

Luther's Truths, Then and Now

It is quite amazing – it is the rarest of occasions in human history – that people around the world are spending so much time, energy, and money to commemorate a simple, ordinary academic exercise.

No one five hundred years from now will celebrate or rail against a faculty forum held at Concordia Seminary in 2015. In 1517 Desiderius Erasmus was much more influential than the young Wittenberg professor, who simply wanted to explore a question of pastoral care in the normal way academicians explored new ideas in their disciplines by posing theses for debate. Erasmus' contemporary Johann Eck, trying to make a career for himself at another new, small university, in Ingolstadt, may have been more intelligent than his Wittenberg colleague in terms of his command of scholastic theology although Martin Luther was no amateur at the scholastic arts.

But with around ninety-five – depending on how the printers divided them – theses on the practice of indulgences Martin Luther began a church-changing, world-altering series of events that shaped the world far beyond the little frontier town of Wittenberg. What Thomas Kuhn labeled in 1962 “a paradigm shift” in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* produced what some call the Copernican revolution in theology, Luther's new characterization of being Christian.[1] When printers pirated Luther's proposals for debate on the issue of indulgences in 1517, they created the first modern media event, a public relations happening like none previously experienced in European civilization.[2] This media event initiated a series of events that captured minds and hearts as it produced a fresh redefinition of what it means to be Christian. This new definition transformed the way Christians understand who their God is and who they are. The ripple effect of this redefinition continues to make an impact – often in ways unintended by Luther and contradictory to his intentions – today.

Recent Luther scholarship has emphasized the continuities of the Wittenberg reformer's thought with elements of medieval teaching and practice. It certainly is important to recognize these continuities and the roots of much of Luther's thinking in medieval antecedents, both in the scholastic tradition and in the monastic tradition of teaching and practicing the faith. Indeed, it is only when we recognize how Luther took what was familiar to his contemporaries and reworked the way key medieval terms were defined and key concepts recast that we can appreciate how radically the core of his understanding of being Christian critiqued medieval constructions of the faith and how fundamentally he set the church on new paths.[3] It should not surprise us that an individual never loses completely all the old forms of thinking into which his mind has been pressed by his instructors. New ideas that catch hold in society always take form within an older way of thinking, so that those who receive these new ways also retain some

footing in the old way of thinking. Medieval Christianity was Christian. But Luther recast the framework for reading Scripture and proclaiming its message as he worked within the old system of thinking to come to significantly new foundations for thinking and living in Biblical fashion.

A framework used in the discipline of comparative religions or the history of religions may help make clear what Luther accomplished with his new definition of being Christian. Religions have six common elements, according to this theory: doctrine (the fundamental principles governing the perception of reality in the specific religious system of thinking); narratives that are the source and the expression of the doctrine; ritual (including both formal liturgical exercises and the routine pious practices woven into daily life as means of relating to the Ultimate and Absolute); ethics (the ways in which human beings properly relate to other human beings and other creatures); community(how adherents live together and how their polity provides governance for their religious institutions, usually through some kind of sacred hierarchy); and finally the element of personal commitment that binds the first five together (faith for Christians, submission for Muslims, the longing for nirvana for Buddhists).[4]

Medieval, western European Christianity had been shaped by its missionaries, to be sure, but in much of the Mediterranean world and quite generally north of the Alps too few Christians were available at the time of conversion to teach and instill the Biblical framework of thinking in the people. The masses took some concepts from Scripture and placed them within the structures of traditional Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic religions. Those religions did not have elaborate doctrinal systems but instead had understood the relationship between the gods, their concept of the Ultimate and Absolute, and themselves largely in terms of ritual. The relationship was initiated by and flowed out of human performance of that which pleased the gods, and what pleased the gods was chiefly the execution of sacred religious activities. Proper implementation of ritual depended on priests; the people of Europe had no problem accepting the religious authority of a hierarchy endowed with powers beyond that of ordinary human beings when Christian priests were introduced into the village.. Thus, in 1500 Christianity for most Europeans consisted of proper performance of ritual in the domain of a hierarchy that they experienced in the person of their local priest and that they knew culminated in the supreme pontiff, Christ's vicar in Rome.[5]

Through a combination of factors the young Wittenberg monk and professor came to a different conclusion. His personality dare not be discounted in assessing how he came to his formulation of the Biblical message. Could Luther's thinking, with their clear display of the stringency of God's wrath and the sweetness of his love in Jesus Christ, have come from the pen of a person who had not experienced the intense emotional highs and lows that Luther himself experienced? Not only his personality, but also his scholastic education molded

his theology in profound ways. The presuppositions he learned from instructors schooled in the tradition of William of Ockham, mediated through the teaching of Gabriel Biel, Luther's intellectual grandfather, professor at Tübingen, shaped his thinking. Well-known is his rejection of Biel's understanding that God gives his grace only to those who do their best (*facere quod in se est*), so that they can perform works meritorious of salvation.[6] Less widely recognized is the fact that other elements of Ockham's and Biel's system of thought set in place fundamental insights for the young monk. Ockham's principle that God's almighty power (*potentia absoluta*) had permitted him to create the world in any way he wished and established him as the Creator who creates and re-creates without condition, Luther decided, even without human beings doing their best. Ockham's understanding of the limits of the human creature's ability to grasp God in categories of human reasoning and his perceptions of how human language functions remained with Luther throughout his life.[7]

But it was finally his study of Scripture that led him to his fundamental new insights into who God is and what it means to be human – that led him to his redefinition of what it means to be Christian. He had learned bits and pieces of the Bible from childhood on, perhaps initially not being able to distinguish its stories from the stories of the saints in the *Legenda aurea*, the collection of tales of miraculous deeds performed by historical or mythical figures who substituted in the popular imagination for the gods and goddesses who had been banned temporarily from the conception of the world that the missionaries brought with them. In school Luther had memorized Psalms in Latin to be sung by the choir in the church. In the university dormitory he had heard Bible readings at mealtime, a custom taken over from the monastery. Once in the monastery this *lectio continua* continued, as well as the singing of the psalmody in the seven hours of prayer each day.

But Luther truly learned Scripture as he began to teach it in 1513. He began with the Psalms, naturally, not simply because he had learned to love the deep-seated expression of human feelings that arose out of his own inner depths, which the psalmists had captured in graceful poetic fashion, but also because instruction in the Psalms had long since become a standard core of the theological curriculum. He went on to Romans, then Galatians and Hebrews, and returned to the Psalms before political events and social turmoil interrupted his lecturing for half a decade from 1521 to 1526. Somewhere in the seven or eight years following his inaugural lectures in 1513 he experienced what has been labeled his "Tower experience" or his "evangelical breakthrough," terms scholars are now giving up on, because it becomes ever clearer that like most human beings, Luther's ideas changed slowly, raggedly, without a direct line of progress. Rather than a "breakthrough" or a magical, single "experience," Luther experienced an "evangelical maturation."

Key to that maturation was his new understanding of what Scripture says about the person of God and the persons created as human in his image. Luther learned from personal experience what it meant to try to deal with the God

created by the mix of Scripture and Aristotelian concepts of an Unmoved Mover. He had received his theological instruction in a world where order depended on human conformity to an eternal law, which served as the only guarantee of the security of the world and the individual in the absence of the Creator. His Ockhamist instruction cultivated in him, however, a suspicion of the Aristotelian definition of the human being as *animal rationalis*. Being a living human being involved more than just reason (although Aristotle himself had made clear that the will and emotions with reason constituted being human). The God whom Moses and the prophets introduced to him was not Unmoved but on the move, moving through the passage of time which he had created, always moving as the utterly faithful Creator and conversation partner, in relationship with the human creatures fashioned in his image, with reason, will, and emotions.[8] Luther had no doctrine of God apart from God in relationship with his human creatures, the *Deus revelatus*. No doctrine of the *Deus absconditus* was possible since there was no reliable basis for wrapping the human mind around God without his own revelation.[9]

God revealed himself by addressing humankind throughout human history. God made the first evangelism call, asking, "Adam, where are you?" God stormed and cajoled, condemned and consoled, warned and wooed through Israel's entire history and sent his disciples into the world to do the same. God just keeps talking throughout Scripture and throughout the church's history. He has been present and continues to be present, exercising his power through his use of human language. Luther loved words, and he loved God's Word. The God whom Luther encountered in Scripture showed a full range of emotions, from raging wrath in his disgust over children who would not listen to him, to tender, gentle, loving, kind comfort and caressing to those whom he lifted to cuddle on his lap. The Swedish scholar of German language and literature Birgit Stolt points out that Luther's use of the Biblical picture of God as Father and his human creatures as his children intensified, both in the frequency of usage and in the drama of the imagery, once his own children came into his life.[10]

In an age in which social systems cultivate individual independence and thus foster a loss of community, a deficit of contact and communication, the call to return to the family of origin, gathered around a loving Father, who is longing to talk with his children, and coming together to connect with those whom he has made to be sisters and brothers, can be a powerful way of presenting our God. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

For several reasons, defining being human in terms of being God's child fits Luther's understanding of what God did when he took dust from the earth and breathed into it the breath of life. Luther's foundational definition of what it means to be God's human child is that we have been created to fear, love, and trust in God above all else. The twentieth-century dogmatician and psychologist Erik Erikson did a better job of capturing a pair of Luther's insights in his psychological theories than he did in sketching the reformer's biography in his *Young Man Luther*. That volume is a less than successful attempt to apply Freudian theory to

a person from another culture and another time.[11] Erikson came closer, however, to Luther as he taught that trust learned from contact with particularly one's mother determines human personality. Our definitions of our own personhood spring from the trust or mistrust engendered in us in the first two years of life, according to Erikson.[12] Luther did a Biblical instead of an experimental analysis of humanity and quickly determined that the faithful God created his people to be faithful, to live by faith, to trust him in order to find the Shalom necessary for life to function well in relationship to him and to all other creatures. Luther recognized that trust in God, not performance of good works, is the foundation and framework of our humanity.

Erikson is famous also for his concept of identity as the key to how human beings deal with themselves and the reality around them. What he means by identity is not the same as, but closely akin to, Luther's concept of human righteousness, being what God made us to be. Righteousness is an important topic throughout Scripture; Luther's understanding of God's righteousness shifted from depicting him as the evaluator with the scale in which things were measured according to the standard of his law to being presented as the person who comes to die and rise for those whom he loves.

Luther also departed radically from medieval perceptions of human righteousness, single-faceted as they were. Righteousness meant for the spectrum of theological voices from Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas to Ockham and Biel that human beings in some way met the demands for perfect performance of God's law in one way or another. That might be possible, as Augustine taught, only through the aid of God's grace and with his gracious forgiveness. Aquinas, too, taught the prevenient grace had to come before good works but that good works constituted that which makes God take pleasure in his human creatures.

Despite the admission that God's grace is necessary for becoming righteous, this one-dimensional understanding of human identity or righteousness placed Luther continuously under God's judgment until he discovered that human righteousness in God's sight comes alone from God and that there are two facets to human identity. The first aspect or facet of human righteousness is passive, the core identity, the real DNA, which is totally a gift of God, just as the physical DNA that constitutes our person is a gift from our parents, unrequested, unearned, undeserved. The second facet is active, human actions executing human responsibilities, which God our Creator built into our nature. Luther labeled his distinction of these two facets of our identity, or two kinds of human righteousness, "our theology" in his Galatians commentary,[13] and Philip Melancthon made it the anthropological basis of his presentation of the justification of the sinner by grace through faith in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession.[14] Luther initially distinguished *iustitia aliena* – righteousness from outside ourselves – from *iustitia propria* – righteousness that we perform ourselves – but later turned to the terminology of passive and active righteousness.[15] Chemnitz wrote in article III of the Formula of Concord, "in this

life believers who have become righteous through faith in Christ have first of all the righteousness of faith that is reckoned to them and then thereafter the righteousness of new obedience or good works that is begun in them. But these two kinds of righteousness dare not be mixed with each other or simultaneously introduced into the article on justification by faith before God.”[16]

Luther’s concept of two kinds of righteousness simply builds upon the image of parent and child. Parents give their children their basic identity, described in modern terms with concepts like DNA and genetic make-up. Parents expect their children to perform in the manner the family deems appropriate behavior. You cannot really have one side of the equation – over the long haul – without the other although the disruption of sin does alter the nature of these two facets or aspects of our humanity. Parents do not ask their children some nine months before birth if the child will be ready to help with household chores and support the parents in their old age as a condition of birth. They give life through conception and birth free of obligation. But the expectations of performance do follow the free gift of life. No parent hopes that the newborn child will never change. All parents expect that their children will be from Lake Wobegon, performing at least a little bit “above average.” Likewise, Adam and Eve did not have a probation period after being formed from the dust of the earth and taken from the other’s rib respectively. God did not wait some time to see whether these living beings met his expectations for being human by behaving properly. He gave the gift of being human without condition.

A simple theological parable may clarify the distinction. Although by the definition of his own theology Thomas Aquinas had sufficient merit to proceed directly to heaven, without having to work off temporal punishment in purgatory, the Dominican saint dallied along the way, visiting old friends and doing research among those who still had purgatorial satisfactions to discharge there. He arrived at Saint Peter’s gate some 272 years after his death, on February 18, 1546. After ascertaining his name, Saint Peter asked Thomas, “Why should I let you into my heaven?” “Because of the grace of God,” Thomas answered, ready to explain the concept of prevenient grace should it be necessary. Peter asked instead, “How do I know you have God’s grace?” Thomas, who had brought a sack of his good deeds with him, was ready with the proof. “Here are the good works of a lifetime,” he explained. “I could have done none of them without God’s grace, but in my worship and observation of monastic rules, in my obedience to parents, governors, and superiors, in my concern for the physical well-being and property of others, in my chastity and continence, you can see my righteousness – grace-assisted as it may be.” Since a line was forming behind Thomas, Peter waved him in, certain that Thomas would soon receive a clearer understanding of his own righteousness. The next person in line stepped up. “Name?” “Martin Luther.” “Why should I let you into my heaven?” “Because of the grace of God.” Peter was in a playful mood, so he went on, “How do I know you have God’s grace?

Thomas had his works to prove his righteousness, but I don’t see that you have brought any proof along that you are righteous.” “Works?” Luther exclaimed.

“Works? I didn’t know I was supposed to bring my works with me! I thought they belonged on earth, with my neighbors. I left them down there.” “Well,” said Gatekeeper Peter, “how then am I supposed to know that you really have God’s grace?” Luther pulled a little, well-worn, oft-read scrap of paper out of his pocket and showed it to Peter. On it were the words, “Martin Luther, baptized, November 11, in the year of our Lord 1483.” “You check with Jesus,” Luther said. “He will tell you that I have been born again as a member of the family. He will tell you that he has given me the gift of righteousness through his own blood and his own resurrection.”^[17]

In this age the search for identity proceeds largely on the basis of “how I perform,” on my job, with raising my kids, in my relationship with my spouse, in my sports club, and on the ball field. At such a time as ours the assertion that our core identity, the one that will last because it lies in God’s regard for us through Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection for us, can give people a whole new vision of life from which to build hope again. In an age in which many mean it when they say, “I wish I were dead,” we are able to say, “I have just the thing for you,” and fit them with the death of the old identity and the garment of resurrection in Christ. This can foster a sense of peace and joy that people have never been able to dream of before. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

The Enlightenment tried to return to something of an Aristotelian vision of the human being as a living being who can manage life successfully through reason. But the Enlightenment is coming crashing down and crushing down all around us. Central and northern Europeans seem to be the only people who are not noticing. It is interesting that the Enlightenment is hanging on longest where Lutheran theology failed to hold onto the popular imagination. In fact, for all the national worries, U. S. Americans still begin by singing, “I did it my way,” thinking that they have established themselves on sure footing with their own decisions, but they go on to sing that they get no satisfaction and end up concluding that freedom is just another name for nothing left to lose. In such a world the mastery of reason seems diminished. Rationality also falls increasingly into conflict with the desire to feel good. But feeling good proves also to be elusive. Around the world optimism is dimming about human capabilities to preserve order and peace, harmony and prosperity, “shalom” in Hebrew terms, the likes of Eden. It is interesting that what the Germans describe with “Zufriedenheit” – being at peace – English-speakers describe as satisfaction – making enough for ourselves – or fulfillment – getting full of what we want. And that is still the goal of all those who live the lifestyle of democratic capitalism, whatever continent they may claim. Nonetheless, more and more people speak of their vulnerability and the frailty and futility of life. Some turn to fatalistic explanations. Others blame someone or some other group. Of the making of scapegoats, there is no end. But casting blame solves nothing. Finally we must conclude, “we have met the enemy, and he is us,” as Pogo, a cartoon figure of my youth, opined. Luther knew that. And Luther knew that evil has deeper roots and sin more profound implications than

any casual brush with bad luck or unfortunate accident can drive home for people. Luther experienced that the good that he wanted to do did not get done because without trust in the God who provides a haven in every need and truly supplies all good he was inevitably turned in upon himself, relying on creatures rather than Creator to secure his identity, the reality around him, and his life.[18] Desperation creeps into the consciousness of those whose perception of their own identity finally end up wanting more security than can be offered by their own performance of what they think is right for them, Other creature or creatures that they marshal as their supporting force and foundation fail as well. For such people, Luther's understanding that the basic problem of life is our failure to fear, love, and trust in God above all things opens the way to settling anxieties and bringing peace. For it teaches that our core identity – in Luther's language our passive righteousness – is given free of charge and free of condition to the God who speaks to us in Jesus Christ. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

The bestowal of passive righteousness takes place, in Luther's view, when God goes about doing what God does, creating, or in this case re-creating, and accomplishing his new creation through his Word, just as in the beginning, he spoke, and reality came into existence. Martin Franzmann caught Luther's sense with poetic precision: God's strong Word had cleft the darkness, when it was done at his speaking; and so also does his strong Word bespeak us righteous, birthed with his own holiness as a result of the light of his salvation breaking upon those who dwelt in darkness and the depths of death.[19] Re-creation takes place when his word of forgiveness, life, and salvation buries sinful identities and raises up new creatures in Christ. Luther called that the restoration of righteousness "justification".

The suggestion that "justification" is a term that has lost its significance for twenty-first century North Americans and Western Europeans – and may never have had much significance for people outside Western cultures – has been repudiated by Oswald Bayer. He argues that most Western Europeans and North Americans spend much of their lives justifying themselves to spouses, parents, children, neighbors, employers, fellow employees, referees on the sports field, traffic police who stop us – we are continually justifying our actions if not our very existence, also to ourselves.[20] This need to establish one's own integrity is not reserved for Europeans and North Americans. Most people feel compelled to present and defend our own merit and value, our own rights to be the person we want to be and the person we are. Usually, what we have accomplished and achieved is the underpinning and substance of our argument. No sixteenth-century Christian was any more insistent on a Pelagian view of human merit than the typical Western European or North American of today. Many of them are just as beset by self-doubt, self-accusation, self-denial, or despair as were the super-conscientious monks of whom Luther was one.

God is still calling out to precisely this kind of person, to those who fear that they have not performed to standard, or have not forged the right connections to

further their children or snag a promotion. God's Word still projects itself to light up the darkness of those who turn in upon themselves because they can trust no outward source of support anymore.

Luther's grasp of God's reality addresses those who feel themselves in free fall, with nothing to grab onto for support and safety. God creates a new reality for them by filling the hole at the center of their lives, where fear, love, and trust in him had been replaced by fear, love, and trust of some unworthy, unworkable substitute for the Creator. God comes to say that he no longer views them with the distaste and disgust that paralleled their own distaste and disgust for their former way of life. God comes to bury their sinful identities in Christ's tomb and raise them up to be justified, righteousness-restored members of his family, so that they can enjoy God's love and live recklessly in risking all for the neighbor and live with abandon, so that Christ's love can be broadcast into the world around them. In this, Luther is echoing Paul's language regarding baptism in Romans 6 and Colossians 2. In fact, Jonathan Trigg suggests that Luther did not derive his understanding of baptism as the death and burial of the sinner and the resurrection of the new creature through Christ's death and resurrection, as described in Romans 6:3-11 and Colossians 2:11-15 from his doctrine of justification, but that Luther's understanding of baptism shaped his teaching on justification.^[21] His concept of justification does seem rooted in Romans 6 and Romans 4:25, where Paul asserts that Christ was handed over into death for our sin and was raised to restore our righteousness, to justify sinners.^[22]

In Luther's German "to justify" referred not only to the judge's verdict of innocence. "*Rechtfertigen*" could also mean "to do justice to" a person. Luther's understanding of the justification of sinners in baptism used this definition.^[23] Sinners receive their just deserts in God's justification. They are buried as sinners so that they may be re-created through the resurrection. The forensic judgment of God kills before it makes alive.

Luther's forensic understanding of justification has received much criticism in the last quarter century, in part from heirs of the classical Liberal critique of Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack, who wanted human righteousness to be understood as upper bourgeois good behavior that could construct the kingdom of God on earth. Therefore, they argued that Luther defined justification in terms of its "effectiveness" in producing people who produce good works.^[24] Recently, the argument that Luther's understanding of salvation resembles the Eastern Orthodox understanding of justification as divinization or theosis – advanced by the so-called "Finnish" or "Mannermaa" school – has won credence in some circles as it sought on a radically different metaphysical foundation to emphasize what justification produces in terms of Christian living. The founder of this school, Tuomo Mannermaa, and many of his followers, sincerely wanted to cultivate devout Christian living, but they misinterpret Luther both historically and theologically when they ignore what "forensic" justification means within the context of Luther's thought.^[25] Gerhard Forde conveyed the true nature of Luther's understanding of God's speaking us righteous when he asserted, "The

absolutely forensic character of justification renders it effective – justification actually kills and makes alive. It is, to be sure, ‘not only’ forensic but that is the case only because the more forensic it is, the more effective it is!”[26] God’s forensic judgment – when he imputes sinners righteous, when he regards them as righteous, when he pronounces his verdict of innocent upon them – that Word of the Lord, like his Word in Genesis 1, determines reality, effectively![27] What Forde meant with his axiomatic quip is that trust in God’s saying that we are righteous moves us to recognize that we are – passively! – righteous in his sight. In faith we cannot do anything else but live out that passive righteousness actively, in the active righteousness of love and service to the rest of God’s creatures. God’s Word makes us alive, not to sin the more that grace may abound (Rom. 6:1), but to demonstrate to the world that our identity bestowed by God’s grace apart from any merit or worthiness of our won, is real. That Word of forgiveness restructures our entire way of thinking and therefore of acting. The new creature it has called into existence produces the fruits of faith, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. If one finds that not to be the case, it is time to hear again the law that calls to repentance. Luther understood that justification meant that the justified sinner acts like a child of God and combats temptations, killing desires to act against God’s will, in daily repentance.

Some accuse Luther of being fixated on the concept of justification to the exclusion of other Biblical descriptions of salvation. Those who say that have not read his catechisms. There and throughout his writings he marshals the richness of Biblical descriptors of God’s saving action in Christ.[28] The word “justification” does not occur in the Small Catechism, his primer and confession of faith for German children. What Christ accomplished for us is instead defined as “redemption” – *Erlösung* – the loosing of the bonds which hold us captive, liberation. In fact, his primary treatise on his teaching on justification bears the title *On Christian Freedom* (1520).[29]

In his explanation of the second article of the Creed in the Small Catechism Luther described the effect of Christ’s death for sinners with the German “*erworben*.” The usual English translation, to “purchase,” certainly is not incorrect, but “to acquire possession of” would be clearer and more precise. For it is not a monetary purchase – Luther quotes Peter that it is not a gold and silver kind of acquisition – but one with blood, not a price for buying something but rather the visitation of what God’s law demands.[30] The lamb did not give as many drops of blood as Israel required that year to compensate for its sins and then return to frolic in the field. The lamb died on the altar of justification. This “purchasing” with Christ’s sacrificial death has the result, Luther relates a few words later, of our becoming his own, belonging to him, being brought into his realm to live with him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

That is what redemption means also in the Large Catechism, where Christ tears hell apart and drives Satan out of the lives of those whom he had imprisoned. There can be no doubt that Luther taught that Christ’s death is vicarious, as he took our place before the law and satisfied its demand for death (Rom. 6:21a). It

is also clear that he emphasized justification through Christ's victorious resurrection; the gospel is "the telling of a true David who tussled with sin, death, and the devil, and overcame them, thereby rescuing all those who were captive in sin, afflicted with death, and overpowered by the devil. Without any merit of their own, he made them righteous, gave them life, and saved them, so that they were given peace and brought back to God."^[31]

Luther and his students did not hesitate to address guilt as they proclaimed God's law, but they more often talked about the anxiety and terror aroused by God's wrath over human guilt rather than about the feelings of guilt itself. And they also proclaimed his liberation from fears that had nothing to do with their own responsibility for perpetrating evil but rather for the threat from the world and Satan in all its many forms. The preaching of the Wittenberg instructors and their students aimed at bringing Christ into their consciousness to liberate them from feelings of estrangement, alienation, and abandonment and of their terrors in the face of death. The mention of "justification" in Luther's preaching abolished perverted perceptions of the hearers' own identities that cast them back upon themselves or other idols they had fashioned as replacements for their Creator. Justification was for Luther the restoration of true identity as God's children, righteousness before God, and the trust that recognizes that identity in that aspect of who we are drives us to act out the secondary identities God has given us as those created to praise him and to serve and love his other creatures. In a world chasing after false identities and seeking rest and protection in false havens and in false standards for evaluating life, Luther's insight – that we can never find sufficient justification for our existence in our own performance or in any created substituted for God as he has revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth – restores stability, order, and peace to troubled consciences. Everything falls into its proper place when Christ comes to the center of life and our trust in him embraces all we think and do, the Wittenberg reformer insisted. According to Luther, Christ's justification of sinners restores our righteousness, our Shalom, the fullness of our humanity. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

All reality flows from the creative, sustaining, re-creative Word of the Lord, according to Wittenberg theology. Luther's unique understanding of God's Word and how it functions set it apart from the "superstitious" use of words in medieval theology – as the Wittenberg theologians defined it – and the symbolic use of words that arose out of platonic presuppositions among other reform-minded critics of that medieval view. Luther's perception that God actually acts in this world through oral, written, and sacramental forms of his Word has caused some difficulties for Lutherans in conversations with other Christians over the past centuries. There is less reason for this issue to continue to be a stumbling block because of the recent discussion among linguists of what is called "performative speech."^[32] Luther's view goes beyond what linguists have seen as the impact of words governed in large part by social constructions and conventions. Luther asserted that when God speaks, new realities come into being and that all reality

has its origin in God speaking. That means that nothing can be more real than the person whose righteousness has been restored to the Edenic identity enjoyed before the Fall by Adam and Eve.

In a world in which we experience that words can hurt us even more than sticks and stones, to know that the Word of the Lord performs what it promises, delivers what it declaims, gives more solid assurance of what is real than an umpire's decisive call, than a judge's determination of innocence. God's re-creative Word gives twenty-first century hearers the solid foundation of the promise ringing out from Calvary and the property of Joseph of Arimathea. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

There are any number of elements in Luther's teaching and the teaching of his colleague Philip Melanchthon and their students, especially Martin Chemnitz, David Chytraeus, and Jakob Andreae, whose confessional works we accept as our confession, that can speak to our cultures around the world if properly translated. Among the topics that could be treated are the reformer's theology of the cross, the Lord's Supper, and Luther's concept of vocation. But we should also look at the *modus operandi* of the Wittenberg theologians, which can provide vital models for us as we give witness to the Biblical message in their train in the twenty-first century.

Luther was a translator. He not only rendered the Bible into the sterling German that helped shape how Germans talk and write to this day. He translated the message of the Bible into the culture of German-speaking people. James Nestingen has pointed out how Yale Divinity School missiologist Lamin Sanneh's recognition of Christianity as a way of life inextricably involved in translation helps elucidate what Luther was doing as he translated Mediterranean expressions of the faith into words and concepts that German-speaking children could grasp.^[33] Born a Muslim in the Gambia, Sanneh perceived the contrast between Islam, in which Arabic is the language which all Muslims should learn to read the Koran and to pray properly, and the Christian faith. In Christianity God has translated himself into human flesh; the gospels translate almost all that Jesus said into Greek from his native tongue; and missionaries immediately set to translating Scripture and other books into native languages when they begin a new mission. Luther recognized that the never-changing, always-moving Creator depicted in the Old Testament is deeply involved in the flow of human history and that on Pentecost he addresses a host of tribes and nations in their own tongues. Luther thoroughly appreciated this aspect of God's person, who falls into conversation with his human creatures within every cultural context that springs from his creative hand, taking seriously the grand variety of human cultures that reflect not only Babel's fall but also his own ultimate complexity. Therefore, while he stood fast on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, he was able to express it in a host of ways, applying and formulating the gospel for specific situations as he encountered them. He was open to a variety of forms of polity for the church, and he did not try to impose uniformity in ritual as Rome did, with more ease than ever, through the agency of the printing press.

In an age in which, within one society, cultures differing in language, customs, worldviews, and other factors exist alongside each other, Luther-like trust in the Holy Spirit's governance of the church demands experimentation within the community to find the proper ways of expressing the gospel and explaining the law for the people to whom God sends us, enjoying fellowship with those who express a common confession in a variety of translations.

Lutherans have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ into at least four different cultural situations. In the sixteenth century the Lutheran church became establishment in large parts of central and northern Europe. But also in the sixteenth century Lutherans lived in churches under persecution, particularly in Eastern Europe. Before the end of the sixteenth century Lutherans had also begun mission churches in northern stretches of Sweden, and soon thereafter brought the gospel to the Delaware, and in the course of the seventeenth century tried to establish mission churches in western Africa and the Caribbean. By 1706 mission efforts began to establish enduring Lutheran churches in Asia as well. Also in the seventeenth century immigrants from Europe began establishing immigrant churches, first in the Americas, then in South Africa and Australia. In each of these forms of church Luther's message spoke to the culture around it. Luther formulated a way of being Christ's people in whatever society and culture God has placed his chosen. H. Richard Niebuhr dubbed Luther's approach to the church's place in human cultures "Christ and culture in paradox," It is more aptly described as "Christ's people and culture in two dimensions," two realms. In what seems to be becoming a more hostile world, Luther's twenty-first century followers must resist the temptation to drift into what Niebuhr labeled a "Christ of culture" model or into a "Christ against culture" pattern. The household of faith needs Lutheran witness to Luther's manner of practicing sharp critique of society's sins while affirming God's extravagant gift of the blessings of one's own culture.[34] That means that in the immediate future establishment and immigrant Lutheran churches have more to learn from those in the lands of persecution and mission than to teach our sisters and brothers there. That means that such conversations are necessary to insure proper translation of Luther's insights. Humanly speaking, Luther's message spread not only because it addressed human perception of needs but also because, more or less by accident, Luther discovered how to use the most effective technology at hand. He did not see the potential of movable type for serving the reform of the church, but printers saw the potential for the marketing of his thoughts on indulgences and then quickly on a host of other subjects. Luther himself did not drag his feet but quickly became a master at combining his words with Lukas Cranach's images, in order to spread the message of Scripture to a wide readership. The cultural appreciation that came naturally to Luther also led to his recognizing the value of other disciplines for aiding theology, including the study of literature and history, and above all of the arts of communication, rhetoric and dialectic. His friend Philip Melancthon drew upon the developing so-called humanistic program to lead a return to ancient sources and to emphasize the necessity of using the skills God implants

for the service of proclaiming salvation in Christ.

Luther recognized both the promise and the ambiguity of new technology and new modes of communication. In a world in which God's material blessings flow richly with gifts that can aid our thinking and our communicating, new modes of communicating can also be hijacked by Satan. Further complicating matters, disciplines always carry ideological baggage and need Christ critique. In such a world, Luther's ability to marshal technology as well as an array of colleagues and their teaching across the spectrum of the curriculum of the time should serve as a model for us. Luther's emphasis on literacy endowed us sociologically with a kind of upward social mobility. As our people assume more and more responsibility in a range of disciplines and societal positions, this emphasis can serve us well as we use these gifts to exercise the responsibilities of leadership and learning which God gives us in church and society. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

Finally, the *modus operandi* of the Wittenberg theologians rested on the fundamental distinction necessary for the proper functioning of God's conversations with his human creatures, the distinction between God's plan for human living and God's re-creative saving activity in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Luther's way of thinking emerged in the poles between God's Word, the Holy Scriptures, the source of truth, and the need to apply that Word in effective pastoral care, which called sinners to repentance and forgave, comforted, and empowered the repentant. In 1532 Luther called this distinction "the noblest skill in the Christian church," for both law and gospel are God's Word but both can be lost if they are jumbled together and not correctly distinguished from each other.[35] "Whoever knows well how to distinguish the gospel from the law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian," he commented in 1532.[36] Luther's concept of law defined it broadly as the whole counsel of God's design for human life but also quite focused on the first commandment as his catechisms in 1529[37] and his preface to the prophets of 1532 amply demonstrate.[38] What caused people to hurt and harm neighbors and to fail to help and befriend them in every bodily need was their failure to fear and love – and trust – in God, above all that he had made. That means that the crushing force of the law that produces true repentance, as Luther depicted it with the image of rock and hammer in the Smalcald Articles (Jer. 23:29)[39] attacks the hole that lack of true faith makes at the heart of our lives whether that hole becomes obvious when we are perpetrating sin or suffering it. Our second and primary use of the law points people to their sin above all against the first commandment – that is, to their failure to fear, love and trust in their Creator and Redeemer over everything else in life – that the gospel may draw them to Christ. It does that by accusing, to be sure, but it begins the process often by crushing and cracking the false gods in other ways as well.

God's plan for human life continues to crush the pretensions of all the false gods we fashion while it remains God's good design for our lives. We can deal neither with the crushing force of its accusations or with the great potential for its help in

charting lives of peace and joy without the Holy Spirit's application of the re-creating power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. The bestowal of a new identity through Christ's death and resurrection transform the reality of our lives through the gospel's forgiving, life-restoring, consoling, empowering action in the Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

Amnesia is a terrible thing, yet far worse are counterfeit memories, changed to fit our predilections, altered to teach history what we wish it could teach us. A living and lively historical memory is a great blessing, particularly when it is directed toward God's work of blessing his church with the gospel. That is certainly the case when we reflect on the career and message of Martin Luther. Furthermore, there is no reason to remember if not to get insights for translation into our own culture and to invite Luther's critique of what we are doing. Above all, we need to heed his call to repent as part of our lives as Christians. Neither forgetting nor condemning, neither idolizing nor merely praising, but engaging Luther in earnest dialogue – this should be the goal of our reflection on our own tradition. If he cannot critique what we are doing and offer suggestions for what we might do in the future, our gaze back five hundred years will be no more than entertainment, and little more than basking in our own image. The form of his address was molded within his own culture and experience and bound by sixteenth-century forms. His insights into the Word of the Lord, however, can be translated, as he translated Scripture and the tradition of the church, into our times and our places, as different as they are in our several corners of God's world. What Luther saw then in the pages of Scripture speaks volumes now.

Endnotes

[1] (2. ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[2] "How Luther Went Viral," *The Economist*, 17 December 2011, 93-95. Luther did recognize the potential of the printing press quickly and imaginatively employed its possibilities for spreading his message.

[3] Volker Leppin, "Luther's Transformation of Medieval Thought, Continuity and Discontinuity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115-124.

[4] Ninian Smart, *Worldviews. Cross Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribner's, 1983).

[5] Scott Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 1-35.

[6] Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1983), 47-50, 146-184.

[7] *Ibid.*, 30-38.

[8] Notger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *Oxford Handbook*, 212-232.

[9] Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross. Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 69-81.

[10] "Martin Luther on God as Father," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1994), 385-95.

- [11] *Young Man Luther, a Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).
- [12] See, e.g., Erikson's *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), esp. 81-107, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), esp. 91-141, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975).
- [13] *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-) [henceforth WA] 40,1:45,24-27; *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986) [henceforth LW]), 26:7.
- [14] *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014 [henceforth BSELK]), 272/273-278/279, 286/287-288-289, 552-553 *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 122-125, 128, 234-235.
- [15] WA 2:145,7-10; LW 31:297.
- [16] FC, SD III:32, BSELK, 1400/1401, BC, 567-568.
- [17] Taken from Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness. Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 449-466, here 454-455.
- [18] L'ubomír Batka, "Luther's Teaching on Sin and Evil," in *Oxford Handbook*, 233-253.
- [19] *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2006), 578.
- [20] "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 273-292.
- [21] Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1-2.
- [22] Robert Kolb, "Resurrection and Justification. Luther's Use of Romans 4,25," *Lutherjahrbuch* 78 (2011), 39-60.
- [23] Werner Elert, "Deutschrechtliche Züge in Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre," in *Ein Lehrer der Kirche, Kirchlich-theologische Aufsätze und Vorträge von Werner Elert*, ed. Max Keller-Hüschemenger (Berlin, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1967), 23-31; Trigg, *Baptism*, 1-2.
- [24] James M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour. German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther* (Montreal: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2000).
- [25] Risto Saarinen, "Justification by Faith. The View of the Mannermaa School," in *Oxford Handbook*, 254-263. Cf. the critique of Klaus Schwarzwäller, "Verantwortung des Glaubens. Freiheit und Liebe nach der Dekalogauslegung Martin Luthers," in Dennis Bielfeldt and Klaus Schwarzwäller, eds., *Freiheit als Liebe bei Martin Luther/Freedom as Love in Martin Luther* (Frankfurt/M: Lang, 1995), 146-148.
- [26] *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (1982; Ramsey, NJ: Sigler, 1991), 36.
- [27] Mark Mattes, "Luther on Justification as Forensic and Effective," in *Oxford Handbook*, 264-273.

- [28] Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); cf. Mathieu Arnold, "Luther on Christ's Person and Work," *Oxford Handbook*, 276-293.
- [29] WA7:42-49; LW31:333-377.
- [30] BSELK , BC .
- [31] WABD6:4,3-11, LW35:358.
- [32] Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 125-138.
- [33] "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001), 440-452. Cf. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message, The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).
- [34] Robert Kolb, "Niebuhr's 'Christ and Culture in Paradox' Revisited," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 259-279.
- [35] WA 36:8,14-10,18, 25,1-34. Cf. 36:28,12-16, 33-38. Cf. Robert Kolb, "The Noblest Skill in the Christian Church': Luther's Sermons on the Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 301-318.
- [36] WA 40, 1: 207,3-4; LW 26:115.
- [37] BSELK 862/863, 930/931, BC 351, 386-392.
- [38] WADB11,1:2,1-15,29, LW35:265-273, cf. Maurice E. Schild, *Abendländische Bibelvorreden bis zur Lutherbibel* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1970), 213-233.
- [39] BSELK 750/751-752/753, BC 312-313.