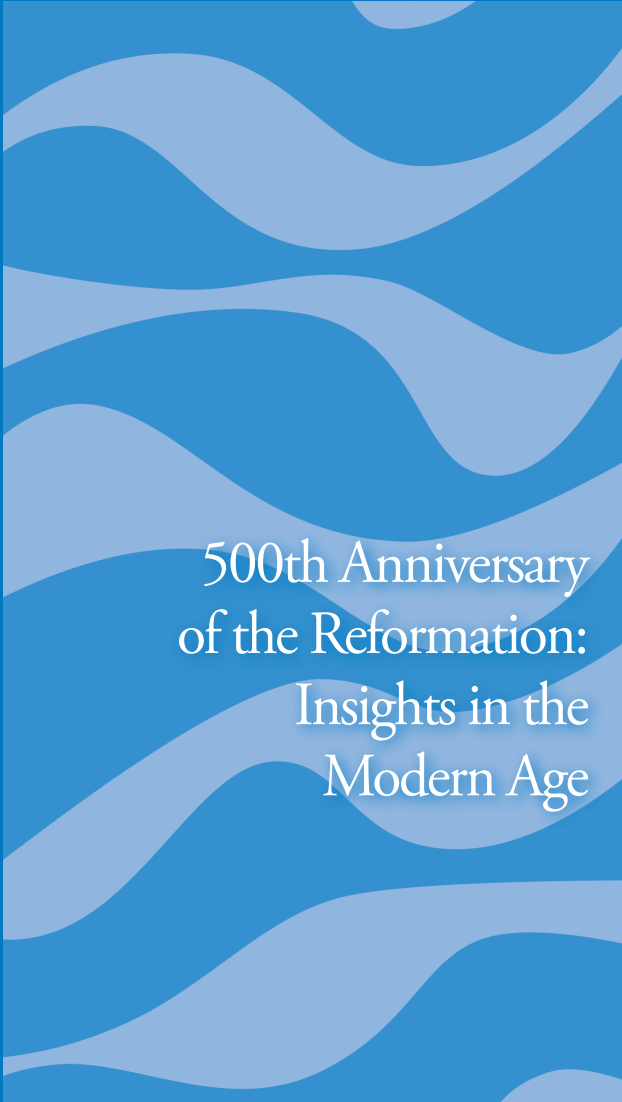


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An abstract graphic consisting of several horizontal, wavy bands of varying shades of blue, creating a sense of movement and depth. The bands are layered, with some appearing more prominent than others, and they span the width of the central panel.

500th Anniversary  
of the Reformation:  
Insights in the  
Modern Age

**CURRENTS**  
in Theology and Mission



# Currents in Theology and Mission

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# 500th Anniversary of the Reformation: Insights in the Modern Age

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In my role as a parish pastor one of my great honors is to help parishioners celebrate and commemorate significant anniversaries. The honor comes from the opportunity to reflect on the years that have passed and formulate a vision about what is to come. In my role as an academic and historian I am also honored to examine and teach the great events that have shaped the development of Christian doctrine. The honor comes from the opportunity to equip my students with information that will help them appreciate the diversity and the unity that makes up the collective story of disciples who have sought to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ as it has been articulated over the course of several thousand years.

The editorial staff of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has given me the opportunity to help mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation movement in Germany. I am blessed with yet another honor and opportunity. Our combined efforts seek to bring together new insights provided by pastors and doctors of the church as a way of reflecting on the years that have passed, and formulating a vision about what is to come. In so doing it is my hope that together we will also contribute, in some modest way, to the task of appreciating the diversity and unity that makes up the story of global Lutheranism, and reflect on how Lutherans have sought to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ as it has been articulated through the lens of the Evangelical Movement for the last 500 years.

In this issue I am pleased to present work done by three esteemed colleagues. **Dr. Jason Mahn**, Associate Professor in Religion at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, reminds us of the unintended consequences of the Reformation as they relate to the secular age. Mahn examines the possibility that Luther's theology provides a resource that could enable us to "train ourselves to see God as hidden under opposite signs, even or especially in our secular society."

**Dr. Kirsi Stjerna**, Professor of Reformation Church History and Director for the Institute of Luther Studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, brings fresh insight into Luther's problematic understanding of Judaism and the Jews of Germany by examining several of Luther's letters that address conversion from Judaism and advice concerning the baptism of a Jewish girl. In Stjerna's words, "The letters add to the evidence on what is constant and what is changing in Luther's relating to the Jews. Both letters offer helpful detail for re-examination of Luther's sacramental theology with larger questions in mind."



**Dr. Maria Erling**, Professor of Modern Church History and Global Missions, and Director of Teaching Parish at the Lutheran School of Theology at Gettysburg helps usher in our commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation by considering the impact of Luther commemoration in the development of North American Lutheran identity. We are reminded that “Luther’s relevance to American Lutheranism, as contrasted with his relevance to Lutheranism, had to be presented in terms that fit the times, and spoke also to other Protestants.”

My own small contribution highlights the connection between the ethical dimensions of the theologies of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Underneath the modest argument that I formulate concerning the reliance of Bonhoeffer on Luther’s theology is a plea to re-examine the ways in which the history of interpretation has impacted our most fundamental beliefs concerning the legacy of Luther in regard to ethics and the temporal realm.

Taken as a whole each author provides a cogent challenge to readers to consider how a 500-year-old theological tradition can continue to provide theological insights and challenges. For the next several years you can expect more of the same in October issues of *Currents*.

**Nathan Montover**

*Issue Editor*



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# Reforming Formation: The Practices of Protestantism in a Secular Age

Jason A. Mahn

*Associate Professor of Religion, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois*

We're approaching the 500-year anniversary of the birth of the Reformation—or at least of the most widely known action by the most charismatic figure within various reform movements of sixteenth century Europe: Martin Luther's composition of ninety-five pithy protests against the sale of Plenary Indulgences in October 1517, along with their fabled public posting to the door of the Wittenberg Church. But as Lutherans and others get ready to celebrate, it's clear that the Reformation has fallen out of favor in many academic circles. Scholars often now point to the late medieval/early modern era as a precursor to many contemporary ills. Fortunate for those ready to commemorate the Reformation, the historical appraisers often point to so many unanticipated, unintentional developments that no one figure or Protestant tradition bears the brunt of their critiques.

The disaffection seems to be in direct portion to other theological trends, including: the recovery of Thomistic thought from easy caricatures of scholasticism; renewed interest in the virtues and moral teleology, which ostensibly were eclipsed by Reformation understandings of grace alone; increasing attention to the importance of Anabaptism and the Radical Reformation, especially among those experimenting with countercultural forms of church or writing political theology (whose numbers are quickly increasing); and finally, rising discontent with American individualism,

moral relativism, far-reaching consumerism, the privatization and then alleged disappearance of religion, and a host of other conditions of the late modern era that together we call "secularism." When religious historians reconsider sixteenth century Europe in light of modern discontent, they often portray the Reformation and other late medieval reform movements as the beginning of the end. While some are filling the 500th anniversary balloons, others wonder whether the helium can be put back in the tank.

Of course, it is possible to celebrate Luther the man or even Lutheranism the movement while still coming to terms with the unintended, ironic, and undesirable consequences of both. It is also possible to trace many of our modern troubles back to Luther and the late medieval reformations without attributing malicious intentions, or even culpable ignorance, to any leading actor. Brad S. Gregory attempts the latter in his recent historical reconstruction: *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*. Gregory views "the" Reformation as including various magisterial and radical reformations, as the culmination of various reform movements of the late middle ages, and as providing the ground of possibility for eventual developments in empirical science, political liberalism, global capitalism, and modern foundationalist philosophy. Despite this capacious definition, he names *the* Reformation as *the* crucial cause for



the way contemporary western culture excludes God from its understanding of reality, relativizes Christian truth claims, subjectivizes morality, manufactures commercialism, and otherwise secularizes the world and our knowledge of it.

Gregory is sure to emphasize that these consequences were unintended by those who sought to reform the church catholic.<sup>1</sup> Titling his conclusion, "Against Nostalgia," he also suggests that if any repair is to be had, it won't come about through some radically orthodox reclamation of the high medieval church. (While not hosting Reformation parties, he's not protesting from the sidewalk either.) But it is one thing to appreciate what Luther and others were trying to do while coming to terms with the unintended, unwelcomed historical consequences of the Reformation. It is another to seek the ongoing reformation of the church while knowing full well that the best intentions so easily lead to opposite results.

In this essay, I will more closely examine Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* beside another large, influential book that connects Christian reform movements to secular society: Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. I do so not to affirm or dispute their historical reconstructions and socio-political insights but to ask what resources in Reformation theology, and in Luther's reforms in particular, might be made to respond to the very problems within our "secular age" that they otherwise helped to create. If indeed Luther and other reformers were complicit in the "exarnation" or disenchantment of our contemporary western world (Taylor), and if a pivotal role in that disenchantment was the uncoupling of soteriology (understandings of

salvation) and the authority of scripture alone from an account of moral formation whereby humans cooperated with God toward the *telos* or goal of human flourishing (Gregory), then can Luther's understanding of the relationship between the sacred and profane and between salvation through "the Word" and ongoing Christian growth now again be understood and employed not as marks of robust Lutheran identity but as resources for renewed reform of the church as a whole, which is nowhere more needed than in our so-called secular age?

## Resacralizing the world

According to Taylor, what Max Weber called the process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*, literally "demagification") first can be tracked in terms of the emergence of a "detached" or "buffered" self in the late medieval period. This new kind of self becomes essentially protective of powers from without—not only from the influence of other people but from impersonal, "magical" powers that, in earlier times, enchanted the world. This buffered self is birthed in and by modernity and not simply uncovered once the cloak of religion falls to the floor, as earlier and simpler theories of secularism (what Taylor labels "subtraction theories") would have it. It follows that with this innovation comes novel possibilities, including the option of retreating inwardly in self-protection, of radical disengagement. According to Taylor, a person need not disengage always or frequently for things to change momentarily. The very fact that it is *possible* now to do so—that I *can* be me apart from you, God, and the rest of the cold, objective world—marks the inception of secularism.<sup>2</sup>

1. Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 364.

2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 29–41.



Taylor underscores a compelling irony that marks secularity, namely, that it accompanies the extension of religious practices and religious fervor of the late Middle Ages. For example, he traces how the late medieval turn from a realist worldview to the nominalist insistence on God's unfettered willpower, along with the new status nominalism affords to individuals as more than instantiations of the universal, seek to restore the transcendence of God and enrich the common person's devotional life. Ironically, however, these end up sowing the seeds for the privatization of belief and the instrumentalization of reason, as well as God's effective removal from the cosmos, except as the initial designer of a disenchanted order.<sup>3</sup> Taylor's other examples include the rise of modern apologetics and the whole Christian reform movement's "affirmation of ordinary life." Both seem to affirm, defend, and extend belief in God, but they end up introducing the possibility of "exclusive humanism" or "self-sufficing humanism" where mundane goods become ends in themselves, and where "the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable."<sup>4</sup>

Each of these ironic reversals might be read as Trojan horse scenarios: Christianity unwittingly embraces conceptions and practices that eventually infect it from within.<sup>5</sup> However, more true to Taylor would be to conceive of these intensifications and extensions of belief and the dawning of the secular age as two sides of the same coin. It is as if the more weight that is given to personal religious conviction and the less

support that the (now radically individualized) person receives from his or her once-enchanted surroundings, the more religion must become spiritualized, privatized, and inwardized. Only if there is some sort of secluded space made responsible for bearing the burden of believing—call it "spirituality"—can the rest of my public identity find time and space for something other than faith. Thus, exactly as Christianity gets intensified and internalized, the "external," "objective," and now "real" world gets thoroughly desacralized.

In light of these developments, Taylor takes the Reformation as an "engine of disenchantment," which culminates in "excarnation"—the disembodying of religious life, which is less and less carried out in public, bodily forms and now more a matter of the head.<sup>6</sup> We in the western world live in what Taylor calls an immanent frame (similar to Weber's iron cage)—a closed worldview that makes secular humanism the norm and treats encounters with "transcendence" as private and thoroughly optional.<sup>7</sup> Protestantism's attempts to ferret out "papist" idolization of the material world end up denying the very cornerstone of Christianity: faith in the Incarnate God.

Is Luther complicit in such excarnation? Certainly we see his doctrine of the two kingdoms in Taylor's description of how a neutral, secular space must be created in place of the monastery to hold the religious flourishing and democratization of priests and saints in the Reformation era. Certainly, too, common understandings of the two realms and of God's two hands (the right ruling the inward and ecclesial life and dealing with matters of salvation, the left ruling the external, political world and dealing with matters

3. Ibid., 92–99; 221–232.

4. Ibid., 19–20, 230–233, 305–306, 369–370, 650.

5. Radical Orthodoxy theologians often describe the rise of nominalism in such terms. See especially John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

6. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 77, 554, 771.

7. Ibid., 552–557.



of vocation) are easily dismissed by those who reclaim the church as having its own distinctive politics and so sharply critique the privatization of religion.<sup>8</sup> But Luther's understanding of the two-fold rule of God (law and gospel) within two distinct realms (kingdom of the world, kingdom of God) cannot in and of itself provide the engine of disenchantment.

For that, one needs the more wholesale separation of the "spiritual" realm of God from this "material," bodily realm. And Luther never distinguishes the world we see and touch from the place and way that God abides, despite all his efforts not to confuse the different ways God works in the different realms that God rules. Indeed, he wages the sacramental wars with other reformers almost entirely *not* to separate spirit and flesh, God and the world. Writing against Zwingli in 1528, Luther refuses to divorce Christ, the second member of the Trinity, from Jesus of Nazareth, who has (or rather, *is*) a body, both before his resurrection and ascension and remaining so afterwards. We thus access God not by calling down some pure spiritual presence through a ritual of remembering. That understanding of the Eucharist is rooted in a reading of the Gospels that essentially "applies all the texts concerning the passion only to the human nature [of Jesus] and completely excludes them from the divine nature."<sup>9</sup> By contrast, for Luther,

Wherever you place God for me, you must also place the humanity for me.

They simply will not let themselves be separated and divided from each other.

8. See for example John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 212–227.

9. Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper—From Part I (1528)," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 263.

[Christ] has become one person and does not separate the humanity from himself as Master Jack takes off his coat and lays it aside when he goes to bed.<sup>10</sup>

We have God only in the form of Christ and Christ only in the form of the bodily Jesus. In this light, Luther's sacramental writings seem much more like a spoke in the gears of any engine of disenchantment.

Admittedly, Taylor himself mentions what might be called the "Lutheran exception" as he otherwise traces our ex-carnate, disenchanted world back to the late medieval reform movements. In fact, the Roman Church can here look more responsible than the reforms it rejected. Taylor, a Catholic, writes:

One can even imagine another chain of events in which at least some important elements of the Reformation didn't have to be driven out of the Catholic Church, and to a denial of the sacraments (which Luther for his part never agreed to) and of the value of tradition (which Luther was not as such against). But it would have required a rather different Rome, less absorbed with its power trip than it has tended to be these last centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Brad Gregory also notes that Luther provides the exception to the Protestant rule of rejecting the bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist. For him it is Zwingli—Luther's leading opponent in the Eucharist disputes—who anticipates what would become the standard "denial that Jesus could be *really* present in the Eucharist" by way of his clear distinction between the spiritual nature of God and material, empirical objects within the natural world.<sup>12</sup>

10. *Ibid.*, 267.

11. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 75.

12. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 42.



Taylor and Gregory thus mention in passing that Luther is excepted, at least when it comes to the sacraments, from the general Protestant trend of spiritualizing God and so disenchanting the physical, shareable world. Isolated exceptions, of course, can make the rule; Luther's sacramental writings might be simply put on the side of Catholicism without otherwise reconceiving the connections between Protestantism and secularism. Others suggest that overlooking or making too little of Luther's own "sacramental realism"<sup>13</sup> reveals a theological mistake at the heart of Taylor's account. Recall that Taylor mourns the absence of transcendent within our immanent frame, in which no particular place, thing, time, or person necessarily points beyond itself. Does such mourning and the perceived absence of transcendence inadvertently overlook the possibility that God manifests God's self not only beyond or by breaking through but also "in, with, and under" our so-called secular world, if only we had eyes to see? Moreover, could the eyesight needed to see transcendence hidden in immanence, to see God incarnate in the secular world, also bring into focus God's manifestation in the lowliest, most unlikely places—in the cross and other places of abandonment and anguish? Beyond preserving the sacramental, incarnational theology of the medieval church, the Lutheran tradition might renew discernment of the *cruciform* presence of God therein. I return to this prospect at the end of the essay.

13. This term and the ideas of this paragraph come from Ronald F. Thiemann, *The Humble Sublime: Secularity and the Politics of Belief* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, forthcoming 2013), chapter 1. I was honored to read a draft of portions of this manuscript before Thiemann's death in November 2012.

## Responding to relativism

In the first chapter of *The Unintended Reformation*, Gregory forwards Taylor's claim that Protestantism, in its nominalist-influenced effort to underscore God's transcendence and unfettered will, actually undercuts the scope and shape of God's otherness. A bit more theologically nuanced than Taylor, however, Gregory notes that transcendence is lost not by contemporary western captivity within an immanent frame, but by the very denial that God can and does incarnate the material world. The sacramental worldview—which is Luther's worldview, as I have taken pains to show—considers God's immanent presence in the created world to be the very sign and means of God's transcendence. In Gregory's words, "Not despite but *because* God is radically other than his creation, it is claimed, God can and does manifest himself in and through it, as he wills..."<sup>14</sup>

Having recognized that Luther insists on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist,<sup>15</sup> Gregory might thereby absolve Luther from complicity in the unintended secularization of society—that is, if disenchantment were the sole characteristic of secularism. As it turns out, the rest of Gregory's book focuses less on God's presence or absence and more on the privatizing and relativizing of Christian authority and truth claims, including Christian morality. Whereas Taylor is concerned with whether and how

14. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 32. On not pitting God's transcendence against God's immanence, see also William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

15. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 42.



God is present in the world, Gregory is concerned with the vast and fissiparous diversity or what he calls the “hyperpluralism” that characterized our knowledge of God, truth, and morality. With this different focus comes a host of new problems for how Protestant Christians might share faith in a secular world.

For an almost 600-page book, there is relatively little about the writings of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Calvin, or Menno Simmons. Gregory tends to boil down their diverse writings into the *common quest* to unfetter scripture alone from the tradition and authority of the Church, as well as to the *sheer diversity* of their various ideas about what *sola scriptura* teaches. This is in fact at the heart of Gregory’s genealogical story: Where once there was a single, largely unified but pliable institutionalized worldview called late medieval Christianity, now we live with multiple disagreements about what the Bible says and why it matters in terms of our shared public life. Moreover, because we lack the practical tools to know how to reason coherently and publically about matters of ultimate importance, we end up consigning ourselves to the truth that there is no truth (which for Gregory amounts to an exclusivist claim thinly veiled under a banner of tolerance).

Readers will hear echoes of MacIntyre’s groundbreaking book, *After Virtue*, in Gregory’s account.<sup>16</sup> Both reflect deep concerns about the moral relativism spawned by rival ethical and epistemological traditions, each of which aims toward foundational, indubitable knowledge but none with tools to negotiate the ever-widening diversity of frameworks. When these rival traditions look around

and recognize their incommensurability, they give up on public claims altogether, and “truth” oscillates wildly to whatever happens to be true for me. For Gregory, then, “secularism” is not so much the absence of God but the inability to speak meaningfully of any God other than the god that each of us chooses. In his words:

In Western society at large, the early twenty-first-century basis for most secular answers to the Life Questions seems to be some combination of personal preferences, inclinations, and desires: in principle truth is whatever is true for you, values are whatever you value, priorities are whatever you prioritize, and what you should live for is whatever you decide to live for. In short: whatever.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his study, Gregory traces this contemporary cult of whateverism back to the diversity of Protestant biblical interpretation and confessional doctrines.

What exactly did Luther and early Lutherans beget according to this historical genealogy? As the first and loudest spokesperson for *sola scriptura*, Luther and his lineage seem prominent. Yet Luther was nowhere close to a relativist in his reading of sacred scripture; nor were or are Lutherans without a fairly clear sense of what everyone should find when they turn to the plain sense of scripture. Gregory, however, notes that the doctrinal unity of the confessional (magisterial) churches only masks the inherent diversity of Protestant beliefs about what scripture says and how God saves. The Reformation taken as a whole—including widely disparate radical reformations—shared little more than the rejection of Rome’s authority. Thus, even if Luther had a clear sense of what Christians “should look for and expect in

16. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

17. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 77.



the Gospels,”<sup>18</sup> the fact that other reformers had equally clear and wholly different interpretations works to relegate religion to private opinion and personal preference.<sup>19</sup>

More important than Luther’s particular understanding of the Bible or even the *de facto* diversity that he helped create is the way he ostensibly uncoupled the Bible’s authority and doctrinal truths, including justification by grace through faith, from a single practical system of moral formation. In short, Luther rejects the dominant practice and framework of teleological virtue ethics. According to that long-lasting framework, a person should practice certain virtues within a community that is constituted by them. The means are inextricable from the end, namely, to live as part of the body of Christ “though the shared practices of the virtues constitutive of that community as the *via* to salvation.”<sup>20</sup> According to Gregory, then, the sixteenth century breakup of the medieval church proved a loss not for the unity of the church *qua* unified but rather for the church as the moral community necessary to sustain the practice of the virtues. Once we are no longer surrounded by saints and other moral exemplars, no longer encouraged to imitate their external actions until we gradually form the dispositions necessary for proper love of God and creation, then we have lost the very framework necessary for the shared goal of human flourishing and salvation.<sup>21</sup>

18. Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” in *Basic Theological Writings*, 93–97.

19. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 298–364.

20. *Ibid.*, 195.

21. Here again Gregory insists that we must account for this loss by viewing the Reformation as a whole. While Luther’s

The decoupling of ethical positions or principles from a moral community that makes them intelligible has monumental effects even in cases where the doctrines of magisterial and radical reformers were virtually indistinguishable from the tradition from which they broke. Almost all sixteenth century churches, for example, condemned avarice, acquisitiveness, and the separation of economic behavior from the protection of the common good.<sup>22</sup> But without the framework needed to connect *practices* of just economic behavior to one’s ultimate *telos*—indeed, with Luther’s emphatic distinction between the kingdom of God from the kingdom of this world, along with his claims about the depravity of human nature which seemed to deny that there is any human good onto which grace could be grafted so that habituation in virtue might lead to human flourishing—early Lutherans seemed to shatter the very framework needed for Christians to connect daily practices to ultimate Christian goals. Fast forward a few hundred years and there emerges the expanding space called “secular society” and later “the Market” with their own formative processes, chiefly, that of “manufacturing

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Wittenberg or Zwingli’s Zurich might have provided a substitute for Rome’s moral community within which virtues could be modeled and cultivated, when taken together and alongside other proliferating Protestants (not to mention the boundless denominationalism ensuing since), we see how multiple communities can entail the loss of community as such, and so the loss of any one practical framework needed for people to mature into full-fledged Christians. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 203–204.

22. For Luther’s part, see his “Trade and Usury” (1524) in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, volume 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), 231–310.



the goods life.”<sup>23</sup> Absent the framework and moral community needed to school and shape a person’s desire so that she will eventually love the *final good*, we seem compelled now to try to satisfy unformed, unbridled cravings with any and every *consumer good*.

Luther and other Reformers often rejected moral teleology because it smacked of being “Aristotelian,” which itself became a sign of all things “scholastic” and later “Roman Catholic.”<sup>24</sup> More substantially, Luther rejects teleological virtue ethics insofar as it correlates human flourishing with God’s gift of salvation and both with the ongoing efforts and practices (Luther would say the “works”) of the person-in-training.<sup>25</sup> To claim that one’s actions could help realize one’s eternal destiny amounted to “works-righteousness” over-and-against which Luther famously emphasized “alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone.”<sup>26</sup>

23. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 268–272.

24. Ibid., 185. The practice of “synthesizing” Christian revelation with Aristotle’s philosophy is beyond Luther’s comprehension: “It grieves me to the quick that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen [Aristotle] has deluded and made fools of so many of the best Christians with his misleading writings. God has plagued us thus for our sins.” Luther, as cited in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 134.

25. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 269.

26. Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness” (1519) in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, volume 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 299. This alien, passive righteousness comprises the first of the two kinds of righteousness; I will return to the second below.

We seem to be at both the vital nerve of Lutheran reforms and the heart of Gregory’s concerns. I for one find the latter’s genealogies convincing and take his critiques of our contemporary age seriously. I also think that Lutheranism is best understood as a reform movement within the church catholic, indeed, as a reformation—rather than a rejection—of the church’s framework for moral formation, even and especially in secular societies. In the remainder of this essay, I mention two ways of reconceiving Luther’s writings and the Lutheran movement to respond to some of these challenges.

## Reconceiving Lutheranism

First, confessional Lutherans and others influenced by Luther could better articulate and otherwise display the ways in which their doctrines become life-giving only within the arc of human lives and a set of practices. Historically, Lutherans have been well-schooled in sorting through the relation between faith and practice, or grace and service to the neighbor, *within* their confessed doctrines. They have fewer internal, inescapable reasons for assuming that talk about God in general and about Christian salvation in particular can be proper and true only as one undergoes training toward participation in final ends.

This is all the more reason to emphasize that part of the Lutheran tradition that reconnects Lutheran theology to Luther’s own life and the lives of other protestant models. In fact, Gregory’s central claim that the Reformation produces unintentional results, many of which are antithetical to the intended reforms of the church, is nothing new to *internal critics* of the tradition we call Lutheranism. Many pose similar critiques of Lutheran orthodoxy, with its emphasis on right belief and praise (orthodoxy) over proper discipleship, communal ethics, and other practices



(orthopraxis). Many also emphasize that any appropriations of some free-floating “Lutheran thought” that do not situate it in the course of Luther’s own life—and the shared practices of the late medieval church—are bound to get Luther and the reforming movement wrong—indeed, they will get them backwards.

I’m thinking here of Lutheran critics of Lutheranism such as Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both mount incisive critiques of the Lutheran church’s penchant toward cheap grace—grace as stockpile and prophylactic, grace that all-too-handily covers sin but leaves sinners and their underlying despair untouched. Kierkegaard repeatedly insists that the “leniency” of grace is rendered innocuous the minute it is separated from the “rigor” of discipleship.<sup>27</sup> So, too, does Luther’s word of consolation, of final and full hope that breaks through the dark night of the soul, undercut itself the minute that the answer is taken while ceasing to struggle with the questions (with “fear and trembling”). Luther’s entire life, according to Kierkegaard, witnessed to the truth of justification by grace through faith that those following Luther wanted to appropriate apart from the same life story and risk.<sup>28</sup>

Bonhoeffer, too, unearths Luther’s life as the soil that cultivates his thought and urges contemporary Christians to cultivate grace-filed discipleship in their own lives. When we take grace without real lives of

discipleship, we commodify and cheapen it. When what was a conclusion for Luther becomes a “principled presupposition of my Christian life,” I end up bypassing the very process that would make grace gracious—the help I need to become the disciple I am called to be. “Grace” thus becomes the very thing that keeps one from following the way of the cross and resurrection.<sup>29</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer want to save Luther from retrospective and anachronistic attempts to make him safely Lutheran—the adherent of a new and better doctrine. Moreover, each resists in his own troubled life prevalent assumptions that Christianity is a safe place to stand rather than the set of dispositions necessary to undergo tremendous upheavals. Kierkegaard famously resists calling himself a Christian, hoping only that he will learn to become one. Bonhoeffer also portrays Christianity as a direction toward which we grope rather than a place to firmly stand, Luther’s pronouncement at the Diet of Worms notwithstanding. He continuously quarries about the shape of Christianity and Christ in the world today, dissatisfied with church membership alone as their only or best shape.<sup>30</sup> He also wonders about the shifting shape of discipleship in his own life. He is willing to participate in a counter-intelligence plot to assassinate Hitler but never rejects (indeed, he clings to) pacifist Christian ideals that make lethal violence incompatible with Jesus’

27. Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1991), 67–68, 140, 149. See my discussion in *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 180–185.

28. Søren Kierkegaard, *Judge For Yourself! (with Self-Examination)*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1990), 193–194.

29. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 37–76. Quotation is from page 50.

30. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Ilse Tödt, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 47–75; *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, and Renate Bethge (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 361–367.



Sermon on the Mount. This sounds like a conceptual contradiction, and it is. But for Bonhoeffer neither the call to radical discipleship nor his openness to discern the will of God in radically uncertain times canceled the other out since the will and way of God are not principles or conceptions. He thus acts to follow God's will in the world while refusing to justify that action as right—much like Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah according to Kierkegaard's retelling.<sup>31</sup> Bonhoeffer freely and with conviction came to “sin boldly” and—not to forget the other half of Luther's letter to Melancthon—also to trust in the promises of God even more boldly.<sup>32</sup>

The reticence of these Lutherans to call their actions justified or even to call themselves Christians follows from the awareness that Christianity is about ongoing formation, about a life that must be practiced and lived forward in hope but without abstracted ethical or doctrinal principles and the smug self-assurance that can accompany them. They both, along with the Luther that they reconceive, can be considered protestant saints insofar as they model their lives after Jesus and thus become models for other Christians. In fact, the entire Lutheran Reformation might be reconceived as the ongoing tradition that makes grace more real, more livable, and even more connected to our messy, uncertain *secular* world—a world without the ideological self-protection that often accompanies religious belief.<sup>33</sup>

31. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (with *Repetition*), ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983).

32. *Luther's Works* (American Edition), vol. 48, 282.

33. Such a critique of Christianity as ideological guarantee is behind Bonhoeffer's famous musings about a “religionless Christi-

Luther's first thesis in protest of grace being sold on the cheap can be seen as the start to it all: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent [Matt. 4:17], he willed the *entire life of believers* to be one of repentance.”<sup>34</sup> Luther thereby leads the way in rejecting “Lutheran” cheap grace.

## Reforming formation

The second way of responding to Gregory's challenges concerning the Reformation's loss of the virtue tradition also returns us to Taylor's charge of excommunication and Luther's particular incarnational logic. It cannot be denied that the deepest convictions of Luther tend to decouple the experience or pronouncement of God's unmerited grace from the person's ongoing efforts at cultivating a life of virtue. Luther seems to sever the intrinsic, practical ties that previously connected the mundane moral lives of Christians to final ends. Why buy into the formative system when you can get the grace “for free”? If the first response is to re-tradition Lutheranism to distinguish free from cheap grace, a second is to rethink moral formation itself.

Note that for all his concerns to decouple grace from disciplined striving and to underscore the incommensurability of God's favor, Luther also works tirelessly to reconnect the two on the other side of a person's received, “passive” righteousness. He thus writes of “two kinds of righteousness”—the first which is given all at once by God apart from human effort, but the second which is formed by daily living into

anity” and the willingness to live “*etsi deus non daretur*,” as if there were no God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 476.

34. Martin Luther, “The Ninety-Five Theses” (1517), in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2005), 41, my emphasis.



the first form by refusing to grasp it as a thing to be exploited. This second, "proper" righteousness flourishes as the person disciplines herself in humility, patterns herself after the servant-form of Christ, and becomes available now to attend to the everyday needs of the neighbor.<sup>35</sup> Luther also writes of two interdependent dimensions of Christian liberty. The first constitutes *freedom from* the authority of others and *from* having to contribute anything to the process of salvation. The second constitutes *freedom for* a life of disciplined striving as one continuously learns to order his desire and to respond to the needs of others.<sup>36</sup>

It would seem that Luther is more concerned to *reconfigure* the relationship between the work of God and of humans in ways that resist quantifiable accounts than he is to sever them completely and leave them split. Indeed, to suggest that God does one hundred percent of the saving work and that humans contribute zero percent is already to make the two "efforts" commensurable and thus to commodify, and thus also to cheapen, God's unmerited grace. As such, free grace turns out to be quite different than grace that "costs nothing," as Bonhoeffer would later emphasize.<sup>37</sup> Many would assume that Luther's particular recoupling of grace and effort still cannot reconstitute the virtue tradition insofar as Luther's comments about morality are indicative rather than

imperative. He describes what Christians *will do* and *will want to do* once they are made righteous but never what they *have to do*. Still, one notes that such a gap (taken by many as a "loophole") between the final end of salvation and human striving is endemic to *any* account of virtue, notwithstanding Gregory's language of a single practical "system" for moral formation. In other words, even moral frameworks that assume a person can become virtuous by cultivating virtuous dispositions through habituated acts must admit of a gap between *quantifiable* human acts and the final virtuous *quality* they are meant to help shape. Repeated acts of generosity, for example, simply do not reach some tipping point whereby they bestow the *quality* of generosity. That requires some outside recognition (or pronouncement) that the whole of the life constitutes virtue, what Luther recognizes as justification by God.<sup>38</sup> The gap between human and divine "efforts," between an acquired state of the soul and that which leads to or from it, seems intrinsic to any account of the virtues. Even Aristotle recognizes this when he suggests that we should call no man happy until he is dead.

Rather than understand the Lutheran tradition as shattering the Aristotelian/Thomistic framework, it is more fitting to suggest that Luther *re-replaces* the gap between formative practices and final *telos*. For the late medieval *via moderna* or nominalist tradition, a person did all that she could, trusting that God's grace would fill in the gap between her quantifiable efforts and the goal of virtue itself. For Luther, the gap happens *after* God conclusively pronounces the person saintly

35. Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness," 299–306.

36. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," (1520) in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 344.

37. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 37–76; for Luther's "accounting," see my "Beyond Synergism: The Dialectic of Grace and Freedom in Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*," *Augustinian Studies* 32.2 (2002): 239–259.

38. See the helpful discussion by Gilbert C. Meilander, "The Examined Life is Not Worth Living," in *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 100–125.



and before she then lives that righteousness out through humble service to the neighbor. The different temporal location of the aperture leads to different descriptions of or priorities within the virtues themselves. Gratitude and humility, for example, would seem particularly fitting of the excellences formed by those who—like the kenotic Christ they follow—do not count the first form of righteousness as something to be exploited but empty themselves, becoming gracious servants to any they find in need.

My language here reflects the fact that, for Luther, the first and second form of righteousness, salvation as instilled by God and salvation as daily lived out, are held together according to the pattern of Christ's self-emptying love. In fact, the Christ hymn from Philippians 2 provides a dominant subtext for both "Two Kinds of Righteousness" and "The Freedom of a Christian." In those works, Christians are urged to regard their accomplished saintly status through the free gift of God in the same way that Christ regarded his having the form of God. Rather than grasping and exploiting (and so cheapening) it, they, like Christ, should empty themselves, having been freed to take the form of servants. The christological pattern underscores the fact that a Christian's movement from alien to proper righteousness is not supplementary or unnecessary, talk of ethical loopholes notwithstanding. Just as Christ's disavowal of any "godliness" that is set above servitude constitutes his very lordship, so too does the Christian become properly righteous when he refuses to "capitalize" on being made righteous. Lutheran formation is (or should be) patterned after a particular and peculiar image of the servant Christ. Justification by grace through faith is that which enables disciples to do nothing less or more than respond to another in need. By cultivating Christoform solidarity

throughout their lives, they become truly holy, which is to say masters at holding their holiness lightly, throwing their lot in with others.

I hope to have suggested that Luther's accounts of the "work" of being free for others and of cultivating proper righteousness fits squarely within the tradition of virtue formation and moral teleology. It has many of the essential ingredients: a supreme exemplar in Christ, countless other masters who have the same mind in them that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:5), and repeatable practices, including the sacraments, meant to internalize dispositions of self-forgetfulness, solidarity, and service. And yet, recognizing the kenotic Christ as the model for Lutheran virtue also helps display how the Lutheran tradition does not simply "fit" within the older virtue tradition. It actively seeks to reform it.

That older virtue tradition is based on a pre-modern "realist" worldview whereby all things, notwithstanding sin, naturally move toward their highest end of eternal beatitude. The abiding advantage of this worldview, and the loss of which Taylor and Gregory mourn under different terms, is that everything is internally connected to and thus is enchanted by its participation in the life of God. Such a participatory worldview is invaluable for Christian community and solidarity with others—especially as we face the ecological disasters resulting from having cordoned off an "economic realm" from the whole of God's Great Economy. But one chief drawback accompanies the particular way that Christians are here schooled to be drawn to God through others. The realist worldview is based on the Greek philosophical assumption that what constitutes the essence of a thing and how it links up with everything else is through its unchanging and invulnerable form. Participatory movement toward



God and one's final end thereby happens primarily by attending to and learning to desire the eternal, unchanging essence that inheres within and lends coherence to any and every particular thing. When, by contrast, one loves particulars rather than the form that connects them to the All, one sins. Thoroughly schooled to love such eternal forms and essences, one is tempted to overlook—indeed, one might be *instructed* to overlook—manifestations of God in and through concrete particulars, and especially God as manifest through vulnerability, suffering, and the cross.

The “thin tradition” of Luther's theology of the cross<sup>39</sup> provides a corrective to this proclivity toward abstractions and the avoidance of the particularity and suffering of others. For Luther, the only true theologians are theologians of the cross—those who comprehend “the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”<sup>40</sup> The alternative (enacted by “theologians of glory”) is the habit of looking upon “the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible,” but perceptible *in abstractions* such as “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth.”<sup>41</sup> Following our own inclinations—or even our desire as schooled within a system that values eternal forms over God's particular (and peculiar) self-revelations—we remain almost bound to prefer “works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to

evil.”<sup>42</sup> For Luther, any conception of God based on such abstractions is a thoroughly human conception and probably a projection of our own ambitions. Without knowing God through Christ and Christ through the bodily, crucified Jesus, one would project onto God what we think “divinity” should entail, calling “evil good and good evil.”<sup>43</sup> Most gravely, we would overlook and fail to respond to the most vulnerable and seemingly God-forsaken among us, unaware that they reveal a God made manifest in weakness.

Above I suggested that Taylor tends to overlook the very incarnational presence that he thinks secularity occludes to the degree that he pits transcendence against our immanent frame. Taylor can appear unaware that God might be found in, with, and under—and not simply “beyond”—our everyday “secular” world. Moving from Luther's sacramental logic to his theology of the cross, we starkly see also that the body of God given in the Eucharist is broken indeed. That same body is revealed in unlikely bodies as well—ones that are easily ignored, forgotten, displaced, abandoned, and tortured. Luther underscores the scandal of a suffering God, convinced as he is that to be formed for participation in the life of God while bypassing the possibility of offense amounts to being malformed and ill-fitted to know the God of Jesus. We need to come to terms with our all-too-human proclivities to portray God in our own highest image. We need to submit *that* penchant to the ongoing reformation of our desires. Only then can we come to see and to love the Other and other others whom we would otherwise be inclined to ignore.

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39. Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering of the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 13.

40. Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” (Thesis 20) in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, volume 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 52.

41. Ibid. (Thesis 19).

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42. Ibid., 53 (Thesis 21).

43. Ibid.



## Conclusion

Lutherans and other Christians ought to re-receive and re-conceive Luther's theology of the cross as a different agenda for Christian formation. The Heidelberg Disputation and other pivotal writings by Luther do seem to *function*—and maybe also to school us—in distinctive ways. They need not only offer distinctive confessional doctrines about the knowledge of God and God's revelation, notwithstanding Gregory's central critique. If and when we take them as formative, they could work to call into question our presumed innocence; they could lead us to recognize our avoidance of the most vulnerable; they could enable us to look again to ostensibly God-forsaken places and people and train ourselves to see God as hidden under opposite signs, even or especially in our secular society. Can such texts be read as handbooks for the proper school-

ing of our loves? How would we practice them? What other practices could lead to solidarity with the vulnerable and love of a vulnerable God? Such training is what Kierkegaard envisions when he ends *Practice in Christianity* by imagining formation in *not* being offended by the cross.<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer then suggests that such training will happen in “religionless” ways, given that “it is a denial of God's revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be ‘Christian’ without being ‘worldly.’”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, our so called secular society—with its ordinary time, abandoned places, and allegedly godless people—may provide a good deal more than the unintended consequence of the Reformation. It may provide the proper context for reforming our practices.

44. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 174–192

45. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 58.



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# Luther and His Jewish Conversation Partners: Insights for Thinking About Conversion, Baptism, and Saving Faith

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*In memory of a dear friend and colleague, Susan K. Hedahl (died 7/7/2013), Professor of Homiletics and the first Stuempfle Professor of the Proclamation of the Word at LTSG—a lover of words and a teacher of listening.*

## Looking for new evidence and tracks

Luther's central theology is worth revisiting with some new evidence from recent scholarship, and for a couple of obvious reasons. 1) In Lutheran sacramental practice and theology, Luther's views continue to shape the life of the church and people's imagination on the channels of God's grace. Contemporary views on the sacrament's effectiveness and necessity, however, can be considerably different from those of the sixteenth century Christians. Is there anything in Luther's own writing that would be helpful for a charitable while distinctively Lutheran teaching of grace today? 2) With the ongoing inter-faith discussions where common ground is explored, Lutherans have a particular call to re-consider the dynamics of Lutheran theology of salvation in respect to Jewish people and faith.

This is especially urgent for Lutherans in the post-Holocaust world where Luther's anti-Jewish teachings and their use in the Nazi terror need to be remem-

bered and examined in raw daylight. It is absolutely clear that Luther's anti-Jewish building blocks of his theology cannot be excused or be kept separate from his much celebrated doctrine of justification or sacramental theology. Is there anything in Luther's own writings that would be helpful in this regard, in either gaining insight into his reasoning or in gleaning pertinent perspectives helpful in our situation? And, is there anything "new" yet to be discovered from Luther?

In the following, after just a few words on the complexity of Luther's relating to the Jews (and complex it is), I will look for insights from two pieces of Luther's lesser known correspondence, as a very limited case study: a letter to a Jewish convert, and Luther's advice on the matter of baptizing a young Jewish girl.<sup>1</sup> Both letters are written for private individuals and both relate to the matter of conversion, baptism and salvation of a Jewish person (one directly, one implicitly).<sup>2</sup> There is about a decade

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1. This article is an expansion of a short presentation I gave at the International Luther Congress in Helsinki, in August 2013.

2. WA, Br 3:101–102 (Nr. 629); WA, Br 5:452 (no. 1632). See Brooks Schramm and Kirsi Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People* (Fortress Press, 2012), 84–86 for an introduction and a text sample



between the writing of the letters and they thus reflect how the historical context and events of the day shaped Luther's argumentation. The letters add to the evidence on what is constant and what is changing in Luther's relating to the Jews. Both letters offer helpful detail for re-examination of Luther's sacramental theology with larger questions in mind.

Not at all attempting a comprehensive treatment on the subjects entailed, I am mostly looking for evidence that pertains to Luther's relating to the Jews and in that context highlight facets relevant for re-assessing his sacramental theology. As a compass for a continued reflection going beyond this article, I would highlight the following kind of questions: What does Luther teach of what baptism does to one's identity in relation to God and in relation to others? What makes baptism "effective"? Can baptism be forced on someone and still be valid? What does baptism effect? What is the role of faith with baptism? How can the sacrament of baptism be practiced with a characteristically Lutheran unflappable certainty of the holy benefits it conveys by God's act only, without considering it the one-way (and the only) traffic sign to salvation (against centuries of Christian preaching on the matter)? Does it make any difference if the baptized or the potentially to-be-baptized person is a Jew?<sup>3</sup>

with the English translation from Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, eds., *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, vol. 2: 1521–1530 (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), 2:185–187.

3. Regarding the last question mentioned, on baptism and salvation, I have argued elsewhere that while Luther stands in the tradition of honoring baptism as the certain heavenly wash that effects a rebirth and includes one in God's kingdom, his view of grace is much more expansive than to be limited to any ritual, even

## Luther's Jewish relations—missed opportunities

Much has been written about Luther's attitudes toward Jewish faith and much speculation has centered on his role in the suffering of the Jewish people in Christians' hands since his times.<sup>4</sup> The

one instituted by God's own child Jesus with a firm promise that should not be doubted. This argumentation comes clear, for example, from Luther's pastoral counsel to women who worried for the salvation of the unbaptized deceased infants. Salvation is not, ultimately, tied exclusively to the sacrament of baptism, while one should trust firmly the salvation reality it brings to the person baptized. Faith is the saving agent that brings the benefits, also with the ritual that rests on God's word, which is the sacrament of the sacraments, so to speak. For more on this, see Kirsi Stjerna, *No Greater Jewel. Thinking of Baptism with Luther* (Augsburg Press, 2009), passim, and especially Conclusions and chapters 4, 5, 6.

4. See, e.g., Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* [Paperback] (Indiana University Press, 2012). Eric Gritsch, "Luther and the Jews: Toward a Judgment of History" in *Stepping-Stones to Further Jewish-Lutheran Relationships: Key Lutheran Statements*, ed. Harold H. Dittmanson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 104–119. Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten: Interpretation und Rezeption von Luthers Schriften und Äusserungen zum Judentum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert vor allem im deutschsprachigen Raum*. BÖT 8. (Munich: Max Hueber, 1972). Carter Lindberg, "Tainted Greatness: Luther's Attitudes toward Judaism and Their Historical Reception" in *Tainted Greatness: Anti-Semitism and Cultural Heroes*, ed. Nancy A. Harrowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 15–35. Heiko A. Oberman, "Luthers Stellung zu den Juden: Ahnen und Geahndete," in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500 Geburtstag*, 2 vols. ed. Helmar



notorious explicitly anti-Jewish writings from the end of his life have generated substantial scholarship from generations of scholars.<sup>5</sup> Less convincing exploration has been done on the whole of his writing corpus with this question in mind. Particularly fruitful in this regard would be his exegetical works, an area of increased interest in current Luther scholarship (and duly so, given Luther's "job" and applied methods as a biblical theologian).<sup>6</sup> Also his correspondence offers a layered source, sporadically studied in this regard. Natu-

rally Luther's personal associations with actual Jewish people would be pertinent to explore from all possible angles. The problem is that he did not have that many such relations to speak of.<sup>7</sup>

Luther was not alone in this regard. In Luther's world where the expulsion of Jews was a reality of the past and present,<sup>8</sup> different rules—imperial, local and ecclesial—effectively kept Jewish and Christian communities apart. Most contacts would come from business interactions (when Jewish businesses were allowed, that is, a situation that could change overnight). Of course friendships and forbidden love affairs could develop any time. But as a norm, Jews and Christians lived parallel lives. Different systems of ghettoizing and requirements for identification forms for Jewish people (whether it be a specific hat, a cloak, a badge, bells, etc.), and the differ-

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Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 1:519–530, 2:894–904.

5. The most notoriously known works are (here with their English titles): "On the Jews and their Lies," 1543, in WA 53:417–552; LW 47:137–306; "On the Ineffable Name and Christ's Lineage, 1543," in WA 53:579–648; in partial translation in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 177–180; "On the Last Words of David, 1543," WA 54:28–100; LW 15:265–352; and "Admonition against the Jews, 1546," in WA 51:195–96; LW 58:458–59.

6. In this area, Brooks Schramm's original work on Luther's exegetical works (and identifying there the key to his anti-Jewish polemics) is notable and leading Luther research into areas in need of detailed examination. See Brooks Schramm, "Populus Dei: Luther on Jacob and the Election of Israel (Gen 25)," in *The Call of Abraham: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson*, eds. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). See also an important piece from Bernhard Erling, "Martin Luther and the Jews, in Light of his Lectures on Genesis," in *Israel, the Church and the World Religions Face the Future*, eds. John Todd, François Refoulé, and Landrum Rymer Bolling (Jerusalem: Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research, 1984), 129–147. Also, see Schramm and Stjerna 2012, for a book-length treatment of the topic with selections from Luther's own texts.

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7. For a comprehensive bibliography on the topic, see Schramm and Stjerna, 2012. Works to be highlighted are Eric W. Gritsch, *Martin Luther's Anti-Semitism: Against His Better Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Martin Luther and the Jews," in *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 127–150. Thomas Kaufmann, "Luther and the Jews," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 69–104. Idem, *Luthers 'Juden-schriften': Ein Beitrag zu ihrer historischen Kontextualisierung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2011). Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Martin Luther und die Juden: Neu untersucht anhand von Anton Margarithas „Der gantz jüdisch glaub“ (1530/31)* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002).

8. On the recurrent expulsions of Jews in different European countries and in German-speaking territories, those preceding Luther's era and those in correlation to Luther's history, see Stjerna in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 206–210.



ent laws pertaining to Jews only, reminded of the division on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup> In addition to plain ignorance and superstition regarding the Hebrew neighbors, Christian writers and artists portrayed a caricature of a Jew that dominated Christian folks' negative imagination of the Jewish people, their tradition and their faith.<sup>10</sup> As Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt writes "[t]he entire society believed in the wickedness of the Jews and that they were the children or tools of Satan, just as they believed in the evil and Satanity of witches."<sup>11</sup> It is safe

9. While some of these ordinances originate from thirteenth century rulings, roots of these practices go deeper in history. For excellent studies, comprehensive and detailed, see e.g., David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Also Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Debra Kaplan, *Beyond Expulsion: Jews, Christians, and Reformation Strasbourg* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

10. See e.g., Edith Wenzel, "The Representation of Jews and Judaism in Sixteenth-Century German Literature," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany* eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 393–417. Petra Schöner, "Visual Representations of Jews and Judaism in Sixteenth-Century Germany" in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 357–391. Bell and Burnett's book is an outstanding and comprehensive assessment of the situation.

11. Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt, *The Historical Writings of Joseph of Rosheim: Leader of Jewry in Early Modern Germany*, ed.

to say that the culture at the time did not condone mutual trust and respect, or friendships between Jews and Christians, quite the contrary. Luther did not "reform" this aspect of Christian life.

Like his contemporaries, Luther had very few encounters with Jews. This was mostly by his choice and because Wittenberg was void of Jewish population in his life-time. Even if Wittenberg had a Judenstrasse originating from the Middle Ages, there was no Jewish community to speak of during Luther's time. Like many places in Europe, Jews had been expelled from Saxony in the previous century, and since the electoral ruling from 1432, Jews were not allowed to reside in the area.<sup>12</sup> In 1536 the ruling was tightened to forbid Jews even from passing through or conducting business in Saxony; this was a devastating decision for the Jewish people and their livelihoods, and most probably made with Luther's impact, given his clout in the elector's counsel. Chances for Luther meeting with a Jew would then need to happen during his travels (which were limited due to his outlaw status), or if Jewish people sought him out, or through correspondence.<sup>13</sup>

Adam Shear. Trans. Naomi Schendowich. SEJ 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 30.

12. See note 8 above.

13. "For Luther the Jews were never at any point in his lifetime 'conversation-partners' in the sense that they had something to say that might have influenced either Christian theologians in their conversations with Jews or their theological judgments about them. There is no evidence Luther ever took the initiative to make contact with learned Jews to learn from them as some of his contemporaries did.... His own narrowly bounded world was located far even from the few remnants of formerly flourishing urban centers of Jewish life and Jewish learning in the Empire, and the few personal contacts which Luther had had with Jews



Against this reality, it is quite curious that Luther's writings at times suggest that he was constantly surrounded by Jews and knew all about them.<sup>14</sup> (An idiosyncratic evidence of this is Luther's letters to his wife in the last days of his life.<sup>15</sup>) While it was not uncommon for

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during the course of his life occurred because others sought him out and asked for his support." Thomas Kaufmann. "Luther and the Jews," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 73–74. Quoted in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 105.

14. See Schramm in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 5–10 on "What Luther knew and thought about Judaism."

15. Illuminating in this regard are, e.g., Luther's last letters to his wife Katharina from February 1546 (WA Br 11:275–276; LW 50:290–292 [from February 1, 1546] and WA Br 11:286–287; LW 50:301–304 [from February 7, 1546]: In a letter dated February 1, 1546, Luther writes that on his trip to Eisleben to mediate in a dispute he passed through an area where about fifty Jews lived in one house. He tried to play on his wife's fears on his wellbeing by implying that this exposure to Jews might have aggravated his physical ailments. In another letter, dated February 7, 1546, he talks about his efforts to contribute to the expulsion of the approximately 400 Jews living in a nearby area. He writes "Today I made my opinion known in a sufficiently blunt way if anyone wishes to pay attention to it. Otherwise it might not do any good at all. You people pray, pray, pray, and help us that we do all things properly, for today in my anger I had made up my mind to grease the carriage." Curiously enough, he then writes "But the misery of my fatherland, which came to my mind, has stopped me." He goes on commiserating why he had to play a jurist, while he had been better off as a theologian. Here we have evidence of the torment Luther felt over many things, including the "Jewish issue," that is, their unfulfilled conversion

Luther to pontificate as a "know-it-all" on different issues he lacked first-hand experience (such as child birth), in regard to Jewish faith and people, his "little knowledge" proved dangerous. It did not help that his sources were compromised, slandering texts from Jewish converts with a Christian bias, and his own Hebrew skills kept him dependent on others.<sup>16</sup> A factor worth considering is also his fears of a Jewish invasion, which got the worst of him. While it is messy to try to figure out the bearing of Luther's words about the Jews of whom he did not know that much to begin with, we can try a compassionate and critical approach. We can try to figure out the demons of the person Martin Luther and recognize his personal failures and hopes, and we can try to make sense of what his theology is made of with as objective a lens as possible—and see how the pieces of the puzzle match. For starters in this study that promises no easy and pleasing answers, Luther can be held accountable for his words in two ways: First, we can continue to do our very best in deciphering the actual meaning of his words and follow his logic, whether pleasant or unpleasant; that would be fair also toward Luther himself. Second, we can distinguish the different meanings

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in his life time, deeply frustrating to Luther who thought he had done his share and then some. (See LW 50:301–304; WA Br 11:286–287.)

16. See e.g., Stephen G. Burnett, "Distorted Mirrors: Antonius Margarita, Johann Buxtorf and Christian Ethnographies of the Jews." *SCJ* 25 (1994): 275–287. Also Maria Diemling, "Anthonius Margaritha on the 'Whole Jewish Faith': A Sixteenth-Century Convert from Judaism and his Depiction of the Jewish Religion," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 303–333.



he has for the word “Jew” in his writings and avoid hasty conclusions.

Most of the time Luther appears to be writing about the imaginary Jew he was pathologically afraid of—the one who would not convert but rather threatened to proselytize Christians. He also uses the word “Jew” in a theological sense—as a prototype of a law-burdened believer under the illusion of works righteousness. He writes about the Jewish teachers and rabbis (real or imaginary) whom he unrelentingly refutes for their supposed ignorance.<sup>17</sup> In most positive terms he writes about the biblical Jews who in Luther’s mind were the true Christians, his foremothers and fathers in faith.<sup>18</sup> Last but not least, he writes about Jewish converts, with some confliction: those converts whom he distrusted, and those whom he cherished. In all of the cases where Luther talks about Jews and Jewish faith, it is safe to say that it is a rare occasion when he is talking about a contemporary Jew, convert or not, whom he had personally also met. Thus any such evidence is of most importance.

## Significant encounters with Jewish individuals

As background for looking at the two letters concerning Jewish conversion, a few words are in order on two particular incidences involving real-life Jewish people, events that would come to shape Luther’s imagination, and his reputation: First, the visit with three Jewish men: According to his own recollection in a 1526 sermon, Luther had met with three learned Jewish men—Samaria, Solomon and Leo—to discuss biblical interpretation. To his frustration, Luther had not been able to

convince or convert the Jewish men with his christological points on proper Hebrew Bible interpretation. Unlike Luther’s many references to the event might suggest, they met only once, sometime before November 1526.<sup>19</sup> Luther was not interested in similar meetings again, deeming them futile. (Could it be that he had clearly met his match and reckoned himself not equipped to debate with people who knew their Talmud? If so, this he could never admit, but we certainly can speculate.)<sup>20</sup> Second, the meeting request from a Jewish peacemaker: Luther had an opportunity to meet with a famous Jewish leader, Josel of Rosheim (1478?-1554). He refused the request, with a letter. This refusal to meet with Josel was a colossal mistake, with devastating consequences.<sup>21</sup>

19. See Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 105; Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Martin Luther und die Juden: Neu untersucht anhand von Anton Margarithas „Der gantz Jüdisch glaub“ (1530/31)* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 103–110. The other times Luther refers to the meeting are found in: *Lectures on Isaiah*, LW 16:227 [1527–1530]/ WA 31/2:162, 28–29; *Table Talk*, WA Tr 3:370, 9–21 (#3512) [1536]; *Against the Sabbatarians*, LW 47:65–66 [1538]/ WA 50:313, 1–6 (5–6); *Table Talk*, WA Tr 4:619, 20–620, 15 (#5026) [1540]; *Table Talk*, WA Tr 4: 517, 4–20 (#4795) [1541/2]; *On the Jews and Their Lies*, LW 47:191–192 [1543]/ WA 53:461, 28–462, 5; *On the Ineffable Name*, Falk, 173 [1543]/ WA 53:589, 12–19 (16–19).

20. According to *Table Talk*, Luther had given the men letters for safe travel, but because he had used the wording “for the sake of the name Jesus Christ,” the men had opted to pay travel fees [set for Jews] instead of using his letters. WA Tr 4:619, 20–620, 15 (#5026). The sermon on Jeremiah 23:5–8 with a reference to the meeting, WA 20:569, 25–570, 12; LW 47:191, no 63. See Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 104–106.

21. On Josel, see Schramm and Stjerna

17. See Schramm in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 14–16.

18. See Stjerna in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 33–35.



Josel, the spokesman for the German Jewish communities, had approached Luther with hopes for Luther's help in securing an audience with the Elector on the matter of restoring traveling rights for Jewish people in electoral Saxony. He was a known peacemaker throughout the imperial German lands and a man of great integrity. He hoped the famous reformer could even indirectly help in the plea for the Jewish people's rights. Luther wrote to Josel, twisting his name, on June 11, 1537: "My dear Jesel! I would gladly have appealed to my most gracious lord on your behalf, both orally and in writing, for my [previous] publication has served all of Jewry so well; but because your people so shamefully misuse my service and undertake such things, which we Christians cannot accept from them, they themselves have thereby taken from me any influence that I otherwise might have had with dukes and lords. . . . If God gives me the space and time, I will write a booklet about this, that I might win several from your paternal stock of the holy patriarchs and prophets, and bring [them] to your promised Messiah. . . . Therefore you shouldn't consider us Christians to be fools or [dumb] geese. . . . For I have also read your Rabbis. . . . Now, let me be a prophet, . . . What you hope for will not happen because the point in time determined by Daniel has long passed. . . . Take this from me as friendly advice, as an admonition to you. Because I would happily do the best for you Jews for the sake of the crucified Jew—whom no one will take from me—unless you use my favor [as an excuse] for your obstinacy. You know exactly what I mean. Therefore, perhaps you ought to have your letters to

the Elector delivered through other orders. God bless."<sup>22</sup>

What is Luther talking about, Jews twisting his words? And why on earth did Josel approach Luther in the first place? This has to do with a particular, much loved treatise from Luther from earlier days: Luther's 1523 publication *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. This text more than anything was the stimulus for Josel, who seems to have sincerely thought he would find a friend or at least an empathetic ear with Luther. The 1523 text was a very popular text from Luther, widely read. It had raised hopes in the Jewish readers used to slandering and belittling Christian writing about them, and it is easy to see why: this rare Christian text speaks of the Jewish people's lot with empathy and explicitly counsels against violence toward the Jews. It also speaks fondly of Jesus' Jewishness, a bond between Christians and Jews. Even more so, it highlights the importance of the Jewish maiden Mary in Jesus' story.<sup>23</sup> From the surface, the text suggests that Luther is a rare voice of reason and compassion in the highly anti-Jewish climate of his times. The text also suggests Luther's excitement about the Jewish tradition and learnedness in it—and it is true that Luther was among the frontrunners of Christians promoting deeper learning of Jewish texts and Hebrew language.<sup>24</sup> The text could be interpreted as

22. See Luther's letter to Josel, from 1537, in WA Br 889–891 (no. 3157) and in English in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 126–128. Luther also refers to Josel in his *Table Talk*, WA TR 3:441 (no. 3597): LW 54:239 (#3597).

23. See *Magnificat*, from 1521, in WA 7:544; LW 21, 295–358, with very similar points to the ones Luther makes in *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*.

24. On Luther's and other Wittenberg theologians' use of Hebrew texts, see

2012, 181–187; Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt, *The Historical Writings of Joseph of Rosheim: Leader of Jewry in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Adam Shear, trans. Naomi Schendowich. SEJ 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).



a theological defense of Jewishness, while it was not intended as such.

The occasion for the writing of the text had not been the defense of Jews or Jewish faith but of Luther himself: it had been Luther's desire to defend himself against accusations that he had denied Mary's virginity and thus Jesus' divinity, which would have only added to his reputation as a heretic. After correcting the misunderstanding in no uncertain terms, he proceeds to give a plan for how to relate to the Jews properly and go about converting them. At this point Luther is very optimistic: Kind treatment and teaching the scriptural interpretation were key strategies in successful mission among Jews. In Luther's empathetic view, no force should be used, no violence of any kind. In this treatise Luther considers Jews as victims shamefully deprived of proper Christian education and clearly feels bad for the mistreated folks. He is not, however, a "Jew friend" in a sense of respecting Jewish faith and theology or going on record for defending the Jews as believers. That misunderstanding he would later make blatantly clear, unfortunately.<sup>25</sup>

Luther's contemporaries at the time did not necessarily know to expect all this. In light of the recurring expulsions and rampant persecutions of Jews in the hands of zealous Christians, Luther's words condoning merciful treatment of the Jews aroused different hopes. There is perhaps

a parallel here to Luther's preaching of Christian freedom and love and stirring the hearts of peasants who then marched to their death influenced by Luther's radical vision of Christian justice. Very much like in the case of the misguided peasants, also with the Jews who considered him an ally, Luther would take huge steps in a different direction and deny any association. He claimed his words had been misinterpreted and text after text he would make his case that no one should call Luther a Jew friend, or so he bellowed. His own words in this regard prove that his attitudes toward the Jewish faith per se did not change; what changed was the strategies he condoned.<sup>26</sup> What unfolded after the exchange with Josel would make this clear. Imagining what positive could have come from a meeting of Luther hearing out Josel's arguments for compassion over violence, it is a cause of lament that they never sat face to face.<sup>27</sup> In such personal encounters human hearts can change.

Obviously the absence of real interactions with Jewish people is a significant

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26. These arguments are more developed and proven with samples from Luther's own texts in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, *passim*.

27. Josel, who believed God condones compassion rather than violence, would become so disappointed with Luther—whose impact he suspected in the renewed expulsion edict for Jews from Saxony in 1543, at the time of Luther's most scathing anti-Jewish texts—that he sent letters to the people in Strasbourg asking them to prevent further circulation of Luther's dangerous writings. Josel's letters reveal that Luther had lost his respect in the eyes of the Jewish people. See Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 181–187; Chava Fraenkel-Goldschmidt. *The Historical Writings of Joseph of Rosheim: Leader of Jewry in Early Modern Germany*, ed. Adam Shear, trans. Naomi Schendowich. SEJ 12 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

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Stephen Burnett, "Reassessing the 'Basel-Wittenberg Conflict': Dimensions of the Reformation-Era Discussion of Hebrew Scholarship," in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson, JCC (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 181–201.

25. WA 11:314–36; LW 45:119–229. See Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 76–83.



factor to consider when assessing Luther's statements and feelings about the actual Jewish people of his time. The Jews he met or read were converts and he favored those who gave Christians ammunition in their criticism of Jewish traditions. Jewish converts not only provided Christians with information about the ins of Jewish faith; they could also be hired as teachers of the Hebrew language at universities. One of these Hebrew teachers became Luther's friend.

## Luther's letter to a Jewish convert, Bernard

We have a rare letter from Luther to a formerly baptized Jew, a letter that sheds light into Luther's thinking about conversion and baptism. The letter comes from 1523 and it is addressed to a Jewish convert with the name Bernard. He was formerly known as Rabbi Jacob Gipher of Göppingen. It is notable that this was the same year of Luther writing his famous treatise *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*. In his own telling, Luther sent a copy of that along for Bernard to read. "Hence it seemed good to send you this little book to reinforce and ensure your faith in Christ,"<sup>28</sup> As mentioned above, this treatise was written with hopes to catechize and educate the Jews of the essentials of Christian faith.

Bernard had been baptized sometime before the summer of 1519, as an early follower of Luther. The fact that Luther had been present at the recent baptism of Bernard's son (1523) speaks of the closeness of their relationship. The men knew each other from Fredrick the Wise's University of Wittenberg, where Bernard

was hired as a Hebrew instructor. Often challenged to pay his bills, he accumulated some debilitating debts that led him to leave Wittenberg in 1531. His wife—a maid of Andreas Karlstadt—and children remained in Wittenberg under Luther's and Melanchthon's care.<sup>29</sup> Luther seems to have felt personally responsible for Bernard, while taking pride in his new life as a Christian. Bernard may have been Luther's poster child for a successful conversion of a Jew after proper Christian proclamation.

As he writes in *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (which was written for individuals like Bernard) Luther in 1523 still very much expects Jewish conversions to happen. In his letter to Bernard he reiterates the same critique of Roman Catholic failure in successfully catechizing Jews and leading them to conversion and baptism and thus salvation. In both texts Luther expresses significant optimism that the reformed gospel-centered preaching and teaching will lead to a significant increase in genuine Jewish conversions, because now Jews would have the opportunity to learn about Christianity for real and see it as it was really supposed to be. "But when the golden light of the Gospel rises and glisters, then, there is hope, that many of the Jews will be converted seriously and honestly, and be seized in their soul to Christ, like you have been seized [by Christ]; and [this will happen also to] some others, who are the survivors of the Abraham's seed and to be saved by faith. Namely, {God} who has begun the work, will perfect it {Phil 1:6}, and will not allow {God's} word to return [to God] empty handed. {Isa 55:11}." <sup>30</sup>

Bernard's path would not be for

28. "Letter to the Baptized Jew, Bernard": WA, Br 3:102 (Nr. 629). Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 86. See also Smith/Jacobs, 2:187. Translation here Stjerna.

29. See Brecht 2:112–113; 3:335; LW 50:144–145.

30. WA, Br 3:102 (Nr. 629); Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 86. See also Smith/Jacobs, 2:187. Translation here Stjerna.



everyone, though: not every Jew who heard the gospel would experience a conversion of heart, induced by God's own Spirit always. Bernard was an example of a Jew who was chosen to hear, and who had heard. He had been educated about Christ via gospel—and proper Christian education. He was a true Christian who had been born again of God and baptized by God's Spirit ("in spiritu baptizatus et ex Deo natus est."). With his example and works, Bernard was making Christ known among other Jews so that those so preordained, would hear the call and return to their King."<sup>31</sup>

One had to be careful to distinguish between the Jews who truly and genuinely had converted and were thus to be baptized by their own asking, and those Jews who converted only for the appearances' sake. The latter was not unheard of: through Christian centuries, many a Jew had been presented with an option to receive baptism as a sign of Christian identity, or if not, then face imprisonment, exile or death. Repeated papal decrees forbidding forced baptisms and imperial ruling against persecution of Jewish people tell their own tale of how common such practices were.<sup>32</sup> Because of rampant Christian violence, for many Jews the feasible option may indeed have been to receive baptism, while continue in the practice of their Jewish faith in secret, or with hopes to return to Jewish tradition at a later time or in a new location (as was the case with many of the forcibly converted Jews in Spain who migrated to, e.g., Italy). The individuals and families who returned to the Jewish

faith afterward were very brave.<sup>33</sup>

A fake conversion and a return to Jewish faith indicated a massive failure, an abomination in Luther's mind. It smelled like squandering the sacraments, or shaming Christ, none of which was allowed. "The conversion of the Jews is in bad odor almost everywhere, not only among Christians but also among the Jews. The latter say that no one goes over from Judaism to Christianity in good faith, but that anyone who attempts it is guilty of some crime and cannot stay among the Jews. The Christians say that experience shows that they either return to their vomit [2 Pet 2:22], or only pretend to have deserted Judaism."<sup>34</sup> Thus, for everyone's protection, and for the protection of the gospel of Christ most of all, it was of utmost importance, that Jewish people were never forced to receive baptism and that their faith and genuine intent be examined first.

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33. "Everybody knows the story of what is said to have occurred at the court of the Emperor Sigismund. When a Jew at the Emperor's court desired, with many prayers, to become a Christian, he was at last admitted to baptism, and afterward was tested, but prematurely and beyond his strength. For immediately after his baptism the Emperor had two fires built, calling the one the fire of the Christians, the other the fire of the Jews, and bade the baptized Jew choose in which of them he preferred to be burned. "For," said he, "you are now baptized and holy, and it is hardly likely that you will ever become a better man than you now are." The miserable man showed that his faith was either pretended or weak by choosing the fire of the Jews; as a Jew he leaped into it, and as a Jew he burned. The story of the will of the baptized Jew of Cologne is also well known and there are many others." Br 3:101–102 (Nr. 629); Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 85–86. See also Smith/Jacobs, 2:185–186.

34. WA, Br 3:101–102 (Nr. 629) English Translation: Smith/Jacobs, 2:185–187.

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31. WA, Br 3:101 (Nr. 629). Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 85. See also Smith/Jacobs, 2:185.

32. Stjerna in Schramm and Stjerna 2012, 28–30.



Regardless of his harsh words and disposition of mistrust toward Jews, Luther is one of the few sixteenth century Christians who would accept true Jewish converts as fully Christian, with no ifs and buts. Like in Bernard's case, to Luther he was a true Christian with whom he was happy to be in a personal relationship. Bernard was a changed person, through baptism. Even in such a case, however, Luther took a risk of a sort in terms of his reputation. Associating with an even converted Jew was not something that came with ease to Christians chronically skeptical of the Jewish communities amidst them. Could a Jew be trusted, was a common fear. What if one was to become a Judaizer, a friend of the Jews? Such an association would bring danger into the life of the Christian so involved. Ironically, Luther flirted with or "suffered" from such a reputation more than once in his life.

It needs to be said that while imperial and local laws enforced divides between Jewish and Christian communities, real life was always more complicated. As mentioned above, the records show that in reality interaction did happen between Jews and Christians, for business most of all, and for personal friendship or love relations. What was nearly unheard of, however, was a Christian taking a public stand on behalf of a Jewish person, especially if a Jew was accused of any wrong doing (rightly or wrongly so), or if faith matters were at stake.<sup>35</sup> Laws, customs, superstitions and irrational fears went hand in hand with supersessionist Chris-

tian theology that considered the ancient Jewish faith as futile, suspect, nuisance and far inferior to the Christian faith. This is in tune with Christians' ongoing desire to missionize and convert the whole world, in following Jesus' command "Go and baptize!"

All this said, in 1523 Luther is still full of optimism that Jewish conversions would be coming. In this context he can afford to be a friend to a Jew converted or about to be converted. There would be more people like Bernard, Luther hopes, once the Jews would be properly illuminated on the truth of the gospel that, he was convinced, gave proper light for interpreting the Hebrew Bible as well. In 1523, Luther is actively writing about the Jews and their upcoming conversion, and also publically in favor of a merciful treatment in ways that indeed earned him the label of a Jew friend. As mentioned earlier, all this infuriated him, and he would do his best to shake off that reputation.

If Luther's 1523 work *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* earned him the label of a Jew friend and has been characterized as evidence of Luther's more positive attitude toward the Jews in the beginning of his career, his later works prove just the opposite. Without getting into this issue in detail here, let it just be said that looking at the evidence throughout his career, there hardly was a change of opinion on the central matter of Jewish faith and the fate of the Jews: over the years Luther consistently expected the Jews' conversion as the "must" for their salvation—as Christians, not as Jews. Without a conversion, a Jew would not be saved or be of no value to him personally but rather an enemy of the gospel to be shunned—or educated. Only a properly catechized, converted, baptized Jew would be a friend of the gospel and thus a friend of Luther. What did change after 1523, however, was Luther's hope for

35. Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), Luther's associate, was one of the few Christians at the time even trying. See Joy Kammerling, "Andreas Osiander, the Jews, and Judaism," in *Jews, Judaism, and the Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, eds. Dean Phillip Bell and Stephen G. Burnett. SCEH 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 219–247.



Jewish conversions: by 1543, the time of his most vicious anti-Jewish writings, he had lost any hope of Jewish conversions. In that sad conviction he came in the end of his years to imagine ways to eradicate the Jewish faith for good with an outrageous program: burn the books and synagogues, imprison the teachers and rabbis, that is, effectively stop the teaching of the faith. Luther knew, in teaching and education, there lies the power!

Centuries later, the Nazis would take on these kinds of actions, and then some. The Nazi solution of killing Jewish people has been contributed to Luther's programmatic vision, at least in part. That connecting is not quite appropriate or fair, however, as Luther actually did not condone the killing of Jews; he saw the extinguishing of the sources that supported Jewish faith as the way to deal with the "Jewish issue" in a world where conversions seemed to not be happening and, he assumed, the end was near. In both cases, in promoting conversions of the Jews and in suppressing Jewish sources for faith life, the education piece and working with the faith-aspect of things was of utmost importance to the reformer. (This is in sync with his fundamental catechetical vision that made his reformation take root in the first place.)

Obviously Luther was disappointed that masses of Jews did not run to Christian baptism. One wonders, in light of his criticism of the Catholic Church in failing to teach the gospel properly and thus prompt conversions, how he in the end of his life dealt with his personal disappointment in the matter. He had failed, hard as he had tried. When taking a stalk at things, he does express frustration of his own part, but most eagerly points to the stubbornness of the Jews themselves in not listening (most explicitly so in the 1543 treatises but also earlier). The Jews who did listen, convert and receive baptism, were

special. With their help, the gospel had a chance. In preparing such converts for their role of Christian witness, the sacrament of baptism was of secondary importance: what matters most is their faith and its right foundation. This comes clear from another letter addressing a situation with a Jewish convert, this time a female.

## **Luther's advice on baptizing a Jewess**

From a later date, 1530, comes another letter involving a real-life Jewish person: the letter addressed to a Lutheran pastor Heinrich Gnesius<sup>36</sup> involves a situation of a possible baptism. Luther offers pastoral advice on how to proceed with the request from a young Jewish girl who wishes to be baptized.

This is a relatively rare occasion, for a Jewish person seeking to become Christian voluntarily, and even rarer for a young female to do so apart from her family or husband. The girl's background and exposure to Christian, Lutheran faith remains veiled to us as we are in the dark about the girl's identity, even name and exact age. One can appreciate the hardship this conversion decision must have caused for the girl herself: first of all, in respect to her Jewish family that was not converting with her, and second, just in facing the skeptical Christians who had a hard time accepting a Jew, converted or not.

By 1530, the time of writing the letter, the evangelicals had established routines for performing baptisms and faith examinations. Why then this need to contact the main man on this seemingly routine matter? Because she was Jewish; she was a special case. So much was at stake with the Jewish conversions in general and every (rare) Jewish person's baptism needed extra care. The questions

36. WA, Br 5:452 (no. 1632).



raised were logical, given the context: On what premise should they baptize the girl? How would they know she was genuine in her desire? All things considered, should baptism be offered in the first place and on what basis would it work? What kind of compromises should be had with the actual ritual, out of consideration to the girl's Jewishness and family?

Luther answers: Baptism alone is of no good. Its benefits come to one with faith. Thus, the convert's faith is to be examined. The girl's faith and its authenticity has to be examined not as a pre-requisite for grace but for two reasons: out of respect for the sacrament, and for underscoring what saves—faith, not a ritual. The pastor needs to make sure the girl is not pretending for whatever reason and that her intentions are pure. Otherwise there should be no baptism. This examination of faith and personal intent is more important than the “how” questions regarding the ritual and its form.<sup>37</sup>

Luther's sternness in this is explained from the context he is writing in: he is highly irritated by rumors of Jews who had been baptized without a true intent to live a Christian life and who had, in his opinion, tarnished the holy baptism with their ridicule of it by returning to their Jewish faith. Whether the rumors were true or not, Luther is petrified by even a possibility of anything that would appear as blaspheming Christ.<sup>38</sup> Luther's christological conviction overrides any empathy he might have for the risky positions and hardship individuals would face in a situation where there was no way out.

37. e.g., Luther examining the faith of Michael the Jew from Posen in 1540. See Brecht 3:339; WA, Tr 5:83 (no. 5354.)

38. Frustrated Luther warns his friend (Amsdorf) of Jewish converts as “rogues” who should be dunked rather than baptized. See Brecht 3:335, 437.

And here really is Luther's bottom line concern with the conversions and his attitudes toward Jewish faith: refusal to believe the Christian gospel of Christ is not a matter of human disobedience but a theological crime with implications in divine realm. Not believing in God is the primary sin humankind has been punished for. Not believing in Christ would mean losing any chance of remedying the existential damage. This in mind, Luther could not have a charitable attitude toward Jewish faith and could not see any hope for Jews who remained Jews. Unlike with the gravity of this faith issue, he is much more relaxed with practical issues pertaining to baptism and he even shows some respectful understanding of a Jewish person's discomfort with some elements of the, to them, unfamiliar Christian practice.

In the case of the Jewish maiden, when discussing the actual ritual and its parameters, Luther is flexible and shows empathy toward the Jewish parents about to witness their child's baptism, a strange ritual to them. He counsels the pastor to accommodate the Jewish family as to not unnecessarily offend them. He seems compassionate toward the feelings of the girl herself for whom the traditional baptism in the nude might be challenging, especially given her Jewish upbringing. To alleviate any anxieties, Luther advises, the pastor could use linens or drapes to cover the girl's nudity and take care as to avoid the parents witnessing the parts of the ritual that they might find most embarrassing or even offensive. This small detail illuminates Luther's capacity for understanding the “other” as a human being and his relating to real-life Jewish people on a personal level with some integrity and care. His tone is qualitatively different from situations where he is refuting the Jewish faith, the anonymous and faceless enemy of his and ...of Christ.



The brief letter about the Jewish girl's baptism speaks of Luther's principal theological insight of the saving power of faith in Christ alone. Also, it speaks of the care he considers necessary for preserving the integrity of the sacrament of baptism. The meaning of baptism should guide the decisions about the procedure. Respect of the sacrament is essential as it is God's work and not to be taken lightly. It has the power to transform lives, and would do so only with faith. This Jewish girl in question, once baptized, would experience transformation and assume a new, Christian identity, and should be respected as such. In all of this, Luther reminds, it is the faith that makes one a Christian. Thus the faith needs to be carefully examined, first and foremost. In the Jewish girl's case, Luther fully anticipates a happy result and sends the girl his warmest greetings, wishing her grace and perseverance. He pledges in Christ's name for the girl his very personal, loving service.

In light of all the things Luther says about Jews, this quick glimpse into Luther's dealings with a Jewish female, reminds us of Luther's compassionate pastoral mindset, on one hand, and of his stern theological backbone, on the other. Furthermore, it speaks of the complexity of his relating to the Jews, providing food for thought: How else might Luther have seen things had he had more such personal associations with real people? After all, Luther was a man of affection, a part of him that shines in his family relations and in his pastoral encounters. That Luther was as real as the foul mouth "nasty Luther" capable of words of rage and slander; both sides of Luther live on the pages he wrote. It is fair to say that Luther was a tormented soul, in many regards, and particularly in his relating to the Jews. It is also fair to conclude that whereas his human heart and compassion might have condoned

merciful and sensible course of action, his theological logic proved uncompromising on the essentials. Such as: by faith in Christ alone is one saved. Luther did not see a way around that. He could not afford to be "compassionate" about that saving principle, but was mercilessly critical of those doubting this, to him, divine, life-altering truth of Christ.

## Concluding with questions

As a principal reformer, Luther was often asked for direction in practical matters and when new theology was put in practice. Whereas he was a hard-liner with his central theological convictions, he had much more flexibility with questions relating to traditions and practices. Both with the Lord's Supper and Baptism, Lutheran specific traditions developed gradually, with much leeway with local variety. Luther hardly sees either ritual set in stone; he would rather not make a ceremony and its parameters into a law. That, to him, would strike close to Jewish religiosity and creating religious laws in ways that Luther has no patience for. (Luther's 1522 *Invocavit* sermons are a most illustrating example of Luther's advice in this regard.)

In respect to baptism, "what/why" is crucial and non-negotiable, whereas "how" is a question to be handled with common sense and illumination from the tradition and scripture. The "why" should be the "salvation concern" with the premise that the person needs the saving work of Christ. What makes baptism effective is Christ's work and person; this happens through the word and through the workings of the Holy Spirit. The only part the baptized person has is that of receiving. For that one needs proper faith, the saving faith that receives God. Baptism as a ritual conveys this gift in an experiential way and even stirs faith but ultimately grace runs through it, not originating from or depending on



it. (Luther's Large Catechism from 1529 and his Schmalcald Articles from 1537 stand as the standard sources on Luther's views in these matters.)

That is why in the case of the Jewish maiden, it was crucial that her faith was examined—not that the faith would be a pre-requirement as if a merit or a sign of worth for baptism. Rather, faith is necessary for receiving what baptism gives by God's grace alone. At the same time, Luther does say, baptism is given for the sake of faith—to stir and nurture it, the faith that continues to make the effects of baptism real to the baptized throughout her/his life. This effectiveness rests in the one who is the object and the subject of the saving faith, and the reason for the baptism—Christ.

With his strong theology of baptism, Luther is careful about to whom baptism is to be offered. Never by force, never blindly, but in the context of proper Christian education. Examination of faith is an important step in this, and a sign of respect of the sacrament. (Luther himself was on several occasions asked to examine people's faith.) Addressing the importance of faith Luther takes a slightly different stance from the Catholic teaching of the effectiveness of the sacraments: they do not work *ex opere operato* without faith, while their effectiveness is not caused by faith either but by God's word. Faith is the channel that plugs one to the source, so to speak; without that, the source is dead for the person.

In conclusion, in his explanation of

the meaning of conversion and baptism of Jewish people, Luther seems to suggest that while baptism is a key step toward Christian identity and a wash that transforms a person for his or her new life as a Christian, baptism is not necessary for salvation *per se*; only faith is! The saving faith works primarily with and on the basis of the word; the ritual of sacrament comes secondary, and then as a sure deliverer of what the word promises. This is Luther's basic argument, repeated in different contexts, and also when addressing the issue of baptism of the Jewish converts.

In light of the questions posed in the beginning of this study, I hope I have demonstrated how perusing Luther's arguments about conversion and baptism of Jewish people—and his complex relating to Jews and Jewish faith—can add to our critical and compassionate comprehension of Luther's reasoning. There are more roads like this to be taken and more questions to be asked. With Luther's baggage, and with our baggage, it seems pertinent to continue to re-assess the point of Christian identity, the meaning and parameters of conversion, and the possibilities for charitable celebration of the sacraments.<sup>39</sup>

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39. In this piece, I have frequently alluded to Luther's sacramental theology as the larger question behind this study. To a reader's disappointment, but for the reasons of focus and space, I have left out detailed discussion on this with references to Luther's works on the matter.



## EXTRA: Abbreviations

### *Luther's Works:*

WA	D. Martin Luthers Werke; kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, Germany: H. Böhlau, 1883-)
WA Br	Briefwechsel
WA TR	Tischreden
WA DB	Deutsche Bibel
AWA	Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe (Cologne, Germany: Böhlau, 1981-)
LW	Luther's Works, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-).

### *Other:*

ADLIF	<i>Anti-Defamation League, Interfaith Focus</i>
AHR	<i>The American Historical Review</i>
ARG	<i>Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</i>
BBG	Basler Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft
BCCT	Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition
BET	Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie
BHR	<i>Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance</i>
BHT	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
BÖT	Beiträge zur ökumenischen Theologie
BibSym	Biblia et Symbiotica
BibSac	<i>Biblia Sacra</i>
CJ	<i>Concordia Journal</i>
Cross Curr.	<i>Cross Currents</i>
CurTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
EvTh	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FF	<i>Face to Face</i>
FKG	Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Geistesgeschichte
HCMR	History of Christian-Muslim Relations
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUS	<i>Harvard Ukrainian Studies</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JA	<i>Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JC	Judentum und Christentum
JCC	Jewish Culture and Contexts
JSS	<i>Jewish Social Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
KZ	<i>Kirchliche Zeitschrift</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LTJ	<i>Lutheran Theological Journal</i>



LQ	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
MT	<i>Modern Theology</i>
MTZ	<i>Münchener theologische Zeitschrift</i>
NAWG	Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen Philologisch-Historische Klasse
NSGTK	Neue Studien zur Geschichte der Theologie und der Kirche
NTT	Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift
PAAJR	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
PIASH	<i>Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities</i>
PMS	Patristic Monograph Series
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
PT	<i>Political Theology</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Study
SCEH	Studies in Central European Histories
SCES	Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies
SCJ	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
SEJ	Studies in European Judaism
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SHCT	Studies in the History of Christian Thought
SJC	Studies in Judaism and Christianity
SKI	Studien zu Kirche und Israel
SMRT	Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought
SRR	<i>Seminary Ridge Review</i>
TSMEMJ	Texts and Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Judaism
VCSS	Variorum Collected Studies Series
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
ZBK	<i>Zeitschrift für bayerische Kirchengeschichte</i>
ZGL	<i>Zeitschrift für germanistische Linguistik</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche</i>



# American Appearances of Luther

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We need wait only a few years more and another important “Luther Year” will arrive, and we will be celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This celebration will bring pilgrims to Luther sites in Wittenberg, Eisenach, and Erfurt, provide the occasion for conferences, and focus reflection on the meaning of Reformations for church, society, and individual life. In North and South America, preparations to mark the Reformation anniversary have begun to take shape. One important benefit of a Luther-related anniversary occurs when more Lutherans learn about Martin Luther. Historians today can provide much more insight thanks to the results of ongoing Luther Research—the historical and theological investigations into Luther and his contemporaries’ thought and his cultural context that have since the beginning of the twentieth century greatly advanced our understanding of the sixteenth-century reformations. Luther Research arose at first to defend Luther and his theological legacy at the end of the nineteenth century, when new methods in understanding historical sources, and a corresponding opening of archives to all scholars, including Roman Catholics, began to result in critical, objective portrayals of the founder of Lutheranism, rather than the mostly hagiographic portraits earlier drawn. Protestant historians, too, approached Luther in a more objective way, and developed a program of Luther Research that has continued to reveal new aspects of Luther and his times to several

generations of scholars and church people. But the field of Luther studies continues to advance into new arenas as Lutherans in Africa, Asia, South and North America seek ways to take the sixteenth century reformer out of Germany and into a more prolonged engagement with modern Lutherans who live in many different cultures. Lutherans today enjoy an advantage over their forbears who lived in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries because we know more about Martin Luther than they did.

In addition to what we can learn from further research into the thought and experience of the reformer is the interesting history of Luther commemoration. This entirely different field of investigation focuses on ways that Lutherans and others have remembered Luther and extended his influence to new generations and in new places. Looking at the way that Luther was remembered does not shed new light on Luther’s times, but instead reveals concerns and conceits of interpreters who sought to make Luther relevant. Typically, American Lutherans were interested in using Reformation anniversaries and Luther birthdays to advance other goals. Historical anniversaries created opportunities to highlight aspects of personality or context that related fruitfully to current concerns, and thus guided decisions by molding public opinion. Given that assumption, the material preserved from previous anniversary celebrations provides a rich archival resource for learning about earlier generations of Lutherans. This



article will examine the manner in which Luther remembrance assisted American Lutherans in adapting their church to the American scene and to otherwise advance institutional and denominational needs. It may not surprise us to learn that the goal of actually understanding Luther's theology was often obscured by other interests.

## Luther in America's diverse religious context

When the western hemisphere was first discovered by Europeans, and colonized, the Reformation had done its political and religious work of unsettling the status quo. Those who rebelled against the church's authority got the name Lutheran whether they deserved it or not. In the early colonial period, and especially where Spanish or French authorities could assign labels to dissidents, the name Lutheran meant Protestant, and enemy. Once actual Lutherans did arrive, we know from Muhlenberg's journals that they did not always appear to him as orthodox, or Lutheran, in their theology. He performed remedial work with those congregations that had already formed and intervened when ministerial colleagues from other parts of Scandinavia and Germany could not be relied upon to hold proper Lutheran views. The ocean created a large buffer between the home base for Lutheranism in Germany or Scandinavia and the new world. The improvisational frontier of colonial Lutheranism also meant that a regular customary Lutheranism rarely flourished without considerable exertion by ministers. In Latin America, Lutheran congregations were even more isolated, and in many places Lutheranism was not a permitted faith until the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

American Lutherans thus had an underdeveloped understanding of Martin Luther, bearing his name but otherwise developing congregational life with a practical orientation to his teaching, but without access to the full scope of Luther's writings or to the complex theological heritage that developed where Lutheranism was an established church. There is one important exception: Luther's Small Catechism and some of his hymns. These have served as vehicles for the Lutheran tradition in America. Even today most American Lutherans know only the basics of those issues at stake in the Reformation, and even less about the actual theological career of their founder. And too soon, American Lutherans no longer spoke or worshiped in the German language, which made it more difficult to use the writings of Martin Luther. In the United States, where the largest numbers of Lutherans settled, Martin Luther functioned as a useful hero of Protestantism, and he was relevant to Reformed Protestants because of his courageous stand against the papacy. Luther's role, however, as a German cultural hero was both a blessing and a barrier to wider appreciation. English-speaking Protestants could not read or appreciate Luther's writings, and German Lutherans admired his beautiful and precious shaping of their language so much that any translation of the Bible, liturgy, hymns or devotional material was seen by them as unnecessary, and when requested by

(Cambridge University Press, 2008). A great insight from this history is that Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor who presided over session where the Augsburg Confession was presented, was at the same time involved in establishing in the Americas a pure Catholic faith, while at home the inquisition continued. His toleration for diverse views is put here in an important context that usual Protestant histories do not capture. See pp 27 and 39.

1. Ondina Gonzalez and Justo Gonzalez, *Christianity in Latin America, A History*,



their children as a betrayal of the identity of their community.<sup>2</sup> Those who sought to understand the German Reformation without a thorough knowledge of German plus an advanced theological understanding would also have a very difficult time interpreting the true importance of Luther's work. Hartmut Lehmann, in his 1988 study *Martin Luther in the American Imagination*, argues that appreciation of Luther has been kept behind three walls, a German, a Lutheran, and a theological.<sup>3</sup> Luther has yet to become interpreted in such a way that all people can understand his influence and significance.

## Fitting Luther for a democratic, evangelical empire

The leaders of America's Lutheran churches recognized the way that Luther was kept under wraps and used moments when increased public attention might be expected, such as anniversaries of significant Reformation events, to introduce Luther to a wider public within and outside the churches. Luther's relevance to American Lutheranism, as contrasted with his relevance to Lutheranism, had to be presented in terms that fit the times, and spoke also

to other Protestants. Luther, in his role as founder of Protestantism, appealed to North Americans establishing churches in an expanding nation. In 1817, at the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, however, there were emerging disputes about what kind of Protestantism, or Lutheranism, was best suited to the frontier. In the New York Ministerium, the Rev. Frederick Henry Quitman adapted Lutheranism to the needs of the area with principles that elevated reason over superstition.<sup>4</sup> In close by New England, Unitarians were separating from their Congregational associations. Reformation anniversary sermons by Quitman, senior minister among New York Lutherans, reflected this regional spirit, and focused on toleration and liberty, even suggesting that the advances in human knowledge could shed new light on older doctrines.<sup>5</sup> In the Mid-Atlantic, Lutherans were influenced by the surrounding evangelical piety that distrusted reason and embraced revival. Farther South, where German Protestants were more isolated, Moravian and Lutheran celebrations of the Reformation were joined.

While Friederich Wilhelm III proposed a "Prussian" Union for the churches upon the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, Lutherans in the Eastern United States also advocated the use of this commemoration to promote closer relationships with the German Reformed churches and other Evangelical Protestants. In the United States Eastern Lutherans were eager to showcase Luther as the Reformer for all Protestants. At the same time, more and more children of Lutherans were using the English language.

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2. Disputes in congregations over language transition and the long delay in making English language translations of Luther's hymns [until the late nineteenth century] make it clear that Luther was understood as a German. See Friederike Baer, *The Trial of Frederick Eberle: Language, Patriotism and Citizenship in Philadelphia's German Community, 1790 to 1830* (New York: NYU Press, 2008) for a case study of political, social, and devotional dimensions of the language transition.

3. Hartmut Lehmann, *Luther in the American Imagination: American Studies, A Mongraph Series, vol. 63* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1988), 310–311.

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4. H. George Anderson, "The Early National Period," in *Lutheranism in North America*, ed. E. Clifford Nelson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 105–106; 110.

5. *Ibid.*, 110.



An English language history of Lutheranism by the Rev. John George Lochman, minister in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was published in response to the anniversary in 1818. In the preface, Lochman indicates that he wrote the account for those who do not read German, or Latin, and that the author is “no bigot” or enemy of any denomination, believing that “The Lord has his people in them all, and that all true Christians, taken together from the different branches or denominations of the several churches, ‘constitute the one holy catholic Christian church.’”<sup>6</sup> Its account of Luther’s life noted controversies with Rome, and also with other reformers, but was remarkably generous in discussing Calvin, even his views on the Lord’s Supper, stating that he had adopted a position *hardly different* from Luther’s, for Calvin proposed a “real tho’ spiritual presence of Christ in the supper.”<sup>7</sup> The real difference between the reformers, according to Lochman, was on predestination, but this should by no means sever a relationship. The brief description of Calvin ends with a quotation, with no references, citing Luther’s wish to converse with Calvin, and his assertion that if this were not granted in life, then certainly in the Kingdom of God it would be possible.<sup>8</sup> The account of Lutheran history proceeds to describe the revivals of Spener and Francke, the early missionary efforts of Halle, and the growth of the Lutheran church in the United States, with the astounding total of 650 congregations.<sup>9</sup> Luther’s work however, according to all the ambitious

American Lutheran church leaders, could be improved upon. Before describing the doctrinal teaching of the Lutheran church, Lochman found another quote from Luther that indicated the reformer’s support for further reformation also of teachings and doctrine: “Many things are yet to be made better. We have only made the beginning, and we have retained some customs, for fear of giving offense to weak minds. They that come after us, we hope, will be enabled, by the Spirit of God, to do more.”<sup>10</sup> This quotation of Luther’s views was also not referenced. Lochman provided it to explain why the Lutheran church had given up some customs that had been followed at the time of the Reformation. Luther, actually, was a little too Catholic for Lochman, and for other Lutherans, with this reference to Luther’s expectation that his work would be improved. Looking forward to the future, Lutherans in America felt that the changes they made were warranted by the way that Luther himself talked, somewhere, about adaptation and improvement of his work.<sup>11</sup>

David Frederick Schaeffer, at Evangelical Lutheran Church in Frederick, Maryland, gave three sermons in 1817 on the Reformation that drew ties between the achievements of Luther and the works of active piety. In the early nineteenth

10. *Ibid.*, 84.

11. In this article the more familiar adjustments to Lutheranism that were later advocated by Samuel Simon Schmucker in his *Fraternal Appeal* 1844, and in *The Definite Platform*, 1854, will not be discussed except to note here that Schmucker was building on an older assumption, as similarly stated by Lochman, that the reformer himself expected Lutheranism, and Protestantism, to keep up the work of adapting and changing the church’s teaching. In his modernizing efforts Schmucker was building on an accepted tradition of interpretation.

6. Johann George Lochman, *The History, Doctrine, and Discipline of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Harrisburg: Wythe Publishers, 1818), i.

7. *Ibid.*, 60.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 67.



century the causes he triumphed were the evangelical revival, with its many benevolent reforms. "We are not dictated to in religious affairs by an avaricious pontiff or prince," he stressed, and that meant that a wide variety of religious "methods" were possible, as long as believers "keep on reading the Bible and promoting the Kingdom of God."<sup>12</sup> The broadly evangelical spirit of Schaeffer and Lochman absorbed influences from Methodism, including the revival method. In this way a form of Lutheranism developed that was amenable to active, spirited, democratic reform. Luther was a hero who stood up to Catholic popes and autocratic monarchs.

Using the democratic innovation of a synod, where delegates voted on resolutions and carried them out when they returned to their congregations, the Synod of Maryland in 1832 started a new practice for congregations: they should hold annually a celebration to commemorate the Reformation. On the year following, the Rev. John G. Morris, pastor of the English Lutheran Church in Baltimore, in a sermon titled "The Glorious Reformation," the image of the emancipation of the church from the bondage of sin and corruption provided a vivid theme. Morris used familiar visual cues that his congregation south of the Mason Dixon line would instantly call to mind: the oppression and shackles that tied the church to old forms. The topic of Reformation was, he admitted to his congregation, an unusual theme for a sermon, but for that very reason it was timely. Recognizing the source of the advantages that Christians enjoyed would help them face the enemy,

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12. David Schaeffer's copy of the Lochman book is now in the Harvard Andover Library, which was made available through Google Books. His Reformation sermon is quoted in Lehman, p. 80.

"coming in like a flood."<sup>13</sup> With typical nativist rhetoric, also, the congregation was motivated to see Luther's work as relevant for the ongoing struggle against corruption and errors certain to affect even civil life now that so many Roman Catholic Irish immigrants were streaming, or flooding, into the country.

Morris voiced sentiments typical of evangelical Protestants who worried about the threat this would pose to American life. In this context, the commemoration of Martin Luther as the instigator of Protestant liberties made the Reformation anniversary an occasion for political commentary. Without using direct quotations from Luther, which would not be expected in a sermon, Morris more generally described the effects of the Reformation on monarchies and all forms of tyranny. This historical appeal to Luther as a hero extended also to the heroic in the Lutheran tradition itself, as it appeared in its pietist and evangelical form. Invoking Johann Arndt's familiar devotional guidance also, Morris noted that "true Christianity inspires sentiments of liberty, and when true Christianity was restored, men necessarily became free."<sup>14</sup> Civil and religious liberty were conjoined in Morris' treatment. His portrait of the sixteenth century reformer depicted him as the source of a movement to intellectual, spiritual, and political freedom. "In whatever country the principles of the Reformation and true Christianity are most highly appreciated,

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13. Morris' sermon, "The Glorious Reformation," was published in *The Evangelical Lutheran Preacher and Pastoral Messenger, being Sermons and Occasional Articles, Devotional and Practical, By Ministers of the Lutheran Church, and notes by the Editor, all designed to Illustrate and Defend the Principles of Religion, as held and taught by Lutherans*, ed. the Rev. Lewis Eichelberger, vol 1, 2, 1833–1835, and was in vol II, no. 8, 113.

14. *Ibid.*, 125.



there civil liberty flourishes most luxuriantly. Compare the Protestant and Roman countries of Europe. Compare the United States with the world, and how firmly is not the position established?! Romanism and liberty are incompatible—they cannot dwell together.”<sup>15</sup> Morris with Schaeffer and Lochman used Luther’s protests against the Catholic Church as a confirmation of the suitability of Lutheranism to democracy. Another group of Lutherans, however, had just begun to arrive in North America, and their leaders turned out to be less enamored of the possibilities of freedom through Luther’s essential or virtual embrace of democracy.

## Luther’s actual words make a stir

John G. Morris, David Frederick Schaeffer, and Johann George Lochman confidently enlisted Martin Luther in promoting civil and religious liberty, and used words and sentiments, vaguely attributed to Luther, that he expected his own work to be improved as support for further adaptation of Lutheranism to the American scene. These assertions of Luther’s true intent with his reform, however, did not consistently accord with other statements from Luther. It is difficult for instance to make Luther a champion promoter of ecumenical and tolerant attitudes, doctrinally or devotionally, with other Protestants. Luther had written about civil and spiritual liberty, and he did oppose the Catholic Church, but he was a man of the sixteenth century, so his assumptions about social hierarchy, especially, did not translate well into the American democratic experiment, which soon became clear in the context of the slavery debate in the United States.

In St. Louis, Missouri, the German immigrant community settled in the midst

of civil, religious, and social agitation over slavery. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther came to Missouri in 1839 with a group of pastors and settlers who, because of their principled opposition to the blended Reformed and Lutheran church in Prussia, sought to build a pure Lutheran church in the United States. Walther became the leader of this resolute band of Lutherans and by the 1850s had established a school and seminary in the city, and published a church newspaper, *Der Lutheraner*, and a journal, *Lehre und Wehre*, both of which became vehicles for the dissemination of his theological views. In nearby Bleeding Kansas, along the border with Missouri, arguments about democracy and individual rights created a violent atmosphere in the years leading up to the Civil War. Proslavery Missourians crossed the border to influence and at times participate in the voting to determine Kansas’s future as a free or slave state. Various other corruptions affected the courts, police, and legislative procedures. The violence and threat of the extension of slavery drew free soil activists and abolitionists also to the area, including the radical John Brown, who in 1856 led two raids on slave owners, including one into neighboring Missouri, carrying off slaves, and in the process killing a slave owner and some family members.<sup>16</sup>

John Brown’s notoriety helped him raise money in far away Boston among the Secret Six, but his actions and the extreme violence in Missouri and Kansas that accompanied the buildup of tensions toward civil war probably prodded Walther

16. John Brown’s raid into Missouri is recounted in Tony Horwitz, *Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid that Sparked the Civil War*. Its effect on the generally rising tension at this time and its effect on Walther in Missouri can only be inferred. There were no statements by Walther on slavery in print before this date.

15. Ibid.



to wade into the turbulent regional waters and to address the topic of slavery. When he did so, he used actual words from Martin Luther that did not support individual freedoms, or democracy, or experiments promoting liberty for slaves. The secular German press may have also goaded him to speak out. The *Anzeiger des Westens*, edited by a forty-eighter Carl Börnstein who held virulent antislavery and anticlerical opinions, was expressly political in its attacks on slavery. As a way to provide a more moderate voice, and give theological guidance for his more conservative religious readers, Walther turned to Luther, and used his inflammatory writing from 1525, *Against the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of Peasants*, to attack all abolitionists. Luther had uttered a judgment that seemed to Walther to directly apply to abolitionist activities. In one of Muntzer's articles the peasants in 1525 had claimed: "It accords with the Scripture that we are free, and we desire to be free. Not that we are free without restriction, not that we would have no government—God does not teach us that." Responding harshly to the peasants, and in support of civil authorities Luther wrote: "This article is directly contrary to the Gospel and robberlike in character: for in this way each one would take away his body from his lord, whose property it is."<sup>17</sup> Philipp Melancthon was also quoted by Walther: "It is a crime and an act of violence that they refuse to be serfs."<sup>18</sup> Serfs, or slaves, could

not demand their freedom, or pursue it violently. Nor should any assist them to change their condition. There is no cause for rebellion that is warranted by scripture, according to Walther.

C.F.W. Walther's views on slavery and social order were complex, and he wrote as a theologian, not a politician. He was not a proslavery advocate in the company of the Southern Presbyterian John Henley Thornwell, but he did make the same biblical arguments, together with a theological use of Luther that brought the reformer's views into the American debate, at least among German immigrants.<sup>19</sup> Because Walther was influential far beyond the Missouri Synod, his broadcast of these unfortunate outbursts from Luther on serfdom and peasantry became the first in a disagreement among factions in the United States over the theological meaning of slavery, hierarchy, social relationships, based on differing interpretations of Lutheran views on free will as it is played out in civil and religious spheres of law and gospel. These divergent views have had long-reaching effects on Lutheran relations in the United States and in the world that continue today. Luther himself, as he was used in the debate over slavery, was not a cause of unity but instead of division. Efforts to translate Luther's writings into English especially lost some popularity by this uncritical application of them to the slavery issue.

17. C.F.W. Walther, *Slaverei, Lehre und Wehre*, November, 1856.

18. Walther's use of Luther and Melancthon is quoted with this translation of Luther, which is the closest English translation [from the Norwegian! where it caused such debate], of the version in use by the Missourians, in David. T. Nelson, *Luther College 1861–1961* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1961), 383, endnote # 9.

19. A fuller exposition of proslavery arguments from the Reformed perspective, including treatment of the scientific contributions toward an understanding of race by the Southern Lutheran minister John Bachman, is in James O Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: John Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values*, (Mercer University Press, 1999).



## Lutheran immigrants arrive, but they are not German

Walther used Luther to support conservative views of social order and these circulated from his newspaper and seminary into Norwegian immigrant debates. As new immigrant Lutherans arrived in the Midwest, some made connections with American Lutherans in the Eastern States, while others aligned with the Missouri Synod. Norwegian Lutherans divided in both directions and added some factions of their own, but a large contingent, named the Norwegian Synod, adhered to the Missouri Synod, sending students to the seminary in St. Louis, and providing also two Norwegian professors to the institution. In their own settlements, however, Norwegian immigrants were very much against slavery and also wanted to control the education of their ministerial students, who it became apparent, were spreading softer views on slavery after having been instructed in St. Louis. Strains that developed over views about slavery and social order resulted in the founding of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Luther's name became the signature of a devout, Norwegian college grappling with what kind of Lutheranism they would construct in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

After the "Jackson Affair" that occurred when in May, 1861, Confederate-leaning state militia troops had a violent skirmish with the Union troops at the local arsenal, Concordia College and Seminary in St. Louis shut down and sent students home. The violence had come too close to campus, but it was not yet clear whether the outbreak of hostilities would last very long. The suspension of operations meant

that the small Norwegian contingent of professors and students returned home to their Norwegian community with very heated stories of confusion and theological reaction just when the Norwegian Synod meeting was to decide whether to found a school much closer to their congregations in Iowa and Wisconsin. Because Walther's position against abolition was more friendly to the Southern cause, Norwegian immigrant Lutherans, many of whom began to enlist in the Union army, questioned vocally and in their ethnic newspapers whether a close association with Missouri Synod was right. Articles in the Norwegian newspapers demanded to know what the Missourians were teaching Norwegian students about slavery and secession. Professor Laurens Larsen, who had been teaching in St. Louis, tried to let the storm pass and remained silent, but after a lay man wrote a public letter so pointedly singling out his supposed cowardice on the topic, finally composed an answer. This failed to satisfy the delegates, and his position was even more maligned in the press. His attempt to define the issue as a theological, and not political question, led to the drafting of a pastor's declaration declaring slavery an evil, but not a sin. These abstractions were not going to satisfy the people during wartime, or ever. A long debate over the biblical and theological status of slavery engulfed the Norwegian Synod until long after the war was over and emancipation was in effect.<sup>21</sup> The inability of the pastors in this immigrant church to end the discussion through the drafting of theological statements revealed the difficulty of applying

20. David T. Nelson, *Luther College 1861–1961* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1961).

21. Several sources tell this story; the most succinct account is in Nelson, *Luther College 1861–1961*, chapter 6. The most thorough is Brynjar Haraldsoe, *Slaveridebatten I Den Norske Synode*, (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1988).



Lutheran theological principles or using Luther to resolve a conflict.

In the process of this theological controversy, Missouri's leader C.F.W. Walther attended the meetings of the Norwegian ministers, presenting his views on the slavery question in light of the teachings of the Lutheran reformers and theologians in the seventeenth century. These presentations were printed in the Missouri journal *Lehre und Wehre*, and were translated also for the Norwegian newspapers. As a by-product, some writings of Luther were translated into Norwegian. Professor Larsen took this on as his own special project, and as he now had become the president of Luther College, in Decorah, Iowa, after leaving his post in St. Louis, his selection of materials naturally aligned with those deemed important also in the ongoing debate. Larsen attempted first to translate Luther into English, believing that eventually this language would be more important to the community, but this was unpopular with his constituency, so the project of translation brought Luther to America through Norwegian. He dedicated himself to this task in order to make Luther's thought available for his students, and for the congregations, as it had become apparent that these materials were needed in a language that the immigrants could understand.<sup>22</sup>

Among other Lutherans debates over slavery avoided the writings of Luther and other Lutheran theologians. They were

conducted on the same basis as they were by other antislavery advocates, or proslavery advocates as had been framed by the primarily Reformed theologians in America's Protestant churches. The seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, also experienced a battle, and some students enlisted in the Union and Confederate armies, but most returned to their regular schedule in October, 1863. Henry Schindle took notes from a class that fall that the Rev. Samuel Simon Schmucker taught on the topic of Polemical Theology, where he learned that "In treating of the doctrines of the Bible it is often the duty of the minister to refute errone[ous] views held & disseminated by others. The obligation to do so is taught in Scripture where it is commanded 'to earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints' i.e., doctrines taught."<sup>23</sup> After listing the defenders of the faith in the early church, Professor Schmucker noted that Polemics becomes a "science" after the Reformation, with the accomplished examples of Chemnitz and Hunnius on the Lutheran side who established the pattern of advancing onward in search of new errors to refute. Luther was not identified as a polemical theologian, interestingly enough, but his principle of establishing the truth based on scripture was still the object to be defended as the church moved forward into new challenges. Historical interest at Gettysburg Seminary was put to service toward future arguments that ministers were sure to meet as soon as they encountered other churches. It was a time of battle for soldiers, but also for theological students. American Lutherans at Gettysburg pushed forward with English language education, but did not engage

22. Larsen first started Luther Historical Association, which soon had 1,000 members, and this group sponsored the translations and publications. There was a lot of work for Larsen, who had to edit, and complete most of the translations he solicited. Karen Larsen, *Laurens Larsen, Pioneer College President* (Northfield, Minn.: Norwegian American Historical Association, 1936), 110.

23. Henry Schindle's lecture notes are in the Wentz Library, Gettysburg Seminary, and have been scanned and transcribed by James Guldner. They are located in the archives section of the library website.



in translation projects to bring Luther's writings to members. They sought to adapt Lutheranism, not necessarily Luther, to the American churches' needs.

## Luther and Lutheran unity

Luther celebrations took a different form in the later part of the nineteenth century, after increasing numbers of Lutheran immigrants began to settle in the Midwest and built their own colleges and seminaries. Just as the Norwegian Synod experienced with their own growth and need for independence, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, and still increasing numbers of more recently arriving German immigrants embarked in the process of sorting and sifting traditions. In that process, Martin Luther became a little better known to North American Lutherans. Luther was presented as a hero, an important person whose face was printed on the hymnals, and who looked down on worshipers from stained glass windows, and lent his name to congregations, schools, and colleges. Through women's magazines, youth programs, newspapers, and choral gatherings, members of Lutheran congregations and associations learned that Luther was an important hero because he had set in motion the Reformation, and this had something to do with the success of American democracy. Carl F. Johansson, the Swedish Lutheran pastor in Boston, gave an address about Martin Luther in 1883, on the 400th anniversary of Luther's birthday, in which he claimed that "if there hadn't been a Martin Luther, and then a Gustavus Adolphus, there never would have been a George Washington."<sup>24</sup> This pretty much proved the importance of Gustavus Adolphus, who also had a college named after him.

An important American invention that made Luther into a household name in the United States was the Luther League, started in New York and Pennsylvania, and incorporated into a national program in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1895.<sup>25</sup> The Luther League made Luther a rallying figure instead of a polarizing polemicist. Like the Epworth League for Methodists and the Westminster Fellowship for Presbyterian youth, the Luther League worked through the churches to provide a program for youth and young adults that would make them proud to belong to the Lutheran church, and to see their church not as an immigrant enclave, but instead as a purposeful and fun social network. The Luther League concept and name was adapted by the several Lutheran churches of Scandinavian background, while the Missouri Synod gave their own youth organization the name of their founder, C.F.W. Walther, to distinguish their program from that of the other Lutherans. The use of the name, Luther, did not mean however, that Lutherans in the United States had suddenly gained a deeper appreciation or knowledge of Martin Luther himself, but these organizations played an important role in organizing young people into a purposeful network. They pushed the churches to make their programs more public and to raise awareness within their own membership so that stirring events and commemorations could command

25. There is as yet no modern history of the Luther League with its many forms in the several Lutheran church bodies in the first half of the twentieth century. Jon Pahl has written a study of the Walther League, *Hopes and Dreams of All*, (Wheat Ridge Ministries, 1993) that describes the Missouri Synod's youth work. My own research in the Luther League work of the Augustana Synod has been incorporated into *The Augustana Story*, written with Mark Granquist, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

24. C. F. Johansson, manuscript copy of his address to Boston Area Swedish citizens, November, 1893, in private collection.



the attention not only of church members, but also the public.

An important Luther commemoration came in 1917, the year of the Quadricentennial of the Reformation. Lutherans were self conscious about their foreign background at a time of rising tension in the United States over the high rate of immigration. Through the Luther League, Lutheran young people were given ways to connect their history also to a national, American organization that sought to be modern and business-like in the promotion of leadership "of the church, by the church, and for the church."<sup>26</sup> All across the country, special events were planned to impress upon the public the importance of Luther's Reformation as an event that created the beginning of the modern world reaching its high point in the experience of the American [Protestant] citizen. The signature event planned for Philadelphia, and announced in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* for October 31st heralded Luther's first public protest by nailing his ninety-five theses to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. "This act inaugurated an epoch of history which proved to be one of the greatest revolutions in the religious, political and social life of Christendom and it is honor of this event that this festival has been arranged."<sup>27</sup> A special feature of the Philadelphia event would be a tribute to the colonial roots of Lutherans in Pennsylvania: the unveiling of a statue of Muhlenberg at the seminary campus in Philadelphia. Lutherans had been in Philadelphia since before the American Revolution, and many Lutherans had fought for the country's independence. Lutherans in eastern Pennsylvania, this

celebration emphasized, were not immigrant Germans.

The committee that planned the national celebrations of the Reformation was composed of representatives from Swedish, Norwegian, and several of the German background churches in addition to three branches of Lutherans from the Eastern, colonial era Lutheran churches, the General Synod, General Council, and General Synod, South. Leaders of the several church bodies, the committee was successful in pushing the three Eastern Lutheran churches to become the United Lutheran Church in America (ULCA), which formed in 1918 as a response to a resolution prepared by the planning committee. Non English speaking Lutherans were not yet ready for a broad merger. Norwegian Lutherans used the Reformation anniversary as the occasion for their own reunion; four separate Norwegian Lutheran church bodies merged into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in that year. But a spirit of unity among Lutherans was broadcast through several promotional items. To celebrate the record of Lutheran accomplishment, the committee prepared a calendar of great American Lutherans and these included, in the rough chronological order of their arrival or work in America: January: Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, February: Paul Henkel, March: Ernest Louis Hazelius, April: Benjamin Kurtz, May: Samuel Simon Schmucker, June: C.F.W. Walther, August: Tufve Nilsson Hasselquist, September: William Frederick Lehmann, October: Charles Porterfield Krauth, November: the Fritschel Bros Sigmund Gottfried, December: Gjermund Hoyne. The leaders included figures from the General Synod, General Council, Ohio and Iowa Synods, the Augustana Synod, Missouri, and the Norwegian Synod. Several more calendars would have had to have been created in order to fully honor

26. The Luther League motto aimed to keep young people in the church and focused on its future.

27. *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, October 31, 1917.



the full range of Lutheran experience in America [Canadian, Danish, Finnish, Slovak, more Norwegians, and Wisconsin]. But Luther, also, was missing.

American Lutherans took it upon themselves to be fully American in their celebration even of the Reformation. When the General Synod, General Council, and the General Synod, South merged to create the United Lutheran Church in America, the resulting accomplishment brought together again the churches in the Eastern States that separated at the Civil War. It was a great accomplishment conducted through democratic assembly, and enacted as a response to a resolution made from a planning committee. The Reformation and Martin Luther inspired committee men to think that they were part of a much grander object: A continuation of the Glorious Reformation. The Rev. Theodore Schmauk's speech at the celebration noted the decisions of the churches that summer, and connected this organizational accomplishment also to the glorious Reformation: "The church had to overcome the influence of rich and powerful men in order to consummate the union that means so much for its future advancement. I believe that the decisions made here mean a church resurgent. It means a church that shall speak the language of its adopted country in every phase of its service, a church that shall be identified with loyalty and Americanism as long as it endures."<sup>28</sup> Schmauk's emphasis on the language of our adopted country in the context of The Great War with Germany complicated the celebration of the Reformation. Celebration of the Reformation was adapted for the national purpose, or

as Schmauk put it "to the necessities of the times" that included for Lutherans of a German background, the necessity of a "proclamation of loyalty and support" that was signed by the presidents of the merging churches, T.E Schmauk [General Council], John A. Singmaster [General Synod], Melancthon G Scherer [General Synod, South].

The celebration of the Reformation gave occasion for events demanding speeches from seminary and college professors. Henry Eyster Jacob was one who rose to this occasion to address "The attitude of the Lutheran Church of America in the present World Crisis."<sup>29</sup> In this address the several subheadings reveal an important and ambitious agenda facing Lutherans: The thorough Lutheranizing of the Lutheran Church of America [involves eliminating the superficial to get to the essential], The Thorough Americanization of the Lutheran Church of America, The Lutheranizing of America, and finally, The Lutheranizing of the World. Seminary professors were ambitious.

## **450th anniversary of Luther's birth, 1933, war with Germany again on the horizon**

The success of the 1917 commemoration in positioning the Lutheran churches in America as fully American churches, made Luther-related commemorations popular events to booster church life. Church leaders seized on these opportunities, also, because they brought the several Lutheran church bodies together into a common cause. In 1933 another anniversary pre-

28. Schmauk's speech was printed and distributed to the newspapers, but not published. A copy of the talk is in the records of the 1917 planning committee, Gettysburg Seminary Archives.

29. The address published in pamphlet form October 21, 1917, in time for the Reformation celebration, and is included in the records of the committee for the official celebration in the Wentz Library Archives.



sented itself for the general excitement of Lutherans young and old. Records from the Washington, D.C., area reveal the high hopes especially within the metropolitan area Lutheran Laymen's Fellowship for a very public event. Through the Washington, D.C., Lutheran Ministerial Association, invitations to area pastors were sent out in September to invite them to send representatives to the planning committee. This did not give the pastors much warning, because the event on November 10, Luther's birthday, was fast approaching. Leaders came from the prominent Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, and Lutheran churches, including Missouri men and ULCA men, plus their appointed lay representatives. Young people in the Luther League were encouraged to promote the event. But it was going to be expensive to hold the event in Constitution Hall, so the committee needed every congregation to help with funding. In the letter announcing the upcoming planning meeting this important condition was also included: "In order to properly celebrate this significant event we deem it wise to secure GUARANTORS in every Church, at least ten for the larger and five for the smaller, who will underwrite the celebration at \$10 each, if such sum be found necessary. No admission will be charged to the public."<sup>30</sup> Lest the pastors receiving the letter think that they could spend much time pondering, the letter concluded with a flourish: "Will the pastors act promptly, as arrangements must be made immediately to secure a suitable place for the celebration which we desire shall be primarily of religious significance, befitting the memory of the Father of Lutheranism and the Hero of

Protestantism?"<sup>31</sup> Luther, and the Lutheran brand, was going to be on display in the nation's capitol.

A descendant of Martin Luther, Hans Luther, was the ambassador from Germany to the United States, and he gave the main address. Unfortunately for posterity he too enthusiastically described the changes then occurring in Germany, defending them as expressions of an essential Saxonism also seen in the Reformation. He qualified his remarks somewhat, commenting that the "fundamental spiritual attitude characteristic of the Reformation [liberty] had at all times [or at least for a long time] been inherent in the people of North Germany, that is in Luther's own environment. [sic]."<sup>32</sup> Ambassador Luther recognized that other Protestants had joined the Lutherans in their celebration of Martin Luther in Constitution Hall. He spoke of the Reformation as a broad reform movement that spread through "heroic leaders" including in his list Switzerland's Zwingli and Calvin and Scotland's John Knox. The real toxin in this focus on heroic leaders that carried forward Luther's spirit in other lands, and again in modern Germany was his emphasis on the Saxon Luther and the Anglo Saxon world. "As regards the Reformation on British soil it can indeed be noted that Anglo-Saxondom is related at its root to the predominantly Saxon North German type. Martin Luther was a full blooded Saxon...."<sup>33</sup> Hans Luther faithfully conveyed the manner in which the Luther anniversary year provided ways

31. Ibid.

32. Address of Hans Luther to the 450th Anniversary of Luther's Birth, Constitution Hall, November 10, 1933, manuscript in the records of the 1933 Washington, D.C., planning committee, [found in records of the 1917 planning committee box 13], Wentz Library Archives.

33. Ibid., 11.

30. Letter from the Washington Ministerial Association to the pastors, September 19, 1933, Records of the planning committee for the 450th celebration, including correspondence, Wentz Library Archives.



for the National Socialist government in Germany to enlist the churches in the promotion of its national consolidation agenda.<sup>34</sup>

The German spirit that imbued the Reformation continued, Ambassador Luther asserted, in the modernizing adjustments currently going on in the German churches. This spirit now united the churches in Germany, following in the footsteps of the Prussian Union, which Lutherans in the United States of course knew had been the occasion of the exodus leading to the Missouri Synod, but which for Ambassador Luther was instead to be seen as “a stepping stone towards the present National German Church which grew out of the movement of the so-called ‘German Christians’.”<sup>35</sup> For American Protestants, the German Christian movement was little understood, but the idea of a pan-Protestant unity would have been popular with most of the attendees at this Reformation celebration. Hearing from a Lutheran who was a descendant of Luther that “This new National Church also vouchsafes confessional liberty” would have been an endorsement of a broad movement into a united Protestant church also in the United States. The new Luther, however, was a politician, not a theologian. This Luther gave voice to an entirely worldly spirit: “In its organization, however, [the new National Church] comprises the totality of the Reich in its church life in full analogy to the long hoped for and finally accomplished complete unification of German political life.”<sup>36</sup> The birth of Martin Luther, celebrated in this way, in

Washington, D.C., was enlisted to promote the agenda of the National Socialists.

Hans Luther included some of his own free thinking speculation when he concluded with an interesting natural image. “Let me venture upon a metaphor: The Sun of divine truth which warms and enlightens us is everywhere the same; but just as the rays of the sun when they shine into water or other fluids are deflected at various angles and the various colors are changed into a manifold of brilliant hues, so, in harmony with our education, our environment, our inner and outer attachments and ties, there form themselves within us visions of the Godhead which are in keeping with the essential nature of the individual and of his fellow believers.” This attempt to capture a near mystical experience was followed immediately, but illogically, with a correct and orthodox statement: “There is no truth but in Christ Jesus. We Lutheran Christians, however, thank God that He gave unto us as interpreter of His truth Martin Luther, and on this day we feel united with many followers of other Christian confessions in thanksgiving unto God.”<sup>37</sup> Hans Luther’s theology had wandered a bit from that of his illustrious forbear, and so had Germany’s. Thankfully this address received scant attention from the Lutheran churches further out in the nation. The idea that Luther should be so fully adapted to the prospects of nationalism that he would be subsumed by them, however, had been clearly set forth.

## American Lutheranism and Luther

After the war, churches in the Americas had to respond to the needs of a war-ravaged Eastern hemisphere. The confidence of North American Lutherans was also shaken, as soldiers returned with

34. For more on the way that Luther’s image was used by National Socialists, see Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), and more recently, by the same author, *A Requiem for Hitler*, (SCM Press, 2012).

35. Hans Luther address, 17.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 23.



stories that shocked the nation. The toll of genocide, nuclear weapons, and the decimation of Western Europe, prodded American Lutheran churches to muster resources to rebuild European churches. American Lutherans dug deeper into their pockets to expand support for missionary work in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. Countries in North and South America received new infusions of German refugees. Martin Luther was not forgotten in these efforts, but now he would help the churches to respond to the new reality of a world Lutheranism, now being built in the form of The Lutheran World Federation. For American Lutherans, Luther could be reliably placed on the side of democracy and liberty, values they also hoped to export to a world coming out of colonialism, but facing the threat of communism as well. Roland Bainton, a historian at Yale University, wrote a modern biography of the reformer for a popular audience, *Here I Stand*, published at the height of the cold war. The study helped Americans understand that Luther was a man of conscience, a man for their times, and a figure that was not the property of any one denomination.<sup>38</sup> Bainton made Luther into a human being, an individual, instead of a heroic pioneer of a particular faith. In Bainton's hands Luther came out of the Victorian era into modernity. His thought triggered a reformation of

individual religious freedom. This was the task of the modern era. Lutherans did not shy away from the popularity of their confessional hero now become the model of an individual protesting communism, totalitarianism, and absolutism of every kind. When the book was turned into a movie, Lutherans promoted the event, too.

Luther's newfound popularity as a hero of conscience also made it possible to promote and finance a more comprehensive translation of Luther's writings into English, making the actual words of the reformer something that the average English-speaking church member can read and interpret. The American edition of Luther's Works began to appear through the joint effort of Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press in 1958. But bringing this Luther to Americans—in English—was going to be a process of “taking Luther out of Germany.”<sup>39</sup> Those of us Lutherans in North America, along with Lutherans in Central and South America, have our own challenges to face in appropriating a sixteenth century figure for our intercultural commemoration. As we prepare for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we can expect that the concerns of the churches of our own time will significantly affect the way we remember Luther's own time.

38. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand, A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abington Press, 1950).

39. The author has recently written on this effort in the post-war period by American Lutherans. See “Taking Luther out of Germany,” *Lutheran Forum*, Spring 2013.



# From Luther to Bonhoeffer: A Clear Line

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I don't believe in heroes. However, if I did Dietrich Bonhoeffer would be at the top of my list of people to follow, adore, and emulate. My first-born child is named after him and I almost never teach a class without including one of his texts in the required reading list. The same could also be said of Martin Luther. Though there is much to abhor in his personality and some of his writings, I am fascinated by his courage and adore the power of his mind and ideas. Truth be told, my second-born child is named after him.

The problem with the legacy of both Luther and Bonhoeffer is that they have become agents and products of history. It is rare to encounter someone who has actually read all of Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*, though there is no end to the theologians and preachers who can pontificate endlessly about cheap and costly grace. As for Luther, conclusions about his lack of attention to the ethical dimensions of theology have almost become axioms. For all the critiques of Luther and his lack of attention to ethics, I am often left to wonder whether the majority of people who speak and write about Luther are familiar with his understanding of alien and proper righteousness, and the happy exchange.

Bonhoeffer has been offered up as a corrective to the perceived "quietism" of Luther, and his role in the life of the

church and theology is to make Luther relevant to modern audiences. Yet when I read Luther and Bonhoeffer, without the aid of the supplemental oxygen provided by commentators, I see a clear line from Luther to Bonhoeffer; a clear influence of one on the other. In fact, what I see is a reliance of the great ethical hero Bonhoeffer on the quietistic, depressive Augustinian monk Luther. Nowhere is this link clearer than in Bonhoeffer's most enduring work, *Discipleship*.

Bonhoeffer's corrective is certainly needed, especially as we near the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Evangelical Movement in Germany. Such anniversaries provide wonderful stimulus for renewed debate over important issues related to the legacy of what has come to be called the Reformation. I am particularly excited to examine the historiography of the Reformation as it relates to the question of Luther's theological and political ethics. Much of what we assume about Luther and his thought has been shaped by a variety of commentators over the last 500 years. It is my assumption that Bonhoeffer's corrective is useful as we begin to differentiate between what Luther said about the ethical life, and how commentators have interpreted his ideas.

In the brief study that follows I would like to present one example of how Luther provided the conceptual basis of Bonhoeffer's



fer's ethical thought. Exclusive commitment to Jesus Christ bears a particular fruit that grows from the tree upon which Christ was hung. The actions of the disciples must reflect and represent the death of Christ if they are to be redemptive for the disciple and the world that the disciple is called to love even in the face of the world's rejection. In Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount he mentions this idea explicitly when he ponders the command of Jesus to "pray for those who abuse and persecute you." He remarks,

In prayer we go to our enemies, to stand at their side. We are with them, near them, for them before God.... Now we are taking up their neediness and poverty, their being guilty and lost, and interceding for them before God. We are doing for them in vicarious representative action what they cannot do for themselves. Every insult from our enemy will only bind us closer to God and to our enemy. Every persecution can only serve to bring the enemy closer to reconciliation with God, to make love more unconquerable.<sup>1</sup>

The same idea is found much earlier in the text. Consider his claim that, "The merciful give their own honor to those who have fallen into shame and take that shame unto themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Bonhoeffer credits Luther with laying the foundation of his own understanding of the burden disciples must carry in their own application of *Stellvertretung* or vicarious representative action.<sup>3</sup> For example, Bonhoeffer claims

"Luther expounds his thoughts on this point with incomparable beauty. My burden is borne by others, their strength is my strength, in my fear and trembling the faith of the church comes to my aid."<sup>4</sup>

Yet the reliance of Bonhoeffer on Luther's theology is sometimes easy to underestimate. As I was reading through a student's paper on the legacy of Luther, the student made the claim that Bonhoeffer had to provide new insights into Luther because Luther was unable to move beyond his own fascination with a rather pessimistic anthropology. As evidence, this student relied heavily on the arguments of a particular scholar who made the claim that the major problem with Lutheran ethics is its tendency toward moral quietism and an individualistic moral vision.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the student did well to follow the arguments made by a great scholar and I was proud to read such a well-reasoned and researched paper.

I smiled when I realized that the author quoted in the research project takes a very different approach to Luther than I do in my own understanding of Luther's ethics. Imagine that, scholars agreeing to disagree! With all due respect and admiration I would like to rehearse the research presented to me in that paper and provide an alternative understanding of the relationship between Luther and

of his thought. Alas, a thorough exploration of this concept is beyond the scope of this modest study. For now I will allude to this concept and ask the reader to consider his or her own examination of Bonhoeffer on this point. See especially Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 120; 145ff.; 180ff.

4. *Sanctorum Communio*, 180.

5. Jeremy Rehwaldt-Alexander, "Avoiding Cheap Grace: Luther and the Problem of Moral Despair" *Dialog*, Vol 45, Number 4, Winter 2006: 376–381.

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 140.

2. *Ibid.*, 107.

3. Bonhoeffer's understanding of vicarious representative action deserves to be examined in great detail by anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding



Bonhoeffer in the words that follow.

The author cited claimed that these two “problems” arise from Luther’s dialectic of law and gospel, and that Luther’s understanding of grace must be reconsidered in order to allow modern thinkers to “think more adequately about appropriate moral action in the wider public world.”<sup>6</sup>

If grace is constructed as freedom, the grace becomes cheap, or so the argument is developed. Blame for this cheap grace is laid at the feet of Luther as evidenced in the author’s understanding of Luther’s “Freedom of a Christian.” The idea is developed into a claim that Luther’s understanding of grace as freedom from sin leads to the conclusion that “now that humans are justified, they can choose to fail to act, and they can choose thusly with relatively clear consciences. No action in the world is needed—all I need is Jesus in my heart.”<sup>7</sup> Humans, with this understanding of justification, “can choose to respond or not; nothing really important is at stake in my actions in the world.” Building his argument, the author of the article cites another well-known scholar who adds to the evidence against Luther. “The problem has always been that a strong commitment to the language of justification seems to undercut any need for the language of sanctification.”<sup>8</sup> In the final analysis, “Luther’s position... fails to take seriously the moral crisis engendered by a recognition of our participation in unjust social structures, as Luther’s harsh response to the peasant revolt illustrates.”<sup>9</sup>

However, despite all the shortcomings of Luther’s thinking, Christians can rest easy knowing that Bonhoeffer provides the necessary corrective to Luther’s theological shortcomings. “Bonhoeffer makes it quite clear. The experience of grace cannot be

divorced from the experiences of moral despair and yet remain grace.... The experience of Grace emerges from a process in which one has experienced moral despair in the process of moral striving.... And the experience of grace does not free one from the striving but sends one back again into the striving itself. Anything less is, as Bonhoeffer puts it, ‘a piece of self-deception.’”<sup>10</sup> In summation, the problem “is the tendency toward moral complacency embedded in constructions of the doctrine of justification.... Another problem remains, the problem of individualizing sin and thereby supporting unjust social structures.”<sup>11</sup>

I agree that Bonhoeffer provides a cogent and beautiful exploration of the doctrine of justification and the ethical dimensions of those who confess that particular article of faith. I also agree that any tendency toward moral complacency and the support of unjust structures must be met with a prophetic “no.” With a brilliant sense of devoted urgency, Bonhoeffer, in his *Discipleship*, offers the reader a clear understanding of the obligations placed on disciples utilizing the concept of vicarious representative action. Certainly the authors I encountered in my student’s paper raise important questions and provide a reasonable critique of Luther and the tradition that adopted his name. Yet, as is the case with all historical and theological explorations, more can be said.

The editors of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Works in English claim that his understanding of vicarious representative action “provides the christocentric foundation for all the associations Bonhoeffer makes between the gospel presentation of the call of Christ to discipleship.... Bonhoeffer’s approach to the demands of discipleship depends on the strong conviction,

6. Rehwalder-Alexander, 376.

7. Ibid., 377.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 378.

11. Ibid.



reinforced in his student days, that Jesus is speaking vicariously in present-day words that call Christians to action on his behalf. The themes of *Discipleship* thus center on Jesus Christ, who has never left his community, who is the costly grace of Christians....<sup>12</sup> For Bonhoeffer, "Such vicariously representative action and suffering, which is carried out by the members of the body of Christ, is itself the very life of Christ who seeks to take shape in his members (Gal 4:19)."<sup>13</sup>

Those who have read Luther have a clear understanding that this was also the center of Luther's own articulation of the doctrine of justification, and the ethical system that proceeds from the doctrine itself. Using the very document that others have used to claim a distance between justification and sanctification in Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," we find language that is almost identical to Bonhoeffer's. Consider how Luther distinguished between faith and love. Both are connected, as freedom and servanthood are connected.

From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us. He has so 'put on' us and acted for us as if he had been what we are. From us should flow on to those who have need of them so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us....We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love."<sup>14</sup>

He continues, "Our faith in Christ does not free us from works but from false opinions concerning works, that is, from the foolish presumption that justification is acquired by works."<sup>15</sup>

Luther was clearly committed to the intimate link between justification and love of the neighbor. This connection is best articulated in his 1519 treatise "Two Kinds of Righteousness." In his explanation of the intimate connection between faith and works he puts forward the idea of righteousness as having two parts. The first, alien righteousness, is the justification that most people associate with Luther. It is a righteousness that exists without reference to the person who receives the gift of justification. In this righteous God is always the subject. God forgives; God gives humanity a gift; God reconciles sinners to God's self. It would be easy to claim a kind of moral quietism if the reader simply stops reading after the first two pages of the treatise. However, if the reader is inspired to carry on for another eight pages the reader discovers Luther's ethic which grows from the first kind of righteousness and bears fruit in the second stage of righteousness, proper righteousness. Here one finds the connection between justification and works; faith and love. "The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works." These works consist of slaying the desires of the flesh, loving one's neighbor, and meekness before God.<sup>16</sup>

Jaroslav Pelikan, vols. 1–30, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vols. 31–55. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 31:371. Hereafter cited as LW.

12. *Discipleship*, 18.

13. *Ibid.*, 222.

14. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, eds.

15. LW 31:372.

16. LW 31:299.



Throughout the treatise Luther gives specific examples of how this proper righteousness is made manifest in the believer. Perhaps one can hear the echo of Luther in Bonhoeffer's writing when the Augustinian monk claims, "For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them."<sup>17</sup>

Anyone trained in the art of rhetoric could easily construct an argument that Luther is simply using metaphorical language at this point. He is not dealing directly with the issues of poverty and the much-needed call for true solidarity with the outcast. Consider Luther's commentary on the book of Galatians, written also in 1519. Here Luther's idea of proper righteousness is unmistakably tied to actual acts of solidarity with the poor and marginalized. It is worth quoting at length.

Furthermore, if there is anything in us, it is not our own; it is a gift of God. But if it is a gift of God, then it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt owed to love, then I must serve others with it, not myself. Thus my learning is not my own; it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe to them. My chastity is not my own; it belongs to those who commit sins of the flesh, and I am obligated to serve them through it by offering it to God for them, by sustaining and excusing them, and thus, with my respectability, veiling their shame before God and men, as Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:23 that those parts of the body that are less honorable are covered by those that are more honorable. Thus my wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. Thus my wealth belongs to the poor, my righteousness to the sinners. For these are the forms of

God of which we must empty ourselves, in order that forms of a servant may be in us (Phil 2:6), because it is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them, as though clothed with someone else's garment, not unlike the priest, when, on behalf of those standing about, he sacrifices in a ritual garb that does not belong to him. But even before men [sic] we must, with the same love, render them service against their detractors and those who are violent toward them; for this is what Christ did for us.<sup>18</sup>

What Bonhoeffer called vicarious representative action Luther had articulated and developed 400 years earlier. In my classes I refer to this idea as Luther's Ethic of the Cross. I'm sure I borrowed that phrase from someone else, but it is a proper description of how Luther understood the ethical life. Luther's fascination and almost exclusive devotion to the event of the crucifixion is the source of his ethical thinking, not a diversion from ethical reflection. When Luther engages in such thought he has "failed to take seriously moral crisis." When Bonhoeffer does it, he is a champion of modern ethics and a model for modern Christian life.

Yet, it is impossible to ignore the predictable consequences of Luther's attitudes concerning the Jews and his reaction to the uprising of the peasants. I am reminded of the words of Richard Marius, "Luther had no interest in leading a secular reformation of society. A man preoccupied with the horror of death, avid to believe in a Christ holding the key to resurrection and the life everlasting, was not made of revolutionary stuff."<sup>19</sup> Marius

18. LW 27.

19. Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1989), 419.

17. LW 31:304.



continues, "...it is difficult to find anything in Luther favoring practical organization of the abused to gain a better earthly life for themselves... Christ existed not to give us a better life here but to offer hope against the certainty of death."<sup>20</sup>

Though I personally find this assessment of Luther to be borderline ridiculous, I can also admit that Luther's actions throughout his life have fueled this sort of caricature. Though Marius may fail to see Luther's commitment to the oppressed of the world, they have ample evidence in several of the episodes of Luther's life to provide a legitimate critique of Luther. If one adds to that the interpretive lens of nineteenth and twentieth century understandings of the so-called "doctrine" of two kingdoms, and the resulting quietism of many who called themselves Lutheran, the suggestion that Bonhoeffer adds a corrective to Luther begins to make sense. Perhaps a trajectory

for further study includes a reassessment of the history of interpretation of Luther and his understanding of the relationship between the gospel and the political realm.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Evangelical Movement in Germany, I am excited by the possibilities of reimagining Luther, especially as we reconsider the contributions that sixteenth century Evangelicals have made in the ongoing task of thinking about the connection between faith and action. Bonhoeffer, like others, saw in Luther a cogent and beautiful understanding of the link between the doctrine of the atonement and the ethical life of the Christian. To borrow language from professors who first introduced me to Luther and Bonhoeffer so many moons ago, neither author developed his ideas in a theological vacuum. There exists a line between the two thinkers that is all the more clear when students of the great thinkers read them on their own terms.

20. Ibid., 427-428.



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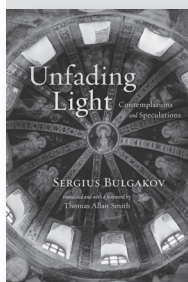
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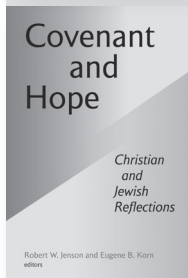
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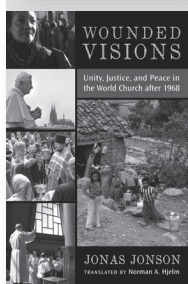
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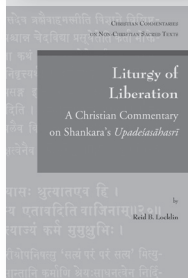
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# Book Reviews

***Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter.*** By Richard N. Longenecker. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6619-6. xxviii and 490 pages. Paper.

The length of this book indicates that it is a thorough review of the introductory questions on the epistle of Paul to the Romans. The bibliographies throughout the book are voluminous, an indication of the deep research that the author has undertaken. It is written in preparation for the commentary on Romans that Longenecker intends to write. He frequently points to this “forthcoming commentary proper.”

The present book has five parts with XI chapters:

Part One: Important Matters Largely Uncontested Today. Although in history there were voices denying Paul's authorship, there is no opposition today to Paul's authorship with the help of the amanuensis Tertius. However, it is questioned whether the original letter consisted of 14 or 15 or the present 16 chapters. Longenecker prefers, with Gamble, the 16 chapter hypothesis. As far as textual-critical matters are concerned, the omission of “at Rome” in 1:7 and 1:15 is not to be taken seriously. Other textual questions are concerning the grace benedictions and the doxology of the last chapter. While Gamble denies the Pauline authorship of the doxology (16:25–27), Longenecker accepts this too as Pauline. Paul wrote Romans after completing a significant ministry in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, probably in the late fifties, according to Longenecker in the winter of 57–58.

Part Two: Two Pivotal Issues. Before dealing with the addressees, Longenecker reports briefly the history of Rome and the presence of Jews and Judaism in Rome. The earliest reference to Jews living in Rome was in 139 B.C.E. (Longenecker uses B.C.). At this time, the Jews were for the first time

expelled from Rome. This happened again in 19 C.E. and in 49 C.E. under Claudius. Jewish funerary inscriptions point to the presence of Jews in Rome during all this time. Most likely, some Jews living at Rome became Christian believers and converted also some Gentiles to the Christian faith. The loose structure of the Jewish synagogues aided the Christian movement taking hold in Rome. When the Jews were expelled, the Christians had to establish their own identity. Were the Christians at Rome Jewish-Christians or Gentile-Christians? After discussing various views and by “Mirror-Reading,” Longenecker draws the conclusion that they were both, however, with a strong tie to the Jerusalem church, without being Judaizers. This strong tie to Jerusalem does not seem completely convincing. Longenecker rejects the views that the letter was primarily a theological treatise, an encyclical letter and other theories because he recognizes the epistolary character of Romans. In the letter frame, the purpose appears as Paul's planned mission to Spain and his desire to visit the Romans on the way in order to give them some “spiritual gift” and to seek their assistance for his further mission. There are other subordinate purposes: defense against criticism, exhortation concerning the disturbance reflected in 14:1–15:13, exhortation regarding their relation to the government (13:1–7).

Part Three: Conventions, Procedures, and Themes. Here, Longenecker discusses orality, such as acoustical orientation, chiasmic construction, and framing statements, some of which he finds in Romans. Then he turns to rhetorical conventions, also among the ancient rhetoricians. He finds many of these rhetorical features in Romans, but delays full analysis to his forthcoming commentary. The next subject is an analysis of epistolary conventions where he discusses the opening formulas and the closing features of the epistle. He detects epistolary features also throughout the letter, such as vocative, questions, disclosure formulas, etc. None of this is surprising. As far as Jewish and Jewish Christian procedures and themes are concerned, Longenecker points to the use of Old Testa-





ment scripture in Romans to support Paul's theological and ethical teachings.

Part Four: Textual and Interpretive Matters. Although some textual matters were discussed already in Part I, Longenecker devotes another section to this subject. He goes through the history of the textual criticism of the New Testament and praises the work of Kurt and Barbara Aland in this regard as a revolution. Is it really so revolutionary? After all, it builds closely on the work of Westcott and Hort and Tischendorf who already had considerable insight into the situation. However, Longenecker gives an accurate image of the textual situation of Romans. (On p. 274, the Codex Alexandrinus should be designated as A, not Aleph.) As major interpretive approaches prominent today, Longenecker discusses "Righteousness of God" and "Righteousness," "Justification" and "Faith," "In Christ" and "Christ by His Spirit in Us," "Faith of or in Jesus Christ," the "New Perspective" on Palestinian Judaism and Paul, "Honor" and "Shame," and "Reconciliation" and "Peace." Longenecker agrees with many other interpreters that *pistis Iesou Christou* should be understood as Christ's faithfulness which is not convincing to me.

Part Five: Focus, Structure, and Argument of Romans. The main reason Paul writes this letter is his wish to share a "spiritual gift" with them (1:11), referring to the letter itself as this gift. Then Longenecker analyzes parts of the letter (1:18–3:20; 3:21–4:25; 5–8), ending with specific proposals to understand the sections. He believes that in 1:18–4:25 Paul and the Jewish believers in Christ agree that believers are justified by the faithfulness of Christ (see above) and because of one's faith in him. Longenecker states that the spiritual gift that Paul wants to share is mainly to be found in chs. 5–8, the gospel that focuses on peace and reconciliation with God. In another chapter in this Part Five, Longenecker discusses the Structure and Argument of the letter; he believes these two subjects cannot be separated. The long salutation enunciates cryptically the subjects to be discussed. The Thanksgiving (1:8–12) reveals the two subjects: the exposition of his gospel and his intention to go to Spain.

The body section (1:13–15:32) contains four sections, surrounded by the body opening (1:13–15) and the body closing (15:14–32). Section I: Righteousness, Faithfulness, and Faith (1:16–4:25). Longenecker uses rhetorical terms in analyzing this section; the statements are agreed among Paul and the recipients. Section II: Peace, Reconciliation, and Life "in Christ" (5–8); Paul shares here his proclamation of the Christian gospel in his Gentile mission. Longenecker sees here the central theological thrust of the epistle. Section III: The Christian Gospel vis-a-vis God's Promises to Israel (9–11). This section is best understood in approaching it from a Jewish and Jewish-Christian remnant theology. The promises of God in 9:6–29 were addressed only to a part of Israel, the remnant. Section IV: Exhortations, General and Specific (12:1–15:13). Longenecker designates chapter 12 and 13:8–14 as general exhortations, presenting the Christian love ethic, with extensive dependence on the teachings of Jesus. 13:1–7 is a specific contextualization of how the Christians at Rome are to behave in their social and civic circumstances. 14:1–15:13 discusses the relations between "the strong" and "the weak."

The body closing consists of 15:14–16:27. As stated earlier, Longenecker accepts the integrity of the whole epistle.

The book is very thorough, including many references to earlier studies of Romans. Bibliographies are found for each part of the book and are comprehensive. There is an index of authors, and an index of Scripture and other ancient writings at the end of the book. I found it rather easy reading although it is somewhat repetitive. Some readers also might find him too conservative and not critical enough about certain matters. I found it annoying that Longenecker so frequently points to the commentary yet to be written. But we will look forward to the publication of this commentary with great expectation.

Wilhelm C. Linss  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago





***Preaching from Home: The Stories of Seven Lutheran Hymn Writers.*** By Gracia Grindal. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6501-4. xii and 3632 pages. Paper. \$32.00.

*Preaching from Home* is an engaging account of the lives and work of seven Scandinavian Lutheran women hymn writers who lived from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. The seventh hymn writer is the author herself, Gracia Grindal. The title provides a thumbnail of the thesis of the book. Each of the women lived in or was influenced by the “parsonage culture;” each as a hymn writer did her preaching from home.

A good history does much more than give us basic facts such as birth date, number of children, and death date. A good history puts the subject in context, and raises questions that transcend the limits of that context. This book is such a history.

Each chapter raised questions for this reviewer. This example will have to suffice. From Dorothe Engelbretsdatter (1634-1716) we learn about the “parsonage culture” of her time, and how her hymns were structured in the same way as Lutheran sermons of the period. And we ask: have we lost the idea of proclamation in our singing?

The other writers Grindal treats are Birgitte Boye (1742-1824), Berthe Aarflot (1795-1859), Lina Sandell Berg (1832-1903), Britt Hallqvist (1914-1997), and Lisbeth Andersen (1934- ). From them we learn about a woman’s “voice,” women in the Haugean revival, hymns for children, the place of humor in hymns, how to write for an age of doubt, and why we need new Christmas hymns.

Finally, from Grindal’s own work and words, we learn about the unique Lutheran perspective on hymns as preaching or proclamation. And we ask: what is a Lutheran hymn?

Gracia Grindal has written a book that reads quickly, that covers a lot of ground, and that causes the reader to ask questions that travel beyond the covers of the book. It should be of interest to anyone who writes,

chooses, or sings hymns. Highly recommended.

*Michael Krentz  
The Lutheran Theological Seminary  
at Philadelphia*

***Missional Preaching: Engage, Embrace, Transition.*** By Al Tizon. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012. ISBN-10:0-8170-1704-6. xxiv and 164. Paperback. \$16.99.

Publication of more than one hundred monographs in less than two decades illustrates the increasing interest in the missional church discourse. Theologians and ministers have been highlighting the missional character of the church and its implications on various aspects of the church’s life. Tizon’s volume is an insightful addition to this ongoing conversation.

In this book, Tizon persuasively argues that mission is integral to the church’s identity and that preaching plays a pivotal role in shaping that identity. He presents three “essentials” of missional preaching in the first section. They are: 1) Mission flows from and is grounded in the very being of God; 2) The Bible is wholly and thoroughly missional; 3) Worship and mission are inseparable.

In the second half, Tizon suggests what missional preaching should aim at. Preaching should prepare the church to authentically become part of the community in which she is located even while shaping the church into the alternative community God has called her to be. Missional preaching should aim at the holistic transformation of individuals, congregations, and communities. It should strive to shape God’s people along the contours of justice and reconciliation, inviting them to embrace an alternative lifestyle congruent with the kingdom values. It should cultivate shalom in this world of violence. Preaching should affirm the uniqueness of Christ. Tizon provides a sermon that meets each of these goals.

With his life experiences in two continents, Tizon offers valuable insights into





and critique of the dominant culture. This book is a welcome addition to the ongoing missional church conversation. Theologians, ministers, and lay leaders would find it to be a helpful resource. Given its clarity, it could also become a useful textbook for Sunday school classes.

James Taneti  
Campbell University Divinity School

## Briefly Noted

**Reading the New Testament for the First Time** by Ronald J. Allen (Eerdmans, \$16.00, ISBN 978-0-8028-6735-3) assumes the reader comes to the New Testament without much knowledge, but with a desire to know more about it. Its thirteen chapters orient one to the content, origins, major ideas, significant characters and the world of the New Testament. He makes full use of the conclusions of critical studies, provides numerous side bars with specific detailed information, and gives useful questions to stimulate discussion of what he proposes. All in all a successful guide for initial reading of the New Testament, this book deserves wide use in study groups.

Edgar Krentz  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

**Mothers of Promise. Women in the Book of Genesis.** By Tammi J. Schneider (Baker Academic, \$24). Schneider provides mini studies of more than twenty impressive women in the book of Genesis, using a feminist's eye and a close reading of the Hebrew text. She observes that the main role and function of women in Genesis concerns their capacity to bear children. Except for Mrs. Lot and Mrs. Potiphar, the role women play as wives is insignificant. Mrs. Potiphar is given the roughest time: "If it were up to her, she would be the only unfaithful wife in Genesis." It would have been interesting if Schneider had explored Gen 39:1 more carefully in Hebrew, for there we learn that Potiphar was a eu-

nuch. I am not saying that is an excuse for Mrs. Potiphar, but....

Ralph W. Klein  
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

**Great Prayers of the Old Testament.** By Walter Brueggemann (Westminster John Knox, \$15). Brueggemann provides incisive exegetical comments on prayers by eleven men and one woman from the Old Testament. As usual, the author is attuned to issues of (the misuse of) power and justice. Prayers for a transformed world like the ones he investigates counter the idolatry all around us that assumes human ultimacy, counter a pervasive sense of self-sufficiency, and are committed to a dialogic existence with God. Questions posed at the end of these studies are quite stimulating: How can we pray in the midst of our disobedience (Jonah)? When do we need to pause in order to pray (Nehemiah)? How can we call God to faithfulness (Daniel)? How can we turn our prayers into songs of wonder and astonishment (Hannah)?

Ralph W. Klein

James C. VanderKam's **The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Bible** (Eerdmans, \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-8028-6679-0) briefly introduces his reader to the scrolls. He then discusses Quman commentaries on earlier Old Testament and Jewish texts, draws conclusions about the scrolls' significance for deciding what texts are authoritative, evaluates their text-critical importance for establishing the texts of early Jewish literature (Jubilees, Enoch, Sirach, etc.), their value for understanding early Jewish sects, and finally discusses what they contribute to the interpretation of the Gospels, Acts and Paul. This clearly written text gives a surprising amount of significant information in a relatively short text (187 pages). The book is based on his *Speaker's* at Oxford University. Read it; you'll like it.

Edgar Krentz

In **Baptism in the Spirit: Luke-Acts and the Dunn Debate** (London: Lutterworth, 2012.





ISBN: 978-0-7188-9268-5), William Atkinson expands upon the Pentecostal doctrine of the subsequence of Spirit baptism. This contrasts with James Dunn's position that both Spirit and Water baptism are necessary for Christian conversion and thus a Christian must have experienced both, which he suggests is often occur concurrently with one another. Written from and for the Pentecostal community, this brief and accessible volume does not claim to irrefutably dispute Dunn's position, but traces the history of scholarship, noting the chinks in Dunn's argument and providing a well-reasoned and supported alternative.

Amy L. Allen  
Vanderbilt University

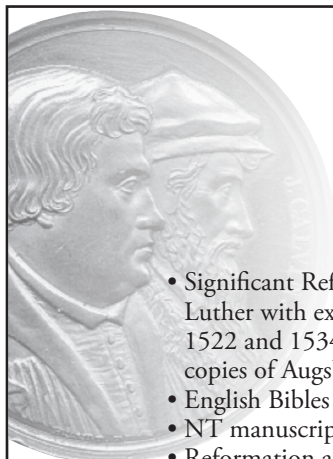
***Walking Where Jesus Walked: Worship in Fourth-Century Jerusalem***, by Lester Ruth, Carrie Steenwyk, and John D. Witvliet (ISBN: 978-0-8028-6476-5 Eerdmans, \$23.00) gives plans of Jerusalem, the Church of the Anastasis, and translations of fourth-century texts (Egeria's Diary, The Anaphora

[Communion liturgy], The Liturgy of St. James), and a table of liturgical Scripture readings for the year. They also include translations of four texts from Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem. Thus the editors present all the material for reconstructing Jerusalem worship. A concluding section gives guidelines for discussing this material in adult forums. A useful text to reconstruct worship six or seven generations after the resurrection.

Edgar Krentz

***The Handy Guide to New Testament Greek*** by Douglas S. Huffman (Kregel, \$16.99, ISBN 978-0-8254-2743-5) is a compact summary of New Testament Greek's morphology and syntax, with a detailed guide to diagramming sentences. Includes a bibliography of Greek resources. Helpful for a rapid review of Greek in traditional categories.

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A medal from 1817, commemorating the forcible unification of Lutheran and Calvinist churches (the Prussian Union)

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# Preaching Helps

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First Sunday of Advent to the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

## In and Out of Season

When Paul Bailie submitted the thought (and heart)-provoking reflections you will read in this edition of Preaching Helps, he quipped that it was a bit of a “psycho-somatic disconnect” to be sending in reflections on Advent when the temperatures were over 100 degrees. For those of us in the part of the world where we celebrate Advent and Christmas in the season one hymn-writer called “the bleak midwinter,” that humorous observation may ring a bell. Perhaps it may remind us of times when we celebrated a holy day out of sync with what was happening in its season: a cold and snowy Easter, an “unseasonably” warm Christmas.

In order to participate in this edition of Preaching Helps, Pastor Bailie had to think beyond the season in which he was living and ministering, stretching to encounter and embrace God’s word coming to him from a season on the far horizon. I once knew a pastor who spent a month of summer vacation reflecting on texts he would be preaching months from his vacation spot. I hope that having such a head start on some “far horizon” texts is a helpful discipline for all who undertake important opportunities to think “out of season” about the seasons of the church year. I hope it was so for Pastor Bailie, whose reflections have already been a blessing to me, and that this is true for all who read these entries in preparation for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany.

Of course, some out-of-season moments have nothing to do with discipline, planning, or preparation. As Richard Lischer puts it so hauntingly in *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, you can “secretly begin to date your life from a single telephone call.”<sup>1</sup> Your life can suddenly be discovered residing in unimagined and uncharted terrain, out of sync with all that was once planned and hoped. The texts for this season offer portraits of people confronted with earthshaking surprises or asked to prepare for them. We begin the new church year with both the reminder to get ready for the future and the reminder that there are events that may rock our anticipated futures beyond anything we could have imagined. These texts are our traveling companions in the both/and of the Christian life as *both* the commitment to prepare and watch *and* the trust that when we are in unexpected and life-altering terrain we are not alone.

Assisting us to encounter these traveling companions is a pastor who knows a considerable amount about both/and pastoral ministry. Paul Bailie is pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, Texas, a Spanish-speaking congregation near the United States-Mexico border. Perhaps the only ELCA pastor to preach in two differ-

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1. Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 7.



ent countries on any given Sunday, his ministry also includes Misión Luterana Cristo Rey, a preaching point in the rural outskirts of Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico. A graduate of Augustana College and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, he interned at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church of Manhattan and previously served Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in suburban San Antonio.

“Preach the word...in season and out of season...” is how I first learned 2 Timothy 4:2. May God bless your preaching ministry in this holy, still-surprising season of the church year, and may your preaching deeply remind your hearers that God in Christ comes to us no matter which kind of season it is.

**Kathleen D. (Kadi) Billman**

*Temporary Editor, Preaching Helps*



## First Sunday of Advent December 1, 2013

Isaiah 2:1–5

Psalms 122

Romans 13:11–14

Matthew 24:36–44

### First Reading

During Advent, four readings from Isaiah give visions of God's peace. Today's oracle, which also appears in Micah 4:1–3, describes a future time when Jerusalem is established as a center of religious and political life for all nations. It is a message of transformation and reconciliation for a people living in the reality of uncertainty and tension. During a time of suffering and pending conflict, it is an anticipation of a longed-for life together that is much more ideal. Walter Bruggemann suggests that this anticipatory nature of such prophesies is not unlike the "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>2</sup> Part of the anticipated vision of what is to come is that tools of war will become farm implements. It conveys the desire for a transformation from a violent way of life to one more agrarian and irenic. The passage ends with the people responding in an invitation to assemble in praise and to live in a transformed way, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD" (2:5). Likewise, Psalm 122 continues the themes of worship and peace. It is both a celebration of being in God's presence and a prayer of peace for Jerusalem.

In the epistle, Paul also presents an urgent hope of what is to come, comparing salvation to the dawn of a new day. With

strong contrasts between light and dark, night and day, sleeping and waking, this brief reading dwells in the anticipatory tension of hoping for what is to be while still living in what is now. More tension arises when read in the context of the entirety of Chapter 13, which includes instructions about being subject to governing authorities. A preacher using Isaiah 2 in order to invite worshipers into working toward peace may face difficulty when civil authorities are, in fact, the ones preventing the swords from becoming plowshares.

The key theme, then, is that humans are not the ones who bring about the reality of God's new vision. In Matthew, Jesus, warning about keeping awake and watching, says, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (24:36). He affirms the uncertainty of trying to predict eschatological events. It is a passage full of surprise and separation. In the ordinary daily tasks of field or kitchen work, people will be divided unexpectedly. It is a call to be prepared and to be ready.

### Pastoral Reflection

When people who do not live near the Mexican border find out that several of my parishioners and I go to Mexico every Sunday for worship at a preaching point in Piedras Negras, the first reaction is usually of concern about safety and violence. My truthful—though perhaps flippant—answer is that we have only canceled worship once because of nearby gunshots. Although I have rarely felt unsafe, I know that violence is a reality. I have parishioners whose family members have disappeared. One person's relatives even received a delivery from one of the drug cartels of their loved one's limbs in a black plastic garbage bag on their door-

2. Walter Bruggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 24.



step. We indeed live in a world that longs for reconciliation. Violence exists, not just on the Mexican border or in Jerusalem, where the psalmist prays for peace. Annual protests during Thanksgiving weekend at Fort Benning in Georgia oppose United States military involvement in Latin America. This month marks one year since the bloody carnage at a school in Newtown, Connecticut. We certainly live in a world in which not all of the swords have yet been turned into plowshares.

What, then, is our deep desire? For what are we longing and waiting? In Jean Shepherd's classic holiday story, the young boy Ralphie spends the weeks leading up to Christmas fervently hoping, with eager anticipation, for an "official Red Ryder carbine action two hundred shot range model air rifle."<sup>3</sup> It shapes his every thought; his new gun is all on which he can focus. He daydreams about it. He writes a theme about it. His longing and yearning impact his life. Whereas Ralphie hopes for owning a weapon, the passage from Isaiah envisions a time where, hearing the teachings of God, the nations of the world turn their weapons into agricultural instruments. What would it look like for the object of our longing to be, instead of an air rifle, a world of peace?

In Isaiah's time, Israel was caught between the great powers of its time: to the south and west, Egypt; to the north and east, Babylon and Assyria. It was conflict and uncertainty just waiting to happen. Isaiah's message is that God guides, warns, challenges, and liberates them, and God reaches out to all the peoples of the world. What great powers are we caught between, in our lives and congregations?

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3. Jean Shepherd, *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 24.

When thinking about the violent world in which we live, it could be tempting to turn a sermon on these texts into either an angry lament against gun violence or into a fear-based admonition to change. Rather, it can be a gospel invitation, encouraging listeners to prayerfully be alert for God's movement in their lives and communities. Wait. Watch. Hope. PAB

## Second Sunday of Advent December 8, 2013

Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalms 72:1–7, 18–19

Romans 15:4–13

Matthew 3:1–12

### First Reading

This Sunday begins two weeks in a row of texts about John the Baptist. In Matthew 3, John is in the wilderness of Judea talking about the nearness of the kingdom of heaven (*basilea ton hourinon*), and calling on people to repent. This kingdom is not necessarily a place, but rather the living out of God's reign in the world. John speaks with strong language, comparing Jewish religious leaders to poisonous snakes and inviting them to change how they live. Images of highway construction in desert areas serve as a call to preparation and change. Appeals to ancestral heritage and links to the patriarch Abraham are not going to be helpful. John warns that trees not bearing good fruit will be cut down and burnt.

Isaiah also has branches and trees. He's writing to people of Judah living in fear of the Assyrian army. In the previous chapter, Isaiah describes how Assyria's power will be chopped down like a tree. "The remnant of the trees of his forest



will be so few that a child can write them down" (10:19). Yet even in the midst of war and destruction, in Judah a new tree will bear fruit. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (11:1). Remembering back into Israel's national origin story, Jesse is the father of David, the little shepherd boy who becomes king. Isaiah is remembering the past, but hoping for the future. He is hoping for a leader in the royal family dynasty of King David. It is a longing for stability, strength, and righteousness. Isaiah hopes for a new era. In the midst of war-torn landscapes, barren times, and uncertain promises, he tells of something new sprouting up. Like a signal flag for the nations, a sign will announce peace.

Paul mentions this root of Jesse in Romans 15:12 as part of an admonition to welcome one another. It is a message of inclusion for both Jews and Gentiles, showing that hope in God's joy and peace is a hope in something inclusive and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. For Paul, Jesus' servanthood is a sign of God's glory and promise.

The psalmist also prays for transformation in the world, on behalf of those who are marginalized and who live in poverty. "May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor" (72:4). The transformation that is happening is not simple human action, but is God's doing.

### Pastoral Reflection

As my congregation has been crossing the international bridge into Mexico every week for worship, it has become a tradition for all those riding in our church van to recite aloud the quotation from Mexican President Benito Juárez that is painted on a mural near the customs checkpoint in Piedras Negras: "*Entre los individuos, como*

*entre las naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz,*" meaning "Between individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of another is peace." Although Juárez was not always an ally of organized religion, his quotation pushes us to think about relationships, both personally and globally. What might this respect look like between wolves and lambs, calves and lions, Palestinians and Israelis, those donating Christmas presents to charity programs and those receiving the gifts?

The Greek word John the Baptist uses for repent, *metanoia*, literally means to change one's mind. It is a sense of turning around and reorienting ourselves. Advent is a time of such a reorientation. Yet, what are we turning around to see? Presents and tinsel? A babe in a manger? Isaiah's vision points us to God's transforming act in the world. God's reign of radical love is stretched to include all creation. Even the animals are practicing reconciliation. In this peaceable kingdom, predator and prey get all snugly together. We watch for little kids to play with snakes, and for scary carnivores to become vegetarians.

A visual image to add to a sermon might be to put a large tree branch somewhere in the sanctuary, inviting the assembly to wonder what it means. One year when preaching on these texts, I hauled a branch over from the brush pile on the western edge of my suburban congregation's campus. It had been a long process to work on clearing up that fence line in an effort for the congregation to become more welcoming to folks in our neighborhood. Barbed wire and shrubbery made sense when the building was surrounded by cow pasture, but not now when we have houses and families next door. What new opportunities for transformation and turning around are emerging in your communities? How can we live into a vision of transformation and



reconciliation? How would you see the tree? Is it an image of law, pointing us to our sinfulness and inviting us to repent? Maybe. Or is it an image of gospel, proclaiming good news of what God is up to? PAB

## Third Sunday of Advent December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35:1–10

Psalms 146:5–10

Luke 1:46b–55 (Alternate)

James 5:7–10

Matthew 11:2–11

### First Reading

In Matthew, we see that Jesus emerges as something more than a prophet. Jesus' role is different than that of John the Baptist or the Hebrew prophets like Isaiah. This passage starts with John in prison, after being arrested by Herod Antipas, questioning about Jesus and his status as Messiah. Jesus invites John's disciples to tell about the deeds and activities of transformation that they have seen. The focus is on the greatness of Jesus, yet Matthew also emphasizes the promises of God's reign, pointing out that "the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (11:11). Jesus performs acts of restoration and compassion not unlike the works of God described in Psalm 146. Blind people see. Outsiders of all sorts become insiders. God brings to the center those often on the edges—widows, orphans, strangers.

An alternative psalmody is Mary's song in Luke 1:46b–55. This text, the Magnificat, is Mary's response in the midst of her pregnancy. She poetically and prophetically recognizes the economic and social transformation that

God does in the world. It highlights the relationship that God has with outsiders. This becomes a text that resonates with people organizing and struggling against oppression and poverty. In the spirit of lifting up marginalized voices, Ernesto Cardenal, a priest serving in the remote Nicaraguan archipelago of Solentiname, invited responses to the biblical text from the *campesinos*, or peasants, in his parish. One of the women there noted, "She [Mary] recognizes liberation... We have to do the same thing. Liberation from sin, that is, from selfishness, from injustice, from misery, from ignorance—from everything that's oppressive."<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Mary and John the Baptist demonstrate a sense of urgency and haste, James gives a call to patience and perseverance. In part of a chapter giving strong warning to rich oppressors of low-wage workers, James uses agricultural imagery of a farmer planting a crop. This text encourages strengthening hearts and having what Elsa Tamez calls a "militant, indomitable patience that awaits opportune moments."<sup>5</sup>

Isaiah presents a vision of abundance in the midst of scarcity. In this oracle describing the return of the exiled Israelites back to Jerusalem, what was once a desolate wilderness becomes a place of bounty and growth, blossoming with crocuses and streaming with flowing water. These images of verdant creation provide a sense of God's promise of restoration and new life. God will provide a way back, without the danger of lions or beasts. It

4. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, trans. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976, 2010), 16.

5. Elsa Tamez, *The Scandalous Message of James: Faith without Works Is Dead* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 46.



becomes an anticipatory hope of what is to come. A desolate war zone and disaster area grows with new life like a garden.

### Pastoral Reflection

The abundance of blooming flowers in the wilderness described by Isaiah is similar to the new life blossoming in the midst of desolation from C.S. Lewis' novel, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The land of Narnia has been in eternal winter by the evil White Witch. It is "always winter and never Christmas," they say.<sup>6</sup> Snow—everywhere. Aslan, the lion and sort of Christ-like figure, is on his way back to Narnia. The White Witch and her dwarf slave have taken a boy, Edmund, prisoner. As they are walking, the snow under their feet starts to become grass. Celandines, crocuses, and primroses start to bloom. Sunshine appears. Green leaves sprout on the trees. The dwarf suddenly stops and says, "This is no thaw. This is *spring*. What are we to do? Your winter has been destroyed, I tell you! This is Aslan's doing."<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, another powerful story about new life sprouting up where it isn't expected is the Mexican story of Juan Diego and his encounter with the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>8</sup> Juan Diego is traditionally commemorated on December 9 and the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12. Both are conspicuously absent from the calendar of the church year. According to the legend, Juan Diego was a peasant living in Tepeyac, a poor farming area outside of

Mexico City. One day, he saw a woman in the light, with facial features like his and speaking his own native language. She sent him to go all the way into Mexico City and tell the bishop to build a church in Tepeyac. The bishop laughed, not taking Juan Diego seriously. Later, the woman appeared again at the top of a hill. Juan Diego was surprised to see the hill covered with beautiful red roses, blooming even in the cold winter. She told him to take these roses to the bishop as a sign. Juan Diego gathered them up into his tilma, and took them to the bishop. When he opened the poncho, the flowers fell to the floor and the Virgin's image appeared on Juan Diego's poncho. The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a story of God's message blooming in unexpected places and sprouting up with abundance and solidarity among those who know all too well the struggle of oppression.

These biblical texts, with their emphasis on unexpected growth and transformation, yearn for preachers to proclaim them with eyes toward the unexpected presence of God in their respective local communities and contexts. What beautiful crocus is growing in the wilderness around you? How are the hungry being filled with good things in your neighborhood? PAB

### Fourth Sunday of Advent December 22, 2013

Isaiah 7:10–16  
Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19  
Romans 1:1–7  
Matthew 1:18–25

### First Reading

In today's scripture we meet somebody who is stuck in a difficult situation without any really easy way out. It's not clear what he

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Harper Collins, 1950, 1994), 19.

7. *Ibid.*, 122.

8. For various Protestant perspectives on Guadalupe apparitions, see Maxwell E. Johnson, *American Magnificat: Protestants on Mary of Guadalupe* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010).



should do next. He doesn't really want it, but he's about to get a divine message. God is about to intervene: A young woman is about to have a child, and will name him Immanuel. Of course, it's obvious who I'm talking about—Ahaz.

Many readers would have thought this referred to Joseph. It's difficult for many Christians in the twenty-first century to hear this promise from Isaiah 7:14, alluded to in Handel's "Messiah" and countless Advent hymns, without thinking of Joseph and his challenging situation of being in relationship with a woman expecting a child that isn't his. Whereas Joseph's story is one of obedience, the story of Ahaz is one of insubordination.

Ahaz was the king of Judah, the southern kingdom, about 800 years before Jesus. He was the king of Judah in a time of lots of political uncertainty during the Syro-Ephraimite War. Jerusalem (in the south) was about to be attacked by Israel (in the north) and Syria, working together. They were trying to persuade Judah, led by King Ahaz, to join in their alliance against Assyria—the huge military and political powerhouse of the time.

Ahaz, however, was thinking about playing the old "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" game and aligning himself and Judah with Assyria. He was playing politics. He had scary stuff on both sides. It was daunting, frightening, and uncertain. Yet the message of Isaiah was that God was in control.

Like Ahaz, Joseph was in a difficult situation without easy answers. The difficulty came not in the form of military invasions and political strategy, but in the honor/shame society of the first century. As an alleged participant in adultery, Mary would have potentially brought shame to her family. Killing her could have restored honor. Joseph could have made her pregnancy public, or he could have kept it a

secret. Unlike Ahaz, Joseph did not rely on selfish desires nor an amplified sense of security. He trusted in God, following rather than protesting God's instruction. Matthew J. Marohl points out an important Matthean theme in this Joseph story: "From expected death comes unexpected new life."<sup>9</sup>

Obedience in the faith also becomes a theme in the reading from Romans. Paul, introducing himself to the Roman community, gives a summary of doctrinal understanding, declaring Jesus to be the Son of God, bringing grace and apostleship.

### Pastoral Reflection

By this point in the Advent season, many congregations are ready to start celebrating Christmas with carols, poinsettias, and pageants. A tension develops between the celebrating and the waiting; the incomplete and the fulfilled; the unknown and the revealed. These texts are alive with such a tension: What could have happened to Mary? What was Joseph's best choice? How can Israel live in peace? What happens if the delicate wartime balance is disrupted? Where is God in all of this?

The similarities and differences between Ahaz and Joseph provide the preacher with many opportunities for asking difficult questions: What does it mean to fully trust in God? How does a righteous person make a decision about life in the midst of death?

A sermon on these texts may be a time to lift up the stories of people whose lives are not unlike those of Ahaz and Joseph—bounded by daunting challenges, surrounded by scary possibilities, stymied by almost uncertain odds. What stories or testimonies are in your local contexts?

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9. Matthew J. Marohl, *Joseph's Dilemma: "Honor Killing" in the Birth Narrative of Matthew* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2008), 71.



The preacher might do well to resist the temptation to turn these lessons into a speculative lesson on reproductive biology. Centuries after the Isaiah text, Matthew uses this text (actually a Greek translation of the Hebrew, with *parthenos*, “virgin” instead of “young woman”) to talk about the upcoming birth of Jesus. Most likely, Isaiah was not directly talking about Jesus, although his message was urgent, pressing, and contextual for the people of Judah. Prophetic literature is full of all sorts of symbolic meanings and signs. Before a little kid is able to eat solid foods and know right from wrong, bad stuff is going to happen. Of course it does. The attack against Assyria failed. This led to more turmoil, more war, more “what happens next?”

The important thing in Isaiah’s message, as well as Matthew’s is the symbolic name—Immanuel. God with us. Even though Ahaz made some foolish mistakes—making alliances, trusting himself instead of God—God is still with God’s people. God-with-us doesn’t just happen at Christmas. God is with God’s people over and over and over and over again. We see that in the Hebrew Bible when the Israelites keep making mistakes. We see that in our lives when we find comfort in the midst of our suffering. We see that on the cross. Immanuel is not just a one-time-deal. God keeps being with us. PAB

## Christmas Eve December 24, 2013

Isaiah 9:2–7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11–14

Luke 2:1–14[15–20]

### First Reading

“The people who walked in darkness

have seen a great light,” says the prophet Isaiah, living a few centuries before Jesus, in a time that likely seemed as dark and dismal as could be. Isaiah is speaking to people in Jerusalem who had lobbied for joining up with Syria and Samaria with war against Assyria. He has told them that this will lead to distress and darkness, with the gloom of anguish. Hunger and rage will rule the land. However, Isaiah also brings them the promise of redemption and a reversal of the world as it is. He gets them ready for a change of how things are. It’s a message of a new leader being born—a king in the line of David. The war and the despair of the present age will be replaced with a reign of justice and righteousness.

Psalms 96 and the epistle are readings that, though likely not the primary preaching text, add an energy and perspective to complement the glorious proclamation from Isaiah and the action-packed Lucan narrative. The psalmist uses many emotion-packed phrases, full of majesty and splendor, singing a new song unto God. The reading from Titus, with its mentioning of God’s grace training us to “renounce impiety and worldly passions,” could serve as a counter to the materialism and commercialism that many infuse into this season.

Christmas television specials, children’s holiday pageants, and beloved hymns often harmonize the accounts from more than one Gospel, rather than letting each book tell its own story. For example in “The First Noel” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #300), the shepherds “looked up and saw a star shining in the east beyond them far.” That is combining Matthew’s magi story with Luke’s shepherd narrative. Unique to Luke are the angels singing, shepherds in the fields, the manger, the census, and no room at the inn.

In Luke 2, Mary and Joseph probably



did not come across a blinking neon “no vacancy” sign at a motel like we know them today. They were likely staying with friends or extended family. Houses in the ancient world often had two levels—an upper one where people gathered, and a lower one for the animals. They delivered the baby down with the animals, away from the crowd and commotion of the upper room. This word for upper room, *kataluma*, is here somewhat confusingly translated “inn,” also appears in Luke 22:11 to describe where Jesus and his disciples share the Passover meal.

### Pastoral Reflection

The preacher’s challenge on Christmas is to resist the urge to be cutesy, dramatic, or overly profound. The biblical texts themselves are powerful testimonies of God’s entry into the world. I offer two starting points for thinking about telling the Christmas story: food and fear.

Many families and cultures celebrate Christmas with various unique food traditions. What customs are part of your congregation’s heritage? My Norwegian-American grandmother would make lefse and krumkake. My Mexican congregation celebrates *Las Posadas*, reenacting the journey of Mary and Joseph as they search for lodging. After peregrinating from house to house with large statues of the Holy Family, we return to the church building for a celebratory dinner of tamales and champurrado. It is an opportunity to remember the humility of Jesus’ birth and to celebrate the welcome of intentional hospitality.

Luke takes great effort to bring the plot to the little village of Bethlehem, making a connection between Jesus and the ancient legacy of King David. In Hebrew, the word “Bethlehem” means “house of bread”—an agricultural place for storing food supplies.

And in Bethlehem, the house of bread, we, too, find that which nurtures and feeds us. In our uncertainty and hopelessness, like Jesus’ and David’s foremother Ruth gleaning in the fields, we too, find a grain there in Bethlehem.

Fear becomes another major Christmas theme. Like Mary and Zechariah earlier in Luke, the shepherds are terrified upon encountering angels. The angel commands them, “Do not be afraid” (2:10). These agricultural workers on the fringes of society receive a visit not from just one angel, but from a whole heavenly host—an angelic army. However, the shepherds break Mary and Zechariah’s pattern in that they don’t sing a song in response. They are sung to—glory and peace. Their response is to go—go to Bethlehem and see the baby. Like the African American spiritual says, “Rise up, shepherd, and follow,” they rise up from fear.

Fear is simply a symptom that a Savior is needed. Bethlehem at the time of Jesus was a war-torn village under the control of a distant imperial government. It was not an easy place. Many people lived in poverty. People had to register for the census so they could join the army or pay taxes. It was a time of economic uncertainty, political turmoil, and great fear.

In this way, Bethlehem is not too unlike our lives in this century, impacted by terror alerts, racial strife, rising housing and insurance costs. Our world is not an easy place. Even while we celebrate today, there may be some very difficult questions on our minds—

What is the diagnosis going to be? When will the check clear? What will the future be like for the children? PAB



## First Sunday after Christmas December 29, 2013

Isaiah 63:7–9

Psalms 148

Hebrews 2:10–18

Matthew 2:13–23

### First Reading

Just a few days after Christmas, we hear a version of the Christmas narrative that is very different from the other three Gospel writers. John starts off with the abstract, yet profound, “in the beginning was the word” passage. Luke has the familiar shepherds, angels, and manger scene with “good news of great joy for all the people.” Mark doesn’t really have a Jesus birth narrative at all. Matthew has an international political thriller.

The story of the flight to Egypt and associated journeying, is urgent, dramatic, and intriguing. Pagan astrologers from the East—magi—had followed a star and have come to pay homage to Jesus. King Herod becomes the ultimate—but very malevolent—Christmas Grinch, stealing not the presents from the Whos in Whoville, but stealing the innocent lives of children around Bethlehem. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee to Egypt when Herod is about to search and destroy. Egypt, which was a place of slavery, injustice, and persecution in Exodus, becomes a place of respite and protection. The Holy Family is on the run from the despotic deeds of Herod, an earthly leader with a deep desire for more earthly power. Seeking asylum, warned in Joseph’s dream, Jesus becomes a refugee.

With the verse mentioning Rachel weeping for her children, Matthew is taking us back into the Hebrew Bible and connecting Jesus with the past. This story of a man named Joseph, messages

in a dream, Egypt, traveling away from oppression, an out-of-control monarch, and baby boys being killed, sounds familiar, with shades of Genesis and Exodus. And Matthew’s quotation from Jeremiah also brings up images of Israel in exile, away from the homeland, some 500 years before Jesus. Rachel, one of the early matriarchs, weeps because her descendants, the people of Israel, have suffered from war and violence.

Because of the violent and emotionally sensitive nature of the Matthew text, a prudent preacher would not likely read it aloud in public worship without reflecting on the events of the narrative and making that text about the slaughter of innocent children the primary preaching text over the other readings. Nevertheless, Isaiah 63:7–9 emphasizes that it is not human activity that saves, but rather God, who shows *hesed*. This “steadfast love” was present with Israel even in times of great sorrow. The epistle reading from Hebrews foreshadows Good Friday and uses language of sacrifice and atonement. It is a text emphasizing Jesus’ solidarity with humanity, suffering together with us in order to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (2:15).

### Pastoral Reflection

Today’s story of the refugee Jesus fleeing the wrath of Herod is one that part of me wishes weren’t there. We would often rather not hear stories like this. It’s easier to jump ahead from the shepherds and the angels and the eggnog and the presents to the lights and stars and “Shine, Jesus, Shine” of Epiphany. Yet it’s a story we *need* to hear, because Christmas comes in the midst of a suffering world. It’s a reminder of all the innocent victims, then and today. It’s a reminder of our need for a savior. It’s a story that reminds us just



how much our world really needs the joy and celebration of Christmas.

This biblical narrative of a family fleeing danger and oppression could well be put into dialogue with modern accounts of people traveling long journeys for new lives away from persecution and economic hardship. My pastoral conversations with families on both sides of the Mexican border about their experiences with checkpoints, border patrol agents, and the immigration system make me wonder about Jesus and his family. If Mary and Joseph were fleeing to the United States instead of Egypt, I wonder what their process would be. If they were to be picked up by federal agents while trying to wade across the Rio Grande, they would likely be put in a detention center, often a private, for-profit jail. Couples would be separated by gender. A young child, like Jesus, could well end up in foster care.

Jesus comes as a child. Jesus knows what it is like to be one of us. The carol “Away in a Manger” prays it well:

Bless all the dear children in your tender care,

And fit us for heaven to live with you there (*ELW* #277).

What would it look like for all the dear children to be blessed—even the undocumented children, children with handicaps, children with ADHD, children living in poverty? A sermon on this Sunday may be a time to lift up efforts to help children and victims of injustice. How does your congregation relate to the work of such agencies as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services? Does your parish have in place policies to protect children, like background checks for those who volunteer with youth?

This is a text of solidarity. Jesus doesn’t just say nice things about refugees. He

doesn’t just write a check to agencies that help refugees. He becomes one. He enters the broken world we live in and shares in our human suffering. I see Jesus functioning like a new Moses—a little child, saved from genocide in Egypt—ready to lead the people to liberation. Jesus gets saved so that he can save us. PAB

## Second Sunday after Christmas January 5, 2014

Jeremiah 31:7–14

Psalms 147:12–20

Ephesians 1:3–14

John 1:[1–9] 10–18

### First Reading

The text assigned from Jeremiah ends just before the verse about Rachel weeping in Ramah that is quoted from Matthew 2:18 in the previous Sunday’s readings. Today’s text is part of a larger section describing the return of Israelites from exile. It is a story of homecoming and celebration after the isolation and feelings of abandonment from being exiled in Babylon. God brings about transformation and newness, turning mourning into joy. Weeping and consolation make way for dancing and merriment.

The sense of being God’s children is expanded in the first chapter of Ephesians. There is imagery of adoption and inheritance. The writer describes “every spiritual blessing” (1:3), including being adopted, receiving grace, forgiveness of trespasses. In verse 10, God gathers up “all things” (*ta panta*). This implies something universal and cosmic. The blessed choosing in Christ happened “before the foundation of the world” (1:4).

The immensity of Christ across time that is developed in Ephesians is also a



major theme in the prologue of John. This incarnational Christmas story contains neither shepherds nor magi. Rather, it is more universal and abstract. The adoption themes of Ephesians complement John's assertion about the "power to become children of God" (1:12). The preacher has the option of beginning at verse 10 or at verse 1. Reading the complete pericope, especially if it wasn't read on Christmas Eve during candle lighting, gives the opportunity for the preacher to put into context some powerful images of Christ's incarnation: Word, light, life, flesh, world, and darkness.

### Pastoral Reflection

To focus on the Word being made flesh, preachers may want to reflect on some of the ways in which God has been present among the poor in their communities. I remember sharing some such stories after coming back from internship at a bilingual and multicultural congregation with a shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth and a center for immigrants on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Another pastor, serving in a large suburban congregation, quipped, "I would love to do urban ministry someday, but I don't think I could handle the commute." It seemed unfathomable that he would imagine living in an urban neighborhood.

In 1975, Wayne Gordon, a Chicago pastor highly involved with Christian community development, made a major life-change in order to more fully understand the people he served. Relocating to the community became a sort of incarnational ministry. Gordon moved with his family into the Chicago neighborhood of North Lawndale, a place with high crime rates, decreased government services, and increased white flight. In Gordon's words: By relocating, a person will understand most clearly the real problems facing the

poor; and then he or she may begin to look for real solutions. For example, if a person ministering in a poor community has children, one can be sure that person will do whatever possible to ensure that the children of the community get a good education. Relocation transforms "you, them, and theirs" to "we, us, and ours." Effective ministries plant and build communities of believers that have a personal stake in the development of their neighborhoods.<sup>10</sup>

In this Christmas season, we discover Christ as the ultimate re-locator. Jesus doesn't live in heaven and commute down to earth, relaxing at home on the weekends. Jesus comes to earth and stays. Jesus has a personal stake in our life and our salvation by becoming one of us. It's total solidarity, not just with humanity, but with all creation.

In James Weldon Johnson's creative retelling of the Genesis creation story, God brings life into the world:

This Great God,  
Like a mammy bending over her baby,  
Kneeling down in the dust  
Toiling over a lump of clay  
Till He shaped it in His own image;  
Then into it He blew the breath of life,  
And man became a living soul.<sup>11</sup>

And now, on Christmas, the word becomes flesh, and God enters our human story. Jesus himself is a living soul. John's Gospel begins with the beginning, and ends with an explanation: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if

10. [http://www.cdda.org/xm\\_client/client\\_documents/Library/theologyofministry.pdf](http://www.cdda.org/xm_client/client_documents/Library/theologyofministry.pdf)

11. James Weldon Johnson, "The Creation," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922).



every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). The Word cannot be contained in a book, so the Word becomes flesh and lives among us. PAB

## Baptism of our Lord January 12, 2014

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalms 29

Acts 10:34–43

Matthew 3:13–17

### First Reading

Isaiah poetically speaks about the role of God’s servant, which has been variously interpreted as an individual, or as the entire nation of Israel. At any rate, God’s spirit (*ruah*) is on the servant, who, as a light to the nations, will bring about justice. It’s an image of liberation and newness. “Former things have come to pass” (42:9). God’s role as creator is also highlighted, with God stretching out the heavens and spreading out the earth (42:5).

Fulfilling righteousness is part of the reason for Jesus being baptized in Matthew’s account of the events in the Jordan River. After Jesus emerges from the water, there is a celestial event with the skies opening up and a voice naming him as a beloved son. Jesus comes up from the water. He doesn’t stay in the Jordan. It is after he gets up out of the water that the Spirit descends and he is named as God’s beloved. This scene of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River is the start of his public ministry. After that, he goes out and preaches, teaches, and heals people.

In being baptized, Jesus shows his humanity. Jesus comes on out to meet

the desert preacher, John. They go down to the river and John baptizes Jesus. This is more than an afternoon dip in the ol’ watering hole. God is at work here. John brings Jesus into the water, but it’s God who says, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:17). The theme of God’s voice is also present in Psalm 29, upon the waters and breaking down forests.

The second reading from Acts is part of a conversation that Peter has with Cornelius, a Roman centurion, after they have both had unique visions that bring them together—Cornelius of an angel, and Peter of something like a sheet being lowered down from heaven with all sorts of animals—both ritually clean and unclean. Peter and Cornelius meet each other and a brief pastoral care conversation takes place. Peter gives a brief summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who he declares as Lord of all, explaining how this message diffused originally from Galilee. The movement of the Holy Spirit is an essential part of this story. Cornelius’ subsequent baptism is important in the missional story in Acts because it is an example of a Gentile embracing the message of Jesus, showing that God’s work in the world crosses all sorts of human boundaries.

### Pastoral Reflection

The Baptism of our Lord could be approached with an ecological perspective, thinking about the cleansing, sustaining, and life-giving aspects of water, drawing on imagery in Isaiah and in Psalm 29 of God as creator. In all the rivers, streams, glaciers, and Evian bottles on this planet, there is a finite amount of water. No new water ever gets created; it is simply redistributed in an endless water cycle of precipitation, seepage, runoff, and evaporation. The molecules in the water



with which you brushed your teeth this morning could very well have been the same water molecules that were in the Jordan nearly two millennia ago. In the incarnation, Jesus became a part of the human creation story and shared in the human experience. Jesus became wet.

Jesus' wetness could also provide the preacher with an opportunity to reflect on Jesus' solidarity with those most vulnerable in society. In my context along the United States-Mexico border, being wet, or in Spanish, *mojado*, has a very specific, and often derogatory meaning. "Wetback" is used as an offensive phrase to describe people of Mexican descent, thinking of people who enter the United States by way of the Rio Grande. A few years ago, border patrol agents near Eagle Pass, Texas, found a life-sized statue of the crucified Christ floating in the Rio Grande. Not only was his back wet, but his whole body. Nobody knew where he came from or how he ended up in the river; this Jesus was truly undocumented. This statue of the Undocumented Christ is now on display in the chapel of a local Roman Catholic parish, Our Lady of Refuge Church, as a symbol of God identifying with those who struggle and long for justice and new life.<sup>12</sup> Jesus becomes *mojado*, wet with the waters of baptism.

Theologically, immigration could be a helpful metaphor for thinking about the hospitality God shows us in baptism. In the political arena of recent years, there's been lots of talk about papers and documents and who has what documents and who doesn't. People get put into categories of documented and undocumented. As sinful human beings, we are all sort of like *mojado* wetbacks in the kingdom of God. We have no rights to enter, and we

don't deserve full participation. Yet God welcomes us. God invites us, giving us full amnesty. Baptism is more than deferred action. It is a fresh start and a new beginning. In this terrestrial journey, we are all on temporary visas because our true citizenship is in the kingdom of God (see also Ephesians 2:19). Our baptismal certificate is document enough. Even if we can't find the old paper baptismal certificate, it's the water and God's word that names us as God's child. We are set apart, drenched with God's love and claimed as God's beloved. PAB

## Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 19, 2014

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalms 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

### First Reading

In this servant song from Isaiah 49, the prophet is speaking in first person and recognizes an intimate connection with God that crosses the limit of time. God is a life-giver and name-caller. "The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb (*rechem*) he named me" (49:1). When the Hebrew language speaks about the womb, the same root is used for the 'cord for compassion' (*rachamin*). To talk about God as compassionate is to talk about God as womb-like. Even though the servant was called before birth, there is still a sense of struggle and denial. Like so many of those whom God calls (i.e., Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah), this called servant protests, suggesting that his work's purpose has not come to fruition. Yet God responds in this dialogue,

12. <http://www.omiworld.org/content.asp?catID=3&artID=1201>



affirming that the servant indeed has an important task: restoring Israel and being a light to the nations.

Paul writes to the church in Corinth, starting his letter with a salutation and thanksgiving for God's grace given to them. Paul describes the Corinthians as being enriched in speech and knowledge, and not lacking in any spiritual gift. As the text of the letter continues in subsequent chapters, the amount of conflict and discord in this faith community becomes revealed. Yet Paul still begins his message by giving thanks for them (even calling them sanctified) and by emphasizing God's graces for that community.

The Gospel text for today is one of identity and invitation. Although John's Gospel lacks an account of Jesus' actual baptism (unlike the Matthean passage from the previous week), John the Baptist identifies the work of the Spirit in Jesus, describing Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This makes a connection between Jesus and the Passover story in Exodus 12. After Jesus is declared the Lamb of God, two of John's disciples follow Jesus. The word Jesus uses when he asks them where they are staying is the Greek verb *meno*, a term frequently used in John to mean "abide" or "remain." That the disciples remained with Jesus implies that they had a familiar and intimate connection in his presence.

### Pastoral Reflection

The idea of naming is a powerful theme throughout the readings. Isaiah speaks about God's prenatal naming practices. John the Baptist names Jesus as the Lamb of God. Jesus gives Simon a rock-like new name. Names are important. Sometimes I feel like an incompetent pastor when I go to the information desk at the hospital and I discover that I don't actually know my parishioner's full name. Even

after two years of serving in a Spanish-speaking congregation, I am just barely starting to figure out the intricate system of nicknames and multiple surnames. Many common first names have a more informal version used by friends and family. *Guadalupe* is *Lupe* or *Lupita*; *Francisco* is *Pancho*; *Ignacio* is *Nacho*. Even if your pastor may not get your name right, God does. What does it mean for people in your community to be named and claimed as God's own?

Another direction these texts could take is that of evangelism and invitation. The invitation that Jesus gives to the disciples is "Come and see." This verse was painted on the back of the church van in the congregation in which I grew up. If people in the community of your congregation were invited to "come and see," what would they actually see? Lovely buildings and worship spaces? Apathy and idolatry? Nasty carpeting and dated wooden paneling? Fervent proclamation and joyous celebration? Intentional hospitality and reconciling compassion? Beloved community? Dreams being made reality?

This Sunday falls the day before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, when issues of race and justice will be on the minds of many. This can be an opportune time for the preacher to highlight the corporate nature of sin and lament our human need for redemption. It is important to note that when John the Baptist says "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" the word for sin is plural, not singular. This is important because it suggests that the sin that Jesus takes away is something corporate, rather than individual. What collective sin does your community need to confess and acknowledge? Who in your neighborhood is being judged by the color of their skin instead of the content of their character?



This week is the first of six Sundays with the second reading coming from 1 Corinthians. Located in a busy seaport, Corinth was a diverse metropolitan area. The followers of Jesus there struggled with issues of leadership. Various voices were challenging each other for power. The Corinthians had differing understandings of sexual ethics. The city had a reputation. The Greek verb *korinthiazomai* even meant “to practice prostitution.” Class and economics were a factor. Wealthier people were excluding poorer ones from the Communion table. The Corinthians were a people in conflict. They’re the same, but they’re different. They’re together, but they’re separate. A preacher may wish to start a series focusing on readings from this epistle, building on themes about unity and diversity, grace, and Christian love. PAB

### Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 26, 2014

Isaiah 9:1–4  
Psalm 27:1, 4–9  
1 Corinthians 1:10–18  
Matthew 4:12–23

#### First Reading

Light, discipleship, and unity become major themes in these assigned readings. In a passage from which portions were also part of the assigned lessons on Christmas Eve, Isaiah uses imagery of light and darkness. The repetition, however, is worthwhile homiletically, especially now in the season of Epiphany. The theme of light is again echoed in Psalm 27, with God as the psalmist’s light and salvation—a remedy against fear. It is a psalm of comfort and solace about seeking refuge

in God’s presence. “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?” (27:1).

The pericope from Matthew has two parts: Jesus beginning his ministry in the geographical area that Isaiah had described as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matthew 4:15 and Isaiah 9:1), and Jesus calling his first disciples from their fishing vocation into something new. Matthew quotes several verses of this Isaiah 9. The phrase “of the Gentiles,” in verse 1, along with the visit of the magi in Chapter 2, highlights the strong theme in Matthew that Jesus’ message not just for Israel, but also for the Gentiles.

In verse 17, Jesus says the same words that John the Baptist said in 3:2—“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” That for which John was preparing people is now being proclaimed by Jesus. This verse marks a transition in the narrative, shifting toward the story of Jesus’ ministry. The phrase “from that time on” is used again in 16:21, marking a similar transition point, shifting the focus toward Jesus’ pending death.

Jesus calls four fishermen as his first disciples. They put down their nets and follow Jesus. However, this transformation is more than a simple career change. Moving from place to place and breaking connections with social and familial networks “were considered abnormal behavior and would have been much more traumatic in antiquity than simply leaving behind one’s job and tools.”<sup>13</sup> Being a disciple of Jesus means making some drastic changes and being part of new relationships and life connections.

Paul writes to the Corinthians in the

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13. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 39.



midst of division and disaccord. Having heard secondhand from people associated with a prominent woman named Chloe about some strife among those in the congregation, Paul gives a call to unity. Perhaps wanting to avoid any more conflict about alliances with leaders rather than with God, Paul is very clear to state who he did or did not baptize. Christ becomes the unifier and giver of identity, not the individual church leader.

### **Pastoral Reflection**

When thirty-three Chilean miners were rescued after more than two months trapped in a mine shaft in 2010, pairs of Oakley Radar sunglasses were sent down the tube to protect their eyes before returning to normal daylight. At \$180 a pair, these particular glasses had wraparound lenses with black iridium coating. The miners had the sporty shades so that their eyes could readapt to the sunlight without damaging their vision.<sup>14</sup> “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...”

Sometimes I wonder if we have become so acclimated to light that we don't notice the radiance of God's presence among us. In our times we're surrounded by lights and shiny things: monitors and screens, pixels and LCDs, iPads and Androids, YouTube and Hulu. With all the light pollution in the city, it is often necessary to drive far into the countryside to see any stars in the sky at all. On several occasions, I have been driving west into the sunset when I was not able to take my hands off the

wheel to block the sun, so I got a longer look at the setting sun than is probably healthy for my retinas. For a few minutes later, I could still see the specks of light, even with my eyes closed. Scientists call these lights you see with your eyes closed phosphenes. You see these phosphenes after you see something bright, or when you come into the light after being in a dark room like a movie theater or a mine shaft. How, then, are we impacted by the bright light of Christ's revelation? How will the light of Epiphany stay with us for more than a few moments? The promise and hope that Isaiah longs for is more than just a one-time deal. God's light shines, has shined, and will keep on shining.

In baptismal liturgies, a candle is often given to the baptized person or their sponsor as a reminder to let their light shine before others. In the second part of the gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus tells Simon and Andrew that their jobs in the fishing industry will be different, that he will make them fish for people. This text is an opportune time to think about evangelism, but the metaphor does have some limits. One problem with “fishing for people” is that people know when they are being baited and hooked. What happens to people once they get netted in? Do they get filleted and fried or sent to a taxidermist and mounted on the wall? Nevertheless, these texts are texts filled with narrative energy that calls us to think about the transformation that God is doing in our lives and in our communities. PAB

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14. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/13/chile-miners-rescue\\_n\\_761259.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/10/13/chile-miners-rescue_n_761259.html)





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