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Table of Contents

The Sacraments and Vocation in Luther's <i>Lectures on Genesis</i> Paul Gregory Alms	3
Luther and the Heavy Laden: Luther's Sermons on Matthew 11:25–30 as Liberation from Christ-Centered Legalism M. Hopson Boutot	21
Luther's <i>Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio</i> as the Shape of Pastoral Care for Pastors John T. Pless	37
All Theology Is Christology: An Axiom in Search of Acceptance David P. Scaer	49
Reflections on the Ministry of Elijah Walter A. Maier III	63
The Spirit-Christological Configuration of the Public Ministry Roberto E. Bustamante	81
The Dichotomy of Judaism and Hellenism Revisited: Roots and Reception of the Gospel Daniel Johansson	101
The Contribution of the Lutheran Theologian Johann Salomo Semler to the Historical Criticism of the New Testament Boris Paschke	113

Theological Observer	133
The Origin of Authentic Rationalism	
<i>Lutheran Service Book</i> at Ten Years	
Is It Time for Wedding Silliness to End?	
What Angels Witness “through the Church”	
“This Is the Night”	
The Human Case against Same-Sex Marriage	
Offending a Postmodern World: The Prophet Speaks the Truth	
Book Reviews	165
Books Received	191

Errata

There is an error on page 285 in the article by Charles A. Gieschen, “The Relevance of the *Homologoumena* and *Antilegomena* Distinction for the New Testament Canon Today: Revelation as a Test Case,” *CTQ* 79 (2015). The sentence in the first paragraph that reads, “It is ironic that the two primary proof-texts . . . are both from the *antilegomena*” should read: “It is ironic that one of the two primary proof-texts for the divine nature of the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Peter 1:21, is from the *antilegomena*.”

The Editors

Luther and the Heavy Laden: Luther’s Sermons on Matthew 11:25–30 as Liberation from Christ-Centered Legalism

M. Hopson Boutot

Few would accuse redemptive-historical preaching of being a legalistic enterprise. After all, the methodology began as a response to legalism prevalent in the church. Legalism, however, is often found in unlikely places. Despite its noble aspirations, redemptive-historical preaching has contributed to a new kind of legalism—a legalism that burdens, not the crowd who hear the sermons, but the clergy who preach them. The goal here is not to disparage regnant homiletical theories, but to suggest a more faithful alternative. This essay contends that the homiletics of Martin Luther, as demonstrated in three sermons on Matthew 11:25–30, can liberate the modern preacher from the unintended legalistic consequences of redemptive-historical preaching.

I. Christ-Centered Legalism

Redemptive-historical preaching as a homiletical discipline began with laudable motives. Beginning with Edmund Clowney’s seminal work, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, the universal desire of its proponents was to combat the moralistic sermons pervading many pulpits.¹ Daniel Doriani explains this exceptionally well:

Redemptive-historical preaching exalts the God who saves with infinite mercy. It opposes moralizing application, denouncing narrative expositions that focus on human participants as exemplars of good or bad behavior. It cannot tolerate sermons (and hymns) that fail to name and honor Christ, that propound general moral or spiritual instruction that any theist could find agreeable.²

¹ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961).

² Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 296. Cf., Bryan Chapell who states, “A message that merely advocates morality and compassion remains sub-Christian even

Similar warnings against moralistic preaching exist throughout redemptive-historical literature.³ Despite these praiseworthy beginnings, well-meaning attempts to liberate the pulpit from moralistic legalism have ironically bred a new form of it. This new Christ-centered legalism is not the atomistic moralism that was rightfully condemned, but a homiletical legalism resulting in heavy-laden preachers burdened by an ever-growing list of Christ-centered dos and don'ts.⁴

Careful study of the array of redemptive-historical literature yields an overwhelming list of guidelines for the aspiring Christ-centered preacher. Preachers must identify the fallen condition focus.⁵ They must not ignore the eschatological kingdom focus of the text.⁶ They must explicitly mention Jesus' name at least once⁷ (preferably before the sermon's conclusion),⁸ but

if the preacher can prove that the Bible demands such behaviors. . . . By themselves, moral maxims and advocacy of ethical conduct fall short of the requirements of biblical preaching." Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 274.

³ E.g., Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 78; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 118–119; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36; Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2007), 51; Derke Bergsma, "Evaluating Sermons," *Preaching* 9, no. 6 (2000): 25, 28–29; Thomas R. Schreiner, "Preaching and Biblical Theology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 21; Michael S. Horton, "What Are We Looking for in the Bible? A Plea for Redemptive-Historical Preaching," *Modern Reformation* (June 1996): 5; David Edward Prince, "The Necessity of a Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Model of Expository Preaching" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 133–136.

⁴ This essay does not argue that redemptive-historical preaching is intrinsically legalistic. However, the totality of literature on the subject has saddled the pulpit with a heavy yoke. These gospel-fueled preaching methods often burden the preacher with homiletical law: an ironic decree to preach the gospel or else!

⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 48–54.

⁶ Prince, "Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Expository Preaching," 100.

⁷ Prince maintains, "It is impossible for a Christian preacher to preach a Christ-centered sermon without specifically mentioning Jesus because all legitimate biblical interpretation and application is mediated through Christ." A sermon can speak of sin, redemption, and judgment, and say true things yet still be "sub-Christian" because "without mentioning Jesus, this is not a Christian sermon." Prince, "Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Expository Preaching," 101.

⁸ Clowney laments the presence of so much "twisted and bungled preaching" in which "the name of Christ is not named except toward the end in an applicatory conclusion." Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 74.

they dare not think that merely mentioning Christ's name is enough.⁹ They must utilize apostolic hermeneutics.¹⁰ They must avoid preaching imperatives without reminding hearers that (1) they are powerless to obey them, (2) their obedience does not merit God's favor, (3) their obedience should be in response to Christ's obedience, and (4) Christ has already obeyed perfectly on their behalf.¹¹ They must filter all their application through the lens of the gospel.¹² They must avoid preaching the characters in Scripture as heroes.¹³ They must position the text within its redemptive-historical context.¹⁴ This onslaught of homiletical red tape has grown so thick that some redemptive-historical proponents are now claiming that other scholars within the movement are not Christ-centered enough.¹⁵ The unintended result of this homiletical prescription is a heaven-laden clergy, threatened with the dreaded diagnosis of the sub-Christian sermon.

II. Unlikely Yet Ideal

In many respects, Martin Luther is an unlikely candidate to emancipate the modern pulpit from this heavy yoke of homiletical legalism. After all, the reformer preached his last sermon over 450 years ago, and his contribution to homiletics is rarely considered the hallmark of his

⁹ In reviewing the Christ-centeredness of Sidney Greidanus's approach (any angle related to Jesus' person, works, or words), Glenn LaRue maintains that a Christ-centered sermon must do more than merely preach about Jesus: "A sermon may discuss Jesus while not really highlighting the nature of his salvation." Glenn Raymond LaRue, "Weighing Sermon Substance: Evaluating a Sermon's Degree of Expository Merit, Doctrinal Essence, and Christ-Centeredness" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 84–87.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*.

¹¹ Cf. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 274.

¹² "A biblical passage explicated and then applied to the hearers does not constitute a biblical sermon if the application is made without reference to the person and work of Christ." Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 118–119.

¹³ Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 82–84; Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 289–290; Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 34–36.

¹⁴ "Preachers who ignore the history of redemption in their preaching are ignoring the witness of the Holy Spirit to Jesus in all the Scriptures." Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 10. Cf. Albert Mohler who says, "[Preachers] must take the particular text and place it within the larger story of Scripture." R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 96.

¹⁵ For instance, David Prince argues that many of the most well-known and respected redemptive-historical scholars are not sufficiently Christ-centered because they lack an eschatological focus. Prince, "Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Expository Preaching," 99.

ministry.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Luther is perhaps the ideal candidate to correct the missteps of the redemptive-historical homiletic.

Luther is an ideal candidate due to his reputation as a proponent of Christ-centered preaching. It was Luther who encouraged pastors to “Preach nothing but Jesus Christ and of faith in him.”¹⁷ The homiletical landscape is full of quotes and anecdotes attesting to Luther’s radical Christ-centeredness. After briefly surveying Luther’s preaching, Sidney Greidanus concluded that although Luther’s desire to preach Christ was laudable, much in his technique should not be emulated.¹⁸ Greidanus explained that Luther’s approach to preaching Christ often went beyond even what those within the redemptive-historical movement would commend.

Why, then, would a redemptive-historical uneasiness with Luther’s excessive Christo-centrism make him an ideal candidate to correct the movement? If the burgeoning requirements for Christ-centered legitimacy are too stringent for a preacher as Christ-centered as Martin Luther, could it be that the redemptive-historical definition of Christ-centeredness is too narrow?

Luther is also an ideal candidate because he viewed himself as a Christ-centered preacher. In the last sermon he preached, Luther summed up his views on preaching with two parallel truths. First, he believed that

¹⁶ This is evidenced by the enormous knowledge gap in Luther’s preaching. In 1967, A. Skevington Wood lamented the absence of a definitive work on the preaching of Martin Luther. A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther: Doctor of Sacred Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster Press, 1969), 85. At that time, “No exhaustive monograph on this subject ha[d] yet been presented, not even in Germany.” Richard Lischer shared a similar sentiment nearly two decades later: “Exhaustive studies of Martin Luther’s preaching are few, and for good reason. The persistence of his scribes has resulted in a corpus of more than 2,000 sermons.” Richard Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 487. Fred Meuser echoes these concerns: “Literature on Luther the preacher is virtually non-existent in English,” and “In no language is there a definitive book on Luther the preacher.” Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 10. Meuser’s own work is limited, despite its status as arguably the most comprehensive study of Luther’s preaching in English. In his 2012 Gheens Lectures at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Carl Trueman expressed a continued need for study of Luther the preacher. Carl Trueman, “Theological and Biographical Foundations” (Gheens Lecture presented at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, September 11, 2012).

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug, trans. Eugene F. A. Klug et al., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 185.

¹⁸ Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 124–126.

preaching should be expository. He states, "Right preachers should diligently and faithfully teach only the word of God and seek only his honor and praise."¹⁹ Second, he believed that preaching should be Christ-centered. He explains, "None other should be preached or taught except the Son of God alone."²⁰ Similar statements pervade his preaching and writings because Luther viewed true preaching to be Christ-centered preaching.²¹

III. Luther and Matthew 11:25–30

This essay contends that the homiletics of Martin Luther, as demonstrated in his preaching on Matthew 11:25–30, can liberate the preacher from the unintended legalistic consequences of redemptive-historical preaching. But what potential do these sermons have to address the concerns of redemptive-historical preaching? With over 2,000 extant sermons to choose from, why were three sermons from Matthew 11:25–30 chosen?²²

These sermons were selected for three reasons. First, they offer the potential to trace Luther's homiletical development. Although each sermon addresses the same text, they represent three different periods in Luther's life. He delivered the first sermon on February 24, 1517, eight months before posting the *Ninety-Five Theses*. The second sermon, delivered eight years later on February 5, 1525, addressed a profoundly changed world. The Reformation had opened the door for radicalism, from the hot-headed impatience of Andreas Carlstadt to the social upheaval wrought by Thomas Müntzer in the Peasants' War. The third sermon was delivered on February 15, 1546, three days before his death. Although he was "old and weak," Luther did not refuse the opportunity to preach the gospel just days before taking his final breath. Sermons from these three stages in Luther's life are ideally suited to reflect development in his preaching.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 51:388; hereafter AE. See below for more detail on this sermon.

²⁰ AE 51:388.

²¹ The issue here is how one defines genuine Christ-centered preaching. This essay will demonstrate that Luther's understanding of Christ-centered preaching is broader than that upheld by many proponents of redemptive-historical preaching.

²² A brief note on sources is in order. This essay is concerned with Martin Luther's preaching, so selections must be limited to actual sermons preached by the reformer. Therefore, Luther's postils and lectures are excluded. Furthermore, this work is admittedly limited by its exclusive reliance on *Luther's Works*, the English translation of the Weimar Edition of Luther's extant material.

Second, these sermons were chosen because they offer the potential to trace consistent homiletical patterns to gauge Luther's preaching. Although it is not impossible for a preacher to deliver drastically different sermons from the same text, it is more likely that continuity will exist. Since these sermons are all from the same text, they are ideally suited to be illustrative of continuity in Luther's preaching.

Third, sermons on this text will demonstrate Luther's level of Christ-centeredness. This is not an obscure Old Testament passage in which movements to Christ may prove difficult for some, but a text where Christ teaches about the rest only he can offer:

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:25-30)

A brief summary of each sermon will illustrate the prominence Luther gives to Christ and his gospel.

February 24, 1517

In the first sermon,²³ Luther begins by asking two questions of the text. First, who are the wise and understanding? Luther believes the "wise" in this text are not necessarily those who incorrectly believe themselves to be wise, but those who lack a hunger for wisdom. He explains, "whether they be those who only think they are wise, like dolts and complete ignor-amuses, or whether they possess wisdom, like subtle hypocrites, are wise only because they are not fools, not empty, not hungry for wisdom, and not babes [before God]."²⁴ The defining characteristic of these fools is pride.

Second, what has the Father hidden from those who appear to be wise? Luther answers, "What is hidden is Christ himself and God the Father."²⁵ Only they whom the world calls fools know Christ and the

²³ To read this sermon in its entirety, see AE 51:26-31.

²⁴ AE 51:27.

²⁵ AE 51:28.

Father, since this knowledge is not attained but revealed. It is foolish for the seemingly wise to exert themselves to achieve or attain this gospel, since it can only be revealed. Likewise, it is foolish to receive this gospel and then resort to laziness. Christians do not work in an ill-fated effort to decrease their heavy yokes. Such folly does not reduce one's labor but increases it. Christians work because their burdens have been lifted by Christ.

Luther concludes his sermon by addressing a then-current concern, the abuse of indulgences. The indulgence system does not give weary disciples rest, but adds a burdensome yoke. Ironically, this heavy burden of indulgences does not lead to holiness, but to greater licentiousness, because indulgences do not teach people to hate sin, but merely its penalty.

February 5, 1525

In the second sermon,²⁶ Luther begins by distinguishing between two types of wisdom. "True wisdom," he explains, "is nothing else than the knowledge of God, that is, when I know what I am to think of God and know his divine will."²⁷ The wisdom in verse 25 is "worldly wisdom, which puffs people up and will not admit the true, divine wisdom."²⁸

The effects of this worldly wisdom are multitudinous. Worldly wisdom leads to a selfish motivation, leading people to call "good" only what is good for them personally. Worldly wisdom is not content to speak on secular matters, but encroaches into spiritual matters as well. It forsakes God for fleshly images. It makes it impossible to understand the things of God. Perhaps the worst effect of worldly wisdom is how it hinders people from understanding the gospel.

Luther urges his hearers entrapped by worldly wisdom to repent and trust in Christ alone for wisdom. The Christian understands that true wisdom is a revealed wisdom, which excludes boasting. It is in this revealed wisdom of God where the heavy laden find true rest. The rest Christ offers, however, is not a rest *from* trials and temptations, but a rest *through* them. The Christian will still be tempted by sin. He will still need prayer. He will still need to endure hardships. These trials and temptations are no longer endured as a heavy yoke of law. They are endured "cheerfully, willingly,

²⁶ To read this sermon in its entirety, see AE 51:121–132. Emanuel Hirsch remarks that this sermon is "one of the richest and most thoughtful of all his sermons which sum up his faith in Christ." Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, ed. Otto Clemen and Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), 392. As quoted in AE 51:121.

²⁷ AE 51:123.

²⁸ AE 51:123

and gladly” because Christ is a co-laborer with the Christian.²⁹ The Christian’s yoke “is called gentle, sweet, and easy because he himself helps us carry it, and when it grows too heavy for us he shoulders the burden along with us.”³⁰

February 15, 1546

In the final sermon,³¹ Luther begins by discussing the wise from whom the Father hides. He states, “The wise and understanding in the world so contrive things that God cannot be favorable and good to them.”³² These people are wise in their own eyes, thinking “what God has done is too poor and insignificant, even childish and foolish; I must add something to it.”³³ Examples of this include the Anabaptists, the antisacramentarians, the pope, and the government, among others. The wisdom that Christ gives is diametrically opposed to this worldly wisdom. The truly wise ask God to rule. They listen to Christ, they listen to his word, and they listen to their pastors. They listen and obey their governments, but only insofar as government officials do not encroach upon matters of faith.

Luther concludes by urging his hearers to come to Christ for rest. He reminds them that this rest is an ultimate rest, a rest that may come through trials. But even through these trials, the Christian experiences incredible rest. Through God’s Spirit “the burden, which for the world would be unbearable, becomes for you a light burden.”³⁴ The reader senses that Luther was speaking from experience. His sickness had worsened and forced him to cut his sermon short. He ends by saying, “This and much more might be said concerning this Gospel, but I am too weak and we shall let it go at that.”³⁵

²⁹ AE 51:132.

³⁰ AE 51:132.

³¹ To read this sermon in its entirety, see AE 51:383–392. Conflicting accounts remain regarding the actual date of this sermon. The transcriber recorded the date as February 15, which was a Monday. However, some historians believe Luther actually delivered the sermon on Sunday, February 14. Cf. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 372.

³² AE 51:384.

³³ AE 51:384.

³⁴ AE 51:392.

³⁵ AE 51:392.

IV. Luther the Liberator

What conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of Luther's sermons on Matthew 11:25–30?³⁶ What lessons from Luther's pulpit can liberate the heavy-laden preacher? First, his preaching liberates the pulpit by failing to qualify for genuine Christ-centeredness by redemptive-historical standards.³⁷ If one of history's seminal Christ-centered preachers is not Christ-centered enough, the modern parameters for Christ-centeredness may be too narrow.³⁸ Second, Luther's preaching liberates the pulpit by presenting a simpler alternative to the redemptive-historical understanding of Christ-centeredness. For Luther, preaching Christ accurately is accomplished by maintaining a robust understanding of law and gospel.

Luther, the Sub-Christian Preacher

It is common among redemptive-historical circles to label sermons that do not adhere to the acceptable criteria as "sub-Christian."³⁹ According to

³⁶ Before any conclusions are highlighted, let the reader understand that three sermons does not a preaching career make. By the 1540s, Luther was preaching almost every day of the week, leaving behind a massive corpus of nearly 2,000 sermons. With such a voluminous corpus of extant material, sweeping claims regarding Luther's preaching should be avoided. Therefore, this essay will restrict its findings to these sermons alone, with the understanding that further study should be done to ascertain whether similar characteristics are true of Luther's preaching as a whole. Nevertheless, given that these sermons allow the reader to trace both homiletical development and continuity (as noted above), it is reasonable to conclude that the findings from these three sermons *may* be reflective of Luther's preaching as a whole.

³⁷ This is not to suggest that Luther's preaching contains no Christ-centered elements. There are certain characteristics of redemptive-historical preaching that Luther does include in these sermons, but he does not meet every measure. Furthermore, many consider the measures that Luther fails to meet as a Christ-centered preacher to be core pillars of the movement.

³⁸ Of course, this is not *necessarily* true. It is certainly possible that Luther's preaching falls outside the parameters of Christ-centered legitimacy, not due to any fault in the standards, but because his preaching is not genuinely Christ-centered. However, given his 450-year-old reputation as a Christ-centered preacher, the onus lies with those seeking to redefine Christ-centeredness.

³⁹ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 273–274; Prince, "Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Expository Preaching," 101; Jason Keith Allen, "The Christ-Centered Homiletics of Edmund Clowney and Sidney Greidanus in Contrast with the Human Author-Centered Hermeneutics of Walter Kaiser" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 1; Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 53; Donald N. Bastian, *The Pastor's First Love: And Other Essays on a High and Holy Calling* (Toronto: BPS Books, 2013), 125–126; Steve Mathewson, "Preaching the Gospel in Judges," *The Gospel Coalition*, February 27, 2011,

several of these criteria, Luther could be labeled as a “sub-Christian” preacher. Despite the prominence given to Christ and the gospel in all three sermons, a careful review of Luther’s preaching on Matthew 11:25–30 reveals that he consistently fails two redemptive-historical tests for Christ-centeredness. First, Luther does not position his text within its redemptive-historical context. Second, he preaches the imperatives of Scripture without gospel qualifications.

Contextual Myopia

One of the fundamental pillars of redemptive-historical preaching is a Christ-centered biblical theology.⁴⁰ Clowney contends, “Preachers who ignore the history of redemption in their preaching are ignoring the witness of the Holy Spirit to Jesus in all the Scriptures.”⁴¹ A careful analysis of the three sermons on Matthew 11:25–30 reveals that Luther does not attempt to place the passage within the grand storyline of Scripture. Nowhere does he utilize the discipline of biblical theology to orient his hearers to the grand meta-narrative of the Bible.⁴² Luther’s approach is contextually myopic at best. He seems far more interested in accurately expositing the text at hand than unveiling the storyline of Scripture. This is not to say that Luther never utilized something like biblical theology in his preaching. Nevertheless, it is safe to conclude that, in practice, Luther did not consider a broad presentation of biblical theology as essential to every sermon.

Unqualified Imperatives

A major point of emphasis among redemptive-historical proponents is how to preach the imperatives of Scripture.⁴³ Generally, these homileti-

<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/02/27/preaching-the-gospel-in-judges/>.

⁴⁰ Allen, “Christ-Centered Homiletics,” 5.

⁴¹ Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, 10. Cf. David Prince who says, “One fully exposes the meaning of the text only in light of the biblical storyline.” Prince, “The Necessity of a Christocentric Kingdom-Focused Model of Expository Preaching,” 161.

⁴² Although it may seem anachronistic to expect a sixteenth-century German Reformer to utilize a theological discipline that some understand to be relatively modern, the fact remains that redemptive-historical advocates often label sermons without biblical theology as “sub-Christian.”

⁴³ For example, Goldsworthy writes, “To say what we should be or do and not link it with a clear exposition of what God has done about our failure to be or do perfectly as he wills is to reject the grace of God and to lead people to lust after self-help and self-improvement in a way that, to call a spade a spade, is godless.” Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 119. Cf. Prince, “Christocentric Kingdom-Focused

cians recommend that imperatives be qualified with one of four indicative truths. First, preachers can qualify imperatives by reminding their hearers that they are powerless to obey them. Second, preachers can remind their hearers that their obedience does not merit God's favor. Third, their obedience should be in response to Christ's obedience. Fourth, Christ has already fulfilled this imperative perfectly on the believer's behalf. Some redemptive-historical scholars may suggest that all four (or more!) qualifications should follow each imperative, but most would be content with at least one qualification every time an imperative is preached.⁴⁴

At no point in any of these three sermons does Luther qualify his imperatives with one of these gospel indicatives.⁴⁵ For example, in the first sermon he commands his hearers to carry their crosses. He states, "[Christ] does not say: Do this or that; but rather, come to me, get away from yourselves, and carry your cross after me."⁴⁶ Luther sees this call from Christ as the supreme imperative, but he does not qualify this imperative. He does not follow up this imperative with a reminder that hearers cannot possibly carry their crosses apart from grace. He does not remind his hearers that Christ bore a cross for them. It is not that Luther denies these gospel truths; he simply finds it unnecessary to issue these qualifications after every imperative.

The same lack of gospel qualifications is evident in the remaining two sermons. In his second sermon, Luther's imperatives shift toward the

Expository Preaching," 168–169; John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2002); Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 71–72.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Mann articulates this exceptionally well: "Among certain believers, there has been such a fear of teaching works-righteousness that any meaningful statement of law is quickly followed with the promises of the gospel, as if to say that everything will be all right for those not living righteously anyway. The law is not given opportunity to do its work. Alternatively, those who do seek to balance law and gospel in their sermons often end up preaching *about* the law rather than preaching the law. Law, like gospel, must be *pro me*. The law must be preached so that I feel its accusing finger pointing at me, not as a lesson on human nature. Who will run to a physician who does not first perceive illness?" Jeffrey K. Mann, "Luther and the Holy Spirit: Why Pneumatology Still Matters," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34, no. 2 (2007): 116.

⁴⁵ This is not to say that Luther did not qualify imperatives with indicatives in his preaching. A wide-angle view of his preaching ministry would reflect a view of gospel-fueled obedience akin to that espoused by advocates of redemptive-historical preaching. However, Luther apparently did not deem it necessary to issue these qualifications in every sermon.

⁴⁶ AE 51:30.

discipline of prayer. The Christian life is full of temptations and trials; therefore, prayer is necessary. He explains, "It will be hard for you, it will be bitter; therefore prayer will be needed and others too will have to pray for you, that you may have strong courage and a brave heart to withstand the devil."⁴⁷ Again, Luther does not qualify this imperative. He does not remind his hearers that their prayer does not merit God's favor. He simply urges them to pray. Finally, in his third sermon, Luther commands his hearers to gladly listen to and obey their government authorities.⁴⁸ He does not remind them that their submission to the government must be gospel-centered obedience; he simply preaches unqualified imperatives.

Luther's failure to meet two of the core standards of redemptive-historical preaching does not necessarily mean that those standards are suspect. However, it does suggest that if the redemptive-historical model is correct, genuine Christ-centeredness is far more difficult to achieve than many have realized.⁴⁹ Perhaps Luther's failure to exhibit the criteria of this model will liberate the modern preacher from it because its Christ-centered metrics are too narrow.

A More Excellent Way

Luther's greatest potential to liberate the pulpit from the homiletical handcuffs of redemptive-historical preaching is his proclamation of law and gospel. Luther does more than fail the redemptive-historical litmus test. His law-gospel preaching offers a healthier, simpler alternative.

Perhaps no element of Luther's theology has received wider recognition than his distinction between law and gospel.⁵⁰ One of Luther's pupils

⁴⁷ AE 51:128.

⁴⁸ AE 51:388-389.

⁴⁹ Redemptive-historical advocate Daniel Doriani recognizes these and other weaknesses to the redemptive-historical approach. He states, "Some advocates of RHP are wary of any specific application, fearing that calls to change behavior will usurp the Spirit's role in application and drift into anthropocentric moralism. Zeal to avoid moralistic readings of narrative leads some to refuse all moral uses of narratives. But narratives edify too. Indicatives precede imperatives, but there *are* imperatives." Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 296.

⁵⁰ For example, see Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, ed. Victor I. Gruhn, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 120-179; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 267-276; Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 251-273; Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 110-124; Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God!: An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (London: The Epworth Press,

claimed, "No other teacher had ever given clearer and more understandable instruction regarding the proper distinction of law and gospel . . . than had Martin Luther."⁵¹ Luther himself states, "Whoever knows well how to distinguish the gospel from the law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian."⁵²

The law and gospel dialectic, for Luther, was not a hermeneutical grid used to interpret Scripture. Luther believed one understands the law primarily in contrast to the gospel. The law and the gospel in their dialectical form are not chiefly about content but function. David Lose explains:

In order to appreciate Luther's understanding of the law, we must note that he treats it always with regard to its functions. That is, Luther does not consider the law primarily in terms of particular codes of conduct but rather as the distinct means by which God achieves certain ends. You recognize the law, from this point of view, not simply from what it says (content) but from what it does (function).⁵³

According to Luther, the law and gospel represent two different ways God speaks to people. Law is any word of God that kills or demands, and gospel is any word of God that makes alive or provides. God kills, crushes, and pulverizes the sinner with the law. He exposes his insufficiencies and reveals his incompleteness. With the gospel, God raises the hearer back to life. He provides what he demands and completes what is missing.

Many preachers mistakenly assume that certain passages are primarily law passages and others are primarily gospel passages. This error often appears in the belief that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with law and the New Testament with gospel. Bernhard Lohse writes, "Most texts assigned to the law have also a gospel side, just as most texts assigned to the gospel have also a law side."⁵⁴ Luther's preaching demonstrates this truth. When he preached the law of the Ten Commandments, Luther found gospel in the phrase "I am the Lord, thy God." When he preached the gospel of the cross, Luther found law in the severity of God's

1947), 152–160; Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 135–156.

⁵¹ As quoted in 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.

⁵² AE 26:115.

⁵³ David J. Lose, "Martin Luther on Preaching the Law," *Word & World* 21 (2001): 254.

⁵⁴ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 269.

wrath against sin. Every text contains both law and gospel because every text testifies to the incompleteness of man and God's provision to make him complete.

The goal of the sermon for Luther, therefore, is not merely to speak accurate words *for* God but to speak in an accurate *manner*. If God speaks through the languages of law and gospel, the preacher must rightly employ those languages in the pulpit. Gerhard Forde opines, "The difference between 'old law' and 'new law (gospel)' is a difference in *speaking*."⁵⁵ He continues, "Law and gospel, as Luther understood them, are more a matter of modes of speech and ways of preaching than of difference in content between Old and New Testaments."⁵⁶ The point of Luther's sermons was to communicate law and gospel accurately to his people.

The import of this truth for the preaching enterprise cannot be overstated. Many redemptive-historical homileticians have unwittingly clamped one side of God's mouth shut while holding up a megaphone to the other. Luther preached the law in a robust manner, however, unlike this one-dimensional approach. If God speaks in the two languages of law and gospel, preachers must painstakingly strive for fluency in both languages.

Later in life, someone asked the Reformer whether law or gospel should receive greater prominence in the sermon. His answer reflects his robust understanding of law and gospel and his confidence in the Word of God. He replied:

This shouldn't and can't be comprehended in a fixed rule. Christ himself preached [the law and the gospel] according to his circumstances. As a passage or text indicates, therefore, one should take up the law and the gospel, for one must have both. It isn't right to draw everything into the gospel alone; nor is it good always to preach the law alone. The Scriptures themselves, if properly adhered to, will give the answer.⁵⁷

V. Conclusion

This essay has contended that the homiletics of Martin Luther, as demonstrated in his preaching on Matthew 11:25–30, can liberate the preacher from the unintended legalistic consequences of redemptive-historical preaching. However, the claims of this essay are narrow since

⁵⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, "Law and Gospel in Luther's Hermeneutic," *Interpretation* 37 (1983): 240; emphasis original.

⁵⁶ Forde, "Law and Gospel in Luther's Hermeneutic," 240.

⁵⁷ AE 54:404.

they only relate to a small selection of Luther's sermons. Can the same be said of Luther's preaching in general? Several areas of additional study may further liberate the preacher from Christ-centered legalism.

First, further historical study is needed to test the faithfulness of other Christian preachers from the past by the Christ-centered metrics of the present. This brief analysis of Luther's sermons suggests that the definition of Christ-centered preaching has become too narrow. Evidence from other historical preachers, and more evidence from Luther's preaching, may further substantiate the need for a broader definition. Another area for further study is the development of a weighted definition of Christ-centered preaching to offer greater flexibility, as opposed to the current all-or-nothing approach.

Second, further study of Luther's preaching will reveal that he demonstrates a wide-angle view of pulpit ministry. Few evangelicals would deny the importance of the homiletical tools proposed by redemptive-historical advocates. At issue is not whether these are useful recommendations, but whether each of these elements is necessary in every sermon. Further study of Luther's preaching will reveal that he is content to build an overall foundation of law and gospel for his people.⁵⁸ An isolated glance at individual sermons may paint Luther as sometimes Antinomian and other times legalistic. But Luther is no homiletical schizophrenic. His strategy is to ground his people firmly in the two languages of law and gospel, and this foundation is not built in a single sermon.

Third, further study of Luther's handling of law and gospel may provide the preacher with a more flexible and robust alternative to redemptive-historical preaching.⁵⁹ One of the unintended consequences of redemptive-historical preaching is that by requiring preachers to move rapidly from law to gospel in a single sermon, neither law nor gospel is preached effectively. When every shot of law is immediately followed by a

⁵⁸ Bernard Lohse opines, "Where the 'law' is in fact already encountered, in suffering, temptation, or other severe experiences, the preaching of the gospel is to be given priority. On the other hand, where the law is denied through self-confidence or hubris, a too hasty preaching of the gospel would only lead to one's feeling supported in self-righteousness. Luther's distinction is clearly related to the context of proclamation." Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 269; emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Cf. James F. McCue, "Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 1 (1985): 33–43; M. Hopson Boutot, "The Arrangement of Law and Gospel in the Preaching of Martin Luther" (Research Paper, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012).

gospel chaser, the law is not given sufficient opportunity to work.⁶⁰ Conversely, the gospel is far less glorious when not understood against a backdrop of unfettered law. Further study of Luther's homiletic may allow the preacher to focus on law or gospel, given the concerns of the text and the needs of the congregation.

Further study will undoubtedly help preachers and theologians who desire to present God's word accurately, no matter the results. Perhaps many of the proposals suggested by advocates of redemptive-historical preaching will be supported by faithful preachers throughout history. Perhaps a closer look at Martin Luther's preaching will reveal that his homiletics conform more closely to redemptive-historical preaching than this essay has revealed. Be that as it may, further study on what it means to faithfully preach Christ will help the pulpit, not hinder it.

This essay is not ultimately concerned with dismantling or discrediting redemptive-historical preaching, but with liberating men of God to preach the word of God faithfully. The apostle Paul once remarked that whether men preached Christ out of rivalry or good will, he would rejoice in the proclamation of Jesus' name (Phil 1:15–18). The reality is that redemptive-historical preaching revels in the unashamed proclamation of Jesus Christ. Little else could be cause for greater rejoicing, regardless of minor methodological differences. Perhaps a deeper look at Martin Luther's preaching will lead to rejoicing on both sides of this debate. May the preachers who faithfully strive to proclaim Christ receive liberation from the threat of the sub-Christian sermon, even if their methodology differs from their redemptive-historical brothers. May these heavy-laden homileticians find rest, not *from* the burden of preaching Christ faithfully, but *through* it.

⁶⁰ James McCue is very helpful here. He states, "The gospel—understood in Lutheran fashion as the proclamation of the unconditional forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake—is not addressed to every casual passer-by." Preachers should reserve the gospel for those overwhelmed by the seriousness of sin. "Where the gospel is proclaimed to a different sort of audience, the results, according to Luther, can be disastrous." "McCue, "Luther and the Problem of Popular Preaching," 37. Cf. Carl Trueman who states, "The gospel of the cross is not the Protestant equivalent of diplomatic immunity. It is the haven of those who know the daily terror of the law, and are acutely aware of the apparent chaos of the world around, and the battle within their own breasts." Trueman, "Theological and Biographical Foundations."

Luther's *Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio* as the Shape of Pastoral Care for Pastors

John T. Pless

The fact that pastors also need pastoral care is inherent in the nature of the office itself. In a 1968 essay under the title, "The Crisis of the Christian Ministry," Hermann Sasse puts it like this: "God always demands from his servants something which is, humanly speaking, impossible."¹ The language of crisis was common back in 1968. Racial unrest in the United States, student protests in Europe, and the Vietnam War captured public attention. The church, of course, was not exempt; there was sweated anxiety regarding the future of the church. Things were described as being in a "crisis." It was in this period that we heard of the crisis of biblical authority, the crisis of preaching, the liturgical crisis, the crisis of church unity, and the like. There was a restlessness for new forms, and everyone was convinced that the present crisis would be resolved only by innovation and creativity. Sasse weighed in with his own essay on the crisis of the Christian ministry. What he says is instructive.

Sasse notes that we must distinguish between the "crisis which belongs to the nature of our office" and "the crisis which is conditioned by the situation of the church in a certain age."² We tend to fixate on the second crisis and can form our own catalogue of issues that might be seen as crises today: projected clergy shortage, maltreatment of pastors, clerical burnout, moral failure of pastors, lack of public trust of the clergy, and the like. More often than not, these issues are addressed programmatically or administratively in the church. That is not bad, but if that is the only approach, it is inadequate and incomplete. These are certainly real problems, but they can only be adequately addressed from the perspective of the primal crisis that belongs to the nature of the office itself. This crisis is

¹ Hermann Sasse, "The Crisis of the Christian Ministry," in *The Lonely Way, Selected Essays and Letters, Volume 2 (1941–1976)*, ed. Matthew Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 356.

² Sasse, "The Crisis of the Christian Ministry," 356.

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occasioned by the word of God itself, namely, that God uses sinners to remit the sins of sinners. Here Luther's triad of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* comes into play, providing an orientation for how we understand the pastoral care of pastors.

Luther describes the making of theologians who can distinguish the law from the gospel in his 1539 "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings." He uses these three Latin terms (*oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*) to describe this process. His framework was a distinct break from the popular medieval scheme for theology as *lectio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. Westhelle observes:

Luther's schema begins with *oratio*, which is more than prayer; it is all God-talk, talk of and to God when one knows that reason will not suffice. Second is *meditatio*—in which he includes *lectio*—which is not limited to meditation in the internal sense but also "external," hence engaging others in reflection. Luther does not follow the third medieval rule, *contemplatio*, but instead he brings up a very different and original concept, *tentatio*, which becomes the foremost—the "touchstone" he calls it—and the last characteristic of theological reflection.³

Thus Luther moves away from the speculative theology of scholasticism and the contemplative spirituality of mysticism. For Luther, the *telos* of the Christian life on this side of the Last Day is not a beatific beholding of the divine but suffering under the cross, which conforms the one who meditates on the Scriptures to the image of Christ crucified.

I. *Oratio*

For Luther, "Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone."⁴ *Oratio* is anchored in the reading and hearing of these Scriptures, which create faith in Christ Jesus and kindle prayer. According to Luther, this is the prayer that David models in Psalm 119:

"Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me," and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the

³ Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 35–36. See also John Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?," *CTQ* 66, no. 3 (July 2002): 255–267, and John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross: A Study of Luther's Pastoral Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 17–25.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelican, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 34:285; hereafter AE.

text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were Markolf or Aesop's Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed."⁵

Concerning Luther on Psalm 119, Oswald Bayer comments,

Almost from the outset, Psalm 119 takes on fundamental significance for Luther's battle with the pope, who wants to prevent him from remaining with the word through which "I became a Christian": the word of absolution. From the beginning of the Reformation, this psalm is seen as a prayer for the victory of God's word against its enemies. In fact, it is seen as a double prayer that was turned into a hymn verse in 1543: Lord, keep us steadfast in your word and curb the pope's and the Turk's sword.⁶

The Scriptures are, to use the words of Oswald Bayer, the breathing space of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Not only did the Spirit breathe his words through the prophets and apostles, but he continues to breathe in and through the Scriptures so that faith in Christ Jesus is created and sustained. In contrast to Schleiermacher, who described the Holy Scriptures as a "mausoleum of religion, a monument to a great spirit once there but no longer,"⁸ Luther understood the Scriptures as the living and life-giving word of God, the dwelling place of the Spirit.

There was a shift in 1758 when Johann Salmo Semler (1725–1791) denounced Luther's use of *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* as unscientific and antiquated monastic theology that must be replaced by what he claimed as a historical reading of the Scriptures.⁹ Semler forgot that "the exegesis of Holy Scripture cannot contradict their inspiration."¹⁰ Now Scriptures are to

⁵ AE 34:286.

⁶ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. Jeffery G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 40.

⁷ Oswald Bayer, "Theology as *Askesis*," in *Gudstankens aktualitet: Festskrift til Peter Widmann*, ed. Marie Wiberg Pedersen, Bo Kristian Holm, and Anders-Christian Jacobsen (Copenhagen: Forlaget Anis, 2010), 46.

⁸ Cited by Bayer in "Theology as *Askesis*," 38.

⁹ See Bayer, "Theology as *Askesis*," 38. For more on Semler's significance, see Roy A. Harrisville, *Pandora's Box Opened: An Examination and Defense of the Historical-Critical Method and Its Master Practitioners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 105–113.

¹⁰ Bayer, "Theology as *Askesis*," 49.

be read and mastered without prayer and meditation. They are also rendered as ineffective weapons in the face of spiritual attack. Studied this way, they can no longer be proclaimed as words of Spirit and life. Sermons become commentaries on the text rather than proclamation of the text, occasions for the edification of religious consciousness or fortification in morality.

It is easy to see the contrast with Luther. In his Genesis lectures, for example, Luther writes, "I am content with this gift which I have, Holy Scripture, which abundantly teaches and supplies all things necessary both for this life and also for the life to come."¹¹ Luther believed the Scriptures to possess clarity, for they are illuminated by the Christ to whom they bear witness. The Scriptures are also sufficient to make us wise for the salvation that is in Christ alone. Far from being a dead letter in need of being vivified by the Spirit, the Scriptures that were inspired by the Spirit are now the instrument of his work to create and sustain faith.

II. *Meditatio*

The word of God is heard with the ear, engaging the hearts and the minds of those who receive it in faith. With the lips, this implanted word is confessed, proclaimed, and prayed. *Oratio* leads to *meditatio*, which is meditation on the word of God. For Luther, this meditation is not an exercise of spirituality that turns the believer inward in silent reflection; *meditatio* is grounded in the *externum verbum* (the external word), to use the language of the Smalcald Articles (SA III VIII 7). For Luther, *meditatio* is oral and outward, so in his Genesis lectures he states,

Let him who wants to contemplate in the right way reflect on his Baptism; let him read his Bible, hear sermons, honor father and mother, and come to the aid of a brother in distress. But let him not shut himself up in a nook . . . and there entertain himself with his devotions and thus suppose that he is sitting in God's bosom and has fellowship with God without Christ, without the Word, without the sacraments.¹²

Evangelical meditation draws one outside of himself into the promises of Christ (faith) and into the need of the neighbor (love): "Such meditation

¹¹ AE 6:329. Also, for more examples of how Luther cherishes the Holy Scriptures as God's word, see Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relationship of Authority and Interpretative Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004), 249–282; Robert Kolb, "Nowhere More Present and Active Than in the Holy Letters: Luther's Understanding of God's Presence in Scripture," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 49, no. 1 (May 2015): 4–16.

¹² AE 3:275.

does not just involve gazing at one's spiritual navel; it does not eavesdrop on the inner self."¹³ Luther, therefore, is dead set against any and all forms of enthusiasm¹⁴ that would rely on visions or miraculous appearances.

Christ once appeared visible here on earth and showed his glory, and according to the divine purpose of God finished the work of redemption and deliverance of mankind. I do not desire he should come to me once more in the same manner, neither would I should he send an angel unto me. Nay, though an angel should appear before mine eyes from heaven, yet it would not add to my belief; for I have of my Saviour Christ Jesus bond and seal; I have his Word, Spirit, and sacrament; thereon I depend, and desire no new revelations. And the more steadfastly to confirm me in this resolution, to hold solely to God's Word, and not to give credit to any visions or revelations, I shall relate the following circumstance: On Good Friday last, I being in my chamber in fervent prayer, contemplating with myself, how Christ my Saviour on the cross suffered and died for our sins, there suddenly appeared on the wall a bright vision of our Saviour Christ, with the five wounds, steadfastly looking upon me, as if had been Christ himself corporeally. At first sight, I thought it had been some celestial revelation, but I reflected that it must needs be an illusion and juggling of the devil, for Christ appeared to us in his Word, and in a meaner and more humble form; therefore I spake to the vision thus: Avoid thee, confounded devil: I know no other Christ than he who was crucified, and who in his Word is pictured and presented unto me. Whereupon the image vanished, clearly showing of whom it came.¹⁵

Visions are deceptive and deceiving; Holy Scripture is not.

Meditation is immersion into the text of Holy Scripture. It is the ongoing hearing of God's word that is read and preached so that the one who hears Christ is enlivened to trust his promises and equipped to respond to the needs of the neighbor in his calling in the world. Luther likened meditation to a cow chewing its cud. In his 1525 commentary on Deuteronomy

¹³ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35.

¹⁴ See Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 40. Here Bayer quotes a December 1520 Luther sermon on Genesis 28, "If they bore their way into heaven with their heads and look around they will find no one, because Christ lies in a crib and in a woman's lap. So let them fall back down again and break their necks." Bayer also writes, "Those who want to search for the Holy Spirit deep inside themselves, in a realm too deep for words to express, will find only ghosts, not God" (55).

¹⁵ Cited in Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), 57.

14:1, he writes: "To chew the cud, however, is to take up the Word with delight and meditate with supreme diligence, so that (according to the proverb) one does not permit it to go into one ear and out the other, but holds it firmly in the heart, swallows it, and absorbs it into the intestines."¹⁶

Luther provides a practical tool for such meditation in his celebrated devotional booklet, "A Simple Way to Pray," written in 1535 for the Wittenberg barber, Peter Beskendorf. Here he suggests that a person meditate on each of commandment of the Decalogue "in their fourfold aspect, namely, as a school text, song book, penitential book, and prayer book."¹⁷ In Luther's way of meditation, one is encouraged to dwell on the text and to engage in various dimensions, including the didactic, doxological, diagnostic, and intercessory. Those who stand in front of the text are taught, brought to praise God, have their sins uncovered, and are given material for their praying.

While Luther prepared this tract for a layman, it certainly has application for the pastor whose life is given to the service of the text of Holy Scripture for the sake of proclamation and pastoral care. The Psalms, in Luther's estimation, were an especially fertile place for meditation for preachers. In his lectures on Psalm 1 (1519–1521), he states,

Therefore it is the office of a man whose proper duty it is to converse on something, to discourse on the Law of the Lord. . . . For this meditation consists first in close attention to the words of the Law, and then drawing together the various parts of Scripture. And this is a pleasant hunt, a game rather like the play of stags in the forest, where "the Lord arouses the stags, and uncovers the forests" (Ps. 29:2). For out of this will proceed a sermon to the people which is well informed in the Law of the Lord.¹⁸

The preacher is not meditating on the word simply for his own spiritual wellbeing but for those placed under his curacy in the church. He meditates on the word so that he may have something to say from the Lord to the people he is given to serve.

¹⁶ AE 9:136.

¹⁷ AE 43:209. Also note Brecht's observation: "Nowhere is the connection between order and freedom in Luther's practice of prayer so clearly seen as in his advice for Master Peter." Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532–1546*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 14.

¹⁸ AE 14:296.

III. *Tentatio*

For Luther, meditation does not take place in a spiritual vacuum in isolation from the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. God uses *tentatio* (spiritual affliction, trial, and temptation) to drive away from the self and toward his promises alone. Bayer captures Luther's thought:

Anyone who meditates can expect to suffer. Luther once again also allows Psalm 119 to prescribe this experience. Therefore in light of this third rule, he expects students of theology also to see themselves in the role of the psalmist who "complains so often about all kinds of enemies . . . that he has to put up with because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God's word (as has been said) in all manner of ways."¹⁹

For Luther, meditation is anchored in the First Commandment. To use the words of Albrecht Peters, "God's First Commandment, however, confiscates this center of our entire human nature for itself. God, as our Creator, calls our heart out of clinging to what is created and demands it for itself in an exclusive and undivided way. Here the First Commandment and the Creed interlock."²⁰ It is only this confiscated heart, fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things that is free to pray in the fashion that God commands and promises to hear. Such prayer is not easy; it involves struggle, for "when we meditate on the first commandment we are involved in a battle between the one Lord and the many lords (cf. 1 Cor. 8:5f)."²¹ To meditate on the First Commandment and to pray from it is to let God be God, but for the flesh, the world, and the devil, such meditation is a declaration of war.

Tentatio is no stranger to those who serve in the pastoral office. Luther understands this *tentatio* as a spiritual affliction that drives faithful servants to rely on the sure and certain promises of Christ alone. Commenting on Genesis 32:32, Luther says, "our Lord Jesus Christ, tested Jacob not to destroy him but to confirm and strengthen him and that in his fight he

¹⁹ Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 60.

²⁰ Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments*, trans. Holger Sonntag (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 118. Also see John Maxfield: "For Luther idolatry is the self-enslaving false worship of a heart turned in on itself, of religious piety shaped by self-will and thus works righteousness in any number of ways, of substituting human reason for the revelation of God in the divine Word." John Maxfield, "Luther and Idolatry," in *The Reformation as Christianization: Essays on Scott Hendrix's Christianization Thesis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 168.

²¹ Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 62.

might more correctly learn the might of the promise."²² God does his work under opposites: "When God works, He turns His face away at first and seems to be the devil, not God."²³

Temptation, which is entailed in the *tentatio*, is necessary for the Christian life in general but especially for preachers of the word. Luther says in a "Table Talk" of 1532,

I did not learn my theology all at once, but had to search constantly deeper and deeper for it. My temptations did that for me, for no one can understand Holy Scripture without practice and temptations. That is what the enthusiasts and sects lack. They don't have the right critic, the devil, who is the best teacher of theology. If we don't have that kind of devil, then we become nothing but speculative theologians, who do nothing but walk around in our own thoughts and speculate with our reason alone as to whether things should be like this, or like that.²⁴

The experience of temptation prepares and equips the pastor to serve as an "instructor of consciences" in the sense that he must have the capacity to distinguish the law from the gospel, directing the afflicted away from the erratic and errant movement of the conscience from excuse-making to accusation. A conscience ceases to rationalize sin or be terrorized by the law only when it comes to rest in the forgiveness of sins:

Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves continually by study, by reading, by meditation and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, and take them from the law to grace, from active righteous to passive righteousness, in short from Moses to Christ. In affliction and in the conflict of conscience, it is the devil's habit to frighten us with the law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell, and eternal death, so that he may drive us into despair, subject us to himself, and pluck us from Christ.²⁵

Like the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, who speaks of the comfort that we give to others in their afflictions as flowing from the comfort that we ourselves have received from Christ, Luther speaks out of the *tentatio*

²² AE 6:144. Here see Mary Jane Haemig, "Prayer as Talking Back to God," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 2009): 270-295.

²³ AE 7:103.

²⁴ AE 54:50.

²⁵ AE 26:10.

that he himself had experienced. The judgment of Walther von Loewenich is on target: “The secret of Luther’s proficiency in pastoral care was that he himself had known what it was like to experience attacks of despair [*Anfechtung*].”²⁶ Only as one who himself was comforted by the gospel could Luther be a comforter to the afflicted and despairing.

IV. *Oratio, Meditatio, and Tentatio* in the Pastor’s Life

Luther’s triad of *oratio, meditatio, and tentatio* shapes the ongoing life of the pastor as he is forever dependent on the power of God’s promises. The crosses and afflictions of the pastoral life drive the pastor to meditate on the words of the Lord, and God’s word opens his lips for confession, prayer, praise, and proclamation, with the confidence that the divine word accomplishes God’s purposes and does not return to him empty.

Here we see that Luther’s triad is also reversible. The *tentatio* drives us to the *meditatio*, which in turn enables the *oratio*, the calling on the name of the Lord. Spiritual attack disables and deconstructs all of our own resources; we are left without anything but Christ and his absolving word. In that word the conscience takes refuge, delighting in it day and night, to use the language of Psalm 1, and finding in it a gift more precious than gold and silver and sweeter to the taste than honey, to use the imagery of Psalm 119:72, 103. It is this word that opens the lips for prayer and proclamation.

At this point, it might also be observed that the catechetical core—the Ten Commandments, Creed, and Lord’s Prayer—follows the contours of the *oratio, meditatio, and tentatio*. Robert Kolb has observed that the Decalogue sets the agenda for Christian praying, and the Lord’s Prayer for Christian living.²⁷ Along these lines we might also say that *oratio* encompasses the prayer that grows from God’s command and promise. *Meditatio* is a meditation on the works of the Triune God, and *tentatio* is that life lived under the cross, which is characterized by the Lord’s Prayer, where we pray the seven petitions that describe our wretchedness and promise God’s mercy. Luther’s theology of prayer is a reflection of the theology of the cross. James Nestingen writes:

²⁶ Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 359–360. See also Lennart Pinomaa, “The Problem of Affliction,” in *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther’s Theology*, trans. Walter J. Kukkonen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 89–100; Mark D. Thompson, “Luther on Despair,” in *The Consolations of Theology*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 51–74.

²⁷ Robert A. Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism* (Saint Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2012), 103.

The Ten Commandments set out the requirements of the creaturely life, incumbent by creation; the Creed declares the gifts of the Triune God; the Lord's Prayer gives voice to the circumstances of the believer living in a world of the *nomos* (law) in the hope of the resurrection. . . . Luther's explanations of the Lord's Prayer arise from such an analysis of the situation of faith. Barraged by the relentless demands of the law, under assault by the powers of this age yet gripped in the hope of the gospel, the believer learns "where to seek and obtain that aid." So, while exposing the Lord's Prayer at its first level, as instruction in how to pray, Luther is at the same time describing the contention in which faith lives, giving language for the rhythm of death and resurrection that is the hallmark of life in Christ. At this level, the Lord's Prayer is a cry wrung from the crucible, an exposition of the shape of life lived under the sign of the cross in the hope of the resurrection.²⁸

Each petition of the Lord's Prayer is a diagnosis of our neediness and a promise of God's mercy.²⁹

What are the implications for the pastoral care of pastors? First, Luther did not understand this triad as individualistic or private. Broadly speaking, they take place within the context of life of the church. Bayer has pointed out the parallel between Luther's ordering of the seven marks of the church enumerated in Luther's treatise "On the Councils and the Church" and the *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* of the Wittenberg Preface, both of which were written in the same year. The *oratio* and *meditatio* are embraced in the first six marks: the holy word of God, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the office of the keys, the calling of ministers, and prayer/public praise/thanksgiving to God. The seventh external sign is "the possession of the sacred cross."³⁰ This sign is the *tentatio*. For Luther it means that Christian people

must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly

²⁸ James Nestingen, "The Lord's Prayer in Luther's Catechism," *Word & World* 22, no. 1 (2002): 39–40.

²⁹ In his *Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), Luther described the Lord's Prayer as "seven reminders of our wretchedness and poverty by means of which man, led to a knowledge of self, can see what a miserable and perilous life he leads on earth" (AE 42:27).

³⁰ AE 41:164.

adhere to Christ and God's word, enduring this for the sake of Christ.³¹

More narrowly, we see the triad in the context of the ministerium.

While our spiritual fathers spoke more frequently than we commonly do of the "ministerium," it is a word in our collective vocabulary that we would do well to recover, especially when we think of the pastoral care of pastors. Years ago Ulrich Asendorf spoke of the pastoral office as a brotherly *Amt*. We are not isolated spiritual entrepreneurs, but we are brothers bound together under the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. And under their regency, we are accountable to one another. We are to have one another's backs, to use the slang. This is not a hermeneutic of mutual pastoral suspicion, nor is it a matter of mouthing the mantra "we've got to trust one another."³² It is a watching out for the brother, but not something that would make his fulfilling the responsibilities given to him unnecessarily difficult. It is also being there for him with the courage to call him to repentance and the compassion to console him with word of the cross. In this way, pastors are also comforting one another with the comfort that they have received from Christ, to paraphrase Paul's language in 2 Corinthians.³³

The *tentatio* is sure to come for the pastor, but he need not face it alone. God gives us brothers and fathers in the office, not simply as companions to dispel loneliness, but as men who will be for us the ears and mouth of Christ Jesus. Such mutual conversation of the brethren is not an occasion for a mutual pity-party, but it exists for the exercise of God's law and his gospel, so that we are called to repentance and faith even as we bear the cross in our various callings. Churchly implications of this are to be found in the practice of visitation, for which we have circuit visitors. The change in nomenclature is a welcome one. Counselors are called in when people are in crisis. Visitors look in to see how things are going not only in times of difficulty or in a period of transition but in the ongoing life of the pastor. Whether it is the circuit visitor or another brother in office, pastors also need a father confessor.

Second, *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* frame the pastor's life of prayer, study, and suffering. The pastor lives with Holy Scriptures as a child in a

³¹ AE 41:164-165.

³² In the New Testament, Christians are never directed to trust one another. We are instructed to love, forgive, edify, admonish, encourage, restore, and bear with one another but never to trust one another. Trust is reserved for God alone.

³³ See the excellent discussion of this comfort in Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 22-30.

cradle, to borrow Luther's language.³⁴ It is here that we learn how to listen to God and to call upon him. It is being nestled in the Scriptures that we learn how to preach and to pray and to suffer. It is this study to which the Apostle beckons Timothy, when in 2 Timothy 2:15 he urges him to present himself as a workman who has no need to be ashamed, "rightly handling the word of truth." This is what Bayer calls "*askesis*" or the exercise of faith.³⁵ It is essential for the spiritual soundness of the pastor. Such study and prayer are not leisure-time activities, a retreat from the world of supposedly "real ministry," but instead they are essential for both the pastor and his hearers, and they cannot be divorced from the cross that is borne for the sake of the office.

Pastoral care of pastors will shepherd pastors to live within Luther's triad: *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio* rather than seeking alternative ways, self-chosen and self-directed, of serving God's holy people.

³⁴ Cited by Bayer, "Theology as *Askesis*," 46.

³⁵ Bayer, "Theology as *Askesis*," 35.