

“Luther’s Tactual Itinerary of Grace”

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Abstract

This paper argues for a multi-sensory approach to construing divine-human relating with special attention to the significance of touch to Luther’s understanding of justification. In the first part of this paper I outline the modern turn to the auditory as the exclusive sensory metaphor for construing divine-human relating. While Luther’s appreciation of auditory metaphors is apparent throughout his texts, I argue that a metaphoric of hearing is inadequate for elucidating justification as union for three reasons. First, it identifies the body as inherently more sinful than the mind. Second, it construes the relation between speaker and listener as one of absolute freedom and absolute passivity to the point of implying ontological nullity. The normative claim that God’s relating to us is ontologically prior to any activity on our part does not define how we relate, but sets the conditions for the very possibility of our relating at all. Third, it construes human agency exclusively in terms of rational assent. While rational assent is one expression of human agency, the body is more basic to our relating with other persons, the world or God. In closing, I turn then to Luther’s teaching on baptism to suggest a tactual itinerary of the relation between grace and faith. Construed tactually, God’s grace may be understood as an ever open invitation to loving relation given to human persons in and through embodied existence.

The ways in which we imagine God and God’s relating to us matters. Our theological imagination contributes to the adequacy of our theological proposals and shapes the ways in which we live our lives. In this paper, I suggest that modern theology has tended toward reductive ways of imagining God’s relating by construing God’s relating exclusively in terms of a single sense. So, early modern and neo-Kantian “liberal” theology tends toward the exclusive use of the visual while late modern theology whether “Barthian,” “post-liberal,” “post-modern,” or otherwise, tends toward the auditory. What is of special interest to me is that in both cases the move toward a single-sense metaphor has been a move away from the lived body. This occlusion of the lived body as the background against which sensory metaphors draw life is significant to me not only as a feminist, but also as a Lutheran. For Luther’s own theological proposals, by virtue of his pastoral approach, are responses to living questions oriented toward a way of life. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s classic distinction between maps and tours, we might say that where modern theology maps divine-human relating, Luther provides us with a tour. Not surprisingly, Luther’s tour of divine-human relating is funded by multiple sensory metaphors. Here, I want highlight his use of the tactual in particular to suggest an alternative to the modern tendency toward the exclusive use of either seeing or hearing. To this end, I begin this paper with a discussion of the late modern turn to the auditory and identify three of its limits for adequately imagining divine-human relating. I then lift up Luther’s use of the tactual to imagine the relation between grace and faith as suggestive for a multi-sensory metaphoric rooted in the tactual.

The Turn to the Auditory in Late Modern Theology

In a brief set of comments on Tuomo Mannermaa's interpretation of justification in Luther, Robert Jenson usefully illustrates what I am describing as the turn to the auditory in modern theology. Jenson praises Mannermaa's ability to resist modern tendencies in justification-talk. As Jenson notes, Mannermaa rightly recognizes that Luther scholars regularly distort Luther's theological claims, especially justification, by reading Luther as, of all things, a Kantian. Against this modern distortion, Mannermaa's interpretation is more in keeping with Luther's own teachings. According to Jenson, Mannermaa offers a fitting interpretation of Luther by organizing Luther's disparate claims through the auditory metaphor. "To be, according to Luther according to Mannermaa, is to give oneself to another, by speaking."¹ This auditory lens offers a means of comprehending Luther's understanding of justification. In "On the Freedom of a Christian," for example, Luther explains justification as a process of faith as making us righteous in several different ways. First, faith makes righteous because "believing what God says fulfills the first and great commandment." Second, faith makes us righteous because "the soul that hearkens to the word becomes what the word is, holy and right." Third, faith makes righteous because "in faith the soul is united with Christ as a bride with the groom, to be 'one body' with him and so possess his righteousness." Jenson suggests that we can make sense of these claims when organized around the auditory sense.

One sees how all this works together only when one notices the astonishing switch that Luther has pulled on the Greeks' ontology and epistemology. In their [the Greeks'] doctrine, the specific character of personal beings, 'souls,' is that their being is determined by what they, as perfect eyes, *see*. Luther switched that; for him the specific character of personal being is that we are what, as perfect ears, we *hear*. Moreover, if for the Greeks "to be" generally is to perdure, to hang on to oneself, for Luther "to be" is to share oneself by speaking: thus for Christ "to be" is to share himself in his word.²

Grasped through the metaphor of seeing, justification amounts to identification between God and the human person. But grasped through the metaphor of hearing, justification is a communication between God and the human person that preserves divine transcendence. In other words, Jenson is suggesting that the auditory metaphor resists the trappings a visual model or "metaphorics"³ brings to justification talk.

Before going on to situate Jenson's comments against the backdrop of a wider turn to the auditory in modern theology, it is worth noting the resonance of Jenson's elevation of the

¹ Robert Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, 'Why Is Luther So Fascinating?'" in *Union with Christ*, eds. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1998), 23.

² Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa," 24.

³ Or, better yet, what Hans Blumenberg refers to as a "metaphorics" which are expressions that border on metaphysical conjectures. As conjectures, metaphorics are distinct from metaphysics in that they are not fixed forms. They are, however, more substantial than mere metaphors because they serve as pointers toward a broad set of epistemological and ontological commitments. See Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 30-62.

auditory with Luther's own privileging of ear over the eye.⁴ As Margaret Miles shows in her study of Luther's theological anthropology, Luther identifies the ear rather than the eye as the most direct access to the heart.⁵ Luther's emphasis on the auditory is significant for at least two reasons. First, it imagines the human subject as passive to the active Word. Whereas the classical model of vision presumes activity on the part of seeing subject as well as the object seen, hearing presumes the passivity of the subject who is accosted by the auditory effects of an object. Second, Luther's the juxtaposition of hearing to seeing expresses Luther's sense of the relation between the reality of faith and present experience. The reality of faith—justification—is given as a promise in the Word alone. As Luther puts it, "A right faith goes right on with its eyes closed," which is to say that the visual might actually distort and inhibit faith. Right faith simply "clings to God's Word."⁶ So, Luther does elevate the ear over the eye and in so doing expresses an alternative set of theological commitments to visually oriented contemporaries. Even so, Jenson's elevation of the auditory to the exclusion of other sensory metaphors cannot be adequately understood in terms of Luther's own work. Rather, it must be set against the backdrop of the turn to hearing in modern theology.

Since the publication of Adolf Harnack's *History of Dogma*, the auditory has been used to express and symbolize true religion. Breaking with scholarly custom, Harnack asserted an opposition between genuine Christianity, identified with Hebraism, and the thinking of the Greeks.⁷ He registered the contrast between these two ways of thinking under the rubrics of hearing versus seeing. Genuinely Christian theology is organized in "dynamic-auditive" terms as opposed to the "visual, contemplative" terms of Greek thought. It is Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans*, however, that is pivotal for the emergence of the auditory as a critical alternative to the visual in modern theology. For Barth, modern theology is a series of efforts at "natural theology," theology that assumes some "point of contact" between God and human beings that may enable the achievement of some measure of theological understanding apart from revelation. In this way, vision tends to collapse the "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and humanity. When the visual is used to imagine divine-human relating in justification, it imagines that relating as something more akin to moral or even ontological participation between divine and human subjects. Morally, the visual suggests agency on the part of both God and human persons. Ontologically, the visual suggests a relationship based in some common likeness between God and humanity. By turning to the auditory, theologians like Barth and Jenson are taking aim at precisely these features of a visual metaphoric.

In this way, the turn to the auditory is an attempt to destabilize the visual metaphoric that have been corrupted by the pressures of scientific humanism. It is worth

⁴ Margaret Miles, "The Rope Breaks When It Is Tightest': Luther on the Body, Consciousness, and the Word," *The Harvard Theological Review*, v. 77, no.3/4 (1984): 239-258.

⁵ Miles, "The Rope Breaks When It Is Tightest'," 245.

⁶ Quoted in Miles, "The Rope Breaks When It Is Tightest,'" 248. Although Miles offers this quotation as evidence for Luther's elevation of the ear over the eye, it seems to me that here Luther mixes the auditory with the tactual such that the appropriate posture before the Word is figured as clinging.

⁷ Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 18.

noting, however, that long before the visual symbolized a problematic and ultimately corrupted way of life, it served as an important locus of resistance and reform within western Christendom. With the rise of scientific humanism, the visual became increasingly associated with human autonomy, individual freedom and liberty from tradition. But equally important is the recognition that under the pressure of scientific humanism, visual metaphors were lifted from their natural habitat among and working in tandem with the other senses. Conceptually, a visual metaphoric need not promote natural theology or a collapse of difference. The visual tends toward these problematics when promoted to the exclusion of other sensory metaphors.

Likewise, when the auditory has been lifted up in modern theology as the exclusive metaphor for construing the divine-human economy, it tends toward several problematic conclusions. First, it tends toward the conclusion that certain features of human persons—their bodies—are inherently more sinful than other features—their minds. This conclusion stems from the assumption that the value of the auditory metaphor stems from the sense that hearing is less dependent on the body than the other senses. As Jonathan Ree puts it, “considered physically or metaphysically, light may or may not be less material than sound; but considered as an experience, hearing is decidedly less materialistic than seeing.”⁸ It is this feature of hearing that features, for example, in Barth’s comments on Romans 1:23 where he relies upon auditory metaphors to correct the human propensity to collapse the infinite qualitative distinction between God and creation through appeal to vision or, worse yet, touch.

They changed the glory of the incorruptible – for an image of the corruptible... They had lost their knowledge of the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier, which must be crossed if men are really to advance from corruption to incorruption... Once the eye, which can perceive this distinction has been blinded, there arises in the midst, between here and there, between us and the ‘Wholly Other’, a mist or concoction of religion in which, by a whole series of skillful assimilations and mixings more or less strongly flavored with sexuality, sometimes the behavior of men or of animals is exalted to be an experience of God, sometimes the Being and Existence of God is ‘enjoyed’ as a human or animal experience. In all this mist the prime factor is provided by the illusion that it is possible for men to hold communication with God or, at least, to enter into a covenant relationship with Him without miracle – vertical and from above, without the dissolution of all things, and apart from THE truth which lies beyond birth and death.⁹

The auditory stands apart because it is less corrupted than either vision or touch precisely because it is less dependent upon the body. On the basis of this feature of auditory experience, Barth calls upon hearing as a way of imagining a mode of relating to God that transcends the sinful limits imposed by our bodies.

Second, an exclusively auditory metaphoric tends toward the problematic conclusion that human beings are wholly passive before God. Hearing is experienced as receptivity; the ear is “affected” and “accosted” by the voice of another. As noted above, Luther uses the auditory metaphor to emphasize the priority of grace in the justifying event.

⁸ Ree, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 44.

⁹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Oxford, 1968), 49-50.

When considered solely in terms of hearing, it is difficult to imagine other features of divine-human relating such as consummation or even faith.

It is perhaps in response to the second problematic that in its late modern form the metaphors of hearing has come to entail activity of a very particular sort. As Ree points out, “the idea that auditory perception is passive compared with seeing and looking seems to forget, however, that hearing and listening may also, in their way, be means of active inquiry, and methods of orienting one in the world.”¹⁰ Perhaps more significantly, it is not only active listening but also the use of the voice that informs the modern metaphors of hearing. This pairing of hearing and voice has been significant since the nineteenth century when it was used to illustrate “the idea that perceptions enter into the body and pass through it on their way in to the soul, whilst actions push past them in the opposite direction heading out into the objective world.”¹¹ What this pairing then suggests is that hearing’s vulnerability to the world is overcome by the powers of reason and will which act upon the world through vocalization. In theological conversations, the auditory enables the claim that understanding and assent are the proper activities of the faithful believer. So, an exclusively auditory metaphors comprehends Barth’s view that justification depends upon an absolutely free and gracious act of God as well as the free rational response of human agents. The logic of this decidedly modern use of the auditory is poignantly expressed in Barth’s argument for believer’s baptism as put forward in his lecture, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*. Here, Barth contends that infant baptism simply cannot be made sense of within a Protestant dogmatics that claims faith is necessary for salvation. For faith, which comes through hearing, is nothing if not conscious acknowledgement of and assent to the work of God in Christ.¹² It is this way of using the auditory metaphor that gives lie to the assumption that elevating the auditory over and against the visual provides a genuine alternative to the problematic course of modern theology. For here we see the auditory fit in response to the very same scientific humanist pressures as the early modern use of the visual.

A Third Way: The Tactual as Route to a Multi-Sensory Metaphors

In response to the modern tendency toward single-sense metaphors for construing divine-human relating, I turn now to Martin Luther’s discussion of infant baptism as suggestive for a multi-sensory approach to divine-human relating. As noted above, Luther does elevate the ear over the eye in order to emphasize the necessary priority of divine agency as well as the sense of faith as grounded in a divine promise. In contrast to the modern turn to the auditory, however, Luther’s does not elevate the auditory to the exclusion of the other senses but in concert with them. This point emerges in his considerations of infant baptism precisely because the practice of infant baptism presents a challenge to the claim that one is justified by grace through faith when faith is viewed exclusively as rational assent to a word

¹⁰ Ree, *I See A Voice*, 53.

¹¹ Ree, *I See A Voice*, 64.

¹² Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest Payne (London: SCM Press, 1948), 45-47.

of promise. Namely, the challenge of claiming that children under the age of reason have faith when they are baptized.¹³

From early on, Luther insists that faith is essential to the efficacy of baptism. His earliest position on the efficacy of infant baptism is that the faith of the sponsors stands in for and so makes efficacious the baptism of the child. By 1522, however, Luther becomes dissatisfied with this faith by proxy view and insists on the necessity of personal faith. At first glance, Luther's abandonment of faith as proxy seems to culminate in a cognitive assent view of faith. He writes, "Baptism helps no one and is to be administered to no one unless he believes for himself. No one who does not personally believe is to be baptized.... Faith must be present either before or in baptism itself, otherwise the child is not freed from the devil and his sins."¹⁴ But Luther does not settle with a cognitive assent view. Instead he offers a theory of infant faith that teaches that children believe when they are baptized. Luther never abandons the idea of infant faith always also insisting that it is not faith but the word and work of God that is decisive for justification.

In the only full-length treatise concerning infant baptism, Luther provides a coherent picture of his mature view. Written in response to two pastors on the question of rebaptism, Luther reiterates his earlier teachings about infant baptism and infant faith but ultimately rests his argument on the divine covenant.¹⁵ Where some interpreters have argued that this represents a shift away from the significance of infant faith in Luther's thought, I would argue that Luther's emphasis on divine activity just makes more explicit the nature of infant faith. By claiming a logical priority for God's action while insisting upon the necessity of faith, Luther suggests that faith is not something that comes either before or after God's action upon us in the word, but is part and parcel of being related to by God.

Faith does not come subsequent to God's word to us; rather, faith is a gift given with God's word. As a gift from God, faith does not depend upon our cognitive understanding and assent. Faith is first and foremost a participation in God's grace. This notion of faith as a participation in God's grace is illustrated by children because, as Luther puts it in a Lenten sermon from 1525, children hear the word, not as adults who "grasp it with their ears and their reason but often without faith" but "hear it through their ears without reason and with faith."¹⁶ After subverting the notion of faith as cognitive assent, Luther goes on to subvert the metaphors of hearing stating that children hear the word through baptism itself. Their *hearing* consists in this: "Christ, who has commanded that they be brought, takes them into

¹³ In his discussion of Luther's defense of infant baptism, Jaroslav Pelikan identifies the formal outlines of Luther's position in this way: "faith and the Word are inseparably interrelated, even and also in the means of grace, and moreover, then even and also in the means of grace 'faith builds and is founded on the Word of God rather than God's Word on faith.'" "Luther's Defense of Infant Baptism," in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 203.

¹⁴ Quoted in Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 364.

¹⁵ These four grounds are outlined in Pelikan, "Luther's Defense of Infant Baptism."

¹⁶ In Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 366.

his arms.”¹⁷ More basic than hearing the word through the ear and grasping it with the mind is hearing the word through the flesh and being grasped therein.

I began this paper by way of a brief set of comments on Jenson’s auditory reading of Mannermaa’s proposal that by justification Luther means something like *theosis*. In conclusion, I would like to use Luther’s suggestive turn to the tactual for imagining the relation of grace to faith in infant baptism as a lens for reading Mannermaa. According to Mannermaa, justification is a real participation in God analogous to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.¹⁸ At the heart of *theosis* is the presupposition that “a human being can participate in the fullness of life that is in God.”¹⁹ Although the later theology of Lutheranism defined justification in an entirely forensic manner, Luther maintains the inseparability of justification and the real presence of Christ in faith. In Luther’s theology, Christ is both “the favor (favor) of God (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and removal of God’s wrath) and the ‘gift’ of God (*donum*, God himself, present in the fullness of his essence).”²⁰ In contrast to the theology of later Lutheranism which defines the good news strictly in terms of “the cross and/or the forgiveness of sins,” Luther proclaims “the crucified and risen Christ himself.” According to Luther, “only the crucified and risen Christ himself as present can mediate salvation.”²¹ One of the ways in which Luther explicates this organic connection between the presence of Christ and justification is in his discussion of Christ as the form of faith.

Luther’s argument for Christ as the form or reality of faith is developed as a counter to the scholastic claim that charity is the form of faith. As Mannermaa puts it, “the core of [Luther’s] program of Reformation itself can be formulated by saying that the form (i.e., the living reality) of faith is not divinely elevated human love...but is in reality Christ himself.” Against the scholastic view of faith as an “uncertain knowledge” or mere speculation, Luther argues that faith “contains the divine reality (*forma*) which is Christ himself, who is present in faith.”²² According to Mannermaa, Luther demonstrates the inseparability of his teachings on justification and Christ as the form of faith in his *Lectures on Galatians*. As Mannermaa concludes, “the notion of the presence of Christ as favor and gift in faith is the essence of Luther’s concept of justification. . . .Forgiveness and indwelling of God are inseparable in the person of Christ, who is present in faith. In that sense, in Luther’s theology, justification and *theosis* as participation in God are also inseparable.”²³ It is also here, as I shall go on to

¹⁷ In Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 366.

¹⁸ Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” in *Union with Christ*, 25.

¹⁹ Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” 27.

²⁰ Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” 28.

²¹ Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” 29.

²² Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” 36.

²³ Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis*,” 38.

show, that Luther again employs tactual metaphors to make sense of the relation between grace and faith.

Developing his argument against the scholastic view of faith as an empty form to which love gives form, Luther argues:

Faith takes hold of Christ...He is the form that adorns and informs faith as color does the wall. Therefore Christian faith is not an idle quality or an empty husk in the heart...It is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It 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 faith itself. Thus, faith is a sort of knowledge or 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. Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present in that very cloud of faith...It is Christ who forms and trains faith or who is the form of faith. Therefore the Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life.²⁴

In this passage, Luther claims that one is justified by faith because Christ is truly present in faith.

The Finns summarize the meaning of this text with five words, "*In ipsa fide Christus adest*" which they translate as, "in faith Christ is really present."²⁵ But as James Kittelson points out in his critical review of the Finnish interpretation, this is by no means a "literal translation" of the text; the exact phrase does not even exist in the original text.²⁶ The standard English translation of the text that the Finns sum up with "in faith Christ is really present" is precisely the line quoted above, "Faith justifies because it takes hold of (*apprehendit*) and possesses (*possidet*) this treasure, the present Christ."²⁷ On the Finnish interpretation, it seems the term *possidet* reinforces the term *apprehendit* and *apprehendit* is translated as "apprehend." So, this text captures the claim put forward by the Finns that Christ is really present in faith because "for the soul to 'apprehend' something is for it to

²⁴ Luther, LW, 26, 129-30.

²⁵ Kittelson, "To the Finland Station: A Review Essay," *Dialogue*, v. 38, no. 3 (Summer, 1999): 235.

²⁶ Kittelson, "To the Finland Station," 235. The critical text reads, *Ideo iustificat fides, dicimus, quia habet illum thesaurum, quia Christus adest; quo modo non est cogitabile...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. WA 40, I: 229-30.

²⁷ Kittelson, "To the Finland Station," 237.

acquire the 'form' of what it sees."²⁸ In order to explain this intimate relating of Christ in faith, the Finns fall back upon a visual metaphoric. But does this provide us with the most adequate means of construing the relation between grace and faith in this text? Taking my clues from Luther's discussion of baptism I would like to propose a tactual reading of this text.

In fact, the tactual is not difficult to find in the text. The primary meaning of the term *apprehendit* is "to lay hold of, grasp, seize, grip." While *apprehendit* may be translated, "to apprehend," the primary sense of this term is not cognitive but physical as in "to arrest someone for a crime." In fact, it is the physical sense of the term that is reinforced by the verb *possidet* which means "to seize upon, take hold of" typically with regard to property. Thus, the standard English translation remains true to the literal sense of the text. Surprisingly perhaps, the literal sense of the text images faith as taking hold of Christ. In the end, it is a tactual image that Luther chooses to provide. The image is not an explanation; as he goes on to say, "the mode in which he is present cannot be thought, for darkness is there as I have said." Yet, the image tells us something nonetheless.

Just as Luther imagined baptismal grace tactually, so here he imagines justifying faith tactually. So where baptism is described as being taken into the arms of Christ, justifying faith is described as taking hold of Christ: "Faith justifies because it takes hold of (*apprehendit*) and possesses (*possidet*) this treasure, the present Christ."

Having been taken into the arms of Christ, the believer takes hold of Christ by faith. The tactual relation is one in which both parties engage and are engaged, both approach and are approached. Like the relationship between a parent and newborn child, the relationship between the believer and Christ is personal even if it does not involve profession and assent. It is this quality of tactual relating that Luther draws upon in his theology of justification. Though sinners, the baptized are justified nonetheless. The main point is not that God looks differently, *as if* righteous. Rather, the point is that God relates to them in a special way that gives form to faith.

So what does tactual metaphor suggest for construing God's relating in justification? First, like the visual, the tactual suggests the very intimate ways in which God relates to us in justification. In keeping with the auditory, however, the tactual also respects difference depending in fact upon the distinction between the one touching and the touched for its form of relating. Third, the tactual resists attempts to transcend the body because the organ of touch is the flesh itself. Fourth, the tactual is basic to the other senses. Thus, turning to the tactual provides a starting point for a multi-sensory approach to imagining divine-human relating.

²⁸ Jenson, "Response to Mark Seifrid, Paul Metzger and Carl Trueman," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65 (2003), 247.