

Consensus

Volume 28

Issue 1 *Waterloo Lutheran Seminary Lutheran Life*
Lectures 1998-2001

Article 6

5-1-2002

Luther's pre-modern proclamation of Christ for a modern Lutheran problem

Barry G. Rasmussen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rasmussen, Barry G. (2002) "Luther's pre-modern proclamation of Christ for a modern Lutheran problem," *Consensus*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss1/6>

This Studies and Observations is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Luther's Pre-modern Proclamation of Christ for a Modern Lutheran Problem

Barry G. Rasmussen

*Pastor, St. Peter Church
Teulon, Manitoba*

At the 1999 national convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada the gathered assembly made a motion inviting the Lutheran Church Canada to sit down for friendly talks concerning current divisions and our common heritage. This invitation reflects the fact that the Lutheran churches of Canada are presently living a painful fragmentation. There are a number of complex historical and theological reasons for this split. Presently, one of the more important issues is the conflict between conservative and liberal hermeneutical traditions concerning the interpretation of Scripture. The situation becomes increasingly complicated as time passes and historical identities become entrenched around those differences.

The divisions are particularly acute since one's very corporate and personal identity in Christ is often attached to issues of interpretive method. Each side in the conflict enters its own hermeneutical circle and that becomes the boundary of its own particular solitude. This essay will look toward Martin Luther's pre-modern hermeneutic as a way to open discussions between the protagonists of these modern divisions. Martin Luther understood himself to be a theologian for the Church and it is the hope here that his writings might still have a pastoral role in our Canadian Lutheran context. As David S. Yeago has written:

Luther is a supremely *rhetorical* theologian; that is, he does not write in a purely analytic mode, but the activity of speaking and writing theologically is always itself engaged in the pastoral struggle against sin, death, and the Devil.¹

The Church, in previous times, had practiced an interpretive practice of reading Scripture with a fourfold meaning.² Gerhard O. Forde has suggested that the Church in our time and culture has placed the various

meanings side by side in competition with one another.³ The moral reading (*tropological*) is pitted against the literal meaning that is further contrasted against the eschatological (*anagogical*) which is again contrasted against its subjective meaning (*allegorical*). These conflicts can be identified as interpretive epochs:

First came the age of allegory (doctrinal “meaning,” orthodoxy), then the age of tropology (the age of the moral, culminating in liberalism), and finally some attempts at anagogy (the eschatological meaning) in our day. One could say that today there is a kind of tug-of-war between tropology and anagogy, the moral versus the eschatological, for interpreter’s rights to the text. After brief flirtation with anagogy, exegesis now seems ready to revert to tropology again. Ignorant of the question of use, exegesis is in a bad way.⁴

In this essay I will put forth the thesis that Martin Luther’s hermeneutic and his use of Scripture go beyond the hermeneutical presuppositions that help create our culture’s current division between conservatives and liberals. In fact, Luther’s pre-modern hermeneutic acts as a critique of the conservative-liberal split in our modern western culture. For Luther, the Church does not gain its identity by following a particular interpretive method for the reading of Scripture. Rather, it is the active voice of God in the Gospel that creates faith in Christ.

Modernity and the Space between Subject and Object

The hermeneutical presuppositions behind the conservative-liberal divisions assume a critical space between the interpreter and the sign so that an interpreter with the proper method can understand, comprehend, and become master of what the sign points toward. The sign can point toward some aspect of the interpreter and/or it can point to something outside the interpreter. The determining factor becomes the interpreter who attempts to master and understand the signs.

If the signs found in Scripture point toward God and God’s activity in the world then the sun, stars, planets, animals, other human beings, and even the self will also act as signs that point beyond themselves. Modernity is based on the double assumption that Scripture, the beings of our experience, and the phenomena that are manifested to us function

as signs and that they are obscure. These two assumptions work together in producing a world where it becomes very important to unlock the signs of Scripture and life with the correct interpretive method. In this search to find the correct technique to unlock the text's meaning, lines of conflict have developed over the priority of either subjective or objective meanings. Both sides of these debates presuppose a critical space between subject and object that requires a methodology to open understanding. It is this space between subject and object that is problematic for Luther's hermeneutic. It opens up a space where humanity becomes the measure of all things. Such an eventuality is a predicament for those who, like Luther, follow the Augustinian tradition that humanity's sinfulness is located in our being curved into ourselves.

John Milbank, in his recent *The Word Made Strange*, investigates Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* published in 1758. Robert Lowth, then bishop of Oxford, wrote about the creative power of the Hebrew poets of Scripture:

The whole course of nature, this immense universe of things, offers itself to human contemplation, and affords an infinite variety, a confused assemblage, a wilderness as it were of images which being collected as the materials of poetry, are selected and produced as occasion dictates. The mind of man is that mirror of Plato, which as he turns about at pleasure, and directs to different points of view, he creates another sun, other stars, planets, animals, and even another self. In this shadow or image of himself, he is enabled in some degree to contemplate the souls of other men;...⁵

Milbank points to Lowth's conception of the "peculiar *poeticity* of the Hebrews" as that which gave birth to modern biblical scholarship.⁶ It is not the application of historical science to the Bible that has caused our current divisions over method. Rather, as Milbank further explains, it was Lowth's "*metaphysical* conception of the Hebrews as co-creators which opens up for the Germans the 'critical' space in which the Bible could be viewed as a human work."⁷

Lowth's Christian orthodoxy made him conceive of a human author who was and whose words were structured through contemplation of the Divine through the physical world. He begins with the affirmation

that God communicates something through Creation. Human beings, then, living within a particular context of space and time, are not in position to make definitive statements about what exactly is being communicated. Nevertheless, the sum total of sensory, existential, and phenomenological experiences that act as mirror for God's activity become a mark for the individual's or culture's experience of the Divine. This experience of the Divine will place the shadows or images of the planets, stars, animals, and the self in some kind of moral and existential relationship with one another. Such mirrors of God's activity will continue to shape and change culture. Lowth's analysis of the "poeticity of the Hebrew authors" of Scripture is the first of many modern archaeologies of the human soul that attempt to uncover such mirrors of God's activity. The hermeneutical presuppositions of western modernity direct the theologian toward the self so that the depths of one's experience of God can be plumbed.

In a non-pejorative fashion, Jean-Luc Marion has outlined a phenomenology of the idol in terms of a conception of the divine that acts as a mirror for our experiences.⁸ An idol, while often made out of wood and stone, is something fashioned from human artistry and thus could conceivably be a text or even a concept. According to Marion, an idol functions to fix the gaze on something so that a human being's experience of the divine returns back to the one contemplating the idol. Idols come and go as human experience of the Divine changes. Marion writes:

Thus the idol consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze. Invisible mirror, mark of the *invisible*, it must be apprehended following its function and evaluated according to the scope of that function....The idol, such as any archaic *kouros*, obviously does not claim to reproduce any particular god, since the idol offers the only materially visible original of it. But consigned to the stone material is what a gaze – that of the artist as religious man, penetrated by god – has seen of the god; the first visible was able to dazzle his gaze, and this is what he artist tries to bring out in his material.... Thus the spectator, provided that his attitude

become religious, will find in the materially fixed idol the brilliance of the first visible whose splendor freezes the gaze.⁹

Marion continues by contrasting the idol with the icon. He quotes St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3: 18: “We all, with face unveiled and revealed, serving as optical mirror to reflect the glory of the Lord, we are transformed in and according to his icon, passing from glory to glory, according to the spirit of the Lord.” With a debt to Emmanuel Lévinas, Marion describes the icon as the infinite intention of the face.¹⁰ The icon can be distinguished from the idol in that the icon is the locus of God’s active communication whereas the idol reflects the human experience of the Divine. Marion continues:

This is why its depth withdraws the icon from all aesthetics: only the idol can and must be apprehended, since it alone results from the human gaze and hence supposes an *aesthesis* that precisely imposes its measure on the idol. The icon can be measured only on the infinite depth of the face; the intention that envisages in this manner depends only on itself – for *aesthesis* is substituted an apocalypse: the invisible disengages itself in the visible, along an intention, only by the pure grace of an advent; the heavens can be rent only of themselves, for the face to descend from them (Isa. 63:19).¹¹

Modernity has opened a space between subject and object that has changed the uniqueness of the Scriptures. In this space, Scripture becomes a mirror for identity that can be used to reflect human experiences of God. Some will look inwardly and some will look outwardly. Before modernity, according to Nicholas Wolterstorff, most of Christian history and all of Christian liturgy assumes that God speaks in Scripture and that this is not only true for Christianity but also for Judaism and Islam as well.¹² Scripture is not an object that reflects the reality of the soul or the world. Rather, it is the place or icon of God’s address and call. The purpose of God’s speaking is actively to create faith in the Speaker. Marion writes:

But, for all that, faith has nothing like a discourse, at least if discourse implies the succession of arguments, the assurance of an object that is defined precisely by the pre-eminence of a subject. Faith neither speaks nor states; it believes, and has no other end than to believe.¹³

In this regard, George A. Lindbeck has noted that there is a profound difference between the hermeneutics used by the ancients and those used by modernity of the last several centuries. For instance, when Irenaeus turned to the questions of method it was to describe the differences of “catholic” and “gnostic” interpretations of Scripture whereby the determining criteria was whether they could describe the creation of faith or not.¹⁴ In contrast, modernity, on both the right and the left, has made the doctrines of inspiration and revelation its starting point:

...the last several centuries have seen a tendency for interpretation on both right and left to start with doctrines of inspiration and revelation, while in our day, structuralist, Marxist, Freudian, and deconstructionist critical theories have been added to the agenda. Reflective interpreters have treated practice as the application of theory, while unreflective ones have tended to lapse into enthusiasm, on the one hand, or parotting of fundamentalist formulae, on the other. There are, however, both theological and non-theological reasons for thinking that this modern priority of theory to practice is a mistake.¹⁵

The priority of method becomes paramount once understanding and knowledge of Scripture become central.

Martin Luther exercised a pre-modern hermeneutic and thus he is an ideal candidate to help the modern church in their divisions over method. His theology and his understanding of God’s Word describe the creation of faith as being turned away from oneself, even one’s own experience of God, so that one can trust the Word of Another, namely, God in the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

Understanding Is Located in the Realm of the Law

In Luther's description, the relationship between faith and understanding is asymmetrical. Those who do not have faith in Christ will lack understanding, and at the same time, correct understanding does lead to faith. This asymmetry is a function of Luther's doctrine that God actively hides from human understanding in order to create faith. Understanding and an increase in knowledge that might be helpful for actions and decisions in order to create a better future result from focusing on events of the past and present. Such confidence in knowledge, even knowledge about God and God's communicative activity in Scripture and Creation, retains an if-then structure. The examination of causes, effects, and consequences creates an understanding that, for Luther, is situated in the realm of the "Law." Such understanding works in two directions. It accuses the one situated between past actions and future consequences and provides a basis on which to make present decisions.¹⁶ According to Luther, attempts to find or "see" God behind "Law" will be met with one of the "masks" or veils" of God. God hides so that any archaeology that attempts to get to the "bottom" or "ground" of understanding will find another mask of God. God hides from all human projections and images of God. Speculations about the future based on the experiences that create understanding of causes and consequences are not to be confused with the future promised in the Gospel of Christ Jesus. The Gospel is to be distinguished from the voice of the Law.

For Luther, a religion based on knowledge or understanding will worship one of these "masks" as God. In a destructive repetition, patterns of "righteousness" and "salvation" will reflect the nature, essence, and precepts of this god. The if-then structure of knowledge and understanding will then inhere to this mask of God and will act as judge. The gods hiding behind the voice of human conscience signify an almost infinite variety of values, types of knowledge, and goods that function as judges of human identity and hopes.¹⁷ According to Luther, the judgment of God is to give humanity up to the "righteousness" and "salvation" of these strange gods who punish.¹⁸ The "righteousness" and "salvation" arising from the "masks" of God will be coherent with the evidence that is available to experience and understanding. Luther writes:

The consciousness that God is angry and that He is an irate Judge of sin is innate in the human heart. His wrath is evident in the world; we see Him punishing

one here, another there. In such circumstances it is impossible for man to be happy. He is in constant fear that God is standing behind him, cudgel in hand, ready to strike him down.¹⁹

This is the judgment. What one believes to be true of God becomes true with frightening results. Thus, Cain who interprets God's natural order in such a way that he trusts in his own worthiness because of his primogeniture believes in a God who is a righteous judge who demands a sacrifice.²⁰ When his own sacrifice is not accepted Cain's image of God becomes concrete and true in an alarming fashion.

Since understanding always remains in the realm of the Law Luther is convinced that the gods that arise from such knowledge will judge the one holding such faith on the basis of the values, truths, and goods of one's own experience. For Luther, there is no way out of that circle. Escape from one circle will inevitably arrive in the middle of another. The opposite, however, does not hold true for Luther. Imaging a non-judgmental God does not create a gracious relationship. In his exposition of Psalm 51, Luther, after explaining how a false image of God will become existentially manifest in one's life, writes:

However, the other thought, that God is gracious to sinners who feel their sins, is simply true and remains so. You should not suppose that it will be this way because you believe this way. Rather be assured that a thing which is sure and true of itself becomes more sure and true when you believe it. On the other hand, if you believe that God is wrathful, you will certainly have Him wrathful and hostile to you.²¹

There is an asymmetry here that prevents faith in Christ from being described as the measure of one's own experience and understanding. Luther's theology has this asymmetry built into its description of faith.

Ludwig Feuerbach, a serious interpreter of Luther who can also be identified as an influential spokesperson for the modern hermeneutical presuppositions addressed in this paper, missed this asymmetry. His interpretation of Luther is based on a symmetrical relationship between the faith arising from the self's understanding of God and faith in Christ.

Feuerbach writes:

Here we have the meaning of the thoughts so often expressed by Luther: "As you believe, so it occurs for you." "If you believe it, you have it, and if you do not believe it, you do not have it"; "If you believe it, it is, and if you do not believe it, it is not"; "If you believe, for example, that God is good to you, then he is good to you; if you believe the opposite, then he is the opposite." The essence of the object of faith is faith; but I, the believer, am the essence of faith itself. As I am, so is my faith; and as is my faith, so is my God. "As in your heart," says Luther, "so is your God." God is a blank tablet on which there is nothing written but what yourself have written.²²

On many levels, Luther often criticized such a return to the subject. Feuerbach missed the fact that, for Luther, human understanding of anything is located in the realm of the Law.

Luther has no doubt that God communicates God's self in Scripture and in Creation. The understanding that arises from the evidence of this communication, however, is actually blinded by faith. In his early lectures on the Psalms, Luther even goes so far to assert: "Faith does not illuminate the understanding but rather blinds it, [illuminating] the disposition (*affectum*)."²³ Instead, the "mask" (*persona*) of God given in the proclamation of the "Gospel" is Jesus Christ. There is a profound difference between this mask of God and the masks of God that come to human understanding as humans attempt to uncover the "hidden" God. The difference is located in that, for Luther, Jesus does not signify God but is God. The space between the sign and that which it points toward is absent. Without this space all attempts of searching for an interpretative key inwardly or outwardly are futile.

Here lies the asymmetry between faith and understanding. Understanding, which results from examining the past and the present in order to face the future, has the structure of Law. A subjective or objective interpretive key will then be decisive in this regard. Faith, instead, participates in Christ who is God. Being God, Christ cannot function as a sign for some deeper reality and thus Luther's focus on faith cannot be confused with a gnostic emphasis on understanding.

The “Gospel” or good news of Christ Jesus gives God’s good future to the believer. According to Luther, Christ proclaims:

“For the world has me; I am its God. And he who has the Son of God and believes in Him cannot be judged, for the Father has abolished judgement through the Son.” Otherwise Christ, the beloved Son, would also have to be condemned, which is impossible.²⁴

The difference between an asymmetrical relationship between faith and understanding and a symmetrical relationship is the difference between Christ as an icon and Christ as an idol.

The asymmetry is based on Luther’s neo-Chalcedonian Christology.²⁵ It is not based on the externality of the Word, although that is certainly an element of the asymmetry in question. Feuerbach, in his conjecture that God is a “blank tablet” for the writing of human desires and fears, even recognizes and incorporates Luther’s insight that faith occurs from the hearing of the Word from outside oneself. He writes:

Telling tells very much; telling makes something of nothing. The creation *ex nihilo* is, actually, the omnipotence of the spoken word. Words “make” people even more than clothes. Very many who are nothing think they are something and actually become something only because others say they are something. Others, on the contrary, who have enough material, ability, and capacity, believe themselves nothing and actually become nothing in consequence of this depressing belief, until a voice from outside calls out to them that they are something.²⁶

Feuerbach goes on to explain that this vulnerable position vis-à-vis the Word can be a terrible thing and that the rare courage and spirit of the person who can say and do something significant before others start speaking is to be admired.²⁷ Such a person has the mature faith of a person come of age. In Feuerbach’s mature religion, God, the empty slate that objectifies human wishes, functions to protect the believer against all the other voices that give identity. God becomes a mirror for human identity who reflects the experiences, understandings, and values

that human beings have gained from the past. The mature believer is one who, like the child who eventually internalises the objective voice of the loving parent, realizes that God is "nothing but the essence of the human heart."²⁸ God, for practical purposes, is the name given to the best of human experience and reflection. Luther, in opposition to this modern faith statement, insists that faith is in Christ. Faith is not in faith. Christ is not an empty slate and Christian faith is not a human attribute.

The Pre-modern Martin Luther: Scripture Is Clear

Paul Ricoeur has written an essay which attempts to correlate what he calls Rudolf Bultmann's modern Alexandrian hermeneutic concerning the sign with the original situation of the first witnesses and proclaimers of Jesus. In this hermeneutic, a circle is created between the ideality of meaning and existential signification.²⁹ Ricoeur describes this circle in the following way:

...to understand the text, it is necessary to believe in what the text announces to me; but what the text announces to me is given nowhere but in the text. This is why it is necessary to understand the text in order to believe.³⁰

Thus, according to Ricoeur, while there is a primacy of the object or text "this primacy of meaning over understanding, is performed only through the understanding."³¹ The hermeneutical task is represented as negotiating the dialectic between the two poles of the meaning and one's understanding of a text. It is not surprising that we have churches split over the question of whether the objective meaning of a text should have primacy or whether its subjective meaning should be the fundamental consideration. Given this hermeneutical situation, it is also not surprising that the question of authority is so pressing to our churches.³²

Luther's pre-modern hermeneutic avoids this dialectic altogether.³³ The reason for this is that in the encounter with the Word, Jesus Christ, there is no "ideality of meaning."³⁴ According to Luther, "you must hear Him and not master Him or prescribe method, goal, or measure to Him."³⁵ The Word is Christ and Christ is the Word. There is no space for the interpreter to judge the Word objectively or subjectively because the signifier is Christ and that which is signified is also Christ.³⁶ The sacramental theology of Cornelius Honius claimed that the bread only

signified Christ's body and the water of baptism only signified the washing of the soul. Against this, Luther points out that such a position would lead to a hermeneutic that everyone on both sides of the argument would find offensive and ridiculous. His conclusion is a remarkable passage because what is assumed to be offensive in Luther's argumentation is often presupposed to be a hermeneutical necessity in western modernity. Luther writes:

For if we permit such violence to be done in one passage, that without basis in Scripture a person can say the word "is" means the same as the word "signifies," then it would be impossible to stop it in any other passage.... In that case one could say: that Mary is a virgin and the mother of God is equivalent to saying that Mary signifies a virgin and the mother of God. Likewise: Christ is God and man; that is, Christ signifies God and man. Likewise Rom. 1: [16]: the gospel is the power of God and so forth; that is, the gospel signifies the power of God. See what a horrible mess this would lead to.³⁷

Christ does not signify some immanent value of human life because Christ is God. For Luther and most of pre-modern Christianity, God cannot signify anything because there is nothing greater that can be thought. Thus, when using the Alexandrian concepts of signifier and signified Luther insists that Christ is both the witness and that which is witnessed.

This hermeneutical insight is based on Luther's conviction that God alone can make the shocking claim that a person who was cruelly put to death by the powers of this world is also the Saviour of this world. For this reason Luther insists that no one but the divine Jesus Christ can testify to the event and significance of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.³⁸ Thus, the testimony of Christ is different from the words and authority of others, including those of the Apostles:

Christ does not bring peace like the apostles, by preaching the Gospel. But gives peace as its Author and Creator.³⁹

There is a *communicatio idiomatum* between Christ's testimony and work that leaves no space for the interpretive efforts of those who receive the testimony and work. In other words, the interpretive work of those who receive the testimony will not be effective for the work of salvation that is done in that testimony. The grace and peace that Christ gives or signifies is nothing other than Christ Himself.⁴⁰ The gifts of forgiveness, hope, love, and faith cannot be separated from Christ. There are two reasons for this. Christ is not a sign that points to something else, and, at the same time, the presence of Christ effects something in human life. From the pulpit, Luther confesses:

For this reason Christ has given himself to us completely, and wishes to be and remain with us until the day of judgment [Matt. 28:20]; not merely that he may be present, as the papists have him and carry him about to no avail, nor as the others say, *ut signum*, that is, as a mere sign, which would bring us neither improvement nor benefits.... This is the benefit that you ought to derive: that you strengthen your faith and make your conscience secure, so that afterwards you may also be able to preach.⁴¹

Luther summarizes his contention about the effective presence of Christ by stating: "...first, that here we obtain forgiveness of sins as a gift, and second, that we afterwards preach and proclaim the same."⁴² There is no room to argue about subjective and objective meanings of Scripture. The grace and peace that the Apostles proclaimed is Jesus Christ, the Author and Creator of the same grace and peace in the believer. The movement is not from past sign to present meaning, but rather from past proclamation to present proclamation. In this proclamation, Christ speaks.

God's Active Voice in Christ

Western modern culture's cherished assumptions concerning the priority of the subject and the autonomy of the human will are confronted by Luther's understanding of the active voice of God. God's Word accomplishes what it says. It does not wait for the autonomous subject to obey or disobey. In this way, God's Word is distinguished from all human authority that is based on the cooperation between a ruling

authority and an obeying subject. God's Word that speaks "let there be light" at Creation or "you are my child" at Baptism does not act like human authorities. While delineating this distinction Luther states:

As the saying goes: "It's only an order from the boss!"; that is, no one pays any attention to it.⁴³

Luther is not making a comment about the disobedience or slow obedience of subjects. Rather, the issue is the very space that exists between the words of the most powerful king and the ones who hear those words. The existence of such a space makes the issue of power and autonomy the two loci of the discussion on authority. For Luther, when talking about the Word of God, Christ Jesus, this space does not exist. It changes the entire focus of the discussion concerning authority.

The decisive question is no longer the obedience or disobedience of the human will. The change of paradigm that is created by Luther's understanding of the active Word of God animated his arguments with the scholastics who insisted that true faith was formed by love. The description of this faith focused on the loving will of the obedient believer. Luther writes:

And while they say that faith is the mere outline but love is its living colors and completion, we say in opposition that faith takes hold of Christ and that He is the form that adorns and informs faith as color does the wall.⁴⁴

Luther continues this discussion by crossing out the idea that Christ can be an object of faith and correcting himself by speaking of the loving presence of Christ:

It [faith] takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself.⁴⁵

The faith that lays hold of Christ cannot be made an object of knowledge either. For as Luther continues in the same remarkable passage, faith is a sort of darkness that nothing can see:

Yet the Christ of whom faith takes hold is sitting in this darkness as God sat in the midst of darkness on Sinai and in the temple. Therefore our “formal righteousness” is not a love that informs faith; but it is faith itself, a cloud in our hearts, that is, trust in a thing we do not see, in Christ, who is present especially when He cannot be seen. Therefore faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ. But how He is present – this is beyond our thought; for there is darkness, as I have said.⁴⁶

The clarity of Scripture is not attached to a theory concerning the fixity of writing and the certainty that comes from empirical investigation. Rather it is a function of the faithfulness of Christ who witnesses and is witnessed and so creates faith.

In the participation of Christ in the believer, faith is not a condition of salvation so that if you have faith then you will gain something else called salvation. That would make either faith or salvation other than Christ. Rather, faith that has Christ is salvation. In Luther's description of faith and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is no longer any room for a focus on faith as a human attribute. God is not anxiously waiting for someone to believe. Rather, God creates believers by speaking the Easter promise in the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. When, in this fashion, the discussion shifts from faith in faith to faith in Christ the question of a whether Scripture should be read subjectively or objectively ceases to be crucial. In fact, Luther's theology concerning the active Word of God in Christ Jesus acts as a critique of both alternatives. Any reading of Scripture that makes the self or some attribute of the self the determining factor of faith and our relationship to God is contrary to the Gospel.

Human language and authority is deficient in as much as it names and in so naming produces systems and institutions. As it names and produces its world it also produces a space for alienation and division. Yet, from the perspective of faith, God's speaking to us only occurs in and under the mask of human language.⁴⁷ By emphasizing that this is a mask, Luther's theology of the Word safeguards against the possibility of turning this perspective into an expression of immanent and available presence. The prospect of such an immanent presence would return Lutheran theology to Feuerbach's position outlined above. As Catherine

Pickstock has argued in a different context, an “immanentist ontology where epistemology is paramount” reduces everything to “the ‘object’ whose existence does not exceed the extent to which it is known by the subject.”⁴⁸

Thus, the sun, stars, planets, animals, other human beings, and the self, while certainly created and upheld by God, are not signs that can be made into objects of human knowledge so that they become the focal point for sinful humanity’s knowledge of God. Such speculation about God on the basis of the signs of Creation will deconstruct. For Luther, God will give one up to the gods so produced by human speculation and these gods always turn against their adherents with some expression of the Law. Nevertheless, faith insists that God communicates through history and all creation.⁴⁹ Instead of providing a foil for human speculation about God, the masks of God in history and creation cause human experiences of *Anfechtungen*. Such temptations to despair are actively created by God in order to drive sinful humanity to faith. All of God’s speaking to us has the structure of Law and Gospel, and, for Luther, confusing the two turns everything into Law.

The Church is a mouth-house for God’s speaking in Christ Jesus. Questions about mission must be organized around the question of how to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God’s activity in the mask of human language is the locus of our discussion on the Church and its mission and organisation. The proclamation of the Gospel that occurs in the mutual consolation of the saints, prayer, preaching, and the sacraments is effective. It is effective because, for Luther, such language participates in the active, creative Word of God in Christ Jesus.⁵⁰ The focus of the Church’s discussion of its mission is whether the mask of human language is an icon of Christ or an idol of our present experiences of the divine.

Notes

¹ David S. Yeago, “Ecclesia Sancta, Ecclesia Peccatrix: The Holiness of the Church in Martin Luther’s Theology,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000) 331-354; pp.331-332.

² The *quadriga* was the four-fold interpretation of Scripture texts popular in medieval exegesis. In the theological compendium “*Rotulus pugillaris*,” the Dominican Augustinus (Aage) of Denmark († 1285) penned the following verse which succinctly describes the method: “*Littera gesta* <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol28/iss1/6>

docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quid speres anagogia. As reported in: Helmut Feld, *Martin Luthers und Wendelin Steinbachs Vorlesungen über den Hebräerbrief* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1971) 127. Evidence of the *quadriga's* popularity is shown by the fact that there was more than one version of this rhyme: The earliest version of this verse comes from John Cassian (ca. 360-435) which has *quo tendas anagogia* instead of Aage of Denmark's *quid speres anagogia*. Cf. Robert M. Grant, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible* (New York, 1963) 119, 127. Helmut Feld notes that in Nikolaus von Lyra's (1270-1340?) writing there is a "Erörterung des vierfachen Schriftsinnes in seinem ersten Prolog und im Kommentar zu der Stelle Gal.4,24." Nikolaus von Lyra uses the *quadriga* but gives a different ending to the verse: "*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*" Helmut Feld, *Martin Luthers und Wendelin Steinbachs Vorlesungen über den Hebräerbrief* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1971) 128. Bonaventure describes the anagogical sense as "*quo docemur, qualiter est Deo adhaerendum.*" Bonaventura, *De reductione artium ad theologiam, in Tri Opuscula* (Quaracchi, 1938) 372.

³ Gerhard O. Forde, "Luther and the *Usus Pauli*," *Dialog* 32 (1993) 275-282; p.276. Mark C. Mattes has made the observation that Forde's theological project is neither conservative or liberal but eschatological. See: Mark C. Mattes, "Gerhard Forde on Re-envisioning Theology in Light of the Gospel," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999) 373-393; p.374.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997) 80-81, n.12.

⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Marion offers a defence against the charge that he is attacking the veneration of other religions by his definition of idolatry. He writes: "... my personal attempt to *accede* to monotheism does not imply any declaration of falsification with regard to other veneration, since the theory of the idol that I outline has precisely no other consequence than to give legitimacy to other veneration and for that very reason to explain their multiplicity, hence to limit their dignity. For one can ground the legitimacy of multiple 'venerations' only by a doctrine that limits them;... I wonder moreover how one can defend the reduction of the divine without presenting a doctrine of the idol..." Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 49-50. Marion goes on to suggest that the play of signifiers which act as identity producing mirror games do not apprehend God who

- ⁹ Marion, 14.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., 20.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 20-21.
- ¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- ¹³ Marion, 183.
- ¹⁴ George A. Lindbeck, "Atonement and the Hermeneutics of Social Embodiment," *Pro Ecclesia* 5 (1996) 144-160; p.146.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Luther has more than "use" of the "Law." The "theological use" is primary for Luther where God accuses the sinner. However, Luther also talks about a "civil use" of the "Law," that keeps order in society by punishing evil-doers. Whether Luther has a "third use" of the "Law" which is given to believers to help guide them in their actions toward others is a debate that goes beyond what this paper can attempt to address.
- ¹⁷ The "veils" of God include such immanent values as Truth, Love, Community, Science, Authenticity, Justice, Peace, Harmony, etc.
- ¹⁸ See: WA 47,104,26-27.
- ¹⁹ WA 47,98,17-21; LW 22,375: "Nun sticktt das in aller menschen herzen, das Gott zurne und ein zorniger Richter sei über die Sunde, wie wir den seinen zorn in der welt sehen, das er einen hie und den andern dort strafft. So kan der mensch nicht frolich sein, sonder mus sich imerdar furchten, das Gott mit der keulen hinder ihme stehe und zuschlagen wolle." For a description of Luther's positive understanding of God's wrath in the creation of faith, see: Steven D. Paulson, "The Wrath of God," *Dialog* 33 (1994)245-251.
- ²⁰ See WA 42,182ff.
- ²¹ WA 40 II 343,20-25; LW 12,322: "Contra illa altera cogitatio, quod Deus faveat peccatoribus sentientibus peccata sua, simpliciter vera est et manet, ergo non est, quod cogites, non sic futurum propterea, quod tu sic credis. Quin hoc statue, quod res per se certa et vera magis certa et vera fit te sic credente."
- ²² Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Faith According to Luther*, tr. by Melvin Chernob (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967) 107.
- ²³ (Translation mine.) WA 4,356,23-24: "Sic enim fides non intellectum illuminat, immo execat, sed affectum." Luther continues by saying that the heart hears the Word and follows it to salvation without knowing

where the Word might be leading: "hunc enim ducit quo salvetur, et hoc per auditum verbi. Audiens enim affectus verbum incipit ire post ipsum nesciens quo." WA 4,356,24-26.

- ²⁴ WA 47,99,13-17; LW 22,376: "Den sie hatt mich dan, der ich ir gott bin, und wer den Sohn Gottes hat und gleubet an in, der kan nicht gerichtet werden, den durch in hat der vater das Gerichte auffgehoben. Sonst muste der liebe sohn Christus auch verdampt werden, aber es ist unmuglich, das ehr sollte verdampt werden."
- ²⁵ David S. Yeago identifies Luther's Christology as belonging to what modern scholars call "Neo-Chalcedonian." This reading of Chalcedon achieved conciliar approval at the second Council of Constantinople (522) and was further developed through the writings of Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus. Yeago identifies four characteristics of this Christology which are lifted up by Luther: 1) the man Jesus is true God; 2) there is a unity of nature between the sending Father and the sent Son; 3) the Son of Mary and the Son of God are unified in one identity; 4) the flesh of Christ is deified and life-giving. See David S. Yeago, "The Bread of Life: Patristic Christology and Evangelical Soteriology in Martin Luther's Sermons on John 6," in *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 39 (1995) 257-279; pp.268ff.
- ²⁶ Feuerbach, 108.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 108ff.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 112.
- ²⁹ It should be noted that St. Augustine's Alexandrian hermeneutic is radically different from modern hermeneutics which search for meaning and sense. For St. Augustine, Scriptures were primarily read to increase charity rather than to gain meaning.
- ³⁰ Paul Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann," *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 397.
- ³¹ Ibid., 390.
- ³² Steven D. Paulson has outlined how this modern hermeneutical dilemma is seen in Erasmus' assumption about the opaqueness of Scripture. He also contrasts this with Luther's assertion that Scripture is clear. The proclamation of the Gospel in Scripture leads to the proclamation of the Gospel in the present. See Steven D. Paulson, "From Scripture to Dogmatics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993) 159-169.
- ³³ Luther was a medieval Christian in the questions he asked. See, for example: Otto Pesch, "Die Frage nach Gott bei Thomas von Aquin und Martin Luther," *Luther* 41 (1970) 1-25.

- ³⁴ There is a positive relationship between Luther's hermeneutic and some contemporary critiques of Kantian suppositions. See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 156. Ward writes: "For both Barth and Levinas, the rupture of revelation fissures the Kantian unity of apperception. Revelation, for both, questions the meaning of human acts, perception and discourse. Revelation, for both, requires a new grammar of the subject-object relation, a grammar which necessarily works within while deconstructing the ordinary grammar of human discourse."
- ³⁵ WA 33,364,11-13; LW 23,230: "in solt ir hören und nicht meistern, im nicht weise, zeil oder mass geben."
- ³⁶ See: Priscilla Hayden-Roy, "Hermeneutica gloria vs. hermeneutica cruces: Sebastian Franck and Martin Luther on the Clarity of Scripture," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 81 (1990) 50-68.
- ³⁷ WA 11,434,30-435,5; LW 36,280: "Denn wo man solchen frebel an einem ortt zu liesse, das man on grund der schriffit möcht sagen, das wortlin 'Ist' heisse szo viel als das wortlin 'Bedeut', szo kund mans auch an keinen andern ortt weren,... Szo möcht man denn sagen: Das Maria ist Jungfraw und gottis mutter, sei szo viel gesagt: Maria bedeutet ein jungfraw und gottis mutter. Item: Christus ist gott und mensch, das ist, Christus bedeutet gott unnd mensch. Item Ro. 1: Das Euangelion ist gottis krafft ac. das ist, das Euangelion bedeutet gottis krafft. Sihe, wilch ein gewlich weszen wolt hierausz werden." This was also an issue in ancient debates on Christology. Referring to Hilary's *On the Trinity*, Luther writes: "The heretics garbled Holy Scripture terribly. They claimed that Christ is called a Son of God by a metaphor, as we, too, are called sons of God." LW 22,363.
- ³⁸ See WA 26,41,16-19: "Ratio humana non potest dicere, quod homo, qui moritur, sit deus, redemptor mundi pro peccatis et dono vitae aeternae, deus quidem videt, sed nos non. Ergo necesse est testimonium verbi, quod nobis annunciet hoc, tum aliam cogitationem induo."
- ³⁹ (My translation) WA 40 I 81,14-15: "Neque Christus affert pacem, ut Apostoli praedicando Evangelium afferunt, Sed ut autor et creator pacis donat eam."
- ⁴⁰ See Oswald Bayer, *Theologie: Handbuch systematischer Theologie*, Band 1, herausgegeben von Carl Heinz Ratschow (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994) 443. Bayer writes: "Daß das signum selbst schon die res ist: das war Luthers große hermeneutische, seine im strengen Sinne reformatorische Entdeckung."

- ⁴¹ WA 19,508,18-24; LW 36,351: "Darumb hat er sich uns gar gegeben und will bei uns sein und bleiben bis an jungsten tag, nicht allein darumb das er da sei, wie ihn die Papisten haben und umbtragen on frucht, odder wie die andern sagen 'ut signum', das ist als nur ein losung, das uns kein besserung noch frucht brechte.... Sondern das sol die frucht sein, das du deinen glawben sterckest und das gewissen sicher machest, auff das du darnach auch kundest predigen."
- ⁴² WA 19,508,30-32; LW 36,351: "Zum ersten, das wir da vergebung der sunde holen als ein geschenck, Zum andern, das selbige hernach predigen und verkunden."
- ⁴³ WA 31 I 445,31-32; LW 14,124: "...wie man sagt: Es ist der herrn gebot, das ist, es geschicht nicht."
- ⁴⁴ WA 40 I 228,28-30; LW 26,129: "Et sicut ipsi dicunt fidem *monogramma et* charitatem vivos colores et plenitudinem ipsam, ita nos e contra dicimus fidem apprehendere Christum qui est forma, quae fidem ornate et informat, ut color parietem."
- ⁴⁵ WA 40 I 228,34-229,15; LW 26,129: "Sic ut Christus sit obiectum fidei, imo non obiectum, sed, ut ita dicam, in ipsa fide Christus adest."
- ⁴⁶ WA 40 I 229,15-24; LW 26, 129-130: Fides ergo est cognitio quaedam vel tenebra quae nihil videt.: "Et tamen in istis tenebris Christus fide apprehensus sedet, Quemadmodum Deus in Sinai et in Templo sedebat in medio tenebrarum. Est ergo formalis nostra iustitia non charitas informans fidem, sed ipsa fides et nebula cordis, hoc est, fiducia in rem quam non videmus, hoc est, in Christum qui, ut maxime non videatur, tamen praesens est. Iustificat ergo fides, quia apprehendit et possidet istum thesaurum, scilicet Christum praesentem. Sed quo modo praesens sit, non est cogitabile, quia sunt tenebrae, ut dixi."
- ⁴⁷ Albrecht Beutel, "'Scriptura ita loquitur, cur non nos?' Sprache des Glaubens bei Luther," *Kerygma und Dogma* 40 (1994) 184-202; p.186. Beutel writes: "...Es ist Gott selbst, der unter der Maske menschlicher Worte zu uns spricht."
- ⁴⁸ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1998) 70.
- ⁴⁹ God's creation is God's address to the creature. Oswald Bayer writes: "Indem Luther von Gottes Urzusage 'Ich bin der Herr, dein Gott' her den Schöpfer als den glaubt, der mich zusammen mit allen Geschöpfen angeredet hat und anredet, bereitet er jedoch keineswegs den Weg vor, den das personalistische Denken unseres Jahrhunderts zu gehen versuchte. Droht dem personalistischen Denken in seinem gleichsam absolut gewordenen Bestehen auf der Anrede und einem Verständnis der Wahrheit als 'reine' personale 'Begegnung' die Gegenwart des Schöpfers

in seiner Schöpfung zu verblässen, so kann Luther diese Gegenwart als frei gewollte Immanenz nicht stark genug betonen." Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr (Paul Siebeck, 1986) 83-84.

⁵⁰ Albrecht Beutel, op.cit.