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Aspects of Reforming

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CHAPTER 2

No alternatives to Jesus: Luther's understanding of idolatry as evident in his *house postils*

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Although the Eucharist and Christology are the two most prominent topics cited when pointing to differences between Martin Luther and the Reformed, another issue that arose in Luther's controversies with fellow Evangelicals was that of sacred images. While reformers like Andreas Karlstadt said, 'Pull them down,' Luther responded, 'Not so fast.' Subsequently, Lutherans and other Protestants continued to develop along different lines with the former being quite tolerant of much of what the latter denounced as idolatry.¹ But that does not mean that the German reformer was 'soft' on 'false gods'. Quite the contrary. In fact, Luther's understanding of idolatry went far beyond statues, and in his discussion of the First Commandment in his *Large Catechism* he explained that a person's 'god' is whatever he trusts most—whether he calls it 'god' or not.² In the con-

¹ Even before the Evangelicals began to divide over the presence of Christ's body in the sacrament, they were disagreeing over sacred images. Carlos Eire has pointed this out in summary fashion in his article on 'Iconoclasm' in Hans J. Hillerbrand (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: OUP, 1996) and at greater length in his book, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: CUP, 1986), 54-73. Irena Dingel has demonstrated the difference over images between Lutheran and Reformed in the 16th century in her "Dass wir Gott in keiner Weise verbilden": Die Bilderfrage zwischen Calvinismus und Luthertum' in Andreas Wagner, Volker Hörner, Günter Geisthardt (eds), *Gott im Wort—Gott im Bild: Bilderlosigkeit als Bedingung des Monotheismus?* (n.p.: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 97-111. According to Dingel, the elimination of pictures and images was a signal that a church was switching from Lutheran to Reformed—along with introducing the breaking of the bread in the communion rite, eliminating the exorcism in the baptismal rite, and promoting a new kind of church music.

² *Large Catechism* 1.1-15 First published in 1529, Luther's two catechisms—large and small—are a part of the Lutheran Confessions, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgerischen Konfession 1930* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959). In this essay, citations of the English version are from Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

temporary world, Luther's definition is immediately relevant in a way that railing against sacred images is not.

But how did Luther, himself, apply this definition? In his sermons, what 'idols' did he identify as especially threatening to the people among whom he ministered? Did he even mention sacred images? Using a set of sermons that Luther originally delivered to his own household, this essay explores Luther's preaching for what it can tell us about competition to Jesus Christ for first place in the lives of those who were among the first hearers of the Protestant gospel. Luther's sermons reveal his theology in action.³

Luther on idols

First, however, we need to consider Luther's position regarding idolatry outside of the sermons in order to determine what it is that we should look for in the sermons. For those familiar with the Old Testament, the term 'idol' immediately calls to mind the continuous struggle of the prophets against pagan images that the children of Israel were tempted to worship and often did. From Moses and the golden calf (Exod. 32) to the three men in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), the first part of the Christian Bible regularly contrasts faithfulness to the true God with the worship of false gods in the form of images. In the era of the reformation, therefore, it did not take a lot of imagination for Protestants who rejected medieval worship in preference to what they considered a more biblically based piety to identify the sacred images of their Catholic neighbors with idolatry.

Indeed, even before the reformation, Erasmus had sharply criticized the cult of the saints and an excessive reliance on images and relics.⁴ Huldrych Zwingli went even further and taught that the invisible God forbids people to make visible representations of him and demanded the removal of all sacred images from

³ For Luther's preaching, see Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) and, by the same author, 'Luther as Preacher of the Word of God' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 136-48; Gerhard Heintze, *Luthers Predigt von Gesetz und Evangelium* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958); Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988); Eberhart Winkler, 'Luther als Seelsorger und Prediger' in Helmar Junghans (ed.), *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1983), 1.225-39, 2.792-97; Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

⁴ Eire, *War*, 36-45. For examples of Erasmus's criticism, see 'The Handbook of the Militant Christian' in John P. Dolan (ed.) *The Essential Erasmus* (New York: New American Library of World Literature, 1964), 60-61, and 'The Praise of Folly' in Dolan, 129-30, 135-36.

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the churches.⁵ Later, John Calvin also maintained that God forbids displaying any reverence toward images like bowing, kneeling, or uncovering one's head.⁶ In general, therefore, Reformed Protestants characterized the Second Commandment of the Decalogue as an absolute prohibition against sacred images.⁷

In developing such arguments, however, both reformers were following the lead of still another one, Luther's one time colleague at the University of Wittenberg, Andreas Karlstadt.⁸ During Luther's absence from Wittenberg after the Diet of Worms (1521), Karlstadt had begun calling for practical changes in the life of the church in the university and town, including the removal of sacred images. In December 1521 and February 1522, Karlstadt's campaign resulted in iconoclastic riots. In March 1522, Luther returned home.⁹

This then became the occasion for Luther publicly to address the question of sacred images, and he did so—along with other issues—in the *Invocavit Sermons*, a series of eight homilies preached on successive days almost immediately upon his return.¹⁰ Luther rejected not only Karlstadt's approval of violence in the removal of images but also his colleague's total rejection of such images in the first place. On the one hand, Luther's remarks hardly constituted a ringing endorsement of images, 'It is true that they are unnecessary, and we are free to have them or not, although it would be much better if we did not have them at all. I am not partial to them.'¹¹ On the other hand, Luther placed them in the category of things indifferent, 'we are free to have them or not.' But to insist on something that God has left open was to violate one of Luther's most cherished principles, Christian liberty: 'They wished to make a "must" out of that which is free. This God cannot tolerate.'¹²

⁵ Eire, *War*, 73-86. See, also, Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion* (edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller; Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), 330-37.

⁶ Eire, *War*, 212-20. For Calvin's own discussion of idolatry and images, see *Inst.* 1.11 and 2.8.17-18.

⁷ See, for example, the 'Second Commandment' in Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson (eds), *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 140-44.

⁸ In the early years of the reformation, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1481-1541) was Luther's close associate at Wittenberg and cooperated in the cause of reform. The two men broke, however, in connection with the reforms promoted in Wittenberg while Luther was at the Wartburg. Karlstadt subsequently left Wittenberg, was exiled from Saxony, found refuge in Zurich, before finally residing at Basel as a professor in the university there. See OER, s.v. 'Bodenstein von Karlstadt, Andreas'.

⁹ OER, s.v. 'Iconoclasm'; Eire, *War*, 55-65.

¹⁰ For the historical context of these sermons, see Neil R. Leroux, *Luther's Rhetoric: Strategies and Style from the Invocavit Sermons* (St. Louis: Concordia Academic, 2002), 41-53.

¹¹ LW 51.81 (WA 10³.26.4-7).

¹² LW 51.82 (WA 10³.26.11-12). For 'Christian liberty' in Luther, see Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (London: William Collins, 1970), 212-14;

Of course, whether or not Christians were truly free in the matter of such images was precisely the question, so Luther went on to explore the biblical evidence. Regarding the prohibition in the Decalogue, Luther argued that it is unclear whether the text of Exodus 20 meant to forbid all images absolutely, 'You shall not make for yourself a carved image' (v. 4, ESV), or only as objects of worship, 'You shall not bow down to them or serve them' (v. 5). But given at least a couple of examples in which God himself employed images, the 'birds [vögel]' placed on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant (Exod. 37.7) and Moses's bronze serpent to heal the people (Nu. 21.9), Luther concluded that 'we may have images and make images, but we must not worship them.'¹³

Luther was not naïve about the possible misuse of such images. After all, Hezekiah finally destroyed the bronze serpent when people began to worship it (2 Kings 18.4); but Luther thought that the best approach was to preach against idols just like St. Paul at Athens (Acts 17). Luther's advice was this, 'It should have been preached that images were nothing and that no service is done to God by erecting them; then they would have fallen of themselves.' For Luther, the real problem lay not with the statues but with the people who worshipped them, 'Outward things [can] do no harm to faith, if only the heart does not cleave to them or put its trust in them. This is what we must preach and teach, and let the Word alone do the work.'¹⁴

Following this first confrontation over the question of images, Luther never changed his opinion that God did not prohibit images per se; and in fact, he even argued for using them positively in the Christian life as teaching devices. In a later work directed against Karlstadt, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), Luther still advocated preaching against idolatrous images but also insisted that 'images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated'. Luther explicitly defended the use of pictures in German Bibles and advocated using them in churches:

Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. . . . Pictures contained in these books we would paint on walls for the sake of remembrance and better understanding. . . . It is to be sure better to paint pictures on walls of how God created the world, how Noah built the ark, and whatever other good stories there may be, than to paint shameless worldly things.¹⁵

Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 93-107.

¹³ LW 51:82 (WA 10³.28.3-4).

¹⁴ LW 51.83 (WA 10³.29.13-30.2).

¹⁵ LW 40.91, 99 (WA 18.74.15-18; 18.82.23-83.3). According to Kurt Hendel, 'The Material as a Vehicle of the Divine,' *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28 (2001), 333, the first complete Luther Bible (1534) contained illuminated initials and 124 colored woodcuts.

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Not surprisingly, therefore, Lutheran churches continued to be highly decorated. Territories that became Lutheran did not remove the images; and, under the leadership of Luther's friend, Lucas Cranach, Lutherans developed a genre of didactic paintings with which to decorate their churches and to edify the faithful.¹⁶

But what about idolatry? In his controversy with Karlstadt, Luther not only rejected an identification of idols with images, he also thought deeply about what constituted idolatry in the first place. It was not a matter of the thing but of the heart. In *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, he urged Christians to destroy images 'with the Word of God. . . . This means to instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ'.¹⁷ For Luther that was the key. Idolatry was a matter of misplaced trust. Christ alone is the object of faith.

Therefore, a few years later, when Luther prepared the *Large Catechism* (1529) for pastors to use in instructing their parishioners in the basics of the Christian religion,¹⁸ he offered several examples of such misplaced trust as instances of idolatry that had nothing to do with images. For instance,

Many a person thinks he has God and everything he needs when he has money and property; in them he trusts and of them he boasts and so stubbornly and securely that he cares for no one. Surely such a man also has a god—mammon by name, that is, money and possessions—on which he fixes his whole heart.

Mammon, Luther added, 'is the most common idol on earth' and afflicted even those who had none of it. Such a person 'doubts and despairs as if he never heard of God. Very few . . . do not fret and complain, if they do not have mammon.'¹⁹ In addition, however—besides money—Luther specified learning, wisdom, power, prestige, family, and honor. Anyone who 'trusts in them, he also has a god, but not the one, true God'.²⁰ A real idol did not have to be a statue.

Of course, Luther also mentioned the cruder forms of idolatry, like that of the pagans who looked to Jupiter, Mercury, and other false deities for well-being and pleasures, or Christians who called on the saints when danger threatened or needs were felt. Some even made pacts with the devil. But the worst of

¹⁶ See Carl C. Christensen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), 42-65, 110-80; John Tonkin, 'Word and Image: Luther and the Arts', *Colloquium* 17(1985), 45-54; Christopher Weimer, 'Luther and Cranach on Justification in Word and Image,' *LQ* 18 (2004), 387-405; and Steven Ozment, *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹⁷ *LW* 40.91 (*WA* 18.74.6-9).

¹⁸ For background to both catechisms, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 2.273-80.

¹⁹ *Large Catechism* 1.5-9.

²⁰ *Large Catechism* 1.10.

all, according to Luther, was the idolatry of works righteousness, practiced by those who sought ‘help, comfort, and salvation in [their] own works and presume[d] to wrest heaven from God’. Where God offered gifts, they demanded rewards for works ‘just as if God were in our service. . . . [W]hat is this but making God into an idol . . . and setting up ourselves as God?’²¹ The ultimate idolatry! To turn oneself into God! But in every case of idolatry, one was looking to something other than God as his source of good and his refuge from trouble. Misplaced trust rather than images constituted the essence of this sin:

Idolatry does not consist merely of erecting an image and praying to it. It is primarily in the heart, which pursues other things and seeks help and consolation from creatures, saints, or devils. It neither cares for God nor expects good things from him sufficiently to trust that he wants to help, nor does it believe that whatever good it receives comes from God.²²

But if these were Luther’s instructions to pastors in the *Large Catechism* about how to teach the people about idolatry, the question remains, how did Luther himself do it when he preached? Did Luther follow his own advice? The answer is ‘Yes’—as will become clear in our examination of the issue of idolatry in the house postils.

Luther and the house postils

But why these sermons in particular, the so-called ‘house postils’?²³ Not merely because Luther originally aimed them at the servants and young people of his own household—reason enough for our purposes. But, also, because they represent an effort by one of Luther’s closest disciples to make the reformer’s preaching to ordinary people available to others—ordinary people and their pastors! The process by which Luther’s theological insights became Lutheranism is a complicated one. But not least in significance is the role played by the mediators of Luther’s thought—people like Veit Dietrich, the editor of the first printed version of the house postils. Dietrich developed a close relationship with Luther, first as a student and, then, as a colleague when he lived in Wit-

²¹ *Large Catechism* 1.22-23.

²² *Large Catechism* 1.21.

²³ According to John M. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils: Catholics, Protestants, and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 12, the term ‘postil’ refers to a homiletical genre developed in the late Middle Ages to assist preachers by offering outlines, exegesis, or even model sermons for the standard Bible lessons—‘gospels’ and ‘epistles’—read annually in church on the Sundays and festival days of the church year. Luther and his disciples made extensive use of this genre in order to promote Evangelical preaching. Their Catholic opponents did the same. For Luther’s postils in general, see John W. Doberstein, ‘Introduction’ to *LW* 51: *Sermons I*, xiv-xv, and Gerhard Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), 30-37.

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tenberg (1522-1535), in fact, with Luther himself at the Black Cloister. Dietrich accompanied Luther to the Marburg Colloquy (October, 1529), the occasion of Luther's face-to-face confrontation with Zwingli, and then stayed with Luther at Coburg during the Diet of Augsburg (April to October, 1530). For many years he served Luther as a kind of secretary and organized his correspondence, took dictation for future publications, transcribed the 'table talk', and recorded Luther's sermons and lectures. Albert Freitag has described Veit Dietrich—along with Georg Rörer—as the 'most significant' of those who constructed the 'Luther tradition'.²⁴

One piece of that tradition has been Luther's house postils. These were sermons on the traditional Bible readings for Sunday services and festivals. For health reasons, Luther limited his public preaching from 1531 to 1535, but he continued to proclaim the Word to the members of his own household—which could be quite a group since it included relatives, friends, boarders, and servants, as well as Luther's wife and children.²⁵ In so doing, Luther claimed that he was acting as a 'house father' in order to instruct his servants (*gesinde*) in how to lead a Christian life.²⁶ Once delivered, Luther thought no more about the sermons. But Veit Dietrich had been taking notes on them, and about ten years later, in 1544, Dietrich published them for the first time. During the next year or so, they were reprinted seven times as well as in low German and Latin editions. John Frymire has published a chronological listing of 94 printed editions of the *House Postils* from 1544 to 1609, including 11 low German; 10 Latin; 1 Polish; and 1 Slovak edition. An alternative edition to Dietrich's work—based on Georg Rörer's notes, but prepared by Andreas Poach²⁷—appeared in 1559, but by that time Dietrich's edition had been printed 35 times, not including the 8 low German and 4 Latin versions that were based on it. The Rörer/Poach version appears only 7 more times in Frymire's entire list.²⁸ In the formative years of Lutheranism, therefore, the house postils, especially Die-

²⁴ Albert Freitag, 'Veit Dietrichs Anteil an der Lutherüberlieferung' in Karl Drescher (ed.), *Lutherstudien zur 4. Jahrhundertfeier der Reformation veröffentlicht von den Mitarbeitern der Weimarer Lutherausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1917), 171. For Dietrich's biography, see Bernhard Klaus, *Veit Dietrich: Leben und Werk* (Nürnberg: Verein für bayerische Kirchengeschichte, 1958); OER, s.v. 'Dietrich, Veit'.

²⁵ Brecht, *Luther*, 2.204.

²⁶ *WA* 52.1.4-6.

²⁷ Poach's version appeared more than a decade after Luther's death. In so doing, he charged Dietrich with numerous inaccuracies, and modern editors likewise have agreed that Dietrich did not publish an exact copy of Luther's original preaching. For background to both versions, see the introduction by Georg Buchwald in *WA* 52.viii-xii. The Weimar edition also provides data on the relationship between Dietrich's edition and Rörer's still extant manuscripts. See, also, Emanuel Hirsch's introductory comments to each version in *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, vol. 7: *Predigten* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1962) 7.69, 84.

²⁸ Frymire, 546-48.

trich's version, were available as models of Evangelical preaching and teaching; and Emil Hirsch has described them as the postils from which entire generations of Lutheran clergy learned about Luther's doctrine and preaching.²⁹

Modern scholarship is agreed that Dietrich did not publish a stenographic version of what Luther originally said in the house postils.³⁰ In reconstituting Luther's sermons from his own transcriptions, Dietrich often combined multiple homilies on a text into just one sermon and on a few occasions when Luther originals were lacking he used the preaching of others, including himself, to fill in the gaps. Therefore, as is often the case with certain kinds of Luther's works—lectures, sermons, and table talk—we are dealing with a highly edited version of the reformer, but that does not necessarily mean an inauthentic version, especially if Luther himself validated what was published as he did with Dietrich's version of the house postils. Nobody could have reasonably expected a word for word recounting of what Luther originally said, but they could expect what Dietrich in fact gave them—sermons on the texts of the church year that went back to Luther's own preaching—preaching transcribed at the time and later reconstructed and developed for pastoral purposes by Luther's close associate, Veit Dietrich.

For the very first edition, Luther prepared an introduction, in which he acknowledged, 'I have preached these sermons from time to time in my house for my household' after the example of the patriarchs and according to the command of Christ to the apostles that they preach first of all in houses, to which, Luther suggested, neighbors might also come.³¹ Though not feeling up to mounting the pulpit in the city church, Luther still felt responsible for leading his servants and children through the appointed gospel lessons for each Sunday and the main festivals of the church year.³² Also, according to Luther's introduction, he did not originally intend their publication. In fact, he didn't even realize that they were being taken down when he preached them. However, Veit Dietrich was recording them—at least, that is the claim that Dietrich set forth in his dedication to the city fathers of Nuremberg that accompanied their

²⁹ Hirsch, 69.

³⁰ Ebeling, 35-36; Hirsch, 69; Klaus, 351-53.

³¹ *WA* 52.1.3-4. There is an English translation of Dietrich's version of the house postils by Matthias Loy (and others), *Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year by Dr. Martin Luther* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1871) as well as a more recent one of Poach's version, Eugene F.A. Klug (ed.), *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). Loy's version is helpful but not always accurate, so the translation in this essay is my own.

³² The title for one of the first editions is, 'Hausspostil D. Martin Luther, uber die Sonntags, und der fürnembsten Fest Evangelia, durch das gantze Jar.' *WA* 52.xxx. In the table prepared for the Weimar edition, the editors have indicated only 8 sermons (out of 94) based on something other than a text from one of the four Gospels. See *WA* 52.xii-xxvi.

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publication in 1544, 'I alone recorded them . . . and have kept them until the present.'³³

Luther called them 'crumbs' and 'fragments',³⁴ but Dietrich saw them as a 'treasure' especially on account of their simplicity and brevity, perfect, he thought, for ordinary folk:

These sermons were presented in a fine, short, and simple fashion and are especially useful for young and simple people. In such circumstances, one must not employ great artistry but should present the doctrine briefly and simply and by means of words to impress them that they can grasp and notice something of the teaching.³⁵

Dietrich, also, thought they were especially appropriate for 'unlearned' clergy who often pastored poor peasant parishes. If such pastors lacked the training and skills to construct their own sermons, their churches should be content if only the pastors would read materials like the house postils that presented pure doctrine in an orderly, simple, and understandable way.³⁶ Dietrich was also concerned that heads of households who could not get to church on a Sunday would have appropriate materials to hear or read at home for the hallowing of the Sabbath with God's Word.³⁷ Finally, Dietrich offered the postils to those who still lived under bishops and clergy who had not yet embraced the reformation. By means of Luther's house sermons, people who had had no expectation of hearing true doctrine in their churches might at least read it at home.³⁸

A principal concern of Dietrich was 'pure doctrine'.³⁹ These sermons provided just that and, of course, had the advantage of coming from Luther himself. Dietrich praised him as the one through whom 'God has brought the Scriptures and knowledge of God to light, has abolished the terrible abuses that the papacy introduced into the Church, and has established both pure doctrine and right worship in the Church.'⁴⁰ Dietrich was convinced that exposure to these sermons would produce much 'fruit', viz., strengthen faith, improve lives, and so result in praising and thanking God.⁴¹

In short, Dietrich recommended the house postils as a simple but comprehensive presentation of the truths of the Christian religion, useful for the per-

³³ WA 52.5.38-39.

³⁴ 'brosamen' and 'brocken'. WA 52.2.5.

³⁵ WA 52.5.40-6.4.

³⁶ WA 52.6.18.

³⁷ WA 52.6.20-26.

³⁸ WA 52.7.34-8.13.

³⁹ WA 52.6.17.

⁴⁰ WA 52.5.21-25. For Luther's reputation among the Lutherans as God's special agent for reformation of the church, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520-1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁴¹ WA 52.6.17-19, 8.22-24.

sonal edification of their readers and hearers and for the professional labors of unskilled clergy.

Luther, the house postils and idolatry

So how do the house postils handle the theme of idolatry? As in the *Large Catechism*, Luther understands it broadly as encompassing all alternatives to faith in Jesus. Thus, idolatry becomes a principal topic in these sermons because justification by faith in Jesus Christ is the main theme. This understanding of the gospel—the forgiveness of sins on account of Jesus and appropriated only by faith—is the center of Luther's theology, generally,⁴² and these sermons that the reformer intended for the children and servants of his own household are no exception. From the first sermon to the last, Luther preaches the gospel. In the first of the series, a homily on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21.1-9), Luther describes Jesus as the 'Righteous One and Savior, who shall bring with himself righteousness and salvation, attack sin and death, be an enemy of sin and of death' so that 'those who believe in him and accept him as their king . . . , their sins will be forgiven and death will not harm them but they will have eternal life.'⁴³

For the last Sunday of the church year, the text is Matthew 5.1-12, the Beatitudes. Luther understands this text as a description of Christians, their lives and attitudes; nevertheless, he still finds opportunity to present Jesus as Savior. The first Beatitude, for example, speaks of the 'poor in spirit', i.e., according to Luther, the person who 'on account of his sins has no peace either day or night'. But God wants 'to comfort such a person with his grace, that he may not despair on account of such fears; but rather that through his holy gospel, the Lord Christ may shine into his heart with the result that he will have consolation and joy and inherit the kingdom of heaven.'⁴⁴ Similarly, when interpreting those who are 'pure in heart' a few verses later, Luther understands such people not as pure in themselves but as sincerely devoted to the gospel:

Therefore, we should hold on diligently to the Word and permit it alone to dwell in and enlighten our hearts, so that we will see God rightly and be certain that he is a kind and gracious God and even though no one is innocent before him, nevertheless he will forgive our sins and save us forever for the sake of Christ.⁴⁵

As one might readily expect, Luther has no trouble finding justification by faith in texts like John 3.16-21 (for the Monday after Pentecost):

⁴² See my essay, 'The Evangelical Character of Martin Luther's Faith' in Kenneth J. Stewart and Michael Haykin (eds), *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 171-98.

⁴³ *WA* 52.11.35-12.2.

⁴⁴ *WA* 52.554.8, 24-27.

⁴⁵ *WA* 52.560.26.

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For just as God has given such a treasure [the gift of the Son of God] through love and mercy, we therefore obtain such a treasure and can only obtain it through faith. To enter a cloister, or to do this or that cannot earn it, for our works have nothing to do with such a great treasure. The only thing that is appropriate is for a person through faith to hold out his hands; and just as God through love becomes the giver, so we through faith in Christ become the receiver.⁴⁶

But Luther can also find his version of the gospel in much more legalistic texts like those in which Jesus told his disciples how to live, e.g., Luke 6.36-42 (for the fourth Sunday after Trinity) or Matthew 5.20-26 (for the sixth Sunday after Trinity). The former text instructs disciples in the virtue of mercy and the dangers of hypocrisy, but Luther in the very first paragraph of his homily reminds his hearers that good works are a consequence of justification, 'For if we have become believers and now have the name and are called Christians, who have been saved by the Lord Christ from sin, from death and all evil, then we also should lead a new life and do what God desires from us.'⁴⁷

The latter text is from that portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which the Lord sharpens the demands of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' In this case, Luther not only begins his sermon as previously with a reminder that his hearers are already the recipients of God's undeserved mercy so they should act like Christians, he also interprets the Lord's demand for a righteousness that 'exceeds' that of the scribes and Pharisees at the beginning of the text (v. 20) as something that *cannot* be accomplished, a law therefore that demonstrates the futility of relying on one's own righteousness and the need for relying on Christ.⁴⁸ Luther then proceeds to a clear statement of justification, 'Whoever knows that such sins [i.e., a heart full of evil lusts and sins] have been forgiven, that person is righteous, not for his own sake because he is a sinner; but on account of grace, such sins have been forgiven through faith in Christ.'⁴⁹

Luther's preaching is textual. He always considers the actual words of the Scripture text placed before him, but it is also evangelical for he also always finds the opportunity to proclaim the good news of forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, received by faith alone. But in presenting his version of the gospel, Luther also describes alternatives to the good news to which his hearers might be tempted—everything from monasticism to money. Whether Luther uses the term or not (and frequently he does), alternatives to Jesus are the essence of what Luther understands by idolatry.

⁴⁶ WA 52.331.34-332.2.

⁴⁷ WA 52.383.26-29.

⁴⁸ This so-called 'theological' function of the Law to reveal sin in contrast to its 'civic' use in regulating temporal society is another great theme in Luther's theology. See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 270-73.

⁴⁹ WA 52.406.22-24.

Luther says this explicitly in his Third Sermon for Christmas, devoted to the praise of the angels (Lk. 2.13-14), 'The dear angels meant to say: Before this Child was born, things were far different. There was nothing going on in this world except blasphemy [*Gotteslesterung*] and idolatry [*abgötterey*]; for everything that is outside of and without Christ, no matter how glorious and great it may be, is nothing but blasphemy.' But blasphemy and idolatry are more than just ignorance about who the true God is. For knowing Christ means knowing, first and foremost, that God is merciful to sinners.

But if God is supposed to be God, that is, held and honored by the people as God, it must be done through this Child. For in this way only can people learn and know for certain that God is a gracious, merciful, and kind God, since he has not spared his only-begotten Son but has sent him to become a human being for our sakes.⁵⁰

With this gospel as his premise, Luther proceeds to indict the world before the birth of Christ, including God's chosen people, as so 'full of idolatry' that they worshipped—'one here, one there, in as many places as there were hills or even beautiful trees in the land'—with all kinds of works, sacrifices, fastings, and sufferings. But this served no one 'except the devil and his plans, for they gave to him the honor that belonged to God'.⁵¹

But idolatry is not just a thing of the past. Luther finds it in contemporary society as well, 'the world is full of idolatry'; but he does not single out false gods and their images like those of the pagans.⁵² Instead, he points to the fact that 'people worship money, possessions, and similar things. . . . For there go kings, princes, merchants, and farmers after this rough log [*klotz*], this shameful mammon, this miserable helper, to which they ascribe everything.'⁵³ But earthly wealth is just one of the things that people use as substitutes for God. Luther, also, talks about pride, going all the way back to the Garden of Eden, 'The human race is afflicted with desire for praise. The devil in paradise persuaded Adam and Eve that they wanted to be like God, and this still adheres to us. Therefore, if God gives skill, money, property, or power, if he presents to a wife or a maid a beautiful belt or dress, everyone expects it to be praised.'⁵⁴ Now, however, the Christmas angels point us to the source of all blessings that we might worship God aright:

⁵⁰ *WA* 52.53.13-21.

⁵¹ *WA* 52.53.30-36.

⁵² Of course, in other places he does. For example, in connection with the Song of Simeon (Lk. 2.25-32) Luther mentions the situation of the Gentiles, 'idolatry, blasphemy, and all kinds of degeneration and sins' (*WA* 52:162.29-30). In an Easter Sermon (Matt. 28), Luther explains that apart from Christ the little spark of knowledge that people have by nature about God is soon lost and they fall into 'error and idolatry' (*WA* 256.38-257.1).

⁵³ *WA* 52.54.2-5.

⁵⁴ *WA* 52.54.25-29.

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For all who accept the angels' song will say: My righteousness, my holiness, my wisdom, skill, money, and power are all nothing. The child Jesus is everything. Therefore, God receives his honor that he alone is our strength, confidence, joy, our money and wealth and that we with our whole hearts put our trust, consolation, confidence, and joy in him alone.⁵⁵

True worship is to acknowledge God alone as the giver of all good things, especially the gospel, 'that we are free from the devil, free from and unencumbered by our sins'.⁵⁶ But it is idolatry to look anywhere else.

Throughout the house postils, Luther warns against alternatives to Jesus.⁵⁷ Sometimes he uses the term 'idolatry' (*Abgöttere*), sometimes not, but the point in every case is to describe something that detracts from the true God and the true way of salvation. As indicated above, such alternatives can include real blessings from God which people then abuse by placing their trust in them. Such things have good and appropriate uses, but are routinely perverted into objects of trust.

There are other 'idols,' however, that are not so much perversions as they are wrong from the start. From this perspective, Luther regularly cites the papacy and its misguided religious activities.⁵⁸ These works are never good. 'Papists,' Luther complains, 'hear the gospel but don't accept it. . . . They are not satisfied with this Savior but go after other "saviors" and rely upon them.'⁵⁹ Accordingly, Luther often indicts medieval (papal) religious practices as forms of idolatry, ways of salvation other than faith in Jesus.⁶⁰ On one occasion, Luther uses the humility and preaching of John the Baptist (John 1.19-28, Fourth Sunday in Advent) to indict the papal system. Luther begins his homily with

⁵⁵ *WA* 52.54.31-35.

⁵⁶ *WA* 52.55.8-9.

⁵⁷ Another excellent example is Luther's second sermon for New Year's Day (*WA* 52.82-88) which Luther devotes to the name 'Jesus' that signifies him as the world's only Savior. Similarly, Luther's sermon on the Parable of the Sower (Sexagesima Sunday, Lk. 8.4-15) gives him the opportunity to discuss alternatives to the true faith in connection with the different kinds of soil. The Temptation of Jesus (First Sunday in Lent, Matt. 4.1-11) also provides Luther with an occasion to discuss a wide variety of alternatives to Jesus (*WA* 52.171-77). His sermon for Laetare Sunday on the Feeding of the Five Thousand (John 6.1-15) presents the challenges of providing for material well-being while still trusting solely in God and his Word (*WA* 52:192-198).

⁵⁸ Luther came to the conclusion that the pope was the Antichrist quite early in the reformation largely on account of his hostility to Luther's doctrine of justification and his oppression of people's consciences through a theology of works. For Luther and the papacy, see Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

⁵⁹ *WA* 52.48.38-40.

⁶⁰ Luther frequently uses the word 'idolatry [*Abgöttere*]' for such practices. Here are some examples: *WA* 52.69.1-11, 70.1-3, 125.9-25, 159.9-10, 177.3-7, 191.10-11, 196.1-3, 212.13-15, 219.29-37, 221.1-5, 233.7-12, 257.38-259.5, 532.37, 533.39-41, 534.29-32.

yet another affirmation of Christ, the world's only Savior, 'through whom alone all patriarchs, prophets, and apostles have been saved from the beginning of the world'. But, immediately, Luther adds that too many reject Christ, preferring their own 'way to go to heaven', e.g., entering a cloister, becoming a monk, fasting, or sleeping on the ground.⁶¹

In this sermon, John the Baptist, himself, is Luther's great example of the inability of works to save. Addressing himself especially to the clergy, 'pope, bishops, priests, monks, and all the world,' Luther challenges them, 'be as pious and holy as you want, you will not be as holy as John.' Then Luther indicts them, 'But they do not want to let the holiness of Christ be their treasure the way John did. He throws all his own righteousness away and does not value it as much as an old rag with which one wipes a dirty shoe.'⁶² Instead of following John in rejecting all forms of works righteousness, the church leaders of Luther's day have invented a wide variety of 'meritorious' works. Among those to which the papists direct people instead of Christ, Luther enumerates: 'entering a cloister, saying mass, conducting masses for the dead, vigils, paying for worship, going on pilgrimages, and buying indulgences'.⁶³ Works like these cannot save.

Instead, Luther maintains, 'becoming a monk or a priest, entering a cloister, and whatever works that can be mentioned similar to these, belong to the devil and in hell'. With such works people expect to merit salvation, but in reality they are 'denying Christ and mocking him'. Through their 'cloister life' they may aim at heaven but they will find it a heaven 'where the flames and fire burst out the windows'.⁶⁴

In addition to John the Baptist in this sermon, Luther mentions 'Paul, Peter, and other saints' who likewise could not save themselves with their own works and righteousness. They, too, had to rely on Christ.⁶⁵ The saints and their cult are still another part of the papal system that Luther preaches against in his house postils, but this is one area of medieval religion that Luther tries to rescue by presenting the saints as examples of true sanctity, i.e., faith in Christ and the works that follow.⁶⁶ So, here in this sermon on John 1.19-28, in which John the

⁶¹ WA 52.30.27-28, 31-33.

⁶² WA 52.33.22-24, 30-32.

⁶³ WA 52.33.7-9.

⁶⁴ WA 52.35.19-21, 24, 34-35. In his sermon on the temptation of Jesus (Invocavit Sunday, Matt. 4.1-11; WA 52.175.36-176.19), Luther identifies monasticism with idolatry. In explaining the third temptation, Luther notes the devil's efforts to lead people into idolatry [*Abgötterey*] through externals that people admire and honor though against God's Word, such as abstaining from marriage and raising children, wearing distinctive clothes, fasting, making pilgrimages, and entering a cloister to separate from the world.

⁶⁵ WA 52.35.27-30.

⁶⁶ In 1530, the Lutherans had made this same point in the *Augsburg Confession* (21.1): 'It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith

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Baptist humbles himself in comparison to Christ, Luther, also, cites Paul (Phil. 3.7-8) who described all his works as 'dirt and filth [*dreck und kot*]'. This, says Luther, 'is speaking horribly clear about our holy living'.⁶⁷ So, Luther draws the conclusion from the example of Paul that even if in the eyes of the world, our life is exemplary, when it comes to eternal life, we must hold entirely and exclusively to Christ and his holiness.

If Luther were at all inclined to admonish his hearers regarding the dangers of sacred images, it would be in connection with the saints whose statues and relics were popular objects of veneration in the medieval world. But Luther does not. Instead—as with other forms of 'idolatry' in the house postils—he speaks against trusting the saints instead of Christ. One can find references to this effect throughout the house postils, but an early discussion of this kind of idolatry occurs in connection with Luther's Christmas preaching. In commenting on the angel's announcement to the shepherds of the miraculous birth in Bethlehem, Luther emphasizes the Christ-child's uniqueness as the Savior. That being the case, Luther concludes, then no one else is the Savior, 'not his mother Mary, St Peter, or St Paul. Neither are Augustine, Francis, and Dominic with their "rules".' And yet, Luther continues, 'up till now in the papacy people have been directed to the intercession of the saints, to monasticism, and other things. But how does this fit with the preaching of the angel?'⁶⁸ Of course, from Luther's perspective, it doesn't fit at all.⁶⁹

But if the saints are not heaven's helpers, they are earthly examples. As we have already seen, Luther employed this idea when describing the humility of John the Baptist and of St. Paul, but he does it elsewhere as well. A revealing instance of this is his pair of sermons for 'The Festival of the Purification of Mary or Candlemas [*Liechtmessen*]'.⁷⁰ In the first of these, Mary is presented simply as an example of obedience—not an intercessor and certainly not the

may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us.'

⁶⁷ *WA* 52.34.33-34.

⁶⁸ *WA* 52.50.39-51.4. A few lines further, Luther mentions, specifically, the perversity of appealing to the Virgin Mary when the gospel and even Christmas songs identify Christ as the Savior (*WA* 52.51.36). Elsewhere, Luther is horrified by the practice of pronouncing absolution in the name of Mary, the apostles, or other saints (*WA* 52.265.26-36).

⁶⁹ Luther frequently rejects the intercession of the saints. Here are some examples: *WA* 52.86.22, 89.24-33, 170.8-13, 212.13-15, 219.34-35, 233.10-11, 535.26-30.

⁷⁰ This is one of three Marian festivals for which Dietrich provided Luther sermons. The others are the Annunciation and the Visitation. All three, of course, have a biblical basis and the last was offered as a replacement for the Assumption [*Hymmelfahrt*] of Mary which Luther describes as 'full of idolatry and without foundation in Scripture' (*WA* 52.681.6-70).

queen of heaven.⁷¹ Along with her Son, Mary submits herself to the law of Moses. Luther uses their behavior as a rebuke to our own, 'Such examples . . . should be preached in order that we might be ashamed of the fact that we . . . do not do what we are supposed when he [the Child Jesus] has done for our sakes what Moses commands although rightfully he was not required to do it.'⁷² At this point, Mary drops out of the sermon and Luther proceeds to discuss at length the significance of first born sons to which the mosaic law in the text applied.

In the second sermon, Luther focuses on Simeon and his song (Lk. 2.25-32) and presents him as an example of faith, 'All of his hope was based on the conviction that God would soon keep his promise and send the Lord Christ.' Luther, also, believes that the Holy Spirit worked such confidence in Simeon 'undoubtedly' from reading the Word of God (Genesis 49 and the prophecies of Daniel) and concluding that the coming of Christ was imminent.⁷³ Finally, Luther interprets Simeon's words as a confession of the gospel, 'This child is a savior from sin, death, and hell. . . . The fact that Simeon calls this child only by the name "savior" must mean . . . that there can be no other savior. . . . Whoever holds to another savior must be deceived and remain in sin and death.'⁷⁴

This is Luther's regular way of treating the saints in the house postils. They exemplify the Christian life and the mercy of God in Christ. Luther's church calendar retained several (biblical) saints days, so Dietrich included 21 additional homilies in order to complete the year—from St. Andrew's Day to St. Michael's.⁷⁵ Luther routinely calls these saints examples [*Exempel*] in his sermons. Thus, Andrew is an example of 'firmly holding to God's Word'; Thomas first for his unbelief but then for his 'glorious confession of Christ'; James as a warning against false security since 'sin and weakness' strike even the best Christians; and Matthew for how Christ wants to be gracious to 'all troubled sinners'.⁷⁶ Mary Magdalene teaches the nature of true repentance and how one

⁷¹ Luther sharply rejects appeals to Mary and depending on her intercession and indicts the pope for wanting to make 'the mother equal to the Son in everything' (*WA* 52.681.27-31).

⁷² *WA* 52.150.10-14.

⁷³ *WA* 52.154.26-155.6.

⁷⁴ *WA* 52.158.20-27.

⁷⁵ According to Buchwald, 'Einleitung,' xi, Dietrich included homilies for St. Bartholomew and for the Ascension of our Lord since these were in the Nuremberg calendar though not in Wittenberg's. He may have based them on Luther materials but they did not originate in Luther's house preaching. They have not been printed in volume 52 of the Weimar Edition.

⁷⁶ *WA* 52.565.4, 572.7-8, 674.2-3, 706.35-707.1.

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can receive the forgiveness of sins;⁷⁷ and Stephen shows the faithful how to find consolation and hope in the midst of persecution.⁷⁸

Without dwelling on medieval abuses,⁷⁹ Luther used his preaching to redefine the role of the saints in the church. They were definitely not intercessors. Instead, they were real people—like his hearers—who personified what it meant to be a Christian, i.e., someone who recognized their sin, believed in Christ alone for their salvation, and then served God in this life, surrounded by trials and temptations, until at last delivered safely into heaven.

Conclusion

As in all of his preaching, Luther's main concern was to proclaim justification by faith in its various ramifications. But at the center of justification was always the person and work of Jesus. Therefore, Luther was always on his guard against anything that threatened to obscure or replace Christ as the world's only Savior—whether the abuses of medieval religion or the perennial temptation offered by temporal wealth. Trusting in *anything* other than Jesus was idolatry. There simply was no alternative to him.

⁷⁷ *WA* 52.664.21-22

⁷⁸ *WA* 588.1-4.

⁷⁹ They surface only occasionally. One interesting example is Luther's description and denunciation of putting one's trust in candles consecrated in connection with the Purification of Mary (*WA* 52.164.6-32). Another interesting passage is one in which Luther discusses the 'lying wonders' performed by agents of the devil, who pretends to be afraid of candles, salt, and water in order to lead people into idolatry and superstition (*WA* 52.191.3-20). In another place, he indicts confraternities for—among other things—distributing the 'good works' of dead saints (*WA* 52.258.1-2). Similarly, the pope through indulgences (*WA* 52.263.23-24).