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Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin on the Significance of Christ's Death

John A. Maxfield

A systematic theologian may have the luxury of treating Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin as pure mind, succinctly sorting out their differences on the atonement. By training and inclination, however, the present writer is more a historian than a systematician, and even his interest in church history is more in the area of the complexities of its characters and the contingencies of their various contexts than in the pure history of dogma. What is of particular historical interest here are the pastoral concerns that brought each of these reformers to his break with the Roman Church and to the evangelical convictions that shaped his reformatory work. Here the historian detects more in the way of similarities than of differences. Therefore, while I will later explore the critical differences on Christ's person that shaped the understanding of his death in the thought of these reformers and, more importantly, led to disunity in the Reformation over the understanding of how the benefits of Christ's atoning death are bestowed upon believers for salvation, the main thesis of this article is that the atonement wrought by the death of Christ is at the center of the *coherence* of the Protestant Reformation, and that confessional Lutherans, even those who bristle somewhat at the very term "Protestant," should not ignore or deny this coherence.

Recent scholarship of the sixteenth-century Reformation has tended to focus so much on the diversity and divisions of the period that there is a tendency to speak of "Reformations" in the plural rather than "Reformation" as a coherent, definable event.¹ By doing so, church historians have perhaps unwittingly played into the hands of social historians—even materialist or Marxist historians—who de-emphasize or even deny the historical significance of great ideas and great men in the sweep of human history, and who therefore often deny that the Reformation is a definable, significant period of the history of Western civilization. If the sixteenth century was marked not by *the* Reformation but rather by a multiplicity of reform movements, then the question must be posed as to what marks the period as different from any other period in

¹ See, e.g., Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

the history of Western civilization, which can be viewed from the rise of Christendom out of the Roman world as one movement of reform after another.²

Reformation historian Scott Hendrix has responded to this trend of seeing only plurality and division in the sixteenth-century movements for reform with a recent book focusing on the *coherence* of the Reformation.³ Hendrix argues that the various divergent movements of reform in the era—from the Erasmian reformers, who never broke with the Roman Church, to Luther, to the city reformers like Zwingli and Calvin, to the radicals like Münzer and the Anabaptists, to the reform of Roman Catholicism culminating in the Council of Trent—had a common agenda of re-Christianizing a Christendom that had devolved by the late Middle Ages into something that was not just institutionally corrupt or theologically flawed, but fundamentally less than Christian. The significance of the Reformation as a distinct period of human history is that in this temporal space of about thirty to fifty years, in the geographic space of central and western Europe, Christian doctrine, governance, worship, piety, and institutions were reformed, restructured, and reinvigorated in ways that dramatically changed Western civilization and indeed the world—ways that continue even now to shape not only our Christianity but also our very concepts of modernity and civilization.

Here I would like to explore how for the Lutheran Reformation, and likewise for the city reformers who gave birth and shape to Reformed Christianity,⁴ the atonement through the death of Christ was at the center of their reformatory work. All three of these reformers criticized the Roman Church for obscuring the significance of Christ's death in its doctrine, liturgy, and piety. All three defined the church's mission of

² See esp. Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). For the Reformation as springing out of the myriad of reform movements in the later Middle Ages, see, e.g., Steven E. Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale, 1980).

³ Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁴ Most historians, while not ignoring the crucial differences between the Lutheran Reformation and the city reform movements that developed into the Reformed confessions, nevertheless consider them together under terms like “magisterial Reformation,” emphasizing the role of civil authorities in implementing concrete reforms, and contrasting these with the various “radical” and spiritualist movements of the sixteenth century on the one hand, and Catholic reform culminating in the Council of Trent on the other.

proclaiming the gospel as announcing to sinners the forgiveness of sins and the hope of salvation brought about through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate. All three were willing—though reluctantly and only after their confession of the gospel and their efforts toward reform of the Western Catholic Church were rejected and persecuted by the papal magisterium at its various levels—to witness discord and eventually the division of Western Catholicism because they believed that the central mission of the church to proclaim the good news of the atonement through the death of Christ had been obscured and even persecuted within the Catholic Church of their time.

I. A Common Background and Context: The Intellectual Movement of Humanism

There was also commonality between these three reformers in the impulses of their time that led to reformation. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin all shared the influence of the intellectual movement called humanism. So central was this movement to the Reformation of the sixteenth century that a generation ago Bernd Moeller could successfully defend the stark thesis, "No humanism, no Reformation."⁵ Yet among historians, including Moeller, there has been quite a bit of confusion regarding the definition of humanism. Consequently, the close relationship between the Reformation and humanism has sometimes been described as the result of a misunderstanding: humanists like Erasmus were at first enthusiastic about Luther's call to reform, but then grew skeptical about the theological radicalism of his agenda, eventually breaking with Luther and the Reformation. Some historians have viewed this break as a break between humanism and the Protestant Reformation.

Humanism, however, was generally a movement for reform—intellectual, pedagogical, societal, and institutional. When the older generation of humanists like Erasmus generally decided against Luther and his drive for theological and ecclesiastical reform, while a younger generation of humanists in central Europe, such as Melanchthon and later Calvin, more frequently took up the cause of the Protestant Reformation, there was indeed a generation gap.⁶ But there was not a decision against

⁵ Bernd Moeller, "The German Humanists and the Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Imperial Cities and the Reformation: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H.C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1982), 19–38.

⁶ On this generation gap, see Lewis W. Spitz, "The Third Generation of German Renaissance Humanists," in *The Reformation: Basic Interpretations*, 2nd ed., ed. and with an Introduction by Lewis W. Spitz (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 44–59.

reformation and for humanism and vice-versa. Rather, it became clear that humanism was an ideologically diverse movement whose adherents found themselves in every party of the sixteenth-century religious divisions while retaining their commitment to humanism.

That commitment was the belief that scholarship—specifically, the liberal arts, especially the study of ancient languages—could make a vital impact for the betterment of life. Humanists shared the slogan *Ad fontes*—to the sources!—and for humanists committed to Christianity that meant study of the Scriptures in the original languages. For Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and other humanists adopting the Reformation, it came also to mean that reform of theology and church life had to be steered by the teaching of Scripture as the highest authority—what came to be known as the *sola scriptura* principle of the Protestant Reformation.

II. Humanism and the Protestant Reformation

I have here purposely included Luther among the humanists. It is true that Luther's theological education at Erfurt was chiefly an education in Scholastic theology. His humanist training may have been second-rate, but Luther's growing commitment to the intellectual movement of humanism can no longer be called into question.⁷ This is true even though Luther bitingly criticized humanists like Erasmus and, later, other Christian humanists who were championing the study of the Hebrew Old Testament by way of pure philology, influenced by the exegesis of rabbinic Judaism.⁸ Luther's personal discovery of the gospel was so tied to his experience of crisis and faith that Bernd Moeller called it not a humanist discovery but a "monastic discovery"⁹—yet Luther's development as a theologian and reformer was deeply influenced by Erasmus's Greek New Testament, by his own study of the Scriptures in the original languages, and finally by his careful study of the sources of church history available to him during the process of his trial, his debate with John Eck at Leipzig, and throughout his career as professor at the University of Wittenberg. Luther's commitment to a reform of studies at Wittenberg along humanist lines has also been

⁷ On Luther's development as a humanist, see Helmar Junghans, *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1985); on Luther as a humanist in his view of history see John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies 80 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 141–179.

⁸ On Luther's critique of humanist biblical study, especially for its dependence on rabbinic Judaism for the study of the Old Testament, see Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*, 48–59.

⁹ Moeller, "German Humanists," 23.

well established.¹⁰ In short, Luther's break with Erasmus on the freedom of the will was just that—a break with Erasmus on the freedom of the will—and no break with humanism.

Zwingli and Calvin can be described similarly to Luther, excepting of course Luther's monastic experience and his deeply personal discovery of the gospel. Zwingli's humanism is well known. He was deeply influenced by Erasmus's erudition, wrote with deep affection not only of Christian antiquity but also of classical antiquity, and had a deep admiration for Plato's philosophy. Zwingli guided the reform movement in Zurich by his understanding of the Bible and his study of the early church fathers—just as we would expect from a Christian humanist. Nevertheless, Zwingli firmly rejected Erasmus's belief in the freedom of the will for the same reason that Luther did, namely, because to posit the freedom of the will and the capacity of man to contribute something to his own salvation is to obscure the absolute necessity and all-encompassing significance of the atonement through the death of Christ. For if fallen man has the inherent, natural capacity to "do what is within him," and thus by using the power of the human will to contribute meritorious works of love toward his salvation, as Scholastic theology had concluded—and here Erasmus agreed—then the death of the Son of God on the cross has only a partial and not a total significance for the salvation of the sinner. Luther, Zwingli, and later Calvin all came to precisely the same conclusion from their study of the Bible: Christian teaching at its very heart is the proclamation that the Son of God became a man in order to fulfill the law of God perfectly and then suffer and die on a cross as the perfect Lamb of God in a substitutionary, sacrificial atonement for sinners. The justification of the sinner before God is accomplished not through a free will cooperating with God's grace, contributing its essential part to the process of conversion and producing meritorious works of love, but by receiving the benefits of Christ's atonement through faith alone.

Perusing the chapter headings in a recent study of John Calvin's doctrine of the atonement conveys the coherence of Protestant teaching that Lutheran pastors should also recognize as familiar to their own confession. First, the starting point of the atonement is the free love of God in Jesus Christ; second, the prerequisite of the atonement is the incarnation; third, Christ has a threefold office of Prophet, King, and Priest;

¹⁰ See Timothy J. Wengert, "Higher Education and Vocation: The University of Wittenberg (1517–1533) between Renaissance and Reform," in *The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation*, ed. John A. Maxfield, Pieper Lectures 11 (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute; Northville, SD: Luther Academy, 2008), 1–21.

fourth, Christ is the obedient Second Adam; fifth, Christ is the Victor over sin, death, and the devil; sixth, Christ is our legal substitute; seventh, Christ is our sacrifice; eighth, Christ is our merit; and finally ninth, Christ is our example—specifically, the supreme example of faith in God in the midst of human suffering.¹¹ All of these are vital themes of the atonement also in Lutheran theology.¹² In fact, even the one issue that has come to characterize the difference between Lutheran and Reformed theology regarding the atonement—namely, the extent of its significance—is a development of later Reformed theology and is not worked out in the theology of Zwingli or Calvin,¹³ although in important ways the doctrine of predestination in these two Reformed theologians perhaps led directly to this development. Nevertheless, both Zwingli and Calvin, like Luther, taught that the atonement through the death of Christ was a universal and not a limited atonement.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the Lutheran Formula of Concord in its condemnation of Calvinism never condemns the Reformed doctrine regarding the atonement; indeed, it does not identify the teaching

¹¹ Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1983).

¹² Gustaf Aulén's attempt in *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1961) to describe Luther's understanding of the atonement strictly within the *Christus victor* motif and in opposition to the theme of *satisfactio* is unsuccessful, I believe. Like Calvin after him, Luther's understanding incorporates all the major motifs—legal substitute whose death satisfies and propitiates the righteous wrath of God against sin, victor over the devil, and example of faith in the midst of suffering. Regarding theories, Ian D. Kingston Siggins, in *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, Yale Publications in Religion 14 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), concludes that "Luther has no theory of the atonement" (109; emphasis added) and that "only the timid and affrighted conscience knows how to say, 'Christ died for me.' [Luther] needs no theory of the atonement to interpret to himself what the 'for me' means" (111).

¹³ Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement*, 90.

¹⁴ There is some disagreement on this among historians of Reformed theology. See G.M. Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1675)* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997), who concludes that Calvin sometimes "spoke of redemption as limited by election, while at other times as unrestricted [universal]. In this way the reformer left to his successors a theology that was indeed a *complexio oppositorum*, and therefore inherently unstable" (34). Both Calvin's defenders and his detractors have posed a consistency and systematic harmony in his thought that is perhaps not there. Among his biographers, William J. Bouwsma, in *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5, 230–234, has denied that Calvin was a systematic thinker. For an analysis that posits Calvin's teaching of union with Christ as the means of salvation and therefore reconciles specific election with universal atonement, see Kevin Dixon Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin*, Studies in Biblical Literature 48 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

of a limited atonement as a threat to pure teaching of the gospel in the many specifics of Calvinist teaching that it does condemn.

III. Divergences on Christ's Person and Work between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin

Where Luther did combat Zwingli and the Swiss and South German theologians allied with him, and where later Lutherans combated crypto-Calvinism and the Philippist party in the midst of *discordia* amongst adherents of the Augsburg Confession, the matter under controversy was closely related to the atonement and its significance in Christianity. The dispute broke out over the understanding of the Lord's Supper, but it turned on the understanding of Christ's person.¹⁵ At issue between Lutherans and the Reformed is not the atonement itself but the way in which the benefits of the death of Christ are communicated to individual Christians for their personal redemption and salvation. At the heart of the difference between Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin is not the propitiation of God's wrath and reconciliation with sinners, and the consequent objective or universal justification of a humanity dead in sin, but rather the means through which God accomplishes the subjective or individual justification of a specific sinner, conveying Christ's righteousness to and bestowing salvation upon that sinner. In presenting this crucial difference between these three reformers, I will treat Zwingli and Calvin first, only because I wish to devote the most detailed attention to how Luther proclaims the atonement for the salvation of the sinner, thus following the example of Jesus and the wedding host at Cana by saving the best for last.

Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525) has been called the pioneering, original systematic presentation of the Protestant faith.¹⁶ Addressing the French monarch Francis I, Zwingli first defines the word "religion" by turning in typical humanist fashion to the use of the word in antiquity, in this case, in the works of Cicero. Religion is about God and man, and therefore about discerning God and knowing man. Zwingli

¹⁵ For a thorough dogmatic treatment of Luther's christology, see Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ. Stages and Themes of the Reformer's Christology*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982).

¹⁶ Willim Walker Rockwell, Preface to Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), iii. Rockwell does not fail to note that Philip Melancthon's *Loci Theologici* predates Zwingli's *Commentary* by four years, but he opines that Melancthon's text "does not deal with the full-orbed Protestant faith, emphasizing rather special points in controversy," and that it cannot be described as an original system, based as it is on the sequence of topics in St. Paul's epistle to the Romans.

criticizes as false religion "that the [Scholastic] theologians have adduced from philosophy as to what God is" and turns instead to the Bible, for "we wish to learn out of His own mouth what God is, lest we become corrupt and do abominable works."¹⁷ It is chiefly through the Bible's testimony about God's Son that Christians come to know God:

For this purpose, then, He delivered up His Son for us, that we, seeing that what was highest as well in heaven as on earth had been made ours, might be sure that nothing could be denied us. For He who has given His Son has given His all. . . . This will, perhaps, be enough to show the untaught that as God is the fountain-source of all good, so He is bountiful and by no means niggardly or inexorable, but is so lavish and prodigal of Himself for the benefit of those who enjoy Him that He delights to be taken, and held, and possessed by all.¹⁸

Religion, then, is between God and man and consists of the knowledge of God and of man. But what is the content of this religion? Here Zwingli turns to the doctrine of creation, specifically of man in God's image, and then to the fall and to the first promise of the gospel, Genesis 3:15. The Christian religion is all about the fulfillment of this gospel, when "our Creator sent one to satisfy His justice by offering Himself for us—not an angel, nor a man, but His own Son, and clothed in flesh, in order that neither His majesty might deter us from intercourse with Him, nor His lowliness deprive us of hope."¹⁹ This Son of God, through whom man was created, born of the ever-virgin Mary—this Son of God "in whom there is no sin, and from whom we had gone astray," appeased the divine justice against sin and sinners by bearing what sinners "had deserved through sinning." So clearly does Zwingli proclaim the atonement worked by the God-man. The gospel proclaims "that sins are remitted in the name of Christ; and no heart ever received tidings more glad."²⁰

Zwingli, however, separates himself from the sacramental theology of both the Roman Church and the Lutheran Reformation when he discusses Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are symbols only and cannot convey to the sinner the purification for sin won by the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross. "Hence it is manifest," Zwingli writes, "that the famous baptizing of Christ by John in the water is nothing but an initiatory rite, and not a washing away of the filth of the soul, for that is the function of

¹⁷ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 56–58, 62.

¹⁸ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 74.

¹⁹ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 87–89, 106.

²⁰ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 114, 119. On Zwingli's biblical defense of the perpetual virginity of Mary, see 112–114.

the blood of Christ alone." A true believer, receiving the mark of Baptism, will be ashamed "openly to defile [himself] with the old vices."²¹ But this work of repentance in the inward man is worked by God directly, not through Baptism. Zwingli writes:

I heartily wish this word "sacrament" had never been adopted by the Germans without being translated into German. For when they hear the word "sacrament" they think of something great and holy which by its own power can free the conscience from sin. Others again, seeing the error of this, have said it was the symbol of a sacred thing. This, indeed, I should not entirely disapprove, unless they also insisted that when you perform the sacrament outwardly a purification is certainly performed inwardly. A third group has asserted that a sacrament is a sign which is given for the purpose of rendering the recipient sure that what is signified by the sacrament has now been accomplished. I do not like to differ from great men, especially at this time when they are so flourishing and are writing with such success that they seem to have clothed the world in a new guise and to have changed it from a rude to a very refined state. But I beg them to consider what I am here going to adduce in the same manner in which I always weigh their own writings.²²

This third group is of course the Lutherans. Zwingli took the polemic against sacraments working *ex opere operato*, from the mere performance of the deed even apart from faith, and extended it to the Lutherans, who said that faith was indeed necessary to receive the benefits of the sacrament but that in the sacrament itself God is at work efficaciously, conveying the forgiveness of sins. Zwingli writes:

They are wrong, therefore . . . who think that sacraments have any cleansing power. The second group [that is, the Lutherans], seeing this, taught that sacraments are signs which when they are performed make a man sure about what is performed within him. But this was a vain invention; as if . . . when a man is wet with the water something happens in him which he could not possibly have known unless water had been poured over him at the same time!²³

For Zwingli, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not means through which the Holy Spirit regenerates, bestows and nurtures

²¹ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 121.

²² Zwingli, *Commentary*, 179.

²³ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 182. Zwingli continues in this section by condemning the Anabaptists, who refused Baptism "to all who have not previously so well learned and confessed the faith that they can respond to all its articles" (183).

faith, and gives the promise of the forgiveness of sins, thus conveying to the sinner the benefits of Christ's atonement. Rather, the sacraments are solely "signs or ceremonials . . . by which a man proves to the Church that he either aims to be, or is, a soldier of Christ, and which informs the whole Church rather than yourself of your faith."²⁴ As Zwingli later stated at the Diet of Augsburg, sharply separating himself from the Lutheran confession regarding the means of grace: "I believe, indeed I know, that all the sacraments are so far from conferring grace that they do not even convey or distribute it."²⁵

Zwingli therefore viewed the benefits of Christ's atoning death as conveyed by the Holy Spirit to the individual, that is, to all whom God has elected and called to salvation by His providential power, without means, sometimes even apart from the external word, that is, the preaching of the gospel. It was this internal working of the Spirit and providential conveying of the atonement directly, apart from means, and not a form of Pelagianism, that led to Zwingli's curious assertion in a later work that amongst the believers in heaven would be included various pagans of pre-Christian antiquity, including the Greek philosophers Socrates and Aristides and the Roman heroes Numa, Camillus, the Catos, and the Scipios.²⁶

Calvin, who preferred Luther to Zwingli in terms of their respective theologies,²⁷ nevertheless followed Zwingli in holding the benefits of Christ's atonement to be granted separately from the physical elements of the sacraments.²⁸ Calvin does have an understanding of the sacraments as

²⁴ Zwingli, *Commentary*, 184.

²⁵ Ulrich Zwingli, *Fidei ratio*, quoted in Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 282.

²⁶ See W.P. Stephens, "Zwingli and the Salvation of the Gentiles," in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, ed. W.P. Stephens, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 105 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 224–244.

²⁷ Of Luther and Zwingli, Calvin wrote to Guillaume Farel on February 28, 1539, "If they are compared, you know yourself how much Luther excels." Quoted in Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 241n47.

²⁸ The rather extreme anti-sacramentalism of Zwingli's position in *Fidei ratio* had already been transcended by Calvin's time through the First Helvetic Confession of 1536, yet there remained a clear distinction between the physical elements and the spiritual working of Christ in the sacraments: "We do not believe that the body and blood of the Lord is naturally united with the bread and wine or that they are spatially enclosed in them, but that according to the institution of the Lord the bread and wine are highly significant, holy, true signs by which the true communion of His body and

means of grace, but God works through them spiritually in the activity of their faithful administration and not through the physical elements.²⁹ Thus Calvin could believe himself to be an adherent of the Augsburg Confession and the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, professing belief in the presence of Christ's true body and blood spiritually in the believer's participation in the Lord's Supper, while at the same time agreeing and maintaining fellowship with the Zwinglians, who denied the presence of Christ's humanity in the elements of the Lord's Supper because the humanity of Christ was supposed to be enclosed locally in heaven at the right hand of God. Also like Zwingli is Calvin's focus on the predestination of God and God's freedom in applying the benefits of Christ's universal atonement to sinners even apart from the external preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Both Zwingli and Calvin are therefore condemned in Articles VII and VIII of the Formula of Concord, the former focusing on the reality of Christ's humanity in the physical elements of the Sacrament of the Altar, the latter dealing with the related subject of the person of Christ, whose distinct natures as true God and true man are united in one, inseparable person.

IV. Luther's Preaching of the Atonement: Sermons on the Gospel of John

How did Martin Luther view the atonement in relation both to the person of Jesus as the God-man and to the means of grace that Luther believed communicated the benefits of Christ's atonement to sinners for their justification before God? To answer that question I will explore briefly the way in which Luther actually preached the gospel of the atonement to the congregation in Wittenberg, specifically in a series of sermons on the Gospel of John that the Reformer delivered during the course of many months in 1537 through 1540, when Pastor Johann Bugenhagen was away implementing the Reformation in Denmark.

blood is administered and offered to believers by the Lord Himself by means of the ministry of the Church—not as perishable food for the belly but the food and nourishment of a spiritual and eternal life." Quoted in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. with historical introductions by Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 108.

²⁹ A reliable guide is Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957). Calvin treats "the way in which we receive the grace of Christ: What benefits come to us from it, and what effects follow" in Book 3 of the *Institutes*, and in Book 4 he treats "the external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

Twenty-eight of these sermons were on the third chapter of John's Gospel, delivered mostly on Saturdays in late March 1538 through September or October 1539.³⁰ An overview of the major themes treated in these sermons reveals a remarkable focus in Luther's preaching on salvation as the atoning work of Jesus Christ, true God and true man united in one person, proclaimed in external word and sacraments through the Holy Spirit working through these means, received through faith which justifies the believer—or rejected by the unbeliever, who therefore remains under the judgment of God.

These sermons show that at the heart of Luther's concern regarding salvation is the preaching of genuine faith in Christ's atonement into the hearts of his hearers. "Faith should be preached above all else," the Reformer told the congregation in his first sermon on John 3, "and then good works are to be taught. It is faith that takes us to heaven, without and before good works; for through faith we come to God."³¹ The miracle of faith that Jesus describes to Nicodemus in the conversation recorded in this chapter is the miracle of new birth, worked "by the Holy Spirit and by water."³² A life without faith, as, for example, the life of the papists, who were indeed baptized, but who focus their teaching and confidence of salvation on their works, or the Turks, who have all kinds of works but no new birth of faith in Christ, is not the new life produced by the Spirit. Though these perform all sorts of so-called good works, they should be told "that all this counts for nothing, that these are evil works, nothing but thistles and thorns. Why? Because the tree is evil; that is, the person is no good. Therefore whatever this person may do, whether he reads or prays,

³⁰ No date is given in the manuscripts for the last sermon on chapter 3, but the second-last sermon is dated September 13, 1539. The first sermon on John 4 is dated March 6, 1540, so there was a break of several months in Luther's preaching on John. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 22:488n174; 503n1 [henceforth *LW*].

³¹ *LW* 22:276. "Aber den glauben soll man am höchsten treiben, darnach von den guten wercken leren, und muss uns der glaube gehn himmel bringen, ohne und führ den guten wercken, denn durch den glauben kommen wir zu Gott." Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 47:2,18–21 [henceforth *WA*].

³² *LW* 22:280. "Die Christliche lere unterrichtet uns also, das wir erstlich müssen andere leute werden, das ist: neu geboren werden. Wie geschieht aber das? durch den heiligen geist und durchs wasser. Wenn ich denn neu geboren bin, from und gottfurchtig worden, so gehe hin, und was ich in der neuen geburt tue, das ist gutt." *WA* 47:7,17–21.

it is all evil. It belongs to the old birth and is accursed."³³ In his second sermon on John 3, Luther directly ties the word, Baptism, and faith together as those means through which God brings about the spiritual birth that Jesus impresses upon Nicodemus.³⁴ Luther then ties this all to the atonement through the death of Christ, bestowed through the word and Baptism:

Physical birth entails physical things, such as diapers and pap, father and mother; it concerns physical life and no more. But if you want salvation, you need different parents, who will bring you to heaven. This Christ does. By means of Baptism and the Word of God He placed you and your Christianity into the lap of our dear mother, the Christian Church. This He accomplished through His suffering and death that by virtue of His death and blood we might live eternally.³⁵

A second theme that appears strongly throughout these sermons is that this atonement could be worked only by the Christ who is true God and true man, with two natures inseparably united in one person, and whose two natures communicate their attributes one to the other (*communicatio idiomatum*). Here the polemic against Zwingli is strong, though Luther never mentions the Swiss reformer by name. While Zwingli held that the divine nature in Jesus is said to suffer only through a figure of speech, seeking to preserve intact the teaching of Chalcedon that the two natures in Christ are not confused, Luther's language suggests a communication of attributes that appears to go beyond the definition of

³³ LW 22:281. "Aber hie saget man: Ej, die papisten thun warlich viel gutter werck, denn sie beten, fasten und halten mess. Do antworthe du drauff: sie gelten gar nichts, es sind bose werck, eittel distel und dornen. Worumb? Der Baum ist böse, das ist: die person taug nicht, darumb was sie thutt, sie lese oder bete, so ists alles bose, denn sie sind eine aldt geburt und vermaledejet, und dieweil sie bose sind, so können sie nichts gutts thun. Wer das nun die Papisten und Turcken bereden kondte, das sie alle distel und Dornen weren. Denn sie sind nicht new geborn, sondern noch alle hehr von der alden geburt." WA 47:8,15-21.

³⁴ LW 22:290. "Also geschiecht die Geistliche geburt durchs wort gottes, durch die tauffe und den glauben, Und wir sind albereit in dieser geburt, dieweil wir noch alhier auff erden leben, wenn wir gleuben, und habe droben gesaget, das man die neue geburt oder das geistlich leben nicht mit den funff sinnen fhulet." WA 47:19,3-6.

³⁵ LW 22:291. "Dann das leiblich geborn ist, das gibt leibliche dieng, als windeln, brey, vater und mutter, und gebraucht alleine dieses gegenwertigen lebens. Aber du must andere Eldtern haben, die dich ghen himmel bringen. Das thut Christus, der dich in deinem Christentumb durch die Tauffe und wortt gottes in den schoss der Christlichen kirchen, als unser lieben Mutter, leget, das hatt er erlanget durch sein leiden und sterben, auff das wir durch den Tod und bluth Christi ewiglich leben mochten." WA 47:20,17-23.

Chalcedon.³⁶ Luther proclaimed to the people of Wittenberg that distinguishing too sharply between the two natures in Christ leads to a conception of Christ as two persons, which "would nullify our redemption and the forgiveness of sin. No, the two natures must be the one Christ. Otherwise no satisfaction could have been rendered for our sins, and nothing would come of our salvation."³⁷ Yes, God suffers in the atonement through the death of Jesus:

If the Son of God died for me, let death consume and devour me; for he will surely have to return and restore me, and I will stand my ground against him. Christ died; death devoured the Son of God. But in doing so death swallowed a thorn and had to get rid of it. It was impossible for death to hold Him. For this Person is God; and since both God and man in one indivisible Person entered into the belly of death and the devil, death ate a morsel that ripped his stomach open.³⁸

³⁶ Most historians, despite Luther and the Lutherans' charge that Zwingli and Calvin have Nestorian tendencies or worse, defend their positions as preserving intact the careful distinctions of Chalcedon, and respond either positively or negatively that Luther's position tended toward the Monophysitism that rejected aspects of the Chalcedonian formula. On Calvin's Christology see E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1966). On Luther, see Dennis Ngien, "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the *Communicatio Idiomatum*," *Heythrop Journal* 45 (2004): 54-68; and Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, who concludes that there is a Monophysite tendency in Luther that distinguished his Christology not only from the Reformed but also from the "Nestorian tendency" of the Latin Middle Ages. Luther, he concludes, has gone "back to an earlier Eastern Christology, emphasizing the unity between the two natures and developing, in the course of the struggle over *Patripassionism*, the conception of the communication of attributes, even the theme of the suffering of God" (387).

³⁷ LW 22:324. "Wenn aber Christus gescheiden wird, das zwene sohne sind, so sind auch zwei personen, so ist dan meine erlösung nichts, auch ist keine vergebung der Sunde, sondern es muss also sein, das die zwei naturen sind der einige Christus. Sonst konde nicht fur unsere Sunde gnung geschehen, und wurde alsdenn aus unser seligkeit nichts werden." WA 47:52,22-26. This statement (and other similar ones) appears to me to contradict the view of Siggins, who develops his systematic study primarily from Luther's sermons and biblical expositions, concluding: "Luther's struggles with the formal categories of christological theory arise from traditional familiarity, not from evangelical concern; and he is therefore unsuccessful in reinterpreting the old orthodoxy in terms of his new and living faith." Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, 239.

³⁸ LW 22:355. "Ist der Sohn gottes fur mich gestorben, so fresse mich der tod hin und verschlinge mich, ehr soll mich wohl widergeben, und ich will fur ihme wohl bleiben. Christus ist gestorben und hatt der Tod den Sohn Gottes verschlungen, aber der tod hatt an ihme einen angel geschlungen, das er ihnen hat müssen widergeben, den es wahr unmöglich, das her im tode bleiben sollte. Den die person ist gott, und do Gott

A third theme that comes through strongly in these sermons is the new reality that Jesus brings about in the life of the believer through the atonement and the bestowing of its benefits through the word and sacraments, benefits received only through the miracle of faith. In a sermon devoted to John 3:16–18, the Reformer teaches his people that Christ sometimes has a stern and rebuking demeanor in this Gospel, but always for the purpose of working salvation:

He wants us to accept Him; He does not want us to hate the light; He wants us to become new persons, to cleave to Him with all our heart, to rely on Him, and to say: "Thou didst not come to condemn me but to save me." People will believe in Him; yet at the same time they will want to retain their old nature. But this is not the way. Those who are addicted to vice cannot love or follow Christ, for Christ and Belial cannot reside side by side. Faith must change the heart. . . . Such a faith will not fail you in the hour of death, for this faith will support you in all kinds of trials. This is what faith accomplishes if it is not false or counterfeit."³⁹

Subsequent sermons develop this theme of false or counterfeit faith, against which Luther warns his people. Where faith is genuine, "there is no love for sin," for a true believer shuns sin.⁴⁰ Luther prophesies

und Mensch in einer person, unzertrennet, in des todes und Teuffels bauch gesharen ist, so hatt der todt ein bisslein an ime gessen das ihme den Bauch zureist." WA 47:80,11–19.

³⁹ LW 22:377–378. "Das ehr aber hin und wider im Euangelio also rumpelt, rumoret und strafft, das ist alles dohin gericht, das her die welt gerne wolte selig machen, und sie nicht verdampt und gericht wurde, den sie sind zuvor gericht und verdammet, wie ehr alhier im text saget, aber er wil, das wir ihnen annemen sollen und das liecht nicht hassen und neue menschen werden, an ime das hertz hangen lassen, ihme vertrauen und sagen: du bist nicht kommen, das du mich verdammet, sondern ich durch dich selig wurde. Aber man wil also an in gleuben, das man gleichewol im alden wesen bleibe. Aber das thuts nicht, den die in den lastern liegen, können Christum nicht lieben oder ihme nachfolgen, den Christus und Belial können nicht bej einander bleiben. Der glaube mus das hertz endern, und wen der glaube wird verhanden sein, so wirstu nicht mehr bauen auff dein geldt und guth, noch stolz oder sicher sein. . . . So bestehet her dan wider den Tod. Den diese wortt erhalten dich in allerley anfechtung. Das thut der rechte glaub, wen er nicht falsch ist oder ein wechselbalg etc." WA 47:100,17–28, 38–40.

⁴⁰ LW 22:389. "So hore nun diesen text: wer an den Sohn gleubet, der hatt das ewige leben, und ist das Gericht hinweg. Wo den ein rechter glaube ist, so liebet man die Sunde nicht, man bleibet auch nicht in Sunden, sondern man meidet Sunde und spricht: Sind die Sunde vergeben, so mus ich nicht drinnen bleiben, gleich wie ein krancker, der gesunth wird und geheilet worden, nicht mus gefallen an der kranckheit haben oder das thun, was zur gesuntheit schedlich were. Also auch wer in falsche lehre und in ergerlichem leben verharret, der ist im gericht und warhafftig verdammet." WA 47:110,30–37.

judgment upon Germany, for "our ungrateful people fairly devour their pastors," but there follows an appeal to faith among his hearers:

The fact that a blind world prefers death to life, prefers hell to heaven, bodes a terrible judgment. Therefore accept the Light, Christ, the Savior, who has removed our sin. For whoever despises the Light and loves darkness will come into judgment.⁴¹

Summarizing in the very next sermon, Luther emphasizes that John associates three things in his Gospel: Christ's true divinity; his true humanity, in which the Son of God bears the sin of the world; and sincere faith, which, in contrast to false or hypocritical or even merely "historical" faith, stakes everything on Christ's atoning work of salvation and therefore receives the benefits of that atonement.⁴²

V. The Reformation and Lutheran Proclamation Today

The thesis was formulated above that the atonement through the death of Christ is at the center of the *coherence* of the Protestant Reformation, and

⁴¹ LW 22:390. "Der Turcke ziehet dohehr auff's Deutchland, nun ist sie reiff und fleust voller bluths der armen ihre pfarrer auff, das ich Sorge hab, wiewohl ich nicht gerne ein Prophet bin, das eine grosse strafe werde uber das Deutchland kommen, und so gross, das kein menschlich hertz moge aufreden. Das vorige Gerichte ist gerieng. Aber das ist ein erschrecklich gericht, das die blinde welt den Tod furzeucht dem leben und die helle dem himmel. Darumb so nemet dast Liecht, Christum, den Heiland, an, der unser sunde hat hinweg genommen. Den wer das Liecht veracht und die Finsterniss liebet, der kommet in das Gerichte, wie den die welt sicher fort fehret in ihren wollusten, fressen und sauffen, Pract, Geitz, Hass, neid und in andern Sunden, und man lests nicht darbey bleiben, sondern hassen und verfolgen auch die prediger des worts Gottes, jha Gott selbst, und wollen von den predigern noch darzu ungestrafft sein, und fallen in sein die Antinomer zu, das man die leuthe nicht schelten noch straffen solle." WA 47:111,20-35.

⁴² LW 22:391. "Diese drei stuck pflaget S. Joannes oft zusammen zu setzen, den sie können auch in der warheit eins vom andern nicht geschieden werden. Erstlich machet her Christum zum Gott, und das treibet her schier in allen worten, das her warhafftiger Gott sej, geborn vom vater yn Ewigkeit, nicht gemacht, und umb des Artickels willen hatt her auch diess Euangelium geschrieben. Darnach so machet her diese person, so Gottes Sohn ist, auch zum warhafftigen menschen, der von der Jungfrauen Marien geborn sej. Zum Andern, das niemands durch seine gute werck selig werde, Sondern alleine durch den Sohn Gottes die seligkeit bekomme. Den der sej darumb in die welt gesanth und mensch worden, auch zum lamb Gottes gemacht, das her die Sunde der Welt wegneme. Sonst werde niemands von der sunde und dem tode erloset den alleine durch in, den her und kein ander ist darzu gesanth, das man durch in solt selig werden, und so es auch ein ander hette thun können, was hette Gott seinen Sohn durffen schicken? Zum Dritten, so soll der glaub rechtschaffen und nicht lugenhaftig, falsch oder ein heucherleij sein, sondern so eigentlich wisse, das es also sej, und wagets dan alles drauff." WA 47:112,3-18.

that confessional Lutherans should not ignore or deny this coherence. Coherence, however, is not the same as unity. As I have attempted to show, even while Lutherans and the Reformed both placed the proclamation of the death of Christ for sinners at the heart of their reformatory work, and while both proclaimed that God justifies the sinner solely on account of faith in Christ's atoning death and victorious resurrection, nevertheless there is considerable disagreement regarding the way in which the benefits of Christ's death are distributed to the believer, in particular through the sacraments, but also through the written and proclaimed word of God, which Luther calls the "external word." This should be no new revelation to pastors and laymen educated in and committed to a Lutheranism defined by the Book of Concord. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that this brief investigation and some conclusions drawn from it will help us to highlight in our preaching and teaching the significance of Christ's atonement and the absolutely essential role of faith for receiving the benefits of that atonement, while also helping to clarify certain patterns of language that seem to be overwhelming our self-understanding as heirs of the Reformation in an age of confessional malaise and theological muddiness.

First, confessional Lutherans should never surrender the term "Protestant" or, more importantly, the name "Evangelical" to the mainline liberal or to the revivalist and enthusiast versions of conservative Christianity in the world today. At its very heart, Luther's Reformation, and indeed the Protestant Reformation as a whole, was the protest that Roman Catholicism, and in some respects Christianity going back to the early church of the fourth and fifth centuries, had through its sacramental system obscured the atonement through the death of Christ. Roman Catholic doctrine and piety had substituted various ways of achieving salvation through works for the biblical gospel that proclaimed salvation through faith alone in Christ's atoning work. Luther's early protest regarding penance grew into a protest against a papal magisterium that had constructed walls preventing true evangelical reform, resulting finally in the term "Protestant" being coined in 1529 to describe the *Lutheran* Reformation's resistance to the threat of a resurgent Roman Catholic Christendom acting through imperial legislation, political oppression, and judicial murder to crush the free preaching of the gospel and reformation of church life. As participants in and promoters of the Reformation even when it was rejected by ecclesiastical and imperial authorities, the early Lutherans were more similar to the Reformed than they were different, as historians have duly noted with terms such as the Protestant or Magisterial Reformation.

The term "Evangelical" gets at the heart of our Lutheran identity in an even more central way, for at the heart of Luther's preaching and his polemic both against the papal church and the Sacramentarians and Anabaptists was the evangel, the gospel. It seems a weak surrender that the name used most widely to describe Luther's movement for reform and the churches that adopted it has become in much discourse today a derogatory term to denote a theological and liturgical populism descended from eighteenth-century pietism and nineteenth-century revivalism in Britain and America, as well as unionism in Germany. Let us rather treasure the name Evangelical, and use it descriptively of our endeavor to keep the gospel at the center of our preaching and our understanding of the life of faith in Christ.

Central to Luther's gospel and that of the Lutheran Confessions is the doctrine of faith, namely, that righteousness comes through faith alone. Divinely instituted sacraments and humanly developed liturgies and other patterns of devotion are not conceived as means through which God pours grace as a substance, resulting in meritorious love that justifies sinners. Nor are the sacraments and the church's liturgies focused in the Reformation on the celebration of the presence of Christ in the midst of his church. Rather, in Luther's understanding, God instituted sacraments and churches develop liturgies and other practices of piety as means through which the promise of the gospel is announced and proclaimed. The benefits of Christ's death—that is, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—are bestowed through preaching and the sacraments. As a truly sacramental theology, Luther's understanding differs from that of Zwingli and Calvin and their Reformed successors in that God does work through the physical elements combined with God's word. But in contrast to medieval sacramental theology Luther did not view the sacraments as effective in themselves by their mere performance (*ex opere operato*). The sacraments are promises of God to which faith clings. This touches upon a phrase sometimes used today among confessional Lutherans, "the objective means of grace"—a phrase open to misunderstanding even though surely it is meant to say that God's promise is presented in the sacraments even if it is not received by faith. Luther frequently in his preaching highlighted the tragic reality that, among the baptized, there are hypocrites, false believers, indifferent despisers of the gospel, and even enemies of the gospel. Luther's response was to proclaim the law for repentance and the gospel for faith, and to proclaim to the stricken sinner that the benefits of Baptism lost through unbelief are yet there in Baptism as the promise of God to which faith can and must return and cling. As he said in the Large Catechism, correcting an image from St. Jerome: Baptism

is God's ship that cannot founder, for it is God's work and not ours. "But it does happen that we slip and fall out of the ship. If anybody does fall out, he should immediately head for the ship and cling to it until he can climb aboard again and sail on it as he had done before."⁴³

Luther's concern in his preaching and sacramental theology and practice was to highlight God's call to believe in Christ the God-man as Savior by virtue of the atonement worked on the cross. Only when that call is received in faith, when Christ the Savior is received as Christ *for me*, can it be said that one has heard the gospel and received the sacraments for salvation.⁴⁴ Where this happens—when not only a person has been baptized but also that baptism lives in the present through a life of faith in its promise—there the Holy Spirit has brought about a new reality in the life of the Christian. By faith Christ's righteousness, which in itself is an alien righteousness—a righteousness *extra nos*, outside of us—does not remain outside of us but becomes our possession, together with Christ's kingship and priesthood, just as the bride receives in marriage all the possessions of the bridegroom together with his very body.⁴⁵

⁴³ Martin Luther, Large Catechism (4.82), in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 446. I agree with Phillip Cary, "Why Luther is Not Quite Protestant: The Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise," *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (2005): 447–486, that Luther understands faith as certainty in God's promises given in the word and sacraments, rather than the reflective faith that looks to its own existence and vitality for certainty of salvation. Cary, however, only touches upon a problem that Luther deals with extensively in the catechisms and his preaching, namely, the problem of unbelief amongst the baptized. I would also amend Cary's title to the tautological "Why Luther is Not Quite Calvinist." Also to be demonstrated carefully rather than asserted is Cary's view that the Formula of Concord "assimilated the Calvinist emphasis on conversion" (485).

⁴⁴ Consider the following from *On The Freedom of the Christian*, 1520: "I believe that it has now become clear that it is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life; yet this is the fashion among those who must today be regarded as our best preachers. Far less is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers. . . . Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us." LW 31:357.

⁴⁵ This real sharing and thus possession of Christ's righteousness through faith, rather than a deification of the human creature through mystical union with the divine Christ, is the meaning, I believe, of the wondrous exchange that Luther describes in *On the Freedom of a Christian*. See LW 31:351–352. On the believer's receiving of Christ's

Luther's followers in the sixteenth century believed that not since the New Testament and the apostolic age had the righteousness of faith proclaimed in the gospel been so clearly confessed and proclaimed as in Luther's preaching and teaching as well as in his major doctrinal and polemical works. Neither the other Protestant reformers, nor the papal magisterium, nor the medieval theologians, nor even the early church fathers and councils had spoken so clearly regarding the doctrine of faith. As Nicholas Selnecker expressed it, "We do not place our faith in Luther, as we place our faith in no other human being, but we love Luther because he leads us to Christ and because his writings are subject to the Word of Christ. He instructs us out of this Word."⁴⁶ In our preaching and teaching today, in the liturgies we celebrate and the hymns we sing, may it be said of Lutherans today that we lead people to Christ that they may believe and so receive the benefits of his death for the sins of the world.

spiritual kingship and priesthood, a central corollary to Luther's doctrine of justification, see LW31:354–357.

⁴⁶ Nicholas Selnecker, *Recitationes aliquot* (Leipzig: Georg Defner, 1581), quoted in Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero: Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books and Paternoster Press, 1999), 72.