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On the cover: Caspar David Friedrich's painting Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818), a classic example of both German Romanticism and the Rückenfigur, the compositional technique of foregrounding a figure with their back turned to the viewer. In an article in the Winter 2016 issue of the Concordia Journal, Robert Rosin envisions this "wanderer" as a stand-in for the historian:

*Is the wanderer looking back to reflect on where he has been,
or is he peering forward to reconnoiter what seems to lie ahead?
Could be both: history is Janus-like, looking both ways.*

(Image: Wikimedia Commons)

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Editorials

Editor's Note

Any seminary, perhaps any institution of higher education, goes through generational shifts, not only as students matriculate and graduate, but as professors come and go, bringing their particular gifts and expertise to bear on the institution's mission. As I look back over the history of Concordia Seminary's faculty, especially since I entered the Seminary as a student in 1980, I can see a couple of generational shifts that brought with them particular emphases that helped rebuild Concordia Seminary as a theologically confessional seminary with a heart for the mission and ministry of Christ's church.

Forty years ago, the church had already been looking toward raising up a new generation of Lutheran scholars in the finest tradition of University of Wittenberg (which exercised an enormous influence on schools and churches throughout Europe), who could not only rebuild the seminary as a school with a reputation for sound biblical and confessional scholarship for the sake of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, but engage Christian scholars throughout the world as a theological leaven and blessing to the church-at-large.

We have now reached a point where this influential group of scholars have either retired over the past few years or will be retiring in the not-too-distant future. Two of them, Robert Kolb and James Voelz, have recently been celebrated with *festschriften* noting their many accomplishments. But three others have significantly served this institution for thirty-five years or more. Andy Bartelt arrived in 1978. Robert Rosin arrived in 1981. Paul Raabe arrived in 1983.

These three men played an instrumental role in reestablishing the seminary as a first-rate institution for Lutheran scholarship and writing. They “elbowed” their way back into professional societies at a time when many regarded the Seminary as second-rate academically. They earned a seat at the table that many on today's faculty currently enjoy. They also took the initiative to establish our annual Theological Symposium, launched Concordia Academic Press, and were among the first to publish theological scholarship in outside journals and with outside book publishers. All the while, they ably and effectively taught several generations of pastors, scholars, and church leaders.

Editor's note

A correction: on the table of contents page of the Winter 2019 issue of the Concordia Journal, the editorial “Recapping SBL 2018” listed Andrew Bartelt as its author. In fact, as was evident from the editorial itself, its author was James Voelz.

Truly, we stand on the shoulders of these giants.

Over the next couple of years, we plan to honor these revered professors for their scholarly contributions over the course of the past thirty years. To that end, we will devote an issue of the *Concordia Journal* to publishing a “greatest hits” of their work. Some of these articles have appeared in the pages of this journal, and a few will be published here for the first time. The articles will be selected based on two criteria. First, they exemplify each professor’s particular interests and expertise. Second, and more importantly, these articles remain relevant to current issues and questions in our day.

This issue inaugurates these tributes with the work of Robert Rosin. In addition to his “greatest hits,” Professor Rosin took us up on the offer to provide some concluding thoughts in the new article, “Story Time: The Work of the Liberal Arts.” Enjoy.

Charles P. Arand
Dean of Theological Research and Publication

"What Can We Learn From Them?"

Four travelers went to Ethiopia in March: Presidents Dale Meyer of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, and Lawrence Rast of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Skopak and Mr. Andemichael Tesfazion of Grace Lutheran Church in Jacksonville, Florida. Pastor Skopak and Mr. Tesfazion went especially to see the support of their congregation for orphans and to explore ways to support local congregations in and around Bishoftu. Presidents Meyer and Rast went especially to meet with Dr. Bruke Ayele, president of the Mekane Yesus Seminary (MYS) in Addis Ababa to discuss how our three seminaries can partner in our Lutheran mission for the Lord Jesus.¹ It was an absolutely inspiring trip. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) is experiencing growth like that of the early church in Acts and soon will be the church home of ten million people. Upon returning to the United States and sharing our experiences, people asked, "What can we learn from them?"

There are several fundamental learnings for congregations, seminaries, and our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. But first . . . Ethiopia is a storied land, mentioned already in the ancient poem of Homer.

But now Poseidon had gone to visit the Ethiopians worlds away,
Ethiopians off at the farthest limits of mankind,
A people split in two, one part where the Sungod sets
And part where the Sungod rises. There Poseidon went
To receive an offering, bulls and rams by the hundred—
Far away at the feast the Sea-lord sat and took his pleasure.
But the other gods, at home in Olympian Zeus's halls,
Met for full assembly there . . .²

The fifth century BC Greek historian Herodotus tells a tale, perhaps essentially true but delightfully embellished with myth, of how the king of Ethiopia dealt with spies sent by Cambyses, the king of Persia. In a second passage Herodotus describes the dress and weaponry of Ethiopians who fought for Xerxes.³ The Greek geographer Strabo, 64 BC to perhaps AD 21, has many descriptions of the land and its people throughout his seventeen books. Ethiopia, sometimes identified as Cush, is often mentioned in the Bible. Most familiar to us is the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:26–40.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah (53:7–8). . . . And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

In ancient history “Ethiopia” defined various regions in Africa, sometimes even the Saudi Arabian peninsula, but “by late biblical times, however, the geographical meaning of the term had come to be well limited to the lands south of Egypt.”⁵

Ethiopia’s more recent history has not always been favorable. Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974 and replaced by the Derg, a military government that identified with communism and the Soviet Union. It was a time of persecution for Christians. Our fellow traveler Mr. Tesfazion had been an officer in the Ethiopian Air Force and spent years in jail under the Derg. Many of his fellow prisoners were executed. One Ethiopian pastor told us how he and others would leave their homes and spend nights in the desert to escape Derg soldiers who might break into their homes to conscript them. In these times of persecution, the church grew. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”⁶ The Derg’s reign of terror ended in 1987 and today Ethiopia has a federal parliamentary government. Christians are free to worship and evangelize, although there are some restrictions. For example, private schools cannot teach Christianity. Christianity is about 63 percent of the country’s 102 million inhabitants. Muslims, about one-third of the population, are aggressively seeking converts. But it was the growth of the EECMY that amazed us, showing us that God is fulfilling prophecies from long ago. “Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush (Ethiopia) shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God” (Ps 68:31). “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush . . .” (Is 11:10–11).

Now to the pressing question: What can we learn from them? People ask that question because the LCMS is not growing. President Rast made a presentation to about seventy pastors and evangelists of the EECMY and laid out how our LCMS has grown through its history up to 1970. First he presented LCMS growth by decade:

1847–1850	58%	1900–1910	20%
1850–1860	343%	1910–1920	14%
1860–1870	154%	1920–1930	15%
1870–1880	90%	1930–1940	24%
1880–1890	32%	1940–1950	29%
1890–1900	39%	1950–1960	65%

More recent decades have painted a more challenging picture:

Year:	Congregations:	Baptized Members:
1847	30	4099
1967	5993	2,847,425
1977	6051	2,776,958
1987	6269	2,707,134
1997	6213	2,603,036
2007	6158	2,383,084
2017	6052	1,968,641

The first basic learning is that the American cultural context has changed. We live in different circumstances today. They are not better or worse; they are different. Yet our Synod and many of its institutions developed their structures in a time and for a world that has since radically changed. We are all familiar with the decline of mainline Christianity and the rise of the “nones,” people who do not identify with a Christian denomination. We find ourselves in the midst of a culture that is changing before our eyes and doing so with a rapidity that the LCMS has not experienced since we transitioned from German to English between the two world wars. Traveling throughout the church, in a different congregation almost every weekend, we meet pastors and laypeople who know we are in changed times. Some are discouraged and resigned to decline, grieving what they’ve seen lost in their lifetimes. A few are rejoicing to see their congregation growing. In general, however, and this is an opinion, a large percentage of people in the Synod, in national, district, and congregational structures and agencies, have not come to terms with our changed times and hence have not moved toward changes necessary for our new American context. We hasten to add—we’re not talking about changing or watering down our precious doctrine!

With that overarching change in our LCMS cultural context, what else can we learn from the growing EECMY? A vision that God’s work is global and multiethnic in the United States is a key to energizing local ministry and mission. Hence a second fundamental learning is that we do well to weave mission stories and mission trips into our shared life as Missouri Synod Lutherans. A St. Louis area pastor recently asked President Meyer how he could energize his congregation. His church is at peace, relationships are fine, finances passing, but this pastor wants more “get up and go.” President Meyer’s suggestion was mission trips. When people have an experience with Christians in a different context than the friendly confines of their congregation, they see worship and congregational life at home in a different way. You don’t need to leave the country; short experiences are effective too. St. Louis and Fort Wayne both have numerous opportunities for outreach to immigrant groups. All major metropolitan areas have significant ethnic groups, first and second generation

immigrants, who need the Gospel and Lutheran outreaches are many. LINC has vibrant ministries in several major metropolitan areas. Mapleton, Iowa, is home to Mission Central, always an inspiring visit.

A third learning is “two wings.” The Rev. Dr. Wakseyoum Idossa, immediate past president of the EECMY, described their church’s approach as such. The first “wing” is evangelization. The second is human care. Ethiopia is one of the poorest nations in Africa. So, as just one example, the Central Ethiopian Synod has a program for congregations that involves fifteen church members of a local congregation and fifteen non-church members. The program teaches the thirty how to become entrepreneurs and thus work their way out of poverty. Obviously the non-church members learn about Jesus and the fellowship of the local congregation. “Two wings” is not how most of our congregations saw their mission in twentieth-century “Christian America.” Local congregations preached and shared the gospel, but human care was often done by government institutions. The Christian cultural milieu understood that we are all to love our neighbor through works of mercy. In today’s post-churched America the witness of the local congregation will be more effective with the “two wings”—evangelization *and* human care. “Don’t tell me what a friend I have in Jesus until I see what a friend I have in you.” Interestingly, Walther’s *The Proper Form of a Christian Congregation* shows that this “two wings” approach was an important aspect of the congregations of the Synod’s life together in our early history.

A fourth fundamental learning is to communicate to people throughout the LCMS how our seminaries are partnering to share confessional Lutheran theology at home and abroad. This consumes a far greater portion of our professors’ time and seminary resources than most people realize. Yes, we form the next generation of pastors and deaconesses for the LCMS but our involvements with seminaries overseas is forming generations to come in confessional Lutheranism. Both American seminaries have sent professors to teach at MYS and to present to EECMY pastors and evangelists. The EECMY sends students to both of our seminaries, as do many other overseas church bodies. Thirty-four students from fifteen countries are studying at Concordia Theological Seminary and thirty-eight from seventeen countries are at Concordia Seminary. Not only do these international students get world-class formation in confessional Lutheran theology, they also enlarge the panorama of mission for American seminarians and form friendships which will enrich future ministries overseas and in America. As your seminarians learn from international students and hear our professors talk about mission overseas, they cannot help but take the vision to the congregations where they will be called. “This Gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to the nations” (Mt 24:14). Indeed, a growing global vision of our Lord’s church will invigorate ministry and mission in local congregations.

Related to that global vision is your seminaries’ passion to share Lutheran theology with people in America who are not Lutheran. Professors tell us that non-LCMS Christians, especially evangelicals, are discovering the theological depth they

desire in the writings of Luther and Lutheran theologians. Non-Lutheran publishers, like Baker and Eerdmans, have been finding a market of Christian readers for distinctively Lutheran theology.⁷ The graduate programs at both seminaries have long been open to non-LCMS students and *nota bene!* This openness does not mean a watering down of what we teach. Your two seminaries will not become generic divinity schools because we will continue to focus our residential programs on the formation of workers for the LCMS and because the bonds between the Synod and her seminaries remains strong. Our vision for the future features our graduate programs acting as “Lutheran leaven” by offering substantial gospel theology to Christians both at home and overseas.

Fifth, congregations and seminaries can cast a vision for a truly multiethnic Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This is more than mission information, which is inspiring to read and hear. This is working to change the faces of the LCMS so that more and more we reflect American demographics and anticipate in time what Revelation (chapter seven) teaches we will see in heaven. Among other effects, the decline of the LCMS has shrunk the pool of pastors for the future if . . . and this is a big if . . . we continue to think of future clergy as white Lutherans of European descent. We certainly do need these candidates for the future; they can invigorate and grow by the Spirit’s grace congregations in communities where the LCMS traditionally does well. But how will ethnic communities in the United States “hear without someone preaching?” (Rom 10:14). Increasing our number of ethnic pastors will help us reach these communities that otherwise may not be blessed with our wonderfully Lutheran christocentric understanding of law and gospel, that “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (Rom 10:13). The student populations at your seminaries are already more diverse than the overall LCMS. The Center for Hispanic Studies and the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology at St. Louis and the Latino SMP program at Fort Wayne offer online learning, but the residential population remains predominantly white and of European descent. We need to begin recruiting the children and grandchildren of immigrants now for residential MDiv and deaconess study. This is your seminaries’ vision, and we pray you and your congregation will find it invigorating and partner with us.

What can we learn from our Lutheran brothers and sisters in Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus? These points and much more. We in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod live in different circumstances today than in past days of growth. Today’s circumstances are not better or worse; they are different. And they are abundant with new opportunities to share the everlasting gospel. As our years in office as your seminaries’ presidents lengthen, we find ourselves spending much time discussing the vitality of our seminaries twenty and thirty years into the future. We’re habituated to think that future vitality will depend upon money, but in years to come the real challenge facing seminaries may not be money, but people. We’re

not going to get our future pastors and deaconesses solely from the demographics of the past. While some are doing so, we need a more general passion throughout the Synod, pews, and pulpits, to reach into the diasporas, those immigrants and their children throughout the United States. The Ethiopian diaspora is some two million people in the United States. When we reach them for Jesus, the second and third generations will have become enculturated in their own ways and will be well qualified for the residential programs at our seminaries. Future pastors and deaconesses with European surnames are needed, yes indeed, but they won't be enough to make The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod grow to reach all of America with the gospel and start to see what we will see in eternity, “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rv 7:9). The prophecy of our Savior in Isaiah 49 should be true of us, Christ's body today.

And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him—for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength—he says: ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Is 49:5–6).

We are your seminaries—for the gospel!

Dale A. Meyer
President
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Lawrence R. Rast, Jr.
President
Concordia Theological Seminary,
Fort Wayne

Endnotes

- 1 Strengthening ties with church leadership at both the national and local synod level was also a central purpose, and meeting with Teshome Amenu, General Secretary, was a highlight. EECMY President Yonas Dibisa was continuing his PhD studies at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, during our visit, and so we were unable to visit with him on this trip.
- 2 *Odyssey* 1.21–25
- 3 Herodotus, *The Histories*, III.17–23; VII.69–70.
- 4 Genesis 2:13; 10:6 (Cush, son of Ham), Numbers 12:1, 2 Samuel 18:21–23, 1 Chronicles 1:8, Psalm 68:31, Isaiah 11:11, Ezekiel 38:5.
- 5 *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, II, 177.
- 6 Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, chapter 50.
- 7 E.g., *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); *God's Two Words: Law and Gospel in Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Jonathan Linebaugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

Robert Rosin, Teacher, Scholar, Friend

In the fall of 1972, a young seminarian came to work for me at the then Foundation for Reformation Research (now the Center for Reformation Research). He took a class or two from me at the Seminary, and we became fast friends. Over the years he has taught me much! Four years after our getting acquainted he went off to Stanford University to further his learning about the Reformation. The grandson of a Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, professor, the son of a college president, seminary dean, and editor of scholarly materials for Concordia Publishing House, Robert Rosin came naturally to the tasks of teaching and scholarly research. His father enjoyed a Fulbright scholarship for work in India, and his mother traveled to many lands as a member of the Board of Missions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. It is no wonder that with travel in the service of the church in his blood, Bob Rosin became professor, author, teacher extraordinaire, serving not only on the Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, faculty but throughout the world: Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

At Stanford, Bob studied under his uncle, Lewis Spitz Jr, at the time doyen of North American Reformation scholarship. Spitz had gone from his study at Concordia Seminary immediately after World War II to Harvard University to study with a premier Renaissance scholar, Myron Gilmore. In the face of the then current criticism of Martin Luther as a forerunner of German fascism and National Socialism, Spitz followed Gilmore's interests in the "humanist" movements for curricular reform in the late medieval period into an investigation of Luther's relationship to the movement of "biblical humanism" that contributed so much to the Wittenberg Reformation. Bob Rosin followed Spitz's lead into the relationship between biblical humanism and the Reformation. In his published doctoral dissertation, Rosin still provides students of the period vital stimuli for further research and thinking. His dissertation helped open up the appraisal of early Lutheran biblical exegesis with a sterling study of the interpretations of Ecclesiastes by Luther, Philip Melancthon, and Johannes Brenz. He demonstrated how the biblical humanists' emphasis on effective communication through cultivation of rhetorical skills and their dedication to working with the original languages set standards for Lutheran theological education as it formed students for service in the proclamation of God's word. Bob's dissertation also focused on one of the hot topics in Renaissance scholarship of the 1970s, philosophical skepticism. His work explored ways of pursuing the history of

exegesis as well as the engagement of these three reformers with the biblical text and the “skeptical” currents of thought in their world. It models methods of examining the church’s address of cultural currents with the message of Scripture.

At Stanford, Bob also came to appreciate the importance of teaching critical thinking, and the various approaches to cultivating analytical ability in students and colleagues. His insights have sharpened the theological thinking of all of us who have come in contact with his application of his phenomenal command of Western thought in addressing the theological challenges of our time.

Bob has carried the confessional convictions that shape the Lutheran proclamation of the gospel of Christ to many corners of the earth. Accompanied and supported throughout his career by his wife, Laine, he has given of his insight and wisdom not only to North American students and colleagues in Saint Louis, but to many others. He taught in Papua New Guinea thirty-five years ago, and since then the churches of the Philippines, Brazil, Croatia, Ethiopia, England, and especially Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have benefitted from his stimulating instruction. In the last two nations, he developed a program of theological education appropriate for raising up pastors for infant churches in central Asia in the twenty-first century.

Among the gifts God has given the church through Robert Rosin are his writings, not only his monograph on the interpretation of Ecclesiastes, but also his many essays as well as the introductions to the books that he has edited. This issue of the *Concordia Journal* presents three essays that give readers a sample of his dedication to the Lutheran Confessions and to critical engagement with the cultures into which God calls us to serve. The invitation to further reflection on how we convey God’s word to those in whose midst we are placed challenges us all to join Bob in the task of teaching and confessing the faith delivered to us by the prophets and apostles through the witnesses of Christ through the ages.

Robert Kolb

Articles



About the Author **Robert Rosin**

Robert Rosin is professor emeritus in the Department of Historical Theology at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. From 1988 to 1990 he was also acting director of Library Services.

He retired in 2016 after 35 years at the Seminary; he was the Eugene E. and Nell S. Fincke Graduate Professor of Theology at the time of his retirement.

A Seminary faculty member since 1981, he served as editor of Concordia Seminary publications (1995–2005) and chairman of the Department of Historical Theology (1995–2004). He also served as the director of the Center for Reformation Research (1997–2013) and as guest instructor or lecturer in many countries, including Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Korea, Japan, China, Cambodia, Brazil, Ethiopia, Croatia, Germany, Sweden, Latvia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, England, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan.

He received his Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Arts from Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. (1986, 1977); Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary (1976); and Bachelor of Arts from Concordia Teachers College in River Forest, Ill., now Concordia University, Chicago (1972). He received an honorary Doctor of Laws from Concordia University, Nebraska in 2018 for “prolonged demonstration of superior service and dedication to a field of study.”

Christians and Culture

Finding Place in Clio's Mansions

Robert Rosin

Ever since Eden, people have been doing more than tending the garden. They have been cultivating culture (same root: *colere* = to care for), from fashioning family home life to building cities and civilizations. Along the way since Genesis 3 sin certainly has complicated the mix, and the culture built is not always a godly, creative use of God-given resources but instead becomes a monument to the creatures rather than the Creator. One need think only of Babel's Tower. Aristotle said that man was a political animal, political in the sense of the *polites* (the citizens) living in the *polis* (the city), meaning people naturally or reasonably live in a societal mix, and both within and by that interaction a culture is formed. True enough, an observation philosophized by a giant in one of history's most influential cultures, philosophized from observing life around him. But we can do Aristotle one better: we know how that political interaction started, not by accident but by design as God said it was not good for man to be alone, and once there were two there was already the start to civilization. Thus people are by nature, by creation social beings, in turn creating culture as we live and interact—from the highbrow intellectual to the most popular and mundane. Nothing has changed in that regard now in the New Testament, though we live on the other side of the most incredible and profoundly influential event ever to occur: the incarnation of God in Christ. The cross was not nearly as tall as Babel, but its shadow stretches infinitely farther, falling across our age and every other until the end of time. Until the last day comes, people (Christians included) continue to develop culture: creating, cultivating, shaping, reshaping, even razing it to begin anew. And till that last day one of the big questions is how Christians as God's new creation, as Christ's children, as people called to holiness, and all those other New Testament images, how we relate to the culture cultivated. The whole creation now is rightfully Christ's, but not all that is built glorifies him and reflects life as God intended it to be pursued. So how should we then live?

Editor's note

From the fourth annual Concordia Seminary Theological Symposium, May, 1994 and published in the fascicle Christ and Culture: The Church in a Post-Christian(?) America (Concordia Seminary, 1995).

Before this goes too far, definitions would be in order, and then a quick overview of what is planned. Definitions and explanations first for the title. I don't want to quibble over who fits the category of Christians—basically “those who confess Christ” will do just fine, and this is not the place to focus on theological aberrations and mount an argument that someone who would not comfortably endorse the Lutheran Confessions—say, Zwingli with his impoverished Christology and anorexic sacramental theology—isn't worthy of the “Christian” label. Zwingli was wrong on that, but he can stay for our purposes, along with a lot of others who err on a host of things. Arius, on the other hand, is out.

“Culture” doesn't have to be defined at length either. Broadly put, culture is anything not naturally biological, anything people create as they freely interact with their natural environment and each other. So that we sleep is not a matter of culture; it is biological. That some people unfortunately feel compelled to sleep in a St. Louis August with windows locked shut and barred while those in Smalltown, USA, have windows open and maybe even doors unlocked says something about the culture of those neighborhoods. Culture can refer to the simplest of tools invented or the most elementary social pattern, but it especially refers to developing, refining, shaping,

*Culture produces
character and forms
habits within society.*

and training the mind, morals, values, attitudes, and tastes. Culture both reflects and, in turn, shapes views of life, of reality. When we understand culture we understand a great deal about ourselves, about our values and worldview. People cultivate a culture

(with varying degrees of awareness as they do so), and that culture in turn shapes them and those who follow. We talk of high culture (often the liberal arts) and pop culture. The dividing line may sometimes be hard to draw, but we generally know where something fits when we see it. Yet while there may be a divide, the two are also never isolated and both reflect a basic underlying mindset and principles. Culture produces character and forms habits within society. We seek, for example, to create a certain culture at the seminary that builds habits and values which, we hope, will carry over and be reflected in graduates—a passion for the word, for learning, for people, for service and sacrifice, and so on—done through a variety of experiences—private devotion, reflection, and study, corporate worship, classroom and library hours, intersection between the contemplative life and the active as students go between study and field education, and so on.

One element of high culture pops up in the subtitle in the person of Clio, something not natural or biological but developed out of reflection, used in shaping a view of life and transmitted to subsequent generations who maintained it because it proved useful. That people today may not recognize Clio does not mean Clio has no use, only that things sometimes fall by the wayside and need to be revived—or

so I hope. But who is Clio? Clio is the muse of history, a name derived from the Greek root *kleein* = to celebrate, to make famous—just what historians do. This then is a look, at least in part, at what has happened through history as Christians and culture intersect, and at what the writing and teaching of history—an element of culture—does to Christianity. So the secret is out: this is a history lecture, hidden under the label of the muse. But be honest: if I had put “history” into the title and told you that, I might have conjured up unhappy memories of history classes past, and Elvis would not be the only one leaving the building. Don’t go. This will be fun (I hope), perhaps shocking, and (if you are inclined to at least one position I’ll get to) it will not be pretty in the end—but then the truth sometimes hurts. It also frees. I wish not to do the muse injustice with what follows, but this is at best an impression. And I hope that Clio has brought along her sister Calliope, the muse of eloquence. Time will tell. Incidentally, please don’t think I’ve invoked Clio here to grandstand as a cultural elitist (though that might not be such a bad indictment given so much that passes for culture these days). Clio is here to accent the interaction that happens every day. I also hope no one is quick to complain about using a reference from pagan antiquity. I have little patience for isolationist sorts ready to quarantine against anything that will not pass pietistic muster. Before a rush to judgment, you ought to know what one of Lutheranism’s heroes did with the Greeks—but that will come in due time.

Like ancient Gaul, this presentation is divided into three parts: First comes a look at the intersection of Christianity and culture in a breezy historical sweep—not comprehensive but a sketch identifying some of the pivot points. You can doubtless fill in the gaps. Second is a look at history, or more precisely, at historiography—at some of the more recent trends and what they imply for understanding our past and where we are for the present. What emerges applies really to looking at life or culture in general, but Christianity is certainly part of that. In fact, it may be even more affected by recent trends than other elements in the mix making our past’s and present’s character, especially when it comes to the most recent fad trashing Clio’s mansion. Then finally come some conclusions—a judgment, warning, call to arms. But there is no place for sloganeering. Yes, it may be that the same basic critical principles still hold, and yes, divine revelation obviously still speaks and should be used. But please spare us if this means just throwing out a few passages and acting as if all is closed. There needs to be sharp, shrewd criticism with no place for tub-thumping with would-be critics tossing out the same old stuff, a one-size-fits-all blast, and then acting as if the issue is settled. We hope to do better. So now first to a broad overview.

Christ told his followers to be in the world but not of it. As part of God’s creation, they cannot flee the world but find themselves a part of daily life, part of the structures—family, the body politic, society—by which God sustains his work. Christians cannot avoid being in and part of culture. Post-Pentecost as Christians



*A statue of Clio, muse of history, by Albert Wolff (1876) in Berlin, Germany
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons).*

gave evidence of the hope that was in them, both verbalizing the faith and living lives marked by the Spirit, they naturally came in contact and conflict with the cultures of their day, the overarching Hellenic mindset and more specific subcultures. They grappled with how to make contact and communicate, how to translate faithfully law and gospel while being true to what they first received. They weighed and measured how much of culture—the language, thought patterns, and so on—they could integrate while maintaining the integrity of the message. Being culturally astute was important in finding an opening. Look sometime again at Paul’s encounter in Athens with the Epicureans, Stoics, and the Mars Hill intellectuals, an example of witnessing smart.¹ Paul knows the situation, engages his listeners, and makes his case, being faithful to the truth as he gets his licks in even as he knows Christ’s resurrection will likely be a stumbling block. He does his job and leaves the rest to the Spirit. No doubt that sort of encounter was multiplied countless times as Christians encountered culture and witnessed, and the early church grew.²

As Christians witnessed, culture mounted resistance. Sometimes Jews, in no mind to hear those who brought Jesus as the Messiah, resisted in their synagogues and larger communities. Others resented Christians for various reasons—their unwillingness to be open and accommodating to other beliefs, their high morality

that put others to shame, their threat to the social fabric by the equality of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female within the household of faith. That translated into more persecution, first locally and then, after the mid-third century, empire-wide. Needing to divert public attention from other problems and schemes, Decius and later Diocletian found Christians convenient targets. Eusebius reports the prisons were filled to overflowing. That says something about how Christians so obviously ran counter to pagan culture that they could be made scapegoats. Even before the empire-wide assault, some Christians had enough of a culture that seemed increasingly corrupt, and they fled to the desert even as the world appeared to be coming apart at the seams. Whether they lived alone, occasionally on top of pillars like Simon the Stylite to be symbolically away from the world, or whether they lived in communities devoted to holy living, some Christians felt compelled to flee the general culture and carve out their own. From those early expressions, monasticism spread geographically and grew over the centuries into quite an institution, one that, as we shall see, sent a mixed message. More in a moment.

Early Christians had to be wary and shrewd in dealing with the culture, being careful in constructive engagement while not being overwhelmed. Despite disadvantages, their progress was remarkable and their numbers grew, perhaps to as much as 10 percent of the population. But things changed dramatically with Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge and his rise to the top. His supposed vision and conversion and the AD 313 Edict of Milan suddenly brought Christians from the outside into a prime position, but not without difficulties. Even as Constantine seemed to sort through his own Christian identity with actions that sent mixed signals,³ the church struggled with problems of its own. Before they almost had a kind of advantage in being less than favored when it came to resisting cultural influence. Now while it would be too much to call Christianity chic, having such a prominent convert no doubt drew others. How sincere were these all? And even if the influx was genuine, how was Christianity to cope with the numbers and how would it maintain its integrity while interacting with a culture it now had an opportunity and even an obligation to influence? Add to the mix new blood coursing in especially toward the end of the century with the so-called barbarian invasions—Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Franks, Vandals, the more the merrier. The frontiers had never been closed tight, and for years smaller groups had crossed borders, raided, and returned. But as the century wore on and pressure from migrations still farther east built up, these outsiders first sought entrance into the empire and, when denied, fought their way in, defeating an emperor at Adrianople (AD 378) and then flooding across. The church faced a twofold challenge: convert and teach the faith to huge numbers of both pagans and Arians, and carry the burden of maintaining and conveying civilization's culture to the masses, especially as things unravel in the western part of the empire. The church (and bishop of Rome) come to fill the vacuum.

Throughout this all something else of utmost importance happened in the early

church, something without which, humanly speaking, all the rest could not have succeeded. In its infancy, Christianity was preserved and given the stuff it needed to succeed. Christianity's social, cultural influence depended on having a spiritual, intellectual foundation, something its early theologians gave it. It is impossible to underestimate the importance of the Greek and Latin church fathers whose writings are preserved in scores of volumes for scholars in the *Patrologia Graeca* and *Latina* and in translation for others. Simply put, the church fathers rethought the world in Christian terms. The Renaissance humanist giant Desiderius Erasmus once observed, "Christendom has had many martyrs but few scholars." With the church fathers, they at least had enough. The blood of the martyrs may be the seed of the church, but nothing grows without life-giving resources. The fathers provided that, taking the New Testament message on one hand, grabbing hold of problems, questions, and challenges on the other, and responding theologically to guide and feed faith and life. So, for example, the Alexandrians struggled (not always as others or we would finally like) with Platonism's threat to spiritualize and swallow the faith. Gnosticism's challenge with its claim of true wisdom along with a skewed Christology was met and thrown back by Irenaeus and Tertullian. How should Christ's place in the godhead (and by connection, his work) be understood? Athanasius rose in defense. The Cappadocians steered between Arianism and modalism, solidifying orthodox trinitarianism in the East. Augustine would prove influential on that in the west. Ignatius and Cyprian offered guidance on the doctrine of the church. And there are still others—Ambrose or Jerome, for instance—who could be named and noted for shaping the church and situating it in the world. One deserving additional mention in any discussion of Christianity and culture through history is St. Augustine and there especially his *City of God*. Refuting the charge that Christianity bore responsibility for the empire's collapse, Augustine gave a masterful assessment of life here even while waiting for the world to come. Overall the fathers proved invaluable as they worked not only with problems in detail but also gave Christianity a big-picture hold on life, a worldview necessary as Christ's new creation struggled to deal with and rise above the old.

The Middle Ages have been derided at times as a step backward when culture in general and even the church went into decline. That is sometimes said especially of the earlier centuries. Compared to other eras, one might get that impression, but a closer look forces reconsideration. Take, for example, Gregory the Great. Certainly one could note deficiencies in his training, criticize his perception of his office, and argue with some of his theological positions. On the other hand he seemed to sense that Christianity was turning a corner, leaving the fathers behind and heading into a new era, and he sought to provide for that by institutional leadership even while urging clergy to provide comfort and guidance with his writing on pastoral care.⁴

Rome's image (if not role) continued to grow, and an argument can be made that for the times it was useful if not necessary. Others had followed those first

invasions from the east and needed to be evangelized, a task that fell increasingly to the professionals, to the clergy, to monks who carried not only the Christian message but also cultural values off to new regions, putting the church and a certain degree of culture out on the frontier, at least preserving if not expanding civilization with their presence. Rather than bemoan the lack of general learning among the people and the crude ways, considering the nearly overwhelming challenge, the church should be commended for taking what it could from patristic-era culture and keeping its head above the deluge. The task was complicated by the pressure, both real and feared, exerted by Islam. Large areas across Africa saw the faith all but vanish and the Eastern Empire fought to hold its own even as its circle shrank. The controversy over icons there represented, at least in part, an effort to juggle Christian piety, Eastern culture, and Islamic pressure. And in the west after holding the line at Tours, the church still had to deal with the Islamic factor in Spain as cultures clashed and mixed.

By the ninth century an interesting reversal had occurred in the west. Once, the empire with its pagan culture threatened Christianity. Then after Constantine came an alliance of sorts for a time until the empire (at least in the west) collapsed and the burden fell more on the church. But with Charlemagne's Christmas Day coronation, the church sought to revive the empire, translating its location and using it to further its purposes. On the other hand, Charlemagne saw the advantage of Christianity as a unifying factor. The revival eventually would make for interesting drama as papacy and empire would struggle to exercise authority not only over church but culture. The Investiture Controversy played out at Canossa is only one of the more dramatic examples of the confrontation as it ebbed and flowed over centuries. We could just as soon point to Innocent III's efforts to break and remake rulers in France, England, and the Empire. Again, criticism is easy in hindsight. Excommunications, interdicts, rebellions egged on, invasions of Italy and ousters of popes can make for juicy scandal, but we can also see these in big-picture terms as efforts to feel the way through treacherous waters. (I often ask students in class, given what we know about the circumstances and what those figures may not have known, what reasonably they would have done differently. The point is not to whitewash or dismiss apparent mistakes with a wave of a hand but rather to develop some empathy that I hope will carry over to their own ministry.)

On another level, Christian theologians sought to show unity and complexity in a worldview with different approaches offered by scholasticism. Realism, moderate realism, nominalism, and variations within all had pros and cons when it came to interpreting nature and supernature, theology and daily life. Grand intellectual cathedrals were built, each offering an approach to understanding reality and truth. In a little twelfth-century revival, Aristotle got a fresh look. His logic seemed a workable method and his observations on life seemed (they thought) to dovetail with much in Christianity, bearing witness to God's truth. But it seems that incorporating that ancient Greek did more than help communicate Christian theology and organize a

worldview. It also influenced them. In a later time another theologian would bluntly argue that “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.”⁵ With apologies to fans of medieval scholasticism, the critic, one Martin Luther, knows what he is doing. Soon after, he wrote “I believe simply that it is impossible to reform the church if the canons, the decretals, the scholastic theology, the philosophy, logic as they now are, are not uprooted and another study installed.”⁶ Luther knew the hermeneutical impact that cultural mix had on theology.

But again, despite serious objections and criticisms of its component parts, overall the Middle Ages can be viewed as an era of long-range mission activity. It was also a time when Christianity and culture become strongly intertwined, done well or poorly for better or worse. But by the end both its theology and culture in general seemed to be running on borrowed time.⁷

The Renaissance marked a rebirth of culture, an effort to recapture the spirit and outlook first especially of classical Rome and then of ancient Greece.⁸ Pioneering scholars such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Salutati, Bruni, and others sought to revive learning with renewed emphasis on grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy—five long-neglected elements of the liberal arts that form the core of Renaissance humanism, the *studia humanitatis*, the study of man and his nature.⁹ Petrarch rediscovered Cicero, among others, finding in him not only a more pleasing, elegant Latin in contrast to clumsier medieval fare but also an exhilarating spirit and outlook on learning and life. Longing for the classical past, it was Petrarch who labeled the medieval era the “Dark Ages,”¹⁰ and humanists spoke derisively about a thousand years without a bath. Humanists sought to recapture not only the mechanics but the feeling of the glory days, reviving not only the Latin language but the Latin past. More, they immersed themselves in Greek to tap that long-dormant source of learning once known only by faint reputation and in round-about, garbled translation—some of Aristotle come through Arabic by way of Islamic scholars Avicenna and Averroes on into Latin, recast along the way with some platonic overtones. Even Hebrew experienced renewed interest, although it understandably placed a distant third given all there was to recover in Greek and Latin. In reading the ancients, humanism could not help but revive those philosophies, though humanism per se focused on languages, history, and moral philosophy, that is, ethics. This educational, cultural revival certainly challenged old outlooks. Petrarch already felt a tension between the long-honored contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) and the active life (*vita activa*) championed by his newfound friend Cicero. But much greater fall-out came another way. After early generations broke new ground and perfected humanism’s core elements, there came a time when humanists sought to diversify and apply their skills in wider fields, including church and theology. Scholastics, who long dominated high culture and ruled the educational ranks, did

not like being challenged by upstart humanists who did not hesitate to flaunt their literary skills along with more accurate, superior understanding of the ancient philosophers including the scholastics' own hero,

Aristotle. That tension along

with the humanists' disdain for the scholastics' heavy emphasis on logic and dialectic as the sine qua non when it came to educational methodology made it difficult to break into regular faculty ranks at the universities where so much of culture was shaped.¹¹ In fact, humanism came to have a profound impact.

Historian/theologian Bernd Moeller has penned a memorable phrase: "no humanism, no reformation." We could just as easily put it this way: "no Renaissance education and no cultural revival, no Reformation," for that is what humanism was. Where and when Luther first became interested in this cultural revival is still debated.¹² What is clear is that Luther became a supporter of this cultural movement. He became better versed in the biblical languages once he became a Wittenberg professor and found useful material for his own lectures from the writings of humanists. Those tools helped him understand what Paul meant by "righteousness" and to grasp the importance of "the just shall live by faith." And as those tools helped him sort through his own theological problems, Luther pressed to bring more of humanist learning into the curriculum.¹³ "Reformation," as Luther first used the term, applied to educational curriculum reform sparked by this cultural revival. Twentieth-century humanism has gone secular, cutting God out of the picture. In the Renaissance, even before the Reformation, humanism centered on man but did so as the foremost creature of God, his special work from day six. The humanists sought to make the most of the image of God and the gifts bestowed in Genesis.¹⁴ But this revival of culture had eternally profound importance when applied to theology. That is why Luther was insistent as noted earlier: scholasticism with its logic had to go, supplanted by new methods.

The Reformation became the work of university men and educators—Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli, and the rest. They drew on Renaissance humanism and over time as the Reformation succeeded, they gave humanism a home in their ranks, embracing the New Learning and turning it loose on whatever they and the students touched. Bernd Moeller's dictum could well be reversed: no Reformation, no humanism. The Reformation's passion for educational excellence, for giving society the cultural best saw it use humanism across the board in languages, drama, history, natural sciences, and still in theology where elements fed into the late Reformation and the Age of Orthodoxy. Education was so important that Lutherans even compared

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The Reformation had a profound impact on culture. A thousand years after the early church first rethought the universe in Christian terms, the Reformation did it again. Luther and company dealt not only with the familiar inner circle of such theological essentials as anthropology, soteriology, sacraments, or ecclesiology, but they profoundly influenced the place of ordinary Christians in the world. The nature and place of good works was recast as was the concept of vocation—no more sacred/secular distinction with clerical callings touted while faithful work in secular callings—peasant farmer, merchant, craftsman—counted for nothing. No longer was the layman simply a Christian *viator* or pilgrim, simply concerned with surviving this life to gain the world to come. True service came not in fleeing tasks God would give for others self-prescribed and practiced behind cloister walls but by accepting vocations God assigns. And proper contempt for the fallen world lay not in flight into the monastery but by standing tall, rolling up one's sleeves, and saying, "I am not going anywhere; this world has been bought by Christ and his, and I am going to serve by living life as he intended it to be." As with the early church fathers, the impact of the Reformation on culture, on a worldview is immense.

The generations that followed sought to preserve what had been reformed. Unfortunately things turned sour. The late Reformation continued to stress education and shape culture through regenerate reason's exploration of life.¹⁶ And the Age of Orthodoxy also continued to explore, trying to display life's intricacies even while preserving the gems discovered by Luther's Reformation. But complex theology left some outside observers confused and wondering if things were not being cut too fine. The charge of dead orthodoxy is probably unfair, but then people often act not on fact but on perceptions right or wrong. Throw into the mix the horrible devastation of the Thirty Years War where confessional allegiances were trumpeted by the warring sides and we should not be surprised that a backlash came. Pietism urged more heart at the expense of the intellect. Deism ridiculed both traditional doctrinal theology and the worldview behind it. Dogma gave way to calls for virtue and ethics with God weighing the balance of moral accounts done by essentially good people. And all this happens no longer in an open world where God can and does intervene supernaturally, miraculously, but now we live in a closed universe. The Clockmaker has made the clock, and we are left to fine-tune. All the pieces are present, all the cards dealt. We now work at organizing the hand. Optimism, expectations of progress, and autonomy all mark this age of Enlightenment.¹⁷

The new era exudes confidence. For example, Francis Bacon explains how people can identify factors that shape our thinking, both human and cultural elements that will shape our expectations and perceptions of reality. Bacon calls them idols, in effect making them false gods before which we ought not to bow. Idols can be smashed and overcome. Even more significant is Descartes's approach to methodology as he lays out steps which, if followed, assure practitioners a firm grasp of reality, or whatever is

under scrutiny. Some descendants of the Reformation embraced Cartesian thought in an effort to hold together a grand synthesis of truth and learning, using Descartes as scholasticism had used Aristotle and greatly influencing their worldview. By the end of the Enlightenment, man had moved from being the object of scrutiny to being the subject. Immanuel Kant's theology illustrates that confident swing—not so much theology as moralistic philosophy of an Idealist with law dominating as the categorical imperative and the metaphysical relegated to theory, not the stuff eternities are staked on.

While the Enlightenment's effect stretched on into the nineteenth century, other approaches offering revamped Christianity gathered steam, notably Hegel, an Idealist on the move.¹⁸ Rejecting Kant's view of truth as defective since Kant stands still, so to speak, and looks from one vantage point, Hegel works with movement through dialectic, gaining an ever better, ever clearer understanding of absolute truth, what we have called God. History is in motion, carrying us ever onward and upward, drawn by reason. Theology no longer stands as queen of the sciences. Instead it is *aufgehoben*, that is, elevated and purified as philosophy. Traditional doctrine is discarded but Hegel insists that its essence remains. Some theologians, glad to be rid of embarrassing elements of pre-Enlightenment religion, embraced Hegel as a kind of Christian apologist. After all, his idealism positing absolute truth is a kind of faith statement. But if the Reformation's theology is the benchmark, Hegel is thin stuff, a philosophical hypothesis.

Some of Hegel's students thought he had not saved but destroyed religion. Ludwig Feuerbach challenged the existence of the absolute truth, locating God not outside and apart from man but within man, making God no more than a projection of man's ideal traits. As a kind of sweaty realist, Feuerbach ushers in a new materialism where we create God in our own image. Karl Marx agreed for a time and then complained that Feuerbach's individual man did not act alone but as part of a group. More, ideas did not spring forth *ex nihilo* but were born and nourished by socio-economic conditions that really drive life. Change the conditions and the idea born of the same will perish. In other words, economic justice will eliminate the need for God, created as an ideological justification for oppression and used by the weak-willed downtrodden to rationalize their cowardly lack of action as they failed to revolt. Both these left-wingers have radical worldviews. Heaven is shattered only to offer a more realistic, hopeful view (they would say) for this life. Christianity is hollow; the world belongs to the psychological or socio-economic materialists who will define culture's values and direction.

The most honest and frightening voice heading this way is Friedrich Nietzsche's. His honesty stems from his challenge to the conventional atheism. They denied God yet insisted on keeping all that rightfully flows from him, especially order, morality, truth. Even Arthur Schopenhauer's atheistic ethics, admittedly concocted for pragmatic purposes, cannot stand. Nietzsche declares that God is dead. We have

killed God, that is, we have come to the point in cultural history where we must admit that God, whom we once made to prop up the world, in fact does not exist. And with his death dies all that hinges on him. It takes a tremendous act of will and nerve to admit and do this. Culture that survives is also an act of will, imposing morality, preaching values not because they are inherently and independently true but because they keep the weak masses in control as the Overman exerts his will to climb to the top of the heap, at least till he is toppled or dies, passing into oblivion. Culture is still created, but it has no roots in reality and reflects no contact with objective truth which does not exist. So Nietzsche hates Christianity in theory for its mindless stupidity, even as he cynically rejoices in its practice since it keeps so many in check.

Nietzsche was too much for most who preferred to believe in something at the end of the nineteenth century. Kant was revived by Albrecht Ritschl's branch of protestant liberalism. Hegelians of both wings continued to assert truth's existence, be it in the absolute truth beyond or in anthropology within or socio-economic forces at work.

But the optimistic culture was shattered by World War I, a slaughter that should not have happened to civilized humanity. In the war's wake, some tried to regroup and carry on with the old schemes while others abandoned them and tried to revive some of the old approaches to God and truth with updated twists.¹⁹ The result was neo-orthodoxy. Still others sought meaning within themselves individually in variations of existentialism. And some began to cozy up to Nietzsche's legacy of nihilism, suggesting there was no bottom.

We call a halt at this point to the historical blitz, having suggested some broad trends through this sampling of how Christianity, culture, and worldviews have intersected. Christians have seen dramatic changes. In the beginning they were wary of culture as they reached out in witness even as the fathers rethought the world in Christian terms. Then after Constantine and with the empire's collapse they became the shapers, conveyers, and guardians of culture into the Middle Ages, trying to Christianize their world. The Reformation rethought the Christians' relationship to God and their place in this world, sacralizing what had been thought secular. Then beginning with the Enlightenment, things change. Christianity (in fact, every religion) is no longer treated as if it could be objectively true and ought to provide a larger conceptual framework for life. Religion is pushed from center stage to become merely a matter of personal preference. At best, a common natural law morality holds sway. Then the universe is declared closed and in varied approaches people are left to build the kingdom of God here and now. Along the way that kingdom is redefined, but the confidence in their construction skills remains, except for Nietzsche where all bets are off. (At least you see what fallen man is like.) With him and in the wake of the Great War an important change occurs. Till then, every worldview and every culture built and defended had reflected the belief that there is absolute truth to serve as a foundation. It may be located in an active and immanent God, in Deism's absentee owner who left instructions behind, or in Hegel's motion be it upward,

inward, or on the way to the bank. But now that absolute truth no longer is assumed.

At this point we pick up history: how it has been understood as a discipline and how it understood the world under study. History traditionally has focused on political and intellectual events. Politics, broadly understood, offered insight not only into government but into institutions that shaped society's structures and set the direction for people's lives. The intellectual side examined their theological beliefs and their cultural values. Things tended to be examined from the top down, not because the little people were thought to be devoid of politics and ideas but because other movers and shakers stood out by virtue of having made a difference and apparently had an effect on others—trickle down and ripple out. The Whig historian Thomas Macaulay argued that history is at bottom biography and the story of great men who lived here. (Today he would have expressly included women, implicit in his nineteenth-century prose.) Great figures were not made by press agents and spin doctors but were identified by looking at life's landscape and seeing who had risen to the top. So, for example, Luther is held to be more important than Andreas Neidecker. Why? Because Luther wrote volumes, was praised and condemned widely, and led a movement that affected millions then and generations since. Andreas Neidecker wrote one so-so treatise that seems a poor echo of Luther and which had no measurable effect. In fact, in the wake of this Roman Catholic's appeal for educational reform in his home town, the village instead swung to the Reformation. So which man deserves the historical limelight? Well-written traditional history has never spurned life's details in terms of the arts and economics, private and public life. It simply has tried to distill the information available to give a picture of how things were. Along the way, the better historians were aware of their biases and went out of their way to make sure they were not missing the forest for the trees or skewing things to suit some cause. They had their own values but worked to uncover those of their subject. They accumulated and distilled facts for the purpose of discovering some coherent flow or pattern. And they were open to revision when other evidence weighed in.

This standard approach served through the first decades of the twentieth century. Since then others have arisen and challenged. Social history tries to find a slice of common life apart from the big picture, working on a local level. So instead of a large comprehensive study we get a narrower case study without the tie to bigger institutions or ideas. So for example, we might get a look at life in one French village first described and then disrupted by the building of a pilgrimage shrine. Such a narrow focus dare not be declared typical or normative until more is known, but multiplying similar studies can help with the larger picture. Quantitative history seeks to add up numbers in categories to give a picture of the average. The trick is in interpreting the figures so as not to impose present values on the past.

Psychoanalytic history tries to put the long dead on the couch and understand the mind. Perhaps more familiar here in our circles is Erik Erikson's *Young Man*

Luther.²⁰ The provocative study drew criticism for simple errors such as misreading and hence misunderstanding Luther's texts. Erikson also gave credence to rumors circulated by Luther's enemies even after they were exposed as fiction, arguing they are consistent with the larger pattern of his behavior. But perhaps most serious is the Freudian presupposition that religion cannot be accepted as actually true but must be taken only as what one feels to be true while psychological development actually shapes ideas. So Luther may feel alienated from God, but that actually stemmed from problems with his own father (which, in fact, Erikson misunderstands and distorts).²¹

Marxist historiography has weighed in, dismissing the idea that individuals, not to mention Macaulay's great men, make history. Instead they insist that history is always made by groups, always driven only by socio-economic forces no matter what else seems to be the case, and inevitably leads toward the betterment of the social, common man. While those elements might on occasion prove true, the Marxists' insistence on these reduces history to ideology.²²

Yet one more innovation comes with the *Annales* school, developed first by French social historians who compiled data and description on everything conceivable to arrive at the *mentalité* of an age. Fernand Braudel introduced the approach with his massive effort *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*.²³ The mass of seeming trivia is given order by the Annalists' division of history into changes of structure and conjuncture. Structural shifts are slow and glacial, all but imperceptible to the average person, yet obvious in looking back over the centuries. Conjunctural change is dramatic and obvious to those affected. People think conjuncture is important—a depression, for example—but the significant changes occur in structure—a shift over centuries in the attitude toward money and wealth. But is the picture accurate? Braudel explains in detail the use of camels on some trade routes and dromedaries on others because different hoof structures were suited for different terrain. At the same time in volume one describing typical life, the number of times “church” is mentioned can be counted on one hand.²⁴ Not till the second volume does religion come up. Was church so unimportant in people's lives?

These variations of the new history all weigh in on Christianity and culture, treating religion, for example, as a group phenomenon, as psychology verbalized, from a statistical rather than dogmatic perspective, or as just another ingredient (perhaps only a dash of spice) in the corporate mindset. Please note: there are certainly things to be drawn from at least some of these approaches, but the newer perspectives are not content to supplement the old. Arguing (wrongly!) that the traditional approach never was interested in a wider view of life, they seek its ouster, scorning traditional political and intellectual interests.²⁵ That not only brings a radical shift in writing history but profoundly recasts our understanding of the past. And because the present is described in such radically different language, continuity is disrupted.²⁶

Yet to this point for the most part all approaches have agreed on one thing: there

is a truth to be known and independent reality can be described. They disagree on what that might be and some approach history with ideological baggage, but at least they theoretically have common ground. And if time permits and if patience holds out, they should be able to point out each other's flaws and arrive at common ground. Even the Marxists have softened their line and admitted that while religion may mean nothing now to them, past ages treated it seriously and thought it was true. The theoretical common ground exists because these approaches spring from modernist roots at the least. Since then, things have disintegrated as postmodernist history has stormed in. (We close out part two now even as we ease into part three, our encounter and reaction with the present situation.)

When did postmodernism arrive? Sociologists and chroniclers of culture can offer a judgment on that. Those scholars generally say the time is here, but their definition, scope, and time frame often vary, starting, for example, as early as World War I or much later with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps we need some historical breathing space before we try to date it for sure. Or we can invoke the dictum of the British historian Lord Acton: we ought to focus on problems not periods. Dating can become a quagmire, so let us assume it is here by now and get on to weightier issues. Now in the age, what kind of attitude are you going to take? Does living in an age make you a true postmodernist? And given your place in that age, what are you prepared to do about it? You can accept, capitulate, or sell out. Or you can grapple and seek to overcome.

We cannot control the age into which we are born and can do little about that in which we live. In that sense we can be postmodern without being culpable. And we also can take advantage of a situation even though it is not to our liking, rather like early Christians coped in a hostile culture. But be careful before you rejoice in the death of modernity and embrace the present with a smile. Anyone who seriously thinks of promoting the principles and apparent agenda of postmodernism might as well throw gas on the fire. Gertrude Himmelfarb, a shrewd, tough-minded apologist for traditional history, recounts some frightening episodes in her book *On Looking into the Abyss*. She tells of ill-prepared, confused, and unsuspecting students who are led to the edge of the postmodern post-Nietzschean worldview, look into the depths of the abyss, and are apathetic, blasé, or amused by what they see.²⁷ In fact they do not understand. Worse are educators who lead them there and come away smiling at the converts made, stooges created. If Nietzsche were alive today to see people laughing at this and even treating it like a parlor game, it would kill him. Postmodernism is not simply a time of confusion and competing voices. That has often happened as with rival claims of truth and reality. But arguments in other times—even in that modern age so quickly scorned by those hurrying to teeter on the edge of the abyss—centered on where truth lay and how reality should be understood. An objective bottom line lay somewhere. Getting there may be terribly hard, but there was a “there” there. In crusading postmodernism, objective truth is nowhere

to be found.²⁸ It is not that objective, absolute truth cannot be identified at the moment. Its existence is denied, and truth exists only for me as I make it. Carl Henry has written ominously that “no fact of contemporary western life is more evident than its growing distrust of final truth and its implacable questioning of any sure word.”²⁹ Those who affirm absolutes—Christians, for example—are behind the times. (If we hold out long enough, maybe we will move from being holdovers to harbingers of the next age, perhaps post-postmodernism.) In the absence of final truth and absolutes it also becomes impossible to argue that Christianity has made more of a contribution to cultural development than any other component. So postmodern relativists would insist, for example, that a historical sketch about Luther’s barber is as important as a study of Luther’s theology. Detail adds spice, but where is the sense of proportion, weighing a subject’s worth? This is the approach to history and culture that produces books, articles, and conference papers on the history of dirt or on cross-dressing in English society.

Should we delight that modernism has been toppled and replaced by permanent chaos? In an earlier age others resisted using classical skepticism to dynamite

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absolutes and clear ground for an alternative because such explosions could not be controlled. When the Renaissance revived classical philosophies, Luther, Johannes Brenz, and Melancthon all looked into that abyss, trembled at the sight, and did their best to deal it a deathblow. “All I know is that I know nothing,” said the skeptics, refusing to assert anything, even

calling doubt into doubt. To get on with life they could only pragmatically go with the flow of common conventional behavior and mouth society’s values, all the while doubting everything. At least they were honest about what doubt entailed and where skepticism led. As Himmelfarb noted, the same cannot automatically be said of postmodernists. A rare bird is Duke University’s Stanley Fish, an apostle of deconstructionism, a postmodernist approach to literary analysis. He admits the only absolute is the lack thereof and is honest about where that leads. Fish rejoices that the death of absolute truth “relieves me of the obligation to be right . . . and demands only that I be interesting.”³⁰ Fish, doing a lecture tour on the intent of the US Constitution’s first amendment, concludes that the amendment finally means what we want it to mean and free speech is only what we want to allow. The “we” is a community banded together to claim some privilege—perhaps as victims³¹—and to read some meaning into the text and impose it on others. Superior numbers mean influence, and text interpretation is a matter of power. Anything called truth has no

real roots but is the artificial creation of those who hold power, define meaning, and impose it as the acceptable orthodoxy. That is totalitarianism.

We object that words have been uncoupled from their larger reference point, making a power grab the only reasonable way to proceed. Proponents argue that they could not have emasculated words since there are no higher corresponding reference points. That sounds like a rehash of medieval nominalism's claim that reality exists only in individual particulars and that higher concepts or truths are only artificial constructs based on collected experience.³² If so, then we only know what we have experienced. No two people have identical experiences, so we can never be sure a communication bridge can be built between the two, making for chronic uncertainty about anything other than our own thoughts. Deconstructionists argue that we cannot read an author's mind and therefore cannot determine his intent. And just sticking with the text will not do either. It has no meaning until I decide and invest meaning from my own reading.

Now the eternal, spiritual value of Christianity can never be proven absolutely in this life. It remains a matter of faith in God's promises until proved true at Christ's second coming. But that is nothing new. What is new is the challenge to the meaning of language used by Christianity, the challenge just noted. Also new and perhaps even more frightening is assault on Christianity because it asserts transcendent values and therefore blocks the full development of one's own humanity. Accepting another's meaning enslaves me (Catechumens of the world unite!); infusing my own meaning into a text empowers and liberates me. A century ago Max Stirner declared that "as long as you believe in the truth, you do not believe in yourself, and you are a *servant*, a *religious* man."³³ Stirner is part of the left-wing revolutionary crowd culminating in Nietzsche with his assault on objective truth and his call for us to become our own creators, our own gods. Here's where the real battle is being waged at a time Os Guinness calls "the American Hour."³⁴

There have been a host of studies showing the development of this assault on objective truth and transcendent values. Some have traced the historical pedigree. Others have concentrated on the theater for the struggle, namely, the school system from early years through graduate education. And some do some of both.³⁵ In recounting the erosion and calling for a return to the idea of absolutes, the effect on Christianity is sometimes noted and generally can be inferred. One study, George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University*, details the clash of a Protestant worldview and values with science's regular, patterned methods, noting how religion lost out.³⁶ Yet another work especially valuable for exposing the outcome of postmodernism's assault on transcendent truth claims is Ed Veith's *Modern Fascism*.³⁷ The title shocks, but then this is serious business. Fascism conjures up images of Hitler and Mussolini, and since we won the war, we think fascism is consigned to the dustbin of history. The shooting has stopped, but the real problem remains and the ideological assault goes on. Fascism is totalitarian, an attempt to liquidate the Judeo-

Christian tradition and worldview buttressed by absolute truths, by transcendent moral laws referenced in God. In its place fascism substitutes a worldview rooted in human identity and driven by the power of the will. To maintain a religious cultural component, pre-Christian pagan and tribal ideas replace Christianity not because they are true per se, but because they in fact have no transcendent reality. Instead they serve to organize and channel human aspirations and energy even as they crowd out Christian values. Primitivism is verbalized but it really highlights the human will that created it and invested it with the values and meaning it pretends to have. In fascism, myths have no meaning until we put it there, just as deconstructive literary criticism words and symbols have no meaning until we put it there. Note the unholy alliance emerging: postmodernism—deconstructionism—fascism—totalitarianism. To be sure, the relationships are complex but real as Veith demonstrates in detail.

It is ironic: much of Eastern Europe has weathered politically imposed totalitarian darkness and is now coming into the light even as we seem intent on rushing into a culturally enforced night. Now in the light, the newly liberated are reaffirming the existence of a transcendent, objective reality that exists and moves people. Vaclav Havel [then] president of the Czech Republic, told the US Congress, “Consciousness precedes being.” Congress did not get the point (surprise!) until he added a line: “Consciousness precedes being and not the other way around as Marxists claim.”³⁸ Saying Marxism was in error drew applause, but just what was its mistake? More important, what was Havel’s point? Simply and profoundly this: there is a larger, transcendent reality that shapes our identity, our being; we don’t shape it. Totalitarianism, on the other hand, creates its own artificial truth by an act of will, by an exercise of power. The tragedy is that in so much of postmodern America we insist on embracing what Havel and others are thrilled to escape. Havel and others knew all this, but for decades the political state was able to impose control. In our circles, although the government is visible, it could not hope to exercise that same sort of immediate repression. That will come by the back door. Instead, cultural institutions—schools, for example—are where our outlook and understanding of reality are shaped. Control them and you define the worldview, and political expression will then follow.³⁹ Put more concretely, in the classroom (a cultural institution) teach an understanding of the “ideal family” not as “Father Knows Best” but as “Heather Has Two Mommies,” and you create a new reality that will then muster political support to insure its legitimacy, and so declare it to be true. Can the same happen to churches (also a cultural institution)? Can public pressure cause churches to alter their message, thereby altering the understanding of reality taught to its members who then act on that new reality and bring political change to insure its continued existence, making it a new cultural orthodoxy? We would like to say no, but in all honesty, are changes in churches driven by new insights learned from an objective truth, from transcendent reality, or are insights discovered under social pressure? It not easy to resist with postmodernism at every turn drumming home the

message that overarching absolutes do not exist, that all are entitled to their versions of reality. And since texts only mean what we want them to mean, we cannot claim they teach an objective truth. Rather we must admit they merely reflect our prejudices and preferences that we want to maintain. As pressure mounts, we will have to let go and rewrite our myths and rework our past.

As committed postmodernists comment on the present and look back on the past to rewrite history, there is an arrogance permeating their hectoring. Traditional history is dismissed as the propaganda of the victors, which means that traditional historians must fundamentally be dishonest people not interested in the truth and implies that postmodern historians must be right and honest for having exposed this scandal. In fact the propaganda charge is simplistic, made not in all honesty but in a calculated effort to intimidate and take the offensive, a power move to control the agenda. Honesty has actually been on the side of the traditionalists who will admit that we sometimes look through a glass darkly when we are hampered by inadequate sources, struggle to learn how to interpret them, and work to remain aware of our own personal shortcomings. An impatient age does not want to hear the historian say, "We are not really sure yet. The jury is still out." But when the warts are shown and judgment is reserved in all honesty, postmodernism is quick to label that an admission that there is no way to arrive at truth, even if there were one to be known. On the other hand, what does postmodern history have to offer in reply? Since it deals in power plays itself within the academy, it understandably finds a lot of power moves in the past, reading that out of history. Note that phrase: *out* of history. Traditionalists try to understand the past as much as possible on its own terms—an empathetic effort. Postmodernists deny the possibility, leaving only themselves on which to focus. At least we have to grant they are creative, conjuring up all sorts of things out of the evidence, some even seem to be *ex nihilo*. Is there an organizing principle? Yes, their own political agendas, sometimes pursued politely, other times not.⁴⁰ Himmelfarb writes, "If postmodernism appeals to the creative imagination of the historian, it also appeals to the political imagination."⁴¹ But traditional historians know better than to let their imagination run away. Long before postmodernism arose, Macaulay said that dramatists create while historians only dispose.

So after all this, where are we? The jury is still out. But at least some conclusions can be drawn, both negative and positive. First, there is cause for concern. Traditional historians also are no fools. They can count noses in their classes and also down the hall at the feet of the feminist/Marxist. They can read the jobs advertised in the *Chronicles of Higher Education* and the *Perspectives* from the American Historical Association. They can read the retirement announcements and watch the replacements. In all honesty, the trend is not good. Not wanting to name names or institutions and unnecessarily make enemies, suffice to say that when it comes to my field of Renaissance and Reformation, as it is called in universities, if a person wants to take a traditional approach, even concentrate on theology as the

major development, pickings are getting slimmer all the time. And with a younger generation being steered in other directions, things are likely to get worse before someone stumbles on the Reformers, is captivated by their thought in its own right, and we will get a renaissance in Reformation studies. It would be nice if seminaries could lead the way back, but as long as theology is taken traditionally and seriously and postmodernism still opposes that approach to truth, seminary scholars will have trouble being taken seriously by the truly skeptical. Of course that should not dissuade them from producing nonetheless for a day when the historiographical resurrection comes. The effort is worth it in and of itself, and there is no historicist law that says things cannot change, cannot return to what is dismissed for a time or consigned to the dust pile of history. (After all, this is the age of recycling!)

Beyond the profession, what the wider Christian public ought to find disturbing is the effect the university's culture and attitudes about religion are going to have on the larger public culture. Christianity may be driven even more to the margin if it insists on being traditional or it may find itself buckling under the pressure to post modernize, in which case it will be more welcome though it will not be itself anymore. What can be done about the threat of cultural hegemony? Realists and pragmatists will be tempted to fight fire with fire, or meet power with power, playing the postmodernism game.

In theology we learn to see things from the perspective of sin and grace, in terms of law and gospel.

That could get ugly, and those suggesting that route ought to count the cost before starting something they might not be able to finish. And what kind of larger witness does that give? Of course there is no reason to invite others

to take advantage of Christians and push them aside. To be sure, God will get done what he wants and will preserve his word and church, but he uses the members of Christ's body to get things done, so we want to use talents and opportunities wisely to stay in the culture-shaping game.

On the positive side of things, we still have talented committed people willing to wade in and put forth their best effort in giving evidence of the hope that is in them on a personal level and on big picture terms as history bears witness to God's working in his world and church. Luther once remarked, "Histories are nothing else than indications, memorials, and tokens of divine works and judgments, telling us how God preserves, rules, checks, furthers, punishes and honors the world in general and especially people as each one deserves evil or good." So taking a Christian look at history, especially at the church, serves as a witness to others and reinforcement for Christians, as Luther observed: "The remembrance of past events supplies faith with comfort and nourishment." So if we are serious about the Spirit working in the word, about law and gospel carrying divine weight, then as history is used in such ways,

we know on another level with eyes of faith that numbers and being a minority do not ultimately matter. That's a theological approach, something we have to cultivate, because theology is an art, it is *sapientia*—wisdom. We learn to look at life and live not from our perspective—that's philosophy—but from God's perspective—that's theology. In theology we learn to see things from the perspective of sin and grace, in terms of law and gospel.

Finally, postmodernism now rules the roost and seems to be expanding its historiographical circle. The uncommitted learn to hold their tongues and may even be mildly convinced that there are no absolutes after all, that all deserve an equal hearing and are equally important (unless, of course you believe in absolutes), and that we cannot talk about greater or lesser contributions, just different ones. But humanly speaking we have one last thing going for us. We have their number, we know what is going on, and where the postmodernist agenda leads. The empire may be growing for the moment, but we know that the emperor has no clothes, that he is a false pretender to the throne of legitimate history and would not even make a good court jester because it was the fool's job to tell the truth. Drawing from his culture, Harvard historian Crane Brinton adapted a biblical allusion to turn a phrase when he wrote, "Clio has many mansions."⁴² (There is the last piece of the title. See, like good historians you need to be patient.) Postmodernism not only wants one of the mansions, it wants others elsewhere evicted. Wise people may rather want to bar the door.

As Christians look at culture and at history, they would do well to echo Luther's observation on how to approach theology: "Wenn es zur Theologie kommt, eine gewisse Bescheidenheit gehört dazu." That is, when it comes to theology (or history, we might add) a certain humility is called for. Luther advised that in the last lines he penned, a comment that saw value in history as teacher. And culture comes in for praise as well. At the start I said I hoped that no one would balk at using Clio from the Greeks, and I promised an example of a prominent churchman doing the same. Here it comes as Luther sifts wisdom from pagan culture and takes a Christian view. He even calls the Bible the divine Aeneid tracing not the seven-year wandering of the Trojan hero after the war but the longer, more certain journey of God's people from the start of time through history toward their final home.⁴³ Here is Luther's advice on living life well and in faith:

No one who has not been a shepherd or a peasant for five years can understand Vergil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics*. I hold that no one can understand Cicero in his letters unless he has been involved in efforts to govern the state for twenty years. And let no one who has not guided congregations with the prophets for a hundred years believe he has tasted Holy Scripture thoroughly. Because of this the miracle is tremendous in John the Baptist, in Christ, and in the apostles. Lay not your hand on this divine Aeneid, but bow before it and adore its every trace. We are beggars. This is true!

Endnotes

- 1 In the Acts 17 episode Paul may well have deliberately maneuvered to get the hearing before the Areopagus. First going to the market and engaging the philosophers, he was sure to get a crowd and draw attention to his unique message. And because he was effective there, that got him invited to appear before the intellectuals whose duty was to scrutinize religious ideas being introduced and taught to the Athens community. Paul seems to have maximized his opportunity—not the only time he did so as his use of Roman citizenship also shows, gaining him freedom at times and finally a hearing before government officials all the way to Rome.
- 2 General surveys and specific area studies abound, but the following offer a basic beginning for understanding the early church: Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967); Chadwick, *The History and Theology of the Early Church* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1982); W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1966).
- 3 For example, on one hand Constantine retained the title Pontifex Maximus and continued to exercise the High Priest rituals expected of the emperor doing his civic duty in honoring and sacrificing for other religions. He also delayed his baptism—not unheard of but also not the strongest signal of commitment. On the other hand, he could have simply legalized Christianity without becoming one. Galerius on his deathbed had simply eased the persecution so Constantine’s edict would already have been a positive development and probably would have won him Christians’ support. Becoming one himself might actually have brought more scorn from non-believers. And he was concerned enough about the unity of the church’s confession to be involved at Arles and Nicaea. On balance, he seems to have had more to lose than gain by becoming a believer, suggesting that while hesitant or confused, Constantine still was serious about his faith.
- 4 As with the early centuries, overview of medieval intellectual and cultural history abound. Several of the basic titles include the classic Henry Osborne Taylor, *The Medieval Mind*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1925), although Taylor neglects Moslem culture as well as art and music; R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London: Arrow Books, 1953); Frederick B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages: An Historical Survey, A.D. 200–1500*, 3rd rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and on the Aristotelian revival fueling scholasticism, Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927).
- 5 Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883), 1: 221–28. [Weimar Ausgabe volumes hereafter cited as WA.] *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31: 9–16, theses 43–44, 50.
- 6 WA-Briefwechsel, 1: 74 (to Jodokus Trutfetter on 5/9/1518).
- 7 Skepticism, resignation, pessimism all plagued late medieval thought. A classic study, unfortunately not in translation, is Rudolf Stadelmann, *Vom Geist des ausgehenden Mittelalters* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1929; facsimile reprint Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987). Another standard is Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1954).
- 8 Worth reading for as an introduction to scores of volumes on the Renaissance and Reformation are two volumes in William Langer’s Rise of Modern Europe series: Myron P. Gilmore, *The World of Humanism, 1453–1517* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952); Lewis W. Spitz, *The Protestant Reformation, 1517–1559* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). Also useful on the cultural revival: Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1929); Ernst Cassirer, et al., eds., *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963). Eckhardt Bernstein, *German Humanism* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983).
- 9 Paul Oskar Kristeller has made famous this five part scheme. See, for example, his *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).
- 10 Theodor E. Mommsen, “Petrarch’s Conception of the Dark Ages,” *Speculum* 17 (1942): 226–242.
- 11 Charles G. Nauert, Jr. “The Clash of Humanists and Scholastics: An Approach to Pre-Reformation Controversies,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 4/1 (1973): 1–18.
- 12 Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985),
- 13 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, is the old standard tracing the overall introduction of humanism to

- the university. See also Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg, 1485–1517* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975). Luther's role in promoting humanism can be traced in Walter Friedensburg, ed., *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen und des Freistaates Anhalt, new series, vol. 3 (Magdeburg: Holtermann, 1926). Friedensburg, *Geschichte der Universität Wittenberg* (Halle: Martin-Luther-Universität, 1917). The change at Wittenberg and its wider impact is the subject of Robert Rosin, "The Reformation, Humanism, and Education: The Wittenberg Model for Reform," *Concordia Journal* 16 (1990): 301–318.
- 14 Emphasizing this overarching interest in man as the foremost creature seeking to reach full potential, Charles Trinkaus used Genesis 1:26 in the title of his study of Italian humanists' efforts to support theology with their skills: Trinkaus, *"In Our Image and Likeness": Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
 - 15 Nicholas Selnecker, himself a product of the New School in Nürnberg whose curriculum Melancthon helped design, gave address in connection with the opening of the *Paedagogium illustre* at Gandersheim, the forerunner of the university at Helmstedt, linking the new institution with the garden of Eden. Nicholas Selnecker, *Oratio de praecipuis Ecclesiae doctoribus in Paedagogii illustris Gandershemii. Inauguratio, constitutio, classes, leges. Oratio D. Nicolai Selneckeri, de praecipuis Ecclesiae Doctoribus. Oratio M. Adami Byssandri Rectoris, de Scholarum dignitate. Oratio M. Esariae preiseri Professoris, de studio Graecae linguae* (Wolfenbüttel, 1571). Eden was also invoked at the opening of Breslau's new gymnasium, the Elizabethanum. For the occasion one piece done by a former Breslau educator was reprinted, comparing Eden to a school. A second inaugural oration reversed the image, describing the Elizabethanum as a revival of God's perfect garden. The two orations are Johannes Scholtz, *Oratio de allegorica comparatione paradysi et scholarum*, and Peter Kirstein, *Oratio de origine, successione, propagatione et perfectione scholarum & de harum incrementi & decrementi causis*, both pieces printed in *Orationes duae introductoriae in gymnasio Wratislaviensium* (Breslau: Georgius Bawman, 1610). An analysis of the paired essays is in Robert Rosin, "Replanting Eden: The Elizabethanum as God's Garden." in *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe*, ed. Manfred P. Fleischer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 109–137.
 - 16 A collection of essays sampling the wide-ranging cultural interests and influences of the late Reformation is Manfred P. Fleischer, *The Harvest of Humanism in Central Europe* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991).
 - 17 Staying with the old and the traditional surveys taking a grand sweep through thought and culture, suggestions for further reading include the following: John H. Randall, Jr. *The Making of the Modern Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940); J. Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition: From Leonardo to Hegel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, vol. 1: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966); Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680–1715* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), argues that the essential change making the modern Enlightenment world was compressed in these decades. Another provocative book, criticized for shortening the time frame even more, is Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815–1830* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
 - 18 Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).
 - 19 A broad worldwide sweep is Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
 - 20 Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1958).
 - 21 The varied criticisms are collected in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
 - 22 Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of Eastern Europe, another old-style constant —working with Marx and Engels' interpretations and making adjustments without repudiating them— has gone by the board. Even before the political changes, other modifications had crept in. For example, older studies routinely asserted the existence of classes throughout history as Engels did for the Reformation era peasants' war, while later historians reserved that concept for the modern world where such an identity can be

- legitimately defined and defended.
- 23 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Sian Reynolds (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Imprisoned during World War II and deprived of his notes, Braudel nevertheless began writing his work, doing an early version that was checked and published after the war.
 - 24 That “church” is used twice is based on memory from graduate school reading. It may appear a time or two more, but at this point I have no desire to take part in a recount.
 - 25 An example of the traditional approach that takes a wide sweep and also happens to deal with the development of culture is Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992). Following several years after his earlier work, *The Discoverers*, Boorstin offers an 800+ page essay ranging from ideas on the genesis of the larger creation to the human contribution in such areas as images, literature, arts and skill crafts, cities and civilizations, views of time and space, and self-assessments of the complexities within each individual—interesting reading as Boorstin weaves together significant themes even as he sometimes gets caught up in the odd or quirky—for example, that Goethe introduced his city of Weimar to ice skating. To his credit, Boorstin keeps a sense of proportion and direction through this all.
 - 26 Perceptive analysis of these approaches and more is offered from a competent traditionalist: Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).
 - 27 Richard Conniff in an *Atlantic Monthly* piece called “Healthy Terror” suggested that we need a revival of awe and wonder when it comes to approaching our world. Conniff, “Healthy Terror,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 273 (March 1994): 18–20. Conniff recounts how the third-century Roman writer Gaius Julius Solinus in his *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (*Collection of Remarkable Things*) both delighted and shocked his readers with stories of Ethiopian ants the size of mastiffs, winged serpents in Egypt, from India the mantichore (a man-eating lion with a scorpion’s tail and a human face), dog-headed people, and more. Now those things do not exist. (We have Jurassic Park instead!) Conniff is not calling for a return to fable but for science to be more honest. In moving from fantastic tales, science has become positively cool and calculating, acting as if all is under control and insisting that laypeople perplexed at mystery simply relax and let them handle things. Instead what we all need, Conniff argues, is “a modicum of healthy terror.” So the technocrats “who nowadays dominate our view of nature make a mistake . . . when they extrapolate from their own quite proper avoidance of emotion about nature, their clinical dryness, their disdain for the anthropomorphic, and expect the rest of us to behave accordingly. They present us with the natural world as laboratory, or as intensive-care unit, or, in their more daring moments, as secular cathedral, and the public, with polite respect, gradually nods out” (p. 20). Now Conniff is really just calling for science to be more human, to get a life. But we might go him one better and ask science to share the floor, at least for a start, with religion. It must just become evident that science does not know everything and theology really has something to say.
 - 28 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Timely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993).
 - 29 Carl Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1: *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco: Word Books, 1976), 1.
 - 30 Quoted in Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, 8.
 - 31 This phenomenon is exposed by Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).
 - 32 Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). Weaver’s book is a study that “tries to analyze many features of modern disintegration by referring them to a first cause. This was a change that overtook the dominant philosophical thinking of the West in the fourteenth century, when the reality of transcendentals was first seriously challenged” (p. v).
 - 33 Max Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, ed. John Carroll (New York: Harper, 1971), 271. Note also the low opinion of religious people: they concede power to others, fail to fulfill their own potential, and hate themselves. A 1973 translation bears the apt subtitle *The Case of the Individual against Authority*.
 - 34 Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

- 35 William Bennett, *The De-Valuing of America: The Fight for Our Culture and Our Children* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), deals with the decline from the elementary level up, arguing also for a return to a more classical approach which emphasizes values and virtues that transcend individual cultures. Thomas Sowell, *Inside American Education: The Decline, the Deception, the Dogmas* (New York: The Free Press, 1993). Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), lays the blame on Hegel who leads in turn to Nietzsche. Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1990), traces the degeneration of the larger worldview and values into fiefdoms, pressed by publish or perish and need to carve out one's new turf and make one's reputation. Smith argues for a return to teaching a synthetic view of the liberal arts. Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), follows the loss of common direction and understanding at the university and the fragmenting into the multiversity to the wholesale adoption of Descartes' method which bred an arrogant self-confidence that all in a discipline could be understood but which also necessitated narrowing the field of vision to get a manageable subject. The result is a fracturing of the university so that people cannot communicate within departments, not to mention across disciplines. The fragmenting brings a loss of value, balance, and proportion—all marks of postmodernism. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), argues that while science in the modern age has largely argued that morals are a product of our natural development rather than a reflection of some larger standard, the values routinely held through the early modern age do not necessarily conflict with more modern-world views and may actually reflect larger, transcendent reality.
- 36 George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Marsden highlights the tug of war that went on for the soul of the university even as it sought to educate minds: the huge struggle between a religious heritage claiming the right to weigh into the scholarly arena with higher metaphysical values and the sciences (both natural and social) living in the wake of Newton and insisting on hearing arguments drawn only from regular demonstrable rules rooted in the natural, physical world. In the long run, science won, and so much in the academy rests on the assumption that all in life is regular and comprehensible, given enough time to put the pieces together.
- 37 Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview*, Concordia Scholarship Today (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993).
- 38 Quoted in Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, 50.
- 39 This relationship is analyzed in detail in Samuel Francis, "Wining the Culture War: The American Cause," *Chronicles* 17, no. 12 (December 1993):12–15.
- 40 For example, the New Historicism promoted by Stephen Greenblatt of Berkeley is driven by the principle that cultural developments and products are the fragrance or bloom stemming from the real root of material production. Apparently unrelated anecdotes and facts are said to be linked if some supposed bridge can just be asserted. So, to concoct an example (mine, not Greenblatt's, and as a non-believer I am not very good at this), if a country were to change the color of its currency—say, a different shade of blue—but had not yet made public the new design, and if a parish were to change the color of its pew cushions to nearly that shade, and if the parish priest happened to be the second-cousin of the treasury secretary's wife, we could declare that the parish's decision was really an effort to portray itself as a voice near the center of power in government and so improve its financial position by gaining parishioners who want to be part of what seems to be a "society parish." On this species of postmodernism, see Paul A. Cantor, "Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist Vision," *Academic Questions* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 21–36.
- 41 Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss*, 148.
- 42 Quoted in Lewis W. Spitz, "The Historian and the Ancient of Days," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 160.
- 43 WA-Briefwechsel 5: 5677.

Luther Discovers the Gospel Coming to the Truth and Confessing the Truth

Robert Rosin

I am a peasant's son, and my great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were peasants. . . . That I earned a bachelor's and master's but then took off the brown hat and gave it to others, that I became a monk, which brought me shame and greatly irked my father, that the pope and I clashed, that I married an apostate nun—who would have read this in the stars? Who would have foretold it?¹

Who indeed? That was Luther (not me!). Someone once asked Luther about the value of astrology. Philipp Melanchthon, his co-worker, had an interest in such things. Natural magic, people called it in that day—not trying to manipulate nature but simply to read it. And many, like Melanchthon, meant well. After all, if God created the heavens and the earth and still held all things in his hand, then maybe he was trying to tell us something through the signs in nature, a little something about what might happen in daily life through a kind of natural revelation.

But Luther would have none of it. Of course, no sparrow falls from heaven without God's knowing and allowing, but sorting through all that swirls around us is far too complicated. Besides, Luther thought, what's the point of trying to decode nature when all that really is necessary for our knowing has been revealed to us by God in his word. So when asked about whether the heavens told us the future, Luther pointed to his own life story: a peasant's son from peasant stock, he went to the university and got a bachelor's and master's degree but then abandoned law school—"took off the brown hat" of the student's uniform—and entered the Augustinian cloister to become a monk, much to his father's dismay and disgust. But he was hardly finished. Luther put it so casually: "the pope and I clashed." Clashed?—

Editor's note

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that's hardly the word for it. This was nothing short of a revolution, sparked by the confession of a monk who had never expected any of this back then, never in a million years. Oh yes, along the way he also married a runaway nun, as Luther put it—you can almost hear him laughing by now. Who would have read this in the stars? Who indeed?

But that's why history is so much fun. It is so full of surprises, of twists and turns we never could imagine. Sure, we plan, but as the German proverb puts it, "Der Mensch denkt, aber Gott lenkt." That is, to make it rhyme, "Man proposes, but God disposes." Not "dispose" as if to throw away (though we could just as well throw away all those great plans *we* make when *we* think we are in control). No, we can plan all we want, but God has his own plans in mind. Read Ecclesiastes if you don't believe it. Luther certainly knew the message: the race is not always won by the swift; the battle is not always won by the strong; sometimes ordinary monks win and popes and emperors lose—that's not in Ecclesiastes, but it might as well be—so fear God (that is, believe) and keep his commandments (that is, take up what he sets before you in life, in the vocations or callings God gives). Yes, Luther learned that and much more. And he spoke of what he learned and believed. He confessed.

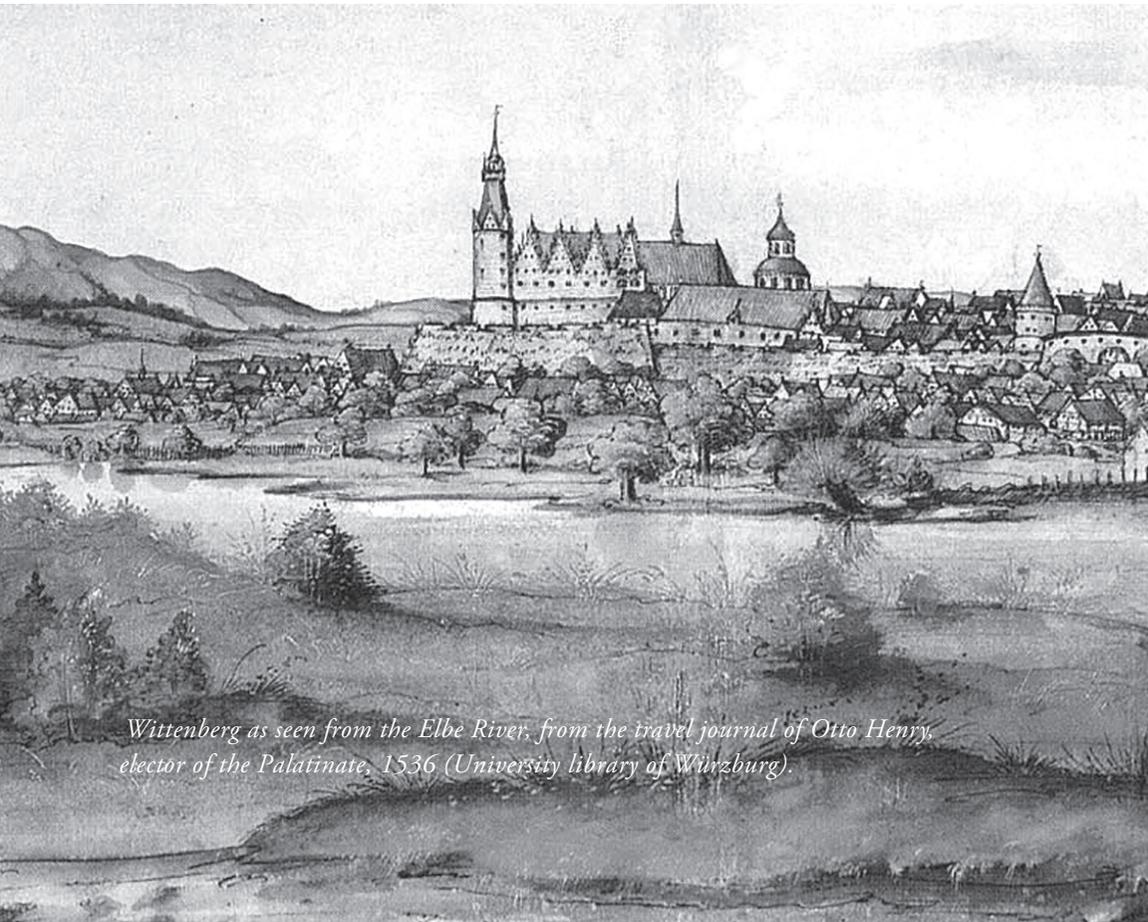
It is amazing what God does, how he raises up what Luther would call "outsized men" in history—"heroes," but not necessarily the sort of great figures we can see coming, that is, people with a long pedigree that we expect to do great things. We expect the son of a king, generally speaking, to do kingly things himself someday. And God uses such people. But he also uses the obscure, those we would never expect to rise up and stand out—the son of a peasant like Luther. How many monks were there in that day? Yet one of those became—quite contrary to his own plan—a fellow who turned the church on its head (not to mention the empire in which he lived). That's Luther: an obscure Augustinian friar, an ordinary university professor at a new institution still fighting for its existence trying to gain a measure of respect. Even more, here is a truly tortured soul whose own spiritual trials and tribulations drove him to distraction, though at the same time he was truly an "everyman," that is, like so many others who would be satisfied with the smallest crumbs of comfort that might fall from the God Almighty's table.

Luther was doing it all as the church had taught him, as it had told him things worked spiritually—and he confessed that sort of message, but it brought no comfort. (More on that in a moment.) Then, amid his own struggles there came a beam of light, light from the word. It took some time to sort things through. But as he did, the light grew until Luther was awash in the sunlight of God's grace, a blinding, joyous light for Luther. He learned to look and find God where God looked least like himself—hanging on the cross, in water in the baptismal font off in the corner of a church, in a piece of bread and swallow of wine that, in their own right, would never make a meal, yet as a gift—not our repeated, re-enacted sacrifice—these were more than enough to fill his soul. Luther learned to look for and find God in the

contraries of life, to cling not to the logic of how he ought to get to heaven but in the illogical yet sure word that was promise, gospel. It was a message of grace that he came to confess. But how did he get there? The apostle Paul had his Damascus road awakening (though actually he learned only a little there; it really largely shook him up and then he would later learn much, taught, as Paul said, by Christ himself). So what about Luther? We'll get there in a bit, but first some groundwork.

The term “confess” in our understanding is to speak forth about the Word (Christ) as well as the word as a larger message (gospel), that we trace back to the word (the Scriptures, the revelation of God through his prophets and apostles/evangelists). “To confess” is first a personal action, an expression of what I (or you or Luther as an individual) believe, and one’s heart is truly in it. But there is also the matter of the individual’s intellectual commitment, not that faith or confessing is the equivalent of an intellectual exercise—we remember our dogmatics: we still have faith when sleeping, not to mention babies and other cases we can think of—but we know that God has given us our reason and all our senses and we do indeed think about and reflect what we believe. So we confess individually.

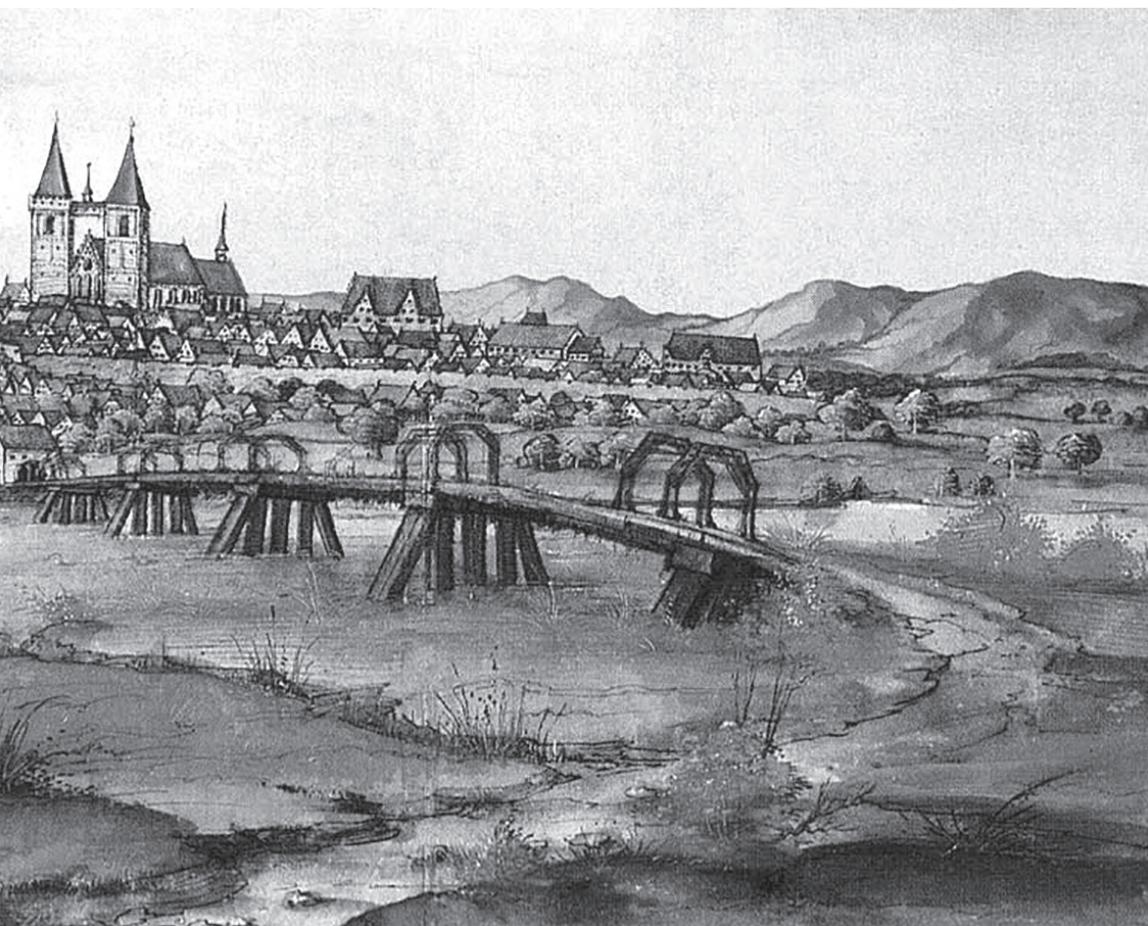
But “confess” is also a corporate/collective matter—what the church believes. This is not the church creating dogma from the bottom up, not Schleiermacher in



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

the nineteenth century creating doctrine, beliefs generated/defined by the community as it feels best. No, it is rather a matter of individuals who confess finding others who confess the same thing, read the same thing, understand and believe the same thing from the Scriptures, and then those who find themselves with this in common stand together and confess as a group, as a community, as the church. So there is one individual and then another and then another and then another—adding up to *our* confessing, not because we all are so brilliant as to think of such things or create such things, but the Holy Spirit has put faith in our hearts one at a time, and I reflect this, and you reflect this, and *we* reflect this. That's how the Spirit works through the word. That is ultimately what Luther's discovery of the gospel, what Luther's confessing, what the Reformation is about.

We look at what God has done, of course—but there is a little more to add (two words) that really makes a lot more: what God has done *for me*. Personal pronouns are crucial—letters written in gold, said Luther. There is a book by Carl Michalson called *The Hinge of History* that makes an important point of how to look at the Christian faith. (As the book moves on, I'm not so keen on what happens and where Michalson ends up, but the starting framework is worth noting.) Michalson says Christianity is like a hinge on a door: two parts that are both essential with a pin that



holds them together. The two parts come together in Christ (who runs down through the middle). We see the two parts explicitly in the Second Article of the Nicene Creed. The one half is the historical facts: came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. These are bizarre, one-of-a-kind, one-time facts or events, but events to be sure.

Christianity certainly needs these facts. After all, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “if Christ is not raised, our faith is in vain.” So we need the events. But, as that Corinthian Bible verse says, the events do not stand alone. There is also faith. The second half of the hinge are the promises of God, promises not floating off in the blue but tied to events. So the event of the resurrection is accompanied by the promise: this resurrection is for you. It could, theoretically, have been just Christ’s resurrection, a vindication of his life while we are left to find our own way. But God did not do that. He promises that this raising is also ours. Events + Promises = Christianity. This is so fundamental we may miss the point, but it is always there: for you, for us. This is Christ’s body/blood given/shed *for you*. . . . Baptism opens the kingdom of heaven *for you*, etc.

I was reminded of this point—the emphasis on the pronouns—when I was in Cambridge for the funeral of Deomar Roos. Professor Roos had taught in Brazil, and then had been at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as a guest professor for almost two years before going to Westfield House. For some years he had suffered with cancer that would rear up and then be controlled again—but now it quickly got the better of him and he died. At his funeral, Reg Quirk told of visiting Deomar in the hospice where they read out of Isaiah, one of Deomar’s favorite books. Isaiah 43:1 was marked. Deomar wanted it for his funeral sermon text and on his tombstone in Hebrew, Portuguese, and English—but it had to be a better translation, he said, than the English he had at hand. The verse read, “I have called you by name,” but that was not good enough, Deomar insisted. The sense, the meaning of the text was stronger: “I have called you by *your* name.” As Reg reported, Deomar said the gospel is in the personal pronoun. God wanted him, even as he wants us all. It is important for us to make a point of this: events and promises that are my promises, our promises.

When we confess, we talk about God, we give voice to “theology,” which simply means a talking about God. This talking about God is something a believer rightly approaches with some caution and does carefully. “Theology” is an attempt by believers to say, to reflect what God has revealed about himself, to restate what God first says to us. We seek to put in other words, honestly and faithfully, what God’s message seems to be in particular circumstances in our life. To put it another way, we read what God has said in his biblical revelation, and then we seek to restate those things in answer to life’s questions and circumstances. That’s speaking theology. (Of course, many of us were fortunate already to have heard and known these things early on from our fathers or mothers who told us as children of God’s love for us—but that ultimately has its source back in the Scriptures, so that is still a reading and applying

of what God has biblically revealed.)

We speak theology with great care lest we confess *not* what God has said to us but what we think or what we would like God to say. We want to be careful not to misrepresent God. As Luther put it in one of my favorite sayings of his—and I repeat this again and again to our students at the

seminary with the hope that they will capture the same spirit—“Wenn zur Theologie kommt, eine gewisse Bescheidenheit gehört dazu.” That is, “When it comes to theology, a certain modesty is called for.” “A certain modesty”—this from Luther, the man who turned church and empire on their heads? Indeed! Luther came to see that he was not God (nor are we), and he did not presume to know the whole mind of God. But he did know (as can we) some things that God did tell him (and us), things we need to know and believe for forgiveness, for life, and for salvation, and also things for life in this world as his creatures, as his redeemed people in his creation.

Luther could and would be bold. But he would also make plain that he was always ready to rethink, to reconsider, because he was not God. He was only trying to speak about God, to confess what he understood God to be saying to him and to us all as sinners in need of God’s salvation.

So how did Luther come to this point? Yes, I know: I have hinted at this several times and have yet to start to answer the historical question of how Luther got to the point of discovering the gospel. But we are finally to that point.

There are many ways to understand this phenomenon in the early sixteenth century that we call the Evangelical Reformation or the Lutheran Reformation. A variety of factors are necessary to explain this movement—political, economic, geographic, cultural, and more. For example, it is fortunate the Reformation happened in the German lands, part of the Holy Roman Empire—a hodge-podge of some 250+ principalities or territories ruled by an elected emperor with limited influence and also distracted by wars with the Turk and the French to the east and west. So the evangelical message found wiggle room, so to speak, in many political entities on German soil. Things might not have gone as well in more unified France just next door. Economically things were tight but on the upturn, a time of inflation but also a time where artisans and craftsmen were starting to carve out an identity for themselves—and Luther’s theology of vocation, that is, of serving God also outside church callings, would resonate with these people. Geographically, it is fortunate that Luther was in Germany rather than Italy, for he benefited not only from the distance from Rome but also from Germany’s resentment of the way the Italian-dominated church hierarchy viewed the German people as a cash cow. The Germans, far more than any other people, sent wagonloads of gold over the Alps to Rome—and

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they came to resent it, and many would rally around Luther as an alternative, their German Hercules to clean house. Indeed, to get the Reformation right, we have to consider a variety of factors.

But as I emphasize in classes at the seminary, while this all is true, at bottom the Reformation is fundamentally a theological movement. It is a rethinking of how to talk about God (theology!) that arose not as some abstract intellectual movement but as a very real, very personal quest for a loving God. We are back to Luther: he had his own personal problems, but he found an answer in what God revealed to him in the Scriptures. And then, realizing these problems were shared by his students in class, not to mention his fellow Germans—indeed, his fellow human beings—Luther felt compelled to confess what he learned. He would speak forth of the love of God in Christ, to give an account of the hope that was in him. Luther's personal reform prompted his personal confession, and his personal confession soon blossomed into a far wider reformation and confession of the church. I was struck by something that Professor Koch said when he talked about Luther's understanding of *oratio, meditatio, tentatio* making a theologian. The *oratio* was a prayer not just in general but to be led to the truth, to be led back into the Scriptures. And then the *meditatio* is not merely a thinking or meditating within, but to complete that "thinking about" a person has to tell others, to speak forth, to confess what is found.

As you have heard, confessing is first an individual matter—I speak forth what I believe. Personal pronouns are crucial: no abstract position here but letters written in gold, as Luther remarked on the "for me." Then I see more like-minded, like-believing people and we confess. That's how things look in the abstract, in theory. But that's not usually where we start in real life. A Luther (or any of us) is not dropped down into the midst of life from somewhere else, taken out of storage, from a sealed room somewhere and thrust into this world and told to figure things out suddenly from the start, from anew. Instead by the time we are old enough to think of what we are going to confess, to speak forth while intellectually aware of what we are saying, we already have been confessing. We have learned and absorbed a message from somewhere else. When a child is asked, "Who loves you and is your Savior?" he or she says "Jesus," not out of the blue as if this were some flash of revelation from heaven. Instead, children say that because parents or a pastor or a Bible school teacher have told them that. They believe, of course. They trust—that's what Luther called faith: not simply *credulitas* or *assensus*, that is, intellectual credulity or assent, but rather it is *fiducia*—trust, a resting in the hands of another. A child can make a simple confession: "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so." But children know and believe that because they have been brought up with it. They have learned it.

The same is true of Luther: he began confessing what he first had learned growing up, what had been told him and what he had absorbed from childhood on. But I do not want to be too hard on Luther's parents. After all, they taught what they themselves had learned and what was typical. And it actually was a mixed message,

because with the urging for moral good there was also talk of the goodness of God. The psycho-biographers (Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* especially) would like to look at this through Freud and portray a severe home life as the basis for rebellion against the church family. So problems with Luther's father sparked later rebellion against "papa," the pope. And mother issues led to a clash with mother church, not to mention Mary. But evidence suggests Luther's home was no more severe than most of his day. And he actually speaks well of his parents. In later life he spoke of his father taking him out to look at the heavens and talk of God's power that held them all—not gospel explicitly, but not judgment talk either. And when Luther was away from Wittenberg on business and word came that his father had died, Luther in turn reported that in a letter and remarked, "Never have I hated death so much." That's not exactly the thing to say if you are estranged from your parents. So they did leave some positive seeds. But, again, what they taught was typical of the religiosity of that day. So in a sense, the Reformation is unlearning that, turning away from one confession to another when Luther discovered what really brought him peace and joy. So what did Luther unlearn in order then to discover the gospel?

The late Middle Ages were highly religious and very confused. The influence of the church was everywhere. The medieval ideal was the priest or monk, those in religious vocations who served God by what they did. But whether in a sacred or secular calling, all people saw themselves as pilgrims. They fixed their eyes on the world to come and endured this present life, trying to avoid whatever might take them off course and keep them from heaven to come. And if they did not manage to finish well when death came, there was always purgatory for the final cleansing, though no one ever knew just how much that might involve (and the church was careful to be suitably vague). A person looked out for his soul and tried to obtain as much merit, as much good will in God's eyes as possible. Righteousness for salvation was clearly seen as a quantity, something to be amassed until it was piled high enough to reach heaven. People in church vocations were, of course, not only on the right course, but they had the shortest route since all they did in their vocations was thought to be God pleasing and obtained good for their souls. Other people in ordinary callings of daily life were taking the slow route.

But the ordinary folk could gain merit as well. They could make pilgrimages honoring a saint at some shrine, and that the saint would, in turn, intercede for them in heaven. People venerated relics with the same goal in mind. The trade in relics was huge. Since the Crusades for the holy sites in Palestine, the trade in relics skyrocketed, and the church quickly realized this not only fostered piety but was big business. Luther's own prince, Frederick the Wise, was one of the most active collectors with thousands of relics, so many that they were only all displayed on special occasions, spread throughout in the Castle Church in Wittenberg. A catalog identified the holdings for the pious who, if they properly venerated them all, could cut their time in purgatory by millions of days. Frederick had quite a collection—pieces of various

robes once worn by the Virgin Mary and even breast milk from nursing her Savior-Son, thorns from the crown of thorns, pieces of the whip used on Christ, straw from the manger, a rock on which Christ stood before his ascension, even a corpse from Herod's slaughter of children in Bethlehem—it went on and on. Frederick easily had one of the largest relic collections in northern Europe.

Relics not only fueled piety but also meant prestige. Cities vied for relics to outdo their neighbors. So Venice managed to obtain what was said to be the body of St. Mark for its cathedral, smuggling it out of Muslim-controlled Egypt in a barrel of pork that the customs officers would never touch. Or—as we were reminded at the visit of Pope Benedict to Cologne for the youth gathering—Cologne has the bodies of the three kings who followed the star to Bethlehem. (Though as German TV noted, the Bible never really does say “three” or name the kings—but three were nonetheless brought down the Rhine and entombed in the church where the jeweled coffins are still to be seen.) All of these have certificates of authenticity, of course. Note the background principle: there are those who have amassed more righteousness, more good than they need, so they can share it with others—saints can give it to those in need who honor them. Righteousness is seen virtually as a quantity to heap up in order to tip things in your favor and so to gain salvation.

Another outlet for piety was the buying of indulgences. Originally these were a release from a temporal penalty imposed by a priest to remind the penitents of what they had done in order to avoid that again. But by Luther's day the claims had been inflated so a plenary indulgence forgave sins past, present, and even future. The cost depended on how much you had to spend—a sliding scale reflecting your income and social position. Plenary indulgence was given infrequently at first and you had to go to Rome, but the church soon issued them more often, all the better to collect more through sales. And the salesmen came to your homeland—except to Electoral Saxony because Frederick had that relic collection and that was income for him. We know how things turned out then in 1517 when Saxons crossed the border to get the more valuable indulgences. Their attitudes—they were desperate but also callous and smug—would so infuriate Luther that he would write the Ninety-five Theses to call for change. Even then conservative Luther would be willing to live with indulgences as originally conceived, as a release from that reminder from the priest to keep people from sinning again. But more important would be Luther's insights on what repentance really was: not *do* penance but rather *be* penitent. Penitence was not an action that gained merit but an attitude of heart and mind.

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No, there was no lack of religiosity in Luther's day as he grew up—pilgrimages,

relics, indulgences, the saying of the rosary and the interest in Mary were on the rise, and saints were sought out for help through life's troubles. That kind of piety figured prominently in the famous story when, in the midst of the thunderstorm, Luther called out for St. Ann, the patron saint of miners. Luther's father was a miner, so Luther doubtless heard her invoked often before. It was a natural reaction. Luther turned automatically to religion—but what kind of religion was it? And it clearly rested on fear, on having enough righteousness accumulated to survive before Christ who so often was pictured as the judge sitting on a rainbow, lily from one ear and sword from the other, a figure to be feared.

That was the kind of popular piety that surrounded Luther, a spirit and outlook he grew up with and absorbed. And in a moment of crisis out on the road in the midst of the thunderstorm, he confessed what came naturally: a fear and desperation that filled so many. It was not a cold, intellectual calculation but a spontaneous reaction of the heart, prompted by what Luther believed. He tried to bargain with God, and he had a mediator, an advocate—but it was St. Ann.

Indeed, it is hard to run counter to such a system, especially when the powerful institutional church stands behind it.² It is all too much. We shake our heads and wonder how people could be drawn into this. But young Luther was very typical of his era, or his culture. Had you asked what he believed, he would have confessed this approach. He believed in Christ, but that believing really meant focusing on the church and all it had to offer for obtaining merit for salvation. Luther's entry into the monastery is really just an act of confessing this late medieval faith. He was troubled and had no peace. Had he done enough? What else was there to do? That thunderstorm was only the trigger that set off a personal spiritual explosion that was primed to happen. Law school would lead to a secular profession with temporal rewards. But the monastery was a sacred calling that could lead more easily to heaven. So Luther confessed not only with his lips but with his feet: he walked through the door of the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt, turning to say to his friends who walked with him to the gate, "After today you shall see me no more." So he thought.

And Luther tried hard as a monk to make the system work. As he once said, "If ever a monk gained heaven through monkery, it would have been I." Hours spent in prayer, meditation, listing sin after sin in an effort to purge his soul. But still no peace. Even when he became a priest and could offer up the continued sacrifice of the mass to gain merit, there was no ultimate comfort. When sent to Rome on business for his Augustinian order he took advantage of the system as he rushed around to churches and shrines to pile up the merits, almost sorry, as he would later say, that his parents were not yet dead so that he could have freed them from purgatory with his pilgrimages. This was a kind of confessing with his life and actions.

It did not seem to matter whether he had been in secular life pointed to law studies or now in a sacred vocation as monk and priest. And it did not get any better when Luther was pressed into formal theological studies by his Augustinian order

that wanted him ready for some future academic role. The formal classroom/textbook theology taught the same thing he'd grown up with and already confessed, only now the classroom theology did this in great hair-splitting detail. There were a variety of explanations for how this all worked, but the approach Luther learned goes (greatly simplified) something like this:

People are born sinful, but not completely fallen or helpless. There remains a spark of goodness, not enough to save but enough to prompt a person to at least try to do something good to please God. It is only logical to think this ability, this spark, is still there. After all, God is perfect and makes no mistakes; God has given us the law; therefore since God would not ask something of us if we could not do it, and therefore there must be some way in which we can respond to Him and keep the law. We may not do it perfectly or be able to do it on our own, but enabled by His grace, we can work at it—a process. And how do we get that grace? Well, remember the spark of goodness? That spark enables us to take the first feeble step. That little baby step does not save, but it earns us congruent merit, that is, merit similar to what God wants. He does not give heaven at this point, but He will give grace to help us work at getting there. As the famous phrase put it: *facientibus quod in se est, Deus non denegat gratiam*—“to those who do what is in them, God will not deny grace.” Do what (supposedly) comes naturally. From that humble beginning, God continues to infuse grace—so keep at those sacraments and keep working the system of popular piety, perfecting your faith until finally you obtain full merit, if not in this life, then in the purgatory to come. Then God rewards with heaven.

Note how the system works: it is *quid pro quo*, that is, you get this for that, heaven for effort. The key word is “ergo”—“therefore”—a system based on logic. If God gives law and if God makes no mistakes, *therefore* there must be some way for you to keep it. If God gives law, and if God also gives grace and faith, *therefore* salvation must be some combination of faith and the keeping of the law, that is, of faith and good works. It is all logical. It is all quite natural. Actually it is also Aristotle, built around the syllogistic logic of that ancient Greek philosopher whose method for organizing and thinking categorized what seemed so normal and became the method for thinking at the medieval universities. There would be many variations on logic over the years, but generally speaking, the roots were in Aristotle. It was such a good way of making sense of the world, or so it seemed. So, too, in theology. It is all so logical—but is it biblical? No matter—it is what Luther would have confessed. So natural human tendencies (to try to do something for God) were reinforced by formal theology that explained or supported this sort of confession.

But something else happened. Frederick the Wise opened a new university

in Wittenberg. The Augustinian order agreed to provide professors. And after some twists and turns that we need not recount, Luther's superior and confessor, Johannes von Staupitz, had him transferred to Wittenberg where Luther finished his doctoral studies and became professor of biblical theology. It was not what Luther wanted to do,

but monks do what their superiors tell them. Luther was still terribly bothered by his spiritual insecurities. Staupitz thought this might solve two problems at once—he'd get a much-needed teacher in Luther, and Luther would have to work through theology to teach his classes and in so doing, perhaps he would find answers to his spiritual problems. Luther did indeed—but not in the way anyone had planned!

Universities in Luther's day were firmly in the hands of the scholastics, the "school men," that is, those who taught at schools. And whatever they taught, theology included, they used logic to approach the subject up for discussion. If this, and if this, ergo that—therefore that. If God makes no mistakes and if God gives law and says "keep it for salvation," therefore . . .

But Wittenberg was a new university without established traditions. At this same time when scholasticism still had a stranglehold on educational method, there was another approach to learning that was being championed by others who would have liked to be in the universities, but they were being kept out by the old guard, by the "school men." The alternative came from the Renaissance, that rebirth of classical learning. The Renaissance looked at ancient culture and realized that people did not live or learn by logic alone. Syllogisms—if A and B, therefore C—could not provide the answer for everything. The *studia humanitatis*, the study of man, that is, the humanities, the liberal arts of Renaissance humanism, saw the value also of rhetoric, of how language is used to explain, to move, to persuade. Renaissance humanists explored the grammar, the language of texts, and they learned the original languages to appreciate what an author was saying. Luther showed some interest in this new learning even before he joined the Wittenberg faculty: he learned some Greek and started Hebrew as well. But it was as a new university professor that things really came together with dramatic results.

Like any new professor, even today, Luther scrambled to find significant ideas and new insights to bring to his students. Looking to various resources to comment on biblical texts such as Psalms, Romans, Hebrews, Galatians, he used some of the text studies, the comments offered by Renaissance humanists. Luther started to read biblical texts differently, to understand the message differently. It took time, but after a few years Luther realized he was adopting a different method for speaking

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theologically: not logic but the grammar, the rhetoric of the text was important. Out of so many insights, perhaps the greatest was this: the righteousness needed for salvation is *not* a quantity of good to be acquired by us but a quality given to us. Not what we obtain, what we have, but how we are. The “*favor Dei*,” the “favor of God,” is God’s grace given not because we can keep the law (because in ourselves we really can’t), but it comes despite what we are like in and of ourselves. Theology is not based on ergo/therefore. Luther hit on a different word he now confessed: “*dennoch*,” that is, “nevertheless.” God gives law, as Paul says in Romans, but—reading the text now, not working out of logic—but God gives law not to show us what we can do but to keep reminding us that we cannot, so that we will despair of our efforts and cling to Christ. *Dennoch* (nevertheless) is a very Lutheran word, a biblical word.

This new approach to theology was a new method, a new way of thinking. Luther denounced the old. We remember the Ninety-five Theses because of the way they upset the system of the indulgence sales and sparked a public outcry. But arguably just as important—more important theologically—from that same year (1517) were Luther’s “Theses Against Scholastic Theology.” There he wrote, “It is not with Aristotle (that is, with logic) that one becomes a theologian; in fact, the opposite is true: it is only without Aristotle that one becomes a theologian. . . . For Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light, and his Ethics [that taught ergo reward for doing good] is the worst enemy of grace.”³ The method is all wrong, Luther is saying. And to a former teacher Luther wrote, “I simply believe that it is impossible to reform the church unless the canons [that is, the church law] and decretals [that is, the papal rules], the scholastic theology, the philosophy, and logic as they now are are uprooted and another study installed.”⁴ University curriculum that centered on scholastic logic to unlock the Scriptures had to go. Logic led only to spiritual problems: when have I done enough? But the new learning of this Renaissance humanism pushed Luther back into the language of the texts, and it was in those biblical texts that he found his answer to saving righteousness.

And what does all this have to do with “confessing,” our general topic? Luther grew up having learned one kind of theology and readily confessed that. Remember Luther’s remark: if ever a monk gained heaven by monkish effort, it would have been Luther. He believed and lived that theology, but it brought no peace. Forced to come up with classroom material, this new professor Luther turned to Renaissance humanism to help find new material. Humanism was not the answer but it gave him tools to read the texts, and there he found spiritual answers. He found comfort for himself. And then realizing that he was typical of countless others who also had no peace, Luther confessed these new insights that he found, and others found them comforting as well. The Reformation then can be seen as the product of a kind of educational curriculum movement and also as the product of an individual breakthrough that was multiplied among so many more as this new way, a reforming way of looking at God’s revelation, grew and grew. The new confession of one

(Martin Luther) became the confession of many who were not echoing Luther but were saying the same thing as they also saw it where Luther did, namely, in the Scriptures.

Although it grew out of Luther's study and university classroom, theology turned out to be no abstract subject but rather a very personal engagement with God. We see that how we approach theology, the method we use for thinking and talking about God as we engage his biblical revelation, makes all the difference in the world. That's why we spend so much time not only on proclamation of the word but also on education, on how we study—both professionals and laypeople—because how we learn shapes what we learn and what we then confess.

Speaking from faith, Luther discovered the gospel by God's grace as God broke him down and then led him out of his dark night of fear and anxiety into the bright light of a sure confidence in God's promises in Christ. Speaking historically, Luther discovered the gospel when, after a long journey that he hoped would bring him personal peace, he was pushed instead into circumstances that came together to show him a new method of thinking theologically. And realizing that he was not unique but, in fact, was just like everyone else who takes God and sin and heaven and hell seriously, Luther rushed to tell others not only of his hope, but he taught them how he came to that hope. He

confessed the gospel. Others heard and rejoiced in that message and confessed it as well. And in the end that confessing swelled to reform the church. There was a new re-formed content (a confession) that was not held or shut up but was used

(confessed!). Personally I have little patience for people who are pleased with their orthodoxy and pat themselves on the back that they have the right message but then do not do anything with it. In fact, because doctrine (teaching) is for use and not to be set on the shelf, I think it could even be argued that people who do have the right content but do nothing with it (that is, only "circle the wagons" in a defense posture) are not really orthodox after all. We pray in one Sunday morning collect (at least in the older Lutheran hymnal we used in the LCMS) that we may read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures that we may embrace and ever hold fast that message. But in the other collect, we ask for the Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above that the word, as befits it, may not be bound but be preached to the joy and edification of Christ's holy people—but I think the point is not to look inward but to make that group of holy people larger. That means the doctrine has to be used. Luther, once he hit upon the evangelical message, certainly waded into the mess of the church of his day and used it with all the energy he could muster.

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There was no guarantee that positive things would come from Luther's confessing, no guarantee that a reformation would happen. Luther could just as well have discovered the gospel, told others, and yet have gotten no response. There is no accounting for whether or not the devil, world, or the sinful flesh will block that message. But Luther also realized he could not control that. It was only up to him to confess. Then it was up to the Holy Spirit to work and produce fruit. That's one final lesson for us to learn. We also cannot control. We cannot read the outcome in the heavens or find it in the stars. We can only seek to use the best tools available (as Luther did), to make the best presentation, the best confession we can (as Luther tried to do), and then what follows is God's doing. We might be disappointed, as Luther sometimes was, that more does not happen. But we can never be disappointed in what we have: the love of God in Christ, the confidence that by faith alone and by God's grace alone we have life eternal. This is what we confess.

Endnotes

- 1 Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Bohlau, 1883-), Tischreden, vol. 5, no. 6250 [henceforth WA-Tischreden, 5, 6250].
- 2 The power of church mixed also with civil rule greatly complicated matters. Over many generations the church had amassed tremendous wealth and vast property holdings in every European land. Bishops and abbots not only ruled their diocese or monasteries, they ruled territories as well, wearing both ecclesiastical and civil-political hats, which often brought a clash of interests or at least greatly muddled things. On the eve of the Reformation the church owned a third of land holdings in England, for example, as well as in France, and half of Danish lands. The prince-bishop was a powerful figure. One of these who figures into Luther's story is Albrecht of Brandenburg. Though not a cleric, Albrecht nonetheless managed to become (to buy himself) bishoprics of Magdeburg and Halberstadt—which made him a pluralist which was against church law, but a contribution to the church took care of that. And then he managed to become Archbishop of Mainz, one of the seven powerful men who elected the Holy Roman Emperor. But to get the post he had to borrow money from the Fuggers, a wealthy family with a vast private fortune from international business ventures. And to pay back the Fuggers and to help Rome looking for money to build St. Peter's, Albrecht arranged for indulgences to be sold in German lands by high-energy salesmen such as John Tetzel. "When the coin clinks in the collection chest, the soul flies up to eternal rest." Indulgence sales skyrocketed—except in Frederick's Saxony since he had his own relic collection, but we've mentioned that.
- 3 WA 1, 221–228. *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia and St. Louis, 1957), vol. 31, pp. 9–16, theses 43–44, 50.
- 4 WA-Briefwechsel, vol. 1, no.74 (to Jodokus Trutfetter on 5/9/1518).

Luther at Worms and the Wartburg Still Confessing

Robert Rosin

Late in the day on April 18, 1521, the imperial diet, that gathering of political representatives throughout the Holy Roman Empire, finally turned to the case of a trouble-making Augustinian monk, one Martin Luther. Rome had already condemned him as a heretic and Emperor Charles was certainly no friend, so it was no mystery how this surely would turn out. But it was necessary to do things properly and in order. Luther was, after all, a German university professor, and the emperor was to watch over the universities in his lands, so he could hardly let Rome simply reach in and pluck up a professor without giving him a hearing. The emperor had his own legal rights and privileges to defend. But as far as Charles was concerned, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. So the representatives gathered in the city of Worms on the bank of the Rhine to play out the drama.

Since 1517 Luther had the empire in an uproar, and things only seemed to get worse. As one observer noted, “Three-fourths of the people cry ‘Up with Luther!’ and the other fourth cry, ‘Down with Rome!’” Yet as Luther would later remark, things actually could have been much worse. “I could have made such a play at Worms,” Luther wrote, “that even the emperor would not have been able to stop the bloodshed.” In fact in the days before, there had been an ominous sign that things could turn violent. A *Bundschuh*, a simple peasant’s boot made of leather laced tight, had been nailed to a wall in Worms. The *Bundschuh* was the symbol of peasant revolts that had plagued Germany in decades past. Would there be an uprising in Worms in support of Luther?

That was not what Luther wanted, and rather than drag others into a fight, into a literal bloodbath he could have started, Luther fought his battles on his own two feet. Shown his writings set on the table before him, he tried to draw his opponents into a debate, to provoke a discussion of the theology. But they would have none of it. They asked bluntly if he would recant—to “rechant,” as Luther later would joke, would be to sing a different tune. With the weight of both Roman and imperial power on him,

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*Anton von Werner's classic depiction of Martin Luther at Worms (1877)
(Image: Wikimedia Commons).*

Luther made a simple, straightforward speech in what one historian called the hinge of history, a turning point in the relationship of faith and authority. To the emperor and the representatives of the German estates Luther said,

Since your imperial majesty and your lordships are looking for a simple answer, I will give you one without horns or teeth [that is, no tricks, no playing games]. Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against one's conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.¹

That is a confession. No mention of Christ or cross, but a confession nonetheless about the necessary matter of authority, about the basis for theology. The foundation: *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. At Worms Luther said "Scripture or clear reason,"



but we should not think of that as two separate tools or criteria for judging. The Enlightenment would do that, and then it would quickly move to embrace reason above Scripture (if Scripture was to be thought of as some divine revelation from above). So the Enlightenment would use reason to trump and refashion Scripture. But Luther certainly did not have two standards in mind. “*Ratio evidens*” (clear/evident/plain reason) was a reasoning ability that had been shaped by the word. Luther later says his conscience is captive to the word of God, and he sees his reason the same way. Scripture is plain on many things, but at times we need to “fill in the gaps” in our theology, as we try to speak about God. So we do that, *but* always remembering that attitude of *Bescheidenheit*, of modesty, because I realize that I do not know the mind of God at this point but think I am in line or in harmony or concert with what God seems to suggest. And I always am ready to take another look or rethink, even as Luther said he was willing to do—to retract what he had written if others could show his thinking was wrong. But at bottom, since clear reason is that which is aligned with the word, the actual bottom line, the foundation, is simply Scripture—*sola Scriptura*.

Luther did not take his stand simply to be contrary, to be different from Rome.

And he was not out to build a personality cult. It gave him no pleasure to have to say that, but he found no answers in the rituals, traditions, or the logic that Rome put forward. Instead Luther re-read the texts of the Bible. He looked at the grammar and at the rhetoric of the Scriptures with a new method, and he found comfort in Christ's cross grasped by faith alone. Because he found Christ in the Scriptures rather than in the decrees of popes and councils, Luther held fast to those biblical texts. The Scriptures were the swaddling clothes that held Christ.

Luther left the assembly hall with his hands raised and fists clenched like a medieval knight leaving the tournament field in victory. But at the same time he muttered to himself, "I am finished." The end likely would not come that day. There were legal steps still to follow, though there was no accounting for what some zealous opponent might do on his own to rid Germany of this renegade. Realistically speaking, Luther could expect the worst as the story played out. But in fact the world had not seen the last of him.

Luther's friends remembered what had happened to John Huss a century earlier. Brought to the Council of Constance under safe conduct, the rules were changed—well, reinterpreted—once Huss was there, and he was burned at the stake as a heretic. So when Luther was given permission to leave Worms a week later—you did not simply travel around on your own in those days; you had to have the clearance of those in authority in a case such as this—Luther was quickly rushed out a side gate to head for home. The authorities were not particularly perturbed since Luther could always be arrested later when legal proceedings got to that point. But on the way back to Wittenberg, the group was ambushed by armed horsemen. Luther's traveling companions "escaped" into the brush—of course they did; they were supposed to!—and Luther was benevolently kidnapped by agents of Frederick the Wise, who had made it sufficiently plain that he did not want anything to happen to Luther, yet Frederick did not want to be directly tied to the plot. Plausible deniability we'd call it today. His men took care of it, and Luther found himself in Wartburg Castle, high above the city of Eisenach where he had once gone to school and stayed with the Cotta family. Meanwhile back in Worms, Emperor Charles had one of the pope's agents (Girolamo Aleander) draw up papers declaring Luther a stubborn schismatic and an obvious heretic, and a small group of delegates passed judgment on Luther although the diet already had officially adjourned. Some would question the legality, but Luther was now an outlaw in the empire according to this Edict of Worms.

On his way to Worms just weeks earlier, Luther had been hailed along the way as one who stood tall, who confessed theologically in the face of Rome's criticism. But many pinned their political and economic hopes on him as well. As he came to Erfurt where he had once gone to university and then had entered the cloister, his old friend, Crotus Rubeanus (a humanist), organized a welcoming party of university faculty and students who greeted Luther as though he were a liberator from the days of ancient Rome, a hero to set right the grievances of the German people against present-day

Rome that seemed to care little beyond collecting German gold to fill its treasury. But along the way others held up pictures of Savonarola, an Italian critic of the church who had enjoyed the backing of both the people and rulers, only to see his support suddenly evaporate. The pictures were meant to be a warning to Luther: do you, Luther, really want to go through with this knowing how things have quickly turned sour in the past? Like Huss, Savonarola had been burned at the stake. Would that happen to Luther? Elector Frederick realized that Luther was condemned before he even set foot in Worms, and sent word through others that Luther should turn back and stay away. But Luther was determined: he would come, he said, even if there were as many devils there as tiles on the rooftops. And so he went. And when it was time, having asked for a twenty-four-hour delay to think things through again and make sure of his heart and mind, he stood now literally by his writings with the table there before him laden with his books, even as Luther stood by the theology that had taken charge of his heart. He confessed.

But now what? Luther was hidden in the Wartburg. He had a room in a secure part of an already secure castle at the end of a passage past guards and up a short staircase that could be raised like a drawbridge. Only a handful involved in the plot knew he was there, and no one was going to get to him. It gave Luther time to think and reflect. Luther had a window that looked out on the wooded hills. The area around the Wartburg was known for the charcoal workers who worked in the forests. As they made the charcoal, the smoke from the fires hung low over the trees and obscured the view. But then would come a gust of wind and almost magically sweep the haze away, and all was crystal clear again. That, said Luther, reminded him of how God dealt with sin. Sin would hang low and cloud our view and plague us. But when a word of gospel came, those promises simply swept the sin away, never to be seen again.

So Luther had time to think and reflect. But what was going on elsewhere? If the point was to keep Luther out of the public eye, then it worked. He might as well have been dead. In fact, rumors quickly spread that he was dead, much to the dismay of those who had high hopes and who were thankful for the theology they had learned from him. Albrecht Dürer, one of the giants in German Renaissance art, spoke for many when he wrote, "O God, if Luther is dead, who will now bring to us the holy Gospel so clearly?"

That's a very good question, a good question on several levels. We talk of the Lutheran Reformation and Lutheranism today, but was Luther indispensable? Was it really *his* movement? (When we visited Wittenberg I noticed a snatch of graffiti on a wall: "*These 1: Lutherkult abschaffen.*" That is, "Thesis 1: Abolish the Luther cult." Is that so? A cult? Hero worship?) Luther himself later bemoaned the fact that people were looking more to him than the message: "What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. God could raise up many Doctor Martins. . . . How is it that I, a poor stinking bag of maggots, should come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?" Yet to be fair to the historical

This argument over who can claim “Lutheran” revolves around what makes up that theological position.

record, by the time Luther complained about people talking about “Lutherans,” he had used the term himself a couple of times. It was simply a convenient way to identify those who held to a particular theological

position, a confession. It was the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, who seems to have been the first to use the “Lutheran” label, though Warham meant it in a negative, critical way, as if this Luther business were a power cult. Yet the point remains: the name simply identifies. As long as words and labels are not stripped of their meaning, we know what they stand for.

Today using a name or label is not always so simple. I can think of several ways people use and react to the use of “Lutheran” today, and there are probably more than what follows. And what I’m about to suggest are also quickly blended. To start, some using “Lutheran” would like to say that they have things all put together and have a clear view of the truth that others do not echo, so those others have no right to use it because they are not Lutheran. Now we are into definition and the problem of who has the right to decide. It seems to me that while I understand this and may also think that the “other side” is not Lutheran in terms of the content of what is confessed in some parts or even as a whole, until I am made the Lord High Mayor with power over definitions and labels, there is little point in my trying to reserve the name “Lutheran” while telling others to find something else. True, I can say that and claim it is a matter of principle, but practically speaking others will do what they want. And pragmatically speaking, if there is indeed a chance to come to some understanding or to win people over to my understanding of the term, and more importantly to the theological position I have come to believe and confess, I may just have to throw out the window a chance to get others to hear what I confess and convince them of that (though it is, after all, the Holy Spirit who finally will convince in matters of faith—but you get my point, I hope). This argument over who can claim “Lutheran” revolves around what makes up that theological position. How wide does the label stretch? What is essential and what can be ignored? Can there be variations and even differences? And how different can the differences be? Questions like these are legitimate. Just what does it mean to be Lutheran? Those who laid claim to that name in the Reformation era had to sort through these questions already in the second half of the sixteenth century, so this is nothing new. By 1555 in the Peace of Augsburg, the Holy Roman Empire was willing to recognize two legitimate confessions in its lands, Roman Catholic and Lutheran. So just what did Lutheran include?

We heard about modern problems with the Lutheran label from Professor Klän when he talked about the Lutheran church in Germany today in light of the

Leuenberg Concord drawn up to bridge Luther, United, and Reformed. Are the Lutherans still Lutheran when on one hand they say they have certain theological positions that go with that name, but on the other hand they agree to live alongside or within or among those who have other positions that contradict the Lutheran ones? In effect they take what once was confessed, what was said to be part of a Lutheran position, and now turn it into an option. They almost make the Lutheran theological ideas or principles adiaphora, except that adiaphora are things on which Scripture does not speak but is silent—but that is not the case for these doctrinal issues drawn from Scripture, biblical teaching that was restated as doctrine, a theology—and yet it is being sidestepped here. Scripture does speak. Those are teachings that are a product of a hermeneutical foundation, but under Leuenberg we are simply supposed to let these teachings slide or overlook what is said. Can a person cut back on doctrine that way and still be Lutheran?

There is yet another way to look at the “Lutheran” name or label. The name is claimed by people today who are not trying to have it both ways as with Leuenberg, but rather who will say quite openly, “Of course we do not think the same things Luther did in his day. But we are in the historical line since Luther, and so we are entitled to use the name.” “Lutheran” is back there somewhere in their family tree, and so they still use the term because there is this thread running from here to there. Never mind where it is snagged along the way. It is a little like me saying that I’m German. Well, this is true (sort of) since my great-grandparents came from Hessen and Pommern (though Stolp in Pommern is now Słopsk, so that would make me half Polish)—but the point is there is a German connection though it is really historical rather than present and active. Or I could say I’m from Minnesota or Nebraska because that’s where my parents grew up, though I’ve only visited there. I’m much more comfortable saying that I grew up in Chicago. This (Chicago) is not just a matter of the sort of historic link I talked about a moment ago but really goes to identity, to what makes me me. But I would never presume then to say that the ideas I learned growing up in Chicago should be considered German. The roots may go there on paper, but I do not “live there” intellectually, so to speak. Yet in the church today something else often happens. People will on one hand admit that ideas have changed. This is usually accompanied by talk of the old being outmoded or old-fashioned in an effort to help push them out the door and to get rid of them. Instead, the argument goes, we have learned to think rightly or in a high-minded way—add those modifiers to gain acceptance. So while the position admittedly is different from a world gone by, we still deserve to keep the original label, or so the argument goes. Well, it makes me feel good to be German (it does!), but to be honest, that is little more than a label whose substance has changed. Not too much of Pomerania here but lots of Chicago. But—turning now to church and theology—what usually happens is that people want to insist that what they now confess is the legitimate evolution of Lutheranism, even though their theological positions may actually contradict what

I'd like to think I understand what Lutheran ought to be, but others think the same about their view.

once was confessed. The only way to get by or get away with this, I think, is to go back to the issue of what falls under the tent or label of "Lutheran," though now we find that

tent is a whole lot smaller than once thought, than even Luther thought.

In any of these cases, I do not want to question the personal sincerity of people, but I do want to pay attention to how the label "Lutheran" is applied. Is it Lutheran because the doctrinal substance now confessed has been maintained since the Reformation? Or is it Lutheran in one of these other ways of speaking? It's worth discussing. I'd like to think I understand what Lutheran ought to be, but others think the same about their view. There's an old Scottish prayer: "Lord, grant that we may ever be in the right, for we shall surely never change our minds." Thankfully that is not in our prayer book. Instead we discuss, confess, and do it with patience and prayer that God might give us wisdom.

Indeed, talking about "Lutheran" in terms of a position, an identity, a confession, is not always so easy. It was not easy in Luther's day either. It took a while till labels settled in on theological positions. We tend to put the Reformers into camps rather quickly, but we have the benefit of hindsight. They took longer to sort things out. In the early years of the Reformation with so much attention on Luther, the problem is slightly different. At that point there was that danger of this becoming more about the messenger than the message. As we saw, some people such as Albrecht Dürer strongly identified the gospel renewal with the Wittenberg professor. Hans Sachs, one of the well-known "Meistersanger" or troubadours wrote a famous poem to the "Nightingale of Wittenberg" who brought law and gospel clearly before the people. But Luther was worried that people might lose sight of the theology and focus instead on the theologian, that they might neglect the confession and idolize the one who confessed. In fairness, both Dürer and Sachs really are concentrating on the substance of the message, though in Dürer's case, he was understandably upset that the messenger might have been lost. You don't want to lose someone who has brought you that kind of message. Yet if asked, Dürer no doubt would have agreed with Luther that God could indeed raise up many Martin Luthers to get the work done. Luther was simply God's "out-sized man" for the moment. But it is an interesting question: What would happen if the messenger were not there, if Luther were taken out of the picture?

In the Wartburg, Luther had plenty of time to think about that and to think of what he'd done both in Worms and earlier in Wittenberg. His Roman opponents taunted him: "Are you alone wise?" In other words, "What makes you so smart? Who are you to come along and stand against centuries and generations of the church? Isn't

this really your own personal, private crusade, an outlet for your own ego? And does not truth finally reside in the church at large as it moves through history, and does not authority finally rest with Rome in the pope, the descendent of Peter and the Vicar of Christ?” Those challenges and more were all concentrated, all wrapped up, in that simple question, “Are you alone wise?”

At the Wartburg Luther had time to consider that question and to sort through answers. Actually, the temptation to flatter himself and to turn this all into a personal campaign had always been lurking there. But Luther could look around and find evidence to prove he was not in this alone.

The most basic proof lay in what had been going on in his study and in the classroom at Wittenberg. As Luther scrambled to come up with lecture material—a good professor always rethinks and revises, but it’s especially hard the first time starting from scratch—Luther found hints of where to go in the work of others he read, in those humanists who commented on the language and the grammar of the texts. Those were only hints and Luther would have to put the puzzle together, but it is evidence nonetheless. And then when Luther walked into the lecture hall he found a room full of students who deep down had the same spiritual questions and problems as he. And as he focused more and more on the gospel in his lectures over the decade, he saw how that resonated with students. So he wasn’t alone.

Turning from his present to the past, Luther found evidence in history. He found voices that said some of what he himself had been finding. (History was another subject that had been neglected by the scholastics. After all, with their method, their approach, you can think through anything with syllogistic logic. Present circumstances are all that matter—no historical context. You don’t need history to help guide you. It’s only interesting in terms of illustration to sprinkle in after you’ve put everything together with logic.) But Luther found evangelical witness, evangelical confession, in history. The voices from the past were not always many or loud, but they could be found, though often drowned out by the institutional church in the same way Luther was being shouted down. Are you alone wise? “Hardly!” Luther could reply.

More, in those years from the Ninety-five Theses until Worms and then in the early 1520s, Luther found other theologians hitting on the same basic ideas he found in the Scriptures. Johannes Brenz eventually had to leave Heidelberg after his evangelically oriented lectures drew a threat of imprisonment. Brenz moved on to become a key reformer in southwest Germany. Martin Bucer heard Luther defend his theology in 1518 before the German Augustinians, although Bucer was not an Augustinian but a Dominican. (I wonder how he got into the meeting!) But Bucer had been studying on his own and then heard of Luther so he came. Bucer never fell easily or comfortably under the Lutheran label. Circumstances in his background and factors in the unique setting of Strasbourg where he led reform would cause him to part company with Luther on some issues, but in general Bucer was on an evangelical

path, finding the way on his own. Those are two of the better known, and there were certainly many more. Luther was encouraged when he looked around and could find others popping up here and there with an evangelical witness that came not from Luther but from the Bible. Luther may have been the senior figure, so to speak, and he was getting the headlines at the moment, but he certainly was not a solo voice. Are you alone wise? Hardly! Just listen to others confess.

But even if he were all alone, would that mean that Luther ought to give up and confess something else? Not necessarily, though that is not really how it works. Luther did not (and we should not) theologize in a vacuum, in isolation from voices around that raise questions and challenges. Those voices provided a valuable sounding board and a testing. Ultimately Luther would make his decisions and confess, but not without running things through the refiner's fire to make sure he had a legitimate basis for what he was saying. So Luther would write and publish. As he did, he got feedback from colleagues around him and from critics as well. His thinking matured. From the perspective of others, as Luther published they could see ideas unfolding. It is interesting to watch these alliances shift leading up to Worms and the Wartburg.

As Luther wrote and published, he gained support, but he also lost support of some who had first been attracted to what they saw happening at Wittenberg, but then as they saw more things developing, they decided Luther had gone down the wrong path or had gone too far. We're talking about humanists here. Their work on the languages, grammar, and rhetoric of texts, and on history (for the necessary context) were all crucial as Luther plunged into the Bible. From his side, Luther valued the tools that Renaissance humanism had to offer—the stress on languages, for example. Luther also came to appreciate that humanism approached learning with a different spirit and a different method. Method is very important for Luther! Even if you are not entirely clear on the outcome, if you approach with a new method, you will get a different product. The theology will not change in the church, Luther wrote, until the old method is discarded (that is, until scholasticism was thrown out) and a new study (that is, the liberal arts pressed by the humanists) is installed in its place. Through the years of the fifteen-teens Luther strongly advocated curriculum change at Wittenberg. The university's charter theoretically opened the door to humanist studies, but universities traditionally had used scholasticism. But because humanism was helping Luther solve his theological problems, he wanted it there in the university in a formal way. He agitated and got language professors as regular faculty members. Melancthon came as the Greek teacher. You could learn a language informally on your own time at universities, but not as part of the regular course of studies. Like many universities today, there were those who taught informally. On the kiosk bulletin board today you see something like “Learn Korean—Tuesday and Thursday evenings—call . . .” which is a nice opportunity and expands your knowledge, but that is not required and gets you no credit for your degree. That happened with Greek in Luther's day. There were competent Greek teachers to be found along with texts

to use, so Luther learned Greek studying with Johannes Lang, a fellow Augustinian, while still in the Erfurt cloister. Luther took up Hebrew soon after, doing it on his own. But now Wittenberg would formally offer the languages and require them of students. And the preparatory schools, the gymnasia, would eventually retool their own curricula to start early on with languages, pointing toward university.

So Wittenberg led the way by making classical Latin, Greek, and Hebrew full “partners” in the liberal arts curriculum. No other university had that system at the time, so Wittenberg quickly became a model that others would follow just to keep up as students “voted with their feet” and swelled Wittenberg’s enrollment. Beyond that, Luther also made sure that scholastic logic was scaled back. And history was also introduced. Meanwhile the humanists were watching what was going on at Wittenberg and applauded Luther. They saw him as a friend of the New Learning. It’s interesting that during this time, Luther used the word “reformation” not for larger changes in the church. For that he talked of preaching the gospel. At first, “reformation” referred to curriculum change at the university.

But something happened. Many humanists wanted reform in the church, but they saw or understood that in terms of institutional change and personal moral reform by the clergy. Especially the humanists older than Luther were so attached to the Roman church that they could not stay with Luther when he said “faith alone.” The older humanists believed in Christ but they also saw him as a model or blueprint they needed to follow—the *philosophia Christi*, the philosophy of Christ. That was still a mix of faith and works, that old theology that Luther would reject. They wanted a purer, simpler piety, and they hated the dogmatic hair-splitting of the scholastics (even though the substance of the theology in the end was the same, just without all the intricate logic and technical language). The humanists also were horrified by the luxury in the institutional church with its vast wealth, but they could not bring themselves to go with Luther down that evangelical path. They came to see Luther’s reform as radical theological change that struck at the core, and that was simply too much for them to accept. It is an interesting footnote that every German humanist who was older than Luther finally backed away from the Reformation as a final theological position and did not ultimately commit to the evangelical cause. Their old ties to the Roman church seem to have been too strong.

This loss of support among the humanists did not happen overnight. Already privately in 1516 Luther expressed his concern about Erasmus, the most famous of the humanists, because Erasmus insisted that when Paul said in Romans 5 that we are freed from the law, Erasmus said that meant only Old Testament civil and ceremonial law while the moral law still had to be kept for salvation. In the years that followed, these theological differences would eventually erupt into the open and Luther would write *The Bondage of the Will* making plain that we do not come to God, but he chooses and converts us. And in salvation, the law only kills.

The older humanists liked Luther’s condemnation of indulgences because of

the excess, but again, they worried about grace alone. They especially liked Luther's rejection of Aristotle's logic in Luther's "Disputation against Scholastic Theology"—Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. But they worried about Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Theses that condemned the idea that we have free will to climb to God. "God's love does not find its object," Luther wrote, "God's love creates its object. Human love finds its object."² That was plainly against the idea of God finding that spark of goodness within us, something lovable. In fact, there is no spark, nothing godly to like. You love something because you find something attractive there. You choose a spouse not because you cannot stand the other person (unless you are the prophet Hosea, and then he really did not choose; God did the match-making). You are attracted to your wife or husband. Human love is "therefore/ergo" love. But God does not find the lovable because the lovable is not there. Nevertheless God loves us because he creates the very thing he wants to loves. But the older humanists worried still more, now that Luther's freedom would lead to moral irresponsibility.

Then came a series of widely read treatises that pushed older humanists to the breaking point. The first was Luther's sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness." And where is the law? Where is my part to make myself presentable to God? This again seemed morally risky to the older crowd. Then in less than a year in 1520 Luther

issued three bombshells. "The Address to the Christian Nobility" put forth a radical design even while relying on a centuries-old idea. The church, the bishops, were resisting the Reformation, dragging their feet when it came to promoting the gospel.

Could nothing be done about this? Rome

All vocations can be God-pleasing when filled by Christians.

had erected a wall (metaphorically speaking) between sacred and secular vocation, and claimed that only the sacred had anything to say about the church. But that was a false distinction, Luther said. All vocations can be God-pleasing when filled by Christians. And princes should look to the example of the emperor who had centuries of historical precedent being the protector of the church—so do your jobs and make it easier for pastors to proclaim the gospel. Yet older humanists worried about the issue of authority.

Luther's next 1520 treatise that shook things up was "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" where Rome and its priests held Christians hostage with the way they treated sacraments. For Rome, sacraments were a way to exercise power as priests stood as mediators between God and people. In fact, Luther argued, sacraments were God' gifts of grace (not the priests possessions or weapons). And by the way, there are not seven sacraments anyway, Luther claimed, because it's saving grace that finally counts. Finally in 1520 came Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*. All you need to hear are the two famous sentences: "The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is the perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all." We do not

become free by combining faith with our efforts. *We are* free! End of discussion. Then because of that, we truly can be servants—but not to get anything from God. It's the same pattern as the “Two Kinds of Righteousness.” This was too much for many of the humanists and they distanced themselves from Luther. They were with Luther on the criticism of morality and the church's institutional failure, but Luther was striking at the heart of theology—gospel, authority, priestly power, and more—and that was simply too much. Every humanist who was older than Luther eventually stayed with Rome. But at the same time, many (though not all) of the younger crowd rushed to his support.

The point here is this: Luther put out his ideas to test them. At the same time, while he obviously would like the support, he finally cannot alter what he believes to be the biblical message simply to gather more support. As Luther once put it, “Peace if possible, but truth at any rate.” Luther confessed what he believed. Some would have none of it, but others searched the Scriptures themselves, like the Bereans did even with St. Paul, and they decided Luther was right—really the Bible was right. But note how this involves a balance. Luther was not willing simply to take something for granted because the church said so. In fact those answers brought no comfort. But he also did not decide on some theological position simply to be contrary. He decided to confess what he did because he looked first into the Scriptures and then put his theological ideas to the test, putting them out before others and against what the church had taught through the centuries. But confession, belief, doctrine need to be used. We confess not to hear ourselves talk or to talk merely to ourselves or to pat ourselves on the back for being guardians of the truth even as we drive people away with our self-congratulatory attitudes or with the way we go about trying to teach and witness to that truth. This is all included in what Luther did. There are ragged edges all along the way when it comes to application, but that's just the way it is this side of the Parousia as long as God builds his church through sinners he saves and then sends out to witness.

Are you alone wise? The answer is clear by now. Luther was always willing to rethink, but at the same time he was not paralyzed by questions. He moved forward while at the Wartburg and beyond. While there he occasionally went out in disguise, and he could find out about the reaction to Worms and to the gospel on the loose. Back in Wittenberg some said the Reformation had not gone far enough or fast enough. Andreas Karlstadt, another professor, read the Bible like a new rule book: “Let no man call you master,” said the New Testament, so he gave up academic degrees and titles—not quite what Jesus had in mind. Karlstadt forced the laypeople to take the Lord's Supper in both kinds, bread and wine, even though they traditionally were not used to this. In principle, giving the cup was correct, but Luther's approach was to preach the gospel and be patient as other issues were worked through. Rather than give comfort in the Sacrament, Karlstadt brought anxiety as the people were still working things through. And then came the iconoclasm, the

destruction of church art—graven images, Karlstadt and the radicals argued. If people worshipped the images, then they had to learn differently, but the art could also teach the illiterate. All this threatened to get in the way of the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins by grace alone grasped by faith alone, so Luther did something about it. He made a quick trip back to Wittenberg to preach against the excesses—a kind of public confession of what the evangelical Reformation is all about.

Also during the time in the Wartburg, Luther offered resources to help others see the gospel and confess it. He wrote “On Monastic Vows,” in which he argued that both celibacy and running off to the cloister were less valuable to society than living a normal life in the tasks God might send. In other words, that supposedly sacred vocation of monk was less valuable than the Christian freed to live as a servant of all in daily life. Monks claimed to practice *contemptum mundi*, that is, contempt for the world. But Luther sees true contempt as rolling up your sleeves and staying put, not going anywhere. We stand there squarely on two feet, confident that we are redeemed and are put into a world Christ has reclaimed as his own, so nothing is going to be surrendered or conceded to Satan. Luther dedicated the writing to his father as if to say “you were right—I should have stayed in school and out of the cloister.” (What if

That supposedly sacred vocation of monk was less valuable than the Christian freed to live as a servant of all in daily life.

he had!) But the most important Wartburg work was Luther’s translation of the New Testament. In eleven weeks he gave the Germans what arguably was the most important contribution for confessing the gospel, putting the texts into the hands of the people to read for themselves in language they could readily understand.

Are you alone wise?—“Read for yourselves,” Luther could say. They would see what he had found and could confess the same.

There is much more to point to in the aftermath of Luther’s stay at the Wartburg—sermon books, catechisms, and more. In a sense, everything was aimed at confessing some part of God’s truth that revolved around the central message of saving grace promised in Christ. Circumstances prompted Luther to respond to problems at hand. He is called an “occasional writer,” not because he wrote once in a while. There are over 120 thick volumes in the set of his complete works. That’s not writing once in a while, that’s responding to a lot of occasions. And that’s yet another important part of confessing: there is a truth to be had, but we never come to the end. It is applied in so many ways and in so many circumstances. That does not make truth relative. It means rather it is inexhaustible. It also means we have to be very aware of our circumstances, of the world in which we live. Context, context, context

when it comes to confessing. Luther's age was highly religious but confused. As Pope Benedict XVI said at a youth gathering in Cologne (and I think at least on this part he's right), our age is highly secular (certainly in Europe and North America and likely elsewhere), and much has happened that has challenged and targeted the gospel in a different way than in Luther's time. That does not mean the biblical message is yesterday's news. It's today's news and tomorrow's hope—but we have to look around and figure out how to get the intellectual foot in the door to best engage the world. Once Luther came clear on just what that message was, he spent his life pursuing it. He spent his life confessing. “*Non moriar sed vivam et narrabo opera dei*”—“I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord.” This was Luther's motto from Psalm 118. It speaks of the activity of confessing and of Luther's attitude of confidence and trust, speaking forth a message of God's wonderful saving works given to him. And that was just what Luther did no matter how many tiles or devils there were on rooftops all around.

Luther's life ended where it began, in the village of Eisleben. He stopped there while traveling, and already in bad health, he died of a heart attack in February 1546. On his deathbed he was asked, “Do you confess Christ, the Son of God, our Savior and Redeemer?” to which Luther replied with a single word, with a loud and clear “Yes.” In the end, it was the most important confession Luther (or we) could ever make.

Endnotes

- 1 Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar: Bohlaus, 1883–), vol. 7, 838 [hereafter cited as WA:; thus: WA 7, 838]. Martin Luther. *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), vol 32, 112–113 (henceforth cited as LW; thus: LW 32, 112–113).
- 2 WA 1, 353–354; LW 31, 39–41.

Story Time

The Work of the Liberal Arts

Robert Rosin

This issue's articles have something in common. It is not authorship. (Well, okay, but guess again.) The answer lies behind and informs these articles. The two Reformation pieces look not just at Luther and what he did, but also at the larger world, the context, in which this happened. The other article traces the path to where we are in Western culture today. Ours is a different world than Luther's, but then like now, culture shapes people and their actions. So context needs to be studied if we care about who we are and why we do what we do.

What proved essential for Luther's breakthrough continued to undergird his take on theology and life: the liberal arts. These "freeing arts" had been part of an educational package in antiquity and were nothing new, but much had fallen by the wayside prior to the Renaissance "rebirth" of classical culture. The Renaissance chronologically overlapped and intellectually challenged Late Medieval Scholasticism, whose "school men," or educators, stood steadfast on syllogistic logic with Aristotle as their hero. Logic had a place in the original liberal arts, but the Renaissance insisted it coexist with other communication skills—grammar and rhetoric—that were used to explore basic subjects: mathematics, geometry, astronomy (meaning science), and music (fine arts). Man could no longer live by logic alone. Other subjects contributed to a broader vision of the world and enrichment of the mind. Poetry appealed to the heart, the affective side of human nature. And the arts taught life lessons through history (learning from the past) and moral philosophy (engaging the present). The *studia humanitatis*, the study of man, did not spurn God but honed in on man as God's foremost creature. "In our image and likeness," said the Genesis text. What did that entail? Answering that was the point of liberal arts education.¹ In today's West, the Christian presence has waned, but there is no reason we cannot continue to use these ideas.

When humanists viewed the past, they saw a chasm. Their world was not classical antiquity. The moment early humanists opened their mouths or put pen to page their Latin told them so. Beyond that, they had to hurdle Greek (and Hebrew) if they wanted to leave behind the Dark Ages (their term). Language studies using ancient texts introduced "new" ideas from another age. But rather than reprintinate, they sought to capture the spirit, make it their own, and then do something new. These Renaissance educational tools and ideas fueled a Reformation. Wrote historian Bernd Moeller, "No Humanism, no Reformation."²

When Wittenberg University opened in 1502, its charter specifically advertised the liberal arts part of its curriculum. No other school did that. Once Luther joined the faculty he championed the humanist curriculum. Why? Because Luther had used its tools to come to his theological breakthrough. Also, daily life took on new meaning as people in God-given tasks sought to live well, to understand the world, and to serve neighbor. How? With liberal arts education.

The Reformation that first benefited from Humanism now returned the favor, making the liberal arts central to education. From the sixteenth century to the twentieth (e.g., the Missouri Synod prep school system), the liberal arts featured prominently. What people did in terms of theology may not always have turned out well, but the arts are central.

The question today is whether to continue the relationship. The pressure is on for more “practical” education with a STEM or technical emphasis, assuming its contribution is more valuable (and then there is the paycheck). The Reformation faced similar pressures, while Luther called for school support and worked to keep students in classrooms when some did not want to invest the money, and parents thought time was better spent helping support the family.

It is important to realize that the liberal arts then were not confined to traditional schools. In the 150 years before Wittenberg approved “poesie and the arts” in its charter curriculum, Renaissance Humanism had been frozen out at scholastic universities. Interested students had to study on the side with humanists who shadowed university communities. Luther did Greek and Hebrew on his own, and he read history on the side. Even after Humanism broke through, not all could return to the university. Parish pastors relied on books for self-study. Today all sorts of interactive programs abound. While it is a step backward when core liberal arts are dropped at a school that once taught them, there are extracurricular alternatives. (In a competitive world, those would not be there if there were no interest.) So accounts of the death of the liberal arts seem to be exaggerated.³

So what about us? Most reading this essay are not fulltime classroom students, and given the topic, you have committed to read this and are interested in continuing education of some sort. (That's what reading this is.) What follows may be carrying coals to Newcastle,⁴ and you may well have a list of books that grab your attention. Still, allow me to ramble a bit, and maybe you might find something to add to your list.

Where to start? Method is a good place, particularly critical thinking. Some years ago the seminary historical theology department saw that with the prep schools gone and students coming with more varied backgrounds, we had to be more intentional about adopting a common approach to thinking things through. Fewer hours with students who had less of the traditional background meant they had to learn more on their own. There were many options, but we decided to use the simple yet thorough *Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* by the late Richard Paul, a pamphlet that lays out basics. There is nothing sacred in Paul's approach, but those basics work. Here's a snapshot.

There are eight elements to consider in thinking things through. Picture a wheel with these segments: goal/purpose, question/problem, information/data, concepts, assumptions (both unspoken and seen), points of view (we each have many), conclusions/inferences, consequences/implications. These seem to flow, but in practice they pop up in any order, and we move here and there as we think. *Thinking* has standards: clear, deep, broad, thorough, accurate, precise, significant, logical (and more—no sacred list/limit). *Thinkers* have traits: being curious, civil, humble, honest, empathetic, fair-minded (and more). Account for the elements, standards, and traits and you likely will do a pretty good job, although there is always room for improvement.

One place people usually stumble: weak vs. strong thinking. Weak finds holes in someone else's argument but is cavalier about one's own—the proverbial mote in another's eye while missing the log in yours. Systems have weak points. Are we honest enough to say so? Good critical thinking tests ideas all around. Once familiar with the method, we often recognize it at work, even if parts go by other names.

In April this year the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University, St. Louis, sponsored a conversation between Robert C. George and Cornell West, former department colleagues at Princeton. The two men have very different positions on politics and social issues but were in step when it came to the need for liberal arts education. As they talked, you could see critical thinking behind a very civil conversation. They were empathetic, fair-minded, and willing to concede they might not understand at the moment and could be wrong. That is quite a contrast to those who, regardless of the topic, are sure they know the mind of God. I am not talking about straightforward “Thus says the Lord” declarations or the promises God makes. Luther rightly told Erasmus, “Take away assertions and you take away Christianity,” and there is nothing wrong with Luther's “unless I am convinced by Scripture or evident reason . . .” But though we have God revealed, plenty remains hidden. That is the time to study, think, and perhaps be quiet. No worries if I do not put it all together. We have here no abiding city, and in due course more and better will come. But until then . . .

We have given lots of space to critical thinking, but we need a foundation. Get that right, and good things can happen when ranging through books and topics. Once again, where to start? So many books, yet so little time—and space. What follows is personal and sketchy, so take it with a grain of salt.

Staying with history and culture, a good place to start is with *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* by David Lowenthal, foundational in another way.⁵ Lowenthal deals with how people construct worldviews, with hopes, questions, and problems that drive their goals, with efforts to understand ideas (e.g., democracy, freedom, church, etc.), while reflecting values they often do not notice. (Did you catch segments of the critical thinking wheel?) The problem is that with so much going on in time past, we misunderstand some things written about and never see others that do not make it into the books, so the past really is like a foreign country. Yet some

may think they can find a golden age for a model and norm. But do we really have all the pieces and understand? We may picture Luther standing tall and answering to no one save God, but do we realize the place and power of the prince? We champion Luther, but then princes trumped theologians. Even if we got “back then” right, what is the point of building booths on that mountaintop? Time has moved on and our world is different. Lowenthal’s book is humbling. Other authors on historical method—for example, Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*—echo some of the same.

Another useful book is Carl Michalson, *The Hinge of History: An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith*. Long out of print (check the library), it looks at the relationship between history and proclamation. Christianity is like a hinge with Christ as the pin. The historical side has facts and events, strange and unique though they be. The hinge’s other side is the existential or relational element resting on promise. Promises are linked to events. God moves Abram (event). Why? Because God will make a great people with the Savior to come (double promise: what will come and what it means). You cannot really disprove a promise by itself. It may not be believed, but it is still there. However, tie it to a fact, and disprove the fact, and what then? (David Friedrich Strauss took that approach: attack the facts and the message falls.) Easter was just last week (as of this writing). What does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 15? If Christ is not raised (if no fact/event), then . . . The Creed has the hinge as well: “who for us and for our salvation (promise) came down from heaven and was incarnate . . .” (events—strange and unique but still events). As the book moves on, Michalson shifts to feature pure existentialists (disappointing!), but the hinge image is useful.

After Lowenthal and Michalson lay out some basics, what comes next? Historical surveys, even with their gaps, offer overviews, and monographs illustrate with cases. Both have their place. There are always new angles to consider, but the newest in the bookstore is not always the best. Older studies can be dated, but it is a plus if they are still for sale in a recent printing. One example: Thomas A. Bailey’s *The American Pageant*, a survey text (not church history) that we used in high school (!), is still in print with added chapters by established names to keep it current.

Along with histories, there are useful works in sociology and cultural studies that give us something to think about when looking at the world around. A classic is Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. Berger has no argument with theological content and message being the most important feature of religion, but religion also draws other aspects of life under its canopy and serves other purposes in terms of structure and organization. Robert Putnam became known for *Bowling Alone* about social capital—how it is accumulated, used, and can fade. One chapter looks at church, at how its presence and influence have changed within society. Bowling alleys close when leagues fade for various reasons, and legacy church bodies decline and their support organizations dissolve as well. We may not like the message or be able to halt the slide, but do not ignore Putnam and his other books on family and on children.

Here are a few names for starters in the area of science/technology. Lewis Mumford wrote long ago, yet his massive books still help explain how cities arose and how technology affects people's lives (even with very dated examples). Scientist Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, criticizes science for claiming its methods are constructed with clear and cool heads, when they actually emerge through trial and error and accident. Something similar is in Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where paradigm shifts come neither by accident nor after calm reflection. Rather they come when models are so frayed by exceptions and wobble under data that no longer fits, so researchers are forced to raze the old paradigm and build anew to accommodate what brought down the old. The temptation these days is to see computers and the internet as the game changers, but printing had a much bigger impact on information and learning. Just read the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein with its keen insights. For instance, the pre-print era dominated by the ear and the oral gives way to print in the hands of many who can read, reread, stop to contemplate, and then internalize. Religion and faith are individualized and made private. Ideas like that also pour forth from Marshall McLuhan, who foresaw cell phones back when computers still took up rooms and had vacuum tubes. His ideas on how people imagine community and connectivity have implications for education (if educators are willing to learn).

It can be worth reading authors with whom we may deeply disagree. They still might have ideas that prove useful, that hold up a mirror to our thinking and call it to account. One of the most provocative is Slavoj Žižek, a neo-Marxist and materialist who is a huge fan of Luther and a defender of Christianity. His interest is not in the message. Rather, Christianity serves social, cultural, and political purposes, and as such should be appreciated and defended. Luther championed conscience and liberty, paving the way for democratic movements. Žižek's book, *Parallax*, shows the value of looking at things from a different angle that may be impossible to resolve. Unless everyone falls in behind me and my right-minded thinking [joke!], it is important to learn to live with a parallax view. In the Robert George–Cornell West exchange referenced earlier, the two talked of just such a parallax relationship—different, unresolved, yet manageable when done with civil discourse.

Others outside the usual Lutheran circles, yet worth the risk and stimulation, are such people as Remi Bragg, Jacob Taubes, Jean Starobinski, Richard Sorabji, and René Girard, all with too many books to mention, but the names will get you there. Since we have talked method, there is Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, along with *The Church and the Kingdom* about the church's loss of messianic character. Catharine Pickstock, *Identity and Repetition*, argues that repeated experiences are needed to construct a composite identity, but that just gets us only close. (Think pixels rather than a hard line. It is something like the Heisenberg Principle: you can measure mass or velocity at any moment, but you cannot do both at the same time.) So can we be sure of identity? Close—but do not despair when it comes to the divine, for God speaks and does not leave us with only near certainties. Pickstock is serious about revelation and theology.

Beyond these complicated authors and topics, there are things to read for pleasure, giving windows into life. Classic fiction probes life's challenges. And poetry pays dividends with a few words—not stuff you must read again and again and still cannot figure out, but rather poets whose spare, precise words paint pictures and focus thoughts: Ted Kooser, Billy Collins, Louise Glück, Mary Oliver, Seamus Heaney, Czeslaw Milosz, W. H. Auden, and more. And do not forget the classics: Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante. Mindfulness is trendy these days. Poets have always known that. Humanists loved the sound of language and what it could create in the mind's eye. Poetry can help our prose, letting us trade a few dogmatic propositions for more pictures or stories painted in minds and hearts. Remember: logic has its place, but there is more to the liberal arts. Words do jobs.

By now all these words may have cured your insomnia. Thanks for your patience. The other articles in this issue deal more with theology. This one has tried to move more away—not that theology is unimportant, but understanding the world around us also is. Theologians have their place, but others have their role in the bigger picture. The Reformers read noble pagans to better understand, so we probably can as well. The names dropped admittedly have been idiosyncratic. And many, while interesting and useful, have their problems. (In some regard, don't we all?) That gives us something to work on, something to talk about in the Great Conversation, informed by the liberal arts.

Luther returned to the liberal arts in the last lines he penned:

No one who has not been a shepherd or a peasant for five years can understand Vergil in his *Bucolics* and *Georgics*. I maintain that no one can understand Cicero in his letters unless he has been involved in efforts to govern the state for twenty years. And let no one who has not guided congregations with the prophets for a hundred years believe he has tasted Holy Scripture thoroughly. Because of this the miracle is tremendous in John the Baptist, in Christ, and in the apostles. Lay not your hand on this divine *Aeneid*, but bow before it and adore its every trace. We are beggars. This is true.⁶

Luther read those classical authors. More, he connected them with life as he understood and lived it, so Vergil and Cicero were open to the reader's comment made after experience. That happens with the liberal arts: life and learning interact and inform the other. But when it came to the Scriptures, Luther saw *that* book differently. Vergil's *Aeneid* is the story of a great fall (Troy) followed by a long journey marked by trouble but also by hope, and finally comes a new beginning. The Bible is the story of a great fall (Eden) followed by a long journey heading to and through the cross to a new heaven and a new earth, a new beginning. But this is God's story, not Vergil's, so I don't revisit God and critique him, but rather God reads me—and a good thing that he does. For we are beggars, and yet . . . what a story. Ain't life grand!

Endnotes

- 1 It should be obvious, but this Humanism is far different from modern Secular Humanism, from Bertrand Russell, the Humanist Manifesto, etc.
- 2 Bernd Moeller, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, trans. and ed. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 36.
- 3 A recent upbeat report on the health of the liberal arts is Adam Kirsch, "Stop Worrying About the 'Death' of the Humanities," *Wall Street Journal*, April 26, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stop-worrying-about-the-death-of-the-humanities-11556290279>
- 4 Now there is an antiquated allusion. First used by Thomas Fuller in *The History of the Worthies of England* (1661). Newcastle was the center of coal production, so carrying coal there from elsewhere was superfluous. The same could hold true for what follows here, but it might also trigger a thought and spark interest.
- 5 We will skip the bibliographic detail here and for the books to follow. They are easily tracked down online, available for sale or through inter-library loan.
- 6 Martin Luther, *Werke, Tischreden* (Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1912) 5:318; *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967) 54:476.

Homiletical Helps

Reverse the Curse

Preaching Sermons that Stick

Ryan Tinetti

To his apostles about to take to the world with the message of the gospel, Jesus told his programmatic parable of the sower. The seed, Jesus says, is “the word of the kingdom,” and sometimes the seed proves fruitful and other times it does not. Like the families of *Anna Karenina*, each of the unfruitful seeds is unfruitful in its own way (rootlessness, riches, etc.), but all the fruitful seeds are alike: they are sown in the good soil of “one who hears the word *and understands it*” (Mt 13:23). Understanding, then, is not some added bonus to preaching—a nice but unnecessary feature. Rather, the “stickiness” of the sermon is part-and-parcel of the commission to preach itself.¹

Preachers, however, have a problem: the Curse of Knowledge, a term coined by social scientists.² Chip and Dan Heath, in their book *Made to Stick*, define the curse of knowledge this way: “Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has ‘cursed’ us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind.”³ While this may be a near-universal human phenomenon (for instance, studies of toddlers prove them to be some of the most egregious culprits of the curse), the problem is especially acute for preachers. The reason being that, as preachers, the theological knowledge and pastoral expertise that make us fit to carry out our calling can also inhibit us from connecting with our congregations in a more profound way.

I have experienced this firsthand throughout my ministry, and so my motivation for exploring this topic is autobiographical and not judgmental. After untold sermons I have heard from parishioners not only “nice talk, preacher” but, God bless them, “what in the world is that *nosti-whatcha-call-it*?⁴ You say they didn’t like *bodies*?” And so in order to help myself and to help other preachers, I want to briefly consider how preachers can “reverse the curse,” so to speak, and better proclaim the life-giving good news of the gospel in a way that the average pew-sitter can understand.

About the Author

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What follows in this essay will only be the bones of an argument that needs much more fleshing out. In part 1, I will explain more about what the curse of knowledge is, discussing further why it is especially debilitating for preachers. In part 2, I will review a sampling of the literature in the social sciences about the curse and suggest some practices that may help preachers to “reverse” its deleterious effects. Finally, I will conclude with some theological reflections.

Part I

Understanding the Curse of Knowledge

It is a pervasive, if tacit, tenet of our age: more is better. More money, more status, even more Twitter followers. As pious Christian people we may resist some of the more consumeristic manifestations of this, calling into question the spiritual value of ever-increasing material goods. What we are less likely to question, though, is the value of more *knowledge*. Knowledge is often viewed as an unmitigated good. Preachers, prone to quoting Scripture, might invoke the lament of the prophet: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). And on the positive side, one thinks of the command of Jesus himself to “love the Lord your God . . . with all your *mind*” (Mk 12:30). Even if we are hesitant to apply “more is better” to all aspects of life, it can be affirmed when it comes to knowledge; as the public service announcements of my childhood used to intone, *The more you know* . . .

Recent research across a variety of disciplines has called this assumption into question. In their seminal article “The Curse of Knowledge in Economic Settings: An Experimental Analysis,” economists Colin Camerer, George Lowenstein, and Martin Weber make a startling claim. Ironically using the characteristic jargon of economics (in which people are known as “agents”), the authors write: “In predicting the judgments of others, agents are unable to ignore the additional information they possess. This ‘curse of knowledge’ has . . . [as a consequence that] better-informed agents may suffer losses. *More information can actually hurt.*”⁵ In an organizational behavior study examining the purchasing behaviors of buyers, Boaz Keysar, Linda Ginzel, and Max Bazerman echo the economists’ findings in their conclusion: “While it is frequently argued in economic models that *more information cannot hurt*, these results along with those from research on the curse of knowledge suggest that *it can.*”⁶ According to these researchers, then, in the case of knowledge more is not necessarily better—and may be much worse. Why would that be?

Consider a commonplace occurrence from around my home. I now have four kids under the age of ten. The oldest (nine) is a strong reader, the second-oldest child (seven) is coming along, and the second-youngest (five) can recognize her letters.⁷ It was not all that long ago when the nine-year-old was muddling through a board book (such as *Goodnight Moon*); now, though, he has almost no patience for his seven-year-old brother trying to read the same: “It says *bowl full of mush*, not *bowel full of moosh!* Why don’t you say those words right?” Meanwhile, the seven-year-old

(no doubt alleviating some frustration with older brother in the process) goads his little sister: “No, that’s a ‘d’ not a ‘b’! You’ve got it backwards!” My kids are exhibiting, with precious little nuance or subtlety, the influence of the curse of knowledge. Having passed through the gates of literacy, with each successive step they forget what life is like on the outside.

Someone might object, “Yes, but those are children. As we mature, we grow in empathy and our ability to appreciate others’ experience.” Psychologist Susan Birch, in an article that focuses on the curse’s effect on children, says not so fast: “One’s own knowledge can be a curse when reasoning about beliefs that differ from one’s own. For children, greater susceptibility to this curse may lead to more blatant errors in mental-state attribution, but knowledge can contaminate even adults’ ability to reason about other people’s actions and beliefs.”⁸ For grown-ups no less than for kids, “The thing that you are by far the most ignorant of is the true extent of your own ignorance.”⁹ Harvard biologist and essayist Steven Pinker is even blunter: “Anyone who wants to lift the curse of knowledge must first appreciate what a devilish curse it is. Like a drunk who is too impaired to realize that he is too impaired to drive, we do not notice the curse because the curse prevents us from noticing it. This blindness impairs us in every act of communication.”¹⁰

How the Curse of Knowledge Impacts Preachers

Insofar as *Homo sapiens* are linguistic creatures, dependent upon speaking with and understanding one another and made in the image of a God of conversation,¹¹ the curse of knowledge is a human problem; every parent or grandparent trying to explain to a little one why our Father in heaven is completing “art” projects knows it all too well. And indeed, every day we find ourselves in situations where a conversation is complicated by varying, and often unknown, degrees of knowledge among the speakers. As Pinker says, the curse “impairs us in every act of communication.” But while the curse of knowledge afflicts everyone to some extent, let us consider why and how it is an especially acute problem for pastors and preachers.

In their book *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath assert that “getting a message across has two stages: the Answer stage and the Telling Others stage.”¹² In the answer stage, you are gathering information and accruing expertise so that you have something to share. This may involve formal study or it could be a period of apprenticeship or simply searching around on the internet. As the Heaths point out, though, the rub is that the same things that *help* you in the answer stage *hinder* you in the telling others stage: “To get the Answer, you need expertise, but you can’t dissociate expertise from the Curse of Knowledge. You know things that others don’t know, and you can’t remember what it was like not to know those things. So when you get around to sharing the Answer, you’ll tend to communicate *as if your audience were you*.”¹³ Once you learn how to pronounce *bowl*, you will assume that your little brother, by some wizardry, automatically knows how to as well.

In many vocations this can present a challenge, but not an essential occupational hazard. A plumber, for example, might struggle to explain to the homeowner how he was able to alleviate the clogged pipes, but the homeowner will be satisfied simply to have the problem repaired; a clear and lucid explanation would be, as they say, “value added.” Not so in the case of preachers. The preacher’s calling *depends* on the ability to convey knowledge to others. Explaining, elucidating, and edifying are right there in the job description. Or to put it more starkly still: the same thing that makes preachers *capable* for their vocation—a body of knowledge, expertise—is also what threatens to make them *incapable* of it. While others may be able to rest on their Answer Stage laurels, for pastors Telling Others is what it is all about. So, then, what are the symptoms that a preacher may be infected with the curse of knowledge? Let me suggest two, knowing others could be put forward.

The most telling symptom is the persistent use, without definition, of words unique to the Christian (or even Lutheran) vocabulary—or, less charitably, *jargon*.¹⁴ Pinker points out that, while every pastime or field of endeavor develops its own vernacular, “The problem is that as we become proficient at our job or hobby we come to use these catchwords so often that they flow out of our fingers automatically, and we forget that our readers may not be members of the clubhouse in which we learned them.”¹⁵ For us preachers, this “clubhouse” takes the shape of our time in seminary. And after completing grad school, it continues by way of the books we read (often technical theological works and commentaries) and the company we keep (other pastors). If not checked, the sermon threatens to become about as intelligible as overheard military orders.

A second symptom of the Curse is that the preacher alludes to the Bible without attribution or context. Birch points out that the Curse is even more potent in this case because the preacher has at least some grounds for assuming the shared knowledge. She writes, “Knowledge becomes a more potent curse when it can be combined with a rationale (even if only an implicit one) for inflating one’s estimates of what others know.”¹⁶ As pastors, we are wont—and for good reason—to put the best construction on our congregations. In this respect, though, recognizing the well-documented challenge of biblical illiteracy,¹⁷ we would do well to assume that the scriptural knowledge of our parishioners is a work in progress (without thereby condemning them for being, in the words of Hebrews, ready only for “milk and not solid food” [Heb 5:12]).

The Curse of Knowledge afflicts us all. Spouses and parents, employees and neighbors, all struggle to a certain degree in communicating with one another without assuming too much. The Curse presents an especial problem for preachers, however, since effective and understandable communication is at the heart of our work. Next, in part II, we will consider some practices that can aid in “reversing the Curse.”

Part II

In part I we diagnosed the problem, the Curse of Knowledge, and surveyed some of its symptoms among preachers. It should have been apparent that no one is immune to the Curse. Now, in part II, we will offer some prescriptions for treating it. We are striving to reverse the Curse. To be sure, as the Heath brothers suggest, “Reversing the process is as impossible as un-ringing a bell.”¹⁸ The goal is for preachers to be better understood by their hearers; the aim is for sermons that, at least according to the modest measure of being understood, “stick.” To that end we will offer a few practices, suggested by research done on the Curse in other fields, that can help to mitigate (if not wholly undo) the more deleterious effects of the Curse of Knowledge.¹⁹

Sit in the Pew

How can you develop a more realistic appraisal of your hearers and see things from their perspective, so as to avoid preaching from atop Mt. Everest when they’re down in Death Valley? In his seminal textbook *The Witness of Preaching*, Thomas Long writes, “Picture the people who are likely to hear the sermon; call to mind what you know of their lives. Go to the text on behalf of the young family in the front row, the teenager in the back . . . the eight-year-old girl sitting there with her mother and new stepfather.”²⁰ The old adage for writers is “think of the reader over your shoulder.” That’s good advice, so far as it goes, but Long’s admonition encourages us to go further. Sit in the pew. Get the perspective of your parishioners.²¹

I mean this both literally and metaphorically. Perhaps it sounds silly, but in order to adopt the mindset of the Sunday morning churchgoer it can be helpful to set your bottom in their spot on Monday morning (or whenever your work week starts). Before you begin to clutter up your unconscious with verb parsings and commentary from antiquity, sit in the pew and read aloud the lessons for the following Sunday in the translation that your congregation uses. The purpose is to reproduce, at least in some small fashion, the experience that God’s people will be having a few days hence. Unlike the preacher, they have not been mulling over this text, pondering it, breaking it apart, and reading it in the original languages. For the vast majority of them, the liturgical assembly on Sunday morning is the first they have heard or thought about the passage for some time, perhaps ever. So bury your pride, sit in Grandma Schmidt’s seat (don’t worry, she isn’t there to kick you out), and read the Bible. Keep a notepad handy and record any first impressions: What questions does the text raise? What oddities beg for explanation? What context is missing? These are the things that will be catching the attention of your hearers on Sunday morning, and are the natural starting point for sermon development.²²

We can also take “sitting in the pew” in a more metaphorical direction. Writing in 1999, Pamela Hinds had the following recommendation for researchers: “Gathering data directly from novices on their ability or task completion times is a method of bypassing the biases involved in relying on others’ judgment and could

result in the most accurate estimates of novice task completion times.”²³ In other words—go right to the source and *ask*. Whatever means Professor Hinds had in mind nineteen years ago, this is made much simpler for preachers in the age of social media. Post to Facebook, Instagram, and so on, a key verse from the coming Sunday’s readings, or an image that captures the text’s theme or characters (for instance, a picture of sheep and goats), and invite people to comment.²⁴ As Jesus once put it: “How do *you* read?” (Lk 10:26). Receiving this input right from the sheep’s mouth, so to speak, provides invaluable data for preaching preparation.

Speak a Universal Language

A temptation in our discussion of the Curse of Knowledge would be for someone to think that the purpose, or at least the strategy, for reversing the Curse is to dumb things down. Dilute the message until it is an inoffensive, tasteless porridge, which makes up for its deficit of meatiness with a surplus of easily digestible pabulum. This is emphatically *not* the aim. But if a watered-down, *Reader’s Digest* version of the sermon is not what we are after, then what is? What we need is a universal language.

Chip and Dan Heath recount the story of a firm that produced the complicated machinery used to make silicon chips. The company relied on two groups of people: engineers to *create* the design, and manufacturers to *construct* the design. Alas, the two groups spoke different languages, the engineers caught up in the clouds of abstraction and the manufacturers thinking about the tactile realities of the machines themselves. Ultimately, the engineers needed to change their behavior and communicate at the level of the physical machine—since that was a “language” shared by everyone. The Heaths conclude, “The moral of this story is not to ‘dumb things down.’ The manufacturing people faced complex problems and they needed smart answers. Rather, the moral of the story is to find a ‘universal language,’ one that everyone speaks fluently. *Inevitably, that universal language will be concrete.*”²⁵

The same could be said of preachers. Preachers are, if you will, the “engineers” of this firm called Church. We have the hifalutin knowledge, if not the beatific vision. In order to convey that adequately to the people of God—the ones caught up in the physical, tangible realities of living by faith in the everyday and mundane—we need to speak in the universal language of the concrete.²⁶ Something is concrete if you can examine it with your senses. “High-performance” is abstract; V8 engine is concrete. Concrete is also the native language of analogy, metaphor, and story. These all deal with particularities grounded in lived experience.

This emphasis on the concrete is particularly important as it pertains to the aforementioned problem of speaking with jargon. As pastors, there are many terms that are native to the biblical witness and important for the life of faith; concepts like justification, holiness, and licentiousness, to name only a few. It is a poor solution simply to avoid or dispense with them. By “translating” them, as it were, into the universal language of concrete experience the pastor retains the theological vernacular without alienating his hearers.

So how can pastors learn to speak the universal language more fluently? Daniel Overdorf, in his book *One Year to Better Preaching*, provides several exercises than can help preachers to “speak concrete.” For example, Overdorf encourages preachers to listen to storytellers.²⁷ Storytelling is inherently concrete, involving specific people in specific places doing specific things.²⁸ By listening to and evaluating those who practice this skill well, the preacher can hone the ability to tell stories.²⁹ Overdorf also suggests dabbling in “multisensory preaching.” Overdorf writes, “Yes, God used the spoken word to proclaim his truth. He also, however, used multiple other means. God created the human body to receive information through five different senses; and, he uses all five to reveal himself and his truth.”³⁰ He encourages preachers to think through how they might engage these different senses in a sermon: using artwork or photography to illustrate a point, placing something relevant to the message in the hands of the congregation (rock, coin, molding clay, etc.), or filling the sanctuary with a scent (perfume with the story of Mary’s anointing, frankincense with the magi, and so on). By engaging multiple senses, the message is more concrete and thus “stickier.”

Bolster the Background

We saw that one of the symptoms of a preacher afflicted with the Curse of Knowledge is allusion to Scripture without context and without explanation. One solution is for the preacher to be more intentional about providing that needed background. Another solution seeks to bolster the background of the hearers by striving to improve their biblical literacy. But how to do it? Clearly, this is a topic that deserves its own thorough treatment. Here we will briefly suggest a few ideas.

In an article for *Christianity Today*, researcher Ed Stetzer suggests several ideas for fostering the biblical literacy of God’s people.³¹ Two in particular stand out for Lutheran congregations. First, Stetzer encourages pastors to help their congregants to “see the Bible as a whole.” “It’s not just that we read our Bibles, but the way we read our Bibles that increases biblical literacy,” Stetzer writes. “We need a whole Bible approach to Bible reading and study. . . . The Bible isn’t 1,000 stories or even 66—it’s one story. Helping people see this encourages them to read the Bible more faithfully and fruitfully.” Here Lutheran (and other) churches have a potentially underutilized resource: the Church Year. By helping their churches to see the Sundays of the church year like a serial narrative spread out over months—drawing connections in sermons, blog posts, newsletter articles, and other congregational communications—pastors can promote a sense of the over-arching narrative of Scripture.³² Having been immersed in the vast sweep of the biblical narrative parishioners are perhaps more capable of attending to the individual *stories* that constitute the larger *story*.

Second, Stetzer counsels that churches create a plan for Bible reading—be it personal, congregational, or both. “It’s critical for church leadership to challenge believers to be in the Word of God, consistently growing in their knowledge of the Scriptures,” Stetzer writes. “I often hear of people who’d rather read devotional books

than read the Bible. That's because most of us need a specific plan to consistently be in the Word." Once again, we in the Lutheran church have the resources at our disposal; we simply need to avail ourselves of them. I have in mind the Daily Lectionary of *The Lutheran Service Book*.³³ This lectionary covers the entire New Testament and a third of the Old Testament each year. A congregation that is encouraged to follow this pattern and is furnished with the means (for instance, free Bibles and the weekly readings printed in the worship folder or on the website) will be well on its way to bolstering its biblical background—and thus helping their preacher to whip the Curse of Knowledge.

Close the Loop

We have looked at practices for preparing for sermon development, beginning it well, and ensuring its success. One last practice for reversing the Curse in preaching comes *after* the preaching: soliciting and receiving feedback. Steven Pinker says, "To escape the curse of knowledge, we have to go beyond our own powers of divination. We have to close the loop, as the engineers say, and get a feedback signal from the world of readers—that is, show a draft to some people who are similar to our intended audience and find out whether they can follow it."³⁴ Pamela Hinds, in her research on expert communication with novices, has a similar recommendation: "Use intermediates to assist in predicting novice performance. I would not suggest eliminating the expert from this process but closing the gap by adding in the perspective of someone closer to the experience of the novices being predicted."³⁵ By intermediaries, Hinds means those who are not quite novices (e.g., the unchurched newcomer or the child) and not quite experts (e.g., pastor, staff, and senior lay leaders).

Such intermediaries may be individuals in the congregation in a formal leadership role, such as the Board of Elders, or it may be those "seasoned saints" who might never ace a theology exam but who will pass with flying colors on the last day. Seek them out. Sit them down. Pick their brains. "Are my sermons closer in clarity to a dishwasher manual or the daily news?" Provide them with an evaluation sheet that has Curse of Knowledge inspired questions, such as "Are there any words or concepts used that you don't understand?" and "Could you follow the sermon's line of thinking?" or "Would you feel confident inviting your unchurched neighbor to hear me preach? Why or why not?" If the only feedback that the preacher is getting is "Nice talk" in the receiving line after worship, you can be sure that the Curse of Knowledge will continue unabated. "A preacher who never seeks intentional, systematic evaluation after leaving the classroom," says Overdorf, "is like a baseball player that learned to hit in little league, but never receives coaching in the years that follow."³⁶ Close the loop and buck the Curse.

Theological Reflections

While the term "Curse of Knowledge" originated in the social sciences, it is irresistibly suggestive for the theologian. All the more surprising, then, that the

concept has not received any sort of sustained theological or pastoral engagement; a spattering of blog posts and a few passing references in books are the whole of it so far. In this section I only wish to sketch out a theological perspective on the Curse of Knowledge, but further exploration could prove fruitful.³⁷

The Lord God commands Adam in Genesis 2, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gn 2:16–17). The curse borne from knowing that accursed tree is primarily separation from the Creator in the form of death. But there is also a secondary facet of the curse that is the rotten fruit of Adam’s choice—and this facet is especially relevant to our understanding of the Curse of Knowledge.

This secondary facet of the curse is apparent in Genesis 3, after Eve takes of the fruit of the tree of knowledge and shares some with Adam. “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked,” the narrative continues. “And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gn 3:7). The fated choice of Adam and Eve not only alienated them from *God*—it alienated them from *one another*. As a result of the entrance of sin into the world, humankind becomes *incurvatus in se*, to use the Augustinian formulation: “Curved in on itself.”

Augustine famously reflects on this *incurvatus* state in book 1 of his *Confessions* as he ponders the tantrums of an infant:

For an infant of that age, could it be reckoned good to use tears in trying to obtain what it would have been harmful to get, to be vehemently indignant at the refusals of free and older people and of parents or many other people of good sense who would not yield to my whims, and to attempt to strike them and to do as much injury as possible? . . . I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother’s milk.³⁸

As the father of a newborn (my fourth), I can confirm Augustine’s dour assessment—an assessment that Scripture shares: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5).

Social scientific research into the Curse of Knowledge does not appear to touch on the deeper, more essential aspects of human nature that may bring it about—nor would one expect such metaphysical analysis from the natural or social sciences. Nevertheless, for the theologian the intersections are clear. Recall the definition of the Curse of Knowledge: “The tendency to be biased by one’s own current knowledge state when trying to appreciate a more naive perspective.”³⁹ Or, in simpler terms, “A difficulty in imagining what it is like for someone else not to know something that you know.”⁴⁰ In other words, the Curse of Knowledge arises from our being *incurvatus*—curved in on ourselves—and so unable to take another’s perspective.

This theological perspective on the Curse of Knowledge is particularly convicting (and ironic) for preachers, who would be the *instruments* of reconciliation with God for their parishioners, and yet in the process of proclaiming the *message* of reconciliation put their own complicity in sin—in the form of the Curse of Knowledge—on full display. This only broadens the scope of the problem for preachers and makes more urgent the need for them to address it. Ultimately, such a demon will only be exorcised by the Holy Spirit. Cooperating with the Spirit, though, preachers can be much more intentional in their approach to dealing with the Curse.

Endnotes

- 1 To be sure, understanding is but one component of preaching generally and of “stickiness” in particular. We might also address how a sermon is “sticky” in its ability to be applied and lived by the hearers. In this essay, however, I will be focusing on the sine qua non element of stickiness: that it be understood.
- 2 See Colin Camerer, George Loewenstein, and Martin Weber, “The Curse of Knowledge in Economic Settings: An Experimental Analysis,” *The Journal of Political Economy* 97, no. 5 (1989): 1232–1254.
- 3 Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *Made to Stick* (New York: Random House, 2007), 20.
- 4 Otherwise known as “Gnosticism.” This is an actual example from my own ministry.
- 5 Camerer, “The Curse of Knowledge,” 1233; emphasis mine.
- 6 Boaz Keysar, Linda Ginzel, and Max Bazerman, “States of Affairs and States of Mind: The Effect of Knowledge of Beliefs,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 64, no. 3 (1999): 290. Emphasis mine.
- 7 At publication, the infant does not read in any capacity.
- 8 Susan Birch and Paul Bloom, “The curse of knowledge in reasoning about false beliefs” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 5 (2007): 385.
- 9 Richard Fisher, “The Curse of Knowledge,” *New Scientist* (July 30, 2011).
- 10 Steven Pinker, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2014), 61–62.
- 11 As Robert Kolb would remind us.
- 12 Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 245.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Some will call this “Christianese.” To be fair, all have sinned in this regard; you can easily find examples of legalese, medicalese, officialese, etc.
- 15 Pinker, *Sense of Style*, 63.
- 16 Birch and Bloom, “The curse of knowledge in reasoning about false beliefs,” 385.
- 17 See, e.g., Bob Smietana, “Americans are fond of the Bible; don’t actually read it,” LifeWayResearch.com. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/04/25/lifeway-research-americans-are-fond-of-the-bible-dont-actually-read-it/> (accessed 22 January 2018).
- 18 Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 20.
- 19 Much of what follows are not new ideas; many have been suggested elsewhere in various forms. The reader is encouraged to see, e.g., Daniel Overdorf, *One Year to Better Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013). My thanks to David Schmitt for pointing me to this resource.
- 20 Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: WJK, 2016), 99.

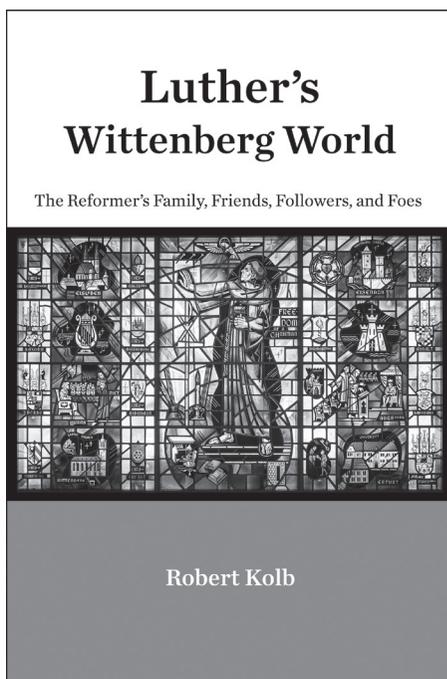
- 21 Keysar, “States of Affairs,” 290, refer to the importance of “perspective-taking” in countering the Curse of Knowledge.
- 22 I am indebted to David Schmitt for this advice.
- 23 Pamela Hinds, “The Curse of Expertise: The Effects of Expertise and Debiasing Methods on Predictions of Novice Performance,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 5, no. 2 (1999): 205–221.
- 24 For ideas on how to use social media effectively in ministry, see Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).
- 25 Heath and Heath, *Made to Stick*, 115; emphasis mine.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 27 Overdorf, *One Year to Better Preaching*, 83.
- 28 As with much of the counsel in this section, storytelling has been a principal strategy for the so-called New Homiletic. One of the foremost leaders of this movement, Fred Craddock advocated for the “inductive” style of preaching that helps the hearers to experience the message along with the preacher. Such an approach generally also helps to mitigate the effects of the Curse of Knowledge.
- 29 Overdorf recommends storyteller.net and the Enoch Pratt library (www.prattlibrary.org/home/storyindex.aspx). I also suggest podcasts such as the *Moth Radio Hour* and *This American Life*.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 31 Ed Stetzer, “Biblical Literacy by the Numbers: Fixing the Problem,” ChristianityToday.com. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/october/biblical-literacy-by-numbers-3.html>. Accessed 24 January 2019.
- 32 Other resources have emerged in recent years to encourage this as well, such as the Narrative Lectionary and the popular curriculum from Zondervan, *The Story*. In the opinion of this author, the lectionaries of the *Lutheran Service Book* (both 1- and 3-year versions) have the potential to inculcate this narrative mindset no less than these re-cent resources when taught well.
- 33 *Lutheran Service Book*, 299–304. The contents of this lectionary is also reproduced in total in *The Treasury of Daily Prayer*, available from Concordia Publishing House.
- 34 Pinker, *Sense of Style*, 75.
- 35 Hinds, “The Curse of Expertise,” 219.
- 36 Overdorf, *One Year to Better Preaching*, 55.
- 37 While there is a growing body of literature addressing the Curse of Knowledge in economics, psychology, education, etc. (see <http://www.curse-of-knowledge.behaviouralfinance.net>), a few blog posts notwithstanding there seems not yet to be any in-depth engagement with the Curse among pastors and theologians.
- 38 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, I §11.
- 39 Birch and Bloom, “The curse of knowledge in reasoning about false beliefs,” 382.
- 40 Pinker, *The Sense of Style*, 59.

Reviews

LUTHER'S WITTENBERG WORLD:
The Reformer's Family, Friends,
Followers, and Foes. By Robert Kolb.
Fortress Press, 2018. Hardcover. 312 pages.
\$34.00.

Robert Kolb's latest book focuses on everyone but Luther, yet Luther remains firmly at its center. In *Luther's Wittenberg World*, Kolb outlines biographies of hundreds of people who influenced Luther or were influenced by him in his own lifetime. The range of figures examined here is broad, from Luther's fellow Wittenberg citizens to the many leaders who either opposed or aided his cause. This range accomplishes one of the major goals that the author sets for himself: to show that Luther was not a solitary hero, but instead that he and his cause were shaped and supported by many, many people. Kolb's numerous vignettes form a vast chorus of people influencing, supporting, endorsing, and challenging Luther, as well as those who helped spread the Wittenberg theology.

The eight chapters organize these figures by their roles. Chapter 1 covers the people who shaped Luther in his youth. Chapters 2 and 3 explore his neighbors, family, colleagues, and early students in Wittenberg. Chapters 4 and 5 branch out to the reform-minded Christians throughout Germany who supported him and to the Germans who were drawn to Wittenberg to study at the hub of his movement. In chapter 6, Kolb



illuminates the international students who came to Wittenberg to study, then returned home to spread Luther's message. Chapter 7 examines the nobility in central and northern Europe who either supported or opposed the spread of Luther's reforms. Although the chapter is entitled, "Princes Friendly and Hostile," Kolb also notes the significant support Luther received from several noblewomen. Finally, chapter 8 covers Luther's many theological foes, both Catholic and Protestant.

The book is intended for a general audience; it contains no footnotes and only a one-page bibliography. For the uninitiated, it includes a glossary of

Editor's note

Is there a book (or movie, or music recording, or cultural phenomenon) you would like to see reviewed in Concordia Journal or concordiatheology.org? Email us at cj@csl.edu.

terms, groups, events, and texts. Readers will appreciate the helpful system of using bold italics to denote a figure's main entry and small caps when a person is referenced apart from his or her main entry. For many readers, however, this book will be either a reference book or something to read in small doses. There is no persistent narrative thread running through the book. Instead, each chapter and subsection outline the stories of individuals in succession. In other words, this book is more a tour of Reformation figures than the story of Luther's movement.

Nonetheless, both novices and specialists will find something worthwhile in this volume. Although there is not one narrative, there are hundreds of fascinating, smaller stories. Most notable are the many minor figures whose contributions to this era have received little notice. Their stories remind us that the spread of Luther's movement depended on hundreds of people whose work we barely know. The chapter on German students (chapter 5) who studied in Wittenberg moves far beyond the handful of figures who became famous for being controversial or for authoring confessional documents. Instead, Kolb emphasizes the many students whose influence was felt in the changes they brought to local areas by introducing or supporting the Reformation. Kolb's chapter on the international students (chapter 6) who came to Wittenberg emphasizes the Scandinavian leaders but also attends to several Hungarian theologians who promoted reform in the lands southeast of Saxony.

While Kolb notes Luther's many opponents as well as the conflicts that sometimes broke out among the Wittenberg circle, the overall impression is one of harmony and common mission. Kolb notes several smaller tensions and disagreements that he portrays as a normal part of communal life, especially during times of upheaval. He also notes that such conflicts often ended with reconciliation, such as the case of Cordatus and Cruciger (85). The theological battles that emerged among Luther's followers are presented in an evenhanded way, as competing interpretations of a beloved leader. This is likely based on Kolb's sensitive portrayal of the relationship between Luther and Melancthon, which was marked by profound respect and gratitude even when their personalities clashed and their viewpoints differed.

As *Concordia Journal* readers likely know, Kolb's knowledge of the Wittenberg circle is nothing short of masterful. The fruits of that knowledge are on full display in this book. The inclusion of six maps and abundant illustrations add to its considerable value and appeal.

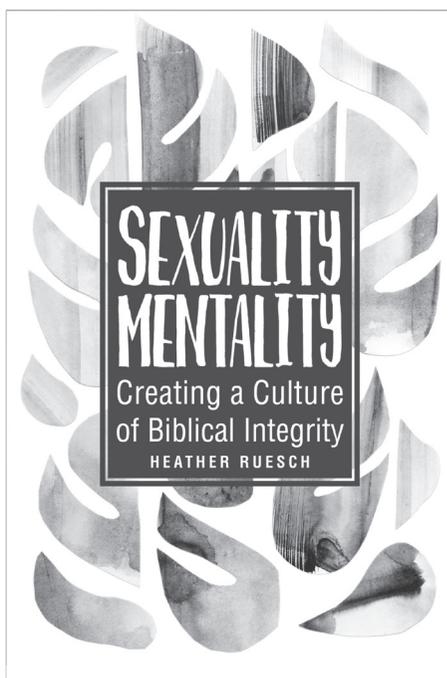
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SEXUALITY MENTALITY: Creating a Culture of Biblical Integrity. By Heather Ruesch. Concordia Publishing House, 2018. Paper. 176 pages. \$14.99.

Concordia Publishing House has provided readers a variety of books addressing sexuality: *Sexual Morality in a Christless World* by Matthew Rueger, *From Taboo to Delight: Ethics of Sex* edited by Gifford Grobien, *How to Talk Confidently with your Child about Sex* by Lenore Buth and the *Learning About Sex* series for girls and boys of various ages. Heather Ruesch's new book is a welcome addition to the Concordia Publishing House collection that addresses the topic of sexuality.

Ruesch makes the case that it can be difficult for people to navigate through all the sexually charged propaganda distributed by the culture. Children, teenagers, young adults, and parents are overcome by voices that normalize ungodly sexual behaviors. We hear a voice say, "It's just sex", and another voice say, "Sex is safe when you use birth control." If a woman gets pregnant both men and women say "It is the woman's decision to keep or end the pregnancy." Naive voices say "you can have sex without any consequences." But, as Ruesch points out, these voices ignore the fact that many sexually active people have sexually transmitted diseases (STD). And a growing number of voices normalize masturbation which drives individuals into loneliness by saying "self-pleasure is harmless."

These voices in the fabric of our everyday lives shape the way we think



and behave. The voices are so prominent that Ruesch has encountered youth saying, "Nobody told me." Nobody told them about STDs, nobody told them that you could get pregnant by having sex, and nobody told them about the harmful effects of pornography. Ruesch discovered that parents and even religious leaders are hesitant to talk about sex. It seems we are too comfortable allowing YouTube, movies, television shows, and other forms of electronic media to educate us about sexuality. Therefore, Ruesch is calling for the church to create a culture of biblical integrity. She is encouraging the church to speak up about the topic of sex even if it makes us feel uncomfortable.

The voice of the culture will separate us from God and one another. But the voice of God brings biblical integrity

to a culture that is wasting away in the lies of a sinful sexual mentality. Ruesch's book *Sexuality Mentality* brings truth and hope to those struggling with the lies and empty promises about sexuality. Ruesch provides the reader with a Godly understanding of various sexual topics. She lifts up the voice of God in a culture that has been inundated with so many other voices that do not speak the truth. Each chapter of the book identifies the cultural voices that propagate lies about sexuality, but then she brings the reader into the truth of God's word. At the end of each chapter are discussion questions that can be used with families, Bible classes, or youth groups. Ruesch has provided an opportunity for the church to discuss the importance of God's word when talking about sex. The reader will be blessed by her work and encouraged to create a culture of biblical integrity about how we think and behave sexually.

Mark Rockenbach

**LUTHER'S OUTLAW GOD:
Volume 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and
Predestination.** By Steven D. Paulson.
Fortress Press, 2018. 308 pages. Paper.
\$34.00.

Luther's Outlaw God is the first of three volumes in which Paulson examines Luther's teaching of the ways God hides, which is a topic that "encompasses the whole of the doctrine of God, and the whole of theology" (xxx). Volume 1, as the title indicates, deals specifically with what Luther teaches about the hidden

God, evil, and predestination. In this initial volume, Paulson examines Luther's argument in the *Bondage of the Will* and Luther's interpretation of biblical texts like Exodus 3–4, and the sermon in Ezekiel 18, among others. Volumes 2–3 will discuss Luther's expositions on other preachers in the Scriptures such as Jonah, Paul at the Areopagus, David in Psalm 51, Luther's Genesis Lectures and so on.

If this first volume is any indication, I cannot wait until the other two volumes are published. I read *Luther's Outlaw God*, not as a historian or Luther expert, but from the perspective of an Old Testament exegete and preacher. I was hoping for a discussion that would help me with the questions concerning evil and predestination that people still ask. (Evidently, Luther calls these the two "monsters" of theology, and I can see why.) I was also looking forward to an in-depth look at Luther's interpretation of some difficult texts and how it might help me in the way I read and teach the Bible. I was not disappointed.

The interesting thing about *Luther's Outlaw God* is not that Paulson is dealing with new questions or problems; rather, he helps us to think in new ways about the familiar issues that never seem to go away. And he does that through a close analysis of Scripture and the work of Luther.

The insights that Paulson gives his readers are extremely helpful. For example, already in his Introduction, Paulson points out a pattern that Luther saw in the way God deals with his people: First, he gives them a promise, and then the promise is followed by terror

(xxviii). Throughout the book, Paulson returns to examples of this pattern in the lives of people such as Abraham, Moses, David, St. Paul, and ultimately Jesus himself. Through Luther's writings and lectures, Paulson gives Luther's perspective on what we do with a God who makes a promise and then hides it in its opposite (*sub contrario*). Luther's insights are extremely helpful for pastors who minister to people troubled by God's seeming absence in this world and question whether or not God has truly abandoned them.

Paulson talks with special clarity on the role of the preacher when it comes to dealing with issues such as evil, predestination, suffering, and so on. He underlines how vital—how absolutely crucial—having a preacher is. It is actually a matter of life and death because God does his electing through the proclamation of the gospel. So, for example, God chose Jacob (and hated Esau) *by means of* his preached word of promise. I can't go into much detail in this review, but here is one quote to get you thinking. It surrounds the question of the difference between Peter and Judas who were, after all, in the same boat: "Peter received a preacher, Judas did not. Without a preacher, one cannot flee from God hidden in majesty, and the result is resentment, insult, pique, aggression, infraction, violation, and despair" (160). For pastors looking for renewed clarity on the nature and importance of the preaching task, they will find it in this volume.

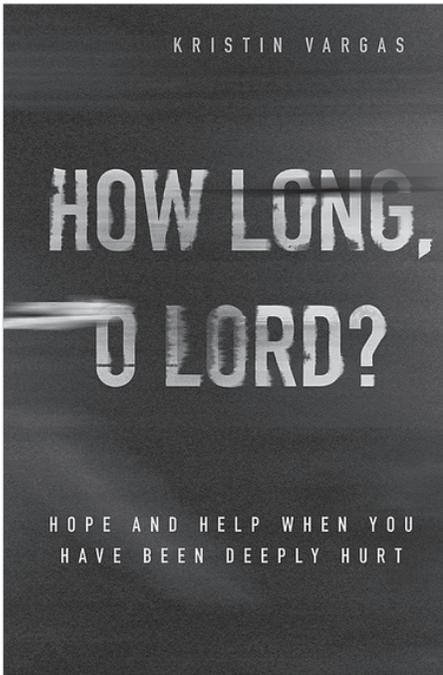
One caution: Readers need to be prepared for a less than smooth reading

experience. Do not expect a systematically arranged collection of topics or a logically unfolding argument. In fact, at the end of the book, you may think, "This guy could use a strong editor." (This is what I actually said.) The reading experience Paulson delivers is more like taking a circuitous hike in the woods or navigating switchbacks up a mountain. Paulson will raise a point or observation in one place, and then circle around to take it back up again. Just keep in mind that we can learn some wonderful things by wandering in the woods. We can be challenged and strengthened in navigating switchbacks up a mountain. Both experiences are rewarding in their own way. New things are seen. Old things are reinforced. It's good to get out of our comfort zones. *Luther's Outlaw God* will help you do just that.

Tim Saleska

HOW LONG, O LORD?: Hope and Help When You Have Been Deeply Hurt. By Kristin A. Vargas. Concordia Publishing House, 2018. 97 pages. Paper. \$12.99. (Bulk Discounts).

Kristin Vargas provides a highly informative and biblically grounded resource to care for persons who have suffered deep hurt due to "moral injury." Such hurt results from committing or experiencing acts that go against one's conscience and beliefs. This type of injury is a spiritual matter that is not typically in the purview of the medical and psychiatric community. Yet it is



powerfully addressed by God's word. Vargas demonstrates that veterans and others suffering post-traumatic stress are dealing with soul-damaging injuries. She writes, this "experience can either shake one's faith to the point that one abandons belief in good and God, or strengthen one's faith as the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacrament to move the believer closer to his or her Creator and Savior" (7).

For the purpose of illustration her study primarily uses military examples. However, she makes clear that moral injury is also suffered by victims of domestic and sexual abuse, violent crimes, and the "great unspoken secret of many women who have had abortions" (12). Additionally, those caring for the sufferers can also experience moral

wounds.

How Long, O Lord? is in a group-study format of twelve sessions, one per chapter. The first six identify with those who have experienced moral injury. These initial chapters show the physical and psychological aspects of this phenomenon. Illustrations include new military techniques, such as reflexive fire training, which increases killing rates and the burden born by the conscience. A section on "Women and War" also illustrates new challenges faced today. Lessons from church fathers demonstrate how the church in the past gave significant attention to soldiers and spiritual issues they faced as a result of war. These chapters also unpack key passages of Scripture that illustrate how profoundly (and graphically) God's word recognizes the reality and effects of moral injury.

The final six chapters describe how God provides healing from his word. Beginning with Lamentations and the prophet Jeremiah, Vargas describes how deeply God knows our pain and is committed to help his people. She writes, "Jeremiah's story illustrates that no matter how wounded, traumatized or angry we are, even at God, God will not forsake us" (46). This is ultimately revealed in Jesus, "who saved us through His moral injury" (51). In dying for sinners and rising from the dead God provides healing and hope for all, including those suffering deep spiritual trauma. They too can experience reconciliation with God as did Peter when he was restored by Jesus, as did Paul who found forgiveness as a former persecutor of the church. The

last section closes with practical lessons in deep listening and “being present” to those in need, as well as remembering trauma intentionally in Christ in receiving the Lord’s Supper.

The bible–study format has discussion questions and a leader’s guide. It can also be read by an individual seeking knowledge of this topic. Do not assume that because of the format and brevity of this work that it is light on substantive content. In a few short pages it provides an informative resource that can be used by pastors and Christian counselors desiring to better understand moral injury and God’s answers to those who have been deeply hurt in this sinful world. Kristin Vargas has done a great service to the church in providing this helpful guide for hope and healing based on the word of God.

W. Mart Thompson

**THE WITTENBERG CONCORD:
Creating Space for Dialogue.** By
Gordon A. Jensen. *Fortress, 2018. 235*
pages. Paper. \$30.60. Kindle \$29.07.

Gordon A. Jensen articulates a thoughtful and compelling case for the use of the Wittenberg Concord in modern ecumenical dialogue. The Wittenberg Concord influenced language regarding the Lord’s Supper in both the northern Lutheran territories and the southern Reformed cities of the Holy Roman Empire. Forty year later, the signatories of the *Formula of Concord* would include the Wittenberg

Concord as a foundational document in article VII of the *Solid Declaration*. With the hardening of confessional lines developing in the late sixteenth century, the Wittenberg Concord fell out of favor as a consensus document in the Protestant churches as other documents such as *Consensus Tigurinus* and the *Formula of Concord* became the means of establishing confessional identity in unity in their respective church bodies. While the hope of unity among the various Reformation church bodies was lost by the late sixteenth century, the hope for a united Catholic and Evangelical Church was still in the minds of the reformers during the negotiations and writing of the Wittenberg Concord. Although other attempts at forging evangelical unity had failed in the past, Martin Bucer, one of the main architects of the Wittenberg Concord, would avoid the pitfalls of past negotiations, such as the Marburg Colloquy, and establish a document which all evangelical churches could sign in good conscience.

In *The Wittenberg Concord*, Jensen carefully navigates the historical circumstances surrounding the events leading up to the signing of the Wittenberg Concord. Jensen rightly notes that political unity in the world of the sixteenth century required theological unity. The Marburg Colloquy was the first attempt to establish theological unity between the Swiss and Saxon reformers in order to pave the way toward a political alliance against the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Although history has not been kind to Luther’s role in derailing the attempts to establish

doctrinal unity between the Swiss and the Saxons, Jensen notes, “The colloquy also gives us a glimpse of Luther that is not often seen. He was willing—perhaps too willing, at least in group situations—to acquiesce to specific formulations of others for the sake of getting along” (50). Besides revealing Luther’s amicable nature in public debate, Jensen helpfully notes that Melancthon, not Luther, was the real serious negotiator of the Reformation removing Melancthon’s stereotype as the indecisive theologian.

While the talks continued between the Lutherans and southern Germans, they were fraught with setbacks and suspicions. Eventually, the Lutherans and southern Germans came together in Wittenburg to create a theological consensus to allow the southern German cities admittance into the Schmalkaldic League through subscription to the *Augsburg Confession* and *Apology*. The Wittenburg Concord was signed, and both Lutherans and southern Germans participated in the Lord’s Supper together following the talks on Ascension Day. According to Jensen, the strength of the Wittenburg Concord was the flexibility it allowed each member to view the Lord’s Supper through their own theological framework in the *Augsburg Confession*. While the southern Germans were concerned about precise language regarding the Lord’s Supper, the theologians in Wittenburg were more flexible with their words seeking to preserve the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist rather than attempt to create formulas explaining Christ’s presence in the Supper. The flexibility

of the Wittenburgers allowed for the phrase *cum pana* or “with the bread” to be the critical point of agreement regarding Christ’s presence in the Supper by both Lutherans and southern Germans. As Jensen points out, the language adopted by the Wittenburg Concord would influence Luther’s writing in the Schmalkald Articles in which his language shifts from “under the bread” to “with the bread” (147). The Wittenburg Concord would also influence southern German and Swiss territories as the document allowed for their subscription to the *Augsburg Confession* and *Apology* to be considered legal churches in the Empire. However, after the Peace of Westphalia and the recognition of Reformed churches, the Wittenburg Concord fell out of favor as the Reformed churches no longer had to subscribe to the *Augsburg Confession*. While the Reformed churches no longer used the Wittenburg Concord, the Lutheran churches continued to cite it in limited form within the *Formula of Concord*. The Wittenburg Concord would be forgotten as a consensus document until the twentieth century and the rise of the ecumenical movement where the Wittenburg Concord served as a template of agreement between various Protestant church bodies seeking altar and pulpit fellowship.

Jensen gives a helpful view of the Wittenburg Concord’s consideration of the problem of words. The problem with ecumenical dialogue as Jensen notes is that either too little is said glossing over important differences or too much is said requiring very precise

and technical language in ecumenical statements. Jensen states, “Participants in a dialogue need to remember the particular nuanced expressions of doctrines that express crucial concepts and teachings from their traditions while listening to fresh expressions of the doctrinal ideas presented by others” (177). Luther adjusted his vocabulary regarding the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and allowed Bucer to interpret the Wittenberg Concord in a way amicable to the Swiss. Another key insight of Jensen regarding the Wittenberg Concord is “less is more.” During the discussions leading up to the Wittenberg Concord, the divisive issue of church property was dropped in favor of establishing consensus in areas where agreement could be reached. The less-is-more approach should be taken up in ecumenical dialogues or else the broad statements generated may glance

over serious theological difference. In his recommendations for the use of the Wittenberg Concord, Jensen clearly knows the failures of the ecumenical movement and seeks to address them using the Wittenberg Concord as a template for consensus.

The appendices give original sources, biographies, and a map of the Holy Roman Empire making this book useful for the parish pastor or scholar that wants to know more about Reformation history. I would recommend this book for pastors and scholars seeking to learn how the various factions of the Reformation sought unity and how they achieved that unity in the Wittenberg Concord.

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