

Space to Be Secular: The Thought of Oswald Bayer as Resource for the Church's Theology of Mercy

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Abstract

The theology of Oswald Bayer is foundational for the church's corporate life of mercy.¹ The place of the Christian in this life, Bayer argues, is between two eons — the old and the new. Baptism marks a sharp break in a person's life between the old world and the new, but it does not take them out of the old world. Thus, it remains for the church to understand how it is to relate to the old world. Bayer suggests this is understood through Baptism. Not only does the gospel as communicated through Baptism create a new person and world from old ones, but the Gospel also finds the church in the "old" world, and informs how the two are to relate. In this way, Bayer demonstrates the relevance of Luther's teaching for today, explicating the "science of conflict" which, for Bayer, is theology between the two eons. Life in the midst of this conflict is lived in response to a promise — God's "imperative of permission."² This promise creates room for the human freedom in which the church's corporate life of mercy finds expression. Moreover, it gives the church's life of mercy a definite shape and specific world view, since a person who comprehends the world in this way — as a beggar who lives in response to what has been given — cannot help but be merciful. That is, one will find the merciful works of Christ in one's own life. This truth has far-reaching implications for understanding our humanity, the place of the Christian in the world and the continuous working of God in His creation. In short, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as communicated through performative statements as the incarnate Word is the necessary foundation and presupposition for theological ethics. This reality, of course, remains especially relevant in today's modern period and contains a much needed message for the ears of our church and society. Somewhere away from antinomianism and legalism, humans find space to act; for the church, works of mercy will occupy the center of this space. A sacramental understanding of the church's corporate life of mercy therefore follows on from Bayer's thought as it is in large part presupposed by it. Such an understanding provides a means by which the ethical implications of Bayer's thought might be explicated — not as a command to what should be the case, but rather as a means of understanding what is the case. Placed in the midst of creation, fellowship, human dignity, and works of mercy are gifts, which in the first place are received. Then, as in the Sacraments, God uses ordinary elements — here, His faithful (though sinful) people — to create, sustain, preserve, and protect His creation. In all this, Bayer's thought informs the theology and material substance of the church's corporate life of mercy as it is lived between the two eons.

I

Michael Mathias Precht's painting, "Martin Luther, Full of Figures Inside," hangs over the hearth of a fireplace in the library of Westfield House, the theological college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (ELCE) in Cambridge. The top corner reads: "Martin Luther / dort und hier / damals und heute,"³ reminding those students studying before it that Luther's situation and work is and will remain relevant for us today. His context, his struggles, and his thought provide a timely message of lasting significance that dare not be ignored by the seminarians, deaconess students, and undergraduates preparing to serve the church and the world with the Word of God.

In essays such as "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today"⁴ and "With Luther in the Present,"⁵ Oswald Bayer specifically demonstrates this relevancy in his treatment of Luther's thinking and speaks to today's cultural and political setting with much the same accuracy and expediency with which Luther spoke to his. That Bayer can so apply Luther today might be explained by noting that "the singular historical experiences moving Luther, impelling him from the inside, extend to a meaning reaching beyond their original situation."⁶ Precht's painting

1 I do not give an exhaustive treatment of Oswald Bayer's thought in this essay. This would obviously require a much more significant work than the scope of the present essay permits. In addition to listing works cited, I have included in my bibliography the works of Bayer read in preparation for this piece, and thus influential for its contents.

2 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

3 "There and here / then and now."

4 Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 35-50.

5 — "With Luther in the Present," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 1-16.

6 — "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 39.

begins to explain how this is so. Though the painting depicts the historical facts of the Peasants' War, Prechtl includes elements of the apocalyptic, which convey both Luther's perception of the eschatological in-breaking of his own times as well as the enduring relevancy of such circumstances. Bayer, commenting on this painting, notes that Prechtl "has intensified the scene by projecting these figures into the mythological. One of the knights carrying a blood-smearred sword has a scaly body; Behemoth and Leviathan are recalled."⁷

This is the setting in which the church finds itself. No different than in Luther's day, we continue to live in the midst of conflict. The most obvious, perhaps, are the wars and in-fighting of nations and neighborhoods. So, too, is there conflict among competing traditions and viewpoints at all levels — family, congregation, social club, city, synod. Any example noted, however, merely names a symptom of a more fundamental condition: "This history of the world is marked by the war of all against all. All fight to live or die in the struggles for mutual recognition."⁸ Though the reality of conflict is certainly not to be praised — being, as it is, a consequence of the fall — neither should it be ignored, for such deliberate disregard will necessarily end in either hopeless despair or idolatry. For the church's life of mercy to find relevant expression today, it must therefore first confess the existence of the "old world" as it is, without being deceived by modernity's lies of "love" and "toleration."⁹ To ignore this realistic perspective is to forget the place of the church in this world and will result in either a pessimistic antinomianism or optimistic legalism. Bayer contends that:

. . . this realistic perspective distinguishes Luther sharply from the harmlessness of modern theologians of love. The theologians of love transform the original Christian confession, God is love, into a principle of both knowledge and systematic construction in order to build an internally coherent dogmatic system. The price paid for this transformation is to render harmless the enemies referred to in the prayers of the Psalms, to let them fade into paper tigers. They are allowed to disappear through the effort of subsuming evil under a theory of love. Luther's life and work, contrary to what modern theologians of love think, is determined throughout by the trials and temptations (*Anfechtungen*) suffered at the hands of these enemies and by the fight against them.¹⁰

To avoid either extremes of ignoring the conflict or making an idolatrous attempt at its eradication, a redirection of focus is needed.

According to Bayer, Luther's address to contemporary society "redirects our eyes to Christ crucified on the cross, who 'was assailed by the images of death, sin, and hell just as we are.' Focusing on the crucified one, Luther encourages us to 'look at death while you are alive and see sin in light of grace and hell in the light of heaven.'"¹¹ And here, Bayer asserts, one finds Luther's relevance for today. The "rupture of the times," which for the church begins to explain — as will be shown below — the conflict in which it must engage, is not a rupture between two historical ages for Luther. Rather, "the rupture of the times between the new and the old eon has occurred once and for all on the cross of Jesus Christ," where the old world meets its end and the new world, the renewed creation, breaks in.¹² This, it must be

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Such words find an important place in the church's theology of mercy, but with christological meaning and implication. Words are important — so much so, in fact, that the fourth evangelist, in agreement with Genesis' creation account, proclaims that all that is created through the Word, "What God says, God does. The reverse is also true. What God does, God says; His doing is not ambiguous. God's work is God's speech. God's speech is no fleeting breath. It is a most effective breath that creates life, that summons into life. It is the nature of God to create out of nothing, to be the Creator by the Word alone. This is not a speculative thought, for those who confess the one who creates out of nothing and gives life to the dead are those who have experienced the truth that God justifies the ungodly by his Word, creating a new self for the old Adamic self" (Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2003, 43). Bayer continues this thought by noting the emphasis Luther places on the written word and the even higher rating of the oral word, by which God creates faith. The word is a deed that does what it says, most notably when spoken by God Himself. For this reason, words must not be abandoned when their meaning is violently usurped by those who reject the inherent value of words that has been given with the fact that they are created by and respond to the bodily, living Word. To such words, it seems, we must cling and remain patiently diligent with an appropriate pedagogical application that may often include explanation and plain rejection (as here) of any deliberate and dangerous arrogation.

10 Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 38.

11 Ibid., 40.

12 Ibid., 45.

deliberately acknowledged, is a conflict of times:

The crucial point of Luther's understanding of time consists of the folding into one another of pivotal events in time, it consists in an interweaving of times (*Verschrankung der Zeiten*). The last judgment, the consummation of the world, and the creation of the world are perceived simultaneously. The future of the world comes from God's present and presence. God's new creation establishes the old world as old and restores the original world. Salvation communicated in the present is seen in view of Christ on the cross. The salvation effected on the cross guarantees the coming consummation of the world. In between the times, the suffering and groaning of the creatures of the old world are experienced in painful contradiction to the creation originally created by the promise.¹³

Precht's painting depicts not only this conflict, but quite literally at its center, the crucified Christ whose death marked the rupture and Christ's expression in words of promise.

Precht draws attention away from the fighting peasants that fill Luther's person and redirects one's focus toward the crucified Lord, from whose side flows a stream of blood that falls on an open Bible. Luther points to this word in the painting as if to say:

And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.¹⁴

Bayer remarks that this Word from the cross, this testament, "bequeaths to our sinful time eternal life and it promises to us, through the forgiveness of our hellish history of life and world, eternal community with God."¹⁵ That is, this Word in its communicative judgment does what it says; it is a speech act.

II

For the Christian, baptism is the place of this rupture, when God creates one to be His child through participation in the death and resurrection of His Son. The whole of the Christian life — and here included is the church's corporate life of mercy — proceeds from and is lived within this baptism.¹⁶ In the words of Bayer, it is life lived in "freedom in response" to God's promise — "for human action does not start with itself; it draws its life from freedom that has already been given."¹⁷ God's continuous creative activity and His preservation and nourishing work in this creation, as it gives form and content to the church's life of mercy, must be grounded in Bayer's fundamental premise that "human freedom is the result of God's promise: 'I am your God. And therefore you are my people.'" This promise is delivered in Baptism and places the Christian in the rupture between the old and new worlds with Christ on the cross and gives this life its content by informing a perception of the world consistent with the "interweaving of times" and communicating the freedom and works that are in the first place received as gift and only then lived and given in response.

To begin to understand what this means for the church's life of mercy, one must first consider Bayer's thesis concerning this promise that claims, "piety in action does not arise from the goodness of categorical imperative, but rather from that of categorical gift."¹⁸ Citing Johann Georg Hamann, Bayer recalls the first and final command in the Bible, which says, "Eat!" and "Come, all is ready!" These commands are not prohibition, but permission — "a promise that is absolutely and unconditionally valid for all. It grants room to move and live, room for work and for human fellowship . . ." ¹⁹ This promise is a gift of space that permits our movement, our action. Our action then is a response to this Word, "discerning the gift and praising the Giver of all things good," and this is called faith.

13 Ibid.

14 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians—1535*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 387.

15 Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 40.

16 Cf. Luther's *Large Catechism*, "Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism." — Baptism is the means by which God creates His church, His holy community that works together in responsive freedom.

17 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 1.

18 Ibid., 13.

19 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 14.

Bayer does not describe here an *abstract* faith or creative word. Rather, this understanding is rooted firmly in the Sacraments of the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism when God's incarnate Word is communicated "in its immediate relationship to God in a temporal and specific way . . . It does not float in a vague inward realm, but rather is linked to a verbal and public consecration that can neither be acquired in an alternative way by logical process nor be traced back to a basically comprehensible anthropological structure."²⁰ The promise attached to these Sacraments is the forgiveness of sins, and from that forgiveness comes all other benefits as well — life, salvation, and fellowship. The concrete form of this promise — especially notable in the Lord's Supper — is found in the world from the mouths of our neighbors, and Bayer notes this includes the physical activity of eating and drinking together. God is encountered in the midst of life, "not in some way that is separate from our daily bread."²¹

Given that theology accepts as its point of departure the Lord's Supper and the singular way we encounter Jesus there as Creator and creation together, we see that humanity's place does not lie between God and the world, but rather in the midst of the world. The words that God speaks to us — the words that make us into human beings — do not exist in a vacuum; they cannot do without mediation through the world, in the bread and the wine.²²

The joy that comes from this table fellowship creates community. More than that, community is created by God in the meal as in Baptism — the means by which God creates His church. Thus humans are first of all *fellow* beings who receive. The church finds itself as a fellowship of receivers, needy ones, and beggars. When showing mercy to the neighbor, therefore, it is not a condescension to those beneath oneself, but a confession that the helper, too, is helpless and needy, and therefore one who shares the other's circumstances as they suffer together, hope together, and live together. The Word of promise, communicated in Baptism, is the space frees one for this kind of action. Insofar as Christ is this "space" into which one is baptized, so far is God Himself serving His creation, showing mercy as One who also suffers, dies, and rises to new life.²³ This response is not some abstract feeling or sentiment toward God. Nor is it an impractical acknowledgment of one's fellow human beings. Rather, this word of promise "is accompanied by a sense of wonder at the world that comes to meet us and is open to us through the generous gift of God, as we marvel at our fellow creatures, and especially our fellow human beings, whom we encounter as a gift."²⁴ Fellowship understood as given with God's imperative of permission includes a physical activity — eating and drinking — of many expressions, and with this Bayer understands that this promise of God "comes to us in the material shape of the world, through the words of our fellow human creatures."²⁵

This categorical gift, Bayer notes, is "more than simply a motivation for Christian living. It contains within itself certainty of a material and ethical kind."²⁶ It provides not only the world view from which a Christian's life is lived, but also its form and content. This, I think, could be called a sacramental world view, for one who understands the creative action of God in both Baptism and the Lord's Supper as *creatio ex nihilo* will therefore, "discern their own fellow human beings simply as those who find themselves in the same situation. Thus the least of our brothers and sisters (Matt. 25:40) will not just be *the others*, strangers, with whom we are called to show solidarity. Rather, from the very outset *we are those people*." This, it must be understood, is how the Christian will learn to relate to the old world — by living in one's Baptism, or at least being constantly returned by God to one's Baptism. This, in fact, is where Baptism finds the Christian at the end of Luther's catechism — in the world, in need of forgiveness.

Having received this forgiveness the Christian may be joyfully surprised to find the fruits of this gift in her life. In the third chapter of *Living By Faith*, "The Passive Righteousness of Faith," Bayer notes that because faith is entirely the work of God, "we experience it in that we suffer it . . . The passive righteousness of faith takes place

20 Ibid., 7. Bayer: "What must be insisted upon against inward and invoked enthusiasm — in our day the 'inner word' is becoming the voice of reason or of our human 'nature', and is becoming what we ourselves can affirm — is the 'outward word' whereby Jesus Christ is encountered as a concrete and universal event. He is heard and tasted by our senses concretely in an indissoluble linking of the occasion and the Word, the Word and the body; this emerges with particular clarity in the Lord's Supper" (7).

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Ibid., 184.

23 Cf. O. Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," 12.

24 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 14.

25 Ibid., 15.

26 Ibid., 20.

when justifying thinking (metaphysics) and justifying doing (morality), together with the unity of both that some seek, are all radically destroyed.”²⁷ God’s action of killing in order to raise is certainly not foreign to His historical dealings with His people. Throughout Israel’s history, God was persistent in His task of killing and raising. It was no different for His Son, the one Israel, upon whom God looked and declared (with a speech act), “I kill you and raise you.” Isaiah 53:10 records that “it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.” But this Law is certainly not the final word. In fact, Christ has been *raised* from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. And in Christ, God’s pronouncement to His people is the same, “I hereby kill you and raise you.” Through this Word, this Christ, “we receive the death and resurrection that marks [this] ‘Israel.’”²⁸ “For in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive . . . Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”²⁹ This action of killing and raising unto salvation is accomplished in Baptism, when God chooses us and creates us as ones who belong to Christ.

In this death, our need “to gain recognition by what we can afford and accomplish” is destroyed.³⁰ So, too, is the “justifying thinking that tries to settle the conflict of justifications and to fashion a concept of the ‘unity’ of reality” destroyed: “the death of the old nature lies last but not least in the fact that the illusion of a totality of meaning, even if only hypothetical and anticipatory, has been overthrown.”³¹ Bayer does not exclude works from the new life, which is given and lived in response to this death. It is quite the opposite, in fact, for the freedom from justifying thinking and action that comes with the death of the old Adam grants space to live and to act — a space free from metaphysical pressure.

III

Returning for a moment to Luther’s “apocalyptic understanding of creation and history,” Bayer runs counter-cultural to Western modernity, importantly observing that Luther rejects the modern fallacy of progress:

In hindering the theme of modern progress, Luther’s understanding does not imply that the justified human person moves around in a circle and cannot walk with firm steps in a specific direction. The contrary is correct. In fact, progress is made in the relation between the new and the old person . . . There is certainly progress, although not absolute, in the ethical domain and in the region of our works, of our cultural, social, and political activity. In its ethical sense, progress is relieved of metaphysical pressure to be considered in absolute terms. The kingdom of God is not earned through work for the kingdom of God; rather, the kingdom has already been prepared (Matt. 25:34). The idea of ethical progress freed from metaphysical weight is no longer an idea of salvation. The idea of progress loses the religious fascination that it exerted as a perverted idea of salvation. Last but not least, it loses its fanaticism in the political region. As ethical progress relieved of the quest for salvation, it is truly progress in a worldly sense. It does not walk in the name of the absolute and the total, but in small and nonetheless distinct steps.³²

That this biblical worldview asserts itself against Western society’s understanding of its culture and political institutions demonstrates from the outset that this theology and its necessary message to the world will engage in conflict. Bayer’s thinking asserts that meaning is given to one’s life, not earned or appropriated by oneself, one’s alliances or one’s place in society. While Luther’s doctrine of the three estates articulates the “three basic forms of life that are God’s disposition for humanity,”³³ even these institutions, sanctified though they may be, are not a path to salvation. Nor might one earn meaning or standing before God by a life lived within them. Such things are first of all granted, and then life in church, family, and society is lived from what has been accomplished. There are at least two implications to this truth. The first concerns the works themselves, the acts of mercy that the Christian

27 —*Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 20-21.

28 Timothy E. Saleska, “Pastors Who Play God,” *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 1 (2005): 24. See this article for a more exhaustive treatment of this idea.

29 1 Cor. 15:22-23, (ESV).

30 Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 21.

31 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

32 —“Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” 43.

33 Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 61.

will find him or herself doing before they are even considered. The second implication concerns the individual's understanding of these works — how Christians perceive their place in the world and remember, as members of society, how to be secular. With those two considerations as a basis, one might then find a rather important insight into God's continuous, sacramental work of creation and preservation through the church's life of mercy.

In the first place, “the one who perceives his or her own life — together with every life — as a categorical gift, thereby acknowledging the ‘out of nothingness’ of all creation, cannot help but be ‘merciful.’”³⁴ The result of this passive righteousness of faith is described by Luther in his Galatians commentary, “When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises.”³⁵ There is a crucial order to this, which Bayer, as noted throughout the foregoing, continues to press. Those works that respond to the categorical gift do not form or adorn one's faith, but “faith forms and adorns love . . . Christ is my ‘form,’ which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall . . . ‘Christ,’ [Paul] says, ‘is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me. The life that I now live, He lives in me. Indeed, Christ Himself is the life that I now live. In this way, therefore, Christ and I are one.’”³⁶ The merciful works of the Christian are thus not their own, at least not according to the new man — they are the works of Christ and belong to the neighbor as works prepared beforehand for the Christian to do.

Bayer too, taking Luther's lead, understands the importance of Pauline thought for theological ethics. In a treatment of Romans 12, Bayer concludes that this text “emphasizes the importance of baptism — of walking in newness of life (Rom. 6.4) — for ethics, and beyond ethics, for the whole way we look at the world. The ultimate mercy of God, shown in the gift of the body of his Son on the cross, speaks to those baptized into his death about giving their own bodies and lives.”³⁷ This responsive giving occurs in the face of, against and despite the old world, as the baptized believers, new creatures who now have allegiance to the new age, are redirected away from the old and abide in the new. Of course, those whose faith has come by that creative word discussed above must continue to hear its message of promise and exhortation, for “it is just as vital for them, while on this earth, to show a consistent attitude to the old age and in the midst of this constantly to appropriate the new age that has broken in. Progress means constantly returning to your Baptism.”³⁸

This life-changing consistency takes place through “renewal of moral judgment.”³⁹ Bayer asserts that “the consequence and goal of the changed life is ‘discerning’ the will of God,” which “occurs only in conversation — and conflict — with what to human minds is simply ‘that which is good, acceptable, and perfect’ (cf. Phil. 4.8).” Here one finds two means by which the Christian relates to the old world. The first is in “critical solidarity” with the old, non-Christian world. The second concerns that conversation and conflict over what is the good, which will bring us directly into the second implication noted above, regarding the Christian's place and action in the world.

Bayer notes a similarity between the Christian and non-Christian world in the mutual concern over the question of conformity to the norms of the day. The Christian cannot easily decide between conformity and resistance by deferring to “the gospel of God's mercy. The mercy of God is not only the purely formal motive for Christian action, as though such action had to go elsewhere to find solid criteria. These criteria for action emerge from responses to God's actions that are straightforward enough to discover.”⁴⁰ Paul's message directs Christians back to their baptism, where they have been placed in that overlapping of ages, that situation of conflict — “the time where [Paul's] exhortation is holding and keeping us is the time of baptism.”⁴¹ It is precisely in this situation that the renewed will is given shape and expression as it finds solidarity with its fellow humanity and the content of God's mercy falls down from heaven in the person and life of the baptized believer. Baptism grants such freedom — “the freedom of that communicative judgment and evaluation (discerning) of which Paul speaks in Romans 12.2 — even when disagreements arise — which shapes the moral teaching of the early Church as it is received

34 —“Self Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings,” *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004): 279.

35 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians—1535*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 11.

36 *Ibid.*, 161, 167.

37 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 37.

38 *Ibid.*, 41.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 42.

41 *Ibid.*

with critical openness.”⁴² Part of that moral teaching concerns the effect of the communicative judgment itself, which calls by promise not only me, but also my fellow creatures with me.

God’s speech act of promise to me calls me along with my fellow humanity, I do well to understand my place in the world in relation to those who God has also “called by name,”⁴³ receiving and addressing them as “the means that God uses to call us, the go-betweens he uses to provide everything . . . Creation is not only God speaking to his creatures, but as an integral part of this it is also God speaking *by* or *through* his creatures.”⁴⁴ These are speech acts of God, by which He serves and preserves His creation through His creatures.

IV

Bayer’s comments on possessions and poverty elucidate how the Christian is to appropriate this knowledge discovery in one’s own life. In the Christian life of receiving and giving, the avaricious person lives unnaturally, “through which it becomes apparent that I shut myself off and live a life of ingratitude, since I fail to pass on to others some of what I have received. Thus I withdraw from the process of give and take, and cut myself off from the process of communication which is life.”⁴⁵ This is a turning away from the Creator, the giver of all that one is and has, and in so doing, “I close myself off, closing my ears, heart and hands to my neighbour. That is the opposite of ‘having,’ without which there can be no human ‘being.’ ‘Having’ is to be understood from the standpoint of the Pauline question, ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 Cor. 4.7).”⁴⁶ This thought is not unconnected to a sacramental understanding of the church’s theology of mercy.

Alexei Streltsov, in an article entitled “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions in Acts,” observes that Christ, “possessing everything, humbled himself and shared with us poor beggars all that he had and now invites us to his heavenly feast.”⁴⁷ With the cross at the center of the Christian life, one must not expect indulgence and hedonism to typify discipleship. After all, Jesus does indeed call the rich man to sell all he has and give it to the poor. Though one might argue that God does in fact create some of His children to do just this, He does not call all Christians to do the same. Rather, through Baptism into Jesus’ crucifixion, the Creator raises us to a life that is characterized by having, but not trusting in possessions. Moreover, Bayer observes, “in the Gospel it is not the one with a lot of money and property who is called rich but only the one who relies on the money or property he or she has.”⁴⁸ Christians are thus enabled to be masks of God’s grace and favor to the world as He distributes His good gifts to all who have need.

Gilbert Meilaender explores this place of trust in possessing, commenting on C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra* in his essay “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave.”⁴⁹ He refers to Ransom, the main character, who finds himself on a planet containing indescribable pleasures. One of these comes from a forest of “bubble trees” which, when their “shimmering globes” are touched, shower Ransom with “an ice-cold shower bath . . . and a soon-fading, delicious fragrance.”⁵⁰ Though Ransom is tempted to “plunge [himself] through the whole lot of them and to feel, all at once, that magical refreshment multiplied tenfold,” he is restrained by a feeling that this over-indulgence would somehow ruin the bubble trees’ pleasure. “This itch to have things over again,” he wonders, “as if life were a film that could be unrolled twice or even made to work backwards . . . was it possibly the root of all evil? No: of course the love of money was called that. But money itself — perhaps one valued it chiefly as a defence against chance, a security for being able to have things over again, a means of arresting the unrolling of the film.”⁵¹ Money, of course, is a possession itself, though perhaps better described (as Meilaender describes it) as possessions in the abstract. And Ransom’s feeling suggests the very danger in possessing — that one would trust in the Creator’s

42 Ibid., 43.

43 Isaiah 40:26. See O. Bayer, chapter 3, “Life in the Midst of Life that Loves Living,” in *Freedom in Response*.

44 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 47

45 Ibid., 134.

46 Ibid.

47 Alexei Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions in Acts,” *Logia* XVI, no. 2 (Eastertide 2007): 13.

48 Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 134

49 Gilbert Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” in *Things That Count*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 194. The quotes here used are cited to Lewis’ novel, though the thought’s application is Meilaender’s.

50 C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), 43-44.

51 Ibid., 45.

gifts rather than in the Creator Himself. Fallen man, always seeking autonomy and self-security, clings to money and his possessions in an effort to lay hold on a future he is unable to predict.

Though this may be the cultural norm and perhaps even the expectation, Meilaender concludes that, “followers of Jesus should have possessions without clinging to them so *that* they are always ready to give to those in need.”⁵² To borrow, and rearrange, words from an oft-quoted passage in Luke 12, from whom much is required, much will be given. Streltsov insightfully notes that sacramental context of sharing possessions, “Just as Christ gives His body and blood to the church in the Eucharist, so He gives the gifts of his creation *to the needy through the faithful.*”⁵³ Having been given everything Christ is and has, we are also freed by his death on the cross to give all that he gives us to any who have need. This, Meilaender notes, is the one area a Christian is called to be decidedly *immoderate*.⁵⁴ Paul would seem to agree, he who was “poured out as a drink offering” in the service of God to His people.

Finally, Streltsov notes that far from an optional or unimportant aspect of the church’s life, “the passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, as well as the event of Pentecost, resulted in the fullness in the sharing of possessions . . .”⁵⁵ and for the church in Acts “it was not just a matter of fulfilling God’s commandment, but they viewed it as a part of the gospel in the wide sense.”⁵⁶ And this is how our Creator would have us understand the gifts with which He blesses us. Rather than possessions we may rely on or use to secure our own future, God provides that we may trust in Him from whom all blessings flow. Far from property we selfishly hoard and accumulate that we may position ourselves above our friends and family, God blesses that we may freely give as we have freely received. It does indeed take a deed of God, the death of His Son and the performative speech act in Baptism, to free us from the bondage of sinful, self-seeking behavior and pride, but it is the prayer of the church that God may set our hearts to obey so that when we find we have received much, we may be all the more ready to give much.⁵⁷

Streltsov notes the “Lutheran church as such is not alien to the ideas of charity, almsgiving, sharing possessions, and the like.”⁵⁸ He describes how the Lutheran Church in Russia, rather than the much larger Russian Orthodox Church, began many organizations of mercy and care including schools for the deaf and blind as well as orphanages. This, however, was indicative of the Lutheran church in the 19th century and, Streltsov laments, is no longer the case. Though he does not argue for a return to the early church practice of holding everything in common as described in Acts, he does rightly argue that, “today’s church needs to recover the true meaning of the sharing of possessions that is centered in Christ, the Gospel, the Sacraments, and the ministry.”⁵⁹ Meilaender seems to agree, writing that “if the church is to be an agent of reconciliation among all who are poor in spirit (even, if perhaps, rich in this world’s goods), its calling must be chiefly, though not exclusively, to speak the Good News of Christ and to let its faith be active in works of mercy.”⁶⁰ The church, therefore, must speak that Word of God, which kills the self-secure man that he may be raised to faith in Christ and made ever-ready to receive much from the hand of his Creator, in order that the neighbor, then, may receive through him blessings as if from Christ Himself.

What is said here only of possessions (for the sake of clarity and simplicity) can be said of the whole of the Christian life. The sacramental character of the Christian life as the new creation relates to the old world, “has as its presupposition and abiding implication that God and the human being are bound together in one ‘person,’ that is, that they come together in a communicative event that reaches the sinful human being in a human manner, . . . rearranges, transposes, and radically transports them (Col. 1:13), and in this way determines and defines them anew.”⁶¹ This is what is meant above when Bayer speaks of Christ as “space” into which one is baptized:

Only because Jesus Christ is simultaneously God, only because God is this human being, can one speak of Jesus Christ as a ‘space,’ into which I am baptized, into which I enter in faith, in which I gain a share.

52 Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 191.

53 Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 17 (emphasis mine).

54 Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 191.

55 Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 14.

56 *Ibid.*, 17.

57 See Gilbert Meilaender, “Hearts Set to Obey,” in *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 37-55.

58 Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 17..

59 *Ibid.*, 13.

60 Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 184.

61 Oswald Bayer, “With Luther in the Present,” 12.

In Christ, then, ‘God and human being do not stand as closed entities over against one another. They communicate with one another without restriction.’ This transposition of human existence into Jesus Christ takes place, ‘through the God who always speaks and promises concretely, who draws the trust unto himself which formerly was based on the self, and thus awakens faith as the consummation of absolute eccentricity.’⁶²

An important qualification must be made here. Bayer writes elsewhere that “the course of this world and that of their own lives are so concealed even from those who are justified by faith that they cannot conceive or experience the divine and the human concern for the world as a harmonious relationship. This ambiguity extends even to the works of the justified done in the new obedience.”⁶³

Rather than condemning the Christian to a life of inactivity or quietism, however, this truth frees the Christian to live and perform works of mercy spontaneously, as the need arises and is discerned. Concern over the “success” and permanency of active faith — love — does not plague the Christian’s action, for their justification has already been accomplished and deeds are pure and joyous response. “They are not condemned to success.”

This, Bayer importantly notes, means that any progress is ethical progress freed from metaphysical pressure — “as ethical progress, progress divorced from the question of salvation is really secular progress. It is never absolute and total.”⁶⁴ This, let the reader understand, is where Luther finds relevance today especially for the church’s interaction with the world, its life of mercy. Luther’s “apocalyptic perception of the times” excludes, counter-culturally, both the modern legalism of progress and the postmodern antinomianism of “tolerance.” Against the former, Bayer writes human action is ambiguous; against the latter, he insists such works are not arbitrary.

V

If the relevance of Luther’s thought is lost, the church will lose “its worldliness and its realistic insight into the human heart with its wicked thoughts and inclinations.”⁶⁵ It will adopt uncritically the idolatrous (and often unconsidered!) presuppositions of modern ideology that seek to provide ultimate meaning to its culture and achieve absolute success for its society. It will forget that we live in between the overlapping ages, the rupture of which occurred on that historical cross of Jesus Christ, and thereby forget that “in between the times, the suffering and groaning of the creatures of the old world are experienced in painful contradiction to the creation originally created by the promise.”⁶⁶ The church, in short, will lose that all-important, incarnate Word that the world needs to hear *in order to remember how to be secular*.

Here the second means by which the Christian relates to the old world (through community building conversation over the good) combines with the second implication of the truth that meaning, dignity, and salvation come first as a gift before one responds in love — that Christians must themselves remember how to be secular and remind the world of the same. Oliver O’Donovan, in his book *Common Objects of Love*, investigates this conversation and “the idea that moral reflection, the identification of objects of love, has effect in organized community.”⁶⁷ The effect is the creation of a people, an organized society, who, according to Augustine, are united by their agreement “to share the things they love.” O’Donovan warns, however, that “for Augustine the love that forms communities is undetermined with respect to its object, and so also undetermined with respect to its moral quality: ‘the better the things, the better the people; the worse the things, the worse their agreement to share them.’”⁶⁸

Communities mediate this love and knowledge with words that give the beloved goods cultural meaning with the aid of a “special kind of signification” — representation. The representative signs of a community provide coherence in tradition where communities find meaning. Modern political society, O’Donovan fears, has forgotten how to be secular in the face of plurality. It seeks to provide ultimate meaning to its own representations and traditions, and this is idolatry. In what O’Donovan calls a “universalizing thrust,” the publicity of Western society attempts to

62 Ibid., 12-13.

63 —*Living By Faith*, 38.

64 Ibid., 67

65 Oswald Bayer, “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” 45.

66 Ibid.

67 Oliver O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 21.

68 Ibid., 22.

achieve absolute progress by introducing a “universal representation” it has created. “In this universalizing thrust we may observe how Western society has forgotten how to be secular. Secularity is a stance of patience in the face of plurality, made sense of by eschatological hope; forgetfulness of it is part and parcel with the forgetfulness of Christian suppositions about history.”⁶⁹ In Bayer’s thought, this plurality is called conflict and society’s forgetfulness includes a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the conflict of times and the resultant inappropriate engagement in the world as it is not.

O’Donovan calls for a believing patience sustained by Jesus Christ, the “double representative” — truly God and truly man — around whom the worshipping community is created and in whom eschatological hope is founded. Christian members of society, therefore, must remind themselves and the world how to be secular by way of word and example of believing patience. This, it seems, includes an active engagement in the dialogue of conflict without an idolatrous expectation or motivation of result. As the church receives ultimate meaning and hope from God alone, in whom it also awaits final salvation, its members relate to the world in patient faith active in love as the masks of God through whom and by whom He serves His creation.

In this conflict of times, the merciful actions of the Christian will be ambiguous but not arbitrary. Their meaning, however, comes not in their perceived success and failure, but rather in the reality of what is the case — they are the merciful works of God in Christ who, though rich, became poor, leaving his heavenly mansion to dwell among us where there was no place to lay his head. A new understanding of the conflicts one faces seems appropriate in view of this. The conflict is certainly not itself to be praised, but rather understood as the new creature finds a means by which to relate to the old world in Baptism. Living in response to the freedom of promise, the church may find space to discuss those controversial topics without either pessimistic despair or optimistic pride. Rather, the Christian has been granted space to be secular, to understand progress as secular, and live in Baptism, from the forgiveness of sins.

The content of this life is given in the incarnate Word of promise, which finds expression in the need of the neighbor — in the church, in the world, wherever the neighbor has need. Understanding that every man is a receiver, a beggar who can give only what he first has received, the church finds itself in solidarity with the old world and speaks to it the Word that has been given it to speak. This will not resolve the conflict until Christ returns and all is made new, but it might just find ethical progress in a people freed from metaphysical concern. Bayer’s call for a “renewal of moral judgment,” therefore, finds appropriate space in this world as it is, in the rupture of times. This is a hopeful space, for it is Jesus Christ himself, the kingdom of God. Students of the Word, therefore, do well to reconsider Pretchl’s painting and, like Luther, engage in the conflict with a finger pointing to the open, active word, understanding that meaning and salvation are given by a God who was, in fact, there when the earth’s foundations were laid, when He said to the sea, “Thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed,”⁷⁰ and when He declared to His chosen, “I am your God. And therefore you are my people.” This is the freedom of God’s permissive promise there and here, then and now.

69 Ibid., 69.

70 Job 38:11.

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