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Standard Abbreviations


BHS Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984).

LSB Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006).

LW Lutheran Worship (St. Louis: Concordia, 1982).


TLH The Lutheran Hymnal (St. Louis: Concordia, 1941).


WA DB Weimarer Ausgabe Deutsche Bibel [German Bible]

WA Br Weimarer Ausgabe Briefe [Letters]

WA Tr Weimarer Ausgabe Tischreden [Table talk]

Abbreviations for the Lutheran confessional writings:

AC Augsburg Confession

Ap Apology of the Augsburg Confession

SA Smalcald Articles

Tr Tractate/Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope

SC Small Catechism

LC Large Catechism

FC Ep Formula of Concord, Epitome

FC SD Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
Editorial Foreword

North Europeans get their fair share of space in the present volume. The Symposium on Scandinavian Lutheranism, which took place at Concordia, St. Catharines, 6-8 June 2011, was conceived to take full advantage of this seminary’s visiting scholar, Rev. Juhana Pohjola. Dean of Luther Foundation–Finland, and pastor of St Markus Koinonia, Helsinki, Pastor Pohjola has suffered greatly for his opposition to the liberal theology and practices that now dominate Finland’s Lutheran established church. At the same time, those who have joined him in forming “koinonias” (worshipping communities), now under the care of the Mission Province and its bishop, Matti Väisänen, have been richly blessed by God. Pastor Pohjola’s presentation of this tragic and yet joyful story to the symposium was too visual and informal to include in this journal, though echoes of it can be heard in his sermon to the East District Pastors’ and Deacons’ Conference. As we now reach the end of his 18-month study leave in our midst, the St. Catharines seminary community bid him and his family farewell with sadness.

Pastor Eric Andræ’s love for Bishop Bo Giertz was itself manifested in a (previous) conference in St. Catharines. Hearing of our call for papers on Scandinavian Lutheranism, Pastor Andræ was quick to offer the results of his long study of this great Swedish theologian. His ode to Giertz’s great pastoral novel, The Hammer of God, as “The best treatment of the proper distinction of Law and Gospel in the history of Lutheran theology”, is only slightly hyperbolic!

The remaining essays in this volume are the fruit of our pastorate’s ongoing scholarly endeavours. Pastor Richard Beinert of Winnipeg, and adjunct professor of Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Edmonton, introduces the reader to theosis (“deification”) as a theme in modern ecumenical theology. He notes that the so-called “Finnish School” is not the first among Lutherans to take up a theme thought to be exclusive to the Eastern Orthodox. Not only does it feature strongly in Luther, but also in Calvin and his later English apologist, Hooker. Beinert compares and contrasts their approaches.

Rev. Geoffrey Boyle, a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto (thus satisfying this journal’s CanCon requirements!) resurrects in a detailed essay a major theme of the monumental 1995 Hermann Sasse conference. Sasse’s ecclesiological thinking, forged in the early days of the

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1 Videos of the presentations are (at the time of publication) still available for viewing on the CLTS gallery: <http://picasaweb.google.com/103000629941768945067>.
ecumenical movement and tempered by the fires of Nazi Germany, remains informative today. Sasse will never allow us to separate the act of confessing from the content of the Christian confession.

Dr James Keller—newly honoured as such by McMaster University—has specialized in inter-religious dialogue, for which the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ is a major issue. Even among some Christian groups, “universalism” has resurfaced as a carefully-reasoned theological position. Dr Keller explores, dissects, and exposes the flaws in such arguments, while demonstrating a sound method for Christians to approach the concerns of the world around them.

The same diligent care characterizes Pastor Jody Rinas’s essay on The Organic Church movement. Prepared for a pastoral conference of LCC’s ABC district, the study presents the movement’s concerns in a charitable light, while faithfully diagnosing the dangers awaiting anyone who would jump in with both feet.

Finally, Dr John Stephenson’s acumen is brought to bear on Pope Benedict XVI’s recent two-volume study on *Jesus of Nazareth*. This writing has garnered much praise in world-wide Christianity, yes, even among Lutherans! The theological precision of former Professor Joseph Ratzinger lends this popular writing a serious edge, while his traditional piety ensures it is devotionally enriching. Yet, the reviewer’s knife does not remain in its sheath, as he offers sound caution to the reader in the places where the present pope does not allow the Scriptural text fully to have its way with him. Nonetheless, echoing the angelic voice to Augustine, Stephenson urges, “Take up and read it!”

TMW
III Easter 2012
“The best treatment of the proper distinction of Law and Gospel in the history of Lutheran theology”: A Historical and Systematic Overview
Eric R. Andræ

“ONE OUGHT NOT TALK ABOUT ONESelf, it may hide Jesus from view”, said the Rector to young Pastor Fridfeldt.¹

With these brief words Bo Giertz has provided us with a sound, Evangelical-Lutheran rubric for Christian life, witness, and proclamation.² Yet, I dare to begin this paper on Giertz with what, at first, seems to be an anecdote about me.

In 1997, having earned my Master of Divinity from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, I decided to postpone ordination for one year so that I could commence my studies for the degree of Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.). This course of study would culminate in the presentation of a thesis on Giertz.³ It was natural for me to study and write on the bishop because I was born in Sweden into a family of pastors,⁴ which included Giertz’s bishop and my great-great-uncle Tor Andræ, and my father, Hans

¹ This essay was delivered at “Scandinavian Lutheranism: A Conference”, Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, St. Catharines, Ontario, on 7 June 2011. Portions were previously published in Eric R. Andræ, ed., A Hammer for God: Bo Giertz (Ft. Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2010).


³ “[A] Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour. ... He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbour through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour.” MARTIN LUTHER, On Christian Liberty (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 62.


⁵ Cf. BENGT SJÖBERG, Prästsläkten Andræ från Småland och Östergötland (Lund: 2001).
O. Andræ, was a ministerial colleague of Giertz in the confessional movement—specifically, within *Kyrklig samling*—and held him in the highest esteem. Nonetheless, as I was not inclined toward an ecclesiastical vocation until late in my university days, Giertz had not really captured my imagination until my first year at the seminary. It was then in 1993 that I for the first time read *The Hammer of God*. The novel was required reading for all first-year seminarians. The choice could not have been more appropriate, or more appreciated among the students. We all loved it, and thus, for me, began a quest to learn more about its author and, in turn, to make its author more well-known and more widely appreciated in North America. The subsequent S.T.M. provided me with the first great opportunity to do this. Both in 1997 and 1998 I spent time in Sweden, researching and writing my thesis.

Thus, in the summer of 1997, one year before his death, I telephoned Giertz at Birgittasystrarnas personal care home in Djursholm, outside Stockholm. During the course of the conversation I said, “I would like the bishop to know that your book, *The Hammer of God*, is required reading at Concordia Seminary in St Louis.” He responded, without hesitation, “That sounds like a good seminary to me.”

The Sources, Context, and Background of Giertz’s Writing of *The Hammer of God*

Christmas 1940, 35-year-old Bo Giertz received a lousy Christmas gift; no, it was not yet another tie or even one more black clerical shirt. No, it was a German novel. Specifically, it was Ina Seidel’s novel *Lennacker. Das Buch einer Heimkehr*. This novel is about a German clergy family, which the reader follows through all the generations beginning in the Reformation era through the 1920s. While it might be a bit harsh to call it lousy, Giertz did think that Seidel’s presentation of the spiritual life in German Lutheranism was somewhat superficial and hardly edifying. And so he thought, “This idea of presenting the faith with a series of historical cross-sections is a very good one, but I can improve on how it is accomplished.” He started writing that very night and the result—only some six weeks

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5 Giertz, telephone interview, 31 May 1997, this writer’s translation.
Andræ: The best treatment of the proper distinction of Law and Gospel

later—was Giertz’s Stengrunden published in 1941, or, as we know it, The Hammer of God, published in the U.S. just over 50 years ago in 1960.

Though he was serving full time as associate pastor in Torpa and as father of three, and did not take any time off to work on the book, he claimed that:

the joy in writing was stronger than the need for sleep. As tired as I often was after having travelled the long roads of my large parish by bike, kick-sled, or skis, I would fall asleep in the evening with my head on my typewriter. So I devised a rule—I would go to bed after I drifted off the third time.

In three representative samplings of history, two generations apart, Giertz’s novel powerfully demonstrates, as Hans Andræ points out, that the Church’s message of forgiveness of all sin through Christ’s atonement was, and is, a living reality among people of flesh and blood—no matter how different the external and cultural conditions might be. The Hammer of God thus serves as illustration, verification, and incarnation. Illustration of how conversion happens within the historical settings of the Church’s life; verification of the doctrine of justification through faith; and especially incarnation—human enfleshment, if you will—of Giertz’s earlier dogmatic work, chiefly his Christ’s Church and his Churchly Piety. These books on the means of grace and faith’s reception of the same, respectively, were first published in 1939, just two years before The Hammer of God. The two-volume work sets forth the objective ecclesial delivery and, in turn, the

7 Approximately 1000 parishioners; maximum 70 in Sunday worship.

8 ALGOT MATTSSON, Bo Giertz: ateisten som blev biskop (Göteborg: Tre Böcker Förlag AB, 1994), 196, this writer’s translation; see also 194-96.


subjective personal reception of God’s grace. The novel is thus the belletristic form and result of Giertz’s systematic theology. Giertz comments that the book was written to describe

how that which, doctrinally, we call “justification through faith” plays itself out in concrete reality … . It was in this way that I would distinguish justification and sanctification through a series of real-life situations …, in describ[ing] how God works when he leads a person to the true faith in Christ … . Almost nothing [in the book] is fictional …, but I have simply re-worked and re-told actual happenings … . I am a chronicler of what I have heard … . I am convinced that it was right to depict [it] in this way. For modern man to understand this, it is necessary to illustrate it among people of flesh and blood.11

Of course, in some ways Giertz is being overly modest here; he was not just a chronicler, not only a reporter; he was indeed also a fine writer, an outstanding novelist. At the same time, it is very true that he tells of “real-life situations”, for “he writes, in a sense, about all who have come near God’s Spirit.”12 It is “En själavårdsbok”—that is, as literally subtitled, “a cure of souls book”13—but the cure and care of souls is not just for the characters, but for us, the readers. Not just “about the cure of souls”, as the English subtitle has it, but “for” the cure of souls as it helps the reader to recognize and know self, God’s work, and, ultimately, Jesus only.14

But let us step back yet a few more years. A pastor in Denmark tells of “a Saturday evening before the Last Sunday of the Church Year 1935. [A young] rural pastor in Sweden, asked himself: ‘Can people actually be saved by what I have been preaching?’ [Bo Giertz] was unconvinced.”15

Giertz reflected many years later about his first pastoral position:

11 Giertz, quoted from CHRISTIAN BRAW, “Till Grunden”, Borås Tidning, 18 April 1994, emphasis added; this writer’s translation.
12 BRAW, lecture at Giertz Centennial conference in Gothenburg, 2 September 2005, this writer’s translation.
13 GIERTZ, Stengrunden, 3, this writer’s translation.
The year in Östra Husby [June 1935 to May 1936] ... gave me much to consider, regarding some of the most essential issues of the faith. Among us theologians at Uppsala [University], Christianity was first and foremost a series of theoretical problems, which were to be discussed .... But the academic piety questioned or ignored Christ’s work of atonement, in order to make the Gospel more understandable and acceptable to our time. In Östra Husby I was given reason to re-think this approach. I could not help but notice that in the midst of all the love and appreciation with which I was met, there was, nonetheless, a touch of disappointment that I did not preach Christ as one would have wished.

Therefore, in a letter of September 1936 from his second position in Ekeby, Giertz reached out to the well-respected and well-known pastor Gösta Nelson. Giertz expressed that he desired to stay with the experienced minister in his parsonage for a week, accompany him on his ministerial tasks, converse with him, and ask him questions.

Kristensen adds that after Giertz’s stay with Nelson, “Giertz journeyed home with books under his arm about salvation’s foundation, means, and order. He studied these books and they changed his proclamation and also found expression in The Hammer of God.”

There can be no doubt that these books included works by Henric Schartau. Time and space do not permit me to go into too much depth on this Swedish churchman and there is not much available on him in English. However, you can read a lot more about him in the opening essay A Hammer for God: Bo Giertz, as well as read samples of his preaching in Henric Schartau and the Order of Grace. This latter volume includes the famous “Jesus only” sermon found in the second novella of The Hammer of God.

**Henric Schartau and West Coast Swedish Lutheranism**

Let me; nonetheless, give a brief overview of Schartau, so that we can then ultimately understand his connection to The Hammer of God.

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16 Young Church movement. Ungkyrkorörelsen.
17 **ALGOT MATTSSON**, Bo Giertz: ateisten som blev biskop, 82-84, this writer’s translation.
Henric Schartau (1757-1825) was, according to some, the greatest theologian Sweden has produced. \(^{19}\) “[S]everal leading churchmen of the last century were directly or indirectly influenced by Schartau.” \(^{20}\)

Schartau served as pastor in the southern city of Lund and as dean of its cathedral from 1780 until his death. Though early in his ministry he was influenced by the German pietists, \(^{21}\) he strongly opposed conventicles, \(^{22}\) emotionalism, \(^{23}\) lay preaching, separatist movements within the Church of Sweden, \(^{24}\) and the discarding of the traditional liturgies. \(^{25}\) He became especially known for his powerful preaching and his thorough catechesis, founded on the *ordo salutis*, that is, the order of grace. By unifying pietism’s care for the spiritual development of the individual with Lutheran orthodoxy’s principled churchliness, \(^{26}\) he could be called a “high-church pietist”. It is important to note that the meaning, connotation, and usage of the term “pietist” have been quite different in Sweden than in the United States. \(^{27}\) More on the order of grace—which is really simply a

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\(^{20}\) Murray, 62.

\(^{21}\) “Schartau was friendly to German pietism, though he clearly saw its deterioration from the lofty beginnings of Spener and Francke. He fully appreciated the merits of these great leaders. The author whom he valued most of all, however, was Luther”; Hägglund, 17. The German pietists of primary influences for Schartau were Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752) and Magnus Friedrich Roos (1727-1803) of the Württemberg branch.

\(^{22}\) Schartau disapproved of their lack of clerical supervision and of their separatist nature Murray, 67-69.

\(^{23}\) “Schartau could not feel at home among the Moravians. His manly personality naturally reacted against a too pronounced emotionalism”; Hägglund, 16.


\(^{25}\) West Coast Lutheranism “ ... shows the influence of pietism, but at the same time lays great stress on tradition within the Church ....” H.M. Waddams, *The Swedish Church* (London: SPCK, 1946), 27.

\(^{26}\) See <http://www.artos.se/lutherska-traditionen/henric-schartau-1757%E2%80%931825-syfte-samtid-samhalle.>

certain way of presenting Law and Gospel, justification and sanctification—and pietism will be presented below.

Schartau’s disciples, especially students at the University of Lund originally from the Gothenburg Diocese, spread Schartau’s message after his death, mainly in their home diocese. This diocese, covering the entire western coast of Sweden, has been synonymous with what is called West Coast Swedish Lutheranism, or “Schartauanism”, which “still carries the spiritual stamp of Schartau’s disciples with firm concentration on public worship, pure doctrine, and great respect for ‘the true teacher.’”

It is this West Coast area in which Giertz served as bishop for 21 years. Upon Giertz’s arrival, “... the west coast and thereby also Gothenburg ... were characterized by ... Schartauanism.” In 1960 Giertz wrote, “From the religious point of view, this diocese is one of the most homogeneous in Sweden. This uniformity is the fruit of the great spiritual revival that emanated in the nineteenth century from the work of Henric Schartau.”

Perhaps most influential for Giertz’s appropriation and praise of Schartau and the order of grace was Giertz’s early stay with the Schartauan, Gösta Nelson—as mentioned above. Ordained in late 1934, Giertz had received his first call to a parish in the spring of 1935. The year

Please note, however, that the sentence “Giertz even restored baptism to its proper foundational place, something that had been to a great extent lost by the pietists”, should actually read, “Giertz even restored baptism to its proper foundational place in relation to the ordo salutis, something which had been to a great extent lost by Schartau.”

28 MURRAY, 87. The Swedish for “true teacher”: rätt lärare. See also VIKTOR SODERGREN, Henric Schartau och västsvenskt kyrkoliv (Uppsala: J. A. Lindblads, 1925), which includes an extensive bibliography.

29 “If ‘the spiritual’ has not come forth on the West Coast, then I do not know what is meant by spirituality. Rather, it is certainly so, that the pietistic heritage, as it in West Swedish and in old-church piety has been unified with sound orthodoxy, is the spiritual foundation for our whole renewal of the church” (BO GIERTZ, letter to Rosendal, 7 March 1938, this writer’s translation; archived at Uppsala University Library.)


32 The material in this and the next paragraph, including the quotations from Giertz, as well as other personal-historical anecdotal data above, is adapted chiefly from MATTSSON, 15-16, 43, 50-54, 78-79, 82-88, 123, 126, this writer’s translation. Some material is also from a personal e-mail from Erik Okkels, quoting Flemming Baatz Kristensen, 21 November 2009. For the Seelsorge of Nelson, see GÖSTA NELSON, Själavårdens elementa (Lund, Sweden: Gleerups, 1951).
he spent in Östra Husby would turn out to be decisive for his ministry and for his view of the Church, the Bible, and the confession of the faith, for there he encountered a traditional, biblical, and sincerely faithful piety which caused him to recognize his shortcomings and struggles. “Can people actually be saved by what I have been preaching?” Giertz comments:

[I did] not [struggle] regarding God’s existence, [but] I felt unsure in the application of my Christian faith and I asked myself if I really had the right to call myself Christian. ... The Christian answer is, of course, that he who believes in Jesus Christ—he has eternal life [and] that there is a forgiveness which is valid despite all that is lacking. [But] no one was able to make these truths clear to me until I started reading Henric Schartau.

Giertz’s struggles and his reading of Schartau inspired him to contact Nelson, a parish pastor in Bokenäs in the Gothenburg diocese, who was recommended as a faithful servant in the West Coast tradition, an intelligent Schartauan, and one who was extremely knowledgeable when it came to the state of affairs in the diocese. Giertz was so bold as to request a one-week stay with this man who, interestingly, later would be one of the three finalists for the bishopric which Giertz attained in 1949. In a letter of September 1936, Giertz expressed that he desired to stay with Nelson in the parsonage; in short, Giertz wished to be renewed and solidified in his Christian knowledge. Nelson readily honoured Giertz’s request that very autumn, charging him one Swedish krona (about 10 cents), so that Giertz would not feel like a guilty freeloader. While with Nelson, in a letter to his wife, Giertz wrote: “[Nelson] is patiently instructing me in the pure doctrine and I have received a great deal to think about .... The main principle is: ‘Everything depends on God’s Word.’ ... That which keeps people faithful to the church [here] ... is, above all, the rich, clear, and almost thrilling instruction regarding the way of salvation ..., the order of grace.” According to Giertz biographer Algot Mattsson, Nelson immersed Giertz in the order of grace and the piety of this West Coast parish. This immersion by Nelson, a “true teacher and great master of doctrine”, not only renewed and solidified Giertz’s knowledge, but gave him an entirely new perspective for his continued walk of faith. He studied the books Nelson gave him and they changed his proclamation and also found expression in The Hammer of God. His new viewpoint, centred on the order of grace, remained primary for Giertz throughout his subsequent life and service to the Church.

Though henceforth a self-proclaimed disciple of Schartau, it is interesting that Giertz also “was at times strongly critical of the west coast heirs of the awakening, whom he felt represented an all-too-rigid Schartauanism. At the same time, he has always shown much respect for a
low-church piety”, which is, at the same time, biblical and pious.\textsuperscript{33} Meanwhile, translator Clifford Ansgar Nelson noted that Giertz has a profound appreciation of the high-church liturgical movement\textsuperscript{34} as well as of low-church evangelicalism. If one should characterize the type of piety which is most congenial to his spirit, it would be as a broad evangelical orthodoxy that makes him congenial to the atmosphere of West Coast Lutheranism in Sweden.\textsuperscript{35}

\section*{The Order of Grace}

As stated, Schartau emphasized faithfulness to the Church, a pure doctrinal foundation, and the authority of the pastoral office. These and any other of Schartau’s teachings, centred on the order of grace,\textsuperscript{36} or \textit{ordo salutis}, the way of salvation:\textsuperscript{37} The Holy Spirit first enlightens the mind; this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33}“Giertz, Bo”, \textit{Bra Böckers Lexikon}, 1985 ed., this writer’s translation, adapted.
\item \textsuperscript{34}Eighteen years before Giertz began his service as bishop, Otto Bolling wrote, “[the] high-church movement’s part of the country is West Sweden. It has been given this character through the Schartau-esque piety-movement, which there has deep roots in the soul of the people. The so-called Schartneranism’s actual homeland is the Gothenburg Diocese ...” OTTO BOLLING, \textit{Svenskt Fromhetsliv av I Dag} (Stockholm: SKDB, 1931), 108, this writer’s translation. Bolling continually points to the high-church movement piety and Schartneranism as synonymous with one another (see 109ff.). However, Giertz contends, “The Church of the West Coast is ... not High-Church, as it is sometimes labelled by badly informed newspapers. In its entirety it is Lutheranism along Low-Church lines with the addition of pietistic elements. On the subject of church rituals the average parishioner is loyal but not overly interested. The office of the church is held in high esteem, but always with the typical Low-Church reservation that the clergyman must be a true teacher. The sacraments are loved and honoured, but most beloved is the Word in pure and clear form”; GIERTZ, “The Gothenburg Diocese”, 157.
\item \textsuperscript{35}CLIFFORD ANSGAR NELSON, “An Introduction”, in BO GIERTZ, \textit{Liturgy and Spiritual Awakening} (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1950), 6-7. This book can also be found online at <www.lcms.org>.
\item \textsuperscript{37}The Swedish word for “salvation”: \textit{salighet}.
\end{itemize}
enlightened intellect then affects the will. While it has been presented in many similar formats, Nathan Söderblom has stated the basic and classic order of the process: “Enlightenment through law and gospel ..., conversion, justification, new birth, renewal, [and] glorification ....”

The ordo salutis is a systematic presentation of God’s grace, specifically the way in which the Holy Spirit applies it to man. From the perspective of the history of dogma, the order of grace covers the development of the analytical method in dogma, which, during the Age of Orthodoxy (ca. 1580-1680), followed the earlier loci-method. Biblically, the connection is found implicitly in such places as Acts 26:17-18 and Col. 1:13-14, but primarily and explicitly in Romans 8, in which Paul describes God’s work for man’s salvation in terms of foreknowledge, call, justification, and glorification. Upon this Scriptural foundation, several and varied detailed systems were then built, utilizing and adapting elements from, among others, mysticism’s traditional stages of salvation, as well as the order of

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38 Schartau held that God commands nothing “which is contrary to either Scripture or reason”; BODENSCHEK, 2307. This is reminiscent of Luther’s stance at Worms: Unless I can be proven wrong by reason or Scripture .... It is, furthermore, indicative of a proper and Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of creation and its anthropology. For more on this, the reader is referred to the many works on creation by twentieth century Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren.

39 For example, Hulthén’s summary of the “order, which never changes ... [is] forgiveness, justification, new birth, sanctification, [and] glorification.” Hulthén also gives us Schartau’s explanation of the foundation, order, and means of salvation: “1. The foundation, which never fails, 2. The order, which never changes, and 3. The means, which are always efficacious, when they are rightly administered. The foundation is the payment and the merit, in other words redemption through Jesus. [The order has already been given above.] The means are baptism, the Word and the Holy Supper”; HULTHEN, 117, this writer’s translation. Cf. Gieritz’s description of the foundation, order, and means in BO GIERTZ, Grunden (Stockholm: SKDB, 1962), 129.

40 Omvändelsen: literally, the action of reversing one’s direction.

41 SÖDERBLOM, 49-50, this writer’s translation. This Order has been criticized: Schartau’s “fault, which was exaggerated by his followers, was certain constant reference to the forms and divisions of logic and to the inward state of the soul—in other words to psychology. This led ... to the requirement of a conscious ascent through certain stages of progress, which was not altogether healthy”; JOHN WORDSWORTH, The National Church of Sweden (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1911), 365. Gieritz, though, maintains that Schartau’s “doctrine is ... the exact opposite of that which it is sometimes held to be. ... The order of grace is often understood as a doctrine about the soul’s way to God through a series of improvements and cleansings. It is completely different .... The essential in the order of grace is not the order but rather the grace”; BO GIERTZ, Herdabrev Till Göteborgs Stift (Stockholm: SKDB, 1949), 151; this writer’s translation.
penance from the Middle Ages, including Gabriel Biel’s (ca. 1420-1490) scholastic formulation of the way of salvation. The systematic formulation of the order of grace, during orthodoxy as well as later, has often been discernibly inconstant. The order of grace can be seen as an attempt of late orthodoxy’s dogmaticians, such as Nicolaus Selnecker (ca. 1528/30-1592), Matthias Hafenreffer (1561-1619), Johannes Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688), and David Hollatz (1648-1713), to illustrate the transformation that occurs to and in the person who journeys from outside the faith to a mature Christian life, as acted upon by the Spirit. In a sense, the *ordo salutis* is really nothing more and nothing less than a presentation of the reality confessed so wonderfully by Luther in his explanation to the third article of the Creed: call, enlightenment, sanctification, and true faith. This is the language of his Small Catechism and it is the language of the order of grace. At times, this order of grace developed simultaneously within Lutheranism (for example, in the literature of pietism), within the Reformed tradition, and also within Methodism, especially as Methodism was often greatly influenced by Reformed theology in areas where such theology was prospering. In these developments, the various elements of the order of grace became understood as stages through which a person must pass, or steps he must successfully complete, on the way to a fully mature Christianity. As such, the *ordo salutis* has come ordinarily to be associated not with sound Lutheranism (at least not in North America), but rather with Reformed theology. This type of the order of grace, as developed and presented by the Reformed and by many pietists, is simply not what is confessed by Giertz as he inherited it from Schartau via Nelson.

The doctrine of the order of grace certainly can be misused, seeming to support works righteousness in a Reformed, synergistic, or even Puritan way. Among those who would corrupt the *ordo salutis*, terms such as “awakening”, “repentance”, “rebirth”, and “righteousness” are often given meanings different than what we find in Luther. Also, the proper distinction of law and gospel, and of sanctification and justification, is threatened by those who stray toward a legalistic interpretation. Furthermore, the *ordo salutis* can be misused to direct one to look inward at the psychological state of one’s mind, rather than outward to the proclamation of the Word and the distribution of the sacraments. However,

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43 See also FC SD II.50: “call ... draw ... convert ... new birth ... sanctify” (K-W). Cf. FC SD III:40-41 and FC SD XI:13-24.
Giertz continually gives warnings on common misunderstandings and misapplications such as these. And, on the other hand, he is able uniquely to synthesize the *ordo salutis* with sacramental and liturgical Lutheran orthodoxy, avoiding the pitfalls of the Reformed and synergistic models.\(^{44}\)

**Schartau’s Emphases**

For Schartau, the order of grace was the source and centre of his emphases on teaching and on preaching. His catechesis was unique because of its discussion method and in its large classes. His works on catechetical instruction, published posthumously, were widely influential. They emphasized clarity in orthodox doctrine, understanding of dogma, and faithfulness to the historic, institutional, evangelical church and its forms and confessions.

One of the most distinctive features of Schartauanism is the style and structure of its sermons.\(^{45}\) After the Trinitarian invocation, the introduction begins with a verse of Scripture, followed by its interpretation or brief exegesis, and then the Lord’s Prayer. The proposition or theme is then stated along with its subdivisions or parts. The main body of the

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\(^{44}\) Material in the preceding two paragraphs is mainly drawn from “Nådens Ordning”, *Nordisk Teologisk Uppslagsbok*, 1955 ed., as well as WERNER EILERT, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 141-42, 148, 153. For a brief overview of Biel’s *ordo salutis* and its critique by Martin Chemnitz, see TORBJÖRN JOHANSSON, *Reformationens huvudfrågor och arvet från Augustinus: En studie i Martin Chemnitz’ Augustinusreception* (Gothenburg: Församlingsförlaget, 1999), 106-109. In the same volume, one finds a summary of Chemnitz’s appropriation of “Augustine’s concept of the distinctions between grace’s different effects and ’stages’ ” (143-44; this writer’s translation). In addition to the language of the Small Catechism in the Lutheran Confessions, the Formula of Concord also speaks of an “order” in relation to faith and the good works of sanctification: FC SD III:40-41, cf. FC SD XI:13-24. Cf. also CHARLES ARAND, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 142. For an example of a mostly negative critical evaluation of Schartau’s Order of Grace on the points already addressed herein, see CARL NORBORG, *Arvet från Schartau* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Pro Caritates Förlag, 1951), especially 250-62. However, even Norborg admits that “the Schartau’esque proclamation, at its best, can preach free grace with much power, so that one truly takes it to heart” (261, this writer’s translation). For an excellent presentation of the heart of Giertz’s theology in homiletical form see GIERTZ, *Hammer*, 264-69.

sermon consists of expounding the theme while addressing the hearer in the third person. The closing application has three sections applied to the hearers, in the second person: one addressed to the self-righteous “confident sinner”, another to the awakened stricken sinner or “mournful soul”, and finally one to the forgiven reclaimed sinner who knows and believes the “assurance of grace”. 

46 HÄGGLUND, 125, 126. See also C. O. ROSENius, The Believer Free from the Law, trans. Adolf Hult (Minneapolis: Lutheran Colportage Service, 1923), 19. Giertz seems to counter this particular structure, at least its introduction:

[The sermon] must not be especially “liturgical.” It must not in any special way become liturgically constructed. Many pastors have a dangerous inclination to do this. The sermon is introduced by a special small liturgy which includes an apostolic greeting, hymn reading, set prayers, the Trinitarian formula and other things. Such a fixed introduction to the sermon is often only a meaningless duplication of the liturgy already celebrated. The greeting was already there (in the Salutatio), as was the appropriate prayer (in the Collecta); and the sermon hymn should have completed the essential preparation of prayer. Personally, I am of the opinion that sermon preambles in the pulpit should be as short as possible. A brief prayer, usually a free one, will in most cases be sufficient. (Bo GIERTZ, “The Meaning and Task of the Sermon in the Framework of the Liturgy”, The Unity of the Church [Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Press], 138)

However, Giertz makes other points, such as the emphasis on the prophetic nature of the sermon as God’s Word, that complement Schartau. Furthermore, in his theology as a whole, he, too, employs the distinctions between what might be called the three hearers. Giertz uses a series of names for each grouping. The first he calls the self-satisfied, or self-secure; the second the anxious, the heavy-laden, or especially the awakened or the poor in spirit; the third the faithful or the graced, perhaps even the converted. See GIERTZ, Hammer, 98-103; and Bo GIERTZ, Den stora lögnen och den stora sanningen (Stockholm: SKDB, 1945), 120-37, especially 134-37; much of the latter is left out of the English translation found in Bo GIERTZ, The Message of the Church in a Time of Crisis and Other Essays, trans. Clifford Ansgar Nelson and Eric H. Wahlstrom (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1953), 58-64. Giertz appropriates one of Schartau’s sermons in GIERTZ, Hammer, 170-75: the English translation of the sermon can be found in HÄGGLUND, and is also available at:

<http://thefirstpremise.blogspot.com/2009/08/henric-schartau-jesus-only.html>; for the original, preached in the Lund cathedral in 1795, see HENRIC SCHARTAU, Femton Predikningar och ett Skriftermålstal, 79-88. Again, the closing application directed to the three hearers is entirely left out of the English translation of The Hammer of God (see GIERTZ, Stengrunden, 170). “For him who has learned to understand [Schartausque preaching], it has more to offer and is easier to remember than any other manner of speaking. ... But if you lack sufficient preparation and knowledge, this kind of a sermon is rather unfathomable”; GIERTZ, “The Gothenburg Diocese”, 154. For an appraisal of Schartau as preacher, see EDV. RODHE, Henrik Schartau såsom predikant (Lund: Gleerups, 1909). For a collection of Giertz’s sermons in two volumes, see Bo GIERTZ, Söndagsboken
The Heart of the Order of Grace: Law-Gospel, Giertz, and The Hammer of God

Giertz presents the order of grace thusly: the call, enlightenment through the Law, enlightenment through the Gospel, justification and rebirth, and sanctification.

The central focus is the Law-Gospel distinction, being a subset or even corollary of justification, and a synecdoche for the ordo salutis, this order of grace.

Robert Kolb, renowned Reformation scholar, says that The Hammer of God is “perhaps the best treatment of the proper distinction of law and gospel in the history of Lutheran theology ....” Notice, by the way, how sneakily I took the word “perhaps” out my paper’s borrowed title! Also, Frank Senn, Senior of the Society of the Holy Trinity, calls it a “masterpiece [on] ... ‘Doing Ministry Between Law and Gospel,’ ” while David Mulder, the late president of the LCMS New England District and executive vice president of Concordia Publishing, called it “the best law-gospel narrative ever written.”

Though the scope of the novel is comprehensive, the teaching of the Church which is most prominent in the book and which finds repeated and helpful expression is indeed that of the distinction between God’s Law and

(Bo Giertz, Preaching from the Whole Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967; reprinted: Ft. Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2007) is actually misleading; it is not so much a homiletic text, but rather presents briefly and helpfully the Gospel lesson’s theme for each Sunday and is aimed at least as much at laymen as at pastors. The Swedish title is Vad säger Guds Ord?, that is, “What does the Word of God Say?”


David Mulder, telephone interview, 12 January 2000. It is not only notable Lutherans who are edified by and appreciative of the novel’s presentation of the Law-Gospel distinction: William Graham Tullian Tchividjian, Billy Graham’s grandson and senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale (home church of the late D. James Kennedy), writes of The Hammer of God describing the “‘Copernican revolution ...’ that has taken place in [his] own heart regarding the need to preach the law then the gospel without going back to the law as a means of keeping God’s favor”; Tullian Tchividjian, “The Whole Debt Is Paid”, 30 June 2011, at: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tullian/2011/06/30/the-whole-debt-is-paid/#comments>.
his Gospel. This is the frame, pattern, and perspective for the entire book. The awakening by the Law and the enlightenment by the Gospel, the heart of stone and the rock of salvation, are not only phrases found in titles of some of the novel’s chapters, but bespeak the book’s central theme. Pastor Bengtsson, the conservative and stocky pastor who preaches a powerful Law-Gospel sermon in the mission house, proclaims, “The stone foundation of the heart and the Rock of Atonement on Golgotha are the two mountains on which a man’s destiny is determined.” In this way, Giertz vividly portrays man’s sinful depravity and God’s universal and unconditional grace. Hans Andræ comments in the introduction to the revised edition:

_The Stone Foundation [Stengrunden]_ is Giertz’ title for the whole book, and _the Rock of Atonement_ is his chosen expression for the heart and centre of the Christian faith .... The English title of this book, _The Hammer of God_, [which is the title of the first novella in both the Swedish and English editions] is, of course, a reference to the work of God’s holy Law. It crushes like a hammer our ‘good’ deeds by which we try to be righteous before God. And as a result, it also exposes the stone foundation, our sinful heart ....

### Law-Gospel Literature: Johannes and Pastor Torvik (and C. F. W. Walther)

In the opening chapter of _The Hammer of God_, the state of the dying villager Johannes, of his very soul, demonstrates this work of the law very poignantly and memorably. The mirroring Word of the Law and repentance does its stone-crushing, impoverishing, alien work, and leaves Johannes in near-despair. Thus, poor in spirit, Johannes is prepared finally to be enlightened by the Gospel, that is, he is brought to see with eyes of faith the atoning cross that friend Katrina holds before him, and so to receive God’s faith-creating and faith-sustaining gifts by means of which Pastor Savonius absolves him and gives him the body and blood of his

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50 Cf. Samuel H. Nafzger’s 1977 Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod national convention essay “That We May Grow … ”, in which he makes extensive use of _The Hammer of God_ in order to illustrate this doctrine. See the _Convention Proceedings_ from the 1977 LCMS Convention in Dallas, 87-98.

51 GIERTZ, _Hammer_, 269.

52 HANS O. ANDRÆ in GIERTZ, _Hammer_, xxi-xxii.
Lord. For, as C. F. W. Walther says, “the Word of God is not rightly divided [if] the Gospel is turned into a preaching of repentance.”

Walther, in his same magisterial work on Law and Gospel, also states in thesis five that “The ... manner of confounding Law and Gospel [which] is the one most easily recognized ... and the grossest ..., consists in this, that Christ is represented as a new Moses, or Lawgiver, and the Gospel turned into a doctrine of meritorious works ....”

Early in the third novella, Pastor Gösta Torvik is made intimately aware of the failure of his works. Recalling several Scripture passages in a dream, he is confronted by his vulgarity and lust, his cowardice and lukewarmness, his self-complacency and lack of love, his mockery and unworthiness, his irritability and malice, and his pride. He realizes that “As a Christian, he was weighed in the balance and found wanting.” The scales of the law do not lie. Torvik’s response was a common and understandable one. He wholly re-committed himself to God, to a stricter obedience and sanctification. The pastor did this by adopting the four absolutes of the Oxford Group movement, namely, absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. And yet, to his dismay, he found that sin remained, in his flock and especially in himself. Writes Giertz:

The more energetically he pursued the evil in order to discover its inner source, the more apparent it became that there were not only single dark wellsprings of evil within him that with a little determination and will power might be stanch, but that the whole inner soil was a morass and deep down a frightening dark flood appeared that he feared he could never master. ... He carried on an almost hopeless struggle to keep his prayer life healthy and vigorous. The old pattern of self-examination and commitment had lost its edge also for him. It was an altogether hopeless task to search out all sin and make amends for it. It was no doubt a sin that he thought

53 C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel (St. Louis: CPH, 1929), 277, thesis 15, emphasis added. It seems that Giertz was not familiar with Walther’s work until many years after writing The Hammer of God. Bishop Bo Giertz visited St. Louis in April 1953. On 21 April, he was given a German version of Walther’s Gesetz und Evangelium, the 1946 St. Louis edition. The book was given to him by [Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod President] J. W. Behnken, “In fond remembrance of your gracious visit to our Synod and with best wishes.” Some pencil notes are found in the book; I presume they were made by Bo Giertz, and his ex libris is also found in the book. According to the pencil notes, Giertz was especially interested in the later theses of Walther’s, 9-15, 20-24. He also made some pencil indications, especially on pp. 249-52, 351-63, 376. (Rune Imberg, e-mail, 27 May 2011).

54 Walther, 69.

55 Giertz, Hammer, 222-25.
good old Magnusson looked slouchy and repulsive; that he noticed how he changed his tone in speaking with Britta because he heard some parishioner entering the hallway; that during the morning hymn at prayers, he would think about how to meet the cost of fuel for the stoves; that he told the deacon thoughtlessly that he had to leave the party at his house early in order to prepare his sermon, when as a matter of fact he really wanted to write letters that Sunday night. Yes, all of this was no doubt sin, but what good would it do to confess all this before men? And what did it mean to make a break with such sins? He would have to tear his evil heart from his breast! And his prayers! Every day he fought despairingly to keep his prayer life from going stale. Every day the quiet hour seemed to grow longer, and it became more impossible to keep his scattered thoughts from intruding on his devotion. Now he thanked God for family prayers. There was at least some order to them. But it was thanks to Britta that this was so. When they were married, he had at first preferred that each of them should have a private devotional period and then share their experiences. But one day Britta had let him know that they were now sufficiently acquainted with each other’s sinful corruption. Now she wanted to hear something about Jesus instead.

It is again godly women of the royal priesthood of the baptized who point the lost soul to the true Gospel, to Jesus only. Mother Lotta pays a visit to the pastor to discuss the case of her niece Margit, who had never been taught the “assurance in God’s grace. She had only examined and tried her deeds, had confessed her sins and fought her temptations, but had never found peace in the wounds and shed blood of Christ. She had never heard anything about the grace of baptism, nor about the robe of Christ’s righteousness.” As such, she had allowed herself to be re-baptized.

“Let me tell you, Pastor, it won’t do to offer Moses a forty percent agreement and expect him to be satisfied with our becoming absolutely pure and loving and honest, as you are always talking about. One will certainly not be saved on that foundation. It will be nothing but patchwork. It will not result in a whole and acceptable righteousness, as the heart will surely attest, and it will certainly not do as a basis for salvation. Those outward sins, which one can pluck away as one rids the padding of a sofa of vermin, one by one, are by no means the worst. And that is true also of those sins of thought that you can take hold of as you would a bug and show the Lord, and say, ‘Here it is.’ But the corruption of our nature, Pastor, the sinful depravity, that remains where it is, and I should like to see how you would turn that over to God. ... [Thus,] a poor, tortured soul,

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56 GIERTZ, Hammer, 239, 243-244.
seeing the whole ugly tangle of his sins, [should] dare to look at Jesus instead of at himself ....”

“But can you tell me, Mother Lotta, what might possibly be able to help overcome the corruption that I have in my heart?”

The woman looked up at him as if shocked at the question.

“The blood of the atonement, Pastor; nothing but the atoning blood.”

It is thus that Pastor Torvik, as Johannes some 130 years previous, is crushed and impoverished and so prepared by the Law to be re-created and enriched by the sweet Gospel that Pastor Bengtsson preaches into his ears. In Pastor Bengtsson’s sermon at the mission house the old pastor describes the effort of a man to clear away his own sin as digging out the rocks in stony ground. But then, having done everything, he finds stones all the way down, until he comes to “the rock foundation we know as the sinful corruption of our human nature.” The one who denies God’s Word, though, “never [gets] down to the rock foundation”, and so “considers himself, his deeds and his life good enough to find acceptance with God”, and then perhaps even “calls that right which the Word of God calls wrong.” Then Pastor Bengtsson shifts to another immovable rock, the Mount of Golgotha.

The stony soil of our heart, the rock foundation of our corrupt human nature, needs not ... be the basis for judgment upon us. It can be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus, just as the hill of Golgotha was when drops of blood fell upon it and it was transformed from a place of execution to the Rock of Atonement. God marks the evil heart with the sign of the cross and makes a man righteous in Christ. The whole sinful rock of man’s natural heart is lifted and made to rest on the Rock of Atonement. It still remains flinty rock. Man, as he is in himself, remains a sinner. But the guilt is atoned for .... A fertile soil now covers the rocky base. It is the good soil of faith, which is watered by grace. Gradually something begins to grow that would never grow there before .... The stone foundation of the heart and the Rock of Atonement on Golgotha are the two mountains on which a man’s destiny is determined. If he remains on the stone foundation of his natural fallen state, he is lost. Only one way leads from that stony foundation to the Rock of Atonement, a firm stone bridge built once and for all. It is the Word. Just as only the divine Word can convict man of sin and lay bare the soul to its rocky base, so nothing but the Word can reveal the truth about the Redeemer .... No one who is awakened in earnest would

ever be able to believe in the forgiveness of his sins, if God had not built a bridge leading to the Rock of Atonement. The supports on which it rests are baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution; the arches are wrought by the holy Word with its message of redemption. On that bridge a sinner can pass from the stony ground that condemns to the Rock of Salvation. 

Torvik himself thus begins preaching Jesus as the crucified and risen Saviour, not as new lawgiver, and commences proclaiming discipleship as being baptized to Christ and receiving his gifts through the Bible, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution; he confesses: “I now see that [the four demands] are not the foundation of our salvation, but goals for our sanctification.” Pastor Torvik has learned to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel, enabled to apply the distinction to himself and to his flock.

**Law-Gospel Systematics: Giertz and Life in the Church**

Johannes and Pastor Torvik were enlightened through the Law and the Gospel. In his doctrinal works, Giertz maintains that without this enlightenment of Law and Gospel, there can be no justification and rebirth, no faith, and no salvation.

Giertz points out that after one has been reached by the law, one’s faith is at first generally moralistic and legalistic. Christianity is only viewed in terms of God’s commands and requirements, which are seen as within the reach of fulfilment. The focus is misplaced, writes Giertz in *Kyrkofromhet [Churchly Piety]*, for it is on what “we are to do for God, instead of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.” While this may very well be in some ways an active faith, its activities are not really part of the whole and completed true faith. Instead, this false faith often displays itself in pride, dangerous self-security, and spiritual arrogance. But here the Law of God, as a guide, teaches one what kind of person one should really be, and, more importantly, it shows one what kind of person one truly is, namely, a sinner. For Giertz, this latter use, commonly called the second use of the Law, plays the chief role in this legal arousal. It is the mirror that provides enlightenment and corrected vision.

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59 **GIERTZ, Hammer**, 265-70.

60 **GIERTZ, Hammer**, 298.

61 **GIERTZ, Kyrkofromhet**, 26, this writer’s translation; **GIERTZ, Life by Drowning**, 229.
Thus, it is also here that God will slowly destroy the sinner’s love of sin. Through the Word, God works regret and repentance. Giertz divides complete repentance into three parts: confession of sins, sorrow over sin, and a longing to be freed from sin.\textsuperscript{62} This repentance, especially the sorrow, is not to be understood in a psychological manner. The sorrow is real, not forced by the penitent for comparative purposes in regard to others or drawn out falsely by a misleading confessor, but rather actually caused by the Law’s swift sword. One realizes, writes Giertz, that, as true repentance is worked, “in your own efforts ... you are much worse off than you ever imagined.”\textsuperscript{63} It is a matter of original sin, not just actual sins. This original sin, which clings to and corrupts all that one does, good and bad alike, is the root cause of all obstacles to salvation. The comprehension of total depravity is a harsh reality. Hopelessness may set in. Think of dying Johannes as Katrina arrives. In this hopeless despair, then, often one stays away from the Lord’s Table, one gets lazy in one’s prayer life and Bible reading. This is what happened with Torvik. This bi-fold hopeless path to which moralism leads must eventually meet its end in Paul’s cry of distress, “O wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24), to which Katrina also alluded. But at last, Paul reminds himself and us, and Katrina reminds Johannes and us, that even this is the work and blessing of God, his alien work, that is, the work of the law. As Pastor Bengtsson explains, “You must know that when God’s work gets started in a man, he will sooner or later experience desperate need, the need that is created by God’s Word.”\textsuperscript{64} This is the excruciating time in which the Law is, as always, accusing. It is this

\textsuperscript{62} Giertz is referring to the latest official edition of the Small Catechism in the Church of Sweden (1878), which states in its Explanation that “I truly repent of my sins when I am sincerely sorry for them, confess them, and long to be freed from them”; \textit{Doktor Martin Luthers Lilla Katekes}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Uppsala: Bokförlaget Pro Veritate, 1991), 91, Question 144; English translation from \textit{Doctor Martin Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation} (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Book Concern, 1957), 53, Question 78. Giertz quotes the 1878 Catechism in his own catechetical work: BO \textsc{Giertz}, \textit{Grunden. En bok för konfirmander om salighetens grund, medel och ordning} (Stockholm: SKDB, 1960), 87; first edition, 1942. See also Ap XII:44-45; this Confessional text demonstrates that there is no disagreement between Giertz and \textit{Concordia} on the meaning and place of repentance, especially in terms of Law and Gospel. See also Ap XII:99 and especially Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration V:8, the latter of which includes essentially the same three parts that Giertz does when discussing repentance.

\textsuperscript{63} \textsc{Giertz}, \textit{Kyrkofromhet}, 28, this writer’s translation; \textsc{Giertz}, \textit{Life by Drowning}, 231.

\textsuperscript{64} \textsc{Giertz}, \textit{Hammer}, 248.
that Giertz calls the “awakening”. See especially the second chapter of the novel, “Awakened by the Law”. Indeed, this awakening is a strange blessing. The Law shows us that we cannot save ourselves. In its pedagogic application, it thus drives us to the Gospel, which tells us that we have one who can save, a Saviour. Thus, in *Kyrkofromhet*, Giertz states,

At last it is clear also to you, that the foundation for our Christian faith, for that covenant which the living God made with us in baptism, truly is not our righteousness or our repentance or our fulfilment of his holy requirements, but rather God’s incredible mercy, his undeserved grace and our Lord Jesus Christ’s atoning work on Golgotha.

When waiting for the light of this gospel to come totally clear, one must, no matter what, never abandon Christ’s Church. God there proclaims the Word, invites us to his Supper, and wants to hear our private confession.

“What does such baptizing with water signify? ... It signifies that the Old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

“You are an honest man, Brother,” said [P]astor [Bengtsson to Torvik before the meeting at the mission house], “and I believe God has chosen you to be an instrument of blessing. But you can do nothing of yourself. First we must make sure that everything is clear with regard to your own conversion.”

“Be converted?” he said with a show of irritation. “Let me tell you, Olle, I have been converted twice, and that should be enough. The first time was at college, the second as pastor here in Ödesjö. How many times does a person have to be converted?”

“As many days as one lives,” was the immediate reply. “But first the conversion must be properly completed through repentance and faith. And that is something God must do, and not you. It is evident that He has gotten you a considerable distance on the way. But you lack faith. You lack the right faith in Jesus only.”

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68 SC IV:11-12.

Our amazing God knows our sinful lot. In our rebellion, he repents us; he turns us around toward him, so that we may be given more than the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. As has been demonstrated he even uses our sin in the way to salvation, that is, the Law shows us our unholy sin, our separation from holy God. Certainly we can be righteous through the Law, but this is righteousness only toward our neighbour, not coram Deo. Giertz speaks rather of the righteousness of the Gospel, a righteousness which is a gift from God, through a faith in Christ which is a gift from God. If we could improve ourselves, then God’s Law would be enough. But we cannot. We want to earn God’s grace, but he gives freely the undeserved benefits of that blood-stained cross. This is the forgiveness of sins. This is the Gospel. We can either believe this or we can despair. Despair will occur at the awakening if we break the ties to the Church of Christ and lose prayer and the Word. But we are allowed to believe. And our Saviour’s faithfulness will not be moved one inch despite our unbelief and our struggles. Christ alone is the foundation of salvation. It is Christianity, after all, not fideism, faith in Christ, one’s own strong Saviour, not faith in one’s own faith and its strength or lack thereof.

Nonetheless, it is a struggle to believe that all God’s work is for you: the struggle to believe that all depends on the Christ who is for you, pro me. This reminds us of Bengtsson’s advice to Torvik:

“We are in the midst of Lent, Brother,” said the rector. “Read God’s Word now as God’s Word, without skipping anything. Underline heavily everything about what our Saviour has done for us. And if you like, write ‘For me’ in the margin. You need this yourself, and it is your duty to preach it to your congregation, as well.”

The struggle to believe Christ’s anthropocentric focus, this struggle to believe in a Lord who is “for me”, who is doing all for me, is in actuality and truly unbelief. And one will indeed encounter doubt, struggles, and terrors of the conscience if one focuses on self. Again, remember Johannes. Man must not be anthropocentric. He must not focus inwardly. Man’s focus is to be christocentric, on Christ alone, on what he has done his love, his death and resurrection, and his incredible mercy. The struggle in and with sin is brought to light by the Law, in order that grace may be brought to light by the Gospel. This is explained systematically by Giertz in his Christ’s Church and Kyrkofromhet, and literarily in The Hammer of God.

Carl Olof Rosenius also warns against placing oneself at the centre, even when this is done in a manner that produces not doubt and despair,

70 GIERTZ, Hammer, 251.
but rather pride and false security. Rosenius was the nineteenth century Swedish religious leader and evangelist who emphasized the objectivity of the atonement in regard to justification by grace through faith, who is mentioned frequently in the novel, and whose writings had a profound and lasting influence on Giertz. Rosenius writes:

The old illusion regarding one’s own strength is often present. Usually it manifests itself in that I talk about how, through prayer and in God’s strength, I will be able to handle so much. In other words, this is a more pious-sounding form of the old reliance upon and trust in what I myself shall be able to do. But what is characteristic is that I, I—not Christ—stand in the centre of this interest. But then I am newly exhausted and killed, so that I must once again sink down at the feet of my Saviour and allow him to be all in all for me. As long as it continues in this way, and I am constantly, again and again, directed back to Christ, then I am not under the law, but rather under grace.

The obstacle of unbelief, the struggle to appropriate Christ’s as one’s own Saviour, is conquered as one is opened by the Lord to be given gifts from him, the Giver, in his Church. These gifts come to one as one is in prayerful reception of the Word and the Sacrament of the Altar. Through these, God creates faith in the Saviour alone as exactly that, our Saviour and Atoner, Jesus only. It is when this faith, the true Christian faith, is present that conversion has been accomplished. This work of God transforms one and places one in a completely new situation and condition; it effects justification and new birth. This is the very heart of

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71 This is in contrast to his disciple, P. P. Waldenström, who eventually opposed the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. See Hans O. Andræ in GIERTZ, Hammer, xxvii-xxviii. Pastor Fridfeldt and the Rector briefly discuss some of these differences between the Rosenian pietism and that of Waldenström; however, this conversation in the original is summarized in only two paragraphs in the English translation without mentioning Waldenström (see GIERTZ, Stengrunden, 115-17, and GIERTZ, Hammer, 118-19). Without naming the two, the differing positions of Rosenius and Waldenström on the atonement are discussed near the end of the second novella; again, however, these pages do not appear in the English edition, though Hebert provides a summary paragraph (see GIERTZ, Stengrunden, 175-78; and HEBERT, Fundamentalism and the Church, 114). As he matures spiritually, Pastor Fridfeldt, at first Waldenströmian, finally comes to the conclusion that “Rosenius no doubt had the deeper vision” (GIERTZ, Hammer, 191). The Evangelical Covenant Church in the U.S. was founded by followers of Waldenström who immigrated to America.

Giertz’s presentation on Law and Gospel, within the order of grace.\textsuperscript{73} He comments in \textit{Kyrkofromhet}:

These are not stages or steps in the process of grace .... One must be careful not to make [this] a staircase on which one gradually moves up to God .... It is rather a descent, a process of impoverishment, in which God takes away from man one after the other of his false grounds of comfort. At its heart it is a description of how God’s love overcomes the obstacles and breaks down the dams which prevent the divine grace from freely pouring itself over a life. ... Therefore everything becomes intertwined in the work of conversion. Already in the [baptismal] call [unto renewed faith] there can be a deep insight into the mystery of the cross. Every meeting of the law and every new confession of sin usually carries with it a new revelation of grace. And when finally faith victoriously enters in, then “justification” and “new birth” is already a reality.\textsuperscript{74}

Faith is kindled in the poverty of the spirit. The true faith, which is not the same as believing in God (for even devils do that) is present when one realizes that one is not what one should be and yet holds onto Christ for dear life. One’s spirit is poor, but one’s Saviour is rich. The atonement actually means something to oneself. It means justification and re-birth. True faith is faith in Christ and in the cross. This realization, and nothing else, is conversion. God has led one to faith. And, with Johannes, one can simply, profoundly, say only “Amen. I believe!”—gift received.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{73} It is helpful to note that Giertz writes originally to a Swedish audience. At that time (1939), even more so than today, almost all Swedes were members of the Church of Sweden, a Lutheran state church. As such, they were indeed baptized and confirmed, but were becoming increasingly secularized and distant from the Church. Therefore, it was, and still is, very common for the baptized Swede to fall away from the faith of Baptism, thus necessitating a later experience of conversion or God’s call, and a reintroduction of a faithful, pious church life. Giertz himself, baptized as an infant but later an avowed atheist, experienced such a call from God during his student years at Uppsala. However, the order of grace and its call retains its pertinence for others; as such an experience is also a daily necessity for any Christian, which the Small Catechism makes clear in its confession of Holy Baptism. (Small Catechism IV; see also Ap XII:1-2, Tappert).

\textsuperscript{74} GIERTZ, \textit{Kyrkofromhet}, 40, this writer’s translation; GIERTZ, \textit{Life by Drowning}, 239.

\textsuperscript{75} GIERTZ, \textit{Hammer}, 26.
Law-Gospel Literature Revisited: Pastor Savonius (and C. F. W. Walther)

Savonius is the one who administers the gifts of God to Johannes. Though the pastor fails in his counsel to the dying man, the Lord nonetheless has instrumental use of him for the God-ordained delivery of his gracious gifts:

“Good-bye then, Peter,” [Savonius] said haltingly. “Thank you for the ride. I am sorry I could not do more for Johannes.” “More?” Peter looked at him questioningly. “Pastor, have you not brought him Christ’s body and blood? Have you not exercised the blessed authority of the keys, which comes from God? Can a man do more?”

Nonetheless, the pastor himself, as it turns out, needs to be impoverished in order to see the light of the Gospel.

Again, Walther reminds us in thesis 25 that, “[T]he Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.” Having been awakened by the Law, especially and chiefly through the miserable effects of his own weak and unfortimotting words at the deathbed, Savonius becomes a real “hammer of the Lord, a powerful preacher against all evil in the parish.” But there is not enough balance. His preaching is generally moralistic and legalistic, in the manner I have already described. The Gospel does not predominate. As such, at the close of the first novella Savonius is confronted by friend and colleague, Pastor Lindér:

We have thundered like the storm, we have bombarded with the heaviest mortars of God’s law in an attempt to break down the walls of sin. And that was surely right. I still load my gun with the best powder when I aim at unrepentance. But we had almost forgotten to let the sunshine of the gospel shine through the clouds. Our method has been to destroy all carnal security by our volleys, but we have left it to the souls to build something new with their own resolutions and their own honest attempts at amending their lives. In that way, Henrik, it is never finished. We have not become finished ourselves. Now I have instead begun to preach about that which is

76 GIERTZ, Hammer, 34.
77 WALThER, 403.
78 GIERTZ, Hammer, 312.
finished, about that which was built on Calvary and which is a safe fortress to come to when the thunder rolls over our sinful heads.  

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GIERTZ, Hammer, 103. In his proper distinction between law and gospel, Lindér, that is, Giertz, sounds much like Luther, as when the Reformer writes in his classic On Christian Liberty (1520):

[A]lthough it is good to preach and write about penitence, confession, and satisfaction, our teaching is unquestionably deceitful and diabolical if we stop with that and do not go on to teach about faith. Christ ... not only said “Repent”, but added the word of faith, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” We are not to preach only one of these words of God, but both; we are to bring forth out of our treasure things new and old, the voice of the law as well as the word of grace. We must bring forth the voice of the law that men may be made to fear and come to a knowledge of their sins and so be converted to repentance and a better way of life. But we must not stop with that, for that would only amount to wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bring back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused. Without this word of grace the works of the law, contrition, penitence, and all the rest are done and taught in vain. (AE 31:363f.).
Luther, Calvin, and Hooker on Theosis

Richard A. Beinert

SINCE THE FINNISH “DISCOVERY” OF THEOSIS, or deification, as a motif within the theology of Martin Luther (1483-1546) nearly thirty years ago, theologians have been pleasantly surprised to find it as an animating principle within the theologies of other figures of the Reformation as well. Indeed, in addition to Luther, it has also been “unearthed” as a facet of the theologies of John Calvin (1509-1564), the erstwhile inspiration for the Reformed tradition of Western Christendom, as well as the celebrated theologian of early Anglicanism, Richard Hooker (1554-1600), among

* Richard Beinert presented this essay at The Sixteenth Century Society and Studies Conference in St. Louis, Missouri, 23-26 April 2008.


numerous others. Part of this fascination with theosis as a doctrine comes undoubtedly from its novelty as a conceptual locus within the field of twentieth and twenty-first century Protestant dogmatics; it is also due in part to the ecumenical potential that it offers to the broader Christian church. Indeed, theosis, more than any other locus of Christian theology, has served as the catalyst for positive dialogue and understanding between the various Christian denominations, whereas discussions concerning justification, ecclesiology, Scripture, and the meaning of the sacraments have continued to divide. This is undoubtedly due to the synthetic character of the doctrine which seeks to describe the dynamic character of the Christian life rather than reduce it to analytical scholastic categories.

Be that as it may, neither can the specific confessional and doctrinal context in which theosis is expressed be easily ignored. There is a kind of perichoresis which takes place on this point among the sculptors of the Western Christian spiritual legacy that needs to be recognized.

The trend, to date, has been to explore the various Western conceptions of theosis in relation to the Byzantine model as though it were the standard or prototype against which all variants are properly judged and

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5 Daniel Clendenin comments that it is a doctrine that “sounds very strange indeed to our [Western] ears.” See DANIEL B. CLENDENIN, “Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37 (1994): 365-79.


7 Cf. O’KEEFE, especially pages 59-60.
adjudicated. While this certainly is consistent with the *ad fontes* spirit of Reformation humanism, it has also limited our ability to understand deification as a root doctrine native to the Reformation mind-set which informed the evolving shape of spirituality in the Christian West. There is still the feeling out there, despite the efforts of recent Finnish scholarship and Anglican writers like A.M. Allchin, that theosis is something foreign to the soil of Western Protestant Christendom. This point is certainly both large and significant for the ongoing work of theological reflection in the West. Be that as it may, it is time for us to move beyond the initial birth-pangs of the theological renaissance introduced by the Finnish school of Luther research and begin to explore the Western conceptions of theosis in the Western context—doing a brief comparison of the views of Luther, Calvin, and Hooker with one another.

**Theosis in Luther**

Franz Posset has noted Luther’s dependence upon both Johannes Tauler’s (c. 1300-61) mysticism as well as the spirituality of the anonymous author of the *Theologia Deutsch* (14th Century). Both made ample use of the concept of *Vergottung* wherein the individual is united with God through the person of Jesus Christ. Thus Luther could write that God became man so that man could become God (*Ideo Deus fit homo, ut homo fiat Deus*), and again, that Christ became thoroughly incarnate that we in turn would be completely deified. This latter statement, from his 1526 Epiphany sermon on the Baptism of our Lord is worth looking at in length. Reflecting on the benefits of Baptism, Luther comments:

> Do you see, that with this word God draws Christ into Himself and Himself into Christ together with those with whom He is pleased? What Christ does, and likewise with the same words, He empties both Himself and Christ His beloved Son upon us and pours Him into us, and draws us into

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10. From Luther’s 1514 Christmas sermon. WA 1:29.26-32.
Himself in return, that He [Jesus] be thoroughly incarnate (vermenschet) and we become thoroughly (gantz und gar) deified (vergottet).\(^{11}\)

He describes it in terms of a mutual interpenetration of the Christian with Christ on account of God’s action in the waters of Baptism so that the one is found equally in the depths of the other, becoming all together one new thing:

So you are most certainly in the same good-favour and equally as deep in the heart of God as Christ, and likewise, God’s good-favour and heart are equally deep within you as they are in Christ, that now you and God together with His beloved Son is thoroughly within you, and you are thoroughly in Him, and all with the other are one thing, God, Christ, and you.\(^{12}\)

Luther often describes this union in common household terms as being baked into one bread (ein brott)\(^{13}\) or into one cake (eine Kuche)\(^{14}\)—similarly using the analogy of sugar-water (Zuckerwasser)\(^{15}\) to illustrate the ensuing commingling of God with humanity. Far from being a bald joining of humanity to the essence of God, Luther conceives of this joining to be mediated through the flesh of Christ.\(^{16}\) As with Athanasius (c. 293-373) and later Cyrilillian mystagogy, Luther understands deification as the direct corollary of the incarnation.\(^{17}\)

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\(^{11}\) “Also sihestu, das Got mit diesen worten Christum ynn sich zeucht und sich ynn Christum mit dem, das seyn wolgefallen sey ynn allem, was Christus thut, und widderumb mit den selbigen worten beyde sich selbs und Christum seynen lieben son aufschuttet uber uns und sich ynn uns geust und uns ynn sich zeucht, das er gantz und gar vermenschet wird und wyr gantz und gar vergottet werden.” WA 20:229.28-34.

\(^{12}\) “So bistu gewislich auch ynn dem selbigen wolgefallen und eben so tieff ym hertzen Gotts als Christus und widderumb Gotts wolgefallen und hertz eben so tieff ynn dyr, als ynn Christo, das nu du und Gott sampt seynem lieben sone ynn dyr gantz und gar ist, und du gantz und gar ynn yhm bist, und alles mit eynander eyn ding ist, Gott, Christus und du.” WA 20:230.6-10.

\(^{13}\) WA 7:337.29-30.


\(^{15}\) WA 33:232.11-21.

\(^{16}\) WA 9:532.15-19; 7:188.19-20.

It is Luther’s emphasis on the fleshly point of union that directs his sacramental and specifically Eucharistic concerns. The doctrine of the Real Presence, for Luther, is not a mere scholastic squabble. It has to do with the very means by which God is brought into contact with humanity and humanity into contact with God through the deified flesh of Christ. In his commentary on John 6, he writes:

[God] did not simply want to give us His divinity. That would be impossible, for God has said, "No one will see me and live, it is impossible." [Ex. 33:20] God must therefore hide, conceal and cover Himself so that we might apprehend Him. Thus He must hide Himself in the Word and the Office of preaching, in Baptism, in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, where He gives us His Body in the bread and His Blood in the wine to eat and drink.

This is no empty doctrine for Luther. For not only does it relate to the very foundation from which he understands the Christian’s deification to come, but he ties it to the active social and ethical life of the Christian in community as well. In a remarkable passage from his 1523 Concerning the Worship of the Sacrament of the Holy Body of Christ, he explains:

It is true, that we Christians are the spiritual Body of Christ. We are all together one bread, one drink and one spirit. Christ does all of this, who through His own body makes us into one spiritual body, so that we all equally become partakers of His Body, and so with one another we are one and the same. Moreover, since we enjoy one and the same bread and drink, we become one bread and drink. And just as one member serves the other in such a united body, one also eats and drinks the other, that is, he enjoys him in all things and is one for the other food and drink so that we are precious food and drink for one another, in the same way that Christ is our precious food and drink.


18 AE 23:123; WA 33:189.40-190.5.
19 “Szo ists nu war, das wyr Christen der geystlich leyb Christi sind und alle sampt eyn brott, eyn tranck, eyn geyst sind. Das macht alles Christus, der durch seynen eynigen leyb uns alle eynen geystlichen leyb macht, das eyr alle seynes leybs gleych teylhafftig werden und alßo unternander auch gleych und eyns sind. Item, das wyr eynerley brott und tranck geniessen, das macht auch, das wyr eyn brott und tranck werden. Und gleych wie eyn gelidt dem andern dienet ynn sochem gemeynen leybe, alßo isset und trincket auch eyner den andern, das ist, er geneust eyn ynn allen dingen und ist yhe eyner des ander speyß und tranck, das wyr alßo eyttel speyß und tranck sind unternander, gleych wie Christus uns eyttel speyß und tranck ist.” WA 11:440.34-441.8.
In this way, the union of the individual together with Christ which arises out of a participation in the sacraments (justification) translates directly into a renewed direction in vocation (sanctification) as the Christian serves his/her neighbour. As Posset notes, however, Luther’s focus is distinctly Christological.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Theosis in Calvin}

The topic of deification within Calvin is likewise of relatively recent provenance. The older opinion is echoed in F. W. Norris’s article from 1996 where he states: “John Calvin seems to have avoided teaching deification or not known of it.”\textsuperscript{21} This view has been successfully challenged by a number of scholars such as Craig Carpenter\textsuperscript{22} and J. Todd Billings. Billings comments, for instance, that “while Calvin’s theology is quite different from late Byzantine conceptions of deification, his theology nonetheless offers an instructive account of the possible consequences of affirming that the fullest manifestation and final end of humanity are found in union with God through Christ.”\textsuperscript{23} Unlike in Luther, however, theosis for Calvin is wrapped up more closely within an Augustinian pattern of Trinitarian mysticism.\textsuperscript{24} Thus while Calvin maintains a definitive stress on the atoning significance of Christ and the cross, the locus for his conception of union is wrapped up in an understanding of the community of persons within the Godhead. It is perhaps because of this distinctively Augustinian texture to Calvin’s theology that Norris’s judgement has hung on for as long as it has. “Insufficient familiarity with patristic writings”, Moser suggests, “is precisely why many of Calvin’s interpreters have not recognized the presence of deification in Calvin even when it has stared them in the face. That and the uncritical acceptance of Harnack’s claims have caused many to assume its absence rather than engage in empirical investigation.”\textsuperscript{25}

It is telling that Calvin begins the third Book of his Institutes discussing the union of the believer with God. He writes:

\textsuperscript{20} Posset, 122.
\textsuperscript{21} Norris, 420.
\textsuperscript{22} Carpenter, 384.
\textsuperscript{23} Billings, 317.
\textsuperscript{24} See Moser, 46; Billings, 322; Hesselink, 15-18.
\textsuperscript{25} Moser, 55.
How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell in us .... We also, in turn, are said to be “engrafted into him [in ipsum inserti]” [Rom. 11:17], and to “put on Christ” [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith .... [It is] the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits .... [T]he Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.26

And again: “This union alone ensures that, as far as we are concerned, he has not unprofitably come with the name of Saviour.”27 He goes on to explain: “how can there be saving faith except insofar as it engraves us into the body of Christ [in Christi corpus inserti]? ... [I]t does not reconcile us to God at all unless it joins us to Christ”28 for “our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ [Christi sumus participles]; indeed, with him we possess all its riches.”29 Building on the Augustinian dialectic of the Letter and the Spirit, Calvin asserts that justification and Christ’s active righteousness, while all the while remaining objectively grounded in Christ, must be appropriated by the believer. This, he claims, happens in the mystical union when the Holy Spirit builds that bond of community between the elect believer and the person of Christ. Jesus, Calvin thus explains, “when he illumines us into faith by the power of his Spirit, at the same time so engraves us into his body [insere in corpus suum] that we become partakers of every good.”30 Thus, Calvin writes, “him whom God receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify.”31

26 JEAN CALVIN, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.1.1.
27 Institutes, 3.1.3.
28 Institutes, 3.2.30.
29 Institutes, 3.11.23.
30 Institutes, 3.2.35.
31 Institutes, 3.11.21.
The close intertwining of Calvin’s Christology, his teaching on the cross, as well as his theory of election, has been amply noted;\textsuperscript{32} as has also his theory of the Scriptures and the sacraments as external testimonies of God’s sovereign benevolence\textsuperscript{33} along-side which the Holy Spirit works in order to strengthen the person’s faith.\textsuperscript{34} For Calvin, faith rests and is founded on God’s eternal decree and, as such,\textsuperscript{35} requires no real means through which it must be granted. “We hold ourselves to be united with Christ by the secret power of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{36} The sacraments, rather, serve as external media through which the Holy Spirit strengthens the faith of the elect\textsuperscript{37} so that they might in turn grasp hold of Christ.\textsuperscript{38} His vision, however, is far from subjective. The Spirit’s work is to draw people out of themselves—to “lift up their hearts”—so that they might find both their election and salvation relationally, outside of themselves, in communion with Christ.\textsuperscript{39}

If we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election. For since it is into his body the Father has destined those to be grafted whom he has willed from eternity to be his own, that he may hold as sons all whom he acknowledges to be among his members, we have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life [cf. Rev. 21:27] if we are in communion with Christ.\textsuperscript{40}

Calvin thus interprets Baptism relationally as well—as the initiation of the individual into the society of the Church.\textsuperscript{41} He similarly sharpens his

\begin{itemize}
  \item See \textit{Institutes}, 1.6-7; also \textit{Institutes}, 4.1.22; 4.14.1; et al.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 4.1.3.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 3.11.5
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 4.14.10.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 3.2.8.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 4.17.18; 4.17.31.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 3.24.5.
  \item \textit{Institutes}, 4.15.1.
\end{itemize}
doctrine of the Office of the Keys horizontally in terms of an exhortation to the community toward the living of forgiveness and reconciliation.\textsuperscript{42}

For Calvin then, Luther’s teaching on the “ubiquity” of Christ’s physical body is entirely superfluous. In fact, he denies it.\textsuperscript{43} It holds no functional value within his understanding of the believer’s union with God. Even the “eating” and the “presence” of Christ, he assigns to the working of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{44} In the same way, the public, social, relational, exercise of piety and prayer must never be hidden because it in itself is a public testimony to an inner faith through which the Spirit works to strengthen faith in others—as Joel Beeke writes, piety and prayer, like the word and the sacraments, are socially transformative.\textsuperscript{45}

**Theosis in Hooker**

Discussing theosis under the rubric of “participation”, Edmund Newey observes that, “at first sight, [it is] not a prominent theme in Hooker’s work.”\textsuperscript{46} Closer examination, however, reveals an entirely different picture. In discussing God in Book One of his *Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Hooker relates that “No good is infinite but only God: therefore he our felicitie and blisse.” He then goes on to begin to trace the outline of his vision of theosis. It is by “desire”, he writes, that humanity tendeth unto union with that it desireth. If then in him we be blessed, it is by force of participation and conjunction with him. Againe, it is not the possession of any good thing can make them happie which have it, unlesse they enioye the thing wherewith they are possessed. Then are we happie therefore when fully we enioye God, as an object wherein the powers of our soules are satisfied even with everlasting delight: so that although we be men, yet by being unto God united we live as it were the life of God.\textsuperscript{47}

He expands this notion in Book Five when he builds it into his theory of theosis.\textsuperscript{48} “God hath deified our nature,” he writes, “though not by turning

\textsuperscript{42} *Institutes*, 4.1.22.
\textsuperscript{43} *Institutes*, 4.17.30.
\textsuperscript{44} *Institutes*, 4.17.33.
\textsuperscript{46} NEWEY, 5.
\textsuperscript{47} RICHARD HOOKER, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, 1.11.2.
\textsuperscript{48} See NEWEY, 5.
it into himselfe, yeat by makinge it his owne inseparable habitation.”

“Oure verie bodies receive that vitall efficacie which we knowe to be in his.” Christ comes to dwell within believers “by way of mysticall association wrought through the guift of the holie Ghost.”

This union, Hooker writes, is effected by the Holy Spirit working in and through the instrumental means of the sacraments. In this, Hooker charts an interesting course—a via media if you will—between Luther and Rome’s sacramental realism and Calvin’s spiritualistic interpretation. For Hooker, the sacraments are necessary as communicative means in order to effect the union of the believer with Christ.

When sacramentes are said to be visible signes of invisible grace, wee thereby conceive how grace is indeed the verie ende for which these heavenlie mysteries were instituted, and besides sundrie other properties observed in them the matter whereof they consist is such as signifieth, figureth, and representeth there end .... Sacraments are the powerfull instruments of God to eternall life. For as our naturall life consisteth in the union of the bodie with the soule; so our life supernaturall in the union of the soule with God.

Notice that this union is an inward one—of God with the soul. Hooker describes this as “that mutuall inward hold which Christ hath of us and wee of him” which is “in such sort that ech possesseth other by waie of speciall interest propertie and inherent copulation.” As such, this union remains both hidden—“removed altogether from sense”—and as such, also equally incomprehensible. Yet it is a presence which can be discerned by the faith-filled person “partly by reason and more perfictlie by faith” itself. Hooker here follows Calvin’s doctrinal structure by placing the emphasis on the divine nature of Christ as the place where this union takes place. “Christ as man is not everie where present” because he holds that

49 Lawes, 5.54.5.
50 Lawes, 5.56.9.
51 Lawes, 5.56.13.
52 Lawes, 5.50.2-3.
53 Lawes, 5.56.1.
54 Lawes, 3.1.2.
55 Lawes, 5.55.3.
56 Lawes, 5.55.3; see also Grislis, 262.
57 Grislis, 262.
his human nature “cannot have in itselze universall presence.”\(^{58}\) This similarly renders the debates concerning the real physical presence of the human nature of Christ within the Eucharistic elements nonsensical.\(^{59}\) He holds rather that “the soule of man is the receptacle of Christes presence.”\(^{60}\) The change, says Hooker quoting Cyprian, is thus a kind of “reall transmutation of our soules and boodies from sinne to righteousness, from death and corruption to immortalitie and life”\(^{61}\) whereby God “mysticallie yeat trulie, invisiblie yeat reallie worke” through these instruments “our communion or fellowship with the person of Jesus Christ as well in that he is man as God, our participation also in the fruit grace and efficacie of his bodie and bloode, whereupon there ensueth a kind of transubstantiation in us, a true change both of soule and bodie, an alteration from death to life.”\(^{62}\)

Like Calvin, Hooker frames this union in the context of a Trinitarian construct. “Life as all other guiftes and benefites growth, he wrotes, originallie from the father and commeth not to us by by the Sonne, nor by the Sonne to anie of us in particular but through the Spirit.”\(^{63}\) This social-relational vision of this union must be read in relation to Hooker’s struggle against the individualistic tendencies inherent within the Puritan practitioners of his day.\(^{64}\) Furthermore, Hooker builds it, not on a supralapsarian vision of predestination, but on his own distinctive theory grounded in the foreknowledge of God.\(^{65}\) Hooker is thus able to ground his doctrine of deification within the context of the Church as a dynamic community in which the sacraments act as true means through which both to create faith through the gift of union as well as sustain it through the forgiveness of sins.\(^{66}\) He can thus say, in opposition to Calvin’s views, that the sacraments are not mere socializing forces within the life of the

\(^{58}\) Lawes, 5.55.7. Although Hooker maintains that there is some kind of conjunction between the ubiquitous divine nature and the localized human nature of Christ that allows the faithful access to both regardless. See Lawes, 5.55.9.

\(^{59}\) Lawes, 5.67.6.

\(^{60}\) Lawes, 5.67.2.

\(^{61}\) Lawes, 5.67.7.

\(^{62}\) Lawes, 5.67.11.

\(^{63}\) Lawes, 5.56.7.

\(^{64}\) GRISLIS, 258ff.

\(^{65}\) See Lawes, 5.56.7.

\(^{66}\) Lawes, 5.60.3.
Christian community but that they are indeed actual means and channels of grace, and by breaking the bond of charity within the Church, he is able to argue that the Puritans have excluded themselves from the bosom of mother church. “Christ”, he writes,

is whole with the whole Church, and whole with everie parte of the Church, as touchinge his person which can no waie devide it selfe or be possest by degrees and portions. But the participation of Christ importeth, besides the presence of Christes person, and besides the mysticall copulacion thereof with the partes and members of his whole Church, a true actuall influence of grace whereby the life which we live according to godliness is his, and from him wee receave those perfections wherein our eternall happiness consisteth.

Hooker thus emphasizes the corporate present-day ecclesial character of the Church’s union with her Lord. “Wee are in Christ because he knoweth and loveth us even as partes of him selfe .... Yea by grace we are everie of us in Christ and in his Church, as by nature we are in those our first parentes.”

Conclusion

In exploring the theme of deification within our three sixteenth century Reformation figures, we discover a landscape which is rich with diversity while remarkably trying to cover the same basic landscape. Luther, Calvin, and Hooker each attempt to formulate their spiritual vision around the desire to foster the mystical life of both the corporate church and the individual believer around the dynamic leaven of God’s divine and active presence. While this overview is precisely that—simply an overview—much more could be said to distinguish the respective views of the three confessors.

Both Hooker and Calvin, for instance, work with a common notion of faith wherein the individual is the passive recipient (even receptacle) of the divine presence. Luther, on the other hand, as Tuomo Mannermaa has

67 Lawes, 5.57.2.
68 Lawes, 5.57.3-4.
69 See GRISLIS, 258-60; also Hooker’s comment that their “zeal hath drowned charitie, and skill meknes.” Lawes, 4.1.1.
70 Lawes, 5.56.20.
71 Lawes, 5.56.7.
aptly pointed out, teaches a dynamic conception of faith wherein faith and the present Christ are co-terminus with one another. The structure of Luther’s theology is distinctly Cyrillian-grounded christologically, whereas both Hooker and Calvin anchor their mystical vision more closely within an Augustinian Trinitarian mysticism. Hooker, however, comes closer to Luther in locating the action of divine grace at the threshold of the sacraments as effective and effecting means. In this sense, as he does with his Eucharistic theology, so too with deification, Hooker “[charts] a new course which [is] both ancient and modern.” This is undoubtedly due, in part, to the different contexts in which each Reformer was working. The social, political, personal, as well as intellectual challenges which they faced in their own contexts of ministry would indubitably have left their impression on the ongoing work of their theological projects. It is significant to note, however, that the “continuous golden thread” of theosis “running throughout the centuries of its ancient theological tapestry” was certainly not exhausted or excluded during the watershed epoch of the sixteenth century reformations in the West. Vladimir Lossky’s comment regarding this doctrine—that it is “echoed by the fathers and theologians of

72 MANNERMAA, op. cit.; Risto Saarinen has recently called this the “Third Dimension” of faith. See RISTO SAARINEN, “The Third Dimension of Faith”, Dialog: A Journal of Theology 44:1 (2005): 15-16; see also Jeffry Silcock, who states “The Christ of the propter Christum per fidem is not only the Christ outside us but also the Christ who dwells in us and is really present in faith. This connection between justification and Christology is central to the Finnish project.” JEFFRY SILCOCK, “Luther on Justification and Participation in the Divine Life: New Light on an Old Problem”, Lutheran Theological Journal 34.3 (2000): 135.

73 Posset notes in this regard that “Luther and Greek Orthodox theology appear to be compatible.” POSSET, 103.


76 CLENDENIN, 366.
every age”\textsuperscript{77}—thus needs both to be broadened and tempered: broadened in the sense that there needs to be a recognition of the full catholicity (both in terms of veracity as well as historical and geographical representation) in discussions of this ancient dogma; tempered, in the recognition that the East does not hold a monopoly on Christian spiritual traditions. There need not be “a hankering for the East”, as Robert Jenson has called it, within the contemporary spiritual ethos of our church today\textsuperscript{78} or within our work as students and inheritors of the sixteenth century Reformation traditions.

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\textsuperscript{77} Vladimir Lossky, \textit{The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church} (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 134.

Confessional, Confessing, or Both? The Ecclesiology of Hermann Sasse

Geoffrey R. Boyle

Introduction

In 1930, in the early days of intense ecclesiological reflection, Hermann Sasse said, “The church fathers said only very little about the church. They only gave deeper consideration to the nature of the church at those times when the unity of the church was threatened and these times necessitated a reconsideration of what the church is.”

Germany in the 1930s illustrates such a “threatened unity” and, consequently, was a time for “deeper consideration to the nature of the church”. Now, it would be horribly naïve to presume a unified Christianity in Germany before Hitler and the Nazi party came to power. This was hardly the case. However, the political circumstances of the 1930s, in conjunction with a young ecumenical movement, did lead to some of the most important ecclesial discussions of the twentieth century, and perhaps of the Church’s history. It was a time of urgency. The German church(es) needed to act quickly if they hoped to survive. Certain voices spoke louder and certain movements proved more influential than others. One of the great tragedies of the time was that the Church did not heed Sasse’s voice. His was “too Lutheran” for someone like Karl Barth. Yet it is his voice that this paper attempts to resurrect. Indeed, Sasse’s ecclesiology, both grounded in confession and realized in the act of confessing, is the ecumenically focused doctrine of the church necessary to combat unionism based on false unity (Scheineinigkeit)—in Nazi Germany as well as today.


2 See especially Sasse’s essay, “Union and Confession”, in The Lonely Way, 1:265-305, where his underlying thesis suggests that with every union unity is not accomplished, rather further and greater disunity. His evidence is the history of German church unions, beginning already with John Sigismund in the 17th century, but most especially the unions of the 19th century.
Who Was Hermann Sasse?

Born on 17 July 1895 in Sonnewalde in Thuringia, Sasse was baptized shortly thereafter into the Church of the Old Prussian Union. He matriculated at the University of Berlin in the summer of 1913, where he studied under Adolf von Harnack, Karl Holl, Reinhold Seeberg, Otto Eissfeld, and Adolf Deissmann (his Doktorvater). His studies were interrupted by the Great War (1914-1918), wherein he served the German Military as sergeant 1st class from 1916-1917. He was awarded the Iron Cross, 2nd Class (second-highest honour in the German military at that time) for his successful recovery of six men (out of 150) during one of the bloodiest battles of the war, the Battle of Passchendaele in Belgium. When he returned from the war he continued his studies, was ordained in 1920 at St. Matthew’s Church, Berlin, of the Church of the Old Prussian Union and served as assistant pastor (Hilfsprediger) in Berlin. He received his first full pastorate in 1921 at St Nicolai in Oranienburg bei Berlin, where he served until 1928. During this time he received his doctorate in New Testament (1923), married his wife, Charlotte Naumann (1924), and studied for his Master of Sacred Theology in an exchange programme at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut (1925-26). This trip to the States was crucial to Sasse’s theological maturity; he notes, “What Lutheranism is, I learned in America.” The following years were marked by his heavy involvement with the Ecumenical Movement (1927-35), which was only brought to an end by the government restriction on travel. He participated in the First World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne (1927), becoming a member not only of the Continuation Committee, but also of the Executive Committee. From 1928-1933 Sasse was called to serve as “social pastor” at St Marienkirche in Berlin. Here, in 1930, he began editing the Kirchliches Jahrbuch. In 1932 he authored a very influential and

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4 They had three children, Wolfgang, Maria, and Hans (Maria died the day of birth, Dec 1930).

scathing critique of National Socialism, especially its false ideology. This earned him fame among those opposed to Nazism as well as hardship from those exercising political oversight of the University. Nonetheless, his call to teach at the University of Erlangen went through, though he did not obtain a full professorship. His outspoken reputation earned him the commission in 1933 by the Council of Young Reformers (Jungreformatorischen Bewegung) to co-author, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Bethel Confession. The final version of this statement was so corrupted from what Sasse and Bonhoeffer originally wrote that neither signed the confession in the end; it circulated, rather, under Martin Niemöller’s name, accomplishing very little. The following May Sasse attended the first Synod of the Confessing Church in Barmen (1934). By his own account Sasse notes that his counter-position was refused a hearing:

When I arrived in Barmen before the official beginning of the synod, it had already been decided in the preliminary discussions that there would be a common doctrinal declaration. As soon as I learned of this at the Lutheran Convention, I protested against it and declined a nomination to the committee which had the task of finalizing the formulation of the declaration. At the compelling entreaty of my territorial bishop, I cooperated with this committee in order to improve the declaration as much as I possibly could, but under the clear reservation that I did not

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6 “Die Kirche und die politischen Mächte der Zeit”, part 2 of “Kirchliche Zeitlage”, in *Kirchliches Jahrbuch*, ed. Hermann Sasse (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1932); repr. in *In Statu Confessionis: Gesammelte Aufsätze von Hermann Sasse*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Verlag die Spur GMBH & Co.: Berlin & Schleswig-Holstein, 1975), 1:251-64. Cf. JOHN R. WILCHER, “Hermann Sasse and Third Reich Threats to the Church”, in *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?*, 65-105, who outlines Sasse’s chief critiques and maintains, “Sasse was the first important German theologian to raise his voice against Nazism” (65); also KLAUS SCHOLDER, *The Churches and the Third Reich: Volume One—Preliminary History and the Time of Illusions 1918-1934* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 142: “In 1932 [Sasse] categorically declared that Article 24 of the Party programmeme made ‘any discussion with the church impossible’. Here, too, it was not some dubious, or at least debatable, political analysis which led Sasse to this conclusion but rather a careful examination of what was said by the Lutheran confession.”


8 “My main difficulty from the beginning was this, that a mixed synod cannot produce joint doctrinal declarations without making it clear that the Lutherans speak only for Lutherans and the Reformed for the Reformed. My positive proposal was that the synod ... should proclaim the right of the confessional churches bound to the confessions of the Reformation over against the illegitimacy of the German Christians”; SASSE, “Union and Confession”, 290, n. 36.
believe the synod was authorized to produce a common doctrinal declaration for both confessions. I asked in vain to be able to present my reservations in the plenary or at least in the Lutheran Convention. It is inaccurate when J. Gaugen (*Die Chronik der Kirchenwirren*, 2:221) asserts that I was given plenty of opportunity to make my views known. I was able neither in the synod nor in the Lutheran Convention to give reason for my position, rather only in the secrecy of a small committee. When I noted that the schedule of the synod would not allow a dissenting view to be presented also to the plenary, I left the synod after having delivered a written explanation.

Sasse continued his critical interactions with the Confessing Church as it met in Synod three more times in the following two years: October 1934 at Dahlem, May 1935 at Augsburg, and February 1936 at Bad Oeynhausen.

After the war the American army appointed Sasse to report on his colleagues at Erlangen in order to make sure the faculty was free of Nazi ideology, thus permitting the university to reopen. This brutally honest report won him no friends among his colleagues, even though by this *Confidential Memorandum* he exonerated the faculty of Nazi ties. Between the hardship at the University and the formation of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), in 1949 Sasse saw no other option but to resign from his post and take a call to serve on the faculty at Immanuel Seminary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia. The rest of his career was spent as professor of Church History at the Australian seminary, travelling frequently to America, lecturing at various Lutheran seminaries. Notably, while in Australia (indeed, one of the chief reasons he accepted the call) he was a member of the Intersynodical Committee and diligently worked for the union of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (UELCA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia (ELCA). The task was daunting at first; the UELCA received a great deal of funding and support from the Lutheran World Federation.

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9 Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 290.


11 Cf. Feuerhahn, “Theologian of the Church”, 19. His relationship with the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod was quite strong, though he encountered quite a bit of hostility from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. His closest kinship was to Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, from which he received an honorary Doctorate of Divinity in 1967.

12 “I accepted the call to Australia to help to unite the two Lutheran bodies of the Missouri and the Löhe-tradition” (Letter of Sasse to Tom Hardt [18 June 1958]).
Boyle: The Ecclesiology of Hermann Sasse

(LWF), which was formed in 1947. As happened in Germany, Sasse once declared himself *in statu confessionis*, “thus he denied himself Communion in his own church, even at Immanuel congregation in North Adelaide.”\(^{13}\) However, on account of Sasse’s instrumental role, in 1966 the merger of the two Lutheran bodies was achieved, forming the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA).

Sasse’s life was marked by great sorrow and much loneliness. He encountered death both on the battlefield in war and at home with the loss of his daughter. He and his wife suffered physically during the war, learning what it meant to be without: often lacking both coal for heat and food for meals. But the physical distresses of a low salary, even a heart attack that he suffered in 1946, were not the primary source of his sorrow. Sasse’s loneliness stemmed from what seemed to be for him a perpetual *Kirchenkampf*: “Many of us are lonely and forsaken: pastors who at lonely posts in areas of the church where today the very things which had been the church’s salvation through the times of the worst apostasy, the Word of the Holy Scriptures and the Sacraments of the Lord, are perishing.”\(^{14}\) This constant struggle marked Sasse as one within the church. According to Luther, life under the sacred cross marks one as a Christian, “They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world and the flesh by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ.”\(^{15}\)

Hermann Sasse’s entire life was deeply intertwined with the life of the church. As it suffered, so did he. That is why one theologian has rightly labelled Sasse “an Ecumenical Churchman.”\(^{16}\) Truly, “the Church’ could serve as a title for his *entire* life and work.”\(^{17}\) Therefore it is the

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\(^{13}\) FEUERHAHN, “Theologian of the Church”, 25. In a letter to Tom Hardt Sasse writes:

> I have been fighting in my own church for the Lutheran faith against the terrific influence of the Lutheran World Federation. Our poor little church has accepted so much assistance from Geneva that we cannot get out. I am in a *statu confessionis* again. My attempts to bring about the union have been in vain, though we have reached an amazing agreement. I am again lonely.

(4 Aug. 1959)

\(^{14}\) SASSE, “The Church at the Turn of the Year [1938]”, in *The Lonely Way*, 1:432.

\(^{15}\) LUTHER, *On the Councils and the Church*, AE 41:164.


\(^{17}\) THOMAS M. WINGER, “The Confessing Church: Catholic and Apostolic”, in *Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times?*, 123.
ecclesiology of this *Churchman* that must be brought to light. In what follows I will focus upon four aspects of Sasse’s ecclesiology: Christological ecclesiology, Sacramental ecclesiology, Confessional ecclesiology, and Ecumenical ecclesiology—all of which are intimately interrelated in Sasse’s thought, thus proving their distinctions somewhat artificial. Nevertheless, the progression from one to the next in logical order coherently tracks with Sasse’s own teaching, especially his ecclesiological work in the 1930s.

### The Essence of the Church

There is no doubt that Sasse’s doctrine of the church is utterly Lutheran. The *Augustana* (Augsburg Confession of 1530) appears regularly throughout his writing. Article VII confesses the church thus:

> Our churches teach that one holy Church is to remain forever. The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered. For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies instituted by men, should be the same everywhere. As Paul says, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.”

This confession shapes all of Sasse’s teaching on the church. Though he did not think it right to speak of “the essence” of the church, for reasons of ecumenical confusion, this confession was for him the answer for which the churches sought. Sasse argued, “Every attempt to define the ‘essence’ of Christianity ends—aside from the fact that hitherto no definition has found universal assent—with a bland, lifeless abstraction.” Abstraction for Sasse is the opposite of truth and accordingly, the opposite of the church, which is not some ideal, but a concrete reality—a reality that “can only be

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19 Cf. Sasse, “Church and Lord’s Supper: An Essay on the Understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar [1938]”, in *The Lonely Way*, 1:373: “No exaggeration lurks in the statement that the basic question facing all theology in all confessions is the essence of the church.”
20 Sasse, “Church and Churches”, 78.
21 Cf. Sasse, “Church and Churches”, 83:

Thus the *media salutis* are at the same time the *notae ecclesiae*, the means of grace are the marks of the church. There are no other marks of the true church than the Word and the Sacrament, and indeed both exist in their
comprehended from the vantage point of faith.” And neither is this faith an abstract faith, but faith grounded in the person of Jesus: “The essence of the church”, therefore, “can only be understood in the light of Christology, and that means only in the light of faith in Christ.”

Sasse proudly defined the church by her marks, as mentioned above in AC VII: the Word and the Sacraments. She is not dependent upon some particular order or governance; nor is she dependent upon man’s faith:

The presence of the church is not dependent upon our faith and profession, but upon the real presence of Jesus Christ: ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia. But Christ is present in the Word of His Gospel even when our human understanding of this Word is partial or false; and He is present in His Sacrament even when we have an imperfect or wrong conception of the Sacrament.

The church depends solely on Christ. The reference from Ignatius sings like a refrain through Sasse’s work: ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia. Any talk of “essence” is always bound to Christ: “That we all, though belonging to entirely different communions, turn ourselves to Him, the one [Redeemer], therein lies the essence of the ecclesia universalis which we seek.” If the church is thus bound christologically, then it follows that she has a body. For Sasse, the imagery is sacramental, through and through. And while both christological and sacramental, this body lives and moves toward its end:

The picture of “body” points to the fact that the church is a living, growing organism. The church of the NT stands not in “being” but in “becoming.” ... The house of God grows; the body of Christ is built. The church “becomes,”

inseparable unity ... Where they are present there is the church ... Wherever in Christendom the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments understood in light of the Gospel are administered, there the church is an empirical reality in this world.

22 Sasse, “Church and Churches”, 82.
25 Sasse, Here We Stand, 182.
26 Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Smyrneans, 8.2.
as the “becoming” church she proceeds toward a state of completion; Christ, “the Saviour of his body” leads her toward completion.

Therefore, the “essence” of the church for Sasse is confessed in the Augustana to be christological, sacramental, and ecumenical, continually calling sinners to receive the absolution offered in the Gospel and respond with the confession of Christ.

**Christological Ecclesiology: I Corinthians 12:27**

The Church is only Church when Christ is Christ. Christology comes first, ecclesiology second: *Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*—with these words every definition of the church must begin. Because there is one Kyrios, there is therefore one church.”

Beginning with Christ, Sasse immediately sets his ecclesiology apart from the Liberalism advocated by Schleiermacher and his progeny. He believes it is wrongheaded to begin from the bottom, the societas, and develop the doctrine of the church upward. On the contrary, he suggests:

Most attempts to define the church, or rather, to describe the church, conceive of the church as a societas, a visible community of people ... But this path has never led to an understanding of the church. For the church is indeed a societas, but it is still something else. No treatment of the church which begins with people, with human communities, with the faith of people, ever leads to that other aspect of the church which the NT describes with the words “body of Christ.”

Sasse was adamant against the sociological approach as a starting point. Certainly the church is comprised of people, a societas, but it is that only secondarily. In fact, what makes the societas a community (Gemeinde) is precisely the body of Christ:

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28 SASSE, “Church and Churches”, 82. Here Sasse and Barth agree: “The Church exists by happening. The Church exists as the event of this gathering together”; KARL BARTH, “The Church: The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ”, in God Here and Now, trans. by Paul M. van Buren, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 62. More work ought to be done in tracking this sort of language to see where it originated. My suspicion is that the philosophical rhetoric of Martin Heidegger is creeping in here: Da-sein.


30 SASSE, “Church and Churches”, 81.
“I in them”—that is the mystery of the communio sanctorum. Again we see how important it is in everything we say about the church that we do not proceed from man, from his faith and his qualities, rather from Christ, from that which he is and does. In this fact of the communio sanctorum the church finds its fulfilment as societas, and here it becomes clear why this societas is at the same time the body of Christ.

But one might ask, “What about the Holy Spirit?” The New Testament surely ascribes much of the church’s life to the Holy Spirit, as do the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Sasse has no disagreement here, for the Holy Spirit’s chief function is to witness to Christ. “Christ and the Holy Spirit belong together”, he argues: “they are not identified but are thought of as coexistent: Ubi Spiritus Sanctus, ibi Christus; ubi Christus, ibi Spiritus Sanctus.”

Furthermore, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the ἐκκλησία is therefore not to be thought of without the real presence of the Crucified and Exalted One. In the light of this presence of the Lord and the Spirit, the church is to be understood: Ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia; ubi Spiritus Sanctus, ibi ecclesia. If one asks about the church, one may not first put the question “Where are the people who belong to the church?” but one must ask, “Where is Christ, where is the Holy Ghost?” And the answer to this can only be this: Christ is really present in the word of the Gospel and in the Sacrament; the Holy Spirit is really given through the Word and the Sacrament. Where the Gospel and the Sacraments are, there people are called into the church, there comes into being the congregation of the saints, that is, of the justified sinners—a community not to be understood by means of sociology.

Hence the Holy Spirit is not denigrated when Sasse defines the church christologically. By being thus defined as the body of Christ, the Corpus Christi, the church necessarily is “full of the Holy Spirit” (Lk 4.1) and, therefore, Trinitarian.

This Christological aspect of Sasse’s ecclesiology comes first not arbitrarily, but as the necessary and logical source of all that follows. From

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31 Sasse, “Church and Churches”, 85.
Christ come the Sacraments, confession, and the petition for unity in the church. “Therefore,” Sasse contends, “the church will remain among us in the future so long as Christ remains with us. ... For the future of the church is the future of Christ ... The presence of Christ is the life of the church.”

Again, this presence is by no means abstract. Christ’s real presence is manifest in the church’s eating and drinking: “For the church, which is the body of Christ, is built on earth when Christ feeds his community which truly believes in him with his true body and blood.”


The Sacraments are the visible manifestations, historically and concretely, of Christ’s real presence on earth. Arguing from Luke’s account of the early church, Sasse insists, “This was the place where the disciples understood the reality of the church for the first time. The nascent church awoke to self-awareness in the celebration of the ‘breaking of bread,’ the ‘Eucharist,’ ”. As a matter of fact, “The church came to understand itself as the body of Christ by means of these words, ‘This is my body’” (Lk. 22:19). While this section will focus particularly upon the Sacrament of the Altar, one should not assume that Sasse neglects Baptism, as the constituent sacrament of incorporation into the Body of Christ; and likewise preaching and absolution. His argument here, though, is primarily concerned with how the existing church lives: “Where the Supper is celebrated, there is the church.”

The Holy Supper is possibly the only locus that contends with the church for the most attention in Sasse’s works. “The pinnacle of this

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35 Sasse, “Theses on the Question of Church and Altar Fellowship [1937]”, in The Lonely Way, 1:337.
39 Notable are his magnum opus, Herman Sasse, This Is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1959); the collection compiled and translated by Norman Nagel in Herman Sasse, We Confess
major focus”, Stephenson proposes, “was attained in the white-hot eloquence of his publications on the Blessed Sacrament between 1938 and 1941.”\(^{40}\) His focus on the Supper is not surprising during these years, for Sasse repeatedly asserted the connection between church and altar fellowship. Having been born, baptized, and ordained into a union church, and being surrounded by talk of “union” both by the Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (DEK) as well as at Barmen, Sasse saw the integrity of the Supper slipping before his very eyes. He was convinced: “No Supper—No Church.”\(^{41}\) Perhaps what set him over the edge was Barth’s indifference toward the doctrinal positions regarding the Supper:

The dispute in the church today, and that concerning which we must “confess,” does not have to do with matters of the Lord’s Supper, but with matters of the First Commandment. In the face of this our need and task, that of the Fathers must recede, that is, there must still be serious opposition between the theological schools, but it must no longer be divisive and schismatic.\(^{42}\)

Barth’s dismissal of the theological baggage between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions as merely “theological schools” infuriated Sasse.\(^{43}\) Four hundred years of church history were collapsed into “theological schools”, and the Supper was relegated to a topic of discussion that “must no longer be divisive and schismatic.”

To counter this Sacramental ambivalence, Sasse rooted the reality of the church in the very act of the Eucharist. He argued, “The supper is necessary for the life of the church, for in the celebration of this Sacrament the church keeps on becoming what, according to God’s will, she is meant to be. Here she becomes visible as church in a totally unique way.”\(^{44}\) The church’s visibility as the body of Christ is manifest in its partaking of the

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\(^{40}\) John Stephenson, “Holy Supper, Holy Church”, in Hermann Sasse: A Man for Our Times? 224-39, 226. He declares, “If permitted to take but one of Sasse’s writings to exile on a desert island, I should pick Church and Lord’s Supper of 1938.”

\(^{41}\) Sasse, “Church and Lord’s Supper”, 422.

\(^{42}\) Karl Barth, Theologische Existenz heute 7 [26 Jan. 1934], 7; cited by Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 288.

\(^{43}\) He exclaims, “It is remarkable that a theologian who is so intelligent and familiar with the Lutheran literature can make this judgment”; Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 299.

\(^{44}\) Sasse, “Church and Lord’s Supper”, 378.
body of Christ. Thus he affirms, “The participation in the body and blood of Christ present in the Lord’s Supper is synonymous with membership in his body.” Thus altar fellowship was no small ordeal for Sasse. It was not merely an argument of former times. Put briefly, the difference between the Lutheran and Reformed position regarding the Supper hinges on the real presence. If Christ is not truly (historically and concretely) present in the Supper—that is, if it is not Jesus Christ’s resurrected body in the hand of the pastor preparing for the distribution—then the Church has no grounds for claiming a real presence either. He summarizes:

Ever since that hour when, in the celebration of the first Supper on the night when He was betrayed, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of the Father, as at once the High Priest and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, distributed His true body and his true blood to his circle of disciples under bread and wine, thereby making them members of His Body and bestowing on them forgiveness of sins along with life and salvation, the heart of the church has been beating in the Lord’s Supper. Even when we do not know it, the heart of the church is still beating today in the Lord’s Supper. If the celebration of the Supper should cease, then the preaching of the Word would be struck dumb, with the result that faith would be quenched, love would grow cold, and hope would die. Where the heart dies, the body dies also. The Church dies with the Supper.46

If this is true, then it is no wonder why Sasse paraded so emphatically the false unions of old as exemplary of what Barth and company were advocating at Barmen. While they touted the Confessing Church as the source of Evangelical life, Sasse perceived the very opposite—indeed, the church’s death. Thus the Holy Supper, which constitutes the church’s life, is the very confession that ought to be discussed, and not dismissed as an argument between “theological schools”. For that reason Sasse links the Supper to right confession: “How inseparably the Holy Supper and the church of Christ belong together and how necessary therefore the correct understanding of the Sacrament of the Altar is for understanding the church.”47

45 Sasse, “Church as Corpus Christi”, 119.
46 Sasse, “Church and Lord’s Supper”, 425. Cf. Sasse, “Why Hold Fast?”, 453: “Holy Communion has been the heartbeat of the church since that hour when the Lord gave his disciples his body and his blood ... That is why there never is and never has been real ‘church’ without the Sacrament. The church came to understand itself as the body of Christ by means of these words, ‘This is my body.’ ”
47 Sasse, “The Lutheran Church and the Constitution”, 468.
Confessional Ecclesiology: Matthew 16:15-19

Feuerhahn notes, “[Sasse] saw a correlation between those who took their confessions seriously and those who took seriously the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” Already noted are Sasse’s unashamed Lutheranism, and confessional Lutheranism at that. His ecclesiology never strays far from AC VII. As seen just above, article X, on the Lord’s Supper, is never far behind: “Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper. They reject those who teach otherwise [improbant secus docentes].” It was especially the last sentence onto which Sasse held tightly: “If the improbant and the damnant (by which is designated the impossibility of church fellowship), which sound so harsh to modern ears is silenced, the Augustana ceases to be confession.” One might then wonder, is that so bad? In fact, that is precisely the conversation held between Sasse and Karl Barth during the second Synod of the Confessing Church:

In an evening session of the Theological Committee of the Second Confessional Synod at Dahlem [in] 1934 the undersigned said to Karl Barth: “You cannot demand of us the abrogation of the Augustana at this moment, when our bishops (Meiser and Wurm) have been robbed of their freedom” [i.e., placed under house arrest by the Nazis]. Barth’s answer was: ‘Why not?’

To give up the Augustana, for Sasse, was to give up Scripture and, therefore, Christ. He argues that the Confessions ought to be confessed because they rightly expound Scripture:

When the norma normata of the confessions tumbles, the norma normans of the Holy Scriptures of necessity falls as well .... What then becomes the norma normans in the place of the Scriptures? “Christ!” comes the answer. But who is “the Christ,” who is to be sought “through the Bible”? We know

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49 Concordia, 61.

50 While improbant is used in AC X and XII, damnant occurs much more frequently: AC I, II, V, VIII, IX, XII, XIII, and XVI-XVIII.


only of the Christ who is to be found in the Bible, because he speaks there, and there alone.  

His loyalty to the *Augustana* was no mere traditionalism—though he is sometimes thus accused—rather, his loyalty was to Christ, to whom the *Augustana* clearly testifies. 

Therefore the unity of Christ and confession follows a top-down pattern. Just as his construction of ecclesiology begins with the person of Jesus, rather than the *societas*, so also does confession originate with the Lord: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). The church’s confession is not, as Schleiermacher supposed, a “voluntary association of men”. It is, rather, the response to revelation. “Thus confession may be described as the *answer to revelation*, and this the revelation which occurred once in history. In her confessions the church gives her answer for all time, the answer of faith in the revelation in Christ.”

The discussion of the church’s confession must begin with Christ; Sasse took very seriously Jesus’ words, “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt. 16:15). Running with Peter’s example, Sasse concludes, “Confession and church belong together.”

But there is a subsequent aspect of confessional ecclesiology. Once it is established that confession is the response to revelation, “To this first characteristic we must add a second: it is always the *response of a fellowship of people*, the expression of a consensus.” That is, confession entails a corporate life. If it were otherwise, to confess the church as a body would either be a blatant lie, or the confession of a severely crippled and self-contradicting body. Because the church’s confession is corporate in nature, and the response to revelation, it should then also be *true*. Feuerhahn affirms, “There is in Sasse’s discussion of the nature and authority of confessions a stress on truth: the confessions of the church

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53 Sasse, “*Quatenus or Quia* [1938]”, in *The Lonely Way*, 1:460.
55 Thus he confesses, “I am of course prepared to surrender any assertion of the confessions or the confessions in their entirety if it be shown to us that the doctrine contained therein is contrary to Scripture”; *Quatenus or Quia*, 459.
separated truth from error.”\textsuperscript{59} Here we return to our discussion at the outset of this section concerning the \textit{improbant} and the \textit{damnant}. These “harsh words” testify that what is confessed must be true and weighty in content. Therefore Sasse asserts, “The moment the church gives its answer to revelation it delimits itself from everything which stands outside of the church. The great task of the confession is the separation of truth and error, of church and that which is not of the church.”\textsuperscript{60} No grey position here—one is either in or out, right or wrong. To be grounded in a confession is to bear concrete witness, to be falsifiable, tested. This was Sasse’s problem with the union. It simultaneously amassed multiple confessions and yet had nothing to confess.

Put briefly, “\textit{The Union is confessionlessness}.”\textsuperscript{61} This was as true for the 19\textsuperscript{th} century unions as it was for the 20\textsuperscript{th}. Sasse repeatedly denounced the DEK for its political existence.\textsuperscript{62} He would lament:

All the brave fighters in the confessional struggles of the last century fought for the content of a definite confession. Where is the definite confession of the “Confessing Church” of the present? For the “confessing attitude” is not a confession. There is no real confession which cannot be confessed \textit{in actu}.\textsuperscript{63}

And so we arrive at the tension alluded to in this paper’s title: Confession or Confessing. Or better, as Sasse puts it: “Confessional Church [\textit{Bekenntniskirche}] or Confessing Church [\textit{Bekennende Kirche}]? Yes, indeed!”\textsuperscript{64} From the force of Sasse’s emphasis upon the former, we might have deduced a different answer; but we must not forget Stephenson’s helpful correction: “Whatever criticism must be made of the existentialist vein in Barth’s understanding of confession, we may not deride the act of confessing.”\textsuperscript{65} Sasse stands in full agreement here. Feuerhahn helpfully

\begin{itemize}
\item[59] SASSE, “Confessionalist and Confessor”, 24.
\item[60] SASSE, “Confession of the Church”, 111.
\item[62] Regarding the formation of the DEK, cf. SASSE, “Union and Confession”, 280: “Thus the constitution of July 11, 1933, came to be, which was so unacceptable that it was as useless as a logarithm table established upon the presupposition that two times two equals five.”
\item[63] SASSE, “Union and Confession”, 286.
\item[65] STEPHENSON, “Holy Supper, Holy Church”, 233.
\end{itemize}
adds: “While for Sasse a confessional church must necessarily be a confessing church, it also must necessarily be both.”

So Sasse:

A church which does not confess its faith before the world, ceases to be the Church of Christ and it arrives at that not only in the act of confessing, but also in its content. The Church must know what it believes, teaches and confesses; and it must make this confession fearlessly before the world.

The conflict between Sasse and his Barthian opponents was not whether or not the church may idly observe the Nazi attack—both ideologically and actually. In fact, “as Sasse often wrote later, he and his confessional Lutheran colleagues were founders of the ‘Confessing Movement!’” Even so, Lowell Green identifies Sasse’s difficulty not merely with the terminology, but with what lay behind it:

The participial construction in the word “confessing” denotes that, in their understanding, confession was the act of confessing something or other, and the content of such confessing could be very general and not at all related to the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessing Church became doctrinaire in a new sense.

Herein lies the heart of a confession: truth, content, substance. Confessing does no good if there is nothing to confess. Yet if there is, do it! Again, Feuerhahn contends, “Any conception of confessions which indeed did not assert the equal importance of the quae with the qua, the objective content with the subjective confessing, was ‘Enthusiasm.’” By this tactic Sasse

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67 Sasse, from Hannover Landeskirche Archiv (Bestand D15/V/Nr.16), 148, cited by Feuerhahn, “Confessionalist and Confessor”, 22.
68 Editor’s introduction to “Union and Confession”, 266.
69 Green, “Sasse’s Relations with His Erlangen Colleagues”, 41.
70 Undoubtedly frustrated in his call to clarity of confession, Sasse pleads:

If you have really come to a new understanding on the basis of the Scriptures, formulate it! Don’t just talk about it, formulate it! For confessions are nothing other than formulations of the understanding of Scripture. If you really believe you have come to some new understanding of the Lord’s Supper which supersedes the doctrines of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, then formulate it in clear language, as did the catechisms of the time of the Reformation. (Sasse, “Union and Confession, 299.)

71 Feuerhahn, “Confessionalist and Confessor”, 23.
unmasks the nakedness of both the unions of old and Barth’s Confessing Church.\(^{72}\)

The move now from a confessional to an ecumenical ecclesiology is unique in Sasse. His foundation for a confessional ecclesiology is the notion of truth. However, as said above, when confession takes place, truth must separate from error. This appears to be the greatest stumbling block for the ecumenical movement—seeking unity where the truth is not its foundation. Yet it is precisely the unified confession of the truth that Sasse considers the greatest and first ecumenical step. Confession firmly believed to be true is necessarily ecumenical:

Lutheran Confessionalism ... does not look always into the past, but it looks into the future, not only upon itself, but upon all of Christendom. It is always catholic and always ecumenical: catholic in the sense that it holds fast to the genuine catholicity of the Church of Christ in space and time, just as the Book of Concord does when it begins with the *tria symbola catholica seu oecumenica*, and concludes with a view to the coming generations until Judgement Day. Ecumenical, not in the sense of a superficial unionism, but in the sense of the faith in the *Una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura*, of which the ecumenical programme speaks, which inheres in the seventh article of the *Augustana*.\(^ {73}\)

**Ecumenical Ecclesiology: John 17:17-21**

The ecumenical movement is founded on Christ’s petition to the Father for unity. For this reason, Sasse was thoroughly involved, already at the Faith and Order meeting in Lausanne (1927),\(^ {74}\) but even at Bethel, Barmen, and Dahlem. Germany in the 1930s provided fertile soil for the ecumenical spirit: “Times of fanatic hopes and plans for a ‘church of the future,’ in

\(^{72}\) Cf. Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 298: “When it comes to serious confessing, the Union is struck dumb. There is no *Union confession*, or more correctly, there are so many varying confessions that none of them is taken seriously and viewed as a real confession.”


\(^{74}\) Feuerhahn notes, “At Lausanne, Sasse found that the church’s confession could also have a positive, unitive role. For it was there recognized that a real union of the churches would only be possible if oneness in the creed of Nicaea is presupposed”; Feuerhahn “Confessionalist and Confessor”, 27.
which the unification of the denominations [Bekenntnisse] is brought about, always coincide with times of great national and political excitement.” Though stated somewhat dismissively, Sasse actively engaged this “fanatic hope”. The alternative, again, was to sit idly by as the “political excitement” destroyed the church. And so he called all to arms, Lutheran and Reformed alike:

And in the meantime it would be good for those of us who uphold the confession of the fathers, whether Lutheran or Reformed, to join together in a federation [Bund]. We will fight shoulder to shoulder for the right of existence of the Evangelical churches born of the Reformation and against the truthlessness of the nineteenth century “religion in which we all agree.”

Sasse’s careful rhetoric should be well noted: Bund, not Union. Though he truly had an ecumenical impetus, Sasse’s involvement after 1934 (Barmen) was hesitant. He was convinced that if Barmen remained a Declaration and not a Confession, Lutheran and Reformed could (and should!) joyfully gather and fight for their own existence as Evangelical churches. On the other hand, if its propaganda continued with the rhetoric of confession, as Barth’s followers reported, and this was believed, then unity would break, confession would be forfeited, and Christ and His Supper would be lost. Union does not create unity.

This was the “lie” that Sasse traced through the history of German unions in his essay, “Union and Confession”. While the apparent goal of uniting two church bodies is to form one, such never materializes so cleanly. He argues, “Every false attempt to unify Christianity has had to bear the curse that, in spite of all the good intentions, disunity has only increased.” Rather than one out of two, a third, tertium quid, is formed—

75 Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 279.
76 Sasse, “Confessional Unrepentance?”, 256.
77 Cf. Sasse, “The Barmen Declaration—An Ecumenical Confession? [1937]”, in The Lonely Way, 1:347-48: “Irresponsible fanatics [Schwärmgeister], however, have since proclaimed this declaration a confession, binding the Lutheran and Reformed churches ... This mischief is even today taught in the theological periodical of the German Barthians’ Evangelische Theologie. Karl Barth himself has not found it necessary to remove such assertions.”
78 “For the lie of the false Union is the curse which for more than a century has rested upon the Evangelical Church of our country and poisoned her life”; Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 290.
79 Sasse, “Confessional Unrepentance?”, 251.
moreover, within that third dissension and strife rule the day: there will always be those within the union who favour their historic descent just enough to fuel further disunity. As a matter of fact, Sasse defended a greater unity amongst the churches while they remained separate, and fully confessional.  

Then if the unions, at least historically, only result in disunity, what hope has the Ecumenical Movement? Sasse would suggest that its hope lies precisely in its truthful confession of Christ: “It is the plain teaching of the New Testament that the true unity of the church is unity in the truth.”\(^{81}\) His constant argument against the ecumenists of the day was that they would only quote Jesus’ petition of John 17 in part; Feuerhahn reaffirms, “The petition, Sanctifica eos in veritate (v. 17), is the indispensible foundation for the petition ut omnes unum sint (v. 21).”\(^{82}\) To separate the two lands one in abstraction: either truth or unity.

So if the goal of unity is for all Christians to join in confessing against the powers and principalities of this world, standing together as one Body under one Lord, constituted by one Baptism, then there must also be one faith—that is, one confession declared in consensus as a response to the revelation of the one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-5). Thus unity must be based on the reality of concrete truth: confession, Supper, Christ. The connection between these Sasse saw as the source of unity:

The two truths which are inseparably conjoined in the doctrine of the church are set forth in this article [AC VII]. The first truth is the belief in the una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura, in the one, holy church which has been given the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. The second truth is the conviction that, in the church militant on earth, the realization of church unity is dependent upon agreement in the generally received truth of the pure Gospel.\(^{83}\)

Unity can be realized in no other way. While AC VII proclaims, “For the true unity of the Church it is enough [satis est] to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel—”\(^{84}\) it is at least that; and this is what was at stake. Those leading talks at Barmen, and what would, after the War, become the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD), wanted to find unity some other

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\(^{80}\) **SASSE**, “Union and Confession”, 272.

\(^{81}\) **SASSE**, “Church and Churches”, 86.

\(^{82}\) **FEUERHAHN**, “Confessionalist and Confessor”, 29.

\(^{83}\) **SASSE**, *Here We Stand*, 186.

\(^{84}\) *Concordia*, 60, emphasis mine.
way apart from this basic unity confessed in the truth of the Gospel. Summarizing, Sasse declared:

There is unity in the church when it has one Lord, the Christ who is really present in His Word and Sacrament. This unity can become manifest in the historical church, however, only when we agree in our profession of faith in this one Lord and in the one truth of the Gospel. The unity of the historical church is not achieved through conformity in rites and ceremonies, nor through identical organization and life-patterns, nor even through uniformity in theological thought-forms and opinions. Such unity is only achieved when, in the joyful assurance of our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, we are one in our understanding of what His saving Gospel is, and one in our understanding of what He gives us in His Sacraments.

Sasse ties all of the above together, confessing the church first christologically, then sacramentally, confessionally, and ecumenically. But, as John Wilch soberly reflects, “Perhaps Sasse should have realized that already in his own day unionism was more important for most Lutherans than the Confessions.”

**Historical Consequences**

This paper began by asserting that Sasse’s ecclesiology is the proper doctrine of the church necessary to combat the false unionism in Nazi Germany of the 1930s as well as today. Understandably, one is right to ask the historical question, “How was his ecclesiology received?” The test of his ecclesiology is best seen against the backdrop of two historical situations (Bethel and Barmen) and two notable figures (Bonhoeffer and Barth).

**Sasse and Bonhoeffer at Bethel**

The chief question at hand—indeed, the question that prompted this paper, but deserves a dissertation to answer—is how two confessional Lutherans parted ways at the height of the church’s engagement with Hitler’s National Socialism. These two men, who crafted “one of the most pointed condemnations yet of the Nazi ideology”, could not unite in their attack

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85 Sasse, Here We Stand, 186-87.
86 Wilch, 66.
of the same just a couple of years later. From one perspective, it was Sasse’s militant confessionalism. From another, it was Bonhoeffer’s enthusiasm. Sasse chose “confession” over the “confessionlessness” of the “confessing” movement because he recognized that he would, inevitably, be forced to abandon the Augsburg Confession. Bonhoeffer sensed an urgency that required desperate measures. Either way, Sasse and Bonhoeffer shared a similar desire to combat Nazi ideology, especially the false church of the DEK. However, where they differ is the difference between union and federation [Bund]. Sasse would not have a church “confession”, such as derived at Barmen, on the basis of a false union, where true unity did not exist. It is interesting to note the language each uses when speaking of the events of Barmen. We’ve already heard much from Sasse; Bonhoeffer differs substantially: for example, “The Confessing Church is the true church of Jesus Christ in Germany.”

Bonhoeffer adamantly defended the Confessing Church: “Whoever knowingly cut themselves off from the Confessing Church in Germany cut themselves off from salvation.” That is to say, the true Church of Christ is marked neither by confession, nor truth, nor even the concrete presence of Jesus Christ in word or Sacrament, but rather by the abstract theory and act of “confessing”. To this very article Sasse responded: “This is pure Schwärmertum, which ends in blasphemy.”

At least in their early years at Bethel each impressed the other. The story is intriguing because it is so little known. When the DEK formed in

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89 BONHOEFFER, 166.

Bonhoeffer’s earlier delight at his discovery of Sasse’s resistance and the view he held sprang not from ecclesial conservatism, but from a new relationship to the Confession, had, of course, given way to profound disagreement over the assessment of the function and dignity of historical confessions. Sasse, for his part, had come to see Bonhoeffer as an “enthusiast” because the latter credited the living event of communal, actual confessing with so much power that antitheses dividing churches dwindled to antitheses dividing schools.

91 In fact, it was Sasse who urged Bonhoeffer to take the call to London, for “I saw in him one of Germany’s best theologians and did not want to see him go under in the petty
1933, the Young Reformation Movement (Jungreformatorische Bewegung) immediately fashioned itself in opposition to this threat. In August 1933, “[Friedrich von] Bodelschwingh, at the suggestion of Berlin, invited ‘a small group of younger theologians’ to Bethel ... to work out together in the seclusion of the Bodelschwingh Institutes a ‘modern confession of faith.’”93 What these men produced, chiefly Sasse and Bonhoeffer, is “in retrospect, viewed as one of the most pointed condemnations yet of the Nazi ideology that had invaded and threatened to conquer the Christian churches of Germany.”94 Moreover, not only was it firm in its attack on Nazism, it was also utterly Lutheran: “The original version of the Bethel confession remains a brilliant, sharp and impressive witness to what theological work was still capable of achieving in summer 1933. It was and loaded with numerous passages from the Bible, from Luther, and above all from confessional texts.”95 Scholder even asserts, “this confession was nevertheless theologically and politically clearer and more exact in some passages than the famous Barmen declaration of May 1934.”96 That said, the sad history of this fine confession is that Bodelschwingh, seeking to confirm this as a church confession,97 distributed the work to a much broader and ecumenical group than either Sasse or Bonhoeffer knew: included are Karl Barth, Karl Heim and Adolf Schlatter, each dismantling the confession in one way or another. Barth, for example, “[questioned] ... as to whether a Lutheran confession was enough for the present.”98 When it was all said and done, neither Sasse nor Bonhoeffer recognized their work—they declined to sign it. Bethel proved Sasse’s ecclesiology to be a war against the Gestapo and Rosenberg”; quoted by WILCH, 85. Guy Carter notes their co-involvement in the periodical Forward March! (79).

92 Hence Guy Carter’s thesis. He argues, “Regardless of the fact that the Bethel Confession of August 1933 was effectively suppressed without ever playing a discernible role in the course of events, it has an integrity and an enduring value of its own .... It deserves to be taken seriously as part of the most important legacy of the German church struggle” (xi).

93 SCHOLDER, 1:456.
94 A Testament to Freedom, 128.
95 SCHOLDER, 1:456.
96 SCHOLDER, 1:456.
97 Cf. SCHOLDER, 1:458: “From the beginning the Bethel Confession was not intended as a private theological work, but as a draft for a modern confession by the church. However, there was not yet a synod which could have accepted and endorsed it.”
98 SCHOLDER, 1:458, emphasis mine.
ecumenically minded, yet confessionally based—and, in 1933, Bonhoeffer was right there with him. But Bethel abandoned Sasse, nonetheless.

**Sasse and Barth at Barmen**

Sasse respected Barth’s theological acumen as well as the sheer breadth of his influence. There is no secret, however, that they disagreed ecclesiologically—especially concerning the “union”. Sasse cheekily writes, “Karl Barth, who now has ‘out Prussianed’ us native Prussians has become the champion of the idea of the Union.” The emphasis upon the union was based on the existential notion of confessing: “The act of confessing is more important than the content.” This misunderstanding of what it means to confess demonstrates an ignorance of the Lutheran heritage, which led Sasse to question Barth’s involvement with the German churches in the first place:

> The demands which he placed before us were the demands of a man who believed himself called to reform our church, a church to which he does not even belong, in which he holds no office, which he finally does not understand, and which he has apparently not seriously been at pains to understand.

Just as Bethel meaningfully associated Sasse with Bonhoeffer, so also Barmen linked Sasse to Karl Barth. Sasse’s relationship with both Barmen and Barth might best be described as dutiful rather than joyful. Happy to attend the conference and aid the Confessing Movement in opposing the false ideology of Nazism, Sasse quickly learned that more was at stake.

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99 Cf. Sasse, “Union and Confession”, 284:

> For the Lutheran Church will ever thankfully acknowledge what Karl Barth did to rouse a sleeping Christianity. She will also learn from him that which she can, just as she has also happily learned what the great theologians of the Orthodox, the Medieval Roman, the Anglican, and the Reformed churches have taught of real Christian truth. But just as she has not taken over all of Tertullian nor all of Augustine, so must she also decidedly reject the error of Barth (for instance, his false doctrine of the relationship between Law and Gospel and his false concept of faith).

100 Sasse, “Confessional Unrepentance?”, 262.

101 Feuerhahn, “Hermann Sasse (1895-1976): A Biographical Sketch”, in The Lonely Way, 1:17. He calls this “Barth’s slogan.” In a letter from Sasse to Leiv Aalen (21 June 1974), he confirms, “[Barth] developed since 1925 a concept of the confession in which the actual act of confession was dominant and overshadowed the doctrinal content of the confessions.”

102 Sasse, “Confessional Unrepentance?”, 263.
here. Interestingly, though Sasse served on the committee, along with Barth, Hans Asmussen, and Thomas Breit, he says very little about the actual document. At most, he speaks highly of what is said, if left as a declaration. The joint voices of Lutheran and Reformed could agree with this document, because its rhetoric intentionally allowed each tradition to understand the statements slightly differently, retaining the historic confession of each. Sasse reflects, “The confession was only accepted because most of the delegates did not understand it as an ecclesiastical confession. It was accepted without contradiction only because the order of business and the proceedings made it impossible for dissent to be expressed before the plenary.” Nevertheless the confession had quite a backing, perhaps more extensive than even Barth would have supposed! It was touted as the ecumenical confession, around which Christians around the world, from Great Britain to Canada, would base their own

103 Cf. GREEN, Lutherans Against Hitler, 179.

104 A more contemporary comparison of a similar feat is the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church (1997). Ambivalence in definitions on top of “equivocations [which] are possible, or perhaps even wanted” in the application of Scriptural proofs summarize Gottfried Martens critique of the document GOTTFRIED MARTENS, “Agreement and Disagreement on Justification by Faith Alone”, Concordia Theological Quarterly 65.3 (2001):195-223.

105 SASSE, “The Barmen Declaration”, 348-49. To be noted, however, the Erlangen faculty rejected the declaration at its inception; cf. WERNER ELERT, “Confessio Barmensis”, Allgemeine evangelisch-lutherische Kirchenzeitung (June 1934), for a complete analysis.

106 Though Sasse notes,

For if that declaration [Barmen] is a confession, then it is a typically Reformed confession, a confession which indeed contains single correct statements—as in fact all Reformed confessions also contain truths to which we gladly assent—but that as a whole is not acceptable because it serves to mask the differences and to bypass the issue of truth, thereby opening the door to the enthusiasts. (SASSE, “Confession and Confessing: Lessons from Five Years of the Church Struggle [1937]”, in The Lonely Way, 1:345.)

107 Cf. SASSE, “The Barmen Declaration”, 348, wherein he cites the British Weekly (22 Apr. 1937). Furthermore, Sasse quotes Arthur G. Cochrane of Edinburgh from the Reformierte Kirchenzeitung, 22 Apr. 1937:

The meaning and force of the Barmen Confession of Faith crosses the boundaries of the German Evangelical Church. When Luther had accomplished his act of confession, the Ninety-five Theses, the effect exceeded the sphere of his little congregation. Likewise, the Barmen Confession means not only a distinguishing of spirits in the German Evangelical Church, rather it appeals for a distinguishing of spirits in all of Christianity!
union work. And while Bonhoeffer was persuaded from his confessional Lutheran heritage to declare, “God spoke at Barmen”, Sasse incessantly rejected the entire synod as Schwärmertum!

Sasse rejected Barmen on principle—theological principle, no doubt, but principle nonetheless. The push for union was a breach of authority. Only the Lutheran bishops in synod could require doctrinal allegiance, over and above the Scriptures and Confessions. Yet, this is exactly what Barmen proposed, to enact a union between Lutheran, Reformed, and United. Perhaps they had the proper authority to call for a unified declaration, a political allegiance of Christians against the onslaught of the German Christians, but not a “confession”. Hence Sasse declares, “Our preparedness to fight shoulder to shoulder against common enemies can never lead to our allowing those with whom we have confessional disagreement to render doctrinal decisions which are binding on our church.”

Sasse fortunately garnered the good favour of his bishop, Meiser, who—though thoroughly involved both personally and by encouraging the assistance of Sasse—in the end rejected the confession for the churches in the Bavarian Church. In the meantime, the pressure even from the Lutherans to accept the “confession” was pervasive; therefore Sasse boldly stated,

As a Lutheran theologian, as a member of the confessional fellowship of my territorial church, and as a participant of the Barmen Synod, I object to this assertion: “He who today, as Lutheran or Reformed, actually desires to confess the confession of his church can no longer ignore the doctrinal decision of Barmen. When the Theological Declaration of Barmen is not recognized, the confessions of the Reformation are in truth surrendered.” I declare, to the contrary: He who recognizes the Theological Declaration of Barmen as a doctrinal decision has thereby surrendered the Augsburg Confession and with it the confession of the orthodox Evangelical Church.

Thus Barmen became the barrier between Confessional orthodoxy on the one hand, and enthusiasm on the other. On each side of the confession were those declaring, “Here is the Church!”

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108 Sasse anticipated Barmen’s full support from the Reformed World Federation, which was to take place next in Montreal.
109 Sasse, “Against Fanaticism”, 308.
Conclusion

If Sasse’s ecclesiology fared poorly in his day, what makes us think it stands a chance today? In all honesty, it probably will not fare any better. The ecumenical movement still actively unites communions, though in many respects they bear resemblances to what might better be called federations. The largest such movement, the World Council of Churches (WCC), describes itself as a “fellowship of churches” with the common goal of visible unity. Since the Toronto Statement, adopted in 1950, it purports to allow each tradition to remain uniquely its own (both structurally and theologically), yet still serve a common purpose. Nevertheless, despite the Toronto Statement’s careful disclaimer, altar and pulpit fellowship has often ensued, which is expected based on its goal for visible unity. While many might argue that there is true unity at the heart of the unions formed within the WCC, the reality is, more often than not, that there continues to be union despite doctrinal disunity. Sasse’s ecclesiology is not welcome where this is of no concern—not only because it is ostensibly Lutheran, but also because his foundation for unity lies not in any common act or purpose, but in the confession of Christ—or better, in the right teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments (AC VII). He admits, “I believed strongly that the future of Christianity in Germany and in the world depended on those churches which still dared to confess their dogma.” Thus he forces “an unhelpful question”, namely, “which Gospel is the right Gospel?”

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112 LESSLIE NEWBIGGIN, The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of Church (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), rightly chastises such federations, “The disastrous error of the idea of federation is that it offers us reunion without repentance” (22). This is not what Sasse meant by “federation” [Bund]. A federation for Sasse was not a church union of any sort, but an alliance for a common social cause—e.g., the Faith and Work movement out of Lausanne or the intended work out of Bethel.

113 Note well the statement made by the Harare assembly (1998):

The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.


But perhaps this question raised by Sasse should not entirely fall on deaf ears. Having been ignored at great length in the many unions of history, today’s ecclesiological concerns pertain to the opposite, yet correlate problem of unionizing: schism. Sasse demonstrated the logical connection between the two by showing that the unions of old have always brought greater disunity. The evidence today mounts more and more. On the American scene alone there are over 35 Lutheran Church bodies. Schism continues because unity, though often desired, rarely actually exists apart from unity in doctrinal confession. Neither structure nor polity, neither liberal (or conservative!) agendas nor shared missional goals, will ever achieve unity—indeed, the unions, alliances, federations, and councils that form function as masks that veil true disunity. Even among the German Lutherans in the 1930s and ’40s, Sasse concluded: “The deepest cause for the failure of the German church conflict is none other but that everyone always spoke about the Confessions, appealed to them, but knew them too little.”

Perhaps which Gospel—similarly, which Church—as unhelpful as some suppose it to be, is precisely the question that needs to be asked, though not from the periphery, but from its fundamental, doctrinal core.

As long as the church suffers from such schism, Sasse’s call to confessional adherence provides at least another option. The church has tried the union card repeatedly, resulting in an embarrassing witness to the truth. While the denominationalism that we take for granted is surely a sinful result of our unfaithfulness, the answer is not to forge our way ahead and fix it. The only remedy can come from above; for this Jesus prayed (John 17). And while Sasse would call all, at least the Lutherans for now, to return to the confessions of 1580, it is not for the sake of mere traditionalism. “We are faithful to this church”, he says, “not because it is the church of our Fathers, but because it is the church of the Gospel; not because it is the church of Luther, but because it is the church of Jesus Christ.” And if that is true, Sasse asserts, then there is no greater

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116 For example, the recent fracturing of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has led to a new denomination in the shape of the North American Lutheran Church. Similarly, the recent creation by the Vatican of “Ordinariates” for disaffected Anglicans in England and North America has not broadened the scope of Christian unity, but has simply transferred a small number of Anglicans from the communion of Canterbury into full fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church.


118 Sasse, Here We Stand, 180.
ecumenical springboard than the confessions: “Since this is the character of Lutheran Confessionalism, it is in harmony with the breadth of genuine ecumenical feeling.”

Therefore, if we heed Sasse’s call to Confessionalism, we must get the order right. The proper goal of the ecumenical movement ought to be unity on the basis of truth. That truth is expressed in the faithful confession of Christ as He is revealed in both the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. Such a confession manifests itself in fellowship at the altar. When unity is had at the altar, as a result of common confession, then unity abides in Christ. Where unity is broken, confessions split, and the Sacrament is no longer practised, Christ is lost. Sasse affirms, “Where Jesus Christ no longer himself speaks to us in the Holy Supper the Gospel ‘given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ the message of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world necessarily fades away.”

So it is that all four of these aspects begin their manifestation in a practical manner with the words: Kyrie eleison! This is no simple matter. As Sasse humbly affirms: “We live only from repentance. Only as we continuously repent can we live. Just as Christianity once began as a powerful repentance movement, all great epochs of the church have begun with the call to repent.”

We get Jesus right, are bound to him and one another in the Supper, and rightly confess the Gospel when we acknowledge who we are in relation to Jesus as the forgiver of sins. Then, and only then, do we begin to witness unity. Therefore, Sasse pleads, “Let us again become confessional Lutherans for the sake of the unity of the church.”

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119 Sasse, Here We Stand, 180.
120 Sasse, “Church and Lord’s Supper”, 421.
121 Sasse, “Where Christ Is, There Is the Church”, 71.
Choosing Hell: A Lutheran View of Free Will
James E. Keller

The existence of hell is, for most Christians, an article of faith. Scripture and tradition leave little ambiguity with regard to a place of eternal anguish, one that is populated by those that have made a free, conscious choice for separation from God. Hell is an existential reality even among Christian universalists, who maintain that despite the certainty of hell, all persons will experience salvation due to the irresistible and gracious will of God.1 The point at issue is free will. Universalists view the freedom of “choice” for hell over heaven as logically incoherent. How, they argue, can persons who repent under the duress of some forcibly imposed punishment be said to have made the choice freely? Opponents of universalism respond that some persons choose to be irrational and dispute even basic laws of logic. Scripture and experience point to continued human rebellion in the face of punishment or threats of punishment.2

I maintain that the universalist position is fatally flawed, since it erroneously states the person who is liberated from ignorance will choose God’s gracious offer of salvation infallibly. Philosophers refer to the distinction between compatibilist freedom and libertarian freedom. A choice made in a compatibilist sense is made on the basis of judgements about what is best, independent of coercion. Choices of this kind are compatible with choices determined by prior conditions, and thus could not have been otherwise. Libertarian free choices, conversely, are such only if it is possible for the person to have chosen otherwise. For universalists, the only choice available to them comes from the libertarian position. Ironically, and contrary to their assumptions, they could not have done otherwise than to accept God’s offer of salvation, since they could not make a free, libertarian decision. In this paper I will examine the work of the Christian universalist Thomas Talbott in some detail, offer a critique of his libertarian free will position, and then present a logical alternative, namely the Lutheran compatibilist theory.


Free Will and Universalism: Thomas Talbott

Thomas Talbott has offered a cogent apology for Christian universalism. He begins his treatment by asserting that God’s primary directive in the world is redeeming sinners, reconciling to Himself those that have fallen into the grip of moral corruption. Most, if not all, Christians share Talbott’s view. The differences, however, are found over the relative success of God’s salvific endeavour. Talbott organizes his thinking using a set of three propositions:

1. It is God’s redemptive purpose for the world (and therefore his will) to reconcile all sinners to himself;
2. It is within God’s power to achieve his redemptive purposes for the world;
3. Some sinners will never be reconciled to God, and God will therefore either consign them to a place of eternal punishment, from which there be no hope of escape, or put them out of existence altogether.

Regardless of theological convictions, at least one of the propositions must be false. Moreover, each of the propositions appears to have some degree of Scriptural support. In defence of Proposition 1 one draws attention to those passages that speak clearly of God’s gracious desire to reconcile all persons without exception, and that failure would be a tragic defeat on His part (II Pet. 3:9; I Tim. 2:4; Rom. 11:32; Ezek. 33:11; Lam. 3:22, 31-33). Proposition 2 is supported by those texts which imply that God is able to accomplish all of His divine purposes, subsume all things under Christ, and by this same Christ gain acquittal and life for all who trust in Him (Eph. 1:11; Job 42:2; Ps. 115:3; Is. 46:10; I Cor. 15:27-28; Col. 1:20; Rom. 5:18). Lastly, Proposition 3 is underlined by Scripture that implies that at least some persons are lost and will be forever separated from God in hell (Matt. 25:46; Eph. 5:5; II Thess. 1:9). That each proposition has biblical support means that none of them may be discounted due to poor textual attestation, and thus at least one of them must be false.

This paradigm leads Talbott to conclude that much can be known about various Christian theologies by examining which propositions they finally reject. A theologian can show affinity for two of the propositions, but

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3 John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 11-34.
5 Talbott, 43-56.
ignore or equivocate on the third. Another may be perfectly comfortable with propositions 1 and 2, and maddeningly circumspect on proposition 3, averring that the ultimate fate of the wicked is an outcome that is known to the Heavenly Father alone. Still another may reject proposition 1—God seeks to reconcile all sinners without exception to Himself—outright, while making a concerted effort to prove that God possesses not only the desire to save, but also that He, in some clandestine manner, offers salvation to everyone.6

Talbott identifies three distinct schools of modern Christian thought whose tenets require special attention. The Augustinians (who some have deemed Calvinists) are perfectly accepting of propositions 2 and 3, but in the end reject the idea of proposition 1, God’s desire to save all of humankind. The Arminians, named for Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who opposed the Calvinist doctrines of limited atonement and (double) predestination, reject proposition 2. Universalists, those that believe all persons are eternal recipients of the grace of God, reject proposition 3 because they accept without reservation propositions 1 and 2.

Consideration of the propositions brings into focus the seeming futility of debate from differing theological frameworks. For example, for Arminians and universalists, the Augustinians are ignoring the clear Biblical teaching that God wills the salvation of all persons. To Augustinians and universalists, the Arminians have come to the false conclusion that God is not almighty and thus some of His divine redemptive purposes can be contravened. Lastly, Arminians’ and Augustinians’ claim against universalism is the latter’s rejection of the plain meaning of Scripture concerning the existence and irrefutable nature of eternal punishment in hell.

Is Christian universalism a heretical position? Talbott responds by claiming that Arminians, Augustinians and universalists each may claim the support of Scripture for their respective positions. How then, Talbott wonders, could universalism be deemed heretical if it enjoys Biblical attestation similar to others?

If it is not heretical for the Arminians to believe that God, being unlimited in love, at least wills (or sincerely desires) the salvation of all (proposition (1)), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well? And if it is not heretical for the Augustinians to believe that God, being

almighty, will in the end accomplish all of his redemptive purposes (proposition (2)), why should it be heretical for the universalists to believe this as well? And finally, if it is not heretical to accept proposition (1), as the Arminians do, and not heretical to accept proposition (2), as the Augustinians do, why should it be heretical to accept both (1) and (2)?

These considerations lead Talbott to pose a second question to those who would deny his universalist doctrine. Talbott raises the case of the evangelical Christian mother whose son is found guilty of several grisly murders and is sentenced to death for his crimes. The mother is asked if she still supports her son, given the monster he has become. The mother is shocked by the question: “Of course I still support him. He is my son. I love him. I have to support him!” The mother in no way condones her son’s violent, anti-social behaviour, or objects even to the pronouncement of capital punishment. Yet she continues not only to support her son in every way possible, but also to hope for his ultimate reconciliation with God. Talbott asks the poignant question: “How could God’s grace possibly reach this suffering mother unless it should also find a way to reach (or transform) her son?”

Holy Scripture describes heaven as the place where God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). It is also a place where there is no more pain, sorrow, suffering or death. Those in heaven will have no worries. So, Talbott wonders, how could someone fully enjoy the blessings of heaven with the knowledge that one or more of their loved ones are suffering eternally in hell? If human beings are to love their neighbour as they love themselves, then they could not remain unaffected by a family member or friend coming to a bad end. Talbott is unconvinced by what he deems a “standard” Christian response, that God in His mercy obliterates all knowledge of lost persons from memory so that the heaven-bound need not suffer worry and thereby lose their perfect, future happiness. For Talbott, this assertion of admittedly well-meaning Christians is diametrically opposed to the assurance of Jesus Christ that in the Resurrection we shall “know the truth, and the truth will set us free” (Jn 8:32).

7 Talbott, “Towards a Better Understanding of Universalism”, 11.
9 Talbott, “Christ Victorious”, 16.
10 Talbott, The Inescapable Love of God, 81-106.
The upshot of Talbott’s considerations is his bold contention that if Augustinianism or Arminianism is accepted, then the only logical conclusion is that those that spend eternity in hell must have made a conscious choice to end up there. Talbott’s uncritical understanding of God’s love for humankind is crucial here. In Talbott’s opinion, if God is shown to love all persons deeply and consistently, the view that one may “choose” to reside in hell eternally is incoherent. For one to choose hell the choice must be fully informed and without ambiguity, the person must attain what he or she desires, and as a result must never, at any time in the future, regret the choice. In other words, the chooser must be free from ignorance and delusion at the time the choice is made and for ever afterward. “Talbott thinks there is an obvious and important asymmetry between choosing fellowship with God as an eternal destiny, on the one hand, and choosing hell as an eternal destiny, on the other. Whereas the first of these obviously is possible, the latter is not.”

That one should “prefer” forcibly imposed, eternal punishment, and freely choose it without coercion, is, for Talbott, unconscionable. “For how could a decision to live apart from God survive without regret a full disclosure of truth about the chosen destiny?” Talbott suggests that the prospect of spending eternity in a place of such malignant suffering, particularly if it could be avoided simply by exercising a different choice, would cause even the most recalcitrant sinner to repent and “believe”. Moreover, such a choice for God would do nothing to alter the status of their free will. All sinners, by virtue of their desire to avoid eternal torment, must in the end renounce their selfishness and happily accept God’s free offer of everlasting bliss.

When he has been asked to defend his position Talbott has argued that the choices to which he refers are free in the libertarian interpretation of freedom. There are several key claims that must be perceived and understood:

1. A person S performs an action A freely at some time t only if it should also be within S’s power at t to refrain from A at t, and

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2. It is within S’s power at \( t \) to refrain from \( A \) at \( t \) only if refraining from \( A \) at \( t \) is psychologically possible for \( S \) at \( t \).\(^{13}\)

Here we find Talbott expressing reservations over unlimited libertarian freedom. There is no necessary connection between possessing the power to accomplish something and being psychologically capable of it at the same instant. Augustine contended that the redeemed in heaven are no longer tempted to do what is evil in the sight of God.\(^{14}\) They see with unflinching clarity that God is the source of their happiness and joy, and sin is the nexus of all that is miserable and deadly. Thus the “choice” for hell is no longer a psychological possibility for them. But, Talbott continues, it does not follow that the redeemed no longer possess the power to sin—it has simply become psychologically unfeasible.\(^{15}\)

So imagine now a person \( S \) in a state of prolonged misery or suffering or sadness, such as one might experience in hell as traditionally conceived; imagine also that \( S \) knows all the relevant facts about the source of \( S \)’s own misery. Given that all of \( S \)’s ignorance has now been removed and all of \( S \)’s illusions have finally been shattered, what possible motive might remain for embracing such eternal misery freely?\(^{16}\)

**Responding to Talbott’s Universalism**

It must be allowed that Talbott’s arguments are cogent and relatively compelling. He has single-handedly advanced interest and scholarship pertaining to eternal salvation or damnation. Talbott’s primary directive is not the overthrow of historic Christianity, but rather a reformulation of doctrine which grants primacy to God’s gracious will to bring about the salvation of all persons. This is a laudable goal, particularly because he does not simply assert that all will be saved, but rather offers a methodological summary of how such universal salvation might be accomplished. Nevertheless, Talbott cannot be credited with an unimpeachable thesis, as the following critique will show.

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\(^{13}\) Talbott, “Freedom, Damnation and the Power to Sin with Impunity”, 426.


\(^{16}\) Talbott, “Freedom, Damnation, and the Power to Sin with Impunity”, 423.
Talbott may be best described as a “free will libertarian”. As such, he is correct to assert that God intends to bring all persons into eternal union with Himself, and never predestines persons to Hell, which is the erroneous Calvinist doctrine of “double predestination”. Talbott’s universalism is diametrically opposed to the aptly named “restrictivism”, which contends that salvation is restricted to those that hear the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and accept it by faith during their lifetimes. Restrictivism implies that the majority of persons are headed to damnation, and severely limits God’s expressions of love directed to them. Given that restrictivism makes salvation extremely difficult to attain, universalism is a more attractive option for the evangelically-minded.

Talbott’s programme, however, is not without error. Talbott challenges the notion that the redeemed in heaven will not be concerned with family members and friends suffering in hell. John Sanders, writing in response to Talbott’s universalism, grants that the various human relationships he has nurtured are deeply connected to his identity. He wonders what, for example, “God may have to do in heaven to my memory of my life with my wife.”

If God can accomplish individual salvation, why can He not bring about salvation universally, particularly in the case of the loved one of a member of the elect? The trouble with this view is that the grief experienced by the eternal death of a loved one is inherently personal—it is limited to something missed by the individual. The source of personal grief is tied to the fact that an individual’s personal life is altered permanently. According to Sanders, Talbott errs by assuming that he will necessarily possess all memories and connections to his reality after he is taken up into union with the Father. This is a mistaken presupposition, since in the course of a lifetime relationships change repeatedly, often with the result of tremendous loss. We are never, however, concerned that those changes will be somehow carried over in their essential characters in eternity. “If God can bring about such changes in me that I do not grieve over very important changes in my relationships, then it is also possible that God can bring it about that I would not be eternally miserable if someone I loved rejected God’s love.”

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17 Sanders, *No Other Name*, 37-79.
19 Sanders, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism”, 172.
In his essay “Freedom, Damnation and the Power to Sin with Impunity”, Talbott states that he affirms free will libertarianism, the ability to do otherwise than was done at some point in time. This free will, however, does not carry with it the possibility that in those instances that we do as we should there was an equal chance that we could have chosen to do wrongly. Talbott maintains that if such were the case God could not be said to act freely since by definition God is never free to do wrong. Along a similar line Alvin Plantinga reasons that God has libertarian free will in many areas, such as in the creation of a particular number of feline species, but lacks what he calls a “morally significant freedom” to do evil. Applying this logic to humanity, it may be argued that we, in our libertarian free will, “ask” God to purify us in such a manner that the free will to do evil is removed from us. In any case, Talbott is exercising inappropriate licence when he claims that humanity has libertarian free will in all things other than salvation. It is sophistry to aver that human beings lack the freedom to reject God on a permanent basis. Talbott attempts to alleviate the threat of attack by claiming his free will libertarianism applies only to the final judgement, when, he says, humanity may no longer choose to reject God’s grace and do what is evil.

Unlike his methodology, Talbott’s eschatology displays a remarkable lack of nuance. He is, correctly, in agreement with Augustine that the will of God cannot be defeated. Yet he fails to acknowledge that God does not “fail” in specific situations if particular persons decide to disobey Him. With respect to His ultimate purpose and design, God never fails. God chose, in His perfect love and forbearance, to grant human beings libertarian free will. He created the mechanism by which humanity could experience His grace and mercy and freely respond to it, fully realizing that we may not reciprocate. Sanders calls this “the risk God was willing to take.” God was willing to be vulnerable, from moment to moment have His will defeated by those whom He created. The evil that occurs at every moment is most certainly contrary to the will of God, but God’s ultimate purpose will not be defeated because of it. Talbott believes that in placing

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20 Some have suggested that God does indeed have libertarian free will to do wrong, but freely chooses not to do so. S. Davis, Logic and the Nature of God. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 86-96.

21 Alvin Plantinga, Does God have a Nature? (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).


salvation outside the locus of free will God is protecting Himself from vulnerability and failure. The heart of the incarnation, however, is the grace-filled and merciful God leaving Himself open to being despised, rejected and crucified, in order that no child is left behind. He grieves when His children choose a different path, but He is never defeated by their choice.

The criteria Talbott establishes for fully free and rational choice are also ill-conceived. Firstly, he maintains that a free choice must be informed to the point that no ignorance of the consequences of the choice remain. Human beings must be completely apprised of the implications of their decision for damnation or salvation. Secondly, no amount of deception may be tolerated, for deception clouds the truth, and if we do not have the entirety of the facts, we cannot be held responsible for a “poor” decision. Thirdly, God must, in a manner unknown to the sinner, remove any trace of sinful desire and impart a moral purity that manifests itself with good and pure decisions. In other words, Talbott is proposing that we must be remade in God’s image to the degree that we are “like” God, indistinguishable from Him. 24

Given Talbott’s rejection of the theory that God selectively obliterates portions of memory, his criteria for fully free choice are disingenuous at best. Scripture denies that anyone is righteous, so the person to which Talbott refers—fully informed, wise, and pure—will not be found. In fact, if such a transformation does indeed take place, how can the decision of that human-divine hybrid be in any way a fully free and rational choice? Such a person would have no option but to “choose” God, since he or she would already be divine, if in a somewhat attenuated state. 25 Sanders finds much of the predestination doctrine Talbott rejects in these criteria, since those that have been purified in this manner could not decide to reject God. Talbott asserts that if only we were to consider all the evidence carefully we would see that rejecting God and choosing hell is fundamentally irrational. This may be the case if humanity were fundamentally good. Yet no matter how rational we think we are, there are many times when we know the truth but fail to act on it.

It would seem that God can appreciate freedom and rationality and God has no need to go through bondage and irrationality in order to arrive at this appreciation. So why do we have to go through this horrendous process?

24 SANDERS, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism”, 179

25 In Eastern Orthodoxy the state which Talbott is advocating is called “divination”, the subsuming of all human characteristics into a quasi-divine being.
Overall, it appears that Talbott has moved much further in the Calvinist direction than simply on the issue of election. It seems he would have God say in preparing to create us, “Let us bring forth evil that good may result.”

**A New Proposition: Lutheran Compatibilism**

To this point I have argued that Talbott’s free will libertarianism is an unscriptural and inconsistent doctrine. It serves by unfortunate sophistry to defend a universalism which Talbott feels is necessary. The question I will consider in the remainder of the paper will be: if libertarian free will is inappropriate, what, if anything, should be proposed to take its place? Free will libertarianism states that God has granted free will to persons such that when choices are made, God does not necessarily know ahead of time what decisions will be made. Tied up in the concept of choice is freedom from constraints or pressures that emerge from internal or external forces. Furthermore, if God possesses foreknowledge of all choices, libertarians argue, persons are not truly free to choose since the decision has, for all intents and purposes, already been made. Divine foreknowledge means that free will is an illusion.

I am willing to concede that free will implies free choice. But free choice does not imply the freedom to choose what is contrary to one’s nature. The Lutheran Fathers debated the Roman Catholics and the Calvinists on this very issue. While they did not use this terminology, they were in fact lobbying for what has become known as the *compatibilist* understanding of freedom of choice. Compatibilism is the view that while a person does exercise free will, he or she may choose only that which is consistent with their nature, and that there are innate influences and constraints on their choices of which they are not aware.27 With regard to the current issue, in libertarian free will a sinner may choose to accept or reject God’s gracious invitation independent of his sinful condition. In compatibilist free will, conversely, a sinner may choose to do only that which is compatible with his fallen nature.

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26 SANDERS, “A Freewill Theist’s Response to Talbott’s Universalism”, 185.
In the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, original, pre-existent sin makes all persons enemies of God until the Holy Spirit, through the inspired and inerrant Word of God, by grace, without co-operation, converts, regenerates, and renews. The unregenerate man cannot, by any “natural powers”, understand, accept or believe the grace of God offered through the Gospel. This is the first assumption of compatibilism, that those who were slaves to sin but released by the power of the Spirit will choose God because their free will has no capacity to countermand their nature, which was dead in trespasses and sins but is made alive in Christ Jesus. The Solid Declaration maintains that the more zealously one tries to comprehend spiritual truths, the less one understands and believes them (I Cor. 2:14; I Cor. 1:21; Eph. 4:13-14; Matt. 13:11-13; Rom. 3:11-12; Eph. 5:8, Acts 26:11; Jn 1:5; Eph. 2:1,5; Col. 2:13).  
Compatibilism holds that the will is free only insofar as its nature allows it to be free. The Solid Declaration appealed to the Church Fathers who defended a “bound” free will which has a “capacity” for freedom in such a way that by divine grace it can be converted to God and become truly free, a condition for which it was originally created. This is in complete agreement with compatibilism, which allows for free will to be altered and that altered state to become the norming feature of choice.

The early Lutherans were concerned that free will libertarianism implied that it is within the human will to accept or reject the Gospel independent of any divine assistance. To allow for such a contravention of monergism undermines the person and work of the Holy Spirit, whose activity would become unnecessary. The work of the Holy Spirit is to set sinners free from bondage to sin. The Lutherans consistently maintained that left to themselves, humankind has no libertarian free will to choose the redemptive good, since their affections are entirely in bondage to sin:

The free will by its own natural powers can do nothing for man’s conversion, righteousness, peace and salvation, cannot cooperate, and cannot obey, believe, and give assent when the Holy Spirit offers the grace of God and salvation through the Gospel. On the contrary, because of the wicked and obstinate disposition with which he was born, he defiantly resists God and his will unless the Holy Spirit illuminates and rules him.
It remains, then, that man’s will is truly free only in the compatibilist sense, since, given the desires of his fallen nature he can choose only to do evil. Free will libertarians contend they have solved this difficulty by proposing a scheme whereby God offers hearers of the Gospel *prevenient grace*, initial grace, which temporarily overcomes the sinful nature and allows them to choose to accept Christ. Martin Luther could not accept a prevenient grace doctrine on the grounds that if it were available and issued inconsistently, there would be many persons existing in a quasi-regenerate state who could theoretically believe the Gospel independent of the salvific work of the Holy Spirit. Not only would this be tantamount to Pelagianism, those in possession of prevenient grace would exist with little or no certainty of salvation.\(^\text{32}\) Holy Writ nowhere claims that human beings are free to choose for or against God apart from their natural desires. We either desire Christ or we despise Him, and those that desire Him do so as a result of grace and not due to their natures (Jn 1:13; Rom. 9:16).

Finally, Luther, in his memorable debate over free will with the Roman Catholic humanist Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, identified the key error of free will libertarianism as its appeal not to Scripture and tradition, but to philosophy. Luther took the compatibilist position that there is free will that leads to salvation, but that will is transformed by the Holy Spirit and informed by the covenant grace of Christ:

> A man should know that with regard to his faculties and possessions he has the right to use, to do, or to leave undone, according to his free choice, though even this is controlled by the free choice of God alone, who acts in whatever way he pleases. On the other hand in relation to God, or in matters pertaining to salvation or damnation, a man has no free choice, but is a captive, subject and slave either of the will of God or the will of Satan.\(^\text{33}\)

Since in his thought Christ is central, Luther felt comfortable in asking Erasmus, in effect: does God will the salvation of all people with weak and ineffectual love, or does God love His elect with a resolute, immutable will that accomplishes what it seeks?\(^\text{34}\) Luther’s firm belief in the power of the

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\(^{\text{33}}\) Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 143.

\(^{\text{34}}\) Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*, 117-24.
Holy Spirit to convert, explicated so succinctly in his Small Catechism, allowed him to view the transformation from sinner to saint as a gentle act of grace. The heavenly Father does not will anyone to perish, just as a caring parent would not want her child to be struck by a car. Instead of coercion, God changes a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, and His children obey not out of fear, but out of thankfulness. Libertarian free will declares that a child should be free to choose whether he would be struck by a car or not. Leaving a child unaided in the midst of danger is inviting disaster. For Luther, God saves us, not because some of us are more humble or intelligent, but because of the sacrifice of Christ. Libertarianism cannot offer this kind of comfort.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have engaged the Christian universalist paradigm, pointed up its weaknesses, and offered a logical alternative. The challenge for Christian compatibilists will be overcoming the post-modern tendency toward “softening” difficult Biblical doctrines in favour of more inclusive language and positions. Compatibilism allows for the confidence and comfort which come from being divinely selected, while at the same time protecting the basic human desire to make up our own mind and decide what we feel is the best option for us. It is not unloving to present the reality of hell—persons must be made aware of the dangers of their possible decision against God. At the same time God has risked rejection by submitting Himself to human choice. In order for God to be truly loving He must grant free will to His created order. This is the message of Lutherans on the doctrine of free will. In this respect Talbott was correct: given all the facts, why would anyone choose eternal suffering over eternal blessing? We may never know.

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35 “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” (Small Catechism, 2:6)
A Theological and Missiological Critique of the “Organic Church”

Jody Rinas

Students of recent church history know the significant movements of our time. Often labelling them as an -ism, we might think of liberalism, fundamentalism, and evangelicalism. Other movements receive no such suffix: neo-orthodoxy; church growth; mega-church; or in the present case, organic church.

Some movements decline; others rise. Discussion continues on the vitality of each. Strands of thought wax, wane, and interweave. So do vocabularies. We look for phrases to describe a movement, ways to describe its features. Opening ears and mouths we join the discussion. We may come to a deeper appreciation of our own confessions. Insight grows. We see history more holistically. We also participate in the task of preserving the Word of God and conserving our tradition.

Background

At the Fall 2010 Church Workers Conference of the Alberta-British Columbia District of Lutheran Church–Canada, a sectional seminar was entitled “The Organic Church: Real Fruit or Simply Going Rogue?” The session’s format included advance readings and a facilitated discussion when the registered group finally met. One popular book was chosen for discussion: Neil Cole’s Organic Church. This choice had come about after some free-ranging discussion at a meeting of the ABC District’s Department of Outreach.

The pre-reading included book reports on this text, reports written by a group of pastors, supplied to the registrants. Each pastor was charged with providing a book summation, brief critique, and cursory examination of the Organic Church movement. I was a part of that group; however, since I

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could not be present at the conference, I drafted this essay in advance, an attempt to alleviate my absence.

A second point: Lutheran missiology seeks to incorporate all good wisdom into its arsenal. We are thinking Christians. We want to utilize all things helpful for directing our work—in this case the planting of churches in our Canadian milieu. Therefore we squeeze as much insight as we can from God’s Word, our confessions, history, and all reliable sources. The District’s Department for Outreach desires to improve its efforts. This is simply the church of God in motion. Likewise, we can critique our own situation and ask about our faithfulness to God’s Word and the tasks He gives. How well are we employing God’s Word? What are other Christians and churches saying about these same tasks? Participating in their discussions, we may indeed learn something. We might also provide truth and guidance to others at the same time. For the moment, our minds engage the Organic Church and its tenets.

Identifying, Locating Terms

In the above title I put *Organic Church* in quotation marks because there is disagreement on its meaning. Or, there are different descriptions of what is entailed by *The Organic Church* (hereafter TOC). The phrase seems to be something of a wax nose. So in critiquing TOC, one is from the outset faced with a difficulty: Which form of TOC are we dealing with? In considering the problem of identification, one may consult the blog comments of Frank Viola, who insists that he has been using the descriptor since 1993—though he himself did not coin the term.

The term *organic* has to do with natural, healthy growth—in this case, the good growth of the Christian church. Such health will lead to a natural, spontaneous expansion of the church. Now in another post Viola clearly states that Organic Church is not a “movement”. Further Viola insists that Organic Church and “transformation of the world” do not go together. These pronouncements, as two examples, flatly disagree with Neil Cole’s

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conception of TOC. Viola and Cole have discussed their approaches, so their ideas are known to each other. To which approach should we then devote ourselves?

When dealing with church teaching and practice, both origin and authority are primary factors. Our institutions and traditions are important. So with any “new kind of church”, from where did it originate? Who is handing over the teachings and methods? One may wish to ponder Viola’s assessment of the situation and investigate. This may shed light on the development of TOC. In perusing his writings, I wondered if he was partly responding to the work of Neil Cole.

Therefore, despite the difficulties inherent to the task, for this critique I will reflect on what Cole presents in his 2005 text, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, since this was the text with which we started. Cole has, however, moved on in the last five years, so it is admittedly fairer to him if one also moves with him and considers his more recent writings.

Cole’s 2005 text is part of the collection of resources in the Leadership Network. This organization arose in 1984. That locates it in the era of the Church Growth Movement, even as they themselves describe their purpose. Under this tattered umbrella, the book may already be viewed with some suspicion. Not to mention the presence of a foreword penned by Leonard Sweet, the loved-or-hated church visionary.

Neil Cole’s book is not a stand-alone resource. There are many gaps. Much is offered while much is left unsaid. So far removed from the

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10 My comments in this critique assume and build upon my previous two-page review of Cole’s book. Cf. n. 2.


12 *Evangelism and Church Growth, With Special Reference to the Church Growth Movement*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, September, 1987.
traditional model of church, these gaps may perplex the reader. This has also left Cole the opportunity to write more books and blog posts as a follow-up. There is no shortage of these.

Cole envisions a certain disenfranchised readership. The book is permeated with religious language from an evangelical perspective. Thus Cole will expect you to fill in the blanks or understand where he is going, because you share his discontent with the present-day church of the West. Or at least he wants to move you in this direction.

Asking about Cole’s background is a good exercise. Where did he come from? This would give us a window to his writing. It may also suggest a critique. On his blog he lists his occupation as “Author/Coach/Spiritual entrepreneur”.\(^\text{13}\) In his book he also mentions having been a pastor for eight years at a “pretty normal church” (17). Moreover he has devoted himself to church planting and consulting.

It took a bit of sleuthing to come upon anything explicit about his denominational attachments. In a fresh blog entry, Cole throws open the sash. He describes himself as a non-creedal Protestant who agrees with the “Athanasius [sic] Creed”. Not signing off on “all five pedals [sic] of the Calvinist tulip”, Cole doesn’t consider himself a full-fledged Calvinist. Yet he appreciates the Anabaptist tradition.\(^\text{14}\) He specifically identifies himself as a member of the Grace Brethren denomination.\(^\text{15}\)

Cole recounts some personal history to help the reader “understand how we stumbled into a movement” (17). A thirteen-page chapter shows his efforts to plant churches. He writes about feeling a release from the church and feeling some overt attack from the enemy. He mentions other feelings, some of which determined his course of action (18-21). Initially he had referred to the bad feelings “we” had about church for our entire lives.

\(^\text{13}\) <www.blogger.com/profile/0828931769647496831>. Accessed 6 October 2010. Note, if the Ministry is suppressed, as it is in TOC, a new form of leadership must needs arise. For example, on the novel practice of Christian “coaches”, see ALISON VAN GINKEL, “Changing Direction—With a Christian Coach”, Faith Today 28.5 (September/October 2010): 26-30. Ironically, trained clergy are dismissed in TOC, but “coaches” nevertheless possess a certain authority, “depending on the expertise and the credentials of the coach” (27). In other cases ministry has become an adjective: ministry facilitator, ministry consultant, ministry leader, ministry director. Such as these have ministry plans, ministry goals, and ministry outings, following a ministry model. The list goes on.


This feeling has brought “us” to this book (xix-xx). One wonders how close to enthusiasm this gets.16

These early anecdotes chronicle the poor collegiality among his pastor friends. He is attacked by pastors and even chastised by his supervisor. It appears that Cole is a victim of poor pastoral care. Many a person has been scandalized by improper soul care from pastors. This in turn leads one to leave the church while spurring another to reform it. Neil Cole falls into the latter category. Or, as he said, he “stumbled”. Cole develops his theology from experience. His “training” develops from real-life encounters.17

Because Cole’s work is in constant process and evolving, this book was only the latest instalment of his involvement with TOC. To fill in the gaps and assess him as charitably as possible, one may wish to surf his blog and peruse his other writings. Further, if TOC is indeed a movement, things are going to evolve or even spoil.18

Connections to the Past, Directions for the Future

The church, of course, has changed over time. Some might suggest that TOC is the next step from the Emergent Church movement of the previous decade. Others can look for the possible connections. I submit, rather, that

16 COLE, 18-21. Compare the revivalist anecdote on 51f.: “We felt the heavens respond.” We also have to listen to the Holy Spirit and His “promptings” (167). “We are looking for the places where His Spirit is telling us that Jesus is going to come” (177). We may honestly ask how the Spirit will tell us this.

17 Cole did have some previous seminary training. Yet a different sort of ad hoc apprenticing has entered the mainstream: “the era has passed when all seminary students moved to an unfamiliar city near an established school before entering ministry. Many churches are calling lay people to fill the clergy ranks and are asking that these folk be trained on the job.” Advertising Feature, “Preparing Students for Life and Ministry”, Faith Today 28.5 (September/October 2010): 33.

Neil Cole and TOC are more an organic movement from the Meta-Church philosophy. Now for a step back in time.

When I was a Lutheran school teacher in Minneapolis in the early ’90s, Carl F. George came to speak at one of our conferences. His theological perspective was quite different, but could we learn something from him? Evidently we could, since the Missouri Synod had recently adopted his methods for their mission platform. Now he was getting his chance in our backyard.

In 1992 George wrote the book, *Prepare Your Church for the Future*. George’s methods sprang from the Church Growth Movement. A number of reviews of George’s book and the Meta-Church movement exposed the dangers of his ideas.

The Carl George model featured a two-pronged approach to spirituality: small-group cell, and celebrative large-group worship. Moving along to TOC a decade later, celebrative worship and small group essentially collapse into one another. That is, the church is that small group cell where worship takes place. Anything that gets too large for a small group will likely break off and multiply somewhere else.

How, so to speak, has Meta-Church given way to Cole’s Organic Church? Here are the underlying principles of Meta-Church:

1. Churches of the future are committed to making more disciples.
2. Churches of the future will be more concerned with the size of the harvest than with the capacity of their facilities.
3. Churches will be known primarily as caring places rather than teaching associations. These churches of the future realize that God measures His people more by their obedience than by their knowledge of Bible facts.
4. Pastors will genuinely encourage ministry by the laity, despite centuries of modelling to the contrary.
5. Lay-ministry assignments will involve leadership of a group.
6. Given the opportunity, laity will invest time, energy, and money to learn required skills.
7. Pastors and people will remain dependent on the Holy Spirit. 

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21 Encapsulated list from Quill, 65.
To a large degree, each of these points is present in TOC. From Meta-Church there has been a significant move toward TOC, which, to use George’s words, could be classed as the “churches of the future”.

I sympathize with Neil Cole. He would see more disciples living like true Christians. He wants to see a great harvest. We share these desires (as have prior movements in church history). But the institutional church does not work for him (nor for others) when it comes to satisfying these desires.\(^\text{22}\) I agree with Cole that there is something wrong with the church (xx). Sadly his solution does not solve but only exacerbates the problem.

Cole observes that people are interested in Jesus but not in the church. They want to hear and believe in His message but they don’t want to do it in the conventional church (xxii). So today we also see billboards announcing, “A church for people who don’t like church.” Well, what kind of church would that be like?\(^\text{23}\) Neil Cole’s movement supplies an answer, one version of that sort of church. But does it end up being something like NFL for people who don’t like football or NASCAR for people who don’t like stock car racing? So now we have church for people who don’t like all the elements that make up church. Can it still be NFL, NASCAR, or in this case, church?

**Fatal Flaws in TOC**

I feel the temptation. What “we” are doing, what “we” have always done, doesn’t seem to be working—at least, not working very well or very fast. “We” do not trust the Lord’s promise about His Word recorded in Isaiah 55:8-11.\(^\text{24}\) Yet from where I sit as a parish pastor looking in on Cole’s paradigm, a number of things are problematic. Particularly, there are three

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\(^\text{24}\) “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” (RSV)
The cavities in his system: an overextended doctrine of vocation, disavowal of trained clergy, and the anti-catholicity of the entire enterprise.

Vibrant vocation and trained clergy are cardinal components not only of the Lutheran Church but of the church in every age. The Small Catechism, as the simplest Lutheran Confession, showcases the doctrine of vocation in Part III, the Table of Duties. On the one hand, this is simply a taxonomy of Bible passages. Yet Luther describes these normal, ordinary Christian duties as “holy orders and walks of life”. Thus, the work of every day is elevated from the mundane to the important, even sacred. Laypeople need not be directed to find their “ministry”. As Pastor Luther reminds them, they already have some important God-given duties which are both pleasing to Him and useful for their neighbours.

In the day of the Church Growth Movement, you had to be at the church building (e.g., on a committee or in the choir) if you wanted to serve God. Now we have expanded that ecclesiastical serving to the extreme. To serve God, one does “ministry” in every place. Ordinary work is less important. One cannot really have a devotion to a calling outside of full-time Christian service because the end-goal is the Christian transformation of our world.

On the one hand, we can much appreciate the desire to live out lives that are truly Christian. Indeed, let God’s holy work be done through us. Yet Cole fails to plunder the particular role or significance of vocation. Or it may be more correct to say that Cole elevates vocation into ministry. The melding is subtle but needs to be noted.


26 STEVEN A. HEIN, “The Outer Limits of a Lutheran Piety”, Logia 3.1 (Epiphany/January 1994): 4-10; esp. 10: “churchyard piety”. At the very end of the essay, Hein mentions those who would replace the righteousness of Christ with a faith defined by obedience. In fact, “God has saved us for obedience” (10). This is exactly what is advanced in Neil Cole’s book. Not too many years ago, the Missouri Synod went through a bit of a tussle around Concordia Publishing House’s publishing of the book, The Goal of the Gospel by authors Bickel and Nordlie (1992). “Obedience to God’s will” was the point of contention.

27 For a meditation on this (or rather, a corrective), see JOEL KURZ, “Getting Our Bearings: Wendell Berry and Christian Understanding”, Concordia Journal 36.3 (Summer 2010): 263-73; esp. 267f.: “The disconnection of work from vocation ... ” (his emphasis).
Nice paragraphs are to be found: “the Word of Christ ... overflowing into all our relationships” (118). Cole also praises the practice of hospitality in everyday relationships (167). This latter point is part of Cole’s commendable focus on the house [Greek, οἶκος] as the unit by which the faith spreads (162-69). My reservation here is that Cole measures everything as gains or losses against “the Great Commission”. We always have this agenda in the back of our heads. When we attempt to execute this agenda, we fulfil or confirm the negative stereotypes that people hold about Christians: we’re pushy, hunting for converts. If the unbeliever doesn’t comply, we wipe the dust off our feet and go elsewhere. When we see people as numbers for filling a quota, there is less patience to treat people, regardless of their spiritual condition, as special in God’s eyes. Rather should we convey to them grace, dignity, and honour, no matter their response. We are not there to convert them. We are there to serve them in our vocations. Of course, the call of the minister is different from the vocation of layperson.

On the other hand, for Cole everyone has a “ministry”. To me, this is akin to Frank Viola’s context in which he says that there’s mass confusion surrounding TOC. In our Lutheran case, there is mass confusion over the ministry. Everyone has a ministry or does ministry, a position at odds with our Lutheran Confessions. Cole’s book sets forth a stringent anti-clerical bias. But this is, predictably, one point on which he and Frank Viola are in complete agreement.

Cole’s book could be a bit of mission inspiration if Bible passages were not misapplied. It is heart-warming to hear of people who go out and speak of the wonders that God has done in their misspent lives. Cole well tells these tales. He also notes the “battle” conditions of the Christian life and our joining ranks against the unholy trinity of devil, world, and flesh. On this waging war we wholeheartedly agree. In that light then, the book

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30 E.g., COLE, 215ff.
would be more of a record of new converts living out their challenging vocations among pagan friends and neighbours.

Here is one of those places where Cole’s “we” does not reflect the catholic experience or my “feelings”—if I can use that term. “We have made church nothing more than a religious show that takes place on Sunday, and after it’s done we all go home, until church starts again next week, same time, same place. Is this what the bride of Christ is?”

Who is it that has made it into “a religious show”? That’s a fine critique, if he is excoriating the practitioners of Church Growth principles. Sentences like the foregoing give no notice to daily prayer or the doctrine of vocation, in which the church’s light continues to shine forth through her individual members and within the weekly corporate worship of Christians and congregations. Because the church believes that Christ is present in our worship services, “we” could never suggest the false dichotomy made by Cole on the previous page: “It is not the local church that will change the world; it is Jesus. Attendance on Sundays does not transform lives; Jesus within their hearts is what changes people” (xxiv). Local churches do change the world because Jesus is there to empower the worshippers! Church attendance does transform lives because Jesus is there to inspire the attendees! In public worship, people are bombarded by the Word and the sacraments. The people then go out and change the world, Christ living in them to will and to do all good things. Perhaps for Cole, working with a non-sacramental model in the past, his church experience indeed supplied the ground for asserting this false dichotomy. He is answering questions that “we” are not necessarily asking.

The church catholic understands “church” to be the place where God serves His people. He enlivens and “equips” them to go out and serve others. A strengthened and inspired faith exhales with the fresh breath of good works. I really don’t get this latter thrust from Cole’s model. The laity already comprises the noble priesthood of the baptized. And Cole is seemingly aware of this, as he quotes from I Peter 2 (44f.). Why do we want to plop a “ministry” on top of that royal position so as, essentially, to diminish it? If he had only turned the page in his Bible, Cole would have seen that in I Peter 5, a distinct office of the ministry, which he rejects, is part and parcel with a distinct priesthood of believers. Both are necessary. No doubt the church’s influence is in society. But this influence arises through its corporate prayer in worship, in individual Christians who are

31 COLE, xxv.
32 Cf. COLLVER, 12.
living industrious lives away from the church building, and when they speak out publicly with eloquence and grace (individually or corporately). How many desire to listen?

I agree that we were created for good works. Cole reproduces the thought of Ephesians 2:10 at the end of the book (217). But which particular good works? Do we want to say this: “This is what you were born to be: a hero.” (A motivational speaker here comes to mind.) Not all were born to be heroes. In fact, not so many were. (Maybe we should say this: “everyday heroes”.) We were born to serve each other in our own spheres of influence, much of which is “ordinary”. We do not have to elevate this to the status of hero. The problem comes when we do not observe the order of shepherd and sheep, clergy and laity, preachers and hearers (Table of Duties). This is like dismissing the order of Creator-created, man-woman, husband-wife, and parent-child. Such dismissal only creates a mess. Worse, such confusion produces misguided people who assimilate erroneous teaching and end up becoming disaffected and disenchanted with their new church when disagreements arise and correction becomes necessary. Those who assume themselves as leaders will be judged harshly for their works (James 3:1). The blind cannot lead the blind.

By not defining terms, Cole does not help his case. This is one of those “gaps”. On the one hand, he can say that only the Gospel will help grow the church. Yet he can also say that we have to obey the Gospel. As Lutherans understand the Gospel, the Gospel is not something to be obeyed because it neither makes demands nor sets up conditions. It is

33 In accord with the opening lines of the Athanasian Creed, such good works start from right faith and worship.

34 When preaching to the crowds, John the Baptist requires neither the quitting of one’s sphere of activity nor elevating it to a religious endeavour (Luke 3:7-14). This seems like a more organic way of thinking. In like manner Paul, commenting on the sanctified life especially in marriage, commands husband and wife to keep their vocation (I Cor. 7:17). At the very least, we can say that these two preachers are not exhorting the faithful to turn life into ministry. (One may counter: depends on your definition of ministry.)

35 Cf. COLE, 66, 86, 119.

36 We are not talking here about such passages as II Thess. 1:8 or I Pet. 4:17. Cole’s emphasis on obedience flows from the Reformed stream in which he is paddling; e.g., COLE, 66, 104, 132, 151, 166, 205, 222.
pure gift. And since it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), it creates and delivers what God both requires and promises.\(^{37}\)

Some of Cole’s statements are overambitious or just wishful thinking. Case one: “If we are willing to pay the price—if we are willing to die to follow Christ—then we can see an abundant harvest of souls for the kingdom of God” (104). Does my obedience bring forth repentance and faith in others? Right next to this, case two: “Every church throughout history whose members were willing to surrender their lives for the sake of Christ witnessed dramatic and spontaneous growth.” In the interest of full disclosure, he may wish to supply evidence on this sweeping claim. Can he validate these remarks? Or this: “What if all of us decided to put everything aside and focus on truly discipling another [sic] for just the next few years in a manner that multiplies? We could finish the Great Commission in just a few years” (104f.). Which “all of us” can put everything aside? Should we forsake our vocations? Will “truly discipling another” lead to multiplication of Christians or churches or a lasting, permanent growth? What about the devil, world, and sinful flesh working against us? Not only is this naïve triumphalism, it is also against the Bible.

The perspective prevailing in this book (“If you only follow this method . . .”) is neither helpful nor realistic. The Bible does say that the Word of God will accomplish what it is sent to do. But this is not ironclad in every time and place. Cole wants to lower the bar of how church is done. This will free up people to be more effective or committed disciples. “Churches will become healthy, fertile, and reproductive” (26f.). The seven churches in the book of Revelation, however, with which Cole is familiar, exemplify that this is not always true. In his book Cole himself gives similar examples from his own experience. Historical evidence shows that more often than not, people may have been interested in Jesus, but they were not really interested in what He was really about. Not to mention that the Scriptures indicate that as time progresses, the church will not necessarily be on the offensive. Rather she will be struggling to survive.\(^{38}\)

Cole’s words can occasionally turn against him. He is against following programmes and institutions, but TOC is its own programme and

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\(^{38}\) See the subsections “Expectation” and “Like A Beast From The Earth” found in Frederic W. Baue, “What Comes After Postmodernism?” Logia 13.1 (Epiphany 2004): 7-16. E.g., “Not a springtime for the church, but an autumnal season of increasing storms while the last harvest is gathered in” (13).
institution. Cole states that we should yield control to the Holy Spirit. “The great things of God are beyond our control” (88f.). To be sure! “A true spontaneous multiplication movement is unstoppable.” Is it? He says, “This is what our Lord wants.” Perhaps. The Lord also wants all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Does it happen? A salutary reminder: God works when and where He pleases. The Spirit blows where He wants, and we may not see Him coming or going. Nicodemus learned this the hard way.

On this point, the operative phrase in the Lutheran Confessions is in Article V of the Augsburg Confession: *ubi et quando visum est Deo*, “where and when it is willed by God.”Interestingly enough, this working of faith is linked to the preaching office (*Predigtamt*), the office of the ministry. Just because you preach, doesn’t mean there will be fruit. And no need to fret about it because the result is out of your hands anyway. The point should also be reiterated: the Lutheran Confessors say it is not simply *preaching* but rather the *pure* preaching of the Gospel that creates faith when and where God deigns. We are to handle the Word with care. Nevertheless, just because we sow the seed does not require God to bring forth the fruit. In this book Cole says so little about the Gospel that it is hard to tell if his would be pure preaching. For that, we have to go to his blog or elsewhere. Of course, we already know something of his doctrinal persuasion.

Carl George prepared his church for the future, and Neil Cole is preparing his church for the future. In these changing paradigms, we are not left scratching our heads as to the theology under the hood. It is not creedal catholicity. We are ever tempted to think we can take a programme or philosophy and “Lutheranize” it. In the worst cases, this is like trying to strain tomatoes out of vomit. At least some religious practitioners are up front about the whole enterprise. Carl George thus advises all church growth entrepreneurs that adapting his programme into an existing church “meets with consistent frustration and produces only marginal result.” Should this be any different with the Cole model, given that it is even further down the church’s evolutionary continuum?

The Lutheran Church has always emphasized the importance of trained clergy. Carl George states, “Pastors will genuinely encourage ministry by

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39 AC V:2. GER: wo und wenn er will. BSLK, 58.
40 Something about Luther and Melanchthon sipping beer while the Word did its work.
41 AC 7:1. BSLK, 61.
42 GEORGE, 59.
the laity, *despite centuries of modeling to the contrary.* 43 Therefore, by following either George or Cole in their methods, Lutherans are breaking from the catholic tradition and introducing something completely foreign, and worse, destructive. With our “shucking off of old forms of authority”, 44 we move into dangerous territory by having a church for people who don’t like church. In attempting to erase the differences between leaders and followers, the first two plates on the Table of Duties slide off the counter and we unwittingly clear the space for religious demagogues or chaos. To wit:

The rejection of existing forms of authority did not magically transform the world into a place with no authorities; the repudiation of the Church’s tradition simply meant embracing a less venerable legacy of more recently developed (and more dubious) ways of thinking, often with disastrous results. 45

In Cole’s book, some of the most egregious passages come, ironically, after he discusses the compassion of Christ (144-49). Over and over Cole repeatedly drives a wedge in between the Holy Spirit and the ministry. “What arrogance it is for us to attempt to add our training to all that God has already given to [new converts]” (150, his emphasis). “The Holy Spirit is a better teacher than we are” (150). “The real sting in these assumptions is that we think we are better able to help people than the Holy Spirit Himself is” (154). I’ve reproduced three passages here; there are more. 46

43 GEORGE, 155. My emphasis.


45 MYERS, 11.

46 Compare the middle paragraph on p. 67: “I have heard people say ....” Just awful. Near the bottom of the page Cole encourages people to read entire books of the Bible: “a simple strategy that anyone can do.” That’s all well and good if people can read, but there’s something to be said for qualified teachers. Cole approaches the Scriptures thoroughly from a rationalistic point of view. He sees the Bible as transparent, containing self-evident truths. The Scriptures, however, are the church’s writings, and often one needs the Holy Spirit working through a competent teacher to explain them. The Scriptures need “adjustment” (exposition) for the typical reader. On the next page he again drives one of his typical wedges: “it is not religious reading of the Bible that is important, but hearing God’s voice” (68). Aren’t we hearing God’s voice in our religious reading?
Let Cole put his money where his mouth is. “Let’s have faith in the Lord of the harvest and in the seed of His word rather than in our methods and strategies” (89). If he thinks the Holy Spirit is a better teacher, I suggest he yield control of his Organic movement in toto and stop studying, writing, teaching, and consulting. Let the Spirit “transform our culture with the power of the gospel” without him (154). This false humility gets no quarter. The ministry was given for a number of reasons and he has evacuated both its purpose and its power. Cole’s zeal here is deceiving, getting the better of his reason and his training (Rom. 10:2f.).

**Not-So-New Suggestions for Action**

I’m not sure what techniques TOC has to offer us. Cole’s rebuff of consumer Christianity is potent. But the critique is hardly new. He also says that we are to make disciples. “The growth of the kingdom of God must start at the smallest of levels” (98). Indeed! What don’t start small don’t end up big! So how is his a new kind of church? (Besides being one without buildings, creeds, clergy, and sacraments?)

For one point, Cole reminds us of the need to pray. Unbeknownst to him, he in fact starts with the ministry (173). We need workers. This is all God’s idea. We must pray to the Lord to send out workers into His harvest. That is a salutary reminder.

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47 In trying to start a church without buildings—a “shocking” endeavour—see ELIZABETH O’CONNOR, *Call to Commitment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ix. The foreword penned by Elton Trueblood reads as a primer for TOC. Witness the following: "so many Christians have an ‘edifice complex’ '" (ix); "church is where the members are carrying on their ministry” (x); “to create, under God, a fellowship so contagious, that the contagion spreads and spreads” (xi); “old established church presents numerous difficulties because it is encrusted with tradition” (xi); “to encourage Christian people to start new growths” (xi); “make their secular occupations into ministries” (xii); “the demonstration has borne good fruit in hundreds of communities” (xii). And further toward the same, by the author herself: "We did not know on the day that sign went up what forms the church would take” (1); “The wind blows and you hear the sound thereof in a coffee house” (2); “More than any other quality this willingness to question, and when necessary to give up the old and embrace the new” (5). Yet two years previous, in 1961, Trueblood himself had composed a little text into which Neil Cole could eventually dig. ELTON TRUEBLOOD, *The Company of the Committed: A Manual of Action for Every Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980 [first paperback edition]). With many identical thoughts here foreshadowed by Trueblood, Cole could just as well have used this earlier handbook as an inspiration for his own movement. Organic Church markers are found clearly on pages xi-45; 59-63; 68-81; 89-93.
A second point: Cole’s insistence on the dynamic nature of the Christian life should spur us to give unflagging attention to the doctrine of vocation. And Lutheran Church–Canada has not been completely out to lunch on this. We have encouraged congregations to hold open houses, so as to encourage hospitality and friendship. Between the “Equipping to Share” workshops and the “Peacemaker” programme, laypeople have access to improving important skills for daily living. We promote the quality writings of our publishing house and seek to get them into the hands of our people. All our Bible classes should direct people to see the Bible as a factor in their lives away from the church building.

A third point could be a reminder to preach the Word more than once a week, being urgent in and out of season (II Tim. 4:2). We should underestimate neither the power of the Word nor our roles as parents and teachers who guide, instruct, and influence. Why do we insist on or offer sermons, Bible classes, Sunday school, confirmation classes and examinations, Banana CramGns, Vacation Bible Schools, seminary lectures, mission festivals, call meetings, pastors’ circuit meetings, LWML conventions, adult instruction, pre-marital counselling, youth retreats, young adult gatherings, convocations, conferences and forums at the circuit, district, and synod levels? Is the Word of God not being planted or watered in these settings? Is nothing being accomplished in these efforts? A Lutheran parishioner once asked me if the Lutheran Church does any good works. Wow! Doesn’t everyone read The Canadian Lutheran with all the reporting of what great things our synod is doing?

Others can examine Cole’s catalogue of writings, noting the theology that drives the practice. After all, theology controls and dictates practice for the church. As one example, how might we respond to a recent entry on his blog?

We do not want people who know facts about the Gospel, but apply them and then own them in the depth of their soul. We do not want only an audience, or even practitioners ... we want agents of the Gospel. Change is not enough, we want change agents. We have developed a learning system for systematic theology based upon this type of thinking. It is a one year learning process for proven leaders where they learn theology in a small community by teaching it in a highly reproducible manner. It is called TruthQuest and is available on our website. TruthQuest will not teach you what to think but how to think. The participants may not come out
thinking the same as you, but they will come out able to think for
themselves. I for one value that even more than simply agreeing with me.48

Thinking for oneself can indeed be a useful quality. Yet shall we separate
what to think from how to think? Seems they must go together.
Furthermore, St Paul told us to be like-minded (I Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2). And
to what extent? If you want to be a change agent, well and good. But
learning how to think for yourself is no guarantee that you’ll become an
agent of the Gospel.

Catholicity as Factor, Guide, and Bulwark

For my part, much of this critique has been focused on the office of the
ministry. This is due to TOC working on the principle that the faith
spreads without trained clergy.49 That would be an awfully big lacuna for
the church of the Augsburg Confession, which devotes two of its first
fourteen articles to the ministry, the first of which follows right on the
heels of the crucial article on justification.50 Lutherans confess that the
ministry exists so that people may obtain this justifying faith.51 The pure
preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments by
called ministers lead to justification by grace through faith. In contrast,
what does this say for a movement that dismisses trained clergy and grace-
filled sacraments? How do people then receive God’s grace and Spirit? Will
they obtain this faith and be justified through such a movement? In fact,
“the primary theologians in the church will need to be the laity because
they are on the mission frontier.”52 Lutherans would instead say that a

October 2010.

49 A forthcoming volume from Neil Cole is entitled Journeys to Significance: Charting a
Leadership Course from the Life of Paul. Ironically, Paul was a trained clergyman, a
professional, ordained, a member of the New Testament apostolate and ministerium.

50 The connection becomes more clear or “organic” when we recall that the AC never had
any “articles” to begin with.

51 AC 5:1. For a bit of necessary augmentation to this—to anticipate likely objections—see
According to the Gospels and the Augsburg Confession”, Concordia Theological
Quarterly 70.2 (April 2006): 119f.

69f.
Christian’s vocation is always operative, whether or not they are blabbing about Jesus.

Neil Cole is antagonistic to the Lutheran (catholic) position. Speaking of some of his churches, he says: “Once the leader moved on, the church ended. ... Churches that were leader-dependent for all of ministry did not have the health to continue and soon fizzled out” (202). Indeed! And why should that not be? Here we see the need to have a pastor. Cole, however, looks at such churches as “a one-man show”. In these churches, the one man “does not share the ministry well with others” (202). In these churches Christians are passive and stare at the back of a man’s head (xxv). Therefore Cole turns the church on its head. The ordering in the Table of Duties becomes inoperative. Whereas Jesus appointed apostles, who in turn appointed apostles such as Timothy who would then do the same (II Tim. 2:25), Cole takes all the Bible passages that normally apply to the ministry and places them within the purview of the laity. This is his modus operandi throughout the book.54

Though he gives credit to people and books that have influenced him, and though he was “an impressionable seminary student” (49), Neil Cole very much remains a self-styled church planter who breaks with cardinal church teaching and practice. He says, “The most insidious thing about self-deception is that you don’t know when you are being deceived” (33). He might ponder his own words carefully. In his own autonomous way, he has been rather harsh in dismissing our liturgical, doctrinal, sacramental, creedal, traditional churches. One need not doubt his sincerity, compassion, his zeal or urgency. His desire to fulfill the Great Commission is to be commended. His devoted spirit is contagious and challenging. Others share his vision of seeing people added to the body of Christ. The catholic and orthodox faith would offer much toward his ongoing studies.

Cole’s break with catholicity is significant because he basically thumbs his nose at the church that has come before him. Since the “hierarchy” of the church is often thought to have arisen immediately after the apostles died, some say that the Holy Spirit left the apostolic church and did not return until much later on. I get the same impression from Neil Cole. In the way that synod (collection of congregations) is often not a great factor in the lives of many of our Lutheran congregations, Cole also looks at his little churches as self-contained, autonomous units with no doctrinal or

53 Starting with Christ, that makes five generations of ministers.
54 E.g., 117-18, 157, 177-79, 181, 187, 202, 205. Such a penchant for poor interpretation does not encourage reliability on other topics.
sacramental connection to the neighbouring ones. They are free to flourish or die. Are they committed to one another? Is there a bond of love, a unity of teaching and practice? Do they seek fellowship with each other? By jettisoning tradition, useful boundaries and hard-fought consensus are dispatched in a moment. He basically has to reform the church with scaffolding constructed from his experience and the wisdom of other entrepreneurs. Some Bible is thrown in to justify it all. In fact, given the cavalier way Cole handles both Scripture and church traditions, we might question whether what he proposes as “church” even qualifies. He decimates the office of the ministry and bypasses a sacramental view of the means of grace, thus turning us into enthusiasts and fanatics when it comes to the working of the Holy Spirit. Is TOC really “church?”

It is not surprising that Neil Cole should write this book as a course correction for his church. He is coming from a mindset and practice (tradition) that is wholly flawed from the start. The sacraments are emptied of their promises. The ministerial office is devalued. Obedience is the end-goal and everything is measured against fulfilment of Matthew 28. The Word of God, though endorsed by God, does not seem to be as effective or successful as it could be.

TOC may indeed find a sympathetic reception among many. And why should that not be? The Church Growth Movement and the Emergent Church have not succeeded in what they promised to deliver. Thus disappointed souls committed to those failing (failed) principles are happy to move on to the next blueprint and panacea. Any Christian may suffer under the discontent that arises when new disciples do not materialize after the prescribed hard work of preaching so as to plant the seed. We find certain movements attractive to us especially when what we are doing


So says Cole: “I have found there are many effective ministry methods that also hold back multiplication. Success, as defined by most of Christendom, is often counter to healthy reproduction” (22). The latter sentence, to me, is an unfair and sweeping judgment on Christendom. Contrast: “Since our ministry is only Christ’s, the words ‘effective’ and ‘successful’ can have no place in our vocabulary.” SCAER, “Integrity”, 18.


seems not to be doing what it should. Thus we become impatient with God’s timetable and methodology, and proceed to adjust or abandon them.

**Conclusion**

For our part as Lutherans, we should keep on. That is, keep on doing what we’re doing: being faithful; strengthening what is weak; maintaining what is strong. We have the best theology. We focus on Christ and His Word. We desire and work toward healthy churches to which many members are added. We defer to God’s will and way and time. Nevertheless God does not need us. No souls will be lost to the Lord since their salvation is in His hands. If the church truly were not concerned about her (His) mission to save sinners and nourish them, we would have closed the doors long ago, along with the seminaries. We have a desire not for Christian coaches but rather for trained clergy who will be able to provide ongoing pastoral care to those who have not abandoned the Faith (and also those who have).

There may be the temptation to view this ministerial office as a profession much like any other profession. We have office hours, we get paid, we help people, we give advice, and we perform certain rites of passage. But we might consider the situation from another perspective. A surgeon may have you on the table for only a matter of minutes. But your precious life is in his hands during those few moments, and every move of his hands is trained for certain critical procedures. These are costly procedures, given the time, money, effort, training, certification, and licensing expended toward getting to the place of standing over someone’s body in an operating room. Then there is the matter of malpractice and the safeguards employed to avoid prosecutions for negligence. So also with a sermon or Bible lesson—every word of Lutheran proclamation is costly, given what it took for a minister to get to the point of standing in a place of teaching. If the Word of God is a sharp sword, we will be careful as to how we handle it. Or are we unaware of this? The malpractice fee will be high and harsh. Our encounters with clergy are serious, in or out of the pulpit. Applying the words of one inspired writer to cases of pastoral care and conversation: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

Likewise we have the best laity. They devote themselves to the concerns of the church, to our facilities, to the transmission of our traditions, to the cost of training our ministers, to the production of resources, to the proclamation of the pure Gospel in near and far places. They honour their pastors and contribute to healthy congregations. They
know the power of the little word “Amen”. They seek to attend the Holy Communion frequently. They are learning the value of Private Absolution. They know their place as hearers, according to the Table of Duties. Thus doing, they devote themselves to the Word of God and to prayer. They are concerned to be biblically literate. They are equipped. They endeavour to think the same things, being like-minded and not being tossed to and fro, carried about by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14).

If we take Cole’s position and say that the church has lost her identity, lost her nerve, decreased in love for the lost, or even refuses to let her light shine, there is a solution to this. The solution is to preach and administer more Christ and His gifts. If one considers our church to be dying (perhaps the church shrinks here while growing there), we might look at how well we preach the pure and free Gospel. Do we attach strings to the preaching of Christ? Do we demand or require certain things along with the free gift? Is it conditional salvation? How often do we offer the Sacrament? Do we give free course to the Gospel by offering it only half the time? Are we making efforts to advance our congregations toward more “evangelical” practices? We might go back even further and ask if we have first preached the Law. If the Law does not drive sinners to repentance, what then of the gospel and the sacraments? Maybe our preaching of the Law needs a tune-up.

On the one hand, we cannot determine the church’s population; but we can preach and disseminate Christ who through His Word goes forth to create and build. He Himself says, “My words are Spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). He may bring forth population explosion in the church, if not here, then in other parts of the world—as He is indeed doing. We trust what He says, that His Spirit is bound to His pure Word. That is our starting point. On the other hand, looking back, “we often can see and evaluate God’s working in history for the church’s decline, growth and rebirth, but the church as divine mystery in the world cannot be manipulated.” No matter how good your programme is.

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Review Article

*Jesus of Nazareth*

John R. Stephenson


Two volumes of Joseph Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth* have appeared thus far, with a third and final instalment (on the Infancy narratives) reportedly under way during his 2011 summer vacation at Castel Gandolfo. This major work, produced by a scholar doubly burdened with advancing years and a demanding day job, constitutes a theological and spiritual classic that we can only appreciate in the context of one of the major issues with which theology has had to deal over the past two and a half centuries.

**The Three-Stage “Quest”**

Describing the theological impact of the 18th century Enlightenment on European Protestantism, Jaroslav Pelikan emphasized how the Age of Reason targeted the interlocking motifs of mystery, miracle, and authority. With respect to the last-named, there was none, outside the autonomous human person; as far as the second went, such phenomena did not, could not happen; and the deep things of God must pass muster before good old earthy common sense, thus excluding mystery from the outset. To adopt this mind-set is, of course, to dismiss the revelation of God in Christ.

Applied by the Hamburg professor of oriental languages, Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), these maxims of Radical Deism delivered a blistering attack on the historical integrity of the Gospels. In a famous section (“On the aims of Jesus and his disciples”) of his posthumously published *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, Reimarus charged the primitive Church in general and the four evangelists in particular with glaring fraud.

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Reconstructing the “actual” Jesus from the rubble of the obviously fiction-ridden texts of the Gospels, Reimarus painted an image of a Radical Deist transplanted to an earlier age, who taught Enlightenment-style moral virtue but also claimed to be Israel’s Davidic Messiah, perishing in a futile rebellion against the Roman occupying power (Ratzinger notes how the theme of Jesus as political revolutionary was renewed by the German Robert Eisler in 1929/1930 and by the Englishman S. G. F. Brandon in 1967; 2:13). Reluctant to return to the humdrum lives of Galilean fishermen, the apostles creatively responded to the collapse of Jesus’ mission by foisting the Resurrection onto a gullible public and launching a spurious religion that entrapped countless credulous generations before being unmasked by Reimarus and his ilk.

In his *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) grippingly told the story of the attempt to prise the “real” Jesus from the manifestly unreliable Gospel framework as it developed from the days of Reimarus to his own early manhood. In a work published in 1901, Wilhelm Wrede concluded that Jesus never claimed to be Messiah, St Mark having covered up this fact by pretending that He commanded His disciples to keep quiet about His status till after the Resurrection. Moreover, Mark conveniently invented the three predictions of the Passion, which, according to Rudolf Bultmann, represent an unequivocal case of *vaticinia ex eventu*/prophecies after the fact.\(^2\) The title of the English translation of Schweitzer’s magnum opus, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, has lent its name to a major ongoing topic of modern theological study. Impressed by Reimarus’ effort, but convinced that Jesus was an apocalyptist who expected the imminent end of the world\(^3\) rather than a political revolutionary seeking the violent overthrow of Roman power, Schweitzer agreed with the launcher of the Quest that Jesus died a failure, period.\(^4\) The harvest of this first phase of the Quest is distilled in Rudolf Bultmann’s judgement that “we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus.”\(^5\)

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\(^3\) This facet of Schweitzer’s argument has had enormous staying power, leading Ratzinger to write of the “conventional interpretation of Jesus’ preaching in terms of imminent eschatology” (2:323).

\(^4\) See **John R. Stephenson**, *Eschatology* (Fort Wayne, IN: the Luther Academy, 1993), 19.

\(^5\) **Rudolf Bultmann**, *Jesus and the Word*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith & Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), “I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often
introduced the method of form criticism to England, R. H. Lightfoot (1883-1953) elegantly paraphrased Bultmann’s thesis, announcing from the pulpit of Oxford’s university church that “the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us.”

Those who studied university theology and/or entered seminary in the 1960s and 1970s became familiar with the New Quest of the Historical Jesus pursued by Bultmannian scholars such as Ernst Käsemann and Günther Bornkamm in Germany and James M. Robinson and Norman Perrin in the USA. After this faddish movement petered out in its turn, the so-called Jesus Seminar began its work in 1985. Still persuaded of the Enlightenment bottom line concerning mystery, miracle, and authority, the participants in the Jesus Seminar made headlines with their pronouncements, democratically ratified by majority vote among themselves, to the effect that Jesus never made this statement or performed that work recorded in the Gospels. Truly, what goes around comes around. As errors recycle through the history of theology, novelty tends to take the form of amended nomenclature rather than fresh substance. Viewed in the perspective of the whole of church history, even Reimarus himself must be denied the predicate of originality. After all, the Gnostics of the second century had already charged the four evangelists with producing distorted accounts of the actual Jesus in line with early Catholic doctrine. In company with Reimarus and his successors, the Gnostic teachers claimed knowledge of the real Jesus, in their case through esoteric access to unsullied channels of authentic tradition.

A major reason for the writing of Joseph Ratzinger’s Jesus of Nazareth is the infiltration of post-Vatican II Roman Catholic scholarship by the presuppositions and methodologies that have wrought much mischief in mainline Protestant circles: “The alleged findings of scholarly exegesis have been used to put together the most dreadful books that destroy the figure of Jesus and dismantle the faith” (1:35). As early as 1957, in fact, Ernst Käsemann paid a backhanded compliment to contemporary Roman Catholic exegetes whom he no longer deemed inferior to their Protestant legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.” Note the opening sentence of his The Theology of the New Testament, 2 vols, trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM Press, 1952) 2:3—“The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself.”

counterparts. In proof of how post-Vatican II Rome has caught up with mainline Protestantism, we need only mention the work of the Irish-born ex-priest, John Dominic Crossan, and note how, in the spring of 2011, the “cutting edge” Convivium Press has been advertising *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* by the Spanish Roman Catholic scholar, José Antonio Pagola. This vicar general of a Spanish diocese has cast off the dogmatic shackles of his benighted past by discovering, in the words of Darrell Turner, his reviewer in the *National Catholic Reporter*, that, “The Pharisees did not seek the death of Jesus. In the Last Supper, bread and wine did not symbolize [!] his body and blood. Jesus did not interpret his death as a sacrifice.”

While the majority of Roman Catholic exegetes have not gone as far as Crossan and Pagola, their embrace of the historical critical method has injected a fateful indecisiveness into their conclusions concerning the earthly Jesus. Thus Ratzinger laments how recent decades have seen no successor volumes to the books written about Jesus in the 1940s by such major Roman Catholic scholars as Karl Adam, Romano Guardini, Franz Michael Willam, Giovanni Papini, and Henri Daniel-Rops:

But the situation started to change in the 1950s. The gap between the “historical Jesus” and the “Christ of faith” grew wider and the two visibly fell apart. But what can faith in Jesus as the Christ possibly mean, in Jesus as the Son of the living God, if the *man* Jesus was so completely different from the picture that the Evangelists painted of him and that the Church, on the evidence of the Gospels, takes as the basis of her preaching? (1:xi)

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Justice obliges us to admit that modern Catholic exegesis, at least in Germany and its immediate neighbourhood, has attained a standard which, generally speaking, is no longer inferior to Protestant work and indeed not infrequently outdoes it in careful scholarship. This state of affairs is proof that the historical critical method has in principle become common property. It no longer distinguishes one exegetical camp from another but now in fact simply divides scholarly work from speculation or primitive thinking.

8 Rejecting the “eschatological-apocalyptic” take on the historical Jesus prevalent since Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss (a thesis that contains a large grain of truth—see Jonathan Grothe’s contribution to the Marquart Festschrift), Crossan imparts the view that “The historical Jesus was, then, a peasant Jewish Cynic.” John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 428; emphasis original.

9 <http://ncronline.org/node/20835>. 
As he respectfully reviews the work of his older contemporary, Rudolf Schnackenburg (1914-2002), Ratzinger intimates that this dean of recent German Roman Catholic NT scholarship came uncomfortably close to the sceptical conclusions of Bultmann and Lightfoot mentioned above (1:xii-xiv).

His decision to respond to a faith-corroding crisis within Roman Catholic scholarship and church life has led Ratzinger to perform a much-needed service for the whole of Christendom: these volumes present an ecumenical solution to an ecumenical problem. In doing so, he has taken off the papal cassock to don the scholar’s gown: “It goes without saying that this book is in no way an exercise of the magisterium, but is solely an expression of my personal search ‘for the face of the Lord’ (cf Ps 27:8)” (1:xxiii). The bottom line of the two volumes of Jesus of Nazareth that have appeared thus far consists in their providing a learned and winsome refutation of the unremitting attacks on the authenticity of the Gospel narratives from Reimarus to the present day, assaults that can count on an abundance of favourable publicity from the mainstream media.

Four Virtues of Both Volumes

Four facets of this magnum opus from a theologian now in the middle of his ninth decade merit immediate mention.

First, although, according to the foreword to Part One, “the historical-critical method … is and remains an indispensable dimension of exegetical work” (1:xv), eagle-eyed Missourians will find scant evidence of its use in

10 In the same year, 2003, that he began work on Jesus of Nazareth (which he appears to have intended as a retirement project), Ratzinger noted how, “Today in broad circles, even among believers, an image has prevailed of a Jesus who demands nothing, never scolds, who accepts everyone and everything, who no longer does anything but affirm us.” On the Way to Jesus Christ, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 7f.; the foreword is dated 2003. Ratzinger goes on to quote from a commentator on the most recent German “Lutheran” liturgies, who laments how, in modern formulae of prayer, “Even the practice of naming the Person of Christ recedes or disappears ..., then there is a shift in emphasis that consists in the fact that Christ is no longer addressed in the respectful terms reserved for royalty but that his solidarity with mankind is stressed instead” (8). Having observed that the eclipse of the real Jesus is an ecumenical problem, Ratzinger remarks that, “The Jesus who makes everything okay for everyone is a phantom, a dream, not a real figure” (8).
Ratzinger’s understanding of this term manifestly differs from the definition expounded by Kurt Marquart in *Anatomy of an Explosion*, and at one point he frankly understands his task as that of refuting “critical scholarship” (1:328). Even as he reiterates how the historical-critical method is an “indispensable tool”, Ratzinger confesses “the biblical writings as a single corpus of Holy Scripture inspired by God” (1:vxi) and launches into a detailed explanation of its limits (1:xvi-xxi). These remarks boil down to the confession that “I trust the Gospels. ... I believe that this Jesus—the Jesus of the Gospels—is a historically plausible and convincing figure” (1:xxi-xxii).

The foreword to the second volume balances recognition of “those aspects of the historical-critical method that are of continuing value” with the caution that “it constitutes a specific and historically conditioned form of rationality that is both open to correction and completion and in need of it” (2:xiv-xv). In short, “mainline” methodology needs to be complemented by “a properly developed faith-hermeneutic ... appropriate to the text” so that “the great insights of patristic exegesis will be able to yield their fruit once more in a new context” (2:xv). Whereas historical criticism traps Jesus irretrievably in the past, Ratzinger has “attempted to develop a way of observing and listening to the Jesus of the Gospels that can indeed lead to personal encounter and that, through collective listening with Jesus’ disciples across the ages, can indeed attain sure knowledge of the real historical figure of Jesus” (2:xvii).

Secondly, as he deftly draws on a wide range of modern exegetical scholarship, Ratzinger sails happily in ecumenical waters. He rejoices in encouragement received from the Protestant scholars Peter Stuhlmacher and Martin Hengel (2:xiii; the latter died while the second volume was being written). Moreover, he gladly incorporates insights from all over the confessional map, showing appreciation for the work of his fellow countryman Joachim Jeremias (e.g., 1:21, 344 et passim) and, within the Anglosphere, for C. H. Dodd (whom I observed at close hand in Oxford’s Radcliffe Camera during the last months of his life), and C. K. Barrett. These examples could easily be multiplied.

At no stage of his career has it been possible to describe Ratzinger as a polemicist. Accordingly, as he quotes Hengel against Bultmann’s view that the idea of the incarnation was lifted lock, stock, and barrel from a full-

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11 But we might connect the gap between the “Christ of faith” and the “Jesus of history” that opened up in the 1950s (1:xii) to Pius XII’s decision, in his encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritus* of 1943, to encourage a restrained use of the historical-critical method (1:xiv).
fledged Gnostic system that allegedly predated Christianity (1:220), he responds with such (albeit decisive) gentleness to Hengel’s view that John’s Gospel is a mere “Jesus poem”, not a reliable historical source (1:228), that, were Hengel still alive, he could cheerfully stop by the papal apartments for Kaffee und Kuchen with his one-time fellow Tübingen professor. Perhaps Ratzinger’s habit of dealing calmly with issues while avoiding personal assaults on other scholars’ jugulars could teach us something.

Thirdly, the whole work betrays not the least trace of the narcissism so evident in those who claim to have rescued the “real” Jesus from His long oblivion, but displays a consistent, calm, and reverent focus on the Lord as He is transmitted to us through the evangelists’ words. Drawing from the well of a lifetime’s scholarship and meditation, Ratzinger expounds the Gospels in a manner helpful to all Christians in their devotions and to all preachers in their homiletical preparations, habitually setting forth with skill the OT background of successive episodes in our Lord’s ministry. The section on Jesus’ favoured self-designation “Son of man” is particularly illuminating (1:321-335):

The enigmatic term “Son of Man” presents us in concentrated form with all that is most original and distinctive about the figure of Jesus, his mission, and his being. He comes from God and he is God. But that is precisely what makes him—having assumed human nature—the bringer of true humanity. (1:333-34)

Fourthly, readers with some expertise in the various theological disciplines and particularly those who have attained a measure of familiarity with the history of the Christian tradition must marvel at Ratzinger’s depth and range of scholarship, not to mention his ability to keep up with the latest developments in research and publication. Only one who has spent many studious hours in the TDNT can offer the definition of the term εὕχηγγέλιον to be found in 1:46f. (cf. also 1:338f.), where Ratzinger puts a ball into play with which we Lutherans can surely run:

The term figures in the vocabulary of the Roman emperors, who understood themselves as lords, saviours, and redeemers of the world. The messages issued by the emperor were called in Latin evangelium, regardless

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of whether or not their content was particularly cheerful and pleasant. The idea was that what comes from the emperor is a saving message, that it is not just a piece of news, but a change of the world for the better. When the Evangelists adopt this word, and it thereby becomes the generic name for their writings, what they mean to tell us is this: What the emperors, who pretend to be gods, illegitimately claim, really occurs here—a message endowed with plenary authority, a message that is not just talk, but reality. In the vocabulary of contemporary linguistic theory, we would say that the evangelium, the Gospel, is not just informative speech, but performative speech—not just the imparting of information, but action, efficacious power that enters into the world to save and transform.

Since an in-depth review of the two volumes that have appeared to date would inevitably grow into a small book on its own account, it is best from this juncture of the present review (a) to point to some highlights; (b) to venture a respectful critique of a sensitive aspect of Part Two as well as raising two other questions concerning this volume; and (c) to reflect, in closing, on the limitations that must attend all attempts (including Ratzinger’s) to set forth the Gospel Figure who necessarily transcends all endeavours, however pious and well-meaning, to grasp Him.

Some Highlights

As the Introduction to Part One (1:1-8) understands Jesus in terms of Deut. 18:15’s prediction of a prophet who will be like but greater than Moses, Ratzinger presents our Lord not (!) as the transmitter of an intensified legal demand, but as the agent of a greater liberation than was achieved in the first exodus. While the Lord knew Moses face to face (Deut. 34:10) and permitted him to speak with Him as a man speaks to his friend (Ex. 33:11), Moses was nevertheless permitted to see only God’s back and not His face (Ex. 33:22). Conversely, “His [i.e., the new Moses’] distinguishing note will be his immediate relation with God, which enables him to communicate God’s will and word firsthand and unadulterated. And that is the saving intervention which Israel—indeed, the whole of humanity—is waiting for” (1:5). “What was true of Moses only in fragmentary form has now been fully realized in the person of Jesus: He lives before the face of God, not just as a friend, but as a Son; he lives in the most intimate unity with the Father” (1:6). Against Adolf von Harnack’s claim “that Jesus’ message was about the Father, not about the Son, and that Christology therefore has no place in it”, Ratzinger contends that, “The Christological dimension—in other words, the mystery of the Son as revealer of the Father—is present in everything Jesus says and does” (1:7).
In the lengthy chapter on the Sermon on the Mount (1:64-127), Ratzinger shows that he “gets it”, big time, on Christology, and to such an extent that we might speak his name respectfully in the same breath as we recollect the contributions of Cyril of Alexandria and Luther on this central topic. Some of the most gripping pages of the first volume consist in a dialogue (1:90-122) with the American rabbi Jacob Neusner, who in his A Rabbi Talks with Jesus (2000), pictures himself listening to the original delivery of Mt. 5-7 and, despite some attraction to Jesus, firmly declining to become His follower. Ratzinger summarizes Neusner’s arguments with greater economy and elegance than the rabbi himself achieved, undoubtedly boosting his book sales in the process. And he responds to his interlocutor’s objections with exquisite courtesy and telling force.

The rabbi pictures himself discussing the Sermon with a fellow rabbi of Jesus’ day, coming to the conclusion that our Lord left out nothing from the Law, and putting his finger on the actual bone of contention between acceptance and rejection of Christ then and now: “’Then what did he add?’ ‘Himself.’” (1:105). As he responds to Neusner’s discomfort with Jesus’ placing Himself above the Sabbath and the ties of family and race, Ratzinger shows how Matthew depicts Jesus as the Torah in person, dealing a knockout blow against the trite view that Jesus’ dispensing with certain prescriptions of the Law attests mere “liberalism” on His part. Note well our author’s attention to the single Greek word ἐξήλθοντο of Mt. 7:28 (cf. Mk 1:22; Lk. 4:32):

Jesus’ “I” is accorded a status that no teacher of the Law can legitimately allow himself. The crowd feels this—Matthew tells us explicitly that the people “were alarmed” at his way of teaching. He teaches not as the rabbis do, but as one who has “authority” (Mt 7:28; cf Mk 1:22; Lk 4:32). Obviously this does not refer to the rhetorical quality of Jesus’ discourses, but rather to the open claim that he himself is on the same exalted level as the Lawgiver—as God. The people’s “alarm” (the RSV translation unfortunately tones this down to “astonishment”) is precisely over the fact that a human being dares to speak with the authority of God. Either he is misappropriating God’s majesty—which would be terrible—or else, and this seems almost inconceivable, he really does stand on the same exalted level as God. (1:102-3)

Dealing with Neusner’s perplexity over Jesus’ claim to lordship over the Sabbath and over the implications of Mt. 11:25-30, Ratzinger writes:

The issue that is really at the heart of the debate is thus finally laid bare. Jesus understands himself as the Torah—as the word of God in person. The tremendous prologue of John’s Gospel—“in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1)—says nothing
different from what the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount and the Jesus of
the Synoptic Gospels says. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of
the Synoptics is one and the same: the true “historical” Jesus. (1:110-1)

Speaking of Mt. 11:25-30, Ratzinger tells us how these verses (closely
paralleled in Lk. 10:21-22) feature in German scholarship as the
\textit{messianischer Jubelruf}—“messianic joyful shout”; in the Anglosphere they
have been dubbed the “Johannine thunderbolt in the Synoptic skies.” The
in-depth exposition of these verses given in two places (1:109f.; 339-44)
feed faith, instruct theologians, and equip preachers, being itself well
worth the purchase price of the first volume.

\textbf{Between Treasure Troves Fodder for an Auseinandersetzung
or Two}

Brief mention of the meaty chapter on the Fourth Gospel (1:218-286)
provides a bridge to the second volume, which sometimes gives the
impression that the author’s day job has sapped his scholarly energy now
and then, and furnishes me the opportunity to pose a critical question to
Ratzinger. As has already been noted, Ratzinger sharply dissents from the
critical consensus that John’s Gospel is severely wanting in historical
content, insisting to the contrary that, “The Fourth Gospel rests on
extraordinarily precise knowledge of times and places, and so can only
have been produced by someone who had an excellent firsthand
knowledge of Palestine at the time of Jesus” (1:220-1) Cutting to the quick,
“in light of current scholarship, then, it is quite possible to see Zebedee’s
son John as the bystander who solemnly asserts his claim to be an
eyewitness (cf. Jn 19:35) and thereby identifies himself as the true author of
the Gospel” (1:225). Small wonder that Ratzinger is less than acceptable in
polite academic company!

\textsuperscript{13} Reasons of space preclude more than pointing to the related section 1:345-55, where
Ratzinger defends the authenticity and expounds the sense of the mainly (but not
exclusively) Johannine “I am” statements. At least one reviewer (a Modernist RC, if
memory serves me right) got fearfully talked out of shape that Ratzinger defies all
political correctness by confessing the genuineness of Jn 8:24! Believers will appreciate
volume one’s closing paragraph, with its calm contention that the Nicene \textit{homoousios}
confesses biblical content, and not least with its swipe at von Harnack: “This term did
not Hellenize the faith or burden it with an alien philosophy. On the contrary, it
captured in a stable formula exactly what had emerged as incomparably new and
different in Jesus’ way of speaking with the Father” (1:355).
Two nuggets from the treasure trove of this Johannine chapter: first, the reflections on the function of “remembrance” in John, in connection with the Lord’s promise in Jn 16:13, are most valuable (1:230-35); and, secondly, like John Kleinig, Ratzinger hammers home how both John’s account and Jesus’ own deliberate choice pattern His ministry according to Israel’s divinely prescribed liturgical year (1:236-38). Awareness of this second point proves especially helpful in understanding the “principal Johannine images” of water, wine and vine, bread, and shepherd (1:238-86); these pages have a fruitful role to play in the shaping of a biblically founded pastoral theology.

Ratzinger’s appreciation of the historicity of John’s Gospel can lead to an insoluble conundrum, as when (in the good company of Hermann Sasse14) he takes the view that the Fourth Evangelist deliberately contradicts the Synoptic dating of the Last Supper, wresting the institution of the Eucharist from the immediate context of Jesus’ last Passover meal and making the crucifixion synchronous with the slaughter of the lambs for that year’s feast (2:106-15). In CLD’s Lord’s Supper locus, finding it incomprehensible that John should knowingly contradict the other Evangelists, I opted for another solution. Okay, Sasse held the same opinion as Ratzinger, whose erudition dwarfs any learning I could swiftly amass; but his and Sasse’s exposition of the Johannine chronology makes me distinctly uncomfortable. ...

As the second volume begins with a consideration of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (2:1-11) and proceeds through the cleansing of the Temple (2:11-23) into the little apocalypses of the Tuesday of Holy Week (2:24-52), Ratzinger significantly skates over our Lord’s sharp denunciation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 (2:24f.) prior to making the only assertion for which I would presume seriously to fault him in the whole work that has appeared to date. He shows how Jesus envisaged the coming end of the era of the Second Temple (2:25), which was in the process of being replaced by the destroyed and revived Temple of His own body, destined to become universal in the Church (powerfully expressed at 2:39, with an exposition of Rom. 3:23-25 and a complimentary reference to the Lutheran...

Ulrich Wilckens). So far, so good. But as Ratzinger sweetens the bitter pill he must administer to Judaism by pertinent quotation from Josephus, who told how unearthly voices foretold the downfall of the Temple in AD 66, he smooths the path of Jewish-Christian relations by providing an altogether too convenient win-win solution to an irresolvable disagreement that has festered for twenty centuries. The Judaism of the Jerusalem Temple has gone, period, leaving “two possible responses to this situation, two ways of reading the Old Testament anew after the year 70: the reading in the light of Christ, based on the Prophets, and the rabbinical reading” (2:33). As a German who spent his teenage years under the Nazi terror, Ratzinger is caught between a rock and a hard place: Hitler and his henchmen sought to destroy the Jewish race, prompting Lumen Gentium 17 to make amends two decades later, and making it impossible for the German Pope to dot the i’s and cross the t’s of his earlier confession of Jn 8:24 (1:346)!15 In his recently published third book-length interview with journalist Peter Seewald, Ratzinger seems to have his cake and eat it on the matter of the exclusiveness of Christ and the salvation of ethnic Jews apart from Him. We should indeed hope for the salvation of all our fellow men—God grant it. Amen! But the New Testament does not give the impression that those ethnic Jews who deliberately and knowingly reject Jesus of Nazareth as I Am in the flesh may look to behold His face in blessedness. For that reason, orthodox Lutherans are going to see Vatican foreign policy16 and

15 See BENEDICT XVI, Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald, trans. Michael J. Miller & Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 81: “Then as Germans we were of course shaken by what happened in the Third Reich, which gave us a special reason to look with humility and shame, and with love, upon the People of Israel.” Unable, of course, to contest this premise, we might, however, question the corollary drawn a few sentences later, where Benedict XVI spoke to Seewald of “this new, loving, sympathetic interrelation of Israel and the Church, where each respects the being and distinctive mission of the other.” This outside observer sees Rome’s “opening up” to Judaism as a futile one-way street, and notes how the continuance of top-level “dialogue” appears conditional on the papacy’s agreeing to exempt Jews from its evangelistic efforts, which defies the Lord’s clear mandate given in Mt. 28:19-20. See also Light of the World, 107. An elderly immigrant (Slovakian) woman here in St Catharines, who worships in the old Latin rite under the auspices of the Priestly Fraternity of St Peter (FSSP), discussed this matter with me once, voicing disagreement with her Pope, wagging her finger as she testified, “Everybody needs Jesus!” Quite right.

16 In the Foreword to the first volume (1:xv), Ratzinger highlights the significance of The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, a 2001 publication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. A careful analysis of and considered Auseinandersetzung
not honest exegesis at work when Ratzinger writes how, “After centuries of antagonism, we now see it as our task to bring these two ways of rereading the biblical texts—the Christian way and the Jewish way—into dialogue with one another, if we are to understand God’s will and his word aright” (2:33-4)

An especially rich treasure trove of the second volume is the chapter on Jn 17 (2:76-102), which begins by crediting the Lutheran David Chytraeus with coining the expression “high-priestly prayer” before going on to expound the whole prayer as deliberately based by our Lord on the liturgy of the Jewish Day of Atonement. Once again, with John Kleinig, Ratzinger underscores our Lord’s rooting His own ministry in Israel’s liturgical year.

To this juncture I have omitted whole significant chapters of the first volume, and any attempt to do justice to all of the second volume would extend this review beyond a word-length that any editor would countenance. In overdue conclusion, then, I limit myself to four further points.

First, as he deals with the issue of responsibility for the Lord’s death (a tricky issue for the German Pope, in light of previous generations’ alleged belief in collective “Jewish blood guilt”), Ratzinger may well overdo his backtracking from the supposed excesses of the past by arguing that, in John’s usage, “the Jews” has the sense, not of the nation as a whole, but simply of the Temple aristocracy (2:185). After all, the “Passover of the Jews” (Jn 2:13; 6:4) enjoyed festal status among the whole people, not just their sacerdotal elite. To claim that “the real group of accusers are the current Temple authorities” (2:186) is unduly restrictive, given that the Lord Himself prophesied that He would suffer “many things from the elders and high priests and scribes” (Mt. 16:21), and that, already at an early stage of His ministry, “the Pharisees took counsel with the Herodians against Him, in order to destroy Him” (Mk 3:6).

Secondly, he does a beautiful job of introducing his readers to the intricacies and complexities of the Resurrection narratives, distinguishing between the “confessional” and “narrative” traditions, and showing (without explicitly saying as much) how the headaches involved in harmonizing the different reports tell against Reimarus’ hypothesis of deliberate fraud on the apostles’ part: actual fraud would have been more smoothly scripted and covered up.

Thirdly, no scholar who describes the central Figure of the Gospels can step out of his own shadow or transcend His own subjectivity, with the

with this document is called for—perhaps this might be a task for David Adams, once his Genesis commentary is finished.
result that not even the most pious and orthodox of theologians can wholly escape the fate of Adolf von Harnack who, in the famous words of Alfred Tyrell, looked down the well of twenty centuries only to see his own Liberal Protestant face reflected at the bottom. Courteous to a fault, ever averse to hyperbole, and anxious always to see only the best in everybody, Ratzinger may well have smoothed over the Lord’s rough edges and wrought a certain softening of His hard sayings—as was noted above, he does not linger on Matthew 23.

Fourthly, and finally, despite His (less than Petrine; cf. Acts 2:36!) hesitation in the matter of bold confession vis-à-vis contemporary Judaism, Ratzinger’s staunch confession of the Holy Name before Rabbi Neusner and his brethren puts in a nutshell why I cry aloud to all readers of this review Tollete, legete—pick up these volumes and read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them:

It is our Jewish interlocutors who, quite rightly, ask again and again: So what has your “Messiah” Jesus actually brought? He has not brought world peace, and he has not conquered the world’s misery. So he can hardly be the true Messiah, who, after all, is supposed to do just that. Yes, what has Jesus brought? We have already encountered this question and we know the answer. He has brought the God of Israel to the nations, so that all the nations now pray to him and recognize Israel’s Scriptures as his word, the word of the living God. He has brought the gift of universality, which was the one great definitive promise to Israel and the world. This universality, this faith in the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—extended now in Jesus’ new family to all nations over and above the bonds of descent according to the flesh—is the fruit of Jesus’ work. It is what proves him to be the Messiah. It signals a new interpretation of the messianic promise that is based on Moses and the Prophets, but also opens them up in a completely new way. (1:116-7)

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Sermon

St Matthew 5:1-12

Juhana Pohjola

“HE WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN.” Did Jesus go there to find peace and beauty or good acoustics and enough space? Maybe so, but He had other reasons as well. Abraham went to a mountain with Isaac, Moses went to a mountain to receive the Law, Elijah went to a mountain to meet God. Yes, mountain is God’s pulpit, a place of revelation!

“He sat down.” Maybe He was tired after climbing; who wouldn’t be. But there is more to it than that. This gesture was a sign of authority. The crowds and disciples stand, but the one who teaches sits down. He speaks ex cathedra. He was about to teach them as the One who had authority.

“He opened his mouth.” This is a solemn and emphatic expression. From His mouth is to be heard the revelation of God. He is the true prophet who speaks out the true will of God. But, more than that, He is not only God’s mouthpiece; He is God Himself. Not only a messenger, but the message itself. “I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them!”

Disciples of Jesus! You have also gathered tonight on a mountain! Peace, beauty and good acoustics can be found on Mount Carmel as well. But there is more to it. “His disciples came to him!” You have come to the real presence of the true Prophet, Priest, and King.

Jesus addressed primarily His disciples and secondarily the crowds. Why? Because His disciples were to be His mouthpiece where ever they were sent. “He who hears you hears Me.” Yes you are called and ordained to be His mouthpieces. In many ordination agendas can be found this passage: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 2:7). And you know what a joy it is in His stead and by His command to deliver His gracious words to the afflicted ones, to set free guilty consciences as his mouthpiece, to give instruction to those seeking the Lord. There is no greater calling than that. And this noble calling makes you humble: through my lips Christ Himself with his life-giving Spirit is gathering and nurturing His congregation. But you know also

* This homily was preached at the Divine Service for the East District Pastoral Conference, Mt. Carmel Conference Centre, Niagara Falls, 6 November 2011.
what a struggle it is Sunday after Sunday to climb again up the mountain. When preparing a sermon, how often do you find your mouth empty and dry, your lips numb? But how true is the promise of Psalm 81[:10], “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it”? Ask yourself: When have I been left without the words needed for delivery to His people?

You truly are His mouthpiece. And that is why we emphasize the purity of teaching, why we encourage each other by saying: let us love God by loving theology! But there is even more to it than that. The faith is given and sustained through the external word of God. Congregations are made up of preachers and hearers, and you know your calling. But here remains a problem, a question that we often forget, an issue that we easily think is not an issue. If you are the mouthpiece of Christ in your congregation, who is the mouthpiece of Christ to you?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother’s is sure.” Yes, you read the Word; yes, you daily deliver the Gospel; yes, you may even sometimes sit critically and listen to how your colleague is dealing with a particular text in his sermon, the text that you would have dealt with totally differently and in a better way.

But my question to you is: who is preaching Christ Jesus to you? When can you close your mouth, seal your lips, and be all ears? Not delivering, but receiving; not preaching but listening; not absolving but being absolved” Christ in your heart is truly weaker than the Christ in the mouth of your brother! There is no other way for our faith to be nurtured than by the external gifts that we need to hear and receive personally.

St Augustine puts it well: “Where I’m terrified by what I am for you, I am given comfort by what I am with you. For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian.” Your baptismal vocation is to receive the gifts; your pastoral vocation is to deliver the gifts! Forget neither of them!

I was glad to see that the conference agenda specifically mentioned the opportunity for private confession and absolution. In our pastors’ collegium [in the Finnish part of the Mission Province] that consists of about 30 pastors, we have introduced a very un-Lutheran custom. That was easy, because we are used to un-Lutheran customs in our liberal church. But this one we learned from the Lutheran Church of Ingria. I have heard that there at least once a year every pastor has to visit his bishop for private confession. We decided together in the freedom of Gospel that every time we had a pastors’ retreat all the pastors, not only may but must see our bishop privately and receive personally the gifts of the keys that Christ gave to His Church. At their retreat, Gospel preachers need not a
few days off from the “Gospel things” but instead the very Gospel things themselves!

We do not need even ask why; it is so important. But our text gives a particular angle on the matter. We see how the Sermon on the Mount starts with the Beatitudes. They are neither ethical demands nor moral exhortations. They describe first what Christians receive from Christ: they receive the Kingdom of Heaven; they are comforted; they inherit the earth; they shall be satisfied. It is all about what Christ is giving to them!

And once they receive Christ and His gifts, then they start delivering them out. They become merciful and peacemakers! Christ acts through them! But what is striking is that in only one of the nine beatitudes does Christ emphatically address the disciples directly. That is in the last one: “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account” (Mt. 5:11). Christ knows what He is talking about: He was himself falsely accused of being a blasphemer, of using Satan’s power, of being a glutton and a drunkard. Yes, people mocked and laughed at Him. They shouted, “Crucify!” Jesus is saying to His disciples then and now: “You certainly will face the same. Why? Because, if you are My mouthpieces, how could it be otherwise in this fallen and rebellious world?” And you know from your experience that this is true. Maybe persecution in our case may be too strong a word, but we know that ministry includes more than carrying only a pectoral cross.

Maybe you haven’t received in your ministry the support and respect from your wife and children that you would have expected and needed. Maybe you haven’t received the call you wanted. Maybe you have been handled unjustly and ungratefully in your congregation. Maybe you have seen your colleagues get rewarded and given positions that you would have justly deserved. Maybe your talents have been overlooked in the Synod. Maybe God has allowed to you personally too much sorrow, too many setbacks, too many disappointments. Whatever the cross might be, did Jesus say to you: “Be bitter and resentful for your load is truly heavy on earth!”?

If I had to name one pet sin among confessional pastors in the Lutheran Church of Finland, that would be bitterness. It is understandable after going through decades of Kirchenkampf, and losing battle after an battle, seeing so many others going with the mainstream in doctrine and practice, being left alone, but bitterness is still a sin poisoning your heart and your mouth. I don’t know if this is the case here in Lutheran Church–Canada, but I would assume that also you may have every reason to be bitter. Certainly you have been wounded, and so you are also tempted to dwell on your own wounds. But that is not what Christ called us to be. What did he
say: “Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven!” How can we rejoice and be glad in the midst of all that brings us sorrow and sleepless nights? Yes we can, because Christ says to you: “Blessed are you!” It is not a matter of feeling blessed. Or of seeing growth in your ministry that would cause you to say: “Now I’m blessed.” Being blessed does not mean being in a good mood or having a life in order or a ministry in a good shape. No it is based on the word of promise: “You are blessed because you are Mine. Both the blessing and the suffering is on My account!” The hardship, the setbacks, the loneliness, the cross in the ministry in not a sign that you are abandoned, that Christ is far away; on the contrary, Christ is there with you. You may not always feel it, you may not see it, you may not even always believe it but His word is true not only for hearers but also for preachers.

So fix your eyes and ears on Him. He has opened His mouth and His nail-scarred hands to you tonight. Whatever wounds, bitterness, and self-pity you may carry in your heart, whatever accusations you may have on your conscience—being a negligent husband or father; not being a patient and loving enough pastor; not being a thankful and faithful disciple of the Lord—the Lord Jesus says to you: “Be of good cheer; all your sins are forgiven.” “All your transgressions as a husband and a father, as My shepherd and servant, I have wiped away with My blood, they are no more. The accusation of your heart cannot curse you because I became a curse for your sake. You are blessed not cursed. In My wounds your wounds are healed. Have I not baptized you to be My child? Have I not ordained you to be My chosen servant? Have I not provided all that you have needed in life and ministry? I have been, I am now, and I will ever be faithful and gracious to you. I have given you a heavy cup to drink, a ministry to carry out in the church militant, but see what a cup I’m giving you tonight, a blessed union: I am yours and you are Mine! Come and taste My eternal victory with all the company of the saints in the church triumphant!”

“For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but My steadfast love shall not depart from you!” (Is. 54:10).

“So depart in My peace and be My mouthpiece in gladness!”

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