

# Promissio

*A Journal of Confessing Theology*

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Volume 1, Number 2 • Spring 2026

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## *Life-Long Christian Learning*

“And let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined; they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored; and, as the gospel itself points out, they are the basket in which are kept these loaves and fishes and fragments. If through our neglect we let the languages go (which God forbid!), we shall not only lose the gospel, but the time will come when we shall be ... unable to speak or write in correct German or Latin, and have well-nigh lost ... natural reason to boot” – Luther (LW 45:360).

*published by the faculty of the Christ School of Theology  
for the Institute of Lutheran Theology*

# Promissio

*A Journal of Confessing Theology*

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.

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Online ISSN: 3070-5096

Print ISSN: 3070-5088

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# Life-Long Christian Learning

Paul R. Hinlicky

**ABSTRACT:** This editorial essay argues several interlocking theses: most broadly an historical thesis that an ideology of this-world-only secularism dethroned the antecedent ideology of Christendom (the Christian people under Pope and Emperor) but is currently in steep decline, subverted by postmodern ideologies of nihilism creating a cultural vacuum. This broad thesis is then integrated with a theological thesis that congregational life is basic to Christian vitality and that congregational life is a comprehensive inculturation by the Holy Spirit into the reign with the crucified, risen and ascended Lord Jesus by learning the mind of Christ. The decline of congregational vitality in this light is diagnosed as a failure of Christian pedagogy. The remedy of it, it is finally argued, is lifelong Christian learning of the Reformation vision of holy secularity, grounded in the gracious justification of the ungodly. Hence: a renewed catechesis to know the mind of Christ given to us working a new evangelization of faith active in love in hope against hope for a perilous time.

## Christianity and Congregational Life

According to Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the Large Catechism, the Spirit's gift of congregational life belongs essentially among the benefits of the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit's community on earth which, as a mother, bears into being every believer through the proclamation of the gospel. Christianity at its base is such congregational life, new life of a new society animated by the Holy Spirit at work uniting believers to Christ by conformation to his death and resurrection. How are we to understand today these extraordinary claims?

Congregational life is a dynamic culture formed ever anew by the gospel as it intersects with the surrounding human cultures of this present age that is passing away. Culture is the primary field of Christian congregational life. Formation of culture is the work of education, the pedagogy that at its best conducts youth

into adult responsibility; sustains adults in this responsibility through the changes, challenges, and chances of life; and prepares each person to face the end of life with dignity and hope. Every Sunday school session, every confirmation class, indeed every sermon, every liturgy, every choir rehearsal and hymn selection, every counseling session, every council or committee meeting, every adult forum, and every Bible study are occasions for Christian pedagogy in the cultivation of Christian congregational life.

The purpose of such instruction is to make and ever remake a caring community of Christ's people, confessing in word and deed the Lord Jesus to the glory of God and for the good of neighbors. That is why Luther counted his catechisms as chief contributions of his enduring theological legacy, modeled on the biblical book of Deuteronomy, to equip every new generation for faithful life amid the allures of Canaan. Similarly, amid the present-day ruins of Christendom, where tottering but still dominant secularism distracts us one and all with its glittering allures, a gaping spiritual vacuum grows exponentially, opening the jaws of nihilism. It will be checked either by *lifelong* Christian catechesis enabling congregational renewal at the heart of our wider, often indifferent, and sometimes hostile Western culture. Or, perilously, it will be filled by seven returning demons worse than the one of ecclesiastical triumphalism expelled with the demise of Christendom's for its sordid reliance on political patronage to underwrite religious hegemony. The urgent update to meet this unprecedented situation of post-Christendom congregational life is to institute *lifelong* Christian learning that will be equal to rapid and unpredictable change.

The pastoral vocation consists in the concrete responsibility to deliver the promise of God in Jesus Christ by sermon and sacrament for the assembly of the baptized and, in just this way, to shepherd the flock of God. The cultivation of this vocational self-understanding of the pastor, this particular theological *subjectivity* (*fides qua creditur*, "the faith by which one believes") is essential to the educational mission of the Institute of Lutheran Theology and its journal *Promissio*. Now, more than ever, amid the ruins of Christendom, to be a pastor is to embrace a person-shaping calling within the broader baptismal call of all Christians where faith in the particular call of God to gospel-pastoring marks the difference between a hireling and a true and faithful servant of the Good Shepherd.

Something matching this must also be said about membership in the congregation of Christ, as the rite of confirmation once indicated. Such publicly affirmed membership also acknowledges a person-shaping calling in baptism faithfully to receive by the gift of the Spirit the promising word of God delivered in word and sacrament in self-entrusting faith and, so informed and enabled, to rise up into one's unique contribution to the community of faith and from the community of faith to the neighborhood. The pastor uniquely ministers *to* the word and sacraments to see that these are proclaimed and enacted in accord with the gospel of God. Each member of the body of Christ uniquely ministers *from* word and sacrament to the

flourishing of this unlikely social reality: the community of God-graced *disciples*—pastor and people together—who, as befits disciples, are ever *learning* what they do *not already know* so that each and all love one another as Jesus has loved them. In this way manifesting the beloved community of God, outsiders and newcomers know that here the Christian people are to be found into whom the Holy Spirit is also drawing them.

The bitter joke is told of the country parson whose church steeple had become infested with bats. Desperate for a solution, he asked at the monthly luncheon gathering of the village clergy if any had an idea. A hard-shell but allegedly “nondenominational” pastor spoke up immediately and said that he would come fix it. He rigged booby-traps to make sound and smoke explosions and triggered the device in the evening as the bats were coming to roost. It worked for a day or two, but the bats returned to the now damaged steeple. At the next monthly meeting, the parson asked again for help. The gentle Unitarian minister spoke up and said that she would come fix it. She rigged up a sound system to play “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” to the Beethoven tune. Sure enough, at the start of the music, the bats retreated, only to return again in a few days. Once more, the parson asked for help, and this time the Lutheran pastor spoke up: “I can fix it for sure.” That evening he ascended to the steeple and waited for the bats to arrive and then spoke some words from a book. The bats then flew out of the steeple and never returned. After some months the parson asked the Lutheran pastor how he accomplished what the others had failed to do. The Lutheran pastor replied, “Oh, it was easy. I just confirmed them.”

Bitter, indeed. What then has gone wrong? Why has congregational life declined? Indeed, why are so many congregations characterized by strife and dysfunction? Why do so many pastors burn out, or beaten up hunker down in abject passivity? Why do so many members turn away and drop out? Why are one and all baffled, paralyzed, or fanaticized by cultural change? Of course, in any given case there may be many factors involved in coming to a diagnosis of the sick and sorry state of any particular Christian community in the contemporary West. Indeed, a central frustration in contemporary congregational life is the difficulty of prospering what is called in secular terminology a “voluntary organization,” for a pastor’s livelihood depends on its prosperity. Financial support of the congregation should be a joyful declaration of Christian freedom, i.e. spiritual independence from the corrupt allures and harsh disciplines of the larger economic culture. Embarrassment from candid discussion of sordid money matters by parishioners so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good inhibits a culture of holy secularity in a congregation’s financial life. The apparent mission of these heavenly minded is to keep the pastor poor and humble and, thusly, under control. The consequent material distress forces pastors to attend to the voluntary organization like a glad-handing, fundraising CEO when the pastor ought rather to be at work inculcating the mind of Christ in the community. Christ did not come as a king to be served but as a priest to serve, giving himself for the sake of others. This baptismal mentality, pastor and people together,

is holy secularity in Christian congregational life. It is not ideological secularism but the sanctification of life in this passing age. But we are all too ignorant of this basic teaching of the Lutheran Reformation.

Thus, a fundamental source of decline afflicting all under the conditions of modern secularism is the failure to prioritize lifelong Christian learning by which disciples are taught to follow Christ in sanctifying the secular without being absorbed into secularism. Otherwise, we experience pastors who have no clear idea of their calling to feed the sheep with the Bread of Heaven and also a laity that doesn't know the difference between being a member of Christ and belonging to a club. Wandering in the dark or at cross purposes, neither pastor nor people are enabled to cooperate intelligently in the gospel mission of making disciples of all peoples. Un-discipled disciples little know how to be little Christs to the neighbor in need on the job or in school, in the family, the workplace or the civic forum, let alone within the congregation. Abysmally ignorant of such Christian word-and-deed *savoir faire*, evangelism becomes the demand that the pastor recruit more dues-paying members. Works of mercy and social ministries become pretexts for partisan political organizing aimed at acquiring secular clout. Congregational life declines into securing a family chapel in the control of major donors.

Inevitably, under the mindset of Western secularism, everything, including the sacred, becomes a commodity to be bought and sold just as business metrics are deployed to assess threats and opportunities. In the spiritual vacuum of secularism, a virtual omniscience is ascribed to marketplace allocation and this calculation spills over from needful and efficient processing for the exchange of temporal goods and services to become an operative deity, consulted like an oracle to chart direction in religion-business stratagems predicated upon meeting perceived needs as defined under dominant secularism. Can Christianity survive a mentality in which the customer is always right? Not according to the gospel narrative in which customers chanted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" In religion thusly advertised as a business seeking market niche, pastors cannot but be hirelings, and church vitality cannot otherwise be measured than by the metrics of social status and sundry other perks of private club membership. But what this secularist religiosity in any case produces bears little resemblance to the community of disciples anticipating the beloved community of God.

What is missing and at the root of this debilitating confusion today about the nature and mission of Christianity in congregational life is the *sine qua non* of discipleship: lifelong catechesis just as Luther required, commenting that in all the changes and challenges of life, no one ever fully masters the theological essentials of God's commandments, the creedal summary of the gospel telling what God has done and continues to do for us, the Lord's Prayer as evangelical instruction in our common Christian life lived conscientiously before God in responsibility for the little piece of his creation given to our interim care, and the sacraments that ever freshly initiate new life and so sustain the life together

of the improbable society on this earth of mutual love in Christ spilling out into a deluded but hurting world.

## Holy Secularity

The independent and committed educational mission of the Institute of Lutheran Theology arose because of the urgent need amid these ruins for the postmodern reconstruction of *objectivity* (*fides quae creditur*, “the faith which is believed”). With Dr. Dennis Bielfeldt and Dr. Mickey Mattox, this editor, back in 2010, co-authored a book titled *The Substance of the Faith*, urging the recovery of doctrinal objectivity in theology in the tradition of Luther. Renewed and knowing focus on the object or “substance” of faith—namely, the peculiar object who is the living subject Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever—emerged from this study to indicate how congregational life may be revitalized as the Holy Spirit pleases. Pastors and people continuously educated this way know that they are not vicars of an absent Christ but servants of the present One who comes into the world to justify the *ungodly*, i.e. the hopelessly *secularized*, making Himself their redemption and sanctification by the Pauline “word of the cross.” The saving cross of the incarnate Son, the Messiah of Israel, thusly initiates the real event of *holy secularity*, as theological mentors like William Lazareth and Gustav Wingren characterized Christ’s earthly body as present and at work in human culture.

One might well tease the Reformation theological program of *holy secularity*, for today, out of the 28th article of the Augsburg Confession, a vision fatefully obscured if not aborted by the vicissitudes of the subsequent wars of religion that were only settled by the initial secularization of religion under political patronage (*cuius regio eius religio*: whoever the ruler, his the religion). This new post-Reformation Babylonian Captivity, not the Reformation doctrine of holy secularity, is the source of the decline of Christianity under the ideological secularism that emerged in the West from the time of the European Enlightenment onward. But holy secularity in the true sense consists in the lifelong learning of what does not occur to us naturally, namely, the Holy Spirit’s ever new correlation of theological subjectivity with the object of faith and to create in lost and dying sinners a justifying faith in Christ alone operative in new life led by the Spirit in the beloved community of God. Indeed, such dying to the old self and arising to the mind of Christ is *union with Christ* already now in the midst of the still unredeemed creation. Thus, united with Christ, each Christian is a living instantiation of holy secularity!

Luther explained the union between the subject and object of faith this way: “First, what one should believe, that is, the *objectum fidei*, that is, the work or thing in which one believes or to which one is to adhere. Secondly, the faith itself, or the use which one should properly make of that in which he believes. The first lives outside the heart and is presented to our eyes externally, namely, the sacrament itself, concerning which we believe that Christ’s body and blood

are truly present in the bread and wine. The second is internal, within the heart, and cannot be externalized. It consists in the attitude which the heart should have toward the external sacrament. . . . Up to now I have not preached very much about the first part, but have treated only the second, which is also the best part. But because the first part is now being assailed by man, and the preachers, even those who are considered the best, are splitting up into factions over the matter. . . . the times demand that I say something on this subject also” (LW 36:335; WA 19 482:25–483:19). As such, confident of union with Christ, Luther went to work to learn and to educate as a theological subject employing the best secular tools of scholarship in the left-hand kingdom task. Just so, lucid apprehension for teaching the faith in its cruciform objectivity was attained. This exercise in holy secularity constituted his work as a theologian, and it represents a model for us in a transformed culture where the supposedly Holy Roman Empire of Luther’s time has been replaced by the secularized West.

In the first part of his career, friar Martin had been a pastoral instructor in the university (his students were predominantly fellow monks) and a pastor-preacher at St. Mary’s, the town church in Wittenberg. In the second half of his career, the biblical scholar Luther became a doctrinal theologian to meet the pressing problem of subjectivity losing its object and so going astray into “enthusiasm.” Centuries later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer allied with Herman Sasse in 1933 Germany to compose the initial draft of the abortive Bethel Confession (a prescient diagnosis of a lost church a year before the appearance of the Barmen Declaration) to expose and oppose the enthusiastic error of the so-called “German Christians” who saw in the rise of Hitler a new thing being done by the Holy Spirit—how timely this precedent is when the ostensibly Christian influencer Nick Fuentes gains traction! At Barmen, heirs of Luther confessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ against the German Christians’ *Führerprinzip* ascribing Lordship to Adolf Hitler. In these cases, the subjectivity of faith lost its essential correlation with Christ and His crucifixion, the object of faith. The journal, *Promissio*, in the trajectory of these two giants, Luther and Bonhoeffer, undertakes an urgent mission today in probing the issues involved for renewed theological education where renewal entails lifelong learning as the key to the renewed vitality of Christianity in congregational life.

In today’s secularism, we experience an avalanche of information overwhelming us via mass social and AI-generated media, provoking the Christianly fatal but easy and tempting resort to propaganda to make sense of it all, indeed, to participate meaningfully in the dominant culture of secularism. Yet, as the French Protestant theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul pointed out more than 60 years ago, succumbing to propaganda consumption and its regurgitation as the de facto alternative to lifelong Christian learning more powerfully deChristianizes both pastor and people than does any overt and malicious propaganda attacking the faith.

Indeed, resorting to propaganda even in supposed defense of the faith is the unholy secularization of ministry and congregational life, the profound if subtle subversion of life together in Christ. Resorting to propaganda confuses proselytism with evangelism; it lays another foundation in some sectarian party line, piggybacking on some partisan faction to manufacture the groupthink of a religious business franchise rather than the vulnerable confession before the world of Christ and his cross as sole foundation—a confession that today will cut across increasingly meaningless denominational lines even as it renders pretentious politics as usual bit players in the cosmic contest of the God of the gospel against powers and principalities usurped by spiritual forces of wickedness in high places. But hitching the wagon to some secular faction and its propaganda replaces common confession even as the sense of common confession to bind together across otherwise powerful worldly divisions is lost upon such secularized thinking. How many pastors today are more certain of and, indeed, more interested in their politics than they are of Christian theology? If we concur with Luther that Christian theology should be catechetical instruction in the objectivity of the faith, lifelong theological education is the healthy way into the Holy Spirit's certainty of faith, i.e. theological subjectivity, that rests in Jesus Christ. Catechesis and the community of deliberation that it enables is as well the politically savvy way through the endemic and debilitating confusions of a total system of propaganda that is penetrating but also perverting congregational life under secularism today.

### Theological Subjectivity: A Pastoral Testimony

Permit me to describe some credentials I bear as a theological subject for writing this editorial even at the risk of sounding like a Pauline fool who boasts of his revelations. When I was a young pastor, I took a call to a hurting and diminished congregation in a poor rural area. Nowadays, a pastor would too often have used such a call as a steppingstone to something better, leaving behind an even more depleted congregation waiting for its property to be sold off to the benefit of others anticipating a monetary largess from its demise. But I wanted to see if my kind of Lutheran theology put into practice would, by the grace of God, revitalize congregational life, even under challenging circumstances. At the heart of my new call (which included a tent making element as a chaplain in the United States Naval Reserve), I undertook a comprehensive ministry of education, both instantiating and instructing congregational life as the community of disciples anticipating the promised victory of the beloved community of God.

Unhappy with the canned Sunday school programs we were getting, I recruited Sunday school teachers to meet monthly for my instruction in the upcoming Sunday gospel lessons wherein they would teach the children and then brainstorm effective pedagogical strategies. During the Sunday school hour before the main service, I would teach the Scripture lessons of the day for those willing to be taught in advance

of the sermon. Children's sermons were simplified to provide memorization with succinct explanation of a Bible verse selected from the Sunday Scripture lessons. As the congregation had a raft of people on the books but no longer participating, I committed to visiting each and every one within the first year to teach what the church was really about and invite renewed participation. Consequently, I learned just how poorly catechized so many had been and, consequently, what strange ideas and expectations they had of Christian life in the congregation: stewardship had never been taught and the congregation supported itself through fundraising activities that exhausted depleted volunteers. How struck I was when hearing that "I don't need the church. I already know what I need to get into heaven" (recall the bitter joke above)!

Discovering so many such folks on the margin, I recruited what we called "lay home visitors" to be catechetical evangelists for the congregation. They went through careful training before they went out—often in a proper mood of fear and trembling—but prayerfully they bravely went! Their task was to listen and in response to offer in vulnerable mode only their human testimony as one beggar telling another beggar where she has found bread. A pastoral visit was offered to every newcomer who passed through the church doors on Sunday, and these were followed up with a lay visitation with the mission to teach what the church is about rather than to proselytize or otherwise motivate participation by heaping guilt upon the lapsed. Eventually, this visitation program morphed into a training program for lay deacons in collaboration with other congregations experiencing the double plight of the clergy shortage and inadequate denominational support for struggling congregations. On the home front, we had year-long Bible studies, rotating on weeknights through a series of member-host's homes, where amid prayers and hymns I had the congregation learn the Torah of Israel, i.e. the great books of Moses in the Old Testament, since the Hebrew Bible and not Platonic philosophy is the true preparation of the gospel. In my preaching, I was always careful to teach and explain to enrich the mind as well as to voice the promises to feed hungry saints. I also began to publish theological opinion pieces in the local newspaper and, after some years of such ministry, undertook the editorship of a theological journal. The congregation was pleased, even proud, to support their pastor at work in the public as a theologian of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for this was an extension of its ministry to the wider church and world.

All of this happened because what I had primarily done as a pastor was to educate with the rich resources we have in Scripture and the Reformation Confession and, thusly, to put into practice the holy secularity interpretation of the doctrine of vocation, the priesthood of all believers, to inform and activate discipleship as a lifelong task of learning together the Christian life. When I left after almost eight years of such ministry, congregational renewal had been granted. I conclude this testimony again as a Pauline fool asking the reader to imitate me as I have imitated Bonhoeffer and Luther in knowing *the mind of Christ* as the subject-object key to revitalized congregational life.

I do not present this testimony, then, as a literal prescription (Latin: *imitatio carnis*) but as illuminating a mentality (*imitatio mentis*) to show how a pastoral ministry focused on lifelong Christian learning supplies what is lacking for congregational renewal. Not only do disciples want and enjoy learning from the pastor who teaches, the teaching enables them to become intelligent cooperators in the work of the gospel. And, as every teacher knows, the study involved in preparing to teach is itself renewal and growth in pastoral ministry, an essential but particular vocational exercise in lifelong Christian learning.

I once heard a liberal pastor say that he stayed away from teaching the Bible because deep exposure to it would be disillusioning, stupidly revealing that he kept the congregation going on the basis of undisturbed illusions and unwittingly showing as well how little he understood the prophetic critique of the religion business for the sake of kingdom business that occurred in the Lutheran Reformation, not to mention the cleansing of the temple by Jesus! In any case, I couldn't be afraid of the inevitable challenges, even trauma, that people experienced when teaching the gospel from scripture as informed by the best scholarship available confronted the potpourri of confused theologies in their heads absorbed from the surrounding culture of decaying Christendom, whether of fundamentalist-reactionary or of secularist-progressive inspiration. Admittedly, negotiating such potential minefields is a missiological art and acquired skill in the historically unprecedented situation of Western post-Christendom now evolved into regnant if tottering secularism. It is an art to tread through minefields that must be learned practically even as it presupposes a considerable investment on the part of a teaching pastor in ongoing theological study. But the hard work, if not drudgery of study, can be invigorated in and after the classroom by the exchange of experience with sisters and brothers in the ministry of the gospel. Missiological expertise in third order theology for congregational leadership is the pastor's goal in lifelong Christian learning.

If pastors have to assert formally their authority by citing an M.Div. degree, they surely have already lost it. Pulling academic rank and professional expertise on secularist grounds is not the way to establish pastoral authority in the community of disciples. Spiritual authority is practically gained by displaying the learning and exercising the wisdom of the generous orthodoxy (universal, not limited atonement in Christ alone!) of classical Lutheranism as this is acquired through theological study. The pastor's lifelong Christian learning is embodied in winsome care of souls and sage counsel of the community. Such a pastor can cultivate curiosity and entertain serious questions, even objections to the faith, without sweet talking easy answers in bromides of pious poppycock, let alone in ostentatious displays of learned esoterica. Such honest exhibition of the intellectual humility that comes from deep, curious, never satisfied, and continuous learning displays common human solidarity before the ultimate mystery of God. Such learned ignorance, such knowing and open acknowledgment of what one does not know in light of what is given for us to know in Christ crucified, is what rightly elicits congregational confidence in

theologically educated clergy. Such education enables the practice of servant leadership, which in turn inspires active discipleship; as in the apostle Paul, the pastor follows Christ and summons the people to follow him. For one and all, pastor and people, discipleship never ends: learning our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in daily *metanoia* is a lifelong task extending into eternity. *Metanoia* literally means “change of mind,” which happens by learning *the mind of Christ!*

Since that ministry now almost 40 years ago, the cultural situation of our churches has only worsened. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer acutely diagnosed in the darkest hours of the 20th century, the Western polity of the “Christian people” under the alliance of throne and altar has dissolved into its component parts, namely, the body of Christ and the secular regime. That dissolution marks the end of Christendom, a utopian dream for Christian empire in the West to check Byzantium and expanding Islam in force ever since Charlemagne was coronated by the Pope to preside over a new and would-be “holy” Roman Empire. Nevertheless, since Bonhoeffer’s time and in spite of his witness to the contrary, much ink has been spilled, wittingly or not, on restorationist attempts. Attempts to regain a supposed former glory are undertaken in one direction or the other on the spectrum between theological accommodation to the secular regime among theological liberals and indiscriminate ideological resistance to “secularism” among theological conservatives up to and including the aspiration to restore the so-called medieval synthesis.

Such attempts to regain former privileges do not remedy our plight. As the Institute of Lutheran Theology itself exemplifies, we must learn to stand on our own two feet, which are the gospel and the Scriptures as enabled for understanding by the ecumenical Creeds and the vital contemporary work of living theology in the tradition of Luther. Such standing in turn necessitates some serious learning from serious scholarship. The wholesome remedy to the decline of Christian congregational life is neither cultural warfare nor political patronage but lifelong Christian learning. This is so because the profound problem troubling our declining churches is the absence of the mind of Christ among us. This absence, already in the glory days of Christendom past, was the real root of its theological rot and final collapse after the dreadful 20th century of Hitler, Hiroshima, and Stalin—faith-wrecking catastrophes all occurring on the soil of allegedly Christian civilization.

### Learning the Mind of Christ for Holy Secularity

The only society that the adjective Christian can properly modify is the *ecclesia*, which exists in the world as the harbinger of the age to come, the earthly body whose head, i.e. mind, is Christ. *Ecclesia* exists truly just because and only because it is given as the mind of Christ. Possessing this treasure is all and only what distinguishes it from the other societies of this age. By contrast, “secularism” is a post-Christendom worldview/ideology claiming as truth this present age only; the secularist ideology was invented and knowingly weaponized against

the “opium of the people,” “going to heaven when you die,” the pie-in-the-sky in the sweet-by-and-by of Christendom’s caricature of biblical eschatology. As such, secularism thinks itself to be an active repudiation of Christian hope for the redemption and rectification of the fallen and oppressed creation even when it has forgotten this ideological origin. This mentality is pervasive today; it is the very air we breathe culturally and, as such, infiltrates both accommodation and resistance, or even sovereign indifference to the blandishments, pomp, and prestige of contemporary Western culture.

Thus secularism, be it carefully noted, is not *simply* apostasy. As mentioned, we still experience believers who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Secularism’s critique of otherworldly evasion of this worldly responsibility is valid in important respects and indeed an essential ingredient of Reformation theology. Nevertheless, in theological perspective, it is an ideology that has fallen into literal hopelessness as we see in gathering outbreaks of nihilistic “tear-it-all-down” violence erupting today. Secularism is in an advanced state of decay because it grasps neither how costly nor how needful the sanctifying redemption and rectification of the sinful and oppressed creation must be. Its optimistic illusions about human wisdom, power, and moral goodness to do what God allegedly has failed to do for creation in any case are crashing against the hard rocks of sin, death, and the power of the devil, realities that do not go away just because we refuse to talk about them. The real issue is not secularism versus Christendom’s otherworldly utopia but how to sanctify the profaned creation in creative amplifications of the gracious justification of the ungodly in Christ the crucified.

The Reformation turn of discipleship from the monastery to meeting the needs of our hurting world for healing and forgiveness in this present age is faithfulness in following Jesus, not apostasy from him. Jesus leads disciples into the workaday world of Galilee to heal and to forgive and, accordingly, into the kingdom-business confrontation with the religion business moneychangers in Jerusalem. It is crucial for us to understand theologically that contemporary secularism is the distorted descendent of the Reformation’s doctrine of holy secularity, i.e. the affirmation of the vocations of the baptized in this time upon this earth whereby the neighbor in need is served the love of God in word and deed, thereby inviting into the beloved community of God. Here and now, God’s kingdom comes on earth as in heaven as his will is done, thusly sanctifying profaned spaces, as daily bread is provided and mutual forgiveness is realized and sustained. Here, the devil is driven back on the field of the groaning creation and times of trial are endured in persevering faith until in public fullness the kingdom, the power, and the glory are God’s alone.

The Reformation doctrine of baptismal vocation was articulated against papist notions of monastic vows undertaking a superior religious life achieved by “self-chosen” practices of self-denial consisting in separation from mundane concerns, as if such evasion of the common life of bodily labor on the earth were the “mind of

Christ.” As Luther knew, however, baptismal vocation undertaken in following Christ deeply into the unredeemed world of this present age to care and to serve would entail bearing many crosses. Holy secularity is, he emphasized, nothing other than the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it can *only* be the Spirit’s sanctifying work in that such faith in the divine value of secular works of mercy and justice is needed to sustain disciples amid the manifold adversities of sin and death and the devil still raging against them. The ultimate and enabling sanction of holy secularity, e.g. to invite those who cannot repay into our dinner parties, therefore, was faith in resurrection to the eternal banquet promised in Christ. Indeed, this hopeful faith and persevering faithfulness in the present temporal kingdom, i.e. in this secular age, is *the mind of Christ* that believers are given to have in them.

Tragically, however, the European wars of religion after the Reformation grew so destructive and disillusioning that the Christian hope, instead of being the assurance that our present day and local labor in the Lord is not in vain, became the target of incipient secularists who, as mentioned, attacked it as Marx’s “opium of the people.” In this sense, it is not incorrect to say, “we [Western secularists!] are all Marxists now,” yes, even we who are *capitalist* opponents of Marxism! Nothing seems less plausible to us and less desirable than betting this life on a vague and dubious promise of postmortem, albeit ghostly, survival. As Kant bitterly pointed out, even traditional or “conservative” pastors who preach present denial for heavenly reward are first in line to receive scientific medical treatment in desperate efforts to prolong secular life and so delay the joys of heaven, no matter what the cost to loved ones or society. Sanctified greed is not holy secularity! What is missing in us is cultivation of *the mind of Christ* to entrust our truly finite selves, ultimately in true death, to the resurrection promises of the living God. What else could be the discipleship lifestyle of those who have been invited by pure gift alone to the everlasting banquet of God, the very end for which God created the world?

Theological education in the epoch of secularism has been torn into pieces under the pressures of these confused and conflicting dynamics, precisely when the need for lifelong Christian learning is more urgent than ever since the time of the patristic church. In those days, the difference between the body of Christ and the secular regime as distinct modalities of divine governance of the wayward creation was unmistakably clear and also theologically understood. On the eve of baptism, the pastor-bishops gave “catechetical lectures” expositing and explaining the new culture of congregational life the baptismal candidates were about to undertake. Here, the biblical texts in Romans 13 and Revelation 13 vividly portrayed a range of “Christ and Caesar” possibilities ranging from respectful cooperation to open hostility. The difference between Romans 13 and Revelation 13, to be sure, can mislead us into thinking that they contradict each other when in fact, theologically, they share the gospel insight that the secular regime is a *temporal* order of *coercion*, which, as such, can serve God’s emergency governance of a fallen, not yet redeemed creation. But the sword cannot analogize the promised peace of the gospel’s God.

By contrast with the secular regime, in the community of Christ no one lords over another; faith is free and willing or it is not faith at all, and teaching is not propagandistic indoctrination but persuasion of the Holy Spirit by teaching and learning the mind of Christ. The secular regime, then, is acknowledged as an emergency order instituted by God to keep the fallen creation from spiraling into anarchic violence until the ascended Lord Christ has subdued every enemy of God and humanity. God grants the power of the sword to keep tolerable peace in rough justice, and believers are conscience bound to respect this institution of God by civil obedience. Precisely so, however, the secular regime, with its monopoly on the means of violence, can also be demonized, setting itself up as a terror on the earth in violation of its divine institution to keep peace by rough justice. Just as believers conscientiously obey the institution of God in submitting to secular government, they may conscientiously resist when a particular regime violates its divine institution. It is better then to obey God than man.

Theologically educated Christians can and must be on watch and alert to discern the difference between conscientious obedience to the divine institution in secular government and the possibility of conscientious disobedience when that divine institution is manifestly violated. With the same diligence, however, they are on watch to see that the earthly body of believers is and remains under the Headship of Jesus, as they are conscientiously bound to disobey false prophets and pseudo-messiahs if and when this normative arrangement of the mind of Christ to his earthly body is violated. For this, too, they have *the mind of Christ*, knowing to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

### Theology for Lifelong Christian Learning

Indeed, this distinction also explains the ancillary recourse in Christian theology to secular wisdom, the classical "love of wisdom" that is philosophy with its methodical search for truth in critical thinking. The presence of wisdom literature in the canonical Scriptures is biblical warrant enough for recognizing the discipline of theology as intellectual work flowing out of the universal mandate of creation for human dominion in the image of God. For this reason, academic credentialing is and should be a prerequisite for the church's ordained service to word and sacrament. *Knowing* the controversial *mind of Christ* is the reason why theology adopts a scholarly method practicing the holy secularity that it preaches, for scholarly method is a prophylactic against propagandizing the gospel and turning evangelism into proselytism by confusing our secularized minds with the mind of Christ.

In other words, if God rejects the wisdom of this world, how much more does God reject its folly! Theologians beginning with the apostle Paul hastened to appropriate the scholarly methods of the learned Greeks to articulate with precision the faith that is believed, a need that daily increased as the gospel advanced

into new languages, cultures, and learning. In the tradition of Luther, theological education formally depends on the study of humanity (*studia humanitatis*: grammar and the languages, logic, rhetoric, history, mathematics, music and cosmology). Lutheran theology has always been coupled with the vocation of the researcher and educator as well as on the scholarly model of those Renaissance humanists returning to the sources, Luther and Melancthon. (Renaissance “humanism” is *not* the incipient philosophy of secularism but a literary hermeneutic requiring that texts be understood in their original contexts; thus, its motto was *ad fontes*, “to the sources,” to seek the original sense of authoritative texts).

Consequently, these theologians argued chiefly by way of exposition, the so-called “deep reading” of authoritative texts, but also of texts in contemporary controversy, by which the points relevant for the case being made are pushed to the surface. They did theology by constructing arguments in this hermeneutical fashion to demonstrate any particular thesis concerning the knowledge of God. The credibility of this method, of course, depends on fair, even generous interpretations of source-texts, especially when critique is being executed. This intellectual skill in critical thinking and hermeneutical art is what academic theology inculcates. Academic theology, moreover, does not evade difficulties but embraces them as opportunities for a deeper knowledge of God than hitherto known, even as orthodoxy is the Holy Spirit’s work in progress. A premature resort to apologetics under these circumstances subverts this forward movement in theology (as above, in nostalgic hankering after the “medieval synthesis”). It fails to listen for the truth in critiques of, even attacks on, Christianity and thusly fails further to attend to such discomfiting truths better than hostile critics do. It fails in lifelong learning and substitutes hasty polemic for enlightening and healing insight. Good theology at its best faces difficulties and does not sweep them under the rug (where they only fester like a neurosis producing undiagnosed dysfunction). Certainly, on a case-by-case basis, an ad hoc apologetics that soberly corrects the record against hostile anti-Christian propaganda is a considered work of theology, yet this is anything but a nervous and hasty dive into counter-propaganda broadsides.

So, if one is looking for a fast and easy take on a case being made in Luther’s kind of theological rationality, one impatiently deprives oneself of the deliberative process of scholarly theology that luxuriates in deep dialogue with competent interlocutors parsing the common source of canonical Scripture in order to exposit *the mind of Christ*, in the process contending against abuses, misreadings, and outright error. The perhaps jarring juxtaposition that will occur in this journal of evidence and argument from the varying modern disciplines of biblical studies, history of doctrine, philosophy, and contemporary theology is quite deliberate. Overcoming the siloing of these disciplines instituted at the turn of the 18th century in the quixotic effort to have Christian theology recognized as a modern science in the secularist university is fundamental to the critical retrieval of doctrinal theology from the tradition of Luther. Christian doctrinal theology is precisely what is being exiled from the secularist “humanities” today. In any case, its natural habitat is the

confessing church of the Lord Jesus in mission to this world where it is a premier instance and exercise in Reformation holy secularity. Formally then, our theology exemplifies critical thinking and articulates in learned language and irenic argument, which are, ironically, the intellectual virtues increasingly absent in the debased cancel culture of academic secularism.

Substantively, however, theology is freedom, as our colleague Andrea Vestrucci urges. Bound to our liberating Lord, we are freed thinkers. Jesus means freedom—freedom to love, to be sure, but the love of God pleasers, not people pleasers. In this age of totalizing propaganda, we stand out in the freedom for which Christ has set us free. We surrender neither intelligence nor conscience to any other lord than Jesus. Lifelong Christian education is the fortification freed thinkers need to persevere in this freedom for which we have been set free. Competing, aggressive narratives, worldviews, and party lines fill the spiritual vacuum created by secularism's refusal of the gospel hope for the redemption of our bodies in the resurrection, the baby tossed out with the dirty bathwater of Christendom. In rejecting *holy* secularity in anticipation of the redemption of our *bodies*, this secularist refusal of Christian hope *profanes* creation by regarding it as beyond need of redemption, as if to set in stone its fall into ungodliness as a new normal. From the seed sown, it reaps the creeping harvest of nihilist despair all around us under the masks of eating, drinking, and making merry.

However, underneath the gilded surface of our secularism, “rich in things but poor in soul,” there is a culture of despair over all human relationships that have been commoditized and are experienced as predatory. Christians inevitably participate in this culture, but for us the sufferings of this present age are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to come. We seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. We can no longer serve both God and mammon. There may be many gods and lords contending over this decaying culture of secularism, as secularism presided over the decaying culture of Christendom, but for us there is one God, the one Father from whom all things are and the one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are. This we know in theology because the Holy Spirit here and now in this present age binds together the faith with which we believe and the faith in which we believe, so forming in us the mind of Christ. Theological education is this work of God the Holy Spirit to sanctify the secular, or it is not theology at all but only religious propaganda (even if dressed with Christian verbiage). What matters is knowing *the mind of Christ*; that is why Christian learning is a lifelong task of the body of Christ and “orthodoxy” is the Holy Spirit's work in progress. To this labor we are called as theologians, professors, pastors, and laity alike.

Preachers now must be teachers, not glad handers or ambulance chasers, local theologians who have learned well and are given time to study and expected to use it to stay fresh in the knowledge of God in our rapid and ever-changing circumstances in a perilous time of decay yet pregnant with the groaning of new birth. Likewise, the congregations must be taught by such preacher-teachers and willing

to learn if they are to have in them the same mind that was in Christ according to the hymn of Philippians 2. The curiosity, if not perplexity, of the laity at our cultural decline likewise must be honestly acknowledged if we are together to understand what we are experiencing so that pastor and people may each in their own way live out the word of God in “holy secularity,” i.e. not accommodated to secularism but extending Christ in the sanctifying Spirit into the needs of this hurting age of personal despair and social hopelessness, publicly being and so vocalizing the hope that is in them.

### Our Educational Mission for a New Evangelization

The bitter joke recounted earlier in this editorial makes the point about the sorry loss of youth in post-Christendom secularism. The Christendom habit of treating confirmation as a once for all rite of adolescent passage for admission to the Lord’s Table inevitably sent two deleterious messages. First, it presented Christian learning as a kind of qualifying exam, purely intellectual, which being mastered need never again be attended to, like a driver’s license. Just so adult disciples are fixed forever in an adolescent faith. One graduates from Sunday school, culminating in confirmation class with the sophomoric conviction that one already knows all that one needs to know to go to heaven when one dies. Of course, this adolescent know-it-all knowledge of God crashes upon the rocks of hard experience before long, not to mention upon the significant intellectual discoveries of historical knowledge and scientific research that any thinking adult will experience today.

Second, the liberal attempt to remedy this problem with the mantra that confirmation is about “belonging, not believing,” as if positive teenage experiences with other teens will emotionally bind to faith and public confession of Jesus as Lord by a kind of social osmosis. This fix, however, unwittingly makes experience of beloved community in Christ the source rather than the delicious fruit of the shattering and life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ through the gospel word and sacraments. It is this present Christ coming into secular life as saving Lord that forms the body of Christ here and now on this earth. The polarization in these two deleterious outcomes of our youth ministry practices reflect the deep and abiding schism in Lutheran theology between the Orthodox and Pietist iterations of it. In a better Christian anthropology, however, heart and head are not alternatives but an integrated organic system such that lifelong learning in the books of nature and history as well as the book of revelation inevitably inform any person’s character, whether for likeness or unlikeness to God our creator.

With Jesus Christ as the image of God and his mind the subject-object of our faith, we can and must do much better in making our congregations centers of lifelong Christian learning. Explicating the correlation of the theological subject who believes and the theological object that is believed by the work of the Holy Spirit is the educational task undertaken in ILT’s new journal, *Promissio*. This editorial has

argued with renewed urgency for an educated clergy enabling an educated laity in an updated arrangement for lifelong Christian learning. We can no longer rely on the wider culture to support Christian congregational life; in fact, Christian congregational life swims against the stream of regnant if also decaying secularism. Unarmed by theological knowledge, congregational life flounders and drowns in the floods of propaganda all around us. Our wider culture sustains a theological vacuum in which diverse but predatory agents seek to instrumentalize the remnant Church of God for alien purposes while reactionary Christians lobby for renewal of political patronage by the production of their own propaganda, which only makes matters worse. Rather than retreat into a corner, however, we must in hope be prepared and eager with the Christian knowledge of God when opportunity is given to come to the rescue in this dying culture. To this end, we must learn to stand on our own two feet in a way that does not repeat the failures of Christendom, at the root of which was an unholy reliance of altar on throne. Comprehending this unprecedented predicament is the beginning of a new evangelization to come forth by way of lifelong Christian learning.

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Paul R. Hinlicky is Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow at the Christ School of Theology of the Institute of Lutheran Theology. His forthcoming book, *The Apocalypse of God in Christ: A Theology of Theology* is issued by Cascade Press in the series Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology of which he is the general editor.



Guest Editorial

# Some Theological Reflections on the Notion of Life-Long Christian Learning

Dan Hackmann

A casual look at the demographic makeup of the student body and faculty at the Institute of Lutheran Theology and its Christ School of Theology immediately displays a strong commitment to life-long learning. We have students of all ages, many of whom are studying with us as a part of their second or sometimes third career plans. Many of our older students continue to study with us because they have felt a calling to learn that goes far beyond what is necessary for a particular position or career. They speak often of the joy that accompanies continued learning. Many of our professors are past normal “retirement” age but continue to teach and do research because of their commitments to Christian life-long learning. A great example is our Distinguished Professor Dr. Dennis Ngien who, though gradually retiring from teaching at Tyndale University, is working and planning with ILT to start a new project called the Center for Reformational Theology and Spirituality. There are certainly numerous other examples of this type of activity among theologians and biblical scholars, one of the most outstanding being Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) who wrote more than 20 books after reaching the age of 65. As inspiring as these examples may be for young and old alike, I would like to raise the question of what theological and biblical justifications exist for advocating Christian life-long learning.

This is an important question for us today because one if not the only reason for engaging in life-long learning propounded in our secular age is to develop and improve ourselves due to the fact that self-development is inherently good for the person and does not need any further justification or grounding. If there are other reasons, be they societal or altruistic, they are secondary to the ultimate truth of the goodness of self-development. The purpose of the individual (if there is one) is to lead a self-directed and enjoyable life, and life-long learning is an important part of achieving this purpose. Of course, it is undeniable that self-improvement

is a positive thing, and we do not want to claim that Christian life-long learning should only be done for others but with no benefit for the self. However, this brief reflection on the reasons for engaging in life-long learning, especially pertaining to Christian learning, raises with it the motivation or motivations for doing so. What might be some theological or biblical reasons that motivate us toward Christian life-long learning?

I would like to submit that the reasons for Christian life-long learning are threefold. The first has generally to do with the Creator and His Creation. We are each part of an ongoing creation process that the Creator God planned and began and within which He is still active. That is, we do not believe in the watchmaker god of the Deists who created once in the past and afterward had no continuing role in either the physical world or in the lives of humans. No, the creator God created each of us in His image, which includes features like reflection on the way things are in the world in the past, present, and future. We are endowed with seemingly endless curiosity about all of reality. We tend to be dissatisfied with explanations that are “cut and dried” and instead search for knowledge and understanding in all areas imaginable. Early scientists like Newton and Copernicus drew on their Christian understanding of the nature of God and His creation and felt certain that because God is a reasonable God and created the world in a reasonable fashion that they could use their God-endowed reason to explore the natural world.

John Calvin claimed that the primary end of human life is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” From the earliest accounts in the book of Genesis, it is clear that God created humans to have fellowship and a relationship with them. A relationship and fellowship glorifying God and enjoying Him forever are terms that include continual action. Thus, the first reason for life-long learning has to do with our created nature. We were created with the desire to know more about God and the universe we inhabit. How was this to be facilitated? The Reformers answered this question clearly: the Scriptures inform us, and this understanding leads to the second reason.

The second reason has to do with the endless breadth and depth of the Scriptures and the theological tradition. It is interesting to note that as many Christians achieve very old age, they claim that there is still so much to learn about God and the Christian life and have the feeling that rather than having “learned out” the Scriptures or the tradition, there is still ever so much to learn and discover. A great example of this sentiment comes from Martin Luther: because the Bible can be understood, it is important that every person make a life-long effort to understand it better. Luther expresses the depth of insights he found studying the Bible thusly:

Now, I have many years read the Bible through twice, and if it were a large, strong tree, and all its words were little branches or twigs, I went through and shook all of its branches and twigs and really wanted to know what

they contained and what they meant, and every time I shook a pair of little apples or little pears down.<sup>1</sup>

The Scriptures and the theological tradition can never be “learned out,” certainly not in a single lifetime. Furthermore, if we look carefully in the New Testament, we find this kind of admonition and encouragement: “Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, ESV). The subject matter to be tested that leads to discernment is primarily the Scriptures and teachings surrounding those texts. The emphasis here is on renewal and continual action, an emphasis that fits perfectly with Christian life-long learning.

Thirdly, a major reason for Christian life-long learning has to do with our calling or vocation. In contrast to a purely self-oriented motivation, Christian life-long learning is motivated and grounded in a call to a life of service and a life of community. We are called to share what we have learned, to teach and encourage others, and to build a life characterized by loving Christian fellowship. Of course, our students, professors and staff profit personally from both participating in life-long learning and from its positive impact and results, but a deeper motivation for doing so has to do with our service to others. Christian life-long learning entails hard work and discipline for the higher purpose of serving the Church and God’s kingdom.

On a practical note, ILT offers a whole range of courses that may be taken at graduate or undergraduate level in the Open Studies program without the necessity of joining or finishing a particular program. We also offer a Pastoral Ministry Certificate program designed to provide a good basis for those with no prior theological education. This commitment to Christian life-long learning is not sustained only by the enthusiasm of individual students and teachers but is also nurtured through the shared stewardship of the Institute of Lutheran Theology itself. The Boards of Directors and Regents along with the faculty bear responsibility for safeguarding the Church’s teaching mission in this place. Their deliberations concern not only the practical governance of an institution but the deeper question of how the Church may continue to learn, teach, and pass on the faith in changing times. In this way, the governance of ILT participates in the same vocation described above: the continual pursuit of understanding in service to the Gospel and the formation of those called to teach, preach, and lead within the Church.

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1. “Ich habe nun etliche Jahre her die Bibel zweimal gelesen, und wenn sie ein grosser, mächtiger Baum wäre und alle Worte wären Ästelein und Zweige, so habe ich doch alle Ästelein und Zweige angeklopft und gerne wissen wollen, was daran wäre und was sie vermöchten, und allezeit noch ein Paar Äpflein oder Birnlein herunter geklopft.” (My English translation in the text above.) Martin Luther, *Christlicher Wegweiser für Jeden Tag*, Paul Hartung, 2. Auflage, 1983, p. 207.

Finally, let me close by noting what a good and satisfying exercise it is to do Christian life-long learning *together*. As our minds and hearts are opened to new insights regarding the spiritual applications of what we are learning, we can be truly grateful for this aspect of the Christian life we live together.

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Daniel Hackmann is Professor of Philosophical Theology and Academic Dean at Christ School of Theology. He received his Ph.D. in philosophical theology at the University of Iowa and his field of special interest is theology and science. In addition to his academic work, he is an entrepreneur in the area of high-tech consultancy. He lives with his wife close to Zürich, Switzerland.

# All Things Fulfilled in Christ

## A Theological Apology for the Liberal Arts

Jack D. Kilcrease

**ABSTRACT:** This article draws on the resources of the ancient Church and the Lutheran Reformation to argue for the continuing relevance of the Liberal Arts for Christian education.

### Introduction

From colonial times onward, the Liberal Arts have been an important component of secular and religious higher education in the US.<sup>1</sup> For those unfamiliar, the Liberal Arts typically refer to the study of the Humanities. This may include the study of philosophy, rhetoric, literature, and art. In twentieth century America, Liberal Arts curricula primarily centered on the study of what has often been called the “Western Canon.” The Western Canon refers to the somewhat shifting body of essential works of literature that for many years stood at the center of a Liberal Arts education.<sup>2</sup>

At the University of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century, Mortimer J. Adler pioneered a “Great Books” curriculum<sup>3</sup> (along with an accompanying book set sold by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in collaboration with the University of Chicago)<sup>4</sup>

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1. Roger Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1-125.

2. See: Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Macmillan, 1995).

3. See: Mortimer J. Adler, *Paideia Proposal* (Touchstone, 1982); idem, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (Simon & Schuster, 1940); idem, *A Guidebook to Learning: For a Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom* (Macmillan, 1986); idem, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (Crowell-Collier Publishing, 1990).

4. See: Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, eds., *Great Books of the Western World*, 54 vols. (Encyclopaedia Britannica/University of Chicago Press, 1952).

that became influential in many American colleges and universities. In courses that followed this curriculum, students would be asked to read Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and others. Implicit in such an educational program is the notion that college students as members of Western society, and future leaders in that society, have the privilege and obligation to be custodians of a body of higher culture that communicates and preserves the distinctive values promoted in the Western Canon.

In spite of the importance and prevalence of the study of the Liberal Arts in American educational institutions, recent decades have seen a sharp decline in the teaching of the Liberal Arts in post-secondary education. Not only have numerous Liberal Arts colleges closed their doors in the last decade, but many colleges that have remained intact have begun to phase out the teaching of the Humanities.<sup>5</sup> The reason for this decline is severalfold with the chief among these being financial considerations. Beyond this, these programs and majors are increasingly unpopular with students. Another reason for decline is the rejection of the program of Liberal Arts by various Modern and Post-Modern critics who see the Liberal Arts Curriculum as reinforcing certain unacceptable power relationships and privileging certain voices over others.

In this essay, we will examine the sources of the decline of the Liberal Arts in detail and offer a diagnosis of why this course of study has so many detractors in secondary education. Key to our argument will be that the financial and ideological reasons for the rejection of the Liberal Arts lie in the deep structures of a particular understanding of creation and human nature at odds with the basic commitments of the Christian tradition.

In the second half of this essay, we will draw on the resources of the ancient Church and Lutheran traditions in order to muster a theological defense of the Liberal Arts. Commitment to the teaching of the Liberal Arts stands in coherence with the recognition of God as a source of the good, as well as humans as his image-bearers, even after the distortions of sin. As both Luther and Melancthon argued, the study of the Liberal Arts aids the teaching both of the law and gospel. The law is nothing but a recognition of the goodness of God reflected both in the natural order and the conscience. Particularly for Melancthon, such a recognition is the basis of civil virtue and order. Likewise, the gospel is the center of Holy Scripture. A proper exposition of Scripture by pastors calls for an understanding of philosophy and literature as tools for discerning scriptural meaning. Luther and Melancthon, along with Lutheran Orthodoxy, shared this commitment to the study of the Liberal Arts on these grounds.

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5. See: Jeffrey R. Docking and Carman C. Curton, *Crisis in Higher Education: A Plan to Save Small Liberal Arts Colleges in America* (Michigan State University Press, 2015), 11-21.

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## Sources of Decline

Before we enter our discussion of the value of the Liberal Arts from the perspective of the historic Christian tradition, it may be of value to examine the sources of the decline of the Liberal Arts over the last few decades in American life. Decline in these disciplines has occurred not only in student enrollment but also in administrators' lacking the willingness to promote these programs both as majors and as part of the general educational curriculum. As we will see, there are two sources of this decline with the first being financial and the second being ideological. Although these two causes may initially seem unrelated, they are intertwined with one another.

Although it is difficult to generalize in light of the differing circumstances of each individual post-secondary educational institution, financial considerations have been a major driving force in the decline and marginalization of the Liberal Arts. An example of the financial rationale for the marginalization of the Liberal Arts can be found in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A." In the early twenty-first century, the University of Chicago sought to expand and secure its long-term viability as an institution. In order to achieve this, they intentionally ran significant deficits over the last fourteen years in order to expand campus life. These changes have taken the form of the financing of new science related programs, a new art exhibition center, more modern cafeterias, and updated dormitories. Part of the reason that the administrators were able to gain access to funding was the lower interest loans available before the pandemic. As a result of the administration's efforts, the enrollment of the University of Chicago has increased from a rough average of 3,500 students in the 1990s to 7,500 students today.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the university could not make up for the financial strain through new enrollment and, thusly, racked up a considerable debt. To maintain itself and begin to pay off its debt, the University of Chicago has limited the entry of new students into twenty Ph.D. programs, many of them in the Liberal Arts. The University of Chicago has shown restraint in fully cutting or removing Liberal Arts programs due in part to considerable protest from faculty and students. Nevertheless, other institutions operating on a smaller scale have removed their Liberal Arts programs or sought to remove Liberal Arts requirements to save money. Within the utilitarian, or pragmatic mindset, of administrators, the programs are simply not seen as valuable because they do not attract money and students the way business, law, or the hard sciences do.

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6. Sara Randazzo and Heather Gillers, "Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2025: <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/colleges-face-a-financial-reckoning-the-university-of-chicago-is-exhibit-a-8918b2b0?st=a33e2L>

In keeping with this financially driven rationale, it is often the perception of post-secondary administrations that students have increasingly lost interest in the Liberal Arts. Particularly since the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, there is a belief that students need to be shown how they can utilize a degree in a future career. Liberal Arts subjects (philosophy, art history, literature, etc.) are seen by many critics as useless for gaining steady employment.<sup>7</sup> The irony existing herein shows that, statistically speaking, while Liberal Arts majors make less money initially than STEM or Business majors, they actually make more money than their peers in other fields considered more practical throughout their working lives.<sup>8</sup>

The financial rationales for the marginalization of the Liberal Arts are very interesting because they reveal larger issues regarding the philosophical and even religious underpinnings of the present social and political system. As should be clear to anyone with even a marginal knowledge of world history, the amount of wealth that modern Euro-American society has generated in the previous two centuries is absolutely staggering compared to any previous period in human history. Since 1800, roughly 90 percent of the world's population has been pulled out of what has been characterized as "extreme poverty," a condition that has been the norm throughout history.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in the early twenty-first century, with unprecedented financial resources, we are told repeatedly that there are no resources to finance the Liberal Arts as there once was.

However, earlier cultures that suffered from extreme poverty somehow found the resources to finance and promote the Liberal Arts. Even in the devastation left in the wake of the destruction of the western Roman Empire, the Carolingians (beginning with Charlamagne) sought to revive and promote learning. Charlamagne himself gathered all the great scholars and theologians of his time to his court at Aachen (notably John Scotus Erigena and Alcuin of York) in order to promote theology as well as Arts and Letters.<sup>10</sup> The unifier of Anglo-Saxon England, Alfred the Great, sought to promote the Liberal Arts as part of his program of unification for England in the face of repeated Viking invasions and attempts at settlement (the "Danelaw").<sup>11</sup> Obviously, neither the Carolingian Empire or Anglo-Saxon England

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7. Jennifer Frey, "Guest Essay: This Is Who's Really Driving the Decline in Interest in Liberal Arts Education" *New York Times*, July 17, 2025: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/17/opinion/liberal-arts-college-students-administration.html>

8. Allie Grasgreen, "Liberal Arts Grads Win Long-Term" *Inside Higher Ed*, January 21, 2014: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/22/see-how-liberal-arts-grads-really-fare-report-examines-long-term-data>

9. Rainer Zitelmann, "Anyone Who Doesn't Know the Following Facts About Capitalism Should Learn Them," *Forbes*, December 21, 2021: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rainer-zitelmann/2020/07/27/anyone-who-doesnt-know-the-following-facts-about-capitalism-should-learn-them/>

10. See: Friedrich Heer, *Charlemagne and His World* (Macmillan, 1975), 191.

11. A.F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England* (Macmillan, 1924), 71-73.

had the vast resources of modern Euro-America to finance the Liberal Arts, yet they considered it important.

Considering this stark contrast between our present society and earlier cultures regarding the importance of the Liberal Arts, what actually seems to be at issue are values and priorities rather than money. A large percentage of modern Euro-Americans consider anything that does not pay or give concrete life-gains in the material world to be impractical nonsense. As Charles Taylor has noted, modern people remain stuck in an “immanent frame”<sup>12</sup> wherein all goods can only be conceived in terms of their temporal value. This is rooted in a materialistic and naturalistic outlook on life that also reduces humans to biological machines essentially built to primarily pursue physical goods and pleasure.

Beyond the economic and utilitarian sources of decline, there have been internal struggles within academia itself that have called into question the usefulness of the Liberal Arts. Particularly since the late 1960s, there has been a pushback from many quarters of academia against the value of the Liberal Arts, at least in the form taught by previous generations. One major target has been “Great Books” curriculums and the belief in a Western Canon of great literature as being a proper matrix of educational formation. The detractors of “Great Books” and the Western Canon have been dubbed by the late literary scholar Harold Bloom, a looming proponent of the Western Canon, as the “School of Resentment.”<sup>13</sup>

In his book *The Western Canon*, Bloom sees numerous traditions of thought in modern academia as belonging to the “School of Resentment.” Notably he mentions: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, and Semioticians. Such groups perceive the very notion of the Western Canon as promoting a hegemonic discourse. To the extent that they are interested in the Liberal Arts, they seek to harness it to the goal of social change.<sup>14</sup> Many thought traditions of the post-Enlightenment West have correctly observed that social and cultural realities are not simply self-evident or divinely wrought givens but contain within them attempts at establishing power relations convivial to certain groups. Whereas it would be difficult to resist the validity of this insight into how fallen humans organize culture and society, what distinguishes members of the “School of Resentment,” or what James Lindsey and Helen Pluckrose call “Cynical Theories,”<sup>15</sup> is their belief that every aspect of human society is an artificial construct bent on implementing covert powerplays. With Post-Structuralists<sup>16</sup> in

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12. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 539-593.

13. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 4, 7.

14. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 27-28.

15. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsey, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 24-27.

16. See: Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism* (University of Georgia Press, 1993), 66-69.

particular (perhaps less so with the Critical Theorists<sup>17</sup> who Bloom also mentions), there is no “real” that critical-reason purifies from sinful distortion but rather simply different cultural-linguistic frameworks that serve the purpose of enhancing one group’s power at the expense of another’s. For this reason, it is very difficult to critique or argue against the positions of these groups since they view logic, or in some cases even empirical evidence, as simply powerplays or ideological ploys that seek to enhance a speaker’s particular group. For this reason, it should be stated that the following critique of their position is undertaken from the perspective of our own tradition and paradigm of Christian critical realism.

When the principles of the “School of Resentment” are applied to the study of the Humanities, the intrinsic value of specific classic texts is very quickly called into question as simply arbitrary and violent. What often is seen as problematic about the Western Canon and the Humanities in general by the “Cynical Theorist” in the “School of Resentment” is that choosing a classic like Homer or Hesiod over another text (perhaps a contemporary African American writer) arbitrarily privileges certain texts over others. We are often told by members of these groups that “Great Book” curriculums allow the voices of “dead white men” to drown out the voices of women and persons of color.<sup>18</sup> As throughout most of Western history only elites could read and write, the system prioritizes the voices of the aristocratic classes over the disenfranchised masses. Some radical versions of Postmodern theory even question why we should privilege any one form of literature over others. For example, a postmodernist may seriously inquire why a “Frosted Flakes” commercial would be considered intrinsically less meaningful than *King Lear*?<sup>19</sup>

Much like our critique of the utilitarian and pragmatic rationales for marginalizing the Liberal Arts, the rationales of the “School of Resentment” bear the clear marks of certain ontological and anthropological presuppositions standing at odds with historic Christian orthodoxy. Although we do not have the space to go through each thought-tradition represented by the “School of Resentment,” one thread that holds together many streams of post-Enlightenment hermeneutics of suspicion is the claim that every facet of life and society can be explained in terms of covert

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17. It should be noted that both Adorno and Horkheimer appreciated the Western canon and the classical arts. Many of the complaints about the “culture industry” (i.e., Hollywood, pop music) and Jazz music come from a concern with preserving high culture against low mass culture. See: Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136. Also see: Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011); idem, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (Routledge, 2002).

18. See description in: Bruce Bawer, *The Victims’ Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind* (Broadside Books, 2012).

19. See the classic text: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Paladin, 1972). Barthes shows interest in the interpretation of the professional wrestling as a cultural text. Also see: Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

power-seeking behavior.<sup>20</sup> John Milbank has argued that in the realm of the social sciences, this interpretative paradigm is rooted in a form of “ontological violence” rather than the Trinitarian “ontology of peace.”<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, there is an assumption that there is no God, or even transcendental ground of being, that might form the basis of or be manifested in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.<sup>22</sup> In the same way, there is no underlying assumption that the Good, the True, and the Beautiful might express itself in the Arts and Sciences or the choices of the Western Canon. Hence, humans are not configured to recognize that good since they are nothing but power seekers who superimpose the good with the paintbrush of power relations on the canvas of reality.

On one level, the historic Christian tradition recognizes the phenomenon of injustice and arbitrary violence present in human social life and culture. Following Paul Tillich’s definition, one might even say that these forces of oppression fall within the range of the “demonic” as anything immanent and temporal that enslaves humans by putting itself in the place of God.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, these facets of human life are not intrinsic to humans or creation but are manifestations of the corruptions of sin. Sin is a privation and a parasite on the fundamental goodness (*privatio boni*) hardwired into human nature and the ontology of creation<sup>24</sup> (sin is an “accident” rather than the “substance” of human nature- as the Formula of Concord affirms).<sup>25</sup> As such, the goodness of creation is purified by Christ and liberated from demonic forces, not cancelled or replaced.

Although distorted by sin and the need for self-justification before others (i.e., powerplays, overt or covert), the human mind contains within it a remnant of the *imago Dei* that can perceive the goodness and rationality of creation as an expression of the goodness and rationality of God.<sup>26</sup> This finds expression in human cultural

20. See good example in: Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon Book, 1980), 109-133.

21. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 13-18.

22. See argument in: George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

23. See: Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, vol. 3 (University of Chicago Press, 1963), 102-103.

24. Augustine, *City of God*, 11.9; Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. First Series (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 2:210. (Hereafter “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series” cited as “NPNFa.”).

25. FC SD, 1.1-5; Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy Wengert (Fortress Press, 2000), 531-533.

26. According to Luther, human reason is “something divine” – suggesting a remnant of the *imago Dei*. See: Disputation Concerning Man (1536); *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 2:45. (Hereafter cited as LW.) 34:137. Also see similar conceptions in early Lutheranism in: Johann Gerhard, *On Creation and Predestination*, trans. Richard Dinda (Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 322-326.

productions such as philosophy, literature, and works of art. As numerous histories of the early Modern period have shown, such a belief in the remnant of the *imago Dei* and the rationality and goodness of creation found in the Christian metanarrative likewise formed the basis of the Scientific Revolution.<sup>27</sup> Human learning and artistic expression (i.e., the Liberal Arts) therefore mirror the goodness of God, albeit in an incomplete and distorted fashion.

Finally, it should be observed that the critical rationality that post-Enlightenment critics of Western society have sought to exercise is by no means a bad thing. Indeed, it stands in perfect harmony with the accusing function of the law, which critiques the structures of human self-seeking and self-justification. Nevertheless, it should be observed that it is only possible to give an account of the critical rationality promoted by post-Enlightenment traditions with reference to a remnant of rationality and conscience offered by the *imago Dei*. Ontologically, there must be something that makes reason reasonable and gives it access to the structures of the created order or, at minimum, the patterns of cultural-linguistic reality that form human interactions with reality.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, there must be a moral order of the universe with which hegemonic discourses are out of harmony.

Ultimately, as Plantinga noted in his naturalistic argument against naturalism, it is only by assuming that God has created our minds to be able to comprehend and absorb the truth that makes truthful claims possible. A pure Naturalist cannot make claims to truth in the quest to curtail self-seeking but can only say that the evolutionary process undirected by divine providence has given us a mind that promotes useful beliefs, not true ones.<sup>29</sup> One could apply Plantinga's critique of Naturalism to the "School of Resentment" and the "Cynical Theories" themselves. Any claim that insists that all truth claims are hegemonic discourses is self-defeating in that it does not escape the critique of being a hegemonic discourse itself.

It should of course be noted that these observations regarding the self-refuting nature of the claims of the "School of Resentment" are offered from the perspective of our own tradition of biblically informed critical realism. For those who operate within the paradigm of the "School of Resentment," nothing but power-relations exist between people, and any appeal to the self-contradictory nature of their philosophical proposals would constitute an exercise in begging the question regarding

27. See: Alister McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Nature*, vol. I (T & T Clark, 2006), 197-203. Also see: Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Reijer Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Regent University Press, 2000); Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 121-201.

28. See: Paul Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther Through Leibniz* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 24-31.

29. Alvin Plantinga, "Is Naturalism Irrational?" in *The Analytical Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James Sennett (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 72-96.

the validity of epistemic principles such as the law of non-contradiction. Hence, the arguments offered above are offered not to those who stand outside the Christian paradigm but rather to those standing within the Christian tradition who seek a basis for continuing to value the Liberal Arts.

## The Theological Value of the Liberal Arts

Unlike the claims of certain anti-intellectual, sectarian, and Fundamentalist strains of modern Christianity, historic Christian orthodoxy has always valued the Liberal Arts. As we will see below, this has been the case not only for the pre-modern Church but also for the Wittenberg Reformation. Indeed, it is incontestable that the Magisterial Reformation would never have happened without the interest in Arts and Letters found in the tradition of Renaissance Humanism, particularly those strains of the Northern Renaissance promoted by figures like Erasmus of Rotterdam.<sup>30</sup>

Why is it the case that historic Christian orthodoxy cannot do without the Liberal Arts? The answer lies in all three articles of the Creed. Although Christian theology has identified the *imago Dei* with various faculties within the human person, most theologians and exegetes have seen a deep connection between the *imago Dei* and a remnant of moral conscience and rationality in the human subject.<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, although humans are damaged by the Fall, they necessarily remain in the image of God to an extent, thereby retaining their capacity for a limited rationality and conscience. Hence, many persons in the early Church held that in anticipation for the coming of God's presence and truth in Christ, there is a kind of dual preparation for the gospel: prophecy among the Hebrews of the Old Testament and philosophy among the Gentiles. Therefore, like supernatural revelation, philosophy (as one of the Liberal Arts) was seen as a preparatory condition for Christ functioning as a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6).<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, in the vein of the second and third articles of the Creed, God's revelation in Christ meant that God conveyed his truth through a historical person (Jesus) and embodied means. In the power of the Spirit, Christ becomes present in and speaks to believers through the embodied means of the sermon and the commentary on God's inscripturated revelation in the Bible.

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30. See: Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 9-29.

31. See discussion in: Ian McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Fortress Press, 2005); Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

32. See: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (Yale University Press, 1993), 3-39. See classical Patristic compendium of this apologetic: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 2 vols., trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Clarendon Press, 1903).

The idea of the Liberal Arts as a preparation for the gospel worked its way out from a number of early Christian thinkers. Philosophy as one of the Liberal Arts functioning as an “Ancillary” or “Handmaid” to the “Matriarch” of theology is an important concept in patristic and medieval theology.<sup>33</sup> Such a notion begins as early as the mid-second century apologists. Justin Martyr worked with the Stoic conception of what is sometimes called the *Logos Spermatikos*. In this conception, the divine principle of the Logos was an immanent organizing rationality that pervaded the universe.<sup>34</sup> Humans as rational beings possessed a share in such a divine rationality. In Justin’s Christianized version of this doctrine, Christ as the Logos pervaded creation and also expressed himself in a partial sense in the writings of the pre-Christian philosophical tradition. All humanity,<sup>35</sup> along with Socrates, Plato, and others, possessed a share of divine rationality present in Christ since in their fallen human reason, they reflected the divine truth. Christ truly embodied the truth since he himself was the Logos, the second person of the Trinity.<sup>36</sup>

Another example can be found in the work of Clement of Alexandria. According to Clement, philosophy functioned as a preparation for Christ among the Gentiles as much as prophecy was amongst the Hebrews.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, “Plato [is] but Moses speaking in Attic Greek.”<sup>38</sup> In light of this belief that God had given an anticipation to his full revelation of himself in Christ through both the pagan Liberal Arts and in Hebrew prophecy, Clement headed up the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Here, Scripture, along with philosophy and the other Liberal Arts, was taught in service of the Christian revelation.<sup>39</sup> His successor at the school, Origen, not only maintained Clement’s educational program<sup>40</sup> but employed Hellenistic techniques of literary scholarship on Scripture, such as the use of a kind of primitive textual criticism as a means of establishing the earliest and best manuscripts of Scripture.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, educational culture and theological metaphors possess a dominant role in early Christianity. In Frances Young’s recent work, *Scripture: The Genesis of*

33. Fredrick Mayer, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (American Book Company, 1951), 75.

34. See: Justin Martyr, *The Second Apology*, 13; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:192-193. (Hereafter “Ante-Nicene Fathers” cited as “ANF”). Also see: Carl Andersen, “Justin und der mittlere Platonismus,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 44 (1952/1953): 157–95; L.W. Barnard, “The Logos Theology of Justin Martyr,” *Downside Review* 89 (1971): 132-141.

35. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 6; ANF, 1:164.

36. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 46; ANF, 1:178.

37. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.17; ANF 2:517-518.

38. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.22; ANF 2:334-335.

39. James Riley Estep, C. E.: *The Heritage of Christian Education* (College Press Publishing, 2003), 7-9.

40. Estep, C. E.: *The Heritage of Christian Education*, 9-10.

41. Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 7, 42-49, 83, 86, 122.

*Doctrine*,<sup>42</sup> she has noted that the ancient Church would not have appeared to the Greco-Roman world that it inhabited as a new religious movement. In both Judaism and paganism, religion primarily centered on sacrifice, something that for Christians had been completed and been done away with in Christ.<sup>43</sup> Rather, the Christian Church would have looked to pagan observers like a network of schools. The clergy and catechists looked like teachers in a highly egalitarian school system. All were admitted—women, slaves, and the low-born. In this school, believers were instructed in the meaning of the Creed, with its three parts embodying the threefold name that they would be baptized into.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, in response to the Gnostic heresy, both Irenaeus and Clement spoke of salvation history as being a kind of *Paideia*, or “education,” important to the purpose of citizenship in a *polis*.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps the church is the true “*polis*” that the divine *Paideia* prepares Christians for citizenship in. For the polemical context of this teaching, it should be recalled that the Gnostics pointed out that YHWH in Genesis 2-3 had prohibited Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Presumably, the knowledge of Good and Evil was a good and salutary thing, and if the God of the Old Testament was denying it to the first humans, then it meant He was an evil imposter (Demiurge, *Yaldabaoth*) and the Serpent was in actuality a hero, seeking to liberate humans from ignorance and tyranny.<sup>46</sup>

Irenaeus taught that, much like for children, certain knowledge was appropriate at different developmental stages.<sup>47</sup> God would have eventually given the knowledge that they had sought from the tree in the midst of the Garden but only at a later and more appropriate stage of development. Humanity had inappropriately attempted to take hold of the knowledge from the Tree beforehand.<sup>48</sup> The subsequent history of salvation was the preparatory education of the children of Israel and humanity for the coming Christ. Irenaeus speaks of Christ as the grown-up human being originally intended in Adam. As the true and fully developed human, Christ gives true knowledge to humans and allows them to grow up by his grace and truth to his full stature.<sup>49</sup> In a similar strain, Clement speaks of salvation history as an education and Christ as the true “Pedagogue.”<sup>50</sup>

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42. Frances Young, *Scripture: The Genesis of Doctrine* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023).

43. See: Maria-Zoe Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago, 2009).

44. Young, *Scripture: The Genesis of Doctrine*, 15-19.

45. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.20; ANF, I:487-492.

46. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert MacLachlan Wilson (T & T Clark, 1998), 97-101.

47. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.38; ANF, I:521-522.

48. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.37-39; ANF, I:518-525.

49. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5.1; ANF, I:526-527.

50. See: Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon Wood (Catholic University of America, 2008).

Like the Patristic theologians, the medieval theologians saw philosophy as an ancillary to theology and promoted the Liberal Arts in the form of the Trivium (*Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric*).<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, Renaissance Humanism represented a new birth of Christian interest in the Humanities.<sup>52</sup> The Southern Renaissance had sought social and political reform of the Italian city-states through a retrieval of Arts and Letters from the Greco-Roman city-states of the past.<sup>53</sup> Following this model, Erasmus and other Northern Humanists sought to retrieve the wisdom of the ancient Church through rhetorical and literary criticism in order to serve as a model so as to reform the contemporary Church.<sup>54</sup> In the case of Erasmus, this took the form of the creation of critical editions of the Church Fathers (notably Jerome, his theological and scholarly hero)<sup>55</sup> as well as the original Greek text of the New Testament.<sup>56</sup>

Both Luther and Melanchthon were heirs to the work of the Northern Renaissance in general and Erasmus in particular.<sup>57</sup> Although Melanchthon was more strongly focused than Luther on educational reform and the promotion of the Liberal Arts, Luther also considered philosophical and Humanistic learning to be of supreme importance in the reform of the Church. Although many accounts of the young Luther have painted the Reformer as decrying philosophy (notably Aristotle and his works) concerning its role in theology,<sup>58</sup> this represents a superficial understanding of Luther's interaction with Aristotelianism. As Theodore Dieter has noted in his work *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*, for the late medieval university, Aristotle was "the Philosopher."<sup>59</sup> Luther certainly contested many of Aristotle's

51. James Ginther, "Liberal Arts," in *The Westminster Guide to Medieval Theology* (Westminster, 2009), 117-118.

52. Jens Zimmermann, "The Cultural Context for Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism," in *Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism: Education and the Restoration of Humanity*, ed. Jens Zimmermann (Oxford University Press, 2017), 137-161.

53. See: Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton University Press, 1966); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Early Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975), 83-103.

54. Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (Yale University Press, 2016), 90.

55. See: Hilmar Pabel, *Herculean Labours: Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome's Letters in the Renaissance* (Brill, 2008).

56. See: Kaspar von Greyerz, Martin Wallraff, Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds., *Basel 1516: Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament* (Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

57. See: Lewis Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism* (Routledge, 2016); Robert Kolb, Nicole Kuroepka, Irene Dingel, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *Philip Melanchthon: Theologian – in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

58. For example, see portrayal in: Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, 3 vols. (Mohr Siebeck, 1971-1989), 2.3: 17-24, 27-32; Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Hay (Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 1: 132-134.

59. Theodore Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine Historisch-Systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 14-18.

ideas (notably his view of God as the inert “Prime Mover”) and condemned the influence of Aristotle on late medieval theology’s concepts of human agency and ethics.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, he did so while consciously or unconsciously utilizing Aristotelian concepts, logic, and modes of conceptualization.<sup>61</sup> He was, in a sense, disputing various versions of Aristotle and Aristotelian inspired Scholasticism from within these traditions themselves.

Regarding Luther’s engagement with the larger emergent Humanistic tradition, it is of course well known that the Reformer considered the study of Scripture and early Church authorities in their original languages to be essential.<sup>62</sup> In his early Psalms lectures, Luther increasingly relied on the Humanist principle of “back to the sources” (*ad fontes*) and sought to study the Old Testament in its original languages.<sup>63</sup> Prior to the arrival of Melanchthon at Wittenberg in 1518, but even more so afterwards, Luther also sought to study the New Testament in Greek to correct certain doctrinal errors based on the annotations he found in Erasmus’s 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament.<sup>64</sup> Finally, following a Humanistic program of educational reform and promotion of the Liberal Arts, Luther also sought wider access to education for both boys and girls. This was intended not least for the promotion of biblical knowledge and the inculcation of the truths of the faith.<sup>65</sup>

Within the Wittenberg Reformation, Melanchthon stands out as an apologist for the Liberal Arts. His advocacy for a program of learning based on Aristotelianism and Humanism became a model for German education in coming centuries, thereby earning him the title of the “Preceptor of Germany.”<sup>66</sup> Such a model became the basis of his reorganization of the Wittenberg University’s curriculum.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Melanchthon’s advocacy of learning stood in coherence with the deep structures of his theological commitments. Melanchthon’s commitment to the Liberal Arts was rooted in both his understanding of Christian anthropology and the proper distinction between law and gospel.<sup>68</sup>

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60. Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 64-129.

61. This comes out strongly in these sections: Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 257-275, 302-429.

62. Timothy Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther’s Early Correspondence: Taking All Things Captive* (Routledge, 2001), 112, 156, 170.

63. Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg, 1484-1517* (De Graaf, 1975), 78.

64. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel*, 92.

65. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel*, 32-34.

66. See older, but classic study: James William Richard, *Philip Melanchthon: The Protestant Preceptor of Germany 1497-1560* (G.P. Putnam Sons, 1998), 125-141.

67. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (Yale University Press, 1981), 310-314.

68. See: Sachiko Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 107-108, 166-167, 176-188.

Melanchthon was concerned with Humanistic learning from the beginning of his work as a professor at Wittenberg. Hired on the partial recommendation of his Humanist uncle, the Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin, Melanchthon's original role at Wittenberg was as a teacher of Greek.<sup>69</sup> In his inaugural address, Melanchthon stated his scholarly goal was not only to purify the "true Aristotle" from Arabic and medieval Scholastic commentary but also to promote the study of Plato, Homer, Horace, and Virgil.<sup>70</sup> Although Melanchthon retained an interest in a purified Aristotelianism, after his arrival at Wittenberg his interest shifted very quickly to the study of Greek as a means of explicating the New Testament and other early Christian literature.<sup>71</sup>

When Melanchthon began to study the New Testament and Christian doctrine, he sought to incorporate techniques of Renaissance rhetorical criticism as a means of explicating the Bible. Through the mediation of Erasmus, Melanchthon drew on Dutch Humanist Rudolf Agricola's work. Agricola sought to find the best models for argumentation in classical authors by finding passages that displayed the best model arguments. In his book *De Inventione Dialectica*, Agricola referred to these passages in classical literature as "*sedes rhetorica*," or the "seats of rhetoric."<sup>72</sup> Melanchthon adapted this idea to the enterprise of Christian systematic theology by identifying in Scripture the "*sedes doctrinae*," or the "seats of doctrine," that contained the articles of the faith. Such grammatically clear passages could be gathered together and mutually interpret one another to form doctrines of the faith within a "loci" or specific treatise on a doctrinal topic. These topics could in turn be gathered into a textbook of Christian doctrine and organized according to a creedal structure—although in Melanchthon's first attempt in 1521, he used the salvation history model of the structure of the Epistle to the Romans. Such textbooks were referred to as "*loci communes theologici*," or "common theological topics."<sup>73</sup>

Beyond the use of Humanist methods of rhetorical criticism as a basis for the task of dogmatic theology, as a Humanist social reformer, Melanchthon had a keen interest in the humanities, natural theology, and the primitive science of the day

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69. Gregory Graybill, *The Honeycomb Scroll: Philipp Melanchthon at the Dawn of the Reformation* (Fortress Press, 2015), 142-143.

70. Philip Melanchthon, "De Corrigendis Adolescentiae Studiis," in *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, 28 vols. (Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1963), 11:15. ("Corpus Reformatorum" will hereafter be cited as "CR").

71. Graybill, *The Honeycomb Scroll*, 179-200.

72. Willem Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 87-92; Sandra Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus: Philipp Melanchthon's Humanist Concept of Philosophy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 107-124; Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 109-110.

73. See Robert Kolb, "The Ordering of the *Loci Communes Theologici*: The Structuring of the Melanchthonian Dogmatic Tradition," *Concordia Journal* 23, no. 4 (1997): 317-337.

as means of bolstering civil righteousness. The context of these educational and philosophical endeavors was the iconoclastic disturbance created by Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets while Luther was in the Wartburg in the early 1520s. The prophetic claim to have “the Spirit” and the issuing of orders based on those claims of authority caused public chaos that disturbed Melanchthon. Melanchthon argued that one needs to be able to use natural reason to establish the law in a way that everyone could recognize. Only then would it be possible to reform public institutions and establish greater civil righteousness.<sup>74</sup>

Perhaps a second motivating factor for Melanchthon’s interest in the humanities and the sciences as a means of promoting civil righteousness is the revival of Epicureanism in the early Modern period. This revival of Epicureanism stood in both tension and continuity with the Renaissance Humanists. On the one hand, it undermined the moral reforms that the Humanists sought. On the other hand, Epicureanism was also part of the rediscovery of the Greco-Roman heritage that the Humanists sought to promote.

Throughout his writings on the Liberal Arts, Melanchthon repeatedly mentions and castigates Epicureanism, thereby suggesting that he saw this thought-system as an increasing threat.<sup>75</sup> As Ada Palmer has shown in her book *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, due to the rediscovery of Lucretius’ book *On the Nature of Things*, a tradition of underground Neo-Epicureanism arose in sixteenth century Europe.<sup>76</sup>

Epicureanism held that the world was made up of atoms that were pushed together by physical pressure at random. The world was, therefore, not designed by a creator and did not have intrinsic meaning but was arranged according to mechanical laws. Although the gods existed, they were largely indifferent to the fate of humans. Death meant the dispersion of the atoms that made up the human subject and, thusly, also the disillusionment of the self.<sup>77</sup> As Melanchthon frequently comments, such a worldview is not only antithetical to the Christian faith but also undermines the teaching of the law and civil righteousness. Therefore, the teaching of literature, philosophy, and many of the sciences could inculcate the law as well as bolster the case for a creator, thereby counteracting the poison of Neo-Epicureanism.

In terms of his philosophical and natural theological enterprises, Melanchthon favored Aristotle’s system of philosophy.<sup>78</sup> Implicit in many of his accounts of the

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74. Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus*, 277-282; Sachiko Kusakawa, “Introduction,” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, trans. Christine Salazar (Cambridge University Press, 1999), xiv-xv.

75. See for example: Philip Melanchthon, “On Natural Philosophy (1542),” “Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540),” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 136, 150-151.

76. Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Also see: Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Clarendon Press, 2008).

77. Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Routledge, 2014), 11-50, 155-174.

78. Kusakawa, “Introduction,” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, xvi-xvii.

value of Aristotle's philosophy is that Melanchthon saw it as a type of media between the nihilism and materialism of Epicureanism as well as the determinism and fatalism of Stoicism. The former system's nihilism and hedonism militated against civil righteousness in obvious ways. Stoic determinism called into question the necessity of moral self-discipline to attain to civil righteousness.<sup>79</sup> In Aristotle's metaphysics, the philosopher also spoke of the existence of a kind of God and a system of civil righteousness based on virtue ethics.<sup>80</sup>

Melanchthon wrote an introduction and commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* (*De Anima*) and works on human anatomy, thereby giving an account of the structure of the soul, human cognition, and the general constitution of human nature. Such an account bolstered civil righteousness in two ways. First, although depraved by sin, humans are made in God's image and are a mirror of the divine life even in the state of sin.<sup>81</sup> Since God is the author of the created order, and it ectypally mirrors his will and intellect, humans as divine image bearers are a kind of microcosm of the macrocosm.<sup>82</sup>

The design of the human subject by God made knowledge and virtue possible. Regarding the question of philosophical epistemology, as Sachiko Kusukawa notes in his book *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, Melanchthon eclectically borrows from other emergent philosophical sources present in Renaissance Europe.<sup>83</sup> Most notably, Melanchthon relies on the concept taken from Stoicism and Epicureanism of "common notions" (*koinai ennoiai*).<sup>84</sup> "Common Notions" are foundational ideas or experiences that humanity universally shares. As a result, common notions can serve as an epistemic foundation of judgment regarding the reality or non-reality of a particular proposition. Melanchthon states that for natural humans even in a fallen state, there are three such common notions or certainties: the self-evident nature of morality (i.e., conscience), the self-evident reality of mathematical truth, and universal human experience (i.e., fire is hot, etc.). Christians have a fourth source of certainty, which is the work of the Holy Spirit inculcating in the human subject the reliability of Holy Scripture.<sup>85</sup>

Secondly, Melanchthon sees the form and *structure* of the soul as being a proof of God's existence. Contrary to the claims of Epicureanism, Aristotle correctly saw

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79. Melanchthon, "Dedicatory Letter to Melanchthon's Epitome of Moral Philosophy," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 140-141.

80. Melanchthon, "On Aristotle," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 204-211.

81. Melanchthon, "Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 146-147, 151. Also see: Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus*, 266-267.

82. Melanchthon, "On Anatomy (1550)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 158.

83. Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, 179.

84. Ralph Doty, "Ennoêmata, Prolêpseis, and Common Notions," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1976): 143-148.

85. Melanchthon, "*Liber De Anima*," in CR, 13:150-155.

that the soul did not come together by chance but is clearly designed by a higher intelligence. Indeed, Melanchthon was deeply interested in proofs of God's existence from design (teleological argument) and causation (cosmological argument) and directly connected such arguments to the study of the arts and sciences.<sup>86</sup> In a similar vein, Melanchthon was interested in anatomy and in medical literature (particularly the works of Galen) since he saw such complex forms as a proof of design by God.<sup>87</sup> This seems also to be the motivation behind one of Melanchthon's later writings in which he gives a glowing profile of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna because of his contributions to medicine rather than philosophy and theology.<sup>88</sup>

In his various orations, Melanchthon commends the study of astronomy as an aid to belief in the existence of an intelligent creator, thereby rejecting Epicurean nihilism and upholding a moral order to the universe. Again, such a moral order could serve as the basis of the civil order of society.<sup>89</sup> Like many persons in the sixteenth century, Melanchthon also held that astrology served the same purpose. Although modern Euro-Americans typically associate astrology with occultism, for many individuals in the sixteenth century, astrology was a genuine science that predicted events in the manner that bears a passing resemblance to modern meteorology. In Melanchthon's estimation, there is no contradiction between astrology and the Christian faith. God rules all things, and even if the stars exercise a hidden influence on events and persons on earth, it remains a medium through which he exercises his sovereign, providential care over his creation.<sup>90</sup>

Beyond an interest in natural theology and the sciences as means of upholding civil righteousness, Melanchthon also upholds the importance of the emergent canon of Western literature. Not only does Melanchthon affirm that such literature is a model for fine writing but sees it as a further means of inculcating virtue. In his ode to Homer, Melanchthon holds that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the greatest books written next to the Bible.<sup>91</sup> Like the other pursuits of knowledge, Melanchthon views the writings of Homer as promoting civil righteousness. Since the *Iliad* centers on the recovery of Helen of Troy from her kidnapper Paris, the clear message is the importance of the Sixth Commandment. According to this understanding, the Achaeans showed their belief in the sanctity of the marriage bed by fighting for ten

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86. Melanchthon, "Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540)," "Preface to *Book on the Soul* (1553)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 146, 154.

87. Melanchthon, "On Anatomy (1550)," "On the Merit of the Art of Medicine (1548)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 158-166, 169-174.

88. Melanchthon, "On the Life of Avicenna (1549?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 220-226.

89. Melanchthon, "On Astronomy and Geography (1536)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 113-119.

90. Melanchthon, "The Dignity of Astrology (1535)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 124-125.

91. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 42.

years and sacrificing tens of thousands of lives to uphold it.<sup>92</sup> Somewhat ironically, there is little reflection on Melanchthon's part on Odysseus' (or the other Greek heroes, for that matter) lack of interest in the Sixth Commandment in their dealings with women. Likewise, the Iliad promotes the virtues of training the body and physical strength with its many battle scenes. The *Odyssey* by contrast promotes the intellectual virtues, since much of the plot revolves around Odysseus' use of his intelligence to get home through various traps and overcome the large force of suitors.<sup>93</sup>

In summary, Melanchthon, like the Church Fathers, provided an account of how Christian theology could find value in and appropriate the Liberal Arts along with the sciences. What makes Melanchthon's manner of engaging the Liberal Arts superior to that of the Church Fathers is that it can appropriate the cultural productions and learning of the pre-Christian tradition in a more critical manner by recognizing a sharper distinction between law and promise and placing the Liberal Arts clearly within the framework of the law.

### Critical Appropriation

As should be clear from this summary of the teachings of the ancient and Reformation era Church, historic Christian orthodoxy has generally had a positive engagement with the Liberal Arts and the sciences. Indeed, in both the work of the Church Fathers and Melanchthon, we can even see the notion that there is a preparatory and indirect knowledge of God as creator in the learning and cultural productions of pre-Christian civilization. Nevertheless, an objection might be lodged to this positive engagement from the perspective of the Barthian tradition. It could be argued that a belief that philosophy and other positive cultural productions reveal and inculcate the divine distorts the gospel by ceding too much authority to a knowledge of God or merely divine goodness that is established apart from any revelation of Jesus Christ.<sup>94</sup> In other words, if humans are fallen, does that not make all knowledge of God apart from grace suspect due to the darkening of the human intellect because of sin? Does this not override God's sovereignty in choosing who He reveals Himself to?

Such a set of criticisms could be validly waged against some of the Ante-Nicene Fathers that we examined above. Prior to Augustine, the deployment of free will

92. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 44.

93. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 44.

94. See: John Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936* (Peter Lang, 2001). Also see: Karl Barth, *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* (Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1934). Although it should be recalled that Barth later in his career speaks of the "great" and "lesser" lights of the truth, and "secular parables of the Kingdom." See "The Light of Life" in: CD IV/3.1.38-165.

theodicy as a means of overcoming the Gnostic argument that the creator-God must be evil led to what anachronistically might be called a naïve Semi-Pelagianism.<sup>95</sup> Hence, the idea of the history of the world as a kind of “*Paideia*” or the Logos gradually guiding and preparing the pagans through philosophy and the other Liberal Arts for the truth of Christ might suggest that the main problem facing human beings is not a radical moral incapacity calling for the intervention of an equally radical divine grace but rather a need for education. The issue is not depravity but lack of proper information. Hence, the Incarnation and the coming of the Holy Spirit become little more than a continuation and completion of fallen humanity’s cultural projects.

Although from the perspective of the mainstream of the Lutheran tradition Melanchthon held some erroneous positions on human agency later in his career,<sup>96</sup> his approach to the Liberal Arts overcomes many of the problems implicit in the Ante-Nicene Fathers. As Sachiko Kusukawa has shown, Melanchthon is ultimately able to accommodate the value of the pre-Christian classical tradition of Liberal Arts and science because of the distinction between law and gospel.<sup>97</sup> In this vein, one could also mention the distinction between two kinds of righteousness.<sup>98</sup>

Melanchthon distinguishes between the knowledge of God on the basis of the law and the gospel. Indeed, in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, he states that all Christian doctrine can be summarized in the form of the distinction between law and promise.<sup>99</sup> In his commentary on Romans I, Melanchthon affirms that a knowledge of God is possible apart from revelation, but it will not save humans because it will invariably be a knowledge that God exists, and He demands compliance with the moral law.<sup>100</sup> It is possible to come to the knowledge of God and his law through nature and also human cultural productions without compromising the Reformation principle of *sola gratia* because the knowledge of God from the law is never saving.

For Melanchthon, the natural knowledge of God and fallen human learning nonetheless has value as a means of inculcating civil righteousness. The human will in earthly things can make better or worse decisions (active righteousness, *coram mundo*), even if it is paralyzed in spiritual matters (passive righteousness, *coram*

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95. See: John Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Pickwick Publication, 2013), 48-72.

96. See controversy in: Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2017), 84-102.

97. Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, 107-108, 166-167, 176-188.

98. See: Two Kinds of Righteousness (1519); LW 31:297-306. Sermon on Three Kinds of Righteousness (1518); WA 2:43-47. Also see: Charles P. Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 397-423.

99. Apology to the Augsburg Confession IV.5-6; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 123.

100. Philipp Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 76-79.

Deo). By contrast, in the Barthian tradition, there is more of an emphasis on the unitary character of revelation. Instead of their being two words of God (i.e., law and promise), there is a single unitary Word of God, that is, the revelation of God's election of humanity in Christ.<sup>101</sup> The revelation of God's election of humanity in Christ contains both grace and law,<sup>102</sup> and, therefore, natural theology would logically represent not law standing in contrast to gospel but an epistemic Pelagianism that accesses God's grace (i.e., all revelation is a kind of grace) without God's initiative.

Seen from the perspective of law and promise, it can also be observed how Lutherans might critically appropriate the concept of human history in general and salvation history in particular as a divine "*Paideia*." Paul also states that God educated humanity prior to the era of the New Testament through the giving of the law as a pedagogue leading to Christ (Gal. 3:24). It should be noted that this does not suggest that the law was something of a kind tutor guiding its students into greater and greater degrees of maturity, but within Paul's ancient context, a pedagogue was often portrayed as a physically unattractive slave placed over a recalcitrant child for his discipline.<sup>103</sup> In the case of non-believers outside of the sphere of the Sinaitic revelation, such a revelation of law and divine wrath is available in "things that were made" (Rom. 1:20) as well as the conscience (Rom. 2:12).

Concerning the *Coram Deo*, such a revelation of God through nature and history is the source of numinous existential dread (Rom. 1:18),<sup>104</sup> whereas in *coram mundo*, such a revelation can have the positive effect of giving rise to the intellectual traditions of what Jaspers called the "Axial Age."<sup>105</sup> Humans are free in things below them and therefore are capable of working civil righteousness apart from faith.<sup>106</sup> In this sense, the law as it is manifest in the various world religions and pre-Christian philosophical traditions was also fulfilled in Christ's atoning work for humanity. This can be said without any danger of suggesting that such religious, ethical, or philosophical traditions outside of the revelation of Christ are sources of salvation.

In that Christ fulfills the law in the Incarnation and the cross, He not only fulfills the Old Testament revelation but also law as manifested in the form of the Good,

101. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. Trans. G.T. Thomason et al. (T & T Clark, 1936-1977), IV/2.3-377, IV/2.116-119.

102. Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays*, ed. Will Herberg (Doubleday, 1960), 71-100.

103. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia/Fortress, 1979), 177.

104. Luther writes: "Anything that exposes sin, wrath, or death exercises the office of the Law . . ." Theses for the Second Disputation Against the Antinomians (1538); LW 73:54. Also see: Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1958).

105. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (Routledge, 2021), 8-29.

106. Augsburg Confession, 18; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 50.

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the True, and the Beautiful as embedded in the varieties of pre-Christian tradition. This applies not only to Hellenism (as the Church Fathers thought) but also to the cultural productions and wisdom of the various other Axial Age civilizations. To paraphrase Augustine, through the gospel, the gold of the Egyptians (pre-Christian learning) can be crafted into the furnishing of the Tabernacle devoted to the *cultus Dei* (i.e., Christian theology).<sup>107</sup> Freed by the gospel, the law can serve its proper place as a guide to vocation. As Melancthon showed, the Liberal Arts as a manifestation of the law are no different. They serve the purpose of training in civil righteousness. They also represent important intellectual tools for organizing and expounding theology in the pulpit and in the classroom.

## Conclusion

From this brief exploration and defense of the Liberal Arts in light of fundamental Christian theological commitments, we can glean several things. First, following the Christian doctrine of creation and anthropology, it should be affirmed that in spite of the fallenness and vitiation of humanity and nature by the power of sin and evil, God's transcendental goodness and truth remain knowable in "things that were made" (Rom. 1:20). Due to the presence of God's goodness, truth, and beauty expressed in the structures of creation and the human subject, fallen humans can engage in the cultural productions that express themselves in the Liberal Arts. The Liberal Arts are part of the works of the law. They help build human civilization, thereby promoting a recognition of goodness and what constitutes proper civil righteousness. In that Christ fulfilled the law by his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, He also fulfills the goodness of the law as it is expressed in all previous human cultural productions insofar as it expresses the law revealed in nature and conscience. Having fulfilled and redeemed the goodness of human civilization and cultural productions, those free in Christ may utilize the Liberal Arts as a means of promoting good works, Christian vocation, the love of neighbor, and pastoral formation.

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Jack D. Kilcrease professor of historical and systematic theology at the Christ School of Theology, and professor of humanities and chair of the humanities department at Christ College. He attended Luther College (BA), Luther Seminary (MA), and Marquette University (Ph.D). Among his chief works are *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits*, *Locus on Holy Scripture: The Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series*, and *Justification by the Word: Restoring Sola Fide*. He resides in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with his wife Bethany and their two daughters, Miriam and Ruth.

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107. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.9; NPNFa, 1:109.



# *In via Wittenbergensi*

## The Forming of Pastors in the Wittenberg Reformation

Robert Kolb

**ABSTRACT:** This is descriptively rich account of the reform of the university curriculum at Wittenberg under the impact of the rediscovered gospel begins by unveiling the scholarly resources of that rediscovery in the appropriation of Renaissance humanism by Luther and Melancthon. The article describes this as a “biblical humanism” to prevent any confusion with scholarly constructs of Renaissance humanism as an anthropocentric worldview rather than a renewed scholarly methodology of going to the primary sources (*ad fontes*) to gain the proper sense of authoritative texts. Broad education and wide reading in ancient authors provided an ideological context for grasping the specific profile of the biblical message: not the “lazy deity” of Aristotle, but the passionate seeking of the God of the gospel to forgive, reconcile and redeem lost and dying creatures and to identify this seeking, moreover, with the contemporary proclaimed word. Reform of the university curriculum, accordingly, was at once existential and pastoral. The products of such education were to be both pious and erudite. Intellectual curiosity was redirected from speculation about the hidden God to inquiry into the material creation and the human condition. Christian doctrine, in turn, was reconceived in the topical method devised by Melancthon to gather together scriptural testimonies in support of the narrative of salvation provided by the apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. This move “deparentified” the so-called church fathers and transformed them into the theological conversation partners.

Christians are people of the Book.<sup>1</sup> While historically many have not been able to read and write, they still practiced their faith as it came to them out of the Bible, in whatever enculturated form it may have appeared. The Book begins with God talking, speaking creation into existence and initiating conversation with His human creatures. The Book ends with His declaration of triumph over the Liar. Throughout the Bible, God speaks with his people through prophets, evangelists, and apostles. The Holy Spirit combines His instruments of human words from their pens with the living voices of the gospel to achieve His work in every age. His voice and theirs address people in need of liberation from their false sources of identity, security, and meaning through a promise delivering Christ’s death and resurrection in oral, written, and sacramental forms. His wisdom and power transform those

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1. Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation. Grammar and Grace* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 18.

seeking wisdom and power in what turns out to be the foolishness and impotence of this world, putting to the Spirit's use the full range of the created gifts of the Creator. Language forms the bridge between God and His human creatures.

Early Christian teachers lived in a world shaped by an educational system that taught even Christians a way of thinking shaped and framed by Greek philosophers and the Roman legal system. They found that the learning and scholarship of their culture could be put to the service of communicating their understanding of the Bible. They undertook this task with sensitivity to the inner dynamics of both the Hebrew way of thinking, with the Creator at its center, and the systems of thought in which no powerful, communicating creator played a role. The marriage of Athens and Jerusalem always had the Bible in sight, but it was opened with varying degrees of insight. Transferring the faith between cultures always presents the church with formidable challenges, and it still lives with positive blessings produced in translating the biblical witness into terms such as "Trinity" and "communication of attributes." At the same time, in this atmosphere believers learned to think in terms of systems in which no Creator who was in verbal contact with creation existed. In this world, the *animal rationalis*, human reason conforming to an eternal law and system of order, preserved the peace of the land. The concept of a gracious God communicating with his chosen people had to be incorporated into a world in which human performance in accord with eternal law counted most of all.

Therefore, believers in Christ have always been served by those able to put their gifts of knowledge and insight to work as disciplined students of Scripture, thereby called by the church to lead in thinking through how what God has said in the past through His people fits into an ever-changing contemporary scene. When Martin Luther took his doctoral oath to teach the Scriptures faithfully for the benefit of fellow believers, he accepted a calling to serve God as one whose mind was focused on the text and the world through the eyes of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

### The Medieval Setting for Wittenberg Theological Education

When missionaries brought the Christian faith to populations in corners of the world far and near, which was then followed by Roman emperors, Frankish kings, and Slavic monarchs choosing Christianity as the religion of state and people, there proved to be insufficient numbers of preachers and catechists to deliver the message of Christ clearly to larger groups of people. Biblical vocabulary fell into the structures of traditional religions, which had not been religions of a book or a single creator in communication with creation. Their views of the individual's relationship with someone or something Ultimate and Absolute often focused on the proper performance of ritual under the supervision of a religious hierarchy.

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2. On the development of the Wittenberg way of forming pastors for the church, see the perceptive study of E. H. Herrmann, "Wittenberg Pastoral Formation as the Reform of Theology," *Promissio* 1 (2026): 59-69.

Sacred activities offered whatever gods there might be the sacrifices that were to preserve the peace of the land and of the individual, even though it often bred more fear than serenity.

The common practice of the faith during Luther's childhood and youth among the common people took place within structures dictated by the patterns of the traditional religions that had not been rooted out by politically-driven conversions. The traditional concept of appeasing the gods flowed into the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the sacrifice of the mass. On the parish level, pious people knew something of the Bible from printed picture books, the "Biblia Pauperum" that acquainted them with Bible stories, or from vernacular preaching when it came to villages or towns. Even so, in its incorporation of and reliance on the structures of traditional religions, their practice of the faith reflected the inadequacy of catechization at the time of the conversion of Germanic tribes.

Alongside his pious upbringing in this atmosphere, Luther experienced a system of education dependent on the use of Aristotle. The Stagarite offered coverage of a wide spectrum of subjects with a system of analysis that clarified thinking. By Luther's time, the message of the Bible had been outfitted with the garb of Aristotelian metaphysics and logic for more than three hundred years. This system offered a metaphysics without a personal God who interacted with his creation in words such as those spoken by the Hebrew prophets. Aristotle's sense of order in creation rested on the correspondence of human reason with eternal law. The ancient world in which the minds of the church fathers had been formed had lacked a way of thinking in which human beings interacted with a personal deity who communicated in human language with them. Scholastic exegesis took place largely without benefit of the Greek and Hebrew original languages as in, for instance, the cases of prominent thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham. The allegorical method developed to aid ancient thinkers in using the stories of the Greek and Roman gods for some meaningful purpose had been appropriated by Jewish thinkers like Philo as they dealt with sex and violence in the Old Testament texts.<sup>3</sup> This method let the reader's presuppositions shape his understanding of the text.

Luther not only learned from scholastic teachers of the Bible, however. As an Augustinian friar, he benefited from the monastic tradition of interpretation that gave greater emphasis to the literal text and its historical settings. Whether he read manuscripts left behind by the masterful representative of this tradition, Hermann von Scheldersche (1290-1357), who also had lived for a while in the Augustinian cloister in Erfurt, is not clear.<sup>4</sup> What is known is the cloister did cultivate a deeper knowledge of Augustine than had earlier been the case among Augustinian Eremites, and its teachers reflected the growing interest in rhetoric and the ancient language cultivated by the biblical humanists.

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3. Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*. Volume 1: *From the Old Testament to Origen*, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 33-45.

4. Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

## The Wittenberg Curriculum Reform Team, Luther and Melanchthon

Luther emerged slowly both from his early practice of this faith centered on the mass celebrated at the church of Saint George just up the hill from his parents' smelter in Mansfeld and from the instruction of his university education by scholastic theologians. In the 1510s, he gradually came to understand that he did not have to perform well enough to merit God's initial favor through his—largely sacred or religious—good works. Instead, God was coming to him, speaking with him, forgiving him out of his unmerited and unconditional grace, and freeing him to be bonded to God and his neighbors. This development took place in part against the background of his exercise of pastoral care as an Augustinian brother and in part in the context of the monastic style of biblical study. It fired his curiosity about what God had said in Holy Scripture and immersed him less in allegory, focused him more on the literal meaning of Scripture, and largely shaped his thinking through the study of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, sparked by those now labeled “biblical humanists.”

Luther acquired Johannes Reuchlin's Hebrew grammar and dictionary three years after its appearance in print in 1506. In 1516, he quickly put Desiderius Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*, the first edited Greek New Testament, to use and he enlisted *Paraphrases* and *Annotations* to strengthen his interpretation of the New Testament. In the midst of this reorientation of the way he practiced the theological trade, Luther welcomed a new colleague to the University of Wittenberg, a twenty-one year old star in the world of biblical humanism, Philip Melanchthon. These two stimulated and enriched each other's thinking and developed a new theological curriculum. They discarded the scholastic focus on the questions posed by Peter Lombard four hundred years earlier, substituting for Lombard a range of lectures on biblical books. Lombard's gathering of the opinions of the ancient Fathers on a long series of disputed or difficult questions had dominated theological learning for most of the intervening period. His *Sententiae* quickly disappeared from the Wittenberg theological faculty's course offerings as Luther and Melanchthon led colleagues in a curricular revolution.<sup>5</sup>

Both assumed their professorships, Luther in 1512/1513 and Melanchthon in 1518, steeped in medieval scholastic methods of education. Luther's reading had provided him a broad background in the classical works of ancient philosophers, poets, dramatists, and historians.<sup>6</sup> Aesop remained a favorite throughout his life,

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5. Helmar Junghans, “Martin Luthers Einfluß auf die Wittenberger Universitätsreform,” in *Die Theologische Fakultät Wittenberg 1502 bis 1602: Beiträge zur 500. Wiederkehr des Gründungsjahres der Leucorea*, ed. Irene Dingel and Günter Wartenberg (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 55-70.

6. Reinhard Schwarz, “Beobachtungen zu Luthers Bekanntschaft mit antiken Dichtern und Geschichtsschreibern,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 54 (1987): 7-22, Carl P.E. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven. The Roman Rhetor and Luther's Reformation* (Brill, 2018).

betraying his literary mind's delight in proverbs.<sup>7</sup> As he prepared to enter his novitiate with the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt, he took with him only two books, works of Vergil and Plautus.<sup>8</sup> Once there, he absorbed pious literature, above all the *Legenda aurea*, Jacob of Voragine's thirteenth century collection of stories of the saints' lives, in the daily *lectio* at mealtime. His education at the University of Erfurt, before and during his time in the cloister, immersed him in Aristotle. Despite his reputation as fierce opponent of Aristotle, his dismissal of the Stagarite and his selective use of the tools and insights he provided demand precision in our treatment of the topic "Luther and Aristotle." He never discarded Aristotelian tools of analysis.<sup>9</sup> Above all, he read the Bible, dodging attempts by superiors to tame his fascination with the sacred text.<sup>10</sup>

Melanchthon came to his professorship with a similar background, although he had more thoroughly absorbed the influence of the new learning propagated by the movement we now call "biblical humanism." His reputation had spread quickly, in part under the aegis of his distant relative Johannes Reuchlin, the pioneer of the revival of Hebrew north of the Alps and a learned Greek scholar. At age 21, he was a prize for the University of Wittenberg when he arrived in August 1518.<sup>11</sup>

Luther's exercise of his professorship had already foreshadowed what he and Melanchthon would engineer as a revolutionary alteration of the curriculum of theological faculty. The highest degree in the medieval scholastic hierarchy was the "*Doctor in Biblia*," indicating that mastery of Holy Scripture served as the pinnacle of theological learning. However, most professors had continued to lecture on the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard as well as biblical books after achieving the degree. Luther began his lectures as a *Doctor in Biblia* in 1513 by treating the most popular book of the medieval theological curriculum, the Psalms, and continued with Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews; he never returned to Lombard. He was about to return to the Psalms when Melanchthon arrived in August 1518.

Melanchthon's primary and secondary education had provided a similar foundation for university studies as that of Luther, with a broad education in the spectrum of ancient pagan authors available at their time. In the early decades of the sixteenth century, some of the works of those authors appeared in new or initial editions, in Latin translation, or the Latin original as well as original Greek

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7. Carl P. E. Springer, *Luther's Aesop* (The Sixteenth Century Journal Press, 2011).

8. *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Böhlau, 1883-1993 [henceforth WA]), TR [Tischreden] 1: 44,23, Nr. 166.

9. Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason, a Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); Theodor Dieter, *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles. Historisch-systematische Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (de Gruyter, 2001).

10. Johannes Mathesius, *Historien, Von des ... Manns Gottes/ Doctoris Martini Luthers anfang, lehr, leben vnd sterben ...* (Johann vom Berg's heirs and Ulrich Neuber, 1566), 3b.

11. Heinz Scheible, *Melanchthon, Vermittler der Reformation* (Beck, 2016), 12-33.

texts, thus expanding the field of study in philosophy, poetry, history, and other fields of learning. Galen's texts became vital for medical study, Justinian's Code for the curriculum in the faculty of law. Melanchthon began his university studies in Heidelberg at the age of twelve in 1509 and moved to Tübingen in 1512. There, he developed as a brilliant representative of the "new learning."<sup>12</sup>

Melanchthon's inaugural address, delivered on August 28, 1518, called for the "improvement of education of the youth." He concentrated on the "undergraduate" curriculum of the faculty of the arts to which he had been called, but the address also laid out his program for the study of theology:

Regarding theology, it is of utmost importance how they equip themselves for their study. For more than all other areas of study, theology really demands the highest possible capacity for thinking, for intensive concentration, and for precision in analysis. The fragrance of the incense of the Lord is sweeter than the aromatic spices of human fields of learning. Led by the Holy Spirit, accompanied by our education in the arts and sciences, it is possible for us to find access to that which is sacred . . . Since the writings that form the basis of theology are written some in Hebrew, some in Greek, we must learn the other languages, so that we do not have to meet the theologians like "masks unable to speak." Only when we return to the original text will we have access to the words with their luster and their true significance, and, to use a figure of speech, the true and real meaning of the letters, which we are seeking, will reveal itself to us in the glorious light of the midday sun.<sup>13</sup>

Melanchthon's appeal for reform reflected the ideals of the wider curricular reform movement labeled "biblical humanism."<sup>14</sup> Humanist principles for the reform of the university curriculum began circulating among scholars north of the Alps a generation before Luther and Melanchthon. Luther's instructors in Erfurt had taught in scholastic style, but the university itself had a humanist circle built around a canon from nearby Gotha, Konrad Mutian.<sup>15</sup> Both Luther and Melanchthon had absorbed the humanist insistence on a return to the original languages of texts, which for theology meant learning Greek and Hebrew. They also both shared the humanist emphasis on good rhetoric, not at the expense of logic, but as that which would aid effective transmittal

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12. John R. Schneider, *Philip Melanchthon's Rhetorical Construal of Biblical Authority*, *Oratio Sacra* (Mellen, 1990), 25-50.

13. *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* [Studien-Ausgabe], ed. Robert Stupperich 3: (Bertelsmann, 1961), 40; Scheible, *Melanchthon, Vermittler*, 39-40.

14. Markus Wriedt, "Humanistische Reform – evangelische Reformation. Melanchthons Beiträge zu den Reformen der Wittenberger Universität zwischen 1518 und 1536 und deren theologische Begründung," in *Die Leucorea zur Zeit des Späten Melanchthon. Institutionen und Formen gelehrter Bildung um 1550*, ed. Matthias Asche et al. (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 117-148.

15. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Harvard University Press, 1963), 130-154.

of the ideas that logic produced.<sup>16</sup> Lewis Spitz argued that the third generation of this educational reform movement, Melancthon and many of his contemporaries, wed ecclesiastical reform to this educational reform movement, giving both new significance and impact in European society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Luther was seeking “a new posture, a new *Standort* for theology that is deeply existential in its orientation and pastoral in its intention,” while at the same time intellectually grounded in the serious examination of the biblical text along with a lively interest in all of God’s creation.<sup>18</sup> He did not lay out his program for curricular reform in such a public address, but he did give certain hints of his rather extensive thoughts on university curriculum. In 1516, his student Bernhard Bernhardt proposed theses for debate on the freedom of the will, the critical point of the content of the theology that was being dismantled under Luther’s leadership in Wittenberg.<sup>19</sup> In September of 1517, Luther composed the next stage of the process of curricular change, addressing the scholastic method’s dependence on Aristotle: “the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.”<sup>20</sup> His *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* of 1520 appealed chiefly for abolition of abuses in the church and the reform of ecclesiastical institutions and life, but he also called for reform of the universities. “There is no work more worthy of pope or emperor [the two possible sources of the approval to establish a university in the German empire of the time] than a thorough reform of the universities. And on the other hand, nothing could be more devilish or disastrous than unreformed universities.”<sup>21</sup> Further, he criticized the university as a place

where loose living is practiced, where little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith, and where only the blind heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ. In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle’s *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Concerning the Soul*, and *Ethics*, which hitherto have been thought to be his best books, should be completely discarded along with all the rest of his books that boast about nature despite the fact that nothing can be learned from them either about matters of nature or matters of the spirit.<sup>22</sup>

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16. Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Harvard University Press, 1963), Leif Grane, *Martinus Noster. Luther in the German Reform Movement 1518-1521* (Zabern, 1994).

17. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., “The Third Generation of German Renaissance Humanists,” in *Aspects of the Renaissance, A Symposium*, ed. Archibald R. Lewis (University of Texas Press, 1967), 105-121.

18. Herrmann, “Wittenberg Pastoral Formation,” 60.

19. WA 1:145-151.

20. WA 1:226,26-27, *Luther’s Works* (Concordia/Fortress, 1958- [henceforth LW]). 31: 12, thesis 50.

21. WA 6:458,37-40, LW 44:202.

22. WA 6:457,31-39, LW 44:200.

Luther went on to advocate retention of Aristotle's *Logic*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics*, although he thought that they should be taught without reading the medieval commentary tradition that accompanied them in university instruction. Cicero's *Rhetoric* was being treated without any tradition of comment, and Aristotle could be as well. Aristotle, like Cicero, provided worthy insights into the use of language. Luther's harsh critique of Aristotle stems from the Stagarite's failure to define humanity without reference to a personal Creator who had designed His human creatures and determined the shape of their lives, a Creator who wanted to remain in constant communication with human beings. Therefore, Luther condemned Aristotle's *Ethics* because "it opposes divine grace and all Christian virtues."<sup>23</sup> He commended the teaching of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew as well as mathematics and history to the experts in these fields. He expressed similar hesitation to give counsel for instruction in the two upper faculties alongside theology, medicine, and law. He continued with a lengthy appeal for a reduction of the number of books printed and read so that full concentration could be devoted to the study of Holy Scripture.<sup>24</sup> He himself did not contribute to the reduction of published books. His publications did join the books of his colleagues in transforming the curriculum for theological students.

### The Scholarship of Luther and Melancthon

Wittenberg students of theology heard lectures from and interacted with Luther's and Melancthon's colleagues in the Wittenberg theological faculty, Johannes Bugenhagen and Justus Jonas, and from 1528 on, Caspar Cruciger. All three shared their scholarship primarily in published biblical commentaries.<sup>25</sup> The students absorbed the practice of scholarship presented by all five, but Luther and Melancthon served as a model not only for the students but also for these colleagues. Many of their students had chosen Wittenberg as the place to get their grounding in the liberal arts; others came from liberal arts studies at other universities to Wittenberg to learn theology. Wittenberg did, of course, offer a rich palette of lectures on the trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic as its arts faculty had expanded the quadrivium beyond the traditional mathematical courses and astronomy. In Wittenberg the arts curriculum included a broader spread of subjects on which lectures were offered, as varied as history and botany.<sup>26</sup> Music as a distinct discipline, vital to the quadrivium in secondary education, was generally not present at the university level.

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23. WA 6:458,725, LW 44:201.

24. WA 6:459,1-462,11, LW 44:201-207.

25. Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God. The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Baker Academic, 2016), 262-266.

26. Robert Kolb, "The Wittenberg Impact on University Education and the Christian Liberal Arts," in *My Savior's Guest. A Festschrift in Honor of Erling Teigen*, ed. Thomas Rank (Lulu Press, 2021), 91-108.

Both Luther and Melancthon grounded their exercise of their calling as professor in the curricular revolution that humanism brought about. That focused both of them on the biblical text in its original language, concentrating their efforts on determining what words and phrases meant and how grammar and syntax functioned. Brian Cummings notes that “Reformation writing and reading reinvented Christian lexis and often coined new words for its purposes.”<sup>27</sup> However, Luther and Melancthon made every effort to retain traditional terminology while filling the old wineskins with fresh new wine, pressed from their use of Greek and Hebrew. Their skills of assessing the biblical terms and expressions with the tools of grammar, logic, and rhetoric drove them ever deeper into the text and then drew them from the text into conversations with their contemporaries and proclamation to followers and foes alike.<sup>28</sup> Together, they initiated a lexicographical revolution by calling theologians out of the Aristotelian maze into the pastures of the Hebrew and Hellenistic thinking of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles.

Supporting the scholarship of its professors, the university had possessed a library begun by Elector Frederick the Wise in the early years of Luther’s professorship. Georg Spalatin, the elector’s amanuensis and Luther’s friend, had organized and maintained a collection that had grown to some 1,600 volumes by 1536. By the time of Luther’s death, the library contained about three thousand volumes, one-third of which treated theological material. The collection was located in the elector’s castle. Professors could consult these volumes including versions of the Bible in several languages, ancient philosophers and poets, the early fathers of the church, medieval masters, and contemporary theologians, as well as books covering various aspects of the liberal arts, jurisprudence, and medicine. The collection offered authors from across the European intellectual landscape, with books published by more than sixty printers from near and far.<sup>29</sup>

Luther’s teaching proceeded from his reading. His lectures reflected the breadth and depth of his reading of ancient poets and philosophers, ancient church fathers, medieval theologians, and even a contemporary work of fiction, the *Theuerdanck*, commissioned by Emperor Maximilian I.<sup>30</sup> His familiarity with ancient Greek and Latin literature stems from his secondary and undergraduate university education, and his training in theology, at the University of Erfurt and in his Augustinian cloister, steeped him in the literature of the ancient fathers and medieval commentators, with some exposure to the Bible. He knew biblical commentary from the late medieval ages and used the *Glossa ordinaria*.<sup>31</sup>

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27. Cummings, *Literary Culture*, 11.

28. Cummings, *Literary Culture*, 60-68, 88-101, 120-127.

29. Sachiko Kusakawa, *A Wittenberg University Library Catalogue of 1536* (LP Publications, 1995); cf. Ernest Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times. The Reformation from a New Perspective* (Concordia 1950), 244-253.

30. Cummings, *Literary Culture*, 68-79.

31. Karlfried Froehlich, “Martin Luther and the *Glossa Ordinaria*,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 29- 48.

Luther's model of scholarship reflected his wide command of the literature of the past but primarily focused on the study of Scripture.<sup>32</sup> His lectures demonstrate that he put ancient wisdom, pagan and Christian, to use in educating students. He expected them to know the "Great Books." Luther had climbed the academic ladder by lecturing on typical medieval texts and authors including Augustine, Anselm, Peter Lombard, Bonaventura, William of Occam, Giorgio Valla, and his contemporary Johannes Trithemius. His copies of their works from which he lectured reveal something of his method of study and his active engagement with the text. His highlighting in red and black ink, his marginal notes that conversed with the author whom he was reading, his references to other works that he was reading, and his slashes that interpret the rhythm of author's thinking all point to his careful and critical habits of learning.<sup>33</sup>

Luther modeled the scholarly study of Scripture in the service of pastoral formation in his lectures, some of which found their way quickly into print. He departed from the methods of scholastic theology in his way of interpreting the text. Although he retained something of the medieval style of offering comment in glosses and scholia in the 1520s, as he lectured on the minor prophets,<sup>34</sup> he informed readers of his 1519 Galatians commentary that they should not expect a commentary in the traditional style but rather "a testimony of my faith" that took a narrative form verging at times on the homiletical.<sup>35</sup> His lectures reflected his belief that a command of the original language is vital for understanding it, even if the students were reading the text in the traditional Vulgate. His early immersion in Hebrew, with the help of Johannes Reuchlin's dictionary and grammar, fostered a sensitivity to the dynamics of the Hebrew language that drove his interpreting eye ever deeper into the specific words or phrases and the wider context of the text. He passed this approach to the Bible on to his students.<sup>36</sup> Although he frequently

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32. Among many works on the subject, see William M. Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture. The Messiah in Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series, Pickwick, 2017), and Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Fortress, 2013), Kolb, *Enduring Word*, 132-173.

33. *Martin Luther. Erfurter Annotationen 1509-1510/11*, ed. Jun Matsuura, (Böhlau, 2009).

34. Andrew J. Niggemann, *Martin Luther's Hebrew in Mid-Career. The Minor Prophets Translation* (Mohr/Siebeck, 2019); Robert Kolb, "Die Kleinen Propheten als Zeitgenossen der Reformatoren. Zur Auslegung des Zwölfprophetenbuchs in der lutherischen Spätrenaissance," *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 38 (2014): 21-43.

35. WA 2: 449, 16-19. Cf. Kenneth Hagen, "What Did the Term Commentarius Mean to Sixteenth-Century Theologians," in *Théorie et pratique de l'exégèse, Actes du troisième colloque international sur l'histoire de l'exégèse biblique au XVIe siècle*, ed. Irena Backus and Francis Higman (Droz, 1990), 25-28, 31-32.

36. Andrew J. Niggemann, "Martin Luther's Use of Blended Hebrew and German Idioms in His Translation of the Hebrew Bible," *Harvard Theological Review* 113 (2020): 483-499, Erik H. Herrmann, "Luther and the Importance of the Hebrew Heritage for His World of Thought," in *Simul. Inquiries into Luther's Expression of the Christian Life*, ed. Robert Kolb, Torbjörn Johansson and Daniel Johansson (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 49-61.

criticized rabbinical exegesis, he also took seriously the insights rendered from their exegesis that was available to him in the Christian Hebraists of his time. Frequent references to Nicholas of Lyra also were used to enlighten students, even if he often criticized Lyra's exposition.<sup>37</sup> His command of patristic interpretations, aided by the *Glossa ordinaria*, enabled him to draw on the best of the ancient fathers' insights while steering students clear of their errors; he, too, had deparentified them and made them worthy conversation partners.<sup>38</sup> His examination of biblical texts confronted questions and problems as they occurred there. John Maxfield observes, "Luther's confidence in the sacred text did not prevent him from asking tough questions of it, however, or from sometimes simply musing over its strange silence."<sup>39</sup> He took its strange expressions and presentation of the mysteries of God's revelation in stride. When passages seemed to contradict, he occasionally tried to find a harmonizing solution but also could just let the texts rest as they were.<sup>40</sup>

The students also needed to learn as much as possible about historical context in order to understand the references and the perceptions of the biblical writers. His lectures dwelt often on analysis of words and grammatical usage. Luther had presented a hermeneutical guide to the epistle to the Romans in the form of the definitions of seven key terms essential for understanding the text.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, hearing his lectures required at least some command of the Hebrew and Greek that they had been required to take before entering theological study. He taught the students to be thinking in terms of the Hebrew or Greek behind what they were reading in the Latin text, cultivating a sensitivity to the Hebraisms and Graecisms underlying what might seem awkward in Latin or German.<sup>42</sup> His grounding in the Graeco-Roman scholarship of old continued to shape his lectures. For instance, in his lectures on the epistle to Titus, he put to use the rhetorical analysis he had

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37. Stephen Burnett, "What Luther Could Have Known of Judaism," in *Juden, Christen und Muslime im Zeitalter der Reformation*. ed. Matthias Pohl (Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, 2020), 133-146; Siegfried Raeder, *Die Benutzung des masoretischen Textes bei Luther in der Zeit zwischen der ersten und zweiten Psalmenvorlesung (1515-1518)* (Mohr/Siebeck, 1967); idem, *Das Hebräische bei Luther untersucht bis zum Ende der ersten Psalmenvorlesung* (Mohr-Siebeck, 1961), idem, *Grammatica Theologica. Studien zu Luthers Operationes in Psalmos* (Mohr/Siebeck, 1977).

38. Scott H. Hendrix, "Deparentifying the Fathers. The Reformers and Patristic Authority," in *Auctoritas Patrum. Zum Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Leif Grane, Alfred Schindler, Markus Wriedt (von Zabern, 1993), 1:55-68.

39. John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Truman State University Press, 2008), 35.

40. Kolb, *Enduring Word*, 85-89.

41. WA DB 7: 6/7, 1-12/13, 26, LW 35:369-372.

42. WA 25:28, 15-19, LW 29:33. The following is taken from Robert Kolb, "Martin Luther's Pedagogical Exposition of the Letter to Titus," in *Always Reforming. Reflection on Martin Luther and Biblical Studies. Essays in Honor of Mark A. Seifrid*, ed. Channing L. Crisler and Robert L. Plummer (Lexham, 2021), 50-64.

learned from the works of Quintilian and Cicero and could explain a text with their technical rhetorical vocabulary, e.g. “*antonomasia*,”<sup>43</sup> “*tapinosis*,”<sup>44</sup> and “*praeocupatio*.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, a range of ancient authors aided his interpretation of words, including Pliny and Suetonius,<sup>46</sup> Vergil,<sup>47</sup> and Aristotle. He could draw on a range of patristic commentators and often took Jerome as his conversation partner,<sup>48</sup> sometimes positively, sometimes with sharp critique. He followed, for instance, Jerome’s classification of certain books in the Old Testament Vulgate as apocrypha and his division of the New Testament into homologoumena and antilegomena.<sup>49</sup> His scholarship, with its roots in his scholastic education, blossomed as it was fed and watered by the new humanistic curricular reform.

Luther was well aware of the kinds of curiosity that Augustine had condemned in his *Confessions* (chapter 35), such as the desire to peek into the hidden mysteries of the Creator whose majesty lies beyond the comprehension of his human creatures.<sup>50</sup> In no way did that preclude, however, Luther’s commending the proper curiosity, an inquisitiveness that could discover and invent as part of the way God provides for His people. He made searching the heavens for something that would give mastery over the Creator off-limits for his students, but a curiosity that would aid them in being agents of God’s providence belonged to their calling as people privileged to study and imagine, for human minds shaped by the mind of Christ naturally seek to know more about creation for the benefit of society.<sup>51</sup> The entire range of human knowledge, as a gift from God, promotes the welfare of society and thus serves as one of God’s instruments to defeat Satan’s attacks on the welfare of God’s human creatures. God sends those freed by the gospel from selfish use of such knowledge into His world to use it to serve.

Melanchthon’s reputation as scholar and “preceptor of Germany” rested upon his knowledge of Greek and also Hebrew. He held three formal academic orations at the University of Wittenberg on the Hebrew. He noted that although by his time good German translations were available, the church needed pastors who possessed the erudition to deal with the writings of the prophets and apostles in their original

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43. WA 25:33,29-30, LW 29:39.

44. WA 25:36, 11-13, LW 29:43.

45. WA 25:68, 19-20, LW 29:88.

46. WA 25:12,31-33, LW 29:12.

47. WA 25:54,3-5, LW 29:67.

48. WA 25:25,27-29, LW 29:29.

49. Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation. Volume 2: From Late Antiquity to the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. James O. Duke (Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 40.

50. Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God. Volume I: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Fortress, 2018), 5-55.

51. Robert Kolb, “Luther’s Providential God,” in *The Interface of Science, Theology, and Religion. Essays in Honor of Alister E. McGrath*, ed. Dennis Ngien (Pickwick, 2019), 48-65.

wording. Indeed, in the New Testament, he asserted, many expressions cannot be understood without knowing Hebrew since the New Testament authors had formulated their thoughts within the context of Hebrew ways of thinking. In addition, if the theologian and pastor did not have a good command of Hebrew, he could not read Jerome, Nicholas of Lyra, or Paul of Burgos, to say nothing of contemporary commentators.<sup>52</sup> Melancthon also wrote a similar oration on Greek in 1549, which his student Veit Winsheim delivered. The oration underlined the importance of the languages for the battle against Satan, whose “guile and rage” continually threaten the church as he leads those who are interpreting the Bible into error. To guard against this, the pastor needed a firm command of the ancient languages.<sup>53</sup>

Melancthon’s scholarship expressed itself in his pioneering adaptation of the “*loci*” method of organizing knowledge by topic.<sup>54</sup> His first collection of “topics,” composed in 1521 under the title “*Loci communes rerum theologicorum*,” was intended as a guidebook for the study of Romans.<sup>55</sup> In the 1530s, he began constructing a substitute for Peter Lombard’s survey of the topics of theology, arranged according to an analytic presentation of all of theology. This “*Loci communes theologici*,” published in 1535, invented Lutheran study of doctrine,<sup>56</sup> understood as both the content of teaching and the active conveying of the subject matter to readers.<sup>57</sup> It offered a system for arranging biblical teaching in a logical structure and was to function as a tool for aiding the student’s efforts at conveying the biblical message, a framework for their practical application of what they had learned. His biblical

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52. “De lingua hebraica” (1546), CR 11:708-715. Three years later the Praeceptor repeated this concern but also emphasized how important knowledge of the languages was for checking translations and for grasping the most important concepts of Holy Scripture, CR 11:867-877, e.g., the distinction of “*fides*” and “*fiducia*,” CR 11:869-73 (867-77). His last public oration, March 18, 1560, also treated the study of Hebrew, CR 12:385-392.

53. “De studiis linguae Graecae,” CR 11:855-867.

54. Paul Joachimson, “Loci communes. Eine Untersuchung zur Geistesgeschichte des Humanismus und der Reformation,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 8 (1926): 27-97; Thomas Töpfer, “Philipp Melancthons Loci communes. Systematisierung, Vermittlung und Rezeption gelehrten Wissens zwischen Humanismus, Reformation und Konfessionspolitik (1521-1590),” in *Lehren und Lernen im Zeitalter der Reformation*, ed. Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2012), 127-147; Nicole Kuroпка, *Philipp Melancthon: Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft, Ein Gelehrter im Dienst der Kirche (1526-1532)* (Mohr Siebeck, 2002), esp. 171-187; Sandra Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus. Philipp Melancthon’s Humanist Concept of Philosophy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

55. *Melancthons Werke in Auswahl. Band II, I*, ed. Hans Engelland (Bertelsmann, 1952), 3-163.

56. *Melancthons Werke in Auswahl. Band II, I*, ed. Hans Engelland (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1952), 164-351, *Band II, 2* (Bertelsmann, 1953), 1-816 ; see Helmar Junghans, “Philipp Melancthons Loci theologici als Lehrbuch während seiner Lebenszeit,” in *Philipp Melancthon. Lehrer Deutschlands, Reformator Europas*, ed. Irene Dingel and Armin Kohnle (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 153-161.

57. Peter Fraenkel, “Revelation and Tradition, Notes on Some Aspects of Doctrinal Continuity in the Theology of Philip Melancthon,” *Studia theologica* 13 (1959): 97-133.

commentaries modeled interpretation of Holy Scripture for his students.<sup>58</sup> His use of the ancient fathers of the church also provided a pattern for their study of those fathers,<sup>59</sup> within the context of his “deparentifying” them, treating them as conversation partners rather than “fathers.”<sup>60</sup> His study of texts depended on original texts, and his philological skill and knowledge allowed him to probe the texts of Scripture, the church fathers, and the Greek and Roman philosophers with sensitivity and insight.

Melanchthon’s scholarly activity extended beyond theology, especially in his textbooks on rhetoric and logic,<sup>61</sup> which guided the way in which students thought and taught. His learning spread beyond the university through print, with works in several genres. His son-in-law Caspar Peucer, professor of medicine in Wittenberg, edited a four-volume collected works to facilitate use of many of his contributions.<sup>62</sup> Most influential were his treatments of rhetoric and dialectics,<sup>63</sup> which he put to use in his lectures on biblical books<sup>64</sup> and which shaped the way in which his students

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58. *Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) and the Commentary*, ed. M. Patrick Graham and Timothy J. Wengert (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), especially the essay by Timothy J. Wengert, “The Biblical Commentaries of Philip Melanchthon,” reprinted in Irene Dingel, Robert Kolb, Nicole Kuroepka, and Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melanchthon, Theologian in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 43-76.

59. Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum. The Function of the patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Droz, 1961); H. Ashley Hall, *Melanchthon and the Cappadocians. A Reception of Greek Patristic Sources in the Sixteenth Century* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Timothy J. Wengert, “O vigilantissimis oculis veterum omnium commentaries excusserit.” Philip Melanchthon’s patristic exegesis,” in *Die Patristik in der Biblexegese des 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Harrassowitz, 1999), 115-134; Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon and Augustine of Hippo,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 22 (2008): 249-267.

60. Hendrix, “Deparentifying the Fathers.”

61. Uwe Schnell, *Die homiletische Theorie Philip Melanchthons* (Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1968).

62. *Omnium operum Reverendi Viri Philippi Melanthonis, Pars prima [-quarta]* (Wittenberg: Johannes Crato, 1562-1564), with reprintings to 1601 (four of volume 1, three of volumes 2 and 4, two of volume 3). Cf. Timothy J. Wengert, “The Scope and Contents of Philip Melanchthon’s *Opera omnia*, Wittenberg, 1562-1564,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 88 (1997): 57-76.

63. William P. Weaver, “Volume Introduction,” in *Philip Melanchthon. Schriften zur Dialektik und Rhetorik/ Principal Writings on Dialectic and Rhetoric. Principal Writings on Rhetoric*, ed. William P. Weaver, Stefan Strohm and Volkhard Weis, in *Philip Melanchthon. Opera Omnia. Opera Philosophica 2/2* (de Gruyter, 2017), XXXIII-LIV; William P. Weaver, “Triplex est Copia: Philip Melanchthon’s Invention of the Rhetorical Figures,” *Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 29 (2011), 367-402.

64. Timothy J. Wengert, “Philip Melanchthon’s 1522 annotations on Romans and the Lutheran origins of rhetorical criticism,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation, Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Eerdmans, 1996), 118-140; William P. Weaver, “A More Excellent Way: Philip Melanchthon’s Corinthians Lectures of 1521-22,” *Renaissance and Reformation/ Renaissance et Réforme* 37 (2014): 31-63.

preached as well as taught. His assumption of the authorship of a history of the world from his friend Johann Carion reflects his introducing formal lectures on history into the Western European university curriculum.<sup>65</sup> Melanchthon's lectures on classical authors encouraged his students to read ancient literature of several kinds.<sup>66</sup> Several students edited Melanchthon's epigrams as models for good Latin poetry.<sup>67</sup> Both he and Luther supported colleagues and stimulated scholarship across the Wittenberg arts curriculum.<sup>68</sup>

### Methods of Instruction in Wittenberg

Wittenberg students learned through the lectures of their professors, through disputations arranged by their professors, and through formal orations.<sup>69</sup> As important as the medium of print was for the spread of Wittenberg thought, its student culture depended heavily on oral communication, even if the necessity of a printing press to provide students with the texts on which their professors were lecturing had been clear from the beginning.<sup>70</sup> Luther presumed that his students would become pastors or teachers, and so his lectures aimed at cultivating a sense of their future vocations in them. According to John Maxfield, "Luther attempted to form in his students a new identity ... Luther's Genesis lectures shed light on how he used scripture to instill in his students a worldview that reflected the ideals of the Lutheran Reformation and that, therefore, contributed to the break between Evangelicals and those who remained within the papal church."<sup>71</sup> His lectures, for instance, on the epistle to Titus presented the qualifications that Paul prescribed there and put them in terms of pastoral service at the time. Luther's method of instruction involved clear definitions of biblical concepts as used in the text at hand within the context of meaning and use of the word or phrase throughout Scripture. In his lectures, Luther intended to train his students to find in biblical texts "teaching and admonition." "By his teaching he sets down what is to be believed by faith, and by his exhortation he sets forth what is to be done."<sup>72</sup> In both, Luther

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65. Mark A. Lotito, *The Reformation of Historical Thought* (Brill, 2019).

66. Asaph Ben Tov, *Lutheran Humanists and Greek Antiquity. Melanchthonian Scholarship between Universal History and Pedagogy* (Brill, 2009).

67. *Philippi Melanthonis epigrammatvm, libri tres* (Peter Seitz, 1560).

68. Robert Kolb, "The Wittenberg Impact," 91-108.

69. The range of these activities is shown in Christiane Domtera-Schleicher, *Die Wittenberger Scripta publice proposita (1540-1569): Universitätsbekanntmachungen im Umfeld des späten Melanchthon* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2021).

70. Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther. 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (Penguin, 2015), 39-46.

71. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 2; cf. 216-221. Maxfield examines Luther's teaching methods, p. 32-59.

72. WA 25:6, 10-17, LW 29:3.

demonstrated how the law and the gospel are to be taught and how each is used in admonition to warn against sin and to encourage trust and obedience.

Luther repeatedly demonstrated to his students how to assess a text grammatically, syntactically, and historically. He kept an eye on how its message fit into the world of the hearers his students would encounter. He loved proverbs and imaginatively chose metaphors and analogies to clarify a text. His applications of a text attempted to bring the biblical author into the midst of sixteenth-century European cultures. This reflected his conviction that God's Word for sinners presents his expectations that they trust in him and that out of that trust fearing and loving him in a life of new obedience. Before that could happen, his students were to be proclaiming the love of God for sinners in Christ who died and rose again to liberate them from sin and to take possession of them and reign over their lives.

Luther's lectures also prepared students for dealing with the continued presence of elements of medieval teaching and piety they would encounter in the parishes to which they would be called. His lectures continued the process of deconstruction of the practices of the past that he had launched in 1520 with his *Open Letter to the German Nobility* and *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. His lectures also continued the construction of a new evangelical piety proposed in *On Good Works* and *Christian Freedom*. He cultivated the rejection and abolition of "ceremonies such as those of the Pharisees, rosaries, vows, masses, vigils, monastic works of the papists, abandonment of material goods by the Anabaptists"—"the outward show of chanting through the night, fasting, torturing the body" (the last point a reflection of Luther's life in the cloister). He strove to lead his students to foster congregations "where God's Word is diligently used. There is pure worship. Souls are aroused to faith, love toward God and neighbor is taught. This is our, the Christian, religion, to believe in Christ and to be moved to compassion for the poor and the weak ... and if the cross approaches, that is the complete Christian religion."<sup>73</sup>

Like Luther, Melancthon centered his teaching of Scripture on Christ within the context of the proper distinction of law and gospel.<sup>74</sup> He and Luther had constructed a common understanding of the justification of sinners by God's grace through trust in Christ.<sup>75</sup> This trust, Melancthon emphasized, bears fruit in new obedience. His lectures cultivated skills at providing comfort to bruised consciences and calling sinners to repentance, instructing them then to walk in Christ's footsteps. Melancthon's method of instruction put to use the elements of his scholarship, acquainting students who heard his lectures and orations with vital elements of the

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73. WA 25:10,31-11,16, LW 29:11-12.

74. Ai He (Luke) Zheng, *Law and Gospel in Martin Luther's Pastoral Teachings as Seen in His Lecture Notes. Finding Guidance in Genesis and Galatians to Serve the Household of God* (Lang, 2016).

75. Rainer Flogaus, "Luther versus Melancthon? Zur Frage der Einheit der Wittenberger Reformation in der Rechtfertigungslehre," *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 91 (2000), 6-46.

biblical message, offering insights into the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of the Greek or Hebrew texts and the usage of classical authors and fathers of the church.

His foremost tool for aiding students in absorbing the material that they were studying for future use as pastors or teachers was the “locus,” or “commonplace,” a topic under which applicable insights from their reading or hearing of his lectures for future use in their own teaching could be gleaned. Thus, for the Wittenberg theologians, “*Lehre*” embraced all forms of proclamation or preaching as well as instruction apart from the pulpit. “Teaching”—“*Lehre*” in German, “*doctrina*” in Latin—functioned as a verbal noun, as Peter Fraenkel argued,<sup>76</sup> that is, it referred both to the content of what was being conveyed to learners and the activity of conveying that content. In this they echo the humanist emphasis on teaching that is “true” or “pure,” or that communicated the intended message clearly.<sup>77</sup> To teach well, according to Melancthon’s humanist rhetorical theory, one must organize the sources that help to understand and express basic ideas or topics. His rhetorical theory mentioned above functioned as he treated biblical books and other texts and topics in his lecture courses, turning his scholarship to the preparation of his students for the practice of their vocation as pastors or teachers. His students learned the art of constructing topics well. Among other personal uses, those among his students who later became professors and wrote commentaries from their own university lectures often offered readers a few “loci” at the end of a chapter or a periscope to aid them in developing a homiletical or instructional use of the material.<sup>78</sup>

The disputation, a defense of a set of thetical statements that was supposed to weather the critique of others served as an auxiliary instructional method. Integral to the medieval university, disputations functioned as the critical examination in the bestowal of a degree, from bachelor through master to doctor, which referred to the professional faculties of theology, medicine, and law. Practice disputations, dubbed “circular” because the students traded roles as defender and critic, also helped develop students’ skills in logic and rhetoric. Disputations also provided professors the laboratories in which they could expose new ideas and tentative speculative ventures to the usually friendly, but sharp, critique of their fellows and their upper level students. The spirit of the disputation resembled the jousting of the knights, with sharp verbal confrontations in a cordial spirit of seeking the truth, proving one’s logical prowess, or testing new insights. Wittenberg’s faculties abandoned the disputation in the 1523 but, in the curricular reform of 1533, resumed them as a standard part of student learning in frequent practice sessions alongside their use in the formal testing.<sup>79</sup>

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76. Fraenkel, “Revelation and Tradition.”

77. *Vera Doctrina. Zur Begriffsgeschichte der Lehre von Augustin bis Descartes/L’Idée de doctrine d’Augustin à Descartes*, ed. Philippe Büttgen et al. (Harrasowitz, 2009).

78. Robert Kolb, “Teaching the Text, The Commonplace Method in Sixteenth Century Lutheran Biblical Commentary,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 49 (1987): 571-585.

79. See Christopher Boyd Brown’s survey of the disputation at the University of Wittenberg in Luther’s time, LW 72:xix-lix.

Among the disputations in which Luther played a role are those for the promotion of students to a higher academic degree,<sup>80</sup> “circular” disputations,<sup>81</sup> and those that he posed to pursue a specific topic or reach a specific goal, such as the “antinomian disputations.”<sup>82</sup> Melanchthon also composed theses for theological disputations.<sup>83</sup> When in 1577 Elector August called Jakob Andreae to lead efforts at returning the electoral Saxon church to its Lutheran roots, Andreae introduced reforms in the structure of university theological education, including the re-introduction and strengthening of the role of the disputation as an educational tool. Students needed to learn to think clearly and to think on their feet.<sup>84</sup>

Orations served as another extra-curricular exercise in learning. Melanchthon delivered many himself, on themes of special interest, and he composed others for advanced students to deliver to the university community. Following his inaugural lecture in 1518 came a “*declamatio*” on Emperor Maximilian I, who had died in 1518, and his concluding oration took place on the Hebrew language a month before he died.<sup>85</sup> The range of his topics reveals the breadth of Wittenberg learning. Melanchthon modeled discourse with examples on theological topics, such as the church or prayer,<sup>86</sup> on geography,<sup>87</sup> on favorite authors from ancient times,<sup>88</sup> and on marriage,<sup>89</sup> among other topics. His orations, spoken by himself or others, on jurisprudence, astronomy, or on anatomy and other medical topics, demonstrate his support of disciplines outside his own areas of instruction.<sup>90</sup> Related to his instruc-

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80. Among the many examples are two “on the church,” WA 39,2:149-184, 206-232, LW 73:289-322, 332-364.

81. E.g., WA 39,2 93-121, LW 73:254-280, “on the divinity and humanity of Christ.”

82. E.g., WA 39,1:334-584, WA 39,2:124-144; LW 73:50-238.

83. CR 12:437-704.

84. Kenneth G. Appold, *Orthodoxie als Konsensbildung. Das theologische Disputationswesen an der Universität Wittenberg zwischen 1570 und 1710* (Mohr/Siebeck, 2004), 15-34.

85. CR 11:26-34, CR 12:385-392.

86. E.g., on the church, CR 11:598-605 CR 12:365-371. He also defended the worth of studying theology, CR 11:326-329.

87. E.g., CR 11:374-383 on his native Swabia; CR 11:383-CR 12:34-46, on the Saxon area Meissen.

88. On Homer, CR 11:397-413, Plato, CR 11:413-425, Aristotle, CR 11:647-658, Pliny, CR 12:182-194, Aesop and the importance of fables, CR 11:116-130; Galen, CR 11:495-503 and Hippocrates, CR 11:503-509. See also on the apostle Paul, CR 11:618-630, Polycarp, CR 11:560-565, Ambrose, CR 11:565-598, Jerome, CR 11:734-741 on Augustine, CR 11:446-456; on Basil the Great, CR 11:675-683, Gregory of Nazianzus, CR 12:277-285. He also saluted contemporary scholars at their deaths, e.g. the Hebraist Sebastian Münster, CR 11:457-466, and Desiderius Erasmus, CR 12:265-271.

89. CR 12:127-138.

90. On the law and jurisprudence: CR 11:66-90, 218-223, 357-364, 630-641, 669-675, 1016-1020, CR 12:19-27, 146-152; CR 12:27-33, 12:173-181, 12:207-213. anatomy, CR 11:939-954 Cf. on medicine as a discipline, CR 11:191-209, CR 12:113-119, 221-240, 327-324. He also treated philosophy, as a discipline, and aspects of it, CR 11:278-284, physics, CR 11:555-560, arithmetic, CR 11:284-292, astronomy and geography, CR 11:293-506.

tional orations are his public celebrations of the life of his deceased colleagues Martin Luther, Caspar Cruciger, and Johannes Bugenhagen and of two electors and an electoral Saxon chancellor who had worked with the reformers closely. These orations exhibited the collegial relationships that bound the Wittenberg professors together, cast in the classical form of a paean.<sup>91</sup> He turned polemical in a critique of Andreas Osiander's charges against him.<sup>92</sup> He also treated the elements of the trivium.<sup>93</sup> These orations not only provided students with information about topics outside what was offered in lectures but also modeled public speaking for students of all faculties.

Some students had contacts with professors outside formal instruction. Students lived in private homes in Wittenberg since dormitories were not provided by the university. The most fortunate students resided in the Black Cloister with Luther's family or nearby in Melanchthon's home, with Johannes Bugenhagen near the town church, or with other professors. Students joined in the evening discussions at Luther's home; some recorded notes of the conversations in "table talks."<sup>94</sup> Similar conversations took place in Melanchthon's home. Luther's correspondence with and for students reveals his on-going concern for them as he gave those who had left Wittenberg encouragement and counsel.<sup>95</sup> Luther's letters of consolation to the parents of students who died during their studies reveal his close connections to at least some students.<sup>96</sup> All the professors wrote letters of recommendation for students who were being considered for positions as pastors or teachers.<sup>97</sup> A letter of recommendation from Luther or Melanchthon, a coveted gift, insured a position to those seeking a post.<sup>98</sup> These letters show how well their professors

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91. On Luther, CR 11:726-734, on Cruciger, CR 11:833-841 on Bugenhagen, CR 12:295-307. He delivered such an oration in memory of Electors Frederick the Wise, CR 11:90-98, with a later oration on Frederick, CR 11:962-975, and John, CR 11:223-227 with a later oration on John, CR 11:954-962; and on his companion in composing the Augsburg Confession in 1530, the Saxon chancellor, Gregor Brück, CR 12:351-360.

92. CR 12: 1-12.

93. CR 11:50-66, Cr 11:209-218, CR 12:213-221, 364-373 on rhetorical topics, CR 11:159-163 on dialectic, CR 11:181-191, 231-239 on education in general.

94. Ingo Klitsch, *Redaktion und Memoria. Die Lutherbilder der "Tischreden"* (Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

95. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Luther's Social Concern for Students," in *The Social History of the Reformation*, ed. Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy (Ohio State University Press, 1972), 249-270.

96. WA Br 8:485, Nr. 3354, WA Br 10:699, Nr 4049.

97. Marion Bechthold, "Zwischen Humanismus und Reformation. Die europäische Dimension der Empfehlungsschreiben Philipp Melanchthons," in *Philipp Melanchthon. Lehrer Deutschlands, Reformator Europas*, ed. Irene Dingel and Armin Kohnle (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 91-302.

98. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr., "Luther's Social Concern for Students," in *The Social History of the Reformation*, ed. Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy (Ohio State University Press, 1972), 249-270.

gauged the gifts and personalities of their students, even if the genre clothed their words in praise. In the 1520s the Wittenberg faculty recognized the need for a continuing education program, so Luther fashioned his postils to provide models and aids for parish priests who wanted to convey his message to their people.<sup>99</sup> Together, he, Melancthon, and others fashioned a kind of “Wittenberg commentary,” as Timothy Wengert dubs it, putting their lectures on biblical books into print.<sup>100</sup> The theologians of Wittenberg also continued to compose advisories on a variety for their former students and others when specific questions arose regarding doctrine and practice.<sup>101</sup>

The Wittenberg faculty of the 1520s and 1530s applied imagination and insight to the tasks to which they had been called. They adapted old methods and devised new approaches to shaping ministers of God’s Word by pursuing a goal of creating “disciplined participants in the truth of God’s self-communication” who were formed within a grammar of faith and able to put the rules of theological speech to use.<sup>102</sup> This vision informed Lutheran theological education at critical points in ensuing centuries and remains its goal today.

By the time they left Wittenberg, most of the reformers’ students had become polyglots, speaking four or five languages. They came to the university with their own dialect of German or the native language of their homeland and generally learned a smattering of the High German that was developing, in part stimulated by Luther’s usage in his translation of the Bible, though Melancthon held special Sunday morning instruction for Hungarian speakers who could not benefit from the worship at the town church. All students understood and were also able to speak Latin, the language of lectures given by Luther and his colleagues who themselves operated daily in a bilingual world.<sup>103</sup> In addition, theology students learned Greek and Hebrew well enough to follow the lectures that were dotted with references to concepts in the original biblical languages.

### Wittenberg Plans for the Study of Theology

Marcel Nieden contrasts Luther’s and Melancthon’s goals in educating candidates for service in the congregations. Luther sought to cultivate “pious practice” in his hearers while Melancthon wished to give them “a habitus shaped by knowledge

99. On Luther’s postils, see Kolb, *Enduring Word*, 192-195. On postils produced by his students, see Kolb, *Enduring Word*, 398-404.

100. Timothy J. Wengert, *Philip Melancthon’s ‘Annotationes in Johannem’ of 1523 in Relation to Its Predecessors and Contemporaries* (Droz, 1987), 31, Kolb, *Enduring*, 245-246.

101. Armin Kohnle, “Die Gemeinschaftsgutachten als Typos“ 189-200, and Martin Brecht “Die Consilien der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Wittenberg : Dokument ihrer Eigenart und ihrer spezifischen Geschichte,” 201-221 in *Die Theologische Fakultät Wittenberg*.

102. Dennis Bielfeldt, “The Accents of Theology in Theological Education,” *Promissio* 1 (2026): 15.

103. Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens* (Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 6-18.

and the skill of interpreting the dogma in the Bible.”<sup>104</sup> Others view Melanchthon’s goals in his teaching in other ways. Timothy Wengert places his exegetical lectures as expressing his own spiritual struggles, thus leading students to prayer and meditation.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, Johannes Schilling interpreted Melanchthon’s translation of his *Loci communes* into German of 1553 as a catechism that provides a meditation on the Christian faith and proceeds from it into daily life, thereby offering “correct teaching in a form that draws readers into meditation.”<sup>106</sup> Each of these observations reveals an aspect of Wittenberg theological instruction.

Toward the end of his life, in his preface to the first volume of his collected works in 1539, Luther suggested a plan for all believers for their engagement with Scripture. Whether by reading or hearing, they should take what God is saying into their lives with prayer, meditation, and spiritual struggle (*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*).<sup>107</sup> These three take place at the same time as the text commands the mind of the reader or hearer. The hearing and reading of Scripture was for Luther always a dialogue with the Holy Spirit. His Word could best be digested when masticated, that is, repeated and thought over and over again. Such engagement with Scripture, Luther knew from experience, always sticks a thorn in Satan’s side, so that studying Scripture always invites assaults from the Deceiver.

In 1529, Melanchthon composed a “method for the study of theology” [*methodus discendi sacras literas*] that his colleague and former student Georg Major published in 1564.<sup>108</sup> In 1533, he composed a similar plan that guided the implementation of the formal reform of the theological curriculum.<sup>109</sup> The core of the curriculum

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104. Marcel Nieden, *Die Erfindung des Theologen, Wittenberger Anweisungen zum Theologiestudium im Zeitalter von Reformation und Konfessionalisierung* (Mohr/Siebeck, 2006), 151; the following paragraphs arise out of Robert Kolb, “The Pastoral Dimension of Melanchthon’s Pedagogical Activities for the Education of Pastors,” in Irene Dingel, et al., *Melanchthon*, 29-42, originally prepared for “Die pastorale Dimension des pädagogischen Wirkens Melanchthons. Die Ausbildungspraxis der Pfarrer” in *Die Leucorea*, 345-358. See also Timothy J. 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*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al. (Brill, 2013), 17-33 and Robert Kolb, “Pastoral Education in the Wittenberg Way,” in *Church and School*, 67-79.

105. Timothy J. Wengert, “Melanchthon, biblischer Theologe der Neuzeit,” in *Melanchthon und die Neuzeit*, ed. Günter Frank und Ulrich Köpf (fromann/holzboog, 2003), 23-42.

106. Johannes Schilling, “Melanchthons deutsche Dogmatik“ *Der Theologe Melanchthon*. (Thorbecke, 2000), 243-257.

107. WA 50:659,5-660,30, LW 34:285-286. See Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Eerdmans, 2008), 29-37, and idem, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Eerdmans, 2007), 33-82.

108. *Melanchthons Briefwechsel: Texte*, ed. Henz Scheible et al. §: (fromann-holzboog, 2000):665-668, Nieden, *Erfindung*, 134-140; Oswald Bayer, “Melanchthons Theologiebegriff,” in *Der Theologe Melanchthon*, ed. Günter Frank (Thorbecke, 2000), 25-48.

109. Walter Friedensburg, *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg* (Selbstverl der Historischen Kommission, 1926), I:154-158.

consisted of lectures on the epistle to the Romans, the gospel of John, the Psalms, Genesis, and Isaiah, along with lectures on Augustine's *De spiritu et littera*. This study presumed command of Greek and Hebrew and basic biblical knowledge, gained, he suggested, by reading one or two chapters of the Bible morning and evening. Melanchthon's original plan of 1529 advised students to discuss theology with one another and keep their collection of material detailing the topics they chose for guiding their future reading of Scripture. Romans provided a "*methodus totius scripturae*," he counseled. There the basic themes of law and gospel were clearly presented; they formed the basis of every sermon the student would preach. When the students had read Romans, they should read the epistle to the Galatians and Luther's 1519 commentary on it, with Colossians as the next step in absorbing the biblical message, to be read in conjunction with Melanchthon's *Loci communes*. The study should continue with the reading of either Matthew or Luke as preparation for reading John's gospel. Students were then to turn to the Old Testament, beginning with Genesis and Luther's published sermons on the first book of Moses. Deuteronomy and Luther's lectures on it should follow. The Psalms and some of the prophets, with Luther's comments, when possible, came next, along with Augustine's *De spiritu et littera* and *Contra Iulianum*. Students were also to strengthen their knowledge of ancient pagan literature—Livy, Virgil, Terence, Ovid, Quintilian, Homer, Herodotus, Demosthenes, and Lucian, with focus on a continuing review of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. All this, he advised, should be done within the framework of distinguishing law and gospel and affirming Christian freedom.

Melanchthon's colleague, Caspar Cruciger the Elder, composed a foreword for a topical summary of biblical teaching by Johannes Spangenberg, pastor in Nordhausen, in 1540. This foreword emphasized the skill at conveying biblical teaching that arises from the study of the biblical text and rhetorical instruction. Luther's counsel that the reading of Scripture should be undertaken with prayer and meditation in the midst of spiritual struggles was to guide students in their preparation to teach the contents of the pearls that Spangenberg was offering.<sup>110</sup> One of Melanchthon's prize students, David Chytraeus, professor in Rostock, delivered an oration that first appeared in print in 1554 with a similar program for theological study. He, too, emphasized the combination of "*pietas*" and "*eruditio*" necessary for effective pastoral care in a combination of accents from the instruction of Luther and Melanchthon.<sup>111</sup>

Such programs for theological study, private as well as within the university community, flowed naturally out of Luther's discovery that being Christian involved, first of all, hearing what God was saying to the faithful in Scripture. This focus on God's coming to sinners through His proclamation of salvation in Jesus

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110. Nieten, *Erfindung*, 87-91.

111. Nieten, *Erfindung*, 91-95.

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Christ altered not only the faith and devotion of believers but demanded a new definition of the clergy. Pastors were no longer chiefly priests who celebrated the Mass; they had become preachers of God's law and gospel for the cultivation of trust in Christ and the obedience that proceeded from such trust. Luther, Melancthon, and their colleagues significantly altered the way in which pastors were prepared at the university. They thereby created a corps of clergy that continued their scholarly work as well as served congregations throughout the German-speaking lands and beyond.<sup>112</sup>

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Robert Kolb, Professor of Systematic Theology Emeritus at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, is co-editor with Timothy J. Wengert of the 2000 translation of *The Book of Concord* and co-editor with Irene Dingel and Lubomír Batka of *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (2014). He has authored several books on Luther and Lutheran teaching, including two appearing in 2024: *Face to Face. Martin Luther's View of Reality* (Fortress Press) and the second edition of *The Christian Faith, a Lutheran Exposition*, co-authored with Theodore J. Hopkins (Concordia Publishing House).

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112. See the analysis of editor Paul Hinlicky, "Life-Long Christian Learning," at the beginning of this issue of *Promissio*, 5ff.



# *Was ist Das?*

## The Nature and Basis of Theological Hermeneutics

Jeffrey Kloha

**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores the nature and task of theological hermeneutics by shifting the focus from abstract “rules” of interpretation to the process by which readers encounter Scripture and generate meaning within particular contexts. The catechism’s question *was ist das?*—What does this mean?—cannot be reduced to the discovery of a method or an abstract idea but must be understood as a question about how God’s Word forms believers for life in Christ. The essay challenges the common assumption that hermeneutics consists of a set of technical rules that, if properly applied, yield the correct meaning of a biblical text. Such a view misunderstands the nature of hermeneutics and the process of interpretation. Theological hermeneutics, therefore, must attend to both the formation of the reader and the purposes of God revealed in Scripture. The goal is not merely to identify correct interpretations but to cultivate readers who hear the Word with the proper theological orientation—shaped by the gospel and attentive to God’s purposes in Christ. In this way, the task of hermeneutics is ultimately pastoral and formative: to help the church hear Scripture in such a way that God’s Word continues to accomplish its work of killing and making alive, creating faithful hearers who dwell within the new life given in Christ.\*

**As I expound [the Psalter], I do not want anyone to suppose that I shall accomplish what none of the most holy and learned theologians have ever accomplished before, namely, to understand and teach the correct meaning of the Psalter in all particulars. It is enough to have understood some of the psalms, and those only in part. The Spirit reserves much for Himself, so**

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\*This article is an updated version of an essay originally published in *Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and Prophets: Sola Scriptura in Context. The Second International Symposium on Lutheran Theology, Westfield House, Cambridge, 15-18 Aug, 2012*, ed. Tapani Simojoki (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of England / North European Luther Academy, 2013).

that we may always remain His pupils. There is much that He reveals only to lure us on, much that He gives only to stir us up. And, as Augustine has put it surely if no human being has ever spoken in such a way that everyone understood him in all particulars, how much more is it true that the Holy Spirit alone has an understanding of all His own words! Therefore I must openly admit that I do not know whether I have the accurate interpretation of the psalms or not, though I do not doubt that the one I set forth is an orthodox one.<sup>1</sup>

By 1519, when Luther began his lectures on the Psalms in Wittenberg, he had abandoned the fourfold-sense approach to the Scriptures. Here, he expounds the “literal sense” (p. 285), yet he admits that he cannot claim to have “completely understood even a single psalm” (p. 285). Perhaps even less confidently, he continues:

I have now come to the conclusion that as long as someone else’s interpretation is pious, one should not reject it unless he wants his own to be rejected in turn, according to “the law of the fang.” One falls short in some ways, another in more ways. I see some things that blessed Augustine did not see; on the other hand, I know that others will see many things that I do not see. What recourse do we have but to be of mutual help to one another and to forgive those who fall, since we ourselves have already fallen or are about to fall?<sup>2</sup>

Although Luther is writing prior to the Enlightenment, Modernism, and Post-Modernism, he recognizes his limitations and the tentativeness of his interpretation, indeed the inability to do anything except express what he is able at that moment. Similar thoughts are expressed in his preface to the 1519 Galatians commentary, wherein he says:

A slight thing it is indeed. It is not so much a commentary as a testimony of my faith in Christ, lest perhaps I have run in vain and have not adequately grasped Paul’s meaning (Gal 2:2). For here, because it is God’s affair and surely of the utmost importance, I am eager to be instructed by any child. I, too, would certainly have preferred to wait for the commentaries promised long ago by Erasmus, a man preeminent in theology and impervious to envy. But since he is postponing this (God grant it may not be for long), the situation which you see forces me to come before the public. I know that I am a child and unlearned, but in spite of this (so bold I may be) I am devoted to Christian piety and instruction.<sup>3</sup>

1. Martin Luther, Preface to *Operationes in Psalmos* [1519] in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 14 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot; Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 284–85.

2. Luther, Preface to *Operationes in Psalmos*, 285.

3. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, trans. Richard Jungkuntz, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hanson; Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 159–60.

For Luther, his exposition will have value not because it is *the* correct interpretation—for others will surpass his—but because he is “devoted to Christian piety and instruction.” If he, the reader, is properly formed, then he will be able to read faithfully if not perfectly.

## Definition of Theological Hermeneutics

Was ist das? The phrase is almost untranslatable into English. I wonder if its traditional rendering, “What does this mean,” is no longer satisfactory. When most people hear this phrase, I fear that they hear “meaning” and think of some kind of abstract, cognitive truth that is floating around somewhere. In Luther’s catechism, though, “meaning” is not abstract and cognitive. When I first glanced at the title I was assigned for this paper, I thought that I was to discuss “*Was ist dasein?*”—and I wondered about the narrow focus on Heidegger.<sup>4</sup> However, Luther’s catechisms do not encourage speculation on existence or awareness. Rather, when given a creedal, biblical statement, the “meaning” is that we *do* something and *do not do* other things. “Thou shalt not kill” does not invite speculation as to the meaning of the word “kill” and then decide how to “apply” the abstract notion of killing. What this means is to simply have a “fear and love of God so that we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need.”

Notice that there is a “theology” inherent in these explanations. Luther’s “theology” does not begin with an assertion that the Bible is God’s Word and as such must simply be obeyed as a divine command that reveals inscrutable, divine will. Rather, he explains the Scriptures as part of a narrative: Christ has come, Christ has risen, Christ will come again, and by Christ’s Word in which he continues to speak and the sacraments in which he works, his Spirit has laid claim on me and given me new life. The new life is imperfect in this age but is nevertheless anticipatory of and, in some ways, participatory in the age to come. The scriptures, including the commandments (such as “Thou shalt not kill”), form us to live in a certain way. There is a goal, a *telos*, to the scriptures. It is God’s goal. “Theological Hermeneutics” seeks to frame our hearing of the scriptures within God’s work in the world, in and among us.

If God is at work, though, why do different “meanings” result from the same text? Individualized interpretation is a relatively new phenomenon in the life of the church. Prior to the Reformation, there was no “Bible”—66 books under one cover, easily (or at all) accessible to the average person. Before Wycliffe and Luther and Tyndale and dozens of other individuals whose names are not so well known put their lives at risk, the Scriptures were unavailable to the vast majority of the Baptized. This was partly the result of economics and technology—a hand-copied biblical manuscript

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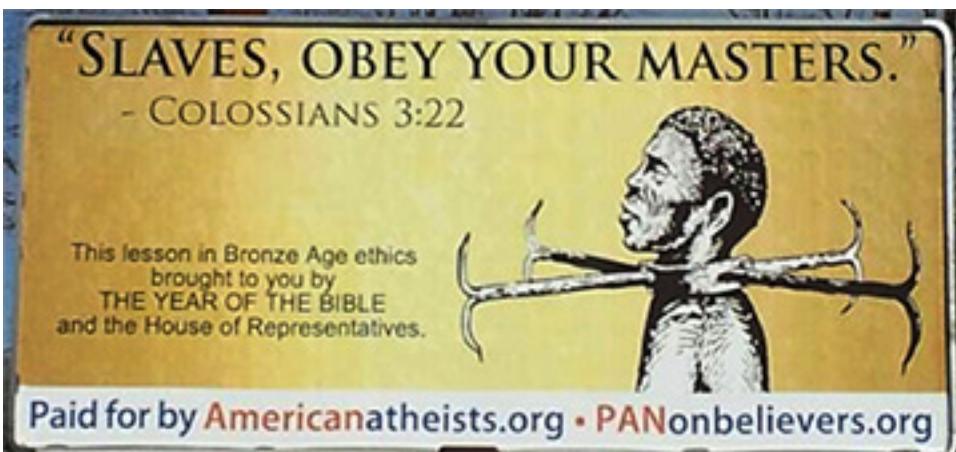
4. See Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* (trans. Alistair McEwen; Harcourt, 1997), 11, 28–30.

was fabulously expensive, and even Gutenberg's Bible (in Latin, remember) cost about the same as a house in the nice part of town. As great a hindrance was that most people could not read at all. There was no public education system and the church did not have schools for the laity. To hear from God, one had to trust what his representative, be it pope, council, bishop, priest, or friar, said on his behalf. This could be good, or it could be very bad, depending on how faithful all those popes and councils were. By the early 16th century, the teaching far too often did not match up with the Scriptures' message. There was more preaching of indulgences than of Gospel; in fact, Gutenberg himself made far more money printing indulgences than he did printing Bibles—in fact, printing Bibles caused his bankruptcy.

The great flow of history that came together in the early 16th century led to the rise of technologies that could cheaply produce printed books, a middle-class that could afford Bibles and education, and a desire to make God's Word available, as Erasmus described it, to every ploughboy and weaver at her loom. Luther took up his lexica and grammar books and translated into German; Tyndale, inspired by Luther, produced the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament in English before he was tracked down and murdered. What we take for granted today—the ability to read the Bible for ourselves, individually and privately, sitting at our tables or in our studies—has been a part of the life of the church for only about 20% of the church's history since the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Now, everyone can read the Bible, but is this good? Our instinctive answer is, of course, yes! Print Bibles by the millions. Put them in hotel rooms. Give them away to visitors to a worship service. Pass them out at county fairs. Get the word out as far and as wide as possible—on brochures, coffee mugs, web pages, billboards, everywhere.

Or, perhaps not. Consider this billboard, which appeared along American highways in the Spring of 2012:



You cannot *not* respond viscerally, revoltingly, or automatically to that billboard.\*

One writer offered this explanation for the problem:

The problem with this is that the sign shows what is lacking in the complaints by village atheists. First, there is something we call “biblical hermeneutics,” which is the art and science of biblical interpretation. Do atheists really want to take the time to understand and learn about how to interpret the Bible? Probably not. If atheists truly care about understanding biblical passages, they should take the time to learn some of the basics of hermeneutics. Otherwise, signs like these make them look like they just want to present a distortion of the Christian faith which is not backed up by proper research.

I think I understand how this writer is attempting resolve the “problem”—learn the “rules,” and you won’t make these kinds of mistakes. Such “solutions,” however, leave several problems unresolved. First, the Bible doesn’t come with any “rules.” There is no book called “Hermeneutics” standing after Malachi or Revelation from which we can cite chapter and verse to find the “rules” for reading properly. Consequently, all the “rules” are made up. We made them up; we inherited them from people like Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Tychonius, Flacius, and Voelz. Many are helpful, of course, and have stood the test of time, but others are not. They are all the result of the trial-and-error (at times it seems, mostly error) of thousands upon thousands of readers over thousands of years.

Second, I’d like us to use more care when we use terms like “hermeneutics.” “Hermeneutics” is not “advanced rules” for interpretation. Hermeneutics is not accomplished by asking the latest AI tools to compile all the rules and then spit out a “meaning” of a text, thereby producing the “right interpretation” on one’s screen. A standard resource in biblical studies provides a helpful definition of “hermeneutics”:

“Hermeneutics” denotes critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding, especially the interpretation of biblical texts or texts that originate from within other cultures. However, this may include all kinds of communicative processes, from signs and visual art to institutions and literary phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Voelz maintains this distinction between “exegesis” and “hermeneutics”:

“The actual interpretation of the Scriptures is called exegesis. The study of the principles of interpretation, the theory which stands behind the actual performance of exegesis, is hermeneutics.” The reason that study of hermeneutics is necessary, he notes, is because the diversity of interpretations are caused by the conscious or unconscious decisions made by the *interpreter* about how to approach the text. This includes assumptions about matters that will be widely agreed upon (such as

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\*The image on the facing page here represents an example of the necessary negative evidence for the point being made; we at *Promissio* recognize and disdain its offensiveness. —PRH

5. “Hermeneutics” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. K. J. Vanhoozer; SPCK/Baker Academic, 2005), 283.

grammatical matters). Others will be less widely shared, such as linguistic theory, understanding of the historical nature and setting of a text, the view of revelation, the person and work of Jesus Christ, one's own relationship to the text, and "view of the world at large, including the possibility of understanding."<sup>6</sup> The problem of understanding, specifically how we come to "understand" what a text "means," is the focus of this essay.

Key in all this is that all readers/hearers of a text have a hermeneutic, whether they acknowledge it or not. In fact, I've found that those who presume that they operate without hermeneutics produce more mischief with the text than those who are forthright about their approaches and agendas. The last item listed by Voelz is the most significant: what is our view of the "possibility of understanding?" How do we come to know something to be true and not merely the construct of our own situatedness? The basic hermeneutical task is to account for the relationship between the author, text, and reader—especially the question of why does the reader come up with the meaning that he or she does, and is it a faithful meaning? Exegesis is studying the text while hermeneutics is studying the processes of interpretation. Both are necessary, but given the multiplicity of interpretation and the fact that most readers of the scriptures, frankly, seem rather poor readers of the text, it is essential that we look at readers and how they create meaning, not merely learn "rules." For the "rules," after all, are only that which the reader—back to the reader again—chooses to apply in his act of reading.

Let's return to this billboard and ask some hermeneutical questions—what does this mean? Why did we respond the way that we did when we saw that billboard?

First, we live in the 21st century, and the intended audience of the billboard is an American. We have had, collectively, horrific experiences with the word "slave." When we hear the word "slave," we think of the American experience, the war fought 150 years ago, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, whips, abuse, and chains. Slavery is a blight on our national history. The billboard, of course, primes us to think of exactly that when it places a troubling image of this conception of "slave" next to the passage. When the average American drives by this billboard and sees "Slaves, obey your masters," we cannot help but read the passage as antiquated at best and at worst as an agent of oppression and evil. Of course, this is exactly what the purchasers of the billboard want viewers to think about "the Bible." However, the problem is not the text; it is the reader who has been shaped and formed to react in this visceral, automatic way to that image and that word. In other words, slapping four words and that image on a billboard—which is viewed at highway speed, no less—does not allow for the kind of reflection that would lead to the obvious conclusion that 19th century American chattel slavery cannot be the same thing as slavery in a first-century, Greco-Roman context.

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6. James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 13–15.

The same goes for “obey.” If you were told by a police officer to “obey the speed limit” or by your parents that you had to obey their curfew rules, you probably would not react in revulsion or horror (granted, teenagers might), but put the word “obey” next to our American notion of “slave” and, again, next to that image, and our automatic reaction will be negative. It becomes an intolerable word.

“Master” also applies. “Master” as a noun has for the most part fallen out of common American usage, probably because of its connection to slavery. Our immediate reaction to that word, as with “slaves” and “obey,” is to think of the American form of slavery, and again we respond negatively to the passage on the billboard.

Notice, I have not yet discussed what the text “means” or the “rules,” only how most Americans will read the text. This is hermeneutics, and such practices enable us to understand that our reading may not be consistent with God’s purposes in giving the text. Hermeneutics exposes the problem that you and I are reading the text, and you and I have been shaped and formed to read it in a certain way because of our education, our cultural environment, the kinds of books we read, the kinds of movies and TV shows we watch, our political leanings, our friends, and our experiences. All of these make us very poor readers of the biblical text and make billboards like this very effective.

To this point, I have not proposed a solution to the “problem” of this billboard’s interpretation of the scriptural text. I raise this as a hermeneutical problem, one that will help us address “theological hermeneutics.” Why are there multiple readings of the same text? What shapes us to produce those readings? How do we hear the scriptures faithfully? My goal in this essay is modest. It is not to provide “the” hermeneutic for coming up with the right “answers” but to lay out a model of how the creation of meaning happens so that we can begin to assess our own and others’ readings.<sup>7</sup>

## Multiple Readings of the Biblical Text

Rather than discussing interpretation in the abstract, let’s turn to one specific passage as an example of the challenge of multiple interpretations and readers’ goals. A classic problem passage is the account in Gal 2:11-14 of the “confrontation” between Cephas and Paul in Antioch. There, Cephas had been eating with the Gentiles, but after pressure came from Jerusalem, he withdrew and separated himself. Paul would have none of this, so he publicly rebuked Cephas. Thereby, at least to many

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7. I should state at the outset that I taught a “Biblical Hermeneutics” course at Concordia Seminary and recently also at Christ School of Theology, a total of some two dozen times. I have used as a core text *What Does This Mean?* by James Voelz. It is impossible to summarize and defend all the issues raised in that book which influence my approach here; but I thought it important to note my influences and the student questions and discussions that shape the directions that I go in this essay.

in the early church, a problem arises: is it possible that an apostle—indeed even the first apostle, who would one day be considered the first Pope—be wrong and in need of public correction?

Clement of Alexandria solved the problem by positing that “Cephas” and “Peter” were two different individuals (as reported in Eusebius’ *Church History* 1,12,2): “This is the account of Clement in the fifth book of his *Hypotyposes*, in which he also says that Cephas was one of the seventy disciples, a man who bore the same name as the apostle Peter, and the one concerning whom Paul says, ‘When Cephas came to Antioch I withstood him to his face.’” This resolution to the problem may be reflected in the various readings in the manuscript tradition.<sup>8</sup>

Jerome’s concern was likewise to protect apostolic authority: “Thus they give Porphyry an opportunity to blaspheme, if one believes either that Peter had gone astray or that Paul had impudently rebuked the chief of the apostles.” He knows, but rejects, Clement’s line of rescue, for another “Cephas” is not known from Luke’s writings, but he cannot brook disharmony among the apostles, so he posits a gap in both Paul’s and Luke’s narrations and argues that Peter and Paul had cooked up, in advance and unknown to the others, a “feigned dispute.” This, according to Jerome, is common practice among lawyers (which I do not dispute) without occasioning outcry, so why should the apostles not make use of this rhetorical device? When Paul publicly rebukes Peter, who is in on the charade, the other Jews are actually rebuked and thereby both the teaching of the text is preserved—that is the Gentiles are fully church—and, apparently at least as importantly, apostolic authority is preserved.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine’s *Letter 28* to Jerome explicitly questions the great exegete’s explanation. If it would be admitted that the apostles carried out falsehood, that Cephas’ (Peter’s) actions were hidden and that he was acting deceitfully, then Paul would not be “speaking the truth” when he rebukes Peter. This would call into question, according to Augustine, whether any passage of Scripture was to be considered reliable. He states his concern quite clearly: “For it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false.” Rather than call the text into question, Augustine is quite willing to sacrifice Peter, which is somewhat surprising, perhaps, given that Augustine himself is a bishop. Were he Bishop of Rome, would he have found that same argument so appealing?

Luther is not concerned about the authority of bishops. Rather, his concern is with the teaching of Justification by Faith: “Paul had no small matter in hand, but

8. Clement read Κηφᾶς in his text; Latin, Syriac, and bilingual Greco-Latin manuscripts as well as the “Majority Text” witnesses read a form of Πέτρος at 2:11 and 14.

9. Text of Jerome’s commentary available in T. P. Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome’s Commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 100-102.

the chief article of the Christian religion. When this article is endangered, we must not hesitate to resist Peter, or an angel from heaven.” A different concern leads to a different reading: the passage is about the gospel, and any thing or any person who stands in the way of the gospel must be silenced.

Further, a fifth line of interpretation using a “socio-scientific” approach asks how the actions of those involved are affected by their social setting. An influential article by Philip Esler<sup>10</sup> argues that in the social context of Paul’s letter, an “honor-shame” culture is operative. The agreement won by the “anti-circumcision party” at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) would require, by nature of the unspoken social contracts of the day, that the “shamed” group restore their honor. As such, Peter is convinced by the Jerusalem church to be inconsistent in the application of the agreement by now withdrawing socially but not theologically from the Gentiles in Antioch. Esler argues that Peter had gone so far as compelling the gentiles in Antioch to be circumcised. Note that this reconstruction requires, just as in Jerome’s, some kind of machination behind the scenes that is unspoken in the text, as indeed is any mention of circumcision in Gal 2:11-14.<sup>11</sup> Peter is not exonerated in this reconstruction, but that is not Esler’s goal. His purpose is scientific: devising an explanation of the setting that is “rooted in ancient Mediterranean rather than modern North Atlantic values.”<sup>12</sup> One might wonder, though, despite Esler’s zeal in “deliberately trying to clear [his] mind of modern presuppositions” (p. 311),<sup>13</sup> if he has quite succeeded, for is it not

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10. P. F. Esler, “Making and Breaking a Agreement Mediterranean Style: A New Reading of Galatians 2:1-14,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 285–314.

11. As Esler, 304 acknowledges: “Since Paul himself supplies no information whatever on this question (except as to the fact that certain people were sent to Antioch by James, leading to Peter’s suspension of table-fellowship with the Gentile members of the community, Gal. 2:12), it is necessary to generate scenarios and then to test them against the evidence in the text.”

12. Esler, 305.

13. Esler claims Ambrosiaster as an ally for his view that Peter was demanding circumcision, quoting his comments (in Latin) at the conclusion of the article. I am not certain that Ambrosiaster can adduced as support, however: “tale est {hoc}, quale et illud dictum ad apostolum Petrum: si tu cum sis Iudaeus, gentiliter vivis, quomodo compellis gentes Iudaizare? ita et hi cum ipsi legem non custodirent conversantes et conviventes cum gentilibus Galatas, circumcidere semetipsos cogebant, ut placèrent Iudaeis. per hoc enim mollebant sibi animos Iudaeorum, ut etiam de ipsis non crederent, quod gentiliter viverent.” The comment is found not at Gal 2:14, but at 6:13. My translation is: “This [referring to Gal 6:13] is the substance of what had been said to the Apostle Peter: If you, since you are a Jew, live like the gentiles, how do you compel the gentiles to Judaize? [Gal 2:14] So also these themselves [“those who are circumcised”; Gal 6:13], who did not to keep the law while living and eating with the gentiles at Galatia, compelled them to circumcise themselves in order to please the Jews. For through this they softened the attitude of the Jews to themselves, so that they [that is, the gentiles] lived on the basis of the very thing that they did not believe.” It seems clear that Ambrosiaster is describing the situation in Galatia, not in Antioch.

convenient to modern, non-ecclesial biblical scholarship that the founders of the church operate by brute force and backroom machinations, which were the very things that Clement and Augustine were most eager to avoid?

The point of this brief review of eighteen centuries of discussion on a few sentences in Galatians highlights several of the hermeneutical problems that we raised earlier. All of these ask questions about why different readers create different “meanings.” It is evident that the goals of the reader affect the reading of the text. This happens in several ways. First, a reader’s goals determine which methods that the reader chooses to apply, such as textual criticism (Clement) or socio-rhetorical criticism (Esler). Second, one’s situational concern produces the “meaning” that the reader draws from the text. Jerome, concerned about the authority of the bishop, created one meaning. Augustine, concerned to uphold the veracity of Scripture, created a different meaning. Each “meaning” derived from the (theological) goals that they brought to the text. Third, although we have used the word “meaning” up to this point, it should be now clear that what we call “meaning” and what we call “application” are inseparable. The text does not “mean” that bishops or apostles are either right or wrong, to be respected or ignored. Rather, the scriptures become *meaningful*, that is, they take on meaning and significance as they shape our thinking and behavior. This was both Jerome’s and Augustine’s concern. How does the way we read the text shape the way that we look at bishops or the scriptures? Fourth, there are multiple possible faithful ways to hear a text. None of the readings outlined here are necessarily “wrong,” but they are all different appropriations in different settings for different purposes. They operate with different theological goals, desiring to shape a specific response on the part of a specific hearer in a specific situation.

It is not “post-modern theory” that argues that different readers are likely to produce different “meanings” from a text. At the level of “words,” Augustine tried to deal with the ambiguity inherent in signs or words. In his *De doctrina christiana*, he uses virtually all of books II and III, nearly half of the treatise, to attempt to unravel the ambiguities inherent in “signs.” He opens book II with this introduction: “Now that I am discussing signs, I must say, conversely, that attention should not be paid to the fact that they exist, but to the fact that they are signs, or, in other words, that they signify” (2:1, 1; Green, 58). He goes on to discuss two problems in determining what words signify: that some signs/words are “obscure” (the topic of book II) and that others are ambiguous (the topic of book III). He cannot offer a comprehensive procedure that would allow one to decipher all the signs unambiguously, however. In fact, in book III he picks up the “Rules” of Tychonius—a Donatist opponent of Augustine’s catholic church—and comments on them to find guidance. However, even here he is not entirely successful, concluding that a single, perfect “meaning” is not attainable.<sup>14</sup>

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14. See David L. Jeffrey, *Houses of the Interpreter. Reading Scripture, Reading Culture* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2003), 39–53.

In fact, Augustine has already heard the so-called “post-modern” claim that cultural diversity requires moral relativism:

Some people have been struck by the enormous diversity of social practices and in a state of drowsiness, as I would put it . . . have concluded that justice has no absolute existence but that each race views its own as just. So, since the practices of all races are diverse, whereas justice ought to remain unchangeable, there clearly is no such thing as justice anywhere. (3:14, 22; Green, 155)

What is Augustine’s solution to this claim? It is not the inerrancy of Scripture, or the revealed will of God, but an articulation of his primary hermeneutical principle:

To say no more, they have not realized that the injunction “do not to do to another what you would not wish to be done to yourself” can in no way be modified by racial differences (*gentili diversitate*). When this injunction is related to the love of God, all wickedness dies; and when it is related to the love of one’s neighbor, all wrongdoing dies. (3:14,22; Green, 155)

Nearly two centuries earlier, Origen had noted the multiplicity of interpretation, in particular of the Old Testament. He attributes this to the interpreter beginning with a wrong theology, that is, the “Jews” look only to a “literal meaning.” As an example, the fact that the wolf does not feed with the lamb is taken to be literal only, and as in the coming of Jesus this did not happen, then Jesus is not the Christ. (*De principiis* 4:2,8). Likewise, the “simple” believe that the Demiurge is the sole God and identify it with the Creator God of the Old Testament (4:2,8). In 4:2,14, Origen lays out a positive approach to reading, one that argues that the first goal (*skopos*) of the Spirit is “to reveal those doctrines necessary for the perfection of the soul”; the second goal (*skopos*) is to conceal “these primary teachings in the secondary story of visible creation and the Biblical account of human history.”<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus likewise places the scriptures into the economy of God, noting that “If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling (*vocationis*)” (*Adversus haereses* 4:26,1).<sup>16</sup>

The earliest fathers knew that multiple interpretations were possible, even likely<sup>17</sup> and that some readings could be ruled out. When they sought to hear the

15. Cf. Ronald Heine, “Reading the Bible with Origen,” in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 131–48.

16. Cf. Maurice Jourjon, “Irenaeus’ Reading of the Bible,” in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (ed. and trans. Paul M. Blowers (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 105–11.

17. In this context, it is appropriate to note that in many cases where textual variants were known, patristic commentators would comment on and interpret both variants without deciding which of the two was “original”; see Bruce M. Metzger, “Explicit References in the Works of Origen to Variant Readings in New Testament Manuscripts,” *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey* (ed. J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson; Herder, 1963), 78–95.

scriptures faithfully, they did not find refuge, primarily, in “rules” but in refocusing on the hearer and shaping him to read with the right eyes, to hear with the right ears, and to have to right goal (viz., God’s goal) in mind as he reads. Once again, we return to the problem of—or, more accurately, the role of—the reader. For it is the reader’s goals, purposes, and skills that produce “meaning.” Hermeneutics must assess the ways in which a reader interacts with a text and incorporates his or her goals into the reading of the text. Theological hermeneutics seeks to hear the text with faithful goals, agendas, and methods and expose those goals, agendas, and methods that do not produce the kind of hearer who has ears to hear.

### God Speaks: The Communications Model

Before proceeding to describe these hermeneutical processes, it would be helpful to articulate a communications model. This allows us to understand more the complications and questions that arise in differences in interpretation. At its most fundamental, the basic communications model recognizes that all communication, including written texts, involves three elements: 1) an author/speaker; 2) a text/verbal utterance; 3) a reader/hearer. By focusing on one or more of these elements of communication, different interpreters ask different questions which then result in different “meanings.”

Historically, the first to articulate a distinction of these elements is Friederich Schleiermacher, widely regarded as the father of Enlightenment hermeneutical theory and modern Protestant biblical interpretation. Schleiermacher distinguished the author’s *intention*—what he termed “psychological interpretation”—from the *text* itself, or what he termed “grammatical interpretation.” Schleiermacher does acknowledge that the reader is involved in the process, especially the modern reader who has limitations of knowledge of the ancient languages and culture. Instead, Schleiermacher’s focus was on the author; he saw the process of interpretation as reversing the process of communication: reader to text to understand the intention of the author.

Put simply, in Schleiermacher’s view, a text means what an author intended it to mean, as opposed to what is explicitly preserved on the grammatical surface of a text. By implication, the true meaning of a text is not to be found in its sentences and paragraphs but rather *behind* the text, ‘in the reconstructed viewpoint of the author,’ which lay beyond the text itself.<sup>18</sup>

With its focus on the intention of the author, Schleiermacher’s approach laid the groundwork for subsequent interpreters to focus on the authors’ processes of composition. Methods such as Form Criticism, Source Criticism,

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18. B. H. McLean, *Biblical Interpretation and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 42-43.

and Redaction Criticism arose as attempts to understand the author(s)' efforts to create meaning.

Historically, "New Criticism" arose next with its focus on the text itself rather than on the author. As Anthony Thiselton notes,

Probably the most influential text-book which reflect the movement was Rene Wellek's and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949)...[who] urged that the whole idea of the author's intention, at least as a criterion of meaning in literature, "seems quite mistaken." "The total meaning of a work of art cannot be defined merely in terms of its meaning for the author and his contemporaries." ... To use the intention of an author as a criterion for judging the "success" of a work of literary art, they claimed, rested on a fallacy. For the author's intention represented a private state of mind, which was virtually inaccessible except through the text itself.<sup>19</sup>

The New Criticism's shortcoming, however, was to presuppose a neutrality on the part of the reader who could, it was assumed, approach the text without presuppositions. Not only did this become quite quickly obvious to literary theorists, the fact of numerous different—and at times quite different—interpretations showed that the reader must be accounted for in the hermeneutical process.

Reader-centered approaches then arose, with Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, and Wayne Booth among the most prominent advocates. As Fish describes,

I "saw" what my interpretive principles permitted or directed me to see, and then I turned around and attributed what I has "seen" to a text and an intention. What my principles direct me to "see" are readers performing acts. The points at which I find (or, more precisely, declare) these acts to have been performed become (by sleight of hand) demarcations in the text.<sup>20</sup>

Reader-centered approaches—in isolation—have limitations as well. Focusing solely on the author only discloses the text itself and does not account for the reader, and New Criticism, which focuses on the text itself, unmoored from its historical context as well as naively assuming that the reader, can be neutral. Reader-centered approaches bring weaknesses as well as strengths. As Thiselton summarizes,

The positive gain in the shift in focus to the reader is potentially significant for biblical interpretation. The reader is no longer seen merely as a passive recipient of the message, but as actively engaged in a process of reading-transactions and responses. However, the losses remain serious ones. Without the constraints imposed on meaning by the text's context or

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19. Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Zondervan, 1992), 58-59.

20. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 12-13.

situation and the directedness of the author's utterance, meaning becomes almost infinitely variable and polyvalent.<sup>21</sup>

Is there a way to hold all three elements—author, text, and reader—together in an interpretive model? A recent student text for biblical hermeneutics, Jeanine K. Brown's *Scripture as Communication*, summarizes how to proceed. She notes that focusing solely on one element will produce distorted readings: focusing solely on the author treats the text as a window, something that one looks *through* to get *behind* the text, but the text gets left behind. Focusing solely on the text itself treats the text as a work of art, but that work may now be understood apart from any historical setting or context. Focusing solely on the reader produces a mirror reading, one where the author sees oneself only and not the text. She offers six helpful "affirmations" that result from a wholistic understanding of the communication process, which acknowledge complexities but also account for the importance of all three elements:

1. Meaning is author-derived but textually communicated. Meaning can be helpfully understood as communicative intention.
2. Meaning is complex yet determinate.
3. Meaning is imperfectly accessed by both individual readers and readers in community.
4. Ambiguity can and often does attend meaning.
5. Contextualization involves readers attending to the original biblical context and to their own contemporary contexts so that meaning can be appropriated in ways that acknowledge Scripture as both culturally located and powerfully relevant.
6. The entire communicative event cannot be completed without a reader or hearer.<sup>22</sup>

With this communication model in mind, we will move toward approaches to seeking "meaningfulness" as we hear the Scriptures.

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21. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 50. As an aside, it is common in conservative circles to equate all reader-centered approaches (and indeed, any approach which acknowledges the role of the reader) with "Deconstruction." This fallacy must be rejected. Deconstruction works from a radically different philosophical framework from what we are describing in this essay. A helpful summary may be found in Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory for Today* (Garland, 1999), 251-52: "For Deconstruction, (1) language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating possible meanings; (2) existence has no center, no stable meaning, no fixed ground; and (3) human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only "identity" is the one we invent and choose to believe. As you may have noticed, the key word here is *unstable*. It should come as no surprise that, for deconstruction, literature is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable as the language of which it is composed."

22. Jeanine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication. Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Baker, 2021). Her discussion of the communications model is found on pp.47-89, with the "affirmations found on p. 89.

## Hermeneutical Models

Earlier, we defined “Hermeneutics” as “critical reflection upon processes of interpretation and understanding.” Here, we will critique several models of the process of interpretation and understanding, especially as these processes occur in the hearing of the Scriptures. I do not find many previous discussions of “Lutheran Hermeneutics” to be sufficient for the issues that face the church in the early 21st century, especially issues involving the new life in Christ (traditionally called “sanctification”) such as marriage, life and death, and health care. However, reflections on “Lutheran hermeneutics” produced in the late 20th century do offer much of value. For example, Martin Franzmann’s “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics” offers an articulate and laser-like focus on the work of Christ, which is embedded as the *cantus firmus* throughout the biblical narrative. Franzmann summarizes this “radical Gospel”<sup>23</sup> in this way: “God, to whom man can find no way, has in Christ creatively opened up the way which man may and must go.”<sup>24</sup> This essay is required reading in my Biblical Hermeneutics courses. Similarly, Edward Schroeder provides a helpful essay, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutic?” which lists many of the same Lutheran assumptions as Franzmann did, such as *sola scriptura*, “Scripture is its own interpreter,” “Christ the Lord of the Scriptures,” and the unitary meaning of Scripture. Indeed, he emphasizes a key Lutheran goal: “But any hermeneutics, however critical or simple or orthodox, if it commits the fallacy which Melancthon saw committed by the Confutation of his day, will have to be rejected, not because Luther says so nor even because the Confessions say so, but because it buries Christ.”<sup>25</sup> Keeping Christ and his work central must be at the heart of any hermeneutic that reads the scriptures as God’s Word. Similar *foci* were articulated centuries before by Matthias Flacius,<sup>26</sup> but as students of Lutheran history are all too aware, articulating and coming to agreement with Lutheran presuppositions does not result in consensus on all issues to which the scriptural text is brought to bear, in particular the social and practical issues which are so controverted today. These essays on hermeneutics have not sufficiently recognized that in addition to *presuppositions*, one’s self-selected *goals* shape and determine that meaning that the reader creates from the text.

This section will use four models, laid out as diagrams, to understand the process of creating meaning from a biblical text. Each of them work with the author-text-reader framework, which was described above.

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23. “Radical” in the Latin sense of the root from which all things radiate, not in the American sense of iconoclastic, extremist, or even “rad.”

24. Martin H. Franzmann, “Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics,” Commission on Theology and Church Relations, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, 1969, p. 4.

25. E. H. Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?” in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, ed. R. W. Bertram (Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 81–97.

26. Now available in a recent translation, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, trans. Wade R. Johnston (Magdeburg Press, 2011).

*Diagram A*  
*Traditional Model of*  
*Interpretation*

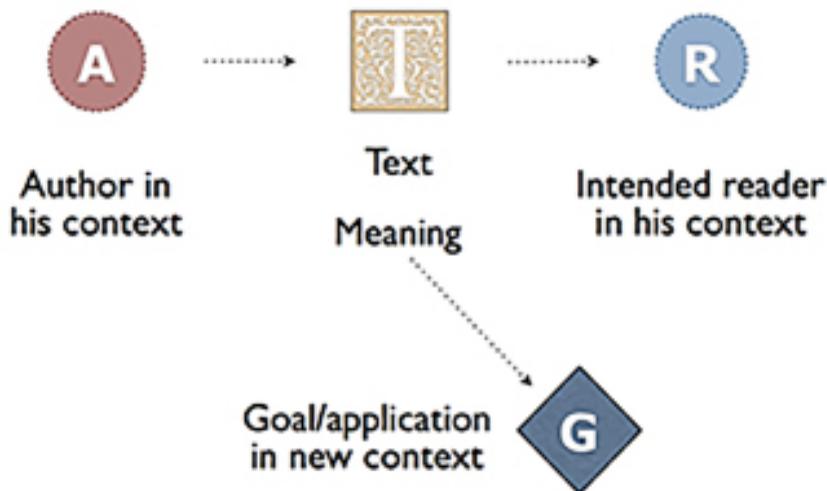


Diagram A: Traditional Model of Interpretation

This diagram represents what might be called a traditional view of the hermeneutical process in the production of meaningfulness via a text. First, the author in his context produces a text for an intended audience, such as, for the sake of an example, Paul writing to the churches of Galatia in the mid-first century.<sup>27</sup> This text conveys a “meaning” that Paul desires the Galatians to apprehend and, presumably, accept. The intended audience then hears (or perhaps reads) the text and from the words then constructs a “meaning.” The process of interpretation for present day readers using this model, then, is essentially the reverse of this process. One becomes as much as possible the original reader (by learning Greek and understanding the Hellenistic world and diaspora Judaism). By adopting the situation of the original audience and their perspectives, one becomes able to apprehend “the correct meaning” of the text and thereby gains insight into the thinking of the original author—indeed even the mind of the divine author himself, the Holy Spirit. Often, those using this model focus upon grasping *the meaning* of the text, which is viewed primarily as *revealing* a single “truth” (usually propositional) that is unknowable apart from this act of interpretation. Once this single “meaning” or “truth” is determined, “application” of that meaning can be made in new contexts. A clear distinction is made between “meaning” and “application.” The “application” might change, but the “meaning,” however, does not.

27. Complications arise immediately, such as the precise location of “Galatia” and conclusions then made from the conclusions made about location such as ethnic background of the audience and date. All of these are debated in the case of Galatians, though the point I am making here does not depend on one’s answer to these issues.

I'm not trying to set up a straw man in this description. Based on my interactions with pastors and teachers, this model fairly describes the way that many readers view the process of discovering the "original meaning" of a text and then "applying" it to hearers. A published example is the recent *Lutheran Study Bible* from Concordia Publishing House, which provides "interpretive notes" and "application notes" as if they are two different things. The former offers the one "interpretation," which readers then "apply" in their situations. This model does help to deal with some aspects of the problem of multiple interpretations. First, it acknowledges a distance between the original audience (in the case of the NT, some two thousand years distance) and our context. We are limited by our lack of familiarity with things like the languages and settings of the NT. Second, it seeks to bridge that gap by various means. Augustine's "application" of Galatians 2 clearly differs from Esler's. Nevertheless, far more fundamental questions cannot be resolved using this model. Furthermore, readers cannot duplicate the "moves" toward application; they remain somewhat arbitrary and unique to each interpreter. The difficulty remains that we raised earlier, which is the problem concerning multiple interpretations: not all readers will come up with the same "meaning" let alone "application." Interestingly, though, several of these multiple interpretations may, in fact, be "correct."

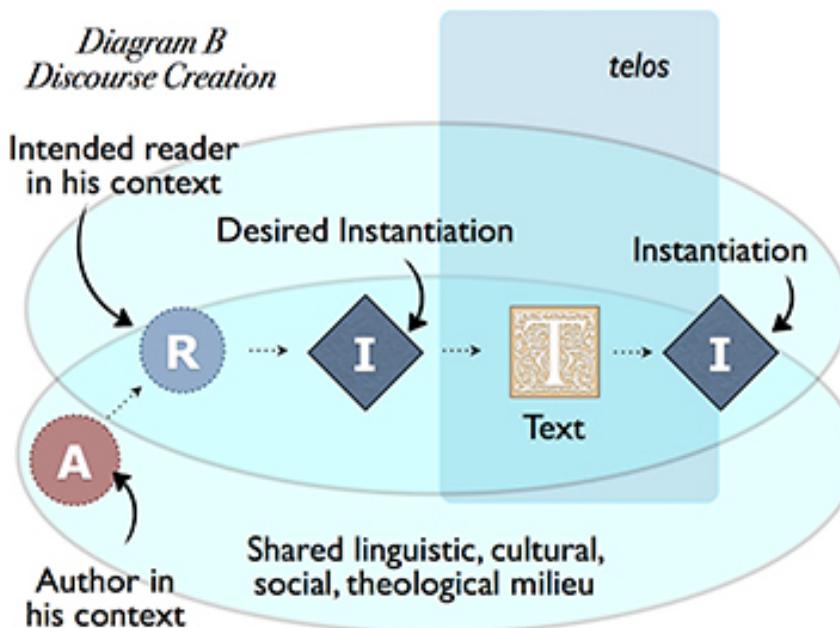


Diagram B: Discourse Creation

This model describes more accurately, I believe, what takes place in the production of a text, in particular of the texts of the New Testament.<sup>28</sup> The author

28. I see no reason why this model would not work for the production of any text. Since many of the contentious issues in our day involve the Pauline Letters, most of my discussion will focus on that portion of the canon.

begins with the reader: what needs do they have? What instruction are they lacking? What correction or encouragement do they need? For example, in the extant letters Paul discusses the Lord's Supper only in I Corinthians 10 and 11. Presumably, this is not because he did not think that the church in Rome or Philippi would not benefit from the Lord's Supper but because the church in Corinth was experiencing conflict in its celebrations. The author does not write in a vacuum, into the sky. He writes for specific people to accomplish specific things. This is labeled on the diagram as a "desired instantiation"—the author's desired outcome. That is, what does it look like, in specific actions, words, or thoughts when the reader/hearer comes to embody the effects of the text? At times this desired instantiation is more or less explicitly expressed by the author: "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (I Cor 11:33). At others the desired effect is less clearly signaled. In Romans, for example, Paul contrasts the "wrath of God" that is revealed to Jew and Gentile apart from Christ (Rom 1:18–3:20) with the "righteousness of God" that is revealed to all in Christ through faith (Rom 3:21–8:39). The goal of the contrast is that the church in Rome find its hope in Christ alone rather than the law. What is the desired result that follows from that? Is it limited to the sphere of salvation (vertical righteousness), or is it an additional goal that Jew and Gentile in Rome be reconciled to one another, as is argued in Romans 9–11, and that they end their disputes over what to eat (Rom 14)? Whether made explicit in the flow of the argument or less clearly signaled by the rhetoric, the desired result for the hearer is in the author's mind before pen is put to paper (or, in the case of Paul's letters, dictation begins). This goal then shapes the selection of words and the argumentation of the passage to impact the hearers. The "meaning of the text," therefore, cannot be limited to the sum of the definitions of the words but is, from the beginning, conceived of as producing a result in the hearer—there is more than *meaning*; the text is to be *meaningful*.

Two ovals in the diagram encompass, respectively, the author and the hearer. These two ovals represent the "Shared linguistic, cultural, social, and theological milieu." An example occurs when Paul writes to the church in Corinth in Greek, referring to specific situations ("A man has his father's wife..." (I Cor 5:1); "brother goes to law against brother" (6:6); etc., in a specific social context (for example, one in which "long hair" is "glory" for the woman, but "disgrace" to the man; I Cor 11:14–15) in a given theological milieu. Of course, at times the "theological milieu" of the hearers is itself the problem that needs to be corrected—for example, in I Cor 15 where the hearers have rejected the bodily resurrection. A problem to which we must return, in due time, is that these settings are distinct and unique—Corinth in the mid-50s of the first century is a different place than Rome, with different people, issues, and circumstances. Not only is there distance between our context and that of the first century church, there were differences (geographic, cultural, etc.) among the contexts of the New Testament church. Perhaps remarkably, Paul forbids circumcision in Galatia (Gal 5:2, etc.) but himself circumcises Timothy in

Lystra (Acts 16:1-3) while refusing to allow Titus to be circumcised in Jerusalem (Gal 2:3-5). Different contexts, even among the churches of the mid-first century, meant that the same action meant different things, and “contradictory” instruction is given. Later we must consider what we do with such texts—do we circumcise, or do we forbid it? As we draw *meaningfulness* from the texts, we must recognize that not even within the NT is the same *meaningfulness* drawn from the same passage—in this case Genesis 19 and the Abrahamic covenant’s requirement of circumcision. There were multiple, faithful interpretations within the NT itself.

At this point, we are ready to speak about the text, for it contains the “signs” (to use Augustine’s term) that are written to provoke the author’s desired response in the hearer. It is produced, again, within the shared milieu of the author and the hearers, so in the diagram the “text” is placed within the ovals representing both the author’s and the hearers’ milieu. However, the text does not inevitably produce the desired instantiation in the hearer. The church in Thessalonica, for example, took the eschatology of I Thessalonians and over-realized it, necessitating a second letter from the apostle. We do not know if some of the baptized in the churches of Galatia underwent circumcision, despite Paul’s words.

There is one final consideration in the process of textual creation that must be considered. On what source did Paul base his desired instantiations? Here is where theological hermeneutics comes into focus. Paul (we believe) is not inventing his “desired instantiations” capriciously, and the resultant text is not considered, from a Lutheran perspective, the mere whims of a human author but revealing and making known of God’s purposes in Christ. The Spirit is at work in the word, so that God’s purposes and intentions are carried out through that word. That is to say, because the apostolic and prophetic word is at the same time God’s word, these scriptures are an effective word, bringing about the Kingdom of God and the new creation through the church in the killing and making alive of the sinner, now made saint in Christ. God is not only *saying* something in the scriptures, he is doing something through them. What they are doing, this scriptural *telos*, or goal, will be considered below.

The strength of this model is that it incorporates pragmatics into the description.<sup>29</sup> The author is not merely providing information, but he is attempting to persuade his hearers to a new situation, perspective, action, or belief. Theologically speaking, it allows us to incorporate the efficacy and infallibility of the scriptures into the hermeneutical process. They functioned, for the original hearers, as the living and active Word of God. As such, they continue to function as the living and active Word of God in our day, continuing to be the means by which the Spirit kills and makes alive. Although this model does not yet account for the present-day hearer, building from this model will better situate us to understand the hermeneutical processes of the creation of meaning in our settings.

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29. On pragmatics, see Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 275–88.

To this point we have only touched briefly on the present-day hearer's interaction with the text. The process of creating *meaning*, or better, *meaningfulness*, from the text is a separate process altogether from the creation of the text. This is illustrated in the next diagram.

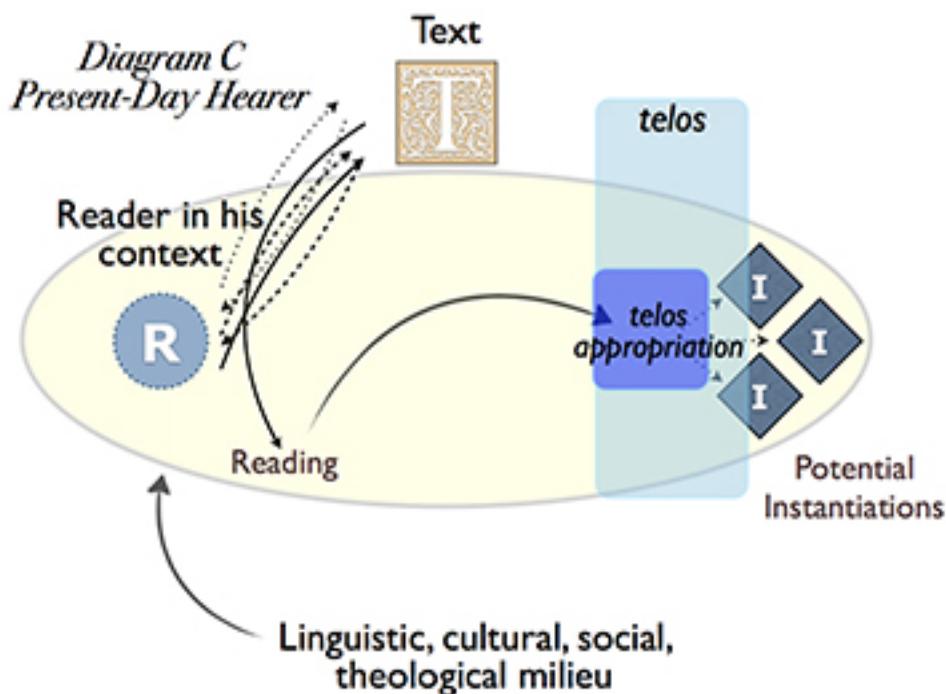


Diagram C: Present-Day Hearer

The reader is situated in his or her own context, which includes again linguistic, cultural, social, and theological perspectives that shape the reader. These perspectives allow some meanings to arise and others to not be considered by the reader. The text, however, is not located in the linguistic, cultural, social, or, even theological milieu of the reader (though the latter might be debated). Most obvious is the fact that most readers of the New Testament are not native readers of Koine Greek, so their competencies are limited, often severely. Cultural and other issues also come into play. An example that I used in a previous essay illustrates this well:

Powell (14-22) relates an example ... which he encountered when teaching the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). He noticed that students, in their work, did not include all the elements of the story. So he conducted an “experiment” to figure out why. He asked 100 students, after reading the parable, to retell the story to another student. Most of the familiar elements were present in these retellings: The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, the distant country, the squandering of all the money, feeding pigs, and “coming to his senses.” However, of the 100 students, all Americans, only six mentioned the famine. Neither Powell, nor the students,

could explain why this was so. During a sabbatical in St. Petersburg, he tried the same experiment to compare the results. Of 50 participants in Russia, 42 mentioned the famine, but only 17 mentioned the squandering of his money. Powell describes a possible reason for this: a “collective memory” of the 1941 siege of Leningrad (as the city was then called) which resulted in the deaths of 670,000 people from starvation, one-fourth of the population. The fear of this event continued to grip those who survived and their descendants even 50 years later. Americans, by contrast, have never, in collective memory, suffered such mass starvation. What concerns Americans is money, how one spends it, and making sure one has enough. This is what is then heard in the parable; the famine, which is outside the experience of almost all educated Americans, scarcely registers.<sup>30</sup>

Examples from the Pauline Epistles could be multiplied; the billboard that cites the passage “slaves, obey your masters” is only one. Hurtado notes that this is true of all readers of Scripture:

I would acknowledge gratefully the critique of naïve epistemological assumptions and the hubristic claims of some historical critics past and present. To be sure, all knowledge claims are limited and shaped by the “knower” as well as by the object of knowledge. The efforts of every interpreter are affected by his or her historicity, in time, geographical, and cultural setting, language, life-experiences, gender, values, biases, beliefs, vices and virtues. All human knowledge is “perspectival,” partial, and corrigible. All inquiry is motivated and, to some degree, shaped by the acknowledged and unacknowledged interests of the inquirer. To apply words from St. Paul, “We know only in part, and prophesy only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). Only in eschatological hope can we envision knowing “even as I have been fully known” (by God).<sup>31</sup>

This “partial knowing” and the inescapability of our own biases and contexts may seem to hinder “the meaning of the text.” However, it must be remembered that “meaning” only happens as the text is read and heard; meaning only exists as the reader—in his context—makes sense of the marks on the page or the sounds in the air.

The creation of “meaning” in the mind is never the sole result of interaction with any text, let alone the scriptural text. Some kind of *meaningfulness* occurs. That is to say, some kind of response is produced as a result. In hearing the scriptural text, an individual must find that *meaningfulness* in his own linguistic, cultural, social, and theological milieu. As we noted earlier, most present-day readers will not hear the injunctions against circumcision in Galatians to be meaningful in the same way that they were to the original hearers; a faithful hearer will desire to live out the

30. Kloha, “Theological Hermeneutics After Meaning,” 8, citing Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Abingdon, 2007), 14-22.

31. Larry W. Hurtado, “New Testament Studies at the Turn of the Millenium: Questions for the Discipline,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 173.

text in such a way that “Christ benefits” us (Gal 5:2). Circumcision, though, in a different setting, may indeed allow Christ’s work to have its way. In the process of moving from text to possible instantiations, various possibilities will come to mind while others will not. Some will suggest themselves, and others will be rejected as the hearer considers the text in his own setting. As a result, there are multiple potential instantiations (as we saw in the example of Galatians 2).

A specific example might be helpful. In 1 Cor 6, Paul rebukes the church, the “plaintiff,” and the “defendant”—everyone involved—for the presence of a wrong between brothers and then having that wrong settled by unbelievers and not by the church. Particularly in our American context, such texts are very difficult to find meaningful. Are all lawsuits forbidden? What about when one is involved in an automobile accident and both parties happen to be Christian? Should the insurance company be left out of it, and all expenses paid out-of-pocket by the person at fault? Insurance is fundamental to social interactions in America; indeed, most states require liability insurance. Does this mean, therefore, that in an automobile accident, 1 Cor 6 is irrelevant? I would suggest that such a move is inappropriate, both because it rejects the authority of the text and because the text is shaping hearers to relate to one another at a more fundamental level than simply setting up “rules” that “apply” only in some situations. Paul’s questions “Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?” (6:7) therefore shape the hearer, as in the Sermon on the Mount, to “turn the other cheek” (5:39), even at the risk of having that one slapped also. Paul’s rebuke, “But you wrong and defraud, and this to brothers” (6:8), shapes the hearer to not wrong or defraud in the first place. This coheres with the Seventh Commandment. Finally, the rebuke of the entire church, that there is “no one wise among you” (6:5), corresponds to instruction elsewhere regarding the role of the church in restoring the lost brother (Matt 18; Gal 6:1; James 5:19–20). As such, while there are specifics in this text, in particular the problem of having the ways of thinking presently in those who do not have the Spirit be allowed to shape and define relationships in the church with respect to disputes, there are multiple potential instantiations of this text in a present-day setting. In some cases (I would hope, rather rare cases), a lawsuit between brothers might be deemed appropriate. In others, some mechanism for resolving disputes *within* the church may be appropriate—and there may be many different ways that such “dispute resolution” might occur. That is to say, there is not only one, single outcome generated by a text as it is heard in new contexts.

The final element in the process of the hearer creating meaningfulness is that there is a prior goal, or *telos*, that shapes and defines the possible instantiations of the text as it is appropriated in its new context. This will have a profound impact on the hearing of the text and decisively influence the result. For example, many present-day readers of the biblical text have a *telos* that is derived from their milieu that then determines their hearing. In the example of the billboard that I used earlier, “Slaves, obey your masters” sounds like a “bronze-age ethic” to our modern, enlightened society. Within a *telos* of inclusivity and egalitarianism, notions

of submission and vocation are foreign. It then becomes impossible to hear that phrase as anything other than something to reject.

Examples in biblical scholarship and ecclesiastical life abound and are not limited to either “conservative” or “liberal” ecclesiastical perspectives. For example, a recent set of essays, *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, lays out the many different goals which readers bring to the text, thereby shaping their reading. The essays are clear about these goals. For example, in an essay on “Feminist Approaches,” the goal is to:

[P]rovide a more involved demonstration of a feminist kind of ideological criticism in the section to follow. By making visible the ideology of gender and slavery in the biblical text, the biblical interpreter is able to analyze how it operates in the text and its interpretations, raise critical questions about it, and envision ways to resist or transform it.<sup>32</sup>

The “resisting and transforming” of the biblical text inevitably has in mind its own ideology before it approaches the text and becomes a lens through which the text is viewed and possible instantiations are envisioned. In the case of the author cited here, it is not possible to have any instantiation result from reading Paul other than to “resist and transform” toward a *different goal*. Here is an example where incorporating a *theological hermeneutics*, one that includes *not privileging* one’s own preferences, cultural contexts, or agendas, becomes important.

Other approaches outlined in the book have a different *telos*, but the results are similar. An essay on “Queer Approaches” argues that “The exercise of queer reading can become an efficacious exercise, not solely for how it produces meaning but for how it generates effects, how it is involved in the production of new concepts of self and society.”<sup>33</sup> Notice that the goals are to generate “new concepts of self and society” as generated by this approach. With a different goal, a different result ensues.

Other ideological approaches may be cautiously considered, however. For example, a “Postcolonial approach interprets with suspicion but also toward retrieval or restoration. Interacting with colonial history and its aftermath a postcolonial optic focuses on histories of repression and repudiation, but through exposé engages also in restoration and transformation.”<sup>34</sup> In some respects, this approach is more helpful than a feminist approach, for it seeks a similar goal to that of the scriptures: the hearers “love their neighbor as themselves,” and the apostolic message, in many ways, was a message of God tearing down the powers and principalities of this

32. Cynthia Briggs Mittredge, “Feminist Approaches: Rethinking Histories and Resisting Ideologies,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Fortress, 2012), 127.

33. Marchal, “Queer Approaches: Improper Relations with Pauline Letters,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters*, 224.

34. Jeremy Punt, “Postcolonial Approaches: Negotiating Empires, Then and Now,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters*, 195.

age.<sup>35</sup> What must be considered, however, is the extent to which a postcolonial *telos* coheres with a biblical *telos*. This is the goal of theological hermeneutics: to consider the divine goal of reading/hearing and then test our readings to see if they cohere with the divine goal.

Self-referential readings are also produced in “traditional” interpretive moves, even if they are not methodologically or hermeneutically self-aware. For example, it is quite common in preaching to produce (to use Luther’s phrase) an “orthodox” reading but not an accurate one. I will use, anonymously, a sermon preached recently on Mark 6:45-56 (I do not know the author, nor his ecclesiastical affiliation, but his sermons are regularly posted on a web site frequented by Lutherans). The text is a challenging one; it is the second time in Mark that Jesus calms a storm. The disciples are alone on the lake in a storm, again fearful. The oddest part of the text is in verses 48–50: “And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified.” Leaving aside the problem that a modernist would have with the depiction of Jesus walking on water, other questions arise, such as, why is he about to pass by? Why would he leave them abandoned to the storm? Why did they think he was a ghost? Why were they terrified this second time that they were in a storm? Most importantly, what *meaningfulness* should we draw from the text? Is it that we not have fear of our (allegorical) “storms”? The sermon, unfortunately, ignores every one of these aspects of the text. Here is the “application” that the sermon makes:

He makes His way to the Boat that the boat may make its way to the other side. Without Jesus there is no way. With Jesus, He is the Way. He is the only way. And His Way is to be carried along by the Wood. The Wood on the Water bearing Jesus to the other side—to safe ground—to a promised Land—to paradise. There is no way to cross over unless you are carried by the Wood. There is no way to heaven, unless you cling to the cross of Christ by faith, receive His baptism in your baptism, hold His Word dear to your hearts. The cross is your bridge. The Body of Jesus is your nourishment. The blood of Jesus is your drink. The passion is your hope. His Church is your ARK.

The sermon, titled “No Crossing Except by Water and the Wood,” is “orthodox” in that it focuses on the cross, encourages participation in the sacrament in the church, and that it has selected one aspect of the Kingdom *telos* and forced the text to urge that aspect. In this example, the preacher knows that in the Kingdom of God salvation happens only by Christ, the Lord’s Supper sustains one in salvation, and the church is the place where Christ and his Supper are found. In the mind of the

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35. An excellent study that highlights this theme in Acts is C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

preacher—the locus of meaning, as we discussed earlier—“boats” evoke wood, from which the cross is made, and the “water” that Jesus walks upon evokes baptism. Body and Blood are absent from the text, but the preacher chooses to insert that from within his understanding of the Kingdom.

Is any of that actually found in the text? The fact that the preacher fails to mention that Jesus is about to pass by the struggling boat while offering neither a word of encouragement nor a finger of assistance, which seems to be a significant element, suggests that the scriptural text is merely a pre-text for the preacher. Is it textually defensible to label the “boat” as the cross or the church (I am not sure which metaphor he is working with; it seems to be both)? This allegorical move, which rejects some textual features into order to fit, Procrustean-like, into his *telos*, is orthodox but not textual. It distorts and ignores key elements of the text. To return to my diagram, the preacher is operating on the right side of the diagram but not on the left. Theological hermeneutics exposes this kind of reading as shaped, unhelpfully, by ideology in the same way (though not with the same result) as a feminist or queer reading.

The problem with such readings is that they abandon and leave behind the text. The text has no normative function even though an “orthodox” sermon has been preached. The pragmatics of the biblical text have been ignored; as a result, the goals of the preacher have replaced the goals of the text and its divine author. The preacher runs several risks here. First, how will his own reading be normed? How does he know, ultimately, that he is preaching with a Kingdom *telos*? If all his readings of the text are this influenced in this way by his own agenda, can any reading of the text actually penetrate his thinking? Second, he runs the risk of neglecting sections of the Scripture that do not suit his self-selected goals. The result will, over time, be congregations who have not heard much of the biblical account of the good news of the Kingdom. A more self-critical approach is needed.

Readers of this essay may have “cheered on” my critique of either the queer reading or the “orthodox” reading, but I hope the reader sees the actual point: privileging human autonomy—whether one is aware of it or not (as I suspect is the case with the preacher of the “boat” sermon)—results in readings that may not faithfully be normed by the actual text. Some discussions of hermeneutics distinguish “general hermeneutics” from “special hermeneutics.” The former includes general principles of interpretation that apply to any text, such as philology, syntax, semantics, historical context, and literary forms. The latter includes assumptions about the biblical writings specifically, such as divine inspiration, the unity of Scripture, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This distinction was first articulated by J. C. Dannhauer, a Lutheran, in his, *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrarum litterarum* (1654). While one may place certain principles into different categories, I am working here with the assumption that both are indispensable and indeed interdependent. As Thiselton summarizes, “Biblical hermeneutics cannot ignore general hermeneu-

tics.”<sup>36</sup> To return to the failed examples cited above, if a “queer hermeneutic” fails to incorporate “special hermeneutics,” a “conservative hermeneutic”<sup>37</sup> fails to incorporate “general hermeneutics.”

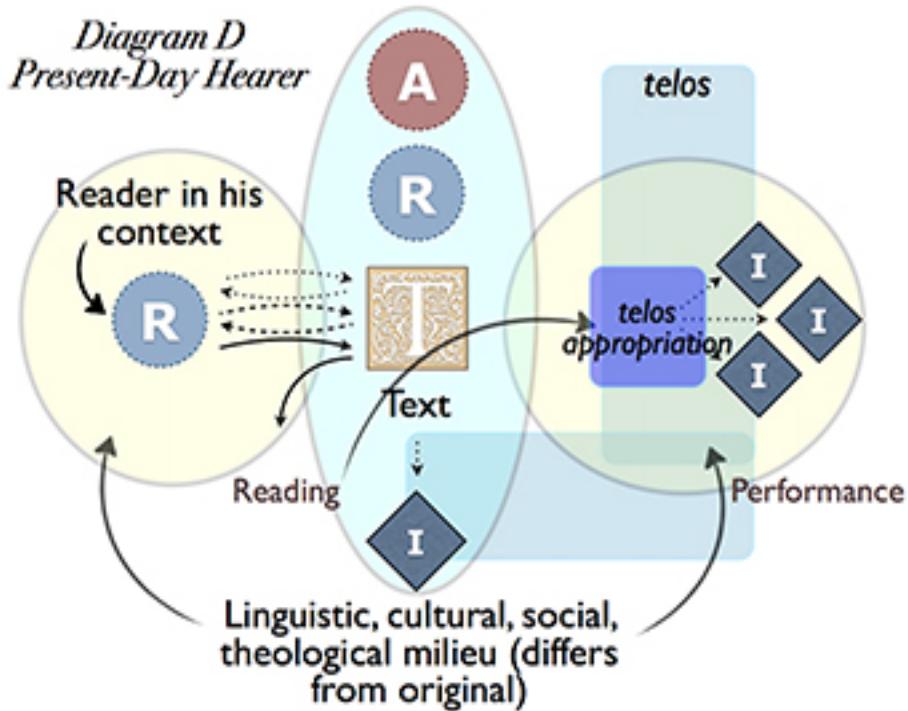


Diagram D: Present-Day Hearer in New Settings

A fourth model incorporates the theological nature of Scripture in accordance with the Spirit’s purposes for the Word and is able to account for new hearings of the word. In this diagram, it is made evident that our setting is different from the setting of the original hearers of the scriptures. This is obvious and is the basic hermeneutical problem, but we continue to hear the Word because in them the Spirit continues to shape and form us in our setting. Nevertheless, faithful hearing occurs in every generation of the church, even if, as the multiplicity of interpretation and the history of the church demonstrate, faithful hearing may look different in different times and places.

In this diagram, the previous diagram (C) is rotated to the vertical axis. This is done to make clear that while we, the present-day readers, have the text in common with the original hearers, we nevertheless have different contexts and therefore different instantiations of the goal (*telos*) of the text.

36. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics. An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2009), 614.

37. I have invented this label for the approach, since this method itself is self-unaware and critically unreflective.

Unfaithful hearing may occur for any number of reasons. On the left side of the diagram, it might occur because of my context, my social setting, or my lack of ability with the Greek and Hebrew. On the right side of the diagram, unfaithful hearing might occur because I cannot conceive of a way that the text might shape my thinking and life, either because it is too foreign and “antiquated” or because I do not agree with the results that the text will produce in me. My ideology, my prejudice, my theology, and my ideology might prevent the Word from having its way with me. At the same time, this model is helpful in explaining why I regularly use profitable commentaries and studies on the biblical text by authors who do not share my theological foundations. They might illuminate issues that focus on the left side of my diagram, and they help reshape my thinking to understand the language, structure and setting of the text. For example, it is fair to say that feminist approaches have made clear that women were more involved in the early churches than had been considered before. When these studies move toward what they believe the instantiations should be as a result, this is where theological hermeneutics becomes critical: do they produce a faithful hearing, consistent with the *telos* of the divine author and his Word?

In the diagram, notice that while the setting of the original hearers is different from our setting, the Kingdom *telos* is the same. That is to say, the Spirit’s work is to keep the hearers of the Word faithful until the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether that hearer lives in the first century or the twenty-first. The Scriptures are a means by which faithful hearers of every generation are taught, reproved, corrected, and trained in righteousness through that God-breathed word, “so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The instantiation of life in the Kingdom formed by the word in every new context will, inevitably, be both different from and, in some respects, identical to the instantiation that the word forms in the original (and subsequent) hearers.

### Toward a Theological Hermeneutic

In conclusion, I will focus on what I believe is most critical for the present-day situation of the church: what theological hermeneutic provides the correct *telos*, or goal, that generates faithful hearing? This is not to say that presuppositions such as infallibility, the Christo-centric nature of Scripture, and the unity of Scripture are not important; indeed, they are essential. However, even agreeing upon these foundational matters has not always resulted in faithful hearing.

Moreover, interpreting the Scriptures as a Lutheran *requires* accounting for the Holy Spirit’s work in making Christ known through His Word, within the Christian community. As the Large Catechism points out:

“I believe that the Holy Spirit makes me holy, as his name states.” How does he do this, or what are his ways and means? Answer: “Through the Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body,

and the life everlasting.” In the first place, he has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims, through which he illuminates and inflames hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. Where he does not cause it to be preached and does not awaken the understanding of it in the heart, all is lost.<sup>38</sup>

However, what is the proper *telos* of the scriptures? “Christ” is the answer, but simply stating that is not sufficient. For which Christ do you have—Christ as lawgiver, Christ as one who frees, completely, from any law, or Christ as model? This is a precise question asked in the New Testament itself (Mark 4:41; 8:31)—and the question could well be answered incorrectly (Mark 13:21-22; Gal 1:6-7; 1 John 4:1-6).

The Small Catechism in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed provides a simple summary of both “which Christ” and “which *telos*.” Christ’s work is for a purpose “that I may be his own, and live under him in his Kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” In order that we might be his own, the Spirit was sent “who spoke by the prophets” and who “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies,” and “keeps.” The Catechism, like the creeds, embeds Christ in a narrative, a creedal narrative, in which God creates and preserves, Christ redeems, and the Spirit calls and sanctifies until the last day when the dead are raised and the resurrection bodies are bestowed on those who believe in Christ. The apostolic and prophetic word is a part of this creedal narrative; its *telos* is the Triune God’s *telos*, to bring us, righteous, to the last day. Therefore, a Christocentric hermeneutic that eliminates the new life in Christ cannot produce a reading that will “keep me in the one true faith,” for with such a hermeneutic I will be free to design my own *telos*. This is the shortcoming of too many feminist approaches, queer approaches, and “traditional” approaches.<sup>39</sup>

The scriptures must be understood within the economy of salvation. God can only be partially and hiddenly known through His creation. He dwells in “unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). Apart from God’s initiative, we cannot know God, know how we stand before Him, fear Him, or love Him. God is a speaking God. “The gods are mute, but the Lord speaks” are the opening lines of Sasse’s

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38. Large Catechism, Apostle’s Creed, Article III, 42-43. Cited from Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, editors. *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress, 2000), 436.

39. To return to the sermon on Mark 6 cited above, the author’s self-chosen goal is, essentially, to attend a Lutheran worship service. That is a fine goal, but the text is asking different questions which would produce different results: Why did the disciples respond in fear? Why did they not ask Jesus why he was about to walk past them? Why is Jesus’ solution to the disciples’ fear “do not be afraid”? And what does that teach us about faith in this Christ?

unfinished work *Sacra Scriptura*.<sup>40</sup> In the economy of God, this speaking occurs by the Spirit who makes known Jesus Christ. Jesus does not begin His public ministry until the pouring out of the Spirit in his baptism (Mark 1:10-11 par.). His authority, to forgive and to heal, is the same authority that belongs to the one God (Mark 2:1-12). In the wisdom of God, the world could not know Him, but He makes Himself known through the foolishness of what was preached, the foolishness of the cross (1 Cor 1:20-25). This Jesus and His authority were rejected and crucified by the world, but through the Spirit of holiness, He was declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection (Rom 1:2-4). God makes Himself known and He speaks in power, only in Jesus Christ to make for Himself a holy and righteous people.

The Spirit, then, continues to call to Christ. The Spirit is the active agent throughout the life and ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:14, 18-21; etc.), and the Spirit speaks the Word about Christ through his Apostles (Acts 1:8) as the narrative of Acts unfolds through the church. “Deacons” such as Stephen (7:55) and Philip (Acts 8:29), “prophets” like Agabus (11:28), and even individuals without title such as Priscilla and Aquila “explain the way of God more accurately” (18:26). This speaking of the Spirit always occurs through people to people who all have their own backgrounds, beliefs, and questions. Therefore, Peter’s speaking to those in Jerusalem will sound different than Paul’s speaking to those in Athens, which will sound different from Paul’s letters addressed to the baptized.

A Trinitarian credal framework also allows us to recognize that God works among us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The work of the Father, the creator, in the words of the first article of the Small Catechism, is to “still preserve” us and His creation. As His creatures, we live within and are blessed through the created realm even in its groaning condition (Rom 8). His reign in his left-hand kingdom is through rulers who mete out justice as agents of God (Rom 13). Therefore, we will find in Christ that the world as we experience it may be in accord with His revealed will. The biblical texts frequently appeal to “the way things are” as genuine expressions of God’s will. For example, in 1 Cor 11 Paul notes that “in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman.” God’s creation shapes and defines relationships between woman and man (or, perhaps in this passage more narrowly, “husband” and “wife”). Furthermore, in the same passage, “nature itself,” that is, the “way things are,” still “teaches” within the church. Of course, teaching drawn from creation alone is insufficient to know Christ, who is revealed only in the “word of the cross” (1 Cor 1) or “in Christ” (Rom 3). Nevertheless, God’s work as Father reminds us that God’s will is not always in conflict with, and in fact is at times worked out through, His creation and left-hand rule.

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40. Hermann Sasse, *Sacra Scriptura. Studien zur Lehre von der Heiligen Schrift von Hermann Sasse*, hrsg. F. Hopf (Verlag “Lutherische Blätter,” 1981), 11.

The work of the Son, the redeemer, is usually in a more antagonistic relationship to the fallen creation. Jesus describes His activity using imagery of someone robbing a strong man's house—in His casting out of demons, He is stealthily stealing people away from the dominion of Satan (Mark 4). Christ's work is described in like manner in the epistles: by Jesus Christ giving Himself up for our sins, He has rescued us from the "present evil age" (Gal 1). Christ's work as redeemer presupposes a "Christ against culture" orientation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. We are called to radically battle against "the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 5). This is the language of the second article of the Small Catechism: "Who has redeemed me ... purchased and won me..." Notice that God's First Article work might seem to contradict His Second Article work—is the ruler one who is to be "obeyed," as in Rom 13, or is the ruler to be regarded as an agent opposed to Christ's Lordship, as in Acts 4? Because scriptural passages that use different creedal discourses may seem to contradict each other, we must account for the ways that we choose which direction to follow and why we choose not to follow the other.

The work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is to make all things "new" and to "transform." He "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies," that is, takes me from where I am now to a new place, thought, and life. This transformative work of the Spirit, however, remains incomplete both in the individual and in the church until the Last Day, so that some part of the old remains. When the Scriptures focus on the work of the Spirit, the discourse will focus on what God is doing in the individual and in the church to achieve His purposes. We are "straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil 3), living in the present in light of the future. As the great chapter on the resurrection concludes, because Christ has risen and we will be raised, "our labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15). When the Scriptures urge sanctification and the Christian life, the teaching and preaching will necessarily adopt third article rhetoric since it is only by the working of the Spirit that such living in the present happens, whether in the individual or in the church.

These three perspectives are not, of course, contradictory or mutually exclusive, any more than are the persons of the Trinity. All three describe ways that God works in the world still today; in our teaching and preaching, however, we often find ourselves gravitating toward one or the other of the articles. In particular, Lutheran preachers tend toward a Second Article framework. If one were to err, better to err on preaching Christ, but such a focus runs the risk of failing to preach "sanctification" or to neglect creation within which we have been placed as stewards. Others will tend toward a Third Article framework. The reign of Christ over creation is highlighted with its emphasis on renewal and eschatological hope. This, of course, is entirely consistent with the New Testament, but even in the apostolic age the danger of "over-realized eschatology" plagued the church (1 Cor 4; 2 Thes).

Above all, the scriptures, because they are Word of God, are performative. That is, they accomplish God's purposes. Although the scriptures convey information,

the information provided is never solely for the purpose of filing away in a dogmatics text that is placed on a shelf. For this reason, remarkably, we keep hearing the Scriptures day upon day and week upon week. The revelation of the Word of God is like no other. How many of us go back and read Plato and Aristotle weekly or daily, even though virtually all the epistemological and ontological questions still discussed in Western thought were raised and addressed by them? We do not go back to those texts to find new insight or new modes of being. If we read them at all, it is for historical purposes; moreover, I could more easily read someone else's expert summary of them to get what I need. Again, it is very unlikely that any of us have read Foucault in the original, yet to a person our thought patterns are shaped by his work and even assume, without realizing it, that all language and relationships are, as he described it, negotiations of power. Unlike these seminal texts, we keep going back to the Word of God. We do not read other people's summary of scriptures. We keep hearing the Scriptures because something happens: God works, again and again, when we hear His word.

When I hear the gospel reading appointed for the Second Sunday in Advent, for probably the thirteenth or fourteenth time during a gathering of God's people in worship, I will hear it differently than I did the twelfth or eleventh time that I heard that same reading because I am different and my circumstances have changed. My struggles have been resolved, and new ones press to the fore. However, in my changing circumstances, God's Word speaks again, and I run to hear it again and again because I know that the hearing will be different this time. Like no other writing, God speaks in this Word. I am addressed. Even against my will, I am made into His faithful child that I may live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. As Wingren describes it:

To speak of the last day, of the final victory and the full redemption, is to speak of something that is being accomplished by the Word and mediated by the preaching that is now going on throughout the world, which is the link between Christ's resurrection and our own. Redemption is not just something of which we hear in the Word. It is something which is even now happening to us, when we encounter the Word; the Word is the creative Word which brings its work to birth in us.<sup>41</sup>

Our struggle, then, is to determine when our hearing of the Word of God is indeed proper hearing. When is the life that we live and urge upon others indeed formed by the Word? When, in fact, is it merely the sinful imposition of my will upon others?

Turning again to our predecessors in the study of the scriptures, I would like to draw upon Augustine, Flacius, Luther, and Bayer to help define an appropriate *telos* toward which the Spirit through the scriptures is working. Augustine summarizes the *telos* in this way:

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41. Gustav Wingren, *The Living Word. A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church* (Fortress Press, 1960), 94.

Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, he states,

So when someone has learnt that the aim of the commandment is “love from a pure heart, and a good conscience and genuine faith [1 Tim 1:5], he will be ready to relate every interpretation of the holy scriptures to these three things and may approach the task of handling these books with confidence. For when the apostle said “love” he added “from a pure heart,” so that nothing is loved except that which should be loved (*De doctrina Christiana* 1:40,44; Green, 53; cf. 3:14,22; Green, 155, cited above).

This “double-love” is the *sine qua non* of faithful hearing of the scriptures. Several authors have pointed this out in Augustine. Francis Watson, in his summary of Augustine’s hermeneutics, places at the top of the list “a firm grasp of the *telos* of Holy Scripture and its interpretation, which is to engender the love of the Triune God and of the neighbor and nothing else.”<sup>43</sup>

Seeing “double-love” as the *telos* of God’s work in scripture is not unique to Augustine. Flacius’ essay *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures* likewise recognizes that unless one understands the overall purpose or goal of the scriptures, one cannot hear properly:

It is useful right in the beginning to understand what one ought to get out of the proposed work, not only so that he might be more clear with respect to the work, but also so that he might recognize what to pluck from it and deposit securely in his heart. All that is written, therefore, is written for us, so that Scripture first binds us under sin and condemns us; then, testifies to us about Christ; third, consoles us so that we might have patience and hope; and finally teaches, rebukes, corrects, and instructs, so that the man of God may be perfected, equipped for all things (2 Timothy 3:16,17).<sup>44</sup>

The purpose of scripture is, for Flacius, summarized in a four-fold goal: Law, Gospel, comfort, and, based on 1 Tim 3:16–17, teaching, thus rebuking correcting and instructing “so that the man of God may be perfected, equipped for all things.” These would correspond to Augustine’s “double-love” in that “Law, Gospel, comfort” accomplish the love of God while “teaching, rebuking, correcting and instructing” accomplish love of neighbor. The necessity of recognizing that a goal of Scripture is to produce a “perfect” life—love both God and neighbor—is reflected in the summary “Guidelines,” which he provides at the conclusion of his treatise: “[I]t

42. *De doctrina christiana* 1:36,49; translation from Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* (ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green; Clarendon Press, 1995), 49.

43. Francis W. Watson, “Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,” in *Reading Scripture with the Church. Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2006), 122.

44. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, trans. Wade R. Johnston (Magdeburg Press, 2011), 70.

is therefore especially necessary in this regard for one to consider and keep in view the attainment of the true and genuine meaning of the Sacred Scriptures, with the desire to use it with the best faith for the glory of God, for your benefit, and for the benefit of others, especially the spiritual and eternal benefit.”<sup>45</sup> This comes tantalizingly close to Augustine’s *telos* of double-love of God and neighbor. However, in his treatise, Flacius does not develop or emphasize in any significant way that hearing of the Word results in love of neighbor. The nearest he comes is in section 51 where he teaches that our speaking “should always be salted by the Word of God, so that we and others are edified” and that we are “to be prepared always to give a reason for our faith,” which is “above all the end product to be sought and derived from this study [of the Scriptures].”<sup>46</sup>

Though not laid out as a treatise on hermeneutics, Luther’s catechism works with the same double-love *telos* in his “meanings” of the commandments in the second table of the law: “We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt nor harm our neighbor”; “We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor’s money or property.” This double-love, of God and neighbor, serves as the key to hearing the word faithfully.

Finally, Jesus operates with this double-love in His teaching of the scriptures. When asked of the “greatest law,” His response was love of God and love of neighbor; “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 22:34-40; cf. Mark 12:28-34). When asked by the “lawyer” in Luke 10 what he must do, Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The man cited the correct passage from Leviticus, and Jesus replies, “Do this and you will live.” The man did not know how to read the law, even though he could read the law, because he had only love for himself; he could not show mercy. Jesus tells a parable, ending with the instruction: “You go, and do likewise.” Perhaps even more striking is the rich young man of Matthew 19 to whom Jesus gives a list of commandments, all from the second table. The man, foolishly, declares that he has kept all of them, but in Jesus’s command to sell all and give to the poor, he walks away from Jesus. This demonstrates that the man loved neither God nor his neighbor. Likewise, the apostle held up this double-love as “summary” (Rom 13:9) and “fulfilling” (Gal 5:14) of the entire law (Torah?), and James calls it the “royal law” (2:8). The proper confession of Jesus Christ, noted above in 1 John 4:1-6, is followed *immediately* by the command to love: “every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God ... Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (4:8).

How does this double-law function hermeneutically? How does the text shape our lives toward the love of God and love of neighbor, even in situations which are so vastly different from those of the Apostles? Here, we refer again to Diagram D.

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45. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 105.

46. Flacius, *How to Understand the Sacred Scriptures*, 98–99.

Notice that our context or milieu does not correspond to the milieu of the text, but what does overlap, what does correspond, is the same *telos*. That is to say, the same God is working to bring about the same kingdom in and among us through the same text. What is produced in us by the Spirit through the scriptures is the same life in the kingdom. What is shared between us and the original hearers is the text and the *telos*, the Spirit's text that produces the Spirit's goal. Therefore, any hearing of the scriptures that does not produce love of God (faith, worship, obedience) and love of neighbor does not reflect the purpose of the scriptures nor produce the faithful response that the Spirit is working through that Word. In a sense, this double-law is eschatological. Through the scriptures, the Spirit produces for God a people of faith who live faithfully in this age and will be proven faithful on the last day. It is a hermeneutic that allows the scriptures to function according to the Spirit's purposes, even if in this age only in a tentative, provisional way with multiple faithful interpretations of the same text. This may not lead to exactly the same instantiations of the text in every time and place, but this has always been the case. Augustine has a faithful reading of Galatians 2, as did Jerome, as did Luther. They produced a different instantiation of the text, but they were all faithful instantiations because they resulted in love of God and of neighbor. We might demand circumcision in accordance with the covenant or forbid it. Either one may obscure Christ; either one may result in not loving neighbor, as it did in Galatia ("It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ"; Gal 6:12). The goal, though, the kingdom goal of the text, is to love God and love neighbor.

We may crave singularity, the one perfect reading so that, once captured, we might put the scriptures aside, but we are called to hear ever again the Word so that the Spirit might shape us in our ever-changing situations and circumstances. Such is the nature of faith that it is always struggling, always seeking, and always trusting. God's Kingdom comes without our prayer, but we pray in the Lord's Prayer that it comes to us also. It comes by the power of God, by His Word, and toward His goal. As Kolb and Arand describe God's *telos*:

Luther's reminder that God calls Christians in the midst of a sinful world to turn from their mistakes, failures, and disobedience each day of their lives reminds theologians of their need to return to Scripture continually to check out whether they are faithfully reproducing God's message. This is true not only because students of God's Word can make false formulations but also because Satan's deceptions take so many forms and God's gift of humanity has so many facets. In different situations and in confrontation with various forms of evil, God's message for a fallen world takes on new and different expressions. The unchangeable truths of Scripture must be proclaimed to specific human beings in their specific environments as the gospel addresses their realities and brings its power to change those realities through forgiveness and the

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promise of new life in Christ. God's Word not only describes reality but also creates it.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Oswald Bayer (summarizing Luther) urges a focus on the biblical *telos* in the teaching and preaching activity of the church that de-centers the self and creates space for the word of God to have its effect:

And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we depend not on our own strength, conscience, mind, person, or works but on what is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive... when we address people with the Gospel, we should not tie them down to themselves and their relationships, we should not demand anything of them, but we should promise them something unexpected, undeserved, something that they are not and do not have, something impossible, at least not possible for them. Through such a promise, they belong to Jesus through the faith it creates. And we can appeal to this same Jesus because he is the Lord, the one who has the first and last word.<sup>48</sup>

The Scriptures are generative and creative. They open new possibilities and create a new, righteous person in the place of a sinner. They create faithful people who "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4) and who have "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24). The Spirit by this word is at work bringing about new life that loves God, does His will, and loves the neighbor imperfectly in this age but perfectly in Christ in the coming age.

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Jeffrey Kloha is Dean of the Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership at the Christ School of Theology of the Institute of Lutheran Theology and Associate Pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church, Arlington, VA.

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47. Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology. A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

48. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Eerdmans, 2008), 52-53.



# Forming the Theologian of the Cross

## A Lutheran Vision for Person-Formative Theological Education in an Online Age

David Patterson, Nils Borquist & Joleen Pietrzak

**ABSTRACT:** This article articulates a Lutheran account of person-formative theological education ordered by the *theologia crucis* and the external Word, proposing that theological schools—whether residential or distributed—should structure curriculum, community, delivery, and assessment by Luther’s triad of *oratio–meditatio–tentatio*. The argument contends that adult-learning frameworks (andragogy and heutagogy) serve ecclesial formation only when disciplined by the Word and embedded in the Church’s life: synchronous seminars that sustain public, prayerful speech; vocal rumination on Scripture aimed at proclamation; and supervised field education as the crucible of *tentatio* where doctrine is tested in the neighbor’s need. The model resists technocratic professionalization and expressive individualism by reframing faculty as theological elders who exercise authority through discernment and pastoral presence while learners assume responsible agency under the cross. Assessment is reoriented toward marks befitting theologians of the cross: doctrinal clarity that “calls the thing what it is,” scriptural habituation, pastoral discernment under trial, communal maturity, and cultural wisdom. Conceived as *seminaria*, theological schools become seedbeds where the Spirit forms workers who confess Christ and serve the Church’s public witness in a digital age.

### Introduction: Christ’s Word, Christ’s Way, Christ’s Workers

**A** Lutheran school of theology must aspire to participate in the Spirit’s work of forming persons who confess the crucified and risen Christ, speak truthfully about God and neighbor, and suffer and rejoice under the incarnate Word’s lordship. In our present moment, the precipitating factor for reconsidering the shape of such dynamic formation, as well as actively pursuing the ultimate goals, proves to be the global shift to online and hybrid delivery in theological education. The question that arises concerns not whether digital modalities can carry theological content but

whether institutions of higher education can serve the Church's vocation to form theologians of the cross, those women and men whose subjectivity gets formed and so disciplined by the objectivity of the gospel, disciples who honestly profess the truth of the Word under the authority of the Heavenly Father.

Regarding educational practices, "pedagogy" refers to the general art and science of teaching across ages; "andragogy" specifically focuses on adult learners through student-centered, experience-rich, problem-oriented, and collaborative practices;<sup>1</sup> and "heutagogy" extends andragogy toward a more mature self-directedness wherein the learner shapes pathways and evidences of learning while the instructor serves as guide.<sup>2</sup> To envision quality Lutheran educational stewardship, these terms shall be used in service of theology rather than as ends in themselves. Our thesis is simple—proper Christian theological education focuses entirely upon whole-person formation. The institution and those involved in the formation process apprentice adult learners into cruciform wisdom under the external Word by ordering the school's life around Luther's three rules of study: "*Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio*." The practices of the Institute of Lutheran Theology can demonstrate this claim, but the general claim itself explicitly pertains to the nature of Christian formation rather than the profile of any single institution.

## I. The Theological Center: Theologia Crucis and the External Word

In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther contrasts a theologian of glory with a theologian of the cross, writing that "a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Luther states, "He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>4</sup> Luther's language avoids rejecting reason or imagination, instead aiming at a renunciation of enthusiasm that separates theological subjectivity from theological objectivity. Imagination matters (Luther is among the most rhetorically creative of theologians) as does speculative reflection, particularly when disciplined by the external Word and ordered to proclamation and pastoral care.

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1. See Gina Decelle, "Andragogy: A Fundamental Principle of Online Education for Nursing," *Journal of Best Practices in Health Professions Diversity* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 1264.

2. See David William Stoten, "Positioning Through Epistemic Cognition in Higher Education: Conceptualizing the Ways in which Academics in a Business School View Heutagogy," *Higher Education* 87, no. 4 (April 2024): 992-003, and Zulyar Kavashev, "A Bibliometric Performance Analysis of Publication Productivity within Pedagogy, Andragogy, and Heutagogy Continuum: Outcomes of SciVal Analytics," *E-Learning and Digital Media* (2024).

3. Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Thesis 21.

4. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputations*, Thesis 20.

Cruciform orientation requires a living authority, the *external* Word of God. As such, Luther insists that God gives His Spirit through the external Word being preached, read, sung, confessed, and borne into a believer's life (Ps. 119). Scripture thus serves as the *prima norma normata*—the primary normed norm—under the norming norm (*norma normans*) of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hence, *sola scriptura*, with *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, witness that Christ (*Solus Christus*) exists as the sole object of faith and the Lord known instrumentally by grace, through faith, and according to Scripture. The Word thusly guards against undiscerning biblicism while also defending the objectivity of revelation against privatized spirituality.

Luther's three rules—*Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*—name not a ladder but a life. *Oratio* initiates in prayer and unfolds as faithful speech, be it in reading, preaching, disputing, or singing. *Meditatio* signifies rumination, hearing and speaking the Word aloud as well as repeating and digesting Scripture so that the Word “takes hold.” *Tentatio* refers to spiritual struggle and suffering as the crucible in which faith gets progressively driven from self-reliance to Christ-reliance. The three aspects socially and spiritually work together in unison; they ideally occur in the communion of saints and for the sake of the neighbor.

In considering such principles, the Lutheran-based education, as well as the wider Christian theological education, exists not primarily as a system for transmitting religious information, professional competencies, or academic credentials but aims, rather, to be person-formative, ordered toward the developing of theologians who speak truthfully of God and neighbor because they themselves have been addressed, judged, and consoled by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The question before theological schools today—especially in light of the global expansion of online and hybrid delivery modes—concerns not whether theological content can be delivered effectively but whether a school's common life can be soundly ordered so that adult learners get formed under the cross rather than trained solely for intellectual mastery.

At the crux of formational Lutheran instruction, Luther's theologia crucis resists every attempt to ground theology in human ascent, technique, or control. Quite specifically, the theologian of glory seeks God through visible success, intellectual achievement, and speculative coherence while the theology of the cross confesses God where He has bound Himself to be found—in the suffering, weakness, and hiddenness of Jesus Christ crucified. As Luther insists in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the true theologian “calls the thing what it is,” not because of superior insight but because God has first called and named us through the cross of Jesus.

The truthful speech therein presupposes a definite and living authority, namely God's external Word. God does not provide His Spirit apart from this Word but through the vehicles of gospel being preached, read, sung, confessed, and, thusly, carried into the theologian's life. Within such speech, clarity and precision is undoubtedly vital. Canonical Scripture serves as the authoritative and sufficient witness by which the gospel creates and so governs the Church's hearing, teaching, and proclaiming. Ultimately, this distinction safeguards a cruciform

Christ-centeredness from two equal distortions: privatized spirituality that severs the Spirit from the Word and undiscerning biblicism that mistakes the Spirit's historic witness for the object of faith.

In so naming the Word as *external*, Luther insists upon its objectivity over against our perceptions, preferences, and projects. We are not formed by what we imagine God to be but by what God has given and revealed Himself to be in Christ. Scripture, the Spirit's living witness through the written Logos, and the neighbor to whom Christ binds Himself constitute the concrete means through which God addresses and forms His people. A theological education faithful to this conviction does not, therefore, begin with learner autonomy or academic creativity but rather with receptive obedience—listening attentively and learning patiently to be addressed before presuming to speak.

This theological posture decisively rejects enthusiasm, the perennial temptation to separate theological subjectivity from theological objectivity, or the Spirit from the cross. The danger herein pertains not to imagination or speculative reflection as such. Indeed, imagination exists as a genuine rational faculty, and Lutheran theology—from Luther's own rhetorical creativity onward—has remained consistent regarding philosophical or speculative engagement. Instead, the danger subsists in speculation unmoored from the gospel's address, in an imagination set loose from Scripture's judgment and promise. Fortunately, when properly disciplined, reason and imagination serve theology when ordered toward proclamation, consolation, and truthful confession before God and the neighbor.

Within this framework, then, Luther's previously stated three rules for theological study—*oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*—signify not a method to be practiced at various intervals but a life lived under the Word. Again, *Oratio* encompasses prayerful and communal speech: reading, disputing, preaching, singing, and confessing the Word aloud so that theology remains public, audible, and ecclesial. *Meditatio* names ruminative engagement with Scripture and with all human knowledge as judged and clarified by Scripture. Further, this is not quietist introspection but a vocal demand involving repeated hearings until the Word “takes hold” and forms discernment for teaching and pastoral care. *Tentatio* names spiritual struggle—trial, suffering, and resistance—as the crucible in which theology is tested, illusions are stripped away, and confidence is driven from the self onto Christ alone.

Luther's three components belong together, combined as a single disciplinary outlook. They are at once both spiritual and social, unfolding in the communion of the Church and for the sake of the neighbor. The Spirit engages the theologian precisely as the theologian engages the Word in the world God loves. In this way, *theologia crucis* resists scholastic abstraction, modern methodolatry, and postmodern self-curation alike, replacing them with a pattern of obedient hearing, communal discernment, and cruciform endurance. Such formation emerges as necessarily ecclesial. In recognizing that God works through external, public means, theologians of the cross are not formed in isolation but in congregations and ministries

where preaching, catechesis, pastoral care, and *diakonia* stand as ordinary arenas of learning. Within such arenas, personal struggles are inseparable from social and spiritual conflict, battling the powers and principalities that Scripture names in caring for suffering neighbors whom Christ claims as His own. Theology learned apart from such engagement quickly becomes either technique without compassion or conviction without patience, outcomes contrary to their grander *telos*.

If truly considering the breadth and depth of Luther's triad as described, and in conjunction with superior intellectual cultivation, theological schools must order their common lives—curriculum, community, assessment, and delivery—under the cross. This remains indisputably true whether instruction occurs in brick-and-mortar classrooms or via synchronous online gatherings. What matters for the students seeking formational and academic development and the instructors delivering the teaching is not the modality itself but a school's sustaining a shared rhythm of *oratio–meditatio–tentatio*, speech disciplined by the external Word and binding learning to the Church's life of suffering witness in the world.

Academic institutions shaped in this way measure success not by speculative brilliance or professional polish but by truthful speech and faithful practice—doctrinal clarity calling the thing what it is, scriptural habituation showing the Word has taken hold, pastoral discernment under trial, communal maturity in and for the Church, and cultural wisdom resisting conformity to the age. These are the true marks of theologians formed under the cross, those whose confidence rests not in themselves but in Christ crucified.

## II. Adult Learning under the Word: Andragogy, Heutagogy, and the Way of the Cross

Due to the reality that most theological learners today are adults, formation must be andragogically administered, built around a student-centered, experience-based, problem-oriented, and collaborative approach.<sup>5</sup> Instructors become facilitators and co-laborers eliciting responsible agency under the Word rather than mere reception of data. *Tentatio* anchors experiential learning, and trials—personal and social—force learners to confront limits and depend upon grace.<sup>6</sup> “Personal and spiritual struggles,” as such, cannot be severed from social forms of suffering under the oppressive powers and principalities that Scripture names (Eph. 6:12).

In increasingly online and hybrid contexts, heutagogical methodologies place mature learners at the centers of their respective learning journeys while the instructor serves as a wise guide.<sup>7</sup> Properly immersed in the *theologia crucis*, self-direction does not mean autonomy from the Word but rather devoted responsibility

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5. See Decelle, 1269.

6. Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Jossey-Bass, 1991).

to it. Synchronous online engagement, therefore, strengthens real-time conversation, catechetical questioning, and communal discernment, all immensely crucial for *Oratio* and *Meditatio*. Simultaneously, embedded service-learning binds doctrine to *diakonia* so that learners meet Christ in the neighbor, discovering *Tentatio* not as abstraction but as pastoral reality.<sup>8</sup>

As such, forming theologians of the cross in the present age requires serious attention to the educational realities of the adult learner. In contrast to pedagogical models oriented toward children or adolescents, Christian higher education today serves students bringing prior learning, vocational experience, social responsibility, and deeply formed patterns of thought and practice into the classrooms. These students are not merely accumulating information but are seeking wisdom adequate for preaching, teaching, pastoral care and servant-leadership, and faithful congregational witness amid concrete historical conditions. Further, knowledge of God comes where Christ has bound Himself to be known: in weakness, suffering, and the lived struggles of vocation. Adult learners often endure such struggle already with lives marked by ministry responsibilities, family obligations, financial constraints, institutional pressures, and social conflicts. Within this reality, theological education must not pretend to be neutral or detached but rather must engage experience critically, interpreting it under Scripture so that suffering becomes *tentatio* rather than despair, and persevering ministry becomes cruciform service rather than self-assertion.

In understanding the contemporary adult learner, the term “pedagogy” simply does not apply. Instead, andragogy designates the proper practice in such settings. As far as the pertinent aspects of andragogy, such a system “is student-centered, experience-based, problem-oriented, and requires collaboration between learners and educators. It represents a process of self-mastery in which learners must be highly motivated and engaged,” and includes certain tenets, such as “personal experiences are a rich source of learning; ... adult education programs should center on ‘life application’ and progress in relation to learner readiness; [and] adults are competency-based learners and need to apply newly acquired skills in real-life applications and immediate circumstances.”<sup>9</sup> In the andragogical model, learners are characteristically self-directed, internally motivated, experience-rich, and oriented toward immediate application, all traits being gifts to be ordered under the Word. Properly understood, andragogy aligns well with Luther’s rejection of speculative theology in favor of experiential faith shaped through trial, responsibility, and accountability.

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7. See Stoten, 992-1003, and Kavashev.

8. Abraham David Benavides, Laura M. Keyes, Ivonne Linares-Hernandez, and Veronica Martinez-Miranda, “Service-Learning in Higher Education: Andragogy in Argentina, Mexico, and the United States,” *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad* 34, no. 4 (2022): 278-279.

9. Decelle, 1264.

The andragogical system may be utilized in a face-to-face classroom or within the online environment, though the primary principles remain the same; Roe provides six key elements:

First, adults become more self-directed in their learning as they age... Second, adults learn best through experiences and lean on their prior learning... Third, adults' readiness to learn is intertwined with their social roles. Fourth, adults are problem-centered as opposed to subject-centered... Fifth, adults tend to be internally motivated... Sixth, adults need to understand why they need to know something.<sup>10</sup>

From a pragmatic perspective, several of these components apply to all learners, but the incorporation of meaningful experiences, the focus on solving immediate problems, and the desire to know the value of presented material separates the adult student from children. Roe's six principles certainly apply to theological instruction, as the inclusion of experience-based lessons, the interconnectedness of social interactions (be they familial, spiritual, or occupational), and the deeper impact of biblical and metaphysical studies and a lifestyle integrating those elements reside at the core of pastoral preparation.

Within an andragogical classroom, instructors do not function primarily as the source of all knowledge but as guides, facilitators, and theological elders. Authority gets exercised through discernment, modeling, and pastoral presence. The teacher and student are bound together under the same external Word, accountable to the same gospel, and mutually implicated in the work of formation, which leads to a shared submission that guards andragogy from devolving into mere consumer preference or pragmatic skill-building.

As useful as the andragogical structure may be for adult learners, the natural progression into a heutagogy further advances intellectual growth through a more efficient methodology and more effective principles and procedures. Essentially, heutagogy "is ... known as an extension of andragogy" that offers a better experience "for self-directed learners predominantly over the age of 25."<sup>11</sup> Stoten gives an expansive definition of heutagogy, writing that "heutagogy places the learner at the center of the learning journey through a ... curriculum in which the nature and scope...are determined by the individual" due to the inherent demand that "the learner has the requisite level of competence and capabilities... [T]he function of the educator," then, "is to support the learner as a guide or a coach."<sup>12</sup> Heutagogy extends the andragogical adult-learning orientation by emphasizing self-directed learning among mature students, especially within online and hybrid contexts. In

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10. Lisa Roe, "Applying Andragogy to Service-Learning in Graduate Education: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education* 29, no. 1 (May 2023): 148-149.

11. Kavashev.

12. Stoten, 992-1003.

heutagogical practice, learners take increasing responsibility for the direction, scope, and application of their studies, while faculty serve as coaches who help students discern faithful pathways rather than prescribe uniform outcomes. When yoked to a theology of the cross, this self-direction is not autonomy from authority but responsibility before Christ. When properly ordered, then, heutagogy reflects Luther's insistence that theologians are developed by being driven back to the Word in the midst of struggle. Students learn by doing theology in context—researching real questions arising from preaching, catechesis, ethics, and pastoral care; testing claims under Scripture; and submitting work for communal examination. Self-direction becomes disciplined rather than liberated, cruciform rather than merely expressive.

The contemporary prevalence of online theological education makes the implementation of such a disciplined heutagogy especially urgent. Asynchronous content delivery alone cannot sustain the communal and dialogical dimensions of theological formation, so synchronous engagement—real-time conversation, disputation, prayer, and mutual exhortation—surfaces as critical for sustaining *oratio* and *meditatio* within a distributed learning environment. Without such practices, theological study risks collapsing into solitary credentialing rather than ecclesial formation.

An intrinsic element of adult learning in a Christian context is service-learning, which functions in this environment not as an extracurricular supplement but as a cruciform center. Adults learn best when faced with real problems that demand faithful judgment. In congregational and community contexts, students encounter the neighbor to whom Christ has bound Himself, and they discover that theological claims are not merely propositions to be defended but words that either console or wound, either bind or free. Such encounters expose inadequacies, provoke repentance, and drive learners back to Scripture—not only as information, but as promise.

Finally, assessment within the andragogical-heutagogical models shaped by the cross must likewise be reoriented so that success is not measured only by content mastery or production volume but by demonstrated competence in truthful proclamation, pastoral discernment, ethical reasoning, and communal accountability. Adult learners in theology get evaluated based on their respective abilities to articulate doctrine clearly, to apply it faithfully, to think critically, and to endure correction without collapse, all marks of formation under the cross. In this way, Christian higher education avoids two false paths: it firstly resists technocratic professionalism that treats ministry as skill acquisition detached from spiritual formation while secondly resisting expressive individualism that treats theology as personal meaning-making. As such, it retrieves a Lutheran vision in which mature learners become apprenticed into lifelong theological discernment—formed not once for all, but continually through the Word, for the neighbor, and under the cross. Ordered rightly, andragogy and heutagogy serve the lordship of Christ. Adult self-direction, disciplined by the external Word and tested through *tentatio*, therefore becomes a means by which theologians of the cross are formed for faithful service in a complex and suffering world.

### III. Church, Culture, and the Formation of Persons

Human life should be realized as obviously cultural and irreducibly theological. Created in the image and likeness of God, human beings receive both physical life as well as vocational responsibilities: to speak, name, tend, and relate within God's glorious creation. From the beginning, this creaturely calling gets exercised through language, symbols, practices, and relationships, and humanity's first acts—naming the animals, recognizing the other, and speaking truthfully about creation—are cultural and creative acts, performed before God and for the sake of a connected life (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:19-23).

Such creaturely creativity, however, never exists autonomously. Although human beings have been endowed with genuine capacities to imagine, order, and produce meaning, sin corrupts such abilities (Genesis 3). Sin does not merely deform moral behavior but distorts perception, language, imagination, and desire. As a result, the most sincere cultural assumptions, traditions, and “common sensical” beliefs may become vehicles of self-justification, domination, or false security. Therefore, the theologian of the cross must think critically, learning to distrust both private intuition and inherited norms, submitting all human meaning-making to the judgment and promise of God's external Word. The Reformation entailed a reform of church doctrine in the light of Scripture and such reform is an ongoing task as Christian orthodoxy as the Holy Spirit's work in progress.

As human beings get formed within shared patterns of belief, value, and practice, a recognizable culture, not optional or incidental, by its nature intertwines with being. Culture names the accumulated and transmitted ways a people come to understand who they are, how the world works, and what appears worth loving or fearing.<sup>13</sup> Every person arrives in theological education already molded by such patterns—familial, ecclesial, political, and economic. As such, theological formation never begins with a blank slate, instead always working with subjects already formed, for better or worse, by the cultures claiming them.

Religion emerges as one of the most powerful of these formative structures. Far from being a purely private or interior phenomenon, religion binds people into a moral community through shared symbols, narratives, and practices.<sup>14</sup> As a social reality, religion orders time, confers identity, and authorizes particular ways

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13. The socio-cultural functionalist perspective views society as a complex system with interconnected parts that work together to maintain stability and social order, thus emphasizing how different aspects of culture, such as social institutions, norms, and values, contribute to the overall functioning and survival of society. Functionalists see culture as serving specific purposes or functions that meet the needs of individuals and the collective.

14. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields, (Free Press, 1995), 44.

of speaking and acting in the world. The Church lives not merely as a voluntary association of like-minded individuals but as a visible community created by the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments through which God forms a people for Himself.

Christian theology takes this social and cultural reality with the utmost seriousness in order to confess how God chooses to work in and through such means. God gives Himself through external, public, embodied instruments—Scripture read and preached, water poured, bread broken, wine shared, sins forgiven, and neighbors served. Formation under the cross is, therefore, never a solitary project of inward development but a communal apprenticeship in faithful hearing, truthful speaking, and cruciform service.

Within this sociological framework, Christianity functions as a distinct cultural community within the broader societies it inhabits with the Church called to be “in” the world without being “of” the world, i.e. not by withdrawal from society or coercion in it but by faithful presence shaped by the cross. Christian transformation ordinarily works from the inside out, similar to yeast hidden in dough.<sup>15</sup> Meanings get reoriented before structures are altered, and hearts get turned before habits change.<sup>16</sup> Such transformation slowly arrives, being contested and costly, often marked by suffering rather than success.

For this reason, theologians of the cross must be formed not necessarily as cultural managers and religious technicians but primarily as discerning witnesses who can read both Scripture and culture truthfully. To love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love the neighbor as oneself<sup>17</sup> means to refuse both uncritical conformity to the age and anxious retreat from it. Faithful theology learns to honor creational goods, unmask idolatries, and endure opposition without surprise, thereby trusting that God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

Historically, the Church recognizes that such formation requires more than the transmission of ideas. From early catechesis and episcopal mentoring, through monastic schools and Reformation seminaries,<sup>18</sup> and into the Pietist insistence of lived faith, theological education repeatedly returns to a holistic vision: doctrine joined to devotion, study joined to prayer, and knowledge joined to love.<sup>19</sup> Where theology degrades into technique or professionalization, renewal movements arise to recall the Church to the formation of persons rather than the production of experts.

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15. Matthew 13:33 (NRSV).

16. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “What is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture,” in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson and Michael J. Sleasman (Baker Publishing, 2007), 31.

17. Mark 12:29-31 (NRSV).

18. Gonzalez, *The History of Theological Education*, 117.

19. Pietist movement sought church reform with a focus on experiential faith, biblical studies, new birth, lived faith as demonstrated in prayer and Godly devotion, and missional outreach.

Accordingly, theological education ordered toward forming theologians of the cross must attend carefully to anthropology, specifically assuming embodied, social, and historically situated learners whose imaginations have been shaped by competing claims upon their loyalty. Formation, therefore, requires sustained participation in practices governed by the Word—prayerful speech, ruminative study, and costly engagement with suffering neighbors. Only in such contexts are students trained to “call the thing what it is” without illusion, fear, or self-glory.

In this way, the Church’s theological schools serve not as engines of cultural domination nor refuges of retreat but as seedbeds (*seminaria*)<sup>20</sup> where persons get continually re-formed under the cross for witness in the world. The task is not to escape culture but to be delivered from its idols so that culture itself may be transformed, slowly and quietly, by men and women shaped by Christ crucified.

#### IV. A Lutheran Model for Formation under the Cross

The following practices promote Luther’s three rules to govern the life of a quality theological institution—curriculum, community, assessment, and mission—so that a Christ-centered formational program becomes a seedbed (*seminarium*) for theologians of the cross (Gonzalez 2014).

- Ordering the Curriculum by *Oratio–Meditatio–Tentatio*:
  - *Oratio*: *Oratio* pertains to a community of prayerful speech. Each course begins and ends with the Word spoken and sung, and daily prayer, mutual consolation, and theological disputation become conventional means of grace by which the Spirit conforms learners to Christ.
  - *Meditatio*: *Meditatio* involves ruminative study in and for the Church. Core sequences in Scripture, dogmatics, and history are structured for memorization, recitation, and vocal rumination so that the external Word “takes hold.” Reading happens to form as it informs, writing aims at proclamation, and exegesis terminates in confession and consolation.
  - *Tentatio*: *Tentatio* employs pastoral practicum as a crucible wherein the individual receives challenging instruction to properly apply knowledge in the world. Field education, research seminars, and

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20. The term *seminaria* or *seminary* was coined by Cardinal Reginald Pole who was the archbishop of Canterbury. *Seminary* means “seedbed.” What was intended was, as in a seedbed, to plant large numbers of candidates, care for them in their spiritual and academic growth, and finally transplant them in the various communities and congregations where their ministry was to take place.

service-learning placements emerge as cruciform foundations of the program. Students face suffering, ambiguity, and opposition, and supervision meetings interpret *Anfechtung* by the Word, training discernment and driving learners back to Christ.

- **Andragogical/Heutagogical Delivery.** Synchronous online seminars sustain oratio and communal meditation while self-directed research trajectories and ministry projects cultivate responsible agency under the Word. Assessment establishes demonstrated competence in doctrine, proclamation, catechesis, pastoral care, and ethical deliberation.
- **Ecclesial Embedding.** Formation occurs within congregations and local ministries. Pastors and lay leaders serve as co-mentors, and students get grafted into existing communities of prayer and service rather than being trained above or apart from them.
- **Cultural Discernment as Ordinary Christian Wisdom.** Courses in “Bible and Culture,” “Theology and the Arts,” and “Public Theology” teach students to read and absorb cultural texts seriously, not as equals in the authority of Scripture but as sites for confession, critique, and compassion, all under the governance of the external Word.
- **A *Theologia Crucis Practicum*.** A culminating practicum binds together preaching, catechesis, pastoral care, diaconal action, and public witness. Students articulate how oratio, meditatio, and tentatio have formed their discernment and commit to submitting their lives and ministries to examination for the sake of Christ’s Church.

#### V. Assessment and Accountability: Calling the Thing What It Is

A Lutheran school loyal to the cross measures formation by truthful speech and faithful practice rather than speculative mastery. To that end, assessment should name particular aspects and address question related thereof: doctrinal clarity (does the student call the thing what it is, cruciformly?); scriptural habituation (has the Word “taken hold?”); pastoral discernment under *tentatio* (does suffering drive the student back to Christ and into the neighbor’s need?); communal maturity (is formation in and for the Church’s life?); and cultural wisdom (does the student discern and witness without conforming to the age?).

#### Conclusion: The School under the Cross

To truly form theologians of the cross, our institutions must function under the cross as servant leaders, thereby refusing the lordship of technique, renouncing the seductions of glory, and yielding to the Spirit’s work through the external Word.

The triune discipline of *Oratio–Meditatio–Tentatio* must suffuse our praying, reading, singing, disputing, serving, suffering, and hoping. Because God delivers His Spirit through the sacred Word, graduates will be fitted for their vocations to confess Christ, to love the neighbor, and to call the thing what it is until the Crucified—our righteousness, wisdom, and life—appears.

The indispensable practice of academic coaching dutifully operates as a ministry of presence and pastoral care. Through mentoring by faculty and advisors, students receive guidance that integrates academic rigor with spiritual disciplines, embracing Luther's three rules while fostering fellowship and resilience. Coaches do significantly more than assist with coursework; they help learners translate knowledge into wisdom for personal discipleship, ecclesial service, and mission so that theology becomes lived truth. Such sagacity proves especially vital for graduate and postgraduate students already bearing pastoral responsibilities and who often work and live without receiving pastoral care themselves. In such cases, academic coaches function not only as educational guides but as pastoral companions, strengthening those who shepherd others so that the Church may be served by leaders formed under the Word and the cross.

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Rev. David Patterson is the Librarian and Dean at the Institute of Lutheran Theology and the Editor-in-Chief of ILT Press in Brookings, SD. He completed a Master of Library and Information Science at the University of Washington in 2002, and a Master of Religion at the Christ School of Theology in 2015. Rev. Patterson served as a parish pastor in rural South Dakota from 2011 to 2020.

Nils Borquist, PhD, is an ILT PhD student and English teacher at Neville High School in Monroe, Louisiana. He attained a BA from Tabor College, an MA from the University of Louisiana at Monroe, an MAT from the University of Mississippi, and a PhD from Liberty University.

Rev. Joleen Pietrzak, MA., MDiv., PhD. Fellow, is the Director for the Center for Wesleyan Studies at Christ School of Theology in Brookings, SD. She has been an adjunct anthropology and sociology professor for the University of South Dakota since 2008, as well as for Christ College since 2025. Rev. Pietrzak serves full time for a rural Global Methodist Church in Arlington, South Dakota and is also the Presiding Elder for the SD SE District in the Upper Midwest Conference of the Global Methodist Church.



A Book Worth Discussing

## A Symposium

Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: On Fearing, Loving, and Trusting God* with a foreword by Graham Tomlin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2025)

### Introduction

Paul R. Hinlicky

**U**nder our banner A Book Worth Discussing, we introduce in this issue what we hope will be a frequent entry, namely, the Symposium. A symposium gathers a circle of scholars responding to an author, not so much to write a formal book review but rather to engage the book's main argument either to excavate it for discussion, or to engage the argument either in appreciation and amplification, or in critique to commend an alternative.

We are delighted in the second number of *Promissio* to feature the newly released book of our colleague, Dr. Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God*, a book which is a scholarly synthesis of the nature and purpose of theology as knowledge of God in Martin Luther. Dr. Ngien is one of our Distinguished Professors and a Research Associate. Recently the Institute of Lutheran theology formally established the Center for Reformational Theology and Spirituality under his leadership. This affiliation deepens our confessional and intellectual commitments and provides an additional locus for scholarly and ecclesial outreach. So, this symposium on his new Luther book provides a wonderful introduction of Dr. Ngien to *Promissio's* readership. An untimely circumstance prevented him from responding to the contributions to the symposium, but we plan to publish his reflections on it in the Summer issue.

Enjoy this intellectual feast with Dr. Jonathan Sorum lifting up that "most earnest purpose" to be that God succeeds in becoming our God; with Christ School of Theology PhD student Rev. Drew Christiansen highlighting the Trinitarian organization of Luther's theology according to our author; and Dr. Erik Herrmann setting God's "most earnest purpose" today against our incipient culture of nihilism. Happy reading! —PRH

## Who, How, and What

Jonathan Sorum

Under the title *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, Dennis Ngien has written a helpful synthesis of the results of Luther research in the last one hundred years or so. "God's most earnest purpose," is, of course, that God should finally succeed in being our God. Since it is the Triune God who actually succeeds in being our God, Ngien rightly points out that a recovery of the church's confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is at the heart of Luther's reformation. This is more than just a recovery of the ancient dogma. The "what" of Luther's theology is first of all instruction about *how* to proclaim the gospel so that the One *who* is proclaimed is in fact the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Lutheran reformation is essentially a movement in pastoral care. The church of Luther's time set forth a way of salvation (a "how") within a comprehensive view, not only of earth but also of heaven, purgatory, and hell, prescribing how one could avoid hell, navigate through purgatory, and finally arrive in heaven. The "how" of salvation grew not out of the "who" of who God is but the "what" of what God is (holy), what humans are (sinful), and what humans must do to be reconciled to God. Since this way was a long struggle with sin, the Sacrament of Penance was crucial. The church prescribed three things penitents must do: be truly contrite (or at least wish they were), make a full and honest confession of sins, and perform the prescribed satisfactions. The problem, as Luther discovered in his own case and then in his pastoral practice, was that the Sacrament of Penance did not work. It could not bring comfort to the anxious conscious facing the judgment of God because one could never be sure that one was truly contrite or had made a full and honest confession of sin, and one could not be sure that works of satisfaction accomplished anything at all before God. What is worse, this was not a bug in the system but a feature. The system required that people be kept uncertain about their statuses before God in order to keep them motivated to obey the church authorities. Instead of bringing freedom, the church used fear to control people and, not incidentally, to keep the money flowing. Worst of all, the system did not require Christ or the Holy Spirit. The church still retained the doctrine of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the "who" of who God is was suppressed.

Luther's breakthrough arose from the intersection of his intensive study of Scripture and his practice of pastoral care in the confessional. He came to realize that the whole point of confession was the absolution. The current theology understood the absolution as a judgment made by the confessor that the penitent was sincerely sorry and truly repenting. Luther began to understand that the absolution was God's Word that actually gives Christ to the sinner as

free gift, a word of promise that can only be received by faith.<sup>1</sup> It is usual to call this God's effective Word, which is certainly is, but it is effective not because it is somehow not an ordinary human word. The point is that God himself is a specific ordinary human word, which, because it is *external* to us, remains the same regardless of what is going on inside of us. We, as sinners, hold on to that unchanging Word by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and so are justified and saved. As a result, God achieves his most earnest purpose. God is our God and we are his people. Faith fulfills the First Commandment, and hence, all the commandments. Luther's theologizing is a continual improvisation to prevent any reading of Scripture that would obscure the pure promise that Jesus is and that would prevent that pure promise from being God's final Word to us. The "who" of who God is is inextricable from the "how" of how God achieves his most earnest purpose. God is deeply and completely human, a human Word—in other words, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and as such is God's last word to human beings. In order to meet God as God really is, we must read the Scriptures in such a way that this human Word, who is Christ as sheer promise for sinners, is in fact God's last word to us; the order is *first* law, *then* gospel. The law is not a way to God at all. The law leaves us confined to this world, without God, and so hands us over to the God who wills to be for us only *within* this world, in the Word of promise, in the water of Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Supper. By faith in these external means, we are brought down to earth, under the cross, with no vision at all beyond it, whether of heaven or hell or purgatory, but living by the sheer promise that those who die with him in this way will also live with him.

Luther's catechisms are training in how to hear the Word of God so that it is the Word of *this* God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They teach us *how* to read the Scriptures, *how* to listen to a sermon, *how* to receive the Sacraments, *how* to follow Jesus. Unlike other catechisms, the order is law-gospel: *first* the Ten Commandments, *then* the Creed, *then* the Lord's Prayer and the Sacraments. They envision the church as a community of practice that continually exercises itself in this catechism because it gives the key to rightly hearing the narrative that forms the church community, the narrative in which the promise is the last Word to sinners trapped under the law, so that the community becomes a community of those who *both* fear *and* love God, and God achieves his most earnest purpose. There is no linear climbing way, but only a continual circling back to dying with Christ and beginning again to live by the hope of the resurrection. The Lord's Prayer expresses this continual circling back in repentance and faith, resting again in the certainty that all of God's promises are indeed for us, despite everything. The gospel is not about our becoming holy, but about God's becoming our God—that is, that *God* is our holiness.

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1. This adopts the interpretation offered by Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 50–51.

The danger is to take Luther's and the Reformers' doctrinal improvisations as foundational for faith. We thereby turn them into a doctrinal system that prescribes a way of salvation in the sense of a method: *first*, we have to preach the law so that people are convicted of their sin, *then* we preach the gospel to comfort and uplift them, *and finally* we admonish them live a life of obedience to God. This is the caricature of law-gospel preaching that has often prevailed through much of the history of Lutheranism. This approach is wrong on multiple levels. For one thing, the situation has changed and Luther's improvisations won't work for most people anymore. A few persons who have been laboring under legalistic religious systems may respond with joy to Luther's announcement of the end of the law, but most people are not in that situation. More importantly, we fundamentally subvert the gospel by making it mere knowledge that we have at our disposal. The "what" as a foundation for the "who" and "how" is a betrayal of Christ. Any theology based on such a claim is not theology at all but is merely a rationale for control and power. The experience of Luther and the Reformers when they attempted to proclaim the gospel as the end of the law made this utterly clear. The church authorities, rightly feeling their power threatened, tried to stamp out the gospel with coercion and violence.

As such, the "how" question is crucial. As in Luther's time and also in ours, theology is for the care of souls. In Luther's time, the urgent question was how my soul can be united with its foundation. Today, the question is how I can get a soul at all. In our modern world, the soul is constantly being absorbed into the crowd. The media and the market manipulate us and reduce us to passivity. Those who still try to be souls, actual persons who act responsibly in the world, have no foundation on which to build other than their own feelings. They invest their faith in narratives of hope that they feel must be true, even though they know at some level that they cannot ground those narratives in anything beyond themselves. This situation forces Christians finally to recognize that their theologizing, too, is contingent, relative, and fallible. The test of its truth is not how closely it corresponds to a supposed foundation (a "what") but how well it works in making us persons, actual creaturely selves, who live by faith in the Person of Christ in whom we know the Father by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Though he did not and could not fully recognize it, Luther's theology in fact places us in an irremediable hermeneutical situation.<sup>2</sup> For him, the inextricable "who" and "how" of the church's discourse is prior to and foundational for the "what" of the church's assertions. Knowledge flows from faith. It is not the case that first we get knowledge, then come to agree with it, and ultimately come to trust in it, as in the traditional Protestant "way of salvation." The knowledge Christians claim, like all human knowledge, is contingent, relative, and fallible. It

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2. The term is from Myron Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Baker Academic, 2013), 67.

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is not the basis of faith but an outcome of faith. As finite creatures, we gain true knowledge of any sort by being members of communities of practice whose members have learned from experience that certain statements can be relied on. Such statements are true because they *work*, that is, they tend to open up a future for us rather than close it off. The church is no different in being a human community of interpretation and practice, just like any other community of interpretation and practice. In this community, we are trained to hear the narrative passed on to us in *this* particular way and have found that that this narrative, heard in *this* way, is true because it vouchsafes to us an *eternal future* that also opens up a future full of hope and love *in this life*. It proves itself true because it works. In the midst of the stresses and struggles of life, the gospel makes us mere creatures with no handle on the eternal but only a trust in the goodness of our Creator, which precisely thereby makes us persons or selves. The gospel is the power of God for salvation; God succeeds through the gospel in his most earnest purpose of being our God. When we practice theology in this way, we stand in continuity with Luther as well as all the witnesses to the truth of the gospel who went before him and who have come after him, and our theologizing can begin to enable a care of souls that leads to God fulfilling his most earnest purpose.

We must be grateful to Dr. Ngien for bringing us to the very heart of the matter in such a way that we can take up Luther's legacy and make it fruitful for contemporary proclamation of the gospel.

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Jonathan Sorum, Th.D., is Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology for Christ School of Theology at the Institute of Lutheran Theology.

## Luther's Trinitarian Articulation in *God's Most Earnest Purpose*

Andrew L. Christiansen

Dennis Ngien's *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Loving, and Trusting God* is a significant contribution to the appreciation of Martin Luther's theology. I emphasize the word *appreciation* because while Luther is widely recognized as a pivotal historical figure—and is of enduring interest to theologians, scholars of Lutheranism, and those working within ecumenical theology—his work is often under-appreciated for the breadth of its theological potential. In particular, Luther's extensive corpus offers rich resources for sustained reflection on God as Trinity in ways that can be meaningfully engaged. Ngien's book is an example of such meaningful engagement.

Ngien's book guides the reader through an exploration of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer, following the same pattern found in Luther's own catechetical instruction; the tripartite structure of the *Large* and *Small Catechisms*. However, if asked to describe Ngien's work, I would hesitate to call it a commentary on Luther's catechisms. Rather, I see it more as a constructive theological engagement with these catechetical materials: Ngien moves through the same texts that Luther treated, drawing deeply on Luther's insights while not confining himself to them, instead situating the discussion within a broader conversation informed by a fairly wide range of theological voices— that nevertheless enhances an appreciation of Luther.

A primary aim of Ngien's work is to articulate how God relates to us—us as members of God's creation and as sinners whom God redeems. This relation is constituted by God's activity: God acts upon and toward us through the persons of the Trinity. The grammar of this trinitarian activity, Ngien observes, is given in the words of the Creed,<sup>1</sup> and the logic of this trinitarian grammar, he argues, undergirds Luther's theology as a whole. Ngien is thus interested in "how Luther applies trinitarian discourse to other theological themes."<sup>2</sup> This focus appears to stem from Ngien's desire not merely to illuminate a holistic character of Luther's theology, but also to give voice to Luther's pastoral sensibilities—for us. God is God *for us*, and Ngien asks how God is *for us* as Trinity.

In his review of Ngien's book, Jack D. Kilcrease writes, "Against those, like Karl Holl and Adolf von Harnack, who claimed that the Trinity was only marginal to Luther's thinking, Ngien is able to successfully show the centrality of the Trinity to Luther's concepts of salvation and the Christian life."<sup>3</sup> I concur with this assessment

1. Dennis Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose: Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God* with foreword by Graham Tomlin (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2026), 5.

2. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.

3. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* [page A following the title page].

of Ngien's work (with a possible slight caveat I will return to shortly). Indeed, if one looks for instances of explicitly articulated "trinitarian grammar" in Luther's writings, these are relatively sparse. By this I mean that, at least at the level of formal discourse, the three persons of the Trinity do not always receive equal or symmetrical treatment in Luther's theology. It may be precisely this feature that has prompted various Lutheran theologians to emphasize the centrality of the Trinity in Luther's thought—particularly contemporary Lutheran theologians who have sought (and, I believe, successfully) to identify *pneumatology*, for instance, as a marrow running throughout the bones of Luther's theology. Such contemporary Lutheran theologians include Cheryl M. Peterson and Leopoldo Sánchez, to name only a few, both of whom inform Ngien's work.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, I think it is rather unfortunate that one would need to speak of a *recovery* of a trinitarianly-centered theology in Luther in the first place. If the readings of figures such as Holl and Harnack—whom Kilcrease rightly laments over—are indeed so misaligned with Luther's thought, then the remedy is simply to allow Luther to speak for himself. When we do so, we encounter a theologian who takes for granted that God *is* Trinity and that God works as Trinity. Luther assumes this so fully that his theology is unselfconsciously trinitarian: he thinks, speaks, writes, preaches, and proclaims on the basis of this conviction. Ngien seeks to show this.

Nevertheless, Harnack and Holl are by no means the only figures in the history of Luther interpretation who have been guilty of such misreadings. Harnack emerged from a century of liberal theology in which Luther interpretation, by and large, was methodologically underdeveloped and historiographically thin. Although Holl stood at the very threshold of a more historically attentive approach (and helped pioneer it), even his work did not yet fully provide Luther a proper hearing (but this is another story altogether). Reformation scholar Carter Lindberg traces the roots of these misreadings back as early as the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy (seventeenth-century). In the campaign of the Lutheran Orthodox scholastics to systematize doctrine with precision—an effort that I sympathize with, given the doctrinal crises of their context—Lindberg argues that the "proclamatory" language concerning justification, that one finds in Luther, gave way to a more "definitional" language contained in the Lutheran scholastics.<sup>5</sup> Of course, what is proclamatory is not necessarily opposed to what is definitional. In order to proclaim, there needs to be an understanding (i.e. definition) of what *is* proclaimed. What Lindberg helpfully identifies, however, is a potential downside of definitional neatness: it can subtly compartmentalize theological loci in a way that narrows their interconnections and

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4. See Cheryl M. Peterson, "The Holy Spirit: Lutheran Perspectives," *The T&T Companion to Pneumatology*, ed. Daniel Castelo and Kenneth M. Loyer (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 197-205, and Leopoldo Sánchez, *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

5. Carter Lindberg, "Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?" *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1999): 5.

the attention they receive. In this sense, justification may become a clearly delimited topic within a doctrinal system rather than sharing the same dynamic reality as all the teachings of the faith (including sanctification).

This shift, even if unintended, contributed to a parsing of justification and sanctification in ways that neither Luther nor the first generation of Lutheran Reformers would have recognized. As Lindberg notes, “the emphasis on the identification of justification and sanctification in Luther’s *Large Catechism*, the *Augsburg Confession*, and the *Apology* (to the *Augsburg Confession*) fades into the background,” while Luther’s insistence on the unity of forgiveness (justification) and the Christian life (sanctification) in the Third Article of the Creed (the pneumatological article!) loses its force.<sup>6</sup> If faith is a gift from the *Holy Spirit*, and it is by faith alone that we are justified, then justification and sanctification are deeply intertwined

Given this historical background, it seems not only appropriate but imperative for Lutheran theologians to undertake the theological task of allowing Luther to speak for himself on these matters. That said, there will inevitably be a degree of interpretation and systematization involved, particularly since Luther was often less explicit on this than some contemporary readers might wish. To be sure, Luther was not shy about formal discourse on the Spirit. Ngien rightfully points out how Luther identifies the cruciality of the Third Article by rhetorically calling it the “most important.”<sup>7</sup> But it has been pointed out before how certain Luther scholars who have taken great interest in the respectable task in retrieving a trinitarian logic for Luther have not always used sound methods to demonstrate their otherwise compelling case.

To give an example of what I generally mean, one can refer to Robert Kolb’s review of Christine Helmer’s seminal work on this very topic *The Trinity and Martin Luther* regarding her method of using a stanza from Luther’s hymn “Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein”—where the Holy Spirit is not actually mentioned nor formally treated—as an example of trinitarian logic. Kolb says:

The argument for this interpretation is grounded largely on the placement of the hymn in the section of the Wittenberg hymnbooks of 1524 and 1519 on the Creed (thus, it must be explicitly trinitarian) and on sermons from the year of the hymn’s composition that attribute the creation of the church—which is expressing its joy in the hymn’s first stanza—to the Holy Spirit.... Unfortunately, this false foundation for the chapter undermines the appraisal of the Reformer’s trinitarian teaching.<sup>8</sup>

However, although Kolb regards this as an argument from silence, he nevertheless observes that “the traditional explication of the hymn need not be set in oppo-

6. Lindberg, “Do Lutherans Shout Justification but Whisper Sanctification?” 5.

7. Ngien, *God’s Most Earnest Purpose*, 43, 44 & 152.

8. Kolb, review of Christine Helmer’s *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study on the Relationship between Genre, Language, and the Trinity in Luther’s Works (1523-1546)* in *Calvin Theological Journal* 36, no 1 (Apr 2001), 176.

sition to its presentation of elements of Luther's understanding of the Trinity."<sup>9</sup> I echo Kolb's judgment here. Lutheran theologians and Luther scholars, I suggest, are better served by treating Luther's theology as a sound foundation from which to develop trinitarian reflection in their own theological work, rather than attempting to uncover an implicit, self-conscious trinitarian logic beneath every text Luther produced. (For instance, Luther nowhere employs a term such as "Spirit Christology," although sound and compelling arguments, I believe, can certainly be made that Luther would agree with its constituent elements and that his theology would align with Leopoldo Sánchez's line of reasoning.)

And for this reason, I hesitate to see Ngien's book as a strict exposition of Luther's theology. To be fair, Ngien does not claim such a task for himself in his prefatory remarks. Returning, however, to Kilcrease's acknowledgement of the merit of Ngien's work, the "centrality of the Trinity to Luther's concepts of salvation and the Christian life" that Kilcrease sees as successfully demonstrated may not, in itself, require a project as ambitious as Ngien's in order to be established. That centrality, I would argue, is largely a given.

Of course, if by "the centrality of the Trinity" one means not merely the acceptance of the classically articulated doctrine of the Trinity as an essential Christian teaching—such that Christianity ceases to be Christianity without it—but rather the Trinity as a *methodological starting point* for the treatment of every doctrinal locus (or at least many), then demonstrating such a claim with respect to Luther would require more than Ngien provides here. It would necessitate a careful, and likely more historical analysis of Luther's writings.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as Ngien himself notes, he does not set out in this book to "trace the historical development and entirety of Luther's trinitarian theology...."<sup>11</sup> (Ngien also helpfully points to recent scholarship like that of Helmer's aforementioned work and Reiner Jansen's that do, in fact, undertake something much closer to this task.)

Nevertheless, what Ngien's book *does* offer is no less valuable for that reason. Its excellence should be recognized as that of a work of informed, imaginative, constructive, and, I believe, pastoral theology, one that seeks, in good Lutheran fashion, to present God *for us*. And one cannot speak Christianly of God being *for us*, or of God's relating to us at all, without acknowledging that God is Trinity.

The book is also well researched and can serve as a strong introduction to a more in-depth presentation of Luther's theology for intermediate-level readers in theology. I think this could even serve well as a basic course text for a graduate

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9. Kolb, 176.

10. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 164. Ngien argues that one finds a logical order in Luther of how from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, God does his work of grace. Ngien points us to Luther's commentary on John 3:13 (as in LW 22:332). But I don't see quite a method here in Luther as much as I see an explicit *Christological* statement—not explicitly involving the Spirit (although the Spirit's work is surely implicit).

11. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.

level introductory systematics course in a Lutheran context. By employing the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer as organizing frameworks, Ngien uses these catechetical materials as prompts for sustained and deep theological exploration—an exploration informed both by Luther's broader corpus and by engagement with theologians within and beyond the Lutheran tradition.

If this is Ngien's intention, it is carried out with clarity and care. If, however, one is seeking the uncovering of a previously unnoticed dimension of Luther's thought or the proposal of a novel interpretive thesis, I don't know if it is fair to say that this work would have any originality in that regard. (However, this book may be read as a helpful distillation—less dense in presentation yet no less rich in content—of what recent scholarship, such as Helmer and others, has sought to demonstrate regarding the importance of the Trinity for Luther.)

But then again, is this Ngien's intention? Although Ngien explicitly states that his book “does not try to trace the historical development and entirety of Luther's trinitarian theology,”<sup>12</sup> but instead seeks to show how Luther applies trinitarian discourse to themes such as creation, redemption, and sanctification, the precise aim of the work remains somewhat ambiguous. Possibly outside of the very careful reader, Ngien's introduction (indeed the very subtitle of this book: *Luther on Fearing, Trusting, and Loving God*) could lead one to see this book as an exposition of Luther. I think there is certainly a very helpful exposition of Luther throughout, but the book isn't in itself that. It also cites and refers to a wide range of theological voices. This book more so represents, I feel, *Ngien's voice* and an exposition ultimately of *his* reflections—which yes are informed by Luther, and are reflections Luther may very well agree with if he were around today. But I do think Ngien could have been more clear up front about this.

Nevertheless, whatever ambiguity may remain about the precise scope of the project, what emerges is unmistakably constructive and bears Ngien's own distinctive voice. One particular example of this appears in Ngien's use of a term that I have not come across before but which I find to be a helpful descriptor for the innate way in which human beings, as creatures, are designed for and drawn toward relationship with their Creator: *Godward-ness*. Ngien writes, “We are endowed with an orientation toward God. This *Godward-ness* is constitutive of our created nature; it is not ours by merits or rewards but is God's gift of grace.”<sup>13</sup> Ngien helpfully employs this concept of *Godward-ness* as a remedy to the over-emphasis that some conventional views of Luther place on Luther's “low anthropology”: God created a receptivity in us for himself that he uses to draw us to himself (but that *God* importantly activates). Drawing on Piotr J. Małysz's work and Luther's Genesis commentary, Ngien speaks of this *Godward-ness* as “original righteousness”—which of creation is distinctly in humans and consists in that humans were created to fear

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12. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 5.

13. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 83.

and trust God, and important for worship and praise of God as a proper response to God.<sup>14</sup> This original righteousness though is part of original Creation, and thus is *reawakened* (passively) in God's *re-creating*. This aspect ties to Ngien's portrait throughout his book of how God's activity of creating is tied to his creative activity of redeeming. God is the agent of all his activities – not us. We are passive recipients of these actions all for *our* benefit—which is God's earnest purpose.

Here Ngien is particularly helpful in articulating, on the basis of Luther, a theology in which God's trinitarian actions toward humanity are foregrounded so that divine power is magnified and human beings are consistently portrayed as recipients rather than *doers* of these actions. This framing reinforces Ngien's broader emphasis that all aspects of divine activity—from creation to re-creation—are grounded in God's grace, not in human merit or capacity.

But this framing of God and man in their proper places nevertheless keeps in mind the crucial point that creation is connected to redemption and an acknowledgement that to be *truly human* is to be made for union with God. If this very premise is forgotten, we have an incomplete understanding of the works of God's love, mercy, and grace.

In underscoring the radical one-wayness of God's gift in Christ, and God making the sinner a 'new creation' from nothing and tying it to *creation ex nihilo*, I think Ngien makes a very helpful note in relation to the Creator-creature relationship. Creatures are corrupted by sin, but they are also God's creatures, "fearfully and wonderfully made." If there is a tendency to see Luther's anthropology one-sidedly—focusing on the fallenness of humanity—then Ngien rightfully counters that by his emphasis of *Godward-ness*; how humans possess an identity, he says, that "is derived from a loving creator, of whom they are completely dependent... our self-worth is derived from God's creative word."<sup>15</sup>

Ngien further draws out the emphasis on *Godward-ness* in his fifth chapter where he focuses on the Third Article of the Creed and the Holy Spirit. Here Ngien revisits the theme of the constitution of human beings for *receptivity of God* along with the "responsivity" to God that is lost through the Fall but restored by God's *re-creating* action. Here the Holy Spirit holds the "distinctive" role of causing our turning to God.<sup>16</sup> Ngien does well in this section to tie closer together the actions of God's justifying and God's sanctifying action—a unity tacitly undone post-Luther as previously mentioned. This was perhaps the section of Ngien's work that I found most helpful and illuminating, particularly in his focus on the mediating work of the Spirit in justification and sanctification. With respect to the latter, Ngien presents Luther as describing the Spirit's sanctifying activity in four dimensions: calling, enlightening, sanctifying, and preserving. Each of these aspects is, for the

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14. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 84.

15. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 109.

16. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 155.

most part, helpfully developed. Yet here again we encounter the problem I noted earlier—namely, the possibility that Ngien is reading a more developed trinitarian framework into Luther than the sources can clearly sustain.

Does Luther himself explicitly attribute these as distinctive (though inseparable) actions to the third person of the Trinity? Luther's theology is often strongly Christological, and he frequently assigns to the Second Person actions that other theologians might treat as more distinctively pneumatological (while still affirming that such actions are common to the triune God). For example, Ngien cites Luther's *Brief Instruction on What to Look For and Expect in the Gospel* regarding a person's encounter with Christ through Scripture, but Luther's language there is explicitly Christological and makes no direct reference to the Spirit as agent. Of course, we can presume that Luther understood the Spirit to be essential in this process, but if Ngien wishes to argue that Luther consciously approached these matters in a robustly trinitarian way, more passages in which Luther explicitly names the Spirit would strengthen the case.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Ngien's retrieval of *Godward-ness* is, in my judgment, a promising and fruitful avenue for contemporary Lutheran theology. The concept offers a way of affirming the radical passivity of the human creature before God while also preserving the theological insight that humanity is created *for* God—constituted for communion, trust, and praise

Returning to my previous comment about the aims of Ngien's work here and how I think it can be best and most accurately described as a constructive theological project that places Luther in dialogue with modern trinitarian thought rather than a work *on Luther* per se, I could not help but notice that of all the modern and contemporary theological voices that Ngien engages, one emerges as having a rather strong influence, though perhaps more implicit than explicit—and that is Wolfhart Pannenberg; particularly in Pannenberg's conception of the Trinity. Although Ngien doesn't state it out right, I see Ngien's work as an intriguing synthesis in which Luther's catechetical material is read *through* a Pannenbergian framework, especially in his treatment of the three articles of the Creed.

My reasoning for this is found in the first chapter of the book. In Ngien's mention of Luther's interest in the *economic Trinity*, Ngien refers to Pannenberg's terminology of the economic Trinity as *differentiated unity*.<sup>18</sup> This means that the actions of God revealed to and known by humanity (*ad extra*) are actions that are "distinctive" to a particular person of the Trinity but importantly "not exclusive" to the person. Pannenberg in fact sees this as a crucial aspect of understanding the Trinity especially to properly distinguish Christianity from other faiths. As Pannenberg says,

In our time of intense inter-religious discussion, Christians cannot compromise the truth that the trinitarian conception of God is not simply a Christian addition to a monotheism that we otherwise share with others.

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17. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 159.

18. Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 40.

The Christian insistence is that God *as such* is to be understood as a differentiated unity. An *un* differentiated unity means unity opposed to the many. Unity that is opposed to the many presupposes and therefore is conditioned by that opposition. Precisely because that is a conditioned unity, it cannot be the absolute unity that is before and above the many. Only the triune God, as differentiated unity, is absolutely and unconditionally the one God. It follows that true monotheism is trinitarian.<sup>19</sup>

While he was a sincere ecumenical theologian, Pannenberg finds it imperative for the Christian theologian to distance themselves a kind of *philosophical monotheism* that is the premise for other world faiths— and not only some other world faiths but also versions of Christianity found in Christianity's own history that proceeded to *infer* a triune God from the doctrine of one God. In his *Systematic Theology*, Pannenberg sees such a method as fruitless. For Pannenberg, a systematic grounding for the doctrine of the Trinity must begin with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, just as the historical path to the construction of overall doctrine in Christian theology proceeds from the message and life of Jesus and the apostolic preaching about him found in Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Pannenberg's decision to begin with the economic Trinity—God as revealed through his actions in history—requires careful attention to the scriptural witness. For Pannenberg, Scripture discloses how the teachings and ministry of Jesus make manifest the triune persons through their self-distinction. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each addressed and portrayed within Scripture, such that the apostolic witness, in a sense, as the data from which the epistemic (or economic) character of the triune persons— their distinct identities as revealed in their actions toward and upon us—can be discerned.

Ngien's appeal to Pannenberg's notion of the Trinity as a "differentiated unity" provides a conceptual grammar for describing the divine economy: trinitarian actions are distinctive but not exclusive to any one person. This framework shapes Ngien's entire exposition of the Creed, functioning less as a historical descriptor of Luther's method and more as a theological lens to engage Luther.

This becomes even clearer in Chapter Four, where Ngien turns to the Second Article of the Creed and focuses on the Son as the subject of redemptive action.

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19. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "God of the Philosophers," *First Things*, June 1, 2007, accessed February 9, 2026, <https://firstthings.com/002-god-of-the-philosophers/>

20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991-1998). He treats the Trinity specifically in chapters 5 and 6. Importantly, unlike Karl Barth, this is the building of the doctrine of the Trinity based on the revelation of God as it is *materially* attested in the biblical writings. Like Pannenberg, Barth also believed that a doctrine of the Trinity must begin with the Trinity as given in revelation, not metaphysical reasoning. But Pannenberg saw Barth as deriving the doctrine "from the formal concept of a self-revealing God" (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 303). In Pannenberg's view, Barth "did not develop the trinitarian statements out of the contents of the revelation to which scripture bears witness (to)..." (Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 303).

His claim that the Father is the subject of creative action and the Son of redemptive action is immediately qualified by the insistence that Father and Son share a common being and purpose, again invoking the logic of differentiated unity. The Son's distinctive role is framed in terms of the downward and upward movement of salvation: God comes to humanity in Christ, and humanity returns to God clothed in Christ's righteousness. Here Ngien's reliance on a Christology-from-below (explicitly resonant with Pannenberg) is especially pronounced.

Seen in this light, I would be curious to see Ngien further explore a more explicitly framed constructive theological proposal that brings Luther into conversation with Pannenberg's trinitarian theology. *God's Most Earnest Purpose* appears to have Pannenberg's trinitarian theology as a sort of guiding framework. Pannenberg's trinitarian framework, with its emphasis on the Spirit's role in history and the economy of salvation, finds, I believe, a compatibility with Luther, and may even help flesh out the implicitly presupposed work of the Spirit in Luther's work. *God's Most Earnest Purpose* begins to prove this. I'd love to see a more overt engagement with Pannenberg as a theological interlocutor as Ngien's work shows that Pannenberg's theology, at least on this front, can be a basis for Luther's theology on the Trinity to be fruitfully interpreted.

I'd like to conclude my engagement with Ngien's work with a quotation that Ngien features on page 209 from the late Robert Jenson,

Christians dare address God, however others may do it, only because Jesus permits them to join his prayer, appropriating his unique filial term of address and relying on his fellowship in the prayer. We pray to "our Father." We pray with the one who, by uniquely addressing God as "my Father," makes himself the Son, and us as his adoptive siblings children, of his Father. Just so, we enter into the living personal community between them, that is, we pray to the Father, with the Son, in the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

I believe Jenson's words here help to demonstrate that Lutheran theologians have in Luther, someone who gives a theology one can build upon to further explicate the trinitarian logic. Ngien does this wonderfully in his book. This book is not only a tribute to Luther and his insights in this way, but a tribute to, as I believe Luther would hope for, *God*. This book demonstrates the work of God's very Spirit in God's own illumining of mind and heart through the many voices engaged in the biblically-informed efforts to appreciate more deeply God's gracious actions (and purpose) for us which we encounter through all three persons of the Trinity. *Sola Deo Gloria*.

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The Rev. Andrew L. Christiansen is a PhD student at Christ School of Theology. He and his wife Rachael live in Lake Charles, Louisiana where Andrew serves as rector of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church.

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21. Robert W. Jenson, "The Triune God," *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1997), 37, as found in Ngien, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, 209.

## The God Who Gives Himself Wholly...

Erik H. Herrmann

A friend and former colleague of mine often ruffled feathers by regularly dropping Nietzsche into faculty discussions—like a teetotaler crashing a wine tasting event. We were all having fun “doing theology,” and then Joel would bring up the “death of God” and repeatedly ask us “Why?” or some such annoyance. He was right, of course, and even though we knew that the collective IQ of the room doubled when he entered, we still wished he would stop nagging us about “highest values” being devalued.

Joel’s concern was the effect of what the philosopher James Edwards called “normal nihilism” on Christian faith, witness, and life.<sup>1</sup> “Normal nihilism” is the modern condition that all of us tend to operate with when what had previously functioned as the *highest values* (by which all other values found their structure and meaning) becomes just *another value*, something to be appraised and haggled over in the flea-market of ideas. “God,” “salvation,” “creation,” and “eternity” were all examples of such highest values: “They define; they constitute. They are absolute; they are sublime. They are not explained, because they explain everything else.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, however, they are “devalued”—measured by their general usefulness to the individual or communities, and often the price is pretty cheap: “God is like someone who is always there for you, I don’t know, it’s like God is God. He’s just somebody that’ll always help you go through whatever you’re going through.”<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire (1821-1861) put it more provocatively: “God is the sole being who has no need to exist in order to reign.... The most prostitute of all beings is the Supreme Being, God Himself, since for each man he is the friend above all others; since he is the common, inexhaustible fount of Love.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, traditional doctrines can remain but only as “vestiges,” no longer carrying the weight they once did. Christians often don’t know why they believe in such doctrines as the

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1. Joel P. Okamoto, “When Salt Loses Its Saltiness: Nihilism and the Contemporary Church” in *Concordia Journal* 44/4 (2018): 33-50. See also James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (Penn State University Press, 1997).

2. *Ibid.*, 40.

3. Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 164.

4. Charles Baudelaire, *Intimate Journals*, trans. Christopher Isherwood (City Lights, 1983), 21, 74, cited by Okamoto, “When Salt Loses Its Saltiness,” 38.

Trinity or creation, even though they retain them, nor can they adequately explain their importance or role.<sup>5</sup>

Dennis Ngien's new book on Luther, *God's Most Earnest Purpose*, is not about "normal nihilism" or intentionally oriented to address it, so why bring it up in a review? What Ngien does instead is exhibit how doctrine functions when the highest values continue to exert their comprehensive explanatory power over theology. Ngien's book offers a fulsome account of Luther's theology as it is shaped by the Doctrine of the Trinity and of creation *ex nihilo*. In this, we are given a beautiful example of how theology unfolds from its foundational Christian assumptions before these assumptions were excavated in modernity and "cornerstones" were made to become "stumbling blocks" again.

Ngien's approach is to give the Doctrine of the Trinity its full force in Luther's own recentering of justification as he expresses it in the catechetical framework of the Decalogue, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. Like a red thread running through a tapestry, Ngien continually invokes the doctrine of creation "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) as an image and fountainhead of *grace*. God's creation *ex nihilo* asserts that God creates with absolute *freedom*, without inner or external necessity, but it also means that creation is an act of perfect and unqualified *generosity*. This is not simply a proposition about the primordial past or the ontology of God and the world; it characterizes and colors everything in theology. God who is "wholly other" is nevertheless the God who gives himself wholly for what he has freely made. As Luther said, it is his "most earnest purpose" to be our God: "the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts."

What Ngien does very well is let Luther's writings echo and bounce off each other as the theme unfolds. He is not presenting us with a comprehensive development of Luther's theology of the Trinity. Instead, he urges us to see again and again the trinitarian coherence of Luther's distinctive emphases in theology, especially his doctrine of justification. It is a constructive picture, and Ngien brings the various brushstrokes of contemporary scholars to embellish it. Again, Ngien is less interested in carving out a distinctive thesis over against secondary literature as he is in presenting a sustained and coherent narrative of how Luther's theology does not just assume the doctrine of the Trinity but is structurally and existentially shaped by trinitarian themes. The scholarly voices are like a catena, linking and strengthening the picture, but no one scholar seems to get the upper hand over the voice of Luther himself.

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5. Okamoto, "When Salt Loses its Saltiness," 44: "The vestigial status of the doctrine of the Trinity shows because most Christians cannot explain why it was appropriate for the word to become flesh, not the Father nor the Spirit, or why a theology of the word, including the Scriptures, should begin with the personal word of God, not the Spirit. For that matter—and this all the more confirms matters—they cannot even understand what they are being asked."

Along the way, one can still observe that Ngien does favor some interpretations of Luther over others. One detects the strong forensic view of justification championed by Gerhard Forde throughout rather than the more ontic interpretation of the Finnish school. Likewise, Oswald Bayer's emphasis on the efficacy of divine speech as a creative act finds a ready home here. However, Ngien places these in service to the larger Trinitarian focus in which participation in the divine life is central, though as a relational concept rather than an ontological one. Ngien seems to be less comfortable with placing Luther in conversation with the monastic/mystical tradition that one sees in the works of Bernd Hamm and Volker Leppin, though it is not obvious that making such connections to the elements of mystical theology that informed Luther's thought would jeopardize the project.

In the end, *God's Most Earnest Purpose* gives us a robust experience of Luther's thought. With a second naiveté, I found myself saying, "So this is what it can look like when we believe that the God who saves me is triune, when redemption from sin and death is grace from beginning to end, and when life with God is a pouring out of the creator's love in Christ and a gathering back into communion with God and one another." Ngien helps us observe and perhaps pine for a theology that moves from "faith to faith"—from belief in the *truth* of divine things, to the "living, busy, active" faith that lives *truthfully*. Perhaps God creating *ex nihilo* is precisely what we need in our day of "normal nihilism."

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Erik H. Herrmann, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Professor and Research Fellow at the Christ School of Theology, Institute of Lutheran Theology.



A Book Worth Discussing

# A Reply to Dennis Bielfeldt

“The Freedom of the Theological Word:  
Andrea Vestrucci’s *Theology As Freedom*  
and the Emergence of a Nova Lingua”  
*Promissio* 1/1 (January 2026), pp. 85-104.

Andrea Vestrucci

**ABSTRACT:** This reply to Dennis Bielfeldt’s review clarifies the central claim in Andrea Vestrucci’s *Theology as Freedom: Luther’s De servo arbitrio* is not simply a doctrinal intervention about human freedom and agency but a performative reconfiguration of the conditions under which theological language can speak meaningfully. Responding to Bielfeldt’s concern that “formal freedom” risks becoming a purely structural account that leaves an “ontological absence,” Vestrucci argues that “formal” does not mean merely linguistic; it names the theological intelligibility of speech whose conditions are judged and re-founded by the unconditional event of revelation. Revelation functions as an “absolute beginning” that is *already* an act and cannot be domesticated by inherited modal or teleological frameworks of freedom. The reply situates formal analysis as derivative of the revelatory event and the status of belief, and agrees with Bielfeldt that pneumatology is the decisive bridge that unites language and being without treating ontology as an external tribunal or as an addition appended after a linguistic prolegomenon. The reply concludes by framing Bielfeldt’s critique as a productive agenda: to show more explicitly how theology’s formal freedom and participatory truth belong together under the priority of divine revelation.

I am grateful to Dennis Bielfeldt for reading *Theology as Freedom* with such care and for presenting its argument with a precision that is itself a form of interpretation. In particular, I appreciate his effort to articulate the book’s basic wager: Luther’s *De servo arbitrio* is not merely a doctrinal statement about agency but a *performative* displacement of the *conditions* under which theology can speak at all. In other somewhat metaphorical worlds, I would say that Dr. Bielfeldt’s review fully encapsulated my thesis that theology is freedom as an alteration of the logical space of human language.

A review proves generous when it also presses relevant and pertinent questions. Bielfeldt's review is no exception as it raises a question that lies at the core of my book, one that is hard to evade once one speaks, as I do, of "formal freedom": *Can theology's freedom endure without ontology?* If the contact with divine revelation is treated primarily as the initiation of a transformation of logical priorities, the worry is that divine action may appear as a "purely structural operator," leaving a kind of "ontological absence"—a sort of grammar without a speaker, a disembodied voice, which is precisely what divine revelation in and as the Word that is Jesus Christ is not! I welcome this question because it clarifies where the argument of my book *Theology as Freedom* is deliberately focused and where it invites continuation.

### 1. "Formal" Does Not Mean "Merely Linguistic"

My intention was never to describe revelation as *only* a change in logical structure nor to let divine speech "recede" behind grammatical or semantic effects. Rather, the "formal" aspect names a specific claim about theological *intelligibility*. Hence, the focus is on theology and its language, not *directly* on God's revelation. As such, the book somehow follows implicitly Luther's dictum to focus on an indirect way of doing theology, a way that begins from the *posteriora Dei*—the "back."

The main thesis of the book is that divine revelation, i.e., the incarnation of the Word, is not one item that sits *within* a prior field of conditions, specifically those conditions that make our speech meaningful. On the contrary, revelation is *eccentric* to these conditions because such conditions could not initiate divine revelation by themselves. Hence, revelation is an eccentric *center* from which those conditions are recognized as *limited*. In the context of *De servo arbitrio*, this limitation concerns the conditions of formulating meaningful statements about freedom.

This is why, in the conclusion, I insist on the asymmetry between conceptual specificity and formal specificity of theology. If the specificity of theology were merely conceptual, then divine revelation as the subject matter of theology would depend on the conditions of these concepts. On the other hand, if we are keen to acknowledge that divine revelation does not depend on human conditions, the specificity of theology is the modification of these conditions.

### 2. Revelation as "Absolute Beginning" Is Already a Claim about Act

Bielfeldt is right to insist that "divine speech ... is act," and it is crucial to see that the book's formal point is meant to protect precisely this irreducibility of divine act. In the conclusion, I speak of theology's foundation as a "message," a "string of information" conditioned by nothing—it is "not only a beginning; it is the absolute beginning."

This is an attempt to say that revelation is not derivable from nor measurable by the frameworks that normally authorize human discourse. Its "mere existence... is already the evidence of the limitation of any possible condition." Hence, "formal" here is not a reduction of the reality of revelation to syntax; it is a way of saying

that theology's *conditions of meaningful speech* are themselves judged, displaced, and re-founded by revelation's unconditionality. Again, the "formal" focus is on the language of theology, not on divine speech as divine act.

Put differently, my formalism is not meant to *replace* divine agency with structure but is meant to articulate why divine agency cannot be captured by the modal, deontic, or teleological idioms that pretend to domesticate a notion of human freedom even in light of divine revelation. When I say that theology is "language beginning (or beginning again) from divine revelation," the point is that language can only confess its own limitation theologically—i.e., under the priority of divine *verbum* over human *verbum*.

### 3. Truth, Reference, and "What Formal Analysis Cannot by Itself Supply"

At the same time, Bielfeldt identifies a genuine methodological tension. A "formal reconstruction" can clarify the *conditions* under which theological statements become meaningful (or cease to be meaningful from the standpoint of inherited logics), but it does not automatically yield a worked-out account of how theological language is *true*—i.e., how *reference* and *reality* belong together. In his terms, "freedom of language is not yet freedom for truth," and the *nova lingua* must not become a self-enclosed "linguistic revolution."

I take this less as a refutation than as a map of tasks. The book's aim is focused to show with and in Luther that theology is not "a conceptual system" but "the effort of formal reconstruction of language's own system-breaking."

As such, one can grant that formal reconstruction, by itself, does not yet provide what Bielfeldt calls an "ontological ground," especially if the question is posed in terms of truth-makers or participatory realism. However, this formal reconstruction is ontologically grounded in the event of divine revelation, which is one with the divine act of *illumination* about this event, i.e., the gracious gift of believing. Without the fact of revelation and the status of believer, no revelation-based formal reconstruction of language would be possible, and thusly no theological language would be available.

### 4. Pneumatology as Bridge—without Undoing the Formal Point

This is why I agree with Bielfeldt's suggestion that "the pneumatological dimension is decisive" and that "the Spirit ... unites language and being." It is precisely the emphasis on the action of the Spirit as ontological proximity of revelation to the speaking human to offer a way to speak of the unity of formal modification and ontological efficacy without collapsing one into the other.

I would put the prospective convergence in these terms: if revelation is "the absolute beginning," then theology is not an autonomous formal reconstruction but is, rather, a derivative reconstruction. Theology is the expression of the *reality* of believing in divine revelation: as such, it is the expression of the servitude under

God. Saying “*servum arbitrium*” is one with acting out this servitude on the level of language. In sum, theology’s freedom is, as the review nicely says, the “freedom of obedience” towards revelation.

That reception, again, is not an abstract transfer of rules; it is the event in which God addresses, constitutes, and thereby re-situates the speaker. If pneumatology names the divine agency by which the Word is present and effective in and as address, then pneumatology can indeed serve as a bridge between (a) the formal claim that revelation re-founds the conditions of meaningful theological discourse and (b) the realist claim that divine speech effects realities outside discourse.

My only caution is that this bridge should not be construed as “adding ontology” *after* a merely linguistic “prolegomenon,” as if revelation first produced a free grammar and only later received reality. Rather, the book’s formal thesis intends to show *why the question of ontology itself* must be posed *under* revelation’s priority—i.e., why “ontology” cannot function as an external tribunal before which revelation must justify itself. Theology speaks *from* an alternative that is already there—divine revelation—and this “alternative” concerns the limitation of every possible metalinguistic condition in light of revelation, including the conditions of ontological speech.

## 5. Conclusion

I therefore receive Bielfeldt’s challenge as an invitation to further work rather than as an objection that defeats the project. If *Theology as Freedom* clarifies how revelation reorganizes theology’s logical space, then a next step—one that Bielfeldt’s own model-theoretic realism outlines with precision and energy—would be to show more explicitly how this formal reorganization is inseparable from the divine act that makes it possible and true. I am thankful for the review because it identifies with precision a central point that future discussions should not avoid: how to hold together theology’s formal freedom and theology’s participatory truth without letting either term cancel the other.

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Andrea Vestrucci (PhD, PhD, FISSR) is associate professor at the Christ School of Theology. He also teaches Artificial Intelligence Systems Engineering at the University of Bamberg, Germany. He holds doctorate degrees in logic and theology from the Universities of Milan (Italy), Lille (France), and Geneva (Switzerland). He served as a pastor in Lutheran and Reformed congregations of the United Protestant Church of France and the Lutheran Church of Cameroon. He is a recipient of the Australia Award, and a Laureate of the Academic Society of Geneva.



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