpreters as well. Likewise, distinctive Reformed doctrines such as church discipline, predestination, and the so-called regulative principle of worship are highlighted in the commentaries of most Reformed exegetes, including Calvin, Bullinger, W. Musculus, and Beza. Nevertheless, it must also be noted that most Protestant interpreters of 1 and 2 Corinthians displayed at least some independence in their exegetical judgments—a fact illustrated earlier in our examination of Paul’s statement regarding baptisms on behalf of the dead (1 Cor 15:29).

Paul’s Corinthian correspondence addressed many theological subjects that were at the heart of the sixteenth-century religious crisis, and Protestant exegetes frequently wielded their commentaries as weapons to attack the Roman church and defend (what they saw as) right Christian doctrine. Protestant commentators harvested abundant exegetical material to challenge the Catholic doctrines of purgatory, papal supremacy, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, sacramental penance, lenten fasting, indulgences, monastic oaths, and the veneration of the saints. Not infrequently, the polemical tone of the commentaries reached fever pitch. For example, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7, Luther responded to Catholic opponents who praised the superiority of celibacy to marriage in this fashion:

These fellows view the state of marriage as a superfluous, presumptuous human thing that one could dispense with and do without, just as I can do without an extra jacket or coat. Then they fill the world with their foolish and blasphemous scribbling and screeching against the married state, advising all men against it, although they themselves feel—and abundantly demonstrate by

⁵⁵ Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii* (N.p., 1566), 691.

their actions—that they cannot do without women. . . . instead they run after and plague themselves with whores day and night.⁵⁶

Protestant commentators not only attacked Catholic opponents, but also provided for their readers detailed explanations of Paul's teaching related to sin, justification by faith, law and gospel, the resurrection of the dead, Christian vocation, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, as well as various practical issues regarding marriage and divorce, worship, spiritual gifts, church discipline, and gender roles. A number of interpreters imbedded substantial "common places" (*loci communes*) in their running commentaries to provide their readers with a more substantial discussion of contested points of doctrine. Peter Martyr Vermigli, for example, included in his commentary on 1 Corinthians no fewer than ten common places addressing such topics as divorce, the image of God, faith and works, Christian freedom, purgatory, the good of marriage, soul sleep, and the veiling of virgins.⁵⁷ Similarly, Tilemann Hesshus, in his explication of 1 Corinthians 11, inserted an eighty-page excursus on the Lord's Supper that explained Lutheran teaching on Christ's real presence in the sacrament (including the *manducatio indignorum*, the "eating by the unworthy"), followed by a detailed refutation of the "fanatical errors" of the Zwinglians and Calvinists.⁵⁸ Hesshus, of course, was not alone in devoting his exegetical energies to explaining Paul's theology of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 9 and 11. No theological topic in these commentaries invited more vehement discussion—and none triggered greater controversy—than the eleven Latin words found in chapter 11, verse 24: "*Hoc est corpus meum pro vobis, hoc facite in meam commemorationem.*"⁵⁹

Commentaries and Pastoral Formation

Many of the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century commentaries under consideration originated in the classroom as biblical lectures delivered to future pastors and teachers. This was true of many of the commentaries of Melancthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin. It was also true of the exegetical writings of Wolfgang Musculus, who wrote his Corinthian commentaries as academic lectures for the municipal secondary school in the Reformed city of Bern.⁶⁰ Consequently, Protestant commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians frequently communicated rich practical advice on the pastoral office. Indeed, some commentaries functioned as virtual

⁵⁶ Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7" (1523), AE 28:5.

⁵⁷ These topics are listed in an index at the conclusion of Vermigli's commentary.

⁵⁸ See Hesshus, *Explicatio prioris epistolae ad Corinthios*, 173–254.

⁵⁹ "This is my body for you, this do for my remembrance."

⁶⁰ See Manetsch, "(Re)constructing the Pastoral Office: Wolfgang Musculus's Commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries*, ed. Stanley Porter and Eckhard Schnabel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 253–266.

pastoral handbooks for young pastoral candidates. Protestant commentators addressed in detail such topics as the personal character of a Christian minister, the duties required of a faithful pastor, the qualities of good preaching, the nature of pastoral care and church discipline, and the unique challenges faced by godly ministers. Several quotations must suffice to illustrate the richness of this *pastoralia*. In his comment on 1 Corinthians 16:10, Musculus defined the central duties of the Christian minister in this fashion:

What is the work of the Lord which must be undertaken by a faithful minister? Is it to wear a two-horned miter? To have rings encircling one's fingers? To exhibit the shepherd's crook? To be draped in a pallium like a rain jacket. . . . and once or twice in the course of a year to amuse oneself with theatrical displays, anointing walls, chalices, altars, and bells? This trash has nothing to do with the work of the Lord. The work of the Lord is the ministry of proclaiming the gospel, planting and nourishing the church, and applying oneself tirelessly to care for the salvation of believers.⁶¹

Tilemann Hesshus, in his treatment of the spiritual gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14:12, offered wisdom regarding the nature of faithful Christian preaching:

[The minister must] direct all things, and especially the labor of ministry, to magnifying the glory of God and edifying the Church. The pastor should always deal with subject matter that is useful and necessary. He should see to it that he instructs his people in the catechism, delivering it to them faithfully. . . . He should vehemently reproach the sins and errors that attack the church. He should strengthen those who are feeble; he should offer consolation to those wasting away from sorrow; he should arouse those who are lazy; he should not engage in joking in the presence of the Church of Jesus Christ. He should not be zealous for subjects that are uncertain, but in everything he should seek to build up the Church.⁶²

At the end of the day, gospel ministry was taxing and dangerous, a point that Huldrych Zwingli emphasized in his annotations on 2 Corinthians 4:11:

To preach the gospel of Christ is nothing other than always to stand ready for battle. . . . Therefore, those who preach the Word not only face the danger of death, but death itself threatens daily. Nevertheless, such danger encourages and comforts them, because they know that whether they are rescued from

⁶¹ Wolfgang Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii*, 757.

⁶² Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 304r.

death or even killed, they will always be victorious. Indeed, in death itself they will find life. For the death of preachers produces life and fruit in their hearers.⁶³

Quotations like these (which could be multiplied) suggest that Reformation commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians served as important resources for shaping pastoral identity and guiding Protestant ministers in their work of preaching and pastoral care.

Commentaries and Spiritual Devotion

A final notable feature of Reformation era commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians is their practical and devotional character. More than polemical pieces—more than theological common places—these commentaries pulsate with practical advice and encouragement for ordinary Christians as they travel their earthly pilgrimage. Commentators reflected on the nature of true confession, the beauty of the Christian soul, the pathology of spiritual blindness, the dangers of wealth, characteristics of a happy marriage, God's purposes in suffering, and the glorious hope of heaven. Sprinkled throughout the commentaries are countless proverbs and aphorisms sparkling with spiritual insight: "Christian soldiers always either advance or retreat" (Tilemann Hesshus).⁶⁴ "Every gracious man is a grateful man" (John Trapp).⁶⁵ "No one can fully fathom the happiness that comes from being the people of God" (Wolfgang Musculus).⁶⁶ "Where the Lord builds a church, the devil builds a chapel next door" (Cyriacus Spangenberg).⁶⁷ "Marriage does not hinder godliness; rather it is the school of the Holy Spirit" (Tilemann Hesshus).⁶⁸ "[Faith] is so active and mighty that it tears heaven and earth apart and opens all graves in the twinkling of an eye" (Martin Luther).⁶⁹

As a general rule, devotional material like this was closely tied to the commentators' explanation of the literal sense of Scripture. In other words, tropological and anagogical meanings of the text were gleaned from the literal sense by way of implication or application. This approach is clearly illustrated in the way that Protestant interpreters treated Paul's "thorn in the flesh" in 2 Corinthians 12:7. No consensus existed as to what this "thorn" might be. Musculus and Chytraeus, following the interpretation of Chrysostom, believed that the thorn referred to

⁶³ Zwingli, *Annotatiunculae . . . ex ore Zvinglij*, 165–166.

⁶⁴ Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, fol. 345v–346r.

⁶⁵ Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition*, 658.

⁶⁶ Musculus, *In Ambas Apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolas Commentarii*, 2:215.

⁶⁷ Spangenberg, *Die ander Epistel Pauli an die Corinthier* (Strasbourg: Samuel Emmel, 1563), fol. 5v.

⁶⁸ Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, fol. 115r–v.

⁶⁹ Luther, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 7" (1523), AE 28:67–68.

Paul's human enemies who were inflicting numerous injuries, insults, and persecutions upon him. Calvin believed that the "thorn" summarized all the different kinds of *spiritual* trials that Paul endured.⁷⁰ David Dickson argued that it related to the residual sin with which Paul struggled.⁷¹ John Trapp concisely defined the "thorn" as "a corruption edged with a temptation."⁷² Tilemann Hesshus warned his readers against "excessive curiosity" on the question, and then listed the many ways that Satan attacks God's people and seeks to undermine their Christian witness, including mental terrors, grief, and temptations, as well as various illnesses such as kidney stones, colic, tuberculosis, perpetual runny noses, and fevers. The lesson to be learned, Hesshus believed, is this: "We should not be annoyed at the cross which the Lord places upon us, because we see that the Lord God spared neither the Apostle Paul nor his only begotten Son."⁷³ Johann Spangenberg drew a similar spiritual lesson from this text:

In this we see the benefit of afflictions [*Anfechtungen*], namely that they drive us to call on God for help. Christ cannot be mighty in us—nor even his Word and faith—if our bodies are not thrust into afflictions [*Anfechtungen*] and weakness. For, if human power and creaturely aid and consolation is present, God cannot do his work in us. However, if we instead allow God to work in us, then our weakness becomes eternal strength, our suffering eternal joy, and our temporal death eternal life.⁷⁴

For Reformation commentators, then, the message of every chapter and verse of Paul's Corinthian correspondence was packed with practical meaning, intended for the instruction, edification, and consolation of the Church of every age. Scripture was not an ancient text to be studied, interpreted, and set aside on a shelf. Rather, Protestant exegetes believed that the Bible was God's holy word which continued to announce Jesus Christ and his gospel to sinners, continued to instruct and guide the Church militant, continued to prepare earthbound saints for the glories of the future resurrection. Hope, joy, and supreme confidence—these themes run as leitmotifs throughout Protestant commentaries on 1 and 2 Corinthians and find special expression in Paul's glorious eschatological vision in 1 Corinthians 15:22. Tilemann

⁷⁰ CNTC 10:159.

⁷¹ Dickson, *An Exposition of all St. Paul's Epistles, together with an Explanation of those other Epistles* (London: Eglesfield, 1659), 91.

⁷² Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition*, 733.

⁷³ Hesshus, *Explicatio Secundae Epistolae Pauli ad Corinthios* (Helmstadt: Iacob Lucii, 1580), 278–279.

⁷⁴ Spangenberg, *Postilla Teütsch: Auslegung der Episteln, so auff die Sonntage von Advent biss auff Ostern in der Kirchen gelesen werden*, *Postilla Teütsch 4*. (Magdeburg: Michael Lotter, 1544). 4:124v–125r. (= Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, 95).

Hesshus's commentary on this passage provides a particularly appropriate conclusion to our study:

"So that God might be all in all," that is, that his divine majesty might shine forth in the Son and in the whole Church. At that time, God will no longer reign in the Church through the ministry of the gospel and sacraments, but his divinity will impart heavenly blessings directly; he will fill us with his penetrating light; he will adorn us with complete righteousness; he will drench us with pure joy; he will raise us up to eternal life. . . . Seeing God will be our highest goodness, our greatest happiness, our eternal joy. . . . "O Lord Jesus, when we will have happily finished the race that you ordained for us, with the help of your Spirit, guide us to this highest and singular happiness and eternal joy, so that the fruit of your death might also shine forth in us, and that we might love you forever, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and never grow weary of worshipping you. Amen."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Hesshus, *Explicatio Prioris Epistolae ad Corinthios*, 342v–343r.

The Reformation of Dying and Burial: Preaching, Pastoral Care, and Ritual at Committal in Luther's Reform

Robert Kolb

The Reformation that had its roots in Wittenberg made sweeping changes to how Christians dealt with death. Instead of focusing on purgatory and the many measures the medieval church believed would help people out of it, Luther and his adherents used the preaching of God's word to emphasize repentance and the saving, resurrecting work of Christ. This new way of dealing with death brought consolation with it.

On October 27, 1584, Michael Eychler buried Judith, the wife of his colleague Joshua Opitz, the ardent supporter of Matthias Flacius' definition of original sin as the substance of the fallen sinner. In his dedication of the printed version of his funeral sermon for their mother, on Psalm 91:14–16, dated December 20, Eychler explained to the Opitz children—Joshua, Abraham, and Dorothy, and their stepbrother Johannes Druginer—why he published his sermon, and especially why he had published it for them. First, Eychler explained, mothers love their children more than fathers do since they have borne their children in their own bodies. God did not say in Isaiah 49:15, “Can a father forget his child?” but rather, “Can a mother forget her child?” Eychler also asserted that children love their mothers more than their fathers. Second, Judith had requested that Eychler share his sermon with the children. Third, their father, who had followed their mother to the grave, had also heard and praised the sermon. Finally, he wanted them to know that their mother had died a blessed, Christian death, for she had led the children into the Bible and cultivated their reading of it.¹

¹ Michael Eychler, *Ein Christliche Leich predigte/ Aus dem 91. Psalm/ Vber die wort: Er begeret mein/ so wil ich jm aushelffen. Gehalten vber der Leiche Der Gottsfürchtigen vnd Tugentsamen Frawen Judithen/ weyland des Ehrwürdigen vnd wolgelerten Herren M. Josuae Opiti/ Pfarherrs zu Budingen/ Seligen/ Hausfrawen. Geschehen daselbst den 27. Octobris/ Im 1584. Jare. Zu dieser Leichpredigte/ ist an statt der Vorrede komen: Ein Heylsame Erklerung des Testaments Thobiae/ zu Ehren vnd nützlicher Vnterweisung: Des Herren M. Opitij Seligen/ nachgelassenen Kindern/ Sampt allen waren Christen/ die jre Pilgerschafft/ durch dis Jammerthal/ zum ewigen Vatterlande/ gerne in reinem Glauben/ vnd gutem Gewissen/ vollenden wöllen* (Ursel: Nicolaus Heinrich, 1585), fol. L2r–v.

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At the end of his sermon, Eychler had related how Judith had found release from her tribulations. She was “a virtuous wife and obedient mother of the household.” He noted that Opitz’s tears as he was preaching confirmed this. She had raised her children in the faith and shown kindness to the poor, especially to pastors who, like her husband, were driven into exile for their faith. She patiently stood at her husband’s side during the exiles that the family had experienced as the model of a godly wife, a bearer of the cross, and a pilgrim. Eychler traced their journeys with children through many and great dangers on water, on land, and among evil people. For sixteen months she was separated from her husband and had managed their livestock and household on her own. But God had always opened doors for them.

On April 19, just months before her own death, she had lost her youngest and most beloved child, the little Wolf. On October 3 the next youngest, Martin, had also died, followed four days later by his brother Heinrich. As Judith was awaiting the imminent birth of another child, she herself died on October 21.

Opitz sent for Eychler after Judith had requested absolution and the Lord’s Supper. As she confessed her sins, she also confessed her faith and forgave all her enemies. She had one last request: that Eychler preach her funeral sermon. He told her he was not a very good preacher, but she insisted. Then she had the women who were attending her pick out the clothing in which she was to be buried. She commended herself to God and then called for each child, one after another, instructing them to fear God and to be obedient. She recited many of the numerous Bible passages she knew by heart and told her husband to remind the children that they should fear God and obey him. When asked if she would not prefer to remain with her family, she said, “I know that my time is up and God will take me to his eternal grace, and I see already before me the dear angels, who are waiting for my soul.” Her husband asked, “Do we not want to walk with each other any more?” She replied, “Yes, I will be walking in the real fatherland, and you will follow me soon.” As her child emerged from the womb, she was immediately baptized. The local countess, Barbara von Isenburg, had agreed to be godmother, but since it was night, she could not be called, and one of the women present took over the responsibility because the child was about to die with her mother.²

Judith Opitz died in a different way than had her great-grandparents. They would have sought comfort in Christ as she did, but unlike her they did not have the same confidence in the sufficiency of his grace alone. Their confidence also rested in their own works and in the works which friends and relatives would perform posthumously to relieve them of their suffering in purgatory. The devotional literature that arose during the fifteenth century, labeled the *ars moriendi* (“the art

² Eychler, *Ein Christliche Leich predigte*, fol. R1v–R4r.

of dying”), cultivated a sense of uncertainty in the dying so that in their dread of hell and purgatory they would strive to form the appropriate disposition and make every effort to please God with actions performed in conformity to his law and the laws of the church.³ These practices surrounding dying fit into the larger picture of medieval piety, which presumed that the relationship between God and his human creatures is secured through human initiative and action, even if in some medieval theological systems grace initiated the relationship or was at least necessary for the establishment and continuation of that relationship. More than ethical works that benefited the neighbor, the works of sacred ritual in pious customs and in the liturgy (especially attendance at mass) were vital for earning God’s temporal and eternal favor.

Through his biblical studies and on the basis of his instruction in the *via moderna* (the philosophical and theological way of thinking inaugurated by William of Ockham in the fourteenth century) and driven by his own tempestuous temperament, Martin Luther came to reject the piety of his childhood, youth, and monastic career. His studies and lectures on the Psalms, followed by Romans and Galatians, led him to believe that God initiates and upholds the relationship between himself and his human creatures and that the Creator does so through his word. Luther’s intensely personal understanding of who God is focused on God’s word and the expression of God’s emotions (particularly his wrath and his mercy) as he speaks creation into existence and sustains it, and as he creates new creatures, his own children, through his promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in the congregation of his people.

This redefinition of being Christian had ramifications for ecclesiastical practice and the Christian life in general. One of the earliest constructions of piety that had to be renovated or razed was the role of purgatory in assessing life after death and the relationship of the living to their departed loved ones. Vincent Evener has recently shown that while Luther cast doubts on the existence of purgatory in 1517 and 1518, he struggled with that question. At the same time, he decisively combatted the idea of “wandering dead”—souls who came to plague the living with appeals for masses, vigils, and other services that would supposedly speed these wandering souls’ movement out of purgatory. He did not deny that the devil could appear as a deceased relative or friend, or even that they could visit earth from purgatory, but he did deny that they needed merits and should therefore command the interest of

³ Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 2–11; Rainer Rudolf, *Ars Moriendi: Von der Kunst des heilsamen Lebens und Sterbens* (Cologne/Graz: Böhlau, 1957); Franz Falk, *Die deutsche Sterbebüchlein von der ältesten Zeit des Buchdruckes bis zum Jahre 1520* (Cologne: Bachem, 1890).

the living.⁴ Luther remained concerned about these “wandering dead” for many years, believing that they distracted people from relying on God’s grace. This was still a concern for him in 1537 when he wrote the Smalcald Articles.⁵

When programs of reform were introduced, evangelical church regulations almost immediately changed the liturgical practice of burial. Previously, these had consisted largely of a procession from the home of the deceased to the cemetery while singing dirges. This usually took place within twenty-four hours of death, and certainly not more than thirty-six. It was followed by the first of many masses intended to deliver the soul of the deceased from the temporal punishments of purgatory, and hasten its entry into heaven. The new evangelical church orders prescribed singing songs of joy and hope in the resurrection which Christ shares with his people. Slowly, the funeral sermon began to assert itself as the centerpiece of the burial rites, and by mid-century it had become the standard practice.⁶

In 1535, Urbanus Rhegius, the superintendent of the churches of the duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, published his *Guide to Preaching about the Chief Topics of Christian Doctrine Carefully*, a book written for the young pastors under his care. In it he cited passages from both Old and New Testaments, as well as the practice of the synagogue and of the whole church, to support his instruction on “how to speak carefully about burial.” He wrote: “The chief article of our faith teaches that this same flesh which we now carry will be glorified at the last day and will rise to eternal life. Just as Christ rose again and will die no more, so all Christians will rise with their bodies, says Athanasius in the Creed.” Therefore, Rhegius insisted, “burial ought to be treated respectfully by Christians on account of the infallible hope of our resurrection.” He set down a summary of contemporary church regulations on burial. “Corpses should be accompanied by the faithful to the grave, and when the body is buried, the pastor or minister of the word should console the people with a brief sermon that recalls, first, how we are all dead in Adam and worthy of condemnation, and then, how we will all be made alive in Christ.”⁷

⁴ Vincent Everer, “Wittenberg’s Wandering Spirits: Discipline and the Dead in the Reformation,” *Church History* 84 (2015): 531–555.

⁵ Irene Dingel, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelischen-Lutherischen Kirche: Vollständige Neuedition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 734–735, lines 13–18; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 304 (=SA II II 16–17).

⁶ Robert Kolb, “Orders for Burial in the Sixteenth Century Wittenberg Circle,” in Irene Dingel and Armin Kohnle, eds., *Gute Ordnung: Ordnungsmodelle und Ordnungsvorstellungen in der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 257–279.

⁷ Scott Hendrix, *Preaching the Reformation: The Homiletical Handbook of Urbanus Rhegius* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2003), 108–113.

The sermons of Rhegius, his pastors, and their contemporaries conveyed one or more of five central themes.⁸ First, some expressed approval of mourning since Christian love naturally regrets the loss of companionship and friendship when a loved one dies, as long as the sorrow remains within the bounds of Christian hope, as Paul had counseled (1 Thess 4:13–14). Second, sermons often reminded listeners of the presence of death on all sides and the mortality that besets all in the congregation, issuing a call for repentance and an exhortation to live the Christian life. Third, the faith and new obedience of the deceased often served as an example for the assembled friends and relatives. Finally, two forms of comfort conveyed peace and hope to the hearers: that those who mourn should know that God provides for his people, especially for widows and orphans, and also that Christ's resurrection and the bestowal of its liberation in Baptism assures all that those who die in the Lord continue to live in the Lord and will be reunited with their loved ones on the last day.

This frequent emphasis on resurrection and reunion calls into question the conclusion of Craig Koslofsky that with a Protestant "doctrine of soul-sleeping, solafideism put the salvation of the dead entirely out of the hands of the living," and that the loss of the burden of paying for masses for dead friends and relatives deprived the survivors of contact with the deceased and the alleged warm relationship with those in purgatory.⁹ Indeed, the confidence that their loved ones were resting in the Lord's hands, whether in some form of soul sleep or the much more common Lutheran belief in an immediate enjoyment of God's presence, seems a much more comforting attitude than that which Koslofsky imagines was the case for those who felt close to the departed because they were sharing the burden of their sufferings in purgatory.¹⁰

Luther's own sermons on death and dying embraced all of these themes. He himself recognized that his principles for reform had changed the context of dying and mourning. Looking back on more than a decade of reforming activity, he commented in 1531, "It has, praise God, come so far that men and women, young and old, know the catechism and how they should believe, live, pray, suffer, and die."¹¹ Luther had begun to address the subject of pastoral care of the dying in 1519,

⁸ As summarized in Robert Kolb, " 'Da jr nicht trawrig seid wie die anderen, die keine hoffnung haben': Der Gebrauch der Heiligen Schrift in Leichenpredigten der Wittenberger Reformation (1560–1600)," in *Leichenpredigten als Medien der Erinnerungskultur im europäischen Kontext*, ed. Eva-Maria Dickhaut (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2014), 1–25.

⁹ Craig Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 87.

¹⁰ Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, esp. 34–39, 53, 156–159.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 30/3:317.32–34, hereafter WA; Martin Luther, 47:52, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed.

adapting the medieval genre of the *ars moriendi* with his radically different point of departure, set within the framework of the familiar literary form. His *Treatise on Preparing to Die* “is part of an ancient tradition, but he departs from it at a decisive point and focuses on just one topic: only faith in the cross of Christ helps in the final hour.”¹² At this early point in his career, while he was still eager to address the fears of death that beset all people, his focus was on the liberating work of Christ in his death and resurrection, and the promise of new life that the gospel of Christ conveys to those who trust in him.

Neither at this point in his life nor at any other is there justification for the argument of Harvard professor Richard Marius, who wrote in 1999 that Luther was, throughout his life, driven by “his greatest terror, one that came on him periodically as a horror of darkness,” namely, “the fear of death—death in itself, not the terror of a burning and eternal hell awaiting the sinner in an afterlife.”¹³ Marius is sparing with his citation of sources, and an extensive reading of Luther demonstrates that in conversation, correspondence, lectures, and sermons his emphasis fell consistently on the joyous expectation of life beyond the trials and tribulations of this life, which God grants through creating sinners anew as his children by the action of his word of promise in oral, written, and sacramental forms, and through the trust in Christ’s death and resurrection which the word creates. For in his death and resurrection, Luther confesses, Christ has done the sinful identity of human creatures to death and raised the faithful up to new and everlasting life.¹⁴ This same emphasis can be seen in Luther’s teaching of martyrdom. Luther transformed the understanding of the death of those who earned execution for their confession of the faith. Martyrs did not earn merit or favor in God’s sight through their bold but fatal confession.

Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

¹² Werner Goetz, “Luthers ‘Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben’ und die spätmittelalterliche *ars moriendi*,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 48 (1981): 97–114. “*Sermo*” in late medieval Latin referred to treatises in general, not necessarily preached sermons. It is unlikely that Luther had actually delivered this text before a congregation. Cf. also Rudolf Mohr, “*Ars moriendi* II,” in *Theologische Realencyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977–2004), 4:149–154; and Helmut Appel, *Anfechtung und Trost im Spätmittelalter und bei Luther* (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1938), 105–135.

¹³ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), xiii–xiv.

¹⁴ Robert Kolb, “‘Life is King and Lord over Death’: Martin Luther’s View of Death and Dying,” in *Tod und Jenseits in der Schriftkultur der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Marion Kobelt Groch and Cornelia Niekus Moore (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 23–45. Cf. Robert Kolb, “Resurrection and Justification: Luther’s Use of Romans 4,25,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 78 (2011): 39–60.

Instead, he made clear that this confession through dying was a gift of God even though it was brought about by a satanic assault on the church.¹⁵

In table conversation Luther made clear that death is the enemy of life, as a tool of Satan and Christ's enemy. Death is "cruel, hideous, monstrous"¹⁶ and it does reveal God's wrath against sin,¹⁷ while fostering within even faithful Christians a sense of fear that is truly unnecessary because of what Christ has wrought.¹⁸ However, the Holy Spirit uses this fear to bring sinners to repentance.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he regarded this fear as very foolish, for death cannot be avoided and is the gate to life eternal—a liberation from sin, illness, pain, despair, and sorrow.²⁰

Luther also dealt with death in personal encounters. For instance, Johannes Cranach, the son of Luther's friends and neighbors Lukas and Barbara Cranach, died during a study tour in Italy. Visiting the Cranach parents in their home, he urged them to accept God's will and to rest assured of his love, both toward Johannes and toward the Cranachs themselves.²¹ He also offered consolation by letter to parents of Wittenberg students who had died while at the university,²² to acquaintances and

¹⁵ Robert Kolb, "God's Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith," *Church History* 64 (1995): 399–411. On Late Reformation treatments of martyrdom, see Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), and "From Hymn to History of Dogma: Lutheran Martyrology in the Reformation Era," in *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*, ed. Johan Leemans (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 301–313.

¹⁶ WA TR [= Tischreden] 2:269, no. 1944; 2:270, no. 1946.

¹⁷ WA TR 6: 300–301, nos. 6970–6971.

¹⁸ WA TR 3:186, no. 3140b.

¹⁹ WA TR 1:84, no. 186.

²⁰ WA TR 3:16, no. 3928. Cf. WA TR 1:418, no. 853; 1:422–423, no. 860; 4:214, no. 4313; 6:302, no. 6978; WA TR 6:301–302, no. 6974–6975, 6977–6978; WA TR 1:404–406, no. 832; 2:210, no. 1764; 2:358, no. 2197; 2:599, no. 2675b; 4:295, no. 4400; 4:473, no. 4757; 4:539, no. 4835–4836; 5:447–448, no. 6031; 5:280, no. 5626; 5:320–321, no. 5685; 5:447–449, no. 6031; 5:666, no. 6445; 6:30–31, no. 6541; WA TR 6:155, no. 6730; WA TR 4: 200–201, no. 4203; WA TR 5:347, no. 3767; 6:303, no. 6979; WA TR 1:246–247, no. 529; WA TR 6:302, no. 6976; WA TR 6:303, no. 6979; WA TR 3:369, no. 3511 WA TR 1:45, no. 117.

²¹ WA TR 4:505–508, no. 4787. Cf. Robert Kolb, "Seelsorge for the Cranachs," *Lutheran Forum* (Spring 2009): 34–37.

²² To Mathias and Magdalena Knutzsen, October 21, 1531?, WA Br [= Briefe] 6:212–213, no. 1876; to Thomas Zink, April 22, 1532, WA Br 6:300–302, no. 1930.

friends when they lost a spouse,²³ a child,²⁴ a father-in-law,²⁵ or a friend,²⁶ and even to rulers, his own elector Johann, and Duke Johann Friedrich, at the death of their brother and uncle, Frederick the Wise,²⁷ and Queen Mary of Hungary when her husband fell in battle at Mohacs.²⁸ These letters followed a medieval and humanist genre of expressing sympathy but also centered their comfort on the resurrection of Christ.²⁹

Luther's most dramatic engagement with death came in his sermons, some of which in printed form guided his students and adherents as they preached for the burial of their own parishioners.³⁰ Both Paul Althaus and Bernhard Lohse have analyzed Luther's proclamation from the pulpit regarding death as occasions for his exercise of the distinction of law and gospel. Death gave Luther cause to call for repentance in view of the inevitable visitation of this ultimate judgment on the sin of every hearer. The topic of death also gave Luther occasion for pronouncing the forgiveness which brings life and salvation in the face of death—a forgiveness that works through the death and resurrection of Christ, as conveyed to his hearers through Baptism.³¹

²³ To Bartholomäus von Starhemberg, 1524, WA 18:1–7, published as an attack on prayers for the dead; to Margarethe N., December 15, 1528, WA Br 6:264–625, no. 1366; to Ambrosius Berndt (who lost a son at the same time), early 1532, WA Br 6:279–281, no. 1915; to Lorenz Zoch, November 3, 1532, WA Br 6:382–383, no. 1971; to Autor Broitzen, August 25, 1534, WA Br 7:95–96, no. 2133; to Hans Reineck, April 18, 1536, WA Br 7:399–400, no. 3015; to Hans von Taubenheim, January 10, 1539, WA Br 8:352–354, no. 3289; to Justus Jonas, December 26, 1542, WA Br 10:26–228, no. 3829; to Wolf Heinze, September 11, 1543, WA Br 10:394–396, no. 3912; to Eva Schulz, October 8, 1544, WA Br 10:663–664, no. 4034; to the widow of Johannes Cellarius, May 8, 1542, WA Br 10:63–64, no. 3751; to Andreas Osiander, June 3, 1545, WA Br 11:113–114.

²⁴ To Konrad Cordatus, April 2, 1530, WA Br 5:273–274, no. 1544; to Justus Jonas, May 19, 1530, WA Br 5:323–324, no. 1571; to Agnes Lauterbach, October 25, 1535, WA Br 7:305, no. 2265; to Katharina Metzler, July 3, 1539, WA Br 8:484–486, no. 3354; to Nikolaus Medler, December 27, 1543, WA Br 10:479–481, no. 3951; to Georg Hösel, December 13, 1544, WA Br 10:698–700, no. 4049; to Kaspar Heidenreich, April 24, 1545, WA Br 11:75–76, no. 4094.

²⁵ To Philipp Glüenspies, September 1, 1538, WA Br 8:280–281, no. 3255.

²⁶ To Prince Georg von Anhalt on the death of Georg Helt, March 9, 1545, WA Br 11:44–49, no. 4080.

²⁷ At the death of Elector Frederick the Wise, May 15, 1525, WA Br 3:496–497, 497–498, nos. 867 and 868.

²⁸ Published as *Vier trostliche Psalmen An die Ko[e]nigen zu Hungern* (Wittenberg 1526), WA 19:542–615, the letter of consolation, 552–553.

²⁹ Ute Mennicke-Haustein: *Luthers Trostbriefe* (QFRG 56, Gütersloh: Mohn, 1989), 33–53, 99–134.

³⁰ The following section comes largely from Kolb, “Life is King,” and idem, “Ein kindt des todts’ und ‘Gottes Gast.’ Das Sterben in Luthers Predigten,” *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 31 (2007): 3–22.

³¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 405–410; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans. Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 329–332.

Through Luther's preaching people heard of the "diabolical maliciousness" of Satan in using death as his instrument³² together with the law and sin, as three warriors, which, along with "pestilence and misfortune," serve as the devil's "spear, sword, and spike."³³ Christ despises death, Luther assured his hearers. John 11:28, according to his translation, recorded Jesus' anger at Lazarus' grave. This anger was "a merely human way of thinking . . . just as a wicked person would say, 'Well, death, may the devil take you to hell!' So incensed was he over death! This is what offers believers the highest comfort: that Christ was so bitter and angry at death that he had apoplexy."³⁴ But in his resurrection Jesus triumphed over death in an act reminiscent of the delivery of Israel from slavery in Egypt,³⁵ or (as Luther explains more frequently in his sermons) of creation itself. The restoration of the life of the widow's son from Nain in Luke 7:11–17, apart from any means of healing alongside his word, recalled the creation of the world *ex nihilo* in Genesis 1.³⁶ "Since God, who has spoken this Word [that promised redemption from death in Gen 3:15], is almighty and has created all things out of nothing, as I have learned and experienced from his creation of all creatures, so I believe that he can make people alive again, even if they have already died. If God has made me out of the [dust of] the earth, he can raise me out of the earth and bring me out of death."³⁷ Thus, in preaching on Luke 7, Luther uses one of his favorite rhetorical devices, the dialogue, to show God addressing death. Brushing aside death's foul grousing, God announces,

"Death, I am your death; hell, I am a plague upon you . . . your bullet, the stone on which you will be ground to dust. Yes, I intend to be your hell. You have filled my people with fear, so that they do not want to die. Watch out! I am on the other side. When you kill someone, I will kill you. You say, 'I have gobbled up that person, I have swallowed down Doctor Martin.' Boast as you will, death! In my eyes they are not dead whom you have killed, but they are asleep, and so softly that I can wake them with a finger."³⁸

With his image of the duel between Christ and Satan,³⁹ Luther made 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 come alive for hearers not long before his own death:

³² WA 36:346.18–26; cf. WA 47:714.1–3.

³³ WA 49:773.14–15.

³⁴ WA 49:54.5–13.

³⁵ WA 36:347.19–348.42.

³⁶ WA 36:327.22–328.11; WA 37:536.35–537.11; WA 49:399.1–400.2; 399.38–400.27; cf. WA 49:436.32–39.

³⁷ WA 49:402.36–41; cf. WA 49:405.39–41; 406.29–30; 408.29–31; 412.29; 433.16–35.

³⁸ WA 37:150.14–20.

³⁹ See Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Duellum mirabile: Studien zum Kampfmotiv in Martin Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

Death lies on the ground. It has lost its kingdom, might, and victory. Indeed, it had the upper hand. The entire world was subject to it because of sin, and all people have to die. But now it has lost its victory. Against death's rule and triumph our Lord God, the Lord of Sabaoth, has his own victory, the resurrection from the dead in Christ. For a long time death sang, "Hurray! Triumph! I, death, am king and lord over all human beings. I have the victory and am on top." But our Lord God permits himself to sing a little song that goes, "Hurray! Triumph! Life is king and lord over death. Death has lost and is on the bottom." Previously death had sung, "Victory! Victory! Hurray! I have won. Here is nothing but death and no life." But God now sings, "Victory! Victory! Hurray! I have won. Here is nothing but life and no death. Death has been conquered in Christ and has died itself. Life has gained the victory and won." . . . This is the song that will be sung by us in the resurrection of the dead when this mortal covering becomes immortality. Now death is choking off our life in many ways and making us miserable, some by sword, others by plague, one person by water, another by fire. Who can count all the ways death is strangling us? Death was alive, ruled, conquered, and sang, "I won, I won, I, death, am king and conqueror of the whole world. I have power and rights over everything that lives on earth. I strike with death and strangle everyone, young, old, rich, poor, of high and low estate, noble, commoners. I defy those who want to protect themselves against me." But now death will soon sing itself hoarse and to death. Then his cantata will soon be laid to rest. For on Easter another song came forth, that goes, "Christ is arisen from all suffering. We shall be joyous, Christ will be our comfort." Death, where is now your victory? Where do you find him who lay in the grave, whom you killed on the cross?⁴⁰

Luther found him alive, present in his word, and ruling his people with grace and mercy.

In his writings on death, Luther spent little time speculating about the nature of heaven. He was quite indifferent to questions regarding the transformation of the mortal remains to the glorified body. He addressed the concerns of some Wittenberg citizens about the possibility of resurrection for those whose mortal bodies had not survived dying physically intact, because of attacks from wild animals or fire. He commented, "Some drown in water and are eaten by fish. Some hang on the gallows and are consumed by the ravens. Some are burned in fire," but all will arise out of the earth like seeds that come to life as plants.⁴¹ His own expectation expressed his faith that Christ "will call me with a single word out of the dust and worms, and

⁴⁰ WA 49:768.25–39; 769.19–32. Cf. Luther's description of the victory of Christ over Satan and death in his Large Catechism, second article of the Apostles Creed, in Kolb and Wengert, eds., *Book of Concord*, 434–435; BSELK, 1054–1059.

⁴¹ WA 49:426.21–35.

cause my body to shine like the sun,”⁴² that his “shriveled up, decaying body” would turn into a “fresh, beautiful, living body that cannot waste away,” but that it would indeed retain his personal, individual identity.⁴³

Luther seldom went further in attempting a description of the heavenly environment. But in September 1532 he ventured into a bit of speculation with students and colleagues at table. Heaven will be, he hazarded, a return to Eden, the experience of the relationship with God that Adam and Eve had. “There the flowers, foliage, and grass will be as beautiful, exquisite, and pleasing to the eye as an emerald, and every creature will be as beautiful as can be imagined. When we have God’s grace, all God’s creatures smile at us. If I will say to a brick, ‘become an emerald,’ it will become an emerald within the hour. In the new heaven there will be an overpowering eternal light and fragrance. Whatever we would like to be, we will be there.” The immortal body will not feel the physical weight that causes aches and pains since the burden of sin will be lifted. Eyes and eyelashes will glow like silver. Illness and all that casts a shadow over life will be gone. Vermin will lose their ugly appearance and their stench. Luther was sure that the wealth of flora and fauna on earth such as sheep, oxen, cattle, fishes and the like, would grace the new creation filled with peace and righteousness.⁴⁴

Among Luther’s students and adherents, too, this confidence in the deliverance from death experienced through death as well as the life with God in everlasting peace and joy that follows permeated the pastoral care and its expression in preaching. His avid promoter, Johann Spangenberg, reformer in Nordhausen, published *A Book of Comfort for the Sick, and on the Christian Knight* in 1548, shortly before his own death.⁴⁵ Its purpose was to provide comfort when “the Christian experiences pain and grief, fear, and distress [as] death draws near. For when the Old Adam wriggles and writhes, resisting death, that is the time when comfort and exhortation are necessary so that the dying person surrenders willingly to God’s will.”⁴⁶ Spangenberg explained carefully the inevitability and necessity of

⁴² WA 49:51.4–19.

⁴³ WA 49:399.22–37. See also similar comments, WA 49:429.23–39; 49:438.18–35; 49:732.33–733.28; and in the sermons on 1 Corinthians 15 of 1532–1534, WA 36:654.15–674.21.

⁴⁴ WA TR 2:578–581, no. 2652; cf. WA TR 3:696–698, no. 3904, from late June 1538, when he commented to students on the gospel lesson for the second Sunday after Trinity, Luke 16, on the rich man and Lazarus. His description of paradise and heaven give few if any specific details or description. He is more interested in theological questions—speculative, too, regarding the nature of paradise—rather than its concrete portrayal.

⁴⁵ Originally published as *Ain new Trostbüchlin/ Mit ainer Christlichen vnderichtung/ Wie sich ain Mensch berayten soll/ zu ainem seligen sterben inn Fragstück verfasst* (Augsburg: Valentin Othmar, 1542). Cf. Johann Spangenberg, *A Booklet of Comfort for the Sick, and On the Christian Knight*, trans. Robert Kolb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 40/41.

death as God's judgment upon sin.⁴⁷ He then proceeded to offer counsel on preparing to die, in the tradition of the medieval *ars moriendi* but with different content. Christians prepare to die, first, by living a godly life in their callings, "in true faith, in brotherly love, and in the mortification of the Old Adam." This will permit a death "with a joyous heart and a good conscience before God." Second, the Christian must "renounce your love of the world and everything that has been created, and even of yourself, for the sake of God." Third, "you should impress some comforting passages from Scripture and the gospel on your memory, passages to use against all temptations." Fourth, "you should recall your Baptism and how you bound yourself through it to God. To be precise, you want to repudiate the devil and all his gang, and to believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to demonstrate this faith as well, with the fruits of faith toward other people, to mortify the Old Adam, the sinful flesh, and to subdue the evil desires and longings, and from day to day become a new creature of God." Fifth, "think about the power of the holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ that you have received, and cast all other concerns, burdens, fears, and tribulations into the lap of the Christian church, and cry to God," in words that Spangenberg then supplied.⁴⁸ Clearly, Spangenberg had absorbed Luther's understanding of God's *modus operandi* with his word and the heart of the gospel in the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation wrought through Christ's death and resurrection.

Funeral sermons often contained accounts of pastoral care for the dying, but one of Luther's students, Andreas Poach, pastor in Erfurt, recorded his ministrations to Luther's close friend, Matthäus Ratzeberger, in a treatise at the beginning of Poach's *Report on the Christian Departure from His Mortal Life . . . of Matthäus Ratzeberger*.⁴⁹ Ratzeberger was not a typical sixteenth-century parishioner. His friendship with Luther during their years together (while Ratzeberger served Elector Johann Friedrich as his personal physician) and his experience of the excitement of the Reformation movement at its center had impressed habits of engagement with God's word that not all shared. His conversations with his pastor during the last weeks of his life built upon his long habit of reading Luther along with his devotional reading of Scripture. Poach accentuated Ratzeberger's devotion to God's word,

⁴⁷ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 44–53.

⁴⁸ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 52–71.

⁴⁹ Andreas Poach, *Von Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors Bericht* (Jena: Thomas Rebart, 1559). Cf. Robert Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana: Andreas Poachs Schrift 'Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben . . . Matthei Ratzenbergers' (1559)," in *Vestigia pietatis: Studien zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit in Thüringen und Sachsen, Ernst Koch gewidmet*, Herbergen der Christenheit: Sonderband 5, eds. Gerhard Graf, Hans-Peter Hasse, et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000), 95–112.

which he had absorbed from Luther. "He had a ravenous desire to hear, read, learn, and live in God's word, and he could never hear or read or speak or do enough to learn more."⁵⁰ His regimen had included reading a half or whole chapter of Scripture and Luther's appropriate comment on it followed by a review of passages in Hippocrates and Galen. By 1559, the year of his death, he had digested the professor's published comment on Genesis, the prophets, and Galatians (several times), along with his postils and the first volumes of his edited works. His copies, Poach reported, were well annotated. At meal times he read to the family and servants from the German Bible or sermons from Luther's postil. On Saturdays he read them portions of Luther's Large Catechism and had the children and servants recite sections of the Small Catechism. On Sunday mornings Ratzeberger or one of the older sons read from the Latin Bible or Luther's Genesis commentary. Visitors in his home received detailed reports on his recent reading. Poach had read to Ratzeberger sections of a manuscript of Luther which he was editing, and Ratzeberger had told him that he would have to study that "on the other side." On the afternoon before his death, Poach recalled that the doctor had turned to a picture of Luther that hung on his wall and said, "with a joyous countenance and with a smile on his lips, 'My dear Luther.'" Turning to Poach, he said, "If God wills, I will soon be with him. Then we will have a good talk with each other about the many strange and curious things that have happened since he departed."⁵¹

Ratzeberger's family and a number of friends, also from other towns some distance from Erfurt, came to his bedside in his last days. His wife Clara had read to him Psalm 22, and he repeated verse 15, "my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." Then he said, "Not that I am like my dear Lord Christ or want to be like him, but I am to follow in his footsteps." As she complied with his request to read the psalm a second time, at the words pointing to the crucifixion, he confessed, "That is our redemption."⁵² As he realized he was dying, he expressed his understanding that his oldest sons and his son-in-law had not been able to make the journey to visit him. He told the three children still at home to obey their mother and learn the catechism, telling his daughter Barbara, "It is not enough that you know the words, but you must grasp it in your heart and put it into action." He admonished the older son Christoph to read Luther's *House Postil* and to avoid bad company and the evils of this world.⁵³ With friends and family at his side the doctor died that evening. Poach's account reflects both the pastoral care,

⁵⁰ Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fol. A2r.

⁵¹ Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana," 101–102.

⁵² Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fols. C3v–C4r.

⁵³ Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fol. F1r–v.

centered on God's word, and the faith, also grounded on the gospel of Christ, that Luther's proclamation and life had fostered.

In congregations formed by the Wittenberg Reformation, pastoral care took place above all in sermons, which called for repentance and conveyed the forgiveness of sins and the love of God in Christ Jesus to the people. The funeral sermon itself represented a special challenge for pastors, who always knew what text was prescribed for the Sunday morning service by the pericopal system, and who may have had one or more postils (collections of model sermons for all Sundays and festivals), but who had but a day or at most a day and a half to prepare a funeral sermon. Sometimes long illness had preceded death, but that was not always the case. The sermons that Luther preached at the deaths of the brothers, Elector Frederick the Wise and Elector Johann, in 1525 and 1532 respectively, had found their way into print almost immediately.⁵⁴ Luther's use of the medium of print had played a vital role in the spread and consolidation of his reform movement. Therefore, it is little wonder that others slowly began to follow his example and publish collections of these sermons as well as individual sermons. The collections were designed to aid pastors in their own sermon preparation. Individual publications of such sermons served as memorials for the departed and as devotional literature for the wider public.

The need for aid in preparing to bury a deceased parishioner, and to do so quickly, led to the first of the postil-like collections, which appeared in the 1540s, issued from the pen of Johann Spangenberg. It was followed by other collections of his sermons edited by his son, Cyriakus.⁵⁵ A number of such collections followed in the next half-century, including two that took specific parts of Scripture as texts without sermons actually delivered, those by the prolific pastor of Joachimsthal, Johannes Mathesius, on 1 Corinthians 15 (1561),⁵⁶ and the Dresden town preacher

⁵⁴ Luther's sermon for Frederick the Wise is in WA 17/1:196–227; for Johann, in WA 36:237–270 (AE 51:231–255).

⁵⁵ Johann Spangenberg, *Funffzehn Leichprediget/ So man bey dem Begrebnis der verstorbenen/ jnn Christlichen Gemein thun mag. Darneben mehr denn LX. Themata/ odder Sprüche/ aus dem alten Testament. Auff welche man diese Leichpredigt appliciren möcht* (Augsburg: Melcher Krießstein, 1545); *Acht vnd zwentzig Leichpredigten zur Begrebnis der verstorbenen/ vnnd sunst in allerley anligen aus dermassen nützlich zugebrauchen/ aus den heiligen Euangelisten Matthaeo. Marco* (Magdeburg: Michael Lotther, 1553); *Vier vnd dreissig Leichpredigten/ Aus dem heiligen Euangelisten Luca* (Wittenberg: Georg Rhau 1554).

⁵⁶ Johannes Mathesius, *Leychpredigten Auß dem fünfftzehenden Capitel der I. Epistel S. Paulli zun Corinthiern. Von der aufferstehung der Todten vnd ewigem leben* (Nuremberg: Johann vom Berg and Ulrich Neuber, 1561). On these and other collections see Irene Dingel, "Recht glauben, christlich leben und selig sterben: Leichenpredigt als evangelische Verkündigung im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Leichenpredigten als Quelle historischer Wissenschaft*, vol. 4, ed. Rudolf Lenz (Stuttgart: Steiner 2004), 9–36; English translation: "True Faith, Christian Living, and a Blessed Death: Sixteenth Century Funeral Sermons as Evangelical Proclamation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27

Peter Glaser (1528–1583) on the biblical treatments of death at the times of Kings David and Hezekiah (1582).⁵⁷ Two collections of sermons that were actually preached also appeared toward the end of the sixteenth century. Nikolaus Selnecker's collection, based on notes taken by his students, presents 171 summaries of his homilies at burials preached during his time as pastor at Saint Thomas in Leipzig, 1576–1589,⁵⁸ and the sermons of the Magdeburg cathedral preacher Siegfried Sack over the biers of his canons, some of whom had only very reluctantly and half-heartedly suffered the introduction of the Lutheran confession to their foundation.⁵⁹ In fact, pastors largely seem to have ignored these collections and chosen a wide variety of Bible passages as texts and as support for their proclamation of repentance and hope in the resurrection.⁶⁰

The court preacher in Stuttgart, Felix Bidembach offered five hundred Bible passages suitable for funeral sermons to readers of his manual for pastors (published in 1603). He also introduced a categorization of the texts under ten topics: (1) those for burying “prominent, respected persons . . . who have over the years served the church or the commonweal”; (2) for the elderly; (3) for “tragic cases,” such as the death of mothers in childbirth; (4) for young people; (5) for “feeble, worn-out people or the long-term ill”; (6) for those who die unexpectedly; (7) for those who “have been torn away by pitiful, terrible, and horrible kinds of death”; (8) for the repentant; (9) for the unrepentant, godless people; and (10) biblical examples of various kinds of death.⁶¹

In practice, Lutheran preachers in the second half of the sixteenth century pursued the basic themes mentioned earlier—justifying mourning since Christian love naturally regrets the loss of companionship and friendship when a loved one dies; reminding people of the ubiquity of death, which made repentance and living the Christian life imperative; presenting the faith and new obedience of the departed

(2013), 399–420; Cornelia Niekus-Moore, *Patterned Lives: The Lutheran Funeral Biography in Early Modern Germany* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2006).

⁵⁷ Peter Glaser, *Sechzig kurtze Leichpredigten Von dem grossen Landtsterben zur zeit des Königs Davids 2. Samuel am 24.: Deßgleichen von der Pestilentz des Königs Hiskias. 4. Reg. 20.* (Dresden: Gimel Bergen, 1582).

⁵⁸ Nikolaus Selnecker, *Christliche Leichpredigten So vom Jar 1576. bis fast an das 1590. Jar zu Leipzig* (Magdeburg: Paul Donat/Ambrosius Kirchner, 1591).

⁵⁹ Siegfried Sack, *Leichpredigten Etlicher fürnemen Personen/ so von anno zwey vnd neuntzig biß ins vier vnd neuntzigste in der Ertzbischofflichen Primatkirchen zu Magdeburgk geschehen* (Magdeburg: Ambrosius Kirchner, 1596). Cf. Niekus-Moore, *Patterned Lives*, especially at 137–147.

⁶⁰ Kolb, “‘Da jr nicht trawrig seid’.”

⁶¹ Felix Bidembach, *Manuale Ministorum Ecclesiae, Handbuch. Darinnen folgende sieben Stück begriffen . . . III. Fünffhundert zu Leichpredigten auserlesene Text/ auff alle Fälle/ in 10. Classes ausgetheilet* (Tübingen: Georg Gruppenbach, and Leipzig: Henning Gross, 1603), fols. “)()(2” r– “)()(3” v.

as an example for the hearers; the comfort, peace, and hope gained from God's providence; and the comfort, peace, and hope given by Christ's resurrection and his bestowal of the promise of resurrection through his word in oral, written, and sacramental forms.

These themes emerge in texts that were chosen for several reasons: because they were a pericope on the day of death or burial; or because they were part of a series of funeral sermons, for instance, on Psalm 90, as was the case for Selnecker in the autumn of 1580;⁶² or because the name or aspects of the life of a biblical figure paralleled something in the life of the deceased; or because of the family situation or occupational vocation of the departed; or because of the age—either youth or old age—of the one being buried; or because of unusual circumstances of the death. Among the latter, two sermons stand out. In 1584 Selnecker preached in close succession upon the deaths of two young Leipzig men at the hands of murderers. The murderer of a young instructor in the arts faculty appears to have been a student whom Selnecker knew and liked, for he warmly expressed his hopes that the young man would repent and be saved despite his grievous sin.⁶³

Despite the predominant position of men in early modern society, over one-third of Selnecker's sermons were preached at the funerals of the bourgeois women of Leipzig, often with special focus on feminine factors, including death in childbirth, and in parallel to biblical figures such as Anna and Tabitha.⁶⁴ In sermons for men, among those occupational vocations featured was that of pastor. A number of funeral sermons for pastors appeared in print during the second half of the sixteenth century, dedicated to establishing the new social status of the pastor and his family as well as to proclaiming law and gospel.⁶⁵ Printers and artists, if sufficiently prominent in their community, slowly crept into the community of citizens ranking among those so memorialized.⁶⁶ But it is probably safe to presume that those from the families of artisans and even common laborers or peasants in the village received much the same kind of sermon, calling for repentance and repeating the promise of life with God forever because of Christ's death and resurrection.

⁶² Selnecker, *Christliche Leychpredigten*, 1:158r–170r.

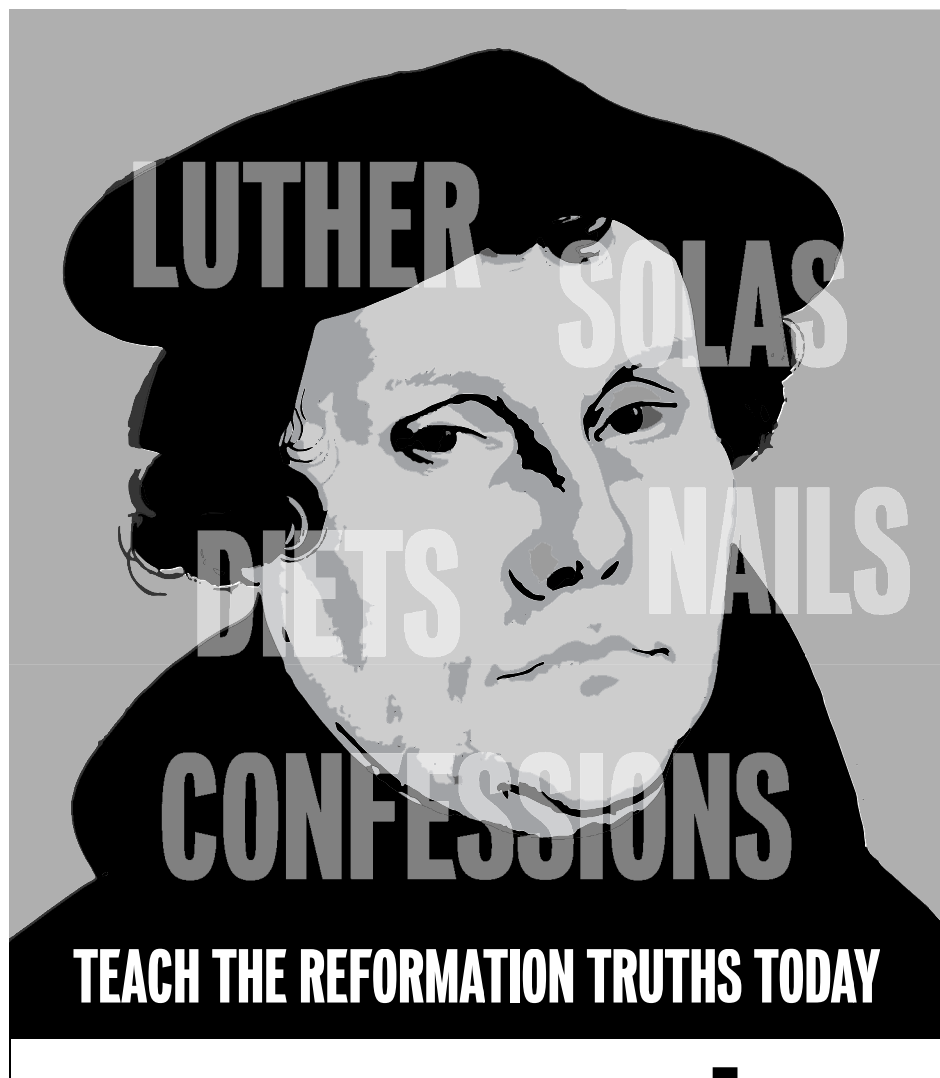
⁶³ Selnecker, *Christliche Leychpredigten*, 2:8r–10r, 10v–13r.

⁶⁴ Robert Kolb, "Accompanying this Sister of Ours to the Grave: Late Reformation Funeral Sermons for Women," (forthcoming).

⁶⁵ Robert Kolb, "Burying the Brethren: Lutheran Funeral Sermons as Life Writing," in *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe: Forms of Biography from Cassandra Fedele to Louis XIV* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 97–113.

⁶⁶ Robert Kolb, "The Printer's Funeral Sermon: Recalling the Contributions of the Printer in the Wittenberg Reformation," in *Studies on the German Book Presented to Ulrich Kopp in His Retirement*, ed. William A. Kelley and Jürgen Beyer (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 191–205.

For the prominent and for all others, preachers following Luther's example conveyed the assurance that God fulfills the promises he made by bestowing Christ's death and resurrection upon his people in Baptism. Assured hope comforted the dying and their survivors after their death. This perception of death stood at the heart of the Wittenberg way of viewing life itself. Death, the enemy, became—through Christ's death and resurrection—the entrance into life eternal. The proclamation of this message replaced the mass for the deceased as the focal point of the liturgical framework for the committal of mortal remains in the culture fostered by the Wittenberg reformers. The burial service presented God's address to the bereaved, calling for repentance and giving the assurance, hope, and consolation that comes from knowing that Christ is risen and that he has promised resurrection to the baptized.



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How Did Luther Preach? A Plea for Gospel-Dominated Preaching

M. Hopson Boutot

As Alasdair MacIntyre and James Davison Hunter have attested, the final decades of the twentieth century were marked by the collapse of ethics, morality, and character.¹ Certainly those trends have continued, if not escalated, in the first two decades of this century. As is often the case, these cultural changes have impacted the church, as Joel Biermann amply demonstrates in *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics*.² This cultural demise of virtue, coupled with a robust Reformation understanding of salvation *sole fide* has created a perfect storm within Protestantism. The end result is a plethora of Protestant preachers who are agnostic and apathetic about the importance of meaningful ethical instruction.

In one sense the Protestant aversion to meaningful ethical instruction is unsurprising. Since the break from Rome, Protestants have been rightly concerned with preaching and teaching that smacks of the twin errors of moralism and legalism. Fear of resorting to what Reinhard Hütter calls the “one unforgivable double sin in Protestantism” has forced many preachers to another extreme.³ Across denominational lines Protestant preachers who avoid ethical imperatives in the pulpit are legion. The result of this overcorrection is, to borrow from Hütter again, “Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity.”⁴

In Lutheran circles the paucity of meaningful ethical instruction is manifest in a homiletic subsumed entirely under a negative versus positive polarity of the law-gospel dialectic—in other words, a homiletic that uses the law only to expose and crush and the gospel only to fulfill and heal. Joel Biermann illustrates by imagining a Lutheran minister attempting to preach verse-by-verse through the book of Colossians. Armed with a determination to avoid moralistic preaching at all costs,

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

² Joel D. Biermann, *A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

³ Reinhard Hütter, “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God’s Commandments,” in Bloomquist and Stumme, eds., *Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, 33.

⁴ Reinhard Hütter, “(Re-)Forming Freedom: Reflections ‘After Vertis Splendor’ on Freedom’s Fate in Modernity and Protestantism’s Antinomian Captivity,” *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001):117–161.

the preacher manages to turn a text with moral instructions for human relationships into a powerful display of law and gospel. Instead of teaching his congregants Paul's instructions for Christian families, the preacher uses the text to show them how far they've fallen and how desperately they require the grace of Christ. Meanwhile, his hearers breathe a collective sigh of relief and thank God that, once again, all they really need to do is keep believing the gospel.

What Biermann describes is an anxiety plaguing many Lutheran preachers. Convinced that the gospel should remain the focal point and highlight of the sermon, many have resorted to a homiletic that requires a predictable gospel-centered resolution in *every individual sermon*. Perhaps this heightened emphasis on the individual sermon is central to the issue within Lutheranism. After all, the fictional preacher would have little reason for concern if the gospel *denouement* could be presented in a subsequent sermon. Biermann concludes his imaginary tale by reminding his hearers, "the problem is not the gospel."⁵ The message of forgiveness of sins through the gracious gift of God is indeed the most marvelous news humankind could ever receive. The Lutheran preacher desiring to proclaim this message is profoundly right in his instinct. The problem arises when what the text actually says is ignored *en route* to a message that highlights gospel indicatives while ignoring gospel imperatives. The problem Biermann locates in Lutheran pulpits is not preaching the gospel, but preaching the gospel too narrowly.

Across denominational aisles, the same anxieties riddle preachers and theologians from other branches of Reformation thought. In an effort to ensure their sermons avoid the "unpardonable double sin" of legalism and moralism, many preachers have abandoned meaningful imperatives altogether. In Calvinistic circles, this "Antinomian Captivity" is evident in the advent of a homiletical school of thought called Redemptive-Historical Preaching (RHP).

This brand of Gospel-centered preaching is less dependent on Luther's law-gospel dialectic than its insistence on a robust biblical theology to position rightly the text within the grand storyline of Scripture. When the text is rightly positioned and proclaimed in its redemptive-historical context, the result should be a sermon that centers on Christ and what he has done rather than what the Christian must do in response. As Sidney Greidanus helpfully explains,

The Bible is not an assortment of similar parts (verses) which, like pizza, can be dished out at random; rather, each text must be understood in its own

⁵ Hütter, "(Re-)Forming Freedom," 2.

historical context and in the light of God's progressive revelation before it can be proclaimed as God's authoritative word for contemporary congregations.⁶

This heavy emphasis on Scripture's meta-narrative creates a twofold homiletical necessity. First, the preacher must proclaim Christ as the focal point of the Bible. In other words, faithful preaching requires consistent, explicit mention of Christ and the gospel.⁷ Second, the preacher must, as one theorist insists, preach "the whole story of Scripture from every passage and in every sermon."⁸ In other words, preaching any text of Scripture without bringing the redemptive storyline of Scripture to bear is to rip the passage from its context.

Much like its Lutheran counterpart, redemptive-historical preaching has a heightened emphasis on the individual sermon. The aforementioned twofold homiletical necessity is not a guideline that should inform the preacher in his *pulpit ministry*, but essential components of *every* sermon in *every* circumstance. As Goldsworthy explains, "if we do not *constantly, in every sermon*, show the link between the Spirit's work in us to Christ's work for us, we will distort the message and send people away with a natural theology of salvation by works."⁹ In other words, in each individual sermon event, the preacher must present both the *center* and *telos* of Scripture. A strict application of these principles suggests it is inappropriate for the preacher to develop gospel concepts over time in consecutive sermons.

The dearth of meaningful ethical instruction in many Protestant pulpits is most visible in those denominations with the deepest Reformation roots. Although each tradition may have its own way of achieving so-called Gospel-centeredness, there is certainly some continuity between these varying approaches. A "gospel-centered sermon" (regardless of denominational affinity) may be understood to share these common threads. First, "gospel-centered" sermons are (rightly and obviously) passionate about the gospel. The message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is a clarion call of those committed to "gospel-centered" preaching. Second, "gospel-centered" sermons are viewed atomistically. In other words, the necessary moves from law to gospel must be made in each individual sermon. To put it bluntly, in the "gospel-centered" framework every Christian

⁶ Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 72.

⁷ E.g., Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 60–61.

⁸ Jason Keith Allen, "The Christ-Centered Homiletics of Edmund Clowney and Sidney Greidanus in Contrast with the Human Author-Centered Hermeneutics of Walter Kaiser" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 10.

⁹ Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Bible as Christian Scripture*, 237 (emphasis added).

sermon is a now-or-never, do-or-die mandate to proclaim Christ and his gospel. Finally, “gospel-centered” sermons share an aversion to meaningful ethical instruction.

I. Meaningful Ethical Instruction

By “meaningful ethical instruction” we mean ethical instruction that is untethered from gospel caveats that minimize its impact—in other words, imperatives that actually demand and expect obedience. Take Biermann’s example, for instance. Those preachers committed to serial exposition will faithfully exposit the gospel indicatives over the course of several weeks, only to advance into an imperatival section without drawing a consistent line from indicatives to imperatives.

One solution to this problem is to issue clear gospel indicatives in close proximity to imperatives. As homiletician Brian Chapell states, “There are many ‘be’ messages in Scripture, but they always reside in a redemptive context. Since we cannot be anything that God would approve of apart from his sanctifying mercy and power, *grace must permeate any exhortation for biblical behavior*.”¹⁰ This permeating grace would likely include, but not be limited to (1) the hearer’s inability to singlehandedly obey the imperatives, (2) the futility of meriting God’s favor through obedience, (3) the necessity of obeying as a response to Christ’s obedience, and (4) the reality that Christ has already obeyed perfectly on the sinner’s behalf.

Nevertheless, requiring preachers to move rapidly from law to gospel in a single sermon may hamper the effectiveness of both. When every shot of law is immediately followed by a gospel chaser, the hearer can become numb to the law’s sometimes-painful ability to drive the hearer to Christ. Conversely, the gospel is far less glorious when not understood against a backdrop of unfettered law. As Owen Strachan laments, “Our modern evangelical movement, particularly the grace-loving wing, . . . has a tendency to take a biblical text, perhaps one anchored in God’s mercy but with some sharp edges, and to blend it all together. To make a gospel smoothie of it.”¹¹

In fairness, not all gospel-centered preaching features the same degree of aversion to imperatives. Nevertheless, the hesitancy to employ meaningful imperatives in Lutheran and Reformed homiletics is unavoidable. John Carrick explains, “Indeed, if the liberal church has been guilty of emphasizing the imperative

¹⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 294. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Owen Strachan, “Pastoring the Idle,” *9marks.org*, April 18, 2013, accessed April 30, 2013, www.9marks.org/blog/pastoring-idle.

at the expense of the indicative, the Reformed church has, *to some extent*, been guilty of emphasizing the indicative at the expense of the imperative.”¹²

This overemphasis manifests itself in noble efforts to avoid works-righteousness and maximize the gospel. Unfortunately, such preaching often presents a truncated gospel that does not proclaim too much gospel, but too little. In noble efforts to avoid the dreaded accusation of legalism, many evangelical preachers quickly follow every shot of law with a gospel chaser. But when the threats of the law too closely precede their gospel remedy, the law is rarely ever able to do its work. And when the law is unable to sufficiently curse and terrify the sinner, the gospel is unable to do its work either. The ironic consequence of this “gospel-centered” approach is a truncated gospel that often leaves the sinner comfortable rather than comforted.

II. Enter Martin Luther

How then can these ills be addressed? My contention is that by considering how Luther *actually preached*, we can glean powerful insight that may remedy what ails much contemporary preaching. To that end, I studied over seventy-five sermons to analyze the way Luther employed law in his preaching. Chief among my concerns was evidence of meaningful ethical instruction in Luther’s preaching, what some theologians refer to as the third use of the law.

Categorizing law and gospel in Luther’s preaching was no easy accomplishment. My analyses employed the following general guidelines. The ultimate purpose of the law in each use is to drive the hearer to Christ, but each use also has a penultimate purpose. The penultimate purpose of the law in its first use is to restrain sin. Therefore, these threats of the law usually appear in a *conditional mood*. For example, in his seventh *Invocavit* sermon Luther warned, “If you will not love one another, God will send a great plague upon you.”¹³ The purpose of this conditional threat was to stop sin in its tracks. However, the first use can also appear in the indicative mood. For example, in a sermon on Jude the reformer warned, “The Lord will punish these ungodly sinners because of their impudent and stubborn

¹² John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 107; Cf. Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 296.

¹³ Martin Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522): vol. 51, p. 96, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

preaching.”¹⁴ Although Luther employed the indicative mood, the context reveals the purpose of his statement: namely, to warn the sinner thereby curbing his sin.

The penultimate purpose of the law in its second use is to reveal the wickedness of the sinner. In this sense, the second use of the law appears primarily in an *indicative mood*, explicating the sinfulness of the sinner. For example, in his first Invocavit sermon Luther declared, “And here, dear friends, have you not grievously failed? I see no signs of love among you, and I observe very well that you have not been grateful to God for his rich gifts and treasures.”¹⁵ The purpose of this indicative statement was to reveal the hypocrisy of his hearers.

The penultimate purpose of the law in its third use is to redirect the hearer towards holiness. The law as guide usually appears in the *imperative mood*. For example, in a sermon against drunkenness he commanded parents “to see to it that your children do not begin too early to fall into this vice.”¹⁶ Words like “must,” “should,” and “ought” will frequently appear alongside the third use.

Nevertheless, the third use is not restricted to explicit imperatives. This use of the law can also appear in the indicative mood. For example, in another sermon Luther stated, “It is not sufficient for his salvation that a man merely refrain from doing harm and evil to his neighbor. . . . It is *required* rather that he be useful to him and benefit him.”¹⁷ What is noteworthy in this indicative statement is the presence of an *implied imperative*.¹⁸ The context of Luther’s remarks indicate he is not employing the indicative to threaten punishment (first use) or highlight wickedness (second use), but to promote obedience (third use). Therefore, the presence of imperatives (either implicit or explicit) characterizes the law in its third use.

Admittedly, there was some degree of subjectivity inherent in the parameters outlined above. Some of the uses of the law contain a greater degree of ambiguity, and upon closer examination of my findings, you may register a difference of opinion here and there. This is not a hard science, but requires some level of interpretation of the *intent* of Luther’s statements throughout his preaching. Nonetheless, in my estimation the potential for disagreements is relatively small and will not render these findings invalid. Others might object to the nomenclature employed in this study, arguing that the imperatives in Luther’s preaching are not

¹⁴ Luther, “Sermons on the Epistle of St. Jude” (1523), AE 30:211.

¹⁵ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:71.

¹⁶ Luther, “Sermon on Soberness and Moderation” (1539), AE 51:294.

¹⁷ Luther, “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AE 51:7 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ The concept of *implied imperatives* is not original. Bruckner’s dissertation on implied imperatives in the book of Genesis thoroughly demonstrates the concept. James K. Bruckner, *Implied Law in the Abraham Narrative: A Literary and Theological Analysis* (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

law, but “commandments.”¹⁹ These commandments, some argue, are fundamentally different from the theological category “law.” In this way of thinking, the law always accuses and kills; therefore referring to law as a guide is “a category mistake.”²⁰ Those who propose this distinction between law and commandment contend that commandments are imperatives grounded in the indicatives of the gospel, whereas the law always operates in opposition to the gospel. Whether one calls these indicatives “law” or “commandments,” however, makes little difference for our purpose, since both terms constitute meaningful ethical instruction.

III. How Did Luther Preach?

This analysis of Luther’s preaching yielded significant fruit regarding the Reformer’s homiletic. No fewer than eight principles can be gleaned from Luther’s handling of the law to equip the modern preacher.

Preach the Law Textually

Luther preached the law textually. When determining how to preach the law effectively, the preacher must consider the text. The preacher’s primary responsibility is to communicate a faithful exposition of Scripture. Luther’s most law-heavy sermons are also the sermons on Scriptural imperatives. Passages like 1 Peter 4:7, with its injunctions to sobriety, resulted in a 1539 sermon laced with blistering law. In a 1532 funeral sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4, Luther’s imperatives on grieving mirrored the text itself. The same is true in his 1540 sermon *On the Cross and Suffering*. His 1523 sermons on Jude revealed a surprising union between the indicative-imperative nature of the text and the sermon. The principle is simple, but profound: the preacher’s use of the law should properly reflect the emphasis of the text.

This is not to argue for *law*-centered preaching to replace *gospel*-centered preaching. Lest the pendulum swing to the other extreme, Luther’s 1545 exposition of the resurrection promises in Hosea and Isaiah create balance. Here Luther preaches a sermon that would rightly be labeled gospel-centered, even by modern

¹⁹ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 275; Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church*, 157–58. See also Herman Stuempfle, who speaks of “the call to obedience” rather than referring to the third use as commandments or law. Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 62–75.

²⁰ Tullian Tchividjian, “Luther On Law,” *The Gospel Coalition*, *Liberate* (September 12, 2011), accessed April 20, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tullian/2011/09/12/luther-on-law/>.

standards. That sermon teaches us that preaching likely *should* look gospel-centered when the text itself is radically gospel-soaked and Christ-centered. To turn a sermon on such a text into a fiery exposition of law would have been a categorical mistake. After all, we must not require the preacher to emphasize that which the text does not.²¹ The central issue really is, as one homiletician has put it, to “privilege the text.”²²

The importance of allowing the text to dictate the law-gospel emphasis of the sermon is reiterated by Luther himself. Later in life, someone asked him whether law or gospel should receive greater prominence in the sermon. His answer reflected his robust understanding of law and gospel and his confidence in the Word of God. He replied,

This shouldn’t and can’t be comprehended in a fixed rule. Christ himself preached [the law and the gospel] according to his circumstances. As a passage or text indicates, therefore, one should take up the law and the gospel, for one must have both. It isn’t right to draw everything into the gospel alone; nor is it good always to preach the law alone. The Scriptures themselves, if properly adhered to, will give the answer.²³

Luther’s willingness to give the Scriptures the final say is evident in much of his preaching. In a 1545 sermon on Ephesians 5:15–20, Luther preached a sermon loaded with imperatives, not surprising given the text’s imperatival nature.²⁴ In a 1546 sermon on the gospel from Titus 3:4–8, Luther almost avoided imperatives entirely while repeatedly magnifying the promises of the gospel.²⁵ In short, Luther strove to preach law and gospel in a manner that properly reflected the emphasis of the text.

How should the preacher respond to this observation of Luther’s preaching? The preacher must beware of the danger of superimposing law or gospel over the clear sense of the text. Although most passages contain some element of both law and gospel, the primary focus of the sermon should correlate with the primary focus of the text. Luther explained, “Nevertheless just as the chief teaching of the New Testament is really the proclamation of grace and peace through the forgiveness of sins in Christ, so the chief teaching of the Old Testament is really the teaching of

²¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 292.

²² Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013).

²³ Luther, “Table Talk recorded by John Mathesius” (1540), AE 54:404.

²⁴ Luther, “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:295–302.

²⁵ Luther, “Afternoon Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany, Titus 3:4–8” (Jan. 10, 1546), AE 58:388–396.

laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good.”²⁶ The preacher should strive to emphasize the “chief teaching” of the text.

Preach the Law Forcefully

Luther often preached the law forcefully. Such forceful preaching was not a capricious exercise, but one bound by necessity. First, he was bound by God to preach forcefully on occasion. In a 1544 sermon regarding betrothals he explained, “If, [as I said], I judge harshly, what else should I do? It is my duty to preach the Word of God and to tear to pieces the work of the devil.”²⁷ Second, he was bound by his desire for personal salvation. Failure to persevere by obeying the Lord would be indicative of a lack of saving faith. In a 1545 sermon on 1 John 4:16–21 he lamented, “Let the devil be your preacher. If I see peasants, townsmen, noblemen and do not chastise them, then I will go to the devil along with you.”²⁸ Third, Luther was bound to preach forcefully by the sinfulness of sin. He explained in his commentary on Galatians,

[Sin] is a great and terrible monster and for the overthrowing of it, God hath need of a mighty hammer, that is, the law, which is in its proper office when it accuseth and revealeth sin after this sort: Behold thou hast transgressed all the commandments of God and so it striketh terror into the conscience, so that it feeleth God to be offended indeed, and itself to be guilty of eternal death.”²⁹

Some preachers, in a noble effort to emphasize the beauty of the gospel, attempt to soften the appearance of this hammer. The result is hearers not sufficiently frightened by the law. In these “honeyed” sermons, the hammer of the law looks more like a child’s toy. Such cannot be said of Luther’s preaching.

Luther forcefully employed the law to threaten the sinner. He threatened damnation to those who lacked compassion for their neighbor, a plague from the devil for those who refused to listen to the word, banishment from the sacrament for those who failed to teach their children the catechism, and hellfire for drunkards and adulterers. In other sermons, he threatened “the abyss of hell,” the darkening of the sun, “bitter death,” invasion by the Turks, and even the hangman and the executioner’s block. Perhaps even more telling is the language he used to describe the sinner: “children of wrath,” “damned,” “polluted,” “shameful,” “unbelievers,”

²⁶ Luther, “Prefaces to the Old Testament” (1534), AE 35:237.

²⁷ Luther, “Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany: On Parental Consent to Betrothals” (1544), AE 58:87.

²⁸ Luther, “Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:234–235.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (1531), ed. John Prince Fallowes, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1979), 190.

“ungodly sinners,” “impudent,” “stubborn,” “rascal[s],” “blasphemers,” “revilers,” “godless,” “carnal,” “sensual,” “beastly,” “ignorant,” “blockheads,” “wanton,” “defiant,” “arrogant,” “riffraff,” “villains,” “piggish,” “filthy,” “gluttonous,” “hogs,” “beggars,” “adulterous,” “rabble,” “coarse,” “insolent,” “foolish,” and “wiseacres.”³⁰ These are just the words Luther used to describe the sin prevalent among his hearers; his language against religious opponents was even more blistering.

The point here is not to supply the modern preacher with vocabulary for Sunday’s sermon. Such a haphazard application of Luther’s homiletic would certainly be unwise.

How then can Luther’s sometimes-forceful handling of the law apply to this settled age? At the very least, preachers must be encouraged to proclaim the law as law, resisting the urge to soften its force for confronting sin.

Preach the Law Discerningly

Nevertheless, one should reject the notion that the reformer was a firebrand, fear-mongering preacher who salivated at the chance to scare the hell out of his people. Luther preached the law with discernment, carefully empathizing with his people before entering into the pulpit. He believed that knowing whether to emphasize law or gospel was an exercise of rightly understanding the congregation. Lohse writes,

Where the “law” is in fact already encountered, in suffering, temptation, or other severe experiences, the preaching of the gospel is to be given priority. On the other hand, where the law is denied through self-confidence or hubris, a too hasty preaching of the gospel would only lead to one’s feeling supported in

³⁰ For these and similar remarks, see Luther, “Sermons on the Epistle of St. Jude” (1523), AE 30:204–213; “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AE 51:8–11; “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Ps. 19:1” (Dec. 21, 1516), AE 51:18; “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:70, 96; “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:137, 141; “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:201–204; “Two Funeral Sermons” (1532), AE 51:243; “On Soberness and Moderation” (1539), AE 51:292–294; “At the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau” (1545), AE 51:361–367; “The Last Sermon, Eisleben” (1546), AE 51:384; “Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany” (1544), AE 58:70; “On the Verse from the Prophet Hosea” (1545), AE 58:157; “Sermon in the Afternoon, Romans 8: On Consolation Amid Afflictions” (1544), AE 58:169; “A Sermon of Dr. Martin Luther on the Passage from John 5, ‘Search the Scriptures,’ Etc.” (1545), AE 58:250; “A Profitable Teaching and Beautiful Exhortation: How God Visits Us through the Holy Gospel and How We Should Respond” (1545), AE 58:278–279; “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:301; “On the Conversion of St. Paul, Against the Monks, etc. From the Ninth Chapter of Acts” (1546), AE 58:374.

self-righteousness. Luther's distinction is clearly related to the context of proclamation.³¹

While Lohse writes primarily regarding the law's accusatory function, the principle remains true: the preacher must discern the spiritual status of his congregation before he can preach the law accurately. Luther's preaching is shaped by the unchanging text without being insensitive to his ever-changing hearers.

Many examples of this principle are manifest in Luther's preaching. In a 1532 funeral sermon, he explicated gospel promises no fewer than thirty-two times in a relatively brief sermon, demonstrating a profound pastoral sensitivity to the grief of his people.³² Conversely, in a 1545 sermon on Ephesians 5:15–20, Luther delivered a "stern admonition"³³ loaded with dozens of legal imperatives and accusatory indicatives.³⁴ Particularly noteworthy in this sermon is its historical ties to the errors of antinomianism, what Luther called an "abomination [that] has intruded more and more over time."³⁵

James McCue offers further insight on the importance of preaching the law with discernment. He postulates that the cultural fixation with penance in Luther's day formed the milieu of Luther's "obsession' with forgiveness of sin."³⁶ Without correctly understanding these cultural and theological developments in Luther's day, the preaching of law and gospel that mimics his style can be dangerous. Preachers should reserve the gospel for those overwhelmed by the seriousness of sin. Preaching that celebrates the good news of Christ's love and forgiveness without first proclaiming the threat of the law and the weight of sin may effectively inoculate its hearers against the gospel.

McCue offers a lengthy excerpt from Luther's *Third Antinomian Disputation* to illustrate these truths:

It is true that when we first began this affair we strenuously taught the gospel and also used those words which now the Antinomians use. But the character of that time was vastly different from today. Then the world was more than sufficiently terrified. . . . There was thus no need to inculcate or even to teach the law to those consciences which were already oppressed, terrified, miserable, anxious, afflicted. Rather the need was to bring to bear that other part of the

³¹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 269.

³² Luther, "Two Funeral Sermons" (1532), AE 51:243–255.

³³ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:294.

³⁴ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:295–302.

³⁵ Luther, "Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity" (1545), AE 58:295.

³⁶ James F. McCue, "Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 1 (1985):34.

preaching of Christ, where he commands also that the forgiveness of sins be preached in his name, so that those who are already sufficiently terrified and in despair would learn not to despair but to flee to the grace and mercy set forth in Christ. But now, when the times are different—altogether different from what they were under the pope, those Antinomians of ours, slick theologians that they are, retain our words, our teaching, that sweet promise from Christ; and what is worse, they want to preach only this, not seeing that people now are not like what they were under the flesh-eating pope. People now have become secure and evil [*securos et malos*]*—dishonest, wicked thieves, indeed Epicureans who reverence neither God nor men. And these are the people whom they strengthen and comfort with this their doctrine . . . Now indeed these fellows of ours want to preach sermons for a time of the contrite in a time of the secure. This is not rightly to follow the word of God, but to tear apart and lose souls. Our view has been right up to now and ought to remain: If you see people afflicted and contrite, preach Christ to them, preach grace, as much as you can; but not to the secure, the lazy, the licentious, adulterers, and blasphemers. If you don't follow this advice, you will be guilty of their sins.*³⁷

Although the first principle to preach the law textually takes priority, this principle is not far behind. The preacher must painstakingly exegete the text in order to grasp its meaning. However, he must also understand the spiritual condition of his congregation. Preachers should ask themselves if their churches are filled with individuals “afflicted and contrite,” or are they like “the lazy, the licentious, adulterers, and blasphemers” that filled the pews in Luther’s latter years? The former should hear the grace of God resounding from the pulpit. The latter must hear the law of God in its fullness. The preacher must understand his congregation if he desires to preach the law effectively.

Although this is especially true regarding the law in its second use, it is also true of the third use. The lazy and licentious must hear the accusing force of the second use so they may genuinely repent, and because their disobedience may be indicative of unbelief. However, they must also hear the commands of the third use so they may learn to live out the gospel they claim to believe by good works.

Preach the Law Frequently

Using the parameters to categorize Luther’s preaching of the law mention above, the results are compelling: Luther utilized the law consistently and frequently. It is no stretch to surmise that Luther preached the law in some manner

³⁷ As quoted in McCue, “Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching,” 37–38, from *D. Martin Luther’s Werke* (Weimar: Bohlaus, 1883–), 39/1: 571.10–572.15; 574.5–11.

whenever he preached. Many preachers mistakenly assume that certain passages are primarily law passages and others are primarily gospel passages. This error often appears in the belief that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with law and the New Testament with gospel. While most texts have a “chief teaching,” they also usually contain elements of both law and gospel. Luther’s preaching demonstrated this truth. When he preached the law of the Ten Commandments, Luther found gospel in the phrase “I am the Lord, thy God.” When he preached the gospel of the cross, Luther found law in the severity of God’s wrath against sin.³⁸ Every text contains both law and gospel because every text testifies to the incompleteness of man and God’s provision to make him complete.

Today’s preachers must follow the example of Luther and preach the law frequently. Such preaching does not minimize the gospel, but maximizes it. As Luther himself attests, “The Law, however, is not to be discarded; for if we cast the Law aside, we shall not long retain Christ.”³⁹

Preach the Law Diversely

Faithfully utilizing the law of God in the sermon is not a one-dimensional exercise. Luther’s practice reveals a surprising diversity to his preaching of the law. My analysis revealed the startling reality that Luther used the law as imperative more than he employed the first and second uses combined. In his final sermon on Matthew 11:25–30, he commanded his hearers to be patient. In a 1544 sermon on Revelation 12 he commanded his hearers to give thanks. In his 1539 sermon against drunkenness he commanded his parish to stop being pigs. In his 1522 *Invocavit* Sermons he told his hearers to study their Bibles, confront the devil, help each other, have patience, abolish the private mass, avoid harshness, teach the word, get married, disobey the pope, destroy images of idolatrous worship, thank God, and stop enforcing change too quickly.

Contrary to the “gospel-centered” way, Luther clearly did not shy away from making ethical demands of his hearers. In fact, the Reformer utilized significant homiletical creativity in his use of sermonic imperatives. His imperatives were at times exemplary (urging his hearers to follow an example), at times prescriptive (urging them to behave in a certain manner), and at times exhortative (urging them

³⁸ A modern reincarnation of the principle that all texts contain both law and gospel appears in Bryan Chapell’s “Fallen Condition Focus.” He says, “The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition (i.e. law) that contemporary believers share with those to whom the text was written that requires the grace (i.e. gospel) of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him.” Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 48–53.

³⁹ Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1–4” (1537–1540), AE 22:146.

to persevere in a certain attitude or behavior). Luther commanded his hearers to put off and to put on, to believe and to reject, to stop and to start, to quit and to continue. However, though the weight of the law in his preaching primarily leaned towards the third use, Luther was still multi-dimensional in his approach.

For those convinced of the “gospel-centered” approach to preaching, little could be more disturbing than Luther’s unyielding use of exemplaristic imperatives. Yet he did not shy away from using characters in Scripture and church history as examples for his hearers. He urged them to follow the examples of Paul, Christ, Abraham, Adam, Joseph, Mary, Monica, Agatha, and himself, to name a few.⁴⁰ In his sermon *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, Luther mentioned these exemplars as part of the value of the Old Testament: “We read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, or love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith.”⁴¹

Moreover, Luther’s diverse approach to preaching the law was not coincidental. The reformer was suspicious of anything that would hamper or handcuff the preacher’s freedom in the pulpit. In 1539, he said this to Agricola in his book *Against the Antinomians*:

I ask you, dear Doctor, to keep the pure doctrine as you have always done. Preach that sinners must be roused to repentance not only by the sweet grace and suffering of Christ, by the message that he died for us, but also by the terrors of the law. For they are wrong in maintaining that one must follow only one method of preaching repentance, namely to point to Christ’s suffering on our behalf, claiming as they do that Christendom might otherwise become confused and be at a loss to know which is the true and only way. No, one must

⁴⁰ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77; “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:198; “Four Sermons on the Resurrection of the Dead and the Last Trumpet of God, from the Fifteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians” (1544–1545), AE 58:106–107; “Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:238; “Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent” (1545), AE 58:343; “The Second Sermon for the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple” (1546), AE 58:434; “The Third Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany” (1546), AE 58:448–449.

⁴¹ Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses” (1525), AE 35:173.

preach in all sorts of ways—God’s threats, his promises, his punishment, his help, and anything else—in order that we may be brought to repentance.⁴²

A clear example of Luther’s diverse approach to preaching the law is visible in his treatment of Matthew 11:25–30. In three separate sermons on the same text, his use of the law was never the same. In his 1517 sermon, he employed the first use once, the second use eleven times, and the third use nine times. In 1525, the first use appeared once, the second use sixteen times, and the third use thirteen times. In 1546, he again utilized the first use just once, but on this occasion, he devoted twenty-one statements to the second use and twenty-three for the third.

Luther’s practice should liberate the preacher to “preach in all sorts of ways” to bring the sinner to repentance and faith. Indeed, the modern preacher should be leery of any legalistic attempts to restrict or minimize the preacher’s impact in the pulpit. Luther’s approach allows for diverse manifestations of law in the pulpit.

Preach the Law Explicitly

Luther did not shy away from preaching against specific sins in his congregation. He condemned loveless inaction in his 1512 sermon on Matthew 7:12.⁴³ He exposed the folly of indulgences in his 1517 sermon on Matthew 11.⁴⁴ He rejected the lopsided ethics of the church in his 1521 sermon on Exodus 25:9–27:18.⁴⁵ He excoriated the sham of relics in his 1546 sermon on Acts 9. In his *Invocavit* Sermons, he outlined clear, practical commands on the biblical execution of reform.⁴⁶ He issued firm admonitions for parenting in his 1528 sermons on the catechism.⁴⁷ In his 1545 sermon from Hebrews 13:4, he told the single to pursue marriage, the married to remain faithful, and the fornicating to repent.⁴⁸ He showed his hearers how to suffer well in his 1530 sermon *On the Cross and Suffering*.⁴⁹ In his 1532 sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14, he taught them how to grieve.⁵⁰

These are no isolated incidents. Luther regularly preached the law explicitly to his congregation. In a 1545 sermon on Galatians 5:16–24, he condemned his people

⁴² Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:111–112.

⁴³ Luther, “Sermon on Matt. 7:12” (1510[?] or 1512[?]), AE 51:11.

⁴⁴ Luther, “Sermon on St. Matthew’s Day, Matt. 11:25–30” (Feb. 24, 1517), AE 51:31.

⁴⁵ Luther, “A Sermon on the Three Kinds of Good Life for the Instruction of Consciences” (1521), AE 44:236–237.

⁴⁶ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:69–100.

⁴⁷ Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:137.

⁴⁸ Luther, “At the Marriage of Sigismund von Lindenau” (1545), AE 51:357–367.

⁴⁹ Luther, “Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering” (1530), AE 51:197–208.

⁵⁰ Luther, “Two Funeral Sermons” (1532), AE 51:231–243.

for failing to pay their pastors.⁵¹ In a 1528 sermon on the Ten Commandments, he rebuked those who were overcharging their clients.⁵² In a 1532 sermon, he excoriated the antinomians for sermons that were nothing but “loose, lazy, and cold gibble-gabble.”⁵³ In a 1539 sermon on 1 Thessalonians 4:1–7, Luther lashed out against sins like theft, fornication, and adultery. He then defended this explicit proclamation of the law by reminding his congregation that the gospel itself was at stake:

The gasbags and honey-sweet preachers object to this. [But a true preacher] must also preach sharply, [pointing out what will happen] if we do not abstain from sin.

... Such [honeyed] preaching is not for you. Christ died for those who seek to have their sins forgiven, cease committing them, and then become daily more perfect. Besides, the sweet sermon is vain, wasted words, because those who hear it say, “Indeed, this is a cheerful preacher, [for] he does not add: ‘If you are in sin, you will be damned, etc.’” ... People want to have such [sweet] preachers today. First, let the terror of judgment be set before them so that they might ponder what they have received from Christ, and then abstain from transgressions. ... If this is preached, they say, “You will frighten them [with your harshness].” But Christ did not die to no purpose, which is what happens if you remain in your sins.⁵⁴

Preachers today are free to preach the law explicitly; such sermons are not anti-Christian. Even some more moderate proponents of redemptive-historical preaching recognize the need for explicit imperatives. Doriani explains,

One *can* preach an effective sermon without uttering commands.

Nonetheless, “We need strength, not advice” is a false dichotomy, spawned by the ingrown chattering of the cognitive religious crowd. *Theologians* may know all they need, but they are long habituated to biblical laws and ethics. Because they are immersed in biblical law, they are free to underestimate the law. *In theory*, Christians might only need to follow the Spirit’s leading, but life refutes the theory. Not all Christians who want to obey know how to do it. If a renewed mind were a sufficient guide to behavior, why does Paul still propound commands? ... Thus, *however sophisticated we are, there is a time to tell people*

⁵¹ Luther, “Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity” (1545), AE 58:288.

⁵² Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:156.

⁵³ Luther, “Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life” (1532), AE 51:274.

⁵⁴ Luther, “Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent” (1539), AE 58:21–22.

what to do. Whoever denies this is wiser than Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, none of whom hesitated to command.⁵⁵

Luther would likely agree: “No one understands the law unless it be explained to him.”⁵⁶ Therefore, preachers must labor, explicitly explaining the law of God to their people.

Preach the Law Intentionally

Luther preached the law intentionally to his congregation. During the anti-nomian controversy, he steadfastly affirmed the preaching of the law. In his 1539 thesis *Against the Antinomians*, he responded by highlighting the intentionality with which he proclaimed the Ten Commandments in Wittenberg:

It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches. . . . Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night.⁵⁷

Historical evidence supports Luther’s defense that the commandments were vital to the Wittenberg congregation. He preached through the Ten Commandments three times in 1528 alone. On November 29 of that year, he explained the importance of these sermons:

It has hitherto been our custom to teach the elements and fundamentals of Christian knowledge and life four times each year and we have therefore arranged to preach on these things for two weeks in each quarter, four days a week at two o’clock in the afternoon. Because these matters are highly necessary, I faithfully admonish you to assemble at the designated time with your families. Do not allow yourself to be kept away by your work or trade and do not complain that you will suffer loss if for once you interrupt your work for an hour. Remember how much freedom the gospel has given to you, so that now you are not obliged to observe innumerable holy days and can pursue your work.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 263.

⁵⁶ Luther, “Sermon on St. Thomas’ Day, Ps. 19:1” (Dec. 21, 1516), AE 51:22.

⁵⁷ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell and Timothy F. Lull, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 177.

⁵⁸ Luther, “Ten Sermons on the Catechism” (1528), AE 51:135.

It is noteworthy to consider how Luther connected the importance of preaching the law intentionally with the reality of the gospel. Christ's atoning work does not free his people *from* obedience to the law, it frees them *for* obedience to the law. Elsewhere he stated, "The law should be interpreted and preached, in order both that love for every man may rightly proceed from a pure heart for God's sake and that the conscience may stand before the world."⁵⁹

Luther's practical understanding of the law permeated his intentional exposition of the Ten Commandments in 1528. First, Luther believed the preacher should explain the law. Every sermon began with a clear explanation of the law. The faithful preacher must never assume that a congregation already understands the law of God; he should carefully explain what God expects of all people. Second, Luther believed the preacher should apply the law. His sermons on the Decalogue contained practical application for his people. Luther refused to speak in mere generalities, but sought to drive the law into the everyday lives of his hearers. Third, Luther believed the people of God should obey the law. He undoubtedly believed that the law instructed the Christian how to live his life. Elsewhere he stated, "You must use the Ten Commandments to teach people how they must live in this life."⁶⁰

At the outset of the Reformation, the Ten Commandments were essential tools in the Christian education of children and adults alike. Sadly, a similar emphasis on the law of God is absent in many churches today. Perhaps many preachers have so lost confidence in the gospel that they now avoid the law. Luther's intentional handling of the law should encourage today's preacher to develop a deliberate plan to proclaim the law from his own pulpit.

Preach the Law Boldly

One of the central claims of redemptive-historical preaching is the plea for gospel exceptionalism. The Christian sermon is not Christian if the unique and exceptional claims of the gospel remain implicit. In other words, the Christian sermon must be distinctively different from the sermon preached in a synagogue, a mosque, or a kingdom hall. Every sermon must articulate clearly and carefully the central, unique claims of Christianity. Few were more passionate about Christian doctrine than Luther. Few held the gospel in higher esteem than he did. After all, how many preachers or theologians today would walk away from Marburg questioning Zwingli's salvation the way Luther did? Nevertheless, despite this indomitable passion for the priority of the gospel, he apparently did not find it

⁵⁹ Luther, "Sermon on the Sum of the Christian Life" (1532), AE 51:274.

⁶⁰ Luther, "Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity" (1533), in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, vol. 3, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 63.

necessary to explicate the uniqueness of the Christian gospel in every individual sermon.

In his 1545 sermon on Hebrews 13:4, he carefully and clearly presented a Christian theology of marriage. None should disregard holy matrimony, not the marriage-forbidding legalists on the right or the sexually licentious on the left. The legalists should abandon their legalism and pursue marriage. The licentious should repent. Those who are faithfully married must labor to remain faithful, while properly raising the children from that union. Yet Luther did not hold a gospel-less view of marriage. His entire theology of marriage was resultant from and consistent with his theology of justification by faith. The gospel is not absent from this sermon, it is merely implicit. Therein lies the problem: many popular ideas of Gospel-centered preaching provide little room for theological implicitness.

Luther's approach to gospel-centered sermons was different. My analysis found a frequent failure to articulate the gospel explicitly in every sermon. Some might contend that Luther's gospel is too small. After all, would not a hearty view of the gospel compel the preacher to explicate its truths at every opportunity? Luther saw things differently. He preached this way, not because his gospel was too small, but because his gospel was infinitely big—so big, in fact, that it was able to do its work even when its claims were implicit. Furthermore, it was not a low view of Scripture that led Luther to preach in this way. On the contrary, he valued the word of God so highly that he was thoroughly content to preach the text and trust God to do the work. In other words, Luther's total confidence in the gospel enabled him to preach the law boldly.

Luther firmly believed that the Evangel was powerless until the *Cacangelium*—the bad news—had done its work. The law must be preached or the gospel will have no effect. Luther's view of the gospel was so expansive that even when its truths were implied, its power remained undiminished.⁶¹ For Luther, the goal of the sermon was not merely to speak accurate words *for* God but to speak in an accurate *manner*. If God speaks through the languages of law and gospel, the preacher must rightly employ those languages in the pulpit.

The expositional imbalance of gospel *exceptionalism* finds remedy in Luther's gospel *expansiveness*. For Luther, preaching the law was essential because it clarified the gospel. The preacher can preach the law boldly because faithfully and effectively

⁶¹ Some of Luther's willingness to leave the gospel implied in his preaching may be due to his liturgical context. The repeated use of certain gospel texts, the recitation of the Apostles' Creed, a gospel-rich hymnody, and the presence of the Lord's Supper ensured that the gospel was always *explicit* in Luther's pulpit setting, even if it was *implicit* in individual sermons.

preaching the law *is* preaching Christ. Regardless of which use of the law is employed, Christ is preached when the law is preached because Christ fulfilled the law and died for the sinner who is helpless to meet its demands. Luther made this connection in his words to Agricola in *Against the Antinomians*:

How can one know what sin is without the law and conscience? And how will we learn what Christ is, what he did for us, if we do not know what the law is that he fulfilled for us and what sin is, for which he made satisfaction? And even if we did not require the law for ourselves, or if we could tear it out of our hearts (which is impossible), we would have to *preach it for Christ's sake*, as is done and as has to be done, so that we might know what he did and what he suffered for us. For who could know what and why Christ suffered for us without knowing what sin or law is? Therefore *the law must be preached wherever Christ is to be preached*, even if the word "law" is not mentioned, so that the conscience is nevertheless frightened by the law when it hears that Christ had to fulfill the law for us at so great a price. Why, then, should one wish to abolish the law, which cannot be abolished, yes, which is only intensified by such an attempt? For the law terrifies me more when I hear that Christ, the Son of God, had to fulfill it for me than it would were it preached to me without the mention of Christ and of such great torment suffered by God's Son, but were accompanied only by threats. For in the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me with words and with lesser deeds.⁶²

Luther's logic is clear. First, the law clarifies the gospel by highlighting the wretchedness of sin. Without clearly preaching the law to reveal man's incompleteness, God's provision in Christ to make man complete will lose its power. Believers and unbelievers alike must hear God's standard preached if they would understand how drastically they fall short. Second, the law clarifies the gospel by highlighting the work of Christ. Luther considered the minimization of Christ's saving work as the tragic failure of antinomianism: "It is apparent from this that the devil's purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law."⁶³ Luther addressed both Christ's obedience and his sacrifice. Lawless preaching drains Christ's obedience to the law of its meaning. Furthermore, lawless preaching diminishes Christ's sacrifice to pay for man's disobedience. Third, the law clarifies the gospel by explaining the wrath of God. Luther stated, "In the Son of God I behold the wrath of God in action, while the law of God shows it to me

⁶² Luther, "Against the Antinomians" (1539), AE 47:113. Emphasis added.

⁶³ Luther, "Against the Antinomians" (1539), AE 47:110.

with words and with lesser deeds.”⁶⁴ The cross illustrates the wrath of God and the law describes why that wrath is necessary.

Finally, Luther argued, “even if we did not require the law for ourselves . . . we would have to preach it for Christ’s sake.”⁶⁵ Luther’s remarks imply that Christians *do* “require the law” for themselves. Luther reiterated that the function of the law is not restricted to revealing man’s incompleteness to satisfy God’s standard of righteousness. The law also reveals man’s incompleteness by commanding him to change his beliefs or behaviors. In some sense, the law still obligates the Christian. How does this function of the law clarify the gospel? The law clarifies the gospel by revealing how gospel people should live.

Luther preached the law to clarify the gospel. He rightly understood that without the law the good news of the gospel is not good at all. As Lohse reminds us, the law and gospel must be preached in “constant contrast” to each other.⁶⁶

Preachers today should not be afraid or ashamed to preach the law of God. After all, faithfully preaching the law is one of the ways the preacher faithfully preaches Christ. Luther believed that law and gospel are the two languages with which God speaks to his people, which testify of Christ, the eternal Word. Many homileticians have unwittingly clamped one side of God’s mouth shut while holding up a megaphone to the other. However, the preacher is free to proclaim the law in a robust manner, unlike this one-dimensional approach. If God speaks in the two languages of law and gospel, preachers must painstakingly strive for fluency in both languages.

IV. Gospel-Dominated Preaching

In a noble effort to avoid works-righteousness and maximize the gospel, too many contemporary sermons feature castrated imperatives, heavily bandaged in a host of gospel caveats. Such impotent imperatives are largely absent from Luther’s preaching. While Luther did articulate gospel indicatives, he apparently saw no need to follow every proclamation of law with a gospel caveat.

Although Luther’s preaching was not consistently “gospel-centered” in the way the term is often employed in popular literature today, it was “gospel-dominated” even when it featured a preponderance of law. In other words, even when Luther’s exposition did not *center* on the gospel, it remained *dominated* by it. Edward

⁶⁴ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:113.

⁶⁵ Luther, “Against the Antinomians” (1539), AE 47:113.

⁶⁶ Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 269.

Engelbrecht explains the concept of gospel-dominance as characteristic of Luther's preaching:

By *dominance* of the Gospel, I do not mean simply that a message contains more Gospel than Law. Some preachers might adopt that as a goal but it is not always what we see in the Scriptures, Luther's sermons, or the messages of other faithful teachers. The proclamation of the Law often takes more space, depending on the state of the hearers. . . . By dominance, I mean that the proclamation of the Law serves the purpose of the Gospel: our forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ alone. This requires sensitivity to the hearers, addressing their sins appropriately with the Law so that the Gospel may do its life-giving work. It also means proclaiming the Gospel vigorously as our only hope and comfort.⁶⁷

An isolated glance at individual sermons may paint Luther as sometimes antinomian and other times legalistic. But Luther is no homiletical schizophrenic. His strategy was to ground his people in the beauty of Christ's gospel, but that foundation was not built in a single sermon. Even when Luther preached the law unabashedly, he still allowed his imperatives to be dominated by the gospel.

In his fourth *Invocavit* sermon, Luther brilliantly rejected the radical reformers' tendencies to throw out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. His sarcastic rebuke is still relevant today:

We must, therefore, be on our guard, for the devil, through his apostles, is after us with all his craft and cunning. Now, although it is true and no one can deny that the images are evil because they are abused, nevertheless we must not on that account reject them, nor condemn anything because it is abused. This would result in utter confusion. God has commanded us in Deut. 4 not to lift up our eyes to the sun, etc., that we may not worship them, for they are created to serve all nations. But there are many people who worship the sun and the stars. Therefore we propose to rush in and pull the sun and stars from the skies. No, we had better let it be. Again, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool out of him; so we kill all the women and pour out all the wine. Again, gold and silver cause much evil, so we condemn them. Indeed, if we want to drive away our worst enemy, the one who does us the most harm, we shall have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Edward A. Engelbrecht, *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 244–245.

⁶⁸ Luther, "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg" (1522), AE 51:85.

Christian history is replete with preachers who have damaged the pulpit with the Christ-denying evils of moralism and legalism. It is true that preachers can abuse the imperatives of Scripture, turning Christianity into a legalistic system of salvation by works. However, Martin Luther was not such a preacher, nor are the countless others who follow in his tradition. The recurring tendency to cure moralism in the pulpit by minimizing the law is not a legitimate remedy. Instead, let us embrace Luther's example of gospel-dominated preaching.

Prayerfully Consider

"Maybe I could be a pastor..."
"Maybe I could be a deaconess..."



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Luther and Lutheran Orthodoxy: *Claritas and Perspicuitas Scripturae*

Roland F. Ziegler

I. Introduction

Lutheran Orthodoxy is not imaginable without Luther, but it is not simply a continuation of Luther.¹ Lutheran Orthodoxy takes up the insights of the Lutheran Reformation and develops a form in which these insights can be taught and transmitted in its own context. In this paper I want to look at one insight of Luther and how it was taken up, defended, and also modified by Lutheran Orthodoxy. The clarity of Scripture is important for Luther's theology not only in his controversies with Rome, but also with the Sacramentarians. The clarity of Scripture is decisive for his approach to theology and church reform. In Lutheran Orthodoxy, the main controversy was with Rome. The perspicuity of Scripture is at the heart of how theology without the magisterium is possible. In this paper, I will first look at Luther's understanding of the clarity of Scripture, then at the objections to it by the Jesuit theologian Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621). I will discuss the answer to Bellarmine by selected Lutheran theologians and conclude with a short meditation on the contemporary dogmatic relevance of the clarity of Scripture.

II. Luther on the Clarity of Scripture

The Clarity of Scripture in the Early Debates with Rome

In 1520, Luther wrote a detailed response and defence of the articles that were condemned by the bull "*Exsurge Domine*." In the introduction to the "Assertion of

¹ Like all periodization in history, the exact delineation of the age of Lutheran orthodoxy is not possible. Robert Preus (*The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 1: *A Study in Theological Prolegomena* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970], 44) sets the beginning at 1580 and the end "in the early 18th century." Johannes Wallman ("Orthodoxie. II. Christentum. 2. Historisch a) Lutherische Orthodoxie" in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., vol. 6 [Tübingen: Mohr, 2003], col. 696-702) sets the parameters between 1555 and 1780. Especially in the late 17th and during the 18th century there was an overlap between Lutheran Orthodoxy, pietism, and the enlightenment. During this later period, Lutheran Orthodoxy lost its theological and cultural dominance in Lutheran territories.

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all condemned articles condemned by the latest Bull of Leo X,” Luther discussed the question of whether he interprets the Bible subjectively in opposition to the “objective” interpretation of the church.² But what is the supposed objectivity that his opponents touted? It is to follow the church fathers in their understanding of the Bible while affirming the impossibility of understanding Scripture on its own. Luther rejects making the opinions of the church fathers normative for the understanding of Scripture. If the church fathers are to be normative for understanding that which cannot be understood by itself, then it follows that one will need an interpreter to interpret the interpretation! For how can one be sure that he has properly understood the church father’s interpretation of the Scriptures? At a certain point, the reader has to be able to understand a text. Otherwise, the meaning of that text will remain forever elusive and one is forced to move from one interpretation to another. Relying on interpretations as method is unworkable. To put it differently, in order for one to understand a text, either the text itself or the interpreters have to be clear or understandable. So, where does clarity begin and darkness end? Why should one assert the clarity of church fathers over the clarity of Scripture?

Luther uses the church fathers themselves to argue that Scripture is clear. For, when arguing a point, the church fathers supported their theses with Scripture. Thus Scripture is to be the judge on all points of doctrine. Luther writes, “But Scripture can only be judge in controversies if it is through itself (not through the interpretation of church fathers or the magisterium) most certain, most accessible [without any difficulty], most understandable, its own interpreter, evaluating everything of everything, judging and enlightening.”³ He continues by asserting that in Ps 119:130 (“The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple”) the Spirit teaches that understanding comes through the words of Scripture.⁴ Thus, if one wants to understand Scripture, one has to begin with Scripture.

² This writing (Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. [Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993], vol. 7, pages 94–151 [hereafter WA]) is not included in the American Edition of Luther’s works. A German version, “Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers, so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind” (WA 7: [299] 308–457), is in English as “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles” (1521): vol. 32, pp. 3–99, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

³ “Oporet enim scriptura iudice hic sententiam ferre, quod fieri non potest, nisi scripturae dederimus principem locum in omnibus quae tribuuntur patribus, hoc est, ut sit ipsa per sese certissima, facillima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres, omnium omnia probans, iudicans et illuminans . . .” (WA 7:97.20–24).

⁴ WA 7:97.26–27. “Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift: Untersuchungen und Erörterungen über Luthers Lehre von der Schrift in ‘De Servo Arbitrio,’” in *Gesammelte und Nachgelassene*

Scripture is thus first principle (*primum principium*). Luther finds the *principium* in Psalm 119:160: “Thy word is true from the beginning; and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth forever.”⁵ Yet the Bible is an unusual *principium*. Usually at that time—that is, in the Aristotelian understanding—the “first principle” in knowledge is that “from which a thing is first knowable . . . for example the hypotheses in demonstrations.”⁶ First principles are evident statements that neither need to be founded on anything else nor can be founded on anything else—otherwise, they would obviously not be first. For Aristotle, the first principle is that non-hypothetical which must be known by all men, for “a principle which one has to *understand* anything is not an hypothesis; and that which one must know if he is to know anything must be in his possession for every occasion.”⁷

If Scripture is to be the first principle, it must be understandable and clear, and it must enable understanding for everything else—at least in theology. This approach differs therefore from common philosophical approaches. Whereas an empiricist puts sensory perception as first principle; a rationalist, reason; and a theologian, neither—Scripture itself imparts its content to man. This might seem strange to us moderns who start with man and with epistemological questions, but it makes sense if one has a realistic understanding of knowledge (i.e., that knowledge comes about when the things of this world form our mind). The alternative to Scripture would be either the things of this world (the parallel to empiricism, so to speak), or the realm of forms in which the mind participates. For Luther, though, neither sensory experience nor innate ideas can serve as the foundation of theology, but solely the word of God. Thus Scripture is the *principium*, and as *principium* it is therefore clear. As the Swedish theologian Bengt Hägglund wrote, Scripture as principle is evident (i.e., plain or clear to the understanding) in the sense of being trustworthy, so that its authority is a given to the believer through the working of the Holy Spirit, and in the sense of meaning, so that “the proper understanding of the statement can be gained by Scripture itself.”⁸

Werke, Band II, Studien zur Theologie Luthers und des Luthertums (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), 238–243.

⁵ The Vulgate translates: “*Principium verborum tuorum veritas et in aeternum omnia iudicia iustitiae tuae.*” Robert Weber, Roger Gryson, and Bonifatius Fischer, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, Editionem quintam emendatam retractatam (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), at Ps. 118:160.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Δ, 1 (1013a 15). Translation from: Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, tr. Hippocrates George Apostle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Γ, 3 (1005b 10–20).

⁸ Bengt Hägglund, “Evidentia sacrae scripturae. Bemerkungen zum ‘Schriftprinzip’ bei Luther,” in *Vierhundertfünfzig Jahre lutherische Reformation: Festschrift für Franz Lau zum 60. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1967), 117.

A year later, Luther addressed the question of the clarity of Scripture again in his book against Latomus. Here he uses the language of the clarity of Scripture:

There is one teacher, even Christ, and the fathers are to be tested by the judgment of the divine Scriptures so that it may be known who has clarified and who has obscured them. Thus Paul orders us to “test everything; hold fast to what is good” [I Thess 5:21]. In I Cor 14[:29] he says, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” He commands that all be tested and that there be no exceptions—neither Augustine, nor Origen, nor any man, not even the Antichrist, the pope. But doesn’t obscure Scripture require explanation? Set aside the obscure and cling to the clear. Further, who has proved that the fathers are not obscure? Are we once again going to have your, “it seems,” and their, “they say”? What did the fathers do except seek and present the clear and open testimonies of Scripture? Miserable Christians, whose words and faith still depend on the interpretations of men and who expect clarification from them! This is frivolous and ungodly. The Scriptures are common to all, and are clear enough in respect to what is necessary for salvation, and are also obscure enough for inquiring minds. Let everyone search for his portion in the most abundant and universal Word of God, and let us reject the word of man, or else read it with discrimination. This is enough regarding this matter, and much more than enough.⁹

The Bondage of the Will

Luther actually uses the term “clarity of Scripture” in his answer to Erasmus. Erasmus had maintained that the Scriptures are intentionally dark. To understand the argumentation, we need to be aware of the original connotations of “clear” and “obscure.” Both have to do with light, but in English such words unfortunately only work with the connotations of “dark” or “obscure.” The opposite of “clear” is not really “dark,” it is “clouded, murky, muddy,” etc. The Latin *claritas* has the connotation of brightness. This is important not because etymology determines a word’s definition (the etymological fallacy of meaning), but because Erasmus himself uses the metaphor of light. The Scripture, he says, is in some places like the Corycian cave, “which begins by attracting and drawing the visitor to itself by its pleasing aspect, and then as one goes deeper, a certain horror and majesty of the divine presence that inhabits the place makes one draw back.”¹⁰ That is how the Scriptures are, he says: they are dark because of the majesty of God, their purpose is

⁹ Martin Luther, “Against Latomus” (1521), AE 32:217.

¹⁰ Gordon E. Rupp and Philip S. Watson trans., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, c. 1969), 38.

not to speak clearly (at least in places), but to give us an experience of the awe-inspiring nature of God—an experience of the *mysterium tremendum et facinosum*.¹¹

Luther first distinguishes between God and Scripture. In God there are many hidden things, but not in Scripture. “But that in Scripture there are some things abstruse, and everything is not plain—this is an idea put about by the ungodly Sophists, with whose lips you also speak.”¹² Luther admits that there are many texts in Scripture that are “obscure and abstruse,” not because of their content, but rather because of “our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar.”¹³ For the content of Scripture is free and open to all, the “supreme mystery brought to light, namely that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ has suffered for us and is to reign eternally.”¹⁴ Thus, the reason why some people do not understand the Scriptures is their “blindness and indolence.”¹⁵ “Let miserable men, therefore, stop imputing with blasphemous perversity the darkness and obscurity of their own hearts to the wholly clear Scriptures of God.”¹⁶

Luther then distinguishes between two kinds of clarity: external and internal. The external clarity of Scripture pertains to the ministry of the word, internal pertains to the understanding of the heart. Regarding the internal clarity, this is only possible with the Holy Spirit. The internal clarity pertains to apprehending and truly understanding the Scriptures, which can be amiss even if one can “recite everything in Scripture, and know how to quote it.”¹⁷ This internal clarity implies faith in God. The external clarity, though, means that “nothing is left obscure or ambiguous.”¹⁸

Luther discusses the subject another time in *On the Bondage of the Will*, this time in the context of evaluating a theological opinion. If the church and the church fathers cannot serve as final arbiters in a theological dispute, what can?¹⁹ Luther’s answer is that everything has to be judged by a twofold judgment. The first is an internal judgment, by which the Spirit enables a person to judge matters concerning his own person, which Luther identifies with the internal clarity of Scripture. The other is external, where “we judge the spirits and dogmas of all men, not only for ourselves, but also for others and for their salvation.”²⁰ Since to judge doctrine is

¹¹ Cf. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).

¹² *Luther and Erasmus*, 110; WA 18:606–609.

¹³ *Luther and Erasmus*, 110.

¹⁴ *Luther and Erasmus*, 110.

¹⁵ *Luther and Erasmus*, 111.

¹⁶ *Luther and Erasmus*, 111.

¹⁷ *Luther and Erasmus*, 112.

¹⁸ *Luther and Erasmus*, 112.

¹⁹ To the following, cf. *Luther and Erasmus*, 158–169 (WA 18:652–661).

²⁰ *Luther and Erasmus*, 159.

especially a duty of the office, this clarity is connected with the office. The Scriptures are to judge opinions, and that they can do this is proved by Deuteronomy 17:8–20; Psalm 19:9; 119:130; Isaiah 8:20.

The connection with the office does not mean, however, that the Scriptures are only clear for the ordained. Rather, the Scriptures can be preached and can serve to evaluate doctrine because they are clear. If they were unclear, not only preaching as exposition of Scripture would be impossible, but of course the appeal to the Scripture in theological controversy would be meaningless.

Luther finds it unacceptable that Erasmus will of course not say that everything in the Scriptures is dark—after all, his point is: let us stick to that which is clear, that which pertains to leading a Christian life, and leave the rest, which is dark. For Luther, the Scripture as a lamp shining in a dark place (2 Pet. 1:19) is a description of the entire Bible, not only parts of it.²¹

This does not mean for Luther that everybody will see the truth of Scripture. Blindness in men prevents them from seeing the truth of Scripture. Luther is content to make his case in such a way that the mouth of the adversaries “is so far stopped that they have nothing to say in reply and, although they say a great deal, yet in the judgment of common sense they say nothing.”²²

Clarity of Scripture in the Controversy on the Lord's Supper

The great debate on the Lord's Supper among those who were opposed to Rome and committed to Scripture alone can be seen as a test case for the clarity of Scripture. For it raises the plausible empirical argument: if the Scriptures are clear, why is there disagreement on its meaning? Luther was not immune to the arguments of the sacramentarians, as he confessed himself.²³ What moved him to stay with the confession that the true body and blood of Christ are orally eaten in the Lord's Supper? It was not some kind of traditionalism—if anyone, it was Melancthon who was a traditionalist, and who fell because of his traditionalism, once he realized that the patristic argument for the Lutheran position was not as good as he thought it to be.²⁴ Neither was it the commitment to a certain form of Christology, as, for

²¹ *Luther and Erasmus*, 163.

²² *Luther and Erasmus*, 163–164.

²³ Cf. Luther's remark in “Ein Brief an die Christen zu Straßburg wider den Schwärmgeist” (1524), WA 15:394.12–28.

²⁴ Gottfried Hoffmann, *Kirchenväterzitate in der Abendmahlskontroverse zwischen Oekolampad, Zwingli, Luther und Melancthon: Legitimationsstrategien in der innerreformatischen Auseinandersetzung um das Herrenmahl*, 2nd ed., Oberurseler Hefte, Ergänzungsbände 7 (Göttingen: Edition Ruprecht, 2011), 232–235.

example, Karl Barth suggested. Rather, it was the words of Scripture themselves that forced him to confess.²⁵

In the introduction of *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*, Luther gives a narrative of the history of Christianity. It is the narrative of the devil attacking the church. In the beginning, "when God's Word was preached by the apostles purely and clearly, and no human commandments but simply the holy Scriptures were set forth, it seemed as if there would never be any trouble, since holy Scripture was the empress among Christians."²⁶ But then the devil attacked and produced "many sects, heresies, and factions among Christians." Since every group claimed Scripture, Scripture lost "its worth," and even was regarded as a "heretics' book." Scripture became suspicious and truth had to be found somewhere else. What was the solution? Councils! To keep unity, councils and their decrees seemed to be the solution, and concomitant with that, it seemed that the Scriptures were not sufficient, that one needed fathers and councils to understand the Scriptures, and that there were authoritative extra-biblical traditions. "When the devil saw this he jeered and thought: now I have won! Scripture lies prostrate, the fortress is destroyed, the weapons are beaten down. In their place they now weave walls of straw and make weapons of hay, i.e. they intend now to array themselves against me with man-made laws."²⁷ The only way to stop arguing about the meaning of Scripture, according to Luther, is to push Scripture to the side. Thus, when Scripture is read, there will be argument in the church. This, for Luther, is not because of the ambiguous nature of Scripture or the limitations of human communication, where the meaning of a text is partly determined by the reader or even created by the reader—as it is now fashionable to say among the hermeneutically sophisticated—but because of the work of the devil. It is the work of the devil to drive the church away from an engagement with Scripture and instead busy itself with human words. In his time, Luther sees first the renewed interest and engagement with Scripture and the corresponding activity of the devil in creating factions. "In short, the devil is too clever and too mighty for us. He resists and

²⁵ Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets" (1525), WA 18:174.10–15: "Denn der text erzwingts mit gewaltt, das die sünde geschehe am essen und trincken, weyl er spricht 'Wer unwirdig isset und trincket' und spricht doch, das die selbige sünd geschehe am leyb und blut des HERRN, das laut gewalttlich, das er ym essen und trincken den leyb und blut Christi habe beleydigt und ubel mit yhm umgangen" (cf. AE 40:183). Idem, WA 18,207,17: "Der spruch war zu helle und zu mechtig und wuste nichts dazu zu sagen" (cf. AE 40:217). See also Bernhard Rothen, *Die Klarheit der Schrift*, Teil I, Martin Luther: Die wiederentdeckten Grundlagen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 101: "Der zwingende, unaufgebbare Grund für Luthers Abendmahlslehre ist darum wirklich nichts anderes als der Bibeltext."

²⁶ Luther, "This is My Body" (1527), AE 37:13.

²⁷ Luther, "This is My Body" (1527), AE 37:14.

hinders us at every point. When we wish to deal with Scripture, he stirs up so much dissension and quarrelling over it that we lose our interest in it and become reluctant to trust it.”²⁸

Lest we think that Luther places the devil in too high regard, we have to keep in mind that Luther sees in the dissension among Christians also the wrath of God. For the devil is the instrument of God, and God “gives the devil free rein to produce crude, clumsy errors and thick darkness to punish our shameful ingratitude for having treated the holy gospel as so wretchedly despicable and worthless”²⁹ Luther is not worried, though. He thinks that this new error will not last long. His confidence comes from trust in the word of God. This doctrine “does not attack obscure and uncertain Scripture, but clear, plain Scripture, as we shall hear.”³⁰ Luther is aware, though, that there is a limit to what can be done with arguments from Scripture. He thinks that the main proponents of the sacramentarian doctrine are beyond help. They are under the judgment of God, and their hearts have been hardened. Thus, he writes for the confused—those who are not yet under the judgment of God. The analogy is Christ, who did not convert the high priests, but their disciples.³¹

From this we see that clarity does not mean for Luther that everybody will see what Scripture has to say. The devil blinds people, and God in his judgment hardens them in their inability to see the clear word of God. Of course, we also have heard this above in the discussion of the *Bondage of the Will*.

Since Luther debates the meaning of the words of institution, we should not be surprised that there is no discussion on the clarity of Scripture as a whole, but rather a discussion on the clarity of the words of institution. That these words are clear is emphatically and repeatedly asserted by Luther. The opposition of Karlstadt, Zwingli, and Oecolampadius did not destroy this conviction. A few examples:

The sum and substance of all this is that we have on our side the clear, distinct Scripture which reads, “Take, eat; this is my body,” and we are not under obligation nor will we be pressed to cite Scripture beyond this text—though we could do so abundantly.³²

Reasonable and conscientious men see clearly here that it is a shame to spread such drivel among the people, and it does not deserve an answer. Nonetheless, the people pounce upon it, cling to it, and treat it as pure Scripture and truth

²⁸ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:17.

²⁹ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:19.

³⁰ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:19.

³¹ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:20.

³² Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:33.

in opposition to these words that are so clear, simple, and lucid, “This is my body.”³³

The holy doctors follow the practice, in expounding the Scriptures, of using lucid and clear passages to clarify the obscure and ambiguous passages. It is also the Holy Spirit’s practice to illumine the darkness with light. But our fanatics proceed the other way around: they tear out of a text an obscure, ambiguous word which pleases their fancy, ignore the context, and then run around trying to use it to make a lucid, clear text obscure and ambiguous, and then claim that it is the pure truth. This is the method of the devil, who is a lord of darkness and tries with darkness to extinguish the light.³⁴

Not that the Scriptures are obscure; but their imagination is blind and lazy, so that it cannot view the clear words correctly, just as a lazy man does not open his eyes to see the real light but takes a glimmer to be the light.³⁵

Luther is not weakened in his conviction through the ongoing dissent. In *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* of 1528, Luther asserts the clarity of the Words of Institution in strong words:

We know, however, that these words, “This is my body,” etc. are clear and lucid. Whether a Christian or a heathen, a Jew or a Turk hears them, he must acknowledge that they speak of the body of Christ which is in the bread. How otherwise could the heathen and the Jews mock us, saying that the Christians eat their God, if they did not understand this text clearly and distinctly? When the believer grasps and the unbeliever despises that which is said, however, this is due not to the obscurity or clarity of the words, but to the hearts that hear it.³⁶

III. The Roman Counterattack: Robert Bellarmine

Robert Bellarmine (4 October 1542—17 September 1621), Jesuit and one of the foremost theologians of the Counter-Reformation, wrote a collection of polemical treatises called “Disputations” in which he engaged the arguments of the reformers and gave a rebuttal. Bellarmine was viewed as important enough that for the next

³³ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:74.

³⁴ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:112.

³⁵ Luther, “This is My Body” (1527), AE 37:113.

³⁶ Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), AE 37:272.

hundred years Lutherans engaged him in their discussion of the perspicuity of Scripture.³⁷

In this section, I will use a selection of Lutheran authors: Leonhard Hutter and his *Loci theologici* of 1619 as a representative of early orthodoxy; Johannes Hülsemann, whose *Observations on Bellarmine's "On the Word of God"* was first published in 1641 and republished as an appendix to his *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae* in 1679, thus demonstrating its continued significance; and three disputations on the topic: one by Hutter from 1606; the second by Johann Adam Osiander, professor in Tübingen, for the doctoral disputation of Heinrich Schütz from Stockholm, Sweden, of 1677; and last one by Gottfried Hoffmann, professor in Tübingen, of 1722, at the end of the age of Orthodoxy.³⁸

The Orthodox Lutherans define the perspicuity of Scripture as a perspicuity of that which is necessary for the salvation of the Christian, for those who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit. Thus, Hutter defines perspicuity in this way: "The canonical Holy Scripture, in matters concerning faith and our salvation, is always perspicuous and clear, so that it can be understood by a pious and believing man, even without the testimony of the church."³⁹ The Lutherans will therefore readily admit that there are dark passages in Scripture, but they reject to speak of the Scripture simply as dark. Like Luther, the imagery of the word of God that enlightens plays a central role for this doctrine.⁴⁰

³⁷ The edition used is: Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationum Roberti Bellarmini Politiani S.J. S.R.E. Cardinalis De Controversiis Christianae Fidei Adversus Hujus Temporis Haereticos Tomus Primus* (Neapoli: apud Josephum Giuliano, 1856).

³⁸ Leonhard Hutter, *Loci communes theologici* (Wittebergae: typis Johannis Matthaei, 1619). Johannes Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae* (Lipsiae: sumptibus Michaelis Ruswormii, 1679). Hülsemann's *Animadversiones in R. Bellarmini Tom I. Controv. Lib. I. De Verbo Dei*, included in this volume, have a separate page count. Leonhard Hutter, *Disputatio Theologica V. De Perspicuitate Scriptura* (Witebergae: typis Cratonianis per Johann. Gorman., 1606). Johann Adam Osiander, *Dissertatio de attributis quibusdam S. Scripturae* (Tubingae: typis Johann-Henrici Reisii, 1677). Gottfried Hoffmann, *Dissertatio theologica quâ praecipui pontificorum errores circa doctrinam de Scriptura sacra ὡς ἐν Συνόψει ob oculos sistuntur, strictimque refutantur DEO clemente adjuvante, praeside Godofredo Hofmanno* (Tubingae: literis Josephi Sigmundi, 1722).

³⁹ Hutter, *Loci*, 44. Similar Hoffmann, 22; Osiander, 7.

⁴⁰ Hutter, *Loci*, 44. Psalm 119 plays an important role as exegetical foundation. Hutter quotes Ps 119:34 (*Da mihi intellectum et scrutabor legem tuam*), 119:18 (*revela oculos meos, et considerabo mirabilia de lege tua*), and 119:135 (*Faciem tuam illumine super servum tuum, et doce me justificationes tuas*). Hutter takes these quotes as proof that those who have received the firstfruits of the Spirit can meditate and learn from the Scripture the statutes of God and do not have to suspend judgment on what the Scriptures say until they are told by council or pope. In his disputation on the perspicuity of Scripture, Hutter starts with John 5:39, which he—like many classical exegetes—understands as an imperative. This verse directs everybody to read and meditate on the Scriptures (Hutter, *Disputatio*, fol. A2r).

Bellarmino's thesis is this: that the Scriptures are not clear (*aperta*) in themselves, and that they do not suffice to end controversies on the faith without explanation.⁴¹

1. If the Lutheran thesis were true, why are there so many controversies?⁴² And just so that we are clear, Bellarmine is willing to go with this argument to the bitter end. Yes, there are and have been controversies concerning the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and all the articles of the faith. This then proves for Bellarmine that the Scriptures are not clear, not even on those articles.⁴³

Hutter wants to make several distinctions in regard to the question about why there is no end to discussions.⁴⁴ If the Scriptures speak to the issue, then all discussions are over in the sense that they are decided by Scripture. If by "over" one means that there are no more people who want to discuss such issues, then this will not do. For such an approach does not take into account the arrogance of wanton characters who will not be satisfied with anything and who would rather accept Plato's analogy of the sun whose light at noon bestows the ability to see the intelligible than admit that what Scripture says is clear even apart from human understanding. Controversies are not due to the darkness of Scripture, but to the sin of man, and to the fact that God blinds man in his judgment.

2. Bellarmine also criticizes Johannes Brenz, who mentions the linguistic difficulties in the Bible, but who also states that the sense of Scripture is still clear.⁴⁵ But this, according to Bellarmine, is patently false, as is shown by Psalm 119:18 ("Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law"). Thus, the Scriptures themselves teach that they are unclear—a nice move by Bellarmine using the same Psalm adduced by Luther in *The Bondage of the Will*.⁴⁶

This illumination, according to Hülsemann, is not to understand what the text says, (i.e., the true apprehension of the *sensus literalis*), but rather it refers to the inner illumination (i.e., faith)—the same kind of illumination of which Paul speaks

⁴¹ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 96. Bellarmine starts with quoting Luther from the *Assertio* referred to above and also refers to the Luther's statements in *The Bondage of the Will*, though without explicitly referring to them.

⁴² Bellarmine mentions the two answers Luther gives: first, because the Scriptures can be dark in one place, but teach what is said there clearly in others; second, though the scriptures are clear in themselves, they are dark to the arrogant and unbelievers because of their blindness and crooked mind (*pravus affectus*).

⁴³ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 100.

⁴⁴ Hutter, *Loci*, 46–47.

⁴⁵ This is from Brenz's answer to Pedro de Sota in his *Apology of the Confessio Virtembergica*. On this debate, see Matthias A. Deuschle, *Brenz als Kontroverstheologe: Die Apologie der Confessio Virtembergica und die Auseinandersetzung zwischen Johannes Brenz und Pedro de Soto* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

⁴⁶ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 96. He quotes Ps 119:19, 34, 135.

in Ephesians 1:8.⁴⁷ Osiander makes the observation that the prayer for the Holy Spirit is not because of the darkness of Scripture, but because of the human frailty and the inborn blindness of the human mind. That it cannot be because of the darkness of Scripture is shown when shortly thereafter David calls the word of God a lamp and a light (Ps 119:105).⁴⁸

3. Bellarmine argues that since Christ explains the Scriptures to the disciples, even though they knew Hebrew and were neither arrogant nor unbelievers, this shows that the Scriptures cannot be understood by themselves (Luke 24). Additionally, Bellarmine quotes Acts 8, the story of Stephen and the Ethiopian eunuch.⁴⁹

Hülsemann states that the examples of Christ explaining the Scripture in Luke 24 and Stephen in Acts 8 do not speak against the clarity of Scripture now, when we discuss whether Christians can know what is necessary for salvation.⁵⁰

Regarding Luke 24, Osiander offers another way to defend the perspicuity of Scripture. He points out that Christ scolds the disciples as foolish and slow of heart, thus blaming them for their lack of understanding, and not the Scriptures for being unclear.⁵¹

4. Bellarmine uses 2 Peter 3:16 to argue for the obscurity of Scripture and the need for interpretation: “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”

Hutter first states that he does not deny that the Scripture needs to be interpreted.⁵² He also does not want to defend the thesis that the Scripture is clear in such a way that it can be understood by anybody immediately. But the question is whether or not the entire Scripture is unclear, and *that* is not asserted in this passage. The conclusion from the particular to the general is not logically valid. Additionally, Peter does not say absolutely that some things are difficult to understand, but rather to those who are unlearned and unstable and thus who purposely distort the meaning. And finally, according to Hutter, and especially Hülsemann,

⁴⁷ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 64. Cf. Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 10.

⁴⁸ Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 10–11. Here he also says that the prayer is for the spiritual understanding.

⁴⁹ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 97, then also brings a long catena of quotes from the church fathers to prove his point. Since this would lead too far, I will omit it here and also, in the answers of the Lutherans, the discussion on the question of what the church fathers taught on the clarity of Scripture. I leave it to my colleagues who specialize in patristics to discuss the question of what the church fathers taught concerning the intelligibility of the Scriptures.

⁵⁰ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 64.

⁵¹ Osiander, *Dissertatio*, 11. Similarly, the problem of the eunuch was not the darkness of the text, but the blindness of his intellect and his ignorance.

⁵² Hutter, *Loci*, 46.

the reference is not to the letters themselves, but to the topic of the letters, namely the last things. They, the subject matter, are hard to understand.⁵³

5. After giving proof from the church fathers, Bellarmine argues from reason.⁵⁴ In the Scripture one has to distinguish between the content and the way of speaking. The content of Scripture is very dark (*obscurissima*), for neither the Trinity, nor the incarnation, nor the heavenly sacraments, nor the nature of the angels, nor the work of God in the mind of man, nor eternal election and reprobation can be investigated without great effort and work and the danger of gravest error. Bellarmine then draws an analogy with metaphysics: since metaphysics is more difficult and dark than other disciplines concerned with rational knowledge, how then could the Scriptures not be even darker, which deal with things far above the ken of metaphysics? Also, since large parts of Scripture contains prophecies concerning the future, this, too, is a dark subject matter.

Against this, Hülsemann states that, of course, the things of Scripture are far beyond the powers of natural reason. But the point of Scripture is that God communicates through the means of language those things that we cannot know by nature, but that we learn through this medium of Scripture.⁵⁵

6. Concerning the way of speaking, Bellarmine also sees innumerable difficulties. There are passages that seem to contradict each other. There are ambiguous statements, like John 8:58. There are incomplete sentences, like Romans 5:12. There are other linguistic difficulties, like sentences that are not in logical order, Hebraisms, and figurative language. Thus, on a linguistic level the Scriptures are dark.

⁵³ Hoffmann (*Dissertatio*, 22) seems to agree with the exegesis of the Catholic side, that there are certain things dark in Paul's letters. This is not a problem for him, since he already has admitted that there are some things obscure in the Bible. Salmer (probably Alfonso [Alphonsus] Salmerón [8 September 1515–13 February 1585], a Spanish Jesuit) had argued that an accessible Bible would breed contempt. This is rejected by Hoffmann as ridiculous, for then also the Apostles's Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer—which are considered clear from the Roman Catholic position—should be mysteriously dark and unintelligible. (Cf. Also Hoffmann, 22.) Osiander (*Dissertatio*, 12) makes the same point.

⁵⁴ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 97–98.

⁵⁵ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 66. But are not the subjects of the Bible so mysterious and deep that the Bible itself is mysterious and not readily intelligible? Hutter (*Loci*, 47) will again agree that there are dark things in Scripture (e.g., prophecy), and that the person who is not enlightened by the Spirit will find the Scriptures dark. But to conclude from such things that the Scriptures are dark is to commit the fallacy of the accident. Regarding prophecy, we cannot understand it without the spirit of prophecy. But once prophecies are fulfilled, like Is 7:14, they are easily understood. Regarding the linguistic difficulties that the Jesuits adduce, most of them can be resolved by looking at the overall usage of words, considering the context and diligent study of the biblical languages. Tropes and types do not make the Scriptures dark, but instead serve to illustrate the content wonderfully.

This is rejected by Hülsemann. First, the examples that Bellarmine adduces can be resolved rather easily. Secondly, though there might be linguistic difficulties in some places, those dogmas that are necessary for salvation are expressed in such a way that anybody who does not close his mind can understand them. The Roman side, according to Hülsemann, agrees that there are clear passages concerning ethics. And regarding the dogmas of faith, Romans 10:8 is adduced: “the word is not far from you.”⁵⁶

7. The reformers, according to Bellarmine, are guilty of self-contradiction. For if Scripture is as clear as they claim, why then do they write commentaries?⁵⁷

According to Hutter, the task of professors and pastors is not to make sense of a dark Scripture, but to draw conclusions from the “first principle” (Scripture) and transmit them, and to give expositions and applications of the Scripture. Hutter also sees a use for the witness of the church and an *a posteriori* argument for the authority of Scripture, even though these are not the reason one believes Scripture.⁵⁸

8. Bellarmine states that Psalm 19:8; 119:105; and Prov 6:23 also do not refer to the entire Scriptures, but to the law. Or, the words of God are said to be a light, not because they are easily understandable, but because, once understood, they illuminate the mind.

Hutter addresses Bellarmine’s argument that the entirety of Scripture is not meant in these references. Hutter rejects the first argument with the observation that *torah* in the Hebrew does not mean the law in the narrow sense, but the entire teaching of Scripture, both law and gospel. Regarding the second point, that the metaphors of light refer to the illumination of the person through the text, Hutter holds no objections. However, he does reject the idea that there can be an illumination of the person without an understanding of the text.⁵⁹

Continuity and Discontinuity with Luther

The Orthodox Lutheran theologians continued Luther’s emphasis on the clarity of Scripture against the concept that a churchly magisterium has the final say over the meaning of an intrinsically unclear Scripture. But there are also some differences. First, there is a terminological change: the preferred term becomes perspicuity, not clarity. But because the orthodox theologians also believe in the

⁵⁶ Hülsemann, *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, 66, 68.

⁵⁷ Bellarmine, *Disputationum*, 95. The quote is somewhat garbled from Luther, “On the Councils and the Church” (1539), AE 41:19–20.

⁵⁸ Hutter, *Loci*, 45.

⁵⁹ Hutter, *Loci*, 44–45. Ps 119:105 speaks of the law as a light. Jesus’ statements in John 16:25 and 17:7, and 2 Tim 3:15 and 2 Pt 1:19 are taken as confirmation of the perspicuity of Scripture.

Scriptures as a light, this terminological shift should not be seen as wholesale categorical shift which makes the Bible into a transparent, passive object. Nevertheless, there is definitely a shift in the way the orthodox fathers talked about the clear and dark passages in Scripture. Luther most of the time refuses to talk about dark passages in Scripture, because he thinks strictly from the Scriptures as a communicative act of God which thus makes these ontological statements of clarity a property of Scripture. Any darkness is in the reader, not in Scripture.

The orthodox dogmaticians, though, combine, it seems to me, two perspectives. Deductively, they affirm the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture. But inductively, from the perspective of the reader, they affirm that some passages are clear and understandable to every Christian, whereas other passages are more difficult to understand. Their doctrine of perspicuity includes both aspects: what the Scriptures are in themselves, and how the Christian experiences reading the Scriptures.

IV. Conclusion: The Systematic Relevance of the Topic

The difficulty of defining clarity / perspicuity

Traditionally, clarity or perspicuity of Scripture is discussed as a property of Scripture. But clarity and perspicuity are not simply accidents in Scripture, rather they describe a relation between Scripture and reader. Something is clear for somebody. At the least, a linguistic communication is clear for a person who speaks the language. If a Uighur talks to me in as clear a way as is possible, it will be utter darkness for me since I do not speak Uighur. Any discussion of clarity must therefore include the reader in some sense, at the minimum level there must be a commonality of language that enables communication.

But as the Anglican John Webster rightfully stresses, clarity of Scripture cannot be transferred to the clarity in readers or the reading communities.⁶⁰ Clarity has to be part, in Webster's words, of the "ontology of Scripture".⁶¹ What he means by that is that there has to be place to talk about the clarity of Scripture in Scripture itself, though he, as a good Barthian, is wary of ascribing properties to Scripture that only belong to God, which would be deifying Scripture in his view.⁶²

⁶⁰ John Webster, "Biblical Theology and the Clarity of Scripture" in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 365.

⁶¹ Webster, "Biblical Theology," 354.

⁶² Webster, "Biblical Theology," 365.

Clarity as a theological statement

Because we use “clear” about writing all the time, it is tempting to use it in the context of Scripture in the exact same way. But as the biblical texts used in this discussion show, “clear” when used of the Bible has the connotation of luminosity. Scripture is a light to enlighten—in both aspects of enlightenment: it creates an understanding of what it states, and it illumines in that it gives faith. That is why clarity and efficacy belong together. The efficacy of Scripture happens not past or beyond the reading and understanding of the text—otherwise we might as well recite the Bible in an unknown language, or even better, carry Bibles around as holy talismans whose vibes will clean our aura. The clarity of Scripture has to do with the work God does through these texts. To put it differently, the proper understanding of clarity refuses to separate clarity from efficacy. Thus, the Scriptures are not only information, but an instrument through which the Holy Spirit, using the words and texts of it, enlightens with his gifts, sanctifies, and keeps the Christian in the true faith.

Webster stresses that as God is light, so his word is light. Luther would probably be more careful, since he distinguishes between God and Scripture quite carefully. Scripture also affirms that God dwells in darkness (1 Kgs 8:12), and that there are many things concerning God hidden to us. But God in his revelation certainly is light, and thus revelation as light and the luminous Scriptures belong together, just as the enlightening work of the Spirit.

So, the clarity of Scripture is a *theological statement*, it is a *confession*, not simply an empirical observation. The clarity of Scripture is a statement derived from Scripture just as much as the statement that the Scripture is the word of God. Both cannot be empirically verified—this is much more obvious in the case of the word of God, for how *would* one empirically verify it, short of a theophany? Just because clarity of Scripture sounds more like an empirical statement, it does not mean that it is an empirical statement.⁶³

But does this not make the term “clarity” rather empty, a word that means in theological parlance something completely different than in everyday speech, and thus negate Luther’s contention that the natural meaning of words is to be preferred? Not quite, but the semantics of “clarity of Scripture” has to be established on its own and not by some extra-theological standard of clarity. But not even in everyday

⁶³ Webster, “Biblical Theology,” 357: “To talk of *claritas scripturae* is to acknowledge that by virtue of the action of God, Holy Scripture *is* clear.” Nevertheless, this does raise the question of whether the scriptures are clear only *in actu* or also *in se*. Webster seems to oscillate somewhat in this. There his Barthianism is a problem.

language do we say that something is unclear simply because not everybody understands it. If there is obscurity in the act of reading, we know it can be the fault of the reader or the fault of the author. Or, to quote Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: “Wenn ein Buch und ein Kopf zusammenstoßen und es klingt hohl, ist das allemal im Buch?” [“If a book and a head collide, and it makes a hollow sound, is that always in the book?”]⁶⁴

Thus, we do not attribute it to God when men falsely understand the Scriptures, nor do we entertain the blasphemous thought that God is unable to communicate clearly and enlighten man. Rather, we see in sinful man the cause of a wrong understanding, just as we do not attribute the unbelief of man to God, but to man.

Practical consequences

We have seen above in the writing of Hutter that clarity of Scripture and interpretation do not exclude each other, nor does it mean that teaching and preaching is superfluous. But clarity of Scripture does have consequences for teaching and preaching, of course. It means that the presupposition of exegesis is that the text can be understood by Christians, that all exegesis is not a clarification of the dark text, but an unfolding, a paraphrase of the text. Exegesis should not be seen as constructive, nor as creative. The readers do not construct the meaning of the text, they follow the word, and they paraphrase what the word says.⁶⁵

Clarity and Ecclesiology

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was an obvious anti-establishment tendency, so to speak, regarding the clarity of Scripture. The polemical thrust was against a theology that maintained the practical preeminence of tradition and magisterium in regard to Scripture.⁶⁶ Thus, since the living tradition and teaching office in the church in the form of the papacy had become an enemy of the gospel, the doctrine took an anti-traditional and anti-papal character, and later an individualistic one. It is anti-traditional in that sense that the clarity of Scripture and its hermeneutical sufficiency go together: the Christian does not depend on an ecclesial authority to understand in Scripture what is essential for faith

⁶⁴ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 1, Sudelbücher I, 6th ed. (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1998), p. 291, Aph. D 399.

⁶⁵ Webster, “Biblical Theology,” 381. Cf. what Francis Pieper has to say about doctrine as repetition in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 57.

⁶⁶ I say practical, because of course any decent Roman theologian would have readily admitted that the Scriptures are supreme, or at least on par with the apostolic tradition.

and morals. The magisterium or tradition as the best guide on questions of philological or archeological matters is not something anybody has seriously proposed anyway.

But of course there can be good tradition and a good teaching office as well. For Luther, the preaching office presupposes the clarity of Scripture. Only a clear Bible can be preached. A dark Bible in the sense of Erasmus has to be venerated, or maybe it leads to introduction of the sacrament of silence in worship, as proposed by the German theologian Rudolf Otto.⁶⁷ But good tradition is a light because it receives the light, just as the teaching office shines if it says what Scripture says. Tradition is at best the moon that receives its light from the sun. Since both what is transmitted in the church and teachers in the church can go awry, it is necessary to evaluate them. Such an evaluation is the task of all Christians. No Christian should swear absolute loyalty to any church, congregation, or teacher in the church. No teacher or church tradition is inerrant and infallible. Only Scripture is inerrant and infallible. So in our reading of Luther and the Lutheran fathers (and the fathers of the early church and the medieval church!), we honor them where they are bearers of the divine word, and teachers of this word, but they are not a *conditio sine qua non* for the understanding of the text.

Let me conclude with a word from an Australian Anglican, Mark Thompson, who says in his monograph on the clarity of Scripture: "In short, a confession of the clarity of Scripture is an aspect of faith in a generous God who is willing and able to make himself and his purposes known. God has something to say and he is very good at saying it."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 210–214.

⁶⁸ Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 21 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 170.

Liking and Disliking Luther: A Reformed Perspective

Carl R. Trueman

I. A Personal Reflection

Martin Luther has been for me (though Reformed in my theology) perhaps one of the most influential Christians on my own thinking. My interaction with him—now more than thirty years long—had a twofold beginning. First, as a young Christian, I came across Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* in a local bookshop. The story caught my imagination. Not only was it, to use the cliché, one of Hollywood-style excitement, but also Bainton's own status as something of a theological outsider seemed to give him a peculiar sensitivity to the maverick status of his chosen subject. In a world where the Christian faith was being rapidly feminized by its representations in popular culture, Bainton's portrait of Luther was a bracing contrast and a refreshing change.¹

The second element of my initiation into Luther came with my doctoral studies. An initial interest in John Knox and the Scottish Reformation gave way to a desire to study more deeply the English Reformation when I started to read the earliest works of William Tyndale. It became clear to me that much of Tyndale's writing was textually dependent on writings of Luther, even as he modified, adapted, and in some areas subverted Luther's original intentions and meanings. Thus, the first part of my eventual PhD thesis examined the transmission of Luther's thought into an English context, something that enabled me to locate some of the earliest English reformers accurately within their contemporary milieu.²

Since PhD days, I have tended to focus more on seventeenth-century themes, particularly on the English Puritan John Owen. But such is life: once one has published a book with "Luther" in the title, one is continuously pulled back to opine on him. And, indeed, since taking up the pastorate as well as holding an academic post,

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950). First published sixty-seven years ago, it remains for many outside of the Lutheran Church the standard introduction to Luther's life.

² The fruit of my PhD studies was *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525–1556* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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I have turned back to Luther with fresh eyes, seeing him as a useful resource for contemporary pastoral work and church life.³

Thus, addressing the matter of Martin Luther as friend and foe is deeply personal for me—academically, pastorally, and as a Christian believer. All three aspects shape my approach and should be borne in mind throughout what follows.

II. Luther's Reformed Reputation

It hardly needs to be mentioned that Luther's reputation among Zwinglians has never stood particularly high. Yet, it is also the case that the attitudes of the Reformed world as a whole are somewhat more generous. Indeed, the young Calvin was far more disposed toward Luther than he was toward the theology of Zurich, as he recalls in a treatise of 1556 aimed at the Lutheran theologian, Joachim Westphal:

For when on beginning to emerge from the darkness of Papacy, and after receiving a slight taste of sound doctrine, I read in Luther that Zuinglius and Ecolompadius left nothing in the sacraments but bare and empty figures, I confess I took such a dislike for their writings that I long refrained from reading them.⁴

This early sympathy for Luther and antipathy to Zwingli and Oecolampadius did not remain unmodified, as Calvin's appreciation for Oecolampadius's patristic scholarship grew and as his mature sacramental theology denied the real partaking of Christ's body by unbelievers; but his overall admiration for Luther remained. Thus, in the polemical discussion of the Lutheran position on the Lord's Supper in the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin does not name his principle opponent, and it seems reasonable to surmise that this is because of his overriding admiration for Luther as a reformer.

A century later, the English congregational divine and Puritan John Owen makes numerous references to Luther in his writings. He is cited as an authority on the imputation of Christ's righteousness,⁵ on faith as the sovereign gift of God,⁶ on justification by faith as central to the existence of the church,⁷ and on the limited authority of church councils and synods.⁸ At a number of points, Owen cites Luther

³ E.g., Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

⁴ John Calvin, *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 2:252–253.

⁵ John Owen, *Works*, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1855), 2:320.

⁶ Owen, *Works*, 4:462.

⁷ Owen, *Works*, 5:67.

⁸ Owen, *Works*, 8:61.

as the great inceptor of the Reformation or as one of a number of illustrious leaders of a previous generation.⁹ At no point does Owen offer any direct criticism or make any pejorative comment about him.

We can contrast these treatments of Luther with Calvin's critiques of Westphal and Heshusius. Of course, these men were his contemporaries and wrote against him, and thus the conflict was inevitably more personal and more clearly targeted at individuals. Yet the doctrine the two men taught was not substantially different to that of Luther and was variously pilloried, mocked, and dismissed by Calvin as unbiblical.¹⁰

Given this, it seems reasonable to assume that Luther's sheer stature as a reformer and, as it were, the founder of the Reformation feast, was sufficient to render him not simply immune to the kind of personal criticism by the Reformed to which his Gnesio-Lutheran followers in particular were subjected, but also that sheer admiration for him as a figurehead effectively precluded any such derogatory commentary. Indeed, the eighteenth-century Anglican divine, Augustus Toplady, cites a private letter from Calvin to Bullinger in which the former alludes to some derogatory remarks made about him by Luther:

It is a frequent saying with me, that, if Luther should even call me a devil, my veneration for him is, notwithstanding, so great, that I shall ever acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God; who though he abounds in extraordinary virtues, is yet not without considerable imperfections.¹¹

We should note, however, that Toplady cites this passage for the purpose of acquitting Calvin of accusations of temerity and nastiness, not to indict Luther for the same. Thus it is not intended so much as a criticism of the Wittenberger as it is an exoneration of the Frenchman.

In short, it is reasonable to conclude that, for the Reformed, regardless of the doctrinal differences, Luther was simply too great a figure to be publicly excoriated.¹²

⁹ Owen, *Works*, 13:38, 219.

¹⁰ E.g., "Were I disposed to amass heresies with that rashness with which Westphal, who makes stupidity the director of our faith, has introduced them, how much more copiously might I be supplied?" (Calvin, *Tracts*, 2:310). The feeling was presumably mutual.

¹¹ *The Works of Augustus M. Toplady*, 6 vols. (London: Baynes and Son, 1825), 2:6.

¹² One might add that such continues today. Both evangelicals and the less historically precise Reformed are likely to claim Luther as an antecedent, the triumph of the heroic over the confessional. The reception of Luther in the non-Lutheran Protestant world—at least the non-Lutheran non-Anabaptist Protestant world—has tended to be that of the great founder of Protestantism whose distinct convictions are regarded either as aberrations or as irrelevant.

III. Luther's Positive Contribution to Historic Reformed Theology

When looking for points of contact between Luther and later Reformed theology, there are a number of such that are obvious, beyond the basic trinitarian and christological premises of Nicene and Chalcedonian catholic orthodoxy.

Foremost among these is justification by grace through faith. The notion of the instrumentality of faith, of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and of the anti-Pelagian framework within which salvation is to be understood, is basic in Reformed theology. As the fact that Calvin was able to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession *Variata* demonstrates, the fundamentals of Lutheran soteriology, with the exception of the status of the sacraments vis-à-vis the ungodly and the related christological underpinnings, are shared by both Lutheran and Reformed.

We have already alluded to the use of Luther by John Owen in his defense of justification. Such is a commonplace among the Reformed. Thus, Owen's contemporary Thomas Goodwin refers to Luther repeatedly as the one who made the key breakthroughs on justification, both in terms of imputation and the instrumentality of faith.¹³ Such is Luther's historical significance on this point that the question of the historical integrity of the doctrine is posed by Owen in terms of where his church was before Luther, Luther being acknowledged as the historical watershed on the matter.¹⁴ This was, in fact, a fairly typical periodization of church history. Fundamental disagreements on sacraments and Christology were, by and large, passed over by the later Reformed, for whom Luther was simply too positive and impressive a figure on justification to be removed from their own narrative.

Closely connected to the doctrine of justification, of course, is the teaching on divine and human agency contained in *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525).¹⁵ Both Lutherans and the Reformed stood within the Western anti-Pelagian tradition and the 1525 clash with Erasmus was another moment in Protestant history that was seen as having significance beyond the bounds of the Lutheran Church. The doctrine that *De Servo Arbitrio* contains is central to the Reformed understanding of salvation, but it should be noted that the text is not cited by the Reformed in details as frequently as the general ideas that it contains and that the conflict symbolized.

¹³ Owen, *Works*, 5:128; 8:475.

¹⁴ Owen, *Works*, 13:10.

¹⁵ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1526), vol. 33, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

There could be a number of reasons for this. First, the anti-Pelagian doctrine of the will is not as uniquely associated with Luther as is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. While the clash with Erasmus had significance as a piece of historical drama that brought key issues to the surface, there was nonetheless a stream of anti-Pelagian thinking that ran from Augustine to the Reformation, of which the Reformed were well aware. We might think of a fringe theological figure such as Gottschalk or of more mainstream individuals such as Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, and even the mature Thomas Aquinas. The figures of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus are also of significance. Thus, Luther might well have been significant for making a clear and precise connection between his understanding of justification and the nature of the human will, but on the latter point, he is not a historical watershed in the same sense as he is on the former.¹⁶

Second, it is clear that questions about the divine will and human responsibility rapidly move beyond the kind of large-scale ontological account Luther provides into territory that requires more conceptual precision and nuance. The kinds of questions that the division in the Reformed world between Calvinists and Arminians generate touch on a variety of issues: not simply the relationship of Creator to his creation but also of the nature of contingency and of the psychology of human action. On such questions, Luther is of limited usefulness, even as the broader structure for understanding salvation, which he proposes remains a plausible one for the Reformed. Still, one is more likely to find the Reformed citing Augustine, Aquinas, and later Dominicans on the issues than one is to find them citing Luther.

One exception to this is Augustus Toplady, the Calvinist Anglican theologian and vigorous defender of the anti-Pelagian Protestant nature of the Anglican settlement. Toplady's context is important. He was an eighteenth-century Church of England minister of pronounced Calvinist sympathies. He was also an inveterate opponent of the Anglican minister and founder of Methodism, the Arminian John Wesley. Toplady thus had a twofold concern. He wished to establish the strong, anti-Pelagian historical credentials of the Anglican communion and refute the anti-predestinarian views of Wesley and his followers. He is thus not so interested in nuancing anti-Pelagian theology as he is in establishing its foundational importance to Protestantism in general and the Church of England in particular. For this task, the sledgehammer argumentation of *De Servo Arbitrio* is perfectly attuned.

¹⁶ An old but still useful discussion of the doctrine of predestination throughout church history is J. B. Mozley, *A Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination* (London: John Murray, 1855).

In the advertisement of his work *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England*, it is amusing to note that Toplady indicates he will use the term *Calvinism*, per convention, to refer to the doctrinal system of both Luther and Calvin.¹⁷ Then, while acknowledging that Luther was no more predestinarian than John Wycliffe,¹⁸ he emphasizes the specific impact of Luther on the views of predestination held by such Reformation luminaries and martyrs as the Scotsman Patrick Hamilton and the English bishop Hugh Latimer.¹⁹ It is clear that Luther's name and theology carry huge persuasive force with Toplady's assumed audience.

In another work, *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism*, Toplady does not simply use Luther as a symbol of anti-Pelagianism, but he also draws directly on *De Servo Arbitrio*. In the course of the work, he asserts the fundamental agreement of Luther and Calvin on predestination and argues that denial of the point is a hallmark of Arminian stupidity.²⁰ He then affirms Luther's argument that predestination is a consequence of the very being of God, to be nuanced with the distinction between the necessity of infallibility and the necessity of coercion. He also assumes with Luther that divine simplicity makes the distinction between will and foreknowledge simply a formal, and not a real, one.²¹

On the issue of whether predestination should be preached, Toplady defers to Luther, offering a lengthy quotation (spanning some three pages) from *De Servo Arbitrio*, to the effect that preaching is to be guided by divine revelation in God's Word, that God's Word reveals it, and that thus it is to be preached.²²

Finally, in his treatise *The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted* (another anti-Wesley work), Toplady quotes Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* on the title page, to the effect that everything happens by necessity.²³ In the work itself, he utilizes the distinction between necessity of compulsion and necessity of infallible certainty, once again citing Luther as his authority on this score.²⁴

With Toplady, therefore, we do have a late flowering of Calvinist appropriation of Luther's work on the will, deployed in context to assert the illegitimacy of Wesley's Arminianism. Luther was not, of course, Toplady's only source. Yet the use he makes of Luther is consonant with what we noted earlier: Luther's name in and of itself carried huge weight well beyond the bounds of confessional Lutheranism.

¹⁷ Toplady, *Works*, 1:163.

¹⁸ Toplady, *Works*, 1:341.

¹⁹ Toplady, *Works*, 1:401, 434.

²⁰ Toplady, *Works*, 5:156.

²¹ Toplady, *Works*, 5:189.

²² Toplady, *Works*, 5:279–283.

²³ Toplady, *Works*, 6:iii.

²⁴ Toplady, *Works*, 6:12.

Indeed, confessional Lutheranism had never been a significant part of the English religious landscape, a point that might actually have made it easier to cite him. For, such citations lacked the precise partisan significance they would have possessed on the continent.

Interestingly enough, a similar use of the work occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1957, James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston produced a new English translation of *De Servo Arbitrio* that formed part of a campaign within British evangelicalism to move the movement away from Arminian and Holiness emphases toward a more Reformation Protestant perspective. The work proved critical in strengthening the cause of Calvinistic evangelicalism in Britain and helped to establish Packer as key player in the movement. Thus, Luther continued to inspire a tradition in many ways far from his own.²⁵

IV. Points of Contention between Luther and Reformed Theology

De Servo Arbitrio actually offers a segue into reflecting on points of antithesis between Lutheran and Reformed. The other strand of significant argumentation in the work, beyond that of the will, is, of course, that of the clarity of Scripture. This, too, was a vital doctrine to the Reformed. Yet the very point of dispute between Lutherans and Reformed—the meaning of the words of institution at the Last Supper—reflected the pressure under which the doctrine came almost as soon as Luther had articulated it. It would perhaps have been a little too ironic for the Reformed to have utilized *De Servo Arbitrio* on the point of scriptural perspicuity, as to do so would have immediately begged some obvious questions.

Of course, when reflecting on points of disagreement between Luther and the Reformed, it is obvious that Zwingli and the consequences of the Marburg Colloquy loom large. Of all the Reformed figures cited above, none would have agreed with Luther on either the direct communication of attributes from Christ's divinity to his humanity or the objective presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549 represents agreement between Zurich and Geneva on the issue and makes it clear that the Lutheran view of Christ's sacramental presence is considered just as absurd as transubstantiation.²⁶

Nevertheless, the *Consensus Tigurinus* was precisely what it claimed to be: a consensus document. As such, it did not tie the parties of Zurich together into a

²⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood: Revell, 1957).

²⁶ *Consensus Tigurinus* XXIV, XXV, in *Credo: Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 812.

narrow agreement on all aspects of the Lord's Supper. Calvin was no Zwinglian. It is true that on one of the key issues that divided Luther and Zwingli, the question of whether Christ is really present in the sacrament to the unbeliever, Calvin is with Zwingli. But I believe it is arguable that Luther's high view of the sacrament continued to influence the way in which Calvin regarded the matter. We noted earlier that Calvin's initial antipathy to Zwingli and Oecolampadius was the fact that Luther declared them to have reduced the sacraments to empty figures. We also know that in the 1530s, Calvin was somewhat distinctive in the circle of Reformed humanists in Basel for favoring the works of Luther over those of Zwingli. He never went through a Zwinglian phase.

Thus, while Lutherans may still abominate Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, it seems plausible to argue that his burden to avoid Zwinglian memorialism is the result of a desire to preserve something of the Lutheran high view of the sacrament refracted through the Christology of the Western tradition as Calvin saw it, embodied in the notion of *extra Calvinisticum*. That puts Calvin on the Zwinglian side of the christological line, but his intentions are far from those of the theologians of Zurich. Sacramental eating is for Calvin a real reception of Christ by faith. That is an idea that was impressed on him by Luther's works, even if the content he imports is from elsewhere.

Other points of antithesis to note might include the aesthetics of worship. The emergence of the Reformed Regulative Principle of worship emerged in the mid to late sixteenth century as in part a legacy of the influence of men like John Hooper and John Knox. These men were leading figures among those who had imported Swiss and Genevan ideas on worship back into England in the early 1550s. With the advent of the Catholic Mary Tudor to the throne in 1553, another generation of English Protestants had retreated to Geneva and Zurich, only to return in 1558 with the accession of the Protestant Elizabeth to the throne.

Key debates under Elizabeth focused on the relationship of church and state, as manifested in contentions over the Book of Common Prayer and the status of the clerical vestments. To such debates, Lutheranism offered little in the way of help, given the (from the Puritan perspective) far more relaxed and concessive approach to the reformation of worship that had marked Lutheranism since the early 1520s. I suspect that Lutheran aesthetics, along with its eucharistic theology, are one reason why Lutheranism never gained significant traction in England. They seemed just a little too papist or high church, given the categories of the English Reformation. Indeed, if there are hints of Lutheranism in the later English Reformation, it is in the sacramental teaching of high churchmen, not among the Reformed.

V. Luther and Contemporary Reformed Theology

There are two areas where I would suggest that Luther can be a constructive source for contemporary Reformed theology, beyond those cited above. I should also add here that, when speaking of Reformed theology, I speak as a pastor—so I am thinking of theology in the traditional sense, of theology that has an immediate impact on the way the church thinks and behaves. I am not interested in the use of Luther for questions that do not terminate in the regular life of the church.

The central usefulness of Luther to the church catholic is made clear by Charles Arand and Robert Kolb in *The Genius of Luther's Theology*.²⁷ If the task of the church is the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, then the means by which Christ comes today are to be determinative of church life. This means word and sacraments. In an era (and a nation) in which innovation and technique are generally assumed to be the answer to everything, this is a liberating insight, for it actually makes the pastoral task considerably easier than it might otherwise be.

Obviously, little in the way of ecumenical rapprochement can be expected between Lutheran and Reformed on the issue of the sacraments, but Luther's theology of the word preached is surely of significant interest to the Reformed pastor.

Luther's unerring (and late medieval) sense of the transcendent creative power of words lies at the heart of his understanding of the nature of language, as he makes clear in a famous passage in his *Lectures on Genesis*:

Who could conceive of the possibility of bringing forth from the water a being which clearly could not continue to exist in water? But God speaks a mere Word, and immediately the birds are brought forth from the water. If the Word is spoken, all things are possible, so that out of the water are made either fish or birds. Therefore any bird whatever and any fish whatever are nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language; through this rule of language those things that are impossible become very easy, while those that are clearly opposite become very much alike, and vice versa.²⁸

The phrase that describes creatures as “nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language” is fascinating, drawing out the clear implications of Luther's linguistic philosophy: words constitute reality. It is God's speech that makes the sea produce birds, a natural impossibility. This is the late medieval nominalism that we noted earlier and that bears some similarities to certain aspects of postmodern literary theory, which emphasizes the constructive nature of words. To an extent, we can all

²⁷ Charles Arand and Robert Kolb, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

²⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535), AE 1:49.

sense the creative power of language: the use of a racial epithet is regarded as obnoxious because it does something to the people to whom it is applied. It denigrates them and thus transforms reality for them in a negative way. Language is creative and we instinctively know that, as demonstrated by the heated debates over freedom of speech and political correctness.

Yet, Luther's understanding of language here is not that of radical postmodernists in one very important way. For Luther, language is creative because it is spoken by God and he uses this speech as the instrument for determining what exactly reality is. He is in himself unknowable. Prior to his speaking, human beings cannot put a limit on what he may or may not do. But when he speaks, his power uses that speech to bring things into being and to constitute reality. That reality has a stability and a certainty to it precisely because it is the speech of the sovereign and omnipotent God who rules over all things. By contrast, I might scream and shout at the ocean all day long, commanding it to give forth fish and birds, but it will not happen, because I am a mere creature and not the Creator. It is because it is God who speaks, God who controls all things, that his language is creative. This is a crucial point to understand when it comes to making the transition from God speaking in his word to the preacher speaking God's word to the congregation.

This creative power of speech is not restricted to the early chapters of Genesis. Throughout the Old Testament, God's speech continues to be the primary mode of his action and continues to reshape reality or to bring new things into being. He calls Abraham and gives him a covenant promise. He calls to Moses from the burning bush. He speaks again to Moses on Sinai and gives him the Law. On this point, Luther and his Reformed contemporaries were in agreement. Significantly, Heinrich Bullinger refers to God's speech on Sinai as "preaching": "In the mount Sina [sic] the Lord himself preached to the great congregation of Israel, rehearsing so plainly, that they might understand those ten commandments, wherein is contained every point of godliness."²⁹ By using this language of *preaching*, Bullinger points out a clear analogy he sees between the act of God in addressing his people and what God's servants do when they speak God's words to his people. God does things through his word. He creates, he commands, he promises. And He does things through his word proclaimed by his servants. Thus, God in the Bible also speaks through various prophets, giving them detailed words to say to his people or even to foreign nations, or using their words to accomplish his own purposes.³⁰ This is important for

²⁹ Heinrich Bullinger, *Decades* I.i, 4 vols., trans. Thomas Harding, et al. (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1849–1852), 1:38.

³⁰ "But in times past, and before that the Son of God was born in the world, God, by little and little, made himself acquainted with the hearts of the holy fathers, and after that with the minds of

understanding the connection between grace and preaching in the Reformation church: New Testament and then postapostolic preachers are the successors of the Old Testament prophets as they bring God's word to bear on God's people and on the world around. The word they proclaim is the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. Its power is thus rooted in divine action, not in the eloquence of the preacher.

One obvious implication of this is that divine speech is not simply, or perhaps even primarily, a matter of communicating information. It is the typical mode of God's presence and power. Speech is how God is present or, to use a more modern idiom, how he makes his presence felt. God's speech created the universe and it also created the people of God. God called Abram and made him the father of all nations. To meet God is to be addressed by him or by his chosen speakers. The Jews were special because God spoke to them in a special way, by his covenant promises. His rule was exercised by and through his word. The Jews were those who had God's law and his promises. These were the means by which God was gracious to them.

This presence of God by speech is not restricted to the Jews. When God addressed the Gentiles, he was present to them also, whether in general matters, such as the judgment against Babylon, or in mercy, as in the particular case of Naaman. His sovereignty over them was also exercised in and through his word. When God ceased to speak, it was a sign that he had withdrawn his favor from his people. Thus Amos predicts a famine of the word of God that will cause the people to wander over the face of the earth seeking God but doing so in vain. A silent God was an absent God.

When we move to the New Testament, the power of the speech of God continues to be emphasized. At Jesus' Baptism, the Father publicly recognizes his Son by speech, as the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove. The point is clear: God in Christ is now present with his people, a presence signified by the word. The economy of grace that is manifested in Christ is inaugurated by a verbal declaration. Then, when Christ is confronted with the devil's temptations in the wilderness, his weapon of choice is the word of God. The word is the means by which Christ is upheld. As the devil does what he did in the garden, that is, pervert the word, so

the holy prophets; and last of all, by their preaching and writings, he taught the whole world. So also Christ our Lord sent the Holy Ghost, which is of the Father and the Son, into the apostles, by whose mouths, words, and writings he was known to all the world. And all these servants of God, as it were the elect vessels of God, having with sincere hearts received the revelation of God from God himself, first of all, in a lively expressed voice delivered to the world the oracles and word of God which they before had learned; and afterward, when the world drew more to an end, some of them did put them in writing for a memorial to the posterity" (Bullinger, *Decades* I.i, 1:38–39).

Christ aptly applies it and puts his enemy to flight. Then there are the many examples throughout the gospels of Christ's speech casting out demons, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. Not all his acts of power are linguistic (for example, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood), but most are. The word was the means by which Christ demonstrated his sovereignty and brought grace to bear in the lives of individuals.

This word-oriented means of God's presence and power continued into the postascension apostolic church. Preaching is central to the narrative of the book of Acts and lies at the heart of the practical realization of God's gracious purposes in Paul's New Testament letters. It was through verbal declaration that the reformers saw the apostles expanding the kingdom. The prophetic word was a word that tore down illusions and built up realities. Thus, the preacher stood at the very center of the spiritual struggle of the present age, both for judgment and for grace.

It is not surprising that the reformers, and Luther especially, saw themselves as standing in continuity with this biblical emphasis on God's words as his means of action, both for judgment and for grace. Thus, in the Reformation, preaching was power and the preaching office was the most significant one within the church. All of the major reformers were preachers, with the pulpit being the center of their professional lives. Their various reformations were all centered on and driven by the proclamation of the word.

There were obvious cultural aspects to this: in an age of low literacy, the preacher was often the person through whom many people obtained their understanding of the world around. Thus, Luther's sermons often ended with an appendix, not connected to the main exposition that offered commentary on some aspect of current affairs.³¹ This political significance of preaching helps to explain the constant attempts in England to regulate the practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even to suppress it entirely at points in the 1630s.

Yet the cultural power of preaching is clearly only a small part of the story and not one that would have interested the reformers to any significant degree. For them, the biblical theology of the word that we have noted above was the driving factor. God preached, and so his servants must preach. Preachers had power because their words were connected in some way to the word and were thus the means of God accomplishing his purposes in this world. Indeed, Reformation preachers saw themselves as the successors, in some ways, of the great prophets of Scripture. This is reflected often in the language they applied to the preaching task. The gatherings

³¹ Thus, and most unfortunately, his very last sermon of 1546 included an appendix that was simply a tirade against the evil of the Jews. Many of these appended admonitions can be seen in AE 58.

of ministers in Reformation Zurich and later in London, where they would hear one another proclaim the word and offer critique and encouragement, were known as “prophesyings.” William Perkins’s classic text on how to preach was entitled *The Arte of Prophesying*.³² The preacher was not merely a lecturer or teacher. His task was not simply descriptive. His task was no less than prophetic: in proclaiming the word of God, he was to tear down human inventions and illusions about the world and to build in their place reality as God had declared it to be through the word of his power. As the *Second Helvetic Confession* declared, the word of God preached is the word of God.³³

A good example of such confidence in the word was provided by Luther in 1522. This was the moment when he returned to Wittenberg from his time at the Wartburg Castle in order to bring order back to a town whose Reformation had fallen under the sway of radical iconoclasts and was quickly descending into chaos. Under pressure from the authorities to restore order, Luther did the one thing he knew would have power to transform the situation: he preached. And during this series of sermons, he made one of his most famous comments about the word of God:

I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.³⁴

The rhetoric is typical of Luther’s exuberance yet the content reflects his theology: the Reformation was above all a movement of the proclaimed word because that was how God achieved his gracious purposes. As long as Luther preached that word, he could be confident that God would use it to tear down human pride and bring sinners by grace to Christ.

For pastors today, this is important. One of the great weaknesses in preaching is that of the failure of preachers to understand their task theologically. Such a failure might manifest itself in a number of ways: a lack of confidence in preaching because of a belief that its power is ultimately rooted in the ability of the preacher; or even a

³² William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1607).

³³ “Confessio Helvetica Posterior, A.D. 1566” 1.4, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 237–238; Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Credo* 2, 460.

³⁴ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77.

marginalizing or abandonment of preaching because it is seen as technically inadequate in the age of mass distraction and technological pyrotechnics. A theology of the word that is also a theology of the word preached seems foundational to an understanding of the church.

The second area where I believe Luther will be of increasing relevance to the Reformed is in the matter of the suffering of the church. In his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther makes suffering, the possession of the holy cross, a mark of the true church.

By making possession of the sacred cross a mark of the church, Luther does three things. First, he offers a polemical counterpoint to the Roman Catholic cult of relics, at the center of which lay pieces of the true cross and vials of Christ's blood. Second, he connects to the standard idea of the trail of blood, whereby outward persecution validated the truth of the church's testimony, given that darkness will always persecute light. Third, and most importantly, he picks up on the Pauline notion of the cross as the revelation of God's purposes and as the criterion for truth in theology and church life. This last point is arguably his most important and original contribution to the doctrine of the church. It connects to his understanding of revelation, of the gospel, and of the church's embodiment of those two things before the second coming and the final judgment.

Here is how Luther states the position:

[T]he holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's word, enduring this for the sake of Christ.³⁵

Behind Luther's thinking on the cross and the church lies his thinking on the cross in general. From as early as 1518, when he presided over the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther acknowledged a significance to the cross that went far beyond what a category such as penal substitution might capture. For Luther, the cross is a revelation of who God is toward his people and also a paradigmatic manifestation of how he deals with his people. The cross is an epistemological, a moral, and an experiential contradiction of natural, fallen human expectations in each of those areas. We might say that the cross was the gospel; and the church is the manifestation of that gospel in the present.

³⁵ Luther, "On the Councils and the Church" (1539), AE 41:164–165.

At a time of dramatic realignment of the cultural relationship between church and state in the United States of America, this message is an important one. One might argue that Luther is simply recapitulating the arguments of Paul in 1 and 2 Corinthians. But it is a message that is important to hear. The fragility of life itself is not something that plays well in a world where Frank Sinatra's "My Way" is a consistent favorite at funerals—or "celebrations of life," to use the popular phrase. As the church in the USA continues to get weaker, it is good to be reminded that what is historically normative in the USA—a Protestant domination of culture—is theologically exceptional. To this, Luther speaks as eloquently as anyone since Paul.

VI. Conclusion

For the Reformed, Luther looms large as a symbol of reform, and as a man who stood courageously for the truth of the gospel. His works are not so often cited by us as his ideas, specifically justification by grace through faith and the bondage of the will. We disagree, of course, on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a manner that is still the most significant point of dispute between our communions. But there is also a rich vein of Luther's teaching on the act of preaching from which the Reformed would do well to learn. If the need of this hour for the church is the proclamation of the gospel, then we also need a theological understanding of that act in itself. And that is where some of Luther's greatest insights are to be found.

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Deus Ludens: God at Play in Luther's Theology

Christopher Boyd Brown

Does God play games? The fear that God might play games is at the root of the anxieties of the modern world. Descartes sought certainty in the face of the possibility that God might play tricks—the *deus deceptor*—and his opponents, solid Dutch Calvinist theologians, accused him of blasphemy for suggesting that such a thing was possible.¹ Albert Einstein famously objected to quantum mechanics by insisting that “God does not play at dice with the universe.” Apart from epistemology or physical science, Enlightenment thinkers rejected the Christian God on moral grounds, insisting that God had to act according to our own, rationally discerned rules. The roots of this seemingly modern anxiety go far back into medieval and late antique philosophy and theology.

For Luther, however, God is a God who plays games: *Deus ludens*.

This theme of God's play, God's game, has received attention as an element in Luther's Genesis lectures, as explored by Ulrich Asendorf and recently by John Maxfield and by S.J. Munson.² It is a motif that helps to frame some of the central structures of Luther's theology: the masks of God, law and gospel, God as Father, and the incarnation itself.

This essay seeks to elucidate Luther's theology of God's play not only on the basis of the Genesis lectures,³ but across Luther's work, especially in Luther's *Annotations on Matthew*, the advice on preaching Matthew's Gospel written down

¹ Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 117f.

² Ulrich Asendorf, *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535–1545)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); John Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2008); S. J. Munson, “The Divine Game: Faith and the Reconciliation of Opposites in Luther's Lectures on Genesis,” *CTQ* 76 (2012): 89–115. See also David Terry, “Martin Luther on the Suffering of the Christian” (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1990), 379–84; Jane E. Strohl, “Luther and the Word of Consolation,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 67 (Winter 1987): 24–26.

³ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” (1535–45/1544–54), in vols. 1–8 of *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE. The original Latin text is edited in vols. 42–44 of *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 73 vols. in 85 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–), hereafter WA.

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by the Reformer for one of his students in 1534–1535, which was published in 2015 in English translation by Concordia Publishing House.⁴

The vocabulary of play in Luther's Latin and German

In Luther's Latin and German, the vocabulary of "play" and "games" (*ludus-ludere, Spiel-spielen*) has a considerable range of meanings. *Ludere*, especially in compound forms, can mean to make sport of, to mock or deceive, "to play games" with someone or something, and can mean not to take it seriously.⁵ Both the Latin and German verbs can mean to play on stage—an important facet of Luther's use of the category of "play" in his Genesis lectures, in which he analyzes stories of the patriarchs according to the structures of classical drama.⁶ Allied to this meaning of "play" is play with masks, such as were worn in German towns at Carnival, in which the wearer pretends to be someone else, or a member of a class to which he did not belong.⁷ Luther's well-known language of God's "masks"—the *larva Dei* behind which God conceals himself as he acts—draws on this.⁸ *Ludere* can also refer to sexual play,⁹ as in the behavior of the Israelites before the golden calf (Exod 32:6), or the "play" of Isaac and Rebecca which reveals to king Abimelech that they are not in fact brother and sister (Gen 26:7).

Ludus or *Spiel* can also mean a game with rules.¹⁰ Luther perceived that games of this kind were characteristic of his age. In a Table Talk of January 1537, Luther observed that

Games with cards and dice are common, for our age has invented many games. Surely there has been a reaction. In my youth all games were prohibited; makers of cards and musicians at dances weren't admitted to the sacraments, and people were required to make confession of their gaming, dancing, and

⁴ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:1–328 (WA 38:443–667).

⁵ Charlton Thomas Lewis and Charles Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary, Founded on Andrews' Ed. of Freund's Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), "ludo" II.F, II.C, II.G, I, II.D.

⁶ See, e.g. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:113; 7:364–67 (WA 43:506, 44:571–73).

⁷ Jacob Grimm, ed., *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984), s.v. "Larve" 3.

⁸ For discussion of the *larva Dei* in terms of God's play, see Anthony J. Steinbronn, "The Masks of God: the Significance of Larvae Dei in Luther's Theology," STM thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN, 1991.

⁹ "to sport amorously": P.G.W. Glare, ed., *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) [hereafter "OLD"], s.v. "ludo" 4.

¹⁰ OLD, s.v. "ludus" 1.b.

jousting. Today these things are the vogue, and they are defended as exercises for the mind.¹¹

Among games of this sort, Luther is familiar with dice and with cards.¹² His biographer Johann Mathesius describes him as a skilled chess player who once played with students as an honorable diversion at carnival time, and Luther alludes to chess in his writings.¹³ Perhaps most often Luther refers to the ancient European game of Mills known in English as Nine-Men's-Morris. Especially the papacy is described as playing its opponents into a "double mill" in which no matter what the opponents do, the pope has them his trap.¹⁴

Luther also knows about games among children, especially those which involve set words or chants. He accuses Erasmus, for example, of playing "hide and seek" in the debate over free choice.¹⁵ The papal theologians with their doctrine of the *clavis errans* are playing a game of blindman's bluff (*der blinden kue*).¹⁶

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Luther knows of a kind of unstructured play, especially between parents and children, that may involve several of the elements already mentioned, especially words or masks—especially a kind of pretending which then gives way to the revelation of reality. Luther tells an anecdote from his student days that embodies some of these dynamics:

The same thing happens to us that formerly happened to me in my boyhood and to my companions with whom I used to gather contributions for our support during our student days. For when at the time of the celebration of Christ's birthday in the church we were singing in four voices from door to door in the villages the usual songs about the boy Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, it happened by chance that we came to a country house situated in

¹¹ Luther, "Table Talk recorded by Anthony Lauerbach and Jerome Weller" (1536–1537), AE 54:221–222, WA TR 3:377, no. 3526a: "*Chartiludia. Ludus chartiludii et tesserae est frequentissimus. Nam varios ludos invenit hoc saeculum. Sie hat warlich woll geloset! Me adolescente prohibebantur omnes ludi, als das man chartenmacher, pfeiffer nicht ließ zum sacrament gehen, et cogebantur de lusu et saltatione et hastiludii spectaculo confessionem facere. Itzundt gehet es in hohen schwangk. Defendunt talia pro exercitiis ingenii.*"

¹² See, for example, Luther's extended satire on the papal council based on the German card game *Karnöffel*: *Eine Frage des ganzen heiligen Ordens der Kartenspieler vom Karnöffel* (1537), WA 50:131–34.

¹³ Johann Mathesius, *Luthers Leben in Predigten*, Georg Loesche, ed., Bibliothek deutscher Schriftsteller aus Böhmen 9, 2nd ed. (Prague: J. G. Calve/Josef Koch, 1906), 430–431. For allusions to chess, see, e.g., Luther, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser" (1521), AE 39:211 (WA 7:677); Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes" (1526), AE 15:40 (WA 20:47).

¹⁴ E.g., Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:203 (WA 38:562).

¹⁵ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1525), AE 33:111 (WA 18:667).

¹⁶ Luther, "The Keys" (1530), AE 40:343 (WA 30/2:479).

a lonely spot on the outermost borders of a village. When the farmer had heard us singing, he came out of the house and asked in a boorish voice where we were. “Where are you, you rascals?” he asked. At the same time he brought out sausages which he intended to give us. But at the sound of these words we became so terrified that we all scattered, although we knew no reason at all for our terror, and the farmer was offering the sausages with the greatest goodwill. . . . Finally, however, he called us back from our flight; and we laid our fear aside, ran up, and took the contribution he was handing us.¹⁷

The farmer was trying to frighten the boys, but it was only a game, and really he intended their good. Or we might think, for example, of a father who lumbers around pretending to be a hungry bear, to the combined sheer terror and equally sheer delight of his children. Luther specifically defends this kind of play in the Genesis lectures, against the critique that it is immoral as a kind of lying. Having defended the obliging lie, which protects the neighbor, Luther goes on:

The third kind is the playful lie [*iocosum*], when one jests with a person and yet preserves propriety, godliness, and faith. This is like the fun Isaac and Rebecca had, or when a husband plays with or fools his wife or little son. When this trick is discovered, it makes them laugh and be gay. Then the lie ends, and there is nothing but laughter or fun. This is also a useful lie, especially among those who are closely acquainted and are friends.¹⁸

It is this kind of play within the household which seems most to shape Luther’s treatment of God’s play, and perhaps to shape Lutheran perspectives on the household and family life as well.

¹⁷ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AE 7:335 (WA 44:548): “Atque idem nobis accidit, quod olim puero mihi et sodalibus meis, cum quibus stipem colligere solebam, unde nos et studia nostra sustentaremus. Cum enim eo tempore, quo in Ecclesia natalis Christi celebratur, in pagis ostiatim decantaremus quatuor vocibus carmina usitata de puero Iesu nato in Bethlehem, forte contigit, ut ad villam quandam in loco solo et extremis finibus pagi cuiusdam sitam accederemus. Inde prodibat rusticus, cum exaudisset canentes et agresti voce querebat ubi essemus, Wo seit jr, jr puben? proferens simul farcimina, quae erat donaturus. Nos vero ad sonum horum verborum ita expavimus, ut diffugeremus omnes, quanquam nullam prorsus causam pavoris sciremus et rusticus summa voluntate offerret farcimina, nisi forte animi assiduis minis et crudelitate magistrorum, quantum in scholasticos saevire solebant, percussi, facilius repentino terrore concuterentur. Tandem vero revocavit fugientes ac nos amotu metu accurrimus, stipemque accepimus, quam porrigebat.”

¹⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:41 (WA 43:456): “Tertium genus est iocosum. Quando quis cum aliquo iocatur, salva tamen gravitate, pietate et fide, qualis iste ludus est Rebecca et Isaac, aut cum maritus ludit aut fallit uxorem aut filiolum, quae fallacia detecta movet eis risum et hilaritatem. Ibi desinit mendacium, et nihil est praeter risum aut ludum. Hoc etiam utile mendacium est, praesertim inter coniunctos familiaritate et benevolentia.”

Playing games with God

Luther defends play among human beings, and he will even describe God as playing with human beings. Yet one basic way of describing human faithlessness for Luther is to describe human beings as trying to play their own games with God. In his sermons on John 17, for example, Luther denounces the scholastic theologians as those who “begin their teaching up in the heights of heaven and preach about God alone and apart from Christ . . . who speculated and played games with God’s works up in heaven: what He is, thinks, and does in Himself, and so on.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, Luther says that “the Sacramentarians play a game when they want to grasp the Word by their own reason.”²⁰

To “play games with God,” with God’s word or God’s works, means to subject God to the rules discernible by human reason: the hierarchy of being or the moral structure of divine goodness diffused through the world, as if God could be caught in our own “double mill” of metaphysical or ethical necessity. In this way, Zwingli argues that God’s omnipotence in fact precludes his presence in the Sacrament, because for God to be bound to the elements would be a limitation of divine power.²¹

For Luther, all this is playing games with God. For Zwingli, of course, it is the opposite. Zwingli rejects Luther’s insistence on “This is my body”—that God can command and do whatever he wills—as being (Zwingli says) “rather childish,” since “the works which God commands he commands for our benefit. God is true and is light; he does not lead into darkness. . . . God does not act thus.”²² What is this but to insist that God does not, cannot play games? Zwingli stands at Marburg, as Heiko Oberman notes, as a representative of the *via antiqua*, the realist school, drawing on Plato through Aristotle and Aquinas’ platonized Aristotle, for whom statements about what God does are necessary consequences of an understanding of what God is. God is spirit; he cannot be flesh. God is light; he cannot be obscure.²³ For Zwingli,

¹⁹ Luther, “The Seventeenth Chapter of St. John” (1528/1530), AE 69:39 (WA 28:101): “*die oben am hoehesten anfahren zu leren und predigen von Gott blos und abgesondert von Christo, wie man bisher jnn hohen schulen speculirt und gespilet hat mit seinen wercken droben jm himel, was er sey, dencke und thue bey sich selbs &c.*”

²⁰ Luther, “Lectures on Isaiah 40–66” (1527–30), AE 17:244 (WA 31/2:450): “*Ita luduntur sacramentarii, qui volunt verbum comprehendere sua racione.*”

²¹ See Heiko Oberman, *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*, translated by Andrew Colin Gow (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 195–197.

²² Luther, “The Marburg Colloquy and the Marburg Articles” (1529), AE 38:21 (WA 30/3:118): “*Deus verus est et lumen non inducit in tenebras. . . . Ita non facit deus.*”

²³ Heiko Oberman, “Via antiqua and via moderna: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought,” in *Impact of the Reformation: Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 16–19.

the God of human games is bound by necessity even in his omnipotence. Luther's God, who plays games, is radically free.

God's Game: the Masks of God

What are the precedents for Luther's discussion of God's play? Certainly the Nomininalist description of divine omnipotence undergirds Luther's idea. Yet the idea of divine play (*ludus*) does not figure prominently in the Nominalist tradition so far as can be seen. Rather, the divine freedom is structured for Nominalists by God's freely chosen covenant (*pactum*), an emphasis which passes then, through Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), into the Reformed tradition as well.²⁴ In its own way, the Nominalist idea of covenant is also in tension with the idea of play.

One exegetical source on which Luther consciously draws is the Vulgate translation of Proverbs 8:30–31, where the Latin *ludens* is used to describe Wisdom in relation to the world. "I was with Him, assembling all things, and I took delight day by day, playing before Him at all times, playing in the world, and my delight was to be with the sons of men."²⁵ Yet though Proverbs 8 is an important christological text for the church fathers, the theme of "play" seems to receive relatively little development either among the Latin fathers or the medieval theologians. Luther himself questions the translation of the Hebrew as *ludens* in his lectures on Genesis 4, though he returns to the traditional translation by the time he reaches chapter 42.

Already in Luther's first Psalms lectures, however, he applies the text about Wisdom's "play" in the world to explain the following words of Psalm 104:27:

"These all look to you, to give them their food in due season. You give it to them, they gather it up, you open your hand and they are filled with good things; when you hide your face, they are dismayed, when you take away their breath, they die and return to the ground. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth."²⁶

This, Luther says, describes Wisdom's play with the world named in Proverbs 8. God opens and closes his hand and opens it again so that the creatures are filled, or wither and die or created anew. Mystically, Luther says, this refers to the church,

²⁴ See J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1980).

²⁵ "*cum eo eram cuncta componens et delectabar per singulos dies ludens coram eo omni tempore, ludens in orbe terrarum et deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum.*" Robert Weber, Roger Gryson, and Bonifatius Fischer, eds., *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, Editionem quintam emendatam retractatam (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), sub loco.

²⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016). Unless otherwise noted, Scripture citations are translated directly from Luther's German or Latin.

in which God opens his hand to fill human beings with the word of the gospel or closes it to remind them that they are children of wrath, to humble them, before God opens it again to renew them in spirit.

The aspect of "play" is identified with the alternations of divine action which are outside the control of the creatures, particularly the human creatures, who experience them. The identification of God's action with this kind of reversal—the human being lifted up and cast down and lifted up again—is a key part of Luther's inheritance from German mysticism that shapes his articulation of law that kills and the gospel which makes alive.

The idea of God's play, however, is not part of the *Theologia Deutsch*. Some traces do appear in Tauler, in connections which suggest that Luther knew them. "See how the loving Goodness of God can play with His elect!" Tauler says, speaking of the way God leads those whom He loves through "wondrous ways . . . into the deep abyss within Himself."²⁷ Luther, too, connects his idea of God's play with the idea that God "leads his saints in wondrous ways"—Luther's translation of Psalm 4:3.²⁸ Yet Luther's conception of God's play is emphatically centered on the incarnate God, not on the abyss of divine being.

Moreover, elsewhere Tauler (or a sermon transmitted in his corpus) makes clear that such "play" is a preliminary stage in spiritual development: God plays with the immature until they are ready "to leave off childish play."²⁹ For Luther, the Christian never outgrows God's play. This aspect of Luther's construction of Christian life has of course proved enormously frustrating to other Christians who, like Tauler, want to see Christians grow up and stand on their own, to move on to solid food from milk. Here Luther stands against old Pelagius, who described the mature Christian as so grown up that he no longer needs God (*emancipatus a Deo*) and with Augustine, for whom the Christian was always dependent on God's grace

²⁷ Johann Tauler, "Sermon for the Monday before Palm Sunday", in Ferdinand Vetter, ed., *Die Predigten Taulers* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1910; repr. 1968), 55–56: "hant ir út geprüfet, wie wunderliche wege er sú gefüret het und sin spil hie gewiset ist? . . . Sicher er het sú hie alzumole wole geordent und durch wunderliche wilde wege sú gefürt und geleitet und übergeführt in daz tieffe abgrunde in sich selber. . . . Sehent wie die minnencliche güte Gottes mit sinen uzerwelte spilen kan."

²⁸ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 8:12–13 (WA 44:588).

²⁹ Johann Tauler, "Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent," in *Des erleuchten D.Johannis/ Tauleri/ von eym waren Euangelischen leben/ Göttliche Predig* (Cologne: Quentel, 1543), fol 78v: "Unser her thut recht als eyenn ersam vatter/ der seynen kynderen die weil sie in seynen kost jung seynd/ in allen dyngen vor ist/ Was jnen von not ist versorgt er/ und leest sie spielen gaen. . . . Darnach gibt erinen eyen teil von seynem gut in jr hant/ und er wil das sie selber söllen sorgen und winnen/ das spielen gaen begeben/ und also lernen reich werden," translated by Susanna Winkworth, *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler of Strasbourg; with Twenty-Five of his Sermons* (New York: Wiley & Halsted, 1858), 320–321. This sermon is not found in the manuscripts edited by Vetter.

like the child stilled at its mother's breast (Ps 131:2).³⁰ Luther does see God's play as shaping the Christian in what we might call "spiritual growth." But for Luther this means an ever deepening faith and reliance upon God, not independence.

At the same time, Luther's idea of God's game departs from the Nominalist or Reformed idea of covenant in that it is always agonistic, both in the presentation of conflicting claims from God but also in human struggle (faith) to lay hold of the promise. Insisting on God's promise of grace over against the condemnation of his commands is never a simple legal appeal but a struggle, wrestling with God, as Luther sees especially in the example of Jacob but also in the Canaanite woman in the Gospels.

Finally, by the time of the Genesis lectures, Luther's analysis of God's play has come to be identified with his discussion of the three estates as God's masks. In providing for creation as well as in proclaiming the gospel, God works (or rather plays) through means.

God's Game: Law and Gospel

Luther's interpretation of God's activity as "play" serves both exegetically and homiletically to frame the Christian's apparently contradictory experience of God both in Scripture and in life. This is especially pressing for Luther in interpreting the ministry of Jesus himself. In reviewing the presentation of Jesus' character in Matthew's Gospel, Luther summarizes "We see that the Lord Christ is depicted and presented to us in Holy Scripture in two ways. First, He is so completely friendly, merciful, meek, and kind that no one could imagine anyone more friendly or kindly disposed. . . . On the other hand, He is so unfriendly, strong willed, and at times almost to be regarded as tyrannical."³¹

Luther faces this contradiction by analyzing Jesus' rhetoric in Matthew's Gospel in words and action. Luther's analysis of Jesus quickly becomes at least implicitly a rejoinder to Erasmus' description of Christian rhetoric or his so-called "philosophy of Christ." "Jesus is not, for Luther, the irenic, rational teacher Erasmus imagines, but an impassioned speaker who deliberately provokes His enemies by speaking offensively [*odiose*], even using scatology, and who expresses Himself in paradoxes

³⁰ See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 351–352.

³¹ Luther, "Sermons on Matthew 18–24" (1537–1540/1796–1847), AE 68:100 (WA 47:400): "Und alhier sehen wir, das der Herr Christus auff zweierley weise uns in der Heiligen Schriefft abgemalet und furgehalten wirdt. Erstlich ist ehr so gahr freundlich, Barmhertzig, sanfftmuttig und guttig, das man doch nichts freundlicher noch holdtseligers erdencken kunde. . . . Widerumb so ist ehr unfreundlich, eigensinnig und also zu rechnen schier Tirannisch bissweilen,"

in order to sharpen His message and impress it on the minds of His hearers—aspects of Luther's own rhetoric which Erasmus had denounced.”³²

To the disciples who believe in him, on the other hand, Christ speaks in a sweet way so as to show himself friendly and well-disposed. With his disciples, Jesus often jests and plays in his words, yet in such a way as to demonstrate his seriousness in his goodwill toward them. At the same time, for his disciples even his apparent wrath is a kind of “play” not to be taken with ultimate seriousness.

Thus, in discussing Jesus' coming to the disciples on the sea in Matthew 14, Luther says:

Christ Himself frightens His own disciples. . . . [I]t would have been frightening enough that they were beset by wind and sea, so that they much rather needed relief and help, but [Christ] Himself adds fear to fear, danger to danger, by appearing to them after a long period of struggle. . . .

But why does [Christ] do such things to His beloved friends and disciples? It is so that we might learn His goodwill toward us, because He plays with us in the sweetest way when we think that all things have become utterly desperate. The fault lies with our sin, which does not allow us to recognize that He is present, but thinks Him an apparition—or, rather, a devil—because He appears otherwise than we imagine and He remains silent. For in the midst of temptation we think that He is ashore or on the mountain where we left Him; we cannot understand that He is present.

He therefore gives us a general rule: that in the midst of all our temptations we of ourselves will imagine God to be someone other than He is. For at that moment we think that God is not God but a phantom, that is, the kind of monstrous apparition that wants to devour us in the midst of troubles. For this reason we must not believe our own thoughts about God, for it is certain that our speculations about God make an altogether hostile phantom out of the God who is altogether well-disposed toward us.

And this should most especially be heeded by those who are in a definite office and vocation—just as the disciples here were in the midst of the sea not by any temerity of their own but at the command and prompting of Christ Himself, who had made them set sail [Matt. 14:22]. For to people such as these, such things take place to test them, just as Abraham had been tempted to sacrifice his son Isaac [Gen. 22:1–2]. Or, again, Jacob wrestles with the Angel [Gen.

³² Christopher Boyd Brown, “Introduction to Volume 67,” AE 67:xliii. See Erasmus, “Discussion of Free Will,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), 76:12–13, 86 (hereafter CWE); Erasmus, *Hyperaspistes* 1, CWE 76:96–102.

32:24–28], etc. These are testings and temptations against the promises and vocations given by God Himself. Here, therefore, one must take his stand and say, “Even if God Himself should command the opposite, I shall not retreat from the place where I have been stationed, for either He is testing me by playing with me or else, if I perish, He will raise me back up.” Thus faith should stand firm in whatever the first commandment of one’s vocation is and with eyes closed declare: “Even if Christ Himself says something else, I shall not yield, for I am certain that it is either not really Christ or that He wants to play with me.” This is just how Paul puts it in Galatians 1 [8]: “Even if an angel from heaven [should preach] another [Gospel],” etc. For it is impossible that an angel would say anything else in earnest. Therefore, if He says something else, you should believe that He is acting playfully, out of love for you, just as a father does toward his son, to test him, etc.³³

Luther’s idea of God’s action as play is manifest here in several key elements (which also appear in his treatment of the narratives in Genesis to which he refers). First, it is indeed Christ himself who terrifies his disciples. The terror of God’s action is not denied. The experience of God as enemy is indeed devastating. Second, lack of faith magnifies the terror by perceiving God as a “hostile phantom” but failing for the moment to perceive God’s game. The speculations which are the basis of human games about God are utterly unable to grasp God’s own play. If God’s action is

³³ Luther, “Annotations on Matthew 1–18” (1534–45/1538), AE 67:229–231 (WA 38:579–80): “*Christus etiam ipsemet terret suos derelictos discipulos in mari, Nam satis fuisset terroris, quod vento et mari vexabantur, ut potius solatio et auxilio opus habuerint. Ipse vero addit timorem timori, periculum periculo, apparens eis post longam luctam. . . . Sed cur talia dilectis facit amicis et discipulis? Scilicet ut discamus optimam voluntatem eius erga nos, quod nobiscum ludit suavissime, cum nos putamus omnia esse perditissima. Culpa est peccati nostri, quod non sinit eum agnosci praesentem, sed putat eum esse phantasma, seu diabolum potius, Quia apparet aliter quam cogitamus, et tacet. Nos enim in tentatione putamus eum esse in littore vel in monte, ubi relinquimus, praesentem non possumus intelligere. ¶ Ergo Canonem hic dat nobis, quod in omnibus tentationibus nosipsi alium fingimus Deum esse, quam sit. Putamus enim deum tunc non esse Deum, sed phantasma, id est horribile spectrum, quod nos velit devorare in mediis angustiis. Ideo non esse credendum nostris propriis cogitationibus de Deo, Quia certum est, quod nostrae cogitationes de Deo faciunt ex Deo faventissimo phantasma hostilissimum. ¶ Et hoc maxime debent observare, qui sunt in vocatione et officio certo, sicut hic discipuli erant in medio mari, non sua temeritate, sed iussu et impulsu ipsius Christi, qui coegerat eos navigare. Nam talibus ista fiunt, ut probentur. Sicut Abraham fuit tentatus, ut filium Isaac offerret. Item Iacob luctatur cum Angelo, etc. Hae sunt tentationes contra promissiones et vocationes ab ipso Deo datas. Ideo hic standum est et dicendum: Etiam si Deus ipse contrarium iubeat, non cedam loco, quo constitutus sum, Quia vel tentat me iocando mecum, vel, si periero, rursum me suscitabit. Ut stet fides firma in primo aliquo vocationis mandato, et clausis oculis dicat: Etiam si ipse Christus aliud dixerit, non cedam, Quia certus sum vel non esse Christum vere, vel ipsum velle mecum iocari. Sicut et Paul. Gal. 1:[8]: Si angelus è coelo aliud, etc. Nam non est possibile, quod angelus serio aliud dicat. Ergo si aliud dixerit, ludere eum credas prae amore erga te, sicut pater erga filium, ut tentet eum, etc.*”

perceived as a game, it is (as Luther says in the narrative of Joseph in the Genesis lectures) a cat's game which means death to the mouse.³⁴ Nevertheless, behind the appearance—the mask or spectre of wrath and terror, even the threat of death and damnation—God is playing as a loving father with his children.

Luther returns to this theme of God's play—Jesus playing with the disciples as a loving father plays with his children—over and over again in his notes on Matthew. Jesus asks the disciples questions beyond their understanding like a father playing with a child. "Christ is the sort of sweet father who jokes with his sweet children in earnest and with delight and takes in the best way whatever they say and do in a foolish or childish way."³⁵ God is a father who plays games.

God as Father at Play

In awareness of the theme of God's play, it is remarkable to note how important "play" is to Luther's description of God as father—not in trinitarian terms, but in relation to human beings. In calling God "Father," Luther is not invoking an analogy of being between human masculinity and divine activity, as Aquinas and other realist theologians do, but describing a relationship typified by play.³⁶

Already this is at the core of Luther's earliest homiletical invocations of the theme of God's play, in sermons of 1516–1517 in which he writes: "God indeed plays with us like a father with his little child."³⁷ Again: "Thus God plays with us, and we are his dear children; he dandles us and cuffs us."³⁸ That is, God plays by giving and taking away earthly goods, even life itself.

Again, what sets Luther apart is not simply the idea of God's play, but the kind of play. Steven Ozment has pointed out the contrasting ways in which Erasmus and Luther deploy the language of play in their controversy over free will. Erasmus compares God to a father who holds out an apple to a child in order to teach the child

³⁴ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 7:225 (WA 44:466); see also Luther, "Preface to A True Account of What Took Place at Stassfurt on Christmas Eve, 1534" (1535), AE 60:80 (WA 38:333).

³⁵ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–45/1538), AE 67:216 (WA 38:570).

³⁶ Contrast Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 13a., Art. 6 and II Q. 26a., Art. 10, in Thomas Gilby et al., eds, 61 vols. (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1964–1981; reprint Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3:68–69 and 34:147–79; cf. James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), 177–179.

³⁷ Sermo in die S. Laurentii (August 10, 1516), WA 1:75: "Verum nobiscum ludit, sicut Pater cum infantulo suo, cui aufert munusculum, ut affectum filii probet et ad sese sollicitet. Dedit enim ut fiduciam sui faceret, aufert ut probet eandem."

³⁸ Luther, "De Sacerdotum dignitate Sermo" (1517?), WA 4:656: "Also spilett Gott mitt uns, und wir seint seine liben kindlen, ehr tentzelt mitt uns und steupett uns." For the dating see Aland, *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium*, 4th edition (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1996), 207 (Pr 43).

how to walk over and take it. The apple is a gift, but the child must learn to respond in order to get the prize. In a similar vein, Erasmus argued about the commandments. God would not command “thou shalt” to human beings who were utterly unable to comply.³⁹

Luther has a more complex image of divine fatherhood and of God’s games: “How often,” Luther writes, “do parents have a game with their children by telling them to come to them, or to do this or that, simply for the sake of showing them how unable they are, and compelling them to call for the help of the parents’ hand!”⁴⁰

Erasmus’ God plays games that are edifying and straightforward, and that cultivate independence (perhaps the sort of educational games that parents buy for their children that get played once or not at all)! Luther’s God plays games with terrifying reversals. Their point is not to teach a lesson that is to be taken to heart away from the game, but to draw the players closer together.

Luther returns to the game with the apple in the Genesis lectures on Jacob:

For God in His boundless goodness dealt very familiarly with His chosen patriarch Jacob and disciplined him as though playing with him in a kindly manner. But this playing means infinite grief and the greatest anguish of heart [to Jacob]. In reality, however, it is a game, as the outcome shows when Jacob comes to Peniel. Then it will be manifest that they were pure signs of most familiar love. So God plays with him to discipline and strengthen his faith just as a godly parent takes from his son an apple with which the boy was delighted, not that he should flee from his father or turn away from him but that he should rather be incited to embrace his father all the more and beseech him, saying: “My father, give back what you have taken away!” Then the father is delighted with this test, and the son, when he recovers the apple, loves his father more ardently on seeing that such love and child’s play gives pleasure to the father.⁴¹

³⁹ Erasmus, *Discussion of Free Will*, translated by Peter Macardle, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 76, edited by Charles Trinkaus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 81. Series cited hereafter as CWE. See Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250–1550* (New Haven: Yale, 1980), 297.

⁴⁰ Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will” (1525), AE 33:120 (WA 18:673): “*Quoties parentes cum filiis suis ludunt, dum eos iubent aut ad se venire, hoc aut illud facere, ea tantum gratia, ut appareat, quam non possint, coganturque manum parentis invocare?*”

⁴¹ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535–45/1544–54), AE 6:130 (WA44:97): “*Deus enim immensa bonitate familiarissime agit cum electo suo Patriarcha Iacob, eumque exercet, quasi colludens suavissime. Sed ludus hic immensus et summa angustia animi est. Et revera tamen est ludus: sicut exitus ostendit, quando veniet ad Phanuel. Tunc enim erit manifestum fuisse mera signa familiarissimi amoris. Ac propterea ludit cum eo, ut exerceat et corroboret fidem eius. Perinde ut pius aliquis parens rapit filio pomum, quo delectabatur puer, non ut aufugiat et aversetur patrem, sed ut magis incitetur ad patrem amplectendum, obsecrandum: mi pater, redde, quod abstulisti. Ibi*

God's Game and Faith

In turn, the disciples themselves, recognizing that God is playing with them, are able, in faith, to join in God's game. Luther's great examples here (and likely another of the sources of the language of play) are the narratives of the martyrs of the early church, to whom he returns again and again, and encourages his students to do likewise:

Here you should introduce the examples and sayings of the saints who scorned death, such as Vincent, St. Agatha, Anastasia, [and] Lucy. For St. Vincent, laughing at those who put him to death, said, "Death and crosses are a kind of joke and game to Christians," and, treading upon glowing coals, he boasted that he was walking upon roses. St. Agatha said she was going to a banquet and a wedding feast when she was going off to prison and torture. Many others did likewise.⁴²

Nevertheless, as Luther describes it, these are heroic examples of faith, which are able to treat death as a game. For ordinary Christians in dire circumstances, this is not expected. But God's game should be discerned. As Luther says in the Genesis lectures:

But how many understand or believe this? If we could persuade ourselves of this, we would be truly happy and completely prepared to endure any evils whatever in a happy frame of mind. But when I reflect that I am a sinner and that I am being punished on account of my faults, I judge far differently. For I do not feel that God is my Father, that He is good and merciful, but that He is the devil himself. Therefore you should know that God is almighty and that for this reason a serious game becomes Him and is worthy of such great majesty. And one must learn, and accustom oneself to, the things in which He delights and His games, as Ps. 4:3 states. . . . Consider that God is playing with you, and that this game is wonderful for you and gives pleasure to God. For if He did not embrace you with His fatherly heart, He would not play with you this way. Therefore this is proof of His ineffable mercy toward you, that you are numbered among those with whom God is pleased, and that He takes delight in you. Accordingly He gives you His promise, Word, and Sacrament as most

delectatur pater tentatione illa, et filius, quando recipit pomum, ardentius amat, cum videt patri voluptati esse amorem et lusum puerilem."

⁴² Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–1535/1538), AE 67:106–107 (WA 38:506): "*Hic inserenda sunt exempla et dicta Sanctorum, qui mortem riserunt. Ut Vincentius. S. Agatha. Athanasia. Lucia. S. Vincentius enim ridens occisores suos, dixit, Mortem et cruces Christianis esse quaedam iocularia et ludicra. Et super prunas incedens gloriabatur se super rosas ire. S. Agatha ad epulas et nuptias ire se dixit, cum ad carceres et tormenta iret. Sic multi alii.*" Cf. Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 8:255 (WA 44:766).

certain symbols and testimonies of grace, that He has adopted you as His son, and that He requires nothing else than that you bear His games, which are pleasing to Him and salutary to you.⁴³

The God who does not play games does not need faith. If God is caught in human metaphysical or ethical schemes, then I can know what God must necessarily do toward me by analyzing my own status: if I am good, then God who is good must be good toward me. If I am like God in my inner being then I am part of God. But with the God who plays games, there can be only faith, trust like that of a child who is tossed in the air and can only trust that he will be caught in his father's arms. The point of the game is not victory for one side or the other through the application of rules, but the relationship of trust (*fiducia*) and love that is deepened between the players.

God's Play in the Incarnation

When God plays his game with his saints, he does not simply set up a game for them to play (and lose) against terrible opponents—sin, death, and hell. Rather, God himself is in the game, in the incarnation. To play God's game is to play with God, the incarnate God. It is not simply a game over which God presides in omnipotent transcendence.

For Luther, the incarnation of the Son as a child embodies the eternal divine game: "But we have an infant, this Child [Isa. 9:6]: the mother bears Him for us, nurses Him for us; He remains a Child for us for ever. He does not display Himself to us in somber seriousness, not in some terrible majesty at which we would have to tremble, but he shows Himself to us as a little Child, and in his childhood he plays with us to all eternity."⁴⁴ God's play with His beloved people is perpetual and eternal.

⁴³ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 7:226 (WA 44:467): "*Sed quotusquisque hoc intelligit aut credit? Si illud in animum nostrum inducere possemus, vere beati essemus ac paratissimi ad quaevis mala hilari animo perferenda. Cum autem cogito me esse peccatorem, ac plecti propter delicta, longe aliter iudico, non enim sentio Deum esse patrem, esse bonum et misericordem, sed Diabolum ipsum. Scias ergo Deum esse omnipotentem, ac propterea ludum ei gravem ac tanta maiestate dignum esse convenire. Ac discendum sane et assuescendum est ad delicias et ludos eius, sicut dicit Psalmus 4. . . [C]ogitate Deum vobiscum ludere, qui ludus vobis mirabilis et Deo est delectabilis. Nisi enim paterno animo vos complecteretur, non ita vobiscum luderet. Argumentum igitur est ineffabilis misericordiae erga te, quod tu in illorum numero sis, quibus delectatur Deus, apud quem deliciae ipsius sunt. Ideo dat tibi promissionem suam, verbum, sacramentum, tanquam symbola et testimonia gratiae certissima, quod te sibi filium adoptaverit, et nihil aliud requirit, quam ut lusus eius sustineas, qui ipsi iucundi sunt et tibi salutare.*"

⁴⁴ Luther, "Enarratio capituli noni Esaiae" (1543–44/1546), WA 40/3:641: "*Habemus autem Infantem et hunc Filium, mater parit eum nobis, lactat eum nobis, manet Puer nobis in aeternum. Exhibet se nobis non tetra gravitate, non terribili aliqua maiestate tremendum, sed exhibet se nobis parvulus Parvulum ac ludit nobiscum in aeternum in pueritia sua.*"

In Luther's reading of Matthew's Gospel, that is manifest by Jesus' continued presence with his foolish disciples, even as he plays with them in chiding their little faith. Luther says:

From these words one may understand how sweet was Christ's conversation with His disciples. For here, as if at play, He is joking pleasantly with Peter, as if with a baby that in its simplicity lacks all artifice, and Christ is delighting in his childish simplicity. And yet you see no frivolity here, but only earnestness and majesty in Christ rejoicing in Peter's simplicity. There must have been a fine, friendly, dear camaraderie indeed between Christ and His disciples, as this passage makes clear. It is as if someone were to jest with his infant son or with the sweetest friend, except that Christ's jesting here is serious in such a way that it is at the same time supremely sweet. And if you pay attention to how great a person it is who is jesting with Peter like this, you could not help but be stirred with the highest love toward God, who condescends to set aside His majesty and to joke and to play with these uneducated men like this, and to jest, as it were, to the point of raising the suspicion of frivolity. Caiaphas would not have acted this way, nor the Pharisees nor the other hypocrites, but if they had heard or seen such things, they would soon have said with furrowed brow: "Look! What a great, fine show-off He is, playing like this with these peasants!" etc. But for us, these things are comforts and spurs to faith, to love the Christ who is so intimate and so sweet, who does not despise fools or the simple.⁴⁵

In the Genesis lectures, the ultimate and climactic game with God is Jacob's wrestling with the angel of the Lord. As Luther insists, "[this] wrestler is the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God's Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared and spoke to the fathers." It is in playing God's game, in wrestling with God, that Jacob comes to know God himself. "For Jacob has no idea who it is who is wrestling with him; he does not know that it is God, because he later asks what His name is.

⁴⁵ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:319–320 (WA 38:666): "*Ex quibus intelligere est, quam suavis fuerit conversatio Christi cum discipulis. Quia hic velut ludens iucunde iocatur cum Petro, velut cum infante, qui sine dolo simplex est, et delectatur Christus illius simplicitate infantili. Et tamen nihil levitatis hic vides, sed meram gravitatem et maiestatem in Christo, laetantem de simplicitate Petri. Es mus ia ein fein, freundlich, lieblich gesellschaftt sein gewest inter Christum et discipulos suos, ut hic locus arguit, Tanquam si quis cum filio infante, vel cum suavissimo sodale nugetur. Nisi quod istae nugae Christi sic sunt seriae, ut simul sint suavissime, Ac si spectes, quanta sit persona, quae sic nugatur cum Petro, non possis non summo amore erga Deum affici, Qui dignetur (omissa maiestate) cum istis idiotis sic iocari, ludere et veluti nugari usque ad suspicionem levitatis. Non sic fecisset Caiphas, non Pharisei, non caeteri hypocritae. Sed si audissent vel vidissent talia, mox rugata fronte dixissent: Ecce quam est ille bonus et magnus phantasta, qui cum istis rusticis sic ludit, etc. Sed nobis sunt ista solatia et irritamenta fidei, ad amandum illum familiarissimum et suavissimum Christum, qui non aspernatur stultos seu simplices.*"

But after he receives the blessing, he says: 'I have seen the Lord face to face.' Then new joy and life arises from the sad temptation and death itself."⁴⁶ It is the God who plays games who is able to become flesh and who then is able to give the presence of his body and blood as pledge. As we might say, quite literally, God has skin in the game. So it is the incarnation which, alongside the Nominalist idea of God's freedom, is fundamental to Luther's idea of God's play.

God's Game in Preaching

God's game continues through the preaching of the law and the gospel, though the world refuses to play along. The Holy Scriptures themselves, for Luther, are examples (as well as witnesses) of God's play. Why, Luther imagines his opponents asking, do the Scriptures (interpreted literally) deal so much with inconsequential, practical matters like the marriages, households, and flocks of the patriarchs rather than high, spiritual mysteries? It is because "the Holy Spirit, God the Creator, deigns to play, to jest, and to trifle with His saints in unimportant and inconsequential matters."⁴⁷ Things which seem unimportant measured in themselves are nonetheless important within God's game. To reject them, to reject God's game, is to reject God. In Matthew 11:16, Jesus says "To what shall I compare this generation?" Luther expounds:

It is as if He were saying, "The evil and crookedness of this perverse and adulterous generation is so great that it cannot be expressed in any straightforward speech or portrayed with any comparison." Finally, He takes up a children's game in which children say to others of the same age:

[Matt. 11:]17. "We sang for you, and you did not dance; [we wailed, and you did not mourn]."

⁴⁶ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 6:130 (WA 44:96–97): "*Nostra vero sententia haec est, quod luctator sit Dominus gloriae, Deus ipse, sive filius Dei incarnandus, qui apparuit et locutus est patribus. Deus enim immensa bonitate familiarissime agit cum electo suo Patriarcha Iacob, eumque exercet, quasi colludens suavissime. Sed ludus hic immensus dolor et summa angustia animi est. Et revera tamen est Iudus: sicut exitus ostendit, quando veniet ad Phanuel. Tunc enim erit manifestum fuisse mera signa familiarissimi amoris. Ac propterea ludit cum eo, ut exerceat et corroboret fidem eius. . . . Iacob enim ignorat, quis sit iste, qui cum eo luctatur, nescit esse Deum: quia postea interrogat, quod sit ipsi nomen. Postquam vero accipit benedictionem, inquit: 'Vide Dominum facie ad faciem'. Ibi nova laetitia et vita ex tristissima tentatione et ipsa morte existit.*"

⁴⁷ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis" (1535–45/1544–54), AE 5:353, translation altered (WA 43:672): "*Spiritus sanctus autem, et Deus creator dignatur ludere, nugari et ineptire cum suis sanctis in rebus leviculis et exilibus.*"

It is not known what that game was. It is rather similar to the way in which among us [children] jeer at others and say toward peevish fellow players: "Spoilsport! Sow-sticker! He buys a spur with an egg and rides it to pieces on that pig." What is meant by this is that the other party by his peevishness is ruining a game the others would like to play. In this way perhaps these [children], too, ridiculed their playmates who were ruining the game by their peevishness, saying, "We sang for you." It is as if they were saying, "It does no good if we ask, and you do not care if we get angry. Oh, you are unfriendly spoilsports! You are good for nothing!"

Thus these godless ones are not ready for God's game—that is, for dealing with the Gospel—and they spoil it as much as they are able. And so they are moved neither by this nor by that. No matter how you do it, it is wrong.⁴⁸

To understand God's game is therefore necessary not only for all Christians undergoing suffering and trials, but especially for those who preach the word. According to Luther's reading, the disciples in the boat where Jesus had sent them were placed in an office, as preachers have been divinely placed in the public office of preaching. The preacher is both the object of God's game and also the agent through whom the game is played.

Conclusion

What difference does it make to describe Luther's theology or to preach and apply Lutheran theology in terms of God's play? I have shown that the theme appears in Luther outside of the Genesis lectures, beginning quite early in his lecturing and preaching. To be sure, it is not as prominent as other structures or ways of speaking in Luther's theology—law and gospel, the three estates, or *Anfechtungen*. It does, however, help to frame these categories in a way that is native to Luther's own thinking about them. If nothing else, it provides a different and striking rhetorical strategy for talking about these basic elements.

⁴⁸ Luther, "Annotations on Matthew 1–18" (1534–35/1538), AE 67:132–133 (WA 38:521): "Q. d. Tanta est malicia et perversitas huius pravae et adulterae generationis, quod nulla simplicitate oratione exprimi, aut ulla similitudine pingi possit. Apprehendit tandem istum ludum puerilem, in quo coaequales dicunt aliis: Cecinimus vobis, et non saltastis. Quis fuerit iste ludus, nescitur. Apud nos similis est fere, qua insultant aliis, et dicunt contra morosos collusores: O spiel zu brecher, Sew zu stecher. Er kauft ein sporlin umb ein ey, und reit es auff einer saw entzwey. Quo significatur alteram partem morositate sua ludum solvere, quem alii libenter haberent. Sic illi forte etiam suos collusores, ludum morositate sua dissolventes, irriserunt, dicendo: Cecinimus vobis. Q. d. Bitten wir, so hilffs nicht, Zurnen wir, so fragt ir doch nichts darnach, Ach, ir seid feindselige spiel zu brecher, Ir tueget nirgent zu. Sic ludo isti divino, id est, Euangelico negocio, impii isti non sunt apti, et solvunt, quantum in eis est, Ita ut nec sic nec sic moveantur, wie mans macht, so ists unrecht."

In pastoral care and consolation, the language of God's play is both a powerful and a problematic mode of speaking. Can a pastor dare to comfort a child diagnosed with incurable cancer that she is playing with God, that her illness is part of God's game? As Robert Kolb has observed, Luther's discussion of God's play is most prominent in the lecture hall.⁴⁹ Yet as I have shown here, he employs this language in homiletical materials as well. In pastoral care and consolation, the language of God's play provides a way of interpreting a Christian's suffering in relation to God's care in a way that does not center exclusively on suffering as punishment for sin.

Finally, Luther's insistence that God is fundamentally one who plays games is an important touchstone for evaluating interpretations of his theology or its relationship to historical and contemporary alternatives. Is the God proposed by those who would assimilate Luther to Aquinas—or even Plato—one who plays games? A God who does not—or cannot—play games is not Luther's God, nor is he the God of the Scriptures as Luther understands them. The theme of God's play in Luther's theology embraces at the same time God's radical freedom—the divine omnipotence of the Nominalist *Via moderna*—the personal but not ontological relationship of the mystical tradition, and also a radical christological realism. It is a theological stance that sets Luther apart from his medieval predecessors, his Reformed contemporaries, and post-Enlightenment moderns alike. Luther's God plays games. Will we play along?

⁴⁹ Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 120.

Theological Observer

“Guard the good deposit entrusted to you”: Is Reading High-Octane Theology Practical for the Parish Pastor?

The following is a convocation presentation given by the Rev. Joshua Hayes at Concordia Theological Seminary on April 5, 2017. He was commissioned by the MDiv class of 2017 to translate Johann Gerhard’s commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy,¹ and is currently pastor of University Lutheran Chapel, Boulder, Colorado. —The Editors

The demands made of the parish pastor are many and diverse. Often the temptation is to sacrifice time spent in the Word and in theology for the sake of doing or reading things of a more practical nature. I wish first to look at Johann Gerhard’s commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy and tell you why I appreciate it, with the aim of providing the pastor himself with a justification for reading high-octane theology in a busy parish. This work is a true gift to the church that you have assisted to produce, and it will serve you well as you make your final preparations for entering the teaching office. I hope you benefit from reading it as much as I have from translating it.

But since I do not have to sell the book to you, I don’t want to spend too much time on that aspect. Instead, I would like to use the book and some other resources and thoughts to tackle the question with which I titled this presentation: “*Guard the good deposit entrusted to you*”: *Is Reading High-Octane Theology Practical for the Parish Pastor?* The pastor is a guardian of the deposit, and this is war. In the words of Gerhard: “As in war, so also in the episcopacy there is perpetual fighting, vigilance, labor, and danger in the face of the enemies.”² Therefore, quit you like men; keep reading theology!

What is good or helpful about this commentary by Gerhard on 1 & 2 Timothy?

I first had contact with this work when I was on vicarage in Southern Illinois. For some reason or another I stumbled upon it online and thought that I should study the pastoral epistles and use this commentary as a guide. At that time I did not read all of it, but I did read much of it. I was able to do so because of its brevity. We tend to associate Gerhard with prolixity and a dogmatic text so long that it will keep CPH busy for twenty years (and that is just the *Theological Commonplaces*, not to

¹ The commentary has now been published: Johann Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, trans. Joshua J. Hayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

² Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, 26.

mention the *Catholic Confession* and all the rest!). But there is a time for the pastor to be long-winded, and there is a time to be concise. This work is a great example of concision (which we also find in his *Sacred Meditations* and Latin homilies). It is not a full commentary in the “Concordia Commentary” sense of the word, but is more a collection of notes (*Adnotationes*). This volume is helpful for showing what the notes of a theological heavyweight like Gerhard would look like were he to prepare to teach a Sunday morning Bible class. Not that one would necessarily go about preparing to teach in the same way, but here is a great example of what substance and concision can look like. (See his *Method of Theological Study* for more information.³)

Besides the format and concision, the content is also noteworthy. Gerhard gives some good answers to tough questions, and he answers them in a way that pastors can present to the laity. For example, one cannot get through a Bible study on 1 Timothy without loosing the knot of 1 Timothy 2:15, “She will be saved through childbearing.” The answer Gerhard gives is both concise and satisfying (p. 37):

(1) The apostle’s aim is to comfort women over against the subordination imposed on the female sex as a punishment and also against the other part of that punishment, namely, their vexation and torment in bearing and rearing children: their eternal salvation is not hindered by these punishments.

(2) The sense, therefore, is: “God made and called the woman to bear children and rear them in the fear of God, not to teach in the church. If she remains in this, her vocation, and perseveres in faith and love she is saved, even though pain in childbirth has been imposed on her as a punishment.”

(3) The preposition διὰ [“through”] is used for ἐν [“in”], a usage that occurs in other statements of Scripture as well. Acts 14:22: διὰ πολλῶν θλίψεων, “through many tribulations” (among many tribulations) “we must enter the kingdom of heaven.” That is to say, the variety of tribulations does not hinder our entrance into the kingdom of heaven. 2 Corinthians 6:7–8: ἐν λόγῳ ἀληθείας, ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ, διὰ τῶν ὅπλων τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῶν δεξιῶν καὶ ἀριστερῶν, διὰ δόξης καὶ ἀτιμίας, διὰ δυσφημίας καὶ εὐφημίας. [“In the word of truth, in the power of God, through the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, through glory and dishonor, through cursing and praise.”] Galatians 4:13: δι’ ἀσθένειαν τῆς σαρκὸς εὐηγγελισάμην. [“Through the weakness of the flesh I

³ Johann Gerhard, *On Interpreting Sacred Scripture and Method of Theological Study*, Theological Commonplaces I–II, trans. Joshua J. Hayes, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 133–241.

preached the Gospel.”] 1 Peter 3:20: “Eight souls were saved δι’ ὕδατος (through water),” that is, “the water of the flood notwithstanding.”

(4) Therefore the apostle is not talking about the cause, merit, or means of salvation, nor even about a needed quality of those to be saved but about a condition and state that does not hinder salvation . . .

I can testify to the good mileage of that answer, and have incorporated it in my own words to students surrounded by feminist indoctrination at the University of Colorado—Boulder. It is satisfying because of its exegetical depth. Well-catechized Lutherans know that salvation is not from childbearing or any other work of ours, yet to some that sounds like what Paul is saying. If Paul is wrong, then what becomes of the inerrancy of Scripture? Pastors cannot be dismissive of these concerns, and Gerhard here gives a model of how to resolve such concerns from Paul himself and the language of the NT.

Is reading theology practical?

I want to move on to my second purpose, which is to provide the pastor himself with a basis for reading what I am calling “high-octane” theology. By that I mean theological writings that are deep, perhaps lengthy, and which require slow reading and mental exertion, or even rereading. High-octane theology is not the sort of thing a pastor would read with groups of laity or that he would necessarily quote directly in a sermon. High-octane theology includes works like Pieper, Gerhard’s *Theological Commonplaces*, the textual notes section of a Concordia commentary that we often skip over when hurriedly looking for a quick answer, much of Luther, and much of the Lutheran Confessions. High-octane theology really includes any strenuous theological reading that might not seem immediately practical, that is not written at a popular level, or that is not read in one’s mother tongue. It is not “I need a quick sermon idea” reading. Of course, these other types of reading are valuable also as a way to learn how better to communicate complex theology in simple ways.

But with so many demands made on the pastor’s time, with so many sermons to write and so much “ready to chew” theology out there already, can a pastor justify *to himself* spending a few hours of his week reading Gerhard subdividing Aristotelean causes or reading Luther wax on about the virtue of pagan Cicero? I believe that whether he serves in the bean fields of Nebraska or among the wacky liberals of Boulder, Colorado, that he can and that he should. But, I also believe that it is hard to do.

Please note that I am not speaking about how a pastor is to justify his use of time to his elders, wife, senior pastor, or anyone else who may justly or unjustly

think it is their business. I am talking about *the individual pastor*. Nevertheless, though most would agree that strenuous study of theology is worthwhile it often becomes hard for the pastor to justify this use of his time *to himself*. There is always someone else to visit, another phone call to make, or a sermon that could be a little (or a lot!) better. At home, the pastor could always be home a little sooner, and put in a little (or a lot!) more time as husband and father. When these and a thousand other things pile up, the temptation just to “get things done” can preclude ongoing theological study.

No doubt you have had the mantra “Visit, visit, visit!” pounded into your heads through the course of your studies. I hope you have. But I also want to urge you to read, read, read, because we are addressing what St. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Tim 4:13: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” You have heard it said: “They’ll never care how much you know unless they know how much you care.” This statement is true enough, but on the other hand, it will not matter how much you care if you do not know anything substantive. “Wear out a pair of shoes in your first year” is good advice, but try also to move up a prescription level on your glasses from reading so much.

I want to be clear that you should not ignore this advice about visiting. In fact, when I asked my wife what I should say to you, she said: “This is your chance to tell the Fort Wayne guys not to be dweebs.” So here it is, from my wife who is wiser than I: “Don’t be dweebs!” It’s okay to be a theological dork like I am, but don’t be a dweeb about it. You will do a lot of damage if you fail in your vows to visit the sick and shut-in. Do not think that things are below you. Do not take yourself too seriously. Take your office and duty seriously. G.K. Chesterton once wrote: “Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.”⁴ So you also, take yourselves lightly and don’t be dweebs.

But let us not create a false antithesis. It must not become either/or. “Get the message straight. Get the message out.” The two go together. President Harrison himself is a great example. Most pastors need to hear the admonition to visit and learn our people because most of us are tempted that way—we are more inclined to read and speak than to visit and listen. But one can fall off the horse the other way and become the social butterfly pastor with shallow sermons and therapeutic Bible classes. There is a real temptation to have a falsely-guilty conscience when it comes to study of the word. In other words, when I visit the shut-in or counsel with a student in my study I always feel great because I have done something concrete and practical. But if I spend three hours reading Gerhard I have nothing concrete to

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 223.

show for it and the shut-in still needs visiting and my sermon is no further along than when I began reading. In the latter case, I begin to wonder if I have wasted my time, a thought which itself betrays a lack of confidence in the sufficiency and value of the Word of God to make the pastor, “the man of God, complete, well-instructed for *every* good work” (2 Tim 3:17).

So when the devil comes to tempt you that the ongoing, strenuous study of theology is a waste, or that you have no time for it, or that it is just for seminary professors but impractical for the parish pastor, I offer the following remedies:

The reading of high-octane theology is (1) commanded by God, (2) service and worship to God in Spirit and truth, (3) necessary for good preaching and teaching, (4) a remedy for theological loneliness, (5) a reminder to humility and what Paul calls “complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2).

The study of theology is commanded by God.

In the ordination rite the ordinand is asked: “Will you be diligent in the study of Holy Scripture and the Confessions?”⁵ Diligence requires more than doing the bare minimum. Diligence requires the inclusion of high-octane theology. It is here that I would like to return to 1 and 2 Timothy, a major emphasis of which is that Timothy, and those pastors whom Timothy will instruct and ordain, “guard the good deposit.” Paul writes, “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you” (1 Tim 6:20). And again,

But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you (2 Tim 1:12–14).

Paul uses the language of a soldier entrusted to guard and deliver a precious cargo, something that the enemy seeks to steal, mutilate, or destroy. Paul writes in 1 Tim 1:18–19: “This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience.” Gerhard notes: “[The warfare] is against false teachers and the persecution of the world for the defense of the Gospel. ‘That you present yourself strenuous and strong in opposing the reign of Satan and spreading the reign of Christ. That you strenuously and manfully carry out your

⁵ LSB Agenda, 166.

office.’ As in war, so also in the episcopacy there is perpetual fighting, vigilance, labor, and danger in the face of the enemies.”⁶

Note too that St. Paul connects “having faith” with “having a good conscience.” Can the parish pastor be justified in spending time reading “impractical theology”? He should think so. For the man of God who fights in this war and keeps faith and remains faithful—he is the one, says the apostle, who may have a good conscience. Studying and training in theology so as to become a better guardian of the deposit can never be a waste. In fact, it is “inseparably intertwined” with having a good conscience.

To be clear: What is this deposit that Timothy and all pastors are to guard? It is the deposit of pure doctrine, for which the man of God must fight to keep sound. On 1 Tim 6:20 Gerhard quotes from Vincent of Lérins:

What is the deposit? It is what is entrusted to you, not what has been discovered by you. It is what you have received, not what you thought up. It is not a matter of talent but of the teaching, not of private usurpation but of public tradition. It is a thing delivered to you, not invented by you. In this you should not be the author but the guardian, not the institutor but the follower, not leading but following. “Guard,” he says, “the deposit. Preserve inviolate and unscathed the talent of the catholic faith. What has been entrusted to you—may it stay with you and be handed down from you. You have received gold. Return gold. Do not add for me some things instead of others.”⁷

The study of theology is service and worship of God in spirit and truth.

In Romans 12 the apostle reminds all Christians that the renewal of the mind, the *νοῦς*, is itself service to God: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” If this is true for all Christians—that we are “no longer to be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine but we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:14–15)—then this should be all the more true for teachers of Christ’s flock. This leads me to include the following point along with this second one, namely that

⁶ Johann Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, 26.

⁷ Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, 105.

The study of theology is necessary for good preaching and teaching.

You see, the pastor is in constant output mode when preaching, teaching, visiting, etc. If he is to avoid preaching the same formulaic sermon every Sunday, his mind (*νοῦς*) needs constant renewal. As a rule, I find that the pastor must take in two or three times what he puts out to keep his mind fresh. As Paul tells Timothy (2 Tim 2:6): “It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.” Gerhard notes that, “Just as the farmer who has tirelessly toiled in cultivating his field receives the fruits and growths there first before all others, so also you, Timothy, if you tirelessly toil in cultivating the Lord’s field (which is the church), then prior to your hearers you will receive the fruit of your toil—that is, a distinct glory and blessedness in heaven.”⁸ In other words, before his hearers can benefit from the pastor’s study of the Word, the pastor should benefit himself.

Moreover, studying high-octane theology goes a long way toward this mental refreshing and renewal. Much of the value I gain from reading precise authors like Gerhard lies in the clarity of his thought, which is often much more orderly than Luther. Learning how to make proper distinctions and, yes, how to use (not abuse) philosophy and logic goes a long way for fruitful preaching and teaching. This is something in which the mind must be trained by continued reading, writing, and study. Such a skill is also your most useful tool for handling the inevitable strange comments and false assertions a pastor hears, not with a flat-out rebuke, but by ferreting out the kernel of truth, making proper distinctions, and teaching people how to think, with “complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2) in a world that has lost its *νοῦς*.

The study of theology in the parish is a remedy for theological loneliness.

Some of you will be called to parishes filled with lay people who already enjoy studying the Bible and theology. You will have a great winkel that reads the Greek and Hebrew and dives deep into all kinds of theological study. You will have many pastors close to you for support. But many more of you will end up serving in remote areas where anti-intellectualism dominates and where the nearest pastor is an hour or more away. You will attend winkels with pastors who know all the latest fads and Rick Warren books, but who have not looked at the Greek New Testament in decades. You will serve parishes where doctrinal indifference, acedia, and moral therapeutic deism hold sway. As you serve patiently and lovingly in such circumstances, it can get lonely. The internet is a huge help, but you need a theological friend even as you need a confessor. Maybe that will be a brother pastor

⁸ Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, 136.

or an elder in your congregation. More than likely, though, such a friend will come to you in book form. Walther, Luther, Gerhard, Augustine, Chemnitz—choose a friend and stick with him. There are times when I feel like Gerhard is a seminary professor who visits me in my study and in my basement. We talk. True, the conversation is a little one sided, but if Petrarch could write letters to Cicero a thousand years after the fact, then I can be justified in calling Luther and Gerhard my theological buddies. Sometimes I quibble with them, but mostly I learn and discuss with them.

Theological loneliness is real. At the seminary you are surrounded by people who live for theology, but it will not be that way in the parish. There are conferences, yes, but what about the day-to-day? Find a theological friend and get to know him. Even if you never quote him directly, your teaching will benefit. And if you get to know him well enough, you might just start to convince some of your people to care about his teaching, too. For many Lutherans, Luther is more a heroic, historical figure than teacher of the church. But get excited about him, know him, give your parishioners digestible portions of the Large Catechism, and you might just transform your congregational leaders from pragmatists into budding theologians.

Digression: But when?

Before I conclude with my fifth and final point on humility, I would like to take a minute to address the practical question: But when? When and how will I do this? *How do you balance academic-theological work with the other duties of the ministry?* Most of all: kill busyness, ruthlessly.

One of the best writers on pastoral business is not a Lutheran but the author Eugene Peterson. In *The Contemplative Pastor* he writes on the word “busy” and how this adjective should never be used to describe the pastor. According to Peterson, the busy pastor is not committed but compromised. Busyness is not to be equated with faithfulness but with a spiritual malady. We grow busy because we want to seem important—which is vanity—or because we are lazy and allow others who do not understand the duties and demands of the ministry to dictate our schedules. Much of this amounts to what Hilary of Poitiers called an “*irreligiosa sollicitudo pro Deo*,”⁹ a blasphemous anxiety to be in God’s place.

To these thoughts from Peterson I would add that an additional cause for busyness is the anxiety we bear of making sure that we are truly earning that paycheck. But the Office of the Ministry cannot be quantified or expressed in terms of numbers

⁹ “On the Trinity,” IV.6, where context is that Hilary is defending the eternity of the Son and the *homoousion* “as if by confessing that He has existed eternally, we made His birth impossible.” It may have been “*de Deo*” not “*pro Deo*,” but the point remains.

and sales figures. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 9 is not just for the laity to know that they must support their pastor, but also so that the pastors themselves will not feel guilty when they see that their salary is most of the church budget. It is God-pleasing to make a living from preaching the Gospel (1 Cor 9:14).

I still remember my first year as pastor reading the epistle for Sexagesima Sunday from 2 Cor 11. Paul is listing his sufferings and says: *χωρὶς τῶν παρεκτὸς ἡ ἐπίστασις μοι ἢ καθ' ἡμέραν, ἡ μέριμνα πασῶν τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν* ["Besides external things, there is the daily anxiety I have, my anxious thought for all the churches." (2 Cor 11:28)]. Not even a year into the ministry and that sentence cut me to the marrow. I had begun to know what the apostle meant—and you will too. You will worry, and that worry will tempt you toward busyness, which is really, as Luther reminds us, that old demon *acedia*. Note that Paul lists this anxiety at the summit of his list of sufferings. It is not a good thing but a weakness of his that he confesses. As St. John of Damascus observes: "Fear is divided into six varieties: viz., shrinking, shame, disgrace, consternation, panic, anxiety . . . Anxiety is fear of failure, that is, of misfortune: for when we fear that our efforts will not meet with success, we suffer anxiety."¹⁰ But fearful anxiety is not a fruit of the Spirit, for it comes from the evil one. Paul writes in 1 Tim 1:7: "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." Commenting on this, Gerhard notes:

Therefore the sense is: "God has not given us a Spirit of *δειλίας* (fear), which very often hinders those to whom God has given outstanding gifts from using them for the church's benefit, but rather they allow them to be extinguished and die out within themselves." Here "fear" means human or worldly fear, and also that perverted modesty by which one is afraid to perform the things belonging to his office, such as (in the ministry of the church) preaching the Gospel, reproving delinquents, etc.

Δειλίας signifies timidity, weakness of courage [*animi*], avoiding the dangers one must face in his vocation. To this is opposed *ἀνδρία* ["manliness, bravery"]. In this passages the apostle sets *δυνάμεως* ["power, strength"] in opposition to it, for it follows in the antithesis.¹¹

Loeche summarizes the temptation well (from *Three Books on the Church*):

It does not consider it an insult, nor is it eager to interpret it as an insult, when someone says, "This pastor thinks it is enough if he preaches, catechizes,

¹⁰ John of Damascus, "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith" 2.15, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952–1957), 291.

¹¹ Gerhard, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*, 120.

administers the sacraments, hears confessions, and comforts the sick!" It knows that even the most faithful pastors do not do enough of this. It has little use for multiplying pastoral duties but treasures those which are commanded in the Scriptures and have been recognized since ancient times. To many people it is something novel that a man should not be a jack of many trades but a master of the few precious means, yet this is what the church has always thought. . . . It is enough, and more than enough, if a man just carries out the ancient duties of a pastor. Superfluous and even a hindrance is the officiousness of modern pastors. Here the slogan should be, "Not many, but much." The poverty of our fathers is richer than the wealth of their opponents. It is through alternating periods of withdrawal and public appearance, stillness and publicity, through persistent use of Word and sacrament, through giving of a quiet but full measure, through modesty and steadfastness that the Lutheran church attains its goals.¹²

The study of theology produces humility.

The final reason to give yourself for reading high-octane theology is simply this: you need to be humbled. Depending on where you serve, you may be, in terms of mere credit-hours, the most educated person for miles. People even outside your membership may come to you with questions thinking you have the answers. Talk about an ego trip! No matter your setting, you need to be humbled. Look at the sheer volume of Luther's writings. You will never amount to that, and that is a good thing to keep in mind. Gerhard had accomplished more by his early twenties than you or I ever will, even if we live long lives. And when you read these giants, you realize that you are not one of them. That is a good thing. Reading high-octane theology is humiliating, which reason alone should suffice for reading it.

As Gerhard says to would-be theologians at the end of his *Method of Theological Study*: "The greatest thing we know is the least of the things we do not."¹³ Or as Augustine reminds us in *De doctrina Christiana*: Whatever we have that is true belongs not to us but to Christ who is the Truth. The only thing that is truly our own is falsehood.

Close

The reading of high-octane theology is (1) commanded by God, (2) service and worship to God in Spirit and truth, (3) necessary for good preaching and teaching,

¹² Wilhelm Loehe, *Three Books about the Church*, trans. and ed. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 165–166.

¹³ Gerhard, *On Interpreting Sacred Scripture and Method of Theological Study*, 241.

(4) a remedy for theological loneliness, (5) a reminder to humility and what Paul calls “complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).

We need our pastors to be theologians now more than ever. Commenting on Titus 1:9 (“He must hold firm”) Luther writes:

This is the most important of all. The virtues are beautiful. A bishop is appointed in the midst of the nation (cf. Phil 2:15), but especially in the midst of heretics. If someone becomes a pastor, especially in a prominent place, and presents the Word, he will have them. Therefore he admonishes that a bishop be ready for both, that he have a trowel in one hand [and a weapon in the other], as in Nehemiah (Neh 4:17). There are not many such; many teach, but few fight. A certain tenacity is signified here, that is, that he not put the Bible aside, but that he give attention to reading, as the Epistle to Timothy says, adding: “Practice these duties” (1 Tim 4:13, 15). The reason he ought to be provided for by the church is that he ought to tend to reading and stay with it not only for others, but that he ought to meditate constantly *for himself*; that is, ought to immerse himself completely in Scripture. Such study will enable him to fight back. It is impossible for someone who reads Scripture studiously to meddle in worldly matters, but he should have the strength to be the kind of man Paul has described here. If he does not diligently study Holy Scripture, which he knows, the result will be a kind of rust, and a neglect of and contempt for the Word will arise. Even though you know Holy Scripture, nevertheless it must be read over and over again, because this Word has the power to stimulate you at all times¹⁴

Brethren, the winds of worldly doctrines are blowing hard. I serve on one of the most liberal college campuses in this country. I see what is coming down the pipeline. Now is not the time for softness in our thinking. Now is the time to fight, “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

I wanted to leave you with some profound reference from classical literature because I am a classicist, but alas, I could not get Tolkien out of my mind. There is a scene in *The Two Towers* in which he writes,

“It is hard to be sure of anything among so many marvels. The world is all grown strange How shall a man judge what to do in such times?” “As he ever has judged,” said Aragorn. “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among

¹⁴ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Titus” (1527), in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vol. 29, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76), 30–31 (emphasis mine).

Men. It is a man's part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house."¹⁵

You are becoming pastors in a world that "is all grown strange." How shall a pastor judge what to do in such times? Heed the wisdom of King Aragorn. Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear. "Guard the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim 1:14). Man your post. The scriptures are sufficient, and serious, high-octane study of them is not a waste of your time. To ignore such study is cowardice. Quit you like men; keep reading theology. S.D.G.!

Joshua Hayes

¹⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 427–428.

Book Reviews

Notice: Additional book reviews will soon be available online at the address listed below.

<http://www.ctsfw.edu/resources/concordia-theological-quarterly/book-reviews/>

***Praying Luther's Small Catechism.* By John T. Pless. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 182 pages. Softcover. \$8.99.**

A child does not learn to speak from themselves, but by being given the words to speak. Likewise, when it comes to prayer, we too are given the words to speak. This contention is the basis of *Praying Luther's Small Catechism*. Using the *Small Catechism* as a template does not stifle prayer, but provides the language to open up a world of prayer.

Although the *Small Catechism* as a prayer aid is not a novel concept, Rev. Pless does a beautiful job synthesizing scholarship on the topic. He walks through each section of the catechism providing sample prayers throughout. The appendices include useful tools such as Psalms correlated to each petition of the Lord's Prayer, and self-examination questions before confession and absolution. This book serves as an excellent resource to refresh one's prayer life and to gain a deeper appreciation for *Luther's Small Catechism*.

Jacob Eichers,
Graduate Assistant, Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, IN

***The Reformation Coin and Medal Collection of Concordia Historical Institute: A Striking Witness to Martin Luther and the Reformation.* Edited by Daniel Harmelink. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016. 416 Pages. Hardcover. \$59.99.**

A constant challenge to Lutherans in America is maintaining their distinctive Lutheran heritage. We are in danger of seeing ourselves, and others seeing us, as another kind of Protestant. One way of regaining and determining what it means to be Lutheran is becoming acquainted with as much of what happened in the last five hundred years in Germany as possible. Helping to reclaim the Lutheran past is this meticulously executed volume of photographs of coins minted to commemorate past Reformation celebrations with an introduction to past Reformation numismatics. Along with coins featuring Luther are those with images of such other

Reformation figures as Jan Hus, Melanchthon, Erasmus, Zwingli, and Calvin. Even Katie Luther manages to find a place on some coins. Also worthy of commemoration are such events as Luther at Worms, the Peace of Augsburg, and Peace of Westphalia. Lest truly tragic events go unremembered coins were struck to commemorate the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Huguenots in France of 1572, and the exile of the Protestants from Salzburg in 1732.

Albertine Electors of Saxony have their images placed on eighteenth century coins, though they were the successors to Maurice of Saxony who in aligning himself with Charles V displaced his more loyal Lutheran cousin John the Steadfast. All is not lost, John finds a place for himself between Luther and Melanchthon in a coin minted in St. Louis in 1930. A coin commemorating the Reformation in Prussia minted in 1839 is a reminder of the disastrous union of 1830 that accelerated the downward slide of Lutheranism and ignited the Lutheran emigration to America. Thus, included also are coins commemorating Lutheran congregations in America.

This is a great book to display on coffee tables in Lutheran living rooms during the commemorative Reformation and beyond. Pastors can make great use of it in study groups, or display it in the church narthex. General, scriptural, and personal indices are appended. Topics and persons commemorated on the coins are listed in the index of legends. Thanks to numismatics, Luther lives on—at least on coins. This is a carefully executed publishing accomplishment and in itself an outstanding work for which I give special thanks to editor Daniel Harmelink.

David P. Scaer

***Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World.* By Larry W. Hurtado. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016. 290 + xiv pages. Hardcover. \$19.95.**

The gods to be destroyed consisted not only of the twelve canonical Olympians, but what Hurtado calls the “cafeteria of deities” (25) that the ancient Romans relied upon for the existence of their civilization and way of life: foreign cults of Isis and Mithras, time-tested rituals of the state religion (*do ut des* = “I give so that you give”), delightful sylvan deities of Roman poetry, the emperor’s image, and so much else. The best way to fit in back then was to reverence “the gods” (note lower case in the book’s title) and curse Christ, and because the early Christians could not (or would not) comply they were dismissed as silly, superstitious, irrational, hateful, obstinate, anti-social, perverse, and wicked (from the dust jacket). The Christians’ worst enemies were their own family members, neighbors, and social contacts. Matthew’s Jesus says it best: “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter

against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. *And a person's enemies will be those of his own household*" (Matt 10:35–36; added emphasis). For Hurtado's documentation of Roman society's harassment and persecution of Christians in the first three centuries A.D. see especially chapter 1: Early Christians and Christianity in the Eyes of Non-Christians.

In chapters 2 (A New Kind of Faith) and 3 (A Different Identity) Hurtado focuses upon the "exclusivist stance" (58; cf. 71, 86, 89, 93) that made the Christians so objectionable not only to their Roman neighbors, but even to Jews, with whom the Christians shared many commonalities. Paganism permitted adherents to placate the traditional deities, *daimones*, spirits (or whatever) of one's own choice (see "A World Full of Gods," 44–49, 86). Christians, however, avoided taking part in the worship of any deity other than the one God of the biblical tradition—and to consider all other would-be deities as so many "idols" (50–52, 87–88). The Jews' refusal to worship pagan gods was at least understandable to Romans for such aloofness was part of ethnic Judaism from time immemorial; however, Christians were comprised of many different ethnicities (including former Jews) who refused to play along with pagan scruples and insisted that Jesus (only!) was Lord—not Caesar (see "One God... and One Lord [Jesus]," 66–75). Holy Baptism meant that one invoked the name of Jesus and so came under the ownership of the Lord Jesus Christ (58–59, 91). The Lord's Supper meant that the participant was linked with the redemptive death of Jesus and failure to discern the Lord's body could make one liable to divine judgment (60–61, 91). Pagan converts retained their various ethnic identities, but all Christians—from greatest to least, and regardless of ethnic background—were expected to reverence Jesus as Lord and follow the type of biblical holiness (with respect to sexuality, e.g.) that could set them at odds with pagans.

Furthermore, Christianity was a "bookish" religion (chapter 4), which meant that reading, writing, copying, and dissemination of texts had a major place among the early believers that was unusual for Roman-era religious groups—with the notable exception of the Jews, again, who were quite like the Christians in this respect (see "Christian and Synagogue Practices," 109–118). Finally, Christianity offered "A New Way to Live" (chapter 5). Thus, Paul and NT authors were not afraid to challenge the sexual double standard of the day (lascivious men could "sleep around" with impunity, whereas women were supposed to be chaste, 157, 164). Indeed, early Christianity supposed all *πορνεία* ("sexual immorality") to be sinful (156, 160), relabeled pederasty (more or less approved of by pagans) as "child corruption and abuse" (167–168), and would not have endorsed the controversial view (made popular by Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* [New York:

Oxford, 2002] 60) that Paul implicitly allowed Christian males to have sex with female slaves (he cites my own negative review of Glancy's position on pg. 259 n. 56). Thus, Christianity was distinctive at the time for insisting upon a set of behavioral requirements (a set of "dos and don'ts," as it were) which, again, is rather universally assumed to be part of all religious ethics of today. In antiquity, however, such ethics were virtually unknown: "Christianity helped destroy one world and create another" (dust jacket).

Much is of interest here to modern adherents of the faith who keenly feel the apparent collapse of Christianity in the world—or at least in North America. Still, Hurtado does not go there. He writes instead to address our "cultural amnesia" (1): though loathed and despised in the early centuries the vigorous young faith so succeeded in transforming the world that even its objectionable features (e.g., expecting its adherents to lead chaste and decent lives; caring about "ethics"; formation of character, etc.) have become so commonplace in western culture as to go unnoticed (2, 188–189). Whereas Hurtado's colleagues have made careers attempting to demonstrate ways that "religion" has remained fixed through time (39), Hurtado points out again and again the many ways that Christianity was "distinctive" (the word occurs in the title and dozens of times elsewhere). This would be a good book for pastors to read and discuss with seasoned adult learners.

John G. Nordling

***Real Music: A Guide to the Timeless Hymns of the Church.* By Anthony Esolen. Charlotte: TAN Books, 2016. Xvi + 280 pages; CD included. Hardcover. \$29.95.**

The name Anthony Esolen will not be unfamiliar to most readers of this journal. When he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, just this spring (May 2017), the citation noted not only his contributions as a scholar and translator (including his three-volume translation and edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*) and his staunch support of life and marriage, but especially "his bold defense of our Christian cultural heritage."

In *Real Music*, however, Esolen moves in a somewhat different direction, as he writes in the Introduction: "I am writing this book to bring back the words of great Christian hymns, most of which are no longer heard anywhere" (xiv). Describing them as "verbal and melodic icons of Jesus Christ" (xiv), Esolen sets the goal of teaching us to appreciate the great hymns of the Church as the works of art that they are. With his impeccable credentials in English literature, he certainly delivers!

Dividing his work into twelve simple chapters, Esolen covers fifty-six hymns. (Approximately half of these hymns appear in *Lutheran Service Book*, though

sometimes in different translation.) What becomes evident from the outset is that Esolen knows how to plumb the depths of this venerable poetry. Himself a devout Roman Catholic, Esolen treats the hymns with great care; only occasionally is there a theological point with which one might quibble. He regularly quotes the Scriptures—always from the King James Version, since this is the version that would have been known to all of these hymn writers—demonstrating just how richly these hymns draw upon the biblical text.

Equally impressive is the unassuming way in which Esolen teaches the finer points of poetry. The careful reader will note, for example, the nature and purpose of rhyme (11, 39), the importance of doxological stanzas (32), how rhyme and meter relate to the hymn tune (45, 94, 108, 114), the intricacies of meter (49, 63, 90), and the beauty of alliteration (61). The level of detail, which is never beyond the scope of the average reader, reminds us why Christians have returned to these and other hymns again and again: they have something to say and they say it quite well!

Included with the book is a CD that contains recordings of 18 of the hymns. Sung by the St. Cecilia Choir of St. John Cantius Roman Catholic Church in Chicago, these recordings reflect more of a Roman Catholic style of hymn singing than Lutheran. They are, nevertheless, a beneficial feature since it is in the very nature of hymns that they be sung.

This is a book that should be read by every pastor, church musician, and praise band leader. It is also highly recommended for anyone else who is involved in a congregation's music ministry. Finally, it is the perfect resource for a book study group or for a Bible class. You will not be disappointed.

Paul J. Grime

***Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career (Second Edition).* By James M. Kittelson and Hans H. Wiersma. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016. Paperback. 275 pages. \$27.00.**

James M. Kittelson (1941–2003) is remembered for his careful Reformation scholarship, robust humor, and his deep commitment to the Gospel proclaimed by Luther. First published in 1986, Kittelson's *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* was quickly recognized as a fresh and important Luther biography. Whereas Roland Bainton's classic and ever popular Luther biography, *Here I Stand* focused on the young Luther, Kittelson's book would see Luther all the way through, not shying away from the aged Reformer. I was serving as a campus pastor when the book first appeared and did not hesitate to recommend it to students who inquired who asked for a suggested Luther biography. It was a good book then

and under the able help of a Kittelson student, Hans Wiersma, a fine work is made even better.

Two observations are in order about this new edition of Kittelson's book. First of all, Wiersma has incorporated the insights of more recent Luther scholarship into his revision. Much has transpired in Reformation studies over the last three and a half decades. Wiersma knows the scholarship and judiciously weaves more recent research into the fabric of Kittelson's work in a seamless fashion. This is demonstrated not only in the narrative but also in the updated bibliography. Second, while the first edition placed a bit more emphasis on Luther's career, Wiersma balances this aspect with more attention to Luther's life. It is not that Kittelson neglected the Reformer's earthy humanity but this aspect is certainly more prominent in the present volume. We learn a little more about Luther as friend, husband, and father.

Like the first edition, the revised edition attends to the chronology of events in Luther's life as well as the context and content of his theology. While the political and philosophical aspects of the Reformation are by no means ignored, Kittelson and Wiersma narrate the story of Luther who saw himself as a servant and preacher of Jesus Christ.

In this anniversary year, the market is flooded with books on Luther. Certainly, there are many fine biographies both long and short to choose from these days. The three-volume work of Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther* is indispensable for the scholar. This fresh edition of *Luther: The Reformer* remains the best one-volume overview of Luther's life and teaching. It is concise without omitting necessary historical details but the reader is not burdened with excessive data in the text or in the footnotes. The book is accessible for ordinary pastors and laity. It should be in every congregational library and it would be an excellent text to use in an adult forum or book discussion group.

John T. Pless

Books Received

- Andersen, Ragnar. *Concordia Ecclesiae: An Inquiry into Tension and Coherence in Philipp Melancthon's Theology and Efforts for Ecclesiastical Unity, Especially in 1527–1530*. Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2016. 515 pages. Softcover. €49.90.
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- Campbell, Constantine R. *1, 2, and 3 John*. The Story of God Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 272 pages. Hardcover. \$29.99.
- Chamberlain, Jonathan. *Chinese Gods: An Introduction to Chinese Folk Religion*. Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books, 2009. 237 pages. Softcover. \$16.95.
- Cremer, Hermann. *The Christian Doctrine of the Divine Attributes*. Edited by Helmut Burkhardt. Translated by Robert B. Price. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016. 88 pages. Softcover. \$17.00.
- Firth, David G. and Lindsay Wilson, eds. *Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017. 232 pages. Softcover. \$30.00.
- García, Alberto L. and John A. Nunes. *Wittenberg Meets the World: Reimagining the Reformation at the Margins*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017. 188 pages. Softcover. \$22.00.
- Gerhard, Johann. *Commentary on 1 and 2 Timothy*. Translated by Joshua J. Hayes. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017. 200 pages. Softcover. \$33.99.
- Gmirkin, Russell E. *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Routledge, 2016. 338 pages. Hardcover. \$145.00.
- Hagen, Kenneth. *The Word Does Everything: Key Concepts of Luther on Testament, Scripture, Vocation, Cross, and Worm. Also on Method and on Catholicism: Collection of Essays*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016. 474 pages. Hardcover. \$25.00.
- Irons, Charles Lee. *A Syntax Guide for Readers of the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016. 608 pages. Hardcover. \$39.99.
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- Klink III, Edward W. *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 976 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.
- Kolb, Robert. *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016. 528 pages. Hardcover. \$49.99.
- Kooi, Cornelis van der, and Gijsbert van den Brink. *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017. 820 pages. Hardcover. \$45.00.
- Mansch, Larry D. and Curtis H. Peters. *Martin Luther: The Life and Lessons*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016. 341 pages. Softcover. \$39.95.
- Meyer, John P. *Studies in the Smalcald Articles*. Rev. ed. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017. 241 pages. Hardcover. \$36.99.
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- Pless, John T. *Praying Luther's Small Catechism*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016. 182 pages. Softcover. \$8.99.
- Roberts, Mark D. *Ephesians*. The Story of God Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 304 pages. Hardcover. \$29.99.
- Rosner, Brian S. *Known By God: A Biblical Theology of Personal Identity*. Biblical Theology for Life. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 274 pages. Softcover. \$29.99.
- Roth-Beck, Meike and Klaus Ensikat. *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017. 44 pages. Hardcover. \$18.00.
- Rueger, Matthew. *Sexual Morality in a Christless World*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016. 178 pages. Softcover. \$14.99.
- Sanders, Fred. *The Triune God*. New Studies in Dogmatics. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. 256 pages. Softcover \$24.99.

- Schmeling, Timothy, ed. *Lives and Writings of the Great Fathers of the Lutheran Church*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016. 320 pages. Softcover. \$25.99.
- Schroeder, Joy A., trans. and ed. *The Book of Jeremiah*. The Bible in the Medieval Tradition. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017. 333 pages. Softcover. \$55.00.
- Schuetze, John. *Doctor of Souls: The Art of Pastoral Theology*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017. 348 pages. Hardcover. \$39.99.
- Senn, Frank C. *Eucharistic Body*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017. 200 pages. Softcover. \$39.00.
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- Taylor, Richard A. *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook*. Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016. 208 pages. Softcover. \$21.99.
- The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*. Hjeltn, Norman A., Philip D. Krey, and William G. Rusch, eds. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017. 157 pages. Softcover. \$18.00.



Christ Academy High School

At this two-week immersive retreat, high-school-aged men encounter a fore-taste of seminary life, centered on Lutheran theology, worship and fun. Classes are taught by CTSFW professors and other excellent teachers and pastors. Pastors, please consider this opportunity for promising parishioners as they consider service in the Church. More information is available at www.ctsfw.edu/ChristAcademy.

Phoebe Academy High School

At this week-long event, high school ladies explore the vocation of deaconess, study theology and meet peers with this same passion. Send your ladies to us to consider God's Word on mercy and what it means for us today; meet deaconesses serving the Church right now; learn what they do and how they are trained to serve their neighbor. For more information please visit us at ctsfw.edu/PAHS.



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