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Turning the World Upside Down

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Acts 17:6–7

Just to be clear, "these people" refers to Paul and his Jewish Christ-following cohort in Thessalonica, a city of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago—not to anybody in this chapel in Thousand Oaks, a city of the American Empire state, today. Hopefully that clarification makes you all feel a bit better, especially those of you who are here without the privilege, or protection, of American citizenship.

It was, after all, citizenship that protected Paul in his missions across the Roman Empire. This was not the first time Paul had been accused of treason to the Empire. It happened earlier in Macedonia, and then later in Corinth, and again in Caesarea. Each time, the charge was proclaiming things that went contrary to the laws or customs of the Roman Empire, a contrariness that could be translated into charges of treason, for which the penalty was execution. Each time, however, Paul's citizenship saved him. Nevertheless, this notion that he and his cohort were "turning the world upside down" followed him, and unsettled those around him, wherever he went.

So what was it that he was proclaiming that was so revolutionary? What made his words so challenging to those who wanted to uphold the structures of the Roman Empire? It was nothing more than the claim that Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the Saviour of the World, the Lord, the Son of God. Which means it was nothing less than the claim that the Roman Emperors (Caesars Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, or Nero—take your pick), were not the Saviours of the World, or the Sons of God, or the Lords and Fathers of the Empire as they very ardently claimed to be. The proclamation of Jesus the Messiah was a rejection of the imperial cult, an accusation of the falsity of the imperial system, and an attempt to turn the world upside down. While Paul certainly never directed anyone to overturn the Empire, he proclaimed an alternate Messiah, Son of God, and Saviour in a system where there could only ever be one. His proclamation of Jesus necessitated a rejection of all other claims to divinely instituted and justified rule.

Paul intended to turn the world upside down, as did Jesus, in whose name Paul spoke. Paul, in bringing together followers of Christ, intended to overturn social and economic hierarchies and inequalities that functioned to uphold the Empire. While the groups he brought together were not so different from other "clubs" of his day (and I recommend Vearncombe, Scott, and Taussig's *After Jesus Before Christianity*[2] for more insight on that), Paul's Christ-clubs did bring together people from different social and economic backgrounds into one family whose head was the God of Israel and not the head of Rome, the pater also known as Caesar. The father and head of Paul's Christ-clubs was the one who protected the poor, the widows, the sick, the foreigners. The father of the Empire, Caesar,

[1] This sermon was preached at the 14th International Luther Congress, held at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California, on August 19, 2022. Dr. Kayko Driedger Hesslein is the newly appointed William Hordern Chair of Theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, and resides in Calgary.

[2] Erin Vearncombe, Brandon Scott, and Hall Tausig, *After Jesus Before Christianity: A Historical Exploration of the First Two Centuries of Jesus Movements* (New York: HarperOne, 2021).

Son of God, stepped on those people. The Messiah, Jesus, Son of God, lifted them up. Paul, like others of his day who proclaimed Christ, was absolutely invested in turning the world upside down, exactly as accused.

Can we say the same about our own proclamations, particularly as scholars? Does our work in academia, in the world of Luther, either explicitly or implicitly reject human claims to divinely instituted and justified authority? Is our work turning the world upside down? Are the Empire's people even accusing us of doing so? I suspect that most of us would answer in the negative, even as we recognize that God is calling us, as Christians, in our vocation as scholars, to the task of this very proclamation, just as God called Paul.

Ah, yes, you heard me—the purpose of our scholarly life is proclamation. Now, I do not mean that every piece of scholarly work should be a sermon, to be clear. But we understand proclamation to be more than preaching from the pulpit. Proclaiming the gospel, proclaiming that God, whom we encounter in Christ through the work of the Spirit, is the one we can fear, love, and trust above all others, happens in deeds—and actually, in just living. The act of engaging in scholarship and in living the life of a scholar can be proclamation when it is done in such a way that our work and our lives point to Christ's presence in and with and for the world.

So what does it mean for our work and our lives as scholars to point to Christ? It means that everything we produce is for the good of the world. It means that the goal of our scholarship is that it serves the most vulnerable, that it helps and supports our most precarious neighbours—human and non-human—in all of life's needs. That it serves to help the vulnerable to escape the god of Empire, in whatever forms that god and that empire take. It means that our work aims to turn the world upside down.

You see, scholarship is not objective, and has never been. It has always served someone or something, whether that something is "the academy" or "the institution" or "the truth" (whatever that means) or even whether that something is our tenure portfolio or a grant requirement or a publishing opportunity. Scholarship is not objective because it is produced by scholars, and scholars are not objective because, while we may as scholars be free to be lords of all, we are also freed to be servants to all. As Luther reminds us, "in all of one's works a person should in this context be shaped by and contemplate this thought alone: to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbour."[3]

Ah . . . there it is. Scholars who are Christian, and that is the vast majority in this chapel, are also called to be servants to all. We are called in all we do to proclaim the gospel so that Christ's work of liberation and new life is felt by those who need it most. We are called to engage in and produce work that empowers others to grasp hold of God's promise and to push away the devil's Empire—even if such subjective proclamation compromises our academic reputation, or our institutional standing, or our vain attempts to position ourselves as objective thinkers. We are called to be subjective, to be subject—to those below us, and through them, to God.

We are not subject to earthly powers or to any earthly empire. Luther again reminds us, "Through faith every Christian is exalted over all things and, by virtue of spiritual power,

[3] "The Freedom of a Christian," in *The Annotated Luther*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 1, *The Roots of Reform* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 520.

is absolutely lord of all things."[4] Before God, through the citizenship we have been given in that kingdom, we are the rulers of our own lives. It was that citizenship that freed Paul to speak against the Roman Empire. Not his citizenship in Rome, but his citizenship in Christ. And it is that same citizenship, given to us in baptism, that first frees us and then calls us to speak against the empires of our day.

You are free, then, to be subjective—to be subject to your neighbour—because you are freed. Freed from aspirations to academic greatness, freed from collegial expectations, freed from attempting to leave a scholarly legacy or to protect the future of Reformation studies. The empires of this day may demand from you that you produce work to their satisfaction, but you are not in the end obligated to them; they do not own you. Your work, then, is also freed. Freed from the expectations of your institution or your colleagues, freed from being accountable to them, because they are no longer your Lord—Christ is. And Christ is pleased, nay delighted, with you and with your work and with your desire to serve and with your secret yearning to bring the empires down.

So as you go forward from this place, turn the world upside down. As you put together the research and papers that emerge from this rich time together, feel free to write with your head and also with your heart. Feel free to let your concern for the vulnerable permeate your work. Feel free to allow your subjectivity, to God and to your neighbour, show through. Feel free to allow your work to proclaim, even implicitly, that the empires of this world should not, can not, and will not stand because Christ, whom we encounter when we are with the empire's most desperate subjects, is our true Lord. Remember, as Luther did, that "before tyrants and stubborn people you may exercise that freedom with contempt and without ever letting up at all."[5] You are free, in your life and in your life's work, to turn the world upside down. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[4] "The Freedom of a Christian," 504.

[5] "Appendix, The Freedom of a Christian," in *The Annotated Luther*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 1, *The Roots of Reform* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 531.