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Suffering as a Mark of the Church in Martin Luther's Exegesis of 1 Peter

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Over a lifetime of conflict with church and empire, in addition to deep personal losses, it is not surprising that suffering is a recurring theme in Martin Luther's writings.¹ Even so, it is notable that Luther in effect canonizes suffering by including it as a mark of the church in his 1539 treatise *On the Councils and the Church*, stating that Christians are known by affliction. The church is "externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross" because its members "steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's word," such that "wherever you see or hear [of such suffering], you may know that the holy Christian church is there This too is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies his people, but also blesses them."² Written near the end of Luther's life, these words articulated a mainstay of his theology for decades, namely, the idea that God's people are a suffering people.³ Indeed, for Luther the cross is

¹ The author would like to thank G. Sujin Pak and Jon Balsarak for their helpful suggestions after reading early versions of this article, as well as David M. Whitford for his insightful questions and comments.

² "On the Councils and the Church, 1539" in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 41:164-65 (hereafter AE); "Von den Konziliis und Kirchen, 1539" in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1914), 50:641-42 (hereafter WA). For more on how Luther distinguished the true/hidden church from, respectively, the "visible church" and the "false church," see Mark A. Noll, "Martin Luther and the Concept of a 'true' Church," *Evangelical Quarterly* 50 (1978): 79-85.

³ This same idea appeared, for example, nearly ten years earlier in his *Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering* (1530), and over a decade prior to that in 1518 in both the *Heidelberg Disputation* and *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*. Robert A. Kelly has noted how this theme of a suffering church recurs in connection with Luther's *theologia crucis* more broadly, as well as with his theology of the two kingdoms (of Christ vs. of the world). See "The Suffering Church: A Study of Luther's *Theologia Crucis*," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 50:1 (1986): 3-17. See also Timothy J. Wengert, "'Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," *Theology Today* 59, no. 2 (2002): 190-205. Wengert relates Luther's *theologia crucis* to Christian suffering and how this confirms God's promises exper-

intrinsic to Christian identity, to such an extent that “whoever is not a ‘Crosstian’ [*Crucianus*] . . . is not a Christian.”⁴ An element of Luther’s doctrine of suffering as a mark of the church that generally has been neglected, however, is its rich presence in his biblical exegesis.⁵ An example of this appears in his *Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter* (1523), which unfold important features of Luther’s ecclesiology from an epistle he considered “pure gospel.”⁶ Yet instead of typical ecclesiological topics like church order and office, Luther concentrates here on defining Christian suffering and its significance in a way that anticipates his explicit identification of suffering as a mark of the church. Do these sermons, then, contain exegetical support for the doctrine of the suffering church that would find more succinct expression years down the line?

ientially. On *theologia crucis* and the idea of the church on pilgrimage, see Albert Brandenburg, “Luthers Theologia Crucis und die Auffassung von der Pilgernden Kirche,” in *Volk Gottes. Zum Kirchenverständnis Der Katholischen, Evangelischen Und Anglikanischen Theologie. Festgabe für Josef Höfer*, ed. Heimo Dolch and Remigius Bäumer (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 323–335.

⁴ “Genesisvorlesung,” WA 43:617; cf. AE 5:274.

⁵ There are exceptions, of course. Kelly connects Luther’s comments in “On the Councils” regarding suffering as a mark of the church with similar ideas in the reformer’s exegesis of the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount (1532), and Galatians (1535), and in the *Sermon at Coburg* (1530); “The Suffering Church,” 5–11. More recently, Michael Parsons has examined the theme of God’s suffering people in terms of the increasingly urgent eschatological outlook of Luther’s interpretation, over time, of five “royal” Psalms. “Luther, the Royal Psalms and the Suffering Church,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35:3 (2011): 242–254. For Luther’s *theologia crucis* worked out in his biblical exegesis, see Marc Lienhard, “Christologie et Humilité dans la Theologia Crucis du Commentaire de l’Épître aux Romains de Luther,” *Revue d’Historie et de Philosophie Religieuses* 42 (1962): 304–315. None of these studies, however, focuses on Luther’s view of suffering as sanctification. Ronald K. Rittgers does point out how Luther increasingly conceives of suffering as a means of testing and strengthening the gift of faith as this theme appears in various works, including Luther’s exegesis of Romans, Hebrews, the Psalms, 1 Peter and Genesis. *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 84–124). The present study agrees with Rittger’s analysis and intends to offer a more focused treatment of Luther’s 1 Peter sermons. For an analysis of the development of Luther’s theology from the reformer’s sermons on 1 Peter, but without specific reference to the topic of suffering and its relation to Luther’s ecclesiology, see Martin Brecht, “Die Entwicklung der Theologie Luthers aus der Exegese, vorgeführt an der Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt (1522/1523)” in *Luthers Erben: Studien zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der reformatorischen Theologie Luthers*, ed. Notger Slenczka and Walter Sparn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1–24.

⁶ Foreword to “Sermons on the First Epistle of St. Peter,” AE 30:4; “Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt, 1523,” WA 12:260. Luther praises 1 Peter for its place among “the noblest books in the New Testament.”

In considering this question, an awareness of the events immediately surrounding Luther's composition and delivery of these 1 Peter expositions situates them within a period of deep personal turmoil for the reformer. Luther had recently returned to a Wittenberg reeling from disturbances that were traceable, in part, to interpretations of his own theology. He also found himself in the midst of his decisive break with his longtime colleague and co-reformer, Andreas Karlstadt.⁷ Could these factors have influenced Luther's choice of 1 Peter—with its prominent treatment of suffering—as a text for preaching, or at least guided his selection of themes to emphasize from this epistle? Would it be too much of a stretch to see in Luther's preaching of suffering as *sine qua non* of true Christianity an attempt to validate his own election in the face of doubts arising from his present trouble? Whatever might be the answers to such questions, they remind us that theological formulations, while aspiring to claim normative value for all times and places, also arise from particular circumstances, concerns, and pressures. Luther's sermons are no exception.

The present study will contend that an examination of Luther's 1 Peter sermons locates, nearly two decades prior to *On the Councils and the Church*, the basic contours of his teaching on suffering as a visible mark of the church that we find articulated explicitly in this later work. It is important to stress that the view of suffering Luther presents in the 1 Peter sermons is neither unique to these expositions nor something that had not appeared in earlier writings. That said, 1 Peter offers Luther a particularly apt exegetical locus from which to articulate his position, bringing together in a single canonical book both overt soteriological themes and an emphasis on suffering. In order to present Luther's 1522 teaching from 1 Peter with sensitivity to concurrent and later developments in the reformer's life, the present study makes three observations. First, Luther uses 1 Peter to carve out a conceptual framework for the Christian life in terms of three key themes: pilgrimage, Word, and sanctification through affliction after Christ's example. This lays a foundation for his insistence that suffering marks the true church, particularly that unjust suffering is an indispensable means of sanctifying God's people. Second, Luther's deep personal distress at the time of these sermons must be permitted to enrich our understanding of his preaching in 1522 in ways that might explain his particular emphases. Finally, setting the 1 Peter material alongside earlier

⁷ See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532*, trans. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), 61–66, 157–172. A helpful account of the public dispute between Luther and Karlstadt, told through key primary texts, remains Ronald J. Sider, ed., *Karlstadt's Battle with Luther: Documents in a Liberal-Radical Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

and later writings reveals the importance of what might be called “cruciform ecclesiology” to Luther’s biblical exegesis, which, in turn, supports his use of this theme elsewhere. Despite variations of circumstance, one ultimately finds over the course of time a basic coherence and consistency to Luther’s insistence on suffering as a mark of the church.⁸

I. Sanctification through Affliction in Luther’s 1 Peter Sermons

Pilgrimage and Word as Conditions for Suffering

Luther’s sermons on 1 Peter were delivered on weekday afternoons to his Wittenberg congregation from May to December 1522 and reveal close attention to an epistle beloved by the reformer.⁹ While containing the core gospel teaching (so critical for Luther) of Christ as the object of justifying faith, 1 Peter also sets this concern for true faith against the sober reality that Christians live as “strangers and exiles,” God’s “holy” people set apart in a world where suffering is a given (1 Pet 2:9, 11; 4:12).¹⁰ By couching the gospel in an idiom of exile, hardship, and holiness, 1 Peter invites Luther to reflect on Christian identity as that of pilgrims in a foreign land. Home remains a destination. This pilgrimage motif supplies the situational context within which Luther’s doctrine of suffering as a mark of the church both arises logically and resonates experientially for believers as a means for God to validate their faith. Luther also finds here an emphasis on God’s word as the catalyst for a uniquely Christian variety of suffering. In what follows, we will show how pilgrimage and word converge to produce

⁸ This is not to say that the nuances of Luther’s views on the matter did not change or evolve, but only that the basic link he draws between suffering and the visible church is a consistent emphasis in his thought that is evoked by way of recurring themes that cannot simply be explained by situational factors. For an analysis of Luther’s views on suffering and the Christian life across a wide range of the reformer’s writings as this reflects his developing views on the centrality of faith for both soteriology and suffering, see Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering*, 84–124.

⁹ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 57–59; see also Kurt Aland, *Hilfsbuch Zum Lutherstudium* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1996), 137–138. By Luther’s assessment, 1 Peter ranks with the Pauline epistles, John’s Gospel, and John’s first epistle as the “true kernel and marrow of all the books” of the New Testament, because these books present most clearly “how faith in Christ conquers sin, death, and hell; and gives life, righteousness, and salvation.” “Preface to the New Testament (1522)” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writing*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 18. Luther’s 1523 foreword to the 1 Peter sermons reiterates that “St. Peter does the same thing that St. Paul and all the evangelists do; he teaches us the true faith and tells us that Christ was given to us to take away our sin and save us.” AE 30:4; WA 12:260.

¹⁰ All scriptural quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1989).

conditions under which Luther saw suffering to be both unavoidable and, at the same time, a blessing for Christians.

The pilgrimage motif in 1 Peter pervades Luther's reading of the letter, which teaches him that the time of pilgrimage is both transient and purposeful. First, "The Christian life is only a night's lodging."¹¹ The "living hope" into which 1 Peter says Christians are born through Christ's resurrection (1:3-4) indicates, for Luther, both that "this life and the life to come are mutually exclusive," as well as the continual movement from one to the other: "Here there is only a stopover where we cannot remain. We must proceed on our journey We are citizens of heaven; on earth we are pilgrims and guests."¹² Meanwhile, the presence of suffering sharpens the pilgrim's hope. Luther contrasts the present life with the greater, lasting possession that awaits pilgrims by juxtaposing faith today to what later will be seen.¹³ 1 Peter urges believers to "rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer" (1:6). For Luther this is the consoling promise of a future in which the pilgrim's patience will be rewarded: "Your mourning will last for a short time. Then you will rejoice, for salvation is already prepared for you."¹⁴

The second basic quality of this present life is its purposefulness, a teaching for which 1 Peter 1:7 is key: "Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile."¹⁵ For Luther, such reverence requires attention to good works as the expression of one's faith: "[God] will ask you: 'If you are a Christian, then tell Me: Where are the fruits with which you can show your faith?' . . . Since you have the kind of Father who does not judge according to the person, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of pilgrimage."¹⁶ The reverence shown by beloved children is not a servile fear, but nevertheless remains the deliberate addition of piety to faith that, for Luther, together makes up "the sum total of the Christian life."¹⁷ Thus,

¹¹ AE 30:35; WA 12:291.

¹² AE 30:11, 67; WA 12:267, 322.

¹³ AE 30:11; WA 12:266-67.

¹⁴ AE 30:16; WA 12:271-72.

¹⁵ Why bother at all with what Luther has already deemed a transient and relatively deficient existence? For Luther, the present life remains part of God's plan and accountable to God's commands. Thus, the proper response is reverence expressed in faithful obedience to God, particularly regarding service toward one's neighbor: "We have no other reason for living . . . than to be of help to others. If this were not the case it would be best for God to kill us and let us die as soon as we are baptized and have begun to believe." AE 30:11; WA 12:266.

¹⁶ AE 30:35; WA 12:290.

¹⁷ AE 30:35; WA 12:290.

Luther reasons from 1 Peter, the Christian life is a transient and purposeful journey, eliciting hope and reverence from self-aware pilgrims who have glimpsed God's design for their present existence. Yet, while life in a world passing away explains a kind of suffering common to all, what we have shown above hints at how Luther also believes that God's word produces affliction unique to true believers. Pilgrimage is a time of testing in which suffering for the word confirms one's faith.

In a 1530 sermon on the theme of Christian suffering, Luther characterizes the Word of God as both the source of Christian "consolation even in the worst of suffering and misfortune" and the principal cause of that same misery: "We suffer because we hold to the Word of God, preach it, hear it, learn it, and practice it."¹⁸ This paradoxical view of God's word is a consistent motif in Luther's theological writings, including his 1 Peter exegesis, wherein he reflects on 1) Scripture's necessity, 2) the right order of its teaching, and 3) its relation to suffering in the Christian life. Luther saw God's word as a catalyst for suffering along the Christian pilgrimage.

Ground zero for Luther's theology is the necessity and centrality of Scripture. 1 Peter affirms Scripture's message and power. Above all, there is no church apart from God's word preached and believed, because this is how people encounter Christ: "St. Peter teaches us to outfit and equip ourselves with Scripture," Luther writes, because it is through preaching that "[we] cling to the proclamation of the Gospel God does not let His grace be offered to anyone in any way than through Christ Through the Gospel we are told who Christ is, in order that we may learn to know that He is our Savior."¹⁹ The mutuality of word and church are such that "God's Word cannot be without God's people, and conversely, God's people cannot be without God's Word."²⁰ Preaching also has power to regenerate and nurture Christians: "How can we build ourselves? Through the gospel and preaching. The preachers are the builders. The

¹⁸ "Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering, 1530," AE 51:200-201; "Ein Sermon vom leiden und Creutz, 1530," WA 32:31-32. Luther's texts for this sermon are Matthew 27, Luke 25, and John 19.

¹⁹ AE 30:25, 29-30; WA 12:280, 284-85. According to Luther, this knowledge of Christ mediated by Scripture subsequently must be embraced by faith to be of any value to the individual: "You must know and believe that [Christ] did all this for your sake, in order to help you." Scripture is critical to Luther's ecclesiology. In the same 1539 treatise that lists suffering as a mark of the church, Luther had first named Scripture "preached, believed, professed, and lived" as the only indispensable sign of the true church. "On the Council and the Church," AE 41:149-50; WA 50:629.

²⁰ AE 41:149-50; WA 50:629. Luther continues, "Otherwise, who would preach or hear it preached? And what could or would God's people believe if there were no word of God?"

Christians . . . are those who are built."²¹ Regarding regeneration through the word in 1 Peter 1:23, Luther comments, "We have been born anew through a seed How does this take place? In the following way: God lets the Word, the Gospel, go forth. He causes the seed to fall into the hearts of men. Now where it takes root in the heart, the Holy Spirit is present and creates a new man You are completely changed."²² Luther further asserts Scripture's necessity when he makes its proclamation the sole reason for a separate ecclesiastical office: "To give pasture is nothing else than to preach the Gospel, by which souls are fed and made fat and fruitful, and that the sheep are nourished with the Gospel and God's Word. This alone is the office of a bishop."²³ Scripture, then, is indispensable to constituting, nourishing, and governing the pilgrim church.

A second theme in Luther's theology of the Word that finds exegetical grounds in 1 Peter is the proper order of biblical teaching. For Luther, justification unquestionably is by faith alone, but true faith always responds with faithful obedience. The exhortation in 1 Peter 2:2 to "long for the pure, spiritual milk" leads Luther to reflect on two ways of offering Christ in the gospel: first as gift, then as example. The latter Luther calls "a strong potion and strong wine," and he urges preachers first to "preach gently to the young Christians. Let them enrich themselves and grow fat in the knowledge of Christ. Do not burden them with strong doctrine, for they are still too young. But later, when they grow strong, let them be slaughtered and sacrificed on the cross."²⁴ Luther counsels preachers to be sensitive to the needs of different experiential stages along the pilgrim's journey—from an initial acquaintance with Christ's sweetness as pure gift to the need later to experience Christ's pain as an example for our own. Luther thus draws the conclusion that the same word that enlivens and nurtures Christians simultaneously creates the conditions for a uniquely Christian suffering as children of God who now find themselves at odds with the world, the flesh, and the devil.²⁵ The 1 Peter sermons help us understand how Luther can say in 1530 that Christians suffer precisely because they "hold to the Word of God."²⁶ This is neither suffering in

²¹ AE 30:50, 52; WA 12: 304, 306. Commenting here on 1 Peter 2:2–5, Luther adds, "It is not enough to hear the Gospel once; one must study it constantly, in order that we may grow up."

²² AE 30:43–44, WA 12:298.

²³ AE 30:134; WA 12:388.

²⁴ AE 30:49; WA 12:303.

²⁵ AE 30:70–72, 141; WA 12:325–27, 395.

²⁶ AE 51:200; WA 32:31.

general nor suffering as a result of one's misdeeds, but affliction received "unjustly," "for doing what is right," and "for the name of Christ" (1 Pet 2:19, 3:13, 4:14). Pilgrimage and word converge in experience to make suffering inevitable for believers. Luther does not leave the discussion there, but goes on to unfold how such unjust suffering can bless the ones it afflicts.

Unjust Suffering as Means of Grace and Mark of the Church

There is a further Christological dimension to suffering: "If we are Christians, we have to say: 'My Lord suffered for me and shed his blood. He died for my sake. Should I, then, be so worthless as not to be willing to suffer?'"²⁷ Pilgrimage is a time in which the church is molded into the image of its Head through suffering that reflects Christ's. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this teaching is how Luther insists on the necessity of real pain in order to receive genuine consolation. Luther argues from 1 Peter that God intends for the church to bear Christ's suffering not only as visible mark of its union with him, but also as a means of effecting this union.

Specifically, Luther's reading of 1 Peter exhibits an understanding of suffering as both communion and consecration for believers, with both categories undergirding his view of suffering as a mark of the church. First, there is a nexus between believers and Christ in his suffering that, for Luther, transcends theoretical reflection on Christ as the object of faith.²⁸ Taking his cue from Peter's urging to "rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings" (4:13), Luther insists that Christians "have communion with the Lord" through unjust suffering.²⁹ In one sense, the kind of communion with Christ that such suffering brings about is intellectual, to test "the genuineness of your faith" (1:7): "God has imposed the cross on all Christians to cleanse and to purge them well, in order that faith may remain pure, just as the Word is, so that one adheres to the Word alone

²⁷ AE 30:118; WA 12:373.

²⁸ Others have pointed out how Luther's theology of the cross takes Christ's suffering to be both distinct from and present in the church's suffering. See Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); also Brandenburg, "Luthers Theologia Crucis," 326.

²⁹ AE 30:127; WA 12:382. Luther does not crassly equate our suffering with Christ's Passion: "St. Peter does not say that we should feel Christ's sufferings in order to share them through faith." Rather he sees in Christ's willing acceptance of unjust suffering a pattern for interpreting both isolated instances and the general unfolding of the Christian life as a whole, in which suffering is given and need not be actively sought. AE 30:110; WA 12:365.

and relies on nothing else."³⁰ Insofar as suffering causes Christians to rely on God's word, which conveys teaching about Christ, this also draws them nearer to Christ. But for Luther this communion with Christ in suffering goes beyond increasing assent to the word. Commenting on 1 Peter 4:13, Luther contrasts unjust temporal suffering with its eternal significance for believers: "Although this is physical suffering, it should be a spiritual joy, in order that you may rejoice forever. For this joy *begins* in suffering and *lasts forever*."³¹ Christian suffering becomes a means of bringing eternal realities to bear upon this present life. More specifically, suffering alone is able to make the gospel's saving power tangible in one's experience: "Where suffering and the cross are found, there the Gospel can show and exercise its power. It is a Word of life. Therefore it must exercise all its power in death. In the absence of dying and death it can do nothing, and no one can become aware that it has such power and is stronger than sin and death."³² Only death's sting can make the promise of life so meaningful and God's power so evident—as power that delivers us not from a theoretical curse, but from a real and felt one. This idea that suffering creates experiential communion with Christ that deepens even as affliction increases reveals what is perhaps the most striking feature of Luther's reflections on suffering in 1 Peter: the link between suffering and sanctification. By exercising faith in the midst of trials, a profound transformation occurs within believers. To be certain, Luther speaks of mental assent to God's word, but he also envisions sanctification via suffering to go beyond thinking like Christ or about him—even beyond feeling his presence—to embodying Christ himself. It is in this regard that suffering emerges most clearly as a visible mark of the church.

Two key texts in 1 Peter guide Luther's thinking on suffering as consecration. 1 Peter 3:19–22 connects Christian baptism and the Flood, inviting Luther to compare the safety of Noah's ark with Christ and the church, so that "we are saved, just as Noah was saved in the ark. Thus you see that the analogy summarizes what faith and the cross, life and death, are. *Now where there are people who cling to Christ, there a Christian Church is sure to be.*"³³ Setting aside the question of whether Luther has adequately

³⁰ AE 30:17; WA 12:272.

³¹ AE 30:127 (emphasis added); WA 12:382.

³² AE 30:126–27; WA 12:381–82. Luther continues: "[God] lays the holy cross on our backs to strengthen us and make faith powerful in us. The holy Gospel is a powerful Word. Therefore it cannot do its work without trials, and only he who tastes it is aware that it has such power God inflicts no glowing fire or heat—cross and suffering, which make you burn—on you for another purpose than 'to prove you,' where you also cling to His Word When you suffer you have communion with the Lord Christ."

³³ AE 30:115–16 (emphasis added); WA 12:370.

explained this notoriously difficult text, he has told us where he locates the true church. It is manifest where “there are people who cling to Christ.” This is represented sacramentally in baptism, which identifies those who escape God’s judgment and cling to the safety of Christ in the church.³⁴ As seen above, Luther views clinging to Christ—here the quintessential characteristic of the baptized—as something realized experientially through suffering.³⁵ When Christians take hold of Christ in their trials, they in effect display their baptism, manifesting that God has taken them into the “ark,” so that they “are saved, just as Noah was saved.” If the Word is how Christians primarily come to Christ, suffering becomes the vehicle God uses to complete their solidarity with Christ. The safety represented in baptism is experienced not apart from, but only in the midst of affliction. This is no mere intellectual maneuver. God’s consolation for Christians who suffer unjustly is that they have actually become the present embodiment of the grace and final victory over death signified in their baptism. By provoking the faith that unites believers to Christ, suffering continues the work of baptism and, if we might be permitted to speak of it this way, makes the church visible.

This idea that suffering makes manifest the promises of baptism in a people who cling to Christ is carried forward when Luther uses the discussion of suffering in 1 Peter 4:15–16 to critique contemporary veneration of relics:

St. Peter says: When you suffer in this way [i.e., for Christ], you should not be ashamed What good does it do to put the cross in monstrances? *Christ’s cross does not save me.* To be sure, I must believe in his cross; but *I must bear my own cross.* I must put His suffering into my heart. Then I have the true treasure. St. Peter’s bones are sacred. But what does that help you? *You and your own bones must become sacred.* This happens when you suffer for Christ’s sake.³⁶

Luther makes a move here that is critical for understanding his subsequent decision to name suffering as a mark of the church. Christ’s work is not effective for an individual so long as what Christ has done remains external to this person—an object to be seen, believed, and even venerated from a distance. Salvation, for Luther, requires nothing less than inter-

³⁴ Luther confusingly identifies the “ark” interchangeably with “Christ,” “church,” “Gospel,” and “body.”

³⁵ AE 30:126; WA 12:381.

³⁶ AE 30:129 (emphasis added); WA 12:385. Luther adds, “We are not worthy of this suffering.”

nalizing Christ's redemptive work.³⁷ This happens when Christians stop merely seeking relics of Christ, but actually *become* these: "You and your own bones must become sacred." Suffering, as both the means and evidence of union with Christ, consecrates the church by making it an authentic relic of the living Christ. The true church will point to its cross to prove its identity, since apart from such affliction any so-called "church" does not actually possess Christ. Luther can see cruciform suffering as a mark of the church because, for him, this pattern of life that defines the pilgrim's journey is never optional. It is intrinsic to one's salvation. Therefore the true church is always also the cruciform church.

Our survey of Luther's exegesis of 1 Peter has shown how his close reading of this letter results in a robust doctrine of suffering that both teaches its unavoidability for those who adhere to God's Word and insists on the necessity of such affliction for sanctification. Not only does suffering confirm the gospel's truth in the believer's personal experience, but in this process it turns the church into a visible embodiment of its message, a living relic of its suffering Savior.

II. Situating the 1 Peter Sermons: Was Luther Preaching to Himself?

When Luther took up the preaching of 1 Peter in May 1522, he addressed citizens of a city newly restored to relative peace after disruptions led by those who were zealous to bring about liturgical and clerical reform quickly and without compromise. Indeed, Luther's own preaching earlier that year, especially his series of eight "Invocavit" sermons delivered the first week of Lent (March 9-16), is credited with regaining public order by persuading both the government and inhabitants of Wittenberg to slow the

³⁷ The "treasure," as he puts it, must become a part of you. Likewise, the value of Peter's bones derives from the apostle's union with Christ, which only points to, but never replaces one's own union with Christ. John Calvin argued along a similar logic when he insisted on the absolute necessity of union with Christ for one's salvation: "We must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us." *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans., F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.1.1; John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum et al., 59 vols., Corpus Reformatorum (Brunswick: Schwetschke [M. Bruhm], 1863-1900), 2:394. Calvin will go on to elaborate extensively on the Holy Spirit's role in effecting this personal, salvific union, whereas Luther does not discuss in detail any of the pneumatological mechanics of union with Christ in his 1 Peter exegesis. Yet we should not underestimate the role of the Holy Spirit in Luther's theology. See Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953).

pace of change and repeal the more radical liturgical innovations introduced during Luther's absence by others such as Karlstadt and Zwilling.³⁸ Viewed in terms of their immediate intent, it would appear that the *Invocavit* sermons were a complete success, curbing public unrest and marking Luther's official return to his position as leader of the Reformation in Wittenberg following nearly a year of incognito exile at the Wartburg. However, as Brecht observes, Luther's correspondence at the time was filled with the melancholy concern that the social unrest was but indicative of the ongoing "struggle with Satan."³⁹

Several thematic connections may be made between the *Invocavit* sermons and the 1 Peter expositions that followed them almost immediately. Luther's exhortation to trust in the power of the word to bring about reform without resorting too hastily to external compulsion or pressing matters is couched in the overall call to express Christian love through patience and humility.⁴⁰ We have shown how both the centrality of the Word and the importance of good works as an expression of true faith feature prominently in the 1 Peter sermons, although it can be argued that these themes recur throughout Luther's entire corpus. At the same time, we must not discount the possibility that Luther chose to take up 1 Peter right after the *Invocavit* sermons precisely to reinforce such key ideas from a biblical book especially well-suited to this purpose.

It is when we come to their common emphasis on suffering that the choice to follow the *Invocavit* sermons with a series on 1 Peter takes on the appearance of greater intentionality. Luther opens his first of the eight *Invocavit* sermons with the somber reminder that "every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone."⁴¹ Beyond imbuing the coming week's preaching with a sense of urgency—as containing "the chief things which concern a Christian" in his preparation to face death—this initial reference to death finds resonance with several reflections on Christian suffering that Luther goes on to offer.⁴² Part and parcel of the Christian's preparation for death is the daily persecution and affliction that requires patience and strengthens faith.⁴³ Those who are seasoned through such testing are reminded that "we do not travel heavenward alone, but

³⁸ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 59–61; see "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522," AE 51:69–100; WA 10³:1–64.

³⁹ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 61.

⁴⁰ AE 51:70–77; WA 10³:1–18.

⁴¹ AE 51:70; WA 10³:1.

⁴² AE 51:70; WA 10³:1.

⁴³ AE 51:71–72; 10³:1–9.

bring our brethren . . . with us."⁴⁴ Thus Luther, in a manner that anticipates his 1 Peter sermons, exhorts believers to accommodate the needs of fellow pilgrims who might require special gentleness in the presentation of doctrine for their particular stage in every Christian's homeward journey. Also finding parallels in the 1 Peter material is Luther's insistence that suffering is necessary for proper reception of the sacrament, insofar as only "those who suffer tribulation, physical or spiritual . . . outwardly or inwardly . . . so that you do not know how you stand with God . . . when he casts your sins into your face" can receive the grace that God means to seal in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.⁴⁵ Only those who experience such affliction to the point of despair are "worthy to receive" the sacrament, because it is "in such terrified and trembling hearts alone God desires to dwell" as the one who comforts and consoles through the sacrament that confirms God's promises as "food" for "a hungry soul."⁴⁶ Luther uses this striking imagery of weakness and hunger as the locus of God's dwelling in order to chastise arrogant Wittenbergers who, in their zeal for reform, lack love. Solidarity with Christ through suffering, and how this is uniquely reflected as God's people participate in the sacraments, is a theme Luther will take up again when he expounds 1 Peter to the same audience.

On the one hand, Luther's robust argument in the *Invocavit* sermons that suffering is the mode of genuine Christians lends support to the possibility that he selected 1 Peter as his next text for weekday expositions in order to reinforce this idea and thus maintain the peace of the city. Seen from this perspective, preaching from 1 Peter becomes a pastoral decision to meet the reformer's own congregation at a particular place of need in their pilgrimage. They required the "strong wine" of teaching on the cross to learn from Christ's example, so that they in turn might recognize their own duty to reflect Christ's humility in their dealings with one another. Perhaps there was also the recognition, in Luther's opinion, that a defective understanding of suffering may have left some desperate for the comfort that God dwells with "trembling hearts." It is not a stretch to imagine such pastoral motives behind Luther's selection of 1 Peter, from among all the options, as the place from which to resume his regular preaching ministry. What remains to be asked, however, is whether this choice had particular relevance to Luther himself.

⁴⁴ AE 51:72; WA 10³:6-7.

⁴⁵ AE 51:93-94; WA 10³:51-52.

⁴⁶ AE 51:94-95; WA 10³:52-55.

While mind reading makes for hazardous historiography, the question of Luther's own acquaintance with suffering in 1522 should at least be considered in any attempt to fill out the wider context for his preaching at that time. We have already noted that Luther's return to Wittenberg coincided with the deterioration of his friendship with Karlstadt, who was among the leaders of the reforms Luther attempted to rein in. Brecht observes that Luther did not consider the matter resolved despite the return of peace and stability to Wittenberg after the *Invocavit* sermons.⁴⁷ Indeed, a glance at Luther's letters immediately before and after his return from the Wartburg reveals the reformer's grave assessment of the Wittenberg disturbances as reactions to his own teaching which, if not corrected, could provoke God's wrath and have repercussions in the form of political rebellion and upheaval throughout the German territories.⁴⁸ These same letters also indicate Luther's willingness—even his expectation—to suffer as a result of returning to Wittenberg against his Elector's wishes, as one who has already been proclaimed a heretic by the church and an outlaw by the empire.⁴⁹ Luther sees his return from the safety of exile as the next round in a battle with Satan, "who has intruded into my fold in my absence." Luther must fulfill his Christian duty to follow Christ's example and "lay down my life" for his pastoral flock, "to die for my neighbor's sake."⁵⁰ Thus the reformer frames his own return from exile in terms of the Christian's personal reckoning with death—the theme with which he opens the *Invocavit* sermons—as well as the necessity to suffer after Christ's example as intrinsic to one's identity as a child of God, which is a pervasive concern of the 1 Peter sermons. Lacking any explicit textual evidence that Luther chose to preach from 1 Peter in 1522 as a means of validating his own sense of calling to suffer whatever consequences might follow from his return to public life, our ability to assess his motives is limited. However, what we read of Luther's self-understanding at the time of his 1 Peter sermons clearly suggests reasons why this text could have been a boon to him.

Raising the question of whether Luther might have needed personal encouragement when he looked to 1 Peter's teaching that affliction is intrinsic to the Christian life is not to relativize Luther's doctrine entirely, as if establishing such connections to his personal situation would limit its

⁴⁷ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 61.

⁴⁸ Letters to Elector Frederick, AE 48:390, 396–97, 399; WA, Briefwechsel 2: 455, 461–62 (hereafter WA, Br).

⁴⁹ Letters to Elector Frederick and George Spalatin, AE 48:392–94, 49:4; WA, Br 2: 456–57, 459; WA, Br 2:490.

⁵⁰ Letter to Elector Frederick, AE 48:395–96; WA, Br 2:460–61.

relevance only to these circumstances. The idea that authentic Christianity involves personal acquaintance with suffering after Christ's example recurs throughout Luther's writings.

III. "Cruciform Ecclesiology" as a Recurring Theme in Luther's Writings

What remains now is briefly to demonstrate how Luther's "cruciform ecclesiology"—as it is worked out in the 1 Peter sermons as the confluence of pilgrimage, word, and cross to identify and sanctify the church—is not unique to these 1522 expositions. We have already noted the mature integration of these themes when he explicitly names suffering as a mark of the church in 1539. While more can be said about how Luther justified the church's existence apart from Rome, his choice of these particular marks in 1539 cannot be dismissed as haphazard or unrelated to his wider theology. That same year, Luther stressed the necessity of affliction (*tentatio*, German *Anfechtung*) for biblical exegesis: "This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom."⁵¹ The Word precedes suffering, but not by much. Only the latter makes biblical teaching ring true. We conclude with three other instances of Luther's "cruciform ecclesiology." These examples affirm the logic of suffering as sanctification displayed in the 1 Peter material; they also benefit from the exegetical support this feature of Luther's thought derives from those 1522 sermons.⁵²

In a 1530 sermon on the theme of Christian suffering, Luther characterizes the Word of God as both the source of Christian "consolation even in the worst of suffering and misfortune" and the principal cause of that same misery. The 1 Peter sermons help us understand how Luther can say in 1530 that Christians suffer precisely because "we hold to the Word of God, preach it, hear it, learn it, and practice it."⁵³ The same sermon also repeats 1 Peter's emphasis on the proper ordering of gospel teaching,

⁵¹ "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings, 1539" in AE 34:286–87; WA 50:600. For a discussion of this concept in Luther's thinking more broadly, see David Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47:1 (1983): 15–30.

⁵² The near ubiquity of suffering as a theme throughout Luther's writings has already been noted. Hence what follows is but a highly selective sample of places in which particular aspects of Luther's reflections on this topic in the 1 Peter materials are reflected on other occasions.

⁵³ "Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering, 1530," AE 51:200–201; WA 32:31–32.

namely that Christ is presented as both promise and responsibility.⁵⁴ Others have examined how this inseparable connection between suffering and the word appears in Luther's exegesis of the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, and Paul's letter to the Galatians.⁵⁵

In Luther's 1518 *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, his discussion of Theses 15 and 58 ground his theology of the cross in personal experience and confirms the real but penultimate role of suffering in God's salvific promise.⁵⁶ The theologian of the cross can tell the plain truth about suffering—that it is a curse—and yet also see in the good news of Christ's suffering and resurrection the power of God in his word to turn death into life both for Christ and for believers. For Luther the gospel reveals God's power "to declare suffering to be what it can never be in and of itself."⁵⁷ Against those who seek Christ in relics of wood, bone, and cloth, Luther exhorts believers to find Christ in their afflictions, which are a gift reserved for "the hearts of the faithful which are incomparably more precious than every piece of gold and every precious stone."⁵⁸ Suffering as communion

⁵⁴ Responding to charges of antinomianism, Luther acknowledges an aspect of gospel preaching beyond the promise of salvation received by faith alone. The gospel also places upon Christians a burden to receive Christ as an example for good works and suffering (AE 51:198; WA 32:29). Luther complains, "Since there are many false fanatics abroad, who only distort the gospel and accuse us and say that we have nothing else to teach and preach except faith alone, that we leave out the doctrine of good works and the holy cross and suffering; and that they have the true Spirit, who moves them to teach as they do, we shall at this time speak only of the example which this Passion gives to us, what kind of cross we bear and suffer, and also how we should bear and suffer it."

⁵⁵ See, for example, Kelly, "Suffering Church," and Parsons, "Royal Psalms."

⁵⁶ Wengert notes that especially Thesis 58 "and its explanation constitute Luther's single most important public statement on the theology of the cross, far more widely published in the sixteenth century than the Heidelberg Disputation and yet almost completely ignored by scholars today. Here is the theology of the cross intended for public consumption, so to speak, and forged in the heat of public controversy." "Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross," 198–199.

⁵⁷ "Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross," 202.

⁵⁸ "A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God), teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed, not alone by the touch of his most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced. Indeed fortunate and blessed is he who is considered by God to be so worthy that these treasures of the relics of Christ should be given to him; rather who understands that they are given to him." "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses, 1518" AE 31:225–26; WA 1:613.

with Christ and relic of God's saving power reappear as themes four years later in the 1 Peter sermons.

Finally, the theology of suffering developed exegetically in the 1 Peter expositions is soon thereafter applied to the 1520s peasants' insurrections. Maligned by some as political opportunism or elitist indifference to the plight of social inferiors, Luther's stern rebuke of peasant violence nevertheless reflects a consistent theological synthesis of Christian suffering and ecclesiology that had been maturing for years.⁵⁹ Citing 1 Peter 2:23, Luther warns peasants in 1525 that their actions have called their salvation to question. To reject unjust suffering at the hands of political superiors is incompatible with the name "Christian" and essentially to align with a counterfeit church:

[Christ] did just what St. Peter says. He committed the whole matter to him who judges justly, and he endured this intolerable wrong Now, if you are genuine Christians, you must certainly act in the same way and follow his example. If you do not do this, then give up the name of Christian and the claim that Christian law is on your side, for then you are certainly not Christians but are opposing Christ and his law, his doctrine, and his example Christians do not fight for themselves with sword and musket, but with the cross and suffering [If you reject this] you should let the name of Christ alone.⁶⁰

Not to exclude the more powerful, Luther's 1523 treatise on *Secular Authority* asserts that every Christian ruler who rules according to God's word should expect suffering. When a prince thus rules, "then his state is right, outwardly and inwardly, pleasing God and to his people. But he must expect much envy and sorrow—the cross will soon rest on the shoulders of such a ruler."⁶¹ Admittedly, Luther is harsher on the peasants. He accuses them of rejecting Christ—essentially renouncing their baptism. We see how deeply embedded suffering has become in Luther's view of what it means to be a Christian on pilgrimage through this present exis-

⁵⁹ For a summary of the traditional Marxist interpretation of Luther by Marx, Engels, and their followers, see Lewis William Spitz, "Images of Luther," in *Concordia Journal* 11:2 (1985): 44–45. The present study has shown, to the contrary, how Luther's emphasis on suffering for the church was not merely a "situational" response to current events, but rather the manifestation of convictions that have deep Christological and ecclesiological roots.

⁶⁰ "Admonition to Peace," AE 46:30, 32; WA 18:312, 315–16.

⁶¹ "Secular Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed (1523)" in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writing*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 400; "Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei, 1523," WA 11:278.

tence. Both princes and peasants should expect it. Yet the peasants are more wrong for trying to avoid it. Understood in this regard, Luther's unrelenting critique of the peasants is so stinging not because he hates them, but because he cares deeply for their souls. To reject his teaching on the necessity of suffering is, according to Luther's cruciform ecclesiology, to reject the very stamp of Christ on his church.⁶²

IV. Conclusion

Luther's position in 1539 that suffering marks the true church reflects a theological trajectory that began at least twenty years earlier and was a consistent feature of his thought long before it was identified so neatly as such. Perhaps the best example of a full-orbed exegetical grounding of this doctrine is found in the 1 Peter sermons of 1522/23.⁶³ My examination of this material has shown how Luther derived, from at least this one major biblical source, key links between suffering and sanctification that support the position, expressed in a variety of places, that where there is no suffering for Christ, there are no true Christians and thus no true church.

I have also attempted to show how these exegetical insights recur in Luther's other writings in the form of conscious application to various situational contexts. Unpacking biblical themes that would shape Luther's theology for years to come, the 1 Peter sermons treat the nature and necessity of Christian suffering, giving special attention to its significance for sanctifying the church. This provides the basis for a "cruciform ecclesiology." Our suffering mirrors Christ's example and embodies the grace of baptism. Ultimately, it is also God's way of bringing about the believer's personal union with Christ, moving beyond simply making us aware of our need for Christ to actually becoming a relic of Christ. This high view of God's good purposes for Christian suffering is behind the otherwise outrageous assertion in 1539 that "those who hang, drown, murder, torture, banish and plague [Christians] to death are rendering God a service."⁶⁴

⁶² "[If you will not change your name to reflect your violence] and keep the name of Christian, then I must accept the fact that I am also involved in the struggle and consider you as enemies who, under the name of the gospel, act contrary to it, and want to do more to suppress my gospel than anything the pope and emperor have done to suppress it." "Admonition to Peace," AE 46:30; WA 18:312.

⁶³ Luther's 1517-1518 lectures on the Epistle to the Hebrews is another important exegetical source for his *theologia crucis* in particular. However, no other biblical book allows him to bring together pilgrimage, word, suffering, and sanctification the way that he is able to synthesize these themes through his close reading of 1 Peter.

⁶⁴ "On the Councils and the Church," AE 41:165; 50:642.

Finally, 1 Peter allows Luther to link *theologia crucis* to Christian experience within a comprehensive temporal scheme that encompasses all of life in the present age. This letter is, for Luther, a manifesto of Christian vocation, teaching believers that the holy cross is both comfort and a calling for their pilgrimage. The true church is found where believers cling to Christ, who is present most intimately with his people in their pain. For Luther, this church—a genuine relic of Christ and embodiment of Peter's "living hope" in a fallen world—will suffer on its pilgrimage "because they want to have none but Christ, and no other God. Wherever you see or hear this, you may know that the holy Christian church is there [Suffering] is a holy possession whereby the Holy Spirit not only sanctifies his people, but also blesses them."⁶⁵ For those who suffer as Christ did in obedience to God's word, salvation becomes a present possession with eternal consequences. Their "bones . . . become sacred." Suffering is at once both the Christian pilgrim's harshest reminder that the blessings and peace of home remain a future reality, and his deepest assurance that God's promise is nonetheless powerfully in effect, right now—as surely as he bears in his own body the indelible imprint of that most precious treasury of all: Christ's suffering to defeat sin and death forever.

⁶⁵ AE 41:165; 50:642.