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Table of Contents

Harold H. Buls (1920-1997)	243
Mark J. Steege (1906-1997)	244
The Theological Symposia of Concordia Theological Seminary	247
Books Received	250
Luther on Atonement--Reconfigured Kenneth Hagen	251
Lutheran and the Priesthood of All Believers Norman Nagel	277
The Universe as the Living Image of God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Universe Reconsidered Randall A. Zachman	299
Book Reviews	313

Testing the Boundaries: Windows to Lutheran Identity.

By Charles P. Arand Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Melanchthons Briefwechsel. Band 8. Regesten 8072-9301 (1557-1560). Bearbeitet von Heinz Scheible und Walter Thüringer.

..... Lowell C. Green

Melanchthons Briefwechsel. Band T2. Texte 255-520 (1523-1526). Bearbeitet von Richard Wetzels unter Mitwirkung von Helga Scheible. Lowell C. Green

Augustine Confessions: Books I-IV.

Edited by Gillian Clark John G. Nordling

Luther on Atonement— Reconfigured

Dedicated to the Memory of Dr. Robert Preus

Kenneth Hagen

Luther writes in his 1535 commentary on Galatians:

“I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for us.” This is the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort. It teaches that we have the indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God. When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: “Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them.” Now the Law comes and says: “I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!” And so it attacks Him and kills Him. By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil.¹

Luther on atonement presents a puzzle. When we use the term atonement, we normally think of some kind of payment in blood for sins. Ever since Gustaf Aulén published *Christus Victor* we have tended to think in terms of theories: objective,

¹ *Lectures on Galatians (1535), Chapters 1-4*, in *Luther's Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, 55 volumes (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986), 26:28. Volumes, in this series are hereafter abbreviated *LW*.

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subjective, classical.² The English word atonement suggests “At-One-Ment” with God. None of this helps with regard to Luther. I will argue in this paper that atonement for Luther is more than the expiation won in Christ’s blood, more than being “At-One” with God.³

The real puzzle with Luther on atonement is that the words that Luther used to describe the earthly work of Christ do not precisely include atonement. For Luther reconciliation is a prominent word for the work of Christ (*versöhnen* or *Versöhnung*), and the key text is 2 Corinthians 5:19: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.” *Versöhnung* is often translated atonement. But *versöhnen* is used in Matthew 5:24 where we are to be reconciled with our neighbor before going to the altar. “Be atoned” with your neighbor does not work. In addition to *Versöhnung*, other words in Luther’s German that are translated atonement in the American Edition and elsewhere include *Bezahlung* (payment), *Opfer* (sacrifice), and *gnug thun* (be sufficient). Latin words that are translated atonement include *placare* (appease), *propiciatio* (propitiation), *satisfactio* (satisfaction), and *reconciliatio* (reconciliation). If one looks up “atonement” in the Index to the American Edition of Luther’s Works, several words appear.⁴ However, the references do not point the reader to the word “atonement” in the texts. Words that are indexed to atonement include sacrifice, mediate forgiveness, satisfaction, reconciliation, ransom, forgiveness, merit of His blood, and reconciled. In the subject index in the *Concordia Triglotta*,

²Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, translated by A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1953).

³Years ago when lecturing on Luther, I was asked what Luther’s theory of atonement was. My immediate reply was that Luther had no theory of atonement. Research for this paper confirms the same assessment.

⁴*LW*55:17.

atonement does not appear; reconciliation does.⁵ The same is true for Tappert's edition of *The Book of Concord*.⁶

The use of terminology in discussing Luther on atonement is difficult since atonement (*Versöhnung*) is a term that Aulén put on the map of Luther studies. Aulén's vocabulary in translation, however, is not Luther's vocabulary in the original. Should atonement therefore be banished from our vocabulary for Luther? No. My solution to the terminology problem has been to see that "Luther's theology of atonement" is similar to other phrases we use to encompass several parts of Luther's thought, such as his sacramental theology, forensic [and sanative] justification, his doctrine of the two kingdoms, and his hermeneutics. Atonement for Luther serves as an important interpretative tool for packaging many genuine Luther articles such as reconciliation, expiation, cross, *fröhlicher Wechsel*, redemption, sacrament and example, justification, and, yes, salvation. To have a more exact understanding of Luther on atonement one needs to be grounded in Luther's actual usage of the "genuine articles." This essay seeks to understand some of those "genuine articles" as a way of reconfiguring Luther on atonement, articles that come from my reading of Luther in the light of medieval theology.

Hence, the several items that atonement embraces in Luther include the method of *enarratio*, joyous exchange, theology of testament, theology of the cross, theology of the worm and the devil, and sacrament and example. These are the many pieces to the picture of Luther on atonement.

Aulén seems to have difficulty specifying the meaning of atonement by claiming that for Luther atonement equals salvation and salvation equals atonement—that atonement

⁵*Concordia Triglotta: die symbolischen Bücher der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, deutsch-lateinisch-englisch* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

⁶*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

and justification are the same thing.⁷ In Aulén's chapter on the New Testament, atonement is not used in translating Scripture; words that do appear are propitiation, payment, ransom, redemption, reconciliation.

Aulén has done us the service of providing a panoramic view of atonement in the Christian tradition, using the Ludensian method of motif-research. The disservice of this method is that it is abstract typology. Aulén speaks of atonement theories: idea, type, and motif. Luther did not have time for theories; he worked as a theologian on the death-resurrection of Christ to give God glory and preserve the mysteries of the faith. Luther trusted only biblical truths.

Enarratio

Enarratio means to explain and expound in detail. Luther preoccupied himself with the Epistle to the Galatians and published throughout his life what are called in Latin and English "commentaries" on that book. Luther himself did not consider his work to be a commentary. He said that his work "is not so much a commentary as a testimony of my faith in Christ." Rather, Luther identified the genre of Erasmus's Greek and Latin New Testament, the *Novum instrumentum* of 1516, as a commentary (and he did so in a sarcastic way).

The term that Luther used to describe his publications on Galatians was "enarrare" or "enarratio." Committed to kindling interest in Pauline theology, Luther set out to "enarrate" Pauline theology—to set forth in detail Paul's theology in the public arena. "Narrate" (*narratio*) means to tell the story. "Enarrate" (*enarratio*), which is not an English word, means to take the message out and to apply it, that is, to tell the story in public. The story concerns the "one true faith in Christ alone." In the Preface of 1535, to "enarrate the Epistle" means to go public against the devil.

⁷Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 135, 167.

To tell Paul's story in public is not to do something new, but rather to do something very old: to fight the devil with the doctrine of "solid faith." From his lectures of 1516 to the printing of 1535, Luther's purpose with Galatians was to go public with the "faith of Christ." Hardly an academic exercise, Luther views this as the battle of life against death. It means to defend the faith against the pseudo-prophets and pseudo-apostles, the false teachers, who both Paul and Luther were convinced return all too quickly to the very centers of faith. To make public the faith—the Gospel of Christ—will inevitably stir up demonic forces and cause eschatological conflict.

In the Large Galatians, after describing the complete death and victory over sin, Luther says that the doctrine of Christian righteousness is too great to describe or understand.⁸ This leads to my claim that any theory of the atonement explains away one of the mysteries of the faith. How Christ took the place of the murderer and adulterer, and all the sins of mankind, and made satisfaction by his blood is not open to theorizing but to praise. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).⁹ Any theorizing takes away the mystery.

Working on the atonement has led me to conclude that, in spite of theories prevalent in Luther's day, the reconciling work of atonement is one of those precious mysteries that escapes theory. Atonement is a mystery rather than a theory developed by reason. It is not clear to the eye of reason how the blood of a Nazarene shed on a cursed tree between two criminals one Friday afternoon in Jerusalem could redeem the sins of humankind the world over. The eye of faith sees my sins dying in the work of the one who has taken my place in the incarnation.

Much of the Luther on atonement research and writing has been spent on Luther and Anselm. My own angle on Anselm and Luther is to remember the rule for doctrinal development

⁸ *LW* 26:280.

⁹ *LW* 26:277, 280.

in the Middle Ages, namely, *potuit, deuit, fecit*. Concerning a doctrinal matter, the medieval theologian asks (1) is it possible (*potuit*); if yes, then (2) is it becoming of God (*deuit*); if yes, the conclusion is (3) it happened (*fecit*). Anselm worked out his view of atonement on the level of *deceo*, what is fitting or becoming of God, all in the framework of faith seeking understanding. Luther, however, worked on the level of *fecit*: what happened. Without analyzing the reasons (fittingness) for God's actions, Luther wants to get the message out (*enarratio*).

If there has been anything of a theological breakthrough for this author in this project on atonement, it is seeing the difference between the dynamic of doctrinal development in the Middle Ages (and continuing in the modern Roman Catholic Church) and Luther's approach to theology. The method of faith seeking understanding in the Middle Ages employed reason in speculating about what is possible and fitting for God to have done. For Luther, the method of *enarratio* meant getting the message out into the public sphere, the message of what God has in fact done in Christ. What God could have done, however beautiful and fitting, was theology of glory for Luther, based on reason. The medieval approach kept theology and doctrine an in-house affair. For Luther theology meant confession of faith, proclamation, profession in public, "the testimony of my faith in Christ."

Der fröhlicher Wechsel

For some, Luther's "doctrine of atonement" is summarized in the phrase "the joyous exchange." Burnell Eckardt, in his insightful book on Anselm and Luther, says: "*fröhlicher Wechsel* occurs only by imputation; it may in fact be termed Luther's version of the vicarious satisfaction."¹⁰

¹⁰Burnell Eckardt, *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was It "Necessary"?* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

According to Ulrich Asendorf, the incarnation is the joyous exchange (*fröhlicher Wechsel*) of our flesh and Christ's.¹¹ We are born of Mary; Christ's birth is our birth; Mary is our mother, Christ our brother, God our father.¹² In the Lord's Supper in faith we are in a joyous exchange with Christ in that we become one with him.¹³ Ultimately, Asendorf argues that the joyous exchange leads in the direction of theosis.¹⁴

The joyous exchange that is seen as a prominent feature of Luther's theology has its precedent in Staupitz, from Augustine. Augustine says in his sermons that the property of man is sin, untruth, and death, but the property of God is goodness, truth, and life. "The sinner with his property possesses God and is possessed by him. . . . What is properly God's (namely, life) becomes man's; and what is proper to human nature (namely, death) becomes God's."¹⁵ Staupitz and Luther use this *commercium admirabile* in Augustine's sermons and add to it both a marriage metaphor and the exchange of sin and righteousness.

Luther used the bridal imagery to convey the idea of common property: the bridegroom turns over to the bride all of his property just as God does to man. Luther said that it would be a fragile love if the groom had not turned over to his bride his keys and the power over wine, bread, and everything else in the house. Luther extended the idea of common property to the idea of the holy exchange (*fröhlicher Wechsel, admirabile/sacrum commercium*).

In his *Lectures on 1 John* (1:3) regarding 2 Peter 1:4, Luther remarks that we are partakers of the divine nature because we

¹¹Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988).

¹²Asendorf, *Theologie Martin Luthers*, 80, 88.

¹³Asendorf, *Theologie Martin Luthers*, 296.

¹⁴Asendorf, *Theologie Martin Luthers*, 423.

¹⁵David C. Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation*, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, volume four (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980), 29.

have all the good things God has. The Father and Son have life, truth, and eternal salvation. "On our side there are nothing but sins. We share His good things; he shares our wretchedness. I believe in Christ. Therefore my sin is in Christ."¹⁶

In his work *On Two Kinds of Righteousness*, where he treats 2 Peter 1:4 and several other texts, Luther says God has granted us very great and precious gifts in Christ. Bride and bridegroom have all things in common. Christ and the Church are one spirit. Through faith in Christ, his righteousness becomes our righteousness and all that he has becomes ours; rather, he himself becomes ours. He swallows up all our sins in a moment for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ.¹⁷

The secret of the divine grace for the sinner is that through a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's, and the righteousness of Christ is not his but ours.¹⁸

Theology of Testament

Luther's theology of testament, the testament of Christ, embraces five parts. Testament was the means for theologizing about the Christian faith for Luther. He says the promise was given to Abraham "through the medium of testament" (*per modum testamenti*).¹⁹ Testament is the message as well as the means, "and so that little word testament is a short summary

¹⁶ LW30:225.

¹⁷ LW31:297-98.

¹⁸ On Psalm 22:1-2, *Operationes in Psalmos* (W² 4:1241.41). Other texts on *admirabile commercium*. Christ has *admirabile commercium* with creatures (WA 5:253,10-11). Christ has *admirabili commertio* with us sinners. Our sins are exchanged for Christ's righteousness. Bride/bridegroom become one flesh (WA 5:608.5-22). LW 26:284 "fortunate exchange" equals *feliciter commutans* (WA 40, I:443,23); *commutans* means total exchange, to alter wholly, change entirely, replace, substitute.

¹⁹ *Divi Pauli apostoli ad Galathas epistola* (1516), WA 57, II:24.9-10.

of all God's wonders and grace fulfilled in Christ."²⁰ The "whole Gospel" is summarized in the testament of Christ.²¹

The first element in testament is the promise initiated by God from the beginning. "It must happen in this manner . . . that God alone without any entreaty or desire of man must first come and give him a promise." The promise is "the beginning, the foundation, the rock."²² "God is the testator for it is he himself who promises and bequeaths."²³ The testament is the promise and the promise is in both books; "all the fathers in the Old Testament together with all the holy prophets have the same faith and Gospel as we have," because "it is all the one truth of the promise."²⁴ For Luther there is no book in the Bible which does not contain both law and promise.²⁵ The testament is eternal. Some would say that the prophets and the New Testament add something to the books of Moses. "No," said Luther regarding all books of the Bible, "throughout them all there is one and the same teaching and thought."²⁶ In every promise, there is a word and a sign just as notaries affix their seal or mark to make a will binding and authentic.²⁷ The signs were rainbow, circumcision, rain on the ground; in baptism – water, and in the Lord's Supper – bread and wine. "The words are the divine vow, promise, and testament. The sacred signs are the sacraments. Now as the testament is more

²⁰ *Ein Sermon von dem neuen Testament* (1520), WA 6:357.25-27; LW35:84.

²¹ *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:374.3-9. Hermeneutically for Luther, the New Testament illumines the Old Testament (*Evangelium in der Christmesse, Luk. 2,1-14* [1522], WA 10,I,1:79-84; one may compare *Ein klein Unterricht was man in den Evangeliiis suchen und gewarten soll* [1522], WA 10,I,1:14.16-15.9). "The books of Moses and the prophets are also the Gospel" (*Epistel S. Petri gepredigt* [1523], WA 12:275.5) for the New Testament is the light of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is the fountain of the new, the new is the light of the old (WA Tr 5:378.25-26, #5841).

²² *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:356.3-8; LW35:82.

²³ *Ad Galatas* (1519), WA 2:519.5; LW27:264.

²⁴ *Das Magnificat* (1521), WA 7:600.1-9; LW7:354.

²⁵ *Adventspostille* (1522) WA 10,I,2:159.7-8; one may compare *Ein Sermon von dem neuen Testament*, WA 6:356-57.

²⁶ *Von Menschenlehre zu meiden* (1522), WA 10,II:73.7-18; LW35:132.

²⁷ *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:358.35-359.3.

important than the sacrament so the words are much more important than the signs."²⁸

The second element in testament is Luther's theology of Word. The Word is the living eternal promise of the testament of Christ. The Gospel of Christ is not a writing but a word of mouth.²⁹

This report and encouraging tidings, or evangelical and divine news, is also called the New Testament. For it is a testament when a dying man bequeaths his property after his death to his legally defined heirs. And Christ, before his death, commanded and ordained that his Gospel be preached after his death in all the world.³⁰

The New Testament is a living Word. Consequently for Luther, the Church is a "mouth house" not a "pen house."³¹ Luther often bemoaned the fact that we have the New Testament in written form because it is primarily proclamation to be sung loudly in German.

The testament is the Word of Christ, "this is my body. In like manner he says over the cup 'take it and all of you drink of it; this is the new, everlasting testament in my blood.' In proof and evidence of this, he left his own body and blood under bread and wine, instead of letter and seal."³² Everything depends on the words of Christ's testament, says Luther.

You would have to spend a long time polishing your shoes, preening and primping to obtain an inheritance, if you had no letter and seal with which you could prove your right to it. But if you have a letter and seal, and believe, desire, and seek it, it must be given to you even though you were scaly, scabby, stinking and most filthy. So if you would receive this sacrament and testament

²⁸ *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:363.4-7; LW35:91.

²⁹ *Ein klein Unterricht*, WA 10,1,1:17.4-11.

³⁰ *Vorrede auf das Neue Testament* (1522), WA DB 6:4.12-17; LW35:358.

³¹ *Adventspostille* (1522), WA 10,1,2:35.1-2; 48.5.

³² *Von den guten Werken* (1520), WA 6:230.10-25; LW44:55-56 .

worthily, see to it that you give emphasis to these living words of Christ.³³

The Word is the promise, the Word is the testament, the Word is Christ. Christ's testament is the Lord's Supper. "Let this stand therefore, as our first and infallible proposition, the mass or sacrament of the altar is Christ's testament."³⁴

Now, says Luther, "you have the testator, the testament, the substance of the testament, and those for whom it was made. Now it remains that it be ratified . . . that is, made valid through the death of Christ."³⁵ Luther often cited Hebrews 9:16: "'for where there is a testament, the death of the testator must of necessity occur.' Now God made a testament; therefore, it was necessary that he should die, but God could not die unless he became man, thus, the incarnation and the death of Christ are both comprehended most concisely in this one word, 'testament.'"³⁶ Testament is not about to be altered or recalled by the living. It is an irrevocable will of one about to die. The cross, then, is in the context of the promise of the testament "that God would become man, and die and rise again in order that his Word in which he promises such a testament might be fulfilled and confirmed."³⁷

The third part of Luther's theology of testament is the cross. Because for many Luther's entire theology is a theology of the cross, we will return to that in Part Four.

The fourth aspect of Luther's theology of testament is grace. Grace for Luther is unilateral gift. One of the primary functions of testament is that it is unilateral, the testator makes out his will without the recipient having to do anything to deserve the inheritance. Testament, at least God's way, is totally gratuitous. The heir in no way merits the inheritance.

³³ *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:360.29-361.9; LW35:88.

³⁴ *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* (1520), WA 6:513.14-15; LW36:37.

³⁵ *Ad Galatas* (1519), WA 2:519.38-520.6; LW27:265.

³⁶ *De captivitate Babylonica*, WA 6:514.6-10; LW36:38.

³⁷ *Ein Sermon*, WA 6:357.22-24; LW35:84.

Testament for Luther stands in contrast with covenant. Often Luther uses covenant as a synonym for testament and understands it as unilateral gift. The covenant, in late medieval covenant theology and elsewhere, is a bilateral, two-way pact, bond or agreement. The various covenant theologies in the later Middle Ages were at least semi- if not fully pelagian, because they called for some human action as necessary part of the pact. This model of covenant does not call for a death. The grace of the unilateral testament is the cross and resurrection. The unilateral act of grace proves that God's promise is true. The cross is final proof that God's testament is valid. The resurrection completes God's action. For Luther, then, grace is God's self-authenticating Word that accomplishes its purpose without requiring any act on our part.

The fifth aspect of testament is faith or trust in the inheritance. One receives faith through the Word accomplishing its purpose. Faith is a gift of grace. Trust is confidence that Christ not only died for the sins of mankind but that he died for me. Trust is intimately bound up with Luther's notion of the certitude of salvation. The Christian has an absolute ground of the certainty of his salvation because his salvation is in Christ—Christ for us and for me. If salvation were dependent on something that I were to do—free will, free reason, free whatever—then Luther in no way can have any confidence. Confidence rests in Christ alone.

Luther's theology of testament is soteriological, having to do with salvation. Luther sometimes, like other medieval theologians, discusses testament in terms of the books of the Old and New Testament and the great eras of divine providence covered by both books. Luther's principle interest in the category of testament, however, is not in terms of books or eras but in terms of soteriology. Luther was quite similar to Saint Augustine in this regard in his understanding of testament as way of salvation, though Luther's doctrine of salvation is different from Augustine's. Luther and Augustine see Old and New Testament as old and new ways of salvation, both ways being present in both books and eras. When Luther

and Augustine discussed old and new, they often meant old man/new man, letter/spirit, flesh/spirit. The man of faith is a New Testament man; that is, for Luther, he has received the testament of Christ in faith and trust because the testament of God is eternal and his Word eternally effective. Those who lived during the era of Old Testament but believed and trusted in the promise in faith belong to the New Testament. Luther does not conceive of salvation in terms of progressive transformation as did Augustine, but in terms of the ever present Word of God, faith, and inheritance, all grounded in the death of Christ. The full force of God's testament is present at every point in time. Those who respond in trust belong to the New Testament of Christ.

The New Testament person is at the same time both totally just in Christ and totally sinful in himself, simultaneously and totally sinner and saint. That is, the human situation never changes, and the divine situation never changes. We cannot build a staircase to heaven, we are totally dependent on the effectiveness of the divine testament for our salvation. Another way of saying this is that just as there are both Old and New Testaments, both old and new men, so also the man of faith himself is both old and new at the same time—old in himself, new in Christ, totally, simultaneously, and continuously (Augustine could not say any of this). The Christian, at whatever point in time and space, is sinful and saved. Luther says that just as Christ on the cross is suspended between heaven and earth so the Christian lives between the Old and New Testament, totally old, totally new, waiting for final glory when he will be totally and finally new. A Christian is simultaneously sinful and saved or, put another way, a Christian is simultaneously Old Testament and New Testament.

Theology of the Cross

The theology of the cross has an anti-speculative force to it that is directed against a theology of glory. The theology of the cross is contextual, working within the framework of what God, in fact, did in Christ on the cross. It is not speculative,

looking into the infinite number of possibilities available to divine power. Remember Luther's difference with his predecessors in his interest to concentrate on what God has done in order to get the message out (*enarratio*), whereas they speculated about the fittingness of what God could do. Rather than using philosophical terms, Luther talks about the wounds of Christ on the cross and about Christ as a worm on the cross, emphasizing the total humiliation of the God-man. The humiliation of the cross is God's total identification with the human situation in order to redeem that situation so that we can live by faith. The meaning and effect of the cross is a continual reality for all of God's faithful people in all times and places; the faithful of all ages live at the foot of the cross. The cross is the Word historicized making credible God's eternal promises.

Luther speaks of the death of Christ as the alien work of God through the devil, the lord of death. Death is used to destroy the lord of death. Life wrought through death is closed to reason and open only to faith. The alien deed is indirect revelation. God is *not* known through the works of creation or his invisible attributes (for example, immutability). He is known through suffering and the cross. Speculation as a way to God is eliminated. God revealed himself in the hiddenness of this One who is crucified. Life is the proper work of God. God uses the devil's proper work to destroy the devil through his own work of the death of Christ.

He destroyed the devil, not by a work of God but by a work of the devil himself. For this is the most glorious kind of victory, namely, to pierce the adversary with his own weapon and to slay him with his own sword, as we sing: "He fell prostrate on his own darts." For in this way God promotes and completes His work by means of an alien deed, and by His wonderful wisdom He compels the devil to work through death nothing else than life, so that in this way, while he acts most of all against the work of God, he acts for the work of God and against his own work with his own deed. For thus he worked death in

Christ, but Christ completely swallowed up death in Himself through the immortality of His divinity and rose again in glory.³⁸

Christ became the death of death.

The key document where Luther develops his theology of the cross is the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518.³⁹ The *Heidelberg Disputation* is key for two reasons: (1) It is Luther's explanation to his fellow Augustinian brothers of his key ideas with regard to sin, free will, and grace – topics that had been debated in his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* the previous year. (2) It is the key text in all of Luther's writings for his theology of the cross.

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible back sides of God seen through suffering and cross. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.⁴⁰

Luther's explanation of Thesis 19, with reference to Romans 1:20 ("His invisible being can be seen so that it is perceived in his works") is: "This is apparent in the example of those who were 'theologians' and still were called fools by the apostle in Romans 1."⁴¹ So, those theologians who seek to know God by speculating through the work of their reason into the invisible things of God clearly perceived in those things that have happened are fools. That is what Luther has said so far, but then typical Luther, if one really wants to know what these invisible things are of God, "the invisible things of God are virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth. The recognition of all these things does not make one worthy or

³⁸ *Lectures on Hebrews*, LW29:135.

³⁹ LW31:40.

⁴⁰ LW31:40.

⁴¹ LW31:52.

wise."⁴² So a theologian of glory speculates into the invisible things of God as though they were perceptible in the things that have actually happened.

Now a theologian of the cross — the subject of Thesis 20 — is different. A theologian of the cross looks at what is visible. What is visible is suffering and cross, and suffering and cross are the back parts of God (*posteriora dei*). The visible things turn out to be the back side of God. God is revealed on the cross, and what we see on the cross is the back side. We do not see, as Moses could not see, God face to face. A theologian of the cross is the only legitimate type of theologian; the theologian of glory is only a theologian in name and is actually a fool. The theologian of the cross comprehends the visible and back sides of God seen through suffering and cross.

The theologian of glory discussed in Thesis 19 seeks a knowledge of God and his attributes, or the invisible things of God, by perceiving and understanding the things that have actually happened. In other words, the theologian of glory comes to a knowledge of God through God's works. He does this by his own works, that is, by his intellectual activity. Luther believes that the powers of reason are contaminated. Just as in morality man misuses the law and appropriates goodness to his works, so in the intellectual sphere he assumes the knowledge of God to be his work. In contrast to the theologian of glory, the theologian of the cross seeks knowledge of God in suffering. Suffering here has a twofold meaning: the suffering of God in Christ and the suffering of the Christian united with Christ. The main point is that knowledge comes in and through suffering rather than in and through works, and this is the key to the theology of the cross in Heidelberg 19 and following. Theology of glory equals works of reason, theology of the cross equals suffering. Furthermore, visible things are perceived rather than invisible things understood. What is perceived is the back side of God.

⁴²LW31:52.

Thus, God is hidden in the revelation, or God reveals himself through concealment. He is concealed because his face is not turned towards us. His brilliance and glory are hidden in their opposites, that is, in suffering, weakness, foolishness, and the cross. Such knowledge cannot be misused by humans as knowledge from works is.

Heidelberg Thesis 21 shows Luther to be an “is-theologian.” The “is-theologian” must get the message out as to what the situation is. The theologian of the cross knows that knowledge of God is found only through suffering and the cross. To find the cross and Christ is to find God hidden in suffering. The theologian of glory gets things reversed and in his confusion fails to find reality. As Luther says in Thesis 21, “A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. The theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.” The “isness” of the situation is the “isness” of the human situation and the “isness” of the divine situation. Through his own experience and through his own theology, Luther is absolutely convinced that human nature is rotten to the core, that God is God, that God is quite capable of being God, and that God has bridged the gap between mankind and himself in Christ. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. In his explanation to this thesis, Luther says, “This is clear, he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering.” The way to know God, is to know the God in Christ who is visibly showing his back sides through suffering and cross.

The cross meant suffering and humiliation for Luther, the wounds of Christ, the blood of Christ, Christ as worm on the cross. Christ as worm meant total humiliation. “I am worm and no man” (Psalm 22:6), said Christ on the cross according to Luther. We find him dying a shameful death, says Luther, which is his theology of the worm and the devil.

Christ as Worm on the Cross

The texts from Luther for this part range from 1517 well into the later Luther. The first is from his Hebrews lectures (1517-18). Hebrews 2:7 says, “thou didst make him a little lower than

the angels." The medievals debated as to who the "him" is in this text and what the author means by "a little lower." Luther first discounts those who understood "him" to be human nature, a little lower than the angels in dignity. Next Luther opposes those who understand "him" to be Christ, which is on the right track, but lacks an adequate Christology. He says,

Others understand this verse to refer to Christ as being lower than the angels, not according to his soul but according to his body which is capable of suffering. But even this interpretation is not precise enough since he was not only made lower than the angels but as he himself says: 'I am worm and not a man' (Ps. 22:6).⁴³

Being made "lower than the angels" meant for Luther the time of total humiliation on the cross and between the cross and resurrection. For three days when forsaken and deserted by God "Thou didst hand him over into the hands of sinners."⁴⁴ The meaning of Christ as worm on the cross carries the connotations of Christ being abject, the object of contempt, forsaken, nauseating, abominable, rotten stench, scandal, offensive or, simply, rotting worm.⁴⁵

The prophets have a special way of speaking but they mean exactly what the apostles preach for both have said much about the suffering and glory of God and of those who believe in him. Thus, David says of Christ in Psalm 22:6, 'I am a worm and no man.' With these words he shows the depth of his abject humiliation in his suffering.⁴⁶

Christ as worm refers to "the mode of his passion as pure man."⁴⁷ The state of pure man (*purus homo*) is that we are a bag of worms. The first enemy that tempts the Christian away

⁴³ WA 57,III:117.4-10; LW 29:126.

⁴⁴ WA 57,III:119.1-5; LW 29:127.

⁴⁵ *Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5:614.4-24.

⁴⁶ *Epistel S. Petri gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1522), WA 12:279.23-27; LW 30:24.

⁴⁷ *Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5:614.8-9.

from the Word of God and faith is “our own flesh,” a rotten old bag of worms hanging heavy around our neck.⁴⁸ “We are nothing other than filth, corruption and worms.” In death, the flesh turns to dust, and the worms consume it. Faith looks beyond death and the consumption by worms and believes that the body will rise.⁴⁹ “For thus it has pleased God to raise up from worms, from corruption, from the earth which is totally putrid and full of stench a body more beautiful than any flower, than balsam, than the sun itself and the stars.”⁵⁰ The inheritance for the worm of faith is eternal life.⁵¹

Christ destroyed the devil’s tyranny over death. God chose not to use heavenly muscle, such as Gabriel, Michael and the others, but

He degrades himself so profoundly and becomes a man, yes, even degrades himself below all men, as it is written in Psalm 22, “I am a worm and no man, scorned by men and despised by the people.” In such physical weakness and poverty, he attacks the enemy, lets himself be put on the cross and killed, and by his cross in death, he destroys the enemy and the avenger.⁵²

How is it that a worm on a cross destroys the enemy’s tyranny over death? The force of the image of worm is illumined by an examination of some early Christian literature. First Clement (16:15) uses Psalm 22:6 to describe the humiliation of Christ and later (25:3) the worm is used as a resurrection symbol. The worm comes forth from the decaying flesh of the Phoenix bird. The resurrection of the mythical Phoenix is used as an illustration of the Christian doctrine of resurrection, “now from the corruption of its flesh there

⁴⁸ *Das fünfte, sechste und siebente Kapitel Matthaei gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1532), WA 32:308.13-14; 489:34-38; LW12:105, 230; LW24:44.

⁴⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-45), WA 43:318.22-23; 303.36-304.6.

⁵⁰ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535-45), WA 43:272.37-39; LW4:190.

⁵¹ *Das 16. Kapitel S. Johannes gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1537), WA 46:54.36-55.8.

⁵² *Der 8. Psalm Davids, gepredigt und ausgelegt* (1537), WA 45:220.14-22; LW12:110.

springs a worm which is nourished by the juices of the dead bird and puts forth wing." In Origen, the worm as Christ's humanity is used as bait to catch the devil and his angels.⁵³ In Cyril of Jerusalem, new life comes from worms as evidenced by the bees and the birds. The transformation of the Phoenix from a worm is proof of Christ's resurrection.⁵⁴ In Gregory of Nyssa, the gluttonous fish is lured by the flesh of Christ as bait. The divinity of Christ is the hook.⁵⁵ Luther refers to Gregory's notion of how God took a sharp fishhook, put an angle worm on it and threw it into the sea.⁵⁶ The worm is the humanity of Christ, the hook the divinity. On the hook, the worm is *gebunden*, namely, the humanity. The devil says, "should I not swallow the little worm?" He did not see the hook.⁵⁷

For Luther, the testator on the cross is pure man, a worm. The testator is also the one who made the promise of the eternal inheritance. "The humanity did not conquer sin and death, but the hook that was concealed under the worm at which the devil struck conquered and devoured the devil who was attempting to devour the worm."⁵⁸

The time frame for the worm action, described by Aulén as gross imagery, is primarily the descent into hell. It can also, however, refer to the whole incarnation.⁵⁹ God in the incarnation acts like a fisherman, with hook and worm. The devil finds him like "a worm and no man" and swallows him up. But this is to him as food which he cannot digest. For Christ sticks in his gills, and he must spew him out again, as the whale the prophet Jonah, and even as he chews him the devil chokes himself and is slain, and is taken captive by Christ.

⁵³ *Selecta in Ps.* 21.7, Migne, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* 12:1254C.

⁵⁴ *Catechesis* 18.8, Migne, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* 33:1026-27.

⁵⁵ *Oratio Catechetica* 24, Migne, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* 45:66A.

⁵⁶ Luther likely means Gregory the Great; one may see *Moralium in Job*, lib. 33, Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 76:682C,D.

⁵⁷ Luther, *Predigt am Ostersonntag* (1530), *WA* 32:41.12-26.

⁵⁸ *Ad Galatas* (1531/35), *LW* 26:267; *WA* 40,1:417.31-33.

⁵⁹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, "grossest" symbol, 119.

For Luther, thinking of Heidelberg Thesis 21, the theologian of the cross tells it like it actually is. God is there in Christ, Christ is there on the cross. In the Lord's Supper, Christ is there: we receive the inheritance, the forgiveness of sins. Inheritance is received by the worm of faith. The beauty of the "is" is that that is the way it is—in the life of faith there is no ought, must, do, wait and see. A man of faith can only have faith because Christ has totally redeemed our human situation in all its worminess. Christ as worm, less than man, decimates the deadly forces and we are totally victorious—from worm to glory; and with Luther's theology of revelation in hiddenness, the glory is in the worminess. The contradictions exist in tension. The tensions are not resolved. In cross, in suffering, in worm is Christ.

Sacrament and Example

Christ's death is a sacrament for dying to sin and walking a new life every day of our lives. Christ's death and resurrection is also an example for us to die confidently since he is not only our companion and leader, he carries us over to the other side.

In his 1517 *Lectures on Hebrews*, Luther speaks of Christ's death as a sacrament and an example (*sacramentum et exemplum*). It comes up in the context of Luther's comments on Hebrews 10:19, 22: "therefore, brethren since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . let us draw near with a true heart." These words move Luther to deal with the work of Christ in terms of sacrament and example. Luther began his interpretation by saying that "the apostle wants us to imitate Christ who suffered and by dying passed over to the glory of the Father."⁶⁰ The passion and resurrection of Christ is "the sacrament for imitating Christ," a sacrament "for the mortification of concupiscence" and "for our new life." Luther then says, "Almost all of Paul's epistles are full of this mystical and exemplary suffering of Christ."⁶¹

⁶⁰ WA 57,III:222.12-14; LW 29:225.

⁶¹ WA 57,III:222.23-223.5; LW 29:225.

The passion of Christ, for Luther, is “exemplary” in a twofold way. Referring to St. Augustine, Luther says, “We pass over in flesh and spirit, but Christ in flesh alone. Therefore, the passing over of Christ’s flesh is at the same time an example of the passing over of our flesh (for we will be like him) and a sacrament for the passing over of our spirit.”⁶² The reference to Augustine made in the lectures on the Hebrews and the earlier lectures on Romans and Galatians shows that the sacrament of Christ’s passion and resurrection is the work of Christ for our salvation.⁶³ We are called to imitate Christ’s sacrament by dying to sin and walking a new way with Christ [first example]. Christ’s death and resurrection is also an example for man to die physically in order to be reunited with Christ in heaven.

In the light of earlier medieval exegesis of this verse, the conclusion that Luther draws from his discussion of sacrament and example is striking. For Luther, because of the sacrament and example of Christ, “we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19). Medieval interpretations ranged from one text that argued that we have confidence because the realities of the New Testament are greater than the types of the Old Testament. Another interpretation emphasized that our certainty comes from the fact that Christ was first to enter. For another, Christ is an infallible leader. For another, Christ prepared and demonstrated, opened, and initiated the way for us to enter.⁶⁴

For Luther, the example of Christ is that he “passed over before everyone else and leveled the rough road in order to elicit our confidence.” However, Christ does more than show us the way, “he also holds out his hand for those who are following.” Our confidence rests in the fact that “Christ alone is not only our companion on the way but also our leader, and

⁶² WA 57,III:223.11-14; LW 29:225 citing *De Trinitate* IV.3.5-6.

⁶³ WA 56:320.11-16; LW 25:308; WA 57,II:54.4-9.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, volume 12 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 115.

not only our leader but also our helper, in fact, he carries us over."⁶⁵ Christ as example, therefore, shows us how to die confidently, and as sacrament makes it possible for us to do so.

In the light of medieval exegesis, the significance of Luther's interpretation of Hebrews 10:19 is that "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary" not because Christ's testament is greater than the old but because of Christ alone, his sacrament and example. Furthermore, our confidence arises from the fact that Christ not only opened the way, but he also carries us over.

For Luther, then, the only way to God is by way of faith in the lowly humanity of Christ seen totally humiliated on the cross. Christ became the most abject of men in his passion and death. This humanity is the holy ladder of ascent to God. Luther concentrates on Christ on the cross by way of emphasizing that our righteousness is effected by Christ's righteousness and our penance by Christ's purgation. It is Christ who accomplishes salvation in us.

Conclusion

This paper has chosen not to focus on themes that are in Anselm and Luther, themes commonly associated with atonement, such as payment for sin, substitution, satisfaction, redemption by blood. Rather it has attempted to reconfigure Luther on atonement. Being convinced that atonement is a broad category that encompasses many genuine Luther items, it suggested several aspects to God's work of atonement, for example, the alien work of God through the devil, the back side of God, Christ as worm, the curse of Christ as sin, in addition to the main themes of the method of *enarratio*, joyous exchange, theology of testament, theology of the cross, theology of the worm and the devil, sacrament and example. The contextual, nonspeculative character of Luther's theology runs through much of the foregoing, namely, the *fecit*, the cross, and Luther's "is-theology." The certitude of salvation rests on the conviction that the testament of Christ is for me.

⁶⁵ WA 57,III:223.24-224.10; LW 29:226.

In all fairness to medieval theology, scholastic speculation was done from the posture of faith seeking understanding; reason was used in the genre of approbation, convincing only to those already convinced. And yet for many critics of scholastic theology—Luther among them—the speculative questions did not help explain basic biblical truths. The use of dialectic, question, reason, and doubt had a life of its own; theology was for theologians. Theology had become divorced from the study of Scripture.

For Luther, theology is in service of the Church; its purpose is to get the message of the truth of Christ out into the public sphere. Theology must protect the mysteries of the faith and speak out against the false prophets. Question, reason, debate were appropriate for the training of young theologians in the university; the weekly Friday afternoon disputations were reintroduced into the curriculum at Wittenberg. The main curriculum, however, as well as the whole purpose of theology under Luther's leadership was to teach, serve, and guide the faithful, especially the weak in Christ.

A Note on the 450th Anniversary of the Death of Martin Luther (February 18, 1996)

The importance of Luther for our time, as I see it, is his clear perception and practice of theology—in the tradition of *enarratio* and the discipline of the sacred page. Often Luther is brought into the contemporary situation to bolster a current agenda (which the history of Luther research bears out). The usefulness of Luther for me is his insight into the task of theology, a discipline with a tradition and an agenda sufficient unto itself. In recent times, studies of theology *and*, or theology *as*, or *adjectival* theology have become popular. In other words, in some circles theology has become copulative, adverbial, and adjectival: theology *and* (society), theology *as* (history), and (*feminist*) theology.⁶⁶ Luther practiced theology *as* theology.

⁶⁶A Harvard Professor said in the early 1960s that when theology has to be qualified with an *and*, *as*, or *adjective*, it has lost its discipline.

In the tradition that Luther worked, theology had (and has) more than enough to do to keep track of the demands of the sacred page, the public, and the demonic. The thesis here is that theology has a discipline, an identity, and a long history that stretches back into Scripture itself. Its starting and ending point is God. It is important to me that other disciplines do not worry about the reality of the Logos present in the flesh, the reality of Christ Jesus present at the table, the forgiveness of sins, and the meaning of redemption, among others. It is important that theology be a disciplined study of God and that Scripture, in the name of consistency, be approached for what it was and is.

Above all else, I have come to see that the discipline of theology is characterized by uniqueness, sufficiency, and finality. Its uniqueness consists in its focus on God and his sacred page. Its sufficiency lies in its tasks to protect the mysteries of God and to ward off the pseudo-apostles; it is best equipped to accomplish these tasks by reliance on the resources deep within the discipline and not by liaisons with other disciplines. Its finality consists in its eschatological dimension. In the grammar of Scripture, there is a finality to *eschaton*, which the Latin Vulgate translates “in the newest days.” The eschatological referent of theology differentiates it perhaps most clearly from philosophy, history, and psychology.

The eschatological referent was the guiding light behind the work of two doctors of the Church, Dr. Martin Luther and Dr. Robert Preus. In his Preface to the Burial Hymns, Luther writes:

We Christians, who have been redeemed . . . by the dear blood of the Son of God should by faith train and accustom ourselves to despise death and to regard it as a deep, strong, and sweet sleep, to regard the coffin as nothing but paradise and the bosom of our Lord Christ, and the grave as nothing but a soft couch or sofa, which

it really is in the sight of God; for He says, John 11, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep."⁶⁷

⁶⁷"Preface to the Burial Hymns," *LW*53:326.