

Matthew's Gospel for the Reformation: "The Messiah ... Sent and Manifested"

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We live in strange times, when people seem not to know right from wrong, when the church is most severely persecuted through no persecution at all, and when Lutherans, of all people, seem so unsure about how to interpret the Bible. Were I to make a case for why in these Last Days you should listen to me, of all people, I would mislead you by referring to my academic credentials or scholarly writings, as if I should be heard for my much speaking and writing. Rather, I would encourage you to think of me as a voice from the past or, better yet—using the definition of a historian concocted by the philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel—consider me a prophet looking backwards, one who has spent his entire career studying and reading in the field of the history of biblical interpretation. This may not be all I know, but it is what I know best.

Before we engage my topic, however, let me clear up two popular myths about Lutheran interpretation of Scripture. For one thing, Lutherans never insisted that there was always only one way to interpret individual passages of Scripture, to which every good Lutheran had to agree. One of the most disturbing things we have inherited from nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical interpretation centers in the insistence that every passage of Scripture, because a single person wrote to a single, intended audience, has only one meaning that later interpreters must discover and explain. Such an approach ignores several important aspects of communication. First, sometimes authors mean to be obscure. Second, sometimes the original audience also took what the author said in different ways from the very beginning. Third, most

biblical authors—to say nothing of most authors in general—do not simply imagine a single audience or a single meaning for their work. To give an example from oral experience: when a father disciplines his young children, somehow his own mother and father, despite living hundreds of miles away, also end up in the room. Their voices come out of his mouth. The intended audience, in this case the children, do not exhaust the possible meanings of any text, especially when the grandparent’s words echo in what is said.

The fact that two well-meaning interpreters come to different conclusions about a particular Scripture passage does not *prima facie* mean that one is wrong and the other right. Instead, it simply means, in the first instance, that they see different things and derive different meanings from the same passage. For this important distinction, I can provide an actual example from the earliest days of the Reformation. The scene is at the Torgau Castle, the center of the electoral Saxon government and the place for a meeting between three important reformers, in late November 1527.¹ The one, John Agricola, would later cross swords with Martin Luther over the role of the law in Christian proclamation and life. In what some call the prelude to that antinomian controversy, in 1527 Agricola, rector of Eisleben’s Latin school, attacked Philip Melanchthon, teacher with Luther in Wittenberg, for having taught and written that repentance arises from the preaching of the law and the servile fear of punishment that such preaching evoked in the sinner. Agricola insisted that only the gospel and filial love of God led to true repentance. To make peace between his two followers and students, Luther agreed to a meeting at the castle in November of the same year. Luther had already written to Melanchthon that one could never rely on one’s own motivation for repentance but rather the certainty of God’s

¹ For the details, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over "Poenitentia"* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 103-38.

promises for forgiveness. This letter substantiated for the most part Melanchthon's position—so much so that he wanted to frame it. The meetings at the Torgau between Agricola, Melanchthon and Luther led to a basic agreement and some small changes in a document on which the Wittenbergers were working jointly, the so-called *Visitation Articles*.

But what applies to our topic came in a private breakfast meeting between Agricola and Melanchthon, at which Agricola reintroduced the charge, already made in a letter to Melanchthon written in October, that Melanchthon and Luther disagreed in their interpretation of Galatians 3:19, "The law is given on account of transgression." Luther interpreted it as a kind of "second use" of the law to drive the sinner to Christ, and Melanchthon as first use of the law, which keeps evil in check. Agricola insisted that Melanchthon needed to change his interpretation to match Luther's. Melanchthon's response, already recorded in an October letter to Agricola, gives us insight into the flexibility of Wittenberg's approach to Scripture. Melanchthon was aware of the differences between himself and Luther and preferred to follow older interpreters instead of Luther. He could not imagine how this would anger Luther. "For there is no doubt that Paul teaches that the law has been proposed for two reasons: first, to coerce the flesh with carnal righteousness; then to terrify the conscience. I have adapted the interpretation of this Pauline text to the former effect of the law; Luther adapts it to the latter." Thus, Melanchthon concluded, he could not see where he had "contaminated the Scriptures" or "wounded evangelical liberty."²

Now, such an approach did not mean Scripture could mean anything or that any interpretation goes. It rather implied that one could not from the get-go reject one interpretation

² Wengert, *Law and Gospel*, 120-21.

of a text simply because it differed from other interpretations. Just as Lutherans are not fundamentalists and cannot agree with the well-known American mantra, “the Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it,” so they do not accord *carte blanche* authority to Luther under a similar slogan: “*Luther* said it, I believe it, that settles it.” Instead, one must listen to interpreters and, as long as they do not disagree on the central witness of the entire Scripture, one can accept their arguments or propose others. Whatever else one can say, such differences are not necessarily “church-dividing,” to use a modern term for it.

The second introductory point has to do with the popular phrase, *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.³ Some years ago, having access to the critical, Weimar edition of Luther’s works on line, I decided to find out how and when Luther used the term. Now, the search feature in this database allowed me to look for all forms of “sola” and “Scriptura,” within ten or fifteen words of each other. The result? I discovered the phrase appeared only twenty times in Luther’s Latin works. Assuming I had made some mistake, I tried *sola gratia* (120 times) and *sola fide* (1200) times. Moreover, two of the twenty were actually quotes from two of Luther’s opponents. Both Cardinal Cajetan and Erasmus of Rotterdam agreed to argue with Luther *sola Scriptura*. Of the remaining eighteen, half came in passages where Luther explicitly stated that he would *not* argue *sola Scriptura*. This left only nine references, none of which presented a generalized theory of the authority of Scripture. Instead, for the most part Luther contrasted his position to those who claimed papal authority *over* the Scripture. First thanks to the nineteenth century, as near as I can determine, have people come to associate Luther’s view of biblical authority with the notion of “Scripture alone.”

³ For the details, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 16-21.

In contrast, with the Melanchthon scholar Peter Fraenkel, I would propose a different phrase. For Luther, Melanchthon and their followers, Scripture was the *primum et verum*, the first and true authority. But this did not eliminate for them other authorities, including the creeds, interpreters from the early and medieval church and the consensus of the church. While these interpreters were always subject to the “first and true” authority of Scripture, they nevertheless represented, to use the phrase employed by Philip Melanchthon in the Augsburg Confession, the *testimonia Patrum*, the testimonies of our ancestors in the faith. Indeed, when we read any interpreter from any time, but especially those to whom we accord special respect and honor, such as Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, we read them as signposts and witnesses to the center of Scripture, Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world. No wonder that Luther used the phrase “*solus Christus*,” Christ alone, well over 500 times in his Latin works! To imagine that Luther or these early Lutherans read Scripture apart from the “cloud of witnesses” that surrounds all of us in the church misses the true heart of the Reformation and would turn us all—liberal or conservative—into fundamentalists.

At very least, these two caveats warn us to be very careful about how we use Scripture. Consider the fact that, in Scripture, the very first people to quote Scripture are the man and the woman in the Garden! “The woman whom you gave me,” Adam sputters, quoting, as it were, from the previous chapter. “The snake whom you made,” Eve rejoins, again “quoting” the Bible. And they are quoting Scripture against God! And in the New Testament, at Jesus’ temptation recorded in Matthew and Luke, the Devil also quotes Scripture. And John, not to be outdone, records Jesus’ attack on the Pharisees and their quoting the Bible. “You search the Scriptures, because in them you think you find eternal life, and yet they bear testimony to me.” What a

shame that when I was growing up, I learned the King James' version's incorrect rendering, "Search the Scriptures," as a command and hence a proof text for reading the Bible!

The Hermeneutical and Christological Heart of Matthew

This brings me to the center of our discussion on the gospel of Matthew. Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon and other Reformation interpreters of Matthew's gospel identified its center and heart, from which the entire book derives its meaning, as summarized in the word, "Immanuel," God with us. Listen to how Philip Melanchthon describes Matthew in his commentary published by his student, Sebastian Froschel, in 1558.

Always at the beginning of an exposition of books that recount the Gospel story, something must be said about the distinction between law and gospel. Then, when something has been said about the promise, it must be added that these narrations have been written so that the Apostles may be witnesses and posterity may be certain that the Messiah has been sent and manifested. Third, it may be stated that the gospel readings principally consist of these four things: 1) Stories about who Christ is and where he came from; 2) Miracles testifying that he is not an imposter but truly sent from God and that his teaching is true; 3) Sermons of the Gospel, that is, the promises, such as: "All who believe in the Son will not perish" or "Come to me, all you who labor" and similar ones concerning eternal life; 4) Sermons concerning good works, which are like sermons of the law and interpretations of the law, and they pertain to sermons about repentance. And the distinction between precepts and promises must diligently be observed lest this light (that remission of sins is gratuitous) is lost.⁴

Analyzing this introduction in some detail will provide the outline for the heart of my talk.

First, the distinction between law and gospel jumps out at even the casual reader. Not only does Melanchthon begin the paragraph by emphasizing the importance of distinguishing law and gospel, but also in describing the content of the four gospels, two of the four points are about law and gospel. In the gospels there are sermons about the gospel, God's promises, and about good works, which are "like sermons of the law." And he closes with the comment: "And

⁴ CR 14: 543-44. The translation is from Wengert, *Reading the Bible*, 59-60.

the distinction between precepts and promises must diligently be observed lest this light (that remission of sins is gratuitous) is lost.” As we shall see, when Lutherans abandon this central hermeneutical principle of theirs, then their interpretations simply cease to be Lutheran, and they join forces with other streams of the Christian tradition, streams that invariably emphasize not just the necessity but the centrality of works and law to the Christian life.

But Melanchthon also emphasizes something else in his introduction, something that we may call the Christological principle of Lutheran biblical interpretation. Thus, he writes: “These narrations have been written so that the Apostles may be witnesses and posterity may be certain that the Messiah has been sent and manifested.” He then reiterates this in his recounting of the first two of four things that make up gospel readings: stories about who Christ is and miracles that prove that point. Melanchthon remembers what many biblical interpreters of our day seem to have forgotten, that (to use the title of a brilliant book from the 1940s by Hoskins and Davies), Jesus Christ, Immanuel, is the answer to the “riddle of the New Testament.”⁵

Already in 1530 Melanchthon had embedded these two principles—distinguishing law and gospel and focusing on Christ as Messiah—in article twenty of the Augsburg Confession.⁶ You may remember that article twenty deals with the charge (still made today, even by some misinformed Lutherans) that Lutherans forbid good works. John Eck, one of the Lutheran party’s most persistent opponents, had just published in Augsburg his *404 Articles* accusing the reformers and their adherents of 386 heretical statements, among the most important of which

⁵ Edwyn Hoskyns and Francis Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1947).

⁶ The Augsburg Confession, trans. Eric Gritsch, art. XX, in: *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 52-57 [henceforth: BC, 52-57].

was forbidding good works. After dismissing the charge, Melanchthon (who wrote this article upon arriving in Augsburg and upon having seen Eck's work) then restates the basic Lutheran teaching on justification, on the nature of faith and finally on good works. His first comments, while echoing article four of the Augustana on justification states, "In the first place, our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace. Instead, this happens through faith alone when a person believes that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator to reconcile the Father. Now all who imagine they can accomplish this by works and can merit grace, despise Christ and seek their own way to God contrary to the gospel." Not only is this the first place where the document confesses justification by "faith alone" and "Christ alone," but it also speaks of Christ's sole mediation. For our purposes, however, the most important comment comes in Melanchthon's description of what happens when people try to merit grace. They "despise Christ and seek their own way to God contrary to the gospel." The heart and soul of Lutheran interpretation of the Bible and, more specifically, of the four gospels protect reader and preacher alike against these two things—despising Christ and contradicting the gospel. The cure? Proclaiming the Christological center of the text in relation to law and gospel.

I would propose that such an approach to the Gospel of Matthew would free us from certain interpretive models—popular among a host of moralizing exegetes—and bring us back to the central task of the preacher and expositor: Christ crucified and risen again for us and for our salvation. Lutherans can best defend themselves against the desperate attempts by some to turn Matthew into a gospel of Christian rules and regulations by listening to Matthew's heart: This one, Christ, is Emanuel, God with us, who speaks law and gospel—commands and promises—to make us believers in him and not in ourselves. For, if that is not the point of this gospel, then why bother with it at all?

The Hermeneutics of Law and Gospel

Nearly thirty years ago, I was being interviewed for a position at a Lutheran seminary, when someone challenged my assertion that Lutheranism's shared hermeneutical principle is the distinction between law and gospel. Needless to say, I did not get the job. Despite that, I continue even in retirement to shoulder the task of defending not just the existence of but the freeing centrality of Lutheran hermeneutics based upon distinguishing law and gospel.⁷

To begin with, when it comes to law and gospel, some Lutheran supporters of the principle are their own worst enemies, even though the problems they cause arise from a completely understandable mistake. Both Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon, when looking at a theological problem, almost invariably divided it into two parts, asking first what the entity is and then what its effects are. Later Lutherans, when asked about the distinction between law and gospel, often focus more on the first part than the second. That is, they first define law as commands or even imperatives and then define gospel as promises or indicatives. This might lead folk to imagine that, in order to employ a Lutheran hermeneutic, all one needs are a Bible, two empty baskets and a really sharp scissors, going seriatim through the texts to determine which are commands and which are promises.

But neither Luther nor Melanchthon thought that they had said anything of import by dividing commands and promises. The point of their hermeneutics was not determining what law or gospel *is* but precisely what any Word of God *does* to people when they hear it. Indeed, this intense listening to what God is doing to us through the Word rests at the very heart of the

⁷ See Wengert, *Reading the Bible*, 22-46 and Timothy J. Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Practice: Using the Formula of Concord in the Parish* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 77-89.

Luther's breakthrough to a new—and remarkably old—way of doing theology. Whether one discovers that breakthrough in Luther's earliest lectures on the Psalms from 1513-1515, as Gerhard Ebeling does,⁸ or in his defense of the *95 Theses* from 1518, as Oswald Bayer has,⁹ makes little difference. The fact remains that Luther discovered that when interpreters encounter God's Word in Scripture *it* works on them *not* the other way around. This did not preclude the hard work of understanding the words and context of a particular passage—what it means—but it did imply that properly speaking, Scripture interprets us not we it. This is what it does to us.

One of the most succinct explanations of law and gospel understood in this way comes from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. In defending the Evangelical position on Penance, Melanchthon insists with all Lutherans that it consists of two parts: repentance and forgiveness, which is why these Lutherans often call it the sacrament of Absolution. To explain the movement from repentance to forgiveness, Melanchthon first distinguishes, as Luther had in earlier writings, between God's alien and proper work—first God reveals sin and puts to death the old creature before bringing the new creature to life. This leads immediately to a discussion of law and gospel. Here is what he wrote.

Scripture makes a practice of joining these two things, terrors and consolation, in order to teach that these are the chief parts of repentance: contrition and faith that consoles and justifies. We do not see how the nature of repentance could be taught more clearly and simply. For these are the two chief works of God in human beings, to justify the terrified or make them alive. The entire Scripture is divided into these two works. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The second part is the gospel, that is, the promise of grace given in

⁸ Gerhard Ebeling, "The Beginnings of Luther's Hermeneutics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 7 (1993): 129-58, 315-38, 451-58.

⁹ Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989).

Christ. This promise is constantly repeated throughout the entire Scripture.... For all the saints have been justified by faith in this promise and not on account of their own attrition or contrition.¹⁰

To see how this distinction works for Matthew, let us take an example from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "Whoever hates one's brother or sister is a murderer." So, what does that *do* to you? As soon as we imagine that this verse is simply one more exercise machine in our spiritual gym that, with enough practice, we can master, then we have not simply missed Christ's point but turned the entire Scripture upside down. So, go ahead. Try it. How are you doing? As soon as this text reveals the truth about our human condition, which is what the law does to us, the old creature starts looking for a way out by reducing the commandment's severity. Then, despite the fact that the text says nothing of the kind, we imagine it has to do with how hard we try or how often we do not fail. Christ's point in preaching the law is not to reduce your discomfort but to make matters worse, to make matters so bad that you are revealed for what you are: a murderer. And yet, even then, the old creature grabs the text by the throat and says, "Oh, not *really* a murderer! They are all on death row in Texas, are they not?" Or, we do what David, a third-grade member of my congregation in Wisconsin in the 1980s, did when he received his Bible. Thumbing through it he stumbled on this verse and announced at dinner that day that he wanted to start reading the Bible before they ate. He promptly read, "Whoever hates his brother is liable to judgment," and turned to his brother (who was a year older) and announced, "See, Tim, you're going to hell." "Ah, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive," as Sir Walter Scott observed two hundred years ago. Or, as Luther says in his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, a series of sermons preached on Wednesdays at St. Mary's church in Wittenberg in late 1530: "See, this is that beautiful Pharisaical holiness, that can make itself

¹⁰ The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, trans. Charles Arand, XII.52-54, in: BC, 195.

pure and righteous, as long as it does not kill with the hand, even though the heart is stuffed full of anger, hatred, envy and secret, evil and murderous treachery.”¹¹

Yet Luther knew that this was not just Christ’s problem. In his own day, theologians had turned this command not to hate into a counsel, which truly holy people could follow but that Christ clearly did not intend for everyone, despite the fact that even the medieval exegete, Nicholas of Lyra, had insisted that this command *was* meant for everyone. In these 1530 sermons, nine years after the Paris theologians had condemned Luther for teaching the same thing, Luther could still quote their legal rule in Latin from the pulpit, “*nimis onerativum legis Christianae*” (the burden of Christian law is too much).¹² “This is the way one ought to grab Christ by the mouth, master his words and make out of them what we please.” Others simply make this into a command for outward behavior but not a matter of the heart, Luther goes on to say, similar to the adage: “Forgiven but not forgotten.” If Christ on the cross had used this rule when he said “Father, forgive them,” then, Luther concludes, he could just as well have remained in heaven, avoided death and simply said, “I will forgive but not forget.” Against this “lazy gloss,” Luther insists that what Christ is doing here is explicating the fifth commandment itself so as to eliminate all attempts at hypocrisy. This means that for Luther, as for later Lutherans, preaching the law is never simply a matter of pointing out how one may transgress a single

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, in: *Luther’s Works* (Amer. Ed.), 55+ vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress & St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-), 21:74 [henceforth: LW 21: 74]. Translations are the author’s own.

¹² LW 21: 74-75. “Haec propositio [that the law to turn the other cheek applies to all Christians] est falsa, legis Christianae nimium oneratiua, & sane intelligentiae scripturae aduersa.” See *Determinatio theologice Facultatis Parisiensis upper Doctrina Lutheriana hactenus per eam visa* (Paris: Ascensio, 1521), b 4v.

commandment but always pushes both hearer and preacher to consider how the first commandment, which demands faith, is also always at play. The hypocrisy, “false appearance” and the “cover” under which sin occurs in the heart are never far from Luther’s mind.

And yet, despite the claims of an egregiously misused modern essay, this is hardly an indication of the “introspective consciousness of the West.”¹³ Indeed, Luther also nails this theory when he talks about a second, higher misuse of this approach to the text: “that one tries to be saved through this command, to make satisfaction for sins and to trust in and crow about such works to God.” What otherwise appears to be a good work—loving the neighbor—suddenly becomes the vilest work of all. When Luther reaches Jesus’ comments about “an eye for an eye,” he makes a distinction between what judges, as part of their official duties, may have to do in punishing a criminal, and what the Christian person, who has no right to take revenge, must do. The former has to do with jurists, “but the Gospel has no reason to concern itself with such matters but teaches how the heart stands before God. In this all should be adept, so that the heart remains pure and does not veer off into a false righteousness.” Christ teaches this “so that the heart depends upon God.” In this world, to be sure, a Christian may stand under the emperor “but regarding his or her own person such a one is, according to the Christian life, only under Christ and not under the emperor or any other person.”

Luther’s exposition of the Sermon on the Mount makes clear that for him, as for the other Wittenberg exegetes, the point of interpretation was not to determine *a priori* whether a text is law and gospel but rather to observe how it actually works on a person, revealing on the one

¹³ Written as a response to Swedish students’ hyper-pietism. See Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 199-214; reprinted in Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 78-96.

hand the truth about human existence and on the other the truth about God's mercy. One particularly stunning example of how one text can be for Luther both Law and Gospel, comes again in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, "Ask and it shall be given you." He states:

Therefore each Christian should in the first place receive this admonition as a command ... and know that he or she is duty bound to practice this Christian work and not behave like that farmer who said that he gives the pastor grain so that [the pastor] might pray for him, or, as some think, "What is the point of my praying? If I do not pray, others will." Christ says this so that people do not assume that prayer makes no difference for us or that it is a matter of free choice. About this I have often admonished you. In the second place, you have here a comforting promise and rich pledge that Christ attaches to prayer, so that a person can see that it really matters to God and can learn to consider our prayer as priceless and precious to God, because he so earnestly admonishes us to pray and invites and promises in such a friendly manner so that we should never pray in vain.¹⁴

This same movement from law to gospel on the matter of prayer is also hardwired into his comments on prayer in the Large Catechism. Given that Christians are surrounded by the wicked triumvirate of flesh, world and devil that always conspire to prevent our prayers, "Now the dear Lord Christ knows [our situation] well and therefore, like an upright, true physician shows us a precious, good medicine [namely, prayer] and teaches us how to use it."¹⁵

But Luther also understands that in the Sermon on the Mount Christ chiefly intended to preach the law, precisely because the people in Christ's day were being misled by those who had reduced the law to outward works. But Luther also understood that in his own day people were making human works into the way of salvation. Thus, at the very end of his exposition, in discussing Christ's speaking with authority, Luther warns against "ignorant, false preachers who

¹⁴ LW 21: 229-30.

¹⁵ LW 21: 231. See also Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. James Schaaf, "Lord's Prayer," 1-34, in: BC, 440-45.

conclude from Christ's words that we enter the kingdom of heaven and are saved through our works and actions."¹⁶ What is the cure for this misinterpretation?

It is necessary for each person to know something about the difference between grace and merit. For the two cannot exist with each other. Where a person preaches grace, that one cannot really preach merit. And what is grace cannot be merit. "Otherwise grace would not be grace," as Paul says in Romans 11:6. This is doubtless true, so that all who mix the two together confuse the people and lead both themselves and the hearers astray.¹⁷

Luther, on the contrary, insists on distinguishing faith and its fruits. Regarding the common Christian name and blessings, no one is better than another. "St. Peter has no better baptism than St. Paul or a child who was born yesterday." And no one hears a better gospel. Now, when it comes to outward fruits of faith, then there are clear distinctions. "Now when you want to talk about Christians or paint their picture, so you have to paint them so that there are no differences among them but so that in all things one is just like the next."¹⁸ Why does the Bible talk about merit and reward? "That is," Luther continues, "pure comfort for Christians. For if you have become a Christian and you have a gracious God and forgiveness both for past sins and those that cling to you, then it will doubtless happen that you must do and suffer many things for the sake of your faith and your baptism."¹⁹ When the flesh, world or devil come calling, then, in the midst of doubts and trials Christians "must flee from them, and for strength and comfort say [to themselves], 'You are now in grace and are God's children.'"

¹⁶ LW 21: 285.

¹⁷ LW 21: 285.

¹⁸ LW 21: 286.

¹⁹ LW 21: 290.

The Christological Witness of Matthew

For Luther and Melanchthon—indeed for any alert reader of the first gospel—Matthew did not write his gospel simply to give Christians a list of rules to follow to be good Christians. Indeed, if we look at Luther’s sermons on many of the Matthean texts appointed in the standard, one-year lectionary, sermons that comprise his oft-published and imitated *Kirchenpostil*—church postil, or commentary on the gospels and epistles comprising the common lectionary—we will discover that what Luther consistently finds in these texts is invitation to faith in the savior of the world, the only Son of God. This Christological center, which has often been neglected in modern commentaries, forms the core of his interpretation of these texts.

On the Feast of the Epiphany, Luther pondered the contrast between the Magis’ search for a king and what they must have thought when they found Christ in Bethlehem.

O how deserted and wild everything looks at the birth of such a king! If a puppy were born, there would at least be a little bit of crying. In this case, a *king* is said to have been born, and yet everything is completely quiet. Shouldn’t the people be singing and jumping for joy, light lamps and decorate all the streets with mayflowers and roses? O the poor king, for whom we search; O we fools, we who permit ourselves to have apes and fools as kings! Without a doubt, the magi, too, made up of flesh and blood, were not without such similar thoughts and musings and must have suffered very great struggles of faith. For natural reason can in no way persist here; it would immediately grumble and wheeze if the king were not found to meet its expectations. Reason would say, “The devil must have led me here. What kind of king is born here when everything is so quiet and appears so miserable. Does not our shepherd cry more when a child is born to him? And when a cow calves it is more widely known than this king!” See? This is what reason and nature does all of the time, and it does not go further than it can feel. If it does not feel it, then it assumes immediately that God has lied and says (as Psalm 14:1 says about reason): God is absent; the devil must be here.²⁰

²⁰ WA 10/1/1: 610, 25 – 611, 17.

What a remarkable reflection on the crucified Immanuel! How like Luther to see in this simple story the paradox of the “King of the Jews,” a title used only here and with reference to Pilate’s inscription on the cross!

In his sermon on the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, which he preached the first Sunday in Advent and Palm Sunday, we hear Luther reflecting on Christ’s humility.

This gospel excites and requires especially faith, for it depicts Christ’s gracious coming. No one may receive him or greet him except by believing that he is the man and that he comes with the intention as this gospel presents it. What is revealed in Christ is pure grace, gentleness and goodness, and whoever believes in him and holds him to be these things is saved. Consider this! He is not riding on a steed, meant for waging war; he does not come clothed in awe-inspiring robes and power, but instead he sits on a donkey, a non-warlike animal designed to help people by bearing loads and working. He does this so that he may demonstrate how he is coming not to frighten or impel or oppress human beings but only to help them, to place their loads on himself and carry them.²¹

Luther connects the lowliness of Christ’s transport with his gentleness and, thus, with that central passage from Matthew 11, “Come to me, all you who labor....”

On the third Sunday in Advent, Luther preached on the embassy sent from John the Baptist to Jesus, inquiring whether Jesus was Messiah, as described in Matthew 11. He notes how Christ points John’s disciples both to his works (the list of miracles) and his words (that the poor have the gospel preached to them). This answer reflects Isaiah 61:1-2. The first part of Isaiah’s text refers to Christ’s anointing. “For the Greek word Christ means Messiah in Hebrew or Unctus in Latin and anointed one in German. One used to anoint kings and priests for their kingdom or priesthood. But Isaiah says here that God himself will anoint this anointed king and

²¹ WA 10/1/2: 22, 16-26. All translations are the author’s own. For a translation of the *Kirchenpostil* into English, see John Lenker, ed., *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1904-1907; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989).

priest, not with earthly oil but with the Holy Spirit, who will rest upon him.”²² This leads Luther to spend most of the sermon talking not just about Christ’s miracles but the gospel itself, contrasted to the law. “This other word of God is not a law or command, demands nothing from us but precisely when in this first word of the law such demands come to expression and are aimed at the awful misery and poverty in the heart, then God comes and offers his loving, life-giving word and promises, vows and commits himself to give grace and help so that we may come out of this misery with all our sins not just forgiven but wiped out and in addition we are given love and desire to fulfill the law.”²³ Here, again, we see how effortlessly Luther moves from who Christ is to what he gives in the Gospel’s comfort.

The Gospel appointed for the eighteenth Sunday after Trinity, comes from Matthew 22, a reading that not only described the Pharisees’ question to Jesus about which commandment is the greatest but also Jesus’ silencing of them by his asking where the Messiah comes from. On the first part, Luther not only describes human inability to love God and neighbor but also stresses that Christ is the only one to fulfill this very law and that only through faith empowered by the Holy Spirit are believers made new so that they can now fulfill the law through Christ alone. Luther concludes the first part by stating, “Therefore, guard yourselves against preachers of works, who go on and on saying that one must do good works in order to be saved. We, however, say, faith alone is enough for salvation. Works belong to a different category, namely to demonstrate our faith, as you have often heard me say.”²⁴ He summarizes the second part of his sermon by distinguishing Jesus’ divinity (by which he was David’s Lord) from his humanity

²² WA 10/1/2: 152, 29 – 153, 2

²³ WA 10/1/2: 158, 6-12.

²⁴ WA 10/1/2: 409, 15-19.

(by which he was David's son), citing Paul's introduction to Romans 1 as one place where Paul put the two together.

The gospel appointed for the twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity is the healing of the synagogue leader's daughter. No other sermon demonstrates more clearly the Christological heart of Luther's interpretation of Matthew. Luther began his sermon on that text with these words.

Dear friends, you know that the gospel is nothing other than a sermon about the single person, who is called Christ. And even though many books may have been written over the years and many sermons preached by a lot of people—both heathen and Christian—even by the Mother of God, St. Peter, the angels and many other saints—but they are still not gospels. On the contrary, this alone is the true gospel: when it presents Christ to us and teaches what good things we should expect from him. From time to time in the gospel something is written about John the Baptist, Mary and the apostles, but that is actually not the gospel... but [was written] only to show more completely where Christ came from and what his office was.²⁵

Then, a bit later in the same sermon, he states,

To this end Christ is presented to us as an inexhaustible fountain, which at all times overflows with pure goodness and grace. And for such goodness and kindness he accepts nothing, except that the good people, who acknowledge such kindness and grace, thank him for it, praise and love him, although others despise him for it. This is what he reaps from it. So one is not called a Christian because he or she does much, but because he or she receives something from Christ, draws from him and lets Christ only give to him.²⁶

We dare not ignore the very lushness of Luther's language, designed to move the heart. Christ is "inexhaustible fountain" overflowing with goodness and grace. The believer is always and only receiver and the one who draws from this rich source of refreshment.

²⁵ WA 10/1/2: 429, 17-29.

²⁶ Lenker, *Sermons*, 5: 329-30; WA 10/1/2: 430, 36 – 431, 3.

This message was constantly on Luther's lips, especially when preaching on miracle stories. Thus, in a sermon on the healing of the Centurion's servant, Luther states,

This is the Gospel that is the beginning, middle and end of everything good and of all salvation. For we have often heard that we must first hear the Gospel, and after that believe and love and do good works, and so reverse the order from what the teachers of works do. But the Gospel is a good report, saying or acclaim of Christ, how he is all goodness, love and grace, as can be said of no other man or saint. For even if other saints have a good report and acclaim, it is nevertheless not called Gospel except where it tells alone of the goodness and grace of Christ ... For the Gospel builds faith and confidence alone upon the rock, Jesus Christ.²⁷

This single-minded concentration upon Christ in the gospel to the point of even defining Christ and his mercy as the gospel itself has two effects. Not only does it lift each text out of its narrower context and into the context of all the gospels, each of which was clearly written to witness to Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world, but it also drives the listener to faith in that very Christ. Thus, finding "Immanuel" in a text is never simply a matter of giving the Christologically correct answer but also a matter of trust and hope in him. No wonder that in Matthew Jesus can praise the God-given rock of Peter's faith and tie with it the remarkable promise of God's unfailing support for the believing assembly: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Finally, in the sermon about "rendering to Caesar" from the twenty-third Sunday after Trinity, Luther shows his amazement at Christ's ability to withstand his enemies' attacks. "Consequently we have here a consolation, when we are attacked; that Christ is in us and gains the victory through us. Christ is so near us that we triumph at all times through him because we are in Christ. As long as we do not have opposition around our necks, he does nothing; but when

²⁷ Lenker, *Sermons*, 2: 73 (Third Sunday after Epiphany); WA 17/2: 73, 31 – 74, 4.

we are attacked and oppressed, then he is at hand and puts all our enemies to shame.”²⁸ No wonder that almost every sermon in Matthew’s gospel wraps together law and gospel and Christ’s person with the bow of faith in the face of attacks. Without the benefit of many of our sophisticated (and sometimes sophistic) approaches to biblical interpretation, Luther nevertheless gets to the heart of Matthew’s motivation for writing and to the heart of the hearers—not just in Matthew’s congregation but also in Luther’s. The result completely blends every possible audience for Matthew’s words and unites them into one assembly, *ekklesia*, against which no evil may prevail.

Concluding Remarks

In the New Testament of 1530 produced in Wittenberg, there is an especially surprising woodcut gracing the beginning of Matthew’s gospel.²⁹ Following in the tradition of medieval manuscripts, the printer had prepared a depiction of the Apostle Matthew sitting at his desk writing. The angel—the first of the four beasts of Ezekiel always associated with the first gospel—holds a mirror in which the evangelist sees reflected Christ on the cross. Two chicks are at Matthew’s feet, reminding the reader of that quintessential gospel picture of the mother hen gathering her chicks. But most striking of all is the face and form of Matthew himself, unmistakably depicted by the anonymous artist as Martin Luther himself. That combination: a crucified messiah and the chicks protected under Matthew’s (or Martin’s) writing desk. God with us on the cross; the mother hen spreading her wings to protect the little chicks under the

²⁸ Cf. Lenker, 5: 300. (23rd Sunday after Trinity); WA 10/1/2: 422, 34-39.

²⁹ Heimo Reinitzer, *Biblia deutsch: Luthers Bibelübersetzung und ihre Tradition* (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog August Bibliothek, 1983), 95-96, 110.

shadow of the gospel itself: from this picture begins all saving interpretations of Matthew. “And, lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Thank you very much.