CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

of Concordia University

SPRING 2018
VOLUME 5: ISSUE 1

In memory of Dr. John Saleska
(1929 - 2017)

ISSN 2374-3573

Concordia University Wisconsin/Ann Arbor is a Lutheran higher education community commited to helping students develop in mind, body, and spirit for service to christ in the church and the world

Theology and Philosophy Faculty

CUW

Roland Cap Ehlke
PhD, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Thomas Feiertag
DMin, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Brian German
PhD, Wycliffe College, Toronto

Nathan Jastram
PhD, Harvard University

Jason Lane
ThD, University of Hamburg

Angus Menuge
PhD, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Brian Mosemann
STM, Concordia Seminary

Ronald Mudge
PhD, Concordia Seminary

Jonathan Mumme
ThD, University of Tubingen

Daniel Paavola
Chair of Department
PhD, Concordai Seminary

Gregory P. Schulz
DMin; PhD, Marquette University

Steve Smith
STM, Concordia Seminary

Jason Soenksen
PhD, Hebrew Union College and the University of Cincinnati

Kurt Taylor
DMin, Ashland Theological Seminary

Harald Tomesch
ThD, Concordia Seminary

Kevin Voss
DVM; PhD, St. Louis University

Patrick Ferry
PhD, University of Colorado, *ex officio*

CUAA

Stephen Parrish
PhD, University of Washington

Theodore Hopkins
PhD, Concordia Seminary

Philip Penhallegon
PhD, Concordia Seminary

Ryan Peterson
MDiv, Concordia Seminary

Charles Schulz
STM, Concordia Seminary; MA, Washington University; MA, University of Virginia

Scott Yakimow
PhD, University of Virginia

Concordia Theological Journal editor: Jason Soenksen
Editorial Committee: Ronald Mudge, Daniel Paavola,
Philip Penhallegon, Steve Smith, Harald Tomesch
Student Editor and Designer: Nick Schmeling
Faculty Design supervisor: Theresa Kenney
Publisher: Concordia University Wisconsin

Table of Contents

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

of Concordia University

SPRING 2018 | VOLUME 5:1

Editorials 5

Articles 11

Martin Luther on the Stewardship of God's Resources: "A Lofty Christian Work" 13
Timothy Maschke

An Evaluation of Sin and Forgiveness in Japanese Culture and Its Effects on Evangelism 45
Jacob Stoltzman

The Significance of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses After Five-Hundred Years 67
Theodore J. Hopkins

Chapel Sermons 87

Book Reviews 97

CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL
JOURNAL

Editorials

By now the frenzy of Reformation celebrations on our campuses has come to a close. After a five-year buildup to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which featured special events both in Ann Arbor and in Mequon, we have moved into the 501st year since Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. The transition from this historic celebration was also marked by a transition within our department in Mequon. Dr. Timothy Maschke, who chaired our Reformation 500 Committee has, like Elijah, ascended upon his own fiery chariot to the glories of a well-deserved retirement. I have found myself the recipient of the prof's mantel, the editorial responsibilities of this journal, if perhaps not yet the recipient of his editorial spirit.

As heirs of the Lutheran Reformation, indeed, of the Christian tradition as a whole, we stand on the shoulders of giants. The truths that we can now see so clearly, were not always, everywhere, and to everyone so clear. In the confusion and dissonance of our own age, we will gain a better ear for the clear voice of Scripture, the voice of our Good Shepherd, as we sit at the feet of others who worked under him during such duress to serve and protect the flock which was entrusted to their care.

We do well to remember and to make clear to others that Luther and the Fathers are witnesses to the Truth, but not the infallible sources of the Truth. The Luther of the Ninety-Five Theses, as Dr. Hopkins notes, is not yet the Luther of our confessional documents, but he is pressing toward the Gospel as he struggles to hear the voice of the Truth. Though times and circumstances have changed, a survey of Luther's work on a biblical topic, such as that of stewardship surveyed by Dr. Maschke, often prompts questions or applications that we would not have generated on our own.

I hope that the articles in this journal may refine your perception of God's Truth, so that, with renewed confidence, certainty, and joy you may contend with one heart "for the faith that has been handed over to the saints once for all (Jude 3)." Our department would like to dedicate this issue of the journal to Dr. John Saleska who contended so long and faithfully for the faith and now rejoices with the saints in the nearer presence of the Word himself.

I would like acknowledge our debt to the Bartling Endowment whose resources make the publication of this journal possible.

Dr. Jason Soenksen, *Editor*

In the background of my computer right now, the 2015 Grand National Championship motorcycle race at the Springfield Mile is playing. Bryan Smith and Jared Mees are dueling each other, swapping the lead every lap. They race at 130 miles per hour on the oval dirt track, sliding the bikes through the turns, inches from each other. It is endlessly exciting to watch.

You might ask, "Isn't that race two years old? Don't you know who wins?" Of course, it's a bit old, and, yes, I know that Bryan Smith will outmuscle Jared Mees out of the final turn to win at the line. But I never get tired of watching it. And you likely don't get tired of watching something much like it. You go to the Packers website and watch the 2013 victory over the Bears. You revisit the concert that you taped, the one in which your daughter sang the solo and hit the high note perfectly. We know exactly what's going to happen and that's why we watch.

Perhaps our celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation has some of that same spirit. We know what did happen and that's the point of revisiting Luther's words and actions. First of all, we need to see the opponents of our hero. Bryan Smith was racing against the finest flat track racers in the world with full factory support. This was a race of the best at their best. So also, Luther's conflicts remind us of the size of his opponents and the uncertainty of the Reformation. By human efforts and understanding, it was no sure thing, nor was the timing a guarantee. So when we re-read a classic Luther biography or go through the Confessions, we meet again the many conflicts that the Reformers faced. It seems every possible aberration of Law and Gospel came to light in that century. As difficult as our ministries might be now, Luther's struggles give perspective to the fullness of trouble that can be.

But besides accounting for the enemies, great conflicts come down to a single moment. On lap 25, coming out of the final corner, Bryan Smith is third, hopelessly behind. Yet, with a perfect corner and a full throttle drive down the straight, he wins. I can still see it. Perhaps we celebrate the Reformation to clarify that single moment. Which Luther moment stands out for you? Nailing the 95 Theses to the door? Saying, "Here I stand," during his defiant insistence on the truth of the Gospel? Alone in the castle translating the Bible for the world? Any of these might be the take-away moment that defines the Reformation and Luther's life. That moment may become the center of our preaching and teaching. It gives our listeners a single, firm grasp on the complex history of Luther and the breadth of the Reformation.

Finally, I watch the interviews after the race. Winners all say the same thing. They thank everyone in the crew and all their sponsors, putting the

spotlight on others, not themselves. I think we can be assured that Luther would do the same in this anniversary. The message of the Gospel and the endurance of the church that bears his name are not Luther's doing. He would point us to the grace of God alone and the Scripture alone that announces the Gospel, all received by faith alone which endures through the centuries. Luther might be happy to be on the podium only so that he could remind us of these truths that alone give our present and future church hope.

So bring up YouTube and let the Springfield Mile, 2015, play in the background while you finish this anniversary year by revisiting of Luther and his world. Let his enemies rage as they will. Despite these enemies then and now, Luther still has his signature moments. And during those defining moments, he will always point us beyond himself to God's grace alone.

Daniel Paavola, Ph.D., *Theology Department Chair*

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Articles

Martin Luther on the Stewardship of God's Resources: "A Lofty Christian Work"

Timothy Maschke

Introduction

Martin Luther, the great evangelical reformer of the sixteenth century, was concerned not only for the doctrine of the church, but also for the life of believers. Although he is not known as a "stewardship person" in the contemporary sense of increasing financial giving in a local congregation, and as professor and pastor, he never wrote a specific treatise on stewardship as we understand it today—the proper use of our time, talents, and treasures for Christ's kingdom—throughout his lifetime he spoke confidently and boldly of the Christian's opportunities to respond to God's gracious giving.

Looking at Luther's view of the Christian's stewardship of God's resources is particularly relevant at this time in history.[1] As we conclude the "Luther Decade," as the Germans designated the past ten years, this is certainly a time to reconsider Luther's theological teachings for our time. Yet, the subject of stewardship in Luther's writings has received scant scholarlyattention in the past several decades.[2]

---

[1] This paper grew out of a presentation for the Stewardship Task Force of the South Wisconsin District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in September 2008.

[2] Most recently Carter Lindberg offered, "Luther on a Market Economy," in Lutheran Quarterly 30:4 (Winter 2016): 373-92; there he also noted several other recent studies, including Thomas Piketty's Capital in the Twenty-First Century, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap Press, 2014) and John D. Singleton's, "'Money is a sterile thing': Martin Luther on the Immorality of Usury Reconsidered" (15 July 2010), Center for the History of Political Economy, Duke University, online http://hope.econ.duke.edu/node/449. See also, Kathryn D'Arcy Blanchard, "'If you do not do this you are not now a Christian': Martin Luther's Pastoral Teachings on Money," Word & World 26:3 (Summer 2006): 299-309, Eric W. Gritsch, "Gospel and Stewardship: The Perspective of Martin Luther," in The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin 70:4 (Fall 1990), 32-46, gave a general presentation on Luther's views of stewardship, particularly as it relates to the idea of vocation. Carter Lindberg established his niche in Luther scholarship in the area of Luther's concern for helping the poor, but also has not written a specific article on Luther's views of Christian stewardship; see Carter Lindberg, Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Finally, George Forell, Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics (New York: American Press, 1957), refers to Luther's dealing with the poor.

This article is the result of examining Luther's various comments on the vocation of being a Christian caretaker of God's resources. His diverse thoughts on stewardship are arranged chronologically and placed into their historical contexts as he addresses the stewardship of God's resources in his lecturing and preaching on the Christian life.[3] Rather than summarize his words, I have tried in most cases to let Luther speak for himself. And speak, he did!

During his early years, Luther often told his hearers and readers to help the poor, while he vociferously condemned the current practice of usury. Later, he worked hard to promote the establishment of a common treasury or community chest for the sake of the poor in various German communities. He saw this as a natural by-product and result of the chief doctrine of the Lutheran Church—justification by grace through faith because of Christ—that is, the free gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation through faith in Christ. Finally, I will demonstrate that Luther recognized the place of the Christian's vocation as a steward of God's creation, particularly in family and community.

I. Early Emphases

A. *Lectures on Romans*

The earliest comments we have of Luther on the Christian stewardship are from his lectures on Paul's epistle to the Romans which he delivered from the spring of 1515 to the fall of 1516. An insight into Luther's understanding of the stewardship of God's creation comes out quite clearly in his comments on Romans 8, where Paul speaks of creation waiting to be freed from its futile existence: "Because created things in themselves are good, … those who know God [Luther is referring to Christians here]…use them but do not derive vain pleasure from them."[4] Reflecting the Augustinian distinction between merely using and truly enjoying things, Luther shows that Christians are to be faithful and careful stewards of God's creation. They are encouraged to use, not abuse, all that God has given to them. Not only is creation the object of Christian stewardship, fellow believers are to be the recipients of Christian care-giving, and especially of one's financial

---

[3] Citations are taken from Luther's writings in D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1883-1999), hereafter noted as WA, and the English translations are from Luther's Works, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-86), hereafter cited as LW.

[4] LW 25:363. Cf. WA 16:373.

contributions.[5]

In his explanation of the spiritual gift of contributing (which Paul describes in Romans 12), Luther shows pastoral concern with those who experience the temptations of wealth. He states:

> As his own devil tempts each man in the use of his own ability, so that he does not serve God purely and faithfully in his use of God's gift, so also he who contributes does not lack for his devil. This man is attacked from two points. In the first place, he is assailed when he gives in a relative sense and not absolutely, that is, with the idea that his gifts will bring him greater returns…. In the second place, such a man is attacked…when equals give to equals,…for they do not give in simplicity for the glory of God but for the sake of their own future advantage….[6]

Here we see that Luther is already going beyond, or perhaps it is better to say behind, the outward acts of giving to look at what motivates true Christian stewardship. If one is giving for the sake of benefiting oneself, he remarks, that person has missed the purpose of benevolent giving according to God's plans. One is obviously seeking to reap only material advantage without considering the true Christian grace of giving. Stewardship always has to do with one's heart, as he will soon announce more clearly.

B. *The Ninety-five Theses*

Interestingly, among his Ninety-five Theses posted a year later on the Castle Church doors in Wittenberg in 1517, we hear the Reformer state two theses which speak directly to Christian giving:

> 43. Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;
> 46. Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are bound to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.[7]

In thesis 43, Luther elevates Christian charity over the purchasing of indulgences, the issue at hand. Three theses later, Luther stresses the need for compassionate care of one's own family. These two theses obviously deal with the stewardship of money, yet they are more than that. Luther encourages the support of the needy, but not to the detrimental neglect of

---

[5] WA 16:120-21; LW 25:106-7; "…he who contributes, who has the ability to contribute, in simplicity, not in vainglory or with some other secret intent, because this goes beyond the grace of this service…. Contribute to the needs, the necessities, the wants, of the saints, that is, the believers, moved by compassion and with the purpose of helping them…."

[6] LW 25:449-50; WA 56:456-57.

[7] LW 31:29; WA 1:233 and 238.

one's own family. This is an important topic to which he will return later.

C. *Lectures on Hebrews*

During this same time, Luther was preparing and delivering his biblical lectures on the book of Hebrews. In these lectures, his students heard him speaking of the importance of works which follow from an active faith. For example, in distinguishing the themes of Law and Gospel in Heb 2:3, Luther uncovers the motivation for being a responsible steward—faith:

> Therefore the whole substance of the new law and its righteousness is that one and only faith in Christ. Yet it is not so one-and-only and so sterile as human opinions are; for Christ lives, and not only lives but works, and not only works but also reigns. Therefore it is impossible for faith in Him to be idle; for it is alive, and it itself works and triumphs, and in this way works flow forth spontaneously from faith.[8]

Christian charity is a faith issue, a living faith as James spoke of in his epistle. Luther expands on this faith-filled motivation for Christian stewardship as he discusses Heb 3:7 and alludes to Heb 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Stewardship, he notes, cannot start with an emphasis upon what a Christian should do, but rather begins by considering all that God has done for every believer in Christ. From this Gospel foundation, faith then follows with actions.[9] He explains this further as he comments on the great faith chapter, Hebrews 11, which further clarifies the relation of faith to Christian stewardship. He marks an important distinction here between believers and those who only feign to act like Christians. Luther states:

> Accordingly, this is the crossroad where the truly righteous and the hypocrites separate. For those who are truly righteous press forward to works through faith and grace; the hypocrites, with perverse zeal, press forward to grace through works, that is, to what is impossible.[10]

The issue of Christian stewardship requires the proper ordering of justification and sanctification. Faith first, then stewardship, is Luther's ordering of activities. For Luther, faith will always show forth in works, if it is a truly living faith.

---

8 LW 29: 123; WA 573:114.
9 WA 573:142-43; LW29:148.
10 LW 29:232; WA 573:229-30.

II. Luther's Turbulent Years

A. *On Usury and Good Works*

Two years after posting his Ninety-five Theses, Luther prepared his first public statement that is most clearly focused on the stewardship of money in a sermon "On Usury."[11] A year later, Luther preached his "Long Sermon on Usury," based upon a Deuteronomy text, in which he denounced not only usury—charging a certain percent—but also begging.[12] Although it was certainly an attack on the mendicant orders of which the Augustinian Hermits were a part, Luther seems to be closely following the Church's traditional teaching against usury which had been in force for several centuries, although not necessarily practiced.[13]

In the meantime, Luther wrote one of his more recognized and cited treatises, "On Good Works," (1520) which emphasized the place of works in the life of a Christian.[14] This treatise had grown from a series of sermons preached at the beginning of his ministry in Wittenberg as the town preacher. Speaking specifically on the seventh commandment, Luther acknowledges that "there certainly are very few who notice and recognize such lust for gold in themselves. For in this case greed has a very pretty and attractive cover for its shame; it is called provision for the body and the needs of nature. Under this cover greed insatiably amasses unlimited wealth."[15] Luther—ever the shrewd observer of humanity—uncovers the subtlety of the sin against this commandment. Instead of admitting the sin of greed, people cover it up with the excuse of providing for their families and their futures. How can one argue against such caring?

On the other hand, Luther strongly warns against those who sit back and do nothing. To such a lazy person, Luther exhorts with a concrete, yet comical conclusion, "I do not say that a man need not work and seek his livelihood. But I do say that he is not to be anxious, not covetous; he is not to despair that he is not going to have enough…. But if you are anxious and greedy, and want the roast chicken to fly into your mouth, then go on worrying and coveting and see if you will fulfill God's commandment and

---

[11] WA 6:3-8. This 1519 sermon is identified as Luther's "Short Sermon on Usury." The designation "short" is attributed to Luther's Jena editors after the longer sermon in which Luther expanded his initial statements was delivered the following year.

[12] This longer 1520 sermon was later attached to Luther's treatise "On Trade and Usury" of 1524 (see LW 45:273-95; WA 6:36-60).

[13] See Carter Lindberg, Beyond Charity, chapters 2, 5 and 6, for a fuller explanation of the medieval abuses and Luther's solutions.

[14] WA 6:196-276; WA 9:226-301; LW 44:15-114.

[15] LW 44:107-8; WA 6:271.12-18.

find salvation."[16] People need to work for their livelihood, says Luther. But they are not to worry about the future, since it is in God's hands. In other words, the lazy need not apply.

Luther explains that a faith-filled Christian will be fiscally generous and produce the benevolent works which God desires, particularly demonstrating the grace of giving financially to others. Noting God's gracious generosity, Luther asks:

> If the heart expects and puts its trust in divine favor, how can a man be greedy and anxious? Such a man is absolutely certain that he is acceptable to God; therefore, he does not cling to money; he uses his money cheerfully and freely for the benefit of his neighbor. He knows full well that he will have enough no matter how much he gives away. His God, whom he trusts, will neither lie to him nor forsake him[17]

Because God remains faithful to His promises, a Christian need not cling to the material things of this world. Luther boldly asserts that true and genuine generosity in the area of stewardship is a reflection of true faith.

But Luther is not satisfied merely to speak of the heart's generosity, he continues to explain the source both of generosity as well as the cause of the sin of covetousness:

> In fact, in this [seventh] commandment it can clearly be seen that all good works must be done in faith and proceed from faith. In this instance everyone most certainly feels that the cause of covetousness is distrust, while on the other hand the cause of generosity is faith. A man is generous because he trusts God and never doubts but that he will always have enough. In contrast, a man is covetous and anxious because he does not trust God. Now faith is the master workman and the motivating force behind the good works of generosity, just as it is in all the other commandments. Without this faith, generosity is of no use at all; it is just a careless squandering of money.[18]

Notice here how Luther clearly discloses the proper relationship of stewardship in a Christian's life. The manner in which people use their resources will certainly reflect their level of faith or their lack of faith. The key for Christian preachers is to preach faith, not works of stewardship.

From the Middle Ages until the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had a ready source of income through the selling of priestly services and ministerial fees, compulsory tithes, and revenue-

---

[16] LW 44:108; WA 6:271.32-5; 272.2-4. See Lindberg, 108, fn. 132, where he explains the origin of Luther's proverbial expression.
[17] LW 44:108; WA 6:262.5-10.
[18] LW 44:108-9; WA 6:272.18-26.

producing properties.[19] Now in Luther's day, with the increased concern for monies leaving Germany for the construction costs associated with the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome and the recognition of the diminished funds as a result of the cessation of indulgence trafficking, many German congregations and communities found themselves facing a major problem with maintaining their community services, particularly aid for the poor—an economic category which has been estimated to have been almost a quarter of the population.[20]

B. *To the Christian Nobility*

In his extremely influential Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate of 1520,[21] Luther encouraged every city to establish a system of helping the poor in some kind of an organized way. After addressing several ecclesiastical and political concerns, Luther speaks against mendicant orders, asserting in his thesis 21:

> One of the greatest necessities [in the German socio-economic and ecclesiastical systems] is the abolition of all begging throughout Christendom. Nobody ought to go begging among Christians. …He who has chosen poverty ought not to be rich. If he wants to be rich, let him put his hand to the plow and seek his fortune from the land. It is enough if the poor are decently cared for so that they do not die of hunger or cold. It is not fitting that one man should live in idleness on another's labor, or be rich and live comfortably at the cost of another's hardship, as it is according to the present perverted custom.[22]

Luther is primarily speaking of the begging characteristic of mendicant friars. Luther's own Augustinian Hermits, along with the Franciscans and Dominicans, had grown to be very wealthy through the accumulated funds from begging and voluntary contributions by wealthy and not-so-wealthy patrons. These extremely affluent orders were a blight on the common people since they demanded alms, yet were living lives of luxury. On the other hand, Luther also knew that there were people who were legitimately poor, whether

---

[19] See Barbara McClung Hallman. Italian Cardinals, Reform, and the Church as Property. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, for an insightful study of the situation around the time of the Reformation.

[20] Preserved Smith, The Age of the Reformation (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1920), 558-9, states that between fifteen and twenty percent of the German urban population were paupers or vagrants. He reports on a sixteenth-century document authored by Matthew Hütlin of Pfortzheim, The Book of Vagabonds, which described twenty-eight different groups of beggars and their practices.

[21] LW 44:115-217; WA 6:404-69.

[22] LW 44:189-91; WA 6:450.22-4; 451.9-14.

this was through illness, low paying jobs, or some other physical or social hardship. And more to Luther's point of concern, the rich nobility often had become prosperous at the expense of these same poor common folk.

C. *The Freedom of a Christian*

Near the end of this momentous year of major writings, Luther addresses Christian stewards in a peculiarly noteworthy way. Luther dedicated The Freedom of a Christian with a very conciliatory letter to Pope Leo X, in spite of having been officially condemned on June 15 with the issuance of the papal bull, Exsurge Domine, censuring many of Luther's teachings.[23] The key theme of this document on Christian freedom is the memorable and seemingly paradoxical propositions:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[24]

In explicating these two profoundly practical statements, Luther explores the role of the Christian as a steward who is to be in service to others:

> Here we see clearly that the Apostle [Paul in Philippians 2:1-4] has prescribed this rule for the life of Christians, namely, that we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor.[25]

A few paragraphs later he reiterates his two-fold thesis in this way: "Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men."[26] Thus, Luther understands and affirms that Christians have a great opportunity to be stewards of all that God has granted them as they serve others through generous financial support.

---

[23] Mark Tranvik, The Freedom of a Christian (Minneapolis: Fortress 2008), provides a fine translation and introductory notes.
[24] LW 31:344; WA 7:49.22-5.
[25] LW 31:365-66; WA 7:65.5-9: Hic clare videmus, Vitam Christianorum ab Apostolo in hanc regulam esse positam, ut omnia opera nostra ad aliorum comoditatem ordinentur, cum per fidem quisque suam sic abundat, ut omnia alia opera totaque vita ei superfluant, quibus, proximo spontanea benevolentia serviat et benefaciat.
[26] LW 31:368; WA 7:66.29-31.

D. *The Magnificat*

During these same turbulent months, Luther also prepared a devotional tract for the nephew of Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, John Frederick. Begun in December 1520 and nearly completed before he left for the Diet of Worms on April 2nd, Luther did not see the publication of this composition until he had escaped to the Wartburg. Regardless of these details, the work gives us some unusual insights into Luther's understanding of Christian stewardship. The work is explicitly an exposition of the Magnificat, Mary's song, which speaks of both the rich and the poor.[27]

Luther begins by addressing the radically paradoxical nature of God's work in the world, particularly in the Virgin Mary's conception of God.[28] Mary's story exemplifies the amazing faith-experience of God's graciousness, since God looks at the heart, which overflows with gladness and joy at His presence.[29] This experience, Luther reminds his readers, is a result of a living faith: "Such a faith has life and being, it pervades and changes the whole man; it constrains you to fear if you are mighty, and to take comfort if you are of low degree."[30]

Commenting on the last section of Mary's song in Lk 1:53, Luther recalls the wealth of the ancient patriarchs and kings. He warns the young prince, in light of this young sovereign's inheritance, that blessings of great riches are privileged opportunities from which one should not flee. He asks rhetorically about riches and then points to faith:

> What hindrance was their riches to the holy fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What hindrance was his royal throne to David, or his authority in Babylon to Daniel? Or their high station or great riches to those who had them or who have them today, provided they do not set their hearts on them or seek their own advantage in them? …There must needs be such differences and distinctions of persons and stations in our life here on earth; yet the heart should neither cling to them nor fly from them—neither cling to the high and rich nor fly from the poor and lowly.[31]

In other words, wealth or poverty were not obstacles to faith when proper stewardship is practiced. As Jesus had said, "To whom much is given, much is required" (Lk 12:48).

---

27 WA 7:538-604; LW 21:297-358.
28 WA 7:546.21-34; LW 21:299.
29 WA 7:547.33-548.11; LW 21:300.
30 LW 21:306; WA 7:553.33-5.
31 LW 21:346; WA 7:592.7-10; 592.13-16

III. **Pastoral Concerns**

A. ***Comments from Deuteronomy***

In 1522, after returning from his exile in the Wartburg, Luther completed his translation of the book of Deuteronomy, revising it with Melanchthon the following year. At that same time, Luther inaugurated a series of conversations on Deuteronomy with some close friends and associates at his cloister-home in Wittenberg. From these studies, Luther began to prepare a commentary on the whole book of Deuteronomy, which was completed in 1525.[32]

Luther addresses several issues related to stewardship in his comments. An intriguing perspective on tithing is given by Luther in his comments on Deuteronomy 14:22. Here he suggests that tithing would be the most equitable way to tax people rather than the current and controversial practice of requiring all citizens to pay a specific set annual sum. He avers:

> This would be the most honorable and just method of income, for it would depend on the sheer goodness of God. If in a given year God were to bless richly, the people would have a rich yield, and the government rich tithes. But if He did not bless very much, the government would bear the burden equally with the subject and would receive less.[33]

In this way, Luther believed, both government and the people would be equally served or would suffer. Both the rich and the poor, the nobles and the common folk, would be at the mercy of God's providence. Such an argument can be applied in the twenty-first century to congregation members regarding the practice of tithing in church. If persons are blessed financially, they give generously as God has benefited them; if they have a hard economic year, they need not feel they have to give as much. It is always a matter of proportionate giving, as St Paul also recommended (1 Co 6:2).

From this same chapter in Deuteronomy, Luther draws out a stern warning for those who do not pay ministers adequately.

> To support the servants of the Word is the first and highest practice of the worship and fear of God. For how does he who fails in that support care for the Word of God? ….Therefore to neglect and despise the servant of the Word is the same as to despise God and His Word.[34]

Such financial support of the ministers of the Gospel, however, grows

---

[32] LW 9:ix-x.
[33] LW 9:139; WA 14:652.17-22.
[34] LW 9:140-41; WA 14:653.32-34; 653.35-36.

from one's recognition of the power and promises and prospects of the Gospel. Luther boldly asserts that "love ought so to flourish here that it would be necessary to restrain the people from giving, as in Ex. 36:5 ff...."[35] What a wonderful "problem" for a pastor to have—people need to be restrained from giving!

The next chapter of Deuteronomy (fifteen) records the sabbatical-year laws in which every seventh year lands and slaves were returned to their rightful owners. Luther writes, "The summary of this chapter is that the poor should not be left neglected in the land, although he also says that there will always be poor, in order that they may have someone to whom to give."[36] While acknowledging the persistence of poverty, Luther also emphasizes the great responsibility of those who had been blessed financially. They have been divinely enabled to help the poor in society. Luther makes this point absolutely clear as he concludes, "The summary, then, of this teaching is this: the poor should be cared for with love."[37] Christians are certainly expected to be stewards of their own finances, but they are also to be generous benefactors in a loving response for the innumerable earthly benefits received from God's gracious hand.

B. *Common Chest at Leisnig*

Luther continued to demonstrate his understanding of stewardship as a part of the Christian life the following year. He moves beyond the manner in which individual Christians use their money and deals more directly with stewardship in the context of the whole community. In 1523, Luther prepared a preface to the "Ordinance of a Common Chest" for the community of Leisnig.[38] While this document is not unique since other cities had prepared similar ordinances, the Leisnig document "was drawn up on Luther's direct advice, had his hearty approval, and was published by him together with a preface of his own."[39]

Luther began his preface with a doxological greeting, noting that their community's common chest is evidentially the result of their Christian vocations—both spiritually and practically—to serve with an active faith-life.[40] Furthermore, Luther asserts:

[35] LW 9:140; WA 14:653.26-7.
[36] LW 9:144; WA 14:654.26-8.
[37] LW 9:148; WA 14:658.12.
[38] See Lindberg, Beyond Charity, 123-127, for more detailed background information on this community's activities.
[39] Walther I. Brandt, "Introduction" to Luther's Preface to the "Ordinance of a Common Chest," LW 45:162.
[40] WA 12:11.7-20; LW 45:169.

> Now there is no greater service of God than Christian love which helps and serves the needy, as Christ himself will judge and testify at the Last Day, Matthew 24 [:31-46]. This is why the possessions of the church were formerly called bona ecclesiae, that is, common property, a common chest, as it were, for all who were needy among the Christians.[41]

Luther draws upon the Christian practice of charity and expands it to include a concern for the whole community in which Christians live. Theirs is not a monastic lifestyle, secluded from society and dedicated to self-service. True Christian charity begins at home, but spreads out over the whole countryside as needs are seen and responded to by the power of the Gospel.

These ordinances at Leisnig, Luther noted, were set up as a replacement for the multiple layers of monastic and ecclesiastical bureaucracy "for no other purpose than the honor of God, the love of our fellow Christians, and hence for the common good,"[42] as the ordinance document concluded. This idea of a common community chest will continue in a number of ways throughout Luther's later discourse.

C. *Pastoral Concerns from Joel*

Unfortunately, during the next months the peasants in Germany took their economic concerns into their own hands with what became known as the Peasants' War (1524-25). At the beginning of these events or just prior to the actual hostilities, Luther began to lecture on the book of Joel.

Commenting on Joel 2:1, Luther shows that God is the great Steward of all creation: "In His management of the world, God has always acted in miraculous fashion and in His own way, and He still does so today. We think that human ingenuity manages and administers everything. Yet, whatever happens is His divine will."[43] Luther here recognizes that God is in charge of all that transpires in the world. Human beings, and particularly Christians, are merely stewards of His creation who are to follow His will in all that they do.

---

41 LW 45:172-73; WA 12:13.26-30.

42 LW 45:194; WA12:30.21-3.

43 LW 18:88. WA 13:94,11-13: "Deus mirabiliter pro suo more in administrando mundo semper egit et hodie adhuc idem praestat, ut putemus humano consilio omnia geri et administrari. Sed voluntas divina est, quidquid fit."

D. *On Trade and Usury*

That same year in response to the rising concerns of the peasants, Luther added some very practical insights related to Christian stewardship in a noteworthy and pertinent treatise entitled, "On Trade and Usury."[44] This document grew out of the growing unfair economic practice of charging high rates of interest as well as in opposition to those radical reformers who condemned any interest.

After Luther preached a sermon in 1520 on usury, a quiet controversy had been set in motion by Jacob Strauss, a former Dominican friar, from Basel. He had taken issue with Luther and Melanchthon, arguing that all usury was wrong and should be completely eliminated by the evangelical reformers.[45]

While Luther shared the concern for abusing usury, his ultimate concern was theological, not political or even social consciousness. He sought to instruct the Christian's conscience. In the first part of this work, Luther explains what a Christian's attitude should be toward temporal goods. Here is where our attention will be drawn as it relates exceptionally well to the theme of this article on stewardship.[46]

Luther was a realist. After recognizing the necessity of buying and selling in the world economic system, Luther points out the frequent abuses that had become so very commonplace in the market and commercial enterprises of his day. He states that there are four ways in which Christians may exchange property and goods.[47] Twice Luther identifies Christian giving as "a lofty Christian work (eyn hoch Christlich werck)," the phrase I have taken as the subtitle of this article. Luther states:

> Giv[ing] freely to anyone who needs it, as Christ also teaches in the same passage [Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:30]…is a lofty Christian work, which is why it counts for little among the people. There would be fewer merchants and less trade if this were put into practice. For he who does this must truly hold fast to heaven and look always to the hands of God, and not to his own resources or wealth, knowing that God will support him even though every cupboard were bare, because he knows to be

---

[44] WA 15 (279) 292-313; 321-2; LW 45:233-310. The latter part of the English translation of Von Kaufshandlung und Wucher in LW 45 adds Luther's sermon "On Usury" from 1520.

[45] See Martin Brecht, Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521-1532, trans. by James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 142-6.

[46] In the second half of the work, Luther criticizes the practice of his day known as Zinskauf, literally "credit purchase," in which creditors "purchased" an income from the debtor who was receiving the loan or other goods.

[47] WA 15:301-2; LW 45:255-57. Here Luther indicates that the first way that goods are exchanged is through stealing or robbery, the second is an outright gift, the third is to lend without expecting return, and the final is buying and selling in cash. See footnote below with the full text.

> true what God said to Joshua, "I will not forsake you or withdraw my hand from you" [Jsh 1:5]…. But that takes a true Christian, and he is a rare animal on earth….[48]

Christian giving is indeed "a lofty Christian work," since it flows from a rock-solid faith in God's generous providence and exhibits an absolute trust in God's Scripture-based promises. This is a key concept for Luther, which flows from his understanding of justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

E. *Lectures on Ecclesiastes*

In the next years, Luther would be occupied with his own excommunication, the Peasants' Revolt, and even a marriage to a runaway nun. The Peasants' War left Luther with somewhat ambivalent feelings about the economic situation in Germany. He recognized the need for government order, yet he also sympathized with the peasants' unfair treatment. Rebellion, however, was not ever a possibility for Luther, in spite of his own theological admonition of and opposition to the papacy. His marriage, on the other hand, provided him with a true helpmeet as his later financial status would reflect.[49]

In the summer and fall of 1526, Luther lectured on the book of Ecclesiastes. (These lectures were published six years later in 1532 from notes made by Rörer.) Again, Luther expresses Christian concern for the poor by contrasting the spiritually poor who may be financially well-off with those who are physically poor, but spiritually wealthy. Commenting on Ecclesiastes 5:12, "Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or

---

[48] LW 45:256. WA 15:301, 5-10. "Die ander ist, Iderman geben umb sonst de res darff, wie Christus auch da selbst leret. Dis ist auch eyn hoch Christlich werck und handel weniger, wo man das sollt ym schwanck haben, den wer das thun soll, mus sich warlich an den hymel halten und ymer das auff Gottes hende und nicht auff seynen vorraht odder gutt sehen, das er wise, Gott wolle und werde yhn erneeren, ob schon alle winckel legen weren. Denn er weys, das war ist, wie er zu Iosua sagt 'Ich wil dich nicht lassen noch die hand abthun," Und wie man sagt 'Gott hat mehr den er yhe vergab." Da gehort aber auch eyn rechter Christen zu, das seltzame their auff erden, Wellt und natur acht seyn nicht." Emphases added to note the source of this article's subtitle.

Lines 15-17: "Die dritte ist leyhen odder borgen, das ich meyn got hyn gebe und wider neme, so myrs wider bracht wird, und emperen mus, wo mans nicht wider bringt…" Emphasis added to highlight the title of this article.

Lines 301,28-302,2: "Dis ist ja auch (alls ich meyne) eyn hoch Christlich und seltzam werck, wo man der welt lauff ansihet, Und wurde, wo es sollt ynn brauch komen allerley handel gar gewalltiglich myndern und nyder legen."

[49] See the caring and careful study by Rudolf K. and Marilynn Morris Markwald, Katharina Von Bora: A Reformation Life (St Louis: Concordia, 2002), chapter 10 "The Luther Household."

much; but the abundance of the rich will not let him sleep," Luther stated:

> Solomon continues to condemn riches, that is, the anxiety and effort to accumulate riches and to keep them. For the more a miser accumulates riches, the more his mind or his greed is stimulated. A miser is always in need and is poor in the midst of his riches…. Therefore the life of the miser is miserable in every way, for he has no rest either by day or by night…. But misers continue their labor until midnight, and they tire and wear out their bodies. The miser's body is overloaded with food and broken with toil, but his mind is overloaded and broken with cares and will not let him sleep. Therefore when Solomon says laborer, he is commanding us to work, but is not forbidding us to acquire riches.[50]

Christian stewardship must maintain a careful balance between being careful with the blessings one has received from God and being overly concerned with money and material gain. Solomon's life-long example provides a good illustration of this properly balanced attitude and action.51

F. *Against the Fanatics*

That same year Luther wrote The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ--Against the Fanatics. In the third, part which deals with his understanding of the proper place of confession, Luther returns to his exploration of being proper stewards of God's blessings for the sake of one's neighbors:

> God has created us in order that we should be our neighbor's steward [scheffner], but in this we all fall short. We do have this advantage, however, that we recognize the fact and are sorry for it, and strive to do more and more every day, fearing God and doing as much as we can and as much as the Adam in us permits. What we fail to do above and beyond this, God cancels by drawing a line through it, as we have said before; we cannot hope to pay it, for it is too much. Therefore we say: "Forgive me, I will forgive in return."[52]

Luther reminds his readers here that, although they may fail in being exemplary stewards, God enables them to start over again with His glorious promises of forgiveness. The justified sinner is God's best steward.

In May of 1527, Emperor Charles V's troops turned against the papacy and

[50] LW 15:87-88, emended according to WA 20:102.28-31; 102.34-5; 103.18-21.
[51] WA 20:137.29-138.25; LW 15:118.
[52] LW 36:357. Widder die Schwarmgeister in WA 19:518,19-25: "Gott had uns drumb geschaffen, das wir sollen des nehisten scheffner sein; wir bleiben aber alle wol daran schuldig, Aber das haben wir zuvor, das wirs erkennen und ist uns leid, streben darnach, das wir alle tag mehr und mehr thun, furchten uns fur Gott, thun soviel, als wir konnen und der Adam lesset. Was wir daruber nicht thun, macht Gott ein strich dardurch, wie gesagt, trawens nicht zuzalen, es ist zuviel, drumb sagen wir: 'vergibe mir, ich wil wider vergeben.'

sacked Rome. Perhaps in light of that event, later that year (September 11 to be exact), Luther was lecturing on 1 John 2:15, and speaks of Christians as stewards in light of the world's obsession with material possessions. Here we see Luther specifically distinguish between possessing property and being an appropriate manager or steward of God's creation:

> To be in the world, to see the world, to be aware of the world, is different from loving the world, just as to have sin, to be aware of sin, is something different from loving sin. …Abraham had property; but he did not love it, since he showed that he was a manager [*dispensatorem*] and knew that by God's will he had been appointed a steward [*oeconomum*] of his goods.53

Luther shows that, although well-to-do, the patriarchs recognized their role and responsibility to be stewards of all God's goods which He had benevolently provided.

G. ***Lectures on Philemon***

Around the middle of that December (1527), Luther delivered several lectures to his colleagues on Paul's epistle to Philemon.[54] Luther accentuates the fact that the motivation for all Christian activities, including stewardship, is always from a position of Christian love and concern rather than from a feeling of obligatory obedience to the law. Rewording Paul's words to Philemon, Luther implicitly connects Christian generosity to the Gospel:

> I do not want this to be a matter of obligation, but of entreaty. But I have also experienced how laws usually take away desires. A man is more easily drawn than pushed, and compulsion brings with it a rebellious will. A Christian, however, does not act that way...Therefore it is my wish that you do this out of love, not out of compulsion.[55]

A little later, Luther applies this idea of non-compulsory obedience to the area of giving with a reference to 2 Corinthians 9:7:

> In Christian matters nothing should be done by compulsions, but there should be free will…. Children have to be trained to serve under compulsion, but of adults a voluntary spirit is required.[56]

---

[53] LW 30: 249. WA 20:662, 26-31: "In mundo eritis sicut lucerna ardens et lucens, ut ceteri accendantur. Esse in mundo, videre mundum, sentire mundum aliud est quam diligere mundum, sicut aliud habere peccatum, sentire peccatum et 'diligere' peccatum. Abrahamus habuit quidem substantiam, sed non delexit, quoniam se dispensatorem exhibuit et cognovits voluntate Dei se constitutum esse oeconomum bonorum."

[54] WA 25.67 and 78 indicates that these lectures were given between December 13th and 18th, 1527.

[55] LW 29:99; WA 25:74.19-22.25.

[56] LW 29:102. Cf. WA 25:76.15-16; 76:18-19.

While Christians are young, there may indeed be a place for compulsion, that is, using the Law to demand obedience, but once a person has matured in the faith, the Gospel will reign. Stewardship, although always part of a Christian's life, is never something to be forced, but will always and only be moved by love and a voluntary spirit.

H. *Lectures on 1 Timothy*

In the spring of 1528, when most of the university had left Wittenberg for Jena because of a severe outbreak of the plague, Luther continued lecturing in his classroom. During those days, he came to several choice verses at the end of 1 Timothy on "the love of money" (1 Timothy 6:10). Here, Luther shows his understanding of human nature. The world, he contended, continues to be motivated by greed. Luther warns that a greedy person "is deprived of this life and that which is to come."[57] Commenting on the term, "the rich" in that section of 1 Timothy 6, Luther explains in quite thorough detail:

> Here you do not see Paul condemning the rich or wealth. After all, these are God's gifts which He distributes. Those who have these gifts he calls Christians. He is making a distinction between the riches "of this world" and spiritual riches. If the wealthy will have used their riches well, they also will be saved, says Paul, lest we condemn well-managed wealth, as David was a king and wealthy.…Paul calls the greedy man an idolater (Eph. 5:5)…. Where there is Christian faith, gold is not one's god. Gold is the god of the world. Scripture and experience both tell us this. …People who have riches don't know whether they will keep them for an hour, because a thief may come…. God abounds in riches. Look at the facts, whether or not this is true. God gives more than all can devour. Enjoyment is out of the picture. We make heaping it up the goal. Who can in this daylight and air accumulate so much water and land, clothing, wool, milk, cheese, wine, oil as ever he can use up—barns and chests full of mountains of gold, pure abundance? God supplies it so abundantly that we cannot use it up. We see Him place these things into our hands, and we are surrounded by an abundance of all good things. …Although a person may accumulate it, yet more remains. If some are in want, the fault is that people are not using it correctly.…
>
> You see, the greedy would always be with us…. So God cannot give enough to people whose interest is in accumulating and scraping together. He does, however, give enough for enjoyment. If we do enjoy this, we have as great an abundance of all things as we have of air.[58]

Luther's observations of those who are greedy and miserly are that such

[57] LW 28:372; WA 26:112.4: Avarus incertus et privatus hac et futura vita.
[58] LW 28:378-79; WA 26:116.12-117.14.

individuals are often the least happy of all people, because they are never satisfied. Playing on Jesus' words about the poor always being with us, Luther sarcastically says that the greedy will always be here, too. On the other hand, if one wants to be happy, God will give us sufficient for our enjoyment.

Furthermore, Luther underscores the idea that wealth will not make a person happy, as he comments on verse 18, "To become rich in good deeds":

> [Paul] hits the bull's eye of the faults of the wealthy. First,…God must humble the wealthy. David became very proud. God therefore used extraordinary means to humble him. He allowed David to fall into adultery. Paul had a great thorn in his flesh. Thus all of us, the more we are gifted with wealth, the more necessary is some fault by which we are to become humbled. Second, the wealthy set their hopes on riches. Now he wants them to make others rich. Their riches are shadows and signs of true riches. If they want salvation, they should be eager "to become rich in good deeds." …He not only says that they should do good, but that they should do it richly. After all, they have in their hands the wherewithal to be able to clothe the poor and to give drink to the thirsty. … Not only should they do good, but they should do it more abundantly than the rest, that they may be rich not in gold and silver but in good works…. These monastic communalists should share with those who are in need. They should show a willingness to share as people who have been set forth for the purpose of sharing, so that people may benefit from them. As the common treasury is open for the use of all the brethren, so it is with a rich man. It is difficult to share, to exist for the common good.[59]

Luther reiterates his view that Christians are God's divinely appointed stewards of all the blessings of this worldly life, but particularly they are to care for those who are less fortunate through a common treasury. This common treasury is a result of God's graciousness to those who have much. However, around that same time as Luther comments on Isaiah, he notes that God is ultimately the One who is the Owner of all things. It is especially through Christians though that He will be seen as the ultimate Steward of the world.[60]

---

[59] LW 28:380. Note especially these lines in WA 26:117,19-26 & 30-5: Ad unguem tangit vicia divitum…Sic nos omnes quo magis sumus donati divitiis, hoc magis necesse aliquid vitium, quo fiamus humiles…. Nunc vult eos facere alios divites….Sint faciles ad dividendum. 'Koinonicos': 'communicantes' his qui indigent, et se praebere communes et ad participandum expositi, das man yhrer geniessen kan. Ut res communis est fratrum omnia usui exposita. Sic dives. Es ist schwer, communicare, commune esse."

[60] WA 312:239, 22-7: "Spiritualis autem est sentencia q.d. Hoc, quod tu modo insumis, hoc iam dudum finxi et implevi, ideo quod tu modo facis, me operante et volente facis. Noli superbire, rex, tuis viribus, quia haec prius feci in te. Ideo te obturavi, ut ostendam gloriam meam in te. Ich habs lengst vor alβo gemacht. Ego iamdudum feci hoc q.d. antequam tu cogitaveras et volueras, ego feci." Cf. LW 16:322.

I. *Luther's Catechisms*

Most noteworthy, however, is Luther's understanding of God as the Source of all that one has in this life. Christians are to recognize this and, therefore, act as God's stewards. This idea is found already in Luther's catechetical sermons and subsequently in his Small and Large Catechisms. For example, in his "Sermon on the First Commandment," which he preached in early December 1528, just before the catechisms were published, Luther proclaims:

> From this [explanation of the First Commandment] there follows the greatest wisdom. One who fears something else and trusts it makes of it a god…. You see, then, what faith is and what idolatry is. If you fear the prince more than God, then the prince is your god. If you trust your wife or money more than God, then these are your god. But God is held not in the hand but in the heart. If you fear him and trust him then you need fear no one and trust no one except God.[61]

Fear, love, and trust in God are the essence not only of this First Commandment, but of proper Christian stewardship. Consequently, Luther affirms in his catechisms these familiar words:

> I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil.
>
> All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.[62]

Finally, in his explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed, he urges, "That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." [63] Here is both the motivation and the response to God's gracious giving for our stewardship activities. God has created all things and benevolently gives them to us out of His own divine Fatherly goodness. We are not to express our appreciation with a sense of dutiful service to Him and others by using

---

[61] LW 51:138-39; WA 301:59.11-12; 59:14-17.

[62] Martin Luther, Small Catechism (St Louis: Concordia, 1943), 9. Cf. Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, Book of Concord (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 354-5; Dingel, Irene, et. al., eds. Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche, Vollständige Neuedition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 870-1.

[63] Luther, Small Catechism, 10. Cf. Kolb-Wengert, Book of Concord, 355; Die Bekenntnisschriften, 870-1.

these gifts for the benefit of others.

IV. Luther's Later Comments

Throughout the following decade of the 1530s, Luther was concerned with the building up of the Lutheran community as the Reformation message took root. Therefore, he spent more time speaking about the Christian life, particularly as a life evident in humble service. While we do not see a major change in Luther's thinking about the stewardship of God's gifts, there is a stronger emphasis upon Christian care for others.

A. *Comments on the Sermon on the Mount*

Most informative for our understanding of Luther and stewardship are a series of sermons he preached on Wednesdays in Wittenberg from the last part of 1530 through the early months of 1532 on Matthew 5-7. These sermons were quickly gathered together and published in the fall of 1532 as his Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.[64]

Almost immediately Luther assures his hearers and readers that "Having money, property, land, and retinue outwardly is not wrong in itself. It is God's gift and ordinance. No one is blessed, therefore, because he is a beggar and owns nothing of his own."[65] Luther understood stewardship, particularly of our finances, as being a part of the secular realm in which a person's vocation required him to have money and goods. For example, Luther says: "The head of a household could not support his household and servants if he himself had nothing at all. In short, physical poverty is not the answer."[66] But such possessions, he goes on to say, should be managed as stewards, not as if it were one's own acquired property.

Taking a rather folksy approach in explaining how Christians are to view the possessions they have, Luther says the following:

> …While we live here, we should use all temporal goods and physical necessities, the way a guest does in a strange place, where he stays overnight and leaves in the morning. He needs no more than bed and board and dare not say: "This is mine, here I will stay." Nor dare he take possession of the property as though it belonged to him by right; otherwise he would soon hear the host say to him: "My friend, don't

---

64 WA 32:lxxv-lxxviii; LW 21: xx.

65 LW 21:12; WA 32:307,12-14: "Denn eusserlich gelt, guter, land und leut haben ist an im selbst nicht unrecht sondern Gottes gabe und ordnung."

66 LW 21:12; WA 32:307.24-26.

> you know that you are a guest here? Go back where you belong." That is the way it is here, too. The temporal goods you have, God has given to you for this life. He does permit you to use them and with them to fill the bag of worms that you wear around your neck. But you should not fasten or hang your heart on them as though you were going to live forever. You should always go on and consider another, higher and better treasure, which is your own and which will last forever.[67]

Faith in God's gracious giving is to be uppermost in a Christian's life when considering one's temporal goods. Luther explains that such an attitude is a matter of the heart. Such altruism is not comprehended by most people in the world, especially by non-Christians. "…No one can understand this unless he is already a real Christian. This point and all the rest that follow are purely fruits of faith, which the Holy Spirit Himself must create in the heart."[68] In many ways, Luther affirms that Christian stewardship is part and parcel with the sanctified life. It is a product of the work of the Holy Spirit, among Whose gifts is the gift of generosity.

Luther summarizes the first verses of Christ's great discourse by stating: "Whoever wants to have enough here and hereafter, let him see to it that he is not greedy or grasping. Let him accept and use what God gives him, and live by his labor in faith. Then he will have Paradise and even the kingdom of heaven here…."[69] Notice, again, how Luther emphasizes the Augustinian distinction between use and enjoyment so that we are to use what God has given us, but make such possessions the sole source of one's contentment. This humble distinction is the mark of true Christian stewardship.

A critical idea in Luther's vocabulary, which was decidedly clarified during this decade, is that of one's vocation (Beruf/vocation) as a Christian who lives in his or her Stand/station.[70] This concept of vocation is notably evident as Luther continues his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. For example, in commenting on the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8), Luther criticizes the monastic orders because they thought they were better than others and denigrated the common life of the laity. Luther criticizes these mendicant orders, asserting: "If they knew the means and purpose of their creation by God, they would not despise these other stations [*stende]* nor exalt their own so highly...."[71] The mendicant orders were similar to the Pharisees of Jesus day in that they did not comprehend the true purpose for God's commands, but instead held these "evangelical

---

67 LW 21:13; WA 32:308.5-16.
68 LW 21:15; WA 32:309.33-36.
69 LW 21:17; WA 32:311.5-8.
70 See Eric W. Gritsch, "Gospel and Stewardship: The Perspective of Martin Luther," in The Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin 70:4 (Fall 1990), 32-46, where this theme of vocation is the most prominently used to explain Luther's view of stewardship.
71 LW 21:35; WA 32:327, 8-15

counsels" as being self-fulfilling requirements for elite followers of Jesus.

Luther explains a little later as he comments on the sermon and places an emphasis upon the common vocation that every Christian possesses:

> Therefore, if according to God's Word and command you live in your station with your husband, wife, child, neighbor, or friend, you can see God's intention in these things; and you can come to the conclusion that they please Him, since this is not your own dream, but His Word and command, which never deludes or deceives us. It is a wonderful thing, a treasure beyond every thought or wish, to know that you are standing and living in the right relation to God.[72]

People's place in life (their "Stand") offers them the opportunities to be stewards where God has placed them. This is truly fulfilling one's role or vocation as a Christian.

Somewhat later in his commentary, Luther concludes his concern by reaffirming an emphasis upon works and also sees all of life, including one's works, as exemplifying faith-filled responses to God's grace:

> In short, whoever wants to be a Christian must make up his mind neither to undertake nor to discontinue any good work on the basis of what other people think, but only as a means of serving God through his office or station, his money or goods, or whatever other possessions or abilities he may have, doing what he can to His glory although he may never merit any thanks for it on earth at all.[73]

Thus, Christian stewardship is not something that requires individual Christians to change their positions or vocations, but to see their rightful places, wherever they may be working in this life, as opportunities for service to God and to their neighbors.

Luther certainly does not suggest that Christians are to be naïve in their handling of money and goods. He notes that Jesus speaks of giving to those who ask in Matthew 5:42. Such a view can be misunderstood. In his comments on this verse, Luther makes some careful distinctions between "the one who really needs" and "the one who develops a whim that he would like to take something from us by force." The latter person, he says, "should be turned over to the police and taught something different…." In other

---

[72] LW 21:38; WA 32:412, 8-9: "…gros ding und ein schatz uber alles was man wundschen odder dencken kan; zuwissen das man gegen Gott recht stehe und lebe….

[73] LW 21:136; WA 32:412, 19-25: "Summa Wer ein Christ sein will mus also geschicht sein, das er kein gut werck thu noch lasse umb der leut willen sondern allein darumb das er mit seinem ampt, stand, gelt, gut odder was er hat, vermag und thut, wolle Gott dienen und jm zu ehren thun was er kan, ob er gleich nimer mehr auff erden einigen danck damit versiene. Denn es ist auch unmoeglich das einem fromen menschen auch das allergeringste werck das er thuet alhie kund belonet werden, wenn man jn gleich mit gold kroenet und ein ganzt koenigreich gebe."

words, a person who uses fraud to steal should be rightfully punished by civil authorities. He concludes, "Therefore we should not do our lending and giving in such a way that we fling our gifts way into the wind and do not look to see who is getting them."[74] In other words, Christian stewards are not to be gullible givers, but rather discriminating in their use of the gifts God has provided.

B. *A Common Community Chest*

Now Luther returns to his earlier encouragement for the establishment of a common chest for the whole community. In order to be discerning, one needs to realize his or her particular station in life. Luther draws upon his clear distinction between one's existence as a Christian (in the sacred realm) and one's life as a citizen (in the secular realm). He advises:

> For this you need to employ your secular person, to be prudent in your contacts with other people, to recognize the poor, and to see the kind of people with whom you are dealing and those to whom you should or should not give. Then if you see that it is a genuine seeker, open your hand and lend it to him if he can pay you back. But if he cannot, then give it to him free, and call the account square. There are pious people who would like to work and to support themselves, with their wife and children, but who can never prosper and must occasionally get into debt and difficulty. For the benefit of such people every city should have its common treasury and alms, and it should have church officials to determine who these people are and how they live, so as not to let any of the lazy bums become a burden to other people.[75]

When the opportunity arises and a person who is truly in need presents himself, Luther advises generosity, even to the point of not expecting full payment of the money given. If an individual cannot be that generous, he recommends the establishment of a community chest for the welfare of the community's neediest individuals. Thus the Christian community's "common treasury" would serve as the public resource from which funds are to be distributed to those who are truly in need.

Several verses later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). This verse provides Luther with another opportunity to speak about a topic which he had addressed several times—greed! Luther personifies greed a number of times in this section of his commentary. He notes that "Whenever the Gospel is taught and people seek to live according to it, there are two terrible

---

[74] LW 21:117; WA 32:396.24-25; 396.33-35; 397.10-12.
[75] LW 21:118; WA 32:397.15-25.

plagues that always arise: false preachers who corrupt the teaching, and then ["Juncker Geitz;" Knight or] Sir Greed, who obstructs right living."[76] He observes that now that the Gospel has been given free reign, people seem even greedier than they were under papal domination.[77] In a passing comment in the form of an aside, Luther mentions his own generosity ("if everyone were to behave the way you and I do, by tomorrow no one would have any house or home left!" [78]), but also points out that his benevolent actions are not normative for every Christian, since it goes beyond reasonable handling of one's resources.

Luther properly points out that Jesus is speaking not to the general population, but that Christ is addressing those who are disciples, the individual Christian follower. Luther therefore concludes his comments about greed and the two realms in this way:

> That person of mine which is called "Christian" should not worry about money or save it, but should give its heart to God alone. But outwardly I may and I should use temporal goods for my body and for the needs of other people. As far as my secular person is concerned, I may and I should accumulate money and treasures—yet not too much, so that I do not become a greedy belly that seeks only its own benefit and can never be satisfied. A secular person has to have money, grain, and supplies for his land, his people, or the others that belong to him…. We dare not all be beggars. Everyone should earn enough to support himself without being a burden on other people, and to be able to help others as well. Thus one should contribute to others in time of need.[79]

Being a Christian steward requires a keen sense of living in two realms—God's and the world's. A Christian has responsibilities in each even in the area of financial resources.

This exploration of properly using one's goods leads Luther again to reiterate a routine recommendation of his, that of a common treasury for the poor. Such a fund held by a parish would be what he dubs a "Christian treasure":

> For this reason every city should store away as much as possible for the common need, and in addition every parish should have a common treasury for the poor. That would not be wrong. It would be a way of laying up Christian treasures. This is not the kind of treasure that is

---

[76] LW 21:166; WA 32:437.14-16: "…zum ersten falsche prediger, so die lere verderben, danach Juncker Geitz, der da hindert am guten leben…."
[77] WA 32:437.11-34; LW 21:167.
[78] LW 21:169; WA 32:439. 20-27.
[79] LW 21:171-172; WA 32:441.5-12; 441.18-21.

gathered to gratify greed and lust, the kind the world gathers.[80]

Demonstrating the principal of having one's heart set properly from his own personal perspective, Luther says that it is not the accumulation of money or possessions that is problematic, but rather such activities often grow out of a lack of greater attention on heavenly treasures.[81]

The gifts which God bestows upon a believer are truly gifts. They are to be used for the good of God's kingdom. Luther again restates his idea of the proper use of money in commenting on Matthew 6:24, where he depicts a proper Christian's attitude toward financial properties:

> This is his attitude: "There is my wallet and money bag, my house and home. But here is my Christ. Now, if I have to forsake and surrender one of them I will let it all go in order to keep my Christ."… It is no sin to have money and property, wife and children, house and home. But you must not let it be your master. You must make it serve you, and you must be its master.[82]

Again, Luther repeats his understanding that money is not the problem, but rather the issue is whether or not it is a master over the Christian who possesses it. The final criterion for stewardship of money is one's relationship to Jesus Christ.

This brings Luther back again to see the sinister quality of greed. Luther reminds his readers as he had in his 1520 work, "On Good Works," that personified Greed uses angelically exquisite language, yet demonically deceptive logic.[83] The result of such one-sided rhetoric is that many wealthy persons develop a deep sense of dissatisfaction with their life and possessions. Such dissatisfaction is the experience of anyone who fails to recognize the corrupting qualities associated with greed. The only answer is to look at the blessings God has provided.

Much of Luther's attitude toward money grows out of his understanding of God as Creator and Preserver of all. Luther notes Jesus' words about the birds being cared for by God. He affirms:

---

[80] LW 21:172;WA 32:441.22-25: "Also solt ein igliche stad samlen soviel sie kund zu gemeiner not, ja auch ein iglich kirchspiel ein gemeinen kasten fur die armen, das hiesse nicht unrecht, sondern Christlich schetze gesamlet, Denn es ist nicht ein solcher schatz, damit den geitz und die luest zubuessen, wie die wellt thut…"

[81] LW 21:176; WA 32:445.3-21.

[82] LW 21:189; WA 32:455.9-10; 455.17-19.

[83] WA 32:452.3-28; LW 21:185.

> Every day He feeds and nourishes innumerable little birds out of His hand. For He does not have merely a bag full of grain, but heaven and earth. … Now, since the birds have learned so well the art of trusting Him and of casting their cares from themselves upon God, we who are His children should do so even more.[84]

As stewards of God's creation, Christian believers need not worry about their own livelihood, since they are assured that God cares for them. And a little bit further on in his comments, Luther affirms, "But we are His highest creatures, for whose sakes He made all things and to whom He gives everything."[85]

The result of such generosity on the part of God is that we can trust Him solely and completely. This brings Luther to expound on the principles of true faith. Faith, as Luther understands it, is something that is always busy and active. Echoing his comments over two decades earlier in his Romans and Hebrews commentaries, Luther reiterates,

> faith…is busy and active in good works….It means that I take the Gospel seriously, that I listen to it or use it diligently, and that then I actually live in accordance with it instead of being an idle fellow or a hypocrite, who lets it come in through one ear and out through the other. The Kingdom proves its presence in deed and in power…. That is what we call the Gospel with its fruits—doing good works, fulfilling your station or office diligently and faithfully, and undergoing all sorts of suffering for the Gospel.[86]

The Gospel alone calls forth activities which are truly pleasing to God. Good works, including those which are related to stewardship of one's goods, will flow from a properly oriented faith.

C. *Comments on the Psalms*

Later in that spring of 1532, Luther returned to his favorite biblical book, the book of Psalms. Again, the concept of caring for God's creation and being proper stewards of God's gifts comes through. He says regarding Psalm 2 that we are to be the caretakers of all that God has provided, confident that this is a natural and appropriate approach.[87]

In Luther's comment on Psalm 2, he draws out several implications for stewardship as it relates to fulfilling one's true and God-given vocation. Being a steward or manager is not something one should strive for, he says,

---

[84] LW 21:198; WA 32:462.33-35; 463.8-10.
[85] LW 21:200; WA 32:464.31-32.
[86] LW 21:205; WA 32:469.4-12.
[87] WA 402:216.33-217.14; LW 12:21.

but rather such a role is accomplished through the proper fulfilling of one's position in life:

> This is the sum total of all religion… If someone wishes to become a Christian, it is not necessary for him to change his social rank….You may manage your family. You may undertake certain jobs to earn a living. God leaves preparation and management of all these things to your judgment. …These are externals which anyone can manage as it is convenient for him, if only he shows consideration for his neighbor so that he does not offend him. Nor does God care whether you live under a civil government or in solitude, except that it is an obvious sin if you desert your calling and of your own will choose another estate in life.[88]

Luther reminds his students of their calling/vocation and of the fact that God has made them stewards of his gifts in whatever position they will finally find themselves.

Beginning in the summer (August to November 1532) he commented on Psalm 45 (published the next year or so), where he designates that management or stewardship is something which actually falls into the realm of our secular roles. It is a responsibility Christians have in this life as citizens on earth. Particularly here in our earthly realm, Luther affirms that there is a general need for being both dutiful and industrious.[89]

D. *The Gospel of John*

Soon after Luther completed these comments on selected Psalms, he began to preach on the Gospel of John from the middle of 1537 until September 1540. In two particular sections of John, Luther addresses stewardship issues. Commenting on the story of Samaritan woman in John 4:9, Luther relates it to Matthew's parable of the Last Times when Christ replies, "I was hungry." Luther criticizes his hearers in this way:

> Though we realize that we are giving to God Himself and not to man, we still keep our pantries and cellars locked to Him. Christ speaks harshly enough about money…. It is fraught with wrongdoing…. But the Christians who really recognize the mercy of Christ the Lord are ready to share their food and drink as the good Samaritan woman did.[90]

Being aware of one's need will also result in being generous with what God has so graciously given. A little later in commenting on John 15:5, Luther says:

---

[88] LW 12:85; WA 402:302.29-30; 303.15-17; 303:29-33, especially note the last phrase: si vocationem deseras et tua sponte deligas tibi aliud Vivendi genus.

[89] WA 40:2:480.18-20; LW 12:202.

[90] LW 22:20; WA 47:223.23-26; 223.37-38.

> Wherever there is such faith and assurance of grace in Christ, you can also confidently conclude with regard to your vocation and works that these are pleasing to God and are true and good Christian fruits. Furthermore, such temporal and physical works as governing a land and people, managing a house, rearing and teaching children, serving, toiling, etc., also develop into fruit that endures unto life everlasting…[91]

Good stewardship has both physical and spiritual benefits, says Luther. There is nothing that we have the opportunity to do that is not pleasing to God, if it is a fruit or result of one's faith.

V. Luther's Final Years

During Luther's last decade of teaching, he returned to lecture on the book of Genesis. Beginning in June of 1535 until November of 1545, just a few months before his death, Luther commented on almost every section of Genesis in spite of interruptions from plagues, travels, and his own ill health. Here Luther reiterates many of his earlier themes about Christian stewardship.

Already in his comments regarding Genesis 1:1, Luther says: "The very simple meaning of what Moses says, therefore, is this: Everything that is, was created by God."[92] He explores this idea further as he comments on the passage, "Let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, etc." (Genesis 1:26):

> Here the rule is assigned to the most beautiful creature, who knows God and is the image of God… Adam and Eve become the rulers of the earth, the sea, and the air. But this dominion is given to them not only by way of advice but also by express command…. Therefore the naked human being—without weapons and walls, even without any clothing, solely in his bare flesh—was given the rule over all birds, wild beasts, and fish.[93]

Adam and Eve were created in God's image and were given due responsibility for the creation which God had provided. More than merely a suggestion to care for the whole of creation, Luther reminds his students that this is part of God's will for the world. Adam and Eve were not given anything other than God's command for which they were now responsible.

No sooner had God created Adam and Eve, but there was work for them, Luther notes in regards to Genesis 2:15: "But it is appropriate here also to

[91] LW 24:220; WA 45:662.5-10.
[92] LW 1:7; WA 42:6.24-25, where he calls Adam and Eve "rectores terrae."
[93] LW 1:66; WA 42:49.18; 49.20-22; 49.27-28.

point out that man was created not for leisure but for work, even in the state of innocence. Therefore the idle sort of life, such as that of monks and nuns, deserves to be condemned."[94] Although work since the Fall into sin has been experienced as a negative activity, Luther reminds his hearers that this was not originally the case. Idleness, particularly as the monastic communities of Luther's day practiced it, is contrary to God's original plan. Luther adds that "… Adam appears to have heard the Lord charge him with the management of household and world affairs…"[95] Thus, careful stewardship or proper management of God's gifts is part of God's original intent for His creation. This is important when considering the stewardship of all that Christians possess; it is fulfilling God's original design for the world.

As Luther expounds on the various activities of the ancient biblical patriarchs in Genesis, he sees management or stewardship as something which the faithful patriarchs and matriarchs accepted wholeheartedly. For example, he comments that:

> …the management [*gubernatio*] carried on by this patriarch [Abraham] was extraordinary. If you consider our times, it would be altogether impossible today. For it is a wonder of wonders that God supported him together with so large a household in a foreign land, and that Sarah had charge [*administravit*] of all this. Accordingly, Abraham's administration or management [*politia sive oeconomia*] of his household is no less remarkable than his church was. He is a stranger and sojourner together with all his household. But he undoubtedly encouraged and sustained himself with the promise.[96]

Stewardship of God's resources is a lifelong activity which, Luther recognized, is sustainable only with the assurance of God's presence and help.

At the death of Sarah, who Luther notes had been Abraham's co-steward of all that God had provided, Luther records that Abraham sought out the necessary help of his servant, Eleazar as a replacement for Sarah's excellent stewardship during her lifetime. He shows that Eleazar recognizes the successful stewardship of God's possessions which Abraham had conducted:

> The servant puts primary emphasis on the fact that Abraham owes all the great wealth he has in such abundance to the blessing of God, for he regards all this in faith. The gifts themselves, of course, he considers of less value. It is most important by far that whatever he has is a gift of God, and that whatever is under his management [*administratione*] is from God. "But I have been appointed," he [the servant] says, "to guard these things and to manage [*gubernationem*] his household. Therefore

94 LW 1:103; WA 42:78.26-28.
95 LW 1:82; WA 42:62.1-2.
96 LW 4:199; WA 43:279.11-16.

you do not have an ordinary guest; you have an ambassador of God."[97]

However, in assuming the role of steward over Abraham's property, Eleazar also saw himself as fulfilling his master's duty of being a caretaker under God's ownership.

Luther similarly says that Isaac served as a manager over his household, yet he recognized that ultimately God is the One who is in control. Luther in an almost humorous tone describes Isaac's activities as being almost minimal:

> All these things are managed by God while Isaac sits still and undertakes nothing at all … and also has no understanding with him; for he only bears what has been ordered modestly and quietly, congregates, constructs a tabernacle, and devotes himself to the Word.98

Isaac merely follows the Lord's wishes and is an instrument of God, Luther observes. This brings Luther, once again, to ponder the role of Christian action and stewardship. "Then what?" Luther asks, "Should nothing at all be done, and should all managing [*gubernentur]* be shunned entirely? Not at all. Rather let everyone diligently and faithfully do his duty which has been committed to him by God." Furthermore he warns, "But let him beware of relying on his own strength or his own wisdom and of considering himself such a great man that everything should be directed in accordance with what he counsels."[99] Stewardship is not an individual's act, but is instead evidence of God working through her or him. One's reliance should always be on God, recognizing one's own particular responsibility to Him, but more importantly, one needs to recognize His blessings to those who are to serve as His representatives. Stewardship is really a matter of representing God in the roles or vocations into which God places individuals.

In a rather common and everyday example, Luther describes how Christian parents are true stewards as they fulfill their vocation of parenting, which is not based upon their own authority, but is divinely mandated:

> Moreover, in the management [*oeconomia]* of the household father and mother are the instruments through which the house and household affairs are governed [gubernatur]. But they themselves should also acknowledge that by their own power, diligence, or effort they can never bring up their children properly and successfully. Therefore they should

---

97 LW 4:287; WA 43:341.29-34.

98 LW 5:83; emended from WA 43:486.28-29: Haec omnia enim divinitus administrantur, ipso Isaac sedente, et nihil prorsus [contra Regem moliente,] nihil etiam cum eo transigente: tantum enim fert, quod mandatum est, modeste et placid, concionatur, erigit tabernaculum et exercet verbum.

99 LW 5:122; WA 43:512.17-19.

> cry out: "Lord God, heavenly Father, help us that our children may turn out well!"[100]

As stewards in whatever station in life one is, God's will is done through them as they faithfully continue to care for those things over which God has placed them. The real question is one of vocation and the stewardship responsibilities of that vocation.

By way of summary, Luther relies on the comforting assurance that "God is the Manager and Governor of all."[101] Although he criticizes the Church leadership of his day for mistakenly looking at special spiritual offices and powerful positions in this world as being superior to the routines of life, he concludes that it is God who is finally the Steward:

> …from history…the church is more correctly instructed about the wonderful administration of God in all stations of life, in the management of a household, in the state, and in the church. Thus, …the counsels of God and His governance…[are] hidden under this ordinary outward appearance of household management….[102]

It is in our ordinary work at home and church that Christians exhibit true stewardship, not only with their money but with their very lives of service.

Conclusion

The idea of stewardship of all that one receives from God in this world is a fundamental concept in Luther's writings as we have reviewed in this article. By way of application and conclusion, five points may be drawn from Luther's writing on stewardship of God's resources:

- God gave his people all things as His stewards.
- Stewardship of God's creation is a lofty Christian vocation.
- Stewardship of money and possessions is of secondary importance to extension and proclamation of the Gospel.
- A communal resource from which funds can be provided to the poor is desirable and necessary for Christian communities.

---

[100] LW 5:124; WA 43:513.34-39.

[101] LW 5:311; WA 43:643.3-7: "Deus enim est οἰκόμομος et gubernator omnium."

[102] LW 5:345; WA 43:667.4-16: "Hortor itaque studiosos Theologiae, ut futiant hoc genus interpretationis in sacris literis. Quia allegoria est perniciosa, quando non congruit cum historia, praecipue vero, quando in locum historiae succedit, ex qua rectius eruditur Ecclesia de mirabilis administratione Dei in omnibus ordinibus vitae, in oeconomia, politica et Ecclesia; quae dum negligent isti interpretes in historiis, necessario omnia in allegorias et alienum sensum transformant. Sicut in hoc exemplo, quia non vident consilia et gubernationem Dei tectam vili ista specie oeconomiae et coniugii, ad fingent peregrinum sensum de vita contemplativa et activa. Nam haec eorum sunt, ad quas pleraque omnia referunt.

- Christians are to manage their money wisely for their family and community.

As we celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, the idea of being God's good stewards of His gifts is a beneficial contribution we can make in the world as a reflection of Luther's legacy.

Timothy Maschke *is Professor Emeritus of Theology at Concordia University Wisconsin, where he taught courses in Luther, biblical theology, and Lutheran Worship. He served as editor of CTJ for two years.*

An Evaluation of Sin and Forgiveness in Japanese Culture and Its Effects on Evangelism

Jacob Stoltzman

Introduction

Those who undertake the work of a Christian missionary face great challenges regardless of where they are sent, and Japan is no exception to this reality. The prospective missionary must learn a challenging new language, fraught with lexical oddities and a dizzying array of characters. He must learn a new set of social graces that are likely quite different from his own, made more urgent by the fact that the people he intends to serve will be quite sensitive to matters of etiquette.

Moreover, he must contend with the challenges of preaching God's word in a culture that has matured quite independently from Christian ideas. Monotheism is a challenge to the polytheistic religion of Shinto. The bliss of the new heavens and the new earth will fall on deaf ears to the Buddhist seeking liberty from the physical world. Jesus' admonition in Matt 6:19–20 to lay up treasures in heaven offends the sensibilities of the secular materialists. These and many other doctrines prove to be stumbling blocks in evangelism. One of the greatest stumbling blocks is the biblical doctrine of sin and forgiveness. The religious traditions of Japan do not offer an easy point of comparison, and the social influences have been largely focused on an ethic of shame and honor as opposed to one of guilt and forgiveness.

To aid the missionary in his endeavor, three topics will be addressed. First, an analysis of Japanese hamartiology—ideas of sin and forgiveness—and their origins in religious and secular thought will be provided. Second, a biblical analysis of these ideas will be provided to show areas of tension and agreement. Finally, methods of practically applying the aforementioned data to evangelize more effectively will be explored.

Sin and Forgiveness in Japan

In order to understand the Japanese notions of sin and forgiveness, one must consider two areas. First, one must examine the religious ideas that form how the Japanese understand themselves in relation to the divine.

Second, one must consider the secular values that guide their society. These two streams of thought merge to form one holistic outlook on sin and forgiveness.

Religious Influences

Of Japan's 127 million residents, roughly 80% identify themselves as adherents to Shinto, with 67% claiming Buddhism.[1] The reason for the overlapping percentages is that many Japanese claim to practice both religions in tandem. These two religions form the pillars of Japanese religious thought, with a healthy dose of Confucianism included to hold the entire system together and fill in the ideological gaps of the other two. This syncretism creates a confusing landscape where the missionary might never be sure if a particular religious thought is the product of Buddhism or Shinto or another source. Nevertheless, each of these religions influences Japanese hamartiology.

Shinto

Shinto is the ancient, native religion of Japan. The name means "the way of the 神 *kami*." The *kami* are spirits thought to reside in all manner of objects, both natural and manmade. These myriad *kami* are the objects of reverence in Shinto, and are arranged in a loose hierarchy with each overseeing certain functions of life.[2] Shinto possesses little in the way of formalized doctrine, instead placing great emphasis on praxis.[3]

Likewise, Shinto possesses no formal scriptures. However, there are two documents which provide the basic, generally-accepted mythos that unifies Shinto across the nation: the 古事記 *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters) and the 日本書紀 *Nihon Shoki*[4] (Chronicles of Japan). These texts were authored by Ō no Yasumaro in the eighth century,[5] and detail various stories about the primordial *kami*, the conquest of Japan, and the ascendency of the Yamato imperial family.

The anthropology of Shinto is important to consider when addressing the topic of sin. Shinto sees all the universe as part of 大自然 *Daishizen* (Great

---

1 Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Japan," CIA.gov, last modified January 12, 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html (accessed February 3, 2017).

2 Ann Llewellyn Evans, *Shinto Norito: A Book of Prayers* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2006), xvi.

3 Yukitaka Yamamoto, foreword to *Shinto Norito*, by Ann Llewellyn Evans (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2006), ix.

4 This document is also referred to as the 日本紀 *Nihongi*. The name carries the same meaning, but omits a character.

5 *Japan: Profile of a Nation*, rev. ed. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1999), 74.

Nature). *Daishizen* includes not only nature in the form of trees, rocks, and other such items, but includes metaphysical forces, the *kami*, and mankind itself.[6] Mankind is posited as the children of the *kami*, and thus shares the same 神性 *shinsei* (divine nature) as their progenitors.[7] Likewise, if the *kami* indwell *Daishizen*, *Daishizen* must share that nature as well. Assuming the goodness of the *kami*, Shinto works out from this axiom to deduce the goodness of mankind and the whole creation.

However, Shinto allows for the existence of various 罪 *tsumi*, deeds which are contrary to this natural goodness. These *tsumi* produce 穢れ *kegare* (impurity) which, if cleared away, allows man to shine with his innate goodness and promote personal and communal flourishing.[8] Analysis of *kegare* and its purification provides the bedrock for Shinto hamartiology.

Kegare

Kegare is the chief fear of the Shinto practitioner. This state is brought about by various deeds—some moral and others purely physical—and causes the worshipper to be unable to beseech the *kami* for their blessings. As such, the chief goal of one tainted by *kegare* is to purify himself of it.

As Ritual Impurity

The ancient documents of Shinto practice and mythos describe impurity almost entirely in physical terms. The majority of actions which cause defilement are related to contact with unclean objects such as blood, feces, corpses, or grotesque medical deformities (e.g., warts, leprosy, albinism, etc.).[9] Less obviously physical contaminants, such as incest or destruction of another's domestic animals, also exist. The shared characteristic of all these varieties of *kegare* is that they involve physical defilement of some manner. Kato goes so far as to claim that this form of *kegare* is purely physical, without any consideration of the metaphysical.[10]

This ancient *kegare* affects even the *kami*, as evidenced when the creator deity Izanagi is tainted after visiting his wife in the underworld, and undertakes ritual ablution upon leaving. Since the gods themselves do not desire to be unclean, one who is in a state of *kegare* will be rejected out of hand if he seeks to approach a god's shrine.

---

6 Evans, *Shinto Norito*, xviii.
7 Evans, *Shinto Norito,* xviii.
8 Evans, *Shinto Norito*, xviii.
9 Genichi Kato, *A Study of Shinto: The Religion of the Japanese People* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971), 112.
10 Genichi Kato, *A Historical Study of the Religious Development of Shint*ō, translated by Shoyu Hanayama (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 145.

As Spiritual Impurity

The moralization of Shinto following the introduction of Buddhism and the successive years of syncretism led to a new dimension of purity that had previously not been in consideration. The *kami* increasingly become concerned with spiritual offerings in preference to physical ones, and require an upright spirit from their worshippers. Saka Shibitsu, writing about his pilgrimage to the Ise Shrine in AD 1342, notes that the pilgrims do not bring offerings or rosaries along with them to the enshrined goddess (Amaterasu-omikami), which he suggests is the "true signification of inner purity" since the pilgrims are approaching the *kami* in humility rather than through offerings or cloying prayers.[11]

With this new focus on spiritual purity, ethical infractions increasingly became a source of concern for the pious. Buddhist and Confucian thought served as a new ethical grounding in conjunction with the nature worship of Shinto, and the *tsumi* one had committed against another were increasingly seen as a source of the god's ire, and cause for seeking restoration through ritual and prayer. Concepts such as reconciliation between coreligionists or penance never developed significantly in this new religious ethos, and matters of restitution were still governed in the civil sphere outside of much religious input, but the idea that the *kami* cared for clean hearts as well as clean bodies began to take a greater hold in the Japanese mind.

Purification

祓い清め *harai-kiyome* describes the process of purification which removes the stain of *kegare* and allows man's natural goodness to come forth.[12] Purification is made by observance of various rites. Some form of contrition also seems to have been required in ancient practice, such as table offerings or forcible removal of one's beard or fingernails.[13] Also described is a rite similar to the scapegoat of Lev 16:5–10 in which deer or roosters offered to the *kami* were either set loose into the wilds or cast into the sea.[14] This rite carried both a sense of restitution for sin and the removal of evil auras. Other rites, such as specific prayers, also exist.

The most prominent rite associated with the removal of impurity is 禊 *misogi*. This rite, connected with Izanagi's washing after visiting the underworld,[15] consists of ritual washing in combination with prayer. The adherent is submerged in water or stands under a flowing stream and

11 Kato, *A Study of Shinto*, 166.
12 Yamamoto, foreword to *Shinto Norito*, x–xi.
13 Kato, *A Historical Study*, 148.
14 Kato, *A Historical Study*, 149–50.
15 Evans, *Shinto Norito*, 126.

performs a number of gestures and chants supposed to expel impurity. Although in ancient times the rite was primarily focused on cleanliness before going to a shrine, later doctrine would place a greater emphasis on spiritual uprightness in undertaking the ritual, such as Tomobe no Yasutaka's admonition that one who undertakes ablution only for the physical cleanliness without curtailing his evil vices will still face rejection from the deities.[16] This resembles Peter's statement that baptism saves not as a result of the removal of dirt from the body but from the spiritual cleanliness it brings about (1 Pet 3:21). However, care should be taken not to link the two too closely, for while baptism is a one-time event to impart the forgiveness of sins and a share in Christ's resurrection (Acts 3:28; Rom 6:3–6), *misogi* is a recurring removal of accumulated impurity, more akin to the Jewish *mikvah* or the Islamic *ghusl*. Baptism might have continuing applications for the Christian life, but it does not need to be repeated to continually forgive new sins.

Non-Native Religions

Throughout its history, Japan has been in contact with many nations—most notably China and Korea. Through these nations Japan adopted many important cultural, scientific, and political ideas that transformed the small island nation into a global contender. Alongside these ideas came new religions to supplement and shape the native religion and change the mores of the people. Most important among these are Buddhism and Confucianism.

Buddhism

Buddhism is traditionally held to have come to Japan through Seongmyeong, king of the Korean state of Baekje in the sixth century.[17] Although challenged by adherents to traditional religion who feared the new religion would upset the native *kami*, Buddhism found support in the Soga clan, who used their growing power in the imperial court to advocate for it, with many accepting it in the hopes that it would provide Japan with the same power and influence of China and Korea, as well as using the rituals to gain power and prestige.[18] Emperor Yōmei and his son Shōtoku would later be instrumental in the promulgation of Buddhism as a religion with imperial support.

Buddhism's origin is traced back to Siddhārtha Gautama, later called the

---

[16] Kato, *A Study of Shinto*, 165.
[17] Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 275.
[18] Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 276.

Buddha (enlightened one), an Indian prince purported to have lived circa 578–447 BC.[19] Discontented with the materialism that had taken hold in India, and moved by the sufferings of the poor, he is said to have renounced his wealth in an effort to attain enlightenment. His native Hinduism had taught him that the world was caught up in a cycle of rebirth, and the highest goal was to obtain *mokṣa* (liberation) and be freed from this cycle.[20] Reflecting on this tradition, Gautama derived three characteristics about the world: (1) *anitya* (impermanence), (2) *duḥkha* (dissatisfaction), and (3) *anātman* (no-self).[21] Simply stated, Gautama concluded that since the universe was impermanent it could not produce lasting satisfaction, and (contrary to the prevailing tradition of Hinduism) there was no lasting happiness—a denial of the Hindu concept of *ātman* (self). This state of the world, in tandem with the cycle of reincarnation, was named with the familiar Hindu term *Saṃsāra*, which described the world as "wandering" through the cycle of rebirth.[22]

This insight led him to develop an entire system whereby one could leave behind the desires that created *duḥkha* and attain *nirvana*, release from the cycle of reincarnation. By observing what was dubbed "the Eightfold Path" one could achieve moral purification and leave behind *duḥkha*. The Eightfold Path prescribed proper epistemology, ethics, and praxis for its adherents.[23] With this in mind, it might be said that the broadest definition of sin in Buddhism is anything that does not comport with the Eightfold Path.

Buddhism has traditionally seen the existence of sin and evil as the proof of the nonexistence of God.[24] Rather, good and evil alike are seen as eternally existing within *Saṃsāra*, and thus exist simultaneously within man. Sin is said to be a natural result of man's egoism. However, sin itself is regarded only as the actions that one commits, not as a state in which one exists.[25] Whether or not man's nature naturally inclines towards evil actions or not is not firmly established, but there is general agreement that man is capable of overcoming evil inclination.[26]

Though Gautama's Buddhism put forth salvation as a self-wrought effort, several Japanese schools developed which stressed dependence on the

---

19 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 11.
20 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 10.
21 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 34–36.
22 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 34.
23 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 53–61.
24 David Thang Moe, "Sin and Evil in Christian and Buddhist Perspectives: A Quest for Theodicy," *Asia Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (April 2015): 23.
25 Thang Moe, "Sin and Evil," 27.
26 Alexander Chow, "The East Asian Rediscovery of 'Sin,'" *Studies in World Christianity* 19, no. 2 (2013), 128.

Bodhisattva, exalted figures developed in later forms of Buddhism that were said to be beings who had already attained *nirvana*, but had remained within *Saṃsāra* to aid in the salvation of others.[27] Among these was 浄土 *jōdo* (Pure Land) Buddhism, which stressed that essential qualities of attaining *nirvana*—sincerity, faith, and aspiration—were not qualities that man possessed naturally, but had to be given by Amida (Amitābha).[28] In this form of Buddhism, there was less focus on introspection and a greater emphasis on 他力 *tariki* (other strength), the grace of Amida. Part of receiving Amida's grace was calling out to him, which is regarded as the sum of repentance in that one is admitting need and weakness in calling out to him.[29]

Confucianism

Confucianism is based on the works of Chinese philosopher Kŏng Qiū (Confucius), who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries BC.[30] Although steeped in the religious traditions of ancient China, much of Confucius' teachings are not overtly religious. Instead, much of his writings deal with harmonious living and societal good. Japan would later appropriate these ideas and utilize them in forming a governmental hierarchy imitating that of China in prince Shōtoku's *Seventeen-Article Constitution*.[31]

The main goal of a follower of Confucius is to become a 君子 *jūnzǐ*. A *jūnzǐ* was a man of exemplary character who outclassed both his peers and his former self.[32] Becoming this exemplary man involved a cognizance of the attributes of a *jūnzǐ*, and a concerted effort to live in conformity to those attributes.[33]

Because Confucianism is focused on self-improvement, there is little in the way of hamartiology. A man improves himself through a constant process of right thoughts and actions. Failure to do so results in shame and upsets the balance in society, but it imparts no lasting guilt in a theological sense. The question of whether man is naturally good is not definitively answered. For example, the Confucian scholar Mencius argued that the human nature was good, but was led to do evil things by the evil environment it interacted with. Another scholar, Xunzi, emphatically declared that human nature itself

---

27 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 130–32.
28 Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 293.
29 Daisetz Suzuki, *Japanese Spirituality*, translated by Norman Waddell (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 180–81.
30 Miles Menander Dawson, *The Basic Teachings of Confucius: The Conduct of Life* (New York: The New Home Library, 1942), xvii.
31 Ryusaku Tsunoda, Wm. Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene, eds. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 54 of *Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies*, ed. by Jacques Barzun (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 49.
32 Dawson, *The Basic Teachings*, 1.
33 Dawson, *The Basic Teachings*, 2–8.

was evil, and that man did good deeds only by virtue of conscious exertion.[34] However, both held that humans were able to achieve the status of *jūnzǐ*, provided they had the determination.

Secular Influences

As important as the religious factors may be, it is just as important that one consider the secular ideas that have influenced the Japanese. Although many of these ideas come from a religious—or at least semi-religious—background, they are secular in that they are largely promulgated on the basis of social order or personal prestige apart from any theological impetus. Two categories will be examined: (1) pre-modern and (2) modern.

Pre-Modern

For this paper, "pre-modern" refers to ideas fostered prior to the Second World War. In many cases, these ideas stem from religious values that are modified for the sake of governing the secular world. For example, Confucius' emphasis on orderly government was very influential in the crafting of Japan's earliest legal codes.[35]

To explore all of Japan's social developments with respect to sin or forgiveness would be an exhausting task. However, two important developments arise in this time. The first is more general, and bears significance even to this day: the concepts of honor and shame. The second is more parochial, but important to understand because of its later adaptation in the modern era: Bushido.

Honor and Shame

When discussing how a society enforces its morality, social scientists assign a position on a continuum between guilt and shame cultures. A guilt culture largely relies on individuals' consciences to steer them away from acts that are harmful to the community. When they fail to do so, their feelings of guilt drive them to admit fault and make an effort to not repeat their mistakes. Conversely, shame societies rely on interpersonal sanction to curtail unacceptable behavior. Sinful acts might create a sense of guilt in the individual, but unless the deed is made public and one's peers react with the expected scorn, the individual might not feel particularly bothered by his actions, nor feel the need to confess to having committed such deeds.[36]

Opposite from shame, when an individual conforms to the etiquette

[34] Chow, "The East Asian Rediscovery of 'Sin,'" 128.
[35] Tsunoda, de Bary, and Keene, *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, 37–38.
[36] Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 223.

expected of him and performs meritorious work above and beyond his calling, he incurs honor to his name. Being honored was highly sought after in antiquity, since it allowed one to have the best possible status within the otherwise rigid caste system of pre-modern Japan. The subsequent abolishment of the caste system took away some of the impetus to gain glory, but the Confucian emphasis on personal development kept the striving for individual distinction alive.

Bushido and the Samurai Class

The Samurai were a class of retainers in Japan's feudal era—the highest one could be without being part of the government.[37] The important writings detailing Samurai etiquette were written in a period of peace following Japan's Age of Warring States from AD 1467–1568. During this time, it became increasingly necessary to control a warrior class that had no wars to fight. However, basic tenets such as the desire to preserve one's 名 *na* (name) and provide glory to his 家 *ie* (house) were already in existence by the Kamakura period, AD 1185–1333.[38] In later years these concepts would be enhanced with Confucian admonitions on seeking personal excellence in martial and artistic matters to create an idealized image to which all members of the Samurai caste would aspire, dubbed 武士道 *bushidō* (the way of the warrior).[39]

The emphasis on glory in the context of a military career led to a distinct distaste for dishonor, and a romanticizing of honorable death. It was better to die, if it would secure one's honor than to continue living without such an assurance.[40] For those who either survived a battle but incurred disgrace, or those who suffered extreme dishonor during a time of peace there existed a ritualized suicide by disembowelment known as 切腹 *seppuku* by which one could restore their honor— a practice which persisted well into the postwar era[41] and even beyond.[42]

The connection between death and honor in Bushido offers an outlook on remittance of sin that is curiously lacking in Japan's religious traditions. Whereas religious thought in Japan has countered wrong deeds by demanding a change in heart, Bushido demands blood payment. However it is incurred, the state of shame is pervasive, and must be atoned for with the

---

37 Alexander Bennett, Hagakure: *The Secret Wisdom of the Samurai* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 18.
38 Bennett, Hagakure, *The Secret Wisdom*, 17.
39 Bennett, Hagakure, *The Secret Wisdom*, 19.
40 Bennett, Hagakure, *The Secret Wisdom*, 20.
41 Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword,* 151.
42 Michael Thomas Cibenko, "The Culture of Death and the Death of a Culture," *New Oxford Review* 76, no. 2 (February 2009): 28.

death of the one who is shamed. The individual remained responsible for his own atonement, however, and they were admonished to handle their own affairs quickly rather than protract the experience and hope for something else to take the shame away.[43]

The Samurai would remain an important figure in the Japanese mind for many years. Although the caste was formally dissolved in the Meiji era (AD 1868–1912), the image of the Samurai would remain an idealized form of virtue and manliness to be utilized in later years, particularly during the WWII era. Far from dead, the values of the Samurai remain a steadfast force in the minds of modern Japanese.

Modern

The beginning of modern Japan can be loosely tied with the Meiji era and the subsequent push for Westernization and imperialism. Two important developments can be seen. First is the ascendancy of the idea of 国家神道 *Kokka Shintō* (state Shinto). Second is the post-war shift in Japanese thought.

State Shinto

It is difficult to state when State Shinto began, and who first articulated it. It is generally agreed that the idea arose in the late nineteenth century as an attempt to purify Japan of the cultural influences of the West and China (via Buddhism).[44] Drawing on Japan's legendary past recorded in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, Meiji-era intellectuals put forth a vision of an organized Shinto that could compete with Buddhism and Christianity, and an emphasis on the divinity of the emperor. These early ideas culminated in violent protests against the Shogun and foreign traders.[45]

As the power of the Shogun waned, the emperor began to morph from a figurehead of the state into a more involved statesman. Consequently, these doctrines that exalted the emperor and the state were well received in nationalist circles, and gradually saw implementation through legislature. The government began to control certain shrines directly, and suppressed elements of 教派 *kyōha* (sect) Shinto—those sects of Shinto that were not formally approved by the imperial government.

Doctrinally speaking, State Shinto differed from classical Shinto in that it more robustly emphasized the divinity of the emperor and the unique nature of the Japanese civilization. These ideas existed previously, but they were

[43] Bennett, Hagakure, *The Secret Wisdom*, 70.
[44] Shimazono Susumu, "State Shinto in the Lives of the People: The Establishment of Emperor Worship, Modern Nationalism, and Shrine Shinto in Late Meiji," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 36, no. 1 (2009): 95–96.
[45] Shimazono, "State Shinto," 99.

now the preferred government ideology. With respect to sin and forgiveness, State Shinto was not appreciably different. The most profound effect that it had in this regard was that it turned the focus on the semi-transcendent *kami* more toward the material subjects of the emperor and the state. Invocation of the *kami* was done to advance the success of the emperor and the state, not for one's own salvation.

Post-War Developments

Japan's defeat in WWII brought about the end of imperial Japan, and replaced it with a secular, democratic government. The publically enforced unity between the government and Shinto ended, although the emperor still retains his place as an object of worship in Shinto practice in spite of having technically declared his humanity. Throughout the postwar occupation, the United States focused on instilling Western values and methodologies in the Japanese nation. As a result, Japan's governmental, economic, and educational institutions became increasingly Westernized, while Western concepts such as materialism, secularism, and capitalism gained ascendancy.

As part of the postwar efforts to curtail State Shinto, overt displays of religiosity became increasingly taboo. Worship of the emperor and one's ancestors, although a part of Shinto from its inception, was associated with nationalism and resurrection in the minds of the American occupiers. As such, religion became an increasingly private matter, with overt expressions becoming largely limited to communal affairs and seasonal celebrations. The combination of State Shinto's focus on worldly matters and the postwar limiting of religion to cultural and communal festivities has essentially reduced religion in Japan to a matter of cultural expression. Therefore—despite the large number of people who report belonging to a religion—Japan can be said to be functionally atheistic.

Sin and Forgiveness in the Bible

Sin

Having seen what the Japanese understand of sin and forgiveness, one can begin to explore the biblical definition thereof and see where tensions are to be found. The main topics to explore from a biblical perspective are: (1) the state of man as it relates to the divine, (2) the relationship between guilt, shame, and sin in the biblical narrative, and (3) the concept of purity and impurity as sin. Once these are grasped, one can better understand the lacunae in Japanese thought and be prepared for them.

The State of Man

Perhaps the most glaring difference between the Christian faith and the Japanese religious traditions is their respective views on man and his capacity to affect his own salvation. Japan's traditions have been unified in the belief that man is able to save himself, regardless of whether his nature is essentially good or not. Contradicting this, the Christian faith asserts that man is corrupted by sin, and his post-Fall nature inclines toward evil (Gen 6:5; Ps 14:3).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that to fulfill the law requires perfection (Matt 5:48). This statement is reinforced by James, who testifies that a single infraction against the law is tantamount to breaking the whole thing (Jas 2:10). Thus man finds himself caught in a predicament: he is required to keep the law perfectly if he would justify himself, but is unable to do so. Contrary to what Japanese religious thought has maintained, the law exists not as a guide to self-improvement or purification, but to convict all men of sin so that they are silent before God (Rom 3:19–20).

This teaching creates tension in witnessing to East Asian cultures, where the religious traditions have created an optimistic outlook on human ability.[46] Yet it is important to keep this difference in anthropology in mind, for it will be a constant source of resistance in evangelism. Furthermore, this outlook on man creates difficulties in preaching, which will be explored later.

Guilt and Shame

The ancient Near East, even in the days of Jesus, has been regarded as a shame-culture.[47] As such, it is unsurprising to find language of honor and shame being used in numerous contexts. For example, Adam and Eve are described as being unashamed of their nakedness in their original innocence (Gen 2:24). Joab accuses David of bringing shame to his men by morning for Absalom (2 Sam 19:5). The book of Proverbs contains several admonitions intended to bring shame to one's enemies while avoiding personal shame (Prov 10:5; 12:4; 25:21–22). These sources of shame find parallels with aspects of Japanese culture.

With respect to sin, it is noteworthy that the ideas of shame and honor are not confined to social and secular transgressions, but are also applicable when considering God's divine law. According to Wilch, the primary source of shame put forth in the Old Testament is misplaced faith which results in

---

[46] Chow, "The East Asian Rediscovery of 'Sin,'" 133.

[47] W. R. Domeris, "Honour and Shame in the New Testament," *Neotestamentica* 27, no. 2 (1993): 284.

a daring venture that is unsuccessful.[48] An example of this kind of shame is shown in Isaiah's prophecy warning Judah not to seek protection from the Egyptians, for Yahweh would turn Egypt's protection into Judah's shame (Isa 30:1–3). The converse is shown in the psalmist's plea to Yahweh that his faith in him not be met with shame (Ps 31:1).

The New Testament continues the previously established pattern, with the incarnate Christ taking a role of prominence ascribed to Yahweh in the OT. This is demonstrated in Peter's quotation of the Septuagint version of Isaiah, in which he posits Christ as the cornerstone spoken of therein (1 Pet 2:6–7). Here Christ is the focus of one's trust, and those who have placed their trust in him have not done so to their shame. Peter uses this motif again when he exhorts believers to honor Christ as holy in their hearts, saying that the ridicule of the unbelievers will be to their shame and not the believer's (1 Pet 3:15–16).

Additionally, it is important to note that the Bible's use of shame does not entail a neglect of guilt. The presence of guilt in the minds of the biblical authors is seen in several of the confessions of sin throughout the Bible. For example, David petitions God to forgive his bloodguilt following his adultery with Bathsheba and arranging the death of Uriah (Ps 51:14). The combination of guilt and shame in the biblical writings connects the more passive experience of shame with the active culpability of the sinner.

Interestingly, the relationship between God and the sinner shows similarities to the feudal system of the Samurai. When a Samurai failed to follow proper decorum, he incurred shame and experienced guilt for his failure to properly honor his *daimyō*. Similarly, the Bible posits God as king over all creation. Thus, when one of his subjects fails to meet the standards that God has set forth, the subject is shamed before his peers and is now obligated to make restitution to his liege. The similarity ends—as will be shown later—when considering how, and by whom, restitution must be made.

Purity and Impurity

When speaking of purity in the Bible, the distinction between ritual and moral purity found in Shinto is also observed. Matters of ritual purity are detailed extensively in the Book of Leviticus, with much attention given to ceremonial washings and purification rituals. These rites served a dual purpose: they proscribed rules for the levitical priesthood to maintain the cleanliness and sanctity of the Tabernacle and the various holy instruments, as well as to remind the Israelites of their status as people set apart for

---

[48] John R. Wilch, *Ruth*, Concordia Commentary Series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

Yahweh to spur them to holiness of living.[49] Unclean things are to be separated from holy things; thus many of the more obviously sinful sources of impurity carry with them the threat of banishment.

The sources of impurity described in the levitical codes run the gamut in terms of their moral implications. Some involved no particular transgression, such as infection with leprosy or contact with the dead (Lev 13; Num 5:2). Others came from explicit violations of God's law, such as adultery, bestiality, or homosexual intercourse (Lev 20:10–16). Others have no obvious moral fault, but show the possibility of evil actions in tandem with other events. An example of this category might be seen in the prohibition against sexual intercourse with menstruating women. Although neither the menstruation itself nor the sexual acts are sins *per se*, the prohibition may carry the implication that women are being taken advantage of during a time of weakness, with the male forcing the woman into a shameful position for the sake of his own gratification.[50]

The Bible describes moral purity in terms of acceptability to God, drawing on the relation between moral concerns and ritual acceptability. Isaiah describes the depths of Israel's sin by comparing the people to an unclean object and their righteous deeds to menstrual garments, items that were not to be brought into Yahweh's presence (Isa 64:6). Jesus also makes use of this dichotomy in pronouncing woes on the scribes and Pharisees, noting their meticulous observance to matters of ritual purity and outward cleanliness while neglecting the moral aspects of the law and spiritual purity (Matt 23:23–28). This statement brings to mind Tomobe no Yasutaka's similar warning against attempting to curry the favor of the *kami* by physical cleanliness while neglecting moral uprightness.

Forgiveness

Analysis of the biblical conception of sin shows noteworthy similarity to motifs present in Japanese thought. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is quite different. The Japanese religious traditions put the onus on the individual to attain his salvation for himself. The practitioner of Shinto must take the proper steps to purify his own *kegare*. The Buddhist must eliminate attachment to the world by his own strength. The Confucian must exert himself to attain the coveted status of *jūnzǐ*. The secular traditions fare little better, with the guilty party still required to make satisfaction for his own missteps, if he considers forgiveness to be worth obtaining at all. Contrary

---

[49] John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary Series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 12–13.

[50] Michael Rosenberg, "The Conflation of Purity and Prohibition: An Interpretation of Leviticus 18:19," *Harvard Theological Review* 107, no. 4 (October, 2014): 466–67.

to this, biblical forgiveness, in all its forms of expression, is centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ, with man saved by grace through faith in him (Eph 2:8–9).

Removal of Guilt

The first form of forgiveness revolves around the removal of guilt. Paul teaches that the cost of sin is death (Rom 6:23), and the Book of Hebrews further emphasizes that sins are not forgiven if blood is not shed (Heb 9:22). The necessity of shedding blood is shown in the OT sacrificial system, which prefigures Christ's sacrifice on the cross.[51]

Christ's work in removing guilt from the sinner is described as a vicarious death. Yahweh is said to have laid the iniquities of the world upon Jesus, even though he had committed no sin for which his own death was required (Isa 53:4–6; 2 Cor 5:21). Thus the penalty laid upon the sinner is satisfied, and by faith in Christ the sinner is presented as just before God.

The largest departure from the Japanese system is the place of Christ as mediator between the Father and man. The aforementioned religious traditions do not place any particular deity in such a position as judge of man's sin. Instead, punishment for misdeeds is relegated to an impersonal force or the natural bad outcomes expected from poor decision making. The secular tradition more readily understands the obligation an individual owes his superior when he has done wrong, but struggles to understand how a third party can make restitution for someone else's faults.

Restoration of Honor

If shame is a result of sin in the minds of the biblical writers, then restoration of honor is its counterpart. The language of receiving honor or exaltation when God delivers his people from physical and spiritual threats occurs many times throughout the biblical narrative. One such example is seen in David's song of praise after being saved from the hand of Saul, where he likens his deliverance from his enemies to being exalted above them on account of God's vindication (2 Sam 22:49).

The NT usage of exaltation is generally tied to humbling oneself and receiving honor in the eschatological kingdom of God. Jesus draws such an analogy in his parable of the wedding feast, with those who seek honor being shamed, but those who act humbly being brought to a place of honor (Luke 14:7–11). Peter offers a similar exhortation, encouraging believers to humble themselves before God and one another so that God might exalt them at the proper time (1 Pet 5:6).

[51] Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 121–22.

This biblical motif is met with equal parts of understanding and confusion. On the one hand, the Japanese understand the importance of personal honor and avoiding shame. Additionally, their understanding of honor is largely interpersonal, and so positing God as an individual who assesses their standing, while uncommon in their historical values, is not completely alien. However, their traditions have taught them that honor is a matter of personal striving. Humility and proper recognition of their station in life are prized, but glory is obtained through distinguishing oneself through deed and character. Thus, to assert that their glory is connected not to their own works, but to the glory which Christ has and shares with his people, is an alien idea.

Cleansing of Impurity

In addition to the impartation of innocence and honor, the forgiveness of sins is also connected with being made pure. As explored previously, to be pure is to be acceptable in God's eyes, and to be permitted in his presence. The language of purification is generally expressed using terms of cleansing or washing, and finds varied use across both the Old and New Testaments.

Throughout the OT, the Israelites are reminded that they are to be holy, just as Yahweh is holy (Lev 19:2). They understand their gifted holiness to be derived from Yahweh's intrinsic holiness, which he shares with his people.[52] For this reason the Israelites feared impurity—ritual or moral—because it separated them from the holy congregation.[53] As such, a mindset similar to that of the Shinto practitioner engulfed in *kegare* emerges, where impurity is to be removed as quickly as possible.

The ritual dimensions of impurity need not be explored here, but the desire for moral purity is expressed in several places. David pleads for God to cleanse him of his sins, so that he might be clean in God's sight (Ps 51:7). Isaiah similarly describes God washing away the sins of Judah following her judgment, resulting in the holiness of those who remain (Isa 4:2–4). Zechariah continues the usage in describing the eschatological vision for God's people, where they are cleansed of their sins by a spring of water which God places in their midst (Zech 13:1).

As a result of Jesus' fulfillment of the Mosaic covenant and its subsequent abrogation, the NT speaks of purity much more in the moral sense. Instances of ritual purity still occur (e.g., John 2:6; Matt 7:3–5), but the focus is more clearly on spiritual acceptability before God. As in the OT, the purity and holiness sought by the people is obtained through their connection to Christ

[52] Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 406–07.
[53] Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 406.

and his intrinsic holiness. By faith the Christian receives Christ's purity and is made acceptable to the Father (1 John 3:1–3). The Book of Hebrew reinforces this by arguing the supremacy of Christ's sacrifice to the cleansing rituals of the Mosaic covenant, noting that Christ's single sacrifice produces a clean conscience, whereas the former needed to be continuously performed (Heb 9:13–14).

Despite this divergence between ritual and moral purity, the two concepts converge in the rite of baptism. Just as the washing rituals of the Mosaic law gave the recipient objective proof of his ritual purity, and confidence that they were acceptable before God in the Tabernacle, baptism assures the Christian that he is cleansed of his sins and acceptable before God in matters of judgment.[54] This cleansing nature of baptism is highlighted as part of Paul's exhortation to husbands to love their wives as Christ loves his Church (Eph 5:26), and in the Book of Hebrews as an admonition to faithfulness (Heb 10:22). This purification is brought about as baptism unites one to the death and resurrection of Christ and to the triune God (Rom 6:4–10; Matt 28:19).

This dimension of forgiveness might be the least objectionable to the Japanese mind. Purity and cleanliness are sought after virtues, even in secular terms. Previously mentioned problems still bear repeating: reliance on external powers, the gift of Christ, et cetera. However, the core concept of acceptability to a deity is well understood in Japan's religious traditions, and the parallels between *misogi* and baptism can be helpful, even as one acknowledges the aforementioned differences between them.

Practical Applications

Having examined Japanese hamartiology and its comparison to biblical parallels, the final task is to consider how to put the information into practice. Due to the nature of evangelism and the variety of individual circumstances that come with it, it is difficult to provide any advice that will be true in all situations. However, two primary categories can be explored. First is the matter of contextualizing sin to ensure that the missionary makes the most impact with his preaching. Second is to acknowledge areas where the Western missionary is already well equipped, and encourage the use of these gifts, to ensure that available skills are not being neglected due to fear of cultural misunderstanding. Preaching purity and honor will be discussed in the former, preaching guilt in the latter.

---

[54] Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 302.

Contextualizing Sin

Contextualization involves expressing biblical ideas in a way that members of a particular culture will resonate with. The difficulty in this process lies with adequately adjusting the biblical content in a way that the target audience will understand, yet remaining faithful to Scripture's intended meaning. To explain the concept, two accounts from Scripture can be examined: Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41) and Paul's address at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34).

In the former, Peter is addressing a largely Jewish audience. As such, when he castigates the Jews for their participation in Jesus' execution they are distressed, because they mistreated the Messiah they had long been waiting for. In the latter, Paul is speaking to Greeks, who do not share the same affinity for the Messiah as the Jews. As such, his initial preaching is tepidly received, so he switches to preaching about foundational issues the Greeks would need to learn before Jesus' sacrifice made sense to them.

In many ways, Paul's problem is the same as the one the modern missionary faces in Japan. The Japanese are far removed from the God of the Scriptures, and hearing that they are guilty in his sight for transgressions against his law is not likely to produce guilt. Thus the Western missionary—who has been taught to approach sin primarily in terms of personal guilt and fear—is perceived as irrelevant by a culture that does not share his values.[55]

Another problem is that, regardless of how one may attempt to convey it to his audience, preaching sin involves identifying faults of the hearer. Japanese culture's focus on introspection and interpersonal harmony puts the onus of discovering fault on oneself, with direct criticism of others being generally avoided outside of particular relationships. These types of status-oriented cultures are not keen on being challenged, and are likely to perceive direct accusations of guilt as uncouth.[56]

To counter this problem, the missionary should seek first to establish the character and nature of Christ. Yukiko Wakui-Khaw suggests that Jesus embodies many traits the Japanese would find appealing, such as his willing humiliation and his empathizing with the poor and needy.[57] This appeal of Jesus can be an entry point for discussing Jesus and his threefold office, through which sin and forgiveness, in all their permutations, can be

[55] Mike Vähäkangas, "On the (Ir)Relevance of Lutheran Theology: Teaching Lutheran Theology in Tanzania," *Dialog* 47, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 174–75.

[56] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Meyers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 108–09.

[57] Yukiko Wakui-Khaw, "Who Do You Say That I Am? A Japanese Response to the Person and Work of Christ," *Stimulus* 21, no. 3 (November 2014): 15–17.

explored. This esteem for Jesus, combined with the naturally inculcated Japanese proclivity for introspection can lead to a personal questioning of sin in their own lives. Furthermore, integration into the Christian community puts the missionary into a peer status that allows tactful criticism without the attending loss of face. Sadly, Western Christians have been noted to act with an all-or-nothing mentality concerning the atonement, where difficulty understanding the nature of atonement is taken as a proof of heresy or a sign of inchoate faith.[58] However, it is vital that the missionary carefully examine the convert to see if his difficulty with sin is a result of cultural unfamiliarity or conscientious rejection. In the former case, the missionary ought to approach him as a brother in Christ, and offer gentle correction. In the latter, the convert has willfully rejected a chief article of the Christian faith, and the missionary should approach him as he would any other heretic.

When preaching on sin and forgiveness, the purity motif proves to be the most readily understandable. Regardless of an individual's piety, he is accustomed to the desire for purity and acceptability; religious ideas are not necessary for him to understand that unclean and unsuitable items are rejected by their owners if they are not cleaned. Cleanliness of home and body are cherished virtues in Japan, as evidenced by the presence of 玄関 *genkan*, vestibules in traditional Japanese homes where one removes his shoes before entering the house so as not to introduce contamination from the outside world. Modern architecture has seen continued use of the *genkan*, showing that the desire for cleanliness is still well appreciated. However, one's state of purity or impurity tends to be thought of in passive terms—why one is unclean is secondary to how one becomes clean. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the missionary to stress that impurity is the result of sinful actions, and not something that one merely accumulates passively, lest that be used to downplay the effects of sin.

Preaching shame is more difficult because it involves less direct statements about one's own state, but relies on an external identification of shameful activity being internalized by the hearer. An example of this type of preaching is found in Jesus' Beatitudes (Matt 5:2–11). Jesus catalogues the various types of spiritually downtrodden, noting that they are μακάριοι (blessed ones). Hanson proposes that these "makarisms" ought to be understood in light of the prevailing societal focus on honor and shame, so that Jesus' pronouncements are read as descriptions of honorable conduct and status.[59] In pronouncing what is honorable, the Holy Spirit works in the heart

---

[58] Herbert Hoefer, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," *Missiology* 33, no. 4 (October 2005), 437.

[59] K. C. Hanson, "How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and Reproaches," *Semeia* 68 (1994): 99–103.

of the hearer to bring them to the knowledge of their own sin and inability to meet this definition of honor, and their subsequent shame.

Building on Strengths

Fortunately, the Western missionary is already equipped to handle much of the trouble in preaching to the Japanese. In the first place, the rise of modernism and secular materialism has cleared away much of the religious objections of former times, leaving the missionary preaching to a theologically apathetic society much like his own. Likewise, the shared condition of man means that the gospel is fully relevant to all people groups, in spite of cultural divisions (Rom 3:23–24).

The Western missionary has already been well-trained in guilt-oriented preaching. While much has been made of Japan's status as a shame culture, social scientists and psychologists alike have recognized that the Japanese conscience is still well aware of guilt, and that guilt and shame often are felt in tandem.[60] Doi argues that the difference between the Western and Japanese mind in this regard is that the Japanese feels guilt and shame most powerfully if he conceives of his sin as having betrayed a group expectation, whereas the Westerner has, by Christian influence, put God in the position of the group. Since God is always aware of the transgression against him, the Westerner always feels the guilt most acutely. However, the law of God is written on the hearts of Gentiles, and their consciences accuse them all the same (Rom 2:15).

Preaching guilt can be offensive in any culture. Accusing one of thoroughgoing corruption, and needing an outside power to remove that corruption and expiate one's guilt, is scandalous regardless of the audience. For Japan, a culture that highly values social harmony, engendering scandal is frowned upon. The missionary, being a foreigner, would be well advised to avoid direct confrontation where possible. Instead, he should seek to utilize the local congregation to his advantage. The Japanese Christians are more likely to be aware of the finer details of etiquette that escape the transplanted Westerner. Additionally, the local believers will possess varied social statuses in the secular world, which gives them peer status with their unconverted neighbors. Furthermore, being approached by fellow Japanese is helpful in removing the stigma of Christianity as a foreigner's religion, unsuitable for the Japanese ethos.

However, direct confrontation is inevitable. In such a situation, the missionary should do his best to proclaim God's truth in meekness and

---

[60] Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, translated by John Bester (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1973), 48–49.

gentleness. The goal of exposing sin is always to bring the sinner to repentance, not the humiliation of the sinner. Public proclamation can be detrimental in this regard, for the hearer is confronted with his sin, even in a general, unspecific sense, in front of an audience of his peers. Obviously, the ability of the Holy Spirit to bring about repentance is not hindered by the tactlessness of the preacher, but the missionary should make every available effort to avoid any scandal that is not the scandal of the cross.

Conclusion

For the prospective missionary, understanding Japan's cultural paradigm with regard to sin, and reacting accordingly, is of paramount importance. By understand Japan's own traditions and mores and evaluating them in light of biblical revelation, the missionary can more efficiently divide the word of truth, and preach the law in full sternness, and the gospel in full sweetness, while avoiding cultural miscommunication. The actual conversion, however, remains solely the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

Jacob Stoltzman *graduated from Concordia University Wisconsin in Spring 2017 and is presently a student at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. This article is his Senior Seminar in Theology paper under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Feiertag, which Jacob submitted to the Theology Department.*

The Significance of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses After Five-Hundred Years

Theodore J. Hopkins

The day was October 31 and the year was 1517. The place was a little town in the frontier of Germany, a town of only 2,000 or so residents. No one would have guessed on that day that a reformation was brewing. In this little town of Wittenberg, a monk pulled out a hammer in front of the castle church, and nailed a piece of paper to the door.1 This was not an extraordinary act; it was commonplace. The monk was simply posting a notice on the town's bulletin board. On this large piece of paper were written ninety-five propositions. The monk finished nailing the paper to the door and left without fanfare. No one at the time would have guessed that this mundane event would be one to remember and commemorate five hundred years later. No one would have thought that ninety-five propositions, ninety-five statements intended for debate among theologians and pastors in the church, would be reason to celebrate after five centuries. These theses were intended simply to start a debate, to begin a discussion on the place and function of indulgences within the church. The monk was not trying to overthrow pope and cardinals; he was not trying to construct a new church confession. He was simply calling for a discussion about the topic of indulgences because he was concerned for the souls of God's people.

Martin Luther might not have been trying to transform the landscape of Christendom, yet here we are. His ninety-five theses on indulgences may not have been unusual for being theses or for being nailed onto the church door, but they were pointed in their attack upon indulgences and rooted in a different way of doing theology. Though Luther did not expect it, his criticisms of indulgences proliferated throughout Germany and beyond. In fact, within two or three weeks, the theses spread like wildfire.2 Sympathizers of Luther quickly translated the original Latin theses into German so that more people could read and understand Luther's critique of indulgences. Within a short time, then, sides began to take shape, and

---

1 Although many have argued that the nailing was only a mailing, Melanchthon specifically mentions Luther posting the theses publicly on the church door, and Luther's comments do not rule that out. See Kurt Aland, Introduction to Martin Luther's 95 Theses: With Pertinent Documents from the History of the Reformation (1967; repr. St. Louis, Concordia: 2004), 19–24.

2 Aland, Introduction to Martin Luther's 95 Theses, 13–15.

the Roman Catholic institution and leaders would not take Luther lightly. They demanded that he recant for years until he was excommunicated as a heretic in January of 1521. Later that year, Luther was also put under the ban of the emperor and became an outlaw of the Holy Roman Empire. I would like to say that from there it's history, but that's not quite true. Much of the development of the Lutheran confession of faith is still to come after 1521, but the sides had begun to be drawn. The division of the church had started, prompted by ninety-five theses posted by a small town, Augustinian monk on the castle church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.

We celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation in memory of these events, but why should they matter to us today? Why should we care about Luther and his Ninety-Five Theses in 2017? It seems to me that we often take the event of Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses to be the most important thing rather than the message of Luther. In other words, I think we celebrate Luther's heroic action of nailing those theses on the door, but we hardly know what he said. To understand Luther's significance, we must go further than that. In fact, Luther is irrelevant to us if all that matters is the fact of his posting the theses. Luther the hero might be interesting, but he has no lasting significance. Other heroes quickly take his place to show us freedom or independence. Instead, Luther matters today only because his message matters. His message reverberates in our day and time because his message is the eternal Gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther proclaims to us that Christianity is not about independence, happiness, morality, politics, or ethics. Instead, Christianity is about the glorious treasure of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, by which God alone acts to declare us right with him, purely by his promise and not by our performance.

This message of the Gospel is what we must come to see in the Ninety-Five Theses for the Gospel is Luther's enduring legacy. This paper intends to aid the reader in approaching the disputation on indulgences in particular and Luther's early theology in general by addressing the theological and ecclesial context in which Luther writes, and to see the good news of the Gospel that Luther proclaims in the theses. One of the challenges of reading this disputation is that the theses are quite typical for medieval Roman Catholic theology. In his 1545 preface to his Latin writings, Luther even warned the readers, "I beg the sincere reader, and I beg for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, to read those things judiciously, yes, with great commiseration. Be mindful of the fact that I was once a monk and a most enthusiastic papist when I began that cause."3 At the same time that the

---

[3] Martin Luther, Luther's Works, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 34:328. Hereafter, all volumes of Luther's Works are cited as LW.

theses contain a number of medieval Catholic assumptions, they are also quite "Lutheran," setting the stage for Luther's later development. Here is my central contention: although the Ninety-Five Theses do not reveal a fully-developed Lutheran theology, the theses on indulgences both respond to the medieval context in which Luther is living in a pastoral way[4] and provide a window into Luther's later theology, remaining significant for the church today. The relevant and essential doctrines of repentance, good works in vocation, and the free forgiveness of sins in Christ alone permeate the theses alongside medieval Roman Catholic theological assumptions.

To bring out both directions of the Ninety-Five Theses, the backward reference to the context of the sixteenth century and the forward reference to Luther's later theology, I will first address the question, Why does Luther write the Ninety-Five Theses in the first place? With reference to Luther's own life, I will dive into a few of the historical and theological issues that Luther came to reject as he recognized something different in the Bible and Augustine. After seeing why Luther decided to write the disputation on indulgences, we will then take a look at some of the theses themselves to see how Luther develops his understanding of repentance, good works, and the treasure of the Gospel in light of that context. Along the way, we will also explore the enduring significance of Luther's message, which points the church to the cross of Jesus Christ and gives the Christian life a cruciform shape.

Why Luther Wrote the Ninety-Five Theses: The Background

To understand why Luther wrote the Ninety-Five Theses, we need to step back into Luther's time and place. Luther was born on November 10th probably in 1483 and was baptized the very next day, on the feast of St. Martin, for whom Luther was named. For our purposes, Luther's early years are not important except to illustrate the perspective on his later education and his turn toward the monastery. Luther came from a peasant family; his father was a copper miner. This was not easy work by any means, and most miners never became more than laborers, but Luther's father Hans did. By the time Luther was twenty-five, Hans owned a portion of six copper mines and two smelters.[5] Luther's family, thus, became part of the new middle class just beginning to form across Europe in the late Middle Ages.

[4] Erik Herrmann ("The Relevance of Remembering the Reformation," Concordia Journal 43/1–2 (2017): 20) states it clearly, "Luther's Ninety-Five Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care." I would add that, for Luther, good theology is good pastoral care, or it is not good theology. For a great volume on Luther the pastor, see Timothy Wengert, ed., The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

[5] James M. Kittelson, Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 32–33. Kittelson's account of Luther's early life informs much of this paragraph and the next.

Although Luther's family had begun to move up the social ladder, it was still unusual for them to send one of their children to the University. One of Luther's teachers, however, noticed Luther's intellect and eloquence, and he recommended that Luther study at the University.6 The expense for University studies would be great, but it also opened up opportunities for Luther through which he would be able to support his family. Knowing the value of these opportunities, Hans and Margarete sent their son Martin to the University of Erfurt in 1501 to begin his studies. Luther was only seventeen years old.

Luther's keen intellect shined at the University of Erfurt, and the investment of his parents into his education must have seemed like they were digging a new gold mine. In the minimum amount of time of three semesters, Luther received his first University degree, the Bachelor of Arts. Luther continued with his education, passing his examination for his second degree, the Masters of Arts, also in the minimum amount of time. In January of 1505, Luther had already received his master's degree at the young age of twenty-one years. Here is where the Reformer's story begins to get interesting. Luther's parents had spent a lot of money and energy on their son's education, and Luther's father expected him to become a lawyer. In fact, Luther's father Hans was so excited about Luther's future as a lawyer that he bought Luther a copy of the most important text for lawyers of that day, Corpus Juris Civilis, The Body of Civil Law. This was no small gift.7 If we think that textbooks are expensive today, in the early sixteenth century when mass printing was still in its infancy and literacy was low, the cost of books was considerably higher. Luther's parents must have felt quite secure in their son's future.

1505, however, was a year of change for Luther. Within six months of becoming Master Luther, the future reformer altered his course from a career in law to a life in the monastery. The circumstances surrounding the change illustrate important aspects of the context into which Luther wrote the Ninety-Five Theses. According to the later recollections of Luther's friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon, Luther first experienced true terror before God around the year 1505. One of Luther's classmates was killed in an accident, and Luther first found himself face to face with the judgment of God.8 Luther would later call such encounters Anfechtungen in German or tentationes in Latin, the existential terrors of the soul in which one is faced with God the Judge, utterly doubting God's love and grace. We

6 See Philip Melanchthon, "Preface to Volume 2 of Luther's Latin Writings, Wittenberg Edition, 1546," in Martin Luther's 95 Theses, ed. Kurt Aland (1967; repr. St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 46.

7 Kittelson, Luther, 49.

8 Melanchthon, "Preface," 47.

can imagine, though the details are scarce, that Luther pondered deeply the death of this friend, and this led him face to face with the judgment of God. We can imagine that Luther began to ponder his own mortality, leading to a realization that he too was not immune from a simple accident, or from the plague that killed so many, and sooner or later Luther would have to face his Creator and Judge. In the same year of 1505, Luther took a leave of absence from his short-lived study of law to journey home. It appears that Luther was already considering a change of course at this time, and the trip home solidified Luther's new direction. In the well-known story, Luther was traveling back to Erfurt from Mansfeld when thunderclouds moved in. Lightning began to flash, and one bolt struck particularly close to Luther. In his great fear, Luther cried out to Saint Anne, the mother of Mary and patron saint of miners and people stuck in thunderstorms, saying, "Help me, Saint Anne. I will become a monk!"[9] In the thunderstorm, Luther saw the judgment of God, and that led him to the monastery to find a solution to God's judgment. Luther wanted desperately to be saved; he wanted assurance and certainty that God loved him and would show him grace. To this end, Luther took his vows of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, determined to find a gracious God in the monastery. As one would imagine, his father was not particularly pleased, especially at first. His mother and father had lost their financial security to a son who was trying to find his salvation.

What we see in this episode of Luther's early life is a picture of Christianity in the early sixteenth century in three ways. First, Luther was focused particularly upon the judgment of God. The historian James Kittelson calls this time period, "an age of fire and brimstone."[10] In part, this stemmed from the cruel, short life the average person lived. Disease and death were rampant, naturally leading to considerations of death and judgment. At the same time, Kittelson notes, Christ was commonly seated upon a throne in the art of the late Middle Ages.[11] Thus, Christ was pictured as the king, the king who reigns in judgment. Christ was certainly also pictured as the crucified one—especially among the mystics and mystically leaning theologians—but one could not avoid the judgment of Jesus Christ.

A second aspect of sixteenth-century Christianity emerges from this episode: Luther prayed not to Jesus but to Saint Anne, the mother of Mary. In the popular Christian mind, Jesus seemed to have been almost replaced by the saints, if not in his salvific power at least in the daily cares and concerns of life. Luther did not pray to his judge that day, the one for whom

---

9 Kittelson, Luther, 50.
10 Kittelson, Luther, 41.
11 Kittelson, Luther, 41.

he probably had more fear than love.12 Instead, Luther prayed to a saint, one to whom he could relate and have confidence that she would hear him. In the piety and basic religious practices of common Christians in the late Middle Ages, one's relationship to God, including to Christ himself, was being increasingly mediated by people, works, and events concerning which God had made no promises in Scripture, such as the saints, relics, pilgrimages, and indulgences. These religious practices were becoming more important than God's Word.

Third, Luther believed that he could find his salvation only by entering a monastery. This was a common move during the late Middle Ages. Numerous men and women took irrevocable vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. For those who couldn't take such vows, lay orders began to arise like the Brethren of the Common Life. So many were interested in religion that in Erfurt, Germany, while Luther was there, around 800 priests inhabited the city of about 20,000.13 Luther's move to the monastery, thus, fit right into the fabric of life in the late Middle Ages. Luther took his vows and became an Observant Augustinian monk precisely because he wished to be right with God and to do God's will. The monastery seemed to be the only reliable place to do that. The monastery provided time and space to do what was considered to be the truly holy things like taking vows of poverty and chastity, fasting, praying, observing the holy orders, and offering continuous confession. In the monastery, one could be holy, or so Luther hoped.

We can see in Luther's life, then, a focus on the judgment of God, and his desire to find a solution to God's judgment in the religious orders of the church. Certainly, a number of theological matters influenced these things, but I will focus on just two. First, the dominant theology, at least in Germany in the sixteenth century, was the nominalist theology of Gabriel Biel. Following other nominalists like William of Ockham, Biel had created a scheme of salvation centered on human performance. In Biel's system, God graciously—called prevenient grace—set up a system that rewarded human beings for doing their best. In Biel's scheme of salvation, human creatures were to do what is in them (facere quod in se est), and in exchange for their best God would grant them merit. Although the system was more complicated than this, the heart of it was that a person must do his best, and God would reward his best effort with merit. According to Biel, even fallen sinners have the synteresis, a power of the mind and will, that make

---

[12] Compare Luther's comments that he did not love but hated the word "the justice of God" from Romans 1:17 as he looks back at his life in 1545. LW 34:336–37.

[13] Robert Kolb, Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 26.

it possible for them to know what is good and to do it.14 With this power, one is more than capable of choosing good works and receiving the rewards that God grants for them. Those who do well are eventually rewarded with righteousness, earning enough merit to be right in God's sight. As one works toward righteousness, the sacraments of the church were indispensable because the sacraments offered forgiveness for original guilt and grace for the sins that continued to emerge on the journey. Despite the role of the sacraments, the heart of the system was human performance. God rewarded proper human performance and granted salvation on the basis of it.15

Not only did the dominant theology of the sixteenth century focus on performance but so too did the logic and practice of penance. In the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance, we will see the role of indulgences, which were directly at issue in Luther's Ninety-Five Theses. Medieval penance was typically divided into three parts: feeling sorry for sins (contrition), confession of sins, and satisfactions, good works intended to pay for the temporal penalties accrued from sin. In this three-part definition, the theological focus fell on the human actions of feeling sorry, confessing to the priest, and doing good works. The divine action of absolution almost seemed like an afterthought, something to be presumed in penance but otherwise not very important. Hence, already in the definition, penance directed attention to human performance more than God's promise for forgiveness.

In the early church, Tertullian spoke of baptism and penance as two planks of salvation. The metaphor of the planks pictures an unconverted person shipwrecked by sin and drowning in the sea. God throws each person two planks, baptism and penance, as two chances for the person to grab hold of a plank and ride it to the shore of salvation.16 Saint Jerome popularized this understanding of the planks of salvation, saying that penance was the "second plank after shipwreck."17 After sin comes back into a person's life after baptism and takes her away from the first plank, God throws the second plank of penance, the second opportunity for salvation. Within this metaphor of the planks, penance is considerably more important than baptism. Baptism forgives original sin and all sins up to that point and is necessary for salvation, but what can a person do when sin inevitably sinks the plank of

---

14 Anthropologically, the mind took precedence over the will for Biel so knowing the good goes right along with doing it. Against this, Luther sides with Augustine in making the will more important than the mind. See Kolb, Martin Luther, 32 and 35.

15 For a more detailed summary, see Kolb, Martin Luther, 31–34.

16 David M. Coffey, The Sacrament of Reconciliation (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 57

17 Coffey, Sacrament of Reconciliation, 57. Luther directly attacked Jerome's notion of baptism as the second plank in the Large Catechism. See Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 466.

baptism? Lifelong penance was the answer.

To be clear, the fact that penance played an important part in the Christian life for Roman Catholics was not Luther's problem—Luther himself went on to emphasize confession of sins and receiving God's forgiveness as a daily practice for all Christians. The problem, instead, was the specific character of penance in late medieval Roman Catholic theology. As I mentioned, penance was divided into three parts, all of which focused on human performance: contrition, confession, and satisfactions. As Luther later described the practice of penance in the Smalcald Articles—as he experienced it himself in the monastery and understood it theologically—each of these parts of penance was problematic, but especially satisfactions and indulgences.[18] The basic idea of penance was that one had to go to a priest once a year to confess one's sins. In doing this, one was supposed to feel contrition for those sins, then one was supposed to confess every mortal sin that one had committed during the past year, every single one of the doozies if you will. Finally, one would be given works of satisfaction to work off the temporal punishments for sin.

Although Luther would see problems with contrition and confession since the focus was more on the human acts than on the work and promises of God, the character of satisfactions drew his ire more than the rest. According to Roman Catholic theology, the forgiveness of the priest took away the eternal penalty of sin before God, but the temporal penalties or afflictions of sin remained to be worked out on earth or in purgatory. Thus, for each sin that a person committed, he had to do satisfactions in order to pay for the temporal penalties that his sins had merited. To be clear, in official Roman Catholic Theology satisfactions are not the same as the forgiveness of sins. Instead, satisfactions are good works that accept God's justice and his goodness in the world by doing good works to repair the damage done by sin and restore God's goodness and justice.[19] One must either do works of satisfactions or one must accept God's punishment in purgatory for these sins. These works and the punishments, though, added up because people sinned a lot. According to a common medieval authority, each mortal sin that someone committed meant they had to do seven years of penance, seven years of satisfactions in order to take away the penalties of their sin. If someone were to commit one mortal sin a month without any other sins—an impossible task because of the enormity of our sins!—in one year that person would accrue eighty-four years of penance. In thirty years, the same person would have to do more than 2,500 years of penance for their sins. Doing penance meant

---

[18] Kolb and Wengert, eds., Book of Concord, 312–19.

[19] John A. Hardon, The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 561.

going on pilgrimages, fasting, saying certain prayers, venerating relics, and going to mass, among other religious acts. In fact, Frederick the Wise, Luther's prince, had a large collection of relics which was open two days a year where people could pay off 1,900,000 days (over 5,200 years) of penance if they could venerate all 19,000 of the relics.[20] It was almost a full time job trying to complete the satisfactions for one's sins.

Just about everyone, then, owed thousands of years of penance for their sins, and no one but monks and nuns had the time, the energy, and the ability to actually satisfy these punishments. This is, in part, what led Luther and others to the monastery. Luther wanted to find God's grace by doing things that would please God, by working off the penalties of sin and making himself less of a sinner. But what about those who weren't monks or nuns? Were they just doomed to tens of thousands of years of suffering punishments in purgatory? To this problem, an answer was found in indulgences that would remove the temporal penalties of sin. Indulgences were simple pieces of paper issued under the pope's purview, which declared that one would receive the forgiveness of some (often seven years or 100 years) or all (a plenary indulgence) of the temporal penalties that a person had accrued because of sin. To the common people, they seemed to wipe the slate clean, taking care of all the satisfactions with a clink into the coffer. In 1517, though, indulgences were questionable theologically since they had not been given a clear dogmatic basis. Nevertheless, a Dominican preacher named John Tetzel began to proclaim indulgences with gusto, which is the direct event that precipitated the posting of Luther's theses on indulgences. Among his extravagant promises, Tetzel promised that as soon as a coin drops into the money jar, the dead soul of a loved one jumps from purgatory into heaven. He even put it in a little jingle for all to remember: "The coin in the coffer rings, and a soul from purgatory springs." Indulgences, then, became not only something that you could buy for yourself to wipe away your own penalties for sin, but indulgences could be bought for others too, even to save the dead from the suffering of purgatory. Think about how you would feel if someone told you that you could get your closest loved one out of purgatory for just a couple hundred dollars. Just a little bit of money into the coffer, and your mother would be freed from the punishments of her sin. Your loved one could now be face to face with Jesus in the blessed paradise of heaven for just a few hundred dollars. How could anyone refuse?

As we will see shortly, the problem was theological, but it was also basic fraud. Indulgences filled the coffers of the church, both the coffers of Albrecht, the new Archbishop of Mainz, who needed to pay for his new archbishopric, and those of Pope Leo X so that he could complete St. Peter's

[20] Kolb, Martin Luther, 18.

basilica in Rome. Hence, Luther repeated a common question among lay people in 1517 in thesis eighty-six of the Ninety-Five Theses: "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"[21] The pope may have been rich, but his wealth had limits. Indulgences seemed to offer an infinite supply of wealth. In fact, the more convincing the preacher, the more money he brought in, and Tetzel's "emotive preaching" warned against the suffering of loved ones in purgatory and added all sorts of great promises to indulgences.[22] According to Luther, Tetzel claimed that one didn't even need to be sorry for sin or repent of sin as long as one acquired an indulgence. An indulgence took away the penalties for sin regardless of whether a person was contrite, Tetzel said. On top of that, Tetzel claimed that even if one seduced the holy Virgin Mary herself, he could be forgiven, as long as he put enough money in the box. Again, Tetzel said that the indulgences gave him more power than even Saint Peter had.[23] These big claims from Tetzel undoubtedly helped him sell indulgences, but they also led God's people away from Jesus and the Gospel. Even if theologians knew that indulgences were not buying salvation, Tetzel's claims make it sound like a person was literally purchasing salvation. Many people thought that with a little bit of money, God would forgive their sins without any need to be changed or transformed by God's Word.

Indulgences, then, filled the coffers, but they were not Christian. Luther's pastoral heart bristled as people were led astray by Tetzel into thinking of themselves as buying forgiveness for their sins. Luther knew that forgiveness does not come through silver or gold but through the blood of Jesus Christ and the promise of God given to us freely through him. Indulgences led people to look to their own works, their own purchases, rather than what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is not a human work, like indulgences, but a divine work in which the Son of God gave up his own life for the sake of sinful human creatures to forgive them and grant them life. Fed up with preachers like Tetzel and seeing problems with indulgences in general, Luther penned the Ninety-Five Theses which, to his surprise, began a Reformation.

The Ninety-Five Theses

As we have seen, the theology of Gabriel Biel and the sacrament of penance both focused attention on human merit, the good works of human performance, especially the religious deeds of nuns and monks. Indulgences

[21] LW 31:33.
[22] Charlotte Methuen, "Luther's Life," in The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.
[23] LW 41:232.

were a part of that framework, offering forgiveness from those religious works required to satisfy the temporal punishments of sin. In the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther took aim primarily at the abuses of indulgences—that's certainly what he thought he was criticizing—but in so doing he also offered a different way of doing theology, suggesting another way of thinking about repentance, good works, and the treasure of salvation itself. Luther offered a theological framework for this not-yet-defined practice of indulgences. The disputation itself was an attempt to begin a rigorous theological conversation about the practice. In 1517, indulgences had been used for a while, but no one had officially specified how indulgences should be used nor why they could be used. To say it another way, it was a church practice, but there was no clear dogma. In fact, the first indulgence for the dead was only issued in either 1476 or 1500.24 We can see, then, that the practice of indulgences was still changing during Luther's day because the theology was not yet clear.25 In the middle of this muddle, Luther's theses intended to start a discussion on the theology and practice of indulgences. Luther wanted to question the premises and the practical effects of indulgences on the basis of Scripture, and he hoped other theologians would come to the table to hash out an understanding of indulgences in relation to biblical truth.

Luther's theological framework developed in the Ninety-Five Theses remains significant for the church today. This is not to say, however, that Luther's theology was complete at this juncture. As hinted at above, the Ninety-Five Theses are full of presumptions about purgatory, the authority of the pope, and even indulgences that Luther later jettisoned. Thus, we do well today to read Luther's Ninety-Five Theses with caution, as Luther himself suggested.26 Although many elements of Luther's thought were already formed by 1517,27 most Luther scholars speak of an "evangelical maturation," a process continuing until at least 1520 by which Luther came to understand and communicate the biblical message.28 Thus, the Ninety-Five Theses reveal a Luther who was on his way to becoming "Lutheran," but not quite fully there.

---

24 Kolb and Wengert, eds. Book of Concord, 316 n. 111.

25 It only became official dogma in 1518 (though never for the dead as Tetzel had proclaimed). Aland, Introduction to Martin Luther's 95 Theses, 18–19.

26 LW 34:328–30, especially 328.

27 Scott Hendrix, for example, showed that Luther's ecclesiology is basically formed in his earlier lectures on the Psalms. Scott Hendrix, Ecclesia in Via: Ecclesiological Developments in the Medieval Psalms Exegesis and the Dictata Super Psalterium (1513-1515) of Martin Luther (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

28 Kolb, Luther, 42–43. 1520 seems to me to be the earliest date at which one may say Luther's framework is complete. Oswald Bayer also dates the Reformation insight to 1520 (Oswald Bayer, Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 44–58).

Despite the Roman Catholic flavor of the Ninety-Five Theses, I contend that three important strands in the disputation were important for the pastoral care of the church in Luther's context discussed in the previous section of the paper, and these three ideas remain significant for the church today. In my evaluation of the theses, I will not cover the entirety of them, nor all the significant ones. My purpose is rather to bring these three doctrines to light that were important in Luther's context and remain important for the church five hundred years later. First is Luther's focus on repentance and the proper disposition of the Christian not only during acts of penance but all of the time. Luther believed that satisfactions and the medieval practice of penance had distorted the biblical understanding of repentance, and indulgences prevented true repentance rather than aided it. Second, Luther saw that the good works that God commands of his creatures were essentially replaced by the religious works of penance. Instead of works that served others, the good works of satisfactions were selfish acts concerned primarily for personal salvation. Third, Luther contended that the actual treasure of Christianity had been eclipsed by indulgences. Luther argued that nothing should get in the way of the Gospel, the church's true treasure. In each of these areas, we will see both how Luther addresses a historical issue of his time, and how his understanding in the Ninety-Five Theses points forward to his later theology that continues to be relevant to the church today.

"When the Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."[29] With these words, Luther began the reformation of the church. Luther believed that the Roman Catholic Church had substituted a deformed sacrament of penance for a biblical understanding of repentance. In particular, only monks and nuns lived lives of penance; for most Christians, penance involved only occasional acts. For example, once a year, Christians were required to confess their sins. At other times, Christians were to visit relics, buy indulgences, say certain prayers, go on a pilgrimage, or fast on Fridays. These specific acts were penance, but Luther saw that such an understanding of penance was partial since it did not involve the whole person. Luther noticed a more holistic understanding of repentance for all Christians based on the Bible. Repentance is not just doing some good works here or confessing some sins there. Although Luther was still a decade or so from writing his catechisms, he saw the reality of repentance in much the same way already in 1517 as he would about a decade later in those writings. Luther's catechisms describe the whole Christian life as one of repentance, returning to baptism in dying to the sinful nature and to the sin that clings so closely and rising to new life with Jesus Christ

[29] LW 31:25.

in the promise of forgiveness.30 In his 1518 Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses, Luther commented that Christians were to crucify their sinful desires and die to sin.31 Theologians of the Late Middle Ages would have agreed… for monks and nuns. These religious vocations were expected to live in repentance all of the time, but Luther expanded this to include all Christians. All Christians must live in the state of repentance, dying to sin and trusting in Jesus the Savior, returning to that promise God first gave in baptism. For Luther, then, Jesus did not wish for only monks and nuns to live lives of repentance but all of his people.

As we have seen, the entire Christian life is one of repentance, dying to sin both inwardly in the heart and externally in one's works.32 When Luther looked at the practice of indulgences, however, he saw a practice that encourages God's people to evade suffering, to get out of the cross of the Christian life and the repentance that God intends to work in his people. Hence, Luther wrote in thesis 21: "Thus, those indulgence preachers are in error who say that a man is absolved from every penalty and saved by papal indulgences."33 Luther's main point, as he explained in his 1518 explanation to the Ninety-Five Theses, was not that a human work like an indulgence cannot save.34 Of course, Luther believed that an indulgence could not save anyone, but that wasn't Luther's point. After all, Luther knew that the official Roman doctrine stated that indulgences save from temporal penalties due to sin, not from the eternal separation from God in hell. The Wittenberg theologian was making a more subtle point about the importance of punishments in the Christian life. Against the idea of indulgences removing all penalties, Luther argued that some punishments must remain in the Christian life of repentance. For one thing, Luther noted, Christians still get sick and die. More central to Luther's understanding of repentance was the assertion that "the evangelical punishment" too must remain.35 Evangelical punishment referred to the cross and mortification of the flesh commanded by Jesus and accomplished by the Spirit in true repentance.36 Luther considered these punishments to be the most important ones for the Christian because they bring death to the sinful nature so that the Christian dies with Jesus Christ. In these punishments, the Christian knows again her continual need of Jesus and her life is brought into the cruciform shape of Christ's life, dying to the sinful self and rising to new life with Jesus by faith. Instead of

30 See the sections on baptism in the Small and Large Catechism of Luther. For example, see Kolb and Wengert, eds., Book of Concord, 360 and 464–67.
31 LW 31:84.
32 See theses three and four of the ninety-five (LW 31:25–26).
33 LW 31:27.
34 LW 31:151.
35 LW 31:151.
36 LW 31:90.

encouraging and delighting in such suffering, indulgences claimed to remove the punishments from sin. Indulgences, then, removed not only punishments from the Christian life but also God's intended work in his people. According to Luther, indulgences did not follow this cruciform shape of the Gospel, conforming the church, instead, to the way of the world. As Luther contended in thesis forty, "A Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sins; the bounty of indulgences, however, relaxes penalties and causes men to hate them—at least it furnishes occasion for hating them."37 Indulgences refused the way of the cross while Christians should be willing to accept suffering as part of the way the crucified Christ works in the lives of his people.

As Luther saw it, indulgences were problematic because they claimed to take away the proper punishments for sin that God wanted to give his people. In addition to this, indulgences led away from true repentance by increasing vice and discouraging contrition. In the first half of thesis twenty-eight, Luther wrote, "It is certain that when money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased…"38 Because indulgences were bought and sold, they only increased greed. They did not do what they were intended to do, bringing comfort and release from church penalties.39 Instead, they caused hatred of God's punishments toward his people and encouraged a desire for lucre. Always the pastor, Luther also saw a danger to souls in papal indulgences: "Those who believe that they can be certain of their salvation because they have indulgences letters will be eternally damned, together with their teachers."40 Indulgence letters gave Christians a false certainty that pointed away from Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for their salvation. Only Jesus and his promise of forgiveness can bring salvation, nothing else. This was exactly the biggest problem with indulgences, Luther argued. They first took away the need to die to sin in repentance as Christ commanded his disciples, but even more they claimed a certainty of salvation based upon one's works. A person who bought an indulgence letter may have felt perfectly secure in his salvation because he bought a piece of paper. Luther was outraged that common people could be deceived into thinking these papers gave them salvation, no matter what the official doctrine of the church stated. Against this emphasis on indulgences, Luther proclaimed,

---

37 LW 31:29.

38 LW 31:28.

39 There was a genuine place for indulgences in the church as part of church discipline, remitting the penalties imposed by church law, the church canons. Over time it warped into remission of penalties from God rather than remission of penalties from the church. Luther addresses this issue in thesis 5: "The pope neither desires nor is able to remit any penalties except those imposed by his own authority or that of the canons." See LW 31:89–95 for Luther's extended discussion.

40 LW 31:28, thesis thirty-two.

"Believe in Christ, trust in him and repent, take up your cross, follow Christ, mortify your flesh, learn not to be afraid of punishments and death."[41]

Throughout the theses, Luther centered salvation in Jesus Christ in whom all Christians have forgiveness simply by faith in his blood and not by gold or silver or any indulgence letter. As we have seen, Luther described the Christian life as one of continual death to sin in repentance and life in Christ by faith, not running away from God's punishments but learning to accept and even love them as the way God is transforming us. Although Luther's understanding of the Christian life would mature to become even more Christ-centered and less self-centered—particularly with regard to contrition—we can see already his central focus on God's actions rather than human performance. The Christian life is a dying to sin and a rising again with Christ; this remains an important message for the church today.

A second argument that Luther made against indulgences concerned the character of good works. The heart of his point was thesis forty-two, "Christians are to be taught that the pope does not intend that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy."[42] Luther explained, "A command of God has infinitely more value than that which is permitted to exist by man's word and is in no way commanded by God."[43] In other words, Luther saw in Scripture specific commands for showing mercy to the needy and loving one's neighbors whereas neither indulgences nor religious works like pilgrimages had a divine command or foundation. Furthermore, Luther observed that indulgences were inherently self-centered.[44] A person bought an indulgence because she wanted the benefit for herself. Even if the indulgence were to pay for a great and important task of the church, it would still be inherently selfish. In fact, it would be better to pay for the same thing—including St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—without buying an indulgence because then a person would be only giving and not receiving. For Luther, then, truly good works did not intend to benefit the person who did them; truly good works benefited others who needed help. In this way, Luther was beginning to switch the direction of good works. Works were not for God or for the self but for others. In medieval Roman Catholic theology, good works benefited the one who did them and brought them closer to God by earning merit in his sight. Luther developed this point further in his later articulation of the two kinds of righteousness.[45] The

---

41 LW 31:180.
42 LW 31:29.
43 LW 31:200.
44 See LW 31:200–1.
45 For Luther's mature doctrine of the two kinds of righteousness, see Luther's own introduction to his magisterial Galatians commentary, LW 26:4–12. See also Kolb, Luther, 64–68.

reformer argued that good works brought no benefit before God. Christians do good works because God has already declared and made them right before him through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, for Luther good works were always for the neighbor, not for the one doing them.

On the basis of a neighbor-centric understanding of works, Luther stated in the next thesis, forty-three, "Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences." Again in thesis forty-five, "Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives his money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God's wrath."46 In both of these theses, Luther argued that the character of the Christian life was outwardly focused. Christians were not to be people who worried about themselves or their own salvation. Rather, Christians were free to give to others because they were already taken care of by God. While the medieval Roman Catholic Church focused the Christian life on religious works of satisfactions, which were actually means to benefit the self, Luther opened up the entire society to be Christian all of the time. Instead of the religious works required by penance, Luther focused on the commands of God and the needs of the neighbor. Luther's understanding of vocation was nowhere close to fully developed, but early seeds are visible in this disputation.47 Already in 1517 Luther recognized that God's commands applied to every Christian, and God called all Christians to holiness in everyday life. In mundane roles like parenting and plumbing, people were fulfilling God's command to love the neighbor and serve the needs of others. In fact, Luther would come to argue that such good works of love take place even more in secular roles than in the convent or the monastery because those religious vocations cared more about religious works than God's commands.

As we have seen, Luther problematized indulgences because they created an understanding of repentance that was partial rather than whole, deriding suffering and the cross rather than delighting in it as God's work within his people. Moreover, indulgences made a religious purchase for the benefit of the self more important than following God's commands by loving the neighbor. The third significant doctrine that I see in the theses is the Gospel

---

46 LW 31:29.

47 For an excellent resource on Luther's development, see F. Edward Cranz, An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society, Sigler Press Edition (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1998). Cranz states that Luther's understanding of society does not play an important role in his theology until 1518. Nonetheless, Luther's notion of God's commands seems to sow some seeds for his later understanding of secular vocations as good works and part of Christian piety. In fact, this idea may be implicit in thesis one. At the minimum, I would argue that as soon as continual repentance is extended to all Christians, the religious/secular divide is already in its death throes, and a new understanding of vocation is needed to fill the gap.

itself. Luther argued that indulgences have no place in the preaching of the church because the true treasure of the church was the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the Gospel proclaimed the good news of the forgiveness of sins completely apart from human works. Only the Gospel declared sinners right before the Creator on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone. Indulgences did not increase trust in Christ and his righteousness; rather, they engendered false trust in a piece of paper. Such false trust, however, endangered souls. Hence, Luther wrote in thesis forty-nine, "Christians are to be taught that papal indulgences are useful only if they do not put their trust in them, but very harmful if they lose their fear of God because of them."[48] Luther was afraid that indulgences gave the illusion of removing the teeth of God's wrath, eliminating the penalties of sin so that God was no longer feared. Without proper fear of God, though, souls were in danger of condemnation. Thus, indulgences were antithetical to the Gospel, which creates fear, love, and trust in God alone. Indulgences gave glory to money and power, but the Gospel brings true glory and honor to God alone by transforming sinners to fear and love him above all things.

For all of these reasons, Luther was convinced that preaching must be focused on the Gospel and not on indulgences. In thesis fifty-four, Luther wrote, "Injury is done to the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or larger amount of time is devoted to indulgences than to the Word."[49] For Luther, only the Word of God could condemn and bring sinners down to the grave through the Law so that the Gospel could bring comfort, forgiveness, and new life to those dead in their sins. Indulgences did neither. They neither killed with the law, nor gave the promise of forgiveness to sinners. They were a mere human tradition, yet they had been treated as if they were some great divine gift. As the Wittenberg doctor saw it, the heart of Christianity was not a human work, but what God has done for his creatures. God's goodness, God's mercy, and God's work were at the heart of Christianity, not human works. Preaching properly focused on and continued the work of God whereas indulgences had no promise or divine word attached to them. Hence, Luther stated in thesis fifty-five, "It is certainly the pope's sentiment[50] that if indulgences, which are a very insignificant thing, are celebrated with one bell, one precession, and one ceremony, then the gospel, which is the very greatest thing, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies."[51] As before, Luther emphasized that the Gospel was the heart of the church, and must be treated

---

[48] LW 31:29–30.
[49] LW 31:30.
[50] Notice that Luther thinks the pope must be on his side. This assumption is behind a number of the theses.
[51] LW 31:30.

as such. This remains true for us today. Nothing may usurp the place of the Gospel within the Christian church. No music, no finances, no building, and no attempt at relevance may detract from the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus and him crucified is why Christians gather together; it's what we believe, namely, that Jesus was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification; and Christ is our reason for hope now and in the life of the age to come. Luther's understanding of the Gospel remains essential for the Christian church. Nothing must ever take the place of Jesus and his Gospel, or even detract from Jesus, because we have salvation only in Christ and nowhere else.

In order to raise up Christ and the Gospel above all other treasures, Luther wrote in thesis sixty, "Without want of consideration we say that the keys of the church, given by the merits of Christ, are that treasure."[52] In the medieval Roman church, the treasure of the church not only included the merits of Christ but also the merits of the saints. In fact, the doctrine of indulgences was based upon the doctrine of a "treasury of merits." The treasury of merits was the idea that Christ had done so many good works that he filled the church's treasury with his infinite merits. In addition, all the extra good works—works of supererogation—that the saints did not need for themselves were also added to the church's treasury of merits. With all of these extra merits from Christ and the saints built up in the treasury, the church paid out these merits in indulgences, paying the temporal punishments for sins. Hence, for the medieval church, it was not only the merits of Christ but also the extra merits of the saints that were handed out. In this way, the saints were placed on the same plane as Christ. Jesus gave infinitely more merits into the treasury than the saints did, but the difference was only in degree and not in kind. As Luther's colleague and fellow reformer Philip Melanchthon later explained in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, the saints were turned into "propitiators, that is, mediators of redemption."[53] Hence, Luther went to great length in his explanation to the Ninety-Five Theses to argue against the idea that the saints earned more merit than they needed for themselves, based on the text from Luke, "when you have done all that is commanded, say 'We are unworthy servants.'"[54] For Luther, the point was to focus on Jesus rather than human performance. Jesus is the only perfect one, the only Savior and propitiator, and only his merit counts for anything. Even the best of human works are always "filthy rags" (Is 64:6). Thus, Luther emphasized the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Ninety-Five Theses and throughout his writings because only by hearing the Gospel and receiving the promise of forgiveness in Jesus, does God break

[52] LW 31:31.
[53] Kolb and Wengert, eds., Book of Concord, 239.
[54] LW 31:212–16. The quote is from Luke 17:10.

through sinful ears and wretched hearts to create faith. Human works cannot cause saving faith. Only the Gospel does this through hearing the word of Christ. For this reason, Luther exclaimed, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."[55] The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the true treasure, offers a promise of the forgiveness of sins to the ungodly, based not on human performance but on Christ's own merit. No one can do anything to earn this promise; we don't have to do a lot by living like a monk or do a little by buying an indulgence. The promise of Christ is the opposite of human performance. We don't do God's promise; we suffer it, receiving what Christ has already done and spoken to us. Jesus simply declares the word, "I forgive your sins. I baptize you," and it is done. Our sins are forgiven just like that because Jesus promised.[56] Nothing is more significant for the church than this promise and treasure of the Gospel.

Conclusion

In 1517 Luther saw how indulgences detracted from Christ Jesus and his Gospel in multiple ways. They detracted from the suffering and repentance that Christians undergo when they experience God's Word. They detracted from God's word of command and his call to love the neighbor in works of mercy. They detracted from the Gospel itself by replacing the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins through Christ alone with a sham piece of paper. Luther's criticisms of indulgences found a wide audience, and his work became the beginning of the Reformation that we know today. Yet, Luther is not most important because of his place in history. Luther is most important for the message that he brings. Luther's message in the Ninety-Five Theses about repentance and the good news of the Gospel remains a relevant one for the church today. Luther points us to the biblical truth that we still need to hear. We Christians often shy away from repentance and the challenge that God's Word brings to us. We want the Word to confirm our lives and make us feel good about our choices, but Luther reminds us that the Christian life is marked by suffering, especially suffering God's Word, being transformed not by human action but as we hear the Word.[57] Thus, we must learn to read the Bible against ourselves, being willing to hear the Word as it calls us to

---

[55] LW 31:31, thesis sixty-two.

[56] Luther first develops the centrality of promise as a category in his 1520 treatise "On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (LW 36:11–126). Although I recognize that promise is not yet an important category for Luther in 1517, he already recognizes the gifts and commands Christ gives in the keys as central to the Gospel. The authority of Christ as God in the flesh and his trustworthiness as the one who merits our salvation by his death are already key. His understanding of promise will come as Luther looks more deeply into the sacraments and the character of the Gospel.

[57] See Bayer, Martin Luther's Theology, 29–43.

repent.58 We shouldn't try to escape this. Instead, we must suffer and die to our sinful flesh so that we rise again in faith to new life in Christ and his forgiveness. This is the daily drowning and dying to sin that Luther confesses in his catechisms.

In addition, Luther's doctrine of good works remains important for the church. We often want to do some big thing for God, but God calls us to our spheres of responsibility where we already have relationships and obligations. In these spheres, God has given us commands to shape our lives and calls us to do good works for our neighbors. We don't do good works for God nor for ourselves; instead, God calls us to do good for our neighbors. Our good works are for their benefit, not our own.

Third, the Gospel must measure everything.59 Without the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there are no Christians, and there is no church. Thus, any doctrine or practice that usurps the Gospel must be reformed or eliminated. Only in the message of Christ's death and resurrection do sinners receive the free gift of forgiveness. Churches will discuss marriage, family, justice, politics, and other matters, but the Gospel must remain the church's treasure and indispensable message. Jesus Christ has come to save sinners. This is the heart of Luther's message, and this is the heart of the Christian church. We celebrate Luther this year because of this message. The church's treasure is still Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins in him. Luther helps the church to be faithful to our Lord, following him in the pattern of baptism, dying to sin and rising to new life by faith in the Gospel. Luther's last words of the disputation traverse this direction: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ their head, through penalties, death and hell; And thus be confident of entering heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace."60

Theodore Hopkins *is Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University (Ann Arbor), where he teaches courses in Lutheran Doctrine and Bible.*

---

58 Dietrich Bonhoeffer's hermeneutic is marked by reading the Bible against oneself. It's one of the things, I believe, he learned from reading Luther. See Edward van 't Slot, "The Freedom of Scripture: Bonhoeffer's Changing View of Biblical Canonicity" in God Speaks to Us: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. Ralf K. Wüstenberg and Jens Zimmermann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 109.

59 Compare Luther's famous line, "The cross tests everything." His Heidelberg Disputation is a good example of what this looks like. In the disputation, the cross tests nearly everything. See LW 31:38–58.

60 LW 31:33, theses ninety-four and ninety-five. Of course, Luther would later focus Christian confidence more clearly in Christ and less on how we follow him. Nevertheless, the pattern of the Christian life does not change.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Chapel Sermons

September 6, 2017
Text: Old Testament Reading for Proper 17 (A Series) Jeremiah 15:15-21

Brian German - Assistant Professor of Theology

O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In your forbearance take me not away; know that for your sake I bear reproach. Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail? Therefore thus says the LORD: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." (ESV)

We might call it pure entertainment, but a big reason why we love reality TV so much is because it's a pretty easy way to feel better about ourselves. Yeah, I party it up now and then, but I'm nothing like those fools on the Real World. Sure, I get too attached to things, but at least I'm not like those guys on Hoarders. Ok, I might be a little controlling, but I'm nowhere near a Real Housewife.

We'll have to go ahead and ask ourselves, then, how we measure up to Jeremiah, the prophet known for all his drama. He's off in the corner again; so messed up this time that he just doesn't care anymore. If you've never heard a grown man cry, it goes like this: "Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable… Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?"

Shots fired. There's nothing juicier for mainstream media than a pastor falling off the rails, and this morning we get to watch the wreck.

It would be nice, I suppose, if we could treat this whole thing like one big snapchat—just a few ancient words flying through our busy day that will soon disappear like chaff in the wind after we leave this place—but we all know that, whether you've been at Concordia for only 10 days or for over 10 years, we'll have our fair share of drama, too. So, what do you do with it?

Well, one approach that never gets old for us is to just run back to the measuring stick and make everything relative. So, you've done something you feel guilty about, but hey, there are lots of things out there that are worse. I still remember a friend of mine from my own college days who was convinced that, even though he was far from perfect, he felt that he had broken only two of the Ten Commandments throughout his life, so, in the big picture, he should be sittin' alright.

Perhaps, though, you know better than to go down that dead end, and so you take the higher road through your drama by trying to pin down God's role in it. So, you've gotten yourself into a big mess with a friend or family member, and you start to wonder: what's he trying to teach me in all of this? Is this some sort of punishment for something? Maybe he's more aloof than I thought he was. Maybe he's different than I had imagined. If I could only figure out what he's doing in all of this.

And then, when we realize that this, too, only gets us so far, we pick up a copy of Jeremiah's playbook, and start taking some shots of our own. So, you've been praying and praying, and the situation just keeps getting worse. It's not your fault, and God has been pressing in on you from all sides like a vice grip around the skull. "I did[n't] sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me…you…filled me with indignation."

Whatever your style, the problem with Jeremiah is a problem we don't mind plagiarizing—it's when we let the drama take us away from what makes us who we are. Check this out:

"Therefore thus says the Lord: 'If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. … And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze… for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord.'"

And that, my friends, is how our Lord deals with drama. And that's awesome, because with this he points Jeremiah back to what was said to him

on day one. Here's another dosage of those same words I gave you years ago for the here and now—sounds like you need these again. Where's the creative thinking from the Creator of heaven and earth, or at least some answers for what's been goin' on? Instead, God hamstrings himself to his own words. If you've been wondering whether God can make a rock so big he can't lift, he's been busy making an echo chamber he can't escape.

Seems to me, then, that, in the midst of our own reality shows, when we find ourselves playing the comparison game or drifting off into what in the world our Lord could possibly be up to or just simply on the verge of goin' off the rails, don't forget that, at the end of the day, the words of the Lord make us who we are. They always have the final say. They'll never reach their shelf life because they continue to define us and recreate us and renew us, and they'll always know us better than we know ourselves.

So, put down the measuring sticks, don't be sidestepping what our Lord says about sin, and remember that there's no comfort in speculation. Instead, let's pull up a seat next to Jeremiah, and get a dosage for our drama.

For starters, try this: "I am with you." You cannot be alone, no matter your feelings or your thoughts. Our Lord is with you far more than you'll ever know because his words make it so.

"To save [you] and deliver you." There is incredible purpose for you, far more than you can muster with the best of grades and rank and social status because he has said this about you.

"I will make you…a fortified wall of bronze." Whatever's going on, he's on it far more than you'd imagine…so much that you're already part of a victory celebration that's going on this very second—it's a done deal, whether you see it or not, because he's declared that for you.

Why is that? Well, because in all of this, we have these words, too: "It is finished." Those are the very words of the Lord enfleshed, going as it was written of him, embodying every last vowel and consonant of God in order to have the final say on our sin, wearing a vice grip of all the world's drama piercing into his skull to give us the last word on who we are.

Last year I went to a Lunch n' Learn that showed how different the German Sesame Street theme songs were between the 1970s and the 2000s. In the 70s version, the children in the video clip were depicted as inquisitive, collaborative, and, of course, playful. In the more recent version, the kids are shown seizing the day, as it were, partying and stuffing their faces with popcorn and candy. Life, you'd think, is all about consumption.

Makes me wonder, then, what this place would look like if we were a

community of consumption…NOT of Twinkies and Twizzlers, but of the words of the Lord. "Your words were found, and I ate them." That in the midst of a culture caught up in identity confusion, a visitor might walk away from here thinking, they know exactly what they're all about—they consume it, and it consumes them. There's no better restoration for us, nothing more inspirational about us, nothing more curricular to us, in essence, than constantly returning to the words that make us who we are, gathering around them, reading, marking, learning, and inwardly digesting them.

That, I think, would be a reality show truly worthy of the name.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

August 24, 2017
Text: Theme verse for academic year in CUAA Revelation 21:5:

Rev. Ryan Peterson - CUAA Campus Pastor

"And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'" (ESV)

Wow. What a day. For many of you as new students, this is a day that you have been anticipating for quite some time. You researched schools, you talked with countless admissions counselors, you attended college fairs. You applied, were accepted, registered, shopped, packed, and here you are. Of course, there were many steps in between.

It's exciting. It's nerve-wracking. It's a flood of emotions. In some ways, today is a bittersweet day.

Parents, today is a big day for you as well. We acknowledge the significance of this moment for you, whether this is the first time you are experiencing a child going to college or you have done this before. We can all agree that today is a complicated day. In some ways, today is also a bittersweet day for you.

For all of us, today is a marker with the words NEW, NEW, NEW written in big, bold letters right in front of us. It is a NEW year. You are in a NEW place. You will meet NEW people. You will have NEW patterns, NEW habits, NEW routines. You might be on a NEW team. You will enter into a NEW program or major.

Many of you here today moved onto campus into the residence halls earlier today. You met a new roommate or suitemate. For those of you living on campus, you brought many things with you, I'm sure.

Do you notice something? You all brought STUFF. Certainly you brought a laundry basket, a back pack, a floor lamp, a fan, and a few tote bins. Each of you, on this important day, brought things that would help you function as a college student.

But I have to say – each of you also brought your STUFF with you. Not simply your material possessions, but stuff. Baggage. Memories. Pieces of

the past. Guilt from mistakes and poor decisions along the way. You're not alone in this, because the truth is that we ALL HAVE STUFF. We all carry baggage. Even though you are in a new place, in this new year, with new roommates, new professors, and new coaches, some of the old wanted to come with you.

What stuff are you bringing with you? We all have a lot.

Even though this is a new year and new start for many, our minds and hearts are easily consumed by the old. Old, destructive habits. Old patterns that still haunt. Old memories of decisions that have altered our life in a negative way. Even though this is a new year in a new school, Satan wants you looking back at what you did or did not do. Your guilt wants you looking down, ashamed and embarrassed because of your stuff. Add in a broken, sin-filled world, overwhelmed with tragedy, and you have the makings of a depressing start to the year.

Our theme for CUAA this academic year, chosen by our student leaders at the conclusion of last year, is: All Things New, based on Revelation 21:5. In the apostle John's vision, he writes, "And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.' Also, write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

This theme comes from the second to last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21. It is an incredible picture for us to consider today. This vision, as given in the book of Revelation, is significant, because it reveals and confirms that Christ was indeed promised and that his life, death, and resurrection did happen so that God's creation could be restored to its original glory. According to Paul in Romans 8, creation is waiting for this time!

If you are familiar with Holy Scripture, you may recognize that these last two chapters of the Bible (Rev 21 and 22) are a nice bookend to the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2. John is going to see BEYOND the end of the first world to the creation of a "new heaven and new earth," and a God who is "making all things new."

That is the promise given to us by God today. He is making all things new. In other words, we know how it ends! This promise is trustworthy and true.

At Concordia, we can't promise you a stress-free semester. We can't promise you a perfectly smooth transition. We can only promise you what God has promised: He is making ALL THINGS NEW. That promise has more power and more punch than anything we could ever say to you. We know this promise to be true because God has already fulfilled His promise to you in sending His one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to dwell with man, to

suffer, to be crucified, and to die with your sins upon himself.

But that's not it. God fulfilled his promise of life by raising that same Jesus from the grave to victorious life, thus claiming full victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. The victory belongs to Jesus Christ, who fulfilled God's plan of salvation and who promises to come back in all glory.

Christ took your stuff – your sin and your shame – so you could live free. In Christ you are forgiven to live out that freedom in love and service to those around you. As Concordians, that is the life God invites us to now live. Martin Luther said it this way in Freedom of a Christian: "Christians live not in themselves, but in Christ and their neighbor. Otherwise they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith, in their neighbor through love. By faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God. By love they descend beneath themselves into their neighbor."1

The future of a believer is not simply an improvement from current circumstances. That is not the gospel. The promise is of a NEW heaven and a NEW earth. In this new heaven and new earth, God dwells with his people, he wipes away every tear from their eyes, and there is no pain anymore. Why? Because death has been destroyed! The former things have passed away. He is making all things new. This promise prepares us for Christ's purpose and calling in all that we do. As classes begin, as relationships form, as struggles ensue, the truth of God's Word defines whose we are as His people. We are people saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone.

What stuff did you bring with you? What did you carry to college? It does not define you. Rather, "fix your eyes on Jesus," for in Christ alone is your forgiveness, your freedom, and your future.

In the name of Jesus, Amen.

---

[1] Martin Luther, Freedom of a Christian, translated by Mark Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 88.

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

Book Reviews

Paavola, Daniel E. *Our Way Home: A Journey through the Lord's Prayer*. St Louis: Concordia, 2017. Pp. 190 $12.99 paperback

Review by Timothy Maschke

Devotional books are rarely described as engaging, yet that is exactly what Paavola has produced in his travelogue through the Our Father. Using an extremely familiar experience for all people, taking a trip, Paavola embarks upon a sublimely transcendent, yet highly imminent voyage of prayer and praise. As a biblical scholar, powerful preacher, and provocative teacher, Paavola utilizes his many talents to communicate the winsome wonders of God's mercy and grace.

Anyone familiar with Paavola's presentation style will recognize his love of vivid analogies and his wonderful ability to tell evocative stories. Throughout this captivating book, we get glimpses into common everyday folksy events in his life, which relate powerfully to the text of our Lord's model prayer. Meandering is often a negative term, yet this book meanders in a marvelous manner. From the farmlands of South Dakota to small Midwest villages, Paavola moves us from heaven to earth and then back to heaven through the profound words of our Lord in His exemplary prayer. Paavola summarizes the prayer-journey near the end of his book with this image-filled sentence: "You can see the Father's bright home, the angels moving aside to take you into the choir, the child taking her Father's hand, the rain clouds moving in from the west, the floodwater washing everything away, our Father catching us up before the wave swamps our raft, and our Father saying, 'It's time to come home'" (190).

Nine chapters, plus an introduction, cover our Lord's paternal petitions. Overarching the prayer is the theme of returning to our heavenly home through life's highs and lows, our struggles and joys. The universality of this prayer is evident as Paavola writes: "in another corner of the world, in a language we'll never know, believers are speaking this petition at the same moment as we are" (62). While the book can be read at one time, it is designed well so that it can be picked up and read chapter by chapter or even section by section over weeks and returned to months later.

In each chapter, Paavola draws us into a particularly perceptive aspect of each of our Lord's petitions, always connecting us to the bigger picture.

Every chapter includes a simple graphic image of our journey streaming from the heavenly chorus through parched ground, stormy and torrential floods, accompanied all the while by our Father as we return to our heavenly home. Relevant biblical quotations are supplemented by numerous citations from Martin Luther. Sidebars, which offer suggestions to help one "GROW" in some dimension of prayer or that encourage the reader to "PRAY EVEN WHEN," are strategically placed throughout the chapters, too. This is a wondrous journey worth repeating, as Paavola notes: "The journey is never the same if we have the eyes to see the differences. And so praying the Lord's Prayer need never be the same because the world in which we pray changes, as we do, every day" (24).

Encomiums aside, there are two areas open for criticism—neither of Paavola's creation, but are a product of the editorial formatting. The font of this wonderfully devotional book is very small, as is the book itself. To be more beneficial, especially for older readers, a larger font would have been extremely helpful (and perhaps a large print edition could be published). Similarly, the engaging sidebars are in a peculiar script that probably unconsciously emulates Dan's own handwriting, which (by the way) is not easy to read. These sidebars, though wonderfully illuminating, as the editor selected insightful quotes from the text itself, are somewhat obscured by the fanciful font.

Lutheran laity and church leaders alike will find inspiring ideas and enchanting encounters with a gracious God in this book. This prayerful journey is truly a trip worth taking over and over again to the spiritual growth and edifying of Christ's people wherever and whenever they pray. As Paavola notes, "The beauty of the prayer as a journey is that each side trip doesn't end the overall journey" (189). If given in celebration of a Confirmation or graduation, this book will be a gift that continues to give for many years.

Schilling, Heinz. *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval.* Trans. by Rona Johnston. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 608 pages. $39.95 Hardcover

Review by Timothy Maschke

Luther's life and work continues to be the amazing subject of innumerable biographies and essays, particularly in this 500th anniversary year. Oxford University Press has released this translation of Heinz Schilling's very successful biography, Martin Luther: Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs, which saw two editions in two years (2012 and 2014). To be recognized and commended is the translator, Rona Johnston, for her careful, yet extremely readable English rendition. This comprehensive biography explores the breadth of Luther's multidimensional life—professor, pastor, and prophet—in its historical and cultural context.

As one of several recent biographies on Luther, which have come out in the past few years, this narrative is unique in its perspective. Several idiosyncratic qualities are immediately worth mentioning. First is Schilling's use of Luther's pre-Reformation names—Martinus Luder—in early chapters of the book, and then, around the time of the Reformation (1517-1519), Eleutherios (Greek, "freed one" or "liberated one"). Schilling explains (139), "Martin Luder became Martin Luther, the name with which he became famous. For historians, the change in name is all the more significant because it provides one of the very few immediate signs of Luther's sense of self during the early years of the Reformation" (139). Second is the political and economic context in which Schilling places Luther's activities. In that area, this book is more appealing to academics than to a general audience, although it also provides extremely helpful insights into Luther's life and times.

Now retired, Schilling was a professor of early modern history at Humboldt University in Berlin whose interest is clearly in social and cultural studies. As a result, he spends less time in Luther's writings and more on the historical and cultural context for Luther's life and the Reformation. For example, after explaining the radical breakthrough of Luther's posting his 95 Theses and the consequences of that event (127-136), Schilling briefly

mentions the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518 (149) and skips to a review of Luther's conversation with Cajetan in Augsburg in October 1519 (150-152). A little later, Schilling provides a similar social-political perspective as he notes: "For German history, the entanglement of ecclesiastical and religious renewal with early modern politics, constitutional affairs, and society would be decisive for centuries to come. Evidence of that intertwining can be seen clearly in the diet of Worms itself…" (193). Such insights make this work unique among the recent Luther biographies.

Engaging in many ways, I found innumerable interesting facts or identified unique viewpoints to relish on nearly every page of this dense narrative. For example, Schilling explains Luther's late oft-condemned comments on Jews: "The texts in which he made reference to Jews were not the product of social, economic, or even racial concerns; their perspective was theological, bound in with the evangelical renewal of the church, a church that for Luther was universal in character and therefore included Jews" (481). Throughout the book, Schilling provides detailed observations on significant individuals in Luther's life or the background information on communities in which Luther's Reformation took root.

Just in time for the Reformation Quincentennial celebration, this work serves as an extremely beneficial resource for those who want to dig deeper into the political and cultural context of Luther's life and work. Whether Luther was a "rebel," as the title suggests, is not convincingly established by Schilling, although Luther's uniqueness in the sixteenth century and his continuing influence in the twenty-first century is unquestionable. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wishes to probe this "age of upheaval."

Pettegree, Andrew. *Brand Luther: How an unherald Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe-and Started the Protestant Reformation*. New York: Penguin Press, 2015. Pp. 383 $19.00 Hardcopy

Review by Timothy Maschke

Luther's life and legacy have many dimensions as has become evident over the past years as we anticipated the Reformation celebration. Andrew Pettegree has made a unique contribution to Luther biographies with this specialized look at Luther's life. He shows how Luther creatively and effectively employed early modern book publishing and the whole sixteenth-century printing enterprise. Pettegree, vice president of the Royal Historical Society and professor of modern history at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, brings a wealth of background along with a gift for writing. Pettegree's narrative is one of the most readable, engaging, and informative books on a unique aspect of the Reformation that I have ever read. He titled his book to underscore the fact that Luther's distinctively diverse writings were more than merely theological essays for the elite, but became an economic brand, which sold throughout the European populace.

Utilizing one of the greatest inventions of the millennium, Gutenberg's printing press, Luther's ideas spread quickly and decisively throughout Europe. Pettegree, a historian of sixteenth- century books, analyzes and affirms Luther's unprecedented success through the publication of informative tracts and simple broadsheets for the masses. He notes, for example, that prior to the Reformation, five Wittenberg printers produced only 123 books between 1502 and 1516; but between 1517 and Luther's death, "…publishers turned out at least 2,721 works, an average of 91 per year. This represents around three million individual copies, and includes many of the milestone works of the era, not least multiple editions of Luther's German Bible. This vast blossoming of what was essentially a new industry was entirely due to Martin Luther" (23).

The success of the Reformation was not merely due to the publishing firms themselves, but was the result Luther's outstanding skill at communicating

clearly to the common folk. Beginning with his sermon against indulgences, published several months before October 31, 1517, Luther's ideas caught the imagination and concerns of the German people. Exemplary are Luther's Catechisms, which captured the essence of the Christian faith in a simple question-and-answer format and made it available in posters and handy booklets for the populace. Pettegree has included a sufficient number of illustrations (over fifty frontispieces, maps, and portraits) to underscore his narrative commentary on this "pyramid of multiple improbabilities" (4).

Historically, this book combines a very pragmatic account of early book publishing with an intriguing analysis of Luther's creative use of print, particularly as it relates to the Word of God for the extension of God's kingdom. Pettegree reminds us that Luther did not work in isolation, but was almost always in a community of colleagues. He cites as evidence Luther's first biographer, his Catholic opponent Johannes Cochlaeus, who called Luther, Melanchthon, Johannes Bugenhagen, and Justus Jonas "the four evangelists of Wittenberg" (171). Perhaps as innovative as Luther was his Wittenberg colleague, the aristocratic artist, Lucas Cranach the Elder. Cranach produced title-page format which was innovative, yet extremely practical—"illustrative features [which] were blocked around a blank central panel into which the text of the title could be inserted" (158). Besides many biblical scenes, Cranach also reconfigured his famous "Law and Gospel" panels into a title page, which visually captured the essence of Luther's evangelical insight.

Ecclesiastical and social historians will recognize a thoroughly researched account. Media and marketing specialists will also appreciate the unexpected narrative surrounding their mostly-secular domains. Pettegree notes, for example, that "Luther's works outstrip those of any other author by a factor of ten; he outpublished the most successful of his Catholic opponents by a factor of thirty. Even this bald statistic understates the dominant role of Wittenberg in the printed works of the Reformation" (213).

Reformation scholars as well as individuals interested in a unique perspective on the culture and context of this era will appreciate this carefully crafted and artistically articulated narrative of Luther's life and legacy. This is one of the most interesting descriptions of Luther's life that I have read in recent years, providing intriguing insights and profound perspectives, which are usually only appreciated by a few elite specialists. The price of the book should make this purchase accessible for every church and school library.

Crawford, Matthew R. *Cyril Alexendria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xi+291. $125/$99 Hardcover

Review by Charles R. Schulz

It would be a remarkable feat for a doctoral dissertation to attain to the spiritual power and simplicity of the historic Christian liturgy. Yet, with some exaggeration, one might suggest that this is exactly what Matthew Crawford has achieved in reworking his Durham University thesis, written under Lewis Ayres, into a monograph about Cyril's Trinitarian and Christological exegesis. While some passages verge on the homiletical both as instruction and as exhortation, the regular rhythms of Cyril's central tenet constitute a kind of devout confession and prayer throughout the book: the Father reveals Himself in the Son through the Holy Spirit. Crawford's work has a special significance for Lutheran pastors and devout laity who may note that the Lutheran Service Book calls for a commemoration of "Cyril of Alexandria, Pastor and Confession" on June 27, but may know little to celebrate regarding this controversial figure.

Crawford sets upon his task aware that he is working in the new spirit of patristics scholars who see themselves as rescuing Cyril from previous scholarly condemnation. For much of the twentieth century, Cyril suffered the reputation of a bully, a bully who interpreted the Bible arbitrarily at that. In contrast, Crawford builds on the work of Robert Wilken (1971) and Marie-Odile Boulnois (1994) in highlighting the pastoral care and Christological content, which focus on Cyril's exegetical work. What Crawford adds is the insight that Cyril's exegesis takes place in the pro-Nicene theological culture, which confesses the full divinity of each person of the Holy Trinity. It is Cyril's Trinitarian commitment, which then reveals his full understanding of the nature of Scripture, its function as the revelation of God, and its interpretation by the Church. Implicit in Crawford's presentation is that all of this takes place within Cyril's life-project to further the knowledge and worship of the true God among his people and throughout the world.

Following an introduction, which succinctly lays out his project, Crawford explores Cyril's understanding of the nature of Scripture as a revelation of the Triune God. He dedicates chapters to the Son as the revealer of the

Trinity, Scripture as inspired by the Spirit, Scripture as revealed by and focused on the Son, Scripture as the Good Shepherd's nourishment for the Church, and Scripture as spiritually interpreted by spiritual exegetes to impart the truth and life of Christ. Thus, the first half of the book explores the nature of revelation, beginning in God and resulting in the scriptural text; the second half shows how the Scriptures function within the Church to draw believers through the Son by the Spirit to the Father. All of these topics remain vital for the church and her ministry in the twenty-first century, even as Cyril's treatment of them will continue to stimulate Christian thinking and devotion.

In this Reformation year, Crawford's thesis helps Lutheran readers celebrate the primacy of Scripture for the church fathers and for Cyril in particular. One of Crawford's contributions is to argue that Cyril honors the biblical text as a kind of "means of grace" (granted, neither Crawford nor Cyril use that term) along with Baptism and the Eucharist. Crawford maintains that Cyril's articulation of his own position is somewhat subdued on account of his predilection to coordinate the saving gifts of Baptism and Eucharist with the soul and body of lost humanity. Thus, Cyril's stated sacramentology mirrors anthropology. Nevertheless, Scripture ultimately rises to the rank of sacramental as it imparts divine life, guides moral behavior, and brings the knowledge of God. This is manifest, for example, in how Cyril's interpretation of Psalm 23 and John 6 brings in Scripture in tandem with the Eucharist as "spiritual nourishment for the flock" and a "bestowal of divine life" (160, 173).

For those looking for a broader introduction to patristic studies than they might expect from a study on Cyril, Crawford is always eager to place Cyril's thought within the stream of the discussions and positions in the early church. As he catalogues potential influences on Cyril, he presents valuable summaries of the theological contours and developments within patristic thought. Thus, one finds an excursus entitled "inspiration by the Spirit in the prior tradition" regarding the Church's consistent confession of the Scripture as the inspired Word of God (69-71), and another excursus on previous interpretations of Psalm 23 (147-151). In this way, Crawford brings to light both what is "traditional" and what is unique in Cyril's approach, concurrently enriching his readers with brief "outings" through the patristic landscape, both worth the price of the fare.

For Lutheran pastors of a certain generation who cut their systematic teeth on Pieper's Christian Dogmatics, Crawford's descriptions of Cyril's Trinitarian theology both reviews the principle of opera ad extra indivisa sunt (the works toward creation are indivisible) and navigates its application

in the work of revelation. How can the Church attribute the revelation of the Father to the Son if the divine persons act in unity toward creation? Again, how can the inspiration of the Scripture be predicated distinctly on the Spirit? Cyril's solutions preserve the Christian confession of monotheism, I might add, against the Islamic or Jewish charges of tritheism while maintaining the distinctions of the divine persons. Crawford also shows how the opera ad extra[1] correspond to and truly reveal the opera ad intra[2] of the divine relations within the unity of the Trinity. In other words, God acts in history in ways which express His very nature.

Crawford situates Cywril's Christological focus, acknowledged by many contemporary scholars, within his Trinitarian confession—also with respect to revelation and Scripture. Hence, the Son reveals the Father and gives the Spirit who confesses the Son. The right interpretation of Scripture will focus on the Son who gives the Spirit and life through the Scripture even as He leads the readers and hearers to the Father. Crawford underscores the confession of the Son's full deity as essential for this blessed revelation, so that the Word of Jesus is fully congruent with and identical to the revelation of the Father. Likewise, the full deity of the Spirit leaves no gap between what the Spirit speaks, what the Son imparts, and what the Father is (63-64). Crawford highlights one further consequence of this Christocentric focus for Cyril: the status of the Gospels as the ultimate revelation of God since they contain the unmediated words and deeds of the Son. The privileged place of the Gospels within the Scripture bears consequences for the prioritized role they must take within the catechesis and worship of the Church.

Finally, I particularly appreciated Crawford's observations regarding the concept of illumination in Cyril. Previous church fathers—notably Clement of Alexandria and Origen—rank believers by degrees of moral progress and spiritual enlightenment, presuming a kind of hierarchy among the faithful. As Crawford notes, this focus on spiritual advance subtly shifts the emphasis from the revelation in Christ to the believer's attainment of spiritual insight. Cyril, however, identifies the illumination of the Spirit with the basic catechetical instruction in Christ imparted together with Baptism. "To exegete the Scripture Christologically is, therefore, to explain the contours of the divine mystery revealed in the written word, so that believers can understand ever more of that which they have believed. In other words, this Spirit-guided practice of Christological exegesis is at root a retracing of the basic baptismal confession with which one's Christian

---

1 "Works to the outside," i.e., those actions which God performs with respect to creation such as the acts of creating, saving, sanctifying, and judging.

2 "Works to the inside," i.e., those eternal actions which are the distinctions of the divine Persons, namely, begetting and processing.

existence is inaugurated" (228). Ironically, it is the supposedly "arrogant" Cyril who shows how the universality of the gracious gifts given in Word and Sacrament override any elitism based on spiritual progress.

Some readers may find the style of Crawford's prose methodically slow as he explores text after text from Cyril, enumerates his observations, and explicates his conclusions. However, this is typical of inquiry in the field of "the history of exegesis." He is careful to limit the number and length of the texts to the requirements of his argument. The repeated return to the same conclusions and formulations could also become a wearying redundancy. For the patient reader, already in love with the Scripture and its divine Subject, the effect is almost a meditation on God. For the practically-minded parish pastor, this monograph on Cyril also includes a salutary vision of the indispensable role of the Scriptures in revealing the God who makes Himself known in the Son, giving eternal life to all who believe.

Johnston, Wade. *An Uncompromising Gospel: Lutheranism's First Identity Crisis and Lessons for Today*. Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2016. 116 pages. $14.95 Paper.

Review by Timothy Maschke

Wade Johnston, assistant professor at Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee, presented the material in this book for a Nebraska District pastors' conference in 2016. The title and subtitles give the overall structure of the three chapters of this work. The publisher asserts that Johnston's book "fills a void in confessional academic resources… [and] serves as a corrective to F. Bente's work…." Those goals are achieved particularly as Johnston provides insights from the works of Matthias Flacius Illyricus and Nicolaus von Amsdorf (the former was the subject of his dissertation) on the early Lutheran controversies.

Evangelical conflicts began early in the Reformation era. Johnston begins with a review of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (1518), which he calls "the beating heart of Lutheranism at its most faithful to the Scriptures" (10). Similarly, Luther's Bondage of the Will (1525) against Erasmus was a clear (sometimes blunt), yet pastoral exhortation for Erasmus and his followers to read the biblical text in its simple, Gospel-focused sense. While works-righteousness is always attractive to humanity by nature, God's grace in Christ is always the center of the "uncompromising Gospel."

Lutheranism's identity crises began developing already during Luther's lifetime, but grew more visible, vocal, and vicious in subsequent years. Johnston reviews those notable controversies in summary form, yet with helpful insights and abundant support from primary and secondary literature. Johnston asserts that the Adiaphoristic Controversy is probably more relevant or urgent today than any other issue (outside of justification) and gave Flacius much of his fame and notoriety. Related to this was the Syncretistic Controversy over free will. Melanchthon's position that human free will had a part in one's salvation could have had an adverse effect upon all other doctrines and practices. Georg Major's misstatements on good

works led to the Majoristic Controversy, an argument of whether works were necessary for salvation (No), detrimental for salvation (No), or necessarily following our justification, but not for our salvation (Yes). The Osiandrian Controversy over justification was a rejection of Luther's and Lutheranism's understanding of forensic justification; today, it sounds similar to the Finnish school (although Johnston does not make that connection). A dispute with Caspar Schwenckfeld over scripture's interpretation led to a solid defense of the biblical text of God's revelation over against Schwenckfeld's spiritual and non-contextual approach. Finally, Johnston addresses the Flacian Controversy over original sin and endeavors to restore him (if possible) by demonstrating that Flacius held a more credible, if still incorrect understanding. Falling into a philosophical trap set by Viktorin Strigel in a 1560 disputation in Weimar, Flacius overstated Luther's position about the extreme nature of original sin. Johnston notes that by using Aristotelian distinctions Strigel drew Flacius into a semantic, yet substantive linguistic trap, which resulted in Flacius' misstatements about original sin as a substance of human nature. Flacius' own obstinate refusal to back away from his own error caused his disgrace among later Lutherans, although Johnston shows his numerous beneficial contributions to Lutheran orthodoxy.

Several doctrinal and practical implications are drawn from these controversies by Johnston in his final chapter. He notes the continual importance of the doctrine of original sin for pastoral practice and preaching. Similarly, he emphasizes the need to clarify adiaphora in the face of both doctrine and practice, particularly in the area of worship in most Lutheran congregations today. A helpful section in this third chapter is entitled, "Conversing, Confessing, Correcting, and Being Corrected as Brothers." Johnston declares that in many situations, "There is a middle ground…. We can work together with great profit in order to address that fear [of doctrinal error] and, in the process, we might even gain a better understanding for the biblical teaching the brother desires to defend and improve our own way to speaking about or understanding it" (101). This section concludes with the issue of biblical interpretation in contemporary congregational practice. Johnston reiterates the importance of using a careful, sound, and proper hermeneutic for biblical interpretation, stating in a heading, "Scripture, Not as It Seems to You, but as It Is for You" (102).

Overall, this was a quick read which theology students, pastors, and pastoral conferences would find beneficial. Johnston's style is winsome and engaging as he speaks clearly to his audience and readers, giving homey and helpful illustrations from life. The frequent naming of his secondary sources in the body of the book is somewhat distracting, but, given the context of his original presentation, an understandable practice.

Knowing the source of this book is also helpful. The 1517Legacy project is composed of a diverse group of academics and theologians who relish the Lutheran heritage and want to undergird its continuing influence. Several close connections with Concordia University Irvine, are evident, yet voices from other venues are also present, as is apparent from the publication of this book. I encourage readers of this review to check out their website, www.1517Legacy.com, for further information and other helpful resources.