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The Reformation of Dying and Burial: Preaching, Pastoral Care, and Ritual at Committal in Luther's Reform

Robert Kolb

The Reformation that had its roots in Wittenberg made sweeping changes to how Christians dealt with death. Instead of focusing on purgatory and the many measures the medieval church believed would help people out of it, Luther and his adherents used the preaching of God's word to emphasize repentance and the saving, resurrecting work of Christ. This new way of dealing with death brought consolation with it.

On October 27, 1584, Michael Eychler buried Judith, the wife of his colleague Joshua Opitz, the ardent supporter of Matthias Flacius' definition of original sin as the substance of the fallen sinner. In his dedication of the printed version of his funeral sermon for their mother, on Psalm 91:14–16, dated December 20, Eychler explained to the Opitz children—Joshua, Abraham, and Dorothy, and their step-brother Johannes Druginer—why he published his sermon, and especially why he had published it for them. First, Eychler explained, mothers love their children more than fathers do since they have borne their children in their own bodies. God did not say in Isaiah 49:15, “Can a father forget his child?” but rather, “Can a mother forget her child?” Eychler also asserted that children love their mothers more than their fathers. Second, Judith had requested that Eychler share his sermon with the children. Third, their father, who had followed their mother to the grave, had also heard and praised the sermon. Finally, he wanted them to know that their mother had died a blessed, Christian death, for she had led the children into the Bible and cultivated their reading of it.¹

¹ Michael Eychler, *Ein Christliche Leich predigte/ Aus dem 91. Psalm/ Vber die wort: Er begeret mein/ so wil ich jm aushelffen. Gehalten vber der Leiche Der Gottsfürchtigen vnd Tugentsamen Frawen Judithen/ weyland des Ehrwürdigen vnd wolgelernten Herren M. Josuae Opiti/ Pfarherrn zu Budingen/ Seligen/ Hausfrawen. Geschehen daselbsten den 27. Octobris/ Im 1584. Jare. Zu dieser Leichpredigte/ ist an statt der Vorrede komen: Ein Heylsame Erklerung des Testaments Thobiae/ zu Ehren vnd nützlicher Vnterweisung: Des Herren M. Opitij Seligen/ nachgelassenen Kindern/ Sampt allen waren Christen/ die jre Pilgerschafft/ durch dis Jammerthal/ zum ewigen Vatterlande/ gerne in reinem Glauben/ vnd gutem Gewissen/ vollenden wöllen* (Ursel: Nicolaus Heinrich, 1585), fol. L2r–v.

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At the end of his sermon, Eychler had related how Judith had found release from her tribulations. She was “a virtuous wife and obedient mother of the household.” He noted that Opitz’s tears as he was preaching confirmed this. She had raised her children in the faith and shown kindness to the poor, especially to pastors who, like her husband, were driven into exile for their faith. She patiently stood at her husband’s side during the exiles that the family had experienced as the model of a godly wife, a bearer of the cross, and a pilgrim. Eychler traced their journeys with children through many and great dangers on water, on land, and among evil people. For sixteen months she was separated from her husband and had managed their livestock and household on her own. But God had always opened doors for them.

On April 19, just months before her own death, she had lost her youngest and most beloved child, the little Wolf. On October 3 the next youngest, Martin, had also died, followed four days later by his brother Heinrich. As Judith was awaiting the imminent birth of another child, she herself died on October 21.

Opitz sent for Eychler after Judith had requested absolution and the Lord’s Supper. As she confessed her sins, she also confessed her faith and forgave all her enemies. She had one last request: that Eychler preach her funeral sermon. He told her he was not a very good preacher, but she insisted. Then she had the women who were attending her pick out the clothing in which she was to be buried. She commended herself to God and then called for each child, one after another, instructing them to fear God and to be obedient. She recited many of the numerous Bible passages she knew by heart and told her husband to remind the children that they should fear God and obey him. When asked if she would not prefer to remain with her family, she said, “I know that my time is up and God will take me to his eternal grace, and I see already before me the dear angels, who are waiting for my soul.” Her husband asked, “Do we not want to walk with each other any more?” She replied, “Yes, I will be walking in the real fatherland, and you will follow me soon.” As her child emerged from the womb, she was immediately baptized. The local countess, Barbara von Isenburg, had agreed to be godmother, but since it was night, she could not be called, and one of the women present took over the responsibility because the child was about to die with her mother.²

Judith Opitz died in a different way than had her great-grandparents. They would have sought comfort in Christ as she did, but unlike her they did not have the same confidence in the sufficiency of his grace alone. Their confidence also rested in their own works and in the works which friends and relatives would perform posthumously to relieve them of their suffering in purgatory. The devotional literature that arose during the fifteenth century, labeled the *ars moriendi* (“the art

² Eychler, *Ein Christliche Leich predigte*, fol. R1v–R4r.

of dying”), cultivated a sense of uncertainty in the dying so that in their dread of hell and purgatory they would strive to form the appropriate disposition and make every effort to please God with actions performed in conformity to his law and the laws of the church.³ These practices surrounding dying fit into the larger picture of medieval piety, which presumed that the relationship between God and his human creatures is secured through human initiative and action, even if in some medieval theological systems grace initiated the relationship or was at least necessary for the establishment and continuation of that relationship. More than ethical works that benefited the neighbor, the works of sacred ritual in pious customs and in the liturgy (especially attendance at mass) were vital for earning God’s temporal and eternal favor.

Through his biblical studies and on the basis of his instruction in the *via moderna* (the philosophical and theological way of thinking inaugurated by William of Ockham in the fourteenth century) and driven by his own tempestuous temperament, Martin Luther came to reject the piety of his childhood, youth, and monastic career. His studies and lectures on the Psalms, followed by Romans and Galatians, led him to believe that God initiates and upholds the relationship between himself and his human creatures and that the Creator does so through his word. Luther’s intensely personal understanding of who God is focused on God’s word and the expression of God’s emotions (particularly his wrath and his mercy) as he speaks creation into existence and sustains it, and as he creates new creatures, his own children, through his promise of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation in the congregation of his people.

This redefinition of being Christian had ramifications for ecclesiastical practice and the Christian life in general. One of the earliest constructions of piety that had to be renovated or razed was the role of purgatory in assessing life after death and the relationship of the living to their departed loved ones. Vincent Evener has recently shown that while Luther cast doubts on the existence of purgatory in 1517 and 1518, he struggled with that question. At the same time, he decisively combatted the idea of “wandering dead”—souls who came to plague the living with appeals for masses, vigils, and other services that would supposedly speed these wandering souls’ movement out of purgatory. He did not deny that the devil could appear as a deceased relative or friend, or even that they could visit earth from purgatory, but he did deny that they needed merits and should therefore command the interest of

³ Austra Reinis, *Reforming the Art of Dying: The ars moriendi in the German Reformation (1519–1528)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 2–11; Rainer Rudolf, *Ars Moriendi: Von der Kunst des heilsamen Lebens und Sterbens* (Cologne/Graz: Böhlau, 1957); Franz Falk, *Die deutsche Sterbebüchlein von der ältesten Zeit des Buchdruckes bis zum Jahre 1520* (Cologne: Bachem, 1890).

the living.⁴ Luther remained concerned about these “wandering dead” for many years, believing that they distracted people from relying on God’s grace. This was still a concern for him in 1537 when he wrote the Smalcald Articles.⁵

When programs of reform were introduced, evangelical church regulations almost immediately changed the liturgical practice of burial. Previously, these had consisted largely of a procession from the home of the deceased to the cemetery while singing dirges. This usually took place within twenty-four hours of death, and certainly not more than thirty-six. It was followed by the first of many masses intended to deliver the soul of the deceased from the temporal punishments of purgatory, and hasten its entry into heaven. The new evangelical church orders prescribed singing songs of joy and hope in the resurrection which Christ shares with his people. Slowly, the funeral sermon began to assert itself as the centerpiece of the burial rites, and by mid-century it had become the standard practice.⁶

In 1535, Urbanus Rhegius, the superintendent of the churches of the duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, published his *Guide to Preaching about the Chief Topics of Christian Doctrine Carefully*, a book written for the young pastors under his care. In it he cited passages from both Old and New Testaments, as well as the practice of the synagogue and of the whole church, to support his instruction on “how to speak carefully about burial.” He wrote: “The chief article of our faith teaches that this same flesh which we now carry will be glorified at the last day and will rise to eternal life. Just as Christ rose again and will die no more, so all Christians will rise with their bodies, says Athanasius in the Creed.” Therefore, Rhegius insisted, “burial ought to be treated respectfully by Christians on account of the infallible hope of our resurrection.” He set down a summary of contemporary church regulations on burial. “Corpses should be accompanied by the faithful to the grave, and when the body is buried, the pastor or minister of the word should console the people with a brief sermon that recalls, first, how we are all dead in Adam and worthy of condemnation, and then, how we will all be made alive in Christ.”⁷

⁴ Vincent Evener, “Wittenberg’s Wandering Spirits: Discipline and the Dead in the Reformation,” *Church History* 84 (2015): 531–555.

⁵ Irene Dingel, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelischen-Lutherischen Kirche: Vollständige Neuedition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 734–735, lines 13–18; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 304 (=SA II II 16–17).

⁶ Robert Kolb, “Orders for Burial in the Sixteenth Century Wittenberg Circle,” in Irene Dingel and Armin Kohle, eds., *Gute Ordnung: Ordnungsmodelle und Ordnungsvorstellungen in der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 257–279.

⁷ Scott Hendrix, *Preaching the Reformation: The Homiletical Handbook of Urbanus Rhegius* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 2003), 108–113.

The sermons of Rhegius, his pastors, and their contemporaries conveyed one or more of five central themes.⁸ First, some expressed approval of mourning since Christian love naturally regrets the loss of companionship and friendship when a loved one dies, as long as the sorrow remains within the bounds of Christian hope, as Paul had counseled (1 Thess 4:13–14). Second, sermons often reminded listeners of the presence of death on all sides and the mortality that besets all in the congregation, issuing a call for repentance and an exhortation to live the Christian life. Third, the faith and new obedience of the deceased often served as an example for the assembled friends and relatives. Finally, two forms of comfort conveyed peace and hope to the hearers: that those who mourn should know that God provides for his people, especially for widows and orphans, and also that Christ's resurrection and the bestowal of its liberation in Baptism assures all that those who die in the Lord continue to live in the Lord and will be reunited with their loved ones on the last day.

This frequent emphasis on resurrection and reunion calls into question the conclusion of Craig Koslofsky that with a Protestant “doctrine of soul-sleeping, solafideism put the salvation of the dead entirely out of the hands of the living,” and that the loss of the burden of paying for masses for dead friends and relatives deprived the survivors of contact with the deceased and the alleged warm relationship with those in purgatory.⁹ Indeed, the confidence that their loved ones were resting in the Lord's hands, whether in some form of soul sleep or the much more common Lutheran belief in an immediate enjoyment of God's presence, seems a much more comforting attitude than that which Koslofsky imagines was the case for those who felt close to the departed because they were sharing the burden of their sufferings in purgatory.¹⁰

Luther's own sermons on death and dying embraced all of these themes. He himself recognized that his principles for reform had changed the context of dying and mourning. Looking back on more than a decade of reforming activity, he commented in 1531, “It has, praise God, come so far that men and women, young and old, know the catechism and how they should believe, live, pray, suffer, and die.”¹¹ Luther had begun to address the subject of pastoral care of the dying in 1519,

⁸ As summarized in Robert Kolb, “*‘Da jr nicht trawrig seid wie die anderen, die keine hoffnung haben’*: Der Gebrauch der Heiligen Schrift in Leichenpredigten der Wittenberger Reformation (1560–1600),” in *Leichenpredigten als Medien der Erinnerungskultur im europäischen Kontext*, ed. Eva-Maria Dickhaut (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2014), 1–25.

⁹ Craig Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 2000), 87.

¹⁰ Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead*, esp. 34–39, 53, 156–159.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 30/3:317.32–34, hereafter WA; Martin Luther, 47:52, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed.

adapting the medieval genre of the *ars moriendi* with his radically different point of departure, set within the framework of the familiar literary form. His *Treatise on Preparing to Die* “is part of an ancient tradition, but he departs from it at a decisive point and focuses on just one topic: only faith in the cross of Christ helps in the final hour.”¹² At this early point in his career, while he was still eager to address the fears of death that beset all people, his focus was on the liberating work of Christ in his death and resurrection, and the promise of new life that the gospel of Christ conveys to those who trust in him.

Neither at this point in his life nor at any other is there justification for the argument of Harvard professor Richard Marius, who wrote in 1999 that Luther was, throughout his life, driven by “his greatest terror, one that came on him periodically as a horror of darkness,” namely, “the fear of death—death in itself, not the terror of a burning and eternal hell awaiting the sinner in an afterlife.”¹³ Marius is sparing with his citation of sources, and an extensive reading of Luther demonstrates that in conversation, correspondence, lectures, and sermons his emphasis fell consistently on the joyous expectation of life beyond the trials and tribulations of this life, which God grants through creating sinners anew as his children by the action of his word of promise in oral, written, and sacramental forms, and through the trust in Christ’s death and resurrection which the word creates. For in his death and resurrection, Luther confesses, Christ has done the sinful identity of human creatures to death and raised the faithful up to new and everlasting life.¹⁴ This same emphasis can be seen in Luther’s teaching of martyrdom. Luther transformed the understanding of the death of those who earned execution for their confession of the faith. Martyrs did not earn merit or favor in God’s sight through their bold but fatal confession.

Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

¹² Werner Goetz, “Luthers ‘Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben’ und die spätmittelalterliche *ars moriendi*,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 48 (1981): 97–114. “*Sermo*” in late medieval Latin referred to treatises in general, not necessarily preached sermons. It is unlikely that Luther had actually delivered this text before a congregation. Cf. also Rudolf Mohr, “*Ars moriendi* II,” in *Theologische Realencyklopädie*, ed. Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977–2004), 4:149–154; and Helmut Appel, *Anfechtung und Trost im Spätmittelalter und bei Luther* (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1938), 105–135.

¹³ Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian between God and Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), xiii–xiv.

¹⁴ Robert Kolb, “‘Life is King and Lord over Death’: Martin Luther’s View of Death and Dying,” in *Tod und Jenseits in der Schriftkultur der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Marion Kobelt Groch and Cornelia Niekus Moore (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 23–45. Cf. Robert Kolb, “Resurrection and Justification: Luther’s Use of Romans 4,25,” *Lutherjahrbuch* 78 (2011): 39–60.

Instead, he made clear that this confession through dying was a gift of God even though it was brought about by a satanic assault on the church.¹⁵

In table conversation Luther made clear that death is the enemy of life, as a tool of Satan and Christ's enemy. Death is "cruel, hideous, monstrous"¹⁶ and it does reveal God's wrath against sin,¹⁷ while fostering within even faithful Christians a sense of fear that is truly unnecessary because of what Christ has wrought.¹⁸ However, the Holy Spirit uses this fear to bring sinners to repentance.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he regarded this fear as very foolish, for death cannot be avoided and is the gate to life eternal—a liberation from sin, illness, pain, despair, and sorrow.²⁰

Luther also dealt with death in personal encounters. For instance, Johannes Cranach, the son of Luther's friends and neighbors Lukas and Barbara Cranach, died during a study tour in Italy. Visiting the Cranach parents in their home, he urged them to accept God's will and to rest assured of his love, both toward Johannes and toward the Cranachs themselves.²¹ He also offered consolation by letter to parents of Wittenberg students who had died while at the university,²² to acquaintances and

¹⁵ Robert Kolb, "God's Gift of Martyrdom: The Early Reformation Understanding of Dying for the Faith," *Church History* 64 (1995): 399–411. On Late Reformation treatments of martyrdom, see Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987), and "From Hymn to History of Dogma: Lutheran Martyrology in the Reformation Era," in *More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity in the History of Christianity*, ed. Johan Leemans (Louvain: Peeters, 2005), 301–313.

¹⁶ WA TR [= Tischreden] 2:269, no. 1944; 2:270, no. 1946.

¹⁷ WA TR 6: 300–301, nos. 6970–6971.

¹⁸ WA TR 3:186, no. 3140b.

¹⁹ WA TR 1:84, no. 186.

²⁰ WA TR 3:16, no. 3928. Cf. WA TR 1:418, no. 853; 1:422–423, no. 860; 4:214, no. 4313; 6:302, no. 6978; WA TR 6:301–302, no. 6974–6975, 6977–6978; WA TR 1:404–406, no. 832; 2:210, no. 1764; 2:358, no. 2197; 2:599, no. 2675b; 4:295, no. 4400; 4:473, no. 4757; 4:539, no. 4835–4836; 5:447–448, no. 6031; 5:280, no. 5626; 5:320–321, no. 5685; 5:447–449, no. 6031; 5:666, no. 6445; 6:30–31, no. 6541; WA TR 6:155, no. 6730; WA TR 4: 200–201, no. 4203; WA TR 5:347, no. 3767; 6:303, no. 6979; WA TR 1:246–247, no. 529; WA TR 6:302, no. 6976; WA TR 6:303, no. 6979; WA TR 3:369, no. 3511 WA TR 1:45, no. 117.

²¹ WA TR 4:505–508, no. 4787. Cf. Robert Kolb, "Seelsorge for the Cranachs," *Lutheran Forum* (Spring 2009): 34–37.

²² To Mathias and Magdalena Knutzsen, October 21, 1531?, WA Br [= Briefe] 6:212–213, no. 1876; to Thomas Zink, April 22, 1532, WA Br 6:300–302, no. 1930.

friends when they lost a spouse,²³ a child,²⁴ a father-in-law,²⁵ or a friend,²⁶ and even to rulers, his own elector Johann, and Duke Johann Friedrich, at the death of their brother and uncle, Frederick the Wise,²⁷ and Queen Mary of Hungary when her husband fell in battle at Mohacs.²⁸ These letters followed a medieval and humanist genre of expressing sympathy but also centered their comfort on the resurrection of Christ.²⁹

Luther's most dramatic engagement with death came in his sermons, some of which in printed form guided his students and adherents as they preached for the burial of their own parishioners.³⁰ Both Paul Althaus and Bernhard Lohse have analyzed Luther's proclamation from the pulpit regarding death as occasions for his exercise of the distinction of law and gospel. Death gave Luther cause to call for repentance in view of the inevitable visitation of this ultimate judgment on the sin of every hearer. The topic of death also gave Luther occasion for pronouncing the forgiveness which brings life and salvation in the face of death—a forgiveness that works through the death and resurrection of Christ, as conveyed to his hearers through Baptism.³¹

²³ To Bartholomäus von Starhemberg, 1524, WA 18:1–7, published as an attack on prayers for the dead; to Margarethe N., December 15, 1528, WA Br 6:264–625, no. 1366; to Ambrosius Berndt (who lost a son at the same time), early 1532, WA Br 6:279–281, no. 1915; to Lorenz Zoch, November 3, 1532, WA Br 6:382–383, no. 1971; to Autor Broitzen, August 25, 1534, WA Br 7:95–96, no. 2133; to Hans Reineck, April 18, 1536, WA Br 7:399–400, no. 3015; to Hans von Taubenheim, January 10, 1539, WA Br 8:352–354, no. 3289; to Justus Jonas, December 26, 1542, WA Br 10:26–228, no. 3829; to Wolf Heinze, September 11, 1543, WA Br 10:394–396, no. 3912; to Eva Schulz, October 8, 1544, WA Br 10:663–664, no. 4034; to the widow of Johannes Cellarius, May 8, 1542, WA Br 10:63–64, no. 3751; to Andreas Osiander, June 3, 1545, WA Br 11:113–114.

²⁴ To Konrad Cordatus, April 2, 1530, WA Br 5:273–274, no. 1544; to Justus Jonas, May 19, 1530, WA Br 5:323–324, no. 1571; to Agnes Lauterbach, October 25, 1535, WA Br 7:305, no. 2265; to Katharina Metzler, July 3, 1539, WA Br 8:484–486, no. 3354; to Nikolaus Medler, December 27, 1543, WA Br 10:479–481, no. 3951; to Georg Hösel, December 13, 1544, WA Br 10:698–700, no. 4049; to Kaspar Heidenreich, April 24, 1545, WA Br 11:75–76, no. 4094.

²⁵ To Philipp Glüenspies, September 1, 1538, WA Br 8:280–281, no. 3255.

²⁶ To Prince Georg von Anhalt on the death of Georg Helt, March 9, 1545, WA Br 11:44–49, no. 4080.

²⁷ At the death of Elector Frederick the Wise, May 15, 1525, WA Br 3:496–497, 497–498, nos. 867 and 868.

²⁸ Published as *Vier trostliche Psalmen An die Ko[e]nigen zu Hungern* (Wittenberg 1526), WA 19:542–615, the letter of consolation, 552–553.

²⁹ Ute Mennicke-Haustein: *Luthers Trostbriefe* (QFRG 56, Gütersloh: Mohn, 1989), 33–53, 99–134.

³⁰ The following section comes largely from Kolb, “Life is King,” and idem, “Ein kindt des todts’ und ‘Gottes Gast.’ Das Sterben in Luthers Predigten,” *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 31 (2007): 3–22.

³¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 405–410; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans. Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 329–332.

Through Luther's preaching people heard of the "diabolical maliciousness" of Satan in using death as his instrument³² together with the law and sin, as three warriors, which, along with "pestilence and misfortune," serve as the devil's "spear, sword, and spike."³³ Christ despises death, Luther assured his hearers. John 11:28, according to his translation, recorded Jesus' anger at Lazarus' grave. This anger was "a merely human way of thinking . . . just as a wicked person would say, 'Well, death, may the devil take you to hell!' So incensed was he over death! This is what offers believers the highest comfort: that Christ was so bitter and angry at death that he had apoplexy."³⁴ But in his resurrection Jesus triumphed over death in an act reminiscent of the delivery of Israel from slavery in Egypt,³⁵ or (as Luther explains more frequently in his sermons) of creation itself. The restoration of the life of the widow's son from Nain in Luke 7:11–17, apart from any means of healing alongside his word, recalled the creation of the world *ex nihilo* in Genesis 1.³⁶ "Since God, who has spoken this Word [that promised redemption from death in Gen 3:15], is almighty and has created all things out of nothing, as I have learned and experienced from his creation of all creatures, so I believe that he can make people alive again, even if they have already died. If God has made me out of the [dust of] the earth, he can raise me out of the earth and bring me out of death."³⁷ Thus, in preaching on Luke 7, Luther uses one of his favorite rhetorical devices, the dialogue, to show God addressing death. Brushing aside death's foul grousing, God announces,

"Death, I am your death; hell, I am a plague upon you . . . your bullet, the stone on which you will be ground to dust. Yes, I intend to be your hell. You have filled my people with fear, so that they do not want to die. Watch out! I am on the other side. When you kill someone, I will kill you. You say, 'I have gobbled up that person, I have swallowed down Doctor Martin.' Boast as you will, death! In my eyes they are not dead whom you have killed, but they are asleep, and so softly that I can wake them with a finger."³⁸

With his image of the duel between Christ and Satan,³⁹ Luther made 1 Corinthians 15:54–57 come alive for hearers not long before his own death:

³² WA 36:346.18–26; cf. WA 47:714.1–3.

³³ WA 49:773.14–15.

³⁴ WA 49:54.5–13.

³⁵ WA 36:347.19–348.42.

³⁶ WA 36:327.22–328.11; WA 37:536.35–537.11; WA 49:399.1–400.2; 399.38–400.27; cf. WA 49:436.32–39.

³⁷ WA 49:402.36–41; cf. WA 49:405.39–41; 406.29–30; 408.29–31; 412.29; 433.16–35.

³⁸ WA 37:150.14–20.

³⁹ See Uwe Rieske-Braun, *Duellum mirabile: Studien zum Kampfmotiv in Martin Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

Death lies on the ground. It has lost its kingdom, might, and victory. Indeed, it had the upper hand. The entire world was subject to it because of sin, and all people have to die. But now it has lost its victory. Against death's rule and triumph our Lord God, the Lord of Sabaoth, has his own victory, the resurrection from the dead in Christ. For a long time death sang, "Hurray! Triumph! I, death, am king and lord over all human beings. I have the victory and am on top." But our Lord God permits himself to sing a little song that goes, "Hurray! Triumph! Life is king and lord over death. Death has lost and is on the bottom." Previously death had sung, "Victory! Victory! Hurray! I have won. Here is nothing but death and no life." But God now sings, "Victory! Victory! Hurray! I have won. Here is nothing but life and no death. Death has been conquered in Christ and has died itself. Life has gained the victory and won." . . . This is the song that will be sung by us in the resurrection of the dead when this mortal covering becomes immortality. Now death is choking off our life in many ways and making us miserable, some by sword, others by plague, one person by water, another by fire. Who can count all the ways death is strangling us? Death was alive, ruled, conquered, and sang, "I won, I won, I, death, am king and conqueror of the whole world. I have power and rights over everything that lives on earth. I strike with death and strangle everyone, young, old, rich, poor, of high and low estate, noble, commoners. I defy those who want to protect themselves against me." But now death will soon sing itself hoarse and to death. Then his cantata will soon be laid to rest. For on Easter another song came forth, that goes, "Christ is arisen from all suffering. We shall be joyous, Christ will be our comfort." Death, where is now your victory? Where do you find him who lay in the grave, whom you killed on the cross?⁴⁰

Luther found him alive, present in his word, and ruling his people with grace and mercy.

In his writings on death, Luther spent little time speculating about the nature of heaven. He was quite indifferent to questions regarding the transformation of the mortal remains to the glorified body. He addressed the concerns of some Wittenberg citizens about the possibility of resurrection for those whose mortal bodies had not survived dying physically intact, because of attacks from wild animals or fire. He commented, "Some drown in water and are eaten by fish. Some hang on the gallows and are consumed by the ravens. Some are burned in fire," but all will arise out of the earth like seeds that come to life as plants.⁴¹ His own expectation expressed his faith that Christ "will call me with a single word out of the dust and worms, and

⁴⁰ WA 49:768.25–39; 769.19–32. Cf. Luther's description of the victory of Christ over Satan and death in his Large Catechism, second article of the Apostles Creed, in Kolb and Wengert, eds., *Book of Concord*, 434–435; BSELK, 1054–1059.

⁴¹ WA 49:426.21–35.

cause my body to shine like the sun,”⁴² that his “shriveled up, decaying body” would turn into a “fresh, beautiful, living body that cannot waste away,” but that it would indeed retain his personal, individual identity.⁴³

Luther seldom went further in attempting a description of the heavenly environment. But in September 1532 he ventured into a bit of speculation with students and colleagues at table. Heaven will be, he hazarded, a return to Eden, the experience of the relationship with God that Adam and Eve had. “There the flowers, foliage, and grass will be as beautiful, exquisite, and pleasing to the eye as an emerald, and every creature will be as beautiful as can be imagined. When we have God’s grace, all God’s creatures smile at us. If I will say to a brick, ‘become an emerald,’ it will become an emerald within the hour. In the new heaven there will be an overpowering eternal light and fragrance. Whatever we would like to be, we will be there.” The immortal body will not feel the physical weight that causes aches and pains since the burden of sin will be lifted. Eyes and eyelashes will glow like silver. Illness and all that casts a shadow over life will be gone. Vermin will lose their ugly appearance and their stench. Luther was sure that the wealth of flora and fauna on earth such as sheep, oxen, cattle, fishes and the like, would grace the new creation filled with peace and righteousness.⁴⁴

Among Luther’s students and adherents, too, this confidence in the deliverance from death experienced through death as well as the life with God in everlasting peace and joy that follows permeated the pastoral care and its expression in preaching. His avid promoter, Johann Spangenberg, reformer in Nordhausen, published *A Book of Comfort for the Sick, and on the Christian Knight* in 1548, shortly before his own death.⁴⁵ Its purpose was to provide comfort when “the Christian experiences pain and grief, fear, and distress [as] death draws near. For when the Old Adam wriggles and writhes, resisting death, that is the time when comfort and exhortation are necessary so that the dying person surrenders willingly to God’s will.”⁴⁶ Spangenberg explained carefully the inevitability and necessity of

⁴² WA 49:51.4–19.

⁴³ WA 49:399.22–37. See also similar comments, WA 49:429.23–39; 49:438.18–35; 49:732.33–733.28; and in the sermons on 1 Corinthians 15 of 1532–1534, WA 36:654.15–674.21.

⁴⁴ WA TR 2:578–581, no. 2652; cf. WA TR 3:696–698, no. 3904, from late June 1538, when he commented to students on the gospel lesson for the second Sunday after Trinity, Luke 16, on the rich man and Lazarus. His description of paradise and heaven give few if any specific details or description. He is more interested in theological questions—speculative, too, regarding the nature of paradise—rather than its concrete portrayal.

⁴⁵ Originally published as *Ain new Trostbüchlin/ Mit ainer Christlichen vnderichtung/ Wie sich ain Mensch berayten soll/ zu ainem seligen sterben inn Fragstück verfasst* (Augsburg: Valentin Othmar, 1542). Cf. Johann Spangenberg, *A Booklet of Comfort for the Sick, and On the Christian Knight*, trans. Robert Kolb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 40/41.

death as God's judgment upon sin.⁴⁷ He then proceeded to offer counsel on preparing to die, in the tradition of the medieval *ars moriendi* but with different content. Christians prepare to die, first, by living a godly life in their callings, "in true faith, in brotherly love, and in the mortification of the Old Adam." This will permit a death "with a joyous heart and a good conscience before God." Second, the Christian must "renounce your love of the world and everything that has been created, and even of yourself, for the sake of God." Third, "you should impress some comforting passages from Scripture and the gospel on your memory, passages to use against all temptations." Fourth, "you should recall your Baptism and how you bound yourself through it to God. To be precise, you want to repudiate the devil and all his gang, and to believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and to demonstrate this faith as well, with the fruits of faith toward other people, to mortify the Old Adam, the sinful flesh, and to subdue the evil desires and longings, and from day to day become a new creature of God." Fifth, "think about the power of the holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ that you have received, and cast all other concerns, burdens, fears, and tribulations into the lap of the Christian church, and cry to God," in words that Spangenberg then supplied.⁴⁸ Clearly, Spangenberg had absorbed Luther's understanding of God's *modus operandi* with his word and the heart of the gospel in the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation wrought through Christ's death and resurrection.

Funeral sermons often contained accounts of pastoral care for the dying, but one of Luther's students, Andreas Poach, pastor in Erfurt, recorded his ministrations to Luther's close friend, Matthäus Ratzeberger, in a treatise at the beginning of Poach's *Report on the Christian Departure from His Mortal Life . . . of Matthäus Ratzeberger*.⁴⁹ Ratzeberger was not a typical sixteenth-century parishioner. His friendship with Luther during their years together (while Ratzeberger served Elector Johann Friedrich as his personal physician) and his experience of the excitement of the Reformation movement at its center had impressed habits of engagement with God's word that not all shared. His conversations with his pastor during the last weeks of his life built upon his long habit of reading Luther along with his devotional reading of Scripture. Poach accentuated Ratzeberger's devotion to God's word,

⁴⁷ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 44–53.

⁴⁸ Spangenberg, *A Booklet*, 52–71.

⁴⁹ Andreas Poach, *Von Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors Bericht* (Jena: Thomas Rebart, 1559). Cf. Robert Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana: Andreas Poachs Schrift 'Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben . . . Matthei Ratzenbergers' (1559)," in *Vestigia pietatis: Studien zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit in Thüringen und Sachsen, Ernst Koch gewidmet*, Herbergen der Christenheit: Sonderband 5, eds. Gerhard Graf, Hans-Peter Hasse, et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000), 95–112.

which he had absorbed from Luther. “He had a ravenous desire to hear, read, learn, and live in God’s word, and he could never hear or read or speak or do enough to learn more.”⁵⁰ His regimen had included reading a half or whole chapter of Scripture and Luther’s appropriate comment on it followed by a review of passages in Hippocrates and Galen. By 1559, the year of his death, he had digested the professor’s published comment on Genesis, the prophets, and Galatians (several times), along with his postils and the first volumes of his edited works. His copies, Poach reported, were well annotated. At meal times he read to the family and servants from the German Bible or sermons from Luther’s postil. On Saturdays he read them portions of Luther’s Large Catechism and had the children and servants recite sections of the Small Catechism. On Sunday mornings Ratzeberger or one of the older sons read from the Latin Bible or Luther’s Genesis commentary. Visitors in his home received detailed reports on his recent reading. Poach had read to Ratzeberger sections of a manuscript of Luther which he was editing, and Ratzeberger had told him that he would have to study that “on the other side.” On the afternoon before his death, Poach recalled that the doctor had turned to a picture of Luther that hung on his wall and said, “with a joyous countenance and with a smile on his lips, ‘My dear Luther.’” Turning to Poach, he said, “If God wills, I will soon be with him. Then we will have a good talk with each other about the many strange and curious things that have happened since he departed.”⁵¹

Ratzeberger’s family and a number of friends, also from other towns some distance from Erfurt, came to his bedside in his last days. His wife Clara had read to him Psalm 22, and he repeated verse 15, “my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.” Then he said, “Not that I am like my dear Lord Christ or want to be like him, but I am to follow in his footsteps.” As she complied with his request to read the psalm a second time, at the words pointing to the crucifixion, he confessed, “That is our redemption.”⁵² As he realized he was dying, he expressed his understanding that his oldest sons and his son-in-law had not been able to make the journey to visit him. He told the three children still at home to obey their mother and learn the catechism, telling his daughter Barbara, “It is not enough that you know the words, but you must grasp it in your heart and put it into action.” He admonished the older son Christoph to read Luther’s *House Postil* and to avoid bad company and the evils of this world.⁵³ With friends and family at his side the doctor died that evening. Poach’s account reflects both the pastoral care,

⁵⁰ Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fol. A2r.

⁵¹ Kolb, “Ars moriendi lutherana,” 101–102.

⁵² Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fols. C3v–C4r.

⁵³ Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied*, fol. F1r–v.

centered on God's word, and the faith, also grounded on the gospel of Christ, that Luther's proclamation and life had fostered.

In congregations formed by the Wittenberg Reformation, pastoral care took place above all in sermons, which called for repentance and conveyed the forgiveness of sins and the love of God in Christ Jesus to the people. The funeral sermon itself represented a special challenge for pastors, who always knew what text was prescribed for the Sunday morning service by the pericopal system, and who may have had one or more postils (collections of model sermons for all Sundays and festivals), but who had but a day or at most a day and a half to prepare a funeral sermon. Sometimes long illness had preceded death, but that was not always the case. The sermons that Luther preached at the deaths of the brothers, Elector Frederick the Wise and Elector Johann, in 1525 and 1532 respectively, had found their way into print almost immediately.⁵⁴ Luther's use of the medium of print had played a vital role in the spread and consolidation of his reform movement. Therefore, it is little wonder that others slowly began to follow his example and publish collections of these sermons as well as individual sermons. The collections were designed to aid pastors in their own sermon preparation. Individual publications of such sermons served as memorials for the departed and as devotional literature for the wider public.

The need for aid in preparing to bury a deceased parishioner, and to do so quickly, led to the first of the postil-like collections, which appeared in the 1540s, issued from the pen of Johann Spangenberg. It was followed by other collections of his sermons edited by his son, Cyriacus.⁵⁵ A number of such collections followed in the next half-century, including two that took specific parts of Scripture as texts without sermons actually delivered, those by the prolific pastor of Joachimsthal, Johannes Mathesius, on 1 Corinthians 15 (1561),⁵⁶ and the Dresden town preacher

⁵⁴ Luther's sermon for Frederick the Wise is in WA 17/1:196–227; for Johann, in WA 36:237–270 (AE 51:231–255).

⁵⁵ Johann Spangenberg, *Funffzehen Leichprediget/ So man bey dem Begrebnis der verstorbenen/ jnn Christlichen Gemein thun mag. Darneben mehr denn LX. Themata/ odder Sprüche/ aus dem alten Testament. Auff welche man diese Leichpredigt appliciren möcht* (Augsburg: Melcher Krießstein, 1545); *Acht vnd zwentzig Leichpredigten zur Begrebnis der verstorbenen/ vnnd sunst in allerley anligen aus dermassen nützlich zugebrauchen/ aus den heiligen Euangelisten Matthaeo. Marco* (Magdeburg: Michael Lotther, 1553); *Vier vnd dreissig Leichpredigten/ Aus dem heiligen Euangelisten Lvca* (Wittenberg: Georg Rhau 1554).

⁵⁶ Johannes Mathesius, *Leychpredigten Auß dem fünfftzehenden Capitel der I. Epistel S. Paulli zun Corinthiern. Von der auffstehung der Todten vnd ewigem leben* (Nuremberg: Johann vom Berg and Ulrich Neuber, 1561). On these and other collections see Irene Dingel, "Recht glauben, christlich leben und selig sterben": Leichenpredigt als evangelische Verkündigung im 16. Jahrhundert," in *Leichenpredigten als Quelle historischer Wissenschaft*, vol. 4, ed. Rudolf Lenz (Stuttgart: Steiner 2004), 9–36; English translation: "True Faith, Christian Living, and a Blessed Death": Sixteenth Century Funeral Sermons as Evangelical Proclamation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27

Peter Glaser (1528–1583) on the biblical treatments of death at the times of Kings David and Hezekiah (1582).⁵⁷ Two collections of sermons that were actually preached also appeared toward the end of the sixteenth century. Nikolaus Selnecker's collection, based on notes taken by his students, presents 171 summaries of his homilies at burials preached during his time as pastor at Saint Thomas in Leipzig, 1576–1589,⁵⁸ and the sermons of the Magdeburg cathedral preacher Siegfried Sack over the biers of his canons, some of whom had only very reluctantly and half-heartedly suffered the introduction of the Lutheran confession to their foundation.⁵⁹ In fact, pastors largely seem to have ignored these collections and chosen a wide variety of Bible passages as texts and as support for their proclamation of repentance and hope in the resurrection.⁶⁰

The court preacher in Stuttgart, Felix Bidembach offered five hundred Bible passages suitable for funeral sermons to readers of his manual for pastors (published in 1603). He also introduced a categorization of the texts under ten topics: (1) those for burying “prominent, respected persons . . . who have over the years served the church or the commonweal”; (2) for the elderly; (3) for “tragic cases,” such as the death of mothers in childbirth; (4) for young people; (5) for “feeble, worn-out people or the long-term ill”; (6) for those who die unexpectedly; (7) for those who “have been torn away by pitiful, terrible, and horrible kinds of death”; (8) for the repentant; (9) for the unrepentant, godless people; and (10) biblical examples of various kinds of death.⁶¹

In practice, Lutheran preachers in the second half of the sixteenth century pursued the basic themes mentioned earlier—justifying mourning since Christian love naturally regrets the loss of companionship and friendship when a loved one dies; reminding people of the ubiquity of death, which made repentance and living the Christian life imperative; presenting the faith and new obedience of the departed

(2013), 399–420; Cornelia Niekus-Moore, *Patterned Lives: The Lutheran Funeral Biography in Early Modern Germany* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2006).

⁵⁷ Peter Glaser, *Sechzig kurtze Leichpredigten Von dem grossen Landtsterben zur zeit des Königs Davids 2. Samuel am 24.: Deßgleichen von der Pestilentz des Königs Hiskias. 4. Reg. 20.* (Dresden: Gimel Bergen, 1582).

⁵⁸ Nikolaus Selnecker, *Christliche Leychpredigten So vom Jar 1576. bis fast an das 1590. Jar zu Leipzig* (Magdeburg: Paul Donat/Ambrosius Kirchner, 1591).

⁵⁹ Siegfried Sack, *Leychpredigten Etlicher fürnemen Personen/ so von anno zwey vnd neuntzig biß ins vier vnd neuntzigste in der Ertzbischofflichen Primatkirchen zu Magdeburgk geschehen* (Magdeburg: Ambrosius Kirchner, 1596). Cf. Niekus-Moore, *Patterned Lives*, especially at 137–147.

⁶⁰ Kolb, “‘Da jr nicht trawrig seid’.”

⁶¹ Felix Bidembach, *Manuale Ministorum Ecclesiae, Handbuch. Darinnen folgende sieben Stück begriffen . . . III. Fünffhundert zu Leichpredigten auserlesene Text/ auff alle Fälle/ in 10. Classes ausgetheilet* (Tübingen: Georg Gruppenbach, and Leipzig: Henning Gross, 1603), fols. “)(2” r– “)(3” v.

as an example for the hearers; the comfort, peace, and hope gained from God's providence; and the comfort, peace, and hope given by Christ's resurrection and his bestowal of the promise of resurrection through his word in oral, written, and sacramental forms.

These themes emerge in texts that were chosen for several reasons: because they were a pericope on the day of death or burial; or because they were part of a series of funeral sermons, for instance, on Psalm 90, as was the case for Selnecker in the autumn of 1580;⁶² or because the name or aspects of the life of a biblical figure paralleled something in the life of the deceased; or because of the family situation or occupational vocation of the departed; or because of the age—either youth or old age—of the one being buried; or because of unusual circumstances of the death. Among the latter, two sermons stand out. In 1584 Selnecker preached in close succession upon the deaths of two young Leipzig men at the hands of murderers. The murderer of a young instructor in the arts faculty appears to have been a student whom Selnecker knew and liked, for he warmly expressed his hopes that the young man would repent and be saved despite his grievous sin.⁶³

Despite the predominant position of men in early modern society, over one-third of Selnecker's sermons were preached at the funerals of the bourgeois women of Leipzig, often with special focus on feminine factors, including death in childbirth, and in parallel to biblical figures such as Anna and Tabitha.⁶⁴ In sermons for men, among those occupational vocations featured was that of pastor. A number of funeral sermons for pastors appeared in print during the second half of the sixteenth century, dedicated to establishing the new social status of the pastor and his family as well as to proclaiming law and gospel.⁶⁵ Printers and artists, if sufficiently prominent in their community, slowly crept into the community of citizens ranking among those so memorialized.⁶⁶ But it is probably safe to presume that those from the families of artisans and even common laborers or peasants in the village received much the same kind of sermon, calling for repentance and repeating the promise of life with God forever because of Christ's death and resurrection.

⁶² Selnecker, *Christliche Leychpredigten*, 1:158r–170r.

⁶³ Selnecker, *Christliche Leychpredigten*, 2:8r–10r, 10v–13r.

⁶⁴ Robert Kolb, "Accompanying this Sister of Ours to the Grave: Late Reformation Funeral Sermons for Women," (forthcoming).

⁶⁵ Robert Kolb, "Burying the Brethren: Lutheran Funeral Sermons as Life Writing," in *The Rhetorics of Life-Writing in Early Modern Europe: Forms of Biography from Cassandra Fedele to Louis XIV* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 97–113.

⁶⁶ Robert Kolb, "The Printer's Funeral Sermon: Recalling the Contributions of the Printer in the Wittenberg Reformation," in *Studies on the German Book Presented to Ulrich Kopp in His Retirement*, ed. William A. Kelley and Jürgen Beyer (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2014), 191–205.

For the prominent and for all others, preachers following Luther's example conveyed the assurance that God fulfills the promises he made by bestowing Christ's death and resurrection upon his people in Baptism. Assured hope comforted the dying and their survivors after their death. This perception of death stood at the heart of the Wittenberg way of viewing life itself. Death, the enemy, became—through Christ's death and resurrection—the entrance into life eternal. The proclamation of this message replaced the mass for the deceased as the focal point of the liturgical framework for the committal of mortal remains in the culture fostered by the Wittenberg reformers. The burial service presented God's address to the bereaved, calling for repentance and giving the assurance, hope, and consolation that comes from knowing that Christ is risen and that he has promised resurrection to the baptized.