

# Toward a Theology of Mercy: Winning Student Essays for 2008

*Space to Be Secular: The Thought of Oswald Bayer  
as Resource for the Church's Theology of Mercy*  
by Peter J. Brock

*The Christian Life Justified: Luther's Theology of Mercy  
in the Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*  
by Jason M. Gehrke

*A Merciful Servant of the Cross: Theology of the Cross  
for Christian Caregivers*  
by Mary Moerbe

*History Worth Repeating: C.F.W. Walther and  
Wilhelm Löhe on Mercy and the Church*  
by Samuel P. Schuldheisz



Mercy forever.

ISBN-13: 978-1-934265-16-1

LCMS World Relief and Human Care  
1333 South Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, Missouri 63122-7295  
800-248-1930, Ext. 1390 • [www.lcms.org/worldrelief](http://www.lcms.org/worldrelief)

## **Preface**

For a second year, LCMS World Relief and Human Care has sponsored “Toward a Theology of Mercy” essay contest at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. This writing contest was initiated by Rev. Matthew C. Harrison, executive director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, as a way to encourage students to contemplate the church’s corporate life of mercy and thereby stimulate them to think more deeply about the Lutheran theological foundations of this aspect of our life together in Christ Jesus. In this way, future pastors and deaconesses of the church will be better prepared to be compassionate servants well grounded in the confession of the Gospel, equipped for every good work.

The four essays in this volume were selected by a panel of judges from the Fort Wayne faculty. Each essayist explores a particular aspect of Lutheran thought and/or history that continues to enliven our contemporary witness and work. Peter J. Brock, a second-year seminarian, draws on the rich work of the contemporary German Lutheran theologian, Oswald Bayer, to show that the church’s life of mercy is given space to act in between the two eons, the old creation and the new creation. First-year seminarian, Jason Gehrke, examines Luther’s seminal treatise of 1520 on Christian freedom, demonstrating that justification by faith alone liberates the believer for a life of mercy in the world. Deaconess intern Mary Moerbe uses Luther’s “theology of the cross” from the Heidelberg Thesis of 1518 to scrub Christian care-giving clean from every barnacle of the “theology of glory” so that works of mercy are freed from heroic claims of self-assertion and are allowed to remain acts of faltering humility in service of the suffering. Finally this collection is rounded out by an essay on C.F.W. Walther and Wilhelm Löhe written by fourth-year seminarian Samuel P. Schuldheisz. Schuldheisz probes the writings of these two nineteenth century churchmen to gain clarity into the legacy that they have left us: faith receiving God’s benefits in Christ and love active in the stewardship of mercy.

Those of us who teach here at Concordia Theological Seminary are rightly proud of these four students and the work they have produced. In their essays we are confident that you will delight in the gifts of scholarship and evangelical clarity that they are even now bringing to the church. We pray that as you are edified by their

essays, your own grasp of a truly Lutheran theology of mercy will be deepened and that you will be enlivened to be an instrument of that mercy in this dying world.

John T. Pless

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions/

Director of Field Education

Concordia Theological Seminary

Fort Wayne, Ind.

Trinity 2008

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

By Peter J. Brock

### Abstract

*The theology of Oswald Bayer is foundational for the church's corporate life of mercy.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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*

---

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.

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*,"<sup>3</sup> 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"<sup>4</sup> and "With Luther in the Present,"<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup> Precht's painting begins to explain how this is so. Though the painting depicts the historical facts of the Peasants' War, Precht 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 Precht "has intensified the scene by projecting these figures into the mythological. One of the knights carrying a blood-smeared sword has

---

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.

a scaly body; Behemoth and Leviathan are recalled.”<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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

---

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 was 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.

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.<sup>10</sup>

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.'"<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> This, it must be 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 consumma-

---

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

11 *Ibid.*, 40.

12 *Ibid.*, 45.

tion 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

Bayer remarks that this Word from the cross, this testament, "be-queaths 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."<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> God's continuous creative activity and His preservation and

---

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.

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."<sup>18</sup> 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 . . ."<sup>19</sup> 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.

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."<sup>20</sup> 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 Sup-

---

18 Ibid., 13.

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

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).

per — 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.”<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup>

---

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.

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.”<sup>26</sup> 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 when justifying thinking (metaphysics) and justifying doing (morality), together with the unity of both that some seek, are all radically destroyed.”<sup>27</sup> 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.’”<sup>28</sup> “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.”<sup>29</sup> This action of killing and

26 Ibid., 20.

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).

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.<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> 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

---

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

31 *Ibid.*, 22-23.

and the total, but in small and nonetheless distinct steps.<sup>32</sup>

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,"<sup>33</sup> 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 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'."<sup>34</sup> 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."<sup>35</sup> 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

---

32 —"Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 43.

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

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.

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.”<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup>

This life-changing consistency takes place through “renewal of moral judgment.”<sup>39</sup> 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,

---

36 Ibid., 161, 167.

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

38 Ibid., 41.

39 Ibid.

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."<sup>40</sup> 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."<sup>41</sup> 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 with critical openness."<sup>42</sup> 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,"<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>45</sup> This is a turning away from the Creator, the giver of all that one

---

40 Ibid., 42.

41 Ibid.

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.

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).”<sup>46</sup> 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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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.”<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup> 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

---

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.

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.”<sup>51</sup> 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 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.”<sup>52</sup> 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*.”<sup>53</sup> 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*.<sup>54</sup> 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 . . .”<sup>55</sup> 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.”<sup>56</sup> 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

---

51 Ibid., 45.

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.

from property we selfishly horde 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.<sup>57</sup>

Streltsov notes the “Lutheran church as such is not alien to the ideas of charity, almsgiving, sharing possessions, and the like.”<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> 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

---

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.

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.”<sup>61</sup> 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. 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.’<sup>62</sup>

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.”<sup>63</sup>

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.”<sup>64</sup> 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

---

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

62 Ibid., 12-13.

63 —*Living By Faith*, 38.

64 Ibid., 67

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.”<sup>65</sup> 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.”<sup>66</sup> 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.”<sup>67</sup> 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.’”<sup>68</sup>

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

---

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.

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 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."<sup>69</sup> 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 worshiping 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,

---

69 Ibid., 69.

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,"<sup>70</sup> 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.

---

70 Job 38:11.

## Bibliography

—Bayer, Oswald. *Freedom in Response*. Translated by Jeffrey F. Cayzer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

—“God as Author of My Life History.” *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (1988): 437–456.

—“Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 273–292.

—*Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003.

—“Nature and Institution: Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Orders.” *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998): 125–160.

—“Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today.” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 35–50.

—“Self Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings.” *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004): 275–290.

—“The Being of Christ in Faith.” *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996): 135–150.

—“With Luther in the Present,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 1–16.

—Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1951.

—Luther, Martin. *Lectures on Galatians—1535*, Vol. 26 of *Luther’s Works*, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963.

—Meilaender, Gilbert. “Hearts Set to Obey.” *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006.

—“To Throw Oneself Into the Wave.” *Things That Count*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000.

—O’Donovan, Oliver. *Common Objects of Love*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002.

—Saleska, Timothy E. “Pastors Who Play God.” *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 1 (2005): 12–36.

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

## The Christian Life Justified: Luther's Theology of Mercy in the *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*

By Jason M. Gehrke

Rather than derive an ethical system from the Law of God, in the *Treatise on Christian Liberty* Luther preached a theology of mercy that looks solely to Christ. Because the sinner has no mercy to give, he always fails to love his neighbor, Luther says. But when the sinner is freed from the Law through the preaching of the Gospel, he becomes a new man, like unto the Incarnate Christ, who though Lord of all, showed mercy to sinners by making himself a servant of every man. By the Gospel, the Christian man is freed from the ordinary claims of distributive justice. He does not seek his due because the Word of God grants him that which is most needful; being justified, he is made the most dutiful servant of every man. According to Luther, the Christian man's service of mercy is not his own. Derived from the Gospel, it is a vicarious mercy given through the Word. Thus, Luther's theology of mercy preaches the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, apart from works of the Law. As Luther's treatise explains, the Law does not create or effect forgiveness and thereby mercy among men. Received by faith, God's Word of justification is the only source of blessing, a well of mercy — according to Luther “a living font [which] springs up unto life eternal.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Law in Luther's Theology of Mercy

Luther's theology of mercy begins with an acute recognition of man's total incapacity to do good apart from Christ. He does not resort to the Law for ethical precepts. Instead, Luther acknowledged the “determinative aspect of human nature which secular ethical systems tend to ignore, play down, or deny: sin.”<sup>2</sup> No external work or deed (*negotio et opus*) can change this condition. Man must become good

---

1 Martin Luther, *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*, Weimar Edition vol. 7, 49-50.

2 **NB:** It is not my purpose to offer a comprehensive presentation of Luther's whole theology. Here, I wish only to delve into this *Treatise*, which seems remarkably neglected, submitting the findings as one helpful piece among Luther's vast corpus. For more on Luther's ethics one certainly must consider his later works, and important scholars of Luther such as Gustaf Wingren, Oswald Bayer, Eberhard Jungel et. al.

Alistair McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 122.

before he can do any good work. Luther puts it this way:

These two sayings are surely true, ‘Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works; Evil works do not make a man evil, but an evil man does evil works.’ Thus, it is always needed that the material or substance be good before all good works; and all good works follow and issue forth from the good substance.<sup>3</sup>

Quoting Matthew 7, Luther drew his argument directly from Jesus, “A bad tree does not produce good fruit; a good tree does not produce bad fruit.”<sup>4</sup> The sinner cannot make himself to serve his neighbor because he cannot change what he is. “Good works are excluded . . . precisely because human nature (that is the moral self) is powerless to perform them.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, no man can perform works of mercy until he is set free from the Law; while a sinner, he can do no good thing.

In Luther’s treatment, the Law actually prevents any truly merciful deed. It drives a sinner not outward, toward his neighbor, but ever deeper into his own self-interested efforts. For works done to satisfy the Law ultimately seek the good of the doer, not of the neighbor. As Werner Elert explained Luther’s teaching, “Where there is knowledge of sin, man’s thinking . . . is directed toward himself.”<sup>6</sup> By the law, the sinner is bound to his own sin, held captive by his own need for life and salvation. This is the dreaded reality of life under the Law: With its true and holy accusations, the Law shackles a man in fruitless works of self-devotion. Each failed attempt compounds the very burden the sinner had tried to lift. The Law ultimately presses him to despair and cease his impotent efforts altogether. Pursued to its conclusion, a theology of mercy

---

3 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 61. *Vera itaque sunt haec duo verba ‘Bona opera non faciunt bonum virum, sed bonus facit bona opera; Mala opera non faciunt malum virum, sed malus vir facit mala opera.’ Ita ut semper oporteat ipsam substantiam seu personam esse bonam ante omnia opera bona et opera bona sequi et provenire ex bona persona.*

4 **NB:** Luther uses *substantia* and *persona*, which translates *hypostasis*, the term used of the two natures in Christ in the Nicene Creed. This Christological tone becomes increasingly explicit later in the Treatise.

Ibid. *Sicut et Christus dicit ‘Mala arbor non facit bonos fructus, Bona arborum facit malos fructus’.*

5 Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther* (Oxford: University Press, 1963), 27.

6 Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 34.

based upon the Law ends in the reckless embrace of self-serving labors — the antithesis of mercy's gifts.

Reading Luther it might be easy to conceive of the Law as bad and the Gospel as good — to consider the Law as contrary to the work of God. For Luther, however, this was not so. Instead, Luther believed God uses the Law as His instrument in driving the sinner to Himself. The Commandments increase sin only because they cannot effect what they demand:

The commandments teach indeed good things, but the things which are taught do not immediately come about. They show what we must do, but the virtue of doing they do not give. For this purpose they were appointed, to show man to himself so that through them he might recognize his own impotence to do good and despair of his own power.<sup>7</sup>

Far from opposing God's work in salvation, Luther says that it is actually God who condemns by the Law in order to press the sinner into an inescapable snare where he learns that all things are of God alone; the Law is not separate nor opposed to God's work in salvation. Luther writes,

When humiliated and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he discovers nothing in himself by which he can be justified and saved, this second part of Scripture comes forth, the Promises of God, which announce the glory of God and say, 'If you wish to fulfill the Law . . . believe in Christ, in whom is promised to you, grace, peace, liberty and all things; if you believe you will have, if you do not believe you will lack.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Luther teaches that the dreaded cycle of trial and failure is established by God to drive the sinner outside of himself and his own needs toward faith in Christ. God condemns by the Law in order to justify by the Gospel.

---

7 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 52. *Praecepta docent quidem bona, sed non statim fiunt quae docta sunt: ostendunt enim, quid facere nos oporteat, sed virtutem faciendi non donant. In hoc autem sunt ordinata, ut hominem sibi ipsi ostendant, per quae suam impotentiam ad bonum cognoscat et de suis viribus desperet.*

8 Ibid., 53. . . . *tum vere humiliatus et in nihilum redactus coram oculis suis non invenit in seipso, quo justificetur et salvus fiat. Hic altera scripturae adest, Promissa dei, quae annunciant gloriam dei et dicunt, 'Si vis legem implere . . . Crede in Christum, in quo promittuntur tibi gratia, pax, libertas et omnia, si credis, habebis, si non credis, carebis'.*

Recognizing God's gracious purpose in crushing with the Law, Luther argues that works done in service to the Law cannot improve a man's condition. Taught by Paul, Luther explains that righteousness comes not by works, but by faith alone,

Because God the Father has placed all things under faith so that whoever has this has all things, and whoever does not have it will have nothing. Likewise, He encloses all [sins] under unbelief that He might have mercy on all, as Romans 11 says. The promises of God give what the commandments demand and they fulfill what the Law bids, with the result that *all things are of God alone, both the commandments and the fulfillment of them. He Himself alone commands what alone He fulfills* [emphasis mine].<sup>9</sup>

Crushing with the Law, God tears down the idol of man's miserable deeds and replaces it with faith in His promise. In this way, God asserts Himself as the only true God. He alone commands, says Luther, He alone fulfills.

While he remains under the Law, a man has neither the will nor the capacity to be righteous and thus to love and serve his neighbor. "We are sinners," as McGrath notes, "and any ethical system that fails to take the sinfulness of humanity with full seriousness must have its right to call itself Christian challenged."<sup>10</sup> If the Christian, once freed, exchanges the Gospel for an ethical system based on the Law, he establishes once again both the Law and the idol of works in place of the God-man who is the only true source of mercy. To be justified by Christ and then to live by the Law is to deny the justification. This is a total repudiation of the Gospel. The Law must pass away so that the Christian man may live in Christ. Luther preached the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone as the sole foundation for a Christian life of mercy. "Justification," for Luther, "establishes a relationship of servant-hood between the believer and any who cross his path. It is in other words, a socially transformative

---

9 Ibid, 53. . . . *quia dux pater omnia in fide posuit, ut quisquis hanc habuerit omnia habeat, qui non habuerit nihil habeat. Concluit enim omnia sub incredulitate, ut omnium misereatur, Ro. 11. Sic promissa dei hoc donant, quod praecepta exigent, et implent quod lex iubet ut omnia sint solius dei, tam praecepta et plenitudo eorum. Ipse solus praecipit, solus quoque implet.*

10 NB: AE, vol. 31, 349 translates "*concluit enim omnia sub incredulitate,*" with "[God] has consigned all men to disobedience."

McGrath, *Justification by faith*, 122.

doctrine.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, in his “brief summa of the Christian life,” Luther teaches a service of mercy derived solely from the free justification of the sinner for Christ’s sake.<sup>12</sup>

## A Two-Fold Man

When the Gospel-proclamation sets man free from the Law, it creates a new man who mirrors the mystery of the incarnation. Luther opens *On Christian Liberty* with two seemingly contradictory propositions regarding the Christian man:

The Christian man, lord of all, is most free, subject to no one.

The Christian man, servant of all, is most dutiful, subject to everyone.<sup>13</sup>

Luther derived his theses directly from Paul’s description of Christ in Philippians 2. The Christian man lives as his Savior, Luther says, who “though Lord of all, being born from a woman was made under the Law, at once free and a servant (*simul liber et servus*), at once in the form of God and in the form of a man.”<sup>14</sup> This Pauline statement encompasses Luther’s entire portrait of the Christian life and divides the *On Christian Liberty* into two discussions of the “interior” and “exterior” man. The Christian man, insofar as he is interior, is lord of all. But when the interior man manifests his lordship outwardly, he acts as a completely free and therefore utterly dutiful servant of all. The person and work of Christ define him in every sphere of life.

At first glance, one might easily conceive Luther’s distinction in a platonic or dualistic sense, dividing the interior from the exterior man. But Luther was not using the classical anthropology, holding the soul as free because it is soul and the body a slave because it is body. He does not say that the Christian man has two natures, but that he “has [one] two-fold nature.”<sup>15</sup> Luther certainly used the parlance of 16th

---

11 Carl Trueman, *Simul Peccator et Justus: Martin Luther and Justification*, In. Bruce L. McCormack (ed), *Justification in Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2006), 95.

12 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 48. Introducing *de Libertate Christiana* to Leo X, Luther called the work a “*summa vitae Christiana . . . compendio congesta*.” It seems that Luther himself saw the treatise as a kind of ethical writing.

13 Ibid., 49. *Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus nulli subjectus; Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subjectus*.

14 Ibid., 50. *Sic et Christus, quanquam omnium dominus, factus tamen ex muliere, factus est sub lege, simul liber et servus, simul in forma dei et in forma servi*.

15 Ibid., 50. *Homo enim duplici constat natura, spiritali et corporali*.

century theology, but his distinction does not promote any kind of liberation-through-inwardness. Luther is unique in this sense, “Just as he assigns human freedom (*libertas*), so also he assigns human bondage (*servitudo*) to the inner man.”<sup>16</sup> Luther himself makes the point, “Nothing external . . . possesses anything of moment either for producing Christian righteousness or liberty, just as neither its unrighteousness or servitude.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Luther’s distinction was not one of ontology. He did not teach that two autonomous selves live in the justified man — one of body, the other soul. He was only explaining how the one justified man relates both inwardly and externally, and therefore depends on one thing inwardly, another according to his outer man. Luther says:

What is it able to profit the soul, if the body does well . . . if it eats, drinks and goes about free, since in these things even the most impious slaves of every wickedness may prosper? Again, how can any evil condition of the body, whether captivity or starvation or any other . . . hurt the soul, since even the most pious . . . consciences are vexed by these things? Neither of these circumstances pertain to the righteousness or liberty of the soul.<sup>18</sup>

With this logic, Luther proves his distinction in order to show how the interior man relates to God. As Eberhard Jungel explains, “The soul is human life in its relation to God, and as such desires to be distinguished from its relation to everything else.”<sup>19</sup> Luther says the interior man can relate to God only through the Word; the exterior

---

16 Eberhard Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther’s Significance for Contemporary Theology* (trans) by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 58. Jungel discusses how certain scholars have found in Luther’s distinction an adherence to platonic dualism that might justify an accusation of Antinomianism. Although their arguments cannot be treated here comprehensively, it is important to clarify what Luther was saying for well-informed readers. See Jungel for a more comprehensive presentation of secondary scholarship on the issue.

17 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 50. *Et constat, nullam prorsus rerum externum . . . aliquid habere momenti ad iustitiam aut libertatem Christianam, sicut nec ad iniustitiam aut servitutem parandam.*

18 Ibid., 50. *Quid enim prodesse queat animae, si corpus bene habeat . . . edat bibat agatque ut libuerit, cum iis rebus floreat etiam impiissimi omnium scelerum servi? Rursus, quod obfuerit animae mala valetudo aut captivitas aut fames quodvis incommodum externum, cum iis rebus vexentur etiam piissimi puraque conscientia liberrimi? Neutra harum rerum pertingit ad animae sive libertatem sive servitutem.*

19 Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 58

man needs the bodily world. Living by the Gospel, the interior man is utterly free simply because no external thing can affect his relation to the Word.

Luther's assertion elucidates his statements regarding good works and the good man. Just as the righteous and free man cannot be harmed or improved either by wrongs committed against him or favors done him in the body, so doing external works cannot make the sinful man free or good. The tree does not grow on the fruit, but the fruit on the tree; outward conditions do not make a man either good or evil. Far from platonic dualism, Luther ascribes utter liberty to the interior man only because the interior man lives on the Word of God alone:

One thing, and this alone, is required for life, righteousness, and Christian liberty. And this is the most-holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ. Just as Christ says in John 9 'I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will never die;'. . . and Matthew 4, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word, which proceeds from the mouth of God.'<sup>20</sup>

Luther draws his anthropology from Scripture: In Christ's distinction between *Word* and *bread* (Matthew 4), he finds both the distinction between interior and exterior man, and an identification of their respective needs. The exterior man may profit from bread; the interior man uses only the Gospel. As in Luther's thought, the two-fold man and his needs are not *divided* but are certainly *distinguished* even in the mind of Christ. Drawing on John 9, he identified the *Evangelium Christi* with Christ himself. Because Christ works through the Gospel, Luther could say that it brings everything needful. Luther writes:

Having this Word [the interior man] is rich, lacking nothing, since it is a Word of life (*cum sit verbum vitae*), of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of virtue, of grace, of glory and every good *inestimably* [emphasis mine].<sup>21</sup>

---

20 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 50. *Una re eaque sola opus est ad vitam, iustitiam et libertatem Christianam. Ea est sacrosanctum verbum dei, Evangelium Christi, sicut dicit Joh. xi. 'Ego sum resurrectio et vita, qui credit in me non morietur in aeternum'. . . et Matt. iv 'Non in solo pane vivit homo, sed in omni verbo, quod procedit ab ore dei.'*

21 Ibid., 51. *Habens autem verbum dives est, nullius egens, cum sit verbum vitae, veritatis, lucis, pacis, iustitiae, salutis, gaudii, libertatis, sapientiae, virtutis, gratiae, gloriae et omnis boni inaeestimabiliter.*

Deriving his Lordship from the Gospel, the interior man is not Dominus omnium in a bodily sense as though free from political authority, a king commanding what he wills. Rather, he is a perfectly free lord of all precisely because he has, and cannot lose, the only thing that can do him good, the Word of God. By the Gospel alone, “the Christian man . . . is magnified above all things, so that by a *spiritual power* he is lord of all, with the result that nothing external in any way may do him harm, nay more, all things, subjected to him, *are compelled to serve for his salvation* [emphasis mine].”<sup>22</sup> The Christian man’s lordship is not of external things; it is a spiritual power received through the Word, by which God subjects all things to serve him eternally. Luther stood once again on firm exegetical ground, invoking Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 3, “All things work together for the good of the elect;” and again, “All things are yours, either death or life, whether things present or things to come, moreover you belong to Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Thus in his assertion of freedom and lordship, Luther confesses nothing else than the certainty of eternal life and of the Creator’s sure protection unto that end. Neither revolutionary nor dualistic, it is simply an incisive explanation of Pauline doctrine. The Christian has the Word; he will live and God will make all things to serve his salvation.

Luther’s exposition of the interior man’s need for the Word leads simultaneously to his assertion that justification by works will drive a man to utter despair, and that a man is saved *sola fide*. Here again, Luther did not draw from his own mind, but found his teaching firmly rooted in Scripture. Having exulted in the Word (as seen above) Luther recalls that all its gifts come freely, when “one believes,”

For *faith alone* is a saving (*salutaris*) and effective (*efficax*) use of the Word of God, as Rom. 10 says, ‘If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and *believe in your heart* that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved [emphasis mine].’<sup>24</sup>

Because the Word alone can profit the soul, and because faith

22 Ibid., 57. *Christianus . . . magnificetur super omnia, ut spirituali potentia prorsus dominus sit, ita ut nulla omnino rerum possit ei quicquam nocere, immo omnia ei subiecta cogunter servire ad salutem.*

23 Ibid., 57. *Sic Paulus Rom. 8. dicit ‘Omnia cooperunter in bonum electis.’ Item 1 Cor. 3, “Omnia vestra, sive mors sive vita, sive instantia sive future, vos autem Christi.”*

24 Ibid., 51. . . . *si crederit praedictioni. Fides enim sola est salutaris et efficax usus verbi dei, Ro. 10., ‘Si confitearis ore tuo Ihesum esse dominum, et corde tuo credideris, quod deus illum suscitavit a mortuis, salvus eris.*

alone receives the Word, external works of righteousness are useless to the interior man. Performed under the Law, they actually damage the soul for whom only the Word gives life. Commanding self-justification through works sets an impossible task for the interior man because the soul cannot relate to God or itself except through the Word; and this it only grasps *per fidem*. The interior man does not live by eating bread with his mouth, but only by hearing the Word. Faith alone receives the Word and makes the soul righteous. “The Righteous man shall live by faith,” Luther notes. “The Word of God is not able to be honored or taken up by means of any works, but by faith alone. Therefore, it is clear that the soul has need for the Word alone for life and righteousness, so that by faith alone and not by works is a man justified.”<sup>25</sup> Works cannot help the interior man because works do not receive the Word. Thus, in Luther’s thought, “Faith effects the *meaning* of the distinction between the inward and the outer man.”<sup>26</sup> Faith makes total conquest of the Law and works.

According to Luther, the Word of God establishes by faith a reciprocity between God and the soul; faith denies itself and gives back to God what rightly belongs to Him. In return, God honors faith by giving to it every good thing. The Word makes the soul true, so that the interior man confesses that God is true in His condemnation of sin, and equally true when He promises mercy by the Gospel. Through the gift of faith, the sinful man abandons his Adamic lust to be God for himself and is made truly righteous precisely in confessing that God alone is true and righteous. God then honors faith with the declaration of righteousness to which faith clings. Luther says,

When God sees that truth is bestowed (*tribui*) to Himself, and that through the faith of our heart He is honored with such great honor . . . in return He Himself honors us, bestowing (*tribuens*) to us truth and righteousness on account of this faith. Faith thus makes true and righteous, returning to God what is His own; and therefore, in return, God gives back [to faith] the glory of our righteousness.<sup>27</sup>

---

25 Ibid., 51. Luther quotes Paul, ‘*Justus ex fide sua vivet.*’ *Neque enim verbum dei operibus ullis, sed sola fide suscipi et coli potest. Ideo clarum est, ut solo verbo anima opus habet, ad vitam et iustitiam, ita sola fide et nullis operibus iustificatur.*

26 Eberhard Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 75.

27 Luther., *de Libertate Christiana*, 54. *Ubi autem deus videt, veritatem sibi tribui et fide cordis nostri se honorari tanto honore . . . Rursus et ipse nos honorat, tribuens et nobis veritatem et iustitiam propter hanc fidem. Fides enim facit veritatem et iustitiam, reddens deo suum, ideo rursus reddit deus iustitiae nostrae gloriam.*

For Luther, faith is not any kind of work or merit that earns salvation; it is the creation of God's Word through Law and Gospel, by which He drives a man to despair and cry out for the righteousness that only God can give. True to form, Luther holds closely to Scripture in this, noting 1 Kings 2, "Whoever honors me, him I will glorify; whoever slights me, they will be inglorious."<sup>28</sup> Faith simply relies on God's promise.

Luther's account of the *virtus* of faith should not be mistaken for any kind of latent anthropocentrism. By faith, the Christian man recognizes both the commandments and the promises, confesses God to be God, and despairs of his own works only because faith receives the Word. Faith keeps the First Commandment precisely because it admits that "all things are of God alone, both the commandments and the fulfillment of them."<sup>29</sup> Faith is righteous not by virtue of its own, but only by the Word. Luther says,

*Since these promises of God are holy words, true, righteous, free, pacifying, and filled with total goodness, it happens that the soul is joined to these things; nay more, it is absorbed, so that it does not merely participate, but is soaked and inebriated with their every virtue . . . In this way, the soul, through faith alone . . . from the Word of God is justified, is sanctified, is made true, is pacified, is liberated, is filled and is truly made the child of God [emphasis mine].*<sup>30</sup>

The same Word that vivifies the inner man drives him outward toward his neighbor. Luther never divided the bifold nature of the Christian. Having expounded the righteousness of faith that makes a Christian free from the Law and lord of all, Luther turned to the Christian's external life. "The inner man is the person turned inward

---

28 Ibid., 53. *Quicumque honorificat me, glorificabo eum, Qui vero contemnunt me, erunt ignobiles.*

29 Ibid. *ut sint omnia solius dei, tam praecepta et plenitudo eorum.*

30 Ibid. *Cum haec promissa dei sint verba sancta, vera, iusta, libera, pacata et universa bonitate plena, fit ut anima, quae firma fide illis adheret, sic eis uniatur, immo penitus absorbeatur, ut non modo participet sed saturetur et inebrietur omni virtute eorum . . . Hoc modo anima per fidem solam, e operibus, e verbo dei iustificatur, sanctificatur, verificatur, pacificatur, liberatur et omni bono repletur vereque filia dei efficitur.*

**NB:** Even Luther's grammar reflects his passive understanding of faith's relation to the Word. Faith does not "*participet*" actively, but rather "*absorbeatur*", etc., passively. Luther uses language very precisely here, as throughout the entire treatise. His passive usage makes a *theological* assertion about the nature of faith and the work of God. It should not be overlooked or smoothed out in translation.

by the accosting word, and in the event of this turning inward is turned away from the self. The inward man exists in that change from within toward the outside.”<sup>31</sup> Sustained by the Gospel, the interior man expresses himself outwardly in free service to his neighbor.

### The Inner Man's Outward Life

Luther most fully developed the ethical implications of justification when he explained the external life of the Christian man — the outward expression of the man who is created anew by the Word of the Gospel. The Christian man's exterior life draws strength from the Word that is possessed inwardly by faith. “Luther makes clear that this invisible, spiritual freedom and lordship is not an entity unrelated to the visible world.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the inner man manifests his likeness to the Word that makes him a righteous creation of God. Driven outward by the Word, the Christian man goes forth in the first-fruits of the Spirit. “To this part pertains [Luther's second proposition]: the Christian man is a servant of all and subject to everyone.” Incomplete until “the last day of the resurrection of the dead . . . with joy and thanks to God [the exterior man] serves his neighbor with unsubdued charity (*libera charitate*).” The Christian man is united with himself in this life of free service. His external servitude directly expresses the interior liberty that is “created through faith and rejoices and is delighted on account of Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

Luther's description pours the justified man into a Christological mold. His exposition of the *duplex natura* in the Christian man derives directly from Paul's description of Christ in Philippians 2. When Jesus takes away sin and imparts faith by the Gospel, the Christian man is created anew in His image. The Christian and Christ are grafted into one flesh by the “wedding ring of faith.” The Christian man's external life expresses the *mera misericordia Dei*, which makes and animates his interior being. His lordship and liberty in the present life are manifest externally in the same paradoxical *libera charitas* that Christ rendered

---

31 Eberhard Jungel. *The Freedom of a Christian*, 63.

32 Ibid., 73.

33 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 59-60. *Ad hanc partem pertinet [exterior homo], quod supra positum est, Christianum esse omnium servum et omnibus subiectum . . . enim interior homo conformis deo et ad imaginem dei creatus per fidem et gaudet et iucundatur propter Christum . . . ut gaudio et gratis deo serviat in libera charitate.*

NB: I translate *libera* with “unsubdued” above only to avoid the debauched connotation that “free love” bears in an American context. Ordinarily, “free” is a perfectly good rendering.

to the world: The Christian man is made a servant not by the Law, but by the Gospel received in faith. As Luther says,

Faith marries the soul with Christ as a bridegroom with a bride. And by this *sacramentum* . . . Christ and the soul are made *into one flesh* . . . All their possessions become common, both the good and the evil, so that whatever Christ has the believing soul is able to take as its own, and whatever the soul has Christ adopts as his very own . . . For if He is a bridegroom He must receive those things which are His bride's, and at the same time impart His own possessions to the bride [emphasis mine].<sup>34</sup>

The Christian man is made one flesh in Christ by the “*annulum fidei*,” the wedding ring of faith that receives only the Word of forgiveness.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Luther personalized the biblical analogy, finding in marriage a legal metaphor. His expression of unity with Christ was not any kind of eroticism; the marriage is still affected by God's Word. In Luther's thought, the Christian's unity with Christ is a legal relationship to which Christ joins himself as a bridegroom to his bride. The bride — the justified soul in this case — rightfully owns the mercy of Christ because Christ freely takes her sins as His own property. From this exchange, the Christian receives those goods that are offered to the neighbor. Therefore, the Christian life of servitude derives from Christ's justification; it communicates only what it receives from the Lord.

Luther uses the legal metaphor of marriage in order to explain the Christological character of the justified man, which provides the form and substance of his life's activity. Carl Trueman writes in a similar vein, saying that “[Luther's] notion of union with Christ in *the Freedom of a Christian Man* gives a Christological, and therefore crucicentric, context for understanding what Luther means in terms of lordship, authority, and power.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian receives his motivation, even his very deeds themselves from the Gospel. Christ is the whole substance of his person. Because “[Christ] is the substance of [the Christian man's] existence before God, what happened to Christ will also happen to

---

34 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 54-55. Quo [connective *qui*=et *ea*] *sacramento* . . . *Christus et anima efficiuntur una caro* . . . *et omnia eorum communia fieri tam bono quam mala, ut, quaecunque Christus habet, de iis tanquam suis praesumere* . . . *Et quaecunque animae sunt, ea sibi arroget Christus tanquam sua* . . . *oportet enim eum, si sponsus est, ea simul quae sponsa habet acceptare et ea quae sua sunt sponsae impartire.*

35 Ibid., 69. . . *fit, ut talis persona peccata, mortem, infernum sponsae et propter annulum fidei sibi communia.*

36 Carl Trueman, *Simul Peccator et Justus*, 79. See note 11.

[him]; [Christ] is the human being par excellence.”<sup>37</sup> It is not surprising in this light that the freedom of a Christian man is expressed outwardly in servitude, just as Christ displayed his Lordship by freely choosing the death of a slave. Luther is not making Christ into a new Law for the Christian so that he finds in the example of Christ a “second use of the Gospel.” His assertion is only that Christ’s gift of the Gospel is the substance of the Christian man’s service. Thus, Luther says,

The good things which we have from God flow from one onto another and become common, so that everyone puts on his neighbor and thus clothes himself in his neighbor, as if he himself were in [his neighbor’s] place. From Christ, who has put us on as if he were what we are, they have flowed and do flow onto us<sup>38</sup>

The Christian man’s good works derive from, and ultimately express the Gospel, because the Christian man only possesses what is received from Christ through the Gospel.

Always supplying the need now for the sake of life *then*, Christian mercy begins and ends with the Gospel of justification. Because the Christian man gives what he receives from Christ, his service cannot be one of Law or of his own works. He gives nothing else than what Jesus bestows in the Gospel. His work necessarily aims at the eternal good of the neighbor because what he gives is not his own; it is only what Christ has given. The Christian man acts, therefore, as Christ acted; he cannot separate his good deeds from the Gospel. As Luther says,

[Because the gifts of God] flow from us onto those who have need for them, I should lay before God my faith *for the covering over and interceding for the sins of my neighbor*, which I receive upon myself, so that *I labor and serve in them* as if they were properly my own: thus, Christ has done for us [emphasis mine].<sup>39</sup>

---

37 H.J. Iwand, “The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly Review*, 21, No. 3 (2007), 445.

38 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 69. . . . *ut quae ex deo habemus bona fluunt ex uno in alium et communia fiant, ut unus quisque proximum suum induat et erga eum sic sibi gerat, ac si ipse esset in loco illius. E Christo fluxerunt et fluunt in nos, qui nos sic induit et pro nobis egit, ac si ipse esset quod nos sumus.*

39 Ibid., *E nobis fluunt in eos, qui eis opus habent, adeo ut et fidem et iustitiam meam oportea coram deo poni pro tegendis et deprecandis proximi peccatis, quae super me accipiam, et ita in eis laborem et serviam, ac si mea propria essent: sic enim Christus nobis fecit.*

Luther's focus on the Gospel makes justification not an excuse for doing nothing bodily or temporal, but rather, quite the opposite. Justification is most emphatically expressed through bodily, earthly, incarnated service, precisely because that is how Christ bestowed it — through his bodily death and resurrection. Any account of Luther's ethics must hold this Christological model closely in view.

It seems that many worthy authors, while recognizing the importance of justification in Luther's theology, have often failed to grasp its full implications. Paul Althaus, for example, begins his important work, *Luther's Ethics*, with the resounding statement that, "justification is both the presupposition and the source of the Christian life." Certainly he affirms that in justification, "man's relationship to the Law is basically changed."<sup>40</sup> But for Althaus the change is one of man's perspective. Whereas once man viewed the Law as a morbid, condemning thing, "Now man is able to love God's law with his whole heart just as he loves God himself — for the content of the Law is the form and expression of the nature of God."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, McGrath, who has written many good books promoting Luther's understanding of justification, still conceives of the Christian life as one of obedience to the Law. For McGrath, "Justification brings about a new obedience — an obedience that would not be conceivable before our justification and that ultimately rests on the grace of God."<sup>42</sup> In McGrath's estimation, justification does not primarily set aside and set free from the Law, but rather empowers for a life of fulfilling the Law, aided by the grace of God.

For Luther, however, the form and expression of God's nature is nothing else than the person of Jesus Christ. Luther surely does not deny the new obedience. Indeed, his writing does quite the opposite. Nonetheless, the language of obeying and fulfilling the Law does not primarily animate Luther's exposition of the Christian life. Instead, Luther emphasizes the free service of the righteous man for whom there is no Law. He says,

---

**NB:** Luther's Christological paradigm of the Christian life shows through strongly in this paragraph. The "*Ex deo fluunt . . . E Christo fluunt . . . E Nobis fluunt. .sicut Christus nobis fecit*" arrangement draws a syntactic parallel that more emphatically asserts Luther's point. Again, the "*ac si ipse esset . . . ac si mea essent*" construction serves the same purpose. Luther is being very careful with his language and terms in this treatise, emphasizing the Christological character of his anthropology.

40 Paul Althaus, *Luther's Ethics*, (trans.) by Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3.

41 Ibid., 11-12.

42 McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, 117.

See (*ecce*) this is truly the Christian life, here truly faith is effective through love! That is, with joy and love [the Christian man] goes forth in the work of perfectly free servitude, in which he serves another willingly and graciously, satisfied abundantly with the wealth and richness of his own faith.<sup>43</sup>

For Luther, the gospel of justification does not produce good works by giving the sinner a new orientation toward the Law. The Law is not the “revelation of God’s nature.” God’s nature is revealed only through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ and the gospel of forgiveness. The Christian man responds to justification with service toward his neighbor precisely because he no longer thinks of the Law at all. The Christian man has no use for the Law because by faith he receives the abundant mercy of his Savior, which he shares *gratis et sponte*, without limit. Quoting Paul, Luther continually exclaims,

For the Christian man, his own faith is sufficient for all things. He will not have need for works in order to be justified. And if for works he has no need, neither for the law does he have any need: if he has no need for the Law, certainly he is free from the Law and it is true, ‘*the Law was not put down for the righteous.*’ (1 Tim 1:9) [emphasis mine].<sup>44</sup>

For Luther, justification is the pure opposite of the Law. It constitutes the Christian life not by empowering the Christian to actually fulfill the Law, but by freeing him from the Law (insofar as he is Christian) with its legal demands. Christ, having removed the Law by the Word of the Gospel replaces its impossible dictates with His own mercy, given without end (*abunde*).

Any veneration of the Law on account of faith is not faithful to Luther’s theology of justification, grace, Christian liberty, or mercy. For Luther, it is of the essence of faith to make free from the Law — that is, to justify, to remove the Law, and to set in its place the Word of the Gospel. When upheld in place of the Gospel, the Law is the power of

---

43 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 64. *Ecce haec est vere Christiana vita, hic vere fides efficax est per dilectionem, hoc est, cum gaudio et dilectione prodit in opus servitutis liberrimae, qua alteri gratis et sponte servit, ipsa abunde satura fidei suae plenitudine et opulencia.*

44 Ibid., 53. *Homini Christiano suam fidem sufficere pro omnibus nec operibus ei opus fore, ut justificetur: quod si operibus non habet opus, nec lege opus habet: si lege non habet opus, certe liber est a lege, verumque est ‘iusto non est lex posita’.*

sin, the enemy of faith; likewise, faith is death to the Law, the virtue of justification, righteousness and Christian liberty. For justification creates faith, removing any need for the Law to reveal righteousness or good works.

Therefore, a theology of mercy based upon the Law's commands will always prove itself a theology of minimalism. The man who constructs an ethical system from the Law rather than simply receiving his good works from Christ, finally chooses the lesser over the greater: Mercy described by the Law will always be confined by it. Thus, for Luther, "Paul's theology, with its announcement of the justification of the godless sets in the place of 'ethics' a doctrine of 'charisms'."<sup>45</sup> The Christian receives mercy from a living well of grace that knows no bounds; it ceases at nothing less than the neighbor's every need. By it, Christ makes a true servant — a man unfettered by the need to justify himself. The Christian man takes no respect of persons; he demands no gratitude for his effort. Living by the Gospel, the Christian man serves his neighbor with that same grace that is poured onto him through the Word of Christ. He gives only what is received; the Word leaves nothing but its own relentless service of mercy.

Clinging to the Word by faith, the Christian finally is freed from the task of self-justification. Freed by the mercy of God — the necessary element in any true work of mercy, the very thing the sinner could not earn by his own merit — the Christian is finally able to turn away from himself, toward the needs of his neighbor. Receiving his own liberty, the Christian relinquishes demands he might have made upon another man; he forgives sins committed against him. Showing the mercy of Christ, he even surpasses the Law's demands. Luther's much later explanation in the *Small Catechism* offers a prime example of this Christian service of mercy. More than simply abstain from murder, Luther says, the Christian man "helps and supports [his neighbor] in every physical need."<sup>46</sup> Being freed, the Christian man does not look to the Law as guide for *his own* works, but simply communicates *Christ's work*, which he receives from the Word by faith. As Luther says, "This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which causes not that we become lazy

---

45 Roy A. Harrisville, "The Life and Work of Ernst Kasemann," *Lutheran Quarterly Review* 21, No. 3 (2007), 311.

46 Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 10. Luther's theology in the *Small Catechism*, especially his presentation of the Ten Commandments certainly reflects his early thought in the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*.

or live wickedly, but rather that no one at all has need of the Law for righteousness or salvation.”<sup>47</sup> Faith receives Christ’s mercy and brings it to bear in the life of one’s neighbor.

## Conclusion

That men might obtain this mercy, Luther’s “*summa* of the whole Christian life,” calls for pure preaching of the Word. According to Luther, “Christ was not sent for any other *officium* than of the Word . . . and the Episcopal [offices] were called and instituted for nothing except the ministry of the Word.”<sup>48</sup> The Christian man actually receives a visible and audible declaration of his own righteousness when the Gospel is rightly preached. Throughout the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, Luther puts greatest emphasis on the need for true preaching. “To have preached Christ is to have nourished the soul, to have justified, and to have made free,” Luther writes. Recognizing that “Christian ethics takes place beyond a tight scheme of ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ of fact and value, of ‘description’ and ‘prescription,’” Luther did not set out any kind of ethical system for Christian living.<sup>49</sup> Instead, he begged only this, “that Christ be preached unto the end that faith in him be established — not that He simply may be Christ, but that he may be Christ for you and for me, so that what is said of Him may be worked in us.”<sup>50</sup> Luther knew that the Law does not sanctify, but only the Gospel of Christ bestowed through preaching. This preaching will always include proclamation of the Law in order to drown the Old Adam. Yet Adam must not be confused with the Christian man who lives by faith; he must not be starved of the Word or there is no forgiveness and no mercy. Ultimately, Luther’s theology of mercy calls for pure preaching of the Gospel of justification; the Christian life and every good depend upon it. Where there is this preaching, there is life, salvation, mercy, peace and every good thing.

---

47 Luther, *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*, 53. *Atque haec est Christiana illa libertas, fides nostra, quae facit, ut ociosi simus aut male vivamus, sed ne cuiquam opus sit lege aut operibus ad iustitiam et salutem.*

48 Ibid., 51.— . . . ut ps. 106 ‘Misit verbum suum sanavit eos’ . . . *Neque Christus ad aliud officium missus est quam verbi, Et Apostolicus, Episcopalis . . . non nisi in verbi ministerium vocatus et institutus est.*

49 Theo A. Boer, “Is Luther’s Ethics Christian Ethics?,” *Lutheran Quarterly Review*, No. 21 (2007), 404.

50 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana* 58. *Oportet autem, ut eo fine praedicetur, quo fides in eum promoveatur, ut non tantum sit Christus, sed tibi et mihi, et id in nobis operetur, quod de eo dicitur et quod vocatur.*



## **A Merciful Servant of the Cross: Theology of the Cross for Christian Caregivers**

*By Mary Moerbe*

In the garden, Adam and Eve rebelled and rejected God at His Word. They ate from the tree of knowledge and came to know evil. This knowledge of evil thoroughly corrupted them, body and soul, so that they fled the presence of the Lord. Their new perspective of reality distrusted and disregarded the Lord and His Word.

Man cannot un-know evil, nor can he change his assumptions and perspective by himself: Fallen man sees through sin. Fallen man rejects God through flight and fight, ignoring God's Word; hiding behind ignorance, distraction, rationalization, and speculation; distancing himself from contact; and attacking how the true God chooses to come to man. This sinful perspective condemns goodness itself, juxtaposing human understanding and goals against God's ways and revelation: "good is called evil and evil is called good."<sup>1</sup>

Combining the consequences of sin with this fallen perspective, sinners suffer in body and soul with no true way of understanding or answering it. Hopelessness and meaninglessness haunt many as marriages fail, businesses collapse, and violence overrides both conscience and physical vulnerability. Distraction and reckless abandon become primary human tools against both boredom and despair, characterizing man's thought, word, and deed.

Adam and Eve had to leave the garden and paradise, but God has not left Adam and Eve or their children. Instead, God works within time and Himself entered into history to fulfill His promise of hope and salvation from sin and man's state. God's Word and His actions reveal the goodness of His character and His perseverance as He continues to act and interact with His fallen creation through His chosen ways.

Perhaps ironically, God hides Himself in response to man's flight from Him. God no longer walks to speak with man in the Garden of Eden, but He sends His Word to human ears and ultimately incarnates

---

1 This is a common expression of man's thorough corruption and sinful perception that is frequently heard in conversations about theology of the cross. Martin Luther used the phrase in the "Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 21 (*Luther's Works*, 31, 41. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House). The scriptural reference is Is. 5:20, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

His Word — His Son — as Jesus, the Christ. Apart from His Word, God's true self is hidden so that the saving knowledge of God must disclose itself in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Reflecting upon Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Sasse writes:

Luther does not deny that such invisible things of God as 'His power, His wisdom, His justice, His generosity, and so on' can be seen in the works of His creation . . . [but what Luther] does deny is that such knowledge is useful. . . . It does not change our relationship with God. . . . Men have misused the knowledge of God which they have from what He has made. They have thus become fools. The knowledge of God from His works has never kept anyone from falling away from God and becoming an idolater. So it has pleased God to save those who believe through the folly of what is preached. This preaching is the word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18 ff.).<sup>2</sup>

Theology of the cross, or study of the cross, reveals the reality hidden by sin: God as He is, His Word, His works, His ways, His Christ in the incarnation and suffering, as well as man's absolute dependence upon God, his standing before God, his suffering, and his service within creation. God has chosen to work for good purposefully through what man intends for evil (Gen. 50:20)! The mercy of the cross answers man's greatest needs for forgiveness, cleansing, freedom from sin, acceptance, reconciliation, hope, unity, and new life, directly from the cross.<sup>3</sup>

Theology of the cross is the substance of the Gospel. It is God's truth cutting through death and sin to give new life.<sup>4</sup> Perspective shaped by this is particularly a blessing to those who suffer or who offer

---

2 Sasse, Hermann, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), p. 47.

3 Supporting Bible passages include: forgiveness (Acts 10:34-43, Rom. 4:7-8, Eph. 1:7-10, Col. 2:12-14); cleansing (Eph. 5:25-27, 1 John 1:7); freedom from sin (Rom. 8:2); acceptance (Acts 10:34-43, Rom. 12:1-2); reconciliation (1 Peter 3:18); hope (1 Peter 1:3); unity (Eph. 1:7-10); and new life (Rom. 6:4).

4 "Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of the many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against its opposite, the prevailing theology in Christendom, the *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and Scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel," (Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 39.)

Christian care amid suffering. It has direct implications for Christian understanding and practice, for individuals and the corporate church as the demonstration of God's mercy becomes the motivation and source for all Christian mercy. Theology of the cross offers God's views and actions on Law, Gospel, mercy, and man's sinful perspective, and has direct implication and application to comfort, instruct, and encourage those in the midst of pain, guilt, or tragedy. This essay will address theology of the cross with Christian caregivers in mind, offering: a) a summary of Biblical theology of the cross for the sake of awareness, b) its teachings relevant to mercy made clear on the cross, and c) an introduction to merciful application.

### Theology of the Cross

To say "*the* theology of the cross" can be misleading. Theology means study of God, and some scholarship attempts to study God apart from the divinity of Christ, denying His incarnation, virgin birth, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and messianic promises, resurrection, Trinity). Some try to study Jesus apart from His historical hours on the cross — and apart from God's Word and its authority. Other scholars prefer to speak in terms of "*a* theology of the cross," focusing on one person's treatment or understanding of the subject, Luther's theology of the cross is the classic example.<sup>5</sup> Luther, himself, specifically sought to proclaim the truth instead of speak about the truth; and so this paper will limit its focus to the Biblical theology of the cross, appreciating Luther's clear understanding and proclamation of it. In addressing Luther's positions, however, this paper will use secondary sources in hopes of introducing readers to good resources for further reading on Luther's extensive works.

Study of the cross must rely on God's Word. Not only did Christ's Word prepare His path to Golgotha, and incite His enemies to kill Him, but the cross contains godly action that cannot be understood apart from God's Word, His revelation. This Word then reveals the importance of the cross as a historical event in itself and its ongoing

---

5 A basic introduction to Luther's theology of the cross can be found in Regin Prenter's *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Facet Books, Historical Series, 17, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), Gerhard Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), Walther von Loewenich's *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1976), Alister McGrath's *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990). On the more practical side, Richard Eyer's *Pastoral Care under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994) is also very helpful.

effects in heaven and on earth (Eph. 2:13-16, Phil. 2:5-11, Col. 1:18-23, 2:9-15; etc.). Indeed, the Lord continues to work through the cross to interact with the world and in the lives of individual Christians (Gal. 2:20, 5:24, 6:14, etc.).

On the cross, God showered His mercy on the world while withholding it from His Son.

The theology of the cross, therefore, paradoxically demonstrates God's justice and His mercy, the extent and depravity of sin and God's reaction to it, in anger and in grace. God held Himself to His word, punished sin, yet also delivered sinful man.

The Lord worked through the clearest demonstration of the world's rejection of Him and His ways. What man meant for evil, God used for good (Gen. 50:20). God worked through man's weakness to identify once and for all His fatherly, divine, goodness and mercy, despite the total lack of goodness, merit, or worthiness in man. The Lord even sends His Spirit to sinful man, who cannot believe on his own that the Son of God would suffer on behalf of man, sacrifice apart from all selfish interest, or die — effectively changing everything, even granting God's favor and blessing forever.

According to the historic scene on the cross, God's greatest display of eternal, unearned mercy is horrific to man's body, soul, and mind:<sup>6</sup> stinking bodies under a hot sun; bloody, meaty wounds; naked humiliation; slow-coming death; shame and rejection; apparently lackluster defenselessness; and even well-known, quoted words instead of guilty tears, anger, or repentance. Yet, this is how the Lord reveals Himself to the world. This is the way the Lord works for the good and salvation of the world.

Charles Anderson summarizes theology of the cross this way, "The basic understanding here is that God often works under the sign of the opposite . . . He deals graciously by means of the cross."<sup>7</sup> God sends His Son, incarnate by the Holy Spirit, mothered by Mary, to be God-made-man, and He works through that very fleshliness to win permanent freedom from sin on man's behalf. In short, God fulfills His own demands and commands, because man is not able to (Rom. 7:18). God restores and elevates man to life with Him forever (2 Tim. 4:18; 1 John 2:17; Rev. 22:5).

---

6 See Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 50, second paragraph: "[T]he place where God's revelation is most repugnant to our reason ..."

7 Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. vii.

In a brief, readable introduction to the subject, Regin Prenter writes:

Luther regarded the theology of the cross not merely as one part of theology but as theology in its totality, that is, theology in so far as it is at all capable of understanding the unity underlying the antitheses in the divine works: God's righteousness under his judgment, his grace under his anger, the life which he bestows even in the midst of death, his power to turn the present evil into a thing of good.<sup>8</sup>

Theology of the cross does address antitheses, also termed paradoxes, contradictions, and hiddenness. The paradoxes include that the immortal God takes on flesh to be mortal; the contradictions that the crucifixion displays both the full wrath of God toward sin and the ultimate loving sacrifice that merits grace and mercy for the whole world; and the "hiddenness" of God's revelation and glory in His crucified son's mortal, dying, and dead body.

Regarding God's hiddenness in the cross, Prenter summarizes Luther's view succinctly, "Luther's God is the God who reveals himself in the cross of Christ, God hidden in suffering. His revelation is at the same time a veiling, for His entire divine majesty lies hidden under the suffering and shame of the crucifixion."<sup>9</sup> The Lord reveals Himself, but not the entirety of His wisdom or His glory, so that in a sense He is hidden even as He reveals Himself.

Much emphasis on God's hiddenness – how and how much the Lord reveals Himself – stems from man trying to know God apart from how God has chosen to be known. As von Loewenich paraphrases, "A knowledge of God that does not understand itself properly is the root of all idolatry."<sup>10</sup> Not only can man not accomplish knowing God apart from God's will,<sup>11</sup> but God knows that sinful man cannot directly see His full glory and live (Ex. 33:17-23); sinful man should not see the revelation he truly desires. Again, "The knowledge of God from His works has never kept anyone from falling away from God and becoming an idolater. So it has pleased God to save those who believe through

---

8 Ibid, p. 2.

9 Ibid, p. 3.

10 von Loewenich, p. 28, citing Cf. W. LVI, 174, 18 ff.; LW 25, 154; W. LVI, 177, 25 ff; LW 25, 158.

11 Walther von Loewenich writes, "We must not meddle with God's inscrutable will with our human questions. All our inquiring will not lead to the goal anyway." (*Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 35.).

the folly of what is preached. This preaching is the Word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18 ff.).”<sup>12</sup>

God, hidden in suffering, gains and grants mercy to the world, while the world recoils from living freely by faith. Man wants to live by his own sight, trusting his personal perspective and understanding above all else, while God is immovable in His insistence on faith through His Son. Hence the Lord *declares* man righteous, incorporates believers into the death and resurrection of Christ *by baptism*, and sends His Spirit by His Word. Man may *want* to live by sight, but true life is only accessible and seen by faith through the grace and merit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Theology of the cross is theology of revelation,<sup>13</sup> not theology of man’s aspirations or works. Theology of the cross focuses on Christ, His incarnation, suffering, and death as a revelation of the heavenly Father, and, indeed, the Trinity. Although this outlook and its Scriptural insights are frequently used to address man’s prideful assumptions about glory and the Law, this theology offers far more. Speaking of Luther’s clarity and clear exposition, Sasse writes:

While Luther in the deep experiences of his struggle for a gracious God was learning to understand what the cross of Christ means for us human beings, he came to understand . . . the deepest nature of the revelation of the cross. . . . He saw not only the depth of God’s wrath and the magnitude of His love, but with a grasp of both he probed the deep secrets of the way God comes to us human beings, the secret of how He deals with them, the mystery of revelation itself.<sup>14</sup>

Theology of the cross must address the apparent contradictions and reality while proclaiming Christ and all He has done, and does, on behalf of His people. This is not a simple matter — as judgment and mercy, Law and Gospel are revealed in their full strength in the suffering and death of Christ, which highlights the falseness of man’s sinful understanding and corrupted perspective.

The sins of the world were displayed on the cross and punished in their totality on the person of Jesus Christ, the Lord. This means that every sin of every person has been paid for within history. Every man has sinned and fallen short so that no man is worthy of Christ’s

---

12 Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 47.

13 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, p. 29.

14 Sasse, “The Theology of the Cross,” *We Confess Jesus Christ*, pp. 45-46.

sacrifice; yet, theology of the cross equally shows that there is divine mercy toward everyone. Divine hatred of sin will not change, and no sin will be small or harmless, but Jesus felt the wrath of God *on behalf* of man. Christ on the cross is the perfect scapegoat, the appeasement of the judging Father, and the completion of all punishment with the finality of judgment day. Christ on the cross offers universal hope and forgiveness to every man, woman, and child throughout time.

Theology of the cross does not hesitate and linger over the apparent contradiction, but professes with Scripture the dominance and power of Jesus' message for salvation. The Father sent His Son out of mercy; the Son freely gave Himself for the sake of saving mankind; and the Spirit points to this temporary death, creating ongoing life and sustaining life by faith. As Schlink summarizes from the Lutheran Confessions, "What is decisive . . . is not the co-existence of God's wrath and God's mercy, of sin and grace, but the victory of mercy over wrath, the victory of grace over sin and condemnation."<sup>15</sup> God's mercy is so abundant that it overflows the Law, fulfilling it and exceeding it for man.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the Gospel predominate to bring comfort and hope to any who will receive Christ, but it also instructs, rectifies, and enlivens the Christian to bring and restore true Scriptural perspective through the revelation of the cross.

Theology of the cross does not reveal why man continues to die, although it highlights that true life is wholly lived by faith. It does, however, reveal why Christ died: obedience to His Father, love toward man, and His earnest desire to forgive man and reconcile creation with the Father. Theology of the cross reveals that God truly is at work in all things, however horrible, for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28; Gen. 50:20). Many things may be hidden from man in his natural, sinful state, but the Lord has made clear that He is working on his behalf, in suffering as well as any other time or situation.

God's mercy is best understood in contrast with the very real dangers and reality of sin, as is displayed on the cross. Although disbelief tries to ignore the depravity of sin and the severity of God's righteous judgment on sin, Scripture's revelation of the crucifixion does not. By acknowledging the pain and brokenness of this world, Christians are especially able to address the very real needs and concerns of those

---

15 Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 55-56.

16 The Son's obedience to His Father ought never be trivialized, nor God's will as made known in the Law, but these topics exceed the capacity of this paper.

around them, body or soul. In stark contrast to human understanding, Christians can seek out sinners to show them God's love, spiritually and physically, while upholding a Gospel-centered call to repentance and new life. Christians are uniquely gifted to offer godly perspective in the face of uncertainty, guilt, shame, and fear.<sup>17</sup>

Man's assumptions must be directly addressed, and careful attention may be necessary in order to discern them at any given time. For example, many assume that pain, suffering, and hardship infer guilt or divine rejection. However, that is not true. Jesus was no less the Son of God because He suffered. He was no less loved and favored by God because He was humiliated and shamed. Likewise, Jesus' servants are rejected in spite of God's blessing on them. It is simply a fact that Christians suffer and bear their own crosses as they follow Jesus, and that they too must rely by faith on Christ crucified, trusting the wisdom and discernment of God.

### **Teachings on Mercy**

Sin corrupts both body and soul, and the Lord's redemption redeems both body and soul. The fact that Jesus accomplished salvation in the flesh of His body demonstrates that He cares and provides for both body and soul. Both body and soul can be served mercifully, as Christ Himself did throughout His ministry, preaching the Word, but also feeding the hungry, visiting the grieving, healing diseases, literally restoring life and limb to those in need.

In Jesus' flesh, God conquers death. This does not mean that death is no longer painful — Christ Himself grieved in spite of the resurrection — but He always remained sensitive and mindful to those around Him. Mercy is such an automatic part of Jesus' life that, even as He slowly asphyxiated, He looked in pity on His mother, His griever, and even those who mocked Him. Facing death, Christ still remembered the widow, the orphan, the outcast, and the helpless.

How did Jesus' personal mercy show itself? Hands bound, He spoke words of forgiveness, affirmed the Word of God even with His last trembling breaths, and mercifully prayed for those around Him. He did not rage uncontrollably or complain about the hardships in His life of violence, grief, betrayal, and deceit. Instead, He submitted to

---

17 "It is significant that the discovery of the suffering and death of Christ as a fearful reality went hand in hand with a new realization of the seriousness of sin and of its forgiveness" (Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 43).

the situation, and honored and obeyed the authorities involved. Jesus continued to look outside Himself toward His heavenly Father, the Scriptures, and those around Him. He lived by faith and not by sight until He gave up His Spirit.

Mercy is not earned by man, nor can it be, but the Son of God gave it freely. He bore His suffering so that all guilt may be taken away from man. God had mercy on the whole world, body and soul, and so motivates and instructs His followers to have mercy, sharing God's gifts.

True mercy recognizes and shares God's gifts. True mercy points to Christ, His Word, and His forgiveness; and true mercy feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, honors the shamed, grieves with the grieving, offers hospitality or a patient presence, and remembers the forgotten or marginalized. True mercy offers godly perspective, unconditional love, mutual and embodied support, and rampant confession and absolution.

Every sin has been condemned and removed by the cross, even sins after the historical crucifixion and sins after baptism or conversion. Indeed, true mercy and true comfort do not consist of pleasantries that ignore or distract from the pains of reality, but offer the Lord's comforting revelation and resources. True mercy is not a generic kindness, but Christ fulfilling the Law on man's behalf and dying that man may be reborn to new life and sure hope in Him. True mercy recognizes that both body and soul are saved by Christ and should be cared for as part of His creation, brothers and sisters united in Him, and potential brothers and sisters restored by Him.

Faith and perspective are not the same thing. One can certainly have faith in spite of incorrect perspective. Truthful (or godly) perspective is another blessing given by the Spirit, cultivated by study of God's Word. It affirms the promises and encouragements of the Lord while guarding against deception and error that tempt away from faith. This gift (or discipline) is given because there are such great temptations as all things may be so easily misunderstood by fallen man! To extend an earlier quote from Prenter:

The basic understanding [of theology of the cross] is that God often works under the sign of the opposite; that is to say that He deals graciously by means of the cross, *that faith is not based upon empirical verification and in fact is often called to believe in spite of such empirical data*, and that it is to such faith that God reckons righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

---

18 Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. vii.

Christ joins the mercy of His incarnation with the suffering and death of this world. He does not annihilate His offenders (Matt. 12:20), but offers them new life, their own life in His (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:17-32). Each Christian is united with Christ in Baptism (Rom. 6:3). Awake or sleeping, active or at rest, the Christian is tied to the death and resurrection of Christ as living proof of the cross' ongoing ramifications and effects (Rom. 6:6; 2 Cor. 13:4; Col. 1:20; 2:14, etc.). This automatically means that every good work is directly united with the cross, as well as every forgiven sin. The historical cross and the crucified Christ impacts Christians daily: Every breath, let alone every action, is dependent on Christ, thriving on His abundant mercy.

Luther does not often speak of the theology of the cross with the same breath as mercy, but Gustaf Wingren ties together Luther's mature emphasis on the cross with vocation, "where God Himself lets the cross take form" in the life of the Christian.<sup>19</sup> Each Christian, baptized into God's abundant mercy, is then called to live in mercy. Matthew Harrison comments, "Rendering love to the neighbor is in large measure the content of the priesthood of the baptized ("Present your bodies as living sacrifices . . . the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Rom. 12).<sup>20</sup>

Mercy is personalized both by the giver and the receiver. God incarnate has mercy and interacts with individuals. Jesus gave as only Jesus could, and He showed His mercy in different ways to different people, whether it was saving the world on the cross or turning water into wedding wine. This does not show divine inconsistency, but rather diversity within mercy. The Christian's cross is tailored to each Christian.

Christian care is, therefore, also personalized, both by the giver and the receiver. No Christian is Savior,<sup>21</sup> but a Christian may be a

---

19 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), p. 54. Prenter writes, "It was decisive for Luther's theology that the proclamation of the historical crucifixion of Jesus Christ was seen in relationship to the effect of the cross which the individual experiences in his daily life. The judgment, which is proclaimed in the cross of Jesus Christ, and the judgment, which is experienced through one's own cross, cannot be separated from each other. Furthermore, the freedom from the guilt of sin which is proclaimed in the cross of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the freedom to praise God and to serve one's neighbor which is experienced through one's own cross" (*Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 13.).

20 Matthew Harrison, "The Church is a Mercy Place!" *Mercy Insights* series, p. 4. (LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2004.)

21 "Christ is not to be imitated by us, but rather to be accepted in faith,

farmer, waitress, businessman, etc., using unique talents, skills, and resources to serve their fellow man. Each person gives according to ability, opportunity, and sometimes even responsibility, so that each assists others, or benefit from others, in different ways through various means, sharing in God's merciful system of vocation.<sup>22</sup>

God has chosen to work through weakness to provide His own strength. Similarly, He offers divine comfort even through suffering. Christians must therefore remain humble about what they may contribute to their neighbor, recognizing God's gifts as they pass from hand to hand, or mouth to ear, but Christians may also speak true comfort and hope with confidence in God's Word and Christ's accomplishments. Prenter remarks on Christian freedom and the righteousness received in God's mercy on the cross:

It is a 'strange righteousness' in the fullest sense of the word and one which gives us the freedom to become the children of God, a freedom which not only sets us free from the impossible task of trying to justify ourselves, but which makes us free to love God and to serve our neighbor. Only because this freedom has been given to us by the historical act of Christ on our behalf are we able to think about making the cross of Christ our own . . . No one can bear the cross of Christ — which in this connection means bearing one's own cross as the cross of Christ — without first having tasted the freedom of being a child of God.<sup>23</sup>

### Application of Mercy

All may offer mercy freely, without hesitation, as long as one remembers what true mercy is: God's gifts addressing man's need (physically, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually) within his vocation. For example, every Christian is free to share the Gospel, point to Christ, and urge a person into God's Word. However, not every Christian is a

---

because Christ also had His special office for the salvation of man, an office which no one else has" (Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 172).

22 Basic introductions to vocation include Gene Edward Veith's *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Crossway Books). To explore vocation more, there are books like Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), Wingren's *The Christian's Calling* (Oliver and Boyd, 1958), or the harder to find Einar Billing's *Our Fortress* (Fortress Press, 1964). There are also books more specific to particular areas of vocation, such as Angus Menuge's *Reading God's World: The Scientific Vocation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

23 Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 11.

pastor. It pleases God that no single man must do everything, except for His Son. Another example is that while every Christian is free to give to the poor, he should not neglect his family in order to do so.

God gives His gifts through multiple people in various vocations. God works through doctors, psychologists, farmers, storekeepers, waitresses, etc., working through all the types of relationships: family, business, church, friendship, and even through newly begun acquaintances. He enables Christians everywhere to live out individually what He has given through creation and His church.

Christians must remember that meeting needs, even miracles, did not produce faithful followers for Jesus. Only His Word equips and brings new life. Therefore, pastors are indispensable. The church exists, not only because Christ instituted it, but because it is Christ's source of mercy, in Word and Sacrament, and, more generally, in supporting and strengthening His people.

A Christian caregiver cannot distribute God's gifts without first receiving them, and so must be continually tied to their church and community. In church, both individuals and the community are constantly receiving abundant mercy that they are to share. Harrison points out that there is a pattern of mercy in the church, where Christians receive mercy and then go out to share that mercy:

Lives that have received mercy (grace!) cannot but be merciful toward the neighbor (love!). Thus the merciful washing of baptism (Rom. 6:1ff) produces merciful living (Rom. 7:4-6). In absolution, the merciful word of the Gospel begets merciful speaking and living (Matt. 18:21ff.). In the Supper, Christ gives himself for us, that we might give ourselves to our neighbor (1 Cor. 10:15-17; 1 Cor. 12:12ff & 26).<sup>24</sup>

Those without godly perspective are prone to think that either their problems center on themselves or that someone else is responsible for fixing them, as though they are only passive victims in this world. If it is the first, their very worldview pressures them to try to fix it on their own, as though personal merit, dedication, or action can redeem them from their situation for a better future. On the other hand, if someone can only see himself as a victim, he can only cast blame about and neglect his own responsibilities to those around him, who may also be sharing his struggles and concerns.

---

24 Harrison, "Theology of Mercy," *Mercy Insights* series, p. 4. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2004).

The spiritual dilemmas can therefore span from overconfidence to despair. Past sins may be plaguing a person's conscience, whether realized or not. Eager hopefulness relies on willpower and personal strength instead of turning outside oneself to God and His aid. Those who suffer may feel abandoned, overwhelmed by their responsibilities, or overwhelmed by their helplessness, and attempt either total control or total dependence on another person.

Christian caregivers must discern carefully. No one can earn his way out of a crisis, and eager enthusiasm to do so may, in fact, hide fading hope and immediate need for assistance. False perception can feed and cultivate addiction to sin, resulting in self-righteousness, moral decadence, and idolatry to perceived needs or immediate gratification. Gerhard Forde writes, "When the addict discovers the impossibility of quitting, self-esteem plummets. The addict tries to hide the addiction and puts on a false front. Superficial optimism breeds ultimate despair."<sup>25</sup> Only Christ can free someone from such an addiction or despair, working through His servants. Mercy must point to, and rely upon, Christ, and not the short-term fulfillment of needs, signs, or miracles that man may be desiring.

Christians are faced with concrete revelations. Things do go badly for people and suffering is very real. Yet Christians are free to admit that and support those who suffer in spite of it.<sup>26</sup> Every Christian can confidently say:

- 1) On the cross, Jesus paid the full debt and cost of sin so that man does not have to (Col. 2:13-15).
- 2) Jesus' death offers the entire universe forgiveness and reconciliation to His Father (2 Corinthians. 5:19).
- 3) Jesus won salvation on the cross so that all who believe will be saved (John 3:16).
- 4) Baptism unites with Christ and His cross for newness of life (Rom. 6:4).
- 5) Jesus perfects man's faith (Heb. 12:1-2).

---

25 Gerhard Forde. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 16.

26 To better incorporate Law and Gospel understanding — whether one needs to hear God's Word condemning sin or God's Word proclaiming Christ's forgiveness — into one's Christian care giving, read John T. Pless's *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005) or C.F.W. Walther's classic *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986).

- 6) God fulfills His own demands and commands through Christ.
- 7) Christ sends His servants to help.
- 8) Physical ailments and suffering are not signs of punishment over sin (John 9:3).
- 9) Sometimes bad things happen so that God may work through them (John 9:3).
- 10) Death is no longer a sign of divine judgment and condemnation (1 Thess. 4:13-14).
- 11) There is life after death, and believers will go to a place without suffering (Rev. 7:17).
- 12) The devil is lying when he claims sinners are “too far gone” or “bad” to be saved.
- 13) The devil accuses, but God has already judged “not guilty.” Man is “justified” (Rom. 3:23-25).
- 14) Christ has assumed responsibility for even the worst sins.
- 15) Jesus has had mercy on idolaters, adulterers, murderers, liars, betrayers, homosexuals, hypocrites, etc.
- 16) Even Jesus suffered and grieved.
- 17) Christ is perfectly faithful to God and to man (2 Thess. 3:5).
- 18) Even though one can't see evidence that things are getting better, one can live by faith in Christ, trusting His promises.
- 19) One can hold God to His Word.
- 20) God keeps His promises and He keeps His Word (Rom. 15:8).
- 21) There is hope apart from work, merit, or the past.
- 22) God's mercy offers new life, new chances, cleansing, healing, forgiveness from each and every sin, complete reconciliation, and hope.
- 23) God's wisdom and ways may be beyond understanding, but He has revealed His eternal love for us in His Son Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The Lord does not delight or take pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; Ezek. 33:11), but reveals Himself in a hidden way to give mercy to the world. He sends His Word into the flesh to live and die in a world of suffering. The Lord then proceeds to work directly through this humility to implement His greatest works of love and glory. Jesus' suffering was no less than what man experiences, but was even more as His Father poured out the full wrath of God upon Him. Christ

took on Himself the one thing that was not His own — sin — in order to bear it away from the world that delights in it.

Jesus Himself chose to suffer. He was not passive the way man must be, but remains active even in suffering, both in His own and man's. It is good to remember that there are worse things than suffering. Not only does suffering play a role in refining faith (1 Peter 1:6-7) and uniting Christians with each other (1 Cor. 12:24-26), Christians suffer for the sake of Christ (Phil. 1:27-30) and doing good (1 Peter 2:20).

A Christian caregiver is not a one-person miracle worker, nor the Savior of the world, but is God's servant to incorporate God's many diverse gifts into humble, merciful service to the neighbor. Only by faith through the activity of the Holy Spirit can a Christian live his hope in Christ in this world, with no guarantee that he will recognize God at work. Even a Christian cannot lean on his own understanding. Living by faith, he must fight the false perceptions that would tempt or distract him from Christ and His work and rely on the work of Christ on the cross.

von Loewenich writes:

The theologian of the cross does not confront the cross of Christ as a spectator, but is himself drawn into this event. He knows that God can be found only in cross and suffering (W. I, 262, 28f.). For that reason he does not . . . shun suffering . . . For God Himself is 'hidden in suffering' and wants us to worship Him as such.<sup>27</sup>

Theology of the cross cuts through death and sin to give new life, to the Christian and through the Christian. Perspective shaped by this is particularly a blessing to those who suffer or who offer Christian care amid suffering, and a powerful tool for individuals and the corporate church to proclaim and live out God's mercy. It is the Biblical, Christocentric answer to man's distorted human presumptions and understanding, and the revelation of God interacting mercifully with fallen man.

---

27 von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, p. 113.

## Bibliography

Eyer, Richard. *Pastoral Care under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994)

Forde, Gerhard. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

Harrison, Matthew. "The Church is a Mercy Place," *Mercy Insights Series* (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care).

Harrison, Matthew. "Theology of Mercy," *Mercy Insights Series* (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care).

von Loewenich, Walther. *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

McGrath, Alistair. *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

Prenter, Regin. *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Facet Books, Historical Series, 17, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

Sasse, Hermann. *We Confess Anthology: We Confess Jesus Christ; We Confess the Sacraments; We Confess the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999).

Schlink, Edmund. *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961).

Wingren, Gustaf. *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957).

## History Worth Repeating: C.F.W. Walther and Wilhelm Löhe on Mercy and the Church

By Samuel P. Schuldheisz

*“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7).*

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was such a man; Wilhelm Löhe was such a man; both are leaders worth remembering. Walther was not a self-proclaimed leader. He sought no pride in his service to the church, save that of boasting in the grace of God who has blessed the church with the riches of Christ. Nevertheless, as Matthew Harrison rightfully notes,

C.F.W. Walther is the greatest Lutheran theologian/churchman in the history of American Lutheranism . . . an audacious statement, to be sure, but through Walther’s dogged faithfulness to the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Martin Luther, there was produced a church body which in its public confession has remained faithful to the Formula of Concord to the present day, even when most others have long since surrendered Lutheran doctrine and clarity.<sup>1</sup>

Walther was a prolific theologian and remains a formative standard for the theological edification of the church today. Seminarians, pastors, and laypersons continue to benefit from the sublime brilliance of *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* and his theses on *Church and Ministry*.

Wilhelm Löhe was also a brilliant theologian of the church in his own right, committed to Confessional Lutheranism and the spread of the Gospel through tireless mission work, even though he never left Germany.<sup>2</sup> In his treatise *Three Books about the Church*, a work he humbly called “deficient and insignificant,” Löhe deliberates on the historic and confessional view of the church for pastors and laity who

---

1 Matthew Harrison. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church’s Corporate Diakonic Life*. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 3.

2 John T. Pless. “The Missionary Who Never Left Home,” *Lutheran Witness*, 127: 2 (February 2008), p. 11.

had neglected the study of the “luminous reality that lies behind the name, church.”<sup>3</sup>

While Walther and Löhe have both shaped the theological and missiological foundation of the Missouri Synod, there remains a significant area of influence that has only recently begun to be unearthed in their individual writings. For Walther and Löhe, Christian faith and theology, the church, and the ministry were never separated from the Gospel *and* the corporate life of mercy in which the church is continuously engaged — even in spite of later disagreements on the doctrine of church and ministry. In other words, justification leads to sanctification; the love of Christ for the sake of sinners leads to the love of man for his neighbor — for the sake of Christ. For Walther and Löhe, the church was to be conscious of the congregation’s efforts in showing mercy both internally and externally. This is most certainly history worth repeating.

Trite as it may be to repeat the litany of tragedies in recent times, the corporate life of mercy offered by the church is needed now more than ever; there have been tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars, and more will surely come until Christ’s return. The reality of life in a sinful world means that our fellow man’s suffering is inevitable. Yet in the midst of such gloom, Löhe writes, “Mercy is love toward the wretched, and it comes into being with misery, but it does not even cease to exist with misery . . . whenever love meets misery, mercy is awakened.”<sup>4</sup>

The church lives and breathes a life of mercy in its witness. Because the mercy that is truly unique to Christianity is so desperately needed in our world, the topic of mercy and the church in the writings of Walther and Löhe will be addressed. LCMS World Relief and Human Care have endeavored, successfully I would argue, to sustain and spread the theology of mercy through the translation of key writings by Walther and Löhe on this topic, not to mention many other insightful articles.

This study will focus primarily on key texts from Walther and Löhe. Walther’s writings on mercy in his *Pastoral Theology, The Form of A*

---

3 Wilhelm Löhe. *Three Books about the Church*. Translated by James L. Schaaf. Reprinted by Permission of Augsburg Fortress Press, (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1989), p. 43-44.

4 Wilhelm Löhe. *Lohe on Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. Translated by Holger Sonntag. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 3-4.

*Christian Congregation*, and occasional excerpts from sermons, provide valuable insight into his proclamation of mercy. Löhe's chief insight into a theology of mercy for the church comes via his work in *Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. This work was originally written for deaconess students to familiarize themselves with the church's history of mercy dating back to the Old Testament. The goal of this paper is to examine Walther and Löhe's thoughts on mercy and the church; through the study of these two towers of confessional Lutheran theology, Christians today can apply their collective wisdom in the Lutheran church's own corporate life of mercy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To begin with, what definition of mercy did Walther and Löhe work with? What is mercy according to these great theologians of the church? Walther's theology of mercy was one of stewardship, "Whoever has true love does not consider himself to be a lord over his goods but a steward of them, and he wishes, according to God's Word, to distribute those goods to his brothers in need."<sup>5</sup>

Löhe begins his treatise with this sublime definition of mercy:

Mercy is goodness, goodness is love, and, therefore, mercy is love. Mercy is goodness and love but in a specific relationship, namely, in relation to the unfortunate and wretched. Love is manifold. When it is directed toward God on high, it becomes devotion and adoration. When it is directed over the whole earth to other redeemed brothers, it becomes goodness, affability, and friendliness. But when it enters areas filled with misery and brings with it consolation, relief, and help, then it becomes mercy.<sup>6</sup>

Love, Löhe contends, is the source of mercy for the Christian. This love is born of the Holy Spirit through baptism, creating faith and new life where sin and death once reigned. Having freely received life and salvation, Christians are free to serve the neighbor. Notice that the direction of Christian love is two-fold, love of God demonstrated through devotion, adoration, and love of the neighbor demonstrated

---

5 C.F.W. Walther. *God Grant It: Daily Devotions from C.F.W. Walther*. Translated by Gerhard P. Grabenhofer. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), p. 514.

6 Wilhelm Löhe. *Lohe on Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. Translated by Holger Sonntag. St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 3.

by consolation, relief, and tangible-visible acts of mercy. This resonates well with Luther's famous dictum from *On the Freedom of the Christian*, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>7</sup> In fact, both Löhe and Walther were avid students of Luther's theology. It is no surprise then, to find that these common trains of thought between Walther and Löhe stretch back to Luther. Indeed, all three of these men were champions of *sola Scriptura*. For Walther and Löhe, Scripture speaks about the vibrant character of Christian faith and life as Christ Himself is alive in the new man (e.g. Eph. 2:10).

For Löhe, mercy and love are intertwined, first, as gift from God unto sinful men, and second, as a continual expression of that love whereby Christians shower mercy upon those in need. This reflects the two-fold character of the first and second table of the commandments in *Luther's Small Catechism*. Likewise, it harkens the ear back to the liturgy of the Divine Service where the sacramental reality of the Christian life which brings forth works of mercy toward the neighbor. This is prayed and confessed through the words of the post-communion collect:

We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your great mercy You would strengthen us in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.<sup>8</sup>

Both Walther and Löhe understood that works of mercy — that is care for the neighbor in body and soul — were indispensable from the life of faith lived in, with, and under Word and Sacrament in the church. Mercy was ecclesial as well as historical. Keeping in mind the church's responsibility to show mercy to the neighbor, these men highlighted unique aspects of mercy in the church, not unlike examining two different facets of a well-cut diamond. In the writings examined, Walther was primarily ecclesial and theological in approach, while Löhe focused primarily on the historical reality of God's people demonstrating works of mercy throughout time.

---

7 Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. "The Freedom of the Christian" Edited by Harold J. Grimm. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 7.

8 Lutheran Service Book. *Divine Service Setting Five*. Prepared by The Commission on Worship of the LCMS. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), p. 218.

Walther links the care of body and soul directly to the duties of the pastoral office as part and parcel of the Lord's work through his servant. In *Pastoral Theology* he writes, "Although a preacher above all has concern for the spiritual needs of the members of his congregation, concern for the physical well-being, particularly the needs of the poor, the sick, widows, orphaned, the infirm, the destitute, the aged, etc., are within the scope of the duties of his office."<sup>9</sup>

In contrast — although not uncomplimentary — consider Löhe's historical approach taken early on in his treatise, "If it is true that all of history is a continuous testimony to the combination of justice and mercy, then it is obviously also a continuous testimony to mercy alone. During all the periods and peaks of history, mercy clearly is not just combined with justice, but prevails against it with great glory (James 2:13)."<sup>10</sup>

In fact, to examine the church's corporate life of mercy, confessional Lutheran theology and ecclesiology cannot be divorced from the historical reality of mercy in the church that has endured from the time of the early Christians.<sup>11</sup> Although a contrast of approaches existed between Walther and Löhe, there is a great harmony that results from the examination of their collective theological reflections on mercy and the church.

Practically speaking, how did this scriptural and confessional theology of mercy work its way into the daily lives of Walther, Löhe, and the congregations whom they catechized? Löhe operates with an assumption — albeit a biblical and confessional one — that, "God does all His works through His servants. Therefore His works are divine and human at the same time, and wherever He works, He soon opens a wide course of mercy for His saints. But they are only to be, as they should,

---

9 C.F.W. Walther. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church's Corporate Diakonic Life*. Translated by Matthew Harrison . (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care), p. 5. The portions of "Pastoral Theology" are a translation of section 35 of Walther's *Pastorale*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906) . *Note*: Walther goes on to reference several Bible passages, namely, Gal. 2:9-10; Acts 6:1ff., 11:30, 12:25, 24:17; Rom. 12:8, 13; James 1:27; I Tim. 5:10; I Thess. 4:11-12.

10 Wilhelm Löhe. *Lohe on Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. Translated by Holger Sonntag. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 7.

11 For example, consider the Christians and churches cited throughout the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles, especially the church's example in Acts 6 of selecting some to perform the task of diaconal work on behalf of the church for the sake of the Gospel.

coworkers of the divine worker.”<sup>12</sup> As Löhe demonstrates throughout his treatise on mercy, this is how the Lord has always worked through His people, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing to the present day; God uses means to do His work. Löhe understood that mercy had both an individual and a corporate nature in the life of the Christian church. Löhe saw God’s work of mercy accomplished through His servants in the Levitical priesthood, the apostles and disciples of the New Testament, and in various institutions that the church had incorporated over the centuries. This becomes even more specific in his seventh and final chapter, in which Löhe zeroes in on the role of the deaconess in providing diaconal works of mercy in both body and soul.

However, Walther takes a different approach. Instead of tracing historic precedence for the church’s individual and corporate works of mercy, Walther narrows his focus to the pastoral office. As mentioned earlier, he locates the responsibility of diaconal work first in the pastoral office, and then through preaching and teaching of God’s Word, the congregation learns and grows in its life of mercy toward the neighbor.

At first glance the focus on works of mercy in *The Form of A Christian Congregation* appears to be self-centered on the part of the congregation and even the pastor. Walther notes, “In the first place, the congregation should do everything in its power to see to it that its pastor has food, clothing, and a home for himself and his family.”<sup>13</sup> However, Walther answers the charge of egocentricity well in connecting the care of pastors with Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment and by stating that, “if the ministry and office of pastors did not receive financial support, many would be deterred from it, and from this the Church of God would suffer great harm.”<sup>14</sup> Walther upholds the responsibility of the church to continue in her life of mercy. The Christian congregation extends this mercy towards its pastor first because he is the man called by God to care for them in body and soul and to provide them with divine mercy through the pure proclamation of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. By supporting the pastor, the congregation is not only showing mercy towards

---

12 Wilhelm Löhe. *Löhe on Mercy*. trans. Holger Sonntag. (St Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 19

13 C.F.W. Walther. *The Form of A Christian Congregation*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 142.

14 Ibid, p. 143.

him and his family, but building a foundation of mercy that will extend beyond the pastor into the congregation, but also to the neighbor. For, “the congregation shall also provide food, clothing, habitation, and all other necessities for the poor, widows, orphans, aged, and invalids, which these themselves cannot procure . . . The congregation shall also care for those who suffer distress through special calamities like fire, famine, scarcity, robbery, and so forth.”<sup>15</sup>

Care in body and soul for the neighbor arises not in order that the Christian might do good works to gain some kind of reward, either temporal or eternal, but rather the work of mercy is a fruit of faith. Walther and Löhe both taught that true mercy is ultimately expressed on account of faith in Christ; without faith the work is, in fact, sin. “My beloved, as impossible as it is for natural man truly to love his neighbor, so impossible is it for a believer not to love his neighbor.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though Walther begins with the responsibility of the pastoral office as the locus of mercy in the church, he also recognized that the Christian church itself was to play a role in this life of mercy. Quoting Luther on the issue of the office of almoner in the Jerusalem church, Walther understands that the Christian community is to, “look after souls, and go about preaching and praying. They also bring about that the body is cared for and set up certain men who dole out the goods, as you have heard. Thus the Christian government is concerned both with the body and the soul, that no one has any need, and all are richly fed and well cared for in both the body and soul.”<sup>17</sup>

Addressing the work of the deaconess, Löhe arrives at a similar conclusion to Walther’s claims on communal responsibility for the church’s work of mercy. Löhe states that “a deaconess without community and connections is actually no deaconess at all . . . That is why the training of deaconesses concentrates both on the individual soul, practicing mercy, as well as the group, which appears as a sacred force, focusing on the greatest thing women can possibly choose: serving others in love and helping them to be awakened in the same walk.”<sup>18</sup>

---

15 Ibid, p. 147-148.

16 *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Selected Sermons*. Translated by Henry J. Eggold, August R. Suelflow, Series Editor. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p.139.

17 C.F.W. Walther. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church’s Corporate Diakonic Life*. Translated by Matthew Harrison. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 7.

18 Wilhelm Löhe. *Löhe on Mercy*. trans. Holger Sonntag. (St Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 62.

This point made by Löhe can also be extended to the office of pastor as well as the corporate and individual work of mercy done by the congregation. Isolation was the way of the strict monastic orders of the Reformation. Luther rightly recognized that the life of the Christian church was to be lived in the world where the Gospel could be proclaimed and the love of Christ toward the neighbor could be fulfilled by caring for both body and soul of those in need. God would not have the church live in isolation or in seclusion from the dangers of the world. In the person and work of Christ, God reveals Himself as one who is constantly giving Himself on behalf of others, even to the point of experiencing unspeakable pain and suffering as He approached a shameful death on the cross. In this life, this is the work of the church – its pastors and people, namely, to continue steadfast in His Word despite any trial that may come, enduring the scorn of sinful men in order to bring them mercy in word and deed for body and soul.

In the face of this great task, Walther reminds us that in this life no person attains complete love; everything, also love, remains imperfect. “Therefore seek comfort not in your poor love but in Christ’s rich, complete love; it covers your lack.”<sup>19</sup>

It is precisely because of Christ and His gifts to the church in Word and Sacrament that the church is God’s source of mercy in this life. In a day and age when federal and state governments supply a majority of the monetary commitment necessary to care for many of the poor and needy, it can be tempting for Christians to forsake the corporate and individual responsibility to render mercy unto their fellow man in favor of supporting government initiatives. Certainly, the work of government aid and care for those in need is not at issue. What is at issue, however, is the Church’s life of mercy towards the neighbor. Do tax-funded charities and government programs fulfill the Christian’s duty of performing mercy? Walther and Löhe would argue it does not. According to Walther, “A Christian congregation cannot simply claim that there are state funds for the poor and homes for them, which they also support . . . Here where Church and State are separated, the church should not allow its sole care for its poor to be taken away.”<sup>20</sup> Walther

---

19 *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Selected Sermons*. Translated by Henry J. Eggold, August R. Suelflow, Series Editor. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p.139.

20 C.F.W. Walther. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church’s Corporate Diakonic Life*. Translated by Matthew Harrison. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 6.

certainly had in mind the poor within the congregation, but this also extends to the poor and needy outside the congregation. He goes on to say, “Indeed, each individual Christian should demonstrate his kind readiness toward everyone, also toward the stranger (including those of different belief) . . .”<sup>21</sup>

Löhe would most likely agree with Walther’s assessment of church-state relations regarding care for the needy. However, Löhe appears to provide more room in his understanding of what the state’s involvement should entail.

One great question remains, namely, who is to take the effort of mercy in his hands and govern it — the state or the church? The judicious recognize that the state can do nothing without the willing spirit of the church, which holds the key to the treasures that the needs of our time require . . . Therefore, it is time for every person to let the Spirit of the Church of Jesus stream into himself and to assist the tremendous job that the Lord has given His Church. Although state charity alone is not going to get the job done, we should not entertain the idea of relegating the state to the status of a mere observer of the things that take place under the hands of the church . . . Thus, just as one has to award the church the full right and the full duty to do the works the Lord will ask for on the Last Day — the works of mercy — so one has to preach to the lords of the world and the rulers of the state that they are founded and instituted to the glory of God, and are not to hinder His works but to foster them.<sup>22</sup>

However, it must be noted that the church-state issue was quite different in Walther and Löhe’s day than today. Löhe’s situation must be taken into context because Germany was still under the governance of the state church system, whereas Walther came to America where freedom of religion and state-sponsored religion was not as frequent. Also, the modern development of the welfare system must be taken into consideration. Walther and Löhe knew of no such program. However, welfare programs and government-sponsored charity do not exhaust the church’s own responsibility to reach out to the neighbor in mercy. In fact, the high number of abuses and cases of negligence gives the

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm Löhe. *Löhe on Mercy*. trans. Holger Sonntag. (St Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006). p. 58.

church further recourse to initiate its own care for people in need.

What, then, is the significance of Walther and Löhe's theology of mercy for today? What do these men contribute to the church's understanding and commitment of mercy for the neighbor? In his foreword, Löhe writes, "If after reading this they are stimulated to study the works of mercy themselves, then the publication has served its purpose."<sup>23</sup> The future of mercy in the church lies in reflection on words; good words from great men, such as Walther and Löhe, and above all, on God's Word. Yet, the future of mercy in the church also lies in the hands of baptized Christians, not as meritorious works, but as divine works — better yet, divine mercy. The hands of mercy extended to the poor and needy in our time may be our hands, but it is Christ's love and the power of the Holy Spirit accompanying them, encouraging them, and sanctifying them. Christ uses our hands, our time, our treasure, our talents — for they are all His to begin with — in order to give clothing to the naked, to visit the prisoner, to give a cup of water to the thirsty, that seeing our good deeds they may glorify our Father in heaven and be swept up in His mercy and love in Christ.

There is a rich stream of love flowing from the cross of Christ through the centuries. Filled with admiration, we see its rich, deep waters. But we also realize that He who caused it to stream out of the hearts of men, only after it had come out of His own pierced heart, does not bind Himself only to the modern time. Instead, He provides for His people at all times to do the necessary in the simplest way.<sup>24</sup>

For Walther, the congregation is the instrument God uses to dispense His mercy, through pastors administering Word and Sacraments, through the visitation of the sick, through the help of the poor and needy, and through the vocations of those who receive such blessings in body and soul from Christ. Walther locates the work of mercy as part of the preacher's duty. "Where there is not an office for care for the needy, there it is required of every Christian member of the congregation, by virtue of his membership, in cases which arise, to take over the functions of this office or to see to it that these functions are taken over by someone in his place."<sup>25</sup>

---

23 Ibid, p. 1.

24 Ibid, p. 47.

25 C.F.W. Walther. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church's Corporate Diakonic Life*. Translated by Matthew Harrison. (St. Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 13.

Walther and Löhe teach us that it is the whole body of Christ throughout history that engages in works of mercy toward the neighbor. God's work of mercy involves both pastor and congregation, both individual and corporate works of mercy, not only on the part of the local congregation but in the Church as a whole. Therefore as the Missouri Synod continues to reflect on the work of the Gospel and the mission of the church in evangelism, it does well to recall its own rich history of works of mercy as found in the writings of Walther, Löhe, and other Lutheran fathers. As both Walther and Löhe noted, the work of mercy done by the church in body and soul is never separated from the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. Compartmentalization of the Gospel will not suffice. Rather, a clear confession of Christ as proclaimed by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions leads to a clear witness of that faith through the Church's diaconal life.

As Löhe wrote, "Working alongside the office of the Word is the office of bodily mercy. In Holy Scripture, all offices of the Holy Spirit are called diakonia, or service, just as all those — beginning with Christ all the way down to the most humble ones — who carry out offices and duties in relation to people in the name of God are called diakonoi or servant."<sup>26</sup> Löhe argues that service and servant-hood is precisely what the role of the deaconess exists for. Service in the name of Jesus is what the office of pastor exists for as well. Therefore, pastors, all manner of church-work in the Missouri Synod, and its congregations are servants that exist for service to the Gospel and in works of mercy. The words of Walther and Löhe on mercy and the church are words that teach us the mercy shown to us by God in Christ on the cross and teach how Christians show mercy towards those in need. For Walther and Löhe, Christian faith and theology, the church, and the ministry were never separated from the Gospel *and* the corporate life of mercy in which the Church is continuously engaged. To be a confessional Lutheran also means to be merciful. Or as Heb. 13:7 puts it, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." This history of mercy, found in Walther and Löhe, is most certainly history worth repeating.

---

26 Wilhelm Löhe. *Löhe on Mercy*. trans. Holger Sonntag. (St Louis: LCMS World Relief and Human Care, 2006), p. 23.