Promissio

A Journal of Confessing Theology

Theology as Knowledge of God

"For God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the afflicted, the oppressed, the desperate, and those who have been brought down to nothing at all. And it is the nature of God to exalt the humble, to feed the hungry, to enlighten the blind, to comfort the miserable and afflicted, to justify sinners, to give life to the dead, and to save those who are desperate and damned. For he is the Almighty Creator, who makes everything out of nothing. In the performance of this, His natural and proper work, He does not allow himself to be interfered with by that dangerous pest, the presumption of righteousness, which refuses to be sinful, impure, miserable, and damned but wants to be righteous and holy." – Luther (LW 26:314).

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Theology is not freethinking but "freed thinking" and therewith bound to its liberating Lord. Therefore, *Promissio* undertakes theology for the sake of informing and enabling the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In order to do so, it operates within a zone in which constraint and freedom are neither separable nor confused.

Table of Contents

Theology

What Is It and What Is It Good For?

Paul R. Hinlicky

In recent times, the curious and ironic, if not decidedly sarcastic term, "Nuclear Theology" emerged in National Security circles. It referred to the "how I learned to love The Bomb" doctrine of *Dr. Strangelove*, namely, the strategic concept of "mutually assured destruction," by way of threatening retaliation with weapons of mass destruction: awesome symbols of power, terrifying instruments of persuasion, and ruthless emblems of the values and beliefs of their possessors. Noting this contemporary usage of "theology" is valuable as this inaugural issue of *Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology* reflects on the scholarly discipline of Christian thought, the knowledge of God or "theology."

Luther's Differentiation Following the Apostle Paul

When considering the various intellectual phenomena currently categorized as "theology" not only in organized religion but also, as above, in the "secularist" ideologies of contemporary "political religions," one is forced to observe that, as a discipline of the mind, "theology" covers *all* human thinking in the highly contested field of putative highest goods. However, in a carefully explained sense, such contestation is biblically appropriate. In the Christian theological tradition in which this journal stands, theology is *knowledge* of the One who is God truly, rightly then to be feared, loved, and trusted above all. According to Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, true theology (*vera theologia*) is knowledge of God (*cognitio Dei*), as he specifies pointedly and controversially, in "Christ crucified." Conversely, false theology certainly exists, even if not especially within the empirical field of Christendom, as Luther names the thinking of those whom he terms "theologians of glory"—as if they had already achieved heaven by their own wisdom. Indeed, following the apostle Paul's opening chapters in his first letter to the Corinthians, the task of Luther's "theologian of the cross" is to *know* the difference, especially by being *this difference* in the personal conformation of the believer's mind to the cross of Christ in expectation, then, not possession of the kingdom of heaven which comes purely as gift.

One reason for Luther's sharp differentiation arises from the equivocal utilization of the term, term "god," which may denote as many possibilities as a human mind conceives for the human heart to treasure as highest good, just as Luther later observed in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism. A god can easily be an idol if the heart clings to that which the mind conceives as highest good yet is not God truly. What is truly God, however, is made known in Christ crucified, as Luther concludes the Heidelberg Disputation. This is the creative love that does not seek and find something beautiful to enjoy, but instead rejoices to create the beloved out of the sin-deformed and dying creation in an act of new creation. Since this world in its wisdom did not know God, it pleased God truly to know this world in the solidarity of the beloved Son's death on a cross.

Israel's Legacy: Title and Name

While Luther developed this sharp insight through careful readings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament, he, like Paul, built upon the theological inheritance from Israel. The de facto state of human culture's antecedent polytheism was etymologically recognized in the Hebrew title *Elohim*, a grammatically plural noun form that the Scriptures of Israel used with a strikingly ungrammatical singular verb form that, when literally translated into the English, would read as "The gods is/does x, y, or z." This grammatically odd yet theologically deliberate usage reflects the fact that in the polytheistic environment of Israel's faith, the Divine was conceived as a variously populated heavenly realm overseeing earthlings wherein many divinities contended among themselves in turf wars for control of the lower realm. Habitually, however, we translate Elohim as "God," as if the term were a singular personal name rather than a title for the divine; consequently, in our long-standing usage habituated by this poor translation, we treat "God" as a personal name rather than as a title. As a title, Elohim, according to Hebrew usage, should be rendered as "The Divine" or "The Holy," or "The Heavenly," the singular Deity reflecting Israel's recognition by the time of the second Isaiah of one divinity alone, incomparable, and presiding over the earth as sole Creator. In the Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, Elohim emerges as the title designating the creator of all that is not divine. The urgent questions then become: "Who? Who bears this title? Who is the One who is God truly?"

Israel's naming of Elohim was announced at the burning bush to Moses—YHWH, the promising God of the Exodus (but also the punishing God casting the pursuing slaveholders down into the sea). YHWH is personally named in Israel as the sole and rightful claimant to the title of deity, Elohim—*claimant*, as the *truth* of a *promisor*, lies in the *fulfillment* of its *word*. As such a recipient of divine salvation, Israel bequeaths the task of a theological critique of the idolatries of any antecedent culture of a fallen and afflicted creation that it may concretely, faithfully and obediently confess the promising God of salvation.

Israel's monotheistic critique of the divine pantheon consequently demoted the panoply of divinities in surrounding cultures into diverse subordinates (angels, powers and principalities, authorities, etc.) of the One truly God—a demotion that recognized their persisting power and presence but denied them ultimacy. In this way, Israel's adherence to the one who is God truly allowed for the persistent reality of sinful rebellion working havoc in actual evil on the field of the creation. This humble acknowledgment by persevering faith of the reality of contra-divine powers realized that the naming in word and deed of the "God" who promises himself as creation's deliverance remains embattled upon the earth. "YHWH is a warrior; Yahweh is his name" (Ex. 15:3); "He must reign until he subdues all enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25). A definite militancy against spiritual powers of sin, death, and the devil animates the confessing work of true theology; doing true theology originates in and remains an act of apocalyptic warfare.

The Shema of Israel, which should be translated (and transliterated) "Hear O Israel, YHWH our God [Elohim], YHWH *alone*" (Deut. 6:4), anticipates the Reformation's exclusive battle cry, "by faith *alone* in Christ *alone* by grace *alone*." As such, the Shema lays axe to the root of the wider cultural world. Here, as in Israel of old, idolatrous naming of the divine prevails as humans project their own idealized selves onto the blank screen of unknown deity as an object of worship in quests for power over others. Or they invest ultimacy of saving power in merely temporal powers and principalities. This routine idolatry gets exposed as a self-deceived if not devious claim for divine right in "God is on our side" theology—which really means "our side is the divine one."

By naming the One who is truly God as YHWH, however, Israel at its best clung in faith to the promising God of the Exodus as the true deity, even in hapless exile as a result of her own unfaithfulness. Indeed, this specification of faithful YHWH's election of the poor in power, the enslaved, the nomad, the exiled, is reiterated in 1 Cor. 1: 28-29. In the apostle Paul's Corinthian correspondence, we are not then surprised to find a nonidentical repetition of Israel's confession of faith in the Shema. "[W]e know that "no idol in the world really exists" and that "there is no God but one." Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:4-6, NRSV).

Paul's restatement of the Shema in the light of Christ crucified possessed reformatory force in its time. In the Second Temple Period, the pious practice had developed of building "a fence around the law" to preclude the possibility of transgressing the commandment against speaking the name, YHWH, falsely. Orally enunciating the name YHWH was prohibited lest it be somehow, even accidentally, profaned. Ironically, however, this avoidance strategy of the literal speech act had obscured the significant difference between name and title, as henceforth Israel sub-

stituted titles like the Lord, the Holy One, or the Blessed One, even turning *Hashem* (Hebrew: "The Name," referring to the now unutterable YHWH) into a title.

Using only titles pertaining to functions or offices rather than the personal name of the deliverer effectually distanced the Deity, no longer bringing YHWH near to save as a personal name would do according to the promise attached to it at the burning bush. Within this climate of pious distance, Jesus innovated by naming anew the God of Israel "the Father in Heaven," even as that personally intimate naming implied Himself as the beloved Son of this Father—Jesus himself, then, as the one in whom the exalted heavenly Deity draws near to redeem and to rectify the fallen and afflicted creation. Inheriting Jesus' new naming of God, his apostle Paul affirms *both* the doctrine of the incomparable being of true God as the one and only creator of all that is not God *and* the identification on the earth of this true God as the heavenly Father of this beloved Son, the two together as distinct personal agents, the creative source and the mediator respectively in redemption as in creation of all else that exists.

The Word from God Given Prior to Thought

Therein lies *the* daunting implication for theology that would be true to the one who is God truly. One *dares* to name God only because God gives His name to be known in deeds of deliverance and used appropriately for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in the corresponding action, to boot, of apocalyptic combat of *disbelieving* the idols that still prevail upon the earth. To believe God is to disbelieve the idols. Formed in this militant way within the canonical Scripture matrix, theology is about true deity as it presupposes, as Israel had presupposed in the ancient cultural environment of manifest polytheism, an elusive sense of deity (*sensus divinitatis*) vaguely acknowledged but not known personally. Unknown deity, however, amounts to little more than a placeholder for humanity being tacitly aware of its finitude, its non-deity. To know that one is not divine is indeed to know something however vague about true humanity. Such vague religiosity or awareness of the divine (as in the plural form Elohim) over against our finitude is not, however, "natural *theology*" since theology is *knowledge* of God—the *sensus divinitatis* yields nothing but speculative groping in the dark or even angry blasphemy, as Luther spoke regarding theology undertaken in the mere "light of nature."

Theology that is true to its subject matter depends on the knowledge of God *given* by God in as much as only the true God speaks truly of God. True theology thusly *dares* to confess in faith divine self-naming in the saving deed of divine self-giving, to repeat what has been heard by virtue of a word from God concerning God. Prior to all cogitation, this word of God concerning God is the ever-new inauguration of theological thinking. To the unbelieving world, this daring speech as a belief about beliefs seems circular, but for true theology, the circle is virtuous, not vicious. That is because confessing in faith the self-naming given by the self-giving

God is the only possibility of speaking truly of the One who is truly God. Because true human speech about God must be validated by God, such theological speech is a vulnerable act of faith, precisely so it is an acknowledgment that true God cannot be mastered, controlled or manipulated by creatures.

Certainly, representing theology as talk about God claiming to be true as prompted by a word from God raises a host of further questions about the grammar of naming as well as attributing or titling; it raises semantical questions about truth conditions, and ontological questions about reference or meaning with respect to the thing signified by the verbal sign. Indeed, questions arise about the different relation between the sign and the thing signified in ordinary, mundane language by contrast to theological language, that is, about the performative power of God's word in uniting the sign with the thing signified (Luther's "This [bread] *is* my body). Additionally, it also questions the inadequacy of mere human words clothing but perhaps therewith obscuring the alleged word of God. Perhaps above all mid this welter of difficulties, it acutely raises the question of deception, of lying spirits, false prophets, and dishonest messiahs seducing with false promises and seductive rhetoric. True theology has a lot of work to do!

Scripture in the Dock

Let us acknowledge, however, that scriptural discourse regarding the deity in its dialectic between naming and titling may thusly seem to doom us to a non-adjudicable maelstrom of conflicting words of God, each offering but one line of pious propaganda alongside multitudinous others as indeed often appears to be the case in contemporary biblical scholarship. The problem is nothing new. Already in the premodern theological tradition, many theologians advanced the program of "metaphysics to the rescue," as if thereby to sort out the really real substance of the Divine from the misleading rhetorical accidents of human language besetting the Bible's gross anthropomorphizing of the deity. Away with warlord YHWH! Back to the unknown divine, Elohim, God beyond the gods! Various conflicting human language about God tells nothing about the Divine, which is transcendentally timeless, spaceless, persistently selfsame, beyond the cognitive ascent of human conceptualization. All language in the Bible about God only refers to various creaturely relations to this ontologically perfect being, *esse ipsum subsistens* ("being itself subsisting"—the metaphysical misreading of Israel's Shema which stands behind the common translation, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is one.").

Many contemporary biblical scholars also pronounce a similar judgment of doom on biblical language for God, as mentioned above; for them, though, Scripture is rather to be exposed as an incoherent assemblage of varying propagandas in the nefarious service of some worldly-all-too-worldly hegemony. The question nowadays is no longer whether Scripture is true, as it was still for the Enlightenment's ontotheology (i.e. the idea of the perfect being on top of the realm of being,

a notion that provided a rational criterion to purge biblical discourse under the Tribunal of Reason). In postmodernity, these scholars instead press the question of Scripture's alleged *holiness*. Many postmodernists regard the canonical text as *Unholy* Scriptures, a woefully influential source of perduring racism, sexism, classism, and bubbling wellspring of fanatical religious intolerance. For all the melodrama in this scholarship, the basic problem here is not new. As mentioned, one may recall only the difficult reception of the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament of Christian Scripture in the early church. Jesus was surely not Joshua redivivus! There is a real problem here, a hermeneutical problem. Does Joshua model Jesus or Jesus Joshua? The sad fact of Christian crusaderism instantiates the problem.

Despite the rejection of Marcion during the formation of the canon by including the Hebrew Bible as Christian Old Testament, this problem remained. Due to Scripture's apparent ambiguity in any hermeneutically illiterate theology of "the Bible alone," the authority of the papal magisterium had evolved in Western Christianity to enact doctrinal judgements, including settling biblical interpretation. This became the hermeneutical issue at the heart of the Reformation, which also involved a reformation in theology as a discipline. A misleading slogan of "Scripture alone" can obscure this insight into what was at issue. As Herman Sasse once pointed out, *both* sides viewed Scripture's authority "as rightly interpreted," for Lutherans chiefly by the distinction between the law of God and the gospel of God, a hermeneutical differentiation within the word of God. In contrast, the papist claim was that when speaking officially, the Pope rightly interpreted the Scripture as the living representative of Peter to whom the keys of the kingdom had been given. Consequently, indeterminable, heated, and divisive theological argument based on competing yet equally plausible Scripture claims, but threatening the unity of the church, could be silenced and settled by papal fiat. Hence, the demand to recant his allegedly private and subjective reading of Scripture was placed upon Luther.

Luther's counterclaim was twofold: scripture is grammatically clear enough to interpret itself for competent scholarship when holistically studied, even if objective clarity is only received and understood subjectively by those enlightened and inspired by the same Holy Spirit who had inspired the Scriptures. Crucially, this enlightenment of the Holy Spirit can be named, Jesus Christ as saving Lord, apart from whom it is impossible to take canonical Scripture as a whole and thus read the canon holistically. The key to the Scriptures, then, is not the mind of Peter but the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5) given to all the baptized who thusly read the Bible as the prophetic and apostolic witnesses to the saving event of God named by Jesus Christ, crucified for our sins but raised for our justification. Luther's counter-thrust really ups the ante: without this Spirit-bestowed mentality, Scripture falls apart into its various components, a pile of archaeological rubble, precisely the contemporary outcome in post-Enlightenment "Biblical Studies" that expressly disavows being a theological discipline.

Luther treated theology as the communal scholarly work for the holistic, intra-textual, and, above all, *messianic* exegesis of Scripture. Such work in the discipleship of the mind is normed by the gospel's claim about Jesus Christ as the liberating

Lord of those enslaved to the anti-divine powers of Sin, Death, and Devil; his cross-achieved and Easter-vindicated righteousness suffices to justify the ungodly who entrust themselves to it by the grace of the same Holy Spirit infusing faith. The same Spirit who brought Jesus through the cross to his crown now caused his prophetic and apostolic witnesses to be recorded to form the faith of every new generation. The church thus ever freshly comes into the truth of Jesus Christ in the knowledge of God by way of Spirit-led theological exegesis of Scripture, certainly not, then, by Spiritless, naïve, and arbitrary proof-texting of a supposedly miraculous text regarding all sorts of extraneous matters. It comes into the truth of the beloved Son in the knowledge of God as the heavenly Father who sends this beloved Son into the maw of the afflicted and afflicting creation by the endowment of His own Holy Spirit to capture and liberate, to enlist and recruit redeemed humanity destined for the glory of God. The touchstone of such correct reading of the Bible is the cross of Christ declaring as true knowledge of God the beloved Son's full identification with the sinful and the perishing as the Holy One of God breaking into a strong man's house to bind him and plunder his goods.

Three Orders of Theological Discourse

Words! Words! Words upon words! Theology is word-smithing arising with the putative Word of God giving knowledge of God and proceeding in the words of faith about this Word of God in creed and confession. These represent several ordered levels of theological discourse: the word of God spoken prior to thought; the word of faith responding and repeating and thinking through what it has heard; the word of hope and love communicating the foregoing in and for the afflicted creation. As such, theology is ongoing communal reflection to the end that the community of faith may knowingly and intelligently cooperate in the saving mission of the God of the gospel to rectify, redeem, and fulfill the creation. Clarity is served, however, if we mindfully distinguish these three orders of theological discourse and identify which of these domains we are investigating in any given case. Clarity in theological argument will be a standard of this journal, producing doctrine of the promising God for its apt and timely confession following the gospel's mission in the world, addressing new problems and opportunities, creatively experimenting with words in pursuing effective communication all the while maintaining fidelity to the authoring and authorizing Word of God by which the meaning of the very word, "God," and the candidacy of the named God to bear the title of true deity are clarified.

In the tradition of Luther, we lift up as first-order theology the doctrine of the word of God, the "norming norm" (*norma normans*). With no other foundation to be laid than the one laid by God in Jesus Christ, the first order of theological business is to describe its own authorizing event of the Word of God spoken in the resurrection-vindication of the crucified Jesus for the life and death he lived and died for us. This is the gospel word which authors and authorizes the faithful church in mission and commissions the discipline of theology as the discipleship

of the church's mind, ever learning the mind of Christ as that which does not occur to us naturally but which, as befits disciples, must ever be *learned*. First-order theology, as such, consists in words about the Word of God given prior to thought. Hermeneutically this description consists in the proper distinction between the righteous demand of God and the forgiving, liberating, and enabling promise of God. It is a distinction within the one word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ whose mind was to give himself in the place and on behalf of sinners.

Second-order theology, accordingly, is the contextually apt repetition of what the community has heard *hic et nunc* from the gospel word of God as articulated in canon, creed, and ongoing confession. A Spirit-led growth of knowledge of God exists in, with, and under the ambiguities and vicissitudes of the historical church that claims our attention and, indeed, our devotion. Important clarifications concerning the doctrine of the Word of God occurred at critical junctures in this history that have been ecumenically decided in the form of creeds and further proposed in the form of confessions in the face of divided Christendom. These are decisions or proposed decisions of ecumenical doctrine for the ecumenical church forged in times of crisis concerning the Word of God, as if to say, given this challenge to the faith, we must speak about the Word of God one way rather than another, if we are to continue to proclaim, believe, teach, and confess the Word of God. This theological procedure should be very familiar to those in the tradition of Luther. The doctrine of justification as a confession of the church proposes that with Romans 8, Christians speak of Jesus such that nothing can separate from the love of God in Christ those who entrust themselves to it. Second-order theology in contemporary confession inherits as well as generates such *rules of faith* to articulate proper speaking of the gospel in just this way. Indeed, this procedure inherits important precedents.

During the church's early centuries, a life and death struggle with Gnostic dualism and against its docetic Christology took place, threatening to divide Old from New Testament and creation from redemption; this would-be separation ran right through the very person of Jesus Christ when Gnostics disdained His flesh, even in principle discarding it in favor of a "spiritual" Christ. Repudiating this deviation from the gospel, the canonical doctrine of Scripture emerged that united the Hebrew Bible with those writings of the apostolic epoch that bore true witness to Christ's coming in the flesh, as doctrinally articulated in the early baptismal creeds by reference to his birth from Mary and his resurrection from the grave. De facto, this recognition of the Christian Scripture of Old and New Testaments as canon, as rule of faith, was the first doctrinal decision of early Christianity. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. further clarified that the gospel Word of God incarnate in Christ is identical in being, though not in person, with God the Father's own eternal being. None other than the eternal, uncreated and personally begotten Word of the Father became flesh in Jesus Christ, the beloved Son, for us and for our salvation. The Augsburg Confession in 1530, as clarified that in 1537 by Luther's Smalcald Articles, explained that for such salvation, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son who knew no sin, came to be our sin in an astounding act of exchange that justly justifies the

ungodly who trust in it. At Barmen in 1934, in a time of trial when Nazism was demanding the total "coordination" of all social institutions including the church to its neo-pagan "political theology," clarity was achieved through the declaration against Hitlerism's *Führerprinzip* that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God for us and for our salvation whom we are to believe and obey in life and in death.

These precedents in the tradition of second-order theology have an abiding claim on Christian theology as "normed norm" (*norma normata*). The historical description and hermeneutically critical appropriation of this inheritance of derivative yet normative doctrine essentially constitute second-order theology. This work is crucial because the church's confession of the Word of God in human time and space specifies *the terms* by which any theological deliberation is Christianly meaningful. If we are not speaking Jesus of Nazareth with the God of Israel, his heavenly Father, and their sanctifying Spirit, it is not a Christianly meaningful discussion of deity as the originating terms of the discourse have been abandoned. As we have reviewed, these terms include the *title* of deity as creator of all that is not God and the *naming* of the Deity as given by the Deity for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, the naming by which believers disbelieve the idols as in 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Concretely, the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the event of divine self-naming (Romans 1:2-4), together with the confession of faith in this naming as articulated in the creedal tradition, define the terms of Christian discourse. The deliberative conversation in second-order theology occurs within the theological circle of the word of God and confessing faith. Here, theologians deliberate with one another through logical argumentation in the humble fashion of offering convincing critiques of common problems (i.e. immanent criticism within the theological circle) and proposing reformulations intending "orthodoxy" (teaching true to the gospel), submitted penultimately to the ecumenical judgment of the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" (i.e. the "ecumenical intention" of the Augsburg Confession) but ultimately subject to God's judgment, He who alone verifies true speech about God. This definite but wide-open discourse opens the door into third-order theology. Equipped with these terms and rules for the right usage, further conversation between Christian theology and all other claims to knowledge and truth in the whole creation is authorized and indeed mandated. Such terms, given prior to thought, constitute the epistemic platform by which everything that exists is relevant, so no topic can be simply excluded from investigation in third-order theology. Far from being conversation stoppers, these are conversation openers because they provide the definite platform from which theology speaks.

In sum, theologians within the theological circle debate and deliberate over their formulations of the first two orders of theology. The description of the Word of God in the first-order of theology and of the tradition of its confession in the second-order can and must be scrutinized for adequacy in formulation to the end of intelligent contemporary appropriation, given the constantly changing horizon of meaning in human history. This scrutiny is a missiological imperative as the gospel advances into new times and places wherein the communication of claims to truth

must be tested both for faithfulness to the originating event and for contemporary intelligibility. Simultaneously, as the gospel encounters unfamiliar peoples, cultures, and languages, a rigorous work of translation utilizing all the resources of scholarly method and employing all the intellectual virtues is in demand. As such, the discipline of third-order theology engages others outside the theological circle in dialogue and disputation, in critique and in appreciation in sharing the human pursuit of truth. Of course, theologians engaged with third order missiological discourse remain within the theological circle; here also theology remain exclusively the work of faith in a word given prior to thought (Jüngel).

Promissio: A Journal of Confessing Theology thusly orients itself in the conflicted world of contemporary theologies, knowing that its struggle is not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. Thus, an insistence upon scholarly method and the intellectual virtues intends a first line of defense against sub-Christian resort to propaganda in a polemical situation, thus tempting a fall from grace into carnal counter-aggression. Articles in this journal will, therefore, be irenic in tone, requiring that necessary critique be charitable. Our authors may only venture criticism when they have described opposing positions with such charity, empathy, and insight that an opponent would acknowledge with delight, "Yes! That's what I mean. I couldn't have said it better." Only then may insightful critique be issued because one is then dealing with the real thing rather than a convenient fiction, a proverbial strawman of one's own imagination easily knocked to pieces with hostile rhetoric. We know very well with Melanchthon that nothing can be stated with such clarity that malice cannot twist it to mean something unintended, but as far as this journal is concerned, such malice will be on the conscience of opponents instead of our authors.

We welcome readers into these deliberations and solicit their participation.

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The Accents of Theology in Theological Education

Dennis Bielfeldt

On the Orientation of Theology at the Institute of Lutheran Theology

Theological education is never neutral. It always proceeds with accents—ways of stressing what matters most, ways of ordering questions, and ways of forming habits of judgment. These accents are often implicit, yet they decisively shape how theology is taught, learned, and practiced. They determine whether theology is approached primarily as historical description, practical training, or disciplined engagement with truth. In this sense, theological education is always already theological, even when it attempts to bracket theological commitments.

At the Institute of Lutheran Theology's (ILT's) Christ School of Theology, we have become increasingly aware that clarity about theology's *orientation* matters as much as clarity about its content. Our programs are not organized around a single method or school, nor are they driven by a desire to mirror prevailing academic fashions. Rather, they are ordered by a conviction about what theology is and how it knows.

We understand theology not first as a field of academic specialization, nor primarily as a professional skill set, but as a disciplined participation in the truth of God's self-communication. Theology is learned not merely by the accumulation of information, but by formation within a grammar of faith that enables truthful speech about God, the world, and the human creature. This conviction governs the accents of theological education at ILT across degrees, contexts, and vocations.

This grammatical emphasis is decisive. The creeds and confessions are not treated at ILT merely as historical artifacts, denominational markers, or boundary documents. They function as rules of theological speech. They shape what counts as a meaningful theological question, what kinds of answers are intelligible, and how apparent contradictions are to be held rather than prematurely resolved. Far from closing inquiry, they make inquiry possible by orienting it toward its proper object.

This orientation also explains why theology at the Christ School of Theology is unapologetically confessional without being intellectually closed. Confession here does not mean repetition without reflection or loyalty without judgment. It names a posture of accountability. Theology answers to a reality it does not control. The creeds and confessions locate theology within a living tradition that authorizes theological speech even as it disciplines it.

For this reason, ILT resists two distortions that increasingly shape contemporary theological education. On the one hand, theology is often absorbed into a general humanities model, where it becomes a descriptive study of religious traditions, practices, and experiences. In this mode, theology risks losing its subject matter. God becomes an object of cultural analysis rather than the living reality to whom theology is answerable. Theological language is evaluated primarily in terms of social function, historical development, or psychological effect rather than truth.

On the other hand, theology is frequently reduced to pragmatic training, oriented toward ministerial technique, institutional leadership, or cultural relevance. Here theology becomes instrumental. Doctrinal claims are assessed less by their truthfulness than by their perceived usefulness. The result is often a thin theology—flexible in form but fragile in substance—unable to sustain either critical reflection or pastoral depth over time.

The Christ School of Theology's programs are intentionally structured to resist both reductions. Theology is treated neither as a merely descriptive discipline nor as a set of tools to be deployed. It is approached as a truth-seeking practice that demands intellectual rigor, historical depth, and confessional accountability. Students are formed not simply to use theological language, but to *inhabit* it responsibly.

This orientation also governs how theology at ILT relates to other disciplines. We do not set theology in competition with the sciences, nor do we retreat into expressive subjectivism when metaphysical claims are contested. Instead, students are encouraged to attend carefully to the conditions of intelligibility operative within their own fields of study—whether philosophy, history, the natural sciences, or the social sciences—and to ask how theological language names what those disciplines presuppose but cannot finally ground for themselves.

In this way, theology at ILT remains both critical and receptive. It is critical of reductionisms that collapse meaning into mechanism or normativity into preference. At the same time, it is receptive to truth wherever it is found, confident that truth is not threatened by inquiry. Theology does not claim a monopoly on knowledge, but it does insist that knowledge itself is not self-grounding.

Pedagogically, this orientation has concrete consequences. ILT emphasizes close reading of primary texts, conceptual clarity, historical seriousness, and patient argument. Students are trained to distinguish levels of discourse, to recognize the difference between descriptive analysis and theological judgment, and to resist both polemical shortcuts and premature synthesis. Such formation takes time. It cannot be rushed or automated.

This orientation comes to particularly clear expression in ILT's PhD program. Doctoral students are formed not simply as specialists in a narrow field, but as theologians capable of sustained judgment across historical, philosophical, and doctrinal domains. Their work is grounded in close engagement with Scripture, the ecumenical creeds, and the Lutheran confessional tradition, while also requiring serious study of the philosophical conditions under which theology speaks meaningfully. Figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and the orthodox scholastics are read alongside Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Levinas, and modern critics of metaphysics, not in order to domesticate theology to philosophy, but to clarify theology's own grammar and limits. Contemporary work in philosophical theology, hermeneutics, and the philosophy of language likewise plays a central role. The aim is not synthesis for its own sake, but the cultivation of theologians who can navigate modern intellectual pressures without surrendering theological realism or confessional depth.

This same conviction also explains why advanced theological formation at ILT places sustained emphasis on disciplines often treated as ancillary to theology. Serious engagement with logic and formal reasoning is not pursued as technical specialization for its own sake, but as training in clarity, distinction, and the disciplined handling of intelligibility itself. Likewise, sustained work in the Reformation tradition is not approached as antiquarian retrieval, but as immersion in a historical moment when the grammar of theological language was tested under extraordinary pressure. Finally, theology's relation to the natural sciences is taken up neither defensively nor triumphalistically, but as a question of non-competitive intelligibility: how distinct forms of explanation coexist without reduction or rivalry. In each case, the aim is the same—to form theologians capable of sustained judgment across domains without surrendering theological realism.

Christ School of Theology's approach is especially important in a cultural moment marked by intellectual fragmentation. Many students arrive having internalized a false choice between scientific naturalisms, which reduce meaning to efficient causation, and self-inventive idealisms, which locate meaning entirely within human construction. Both options ultimately fail. One drains the world of significance; the other collapses truth into preference. Theology, rightly practiced, cuts a path through this impasse by refusing both evasions.

Theology dares to speak of God as real without treating God as an object among objects. It affirms transcendence without competition and immanence without reduction. It insists that meaning is neither imposed nor illusory, but given. This conviction does not deny finitude, pluralism, or historical contingency. It acknowledges them. Yet it refuses to infer from finitude that truth must therefore be inaccessible or merely relative.

In this sense, theological education at ILT is not primarily about producing specialists or technicians, though it may do both. It is about forming judgment. It is about cultivating the capacity to speak truthfully under conditions of uncertainty, to

reason patiently amid disagreement, and to remain faithful to the object of theology even when cultural pressures pull in other directions.

These accents do not constitute a single method or party line. They describe an orientation—a way of standing within the theological task. This inaugural issue of *Promissio* explores that task from several angles. Future issues will extend the inquiry: to the necessity of an educated clergy, to Scripture as the basic language of faith, and to the creeds and confessions as the grammar that sustains theological speech across time.

For now, it is enough to say this: theology at ILT begins where truth is taken seriously, where faith seeks understanding without fear, and where speech about God is disciplined by the reality it names. That is the accent we seek to cultivate, and the grammar we hope our students will learn to speak with clarity, humility, and confidence.

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Theology and Semiotics

Jonathan Sorum

Theology is at an impasse.

Modern apologetic theology that construes God in terms of the self-possessed self has failed. It is clearer than ever that its talk of God cannot give an account how God is other than our own feelings or ideas. The successors of liberal apologetic theology are now mainly interested in social and political ideology and, while they sometimes mention God, they make little pretense of actually being interested in God or clarifying what they mean by God. Theology—speech about God—can hardly proceed if one is not actually interested in speaking God. In any case, the empty pews in many churches are evidence that the God of modern apologetic theology is no longer compelling for people, or at least that the church and its proclamation are not necessary for having some kind of relationship with whomever one's God may be.

The conservative reaction to modernism fights for the objective truth of God, but it, too, can only make its case on the basis of the self-possessed self. Because the common rationality that the Enlightenment assumed has proved to be an illusion, conservative apologetics based on that rationality fail. Facing stubborn rejection, such apologists are left with two alternatives. They can withdraw into isolated cultural enclaves that share the same truth (a "biblical worldview"). Or they can try to conquer society by imposing their worldview through political force. Both choices (and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive) constitute a hostility to the world that betrays the bankruptcy of conservative theology .

In the last century, Karl Barth attempted to lay down the apologetic weapons of modern theology.[1] He eschewed apologetic theology in order to speak unapologetically of God as God, and exposed the Bible and the Christian tradition accordingly. But he, too, could only theologize from the perspective of the self-possessed self. His theology is rich and suggestive, but in the end it failed to connect with modern people. His successors continue on the same track. They seem to think that it's enough merely to assert God, as if in capital letters, thinking that God will do the work of asserting God's own reality by virtue of God's Word. But they mostly find

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1. Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

themselves preaching into the air. In the end, the Barthian revolution in theology gained nothing decisive for proclaiming the gospel to modern people.[2]

The problem is that theology inevitably operates within some kind of general account of human being within the world. Traditional theology based on the metaphysics inherited from antiquity must, despite all reservations, finally assign God some kind of being, which determines ahead of time what it is possible for God to be and to do. This spurred the nominalist revolution in the late medieval period, which tried to free God from such constraints, provoking a chronic spiritual crisis. The Reformation was largely a movement to set people within the Biblical narrative in order to free them from this nominalist God. But the Reformation could not for the most part escape the traditional metaphysics that caused the crisis in the first place. With the advent of modernity, theology cast off traditional metaphysics in favor of an analysis of subjectivity. But the supposed necessity of the God found in human subjectivity quickly breaks down in the modern secular age, in which belief in God is optional, a personal choice. This is not to say that religion has died out. Modern people do indeed live with a transcendental backdrop to their lives; there is *something* people are trying to get in touch with, whether an ineffable oneness with all things or a ground for the reliability of our reasoning or something else. But modern people have only are their own individual beliefs and feelings. There is no road from individual beliefs and feelings to *public* truth—and truth is by definition public. Merely eschewing metaphysics gets us nowhere in our attempt to speak of God. Martin Heidegger's work has been the most influential attempt to critique metaphysics and bring philosophy down to earth. However, his resolutely atheistic presuppositions mean that he can never make theology intelligible except as a study of human believing and of the "God" of that human believing, leaving the truth claims that faith makes about God unanswered, since those claims can only be made as determinations of Dasein.[3]

But decades before Heidegger, the American philosopher and polymath Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) provided a much more promising way for theology. He picked up a thread of thought left by the medieval scholastics and developed it into a truly new start in philosophy, which he called *semiotics*, the doctrine of signs. This doctrine of signs provides a way of asserting that truth is one and therefore public, so that theology carries on its work within the same epistemic realm as other sciences and it does so in a way that reveals both the constraints under which they work and energizes them with the freedom to unfold the richness

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2. Bonhoeffer thought that Barth, despite having made a good beginning in his critique of religion, lapsed into a "positivism of revelation." As he wrote, "For the working person or any person who is without religion, nothing decisive has been gained here." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 9, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 362–65.

3. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 61–73.

of the universe. This paper makes the case that Peirce's doctrine of signs enables theology to articulate its true theme: the interpretation of *the* sign, Jesus Christ as the union of ungodly human and the God who justifies the ungodly. The doctrine of signs gives us a way of advancing Luther's great theme, opening up a vista for the future of theology and promising a renewal of preaching, of the church, of the church's public witness, and of the academy.

A Doctrine of Signs

But before we can catch sight of this vista, we must sketch Peirce's doctrine of signs.

We ask first: What is a sign? Reflection on signs traces back to ancient medicine. Physicians learn how to interpret symptoms as signs of an underlying disease in order to prescribe the correct treatment. So, for example, the physician observes spots on the patient's face and interprets them as a sign that the patient has measles. The spots themselves are not the disease, but *signify* to the physician the disease that causes the spots. Signs of this sort have a physical connection to that which they signify, in the same way that smoke is a sign of fire.

It was Augustine, precisely in reflecting on the interpretation of Scripture, who inaugurated reflection on signs in and of themselves by giving a general definition of signs. He defined a sign as "a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself."[4] He recognized two kinds of signs: natural signs, such as smoke or footprints, and conventional signs , which "are those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts."[5] He concedes that other creatures may use signs for this purpose, but he is chiefly interested in human words as signs, since he is addressing the issue of interpreting the Scriptures. It is true that our Lord gave signs that are not words as signs of his will, such as the sacrament of his body and blood. However, these are signs that can be put into words, whereas one could "by no effort express words in terms of those signs."[6] In other words, bread and wine by themselves cannot tell the story of the Last Supper unless they are joined to the Word, as they are in the sacrament.

Augustine's reflections spurred a tradition of reflection on signs in Latin philosophy. A major discovery of medieval philosophy was that relations have being, regardless of whether the terms of the relation are external to the mind or internal to it. This applies to the relations created by signs; they have being and they are

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4. Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana, iv libri*), trans. J.F. Shaw (Paris: Books on Demand, 2018), ii,1.

5. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ii, 2.

6. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, ii, 3.

real. The nominalists, who denied that concepts are real, did not notice that concepts "cannot be without making us aware of something besides themselves unless relations be admitted as suprasubjective modes (that is, as modes that need not be themselves objectified in order to be.)"[7] The way beyond the nominalist impasse was pointed out by the late scholastic John Poinsot (1589-1644), who sharply distinguished between representation and signification. A thing may represent itself, but a sign represents another than itself. Therefore, the being proper to a sign is *the relation as such*. "Signification is always something over and above its foundation in some individual being or material object, something superordinate thereto, something of its very nature *intersubjective*, either actually or prospectively."[8] Signs are about how the world is known in that it is *communicated*. Signs are indifferent to their foundation. The foundation may be material, psychological, natural or cultural, instrumental or formal. It may even be false. The sign relation is real regardless of the nature or even the reality of its terms.

By the time of Poinsot, however, the dye was cast for a radical break in philosophy. Reflection on signs, rooted in Augustine's concern for interpreting the Scriptures and the Sacraments, was cut off, along with the whole of Latin philosophy, in order to free the individual self for exploration of the world unburdened by any intersubjective authority. Except for a brief mention by John Locke at the very end of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*,[9] which he never followed up on, the doctrine of signs remained dormant in western philosophy until Peirce took it up again.

Peirce probably did not read Poinsot, but he did read Aquinus and Scotus and other medieval Latins. It was on this basis that he was able gradually to break with modernity and become what might be called the first "post-modern" philosopher. He learned enough from the scholastics to realize that signs are essentially *triadic*. Upon first reflection it would seem that they are dyadic: a sign stands for something else and so there are two elements. But the scholastic reflection had made clear that the sign consists also, and most essentially, of the relation between the two elements. In a late writing, Peirce gives a concise definition of a sign:

> I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former.[10]

He goes on to clarify that he uses the word "person" as a concession to those who will not understand the more general "*interpretant*." The interpretant is an inherent

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7. John Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 392.

8. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 431.

9. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 720–21.

10. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Peirce Edition Project, Volume II (1893-1913) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 478.

part of the sign, whereas a person as interpreter may or may not be involved. The interpretant is the effect that the sign has in relation to the object, which may be actual in a person, but which may be only potential, a "would-be," as Peirce called it. The interpretant, in turn, is a second sign, determined in a particular way by the first sign. Peirce's definition of "interpretant" is as follows:

> Any sign, *B*, which a sign, *A*, is fitted to determine, without violation of its, *A*'s, purpose, that is in according with the "Truth," even though it, *B*, denotes but a part of the objects of the sign, *A*, and signifies but a part of its, *A*'s, characters, I call an *interpretant* of *A*.[11]

Despite the rather awkward language, the concept is quite straightforward and can perhaps be made clearer with a concrete example. Suppose sign A is "Susan is a theology student." The purpose of this sign, its "truth," is the fact that Susan is a theology student. Susan qualified as a theology student is the object of the sign, that for which the sign stands. Sign B is the relation that sign A sets up between itself and Susan. The being of this relation is the truth thus expressed, namely, that she is a theology student, which the sign is fitted to determine but which, of course, is not the whole of who or what Susan is. The interpretant guarantees the objectivity of the sign by relating it to its object. The interpretant is, in turn, a new sign (sign B) ready to be taken up into discourse by anyone who cares to do so, multiplying the signs that qualify who and what Susan is, including, perhaps, finding out that some are false. So the interpretant is a sign that in turn produces a new interpretant, and so on, constantly being tested against the object of the sign, Susan herself. Reality is the regularity that emerges from this series of signs, which is, however, only approached asymptotically in the sign relation because we never get beyond sign relations.

Thus, human beings find themselves in the midst of a stream of signs; as Deely says, we are floating in a river of signs, with no access to the bottom or the banks, in the midst of what seems to be "an infinite process, not a hopeless or self-defeating one, by any means, but neither is it one over which the individual can gain a complete critical control."[12]

But all the signs purport to signify the world as its really is. The question is: How can we know?

Pierce's answer is what he called *pragmaticism*. The usual term is "pragmatism," a school of thought he helped originate, but he later wished to distinguish his version of pragmatism from that of his colleagues and so invented the term "pragmaticism." The more usual pragmatism stays within the realm of the modern self-possessed self and aims to solve the problem of truth by defining the truth of a proposition as the behavior that it funds. Peirce goes deeper. He does indeed affirm the maxim of pragmatism:

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11. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:304.

12. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*, 644.

> Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood.[13]

And he concedes that such a philosophy may lead to success. "But," he writes, "it does not at all follow that its conclusions are true."[14] He wants to establish a framework for ascertaining truth that is beyond the judgments we make about statements. All the three "normative sciences" consist in making such judgments by distinguishing the good from the bad. Esthetics distinguishes what is admirable from that which is not, ethics distinguishes the good to which our wills are to be oriented from evil, and logic, which is the application of ethics to thought, distinguishes the true from the false. What is necessary to ground all of these is a science that does not draw any distinctions between the good and the bad, "but just contemplates phenomena as they are, simply opens its eyes and describes what it sees."[15] This science is *phenomenology*.

In delineating his phenomenology, Peirce takes the daring step of proposing *three new categories*. Aristotle's categories map mind-independent being, by the use of which one can make unequivocal predications. Kant's categories are the means by which the mind constructs phenomena for itself based on sensory inputs. Peirce's categories are what we must take into account in order to understand the particularly human way of being in the world. They reveal the way by which, through the action of signs, our world transcends the limits of a mere animal environment and becomes the world of signs that we live in, the human *Lebenswelt*. All living things, perhaps all things whatsoever, exist by means of signs. But humans are the only ones who know that there *are* signs and know themselves in a world of signs. Peirce's three new categories are the parameters of the river of signs within which we live.

Peirce's phenomenology is founded on the "Conditional or Hypothetical Science of *Pure Mathematics*, whose only aim is to discover not how things actually are, but how they might be supposed to be."[16] This explains the mathematical starting point for his new categories, which he set out early in his career. Everything rests on a consideration of the ordinal numbers. "First," by its very nature, requires a "Second" in order to be First. And Second, in turn, is in relation to First, and that relation forms a Third. All further ordinal numbers can similarly be analyzed as triads. A Fourth, for example, is Second to Third, which is the First in the triad and the relation between Third and Fourth is a Third. Peirce takes the triad as fundamental, and therefore calls his new categories, simply, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

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13. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:134–35.

14. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:139.

15. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:143.

16. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:144.

Firstness is the human capacity to render the perceptual world intelligible. It is what Aquinas termed the *ens ut primum cognitum*, "being as first known." Firstness is our capacity to grasp the essence of things, not by direct intuition, but by relating things to themselves. This relation is what cognition adds to perception, which enables us to live in a world perfused with signs and to know ourselves as living in that world. For example, imagine I sit down to an appetizing meal. The sight and smell of the meal itself are natural signs, such as other creatures may also apprehend, representing, among other things, feelings of satiation and satisfaction. But in addition, I can receive a whole host of other signs in connection with the meal, such as thoughts about the conditions under which it was produced, or memories of past occasions when I ate the same dishes, or questions about whether this food is good for my health. I have the capacity to apprehend the meal within a complex of signs, which lead to other signs, which lead to other signs, and so on. This is the uniquely human life-world in which we live. It is the means by which we construct worlds beyond what is merely presented to us by perception. The understanding does indeed find relations among things presented by perception, but it also constructs relations of its own and it is *all* these relations as such that are the world we call culture.

But Firstness as such is *potentiality only*; all representations of it already go beyond it. Firstness is

> present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation...What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence—that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it.[17]

Because of Firstness, I can come into objective relation to the world. But, just because "mind-dependent and mind-independent relations are univocal in their being as *objective relations*,"[18] Firstness includes the possibility that I may indeed live in the relation as real, but be mistaken about the reality of the object of that relation. Signs may be false or we may misinterpret them. Firstness is mere possibility and gives no guarantees ahead of time that a sign-relation will correspond to the reality of the object.

Secondness is what happens when we bump into reality. Secondness is the last, which cannot exist apart from the First of Firstness. "It meets us in such facts as Another, Relation, Compulsion, Effect, Dependence, Independence, Negation, Occur-

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17. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, vol. Volume I (1867-1893) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 248.

18. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*: 658.

rence, Reality, Result."[19] I run up against hard facts that "I cannot think away," something that is "there," so that I am forced to acknowledge "a second beside myself."[20]

The immediate result is *Thirdness*, which brings Firstness and Secondness into relationship. "Between the beginning as first, and the end as last, comes the process which leads from first to last."[21] Peirce suggests that we think of the first and second as two points on a line, say on a yardstick, then conceive of these points as the absolute First and the absolute Second, or Last. But both the absolute First and the absolute Second recede out of our grasp and "there is no absolute third, for the third is of its own nature relative, and this is what we are always thinking even when we aim at the first or second."[22] We cannot talk about Firstness without reference to a Second, and hence find ourselves in that which mediates them, the relation between them, which is the Third. In other words, we inevitably find ourselves in the middle, in a world perfused with signs. This places us before a fundamental decision, a faith decision:

> The starting-point of the universe, God the Creator, is the Absolute First; the terminus of the universe, God completely revealed, is the Absolute Second; every state of the universe at a measurable point of time is the third. If you think the measurable is all there is and deny it any definite tendency whence or whither, then you are considering the pair of points that makes the absolute to be imaginary and are an Epicurean. If you hold there is a definite drift to the course of nature as whole, but yet believe its absolute end is nothing but the nirvana from which it set out, you make the two points of the absolute to be coincident, and are a pessimist. But if your creed is that the whole universe is approaching in the infinitely distant future a state having a general character different from that toward which we look back in the infinitely distant past, you make the absolute to consist of two distinct real points and are an evolutionist.[23]

Because we find ourselves in the middle moving through time, Peirce concludes that the Absolute First and the Absolute Second are real and distinct and that the universe therefore evolves and has entelechy. We live within the mediations of the First and the Last, that is, in a world of signs, and this world is moving in the direction of truth. We human beings, with our capacity to be within a world of signs (Firstness), are constantly bumping up against resistances that adumbrate an ultimate end (Secondness), placing us in sign relations, in the stream of signs whose end we never attain, but which is going somewhere. We never attain truth as such. We always have our being only in signs. But we have the hope that the

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19. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:248.

20. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:249.

21. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:250.

22. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:251.

23. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:251.

signs in which we live more and more approximate truth. The condition for this is that we never violate the essentially triadic nature of signs and presume that our ideas directly mediate the world to us in dyadic fashion. The triadic nature of signs keeps us firmly grounded in the facts of both nature and history so that we don't confuse our ideas about either for nature or history itself. In this he sharply distinguishes himself from Hegel, whose philosophy he rejects "in toto." Hegel's problem was that he had "usually overlooked external secondness altogether." In other words, "he has committed the trifling oversight of forgetting that there is a real world with real actions and reactions."[24]

We are embedded in a continuous process of *semiosis* (the action of signs), a doctrine Peirce called *synechism* (continuity). The process of semiosis is ordered toward the truth, but we do not arrive at certainty about truth, only provisional judgments. It is not as if we can be certain about the material world, but our ideas about it may be questionable or vice versa. It is that *we cannot separate the two*. Synechism "can never abide dualism."[25] Because of the triadic nature of signs, there can be no real distinction between matter and mind or at least no sharp dividing line that we can discern. "All phenomena are of one character, though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular. Still, all alike present that mixture of freedom [Firstness] and constraint [Secondness], which allows them to be, nay, makes them to be teleological, or purposive."[26]

Moreover, the world we live in is a shared world; we are moving toward the world's telos together. In order to understand this point, we have to understand Peirce's profound rejection of the nominalism of modernity. His philosophy requires that we regard "generals" or "universals" as real. We all have our being in the action of signs, in the sign relation, and we have that being in common. The modern assertion that "I am altogether myself, and not at all you" he calls a "metaphysics of wickedness," "the vulgarest delusion of vanity."[27] Each individual has a role in the drama of creation, but "so far as he loses himself in that *role*—no matter how humble it may be—so far he identifies himself with its Author,"[28] and so becomes wicked. The reality of the Third Category is precisely what nominalists deny. In denying the reality of generals, they attribute to humans "a power of originating a kind of ideas the like of which Omnipotence has failed to create as objects…." In other words, they "will not admit that God has the faculty of Reason."[29]

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24. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:256. "External secondness" is in contrast to internal secondness, which is internal to the mind, when the mind sets "one part of a notion in relation to another." (254) Peirce later softened his harsh judgment on Hegel somewhat.

25. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.

26. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.

27. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:2.

28. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:3.

29. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:157.

The telos toward which we are moving is, according to Peirce, love. He bases his notion of *agapaistic* evolution on the synechism (continuity) of a world embued with signs. True movement in history, either natural or human, comes about through the Thirdness that contains within itself both freedom (Firstness) and constraint (Secondness). Evolution does indeed involve chance and mechanical necessity (as in Darwinian evolution) but these are encompassed within agapaistic evolution. In agapaistic evolution, the mind is placed in the interplay of freedom and actuality. It is free to play with ideas, form beliefs, and put them into practice. It is this last that is the test of truth within Peirce's pragmaticism: If the effects of our conception are the reinforcement of love, "the ardent desire to fulfill another's highest impulse,"[30] then that conception is true—or rather, it is approaching the truth, for we have not arrived at a final Second. We continue to evolve and the continuity that powers our evolution is love:

> The agapaistic development of thought is the adoption of certain mental tendencies... by an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it by the power of sympathy, that is, by virtue of the continuity of mind....[31]

In other words, there is such a thing as spirit, not the Hegelian spirit that grasps history according to its necessity, but spirit as the entirely mundane process of human semiosis, by which we, as members of one another, living between freedom and constraint, move in the direction of the Truth. That spirit, Peirce would say, is Love. His creed is the biblical affirmation that "God is love." (1 John 4:8) This is the basis of Peirce's philosophical realism. Ideas regarded in an individualistic and nominalist way can, by definition, never be thought in community. But ideas that are buoyed by a shared "continuum of feeling" are real. They exist in that they can be represented, that is, communicated, which means that they can "influence and be influenced by one another." Arbitrariness certainly exists in human minds, but the reality of this shared discourse—love—is the central reality (though of course we cannot, as of yet, know its final end.)[32] The triadic nature of our being in signs reveals that truth and goodness are transcendentals, that is, that they are convertible with being. Truth and goodness are inextricably linked as one—and together they are beautiful. Semiotics assures us that we don't approach the world doubting everything, but that we are embodied creatures constantly coming up against reality and so forming beliefs about the world that we rely on and that shape fixed common habits of behavior—the doctrine of pragmaticism. This is the basis of the security of thought. Semiotics, however, also assures us that our determinations of the truth and our determinations of the good are always provisional. It prevents us from lapsing into a security that "would stifle and reduce us to that very pure

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30. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:354.

31. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:364.

32. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume I:330.

play of secondness which the old determinisms ever mistake for the whole truth of existence."[33] Semiotics is thus the source of the *uberty* of thought, that is, its richness and fecundity.[34]

What Peirce offers is a cosmos in which we can be at home. It is not the absolute and hierarchical cosmos that the medievals inherited from the Greeks. Nor is it the modern cosmos of isolated individuals created by self-emancipation from that cosmos, the "metaphysics of wickedness." He offers instead a philosophy of radical finitude based on an analysis of our ordinary being-in-the-world in an ineluctably triadic way. That is, we have our being in signs. Decades later, Heidegger would attempt something similar, but, remaining adamantly atheistic, he could only characterize that being as "being-unto-death." Peirce began with just as strong a presumption of atheism but found he could not give an account of finite being without locating us between an absolute beginning and absolute end, and our existence as (very provisionally) mediating those two. And so, on purely philosophical grounds, he had to presume that there is a God, and not just an abstract God, but a loving and personal God.

Theology as Exposition of *the* Sign

The above all-too-sketchy overview of Peirce's thought is enough to give us a glimpse, at least, of his achievement. He presents us with a universal field of discourse that is based on everyone's ordinary experience of being in the world and that excludes no area of inquiry whatsoever. The liberal arts reappear as the ancient Trivium, but now understood in a thoroughly semiotic way.[35] The other fields of inquiry follow in train, both the sciences and the arts. There is one world and one field of discourse by which human beings approach both truth in their thinking and goodness in their behavior. There is no overlay of metaphysics or myth. The "discarded image"[36] of the medievals is truly discarded, and it doesn't reappear in the covert form of the modern analysis of subjectivity. It is truly gone. But it is not simply tossed into the dustbin of history; it is replaced by an account of how things actually are, here and now.

Theology, too, finds its home in this universal field of discourse, or, as we can say, reclaiming one of the signal achievements of western culture, in the *university*. It does not rule there imperiously as queen, regulating the other sciences by the

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33. Deely, *Four Ages of Understanding*: 627.

34. See Peirce's "An Essay toward Improving Our Reasoning in Security and in Uberty," Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II: 463-474.

35. Outlined in "Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing," in Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, Volume II:324–30.

36. C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

authority of its tradition. But neither does it have to beg for a place at the table. Theology's theme, after all, is *the* Word. It has no other subject matter than an entirely human semiosis that has been injected into the world which is at the same time a *transcendental semiosis*: It is the human semiosis that mediates to us the Alpha and the Omega, the ultimate beginning and the ultimate end, the Absolute First and the Absolute Second. In explicating and facilitating that mediation (the mediation being the proclamation of the gospel), it also calls all other fields of inquiry to remain within a genuine Third, both constrained by reality and free to play and explore. It thus becomes an essential and foundational servant—and in *this* way "queen"—of all the arts and sciences.

　　We can begin to see how semiotics transforms theology by starting at theology's center: Christology. In its Christological reflections, the early church found itself confronted with the claims of the prevailing metaphysics, which laid down the axiom that God could not suffer. This was contrary to the clear Biblical witness to the cross, leading to a centuries-long struggle to square the two assertions: that God is impassible but that nevertheless God the Son suffered. The Chalcedonian Formula distinguished "nature" from "hypostasis" and thus could characterize the Person of Christ as the one divine hypostasis of the Son subsisting as two natures. The distinction between the hypostasis and the natures allowed a formulation that made room for the biblical narrative, the Theopaschite Formula: "One of the Holy Trinity suffered in the flesh." However, since the distinction between hypostasis and nature could not be made intelligible in the prevailing metaphysics, which demanded the distinction between God as impassible and humans as capable of suffering, the attributes of the two natures tended to govern theology and interpretation of Scripture, especially in the west. As Luther found in his controversy with the Sacramentarians, this applied also to the human nature of the exalted Christ, which, according to his opponents, could only be present in one place, in heaven, at God's right hand, and so could not be present in the bread and wine of the Sacrament. Faced with philosophical presuppositions that denied that the clear promise of the Gospel ("This is my body, etc.") was possible, Luther concluded: "...we do better if we leave the language of philosophy behind in its own sphere and learn to speak a new language [*nova linguis*] in the realm of faith, outside of every other sphere."[37] The basic method of medieval scholastic theology was to employ philosophy to determine what was possible, and then construct a Christology that accorded with it. Luther's method was to exclude metaphysics from theology so that theology could speak its "new language." This enabled Luther to employ the ancient church's teaching of the communication of attributes with unparalleled

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37. WA 39/II, 3,3f (Th.2) In the disputation *De divinitate et humanitate Christi*, quoted in Oswald Bayer, "Das Wort Ward Fleisch: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre von der Idiomenkommunikation," in *Creator Est Creatura: Luthers Christologie Als Lehre von der Idiomskommunikation*, Theologische Bibliothek Toepelman 138 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 19. (All quotes from Bayer's article are translated by the present author.)

boldness. He did so in the spirit of the inherited tradition of the doctrine of the communication of attributes, which emphasized that this doctrine is not a general rule, but a confession concerning the unique Person of Jesus Christ. As Bonaventura wrote, "There is no communication of attributes in the abstract but only in the concrete, for divinity is not humanity, but God is a human being [non est *communicatio idiomatum* in abstractione, sed in concretione, quia Deitas non est humanitas, sed Deus est homo].[38] So Luther is able to find a basis in the tradition, firmly established as orthodox though constantly slipping from sight, from which to declare his independence from philosophy and proclaim the communication of attributes without reserve. But he thought he could do that only at the cost of giving up the unity of truth. He asserted that theology has its own rules and logic and cannot be dictated to by philosophy. But then we have to ask: Is theology therefore condemned to irrationalism? Isn't theology ghettoized from the whole university, so that it has nothing to say to any other realm of knowledge and they have nothing to say to it? Don't the truth claims of theology become unintelligible, not just to those outside the theological community, but also, if they are honest, to the theologians themselves?

The answer emerges when we realize that the Word with which Luther begins is a *sign*. It is a sign that has been injected into the very same world of signs that we all share and in which we have our being. If we understand that the Word is a sign of the exact same nature as every other sign, then, with Luther, we can not only declare our independence from the substance metaphysics inherited from the Greeks. But we can also declare our independence from the modern analysis of subjectivity, which casts into doubt any truth claims about a God external to our own feelings or thoughts.

For Luther's Christological breakthrough regarding the communication of attributes opens the way to understanding the gospel as *semiosis*. The phrase "communication of attributes" itself references a communication. Christ's very Person is a communication, the Word become flesh. Bayer's concept of the communicative being of Christ expresses this insight and certainly means that the gospel is semiosis.[39] Bayer points out that Luther's famous "joyful exchange" in his *Freedom of the Christian* explicitly depends on the church's two-natures doctrine.[40] The exchange is the communication of a promise:

> The promise (*promissio*) is the medium in which true human being (*vere homo*) and true God (*vere deus*) are indivisibly united. This entails that the

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38. Quoted in Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 14.

39. Bayer himself is skeptical that Peirce's semiotic is helpful in illuminating the communicative being of Christ. (Oswald Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 32.) He cites Hermann Deuser's use of Peirce's ideas in his *Kleine Einführung in die Systematische Theologie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999). Deuser's use of Peirce's ideas is, however, not the same case that is being made here.

40. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 8-9.

> *Est* that mediates the *vere homo* and the *vere deus*, God's life and Jesus' death, cannot be understood as apophantic, that is it does not express the meaning of an already established subject. Rather, it is the movement in which the reality of both the *vere homo* and the *vere deus*, God's life and Jesus' death, are posited simultaneously.[41]

This can only be said of the Person of Jesus Christ, not of the natures. The Person *is* this communication of promise. This communicative being of Christ as promise at the center of Luther's doctrine of justification is precisely what animates his Christological reflections in the controversy on the Lord's Supper. In the Supper, Jesus makes his testament (promise) to his disciples. The content of the promise is the conflict on the cross, in which he defeats death and life is victorious. The effect is the joyful exchange: when we hear the promise in faith, he takes our sin and death and we receive his life. All of this is identical to what the phrase "the communication of attributes" expresses: Jesus' Person *as* communication, *as* promise, the union of ungodly humanity with the God who justifies the ungodly, which is Jesus' death and God's life at once. In the words of the Chalcedonian Formula, these two are "one and the same."

But Bayer's understanding of the *Est* needs correction, at least insofar as to what it denies. He writes that "The *Est* is not a signifying copula, but an effective copula that does what it says; it is, in fact, a synthetic copula."[42] But there is no need to take the gospel out of the ordinary realm of signs that signify and transfer it into a "new language" that, in some mysterious fashion, is "effective" and "does what is says." Nor does it help to invoke a dubious distinction between words that merely make assertions and "effective words" that do what they say. To be sure, the gospel is effective and does what it says. It is God's creative Word that indeed synthesizes something utterly new, a new creation, in the reconciliation of ungodly humans with the God who justifies the ungodly. But it does so in *a totally human way*, precisely by signifying in the ordinary way.

For Jesus Christ, in the comprehensive unity of his Person and work, is a sign. As a sign, he signifies Another, the One he called his Father. And, as with every sign, he does so only by determining an Interpretant, who expresses all actual and future relations between the Father and the Son—the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a power super-added to the sign to make it effective. The Holy Spirit is *inherent in this entirely human sign* because of the triadic nature of all signs. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, of Jesus as the sign of the Father. This sign is the whole Bible, now fulfilled in Jesus' testament, his death for us that is at the same time God's life for us.

The result is that this sign gives us an *Absolute Second, fully embodied in an ordinary human sign*. The promissory nature of this sign makes it utterly certain

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41. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 24.

42. Bayer, *Das Wort Ward Fleisch*, 24.

and thereby cuts off access to any second sphere we may imagine, whether mythic or metaphysical, which would render the sign questionable. The Absolute Second is fully and truly within this human promissory sign, Jesus' testament in bread and wine. With the giving and receiving of this sign, the end of the ages is upon us. At the same time, the sign gives an *Absolute First, the word of creation*, but again as a promise, beyond which we cannot go. So we are confined to the time in between, to the middle, to finitude. Everything that pretended to give an Absolute First and Absolute Second—all the idols, powers, and spirits of this age—are now defeated, objects of derision in Christ's triumphal procession.

In other words, it is through this sign that God succeeds in being God to us, precisely by being *absent*. The doctrine of the Real Presence is misleadingly named, insofar as it suggests a presence not mediated by the sign. As Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, it is not eating and drinking that give life and salvation, "but rather the words that are recorded: 'given for you' and 'shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"[43] The sign is legible and hearable as the communication of *Jesus himself*, or it is not the gospel. The elements and word are inextricably united in the sign. Because the sign is a human sign, we can receive it; we can take, eat, and drink the elements united with the Word. But there is no "presence" in the bread and wine. On the contrary, the elements are now emptied of all presences by which we might take them as dyadic representations, sacred objects whose power we have at our disposal. The elements become bits of creation that cease to speak ambiguously to us, proclaiming both God's blessings and God's curse. Instead, they become *mere* creation, without any other cultural "presence," any other meaning, and now unambiguously speak *only* the words Jesus adds to them: "Given and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins." We live in the Interpretant of the sign, by faith alone, in the middle, between an Absolute First and Absolute Second which are both sheer gift to us in the promise. So the bread and wine signify—finally—absence, Jesus' death as our death, and at the same time created being called forth *ex nihilo*, out of nothing—all *for us*. The only God we have is the dead man who died forsaken on the cross and who is at the same time revealed as the Son of God because we hear—and only hear!—that he is risen from the dead. We gain the being of the sign relation as our being, and now we live before the God who is truly other, that is, the God who is truly God.

The sign of the gospel is expressed in Bonhoeffer's precise Trinitarian formula: "Before God and with God, we live without God."[44] "Before God" designates the Father, the object of the sign, and "with God" the Son, the sign itself. The Holy Spirit, the Interpretant of the sign, mediates the absence of God. In other words, the Holy Spirit leads us to live *within* the sign, and not beyond it, within finitude, with

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43. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 363.

44. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9:479.

only provisional knowledge and no grasp at all of any Absolute First or Absolute Second. The God that we grasp is the sign of that dead man hanging on the cross whom no one rescued when he cried out for help.

So by the work of this sign, we are left alone in this world, with no special power and no special knowledge. We rather find ourselves awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, with our senses more and more attuned to the signs around us, by which God is speaking to us. We are no longer self-possessed selves trying to make something of ourselves. Instead, we find ourselves living fully "in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failures, experience and perplexities," no long taking our own sufferings seriously but "rather the suffering of God in the world."[45]

In other words, God ceases to be *a* being or *being itself* which oppresses and enslaves us. Instead, God encloses us within *his* Absolute First and Absolute Second, and thereby places us within the stream of created time, to live in free responsibility before him. We live, as Peirce recognized, between constraint and freedom. We are constrained by the real, all the reactions and resistances we run up against in our finite life as creatures. And we are free in that we are awake to the signs and can begin to read them, to read the book of history and the book of nature, in hope, and thus apply ourselves to writing the story of our lives in congruence with the world's end, which is love. We begin to perceive God's continuing activity as creator, calling forth the true, the good, and the beautiful as human beings, despite sin, embody God's creative love. Every instance of truth/goodness/beauty is an adumbration of the Absolute First and the Absolute Second. Every sign we encounter that calls forth an interpretant of freedom and constraint is the Word of God in creation, expressing in some manner the Triune God, who is Alpha and Omega, and granting true human *being*. It is not true that the fall is the beginning of history or the beginning of time. Sin and evil are encompassed within the larger bracket of the Absolute First and Absolute Second. Sin is an anomaly within the *creatio continua*, in which we seize being itself by violence and then attempt to rise above it by ascending a heavenly hierarchy (religion, also in its Christian guises) or by assuming a pretended position above it as a self-possessing self (modernity and post-modernity, also in its Christian guises). In sin, we can never escape being and its demand that we be, so that being is always "being-unto-death," weighed down with care for our own being that is constantly threatened with nothingness. Only the Sign enables us to live without God as free and responsible creatures, within finitude, within time.

Yes, the Word of the cross is an effective word. But we don't have to set the divine effective word over and against the human persuasive word.[46] The word of the cross is effective precisely because it is *merely* a human, persuasive word,

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45. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 9:486.

46. On this distinction, see André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 130–80.

and nothing more. The power of God is the power of God's own death and a sign thereby given of a truly human life sustained by the abyss of God's love and energized by faith in his promises and hope for his ultimate success in being God to his creation, of being "all in all." The assertion of the gospel is that God *is* this sign, this entirely human, very ordinary (and hence utterly extraordinary) sign. The Christian missionary task is the task of creating a truly universal grammar, logic, and rhetoric, with no overt or covert appeals to any supposed super-human power over and above our own ineluctably divided languages. Proclaiming the gospel is not imposing a new language on people, but uncovering the created reality of their own already-existing language, in which God has all the time been carrying on his "continuous miracle"[47] by which people actually succeed, however imperfectly, in emptying themselves of themselves in order to enter into the narrative of others and walk with them in true communion, community, and communication with each other. The gospel then acquires persuasive force as the sign that announces the ultimate victory of that love. It is the revelation of God who sets us free to live without God.

The result is that we ourselves become signs. We might take as an example Levi sitting at his tax booth (Luke 4:27-28). Jesus says, "Follow me," and Levi gets up and follows him, thereby embodying the interpretant of the sign that Jesus utters. Jesus' command has no other content than simply to be with him; it is in reality sheer promise and gift. So Levi's action, while certainly *his* action, is something entirely new. It is a repetition of the sign that Jesus himself is. It is Levi's death, so that Jesus alone lives in him. If the call had come from anyone else, the interpretant would have been a mere active *imitatio*,[48] which would have then become a new sign demanding a new act of obedience, and so on. The relation would be one of unending bondage. With Jesus, however, Levi's repetition of the sign is the end of bondage. Its interpretant, which re-interprets Levi, is the whole narrative that Jesus Christ is, which brings Levi to an end and replaces his endless bondage with the gift of created time, created by a Final Second that grounds him in a Primal First, living in the power of the sign's interpretant, the Holy Spirit. In Jesus Christ, the human and the divine are "one and the same." The entirely human act of following

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47. The phrase is from J. G. Hamann, quoted by Oswald Bayer in *A Contemporary in Dissent: Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 158.

48. Anthony Bartlett's application of semiotics to theology, otherwise very rich and suggestive, in the end reduces the sign that Jesus is to a demand for imitation, albeit one that transforms persons so that they are enabled to imitate him. Bartlett's dependence on the anthropology of René Girard pushes him toward construing the gospel as gnosis: when you know that God is a God of love and non-violence, then you yourself will be transformed into one who loves. The conflation of creation and fall in Girard fails to fully affirm both the goodness of creation and the seriousness of sin. See Anthony Bartlett, *Theology beyond Metaphysics: Transformative Semiotics of René Girard* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), esp. 131–48.

is the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, the turning of the ages, the death of the old and the beginning of the new.

Conclusion

Semiotics began with the question of interpreting the Scripture and was nurtured though its medieval development by the urgent question of biblical interpretation. It now comes full circle to providing a framework for theology in our post-modern context. The task remains of drawing out its implications in all areas of theology. We have before us a wide vista. It is time to explore it.

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Why the Words Still Matter

Recovering Biblical Languages as an Act of Pastoral Love

Dan Lioy

Introduction

In many ministerial settings, expectations for clergy proficiency in the original languages have softened. Seminaries are under pressure to revise their curricula to place greater emphasis on developing competencies in leadership, counseling, and missiology. Churches ask pastors to be generalists who can move quickly from text to talk to task. Bible software has matured, shortening the perceived distance between Hebrew and Greek and the reader's eye.

None of this is inherently problematic. Yet taken together, these forces provoke a shift in how the Church handles Scripture. The ordinary work of proclamation begins to rely on second-hand determinations about meaning. A sermon crafted from competing English translations and a cascade of study-Bible notes can still be edifying, but it subtly relocates authority from the preacher's living engagement in the original languages with the biblical text to an ecosystem of editorial decisions that the pastor is inadequately equipped to evaluate firsthand.

This shift touches the pastor's three central tasks, namely, preaching, catechesis, and sacramental practice. In preaching, the lack of linguistic competence can foster confidence where there should be patience and can generate caution where the text speaks with bracing clarity. In catechesis, the Church's doctrinal memory risks becoming derivative of standard reference voices rather than responsive to the precise way Scripture speaks to the contemporary theological and cultural horizon. In sacramental practice, textual nuances that shape the Church's identity (for example, covenant language in the words of institution) may be muffled by translation choices that, while excellent, cannot carry the full semantic weight.

A pastoral vignette illustrates the problem. A minister plans a series on Romans. Consulting several English versions, she notices disagreement over "propitiation/ atoning sacrifice/mercy seat" in Romans 3:25 and decides to avoid the term altogether, offering a vague statement about "God dealing with sin." The sermon is earnest, but the congregation never hears how Paul's word choice weaves Old

Testament temple imagery into the announcement of grace. A modest investment in Greek would have enabled the pastor to explain the options succinctly, show why the context tilts in one direction, and proclaim God's cruciform mercy with greater clarity.[1] For Luther, the original languages functioned not as academic badges but as instruments of reform and pastoral care. He warned that the Gospel is not long preserved without proficiency in Hebrew and Greek, precisely because the Church's proclamation is bound to the particularity of the biblical text: real words, in real syntaxes, about the real Christ given for the real Church.[2]

The main thesis of this essay is as follows. Competence in scholarly exegesis anchored in the original languages is essential to the customary practice of ordained ministry. This is because it guards doctrinal integrity, enables faithful proclamation, and animates sacramental ministry in continuity with the Church's confession. The claim is ecclesial, not merely academic. The Church's truth-telling depends on its truth-hearing, and truth-hearing requires attentiveness to the form in which God gives Scripture.

With respect to the essay's methodological approach, the argument proceeds in three movements. First, a historical-theological sketch (patristic through Reformation) demonstrates that attention to Hebrew and Greek has long been understood as a pastoral necessity rather than a scholarly luxury.[3] Second, a theological-

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1. For a detailed, incisive discussion about this issue, see the following: C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 214–18; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., 2nd ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 252–59; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 198–203. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version, © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

2. For example, see the following two representative observations made by Luther: Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 36: *Word and Sacrament II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 304; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45: *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 360.

3. For a survey of ancient interpretive manuals, see Tarmo Toom, "Early Christian Handbooks on Interpretation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 109–25. For a profile of the qualifications of exemplary exegetes in the early church, see Peter W. Martens, "Ideal Interpreters," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 149–65. For a discussion about how the Reformers explicitly recentered Hebrew and Greek as instruments for pastoral reform (for example, Bible translation, preaching, catechisms), not as scholastic hobbies, see Esther Chung-Kim, "Reception in the Renaissance and Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 686–703.

hermeneutical account clarifies what scholarly exegesis is (and is not), locating it within the Church's doctrinal life and the economy of triune self-communication.[4]

Third, a practical-ecclesial section traces implications for preaching, catechesis, and sacramental practice, illustrated by specific examples where linguistic decisions directly shape pastoral outcomes. Throughout, the tone aims to remain sympathetic to genuine constraints (for example, time, finance, accessibility), yet resisting the misperception that adeptness in Hebrew and Greek may be safely outsourced to algorithms or entrusted to a shrinking cadre of specialists. The Church's speech about God is most itself when it is accountable to Scripture's actual words.[5]

The Historical-Theological Imperative

Luther's Warning and the Schooling of the Church

For Luther, the original languages were means of grace insofar as they enable the Church to hear Christ's voice with clarity. The languages safeguarded the Church against doctrinal additions by tethering one's argument to the literal (that is, grammatical) sense of Scripture. At stake was catechesis, not just controversy: pastors formed by Hebrew and Greek could bind consciences with precision, instructing the laity on justification, sacraments, and Christian freedom without rhetorical fog. In Luther's call that cities maintain Christian schools, Luther envisioned an ecosystem—municipal, ecclesial, and academic—ordered to the pastor's daily work of teaching. In this vision, an emphasis on the original languages discipline debate without weaponizing it. They make polemic less personal and more textual, even as they animate preaching with confidence that claims are warranted by the text itself.[6]

Timothy Wengert clarifies that this was not anti-tradition biblicism. Luther's method honored the Church's rule of faith while constantly returning to the words and syntax through which Christ is preached. Wengert shows how Luther's pedagogy

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4. In *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), John Webster deliberates this issue. For instance, in chapter 3 (pgs. 68–106), he develops the idea that reading Scripture is God's triune self-communication, so that interpretation is not only a human act but also part of God's saving work. Also, in chapter 4 (pgs. 107–135), Webster argues that theological accounts of Scripture clarify the nature and limits of scholarly exegesis by situating it within the church's doctrinal life.

5. On this point, see Luther's statement: "The truth of Scripture comes first. After that is accepted, one may determine whether the words of men can be accepted as true"; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 282.

6. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, *The Christian in Society II*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 343, 351–52, 355–56, 358–68.

integrates grammar, rhetoric, and theology, so that ministers do not simply quote authorities but can argue from the text. Luther's insistence that reform requires schools—staffed, funded, and disciplined—remains poignant. A Church that trims original language study from pastoral formation can celebrate mission today and lose the grammar of the Gospel tomorrow.[7]

Two examples from Luther's work underscore the point. His lectures on Galatians linger over Paul's prepositions and genitives. Also, Luther's translation choices in the German Bible are often accompanied by marginal notes that teach lay readers the sense of a passage. The trajectory runs from grammar to doctrine to pastoral care. Here, exegesis becomes proclamation.

Patristic and Medieval Continuities

The Reformation's retrieval did not emerge from a vacuum. For example, Jerome insisted that the Church must not be captive to mistranslation. His attention to Hebrew and Greek served the Church's comprehension and the doctrinal integrity of its preaching.[8] Also, Augustine teaches that languages, history, and rhetoric are indispensable tools for interpreting Scripture, yet their use must be governed by humility, patience, and above all charity. For him, the aim of all learning is to build up the love of God and neighbor, so that even eloquence and linguistic skill serve truth rather than pride.[9]

As de Lubac explains, medieval interpreters never treated allegory as a detour from the text's historical grounding. The literal sense was the indispensable base upon which spiritual readings were built. Allegorical meaning did not bypass linguistic precision; it grew out of it. To separate spiritual interpretation from careful attention to language is to sever it from its sustaining root.[10] By the high Middle Ages, the university curriculum prioritized grammar and rhetoric as preliminary to theology. This arrangement was not only administrative but also goal-oriented, reflecting the conviction that divine revelation is mediated through human language and thus requires interpreters who attend to its formal characteristics.[11]

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7. Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 21–22, 32, 53, 92–94.

8. Jerome, "The Letters of St. Jerome," in *St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, translated by W. H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W. G. Martley, vol. 6 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1893), 113.

9. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine and Selected Introductory Works*, ed. Timothy George, Theological Foundations (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2022), 37–38.

10. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, vol. 2, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 84–85.

11. Franklin T. Harkins, "Medieval Latin Reception," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 651, 663–64.

Confessional Echoes and Early Modern Consolidation

Early modern confessional documents presuppose a textually disciplined ministry. For instance, Philip Melanchthon's humanist trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—was designed to form ministers who can analyze, articulate, and argue responsibly.[12] Also, post-Reformation exegesis maintained a consistent partnership between linguistic precision and theological clarity, ensuring that doctrine remained anchored in Scripture. In a time of disputed authority, requiring ministers to engage directly with biblical languages helped preserve the Church's fidelity to Christ.[13] Moreover, confessional schools cultivated habits of public debate, where exegetical claims had to be substantiated by textual evidence. The rhetorical pressure of such exercises formed pastors who could teach, not just assert.[14]

What Scholarly Exegesis Is and Is Not

In accordance with what has been stated so far, exegetical theology, when understood correctly, is the Church's disciplined practice of listening to God's voice as he has chosen to communicate, specifically through words, grammar, and syntax. It is neither a preliminary step before "real" theology, nor a technical exercise reserved for specialists. Instead, it is theology's native posture: patient, faithful listening to Scripture's literal sense so that doctrine, proclamation, and pastoral care arise from the text rather than being imposed upon it.

In this sense, exegetical theology is the Church in prayerful attention, receiving the triune God's self-communication in Hebrew and Greek, and allowing that communication to shape its confession, preaching, and ministry of the Sacraments. Because God binds his promises to linguistic signs, exegetical theology safeguards the Church from drifting into abstraction by anchoring its speech in the concrete form of divine address. Thus, the work of exegesis is not academic elitism but pastoral fidelity. It is a way of ensuring that what is proclaimed in the pulpit, taught in catechesis, and enacted at the altar arises from the very words through which Christ gives eternal life.

Definition and Scope

Scholarly exegesis is a linguistically responsible reading situated within the Church's confession and mission. Its heartbeat is the literal sense: meaning as generated by words in their grammatical, semantic, and discourse contexts. Yet, the literal sense

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12. Philipp Melanchthon, *Philip Melanchthon: Orations on Philosophy and Education*, ed. Sachiko Kusukawa, trans. Christine F. Salazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–8, 79–83.

13. See A. C. Neele, "Post-Reformation Reformed Exegesis: Continuity or Discontinuity of John Calvin?" *Koers – Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 79, no. 4 (2014): Art. #2148, 8 pages.

14. See David Luy, "Martin Luther's Disputations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

is not diminished; it is enhanced by attention to genre, intertext, and canon.[15] Building on Brevard Childs, exegesis approaches the text in its canonical form as Scripture within the life of the Church, attending to the way individual passages interrelate within the whole. Such a canonical perspective protects against fragmentary proof-texting and historicist reconstructions that strip the text of its theological substance.[16]

Scripture's sanctification as divine self-communication calls for an interpreter formed by the Church's faith and virtues. The exegete is not a detached observer but a participant in the Spirit's work within the ecclesial community. In this context, humility and patience are not optional dispositions but necessary knowledge-related virtues for hearing accurately. Thus, scholarly exegesis transcends mere technique. It becomes an embodied practice shaped by tradition and oriented toward proclamation, accountable to the Church and animated by grace.[17]

Genre awareness belongs here. Whether it is narrative, poetry, apocalypse, or epistle, each literary type sets expectations for how meaning is signaled. For example, in Hebrew poetry, parallelism and terseness do semantic work. In Pauline discourse, conjunctions and clause structures carry argumentative force. Genre sensitivity is not a bonus round. Rather, it is part of the literal sense.[18]

Exegesis and Dogmatics in Mutual Service

Detaching biblical interpretation from theological reflection results in superficial readings; separating theology from Scripture leads to speculative systems without grounding. These two disciplines are interwoven in a dynamic interpretive process: the framework of faith shapes how Scripture is read, while careful reading reshapes and deepens doctrinal understanding. When the plain sense of the text is replaced by abstract concepts, the narrative integrity of Scripture begins to unravel. As a result, interpreters lose sight of how the Bible articulates its claims about God.[19]

Vanhoozer reimagines doctrine as a guide for faithful enactment. Doctrine instructs the Church in how to speak and behave in ways that align with the roles and

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15. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), I.A.3; II.B.1.

16. Brevard Childs, "Introduction to the Old Testament. Chapter 3: Canon as Criticism," in *Theology, History, and Biblical Interpretation: Modern Readings,* ed. Darren Sarisky (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 258–61.

17. Gregory Vall, *Ecclesial Exegesis: A Synthesis of Ancient and Modern Approaches to Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 8–10, 12–14.

18. Jeannine K. Brown and H. Daniel Zacharias, *Embedded Genres in the New Testament: Understanding Their Impact for Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 19–24.

19. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 372–73.

storyline of the biblical narrative.[20] Hays demonstrates how intertextual echoes shape theological imagination by anchoring interpretive claims in the text's figural language, namely, its recurring motifs and patterns woven throughout the canon.[21] In practice, this means that creeds and catechisms function as both guardrails and guides, not substitutes for Scripture. The Church's theological grammar is cultivated by speaking from and about Scripture, in the Spirit's power, and for the sake of the world.

Tools, Fallacies, and the Interpreter's Virtues

People in the Global North now live amid a renaissance of digital tools that provide unprecedented access to lexica, grammars, and corpora. When used responsibly, these tools democratize scholarship and facilitate accurate interpretation; when used carelessly, they amplify misunderstanding. Carson identifies several interpretive pitfalls that arise when readers mistake gloss lists for meaning. These include illegitimate totality transfer, the root fallacy, and semantic anachronism.[22]

Illegitimate totality transfer occurs when an interpreter assumes that a word simultaneously carries all its possible meanings in every instance. For example, the Hebrew noun *hesed* can mean "covenant loyalty," "steadfast love," "mercy," or "kindness," depending on context. The error arises when one imports the entire semantic range into a single occurrence, such as insisting that *hesed* in Psalm 136 must encompass every theological nuance the term bears elsewhere, rather than allowing the immediate context to determine its sense. Similarly, the Greek noun *logos* can mean "word," "reason," "account," or "principle." Reading John 1:1 as though *logos* necessarily includes all Stoic philosophical connotations, instead of attending to how John employs the term in his prologue, exemplifies this mistaken understanding.

The root fallacy assumes that a word's meaning is determined by its etymology rather than by its actual usage in a given period. For instance, some interpreters claim that the Greek noun *ekklēsia* ("church") must always mean "called-out ones" because it derives from *ek* ("out") and *kaleō* ("to call"). In reality, by the first century *ekklēsia* simply denoted an "assembly" or "congregation," without implying the notion of "calling out." Likewise, in Hebrew exegesis, one might argue that *'elohim* ("God") fundamentally means "mighty ones," and therefore always carries polytheistic overtones. This overlooks the fact that in most Old Testament contexts, *'elohim* functions as the standard designation for the one God of Israel, irrespective of its root form.

Semantic anachronism involves retrojecting later meanings of a word into an earlier text. For example, the Greek verb *baptizō* ("baptize") in the New Testament

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20. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (La Vergne: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2005), 59–60.

21. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 193.

22. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 12–17.

period meant simply "to immerse" or "to wash." Reading into these occurrences the full sacramental theology that developed in later Christian tradition commits this fallacy. Similarly, interpreting the Hebrew noun *qāhal* ("assembly") in Deuteronomy through the lens of later rabbinic technical usage, rather than according to its plain meaning in its eighth- to sixth-century BCE context, represents the same error. In both cases, meaning from later stages of linguistic or theological development is wrongly imposed on an earlier text.

As Green observes, the meaning of a word in Scripture emerges from how it functions within its immediate literary and historical context. Significance arises not from etymology or aggregated glosses, but from usage within the text itself.[23] Whether analyzing the semantic range of Hebrew terms in Leviticus or tracing Paul's use of Greek vocabulary in his letters, responsible interpretation depends on attending to contextual meaning rather than relying on decontextualized word studies or oversimplified definitions derived from digital tools.

These cautions are not solely academic concerns but serve as vital pastoral safeguards. When preaching relies on superficial lexical analysis, it risks distorting the biblical message by overstating the semantic weight of individual terms. For instance, the frequently cited assertion that Greek clearly differentiates between *agapaō* (often associated with divine love) and *phileō* (typically seen as either a lesser or more affectionate love) in John 21 is exaggerated, as actual usage reveals considerable semantic overlap.[24] Similarly, the Hebrew term *yôm* ("day") in Genesis 1 carries substantial literary and theological significance regardless of one's stance on chronology, and its interpretation is shaped more by narrative context than by lexical definition alone.[25] Such missteps can burden hearers with misplaced certainties or obscure the rhetorical flow of a passage. Responsible interpretation, therefore, must attend not only to lexical data but also to the broader textual and theological context in which meaning is shaped.

The character trait of virtue brings the whole into focus. Here, Augustine's counsel remains instructive: exegesis is a craft and a moral posture.[26] Language shapes not only one's intellect but also one's character, cultivating patience (because syntax resists haste), purity of thought (because context constrains creativity), and love (because understanding requires attentive listening). For ministers, the issue is not pedantry but pastoral credibility. Congregations can sense when clergy persons have lingered long enough to be shaped by the Word they proclaim.

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23. Gene L. Green, "Lexical Pragmatics and Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 4 (2007): 799.

24. Paul Aaron Himes, "Loving Wisdom: The Ἀγαπάω–Φιλέω Exchange in John 21:15–17 as an Allusion to LXX Proverbs 8:17," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 30, no. 3 (2020): 401–02.

25. Rick Wadholm Jr., *The Theological Meaning and Significance of Yôm in Genesis 1* (Master's thesis, Providence Theological Seminary, 2012), 88–90.

26. Mark Ian McDowell, "Augustine, Virtue, and the Moral Field," *Reformed Faith & Practice* 7, no. 2 (December 2022): 10–11.

Linguistic Depth: Aspect, Syntax, and Discourse

Greek verbal aspect serves as a compelling illustration of how linguistic analysis can enhance pastoral discernment. Whether one adopts the perspective that aspect constitutes the primary semantic feature of the verb system or favors a more traditional framework that incorporates *Aktionsart* (a term referring to the inherent nature or type of action expressed by a verb), pastors stand to gain. Imperfective forms generally portray actions or states as ongoing or incomplete, while perfective forms typically present events as complete wholes. Though not a subject for homiletic exposition, verbal aspect remains a valuable exegetical tool for sermon preparation.[27]

Similarly, Hebrew grammar—particularly the use of *wayyiqtol* forms (a verb form typically used to convey sequential past actions in narrative) and linked clauses—shapes the rhythm and highlights within narrative texts. Scholars have demonstrated how discourse features like topicalization and emphatic particles signal what the author wants the readers to notice. Paying attention to these linguistic signals helps pastors avoid reading too much into minor details while ensuring they do not overlook key structural transitions.[28]

Lexicons remain tools, not masters. Hebrew and Greek dictionaries, when employed thoughtfully and in light of literary context and genre, assist pastors in steering clear of eccentric or misleading interpretations. Still, lexicons do not dictate meaning; usage does. The pastor's task is to weigh options, articulate a reasoned choice, and move expeditiously to proclamation.[29] For insights at the level of discourse, Runge's analysis of Greek features, such as emphasis, contrast, and progression, can help preachers discern how paragraphs cohere.[30] The aim is not to deliver grammar lessons from the pulpit, but to allow grammatical understanding to support clarity and conviction.

Canon and Figural Reading in Practice

Biblical clauses do more than transmit information; they carry communicative force. They assert, exhort, and promise, often signaled by particles, verbal aspect, and literary context. Recognizing this safeguards preaching from reducing God's Word to mere advice or data. For instance, Psalm 23:1 declares, "The Lord is my

27. Andrew David Naselli, "A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 17–23, 25–26, 28.

28. John A. Cook, "The Semantics of Verbal Pragmatics: Clarifying the Roles of *Wayyiqtol* and *Weqatal* in Biblical Hebrew Prose," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 49, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): 247–250, 269.

29. Cilliers Breytenbach, "The Task and Future of New Testament Studies," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023): 3–4.

30. Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 1–5.

shepherd; I lack nothing." This statement not only affirms God's care but also invites trust. Similarly, Psalm 100:4 commands, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving." In Hebrew, this imperative is not a harsh order but a gracious summons into God's joy, drawing hearers into the worshipful songs of his people.[31]

Figural reading—a hallmark of canonical interpretation—attentively discerns how earlier biblical texts are prophetically echoed, fulfilled, and brought to completion in later ones, all while preserving the historical and literal integrity of the original contexts. Likewise, figural reading grows from the literal sense under the Spirit's guidance. For example, Psalm 8:5 in the Hebrew text describes humanity as made "a little lower than God" (*elohim*), whereas the Septuagint translates it as "a little less than the angels."[32] Hebrews 2:7 and 9 adopt the Septuagint's wording to proclaim Jesus as the ultimate representative of humanity—the true Son of Man—who, through his incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection, brings many redeemed sons and daughters to glory (v. 10). This interplay between the Hebrew and Greek versions is not a textual discrepancy to resolve but a divine gift to receive, exemplifying how Scripture interprets Scripture in pointing to Christ.[33]

The Gospel writers' use of Israel's Scriptures—such as Mark's new exodus motifs and John's temple imagery—emphasizes that preaching must be deeply theological and Christ-centered.[34] The Messiah is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, and this reality shapes how ministers proclaim the text. Faithful interpretation attends carefully to the original languages and the unity of the biblical canon. Linguistic work is not an end in itself. Instead, it serves the Church's confession by illuminating the typological and figurative patterns through which the Gospel is revealed.

Common Myths and Pastoral Corrections

Word studies can deepen preaching, yet they often succumb to popular misyconceptions. When misused, Greek and Hebrew terms can obscure rather than clarify meaning, misleading congregations. The following corrections aim to tether inter-

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31. Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, ed. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 1.

32. Literally, "lesser him little something"; see Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012), Ps 8:6.

33. John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews*, ed. Curtis P. Giese, *Concordia Commentary* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 129–30.

34. Rikk E. Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 112; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "John," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,* ed. G. K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 422.

pretation to context and authorial purpose, offering sound guidance for pastors who do exegetical work in Hebrew and Greek.[35]

"Etymology determines meaning."

Correction: Etymology points to a word's historical origin, not its current sense. Words evolve over time. For instance, the Greek *dýnamis* means "power" or "ability," not "dynamite," a modern invention. Similarly, as noted earlier, *ekklēsia* refers to an "assembly" or "gathering," not mystically to "those called out."

"Every occurrence carries the full semantic range."

Correction: Meaning is determined by usage within context. Assuming every nuance applies in each appearance leads to distortion. For example, as noted earlier, *logos* ("word") in John 1 does not encompass every philosophical connotation but conveys what the Evangelist intends in that passage. Likewise, *sarx* ("flesh") in Galatians 5 denotes the sinful nature, not simply bodily tissue.

"Greek has many 'loves' that imply hierarchy."

Correction: The Gospel of John often employs *agapaō* ("love") and *phileō* ("love") interchangeably. In John 3:35 and 5:20, the Father's love is expressed with different verbs, yet without distinction in depth or quality. In John 21:15–17, as noted earlier, the focus lies not on a gradation of affection but on Peter's threefold restoration to ministry.

"The Hebrew *yôm* in Genesis 1 must mean a 24-hour day."

Correction: *Yôm* ("day") draws its sense from a passage's literary and theological context. Genesis 1's pattern of forming and filling emphasizes divine order and human vocation rather than chronology. In Psalm 90:4, by contrast, *yôm* ("day") depicts an extended span of time, showing the word's semantic flexibility.

"The lexicon settles the question."

Correction: Hebrew and Greek lexicons are invaluable aids but not final authorities. Meaning arises from usage shaped by context, genre, and authorial intent. For example, *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness") in Romans 4:3 (further explained in vv. 4–5) functions differently from its use in James 2:23–24, where the discourse context shifts the sense of "righteousness."

"Discourse markers are incidental."

Correction: Particles and conjunctions are structural cues that connect arguments. Overlooking them disjoints the logic of the text. For instance, *oun* ("therefore") in Romans 8:1 and 12:1 signals conclusions drawn from prior reasoning, anchoring theology in flow and cohesion.

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35. In this regard, see William D. Barrick, "Exegetical Fallacies: Common Interpretive Mistakes Every Student Must Avoid," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 15–27.

Faithful preaching therefore demands careful attention to language without succumbing to linguistic shortcuts. Words exist within sentences, sentences within paragraphs, and paragraphs within discourse. By resisting the tendencies exposed above and attending to each passage's immediate context, pastors both honor the text's intent and serve their congregations with clarity and truth.

Exegesis for Mission and Culture

As Phan argues, translating the Gospel into different cultures is not a compromise but a necessary act of obedience to Christ's commission to "gather disciples from all nations" (Matt 28:19).[36] Throughout history, Christianity's vitality has depended on its capacity for translation. The Gospel is planted in local languages, both affirming and transforming them according to the Word. This mirrors the Incarnation—God's Word became flesh and spoke into human contexts (John 1:14)—demonstrating that divine truth meets people where they are. Pastors who grasp this dynamic become more effective communicators, recognizing how to move faithfully from the biblical text (source) to their contemporary audience (receptor), without sacrificing meaning or theological integrity.

Biblical Foundations for Translating the Gospel

Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11): At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's gift of tongues signaled that the Gospel is not confined to a single language or culture. Everyone heard in their "own languages the wonderful works of God," foreshadowing a Church called to bear Christ's message to all peoples.

Paul's Missionary Method (1 Cor 9:19–23): Paul's willingness to "become all things to all people" reflects strategic flexibility, but his core message—Christ crucified—remains unchanged. Cultural adaptation is always subordinate to the lordship of Christ and fidelity to the Gospel, not mere accommodation.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15): Gentile converts were received into the Church without being required to adopt Jewish ceremonial law. The Gospel undercuts cultural and ritual distinctions, welcoming all who trust in Christ, while upholding what strengthens faith and love in the community.

The Church's Rhythms: Indigenizing and Pilgrim Principles

Wall portrays the Church living by two complementary principles: the indigenizing principle (the Gospel genuinely inhabits every culture) and the pilgrim principle (the Gospel critiques and relativizes all cultures beneath Christ's lordship).[37] Here, exe-

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36. Peter C. Phan, "Mission as Inculturation: Contextualizing God's Message in Local Cultures," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, ed. Kirsteen Kim and Alison Fitchett-Climenhaga (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 420–36.

37. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 7–9.

gesis in Hebrew and Greek equips ministers to enter the biblical world on its own terms, and then faithfully rearticulate its message in today's idiom, preserving both the scandal of the Cross (1 Cor 1:18–25) and the consolation of grace (Eph 2:8–10).

Practical Implications for Ministry

- Pastors must avoid false verbal correlations—words that sound familiar across languages but diverge in meaning. For instance, the biblical term *charis* ("grace") refers to God's undeserved favor, distinct from notions of elegance or courtesy.
- Catechists should measure translated creeds and liturgies against Scripture's patterns, ensuring that every confession keeps Christ at the center and remains clear in meaning.
- Mission leaders must not uncritically borrow theological terms from secular culture. Christian proclamation follows the grammar of Scripture, which protects the promise of the Gospel. Biblical narratives should continually reformulate concepts like "justice" or "freedom" around Christ's cross and resurrection.[38]

The Lutheran Imperative for Translation

Alawode explains why translation is not an optional task; it is central to the Gospel's mission.[39] The Word that justifies sinners by grace alone, through faith alone (Eph 2:4–7), must be clearly proclaimed in every language. Paul emphasized that "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17), which requires faithful and accurate rendering of the biblical message. For pastors and missionaries, attentiveness to the original biblical languages is not academic indulgence but vital preparation for proclaiming Christ crucified in ways that are both understandable and transformative.

Exegesis as a Ministerial Competency for Word and Sacrament

Preaching That Says What the Text Says

Preaching stands as the Church's central act of truth-telling. It is not a performance or rhetorical display but the faithful articulation of God's Word in human language. Authentic proclamation renders divine speech audible within the Church's time and place, expressing the Gospel in contextually sensitive, contemporary language without compromising fidelity to the biblical witness. In this sense, preaching transitions from exegesis to proclamation. This shift occurs not by simply transferring lexical data into the pulpit, but rather by discerning the text's central theme and

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38. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 9–11.

39. Akinyemi O. Alawode, "Understanding Christian Translation and Its Missiological Relevance," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–6.

purpose. By understanding both the text's focus and its function, the preacher can effectively shape the sermon's structure and tone.[40]

The pastor, then, serves as a living bridge: one foot rooted in the world of Scripture, the other in the present world of the congregation, with the minister's full weight resting on the biblical text. Such a stance ensures that the sermon's authority derives not from rhetorical skill or personal charisma but from the Word that speaks Christ into the midst of sinners.[41]

Why Language Matters

Romans 3:21–26 offers a pertinent example of why linguistic precision and theological care belong together in preaching. As discussed earlier, terms such as *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness") and *hilastērion* ("propitiation") convey theological depths that no single English word can fully express. So then, when a pastor weighs rendering *hilastērion* as "propitiation," "atoning sacrifice," or "mercy seat," the interpretive choice becomes an act of confession. Each possibility opens a different vista on Paul's vision of divine righteousness, namely, God's initiative to restore covenantal faithfulness and reconcile the world to himself.

Likewise, the debated phrase *pistis Christou*—whether "faith in Christ" or "the faithfulness of Christ"—is not a grammatical curiosity but a theological lens. The former locates righteousness in human believing; the latter discloses it as Christ's own obedient fidelity on behalf of sinners.[42] From a Lutheran perspective, this distinction underscores that the Gospel is fundamentally about divine initiative: faith does not activate justification but receives the gift of righteousness already accomplished in the crucified and risen Christ.

Tracing the Logic of the Text

Attention to linguistic connectors clarifies how the Spirit's reasoning unfolds through Scripture. As noted above, Greek particles and Hebrew conjunctions signal the movement of thought and the development of argument. Noticing these small words often reconfigures a sermon's outline, transitions, and pastoral applications. This is not pedantry but pastoral attentiveness, guiding the congregation to follow how God's logic of mercy arises within the text itself. Through such precision, the

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40. See Abraham Kuruvilla, "Christocentric View," in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 57–95; Paul Scott Wilson, "Law-Gospel View," in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 133–171.

41. See Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor Is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 25–27, 56–61.

42. See B. J. Oropeza, "Justification by Faith in Christ or Faithfulness of Christ? Updating the ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ Debate in Light of Paul's Use of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2022): 102–24.

pastor serves both the Word and the hearers, ensuring that Christ's action, not human interpretation, drives the sermon's momentum.

Movement and Tone in the Sermon

After making one or two decisive linguistic decisions, the minister should express the text's focus and function in succinct, transparent sentences. These summary statements act as navigational points, orienting the sermon's path and ensuring coherence between exegesis and proclamation.[43] Clear transitions, which are carried by active verbs and concrete imagery, allow the sermon to progress naturally, tracing a single thread of Gospel promise that culminates in a pastoral summons to faith. In this way, the sermon mirrors the dynamic of justification: from divine action to human trust, from proclamation to response.

Clarity for the Ear

Because preaching addresses living hearers rather than academic specialists, clarity must govern both language and tone. Words that are simple, vivid, and concrete communicate theological truth most effectively.[44] For instance, "God set forth Jesus as the place where mercy meets justice" speaks more directly to the conscience than "the *hilastērion* ('place of propitiation') refers to the cultic *kapporeth* ('mercy seat')." Scholarly insight serves proclamation best when it clarifies rather than obscures the Gospel. The pulpit, therefore, is not an arena for linguistic display but a place where the mystery of God's mercy becomes audible for sinners in need of grace.

Catechesis and Pastoral Care

Catechesis is the sustained and deliberate instruction of Christian doctrine in accordance with the form and texture of Scripture. It is not an extrinsic moral program but an immersion into the grammar of divine revelation. For example, in the instructional life of the Church, the Lord's Prayer redirects human desire toward the will of the Father; the Decalogue orders the moral imagination within God's law; and the Psalter shapes the affections in lament and praise. Exegetical attentiveness to language reinforces this process by safeguarding the text's sacred otherness.[45]

To reduce Scripture to just paraphrase or moral maxims obscures the divine agency that speaks through it. So then, when the petition "hallowed be your name" (Matt 6:9) is taught in its passive construction, its grammar testifies that holiness is God's act, not a human achievement. Likewise, when "You shall not give false testimony" (Exod 20:16) is read within its juridical context in Israel's law, its ethical

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43. See Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 124–30.

44. See Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 125–27.

45. See B. D. Espinoza and Beverly Johnson-Miller, "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (2014), 15–21.

implications emerge from rather than replace its legal character. Such instruction resists moralism precisely because it keeps the text's forensic structure intact, thereby returning hearers to Christ as the one who fulfills the law's righteousness for them.[46]

Luther's hermeneutical principle that the clarity of Scripture serves the Gospel provides the theological foundation for this approach. The divine Word is clear, not in abstraction but in its concrete function: God speaks clearly to justify sinners by grace through faith in Christ. Consequently, catechesis must be understood not as general ethical formation but as participation in evangelical freedom, namely, the life constituted by the forgiveness of sins. Proficiency in the biblical languages contributes to this work by cultivating a posture of theological patience. Slow, meditative attention to grammar and syntax allows pastors to first receive the text as promise before they proclaim it as command, thereby preserving the evangelical order of gift preceding obligation.[47]

Sacramental Practice Grounded in the Text

Pastoral practice, rightly understood, presupposes a sacramental theology disciplined by careful exegesis and rooted in the living Word of God. For example, in Romans 6, Paul's language of burial and resurrection with Christ in the waters of baptism is not a detachable metaphor but an integral part of the apostle's argument about union with Christ. Attentive reading of *baptizō* ("baptize") and the passage's verbal aspect supports preaching that avoids two distortions: magicalism, which treats the sacrament as automatically effective apart from faith, and minimalism, which reduces baptism to only a symbol or human confession. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 10–11, attention to the socio-rhetorical setting (particularly the divisions of status reflected in communal meals) reveals that Paul's exhortation to "recognize the Lord's body" (11:29) calls the Church to a communal recognition of Christ's real presence and to mutual regard within his body, rather than to isolated introspection.[48]

Within this scriptural horizon, Lutheran theology offers a steady guide. The Word of God gives the Sacraments their promise and meaning, while the Holy Spirit unites sign and reality in the Church's worship. The Sacraments are neither substitutes for proclamation nor appendages to it, but the Gospel made visible. It is Christ's own promise delivered under tangible signs. Their intelligibility depends upon the Church's speech, continually reformed and shaped by Scripture. Thus, sacramentality belongs at the very center of the Church's life, orienting the congregation toward the joy of God's right-hand kingdom, where Christ gives and sustains faith.

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46. See John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 43–44.

47. See Erling T. Teigen, "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982): 147–50.

48. See Nicholas Perrin, "Sacraments and Sacramentality in the New Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52, 55–57.

Competence in the biblical languages enables ministers to confess and teach this sacramental theology with clarity and depth, avoiding polemical excess while guiding the faithful to receive Christ's gifts with understanding, trust, and thanksgiving.[49]

Parish Formation: Cultivating a Language-Aware Congregational Culture

At its core, Lutheran theology stands on the conviction that God works through means, and the foremost means of grace is the Word spoken, written, and proclaimed. Because the Gospel arrives clothed in human language, attentiveness to that language is not limited to linguistic curiosity but involves pastoral fidelity.[50] Several theological principles clarify this conviction.[51]

Fundamentally, just as the eternal Word assumed human flesh, so the divine promises are bound within ordinary human words. Here, God binds himself to the external Word so that faith may grasp something tangible. Language awareness honors this incarnational truth. The Spirit does not transcend grammar, syntax, or vocabulary but employs them as instruments to deliver Christ.

Moreover, the doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity does not imply that every verse is immediately self-evident, but that the Gospel shines clearly through the text. When readers attend to conjunctions, repetitions, and patterns, they discern how the biblical language itself proclaims Christ. Such attentiveness does not cultivate elitism but expresses confidence that God speaks plainly through words of the Spirit's choosing.

Crucially, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, which is the hermeneutical keystone of Lutheran theology, depends on hearing precisely what the text says. A careless verb tense or overlooked connective can veil the difference between accusation and promise. Linguistic attentiveness safeguards the pure proclamation of justification by faith alone.

In practice, preaching is not instruction alone but a means of grace. When pastors disclose how a Greek verb or Hebrew image guided their proclamation, they demonstrate how the Spirit operates through words to impart Christ. Such transparency cultivates congregational trust that the proclaimed Word is not arbitrary but anchored in the text bearing God's saving promise.

Likewise, in Lutheran theology, prayer and exegesis belong inseparably together. So then, to read the Psalms with attention to form, imagery, and rhythm is to pray

49. See Mickey L. Mattox, "Sacraments in the Lutheran Reformation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 269, 273–81.

50. See the *Smalcald Articles* (Part III, Art. VIII, 10) in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 312.

51. See Johannes von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–55.

God's Word back to him. Language awareness, therefore, nurtures a devotional life attuned to hearing Christ in the text and responding in faith.

Ultimately, language awareness in the parish does not aim to produce exegetical experts but to form a community that listens closely to the Word through which the Father grants the Son. Such attentiveness flows from the Lutheran assurance that the Lord hides himself in humble means—ink, paper, and syllables—and yet reveals himself fully for the parishioners' salvation.[52]

Contemporary Objections to Biblical Language Study and Constructive Lutheran Responses

The Lutheran Case for Biblical Languages Today

In the Lutheran tradition of seminary education, the study of Scripture's original languages holds a central place in pastoral formation, rooted in the Reformation's emphasis on the *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") principle and the priesthood of all believers. This commitment stems from a Christ-centered hermeneutic, where the Word of God is not solely a historical artifact but the living vehicle through which the Holy Spirit conveys the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone. Luther exemplified this by translating the Bible into the vernacular while insisting on rigorous engagement with the source texts to ensure fidelity to Christ's message. Melanchthon, in developing the Lutheran educational framework, integrated grammar, rhetoric, and logic (the trivium; Latin for "three ways") as essential for ministers to analyze, articulate, and argue the faith with integrity.[53]

Yet, contemporary objections to require such study in seminary curricula persist, often reflecting practical pressures in an era of compressed training and digital resources. The following sections address these objections constructively, emphasizing how language proficiency serves the proclamation of Christ, safeguards doctrinal integrity, and equips pastors for lifelong ministry in service to the Church. Building on the observations in the preceding sections, each of the following responses reflects theological convictions that emphasize the clarity of the Gospel, uphold the authority of Scripture, and affirm the pastor's ministerial role as a steward of the Word.[54]

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52. See Steven Paulson, "Luther's Doctrine of God," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 188.

53. See Peter Goeman, "The Reformers and the Original Languages: Calvin and Luther on the Importance of Greek and Hebrew in Theology and Ministry," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 6–10, 12–14.

54. See the comparable discussion in the following: Lodewyk Sutton, "Biblical Languages: Challenges for Postgraduate Supervision in Old and New Testament Studies," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2023); Robert L. Plummer, "The Necessity of Biblical Languages in Ministerial Training," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 25, no. 3 (2021): 197–211.

"There's No Time in the Curriculum"

Curricular constraints in modern theological education are undeniable, driven by demands for broader pastoral competencies in areas like counseling, leadership, and mission. However, abandoning the study of the biblical languages risks diluting the pastor's ability to engage Scripture on its own terms, potentially obscuring the Christological heart of the biblical witness. A Lutheran response prioritizes thoughtful curricular design that integrates languages as an essential component of formation, viewing them not as extraneous but as foundational to accurately handling the Word for the edification of Christ's body (2 Tim 2:15).

Seminaries can strengthen language instruction by adopting tiered tracks (such as basic reading proficiency for parish ministry and advanced exegesis for teaching and scholarship), while embedding study within pastoral formation to show its immediate relevance. Linking Greek exegesis to preaching workshops and Hebrew Psalms to care practicums demonstrates how linguistic detail shapes proclamation and comfort in Christ. Beyond ordination, language should be cultivated as a lifelong pastoral craft through reading groups, institutes, and retreats, echoing the Reformation's vision of rigorous yet accessible engagement with Scripture. By framing languages not as hurdles but as enduring tools for proclaiming the Gospel, seminary education forms pastors whose minds, hearts, and practices serve the crucified and risen Lord.

"Software Gives Me What I Need"

The proliferation of Bible software and digital lexicons offers unprecedented access to linguistic data, yet reliance on these tools without foundational training can lead to interpretive errors that distort the Gospel message. In a Lutheran framework, where the clarity of Scripture is paramount for conveying Christ's saving work, software must function as a servant to human judgment, not a surrogate. Untrained use often amplifies misunderstandings: lexical glosses are conflated with contextual meanings, word frequencies mistaken for theological weight, and etymologies prioritized over actual usage in discourse.

Influential critiques, such as those from Barrick and Carson (cited earlier), remain indispensable: words carry semantic ranges shaped by context; discourse units and genre, rather than isolated dictionary entries, determine sense; and grammatical features like aspect or mood constrain interpretations to align with the text's intent. Pastors equipped with these principles can interrogate their tools critically: Why does this gloss predominate? What defines the broader discourse unit? How does verbal mood illuminate the author's theological emphasis? Such scrutiny prevents software from becoming a crutch that erodes confidence in proclaiming the Word.

"Language Study Is Elitist"

Objections rooted in equity concerns are valid, acknowledging real barriers posed by time commitments, financial costs, and varying educational backgrounds. In diverse congregations, these hurdles can exacerbate divides, seemingly privileging those with prior advantages. However, from a Lutheran perspective, equity in ministry demands

that pastors strive for fidelity to Scripture's original languages as a ministerial act of love that enables clearer proclamation of Christ to all people, regardless of context.

Multilingual and multicultural Churches, in particular, benefit from pastors who navigate between vernacular translations and source texts, ensuring that the Gospel's universal call—salvation by grace through faith in Christ—is conveyed without cultural distortion. This is not clerical prestige but ecclesial service. Ministers undertake the labor of faithfully handling Scripture to nourish the body of Christ with the "pure milk of the word" (1 Pet 2:2). Framed thus, language study embodies the Reformation's democratizing impulse, empowering laity through informed teaching while honoring the priesthood of all believers.

"Theological Interpretation Makes Languages Optional"

Theological interpretation, at its finest, revitalizes reading Scripture through doctrinal lenses, such as the Lutheran categories of Law and Gospel, along with sin and grace. Yet the deeper point is that theological interpretation regards God in his Word and his self-giving, self-revealing acts as the central subject of Scripture. Theology, after all, is talk about God, and the Scriptures are fundamentally about God. This means theological interpretation can become shallow if it ignores the text's linguistic foundations, and it can even profane Scripture if it shifts the focus away from God or fails to lead to a true knowledge of him. Leading voices in this field assume, rather than bypass, careful language study. They recognize that doctrinal insights arise from the text's literal sense, which is the grammatical-historical meaning that the Holy Spirit uses as his instrument of divine address.

In Lutheran theology, Scripture's authority flows from its inspiration as the cradle of Christ, where every word and structure serves to unveil the Savior.[55] Because God is the subject matter of Scripture, interpretation that misses this sacred center fundamentally misunderstands what Scripture is. Paying attention to narrative arcs, intertextual allusions, and rhetorical patterns thus requires precise word study and syntactic analysis, not as ends in themselves, but as pathways to encounter God in his self-revelation. Without this grounding, interpretation can drift into allegory detached from the incarnate Word. The guiding principle is clear: theology begins with the text, and the text is rooted in its languages. By integrating theological interpretation with linguistic study, pastors honor the Spirit's work and ensure that doctrinal reflection returns to Scripture's Christ-centered core, namely, to God himself speaking and acting in his Word.

Budget, Staffing, and Sustainability

To begin with the overarching framework, sustaining biblical language instruction requires prudent resource allocation, viewed through a theological lens as an investment in the Church's enduring witness to Christ. Below, key areas are addressed

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55. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), xviii, 396.

with practical proposals, supported by metrics to ensure long-term viability. This framework not only addresses practical challenges but reinforces the Lutheran conviction that biblical languages are indispensable for pastors to feed Christ's flock with the bread of life drawn from Scripture's depths.

Regarding financial stewardship, seminaries can optimize costs by collaborating in academic alliances for shared courses, securing endowments from partner denominations for dedicated language chairs, and leveraging summer intensives to utilize adjunct expertise efficiently. Congregations can contribute through initiatives like funding annual "Languages for Preachers" retreats or providing software licenses contingent on usage, with renewal based on quarterly reflections detailing how textual work informs Christ-focused ministry. These measures transform budgeting from a constraint into an expression of ecclesial stewardship.

Turning to personnel and alignment, seminaries can appoint a Director of Biblical Languages and Exegesis Integration to orchestrate coherence across disciplines, ensuring languages inform homiletics, systematics, and pastoral theology in a unified curriculum. At the parish level, designating a rotating "text steward" (a role for clergy or trained laity) to prepare linguistic briefs for preaching teams fosters collaborative preparation. Doing so reflects the Lutheran emphasis on the communal discernment of Scripture.

Ultimately, to ensure lasting viability, it is important to adopt meaningful indicators such as the frequency of explicit textual connections in sermon manuscripts, the integration of original-language insights in catechetical resources, and the handling of key terms (for example, "justification" as *dikaiosis*) in sacramental teaching. These qualitative and quantitative measures, perhaps compiled in annual reports, promote accountability without reducing worship to pedagogy. Doing so ensures that language study remains a vital conduit for encountering Christ in the Word.

Conclusion: Biblical Languages as Pastoral Love—
A Demonstration and a Guideline for Practice

The thesis of this essay can be demonstrated through Scripture itself. When pastors approach the biblical languages as instruments of God's self-giving speech, the Church's doctrine is preserved, and its life is renewed in Christ. Paul's account of the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26) makes this concrete. The key terms that carry the Supper's theology—*anamnēsis* ("remembrance"), *diathēkē* ("covenant"), *katangellō* ("proclaim"), and *sōma* ("body")—are not peripheral; they govern the pastoral event.

Anamnēsis signifies more than recollection. The remembrance is covenantal, a re-presentation before God in which the Church is again placed under the promise of the crucified and risen Christ. If translated as only mental recall, the promise collapses into subjective memory. Heard in Paul's register, it anchors the Supper as a Gospel event, namely, Christ's saving act given and received. Thus, preaching and catechesis speak about Christ's giving rather than just human remembering, protecting the meal from moralism or sentimentality.

Diathēkē denotes covenant, not contract. Paul's wording situates the Supper within the saving economy of Exodus and Jeremiah. If the meal is covenantal, its logic is pure promise, enacted by God in Christ alone. To treat it as mutual pledge is to return to the law. Hence the pastor's work at the table—admission, discipline, and consolation—must proceed from the Creator's unconditional love for the lost, not human worthiness, embodying the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel.

Katangellō identifies proclamation, namely, the announcing of the "Lord's death." The Supper is therefore inseparable from the kerygma ("preaching" or "declaration"): the Gospel made audible and edible. The words of institution are not merely decorative but the means of grace. Language-aware exegesis compels pastor and presider to mutual accountability, that the congregation may receive one Christ, one promise, and one gift.

Sōma directs attention to discern the "body." Paul binds sacramental and ecclesial realities, namely, the body given produces the body gathered. Read in Greek, the apostle's admonition resists two distortions: a privatized introspection that isolates and a punitive exclusion that divides. Consequently, pastoral practice embraces confession, reconciliation, and shared participation as essential to the Supper's true celebration.

These are not academic refinements or gratuitous flourishes but the hinges of doctrine and care. If God binds himself to external words to give Christ to believers, and if those words come to them in Hebrew and Greek, then the pastoral office—sworn to preach and administer—must also confess what those words declare. The reasoning follows naturally:

- *Major premise*: The ministry of Word and Sacrament is the ordinary means by which Christ bestows forgiveness and life.
- *Minor premise*: Christ gives these gifts through specific scriptural words whose sense is borne by their original languages.
- *Conclusion*: Therefore, competence in those languages is not ornament but fidelity, a pastoral love that keeps Christ's promise clear and free.

To bring this essay to a close, those ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament are entrusted with the sacred vocation of proclaiming Christ with faithfulness and care. In our age, that calling necessitates a renewed attentiveness to the Scriptures in their original languages, not for scholarly display, but as an act of pastoral love. The Holy Spirit enables pastors who do so to draw nearer to the living voice of the Good Shepherd, so that his saving Word may reach congregants without dimming or distortion. To neglect these languages is to risk exchanging promise for paraphrase. To keep them alive in heart and hand is to confess that God still speaks to his Church: Christ for sinners, here and now, through the very words by which he gives eternal life.

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Wittenberg Pastoral Formation as the Reform of Theology

E. H. Herrmann

Introduction

The question of theology belongs to Christianity's perennial task, for the Spirit of Christ that animates it—*windhover* that he is—flies free and fast over the chaos of the world and will not be confined in any ecclesial ark, no matter how gilded the cage provided. Each generation needs take it up anew, whether awake to this fact or no. In the course of church history there are sleepier moments when theology seems tractable and predictable, but then there are those events, electric and propitious, when theology perceives the hour and turns toward it. The Reformation is undoubtedly the latter, regardless of how one squares with its conclusions or effects. Martin Luther, in particular, steps out as a man compelled by his conscience and his calling to turn his mind and energies toward a theology for his day. But what is this theology?

Of theology Luther wrote an enormous amount: "every book is a great action, and every great action a book!" Yet Luther is difficult to pin down exactly: "*sola experientia*—only experience makes a theologian!"[1] Indeed. But Luther also says that only the one who learns to distinguish the gospel from the law can be called a theologian.[2] And not this only, but for Luther, a true theologian is one who is a "theologian of the cross" rather than a "theologian of glory."[3] The "cross alone is our theology" he wrote,[4] but he also wrote that "our theology" is the distinction of "two kinds of righteousness."[5] Or is the proper subject of theology rather *cognitio dei et hominis*, the knowledge of God and humanity?[6] And what of Luther's rule for theology, *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio* where spiritual affliction (*Anfechtung*) is the

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1. WA TR, 1: 16, 13, no. 46. Cf. WA 5: 163, 28-29: "It is by living, nay by dying and being damned that one becomes a theologian, not by understanding, reading, and speculation."

2. WA 40/I: 207, 17-18, Commentary on Galatians, 1535, chapter 2.

3. WA 1: 354, 17f., Heidelberg Disputation, 1518.

4. WA 5: 176, 32.

5. WA 40/I: 45, 24f., Luther's Preface to the Commentary on Galatians, 1535.

6. WA 40/II: 328, 30f. Preface to Commentary on Psalm 51, 1532.

touchstone by which one comes to understand, know and experience the Word of God?[7] Luther likes his superlatives and exclusive particles—he seems to attribute many things to theology's center and regard many different themes as constitutive for its truth and efficacy.

It has become fairly common to remark that Luther was not a "systematic" theologian. This does not mean that his thought lacks coherence or he is inconsistent. Rather, Luther does not conceive of theology as a *system*, a framework for organizing theological concepts and bringing them into logical, internal relation to one another. Luther is certainly trained in such a methodology and can engage the medieval and contemporary systems of scholastic theology. But his antipathy toward this method was not driven by the desire to replace one theological system with another. As the variety of definitions of theology above shows, for Luther, (and perhaps unfortunately for the subsequent generations of Lutheran "systematic" theologians), there is no single "Lutheran theology." Instead, what Luther intends is a new posture, a new *Standort* for theology that is deeply existential in its orientation and pastoral in its intention.[8] This found expression especially in the focus of the reforms at Wittenberg that Luther prompted, both in the changes to the curriculum and the theological resources produced.

What follows is a look at the initial history of those reforms, keeping in mind that it was precisely in this concrete and historically particular manner that Luther's theology was realized. How this informs the efforts of this generation is thus not as obvious or simple as Wittenberg's theology stated and repristinated. Reflecting on the educational impact of Wittenberg, Robert Rosin writes,

> The twenty-first century is not the sixteenth, and more than a few things are different. There is no chance of mimicking Luther even if we wanted to. If anything, we ought to be concerned about those who do not want to go any farther than the sixteenth century … Peter, James, and John were admonished not to build booths on the mountaintop as if they could freeze time. Christ had work to do—and so did they…. Yet booth building is a perennial temptation and almost a cottage industry in some circles. Grand as that mountaintop vision was, or as exciting as the much paler sixteenth-century image appeared atop [Wittenberg] "White Mountain" by the Elbe, life moves on.[9]

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7. WA 50: 660, 1-4. Luther's Preface to his German Writings, 1539.

8. This new "theologischen Standort" is in Leif Grane's opinion the most important "discovery" of Luther; see "Luther und das Luthertum" in *Reformationsstudien: Beiträge zu Luther und zu Dänischen Reformation*, ed. Rolf Decot, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung Religionsgeschichte 49 (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999), 117-26. See also Otto Herman Pesch, "Existential and Sapiential Theology – the Theological Confrontation between Luther and Thomas Aquinas," in *Catholic Scholars Dialogue with Luther*. Edited by Jared Wicks, S.J. (Chicago: 1970): 61-81.

9. Robert Rosin, "Luther, Learning, and the Reformation A Look at Then with Some Thoughts for Now," in *Concordia Journal* 43, 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2017), 98.

Wittenberg as a Reformation of Pastoral Formation

Pastoral formation in the Wittenberg Reformation is shaped by a particular understanding and emphasis on pastoral care, centered on the preaching and teaching of God's Word. In some ways, this stands in continuity with late medieval definitions of pastoral care and efforts to better prepare and resource clergy. On the other hand, Luther's understanding of the gospel with his theology of the Word providing the *Standort* influenced the direction and means of pastoral formation in the Reformation, with the University of Wittenberg playing a central role.

Pastoral care in the Middle Ages was a broader category than simply the work of the clergy, and encompassed efforts among religious orders as well as lay movements, official priestly acts such as penance or the mass, but also devotional literature and practices—"*Geistlichkeiten*."[10] Preaching, for example, as a non-sacramental act, was not strictly limited to priests, but was also assumed by monastic and mendicant preachers and even within lay religious communities. Yet already in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was a concerted effort to better equip the clergy for teaching and preaching.

The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), building on the earlier reform efforts of the Paris masters,[11] marks a significant undertaking of the church to reform pastoral care and formation. Canons 10 and 21 are the most cited, with 21 famously focusing on lay piety and annual sacramental participation in penance and the eucharist. Canon 10, however, focuses on the episcopal and priestly obligation of *preaching*, calling for the appointment of competent and capable preachers. Canon 10 says in part:

> Among other things that pertain to the salvation of the Christian people, the food of the word of God is above all necessary, because as the body is nourished by material food, so is the soul nourished by spiritual food.... It often happens that bishops, on account of their manifold duties or bodily infirmities, or because of hostile invasions or other reasons, to say nothing of lack of learning, which must be absolutely condemned in them and is not to be tolerated in the future, are themselves unable to minister the word of God to the people, especially in large and widespread dioceses. Wherefore we decree that bishops provide suitable men, powerful in work and word, to exercise with fruitful result the office of preaching; who in place of the bishops, since these cannot do it, diligently visiting the people committed to them, may instruct them by word and example. And when they are in need, let them be supplied with the necessities, lest for want of these they may be compelled to abandon their work at the very beginning.

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10. See Scott Hendrix, "Martin Luther's Reformation of Spirituality," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 249-270.

11. Ronald J. Stansbury, "Preaching and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages," in *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages (1200-1500)* (Leiden: Brill 2010), 23-40.

The result was a whole host of pastoral literature aimed at the instruction of priests, providing both form and content for the priestly duty to preach, admonish, and instruct the people.[12] Scholarship has seemed to give more attention to the proliferation of penitential manuals and sacramental literature that followed Lateran IV, perhaps because of the central critique of penance in the early Reformation. However, the role of preaching was still the primary vehicle through which the Christian faith was inculcated among the laity and thus became a primary focus of clergy formation and education.

Few parish priests had a university education, so episcopal legislation became one of the primary means of educating clergy.[13] Bishops and local councils would establish requirements and syllabi for how priests should carry out their responsibilities. For example, John Pecham, the Archbishop of Canterbury, issued a syllabus in the Lambeth Council of 1281 that required priests to teach their people, in the vernacular, the core teachings of Christian doctrine at least four times a year. These included the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the two evangelical precepts, the Seven Works of Mercy, the Seven Deadly Sins, the Seven Virtues, and the Seven Sacraments. University masters, especially those of mendicant orders, would craft biblical commentaries to support preaching, write treatises on the *ars praedicandi*, and produce sermon collections, all as vehicles of clergy formation.[14] Sermons taught the clergy who then, in turn, taught the laity through such sermons. The importance of preaching for clergy formation, therefore, was not an invention of the Reformation. Instead, the Reformation redoubled its importance.

On the eve of the Reformation, in spite of the various educational efforts, the problem of "*ignorantia sacerdotum*" continued on in some measure. Educational reforms had made its earlier advances in France and England, but after the Western Schism (1378-1417), it began to find greater purchase in the lands east of the Rhine. The urgent call for better and wider spread clerical education in the German lands in the 15th and 16th centuries was thus a kind of "revolution of rising expectations," as more people experienced and expected better preachers.

Luther's own education and formation was mediated primarily by the Augustinian Order of which he was a member. Since the 13th century, it was the mendicant orders that dominated the universities and the educated clergy with the observant Augustinians having a particular emphasis in pastoral care in order to bring central monastic ideals to the laity. The spiritual and academic formation program of the Augustinians had been very rigorous in the years before the Western Schism—

12. See Leonard E. Boyle's pioneering work on medieval *pastoralia* reprinted in *Pastoral Care, Clerical Education and Canon Law, 1200-1400* (London, 1981).

13. See Andrew Reeves, "Teaching the Creed and Articles of Faith in England: 1215-1281," in *A Companion to Pastoral Care in the Late Middle Ages*, 41-72.

14. See Randall B. Smith, "Initiating Young Friars into a Culture of Preaching: The Connections between Thirteenth Century Preaching and Biblical Commentary" in *Initiation and Mystagogy in Thomas Aquinas*, ed. H. Schoot et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 323-349.

16 years of theological study. But in Luther's day it was far less extensive and Luther studied hardly more than 3 years before getting his doctorate.[15] Thus, his most important theological formation occurred afterward with his own study of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings in preparation for his lectures on Romans.[16] It was also there that he began to see the fundamental problems in the theological method and formation that dominated the universities. And so, he advanced a critique to his faculty colleagues—first in the disputation of Bartholomäus Bernhardi on grace and free will, (*Quaestio subscripta de viribus et voluntate hominis sine gratia*, 1516), and in his Ninety-seven Theses Against Scholastic Theology (*Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam*, 1517)—and then to his fellow Augustinians in his Heidelberg Disputation (*Disputatio Heidelbergae habita*, 1518).

In these critiques, Luther indicated how certain commonly held assumptions, coupled with scholastic sources and methods, distorted the gospel, bound consciences, and adversely impacted both piety and pastoral care. The response was to change the theology curriculum at the university. For Luther, changing the curriculum was the first step in reforming the church. In fact, only in the context of university curriculum changes did Luther use the word "reformation":

> The universities, too, need a good, thorough reformation.… Actually a great deal depends on it, for it is here in the universities that the Christian youth and our nobility, with whom the future of Christendom lies, will be educated and trained.[17]

Such reform was not aimed at the education of clergy as such but of all Christians who would lead and work in both society and church. Doctors of Scripture were not made by men but by the Holy Spirit alone, wrote Luther, and the Spirit has no regard to "whether a person is young or old, lay or cleric, monk or secular, unmarried or married." As such, Luther wanted the Scriptures to be the central text in the classroom and that meant the displacement of the more traditional scholastic texts like Lombard's *Sentences*, and Aristotle's logic and ethics. These curricular changes already began in 1516—Johannes Lang, one of Luther's colleagues, excitedly reported the progress to the elector's secretary: the study of the Scriptures and the early Fathers were now eagerly received by the Wittenberg students so that lectures on the scholastic doctors were left with only two or three auditors.[18] Luther echoed the same a year later:

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15. Eric Leland Saak, *Luther and the Reformation of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: 2017), 85-90.

16. Cf. WABr 1, 69-71, no. 27.

17. LW 44, 200, 202. Cf. WA Br 1, 170; Lewis Spitz, "Impact of Reformation on the Universities" in *University and Reformation: Lectures from the University of Copenhagen Symposium*. Edited by Leif Grane. Leiden, 1981, 9-31.

18. Kenneth Hagen, "An Addition to the Letters of John Lang. Introduction and Translation," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 60 (1969), 30: "Talia sunt studia, quae iam reviviscere cum

> Our theology and St. Augustine are advancing as hoped and reign in our university by God's working. Aristotle has gone down, little by little, to almost eternal ruin. The students are surprisingly disgusted with lectures on the Sentences, and no one can hope for any auditors unless he wants to promote this theology, that is, the Bible or St. Augustine or some other teacher of ecclesiastical authority.[19]

On the one hand, the desire for these kind of changes was not unique to Luther. Enthusiasm for a return to the early fathers and the Scriptures coupled with a general antipathy to scholastic theology characterized the attitudes of many German intellectuals who, through the rebirth of classical studies, sought a renewal of Christian faith and piety. There was a sense among these humanists[20] that the ancient sources of Christianity, esteemed along with other works of classical antiquity as *bonae litterae*, could serve both spiritual and educational goals and aid in the reform of the church. And Luther found much in these goals both appealing and useful. In particular, he valued efforts to learn the Scriptures in their original languages and argued for professors who could teach Greek and Hebrew in the arts faculty. In the autumn of 1518, his wish was granted—far beyond what he could have hoped or imagined—with the arrival of the young rising star, Philip Melanchthon, the new professor of Greek. The University of Wittenberg—not even in existence for a score of years—was on its way to being the most celebrated school in Europe.

All of this was a cause of celebration among the reform-minded—education and church reform seemed to go hand in hand. And like the humanists, Luther had a generous and practical view of who theological education was for and to what end. Still, Luther's educational changes were not just the shifting of sources or methods; it was also the content—the *doctrine* of the gospel word of God—that was central. The gospel, as he had come to know it by his own focus on the Scriptures and Fathers, changes people, frees their consciences, gives them hope in a tumultuous

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gaudio cernimus, dum sacram bibliam antiquosque scriptores complures et anhelant et laetanter audiunt, dum scholastici doctores (quod appellant) vix aut duos aut treis habent auditores. Dabit deus iis molestis perplexis et multo plus quam praebeant promittentibus studiis finem"; "Such are the studies which we now see revived with joy, while many are eager and listen joyfully to the Holy Bible and the ancient writers, the scholastic doctors (as they are called) have scarcely two or three auditors. May God put an end to those troublesome, perplexing studies which promise much more than they deliver."

19. WABr 1, 99, 8-13, no. 41 (18 de mayo 1517): "Theologia nostra et S. Augustinus prospere procedunt et regnant in nostra universitate Deo operante. Aristoteles descendit paulatim inclinatus ad ruinam prope futuram sempiternam. Mire fastidiuntur lectiones sententiariae, nec est, ut quis sibi auditores sperare possit, nisi theologiam hanc, id est bibliam aut S. Augustinum aliumve ecclesiasticae autoritatis doctorem velit profiteri."

20. The term "humanist" here refers to those reformers of culture and education during the Renaissance, especially through the retrieval of classical sources and the *studia humanitatis*. This should not be confused with later 19th and 20th century secular "humanism," which arises from different parentage.

and difficult world, and quickens them for service to the neighbor. Attend to the gospel in the universities, he argued, and it will eventually trickle down, leaven and change all of society. The Word, sown and cultivated like seed, would one day produce a harvest thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

But in the short-term people desperately needed the gospel now and part of that meant that they needed evangelical preachers. Pastoral concern, perhaps coupled with a sense of apocalyptic urgency, moved Luther and his faculty colleagues to produce an abundance of resources that helped educate and shape the existing clergy. Following the same path as the university schoolmen several centuries before, Luther produced treatises, translations, biblical commentary, and especially collections of sermons—*Postils*—as way to form pastors in their understanding of the faith and as aids to their own pastoral responsibilities. By leveraging the printing press, they hoped to at least effect some changes at the parish level and among the laity.

The Saxon visitations of 1527 largely disappointed that hope, however. Education of the clergy had to become a higher priority and would require a more thorough program of study. Though Lateran IV regarded preaching as the chief pastoral work for the *cura animarum* (care of souls), the ritual side of the ministry—performing the divine office and offering the mass— had continued to be more closely identified with the work of the priesthood. Practically, that was much easier to maintain—to perform liturgical ceremony and recite sacramental formulae required minimal theological education nor even much education in general. If pastoral care was primarily and properly ringing bells, brandishing thurifers, and repeating Latin prayers then theological education was neither very necessary nor urgent. But Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues saw the matter quite differently. The center of Lutheran theological formation was not the *chancel* but the *classroom*.

At the heart of all things was education in the Word of God—the evangelical promise that in Christ God was being reconciled to his sinful world. This Word was a word of creation—like the first word that created light and all things through God's speaking, the Word of Christ fashions a new people, bestows new hearts, and binds our future to the eternity of God.[21] The power of this Word was the power to evoke faith—not a formulaic, magical power, not *ex opere operato*—but the power to communicate God's heart and his promise. The Holy Spirit is a rhetorician instructing the mind and moving the heart.[22]

Therefore, a human being is doubtless redeemed, but as long as he does not believe it he does not *feel* it, it is still not *in his heart*. Here comes now this

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21. For an in-depth study of the theological, pedagogical, and pastoral centrality of the Word in the Lutheran Reformation period, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther, and The Enduring Word of Good: The Wittenberg School and is Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Backer Academic, 2016).

22. WA 40/III, 270a, 3-4: "And you will see that the Holy Spirit is the best Poet and Orator, who knows the rules of the art of speaking and persuasion."

third part, that God pours the Holy Spirit into the hearts, who speaks it so into the hearts that we know that what He says is truly so and not otherwise.[23]

And so, at the heart of the ministry of the church was the proclamation of this Word. Pastors were to shepherd God's people with this Word, to be "ready in season and out of season … to reprove, rebuke and exhort." To be thus "apt to teach" pastors needed to be educated, serious students of the Scriptures from which they were to preach and teach.

The curricular changes at Wittenberg introduced an eclectic reorientation inspired especially by the *ad fontes* ideals of the humanist "new learning." This was an exciting and creative time, leading to some of the highest enrollment numbers in the university's history. The drawback, however, was the questionable status of the university in its authority to grant degrees. Distancing itself from the traditional late medieval requirements of lectures on the *Sentences*, the diminishment of Aristotle in the arts faculty, and the elimination of disputations put Wittenberg at a disadvantage. But as negotiations with the emperor broke down, Wittenberg leaned into a new curriculum aimed at forming a new clergy that would adhere to the evangelical confession at Augsburg.[24]

In 1528 Melanchthon crafted Articles of Visitation, a new kind of syllabus of what was to be expected of and taught by evangelical pastors. Melanchthon began with a presentation on the need to preach repentance and faith, clarifying for the pastors the central pastoral task of distinguishing law and gospel. Knowledge of the catechism, the sacraments, confession and a few other aspects of pastoral ministry were likewise detailed. By 1536, the university curriculum at Wittenberg was more thoroughly revised with the intention of bringing greater cohesion between what was taught there and what was expected of pastors in the visitations.

Ordination was introduced in 1535—not that there was a theological necessity for it (Saxony had been placing preachers without ordination throughout the 1520s)—but it tied the selection and call of pastors more tightly to examination by the university.[25] Other universities followed the example of Wittenberg's curricular changes. Philip of Hesse's new university in Marburg was already imitating Wittenberg since its founding in 1527. The Lutheran university in Königsberg was

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23. WA 45:22-12-16.

24. See Timothy Wengert, "Philip Melanchthon and Wittenberg's Reform of the Theological Curriculum," in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, eds. Joran J. Ballor, David Sytsma, Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), for an extensive examination of the theological statutes of 1533.

25. Martin Krarup, *Ordination in Wittenberg: Die Einsetzung in das kirchliche Amt in Kursachsen zur Zeit der Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). See also James M. Kittelson, "Historical and Systematic Theology in the Mirror of Church History: The Lessons of "Ordination" in Sixteenth-Century Saxony" in *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (December 2002): 743-773.

founded in 1544 and the university of Jena tried to outdo Wittenberg after its founding in 1558.

Even so, it took some time for the new clergy to come from the university. Ordinations by Wittenberg from 1537-1550 were largely from other occupations, especially teachers, sextons, and craftsmen (e.g. printers and clothmakers), rather than from university students.[26] This means that while universities oriented themselves as part of a central effort to bring evangelical pastors into congregations, university education was not an obligatory qualification for ordination in the 16th century. In addition to the university reforms, clergy education and formation throughout the 16th century continued to rely on theological resources produced for pastors in the parish. Postil literature—not just from Luther but from pastors and theologians of the next generation were popular and continued to be important for the education of clergy.[27] Biblical commentaries were often keyed for preaching by including loci as a way to thematically shape didactic sermons, and homiletical texts and treatises were published regularly throughout the second-half of the 16th century. By the mid-century, pastor's manuals—a kind of single volume handbook on preaching, theology of the office of the ministry, and pastoral care—were being produced as well.[28] The content of these manuals shifted towards the end of the 16th century as more and more pastors were receiving university instruction.

The sixteenth-century reformation was a reformation of education, and that included, in no small measure, the reformation of pastoral education. The statistics that we can observe are striking. James Kittelson offers just a few examples from along the Rhine, spanning mid-century to its end. In 1560, only 23% of the clergy in Sponheim had a university education. By 1619, this had risen to 78%. Likewise, in Zweibrucken, the percentage shifted from 33% to 92%.[29] Projecting back in the beginning of the century, we are looking at a fundamental shift with only 10-15% of clergy having a university education at its beginning compared to 90% at its end—and educated in the *tres linguae sacrae*, no less!

There is a certain centrifugal effect that Wittenberg had in these educational efforts. "Missionary" was not a word available to the reformers in the 16th century but Werner Elert is right that what we see is the Lutheran "*evangelischer Ansatz*"— the intentional impact of the gospel from the Wittenberg reformation on the rest

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26. See Susan Karant-Nunn, "Luther's Pastors: The Reformation in the Ernestine Countryside," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 69, No. 8 (1979), 1-80.

27. John M. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants, and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). See also Benjamin T. G. Mayes' excellent introduction to Luther's Church Postils in LW 75, xiii-xxxi.

28. Amy Nelson Burnett, "The Evolution of the Lutheran Pastors Manual in the Sixteenth Century," in *Church History*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Sep. 2004), 536-565.

29. James M. Kittelson, "The Reformation's Impact on the Universities—and the Reverse," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 48 (1984): 23-38.

of Europe.[30] Whether it involved the sending of pastors in to other territories, or reformers like Bugenhagen to Denmark and Norway, or the international character of the student body in which nearly a third of students came from outside of Germany, Wittenberg's educational undertaking extended beyond its matriculation roles and lecture hall.[31]

The Lutheran effort on clergy education was significant and the Council of Trent responded in kind. In 1563, in the 23rd session, canon *Cum Adolescentium Aetas* required the establishment of diocesan seminaries, under the authority of the bishop, for the formation of priests. Here we should point out that the word "formation" is more fitting for these Catholic seminaries than it is for the Lutheran efforts. The Catholic seminarian certainly received education in the liberal arts, but spiritual disciplines and scholastic theology reinforced the idea that the person of the priest was peculiar—set apart to stand, *in persona Christi*, as a bridge between God and the people. But this view of priesthood was antithetical to the Lutheran view. For Lutherans, baptism "formed" *Christians*—the true priesthood—through the ministrations of preaching, catechesis, and hymnody on the secular field of their daily vocations. Accordingly, the church "educated" pastors in the doctrine of the gospel, and the university as well as the schools and academies modeled after it were the fitting place to carry out this task.

There is an irony here, it would seem. As long as theological education arose *from* and *for the sake* of Christian formation, the Wittenberg way had the potential to effect the wider reform hoped for. But the tendency was for education to separate and specialize, to create a new clerical elite over and against the "simple" Christian. This put the clerical vocation into a peculiar category of its own credentialed by professional expertise in university theology rather than a public ministry of the universal Christian priesthood. The greater this separation the more susceptible was Protestant theological education to a different spirit than Christ's own.

Concluding thoughts

This overview has tried to highlight some of the distinctive features and influences of the reform of theology expressed in the pastoral education that developed in the Wittenberg Reformation and beyond. As with most historical research, the intent is more descriptive than prescriptive. One doesn't pick up examples from sixteenth-century electoral Saxony and simply drop them into the Americas 500 years later and think we should have the same results. There are new challenges for the

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30. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 385-402.

31. See Douglas L. Rutt, "Theological Education and Mission" in *Let the Gospel Lead: Essays & Sermons in Honor of Dale A Meyer*, edited by Travis J. Scholl (St Louis, Missouri: Concordia Seminary Press, 2020), 69-82.

church in the 21st century and we need to examine them clear-eyed with both courage and humility. To return to Rosin's thoughts continued from the beginning:

> Beware booth building but revel instead in all the work to do. Renaissance humanism recaptured a rhythm to life: there was more to life than being a *viator*, a pilgrim enduring and passing through. The *vita contemplativa*, that is, a life of contemplation and reflection, had a foil in the *vita activa*, the active life that put reflection and learning into practice. The Reformation with the Lutheran idea of vocation had an even richer foundation for rolling up one's sleeves and taking on life each day, sorting through context to serve people in their varied circumstances. In so doing, they may benefit, but we most surely do. Marcel Proust, "recommended reading" for today's liberal-arts crowd, wrote, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes…."

> Some years ago, Yale law professor Stephen Carter argued in *A Culture of Disbelief* that not only was American society actually structured at its founding to welcome a theological/philosophical voice, but he insisted that the absence of a theological voice today has skewed how we tackle problems and leaves us with incomplete solutions. With a context that seems to increasingly dismiss theology's place in the public square, its voice grows ever more distant, even as politics—a kind of faux religion—promises its version of a new heaven and a new earth via this program or that set of regulations designed to fix, direct, and control. In contrast, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked that democracies are an attempt to find proximate solutions to insoluble problems. Don't we know it! But it is precisely because of life's ragged edges that theology ought to pull up a chair at the table and weigh in on the discussion. You may first have to defend your right to be there. Hopefully it will not be necessary to defend that in the way and to the extent Luther and others of his day found necessary. Assured by the gospel and mindful of life's vocations God gives—theological insights from the Reformation—we are not going to sit this one out.[32]

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32. Robert Rosin, "Luther, Learning, and the Reformation A Look at Then with Some Thoughts for Now," in *Concordia Journal* 43, 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2017): 101-102.

Luther the Tech Critic

Technology and the Gospel of Eternal Life

Julian Waldner

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear,
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye
clear. What we need is here.[1]

Part I: Luther's Monastic Counterproductivity

For several years now I have been nursing an intuition that the theology of Martin Luther has something to say to our technological society. My intuition surprised me because I had grown accustomed to hearing about how Luther was irrelevant, pie-in-the-sky, implicitly antinomian, and probably at fault for most of what is wrong with the modern world.[2] And yet, what if the "accidental" progenitor of our technological modernity has a profound diagnosis of its disease and a real sense for its cure?[3] What if it is a denial of the gift of eternal life that makes

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1. Wendell Berry, "The Wild Geese" in *Collected Poems, 1957-1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1985), 155.

2. See for example Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

3. I've been encouraged to see similar arguments from various quarters including, David Zahl, "The Seculosity of Technology" in *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion—and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019). David Zahl, "Against Self-Optimization," *Plough*, July 1, 2025, https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/health/against-self-optimization. Matthew J. Milliner, "Evangelicals and Zen Masters," *Millinerd*, Sept. 4, 2025, https://millinerd.substack.com/p/evangelicals-and-zen-masters. William G. Fredstrom, "Wendell Berry and Martin Luther on Creatureliness in a Technological Age," *Lutheran Quarterly* 39 no. 1 (Spring 2025) 1-20, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/950806. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 103, 110-112, 156, 292. Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability and the Body of Christ* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), chapter 2.

our relationship with technology so toxic and terrifying? The Reformer insisted that eternal life cannot be manufactured but is given as a free gift. This can only be heard as a scandal to those who trust in the technological paradigm. In some measure this includes all of us, whether we believe with the tech-futurists that technology can literally grant eternal life or whether we buy technology's more prosaic promises to give enduring life through some service or device. At the center of the argument in this article is a paradox: faith in the gift of eternal life, rather than being an otherworldly form of wish-fulfillment, is actually what allows us to embrace our mortal limits and find joy in the gratuity of creation.

Luther's own path to this insight was to come through the harrowing experience of the monastery. Luther, a particularly sensitive soul, found the practices of monastic life to be counterproductive: the more he tried to secure peace, the more distant this goal became.

> When I was a monk, I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and performed the assigned penances faithfully. Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: "You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession … by following the righteousness of the monastic order, I was never able to reach it."[4]

Luther's autobiographical statement is part of a theological argument that he wants to make in his Galatians commentary about the futility of achieving righteousness through the works of the law or human traditions. Paradoxically, while these monastic traditions and practices were intended to aid the monk in growing in peace and holiness, Luther's experience is that this "vanishes exactly with the effort to *make* it present."[5] Rather than working as rungs on a ladder to heaven, these practices or "works" end up shriveling Luther's life. As he writes elsewhere, "If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."[6] Indeed, Luther finds that these works, traditions, or practices—in short, the Law—do not increase holiness, but rather exacerbate *sin*: "Many have worked hard, inventing various religious orders and disciplines, to find peace… but instead they have plunged more deeply into even greater misery, for such tactics are merely ways of multiplying doubt and despair."[7] This is the state that Luther will

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4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 5-6*, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:13.

5. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 94.

6. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 45.

7. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4*, in *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 26:27.

later identify as *incurvatio in se ipsum* (sin as being curved in on oneself). "The human being, who is made by nature to respond by looking outward, ends up entrapped now in the endless downward spiral of a circle, talking to himself ceaselessly… being absorbed in his own existence… the sinner draws his fellow creatures in, so that they have to suffer."[8]

Skepticism and the Natural Desire for Eternal Life

Luther, in his pursuit of holiness by the Law, is under the grip of what philosopher Stanley Cavell calls "skepticism." For Cavell, the skeptic is disgusted with the limitations of humanity and seeks some violent transcendence of those limitations. The skeptic feels chaffed by his own skin,[9] "astonished"[10] and "disgusted"[11] by his own limitations and fixated on the wish to escape its confines. The logic of skepticism is a logic of "the best case," which cannot settle for anything but absolute knowledge, complete certainty, unquestioning devotion, perfect bliss, and total penetration.[12] Luther, in seeking total sinlessness, perfect holiness, and absolute certainty about his spiritual state, has come to despair at his humanity and seek what is not attainable for human beings. This unachievable goal, combined with his disgust at his humanity, leads to the "paradoxical counterproductivity" of "the works of the law." The more Luther seeks to attain this goal, the more frustrated he becomes.

What is it that Luther is seeking? We have seen from Cavell that the skeptic is frustrated with the unfulfilled desire, limited knowledge, and impurity of the human condition. What the skeptic seeks is an absolute *overcoming* of these limitations: the fulfillment of desire, knowledge, happiness, and goodness. Against the limitations of human existence, there is a desire for the *negation* of those limitations. Positively stated, there is the desire to *transcend* those limitations. What is this but the desire for eternal life? The phrase "eternal life" has a double sense in the Christian tradition: on the one hand, it denotes a life that endures and is not simply snuffed out by death, and on the other, it denotes *abundant* life, fulfilling life. This double sense is suggested by Jesus in the gospel of John: "those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn. 4:14).[13] Ultimately, "eternal life" is equivalent with God, the source and end of all life. In *The City of God*, Augustine follows the Platonists in describing God as the *summum bonum*, that which "we desire not for the sake of anything else but for its own sake alone, [which] will,

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8. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 183.
9. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 61.
10. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 128.
11. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 12.
12. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 128.
13. All scripture references are in the NRSV.

when attained leave us nothing further to seek for our happiness."[14] In seeing God as the "highest good," the Christian tradition makes a dual claim: on the one hand, there is nothing higher, better, or more desirable than life with God, but on the other hand, there is an innate desire in all human beings for this eternal life that explains much of human action and motivation.[15]

The documentary "Transcendent Man" featuring the futurist and technologist Ray Kurzweil opens with a vivid illustration of this. In a voiceover that introduces the documentary, Kurzweil describes a recurring dream that symbolizes his greatest fear:

> I have a [recurring] dream. It has to do with exploring this endless succession of rooms that are empty and going from one to the next. Then feeling hopelessly abandoned and lonely and unable to find anyone else. That's a pretty good description of death. And death is supposed to be a finality but it's actually a loss of everyone you care about. I do have fantasies sometimes about dying, about what people must feel like when they're dying, or what I might feel like if I were dying, and it's such a profoundly sad, lonely feeling that I really can't bear it. So, I go back to thinking about how I am not going to die.[16]

Kurzweil is known for his predictions about the rapid rate of technological innovation leading to what he calls "the Singularity." The Singularity is the point at which humans and machines could merge, leading to a transhuman future of unlimited possibilities. In his book, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Kurzweil describes a coming Singularity in religious, eschatological terms:

> What then is the Singularity? It's a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed … this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself…. To truly understand [the Singularity] inherently changes one's view of life in general and one's own particular life. I regard someone who understands the

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14. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 1-10), translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2012), 8:8, pg. 251.

15. The book of Genesis argues this implicitly by placing the narrative of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) after humanity's expulsion from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-23). Humanity's attempt to build a tower that reaches to the heavens is their rebellious response to the expulsion, and an attempt to regain eternity on their own terms. God's response to this human attempt at totality is the establishment of different cultures and languages. God's establishment of good limits places human beings back into the context in which they can flourish.

16. *Transcendent Man*, directed by Robert Barry Ptolemy (Ptolemaic Productions and Therapy Studios, 2009), MP4.

Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life as a "singularitarian."[17]

The two features we saw at play in Luther's monastic counterproductivity are on display in Kurzweil's comments: first, there is a disgust at humanity. Kurzweil cannot reconcile himself to the fact that human beings die; he cannot even think about death. Second, there is an attempt to violently transcend these limitations, in Kurzweil's case, through the pursuit of technological immortality in the "Singularity." Most strikingly, we can see how a negative fear of death and a positive desire for eternal life are the motives of Kurzweil's futurology and technological innovation. Kurzweil's quest for technological immortality is transparently a modern version of Luther's monastic quest for self-justification. Quite literally, Kurzweil is seeking to attain through humanity's own technological "works" the eternal life that the Christian tradition insists can only be obtained as a free, unmerited gift from God. But Kurzweil's eternity must be a distorted earthly one: an endless succession of increments rather than the eternal present of Christian hope.

While Kurzweil's transhumanist vision is on the cutting edge, he is not out of step with the leading technologists of our age, including Elon Musk and Peter Thiel. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Kurzweil is articulating the submerged myth of the modern technological and scientific quest: the search for the philosopher's stone. This magical quest for an alchemical material capable giving eternal life as well as turning base metals into gold (thus unleashing the latent capacities of the natural world) was a project in which serious early modern philosophers such as Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton were engaged. The search for the philosopher's stone represents the quest to penetrate to the bottom of things in order to bring nature fully under human dominion. As Kurzweil puts it, the quest for the Singularity is "predicated on the idea that we have the ability to understand our own intelligence—to access our own source code, if you will—and then revise and expand it."[18]

According to Scripture, we live in a world created good yet invaded by the alien power of Death (1 Cor. 15:26-27). Technology can be understood as a "remedy" for the conditions of the fall and the ill-suitedness of human bodies to the world we live in.[19] "And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and his wife,

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17. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2008), 7. Kurzweil's language here echoes Paul's in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye…. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality."

18. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, 4.

19. David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 195.

and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21).[20] We become sick and require medicine, our bodies cannot stand the climate and require clothing and shelter, and we go hungry and require means of harvesting and preserving food. It is not illegitimate that we have devised technologies to help ameliorate these conditions. Moreover, Kurzweil's desire to escape the clutches of Death is correct. Death is an alien force that must be defeated; humans are made for eternity. However, Kurzweil and his ilk go wrong when they claim to be able to achieve what only Christ can do: defeat the power of Death and grant eternal life.

The Essence of Modern Technology

Kurzweil's vision brings the modern technological paradigm—as diagnosed by philosophers of technology such as Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger—into sharp relief. For Ellul, contemporary society is dominated by what he calls *technique*, the pursuit of efficiency, or the quest for the "one best way" in every domain. According to Ellul, we live in a *technological society* because it is the logic of *technique* that finally governs our society in all its aspects. Heidegger, in his 1954 essay "The Question concerning Technology," sees us as caught up in a *technological* way of seeing in which creation becomes a "standing reserve" waiting to be ordered. Kurzweil's example, it seems to me, shows that something even more fundamental is at play: at the heart of the modern disordered relationship to technology is humanity's longing for immortality and the attempt to secure this by our own means. In theological terms, our technological society is founded on the refusal to gratefully receive eternal life as a free, unmerited gift. It is this refusal of grace that makes our technological society hellbent on ensuring that life, health, learning, and growth continue with the certainty of eternity.

Augustine already diagnosed this condition in his magisterial work *The City of God* with his contrast between the goods of the heavenly city and the goods of the earthly city. The heavenly city has its good in eternity, "secure in supreme and eternal peace." The earthly city by contrast "has its good here on earth."[21] The earthly city's exclusive love of these earthly goods leads to anxiety, conflict, and rivalry. Kurzweil feels the anxiety of death and puts all his hope in securing an earthly escape. For Augustine, this can only lead to misery: "But, if the higher goods are neglected … and if lower goods are desired so much that people believe them

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20. The following thoughts are undeveloped and for that reason relegated to a footnote. The 'garments of skin' that God gives to protect Adam and Eve from the harsh climate are typologically associated with the 'covering' that Christ provides. There is a suggestion here about technology as a providential remedy that is in some sense superseded by the gospel. However, given that humans still live in a world marked by Death, garments of skin are still necessary. At the same time, as the tower of Babel story shows, technology risks becoming an alternative to reliance on God and His provision.

21. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2013), 15:4, pg. 142.

to be the only goods or love them more than [higher goods], then misery will necessarily follow."[22] The quest for "earthly eternity" (the anxious technological quest to ensure that life goes on as long as possible, profitability increases exponentially, and agricultural yields increase year by year) can only end in disappointment and disgust at our humanity because this world cannot bear the weight of eternity.

The sociologist Hartmut Rosa explores this very disappointment in his 2020 book *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Rosa notes that the central feature of modern society is the drive to progress. This, Rosa points out, is not a *positive* motive but a *negative* one, motivated by the fear of loss: "To argue that modernity is driven by an increasing demand—*higher*, *faster*, *further*—is to misunderstand its structural reality. This game of escalation is perpetuated not by a lust for more, but by the fear of having *less and less*."[23] Rosa explains that this is because modern society can only stabilize itself by "constant economic growth, technological acceleration, and cultural innovation in order to maintain its institutional status quo."[24] This is precisely the dynamic that Augustine observes in *The City of God*: the peace of the earthly city is the peace of having subdued all its enemies—"if it triumphs and there is no one left to resist it, there will be peace."[25] Rosa goes on to argue that this fearful drive for progress becomes a drive to make the world ever more knowable, accessible, manageable, and useful, on the promise that this increase of control will make our lives better.[26] However, Rosa notes, "this cultural promise of making the world controllable, not only does not 'work' but in fact becomes distorted into exact opposite."[27] The quest for greater controllability puts human beings into artificial environments that many find alienating and uncontrollable—that is, unknowable, inaccessible, unmanageable, and difficult to use. At the same time, modern life is characterized by catastrophic outbreaks of uncontrollability: financial crashes, terrorism, pandemics, ecological crises, and more. Paradoxically, the attempt to bring more of the world under control ends up generating new forms of uncontrollability.

Strikingly parallel observations were made by Ivan Illich who noticed what he called "paradoxical counterproductivity" across a range of modern institutions. Beyond a certain threshold of professionalization and efficiency, institutions begin to undermine the purpose for which they were established: schools make people dumber, hospitals make people sick, therapists make people mentally unbalanced, transportation makes movement slower, and in our own day communication technology makes people less connected. Illich is concerned with how these institutions foster dependence, leading people to believe that "salvation" can only be found

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22. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), 15:4, pg. 143.
23. Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 9-10.
24. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 9.
25. Augustine, *The City of God* (Books 11-22), 15:4, pg. 142.
26. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 10-11 and chapter 2.
27. Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 19.

through the mediation of experts. Illich observes this in the process by which verbs such as education, health, or life that are part of ordinary life become *nouns*, packaged as scarce goods that are the purview of experts. Thus, we come to see education as something that can only be administered by trained teachers, health as something that can only be provided by a healthcare system, and counseling as something that can only occur in a therapist's office from a professional with the proper credentials. In effect, modern institutions and technologies have a *religious* structure: by means of a priestly class of experts, in the sanctuary of institutions, packaged goods of education, health, and other promises of enduring life are distributed to a dependent and ignorant public. The disturbing effect of this is the devaluing and discrediting of the abundant ways ordinary humans provide home remedies, teach each other, and offer consolation. This leads to the shrinking of community as the communal capacity for mutual aid is hollowed out. Furthermore, it leads to a shrinking of the soul as the individual loses agency and the capacity to reach out to his neighbor.

At the heart of the modern technological paradigm is the promise that these devices, services, or institutions can deliver us from the drudgery of mortality and grant us eternal and enduring life. This is essentially a religious claim. Meta promises to make us all more connected. The automobile promises to give us freedom. AI promises to make our lives better in an unspecifiable way. Yet, there is no more important truth about technology than that it cannot give what it promises. There is no shortcut to being human: there is no device, training, or institution that can release us from the frustrations of creaturely life and bring us the freedom, happiness, connection, knowledge, or peace we long for. In short, technology is an inadequate religion. It is incapable of delivering the abundant, eternal life it promises.

Part II: Gospel

Content to be Creatures

We saw above how Luther's monastic faith ran aground in his attempt to transcend his humanity by his own effort. The more Luther attempted to achieve righteousness, peace, and faith, the more distant these became. I attempted to show how similar structures of "paradoxical counterproductivity" characterize our technological society.

Luther's breakthrough was his discovery of the gospel. Through his reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, Luther came to see that the gospel about Jesus Christ is a message which if believed, gives the believer the reality that is signified: "the word of the Gospel … [is the] outward means by which God gives us Christ and all that is his, including his righteousness, holiness, blessing, salvation, and everlasting life."[28] In short, the gospel enables us by faith to participate in

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28. Philip Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology: Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel that Gives Us Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), Chapter 7, epub.

the eternal divine life. Eternal life then is not achieved by striving towards a distant goal but instead by simply accepting that eternal life has already been given. Luther's *humanity*—his limitations, moral failures, and inadequacies—is no longer an impediment to his search for righteousness. Instead, it is Luther's *acceptance* and coming-to-terms-with his humanity that is the precondition of his reception of grace as a free, unmerited gift:

> *Because* I am in sin, a captive of death and the devil, because I feel that I am weak in faith, cold in love, wayward, impatient, envious, with sin clinging to me before and behind; therefore I come hither where I find and hear Christ's words that I shall receive the gift of forgiveness of sins.[29]

This exactly reverses the situation we saw in Kurzweil and the modern technological paradigm. In that case, the hatred of the limitations of humanity leads to a violent attempt to transcend them. Luther's acceptance of the present eternal life allows him to arrest his striving to transcend his humanity and instead find contentment in his creaturehood. Luther will call his way the *vita passive* (the way of passivity). Progress is not the way; instead, by some great mystery, "what we need is here." In *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Jacques Ellul describes the Christian difference *vis-à-vis* the modern vision of progress:

> The whole object of ethics is not to attain an end (and we know very well that for a genuine Christian ethic there is no such thing as striving for holiness) but to manifest the gift that has been given us, the gift of grace and of peace, of love and the Holy Spirit, that is, the very end pursued by God and miraculously present within us.[30]

Luther's gospel—that eternal life is to be celebrated rather than manufactured—makes visible the abundance of the present. "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be be observed, nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Lk. 17:21). What is needed for the good life is already present. We should not heed the promises of our many false technological messiahs who announce the kingdom is coming with the latest device or method.

Living by Faith[31]

This does not mean that what the gospel unveils is obvious and can be read off the surface of things. It requires energy to keep one's eyelids open. Luther spoke of how believers are *simul justus et peccator*, that is, simultaneously sinner and saint.

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29. Emphasis mine. Martin Luther, "The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 233.

30. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), 82.

31. Thanks to Paul R. Hinlicky for suggesting I add this section.

Our eyes have been opened to the vision of the kingdom while being liable to close again in slumber. We are participants in the divine life but also through our biological bodies bound to a world still subject to death. When Jesus, God veiled in flesh, came announcing the kingdom of God, his hearers were called to answer with faith. Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was already present, here and amongst them (Luke 17:21), and at the same time that it was arriving, on the way, and yet to come (Luke 19:11). The call to have faith—to entrust oneself to God—then as now, requires a kind of crucifixion of the flesh and of the eyes. For Jesus' first hearers, faith was required to believe in this intriguing man before them as the divine presence drawn near: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? (Matt. 13:55-56). In the same way, faith is required to believe that we have been given what we need to live a life beyond the world's options of violence, greed, and despair. Perhaps the more painful crucifixion is the death of our desire to have salvation by our own hands. This means that the prestige we think we have earned, those things that justify our existence or set us apart from others, our desire to be the ground of our own existence—is relativized, and we must acknowledge our moment-by-moment dependence on God.

Thus, we see the appeal of the false gospel of Silicon Valley. It does not ask for faith but gives mechanical certainty. Kurzweil makes his case for the coming Singularity with charts and statistics: given the current trajectory of technological development we can be assured of this future. The men in lab coats inspire confidence and their marvelous machines leave us awestruck. This gospel does not demand that we live for a hope that lies beyond this world in the promise of God; instead, it simply asks us to put our confidence in humanity's great technological achievements, so sure and impressive. Yet, the gospel of Jesus Christ announces that this is an impressive façade, an illusory hope that is ultimately a form of slavery to the fear of death. Instead, it calls us to put our faith in the One who can destroy the power of death and "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:15).

Gratuity

To live by the gospel is to "walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). This means trusting in the provision of God and hoping that we have been given what we need in the present (not the future) to live abundantly and be at home in this world:

> Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. And can any of you add a single hour to your span of life. And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the

> grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore, do not worry, saying "what will we eat?" or "what will we drink?" or "what will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed, your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matt. 6:25-33).

The point of this is not that ordinary provision is off limits, that somehow thinking prudently about clothing, shelter, or food is wrongheaded. Jesus affirms that humans do need these things. Instead, the point is that there is enough. The world is filled with the provision of God: sunshine, rain, fruit trees, grass, people to love, "wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart" (Ps. 104:15). Luther articulates this same wonder at the provision of God in his *Small Catechism*:

> I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And this is done out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any worthiness of mine at all![32]

The point is to awaken us to the fundamental gratuity of things, that wonder that God moment-by-moment sustains me and all the world in existence. It is the wonder that things should be as they are, the wonder that we live in such a world as this, with such people in it to love. These gifts far surpass any merit on our part to deserve them. As Kris Kristofferson sings: "Why me Lord? / What have I ever done / To deserve even one / of the pleasures I've known?"[33] It is precisely this gratuity, this sheer givenness and contingency of things, that contains the possibility of its negation and shadow side. The question asked in gratitude, "why should I live in such a world as this?" can become Kurzweil's question: "Why should things be as they are?" Why should the genetic allotment of birth be left to chance? Why should we be constrained by our biological bodies? Why should human lives be limited to a span of a handful of decades? Here we see again the hatred of humanity in its contingency and mortality and the desire for an earthly eternity to ensure that the preservation of life is not gratuitous but lies secure in our own hands, locked down and certain from all the ravages of time.

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32. I have modified this translation by adding some phrases from Oswald Bayer's translation in *Martin Luther's Theology*, 95. Original from Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 327.

33. Kris Kristofferson, "Why Me." Track 10 on *Jesus was a Capricorn*, Monument Recording, 1972.

What We Need Is Here

The conceit is not only that eternal life can be controlled but also that it can come as a result of human ingenuity, with "things that can be observed" (Lk. 17:21). This same conceit lies behind some reactions to modernity that hold that the possibility for a good and meaningful life has vanished with the breakdown of past social or cultural structures. Just as Kurzweil locates "eternal life" in a particular time and social arrangement, namely the technologically advanced future, in the same way some critics of modernity locate "eternal life" in a particular time and social arrangement, namely pre-modern communities. For both, the good life is only possible "if only things were different." For example, the reactionary might argue that life in the city is inherently meaningless, isolating, and suffocating. Because for the reactionary the good life is located in a particular place and time, say a peasant community in the Middle Ages, it cannot be possible in a modern city. However, from the vantage of the abundance of the gospel, life in the city is full of surprising possibilities: urban gardens, backyard chickens, plants growing on skyscraper windowsills, hospitable houses with revolving doors, backyard trees, campfires, and networks of friendship.

Consider the following lists of imperatives from the New Testament. These exhibit a life lived from the abundance of the gospel and they can be lived out just as faithfully under the shadow of the Roman empire as within the matrix of our technocracy:

> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you… Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (Rom 12:9-18).

> Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them… Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have… (Heb. 13:1-5).

The reactionary, like the futurist, misses that the good life—eternal life—is not dependent on material conditions but is more "spiritual," mysteriously present anywhere. The good things that are promised by the technologist and the reactionary are never theirs to give: joy, connection, community, freedom, and peace are not confined or controlled by any social or technological system because they transcend material conditions. They can be found anywhere, in any set of circumstances. What is required is a retraining of our attention from where "things are different," back to where we are to see the possibilities of humanity, togetherness, happiness,

conviviality, and joy where it can be hard to see them. The places we inhabit—often mindlessly and thoughtlessly—lie dormant with these possibilities: might there be interest in a book club in your neighborhood? Could a new friendship be sparked with a delivery of fresh-baked cookies? Is there room to grow a garden?

Restful Repetitions

We are oriented, then, away from forces beyond our control and into the realm of the present where we have agency: "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matt. 6:34). Today has enough. What we need is here. This same thought is reflected in that tangible line of the Lord's prayer: "give us this day our daily bread." The bread that is chewed and digested for human nourishment and survival physically instantiates God's care and ongoing giving of life. For Luther, the repetition of eating becomes an image of how we grow in the Christian life. This occurs not through striving into the future but by returning again and again in hunger and need to take hold of Christ in the gospel: "One thing and one thing alone leads to Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. This is the holy word of God, the gospel of Christ, as Jesus himself… says in Matthew 4:4: 'One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"[34] Luther scholar Philip Cary summarizes Luther's position here: "We make progress precisely by returning over and over again to [the] beginning, which is to ssay by taking hold of Christ once again by faith alone, so that our hearts are increasingly formed in his image."[35] The image here is of a well in the center of a community to which the townspeople must continually return to be refreshed or a table set with food around which we must gather three times daily for our nourishment.

What Luther is offering us here is an alternative to the picture of "progress" that has thoroughly colonized our modern imaginations. Our attention is pointed back to the mundane acts that make life livable and worthwhile. Within God's daily economy of provision—the sun that rises, the rain that falls, the plants that grow—there are humanity's "restful repetitions" that allow human life to flourish: planting and tending crops, cooking and preserving food, raising and teaching the young, repairing and building homes, helping neighbors, having conversations, singing, and prayer. These restful repetitions, so often scorned and taken for granted, are like the repetitive heartbeat which sustains the life of any community. Our contemporary fixation with progress has the spiritually corrosive effect of making us feel that what is worthwhile is to be found elsewhere, in the future, rather than here and now where there is *vital* work to be done. Against the grand aspirations

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34. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd edition, edited by Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russel, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 405.

35. Cary, *The Meaning of Protestant Theology*, chapter 7.

of modern utopianism or progress narratives, Ephraim Radner argues that the Christian vocation is to tend to what he calls our "mortal goods":

> …our Christian calling is to limit our politics to the boundaries of our actual created lives and to the goods that stake out these limits: our births, our parents, our siblings, our families, our growing, our brief persistence in life, our raising of children, our relations, our decline, our deaths. These mark the goods of our lives along with the acts that sustain these goods, like toil and joy, suffering, prayer, and giving thanks. Christian politics is aimed at no more and no less than the tending of these "mortal goods."[36]

The gospel that Luther discovered opens the possibility of doing good, not for the sake of earning eternal life, but for the genuine good of the neighbor: "Let us be clear that no one needs to do these things to attain righteousness and salvation. Therefore, we should be guided in all our works by this one thought alone—that we may serve and benefit others … having nothing before our eyes except the need and advantage of our neighbor."[37] There is a suggestion here about what an orientation towards our tools that has been nourished by the gospel might look like. Such an orientation would be able to overcome the fearful drive for eternity that characterizes modern technology. Instead, it would seek in its use and development of tools to build up the neighbor and the common life we share. This would be a use of technology that is in the service of tending the "mortal goods" to which we have been entrusted rather than as a means of escape from them. Technology would serve a "remedial" purpose, making the conditions of mortal existence livable rather than as a spurious means of salvation. This would be a use of tools that returns them to their rightful, limited, instrumental place where they serve human ends rather than the other way around. Finally, this would be an approach that smashes idols and divests tools of their mystique of being instruments of salvation, capable of granting eternal, abundant life. This, finally, is not within the power of technology to give or withhold. Abundant life can only be given by the one who is Life itself. It is given freely by the one who lived, died, and was raised so that "that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

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36. Ephraim Radner, *Mortal Goods: Reimagining the Christian Moral Duty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 8.

37. Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 418.

The Freedom of the Theological Word

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* and the Emergence of a *Nova Lingua*

Dennis Bielfeldt

Theology and the Freedom of Its Own Word

Every generation of theologians inherits not only a determinate set of doctrines but also the linguistic frameworks through which those doctrines can be asserted. The question confronting theology is therefore not merely what is affirmed, e.g., *God justifies the ungodly*, but how such a paradox can be linguistically possible. As I have argued elsewhere, Luther recognized that in matters of faith the majesty of the subject matter itself functions as a transcendental constraint on discourse: revelation demands a form of speech proportionate to its own reality. *De servo arbitrio* stands as his most systematic meditation on this necessity. Against Erasmus' rational piety, disciplined by the conventions of humanist and scholastic discourse, Luther forged a new grammar in which theological meaning emerges only through the disruption and reconfiguration of inherited logical forms. What is at stake, therefore, is not only the relation between grace and freedom but the deeper relation between divine locution and human signification, between Word as act and word as structure.

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* addresses this problem not at the level of doctrine but at the level of formal structure. His thesis is both conceptually audacious and methodologically exacting: Luther's treatise does not merely argue about the will but performs a transformation in the logical preconditions of theological discourse itself. As Vestrucci states at the outset, "Theology is freedom: the freedom of its own word, the autonomy of theological language vis-à-vis every other form of reason."[1] With this claim he signals a Copernican reversal in theological method. The freedom of theology is not the liberation of doctrine from metaphysical constraint but the emancipation of theological discourse from the inherited logics—modal

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1. Andrea Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther's De servo arbitrio* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2021), 2.

and deontic—that once governed reason's speech about God, and its reorientation toward the typological logic disclosed in revelation.

By analyzing the implicit logics operative in Erasmus's defense of the will—the formal languages of possibility, obligation, and typological life that structure the *liberum arbitrium* debate—Vestrucci demonstrates that Luther's apparent denials of freedom are, paradoxically, theology's discovery of its own linguistic autonomy. Theology becomes free when it recognizes that its discourse cannot be regimented by the modal or deontic operators that govern philosophical reasoning. Freedom, in this sense, is not the negation of necessity but the liberation of language from an alien form. Hence the title: *Theology as Freedom*.

Vestrucci articulates the governing axiom of his project in a sentence that could stand as its formal key: "Divine revelation is not an object of investigation but the principle—the *lumen*—in whose light human forms and structures are re-considered as dependent on revelation and thus as theologically limited."[2] This single sentence expresses what the *nova lingua theologiae* demands. Revelation is not an epistemic datum within an existing framework but the transcendental condition that reconfigures the framework itself. Theology's freedom, therefore, is not independence from constraint but dependence upon the only constraint that makes truth possible.

The *lumen revelationis* is not an external illumination but the constitutive act by which finite rationality is re-specified for divine reference. While such a thesis recalls modern attempts to reclaim theology's autonomy after the Enlightenment, Vestrucci's originality lies deeper. "Theology does not describe freedom," he writes: "it performs freedom. It enacts the liberation of language from heteronomous forms of logic."[3] In other words, theology is not a meta-commentary on revelation but a linguistic event generated by it. Freedom here is not a property predicated of the human will but a formal parameter of theological discourse itself; it is the capacity to speak under divine authorization rather than under philosophical necessity.

Luther's paradox *servum arbitrium* becomes, for Vestrucci, the event in which reason, standing before divine majesty, discovers its own limits and receives a new grammar adequate to revelation. The paradox functions as a metalogical boundary condition, the point at which the language of philosophy ceases to apply and a new rule of formation is given by revelation itself. What I once called theology's "strange language" finds in Vestrucci its formal articulation: a logic that must change because its subject matter exceeds the syntax of the finite.[4]

This concern for the formal authorization of theological speech intersects with my account of the *nova lingua theologiae*, a language constituted through divine

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2. *Theology as Freedom*, 54.

3. *Theology as Freedom*, 4.

4. See Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther and the Strange Language of Theology: How New is the Nova Lingua?," in *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002), 221–244.

causality rather than human synthesis. In my recent formulation of model-theo-retic theology, I have proposed that theological discourse qua theological should be understood syntactically, as possessing felicity conditions rather than truth conditions, and that its internal grammar presupposes authorization by the Holy Spirit. Theological propositions are thus felicitous not by social convention but by pneumatological causality, for it is the Spirit who unites word and divine act. Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* provides the formal analogue of this thesis: where I pursue the metaphysics of participation, he specifies its logical structure in syntax.

Yet freedom of language is not yet freedom for truth. The emancipation of theo-logical syntax from philosophical constraint does not by itself guarantee reference to divine reality. If theology is free only insofar as it no longer answers to the logics of philosophy, one must ask whether it can still answer to the Logos of God. Vestrucci's subtitle, *On Martin Luther's De servo arbitrio*, shows that his chief concern is method-ological: Luther inaugurates a new mode of theological discourse. But here the decisive question arises. Does this nova lingua remain a self-enclosed linguistic revolution, or does it sustain genuine intentionality toward divine being? The enduring task of post-critical dogmatics is precisely to preserve the radicality of Luther's linguistic turn without forfeiting theology's referential realism. The Word that frees must also be.

Vestrucci's resolution unfolds through a triadic architecture—the modal, the deontic, and the typological. Each stage isolates a distinct philosophical grammar and then demonstrates its theological transposition. The result is not a reform of con-cepts but a re-specification of the rules governing meaningful discourse: a *metalogical Reformation*. The scholastic idioms that once secured theology's rational respect-ability are displaced by a paradoxical grammar in which negation, contradiction, and asymmetry become the privileged forms of revelation. Luther's paradoxes—*iustus et peccator*, *servum arbitrium*, *Deus absconditus*—are not rhetorical excesses but logical operations marking the point at which divine disclosure subverts human semantics. Language learns to signify by contradiction because grace communicates by inversion.

This reading situates *Theology as Freedom* within the broader trajectory of post-critical dogmatics, which seeks theology's internal normativity without relapse into pre-Kantian metaphysics. While thinkers such as Lindbeck, Frei, and the Finn-ish school have emphasized the self-referential character of theological language, Vestrucci distinguishes himself by giving that character formal precision.[5] Theology, he argues, operates under a logical regime disclosed by revelation itself. Revelation

5. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 63–69; Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 1–20. Lindbeck's "cultural-linguistic" model proposes that theology functions more like an internal grammar than a set of empirically verifiable or metaphysical claims. Frei foregrounds the irreducible narrative logic of Scripture in contrast to Enlightenment hermeneutics. The Finnish School, especially

is thus not a semantic content within theological discourse but the generative rule that determines its very syntax. *Theology as Freedom* therefore stands as one of the most exacting contemporary attempts to show how the language of faith arises from the *lumen revelationis*, the majesty of the subject matter speaking its own freedom.

Part I. The Modal Logic of Freedom and the Birth of a New Grammar

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* occupies a central place in his wider intellectual project. Across his work in ethics, philosophy of language, and systematic theology, a single question governs his inquiry: what form of rationality can remain answerable to revelation without collapsing into pre-critical metaphysics or post-critical relativism? Earlier writings—*La responsabilité de la foi*, *Philosophie et théologie après Wittgenstein*,[6] and a series of essays on ethics and linguistic responsibility—approached this question phenomenologically and ethically, asking how moral agency might be articulated under the conditions of a revelation that exceeds conceptual control.

Theology as Freedom represents the formal completion of that trajectory. What Vestrucci had previously framed in terms of moral responsibility and linguistic limitation is here transposed into the *metalogical structure* of divine address. His aim is not to produce a doctrinal synthesis but to show that *revelation generates the logical space in which theology can speak at all*. Across his corpus, Vestrucci consistently seeks a theological rationality governed not by external philosophical criteria but by the *internal normativity* of revelation itself. Positioned within the post-Kantian landscape as both logician and theologian, he attempts to show how theological discourse can remain formally rigorous while remaining obedient to the structure of divine speech. In this sense, *Theology as Freedom* is not merely a summit within his *oeuvre*, it is the hinge at which his philosophical and theological commitments converge. It offers a single formal horizon in which logic, language, and theological truth can be thought together.

Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* begins, characteristically, not with a doctrinal claim but with an analysis of the logical form that renders such claims possible. The opening chapters investigate what he calls "the logic of freedom … the modal structure that allows talk about the will to be possible."[7] For Erasmus, freedom belongs

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through Mannermaa, retrieves the ontological dimension of Luther's theology, highlighting union with Christ (*unio mystica*) as the inner logic of justification. Vestrucci's formalization of theology's internal logic builds upon this trajectory, moving beyond epistemological debates to assert that revelation discloses its own rational structure—what he terms the *lumen revelationis*.

6. Andrea Vestrucci, *La responsabilité de la foi* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2014); and *Philosophie et théologie après Wittgenstein* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2010).

7. *Theology as Freedom*, 27.

to the metaphysical schema of potency and act: *libertas est potentia ad oppositum*. Within this framework the human will occupies the region of possibility, its agency defined by its capacity to realize one potential among many under divine assistance. The logical field is therefore symmetrical: God and creature both operate within the same modal space, differing only in the kind of necessity or efficacy involved. As Vestrucci observes, this symmetry presupposes a shared grammar of possibility, a modal continuum in which grace and nature are commensurable.

Luther's *De servo arbitrio* shatters that continuum. The will is not a field of potentialities awaiting divine cooperation but the effect of divine causality itself. To speak of "freedom" in modal terms is already to have misdescribed revelation. "To maintain theology within the logic of modality," Vestrucci writes, "means to render its object unintelligible, since revelation does not belong to the order of the possible."[8] What begins as a critique of Erasmus thus becomes a metalogical reformation: the creation of a grammar no longer bound to the possible but authorized by the revealed.

Vestrucci's decisive insight is that the dispute is not primarily about anthropology but about language. To speak of divine and human "possibility" under a single modal operator is to impose a univocal logic upon an analogical relation. The idolatrous result is a logic of freedom that presupposes commensurability between Creator and creature. Against this, Luther's theology introduces what Vestrucci calls "the operator of paradox," "the theological structure of meaning as asymmetry between divine revelation and human reason."[9] Where the logic of possibility calculates, the logic of revelation discloses.

This move amounts to a redefinition of theological intelligibility. The "void name," as Vestrucci terms it, marks the point at which inherited logical structures fail to signify the divine relation and must be replaced by forms of speech generated within revelation itself. "The name of God," he writes, "functions as a void name for reason, a term that breaks the coherence of conceptual logic and opens language to revelation."[10] Theological discourse becomes intelligible not by extension of prior semantics but by the emergence of a new semantics in which meaning no longer derives from modal comparability but from revelational participation.

In this sense, Luther's argument is not merely a critique of Erasmus's modal reasoning but a transformation of what it means for a proposition to be theologically meaningful. The shift from modality to paradox constitutes theology's liberation from the univocity of being and its entry into a logic of participation. The modal collapse is not a loss of rationality but the birth of a new grammar, one that is adequate to the asymmetry of Creator and creature, a grammar in which possibility itself is redefined as the openness of reason to the act of God.

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8. *Theology as Freedom*, 29.

9. *Theology as Freedom*, 34.

10. *Theology as Freedom*, 37-38.

The Failure of Modal Translation

Vestrucci characterizes Erasmus's project as a paradigmatic instance of what he calls *modal translation*: the assumption that theological assertions can be rendered without loss of meaning within the language of possibility and necessity. Erasmus's discourse presupposes that divine and human predicates share a common logical space, that what *may*, *must*, or *can* apply to God may, *mutatis mutandis*, also apply to the human subject. The theological relation is thus expressed through the semantics of possible worlds.

For Vestrucci, this assumption is not simply mistaken but structurally incoherent, for the attempt to translate theology into modal form falsifies the asymmetry it seeks to describe. The divine $\Diamond$ and the human $\Diamond$ are not homonymous but equivocal, and to employ them under a single operator is to erase the categorical distinction between Creator and creature.[11] The logical apparatus of modality, designed to measure degrees of necessity within a finite domain, cannot accommodate a relation in which one term—God—is the ontological ground of the other. To speak modally of God and humanity as though they share a field of possible predicates is, therefore, to commit a category mistake.

Luther's rejoinder to Erasmus, as Vestrucci reconstructs it, is not an alternative modal theory but a performative critique of the entire modal framework. In denying the possibility of libertarian freedom, Luther exposes the linguistic inadequacy of modal discourse itself. The issue is not whether the will is free or bound *within* a given logical space, but whether the logical space presupposed by Erasmus is theologically legitimate. The relation between divine act and human response does not occur within a preexisting field of possibility but it rather *constitutes* that field.

Vestrucci identifies the *operator of paradox* as the formal sign marking the breakdown of modal symmetry and the inception of a new mode of predication. The paradox operator functions as a meta-linguistic instruction; it signals that the proposition in which it appears must be interpreted under the rule of revelation rather than under the rule of modality. Where classical logic seeks to resolve contradiction by refining definitions, theological logic accepts contradiction as the condition of meaningfulness when speaking of God.

This is what I have called theology's *strange language*, a speech compelled to twist and break its inherited syntax under the weight of the divine reality it must name. Theological language, Luther recognized, is not accidental metaphor but necessary excess. As I wrote many decades ago, such a language is one in which "the majesty of the subject matter demands a new form of thinking and speaking, one whose grammar is given with the object itself."[12] The demand is grammatical

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11. In many modal logics, '$\Diamond$' standardly means "it is possible that," while '$\Box$' signs that "it is necessarily that."

12. Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (January 1990): 33.

before it is doctrinal. Vestrucci's "void name" is the logical analogue of that insight. It is the point where language, overwhelmed by the infinite, becomes free precisely by being broken.

Thus, on Vestrucci's reading, Luther's *De servo arbitrio* is not an anthropological thesis but a metalogical event; it is that moment in which the inherited syntax of possibility collapses under the weight of divine necessity. The language of theology, confronted with the infinite, is compelled to violate its own rules to remain truthful. Meaning is preserved only through formal rupture.

Vestrucci's reconstruction therefore recasts *De servo arbitrio* as a treatise on the limits of translation. To render theology in the grammar of modality is to translate revelation into an idiom that cannot contain it. The proper task is not to improve the translation but to abandon it, to allow the paradoxical logic of revelation to dictate its own operators, its own semantics, and finally its own truth conditions. In that surrender, theology ceases to be a species of philosophical discourse and becomes what it properly is: *a language generated by the act it names.*

Revelation and the Copernican Turn

Vestrucci renders this shift with exacting clarity. "Luther's *De servo arbitrio*," he writes, "inaugurates a Copernican revolution of thought: the center of theology is no longer the human intellect that thinks God, but the divine Word that thinks humanity."[13] In the history of reason, this marks a third displacement: as Copernicus relocated the proximity of the earth by the distance of the sun, and Kant displaced the distance of the object by the proximity of the transcendental unity of apperception, so Luther displaces the proximity of human thinking of the divine by the distance of the divine thinking the human. The hiddenness of God (*Deus absconditus*) signals the inapplicability of modal predicates to the divine, for such predicates presuppose conditions of possibility internal to creaturely reason. Revelation (*Deus revelatus*) therefore introduces a new inferential space rather than supplementing an old one. Paradoxical predication becomes possible not because logic is suspended but because the domain of application has changed. "Freedom," here, designates the release of language from modal constraint; it is the point at which theological reasoning begins precisely where human reasoning reaches its limit.

At this point Vestrucci's position converges with my account of the *nova lingua theologiae*, where semantic determination occurs on the side of the object, not the subject. His framework formalizes what I describe now as the pneumatological felicity of theological speech: truth as divinely authorized assertion. On this view, theology does not generate truth-conditions but receives them from the act of divine speech. The Word is not a term within a model but the agent who establishes the model itself.

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13. *Theology as Freedom*, 58.

Still, Vestrucci's formulation introduces a risk. If revelation is construed primarily as a reversal of inferential priorities, it can appear as a purely formal operation, an inversion rather than an act. This renders the "freedom" of theological language underdetermined. A logical transformation without an ontological agent collapses into abstraction. My model-theoretic realism addresses this by locating the revolution in the being of the speaker: the new grammar is not only given but caused. Revelation is an instance of divine agency, not a shift in logical protocol. The constitutive act of the Word grounds the inferential possibilities that Vestrucci identifies.

Once this ontological ground is acknowledged, the status of paradox is clarified. Paradox is not an indicator of inconsistency but the expected form of discourse when finite language is determined by an infinite agent. It marks the asymmetry between divine causality and human predication. The contradiction is not internal to theology but external: it arises from the mismatch between the categories of creaturely logic and the act that founds those categories. Paradox, therefore, is not a methodological concession but the grammar proper to revelation.

Paradox as Method

Paradox does not function in Luther as a negation of logic but as a specification of its theological limit. In *De servo arbitrio*, paradox marks the point at which the inferential resources of deontic and modal language fail to track the object they attempt to describe. The contradiction is not introduced rhetorically but arises from the mismatch between the grammar of human agency and the act of divine self-disclosure. Here Vestrucci is exact: paradox appears when a predicate continues to be used beyond the domain for which its rules were designed.

Under Vestrucci's analysis, this limit is not merely epistemic but structural. The paradox *servum arbitrium / liberum arbitrium*, for example, is not a metaphysical antinomy but a linguistic artifact generated by two incommensurable frameworks:

(1) a deontic system in which *ought* presupposes *can*, and
(2) a revealed framework in which the *Sollen* becomes the instrument of its own impossibility.

Theological paradox therefore names the point at which ordinary predicates lose applicability because the domain of evaluation has shifted. The grammar governing theological assertions is not an extension of the natural grammar of agency, but a rule system constituted by revelation. Paradox, therefore, is neither contradiction nor equivocation but a signal that the semantic conditions of evaluation have changed.

On this view, paradox becomes a methodological indicator. When a theological statement appears contradictory—for example, the will is bound in every respect and yet commanded without qualification—the contradiction is not resolved by appeal to higher-order modal distinctions. Rather, the appearance of contradiction is itself evidence that the assertion belongs to a different logical space, one whose rules are supplied by the divine Word rather than by the human subject. Paradox

thus functions as the boundary marker between the logic of creaturely possibility and the logic of revealed address.

Hence paradox is the formal footprint of revelation within language. It indicates that an assertion has crossed the boundary from a realm in which predicates are applied according to human capacities to a realm in which predicates are licensed by divine act. Paradox is therefore not a deficiency in theological speech but the expected consequence of its proper object. It is the linguistic evidence of a *nova lingua*: a grammar whose rules are authored by revelation and whose predicates receive their sense from the act that names them.

Freedom as Dependence

Theological freedom, in Vestrucci's account, is not an attribute possessed by the human subject but a structural feature of divine revelation. Freedom arises only when the inferential norms that govern theological discourse are no longer supplied by deontic logic where obligation is indexed to human capacity, but when they are provided by the divine Word itself. In this transition, freedom is not expanded agency but re-specified grammar.

The decisive analytic move is the suspension of the deontic implication *ought* → *can*. This suspension is not a concession to human weakness but the result of a logical modification introduced by revelation itself. As Vestrucci repeatedly shows, the *Sollen* of Scripture is not a task assigned to human ability but an instrument of divine address. Consequently, what appears as heteronomy from within deontic language becomes autonomy from within theological language, for the norm is determined by the speaker rather than the agent. Revelation frees not by relaxing obligation but by relocating obligation's ground from human capability to divine predication.

Vestrucci characterizes this transition as a transformation in the "logistics of freedom," a transformation made possible only by revelation's unconditionality: "the theological conceptualization of freedom corresponds to the theological modification of these logistics of freedom in light of the unconditionality of divine revelation."[14] This modification is formal rather than psychological. It shifts the agent from a normative space structured by ability to a normative space structured by promise. As his analysis of Luther's account of sin and forgiveness shows (pp. 135–148), the deontic consequence between action and judgment is annulled by divine promise: forgiveness becomes the negation of a negation, an absolution that presupposes not the capacity to realize the *Sollen* but the impossibility of doing so. Promise thus creates the very condition through which freedom is recognized.

Under this framework, dependence becomes the very condition of freedom. The human subject is freed precisely insofar as it becomes the object of divine

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14. *Theology as Freedom*, 298.

predication. To be addressed by God is to be inscribed within a logical environment in which evaluative standing no longer turns on the realizability of the *Sollen* but on the stability of a divine promise. Freedom no longer signifies the capacity to act otherwise, but it now points to one's being located within an act of God whose efficacy precedes, grounds, and sustains all human agency. Freedom is dependence because dependence is what secures the unconditional space in which human action is as no longer the measure of obligation.

It is here that Vestrucci explicitly aligns with the semantic insight I first articulated forty years ago in my account of Luther's *nova lingua*: theological meaning is determined from the side of the object, not the subject. Accordingly, theological language must become strange because its object commands it; the majesty of the subject matter demands a new form of thinking and speaking, one whose grammar is given with the object itself. Vestrucci confirms this reading. On pp. 55–57, Vestrucci defends this claim against Graham White's charge of anachronism, arguing that the syntactic and semantic distinctions I draw do not impose external categories upon Luther but formalize an operation already implicit in Luther's own practice of theological speech. Vestrucci locates the logic of this operation not in speculative reconstruction but in Luther's insistence that theological language is governed by divine self-reference, for God is both agent and referent of theological predication.[15] This is fully consonant with my recent model-theoretic formulation in which theological speech is defined not by truth-conditions but by felicity-conditions authorized by the Holy Spirit.

This vindication is not merely historical. It underscores the analytic point at stake. If theological meaning derives from divine predication, then theological freedom must likewise be traced to divine predication. Dependence is not a limitation within this logic but its necessary structure. Only an externally grounded norm can supply the stability required for freedom understood as promise rather than performance.

For this reason, Vestrucci's formalism converges with the model-theoretic realism I am currently developing. Both positions maintain that revelation determines the space of reasons within which theological assertions are true. In such a space, freedom is dependence because dependence is the only form of agency not hostage to the contingency or failure of human action. To be bound by the Word is to inhabit a grammar in which one's standing is given rather than achieved, and therefore a grammar in which freedom is not a property of the will but a consequence of being addressed by God. Vestrucci's conclusion captures this with crystalline precision: "To obey is to be free: theology's liberty lies in its dependence on revelation alone."[16]

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15. *Theology as Freedom*, 299: "The novelty of the language of *De servo arbitrio* refers not to a metalanguage but to the theological reflection upon the validity of every possible metalinguistic proposition."

16. *Theology as Freedom*, 12.

Freedom, Formalism, and the Question of Truth

Any evaluation of Vestrucci's project must begin by identifying its principal achievement. He succeeds in giving a precise formal account of Luther's central claim in *De servo arbitrio*: that theological meaning arises not through conceptual derivation but through divine address.[17] By reframing Luther's polemic as a transformation in the logical conditions of thought, he exposes the structural implications of the Reformer's insistence that the Word determines both the agent and the grammar within which the agent is understood.

The strength of this approach lies in its refusal to psychologize Luther. Vestrucci does not treat bondage of the will as a theory of motivation or a pathology of agency. Instead, he parses it as a modification of inferential norms. From this angle, the "bondage" thesis is not an anthropological claim at all but a meta-semantic one: the rules that govern theological discourse are not derived from human capacities but from divine speech. The human subject is not evaluated by its potential but by its placement within the divine assertion.

This structural recasting allows Vestrucci to explain, without recourse to speculative metaphysics, why Luther denies the applicability of modal predicates to God. If divine action is the condition of theological predication, then God cannot be located within the modal space that divine action generates. Luther's *Deus absconditus* is therefore not an epistemic gap but a formal boundary. The *Deus revelatus* is not an ontological contrast-term but the introduction of a new inferential environment within which theological statements obtain. As Vestrucci summarizes his project: *Theology as Freedom* is "not a theological system, but the formal reconstruction of theology's own system-breaking."[18]

Nonetheless, the project displays a set of limitations that follow directly from these strengths. By identifying revelation with a transformation in logical form, Vestrucci risks converting divine action into a purely structural operator. Revelation becomes a condition of intelligibility rather than an act of God; the grammar is retained while the speaker recedes. The danger is not heterodoxy but abstraction: a theological Copernican revolution without a theological sun.

This limitation becomes acute in Vestrucci's extended analysis of forgiveness, promise, and justification. His treatment of deontic language is exact, and his argument for the negation of "ought → can" in the theological register is compelling.[19] But the reconstruction remains at the level of formal consequences. *Gratia* becomes the name for an altered inferential rule rather than for a divine act that alters the world. Nothing in the logic is wrong. My concern is with an *ontological absence* that the logic cannot by itself remedy.

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17. *Theology as Freedom*, 55-57.

18. *Theology as Freedom*, 298.

19. *Theology as Freedom*, 137-148.

What is missing is what analytic theology can supply: a semantics in which divine speech does not merely determine inferential patterns but *causes* them. A formal grammar of revelation requires an ontological ground if it is to avoid collapsing into a self-contained language-game. Without such grounding, the *nova lingua* risks becoming another linguistic turn, while brilliant and intricate, it is insufficiently anchored.

Vestrucci's analysis and my own model-theoretic proposals diverge here. While his account demonstrates the necessity of a new logical space, mine attempts to identify the agent who creates and sustains that space. For theology to speak truth rather than merely reconfigured coherence, revelation must be not only a rule-governed form but a real act. The transition from modality to promise cannot be merely conceptual; it must be metaphysical. While freedom is found "not [in] a theological system, but [in] the formal reconstruction of theology's own system-breaking,"[20] something more is needed, for while Vestrucci's formalism identifies the "new logical space" of theology, the task now is to identify the agentive ground of that space: the Logos whose act constitutes both meaning and world.

Part II. The Deontic Logic of Obligation and the Promise of Speech

Part II shifts from modality to deontology, from the grammar of possibility to the grammar of obligation. Erasmus's defense of *liberum arbitrium* presupposes a stable deontic architecture in which, if God commands, the human agent must be able to obey. The normativity of divine law is secured through the symmetry between *ought* and *can*. Within this structure, moral responsibility presupposes deontic feasibility; grace assists but does not displace natural capacity.

Luther's *De servo arbitrio* dismantles this equilibrium at the level of logical form. The command that cannot be fulfilled is not an anomaly but the very function of the law. The *ought* reveals the impossibility of its own realization. Vestrucci formalizes this as a transformation in the inferential structure of deontic logic. Classical systems assume the axiom

$$O\,p \rightarrow \Diamond\,p$$

asserting that if one ought to do p, then it must be possible to do p. Luther, on Vestrucci's reading, replaces this with:

$$O\,p \rightarrow \neg\,\Diamond\,p$$

This states that if one ought to do *p*, then it is *not* possible to do it. The law's role is therefore not directive but diagnostic. It does not delineate achievable moral space but exposes the absence of such space altogether.

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20. *Theology as Freedom*, 11.

From within moral philosophy, this appears as a collapse of deontic coherence. From within theology, however, it becomes the disclosure of dependence. The impossibility of obedience is not an empirical limitation but a *formal one*: deontic demands terminate not in human ability but in divine action. The law is a logical limit, an operator that reveals incapacity by its very structure. Its "ought" acquires theological meaning only as the precondition for the promise that follows.

From Law to Promise

Vestrucci interprets Luther's inversion of the deontic axiom as the formal hinge on which theology turns from law to promise. Once the impossibility of the law is disclosed, the linguistic mode of theology must change. Deontic utterances—*you shall*—cede their place to declarative and performative ones—*you are*. Justification is not the consequence of satisfying a command but the effect of a promissory act. The Gospel's speech does not evaluate; it creates.

In these terms, *sola fide* becomes not merely doctrinal but grammatical. It marks a reconfiguration of the very conditions under which theological statements acquire sense. The Word that declares righteousness constitutes the state it predicates. Vestrucci's analysis captures this transition with admirable formal clarity, for the Gospel is not a moderated form of the law but a different linguistic regime altogether.

This transformation mirrors what I have elsewhere described as the birth of the *nova lingua theologiae*. Theological speech becomes "strange" because it must bear the majesty of the subject that utters it; its syntax bends beneath divine causation.[21] In Vestrucci's terms, the transition from obligation to performative declaration marks the point where language ceases to legislate and begins to generate. Freedom is no longer the autonomy of the subject but the generativity of divine discourse within the subject; it is the freedom of a language spoken by God rather than determined by human agency.

The Promise as Divine Performative

Vestrucci's analysis reaches its height in showing that the Gospel's freedom is linguistic before it is moral. Justification by faith alone is the grammar of a performative utterance whose felicity depends solely on divine authority. In his reconstruction, the statement "*You are righteous*" is a speech act that accomplishes its own truth. Yet unlike ordinary performatives, divine speech presupposes no prior convention.

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21. See Dennis Bielfeldt, "Luther on Language," *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (2011): 199–222. There I argued that Luther's *nova lingua* names neither a semantic innovation nor a syntactic anomaly but a structural transformation in which theological meaning is determined "from the side of the object." The grammar of faith is generated by God's act, not by human linguistic competence. Vestrucci's formal distinction between philosophical and theological inference (esp. *De sententia Verbum caro factum est*) effectively confirms this thesis: the conditions of predication in theology are fixed by revelation, not by prior logical norms.

Rather, *it creates the very conditions of its felicity*. Here the "majesty of the subject matter" becomes logical necessity: the infinite speaker generates the syntax through which the finite may respond.

All of this aligns directly with the pneumatological realism I am developing. In human discourse, felicity conditions are conferred externally by social or institutional norms. In theological discourse, they are generated internally by the Spirit's causality. The Spirit is the ground of the truth of divine speech. A promissory utterance is true because the Spirit makes it so. Vestrucci's deontic inversion therefore anticipates what I elsewhere call Spirit-felicity: the coincidence of linguistic authorization and ontological efficacy.

Freedom as Obedience

The logical outcome of this architecture is the paradox Luther relentlessly asserts: freedom consists in dependence. Vestrucci formulates this with technical clarity. Once theology rejects the deontic assumption that "ought implies can," it discovers that its freedom is not linguistic autonomy but subjection to revelation. Accordingly, to be free is to be bound to the Word that establishes its own grammar.

In analytic terms, theological freedom is the recognition that its inferential norms are externally grounded. The system's integrity does not arise from internal coherence but from responsiveness to an authoritative agent. The theologian's language is most free precisely when it is least self-governing. To speak truly is to be spoken.

This completes the deontic revolution. The subject's capacities no longer delineate the space of obligation, for divine speech delineates the space of meaning. The law exposes incapacity; the promise constitutes agency. What results is not a moral psychology but a theory of linguistic causation: God's Word is the ground of both theological grammar and theological truth.

At the heart of this revolution stands Luther's enduring paradox: *to obey is to be free*. Vestrucci captures this with admirable precision. Theology becomes most autonomous when it is most obedient, for only then does it participate in the divine performative that grounds it. Just as the will's bondage is its liberation, so theology's captivity to the Word is its true autonomy. To speak within the Gospel's grammar is to be spoken by God.

The analysis of deontic inversion yields a single structural conclusion: once $O\,p \rightarrow \neg \Diamond\,p$ is recognized as the logical form of the law under revelation, the grammar of obligation ceases to function as a site of moral achievement and becomes instead a site of epistemic disclosure. The law's impossibility establishes the conditions under which the promissory Word can operate as a performative creating the very states of affairs it declares. Theological freedom therefore emerges not as autonomy but as dependence: the linguistic space in which faith speaks is constituted by the divine act that precedes it. This result completes the deontic analysis and opens directly onto

the third movement of Vestrucci's argument, where the logic of promise expands into a typological account of history, time, and eschatological fulfillment.

Freedom as Obedience

The logical outcome of Vestrucci's architecture is Luther's central paradox: *freedom consists in dependence*. When theology abandons the deontic axiom that "ought implies can," it discovers that its freedom is not linguistic autonomy but responsiveness to revelation. In analytic terms, theological inference is normatively governed from outside; its integrity is grounded not in inner coherence but in its relation to an authoritative speaker. The theologian's language is most free precisely when it is most obedient, when it is spoken rather than self-generated.

This inversion marks the collapse of the classical deontic system. The law no longer functions as the site of moral agency but as the site of epistemic disclosure: it reveals incapacity rather than presupposing possibility. Within this exposed space, the promissory Word operates performatively, creating the very states of affairs it declares. Divine speech, not human ability, becomes the ground of theological grammar and theological truth.

Once the relation $O\,p \rightarrow \neg\,\lozenge\,p$ is recognized as the formal structure of the law under revelation, deontic categories cease to regulate theology. Obligation yields to promise; human possibility yields to divine agency. *Theological freedom therefore emerges as dependence upon a Word that generates its own conditions of meaning*, opening directly onto the typological horizon Vestrucci explores in the third movement of his argument.

Part III. The Typological Logic of Life and the Aesthetics of Divine Speech

From Teleology to Typology

Having dismantled the modal grammar of possibility and the deontic grammar of obligation, Vestrucci turns to a third linguistic architecture: the typological grammar that shapes theology's account of life. Classical and humanist traditions construed life teleologically, a progressive narrative in which virtue leads to reward, providence secures continuity, and moral agency explains historical coherence. Vestrucci argues that Luther breaks this narrative logic. Life is not the unfolding of inherent capacities but the arena in which divine address interrupts, reconfigures, and reconstitutes the subject. Existence is not narrated; it is spoken.

Typology, not teleology, governs this mode of life. It is not an exegetical technique for discovering symbolic correspondences but the very structure of revelation: meaning is given through inversion. Election—the elder rejected, the younger chosen—becomes the paradigmatic rule. Types anticipate their fulfillment not by similarity but by contradiction. This inversion is the grammar of grace.

The shift bears directly on theological semantics. Teleological narratives presuppose modal continuity; they presuppose a world where possibility develops toward fulfillment. Typological discourse presupposes divine causality and a world constituted by reversal. As I argued in *Luther and Metaphor*, the finite is bent into the form of the infinite without loss of identity. Vestrucci provides the formal analogue: typological reversal is the linguistic trace of divine action.

On this basis, Vestrucci sketches a "theology of life." Life is not self-interpreting but revealed; its meaning does not arise immanently but is given from without. To live by faith is to receive one's biography as a divine predicate. Human life becomes typological, for its shape is determined by the one to whom it is joined. Thus, typology is not merely a hermeneutical tool but an ontological description -- the believer is a life hidden with Christ in God – and theological language does not merely point to divine realities but participates in them. The life of faith becomes a sentence in a grammar authored by the Word.

Predestination, Aesthetics, and the Hidden God

Predestination stands at the center of this typological logic. Vestrucci captures it with striking concision: "For Luther, theology is *coram Deo abscondito*—theology before the hidden God. Divine revelation operates *sub contrario*, freeing reason from its own unconditional principles." This is not rhetorical flourish but the formal principle of typology. Predestination extends typology to its deepest horizon: revelation appears in its opposite. Judgment appears as grace and absence appears as presence. The hidden God is not a residue of metaphysical opacity but the formal condition of revelation's paradoxical grammar.

Predestination is therefore not primarily a metaphysical doctrine but a linguistic one. It expresses the manner in which divine speech addresses the creature through contradiction. The cross is the paradigmatic instance: the point at which divine action appears in its opposite and thereby determines the typological pattern of every believer's life. Yet this interpretation requires completion. The cross is not merely figural; it is causal. Typology depends upon the real presence of the act it figures. Without this ontological ground, typology risks collapsing into aesthetic inversion. However, with it, typology becomes the linguistic surface of divine participation.

This leads naturally to the aesthetic dimension of Luther's theology. For Vestrucci, the rhetorical form of *De servo arbitrio*—its hyperbole, antithesis, and paradox—is not ornament but substance. The aesthetic intensity of Luther's prose is the perceptible form of its logic: beauty is the manifestation of order within contradiction. Theology becomes aesthetic because divine speech, entering finite language, generates a distinctive form—contradictions held in unity. This parallels my own insistence that metaphor is not optional but structurally necessary. When the infinite speaks finitely, language must break, stretch, and reform. Aesthetics is therefore not an auxiliary discipline but the phenomenology of divine causality in speech.

Still, beauty alone cannot secure theology. The *nova lingua* is beautiful because it is true, and it is true because it is grounded in divine agency. Here Vestrucci's formalism and my model-theoretic realism converge, for form without ontology is empty; ontology without form is inexpressible.

Part III therefore shows that theology's final grammar is typological: it speaks the logic of divine actuality rather than the logic of human potential or obligation. Typology, however, cannot stand on its own. Without an ontological ground, reversal becomes rhetorical display rather than revelatory event. When rooted in the causative Word, typology becomes a genuine semantics of participation—the *nova lingua* as the linguistic manifestation of divine being.

At this point Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* and my model-theoretic realism converge. His formalism identifies the logical space in which revelation speaks; my realism specifies the divine act that renders such speech true. Theology is free because it participates in that act, and its language is true because it is spoken by the Word. The *nova lingua* is thus the finite resonance of divine speech; it is precise, participatory, and ontologically real.

Part IV. Evaluating the *Nova Lingua*: Between Freedom and Realism

Andrea Vestrucci's *Theology as Freedom* is among the most formally ambitious contributions to contemporary Lutheran theology. By reading *De servo arbitrio* as a metalogical treatise, he argues that Luther's text effects a threefold displacement: the modal grammar of possibility yields to paradox, the deontic grammar of obligation yields to promise, and the teleological grammar of narrative yields to typology. In each case, the shift is not rhetorical but structural. Theology, once freed from reason's natural languages, speaks within a logical space constituted by revelation itself. The achievement is unmistakable: Vestrucci restores theology's internal normativity without retreating into pre-critical metaphysics or capitulating to post-critical relativism.

Three contributions stand out.

1. Vestrucci secures theology's intellectual dignity by relocating its rationality. Reason is not discarded but converted. Modality, obligation, and teleology are neither abolished nor ignored but reinterpreted through paradox, promise, and typology. Logic becomes responsive to divine speech.
2. He interprets justification as a linguistic act. The declarative "You are righteous" functions as a divine performative whose felicity depends solely on God's authority. Grace becomes linguistic causality; the Word does what it says. Deontic reciprocity (ought → can) collapses into promissory immediacy (God declares → it is so). This formalization gives Luther's forensic insight superior conceptual clarity.
3. Vestrucci's extension into typology and aesthetic form demonstrates that the logical transformations of Parts I and II are not episodic but structural.

> Typology becomes theology's grammar of life. History is interpreted from a future already given in promise, and paradox becomes the stable form of revelation rather than a temporary rupture. The *nova lingua* is not simply a revised syntax but a reconfiguration of the logical space in which human life is understood.

Yet the very elegance of this architecture raises the question of realism. Vestrucci explains with rare clarity how theological language operates under revelation, but not how that language is true. While paradox, promise, and figure function as operators within discourse, theology also claims that divine speech effects realities outside discourse. At this juncture the pneumatological dimension becomes indispensable. The Spirit is not a rule of inversion nor a formal constant but the agent who unites illocution and ontology. Model-theoretically, one might say that the Spirit ensures that theology's assertions hold in the model constituted by God's self-communication. *Felicity*—the internal authorization of assertion—and *reference*—its adequacy to divine reality—coincide only because the Spirit bridges them. Without this mediation, theology risks becoming an elegant but self-contained construction: free, but not yet true.

This is precisely where Luther exceeds the limits of a purely formal account. The paradoxes of *De servo arbitrio* are not linguistic maneuvers but statements grounded in the incarnate Word whose divine act constitutes their referent. The *nova lingua* is free because it participates in that act, because the One who speaks it causes its truth. Seen through this pneumatological and ontological lens, Vestrucci's project becomes a summons to theology's vocation. The nova lingua is not the invention of a conceptual scheme, but the reception of a grammar given in revelation. Theology's freedom is its obedience to that grammar. To think God is to be disciplined by divine speech, and autonomy is found only in dependence. Theological speech must die to itself that it might live in the Word. Vestrucci has uncovered the theology of the Cross in its purest linguistic form. His formalism now gives this claim new structural clarity: the *nova lingua* is a mode of life before it is a mode of discourse. It is a participation in the divine act by which creaturely speech is taken up into divine intelligibility.

Viewed in this light, *Theology as Freedom* accomplishes the formal prolegomenon to a renewed theology. It shows how revelation reorganizes the logical space of human thought. Yet the project can reach completion only when the formal revolution is grounded in ontological participation. Theology's freedom is identical with its truth because both depend upon the Spirit's causality. The *nova lingua* speaks truly not because it follows a new syntax but because it is sustained by the divine being who speaks through it. In contemporary metaphysical terms, the divine act that sustains theological language functions as its truthmaker. In this union of form and reality—paradox and truth, promise and fulfillment—revelation becomes intelligible without ceasing to be divine. Theology's language is free because it is true, and it is true because it participates in the One who speaks it.

Epilogue: From Freedom to Truth—
The *Nova Lingua* and the Future of Theology

Theology as Freedom concludes with a sentence that encapsulates the whole work: "Theology's liberty lies in dependence on revelation alone." Across its pages, Vestrucci traces a threefold transformation in rationality. First, theology is freed from modality—what *may* be yields to what *is* revealed. Second, it is freed from deontic obligation—what *ought* to be gives way to what the Word declares. Third, theology is freed from teleological progression into typological participation— history becomes intelligible not as moral development but as figure and promise. Through these movements, he relocates theology from the conditions of philosophical discourse to the act of revelation itself.

Seen in this light, *Theology as Freedom* offers a form of post-critical dogmatics. It neither reinstates premodern metaphysics nor dissolves theology into linguistic pluralism. Instead, Vestrucci argues that revelation generates its own logical space: its own operators, inference rules, and conditions of felicity. In this way, he retrieves a principle Luther grasped but modern theology neglected: the logic of theology must arise from the majesty of its subject, not from the capacities of the finite mind.

This project reflects Vestrucci's broader vocation. Trained in ethics, logic, and systematic theology, he has long sought to unite formal precision with obedience to revelation. *Theology as Freedom* achieves this aim: ethical and phenomenological themes are transposed into a metalogical register where theological claims can be analyzed with rigor while remaining ordered to divine speech. What had been moral inquiry becomes a grammar of address; what had been conceptual analysis becomes formal theology.

Yet the achievement raises the unavoidable question this article has pressed: Can theology's freedom endure without ontology? If revelation functions only as a linguistic operator, theology risks becoming formally elegant but metaphysically inert. Divine speech, however, is not structure alone; it is act. Its truth depends upon its reality.

Here the pneumatological dimension is decisive. The Spirit is not a logical constant but the agent who unites language and being. In model-theoretic terms, the Spirit secures the correspondence between the theory (the internal grammar of revelation) and the model (the divine reality that renders that grammar true). Without this mediation, the *nova lingua* would float free of ontology: grace without enactment, freedom without world.

To say, therefore, that theology is freedom is to say that theology participates in the divine act of speaking. The *nova lingua* is not constructed; it is received. Its freedom is the freedom of obedience, the grammar of those addressed and constituted by God. In a theological culture tempted either toward moralism or toward aesthetic mysticism, *Theology as Freedom* recalls that theological language is accountable only to truth *spoken by God*.

In this way, Vestrucci's formalism and my model-theoretic realism are complementary: he clarifies the logical conditions under which revelation liberates language; I articulate the ontological ground that renders such liberation true. The Spirit stands between them as the bridge by which language participates in being. The future of dogmatics may well depend on holding these dimensions together: formal freedom and participatory truth.

Theology as Freedom thus points beyond itself. By articulating the formal conditions of theological discourse, it opens a path toward a pneumatological ontology of truth adequate to the revelational logic it describes. Only then will the *nova lingua* fully resound: the divine Word spoken in human language. It is true because free, and free because true.

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The Bible and Reconciliation

James Prothro's *The Bible and Reconciliation:*
Confession, Repentance, and Restoration,
A Catholic Biblical Theology of the Sacraments

Peter Beckman

The last few decades have witnessed a flourishing in the practice of biblical theology from theological perspectives that value and emphasize the truth and infallibility of Scripture. Series such as *New Studies in Biblical Theology* by InterVarsity or *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* by Crossway exemplify this trend. Biblical theology traces the unfolding of theological themes across the canon of Scripture. Biblical theology also allows the engagement of each idea in its own right and space, noting both the differences and continuity across time, as each theme develops and grows across the canon. An essential connection exists between the rigorous historical exegetical study of individual passages and the broader conclusions of systematic theology for the believer today. The strength of biblical theology derives from examinations of critical concepts in the Bible that are often absent or lacking from many systematic theologies, such as hospitality, the royal priesthood, covenant, and kingdom. Christians from Reformed and free-church traditions have excelled in writing many of these introductory books on biblical theology that are both accessible to a curious general audience and uphold a traditional view of Scripture's integrity. As a result, many preliminary books of biblical theology privilege themes that all Christians share or discuss topics meaningful to free-church Christian traditions. Sacramental Christian Churches often find that some themes important to their own traditions are not collected together in books easily engaged by a general audience. Until the last few decades, there were few accessible books of biblical theology, as opposed to dogmatic theology, written by Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox presenting accessible themes important to their own traditions. Within this field, Baker Academic has introduced a new series, *A Catholic Biblical Theology of the Sacraments*, to bring attention to some of these sacramental themes, such as marriage, baptism, priesthood, and the anointing of the sick. In addition to the excellent cradle of Roman Catholic writers, some readers will find it interesting that many of the writers in this series are either Evangelical/Protestant converts to Roman Catholicism or have been educated at evangelical institutions.

In this vein, James Prothro provides an invaluable survey of sin, repentance, and restoration throughout Scripture in his book *The Bible and Reconciliation: Confession, Repentance, and Restoration*. Prothro writes as a practicing Roman Catholic worshiper, weaving in modern applications and theological statements from time to time in his exegetical survey; the book is written by a Roman Catholic for other Roman Catholics. Nevertheless, other traditional Christians, notably Lutherans, will find much valuable material and insights in his work. While writing as a Roman Catholic, Prothro, as a former Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod pastor, expresses many themes familiar to readers shaped within the Lutheran tradition. While expounding biblical patterns, the book contains a constant emphasis on God's grace and mercy, law and gospel, salvation, repentance, and restoration. Christians accustomed to the regular disciplines of confession, repentance, the declaration of our grace and forgiveness in Christ, and the calling to a pursuit of holy living will find much value in this text.

In this book discussion I will note the biblical citations from which Protho builds his arguments. When I provide my own theological commentary after a section, citations are my own observations. At the beginning of his text, he notes that he writes utilizing the form of biblical theology expressed by authors such as Geerhardus Vos, Brevard Childs, and Pope Benedict XVI as he draws together various testimonies while also drawing together synthetically the truth expressed by many witnesses in light of the revelation of Jesus. As a work of biblical theology, the book rearticulates the images and metaphors provided by each testimony in Scripture while resisting a flattening of these images into one system (Prothro, 20-21).

Using the biblical narrative and terminology, Prothro provides a helpful summary of the consequences of sin and God's restorative acts of grace and mercy: "God's children sin in various ways, failing to live out their identity under the Father, and some choose to leave the household altogether. But God wants his children home, and he embraces them with mercy and grace when they turn back in repentance" (Prothro, 2). Prothro weaves together the trends of human straying and God's mercy across major biblical stories and groups, highlighting insights that are true in the lives of Christians today. In the stories of Adam and Cain, God regularly meets the people after they sin, providing them a chance for repentance. God's mercy stands behind His question, "where are you" (Gen 3:9), inviting the people to turn back to God in repentance and have their respective relationships healed (Prothro, 26). The stories of the Flood and Babel highlight the terrible consequences of impiety toward God on a global scale (Prothro, 32-35). Likewise, the stories of Abraham and later the children of Israel in the Exodus and Wilderness repeat the cycles of the enslavement of sin and God's mercy and deliverance. Just as the people of Israel sin immediately in the wilderness after their deliverance through the waters of the Red Sea, this typologically parallels the life of Christians who sin after baptism and are again in need of God's forgiveness (1 Cor 10:1-2) (Prothro, 46-48). While God forgives the people when they refuse to trust God and enter the Promised Land after the negative report of the spies, there nevertheless remains the conse-

quences of wandering in the wilderness through which God desires to shape the people (Num 14:20-23, 31-34) (Prothro, 52-53). The book progresses to provide surveys of grace, repentance, and reconciliation across the narrative books, wisdom books, and the prophets. Prothro's presentational strength is allowing readers to take time to examine how the people of God received forgiveness across various episodes of the Old Testament. This is particularly helpful when he notes how sin and forgiveness are explained across grand narratives and stories instead of merely thinking in individual terms, as we often do in church today (i.e. what did I do wrong this week?).

Within the narrative development, the book notes that the Babylonian Exile was a form of restorative discipline when God would purify the people through this experience prior to the coming day when their full reconciliation would occur (Isa 4:4; 48:10; Bar 2:30). Although back in the land, the people are still in spiritual exile, waiting for God to fully reconcile with His people (Jer 50:20; 2 Macc 8:29). There remains the hope of a reversal of the consequences of sin and death through a future physical resurrection of all the people (Dan 12:2; Wis 3:2-7; Isa 25:8). That will be a time of a New Covenant, which will provide the forgiveness of sin and the transformation of the hearts of the people (Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:25-57) (Prothro, 94-113). This rescue mission culminates in the Messiah Jesus who releases those captive to sin and death (John 11:14-15; 38-44; Mk 3:27; Luke 4:18). Jesus's ministry reveals an extravagant mercy toward sinners as He continually seeks out those who are lost (Matt 9:11; Luke 15:12; 19:1-10). True repentance in Jesus's ministry gets characterized by doing what Jesus calls His redeemed followers to do, bearing fruit worthy of repentance (Matt 3:8; 21:28-32) (Prothro, 114-145). For many people in the pews, a difficulty lies in knowing how the Gospels relate to the prophets or the rest of the Old Testament. Once they understand that the Old Testament stories lead to the reality of exile, they can understand the hope associated with a new Exodus and a New Covenant that will result in the restoration of the people's relationship with God. This better primes them to see how Jesus, the enactor of a New Covenant, fulfills those aspirations.

He then turns to the nuts and bolts of how believers receive this New Covenant forgiveness. This is an area where Lutherans will have much agreement despite some differences around the means of this forgiveness. When highlighting baptism as a physical means by which believers are united in Christ and thus receive forgiveness, he devotes a chapter to the role of the church's ministry in mediating post-baptismal forgiveness, which are called the keys (Matt 16:19; John 13:20; John 20:22-23). Arguing for the apostolic succession and Episcopal structure of church leadership, Jesus shares his authority with Peter, which is given to the apostles, and then Presbyters, who they ordain (Prothro, 146-165); their ministry of preaching and sacraments links to confessions, which can be provided to a Presbyter/priest (Prothro, 198-204). Given that Prothro is writing primarily for Roman Catholics, he infers that Presbyters possess a unique priestly mediating ministry for providing forgiveness.

Some readers, such as myself, may find that his development of the Levitical sacerdotal feature of elders/Presbyters goes beyond what is developed in the text while simultaneously certainly recognizing that this was claimed by some third century church fathers (i.e. Cyprian, *Ep.* 63). Like most Second Temple Jewish Synagogues, the early churches or assemblies were normally structurally led by male Presbyters/elders/bishops (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Tit 1:5-7; 1 *Clem* 44.1-5), yet this did not preclude the ministry to which Jesus called all men and women to be His disciples who proclaim His word and spread the kingdom of God (Luke 8:1-3; 10:1-12; Acts 9:36) while hearing the confessions of sin to one another (1 John 1:8-10; Jas 5:16). While certainly elders/bishops normally led churches, it is not clear that they were all ordained uniquely by the successors of Peter or that they alone could hear confessions. In certain circumstances, the congregation or fellow elders could appoint men as elders (*Did* 15; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.1; Tertullian, *Exh. cast.*, 7). The question of who ordains who is an area where Lutheran ecclesiology is eclectic, and even today, there exists differences between the Evangelical Church of Sweden, which maintains Episcopal structure, and the Association of Free Lutheran Churches, which understands ordination to come primarily from the congregation; however, in both traditions, the elder/Presbyter/pastor, while entrusted with the sacrament of confession, is not the only one who can provide confession and absolution. In my perception, eclectic Lutheran ecclesiology reflects some of the diversity that existed in church structures in the early church.

The book highlights that the goal of confession is always the restoration of the believer by God's grace. Within this vein, Prothro surveys what happens when believers reject God's grace. He provides a helpful survey of apostasy and the restoration of those in mortal sin as believers await Christ's new creation (Heb 6:4-6; Jas 5:19-20; Jude 22-23; 1 John 5:16) (Prothro, 175-176; 204-208). Although not commonly referenced, Lutherans likewise recognize mortal sins that accompany the loss of faith (Andrew Voigt, *Biblical Dogmatics* 65). For the early 20th century Lutheran professor Andrew Voigt, certain sins accompany the reality that the believer no longer believes in God; however, what separates the believer from God is the lack of faith. It would have been interesting to explore more at this point the status of those who die with unrepentant sins, given its common occurrence in the parish. Especially if you work in parish ministry, this remains a very pressing issue. The empty pews in many Lutheran and Catholic Churches at worship, as well as the nonchalant willful engagement in sin that often accompanies a lack of faith, ought to weigh heavily on the hearts of many pastors when they think of people's souls in light of eternity. I think of the words of the early 20th century Norwegian Lutheran pastor and professor J.N. Kildahl: "Many people, however, fall away from their baptismal covenant. And there are many, many such in our churches – people who have never experienced a revival, who have never been really troubled about their spiritual condition, who have never been anxious about their relation to God, and who have never experienced the power of the new life and the peace which faith brings to the soul" (*Christian Dogmatics* 285-286).

At the end of the book Prothro gives an excellent survey of sin, repentance, and growing in Christ. In contrast with the old Adam, subject to sin and death, believers are given a new birth in Christ in hope of the resurrection and incorruptibility as children of God (1 John 3:1; 1 Pet 1:3; 1:23). In contrast to condemnation and death in the first Adam, believers have justification and new life in the New Adam (Rom 5:16-17; 1 Cor 1:30, 15:22). Humans naturally live in sin, apart from God's grace, and stand as God's enemies (Rom 5:10; Jas 4:4), yet Jesus's work of justification brings reconciliation, restoring humans to friendships and love with God (Rom 5:1, 10) (Prothro, 168). The life of faith is a struggle. Even though believers are not under the dominion of sin, they still can submit themselves to it again by their choices and return to enslavement (Rom 6:12,16; Gal 4:8-9). God provides believers with his Spirit, which empowers them to fight against the influences of sin and the fleshly desires (Gal 5:17; Rom 6:12-13; 8:5-9; 13:11-14) (Prothro, 166-178). Paul's continual exhortation to fight against carnal passions and warnings against returning to enslavement assumes that believers are regularly tempted and do sin after becoming Christians. Like plants, believers grow into salvation and bear fruit (1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18) (Prothro, 192-193). Sin is not simply the breaking of arbitrary rules but the turning away from what God has made us for. Rather than hiding, the narrative of Scripture reminds us again and again that God continually acts to mercifully restore his people (Prothro, 213-214). Prothro continually emphasizes that the believer's status of holiness and transformation flow from being in Christ. It would be interesting to further delve into where he specifically sees the break between classical Lutheran understandings of a believer being holy and justified because he is in Christ, with the resulting sanctification and holy living that flows from that union, and where he understands himself to fit in the Roman Catholic tradition that has traditionally understood there to be a role of human merit in the maintenance of one's status of justification.

In this volume, Prothro highlights the centrality of grace and God's mercy throughout Scripture. This text is an excellent introductory and accessible tome of biblical theology for the curious student. Portions of this book could easily be adapted for use in a Sunday School or Bible study, serving as a helpful aid for Christians to piece together the overarching themes of reconciliation throughout Scripture. Of particular strength is his introduction to reconciliation across the Old Testament. While Lutherans and other evangelicals will come to different conclusions about a few topics, the vast majority of the book is a concise and valuable survey of the biblical material for all Christians.

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