“Loose Ends and Ragged Edges”

A Poem to Philip Melanchthon

The Sheep and the Voice of the Shepherd: The Ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confessional Writings

Works of Mercy and Church Unity: Does Service Unify and Doctrine Divide?
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Much has changed since the last issue of the *Concordia Journal*. A group of Lutherans met in convention in Houston, Texas and restructured The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, while at the same time electing Rev. Matthew Harrison as the new president of our church body. Shortly thereafter, another group of Lutherans met in convocation in Columbus, Ohio, to create a new church body entirely, the North American Lutheran Church, breaking off from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. American Lutheranism seems to be shifting sand. Perhaps the same goes for American Christianity.

Nevertheless, during all this time, groups of Lutherans throughout America of all shapes and sizes continued to meet around Word and water, and bread and wine, to sing psalms, hymns, and sacred songs. So, some things didn’t change, even if some of the instruments did.

A little over a year ago, some members of this faculty asked Robert Kolb to write an article on ecclesiology in the Lutheran confessions. In many respects, they were anticipating exactly this situation. But, all in all, what they were hoping for was to remind the church that no matter what changes in structure and governance might be made, the ecclesiological challenge would still be there. Dr. Kolb wrote the article and it appears here. Not only was he up to the challenge, but, in only the way that he can, he subtly, but nonetheless radically (as in, “to the roots”), reorients the whole discussion about what it means to be church in the Lutheran tradition. But would you really expect anything less from Robert Kolb?

Likewise, Dale Meyer provides in his lead editorial an honest breath of fresh air to the more contemporary issues of our life together.

And as coincidence would have it, at around the same time the faculty was approaching Professor Kolb, Al Collver submitted an article that provides historical background to the principle of *cooperatio in externis*. Given changing contexts, he asks new questions that seek new interpretations of the principle in practice. When he submitted the article to us, Dr. Collver was working in LCMS World Relief and Human Care. Now he serves in President Harrison’s administration as director of church relations, which only makes his analysis more timely.

We also wrap up Philip Melanchthon’s anniversary year with a final tribute, this one thanks to the good work of Korey Maas and C. J. Armstrong of Concordia University—Irvine. In the midst of change, history, of course, takes the long view.

Finally, as you plan for fall, winter, and spring Bible studies and small groups, check out *ConcordiaTheology.org*. We are putting the finishing touches on a free downloadable study guide to go along with the book, *The American Mind Meets the Mind of Christ*. We would be remiss to attempt to understand the changes within our church bodies if we didn’t seek to understand the changes within our culture, which is exactly what *The American Mind* seeks to do. It is still *fides quarens intellectum*, after all.

Travis J. Scholl
Managing Editor of Theological Publications
For some time now I’ve found The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod a sad place. Many faithful pastors and people see church attendance declining. Many congregations are struggling to keep their doors open, but we regularly hear of church doors closing forever. Many rural congregations are dying, and few urban congregations are thriving. The strong witness of our Lutheran grade schools and high schools grows weaker by the year. Pre-seminary enrollments in the Concordia University System are drastically down, and declining residential enrollments at our seminaries are an ominous trend. Try as we do, and people are trying hard to get things going, we are up against cultural changes the likes of which we haven’t seen in our lifetimes. On top of that, we are prone to kill our wounded. Unofficial print and blogs within our fellowship are often ill-informed and sometimes slanderous. The “Progress Report of the Task Force on Synodical Harmony,” distributed in the workbook leading up to last summer’s synodical convention in Houston, identified seven aspects of LCMS that contribute to our sadness: “Inability to deal with diversity, a lack of civility, a politicized culture—primarily a problem of the clergy—poor communication across ‘party lines,’ a lack of accountability, and distrust.” I have a grade school classmate, one of the smartest in our class, who told me that she had had enough and left the LCMS. And then there are the uncertainties coming from last summer’s Houston convention, the uncertainties of massive structural changes and a new administration.

Now you ask, “Dale, why so down?” Answer: The editors of the Concordia Journal asked me to write a brief editorial about the future in the light of that convention. Truth is, there are countless good things—God things—going on in the LCMS. Despite my litany of reasons, and they are real, of why there is a palpable sadness throughout our church, I am actually very positive about the future, if …

We all try to peer into the future; that’s human nature and can be good stewardship, but the best guidance for the uncertain future comes from the past. “This is what the Lord says, ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls’” (Jer 6:16). Robert Kolb’s article, “The Sheep and the Voice of the Shepherd: The Ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confessions,” teaches how the Reformers “did church.” “Ecclesiology,” he writes “was a critical issue for Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg.” Yet they wrote no long tomes on it—did not prepare a comprehensive restructuring document—for at least two reasons. First, it was because they addressed individual ecclesiological issues in the specific context of their own time and place. Second, talking about the marks of the church, Kolb writes, “The papal party believed that the structure of papal governance defined the church, and that definition had the grace of simplicity. For the Wittenberg theologians the facts of the matter of the church’s apprehendibility had more loose ends and ragged edges.” Amidst all the loose ends and ragged edges, they centered “their definition on the creative power of God’s Word.”
Of course, all the partisans and non-partisans in our church affirm “the creative power of God’s Word.” It reminds me of the chairman calling the voters’ assembly to order. After the devotion he said, “Now let’s get to business.” That’s why Concordia Seminary’s Theological Symposium was so timely: “Scripture in the Church: Formative or Formality?” The faculty of Concordia Seminary is intent on engaging today’s issues theologically. The goal of the Concordia Journal, ConcordiaTheology.org, iTunesU, and our on-site conference presentations and continuing education workshops is to bring God’s Word to illuminate specific issues in today’s ecclesial, national, and world contexts. And when an occasional criticism comes to me that we’ve had a speaker on campus or a writer for our theological resources who doesn’t share our church’s complete confession, my response is that the LCMS needs a place where differing voices and controversial issues can be engaged even as we remain under the authority of God’s Word and in obedience to our confessional subscription. Partisans cannot impose unity nor can those who seek unity find it through indifference to doctrine. “The creative power of God’s Word” is the only way. That’s the Wittenberg way.

But then again, I remember Martin Scharlemann saying, “God has given us the terrible ability to say, ‘No.’ to him.” I am very positive about the future of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod if … if we humble ourselves and seek the whole counsel of God. It’s not just “wine, women, and song” that should occupy our biblical study and discussions. In the pastor’s study, in the homes of all the baptized, in small group Bible studies, and in our life’s centerpiece, the divine service, studying, hearing, and obeying the whole counsel of God should be our occupation. Ad fontes! To that end, Concordia Seminary will work in the new synodical structure and with the new administration to provide the pastors, deaconesses, and theological resources that the church needs in this new day.

Again, Kolb: “Luther and Melanchthon were not seeking a pure church but rather were seeking to purify the church in so far as possible with their call to return to biblical teaching and especially the gospel of the free forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. They both recognized, as Luther observed in a sermon two weeks before his death (among several places), ‘where God builds a church, the devil erects a chapel next to it,’ or perhaps more accurately reflecting the Wittenberg viewpoint, within it.”

O Spirit, who didst once restore
Thy Church that it might be again
The bringer of good news to men,
Breathe on Thy cloven Church once more,
That in these grace and latter days
There may be those whose life is praise,
Each life a high doxology
To Father, Son, and unto Thee. (Lutheran Service Book, 834)

Dale A. Meyer
President
Philip Melanchthon’s irenic and ecumenical temperament has occasioned suspicion and criticism from Lutheran observers of the sixteenth century for some time. Already in his own day a reputation for compromise occasionally invited the suspicion of his fellow Lutherans. The revisions introduced to later editions of his Augsburg Confession and Loci Communes, his qualified endorsement of the Schmalkaldic Articles, and his stance during the Interim controversy were sometimes characterized by contemporaries as dubious compromises in vain hopes of peace; and even today one encounters such judgments being made with little sensitivity to the historical situations of sixteenth-century Lutheran life. In fact, Melanchthon also won praise from his contemporaries for his courage in the face of Roman Catholic threats. Nikolaus Selnecker, his student and a later Formula of Concord author, depicted him, for example, as standing at Augsburg among a den of lions, bears, and wolves. The origins of his reputation as one lacking an appropriately stiff spine and sharp tongue originate, indeed, with his critics in the 1550s and 1560s, but also with his friends attempts to defend him by depicting him as a mild-mannered victim of the savage attacks of former friends, especially students. However, Melanchthon had always known when to hold and when to fold, pursuing the confession of justification by grace through faith in Christ’s atoning work, but ready to permit variety in what he saw as only practices of the church. Especially in the face of perceived betrayal, though, he reacted sharply at many points in his life. One example arises from the sudden breakdown of Lutheran negotiations with England in 1540; the reformer’s less than irenic reaction did not go unnoticed by contemporaries. England’s reformation has often been portrayed as a great might-have-been in the history of Lutheranism. Especially during the decade of the 1530s—from Henry VIII’s solicitation of Wittenberg’s approval of the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, to his later inquiries about joining the Schmalkaldic League—a Lutheran England often seemed a real possibility. No two men more earnestly hoped for such a development than the English Augustinian, polemicist, and sometime royal chaplain Robert Barnes and Melanchthon himself, whose humanist credentials and conciliatory disposition made him the only Lutheran for whom Henry ever expressed genuine admiration. Despite their hopes, and Melanchthon’s especially buoyant belief that these were shared by the English King, neither a Lutheran England nor even a significant Anglo-Lutheran alliance emerged. Negotiations toward these ends—involving both Melanchthon and Barnes—limped along through the second half of the decade; but throughout, Melanchthon’s less optimistic countrymen judged Henry disingenuous, while the King, with equal consistency, held them to be intransigent. Such sentiments, however, were expressed most loudly only in the aftermath of dramatic events commencing in the summer of 1539. The English promulgation of the Act of Six Articles, deemed by the Germans a reactionary confirmation of papal
doctrine, finally confirmed for them that Henry had acted all along as a “tempter” with a “hypocritical pretense,”9 that the King was no different than Herod or Antiochus.10 The ever-hopeful Melanchthon, however, could still qualify his criticism even while writing against the Act. The legislation, with its capital penalty for certain evangelical doctrines and practices, was certainly “pernicious and odious,” yet its contents he attributed to Henry’s “impious and wicked” advisors, suggesting that the King himself was guilty only of being manipulated.11

All hopes of maintaining such a sanguine outlook, however, were dashed the following summer when the effects of the Act became evident. In London alone, hundreds were suddenly arrested on suspicion of heresy. Among them was Robert Barnes, as well as his most powerful patron and protector, Henry’s own chief minister Thomas Cromwell. Two weeks after Cromwell’s arrest on charges of collusion with the German Lutherans, the King also expelled from his court Anne of Cleves, pawn of a last-ditch effort to establish an Anglo-Lutheran alliance via marriage. The marriage with Anne was officially annulled on 9 July, Cromwell was beheaded on the 28th, and two days later Barnes was burned at the stake.

It was especially the execution of Barnes, who had not only been England’s most outspoken and influential defender of Lutheran theology, but who had for many years been an intimate friend of the Wittenberg theologians, that finally brought Melanchthon around to the opinion of his colleagues. The events of July left him feeling betrayed by the King to whom he had so glowingly dedicated his 1535 Loci. Henry, he concluded, contrary to his earlier hopes, was no innocent pawn of evil advisors; he was an ungodly tyrant. “No more pleasing victim can be sacrificed to God than a tyrant,” wrote the exasperated irenicist on 24 August; “Would that God might put this mind into some brave man.”12

That such an otherwise conciliatory figure would turn so dramatically on the King in whom he had long placed such high hopes—being so bold even as to invite regicide—could hardly pass without notice. One contemporary who not only noted this rarely seen side of Melanchthon, but made a point of praising it in print, was the young poet Johann Sastrow (1515–1545). Eldest brother of the celebrated memoirist Bartholomew Sastrow,13 Johann received bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Wittenberg (ranked first among thirteen students granted the latter in 1540), and in 1544 was named Poet Laureate by Emperor Charles V. Having been at Wittenberg during the years in which Barnes was frequently in the city, he, like Melanchthon, was shocked and saddened to receive the news of his execution. In 1542 he published in Lübeck A Dirge for the Martyr of Christ, the Englishman Dr. Robert Barnes, which excoriated Henry VIII for his role in the death of Barnes.14 Appended to these memorial verses was the following poem to Melanchthon, applauding the reformer’s similarly vigorous denunciations of the King. This rare work is translated here for the first time by C. J. Armstrong.

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AD PHILIPPUM MELANTHONEM

Quem cum Stigelio meo Philippe,
Ornasti eximiis tuis libellis,
Hunc cum StigelioPhilippe Regem
Debebas ita Publicis libellis
Nobis pingere, sicut emeretur
Natura, acta, Tyrannis, Ate, Erinnys,
Pestis maxima gentium suarum,
Catarma, et scelerum execranda Lerna.
Qua lege evehis Angliae Monarcham,
Hac impurum ego perditum Neronem.
Aut si quis magis impius Nerone,
Nunc vos conspiceo queri, dolere,
Mirari, et Stygiam vocare Pestem,
Quantum in rebus inane, quae fefellit
Spes atque irrita vestra vota fucus.
Quantum fraudis habet malique fucus.
Verum vindice qui vides caducas
Res nostras oculo, pias querelas,
Pias accipias preces tuorum,
Et mitis reprimas malos Tyrannos.

FINIS

A Note on the Text:

The meter of this twenty-line poem is hendecasyllabic, the Phalaecian line used in Greek lyric poetry (e.g., Sappho et al.), made famous in the Latin poetry of the first century BC by Catullus, and regularly employed in the middle ages and the renaissance in Italian sonnets and classical Italian poetry (e.g., of Dante and Petrach). The classical hendecasyllabic accommodated a wide variety of poetic subjects from light love elegy to stinging invective. This poem is at once an encomium of Philip, a denunciation of Henry, and a prayer for the preservation of the faithful, although the balance of topics weighs most heavily in the middle section censuring the King. For all of its classical allusions both in the text and the margin, the poem is nevertheless straightforward and written in a simple style. As one might expect from one of Melanchthon’s former students, especially in verse written for Melanchthon himself, the young author is anxious to demonstrate his humanist credentials by means of facility with classical references, metaphors, and allusions. A certain obsequiousness may further be evident not only in Sastrow’s mention of Melanchthon’s “most excellent” books and his flattering sympathy with the reformer’s righteous indignation, but also in his praise of Stigelius (Johann Stigel). Though the same age as Sastrow himself, Stigel had already in the previous year been named Imperial Poet Laureate. If part of Sastrow’s motivation for writing was to curry favor with potentially career-boosting humanists within the Empire, then it appears that he had some success; a similarly flattering poem in praise of Emperor Charles V earned him the Laureate title two years later.
TO PHILIP MELANCHTHON

The one that you depicted with my Stigel,24
Philip, in your books most excellent.25
This King, the one you needed to depict,
Philip, in your public tracts for us,
You painted him just as his works deserve:
His nature,26 deeds, his Tyranny and Curse,
His Furies, his own people’s great Disease,
The Scum, the sinners’ Lerna pestilent.

The principle by which you would remove
The king of England, so accordingly
Would I the foul desecrated Nero27 –
Or if any be deemed more impious than he,
I hear witness that you complain, and grieve,
And slack-jawed, name him Pest from River Styx,
For as much as he in indolence28
Has so neglected matters, just so much
Has he, the drone, deceived your prayers, vain,
and all your hopes.29 So much deceit he owns,
So much the stain he owns of the Evil One.

But You, who see us thus, and doomed to fall,
Who see our pious plaints by means of Your
Retaliating eye, may You receive
The pious prayers of Your very own,
And in Your mercy, evil Tyrants check.30
THE END

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Endnotes
1 The authors would especially like to acknowledge the generous advice and assistance offered by Professor Robert Kolb (Concordia Seminary), which much improved an earlier draft of this short piece.

On these negotiations, see Dingel, “Melanchthon und Westeuropa,” 118–22.

For the relationship of Henry and the Lutherans see Nedak Tjernagel, Henry VIII and the Lutherans: A Study in Anglo-Lutheran Relations from 1521 to 1547 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), and the more recent work by Rory McEntegart, Henry VIII, the League of Schmalkalden and the English Reformation (Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society, 2002).

6 LW 50:204–6.

7 LW 50:192–204.

8 CR 3:1868. Citations from the Corpus Reformatorum are referenced by volume and document number.

9 CR 3:1995. The first half of Melanchthon’s remark quotes from Hercules Fures 922–4, a tragedy written by the first-century Latin playwright Seneca the Younger.

10 CR 3:1868. Citations from the Corpus Reformatorum are referenced by volume and document number.

11 CR 3:1995. The first half of Melanchthon’s remark quotes from Hercules Fures 922–4, a tragedy written by the first-century Latin playwright Seneca the Younger.

12 CR 3:1995. The first half of Melanchthon’s remark quotes from Hercules Fures 922–4, a tragedy written by the first-century Latin playwright Seneca the Younger.

13 Bartholomew Sastrow, Social Germany in Luther’s Time: Being the Memoirs of Bartholomew Sastrow, trans. Albert D. Vandam (London: A. Constable, 1902), in which are found the brief details of Johann’s biography.

14 Johannes Sastrow, Epicedion Martyris Christi, D. Roberti Barni Angli (Lübeck, 1542).

15 Ate transliterates the Greek Ἄτη, daughter of Zeus, a personification of ruinous destruction.

16 Erinnys transliterates the Greek Ἐρινύς, the Furies of classical myth.

17 Catarna is a Latin transliteration of the Greek κάταθραμα, meaning “refuse.” It is a word in common use in Protestant circles at the time, particularly favored by Melanchthon, and perhaps derived from the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 4:13, “δυσφημούμενοι παρακαλούμεν· ὡς περικαθάρματα τοῦ κόσμου ἐγενήθημεν, πάντων περίψημα ἐξ οὗ διότι” (“When slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things” [ESV]). We are grateful to Professor Dana Sutton (University of California, Irvine) and Professor Johann Ramminger (Thesauri Linguae Latinae) for their help with this neo-Latinism.

18 Lema is an Argive region of Greece, in which was the swamp that housed the many-headed Hydra defeated by Hercules in his second labor.

19 Consocio is read for conspicio.

20 Strygian is the adjectival form of Styx, the river of the underworld in classical myth, and in some later Christian literature (e.g., Dante), located in hell.

21 Fucus is a drone-bee, a classical topos of laziness (see, e.g., Lucretius, De rerum natura 2.683, Virgil, Georgics 4.244). The same word can also denote a reddish-purple dye or a mixture of such that is used to stop up a hive. Sastrow puns in the ultimate word of this and the next line.

22 The Greek, a marginal gloss, reads, “God has an avenging eye.” This is a quotation from a Homeric parody, the Batrachomachía (Batrachomachia, or Batrachomyomachia, i.e., The Battle between the Frogs and Mice), modeled on the Aesopic fable of the frog and the mouse. This pseudo-Homeric poem was especially popular as a school text, so much so that it may well have constituted the first printed Greek book. See H. Wölke, Untersuchungen zur Batrachomyomachie (Meisenheim a.G.: Hain, 1978), 44.

23 This clause translates the substance of the Greek quotation in the marginal gloss.

24 Johann Stigel (1515–1562) matriculated in 1531 at Wittenberg, where he became a Melanchthon protégé. He was named Imperial Poet Laureate in 1541 and, after taking his master’s degree the following year, assumed, upon Melanchthon’s recommendation, a Latin professorship at Wittenberg in 1544. A prolific and highly regarded neo-Latin poet, he occasionally collaborated in publications with Melanchthon. Multiple collections of his verse were published posthumously.

25 Melanchthon’s late 1539 De officio principium, quod mandatum Dei praecipiat eis tollere abusus Ecclesiasticos, though not naming Henry VIII explicitly, was undoubtedly written— and read—with a view toward the King. For the text see Melanchthon’s Werke, Bd. 1, ed. Robert Stupperich (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1951), 387–410. His 1 November 1539 letter to Henry (CR 3:1868), in which Melanchthon attacked the Six Articles suggesting they implicated Henry in “bloody tyranny,” also circulated widely in manuscript form and was referred to in Germany as his expositio. In England, already in the month after its composition, it would provoke ten days of minor crisis in the King’s Council when manuscript translations traced back to the London printer Richard Grafton were found circulating in Norfolk. See Alec Bytie, The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114. It was finally printed for English consumption in the year of Henry’s death as The epistle of the famous and great Clerke Philip Melancthon made unto our late Sovranye Lorde Kyng Henry the eight, for the revokynge and abolishing of the six articles (Antwerp, 1547).

26 That Henry’s nature was “unstable” and “hypocritical” was a common trope among the German Lutherners. See, e.g., LW 50:192–206 and LW 54:361–2.

27 Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors, an infamous example of tyranny. By the time this poem was composed, “English Nero” had become a common description of Henry. See, e.g., Melanchthon’s use of the phrase in a 17 August 1540 letter to the above-mentioned Johann Stigel (CR 3:1990).

28 The tyrant’s indolence, his failure to perform his right duties, is reflected again in the subsequent reference to the drone. The refusal to perform the duties proper to one’s princely office is precisely the subject of Melanchthon’s De officio principium, noted above.

29 Melanchthon’s hopes for an Anglo-Lutheran rapprochement were consistently expressed from the mid-1530s until the passage of the Six Articles (see, e.g., CR 3:1788 and 1792), and even, though somewhat tempered, until he finally received news of the 1540 executions.

30 The concluding prayer suggests, more piously and ambiguously, Melanchthon’s hope (CR 3:1995) that someone might commit regicide.
... at all times there must be and remain one holy Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that the gospel be preached with one accord according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. (Augsburg Confession, Article VII)\(^1\)

The Nature of the Lutheran Confessions and the Brevity of their Teaching on the Church

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession does not provide a very detailed definition of the church. That corresponds to the nature of this confession and of the other statements of faith found in the Book of Concord. Each document confessed Wittenberg theology in a specific situation, focusing on the precise need of its audience for clarification of the issues at hand at the time of its composition. Luther’s catechisms confessed the faith before the children of Germany and their parents and pastors, whom God had called to instruct them in that faith. Melanchthon drafted the Augsburg Confession so that the princely courts and municipal councils which were introducing Wittenberg reform could explain to Emperor Charles V what they were doing to improve ecclesiastical life and why. Luther’s closest colleague composed his Apology of the Confession to defend its confession of the faith against the Roman Confutation and to appeal to the emperor for justice. Luther wrote his Smalcald Articles as an agenda for the Lutherans to use at the papal council and, in all likelihood, also to meet his elector’s request for another doctrinal last will and testament, a supplement to the earlier confession of faith which concluded his Concerning Christ’s Supper, Confession (1528). Melanchthon was charged with the composition of the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope to supplement the Augsburg Confession as the actual agenda that Lutheran governments were to take to the papal council when they decided to use their “mission statement” of 1530, the Augsburg Confession, for that purpose. The Formula of Concord arose as a settlement of disputes within the Wittenberg circle.

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Robert Kolb is mission professor emeritus of systematic theology and former director of the Institute for Mission Studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He has published widely in Reformation studies. His most recent volume, Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith, was published in 2009 by Oxford University Press.
over controverted points in the proper interpretation of Luther’s legacy and the biblical message after the reformer’s death. None of these documents purported to be a complete overview of all of biblical teaching. For a while some Lutherans had entertained the possibility of accepting several of Melanchthon’s writings, assembled in the Corpus Doctrinae Philippicu (1560), as a “rule of faith” for the Wittenberg circle (serving the purposes fulfilled by the Book of Concord), and it did include such an overview in Melanchthon’s Loci communes theologici. But this collection slipped into obscurity when, around 1580, a majority of Lutheran churches in Germany found that the Formula of Concord and the Book of Concord would serve that function better.2

Designed first of all to meet particular needs of the church in distinct situations, the Lutheran Confessions served the function of guiding the church so effectively in those situations that they were taken not only as prescriptions for public teaching but also as models for the way in which the Wittenberg reformers thought theological processing of the biblical message should be formulated in other, future situations. Just as Luther and Melanchthon never stopped experimenting with their formulations of the unchanging teaching of Scripture for changing circumstances and with changing expressions and language, so they expected that their students would seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and carry out their callings as ministers of God’s Word by finding the proper answer to current problems out of Scripture’s pages, in the language appropriate for the challenges of new times as they arose. Therefore, their doctrine of the church is lean and clean in the Book of Concord. Nonetheless, it offers a sufficient basis for applying what the Wittenberg reformers believed are the essentials of God’s will for the assembly he gathers through his Word in every age. It enables believers to understand who they are and what he is doing with and through them as his church throughout history.

Lutherans look to their confessions of faith for the bedrock of their theology, its foundation for meeting the questions and needs of their day—but not for a finished and final edifice. Therefore, the Book of Concord contains relatively few prescriptions for the details of living out the life of the church, although its documents do put in place the pilings on which such details must be constructed for the individual circumstances in which the Holy Spirit calls his people to work. Lutherans believe that God is God, Lord of history, and so they presume that Scripture sets the foundation upon which succeeding generations will work out applications through Spirit-guided wisdom. The Confessions, like the rule of faith in every form throughout the church’s history, are necessary tools for addressing this biblical message to specific concerns in specific historical situations.

Lutheran ecclesiology always proceeds from Luther’s and Melanchthon’s understanding of God’s Word and what it does as his instrument for creating his universe and re-creating his human creatures who have fallen into sin.3 “The only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament alone,” Jakob Andreae wrote in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord. He was summarizing the Solid Declaration, which had stated, “We confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of
Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated.”

Modern attempts to find authority in the summary of biblical teaching found in the Apostles Creed, as N. F. S. Grundtvig did in nineteenth-century Denmark, or some other rule of faith, have been made in vain. Such attempts usually stem from the theologian’s failure to master the problems which the biblical texts sometimes seem to pose. These attempts reveal our impatience with the exegetical questions over which our powers seem inadequate. They stem from a failure to realize that God retains mastery of Scripture, and that a Lutheran view of its nature is that this bearer of the “weak and foolish” Word from God on the cross (1 Cor 1 and 2) will always seem to have ragged edges and loose ends that defy even the most sanctified of human reasoning.

Sixteenth-century Lutherans also claimed to conform their teaching to the ancient analogia fidei, but their rule of faith was always the analogia fidei Wittebergensis, the Reformational insights that revolutionized Western Christian theology’s ways of posing questions to the Scripture. Every Christian group caught up in the march of God’s sweep through history has faced the same problem. The effort to assert mastery through our own reading of tradition, through appeal to the Fathers, or through church officials or other forms of polity never finds success.

To be sure, no sixteenth-century Christians advocated individual interpretation of Scripture as some personal right. Understanding the Bible requires a village and more. All Lutherans have agreed on the Holy Spirit’s use of the community which God creates by renewing his conversation with us in the continuing interpretation and application of Scripture. Since the colloquy between Wittenberg theological professors and Roman Catholic theologians at Regensburg in 1601, Lutherans have recognized the role of the community in the study of Scripture. But even in this activity the community is simul justus et peccator and stands always under the call to repentance in teaching and in practice. The community cannot be substituted as an ultimate source of authority, but it stands as the disciplinary means by which individual interpreters of Scripture are called back to the confession of the church tested by scriptural scrutiny over the ages. The community of believers aids individual hearers’ and readers’ of the text in living the repentant life. But it is clear from Luther’s and Melanchthon’s writings on ecclesiology that the biblical Word governs the entire life of the community, the family, which is called the church. Communities have a difficult time repenting, but a spirit of repentance is a necessary accompaniment to the confidence which the Holy Spirit creates as we deliver his message. The practical implications of this position are, of course, harder to codify than to proclaim. The Holy Spirit remains the Lord of the church, and his operations escape every attempt at human domestication.

‘Wittenberg Ecclesiology’ Is Not a Contradiction in Terms

Though Melanchthon was restrained in elaborating his doctrine of the church in the Augsburg Confession, its essentials are there. It is sometimes said that Luther in particular, but also his colleagues in Wittenberg reform, did not concentrate much attention on the doctrine of the church, but that is not true. They formulated a different concept of the body of Christ than had been prevalent in the Middle Ages. The
domination of the ecclesiastical scene by the papacy, and what the reformers viewed as the pressing need for radical change in congregational life at the local level, dictated the necessity of paying attention to details of both the doctrine of the church and the details of its teaching, ritual, and polity. Vitor Westhelle is correct in calling this refocusing of the definition of the church both a “revolution” and a “metanoia”: “To paraphrase [Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Christ the Center*], the center of Christ existing as church-community, the identity of the church, cannot be represented either by the product of its labor or by the modes of interaction of its members. This a revolutionary move (analogous to Copernicus’s) that changes the gravitational basis for the existence of the church: the margins become the center, the periphery the axis of the church’s own being…. The term (revolution) in this epistemological sense, suggesting a radical change in the orientation of one’s thinking … in biblical terms is called a metanoia, a conversion.”

The Lutheran confessions all reiterate this insistence that the church is a product of God’s Word, which gathers his people together around its presentation in oral, written, and sacramental forms. Melanchthon took it for granted that the Word actively carried out God’s will as the instrument of the Holy Spirit: “[T]he church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit.” The people of God “share in common the association of the same gospel or doctrine and the same Holy Spirit, who renews, sanctifies, and governs their hearts.” Luther affirmed this point when he taught children the basic fact about the church: it is called and gathered by the Holy Spirit.

Ecclesiology was a critical issue for Luther and his colleagues in Wittenberg. They may not have developed extensive treatments—Luther’s single, longer contribution devoted specifically to the topic was his *On the Councils and the Church* of 1539, his last significant attempt at preparing for the specific agendas of the papally-called council. This work pursues the history of the councils through Chalcedon and finds that their chief purpose was to proclaim salvation in Christ. Part one treated conciliar theory in the earliest years of the church; part two traced the history of subsequent councils and how they developed their expressions of doctrine from Nicea to Chalcedon, and part three presented the marks of the church and their significance. Apart from this work and a few others focused in part on the doctrine of the church, he did address the essentials of the biblical teaching on the church in exegetical and practical works, and, as every Lutheran student of theology knows, his doctrine of the church is known to any seven-year old child, sheep listening to shepherd, as the reformer wrote in the Smalcald Articles.

A variety of spirits have inspired Lutheran theologians over more than four centuries to fill in gaps in the definition Melanchthon’s text in the Augsburg Confession gives us, as they have perceived this text on the basis of their own situations and their own imaginative application of the text to those situations. Melanchthon’s spare—though for his purposes extremely well-targeted and effectively formulated—definition of the church served the cause for which he drafted the confession for the confessors who put their lives on the line as they offered its explanation of their reforms to Emperor Charles V. The brevity of this definition illustrates the genius of the Augsburg Confession and part of the reasons for its composition. Those who want to marshal
its authority for the urgencies of another time and who do not understand its historical context may find its definition of the church inadequate, and some may then force its words into anachronistic interpretations. In fact, this article, like the others, accurately reflects both the situation of those who initially confessed it in public and of the convictions of Wittenberg colleagues of its drafter, Melanchthon.

Its confessors, Elector Johann of Saxony, his son Johann Friedrich, five of their princely colleagues, and two municipal governments, wished to present the Confession as their compliance with the demand of Emperor Charles V for an explanation of their reasons for introducing Wittenberg-style reforms in the churches of their lands. The emperor wished to eradicate the Lutheran heresy; the defenders of Luther’s reform were maneuvering to save their faith and their political situation. Melanchthon and the other leaders of Wittenberg reform were using the Confession as one more opportunity to spread their own ideas regarding the biblical message and its implication for the church. Melanchthon had chosen the title “confession” in an innovative, indeed revolutionary, revision of how medieval Christendom had gone about defining the church and its public teaching and practice. His explanation of Wittenberg reform was not titled “explanation,” nor did it retain his initial choice for a title, *Apologia*, or defense. Instead, it claimed to be a “confession,” a public expression of belief in the teaching of Scripture in the manner of the ancient creeds, which it presumed were being reproduced and confessed anew in the Confession’s words.15

Article VII exhibits Melanchthon’s skill at combining his and Luther’s theological concerns with language designed to make a decisive case to the emperor that Luther’s reform program did not carry the Wittenberg theologians beyond the pale of the church, as their Roman Catholic foes were charging. In article VII Melanchthon used the language of Roman law from code of the Emperor Theodosius II, who in the early fifth century had defined Christianity with words quite similar to Melanchthon’s. It was to be “the religion which the divine Peter transmitted to the Romans” and based its faith upon “apostolic discipline and the doctrine of the gospel.”16 The paraphrase maintained that the churches in the lands and towns of the Augsburg Confessors understood the church to be the assembly of believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel and had the ring of legality to it. At one level the Augsburg Confession was only insisting that Wittenberg reform conformed to the legal definition of the church in the law code Charles V was pledged to uphold. However, his wording embraced much more in fact.

**The Church is God’s Mouth House**

Melanchthon’s formulation reflected a radical change in Western Christendom’s understanding of the reality of God’s way of working in his world and of his design for the relationship between humanity and himself. The Wittenberg reformers, under Luther’s leadership, had introduced this change in the decade preceding the Augsburg diet of 1530. Medieval Christianity had largely been, on the popular level, a religion of ritual, of properly attaining a hearing with God, and perhaps his favor, through the proper performance of works, especially sacred or religious works, aimed at winning his approval. On the official level, it had become a religion in which a question of polity

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defined the church, not as the people of God but rather as the structure of following Christ in submission to his vicar, the bishop of Rome.

Luther and Melanchthon believed that the church was instead a creation of God’s Word, his identifying himself and his human creatures through the message of the prophets and apostles, as given in Holy Scripture. There, they believed, God is present and powerful in the active proclamation of the biblical message and its application to the lives of God’s people. Luther’s designation of the church as “a house of the mouth” rather than “a house of the pen” arises in part from his writing in a largely illiterate and thus inescapably oral culture, but it also reflects his belief that the Holy Spirit uses Scripture to produce the living, active, re-creative Word of the gospel. There, in the meeting of Speaker and hearer, this Word acts to condemn and recreate sinners, to kill and make alive. It is that Word that defines and identifies the church as the people of God, whom the Holy Spirit gathers by and around the preaching of God’s Word and the sacraments, as a specific form of that Word, which also takes oral and written forms. A happy coincidence of language—if not necessarily of meaning—enabled Melanchthon to present in very succinct form this Wittenberg theology of God’s Word in wording which at the same time made the political point that the Lutherans met the official legal definition of members of Christ’s church. That is what the emperor needed to know.

The Confession’s treatment of the ceremonies or rites of the church and related practices in Article XV reaffirmed the Wittenberg move from a ritual-based piety to a way of life based on listening to and responding to God’s Word. The intention and nature of the Confession reflect the Wittenberg conviction, shared with all Christians, that doctrine expresses itself in ritual, in liturgy, and in other customs and practices. The critical difference with medieval perceptions lay in Luther’s and Melanchthon’s conviction that ritual observance does not contribute to salvation and that doctrine governs and determines ritual. The law of what is taught ought to produce and regulate what is prayed, they believed. Lex credendi, lex orandi—even if the normal reverse formulation of this slogan often describes the reality of the church’s stumbling through history.

Articles XXII through XXVIII, discussing practices from the distribution of the Lord’s blood in the Lord’s Supper, through clerical marriage and the mass, to monastic vows and the power and calling of bishops, were based on Articles XV’s expression of the principle. There, accentuating the positive, Melanchthon began by urging that all practices “that can be kept without sin and that serve to maintain peace and good order in the church” be retained. At the same time it must be made clear that ritual practices do not contribute to salvation, as the piety of the Middle Ages had firmly held. Any ecclesiastical practice that purports to offer grace and make satisfaction for sin is “good for nothing and contrary to the gospel.” “We must also retain the teaching that human traditions are pointless acts of worship [often identified in Wittenberg writings as the “human commands” of Matthew 15:9] and therefore that neither sin nor righteousness ought to be connected with food, drink, clothing, and similar matters.”

Although he did not explicitly express his passionate rejection of the concept of sacramental benefit ex opere operato at this point in the text, the popular belief that out-
ward performance of rites and external conformity to practices, such as attending the mass, provided grace regardless of the presence or absence of faith in Christ contradicted the Wittenberg understanding that the Christian faith involves conversation between God and his human creatures, initiated by the creator. This conversation stands at the heart of the community which God also created so that he and his human creatures might enjoy fellowship. In Genesis 1 it is clear that God created all things through his Word, as Luther repeatedly insisted, above all, in his Genesis lectures five years later. In Genesis 2:18 he created human community as he brought Eve into existence. The first thing God missed when Adam and Eve hid themselves from him was their community: “Adam, where are you?” God asked (Gn 3:9).

God’s approach to his human creatures begins with his call to them. The church is, in Luther’s words, “the little sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd” (Jn 10:3), as any seven-year old child knows.” This conviction led Melanchthon to confess that “the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel.” He further defined the very topics of preaching which give evidence that the conversation of God with his people is being conducted: “Repentance, fear of God, faith in Christ, the righteousness of faith, consolation of consciences through faith, the exercise of faith, prayer (what it should be like and that everyone may be completely certain that it is efficacious and is heard), the cross, respect for the magistrates and all civil orders, the distinction between the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom) and political affairs, marriage, the education and instruction of children, chastity, and all the works of love.” The conversation which God wants to conduct with his sheep begins with the law that works repentance, continues with the cultivation of faith through the proclamation and consolation of the gospel, and then proceeds to motivate and guide the human creatures restored to the fullness of their humanity into a God-pleasing life which brings his love to his world.

Melanchthon’s summary of the pastoral office, in his description of the calling of the bishop in Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, also focused on his role and function in the church as a minister of God’s Word. Although these documents do not discuss the Wittenberg distinction which lay at the root of Luther’s and Melanchthon’s hermeneutical enterprise, the proper distinction of law and gospel, they do imply that this art of distinguishing God’s bestowal of identity as children of God through trust in Christ—specifically his work which won the forgiveness of sins—from God’s expectations for human performance, the gospel and the law. This distinction lies at the very heart and constitutes the very nature of proper church life. For bishops are not only “to preach the gospel, to forgive sins, to judge public teaching,” but also “to reject public teaching that is contrary to the gospel and to exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose ungodly life is manifest – not with human power but with God’s Word alone.”

The Church is God’s Household and Christ’s Body

God’s Word resounds into human history from the pages of Scripture because the Holy Spirit continues to have it spoken. Thorliev Austad says it precisely: “The church is a product of the Holy Spirit.” The Lutherans firmly believed that speaking
God’s Word, in all its uses in oral, written, and sacramental forms, served as the Holy Spirit’s method of re-creating the human community he had first implemented in Eden.

The calling, speaking shepherd is key to the existence of the church. For Melanchthon and Luther Christ is the only head of the church, an implicit polemic against the papal claims that had dominated the ecclesiological discussions of the Western church since the conciliar period a century earlier. The church is Christ’s “living body,” in which he “bestows those gifts that he promised to the church: above all, the righteousness of the heart,” as well as “forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

In his personal confession of faith composed in 1528 as an appendix to his Concerning Christ’s Supper, Confession, Luther had written that the one, holy, Christian church is “the community or number or assembly of all Christians in all the world, one bride of Christ, and his spiritual body of which he is the only head.”

Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession, on the church, flow naturally out of articles III through VI, which confess that God justifies sinners through faith in the work and the promise of Christ, as the Holy Spirit conveys that promise and work, with all their benefits, through the Word, and it produces the new obedience of faith. The justifying action of the Savior Jesus Christ, his work through the Holy Spirit using God’s Word, and, in a derived sense, the new obedience of the faithful, constitute the church. In the Smalcald Articles Luther focused on one issue as the key to the existence and life of the church: that “Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification … and [all people, as sinners] are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, by his blood.’” “Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away … On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world.” On the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ’s person the two sides that were to meet at the council agreed (SA I). But the battle against medieval theology and piety joined at the central question of the human being’s relationship to God, the work of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit which creates faith in hearts, that is, trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That made the church stand upright or brought it to its knees.

God’s people respond to God’s promise in the gospel by trusting in him, a trust that fills their lives and reorients their entire being toward being in community with the God who made them for that purpose. In the Smalcald Articles Luther drew the contrast between a Word-based faith and the piety of humanly invented vestments and ceremonies, and concluded that “the holiness of the church exists in the Word of God and true faith.” For indeed the human response of trust in the promise of the gospel is necessary for the church to constitute truly the family or people of God. As Melanchthon had explained to the emperor five years earlier, in 1531, the Wittenberg theologians insisted that for the “true unity of the church” there must be people with faith in the heart and righteousness in the heart before God. Implied is the rejection of the opposite: ex opere operato performance of rituals does not constitute a proper relationship with God, nor does it have a place in defining the nature of being a Christian
and of God’s church. This righteousness of the heart is not a “righteousness bound to certain traditions…. For this righteousness of the heart is a matter that makes the heart alive. Human traditions, whether universal or particular, contribute nothing to this giving of life. Nor are they caused by the Holy Spirit, as are chastity, patience, the fear of God, love of one’s neighbor, and works of love,” in Melanchthon’s view the inevitable results of God’s conversation with his people.32

The scholastic theologians with whom Luther was debating and Melanchthon was negotiating in this period could point to the church as they conceived of it. It was visible, in its prescribed rituals, in its polity, and in the glory expressed in everything from the extravagant pomp of the Roman court to the magic moment in the village when the priest brought God’s very body and blood to the altar in the midst of a formula no one present, with the possible exception of the priest, really understood. So it is no wonder that their opponents accused the Wittenberg theologians of imagining that the church existed only in some ethereal place among Plato’s real forms.33

No, Melanchthon confessed, the church truly exists and is apprehensible in the “true believing and righteous people scattered through the entire world.” In addition, it has outward marks, signs that can be apprehended, in its pure teaching and in the delivery of God’s Word through the sacraments.34 Luther made the list more concrete in 1539 when he specifically listed forms of pure teaching as well as elements of the human response: preaching and other oral sharing of the gospel, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, absolution, all conveyed in the office of the public ministry, to which God’s people respond in worship and praise as they live under the cross and do works of love (which do not necessarily distinguish them outwardly from those outside the church but which do indeed belong to the fundamental characteristics of God’s people).35 The Glossa Ordinaria had distinguished the church “in name and in fact” (nomine et re),36 and for Luther and Melanchthon “in fact” was constituted by the proclamation of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments.

Precisely what form this apprehendibility took was a question of some importance to the church of the early sixteenth century. John Wycliffe and Jan Hus had aroused passions a century and more earlier as they redefined the church from its clerical structure to the assembly of God’s people. Wittenberg insistence that the church is the assembly of all God’s people, breaking the priority of clergy over laity and bishops over parish priests, radically challenged fifteenth century positions that had been won at no little effort in fighting back implications of the conciliar theory that had arisen during the Great Schism.37 The papal party believed that the structure of papal governance defined the church, and that definition had the grace of simplicity. For the Wittenberg theologians the facts of the matter concerning the church’s apprehendibility had more loose ends and ragged edges. Nonetheless, by centering their definition on the creative power of God’s Word, they sharpened the definition of Wycliffe and Hus.

To affirm that the church contains sinners and hypocrites met only in part the Roman Catholic criticism that the Lutherans believed that the church could somehow be pure on earth. No Lutheran had ever suggested that, but Johann Eck had striven to associate Wittenberg reform with every imaginable heresy afloat in early sixteenth century Germany, including the charge that the Lutherans taught that only the prede-
tined are in the institutional church. Some Anabaptist reformers indeed had called for a purifying of the church on earth and asserted something closely akin to ancient Donatist and similar views. For that reason Melanchthon insisted in the Augsburg Confession’s eighth article that the Donatist position be condemned, explicitly in regard to the idea that sacraments administered by unworthy priests had no validity. “… In this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even public sinners remain among the righteous …. ” Melanchthon used his and Luther’s distinction of the two kingdoms of God and Satan to explain that in the earthly realm, in which God is Lord over life in family, occupation, society, and church, Satan is always on the attack. He battles God not only in the situations of the home but also in the workplace and the political sphere. The church is also one of those earthly institutions through which God works his will but which Satan is always trying to pervert.

In his defense of the position in the Apology, Melanchthon wrote, “Just as the church has the promise that it will always have the Holy Spirit, so it also has the warning that there will be ungodly teachers and wolves. But the church is strictly speaking that which has the Holy Spirit. Even if wolves and ungodly teachers run rampant in the church, they still are not the kingdom of Christ, strictly speaking …. ” Although the Wittenberg theologians sometimes called the true church “the kingdom of Christ,” it is clear that the visible institutions of his kingdom remain the battleground between Christ’s kingdom of truth and Satan’s kingdom of deception and that Satan never completely loses his beachhead on the soil that belongs to Christ. This view found reaffirmation in the last article of the Formula of Concord, in which the Concordists condemned the Anabaptist teaching that “a congregation in which sinners are still found is not a true Christian congregation.”

The form of the Augsburg Confession did not permit Melanchthon to go into detail, but this conviction expresses more than simply the Wittenberg reformers’ commitment to combat ancient heresy. It also enunciates implicitly their belief that the entire history of the church, like the history of humankind since the fall, has been a battlefield between God’s truth and Satan’s lie. Every moment of the church’s history is an eschatological moment, both because God’s people always stand in his presence, under his providence and protection, receiving the power of his transforming Word, and because God’s people are always engaged in the conflict with the thief and robber, the deceiver and accuser, the liar and murderer (Jn 8:44), who never ceases prowling, seeking to devour God’s children (1 Pt 5:8).

Luther and Melanchthon were not seeking a pure church but rather were seeking to purify the church in so far as possible with their call to return to biblical teaching and especially the gospel of the free forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. They both recognized, as Luther observed in a sermon two weeks before his death (among several places), “where God builds a church, the devil erects a chapel next to it.” Or perhaps more accurately reflecting the Wittenberg viewpoint, within it. They put their confidence in no human agencies, neither bishops nor human traditions, neither regulations of councils nor reform movements, to preserve the proper teaching of gospel and the proper conduct of ecclesiastical life. They placed their confidence in the Holy Spirit, working through his Word, to perform the task. This required that they be content to
live with the church that remained at the same time both sinful in its own imperfect attempts to live as Christ’s people and righteous as regarded by God. They had no expectations of a new stage of church history in which all the mistakes and failures of the past would vanish so that God’s people would live without the need for repentance, individually or collectively.\footnote{The church asserts its presence and existence in concrete forms throughout the world, but that presence can be best apprehended by those who were listening. The concept of an invisible church only slowly became an important element in the sixteenth century Wittenberg thought on the church. It assumed importance largely because the Roman Catholics were condemning the Lutherans for holding that the true church is not apprehendible. To be sure, the doctrine of the “invisible church” is not an illogical development of the Apology’s emphasis on “faith in the heart,” as Melanchthon expressed in paragraph 31 of his defense of Articles VII and VIII. But he always concentrated on the concrete manifestations of that one church in all the world as it heard the Word proclaimed and given also through the sacraments. That “calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying” happens, of course, in the local congregation as it functions as a community in a place. At the same time Melanchthon also placed in the mouths of the princes and municipal representatives for whom he drafted the Confession the designation of “our churches” and their teaching, not for all the individual congregations under their political jurisdiction but for the territorial church which they were aiding in reform as they worked through local superintendents (one Latin translation for episcopus). They were not setting individual congregations loose to pursue their own definitions of public teaching and their own practices. Melanchthon also referred to the Roman church and the Greek church as parallels of a sort to the territorial churches of Saxony, Hesse, or Braunschweig-Lüneburg, or the municipal churches of Nuremberg and Reutlingen.\footnote{In relationship to churches such as that of Rome or Constantinople Melanchthon felt an obligation to ecumenical witness, and not in a spirit of arrogance but in forthright seeking of the truth, and he gave his testimony in Augsburg in the spirit of gentleness and respect of which Peter wrote (1 Pt 3:15–16).}

Luther shared Melanchthon’s convictions and expressed them in his catechisms. The Small Catechism’s explanation of the third article of the Apostles Creed begins with a one line summary of his work On Bound Choice, “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me ….”\footnote{He does that “just as” he gathers “the whole Christian church on earth.” The third article parallels the first for Luther: there God created me, but he did so “together with” (samt) all other creatures. Here, Luther believed, he was only interpreting the Apostles Creed’s confession that the church is “the communion of saints.” So also regarding their new creation the children learned that there is no such thing as an individual believer. Not only are the people of God always in community and conversation with God himself; they are also in conversation and community with others.}

The Large Catechism contains a rather simple expansion of this description of the church as the place where the Holy Spirit is speaking as his Word calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies God’s people as a community. Luther spent some time
explaining that the church is the community where the Holy Spirit’s conversation with his new creation goes on. He summarizes, “I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet it is united in love without sect or schism.” Luther confessed that as an individual he had been made part of that community by the Holy Spirit, who rescued him from Satan’s captivity through the Word. The Word “creates and increases holiness” in the church because it is “causing it daily to grow and become strong in the faith and in its fruits, which the Spirit produces.” The church is the place where the Holy Spirit forgives sin, the basis of Christian living and community life, to combat the ongoing presence of evil in the lives of both individual Christians and the entire church. This forgiveness makes the church holy, and nothing else. God’s people are holy only because God has made them holy through the forgiveness of sins. The Wittenberg theologians were consistently clear on this. Gunther Wenz sees Melanchthon’s treatment of the saints in the twenty-first article of the Augsburg Confession as, among other things, a clarification of this.

Therefore, the church is “epiphanic space,” according to Westhelle, the place where God through his Word reveals himself. God continues to address human beings, now only on the basis of Scripture, in history, and history takes place in places. Luther protested against the common definition of the word “church” as a building, and Westhelle’s observation is certainly not intended to restrict the “place” in which the church as event takes place to buildings. But the Lutheran view requires concrete locations for the sound of the Word to resound in its oral, written, and sacramental forms and for them to do their work and take effect. In the words of Thorleiv Austad, “The true church is to be recognized not simply by its correct teaching, the decisions of its ecumenical councils, its official confessional writings, or indeed, its hierarchical structure. It must be experienced existentially in the shared faith in Jesus Christ, in unity with him, the only head of its ‘body.’” Furthermore, as Friedrich Brunstäd wrote, “The church is the location in which reconciliation takes place, the instrument that proclaims reconciliation; the church is the reality of reconciliation and justification, the reality of Christ in the life of his human creatures, Christ’s kingdom.” How can that be? Brunstäd continued, “Reconciliation of our life is delivered to us in Word and Sacrament, in the means of grace.”

The Formula of Concord and the Church of Word and Worship

Nearly fifty years after the publication of Luther’s catechisms his and Melanchthon’s students were coming to the end of more than two decades of strife over the proper interpretation of their legacy. They brought that strife largely to an end through the Formula of Concord. Since it treated only those issues that had caused disagreement within the Wittenberg circle, and the doctrine of the church had not, the Formula contained no article on ecclesiology in general. However, the strife had been initiated in the public arena by the compromises surrounding the Leipzig Proposal of 1548, a draft of electoral Saxon policy for the church that was intended to stave off an
imperial invasion of Saxony as Emperor Charles V tried to complete his victory over Lutheran forces in the Smalcald War of 1546–1547. The electoral government, with the support of the Wittenberg theological faculty, had developed this policy to save Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran preachers. But its compromises, centered around the imposed reintroduction of “neutral matters” (“indifferent matters” is a literal translation of ἀδιάφορα but “neutral” better conveys its true meaning), seemed in the context of the aftermath of the defeat of the League of Smalcald to deny the gospel itself, according to critics among Melanchthon’s former students and colleagues. They feared that on the popular level the reception of these “neutral matters” would undermine Lutheran proclamation because they returned to medieval practices which in many parts of Saxony had been laid aside with the introduction of the Reformation. These critics were sensitive to the dynamic of communication, recognizing that the Leipzig Proposal would have an impact on the common people through its appearances of concession no matter what was being preached from the pulpits. In finding a solution to this dispute the authors of the Formula of Concord addressed several issues, above all, the necessity of confessing the faith publically, clearly, effectively, and boldly when that confession is under attack. That affirmation carried with it an affirmation of the importance of ritual in the life of the church and its subservience to doctrine, as well as a defense of the freedom of “churches” (without doubt territorial churches are meant in this case) to arrange ceremonies, liturgy, and other pious practices in Christian freedom. In the Augsburg Confession Melanchthon had taught much of the position he held in 1548: its fifteenth article expresses his conviction and that of his colleagues that the use of ritual elements of church life should be disposed of freely for the edification of the people and the defense of weak consciences, precisely what he had shown himself prepared to do as he paraphrased the Augsburg Confession for diplomatic efforts by electoral Saxony and its Lutheran allies in the 1530s to induce Kings Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England to accept and promulgate the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone.

Article X of the Formula of Concord places the public confession clearly at the center of the church’s life, and believers are to risk all to make that confession clear. Liturgy and other practices of the church may indeed be changed in freedom “as may be most useful and edifying for the community of God” so long as they do not undercut pure teaching. Thus, the Formula reaffirmed two basic principles enunciated in the earlier Lutheran confessions, the vital centrality of the Word of God and its public proclamation, and the nature of the church as the place where God converses and enjoys community with his human creatures, not a place where the performance of rituals by human beings elicits God’s grace or favor in one way or another. The authors of the Formula of Concord were not in agreement themselves over a related issue that had loomed large in the disputes over “adiaphora” and “public confession,” the respective roles of Christian secular governments and the leadership of the church in determining church teaching and practice. All sides firmly believed that governments have the obligation to support the church, but Jakob Andreea had represented the position of his colleague in Württemberg, Johannes Brenz, that God calls princes
to exercise a strong hand in all matters of church life, whereas Martin Chemnitz and David Chytraeus had generally defended the exclusion of princely power from determining doctrine and practice. Probably for this reason, the issue won no mention in the Formula’s text.

The People of the Book of Concord in the Church of the Twenty-first Century

In the end, searching the Book of Concord for specific proof passages to guide the twenty-first century church in solving pressing problems will lead to frustration in many instances and occasionally to an abuse of the historical intent of its authors. Just as students of biblical narrative have noted the challenge of the “gaps” in the telling of stories and the story of Scripture, so in its teaching the New Testament accounts of church life have always challenged believers to fill in certain gaps. Not in the essentials: the church lives as God’s community from his Word, in the conversation every initiated anew by his conversation from the pages of Scripture in its various forms. The Word is living and active with the result that the community can serve as the fellowship and family which brings God’s light and salt into the world. But the church also lives in the experience of winds of false teaching tossing it to and fro (Eph 4:14), of Satan’s repeated attempts to strew grains of poison in our salt. In this struggle back and forth the whole life of church seems foolish and impotent. What that finally means is that the whole life of the community of God’s chosen forgiven sinners is a life of repentance.

We may attempt a solution to our dilemma of thinking we need prescriptive directives from our secondary authority for current problems, which the Holy Spirit apparently leaves to our own wisdom and sanctified imaginative address. For those who choose to make Luther and Melanchthon tertiary authorities for the teaching practice of the church, the Wittenberg reformers do leave clues as to how they implemented the ideas of the documents that became norming confessions of the church. In the preface he composed for the Visitation Articles of the Saxon government in 1528 Luther complained that the visitation practice of parishes and pastors of his time “paid no attention to how one teaches, believes, loves, how one lives a Christian life, how to care for the poor, how one comforts the weak or punishes the unruly, and whatever else belongs to this office.”60 This reflects what Luther thought pastors and congregations should be. The Articles themselves call pastors to preach repentance and faith within the framework of the distinction of law and gospel.61 In 1526 Luther had made practice suggestions for congregational life in his German Mass. He wrote in the wake of the Peasant Revolts of 1524–1526, hardly before they were concluded. Yet he did not despair of common Christians’ ability to minister and administer. He recognized that, in a society in which all are baptized, all who must be addressed as those claimed by Christ cannot be expected to live as his faithful followers. His initial optimism regarding the role lay people could play in congregational life waned somewhat in the wake of the practical experience imposed by his own times. Nonetheless, he never abandoned his confidence that all Christians could bring forgiveness of sins to other Christians as they spoke God’s Word of life and salvation to each other.62
In 1526 he made clear his opposition to imposing rigid laws for church practice, probably because he realized that no prescriptions can insure effective communication of the gospel, an art that must be practiced to deliver what hearers need in their own situations.\textsuperscript{63} He discussed three forms of public worship. These reflect his confidence in the power of God’s Word and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of even small groups of two or three of his people. The first form of worship of which he approved retained the medieval Latin text of those parts of the liturgy that did not undermine the gospel. But he also desired to have the Germans worship in their own language, and so he advocated a German translation of the traditional liturgy.\textsuperscript{64} Beyond that, his confidence in the Holy Spirit and his use of the Word found in Scripture and delivered by the saints from its pages led the reformer to conclusions about freedom in formulating the liturgy for regular worship and the propriety of small groups organized for prayer and Bible study, which some Lutherans have disclaimed as unwarranted confidence in God’s actual presence and power.\textsuperscript{65} That is, of course, the risk of trying to create authority from historical figures who did not have the benefit of current experience and insight. History never provides totally trustworthy supporters, and it too often turns us to dishonesty in reporting the insights and opinions of our historical heroes.

Twenty-first century Lutherans may be more reluctant to turn to Luther’s partner whose confessions, from Augsburg, its Apology, and its extension in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, guide Lutheran public confession to this day. But Melanchthon also offers the church today more extensive comments on the doctrine of the church. He revised his \textit{Loci communes theologici} in 1535 and 1543 as the needs of his students and his church changed.\textsuperscript{66} The later editions do demonstrate how Melanchthon took the elements of his doctrine expressed in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology and applied them to specific challenges. In 1543 he was reacting directly to Roman Catholic criticism he had experienced in the Regensburg colloquy two years earlier. He found, for example, the distinction of visible and invisible church at this point helpful in asserting the Lutheran adherence to the universal tradition of the church.\textsuperscript{67} He also changed the order in which the sacraments, as forms of the Word of God, related to the church. In 1535, the treatment of the sacraments had preceded the topic “on the church; in 1543, they followed treatment of the church.\textsuperscript{68}

Not only what Luther, Melanchthon, and the Concordists said but also their very act of confessing commands our attention as well. It leads us to center our confession always on the Evangel of Jesus Christ, on his person and work, and to confess with a sense of eschatological urgency. It leads us to confess for the edification of our own congregations, for the ecumenical witness that echoes Melanchthon’s efforts at Augsburg, and for evangelistic confession for those outside the faith.\textsuperscript{69}

But neither these texts nor our interpretation of the confessing actions which produced them have any assigned authority. Even the unofficial “tertiary” authority bestowed by our admiration for Luther and our conviction regarding his role in the history of the church dare not give us license for the historically insensitive transfer of maxims or practices appropriate for the Germany of the sixteenth century from their context into that of the twenty-first century. That violates the biblical teaching on
God’s creation of human creatures as creatures within his ever-unfolding history. So we are called to explain his unchanging truths and Scripture’s unchangeable insights into the proper rules and structures for the life of his community as an institution entrusted under Scripture’s direction to human design and ingenuity.

In the end we are left with God’s Word and Christ’s lordship as the anchors of our ecclesiology. The church proceeds on the basis of its conviction that the Paraclete will not leave us but will be with us forever and will remind us of all that Christ said (Jn 14:15, 25). The church must expect to see itself as weak and foolish, bearing a weak and foolish Word from the cross and yet reflecting in its own existence the wisdom and power of God, which is made perfect not only in the weakness of its individual members (2 Cor 12:9) but also in their collective weakness. For Christ saves sinners, the church does not, although it serves as the Holy Spirit’s instrument to convey the message of salvation. This view sustains the church and sees it through because it lets God’s people see Jesus.

Endnotes

4 BSLK, 767, 834; Book of Concord, 486, 527.
6 Therefore, I find misleading the conclusion of Wilhelm Maurer, Historischer Kommentar zur Confessio Augustana (Gütersloh: Mohr, 19.76, 1978), 2:163, that “the most decisive definitions of what the church is” are not in the Augsburg Confession but in the Schwabach Articles of 1528, which he labels “Luther’s confession.” The Augsburg Confession summarizes its slightly longer definition aptly, according to Maurer’s own determination of its three constitutive elements: the universality of the church as the congregation of God’s saints, its boundness to Christ, and its boundness to God’s Word and the sacraments. Maurer’s entire first volume elaborates his conviction that Article XXVIII of the Confession forms its focal point. Without denying the validity of Maurer’s observation of the article’s political and ecclesiastical significance for the existential situation of the Evangelical estates in 1530, it is clear from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that Melanchthon found its doctrinal focus in articles IV, V, and VI. They hold the key to the church’s life.
7 Vitor Westhelle, The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 121.


17 Warburg Postil, sermon on Matthew 21:1–9, WA 10,1:2, 48,1–15.


21 WA 42:3–176, LW 1:3–236.


33 See Luther’s response to Thomas Murner’s charge, in WA 7:683, 3–11, LW 39:218.


38 Johann Eck, “Four Hundred Four Articles for the Imperial Diet in Augsburg,” (1530), translated in *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 53.


43 WA 51175, 2–23.


53 Pöhlmann et al., *Theologie*, 172.


Works of Mercy and Church Unity
Does Service Unify and Doctrine Divide?

Albert B. Collver, III

Background

While it is somewhat prevalent to blame divisions in the church on the Reformation\(^1\) in the sixteenth century or the rise of denominationalism\(^2\) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact is people have been divided over Jesus ever since he ministered on earth.\(^3\) This division over Jesus even has entered into the church. Saint Paul warned the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the Romans about divisions.\(^4\) Jude says that those who cause divisions are worldly people and devoid of the Spirit.\(^5\) From the time of the Apostles, the church faced both heresy and schisms. “The church has always from its beginning suffered such divisions.”\(^6\) Knowing that his church would face heresy and division, Jesus prayed that his church might be “one.”\(^7\) In the Nicene Creed, the church confesses, “And we believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.” Yet this one holy Christian church is not seen with the eye, but is believed by faith. The eye sees the Christian church divided into several major confessional families and 9,000 denominations\(^8\) with some estimates reaching 20,000 to 30,000. Herein, lies the problem. The church that can be seen is fractured and that fracture causes offense both to the world and to those in the church.

“The question of the one church of God,” wrote Hermann Sasse, “arose on the mission field as a necessary question in light of the division of churches. It was a practical necessity born of the multiplicity of denominations carrying on mission work, and a necessity of the faith which had arisen as a result of the work.”\(^9\) The divisions of the Christian church hindered missionary activity. “Non-Christians often reacted to missionary efforts with the feeling that, before asking them to convert, the missionaries ought to agree among themselves what Christianity is.”\(^10\) Not only did the divisions in the Christian church cause scandal but also it seemed to be a waste of resources. What sense did it make to have three or four, let alone ten different denominations send missionaries to a given country? More often than not it was the missionaries themselves asking these questions and not the church bodies in Europe or America.\(^11\) In the case of Africa, major missionary activity took place in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and during the twentieth century, there were many different denominations in

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Africa. It is from the mission field where the question of Christian unity was asked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1910, the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh was held to address how the gospel could be proclaimed to the whole world. For all intents and purposes, the ecumenical movement was born from this gathering of missionary societies, although before this there were some efforts to cooperate across denominational lines in the area of Christian education, particularly for Sunday school. From the movement came the World Conference on Faith and Order in the 1920s and eventually the World Council of Churches in the late 1940s. One of the outcomes of the 1910 Edinburgh meeting was that Protestants would not proselytize Roman Catholics and the Orthodox; they were considered “Christian” and not in need of missionary work. It should be noted that many of the denominations that participated in the Edinburgh conference were spiritual descendents and offshoots of the Anglican Church such as the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, etc. Many of these groups had a similar theological heritage and foundation in the Reformed tradition. From a certain perspective, these groups were not so much divided by fundamental doctrinal differences as they were by practice and church government. This recognition may help to explain some of the initial growth of the ecumenical movement. Many of the denominational developments from the Old World and America did not seem applicable on the mission field. The time was also ripe for such a development as the ecumenical movement was a child whose mother was Pietism and whose father was the Enlightenment.

Doctrine Divides but Service Unites

Out of the ecumenical movement came the phrase, “Doctrine divides, but service unites.” It has been a rallying cry in ecumenical circles at least since 1925. When the attempt to pool missionary resources for the preaching of the gospel was hindered by the confessional stances of some churches, the ecumenical movement turned to *diaconia* as a means of unity. If doctrine or theology might prevent two different denominations from sharing a missionary or preacher, what theological or doctrinal objection could be raised to different denominations sharing resources in order to dig a well or to establish a medical clinic? If the unity of the church could not be seen in preaching and teaching, perhaps it could be seen in *diaconia*—in works of service and mercy. The world would see the church working together on projects involving human care rather than being divided. The cooperating together in matters external to doctrine made a good and positive witness.

Several factors contributed to the phase “doctrine divides but service unites” arising in the mid-1920s. Pietism from the eighteenth century contributed to it. The Enlightenment and the events of the nineteenth century made contributions to it. Both of these movements fed into the ecumenical movement with the effect of de-emphasizing orthodoxy, that is, doctrine, while emphasizing orthopraxis, this is, deeds. The end of World War I also created a desire for churches to work beyond their traditional confessional lines. Other events in the twentieth century such as World War II, the civil rights movement, socialism, church denomination unions, etc., affected how “doctrine
divides but service unites” developed. An examination of the assertion that “doctrine divides but service unites” is a mere snapshot of a given period of its development over the past century. Nevertheless, there are certain common themes that remain throughout its development.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, an important development was the division of evangelism into three components: kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia. Sometimes kerygma—the proclamation of a gospel for the whole world, koinonia—the welcoming of all into the new covenant, and diakonia—Christian service are described as “forms of communication.” The three together are the church’s mission to the world. This way of speaking about the mission of the church and diakonia emerged as socialism and secular and government humanitarian efforts were on the rise. Those who promoted the notion that “doctrine divides but service unites,” pondered the question of the way in which humanitarian aid given by church differs from that of government and secular agencies? In a certain sense, if churches are cooperating with each other in matters apart from doctrine and external to the sacred things, the humanitarian efforts of the church are not clearly distinguishable from that of secular and government agencies. This recognition led to the recognition that “Christianity has no monopoly of humanitarian service to mankind” and that “secular loyalties” might be a stronger motive to serve than the “Christian conscience.”

Humanitarian work, once the domain primarily of the church, became the domain of the secular world and government. Some even imagined the day when secular entities and governments, inspired in part by socialism, would do most if not all of the humanitarian work in the world. Theodore Wedel wrote, “Christian diakonia will, accordingly, have to accustom itself to the presence in our modern world of this rival religion of brotherhood without God.” Increasingly, as the world became concerned with issues such as racism, justice, and liberation of the oppressed, so did the church as both pursued similar humanitarian aid and service. During the 1960s and 1970s these concerns, which arose in the secular world, were “theologized,” creating a “theological” rational for diakonia work and service in the church. In the absence of a biblical, creedal, and confessional theology, a humanistic theology, that is, anthropology, would fill the vacuum.

Some thought that the increasing presence of governmental and secular agencies in humanitarian work would only increase koinonia (fellowship) between church bodies in works of diakonia (service). As denominational specific agencies were subsumed by the state, as Christian hospitals and orphanages gave way to state supported and or run hospitals and orphanages, the role of the lay church member was seen as even more important. A Christian doctor working in a state run hospital will seek the companionship and fellowship of other Christians, even those who are not a part of his denominational heritage, as he carries out his Christian witness. In this way, it was thought that lay people, rather than clergy, would promote the koinonia between church bodies.

The thought that the laity would play a greater role or perhaps even the greatest role in church unity was not entirely new in the ecumenical movement. Since the earliest days of the ecumenical movement, a contingency thought that church unity
had been hindered since the time of the Reformation by the clergy who unnecessarily divided the church by rigidly holding to non-essential and divisive doctrines. It is not surprising that a lay movement went through the entire church during this time. As service and humanitarian aid increasingly became associated with the mission of the church, the role of the laity as missionaries become more prominent. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, in many church bodies, lay missionaries vastly out numbered professional missionaries or clergy missionaries. There seems to be no reduction in this trend.

For our purposes, the theological rationale for the increased role of the laity given by any particular church body is not of primary importance. Theological principles or a new biblical understanding of the laity was not the primary impetus in this movement. The focus in this movement is on orthopraxis not orthodoxy. The focus is on getting what is necessary done and developing the rational after the fact. In some ways, it seems as if the ecumenical movement was seeking how to address issues raised from the doctrine of the two kingdoms and Christian vocation—to use Lutheran categories. In this sense, perhaps, the churches of the Augsburg Confession, rather than ignoring the ecumenical movement or being drawn into its presuppositions, might have done better to speak clearly on the doctrines of the two kingdoms and vocation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the understanding that doctrine divided while service united shifted once again. Works of service were seen as a theology in and of themselves. The lack of cooperation in works of service was seen as the source or origin of heresies, schisms, and divisions within the church. Nikos Nissiotis wrote, “The greatest sin of the people of God is that they have neglected to perceive the theological, vertical dimension of diakonia in the ecclesiological, horizontal one.” In other words, the failure of the church to cooperate in works of service indicates a theological problem in koinonia (fellowship). There are really only two alternatives: either 1) diakonia (works of service) is not doctrinal, in which case there is little to distinguish the humanitarian work of churches from that of government and secular agencies, or 2) diakonia has a doctrinal component related to ecclesiology and church fellowship. Many in the church were not willing to give diakonia wholesale to the secular realm. Diakonia must be redefined not as a good moral act or as the expression of compassion but as the “overflowing of the grace which binds and moves their inner life as a total fellowship.” Thus, diakonia attached to a doctrine of ecclesiology and koinonia would become one of the primary vehicles by which to obtain visible unity of the church on earth. This line of thought leads to the conclusion, “This greatest sin has been in the past, and still is, to hasten to offer service to the world without practicing diakonia between the separate churches. It is our calling now to restore church unity through a practical, existential, living process of sharing each other’s life beyond any confessional barriers.”

By the late 1970s, the ecumenical movement had come full circle. Initially, it was said that doctrine divided but service united. Jürgen Moltmann wrote in “Fifty Years of Faith and Order,” “... fifty years ago in the early days of the ecumenical rapprochement it was said ‘Doctrine divides—service unites’... Today the situation is almost completely reversed. Now, after many years of patient, painstaking work it would be
true to say ‘Theology unites—praxis divides.’ Controversy in the ecumenical movement no longer centers on the *filioque*, but concerns instead the Programme to Combat Racism. The problem now is not the theological understanding of the eucharist and of ministry, but the practical recognition of ministries and common celebration. After fifty years of concerted theological effort we now have to say quite openly to Christians and church authorities that there are no longer any doctrinal differences which justify the divisions of our churches . . .”31 As the ecumenical movement seemingly overcame doctrinal differences,32 the visible unity still did not appear. As the focus intensified on *diakonia*, controversy actually increased among some churches33 in part because churches feared cooperation would endanger their own institutional interests.34 In the course of the ecumenical movement, *diakonia* went from a uniting force devoid of doctrine to a divisive force linked to a *koinonia* doctrine. Therefore, works of service (*diakonia*), in fact, are doctrinal. Works of service both unite and divide.

With Moltmann’s statement that “doctrine unites—praxis divides” and the failure of churches to unite on the basis of service, the ecumenical movement in the late 1970s in some ways was in a period of crisis. Despite the ecumenical movement’s reconciled diversity and convergence-statements on creeds, sacraments, and justification, churches remained divided. Carter Lindberg asked the question whether, “there are fundamental differences between the churches that have to do with ethics.”35 Some in the Orthodox Church identified the cause of the crisis in the WCC as a false assumption, “that all its member churches were able to agree together in giving a universal Christian answers to the questions arising at any given time.”36 In order to promote “solidarity in *diakonia*,” some in the Orthodox Church proposed that the answer be sought in the liturgy.37 Orthodox and Roman Catholic authors suggested the eucharist could be the bridge between the liturgy and *diakonia* by suggesting “an interpersonal relationship, not only between the community and God but also between the community and all present or absent members of the church.”38

In essence, the linking of the liturgy to *diakonia* via the eucharist stated that communion with God produces communion between human beings. From this approach, the WCC concluded, “Service, *diakonia* and the eucharist belong together; by sharing through bread and wine Christ’s body, we become his body, we are made into sharepeople, are empowered to share with others our own lives, our gifts.”39 Whatever inspiration the liturgy and eucharist provided *diakonia* service within a church body, the eucharistic vision was an empty formula for producing a unity through *diakonic* service “as long as the churches themselves have no real eucharistic community with each other.”40 In other words, the eucharist promotes *diakonic* service but churches need to have communion fellowship with each other. Once again, the lack of common participation in the eucharist prevents church unity and common *diakonia* service.41

Ultimately, the lesson the ecumenical movement learned from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches about the connection between the eucharist and *diakonia* is that of “sharing.” “The language of sharing is even more basic than any of our theological or ecclesiological concepts, for it is the people’s language in an elementary sense. All people know what sharing means, whether from experience or longing hope, and they know that fullness of life is only found in sharing life with one another. ‘Sharing’
is thus a fundamental symbol of life.” Thus, God’s sharing of himself in Jesus Christ allows the church to share with each other and with the world. The language of sharing is remarkably similar to that used in ecumenical statements about the Lord’s Supper in that the gift of the supper is Christ sharing himself.

A Preliminary Excursus on Cooperatio in Externis (cooperation in externals)

The principle cooperatio in externis is most commonly defined as cooperation between or the working together of a church with another church that do not have doctrinal agreement or fellowship in matters not related to the preaching and teaching of the faith or the administration of the sacraments. This principle seems to have developed from the interaction between the ecumenical movement’s focus on diakonía disconnected from the efforts to unite various Lutheran groups in America. While there may not be a direct cause and effect link or proof of direct influence between the efforts of the ecumenical movement to practice diakonía apart from doctrine and the union discussions between various Lutheran groups in America, there is a similarity of thought between the two efforts. It also seems the ecumenical movement’s conversation about “doctrine divides, but service unites” influenced the further development of the cooperation in externals principle. It seems appropriate to discuss briefly cooperation in externals in light of the discussion on service uniting the church.

Although some have reported discovering cooperatio in externis in the Lutheran dogmaticatians, our preliminary research was unable to locate the term using the index to Baier’s Compendium. Nor have we located the term in the Francis Pieper’s Christian Dogmatics. Although our research into the origin of the term, cooperatio in externis has not been exhaustive, the term, at least as a technical term, (and dare we suggest the concept) did not come until widespread usage until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The earliest reference we found to the term cooperatio in externis was located in a Roman Catholic work on moral theology. In this work, the term cooperatio in externis is used to distinguish the cooperation of individuals in a moral transgression from a moral transgression committed by a sole individual. The context of this usage is different from what has become more commonplace among some Lutherans, but it does indication that cooperation occurs between individuals in works external to an individual. People are not able to cooperate in a work occurring within the mind of an individual. By extension, one can understand how the term cooperatio in externis could be used to describe works external to the communio in sacris (communion in sacred things). Our preliminary research has not uncovered evidence that Lutherans were reading this Roman Catholic work on moral theology but it is certainly a possibility.

An early appearance of the concept and words but not the exact phrase “cooperation in externals” among American Lutherans is found in the “Declaration of Principles Concerning the Church and Its External Relationships,” adopted at the Second Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America at Washington DC, October 26, 1920. The purpose of this document was to “define the attitude of The United Lutheran Church in America toward cooperative movements, both within and without the Lutheran Church, toward organizations, tendencies, and movement, some of them
within and some of them without the organized church.” The document states that there can be “complete cooperation and organic union” with church bodies calling themselves Evangelical Lutheran and who subscribe to the Confessions. While this may not be the same doctrinal standard used by some confessional Lutheran churches for pulpit and altar fellowship, it is important to note that this document distinguishes those who call themselves Lutheran from general Protestant churches and from non-church groups. Since Protestant church groups are not Lutheran separate ministers, pulpits, fonts, and altars must be kept and not shared. Thus, The United Lutheran Church in America could not have communio in sacris with the Protestant church.

“In view of the many proposals for cooperation of the Protestant churches in various departments of practical activity and in view of the many organizations already formed,” the document, offers some guidelines for carrying out cooperative work. As long as cooperation in “works of serving love” between The United Lutheran Church in America and various Protestant churches or service organizations did not “involve the surrender of our interpretation of the Gospel, the denial of conviction, or the suppression of our testimony to what we hold to be the truth,” such cooperation was possible. However, The United Lutheran Church in America rejected the possibility of cooperation in external matters if the basic tenets of the Christian faith were rejected, such as a rejection of the Holy Scriptures, the Trinity, the universality of sin, etc. Nor was cooperation in external matters possible if the church’s confession of the truth was limited in any way. Nor could cooperation be possible with movements or organizations whose purposes lie outside the proper sphere of church activity. An example given of an activity outside of the proper sphere of the church was that of law enforcement. For our discussion here, there are two crucial points: 1) cooperation in external matters in this document is defined more narrowly than it is by many who speak of cooperation in externals today, 2) the seminary journal, Concordia Theological Monthly, of the Missouri Synod reprinted without comment this declaration of The United Lutheran Church in America in 1935 “in view of recent developments in the American Lutheran Church.”

Six years after the Concordia Theological Monthly published The United Lutheran Church’s Declaration, President Behnken of the Missouri Synod issued a statement, “You realize, of course, that Missouri has been cooperating in externals in matters which do not involve pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. Such cooperation must not be interpreted as a step towards fellowship or a method of bringing about fellowship among Lutherans.” President Behnken did state that such cooperation in externals did not include, “joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, or in joint services celebrating great events.” President Behnken’s statement represents the first official statement by the Missouri Synod on cooperation in externals and was one component of Wisconsin Synod’s breaking of fellowship with the Missouri Synod some years later.

Two years after President Behnken’s statement on “cooperation in externals,” Theodore Graebner wrote, “We are living in an age which calls for a re-thinking, a new thinking-through of all our principles of church work, not in order to revise them, but in order to obtain a clear understanding of their application to new issues and new
Graebner helped bring acceptance to the concept of “cooperation in externals” within the Missouri Synod. The fruit of his work was seen in 1965, when the Missouri Synod in convention adopted the concept of “cooperation in externals.” According to one author on social ministry in the Lutheran tradition, the Missouri Synod church leaders invented “cooperation in externals” to get around the denomination’s conservative theology on church fellowship which prohibited cooperation in inter-Lutheran efforts, in military chaplaincy, and praying with other Christians. This view may represent the position some had in the Missouri Synod. Many in the Missouri Synod simply accepted “cooperation in externals” uncritically. The principle of cooperation in externals led to the creation of the Department of Social Welfare in the Missouri Synod.

On the one hand, the Missouri Synod’s position on cooperation in externals provided the church with a freedom in how it interacts with the world. On the other hand, it also allowed some to define “externals” so broadly and “fellowship so narrowly” that nearly any cooperation that did not involve preaching, worship, or prayer was permissible. If the extreme of no cooperation in external matters without full doctrinal agreement was not helpful to the church, neither is the other extreme that all so-called “external matters” are permissible. A more nuanced and critically thoughtful approach is required lest the sacred things are violated.

Conclusion

“The venerable ecumenical slogan ‘doctrine divides, but service unites’ no longer seems valid.” Even those within the ecumenical movement recognize that without agreement in doctrine, a common philosophy or worldview, or a common ethic is incapable of producing visible unity of the church on earth. Without a common foundation and agreement in doctrine, *diakonia* (works of service and mercy) become nearly indistinguishable from humanitarian aid provided by government or other secular and non-religious organizations. Without agreement on “ethics” or “Christian ethos” (to speak in Lutheran categories), various church bodies are incapable of agreeing on common works of service. For instance, if one church body holds that homosexual unions or marriage are ethically acceptable and another church body does not, how can these two church bodies cooperate in placing children through an adoption agency? Ultimately, a common ethic or Christian ethos comes from theology and doctrine. In a certain sense, the ecumenical movement has done the church a favor by disproving its own mantra that “doctrine divides and service unites” over the past century. Whether or not the ecumenical movement wishes to recognize the fact, it has demonstrated that service without agreement in doctrine will not ultimately provide unity to the church.

It is no accident of history or coincidence that Lutheran churches in America coined the phrase “cooperation in externals” around the same time that the ecumenical movement proclaimed, “doctrine divides, but service unites.” As churches of different confessions and denominations began to cooperate in social and humanitarian projects around the world, Lutherans did not want to be left behind. At the same time, Lutherans, especially Confessional Lutherans, recognized that the lack of doctrinal agreement and fellowship prevented certain types of cooperation. The formulation
of “cooperation in externals” was an attempt to delineate a realm where Lutheran churches could cooperate with other Christians and even with non-religious humanitarian organizations. In a certain sense, “cooperation in externals” is an attempt to address what it means for the church to exist in two realms or two kingdoms and to define the role of Christian vocation in the world.63 “Externals” are matters not connected to the sacred, that is, the pulpit, the altar, and the font. In theory, such a definition of “externals” is rather broad and all encompassing. However, the further removed the parties who wish to cooperate are from a common ethical and philosophical framework, the more likely that the so-called “externals” will touch upon the sacred.64

A re-examination of the principle of “cooperation in externals” is in order for the inter-Lutheran community because many Lutheran church bodies have inherited the principle from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod without critical or thoughtful evaluation. In the current pluralistic age, it is perhaps more important now than previously to consider what “externals” can be cooperated in without compromising confession. As more church bodies within the Lutheran World Federation ordain or consider the ordination of women and homosexuals, confessional Lutheran church bodies need to consider if they can cooperate in so-called externals. Or does such cooperation end up compromising their confession, or even worse, open the door for such practices to enter their church?

As many in the ecumenical movement recognized, large amounts of money are involved in humanitarian work.65 Confessional church bodies need to question themselves whether the tithes and donations of their church members given to serve the neighbor out of love for Christ, can be given to church bodies and organizations that promote women’s ordination, homosexual unions and marriages, homosexual adoption, abortion, euthanasia, and so on. Many inter-Lutheran and inter-denominational organizations intentionally limit or forbid the proclamation of the gospel in proximity to the giving out of humanitarian aid. Careful thought needs to be given to whether cooperation with church bodies, groups, and organizations that promote an “ethos” different from that of historic Christianity can be done without compromising confession. It seems that such cooperation without compromise will become increasingly difficult. Such a reconsideration of cooperation in externals also may alter some arrangements in the mission field. Working alone for the sake of the confession of faith is not something to be criticized and in fact may be very commendable.

Ultimately, Christian works of mercy (diakonia) flow out of the gifts that Christ has given his church. Christ’s love for humankind expressed in his suffering, death, and resurrection along with his forgiving gifts of absolution, baptism, communion, and preaching give the Christian a heart to love his neighbor, whoever that may be. Ultimately, it is the common confession of faith and the recognition that we are part of Christ’s body because he has put his holy name upon us in baptism and has made us a part of his body by giving us his body and blood in Holy Communion. Doctrine and service are connected. Service disconnected from the sacred things does not remain Christian for long. Doctrine without works of service to the neighbor is a dead faith.66 We need to reclaim the connection between doctrine and service, faith and works, and the connection of diakonia in close proximity to the Lord’s altar. As Hermann
Sasse wrote, “There is no unity of Christianity without deep and serious wrestling over the truth, without the seriousness which, in dialogue of confession with confession, glosses over no difficulty.”

Without doctrine and truth, works of service cease to be Christian. If such service is not Christian, the church needs to ask why it has engaged in such activity.

Endnotes

1 Werner Elert, Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, trans. Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 43. “Hans Asmussen, speaking for many, sees their origin in the ‘confessional churches’ which arose from the Reformation. ‘The division at the Lord’s Table as we have it today has a history of four hundred years.’ According to the context of this statement it is clear that in his view such divisions first arose 400 years ago.”

2 Parallel denominational structures, their true nature hidden as well as revealed by their designation as churches, emerged with the grant of religious toleration in the generous world-view of the Enlightenment. Since then denominationalism has increased and multiplied, not only in the United States, where it is seen in extreme form, but throughout the Christian world wherever freedom prevails.

3 John 7:43, “So there was a division among the people over him.” (ESV)

4 Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 11:18; Galatians 5:20.

5 Jude 19.

6 Elert, Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries, 44.

7 John 17:22.


11 James Good, “Kikuyu 1913: A Cradle of Ecumenism,” AFER 25, no. 2 (1983): 86–89. “The beginnings of ecumenism in this century were, of course, motivated by something other than the unselfish desire for Christian reunion. The missionaries of the colonial era simply found themselves with more territory than they could handle, and the only viable arrangement was to parcel it out among themselves.”


13 Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the Mission Field,” 180. “It is no accident that in our century the mission field was the place from which the question of the unity of the church was raised, and indeed the first in the form of the call to unify Christianity. Since the days of the apostles, the mission field has always been the place where the church and that which is not church, divine truth and demonic lies, encounter each other and separate. It is also the place where the deepest questions of the Christian faith first arise and where the last judgments in the history of the church are rendered.”


15 Forrest L. Knapp, Church Cooperation: Dead-End Street or Highway to Unity (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 169. “In Christian education we have one of the oldest fields of cooperation across denominational lines.” Ibid., 170. “The insistent need of all Sunday schools for lesson materials led to a decision in the 1872 International Sunday School Convention (United States and Canada) to appoint a committee to prepare uniform lessons. After a struggle with the difficult task, the committee produced results, and the cooperative preparation of Uniform Lesson Outlines continues to this day, now under the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches.”

16 Carter Lindsberg, “Luther’s Critique of the Ecumenical Assumption That Doctrine Divides but Service Unites,” Journal of Ecumenical Studies 27, no. 4 (1990): 694. “These endeavors are rooted in pietism and the Enlightenment, not the Reformation.” See also Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the Mission Field,” 188. “The modern Protestant world mission effort is a child of Pietism, and it cannot deny its origin. But Pietism has never had any understanding of dogmatic questions, and thus neither any understanding for the unique significance of pure doctrine.”

17 The phrase is attributed to Dr. Hermann Kapler (1867–1941), president of the Federation of German Evangelical Churches (1925–1933).

18 Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds., A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948, vol. 1, 2nd ed with revised bibliography. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 540. “At Hässingborg, the International Committee had before it the suggestion, made by the General Secretary of Faith and Order, that Life and Work might be interested in holding its conference in Washington in 1925, just after the first World Conference which Faith and Order was planning to hold in that city in May of that year. After thorough consideration, the International Committee arrived at the conclusion that it would be better to keep the two conferences separate. The goal of the Faith and Order movement
was relatively distant, whereas the Christian churches should be able ‘without difficulty’ to unite at once in an effort to apply Christian principles to burning social and international problems. The answer of the Committee quoted Dr. Kapler: ‘Doctrine divides, but service unites.’ The Life and Work movement, it said, was aiming at common service; such common service in the field of practical problems might well help to break down walls and prejudices between church bodies, and create a spirit of brotherhood which would make it easier to realize also the aims of the Faith and Order movement.’

20 Stephen Cranford, “Aid and the Unity of the Church,” Mid-Stream XVIII, no. 2 (1979): 157. “Too often the world sees only a divided church; inter-church aid is one way, however, of demonstrating visibly the essential unity which is God’s gift to his church.”

21 Lindberg, “Luther’s critique,” 680. “The idea that ecclesial unity is rooted in ethics arose in pietism. It was Gottfried Arnold (1666–1714) who forcefully advanced the claim that the mark of true Christianitv is piety (orthopraxis), not doctrine (orthodoxy).”

22 Theodore Wedel, “Evangelism’s Threefold Witness: Kerygma, Koinonia, Diakonia,” Ecumenical Review 9, no. 3 (1957): 239. “The kerygma proclaiming a gospel for the whole world, the koinonia welcoming all into the new-covenant-life, and then a demonstration of the power of the Spirit in diakonia (Christian service)—only when the ‘people of the mission’ utilize the full orb of these three forms of communication as an inseparable triad can the church witness rightly to itself and to its Lord. This triad has never been disrupted by internal rivalry except when the church has lost its sense of mission to the world.”

23 Ibid., 235. “Christianity has no monopoly of humanitarian service to mankind. Indeed, puzzling paradox though it may be, if the concept of ‘welfare’ is equated with that of ‘salvation,’ the Church’s diakonia may soon find itself outdistanced by its secular rivals. Even the motive for service to the needy may, when judged by external standards of sacrificial devotion to a cause, appear stronger under secular loyalties than that which animates the Christian conscience.”

24 Ibid., 236.

25 Ibid., 237. “The Christian doctor in a state-supported hospital, or the Christian teacher in a secular school, is called upon to be a lay evangelist in a more difficult environment than that which lay specialists encountered in the era of protected diakonia. He will escape the prison of loneliness only as he finds strength for his ministry in the fellowship of his brethren in Christ. Thus under the threat of failure to witness at all the connection between diakonia and koinonia will be rediscovered.”

26 Nikos A. Nissiotis, “The Ecclesiological Significance of Inter-Church Diakonia,” Ecumenical Review 13, no. 2 (1961): 195. “Among the main reasons for the church heresies, schisms and divisions is the lack of this inner power of mutual service, of mutual inter-dependent existence.”

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 191. “This diakonia is neither a good moral act springing from the good will of a regenerated Christian nor an expression of compassion for the misery of man outside the church. The care of the churches for the world is not a vehicle for showing compassion for the suffering or the weak or the uneducated man. The help of the churches offered to the world is not of a humanitarian nature. The churches are not primarily philanthropic institutions. The act of the diakonia of the churches is ecclicial: namely it is the overflowing of the grace which binds and moves their inner life as a total fellowship.”


30 Nissiotis, “The Ecclesiological Significance” 197.


32 Raymond Hickey, “Ecumenism Beneath the Cross in Africa,” AFER 26, no. 3 (1984): 155. “The rigid barriers which had been erected—and frequently reinforced!—between Christians for over four hundred years were now seen to be tumbling in a planned and orderly manner.”

33 Dickinson, “Diakonia in the ecumenical movement,” 419. “Leslie Cooke’s wry warning in 1966 could not have been more apt. He observed that the more involved in real development—as distinguished from relief—the churches were, the more controversial and sometimes unpopular their diaconal witness would become.”

34 Knapp, Church Cooperation, 174–175. “Too often local churches and denominations have discovered reasons for only limited cooperation. When their own institutional interests have been endangered, they have tended to draw back. The strength and continued existence of denominational life has been allowed to have primary place.”

35 Lindberg, 680.


37 Ibid., 138. “But I believe we can use this term ‘liturgical’ to show why and in what sense every Christian diaconia to the world, to culture, to politics, human beings must be a liturgical diaconia.”


40 “Ibid., 283.

41 Good, “Kikuyu 1913,” 88. “But there is one major exception, and it remains a stumbling-block: common participation in the eucharist is today, for many Christians, as big a crime as it was in Kikuyu in 1913.”

43 Kurt E. Marquart, “The Issue of Church Fellowship and Unionism in the Missouri Synod and Its Associated Churches,” Logia XII, no. 1 (2003): 20. “Church fellowship has always been understood as communio in sacris (communion in sacred things) as distinct from mere cooperation in externis (cooperation in externals).”
44 Josepha D’Annibale, Summulae Theologicae Moralis (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1896).
45 Ibid., 161. “Cooperation in externis dumtaxat transgressionibus locum habet; externa autem legis transgressio constat intentione et operi externo: qui est particeps utrisque, corrensi seu cooperator formalis; qui operis tantum, cooperator materialis dicit solvi.” “Cooperation only takes place in external transgressions. An external transgression of the law consists in intention and external work. Whoever [or whatever] is a participant in both [is usually called] co-guilty or a formal cooperator. Whoever [or whatever] is a participant in the work alone is usually called a material cooperator.” (Translation by Rev. Benjamin Mayes, Ph.D.)
48 Ibid., 46.
49 Ibid., 49.
50 Ibid., 50. “That until a more complete unity of confessions is attained than now exists, The United Lutheran Church in America is bound in duty and in conscience to maintain its separate identity as a witness to the truth which it knows; and its members, its ministers, its pulpits, its fonts, and its altars must testify only to that truth.”
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 52.
54 Ibid., 53.
55 John Behnken, “Fellowship Among Lutherans: Address to the American Lutheran Conference,” Quartalschrift 44, no. 1 (1941): 68. President Behnken’s entire statement: “Today efforts are being put forth toward fellowship via cooperation. Cooperative efforts have been proclaimed and heralded as harbingers of Lutheran fellowship and Lutheran union. Let me speak very frankly. If such cooperation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then cooperation is just another name for pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement this spells compromise. It means yielding in doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture. You realize, of course, that Missouri has been cooperating in externals in matters which do not involve pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship. Such cooperation must not be interpreted as a step towards fellowship or a method of bringing about fellowship among Lutherans. Fellowship among Lutherans is possible and biblical only where there is agreement in biblical doctrine and scriptural practice. Where such agreement has been reached, pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship will necessarily follow.”
56 Ibid.
60 Inter-Lutheran efforts for social ministry work and military chaplains were characterized as “cooperation in externals” by the Lutheran Synod—Missouri Synod leaders as a way of getting around the denomination’s conservative theology and refusal even to pray with other Lutherans. John W. Behnken, the synod’s president, wrote a policy statement in 1941 declaring that his church could not cooperate ‘in any form in the dissemination of the gospel.’ Any cooperation had to be confined to ‘externals,’ such as relief to orphaned missionaries and work among soldiers and sailors. Still others contended that the term suggested that social ministry was an external matter to Christian faith and the life of the church. Not so, Missouri Synod welfare leader Henry F. Wind insisted in 1943. Social ministry is a sign of the presence of the grace of God and a necessary fruit that grows out of faith.”
61 Lindberg, 680.
62 Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity,” 180. “It belongs to the unfathomable mysteries of the history of the church that it experiences mighty movements, independent from all national and confessional boundaries, which pass through all of Christianity and transform it both inwardly and outwardly.”
63 We might have done much better to address these questions in terms of the doctrine of the two kingdoms and the doctrine of Christian vocation rather than in terms of “cooperation in externals.”
64 For example, if a group of different denominations band together for a legal brief in order to promote religious freedom, the common ethic or philosophical framework is not a union of religious belief but rather the legal principle that religions have the right to practice unencumbered by the State or other hindrances.
65 Cranford, “Aid and the Unity of the Church,” 156. “It is simply that the major obstacle to church unity in many places in the world is not theological or doctrinal—it’s money.”
66 James 2:17
67 Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity,” 194.
Still very mindful of my commitment to devote less installments to the Hebrew infinitive than to what has become the serial drama of the Greek participle, now into “part IX,” (Concordia Journal, Spring 2010, p 157, cf. my previous “Corner” in Winter 2010), I will make a few additional comments to what was only just introduced last time (thus this is really only part 1, continued). There we reviewed very briefly the use of the infinitive absolute primarily as an intensifying adverb, literally added to a verb of the same root, for a sense of double force, it might seem. This is an odd use of an infinitive in any language and seems almost unrelated to the infinitive construct except for the formal considerations that, most obviously in the Qal, the form of הָקטוֹל (“qatol”) relates to הָקט (“qtol”) as that of a noun in the absolute state to its construct form.

To the simple summary that the infinitive absolute can intensify a verbal action let me add one further level of understanding concerning the position of the infinitive before (prepositive) or after (postpositive) the main verb. It is sometimes asserted (even in teaching grammars) or assumed (in English translations) that this can mark the nuance of the adverbial force as either “intensity” (“surely, truly, certainly”) when used before the main verb or “duration” (“keep on …”) when used after.

The classic Gesenius Kautsch grammar notes that the postpositive position is used (apparently unlike the prepositive) “sometimes to express the long continuance of an action” (GK 113r). But both Joüon (§123d) and, more recently, Waltke/OConnor (WO, §35.3.1.d) argue that this distinction is artificial. Joüon suggests a “stronger nuance” when placed before the verb but goes on to note that the postpositive use is (a) generally less common (for whatever reason, other than statistical) and (b) “always placed after an imperative and a participle.” WO cite positively the conclusion of J.P.K. Riekert in his 1979 study of the infinitives in Genesis that “we have an artificial distinction between the prepositive and postpositive infinitive and that the latter is incorrectly credited with the aspect of expressing duration.” Both Joüon and WO conclude that “it is only from the context that the nuance added by the infinitive can be deduced in each case” (Joüon, cf the similar statement in WO at 35.3.1.e).

As noted in Fundamental Biblical Hebrew, though only in passing (p 138, at EG 4), the position of the infinitive has to do with the form of the main verb, there with reference to imperatives. I do concede that “this may imply ongoing action,” but, frankly, even though it “may,” I would not even say that much in a future revision. The statistical dominance of the prepositive position is likely due to the use with perfect and imperfect forms, while WO state clearly that the use “almost always occurs postpositively with wayyiqtol (“impf waw consecutive”), the imperative, and the participle.

As an example, my own recent work on Isaiah 6:9, which is difficult enough for interpretation, has noted that most translations seem to assume the durative force of the infinitive absolute, presumably because it follows the main verb (as though the key distinction is before or after and not because it follows an imperative form). Isaiah 6:9 reads,
A rough translation, with the infinitive absolute italicized without nuance, would be “Hear hear but do not understand! See see, but do not know.” In both cases, the infinitive follows the imperative. The following translations represent a spectrum of English renderings of the two commands:

- NIV “Be ever hearing … be ever seeing …”
- ESV “Keep on hearing … keep on looking …”
- RSV “Hear and hear … see and see …”
- NRSV “Keep listening … keep looking …”
- NASB “Keep on listening … keep on looking …”
- KJV “Hear ye indeed … See ye indeed …”
- NKJV “Keep on hearing … keep on seeing …”
- AAT “You may go on hearing … and go on seeing …”
- GWN “No matter how closely you listen…no matter how closely you look …”

The most common nuance is, indeed, the durative sense, which dominates the more contemporary translations. Gesenius Kautsch, as referenced above, cites Isaiah 6:9 as an example of the durative sense “hear ye continually.” Interestingly, the same construction appears in Isaiah 55:2, where NRSV, NASB, and ESV translate, “listen carefully” (ESV, “diligently”) and NIV simply repeats the impv, “listen, listen.”

In my own view, the more general sense of intensification should be the place to start, regardless of the position of the infinitive. Further nuance can be provided by comparison with other uses of the same verbal root. For example, the idiom with root שׁמע in the imperfect is fairly common in the exhortations in Exodus and Deuteronomy (Ex 15:26, 19:5, 23:22; Dt 11:13, 15:5, 28:1), usually translated with “listen carefully.” In the case of Isaiah 6, the whole verse must also be considered in light of the larger context, both as imperatives within the immediate commissioning of the prophet to “go and say to this people” and within the larger historical context of the overall ministry and message of Isaiah.

In light of the context (and already engaging the theological interpretive problem of this seemingly strange sort of mission imperative, especially as continued into verse 10) I would suggest a possible sense of sarcasm within the intensifying force of the infinitive, “really listen,” as though the people have not—and are not about to—listen with “ears to hear.” The overall implication is that they will not really hear with understanding or comprehension no matter how hard they try, so a paraphrase rendering such as, “try to listen as hard as you can, but don’t think you will understand” might convey the sense even better.

If this is correct, then the RSV and old KJV (despite its archaic language) are more on track, and the GWN “natural equivalent” translation is the most helpful of those cited above. One could argue that the durative force could be understood in a similar way and may gain support from Isaiah’s own “durative” question, “how long?” in verse 11. But the simple translation of “keep on listening” would need further interpretation to explicate the nuance more clearly (as do all translations!). In any case, the grammatical point at issue in this short essay is that the durative sense, while a possible option, is not determined or dictated by the postpositive position of the infinitive absolute.

Andrew Bartelt
HOMILETICAL HELPS
Thoughts from the Text

The end is in sight. Another year is drawing to a close—the church year anticipating the calendar year by a good month. Fittingly, the last words of the Old Testament point to the last “great and terrible day of the Lord” that marks the end of time and the world as we know it. In this brief text, Malachi provides a remarkable series of dualities, some contrasting positive versus negative items, others pairing together complementary thoughts. On one hand, we have the consuming inferno of the furnace that sets ablaze all the arrogant and evildoers; and on the other, the rising sun of righteousness shedding its warm healing on those who fear God. Thus, judgment and blessing, death and new life, are again brought into sharp juxtaposition. Then we have the twofold instruction: remember Moses’s law and watch for Elijah’s restoration. Interspersed through these themes are more pairs: arrogant and evildoers, root and branch, statutes and ordinances, great and terrible, fathers and children. Lutheran readers should immediately resonate to a text flush with dualities. Yet the same readers are perilously prone to fall prey to yet another set of dualities implicit in the interpretive moves typically made on such a text. There is, on one side, the temptation to dismiss this as “just an Old Testament text” fully accomplished in the work of the baptizer—John (Elijah) and John’s greater cousin—and thus, other than its significance as a completed messianic prophecy, it has little meaning besides, “John fulfilled it, and isn’t it great that we get Jesus instead of Moses!” But the other interpretive move results in a similar marginalization of the text: with its strong “end-times” flavor, it is easy to label the text, “eschatological,” and push its importance into a “pie-in-the-sky, in the sweet bye and bye” irrelevance for today.

One way to fight the tug toward predictable (and painfully boring) interpretations that gut the impact of the text is to take hold of the “arrogant and evildoers” duality. It is fascinating—and more than a bit disconcerting—that Malachi would lump the two together. While no one readily accepts the arrogant moniker, the self-reliance, self-absorption, self-promotion, and general self-centeredness that lie at the heart of humanity have no better description than arrogance. Arrogant is man in rebellion against God. Arrogant is man making his own way. Arrogant is man determining that he can force God into his own cherished views of what God should be and do. Arrogant is the antithesis of faith and gospel. We are all arrogant—which means we are all evildoers; we are all chaff; we are all fuel for the furnace; we are nothing … but ashes. The duality is not between others and us. It is a duality that cleaves each believer. And as arrogant evildoers we foment division in our homes and discord in our relationships. The restorative work of Elijah seems to have been ineffective. We look at our lives and the lives of those around us and wonder what ever happened to Elijah. Yet, from the ashes—all vestiges of arrogance thoroughly purged—we see the Sun of Righteousness rise and we delight that the ultimate father/son relationship was restored...
in his work, and so we also are restored. Phoenix-like, we are raised from the ashes and restored with the Father and his creation—a reality that begins now and waits with certain confidence for the full and final consummation when the dance that animates creation (and so is known instinctively by the calf newly sprung from the stall) climaxes according to the creator’s choreography and is joined in earnest by every creature.

Suggested Outline
“Dancing in the Ashes”

I. The furnace.
   A. We are the arrogant and evildoers.
   B. We (and our relationships) end in ashes.

II. The dance.
   A. Christ restores what we destroy—all relationships are healed.
   B. We dance (live in harmony) now, with the creator and with creatures.

Joel D. Biermann

Proper 29 • Malachi 3:13–18 • November 21, 2010

There is famine, poverty, oppression, and unfaithfulness. People live their lives contrary to God’s Word, and he doesn’t even seem to care. Does it really pay to follow God? This is the state of the world today. But this was also the context of Malachi’s ministry. The people were waiting for God’s glory to return, but nothing seemed to be happening. The people grew lax spiritually and morally. Malachi’s ministry was to call God’s people to repentance and to reassure them of his love for them. God’s glory would return in his own time.

This is the last Sunday of the church year, and the Christian’s eyes are focused on our Lord’s return. The church waits in hope. We wait to see his glory in all its majesty and full array. Yet, as we wait we can become discouraged with what’s going on around us. God’s word of repentance, promise, encouragement, and continued love is just as valid for us today as it was in Malachi’s day.

Liturgical context: The Gospel for today is Luke 23:27–43, the crucifixion. Here we find the world mocking Jesus. He claimed to be the Son of God, the Messiah, but look where that got him. He received nothing but a date with the cross, filled with humiliation, mockery, and shame. Nevertheless, this is what the Son was sent by the Father to do. The Father spared not his Son so that our sins would be forgiven and paradise’s gates would be open to any and all who repent of their ways. Such is the example of the repentant thief on the cross.

Homiletical helps: In vv. 13–15 the people are murmuring against YHWH because in their own eyes they don’t see why it pays to serve him. The wicked and the proud seem to taunt YHWH who doesn’t seem to even care about what’s happening. Why,
then, should his people serve him? In other words, it seemed vain and useless to serve God. They didn’t feel like they were “getting anything out of it” and in fact, the wicked seemed to be doing rather well by not serving YHWH. “What gives, God?”

The Hebrew verb ἀνωθ is means “vain, empty” and is found in Exodus 20:7—the second commandment. Many Christians in the pew may simply think that cussing, swearing, or using God’s name flippantly is the only way one breaks the second commandment. And yet it’s more than that, as we hear through Malachi. We break the second commandment by murmuring against YHWH and by wondering “what’s in it for me” to be a Christian, especially when the wicked aren’t living right and God doesn’t seem even to care. This kind of thinking and comparison with worldly ways is what leads Christians into spiritual laxness, living lives of indifference, skepticism and permissiveness. In other words, this demonstrates our unfaithfulness to YHWH.

In vv. 16–18, Malachi assures the God-fearers that God still loves them and that God is doing something about the situation “behind the scenes” even though they don’t realize it at the time. The wicked and the proud were not really “getting away with it” because on the day of YHWH’s choosing all people will see that there is a difference. The day will come when all will see who are a part of God’s special possession (“jewel” in the KJV—the preacher might be able to use this as a Gospel handle) and who are not. Those who live their lives in repentant faith to the end are written in YHWH’s book of remembrance.

YHWH’s word of grace is also found in v. 17: ἡμιλ άσι τιλ ημνον ηχ ια ηρο ωμαιτηρ—“as a man spares his son who serves him.” The phrase, “serves him,” is noteworthy. This can be used as a bridge to the gospel reading for the day to bring the hearer to the cross. It is the Son who serves the Father. The gospel twist is that the Father did not spare his Son so that we who are unfaithful are spared.

Homiletical direction: The malady of the sermon seems rather obvious. Our culture today is the same as that in Malachi’s day. We look around society and question why unbelievers live lives against God’s Word and nothing happens to them. “They seem to be doing all right, and in fact, many of them are prospering. The Lord doesn’t strike them dead. In fact, he even seems to be blessing them more than he’s blessing me! Maybe God doesn’t really care about whether someone is faithful to him or not. Maybe I, as a Christian, should simply live a life of moral indifference. After all, everyone else is doing it. So why can’t I have my cake and eat it too? I believe in Jesus, and that’s all that matters. Right?”

The preacher can work this malady according to his congregational context. The careful distinction should be made between sanctification and justification. Of course, faith in Jesus alone is what saves. But saving faith is never alone. It produces works of righteousness—lives lived in repentant faith and hope as we wait for our Lord’s return, which is the emphasis of the last Sunday of the church year.

Verse 17 can serve as the connection point between the Old Testament reading and the Gospel. As the preacher prepares the sermon, he can key in on “as a man spares his son who serves him.” The “son who serves him” points to Jesus’s service on the cross. There, in the theology of the cross, is where God’s glory is revealed. There is where God makes the distinction between the righteous and wicked as the great
exchange takes place. In the midst of the world that mocks, humiliates, and crucifies him, the Son serves the Father. The Father spares not his only Son in order that we who are unfaithful will be spared. Those who murmur rebellious words against Christ, shaking their heads and pointing their fingers hear our Lord’s words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34).

Christ’s words of forgiveness are offered to all. But the one who hears and repents receives the benefits of the cross just as the repentant thief did. The repentant one hears, “Today you will be with me in paradise. You are mine. You are my special possession. Your name is written in the book of remembrance.”

On this last Sunday of the church year our eyes are once again fixed on Jesus as we wait for the day of his glorious return. On that day he will raise up all people and take his special possession to live with him forever. Reassure the hearers of God’s covenant love for them sealed in baptism, and of his promise of eternal life with him. Until that day we live our lives in repentant faith and hope.

God’s blessings on your sermon preparation.

Michael J. Redeker

Advent 1 • Matthew 24:36–44 • November 28, 2010

Socrates summed up the first principle of philosophers everywhere: to know that we don’t know. And perhaps the “not knowing” is what makes the future so maddening. Everything about it is unknown.

Except for this: “… your Lord is coming” (v. 42). Yet, even then, despite the prognostications of a thousand, thousand TV evangelists (and before them, a thousand, thousand street preachers), the questions abound: How? When? Where? We are left in the fog of unknowing, and don’t we know it.

For Socrates, at least as Plato gave him to us, the self-aware unknowing is an ironic source of comfort and hope because it is the beginning of discovery. For the Christian, it is even more. It is the beginning of trust. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (v. 36). If even the Son of Man has been left in the dark, then what is left to do but cling to the promise God gives? Our future belongs to God. Time is in God’s hands. And God’s future is pushing all things into his reign of justice, mercy, and peace. All we really need to know is that we are one day closer to the Last Day than we were yesterday. “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers” (Rom 13:11).

And perhaps our not-knowledge of everything else is divinely intended to drive us, again and again, to simply that point: to trust God’s promise that time is in his hands. “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (v. 42). Keep awake not so that you may know the day. Keep awake so that your whole life may be prepared for all the ways God will keep his promises in your midst now.

“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected
hour” (v. 44). Be ready not so that we can expect the exact hour, but so that our lives may be attuned to the imagination of God at work in ordinary routines.

And that is the bottom line: Christ’s eschatological teaching—particularly in Matthew—directs us not toward predicting the future, but toward how we ought to live our lives in the holiness of advent expectation (think of the last judgment of the sheep and the goats in chapter 25). As today’s epistle reading exemplifies, we are made ready so that we might “love one another.”

I wonder what it would be like if, somehow, Christmas could come at a different time every year. We would still plan for it, still take the day off, still have the same celebrations, it just wouldn’t necessarily happen on December 25. All we would know is that it would happen sometime in December. And one morning we would wake up and the TV or radio would announce: “Today’s the day! Merry Christmas!” How would we plan differently? How would our gift-giving and our holiday routines change? How would we receive the day? The coming of Christ is ever and always a surprise. And to those who trust the promise of God, it is filled with the thrill of joy.

Travis J. Scholl

Historically Specific Theology

Matthew begins by writing, “and in those days.” Recalling that chapter divisions are later additions and (sometimes) unhelpful, I would encourage the following understanding: there is no “break” between chapters 2 and 3. Even though we know that there is a gap of several decades, Matthew’s narrative flows seamlessly. The “days” of John the Baptizer’s ministry are the same as “those days” of chapter 2. And to be specific, those are the days of fulfillment when the OT promises to Israel are finally happening—in Jesus. John’s ministry is also part and parcel of the unique moment in history when God’s promises to and through Israel on behalf of the world begin to come true. The fulfillment theme is made explicit through the Isaiah 40:3 quotation, and it is implicit in the description of John that shows that he looks like the long-promised Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8; Mal 3:1, 23; Mt 11:7–15).

The figure of John is introduced, and his basic message is summarized: “Repent, for the reign of heaven has come near” (3:2). The reign of heaven is not a place (the default meaning of the English “kingdom”), and it is certainly not an internal experience. Rather, it is the kingly deeds of God long foretold and long awaited; the “reign of heaven” (= reign of God) is God’s intervention, his “reigning.” God has broken into human history through the one whom John is announcing. Even more than this, it is the beginning of the end of all things, as history’s consummation already intrudes into the present time.

John’s call to repentance refers in the first place to what we might call “being converted.” As Jesus’s teaching will make clear, the people in Judea and Galilee can be
generally described as the “lost sheep which are the house of Israel” (10:6; 15:24). Thus John’s preaching (and Jesus’s after him) is both unexpected and radical. John is no “covenental nomist,” who believes that most, if not all, Jews were in a saving covenantal relationship with their God. No, a radical turning must happen, and that because God has now, in Jesus, begun to do his kingly deeds of restoring all things. God’s power is at work, for there is a great response to John’s preaching and John’s baptism. Many come, acknowledging their need for conversion and confessing their sins—the very sins from which Jesus has come to same them (Mt 1:21).

Religious leaders also come, however, and in the form of an unlikely alliance. Pharisees and Sadducees come together—but only together because they have come to examine John’s baptism. John, however, denounces them in the fiercest terms, for he perceives no true repentance. Descent from Abraham means nothing. God’s judgment is surely coming, and those without fruit-full repentance will be cut down and destroyed. Indeed, John announces the coming of the agent of God’s judgment, both for salvation and for destruction. As powerful as John’s ministry and baptism are, he knows of one who will, on the Last Day, baptize with the Holy Spirit (for final salvation) and with fire (for final condemnation). The time is urgent; God has begun to act. Human response can only be to confess sins, turn to God and look for what he is going to do through his agent.

Contemporary/Homiletical Application

The reading does not reveal “timeless theological truths.” It proclaims the time when God began a work, a new work that is still going on. Proper proclamation must somehow invite the congregation to embrace the understanding that God is the Lord of history and that the congregation’s life, and the members’ lives, are merely (but not unimportantly!) located in the flow of what God is doing for the world.

Long ago (to us), John announced that God had begun a new thing. The call to repentance reveals that it was into a broken and rebellious world that God’s new deeds in Jesus had penetrated. The ultimate goal of God’s reign in Jesus is the Last Day, when separation of repentant from rebellious will take place.

Christian congregations must have (or regain) a sense of their temporal location in the plan of God for the world. God in Jesus, through the Spirit and his means, is still at work in the world even as that world continues in rebellion. Where Jesus is present—in the gospel and the sacraments—God is reigning to call a people together as a community to be salt and light for the world (5:13–16). The Last Day is coming near, when all will finally be put right—God’s repentant people will be known and his stubborn enemies will be turned away into the hell of judgment. Nothing matters but a response to John’s message; nothing matters but to repent and to embrace Jesus in faith.

Christians will acknowledge again the need for God to reign over and repair the world; and to reign over and repair their lives. Christians will also marvel and rejoice over God’s unexpected reign in Jesus. As Matthew (and the whole NT) proclaim, God’s mighty agent of judgment has come in astonishing and unexpected ways—to be baptized in the place of sinners (3:13–17) and ultimately to suffer and die for their sins.
God vindicated his Son, and now the Son’s work continues in the world—in the congregation—as God’s people wait for the day.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs

Advent 3 • Matthew 11:2–15 • December 12, 2010

Textual Notes

Two phrases are problematic in this text. First, Jesus seems to diminish John in verse 11. So who is the “greatest?” Greatness in the kingdom is the opposite of what is considered greatness outside of it. The greatest are those who serve (Mt 20:26; 23:11) but above all—directly answering the question “who is the greatest”—is the little child (Mt 18:1–4). A “child” does not represent cuteness, innocence, purity, or any such modern western ideas of a child. Rather, in near-eastern culture a child is one who cannot offer anything, needs constant care and supervision, and is a burden until he can do something useful to support the family (see the recent Concordia Commentary on Matthew by Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs). So in the kingdom the “greatest” are those who most need care and are most a burden—exactly the people Jesus was serving by opening eyes and ears and making the lame walk. Those to whom honor and attention are to be given are the weakest in the world. John was a mighty preacher, indeed a prophet, but the powerful preacher is not the one in the kingdom of heaven who should be receiving the attention. Instead of questioning Jesus, John should be serving him and others; instead of worrying about John, the crowds should be worrying about the suffering ones in their midst, for in serving them the kingdom of heaven is evident.

Second, this kingdom of heaven “undergoes violence, and violent people try to snatch it away” (11:12). The immediate subject of this comment is John himself, who announced the kingdom and suffered violence and ultimately death from violent people who try to destroy (a conative present) the kingdom. So it is with Jesus, whose preaching and service is questioned and rejected, and ultimately who will be put death—but his kingdom will not be conquered. This is not a condemnation of those who try to battle their way into the kingdom (though of course that is not the nature of this kingdom, which cannot be taken for oneself), but an explanation of what has happened to John and will happen to Jesus (and ultimately his followers; Mt 5:11; 23:34).

“Unfiltered Jesus”

Pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, lowest common denominator. A Big Mac tastes the same in Peking or Peoria. A Budweiser tastes the same in Fargo or Florida. Lowes, Applebee’s, and Target can be found clustered together in big boxes along the highways that head out of every city in America. Nothing is unique, distinctive. Jesus Christ is often thrown into our homogenization process. He is made to look like other religious figures; his teaching is reduced to Oprah-esque spirituality and Dr. Phil-ish advice. He becomes comfortable, undemanding.
What was John thinking in his question sent to Jesus? Was he disillusioned because the promised kingdom didn’t come in time to keep him out of prison? Did he want a flashier, fire-and-brimstone Messiah? The winnowing fork is in his hand (Mt 3:11–12), but the chaff is not being burnt up soon enough? Whatever the reason, Jesus didn’t match his preconceived ideas. For him, Jesus was expected to do what all other messiahs—past, present, and future—would be expected to do: Destroy our enemies and make us prosper. Jesus, of course, did not come to do what all other messiahs were expected to do. Rather than go to the top and take his faithful with him as the new rulers, authorities, and powerful, he goes to the lowest—the blind, lame, deaf, poor (even the dead!), and lifts them up. You want to know what this reign of God is all about? The least will be served. Look! It is already happening! (Mt 11:2–6).

Jesus then turns on the crowds (11:7), for neither were their expectations being met. John was popular. Crowds went out to him (Mt 3:5–6). But what did they go out to see? A celebrity? A fad? Had the preaching of repentance accomplished its goal? The crowds, like their preacher John, were not responding to Jesus’s ministry any better than John. The crowds’ adulation of John was not enough. He was the forerunner, THE prophet promised at the coming of the great and terrible Day of the Lord. And indeed, the winnowing fork is in Jesus’s hand (Mt 11:9–14). But it is not intended for others. It is intended for you: he who has ears, let him hear! Judgment is at hand! (Mt 13:9, 16). You filtered out what you wanted from John and his message. And so you filtered out what you wanted from the Messiah he announced.

Yet John was indeed a prophet. He came to announce the in-breaking of the kingdom of heaven, and with that announcement a call to repent. This kingdom does not match expectations; neither our expectations of victory and glory, nor the expectations of those who wish to establish themselves as king and so seek to destroy the kingdom of heaven. But this kingdom will not be conquered (Mt 16:18). The kingdom ours remaineth.

To what are we called in this text? To hear again the message to repent, to turn to this king and receive his forgiveness. And, as heirs of his kingdom, to have the filters taken off our lenses and see the least as those whom we are called to serve in anticipation of the full revealing of that kingdom on the Last Day (Mt 25:31–46). And at that feast there will be nothing filtered or homogenized, only full-bodied Jesus.

Jeffrey A. Kloha

Advent 4 • Matthew 1:18–25 • December 19, 2010

We were driving home from a Wednesday evening Advent service when my three-year-old daughter announced from her car seat, “I’m afraid of angels.” Her mother and I, in mild shock that our daughter should express such a sentiment, asked, “Why are you afraid of angels?” “I’m afraid they’ll talk to me,” she answered. Then we realized that all the Sunday school stories leading up to Christmas involved angels. The angels talked to people, and my daughter was afraid angels would talk to her.
And in one sense, she was right to be afraid. We should be afraid that angels will speak to us. When they speak in the Christmas story, whether it is here to Joseph, in chapter 2 to the Magi, or to Mary in Luke 2, lives are turned upside down and inside out and nothing is ever the same again. We should be afraid that angels will speak to us if we value worldly success and security or the honor and acclaim of society.

Joseph certainly had his own honor and good standing in mind when he decided to break his engagement to Mary privately. But he was primarily, we are told, concerned for her honor and perhaps for her very life. What Joseph learned from the angel in a dream was that his promise to wed Mary mattered, and had to be fulfilled, but only because it was part of God’s plan to fulfill his far greater promise to bring into the world a savior from sin and death. This conception was like no other conception in all of human history because the child of Mary was the Immanuel that Isaiah promised.

We don’t know exactly what happened after the dream—how or if Joseph tried to explain the miracle to relatives or friends—but from a human point of view this was far from the solution to his problems. His problems, which would include a flight for the baby’s life, were only beginning.

That’s why Luther talks about this text as expressing the turbulent side of the Christmas story. Matthew introduces the cross to the narrative of Jesus’s birth, Luther says. “When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.’ Here we have the text of the Creed: Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Matthew then introduces the cross, namely, the confusion of Joseph, into the conception of Christ. For as soon as the Christian life is begun or anything else of Christ, there next thing the cross is at hand.” (Contio in Vigilia Nativitatis Christi, WA 27: 475–76)

The cross is at hand in our lives, too. Like Joseph we have the word of God in the midst of trouble and turbulence. The promise spoken by Isaiah and repeated by the angel to Joseph is not for him alone but is good news for all people: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel” (1:23). The promise stands sure even when the Christmas season comes amidst suffering and loss. Indeed, the story of Joseph as told in Matthew serves as an antidote to an overly sentimental Christmas. Yet what we have in this text is not a bucket of cold water that douses our celebration. Rather, we have the living water of God’s promises fulfilled—the real reason we celebrate.

Paul Robinson

Christmas 1 • Matthew 2:13–23 • December 26, 2010

Talk about good news, bad news. The day after Christmas (“On the second day of Christmas, my true love gave to me…”), and already the evangelist has swept up the holy family to Egypt, and Herod is massacring the innocents of Bethlehem.
Of course, as much as the news might wake us out of our two-turtle-dove stupor, the news was worse for Mary and Joseph and even worse for the mothers of Bethlehem. Not that they probably expected different; they were used to life under the thumb of a paranoid king and a ruthless empire. It is we who experience the culture shock of expecting those in authority to protect the littlest and the least among us but then hearing otherwise. Thank God that they do. Or do they? Perhaps that’s another question for another time.

Back to the text. There is tremendous upheaval and movement in these ten verses of Matthew—from Bethlehem to Egypt, back to Judea, before we end up in Galilee in the backwater town of Nazareth. And all these movements, as well as the massacre enveloped within them, carry prophetic weight. This shouldn’t surprise us, given that this is Matthew’s telling of the Gospel story. Nevertheless, these prophetic reverberations remind us that these are not isolated events and their cause-and-effect are not random.

Indeed, despite the genocidal horror, history is on the side of the little family making their way to Egypt. Egypt: the land of exodus and the Bible’s deep symbol of otherness. New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell notes the ironic parallels in Matthew’s account of the flight into (not out of) Egypt: “Matthew tells the story of the holy family’s flight to Egypt with incredible irony. In the exodus story, babies were slaughtered in Egypt by the wicked pharaoh. But now, righteous Jews must flee to Egypt to escape a massacre of infants in their own land (Mt 2:16–18). It is not, of course, a detour without precedent: another Joseph, who was also guided by God through dreams, once brought his family here (Gn 37–50). And, as it turns out, Jesus’s sojourn here is a brief one.”

Matthew’s Jesus will rise from Egypt, just like Moses and the wilderness-wanderers before him, and will settle in Galilee, almost outside the boundaries of the “true” Israel of his day, so that there will be no stranger or little one left behind by his messianic mission. He’d see to that. Of course, when the angel tells Joseph, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead” (v. 20), that’s not without irony either. It’s exactly that messianic mission that will get him killed 30 years later.

And I wonder, too, just how foreign—how shocking—this text would sound if our ears weren’t North American. Forced migration and mass violence are not ancient problems; they are problems that the Christian church in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East is confronting as we preach. How comforting it must sound to their ears to know that Jesus started his life as both an immigrant and a refugee. And this text rings in their ears with an urgency that is, shall we say, prophetic.

Indeed, if Matthew and the prophets have anything to tell us about the Christ child—and about what life is like following him—it is that our lives will never be “settled.”

Travis J. Scholl

Endnote

So soon after the sometimes sentimental scenes of the infant Jesus we cherish at Christmas, this unique account of Jesus as a twelve-year-old boy accelerates us toward the mature ministry of the Savior. The sense of leaving infancy behind and jumping ahead toward Jesus’s mission is integral to the text (rather than an artifact of the lectionary); the so-called “infancy narrative” of Luke’s gospel (1:5–2:52) does not paint us a Hallmark portrait of Jesus but rather prepares us to witness and believe his life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection for our salvation.

Verse 40 actually concludes the preceding section of the infancy narrative, but the lectionary reading includes it to help us connect this story of Jesus as a growing child with the preceding passage in which he was first brought to the temple in Jerusalem. Both that earlier passage and this present one conclude with Jesus returning to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph and growing physically and spiritually (vv 51–52, compare vv 39–40).

While Arthur Just (in his Concordia Commentary on Luke) and Luke Timothy Johnson (and others) find eschatological significance in the phrasing “after three days” in verse 46 and see here an allusion to Jesus’s resurrection, the wording in Greek seems to be a more ordinary designation of time and does not necessarily carry that fuller theological weight.

What does stand out theologically is the answer Jesus gives when his mother chides him for the worry he has caused his human parents. They should have known, he says, “that I must be in my Father’s house” (49). A few points can be noted briefly. First, as Joseph Fitzmyer points out, this is the first time Luke uses the impersonal dei (“it is necessary”) in his gospel. For Luke this usage has a special connotation which connects this necessity to God the Father’s plan of salvation, which is the impulse behind everything Jesus says and does. We may also note that the Greek places the personal pronoun me in final (emphatic) position, which accents that this saving plan of the Father centers uniquely and emphatically in Jesus.

The phrase usually translated “in my Father’s house” (en tois tou patros mou) is more literally “among those [things/people] of my Father,” and is sometimes rendered something like “about my Father’s business.” While either translation is possible, the context stresses the location (i.e., the temple) where Mary and Joseph found Jesus, so it is best to translate it as the ESV does.

These first recorded words of Jesus are an unmistakable claim to being the Son of God, a claim which echoes and confirms 1:32 and 35. Mary and Joseph do not understand (v. 50) what Jesus has told them in spite of those earlier predictions and promises, but Luke expects us as readers of his gospel to understand by faith what they were unable to fathom at the time. For, as the closing verses show, Jesus does leave the temple and go to Nazareth with his human parents. In other words, the unveiling of Jesus as a boy in temple was neither complete nor permanent; he returned to a “normal” life of a twelve-year-old Israelite boy in first-century Galilee.
This episode from Jesus’s childhood is a glimpse (but not a complete revelation) into the deep truth about the person and work of Jesus, God’s Son. Here we have what I. Howard Marshall called a “secret epiphany,” a brush with things which are not yet fully revealed in these events, but which God’s insistent mercy drives forward to their fulfillment in the passion of God’s Son for the salvation of the world.

God’s self-revelation in Christ is a glorious mystery and now a public proclamation in all the world. But it is not self-evident, not even for those who saw these things with their own eyes, and in whose ears God’s promises had rung. There is more here than meets the eye, and we are still unpacking the inexhaustible Christmas gift from our Father.

William W. Schumacher

Baptism of Our Lord • Matthew 3:13–17 • January 9, 2011

Still Waters Run Deep

Introduction: Over time you get to know some people well enough to know how they’ll react. You have a good idea how friends, family, and co-workers will react in certain situations. Some people you know keep a calm composure on the outside but inside are deeply intense. “Still waters run deep,” we say of such people. Today’s gospel lesson, the story of Jesus’s baptism, shows us that “still waters run deep” describes our Savior. As you learn from this gospel of the quiet resolve of Jesus to be your Savior, his Spirit will give you a calm composure to face life.

The text in context: John the Baptist had a very good understanding of Jesus’s mission. John knew that he was prophetically preparing the way (3:3, 11). He preached the coming Day of the Lord (3:7, 10), urged repentance and amended lives (3:8), knew the Messiah would bestow the Spirit (3:11), and, in John’s Gospel, identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Knowing so much about Jesus, John was surprised by Jesus’s request for baptism. “John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you but do you come to me?’” But John was about to learn that “still waters run deep.” This was the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, and he wanted John and us all to put the specifics of our religious knowledge into clear focus of his saving mission. “Let it be so now,” Jesus said. “It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” So they went down into the running waters of the Jordan for baptism.

The teaching: of all the people in your life, Jesus is the one you need to know the best, but that’s not easy since we don’t see him. What do we learn from Jesus’s desire to be baptized? Jesus wanted to be baptized to “fulfill all righteousness.” Now John had been preaching about the people’s lack of righteousness, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?” You know your sins and I know mine. The Bible promises judgment upon our sins (Rom 6:23a; 2 Cor 5:10; Ps 143:2). So John had drawn the correct conclusion: Jesus didn’t need baptism for the repentance of his sins
because Jesus doesn’t have any sins. Or does he? Didn’t he come to carry your sins and mine? By being baptized, Jesus began his public ministry, showing that he steps into our unrighteousness in order to bring us God’s righteousness. Instead of ushering in an “apocalypse now,” Jesus gives us an advance look at how God’s righteousness comes to us: by carrying our sins all the way to the cross, his work of forgiveness and life validated by the resurrection, and the benefits given us by the Spirit. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Application: “Still waters run deep.” That’s true of Jesus, and it can be true of you the more you get to know your Savior. As a Christian you may think you know Jesus pretty well. You know the basics of his life, not unlike John knowing true things about Jesus. But Jesus is deeper than any of us know. Troubles come our way in this sinful world. Sometimes they are troubles that our own sins have brought upon us. Other times our troubles come from the unrighteousness of other people. Tuck today’s gospel into your mind. Jesus’s ministry steps into our unrighteous world to give us God’s righteousness. Don’t confuse Jesus’s silence for lack of caring. Don’t conclude that your prayer for help is not being answered. Jesus was baptized to assure you that he is standing with you. Trust the promise! His care for you runs deep. In all the unrighteousness of our lives, Jesus brings us God’s righteousness. He brought that to you in the waters of your baptism. Jesus’s presence gives you calm composure to face daily life, and one day he will bring you to the still waters of the Lord’s eternal house. Until then, your spiritual waters can run deep because the most important person of all stands with you.

Dale A. Meyer

Epiphany 2 • John 1:29–42a • January 16, 2011

Because They Have Seen?

Seeing is believing. Or so the saying goes. In the gospel of John, however, there is much to be said for the suggestion that what the gospel is meaning to extol is hearing not seeing. If one is to see what only the mind and the heart—what only the “eyes of faith”—can see about Jesus; if one is to know who Jesus really is and what it is that the Lamb of God has done to take away the sins of the world (1:29), one must have ears that are ready to hear what eyes can in no way see. “Have you believed, because you have seen?” asks Jesus (20:29). Or has something else happened? Something more? From beginning to end, St. John’s gospel consistently and compellingly indicates that something else must indeed happen if any are to know Jesus of Nazareth (1:45–46) as God and Lord (20:28).

The Testifier

So early on, on the day that Jesus first appears in St. John’s gospel (1:29–34; cf. 1:19–28), he appears to the one whose purpose in life was to do no more and no less
than to testify to the coming one—the greater one—so that all might believe through Jesus (1:6–8). So when the testifier “saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me’” (1:29–30), the testifier said this because he knew that Jesus was not just greater but was, in fact, the long-awaited, much-anticipated greatest-of-all one (ὅτι πρώτος μου ἦν 1:30; cf. ὁ πρώτος in Rv 2:8; 22:13). He said this—he knew this—about Jesus not because he had seen it in Jesus. He said this because someone had already told it to him, because he had already heard it from God himself. At first, declares the testifier, “I did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, so that he (the greater one) might be revealed to Israel” (1:31). “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him” (1:32). But even then “I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit’” (1:33). Then, and only then, did he know him. Then, and only then, did he proclaim, “this is the Son of God” (1:34). From the Father to the testifier a word is spoken, a word is heard, so that it might be taken to heart and believed, so that it might in turn be repeated, so that it might be heard again and again and again.

The First Followers of Jesus

So the next day, “John was again standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as Jesus was walking by and said (again), ‘Behold, the lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, ‘What are you seeking?’ And they said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’” (1:35–38). For, at the behest of their former teacher, John, at his word (cf. 3:29–30), their wish was to go—to stay—with this greater one; their wish was to ally themselves with him, to be his disciples. And so Jesus “said to them, ‘Come and you will see.’ So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him” (1:39). From John to his own disciples (the first of Jesus’s disciples) a word is again spoken, a word is heard, so that from these to others it might be repeated, it might be heard, again and again and again.

The Subsequent Followers of Jesus

So, “One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which means Christ). (And) He brought him to Jesus” (1:40–42). In other words, he continued the pattern of repeating what he himself had heard to others so that they too might hear, so that they too might be brought—might come—to Jesus. For “the blessed” are those who believe not on account of what they have seen (20:29), which can only take a person so far, but on account of what they have heard, “on account of the word” (17:20) that is given so that it might be passed from generation to generation until the day that finally all will be blessed to “see him just as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). For now, however, it suffices—for now it is everything—that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;
but these things are written so that (hearing them!) you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). 

Bruce Schuchard

Epiphany 3 • Matthew 4:12–25 • January 23, 2011

How rich can a text be? How many options can one text give a preacher? The richness of options is almost overwhelming as God speaks to us as preachers and to his people.

Following his temptation, Jesus begins his Galilean ministry. In summary and rapid-fire form, Matthew ushers in Jesus’s work. In this summary, we see what Jesus did in his ministry and what we can do as his followers.

What are some of the options for the preacher?

1. Jesus fulfills the prophecies found in the Hebrew scriptures (4:12–16).
2. Jesus preaches repentance and the advent of the kingdom of heaven (4:17).
3. Jesus calls his disciples as people who will be “fishers of men,” evangelists who follow Jesus (4:18–22).
4. Jesus teaches, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom (4:23).
5. Jesus heals “every disease and illness among the people” (4:23–24).

Any of these options can become thematic for the sermon of the day. An oft-used and important theme is discipleship.

Jeff Gibbs highlights some of these themes in the Concordia Journal, Volume 21, Number 4, October 1995, pp. 439–442. Gibbs’s focus on the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah Son of God (4:12–16), his emphasis on “the reign of heaven (which is) the long-awaited eschatological intervention of God, the king of kings, whereby he will defeat the powers of satan and evil and bring about his long-promised reign” (pp. 439–440) (4:17–23), and the calling of disciples (4:18–22) become central to his suggestions for homiletical work. Highlighting discipleship, Gibbs writes: “The first thing that Jesus does is what he desires to do until the end of the age: to make disciples…. Even as he proclaimed the gospel message (4:23) that in himself lies God’s power to save both now and on the Last Day, so does he still earnestly desire that gospel to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth” (p. 441).

Quentin Wesselschmidt, sainted colleague, underscores the call of the disciples (4:8–22) in working with this text in the Concordia Journal, Volume 30, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 398–399. “This text provides the pastor with an excellent opportunity to reflect on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, to weigh the demands, and count the cost of discipleship. The pastor can also call attention to the joys of being a follower of Jesus Christ. An excellent resource for further material is Martin
Discipleship is a wonderful theme. It points out that Jesus brings together people to be witnesses to him. His work is what he does alone, but his work includes gathering others who carry the work on. It is, thus, our task as his called disciples to follow him and use his ministry as our example.

But what work do we carry on? Preaching repentance? Certainly! Calling and equipping other disciples? Yes! Teaching God’s Word? Absolutely! Healing diseases?

More difficult in twenty-first century America might be preaching or teaching on Matthew’s witness to Jesus’s healing ministry. In what ways, as followers of Jesus, do we follow him in his healing of disease?

Try out Garth Ludwig’s *Order Restored: A Biblical Interpretation of Health, Medicine, and Healing*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999). CPH says, “This book urges a return to the healing ministry by ministers, congregations, and Christians, through prayer, faith and worship…. The author describes disease as disorder, so healing requires the restoration of order in one’s life. He separates disease and illness and notes that a person can be cured of their illness by restoring order through faith and belief while still having the disease” (www.cph.org).

Or, although out of print, see Martin Scharleman’s *Healing and Redemption* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968) for another excellent resource.


**Suggested Outline**

I. Jesus’s healing ministry in the Bible  
II. Illness and disease today  
III. The church’s healing tasks in the here and now  
IV. Our ultimate healing in Christ.

Since the healing ministry is so easily misunderstood, a careful study before preaching and teaching about it is quite important. But that it is easily misunderstood is not the rationale or excuse to run from addressing the question of health, healing, and salvation. As we walk through the life and ministry of Jesus, healing of the whole person is a central feature.

Bruce M. Hartung

**Epiphany 4 • Matthew 5:1–12 • January 30, 2011**

In this pericope, Jesus is proclaiming the blessings of his reign to those gathered around him on the mountain. His words address a repentant, lowly people with the assurance of God’s presence and reign over them (in Jesus: Immanuel) and the promise of eschatological blessings. These blessings which are yet to come are so rich,
profound, and complete that they invite Jesus’s lowly hearers into present joy, hope, and transformation of life.

For helpful exegesis of and theological reflection upon these beatitudes, see Jeffrey A. Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1 (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis: Concordia, 2006). Scriptural texts which offer important background or shared themes include Psalms 24 and 37; 1 John 3; Revelation 21–22; and Matthew 1–4, especially the temptation narrative in 4:1–11.

This text is appointed during Epiphany because it reveals the nature of the divine reign which is breaking into human history in the person of Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’s kingship has been a prominent theme through the first four chapters. In chapter 1, Jesus is called the “son of David” (1:1) who is then described as τὸν Ἰακώβον τὸν βασιλέα. In chapter 2, the magi come asking “Herod the king” (2:1) the question, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” In chapter 3, John the Baptist proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” (3:2). John further specifies the nature of this heavenly reign by tying it to the “one who will come after me” (3:11). In Chapter 4, the devil tempts Jesus on a high mountain by showing him πάσας τὰς βασιλείας τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν (4:8)—a kind of parody of the true king and the kingdom which he will proclaim on the mount in 5:1–12.

Finally, in the verses immediately preceding this pericope, Jesus goes about proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” (4:17) and preaching τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας (4:23). “If the reign of heaven/God” stands near, then the God of heaven has come down to reign, to perform his kingly deeds. Thus, the reign of God is not primarily a place. Rather, it is a divine action that occurs where Jesus is, through his words and deeds” (Gibbs 48–49).

Space prohibits a detailed discussion of each of the nine Beatitudes, as time will likely prohibit this in a sermon, but a few overall observations may be useful:

Present and Future. Matthew 5:3b and 5:10b bracket the other blessings with a repeated, present tense assurance: “... for theirs is (ἐστὶν) the kingdom/reign of heaven.” Jesus’s other declarations here are generally future passive, implying God’s action for the people on the last day. (“They will inherit the earth” in 5:5, while grammatically future active (κληρονομήσουσιν), is conceptually passive. “They will see God” in 5:8 likewise seems an exception, but might be understood as “… will be permitted/enabled to see God.”) Jesus’s words, then, stand as a two-fold proclamation to those who are spiritually poor and lowly: “First, you should know that Jesus, God’s appointed king, has come for you and is already now with you and reigning over you. Second, in spite of present weakness and struggles, you can trust that the day of the Lord is coming and that he will act decisively for you on that day. He will comfort you (v. 4) and give you a share in the eternally-renewed earth (v. 5). He will give you the satisfaction of justice, things being “made right” for you and others (δικαιοσύνη v. 6). He will show you his mercy in the final judgment (v. 7). He will give you the privilege of seeing him in his glory and beauty (v.8). He will own you as his own child (v. 9).

Faith, endurance, and joy. These are the chief responses which the rhetoric of the Beatitudes solicits. Jesus’s declarations here do not summon his hearers to strive for
poverty of spirit, lowliness, etc. Instead, he addresses those who, in part by his earlier preaching of repentance, find themselves to be spiritually helpless, without status and without excuse before God. Jesus proclaims the good news that he has come to be a gracious king precisely for such helpless, empty-handed sinners.

From “they” to “you.” The first eight blessings are spoken in the third person, but the ninth changes to second person address: “Blessed are you (plural) when they revile/insult you … because of me.” While this change may represent only an oral cue that a list is coming to an end, it may also function to invite “outsiders” to see the promises of Jesus and his reign as their own. For the hearer, “for them” has suddenly become “for me.” This change in address, then, may add rhetorical emphasis to this last blessing (5:11–12), which would also serve to highlight the desired response to this blessing and the Beatitudes as a whole: Ἐρεῖ—Rejoice!

Suggested Outline: “The Blessings of Our King”

I. Introduction: Jesus has come to reign as king.
   A. Not Herod (Mt 2).
   B. Not Satan (Mt 4).
   C. But Jesus, the Son of David, the king (Mt 1).
   D. He has come to bring near the reign of God (Mt 4:17, 23).
   E. His kingly blessings are won for us through his death and resurrection—he is the crucified king (Mt 27:37, 42) and the risen king (28:18–20).

II. To whom does Jesus bring his blessings?
   A. The poor in spirit.
   B. The mourning.
   C. The meek/lowly.
   D. Those left hungry for justice in the world.

III. What blessings will this king bring? (Focus on two or three of the future promises.)

IV. When will the blessings be given?
   A. He has come near and reigns over us already now.
   B. The focus and fullness of his kingdom promises is the last day.
   C. And so we watch, we endure, we rejoice—showing mercy and making peace.

Tom Egger

Epiphany 5 • Matthew 5:13–20 • February 6, 2011

The Text’s Limits: A Strong Suggestion

Although the lectionary has put together 5:13–16 and 5:17–20, I would strongly suggest separating them. A very solid case can be made for the view that 5:13–16
adhere closely to the Beatitudes (5:3–12). On the other hand, 5:17–20 introduce a new and significant topic in the Sermon on the Mount and mark a transition and introduction to the six so-called “antitheses” found in 5:21–48. To attempt to preach one unified sermon on 5:13–20 would be, I am convinced, practically impossible, and I recommend against it. In the brief comments that now follow, I will focus my attention entirely on 5:13–16, the “salt and light” sayings that apply to Jesus’s disciples who have just heard the Beatitudes (5:3–12).

Jesus’s Teaching: The Identity and Purpose of His Disciples

The doubly-metaphorical proclamation that “you, plural” are the salt of the earth and the light of the world addresses those who have just heard the nine-fold declaration of “blessed” in the Beatitudes. It would be folly to try to believe and live out the identity and purpose given in 5:13–16 without the power of blessing found in 5:3–12! Two comments on the Beatitudes will have to suffice; more extensive comments on the Beatitudes can be found in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, Matthew 1:1—11:1, pages 234–256. First, Beatitudes 1–4 (Mt 5:3–6) proclaim that human creatures who have nothing in themselves to offer God nevertheless receive all the gifts that have come through Jesus. To sum up, all the blessings of God’s reign in Jesus are given to the spiritually bankrupt, and that is why they are now profoundly and eternally blessed. Second, Beatitudes 5–8 (Mt 5:7–12) pronounce further blessing upon Jesus’s disciples who, by virtue of their relationship with him, have begun to be merciful, have received pure hearts, now work for Gospel peace, and may even suffer persecution. From beginning to end, the Beatitudes presuppose the “preaching of the Law”; only those who have begun to repent (3:2; 4:17!) can hear 5:3–12 aright. For such, Jesus speaks powerful, strengthening, reorienting gospel, both to Jesus’s original disciples and to all who will believe their message today.

In light of that blessedness, Jesus’s words in 5:13–16 to his disciples—all believers—can be understood to be a summary description and application of the doctrine of vocation; the words apply wherever you live. Both metaphors (since they are parallel, and the text shows no signs of intending a contrast) are positive ones. Both metaphors express an “objective” genitive. “You salt the earth; you enlighten the world.” The metaphorical use of “salt” in the scriptures and in the ancient world prevents any interpretation that is too specific: “flavoring,” “preserving,” etc. The picture, however, is just as positive as the second one. Light shines in darkness and shows the way; it alerts one to the presence of danger. Ultimately, the light of good works in the lives of Jesus’s disciples reveals the character of God the Father.

Jesus’s words do contain a warning and a possible rebuke. Although a literal impossibility, the Lord speaks of salt that has lost its flavor; he holds out the absurd arrangement of a lamp that is lit, only to be hidden under a basket. There is a danger that his disciples would forget or misunderstand the calling that they have received as those who have been blessed, forgiven, saved, and called. Lest disciples begin to forget, Jesus’s words are direct and clear: “Let your light shine in the presence of people” (5:16a). The nature of the light is also clear: “your good works” (5:16b). The purpose of
shining of such light? That people will see the good work and recognize it as testimony to the heavenly Father. This purpose is to motivate what Christians do, individually and corporately. Whether or not the purpose comes to pass is up to God.

This reading thus invites the congregation to grasp by faith its identity as a community and to live not for themselves, but for others and for the world. In the Lutheran tradition (when it is badly misunderstood), “good works” can almost come to have a “bad name.” Not so with Jesus. Having filled his empty disciples with blessing (5:3–12), he names them salt and light and sends them out to their vocations and their communities as those who bless others with the goal of revealing what God, the Father of the Lord Jesus, is like. Just as surely as salt is a blessing and light brings hope and clarity, so Jesus’s disciples, by their good deeds, show others who their Father is.

Jeffrey A. Gibbs
BOOK REVIEWS
MARTIN LUTHER: A Life

Martin Luther remains one of the most popular subjects for biographers, besides Jesus Christ. Why another biography? Why such a short overview of one of the most influential individuals in the world? The answer is found in the book itself. Paul Robinson has provided a concise, yet insightful review of Luther’s life and work for the general reader as well as for the interested student. As a part of the Library of World Biography series, Robinson has culled the important features of Luther’s life with a historical perspective that engages the scholar as well as the non-professional.

Arranged into five chapters around central chronological themes of Luther’s life—monk (1483–1511), professor (1512–1519), reformer (two chapters: 1520–1521 and 1522–1529), and preacher (1530–1546)—this work follows the pattern of earlier biographers, yet offers creative interpretative lenses for further study by selectively placing Luther’s ideas into their broader historical contexts. Each chapter (except for chapter 4, which is probably subsumed under 3) begins with a brief introduction to that era in Luther’s lifetime and concludes with a quotation from Luther himself (again except for chapter 4) under the subtitle, “Luther in His Own Words.”

Unique in this booklet is a section entitled “Writing History,” which gives a historian’s view of the context of Luther’s life or a manner of historical reporting in that time or which reflects historical issues raised by scholars regarding that particular period.

Selecting important events in the life of such an active churchman and profound theologian as Martin Luther is obviously onerous, yet Paul Robinson has done a yeoman’s job in carrying out the task in a winsome manner. Chapters 1 and 2 flow nicely as they explore the years up to and including the indulgence controversy and its consequent papal responses. Putting the best interpretation on the motivations of Luther’s opponents, Robinson underscores the profoundly personal, yet richly nuanced rationale that led to Luther’s break with the church as evidenced in the Leipzig Disputation.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide much meat, yet carefully minced, as Robinson deals with “The Reformer (1520–1521)” and “The Reformer (1522–1529).” That distinctive break in the chronology of Luther’s life enables Robinson to present an overview of the crucial issues that led to the Diet of Worms and its consequences. The latter chapter deals with formative political and theological issues which engaged Luther after Worms. A final chapter, misleadingly entitled “The Preacher (1530–1546),” deals with Luther’s activities more broadly as a churchman—the Diet of Augsburg, Peace of Nuremberg, family and university activities, and several controversies and conflicts which engaged Luther’s later years. Throughout these latter chapters, Robinson has kept his focus by neatly highlighting the various contexts of Luther’s activities and his overall focus on God’s grace.

Helpful for the novice scholar are the back materials after each chapter as well as after the final chapter. An index of sources with an explanation of their significance is provided along with
historical information on Luther’s life in English unless “no English equivalent is available” (92). These include editions of Luther’s works, biographies, background to the sixteenth century—specifically, printing, art, people—“Luther and …”, and history writing of the Reformation era. A fairly thorough chronology is followed by a beneficial glossary of key terms for the non-expert. The index, though only three pages, is well done for such a brief work.

Knowing the limits of this biography series, I have one minor criticism of this book: the lack of references to primary sources for further follow up. The helpful bibliography does not provide the sufficiently specific source references from which particular ideas are derived; this is even true for the actual quotes from Luther’s works. Some kind of brief notation of sources (either from the American Edition or the Weimarer Ausgabe) would have proven advantageous for students who should be interested in pursuing Luther’s ideas more fully.

Editions of Luther biographies will continue to be produced, especially in the coming decade as we approach the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Robinson’s book provides an evenhanded and succinct, yet readable resource for individuals interested in a brief, but detailed overview of Luther’s life and the historical impact he had on the early modern world. Luther’s life certainly was one which formed and re-formed the world as he sought to restore the resounding good news of God’s love in Christ.

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PHILIP MELANCTHON AND THE ENGLISH REFORMATION.

A revised version of his Newcastle Ph.D. dissertation, Schofield’s is not a bad book; it is even, in parts, a very welcome contribution to scholarship on the question of Lutheran influence on the English Reformation. That being said, a number of shortcomings might cause one seriously to consider whether the benefits outweigh the cost of this slim but expensive volume.

On the positive side, Schofield is to be commended for clearly outlining Melanchthon’s unsought role as a teacher of the church and his subsequent impact on the Reformation in England. He is unquestionably correct in arguing that the ecumenically minded Melanchthon, more than any other German theologian, might have made possible an Anglo-Lutheran rapprochement. He also convincingly makes the case that Henry VIII’s sporadic flirtation with the German theologians was driven not solely by diplomacy, but by a serious—if confused—interest in theology. His suggestion that Lutheranism’s failure in England was, ironically, due less to its rejection by Henry than to its later marginalization by evangelicals such as Archbishop Cranmer, is also persuasive.

Even more convincing is the concluding chapter on the religion of Elizabeth I in which Schofield highlights the Queen’s childhood education in Melanchthon’s Loci as well as her Greek and Latin tuition under Melanchthon’s former pupil John Spithovius, who would
later serve as Elizabeth’s emissary to Lutheran Denmark. It is in the person of Elizabeth that Schofield finally finds a real commitment to the Augsburg Confession; a commitment impossible by this time to implement nationally on account of the Reformed leanings of her clergy and further weakened by the death of Melanchthon himself only eighteen months after the Queen’s coronation. Nevertheless, Schofield concludes his work with the proposal that Elizabeth be deemed a “Melanchthonian” in religion.

Further kudos are deserved for Schofield’s convincing case for Thomas Cromwell’s authorship of the Ten Articles, his careful treatment of Melanchthon’s eucharistic understanding, and his highlighting of Melanchthon’s defense of Marian exiles in Lutheran lands.

What, then, is not to like? To begin with, very little of the above was previously unknown. More problematic, however, are hints that Schofield himself is unaware of this. He claims, for example, that Henry’s seeking of religious advice from European theologians is “an often overlooked aspect of Henry’s divorce crisis” (59), which is far from the case. That Schofield could make such a suggestion seems, at least in part, related to his use of sources; some of those upon which he most heavily relies, especially in early chapters, are seriously outdated. Similarly, almost wholly lacking is any real engagement with more recent authors whose research might contradict, or at least qualify, his own. While this results in a book much less polemical than might otherwise have been the case—which Melanchthon would surely appreciate—it also evades some of the most important, and most debated, historiographical questions current in English Reformation studies. With regard to Henry VIII, for instance, was it the King himself or his ministers and advisors who most closely directed the religious changes taking place during the 1530s and 1540s? Just how theologically literate was the King?

A failure to answer such questions decisively—and to challenge alternative suggestions—leads ultimately to some confusion. To note just one example: it is somewhat difficult to believe that Henry was such an amateur theologian that he could not appreciate the vast difference between the Lutheran doctrine of justification and his own (133-4), while at the same time believing that the King’s knowledge of the church fathers was so sophisticated that he consciously sought to create a church and theology in harmony with the “middle fathers” (Cyprian, Augustine, et al) rather than early fathers such as Irenaeus or later fathers such as Gregory (126).

Though there may be room for honest debate over such issues of interpretation, this is not the case with some simple factual errors that slipped by the editors. King Henry, a staunch transubstantiationist, is for example described as being “adamant that the substance of the bread and wine remained after consecration” (119). Melanchthon, conversely, is described as never having accepted predestination even in its modest, “single-predestinarian” form (xiv). Finally, and admittedly more pedantically, some awkward and anachronistic analogies occasionally mar Schofield’s otherwise clear and pleasant prose. Comparing Henry VIII to “a modern evangelical after an Alpha course” (77) or Luther to “the great former world heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammed Ali” (38) is simply more distracting than illuminating.
Such quibbles aside, it must be admitted that Schofield’s work does what its title says it will do—describe the relationship between Philip Melanchthon and the English Reformation. Even if many of its conclusions are neither new nor wholly persuasive, having them drawn together in one volume will certainly benefit a future generation of students approaching the question of sixteenth-century Anglo-Lutheran relations.

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Editor’s Note: The following reviews by Professor Reed Lessing reflect some of his latest research in anticipation of his Concordia Commentaries on Isaiah.


The book of Isaiah is one of the most complex and theologically significant books in the Hebrew Bible. Beyer’s book seeks to make its message clear and applicable for his target audience, which appears to be undergraduates at an evangelical Christian university. He structures his book by means of sidebars, chapter outlines and objectives, key terms and glossary, study questions, and suggestions for further reading. Sidebars include titles like, “The Place of the Sacrificial System in Israel’s Faith,” “The Prophets and Social Justice,” “Human Reactions to Theophanies in Scripture,” “Sennacherib’s Siege of Jerusalem,” and “Vineyard Images in Isaiah 5 and 27.”

Beyer’s interpretive strategy is to read Isaiah holistically, move to the New Testament, and then apply the text to evangelical Christian concerns. Hence, he sprinkles his book with comments like, “Isaiah’s words [66:19] anticipate the Great Commission proclaimed by the risen Jesus as he sent forth his disciples to make more disciples throughout all the world (Mt 28:18–20)” (32). In his comments on Isaiah 4:2, the author notes that this is Isaiah’s introduction to the theme of a redemptive “branch.” His discussion continues into 11:1 where the prophet states the branch’s identity as coming “from the stump of Jesse” which is a reference to David’s line (e.g., 1 Sm 16:1, 11–13). Beyer concludes with a sidebar that discusses Christ’s fulfillment of these texts and his current power as king.

Beyer’s analysis of the overall movement of Isaiah is rare, but his discussion on Isaiah 41–42 is an exception. Israel is Yahweh’s chosen servant, so the nation need not be afraid. Yahweh is with them, even though they feel like worms. His power will give them strength to accomplish his will (41:8–14). Yahweh’s ideal servant will come (42:1–9) and his Spirit will guide him to bring justice to the nations. By contrast, Israel is spiritually blind and deaf (42:18–20). They do not see or hear the plan Yahweh has for them.

Beyer’s comments on 52:13–53:12 are likewise helpful. He notes that the Isaiah Targum adds the words “the Messiah” after 52:13 which is not the only witness to this belief. Jewish rabbis, therefore, who debated early Christians, did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, but they did embrace the idea that Isaiah’s words describe a Messiah. Beyer then provides this analysis: “This
Evidence is important because sometimes one gets the impression Judaism has always maintained the servant is Israel, whereas the church has believed the servant is Jesus. Actually, both Judaism and Christianity appear to have been united for a millennium in believing that 52:13–53:12 described the Messiah. The difference of opinion lay only with the issue of the Messiah’s specific identity” (212).

An ongoing interpretive malady is that Beyer often moves too quickly to New Testament and Christian applications and therefore fails to explore an idea or theme within the book of Isaiah. Typical are his comments on 49:2 where he discusses the servant’s mouth, likened to a sharp sword. He then moves directly to Revelation 19:15, while ignoring the fuller Isaianic theme of Yahweh’s powerful word (e.g., 11:4; 40:8; 55:10–11). In his discussion on Isaiah 13:1–14:23 (the oracles against Babylon and her king) Beyer does not mention Isaiah’s later oracles against Babylon in chapters 46–47. And in his discussion on 35:5–6, which promises that the blind will see and the deaf hear, he does not matrix these words with 6:9–10 which programmatically set out Isaiah’s blind and deaf themes.

Beyer’s sidebars are one of the book’s strengths, yet rarely do they interact with ancient Near Eastern texts to shed light on Isaiah’s history, theology, and rhetoric. For example, he interprets 13:1–14:23 as oracles directed to Babylon and her king. However, it is not that simple: for during the Assyrian era Babylon possessed a prestige something like that of Rome in the Middle Ages. And so Assyrian kings like Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib were proclaimed sar Babiliki “king of Babylon.” It may be argued, therefore, that Isaiah’s oracles in 13:1–14:23 are addressed to Assyria and the Assyrian king Sargon II.

Sometimes Beyer is careless. For example, in his discussion on 52:13 he writes that many interpreters view the verbs rum and nasa’ as suggesting that the servant is more than a mere human being. His endnote, however, only cites one such scholar.

This handbook aims for simplicity, yet often ends up as overly simplistic. However, those seeking a conservative Christian overview of Isaiah will be adequately served.

R. Reed Lessing


In this revision of his 2001 dissertation at Emmanuel College under the direction of Gerald Sheppard, Randall Heskett examines messianism in the book of Isaiah. Heskett believes that interpretations “must extend to the dimensions of the scriptural scroll of Isaiah as a whole and not the prophet that we can reconstruct behind the book” (35). Interpretive problems have occurred because scholars “have atomized the text into pre-biblical traditions that antecedent the scriptural form of the book of Isaiah” (153). The focus, then, is on how the final redactors of Isaiah edited earlier texts and made them expressions of messianic hope.

In his first chapter, the author offers a definition of messianism which guides
his study. “Our definition of a Messiah requires that a person or persons offer a solution in an extraordinary way to activate and restore within this world the promises made to David after the monarchy has ended” (3). While Heskett grounds his study on this definition of messianism, he offers only one page to defend the position. It would have been helpful if he had further defended his interpretation of messianism, since there are several texts in Isaiah that even most critical scholars believe are both pre-exilic and messianic (e.g., 32:1 and 33:17). Moreover, 2 Samuel 7 envisions a perpetual Davidic king which goes beyond David’s son Solomon, while Psalm 2 (also pre-exilic) invites the newly crowned Davidic king to request nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth for his possession.

In chapter 2, Heskett discusses the role of Cyrus in Isaiah. The irony is that, whereas he maintains that royal oracles like 9:1–6 and 11:1–9 were reinterpreted as messianic, Cyrus, the only “messiah” in the book (45:1), is de-messianized. He explains, “Therefore, just as later editors may reinterpret non-messianic texts messianically, they could just as well reinterpreted messianic texts as non-messianic, showing that this shift can move in both directions as a result of the changing meaning of ‘messiah’” (36).

The author next studies the three messianic texts of 7:14, 9:1–6, and 11:1–9. He contends that Isaiah 7–11 represents a level of tradition which has been “rehistoricized” by the final editors of Isaiah. For example, 9:1–6 was an enthronement song describing an ideal king, but post-exilic editors placed the text after the “former things” of 8:23 to make it messianic. Heskett uses terms like “progressive dehistorization” and “gradual opaqueness” to describe the changes editors made after the exile to texts such as 7:14, 9:1–6, and 11:1–9.

In his thorough study of the Servant Songs, Heskett uses the terms coined by Sheppard, “systemic vagueness” and “functional ambiguity,” in order to clarify the enigmatic nature of these texts. “Systemic vagueness” occurs due to the distance between writers of texts and readers. “Functional ambiguity” is an intentional rhetorical feature of the author. The author believes that Servant Songs “have been edited into the larger context, whereby ambiguity now functions rhetorically within the text” (174). They contain tantalizing connections to David (e.g., 11:1 and 53:2), but further information is withheld. The songs were later understood messianically by early Christians.

Lastly, Heskett examines Isaiah 61:1–3 as the only explicitly messianic text in the scroll of Isaiah. Like the other texts surveyed in Isaiah, 61:1–3 is ambiguous, resulting in a wide range of suggestions identifying the speaker. While the pre-biblical form of this text may not have been intentionally messianic, there are enough warrants in the biblical text for later interpreters to read it as messianic, as did early Christians and possibly the Qumran community. In both cases, later interpreters exploit the ambiguity of the text and interpret the text as messianic.

In his concluding chapter the author summarizes his results. “The original Isaianic traditions did not anticipate a messianic hope upon which the later editors built. Instead, this latter level of editing semantically transformed earlier non-messianic traditions so that they may be re-interpreted by the editors as
messianic” (265). Historical critical methods have been distracted from the meaning of Isaiah by searching for specific Sitz im Leben for pre-biblical traditions. It is only when the book is viewed from the perspective of the final, canonical form that one is able to read Isaiah as a whole as prophecy. Heskett finishes his study by drawing several implications of his thesis for another large body of scripture that underwent a post-exilic redaction, the Psalms. In this case the redactional layers are evident to all, thus making for a more compelling argument than he offers in his study of Isaiah.

And this gets to the heart of the problem. The only criterion the author offers to differentiate between Isaianic pre-biblical and scriptural levels is textual tension (e.g., 132). Yet, it is precisely the nature of prophetic discourse to make sudden shifts on all levels of language, including style and imagery, and to juxtapose multiple, divergent, and even dissonant perspectives in much the same way as in the use of poetic parallelism. It is anachronistic to impose upon the book of Isaiah criteria applied to writing intended to be scientific or didactic—clear and distinct ideas, logically ordered. Heskett needs to defend his reasons for disjointing Isaianic texts just because they stand in tension. This aside, the author offers a valuable contribution to the study of Isaiah. He is to be commended for mastery of the massive secondary literature on messianic passages as well as his sensitivity to Christian interpretations.

R. Reed Lessing


Joseph Blenkinsopp, longtime professor of biblical studies at Notre Dame, has been a leading figure in the study of Isaiah, authoring the three-volume Anchor Bible commentary on this “prince of the prophets.” In this book he probes Isaiah’s influence in Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity. Blenkinsopp’s thesis is that “the interpretation of the book of Isaiah [is] an essential and irreplaceable factor in the legitimizing, grounding, and shaping of dissentient movements in late Second Temple Judaism” (xv). His definition of Isaiah is “… a collection of miscellaneous material deriving from a number of anonymous (or pseudonymously Isaianic) authors, compiled over a long period of time, from the 8th century B.C.E. to perhaps as late as the 3rd century B.C.E.” (xvi). As such, he believes that the interpretation of Isaiah begins in the book itself when redactors both changed and commented on earlier texts.

By means of Isaiah 40:3 Blenkinsopp explores the relationship between the Qumran community (understood as synonymous with the Essenes) and John the Baptist. Qumran interpreted Isaiah 40:3 programmatically as the biblical validation of their eschatological separation in the Judean wilderness from mainstream Judaism. In the Community Rule (1QS VIII 12–16), the leveling of the barriers comes by studying Torah. Blenkinsopp postulates that John the Baptist was a member of the desert sect and left it
to bring its message of repentance and eschatological awareness to all who would listen (e.g., Mt 3:2–3).

Blenkinsopp maintains that it is not just the number of Isaiah quotations and allusions in the New Testament that indicates its influence upon the Christian faith, but it is also that “the book of Isaiah came to serve as a grid or cognitive map by means of which they [early Christians] could articulate their sense of the unique character of their founder and chart the direction in which their destiny was leading them” (136). Chief among Isaianic texts that impacted the New Testament is the Fourth Servant Song. The earliest Christian preaching announced that Jesus is the suffering Messiah (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–4), while Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is reflected by means of the term *ton paida* (“the child/servant”) for Jesus in Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30. The passive verbs in Isaiah 53, coupled with the statement that it was “Yahweh’s will to crush him” (Is 53:10), influenced Paul’s use of *paradidomai* (e.g., Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 11:23; Galatians 2:20 and Ephesians 5:2).

The chapter entitled “Isaianic Titles in Qumran and Early Christianity” is delightful. Blenkinsopp comments on the word “way” (*derek*) in Isaiah 40:3 and notes that it is frequently employed metaphorically. There is a good way (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:25; Ps 119:1), a way of life (e.g., Prv 6:23), the way of wisdom (e.g., Prv 4:11), and the way of well-being (Is 59:8). The Psalter begins with the contrast between the way of the righteous and the way of the unbeliever (Ps 1:6). There is also a way that looks good but ends in death (Prv 14:12; cf. Mt 7:13–14). Yahweh’s way is sometimes inscrutable (Is 55:6–9; Rom 11:33). The early church took “the Way” as a title (e.g., Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Apollos needed further instruction in “the way of God” (Acts 18:24–28), and Jesus himself taught “the way of God” (Mt 22:16; Mk 12:14; Lk 20:21). Isaiah’s use of *babar* (“to choose”) (e.g., 43:10; 44:1, 2; 48:10; 49:7) finds its way in the New Testament as follows: Jesus’ disciples are chosen (Mt 20:16b; Jn 15:19; Rv 17:14), and he promises that the last days will be cut short for the sake of the elect (Mt 24:22). In Romans 8:33, Colossians 3:12 and Titus 1:1, Paul calls Christians “the elect of God.” Based upon the Father’s election of Christ (1 Pt 2:4, 6), in 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle addresses the baptized with the term “elect people.”

Blenkinsopp stands in the tradition of form rather than redaction criticism and as such rearranges the canonical form of Isaiah to suit his interpretations. In this way he disregards much of the past twenty years of Isaianic scholarship which reads the book more holistically. Yet, for those who want an in-depth study of Isaiah’s influence in Qumran and New Testament texts, this is your book.

R. Reed Lessing

**THE DESERT WILL BLOOM:**


This volume of essays is a compilation of papers presented by the Formation of the Book of Isaiah Group of the Society of Biblical Literature. The
studies pay close attention to the synchronic dimensions of the text, figurative language, specific imagery, metaphors, and matters of intertextuality. Topics explored combine scholarly, academic, and pastoral concerns. A total of thirteen essays are presented. I will comment on four of them.

Patricia Tull’s essay titled “Persistent Vegetative States,” explores Isaiah’s use of creational language. For example, in 40:6–8 the comparison between a meadow of grass or a field of flowers and people is a comparison of judgment. Carrying this imagery further in 40:23–24 (cf. 41:2), Isaiah employs the same ideas to describe princes and rulers. They wither and are carried off like stubble. Tull’s point is that people are not in a separate category from creation. What happens to grass and flowers happens to us. They thrive and we thrive; they die and we die. Trees lament (e.g., 33:9) and so do people (e.g., 6:5); trees rejoice (e.g., 14:8; 44:23; 55:12) and so do people (e.g., 42:10; 51:11). Long before the environmental movement burst into the mainstream of our consciousness with its warnings about the misuse of nuclear power, the depletion of the ozone layer, and the abuse of pesticides and herbicides, Isaiah testifies to the connections between civilization and vegetation. Tull maintains that the “attribution of human characteristics to plants, like the attribution of plant characteristics to people, affirms the critical ties binding humans to the landscape they depend upon, and evokes respect for the rights and dignity of nonhuman creation” (28). Land degradation signals that people have turned away from Yahweh. Conversely, when the land flourishes Israel has returned to its God (e.g., Lv 26:3–6, 10; Dt 28:2–5, 11–12; Pss 65 and 72). Embedded in plant life is the potential for regeneration, and so Isaiah promises that the survivors of the house of Judah will “again take root downward and bear fruit upward” (37:31). Spiritual health and environmental well-being are interconnected throughout the book of Isaiah.

In his essay, “A Bitter Memory,” A. Joseph Everson traces how the divine hardening in 6:9–10 functions in the rest of Isaiah. While the thrust of these verses is Israel’s inability to see (rab) and hear (shma), know (yada) and perceive (bin), Isaiah 40 implies that this curse has been lifted and the people are once again able to understand and perceive Yahweh’s plan. “All flesh will see (rab) Yahweh’s glory” (40:5). “Lift up your eyes and see (rab)” (40:26). “Do you not know (yada), have you not heard (shma)… do you not perceive (bin)” (40:21; cf. 40:28). These connections indicate that while a new day has dawned, chapter 40 does not indicate a new call for Isaiah. Lexical similarities indicate that it is an expansion of the first one.

Willem Beuken’s essay, “YHWH’s Sovereign Rule,” discusses the role of king(s) in the book of Isaiah. His major point is that in 33:22 Isaiah says, “Yahweh is our King” (cf. 6:5), yet both Sennacherib (e.g., 36:1, 2, 4; 37:4, 8) and Merodach Baladan take the title of king (39:1, 7). However, after the kingly description of a victorious Yahweh in 40:10–11, earthly kings are only described in the plural. “Kings” is normally parallel with “nations” (e.g., 41:2; 45:1; 52:15.) The thrust of these insights, Beuken maintains, is that the book of Isaiah wants all people to make Hezekiah’s
confession their own; “Yahweh the God of the armies, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth” (37:16).

Also expanding upon Hezekiah’s role in the book of Isaiah in his essay titled “The Spider Poet: Signs and Symbols in Isaiah 41,” Hyun Chul Paul Kim notes that the root *chazaq* is a catchword in 41:1–13. Isaiah employs it in 41:6, 7 (two times) to describe how idolaters attempt to encourage or strengthen one another. In 41:9, 13 the word recurs, denoting how Yahweh strengthens his people. Kim’s insights come when he calls attention to the fact that King Hezekiah (whose name is derived from *chazaq*), is mentioned thirty-two times in chapters 36–39. The name means “Yahweh has strengthened him” or “Yahweh is my strength.” Living in Babylon and tempted by her idols, Isaiah’s message to the exiles in 41:1–13 is to walk in the footsteps of Hezekiah and trust that Yahweh will strengthen them against their enemies.

Isaiah’s vision (1:1) is a portrait of *shalom* for people as well as all creation. These essays give readers of this marvelous prophetic scroll much to ponder and much to appreciate.

R. Reed Lessing
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