Re-envisioning Luther's Christological Hermeneutic

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Preliminary remarks

Martin Luther took the Bible seriously. He studied it, prayed it, preached it, and translated it. For Luther, the Bible was not merely a piece of great, transformative literature like Shakespeare, but contains, reveals and is the word of God. And this word of God is a life-giving, transformative power that brings into being what it speaks. In J. L. Austin's language, it is performative language.[1] "Let there be light, and there is light." "In Christ you are a new creation," "Your sins are forgiven." These are not just utterances but perform that which they speak. The Bible contains, reveals, and is the power of God to bring about a new creation. In reading it, one encounters the living God. But, is this obvious today?

Tim Wengert has written a helpful book titled *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*.[2] Perhaps a new book should be written, *Do Lutherans Read the Bible*? For many Christians reading the Bible is limited to Sunday pericopes or assignments in daily devotions such as *Daily Texts* or *Christ in our Home*. Some students come to seminary unfamiliar with key scriptural stories. An attempt at one congregation to have members read the entire Bible in one year failed and the progress chart was removed after a couple of months. David Bartlett, professor emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, once said, "I sense that the Bible is a nostalgic part of our past instead of a vital resource for the present. Nobody ever got up one day and said, 'I have to get away from the Bible.' We just drifted."[3]

Have we drifted away? Is the Bible nostalgia or a vital resource? What are people's expectations when they read Scripture? Do people expect to encounter God when they read Scripture? There are Muslim converts to Christianity who converted after meeting and experiencing Jesus in the reading of the Gospels. Are some Christians not experiencing this anymore? Is it that people don't see God's transforming power enough in their lives to believe this power can be found in Scripture? Is it too difficult to experience and understand Scriptures written 2,000-3,000 years ago? Is today's context one of a post-reading society so that experiential and transformative experiences are more likely to occur in other media, other ways? Luther's reading of Scripture 500 years ago transformed the world. How can people experience this transformative word of God today? These questions are worth further exploration but are not the focus of this paper.

An expansive understanding of Luther's christological hermeneutic is useful in addressing many of today's theological and societal issues.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Martin Luther and the Reformation tradition is Luther's hermeneutical lens of reading Scripture christologically, his Christ centered interpretive approach. That is, the whole of Scripture deals with Christ throughout. Some have taken this idea very narrowly as a sort of "Where's Waldo?" search for Jesus of Nazareth in the Hebrew Bible. It is limited to looking for predictions of Jesus while often ignoring the original context. This paper argues that an expansive understanding of Luther's christological hermeneutic is useful in addressing many of today's theological and societal issues. This includes reading through the lens of the cosmic Christ and the reign of God, and a Christo-centric proclamation that can challenge reductionistic, moralistic, and therapeutic proclamations of the gospel. This paper will also explore what it means to read the Bible as the body of Christ.

The cosmic Christ

The cosmic Christ allows people to understand that God is at work in the world in many ways, some of which have not been revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. An example of the idea that God is at work among other people in hidden ways comes from Amos 9:7. "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the LORD. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?"

In this text while Israel is proclaiming they are the particular, chosen people of God, God shows God's universal rule and love by sharing how God has done exodus-like, salvific events for two of Israel's enemies. This is a claim not recorded elsewhere and perhaps not even recognized by the Philistines and Arameans.

1. J.L. Austin and J. O. Omson, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1962.
2. Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), 2013.
3. David Bartlett, Preachers on Preaching Podcast Episode 29, May 22, 2016 https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2016-05/episode-29-david-bartlett

This bold scriptural claim suggests Christians speak with humility when we talk about God's actions in the world and especially when engaging other religions. An expansive view of reading christologically includes reading through the lens of the cosmic Christ. Such a reading allows Christians to engage other religions humbly and respectfully, knowing God may be at work in hidden ways in the world.

Reading through the lens of the cosmic Christ also reminds Christians that creation itself is important to God. God did not just create humans. God did not create the world just for the benefit of humans. The word *cosmos* in John 3:16, "for God so loved the world", and the claim of Rom 8:21, "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God," show a relationship between humanity and creation. Such verses highlight a creational emphasis that can challenge theologies that only talk about human salvation, the salvation of souls and not embodied beings, see human dominion of creation as domination, or are unconcerned about climate change because this world will be destroyed or replaced. The psalms especially remind readers that creation joins humanity in praising and bearing witness to God. Slowly Christians are recovering readings of Scripture and theologies that take creation seriously; approaches that are strongly needed in this time of global climate change and which can be developed from a cosmic Christ hermeneutical lens.

Reading through the cosmic Christ hermeneutical lens allows people to move beyond a where's Waldo/Jesus approach to Scripture, to engage our religiously pluralistic world with openness, respect, and humility and to think more holistically about creation. But Luther's christological hermeneutical lens can be further expanded.

Reign of God

Reading Scripture christologically should also mean reading through the lens of the reign—the rule—of God, proclaimed and envisioned in both testaments, breaking into our world in Jesus' life and ministry and witnessed to by the church. An emphasis on the reign of God allows Christians to acknowledge that part of our Scriptures is also Jewish Scriptures. Christians share roots and can learn from our Jewish sisters and brothers who do not claim Jesus as the Messiah.

Given the dangers of the theology of supercessionism, that the church has replaced the Jewish people as the people of God, the anti-Jewish tones of some of Luther's later writings, and the mixed responses of Lutherans to the Nazi persecution and killing of over 6 million Jews, it is important for Christians to acknowledge our sharing of the Scripture of God and the idea of God's rule on earth. It is not enough to acknowledge our sins against the Jewish people and then continue to exegete as if Jews are irrelevant to Christians and to God's future.

An emphasis on the reign of God can also overcome simplistic, reductionistic understandings of "knowing Christ and him crucified" that can lead to social passivity. Christ crucified can be understood reductionistically and simplistically as the proclamation "that Jesus died for your sins so that you can go to heaven when you die." Such a formulation is unhelpful for at least two reasons—it is based on an ancient system of atonement that makes no sense today; and today many people are not concerned about life after death, but wonder if there is any meaningful life during life.

If Jesus' death and resurrection were the only key parts of Jesus' life and ministry, they could have happened at any time, as a child or after his baptism. His teaching and ministry are key to understanding his death and resurrection and his teaching and ministry are about the reign of God.

The Lutheran emphasis on justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ can lead to a focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet, if Jesus' death and resurrection were the only key parts of Jesus' life and ministry, they could have happened at any time, as a child or after his baptism. His teaching and ministry are key to understanding his death and resurrection and his teaching and ministry are about the reign of God.

A little aside. Lutherans cannot forget that people are justified by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake alone. Grace is very counter-cultural. A recent survey of Lutherans showed 50 percent of Lutherans believe we get to heaven through our works, our being good people.[4] Clearly, Luther's proclamation of justification and grace still needs to be heard 500 years later. It may be that certain attempts to update the doctrine of justification have led to the moralistic, therapeutic preaching that is sometimes proclaimed in Lutheran congregations today.

Often Lutheran proclamation includes talking of the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and even *freedom from* the powers of sin, death, and evil. Our proclamation of the *freedom for* is often to love and serve the neighbor, to be little Christs to our neighbor. Discipleship is seen as love, compassion, and social ministry. Just as justification is seen as an event involving an individual, discipleship may also be seen as an individual responsibility. The reign of God challenges us to a different vision.

The reign of God is not about our souls sitting on clouds playing harps. It is a reign of inclusive justice, wholeness, and peace. In a context of fear-mongering, and divisive and hate-filled speech and actions, the contrast between current economic, political, and social systems and the reign of God needs to be lifted up and current

4. Elizabeth Eaton, "It's not what we do," in *Living Lutheran* 1 no. 11 (February 2017): 50.

systems challenged. According to the prophets, the Beatitudes, and the Magnificat, God's reign is an embodied, real world reign that challenges the status quo. It is a radical reordering of the world that shakes the foundations of our way of life. A life bearing witness to God's reign is not only about being nice and doing social ministry. A life-bearing witness to God's reign includes acknowledging how we benefit from current institutions, acknowledging we prefer a comfortable life to a radical call to discipleship, and acknowledging that we don't want to take risks, to make people upset, and to live as if we truly believe God's reign is a reality.

The Reformation tradition has tried a variety of ways of dealing with civil systems and governments, not all successfully. It may be that the Lutheran emphasis on justification (and not justice) and the two kingdoms or realms theology has sometimes led to a certain political and social passivity. While concerns for orthodoxy were the focus of early Reformation struggles, perhaps in our current context, might not an emphasis on orthopraxy, right actions, be a key gospel witness for this time? What might our bearing witness to the reign of God look like in our actions, our discipleship? A hermeneutical lens of the reign of God can challenge supercessionism, factionalism, and social passivity.

Gospel proclamation

Another effect of reading Scripture through a christological lens is that it keeps the gospel message of Christ and Christ crucified at the center of our reading and proclamation. This paper argues that not keeping Christ in the center has helped lead Christianity to being lost in moral therapeutic deism. Moral therapeutic deism may also be a result of attempts to make the doctrine of justification meaningful and relevant today. Moral therapeutic deism has the following tenets:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.[5]

Moral therapeutic deism is the religion of many Christians, as evidenced when they talk about God, not about Christ, and the gospel becomes mere moralism or mere therapeutic comfort.

Moralism is understood here as the practice of seeing things in terms of right and wrong, should and should nots, often in very simplistic terms. It is about living one's life according to such guidelines. Even some seminary students and preachers have a tendency to reduce the gospel to moralism. Rather than being deeply engaged in and by Scripture, it is easy to look for the preachable/teaching ethical or moral nuggets that will tell Christians how to live. The gospel is reduced to making us *better* people, rather than making us *new* people, new creations, the body of Christ. If the gospel is mere moralism, no wonder some people leave the church. Church is seen as a school of morality and once you have learned the basic lessons, you don't need it anymore. Ultimately, an emphasis on moralism can also lead to judgmentalism and hypocrisy, accusations often made by those now called the nones and dones.

> In a context of fear-mongering, and divisive and hate-filled speech and actions, the contrast between current economic, political, and social systems and the reign of God needs to be lifted up and current systems challenged.

The Lutheran tradition understands that reading the Scriptures christologically is not to derive a moral or two from the text but rather to create the opportunity for an intimate encounter with Jesus. Many are seeking such encounters with a living Jesus and often they are being given a list of rights and wrongs.

If there is a tendency for some to turn the gospel into moralism, there can also be a tendency to make the gospel into a therapeutic message. The gospel is about maintaining/restoring health or having a beneficial effect on one's mental state. Our society has become increasingly therapeutically oriented and this has worked its way into the church as well, often with unintended consequences.[6] This tendency toward a merely therapeutic gospel can be heard in many ways— for example, charismatic healings or the prosperity gospel. The proclamation that God wants us to experience wholeness, well-being, purpose, meaning, and identity *can* all be therapeutic proclamations. What are some of the consequences of the tendency to proclaim a gospel of therapeutic healing rather than Christ crucified?

Such proclamations influence readings of Scripture. Many people want to know how biblical characters thought and felt— often not the point of the text and not a central concern of the biblical world. The Bible's original context is ignored in order to make it relevant for today. An example: repentance comes to mean feeling sorrow or remorse, rather than changing one's way of life. The rabbis understood that Judah had repented of selling his brother Joseph into slavery when he refused to do something similar to his brother Benjamin. In the HB, repentance is changing one's

5. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–163.

6. While a useful and necessary experience, the role of Clinical Pastoral Education in increasing this tendency could be explored.

actions especially when given a chance to repeat a sinful action.[7]

A therapeutic proclamation also focuses on individualism rather than a communitarian, missional understanding of discipleship. Philip Rieff, in his classic *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud,* critiques the replacement of Christian concern for the community with a more selfish concern for individual well-being. He argues "That a sense of well-being has become the end, rather than a by-product of striving after some superior communal end announces a fundamental change of focus in the entire cast of our culture.[8] This trend is reflected in church shopping—where people explore churches based on programming, or meeting their needs, rather than how together all are the body of Christ.

Similar concerns were also noted in the February issue of *Living Lutheran*. In talking about the type of leaders needed for the future church, participants in a Theological Education Advisory Council listening session noted, "The entire Christian church in North America (not just Lutherans) has focused much too heavily in the past 60 years on meeting the needs of its members." "Our congregations have for too long been places where people had their needs met without being sent out to meet the needs of the world, … We need to form and equip leaders who can both cast a vision and help people own and live it." Charles Austin also noted, "Pastors prepared for greater service in the world will be teaching members how the gospel enables everyone to reach out and engage in the needs of the world, not just their own spiritual lives. This is a different image than the view that the pastor is primarily the spiritual leader of a congregation."[9] Presiding Bishop Eaton, in the same issue, calls for leaders "to keep us pointed to Jesus, to the law, to the cross, to the resurrection and away from the world's siren song of self-help, self-determination and self-righteousness."[10] It is this Christ-centered gospel proclamation that can help Christians move away from moralism and merely therapeutic concerns.

Reading as the body of Christ

Another expansion of Luther's hermeneutic of a christological lens is the church as the body of Christ. What does it mean for Christians to read Scripture as the body of Christ? First some thoughts about the body of Christ.

Ernst Käsemann argues that the Christian community as the body of Christ is not a metaphor, but a reality.[11] Bodies are the way by which people communicate and interact with the world. And the church is how Christ interacts with the world. As members of the body of Christ, Christians are members of one another,

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because all belong to Christ. Unity is a given in the body, but it is a unity not built upon uniformity, but rather union in Christ. There is a marvelous diversity in the body of Christ that is a gift from God. Christians are not just individuals and cannot just think individualistically. This unity and the claim that all are needed to make up the body and that "when one suffers all suffer, when one rejoices, all rejoice," challenges American individualism and any way of life that begins with "self" such as self-determination or self-sufficiency.

The church as the body of Christ is both a reality in which Christians live and is a claim on them. There are contradictions between our hostilities and Christ's forgiveness, our factionalism and Christ's inclusiveness. Christians represent Jesus Christ to the world and people feel included/excluded from the love of Christ by the way they experience Christians. In addition, Christ cannot be solely identified with one faction–liberals, conservatives, rich, poor, black, white, American—for then he is no longer Lord of the entire world. The question is how do Christians live in a way that corresponds to being the body of Christ?

If Christians live in a way that corresponds to the body of Christ, they cannot live neutrally as they bear witness to the reign of God which challenges the status quo. They will challenge factionalism, individualism, and even moral therapeutic deism as they live in a way that people can gain an experience of the living God and create genuine community.

One way this can be begun is by reading Scripture together as the body of Christ. The idea is that the body of Christ is both identity and context for Christian readings of Scripture. Reading Scripture as the body of Christ can challenge the American emphases on individualism, factionalism, and social passivity. So many Bible readings, even those done in groups, seem individually focused. The questions of the "lectio divina" can be changed from "What is God saying to me? What is God asking me to do?" to "What is God saying to us?" "What is God asking us to do?" Can rostered leaders help others see that relevance for the body of Christ will include relevance for their personal lives? This communal reading of Scripture is sometimes seen as congregations discern their mission. What if it became a regular habit?

As the body of Christ, Christians discover their story and

7. http://rabbisacks.org/birth-forgiveness-vayigash-5775 as on March 31, 2017.

8. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 261.

9. Charles Austin, "A new kind of pastor" *Living Lutheran* 1 no. 11 (February 2017), 19.

10. Elizabeth Eaton, "It's not what we do" *Living Lutheran* 1 no. 11 (February 2017), 50.

11. Ernst Käsemann, "The Theological Problem Presented by the Motif of the Body of Christ" in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 104.

identity in God's story and identity. Yet, many Christians do not know the biblical story very well. It is not easy to read a book written over 2,000–3,000 years ago that has a worldview very different from today's. No wonder many look for morals or easy applications to their lives. People want to search the Scripture for meaning in their lives. It is a very Lutheran, very catechetical search: "what does this mean?" The default, however, is often an individual response. It is common to individuals creating their own meanings, their own facts, and their own truths.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, has a more communal understanding of meaning and the search for meaning. He argues that "Meanings are socially constructed. They exist in the form of words, stories, constitutive narratives. They belong to the shared life of communities. They involve a living connection to a past to which we feel ourselves to belong, and a future for which we hold ourselves responsible."[12] In religion we see, "the constant making and remaking of meaning by the stories we tell, the rituals we perform and the prayers we say… . Religion is an authentic response to a real Presence, but it is also a way of making that presence real by constantly living in response to it. It is truth translated into deed."[13]

As people search for meaning, search for an authentic experience of God, they communally make meaning and live in and respond to God's presence by reading Scripture together as the body of Christ.

Reading Scripture as the body of Christ is not only seeing how peoples' stories connect with God's story. Reading the Bible as the body of Christ is a way of living the story, of making it a part of ourselves. Similar to the Jewish understanding of the Seder service, Bible stories become not mere history but memory. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians become a part of that story, linking people to the people of God in different times and places. As Rabbi Sacks says of the Seder service, "It changes me, for I now know what it feels and tastes like to be oppressed and I can no longer walk by when others are oppressed."[14] A communal reading of Scripture as the body of Christ helps Christians claim a communal memory that transforms them.

A new vision of reading the Bible as the body of Christ can help make God's presence real to us. We hear of God's actions in each other's lives and see and experience Christ in one another. We can mutually encourage one another to live as the body of Christ so that we experience Christ's presence in our actions and lives.

Reclaiming a communal reading of Scripture as the body of Christ is key to congregations reclaiming an identity to be a living example of what the reconciling, liberating and transforming love of God can do. It will help congregations discern what their specific role in God's mission is, and how to bear witness to God's reign of inclusive justice and peace.

12. Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), 199.
13. Ibid., 197.
14. Ibid.

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The church sometimes lives as if Christendom still exists. The church is no longer the center of our society, it no longer has the power or authority it once had. That does not mean, however, the church cannot be a vibrant subculture that offers an alternative way of life to individualism, moralism, factionalism, passivity, the easy answers and fear of today's society. To do this the church needs to bring good news in specific ways–clear proclamation of God's love and grace for all in Christ and him crucified, working toward God's vision of justice and peace, including racial equality, care for the environment, economic justice and immigration.

The church needs to bear witness that love can overcome fear and that people need not fear because of what God has done for all in Jesus Christ. Christians have been given God's faithful and sure promise. And as Christians, the body of Christ, read Scriptures and see God's faithfulness there can be mutual consolation and encouragement to trust God's faithfulness.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly explored a series of variations on Luther's christological hermeneutical lens, which was valuable 500 years ago and is still valuable today. Reading through the lens of the cosmic Christ allows Christians to engage a religiously pluralistic world and remind all of the need to care for creation. The lens of the reign of God helps Christians in our dialogues with our Jewish brothers and sisters and calls people to move beyond social passivity to bear witness to a God whose will upsets the status quo. The christological focus allows Christians to critique gospel proclamations which may be reductionistic, moralistic, or merely therapeutic. And stretching Luther's hermeneutic to include reading Scripture as the body of Christ may help us move beyond factionalism, individualism, and fear to live as the body of Christ bearing witness to the reconciling, liberating, transforming power of God. Valuable 500 years ago, Luther's christological hermeneutic in expanded forms, is still valuable to Christian theology, understanding, and proclamation today.