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Reformation Christology: Some Luther Starting Points

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"Reformation Christology" is an impossible topic in the space allotted. A narrower topic, relatively speaking, is Martin Luther's Christology, which leaves *only* about one hundred and twenty heavyweight volumes, each the proverbial blunt instrument that could do in the person foolish enough to think that Luther can be managed in this space. Nor is it just a matter of volume(s). A conceptual argument lurks in the shadows: Did Luther really have a Christology? Not that Luther was uninterested in Christ. Christ, said Luther, was the focal point: "One doctrine rules in my heart, namely, faith in Christ. All my theological thought ebbs and flows from it, through it, and to it day and night. Yet I realize that all I have grasped about the height, breadth, and depth of this wisdom amounts to poor, measly first fruits and [is just] bits and pieces."[1]

It is not "Christ," but rather a question of the "-ology," that gives us pause. One looks in vain for a coherent, systematic treatment of the doctrine of Christ that is at least to some degree a presentation in abstract.[2] Luther was a biblical theologian, not a systematician. He neither wrote nor lectured in that style. Instead, Luther was an "occasional writer." This does not mean that he wrote every once in a while—one does not produce better than one hundred volumes doing that. In fact, he could keep two secretaries busy at once, while he also scribbled away. As he once quipped, "I deliver almost as soon as I conceive."[3]

The "occasional" problem is crucial in understanding how Luther viewed Christ. Different occasions with varied circumstances shaped his answers to the problems at hand. That is part of his view. There was no

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[1] Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 40.I:33. Hereafter cited as WA. For the English edition, see Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 27:145. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

[2] Whether dogmatic theology is ever really theology in the abstract is a discussion for another day.

[3] WATR 4:189; *LW* 54:326. *Table Talk*, no. 4188 (1538).

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hope, no expectation, that he could ever exhaust all that could be said, no way to wrap up everything into *loci theologici* with a thick "*de doctrina Christi*" section. Yet this does *not* preclude making summary statements. Luther had no patience for Erasmus throwing himself back into the arms of the church and instead asserted boldly: *Spiritus Sanctus non est scepticus.*[4] To be honest and realistic, one never really finishes with "Christ" once and for all. Rather God continues to engage his people in a real, ongoing, existential (not existentialist) way. Luther would come to realize this, and his own writings on Christ reflect it. Some texts are better than others when it comes to mining Luther's thought, but one should always remember to read with the circumstances well in view. That is part of the reason Luther said "historians are the most useful people and we cannot thank and praise them enough."[5] Yet while circumstances changed both in terms of God's engagement and Luther's writing about it, Christ remained the anchor that held Luther's theology firm.[6] At bottom, the message of Luther, as of Christianity, was simple. A child can say, "I am Jesus' little lamb," or, "Jesus loves me, this I know." Or, since 2007 is the Paul Gerhardt year: "Lord Jesus, who does love me, now spread your wings above me, and shield me from alarm. Though Satan would assail me, your mercy will not fail me. I rest in your protecting arm." Yes, there is a simple message.

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[4] WA 18:606; *LW* 33:24.

[5] WA 50:384; *LW* 34:276.

[6] Lutherans saw this Christ-focus early and hung on for dear life. Through any number of in-house theological arguments, the clash often focused on whether Christ would be lost or mitigated. Take the flap over the Leipzig Interim, for example. Critics weighed in to chastise Philipp Melanchthon for forfeiting too much. They claimed that he had surrendered the cause. Perhaps so, but it also might be easier to criticize when imperial troops are not just down the road. With the war going horribly for the Smalcald League at the time, the Lutherans were something like a boxer pinned in the corner, covering up and hoping to hang on till the bell for a chance to regroup and push back next round. So Melanchthon conceded all sorts of things in the Interim (including the *sola*, some complained), but with all the punches taken, look at the three things left: justification by grace, the Lord's Supper in both kinds, and pastors/priests keeping their wives. In two of those three, Christ is immediately the focus. The third helped stall the rebuilding of that old sacred-secular wall that Luther razed in his 1520 *Appeal to the Christian Nobility* with implications for vocation and Christian service in daily life. Losing the idea of vocations as ways to show the fruits of faith would let "sacred" works up off the canvas, special good works needed for finishing off salvation, and Christ would be lost in the confusion. One may quibble with the attempt to salvage Melanchthon's efforts and reputation, but Christ still was his focal point. Both sides saw the importance of Christ—who he is and what he does. It marked evangelical theology.

While simple, Luther's theology is hardly simplistic. Only consider his comments on Christ: the intricacies and wonders of the things Luther touched on could occupy a person until Christ returns and there would still be more to explain. It is a daunting task. Yet there is no need to rehearse the basics from classes on Reformation history or dogmatics. I would rather mention quickly what some others have done with the topic and then note some of the interesting accents of Luther on Christ—what he says, and how and why he says it—with the hope of sparking more occasional thinking. I hope that by looking at Luther's take in various circumstances, we might realize that our task is really the same: not to find a Luther quote and sling it at a problem, but to watch Luther in action so that we might seek better to engage, assess, and then divide rightly the word of truth.

It has been said that more books have been written about Luther than any other figure in human history except for Jesus Christ.[7] Yet there are only a handful of books on Luther's Christology and that handful is not always as helpful as one might wish. In the centuries after "the case of Luther," Luther and the Reformation had become a kind of football up for grabs, fought over first in theological/confessional circles and then in the wider political and cultural arena. Having barely survived the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century progressive idealism, Luther underwent a renaissance about a hundred years ago. Prior to World War I, German culture had lauded Luther as arguably the most influential German to date,[8] but not all agreed. Critics from Roman Catholic, liberal, and leftist ranks chipped away at Luther's pedestal so that, in the wake of the war, some Protestants thought it time to regroup and revisit his role. Luther was reexamined primarily as a theologian by Karl Holl, Friederich Gogarten, Erich Vogelsang, and others.[9] The trend was set by Holl with his

[7] So says John Todd, a Roman Catholic historian, in *Luther: A Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), xvi. His book added to the pile.

[8] A 2003 a poll done by ZDF, the "Second German Television Network," still had Luther second, standing only behind Konrad Adenauer among all-time influential Germans. Karl Marx placed third, perhaps a DDR memory dying hard. For the ZDF story, see "Best Germans: Adenauer Beats Marx and Luther," *About.com Web site* (About, Inc., a part of the New York Times Company, 2007), http://german.about.com/cs/culture/a/bestger.htm.

[9] Nineteenth-century Lutheranism (Protestantism) had lost sight of the Reformation long ago, instead selling its birthright for the blessing of the state. In a closed, mechanical universe, the old Luther-era way of thinking that presumed accepting at face value both the biblical stories and the theology that went with them had given way to a message that set forth moral and cultural goals for what the church was to do. While the church had been a great civilizing agent for centuries, in the era of the modern

"Was verstand Luther unter Religion?"[10] The result? Luther's primary intention and contribution was once again seen as fundamentally theological.

Is it enough, however, to characterize Luther's primary thrust as "theological"? In fact, Holl did not quite hit the target, though others that followed would do better. For Holl, Luther's Reformation was primarily theocentric. Compare that with the Luther statement mentioned earlier: "One doctrine rules in my heart, namely, faith in Christ."[11] Holl's attempt at recovering Luther was progress, certainly better than what had been championed, but Luther still was not in focus.[12] Since Holl, theology regained some attention, at least for a time, though *Geistesgeschichte* has fallen out of favor and, within history, the study of theology per se is not what it once was. Instead theology has become part of cultural studies or even a mask for the history of power politics, as one can see from a look at professional societies' conference programs.

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state the inculcating of moral/cultural values could probably be better done by the state itself. Yet church could still play an assisting role, adding a certain eternal *gravitas* to the efforts. So the church applauded efforts to establish and inculcate a *Kultur* that had little to do with the gospel Luther once treasured. Yet Luther still played a role as a rallying point, praised for his heroic stand that inspired high moral sacrifice and furthered nation building. Efforts to refocus began against that background. See James M. Stayer, *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Toronto: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). Others in the revival were Werner Elert, Emmanuel Hirsh, and Paul Althaus.

[10] In *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1928), 1:1–110. Available in English as Karl Holl, *What Did Luther Understand by Religion?*, ed. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, trans. Fred W. Meuser and Walter R. Wietzke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). Yet while Holl sought to reemphasize the theological, he did not give up on the argument for the Reformation as the seedbed of modern, progressive German culture. See Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, trans. Karl Hertz, Barbara Hertz, and John Lichtblau (New York: Meridian Books, 1959). Nor did Holl succeed in convincing others in the Luther Renaissance to follow precisely in his footsteps. Gogarten, for example, criticized Holl for being still too intent on order—moral law—in his view of Luther.

[11] *LW* 27:145; WA 40.I:33.

[12] Regin Prenter registers essentially the same complaint. In "Luther on Word and Sacrament," he discussed Holl's view of Luther's exegesis, which again comes out as theocentric. Instead, wrote Prenter, "To Luther the Bible is a book which bears witness to God's decisive action, that is, his judgment and forgiveness in and through the incarnate, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ." In *More About Luther*, Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Regin Prenter, and Herman A. Preus, Martin Luther Lectures 2 (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1958), 77.

Yet theology still survives with studies of Luther on Christ (or Christology), though the titles gravitate toward Luther on soteriology, leaping in already at that point, with fewer major works about Luther on Christ. When it comes to studies that start or stay more with Christ, there are only a few. Before the Luther Renaissance, Theodosius Harnack had a study with many useful observations, though it homogenized the reformer at the expense of the historical particulars.[13] Erich Seeberg, on the other hand, recognized historical development, but he was more interested in trying to find philosophical underpinnings that he thought drove Luther.[14] More recently, there is the very readable work of Ian Siggins.[15] His study moves beyond St. Paul and highlights the Johannine elements in Luther's thought, along with Luther's efforts to take his cue from what went on in the early church leading up to and through Chalcedon. With Siggins, however, the pendulum may have swung too far. More John is fine, but it comes at the expense of Paul. Plus, Siggins takes a dogmatic rather than a historical tack, which winds up sacrificing too much context.[16] Yves Congar has also written on Luther and Christ, arguing that for Luther the human nature is downplayed so much that it seems simply to tag along as the place where the divine alone holds sway.[17] Congar argued that Jesus' humanity is the real focus, dependent on the divine, yet where salvation really takes place even as the humanity sets the pace for the life of the believer. He thought that Luther, because he was so fixed on Christ in action, failed to deliver a balanced Christology that covers all the necessary points one expects to find in a *locus* on Christ.[18]

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[13] Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, vol. 2, *Luthers Lehre von dem Erlöser und der Erlösung*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C. Kaiser Verlag, 1927).

[14] Erich Seeberg, *Luther Theologie: Motive und Ideen*, vol. 2, *Christus: Wirklichkeit und Urbild* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1937).

[15] Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

[16] Context! Students ask, "What did Luther say about . . . ?" and the historical department drives them crazy by replying, "When?" Context matters. Compare the rich young man with Jesus in Matthew 19 to the jailor at Philippi in Acts 16. One can go overboard, of course, and refuse ever to make a summary statement about Luther's thought, and perhaps the gulf between early and late Luther is not quite as wide as some might argue. Still, attention to context helps highlight nuances and makes any attempt at a summary picture all the richer.

[17] Yves Congar, *Dialogue between Christians: Catholic Contributions to Ecumenism*, trans. Philip Loretz (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966).

[18] Congar's model for a *locus* on Christology was Thomas Aquinas. The preference for Thomas will surface again in the "New Catholic" revisionist view of Luther.

Perhaps the most helpful work about Luther on Christ is by Marc Lienhard. He stayed with the historical flow in Luther's thought over his life, showing growth and development along with simply highlighting different accents in different circumstances.[19] That approach immediately reminds the reader that nothing happens in a vacuum. Luther is not arbitrary, nor is he out of balance (contra Congar), but rather he does indeed have principles and anchor points that he applies in context. It takes vigorous, honest critical thinking on the part of the modern reader to grasp what Luther thought. There is plenty to find on Luther's view of Christ, but the approach often starts with soteriology and then backs into Christology, the "economic" approach that moves from his work to describing the person. Yet there is something to be said for starting with Christ and moving into the work, particularly when, as we shall see, *who* Christ is affects *what* he does on man's behalf. The Augsburg Confession begins with Article III and then moves to Article IV concerning justification.

When looking through the eyes of Luther, what kind of Christ does one see? Mindful of the caveats, one can highlight some of the ways Luther emphasized Christ at various times during his life and reform efforts. Initially, Luther's Christ was no friend but rather the judge enthroned on the rainbow with a leveling sword and consuming fire—not arbitrary or unfair, just all too righteous for Luther's eternal good. God had set the standard to attain, but how much was enough? One never knows. Whatever is brought to the table never measures up. The church offered means—sacraments and supplements—but it wisely remained ambiguous (yet encouraging) when it came to getting from here to there. So who wanted to take a chance, and who would challenge the church?

Luther, however, found a new Christ. There were some theological helps to push Luther along as he began his odyssey. The first five centuries of the church had much to say about Christ and clearly prized him.[20] How the

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[19] Marc Lienhard, *Luther, Witness to Jesus Christ: Stages and Themes in the Reformer's Christology*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982).

[20] Luther eventually came to the point where he noted the contribution of the *consensus quinquesaecularis*, but he did not feel obligated to it when he thought Scripture said otherwise. His Worms speech is a prime example. Later Lutherans wanted to defend their catholicity, but they, too, came to balance the historic voice of the church with exegetical results. A recent study is Quentin D. Stewart, "Catholicity or Consensus? The Role of the Consensus Patrum and the Vincentian Canon in Lutheran Orthodoxy: From Chemnitz to Quenstedt" (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2006).

fathers sorted through Christology, especially the two natures relating to who Christ is and what he does, took time to sink in for Luther, but deep roots would develop. Augustine's talk of grace also helped, though Luther would later leave him behind. Incarnation would be seen not simply as entrance but the whole life and work of Christ through cross and resurrection, and it was incarnation for a purpose. The realization and implications of this did not spring up overnight, but it can be seen by the time Luther took up the task of professor. His early classroom work—the *Dictata super Psalterium*—shows evidence of this.[21] Early talk of an indwelling Christ smacks of the neoplatonic in Augustinianism, but it seems as if Luther used that coincidentally; it was part of his tradition rather than an intentional program.[22] The point is that Luther did not change cleanly or sharply all at once. There was a tie to the old but also a definite shift going on.

More important is what Luther seemed consciously to be doing. He found Christ regularly in the Old Testament.[23] While some of his explanations may seem too allegorical for our taste, one should not throw out the baby with the four-fold bathwater. Luther would get beyond the *quadriga*. His use of the *quadriga* actually helps highlight breakthrough ideas. For example, as Christ stands in front of Moses in the burning bush—incarnation—Luther starts to think of the active participation of

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[21] For example, when Luther deals with Christ as God incarnate in Psalm 90 (WA 4:53; *LW* 11:195), when he talks of Christ as God on the highest possible sense in Psalm 11 (WA 3:93), and when he has God as Christ bring grace in Psalm 99 (WA 4:125; *LW* 11:277–278). These places do not just use the vocabulary but show an awareness of the significance.

[22] As time passed, the church fathers themselves became more coincidental to Luther in this sense: they were certainly closer to Christ than was Luther, but that did not make them somehow inspired or guarantee they would necessarily be correct by virtue of chronological proximity. They, too, were human and capable of missing something in the prophetic/apostolic message. So while honored, they were not automatically privileged. Luther came to see them rather like how we grow in our view and understanding of our own parents. A later, more nuanced relationship need bring no disrespect but might actually mean a richer appreciation for what they contributed. See Scott Hendrix, "Deparentifying the Fathers: The Reformers and Patristic Authority," in *Auctoritas Patrum: Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Century*, ed. Leif Grane, Alfred Schindler, and Markus Wriedt, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz 37 (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1993), 1:55–68.

[23] For example, Luther tied the presence of God at Sinai to Christ's presence, and the bush burning reminded Luther of Christ: blazing divinity tied to that which was there before Moses' eyes in the bush burning (humanity), God came in a desolate place no one would choose even as Christ came to Mary of low regard. WA 3:385; *LW* 10:324–325.

both natures, distancing himself a bit from Augustine, whose neoplatonic bent tended to see the accomplishment of salvation depending more heavily on the divine flowing through the humanity, while for Luther it was more integrated. Instead of God being hidden afar, divinity was right in front of him (in Christ), though hidden in humanity—God in the bush prompted this thinking. This right-in-front-of-you emphasis could be a reflection of nominalism, but Luther would not keep the emphasis simply for that reason. The Bible mattered. That Luther would not simply repeat the standard line is seen in his rethinking of grace, which was there not merely to assist or enable (as Luther once learned from the nominalist *via moderna*) but to save completely, totally.[24] In another example of change, he saw God fully involved, not only in high-spirited, upbeat moments, but also in sorrow and suffering. It is not just the church as the body of Christ that suffers (as Luther once learned), but God in Christ as well.[25] In short, Luther from the start stood by the historical expressions of the church in the creeds and the Christological work of the fathers heading toward Chalcedon. He also reflected the tradition of his teachers, as is natural. Yet the heritage did not seem really to provide the answers or the comfort he sought. So alongside the nod to tradition, there is evidence in Luther's earliest work for the start of what would become a significant shift in how Luther saw the incarnation and what it means.

When it came to medieval theology's influence, we know that Luther understood more of High Scholasticism than was once thought. He simply does not spend much time there because his own context was Late Scholasticism or nominalism.[26] There Luther resonated to the immediacy of God in Christ and the stress laid on the two natures, each doing what is proper to it; nominalism's distinction of the two natures, however, seemed also to keep them less than integrated. Luther would come to talk less about individual natures and more about the whole person. Moreover, his view of the beyond of Christ's work also changed. Luther found no real comfort in Scholasticism's Christ, who might have cleared a path and shown a way, yet still left those trusting him to take up the example set

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[24] Reinhold Schwarz, "Gott ist Mensch: zur Lehre von der Person Christi bei den Ockhamisten und bei Luther," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 63 (1966): 289–351.

[25] Erich Vogelsang, *Die Anfänge Luthers Christologie: nach der ersten Psalmenvorlesung* (Berlin; Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1929), 18–19.

[26] Denis R. Janz, *Luther and Late Medieval Thomism: A Study in Theological Anthropology* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), and *Luther on Thomas Aquinas: The Angelic Doctor in the Thought of the Reformer* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989).

before them and to follow him, hoping to meet the expectations set.[27] In comparing Luther and the nominalists, the crucial question is not where one finds similarities but where one finds differences as well as how and why those differences are significant. Some have argued for continuity: in the long light at the end of an era comes an ingathering of the best from that fading age, reaping the fruit of the nominalist thought and sowing seeds for the Reformation to carry on.[28] There are always likely to be connections, but what about the dissimilarities and the apparent methodological change?

Luther's new view of Christ came as he learned to read the Bible differently, not through Aristotle's syllogisms but from the texts themselves.[29] This is a small sentence, but probably the biggest point when it comes to how Luther sees Christ. A change in method brings a change in the outcome. The "New Learning" of Renaissance humanism provided tools of the languages to read the texts,[30] coupled with history and the

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[27] A view captured by the well-known statement, *Facientibus quod in se est.*

[28] Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963). Oberman argued for a line of thinking from Augustine through Gregor of Rimini and on to Luther, so that Luther's contributions were really the germination of seeds transmitted and sown in the *via gregorii.* Unfortunately the path seems to trail off. Apparent similarities in a kind of associative method or approach are problematic in history and do not really seal the case. The methodological debate is part of this exchange: Heiko A. Oberman, "Reformation: Epoche oder Episode," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 56–111, and Leif Grane, "Lutherforschung und Geistesgeschichte: Auseinandersetzung mit Heiko A. Oberman," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 68 (1977): 302–314.

[29] If there is any doubt about method being key, see the following: Leif Grane, *Modus loquendi theologicus: Luthers Kampf um die Erneuerung der Theologie (1515–1518),* Acta theological Danica 12 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975); *Contra Gabrielem: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Gabriel Biel in der Disputatio Contra Scholasticam Theologiam, 1517,* Acta theological Danica 4 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1962); "Die Anfänge von Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit dem Thomismus," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 95 (1970): 241–250; and "Luther and Scholasticism," in *Luther and Learning: The Wittenberg University Luther Symposium,* ed. Marilyn J. Harran (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1985), 52–68. On the tributaries that fed Luther's reform, compare: Heiko A. Oberman, "Headwaters of the Reformation: Initia Lutheri—Initia Reformationis," in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era: Papers for the Fourth International Congress for Luther Research,* ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 40–88, and Lewis W. Spitz, "Headwaters of the Reformation: Studia Humanitatis, Luther Senior, et Initia Reformationis," in *Luther and the Dawn of the Modern Era,* ed. Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 89–116.

[30] Where and when Luther first had contact with Renaissance humanism remains an open question, but the contact was early. Already in Erfurt he began to study Greek with fellow monk Johannes Lang, and the Hebrew study tools of Johannes Reuchlin

sense to see the Bible as God's story of redemption. Rather than the product of a harvest, Luther's Christ seen from various angles and in various ways stemmed rather from biblical roots. As Luther read the Bible, he saw Christ in the life of God's people, engaging them in both the Old and New Testaments in terms of sin and the promise of saving grace, and he expected God to deal with him (and with any believer) the same way.

Several things were going on at once that helped Luther see Christ differently. For some time, Renaissance humanism had been bringing pressure on the tight grip that Scholasticism held on the universities. Scholasticism understandably did not want to share, and that approach—touting syllogisms used in dialectical argument—dominated higher learning. Renaissance humanism saw a role for logic, which was part of the classical curriculum. Man did not live by syllogisms alone. There were other angles to consider, including rhetoric and the maddeningly interesting vagaries of life as seen in the study of history.[31] Yet Scholasticism held on tight at the universities while humanists complained. That was one factor: the ingredients for a new way of thinking were available. The second thing that helped Luther was his own appointment as professor at one of those universities. Wittenberg was relatively green and without entrenched traditions. To attract a wide range of teachers and students to this "academic Siberia" at a slow spot on the Elbe River, Elector Frederick's men not only left it to the *via antiqua* and *via moderna* to sort it out among themselves as to which would hold sway, but the door was opened also for humanists. The university's charter specifically mentioned "posie and the arts." Throw into this mix a newly minted professor who was expected to add his two-cents worth to the

gave him access to Hebrew. Luther seems to have been largely self-taught. See Helmar Junghans, "Der Einfluss des Humanismus auf Luthers Entwicklung bis 1518," in *Lutherjahrbuch* 37 (1970): 37–101, and *Der junge Luther und die Humanisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985).

[31] Humanists would tout a core of grammar, poetry, rhetoric, history, and moral philosophy, branching out from there. It was not simply what was done but how it was done: with a certain elegance and engagement. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); *Medieval Aspects of Renaissance Learning: Three Essays*, ed. and trans. Edward P. Mahoney, Duke Monographs in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 1 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974); Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Hanna H. Gray, "Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963): 497–514; and Lewis W. Spitz, "Humanismus/Humanismusforschung," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, ed. Horst Robert Balz et al. (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986) 15:639–661.

theological scene. Like countless new academics, Luther scrambled to do those first lectures, looking for new angles and for things to say from the lecture pulpit. At the same time, he had his own theological questions to answer. Working on both, he found help in biblical tools from some of the humanists. They helped him see the Bible, and Christ, differently. Convinced that he was not alone in his struggles, Luther took his new ideas into the classroom where appropriate, and others rallied to this theology. That only encouraged Luther to press for change in the program at Wittenberg. In his first years as professor, he pressed for the hiring of humanists and the phase-out of scholasticism.[32] In a sense, the Reformation was the product of cultural and educational reform.[33] Method mattered! Change the method and new results come.[34] Others came close at times, and Luther certainly acknowledged earlier voices that were cut off, but no one seemed to be quite able to get a whole-Bible grasp of things in the same way as Luther, a man with a metanarrative before the buzzword was

[32] For Luther's September 1517 "Disputation against Scholastic Theology," see *LW* 31:3–16; WA 1:220–228. In theses 43, 44, and 50, Luther said that it was wrong to say one needed Aristotle to become a theologian, and, in fact, that the opposite was true: it is only without Aristotle (that is, without his logic) that one truly becomes a theologian, for Aristotle was to theology as darkness was to light.

[33] Luther's efforts to replace scholasticism with humanists at the university can be followed in Walter Friedensburg, ed., *Urkundenbuch der Universität Wittenberg*, Geschichtsquellen der Provinz Sachsen und des Freistaates Anhalt, Neue Reihe 3 (Magdeburg: Selbstverlag der Historischen Kommission, 1926), and *Geschichte der Universität Wittenberg* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1917). Luther's wider contacts in the decade are the subject of Timothy P. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther's Early Correspondence: Taking All Things Captive* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001). See also Max Steinmetz, "Die Universität Wittenberg und der Humanismus (1502–1521)" in *450 Jahre Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*, vol. 1, *Wittenberg 1502–1817*, ed. Leo Stern et al. (Halle: Selbstverlag der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, 1952), 103–139, especially 108–112; Karl Bauer, *Die Wittenberger Universitätstheologie und die Anfänge der Deutschen Reformation* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Siebeck [Paul Mohr], 1928); and Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg, 1485–1517* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1975). One recounting of Luther's efforts at curriculum change is Robert Rosin, "The Reformation, Humanism, and Education: The Wittenberg Model for Reform," *Concordia Journal* 16 (1990): 301–318. A longer, more recent study is Jens-Martin Kruse, *Universitätstheologie und Kirchenreform: Die Anfänge der Reformation in Wittenberg (1516–1522)* (Mainz: von Zabern, 2002). On Luther's approach to education, see Robert Rosin, "Luther on Education," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 197–210.

[34] In a 1518 letter to his old teacher Jodokus Trutfetter, Luther wrote: "I believe simply that it is impossible to reform the church if the canons, the decretals, the scholastic theology, the philosophy, logic as they now are not uprooted and another study installed." WABr 1:170.

invented.[35] As Luther approached his professional task, he would read the verse but quickly "window out" to see the larger pericope, the chapter, the book, and the whole Bible, finding connections across the board, even as he zoomed back in on the verse(s) at hand. This was fluid but certainly not without focus. In the end, Luther's thinking about the Bible revolved not so much around a unifying idea as around a unifying person: Christ.

What came from all this? Enough groundwork has been laid to show why these ideas are significant and where they might lead. Some of the insights from the early years have already been mentioned. Luther certainly wanted to be in step with the creeds, and he paid attention to the fathers and knew the church traditions. As he sorted out his own theological problems, looking for a loving God, it was in the Scriptures that Luther really looked to find Christ. One can see the results in a strong influence of St. John with God dwelling among us, but St. Paul also is prominent with Christ's saving righteousness and also the indwelling motif. There really was no part of Scripture that dealt with justification that did not somehow influence Luther. He came to see a Christ who was immanent, close at hand. While both natures were involved, Luther showed a preference for talking of what the whole Christ does rather than for sorting them out. As problems would arise in the years to come, Luther would emphasize one nature or the other, prompted by the issue at hand.

Another early contribution that has not been mentioned, and one that would hang close to the center of Luther's thought through his life, was the role Christ's divinity plays in the whole person. Because Christ is God, he is in control, and he can (and does) accomplish all according to his good pleasure, in his love. With God acting that way, what role could man have? How foolish, how insulting to mix in man's work with what God is doing. Monergism in salvation began to emerge as an early and important theme; it was personal for Luther, because he could not find peace as long as he kept offering up his own paltry efforts. Instead the way was by faith, resting in the hands of God regardless of what comes—even *resignatio ad*

[35] Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), is really a book about medieval exegesis. In an impressive study, Ocker argued that what is touted as revolutionary in the Renaissance and Reformation was to be found already in medieval exegetes. In fact, similarities and continuities have been noted from the start by no less a scholar than Paul Oskar Kristeller who wrote of the *ars dictamini*. Cf. note 31. The question really seems to be how much these earlier voices put the pieces together and how much they realized what the sum of the parts actually produced. Luther did.

infernum, trusting that what comes is God doing so for good.[36] Monergism also kept Luther on course when he looked at medieval mystics. His first publication was an edition of the *Theologia deutsch* (with Luther's preface),[37] a contemplation of the cross and Christian life in the vein of the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis. Luther also thought highly of John Tauler, for example, and St. Bernard.[38] But what attracted him was not the thought of being somehow absorbed into God, and there was no thought of fanning some scintilla of leftover godliness to move from purgation to illumination and then union. Rather, Luther was attracted by the personal coming of God in Christ to embrace the sinner.[39]

One last insight or contribution from Luther's first Wittenberg years was how he came to see Christ entering God's plan for salvation. Prior to Luther, the exegetical tradition put forth a view of salvation with a history that ran from Genesis until Christ entered and then redirected that history, a long flow interrupted. In this case, we are fortunate to live on the "back side" of Christ's change. Luther rethought all that. While Galatians 3:19–4:7 was a key passage and was part of lectures later in that first decade, the ideas that would come together there were perking already in the first Psalms lectures. What was the different view? Salvation history was not a matter of law first, then Christ, and now gospel. Rather the real history occurs in each individual who becomes conscious of how things once were under the boot of the law and how they now are with Christ having entered into his life with saving grace grasped in faith. This was not to dismiss God acting in history from Genesis onward; the activity was there with the promise of the Messiah and then Christ and now the church. The

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[36] Although Luther was still sorting through new ideas, the ideas of commitment and trust are present in the Romans lectures. See WA 56, 57; *LW* 25.

[37] WA 1:378–389; *LW* 31:71–76.

[38] Luther described Tauler's theology as "a theology that is more sensible than all the universities' scholastic doctors." WA 1:557; *LW* 31:129.

[39] Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics: A Reexamination of Luther's Spiritual Experience and His Relationship to the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976); Theo Bell, *Divus Bernhardus: Bernhard von Clairvaux in Martin Luthers Schriften* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1993); and Heiko Oberman, "Simul gemitus et raptus: Luther and Mysticism," in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 219–251. The *via negativa* certainly reminded one that comprehending God himself was finally impossible; but the direction was really wrong: not man to God, but God needs to come to man in the suffering and death of Christ. Mysticism was certainly all around Luther, not only as a professional theologian but also as a monk. Rather than the mystical ladder, Luther found benefit in the talk of the personal connection of Christ and the believer, the union, even the exchange—a theme that he would develop more in just a few years.

point rather was that throughout this history everyone was always, no matter when, saved by God the same way: by promise. It started with promise to Adam and more promises—particular promises yet all tied to Christ—and it still is a matter of promise: this baptism is promise of entry into the kingdom, this cross and empty tomb are yours, this body and blood is for you for the forgiveness of sins. Christ is always there throughout all of those promises, meeting each believer in a very real, existential (not existentialistic) way. God, particularly God in Christ, acts alone, and Christ comes to sinners, meeting them where they are in a very concrete way in the promise put into their ears. That was a huge rethinking of Christ and his role in salvation.[40]

In the pressure-packed years of 1517 through 1521/22, Luther wrote several dozen things for varied audiences. None was a specific treatment of Christ, but there were significant themes to be seen. For example, while Luther's Ninety-five Theses were aimed obviously at correcting indulgence abuses, behind them was the idea that Christ, not the pope, ruled the church.[41] It was not Rome's place to peddle forgiveness, and people should not heed false calls of peace but focus instead on the cross where God came. Clinging there would surely bring tribulation, but also entrance into the kingdom. Christ could claim the church by virtue of having suffered and died for it. The church's sufferings were not to gain indulgence, but because as Christ's body it also endures the scorn of the world. These theses thrust Luther into the spotlight, though the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* perhaps struck a deeper blow with its focus on method. What Luther himself offered instead rested not on syllogisms supporting a *quid pro quo* rise to salvation but on Christ, cross, and faith.

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[40] Perhaps the best-known proponent of this existential approach is Gerhard Ebeling. See Ebeling, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1942), and "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 48 (1951): 172–230, available in English as "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 129–158, 315–338, 451–468. An extremely thorough study of Luther's rethinking of Christ in salvation history (and also of Ebeling's treatment that still leaves questions) is Erik H. Herrmann, "Why Then the Law? Salvation History and the Law in Martin Luther's Interpretation of Galatians" (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2005). A look at how Luther could hang on to aspects of his older method yet rework them in service to this new approach is Timothy Maschke, "The Understanding and Use of Allegory in the Lectures on the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians by Doctor Martin Luther" (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1993). The Ebeling understanding does not jive well with efforts to champion a *theosis* approach to salvation.

[41] WA 1:229–238; *LW* 31:17–34.

These ideas appeared just months later in the 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation* where the famous and familiar theme of theology of the cross was pitted against theology of glory.[42] According to Luther, free will on man's part is a fiction, and it is rather by God's good grace and love that salvation comes. Incarnation was the key, not logic. Incarnation, God become man, defies logic—not only in terms of how but also why—except for the purpose of declaring the love of God. Thesis 28 of the theological set turned conventional thinking on its head: God's love does not find its object, it creates it; human love is drawn to what pleases it. Though there is nothing lovable in fallen man, nevertheless God creates that which God wants to love, and he does this in Christ. The answer comes not in human rising to God, which is impossible, but in God stooping, God loving in spite of—not because of—what man has to offer. Again, Christ was the focus of all this. Luther's 1519 "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness" has that same Christ, one who stoops and gives what is needed for salvation, namely, righteousness won and offered.[43]

In 1520, Luther launched a sharp attack against Rome on several fronts with his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. His *On the Freedom of a Christian* was less confrontational yet just as firm when it came to his picture of Christ.[44] Using the bride-bridegroom marriage image, Luther set forth what is called the *commercium admirabile*, the happy or joyous exchange. The groom assumes what is not his—the sin and thereby the wrath of God—and gives his status by virtue of his righteousness to the bride. This happens because of the incarnation, emphasized earlier in the treatise as Luther explained that the word is God's gospel about the Son made flesh, suffered, risen from the dead, and glorified by God's sanctifying Spirit. Bride and groom have a relationship, a bond, but that union is not a merger or fusion into one.[45] Each one still has an identity, and, in the case of the bride, Christ does not make her more than human, but rather brings new life, which opens new doors to all that is human.

A crucial point is underscored by this exchange motif: incarnation for Luther was not simply becoming human, just as the human nature was more than just a collection of traits. With a human nature, Christ not only

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[42] WA 1:353–374; *LW* 31:35–70. Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

[43] WA 2:145–152; *LW* 31:293–306.

[44] WA 7:49–73; *LW* 31:327–378.

[45] The losing or emptying of oneself was a mystical theme Luther did not embrace, a point worth noting in the discussion about *theosis*.

entered into the created world but also entered into human plight, throwing in with man's lot and taking on man's sin. Mindful of passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin") or Philippians 2:6–8 ("found in the fashion [appearance, form] of a man"), the phrase "become man" was tantamount for Luther to "become sin." The "becoming" describes not just some status or state of being but indicates a purpose: to take man's place, to redeem. Remember, "incarnation" was not simply the entrée but the full course: birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. While nothing was taken for granted and the temptations were quite real (and resisted), there was also a confidence that God is in Christ and would not fail but would press on till the end. The entire business defied logic, and Scholasticism's syllogisms toppled like a house of cards. The redemption that makes the Christian free cannot be argued logically.[46] Rather it is confessed, based on what God has revealed in the Scriptures. Despite the logical disconnects along the way, there are promises, especially the ultimate *promissio Dei* in Christ, that serve finally to anchor.[47] These Christ themes arose out of controversy and pressure, yet they were hardly exaggerations or distortions.[48]

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[46] It is also more complicated, with acceptable (biblical!) representations being not nearly as univocal as Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* would suggest. Cf. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

[47] Several years ago when teaching in Ethiopia I caught a ride home from church after a Good Friday service with a missionary and her granddaughter of about 4 or 5 years old. The missionary was explaining that while we always think of Jesus on the cross, this was the particular day when we remember what happened and that God wanted his Son to take away our sin, so God sent him and let him die on the cross. "Well," said the granddaughter, "I think God must be crazy." "I suppose so," the grandmother replied, "but God did it because he loves us and wants to save us." "Oh, that's good. Then it's okay. I'm glad." Incarnation, the whole life/work of Christ, defies logic, but childlike faith gets it.

[48] The use of "logic" in these last lines has to be balanced, and much revolves around just how "logic" is to be taken. To say that the message Luther put forth "defied logic" is not to say that the presentation does not hang together. Everything, in a sense, has a logic that makes it what it is. So, too, with Luther's thought or with biblical theology. The outside observer can examine what is said and judge whether the whole adequately reflects a connection of its various parts. The observer can say, simply put, "That makes sense. I understand what he is saying." Yet that is not the same as saying that what is said is true, as if the logic of the system guarantees its truth. That is particularly the case when dealing with matters of theology, climbing into the metaphysical realm, so to speak. While it is possible to say that what is claimed "makes sense" logically, that the message itself is coherent, it is impossible to prove the truth of those claims by logic, because the truths are in a higher realm that can be grasped only by faith. Christianity

When Luther wrote his postils in 1522, these themes appeared again, now as they arose from the Gospel and Epistle texts. These sermon abstracts were important, of course, for a practical reason. There were clerics in the field who were attracted to the Reformation and the gospel message, but they had received a theological upbringing and had no real hope of returning to Wittenberg for retrofitting. The postils served as their continuing education, a way of learning to think and preach evangelically. Even more, the focus on sermons underscored the idea that *Deus revelatus* is not simply God in Christ as if "revealed God" were some abstract category or some object for observation under glass in a museum. For Luther, *Deus revelatus* was God in the *preached* Christ—Christ engaged with man. While preaching may seem like a Sunday morning monolog on the surface, it is really a conversation along several lines: the preacher with people, but also the preacher with God, and certainly God with both.

It might have been more enjoyable to spend time writing postils, but Luther could hardly take a rest. In the early 1520s new problems arose in the form of more radical reformers who were not satisfied with what Luther had done, thinking that he had quit too soon. For them Luther was still too Roman Catholic. His view of Christ was a case in point. Christ had indeed become man and taken on flesh and human nature; but, as they saw matters, when Luther argued that Christ was present in the Lord's Supper, as he had always maintained,[49] he was casting aside this humanity. They thought that Luther must have been some kind of Docetist or Marcionite with a Christ that was, ironically, too spiritual for the

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involves information and historical facts, and there can be a logical consideration of the facts: things so or not? But that alone will not settle the matter, because that is not all there is to the Christian proclamation. Promises are attached to facts. The facts or events have to be there, but that still leaves man with the faith element. Absent the facts, faith tied to them counts for little. (As 1 Corinthians 15:14 says, "If Christ is not raised [fact, unique though it is], then our faith [promise: this is your resurrection as well] is in vain.") So when Luther turned away from logic, he was not saying that people must not think about the Christian faith. Rather he objected to what the broad reasoning process would inevitably produce if pressed to the end, because human nature is fallen. When left to itself, it is bound to lead astray. Build with the crooked timber of humanity and the house will never be plumb, though those involved may yet think it so. The point is that we must understand what was going on when Luther turned his back on the theological method that had staked its success on logic.

[49] Luther's *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* makes plain that the Lord's Supper is no sacrifice effected by the priest, but Christ's gift to man. WA 6:497–573; *LW* 36:3–126. By maintaining a sacramental presence in the elements, Luther was, in the minds of the sacramentarian critics, rejecting the human nature that they believed now precluded any sort of "real presence."

spiritualists. Luther countered sharply by trumpeting not the humanity but the divinity of Christ, reminding critics that God could and would, when he said so, be present. To deny that possibility—that reality!—had implications undermining any and all other promises of God. Much more could be said on how Luther understood the two natures and their connection in Christ, but, for the early radical/sacramentarian problem at hand, the fact of Christ's divinity and the interaction of the natures was enough, Luther thought, to dispatch the critics.

Rome had not forgotten either. Powerful voices argued that Luther had shown his true colors at Worms and was a libertine with talk of free grace in the person and work of Christ. The statement "unless I am convinced by Scripture or clear reason" (meaning a mind shaped by the word) flew in the face of both the tradition and the exegesis of the time.[50] Of course that exegesis was marked by syllogisms made standard fare in the twelfth century: if God is perfect and makes no mistakes, and if God gives people the law with the command to keep it, then there must be some way people could comply and be rewarded, if not on their own, then aided by grace. Such exegesis was logical, but not Pauline. Luther sought to banish this thinking from the university and the resulting theology, but it was the thinking Erasmus defended, albeit in a very elegant, sophisticated fashion. The bad blood stemmed from the mid-1510s when Luther had criticized Erasmus's idea that Christ freed the believer from the obligation of the ceremonial but not the moral law. Erasmus watched Luther plow ahead and concluded that this man was a threat to the church and questioned Luther's penchant for vigorous rhetoric. Luther, knowing of Erasmus's high anthropology, criticized him without mentioning him by name when

[50] The complaint is still made today. Joseph Lortz, pioneer of the "New Catholic" view of Luther, agreed that the church needed reform, but in the end Luther "war nicht vollhörend," that is, he did not listen to the wider counsel of the church. The famous thesis runs through Lortz, *Die Reformation in Deutschland*, 2 vols. (Freiburg: Herder, 1940). Lortz much preferred Thomas Aquinas and thought Luther was blinded to the wider tradition by the inferior nominalist *via moderna* thought of his day. Had Luther listened to the wider church, Lortz thought he might have found his answers in Thomas, and Luther would have rendered saint-like service to the church. Needless to say, Lortz's view does not mesh with Oberman's view that Late Scholasticism provided the positive fruit and the seeds Luther planted. It does, however, mesh with Yves Congar, who thought Thomas provided the balanced Christology that Luther lacked. The New Catholics shifted in the generation after Lortz with such men as Erwin Iserloh, Daniel Olivier, Peter Manns, and Otto Hermann Pesch, who all in various ways concluded that Luther was actually correct in his theology, especially in his view of Christ and salvation. Luther was catholic—with a small c—and should have been given a place in the Roman Church then and now.

Luther, in his 1523 preface to Ecclesiastes, said that Ecclesiastes preaches against the free will which some people foolishly maintain. Erasmus then went public with his *Diatribe*, his *Freedom of the Will*, and Luther let fly with his *Bondage of the Will*.[51] It was not done lightly. Erasmus was no rank amateur, and Luther knew this was a theological death match. The immediate focus was the human will and its ability (or inability) to respond to God in faith and life. Behind that question was a fundamental argument over Christ. Erasmus propounded a kind of *philosophia Christi* where there certainly was faith, but Christ also served as a model to be imitated in fashioning the Christian life and finishing salvation. Although Erasmus was metaphysically tone deaf and hated the Scholastics, he actually echoed their basic approach. Christ was an *exemplum* for faith and life leading to salvation. Luther's Christ was an *exemplar*, not simply the model but in fact a substitute, a vicar, the stand-in for the happy exchange; for Luther, salvation was certain and complete. The life that comes, which can certainly be Christ-like, is pure fruit on a redeemed tree, the works of the new man of faith. It remains a crucial divide: Christ as savior and enabler, or Christ as savior.[52]

In the latter half of the 1520s, Luther again clashed with sacramentarians, this time with Zwingli.[53] The person and work of Christ were at the heart of the matter. Lutheran critics give Zwingli the Nestorian label. His early humanist interests literally introduced him to Erasmus and neoplatonism, and Zwingli never quite escaped the *philosophia Christi* tendencies.[54] In

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[51] Erasmus tried one more reply in his two-part *Hyperaspistes*, sending it to Elector John with a complaint that Luther had behaved badly with his rhetoric. John was amused and sent it to Luther, who was enraged that Erasmus would continue the fight. Friends redirected Luther's energy to more immediate problems, arguing that Luther had effectively dispatched Erasmus. Luther fumed privately, and when he needed a semester's lecture topic in 1526–1527 as a filler while most of the university had fled Wittenberg for Jena due to the plague, Luther settled on Ecclesiastes. He never mentioned Erasmus by name, but Luther had him in mind as free will was again sent packing. See Robert Rosin, *Reformers, The Preacher, and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melanchthon, and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1997).

[52] On the clash and the complex aftermath, see Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

[53] On this exchange see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003).

[54] In Zürich outside the Wasserkirche at the Limmat River is a statue of Zwingli holding an open book. It is meant to be a Bible, but biographer Oskar Farner suggested it could be interleaved: one page of Scripture and one page from the classics.

order to preserve the majesty of the divine Christ, he could not conceive of Christ in the Supper. Luther responded that—although it was mind-boggling and might seem poor taste to ask the risen and ascended Christ to be in the bread and wine—if Christ said he wanted to do that and promised to be there with forgiveness, life, and salvation, then Christians ought to take him at his word and give thanks. After an escalating paper war, both sides met at Marburg—Zwingli seeking credibility to rank with Luther's reform, and Luther going because his prince said that he had to go. Honest observers expected little, and they were right. In the language battle, Luther proved the better rhetorician in showing that "is" actually means "is," especially when Christ says so. Luther was also better at going back to the ancients, in this case the fathers, when it came to how human and divine natures could interact. Zwingli simply could not and would not accept the *communicatio idiomatum* because in his mind it demeaned the divine Christ. Besides, for Zwingli the weight of the matter fell not on the promise "for you" but on "do this" as a command to re-enact in some sort of commemorative way.[55] For Luther, how this could be was no more a problem than any other aspect of the incarnation, from manger to cross and out of the tomb. In this context Luther repeated one of his early ideas: the divinity of Christ overwhelms any problems as Christ takes care of things. It is the whole Christ, both natures, in the Lord's Supper. A mere human could not be sacramentally present in this way; the divine is evident. It is Christ's body and blood, a matter of the incarnation; it is given and shed for forgiveness, again, a matter of the incarnation.

To be sure, there is much more to include on Luther's view of Christ. There are, of course, more texts to decipher and more themes to include,[56]

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[55] It is rather like weekend war re-enactments. Say we gather to "re-fight" the Battle of Bull Run. The exercise is interesting, and it calls to mind what once was done, which can be uplifting or upbuilding in terms of one's patriotism and respect for those in the original fray. But it hardly carries the same profit or benefit. This perspective comes from Zwingli's definition of "sacrament" as a pledge or declaration or statement of intent—ideas he gleaned from the Latin poet Varro. See Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1981).

[56] Theosis is one of those, but I wonder if that angle, prompted by dialogs with the Eastern Orthodox Church, will have the staying power of the incarnational focus, or if it offers the same surety. Time, of course, will tell. Some years ago at the first North American Forum for Luther Research held at Luther Seminary, Gerhard Forde gave a plenary address in which he had occasion to comment on just those questions. He had his doubts. Forde said he could imagine Christ crucified on Good Friday with family and followers distraught at the foot of the cross, and then Christ suddenly would look

but the few texts handled here certainly mark Luther's as a wonderfully precious, evangelical view of God in Christ for humanity. God became incarnate—not just as man, but as sin for us. This Christ suffered, meaning God suffered—another mind-boggling concept that Luther asserted. Because of the happy exchange, his relationship with the Father and his life-bringing righteousness are given to people. When the church suffers, it is also an eschatological reminder of the deliverance still to be won but already assured, even as Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity.[57] Luther left behind in the catechism what he uncovered along the way. The faith is not simplistic, but the core is simple; thinking about it can be very humbling. Remember the famous line: When it comes to theology, a certain modesty is called for.[58]

"Men fear death, as children fear to go into the dark," wrote Francis Bacon.[59] Death is the last enemy, the threshold at which Satan has a last chance to snatch at faith. The fear of death is all too human. Because of the

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down and say, "Don't worry, folks, it's just a metaphor." To Forde, Luther's thoroughgoing incarnation with God and man in Christ seemed a lot more solid.

[57] The impact of Luther's God-man Christ incarnate was brought home to me while teaching at Concordia Lutheran Seminary in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. A visitor to class asked the students why they had decided to become pastors. Given the culture and the financial sacrifices, it was a good question. The first student to speak said that he had grown up in a time when they were told there was nothing but the material world around them. Then a friend assured him that it was not so: there was indeed a God who created the world and because of all the trouble and our sin came into the world as Christ and died for him. It was a simple presentation, but the student said that it had made all the difference in his life, and so he thought it was important to do as much as he could to tell others and to serve those who already know. That started a chorus of "me too" from the others. They reprised the basic themes we have seen. Later that week, at the ordination of the national church's first Kyrgyz-speaking pastor, there was a similar story but with more at stake. The missionary who preached the ordination sermon told of this pastor's earlier life. He had been a policeman—not a bad job—but he had a troubled life with no purpose or hope as he saw things. So he went into his apartment bathroom and slashed his wrists. His wife managed to save him, and a Christian friend talked to him about the Christian faith: there is hope and certainty because God himself came into this world, dying and being resurrected, for us. The preacher said that this new pastor would always carry those scars to remind him of who he once was, but he would also know that there are scars borne by another, Christ, who had made him what he now was and who would continue to come in his word proclaimed and in the Sacraments.

[58] Wenn zur Theologie kommt, eine gewiße Bescheidenheit gehört dazu.

[59] Francis Bacon, "Essays, Civil and Moral," in *Essays, Civil and Moral and The New Atlantis by Francis Bacon; Areopagitica and Tractate on Education by John Milton; Religio Medici by Sir Thomas Borwne*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, Harvard Classics 3 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 9.

human and divine Christ, however, Luther had another take on death with his motto, though not his own words but the promise from God: "I shall not die but live and declare the works of the Lord" (Ps. 118:17).[60]

Response to Robert Rosin

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This is a marvelous opportunity to discuss theology with brothers in the pastoral office who still care about Luther and the Reformation. As Dr. Rosin stated, "When it comes to theology, a certain modesty is called for." As "beggars," we would like to be *unter den Schriften*, remaining pupils of Christ. In addition to highlighting a few points from Dr. Rosin's presentation, I would like to add one particular area of Luther's confession of Christ which has gone unmentioned and which I have been asked to present: that is, the place of Christ in the liturgy.

Dr. Rosin's paper gave a splendid and learned overview of Luther's confession of Christ. For such a large topic—Luther's view of Christ—he offered helpful insights and observations in a brief space. Whether Luther had a "Christology" was a good question, and he rightly demonstrated that Luther's understanding of Christ derived directly from the Scriptures while being well-informed by the church's dogma on Christ. As Werner Elert observed in his *Der Christliche Glaube*, Luther's Reformation may be seen as a tearing down of the theological premises of medieval Roman Catholic thought on the relation between Christ, the church, and the world.[61] This included Luther's rejection of the inadequate image of Christ as a lawgiver and an example. The church can never be content with the doctrinal statements from one time in the past, otherwise the church would place the authority of her dogma above the authority of the gospel. Luther's greatness, in the context of Late Scholasticism, rested in the fact that he did not strive to teach anything new, but, as St. Paul wrote, "that

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[60] "Ps. 118 remained Luther's favorite throughout his life. The words 'I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord' [Latin, Ps. 117: *non moriar sed vivam et narrabo opera Domini*] were his personal motto." *LW* 14:45 n. 4. For Luther's commentary on Psalm 118, see *LW* 14:41–106; WA 31.I:65–182.

[61] Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der Lutherischen Dogmatik*, 3rd ed. (Hamburg: Furche, 1956), 17–55. Most of the fifth edition has been translated into English as *The Christian Faith: An Outline of Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Martin H. Bertram and Walter R. Bouman (Columbus: Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1974).

which I received, I handed over to you" (1 Cor 15:3). For Luther, the doctrine belonged to Christ, not to us.[62] Doctrinal theology was not a systematic theology in a modern sense of the term, like the theology of Schleiermacher, but homology.

The best place to confess doctrine may not be in dogmatic textbooks, synodical by-laws, or popular devotional books, but in the liturgy where the means of grace are going on: the place of our Lord's giving and our receiving. Luther was very careful in his life so that he would never diminish his dear Lord Jesus Christ. In *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith, 1538,* he wrote: "All heresy strikes at this dear article of Jesus Christ."[63] Dr. Rosin's observation is correct: "Luther's thinking about the Bible revolved not so much around a unifying idea as around a unifying person: Christ." For Luther, "Christology" was an afterthought, a confession. His point of departure was not doctrinal formulations of the church but the apostolic witness of Scripture.

Dr. Rosin's procedure—presenting Luther's thought chronologically with the circumstances in full view—was helpful, though he could have allowed Luther to speak more for himself. It is also the case that Dr. Rosin needed more space to include the christological problems of the sacramentarian controversies during the mid- and late-1520s. Individual points of Dr. Rosin's interpretation may be questioned. For example, when he posted the Ninety-five Theses, did Luther actually have as clear an understanding of the gospel as presented by Dr. Rosin? Luther was speaking against the paper of indulgences, but the reason for his opposition was not on account of his own clear understanding of Christ but on account of being offended by the hard process of salvation in the medieval Sacrament of Penance which included inner contrition of the heart and outer mortification of the flesh. Theses 94 and 95 read: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell; and thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace."[64] Throughout the Ninety-five Theses, Luther did not

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[62] This point is demonstrated by an anecdote from class. One day a student commented on Matthew 28:18–20 by saying, "Our theology of baptism, then, is well supported by this passage." This is a wrong way of speaking. Matthew 28 does not support *our* theology of baptism; rather, our confession of baptism is derived from these words of our Lord. We never fit our Lord's words into our system; his doctrine fits him! The words of the Lord are the *viva vox*, the living voice of Jesus.

[63] WA 50:267, 18; *LW* 34:208.

[64] WA 1:238, 16–19; *LW* 31:33.

once use the word "faith." In his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses, 1518*, Luther wrote: "Perfect contrition does not need his absolution."[65] This sounds similar to the pietism of Philipp Jacob Spener.[66] Despite such open questions, Dr. Rosin has given a masterful treatment of Christ in Luther's thought.

Three more things stood out in Dr. Rosin's paper. The first was the importance of *promise* as God's way of salvation in Christ. Although the *proprium* of baptism or the Lord's Supper was not always presented as one may have wished, Dr. Rosin emphasized "the personal coming of God in Christ to embrace the sinner" in Luther's thinking together with Christ's "right-in-front-of-you" vitality. Ian Siggins observed that Luther "is less comfortable (and less clear) when he moves from the concrete to the abstract, from the historical to the ideal, from the practical to the theoretical."[67] Oswald Bayer maintains that Luther's thought on the promise of God in Christ does not describe what will happen in the future but something which takes immediate and present effect.[68] The second was

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[65] WA 1:550, 36; *LW* 31:117. Latin : *perfecta autem eius absolutione non eget.*

[66] ". . . and further more it [forgiveness pronounced by the pastor] is a reassurance that sin is not about to be forgiven, but that it has already been forgiven previously." Philipp Jakob Spener, *Gründlicher Unterricht von dem Amte der Versöhnung* (Frankfurt am Mayn: Zunnerisch-und Junischem Buchladen, 1716), 3:414. Thus, Spener viewed the forgiveness of sin as bestowed not at holy absolution itself. Rather, holy absolution was a confirmation of what had already happened internally. His focus was on the process of regeneration *in nobis*. A pastor was supposed to ask whether a believer was repentant enough and was progressing in good works enough. He thus functioned as a judge, while Christ was seen as an example to follow. Here a certain similarity with the medieval Roman Catholic Sacrament of Penance may be observed.

[67] Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 1–2.

[68] On the motif of the promise in Luther's theology, Oswald Bayer wrote: "The term 'promise' (*promissio*) is the center of Luther's theology. When he says that God promises, he does not refer to something in the future that we may anticipate. The promise is not only an announcement that will only be fulfilled in the future. It is a valid and powerful promise and pledge that takes immediate and present effect. A good comparison is the text of English banknotes: 'I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of X amount of pounds. London, for the governor and company of the Bank of England, Chief Cashier.' With this understanding of the term 'promise' Luther was moving along the lines of medieval German legal thinking that used the word *promissio* to describe the way a ruler bound and committed himself at his enthronement. This was how God also committed himself in the *promissio* pronounced in his name. He was bound by it and will stick to it and keep it. Faith lays hold of God by accepting and counting on the given promise, and therefore it lays hold of the 'faithfulness of God, of his truth, his

the presentation of Luther's happy or joyous exchange. Dr. Rosin's description of the incarnation as the cause of joyous exchange initially may have produced some uneasiness, making one suspicious of reading Luther according to Hegelian or Eastern Orthodox accents. I still wonder whether it may be helpful to include "the full course" of Christ's birth, suffering, death, and resurrection in the single term "incarnation." Yet Dr. Rosin's intention was to show how for Luther the incarnation of Christ meant not only "to become man" but "to become sin" in man's stead. Third, Dr. Rosin was right when he said that for Luther *Deus revelatus* was not an abstract theological category but "God in the *preached* Christ" who engages man. While found in Luther's 1522 postils, it is also found in his other writings, such as his *The Bondage of the Will, 1525*. In this work, Luther not only described the distinction between the "God preached" and "God hidden" but also presented "God *preached*" as "God revealed, *offered*, and *worshiped*."[69] The preached Christ is Christ offered for man and worshiped by man.

This opens the topic of the liturgy in Luther's confession of Christ. In *Against the Heavenly Prophets, 1525*, Luther left this clear statement:

> We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is *achieved* and *won*. Second, how it is *distributed* and *bestowed* on us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But He has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the Lord's Supper or the sacrament. There He has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the Gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world.[70]

In this passage, Luther was clear on the role of Christ as the redeemer who accomplished forgiveness on the cross, what Dr. Rosin described as the motif of incarnation. This is not the only thing, however, that this passage says about Christ. Luther was equally clear in confessing Christ as the deliverer of the forgiveness he won on the cross. Christ is not just the content of preaching but he himself is the preacher and the one who bestows his body and blood. Furthermore, Luther confessed that such a distribution of the gospel takes place not only in the era of the New

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Word, his righteousness.'" *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 51–52.

[69] WA 18:685, 3–5, 25–27; *LW* 33:139, 140. Emphases added. Latin: *de Deo praedicto, revelato, oblato, culto.*

[70] WA 18:203, 28–35; *LW* 40:213–214. Emphases added.

Testament but also in the Old Testament, as Dr. Rosin noted. In his *Sermon on the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass, 1520,* Luther wrote: "In the mass we give nothing to Christ, but only receive from Him."[71] The rhythm of the Divine Service that Luther had in mind was the Lord's giving and man's receiving. The one who gives in the liturgy is Jesus himself. Throughout his *Lectures on Genesis,* Luther earnestly catechized his students, future pastors, to know for certain this utterly wonderful thing that even Abraham, who rejoiced only in faith and in spirit, did not have.[72]

Elsewhere Luther expounded on Christ's role of distributing each of the means of grace. In *The Confession Concerning Christ's Supper, 1528,* Luther wrote, "[Christ] distributes this death through preaching."[73] That same year, in *Concerning Rebaptism,* Luther wrote, "We can hardly deny that the same Christ is there at baptism and in baptism, indeed, He is the baptizer Himself."[74] The same is true of holy absolution, as discussed in a 1540 table talk:

> This ought especially to be taught, that confession is not made to man but to Christ. Likewise it is not man but Christ who absolves. But few understand this. Today I replied to the Bohemians, who insist that God alone remits sins and are offended by my little book on the keys. Wherefore one should teach that men make confession to Christ, and Christ absolves through the mouth of the minister, for the minister's mouth is the mouth of Christ and the minister's ear is the ear of Christ. It is to the Word and the mandate that one should pay attention, not to the person. Christ sits there, Christ hears, Christ answers, not a man.[75]

It is also true of the Lord's Supper, as Luther made clear in *The Sacrament of The Body and Blood of Christ – Against the Fanatics, 1526:*

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[71] WA 6:364, 23; *LW* 35:93.

[72] For example, "But [Abraham] saw [the day of Christ] only in faith and in the spirit. But we see this glory face to face. We hear God speaking with us and promising forgiveness of sins in Baptism, in the Supper of his Son, and in the true use of the keys. These Abraham did not have, but he saw in the spirit and believed. Therefore our glory is greater; but because we do not take care of it or thank God enough for such great gifts of grace, our studious concern for power and pleasure is greater." WA 42:514, 31–37; *LW* 2:353. See Naomichi Masaki, "Genesis as Catechesis: Sacramental Instruction of Dr. Martin Luther according to his *Lectures on Genesis 1535–1545*" (STM thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1997).

[73] WA 26:295, 34–35; *LW* 37:193.

[74] WA 26:156, 34–36; *LW* 40:242. See also *LC* IV, 10.

[75] *Table Talk,* no. 5176 (1540). WATR 4:695, 1–9; *LW* 54:394.

> There [in the sacrament] my Lord has given me His body and blood in the bread and wine that I may eat and drink. They are to be my very own so that I may be certain that my sins are forgiven, that I am freed from death and hell, that I have eternal life and am God's child and an heir of heaven. Therefore I go to the sacrament to seek such things.[76]

It is crucial for us to recognize that the foundation of Luther's confession of Christ as the preacher, baptizer, absolver, and administer of the Lord's Supper was Jesus' mandate and institution of them. Luther spoke of the means of grace and the Office of the Holy Ministry in *On the Councils and the Church, 1539*: "[Jesus] Himself is there and will do everything Himself."[77] He said this on the basis of Christ's mandate and institution.

According to Luther, pastors do not float around with nothing given them from the Lord. Nor do preaching, baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper float around as abstract functions seeking someone to carry them out. Luther confessed Christ and his continuous ministry on earth not only with the means of grace but also with the office of the holy ministry. In the words of Theodor Kliefoth, a nineteenth century theologian, Christ instituted not only the *Gnadenmittel* but also the *Gnadenmittelamt*, the office that delivers the means of grace.[78] Both belong together for the sake of the delivery of the gifts.[79]

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[76] WA 19:506, 30–507, 15; *LW* 36:350. See also Luther's *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body, etc." Still Stands Firm against the Fanatics, 1527*: "We know, however, that it is the LORD's Supper, is called thus, not the Christians' supper. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and gives it himself, and is himself cook, butler, food, and drink, as we have demonstrated our belief above." WA 23:271, 8–11; *LW* 37:142.

[77] WA 50:647, 28–30; *LW* 41:171.

[78] Theodor Kliefoth, *Acht Bücher von der Kirche* (Schwerin and Rostock: Stiller, 1854), 18–19, 187–212.

[79] In *Concerning the Order of Public Worship, 1523*, Luther saw the connection between *Gottesdienst* and *Predigtamt* in such a way that when one is perverted the other also may be corrupted. When the centrality of the Lord's giving in the Divine Service is impoverished, the place of Jesus in the Office of the Holy Ministry may be substituted by the work of the church. WA 12:35, 2–18; *LW* 53:11. In *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests, 1533*, Luther wrote: "Our doing only administers and gives such baptism, ordained and constituted by Christ's mandate and institution. For this reason He alone is and remains the one true, eternal baptizer who distributes His baptism daily through our doing and ministry until the day of judgment. So our baptizing should properly be called an administering or giving of the baptism of Christ, just as our sermon is a giving out of the word of God. . . . So, too, it is not by our doing, speaking, or work that bread and wine become Christ's body and blood, much less is it by the chrism or consecration; rather it is caused by Christ's ordinance, mandate and institution." WA 38:239, 27–240, 3; *LW* 38:199. Cf., Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the*

Luther's confession of Christ in the liturgy is an important addition to Dr. Rosin's observation of the "right-in-front-of-you" vitality of Christ. In the dynamic flow of the Lord's speaking and giving and man's receiving and living out in the world, Christ is not far but near. He is not just an object of worship and devotion but he is the doer and distributor of the fruit of the cross. For Luther, Jesus' ministry continued in the means of grace and through the office that serves them.[80] Dr. Rosin deserves our thanks for his wonderful presentation. The church rejoices not in Luther's "Christology" but, as presented by Dr. Rosin, in his confession of Christ as our savior.

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Council of Trent, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 2:228–229.

[80] The Augsburg Confession reflects Luther's understanding of Christ. The purpose of Christ's ascension and session was "so that through the Holy Spirit *he* [i.e., Christ] may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life and various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin" (*CA* III, German text; emphasis added). The Augsburg Confession also confesses that the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus, is given in the *externum verbum* through the *Predigtamt* (*CA* V), and that forgiveness which is thus received shows itself in the entire life of a Christian (*CA* VI).