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Liking and Disliking Luther: A Reformed Perspective

Carl R. Trueman

I. A Personal Reflection

Martin Luther has been for me (though Reformed in my theology) perhaps one of the most influential Christians on my own thinking. My interaction with him—now more than thirty years long—had a twofold beginning. First, as a young Christian, I came across Roland Bainton's *Here I Stand* in a local bookshop. The story caught my imagination. Not only was it, to use the cliché, one of Hollywood-style excitement, but also Bainton's own status as something of a theological outsider seemed to give him a peculiar sensitivity to the maverick status of his chosen subject. In a world where the Christian faith was being rapidly feminized by its representations in popular culture, Bainton's portrait of Luther was a bracing contrast and a refreshing change.¹

The second element of my initiation into Luther came with my doctoral studies. An initial interest in John Knox and the Scottish Reformation gave way to a desire to study more deeply the English Reformation when I started to read the earliest works of William Tyndale. It became clear to me that much of Tyndale's writing was textually dependent on writings of Luther, even as he modified, adapted, and in some areas subverted Luther's original intentions and meanings. Thus, the first part of my eventual PhD thesis examined the transmission of Luther's thought into an English context, something that enabled me to locate some of the earliest English reformers accurately within their contemporary milieu.²

Since PhD days, I have tended to focus more on seventeenth-century themes, particularly on the English Puritan John Owen. But such is life: once one has published a book with "Luther" in the title, one is continuously pulled back to opine on him. And, indeed, since taking up the pastorate as well as holding an academic post,

¹ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950). First published sixty-seven years ago, it remains for many outside of the Lutheran Church the standard introduction to Luther's life.

² The fruit of my PhD studies was *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and English Reformers, 1525–1556* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

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I have turned back to Luther with fresh eyes, seeing him as a useful resource for contemporary pastoral work and church life.³

Thus, addressing the matter of Martin Luther as friend and foe is deeply personal for me—academically, pastorally, and as a Christian believer. All three aspects shape my approach and should be borne in mind throughout what follows.

II. Luther's Reformed Reputation

It hardly needs to be mentioned that Luther's reputation among Zwinglians has never stood particularly high. Yet, it is also the case that the attitudes of the Reformed world as a whole are somewhat more generous. Indeed, the young Calvin was far more disposed toward Luther than he was toward the theology of Zurich, as he recalls in a treatise of 1556 aimed at the Lutheran theologian, Joachim Westphal:

For when on beginning to emerge from the darkness of Papacy, and after receiving a slight taste of sound doctrine, I read in Luther that Zuinglius and Ecolompadius left nothing in the sacraments but bare and empty figures, I confess I took such a dislike for their writings that I long refrained from reading them.⁴

This early sympathy for Luther and antipathy to Zwingli and Oecolampadius did not remain unmodified, as Calvin's appreciation for Oecolampadius's patristic scholarship grew and as his mature sacramental theology denied the real partaking of Christ's body by unbelievers; but his overall admiration for Luther remained. Thus, in the polemical discussion of the Lutheran position on the Lord's Supper in the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin does not name his principle opponent, and it seems reasonable to surmise that this is because of his overriding admiration for Luther as a reformer.

A century later, the English congregational divine and Puritan John Owen makes numerous references to Luther in his writings. He is cited as an authority on the imputation of Christ's righteousness,⁵ on faith as the sovereign gift of God,⁶ on justification by faith as central to the existence of the church,⁷ and on the limited authority of church councils and synods.⁸ At a number of points, Owen cites Luther

³ E.g., Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

⁴ John Calvin, *Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 2:252–253.

⁵ John Owen, *Works*, 24 vols. (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1855), 2:320.

⁶ Owen, *Works*, 4:462.

⁷ Owen, *Works*, 5:67.

⁸ Owen, *Works*, 8:61.

as the great inceptor of the Reformation or as one of a number of illustrious leaders of a previous generation.⁹ At no point does Owen offer any direct criticism or make any pejorative comment about him.

We can contrast these treatments of Luther with Calvin's critiques of Westphal and Heshusius. Of course, these men were his contemporaries and wrote against him, and thus the conflict was inevitably more personal and more clearly targeted at individuals. Yet the doctrine the two men taught was not substantially different to that of Luther and was variously pilloried, mocked, and dismissed by Calvin as unbiblical.¹⁰

Given this, it seems reasonable to assume that Luther's sheer stature as a reformer and, as it were, the founder of the Reformation feast, was sufficient to render him not simply immune to the kind of personal criticism by the Reformed to which his Gnesio-Lutheran followers in particular were subjected, but also that sheer admiration for him as a figurehead effectively precluded any such derogatory commentary. Indeed, the eighteenth-century Anglican divine, Augustus Toplady, cites a private letter from Calvin to Bullinger in which the former alludes to some derogatory remarks made about him by Luther:

It is a frequent saying with me, that, if Luther should even call me a devil, my veneration for him is, notwithstanding, so great, that I shall ever acknowledge him to be an illustrious servant of God; who though he abounds in extraordinary virtues, is yet not without considerable imperfections.¹¹

We should note, however, that Toplady cites this passage for the purpose of acquitting Calvin of accusations of temerity and nastiness, not to indict Luther for the same. Thus it is not intended so much as a criticism of the Wittenberger as it is an exoneration of the Frenchman.

In short, it is reasonable to conclude that, for the Reformed, regardless of the doctrinal differences, Luther was simply too great a figure to be publicly excoriated.¹²

⁹ Owen, *Works*, 13:38, 219.

¹⁰ E.g., "Were I disposed to amass heresies with that rashness with which Westphal, who makes stupidity the director of our faith, has introduced them, how much more copiously might I be supplied?" (Calvin, *Tracts*, 2:310). The feeling was presumably mutual.

¹¹ *The Works of Augustus M. Toplady*, 6 vols. (London: Baynes and Son, 1825), 2:6.

¹² One might add that such continues today. Both evangelicals and the less historically precise Reformed are likely to claim Luther as an antecedent, the triumph of the heroic over the confessional. The reception of Luther in the non-Lutheran Protestant world—at least the non-Lutheran non-Anabaptist Protestant world—has tended to be that of the great founder of Protestantism whose distinct convictions are regarded either as aberrations or as irrelevant.

III. Luther's Positive Contribution to Historic Reformed Theology

When looking for points of contact between Luther and later Reformed theology, there are a number of such that are obvious, beyond the basic trinitarian and christological premises of Nicene and Chalcedonian catholic orthodoxy.

Foremost among these is justification by grace through faith. The notion of the instrumentality of faith, of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and of the anti-Pelagian framework within which salvation is to be understood, is basic in Reformed theology. As the fact that Calvin was able to subscribe to the Augsburg Confession *Variata* demonstrates, the fundamentals of Lutheran soteriology, with the exception of the status of the sacraments vis-à-vis the ungodly and the related christological underpinnings, are shared by both Lutheran and Reformed.

We have already alluded to the use of Luther by John Owen in his defense of justification. Such is a commonplace among the Reformed. Thus, Owen's contemporary Thomas Goodwin refers to Luther repeatedly as the one who made the key breakthroughs on justification, both in terms of imputation and the instrumentality of faith.¹³ Such is Luther's historical significance on this point that the question of the historical integrity of the doctrine is posed by Owen in terms of where his church was before Luther, Luther being acknowledged as the historical watershed on the matter.¹⁴ This was, in fact, a fairly typical periodization of church history. Fundamental disagreements on sacraments and Christology were, by and large, passed over by the later Reformed, for whom Luther was simply too positive and impressive a figure on justification to be removed from their own narrative.

Closely connected to the doctrine of justification, of course, is the teaching on divine and human agency contained in *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525).¹⁵ Both Lutherans and the Reformed stood within the Western anti-Pelagian tradition and the 1525 clash with Erasmus was another moment in Protestant history that was seen as having significance beyond the bounds of the Lutheran Church. The doctrine that *De Servo Arbitrio* contains is central to the Reformed understanding of salvation, but it should be noted that the text is not cited by the Reformed in details as frequently as the general ideas that it contains and that the conflict symbolized.

¹³ Owen, *Works*, 5:128; 8:475.

¹⁴ Owen, *Works*, 13:10.

¹⁵ Luther, "Bondage of the Will" (1526), vol. 33, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Tortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Maycs (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AL.

There could be a number of reasons for this. First, the anti-Pelagian doctrine of the will is not as uniquely associated with Luther as is the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. While the clash with Erasmus had significance as a piece of historical drama that brought key issues to the surface, there was nonetheless a stream of anti-Pelagian thinking that ran from Augustine to the Reformation, of which the Reformed were well aware. We might think of a fringe theological figure such as Gottschalk or of more mainstream individuals such as Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, and even the mature Thomas Aquinas. The figures of John Wycliffe and Jan Hus are also of significance. Thus, Luther might well have been significant for making a clear and precise connection between his understanding of justification and the nature of the human will, but on the latter point, he is not a historical watershed in the same sense as he is on the former.¹⁶

Second, it is clear that questions about the divine will and human responsibility rapidly move beyond the kind of large-scale ontological account Luther provides into territory that requires more conceptual precision and nuance. The kinds of questions that the division in the Reformed world between Calvinists and Arminians generate touch on a variety of issues: not simply the relationship of Creator to his creation but also of the nature of contingency and of the psychology of human action. On such questions, Luther is of limited usefulness, even as the broader structure for understanding salvation, which he proposes remains a plausible one for the Reformed. Still, one is more likely to find the Reformed citing Augustine, Aquinas, and later Dominicans on the issues than one is to find them citing Luther.

One exception to this is Augustus Toplady, the Calvinist Anglican theologian and vigorous defender of the anti-Pelagian Protestant nature of the Anglican settlement. Toplady's context is important. He was an eighteenth-century Church of England minister of pronounced Calvinist sympathies. He was also an inveterate opponent of the Anglican minister and founder of Methodism, the Arminian John Wesley. Toplady thus had a twofold concern. He wished to establish the strong, anti-Pelagian historical credentials of the Anglican communion and refute the anti-predestinarian views of Wesley and his followers. He is thus not so interested in nuancing anti-Pelagian theology as he is in establishing its foundational importance to Protestantism in general and the Church of England in particular. For this task, the sledgehammer argumentation of *De Servo Arbitrio* is perfectly attuned.

¹⁶ An old but still useful discussion of the doctrine of predestination throughout church history is J. B. Mozley, *A Treatise on the Augustinian Doctrine of Predestination* (London: John Murray, 1855).

In the advertisement of his work *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England*, it is amusing to note that Toplady indicates he will use the term *Calvinism*, per convention, to refer to the doctrinal system of both Luther and Calvin.¹⁷ Then, while acknowledging that Luther was no more predestinarian than John Wycliffe,¹⁸ he emphasizes the specific impact of Luther on the views of predestination held by such Reformation luminaries and martyrs as the Scotsman Patrick Hamilton and the English bishop Hugh Latimer.¹⁹ It is clear that Luther's name and theology carry huge persuasive force with Toplady's assumed audience.

In another work, *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism*, Toplady does not simply use Luther as a symbol of anti-Pelagianism, but he also draws directly on *De Servo Arbitrio*. In the course of the work, he asserts the fundamental agreement of Luther and Calvin on predestination and argues that denial of the point is a hallmark of Arminian stupidity.²⁰ He then affirms Luther's argument that predestination is a consequence of the very being of God, to be nuanced with the distinction between the necessity of infallibility and the necessity of coercion. He also assumes with Luther that divine simplicity makes the distinction between will and foreknowledge simply a formal, and not a real, one.²¹

On the issue of whether predestination should be preached, Toplady defers to Luther, offering a lengthy quotation (spanning some three pages) from *De Servo Arbitrio*, to the effect that preaching is to be guided by divine revelation in God's Word, that God's Word reveals it, and that thus it is to be preached.²²

Finally, in his treatise *The Scheme of Christian and Philosophical Necessity Asserted* (another anti-Wesley work), Toplady quotes Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* on the title page, to the effect that everything happens by necessity.²³ In the work itself, he utilizes the distinction between necessity of compulsion and necessity of infallible certainty, once again citing Luther as his authority on this score.²⁴

With Toplady, therefore, we do have a late flowering of Calvinist appropriation of Luther's work on the will, deployed in context to assert the illegitimacy of Wesley's Arminianism. Luther was not, of course, Toplady's only source. Yet the use he makes of Luther is consonant with what we noted earlier: Luther's name in and of itself carried huge weight well beyond the bounds of confessional Lutheranism.

¹⁷ Toplady, *Works*, 1:163.

¹⁸ Toplady, *Works*, 1:341.

¹⁹ Toplady, *Works*, 1:401, 434.

²⁰ Toplady, *Works*, 5:156.

²¹ Toplady, *Works*, 5:189.

²² Toplady, *Works*, 5:279–283.

²³ Toplady, *Works*, 6:ii.

²⁴ Toplady, *Works*, 6:12.

Indeed, confessional Lutheranism had never been a significant part of the English religious landscape, a point that might actually have made it easier to cite him. For, such citations lacked the precise partisan significance they would have possessed on the continent.

Interestingly enough, a similar use of the work occurred in the middle of the twentieth century. In 1957, James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston produced a new English translation of *De Servo Arbitrio* that formed part of a campaign within British evangelicalism to move the movement away from Arminian and Holiness emphases toward a more Reformation Protestant perspective. The work proved critical in strengthening the cause of Calvinistic evangelicalism in Britain and helped to establish Packer as key player in the movement. Thus, Luther continued to inspire a tradition in many ways far from his own.²⁵

IV. Points of Contention between Luther and Reformed Theology

De Servo Arbitrio actually offers a segue into reflecting on points of antithesis between Lutheran and Reformed. The other strand of significant argumentation in the work, beyond that of the will, is, of course, that of the clarity of Scripture. This, too, was a vital doctrine to the Reformed. Yet the very point of dispute between Lutherans and Reformed—the meaning of the words of institution at the Last Supper—reflected the pressure under which the doctrine came almost as soon as Luther had articulated it. It would perhaps have been a little too ironic for the Reformed to have utilized *De Servo Arbitrio* on the point of scriptural perspicuity, as to do so would have immediately begged some obvious questions.

Of course, when reflecting on points of disagreement between Luther and the Reformed, it is obvious that Zwingli and the consequences of the Marburg Colloquy loom large. Of all the Reformed figures cited above, none would have agreed with Luther on either the direct communication of attributes from Christ's divinity to his humanity or the objective presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549 represents agreement between Zurich and Geneva on the issue and makes it clear that the Lutheran view of Christ's sacramental presence is considered just as absurd as transubstantiation.²⁶

Nevertheless, the *Consensus Tigurinus* was precisely what it claimed to be: a consensus document. As such, it did not tie the parties of Zurich together into a

²⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood: Revell, 1957).

²⁶ *Consensus Tigurinus* XXIV, XXV, in *Credo: Creeds & Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valeric R. Hotchkiss, vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 812.

narrow agreement on all aspects of the Lord's Supper. Calvin was no Zwinglian. It is true that on one of the key issues that divided Luther and Zwingli, the question of whether Christ is really present in the sacrament to the unbeliever, Calvin is with Zwingli. But I believe it is arguable that Luther's high view of the sacrament continued to influence the way in which Calvin regarded the matter. We noted earlier that Calvin's initial antipathy to Zwingli and Oecolampadius was the fact that Luther declared them to have reduced the sacraments to empty figures. We also know that in the 1530s, Calvin was somewhat distinctive in the circle of Reformed humanists in Basel for favoring the works of Luther over those of Zwingli. He never went through a Zwinglian phase.

Thus, while Lutherans may still abominate Calvin's understanding of the Lord's Supper, it seems plausible to argue that his burden to avoid Zwinglian memorialism is the result of a desire to preserve something of the Lutheran high view of the sacrament refracted through the Christology of the Western tradition as Calvin saw it, embodied in the notion of *extra Calvinisticum*. That puts Calvin on the Zwinglian side of the christological line, but his intentions are far from those of the theologians of Zurich. Sacramental eating is for Calvin a real reception of Christ by faith. That is an idea that was impressed on him by Luther's works, even if the content he imports is from elsewhere.

Other points of antithesis to note might include the aesthetics of worship. The emergence of the Reformed Regulative Principle of worship emerged in the mid to late sixteenth century as in part a legacy of the influence of men like John Hooper and John Knox. These men were leading figures among those who had imported Swiss and Genevan ideas on worship back into England in the early 1550s. With the advent of the Catholic Mary Tudor to the throne in 1553, another generation of English Protestants had retreated to Geneva and Zurich, only to return in 1558 with the accession of the Protestant Elizabeth to the throne.

Key debates under Elizabeth focused on the relationship of church and state, as manifested in contentions over the Book of Common Prayer and the status of the clerical vestments. To such debates, Lutheranism offered little in the way of help, given the (from the Puritan perspective) far more relaxed and concessive approach to the reformation of worship that had marked Lutheranism since the early 1520s. I suspect that Lutheran aesthetics, along with its eucharistic theology, are one reason why Lutheranism never gained significant traction in England. They seemed just a little too papist or high church, given the categories of the English Reformation. Indeed, if there are hints of Lutheranism in the later English Reformation, it is in the sacramental teaching of high churchmen, not among the Reformed.

V. Luther and Contemporary Reformed Theology

There are two areas where I would suggest that Luther can be a constructive source for contemporary Reformed theology, beyond those cited above. I should also add here that, when speaking of Reformed theology, I speak as a pastor—so I am thinking of theology in the traditional sense, of theology that has an immediate impact on the way the church thinks and behaves. I am not interested in the use of Luther for questions that do not terminate in the regular life of the church.

The central usefulness of Luther to the church catholic is made clear by Charles Arand and Robert Kolb in *The Genius of Luther's Theology*.²⁷ If the task of the church is the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, then the means by which Christ comes today are to be determinative of church life. This means word and sacraments. In an era (and a nation) in which innovation and technique are generally assumed to be the answer to everything, this is a liberating insight, for it actually makes the pastoral task considerably easier than it might otherwise be.

Obviously, little in the way of ecumenical rapprochement can be expected between Lutheran and Reformed on the issue of the sacraments, but Luther's theology of the word preached is surely of significant interest to the Reformed pastor.

Luther's unerring (and late medieval) sense of the transcendent creative power of words lies at the heart of his understanding of the nature of language, as he makes clear in a famous passage in his *Lectures on Genesis*:

Who could conceive of the possibility of bringing forth from the water a being which clearly could not continue to exist in water? But God speaks a mere Word, and immediately the birds are brought forth from the water. If the Word is spoken, all things are possible, so that out of the water are made either fish or birds. Therefore any bird whatever and any fish whatever are nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language; through this rule of language those things that are impossible become very easy, while those that are clearly opposite become very much alike, and vice versa.²⁸

The phrase that describes creatures as “nothing but nouns in the divine rule of language” is fascinating, drawing out the clear implications of Luther's linguistic philosophy: words constitute reality. It is God's speech that makes the sea produce birds, a natural impossibility. This is the late medieval nominalism that we noted earlier and that bears some similarities to certain aspects of postmodern literary theory, which emphasizes the constructive nature of words. To an extent, we can all

²⁷ Charles Arand and Robert Kolb, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

²⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis” (1535), AL 1:49.

sense the creative power of language: the use of a racial epithet is regarded as obnoxious because it does something to the people to whom it is applied. It denigrates them and thus transforms reality for them in a negative way. Language is creative and we instinctively know that, as demonstrated by the heated debates over freedom of speech and political correctness.

Yet, Luther's understanding of language here is not that of radical postmodernists in one very important way. For Luther, language is creative because it is spoken by God and he uses this speech as the instrument for determining what exactly reality is. He is in himself unknowable. Prior to his speaking, human beings cannot put a limit on what he may or may not do. But when he speaks, his power uses that speech to bring things into being and to constitute reality. That reality has a stability and a certainty to it precisely because it is the speech of the sovereign and omnipotent God who rules over all things. By contrast, I might scream and shout at the ocean all day long, commanding it to give forth fish and birds, but it will not happen, because I am a mere creature and not the Creator. It is because it is God who speaks, God who controls all things, that his language is creative. This is a crucial point to understand when it comes to making the transition from God speaking in his word to the preacher speaking God's word to the congregation.

This creative power of speech is not restricted to the early chapters of Genesis. Throughout the Old Testament, God's speech continues to be the primary mode of his action and continues to reshape reality or to bring new things into being. He calls Abraham and gives him a covenant promise. He calls to Moses from the burning bush. He speaks again to Moses on Sinai and gives him the Law. On this point, Luther and his Reformed contemporaries were in agreement. Significantly, Heinrich Bullinger refers to God's speech on Sinai as "preaching": "In the mount Sina [sic] the Lord himself preached to the great congregation of Israel, rehearsing so plainly, that they might understand those ten commandments, wherein is contained every point of godliness."²⁹ By using this language of *preaching*, Bullinger points out a clear analogy he sees between the act of God in addressing his people and what God's servants do when they speak God's words to his people. God does things through his word. He creates, he commands, he promises. And He does things through his word proclaimed by his servants. Thus, God in the Bible also speaks through various prophets, giving them detailed words to say to his people or even to foreign nations, or using their words to accomplish his own purposes.³⁰ This is important for

²⁹ Heinrich Bullinger, *Decades* I.i, 4 vols., trans. Thomas Harding, et al. (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1849–1852), 1:38.

³⁰ "But in times past, and before that the Son of God was born in the world, God, by little and little, made himself acquainted with the hearts of the holy fathers, and after that with the minds of

understanding the connection between grace and preaching in the Reformation church: New Testament and then postapostolic preachers are the successors of the Old Testament prophets as they bring God's word to bear on God's people and on the world around. The word they proclaim is the means God uses to accomplish his purposes. Its power is thus rooted in divine action, not in the eloquence of the preacher.

One obvious implication of this is that divine speech is not simply, or perhaps even primarily, a matter of communicating information. It is the typical mode of God's presence and power. Speech is how God is present or, to use a more modern idiom, how he makes his presence felt. God's speech created the universe and it also created the people of God. God called Abram and made him the father of all nations. To meet God is to be addressed by him or by his chosen speakers. The Jews were special because God spoke to them in a special way, by his covenant promises. His rule was exercised by and through his word. The Jews were those who had God's law and his promises. These were the means by which God was gracious to them.

This presence of God by speech is not restricted to the Jews. When God addressed the Gentiles, he was present to them also, whether in general matters, such as the judgment against Babylon, or in mercy, as in the particular case of Naaman. His sovereignty over them was also exercised in and through his word. When God ceased to speak, it was a sign that he had withdrawn his favor from his people. Thus Amos predicts a famine of the word of God that will cause the people to wander over the face of the earth seeking God but doing so in vain. A silent God was an absent God.

When we move to the New Testament, the power of the speech of God continues to be emphasized. At Jesus' Baptism, the Father publicly recognizes his Son by speech, as the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove. The point is clear: God in Christ is now present with his people, a presence signified by the word. The economy of grace that is manifested in Christ is inaugurated by a verbal declaration. Then, when Christ is confronted with the devil's temptations in the wilderness, his weapon of choice is the word of God. The word is the means by which Christ is upheld. As the devil does what he did in the garden, that is, pervert the word, so

the holy prophets; and last of all, by their preaching and writings, he taught the whole world. So also Christ our Lord sent the Holy Ghost, which is of the Father and the Son, into the apostles, by whose mouths, words, and writings he was known to all the world. And all these servants of God, as it were the elect vessels of God, having with sincere hearts received the revelation of God from God himself, first of all, in a lively expressed voice delivered to the world the oracles and word of God which they before had learned; and afterward, when the world drew more to an end, some of them did put them in writing for a memorial to the posterity" (Bullinger, *Decades* I.i, 1:38-39).

Christ aptly applies it and puts his enemy to flight. Then there are the many examples throughout the gospels of Christ's speech casting out demons, healing the sick, and even raising the dead. Not all his acts of power are linguistic (for example, the healing of the woman with the flow of blood), but most are. The word was the means by which Christ demonstrated his sovereignty and brought grace to bear in the lives of individuals.

This word-oriented means of God's presence and power continued into the postascension apostolic church. Preaching is central to the narrative of the book of Acts and lies at the heart of the practical realization of God's gracious purposes in Paul's New Testament letters. It was through verbal declaration that the reformers saw the apostles expanding the kingdom. The prophetic word was a word that tore down illusions and built up realities. Thus, the preacher stood at the very center of the spiritual struggle of the present age, both for judgment and for grace.

It is not surprising that the reformers, and Luther especially, saw themselves as standing in continuity with this biblical emphasis on God's words as his means of action, both for judgment and for grace. Thus, in the Reformation, preaching was power and the preaching office was the most significant one within the church. All of the major reformers were preachers, with the pulpit being the center of their professional lives. Their various reformations were all centered on and driven by the proclamation of the word.

There were obvious cultural aspects to this: in an age of low literacy, the preacher was often the person through whom many people obtained their understanding of the world around. Thus, Luther's sermons often ended with an appendix, not connected to the main exposition that offered commentary on some aspect of current affairs.³¹ This political significance of preaching helps to explain the constant attempts in England to regulate the practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even to suppress it entirely at points in the 1630s.

Yet the cultural power of preaching is clearly only a small part of the story and not one that would have interested the reformers to any significant degree. For them, the biblical theology of the word that we have noted above was the driving factor. God preached, and so his servants must preach. Preachers had power because their words were connected in some way to the word and were thus the means of God accomplishing his purposes in this world. Indeed, Reformation preachers saw themselves as the successors, in some ways, of the great prophets of Scripture. This is reflected often in the language they applied to the preaching task. The gatherings

³¹ Thus, and most unfortunately, his very last sermon of 1546 included an appendix that was simply a tirade against the evil of the Jews. Many of these appended admonitions can be seen in AE 58.

of ministers in Reformation Zurich and later in London, where they would hear one another proclaim the word and offer critique and encouragement, were known as “prophesyings.” William Perkins’s classic text on how to preach was entitled *The Arte of Prophesying*.³² The preacher was not merely a lecturer or teacher. His task was not simply descriptive. His task was no less than prophetic: in proclaiming the word of God, he was to tear down human inventions and illusions about the world and to build in their place reality as God had declared it to be through the word of his power. As the *Second Helvetic Confession* declared, the word of God preached is the word of God.³³

A good example of such confidence in the word was provided by Luther in 1522. This was the moment when he returned to Wittenberg from his time at the Wartburg Castle in order to bring order back to a town whose Reformation had fallen under the sway of radical iconoclasts and was quickly descending into chaos. Under pressure from the authorities to restore order, Luther did the one thing he knew would have power to transform the situation: he preached. And during this series of sermons, he made one of his most famous comments about the word of God:

I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.³⁴

The rhetoric is typical of Luther’s exuberance yet the content reflects his theology: the Reformation was above all a movement of the proclaimed word because that was how God achieved his gracious purposes. As long as Luther preached that word, he could be confident that God would use it to tear down human pride and bring sinners by grace to Christ.

For pastors today, this is important. One of the great weaknesses in preaching is that of the failure of preachers to understand their task theologically. Such a failure might manifest itself in a number of ways: a lack of confidence in preaching because of a belief that its power is ultimately rooted in the ability of the preacher; or even a

³² William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophesying* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1607).

³³ “Confessio Helvetica Posterior, A.D. 1566” 1.4, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, Bibliotheca Symbolica Ecclesiae Universalis (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 237–238; Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Credo* 2, 460.

³⁴ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg” (1522), AE 51:77.

marginalizing or abandonment of preaching because it is seen as technically inadequate in the age of mass distraction and technological pyrotechnics. A theology of the word that is also a theology of the word preached seems foundational to an understanding of the church.

The second area where I believe Luther will be of increasing relevance to the Reformed is in the matter of the suffering of the church. In his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther makes suffering, the possession of the holy cross, a mark of the true church.

By making possession of the sacred cross a mark of the church, Luther does three things. First, he offers a polemical counterpoint to the Roman Catholic cult of relics, at the center of which lay pieces of the true cross and vials of Christ's blood. Second, he connects to the standard idea of the trail of blood, whereby outward persecution validated the truth of the church's testimony, given that darkness will always persecute light. Third, and most importantly, he picks up on the Pauline notion of the cross as the revelation of God's purposes and as the criterion for truth in theology and church life. This last point is arguably his most important and original contribution to the doctrine of the church. It connects to his understanding of revelation, of the gospel, and of the church's embodiment of those two things before the second coming and the final judgment.

Here is how Luther states the position:

[T]he holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's word, enduring this for the sake of Christ.³⁵

Behind Luther's thinking on the cross and the church lies his thinking on the cross in general. From as early as 1518, when he presided over the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther acknowledged a significance to the cross that went far beyond what a category such as penal substitution might capture. For Luther, the cross is a revelation of who God is toward his people and also a paradigmatic manifestation of how he deals with his people. The cross is an epistemological, a moral, and an experiential contradiction of natural, fallen human expectations in each of those areas. We might say that the cross was the gospel; and the church is the manifestation of that gospel in the present.

³⁵ Luther, "On the Councils and the Church" (1539), AI: 41:164–165.

At a time of dramatic realignment of the cultural relationship between church and state in the United States of America, this message is an important one. One might argue that Luther is simply recapitulating the arguments of Paul in 1 and 2 Corinthians. But it is a message that is important to hear. The fragility of life itself is not something that plays well in a world where Frank Sinatra's "My Way" is a consistent favorite at funerals—or "celebrations of life," to use the popular phrase. As the church in the USA continues to get weaker, it is good to be reminded that what is historically normative in the USA—a Protestant domination of culture—is theologically exceptional. To this, Luther speaks as eloquently as anyone since Paul.

VI. Conclusion

For the Reformed, Luther looms large as a symbol of reform, and as a man who stood courageously for the truth of the gospel. His works are not so often cited by us as his ideas, specifically justification by grace through faith and the bondage of the will. We disagree, of course, on the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in a manner that is still the most significant point of dispute between our communions. But there is also a rich vein of Luther's teaching on the act of preaching from which the Reformed would do well to learn. If the need of this hour for the church is the proclamation of the gospel, then we also need a theological understanding of that act in itself. And that is where some of Luther's greatest insights are to be found.