

WINTER/SPRING 2017 | VOLUME 43 | NUMBERS 1&2

concordia Journal



REFORMATION

500

On the cover: A portrait of Martin Luther from the Workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder (1528). One of many portraits of Martin Luther produced by Cranach and his workshop, this particular painting was evidently Luther's favorite. Luther's intense gaze, directed toward the viewer, lends an immediacy and vitality to this portrayal, which is apropos as we reflect on Luther's ongoing influence on global culture and thought in this anniversary year.

Issued by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, the *Concordia Journal* is the successor of *Lehre und Wehre* (1855-1929), begun by C. F. W. Walther, a founder of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lehre und Wehre* was absorbed by the *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1930-1974) which was published by the faculty of Concordia Seminary as the official theological periodical of the Synod.

Concordia Journal is abstracted in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete, New Testament Abstracts, Old Testament Abstracts, and Religious and Theological Abstracts*. It is indexed in ATLA Religion Database/ATLAS and Christian Periodicals Index. Article and issue photocopies in 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, and 105mm microfiche are available from National Archive Publishing (www.napubco.com).

Books submitted for review should be sent to the editor. Manuscripts submitted for publication should conform to a Chicago Manual of Style. Email submission (cj@csl.edu) as a Word attachment is preferred. Editorial decisions about submissions include peer review. Manuscripts that display Greek or Hebrew text should utilize BibleWorks fonts (www.bibleworks.com/fonts.html). Copyright © 1994-2009 BibleWorks, LLC. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The *Concordia Journal* (ISSN 0145-7233) is published quarterly (Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall). The annual subscription rate is \$25 (individuals) and \$75 (institutions) payable to Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105. New subscriptions and renewals also available at <http://store.csl.edu>. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Concordia Journal*, Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105-3199.

concordia Journal

A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication



concordia Journal

Volume 43 Numbers 1&2

Editorials

- Editor's Note* 07

- “Turn the Exegetes Loose” 09
Dale A. Meyer

Articles

- The Relevance of
Remembering the Reformation* 17
Erik H. Herrmann

- Beyond Law and Gospel? :
Reflections on Speaking the Word
In a (Post)modern World* 29
Mark A. Seifrid

- Recovery Not Rejection:
Luther's Appropriation
of the Catechism* 43
Mary Jane Haemig

- “The Armor of God
and the Might of His Strength”:
Luther's Sermon on Ephesians 6 59
Robert Kolb

- History and Freedom in Luther's
On the Councils and the Church* 75
Paul Robinson

- Luther, Learning, and the
Reformation: A Look at Then
with Some Thoughts for Now* 89
Robert Rosin

Homiletical Helps

- Luther's Suggestions for Preaching* 109
Robert Kolb

Reviews

117

Publisher

Dale A. Meyer

President

Executive Editor

Charles Arand

*Dean of Theological
Research and Publication*

Editor

Travis J. Scholl

*Managing Editor of
Theological Publications*

Assistant Editor

Melanie Appelbaum

Assistant

Andrew Jones

Graphic Designer

XiaoPei Chen

Faculty

David Adams

Charles Arand

Andrew Bartelt

Joel Biermann

Gerhard Bode

Kent Burreson

Timothy Dost

Thomas Egger

Joel Elowsky

Jeffrey Gibbs

Benjamin Haupt

Erik Herrmann

Todd Jones

Jeffrey Kloha

David Lewis

Richard Marrs

David Maxwell

Dale Meyer

Peter Nafzger

Glenn Nielsen

Joel Okamoto

Jeffrey Oschwald

David Peter

Paul Raabe

Victor Raj

Paul Robinson

Mark Rockenbach

Timothy Saleska

Leopoldo Sánchez M.

David Schmitt

Bruce Schuchard

William Schumacher

Mark Seifrid

Kou Seying

W. Mart Thompson

James Voelz

Exclusive subscriber digital access via ATLAS to
Concordia Journal & Concordia Theology Monthly
<http://search.ebscohost.com>
User ID: **ATL0102231ps**
Password: **subscriber**
Technical problems?
Email: support@atla.com

All correspondence should be sent to:
CONCORDIA JOURNAL
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, Missouri 63105
314-505-7117
cj@csl.edu

Editorials

Editor's Note

Five hundred years later, it is hard to imagine we would remember anything about an Augustinian monk who taught the Hebrew Bible at a little-known university in Wittenberg, Germany without the machine Johannes Gutenberg had invented about sixty years earlier. In terms of European history, what was so remarkable about what Martin Luther did on October 31, 1517, was not as much the theses he posted on a castle church door (and/or sent to Albert of Brandenburg, however the case may be) as that they were circulated throughout Europe so remarkably quickly, thanks to the technology we call “movable type.” Luther may have intended to dispute the theses with Tetzel, but it didn’t take long before people were disputing Luther’s ideas across the continent.

Thanks to Gutenberg’s press, the world has been disputing them ever since.

Of course, movable type made for a cultural revolution beyond theological ideas. Knowledge became mass (re)producible. Literacy rose. Books became affordable (eventually). And it fundamentally changed the way human beings viewed language. Words became primarily objects we viewed with our eyes—texts to be read—rather than sounds we heard with our ears. As such, language became malleable, revise-able, a text(ile) of human expression.

Five hundred years later, you have this text you now hold in your own hand. It looks and feels different from the last issue you received. We believe you will find what you now hold to be more pleasing to the eye and more, dare we say it, pleasurable to read. We thought a redesign of *Concordia Journal* is more than fitting to kick off a milestone year of Luther’s Reformation, so much so that we turned it into a double issue featuring the vast wealth of knowledge housed in the minds of the Reformation scholars (and a few of their friends) who sit on Concordia Seminary’s faculty.

As one of those scholars and the director of the Center for Reformation Research, Erik Herrmann co-edited this issue. His article, beginning on page 17, provides the introduction for how we approached the themes of this issue and lays the groundwork for how we can approach this milestone throughout 2017 and beyond. I should also mention that this issue’s Homiletical Helps is a special excerpt from Bob Kolb’s hot-off-the-press *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, aptly titled “Luther’s Suggestions for

Preaching.”

The technology of movable type has gone through a few more revolutions since Gutenberg’s, which is what makes this new version of *Concordia Journal* possible. The ability to manipulate type through the machine Steve Jobs first introduced to the world about thirty years ago—together with the software suite developed by Adobe in clear homage to Gutenberg—allows us to produce a journal with an aesthetic eye that would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago. Even further, Gutenberg’s ghost haunts the latest revolution of movable type known as the digital age. Thus, www.concordiatheology.org has undergone a redesign too, one that will deepen the interactions between what you find here in print and what you find there on the Web. We invite your feedback on how you think we are doing with either or both.

The pace of these changes in text will continue to move with incredible velocity. Nevertheless, the seed of the divine word contained therein stands in our day as it did in Luther’s: *verbum domini manet in aeternum*. The word of the Lord endures forever.

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications

“Turn the Exegetes Loose”

Do you feel good about your church, so good that you tell others? When people talk about The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, does it make you proud to be a member of this church? Mention “feeling good” about church and someone will jump to the illogical conclusion that we’re talking about “happy, clappy churches” that aren’t faithful to God’s word. Such jumps don’t help the climate in the church-at-large or “explain everything in the kindest way.”¹ There are legitimate ways to feel good about going to your church. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” (Ps 122:1). And to be “proud” to be a member of a congregation of the Synod need not be pride in self but boasting in the goodness of God mediated through the church. “It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose” (Gal 4:18). “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31). I mention pride and feeling good about our congregation and Synod to ask this question: Are we so immersed in the living and active word of God that people see our congregations as welcome alternatives from other gatherings, other organizations, and other affiliations in this chaotic, post-churched time?

It’s half a millennium since Martin Luther posted the Ninety-five Theses, and a lot of things change in that long a time. Globalism, pluralism, ideologies, nationalism, world wars, genocides, possible nuclear annihilation, space exploration, digital revolution, biomedical advances, ecology, denominationalism, modernism, post-modernism . . . A beneficial observance of the 500th anniversary has to take into account cultural changes; it must do the theological work of interpretation so that the exegetical insights of Luther continue to be incisive and helpful to our ministries in this changing time. More than anything else, Martin Luther is significant because his profound exegetical insights challenged the church and its members about their life before the Creator who has revealed himself to us in the grace of Jesus Christ. “We should fear and love God that . . .”² Luther was troubled about his relationship with God; how many are today, even in our congregations? He lived in a nominal Christian culture, “Christendom”; we no longer do. He was deeply troubled that the practices and teachings of his church acquiesced to the ways of the world; can we see the ways of the world at work in our congregations and Synod? Luther’s critique of the church *coram deo*, law and gospel, led him to see that life freed from the dominion of the law still has duty under the law to others, *coram hominibus*. This life takes form in the two

kinds of righteousness, passive in our justification and active through graced good works in every Christian's vocation. We are poor stewards of our heritage if we don't bring the teachings of the Reformation into dialogue with today's context. Half a millennium later we face our own twenty-first-century issues and attacks from Satan, world, and our sinful flesh that are targeted personally against you and me, our congregations, and Synod. Does our life together reflect our belief that Satan, world, and sinful flesh are smarter than we theologically trained Lutherans? If so, and I'm convinced we generally don't recognize our peril, then we'll be zealous about one activity. Amidst all the cultural changes swamping the church, we should be more fanatical than ever about living in the Scriptures. "The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pt 1:24–25).

Does *sola Scriptura* mean something in the culture of our congregations and Synod? Do our people know that living in the Bible is something we all do in this church? If we're really serious about *sola Scriptura* we will continually be challenged about how we deal with one another. Do we deal with one another according to the ways of the world or in a markedly different way, as people who are in but not of this world, holy, peculiar, and graced?³ In *Paul & the Gift*, John M. G. Barclay demonstrates how grace was understood and used by Paul in the first century and by, among others, Luther in the sixteenth.⁴ About Paul, writers of the "new perspective on Paul" assert that grace was very present in Second Temple Judaism, and therefore Paul's talk of grace was not new to Jews. That is, first-century Jews did not believe in crass works righteousness for their justification but believed in grace. That's not the way we Lutherans have generally presented Paul's message of grace. Paul, says the new perspective, used grace for the sake of his mission to the Gentiles; the Jews already knew grace. "Proponents of the new perspective insist that Paul's theology of justification was articulated not just *in the context* of his mission to the Gentiles ... but *for the purpose* of defending and promoting that mission."⁵ Barclay, however, shows through almost six hundred extensively documented pages that Paul's use of grace was in fact very different.

Grace is everywhere in Second Temple Judaism. But it is the incongruous grace that Paul traces in the Christ-event and experiences in the Gentile mission that is the explosive force that demolishes old criteria of worth and clears space for innovative communities that inaugurate new patterns of social existence. It is because grace belongs to no one that it goes to everyone.⁶

Please pause, dear reader, on that quotation and bridge to our observance of the 500th anniversary. Does our being Lutheran make us acceptable to God? If your answer is in anyway "yes," then your understanding of grace is akin to Second Temple Judaism. They believed in grace but not incongruous grace. *Gratia*, yes, but deep in their religious hearts it was not *Sola Gratia*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

Even Paul said of himself that he was the foremost of sinners (1 Tm 1:15); he said this specifically at the point where he was speaking of his service as an apostle. There can be no genuine acknowledgement of sin that does not lead to this extremity. If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. My sin is of necessity the worst, the most grievous, the most reprehensible.⁷

Jesus teaches that our public habits and practices come out of our hearts (Mk 7:21). Similarly, the first commandment takes place in the heart, and commandments two through eight are outward actions coming from the heart.⁸ What is it that makes you different? “The truth of the good news is entirely lost if it is not enacted in creative social relations that are apt to challenge central features of their cultural environment.”⁹ Incongruous grace led Paul to say, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Personally, I can talk about unmerited grace but deep in my heart I still want grace to be, using Barclay’s word, congruous, something about me that merits God’s goodness. And what are the “old criteria of worth” that our parishioners bring with them when they come to worship, when they attend meetings, when they think about church, and when some gather for district and synodical events? Constitutions and bylaws? Resolutions? Policies? Best business practices? Financial condition? Facilities? Cliques? Legalism? Is the amalgam of all that, all that they experience in the world, the way they see the church? “It is in their patterns of behavior that believers demonstrate and actualize the change that has taken place.”¹⁰ *Sola gratia* is different from anything we know and shows in the way we deal with one another. “Since God’s incongruous grace dissolves former criteria of worth, it forms the basis for innovative groups of converts, by loosening their ties to pre-constituted norms and uniting them in their common faith in Christ. The starting point is the framing of the *Christ-event* as gift.”¹¹

How did Luther use this unmerited, incongruous grace? His context was far different from ours. The missionary context of Paul was gone; in Luther’s time, church and society had come together in “Christendom.” A radical disjointing of the church from the ways of the dominant Gentile society was no longer the context; the institutional church was the problem. Rather than using God’s unmerited grace in Christ in the context of the Gentile mission, Luther targeted the church and the inner being of Christians for reformation.

The achievement of Luther was to translate Paul’s missionary theology of grace into an urgent and perpetual inward mission, directed to the church, but especially to the heart of each believer. Luther recaptured both the incongruity of grace in Paul and its origin in the event of Jesus Christ; the challenge was to make this significant in communities of believers long socialized in the Christian tradition. . . . Paul’s theology

... a weaving of public culture and church that muffles the existential call of faith and leads us to forget the radical nature and mission of the church.

of gift is re-preached to effect the perpetual conversion of believers, who need to learn over and again to receive the gift of God and to banish the false opinion that

their works will merit salvation. The gospel constitutes a mission to the self and a daily return to baptism.¹²

“What does this mean?” Serious and regular exegetical study can be a bridge to bring invaluable lessons from both the first and sixteenth centuries to our challenged ministries today.¹³ Like Luther’s context in sixteenth-century Christendom, many of our parishioners were formed in an America that was churched and publicly “Christian.” That’s the mindset they bring to their participation in our church, a weaving of public culture and church that muffles the existential call of faith and leads us to forget the radical nature and mission of the church. So from Luther we emulate the inner mission: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Lutherans today strive to preach and teach incisively so that our congregations see that Jesus Christ is Lord, not the amalgam of values and experiences of the world that would form us to be something other than the body of Christ. That’s consonant with Paul’s outward mission of God’s unmerited grace in Christ. It too focused on the conduct of the church. Paul’s most important question was “whether the life of his churches was grounded in and reflective of the incongruous gift of God, or whether they were beholden to other systems of worth outside of that gift. The Christ-gift could not take effect in the Galatian churches if it did not enjoy sole and supreme authority to shape their lives.”¹⁴ It’s not only what we Missouri-Synod Lutherans believe in our heads about grace that determines our fidelity to the Reformation. It’s also how we practice that grace in our dealings with one another, and for that we’ll be judged by God.¹⁵

Lamenting the serious divisions in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a district president encouraged me, “Turn the exegetes loose.” He was not advocating carte blanche for interpretive novelties, nor was he writing off the other disciplines of classical academic theology. Though he referred to our exegetical professors, he meant more. Let the church be led in these troubled times by making Bible study one of the ways we are known in our communities and a way our Synod is known in the world. Pastors, that duty is ours. How shall we lead our people into the word so that they yearn for more? How can we receive a positive recommendation like that given the Bereans (Acts 17:10–15)? Part of the answer is to suspend our propensity to talk about our views of church long enough to hear what

regular people have to say. What are their questions, their fears, their hopes? How can we speak God's grace to their hearts? Thomas Long:

The picture of a preacher sitting alone in the study, working with a biblical text in preparation for the sermon, is misleading. It is not the preacher who goes to the Scripture; it is the church that goes to the Scripture by means of the preacher. Those who have sent the preacher (into the study) have questions and concerns, and sometimes the text will speak directly to those questions. The text may, however, call those questions into question.¹⁶

Isagogics, Greek, Hebrew, quotations from the fathers, these all have a place in the study but not so much in our sermons, Bible class lesson plans, and general pastoral care. From pulpit, podium, in meetings, visitation, and certainly in our witness to those outside the faith, our burden is to explain what's going on in their *simul iustus et peccator* workaday lives, not merely in light of God's word but by leading them to direct engagement with it. Whether they know it in the depths of their hearts or not, these people entrusted to our pastoral care are dependent solely upon the incongruous grace of God in Christ, *sola gratia*. To whom shall they go? Doctrinal statements? Writings about the Bible? They have their place to help us understand, but together we go to the unmerited grace of Jesus. "You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God," *sola fide* (Jn 6:68–69). And according to Lutheranism's material principle, that grace and faith come to us through *sola scriptura*. Living and active, the word will convict us anew of the unmerited, incongruous grace God gives to you, to me, to us. This inner mission needs to be soul challenging, sometimes soul wrenching, so that Christ will more and more be formed in us. "Everything is either beholding to God-in-Christ or beholding to human tradition."¹⁷ Congregational culture immersed in Scripture promises to transform our outward mission so that we truly are seen as different from other gatherings, other groups, and other organizations in this chaotic, post-churched time. "In your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pt 3:15). Spirit of our Lord Jesus, turn the exegetical passion loose in us all!

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.
(Rom 11:33–36)

Dale A. Meyer
President

- 1 Martin Luther, Small Catechism, Eighth Commandment.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Cf. John 17:14, 16; 1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 2:9, etc.
- 4 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul & the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).
- 5 Barclay, 160. Emphases his.
- 6 Barclay, 572.
- 7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper Collins, 1954), 96.
- 8 Coveting, forbidden by the ninth and tenth commandments, comes from the heart, thus forming an inclusio with the first commandment.
- 9 Barclay, 439.
- 10 Ibid., 429.
- 11 Ibid., 566.
- 12 Ibid., 571.
- 13 Bible study as “bridge” is taken from Thomas Winger: “Most of what we do in serious Bible study has to do with overcoming the gaps that separate us from the original audience of the scriptural documents. We learn cultural, legal, geographical, theological facts about the people who wrote and received the Scriptures so that we can bridge that gap.” Thomas M. Winger, “The Spoken Word: What’s Up with Orality?” *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003): 136.
- 14 Barclay, 442.
- 15 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:17, etc. Cf. also the Apostles’ Creed: “He will come to judge the living and the dead.”
- 16 Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* 2nd ed (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 49.
- 17 Barclay, 426.

Articles

The Relevance of Remembering the Reformation

Erik H. Herrmann



Erik H. Herrmann is associate professor of historical theology and director of the

Center for Reformation Research at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

In 1983, for the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth, Michael Mathias Precht painted a portrait of Luther entitled, "Martin Luther, inwendig voller Figur," "Martin Luther: Full of Figures Inside." I first saw this print in Peter Newman Brooks's office in Cambridge, (it is now in the Evangelical Lutheran Church

of England's Westfield House, a gift from Brooks). Professor Brooks often held his lectures on Reformation history in his office and he had the delightful habit of breaking away from his notes and carrying on brief dialogues with the portrait of Luther that hung behind us at the back of the room. I even remember once he suddenly shot up from his chair and then dramatically dropped to the floor to bow the knee in genuflection to this painting of Luther, this icon of the Reformation! Of course it was all in jest but it does raise an interesting question—can one still carry on a conversation with Luther? Does he have anything relevant to say to us in this time of tech and Twitter, or can we only look at Luther in admiration from a distance and genuflect to a relic from the past?

Another commemoration is now just around the corner. On October 31, 2017, the world will remember the 500th anniversary of what is often recognized as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther's posting of the Ninety-five Theses against Indulgences in Wittenberg. For various reasons this moment catapulted Luther into the public eye and he became the lightning rod for the reform of the church. As with many big anniversaries, questions of relevance will arise: Why does the Reformation matter? What was at stake? What was it all about? Was it worth it? Does anything that Luther said or taught have meaning for us today? How should Lutherans and the heirs of the Protestant Reformation view Luther?

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the North American Refo500 conference at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 27, 2010. Another form of this paper can be found at www.lutheranreformation.org.

Images of Luther and the Reformation

In 1529, Johannes Cochlaeus, one of Luther's vocal opponents, published a pamphlet entitled the "Seven-headed Luther."¹ In it he depicted Luther as beast with a head of a doctor, a saint, a heretic, an enthusiast, a priest, a church visitor, and Barabbas. All of these were given an interpretation that made Luther look unreliable and dangerous. Since then there have been many images and interpretations of the reformer—some complementary, others less so. Today, with perhaps more books having been written on Luther than any other historical figure (except for Christ), you can be certain Luther's "heads" have increased well beyond seven. In his own day, Luther's admirers and followers hailed him as a prophet, an instrument of God, and a German hero and Hercules battling the tyranny of Rome.² But both then and after his death, the emphasis of the next generation of Lutherans was not on Luther's person or life—he was not to be venerated or emulated, and certainly there were no stories of miracles like the stories of the medieval saints. Rather, the focus was on what Luther taught, the strength of his message, his insight into the Scriptures and the blessed rediscovery of the gospel.³

Later centuries saw Luther and the Reformation through different lenses.⁴ The rationalists of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century—who had little time for religion of any stripe—lamented that so much turmoil in Germany was caused by Luther's "superstitions" and in England by King Henry VIII's love for Anne Boleyn's deep brown eyes. Others, however, could express a more romantic view, casting Luther as the father of the free individual who threw off the shackles of tradition and the church's institutional power. For example, the assessment of Francois Guizot who lived just after the French Revolution:

The Reformation was a vast effort made by the human race to secure its freedom; it was a new-born desire to think and judge freely and independently of all ideas and opinions, which until then Europe had received and been bound to receive from the hands of antiquity. It was a great endeavor to emancipate the human race and to call things by their right names. It was an insurrection of the human mind against the absolute power of the spiritual estate.⁵

In Germany, Luther became a symbol for the patriot and a national hero. The Reformation was deemed Germany's "consummate achievement" and Luther was the leader of liberty into the life of Europe. Into the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the Reformation was often interpreted as an inevitable movement driven more by social and economic forces than by religious ideas. The Peasants' War of 1525 was more

(Right) Michael Mathias Prechtl, Martin Luther, inwendig voller Figur, 1983 (collection of Westfield House, Cambridge, England).

Martin Luther
dort und
hier,
damals
und
heute

Nürnberg
Gespräch
9.-10.



significant to the direction of the sixteenth century than Luther's speech before the emperor at the Diet of Worms.⁶

So which is it? Of course, the Reformation is too complex a time and movement to be only about one person or one thing. Its causes and effects touch on a wide range of social and political factors, theological ideas, unique personalities, and churchly pressures. Some would even argue that it is better to speak of *Reformations* rather than a single, unified movement.⁷

Yet in spite of the complexity of the Reformation, October 31, 1517 marks a very specific event with a relatively narrow scope. Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses was admittedly a match that set off a firestorm, but the nature of this event is often obscured by the tumult that follows rather than its original intent. To put it succinctly, *Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care*, and it is from this perspective that one should try to understand what Luther was up to in those early years of the Reformation. As the Reformation scholar, Jane Strohl, so wonderfully put it, "One could describe Luther's career as the mounting of a life-long pastoral malpractice suit against the church's authority at every level of the hierarchy."⁸

"*Pro re theologica et salute fratrum*"— "For theology and the salvation of the brethren." Luther wrote these words in a letter to his friend Georg Spalatin on October 19, 1516, almost a year before the posting of the Ninety-Five Theses. The letter was a critical assessment of the famous scholar, Erasmus, and his recently published annotated Greek New Testament. On the one hand, Luther greatly appreciated Erasmus's scholarly work—Luther had just finished his lectures on Romans during which he consulted Erasmus's text and was about to begin a new series of lectures on Galatians. However, he was not too impressed with Erasmus's understanding and interpretation of the apostle Paul. Luther wanted Spalatin to convey his concerns to Erasmus even though he knew that his criticisms might fall on deaf ears. After all, he was a "nobody" and Erasmus was known throughout Europe, a "most erudite man." Still, Luther said that he felt compelled to say something since this was not merely an academic difference of opinion—an obscure point that could be debated in the ivory tower of the university. No, Luther was only interested in matters that touched on the heart of everything—the whole of theology and the salvation of all was at stake. When Luther began to change things in the university curriculum at Wittenberg where he taught, he did so because of how it would affect the weekly preaching, teaching, and pastoral care on the parish level. That was the goal of reformation for Luther.

But what was pastoral care on the eve of the Reformation? Of what did it consist?

**Luther's Ninety-Five Theses
were written as a protest
against bad pastoral care.**

The formal, ecclesiastical, that is, priestly aspects of pastoral care could be largely subsumed under the following: (1) the sacrament of penance, (2) the selling/buying

of indulgences, and (3) private mass. On the other hand, there were many less formal but wide-spread practices aimed at the care and comfort of souls: stories of virtues and vices; devotional literature such as the

Fourteen Consolations, Art of Dying

(*ars moriendi*), and the Lives of the Saints alongside a variety of other spiritual practices such as relics, pilgrimages, and prayers patterned after the monastic life. These *Geistlichkeiten* (literally, “spiritualities”), as Luther called them, became the focus of much of Luther’s reform efforts.⁹

It is more customary to think of Luther as a reformer of doctrine (perhaps a specific doctrine like justification or the Lord’s Supper) and as an ardent opponent of papal authority. But questions of doctrine and theological authority arose for Luther as means to a greater end: the pastoral care that nurtures a genuine Christian life. Beginning with his own personal search for consolation and hope, Luther urged practices that would saturate one’s life with the word of Christ. Only in this deep connection to Christ did Luther find freedom and strength to live in a world shaped by the contradiction of God’s providence and the continual presence of sin and suffering.

And so we see Luther repeatedly and programmatically attack what he believed to be false *Geistlichkeiten*—spiritual practices that tried in various ways to overcome the contradiction of Christian existence by pushing God back up into heaven away from the world and mitigating the unpleasant realities of life with the lesser “deities” of saints and other spiritual securities. The intermediary position of the saints had the double benefit of preserving God from blame for sin and people from suffering. That Luther posted the Ninety-Five Theses on the eve of All Saints’ Day was perhaps a coincidence, but there is a certain seemliness in the proximity of his attack on a saintly treasury of merits and a feast celebrating that pantheon of holy intercessors. For Luther such efforts at keeping God and affliction at bay was wishful thinking and fostered a way of living that made faith in a good God and faithful Father inconspicuous if not unnecessary. But because Luther found in Christ a God who entered into the breach between goodness and sin—suffering and salvation—Luther was also able to bring the saints back down into the secular. For Luther, the saints were now those who found hope in life’s contradiction by holding fast to the promises of a God who deigned to suffer for and with humankind. And in that hope the saints found courage to live life in God’s creation—to marvel in it, to find beauty in it, to plant, to harvest, to marry, to raise children—though plagues and peasant wars raged.

It is here that we touch upon perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the Reformation; namely, its subversion of the saint, *its redefinition of the religious life, its sacralization of the secular*. And Luther did this through a single, brilliant assertion: neither ordination nor religious vows make one spiritual or religious; rather, it is baptism and faith. Against

Neither ordination nor religious vows make one spiritual or religious; rather, it is baptism and faith.

prevalent piety, the common people are spiritual. The common people are the priesthood.

In the late-medieval context, Christendom could be divided into what was essentially a two-tiered Christianity. The top tier was the spiritual elite represented by members of the monastic life and, by derivation, the priestly office. After martyrdom, monasticism was long regarded as the religious ideal of Christianity. In an attempt to embody the more sacrificial, radical tenets in the Gospels, the monastic distinguished himself from the ordinary Christian by his vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Ten Commandments were important, but “if you would be perfect” said the Lord, “sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow me.” To be fair, the monastic usually did not make such a distinction between the ordinary Christian and the “perfect”; he regarded his vows and life as intrinsic to the call to discipleship. For the monk, genuine Christianity looked like monasticism. It would be the church’s conscience, an ideal in the midst of Christian mediocrity.

As such, monasticism was frequently both the catalyst and benchmark for reform. More often than not, reform was contained by simply establishing a new monastic order, but sometimes it would spill over into the broader church. For example, the Cluniac reforms of the tenth century would among other things bring the mandatory vow of celibacy into the priesthood, giving priests a deeper share in the same spiritual estate. The common people too, when seeking a more religious, devoted life, approached monasticism as the standard. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, lay piety grew into a “modern devotion” (*devotio moderna*), modeling itself after certain habits and practices found in the monastery. In short, religious life was not common life. The common and ordinary was de facto not spiritual.

It was thus a revolutionary assertion when Martin Luther (an Augustinian monk!) argued that all ordinary Christians were spiritual and religious. Only faith made one spiritual, and the life of the common, lay person was a true religious sacrifice and worship when shaped by God’s commandments. Living as a faithful father or mother, an obedient worker, a responsible citizen or temporal ruler was the real religious life, more pleasing to God than all the vows and daily offices together. Monasticism was neither the ideal nor the moral mediator for the church. Likewise the priesthood. The ordinary Christian did not need a priesthood to stand in the breach between the common and the holy. In baptism, all Christians participate in a spiritual priesthood (1 Pt 2:9) having direct access to God by faith.

The result was a genuine lay piety with secular life as a self-referential spirituality. Everyday vocations were divine callings. When coordinated with other vocations and ordinary works, the neighbor was served and loved and the community flourished. The body of Christ had many members, each with its own function and role. Even the weakest and least was to be honored as a special and important member of the same body of Christ.

A Premodern Luther for a Postmodern World

The image of Luther as a theologian engaged in the reform of pastoral care is compelling and his picture of the Christian life in this world sounds beautiful, yet we know that life isn't like that. The contradictions between the presence of God, the presence of sin, and the presence of suffering continue to exist. Vocations have lost their moral compass and are continually being redefined by social norms, and a whole host of "isms"—capitalism, individualism, consumerism, materialism, and . . . postmodernism.

Postmodernism is often used to describe our present context in the West, though it is not always understood. Often it is defined as relativism—nothing is true except what is true for me. But relativism as such is not really that new of an idea. One can find such views in a variety of movements in late antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment—often called Skepticism.¹⁰ While postmodernism can lead to skepticism there is more to it than that. Simply put, postmodernism describes that, whether we like it or not, the old reliable norms have been called into question. Our so-called foundations—those assumed bases for authorities and power structures, truth claims and ethics—have been crumbling. In this context nothing is objective, everything is relative to our perspective, everything is an interpretation, all conclusions are necessarily provisional. There is no longer a single frame of reference for our understanding of ourselves or the world, rather it is increasingly argued that we live in a network of *narratives* and *stories* each competing with one another to define us and explain our world. We have personal stories, but also societal, and cultural stories and narratives—large metanarratives. All of these narratives and stories shape us, define us, give us meaning and identity even if the “truth” of them is not demonstrable.

Much of this is a reaction to the self-assuredness of *modernity* (hence the “post” of postmodernity) which, building on the foundations of reason and that which can be known through our observations and senses, dismissed the importance of narrative and story altogether. Instead, narrative—including the Bible’s narrative—was regarded as an impediment. One must try to get *behind* the story in order to find some kind of verifiable, historical, rational, or reliable truth. Hans Frei, in his book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, essentially called this modern approach to narrative the “reverse of fit.”¹¹ Back in the days of the Reformation, before the Enlightenment, the premodern reader approached the Bible as an accurate description of his world—as Frei notes, the reader saw “his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era’s events as figures of that storied world” of the Bible.¹² That is, the reader of the premodern era fit her world and her story back into the world of the Bible. But the great shift of modernity is a “reverse of fit”: “All across the theological spectrum the great reversal had taken place,” Frei remarked. “Interpretation was a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world with another story rather than incorporating that world into the biblical story.”¹³ Our present existence became the judge and norm and interpretive key to the story of the Bible.

However, we are said to live in postmodernity. And in this context, we are again seeing an *embrace* of narrative and story, and we can see it in almost every area: in philosophy and ethics and politics; and—over the last quarter century—narrative has also found an increasingly central place in theology. The narrative, the *story* seems to be all important to the postmodern condition . . . the story is king.

But then Luther always knew this. Or at least he came to fully know this as he struggled against his own doubts and uncertainties. In the end, it was the story of the Scriptures alone, the story of God and his people, the story of Christ that filled Luther's horizon and replaced the false securities and crumbling foundations of his day with newfound certainty. I would like to suggest that the nature of Luther's use of the Scriptures as narrative—as identity-shaping story—is a point of relevance worth stressing again in our time.

Luther is in many ways a typical premodern interpreter of the Bible (though the intensity of his occupation with the Scriptures sets him apart even from the monastic tradition). Still, like his contemporaries, Luther found the unity of the biblical narrative as the definitive explanation for his own world. The connection between world history and salvation history was assumed even though it was not always clear. Early on he followed the traditional fourfold method of biblical interpretation that tried to make the connection between the two through a series of figural or allegorical readings of the biblical narrative. Later, however, Luther would eschew this method because it reinforced a view of salvation history that moved along a course of such graduated continuity that Christ and the gospel appeared merely as new and improved versions of Moses and of the law. Instead, Luther began to find a different metanarrative that pervaded the Scriptures beyond that of simply figure and fulfillment or type and antitype.

In any event, Luther gave more intentional thought to how the Scriptures functioned as the word of God. There is a saying that “there are some books that you read, and then there are some books that read you.” For Luther, the Bible was that second kind of book. He did not see the Scriptures primarily as the object of our interpretation, but rather we are the object as the Scriptures interpret us. Now this is not to say that Luther thought there is no need to try to understand the text, or that Scripture requires no study and no explanation. It's simply that for Luther the primary function of the Scriptures is to shape us, form us, to lead us into a new creation, to kill us and make us alive again. Even from his very earliest lectures he held to such a view, “Note well, that the power of Scripture is this: it will not be altered by the one who studies it; instead it transforms the one who loves it. It draws the individual in—into itself—and into its own powers.”¹⁴ The Scriptures draw you in—into its world, its history, its story—so that we read our world, our history, our story against the backdrop of the Bible. The biblical narrative becomes the key to understanding our life, the defining story that interprets our world. It's not that we find the Bible meaningful to our life, but rather our life receives its meaning from the Bible. This, of course, runs completely counter to the *modern* approach, but interestingly it is not so foreign to the *postmodern* understanding of narrative.

For Luther the Scriptures are not merely a deposit of divine propositional truth. They do contain such truth, but the Scriptures are properly more than this. They are the story of the living God of Israel who brings kings and mighty men to naught and raises up the lowly and the orphan, who brings forth springs in the desert and gardens in the desolate places, who makes patriarchs out of pagans, who cuts down the olive tree and makes the stump blossom, who chooses the things that are not, who brings to nothing the things that are. And what's more, this story confronts us with the remarkable claim that it is also *our story*.

We can see this view of the Scriptures in how Luther continually understood the contemporary events around him in light of salvation history. Luther always saw more than just emperors and princes, peasants and popes. He saw their actions as well as his own against the eschatological backdrop of salvation history to which as St. Paul says: our striving is not against flesh and blood but powers and principalities . . . against this present darkness—Luther sees a world full of men but also full of devils!¹⁵ Consider Precht's portrait of Luther again—Luther is stuffed full with figures of his own particular history—peasants aligned against armored knights: The terrifying Peasants War of 1525! Yet for Luther this was not just some social uprising, some class warfare—reading his own history against the backdrop of the biblical narrative Luther viewed these events in apocalyptic terms. Indeed, what could be more apocalyptic than such a complete upheaval of the world and its order.

But isn't Luther's apocalypticism usually highlighted as evidence of his distance from us rather than his contemporary relevance? And isn't such a view of history dangerous? After all, this is precisely what one of his contemporaries, Thomas Müntzer, did in leading the Peasants' War. Müntzer used the Scriptures to interpret the events of his day apocalyptically, being inspired by the stories of the Bible that describe the wars that will arise between good and evil in the final days. To be sure, at times we can see that Luther could also slip into such dangerous apocalyptic interpretations—his assessment of the Jews being the most egregious example.¹⁶

But more often than not, Luther's apocalypticism is nothing like Müntzer's or the other "prophetic" figures of the sixteenth century who tried to seize the reigns of political history in the name of God. The word *apocalypse* means to unveil what lay hidden, to reveal what was before unknown to the world. It asserts that without such a revelation the world's true meaning remains closed. In his Disputation Against Scholastic Theology of 1517 and even more clearly in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther rejected a theology that proceeded without *apocalypse*, without revelation—that one could simply discern the hidden, invisible things of God from the visible things of this world.¹⁷ Such a "theology of glory," as he called it, presses the biblical world into a world understood by logic, philosophy, and human experience. In effect, it tries to fit the narrative of Scripture into the narrative of the world, whether that be the world of philosophy or science, or the world of peasant and prince. With such a reversal of reason and revelation, of dialectic and the apocalyptic, the scholastic would try to fit the righteousness of God

into the righteousness of man, and someone like Thomas Müntzer would search for the eschatological power of God in the power of peasant armies.

Yet Luther's apocalyptic view of the events of his own history was ultimately not governed by the injustices of pope or prince, the threat of peasant or plague, the wars and rumors of wars, nor even the raging of devils. Rather it is the mystery that was hidden for ages (Col 1:26), a wisdom kept from the wise but made known to the lowly (Mt 11:25; 1 Cor 1:18f.), a "theology of the cross" that reveals that the end of the ages has come upon us in Christ the crucified. This is the *apocalypsis* that, for Luther, interprets his world and its end: the crucified one has taken all evil and sin into himself and triumphs over them in his cross. Following Paul's summary of the biblical narrative, especially the grand sweeping history of salvation recounted in Romans and indicated by Galatians, Luther focused on the story of *promise*—God's promise. From the beginning of the biblical story until the end, Luther witnessed God's promise continually breaking into the lives of his people in order to claim the last word so that everything else is penultimate—sin, death, the devil, even the law. Only by the promise does Israel live in faith, and only through faith in the promise do the Gentiles find their spiritual home, for "all the promises of God find their 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20). And this story of promise confronts us as itself a promise—Christus pro nobis—Christ for us. So it is that the Scriptures, confronting us as a promise, require and produce faith. Therefore, in the midst of defeat, the fear of death, the doubts and trials that seem to contradict the power and mercy and justice of God, it is nevertheless the death and resurrection of Christ that promises hope and gives meaning and purpose to one's own story.

Without the revelation of this promise, without this other story, Luther's statements and actions can sound absurd. Well known is the saying ascribed to Luther, "if I knew that the world was to come to an end tomorrow, I would plant an apple tree today." They are not his words, but they seem to get close to his thought. Perhaps more striking is something that he did say: in the midst of the darkness and tumult of the Peasants War, Luther does something even more absurd than plant an apple tree—he decides to get married.¹⁸ Writing to a relative about his possible death at the hands of the peasants, he pauses and says, "If I can manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie *to spite the devil*, should I hear that the peasants continue. I trust they will not steal my courage and joy."¹⁹ A remarkable moment: Luther paradoxically exhibits both resignation from the world and yet at the same time confidence and freedom to live and even invest in the world. He does this because the story of the Scriptures, stained on every page with the blood of Christ!—promises him that the God who destroys the power of sin, death, and the devil is *his God*. In this faith, the biblical story of salvation becomes his own story, interpreting and shaping every moment of his life. Only with his "conscience held captive by the word of God" does he find true freedom.

To be clear, Luther does not mean that every narrative in the Bible is simply to be reduced to the admonition "repent and believe." God's promise, and the faith that it calls

into being, comes not in generalities but in the midst of the particularities of human life and history. (The saying, “the devil’s in the details” is really quite incorrect—the devil is much better at general platitudes; it is God who descends into the irreducible sweat and blood of human history—as Luther says, “into the muck and work that makes his skin smoke.”²⁰) It is in real life, with all its contradictions and uncertainties that God speaks to us, that he draws near to us in the flesh of his Son.

It is here, in the story of God’s promise that Luther’s theology is even more important and urgent for our day. While it is true that the postmodern tearing down of traditional assumptions and foundations exposes the naïveté and arrogance of modern society, it has also left our society in a state of disorientation, disillusionment, and anxiety. There seems to be an ever-growing cultural “*Anfechtung*” that simultaneously rejects all authority but still longs for certainty. In the midst of this uncertain climate with all of life’s contradictions and doubts, that values authenticity more than authority and truthfulness more than truth, Luther’s theology points to, not another set of securities, handholds or objectively verifiable foundations, but a promise, a word that depends entirely on the love and faithfulness of the one who speaks it. Luther’s hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” says that it is just “a little word,” but words and stories are all we have—and “though devils all the world should fill” against the prince of this world, this “one little word can fell him.”

Story and promise—naturally, what we are talking about is Luther’s theology of the word. After all, if Luther does still speak to us today it is not because his words are all that terribly important, but because he directs us to hear the one whose word promises the world hope and life. Before this word, as Luther wrote in his very last words, “*aller Bettler*”—we are all beggars. This is true.²¹

1 Johannes Cochlaeus, *Sieben Köpfe Martini Luthers Vom Hochwirdigen Sacrament des Altars* (Leipsig: Schuman, 1529).

2 Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Baker Academic: 1999).

3 Irena Backus, *Life Writing in Reformation Europe: Lives of Reformers by Friends, Disciples and Foes*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

4 See Walther von Loewenich, *Luther und der Neoprotestantismus* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1963); Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte mit ausgewählten Texten von Lessing bis zur Gegenwart*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); and Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation* (Harvard, 1920), 699–750.

5 François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (Paris, 1828), as quoted by Preserved Smith, *The Age of the Reformation* (Harvard, 1920), 714.

6 See for example Karl Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, trans. by J. L. and E. G. Mulliken. (London, 1897); Roy Pascal, *The Social Basis of the Reformation* (London, 1933); Harold J. Grimm, “Social Forces in the German Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*. Ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, MA, 1972), 85–97; Hajo Holborn, “The Social Basis of the German Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 75–84; Henry Charles Lea, “The Eve of the Reformation,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 98–118; Hartmut Lehmann, ed. *Luthergedächtnis 1817 bis 2017* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

7 E.g., Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

8 Jane E. Strohl, “General Introduction,” in *Luther’s Spirituality* (Paulist Press, 2007), xxiii.

9 Scott Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation Spirituality,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 249–270.

10 Cf. Robert Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melanchthon and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: Philip von Zabern: 1997).

11 Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Yale, 1980).

- 12 Ibid., 3.
- 13 Ibid., 7.
- 14 *LW* 10, 332.
- 15 See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Eerdmanns, 2008,)1–5.
- 16 See Mark Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–1546* (Fortress: 1983).
- 17 *LW* 31, 9–16; 39–70.
- 18 See Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 5.
- 19 *WA* BR 3:482.
- 20 *WA* 4, 608–609.
- 21 *WA* TR 5:168.

Beyond Law and Gospel? Reflections on Speaking the Word in a (Post)modern World

Mark A. Seifrid



Mark Seifrid is a professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. He has published

major works on justification in the New Testament and a commentary on 2 Corinthians, and is currently writing a commentary on Galatians. He has published numerous articles on Pauline theology and the doctrine of justification — in particular articulating a Lutheran view of justification as drawn from the Pauline Epistles.

There's no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish between the law and the gospel. We may think we understand it when we are listening to a sermon, but we're far from it. Only the Holy Spirit knows this. Even the man Christ was so wanting in understanding when he was in the vineyard that an angel had to console him; though he was a doctor from heaven he was strengthened by the angel. Because I've been writing so much and so long about it, you'd think I'd know the distinction, but when a crisis comes I recognize very well that I am far,

far from understanding. So God alone should and must be our holy master.¹

Thus Luther writes concerning the distinction between law and gospel, between the demands of God and the grace of God, a distinction that he finds from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures. The gift of such discernment, as Luther articulates it here, entails seeing through trouble, suffering, and crisis to the saving goodness of God at work in and through the very experience of evil. It also entails the gift of seeing through remaining goodness of the creation to see that it is a “broken goodness.” The present world and all human beings within it—ourselves included—lie under the power of sin and evil.²

For Luther, God is his own interpreter. It is finally God who must make the meaning of the Scriptures plain to us, must open the text to us in its witness to the crucified and risen Christ, not apart from, but precisely within our own hearing and reading of the Scriptures.³ It is in this way that God makes his ways with us known to us. That is the message of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, which we shall briefly consider below. Labor as we might with the text, we cannot “of our own reason and strength” come to understand it apart from the Holy Spirit. All other books we may read and understand with our own

Editor's note

This essay was first presented to a convocation called by the Department of Practical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on May 4, 2016.

powers. The Bible is the book that reads us.⁴ This is the nature of its authority.⁵ This Emmaus-road inversion of our usual assumptions is necessary to God's saving work in us. Interpretation is finally not our mastery of the Scriptures, but their mastery of us. The Scriptures interpret us in our relationship to God, a broken relationship to which we are otherwise blind and deaf.⁶ We need a Savior because we are sinners, not merely in an abstract and general confession, but specifically and practically. It is precisely this truth that we—even we who believe—are unwilling and unable to hear apart from the work of the Spirit, who brings home the word of Scripture to our hearts. Distinguishing between law and gospel, between the demands of God and saving grace of God in Christ, is not a hermeneutical tool that once learned may be tucked away among others.

It is no secret that the message of Scripture faces fresh challenges in our time.⁷ Not only evangelizing the lost, but also evangelizing the saved has become more difficult. For a variety of reasons, our society has become more secular, more distanced from the life of churches, more distanced from the message of Scripture. That is not to say that it has become “godless.” Modernity asked whether there was a God. But that question merely hid the idolizing of the human being and human powers that lay behind it. It is no surprise, then, that postmodernity has discovered many gods: Whatever works for you! This phenomenon makes manifest what Luther understood long ago: “A god is that from which one supposes that they supply themselves with all good and in whom they have refuge in all distress. . . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your G/god.”⁸ This diagnosis already hints at the abiding power of the Scriptures to interpret fallen human beings, including us and our contemporaries. We may reflect on this truth in relationship to our speaking the gospel in our time as it appears in three biblical contexts.

The first of these, to which we will give most of our attention, is the Lukan report of Paul’s speech before the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34). Before that speech, in the marketplace of Athens, Paul proclaimed “Jesus and the resurrection” as good news (Acts 17:18). This Lukan description most likely represents a concluding summary of Paul’s proclamation, which was preceded by something like the Areopagus speech. That Paul’s audience of philosophers described him as a “seed-picker” (*σπερμολόγος*) suggests that we are to understand that he had been citing or alluding to poets and philosophers such as Aratus, as Luke subsequently presents him doing in the Areopagus speech.

The collision of worldviews brought confusion. Paul’s Epicurean and Stoic hearers understood him to be announcing “foreign deities,” namely, *Jesus* and *Anastasis* (“the resurrection”). This charge of introducing foreign deities into Athens might subtly allude to the condemnation of Socrates. But Luke presents the situation as a matter of curiosity on the part of the hearers rather than one of danger for Paul.⁹ Paul’s audience brought him to the Areopagus where they allowed him to explain himself (Acts 17:16–18).

Here, it turns out, Athens does have something to do with Jerusalem, and vice versa.¹⁰ Luke presents Paul as addressing his audience in their own terms, with a friendly *captatio*

benevolentiae intended to win their attention: “I see that you are most religious” (Acts 17:22). The descriptive may well be slightly ambiguous: on the one hand the adjective δευτιδαιμονεστέρος may signify “extremely god-fearing,” on the other hand it may characterize a local religion as bigotry and credulity, that is, “highly superstitious.” There is a hint of the latter idea in Festus’s words concerning Paul and his accusers in Acts 25:19. That is likely the case in this context as well. As Luke’s following report shows, the point of contact is also the point of confrontation. Paul’s appeal to the altar inscription “to an unknown god” serves this purpose.¹¹ The altar most likely was dedicated to a god or gods who could not be named or identified in the hope of gaining their help or avoiding offending them.¹² This uncertainty concerning God provides the starting point of Paul’s address. He proclaims to them “the God whom you worship in ignorance” (Acts 17:23). This “ignorance” is a culpable ignorance. The warnings against supposing that the divine being dwells in temples made by human hands, or is anything like that which is formed from human skill and imagination suggest that the inscription serves as an implicit indictment on the many other objects of reverence (*σεβάσματα*) that filled Athens (Acts 17:23). There is no doubt that the Athenians worship, and indeed, worship that which is divine (τὸ θεῖον; Acts 17:29). But they worship falsely in idolatry, just as all idolatry feeds parasitically upon the name of the true God.¹³ The point of contact is thus the point of confrontation.¹⁴ Athens and Jerusalem meet one another at the point of provocation.

“Confrontation in contact” continues throughout the speech. The God who made the world and all that is in it does not “dwell in temples made by human hands,” since he is Lord of heaven and earth (Acts 17:24).¹⁵ Nor is this God served by human hands, as if needing anything. This God gives to all life, and breath, and all things.¹⁶ Each of these statements has biblical roots, yet each of them also reflects Stoic language and thought.¹⁷ In each instance there is a point of confrontation with the Athenian audience. The opening of rejection of temples as dwelling places of deity is constructed with a view to the concluding condemnation of idolatry: “we ought not think that the deity is like material things, gold, silver, or stone *formed by human skill and imagination*” (Acts 17:29).¹⁸ From the outset, the language of the speech intimates that idolatry turns out in the end to be the idolization of human powers, especially the power of thought, speech, and artistic expression.¹⁹

God cannot be placed in a “box” of an idol or temple that is constructed by human hands.²⁰ On the contrary, it is God who has placed all the nations in “boxes.” From one human being, God made every nation to dwell on the face of the earth and determined their times and boundaries (Acts 17:26).²¹ That all peoples have been created from one human being establishes God’s claim on all of them, including the Athenians.²² The same is true of the concluding announcement that God will judge the inhabited world through one human being (Acts 17:31). Paul is not introducing “foreign deities” in Athens, as they supposed. He is announcing to the Athenians the God who made them, who is near them, and whom they worship in blind and rebellious ignorance.

Why then has God placed them together with other peoples in the Babylonian “boxes” of their times and places?²³ The divinely set limits are intended to induce the peoples to seek the God who transcends these limits. God scattered the nations so that they might seek him, so that they might reach out for him with their hands, touch him, and find him (ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν).²⁴ God is palpably near. The true God is not hard to find: he is not far from any one of us (Acts 17:27–28a).

The thought is not only biblical, but also Stoic. Paul explains himself with a series of statements drawn from Stoic thought, including a citation from the early philosopher-poet Aratus: “For in him we live, and move, and exist,²⁵ as also certain poets of yours have said ‘For we are [God’s] kind/genus/offspring.’”²⁶

How shall we understand Paul’s speech here? How is it that “our existence in God” demonstrates that we are God’s offspring? Likely it is in a twofold way. In the first place, the idea of the human being bearing the *imago Dei* is operative here, as one also finds it in Stoic thought. And yet there is a twist, a point of confrontation. It is not the rationality of the human being that secures our participation in the divine, as one finds it, for example, with Epictetus,²⁷ it is instead our actual being and existence in the world. Since we are God’s “living and moving” offspring, it is evident that God is not like the inert materials from which idols and their temples are constructed.

Secondly, the line from Aratus also takes up Paul’s preceding assertion that God “gives to all life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25). The divine omnipresence is not merely a rational power, but the loving, fatherly presence of the Creator (Acts 17:25).²⁸ The same thought appears in the Lukan report of Paul’s address to the crowd in Lystra.²⁹ Our living and moving existence “in God” shows that we are God’s offspring, for whom the living God and Creator constantly cares.³⁰ At this point, Paul’s argument is not far from Aratus’s paean to Zeus: “Always we all have need of Zeus, for we are of his kind.”³¹ It is likewise very close to Cleanthes’s hymn to Zeus.³² Paul continues to borrow from the Stoics. He speaks to his audience in language they understand, appealing to them by means of God’s address to all human beings through the providential rule of creation.³³ Paul “re-presents” the witness of Scripture to God as Creator in the language and thought of his hearers.³⁴

Furthermore, Paul’s apologetic, according to Luke, is not merely intellectual but also personal and existential. God makes himself known to each of us through the goodness of his created works.³⁵ This thought is not at odds with Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–32.³⁶ The point of the Areopagus speech is to expose the unjustified idolatry and rebellion of the human being in the face of the loving self-revelation of the one true God. The problem of knowing God does not lie in the limitations of natural revelation; it lies in the natural theology of the human being, who always perverts that revelation in idolatry. Until now God has overlooked “the times of ignorance.”³⁷ But now God commands all people everywhere—including the Athenians—to repent.³⁸ They are to repent their willful ignorance of the one true God.³⁹ As we have noted, the point of contact is the point of confrontation. Indeed, a final confrontation is coming: God has

set a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness, through a human being whom he has appointed.⁴⁰ The “judgment of the world in righteousness” suggests a contention between God and the world as to the identity of the true God, such as that which appears prominently in the book of Isaiah.⁴¹ God has given reliable evidence ($\pi\acute{\imath}\sigma\tau\acute{\imath}\varsigma$) of this purpose by raising this one human being from the dead (Acts 17:30–31). Paul thus preaches “law” to his hearers in the form of the first commandment. The word of God to Israel as the one who redeemed it from Egypt is the address of the loving Creator to all human beings. We are “to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”⁴² We are to have no other gods before him.

At the mention of the resurrection, Paul’s speech ends. Luke gives the impression that it was so intended. Perhaps. Some in the audience mocked this idea. It is not impossible that a line from Aeschylus’s *Eumenides* plays a role in this element of the Lukian report: “once someone is dead, there is no raising them up ($\grave{\alpha}\nu\alpha\sigma\tau\acute{\imath}\varsigma$).”⁴³ Nevertheless, at least some in the audience expressed the desire to hear Paul again on the topic (Acts 17:33). The foundation for the proclamation of the gospel had been laid.

Luke’s earlier summary of Paul’s discourse in the marketplace gives an indication as to what Paul next would have announced: he would have proclaimed “Jesus and the resurrection” as good news (Acts 17:18). *Jesus* is the name by which the “unknown God” is made known savingly to those in rebellion, the one name “given under heaven among human beings by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The distance from Stoic thought now becomes apparent. God is not known as one of many names.⁴⁴ The God who already is near and tangible in his providential care for us has made himself savingly near us in Jesus. The Lukian account of the words of the risen Lord to his disciples on the day of the resurrection resonates with his presentation of Paul’s speech: “ψηλαφήσατέ με!” (“Touch me!” Lk 24:39).

As we have seen, in the Areopagus speech, Paul proclaims Jesus as eschatological judge—the very image of the final judge that tormented Luther the monk—before he preaches him as Savior. One can hardly make this order a hard and fast rule, as Paul’s response to the Philippian jailer makes clear.⁴⁵ When the jailor in terror asks what he must do to be saved, Paul immediately answers, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household!” (Acts 16:31).⁴⁶ In the face of death and in the moment of despair there could be no other response. In Athens, however, it was necessary to announce judgment before announcing salvation. Comfort comes only to the troubled. The comfortable must be troubled in order for comfort to come to them.

What, then, shall we make of Paul’s Areopagus speech? First, we must learn with Paul how to translate, how to speak the gospel in a way that communicates to our contemporaries in their own language.⁴⁷ Luke presents Paul first of all as a missionary. Paul goes to Athens, to the place where his hearers live. He sees the images of the gods that they worshipped and on which they hung their hearts. Secondly, Luke presents Paul as speaking to his audience about God in their own terms in a way that is nearly scandalous to us. His

discourse is so thoroughly informed by Hellenistic and especially Stoic conceptions that, if it were removed from context, we would not recognize it as the voice of Paul. We, too, must learn, as Luther urges to *das Volk aufs Maul schauen* (look at people in their snout), to communicate the gospel in word, voice, and song in *their* language, not ours. Just as all Christians are theologians, we all are called, both individually and corporately, to be “translators” of God’s word.⁴⁸

In this regard, it is important to see the form of Paul’s argument. He does not here engage in a rational proof of the resurrection, certainly not in a way that corresponds to a modernist hermeneutic. Nor does he present a story line of Scripture in which he then locates the gospel.⁴⁹ He simply announces the resurrection. He does not address the moral failures of his hearers, although he might well have done so. He appeals to the witness that God the Creator is quietly and constantly speaking to every human being within the world in his fatherly goodness. It is this witness that pins every human being down not merely in their sinful deeds, which may be treated all too superficially, but in the primal sin of idolatry: our refusal to honor God as God and give him thanks, making ourselves god in God’s place (Rom 1:21).

Secondly, and most importantly, according to the Lukan report, Paul openly announces a coming day of judgment without any qualifications or preparation of his hearers. Only in this way could Paul preach Jesus and the resurrection as good news. Our own speaking the message of Scripture requires not only translation, but also confrontation. Confrontation is the necessary outcome of the translation of the message of Scripture. In this regard, it is necessary for us, too, to announce and reintroduce the reality of the final judgment to our contemporaries, from whose thinking this horizon has almost universally disappeared.

The announcement of a final judgment brings with it, as it did for Paul, a universal call to repentance, which is not mere moral improvement, but the turning to the true God and therewith turning away from the idols of the heart. In this regard, it is worth reminding ourselves that God’s second use of the law, the *usus elencticus*, especially as it is bound up with the first commandment, does not deliver an alien demand, but one that resonates within every human heart. The message that we have a Creator to whom we must give account rings true within the human heart, even when it is denied that there is a Creator.

How, then, shall we translate the message of Scripture so as to rightly confront our time with that message? That will depend, of course, on the audience whom we address. But several observations may be helpful in a variety of instances. Our cities may not (yet) be filled with the temples and altars of idols, but human hearts remain captivated by the gods of power, pleasure, wealth, and success. If outward and visible idols were Paul’s starting point, the inward idols of the heart must be the starting point for our speaking the gospel. As Paul’s reference to the “imagination and skill” of human beings in the construction of idols suggests, idolatry at its root is the idolization of human powers. The contemporary difference from antiquity is only external: the outward idol falls away, and



The Erechtheum, western side, Acropolis, Athens, Greece

human abilities themselves become the object of worship—an idolatry to which Christians themselves are not immune. This “idolatry” always entails an implicit “legalism,” even if it remains unnoticed. As Oswald Bayer has observed, our world paradoxically has become increasingly nomistic, precisely in its becoming increasingly antinomian.⁵⁰ The presupposition that the human being is inherently autonomous and free leads to legalism in an extreme form. We are free in theory, but must make ourselves free in practice.⁵¹ We are tempted to seek to establish our identity and our lives by the “works of human hands” and thus substitute an idol for the true God. We are Athenians, whether we recognize it or not. This demand to actualize our freedom, to make something of ourselves, means that we are called to take upon ourselves burdens that we were not created to bear. In this respect, our remarkable prosperity creates burdens for us. Because there are so many possibilities for self-development, so many opportunities for success, so many chances to make something of oneself, many young people may become depressed—and not a few older

ones do, too. If you can't succeed and make something of yourself with all the possibilities that lie before you, what does that say about you?

On top of this demand, there remains the inward sense of moral responsibility to care for others. Can we truly be successful and free apart from giving back or giving forward? Our society, still under the influence of its cultural heritage in Christianity, seems to sense this truth. As God's creatures, we cannot finally rid ourselves of it.⁵²

The possibilities of individual success together with the gradual disintegration of the family have also led to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Once our personal identity is cut loose from a loving God, it becomes fragmented into the various roles that we must fulfill successfully. We have a Facebook self, a familial self, a self among friends, a self in our employment, and perhaps yet other selves. But which self is our true self? Is our self constituted by our achievements? Is it constituted by what our friends or family say of us? Is it constituted by the stories that we tell ourselves? Is there a self there at all? Or is self a mere construction? Life becomes meaningless. In the midst of imprisonment and danger that threatened to dissolve his own identity, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could still end his poem, "Who am I?" with the confession, "Whoever I am, I am yours, O God!"⁵³ Stripped of that confession Bonhoeffer's poetic question becomes one of sheer despair. The loss of personal identity and worth that is ours in the unconditioned acceptance and love of God our Creator is immeasurable. It cannot find compensation in any sort of story that we tell ourselves, any recognition by others, nor any achievement that we might attain.

There will be times of tragedy and despair that require the immediate word of the gospel from us, as was the case with Paul. In many other circumstances, however, it is necessary to first speak the demand of God to our contemporaries, and to do so in terms that they will understand, especially now in terms of the personal identity, worth, and value as persons that we all seek. The Areopagus speech instructs us that this "translation" of the Scriptures necessarily means a confrontation. The gospel does not rightly address us if it is thought to speak merely to the needs that we sense and feel. Otherwise, even in despair, we are tempted to substitute one idol for another. The Scriptures speak to the one need that we do not sense or feel, the need to repent of the idols upon which we hang our hearts. God's demand must be announced. It must be announced in view of the coming final judgment—a judgment that has taken place already in the cross of Jesus. This announcement is "the word of the cross" that attacks the false optimism, the *superbia* of the human being that often is at work even within despair. This announcement is not merely for the lost, it is for us as Christians as well. We are not different from our neighbors. Apart from this confrontation, the gospel can never make its home in the human heart, neither ours nor that of our neighbor.

We may remind ourselves that Corinth is not all that distant from Athens. The issue that Paul addresses in Corinth—the various problems boil down to only one issue—is not far from the point of confrontation in the Areopagus speech. Paul deals again with idolatry, not merely in the question of idol meats, but also more fundamentally in the

Corinthian idolization of gifts of God and the human beings to whom they have been granted. Now the idols are found not in the marketplace of Athens, but—despite their profession of the gospel—in the hearts and minds of the Corinthians. Not only is Corinth close to Athens, it is close to us today. The question of idolatry is finally a hermeneutical one: are we able to interpret and judge God and God's work, or is it God's work that judges us? As we observed at the outset, this question has to do with the distinction between law and gospel, a distinction that Paul brings to direct expression in 2 Corinthians 3:6: "the letter kills and the Spirit gives life."⁵⁴ God gives the life and righteousness of the resurrection by the word of the gospel only where the word of the law has first brought death and condemnation. This working of death and life, or more precisely, life within death bears the hermeneutical significance that we noted at the outset. We are interpreted by the Scriptures, and remain interpreted by the Scriptures, before we interpret them. In this manner, God works our salvation, namely, salvation from ourselves and our culpable blindness. Paul makes precisely this point in his following appeal to the story of Moses's veil (2 Cor 3:12–18). Only where the Spirit of the Lord is present—namely, in Christ and the apostolic proclamation of Christ—is there freedom, the freedom of communication of God, the Creator and Savior of the fallen human creature (2 Cor 3:16–18; 4:5–6). This "hermeneutical" function of the gospel comes to expression prominently in the Corinthian correspondence, because the Corinthians suppose that they are capable of judging marks of the saving work of God, the presence of Christ, and the legitimacy of an apostle.⁵⁵ They do not recognize that the human capacity to judge is always guided by fallen human standards of wisdom, power, and status. It is therefore blind to the work of God and deaf to the gospel. The gospel itself may bring judgment, not where it is heard and believed, but where it is heard and disbelieved, where it is interpreted and judged according to the standards of the present, fallen world.⁵⁶ Here human powers are idolized directly. It is for this reason that Paul announces the gospel to the Corinthians as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18). The risen Lord is the crucified Christ. The marks of the nails remain in his hands, and we shall forever know why they are there. Aren't we in precisely the same danger that the Corinthians were? Aren't we in new ways opened by our technological advances exposed to the danger of measuring the ministry of the gospel by our own standards of power and success? The work of God in "letter and Spirit," condemning and yet giving life, continues to speak afresh to our time.

Finally, it would be remiss to overlook the significance of the distinction between law and gospel for Christian living. A proper understanding of how the law with all its righteous requirements finds its fulfillment in the good news of Jesus Christ sets us free. It liberates us for the freedom of true service. This ground has been covered before in the debates in the sixteenth century over good works and the law, especially in its "third use."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the concerns of our time require fresh reflection on the relationship of the gospel to ethics, or more properly, to Christian living and the new obedience. For our purposes, it will be best to consider Romans 13:8–14.⁵⁸ The text represents the typical

pattern of Paul's exhortation, in which the "new obedience" to which he exhorts his readers paradoxically arises from God's grace and the gift of salvation given in Christ. This intimate connection between the gift of salvation and the new life of the Christian bears obvious significance for the preaching of the gospel.

In context, Paul's exhortation in Romans 13:8–14 is a synthesis of his preceding instruction concerning life in the church and life in the world. It further anticipates his call to reconciliation between Gentiles and conservative Jews in Romans 14:1–15:13. He opens by taking up afresh the wording of his preceding call to civil obedience: "owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another, for the one who loves the other has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8). The exhortation has two dimensions. First, Paul places Christians under an unending debt. That which is due to a governing official might be paid and finished (Rom 13:7). But we remain permanently indebted to our neighbor to love them. While Paul does not state precisely what establishes that debt, the following context makes it fairly clear. It is not the law that makes us debtors. The law finds its summary and fulfillment in love, thus leaving all its other commandments behind.⁵⁹ We are instead indebted by the love of God in Christ, the love which is characteristic of the life of the eschaton that has now dawned (Rom 13:11–13). Paul's last word in this context is his call to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh with respect to its desires" (Rom 13:14). The last time that Paul has spoken of "our Lord Jesus Christ" is in Romans 8:39, where he affirms that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is found in him. That is his implicit point. As Christ has loved us, so we are to love one another. The debt that we unendingly owe, then, is not a debt to God, as if we could secure our place with him. We are indebted by the gospel to our neighbor. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."⁶⁰

This observation points us, secondly, to the other dimension of the exhortation. Paul presupposes that *love* is a present reality. That is already clear in Romans 13:10, "Love does not harm the neighbor, love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." Paul presents love not as an ideal to be attained, but a reality that has arrived already. This perspective becomes even clearer in the following exhortation. Paul urges his readers to so act in love, "knowing the time that it is the hour for us to awaken from sleep." Salvation is near, and draws ever nearer, even within our mortal life. Indeed, "the night has passed, the day has come." We must therefore set aside the deeds of darkness and clothe ourselves with the weapons of the light (Rom 13:12). We are to clothe ourselves again and again with Christ, who is the light and the reality of the eschaton (Rom 13:14). Paul is speaking to baptized Christians, calling them to return ever again to the Christ who was given to them in baptism (Rom 6:3–4). In this earthly life we are never done turning away from our rebellion and turning to God. We are never done with receiving the gospel.

As is the case elsewhere, Paul's call to the Christian life is paradoxical in nature. It is a call to the life of the age to come already given to us in Christ. We are to do what already

has been done for us. We are to become what we already have been made to be in Jesus Christ. We have been given a new life in him that we must again and again grasp as our own. That life is not the life under the law, to which we have died in Christ (Rom 7:6). The new life, given to us in Jesus Christ is the life of the eschaton, the law's fulfillment. In this fulfillment, every commandment, including all the prohibitions of the Decalogue, has been "summarized" (*ἀνακεφαλαιούται*) and thus transcended. The ones who love their neighbors do not need to be told not to murder them, or be warned against adultery, theft, or coveting. Love does no harm to the neighbor. It is the fulfillment of the law, which, although it is holy, right, and good, could never make us holy, right, and good. Paul's description of the law's fulfillment in love presupposes a spontaneity of actions that serve the neighbor and seek their good before and apart from any commandment.

Nevertheless, here as elsewhere, Paul instructs his readers that they are not to walk, not to conduct their life as Christians "in carousings and bouts of drunkenness, not in deeds of immorality and licentiousness, not in strife and jealousy" (Rom 13:13). We remain in need of instruction, despite the presence of spontaneous love. This instruction, which echoes the prohibitions of the law is not merely educative, although it certainly serves that function. It also bears an implicit warning: deeds such as these are the deeds of darkness. They are the deeds of the fallen world that remains under divine judgment. In Galatians Paul puts the matter quite sharply: "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal 5:21). One might well describe Paul's exhortation here and elsewhere as "the third use of the law," but it is well-nigh impossible to separate it from the *usus elenchiticus*. We need the instruction of the law, but that instruction, when delivered, invariably condemns us.

Yet Paul delivers his exhortation to his readers in calling them afresh to the gospel, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its desires" (Rom 13:14). Paul makes it clear that God's justifying work in Jesus not only brings forgiveness, but also brings a new life. The gospel makes us new creatures, no matter that we rarely feel it to be so. In his proclamation and instruction, Paul reminds his readers in Rome and elsewhere precisely what it is that God has given them and made them to be in Jesus Christ. He does so here and elsewhere with an eye to their particular needs. In effect, he answers the question, "Who is Jesus Christ for me today?" not in terms of the subjective questioning of his readers, but in his authority as an apostle of Christ who delivers the gospel to them at the point where they need it.⁶¹

We live in a time in which our society is unravelling morally, a deterioration which has an enormous impact on our churches. In many admirable and praiseworthy ways, many churches are socially engaged in ways that were lacking in the past, and likewise seek to address tremendous needs within their own walls. The comfort of the forgiveness of sins as well as instruction in Christian living are absolutely essential in this work. But the apostle Paul shows us that the two cannot finally be separated from one another. We must avoid the danger of producing by our preaching mere cathartic experiences, which

ever only end in the implicit word, “You have been forgiven, go home and feel better.” This preaching finally becomes cheap grace. At the same time we must avoid dispensing mere moral instruction that implicitly ends with the thought, “This is what God wants you to do. Go home and by the help of the Spirit, try harder.” This preaching finally becomes cheap ethics. To rightly preach the demands of God and the grace of God in Christ, to rightly preach law and gospel, will mean that we must first preach not merely abstractly and generally, but really and concretely to real sinners concerning real sins. We desperately need pastors and not mere preachers. In preaching the gospel we must announce that the gospel of the forgiveness of sins brings forgiveness and release from real sins to a new life, reminding our hearers that new life has been given to each one of us, according to our needs, in Christ. The gospel brings the fulfillment of the law, the life of the new creation into the present world—into our lives in the present world.

Does our time call us to go beyond preaching the Scriptures as law and gospel? As long as we do not allow the distinction between law and gospel to become a mere abstract formula, but seek ever afresh within the Scriptures themselves to discern how the demands of God that expose our rebellion find their fulfillment in the crucified and risen Christ, there is no need to do so. And there is every reason to avoid it. As Luther reminds us, the grasping of this distinction and the preaching of it is so fine an art that God alone must be our master, and ever again teach us by his Holy Spirit to hear and speak his word rightly. That is just as true in our postmodern world as it was in the sixteenth century.⁶²

1 LW 54:127 (No. 1234) = WA TR 2, 4, 7–16.

2 Luther elsewhere gives these two forms of discernment a name. They constitute the “theology of the cross,” by which a true theologian names things as they are, calling supposed “good works” evil and suffering good. See LW 31:52–53 (Heidelberg Disputation, Theses 19–22).

3 On this topic, see James W. Voelz, “Reading Scripture as Lutherans in the Post-Modern Era” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 309–334.

4 I have drawn this wording from the title: H.-R. Weber, *The Book That Reads Me: A Handbook for Bible Study Enablers* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1995).

5 On the topic see O. Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Zu Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), esp. 39–58.

6 It is this relationship between God and the human being that Luther regards—rightly—as the proper subject of Scripture: “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner. Whatever is asked or discussed in theology outside this subject, is error and poison.” (LW 12:310 = WA 40.II:328, 7–20).

7 On this topic see Robert Kolb, *Speaking the Gospel Today: A Theology for Evangelism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984).

8 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

9 Paul appears in something of the role of Socrates, who was condemned for introducing “new” or “foreign” deities into Athens (e.g. Plato, *Apologia* 26b2–6). Perhaps the danger of such a condemnation remained, as a report from Josephus suggests (*Contra Apionem* 2.267–268). But the Lukan account that the Athenians were constantly curious about new things is redolent of the account of Strabo (*Geographica* 10.3.18; late first century BC), who mockingly reports that the Athenians are so hospitable that they happily welcome new gods. Might one suggest that this openness was due to pent-up demand? It is unlikely that Luke is playing up the danger of condemnation or execution. The Epicureans and Stoics who brought Paul before the Areopagus are presented not as finding his message objectionable so much as worthy of derision: Paul is a mere “seed-picker,” citing the poets without bringing forth a coherent message. Luke presents them as intellectually curious about the novel message, not as offended by it. Furthermore, in the Lukan account Paul does not announce new gods. He proclaims the “unknown God” to whom an altar already had been dedicated. Perhaps Luke plays upon the well-known role of Socrates in his presentation of Paul. But could one have avoided doing so in any depiction of the proclamation of the gospel? In any case, the narrative plays down any connection with Socrates’s condemnation.

10 Tertullian, *Prescriptions against Heretics*, 7.

- 11 The appeal to an altar inscription often functioned as a *captatio benevolentiae*, as is clear from other examples. There is direct attestation of altars to “unknown gods,” but not to one dedicated “an unknown god.” It remains quite possible that there was such an altar in Athens. It is also possible that Luke (and Paul) rhetorically shift to the singular in order to establish a point of contact for the preaching. Such a move would have been perfectly acceptable to Stoic listeners. See Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God’ in Athens (Acts 17:23) and the Cults of ‘Unknown Gods’ in the Greco-Roman World,” *Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity: Essays on Their Interaction Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology* 8 (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1994), 166–196, 197–198.
- 12 The most likely alternative would be an indirect reference to the God of the Jews. Cf. P. W. van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God,’” 185–196.
- 13 Luther recognized this inherent and parasitic dimension of idolatry. See Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* ed. Victor I. Gruhn; trans. Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 45–57:
- (Luther’s) discernment of the reality of the divine name in idols did not of course negate the prophet’s conviction that idol worship was robbing God of the honor due him. Nevertheless, to Luther it was truly an act of robbery. The pagans had robbed God of his name (50).
- But (the) idols live by (God’s) name, and the veneration of his name is the truth of natural religion. Thus truth and error are intimately linked with one another, and only the power of the divine Word can separate the two (51–52).
- 14 Here we touch on the dated debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner concerning natural theology and stand closer to Brunner than to Barth. The recognition that the point of contact is the point of confrontation—the *Anknüpfungspunkt* is the *Angriiffspunkt*—resolves this old debate sufficiently, I think. For a balanced and thoughtful analysis of the debate, see Trevor Hart, “A Capacity for Ambiguity?: The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited,” *TynB* 44 (1993): 289–305.
- 15 The Lukan report of Paul’s witness to the crowd in Lystra is similar, although in this instance his appeal to “turn to the living God, who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that is in them” recalls biblical language (cf. Ex 2:11; Dan [OG] 4:37; LXX Ps 145:6).
- 16 Cf. Is 17:8; 31:7, 9.
- 17 See Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Leipzig/Berlin: Teubner, 1913), 13–30, although we may reject the suggestion that “the unknown god” referred to the God of the Jews. For a thorough reassessment of Norden’s magisterial work, see van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God,’” 165–202.
- 18 Its first-person form maintains contact with the hearers.
- 19 On this theme, see Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 46–47.
- 20 Paul’s assertion that God does not dwell in temples “made with human hands” corresponds to the Isaianic word that appears in Stephen’s criticism of the Jerusalem temple in Acts 7:47–49 (cf. Is 66:1). These assertions serve in both instances to establish the universal presence of God, who dwells neither in the temple of the Jews nor in pagan temples.
- 21 Again the pattern of the preaching in Lystra is similar. In this case, however, there is a suggestion of human rebellion that anticipates a coming judgment: “in past times God permitted the nations ($\tauὰ \Thetaνη$) to go their own ways, yet he did not leave himself unattested” (Acts 14:16–17).
- 22 Universalism appears in Stoic thought as well, although it takes the form of human rationalism. According to Epictetus, when asked to what country he belonged, Socrates refused to be called an Athenian or a Corinthian, but insisted that he was “rather of the universe” ($\alphaὐλλα \ότι \χόσμος$): Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.9.1–2.
- 23 The allusion to the story of the tower of Babel is evident (Gn 11:1–9). Yet, just Paul, according to Luke, omits any reference to the fall; in this case he says nothing of the judgment of God that resulted in the scattering of the nations.
- 24 As the usage of both the Septuagint and the New Testament shows, the verb $\psiηλαφάω$ does not in most contexts bear negative connotations (such as “blindly groping about”). The other Lukan usage is clearly positive. The risen Jesus says to the eleven, “Touch me and see that a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you behold that I have!” (Lk 24:39). Human hands have not been made to serve God’s needs, but to grasp and find him in his goodness and power (cf. Acts 17:25).
- 25 This statement is thought to have come from Epimenides of Knossos, a poet-philosopher from the sixth century BC, but its origin is uncertain.
- 26 The citation is drawn from the opening paean to Zeus in Aratus *Phenomena* 1–5, in which Zeus is characterized as the beneficent creator and ruler of humanity.
- 27 Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.3.1–9; 1.9.5–6.
- 28 See Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.24.15–16.
- 29 The living God, who made the heavens and earth is not without witness in the world. He does good to all in giving us rain and fruitful seasons, supplying us with food and filling our hearts with happiness (Acts 14:15–17).
- 30 Once again the preaching in Lystra corresponds to Paul’s message here: God bears witness to himself even among the wayward peoples of the earth by doing them good, providing rain and times of produce, supplying food and making hearts glad (Acts 14:17).
- 31 Aratus, *Phenomena* 1.4: “πάντη δὲ Διός κεχρίμεθα πάντες. Τοῦ γάρ καὶ γένος εἰμέν.”
- 32 “Ἐκ σού γὰρ γενόμεθα, θεοῦ μίμημα λαζόντες μούνοι, ὅσα ζώει τε καὶ ἔπει Θνήτης ἐπὶ γαιάν”: “For from you we have come to be, possessing alone the likeness of God, of whatever mortal thing lives and creeps upon the earth.” Cleanthes, *Fragmenta* 1.4–5. Note that Cleanthes understands the divine image as human rationality, as do later Stoics such as Epictetus. This rationality separates human beings from other creatures. In the Areopagus speech, in contrast, human beings are presented in their essential creatureliness, and thus the same as all other animate creatures. For a discussion of these texts, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic,

- 2012), 2659–2664.
- 33 On this theme see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 101–105.
- 34 For this reason, it is unlikely that the Areopagus speech presupposes that the inscription alludes to the God of the Jews. It is more likely, in any case, that such an inscription was intended to cultivate favor or avoid offending a god who was unknown. Cf. van der Horst, “The Altar of the ‘Unknown God,’” 195–195.
- 35 The speech does not take up the problem of evil, which has to be regarded as derivative of the goodness that is present within the world.
- 36 Nor is it at odds, for that matter, with Luther’s theses concerning the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross.
- 37 Cf. Acts 17:23.
- 38 Again, the address to the pagan crowd in Lystra contains the same elements: Paul calls the crowd to “turn from worthless things, in this case a sacrifice to Zeus, to the living God,” who in past generations allowed the nations to go their ways—but now no longer (Acts 14:15–17).
- 39 While the call to repentance is not alien to Paul (cf. Rom 2:4; 2 Cor 7:9–10; 12:21), it is a distinctively Lukan theme (cf. Lk 5:32; 15:1–10; 16:30–31; and especially Lk 24:47, Acts 2:38, 3:19, 11:17–18; 26:19–20), for whom “faith” and “repentance” have been made inseparable in the message of the gospel. Just as there is no faith without repentance, repentance does not bring salvation apart from faith in Jesus (Acts 19:4–6). On this question in the time of the Reformation see Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon’s Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
- 40 One cannot miss Paul’s sounding of the language of justification within his address.
- 41 E.g., Is 5:16; 42:6–8; 45:1–10, 11–25. The contention between God and the world, which bears both vertical and horizontal dimensions, is reflected also in the repeated Lukan references to Jesus as “the righteous one” (e.g. Acts 3:14; 7:52; 2:14; cf. Acts 13:38–39).
- 42 Luther, Small Catechism, the First Commandment (1529): “You are to have no other gods. What is this? Answer: We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”
- 43 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 647. See Lynn A. Kauppi, *Foreign but Familiar Gods: Greco-Romans Read Religion in Acts Library of New Testament studies* (London, New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 83–93. The “ἀναστάσις” may be understood either as a resuscitation (as with Aeschylus) or a resurrection (as with Luke and Paul).
- 44 Cleanthes, *Fragments* 1.1 (πολυόνυμε παγκοστές αἰεῖ: “many-named almighty, eternal”).
- 45 See, likewise, Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:25–40).
- 46 In the Lukan account of Peter’s proclamation to Cornelius and his household, Peter announces Jesus as the word of good news to “the sons of Israel” before he declares him to be the risen Lord, who is appointed to judge “the living and the dead” (Acts 10:36, 42–43).
- 47 Thus Luther, famously, on the art of translation: “dem Volk aufs Maul schauen.” See WA 30.2, 637.17–22 (Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen).
- 48 On this theme see Oswald Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Zu Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 1–8.
- 49 The same is true in the emergency situation of Acts 14:14–18. In so far as Paul appeals to the story of Scripture in Acts, he does so only where that story is known already, as for example, in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–41). The same is essentially true of Peter’s preaching to Cornelius: he tells only the story of Jesus, and likewise announces him as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:34–43).
- 50 Oswald Bayer, “With Luther in the Present,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 6–8.
- 51 Bayer appeals at this point to Jean Paul Sartre’s lament about the “freedom to which we are damned.” See “With Luther in the Present,” 8.
- 52 Cf. Bayer, “With Luther in the Present,” 8–9.
- 53 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison* ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 347–348.
- 54 For a defense of the reading of this statement as a distinction between law and gospel including its hermeneutical implications, see Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2014), 127–50.
- 55 See 1 Cor 3:18–23; 4:1–5, 6–13; 2 Cor 3:1–3; 5:11–13; 10:12–18; 11:1–4, 12–15; 11:16–12:13; 13:5. On this topic, see Mark Seifrid, “Effective Justification and Its Hermeneutical Implications,” in *The Press of the Text: New Testament Studies in Honor of James W. Voelz* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).
- 56 In God’s purpose, the apostle is not only the aroma of life but also of death (2 Cor 2:15–16).
- 57 See *The Formula of Concord*, Articles IV–VI.
- 58 We also might have cast a sideward glance at Paul’s parallel statement in Gal 5:13–26, which has a more polemical setting and introduces additional themes.
- 59 For Paul the law is given as a whole and cannot be partitioned. Cf. Gal 5:3.
- 60 Luther, *On Christian Liberty* trans. W. A. Lambert; rev. Harold Grimm. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 2.
- 61 This question is drawn from Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison*, 278–281. Bonhoeffer directs his question to the very issue that we have considered in relation to Acts 17: How are we to speak about God to our secular contemporaries? He asks the question, however, in a modernist way, in relation to a “religionless” world. As we noted above, however, the postmodern world is not religionless, but precisely the opposite: it is filled to the brim with religions. The gods of the modernist world, which never disappeared, but only receded from sight for a time, have re-emerged. Precisely this phenomenon reveals the precarious nature of Bonhoeffer’s starting point in the subjective and conscious requirements of our culture.
- 62 On this topic see the helpful work of John Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

Recovery Not Rejection

Luther's Appropriation of the Catechism

Mary Jane Haemig



Mary Jane Haemig is professor of church history at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota,

specializing in Reformation studies, particularly the study of the Lutheran Reformation. Her interests include preaching, catechesis, and prayer in that period. She is also director of the Reformation Research Program at Luther Seminary and associate editor of *Lutheran Quarterly*.

Martin Luther's comments in the preface to the Small Catechism, written after participating in the Saxon visitations, are well known:

The deplorable, wretched deprivation that I recently encountered while I was a visitor has constrained and compelled me to prepare this catechism, or Christian instruction, in such a brief,

plain, and simple version. Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately, many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly, they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments! As a result, they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and despite the fact that the Gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.

O you bishops! How are you going to answer to Christ, now that you have so shamefully neglected the people and have not exercised your office for even a single second? You . . . insist on observance of your human laws, while never even bothering to ask whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or a single section of God's Word. Shame on you forever!

Therefore, my dear sirs and brothers, who are either pastors or preachers, I beg all of you for God's sake to take up your office boldly,

Editor's note

This paper was presented at the Fall 2016 Theological Symposium, "From Font to Grave: Catechesis for the Lifelong Disciple," at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

to have pity on your people . . . and to help us bring the catechism to the people, especially to the young.¹

Luther's comments bemoaning the widespread lack of knowledge of the Christian faith could have been written today. Not only would it apply to many who call themselves Christian but it could also include in our society the many unbaptized and people who answer "none" when questioned about their religious affiliation. Surely, the task we face is as great as or greater than that faced by Luther and his fellow reformers. Fortunately, we have resources!

This article gives some historical background on Luther's catechisms and reformation catechesis. I will first examine how Luther and his movement recovered the catechetical heritage. Second, I will consider their renewal of the reasons for teaching and learning the catechism. Third, I will look at how they re-energized and retooled teaching methods. This is not merely a historical discussion. Consideration and appreciation of what those who lived in the past have said and done can contribute to our deliberations today. Sometimes I will make the connections to today's challenges and opportunities explicit; at other points I will let you draw those connections.

Recovering the Catechetical Heritage

Luther followed well-established Christian practice in using catechetical elements. Notice in Luther's statement prefacing the Small Catechism the "short list," the concrete elements that he says people do not know: the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Luther connected with the Christian past in seeing knowledge of these as basic to Christian understanding. Luther and his reforming movement did not invent new key elements of Christian understanding. Just as he did not believe his message was new but rather a recovery of the apostolic message, so Luther also sought to use forms and ways of speaking—basic catechetical elements—long in use among Christians to convey this message.

A note to keep in mind: When Luther and his followers used the word "catechism" they had in mind not a book with explanations but rather some key content: the texts of the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and the words of institution of the sacraments. Only later did the word "catechism" come to mean some explanations to these and a book—and even later it came to mean (among Lutherans) Luther's Small Catechism.

Luther used catechetical elements to connect with his audience. From early in his work as a reformer, Luther found in catechetical texts appropriate ways to express his message. He started with what people knew, or with what they should have known, or at least with what they should have heard at some point. A number of his sermons or short explanations of the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Penance, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper were published before 1520² and contributed to the spread of his reforming ideas. Using these catechetical forms connected Luther to his audience. He knew that his reforming insights were not simply technical theological insights, suitable

only for the academic context. Rather they were *for all* and needed to be expressed in a way that was accessible to all.

This desire to connect with his audience shaped other actions of Luther. In the 1520s Luther and his Wittenberg circle produced a number of writings designed to take his reforming insights to the grassroots level and to make sure that the reformation took root among all segments of the population and did not merely remain an interesting academic movement. Consider such matters as the reform of theological education (Melanchthon's *Loci Communnes* 1521), the production of evangelical hymnals (1524), the reform of worship (1523 and 1526), and the reform of practices of ecclesiastical oversight (Melanchthon's *Instructions for Visitors*, 1527).

Some regard Luther's *Betbuchlein* (Little Prayer Book) of 1522 as a type of catechism. It certainly had a catechetical structure, centered on the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord's Prayer. The 1520s saw many evangelical pastors write catechisms, but none "caught on" and all have been consigned to the dustbin of history.³ In the preface to his German Mass (1526), Luther noted the need for a "plain and simple, fair and square catechism" and commented that the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer "plainly and briefly contain exactly everything that a Christian needs to know."⁴

Events caused (or forced) Luther to think deeply about a catechism, put it in writing, and have it published. Three events are key: First, the dispute in the 1520s over the role of God's law and the relationship between law and gospel invited renewed consideration of these.⁵ Second, in 1527–1528 Luther took part in formal visitation of parishes in electoral Saxony. As attested in the preface to his Small Catechism, he found abysmal ignorance of the faith among both clergy and laypeople. Third, due to Johann Bugenhagen's absence from Wittenberg in 1528, Luther took over the task of preaching the catechism and preached through the catechism three times.⁶ In 1529, Luther's catechisms were published.

Luther recovered some elements of the catechetical tradition and eliminated others.

Luther did not ignore the medieval catechetical tradition but rather recovered the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, (Sacraments) Baptism, Lord's Supper, and Confession, as well as the use of prayers. A word about each of these:

The Ten Commandments were not commonly found in catechisms until the high and late middle ages. They were then added as a confessional aid. If you could not remember your sins, you could consult the list or your confessor could prod your memory. Note that Luther kept the medieval numbering scheme.⁷

The Apostles' Creed was used in early catechisms. It was the first element in some medieval catechisms. Dietrich Kolde's catechism, "A Fruitful Mirror or Small Handbook for Christians" (1470) begins with the creed, noting "it is necessary and very useful for a person to say the creed often with his mouth and to ponder it at the same time in his heart."⁸

The Lord's Prayer was a part of early and medieval catechisms.⁹ Medieval catechisms also routinely contained descriptions of the seven sacraments. Sometimes they also included a daily structure for prayers.¹⁰

What did Luther eliminate? Catechisms had become cluttered with all sorts of elements of late medieval piety. For example, Kolde's catechism contained sections on the five commandments of the Holy Church, seven deadly sins, nine alien sins, openly discussed sins and mute sins against nature, six sins against the Holy Spirit, great sins of the tongue, instructions on how to hear mass, prayers for the canonical hours, and prayers to saints. (Luther had included the Hail Mary in his 1522 Little Prayer Book, giving it an evangelical interpretation, but did not include it in his 1529 catechisms.) In short, Luther radically "slimmed down" what was essential for a Christian.

Luther reworked the explanation and use of catechetical elements to express his reforming insights. Luther engaged in significant re-working of each catechetical part's understanding and place. He reformed both content and order of the catechetical parts. In terms of content, consider four examples:

Medieval catechisms had seen the function of the Ten Commandments as identifying discrete sins, but Luther saw them as describing how life in relationship with God and humans should be lived. Thus, Luther's explanations all begin with "We should fear and love God . . ." and include the positive prescription as well as negative prohibition. The Commandments were seen as setting forth God's intentions for life in this world, not just for identifying sins to be confessed.

Luther saw in the Apostles' Creed not a listing of facts about God but rather a confession of God's moves on our behalf. Therefore, he did not, as medieval catechisms did, divide the creed into twelve parts. (There was a legend that the twelve apostles had each contributed part of the creed. This legend had no historical basis.) Rather Luther saw that the creed had three parts: creation, redemption, and sanctification—God's three moves toward us. Luther's explanation of each part is a personal statement of faith—what God has done "for me," rather than a general statement of facts about God.

Medieval interpretations of the fourth petition "Give us this day our daily bread" often gave "bread" a spiritual meaning, including an understanding of "bread" as the bread of the Lord's Supper. Luther changed this tradition. His explanation of the fourth petition shifts its focus from the Lord's Supper to common, everyday bodily needs.¹¹

Medieval confession focused on the identification, naming, and describing of individual sins. Luther shifted the focus to the speaking and hearing of the words of absolution.

Luther also changed the order of the catechetical parts. Medieval catechisms had traditionally put the creed first, then the commandments (including other things amplifying law), followed by confession, prayer, and instructions on conduct. John Colet, an English humanist, composed a brief catechism for the boys at his school in 1510. It began with the Apostles Creed, divided into twelve articles of faith, then continued with the seven sacraments, and continued with describing the works of charity—divided into love of God, self, and neighbor, and penance. It concluded with brief instructions on what to do in sickness and in death and a lengthy list of precepts of living.¹²

The order of parts in these medieval catechisms reflected a theological scheme. That

scheme saw the creed as intellectual knowledge of the Christian faith. But such *knowledge* (deemed *faith* in the medieval way of thinking) was not enough, rather it needed to be formed by works of *love*. The rest of the catechism was designed to help one do that. The commandments and various lists of sins and good works informed the Christian what to do and the sacraments provided help in getting the strength to do them.

Luther placed the parts in a different order. Writing in his Little Prayer Book (1522), he explained the reasons for this.

Three things people must know in order to be saved. First, they must know what to do and what to leave undone. Second, when they realize that, by their own strength, they cannot measure up to what they should do or leave undone, they need to know where to seek, find, and take the strength they require. Third, they must know how to seek and obtain that strength. It is just like sick people who first have to determine the nature of their sickness, and what to do or to leave undone. After that, they have to know where to get the medicine which will help them do or leave undone what is right for a healthy person. Third, they have to desire to search for this medicine and to obtain it or have it brought to them.

Thus the commandments teach humans to recognize their sickness, enabling them to see and perceive what to do or refrain from doing, consent to or refuse, and so recognize themselves to be sinful and wicked persons. The Creed will teach and show them where to find the medicine—grace—which will help them to become devout and keep the commandments. The Creed points them to God and God’s mercy, given and made plain in Christ. Third, the Lord’s Prayer teaches how they may seek, get, and bring to themselves all this, namely by proper, humble, consolatory prayer. So it will be given to them.¹³

So Luther placed the Ten Commandments first, the creed second, and the Lord’s Prayer third. For Luther, the Ten Commandments summarized God’s law and were God’s gift and demand for all people. Thus Luther placed them first. Luther made clear that the commandments mandated what to do as well as what to avoid in the relationships that shape our lives. They were a diagnostic tool to understand the true human condition and the need for God’s action. (They were not a way of forming one’s faith to make it sufficient for salvation.) For Luther, the creed was not a list of twelve facts about God, but rather a recognition and confession of God’s work for us. Luther saw prayer as response to God’s words to us and placed the Lord’s Prayer after the creed. As he stated in the Large Catechism, we pray for faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments.¹⁴ That is, we pray that what we have confessed in the Ten Commandments and Creed may be true for us. Luther

ENCHIRIDION
Der kleine
Catechismus für
die gemeine pfarrher
vnd Prediger/
D. Mart. Luth.
Wittenberg/ge=
druct vnd. Schir.
1536.

Title page to Martin Luther's "Der kleine Catechismus" (The Small Cathechism), 1536.

had no catechetical section titled “sacraments” but rather sections on “Baptism” and the “Lord’s Supper” in which he emphasized the benefits of each. The section on confession provided a simple rite and emphasized the word of absolution rather than the work of confession. Luther also included morning, evening, and table prayers, and a Table of Duties.

Later Lutheran catechists kept Luther’s ordering of the catechetical parts and explained that ordering. Erasmus Sarcerius, for example, said that the Ten Commandments teach what one owes God and the neighbor. The articles of faith (that is, the creed) contain the sum of our religion, namely, who has created, redeemed and sanctified us. In the “Our Father,” we ask God for all the needs of the body and soul.¹⁵ Luther and his followers sought to help people understand the catechism not as a set of separate discrete statements about the Christian faith, but as a coherent whole that made sense of the Christian faith.

Luther and his fellow reformers recovered a sense that catechesis was important and not optional. Consider again Luther’s comments after the Saxon visitation. Luther and his fellow reformers recovered the idea that teaching the faith was one of the primary tasks of the clergy. Why was teaching the catechism important? Why should Christians learn the catechism?

Renewing the Reasons for Teaching and Learning the Catechism

Luther’s recovery was not simply a recovery of the forms of the catechism and their apostolic meaning. It was also a recovery and renewal of the catechism’s importance for life—both the church’s life and the individual’s life. One sees this in the repeated statements of the reformers on the reasons for learning. Why is learning the catechism so important?

Medieval catechisms had several purposes. They were designed to help prepare laity for confession and clergy for helping laity to confess. They were also intended to provide people with the necessary knowledge of faith. Remember that in the medieval scheme “faith” was knowledge of facts. These facts (faith) were necessary for salvation but, of themselves, not enough to reach God. The medieval Christian sought to shape that faith by doing works of love—all in the desire to become more and more like God and progress toward salvation. Both content and arrangement of medieval catechisms were designed to mirror and aid the Christian’s progress toward salvation from mere faith to faith formed by works of love.

Luther and his fellow reformers expressed a number of reasons for teaching and learning the catechism. Please note they are in no order of priority.

Identifying Mark of the Christian

Luther said that those who do not know their catechism should not be counted among Christians. This is really about identity—but a deeper sense of identity than one that merely involved intellectual knowledge. Luther compared the Christian who does not know his catechism to the craftsman who does not know his craft.¹⁶ Just as a craftsman’s

knowledge defines his very existence, so too knowledge of the catechism defines the life of the Christian. Several of the later catechetical preachers picked up this theme. Christoph Fischer remarked that no one accepts a tradesman into a guild unless he knows the customs and usages of the trade. So one should not take those into the praiseworthy guild of the Christians who does not know his catechism.¹⁷ Simon Musaeus complained that while workers have to prove their competency to attain the title of “master,” many bear the name of Christian without knowing the catechism. He compared the latter to cooks who cannot cook.¹⁸

Summary of Scripture or Introduction to Scripture (Not As Competitor!)

In Luther’s first series of catechetical sermons in 1528, he said that in the first three parts of the catechism all scripture is contained.¹⁹ Already in his Little Prayer Book Luther had commented:

It was not unintended in God’s particular ordering of things that a lowly Christian person who might be unable to read the Bible should nevertheless be obligated to learn and know the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer. Indeed, the total content of Scripture and preaching and everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and richly comprehended in these three items. They summarize everything with such brevity and clarity that no one can complain or make any excuse that the things necessary for salvation are too complicated or difficult to remember.²⁰

Of course, Luther did not mean that everything in the Bible is in the Ten Commandments, creed, and Lord’s Prayer. Rather he meant that these three parts convey the central salvific message of the Bible. By focusing on the central message, the catechism gives readers and listeners an introduction and guide to reading scripture. The catechism reminds us of the central plot of the Bible. Knowing the plot always helps you read the book! How does this work? The Bible proclaims to us God’s commands, God’s expectations for our lives. The Bible tells us what God does for us and instructs us in how we communicate with God. It proclaims how God assures us of his favor. The commandments, creed, Lord’s Prayer, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper provide summaries of these. This relates to the classic Lutheran doctrine that the Confessions are normative and helpful because they say what scripture says. The catechism is a way of upholding the primacy of the word of God over against those who wish to go beyond scripture (tradition?) or claim authority over scripture (the pope?).

For the Christian, learning the catechism is never itself an end. Luther emphasized in his second series of catechetical sermons that after people have learned the catechism they should be led further into scripture.²¹

This theme was picked up by later followers of Luther. Daniel Kauxdorf commented that knowledge of the catechism provides a guide to reading the Bible and those who know the catechism can read the Bible fruitfully.²² Simon Musaeus remarked that people who do not have the catechism to guide them in reading the Bible remain poor and needy in the midst of the great riches of the Bible. He compared them to sick ones who have a pharmacy full of healing herbs and spices but cannot use it for lack of proper directions.²³ The Lutheran reformers expected the catechism to teach Christians how to read the Bible, making them independent of the whims and caprices of pastors, priests, and false teachers. (Given the widespread biblical illiteracy today, this use of the catechism can provide useful assistance.)

Weapon in the Fight against Sin, the Devil, and Heretics

When preaching on the third commandment in 1528 Luther commented: “Since therefore the devil is always soliciting us, it is necessary that we hold the symbol [the Apostles’ Creed] and the Lord’s Prayer in our hearts and mouths.”²⁴ In his 1530 preface to the Large Catechism Luther wrote:

Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one’s self with God’s Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it. . . . For this reason alone you should gladly read, recite, ponder, and practice the catechism, even if the only advantage and benefit you obtain from it is to drive away the devil and evil thoughts. For he cannot bear to hear God’s Word.²⁵

The reformers saw the catechism as having the same function that scripture did, that is, it functioned as a weapon in the ongoing fight against all that could destroy faith and cause the Christian to despair. In the sixteenth century these enemies of the faith were both cosmic (sin, death, and the devil) and temporal (Roman Catholics, Anabaptists, and various Protestant opponents). Lest you think that this promoted paranoia, I should add that the catechetical preachers wanted to give their listeners hope that these battles would not last forever. Christoph Fischer said that “pious Christians” should not be angry about the controversies but should also “lift up their heads” because their salvation is near. Controversies occur because the devil realizes he does not have much time and therefore is raging most horribly.²⁶

Summary of the Faith and a Measure for Judging Other Teaching

Sixteenth-century reformers saw the catechism as empowering laity to listen intelligently to sermons and to distinguish between true and false teaching, that is, to judge what was being preached and taught to them. The catechism gives laity an important ecclesiastical oversight function. This was revolutionary in its time, both socially and ecclesiastically. Every well-catechized Christian was encouraged to challenge teachings and persons in

positions of authority. This theme was stressed particularly by preachers in the second and third generations after Luther.

One purpose of the catechism was to enable the laity to listen to the sermons. Christoph Fischer told his hearers that the catechism is a sum of, and guide to, the preaching they hear throughout the year.²⁷ Jakob Andreae wrote that the catechism gives a summary of the main doctrines that are otherwise discussed at some length in sermons; knowledge of the catechism thus enables the hearer to identify the part of the catechism with which a sermon is dealing.²⁸ (Presumably he is referring to the usual Sunday, non-catechetical, sermon.) He also remarked that listeners would have a standard by which to protect themselves from error. Simon Musaeus stated that the catechism serves hearers “in regard to their own shepherd in this way, that the catechism shows them the right way to understand their sermons” but in regard to “strange wolves” the catechism gives to listeners a certain “touchstone and scale” to distinguish the damnable lies and many corruptions from the salvific truth.”²⁹ One purpose of teaching the catechism then was to produce thoughtful and faithful hearers of sermons.

Some reformers expanded on how the catechism enables a layperson to recognize and reject false teaching. Johann Gigas in his catechetical sermons engaged in an imaginary dialog with a parishioner: “Yes, you say, I am a layperson and one teaches this and another that, how can I judge between them?” Gigas responded (in part):

In the holy Ten Commandments you have the proper good works that God has commanded through which God is honored and the neighbor is served. For this reason, reject pilgrimages and regulations of food and marriage.

In the Apostles Creed you hear clearly that Jesus Christ alone your helper and savior is, therefore reject all leaders who point you to the law, to your own or to other’s works, to earn heaven.

Our Christian faith also declares that Jesus Christ is God’s only son and the son of the Virgin Mary . . . the divine and human natures are united in one person. Therefore avoid old and new Nestorians and puffed up chaps who divide the person of Christ, such as Osiander and Stancarus.

In your catechism you hear that one should pray in spirit and in truth, that is, in true knowledge of God and in the Name of Jesus Christ. So reject all those who tell you to seek help from dead saints.³⁰

Implicit in this was the assumption that laypeople were aware of theological controversy and could understand theological issues and viewpoints. Laity were assumed to understand not just contemporary issues of practice (such as whether to pray to saints) but also relatively complicated theological issues. Both old controversies (e.g., Christological controversies) as well as newer controversies (e.g., Calvinistic views of the sacraments) were matters where laity

were expected to understand and discern the truth. Learning the catechism became a way that laypersons were empowered to do what previously only a spiritual elite, an ecclesiastical hierarchy, had done: to judge what is true teaching and false teaching.

Illiteracy was not an obstacle to doing this. (We minister to illiterate people today and often do not realize it.) Sixteenth-century Lutheran pastors expected the illiterate to learn their catechism and thereby evaluate what they were being taught. Addressing a rhetorical question from a listener, Jacob Andreae explained:

Yes you say, “I am a layperson, a rough, ignorant person, I can neither write nor read. Who will tell me who preaches correctly or incorrectly, how should I be able to judge this?” Pay attention . . . when you have learned these six main pieces [of the catechism] well, even if you cannot write or read no erring preacher shall soon lead you astray.³¹

None of the sources cited—nor any of the sixteenth-century Lutheran sources I read—saw the authority of the layperson to judge all preaching and teaching as authorizing any judgment that person wanted to make. To the contrary, this authority was always bound to the word of God. The catechism was a tool for learning and knowing the word of God. What I see in the sources is a recognition that it is the task of all Christians, clergy and lay, to discern what is right and wrong in the faith. All are held accountable to the standards of the apostolic faith, as set forth in Scripture and summarized in creed and confession.

Martin Luther touched on some of the same themes in *Concerning the Ministry* (1523). He asserted that all Christians are “priests in equal degree,” and included among the functions of a priest to be a “judge of all doctrine and spirits.”³² In commenting on the authority that this entailed Luther noted:

If you could deprive the hearers of this function, what would not a teacher be able and dare to do, even surpassing Satan himself if he could? On the other hand if the hearers are permitted, even bidden to exercise this function, what would a teacher be able or try to do even if he were greater than an angel in heaven? . . . With what fear and trembling bishops and councils would have spoken and issued decrees, if the judgment of hearers would have had to be regarded when decisions were made with respect to priesthood, to the office of teaching, of baptizing, of consecrating, of sacrificing, of binding, of prayer, of judging doctrine. Indeed, there never would have been a universal papacy if this right of judgment had prevailed.³³

Guide for Life

Sixteenth-century preachers taught that people should live in accordance with the catechism. This meant the whole catechism, not just the commandments! Most of the

catechism addresses how humans can deal with the fact they are sinners, unable to keep the commandments. The catechism teaches people how to seek forgiveness and consolation from God in the midst of their sinfulness.

Building Up the Church

A number of sixteenth-century reformers mention the catechism's role in building up the church. Jacob Andreae compared children learning the catechism to stones building the church.³⁴ Johann Gigas said it was as necessary for the catechism to remain in the church as it is for a grammar book in the school.³⁵ Just as the catechism defines the Christian, so also it defines the church. Luther and his followers saw the recovery of the catechism as an agent for positive change in the church. Of course, this relates to other reasons for learning the catechism—knowing how to read scripture, understanding the faith, and evaluating teaching all help to build up the church.

Luther and his fellow reformers taught the catechism not for intellectual mastery but primarily for life. They wanted everyone to experience the hope and consolation of the gospel, and they wanted to put this into a simple form that was easily remembered. They wanted to offer every Christian concrete help in reading scripture and listening to preaching. They wanted to give everyone words to speak and confess the faith. In recovering and renewing the use of the catechism, the reformers were renewing the idea that every Christian should know how to speak and confess the faith.

Resurgence, Re-energizing, Retelling, and Retooling

Consideration of some sixteenth-century methods and approaches that Luther and his fellow reformers used to teach the catechism can enrich our conversation today.

In the Reformation era, catechism was not just for the young. Luther studied it every day. Reformers wanted all Christians to engage in this study. The heading of the Small Catechism states that it is “for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers.” The Small Catechism was meant to orient/focus them (and us) in the basics of the faith, continually recalling the central message of the faith and shaping ministry around that. In doing this, the Small Catechism performed a key task for leadership. Look also at Luther’s longer preface (1530) to the Large Catechism. He spoke plainly:

It is not for trivial reasons that we constantly treat the catechism and exhort and implore others to do the same, for we see that unfortunately many preachers and pastors are very negligent in doing so and thus despise both their office and this teaching. Some do it out of their great learnedness, while others do so out of pure laziness and concern for their bellies.³⁶

Before we reflect on teaching others, we need to consider our own use and study of the catechism.

Methods

Sixteenth-century reformers used a number of methods or approaches. These saw the teaching and learning of the catechism as a matter of the whole person, not just the intellect.

1. Orally—specifically preaching. Faith comes from hearing! The reformers continued the medieval custom of preaching on the catechism, using the texts of the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed, Lord's Prayer, and sacraments as preaching texts. In some areas, these catechetical sermons took place every Sunday at a certain time (usually prior to the main service); in other areas they were preached as a series at certain times of the year (as in Wittenberg). Catechetical preaching was widespread among Lutherans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
How did this work? Generally, pastors preached one sermon on each part—that is, one sermon on each commandment, one on each creedal part, one on each petition, and so on. Some pastors had the congregation repeat the texts of the catechetical part and its explanation at the beginning and end of the sermon, reinforcing what they had heard in the sermon.
Some today want to reserve the catechism just for home use. The catechism was part of public proclamation in the sixteenth century. Note also that the reformers knew that the catechetical sermon was a sermon, not merely information transmitted but rather a word of God which creates faith.
2. Orally—through teaching. The reformers knew that teaching the catechism should take place in several settings—at home, at church, and in school. Luther mentions the duty of every head of household “to examine the children and servants one after the other and ascertain what they know or have learned of it, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it.”³⁷ Historians recognize that the direction of instruction may have been reversed; that is, children who learned the catechism in school may have come home and taught it to their parents.
3. Music—Luther and the reformers provided explicitly catechetical hymns, writing hymns on the individual parts of the catechism. Some of these we still use today, such as “We all believe in one true God” (creed), “To Jordan came the Christ our Lord” (baptism) and “Out of the depths I cry to you” (confession). They also used other hymns to offer insights into catechetical content. Clearly, they saw music and hymns as effective means to reinforce teaching. Some sixteenth-century catechetical preachers listed the hymns for use before and after a sermon. Hymns were another way to convey the message of the catechism and another way in which listeners could respond to the teaching. Their poetic form and melody undoubtedly made them easy to retain.
4. Pictures—Early Lutheran catechisms were full of woodcuts. These were often illustrations of Bible stories. In Luther's Small Catechism, a woodcut of a Bible story was associated with each commandment, article of the creed, petition of the Lord's

Prayer, and sacrament.³⁸ For example, a woodcut of Cain slaying Abel illustrates the fifth commandment and a woodcut of David and Bathsheba the sixth.

5. Stories, illustrations, and analogies—Those who taught the catechism in the sixteenth century used not only biblical stories to illustrate their points, but also stories from classical authors, exotic locations, local events, the political realm, and family life. They wanted their hearers to relate the catechism to everyday life. One example: In explaining “Our Father,” Jacob Andreas says that just as a small child runs to a father’s lap seeking shelter when hurt so also can we seek protection and shelter with our heavenly father and know that we will find it there.³⁹ In preaching on the commandments, preachers often named very concrete ways that the commandments were broken or kept in their own time. Johann Gigas’s list in his sermon on “little thieves” included merchants “who charge double for their goods,” metal craftsmen who dilute metal, women who dilute beer, servants who do not work diligently, masters who do not pay their servants, students who dally in bad company instead of studying, medical quacks, those who find something and do not return it, and so on. His sermon on “big thieves” named usurers, those who steal church property, dishonest officials, rulers who take from their subjects, shavers of coins, lazy professors, and dishonest trustees.⁴⁰ Do we enrich our explanations of the catechism by drawing on stories and analogies to which our people can relate?
6. Printed materials—in the sixteenth century, the catechism was printed as a poster, in pamphlet form, and was included in books, Bibles, and hymnals. We tend to skip these today and miss some of the richness and variety of catechetical teaching that was present in the sixteenth century.

Teach the Catechism Simply to Create Understanding

In his *Preface to the German Mass* (1526) Martin Luther, while commenting on catechetical instruction within the German service, said “nor should they only learn to say the words by rote”⁴¹ and emphasized that people should understand the meaning of each part. In his preface to the Small Catechism Luther set out a process for teaching: (1) teach the bare text of the catechetical parts, (2) teach a short explanation, and (3) teach a longer explanation to further understanding. Luther’s original preface (1529) to the Large Catechism noted that it is not enough for people

simply to learn and repeat these parts verbatim. The young people should also attend sermons, especially during the times when preaching on the catechism is prescribed, so that they may hear it explained and may learn the meaning of every part . . . The reason we take such care to preach on the catechism frequently is to impress it upon our young people, not in a lofty and learned manner but briefly and very simply, so that it may penetrate deeply into their minds and remain fixed in their memories.⁴²

Luther's followers stressed the need to teach in a simple way. Erasmus Sacerius criticized those preachers who, instead of preaching the catechism, prefer to deal with the "weighty books of the Holy Scripture" and pour and dump their sermons into the ears of the unlearned. He comments that preachers behave this way because the preaching of the catechism is "much more effort and work than great honor and prestige."⁴³

Luther and his fellow reformers saw the need for regular practices, both communal and individual, for learning and teaching the catechism. Luther, commenting on his own practice said

I am also a doctor and a preacher, just as learned and experienced as all of them who are so high and mighty. Nevertheless, each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the catechism.⁴⁴

The reformers recognized the importance not only of individual practices of learning the catechism but also of communal practices. The church orders of sixteenth-century Germany, those documents that regulated church life, mandated practices of teaching the catechism, including catechetical preaching. (Aside from the practice of confirmation instruction, what ongoing practices do our congregations have for teaching the basics of the Christian faith and allowing laity to reflect upon them?)

Conclusion

Luther and the Lutheran reformers have a great deal to offer us as we think about this whole matter of teaching the faith. Our situation may be even more urgent than theirs. The number of "nones" (people with no religious adherence) is rising. Many Christians, like those sixteenth-century Saxons, do not know the faith. Christian congregations struggle to present the faith in ways that are cogent and memorable. We fear discouraging people or turning them away if we come across as too "intellectual." Remember that we cheat people if we fail to teach them the faith, fail to teach them that God has intentions for their lives, God is continually active in good ways in their lives, and God desires communication with them. Do we care about people? Current church members? Non-Lutherans? The unchurched? If so, we will not hesitate to teach them the basics of the faith—and the catechism offers us wonderful assistance in this task.

1 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress 2000) (hereafter: *BC*), 347–348. All citations to the Large and Small Catechisms are to this edition.

2 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–1986) (hereafter: *LW*). See, for example, "The Sacrament of Penance, 1519" *LW* 35, 9–22, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism, 1519" *LW* 35, 29–43, and "An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen, 1519" *LW* 42, 19–81.

- 3 See Ferdinand Cohrs, *Die Evangelischen Katechismusversuche vor Luthers Enchiridion* (Berlin: Hofmann & Comp., 1900–1902).
- 4 *LW* 53, 64–65.
- 5 See Timothy Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eiselen over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 148. “The single most important correction of Agricola’s catechesis came not from Melanchthon at all, but from Luther. His catechisms, viewed within the context of this dispute, arose out of and answered the challenges contained in Agricola’s ‘130 Fragesstücke.’ This connection has largely been ignored in the secondary literature. Yet both Wittenberg’s problems with Agricola’s theology, sermons, and catechisms and Agricola’s public dispute with Melanchthon provide essential background for understanding the timing and shape of Luther’s Catechisms.”
- 6 Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993) (Hereafter *WA*). *WA* 30/1, 1–122 An English translation of the third series is found in *LW* 51, 137–193.
- 7 Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms: Ten Commandments* trans. Holger Sonntag. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2009), 89–90, 141–146.
- 8 Denis Janz, *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 33.
- 9 See, for example, St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1961).
- 10 Janz 84. Kolde’s catechism (1470) instructed readers that when they awaken from sleep in the morning, “you should wail and think or speak thus. . . How I waste my precious time, how lazy and indolent I am, how I will have to burn in purgatory for having lost my precious time so miserably.”
- 11 Paul W. Robinson, “Luther’s Explanation of Daily Bread in Light of Medieval Preaching,” in *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 435–447.
- 12 John Colet, “Catechyzon (c. 1510)” in William P. McDonald, *Christian Catechetical Texts: Book 1: Medieval and Reformation, 1357–1579* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 69–74.
- 13 Martin Luther, “Little Prayer Book, 1522,” in *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 4, Pastoral Writings ed. Mary Jane Haemig (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), (Hereafter: *AL* 4) 167.
- 14 *BC* 440–441.
- 15 Erasmus Sacerius, *Catechismus Erasmi Sacerij/ Durch M. Bartholomeum Wagner/ Diener der Kirchen zu S. Thomas zu Leipzig/ mit vleis aus dem latein in das Deutsch gebracht/ tro(e)stlich und nu(e)tzlich allen Christen.* (Leipzig: Wolff Gu(e)nter, 1550), B2r–B3r.
- 16 *BC* 383.
- 17 Christopher Fischer, *Auslegung der Fu(e)nff Heuptstu(e)cke des Heiligen Catechismi/ Gestellet und geprediget durch M. Christofferum Vischer/ Hen-nebergischen Superintendenten/ und Pfarrherrn zu Meiningen.* (Leipzig: Johan Rambaw, 1573), B2r.
- 18 Simon Musaeus, *Catechistica Examen mit kurzen Fragen und Antworten/ von den aller notwendigsten und wichtigsten Artickeln Christlicher Lere . . .* (Ursel: Nicolaus Henricus, 1568), 5r–v.
- 19 *WA* 30/1, 2.
- 20 *AL* 4, 167; *WA* 10/2, 376
- 21 *WA* 30/1, 27.
- 22 Daniel Kauxdorf, *Eyn sehr nu(e)tzliches und tro(e)stliches handbu(e)chlein/ Von allen stu(e)cken Christlicher Lehr/ Welche im heiligen Kinder Cat-echismo/ des theuren Mans Gottes: Docto. Martini Lutheri. Seligen/ verfasset sein . . .* (Erfurt: Georg Bawuman: 1569), B4r.
- 23 Musaeus, 6r–v.
- 24 *WA* 30/1, 5.
- 25 *BC* 381.
- 26 Fischer, alpha 4r.
- 27 Fischer, B1v.
- 28 Jacob Andreae, *Zehn Predig von den sechs Hauptstucken Christlicher Lebr (Catechismus genannt) allen Christlichen Haufna(o)tttern nutzlich zu(o) lessn . . .* (Tübingen: Ulrich Morharts, 1561), 8r or C3r.
- 29 Simon Musaeus, *Catechismus Mit kurtzen Fragen unnd Antwortenv/ von den aller notwendigsten und wichtigsten Artickeln Christlicher Lehr/ sampt erinnerungen von den fu(o)rnehmsten Irrhuamen und Corruptelen/ durch welche der Teufel jetziger Zeit viel Leute irre machete und verfu(e)bret/Fu(e)r die kinder und einfeligen gestellet . . .* (Frankfurt/M.: Nicolaus Bassee, 1580), C1v–C2v.
- 30 Johann Gigas, *Catechismus Iohannis Gigantis Northusani. Gepredigt zur Schweiadnitz . . .* (Franckfurt/Oder: Johan Eichorn, 1578), Bii(v)–Biii(i).
- 31 Andreae, 78r.
- 32 *LW* 40, 21.
- 33 *LW* 40, 31–32.
- 34 Andreae, A3v.
- 35 Gigas, A4v.
- 36 *BC* 379.
- 37 *BC* 383.
- 38 *BC* 351–362, see especially footnote 25 on page 351.
- 39 Andreae, 42v.
- 40 Gigas, O1r–O7v.
- 41 *LW* 53, 65.
- 42 *BC* 386.
- 43 Sacerius, B3r–v.
- 44 *BC* 380.

“The Armor of God and the Might of His Strength” Luther’s Sermon on Ephesians 6 (1531/1533)

Robert Kolb



Robert Kolb is mission professor emeritus of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God* is just the most recent of his many published works and *The Way of Concord: From Historic Text to Contemporary Witness* is forthcoming from Concordia Seminary Press in 2017.

former students, among them the spiritualist Thomas Müntzer and Georg Witzel, who had returned to papal obedience after serving as an Evangelical pastor, had denounced him and sharply critiqued his way of thinking. Former allies, such as Ulrich Zwingli, had also turned praise into criticism. While Luther had many reasons to rejoice in the widespread acclamation his interpretation of Scripture had attained, even well beyond the borders of the German lands, he had experienced in the very year 1531 not only physical illness but the fallout from the collapse of negotiations with the emperor and the German Roman Catholic party at the imperial diet in Augsburg thirteen months earlier.

His text on that late October Sunday was Ephesians 6, the epistle for the day. Luther delivered sermons on the text at least six other times, in 1530 (three times), 1535, 1536, and 1545. Usually the epistle lesson was treated at the afternoon service according to the Wittenberg church ordinance of 1533.¹ The sermons from 1530 had been preached on the twenty-first and twenty-second Sundays after Trinity and on the festival of Saint Martin on Thursday of the intervening week. Only the third treated more than verse 10, and it ended with verse 12.² A year later the preacher repeated many of the themes and phrases from these three sermons. The sermons in 1535, 1536, and 1545 departed further from what Luther had said in 1531 at most points but did cover verses 10–17.³ In 1545 he confessed that he found the text simply too much for adequate coverage in one sermon.⁴

The sermon from 1531 found its way into print in 1533 and became the epistle sermon

As Luther mounted the pulpit of the town church in Wittenberg on the twenty-first Sunday after Trinity, October 29, 1531, he could look back on fourteen turbulent years that had brought him incredible success in spreading his message of reform and one personal disaster after another. Eleven years earlier Pope Leo X had excommunicated him, and Emperor Charles V had outlawed him. In the ensuing years

It is noteworthy that Satan does not really occupy center stage in this sermon: God does.

for the Sunday in the “summer postil” of 1540. Notes on the sermon from the amanuensis appointed by Elector Johann Friedrich to record Luther’s preaching and teaching served as the basis for the published sermon, but other student notes exist

as well.⁵ The precise role the preacher himself played in the preparation of the published version is not clear. His concern centered on the message, not his authorial claim to fame. He entrusted the task of improving his words for public consumption freely, and so he gladly handed over the tedious task of editing and preparing a manuscript for print to colleagues or students. It is hard to imagine, however, that he did not read, tinker with, and finally approve the final printed text, and it certainly reflects his thinking.

Luther wrote for the most part with specific situations that called for public comment in mind or for a congregation that was to hear the pericopal lesson for a Sunday or festival or the section of a book on which he was lecturing, verse for verse, as he did during the week. He composed no treatise on the devil even though he regarded the topic of the eschatological struggle that rages every day in the church and in the believer’s own life as extremely vital. His published treatment of Ephesians 6 is one of the most important of his works that focuses quite specifically on Satan and this eschatological battle. It gives twenty-first-century readers interested in how the reformer’s thought functioned an excellent example of the role the devil played in his conception of the daily Christian life. It is noteworthy that Satan does not really occupy center stage in this sermon: God does. God is depicted as the victor over the devil’s deception and murderous designs through Christ’s death and resurrection. The outfitting of believers with a faithful life of obedience and undergirded by a strong trust in Jesus created and sustained by the word of the gospel is the foundational theme of the sermon.

The Sermon’s Context

The professor took the task of preaching very seriously. In 1526 he had identified the “preaching and teaching of God’s word” as “the most important part of the divine service.”⁶ Of the perhaps as many as four thousand sermons that Luther delivered between his first monastic preaching and his death almost forty years later, notes or published versions of some twenty-three hundred remain. The majority were not published, but those that were, as individual pieces or in larger collections, such as the postils (which offered sermons for every Sunday and festival of the church year), served as reading for devotions in the home and as a model for preachers.

Like all sermons, Luther’s must be read in context. The year 1531 had not been one of Luther’s best. After the emperor’s rejection of the Augsburg Confession and the subsequent collapse of negotiations with leading Roman Catholic theologians in the

summer and early fall of 1530, Wittenberg reform stood under renewed threat. Charles V had demanded the submission of the protesting princes and towns to himself and to the pope by April 15 or face the punishment prescribed by the edict issued against Luther and his followers in 1521 at Worms. That date came and went without military action because the imperial government was preoccupied with other problems. The threat remained. However, Luther's correspondence reveals that he continued to advise governments, pastors, and lay people on a variety of problems. Electoral Saxon chancellor Gregor Brück sought his counsel.⁷ So did his English friend Robert Barnes, on the matter of the divorce of King Henry VIII from Catherine of Aragon.⁸ Luther wrote to the municipal secretary in Nuremberg, Lazarus Spengler, and his friend Wenzeslaus Link, who served as pastor there, regarding his shifting stand on the validity of armed resistance by the princes and towns to the emperor.⁹ Luther extended pastoral care through his letters, for instance to Barbara Lißkirchen, the sister of his children's tutor, Hieronymus Weller, as she struggled with melancholy because she despaired of her election to grace.¹⁰ Tensions with Johannes Brenz over the proper formulation and understanding of the doctrine of justification found a happy resolve.¹¹ The illness and death of his mother brought sadness to the entire household in the Black Cloister.¹²

In the midst of all such activities, threats from various sides to his reform arose, within the context of the ongoing menace of Turkish invasion.¹³ Indifference to God's word and moral aberrances in Wittenberg, among the people and at the court, disturbed him deeply.¹⁴ A sharply-worded dispute with the town council in Zwickau over its treatment of Pastor Nikolaus Hausmann and one of his colleagues aroused the reformer's ire.¹⁵ He occasionally noted the advance of his Zwinglian opponents¹⁶ and recalled the apostates Müntzer and Witzel.¹⁷ His letters also occasionally record his struggle with physical ailments, including headaches.¹⁸ He wrote to Link in August, "I am overworked, I have been overworked, I will continue to be overworked, as I see it, as long as I live."¹⁹ That burden of reforming and directing the church and its people along with his teaching and preaching duties in Wittenberg combined with the continuing menace of imperial invasion shaped Luther's consciousness as he prepared to preach on October 29, 1531.

It is not surprising that Luther found in the text of Ephesians 6:10–17 apostolic thoughts of great relevance for himself and his hearers in its description of the eschatological battle against the deceit and menace of the devil's assault on God and his people that believers experience in daily life. Luther frequently cited John 8:44, "the devil is a liar and a murderer," in his sermons and lectures. In Luther's multifaceted view of "the last times,"²⁰ the eschatological battle between the God of truth and life and this deadly deceiver occupied a large role.²¹ "Death [is] the devil's intent. Luther learned to draw life from the struggle against the devil, for the just shall live by faith," Heiko Oberman concluded. Luther turned the medieval *momento mori* into its opposite: "In the midst of death we are surrounded by life."²² Luther's sermon for Judica Sunday in 1533 on John 8 defined what it means to be of the devil: "not hearing God's Word, but blaspheming God,

cursing him, and then striking with the fist and becoming a murderer.”²³ Satan’s deception caused human doubt, for Luther the root or the original sin. Two years he explained to students while expositing Genesis 3,

“Satan here attacks Adam and Eve in this way to deprive them of the Word and to make them believe his lie after they have lost the Word and their trust in God. . . . Unbelief is the source of all sins; when Satan brought about this unbelief by driving out or corrupting the Word, the rest was easy for him. . . . The chief temptation was to listen to another word and depart from the word that God had already spoken.”²⁴

The devil’s deception had alienated Adam and Eve from their Creator and thus lost the gift of life. “When Satan had separated them from and deprived them of God’s Word, nothing was not easy for him.”²⁵ That the devil became more significant in Luther’s theology than he had been for most medieval theologians arose in all likelihood from Luther’s intensively relational view of reality, which contended that fearing, loving, and trusting in God lies at the heart of humanity and that God is interested and engaged in every aspect of his creation as a person.

Luther the Preacher

Luther’s sermon practice grew out of his assignment to preach in the monastery. Elmer Kiessling’s study of Luther’s first decade of preaching described an evolution from homilies shaped by the scholastic form of the logical presentation of key ideas, largely on ethic subjects from 1512 into 1516. In the next year elements of the monastic-mystical tradition of Johann Tauler and others reshaped his preaching, but he moved quickly to proclamation formed by the distinction of law and gospel and other pillars of his new way of thinking.²⁶ These sermons continued the medieval practice that Luther had also practiced, using the sermon as a means of basic instruction in the catechism, the core of the Christian faith, expressed in the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Throughout his career from 1522 on Luther’s preaching almost always contained this instruction in the core of the faith, even when the three central elements of the medieval catechism were not expressly used. This catechetical preaching drew parallel passages and narratives from throughout the Bible to make clear what God was conveying to his people in the text—if only, at times, obliquely. His sermons also contained exposition of the text, filling in the details of grammar and syntax as well as history and geography, so that his hearers could be drawn into the atmosphere of the author and, in the case of narratives, the actors in the story. Luther enriched this aspect of his sermons often with imaginative expansions of the events told in the text.²⁷ Luther used typology to illuminate how God prepared the way for the work of Christ and the life of the church. More seldom allegorical extensions of the text occur although he increasingly indicated his hesitation in building on the biblical material in that way.²⁸

His sermon on Ephesians 6 contains no allegory or typology; passages from the Old Testament contributed very little to this sermon. Nor did the text offer the stories upon which Luther loved to elaborate, although the preacher occasionally probed what Paul must have been thinking as he turned a phrase with a monologue from the apostle. This sermon presented its assessment of the eschatological battle between God and Satan on the battlefield of the hearers' daily lives with some use of other biblical references, the lively word pictures offered by the apostle in the text, and a good deal of explanation of how the devil wages his aggression and how God defends his own. This catechesis was supported by exposition of some grammatical or syntactical points.

The linguistic gifts that made Luther the perceptive, sensitive translator included his awareness of the importance of genre, that is, the intention of the author as indicated by his choice of form for communicating specific ideas. In this conclusion to the epistle Paul was not continuing to teach how the Ephesians should believe and live, as he had done throughout the letter to that point. This was an exhortation encouraging his readers what each was to do in his situation in life as a Christian. All were to act as upright, proper soldiers of God. The text offered a sermon from the battlefield.²⁹ In 1522, in his postil sermon for the festival of Saint John, Luther had followed the example that he believed Paul had set forth, distinguishing teaching from exhortation. The former brings new insights to hearers, Luther explained, whereas exhortation is designed to apply the teaching by moving and empowering the faithful to carry out the teaching in their daily lives and give them comfort and support so that they do not tire and fail to live in a godly manner.³⁰ He continued to use this distinction occasionally in his teaching and preaching, for instance, in his lectures on Titus in 1527.³¹ To understand what the apostle was saying to them, the Wittenberg hearers needed to know the form—and thus the intention—of the author. Language served God as his instrument and power to deliver salvation, and therefore the broad and specific elements of Paul's address to the Wittenberger had to be clear.

"In the might of his strength"

An example of Luther' exposition of terminology and linguistic factors is found in the preacher's observation of Hebraisms in the text, such as "in the might of his strength," in verse 10. Luther asserted, "This is really an unclear expression and not good German, Latin or Greek. It is simply Hebrew." And yet it is the translation that he had formulated at the Wartburg, and remained to the last edition which he supervised in 1545.³² Though he often translated Hebraisms with a dynamic equivalent, he remained with what he regarded as a wooden translation in this case.³³ Paul had his reasons for doing this, compelling the translator to remain with the apostolic formulation. What Paul was trying to convey, Luther informed the congregation, was: "Stand firm and persevere, so that you do not become lazy and neglectful or dilatory in what you are planning to do. Instead, remember that what is taught here is God's Word, and he has set it before us, and this is true worship of God."³⁴ Paul's command here contains a double intention and impact, "two powers,"

the preacher continued: “be strong” indicates that God’s people are to remain steadfast in their faith and actions, that is, to be strong in and for themselves. Second, they are to be able to strike back at Satan when he attacks, just as the person in charge of a city is not only to protect the city from being captured and occupied but also must be able to attack and drive the enemy to flight. Luther’s imagination easily fashioned analogies for his hearers. One power protects the city; the other goes to battle and wins the victory. Both are necessary for believers, for the devil is a mighty enemy, and God’s people need to be well outfitted for the conflict.³⁵

Catechetical instruction, perhaps especially from the pulpit, moves from Scripture to daily life. Application took place in Luther’s preaching by zeroing in on the place in his hearers’ lives where the text met and affected the course of everyday experience. This was not an admonition only for pastors and preachers, though the exercise of their responsibilities included faithful delivery of God’s message. They must not only teach and apply God’s word but also counter the devil’s errors and false teaching, as Paul had written to Titus (1:9).³⁶ This exhortation addressed not only the clergy, but also every Christian, who should stand ready to defend their faith and give an answer to those who challenged the biblical message and meet their arguments. Paul had given instructions to “all walks of life, husbands, wives, the young, the old, masters, servants, etc.” (Eph 5:22–6:9), that all Christians in whatever situation they are, must do battle against the devil, who is attacking them and storming them with evil thoughts or others who urge them to live according to their own desires.³⁷ This exhortation is consistent with Luther’s belief that in baptism all Christians receive God’s call and commission to speak God’s word in witness and absolution to their neighbors.³⁸ Only with God’s word, which is his strength and might, can believers stand firm against the evil one.

“Put on the armor of God”³⁹

Luther observed that the apostle then moved from exhortation to a description of the means of defense God gives to his people for their struggle against the devil. He combined his very serious appraisal of the devil’s power with his absolute confidence that God insures his people victory over Satan’s machinations. Paul’s command to dress in God’s armor elicited the preacher’s rhetorical question: “What sort of armor can that be?” “Where are we supposed to find that armor or where is the armor maker who can forge such armor?” No earthly armor maker is capable of creating that kind of armor.⁴⁰ The residents of Wittenberg saw armor occasionally at the electoral castle before the Coswig Gate at the west end of their town. Luther probably knew a great deal about armor since his colleague Philip Melanchthon had grown up in a household dedicated to fashioning armor; his father was among the most famous armor makers in the German lands, having served not only the electors of the Palatinate but Emperor Maximilian himself, before he died at a young age, perhaps poisoned by a foe of his Palatine lord.⁴¹ Luther explained that Paul used this imagery to emphasize the seriousness of the conflict

between God and the devil. Their combat necessarily drew everyone on their side into the clash of truth and lie, of the Creator and Satan. The devil intends to destroy God's rule, and therefore Christians must be prepared to resist him. Luther accentuated the comfort believers have, however, in knowing that the conflict into which they have been drawn is ultimately not their conflict but God's and that God will give them aid and support against the raging and fury of the Foe. God plans to play a trick on "this proud and angry spirit" by throwing believers up against him, a poor weak shanty, as a bulwark, whom he could blow away, a little spark against a mighty wind. But God triumphs through our weakness, Luther said without mentioning 2 Corinthians 12:9. His "theology of the cross" continued to inform his expression of the way in which God does battle against the old evil foe.⁴²

Paul had explained why putting on God's armor is important: "so that you are able to stand against the cunning assault of the devil" (6:11). The devil will not attack directly when he sees that you grasp the sword, Luther told the congregation, but he will find the gaps into which he can sneak. He has indeed raged again Christendom with his tyranny, using sword, fire, water, and other means to persecute the church. But that has not worked so well; the church grows under persecution. Luther repeated the ancient dictum that the apostles planted the church but the martyrs watered it.⁴³ His own view of martyrdom departed from the medieval view that focused on witness unto death as a meritorious act of Christian courage. Luther taught instead that it was God's gift to die for the faith, both to the individual so honored and to the church, which received edification through the death.⁴⁴ The Wittenberg hearers were to expect, on the other hand, that the devil would appear to them as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), employing the world's reasoning, wisdom, and cleverness to deceive, as a friend, not an enemy, a shining, snow-white devil, out to blind Christians as the serpent deceived Eve. His intrigues take a variety of forms to enchant believers.⁴⁵ The residents of Wittenberg were not to expect a despicable devil, clothed in black, who would say, "I am Satan. Protect yourself from me." Instead, he slinks like a snake and adorning himself with God's word and name, he cites Scripture. He appears as a faithful, pious preacher, who is seeking only God's honor and the salvation of souls. He speaks of Christ ascended to the right hand of the Father, with the logical conclusion that his body and blood could not possibly be present in the Lord's Supper.⁴⁶ The threat of Zwinglianism lay in the air, and Luther countered its claims in case its message had penetrated to his own precincts.

Satan had forged similar arguments from reason through the Arians, who had denied Christ's divinity and drawn the emperor of his time and many bishops to his false teaching.⁴⁷ The first attempt of the Spanish physician Michael Servetus to argue against the divinity of Christ had appeared earlier in 1531; whether Luther was aware of this new challenge to the biblical message or was simply using an example from church history is unclear. Philip Melanchthon was familiar with the Anti-Trinitarian's work some three months later,⁴⁸ and so it is not impossible that Luther's attack on the Arians had current

relevance in Wittenberg. Luther continued with comments on the devil's cleverness and the need to oppose his efforts.⁴⁹

"For we are not fighting with flesh and blood"

With this negative description of the enemy Paul continued (6:12). Luther clarified for his hearers and readers that this was not to be understood as a reference to evil desires and the provocation of the "flesh" in the sense of the sinful lusts of the fallen human nature that led to fornication, anger, hate, pride, greed, and such sins. Here Paul used "flesh and blood" as a reference to the situation of people in the world who live as God created them in their physical bodies to live according to reason and in human society, which provides protection for home, family, servants; the heathen are included in this sense of "flesh and blood."⁵⁰ Such exposition of definitions of terms was vital for understanding the text, Luther consistently maintained. This meant, however, that believers do not wage war with the gifts of the created order apart from God's word. Luther's memory of the attempt of his former student Thomas Müntzer to establish God's rule on earth through military action recalled for his hearers and readers the error of resorting to such means, which may be validly used in preserving order in secular life, as an alternative to God's word in the spiritual dimension of life. The appropriate weapons for believers are found in "our faith, the dear Word of God, baptism, the Lord's Supper and all the articles of faith, of which none was given by flesh and blood but came from heaven." Christians must live in constant repentance, turning ever again away from false faith and thinking.⁵¹

The sermon continued with extensive elaboration of the importance of confessing the truth of God against every form of satanic deception as it moved to the exposition of the devil's forces with which the believer has to contend. The "princes and powers, the lords of this world, who rule in the darkness of this world" commanded Luther's attention relatively seldom; his concern focused on the deceiver and accuser himself. In this sermon, however, the text demanded some consideration of the demonic powers, and so the preacher compared them to the organization of the German empire. The emperor was over the princes, the princes were over the counts, knights, and nobles, and they were over the peasants and citizens of the towns. This served chiefly to emphasize the might of the imperial figure of the devil himself although Luther did not discount the evil that proceeded from his henchmen. He accentuated the need for believers to be prepared for combat with all these evils forces with God's word.⁵² That the devil's legions "rule in the darkness of this world" reminded Luther's hearers and readers that the devil and his angels were not far away in India or Africa, but daily were present in the Christian's life, "in your bedroom, around your bed, at your table, on the streets where you are, walk, stand, and are active." That they rule in darkness referred not only to the devil's ruling in the heart but also that his presence brings darkness wherever it appears. For this darkness refers to the absence of any recognition of God and his word. Paul had said just that in 2 Corinthians 4:3–4.

When Satan's dark rule has occupied human hearts, they fall into error, false teaching, heresy, and discord; and disputes regarding the faith, hatred, jealousy, war, and uprising among the people since his rule brings deception and murder. This darkness in the heart is where the devil finds his dwelling and place of refuge.⁵³ There his "evil spirits" are active; they are not only clever, subtle, and tricky, far and above over human reason and wisdom, but they are also poisonous, evil, and vicious," and they are devising ways to harm Christians day and night. All they want and enjoy is to bring evil, disruption, and misfortune upon Christians and take from them "wife, child, body, life, health, and everything that we have," and bring the world, and especially poor, innocent Christians to ruin with war and bloodshed. The devil—Luther returned to concentration of the prince of the evil spirits—visits upon human beings "hunger, thirst, misery and want, along with betrayal and the shedding of blood."⁵⁴

As he indicated in his explanation of the first article of the Creed and the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther's perception of God's providence in daily life extended to his concern for the welfare of livestock and for good weather for the crops. In this sermon he noted that the devil attempts to break the neck of, choke, or drown not only human beings but also cattle, and he wants to poison the air, ruin grain and fruit in the fields with bad weather and hail, and exercise his rule through every kind of plague and disease.⁵⁵ Luther's

*Albrecht Dürer, Knight, Death and the Devil, 1513
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).*



doctrine of creation produced both confidence in God's concern for the needs of daily life and appreciation of his good temporal, material gifts. Therefore, it was no wonder that he was profoundly aware of Satan's assault on human beings, particularly Christians, in the horizontal dimension of life and its physical needs and blessings.

"Because of him, take hold of the armor of God"

As he turned to verse 13, Luther noted that "up to this point he [Paul] had painted the devil in his true colors, not as the painters paint him, black and dreadful, with sharp claws and teeth and fiery eyes, but as he is when he attacks Christians, especially with his subtle assaults and spiritual trickery, with which he can adorn himself with the highest wisdom and even our own gospel and present himself as a brother or Christ himself." Thus, Luther's hearers and readers were to take in hand the proper armor, not the armor of straw, human reason, but with God's word. This was not a battle for gold or silver, land or people, castles or cities, earthly peace or outward righteousness. There are people charged with taking care of these things. But in this combat iron and steel, sword and rifle, will not suffice. In this battle believers need armor from heaven.⁵⁶ This armor serves "to make you able to stand firm on the evil day so that you may take your stand in all that you do" (6:13b). Human flesh and blood is weak, but God's word in the proclamation of the gospel, baptism, and the Lord's Supper gives strength to his people.⁵⁷

"So stand with your loins girded with the truth"

Paul set forth the six elements of the Christian's armor in a fashion that did not translate easily into German, Luther thought. When Scripture speaks of the truth, it refers to the proper essence of the person, with nothing false or deceitful in him or her. This means furthermore to take God's word and faith in him seriously. The preacher particularly emphasized the need to grasp the word and its use with all seriousness, a reaction against the lackadaisical attitude in Wittenberg that was vexing him. Scripture defines "girding the loins" as properly equipping yourself and getting your equipment in working order so that you are ready to run or to fight, without hindrance. Luther cited Luke 12:35 and 2 Kings 4:29 as examples of this usage. False Christians ignore this admonition, Luther charged, and warned those in the congregation who were not taking the struggle against Satan and the power of God's word seriously to do so.⁵⁸

"Put on the breastplate of righteousness"

The "breastplate of righteousness" Luther defined as "a good conscience, that a Christian live in such a manner that he offends no one and no other person may have a complaint against him." "Conscience" for him embraced more than simply an inner voice which offers instruction on what is right and what is wrong. Conscience provided orientation for all of life: it permeated the whole of human existence, and thus it is close to synonymous with the trust that enfolds every aspect of human perception and decision-making. The

preacher cited Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:12, "our boasting is this, the witness of a good conscience, that our conduct in the world has been marked by simplicity and godly purity, etc." Moses also condemned those who brought harm to anyone else. Thus, for Luther the "breastplate of righteousness" referred to the active righteousness of upright outward conduct toward all, harming no one but "diligently serving everyone and doing good for all." This breastplate protects from being stabbed by the devil in the heart, losing courage because of a terrified and despairing conscience. As Peter had admonished, "dear brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election firm" (2 Pet. 1:10). Such conduct confirms the faith through the good fruit that a good tree produces. Luther did not consistently look to good works as evidence of faith, for he knew that the struggling conscience can find peace and rest only in the promise of Christ's cross and resurrection. But on occasion he did use precisely this confirmation. For John had written that this love would accompany believers to the presence of God on the day of judgment (1 Jn 4:17).

"And put on the boots of the evangelism of peace, so that you are prepared"

"Live in peace with others," as Paul had commanded in Romans 12:1, Luther admonished his hearers and readers. Beyond living in an upright manner, doing good, and not being indifferent to others, God wants his people "to be at peace with everyone (as Paul says in Romans 12), both for our own sake and to help others, provide for them, promote their welfare through the gospel, so that we in this way can conduct ourselves with readiness and properly and move through this evil world without hindrance even if the world in and of itself grumbles and causes friction, discord, and strife, and people provoke us to anger, impatience, revenge and the like." Patience is a prime characteristic of the Christian life because the cross will not remain far from God's people and all of Scripture reveals that even when we do good to all, we must expect resistance, violence, evil attacks, contempt, ingratitude, contempt, and humiliation. Luther advised the congregation that revenge and refusing to suffer injustice will never produce peace. Patience and the willingness to accept suffering pave the way to peace.⁵⁹

"Above all, take hold of the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming arrows of the villain"

Luther noted that Paul had presented six pieces of armor to his readers, three concerning the protection against the devil provided by the proper conduct of daily life, and beginning with verse 16, three concerning that given by faith. The devil not only tries to lead Christians astray in their relationships to other people. He attacks the conscience and seeks to weaken and destroy the believer's relationship to God by creating fear and worry about that relationship. Interestingly, the preacher did not mention guilt directly although it certainly stands behind the terror and despair upon which he focused. Satan attempts to arouse the concern that the believer's life demonstrates alienation from God. In such a case

the first three pieces of armor will not provide protection from God's anger, for the devil's assault is designed to end the bond between the Creator and the forgiven sinner. Believers are instead to grasp the shield of faith and answer Satan's accusations:

"If I am a sinner and have not lived properly or done too little, there is the man who is holy and has given himself for me, died for me, has been given to me by the Father, so that his holiness and righteousness and so forth belong to me, and so you must leave me alone, in peace, no accusations allowed. I will stick to that. My life and activities may be whatever they are. I want to do as much as I can in my obligation to others. But where that is lacking and is present consistently in my life (which I cannot on my own apart from Christ) there may my Christ help me and preserve, and you cannot bring an accusation against him. On that I rely as I would rely on a shield, in which I have confidence and with it can stand against every power and gate of hell."⁶⁰

Paul's mention of "flaming arrows" indicated to Luther that "he was speaking as a man who has faced temptation, who had often in the midst of the daily assaults of the devil and experienced that nothing else lasts and is effective in this sort of battle, when the devil attacks." Then godly conduct is not enough to fend off the flaming arrows of the devil. They pierce through the armor to the heart. Through all kinds of sects and false teachers the devil strives to deprive believers of Scripture, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The shield of faith remains the only effective protection.⁶¹

Hearers and readers received their side of the dialogue with Satan over their worthiness. There to answer the devil: "God grant that my life and all that I do remain where they are intended to be, whether it is truly proper and can stand before the world. For I have in all seriousness and faithfulness taught, lived, and fulfilled my calling. But because you want to shoot me in the heart, and say that none of this is valid and with that you want to afflict my conscience, I will just let that all go by me and grab my shield, which covers and protects me and my entire life, etc. . . . For Christ stands before me, takes my place, and says, 'I have given my flesh and blood to this person, placed my life and holiness in his stead,' therefore, leave me in peace." Satan must yield and vanish at that point, the preacher concluded. Believers can hold Christ in front of the devil's nose and repudiate his accusation. Peter's admonition, "be alert and on guard, for your foe, the devil, is going about like a roaring lion and seeks to devour whomever he can. Resist him, firm in the faith" (1 Pt 5:8) reminded Luther's readers that without the shield of faith they cannot be certain that "the devil will not strangle us and gobble us down if we do not at all times have Christ in our hearts and hold fast to him."⁶²

"Take the helmet of salvation"

Luther defined the "helmet of salvation" as the hope and expectation of life in heaven,

which sustains believers in all their suffering. He shared Paul's observation that "if we only hope in Christ for this life, we are the most miserable people on earth" (1 Cor 15:19). Thus, believers can defy the devil, confident that all the misfortune that he can bring upon them in this world cannot deprive them of eternal life with Christ.⁶³

"And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"

"The final but absolutely strongest weapon, the right one for the war, with which we must strike back at the devil and conquer him" is God's word. Luther transformed the definition of being Christian from the medieval understanding that human performance of ritual and submission under the hierarchy of the church to his own conviction that God approaches sinners and does so in his word in oral, written, and sacramental forms.⁶⁴ This definition found a natural springboard in the closing words of the text. The confrontation with Satan demands not only the power to protect oneself but also the power to attack the devil and set him to flight. No sword of steel or iron is appropriate or allowed in this conflict. It must be the sword of the Spirit.

That takes place above all when the Word is publicly presented from the pulpit, but also every Christian individually or with others is to be hearing, reading, singing, speaking, and meditating on the Word. For it has the power, when clearly and purely proclaimed and used, diligently learned, and earnestly meditated on. Then Satan nor any devil can remain. For the Word reveals his deception and roguery which deceive people, with the intention of building false trust or false faith, sadness, or despair. For the Word reveals the Lord Christ, whom he crucified, but he collided with Christ and got burned, for Christ trampled on his head. Therefore, he is afraid and flees from his presence. That did him tremendous harm, takes many souls back from him, and weakens and destroys his kingdom. [For it is] God's might and power.⁶⁵

Thus, the preacher admonished readers to actively hear and learn God's word and not hide it away or let it remain in the books, as if one would keep the sword in its sheath or let it rust. Therefore, the pastoral ministry must have preachers worthy of their office, faithful workers, to resist the sects and papacy. The followers of the pope read and sang by rote "without heart or understanding," an expression of Luther's critique of the practice of the faith which his generation had grown up. For God punishes those who have contempt for his word and ingratitude for what he has taught.⁶⁶

Although Luther had no call as pastor or preacher in the town church in Wittenberg, from his monastic days in the 1510s to the end of his life, he occupied its pulpit rather often, sometimes on a fairly regular basis when the pastor, Johannes Bugenhagen, was traveling to aid territories and towns, and even the kingdom of Denmark, in organizing an evangelical church. Luther's familiarity with the students and townspeople of Wittenberg,

born of daily contact, enabled him to converse with his hearers there in each sermon. Disciplined by the pericopal system on Sundays, his sermons treated the familiar texts of that system. He or his associates deemed his sermon on Ephesians 6:10–17 from 1531 worthy of wider use. It joined other sermons of his in print, as models and tools for pastors in preparing their own sermons and as devotional literature for families and individuals.

This sermon highlighted topics that stood at the heart of the reformer’s message, the eschatological conflict that believers daily experience between God and his truth and the devil and his lies. The only effective weapon for this conflict God gives in his word, Luther believed. He insisted on the necessity of faithfulness to biblical teaching and the proper use of God’s word in its oral, written, and sacramental forms. But the armor of God included not only this emphasis on correct use and delivery of God’s word but also on the godly conduct of daily life. The two belonged together in Luther’s view; the passive righteousness bestowed by God and apprehended by faith naturally led to the believer’s acting out what it means to be God’s chosen and newborn child in the active righteousness of human performance both of praise of God and service to the neighbor. Trust in Christ cannot do other than bring forth the fruits of faith in human action. Thus, in this one sermon the reformer conveyed to hearers and readers central elements of his theology for the edification of their faith and the encouragement of its fruits.

- 1 Emil Sehling, ed., *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig/Tübingen, 1902-), 1: 700–701. On Luther’s preaching, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 174–208; Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983); Ulrich Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums. Luther als Prediger Pädagoge und Rhetor* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972); Elmer Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935); Harold J. Grimm, *Martin Luther as a Preacher* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1929).
- 2 *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993 [henceforth WA]), 32:141–149, 150–158, 178–187.
- 3 WA 41:449–454 (1535), 41:708–712 (1536), 51:67–76.
- 4 WA 51:67, 21. In this sermon he personified different devils that afflict various aspects of human life, perhaps laying at least part of the basis for the development by many of his students for the genre of the “devil book”; cf. WA 51:71, 10–74, 4. Cf. Heinrich Grimm, “Die deutschen ‘Teufelbücher’ des 16. Jahrhunderts. Ihre Rolle im Buchwesen und ihre Bedeutung,” *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 16 (1959): 513–570; Wolfgang Brückner, *Das Wirken des Teufels. Theologie und Sage im 16. Jahrhundert*, in *Völkerzählung und Reformation. Ein Handbuch zur Tradierung und Funktion von Erzählstoffen und Erzählenliteratur im Protestantismus* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1974), 393–416, and Rainer Alsheimer, “Katalog protestantischer Teufelserzählungen des 16. Jahrhunderts,” in ibid., 417–519.
- 5 WA 34, 2:360–371.
- 6 The German Mass, 1526, WA 19:78, 26–27, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958–1986 [henceforth LW]) 53:68.
- 7 WA Briefe 6:108–109, Nr. 1822.
- 8 WA Briefe 6:178–188, Nr. 1861.
- 9 WA Briefe 6:16–17, Nr. 1772;
- 10 WA Briefe 6:86–88, Nr. 1811.
- 11 WA Briefe 6:99–101, Nr. 1818;
- 12 WA Briefe 6:103–106, Nr. 1821.
- 13 WA Briefe 6:52, Nr. 1793.
- 14 WA Briefe 6:83, Nr. 1808, 6:122–124, Nr. 1826.
- 15 E.g., WA Briefe 6:46–47, Nr. 1788, 102, Nr. 1819, 125, Nr. 1827, 126, Nr. 1828.
- 16 WA Briefe 6:16, Nr. 1772; 6:155, 156–157, Nr. 1849, Nr. 1850.
- 17 WA Briefe 6: 308, 9, Nr. 1874.

- 18 WA Briefe 6: 17, Nr. 1772.
- 19 WA Briefe 6: 165, 2–3, Nr. 1856.
- 20 Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967).
- 21 Cf. Hans-Martin Barth, *Der Teufel und Jesus Christus in der Theologie Martin Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- 22 Ibid., 330.
- 23 WA 52: 199, 27–28.
- 24 WA 42:110, 38–111, 3; LW 1:147.
- 25 WA 42:111, 2–3; LW 1:147.
- 26 *The Early Sermons of Luther*, 68–108.
- 27 Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God, Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).
- 28 Cf. Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 153–167.
- 29 WA 34, 2:372, 8–28.
- 30 WA 10, 1, 1:290, 7–13, LW 75:342.
- 31 WA 25:6, 10–15; LW 29:3; WA 25:55, 2–5; LW 29:68.
- 32 WA DB 7:208/209.
- 33 Cf. Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 213–214, and Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2000), 96–97.
- 34 WA 34, 2:377, 13–20.
- 35 WA 34, 2:377, 24–378, 15.
- 36 WA 34, 2:378, 16–379, 8.
- 37 WA 34, 2:379, 9–26.
- 38 Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 185–188.
- 39 Translation of the Bible verses in this article reflect Luther's German rather than any specific published English translation.
- 40 WA 34, 2:379, 28–380, 6.
- 41 Heinz Scheible, *Melanchthon. Vermittler der Reformation. Eine Biographie* (Munich: Beck, 2016), 12–15.
- 42 Cf. Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Although some scholars suggest that Luther abandoned his “theologia crucis” after the early 1520s, he was still very much employing its elements in the early 1530s; cf. Robert Kolb, “Luther's Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Luther's Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 69–85.
- 43 WA 34, 2:381, 18–32.
- 44 Cf. Robert Kolb, “God's Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith,” *Church History* 64 (1995): 399–411.
- 45 WA 34, 2:381, 33–382, 24.
- 46 WA 34, 2:382, 25–383, 7.
- 47 WA 34, 2:383, 8–25.
- 48 *Melanchthon's Briefwechsel*, Text Band 5, ed. Heinz Scheible (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-hozboog, 2003), 382–383, Nr. 1305, 25–44.
- 49 WA 34, 2:383, 26–385, 8.
- 50 WA 34, 2:385, 17–30.
- 51 WA 34, 2:386, 1–40.
- 52 WA 34, 2:388, 25–392, 31.
- 53 WA 34, 2:393, 6–394, 4.
- 54 WA 34, 2:394, 6–395, 14.
- 55 WA 34, 2:396, 37–397, 8.
- 56 WA 34, 2:397, 30–309, 8.
- 57 WA 34, 2:398, 11–37.
- 58 WA 34, 2:398, 11–400, 4.
- 59 WA 34, 2:401, 20–32.
- 60 WA 34, 2:401, 36–402, 30.
- 61 WA 34, 2:402, 31–403, 14.
- 62 WA 34, 2:403, 15–404, 10.
- 63 WA 34, 2:404, 12–405, 2.
- 64 Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word of God*, 1–6.
- 65 WA 34, 2:405, 4–32.
- 66 WA 34, 2:405, 33–406, 26.

History and Freedom in Luther's *On the Councils and the Church*

Paul Robinson



Paul Robinson is professor of historical theology and dean of the faculty at Concordia Seminary, Saint

Louis. Robinson is editor of *The Annotated Luther Volume 3: Church and Sacraments*, to which he also contributed the selection "On the Councils and the Church" (Augsburg). He is author of the biography *Martin Luther: A Life Reformed* (Pearson Longman).

In November 1535, the papal legate Pietro Paulo Vergerio visited Martin Luther in Wittenberg. He had come to announce that the pope would summon a general council of the church to meet in Mantua beginning the next year. This was difficult news for the Lutherans because Emperor Charles V had promised to coexist with them but only until a council could meet. The reformers themselves had been calling for a free council of the church, that is, one not called or led by the pope, to

meet in Germany for the purpose of reform. The question of how they should respond to a papal council required a great deal of conversation and negotiation. The situation resulted in a number of writings from Luther and others, including the Smalcald Articles, but Luther had also promised to deal at length with the question of a council's authority.

After the pope's council had been postponed indefinitely, but at a time when other negotiations kept the issue of a council alive, Luther delivered on that promise by publishing *On the Councils and the Church* in 1539. It is a historical tour de force, but its modern readers generally skim through the history in part two, if they don't skip it altogether, to get to the conclusion in part three, in which Luther enumerates the "signs" of the church. Yet this is a mistake because Luther's understanding of the church is itself historically informed, and *On the Councils* is a master class on reading history with Luther. History matters because the church is present in the world, not floating around up above it. The church is created by the word of God, but it exists in particular places and in particular times. Because the principal sign of the church is the word, the outward circumstances of the church are mutable. So Luther's understanding of authority in the church, whether it is the authority of popes, councils, or fathers, is bound up with his understanding of history. And from his reading of history, he concludes that any exercise of church authority apart from maintaining what is clearly taught in Scripture as required for faith has no permanent claim on the church. Rather, most authoritative pronouncements should be understood as an exercise of love—agreements that Christians make with each other about how to live together. Apart from their time and place, these

agreements have no binding force. Yet they can provide sound examples of the church in action, especially those of the early church.

The Argument of On the Councils and the Church

In *On the Councils*, Luther addressed the crucial difference between Rome and Wittenberg concerning the councils, which did not concern the potential value of a church council but rather its intrinsic authority. His argument is in three parts. The first deals with the authority of councils in general; the second addresses the history of the first four ecumenical councils along with the apostolic council described in Acts 15; the third answers the question of how the church can be found in the world without the authority of popes and councils.

Luther addresses the authority of the councils by pointing out what even his opponents admitted—the councils were unequal in their authority and some were better than others. To this he adds that they also contradicted each other just as the fathers did. By emphasizing the contradictions without trying to resolve them—in fact, assuming they can't be resolved—Luther departed from precedent. In previous centuries, canon lawyers and theologians had also recognized what they considered apparent contradictions in the statements of these authorities, but had then worked to resolve the contradictions and show that they were *only* apparent. Texts that became cornerstones of medieval education, particularly Gratian's *Decretum* and Lombard's *Sentences*, both began with this assumption, which was crucial for the task of assembling authoritative statements in an organized way. Luther considers this approach fundamentally dishonest. He admits that he picks the quotes that he likes from such sources, but wants his opponents to admit the same.

However, while we both thus cull from the councils and the fathers, they what they like, and we what we like, and cannot reach an agreement—because the fathers themselves disagree as much as do the councils—who, my dear man, is going to preach to the poor souls who know nothing of such culling and quarreling?¹

Luther asserts that such quarrels, in addition to being a distraction from preaching the gospel, also miss the point of the decisions of the very councils they so assiduously quote. Because his opponents are fascinated by the letter of the conciliar decrees and missing the point of the councils' decisions, he writes, "Yes, it is fun to fool around with councils and fathers if one juggles with the letters or constantly postpones the council."²

In the second part of the treatise, Luther addresses the history of the councils to demonstrate that they are uncertain authorities. The best of the best, the Council of Nicaea, went astray on many points of legislation. Even on its affirmation of the divinity of Christ, Luther comments, "If we had nothing with which to defend this article except this council we would be in a bad way. Then I myself would not believe the council, either, but say, 'They were human beings.'" Yet within this largely negative historical survey, Luther expresses a highly significant point of interpretation—the idea that the councils

should be interpreted according to the chief point under debate and in their historical context. This understanding, as we will see, provides the basis for Luther's argument concerning the freedom of the church.

The third, and most often cited, part of the treatise asks and answers the question of what the church is. Rome assumed that the pope, the cardinals, and the bishops made up the church and that this visible structure guaranteed its authority. Luther disagrees: "But as for saying what, who, and where the church is, they do not render either the church or God even the service of asking the question or thinking about it."³ Luther has thought about the church and has concluded that, as the Children's [Apostles'] Creed puts it, it is "a crowd or assembly of people who are Christians and holy."⁴ The Holy Spirit working faith through the word produces this crowd. Luther then asks, "How will or how can a poor confused person tell where such Christian holy people are to be found in this world?"⁵ To answer this question, he describes seven "signs" of the church. There is no significance in the number—in other writings Luther has more or fewer signs—and the list is not meant to be exhaustive. What it is meant to do is to root the existence of the church only and firmly in the word of God. "First," he writes, "the holy Christian people are recognized by their possession of the holy word of God."⁶ This is *the sign* that marks the church and the others flow from it and are related to it. They are: baptism, the Lord's Supper, public binding and loosing of sins (office of the keys), called ministers, public prayer and praise to God, and suffering persecution. This is the church that exists by and bears witness to the word and promise of God.

Luther Argues from History: Easter and Blood Sausage

In the second part of *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther addressed the first four ecumenical councils of the church for two reasons. First, he treated only these four because the tradition of the western church emphasized them as being of greater authority than the others. This supremacy had been codified in canon law and can be treated as an assumption that gives Luther a place to start his argument.⁷ Second, and more important, these councils occurred in what many considered a golden age of the church. This was the time of great church fathers like Augustine, Jerome, and Athanasius who were still revered as authorities in the Middle Ages and, for this reason, routinely and extensively quoted in theological texts. These councils were also sufficiently close to the time of the apostles that they still reflected at least a glimmer of apostolic authority, and in fact the events of the so-called Apostolic Council of Jerusalem related in Acts 15 were often bundled into the histories of these councils. In addition, these councils had their origin in the first flushes of success of Constantine's newly Christian Roman Empire.⁸ Even Luther cannot help himself when it comes to Constantine but speaks of the empire in those days as a peaceful paradise for the church into which the old serpent let loose the heretic Arius.⁹

This represents in broad strokes the medieval consensus regarding the councils. Beyond this consensus, however, the conciliar movement of the later Middle Ages had

stressed the authority of councils over against the authority of the pope. The height of the conciliar movement came at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), which settled the papal schism and adopted two decrees that attempted to establish the role of the councils in the governance of the church.¹⁰ For the conciliarists, the first ecumenical councils represented a golden age in which the pope ruled the church along with the bishops as they gathered in council.¹¹ One of the leading lights at Constance, Jean Gerson, considered the primitive church (*ecclesia primitiva*) to be normative and believed that reform constituted a return to its spirit and tradition.¹² By *ecclesia primitiva*, Gerson meant the apostolic and early patristic periods. Within that time frame, however, he emphasized the experience of the church at Jerusalem and claimed to find four councils mentioned in the book of Acts. Gerson did not reject the possibility of development in the church after this time, but he did locate its validity in the entire church hierarchy, rather than in the pope alone. This hierarchy, he argued, was endowed by the Spirit with a “life-giving and reforming seed” (*semen vivificum et reformativum*).¹³

Like Gerson, Renaissance humanists who wished to reform the church privileged the early centuries of Christianity, but unlike Gerson they had little interest in propping up medieval developments. Rather, their intent was to strip away later accretions and return to the supposed simplicity and purity of the early church as represented in Acts and at Nicaea. Many church reformers of the sixteenth century, both Protestant and Catholic, shared this outlook. For Protestants, a return to the ancient, primitive church often meant extreme simplicity, especially in worship.¹⁴ For Catholics, it often meant curbing the greatest abuses in the church of their day, whether lay superstition, clerical ignorance, or hierarchical wealth. Their reliance on councils reflected this return to the primitive, that is, a return to the laws established by the early church and, in particular, the first four councils.¹⁵ Luther himself adopted the early church as a “tentative norm,” to use John Headley’s phrase. “In his use of the material concerning the early Church after Christ,” Headley writes, “[Luther] often found historical facts which were in such profound agreement with the nature of the true Church that he tended to make them tentative norms.” One example is the pivotal Council of Nicaea because “it provided specific definition to the claim that there had been a time when the Roman church had not been above all the others.”¹⁶

This appeal to the primitive was not new, but the humanists brought to it a new spirit and a new arsenal of linguistic and historical tools. Humanist reform efforts were grounded in vastly improved editions of the church fathers, which were then read by them with greater sensitivity to historical context and with a better grasp than medieval scholars of the development of the Latin language. Humanists who wished to reform the church often deployed these resources to criticize papal power. One example that is particularly relevant to *On the Councils* is Lorenzo Valla’s *The Falsely-Believed and Forged Donation of Constantine* of 1440.¹⁷ The Donation was a supposedly ancient text that documented how Constantine, when he departed for his new city of Constantinople, gave territory in Italy and rule in the west to the pope. Though many in the Middle Ages doubted this absurd account, it

(Right)

Detail from icon
depicting Council
of Nicaea.



nevertheless made its way into papal pronouncements against the emperors in the eleventh century. Valla demonstrated conclusively that it was a forgery based on his knowledge of classical writing and fourth century Latin.

Luther read Valla's work in an edition by Ulrich von Hutten, another humanist

and Luther's contemporary, and later published his own German translation of the *Donation* with comments.¹⁸ "Valla pleases me," Luther said, "He is a good author and a good Christian; I read him most avidly."¹⁹

It is no surprise that what pleased Luther most in Valla was his attack on the pope's power. Luther had become convinced that the pope was the Antichrist and searched history books for evidence of the pope's tyranny.²⁰ Though he frequently asserted that the church had changed for the worse relatively recently, by the time of *On the Councils* Luther was reading the histories of the early church in order to discover the origin and describe the development of papal power. In his carefully researched treatment of the councils in *On the Councils*, he used recent editions of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, Rufinus's translation and continuation of Eusebius, and the *Historia Tripartita* of Cassiodorus Senator. In addition, he relied heavily on the work of the Franciscan Peter Crabbe on the councils, *Concilia Omnia*, that had just been published in 1538, along with Platina's *Lives of the Popes* from the last quarter of the fifteenth century.²¹ Luther was a discriminating reader and used these sources for his own ends. In his discussion of the Council of Ephesus, for example, he lumped Platina together with other "very difficult to believe" papal histories.²² Yet Platina was still useful because what he wrote was history. "I attribute nothing to Platina," Luther had asserted at the Leipzig Disputation, "but to history which is the mother of truth, which Platina writes."²³

In search of truth, then, Luther writes at some length on the canons of the first four

councils, and especially Nicaea, in *On the Councils*. In doing so, he takes issue even with the well-meaning, but in his mind misguided, approach of church reformers influenced by Renaissance humanism. Luther wishes to make clear that not everything done even by the first four ecumenical councils was worthy of imitation. In fact, he begins his account of Nicaea with a story about how Constantine threw into the fire letters brought to him by the bishops that concerned their disputes with one another. Later, in writing about the deliberations that took place at the council following the condemnation of Arianism, Luther states, “Most of this was sheer clerical squabbling.”²⁴ As an illustration of this point, Luther addressed the controversy over the date of Easter, which he called “one ember from these wooden articles [of Nicaea that] has kept on glowing.”²⁵ It was still glowing because in the sixteenth century the Julian calendar was desperately in need of adjustment, and as a result Easter came later than usual in relation to the seasons. This was a problem because so much economic activity, including agriculture, was tied to the date of Easter. Since the fifteenth century, a number of scholars had been working on a solution. Nicaea had attempted to settle controversies over the date of Easter that had divided the church. Some argued that Easter should be celebrated on Passover, others that it should be celebrated on the Sunday after. This argument was further complicated by problems of establishing the date of Passover, including the fact that the dating of the spring equinox differed between Rome and Alexandria. Despite the solution decreed by the council, the matter was not entirely settled in the West for several more centuries. Luther deplored such controversy, writing, “Over this trifling and unnecessary matter the bishops accused one another of heresy and excommunicated one another, which was a sin and a shame.”²⁶ So much for a golden age!

Yet, some of Luther’s readers might have asked: What about the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem? Doesn’t Acts 15 set a precedent for the authority of a council in the church? Luther’s treatment of this episode is perhaps the most devastating of all for deflating dreams of a golden age of the church, and he does it by appealing to the consumption of blood sausage. To those who insist on the authority of councils, Luther asks why they eat blood sausage when this most authoritative council of all forbade eating blood, even to Gentile converts. More importantly, Luther asks how Peter’s proclamation of the gospel—“Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (vv. 10–11)—can be reconciled with James’s commands, including abstaining from blood. “These two articles, that of St. Peter and that of St. James,” Luther writes, “are contradictory and yet they are not.”

yet they are not.”²⁷ They are not contradictory because the members of the Jerusalem Council did not intend to establish “an eternal law in the church.”²⁸ Luther argues that Peter’s statement of the gospel, because it is the eternal gospel, abrogates every law. The council did not meet to establish the truth of the gospel but rather to apply it to the life of Jewish and Gentile believers together in a specific case and in a particular context. Peter’s statement stands as true without the council’s authority. The council is, rather, deciding on whether their proclamation of the gospel requires that Gentiles be circumcised and observe the Jewish law. Once they decided that the gospel did not require this, the main business of the council was, according to Luther, over. The additions made by James—“to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (v. 20)—were made not as requirements for salvation but in order to help Jewish and Gentile believers live together without giving offense to each other. Luther maintained that sexual immorality, unlike certain foods, was still forbidden for Christians. In that sense it would be “eternal law,” but it has that status because it is natural law and part of the Decalogue and not because the council proclaimed it. James highlights it, according to Luther, because the Gentile cultures took fornication lightly. He also observes, with a heavy dose of irony, that this is one rule members of the papal court in Rome have been quick to circumvent. The Mosaic law, or parts of it, are not put in force once again because James added these rules. Luther states unequivocally, “One must give Moses or his church and law an honorable burial.”²⁹

Reconciling Peter and James is not accomplished by bringing the law back in after the gospel—even if it is just a few little rules. If that were desirable, James could simply have agreed with the Pharisees. Luther argues that exactly the opposite is the case. For him Peter and James speak for faith and love respectively. Peter rightly insists on freedom from the law, and James rightly encourages love toward fellow Christians. What James is advocating is not, in fact, the law as it was understood by the Pharisees because it is no longer a burden. Luther concludes, “When a burden is no longer a burden, it is good to bear; and when a law is no longer a law, it is good to keep, like the Ten Commandments. How much more is that true of ceremonies, especially if they are abolished or if very few are retained.”³⁰ What James said can be explained and observed without doing violence to the freedom of the gospel.³¹ What cannot be tolerated for Luther is the idea that James legislated for the whole church in every time and place.

This seeming digression into a consideration of the Jerusalem Council after Luther has already discussed Nicaea plays a critical role in his argument. If the legislation of this apostolic council was no longer in force, as it clearly was not in his day, how much more should the decisions of the other councils be understood as provisional and changeable? In addition, the act of interpreting the Jerusalem Council in this text was intended as a demonstration of how all the councils should be understood.³² The council’s force stems from its chief article, that is, the central question the council had gathered to discuss. Legislation adopted after that is secondary, mutable, and has no significant authority in the church.

One should view and also keep the councils according to the chief article which has given the council its purpose; for that is, and in that consists, the real essence of the council, the true body of the council, to which everything else must be adjusted and fitted, like a garment that is fitted to the person who wears it or is dressed in it.³³

So, for example, in the case of Nicaea, it is necessary for Christians always and everywhere to believe that Christ is true God, of one substance with the Father. It does not follow, however, that it is necessary for salvation that all Christians observe the same date of Easter, or for that matter, observe a single day as Easter at all.

It would seem that with this conclusion Luther has rendered councils and fathers useless, but that is far from the truth. What he has done is to render the council bishops and fathers human. Luther no longer considered them infallible oracles—to be sure, he has “deparentified” the fathers, to use Scott Hendrix’s phrase.³⁴ But for Luther the fathers were still wise conversation partners and examples of faithfulness to Christ, even when circumstances and human limitations led them to make regrettable choices. So, for example, he points out how Paphnutius defended clerical marriage at Nicaea, though the other bishops pressed on to forbid it anyway. Luther himself so opposed the idea of forbidding marriage he speculates that the Arians were behind this decision. He deals with Cyprian and Nicaea³⁵ in a similar way concerning the issue of rebaptizing heretics. Since Cyprian believed heretics had no baptism, he demanded that they be baptized “like other heathen,” as Luther puts it. Luther observes that “Augustine and whole later church declare this to be wrong.”³⁶ Nevertheless, he almost makes a virtue out of Cyprian’s error. “But we are well content with St. Cyprian,” he writes, “for in him Christ comforts us poor sinners mightily, showing that his great saints are after all still human—like St. Cyprian, this excellent man and dear martyr, who blundered in more serious matters, about which we lack the time to speak now.”³⁷

In this way, Luther portrays disagreement between the fathers, which he notes throughout the treatise, not as a difficulty to be overcome but as a reality to be embraced. The fathers are not valuable in spite of such disagreement but because of it, since in this way they testify to the primacy of God’s word over human decisions. Rather than quarrel over reconciling the church fathers, Luther suggests that the church concern itself with preaching to the people.³⁸ Harmonizing the contradictory statements of the fathers had been a major part of theology in the Middle Ages, and Luther characterizes Gratian and Peter Lombard as pursuing this task. Luther expresses a low opinion of Gratian’s effort because “he concedes too much to the Roman bishop [i.e., the pope], and applies everything to him.”³⁹ He speaks more highly of Lombard, “who is diligent beyond measure in this task and was way ahead of us, for he too felt this anguish over the disagreement of the fathers.”⁴⁰ Yet Luther is content to allow Lombard to stay ahead of him in the task of harmonizing, because he has come to believe that this is not the solution. As an antidote to such thinking, he recommends the commentary on the first

four chapters of 1 Corinthians by the pastor of the city church in Wittenberg, Johannes Bugenhagen, also known as Pomeranus: “If any one wishes further proof that the dear, holy fathers were human beings, he should read the booklet of Dr. Pomer, our pastor.”⁴¹

Because the fathers are, in fact, human beings, Luther inescapably concludes, they and all their writings must stand under the judgment of Scripture. On this point he cites 1 Corinthians 3:12–13, “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done,” and interprets it as a warning against all human authorities.

If the Holy Spirit had been so foolish as to expect or trust that the councils or fathers would do everything well and make no mistakes there would have been no need for him to warn the church against them. . . . In that way, [the Spirit] foretold, not privately and feebly, but openly and mightily, that in the holy church there would be those who build with wood, straw, and hay, namely teachers who would remain on the foundation and be saved, even though harmed by fire.⁴²

The best of the fathers did not expect their pronouncements to have the authority that they were later given. As an example, Luther cites a letter from Augustine to Jerome, in which Augustine states, “As I read the books of others, so I wish mine read.”⁴³ In addition, he cites the dispute between the two fathers over a point in Jerome’s Galatians commentary. Augustine wrote in part, “I hope that you do not expect your books to be regarded as equal to those of the apostles and prophets.” Luther adds, “May a pious and good man never write letters to me like those St. Augustine addressed to St. Jerome, asking me not to regard my books as the equal of those of the apostles and prophets!”⁴⁴ Luther had already expressed this thought with regard to his writings in the preface he wrote to a collection of his German writings and would express the same sentiment only a year before his death in the preface he wrote for the collection of his Latin writings.⁴⁵

Luther recognized that the work of the councils, once they had defended from error what Scripture clearly taught, was to situate the proclamation of the gospel in their own context. His first step in this direction was to point out that his opponents who touted the authority of the councils were the very same people who ignored the councils’ decisions. As evidence, he cited a long list of canons of the Council of Nicaea that were no longer observed under the papacy or that had “lapsed,” according to the euphemism often employed.⁴⁶ Luther’s argument here is not driven simply by a theology opposed to that of Rome but by a fundamentally different approach to history and its authority. He frequently questions his opponents’ attempts to interpret around the conciliar decrees in an effort to maintain the authority of councils without actually obeying them. At one point he expresses his frustration, saying, “Interpret it as well as you can, and I will be content with it. Only tell me, were you present at the Nicene council when this article

was adopted, since you can repeat this interpretation with such certainty? If not, where did you read this?"⁴⁷ In this approach to interpretation, he takes a page from the historical efforts of the Renaissance humanists. Medieval interpreters had often forged ahead without historical context, in part because much information was lacking, but also because the texts were taken at face value as authoritative in their own right without reference to the purpose for which they might have been written. The Renaissance humanists rejected this assumption of authority apart from history. They wished to read the texts of the classical world and of the early church in their original languages and in light of their historical context. In this way, they hoped to wrest them from the grasp of the medieval interpreters and to let their original meaning stand unaltered by subsequent commentary. Part II of *On the Councils and the Church* is Luther's extended demonstration of how to do that for the church councils.

Yet Luther also went a step beyond many of the humanists by his refusal to privilege the activities of the councils once they had defended what Scripture taught. He gives example after example from the councils in which their decisions are questionable, misguided, or just plain wrong. In so doing, he demonstrates the danger of endowing the councils with direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit. In fact, he considers the questions that absorbed the council fathers to be beneath the Holy Spirit and a distraction, at best, from proclaiming the gospel. "Or does the Holy Spirit," he writes, "have nothing better to do in the councils than to bind and burden his servants with impossible, dangerous, and unnecessary laws?"⁴⁸

Conclusion: The Freedom of the Church

Luther read the councils and fathers in a way that ultimately argued for the freedom of the church, understood as the people of God, to order its affairs in whatever way it wished under the authority of Scripture and in order to serve the proclamation of the gospel. *Freedom* had meant something quite different in the Middle Ages, when it was understood primarily in terms of rights.⁴⁹ The so-called Gregorian reform, the project begun by the eleventh-century popes, demanded the freedom of the church (*libertas ecclesiae*) in precisely these terms. What these reformers wanted to guarantee was the freedom of the church, meaning primarily the pope, from outside influence, especially that of the lay nobility.⁵⁰ In pursuit of this goal, the popes appealed to the legislation of the councils and the judgments of the fathers as presenting a picture of how the church should be everywhere and for all time. Gratian's *Decretum* was meant to promote precisely this sort of church reform, leading to Luther's judgment that Gratian gave away too much to the pope.⁵¹ Luther's understanding of freedom is quite different and includes a freedom from the ossified and discordant tradition of fathers and councils.⁵² This freedom from tradition bred a freedom to interact with the church fathers as fellow believers who offer examples of faithful, though not perfect, lives and sound, though not perfect, judgment in leading the church.

In *On the Councils*, Luther frequently quotes one of Augustine's letters⁵³ to the effect

that the bishops have oppressed the church with burdens beyond even what the Jews had experienced, since at least their burdens were from God rather than human beings, and stating that Christ himself imposed only a few easy ceremonies, namely, baptism and Lord's Supper. So, by contrast, the bishops seem to have overreached. Luther continues, "But [Augustine] also weakens [the ordinances of the bishops], saying in the same place, 'No one is obligated to keep all of these, but may ignore them without sin.' If St. Augustine is not a heretic here, I never will be one."⁵⁴ Of course, it could be argued that by focusing on this one text Luther has created his own version of Augustine, but that is precisely the point. This is the example Luther wishes to emulate, not as a result of a capricious cherry picking of quotes from the church fathers (although all of the reformers are capable of that), but as a result of his understanding of the nature of the church and its history. Luther's confidence in the word of God enabled him to place it at the center—to understand the church as God's people gathered by God through the power of his word—and then leave well enough alone.

Luther often expressed his reluctance to legislate for Christians even in other parts of Europe or Germany, much less for Christians of all time. When asked to write an order of worship, he initially demurred, not wanting his liturgy to become the law in other places. He recognized that nothing had changed since the times of the councils. The gospel was still preached in a specific context, and the church had to have freedom to keep legalism at bay. Though later in his life Luther came to terms with a certain amount of regulation in the church, he endeavored nevertheless to keep that regulation in its proper place. He made this point, for example, with regard to the need in his day to adjust the calendar and the ever-later celebration of Easter.

We therefore have and must have the power and the freedom to observe Easter when we choose, and even if we made Friday into Sunday, or vice versa, it would be right, as long as it were done unanimously and by the rulers and the Christians (as I said before). Moses is dead and buried by Christ, and days or seasons are not to be lords over Christians, but rather Christians are lords over days and seasons, free to fix them as they will or as seems convenient to them. For Christ made all things free when he abolished Moses.⁵⁵

This sort of freedom, if it is not to turn into a new tyranny, requires the recognition that the church will not always make wise decisions. With that recognition comes the need for humility and forgiveness. In this way, too, Luther thought nothing had changed since the time of the councils. "If [the fathers] were human," he wrote, "they would also at times have thought, spoken, and acted just as we think, speak, and act, but afterwards they would speak (like us) the beloved prayer, 'Forgive us our trespasses.'"⁵⁶

- 1 "On the Councils and the Church" in *The Annotated Luther, Vol. 3: Church and Sacraments*, ed. by Paul W. Robinson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 360. Hereafter cited as *TAL*.
- 2 *TAL* 3:359.
- 3 *TAL* 3:416–17.
- 4 *TAL* 3:417.
- 5 *TAL* 3:422.
- 6 *TAL* 3:422.
- 7 The *Decretum*, the first portion of medieval canon law, states, "Among other councils we recognize four venerable synods that, before all others, shelter the whole of the faith, like the four Gospels or the like-numbered rivers of paradise." Gratian, *The Treatise on Laws*, trans. by Augustine Thompson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 54 (Dist. XV C. 1).
- 8 The empire was not yet officially Christian, but Constantine was a Christian, and his legislation privileged the church.
- 9 *TAL* 3:368.
- 10 *Haec Sancta et Frequens*. On the topic of reform at Constance, see Philip H. Stump, *The Reforms of the Council of Constance (1414–1418)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994).
- 11 Only a few radical conciliarists would have suggested dispensing with the pope altogether. Even the opponents of Pope Eugenius IV in the later stages of the Council of Basel elected their own pope, Felix V.
- 12 Louis B. Pascoe, "Jean Gerson, the 'Ecclesia Primitiva,' and Reform," *Traditio* 30 (1974): 382.
- 13 Pascoe, 383.
- 14 See, for example, Euan Cameron's account of Heinrich Bullinger's *On the Origins of Error*, a historical exploration of the origin of the cult of the saints and the Roman Mass that appeared in the same year as *On the Councils. Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Church's Past* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 126–129.
- 15 For example, John Colet, dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and reformer, preached a ceremony on this topic for a convocation of English clergy in 1512. For the sermon, see John C. Olin, *The Catholic Reformation: Svonarola to Ignatius Loyola* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1978), 27–39. Luther mentions such people as being honest about their appeal to the authority of councils, unlike the papacy.
- 16 John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 164.
- 17 The title is variously translated into English. This translation most literally captures Valla's Latin: *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatio*.
- 18 *WA* 50:65–89.
- 19 *WA* Tr 5:333 #5729.
- 20 Headley, 197ff.
- 21 *TAL* 3:321–322.
- 22 *LW* 41:107.
- 23 *WA* 2:289.
- 24 *TAL* 3:372.
- 25 *TAL* 3:373.
- 26 *TAL* 3:374.
- 27 *TAL* 3:388.
- 28 *TAL* 3:380.
- 29 *TAL* 3:390.
- 30 *TAL* 3:386–387.
- 31 "For if St James had intended to impose these items as law he would have had to impose the entire law, as St. Paul says in Galatians 5" (78).
- 32 Luther summed up his approach to all the councils by saying "actions are best understood by understanding that which motivates them." *TAL* 3:366.
- 33 *TAL* 3:386.
- 34 Scott H. Hendrix, "Deparentifying the Fathers: The Reformers and Patristic Authority," in *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15 und 16 Jahrhundert* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993), 55–68.
- 35 Luther assumes that Nicaea adopted Cyprian's position, but the council simply recognized this practice. *TAL* 3:359, note 130.
- 36 *TAL* 3:359–360.
- 37 *TAL* 3:358.
- 38 "However, while we both thus cull from the councils and the fathers, they what they like, and we what we like, and cannot reach an agreement—because the fathers themselves disagree as much as do the councils—who, my dear man, is going to preach to the poor souls who know nothing of such culling and quarreling?" *TAL* 3:360.
- 39 *TAL* 3:362.
- 40 *TAL* 3:361.
- 41 *TAL* 3:362.
- 42 *TAL* 3:363.
- 43 To Jerome, Letter 82, *NPNF* 1:350.
- 44 *TAL* 3:342.
- 45 *LW* 34:285, 327.

46 *TAL* 3:346–361.

47 *TAL* 3:351.

48 *TAL* 3:357.

49 Even the use of the slogan “freedom” in the 1525 Peasants’ War can be understood in this more traditional way, as the *12 Articles*, the list of peasant demands, demonstrates.

50 When Luther wrote his *To the Christian Nobility*, suggesting that lay nobles could and should reform the church if the bishops would not, he was appealing to a situation that had existed in the church prior to, and later in places in spite of, the Gregorian reform.

51 See Anders Winroth, *The Making of Gratian’s Decretum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

52 The official title of the Decretum was, tellingly, *Concordance of Discordant Canons*.

53 To Janarius, Letter 55, *NPNF* 1:315.

54 *TAL* 3:338.

55 *TAL* 3:379.

56 *TAL* 3:363. On this point Headley quotes Luther’s *Ennaratio* on Psalm 90 of 1534: “For the true Church is that which prays and prays seriously from faith “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” 40.

Luther, Learning, and the Reformation

A Look at Then with Some Thoughts for Now

Robert Rosin



Robert Rosin is the Eugene E. and Nell S. Fincke Graduate Professor Emeritus of Theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. A global scholar on Luther and the Reformation, he has been a guest instructor or lecturer in many countries including Papua New Guinea, Korea, and Kyrgyzstan.

A monkish squabble got out of hand. In this corner, representing the Augustinian Hermits, from Wittenberg: Martin Luther. In the other corner, backed by the Dominicans (always up for a scrap) plus other heavy hitters: John Tetzel. The clash should have been no more than an undercard tussle. Others had complained before about indulgences, yet not much happened. This time things were

different, with this monk and university professor punching above his weight against both pope and emperor. This indulgence clash garnered huge public attention. How could it not with theology involved, along with big money and influence at stake?

A Look Then

It was not meant to start that way. The public row had routine academic roots in the common practice of theological disputation. Theses, or propositional statements, were debated publicly, put under a microscope of analytical thinking to knock off the rough edges, challenge what could not be substantiated, and arrive at what could be defended as true. In this case, at the end of October 1517, the issue was the current practice of indulgences. While Rome's plenary indulgence was being offered in many German territories, indulgences also were promised those who venerated Saxon Elector Frederick's massive relic collection, the largest north of the Alps and once again on display in Wittenberg for All Saints' Day. In either case, popular piety (or lack thereof) prompted Luther to call for a second look—hence Luther's Ninety-five Theses. Much commotion ensued. Talk of history's law of unintended consequences . . .

Despite the high profile clash over indulgences, other developments both before and after may have had an even deeper influence on this revolution that turned theology, church, and world upside down. Today the clock is ticking down to October 2017, with the 31st circled in red (and much hoopla will again ensue), but a different October anniversary marks an event without which the five-hundredth would not have come about,

at least not as we know it. October 18 is the date, and Wittenberg again was the place, this time the scene for the founding of a new university, a fledgling institution that from the start would punch above its weight to garner attention and gain both teachers and students.

Heidelberg had opened on October 18 in 1386, the oldest university in the German Empire. Wittenberg became the newest in 1502—coincidentally also on October 18. That was not done to honor the old guard. Wittenberg did not intend merely to walk in the footsteps or stand in shadow of Heidelberg or any other institution. As the newest in a crowded field, Wittenberg would have to find a way to keep nose above water and be noticed. October 18 was chosen for another reason that reflected the context of that time.

Late medieval universities had two nominal but necessary patrons. Both the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation were official guarantors; although, real oversight as well as operating costs fell to the local prince. Both Pope and Emperor had to give their imprimatur to open, but Wittenberg started without the final papal seal of approval. Luther was yet nowhere on the scene, and the Reformation furor was still years away, so 1502 was too early to be on the outs with Rome. Opening without paper papal approval was a matter of timing that even popes could appreciate: a horoscope concluded that October 18 was the most fortuitous day to open the doors, and so Wittenberg jumped the gun in order to align with the stars in God's heavens. The Emperor's approval was in hand, and Rome's was in the mail. It was important to get a good start because Wittenberg was doing something new, expanding the traditional curriculum to include the New Learning of Renaissance humanism. This return to a wider balance of the liberal arts with a change in both method and content eventually would fuel the Reformation. Without this foundation and the approach Wittenberg came to champion, October 31, 1517, might have passed with little notice. There is a lesson to draw from this story: context and method matter. A context is a matrix. "Matrix" is related to the Latin root *mater* or "mother"—something that gives birth or gives rise to an offspring that nurtures and shapes what comes forth. The product does not come forth from splendid isolation but reflects context or matrix. Method likewise does not arise in a vacuum but will reflect its times and circumstances. Working within context or a matrix and developing method is no one-way street or a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, it involves constantly taking stock and adjusting. How this all played out at Wittenberg is a case that still has lessons to teach.

In 1518, about six months after the theses explosion, Martin Luther wrote to Judocus Trutvetter, his old Erfurt teacher. Trutvetter represented much of mainline late medieval theology, the sort Luther would reject, but Trutvetter also showed a bit of sympathy for some of the new trends in education seeking acceptance in the academy, trends at the root of Luther's rethinking that would turn theology upside down. His Ninety-five Theses from 1517 had the German lands taking notice of this previously unknown academic at an undistinguished school on the banks of the Elbe River.¹ But while Luther's theses made tabloid headlines, something far more basic was going on. In his letter to Trutvetter, Luther advocated far deeper and widespread change: "I simply believe that it is impossible

to reform the church unless the canons, the decretals, the scholastic theology, the philosophy, and the logic as they now exist are uprooted and another study installed.”² Context along with method and content—Luther was drawing on something different to formulate something new that, ironically, also recovered something old.

Look at what Luther is saying; to change the institutional church not just cosmetically but substantially, you have to change theology (the content), because theology shapes the church. To change theology, you have to change the method that produces it. Luther constructed that method by interacting with the context at hand. So, says Luther, no more leaning on papal pronouncements or falling back on ecclesiastical decrees. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) will be both the source and the standard. But how shall we read Scripture? Not through the old lenses of medieval scholastic theology. That method had been in vogue since Aristotle was rediscovered in the twelfth century and incorporated into the curriculum, theology included. Aristotle used syllogisms and logic: if A, and if B, therefore C. So if God is perfect and makes no mistakes, and if God gives us the law and says to keep it in order to be saved, therefore there must be some way we can keep that law, if not purely on our own, then perhaps enabled by grace. That’s logical, but, says Luther, that’s not biblical. That is not what St. Paul is doing in Romans, for example. When Paul heaps up law, he is not suggesting you are capable of keeping the mandates, but rather he is making crystal clear the fact that you cannot, and so you can only despair of yourself and instead look to Christ alone. So late medieval theological method has to go if the theology, the content, is to change. The old relies on “therefore” (*ergo*)—if, if, therefore—which makes for nice logic, but the Bible teaches “nevertheless” (*dennnoch* in Luther’s German): I am lost and dead. Period. *Nevertheless* God loves me and saves me through Christ Jesus.

That message is the product of the new method Luther was determined to usher in. At the risk of overkill: theology depends on method. That method is a context, a matrix that gives birth to something new. (That method/matrix stems from a wider matrix or context as will be seen in a moment.) Change method and you change theology—and you change the church. This is not just academic or theoretical. It is a pastoral, practical issue. Luther would interact with the best of the New Learning scholarship of his day—that wider context/matrix—and so address the needs of people. He does not force on them some answer that he had in hand, business as usual, theology pulled off the shelf and dropped on them with no real regard for the needs to be met. He had been (and still was) part of the people, troubled by the nagging question that drove many to indulgences and pushed Luther into the monastery: where is a loving God who will accept me? The stock response that rested on “ergo” was no answer. The old approach left people dangling: how much is enough? The new theology that reflected a different educational context connected with people in their personal, spiritual context, brought comfort: despair not, for God in Christ has done it for you. That is the core of what was going on at Wittenberg.³

Forty years ago German historian Bernd Moeller wrote, “No humanism, no Reformation.”⁴ That little says a lot: without the “New Learning” as the liberal arts revival

was called, Luther's Reformation as we have come to know it simply would not have happened. To be clear (since definition matters): Renaissance humanism is much different from twentieth-century Secular Humanism, the Bertrand Russell sort with God absent from the picture that revolves around humankind alone. Humanists in Luther's day were Christian. To be sure, some liked to push the envelope, calling God "Jupiter," for instance, affecting an accent from classical antiquity. But in the end, these humanists all died within the pale and under the pall of the church. Their humanism was a rebirth—a renaissance—of classical learning, a revival of the liberal arts that once had thrived and then were consigned too much to memory and put on the back burner, only to heat up again. The *studia humanitatis*, the study of humanity, saw people as the foremost creatures of God. The late Charles Trinkaus, a longtime history professor at Sarah Lawrence College, sums this up in his book title *In Our Image and Likeness*, playing off Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness").⁵ The humanists wondered what this image and likeness entailed. How could they realize their potential? Both method and content of the answer involved education. The exploration of the liberal arts that had become known again, created a context in which Luther would be influenced by these and would use them to come clear on the gospel. The context, tools, and method of Renaissance education sparked theological exploration and renewal that would play out as the evangelical Reformation.

Realizing the debt owed to the New Learning, the Reformation in reply provided a prominent place in its school curriculum into the seventeenth century and beyond.⁶ There is much to say in broad terms about what it was and did, but first a qualifier. While Luther and the Reformation leaned on Renaissance humanism, do not be surprised to find ideas and language from the old approach still in their vocabulary. These stayed not because Scholasticism as a method was thought to be correct, but because the substance of some of those ideas was still acceptable and the language was still useful, not getting in the way of the evangelical advances. It is often that way with revolutions: not everything is set aside immediately or revamped across the board, but change comes in the problem at hand.⁷ And change comes unevenly.⁸ While the old would hang on in some ways, the new was not completely new, with harbingers of greater change to come. While the Renaissance humanists often painted the Middle Ages in tones as dark as possible, some expressions of the liberal arts could be found earlier in that age.⁹ The problem: the elements were limited both in use and in audience. So when the New Learning arrives, it makes a splash but does not start from scratch. It also does not seek a head-on confrontation with the older Scholasticism, but rather it would keep logic—part of the trivium—while seeking to make a case for its own program. So as the Reformation unfolds, plenty of the old is still around. But the old does not bring change. The new made the difference. And just what was new and different for Luther and Wittenberg? The focus falls on context and method, as well as on content.

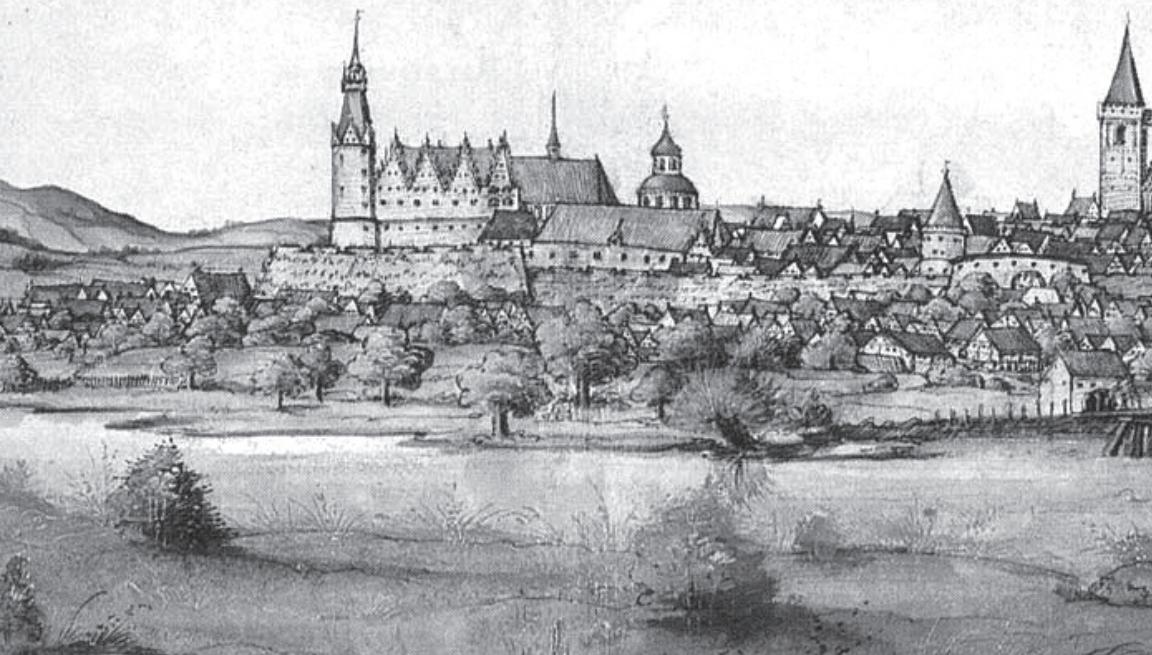
Classical antiquity had developed a liberal arts core for education. This core fell into two parts. The *trivium* included grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Grammar shaped thoughts

and conveyed meaning in intelligible speech and writing. Logic strung together those thought units, often using syllogisms: if A, if B, therefore C. And rhetoric marshaled arguments to persuade or convince someone of the truth of a position. Taken together, the trivium taught a person how to analyze and communicate.

With these thinking skills in hand, education turned to the world around, to the *quadrivium*: math, geometry, astronomy, and music. Math was a language that could lay out and explore relationships. Geometry used math to look at spatial relationships and then to see examples in the physical world. Astronomy encompassed not only the heavens above but also other sciences below. And music epitomized the fine arts with their strong affective dimension. Taken together, the interplay of the quadrivium set the world before our eyes. (In the Middle Ages the advanced subjects of medicine, law, and theology stood at the apex, resting on the liberal arts foundation.) That is how things worked in theory.

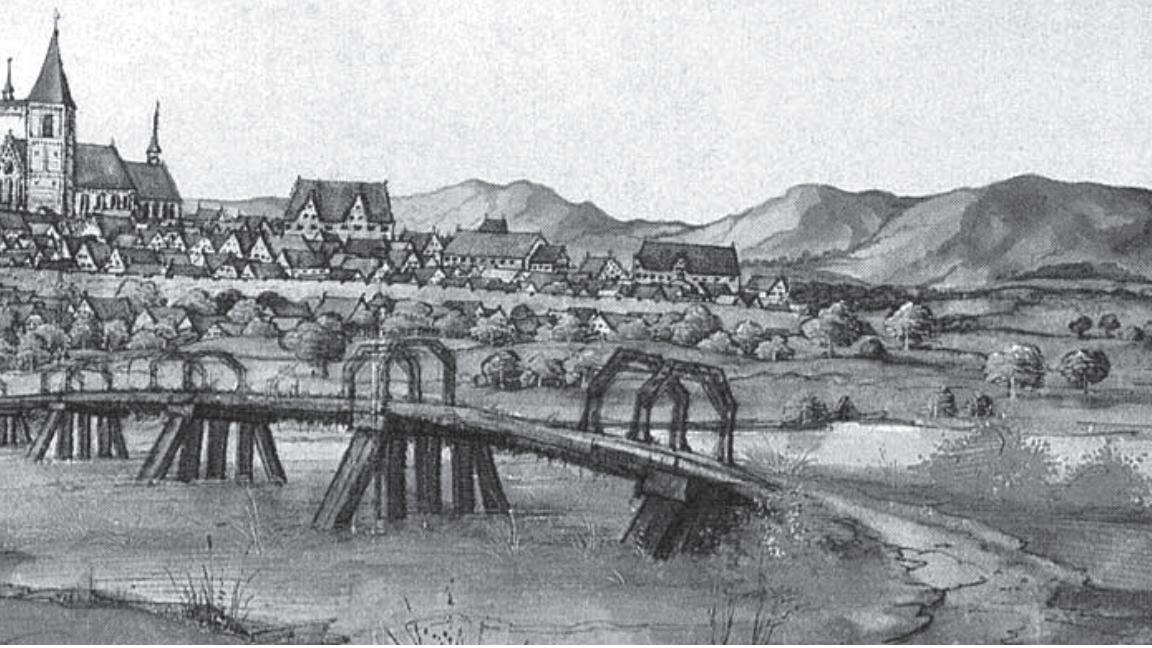
But education did not work so well when the old Roman Empire collapsed. When the church provided for its own needs with schools tied to monasteries and cathedrals, the already restricted opportunities for classic liberal arts learning became even more limited. A boon to education came in the twelfth century when the teachings of Aristotle were revived.¹⁰ Aristotle offered a way to organize learning and to talk about it—structures and vocabulary. In short, he provided a method. There were categories to manage and analyze and logic applied in syllogisms to work through it all. Aristotle was a powerful tool, and as so often happens, after a while the tool begins to take over and run things. Logic became the be all and end all when it came to thinking and learning. It had been part of the *trivium* balance, but now it ballooned out of proportion, eclipsing other ingredients in the mix. Method affected product or outcome across the board, theology included. Scholasticism, the approach of the university teachers who employed the method, dominated.

In the mid-fourteenth century, Scholasticism was still going strong, but something new was on the rise: a renaissance of classical culture.¹¹ Proponents called this the *studia humanitatis*, the study of humanity, claiming it offered a more rounded look at what it meant to be a human being made in the image of the divine. A new world opened up, starting with the more elegant classical Latin used by the greats in the ancient world. A better grasp of the literature of the Latin West prompted humanists to look east, and they discovered (as the old line goes) that what is patent in Latin is chic in Greek. Some even tried Hebrew. Language study using long-neglected texts revived old ideas. With grammar revived, rhetoric regained ground, and poetry was added, pleasing the affective side of the human spirit. History originally had been part of rhetoric—you illustrate using history—but now it stood on its own feet, highlighting context and application “back then.” From there it is an obvious move to “now,” to moral philosophy or ethics, putting learning to present tense use. Compared to all this, the Middle Ages looked thin (at least to the humanists). They were the dark ages, as one humanist put it—a thousand years without a bath. To shed light on past and present, the early humanists developed basic tools—grammars and wordbooks—and then found texts to explore. Texts



not only taught language but brought philosophical ideas back to life. The first couple of generations introduced and then perfected these tools, so that when “gen-three” came along, things were ready to branch out into law, medicine, and theology. Enter Luther et al. As the movement grew, princes and city leaders employed humanists for their ability to communicate effectively and elegantly, to know history and tell its story, especially when it helped the local cause. It was welcome work for devotees of the New Learning,¹² but at universities and their prep schools, the schoolmen staffed the walls and closed ranks, not interested in making room for rivals or critics.

Frederick the Wise, Luther’s first prince, was a patron of the New Learning and had humanists in his entourage. Nothing special there, but what he did for higher learning quickly gained attention. When Saxony was divided in 1485, the university (Leipzig) went to the other side of the family, so Frederick announced the opening of his new school in Wittenberg in 1502.¹³ Although new, the *Leucorea* (Greek for Wittenberg) had some regard for the old. No need to reinvent every wheel as it copied traditional governance procedures from Tübingen, begun in 1477. Some old remained, but new was coming. The university’s classical Greek name should have been a tipoff, but there is more. Along with standard stuff about what to expect from the new institution, the last lines of the charter signaled Wittenberg’s intention to be different, as Frederick decreed that Wittenberg would exist for the study of “poesie and the arts.” Poesie, poetry—a humanist bullet point from the liberal arts lineup. Logic and the scholastics remained a traditional part of the mix, but in those first years, they had to fend for themselves in the fray. Time would tell



Wittenberg as seen from the Elbe River, from the travel journal of Otto Henry, elector of the Palatinate, 1536 (University library of Würzburg).

what approach would stand out and draw students. No other university offered such an open door. Scholastics could have their say. But humanists held their own when it came to teaching rhetoric, what passed for literature, philosophy, and poetry as well. That they often did not last long was due more to Wittenberg being a bit of a backwater (despite Frederick's efforts to spruce up things), and humanists always seemed on the lookout for greener grass. When other schools in better spots with bigger reputations found it necessary to loosen up a bit to compete, that prompted some humanists to move on. The jockeying within Wittenberg went on for some years, but a new direction had been set, and the resolve to carry on was strengthened considerably after Luther became a permanent faculty member in 1512.¹⁴

From the start, the New Learning was crucial to Luther as professor. Where he first encountered humanism we don't really know.¹⁵ By 1508 he was studying Greek with fellow Augustinian Johannes Lang, and the next year he started Hebrew on his own. But it was as a newly minted professor that humanism grew more important. Professors were expected to know what others had said before them. But lecturers could not simply amass and repeat what earlier teachers had done. Professors needed to add their own take to expand the field. With nothing in the file, Luther had no choice but to look anywhere and everywhere for material to set the stage and prime the pump for his own efforts. He

discovered his best insights came from Renaissance humanists. In place of syllogisms, humanists raised points about grammar and vocabulary and about the message of the text as a whole. Logic seemed too much like reading into a text or imposing a theological position from outside. Better to take a text in context and then apply what is learned in yet another context.

It takes time and effort to listen to what the past has to offer and what the present needs, but Luther found it was worth it. As he used these texts and vocabulary tools and used the new approach, he came to see the Scriptures in a different light. He had once thought “righteousness” was a quantity of goodness he needed to accumulate and offer God, but the New Learning showed that “righteousness” was actually a quality God gave him on account of Christ. That brought Luther comfort. And if this helped him, there surely were others in his classes who would thrill to hear this insight. So he applied method and product to his very human context and reaped the benefits. We see Luther doing this to some extent already in his first lectures on Psalms in 1513, though he moved in fits and spurts.¹⁶ By the Romans lectures mid-decade, he realizes that he is onto something and that his method is changing.¹⁷

Luther’s new method served him beyond the classroom context in the arena of academic debate. His Ninety-five Theses showed he had studied the history and knew the relationship between indulgences and the papacy. When in 1518 he butted heads with Cardinal Cajetan over a medieval text that Cajetan claimed as support for Rome’s view of merit, Luther knew better because he had studied the text and knew history was on his side. “Historians are the most useful people,” Luther would later write, as he had learned from experience.¹⁸

Although the Ninety-five Theses grabbed the public spotlight, the month before saw Luther issue his Disputation against Scholastic Theology, the so-called Ninety-seven Theses, challenging the heart of all the academics did and how they went about their business every day. Theses 43, 44, and 50 especially make clear that Luther is not just questioning but rejecting the old way of doing theology: “It is an error to say that no one becomes a theologian without Aristotle. This counters what is commonly said. Moreover, no one becomes a theologian unless it is without Aristotle. . . . In short, all Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light, and his [book on] Ethics is the worst enemy of grace.”¹⁹ Aristotle’s quid pro quo ethics—do this and you are rewarded; don’t and you are punished—had been proof to the church that even pagans get the point about God’s expectations and the need to amass righteousness. But Luther understood fallen nature is blind to its inability and just digs the hole deeper, so pagans (and misguided Christians) do not “get it” when it comes to the gospel. Aristotle’s method is poison to biblical theology.

Luther was so enthusiastic about what the New Learning had to offer in education and theology that he sought to move the faculty in that direction during his first decade at Wittenberg.²⁰ As positions opened up, he lobbied for getting professors who understood the value of the New Learning’s liberal arts. In 1517 his efforts helped bring classical Latin,

Greek, and Hebrew into the official curriculum, something not yet found at other schools where such study was only extracurricular. Wittenberg's move meant a Greek teacher was needed, and so Philipp Melanchthon was added to the group.

To be fair, not all humanists flocked to the Reformation. In fact, to a man, every humanist older than Luther stayed with Rome in the end. Those who joined the evangelical ranks came from the younger-than-Luther crowd. Why? In part it could be that it is hard to teach an old(er) dog new tricks, but the question really has to be answered case by case since any number of factors could combine to keep people connected to Rome.²¹

One more tidbit. Today when we say "Reformation," we think of the broad theological movement with Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, Zwingli, and others. When Luther said "Reformation" in the 1510s, he meant curriculum reform at the university. The larger work he called preaching the gospel. Even here it appears Luther understood the link of educational method and content with a product, a theology, that results both from and for a context.

The liberal arts revived by the Renaissance provided an alternative to the scholastic logic that had dominated. The wider, broader liberal arts created a nurturing environment in which theological study took a radical turn. More specifically, it was tools of Renaissance learning—languages, texts, history, rhetoric, and literary studies—that fueled this change. It was not through the old but through the new method that Luther came to his breakthrough. Bernd Moeller seems on target: "No humanism, no Reformation." Remember what Luther said in his letter to Trutvetter: "I simply believe that it is impossible to reform the church unless . . . the scholastic theology, the philosophy, and the logic as they now exist are torn up and thrown out, and another study is installed instead." It is *within* a context that Luther came to formulate a method for biblical theology, and it is *to a* context that the product of that method is addressed.

Some Thoughts for Now

Now the question that naturally comes: so what? What difference does this make? The Reformation trigger of the Ninety-Five Theses was pulled five hundred years ago. Half a millennium! What could be left to think through or do? We can tackle that on a number of levels.

First, it is okay to be happy and to celebrate that many people found comfort in the message that came from that alignment of Renaissance liberal arts education, Wittenberg, and a certain professor of theology. There were others involved, of course, both at Wittenberg and beyond, with many using the same ideas and method in that context—a fact that helped Luther deflect his critics' question: "Are you alone wise?" Luther's complaints and suggestions about indulgences led to more than anyone then (or now) might have imagined. It can be interesting to consider how things otherwise might have turned out—the counterfactual to consider within history that helps think things through—but the posting and its surrounding events are what we have. It would also be

good to widen the circle to see how the immediate episode came about, highlighting the New Learning as a chief tool for reform. It would seem that Lutherans would rethink the value of liberal arts education, a staple of the old preparatory program for seminary studies and teacher training that no longer exists and will not return.²² But the liberal arts that played a role before that system came and went can still contribute positively to theological studies. In fact, a broad foundation for thinking through context and applying abilities seemed preferable to becoming overly focused or narrow. There never seems to be enough time to manage all the “one more class and one more book” suggestions that come when revisiting the theological curriculum. A step back to a look at life through a wider, different window can help put other things in focus. So again in very broad terms, be happy for the result five hundred years ago, for the evangelical theology that resulted. Be happy for the broader foundation, for the approach that helped get to that end. Look for ways to engage the context of this present age and the people at hand.

But take a second pass at the “so what?” question. If certain tools and tactics worked for Luther, are we simply supposed to reprise the same? Is the fact that we have made it to the 500th mean we should “go and do thou likewise”? Well, the twenty-first century is not the sixteenth, and more than a few things are different. There is no chance of mimicking Luther even if we wanted to. If anything, we ought to be concerned about those who do not want to go any farther than the sixteenth century (or a variation: those who would not go beyond the early church, or who would put things on hold with Walther and the confessional voices in the nineteenth century in Missouri circles). Peter, James, and John were admonished not to build booths on the mountaintop as if they could freeze time. Christ had work to do—and so did they. Even without sharing that vision per se and having only (!) the Gospels’ verbal sketch, it is easy to see why Peter made his suggestion, but the lesson ought to be clear. Yet booth building is a perennial temptation and almost a cottage industry in some circles. Grand as that mountaintop vision was, or as exciting as the much paler sixteenth-century image appeared atop “White Mountain” by the Elbe, life moves on. As humanism picked up steam, they debated what it meant to carry on in the spirit of Cicero, their hero with his clean, classical-era Latin. Some argued that true Ciceronians could use only vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and rhetorical devices that Cicero himself had employed, and to expand or invent beyond that would be heresy. (That is an example of building booths on the mountaintop.) Others realized that even as they could appreciate Cicero’s skills and were quite capable of copying him, they honored Cicero more by also carrying on his spirit—a much harder task—as they wrote new things and headed into new directions, almost as if Cicero were among them doing the same. That did not mean all bets were off, so do what you want. Cicero was a touchstone, not a drag anchor. Nietzsche pointedly said that a student honors his teacher most when he surpasses his teacher.²³ Could we say that we have done that—surpassed a teacher? Modesty might pass on that question, but thanks to the liberal arts we have a chance to look at, think through, and respond from varied, if not better, angles to what life brings.

Come October 31 there will be no small amount of congratulations (though not self-congratulations, one would hope). There will be thanksgiving, and rightly so, perhaps with cautions for humility and calls for repentance. (If we take sin and grace, law and promise seriously those well could be more than a momentary stopover on the way to the cheering.) Then comes the rejoicing with all the stops pulled, and we may find just how loud people really can sing “A Mighty Fortress.” But no booth building. In its time, Wittenberg hardly had time to take notice when the early anniversaries rolled around. Given their context and the larger political realities of their day, 1530 and the Augsburg Diet and Confession were in some ways more crucial, given pressure from Emperor and Empire to demonstrate they truly upheld the faith. It was necessary to make clear that they were church and thus had a legal right to carry on in the Empire—essential then but no factor for us. Contexts and problems change.

But between 1517 and 2017 there have been other things to complicate matters—the Enlightenment and Modernism, for example—and it does not work simply to find something in the Wittenberg Reformation that sounds good on the surface and then sling it at a problem as a kind of Luther trump card. Luther was an occasional writer, not that he wrote occasionally, but because he was aware of context and wrote for circumstances. Do we really understand that late medieval context and culture? (Even those who specialize know doing so is a work in progress.) And if we more or less grasp our own matrix, leaping to another context can take us into uncertain territory. A popular history text puts it well in the title: *The Past Is a Foreign Country*.²⁴ At that point it is important to get the lay of the land and engage accordingly.

Saint Paul understood: all things to all people in an effort to connect and win some. Just look at the varied issues and ideas in his epistles: Romans compared to Galatians compared to Colossians compared to the pastorals. Luther and other Reformers got it as well. Within their larger German context, there were, for example, issues handled by Johannes Brenz off in Swabia that differed from Luther in his territory or from Johannes Bugenhagen in his north German environs. Look closely at Bugenhagen’s church orders—his reports on the goings-on in various congregations and areas followed by suggestions for what might be done to hew closer to an evangelical line—and it becomes apparent that while there is repetition, these are not simply carbon copies or Wittenberg’s pattern imposed on different contexts.²⁵ If ever there were an era rife with too much to do and with precious little time and too few resources to do it, it was the Reformation. Yet those involved were smart enough to pick out and address what was essential, even as they realized the folly of one-size-fits-all prescriptions for people in territories that had much in common but were not clones.

Since then the world and efforts to reach out have not gotten simpler, whether the focus is right across the street, just across the border onto what can already be foreign turf (think Peter to the Roman Cornelius in a Gentile city Caesarea) or twelve time zones away. More than fifty years ago, a novel spawned a phrase that still conjures up an

unfortunate image of American culture: the ugly American.²⁶ No matter if the problem was that bad in real life, people understood it because there was at least some ring of truth. The phrase has stuck in our culture, a kind of thorn in the flesh reminding of shortcomings that need fixing and avoiding. Church can do no less, listening and engaging people in context rather than ignoring those who could or should be involved in the conversation. Even in relatively homogenous German circumstances, the Reformation understood listening to context. From that, good things can follow. Misunderstandings and mistakes will dog efforts until the Parousia despite best efforts and honest intentions; however, with such efforts and intentions, failures can be met with honest repentance and then by new attempts.

Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, takes a look at how Christianity has done things right (and sometimes wrong) and how its method for spreading the message has served well (in sharp contrast, for example, to Islam).²⁷ Christianity has had faith in its message and courage to share its evangelizing task by handing on the message from one culture, that is, from one context or matrix, to another, letting those who receive it (and who presumably know their own circumstances best) then communicate the message in their own context. In Reformation times, as just noted, that meant while much might look alike, particulars also mattered. Efforts were made to deal with the local circumstances but also to connect to the wider Lutheran reforms. When Wittenberg got involved, it was not to hand down from on high how things were going to be, but to help others meet local needs, while remaining faithful to theology and practice.²⁸ Then like now, there could be variation in how that was done. But while Christianity has adapted and adopted, Islam, Sanneh notes, has insisted on a single approach: no adjustments—even ordinary folk really should learn Arabic—and the square peg *will go* into the cultural hole, round or whatever.

This can be tricky business, of course. There is benefit or value in people doing things that can bridge cultural lines. The sixteenth century certainly had its share of pressures to conform to what pleased the powers that be, be they ecclesiastical or political (or mixed), and a course had to be navigated sometimes through minefields (to use an image before its time), deciding what should be upheld and insisted upon, and what could be left alone. In our own day, “A Mighty Fortress” will be sung next October in many languages, and as that happens, it is wonderful for those singing to think of brothers and sisters elsewhere doing the same. The creeds are another case in point, cutting horizontally across space and vertically through history. Yet there is a risk in transplanting (imposing?) a familiar form from home in some far-flung place. History should teach senders to guard that receivers do not get the impression that adopting this practice or that form will put them in good graces and assure other good things will follow. Lamin Sanneh notes that a problem can come in missions when some who accept Christianity assume this will guarantee other socio-economic benefits to follow.²⁹

More, the assumption that the way church “is done” in one place (ours) is *the way*, and that others ought to match up, is, to be polite, mystifying. There was church before

the Reformation despite problems aplenty. Believers could be found, made believers by baptism, word, and sacrament, even when misguided notions hampered the task. There has been church since the Reformation, a witness, even amid rocky times, until Christ comes again. Through this all, the church has found ways to engage in present tense, not simply reprising the old. The Reformation was keen to demonstrate its roots as well as its present message and practices—part of making clear that the Lutherans were church. While no one sang “A Mighty Fortress” on October 31 for more than a decade after the Theses were posted, Lutherans were on the move, not looking back in longing and certainly not building booths, but formulating theology and communicating the same in sermons, tracts and treatises, hymns, and confessional writings. Know the past, yes. Live in the past, no.

A daily podcast from Minnesota Public Radio titled “Composer’s Datebook” focuses briefly on some event from that day in music history—a Bach concerto debuted, fistfights broke out at Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” the Beatles first topped the charts, and so on. At the end of each broadcast, the announcer concludes by “reminding you that all music was once new.” He does not say all music was good or all will endure, but what eventually sticks in the culture did not start as a standard. Luther wrote a simple catechism that many found useful. Brenz did his own, and while people elsewhere gravitated to Luther’s, people in Brenz’s area used his for years—and nobody told them they were not part of the evangelical Reformation. Culture and context both had an influence and were served.

There could be many reasons why some insist on this or that way of “looking like church.” It could be fear, wanting to control the content lest things go wrong. In contrast, the Reformer once asked rhetorically, “Who is Luther?” and then immediately dismissed thoughts of self-importance with a verbal wave of his hand: “God can raise up many Dr. Luthers.” So much for caving to fear. Perhaps it is arrogance, some supreme confidence as if they have everything put together and see the whole picture. That sort of thinking shuts off conversation and stifles learning, all around. It acts as if all will fall in place if (when) certain steps are followed. No need to get the lay of the land or the people involved. Instruct (unload) and move on. In contrast there is a saying, sometimes attributed to Luther, that “when it comes to theology, a certain modesty (*bescheidenheit*) is called for.”³⁰ Amid the drama pointing toward next October, we might hope there is room for some *bescheidenheit* as well. When we pray for a measure of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes from above, so that the word may not be bound but be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people, it would behoove us to trust God and word not only to build up his people but also to make more. Somewhere along the way, reread Ecclesiastes as a reminder of just how much finally is within human control and how much is in his.

But do not dwell on the downside. Beware booth building but revel instead in all the work to do. Renaissance humanism recaptured a rhythm to life: there was more to life than being a *viator*, a pilgrim enduring and passing through. The *vita contemplativa*, that is, a life of contemplation and reflection, had a foil in the *vita activa*, the active life

that put reflection and learning into practice. The Reformation with the Lutheran idea of vocation had an even richer foundation for rolling up one's sleeves and taking on life each day, sorting through context to serve people in their varied circumstances. In so doing, they *may* benefit, but we most surely do. Marcel Proust, "recommended reading" for today's liberal-arts crowd, wrote, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Being open to new landscapes far afield is fine, but do not overlook the backyard. And look at both with a little *bescheidenheit* and with new eyes. There is plenty to see and people to engage up to next October and beyond.

We may have strayed from the focus on liberal arts learning and the Reformation, but the last few pages are a call to embrace that learning, not to insulate, but to press on with eyes and ears open, to engage in life's great conversations, and to seize opportunities to bring evangelical theology to bear. It can be hard to convince students today that a liberal arts education can really serve through a lifetime. The pressure is on to specialize and to do it quickly. Trouble noted. But a broad education that teaches people how to continue to learn, how to think, how to question, how to assess and form judgments, and how to deal with problems as well as opportunities can open all sorts of doors. It can reach beyond the particulars of theology, of doctrinal formulations to help understand better the matrix that shapes one's world. At that point, theology certainly has a thing or two to say.³¹

Liberal arts supporting theology is a given. Elements of the Renaissance *studia humanitatis* contributed directly to Luther's understanding of God's message to sinners. Those elements have continued to prepare people to engage with that same basic message. God created the world and came into the world to save the same. What is that world like? What is my context? What is my target? Without knowing that, we thrash about and engage in what a colleague used to call "*allgemeine blah-blah.*" Georges Bernanos, the French novelist who wrote *The Diary of a Country Priest*, observed, "Nothing is so deceptive as problems wrongly stated." A liberal-arts education, especially tied to theology but even in general, helps one to not be deceived, but rather to head toward the light. Are there guarantees we always will be on target? No. Are all the answers to be found? Of course not. But at least we have good questions to start, and those are essential.

Then when faced with questions, theology stands ready to deal with the matter at hand, drawing from a rich foundational education, and having a say about what is going on. Some years ago, Yale law professor Stephen Carter argued in *A Culture of Disbelief* that not only was American society actually structured at its founding to welcome a theological/philosophical voice, but he insisted that the absence of a theological voice today has skewed how we tackle problems and leaves us with incomplete solutions.³² With a context that seems to increasingly dismiss theology's place in the public square, its voice grows ever more distant, even as politics—a kind of faux religion—promises its version of a new heaven and a new earth via this program or that set of regulations designed to fix, direct, and control. In contrast, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked that democracies are an attempt to find proximate solutions to insoluble problems. Don't we know it! But it is precisely

because of life's ragged edges that theology ought to pull up a chair at the table and weigh in on the discussion. You may first have to defend your right to be there. Hopefully it will not be necessary to defend that in the way and to the extent Luther and others of his day found necessary. Assured by the gospel and mindful of life's vocations God gives—theological insights from the Reformation—we are not going to sit this one out.

Context counts, method matters, and the content that results is important for engaging in life's great conversation. "Luther, Learning, and the Reformation" has more than antiquarian interest. It reminds us, in broad terms, how we got here. More, it stops any hiding in some mountaintop shrine and gets us moving back to the plain. So pull up that chair at life's table, join in the discussion, and enjoy what comes next.

- 1 "Wittenberg" means "White Mountain." The mountain was really a white sand hill, and with just over 2,000 people in a few blocks, it barely qualified as a city. It did "command" several trade routes and was fortified with walls and a castle. The prince poured money into renovations so that a university might add to its reputation.
- 2 Martin Luther, *Werke. Briefwechsel*, vol. 1 (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930), no. 74. Dated 5/9/1518. (The *Weimar Augabe* [Edition] henceforth *WA*.) While the wider public focused on the indulgence flap, intellectuals and academics would find Luther's theses here far more radical. In the end, a change in method would bear more fruit.
- 3 Leif Grane, *Modus loquendi theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie (1515–1518)* (Leiden: Brill, 1975). Grane, "Luther and Scholasticism" in Marilyn J. Harran, ed., *Luther and Learning. The Wittenberg University Symposium* (Selinsgrove, NJ: Susquehanna University Press, 1985), 52–68. Grane, *Contra Gabrielem. Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam 1517* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962). In the 1545 *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (*WA* 54:179–87; *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), vol. 34, pp. 323–38 [hereafter *LW*]), Luther wrote of a breakthrough in discovering the gospel—his so-called tower experience, feeling as if the gates of paradise had been flung wide open. Luther did not date the experience, leaving historians to speculate. Grane does not venture a date, but it is clear that by the time Luther was lecturing on Romans, he knew he was using a new and different method for exegesis. Marilyn Harran, *Luther on Conversion: The Early Years* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983) looks at how Luther's concept changed over those early years in an upward trend overall. The "tower experience" might not have been the actual breakthrough but rather a realization that came at the end of the 1510s with a look at what had transpired over the decade, so that Luther would have been struck by the change. Regardless of when that happened, Grane's point about Luther's intentional change in method is significant.
- 4 Bernd Moeller, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation" in *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. and ed. by H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 36.
- 5 Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- 6 The Reformation leaned early on Renaissance learning, and as time passed, that learning was perpetuated in Reformation schools. There is a picturesque example of the symmetry in the inaugural addresses by two rectors of the Elizabetheum, a Lutheran school in Breslau (Wroclaw) in German-populated Silesia (Poland). Johannes Scholtz portrayed Eden in Genesis as the first school, with rivers of learning flowing forth. His successor, Peter Kirstein, reversed the image with evangelical schools described as Edens that fostered learning that eventually led back to paradise. Robert Rosin, "Replanting Eden: The Elizabetheum as God's Garden," in *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe*, ed. Manfred P. Fleischer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 109–137.
- 7 The French Revolution tried to sweep most everything away, seeing it as evidence of either the *ancien régime* or church, both of which should give way to modern rational thinking. For example, days of the week and months were renamed. Time was decimalized: no more 12 hours in AM and PM, just 10. In the end, such changes proved to be a fad and did not endure, although for some larger philosophical ideas that were part of the revolutionary substance, it is another matter.
- 8 For example, while the Ninety-five Theses contain some barbs with no real room to wriggle free, there are other topics—purgatory, for example—that are still included rather matter-of-factly, and even indulgences are not rejected wholesale. Luther was willing to work with the original concept before it ballooned out of control. (How many will swallow the 500-year celebration completely and cheer on Reformation Day 2017 without ever having really read the theses.)
- 9 Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought. The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1955). Renaissance thought springs from different sources that must be balanced, weighed, and assessed. So amid medieval scholasticism marked by logic, the *ars dictaminis*, the art of composition employing aspects of grammar and rhetoric also could be found, albeit on a much smaller scale.
- 10 Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, 8th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

- 11 Kristeller, Renaissance Thought. Kristeller made much of a fivefold core of grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy—two parts of the original trivium long overshadowed by logic, along with other subjects that touched on the affective view of life with all its twists and turns over time (history) and in the present (moral philosophy or ethics). Kristeller understood this was to be done with a sense of flair and beauty, though some thought he did not make enough of that angle. See Hanna Holborn Gray, “Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 25 (1963): 497–514.
- 12 Lewis W. Spitz, “The Third Generation of German Renaissance Humanists,” in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1972): 44–59.
- 13 The history of Wittenberg’s founding can be found in the following core sources. Walter Friedensburg, ed., *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg. Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen und des Freistaates Anhalt, Neue Reihe*, vol. 3 (Magdeburg: Holtermann, 1926). Friedensburg, Geschichte der Universität Wittenberg (Halle: Niemeyer, 1917). Max Steinmetz, “Die Universität Wittenberg und der Humanismus (1502–1521)” in *450 Jahre Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*, vol. 1: *Wittenberg 1502–1817*, ed. Leo Stern, et al. (Halle: Martin-Luther-Universität, 1952), 103–139. Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg, 1485–1517* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975). Helmar Junghans, *Wittenberg als Lutherstadt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979). Nicolaus Marschalk, *Oratio, 1503*, trans. Edgar Reinke and Gottfried Krodel (Valparaiso: Valparaiso University Association, 1967), includes the history and the connection to Marschalk, the first rector, and Marschalk’s inaugural address, striking the tone for the new school.
- 14 Luther had filled in for a semester in 1508, and while doing the basic required lectures on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, he saw how deadly the logic could be, and he complained about the approach. Upon his return and as he found parts of humanism useful, he urged its increased use at the university. See Marilyn J. Harran, “Luther as Professor,” in Harran, ed., *Luther and Learning*, 29–51.
- 15 Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) takes an extensive look at Luther’s connections, although when and where Luther first encountered something of the New Learning is still up for discussion.
- 16 Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1991).
- 17 Grane, *Modus loquendi theologicus* analyzes Luther’s Romans commentary.
- 18 The larger quotation goes “Historians are the most useful people and the best teachers, so that one can never honor, praise, and thank them enough. That may very well be a work of great lords, as the emperor, king, etc., who in their time deliberately had histories written and securely preserved in libraries. Nor did they spare any cost necessary for supporting and educating such people as were qualified for writing histories.” Martin Luther, “Preface to Galeatus Capella’s History (1538),” trans. Lewis W. Spitz, *LW* 34:276.
- 19 WA 1:221–228. *LW* 31:9–16, theses 43–44, 50.
- 20 The activity is recounted in Walter Friedensburg, *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg und in Geschichte der Universität Wittenberg*.
- 21 Spitz, “The Third Generation of German Renaissance Humanists.”
- 22 Every so often there comes a call to reinstitute the prep school system, perhaps well meaning but with no real account taken of the economic and sociological changes that make such an idea no more than a pipe dream. “Back in our day we had . . .” and “in my time we did . . .” which is all fine and good. We are happy things seemed to work out well for those who had that experience, but before anyone gives more thought to such a proposal, ask how many thirteen-year-old boys today will pack up a suitcase and head hundreds of miles away for months on end. One of my grandfathers didn’t leave the state, but there was no going home on weekends. The other left western Nebraska on the train, transferred in Chicago, and got off in Fort Wayne to attend the prep school there—off in the fall and home again at year’s end, with a family from a local congregation who provided Sunday dinner and did laundry. He spoke of their kindness, and of the loneliness despite making friends and having well-intentioned professors. The system served a purpose, working in the context of its time. There are other benefits today with much of the same good accomplished as other positives are added. The present can improve, but the past was hardly an unqualified success. Now, like then, it is a matter of doing one’s best in the vocations given.
- 23 We are not taking issue here with Jesus reminding the disciples that a servant is not above his master.
- 24 After the original was well received, author David Lowenthal planned an update. As he says in the introduction to a second book, the more he dug into familiar territory, the more he realized that in just thirty years of history exploration and writing the more he could not just tweak and gloss. So with a nod to his first book, he reused but revised his title for *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
- 25 One look at the shelves of volumes that make up Emil Sehling, ed., *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Reisland, 1902–) should put an end to any notion that those who visited churches and then drew up the reports and made suggestions fell back on a cookie-cutter approach.
- 26 Eugene Burdick and William Lederer, *The Ugly American* (New York: Norton, 1958).
- 27 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989; rev. 2nd ed., 2009).
- 28 For example, as the Reformation carried on, it was common for students from lands to the east—say, Slovakia or Siebenbürgen (Romania) to first study theology there at a local gymnasium or prep school that added university level courses without university sanction. The local officials could be satisfied at how things turned out, but the student might also attend classes at Wittenberg that served as a kind of check. It might also be that the student went sooner for most of his theological education. In either case, the student might even be ordained in Wittenberg—really what amounted to faculty certification, because that was just one more step after which the student returned to the home region where those responsible for oversight would review the student who then (and only then) would become a pastor at installation. As more schools developed, the pattern and locus of education changed. There was not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather circumstances and interests dictated how things were done.
- 29 In an extreme example, in the South Pacific during the war years “cargo cults” arose, thinking that because the American soldiers drilled

on the beach and then supply ships showed up, if they mimicked the marching, they would be supplied as well. The logic behind adopting characteristics and patterns from some supporting church can be more sophisticated. Best efforts are made to focus on what matters, on the message that saves and cheers, but temptations can be great on all sides. A more disturbing scenario has receivers seeking to please in the hope of forging a connection and assuring favor. Less troubling but still a problem is receivers wrongly thinking they have to mimic senders in every way in order to be truly Lutheran or Christian.

- 30 Engaging with foreign cultures underscores this point, as teaching over more than three decades in a wide range of overseas settings proved repeatedly. I was happy the first experience was in Papua New Guinea; such stark contrasts made clear that I was not in mid-America anymore. During orientation, the principal of the seminary said, “I think it is important to remember that Aristotle and the Enlightenment have not yet come to Papua New Guinea.” Indeed. Such experiences taught the value of cultural anthropology. It is a never-ending process. After 25 times in Kyrgyzstan, there were always things I thought “worked” one way in their context only to have the students help me learn otherwise. Recently a friend sent an article on Kyrgyzstan and “shame culture,” a motif that means much in their context but not so much in our own—a gap that needs to be bridged. You cannot spend a weekend and pretend to grasp what is going on. *Bescheidenheit* needed!
- 31 A friend of mine was once an administrator at Bard College known for its core liberal arts program, a broad yet rich education. Administrators of Yale medical school said they would rather have Bard graduates than people who had focused more specifically on pre-med courses. Why? The Yale medical school figured they got bright, well-rounded people from Bard, and Yale then could teach them what they needed to know about medicine, but they couldn’t give them the wider view of life they got elsewhere. Those students understood better what it meant to be human, a study that never ends. Over the years the same has proven true with theology—not the only door into the field, but often a wider and more direct one.
- 32 Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993).

Homiletical Helps

Luther's Suggestions for Preaching

Robert Kolb

Luther's reputation as a good preacher had spread even before his postils appeared. Early in his public career as reformer, in 1520, a pastor in Eilenburg, Georg Kunzelt, sought Luther's advice on beginning and ending his sermons. Luther told him that he omitted "verbose prologues," and simply stated,

In order that God's Word be fruitful for us and please God, let us first call upon his divine grace and speak an inner "Ave Maria" or the Lord's Prayer. Then I read the text without giving a topic, explicate it, or I set forth what it teaches. At the end I say, "That is enough," or "more another time," or "Enough said; we will call on God and his grace, that we may do it," or "God help us." Then in the briefest words, "Let us commend [to God] our spiritual and temporal situation, in particular, and so forth. For these and all else for which we are obligated, we will pray the Lord's Prayer together." After this, to those who have stood, "the blessings of God the Father. . . . Amen."

His printed sermons seldom followed this form, but it is likely that in 1520 he was indeed delivering sermons in this manner.

Jesus's description of true and false shepherds in John 10 led Luther to distinguish three kinds of teaching that preachers practice, revealing that his chief concern centered on the consolation of the gospel. Some are "thieves and murderers" (John 10:1), who simply teach falsely. Others are "doorkeepers of the sheepfold" (10:2), who teach the content of God's law but encourage works-righteousness thereby. The third kind of preacher brings comfort and help by proclaiming Christ. The first of his sermons in his Wartburg Postil, on Romans 13:11–14, began by instructing readers how to preach on the basis of Paul's description of preaching in Romans 12:7–8. Proper preaching consists of teaching and exhortation. "Faith teaches how the person is supposed to be changed in spirit and in God's sight." Romans 13 did not do that, Luther explained, but rather it "urges, exhorts, drives, and awakens people to know what they should do on the basis of what they know already. . . . Teaching is when one preaches and conveys what is not known, and people learn and understand it. Exhortation is when one urges [hearers to act on] what is already known and sheds light [on how to do it]. Both are necessary for a preacher."

Editor's note

Originally published in "Faith Comes by Hearing: Luther the Preacher" in Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation by Robert Kolb. (Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 185–191. Used by permission.

Luther described the epistle for the Festival of Saint John, Sirach 15:1–6, in this postil as

not teaching but praise, for it does not say what we are to do and how we are to act but what happens to those who do good. Therefore, it is only a stimulus and admonition to do the good we already know. Saint Paul divides all preaching into two parts, calling them teaching and exhortation. Teaching gives what we do not already know or have; exhortation excites, stimulates, and animates so that teaching does not remain idle, and it provides comfort so that we do not give up and grow weary.

The Epistle to Titus also offered a good example of how the two may be synthesized (1527). Paul “is truly a master who teaches and exhorts. He never exhorts without at the same time introducing teaching, that is, instruction.” “Christian doctrine must always be taught because there are always hearers and children who need to grow and receive what they do not know. Exhortation is always repeated and inculcated.”

Johannes Mathesius described the way in which Luther constructed his sermons, following the command of “our king of preachers,” Christ, in Luke 24:46–47, to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name. This preaching aimed to bring people to “recognition of their sin and a blessed sorrow, so that they might attentively meditate on the Word of grace and reconciliation and in good conscience abide in a holy, new obedience.” Mathesius criticized “many unwise and unskilled Evangelical preachers, [who] leave out the preaching of repentance and presumptuously talk about faith and a little about a holy life, good works, and brotherly love, which really belongs to the preaching of repentance.” In practice it is clear that Luther differentiated between stating what God reveals in a catechetical manner (law and gospel, instruction in both what God has done for his human creatures and what he expects them to do as his human creatures) and his application of the biblical content to people’s lives, with appeals to their wills and emotions for action. Teaching and exhortation blend together and are inseparable, but the two elements are always present.

Several sources reveal Luther’s practical approach to effective proclamation of God’s Word, above all, his casual comments to students at the table. Luther’s preface to Johann Spangenberg’s postil (1542) criticized bad preachers by constructing a list of expectations for good preachers: they should pray, study, read, search the Scripture, and meditate on it in preparation for their teaching and preaching. “It is true that a preacher ought first to ascend through prayer in order to receive the Word and teaching from God, and then ought to study, learn, read, and meditate. Thereafter he ought to descend and teach others.”

Preparation for preaching involves Luther's famous triad of (1) prayer and (2) meditation based on careful study of the text amid (3) eschatological attack from Satan, the world, and the flesh. He clearly regarded the sermon as part of Christ's battle against sin and evil; the pulpit is an eschatological battleground where Christ's truth is attacked by and triumphs over the devil's lie. In speaking to his students on 1 Timothy 1:12, Luther commended boldness in teaching, contending for, and fighting for the faith. Dialogue with Satan, rejecting his claims on believers, enlivened his instruction of the congregation on how to pursue the struggle. Luther regarded prayer as vital for beginning study of Scripture but also as necessary before and after a sermon. Christ's prayer in John 17 led him to set down a rule: "After a good sermon belongs a good prayer. That is, once you have set for the Word, you should begin to sigh and seek that it may have power and produce fruit as well. . . . Those who hear and know God's Word preached but do not pray indicate that they are still presumptuous and secure, as if they were not continually in need of God's grace." "Whoever wants to become a theologian [must pray], 'Create in me a clear heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in the core of my being'" (cf. Ps. 51:10).

Wittenberg theologians strongly recommended that preachers read Scripture in Hebrew or Greek since that lent the message freshness and power. The variety in expressions and examples produced by such reading enlivens and strengthens preaching. The simple preacher who does not know these languages could preach the gospel, but in "a flat and tame manner." "Whoever engages the text is a true pastor. That is my best Christian advice, to take water from the well or source, that is, to read the Bible diligently. Whoever is well grounded and exercised in the text will be a good and superb theologian since a passage or text from the Bible is worth more than many authors and glosses, who are not so substantial." "A true theologian should be familiar with and know the entire Bible, that is, what the chief subject and the outline is in Moses, in the Prophets, Isaiah and the others, in the Psalms, the evangelists, Paul, and others, what they discuss as chief topics, and not just understand one or two prophets." Nonetheless, Luther deplored arrogance in the pulpit and counseled simplicity. No Latin, Greek, or Hebrew should divert the hearer from the plain truth in the mother tongue.

A preacher should be a dialectician and a rhetorician, that is, he must be able to teach and admonish. If he wants to teach on a subject or article of faith, he should first determine what it really means, then define, describe, and picture what it is; third, he should cite passages of Scripture to confirm and strengthen the point; fourth, he should fill it out and make it clear with examples; fifth, embellish it with stories; finally, admonish the lazy and arouse them, criticize disobedience and those who teach falsely, that they may see that they should seek God's honor and the benefit and blessing of the people, not out of disgust, hate, or envy.

Yet, what is most important, the text must deliver the message of Jesus Christ. “The best preacher is the one of whom it can be said, . . . even if he did not cite Scripture a great deal, nevertheless he preached its message according to the rule of faith.” Luther’s rule of faith included the proper distinction of law and gospel as the framework for the activity of the text in making its impact on hearers.

The preacher must always be cognizant of his hearers’ needs, Luther insisted.

Dialectic is for saying something distinctly and clearly with a few words; rhetoric tends to persuade and dissuade. . . . When I want to instruct a peasant, I use dialectic to define how he should live, work, conduct his household, the fruits and whatever belongs to the substance of his life. After that I use rhetoric to praise his life, as the most peaceable and tolerant possible, . . . and convincingly counsel him to practice that life and give other ways of life. When I want to criticize, I reprimand their vices and stress their coarseness.

“A preacher is like a carpenter. His tool is God’s Word. Because his hearers with whom he has to act and work are so different and diverse, he should not always sing the same song and deliver just one message in his teaching, but because the hearers are diverse, he should threaten, terrify, criticize, complain, comfort, reconcile, console, and so forth.”

Luther advised students to develop their own style. “If you cannot preach an hour, then preach a half hour or a quarter of an hour. Do not try to imitate others. Center on the shortest, simplest point, which is the heart of the matter, and leave the rest to God.” He continued, reflecting his own experience, telling them that they would forget what they had carefully prepared, abandon their outlines, and experience God’s grace. Even when they had not done sufficient preparation, they would preach sermons acceptable to their people and themselves. For God is ultimately in charge of the experience of preaching, for the preacher and the hearer.

Luther thought it necessary to prepare a written basis for a sermon. Yet he did not want to be strictly bound to his outline but rather hoped to bind himself to the rule of faith. He was most concerned to meet the needs of his hearers, he told the students. “It has often happened to me that my best outline slipped through my fingers,” Luther told his students. Nonetheless, he wanted to jot down at least a sketch of what he wanted to say from the pulpit, even when pressed for time. Several such sketches survive. He set down these sermon plans in Latin. The sentences lent themselves to expansion and often to some tempering as he actually addressed the congregation before him. His plan for preaching on John 20:19–31 on April 16, 1531, drew sharp distinctions between imagined sin and genuine sin, and between incubating sin and conscious sin, which played a much less prominent role in the recorded and the edited versions of the sermon. For preaching on Luke 18:9–14 for August 20, 1531, a distinction that his outline contained between God’s indirect rule in the realm of this world through secular authorities and God’s direct rule in the realm of

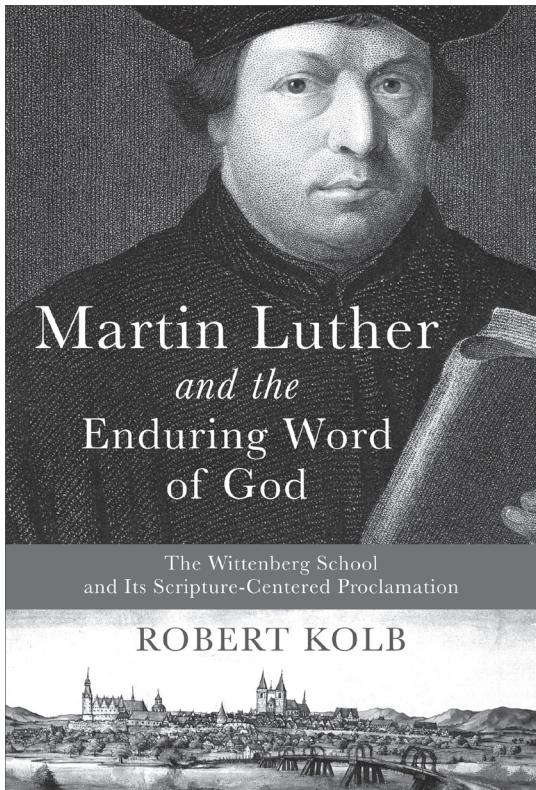
grace disappeared when he mounted the pulpit. However, his preaching sermon on Matthew 4:1–11 for February 22, 1534, followed the outline of the three temptations with which Satan confronts believers, parallel to the temptations Jesus experienced.

At least in theory, Luther opposed verbosity. The sermons of his students Joachim Morlin and Nikolaus Medler he compared to turning on the tap and letting the full cask flow. “But flowing words do not touch the hearers even if they enjoy them, nor do they learn from them. It is therefore much better to speak precisely. Then the content can be grasped.” Preachers should not let their minds and mouths run wild, Luther counseled. “A preacher should remain with the main point and do what he intended, so that point can be understood.” No

dallying or playing with extraneous ideas, he insisted. Conrad Cordatus asked Luther for instructions on preaching. Luther replied, “You have to learn how to mount the pulpit, to stay there a while, and then to leave the pulpit.” That angered Cordatus, but then the student acknowledged that these words did apply to him. Luther continued by stating that the preacher should have a proper call to preach, that he should teach purely and correctly, and that he should not preach longer than one hour. “It is best not to make the sermon long and to speak simply and on the level of the children.”

About his own preaching, Luther observed, “I have often wanted to spit on myself when I left the pulpit: ‘Pfui on you! What did you preach?’” He regretted not following his outline. “But just this sermon the people praised the most, that I had not preached so wonderful a sermon in a long time.”

Luther’s students often heard, especially at the end of the 1520s when Anabaptist traveling preachers first ventured into Saxon territory, that a legitimate call to a congregation or other ecclesiastical position through regular channels was necessary for one to preach publicly. Luther also defined the “office” or “obligation” of hearers of God’s Word in many places. Song of Solomon 4:7 was speaking of the fruit and efficacy of God’s



Word and how the minister of the Word should preach. The people who heard the sermon were to return to their homes to learn from the Word how to govern themselves and those family members and servants entrusted to their care. The Word was to permeate all the aspects, obligations, and situations of public life, in church, society, and households. At times Luther's hearers received his complaints about the indifference and contempt that they and their fellow townsmen exhibited toward his preaching, toward God's Word.

Various circumstances led Luther to preach on specific topics in the weekday services. His own ill health and the decline of Saxon Elector Johann the Steadfast in August 1532 may have led him to preach seventeen Sunday afternoons on the resurrection. He worked through 1 Corinthians 15, with its message of joyful hope for life everlasting through Christ's rising and bestowing new life on believers through their incorporation into his resurrection via the baptismal promise. Such sermons built a bridge from Scripture to the congregation, facilitating the conversation between God and the people hearing the proclamation.

Reviews

LUTHERANS IN AMERICA: A New History. By Mark Granquist. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. 388 pages. Paper. \$44.10.

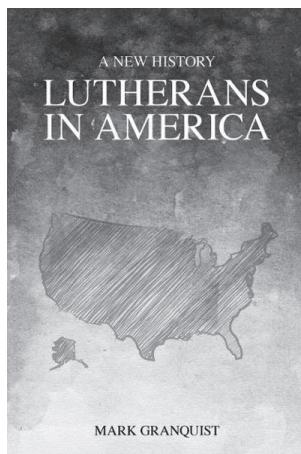
A New History is the subtitle Mark Granquist has assigned to his *Lutherans in America*. This book is in fact the first comprehensive narrative since the publication of E. Clifford Nelson's *The Lutherans in North America* in 1975.

Granquist aims not only to recount the past forty years of Lutheranism on the American scene, but to examine the whole story with "new eyes" and thus to offer a fresh perspective.

Nelson was an unabashed champion of the twentieth-century movement toward unity among American Lutherans and bold enough to predict that even The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) would not be able to forever deny "the implications of its own confession" (303). Granquist clearly demonstrates that this forecast was premature. The Seminex crisis of the 1970s, and its bitter aftermath, sidelined the LCMS. Those who left this denomination to form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) did become a catalyst for the creation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988. However, this same merger, which also involved the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC), resulted in two rather than one major Lutheran church body. Since then, not only have the ELCA and the LCMS steadily grown farther apart from each other, but each of them remains internally divided. Here Granquist draws attention to the moderate and conservative

factions in the LCMS and to the various contending parties within the ELCA, a denomination that in its first twenty-five years has in fact undergone two major schisms and suffered the loss of a million members. In his effort to put these post-Nelson years into perspective, Granquist also stresses the downside of Lutheran denominational mergers. In his estimation, they tend to "disrupt the natural flow of organizations," to break longstanding "patterns of loyalty and affiliation," to divert time and energy away from "direct proclamation of the gospel," and to create "inevitable hard feelings that can drain the life out of any denomination" (283).

For Granquist, the central question with which all members of this same family



of denominations have commonly grappled over the course of their histories is how to be both "Lutheran" and "American." Since their answers were "divergent," or so he asserts, "they argued and divided and united" (197). At the extremes in the nineteenth century were Samuel Simon Schmucker of the General Synod, who was

ready to rewrite the Augsburg Confession in order to better align Lutheranism with the American Protestant empire, and C. F. W. Walther of the Missouri Synod, who in the Predestinarian Controversy, ardently defended the Lutheran emphasis on sola gratia against the individual freedom Americans had grown to cherish in their religious as well as their civic lives. In both cases, the attending conflicts deepened Lutheran divisions. Other Lutherans of this same era sought to strike more of a balance, as Granquist points out, by resisting the wild-eyed versions of revivalism, but employing some of its moderate features on occasion for the sake of congregational renewal and supplementing conversions with catechetical instruction (158–159).

A noteworthy imbalance in Granquist's compelling presentation is the fact that he devotes his first four chapters (one third of the book) to Lutheranism's Old World backdrop and to its beginnings in colonial America, when twenty-five thousand souls at best could be counted as members. On the other hand, considerably less attention is paid to the nineteenth-century confessional movement that enabled both old and newer immigrant groups, albeit in differing ways, to establish their identity as "Lutherans" in the free religious environment of the new nation. Granquist has chosen to be equally parsimonious, moreover, with respect to the details of the Seminex crisis of the 1970s in the LCMS and the ways in which it affected all of Lutheranism in America.

What is also "new" about *Lutherans in America* are Granquist's ample descriptions of people's lives at the congregational level.

Topics include worship and hymnody, the role of women, outreach efforts, pastoral care issues, and ministry to minority groups. To each chapter of the book he adds an often-interesting excursus that underscores this emphasis. Granquist is not the first or the only scholar to go down this path. But "local communities of faith" are the major source of the hope of revitalization he holds out in the twenty-first century for Lutherans, whose total membership since 1975 has declined from nine million to less than seven million, in an America where the population has increased by 50 percent. In many ways, Lutherans in today's post-churched environment are facing a challenge as daunting as did their immigrant forebears. Stripped of the privilege and influence their European state churches could claim, as well as the "standing" their clergy enjoyed, they were nonetheless remarkably creative in their New World context when it came to discovering alternative ways to nurture and to bear witness to their Lutheran understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Granquist laments the fact that too many of us today do not value history. But for those who desire a better future for Lutheranism in America, a good place to start is with his "new history."

Jon Diefenthaler

***BEING LUTHERAN.* By A. Trevor Sutton. Concordia Publishing House, 2016. 240 pages. Paper. \$14.99.**

Is your church the center of your community? In most cases, the answer is

probably “no.” As a driver of the culture, the church has moved from the middle to the margins. This prompts us to ask the hard question of the ministry we have been given: How are faithful Christians, both clergy and laity, supposed to stay true to the word while moving through the world? By being Lutheran.

When we are living out our faith, Sutton says in his book, we are actively confronting new challenges. We do not run away from the culture or our community because it got hard to talk about Jesus. It is increasingly getting harder to speak faithfully about Jesus because of social, political, and other repercussions. Yet, we still live in a world where people are seeking meaning and looking for answers. By being Lutheran we can point people to the one who gives life its definition.

“A meaningful relationship has the power to change your entire life” (109), Sutton writes. These words ring true in my personal experience, and they highlight the true opportunity that we have as Lutherans living in America’s shifting cultural landscape. Building relationships is vital to any sort of lasting discipleship, both inside and outside of our church walls.

“It is possible to think as Lutherans, yet never act as Lutherans” (xvii), Sutton writes and “it is possible for us to act as Lutherans, yet never think as Lutherans.” This is why Sutton urges readers to merge our thinking and acting. Where we see vivid actions alongside vivid teachings of Jesus, there the true church is found. When we center ourselves on Jesus as he has been revealed to us, it is the foundation of authentic community that lasts for

eternity. In Jesus, we’re connected to the past and to the disciples who act as a cloud of witnesses for us. We’re also connected to the future. Our gospel proclamation is a signal for future believers that grace and love are found in Jesus.

There are many different ways you can use Sutton’s book to encourage faithfulness in your church and your community. To



A. Trevor Sutton

start, it slots in easily to any book club you are already running. With questions at the end of each chapter, you can break the book up into weekly segments for reading and reflection. Additionally, because of its structure, you can use *Being Lutheran* in a new member class to dispel Lutheran myths and fortify the foundation of faith. You could also use the book as content for a Bible study.

My favorite line from the book is also the one that gives me motivation to get moving in my church and my community. I hope it encourages you: “Being Lutheran is ultimately about following Jesus. We go where Jesus goes, we listen when Jesus

speaks, we trust when Jesus promises, we learn when Jesus teaches. And we live because Jesus lives. This is what it means to be Lutheran” (249).

*Matt Schuler
Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Oxford, Michigan*

**THROUGH THE NEEDLE’S EYE:
*Sermons on the Gospels. By Michael
Kasting. Bookstand Publishing,
2016. 270 pages. Paper. \$15.00.***

This collection of sermons written and preached by a thoughtful, experienced pastor will repay careful reading and meditation. It is clear that over the years Kasting has developed and refined his own approach to preaching. That approach is direct and straightforward but by no means simple. Although he was trained in a homiletic approach that constrained every appointed text to produce a “malady” and then a “means” for curing that malady (I know, for, as his classmate, I was there), we can be thankful that his own preaching is more supple and much more inclined to find ways to draw his hearers into the Gospel narratives. He preaches the whole counsel of God as he finds it in the Gospel stories, and he is not afraid to ask both his hearers and himself to amend their lives.

Especially striking are moments when he gives a Gospel story a twist we might not have expected. So, for example, when the story of the Gerasene demoniac (Mk 5:14–20) turns up as his text for “Mission Sunday,” Kasting invites his hearers to reflect upon the fact that this man, having

been healed, begged to be allowed to accompany Jesus henceforth. But Jesus response was, “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.” Hence, the message for the worshiping congregation on this Mission Sunday was to “Tell the Folks at Home” (fleshed out also with a story about a man who had done just that and had influenced Kasting himself when he was a teenage boy).

Or there is a sermon titled simply “The Stranger,” that draws his hearers into the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–33). Jesus’s own disciples seem not to recognize him. How then are we centuries later to know him as present with us? He is unlikely to come to us with lights flashing and trumpets blaring, but, rather, quietly in his word and in the meal he shares with us as he did with the Emmaus disciples. Readers should note, however, that the sermon does not simply end with that comforting thought. It continues by observing sadly that still today Jesus is a stranger to many who are walking by themselves on lonely paths. What then is the responsibility of those listening to the sermon? They need to join others who are walking alone, taking the occasion to talk about who this stranger is and what he still does for us.

Or, in the sermon that gives the book its title, listeners are urged to remember that the congregation’s offering of its gifts is not just a “financial intermission.” On the contrary, it is “an act of defiance to a culture that says ‘Acquire!’ and an act of obedience to God who commands us to give.”

What, if anything, is missing from these sermons that might have been there?

Not a lot. If I had to point to one lacuna, however, it would be that relatively few of the sermons make connection with particular moments in the liturgical year. (There are exceptions, of course, but they are mostly at obvious places, such as Christmas and Easter.) The life of a worshiping congregation has a form that is shaped by the seasons of the church year, a shape that gives point and purpose to life, and sermons can develop these connections.

This is a minor quibble, however, and cannot detract from the richness that is here. How, we might ask ourselves, is such a book most usefully read? My own view is that we should not forget that it is a book of *sermons*. They were and are meant first for the ear; they have their own distinctive cadence and might best be read aloud. Moreover, they need to be read singly, perhaps for private meditation. This is not a book that one just sits down to read from beginning to end. It is a book to be taken in small doses that give opportunity for reflection. Readers who approach the book this way will be better able to squeeze through the needle's eye.

*Gilbert Meilaender
Valparaiso, Indiana*

CHINA'S URBAN CHRISTIANS: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden. Studies in Chinese Christianity. By Brent Fulton. Pickwick Publications, 2015. Paper. 145 pages. \$19.00.

Fulton begins this compact book with an attention-grabbing, jaw-dropping overview of the challenges facing today's China: the most massive human migration in the

history of the world (recent urbanization), toxic pollution, dissolution of traditional family structure, aging population, rising expectations of affluent middle class, expanding gap between haves and have-nots, shriveling of state-sponsored industries, colossal national debt. This introductory chapter sets the stage, not only for the monumental issues facing China, but also, for the context within which the Christian church is living, adapting, and transforming.

As the title suggests, Fulton's focus is on urbanization and specifically the urban Christian church. "As China urbanizes, its Christians are more concerned with the challenges posed by urbanization—both to the internal working of the church as well as in the outworking of its mission in society—than with the threat of an oppressive Chinese party-state" (126).

Fulton distinguishes five forms of the urban church, the first four of which have a longer history: (1) the registered church most closely affiliated with governmental structures, namely the Three Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council (TSPM/CCC); (2) churches planted by churches in the Wenzhou area (often connected with businesses and factories); (3) migrant community churches (rural churches in the city); and (4) traditional unregistered urban churches, often called house churches. It is the fifth form that Fulton finds most fascinating and most promising, namely urban professional churches of the last decade and a half.

These urban professional Christians tend to be relatively new Christians, younger, affluent, well educated,

experienced and capable in the public sphere, familiar with overseas models of church leadership and life, at ease with democratic, team-driven practices, and active in the structures and concerns of social and civic life. While the first four forms of the Christian church listed above emerged from periods of suppression and persecution, and relate cautiously with society, these urban professional Christians are part of a new generation, confident and eager to be productive factors helping move China into a more open future—sometimes even providing “safe” spaces for lawyers or intellectuals who are front-line advocates for governmental openness.

This is not to say that these Christians meet no obstacles. As unregistered churches without legal status, they are marginalized, unable to hold bank accounts or purchase property, and they are sometimes subject to suppression. However, they worship openly in rented facilities, provide Christian education ranging from Sunday schools to theological education, have trained full-time pastoral leadership, are active in social ministry ranging from disaster relief to providing assistance to displaced and separated families. Most are actually quite willing to register formally with the government, though not at the expense of being subsumed in the TSPM/CCC.

Fulton notes another feature of these churches, namely interest to form networks or fellowships both among other urban churches in China and with churches outside China. If the church in China sees itself as post-denominational by circumstance and by conviction, many of these churches feel that the church is also

pre-denominational, and indeed can benefit from the clarity of both theology and church order that a denomination provides. The churches are clear that the move to denominational identity begins with them, however, rather than with a denomination making a claim on them. In any case, this recent, and not universally agreed on shift is still in initial stages. A trans-national identity or entity would represent a challenge to the “franchise” granted the TSPM/CCC to be the formal, legal voice of Christianity. It is striking and a bit disappointing that the only denominational option Fulton entertains or commends is Calvinist/Reformed, even though other families of the larger Christian family have significant care for and ministry in China.

Fulton does raise one matter of significant concern, namely the disjuncture between two generations of Christianity in China. In contrast to the Christian churches that “experienced Christ in their poverty,” this urban professional church can easily be enamored enough with its vibrancy to slip into a “culture of ostentation,” which commends its own patterns of success and prosperity as marks by which it expresses the gospel in an increasingly affluent segment of society. In the words of one church leader, “At present the main problem facing the church is not government persecution; in fact, this is unimportant to the church. No, the main problem is holiness. If the church is not holy, its witness is destroyed” (49). The disjuncture is real between the vibrant and confident on the one hand and the cautious and circumspect on the other. The vibrant needs the rock-solid faith of the cautious,

while the cautious needs to be energized by the vibrant, but the two do not meet easily or often.

For so few pages, this is a superb book, current, insightful, forward-looking, and balanced. Fulton, president of Hong Kong-based ChinaSource (<http://www.chinasource.org/>), knows the Christian church in China better than most. As I am sure Fulton would agree, however, there have been “reality-checks” already since the publication of the book: recent continued demolition of church buildings, detention and imprisonment of church leaders (as well as intellectuals and lawyers sympathetic to Christianity), and severely tightened strictures on NGOs under the rubric of avoiding infiltration via religion. Change, of course, happens, and seemingly more often, more unevenly, and more unexpectedly in China. However, the emergence of this new form, indeed new generation, of Christianity is a noteworthy development. It certainly informs not just our knowledge but also our prayers for the Christian family in China as well as our openness to ways to encourage and enable the ministry of the gospel there . . . and everywhere.

Henry Rowold

The first-ever English edition of
a standard German biography.

A Short Life of Martin Luther



Thomas Kauffman

“Impressively clear, providing insights into the mind of a complicated individual.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“A welcome addition to Reformation scholarship.”

—John T. Pless

ISBN 978-0-8028-7153-4 • 158 pages • paperback • \$18.00

At your bookstore,
or call 800-253-7521
www.eerdmans.com



WM. B. EERDMANS
PUBLISHING CO.
2140 Oak Industrial Dr NE
Grand Rapids MI 49505

WALTHER'S WORKS

Pastoral Theology



C. F. W. Walther

**NEW TESTAMENT
DRIVEN,
CONFESSIOANLLY
LUTHERAN
DРИPPING,
LUTHER INSPIRED.
“PURE GOLD.”**

**Edited by David W. Loy;
translated by Christian C. Tiews**

Walther guides the reader from the path to call and ordination, through the range of congregational practice and pastoral issues and questions, to the very end of the pastor's ministry. It is New Testament driven, confessionally Lutheran dripping, Luther inspired, orthodox Lutheran theologian confirmed gold. It's pure gold.

**—Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President,
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

Walther's *Pastoral Theology* was the first confessional Lutheran handbook for the pastoral ministry published in the United States. It remains an eminently practical work of careful biblical theology and application of the Bible's teaching for the Church's ministry. This is the only complete translation of one of C. F. W. Walther's most important and influential books.

“Pastoral theology is the God-given practical disposition of the soul, acquired by certain means, by which a servant of the church is equipped to perform all the tasks that come to him in that capacity—validly, in a legitimate manner, to the glory of God, and for the advancement of his own and his hearers' salvation.”

—From Chapter One



VISIT CPH.ORG/PASTORALTHEOLOGY

© 2017 Concordia Publishing House Printed in the USA 581611_54



*Mom always said,
"Where there's
a will, there's a way."
Mom was right.*

Mom also made sure you went to church and learned about God's love. She was right about that, too.

Now it's your turn. You want the church to be there for your children and their children. You've set the example, but there's another step you can take.

If you have a will, there's a simple way to make sure that future generations will have Gospel-proclaiming, people-loving pastors to serve them: Include Concordia Seminary in your estate plan. You'll make a lasting difference as future pastors serve families like yours.

It's easy. To learn more with no obligation, call 800-822-5287 or simply return the form below.

Yes! I'm interested in learning about ways to include Concordia Seminary in my Christian estate plan. Please contact me.

Yes! I want to help Concordia Seminary prepare future pastors. I'm enclosing a one-time gift of \$_____.

Name(s) _____ Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Phone (_____) _____ Email _____

For more ways to help, call us: 800-822-5287, give now: www.csl.edu/give or mail this form to: Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105.



**Concordia
Seminary**
ST. LOUIS

#WhoWillGoForUs

REFER A PROSPECTIVE STUDENT

Who is our next church worker?

Below is the name of a person I think would be an excellent pastor or deaconess.

(If you don't know the information requested, name and congregation/city is sufficient.)

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

Email: _____ Approximate age of candidate: _____

Congregation: _____

City: _____

Additional comments: _____

I have discussed the possibility of studying to be a pastor/deaconess and he/she is interested.

I have not discussed this possibility with him/her, but I feel that he/she has been blessed with the necessary gifts to serve as a pastor/deaconess.

Please return this form to the Seminary's Ministerial Recruitment and Admissions office at the address below. Concordia Seminary will send information to this prospective student. You also may contact the office at 800-822-9545 or admissions@csl.edu.

"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me!'" (Is. 6:8 ESV)



Concordia
Seminary
ST. LOUIS



concordiatheology

COMMENTARY, CONVERSATION, AND RESOURCES FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY TODAY.

BLOG

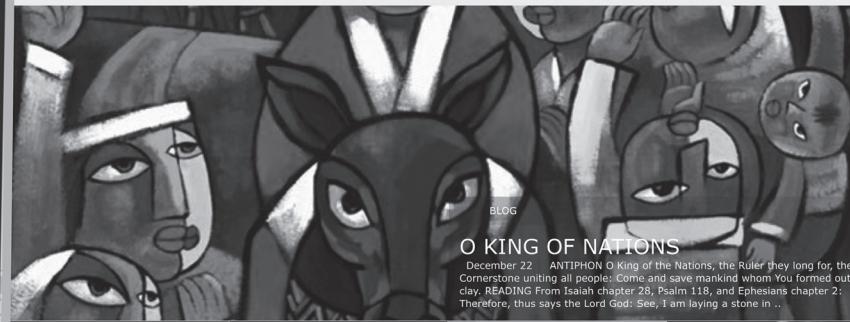
THE PULPIT

CJ ONLINE

CONGREGATIONS

NEWS

SCHOLAR



BLOG

O KING OF NATIONS

December 22 ANTIHON O King of the Nations, the Ruler they long for; the Cornerstone uniting all people! Come and save mankind whom You formed out of clay. READING From Isaiah chapter 28, Psalm 118, and Ephesians chapter 2: Therefore, thus says the Lord God: See, I am laying a stone in ..



concordiatheology.org

WE HAVE A NEW LOOK! CHECK US OUT TODAY!

- **BLOG**

Posts from professors

- **THE PULPIT**

Preaching resources

- **CJ ONLINE**

The digital version of our
flagship theological journal

- **CONGREGATIONS**

Bible studies and other resources

- **NEWS**

Information about
Seminary happenings

- **SCHOLAR**

Research and scholarship



Concordia
Seminary
ST. LOUIS

From Taboo to Delight

ETHICS OF SEX

“*Ethics of Sex* is biblically faithful, theologically sound, and above all, Christ-centered. While the authors responsibly draw from fields such as science and psychology, they constantly return to the cross, emphasizing themes such as forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation.

Christians across denominational lines will appreciate this book for its winsome style, pastoral tone, and Kingdom focus.

—David W. Jones, PhD, Professor of Christian Ethics,
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

CONTENTS + CONTRIBUTORS

Male and Female Sex Differences
by Dr. Cynthia E. Lumley

What Is Marriage?
by Rev. Dr. Christopher Wright Mitchell

Polygamy and Its Contemporary Variations in Biblical Perspective
by Rev. David A. Kind

Contraception: An Embryo's Point of View
by Dr. Donna J. Harrison

Pastoral Considerations of Contraception
by Rev. D. Richard Stuckwisch

Christian Sex Education: The Great Cover-Up
by Rev. Dr. Matthew Rueger

Self-Pollution: Its Definition and Remedy
by Rev. Dr. Benjamin T. G. Mayes

A Biblical Response to Homosexuality
by Rev. Tom Eckstein

Transgender Identity in Light of Biblical Identity
by Rev. Dr. Robert W. Weise

From Taboo to Delight: The Body, Sex, and Love in View of Creation and Eschatology
by Rev. Dr. Gifford Grobien, General Editor



VISIT CPH.ORG/ETHICSOFSEX

© 2018 Concordia Publishing House Printed in the USA 581811_53



Concordia Seminary
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, MO 63105