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PREACHING BEFORE POSTING: LESSONS FOR THE POSTMODERN CHURCH FROM THE EARLY SERMONS OF MARTIN LUTHER

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Martin Luther (1483–1546) was, above all, a prominent and prolific preacher—the standard edition of his works includes thirty volumes of sermons and postils (model sermons or outlines for preaching), which is about one third of the total collection.[1] For this reason, Luther's preaching offers a helpful point of departure for exploring his vital contribution to the Protestant Reformation and its relevance for today.[2] To be sure, the major premises and contours of Luther's theology in its later, more mature expression are already well-travelled territory. By contrast, this study will mainly focus on his preaching immediately prior to the promulgation (in October 1517) of the famous *95 Theses*, looking for indications of the spiritual and theological ferment that spurred Luther to action (if to some degree unwittingly) in the service of reformation and the renewal of the church.[3] First, however, it is helpful to review salient features of the Western (especially, North American) cultural landscape in our own day.

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[1] Frymire, "Martin Luther's Sermons and Postils," 1–2.

[2] Accordingly, this study focuses on theological content (and its implications for method) rather than style or rhetoric *per se*, on which see O'Malley, "Luther the Preacher," 3–16.

[3] As Frymire ("Martin Luther's Sermons and Postils," 5) comments, "One must be wary of earlier studies that found too much of Luther's mature theology in these sermons, but one cannot deny the early appearance of theological formulations that became central thereafter." The precise historical circumstances surrounding Luther's posting of his theses are a matter of vigorous scholarly debate: the traditional date of 31 October 1517 may or may not be correct. For a review of the evidence and its interpretation, see Leppin and Wengert, "Sources For and Against the Posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*," 373–98.

"No King in Israel" (Judges 21:25): Postmodernism and the Freedom to Choose

Key among postmodern sensibilities are, first, a rejection of absolute truth claims (above all, religious truth claims); second, a fundamental pessimism with regard to the larger shape or direction of human existence; and, third, an insistence on absolute liberty with regard to personal self-determination. Existential meaning and purpose, to the extent that these are possible, are no more than social and/or individual constructs. Each of us is free to adopt the worldview of our choice, and must do so without external constraint. In the words of Allan Bloom, "There are no absolutes: freedom is absolute."[4] More precisely, religious, philosophical, or metaphysical "truth" is conceived of as a matter of "values" or personal opinion, rather than of "fact" in any objectively verifiable sense.[5] Because religious belief (of the sort that preoccupied Luther and his contemporaries) expresses non-verifiable personal opinion, all religions are accorded equal standing: no one religious belief is any more "true" than another, since none of them are "true" in the factual and scientific sense of the word. The result is a kind of agnosticism—a functional atheism—in which metaphysical ultimacy is reduced to a matter of personal preference.

Yet, paradoxically, postmoderns are typically open to mysticism and mystery, even to the point that some observers have begun to speak of contemporary Western societies as "postsecular."[6] Rejecting the reductionist tendencies of Enlightenment rationalism, which limits "truth" to that which is scientifically verifiable, entails an acknowledgment that some aspects of human experience—spirituality in particular—defy any simple form of rational explanation. For this reason, rejecting claims of hegemony on the part of any one worldview (whether religious, political, or philosophical) does not, in practice, necessitate rejection of spirituality itself. Indeed, sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman goes so far as to assert that in its intentional dismantling of rationalism, postmodernism itself represents "the re-enchantment of the world."[7] As Paul Corrigan observes, reviewing developments in the first decade and a half of the current century,

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[4] Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, 28; further, Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*, 58–59.

[5] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 7.

[6] For a survey of contemporary views, see Corrigan, "The Postsecular and Literature," passim.

> Talk of the postsecular responds to the surprising persistence, resurgence, and/or reenvisioning of the sacred, the spiritual, and/or the religious within societies, individuals, and/or works of art in the face of industrialization, globalization, science, and/or pluralism. Conceptually and stylistically messy, the shorthand and/or captures something of the spirit (and/or Spirit) of the postsecular. Conceptually and phenomenologically, the postsecular crosses and blurs the traditional boundaries between religious and secular ways of being and seeing in the world.[8]

Moreover, anti-rationalism and the postmodern insistence on individual liberty entail a surprisingly robust anthropology: "meaning" may not be universal, but individual and local narratives are nonetheless deemed capable of furnishing philosophical coherence. In other words, we understand ourselves, whether as communities or individuals, to be both sufficiently free and sufficiently able to construct frameworks of meaning in whatever manner seems best to us. We appear, in fact, to have embraced the existential programme proposed by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, "Le Mythe de Sisyphe." Sisyphus, we recall, was condemned for his sins to spend eternity rolling a massive boulder uphill only to see it roll down again each time, requiring him to repeat the same futile task without end. As Glen Scorgie explains, "Camus suggested that if Sisyphus had only learned to accept the absurdity of his task, and resigned himself to it, he might possibly have been able to enjoy his ordeal."[9] Without recourse to divine purpose, condemned to endless redundancy, Sisyphus nonetheless rises above his fate by embracing it: "All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols . . . he knows himself to be the master of his days."[10] In other words, when there is no ultimate meaning to be had, meaning emerges regardless from the willing embrace of futility. Hence Camus concludes the essay by declaring, "Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux [One must imagine Sisyphus happy]."[11] As Bauman's comment indicates, postmodernism is not, in principle, as philosophically bleak as Camus demands, yet the programme of epistemological independence and constructed meaning that Camus proposes nonetheless finds itself welcome within a postmodern worldview.

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[7] This is the title of the introduction to Bauman's *Intimations of Postmodernity*, vii. Bauman comments: "All in all, postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of artifice that has been dismantled; the modern conceit of meaning—the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant*" (x; emphasis original).

[8] Corrigan, "The Postsecular and Literature," §5. Conclusion.

Still, the freedom to construct one's own epistemology is not without risk. Toward the end of the Book of Judges, we read of a man by the name of Micah from the hill country of Ephraim who builds himself a household shrine, complete with an idol cast from precious metal, and pays a Levite to serve there as its priest. Despite the fundamental violation of covenant fidelity that such a project implies, he even declares his expectation that Yahweh will now bless and prosper this endeavour. The narrative offers a simple explanation: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6). Four chapters later, the book as a whole concludes on a similarly ominous note. Internecine warfare among the tribes of Israel and an enduring blood feud threatens to extinguish the line of Benjamin, as no women now remain alive. The general consensus is to provide wives for surviving Benjaminites by means of abduction and mass murder (Judg 21:11–12). Hence the final verse in the book offers the same grave verdict: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 21:25).

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[9] Scorgie, *Little Guide*, 111.

[10] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 91.

[11] Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, 47.

Although the comparison seems drastic, it underscores the fact that absence of an agreed framework for worship and ethics —a common worldview—has the potential to be no less regressive, repressive, and dangerous than any hegemony that the claim of individual liberty in such matters seeks to redress. Far from constructing a "brave new world"—Aldous Huxley's borrowing from Shakespeare was intended to be ironic[12]— the result is characterized rather by loss of hope, and homelessness. It is hardly accidental that Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" heads the *Rolling Stone* list of "500 Greatest Songs of All Time" (any more than it is accidental that the magazine is named after the song!). Released 20 July 1965, well prior to the public dawning of postmodern consciousness, its chorus nonetheless presciently describes our contemporary cultural dilemma:

> How does it feel
> To be on your own
> With no direction home
> Like a complete unknown
> Like a rolling stone?[13]

Just so, Middleton and Walsh characterize postmodernity as "a culture of radical homelessness":

> We can no longer be at home in the world: first, because we recognize that any notion of the world as home is merely a social construction; second, because we are racked with guilt and embarrassment about the violence of our social construction vis-à-vis other people in the world; and third, because the very environment in which we live is now polluted to the point where it is becoming inhospitable to us

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[12] The title of Huxley's dystopian novel (published in 1932) is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* V.i.205.

[13] Dylan, "Like a Rolling Stone" [n.d.]

> and even a threat to any sense of humans remaining at home in this world.[14]

By definition, postmodernism proclaims the demise of the "myth of human progress" and the Enlightenment optimism that has kept it afloat for the past half millennium.[15]

Of course, it goes without saying that such perspectives are distant indeed from the philosophical convictions of late medieval Europe: although Luther stands at the forefront of a turn toward individual freedom and philosophical autonomy, it will be centuries before this new perspective emerges in full. Even so, and notwithstanding the fact that Luther's preaching remains unavoidably rooted in the intellectual presuppositions of his own day, his construction of the Christian gospel offers the twenty-first century church several promising avenues for responding to the challenges of postmodernism. That being said, given the wealth of available material and the daunting mass of contemporary scholarship on Luther, the following summary can offer no more than a few salient comparisons.

Sapientiam Crucis: The "Wisdom of the Cross"[16]

By the end of October 1517, Luther had already been preaching, first to his fellow Augustinian monks and subsequently in the Wittenberg City Church of St. Mary, for some five and a half years.[17] His output in these early years was prodigious: he would later recall that by 1517 he was preaching up to four times daily.[18] His earliest surviving sermon, from 1512 (or possibly 1510), betrays a mind on the brink of new insight.[19] Reflecting on Matt 7:12 ("All things therefore whatsoever you will that men do to you, do you also to them. For this is the Law and the Prophets"),[20] Luther argues that merely refraining from evil is insufficient: Christ commands that we render positive benefit to our neighbours. "This," he says, "is love toward all and the true Christian life [*vera vita Christianorum*]."[21] The "shame and scandal" of our human situation (*O pudor et scandalum!*) is that far from obeying Christ, we alone among living creatures bring trouble and harm upon each other, thereby clearly forfeiting any claim to salvation.[22] Of signal importance is the fact that Luther aims his broadside at "secular and spiritual" realms alike, for it is only a short step from observing the failure and spiritual peril of his fellow ecclesiastics to confessing the depth of his own.[23]

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[14] Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger*, 145–46.

[15] Bosch (*Transforming Mission*, 262–67) discusses seven key dimensions of the Enlightenment worldview, focusing on various aspects of "faith in humankind" (267).

[16] This title derives from Luther's admonition in a sermon preached 11 November 1515: "Preach one thing: the wisdom of the cross [*Unum praedica: sapientiam crucis*]!" (*LW* 51:14; WA 1:52).

[17] Doberstein, "Introduction," xi–xii; cf. Frymire, "Martin Luther's Sermons and Postils," 4. Brecht (*Road to Reformation*, 151) offers slightly later dates: "Apart from the two sermons in Erfurt, part of his obligation as a student, the first evidence of Luther's preaching activity is found in the year 1513. The first sermons which can definitely be dated come from 1514."

From July of 1513 through March of 1515 Luther will lecture on the Psalms to theological students at the University of Wittenberg; lectures on the book of Romans will occupy him until August of 1516, followed by lectures on Galatians until 1517, and thereafter lectures on the letter to the Hebrews into the following year.[24] His critique of the church continues unabated. For instance, as he laments in his lecture notes on Ps 69:3, from 1514, “Is there anything more proud, more arrogant, more pompous, more ostentatious than the princes and priests of the church” who replace the service of God’s word with “worldly power, with earthly rule, and control of cities, kingdoms, and provinces”?[25] Between 29 June 1516 and 24 February 1517, he preaches on the Ten Commandments to the congregation of St. Mary’s church.[26] Brecht summarizes the theological outlook of the entire series:

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[18] Doberstein, "Introduction," xii; in subsequent years, according to Doberstein, "He preached on the average of two or three times, occasionally four times, a week." Cf. Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 86–87.

[19] "Luther's First (?) Sermon, Matt. 7:12, 1510(?) or 1512(?)," *LW* 51:1–13; Latin text in WA 4:590–95. That few if any extant sources reproduce Luther's preaching exactly (sometimes offering significantly different accounts even of the same sermon) is widely acknowledged: see, e.g., Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," 266–68, and, more fully, Frymire, "Martin Luther's Sermons and Postils," 12–14, 23.

[20] Quotations of Scripture in English (with modernized spelling) follow the Douay-Rheims Bible, which, although it postdates Luther by up to a century (the New Testament having been published in 1582 and the Old Testament in 1609–1610), nonetheless reflects the Vulgate that Luther would have consulted alongside the Greek or Hebrew text.

[21] *LW* 51:8; cf. Bluhm, "Significance of Luther's Earliest Extant Sermon," 178.

[22] *LW* 51:10–12; cf. Bluhm, "Significance of Luther's Earliest Extant Sermon," 179–80.

[23] *LW* 51:12; more fully, Bluhm, "Significance of Luther's Earliest Extant Sermon," 181–83.

> The introductions to the sermons call again for humble confession of sins and self-accusation. God does everything, we only receive. Righteousness is to be sought not in ourselves, but in Christ, for righteousness, wisdom, and power are in him, not in ourselves . . . Before doing his proper work, which consists of mercy and righteousness, peace and joy, God must do his foreign work with the cross, mortification, and identification with Christ’s suffering. The gospel first increases sin, and thus it appears not as good news, but as bad news.[27]

His meditations on the Decalogue make clear the human impossibility of meeting God’s righteous demand. For example, in his sermon on the first commandment (dated 29 June 1516), Luther seizes on the fact that Exod 20:3 avoids either a positive affirmation of what God’s people should do, or an imperative prohibition of what they must not do.[28] As he sees it, the reason for this wording is entirely theological:

> Every commandment of God is established so that it now shows past and present sin rather than that it prohibits future sin, since (according to the apostle [Rom 3:20]), “Through the law comes only the knowledge of sin,” and again [Rom 11:32], “God shut up all people under sin, so that he might have mercy on all.” Therefore, when the

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[24] Johnston, *The Protestant Reformation in Europe*, 18.

[25] *LW* 10:358, quoted in Firth, “*Exsurge Domine*,” 6 nn. 42–43.

[26] Wengert, “Martin Luther,” 97. For a summary of their content, see Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 152–5.

[27] Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 152.

[28] The Hebrew text has a Qal imperfect (לא־יהיה), which Jerome renders as a future tense (*non* habebis *deos alienos coram me*); so WA 1:398.

> commandment of God comes, it finds sinners and increases [sin], so that sin may abound more fully (Rom 5[:20]) . . . Therefore the Spirit, since he is the most blessed Teacher, speaks instead in the indicative, as if to say, "O miserable human, behold I show your depravity to you. You ought to be such a person who has no gods, who does not take the name of God in vain, who sanctifies the Sabbath, who does not kill, does not covet, etc. Now, however, you are totally opposite and perverse [*alius et perversus*].[29]

For Luther, the fact that it denounces sin without resolving the moral dilemma such denunciation implies does not mean that the law is devoid of grace. Rather, the grace of Torah lies in its unwelcome yet necessary revelation of the human condition: this condemnatory grace, as it were, reveals our need of saving grace.

If the purpose of God's holy law is to discover our sin and declare it to us, the same appears true of all Scripture. A month later, on 27 July 1516, Luther's sermon on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (Luke 18:9–14) begins conventionally enough by advocating self-abasement and acknowledgement of our profound need of God. Yet Luther does not admonish his listeners to imitate the penitent publican, as though we might properly humble ourselves in the presence of a holy God. Rather, he proposes that we recognize our own lack of merit in *all* that God requires of us—even humility itself. Hence he concludes:

> Who is so proud that he can boast of being free of all pride and can claim for himself this utter humility of the publican? Therefore we shall rather acknowledge that we are like the Pharisee and shall groan over ourselves and hate ourselves more than he did, and not presume so confidently that we are like the publican; for he was blessed beyond measure and was a child of grace. We, however, are children of nature and, therefore, children of wrath.[30]

This is a bold and unexpected assessment of himself and his congregants in the parish church of Wittenberg, none of whom might wish to think of themselves in such uncompromising terms. In Luther's eyes, instead of providing moral admonition, illustrating conduct to emulate or avoid, the parable speaks directly against us. Indeed, rather than reading the text, the text reads the reader in a strikingly postmodern sense: it exposes our failure to live as God's holiness demands.

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[29] The translation is that of Wengert, "Martin Luther," 98.

[30] "Sermon on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, Luke 18:9–14, July 27, 1516," *LW* 51:17.

Similar themes emerge in a sermon from the following February that explains the episode of Christ sleeping in the stern while storm waters slosh over the gunwales of his boat (Matt 8:23–27). Luther takes the imperilled vessel and terrified disciples as representative of the human situation generally: "There can be no doubt," he declares, "that in this Gospel the sea is a symbol of this world, that is, this troubled, unstable, and transitory life."[31] The danger, for Luther, is not human insecurity itself, but our failure to recognize its full measure and the vanity of our efforts to rescue ourselves. Hence, he insists, "The greatest security is the greatest temptation, the greatest wealth is the greatest poverty, the greatest justice is the greatest injustice, the greatest wisdom is the greatest stupidity, and every excess drives one to excess in everything, and this becomes the greatest peril" (*LW* 51:23). Effectively ignoring Jesus' rebuke of the disciples for their lack of faith (Matt 8:26), Luther instead proposes that Christ intentionally neglects his followers—falls asleep!—precisely in order to solicit their recognition of the need to be rescued:

> Therefore it is well with those who find water breaking into their ship, for this moves them to seek help from God. Wherefore, observe how Christ in all things is seeking our profit and is serving us even while he sleeps . . . while he abandons us he is upholding us and while he is allowing us to go through storms in terror he is bringing us forward . . . Indeed, he wants to arouse in us a desire for him, so that we may continue to cry out to him; he wants us to cry out to him in order that he may hear and answer us (*LW* 51:24).

Luther's proposal represents a counterintuitive, deeply paradoxical reading both of the human situation and of God's response to it, according to which trouble and despair constitute our hope for salvation, provided only that in our distress we turn to Christ.

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[31] "Sermon on the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Matt. 8:23–27, February 1, 1517," *LW* 51:23.

To reiterate, Luther is not enamoured of paradox for its own sake so much as he is motivated by a particular understanding of how God, and more specifically how God's Word and its proclamation, bring sinners to repentance. Anticipating one of the major themes of his later theological programme, he explains the twofold work of the gospel in a sermon on Ps 19:1[32] from 21 December 1516. Fittingly, this date is the festival of Saint Thomas, the apostle who questioned Jesus' resurrection only to have his doubts resolved by a personal encounter with the risen Lord.

Luther begins by explaining the gospel itself as a species of preaching, initially ignoring the fact that the text before him speaks not of human action but of the manner in which heaven and earth declare God's glory without need of human help: "The gospel is nothing else but the proclamation of the works of God, for it preaches what God does, and this in itself preaches his glory, since God is glorified through the very telling of the works of God."[33] The glorious work of God (what Luther calls God's "proper work," or *opus proprium*) "is nothing else but to create righteousness, peace, mercy, truth, patience, kindness, joy, and health," all of which characterizes the saints who are God's "new creation" (*LW* 51:18–19). But divine glory—whether revealed in the cosmos or the preaching of the gospel—leaves no room for human glory or pride. On the contrary, it reveals human glory to be both foolish and vain: "Therefore, the gospel, since it proclaims the glory of God reveals human shame, and, since it manifests the works of God, discloses the idleness and sin of men" (*LW* 51:18).

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[32] Numbered in the Vulgate as Ps 18:2: *Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei et opus manus eius adnuntiat firmamentum* ["The heavens show forth the glory of God, and the firmament declareth the works of his hands"].

[33] "Sermon on St. Thomas' Day, Ps. 19:1, December 21, 1516," *LW* 51:18. The oral character of God's message—which the preacher takes up in the pulpit—soon develops into a key feature of Luther's theology: "Since the advent of Christ the gospel, which used to be hidden in the Scriptures, has become an oral preaching. And thus it is the manner of the New Testament and of the gospel that it must be preached and performed by word of mouth and a living voice. Christ himself has not written anything, nor has he ordered anything to be written, but rather to be preached by word of mouth" (Luther's *Church Postil* of 1522; WA 10.1.48, cited in Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 90; cf. *LW* 52:205–206). So, subsequently, WA TR 4.531 §4812: "God, the creator of heaven and earth, speaks to you through His preachers . . . It is God himself who speaks" (Wood, *Captive to the Word*, 93).

For Luther, revelation of the latter ("God's alien work" or *opus alienum*) is essential to any promulgation of the former: God must first convict of sin and the human need for forgiveness before announcing grace and forgiveness itself. It is in this sense that proclamation of the Gospel itself "preaches what God does":

> For just as the work of God is twofold, namely, proper and alien, so also the office of the gospel is twofold. The proper office of the gospel is to proclaim the proper work of God, i.e., grace, through which the Father of mercies freely gives to all men peace, righteousness and truth, mitigating all his wrath . . .
>
> But the strange work of the gospel is to prepare a people perfect for the Lord, that is, to make manifest sins and pronounce guilty those who were righteous in their own eyes by declaring that all men are sinners and devoid of the grace of God . . .
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> So the gospel sounds exceedingly harsh in its alien tones, and yet this must be done, in order that it may be able to sound with its own proper tones (*LW* 51:20).

Corresponding to the "good news" and "proper office" of the Gospel or εὐαγγέλιον, which makes for "pleasant and joyous preaching," there is also for Luther a necessary "*Cacangelium*, i.e. bad news and an alien office" that "brings sad and unwelcome tidings" in its declaration of human guilt (*LW* 51:21). More particularly, reference to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ completes the theological portrait of God's twofold work, and twofold proclamation of glory:

> God's alien work, therefore, is the suffering of Christ and sufferings in Christ, the crucifixion of the old man and the mortification of Adam. God's proper work, however, is the resurrection of Christ, justification in the Spirit, and the vivification of the new man . . .

> Thus, conformity with the image of the Son of God includes both of these works (*LW* 51:19).[34]

On the one hand, then, lie the "unwelcome tidings" of crucifixion, the vanity of human glory, divine judgement, and conviction of sin, which are "the strange work of the gospel," while corresponding to it on the other lie the grace and glory of resurrection, by which God justifies sinners and transforms them into saints.[35]

In October of 1517, Luther will summarize and reiterate this all-important concept in the fifty-eighth of his *95 Theses*, declaring that the merits of Christ "always work grace for the inner person and cross, death, and hell for the outer person."[36] So important is it to his theological outlook that Luther's *Explanations of the Disputes Concerning the Power of Indulgences*, published less than a year later in August of 1518, include an extensive discussion of the critical difference between a "theology of the cross" and the *theologia illusoria* that he subsequently describes as a "theology of glory."[37] He expands on the wording of Thesis 58, explaining that "The merits of Christ perform an alien work . . . in that they effect the cross, labor, all kinds of punishment, finally death and hell in the flesh, to the end that the body of sin is destroyed, our members which are upon earth are mortified, and sinners are turned into hell."[38] In this way, "God's first, alien work . . . clears the way in us for God's proper work of salvation."[39] As he declares in the course of the Heidelberg Disputation (its precepts delivered and debated in late April and May of 1518), "God can be found only in suffering and the cross."[40]

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[34] Luther will subsequently develop a full and robust theology of the Holy Spirit, in which the Spirit's agency is essential to preaching: see Marty, "Preaching on the Holy Spirit," 423–41.

[35] So on Ps 68:6 (from 1521): "He who feels no sin will not be impelled to seek grace; he will pay no attention either to the Gospel or to faith. Therefore the Law is conscience' jailer, chains, fetters, and prison . . . God does not deliver us from these bonds whenever we deem it necessary, but He permits us to be humbled and tormented in them until we thirst for grace. . . . That is the twofold work and performance of Christ in us: He kills us, and He resurrects us; He humbles us, and He exalts us, each in His good season" (*LW* 13:7–8; WA 8:8–9).

[36] Wengert, ed., *Roots of Reform*, 42 (*semper . . . operantur gratiam hominus interioris et crucem, mortem infernumque exterioris*); cf. *LW* 31:212; WA 1:605.

[37] Luther first employs this distinction, referring to "theologians" of the cross and of glory, respectively, in the Heidelberg Disputation (Theses 20–21 in particular); text in Wengert, ed., *Roots of Reform*, 80–85.

Returning to the sermon on Matt 8:23–27 from 1 February 1517, the concept of a two-fold gospel explains Luther's exposition of the disciples' response to Jesus asleep in the boat—to repeat, an exposition at odds with the plain meaning of the text: "For the first step to health is to admit that one is sick, and the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" (*LW* 51:23). He insists that even those who think of themselves as Christians fail to recognize their peril before God and the folly of trusting in their own righteousness. Our true salvation depends, therefore, on Christ's discomfiting withdrawal, distance, and apparent neglect:

> Thus we are taught that we perish when he sleeps. For he for whom Christ is not sleeping will not perish. He who does not perish does not cry out. He who does not cry out will not be heard. He who is not heard receives nothing. He who receives nothing has nothing. And he who has nothing will perish. So it happens that he who does not perish really perishes; and he for whom the Lord does not sleep never rightly wakes him. Therefore sleep on, Lord Jesus, that thou mayest awake, and let us perish, that thou mayest save us (*LW* 51:25).

Just over three weeks later, on 24 February 1517, Luther resumes a similar line of reasoning in a sermon for the Feast of Saint Matthew, but this time with specific reference to human intellect and understanding rather than salvation in general. Beginning with the words of Jesus in Matt 11:25, "I confess to thee O Father Lord of Heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them to little ones [*parvulis*]," Luther addresses the meaning of wisdom and foolishness, citing 1 Cor 3:18 ("If any man seem to be wise among you in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise"). He is again uncompromising in his analysis of the human situation: "[The] truly wise [are] those who do not consider themselves wise, who have no wisdom of their own but rather are fools, lacking wisdom and understanding, because without any self-deception whatsoever they see that they are empty and know absolutely nothing."[41] If wisdom is to be found at all, he says, it is "Not in us, but in Christ. It is outside of us, in God. Thus we have been made babes, fools, sinners, liars, weaklings, and nothing, since everything was given over to Christ" (*LW* 51:28). More clearly than in his sermon of February 1, Luther directs these comments toward his fellow preachers, accusing them of relying on natural or human wisdom alone: "This right reason, this dictate, this wisdom of nature, which now resounds and is being vaunted *from every pulpit*, this is the wisdom and prudence which the Father has hidden *from those who are his*, in order to make them fools and defendants and thus compel them to seek for grace to guide them" (*LW* 51:27; emphasis added).

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[38] Wengert, "Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross," 198–203; here, 199–200.

[39] Wengert, "Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross," 200; further, Ngien, "Theology of Preaching," 33–38.

[40] *Deum non inveniri nisi in passionibus et cruce* (*LW* 31:53; WA 1:362). For a brief summary of Luther's *theologia Crucis*, see McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 148–52 ("It is through undergoing the torment of the cross, death and hell that true theology and the knowledge of God come about" [152]).

Of course, the question of papal indulgences also preoccupies him. Ironically, Luther himself has recently been invited to preach (most likely on 16 or 17 January 1517) for the anniversary of the rededication of the Wittenberg Castle Church, celebration of which entailed an indulgence.[42] According to Wengert, "it would seem most likely that this is the very sermon that riled the Elector [i.e. Duke Frederick III, Elector of Saxony] and sparked Luther's own earnest research into the question that eventually led to the writing of the *95 Theses*."[43] Indulgences, says Luther in his festival sermon, address only the fear of punishment but not sin itself. The true penitent, by contrast, "does not seek indulgences and remission of punishments but rather exaction and imposition of punishments," even the cross.[44] Since indulgences offer remission of punishment rather than true remedy for sin, they teach what Luther terms "a mutilated grace" (*quae praecisa gratia docet* [WA 1:99]). In this sense, those who rely on them are like the shrines they venerate and the churches in which they congregate: external signs that lack spiritual substance of their own. Whether, then, with regard to churches or postulants, asks Luther rhetorically, "What does God care for the temple of a sign when he does not have the temple of the thing signified?"[45]

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[41] "Sermon on St. Matthew's Day, Matt. 11:25–30, February 24, 1517," *LW* 51:27.

[42] See WA 1:94–99; on the dating of this sermon, see Wengert, "Luther's Preaching an Indulgence," 70–73.

[43] Wengert, "Luther's Preaching an Indulgence," 64.

Just so, in his sermon for the Feast of Saint Matthew, Luther repeats his assertion that "Through these nothing is accomplished except that the people learn to fear and flee and dread the penalty of sins, but not the sins themselves" (*LW* 51:31). In fact, he says, the danger of indulgences is that those who rely on them end up refusing the forgiveness which is "Christ's easy yoke," as a result of which they fail to find true rest for their souls (cf. Matt 11:29):

> So they go on laboring under their burden, being afraid where there is nothing to afraid of, and dragging their sin like a heavily laden wagon . . .
>
> They teach us to dread the cross and suffering and the result is that we never become gentle and lowly, and that means that we never receive indulgence nor come to Christ. Oh, the dangers of our time! Oh, you snoring priests! Oh, darkness deeper than Egyptian! How secure we are in the midst of the worst of all our evils! (*LW* 51:30–31)

Recapitulating both the paradoxical benefit of cross and judgement and his dismissal of futile preaching in the church of his day, Luther will conclude his *95 Theses* in a similar vein:

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[44] Wengert, "Luther's Preaching an Indulgence," 66–67 (*non quaerit indulgentias et remissiones poenarum, sed exactiones poenarum . . . Ideo non petit indulgentias sed cruces*).

[45] Wengert, "Luther's Preaching an Indulgence," 64.

> 92. And thus, away with all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace [*'Pax pax,' et non est pax*]!
> 93. May it go well for all those prophets who say to Christ's people, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross [*'Crux crux,' et non est crux*]!
> 94. Christians must be encouraged diligently to follow Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell,
> 95. And in this way they may be confident of "entering heaven through many tribulations" [Acts 14:22] rather than through the security of peace.[46]

Learning from Luther Today

What lessons, then, might we take from Luther's early preaching for the church of a postmodern, perhaps even post-secular culture? First and foremost, however self-evident the assertion may seem, we would do well to acknowledge Scripture, as did Luther, as our primary source of theological insight.[47] This does not mean reverting to a simplistic textual or doctrinal scholasticism, or abandoning all narrative, ideological, or reader-oriented forms of exegesis. But it does entail submission to the uncompromising worldview of the biblical text, its portrait of God, and its assessment of the human condition. Erich Auerbach explains what is at stake:

> The Bible's claim to truth is not only . . . urgent . . . it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories . . . insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of mankind, will be given their due place within [the Biblical world's] frame, will be subordinated to it . . . Far from seeking . . . merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.[48]

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[46] Wengert, ed., *The Roots of Reform*, 46.

[47] As Wood (*Captive to the Word*, 89) notes, "The salient feature of Luther's preaching was its biblical content and reference. It was subject to Scripture throughout."

[48] Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14–15.

Just so, and in contrast to the epistemological laissez-faire of postmodernism, Luther reminds us that the biblical text stands over against us with uncompromising assertions of divine sovereignty and demand. Indeed, altogether rebutting our own optimism in this regard, Luther contends that in the face of the Gospel, humans are not free, able, or (in particular) willing to perceive and interpret—much less construct—the reality of their situation.

Whether with regard to epistemology or soteriology, much of Luther's energy is directed toward convincing his hearers to come to a complete end of themselves, so as to rely instead on the grace and power of God. Far from consoling former heirs of the Enlightenment who have now lost faith in humanity that things are not so desperate after all, Luther would surely encourage us to remove whatever human props and consolations might yet remain. No doubt he would also speak out against misplaced optimism or self-reliance on the part of clergy and congregations today, just as he would likely contradict our discouragement at the church's loss of face and place within society. Notwithstanding our wealth of material and managerial resources, and the complacency that these sometimes inspire, he might suggest that our despair for the state of the church (whether internally or in relation to contemporary culture) is not yet sufficiently deep. We still cling to the hope that we can work out a suitable solution to whatever ails us without casting ourselves headlong before the cross in prayer. We strive for social "relevance" and recognition. As with the church of his own day, our crisis is spiritual and theological rather than social, political, or organizational, and so can only find its answer in conversation with the One who calls us to Himself.

Just so, Luther does not direct his attention towards the reformation of society as a whole, but rather toward the church in particular. Granted, he lived in a notionally "Christian" culture, one in which the concerns of church and state might frequently overlap. And there is no question that his attention to spiritual and ecclesiastical reform ultimately had a profound impact on European politics, culture, and philosophy alike. Indeed, even the radical individualism of a postmodern worldview can be traced back to the philosophical transformation of which Luther was part. Yet in his lectures on Ps 44 from around 1514, Luther interprets the Psalmist's lamentation—"You have rejected us and abased us . . . All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face" (Ps 44:9, 15)—with particular reference to the church, "interpreting this psalm as God's judgment against the self-righteous [and] quoting 1 Pet 4:17, 'The time has come for judgment to begin at the household of God.'"[49] Not content simply to critique the church, he applies this lament first to himself, and to the inadequacy of his own devotion.[50] Where twenty-first century saints are more likely to lament the pernicious godlessness of the society within which they live and bask in the assurance of their own salvation, Luther would have us first consider our own persistent ungodliness.

Not least, Luther would call us again to the vital theological significance of preaching itself, which in many Western pulpits tends more to good humour and moral high-mindedness than to forthright conviction and the proclamation of a counter-intuitive gospel. Luther's preaching reminds us that Scripture has decidedly sharp edges: it stands against us before it draws us near, and bears little resemblance to the moralism that seems to predominate in many of our own sermons. But such a re-visioning of the task requires careful definition. If Luther is correct, preaching in such a theological register does not require homiletical badgering or harassment. Rather, faithful proclamation is a matter of allowing Scripture to speak for itself in its full range of address to our human situation. Already in his sermons on the Ten Commandments of 1516–1517, Luther insists "that God's Word *does* something to its hearers."[51] In this regard, as Timothy Wengert points out, Luther's understanding of Rom 3:20 ("through the law comes knowledge of sin") is pivotal:

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[49] Waltke et al., eds., *Psalms as Christian Lament*, 179. See *LW* 10:205–207.

[50] So Waltke et al., eds., *Psalms as Christian Lament*, 179.

[51] Wengert, "Martin Luther," 98–99; emphasis original; also quoted in Frymire, "Martin Luther's Sermons and Postils," 5. Further discussion in Wilson, "Luther on Preaching as God Speaking," 63–72.

> It is not just that the law informs us of a problem (as if Paul were saying, "By the law we learn something about sin"), which we must then fix. Instead, the law (to use Luther's other metaphors) thunders, breaks, threatens, and (in agreement with 2 Cor. 3:6) "puts to death" . . . The law thunders and threatens; the gospel consoles, heals, comforts.[52]

Convinced that our ministries and sermons are essential to the fulfilment of God's purpose, we are more likely to assume that pastoral consolation, healing, and comfort are largely human responsibilities. Knowing that our hearers are free either to accept or reject our preaching makes us strive all the more diligently to be rhetorically winsome, persuasive, even compelling. Yet the balance between human and divine responsibility is more subtle than this, notwithstanding the high esteem accorded preaching and preachers alike in Luther's later theology.[53] Far from exalting the preacher, the importance of the task compels radical reliance on God as much for ourselves as for our hearers. Expounding Ps 68:11 (rather freely!), Luther declares, "Where God does not provide the message, a sermon is useless . . . For wherever God does not suggest the words, there is no sermon at all, or it is a vain and pernicious sermon."[54] More specifically, in a sermon that he preached on the first Monday in Lent, 1522, Luther distinguishes between mere human speech and the Word of God:

> [God's] Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men . . . I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We

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[52] Wengert, "Martin Luther," 99.

[53] So Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," 269–72.

[54] *LW* 13:12 (WA 8:12–13), cited in Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," 273.

> should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.[55]

Because God's manner of working is often paradoxical, proclamation of the gospel will require humility, patience, and perseverance in equal measures. For, as Luther reminds us, the task is frustrating and the fruit of our labours often hidden. Far from being himself immune to discouragement, Luther at one point resolved to cease preaching altogether, such was the antipathy of his hearers—the congregation of the Church of St. Mary in Wittenberg!—toward the gospel. "I would rather preach to mad dogs," he railed, "for my preaching shows no effect among you, and it only makes me weary."[56] Nonetheless, he soon resumed his pulpit ministry, convinced that this was the office to which God had called him. On this point, we might be wise to avoid his example (however temporary) and heed his advice instead:

> For one should not quit simply because so few are changed for the better to hear the preaching of the gospel. But do what Christ did: He rescued the elect and left the rest behind. This is what the apostles did also. It will not be better for you. You are foolish if you either presume that you alone can accomplish everything or despair of everything when it does not go your way.[57]

Luther might have sometimes despaired at the apparently meagre results of his own ministry, yet five hundred years of history have proven him very wrong. Why should it be either better or worse for those who preach today?

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[55] "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after Invocavit"; *LW* 51:76; WA 10:15. Here, Luther combines German and Latin terms: "wir haben wohl *ius verbi* aber nicht *executionem*." Cf. WA 29:381, where Luther observes that the preacher "corporaliter verbum praedicet docente deo interne [preaches the Word physically while God teaches internally]"; quoted in Büttgen, "Luther et l'objet de la predication," 569 n. 16.

[56] *LW* 17:128–29 n. 6, cited in Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," 277. This decision followed his sermon on New Year's Day, 1530; see the fuller treatment by Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 28–34.

[57] *LW* 15:124; WA 20:144 (from his expanded notes [1532] on Sir 7:18), cited in part by Ferry, "Martin Luther on Preaching," 277.

Abbreviations

LW *Luther's Works.* Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. 55 vols. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg/Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986.

WA *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [*Schriften*]. 73 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009.

WA TR *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Tischreden*. 6 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1912–1921.

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