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LUTHER ON IDOLATRY:
A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO CONTEMPORARY FALSE BELIEF

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
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May, 2013

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It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. ...
Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

Luther, *Large Catechism* I 2–3.

The highest forms of religion and holiness, and the most fervent forms of devotion of those who worship God without the Word and command of God, are idolatry. ... every such form of religion, which worships God without His Word and command, is idolatry. The more spiritual and holy it appears to be, the more dangerous and destructive it is; for it deflects men from faith in Christ and causes them to rely on their own powers, works, and righteousness.

Luther, *1535 Galatians Commentary*, LW 27:87–88.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- LC “The Large Catechism.” In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, 357–461. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.
- LW Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works*. American Edition. 56 Volumes. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86.
- NIV New International Version
- SA “The Smalcald Articles.” In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, 287–318. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.
- SC “The Small Catechism.” In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, 337–56. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.
- SD “The Solid Declaration.” In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, 501–636. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.
- WA Luther, Martin. “Schriften.” Part 1 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 88 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. <http://luther.chadwyck.com/> (accessed 2010–13).
- WA BR Luther, Martin. “Briefwechsel.” Part 3 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. Part 3, 18 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. <http://luther.chadwyck.com/> (accessed 2010–13).
- WA DB Luther, Martin. “Die Deutsche Bibel.” Part 4 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 15 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. <http://luther.chadwyck.com/> (accessed 2010–13).
- WA TR Luther, Martin. “Tischreden.” Part 3 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 6 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. <http://luther.chadwyck.com/> (accessed 2010–13).

ABSTRACT

Lockwood, Michael A. "Luther on Idolatry: A Lutheran Response to Contemporary False Belief." Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2013. 303 pp.

The first step in solving any problem is to understand the problem. As Christians we know that Christ is the solution to the human plight. Yet what exactly is this plight? And why do so many people feel no need for the solution he provides? Luther's answer is that people feel no need for the true God until they are disenchanted with the false gods they have put in his place, which they think can provide all they need.

In this dissertation I examine Luther's insights into idolatry, and use them as a tool for understanding contemporary society and its resistance to the gospel. Luther's view—that anything we fear, love, or trust more than the true God is effectively our god—is widely applicable to the contemporary western world, and unmask the religious nature of many of our ostensibly secular commitments.

In particular, I argue on the basis of Luther's thought that: (1) the self-seeking and self-reliant self is always the greatest idol and the driving force behind other idols; and (2) when people refuse to fear, love, and trust the true God they are compelled to find substitutes for him and all the work he does for humankind in the economy of salvation. This means finding substitutes for the Father and his work of providence, the Son and his work of redemption, and the Holy Spirit and his work of enlightening those who believe. It also means replacing God as the goal of our life and the object of our love. Applied to contemporary society, Luther's analysis reveals things like human activism, the cult of self-esteem, human rationalism, and the pursuit of personal happiness to be key idols, as we seek to provide for ourselves, to justify ourselves, to walk in the light of our own understanding, and to make the world revolve around us and our desires. Only when the futility of these projects is exposed can the good news be heard as good news: that the true God gives us by grace all the good things we have vainly sought to provide for ourselves.

CHAPTER ONE

THIS DISSERTATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP

Introduction

The first step in the cure of any disease is an accurate diagnosis. A false diagnosis is likely to lead to the prescription of remedies that cannot cure. This is true not only for diseases of the body, but also for diseases of the soul. If we as Christians are to be servants of the great Physician in bringing his healing to a world that is sick with sin,¹ then it is vital that we are able to recognize the true nature of this illness.

This dissertation is born from the conviction that the first commandment, “I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods,”² provides an invaluable tool for spiritual diagnosis. If we take seriously the “theological” use of the law, as a mirror that exposes our sin and need for Christ, then we will regard the ten commandments as an indispensable tool for understanding what is wrong with ourselves and our society. This is especially true for the first commandment. As Luther reminds us, not all commandments are equal. Instead, all the other commandments hang on the first one, and we distort and misapply them if we fail to see how they relate to it. If we truly fear, love, and trust God above everything else, then we will delight in following his will, including all his commandments. Yet if we set our hearts on anything else in place of him

¹ Luke 5:31–32.

² Exod 20:2–3; Deut 5:6–7.

we will keep neither the first commandment nor any of the others.³ Therefore if we want to get to the root of our disease we have to examine ourselves in the light of this primary command.

There are two sides to this commandment. Positively, it tells us what spiritual health is: to fear, love, and trust the true God above everything else. Negatively, it exposes the disease of our idolatry. That is, it reveals our propensity to turn things that are not God into false gods by investing in them the fear, love, and trust that belongs only to God.⁴ As painful as it may be, this exposure is the first step in our healing. This theological use of the commandment is essential in driving us to Christ, who alone can restore our fellowship with God, and thereby with each other.

The Thesis

In this dissertation I will argue that Martin Luther's theology of idolatry provides a useful framework for understanding and responding to false belief in contemporary western society. More specifically, I will contend, in agreement with Luther, that a full account of idolatry involves recognizing: a) that the self is the most significant idol that lies at the heart of all other outward expressions of false belief and devotion; and b) that the human propensity to create "God substitutes" must be seen not just in relation to the Father's work of creation, but in relation to the whole economy of salvation that involves all three members of the Trinity. On the basis of these insights from Luther I will attempt to develop and defend a theology of idolatry that can be used to give an account of idolatry in contemporary society.

³ LC I 321–29 = WA 30.i:180.3–181.24; Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.45 = WA 5:392.26–35; cf. LW 1:329; 9:69–70; 13:150; 31:353; 34:154.

⁴ This is how Luther defines idolatry (SC I 2 = WA 30.i:354; LC I 1–25 = WA 30.i:133.1 – 136.3), and is the understanding of idolatry that I will be using throughout this dissertation. When referring to cultic images, the other common meaning of the word idol, I will call them cultic images, unless I am stressing their role as false gods rather than their nature as images.

The Current Status of the Question

The prevailing trend in contemporary theology is to ignore idolatry as a category for understanding sin or unbelief in western culture. Only a small group of scholars have bucked this trend, and have used this biblical category as a means for diagnosing our spiritual state. Idolatry is also a much neglected topic in Luther studies. To my knowledge only one monograph has ever been published on Luther's theology of idolatry.⁵ While Luther's focus on the first commandment, and on faith and unbelief, are standard elements in most treatments of his theology, little work has been done to give a comprehensive account of his views on idolatry.

The General Neglect of Idolatry as a Topic of Discussion in Contemporary Theology

Idolatry has been a much neglected topic in contemporary theological discussion in the western world, including discussions about how to relate the gospel to the surrounding culture. It is as if the unspoken assumption is that although idolatry may be a relevant topic in contexts where Christianity is contending with paganism, it is not relevant in the west where the Christian faith is mostly vying with secularism.⁶

⁵ This is the following Ph.D. dissertation completed at Drew University: Tae Jun Suk, *The Theology of Martin Luther between Judaism and Roman Catholicism: A Critical-Historical Evaluation of Luther's Concept of Idolatry* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2001). Thanks goes to Jeffrey Dukeman from the Concordia Seminary Library's reference desk who located this work for me when, after much searching, I was unable to find any major works on Luther's theology of idolatry.

⁶ I recently examined the contents of seven missiological journals (*Missiology*, *International Review of Mission*, *Missio Apostolica*, *Mission Studies*, the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, the *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education*, and the *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*) over the last two decades from 1989–2009, and found hardly any mention of idolatry, let alone any serious attempts to apply the category of idolatry to contemporary western society in a systematic way. I also examined the reading list for the comprehensive examination for the Ph.D. in theology and culture at Concordia Seminary St. Louis. Here the story was much the same. An enormous amount of the material on this reading list and in these journals was focused on horizontal human relationships, on an analysis of cultural trends using the tools of sociology and philosophy, and on human strategies for education, communication, and outreach. There was a certain amount of discussion of theological themes and of the relevance of the vertical, divine to human dimension of life for evangelism. Yet with few exceptions idolatry was not used as a category for analyzing sinful human life as it stands before God. One author even suggested that secularization and atheism have had the benefit of clearing away the idols from society and thereby preparing the field for the proclamation of the unknown God, as if secularism does not have idols of its own (Tomas Halik, "The Soul of Europe: An Altar to the Unknown God," *International Review of Mission* 95 [Jul–Oct. 2006], 269).

Richard Keyes: A Call to Get Idolatry Back on the Agenda

Richard Keyes, the director of the Massachusetts branch of L'Abri, has appealed to the Christian community to get idolatry back on the agenda. He points to the Old Testament prophets, who were able to use their understanding of idolatry to get to the heart of pagan culture and religion to disenchant people from it. In the same way, Keyes suggests that Christians today should be able to use idolatry as a framework for understanding all of secular culture and thought so we can critique it at the deepest level. Keyes then laments that Christians have mostly lost the ability to apply idolatry as a critical tool in this way. He therefore appeals to Christian scholars to do more work in this area, to deepen our understanding of idolatry so we can use it to critically assess the thinking of the surrounding culture that challenges our faith in the living God.⁷ This dissertation is an attempt to heed this call.

Keyes also suggests that there is a deep structure to idolatry. If idolatry is to function as a diagnostic tool for assessing false belief, then we need to do more than simply catalogue idols. Instead, we need to reflect on the underlying spiritual dynamic that causes these idols to have such power over people's hearts and minds. If people latch onto idols at random without any rationale behind what they are doing, then a theology of idolatry cannot be a very useful diagnostic tool. Yet if there is a deep structure to idolatry it is a different matter.

In the next two sections I will summarize the work of a small number of scholars who have made some attempt to reflect on this spiritual dynamic. First, we will consider the contention that the self is the deepest idol that lies at the heart of other outward expressions of idolatry. Here these scholars are in agreement. To my knowledge no theologian has ever mounted an argument against this position, and it is hard to envision what a good argument might look like. Second, we

⁷ Richard Keyes, "The Dynamics of Idolatry," <http://www.bethinking.org/spirituality/the-dynamics-of-idolatry.htm> (accessed Nov. 17, 2006).

will consider their thoughts on how idolatry relates to the work of the Trinity in the economy of salvation. Here their thoughts are more fragmented, and there is more room for contention.

The Idol of the Self in Contemporary Scholarship

Richard Keyes. When Keyes offers his own suggestions for what a renewed theology of idolatry might entail, he begins by arguing that at the heart of all idolatry stands humankind's rebellious assertion of autonomy over against its Creator.⁸ On the basis of Romans 1 he concludes that idolatry occurs when we grasp God's revelation but twist it and construct idols out of it to prevent God from challenging our autonomy and our acceptance of Satan's promise that we can be like God. He refers to idolatry as what we do with the revelation of the true God when we do not want to face him in repentance, and confess that our only hope is in his forgiveness. Keyes quotes with approval a line from a Tom Stoppard play, "Atheism is the crutch for those who cannot bear the reality of God." He then applies this to idolatry in general.⁹

Keyes also talks about the insecurity that results from this human refusal to bow before the Creator as the driving force behind idolatry. He points to the condition of humans before the fall, who were created to live in a state of trust in God above them and dominion over the earth below them. Their fellowship with God brought meaning, purpose, value, coherence, and security to their lives. At the same time the creation below them submitted readily to their dominion, provided amply for their physical needs, and provided a venue for them to express their God given talents and creativity. Yet humans then tried to assert their autonomy from God, and in doing so turned their backs on the only one who could give their lives ultimate value, meaning, purpose, security, and coherence. The result is that humans are now lost and adrift. At the same

⁸ Richard Keyes, "The Idol Factory," in *No God but God: Breaking with the Idols of our Age*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody, Chicago, 1992), 31–32, 48; Richard Keyes, "The Dynamics of Idolatry."

⁹ Keyes, "The Dynamics of Idolatry."

time, the creation below them started rising up against them and no longer submitted readily to their dominion. The result is fear, deprivation, frustration, and powerlessness. So the rest of fallen human history has been a quest to find substitutes for God, to provide purpose and meaning on the one hand, and power and control on the other. This leads Keyes to suggest that people construct both near idols and far idols. Near idols may be things such as money, technology, magic, human expertise, legalistic religion, and so on, things that are close at hand and give us a sense of power over our lives. Yet since these nearby idols are small enough that we can control them, they are not large enough to answer our big questions or provide an overarching sense of meaning and coherence for our lives. Therefore we also construct far away idols, such as ideals and ideologies, beliefs in fate, karma, luck, the moral or benevolent structure of the universe, mother nature, divine benevolence, or Evolution with a capital “E.” Such idols give us an overarching sense of coherence or meaning, yet are still vague enough or far enough away that they do not threaten our ultimate idol: ourselves and our autonomy.¹⁰

Charles Taber. Charles Taber, past president of the American Society of Missiology and the Association of Professors of Mission, suggests that behind the façade of idolatry lies human self-worship. Like Keyes, he regards the root of idolatry to be the unholy ambition to be like God that prompted human rebellion in the first place.¹¹ As rebellious creatures we try to escape the terrifying immediacy and awesome holiness of God by constructing idols that are more manageable than him.¹² These we tailor to suit ourselves and our desire to be our own lords.¹³

¹⁰ Keyes, “The Idol Factory,” 35–45; Keyes, “The Dynamics of Idolatry.”

¹¹ Charles R. Taber, “God vs. Idols: A Model of Conversion,” *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 3 (1987–88): 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 26–27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Taber also argues that the secular nature of modern society makes it particularly easy for people to hide their idolatry. He observes that so-called “secular” entities can function as idols just as effectively as entities that are obviously religious, and it is these secular things that are the dominant idols in our society.¹⁴ Whereas divinities in the ancient world were often personifications of different powers in the world, people in our society rarely personify these powers in the same way. Yet this does not mean we are any less likely to be fixated on harnessing them for our own advantage. People continue to worship Eros, the god of sexual pleasure; Dionysos, the god of wine and self-indulgence; Mammon, the god of wealth; Prometheus, the god of human power and achievement; and Mars, the god of race, land, and nation.¹⁵ Yet because these things appear to be secular rather than religious they are frequently not identified as idols, and people are often invited to join the church without being asked to renounce them.¹⁶ The lure of self-worship means that even those who worship the true God are tempted to try to limit his authority over them and make him into one member of their pantheon instead of the only one.¹⁷ This can be done by cutting him down to a more manageable size, relegating him to a conveniently remote region, stressing that he is an ineffable mystery, or consigning him to merely one sphere of life.¹⁸ This is easy to do in a secular society, where religion has been isolated and relegated to a subordinate, auxiliary, private domain.¹⁹ This makes it easy for people to say “Yes, but” to God, and to give the appearance of worshipping him,

¹⁴ Ibid., 23–24.

¹⁵ Ibid., 27–29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 26–27.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23–24, 29. Taber refers here to the work of sociologists like Peter Berger and Robert Bellah who have documented the privatization of religion in America.

while their ultimate allegiance belongs to secular idols.²⁰ They may even attempt to make God serve the ends of these idols,²¹ and thereby their own selfish ambitions that stand behind them.

Jacques Ellul. Jacques Ellul, the French philosopher, sociologist, and lay theologian, distinguishes God’s revelation in Christ from all human religion,²² and concludes that religion and idolatry amount to people worshipping themselves as they worship the work of their hands.²³ Three lines of thought lead him to characterize religion this way. The first is that he agrees with Feuerbach that religion is a human projection. He talks about people projecting their own best attributes or religious desires onto an illusory supreme being they construct according to their own requirements.²⁴ This includes identifying natural powers and turning them into gods by ascribing to them value and authority they do not inherently possess.²⁵ The second line of thought is that religion and idolatry are human attempts to lay hold of these powers, to bind these “deities” to themselves and gain power over them. Ellul views idolatry as that form of religion whereby humans construct visualizations of these powers in an attempt to render them concrete so they can grasp hold of and control them.²⁶ The third line of thought is that fallen people constantly try to exalt their works and justify themselves by them. Here Ellul is not merely talking about some subset of our works, such as our moral works in obedience to the law, but all our works. Ellul, in line with Ecclesiastes, stresses that all human works are vain unless God

²⁰ Ibid., 24, 26.

²¹ Ibid., 29.

²² Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), 156–57.

²³ Ibid., 144.

²⁴ Ibid., 25, 156–57.

²⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 87; Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 156.

²⁶ Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 87, 89; *The Ethics of Freedom*, 156–57.

gives them value as a gift. Yet the constant human tendency is to think that if only the world were better organized success would crown all our works. We hunger for a true “meritocracy,” where our works, and not God’s blessing, would determine our success or failure in life,²⁷ and we could claim “My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.”²⁸ Idolatry then is just an extension of this thinking, as we exalt our works by turning them into idols by which we think we can secure the kind of honors and blessings that come only from God.²⁹

Paul Achtemeier. Recent biblical studies also support this contention that self-worship lies at the heart of all idolatry. For instance, Paul Achtemeier, the New Testament scholar and past president of the Society of Biblical Literature, argues on the basis of Romans 1 that idolatry stems from human attempts to play God. Instead of glorifying God as God, people want to be “like God” themselves.³⁰ They seek to have the godlike freedom to determine for themselves what is good and evil, and claim they are wise enough to do as they please rather than listening to God.³¹ This rebellion against the Creator inevitably leads to chaos in all their relationships

²⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 96–98.

²⁸ Deut 8:17; Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 143.

In this Ellul is in agreement with Luther, as we will see in Chapter 3.

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²⁹ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 142–44; *Reason for Being*, 242–44. Andrew Goddard, “Jacques Ellul on Idolatry,” in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 239–41.

³⁰ Rom 1:21.

³¹ Rom 1:22.

within his created order.³² Yet instead of repenting in the face of these problems and glorifying God, people latch on to created things in the vain hope that these can provide the remedy.³³

This understanding of idolatry leads Achtemeier to suggest that one of the main ways idolatry is expressed in contemporary western society is in the relativism that permeates our culture. If truth is relative, and no religion has the right to claim absolute validity, then no religion can tell us what we must believe, or what we can or cannot do. Just as in the ancient world there was a whole smorgasbord of idols on the market, so in today's pluralistic, relativistic society we can choose whatever idols appeal to our felt needs the most, without any of them making an absolute claim on us that might threaten our autonomy. What Isaiah exposes as the futility of idols—the fact that they cannot move by themselves or even stand in one place without us nailing them upright—is actually part of their appeal.³⁴ Such idols are in no shape to tell us anything we do not want to hear. If they cannot move without us moving them, this reveals who the real gods are: the ones who create and manipulate the idols.³⁵

Conclusion. This survey reveals considerable support in recent scholarship for the contention that the self is the deepest idol that lies beneath all the different outward expressions of idolatry. Other examples could be noted,³⁶ but this should be sufficient to establish the point.

³² Rom 1:24–31.

³³ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Gods Made with Hands: The New Testament and the Problem of Idolatry,” *Ex Auditu* 15 (1999): 48–50, 58.

³⁴ Isa 41:7; 46:1–7.

³⁵ Achtemeier, “Gods Made with Hands,” 57–58.

³⁶ E.g. R. R. Reno, “Pride and Idolatry,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 60 (April 2006); G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 293–303; H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, With Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 119; H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989), 84; H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 154.

Idolatry in Relation to the Economy of Salvation in Contemporary Theology

The ultimate reason for talking about idolatry is to ascertain how we can be liberated from it. Therefore no discussion of idolatry is complete until we have discussed what is needed to free us from idolatry, and what the non-idolatrous life looks like. Furthermore, the God we worship is Triune. If idolatry involves making God-substitutes, then it should be expected that this would not just involve finding substitutes for the Father and his work in creation, but also for the Son's work of redemption and the Spirit's work of sanctifying and transforming our lives. Therefore, if we are to give a full account of idolatry, we must see how idolatry relates to the work of all three members of the Trinity in the economy of salvation. While no contemporary scholars have tried to relate their thoughts on idolatry to Trinitarian theology or the economy of salvation in a systematic way, it is nevertheless possible to glean from them numerous thoughts on the subject.

The first article: Providence. Many scholars have reflected on the futility of putting any created thing in God's place and expecting it to provide things only the divine Creator can. For instance, Paul Achtemeier draws from Romans 1 the following consequences of idolatry. First, it makes us foolish. Since idolatry involves us refusing to acknowledge our status as creatures, it means we must base our whole existence on a lie instead of the truth, and will no longer be able to properly assess reality. Second, this perversion of the Creator/creature relationship inevitably perverts our relationship with the rest of creation. This is graphically portrayed in the list of vices at the end of Romans 1, which are all perversions of the created order.³⁷

Richard Keyes gives an even more detailed discussion of the futility of idolatry. He talks about the "shelf life" of idols, as people turn them over for new idols when their original idols fail to satisfy. He also talks about idol clusters. Since no single idol is big enough to satisfy

people, they choose many idols in the hope that together they will satisfy. The result according to Keyes is psychological fragmentation and confusion, as people get pulled in many directions at once by their different idols. Here he quotes Kierkegaard, who said that “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”³⁸ If we set our hearts on anything less than God it will not be big enough to satisfy us, so we will become double minded. We will find other things that also make a claim on our hearts so that we are tugged in multiple directions at once.³⁹

This talk about the futility of idolatry is certainly faithful to the biblical description of idols as “broken cisterns that can hold no water.”⁴⁰ However, it does need to be balanced with some discussion about the success of idolatry. Idols must offer some payoff, some illusion of success, or they would not be able to capture people’s hearts the way they do.

A few scholars have touched on this subject. One is the Christian psychologist David Powlison. Powlison talks about eufunctional and dysfunctional idols. He suggests that secular counseling is often good at helping people to exchange their dysfunctional idols for eufunctional ones, so they can lead happy, healthy, confident, and successful lives in worldly terms. He acknowledges the biblical critique—that all idolatry is self-destructive—yet he emphasizes that this is primarily to be understood in an ultimate, eschatological sense. From the perspective of life in this world many idols are not obviously or immediately self-destructive.⁴¹

Another scholar who talks about the apparent success of idolatry is Gregory Beale, a Professor of New Testament from Wheaton College. Beale talks about how idols anesthetize

³⁷ Achtemeier, “Gods Made With Hands,” 48–50.

³⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere. <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=2523> (accessed Jan. 16, 2010).

³⁹ Keyes, “The Dynamics of Idolatry.”

⁴⁰ Jer 2:13.

⁴¹ David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair,’” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13 (Winter 1995): 37.

people, and make them blind and deaf to the spiritual damage they are doing.⁴² He uses the analogy of gum disease. When his dental hygienist told him he had to take urgent action if he was to prevent serious gum disease, he responded, “But my gums feel fine.” She then answered, “That is the genius of gum disease—it does not hurt badly until it is too late.” Likewise, he suggests we are often blind to the harm our idolatry is causing until it is too late. Therefore we need God’s word to shock us with the reality of our sin and where it is leading.⁴³

It is important that we are aware of both the failure and the success of idols. Since people often cannot see the destructive nature of their idolatry, it is our responsibility to warn them where their idolatry is leading. Therefore it is worth consulting Luther on this issue, since he was able to talk not just about the ultimate failure of idolatry, but also about its apparent success.⁴⁴

The second article: The justification of the sinner. A few contemporary scholars have made some suggestions for how idolatry relates to the second person of the Trinity and the doctrine of justification. For instance, Ellul touches on justification briefly, when he talks about the tendency of sinful human beings to try to exalt themselves through their works, and to think their works carry some intrinsic merit apart from God’s free choice to give us his blessing.

A more developed view is provided by Keyes. As we have seen, he argues that idolatry results when people refuse to bow before the Creator in repentance and to trust in his mercy.⁴⁵ He then says that the solution is for us to repent of our attempts to gain autonomy from God and to come to faith in Christ.⁴⁶ Keyes also talks about the idolatry of those like the Pharisees who think

⁴² Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 308; Ps 115:4–8; 135:15–18.

⁴³ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 308–9.

⁴⁴ LW 8:201–3 = WA 44:725–28; LW 14:303–5 = WA 5:41.6–43.31; LC I 42–46 = WA 30.i:138.11–34.

⁴⁵ Keyes, “The Idol Factory,” 31–32; Keyes, “The Dynamic of Idolatry.”

⁴⁶ Keyes, “The Idol Factory,” 47–48; Keyes, “The Dynamics of Idolatry.”

they can control God and make him their debtor through their works or adherence to a strict code of behavior.⁴⁷ Finally, he tells a story that illustrates how idolatry can make people secure in such a way that they become unreceptive to the gospel. He tells of a letter Sigmund Freud wrote to James Putnam, a professor of neurology at Harvard. In this letter Freud wrote, “I have no dread at all of the Almighty. If we ever were to meet I should have more reproaches to make to Him than He could to me. I should ask Him why He had not given me a better intellectual equipment, and He could not complain that I had not made the best use of my supposed freedom.”⁴⁸ Keyes observes that according to Freud’s theology it is God who must come on his knees asking Freud for forgiveness, not the other way round. He also suggests that such theology, which blames God for the problems we face without any acknowledgement of our culpability, is very common in our society, even if most people are not willing to express it in such a cheeky way. He points out that if a Christian were to come to Freud to tell him they bring him good news that his sins are forgiven through Christ, this would be a solution to a non-problem as far as Freud is concerned. Until we are able to disenchant the Freuds of this world of their idols through which they have justified themselves, proclaiming the gospel to them will be casting pearls before swine.⁴⁹

The most developed view by a contemporary theologian of how idolatry relates to justification is given by Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and professor of practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Keller acknowledges his debt to Luther in seeing the connection between idols and self-justification, a connection we will spell out in detail in chapter 5. According to Keller, Luther’s basic insight is

⁴⁷ Keyes, “The Idol Factory,” 43. Richard Keyes, “Giving a Word Back,” <http://www.bethinking.org/what-is-apologetics/giving-a-word-back.htm> (accessed Nov. 17, 2006).

⁴⁸ Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and abr. Lionel Trilling and Steven Marcus (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 472–73. This is loosely quoted in Keyes, “Giving a Word Back.” The exact quote and its source was obtained through correspondence with Keyes.

that the Old Testament law against idols and the New Testament emphasis on justification by faith alone are essentially the same. Justification by faith stands at the heart of the first commandment, and therefore idolatry stems from our failure to believe we are saved by faith alone, that God accepts us fully in Christ. When we do not trust in Christ as our Savior, we inevitably latch onto something else that we hope to use to secure salvation for ourselves. Idols are therefore self-salvation projects.⁵⁰

So how does Keller develop this insight?

Essentially, he argues that there are two ways to be your own savior and lord. The first is to be very bad—to rebel against God and write your own rules and try to find life apart from him.⁵¹ The second is to be very good—to be sold out for Jesus and to do all the right things to earn God’s favor and blessing. While the two look different on the surface, at their core they are the same. They are both attempts at self-salvation.⁵²

Keller illustrates how similar legalistic religion is to irreligious rebellion by stepping through a number of biblical passages. One is the book of Jonah. Jonah is sent to preach judgement and grace to a group of evil pagan idolaters. Yet as the book unfolds it becomes evident that Jonah is also an idolater. Although he is a prophet of God, he has turned his nation and people into such an idol that he wants their enemies destroyed at all costs, and is “angry enough to die” when God shows mercy to them.⁵³ This shows that his heart was really set on

⁴⁹ Keyes, “Giving a Word Back.”

⁵⁰ Timothy Keller, “Smashing False Idols: Gospel Realisation,” 2007, The Evangelists Conference, <http://www.evangelists-conference.org.uk/1F014-01GospelRealisation.mp3> (accessed Sept. 15, 2009); Timothy Keller, “Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age,” April 2007, <http://www.stevekmccoy.com/keller-idoaltry.pdf> (accessed March 4, 2010).

⁵¹ Cf. SA III ii 2.

⁵² Timothy Keller, “Smashing False Idols: Gospel Communication,” 2007, The Evangelists Conference, <http://www.evangelists-conference.org.uk/2F014-02GospelCommunication.mp3> (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

⁵³ Jonah 4:8–9.

himself and his people and not on the God of grace. He wanted to use God to serve his idol, and was furious when God would not.

Another text is the story of the prodigal son. The younger son had his heart set on his father's money and broke all the rules to get it. Yet he is just one character in the story. The text devotes nearly as much attention to his older brother. Like the younger son, he too had his heart set on the father's wealth. He just chose a different strategy for obtaining it: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders."⁵⁴ And whereas the younger brother was saved by the end of the story, the older brother still remained in need of repentance.

The final text is Romans 1–3. At first it sounds like Paul is using this passage to attack pagan idolatry. Yet as the text progresses it becomes clear that he is including the Jews in this condemnation. In chapter 3 Paul concludes, "Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all."⁵⁵ For "no one seeks for God. All have turned aside."⁵⁶ This is a stunning conclusion, that people like the Pharisees, who searched the Scriptures and were zealous for God's law, were not seeking God. Instead, like all legalists, they were using God as a means to an end, hoping he would give them other things. They were not seeking God but the other things they thought would satisfy them, like money, a good family, a happy life, or the respect of other people.⁵⁷ These were their real gods, and in this they were no different from people who turn their back on God altogether.⁵⁸

Yet Keller also shows that the comparison goes the other way. It is not just that the logic of moralistic religion is to use God as the means for obtaining the other things that people's hearts are really set on. It is also true that irreligious people are just as focused on salvation by works as

⁵⁴ Luke 15:29 (NIV).

⁵⁵ Rom 3:9.

⁵⁶ Rom 3:11–12.

⁵⁷ "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (Luke 16:14); Matt 6:5, 16.

the most ardent legalists. Keller suggests that people in New York city today are every bit as works righteous as the Pharisees. They all try to create their identity through their achievements.⁵⁹ Secular idolaters may not think of salvation in terms of an afterlife or a final judgement, but they are seeking salvation nonetheless. They all need to know they are of value, that their life is worth living and their existence is not in vain,⁶⁰ and they need to secure this against everything that threatens it. Yet whatever they latch onto to do this places enormous demands on them, and will punish them without mercy if they fail to measure up.⁶¹ Works righteousness in this context does not mean striving to do the works God commands, but rather there are as many different forms of works righteousness as there are idols. Business people who pursue the idol of money will work incredibly long hours and will sacrifice everything including their children to obtain it. Artists on the other hand who pursue the idol of artistic expression may sacrifice commercial success to keep their art pure, and scoff at the thought of “selling out.” People who make romantic love or the perfect family their idol must live by a different set of rules yet again. Yet although the rules change, it is still salvation by works.⁶²

Keller contends that such an understanding of idolatry is critical in proclaiming law and gospel, judgement and salvation in society today. This is for two reasons. The first is that the

⁵⁸ Keller, “Smashing False Idols: Gospel Communication.”

⁵⁹ Timothy Keller, “How the Cross Converts Us,” 2007, Christian Life Conference (Second Presbyterian of Memphis, TN), http://www.2pcmedia.org/get.php?web=2007-01-19_How_the_Cross_Converts_Us.mp3 (accessed Sept. 15, 2009); Timothy Keller, “How the Cross Changes Us,” 2007, Christian Life Conference (Second Presbyterian of Memphis, TN), http://www.2pcmedia.org/get.php?web=2007-01-19_How_the_Cross_Changes_Us.mp3 (accessed Sept. 15 2009).

⁶⁰ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promise of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (New York: Dutton Adult, 2009), 40, 72–78.

⁶¹ Timothy Keller, “Reaching the 21st Century World For Christ,” 2005, The Gathering, http://thegathering.com/gws/media/_mp3/2005/2005-Tim%20Keller-Reaching%20The%201st%20Century%20World%20For%20Christ.mp3 (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

⁶² Timothy Keller, “The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry,” April 20, 2005, The Gospel Coalition, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/video/The-Grand-Demythologizer-The-Gospel-and-Idolatry> (accessed March 3, 2010).

more moral relativism permeates our society, the less people respond when the law is preached in moral terms. When Keller first went to Manhattan as a church planter in 1989 he attempted to use the evangelism tools he had been trained in such as D. James Kennedy's *Evangelism Explosion*. These tools all basically followed the same approach. They began by telling people they were sinners who broke God's rules, and therefore they needed Jesus. He found this approach had little impact on most people. They were far more likely to say, "Well, I don't have the same view of the rules as you do" than to acknowledge their sin. Yet as soon as he started talking about sin using the conceptual structure of idolatry he started getting traction. Once he started telling people that sin is not so much about doing bad things as it is about taking good things and making them into ultimate things, they could see that what he said applied to them.⁶³

The second reason is that only when we deal with sin in terms of idolatry do we have a profound enough view of sin that we can deal with both irreligious rebellion and legalistic religion at the same time. If we talk about sin in terms of breaking God's rules it is easy to see why rebellious people like the younger son in the story of the prodigal son stand condemned, but not so easy to see why legalistic people like his brother also stand condemned. Since the default mode of the human heart is self-justification, when people hear us calling them to repent and believe in Jesus they naturally assume we are preaching some form of legalistic piety: kiss up to God and do what he says and he will forget your past and bless you. Yet many people in our society have already been burnt by older brother Christianity and want nothing to do with it. Only when we clearly teach that legalistic religion is every bit as idolatrous as outright rebellion will they be able to see that we are preaching a third way, the way of the gospel.⁶⁴

⁶³ Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Communication"; Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Realisation."

⁶⁴ Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Communication"; Keller, "Reaching the 21st Century World For Christ."

The second article: The incarnate Mediator between God and humankind. The justification of sinners is not the only role Christ plays in the economy of salvation. His other role is to stand at the heart of the Christian *cultus* as the one who makes the hidden God visible and the heavenly God present and available to his worshippers on earth. The New Testament refers to him as the mediator between God and humankind.⁶⁵ He is the image of the living God,⁶⁶ who reveals to us the Father and his glory.⁶⁷ Through him God tabernacles among us in grace,⁶⁸ so that we can receive a gracious God and respond with our prayers and praises.⁶⁹

Idolatry is something that was first defined in the cultic domain. In the Old Testament idolatry primarily meant participating in worship rites centered on pagan cultic images, as opposed to worship prescribed by the true God centered on the temple or tabernacle. Yet what is the crucial difference between the two? How can we determine the precise dividing line between legitimate and idolatrous worship?

Theologians have offered two basic lines of interpretation regarding this question. The difference between the two is best illustrated by considering the question of why cultic images were banned in the Old Testament.

The first approach to this question is what I will call the metaphysical approach, which employs what Carlos Eire calls “the metaphysics of transcendence.”⁷⁰ According to this approach it is metaphysically impossible for God to have an image, since he is so transcendent over his creation that the gap cannot be bridged. Any image of God must be a false image, since it is

⁶⁵ 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24.

⁶⁶ 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3.

⁶⁷ Matt 11:27; John 1:18; 12:44–46; 14:7; 17:25–26; 2 Cor 4:6.

⁶⁸ John 1:14; 2:18–21.

⁶⁹ John 4:19–26; 14:6–14; Phil 2:10; Heb 9:11 – 10:25; 12:18–24; 1 Pet 2:4–10.

⁷⁰ See chapter 6, pages 202–3, for a fuller treatment of Carlos Eire and the metaphysics of transcendence.

impossible for the invisible, infinite, spiritual God to be seen in finite, visible, physical form. This means that any image will misrepresent God and detract from his glory simply because it is an image. This has been a common approach among scholars in the Reformed tradition. For instance, Greg Beale argues that God banned images to imprint on people's minds his absolute transcendence over the finite creation, to teach them that his presence can never be captured or localized, and to point them to his spiritual nature that cannot be seen or thought of in corporeal terms.⁷¹ Likewise, Ellul stresses that God is the "Wholly Other,"⁷² and is so transcendent over his creation that he cannot be equated with anything in it. It is therefore idolatrous to identify him too closely with anything in this visible, created realm. Ellul says that "Sight is utterly excluded from the faith relationship,"⁷³ and images are completely incapable of expressing anything about God, since they belong to the domain that is not God and can never be God on any grounds.⁷⁴

The other approach to the question of divine images is what I will call the covenantal approach. According to this approach, God banned his people from setting up images of him not because it is metaphysically impossible for God to have an image, but simply because they are a violation of his covenant with his people. As part of his covenant God has instituted certain rites and patterns of worship through which he promises to be with his people to bless them, and he will not allow anyone to despise this worship by establishing their own in its place. One proponent of this line of thought is the editor-in-chief of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz. Rabinowitz asks why certain cultic images were commanded in the Old Testament—such as the cherubim above the ark and on the walls and doors of the temple—

⁷¹ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 18–19, 311.

⁷² Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80–81.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

whereas others were forbidden. He concludes that no satisfactory explanation can be found other than that God has commanded some and forbidden others. This he notes is perfectly consistent with the basic theology of the Bible, which is that God must be worshipped only in the manner he has prescribed. For us to invent our own rites for worshipping God apart from what he has instituted in his covenant is to commit the sin of *avodah zarah*, or “nonprescribed cult.”⁷⁵

A similar line of interpretation is given by Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, two Jewish philosophers who have coauthored a book on idolatry. They note both ways of interpreting the ban on cultic images, but lean in the direction of a covenantal approach. They observe that the Bible never says that God does not or cannot have an image. Often people who espouse the metaphysical approach appeal to Deut 4:15, “Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves.” Yet this text never says that God cannot appear in visible form, but simply that he did not appear in this way to Israel. The numerous Old Testament passages that talk about people seeing God or his likeness suggest that it is possible for him to appear in visible form.⁷⁶ Halbertal and Margalit then propose reasons why God might prohibit the Israelites from constructing an image of him even if he has an image. First, if his image has not been revealed to us, any image we construct for ourselves will be erroneous. Second, God may have forbidden us to have the degree of exposure to him that sight permits.⁷⁷

The problem with the metaphysical approach to this question is that if it is pursued consistently it rules out all contact between God and humankind, including all the contact

⁷⁵ Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, “Idolatry,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 8.1229–31; cf. Exod 30:9; Lev 10:1; 16:2; Num 3:4; 26:61; Deut 12:13–14.

⁷⁶ E.g. Exod 24:11; 33:20; Num 12:8; Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26.

⁷⁷ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, translated by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 45–47, 52–53, 239; cf. Exod 33:20.

outlined in the Bible.⁷⁸ If God can have no image, then not even Christ can be his image. If the metaphysical gap between the Creator and his creation cannot be bridged, then we can know nothing about him and have nothing to do with him. When the Scriptures refer to Christ as the image of God, tell us about many divine appearances, and speak about a host of ways in which God has bridged this gap, these must all be exceptions to the metaphysical rule. Yet once one starts admitting such exceptions, as Beale and Ellul do,⁷⁹ what happens to the rule?

The tension created by these exceptions can only be resolved in one of two ways. The first is to surrender or relativize the metaphysical rule by admitting that the gulf between God and us can be crossed. Perhaps we cannot cross this gulf at our own initiative, and it provides a good explanation for why we cannot devise our own ways of approaching and worshipping God. Yet God must be able to bridge it when he chooses to do so. This is the position that Beale ends up espousing. He suggests that God only tolerates images he creates himself, not images “made by human hands,” which mortals decide to construct for themselves.⁸⁰ Yet this effectively means subordinating the metaphysical approach beneath a covenantal one. If God can cross this divide when and where he chooses, then the important question becomes, what has he chosen? How has the God of the covenant chosen to come to us, and what has he prescribed for our worship?

The other way to resolve this tension is to try to uphold the preeminence of the metaphysical rule by undermining the significance of the exceptions. This is the approach that Ellul takes. While he recognizes Christ as an exception to the rule—who as the image of God brought God into the visible domain⁸¹—he is at pains to minimize the significance of this for

⁷⁸ E.g. Exod 13:21; 20:20–21, 24; 25:22; 29:38–46; 40:34–38; Lev 16:2; Deut 12:5; 31:15; John 1:14; 14:6–23.

⁷⁹ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 20, 127–135; Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 79–80, 83–85, 105.

⁸⁰ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 276–80.

⁸¹ Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 79–80, 83–85, 105.

how we relate to God. He emphasizes that the people who saw Jesus saw nothing of his divinity but only his humanity, and insists that the incarnation is in no way paradigmatic for God's dealings with his people.⁸² He even goes as far as to suggest that the incarnation ended with Jesus' earthly life, and that Christ's death means the destruction of the divine image. He refers to this as the ultimate iconoclastic act that should encourage other iconoclastic acts.⁸³ Thus Ellul undermines an orthodox understanding of Christ's incarnation and the indissolvability of the hypostatic union for the sake of upholding his metaphysical rule.

If one takes a covenantal approach to the ban on cultic images, all these difficulties disappear. When the Scriptures describe Christ as God's image, this is not an exception to the Old Testament ban, but fits perfectly with it and indeed explains it. This is the way Achtemeier approaches this issue. He says that since Christ is God's true icon, who makes God visible to us, he is the one who renders other cultic images both unnecessary and inappropriate.⁸⁴ In other words, we humans must not construct our own images of God, for to do so would be to bypass the true image that God has established in favor of false ones we have dreamed up. If we then ascribe to such images the ability to reveal God to us or bring his spirit and power down to earth—as those in the pagan world did⁸⁵—we have effectively supplanted Christ in the economy of salvation as the mediator between God and us. If such images become the focal point of our worship—as they were in the pagan world—then we have abandoned the Christ-centered *cultus* God has established in favor of our own self-chosen cult.

⁸² Ibid., 80–85.

⁸³ Ibid., 62–63.

⁸⁴ Achtemeier, "Gods Made With Hands," 58–59.

⁸⁵ Rabinowitz, "Idolatry," 8.1232–33; John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 53–63; Thornkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 22–29.

When we get to chapter 6 we will see that Luther's approach was consistently covenantal.

The third article: The word. Halbertal and Margalit point out that those who see an unbridgeable metaphysical gap between the Creator and his creation as the primary issue in idolatry do not usually stop with attacking visible images. Instead, the logic of their position tends to drive them to attack other concrete representations of God as well, including Scripture.⁸⁶ For those who consider God to be so totally transcendent over his creation that it is impossible for him to present himself to us visibly, it is also reasonable to conclude that he cannot be represented in human language, since this too is a finite, created thing.

The mildest form of this view is expressed by Beale. Beale acknowledges that Scripture speaks truly about God, and says we must learn to see all of life through the lens of Scripture if we are to avoid idolatry. Yet then he turns around and says that created objects do not contain God's living Spirit, and this includes the Bible and the elements of the Eucharist.⁸⁷ So evidently in his view a created thing such as the Bible can bring us information about God, but not God himself. A more extreme view is expressed by those who associate the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy with "Bibliolatry," and accuse those who hold to it of worshipping the Bible instead of the God who stands behind it.⁸⁸ The most extreme view is expressed by those who question whether God can be represented at all in human language. An example here is the Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash. Lash suggests that in order to avoid idolatry our doctrine should be regulative rather than descriptive. It should regulate how we are to speak about God, and how we are to behave, worship, and hope, without purporting to give us a "fix" on God or his true

⁸⁶ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 53–62, 239.

⁸⁷ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 310–11.

⁸⁸ E.g. Kurt W. Peterson, "'The Spirit Gives Life, but the Letter Kills': Bible-olatry in American Protestantism," *Ex Auditu* 15(1999), 120–22, 124–26.

nature.⁸⁹ Lash stresses that God is a holy mystery that we can never fix within the categories of our understanding.⁹⁰ All our words, thoughts, and images are ultimately inadequate for the task of speaking about God,⁹¹ who cannot be brought into our world of images, narratives, and descriptions.⁹² Therefore our words must always point beyond themselves to the One who is beyond such predications.

The interpretation of Ellul runs in this direction. Ellul does not just attack visible depictions of God but all visible things put to religious use,⁹³ including the circumscribing of sacred space,⁹⁴ ornate liturgy, popular music, human activism, visual aids to assist in the proclamation of the word,⁹⁵ any use of evidence to support the faith,⁹⁶ and even the mental images of God in people's heads.⁹⁷ Ellul does emphasize that God acts and reveals himself in this world through the Word.⁹⁸ Yet even here he is at pains to stress that the Word is distinct from all human words, including the Scriptures, which he regards as the work of human beings.⁹⁹ Human words and nothing else can act as a vehicle for the Word, but only when God chooses to add his Spirit to them, which can never be guaranteed.¹⁰⁰ Therefore the Scriptures by themselves are a dead letter.¹⁰¹ On this

⁸⁹ Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of "Religion"* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88–90.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁹² Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), 276.

⁹³ Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 91.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 183–92, 200–203.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80, 97.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95–96.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50, 80, 107.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 107–8.

basis Ellul attacks all biblical literalism, and says we must be free in relation to the text.¹⁰² He also rejects all attempts to form a system of dogmatics or ethics,¹⁰³ since the Word can never be something of human familiarity or an object at human disposal.¹⁰⁴

An interpretation that runs the opposite way is given by Halbertal and Margalit. They suggest that the biblical view of idolatry cannot be separated from an anthropomorphic view of God. In order to understand what the Bible says about idolatry, and why it is such a terrible sin, it is necessary to enter into the anthropomorphic metaphors the Bible uses to describe idolatry. The first major metaphor is drawn from marriage: idolatry is adultery, the betrayal of one's marriage partner.¹⁰⁵ The second is political: idolatry is rebellion against one's Lord.¹⁰⁶ Both metaphors depict idolatry as a sin that occurs in the context of an interpersonal relationship that demands loyalty. Halbertal and Margalit demonstrate that the way the Bible uses these images requires that God is understood in personal terms, and is sufficiently like us that such an interpersonal relationship is possible.¹⁰⁷ They then contrast this biblical view of idolatry with the metaphysical approach to the question of idolatry. The metaphysical approach turns the issue on its head, and makes anthropomorphism into the great enemy. According to this approach, if one is to avoid idolatry it is necessary to purify one's view of God from anthropomorphisms and other concrete elements (such as corporeality, locality, visibility, and emotion) through a process of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 111.

¹⁰² Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 163, 166.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 145–46, 156.

¹⁰⁴ Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, 111.

¹⁰⁵ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 9–36.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 214–35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1, 9, 237–38.

abstraction.¹⁰⁸ This is what we see with theologians like Ellul and Lash, and to a lesser extent with Beale.¹⁰⁹ Yet as Halbertal and Margalit point out, this view of God has more in common with pagan philosophy than with the biblical picture of God. Instead of freeing us from idolatry, it is just as easy to view excessive abstraction as the path to creating an idolatrous philosopher's god in place of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹¹⁰ It is the Greek philosophers such as Aristotle who insisted that the false god is the anthropomorphic one, and that God must be absolutely separated from the fluctuating life of the emotions and finite physical things.¹¹¹ The Bible speaks about God's transcendence, but still has no qualms about speaking of him in anthropomorphic terms, and depicting him as intimately involved with creation. When we get to chapter 7 we will see that for Luther the true God is never the God of philosophical abstractions, but rather the God who can only be known as he condescends to speak to us in human terms.

In addition to this question of how God relates to linguistic representations in Scripture, a number of scholars have touched on the question of how idolatry relates to natural reason.

Many of the scholars we have examined treat idolatry as little more than a projection of the human mind. Ellul is a good example. Ellul openly accepts the analysis of Feuerbach and Freud in their critique of religion.¹¹² He talks about religion as something humans construct by projecting their own best attributes or their own feelings and desires onto an illusory supreme being that they tailor according to their own requirements.¹¹³ He simply makes an exception for

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 2–3, 109–12, 130–32, 238–39.

¹⁰⁹ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 18–20, 311.

¹¹⁰ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 134–35.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 238.

¹¹² Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 25, 156.

¹¹³ Ibid., 25, 156–57.

the revelation of God in Jesus Christ,¹¹⁴ and refuses to go along with Freud in ruling out the work of God behind the human longing for a father figure.¹¹⁵

However, a different view is given by Keyes. On the one hand he recognizes an element of human projection in idolatry. For instance, he talks about human insecurity as the driving force in idolatry, and says idols result from humans inflating earthly things to divine proportions.¹¹⁶ Yet on the other hand Keyes stresses the inescapability of God's revelation in this world. For Keyes, human insecurity stems from our attempts to evade God's revelation, and our idols are constructed out of the stuff of God's revelation in an attempt to render this revelation unthreatening to our autonomy. Therefore there is an element of genuine truth in all idolatry. In this way he turns the thinking of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud on its head. Instead of religious beliefs being merely a product of human psychology and sociology, he treats even atheism as a product of genuine revelation and a natural knowledge of God.¹¹⁷

This has practical consequences for Keyes. He notes how Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament vary their proclamation considerably depending on who they are speaking to. The way they adapt their message to their audience suggests they have first asked two questions: 1) "What do these people already know of God?" And 2) "What have they done with what they know of God? What sort of idol have they created with what they know of God?" He then suggests that this is a good pattern for us to follow in dealing with non-Christians.¹¹⁸ Although any knowledge non-Christians have of God has been twisted into idolatry, we should still consider how this knowledge provides us with starting points for dialogue.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 156–57.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 365.

¹¹⁶ Keyes, "The Idol Factory," 32–33; Keyes, "The Dynamics of Idolatry."

¹¹⁷ Keyes, "The Dynamics of Idolatry"; Keyes, "The Idol Factory," 29, 31–32.

When we get to chapter 7 we will see that for Luther idolatry always involves a measure of genuine knowledge, as people twist both natural and special revelation to suit their own ends.

The third article: Repentance. A number of scholars have recognized that if our hearts are to be free from their attachment to idols, God is the one who must work this change in us by producing in us faith in Christ.

Greg Beale's excellent study of idolatry in the Bible illustrates this point. Beale's key texts are Isaiah 6, Psalm 115, and Psalm 135. Psalm 115 is echoed in Psalm 135 and reads,

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.¹¹⁹

Then in Isaiah 6, God says to Isaiah,

“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”¹²⁰

When this text is read in the light of Psalm 115 and Psalm 135, it becomes evident that God's judgement on the people of Israel through Isaiah is not just a random judgement on their sin, but a specific judgement for their idolatry. God is forcing them to experience the natural consequence of their idolatry, which is to become as blind, deaf, and lifeless as their idols.¹²¹ Beale then traces this theme throughout Scripture, and demonstrates what a major theme it is. Isaiah 6:9–10 is quoted by Jesus in all four gospels, as well as by Luke in his conclusion to

¹¹⁸ Keyes, “Giving A Word Back.”

¹¹⁹ Ps 115:4–8.

¹²⁰ Isa 6:9–10.

¹²¹ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 36–64.

Acts.¹²² Furthermore, there are many allusions to this theme elsewhere in the New Testament, such as the common refrain, “He who has ears, let him hear.”¹²³ Yet this creates a problem. If idolatry makes people blind and deaf to God and his word, how can they possibly repent?

The only possible answer is that God must reverse this judgement and give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to know him. Beale demonstrates that this is exactly the way Scripture deals with this issue.¹²⁴ Whereas Isaiah was sent to blind Israel’s eyes, later in the same book we read that when “a king will reign in righteousness”¹²⁵ and “the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,”¹²⁶ then “the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention. The heart of the hasty will understand and know, and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak distinctly.”¹²⁷ This is then witnessed in the New Testament, when Christ comes to proclaim “recovery of sight to the blind.”¹²⁸ Directly after his quotation of Isa 6:9–10 in Matt 13, Jesus says to his disciples, “But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”¹²⁹ The New Testament makes it clear that this was a gift that had to be given to them by God.¹³⁰

A number of other scholars have also touched on this theme. For instance, David Powlison talks about “the expulsive power of a new affection.”¹³¹ He suggests that the only way to

¹²² Matt 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; 8:17–18; Luke 8:10; John 12:39–40; Acts 28:26–27; Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 163, 198–200, 271.

¹²³ E.g. Matt 13:9; Rev 2:7.

¹²⁴ Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 268–83.

¹²⁵ Isa 32:1.

¹²⁶ Isa 32:15.

¹²⁷ Isa 32:3–4.

¹²⁸ Luke 4:18.

¹²⁹ Matt 13:16.

¹³⁰ Matt 16:17; Luke 10:21–24.

¹³¹ This phrase originally comes from a sermon by Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the free church in Scotland

eliminate idolatrous desires from our hearts is to replace them with new master motives and desires that flow from new, listening hearts. These are worked in us through the Holy Spirit as he works his word and the gospel of Jesus Christ into our lives.¹³² Bernd Wannewetsch, professor of ethics at Oxford University, expresses a similar view that he attributes to Philip Melanchthon, that idolatrous desire can only be overcome by another stronger desire, not by the power of the rational will.¹³³ Keller makes a similar suggestion, that idolatry cannot simply be rooted out, it must be supplanted by a greater love for Christ.¹³⁴ He says that since idols are usually good things that we should love but not love inordinately, we need to learn to love and rejoice in Christ more than these other things so that our loves become rightly ordered.¹³⁵ He further suggests that this rejoicing in Christ can only be cultivated through spiritual disciplines such as prayer, corporate worship, and meditation.¹³⁶ Keller also makes the intriguing suggestion that suffering has a part to play in freeing us from idolatry, since without suffering we never learn that we are looking for blessing in all the wrong places, in everything except God.¹³⁷ As we will see when in chapter 8, Luther develops this thought when he talks about God's alien work.

during the first half of the 19th century (Thomas Chalmers, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection," <http://vorthosforum.com/export/Articles/The%20Expulsive%20Power%20of%20a%20New%20Affection.pdf> [accessed Feb. 15, 2010]).

¹³² David Powlison, *Seeing With New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2003), 161–62.

¹³³ Bernd Wannewetsch, "The Desire of Desire: Commandment and Idolatry in Late Capitalist Societies," in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 329. Melanchthon wrote in the section on free will in his 1521 *Loci Communes* that "the will cannot in itself control love, hate, or similar affections, but affection is overcome by affection. ... the Schools are in error when they imagine that the will by its very nature opposes the affections, or that it is able to lay an affection aside whenever the intellect so advises or warns." (Philip Melanchthon, "Loci Communes Theologici," in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, Library of Christian Classics XIX, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, trans. Lowell J. Satre [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969], 27)

¹³⁴ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 71.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹³⁷ Timothy Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Incarnation," 2007, The Evangelists Conference, <http://www.evangelists-conference.org.uk/3F014-03GospelIncarnation.mp3> (accessed Sept. 15, 2009).

Not only is Keller able to recognize that only faith in Christ can free us from our idols, he also demonstrates how the gospel, idolatry, and sanctification all relate. Keller contends that if we are to be transformed into people who reflect Christ's love, then the gospel must penetrate deeply into our hearts. He suggests that the great scandal of Christianity today is that so many people confess faith in Christ, but live no differently as a result. He then suggest two reasons for this. The first is that we fail to discern, expose, and destroy people's idols, so that although we lead them to make a confession of faith in Christ, in functional terms the dominant force in their lives is still their idolatry.¹³⁸ The second related reason is that although on an intellectual level people know the gospel, it never penetrates their hearts. Here he uses the analogy of the coke machine in the building where he lives. You put your money in this machine expecting a coke to come out, but no matter how many times you press the buttons it never does. But if you pound on the side of the machine until you hear the pennies drop, out comes the coke. Keller says this describes the task of a preacher. We give people the gospel, and on one level they accept it. The gospel is in them. Yet it never penetrates their hearts, so they remain just as anxious and fixated on their idols as they were before. So we have to keep pounding away at them until the pennies drop, the gospel penetrates the heart, and out comes graciousness.¹³⁹

Keller is able to demonstrate why the logic of the gospel produces such things as boldness, graciousness, and love, whereas the logic of idolatry does not. No matter what idol we choose as the ultimate basis of our identity, we will become enslaved to it, and forced to live up to its demands. If we fail, it will crush us without mercy, and we will not have the boldness or confidence to be of much service to others. If we succeed, it will make us proud, and we will look down on those who do not measure up according to the standards of our idol. Idolatry

¹³⁸ Keller, "The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry."

therefore makes it impossible to be both bold yet humble and loving at the same time. Yet the gospel gives us the boldness of knowing we are accepted by Christ and do not have to justify ourselves according to any other standard, the humility of knowing we are sinners, and the graciousness that is needed to accept and love all people as they are. Only when we remember that we are sinners saved by grace can we have both the boldness and the graciousness needed to be effective ambassadors of the gospel.¹⁴⁰

The logic of idolatry is always the logic of the law, and Keller observes that the logic of grace, once we have grasped it, leads to a far greater response than the law ever could. If we are locked into the logic of legalism, there is always a limit to what God can ask of us. We are like taxpayers. We have rights. Once we have paid our dues, God cannot expect anything more from us and is obligated to reward us. Yet once we realize that we are sinners saved by grace, then no amount of love in response is enough, and there is nothing God cannot ask us to do.¹⁴¹

As we have seen, both Keller and Powlison associate this spiritual transformation with the gospel penetrating the human heart. This is an extremely practical issue. If only God can free us from our idolatry, does this mean the Church is completely impotent in the struggle against idolatry? Does this lead inevitably to quietism, since there is nothing we can do except sit and wait for God to act? Or has God placed himself at our disposal in the Spirit-breathed word that he gives for our use? If so, then our faith can be active, and we can actively join in the struggle against idolatry, yet all the while trusting not in our own strength or wisdom but in his.

When we get to chapter 8 we will see that Luther also stresses that only God's Spirit can produce true faith and its fruits in us, and that he does this through the gospel.

¹³⁹ Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Realisation."

¹⁴⁰ Keller, "Reaching the 21st Century World for Christ."

¹⁴¹ Keller, "Smashing False Idols: Gospel Communication."

Summary. As we have seen, there is much fruitful reflection in contemporary scholarship on how idolatry relates to every article of the creed and all three members of the Trinity. There is a certain amount of disagreement, particularly regarding how God can be represented within creation, and how he relates to such concrete, created things as word and sacrament. Nevertheless there is much helpful material. However, all these thoughts are still somewhat disjointed. No one has tried to demonstrate in a systematic way how the idol of the self relates to all three articles of the creed, or why a full treatment of idolatry requires an account of how it relates to all three members of the Trinity and their work in the economy of salvation.

Scholarship on Luther's Theology of Idolatry

Luther's treatment of the First Commandment in his *Large Catechism* is well known and frequently quoted in the scholarly literature. Yet scholars rarely go beyond the *Large Catechism* to give a more detailed treatment of his views on idolatry. There is much Luther scholarship that deals with idolatry tangentially as part of a discussion on faith, worship, the theology of the cross, or the catechisms, yet very little that makes Luther's view of idolatry its primary focus.

Tae Jun Suk: Faith, Christ, and the word. The most significant exception is a doctoral dissertation on Luther's theology of idolatry by Tae Jun Suk. Suk gives an excellent summary of Luther's theology of idolatry, and provides a helpful working definition of idolatry for Luther as "any worship apart from faith in Christ who is revealed in the Word."¹⁴² Suk also touches on many of the issues I will deal with in this dissertation. He identifies how Luther saw inordinate self-love at the heart of idolatry.¹⁴³ He discusses how idolatry relates to Christ, and therefore

¹⁴² Suk, *Luther's Concept of Idolatry*, 126–27; cf. 80.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12–15, 32–36.

brings idolatry into the domain of the second article.¹⁴⁴ He also discusses how idolatry relates to faith and the word, and therefore the third article.¹⁴⁵ However, the focus of Suk's study is not on the idolatry of the self or how idolatry relates to the economy of salvation. Therefore although Suk touches on some of this ground, the present study will treat these issues in more detail. Also, Suk's study is historical rather than systematic. His goal is to use Luther's thoughts on idolatry as a means of understanding his polemics against Catholics and Jews. Therefore he does not attempt to use Luther's theology to engage with contemporary theology or to analyze contemporary society, as this present study will do.

Other scholarship. No scholars apart from Suk have attempted to give a comprehensive account of Luther's theology of idolatry. Suk confirms what I have discovered, that very few scholars have written on this topic.¹⁴⁶ Suk mentions only four works that have addressed Luther's view of idolatry in any detail: Vilmos Vajta's *Luther on Worship*, Heinrich Bornkamm's *Luther and the Old Testament*, *Grace and Reason* by Brian Gerrish, and Carlos Eire's *War Against the Idols*. To this list I could add works by Charles Arand, Michael Parsons, Randall Zachman, and Ingemar Öberg. Vajta is responsible for identifying the three elements that distinguish right worship from idolatry in Luther's thought—faith, Christ, and the word—that Suk borrows to articulate Luther's working definition of idolatry.¹⁴⁷ Eire's work focuses exclusively on idols in the sense of images rather than false gods, and will be discussed in chapter 6.¹⁴⁸ Arand talks

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 20–21, 96–111.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 43–96, 111–29.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 3–4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 80; Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1954], 67–84, 125–48.

¹⁴⁸ Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65–73.

about how Luther relates the first commandment to the Creator and the law of creation.¹⁴⁹

Parsons and Bornkamm talk about how the idol of the self lies at the heart of Luther's thought on idolatry.¹⁵⁰ Gerrish, Öberg, and Bornkamm all discuss Luther's views regarding the relationship between idolatry and the natural knowledge of God.¹⁵¹ Parsons, Gerrish, Öberg, and Zachman talk about idolatry in relation to human attempts to justify themselves.¹⁵² Yet none of them attempt to tie all this together to form a complete picture of Luther's thought.

Conclusion. Existing scholarship on Luther's theology of idolatry is limited. While some scholars have highlighted individual aspects of Luther's understanding of idolatry, no one apart from Suk has attempted to give a comprehensive account of his views. Suk's study is commendable, and proved valuable in confirming and expanding my thoughts on the subject. However, the focus of this study is different from his. His is an historical study, focused on how Luther theology of idolatry shaped his polemics. The present study is an attempt to retrieve key ideas from Luther with the intent of applying them to the present day.

The Dissertation in the Context of Current Scholarship

Why Should We Talk about Idolatry?

Given that few theologians have deemed idolatry to be an important topic of conversation today, a case must be made for why idolatry should be put on the agenda.

¹⁴⁹ Charles P. Arand, "Luther on the God Behind the First Commandment," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (Winter 1994): 397–423.

¹⁵⁰ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 46–48; Michael Parsons, "Luther on Isaiah 40: the Gospel and Mission," in *Text and Task*, ed. Michael Parsons (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 69–70.

¹⁵¹ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 100–113; Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, 48–55; Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 37–81.

¹⁵² Randall C. Zachman, "The Idolatrous Religion of Conscience," in *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 19–39; Gerrish, *Grace and*

A strong case can be made that the first commandment and how we relate to it is the number one theme in the Bible. This is not to downgrade other themes such as law and gospel, but to point out that the first commandment provides the essential backdrop for how the Scriptures deal with such themes as judgement and grace.

It is not hard to make the case that the first commandment with its prohibition of other gods is the central theme of the Old Testament. The worship of only one God, as expressed in the first commandment and the Shema, was recognized by the teachers of the law in Jesus' day as the most important commandment in the law,¹⁵³ and by Jesus as the linchpin of the Old Testament.¹⁵⁴ Without seeing the importance of the first commandment most of the Old Testament remains opaque: from the way the Deuteronomic history views Israel's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God as the decisive factor in determining the course of its history, to the way the prophets interpret the exile, to God's rejection of Saul (for sins that are trivial or perhaps even commendable from a modern secular perspective), to his commendation of the adulterer and murderer David as "a man after God's own heart."¹⁵⁵

While the Old Testament prophets never stop railing against idolatry, at first glance there appears to be far less mention of idolatry in the New Testament. Yet two things must be kept in mind. First, the Old Testament is always in the background for the New Testament writers. For instance, the references to Isaiah 6 in the gospels and Acts effectively mean that Jesus and Luke are accusing the Jews of idolatry and interpreting their refusal to listen to the gospel as a consequence of this idolatry. Yet this is only evident if we are aware of the Old Testament

Reason, 100–113; Parsons, "Luther on Isaiah 40," 69–70; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 37–81.

¹⁵³ Luke 10:25–27.

¹⁵⁴ Matt 22:24–40.

¹⁵⁵ 1 Kings 11:4; 14:8; Acts 13:21–22.

background. Or else, when Jesus says of the Pharisees, “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men,”¹⁵⁶ an astute reader will observe that he is comparing their worship to the idolatrous worship censured by Isaiah and the self-chosen worship of Jeroboam.¹⁵⁷ Second, after the Babylonian captivity the outward expression of idolatry in Israel changed considerably. No longer did the Jews bow down to gods of wood or stone. If idolatry was to be found in Israel it was in less obvious forms that are frequently not recognized as idolatry, just as idolatry in the western world today is generally not recognized as such. St. Paul directly accuses the Jews of his day of idolatry in Romans 1–3, as well as in Galatians 4:8–10, where he says that if Christians think they must be justified on the basis of Jewish laws and ceremonies they have turned from God and become enslaved to that which is not God.

In his *Large Catechism* Luther defines an idol as anything that supplants God as the focus of our trust and devotion.¹⁵⁸ This broadens the category of idolatry considerably from the narrow understanding of idols as cultic images. This broad understanding is essential if idolatry is to be a useful category for analyzing western society. Likewise, this broad understanding is needed if we are to recognize much of the talk about idolatry in the New Testament.

This way of regarding idolatry was not invented by Luther. It is clearly present in Scripture. The Gospels tell us to “love the Lord your God with all our heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”¹⁵⁹ This way of stating the first commandment indicates that anything we are more devoted to than God has usurped his place. Furthermore, there is precedent in Scripture for calling anything that supplants him in this way a

¹⁵⁶ Matt 15:9.

¹⁵⁷ Isa 29:13; 2 Kings 12:25–33; 2 Chron 13:8–12.

¹⁵⁸ LC I 2–28 = WA 30.i:133.1–136.26.

¹⁵⁹ Mark 12:30.

false god or idol. In Habakkuk the Babylonians are said to have made their own might their god.¹⁶⁰ When the people of Judah put their confidence in their alliance with Egypt to keep them safe instead of trusting in the Lord, they were accused by Isaiah of rebelling against the Lord and trusting in a false god.¹⁶¹ In Ephesians and Colossians *πλεονεξία* is called idolatry.¹⁶² *Πλεονεξία* literally means “wanting more.” This usually means the desire for more wealth, but can also include the desire for more power, fame, pleasure, and so on.¹⁶³ Therefore all these “secular” things can be idols as far as the New Testament is concerned.¹⁶⁴ In Philippians Paul talks about the enemies of Christ whose “god is their belly” since their “minds [are] set on earthly things.”¹⁶⁵ As we have seen, in Romans 1–3 Paul lumps Jews and Gentiles together, and accuses them all of turning aside from God to worship the creature instead of the Creator. Finally, although he has not made any mention of gods of wood or stone, John sums up his first epistle by concluding, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” It then becomes evident that when he spoke about the love of the world,¹⁶⁶ “the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in what one has and does,”¹⁶⁷ the attachment to our possessions that prevents us from giving to those in

¹⁶⁰ Hab 1:11.

¹⁶¹ Isa 31:1–3.

¹⁶² Eph 5:5; Col 3:5.

¹⁶³ Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 6.266–68.

¹⁶⁴ E.g. Luke 16:13.

¹⁶⁵ Phil 3:19.

¹⁶⁶ 1 John 2:15.

¹⁶⁷ 1 John 2:16. Author’s own translation.

βίος can mean either mean “manner of life” or “means of subsistence” (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 141). Therefore “pride of life” can mean both pride in the way we live or pride in our possessions.

need,¹⁶⁸ and the devil's deceptions that lead people to disobey or deny Christ,¹⁶⁹ John was describing different idols.

As we saw earlier, the topic of idolatry has largely been ignored in missiology to our secular society. Instead, there have been many attempts to analyze and engage with contemporary people using human tools derived from sociology, psychology, and philosophy. We have discussed at length whether people are modern or post modern or post post modern. We have talked about whether our target audience belongs to the baby boomers or Gen. X or Gen. Y, about the merits of evidentialist vs. presuppositionalist apologetics, about whether we should argue using a foundationalist or a non-foundationalist epistemology, about managing our resources and programs more effectively, and about how to repackage the church to grab people's attention and appeal to their felt needs. I do not want to dismiss all this talk. When such discussions are conducted wisely and kept in perspective they can be examples of faithfully using the gifts of reason God has given us. Yet they cannot replace the analysis of the human situation given in God's word. Only God can look past all outward appearances to see the human heart and its plight clearly, and only God can provide the solution. Therefore if we truly want to understand the fallen state of our society and the people we hope to reach we cannot ignore the analysis of their state given in the Bible. Central to this analysis is the first commandment. The book of Revelation tells us that the bulk of humankind will never repent of their idols until the last day.¹⁷⁰ So how can we treat idolatry as if it is not relevant today?

¹⁶⁸ 1 John 3:17.

¹⁶⁹ 1 John 2:3-6, 22-23; 3:4-10; 4:1-6; 5:19.

¹⁷⁰ Rev 9:20.

Conversion in the Scriptures is often described as turning “from idols to serve the living and true God.”¹⁷¹ Where repentance is viewed more narrowly than this, as simply repentance from certain bad deeds in violation of some moral code, it is easy to see why the preaching of repentance could lose its impact in contemporary society. People could easily say, “Well, I don’t believe in your God or his rules.” Yet the proclamation of Christ cannot be so easily sidestepped, since he has come to challenge whatever gods we do believe in.

Why Should We Talk about the Idolatry of the Self?

The number one reason we should be talking about the idol of the self is that the Scriptures see human attempts to usurp the place of God at the heart of the human predicament. It is not just Adam and Eve who set aside the word of the Lord, thought they could determine for themselves what was good and what was evil, and attempted to be like God.¹⁷² Instead, throughout Scripture we see that this original sin has set the pattern for the whole of fallen human history, which is characterized by pride, self-love, selfish ambition, self-justification, and self-reliance rather than trust in the Lord.

The Old Testament. This can be seen in the sweep of the Old Testament narrative. Not long after the fall in Genesis we have the tower of Babel, in which the builders attempted to provide for their own security and make a name for themselves by building a tower up to heaven.¹⁷³ Next, we see that Abraham was called by God to surrender all the usual human sources of security and blessing, including his nation, his home, and even his son and heir, and to

¹⁷¹ 1 Thess 1:9; Gal 4:8–9.

¹⁷² Gen 3:4–6.

¹⁷³ Gen 11:4–7.

trust solely in God's promises.¹⁷⁴ A similar pattern is recounted in the lives of numerous other biblical characters. For instance, Jacob, who originally tried to obtain blessing through human conniving, finally obtained it when he came to the end of his human rope: first when he was alone and fleeing for his life,¹⁷⁵ and then when he was again in fear for his life and God came and knocked him to the ground.¹⁷⁶ This pattern continues with the nation of Israel. As they entered the promised land, God told them it was not because they were greater than other nations that he had chosen them as his own, but simply because he was faithful to his gracious promises.¹⁷⁷ Therefore only confidence in him could make them great.¹⁷⁸ Hence God tested them to humble them, and urged them not to forget his provision or think, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."¹⁷⁹ In the time of Samuel, the people thought a human king could make them great, and the Lord regarded this as a rejection of him.¹⁸⁰ Throughout their occupation of the land, the people of Israel were repeatedly warned not to put their confidence in their armies or political alliances, but to trust in the Lord.¹⁸¹ They brought disaster on themselves when they failed to heed these warnings. When they humbled themselves God's wrath turned from them,¹⁸² but eventually they were destroyed because they failed to heed God's warnings about their pride.¹⁸³ Even two of their more godly kings, Uzziah and Hezekiah, brought God's wrath

¹⁷⁴ Gen 12:1–3; 15:1–6; 22:1–18.

¹⁷⁵ Gen 28:10–17.

¹⁷⁶ Gen 32:22–32.

¹⁷⁷ Deut 7:6–9.

¹⁷⁸ Deut 7:12ff.

¹⁷⁹ Deut 8:2–3, 16–17.

¹⁸⁰ 1 Sam 8:4–20.

¹⁸¹ Judg 7:2; 2 Chron 17:7–10; Isa 30:1 – 31:3; Hos 14:3.

¹⁸² 1 Kings 21:27–29; 2 Kings 22:19; 2 Chron 12:6–12; 32:26; 33:12–13, 19, 23–24; 34:26–28; 36:12; cf. 2 Sam 22:8.

¹⁸³ Isa 28:1–4; Jer 13:8–19; Ezek 7:10, 20, 23; Hos 5:5; 7:10; Amos 6:8.

upon themselves because of their pride.¹⁸⁴ This judgement for pride also extended to the surrounding nations.¹⁸⁵ Sennacherib boasted that he was so mighty that no god could deliver its people from his hand,¹⁸⁶ so the Lord destroyed his army in one night. Nebuchadnezzar and Pharaoh were both rebuked and humbled for claiming to be the creators of their realms,¹⁸⁷ the King of Tyre was destroyed for claiming “I am a god,”¹⁸⁸ and Belshazzar was killed for failing to humble himself before the Lord.¹⁸⁹ We are told that the Babylonians made their own might their god and were destroyed for their divine pretensions,¹⁹⁰ while Jeremiah pronounced God’s curse on anyone who trusts in humans instead of the Lord.¹⁹¹

Similar themes are evident in the wisdom literature. In Proverbs, trusting in the Lord is contrasted with leaning on one’s own understanding,¹⁹² and God declares that he is against the proud to bring them low.¹⁹³ In the Psalms we are told that pride goes together with a denial of God,¹⁹⁴ and the Lord is called upon to judge the proud.¹⁹⁵ The Psalms are also replete with calls to neither fear humans nor trust in them, but to trust in the Lord: “Grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man!”,¹⁹⁶ “Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is

¹⁸⁴ 2 Chron 26:16; 32:25.

¹⁸⁵ Jer 48:29–31; 49:16; 50:31–32; Isa 13:11; 16:6–7; 23:9; 25:10–12; Ezek 31:10–11; Obad 3; Zeph 2:9–10

¹⁸⁶ 2 Kings 18:28–35.

¹⁸⁷ Ezek 29:9; Dan 4:29–32.

¹⁸⁸ Ezek 28:1–10.

¹⁸⁹ Dan 5:18–23.

¹⁹⁰ Hab 11:1; Isa 14:12–15; 47:8–11.

¹⁹¹ Jer 17:5–6.

¹⁹² Prov 3:5.

¹⁹³ Prov 8:13; 15:25; 16:18–19; 21: 4; 29:23.

¹⁹⁴ Ps 10:4.

¹⁹⁵ Ps 59:12; 31:18; 94:2; 123:4.

¹⁹⁶ Ps 108:12.

no salvation”;¹⁹⁷ “Arise, O LORD! Let not man prevail ... Let the nations know that they are but men!”¹⁹⁸ Then in Psalm 46 we are told that despite all their struggling and fighting for preeminence, it is not humans who will be exalted among the nations but the Lord.¹⁹⁹

It could be argued that gods of wood and stone are a greater problem in the Old Testament than human pride. Yet as the Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright points out, idolatry and pride go hand in hand in the Old Testament. Not only is the critique of idolatry frequently coupled with a plea not to trust in human strength,²⁰⁰ but more than anything else the Bible describes idols as “the work of human hands.”²⁰¹ This is not simply naiveté or unfairness on the part of the biblical writers, as if they were unable to recognize that people who bow down to cult statues make a distinction between the transcendent gods and the statues that represent them. Instead, this is precisely the sting in the biblical critique. When the biblical prophets call idols “the work of human hands” they are not merely observing that cult statues are constructed by human craftsmen. Instead, they are claiming that the so-called gods that people think stand behind the statues are nonentities. They are no more than the projection of human hopes and proud aspirations, and are therefore no more powerful than the people who dream them up.²⁰² Hence trusting in them amounts to trusting in human strength.

¹⁹⁷ Ps 146:3.

¹⁹⁸ Ps 9:19–20. See also Ps 10:2–6; 20:7–8; 33:16–17; 49:5–20; 127:1–2; 147:10–11.

¹⁹⁹ “Come see the works of the Lord, the horrible things he has caused in the earth. [What are these horrible things—for humans who are trying to exalt themselves with their weapons of war?] He makes wars to cease to the ends of the earth, he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire. Stop it!—and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” (Ps 46:8–10. Author’s own translation. This interpretation of the Psalm was suggested to me by Dr John Kleinig of Australian Lutheran College.)

²⁰⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006) 147–61; cf. Isa 2:6–22.

²⁰¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 147; e.g. 2 Kings 19:17–19; Ps 115:1–4; Hos 8:4, 6; Hab 2:18–19; Jer 10:3–5, 9, 14; Isa 40:18–20; 44:9–20.

²⁰² Wright, *The Mission of God*, 149–57.

We see this coupling of idolatry with human pride in the book of Daniel, where we are told that Belshazzar expressed his pride by praising the gods of metal, wood, and stone instead of the Lord.²⁰³ Elsewhere we are told the same about Amon and the people of Judah and Jerusalem.²⁰⁴ Yet this pairing of pride with the worship of false gods is perhaps most clearly seen in Isaiah, where the prophet rails against pride and idolatry in the same breath:

Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. So man is humbled, and each one is brought low—do not forgive them! Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the lofty mountains, and against all the uplifted hills; against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft. And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. And the idols shall utterly pass away. And people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth. In that day mankind will cast away their idols of silver and their idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats, to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth. Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?²⁰⁵

The New Testament. In the New Testament narrative we are presented with Christ, the humble and gentle king,²⁰⁶ who comes to lift up the humble and bring down the proud and

²⁰³ Dan 5:22–23.

²⁰⁴ 2 Chron 33:22–23; Jer 44:2–10.

²⁰⁵ Isa 2:7–22.

²⁰⁶ Matt 21:5.

mighty.²⁰⁷ He is held up for us as the one we should emulate.²⁰⁸ Jesus spends a significant portion of his earthly ministry trying to open the eyes of the Pharisees and scribes to the folly of their self-righteousness,²⁰⁹ and tells us that he has not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.²¹⁰ His disciples vie for positions of power, but he teaches them that if they want to be great in the kingdom of heaven they must be willing to take last place and be servants of all.²¹¹ Indeed, if they want to enter the kingdom of heaven they must become humble like little children,²¹² since God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble and poor in spirit.²¹³ Herod Agrippa, who was the antithesis of this, was eaten by worms for failing to give glory to God when the people of Tyre and Sidon called him a god.²¹⁴ Many in Israel believed in Jesus but failed to confess him, since “they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”²¹⁵ St. Paul on the other hand, who had taken great pride in his own righteousness according to the law,²¹⁶ was humbled and made an effective servant of the kingdom. To keep him from becoming conceited and trusting in his own strength instead of Christ he was given a thorn in his flesh,²¹⁷ and he and his coworkers had to experience great hardships “to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.”²¹⁸ While the super-

²⁰⁷ Luke 1:51–52.

²⁰⁸ Phil 2:3–8.

²⁰⁹ Luke 5:19–32; 7:36–50; 15; 18:9–14; 19:1–10; John 8:1–11.

²¹⁰ Luke 5:32.

²¹¹ Mark 9:33–37; 10:35–45; John 13:13–15.

²¹² Matt 18:1–4.

²¹³ Matt 5:3, 5; 23:12; Luke 1:51–52; 14:11. Cf. James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5–6.

²¹⁴ Acts 12:20–23.

²¹⁵ John 12:42–43.

²¹⁶ Phil 3:4–8.

²¹⁷ 2 Cor 12:7–10.

²¹⁸ 2 Cor 1:9.

apostles boasted of their own super-spirituality, and the Galatians boasted of the things of the flesh, Paul would boast only of his weakness and of Christ's power at work in him.²¹⁹

This narrative is consistently reinforced by New Testament teaching. Christ and his apostles repeatedly warn us not to put our confidence in our piety or works,²²⁰ or in other human things such as family,²²¹ wealth,²²² earthly pleasures,²²³ social status or reputation,²²⁴ our own race or nation,²²⁵ human wisdom and philosophy,²²⁶ or human traditions.²²⁷ Rather than allowing us to exalt ourselves in this way, we are told that God has chosen the foolish, the weak, the low and the despised of this world so that no one may boast before him.²²⁸ St. Paul tells us that the reason why people are estranged from God is not a lack of knowledge, but rather their refusal to glorify him, which causes them to suppress this knowledge.²²⁹ Therefore we must learn to despair of our works and wisdom and all human and earthly things, and live solely by faith in God's mercy.²³⁰

The haughty self-seeking of humankind is something that will continue as long as this world endures. In his instructions to a young minister of the gospel, St. Paul writes,

But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be *lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-*

²¹⁹ 2 Cor 11:1 – 12:10; Gal 6:12–14; 1 Cor 3:21.

²²⁰ E.g. Rom 9:16; Eph 2:8.

²²¹ Matt 10:37.

²²² Luke 12:13–34; 1 Tim 6:17.

²²³ Luke 8:14.

²²⁴ Luke 14:7–14; Heb 13:12–14.

²²⁵ John 8:39ff; Acts 10:34–35.

²²⁶ 1 Cor 1:18 – 2:16; Col 2:8, 22.

²²⁷ Matt 15:1–9; Col 2:8.

²²⁸ 1 Cor 1:27–29.

²²⁹ Rom 1:18–25.

²³⁰ E.g. Rom 1:16–17; Gal 2:16 – 3:29.

control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, *swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.* (emphasis added)²³¹

Since this proud self-seeking will be a continual problem, Paul's next instruction to Timothy, and to those of us who hear his words today, is that we must hold firmly to the Spirit filled word that points us to Christ.²³²

Summary. What this material demonstrates is that the idolatry of the self, and God's response to it, is not a peripheral matter in Scripture. It is not just that Scripture contains individual passages that talk about the evils of pride, self-reliance, and self-justification, and of our need for humble trust in God's mercy. Rather, such material is pivotal in the biblical narrative, and biblical teaching as a whole makes no sense without this key. For instance, anyone who expects to find in the biblical characters examples of virtue to emulate will find them sadly lacking. The stories only make sense when one realizes they are primarily about human failure and divine mercy. Or anyone who comes to Scripture expecting help in the human quest for God will hear instead, "no one seeks for God. All have turned away,"²³³ "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."²³⁴ The Scriptures are ultimately about fall and redemption. The fall means that left to our own devices we each choose to do what is right in our own eyes,²³⁵ and turn aside to our own way.²³⁶ Redemption means that while we are still sinners,²³⁷ bent on pursuing our own self-centered will, Christ comes to seek and save the lost.²³⁸

²³¹ 2 Tim 3:1–4.

²³² 2 Tim 3:10–17.

²³³ Rom 3:11–12.

²³⁴ John 6:44.

²³⁵ Judg 21:25.

²³⁶ Isa 53:6; 1 Pet 2:25.

²³⁷ Rom 5:6–10.

So why should we be talking about the idolatry of the self as we seek to understand contemporary society? Because the Scriptures warn us that this is what we will struggle with in these last days: human pride, love of self, and the pursuit of selfish pleasures.

Why Should We Be Talking about Luther?

The reason I am interested in talking about Luther is that I don't know of any other theologian with such a clear and helpful understanding of idolatry.

In 1509, very early in his theological career, Luther wrote to a friend,

From the outset I would most rather have exchanged philosophy for theology. I mean, for a theology that gets at the meat of the nut, at the kernel of the corn, or the marrow of the bones. But God is God: man is often, in fact is always, fallible in judgement. This is our God, he will always lead us in kindness.²³⁹

This desire to get at the meat of the nut led Luther to delve into Scripture like few before or after him.²⁴⁰ In them he discovered what is truly important in theology, the good news of God's full forgiveness for all who look to Christ in faith. This led him to write, "in the real sense the subject of theology is guilty and lost man and the justifying and redeeming God."²⁴¹

The reason we should listen to Luther on the topic of idolatry is that his theology gets to the meat of the nut. He does not get carried away with philosophical speculations, but develops his theology through a close reading of Scripture, and is able to discern in it the things of central importance. In particular he was keenly aware that as guilty and lost people we cannot save

²³⁸ Luke 19:10.

²³⁹ *Letter to Johann Braun*, WA BR 1:17.42–46. Quoted in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999), 36.

²⁴⁰ As Eugene Klug points out, Luther took an oath of fealty to Scripture when he was made a Doctor of Theology in 1512, and considered it his sacred duty for his whole life to be a Doctor of the Holy Scriptures (Eugene F. Klug, "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies Since World War II," in *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives: Viewpoints from Trinity Journal*, ed. Douglas Moo [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997], 117). The more I have studied Luther and the Scriptures in parallel the more I have come to realize what an outstanding exegete Luther was, and the extent to which his theological insights emerged from prolonged wrestling with Scripture.

ourselves or climb up to God, and cannot even know him as he is, unless he climbs down to us. His theology is therefore thoroughly theocentric, not just in the article on creation, but in every article of the creed. Since Luther was keenly aware of how much God must do for us, he was also aware of how constantly and in how many ways we try to usurp God's place and claim honors that belong only to him. This makes his theology of idolatry rich, multi-faceted, and broadly applicable. Yet it also has the clarity and simplicity of biblical truth.

Luther's most helpful statements about idolatry are found in his exegetical writings. On the one hand this is a great advantage. It means that Luther stayed close to the text. Instead of developing some abstract theory of his own, he was seeking to mine God's word for insights. This gives his theology of idolatry its depth and richness, and also its power to transcend the age in which it was written to speak to our age as well. Yet on the other hand it is a disadvantage. It means that Luther's thoughts on idolatry are widely scattered throughout many different writings, and Luther never drew them all together in one place or laid them out in systematic form.²⁴² However, when one attempts to draw Luther's theology together it becomes apparent that Luther thought in an orderly and consistent way even if he generally did not write in a systematic manner. He used a number of key insights to tie all his thoughts together, and these emerge again and again in his writings.

Luther's first insight is the crucial role that faith plays in human life. He saw that faith is not just one aspect of the human person amongst many. Rather, we were created to live by faith in God, and through faith we receive the life giving benefits of Christ. When our faith is placed

²⁴¹ *Lectures on Psalm 51* (1532), WA 40.ii:328.1–2. Quoted in Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 40.

²⁴² In his *Large Catechism* Luther does lay out his most basic insights in a systematic way. Yet he was acutely aware that he was producing material to be taught to children, and did not want to confuse them with his more subtle insights (LC I 23 = WA 30.i:135.27). If one wants to find his theology for mature adults, such as he taught to his students at the university, then one needs to look elsewhere, particularly his exegetical lectures.

in anything else we are robbed of this life. When it comes to worship, Luther recognized that the most important ingredient is not outward forms, but faith, and the word that God has give to anchor our faith. He saw that changing outward forms by itself can never defend us against idolatry, since the devil can always mimic the outward forms of godly worship, yet turn them into idols by removing their true substance, which is faith in Christ.²⁴³ Therefore he recognized that the use of images in worship is not the key issue when it comes to idolatry, but is a distraction from what is really important. Instead, Luther emphasized the faith of the heart that clings to the word of the Lord.

Luther's second insight is that the human self is the greatest idol of all. Humans in their fallen state are so radically curved in on themselves that they use all things to serve their own advantage. This not only includes the worst things, but also the best and most spiritual things, and even God himself. This idol of the self must be dethroned by Christ and his Spirit if our idolatrous hearts are to be cured, and our fellowship with God and each other is to be restored.

Luther's third insight (though he never put it in exactly these terms) is that idolatry is ultimately about adopting a different economy of salvation,²⁴⁴ and that when we adopt a different economy we effectively adopt a different god. Luther recognized that we have no other means of knowing or accessing God than the economy of salvation he has provided. Therefore if we change this economy we no longer have access to the true God, and our self-invented piety will be directed towards a god of our own imagining instead.

The final notable feature of Luther's theology of idolatry is that it is thoroughly Trinitarian. For all his emphasis on Christ, Luther was no Christomonist. He fully recognized the vital role

²⁴³ LW 4:235–37 = WA 43:304–6; LW 16:14–15 = WA 31.ii:9–10; cf. LW 12:87; 20:234, 332; 44:30–33; 54:436.

²⁴⁴ In the Ancient Near East idols were understood as a means of gaining access to the gods. They facilitated the divine-human relationship. In other words, they had a central place in the economy of salvation.

each member of the Trinity plays in the economy of salvation. Therefore he was able to see how idolatry relates to the whole Trinity. When people rebel against God and seek to put their own substitutes in his place, this does not just involve replacing the Creator and his provision. It also involves trying to replace the Redeemer with some alternative means of justifying ourselves, and replacing the Spirit and his word with some other way of making ourselves wise and holy.

The Methodological Procedure to Be Employed

In this dissertation I will attempt to do two things. First I will sketch out the main outlines of Luther's thought on idolatry, as evidenced primarily by those places in his writings where he discusses the first commandment or uses terms like *idolum*, *idolatria*, *Abgott*, and *Abgötterei*. Second, I will attempt to show how key themes and insights from Luther can be retrieved and applied to the present day. The goal of this dissertation is not to reconstitute the theology of Luther as it stood in its historical context, but to build on his ideas with a view towards understanding and responding to contemporary false belief.

The remaining chapters of this dissertation will be arranged around the key insights I intend to retrieve from Luther. In chapter 2 I will introduce the central themes: first, that the human self is always the greatest idol; and second, that when we refuse to worship the Triune God, we are compelled to construct idols to take his place in every part of the economy of salvation. In each of the subsequent chapters I will then focus on a different locus of God's economy, and how the idol of the self seeks to take over this work from God. The loci are: providence, love, justification, incarnation, reason/revelation, and repentance.

The best way to detect any forgery is to be intimately acquainted with the original. The same is true with idolatry. The best way to recognize an idol is to know the true God. This is the approach Luther takes to identifying counterfeit gods. He first asks, "What is it to have a god?"

and “What is God?”²⁴⁵ Once he has identified what it is for us to have the Lord as our God, it is easy for him to identify idols that we put in his place. Luther takes this same approach in dealing with every locus of God’s economy. He first asks what it means for us to have the Lord as our God in this area of life, and then uses this as his criterion for identifying idols. I will follow this same pattern in dealing with Luther’s thought. Chapters 3–8 will each begin by asking what Luther thinks it is to have the Lord as our God in this area of life, and will then explore what this teaches us about idolatry. The central theses of these chapters are:

3. *The Idol of the Self and the First Article: Creation.* The Father is the one who provides us with all good things; all who think they can provide for their own creaturely needs apart from him are idolaters.
4. *The Idol of the Self and the First Article: Love.* The Father call us to love him above anything else; all who love themselves more than him are idolaters.
5. *The Idol of the Self and the Second Article: Justification.* Christ must justify us sinners with a righteousness that is not our own; all who attempt to justify themselves are idolaters.
6. *The Idol of the Self and the Second Article: Incarnation.* The incarnate Christ who comes to us in the gospel bridges the metaphysical gap between God in heaven and his people on earth so that we might know him and worship him; all who devise their own picture of God or worship of God apart from Christ and the gospel are idolaters.
7. *The Idol of the Self and the Third Article: Reason and the Word.* The Holy Spirit reveals God to us through his word; all who bypass the Spirit-breathed word and attempt to know God by means of their own reason are idolaters.

²⁴⁵ LC I I = WA 30.i:132.34–133.1.

8. *The Idol of the Self and the Third Article: Repentance.* The Spirit must free us from our idols and create true faith in us; all who think they can produce true faith and its fruit without relying at all times on him are idolaters.

The first half of each chapter will provide a summary of Luther's teaching. The rest of the chapter will then be devoted to making suggestions for how these ideas can be applied to the present day. This will mean engaging with contemporary psychology, sociology, philosophy, and theology to show the relevance of Luther's ideas to things that are going on in our society as revealed by these disciplines. The thoughts given here will be somewhat ad hoc, since they are intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. They are intended as examples of some of the ways Luther's ideas can be reappropriated for our context, and to stimulate further thought and discussion. To limit the scope, most of the examples will be drawn from U.S. society, although occasional references will be made to my home country of Australia that shares similar issues.

Since Luther developed his theology of idolatry over against his understanding of the economy of salvation, the two cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Luther's theology of idolatry is only convincing to the extent that one accepts his account of the economy of salvation. It is not possible within the scope of this dissertation to adequately defend a Lutheran understanding of this economy. I will therefore simply assume it as given and proceed to demonstrate its implications for understanding idolatry. Hopefully readers who do not accept a Lutheran account of the economy of salvation at all points will still find enough common ground that this dissertation can help them to develop their own understanding of idolatry.

The Outcomes Anticipated

In this dissertation I hope to achieve the following outcomes:

- To contribute to our understanding of Luther's theology of idolatry, particularly as it relates to the chief idol of the self, and the work of the Triune God in the economy of salvation.
- On the basis of Luther's theology of idolatry, to contribute to the contemporary scholarly discussion of idolatry.
- To demonstrate some of the ways in which Luther's theology of idolatry can be applied to understand contemporary false belief and resistance to the gospel.
- To help focus the church's proclamation of law and gospel in contemporary society.

This final point is the ultimate goal of this dissertation. If we proclaim the law in terms of the other commandments, without identifying how our sins against these commandments relate back to our failure to keep the first commandment (i.e. our idolatry), we have only proclaimed the law superficially without going to the heart of the problem. If our diagnosis of the problem through the lens of the law is superficial, then our administration of God's remedy in the gospel will also be superficial. Therefore an understanding of idolatry is vital to our proclamation of law and gospel, and our efforts to call people in our society to repentance and faith.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION TO LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF IDOLATRY: GOD'S GIFT VS. HUMAN WORK, THE REVEALED GOD VS. HIS IMITATORS

In this chapter I will be outlining the two major themes from Luther's theology of idolatry that will shape the rest of the dissertation. The first is that the human self is the chief idol and the source of all other idols. The second is that when we create idols as substitutes for God we shape them to take over the roles of all three members of the Trinity in the economy of salvation.

Both points are unlikely to be familiar to those who only know Luther's views on idolatry via the *Large Catechism*. In the *Large Catechism* Luther mainly talks about what I will call first article idols, things such as money that people use as substitutes for the Creator and his work of providence. While he touches on idolatry of the second article of the creed by talking about works righteousness, he only does this briefly, and he doesn't mention third article idolatry at all. Furthermore, Luther barely mentions the idol of the self, but instead calls money "the most common idol on earth."¹ Yet Luther tells us why he doesn't speak more about such topics. After briefly talking about works righteousness, and how it involves putting ourselves in God's place, he then says that this topic is too subtle for young pupils.² This explains why he doesn't say more, and means that the *Large Catechism* is not the best place to find his more profound insights. Only when we consider his works addressed to mature adults, such as his lectures on Scripture at the university, do we see him speaking at length about idolatry in relation to the second and third articles, or about idolatry of the self. Yet as I hope to show throughout this

¹ LC I 6 = WA 30.i:133:23–25.

dissertation, Luther regarded the idol of the self, and its expression through things like works righteousness and self-invented religion, to be the most profound and insidious of all idols.

The Self: The Chief Idol and Source of All Other Idolatries

My two-year-old son is a great illustration for how idolatry comes about. He beams with pride when he can do something “all by myself.” Often he is not yet capable of doing things all by himself. Nevertheless he will insist on trying and refuse any help. While it is healthy for a boy to learn independence from his earthly parents in this way, when the same attitude is transferred to our dealings with God the result is disastrous. Idolatry comes about when we insist on developing our own opinion about God instead of allowing him to instruct us, and when we try to redefine our relationship to him on our own terms. We do this because we want to be in control, to serve ourselves, and to say “I did it all by myself,” when all the credit belongs to him.

All of Life Begins with God’s Gift of Himself

For Luther, true faith involves receiving God and his blessings as a gift as he gives himself and reveals himself to us in the economy of salvation. Luther emphasizes that the entire Christian faith, and indeed all of life, begins with God’s gift of himself to us. This is expressed most clearly in his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* of 1528:

These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam’s fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts.

But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also,

² LC I 22–23 = WA 30.i:135.17–27.

wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it. He does this both inwardly and outwardly—inwardly by means of faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly through the gospel, Baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, through which as through three means or methods he comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation.³

The consequences of this passage are worth spelling out. First, this means that all of life, from our original birth as God’s creatures to our new birth as his children, is a gift of God who is the exclusive Giver of every good thing. Second, these gifts do not come to us apart from the Giver, since the Lord of life gives himself to us in and through his life giving gifts. And finally, these gifts are unearned. They come purely from God’s generosity, without any merit in us. This calls for a response of faith and love. The call of the first commandment to love and trust God with all that is in us is fitting and right given that everything we have comes from him. The right response is to thank him and love him and look to him in faith for his ongoing provision.⁴

The centrality of faith to all of life is articulated by Luther in his *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536). Over against the definition of a human being as a rational animal that he received from the philosophical tradition, Luther defined the human person as *hominem iustificari fide*, “a human being to be justified by faith.”⁵ By giving this definition he is saying that our need to live by faith is not merely one aspect of our nature amongst others, but the most fundamental characteristic of our being. He then spells out three dimensions to this: only through God our Creator can we receive life;⁶ only through God our Redeemer can we be freed from sin, death,

³ LW 37:366 = WA 26:505.38 – 506.12.

⁴ I am indebted to Oswald Bayer for this perspective on Luther’s theology (Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008], 95–105). Bayer summarizes Luther’s theology of the Trinity as a “theology of categorical gift” (ibid., 254).

⁵ WA 39.i:176, thesis 32. Author’s own translation.

⁶ *Disputation Concerning Man*, Theses 14, 17, and 21 (LW 34:138 = WA 39i:175–76).

and the devil, and receive eternal life;⁷ and only through God can our lives find their glory and fulfillment, since the goal of our lives is not merely the peace of this life, but rather to be made glorious and imperishable as God remolds and perfects us in his image.⁸ Therefore we must live by faith when it comes to every aspect of our lives: our creation, redemption, and final glorification.

We Can Only Know God as He Reveals Himself

Part of God's gift of himself to us is that he reveals himself to us so that we might know him. Since the fall we no longer have unmediated access to God. We cannot talk with God face to face as Adam and Eve did in the garden, and as we will when we enter into glory. Luther stresses that in our present fallen state our sin incurs God's wrath and we are unprepared to stand before him in his full majesty. So instead God wraps himself in coverings such as his word and the humanity of Christ so we can receive him in grace without being terrified and crushed by the weight of his glory.⁹ He accommodates himself to our weakness and condescends to deal with us in a human manner so that we can understand and receive him.¹⁰ Only as God has chosen to reveal himself at specific times and places with specific words, signs, and promises can we know him.¹¹ That is, the only God we can know is the one revealed in the economy of salvation.¹²

⁷ *Disputation Concerning Man*, Theses 22–34 (LW 34:138–39 = WA 39i:176–77).

⁸ *Disputation Concerning Man*, Theses 35–38 (LW 34:139 = WA 39i:177).

⁹ LW 1:11–14 = WA 42:9–12; LW 5:44 = WA 43:458–59; LW 12:312–13 = WA 40.ii:329–30; LW 16:54–56 = WA 31.ii:38–39; cf. LW 6:148.

¹⁰ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:143–44 = WA 43:239.

¹¹ *Lectures on Psalm 51* (1532), LW 12:352 = WA 40.ii:386–87.

¹² This suggests a certain affinity between Luther's thought and the dictum of Karl Rahner: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity." (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel [New York: Herder and Herder, 1970], 22.) It is beyond the scope of this study to do a thorough comparison of Luther's thought with Rahner's. Yet on the following points they are in agreement: that in the man Jesus we are dealing with the Son of God himself and not merely with a mask behind which the Son of God hides (Ibid., 33); that in the Triune God's dealings with us in the economy of salvation he does not merely present us

This is the point that Luther is making when he distinguishes between the hidden and revealed God, or God's hidden and revealed will. He is saying that we must stick with the revelation, and grasp hold of God there, rather than speculating about things God has not chosen to reveal, or trying to grasp hold of God in places he has not chosen to be found. If we try to know the hidden God in this life we will not succeed, but will only find an idol of our own creation.¹³ Yet if we stick with the revealed God we can be certain we have the real God. Luther stresses that there are many things about God and his will that remain impossible for us to know or understand in this life, yet he also emphasizes that in God's revelation we grasp hold of God as he truly is. When we enter into glory we will discover many things that are currently hidden from us, yet we will find the same God who has given himself to us in Christ and his word.¹⁴

with created copies or analogies or mediations of himself, but rather he gives himself to us as the gift (Ibid., 35–36, 41–42, 99–101); and finally, that the transcendent God is not to be found by getting beyond all concrete events and objects to some “imageless” mystical experience, but rather the transcendent God presents himself to us in the objects of the economy themselves (Ibid., 92).

¹³ “For one must debate either about the hidden God or about the revealed God. With regard to God, insofar as He has not been revealed, there is no faith, no knowledge, and no understanding. And here one must hold to the statement that what is above us is none of our concern. For thoughts of this kind, which investigate something more sublime above or outside the revelation of God, are altogether devilish. With them nothing more is achieved than that we plunge ourselves into destruction; for they present an object that is inscrutable, namely, the unrevealed God. Why not rather let God keep His decisions and mysteries in secret? ... for this is what Christ says in John 6:65 (cf. John 14:6): ‘No one comes to the Father but by Me.’ Therefore when we approach the unrevealed God, then there is no faith, no Word, and no knowledge; for He is an invisible God, and you will not make Him visible.” (*Lectures on Genesis* [1538–42], LW 5:44 = WA 43:458.37–459.11–14)

Cf. LW 1:11–14; 4:143–44; 5:43–50; 16:54–55; 51:27–28; 28:125–26; 33:138–40; 49:63; 54:249, 385.

¹⁴ “ ‘From an unrevealed God I will become a revealed God. Nevertheless, I will remain the same God. I will be made flesh, or send My Son. He shall die for your sins and shall rise again from the dead. And in this way I will fulfill your desire, in order that you may be able to know whether you are predestined or not. Behold, this is My Son; listen to Him (cf. Matt. 17:5). Look at Him as He lies in the manger and on the lap of His mother, as He hangs on the cross. Observe what He does and what He says. There you will surely take hold of Me.’ For ‘He who sees Me,’ says Christ, ‘also sees the Father Himself’ (cf. John 14:9). If you listen to Him, are baptized in His name, and love His Word, then you are surely predestined and are certain of your salvation. But if you revile or despise the Word, then you are damned; for he who does not believe is condemned (Mark 16:16).” (*Lectures on Genesis* [1538–42], LW 5:44–45 = WA 43:459.24–34)

Cf. LW 4:144; 5:43–50; 23:195; 28:125–26; 33:289–92; 42:147.

Instead of Living by Faith, Humans Are Curved In on Themselves.

Luther's characteristic way of talking about human depravity is to say we are curved in on ourselves.¹⁵ We place ourselves at the center of our universe. On the one hand we think first and foremost of ourselves, and are bent in the direction of our desires, so that we seek to use all other things for our advantage. Not only do we use earthly things to please ourselves, but we treat God in the same way, as if he merely exists for our benefit.¹⁶ On the other hand we have an overblown sense of our importance and a misplaced confidence in our ability.

For Luther this self-orientation is the source of all idolatry. Since fallen human nature tries to use all things including God to achieve its own aims,¹⁷ it “sets itself in the place of all other things, even in the place of God, and seeks only those things which are its own and not the things of God. Therefore it is its own first and greatest idol. Second, it makes God into an idol and the truth of God into a lie, and finally it makes idols of all created things and of all gifts of God.”¹⁸ Thus Luther writes that “You need to humble, and despair of, yourself, lest you make many gods, and that you may have one God.”¹⁹ Furthermore, he calls trust in ourselves “the supreme idolatry,”²⁰ and “the fountain and source of all idolatry.”²¹

¹⁵ Luther borrowed this way of speaking from Augustine (*City of God*, 14.13, 14.28). Luther spoke about us being turned or curved in upon ourselves particularly in his 1513–15 lectures on Psalms (LW 10:241; 11:69, 262, 289, 386) and his 1515–16 lectures on Romans (LW 25:245, 291–92, 313, 345–46, 351, 426, 513). This was while his understanding of the gospel was still developing and had not yet come to full flower. Yet it would be wrong to think that he abandoned the thought later in his career (see for instance his comment in *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:176 = WA 18:709.14; see also Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole [2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826], 1.202 = WA 5:139.12). He just found different language to express it. Luther used this understanding of human depravity throughout his career when talking about the root cause of idolatry.

¹⁶ LW 21:309 = WA 7:556–57 ; LW 25:345–46 = WA 56:356–57.

¹⁷ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:291 = WA 56:304–5.

¹⁸ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:346 = WA 56:357.2–6.

¹⁹ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:68 = WA 14:609.22–23.

²⁰ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:216 = WA 31.ii:153.31.

²¹ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:17 = WA 31.ii:273.14; cf. LW 17:107

So how does this orientation towards ourselves conflict with God’s character as a generous Giver? Surely selfish people would delight in receiving something for nothing? Yet this is not necessarily so. On the one hand the Giver is a problem. People will happily take the gifts, but the Giver always threatens to dislodge us from our preferred place at the center of the universe. On the other hand, the pure “giftedness” of the gifts is a problem. Giftedness also means “givenness,” and as self-oriented people we have trouble accepting all the “givens” of life. If something is simply given it means we cannot choose, control, define, or take credit for it ourselves.²² It means we are dependent on the Giver, and this threatens our autonomy. The threat that God’s gifts present to the self is expressed by Luther in the following passage:

What, then, is the grace of God? It is this, that from sheer mercy, for the sake of Christ, who is our beloved Bishop and Mediator, God forgives all our sins. He abates all His anger, leads us by faith from idolatry and error to truth. And the Holy Spirit purifies our hearts, enlightens, sanctifies, and justifies us, chooses us as children, and heirs, adorns us with His gifts, redeems and protects us from the power of the devil, and finally gives us eternal life and blessedness. And yet He also supplies this transitory life with everything needful, gives and preserves it, through the service and co-operation of all creatures of heaven and earth. The whole world could not deserve even the tiniest of these gifts ... If this is true—and it undeniably is—then it follows that our works, wisdom, and holiness are nothing before God. For if it is God’s love, then it cannot be our merit. And if it is our merit, then it is not God’s love (Rom. 11:6). ... Why do they all fight this teaching of God’s grace and call it heresy? Because they do not want to see their own teaching and works despised and discarded. That God’s grace gives us so much, as I said above, they are willing to accept; but that their own doings should be nothing and only pure and simple grace should count before God, why, that has to be heresy. They want to have a hand in the game and through free will do so much that they will earn God’s grace and buy it from Him, together with all the aforementioned goods. Then not the love of God but our own merit achieves grace. Then we are the workmen who lay the cornerstone on which God then builds His grace and love, so that He must praise, thank, and adore us. Then we become His gods instead of the other way around.²³

²² I owe this thought to Joyce Little (Joyce Little, *The Church and the Culture War: Secular Anarchy or Sacred Order* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 38, 124).

²³ *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), LW 14:25 = WA 31.i:243a.12–244a.6

Here we see Luther articulating once again that God alone is the source of all good gifts in every area of life: in redemption, in sanctification, and in his provision for our earthly lives. Yet he is also able to articulate what an offense this is for people who want to take control and take credit for themselves. When we are guided by our sinful nature we refuse to look to God as the exclusive Giver of every good gift, and think we can play a hand in grasping his gifts for ourselves. We therefore inevitably distort our picture of God and turn him into an idol, as well as put ourselves and other idols in his place.

This is the same issue that is at work in Luther's well known distinction in his *Heidelberg Disputation* between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. This is simply a different way of phrasing his much more common distinction between faith and idolatry,²⁴ which he describes using exactly the same themes and biblical texts.²⁵ A theologian of glory is nothing other than an idolater. In his *Heidelberg Disputation* Luther identifies two characteristics of a theologian of glory. On the one hand he tries to grasp hold of the invisible God with his own reason and insight. By reflecting on the things God has made he hopes to ascend with his reason

²⁴ Luther frequently talks about the theology of the cross throughout his career. Yet he never contrasts this with the theology of glory except in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and his *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* (LW 31:227). The expression "theology of glory" or "theologian of glory" does not appear anywhere in his writings apart from these two works from 1518 (as far as I can tell from my search of the *American Edition* and the *Weimarer Ausgabe*). By contrast the distinction between true, Christ-centered faith on the one hand and idolatry on the other is extremely common throughout his writings. Despite this, the distinction between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory has received enormous attention in Luther studies, while the distinction between the theology of the cross and idolatry has received very little. This is an unbalanced state of affairs. The expression "theology of glory" does draw attention to the outward show associated with idolatry in contrast to the shame and humility of the cross. Since idolatry must appeal to the sinful nature it always makes a show of things that appear glorious to sinful human beings. Yet "theology of glory" is also a more obscure expression, which is perhaps why Luther dropped it.

²⁵ Romans 1:20 is Luther's key passage for talking about the natural knowledge of God and how it leads to idolatry, as we will see below. Jesus' words in John 14, "No one comes to the Father, but by me" and "he who has seen me has seen the Father" are used by Luther to distinguish the true knowledge of God through Christ and the gospel from the idolatrous knowledge of God that comes from natural reason (LW 12:84; 24:23–24; cf. LW 22:148–59; 43:54–55). Exod 33:18–23 is used by Luther to argue that the true, non-idolatrous knowledge of God must be revealed to us under coverings (LW 22:157). These are the key texts and themes that Luther is dealing with in Theses 19 and 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*.

to a knowledge of God.²⁶ On the other hand he hopes to secure righteousness and fellowship with God through his works.²⁷ In both these ways he seeks to grasp hold of God for himself. He misuses the best things in the worst manner, since he “takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God.”²⁸ He cannot hope in God since he has not despaired of the creature and therefore is not prepared to put all confidence in God.²⁹ Instead, he enjoys his own works and adores himself as an idol.³⁰ Nor can he know God as he is, since “true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ.”³¹ He is like one who tries to climb into heaven to grab some glory for himself, but in the process only grasps an empty idol. A theologian of the cross on the other hand finds God in the place where he freely gives himself to us, in Christ and the cross.³²

Luther develops at great length this theme of how the self with its self-chosen efforts to grab hold of the things of God lies at the heart of all idolatry, as we will see in subsequent chapters. For now it is sufficient to establish the point that idolatry involves pushing ourselves forward when God alone should be at work. It is God’s job to reveal himself to us. We create an idol when we think we can form our own picture of him. It is God’s job to provide for us. We latch on to many idols when we think we can care for ourselves. It is God’s job to justify us from our sins. We make an idol of our righteousness when we attempt to justify ourselves. Whereas

²⁶ Theses 19–22, 24, and 29–30 (LW 31:40–41 = WA 1:354–55).

²⁷ Theses 1–18 and 21–28 (LW 31:39–41 = WA 1:353–54).

²⁸ Luther’s discussion of thesis 24, LW 31:55 = WA 1:363.29–30.

²⁹ Luther’s discussion of thesis 11, LW 31:48 = WA 1:359.

³⁰ Luther’s discussion of thesis 7, LW 31:46 = WA 1:358.

³¹ Luther’s discussion of thesis 20, LW 31:53 = WA 1:362.18.

³² For Luther, the “God hidden in suffering” (LW 31:53) is not the hidden God but the revealed God. The hidden God is the one whose invisible attributes people think they can make visible by reflecting on the things he has made (Thesis 19, WA 1:354.17–18). The revealed God is the one who comes to us in the coverings of suffering and the cross (Thesis 20, WA 1:354.19–20; LW 31:40, 52–53). This is a hidden revelation, since people do not expect God to look like this, and therefore do not recognize Christ as God (Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985], 149–50). Yet in Christ the true God is on display for all who have eyes to see.

God wants to give us all things by grace, we want to define and control for ourselves our relationship with him and his gifts. The living God and true faith in him always come as a gift. Idols on the other hand are our own work and accomplishment.

Idols Ape the Work of the Triune God in the Economy of Salvation

The second major contention of this dissertation is that idols are not counterfeits of a generic god, but of the true God, and this means the Triune God who gives himself to us in the economy of salvation. In subsequent chapters we will see how Luther relates idolatry to the work of all three members of the Trinity. For now we will simply note a few suggestions from Luther as to why idols should mimic the economic Trinity in this way.

As we have seen, all of life for Luther must be lived by faith. This means receiving God and his gifts as he gives himself to us in the economy of salvation. Faith does not involve grasping hold of God as he exists apart from us in heaven, but receiving him as he gives and reveals himself here on earth. In the same way idolatry does not challenge God as he exists apart from us, but rather as he relates to us and is known by us in the economy of salvation. Luther makes the point that not even the Antichrist can exalt himself above God in his hidden majesty. Yet he can exalt himself above the preaching and worship of God, and above God in our knowledge and dealings with him.³³ In the same way, when we elevate other things above God and turn them into idols, we cannot elevate them above God's essence as he dwells in glory. Yet we can elevate them above God's word and his worship, and assign them a higher place in our hearts. Luther says that "God becomes God and changes in accordance with the change in our feeling toward Him,"³⁴ and that "the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an

³³ LW 9:67–68 = WA 14:608; LW 33:139; 22:470; 3:121–22; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.530 = WA 5:331.

³⁴ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:67 = WA 14:608b.26–27; cf. LW 33:116–17.

idol.”³⁵ Luther is not saying that God’s essence changes based on our feelings towards him, but rather our relationship with him changes. When we come to faith he is born in our hearts, and if we fall away an idol takes his place. Thus the contest is always between our idols and the economic Trinity, God as he relates to us and is known by us.

A second thought from Luther that suggests a reason why idols would mimic the economic Trinity is that the devil is God’s ape.³⁶ Likewise Luther says that heretics and idolaters always ape true worship and doctrine.³⁷ The way Luther develops this is to say that the devil, and those who follow his lead, imitate the outward forms of true piety while removing the substance. They remove the kernel and retain the husk.³⁸ The devil apes God by countering true prophesy with false signs and visions,³⁹ and those who follow him copy godly works, ceremonies, traditions, and doctrine, yet leave out God’s word and Spirit. They perform outward deeds with a great show of piety, yet dispense with God’s commands and promises, and leave out faith in Christ.⁴⁰ Instead of placing their confidence in God as he truly comes to us, they want to outshine Christ and his Spirit.⁴¹ So they preach their own knowledge with an appearance of wisdom, but without bringing peace to the conscience.⁴² This implies that the devil is not truly creative, and can only twist, distort, and misuse what God has already made rather than making anything new. It also explains why idolatry would be a distorted reflection of true faith.⁴³

³⁵ LC 12 = WA 30.i:133.4.

³⁶ LW 4:236–37; 6:331; 7:121; 41:167–71.

³⁷ LW 4:235, 328; 8:133; 9:7; 12:360; 15:182–83; 16:331; 23:105; 27:161; 28:84–85; 52:162.

³⁸ LW 4:328; 39:191–92.

³⁹ LW 6:331; 7:121.

⁴⁰ LW 4:235–37, 328; 16:185.

⁴¹ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:279–81 = WA 33:445–48.

⁴² *Lectures on Zechariah: The German Text* (1527), LW 20:233–35 = WA 23:567–69.

⁴³ This same thought can be seen in the New Testament, particularly the book of Revelation. We are told that

A final thought from Luther that suggests why idolatry should take this particular shape is that the first commandment has been embedded in the order of creation.⁴⁴ This includes our need for God, and the knowledge of God and his law that is written on our hearts. We cannot escape our need for the Triune God no matter how much we may want to. Nor can we erase the knowledge of God from our hearts. Sin and Satan can twist it, distort it, misdirect it, and suppress it, but not eliminate it.⁴⁵ Luther frequently refers to Romans 1 and 2 and talks about how the natural knowledge of God leads people into idolatry.⁴⁶ He writes, “if there had not been an inextinguishable knowledge of the divinity implanted in the minds of all men, idolatry would never have been found.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, “The human heart must necessarily have something to love, and something to believe and trust in.”⁴⁸ When confronted with their earthly needs people know there is a God, and they know they need a God to help them.⁴⁹ Yet just as the Jews in Jesus’ day knew there is a God, but most of them did not recognize that he was standing in front of them, so by the light of fallen human reason people know there is a God but not his true

the Trinity will be opposed by the false trinity of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (Rev 12–13; 16:13; 20:10), Christ will be opposed by the antichrist (2 Thess 2:1–12; 1 John 1:18–23; 4:1–3; 2 John 7; Rev 13:1–8), the true church of those who bear the seal of God on their foreheads (Rev 7:1–8; 14:1–5) will be opposed by the false church of those who bear on them the mark of the beast (Rev 13:16–17; 14:9–11; 16:2; 19:20), the city of God will be opposed by the city of Babylon (Rev 17–18), the true testimony of God will be opposed by false prophesy (Rev 11:1–11; 13:11–18), and so on.

⁴⁴ Charles Arand notes that Luther did not regard the first commandment as something God imposes on us heteronomously, but something he has built into creation in such a way that we cannot ignore it without doing violence to the very fabric of our being (Charles P. Arand, “Luther on the God Behind the First Commandment,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 [Winter 1994], 398–99, 407).

⁴⁵ *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text (1526)*, LW 19:53–54 = WA 19:205–6.

⁴⁶ LW 9:54 = WA 14:588–89; LW 19:53–57 = WA 19:205–8; LW 3:117; 5:259–60; 6:113; 7:336; 22:148–59; 29:235; 40:96–97.

This is the most natural interpretation of Romans 1 and 2, that the knowledge of God and his law that has been written on every human heart does not lead people to God, but drives them to construct idols.

⁴⁷ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.45 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:392.37–38.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.141 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:104.14–15.

identity.⁵⁰ It is the role of the Spirit through the word to reveal God to us, so idolatry begins when we replace the Spirit with our own opinions about God. When our own reason takes the place of the Spirit in this way Luther calls it an idol.⁵¹ People then grope in this false light for a god to help them in their needs but grasp a second idol instead of the Father of all.⁵² Furthermore, since people do not obey God's law that is on their hearts their consciences accuse them. Yet since the light of nature does not show them God's mercy in Jesus Christ they flee from God in fear and find a third idol to justify them and bring them peace.⁵³ In this way the natural knowledge of God can drive people to create idols to take over the roles of all three members of the Trinity.

Summary

All idolatry can be traced back to our self-focus and our attempts to usurp the work of the Triune God with idols of our own creation. Since idols are used to take over the functions of God they end up mimicking the work of the Triune God in the economy of salvation.

⁴⁹ LW 6:113; 7:336.

⁵⁰ LW 19:54–57 = WA 19:206–8; LW 3:117; 6:113.

⁵¹ LW 1:149 = WA 42:112; LW 13:375; 14:202; 19:115; 31:350; 41:122; 52:107; cf. LW 9:53–54; 11:289; 16:160; 18:184.

⁵² *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text (1526)*, LW 19:54–57 = WA 19:206–8; *Sermons on Deuteronomy (1529)*, WA 28:609–11.

⁵³ LW 9:104 = WA 14:636–37; LW 7:336; 12:308–9, 378–79; 14:202; 16:249; 17:108; 22:148–59; 40:94; 51:17.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE FIRST ARTICLE: PROVIDENCE

Introduction

In his *Small Catechism* Luther summarizes the first commandment succinctly, “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”¹ From this definition we can see that there are two main ways in which the self can function as an idol. First, we can love ourselves above everything else, so that we seek our own wellbeing above all things, and use all things including God for our own advantage. Second, we can trust in ourselves above everything else, so that instead of trusting in the Lord to provide we rely on our own ability to secure the good things of life for ourselves. In this chapter we will focus on trust, and in the next on love.

Luther’s best known discussion of idolatry is his treatment of the first commandment in his *Large Catechism*. There he focuses exclusively on trust, and most of the examples of idols that he gives are idols that we trust in the domain of the first article. That is, they are things people use as substitutes for the Creator and his work of providing for our earthly needs.² For instance, Luther talks about money, and how people with money think they do not need God since they have a fat purse to provide. As we will see in subsequent chapters, Luther also speaks about idolatry in many other ways. Yet idolatry that supplants our trust in the Creator is the most obvious form of idolatry and a good place to begin our discussion.

¹ SC 12 = WA 30.i:354.

² LC 15–12, 18 = WA 30.i:133.17–134.17, 135.1–6.

Thesis

The Father is the one who provides us with all good things; all who think they can provide for their own creaturely needs apart from him are idolaters.

Luther's Teaching

For Luther the first commandment is part of the law of creation.³ It flows naturally from God's nature as the Giver of every good gift and our status as creatures who are constantly dependent on these gifts.⁴

Luther's view of our Creator is not of a distant or abstract power who wound the world up but now leaves us to our own devices. Abstract powers and distant gods can be relativized and ignored, since in practical terms they leave us in the driver's seat. Instead we have a personal Creator who is intimately involved with his creation, and cannot be evaded. Those with eyes to see encounter him in every moment of their lives.⁵ Luther writes that "God himself is personally

³ LW 40:96–97; 10:368.

⁴ This means that the first commandment pertains to both believers and unbelievers alike. This can be seen in Romans 1–3, where all people are held accountable for the failure to thank and honor the Creator, whether they are part of God's covenant people or not. Cf. Matt 5:45; Acts 14:17.

⁵ LW 28:180; WA 46:493–95; 49:423.10–12, 434.16–18; Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 106–12.

Heiko Oberman, a leading authority on late Medieval and early Reformation thought, contends that during the late medieval period the established view of God as the Supreme Being was increasingly challenged by a new paradigm that focused on God as the Supreme Person. The former view was represented by such figures as Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and the whole theological tradition that had been influenced by the philosophy of being of Neo-Platonism and Aristotle. According to this view God is the apex of the great chain of being that connects all things in a rational manner. All other things were seen as a reflection of God's eternal being in one way or another, and could be used as a conduit for gaining knowledge of his being (Heiko A. Oberman, "Luther and the Via Moderna: The Philosophical Backdrop of the Reformation Breakthrough," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54 [Oct. 2003]: 647–49). The new paradigm was represented early on by Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus, and later on by the representatives of the *via moderna*, including William of Occam, Jean Buridan, Nicholas Oresme, Pierre d'Ailly, Gregory of Rimini, and Gabriel Biel (*ibid.*, 641–42, 649, 651). This new paradigm stressed that God should not be pictured as the Thomistic "Unmoved Mover," but rather as a personal, mobile, covenantal God-who-acts (*ibid.*, 641, 648–49, 655–56, 668). Since he is almighty he is free with regard to his creation. He is not bound by any necessity apart from his free decision to create and to enter into covenants with his creation (*ibid.*, 646, 656, 662). Oberman draws out a number of important consequences from this. First, since God does not create according to any logical necessity, one cannot deduce on the basis of any preconceived rational principles what God's creation must be like. Instead, one must go and examine the evidence to

present in all things,”⁶ and is “wholly and entirely in all creatures and in every single individual being, more deeply, more inwardly, more present than the creature is to itself.”⁷ This present God is constantly at work to give us his blessings. The so-called “laws of nature” do not operate by themselves, but are examples of his activity. He is simply so reliable in upholding his creation that we come to expect it and no longer regard it as miraculous. For instance, Luther says that the birth of each new life and the light of the sun are wondrous miracles, even if we do not recognize them as such.⁸ In the same way he sees God’s mighty power at work even when we are at work, since he must give us our strength and skill and enable our labor to bear fruit. Luther writes,

What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but just such a child’s performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things.⁹

This means that in daily life we are constantly dependent on God’s good work to supply our every need, and must live by faith in his provision. When we trust in ourselves or God’s creatures instead, we turn both them and ourselves into idols.

see what he has freely chosen to create (ibid., 650). Oberman suggests that this paradigm shift was instrumental in the rise of modern experimental science (ibid., 651). Second, it means that God can never be adequately figured out on the basis of rational analysis beginning with first principles or with creation. Instead, to know God and his will it is necessary to go to his personal communication, such as his revelation in the Scriptures, his concrete acts in history, and his covenantal promises in the sacraments (ibid., 655–56, 658, 661, 667–68). Third, this new focus on the God-who-acts-in-history led to a new interest in God’s dealings with particular, finite, temporal things, and his purposes within the flow of history (ibid., 650–51). Oberman suggests that while Luther did reject certain tenets of the *via moderna*, he whole heartedly embraced its personal view of God, and put his own stamp on it (ibid., 646–47; 654, 666–67). The *via moderna* had stressed the God-who-acts-in-history (ibid., 646). For Luther this became the God of covenant and promise who acts above all in Christ (ibid., 641, 654).

⁶ *That These Words of Christ, “This Is My Body,” Etc., Still Stand Firm Against The Fanatics* (1527), LW 37:63 = WA 23:142.2–3.

⁷ *That These Words of Christ Still Stand Firm* (1527), LW 37:60 = 23:136.32–33; cf. Acts 17:28.

⁸ LW 1:53–54 = WA 42:40; LW 1:126 = WA 42:94–95.

⁹ *Commentary on Psalm 147* (1530), LW 14:114 = WA 31i:436.7–11.

Trusting in Our Works = Seizing God’s Glory for Ourselves

Luther stresses countless times that “works righteousness” stands at the heart of all idolatry, as we will see in the next chapter. Yet it is worth noting that for Luther works righteousness is not merely an issue of salvation. It is not only when it comes to our redemption that we attempt to justify and establish ourselves on the basis of our works rather than trusting in God. Instead, this same perversion affects every aspect of our lives. Therefore when Luther explains the creed in his catechisms he uses the language of justification in relation to every article.¹⁰ When it comes to God’s provision of earthly things Luther stresses that this takes place “without any merit or worthiness on my part.”¹¹ He also emphasizes that none of us can own, preserve, or take credit for any of our temporal goods but must continually receive them as gifts from God.¹² Yet we act as if the world stands on our shoulders and is upheld by our deeds. We turn ourselves into idols by thinking that through our strength and ingenuity we can secure all the things we need for this life. When we do this we are making our own might our god, and we steal God’s glory for ourselves. We end up boasting that the things he has given us are our achievement, instead of giving thanks to him.¹³ We refuse to recognize the truth, that we are always beggars before God who live off his charity. Luther’s attitude is illustrated by the following anecdote recorded by Mathesius Khumers:

Once, when Luther was traveling to Jessen to recuperate, along with Dr. Jonas, Veit Dietrich, and other table companions, though he himself did not have all that much, he gave alms to the poor there. Dr. Jonas followed his example, with the explanation:

¹⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 95–100, 254.

¹¹ SC II 2 = WA 30.i:365.2–3.

¹² LC II 16–21 = WA 30.i:184.14–185.9.

¹³ LW 9:84–85 = WA 14:626; LW 2:125; 14:66–68; 16:215–16, 346–49; 19:115, 186–87; 21:216–17; 44:30–31.

Who knows where God will provide the same for me another time! To which Luther replied with a laugh: As if your God has not provided it for you already.¹⁴

Seeing Is Believing.

Luther ties this tendency to trust in ourselves to our tendency to enthrone God's creatures in general as idols. He suggests that the reason it is so easy to worship the creature instead of the Creator is that God uses his creatures as masks of his activity. He uses the prince to provide us with protection. He makes plants and animals grow to provide us with food. He gives us joy through human companions. He provides us with our living through the work he has called us to do. When we take the attitude that seeing is believing it is easy for us to put our confidence in these masks of God's provision, since they are all we see.¹⁵ We then fail to recognize the true Giver who stands behind these masks, and think that as long as we have these creatures we have all we need. This means turning these creatures into idols.

Yet humans are the greatest of God's earthly creatures. Therefore trusting in the masks of God usually means trusting in ourselves more than anything, at least corporately if not individually. Furthermore, even when we turn creatures outside ourselves into idols, such as money or mother nature or other people, a certain self-confidence is likely to be involved. When we depend on our ability to acquire money, harness nature, win human favor, and acquire blessing from these creatures without God's provision, we have set up ourselves as idols in addition to these things.¹⁶

¹⁴ WA TR 4:140. Translated by Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 96.

¹⁵ *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (1529), WA 28:607–14, 617–20; Cf. LW 1:15.

¹⁶ LW 9:96; 14:66–68; WA 28:612–14, 617–20.

Manipulating God.

There is also a more subtle way in which we can place confidence in ourselves: by trusting in our ability to manipulate God or other “higher powers” for our own ends. We may acknowledge only one God. We may give God’s name to other powers we see in the world like the sun, the moon, or fortune.¹⁷ We may pile up many gods like Jupiter, Mars, and Venus.¹⁸ For Luther it makes little difference. If we think this power can be made subject to our control we have an idol and not the true God, since the true God does not allow himself to be used in this way.¹⁹ If we think God’s favor can be bought, and we can use our works to coax him into blessing us instead of receiving everything by grace, then we have a false picture of God and have turned ourselves into an idol.²⁰

True Faith Trusts in God Alone.

The faith that God calls for has a completely different attitude. It trusts in the true God as the Giver of every good thing, gives all glory to him, and receives all of life as an ongoing miracle from his hand.²¹ It realizes that all power belongs to him and not us, and that apart from him we can accomplish nothing.²²

¹⁷ LW 1:15; 4:236, 328; 20:170–71; WA 28:13.

¹⁸ *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (1529), WA 28:609–11.

¹⁹ David S. Yeago, “The Catholic Luther,” in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 18.

²⁰ LW 9:104; 38:106–07

²¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 110.

²² In his reflections on the Magnificat (1521), where Mary praises Almighty God for turning the tables on the mighty of this world, Luther writes,

Truly, in these words she takes away all might and power from every creature and bestows them on God alone. What great boldness and robbery on the part of so young and tender a maiden! She dares, by this one word, to make all the strong feeble, all the mighty weak, all the wise foolish, all the famous despised, and God alone the Possessor of all strength, wisdom, and glory. For this is the meaning of the phrase: “He who is mighty.” There is none that does anything, but as St. Paul says in Ephesians 1: “God accomplishes all in all,” and all creatures’ works are God’s works. Even as we confess in the Creed: “I believe in God

Luther outlines four ways God works to provide for his creation. He calls this God's fourfold rule. The first rule is when he works through his own mighty power without the cooperation of any creatures, such as when he gives his creatures life and provides them with their powers and skill. The second rule is when he works through his angels to guide and protect his creatures on earth. Often people attribute this protection to fate or good fortune, when really it is God's doing. His third rule is carried out by his preachers of the gospel, who preach his word outwardly and in this way bring his Holy Spirit, who works inwardly to change human hearts. His final rule includes the other earthly vocations, such as government and the rule of parents in the home. Through these callings he is at work to provide for our earthly needs.²³

Luther then draws two implications from this. The first is that we should not despise the means through which God has chosen to work. We should not expect a heavenly miracle if we have refused to use the earthly means of assistance God has provided for us. To do so would be to put God to the test, and to demand that he provide for us in the manner of our choosing instead of in the manner he has chosen.²⁴ Yet the second implication is that we should not put our confidence in these earthly means but in God alone. To transfer the trust that belongs to God to these earthly things would be to turn them into idols. Therefore we should not be disturbed when

the Father, the Almighty." He is almighty because it is His power alone that works in all and through all and over all. Thus St. Anna, the mother of Samuel, sings in 1 Samuel 2:9: "Not by might shall a man prevail." St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:5: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God." This is a most important article of faith, including many things; it completely puts down all pride, arrogance, blasphemy, fame, and false trust, and exalts God alone. It points out the reason why God alone is to be exalted—because He does all things. ... For the word "mighty" does not denote a quiescent power, as one says of a temporal king that he is mighty, even though he may be sitting still and doing nothing. But it denotes an energetic power, a continuous activity, that works and operates without ceasing. For God does not rest, but works without ceasing, as Christ says in John 5:17: "My Father is working still, and I am working." In the same sense St. Paul says in Ephesians 3:20: "He is able to do more than all that we ask"; that is, He always does more than we ask; that is His way, and thus His power works. (LW 21:328 = WA 7:574.3–34)

²³ *Lectures on Zechariah: The German Text* (1527), LW 20:169–72 = WA 23:511–14.

²⁴ LW 7:113–14; 9:74–75; 14:115; 28:347; 46:202–3.

the earthly things we need are lacking and God seems slow in answering our prayers, so that all we have to cling to is his word. Rather, we should trust in him to provide.²⁵ Luther writes, “God will save through the sword if it is at hand, and without the sword if it is not available. Hence one must use things, but one must not trust in them. Only in God should one trust, whether that which you may use is at hand or lacking.”²⁶

This means that we cannot boast that we have earned the things God has given us through our labor. God does not need our help. He is quite capable of providing without it. In the usual course of daily life he chooses to provide for us through our work. Therefore we should not despise the work he has called us to do, but do it with all our strength.²⁷ God honors us by allowing us to join him in his work.²⁸ He also uses our work as a means of restraining our sinful nature, and giving us opportunity to serve our neighbor.²⁹ If we refuse the honor of working with him he will still carry out his work of caring for others, but threatens to withhold his blessings from us.³⁰ Yet although we can forfeit God’s blessings by refusing to work, God does not give us anything because of our work, but simply because of his goodness.³¹ Our work by itself creates or preserves nothing, for “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”³² Instead, our work is simply a matter of finding and collecting God’s gifts.³³ When we believe otherwise we transfer our trust from God to ourselves, and turn ourselves into idols.

²⁵ LW 9:70–71, 74–75; WA 28:612–13, 617–20.

²⁶ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:75 = WA 14:617–18.

²⁷ *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians at Riga in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:331 = WA 15:372–73.

²⁸ *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:52 = WA 6:227.

²⁹ *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:326 = WA 15:367.

³⁰ LW 14:114–15; 44:52; 45:325–26.

³¹ LW 9:96; 14:52–53; 45:326.

³² Ps 127:1; *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:321–22 = WA 15:363.

³³ *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:326–27 = WA 15:368–69.

Consequences of this Idolatry

This trust in human strength and earthly power has two inevitable consequences: futility and fear.

Anxiety vs. confidence. When we transfer our trust from God to his creatures, our fear gets displaced to his creatures as well. When our fear, love, and trust are in the Lord, he says “fear not,”³⁴ and takes all our fears away. Yet without this confidence in him our stance towards the rest of creation will always be fearful. Fear is the natural result of trusting in the uncertain things of this world, and performance anxiety flows naturally from trusting in our own unreliable performance.

This may not always be apparent. When we rely on ourselves to provide for our needs, this leads to arrogance when things are going well. We then pat ourselves on the back for our diligence or wisdom. Yet when trouble comes this pride quickly turns to fear and dismay. We may try to stave off this fear with anxious toil, or shrink back from what we fear so that it paralyzes our actions. Yet these worries are in vain, since the future is in God’s hands. Without his blessing and protection our toil can achieve nothing, but with his it we have nothing to fear. Those who commit all things to the Lord will not be arrogant when things go well with them, since they will attribute this to the Lord’s blessing and not themselves. Yet they will not be worried when trouble comes either, but will do their work with a happy heart and sleep at night without a burden of care, knowing that the Lord has promised to care for them and work all things together for their good.³⁵

³⁴ Matt 10:28–31.

³⁵ LW 43:25–26; 45:321–34.

Ultimate futility vs. ultimate triumph. Idolaters have good reason to be anxious, since their idolatry is futile. Those who trust in human strength ultimately will come to ruin, and their idols will fail them when they need them most. Luther frequently talks about the futility of idolatry. He was fond of the German saying that it requires more toil to get into hell than into heaven.³⁶ Idols wear us out by demanding that we serve them, and then reward us badly by giving us misery and vexation, and failing us in our hour of need.³⁷ Yet the true God will care and provide for us, and those who live by faith in him will triumph over all adversities.³⁸

This may not always be immediately apparent. Luther recognized that “God is a slow rewarder.”³⁹ He writes that “God is patient and slow in carrying out both His promises and His threats.”⁴⁰ In this way he trains us to live by faith in his word. Since God delays in fulfilling his word—including his promises to provide for his people, and his threats towards those who despise his aid—our present experience may seem to contradict it. The idolatrous flesh uses this as license to despise God’s word. It neglects both the threats and the promises, and looks to what its eyes can see. Faith on the other hand takes heed of God’s threats and grasps hold of his promises, and is rewarded. In God’s good timing he carries out his threats with full severity, and fulfills his promises with great abundance, since his word is sure.⁴¹ This can be seen in human history. As the Old Testament shows us, those who despise God’s threats may flourish briefly,

³⁶ LW 13:123; 17:110–11; 34:131.

³⁷ LW 16:17; 17:107, 109–11, 134–35, 401; 18:43–44, 50, 69–70; 19:20, 223–25; 20:164–65.

³⁸ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.21–22, 46, 130, 149, 454–57, 501–2; 2.225; LW 14:67–68; 45:319–20.

³⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.489 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21) WA 5:307.29.

⁴⁰ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:202 = WA 44:726.33–34.

⁴¹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:199–204. = WA 44:724–28.

but things never turn out well for them in the end.⁴² Since God delays in carrying out his judgement, kingdoms may rise and flourish for a time through human wit and arrogance without giving heed to him. Yet even more swiftly they fall—and this not for lack of resources or manpower, but because their true watchman has withdrawn his protection.⁴³ Those who labor in unbelief to acquire wealth may find it. Yet it will then slip through their fingers. All their wealth will profit them less than the little in the hands of the righteous, who receive it with thankfulness and a carefree heart. Even if the wicked manage to hold on to wealth for a lifetime this will only lead to greater ruin as they go on blindly in their unbelief.⁴⁴ The righteous on the other hand may have to bear many crosses and suffer much for the sake of Christ. Yet they will not be deserted, even if they are a slain Abel or a swallowed Jonah.⁴⁵ Although they may go without for a time, as they wait in faith for God’s promises to be fulfilled, ultimately they lack no good thing, for it is impossible for God to forsake those he has promised to bless.⁴⁶ Therefore the watchword is “Wait a bit, wait a bit!”

Luther makes this thought the theme of a sermon on John 16:

A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.⁴⁷

⁴² *Preface to the Prophets* (1545), LW 35:267 = WA 11.i:5.

⁴³ *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:328–30 = WA 15:370–72.

⁴⁴ *Exposition of Psalm 127, For the Christians in Livonia* (1524), LW 45:327–28, 332 = WA 15:369, 373–74.

⁴⁵ *Preface to the Prophets* (1545), LW 35:267 = WA 11.i:5.

⁴⁶ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:92–94 = WA 14:630–32.

⁴⁷ John 16:16, 20–22.

Luther writes that these words apply not only to the Apostles, but to us as well. We also see that the world has its season of joy and triumph, while we experience defeat and anguish as if God has hidden his face from us. Yet during these times we must not judge according to what we see and feel or we will be overwhelmed with misery. Instead, we must hold onto Jesus' promise, "A little while." Then we will endure until the great reversal takes place and we experience joy.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Since God is the Giver of every good gift that we need for our earthly lives, he is the one we must trust to provide. Yet the human tendency is to trust in ourselves instead, and think that by our own work and ingenuity we can harness God's creatures and use them to supply what we need. This appears to make sense, since God normally uses these creatures as masks of his provision. Yet in reality such efforts are futile, since no creature can achieve anything without God's aid, whereas he can always find alternative means when he decides to provide.

In this chapter I have spent little time cataloguing idols like money and technology that we recruit in our efforts to provide for ourselves. The reason for this is that these idols are secondary. If one is torn down, another will spring up in its place, unless we first address the underlying spiritual dynamic that leads us to latch on to them in the first place. The only cure is to despair of our idolatrous trust in ourselves and to trust in the Lord.

Contemporary Application

As we have seen, Luther urges us to recognize our Creator as the source of every earthly blessing, so that we give all thanks to him and place all confidence in him as the one who

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, ed. Eugene F. A. Klug, trans. Eugene F. A. Klug et al. (3 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 2.85–95 = WA 52:283–89.

provides for our earthly needs. In this light the idolatry of our society is clearly evident, as more than anything our society places its hope in human potential.

The Focus on Human Ability in Dominant Contemporary Social Narratives.

This can be seen in the dominant narratives that shape American culture today. These narratives all place humans center stage. In them we are the lead actors in a world that revolves around us and our achievements.

Christian Smith, a sociologist from Notre Dame, lists the following as some of the more significant narratives that have shaped contemporary American culture:

- The narratives of capitalism and socialism. These both place their hope in a particular human economic system to improve society.⁴⁹
- The expressive romantic narrative, which celebrates the free expression of the human spirit.⁵⁰
- The American experiment narrative, which lauds human freedom and democracy.⁵¹
- The narrative of liberal progress, which is a story centered on how noble human aspirations can be harnessed to make society more free and equal.⁵²
- The narrative of scientific enlightenment and progress, which puts its hope in the power of human reason to improve our world.⁵³

⁴⁹ Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 82–83.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63–64, 67, 71.

- Various postmodern narratives, which celebrate human freedom and choice, and the power of the autonomous self to define its identity and values in positive ways.⁵⁴
- The narrative of naturalism, which assumes that since there is no God or “superempirical order,” we humans are free to direct our own fate.⁵⁵
- The Christian narrative. This is the only religious narrative that has had a profound enough impact on American culture to warrant inclusion in this list as an effective challenge to all the human-centered narratives.⁵⁶

What is of note for the purpose of this study is that all these narratives, with the exception of the Christian narrative, center on human beings and their abilities. They are not stories about God or the gods, but instead focus almost exclusively on us. The focal point may be the human ability to construct more just or effective economic systems, the vital forces in human nature that need to be expressed, the value of a democratic political system, the power of human reason to improve human living conditions, or the power and freedom of human beings to define themselves. It makes little difference. Human power takes center stage. Stories about us certainly have their place within an overarching story that centers on God. Yet when such stories become the dominant narratives that shape our society, it tells us something about the value we place on ourselves and our activity.

Technical-Rational Control in Society.

One significant feature of modern industrial society has been the human attempt to exert technical-rational control over more and more areas of life. The sociologist Peter Berger writes,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 66–67, 88, 154–56.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 93–94, 98–106.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 67, 69.

Modernity means (in intention if not in fact) that men take control over the world and over themselves. ... In principle, there is the assumption that all human problems can be converted into technical problems, and if the techniques to solve certain problems do not as yet exist, then they will have to be invented. The world becomes ever more "makeable." This view of the world is essentially that of the engineer. First expressed in engineering proper, in the systematic manipulation of nature and of mechanics, it is carried over into multiple forms of social engineering (including politics), and finally into engineering approaches to the most intimate areas of interpersonal experience (including psychology, qua engineering of the self).⁵⁷

Despite the challenge postmodernism has made to the modern narrative of scientific enlightenment and progress, this feature of modern life remains unchanged. Our technological societies are still dominated by enormous efforts to control every area of life. As Berger points out, this is not just about technology, economic efficiency, and control of the means of production, but extends to the social areas of life. Our society has Prozac to fix emotions, counseling to fix broken relationships, public relations consultants to manage our political or corporate image, human relations consultants to manage the people who work in our institutions, contraceptives, abortifacients, and IVF to control reproduction, urban planners to control the environments we live in, genetic modification to control the food we eat, education policies to ensure no child gets left behind, social welfare agencies to care for disadvantaged members of society, and although it may be popular to advocate small government our governments keep getting bigger, since it is also popular to demand that they control more things.⁵⁸

From Luther's perspective most of these things are neither good nor bad in themselves. On the one hand it is possible to view all this work as faithful stewardship. We are called by God to work to earn our living and to care for our neighbors, and in a highly organized and complex

⁵⁷ Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 21.

⁵⁸ Cf. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World, or, Why it's Tempting to Live as if God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), .33–36, 49–51, 71–72.

society this will take complex forms. Yet on the other hand it can be viewed as an idolatrous trust in human strength instead of in the Lord. So how can we tell the difference?

First, we can pay attention to Luther's dictum that our work in vocation must be established and guided by God's word.⁵⁹ We are called by God to work to care for our neighbors. We are not called to work simply to accrue wealth, power, or pleasures for ourselves. When our efforts to control our world lead us to exploit the earth, exploit our neighbor, or transgress the bounds of God's law, then we can be sure we have an idol. For instance, when our efforts to control our reproduction lead us to show a cavalier disregard for the lives of unborn children, there is no doubt that we are serving an idol.

Second, when immense anxiety becomes attached to our work,⁶⁰ and we are unable to let go of it for long enough to spend time in God's word or prayer, or take our Sabbath rest, then we know we have an idol. In my parish ministry one of the most frequent excuses I hear from people for their slack church attendance is, "we've been really busy, pastor." In most cases this could be rephrased as "we've been off serving other gods." Luther writes regarding the Sabbath day that "our sinful nature is very unwilling to die and to be passive, and it is a bitter day of rest for it to cease from its works and be dead."⁶¹ On the Sabbath day God is at work while we rest and receive from him his gifts. This is an act of faith. It requires confidence that God is the one who creates life and not us, and therefore we can periodically cease our labor and leave things in his

⁵⁹ LW 3:216–18; 4:103–7; 5:274; 21:265–67.

⁶⁰ See the data from Jean Twenge, reported in chapter 4, footnote 123, that indicates how anxiety is on the rise in contemporary American society.

⁶¹ *On Good Works* (1520), WA 6:248.26–27, cited in Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 92. I have followed Bayer's translation instead of the translation in LW 44:78. Bayer translates *leyden* (i.e. *leiden*) as "to be passive" rather than "to suffer." In Luther's day *leyden* could mean to receive something or submit to something, just as "to suffer" could have this sense in old English (Alfred Götze, *Frühneuhochdeutsches Glossar* [5th ed.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1956], 149). Bayer has correctly observed that Luther is interpreting the third commandment at this point. He is not talking about pain and agony, but rather about ceasing from our work and permitting God to work.

hands.⁶² When we are unable to do this, this is the best evidence that we are in the grip of an idol that we think will give life, but in reality just wears us out by demanding our service 24/7. A Sabbath day of rest can be a bitter pill for the sinful nature, since it means letting go of our idols.

Technical-Rational Control in the Church.

We should not think this is only a problem for people who labor in secular professions. In the gospels we see our Lord constantly in prayer, particularly when he faced a big decision or crisis. He often stayed up late at night to pray, and he instructed his disciples to be people of prayer.⁶³ Many of the biblical saints also set an example of fasting and prayer in times of need.⁶⁴ Yet all too often my experience of the church has been more like this: We face a problem, so we call a meeting. We pray for two minutes, and then plan and strategize for two hours. Maybe my experience is atypical—and certainly I have experienced exceptions—yet my experience of the church is wide enough that I suspect it is not. Yet if this becomes our standard way of managing the church it suggests that we have more faith in our planning and strategizing than in our Lord who answers prayer. The work habits of church leaders could also suggest the same thing, that as a group we place too much confidence in what our strength can achieve. It is worth noting that survey and census data show that clergy are among the hardest working people in society.⁶⁵ Once

⁶² Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, 92–93.

⁶³ Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 10:2; 11:1–4; 18:1–6; 21:36; 22:31–32; 39–46; 23:34, 46; John 17.

⁶⁴ Deut 9:25–29; 1 Sam 1:9–18; 7:5–11; 2 Kings 6:15–19; 19:14–19; 20:1–7; 2 Chron 7:12–15; 33:12–19; Ezra 10:1–6; Neh 1:4–11; Dan 9:1–23; Jonah 2:1–9; and all the Psalms of lament.

⁶⁵ Figures from the 1991 census in Australia found that 55% of clergy worked 49 hours per week or more. This was higher than the 48% of medical doctors who worked this hard, and much higher than the national average for all employed people of just 15%. Of all denominations, the Lutherans (who live by grace through faith!) had the hardest working clergy, with 67.2% working 49 hours per week or more (Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends 1994*, ABS Catalogue No. 4102.0 (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1994), [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/1CC597199AA4BD14CA25722500049553/\\$File/41020_1994.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/1CC597199AA4BD14CA25722500049553/$File/41020_1994.pdf) [accessed May 21, 2010], 195–96). In the United States, a 1991 survey of pastors by the Fuller Institute of Church Growth found that 90% worked more than 46 hours per week (Maureen F. Dollard, Anthony Harold Winefield, and Helen R. Winefield, *Occupational Stress in the Service Professions* [London: Taylor & Francis, 2003], 312).

again, this can be interpreted two ways. It could be a sign of faithful service and dedication to the Lord. Faithful service always requires crosses that vex our sinful nature, and long working hours may be one of them. Yet it could also be a sign that our work has become an idol, and we have allowed ourselves to think that we will build God's kingdom by the strength of our arms. The test is much the same as for work in any other vocation. Have we become so busy that we neglect our devotional life? Do we become so involved in our ministries that we neglect the other callings God has given us, such as our families and other relationships? Do we become so stressed and anxious that we can no longer find joy in our ministry, but are crushed by its burdens instead of being refreshed by periodically resting in the Lord? These are signs that we have come to trust in our own strength and not the Lord, so that although we preach about God's grace and power we are modeling something else.

Summary

Confidence in God as the Giver of every good gifts means that we surrender our confidence in our own works and achievements, not only when it comes to our salvation, but in every area of life. When we examine our contemporary society in this light we have good reason to believe that the idol of the self is alive and well.

Conclusion

Luther instructs us to regard God as he truly is, the sole Creator of every good who alone can provide for his creatures. This does not mean the abolition of human work or a rejection of his gifts in creation, but a theocentric reordering of the significance we place on these things. He is the one who provides us with every good thing by grace—without the aid of our efforts—even if he uses our work and his creatures as masks of his provision. This means that all our trust must adhere to him, which is a radical challenge to our modern Promethean age.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE FIRST ARTICLE: LOVE

Introduction

In the previous chapter we looked at how we turn ourselves and God's creatures into idols whenever we trust in ourselves to provide rather than trusting in the Lord. In this chapter we will look at the other major way we can put ourselves in place of the Creator, by loving ourselves above all else and trying to get the universe to revolve around us and our desires.

If God is God then the universe must revolve around him, not us. Yet in our fallen state we love ourselves more than him and strive to "live as if we ourselves were God and lord of the earth."¹ That is, we try to use all things and even God for our own purposes,² as if the world should revolve around us and the things we want for ourselves.

Thesis

The Father call us to love him above anything else; all who love themselves more than him are idolaters.

Luther's Teaching

As we noted in chapter two, Luther says that original sin has perverted human nature by making us curved in on ourselves. More than anything this means that our love is turned inwards,

¹ *Commentary on Psalm 147* (1530), LW 14:113 = WA 31i:435.1–2; cf. 17:20; 31:10.

² LW 5:112; 17:17.

in the sense that we always seek our own benefit in our dealings with God and his creatures.³

Luther says that without faith and God's grace it is impossible for people not to seek their own advantage.⁴ Instead of wanting the things that please God, they "are continually turned in the direction of their own desires, so that they are unable not to seek the things of self."⁵

This self-centeredness is expressed not only in our dealings with other people and created things, but also in our religion. The normal approach to religion for fallen people is to treat God primarily as a means for obtaining blessings for themselves. Luther rejected such an approach as idolatrous. To think that God should revolve around us and our desires is to turn ourselves into idols, by putting ourselves in God's place and loving ourselves more than him.⁶ It is also to turn him into an idol, by treating him as merely something to serve our own ends. Luther never denied that God serves human needs or fulfills human desires, yet he also recognized that God and his world do not revolve around our desires, and that the true God calls us away from this self-centeredness. He rejected religious eudemonism, and therefore his theology is aptly called a Copernican revolution from the usual anthropocentric approach people take to religion.⁷

³ Self-love in this sense is not the same as self-esteem. It is possible for us to love ourselves in the sense of pursuing our self-interest while at the same time despising ourselves for our failings.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.6 = WA 5:

⁵ *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:176 = WA 18:709.14–15.

⁶ Cf. Satan's accusation of Job, of only loving God out of self-interest (Job 1:9–11). The logic of the book of Job is that, if true, this is a serious indictment. Job is only vindicated because subsequent events demonstrate that the charge is not true.

⁷ I have borrowed this way of speaking about Luther's theology from Anders Nygren and Philip Watson, who both call Luther's theology a "Copernican revolution" from an anthropocentric to a strictly theocentric understanding of religion (Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson [New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969], 681–84; Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God!: An Interpretation of the Theology of Luther* [London: Epworth, 1947], 34–37, 73–96).

Luther and Eudemonism

In order to see the radical nature of Luther's rejection of eudemonism it is worth comparing his position to that of St. Augustine, who cast a large shadow over the theology Luther inherited.

Augustine's eudemonism: Finding one's own good in God, the highest good. Augustine is an excellent example of an attempt to give a eudemonistic account of the Christian faith. As the Lutheran bishop Anders Nygren points out in his seminal work *Agape and Eros*, Augustine's understanding of love—which stands at the heart of his whole theology—is essentially an attempt to baptize the eudemonism he found in the pagan philosophers. It is about distinguishing between enlightened and unenlightened self-interest and discerning where our true good lies.⁸

Like the Neo-Platonic philosophers, Augustine understood love primarily as desire.⁹ It is therefore acquisitive—it seeks to satisfy its desire by acquiring the objects of its desire. This means it is fundamentally self-interested. In the *City of God*, Augustine spoke about humans being turned in on themselves, and set love of self in opposition to love of God.¹⁰ This sounds identical to Luther's statements about fallen human nature. Yet Augustine meant something different. He was not critiquing human self-interest like Luther, but only human self-sufficiency. Augustine simply assumed that love is self-interested.¹¹

The problem as Augustine saw it is not that humans are self-interested, but that they seek their self-interest in the wrong things. Instead of seeking their own good in God, the highest good, they seek it in the lesser goods of this created world. When Augustine said that humans

⁸ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 476–503, 530, 538–48, 639.

⁹ Augustine, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, 35.2; *City of God*, 14.7.

¹⁰ Augustine, *City of God*, 14.13, 14.28.

¹¹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 476–80, 501, 532–48; Matt Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin: Augustine, Luther and Barth on Homo Incurvatus In Se* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 7, 15, 96.

have turned their love in on themselves, he was not accusing them of self-interest, but of unenlightened self-interest. The problem as he saw it is that people seek their own good in themselves, as if they can be their own highest good in a self-sufficient manner. He saw no problem with people pursuing self-interest, as long as they do it in an enlightened way, by seeking it in God. Indeed, it was unusual for him to set love of self in opposition to love of God as he did in the *City of God*. His more common mode of speaking was to say that to love God is the best way to love oneself.¹² Augustine's whole theology is focused on identifying what is truly good for us, so that we can pursue our self-interest in the most enlightened manner.¹³

Augustine worked this out in terms of a Neo-Platonic hierarchy of greater and lesser goods, with material things at the bottom, spiritual things at the top, and God as the highest good above all. This meant that he introduced a certain dualism between matter and spirit into his theology. Augustine rejected a Manichean dualism, and recognized that since matter is created by God it must be good and not evil. Yet in a more subtle way he still devalued material things. Augustine did not regard material things as evil, but he did regard them as "lesser goods" that are not worthy of the attention we give them. He did not consider the Pauline distinction between flesh and spirit to be a distinction between different human faculties, as if our spirits are good and our bodies are bad. Yet his view still yields a certain renunciation of material things. He regarded the

¹² "We love ourselves so much the more, the more we love God" (Augustine; *The Trinity*, 8.8.12).

"The Mind Loves God in Rightly Loving Itself; And If It Love Not God, It Must Be Said to Hate Itself. ... He, therefore, who knows how to love himself, loves God; but he who does not love God, even if he does love himself,—a thing implanted in him by nature,—yet is not unsuitably said to hate himself" (Augustine, *The Trinity*, 14.14.18)

"For it is impossible for one who loves God not to love himself. For he alone has a proper love for himself who aims diligently at the attainment of the chief and true good; and if this is nothing else but God, as has been shown, what is to prevent one who loves God from loving himself?" (Augustine, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, 1.26.48)

Cf. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel According to St John*, 87.1; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 532–548.

¹³ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 476–512, 532–48; Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*, 17, 22–23, 25–28.

struggle between flesh and spirit as a contest between two different orientations of the whole person. It is a struggle between *cupiditas*, the whole self as its desire is directed downwards to earthly and material things, and *caritas*, the whole self as its love is directed upwards to God. This means that although he did not say that material things are evil, he did say that to turn towards them and love them inordinately is evil,¹⁴ since this means diverting our attention away from God and higher spiritual things. This meant that Augustine, as well as much of the monastic tradition that followed his lead, regarded our love for the things of this world as the main obstacle to our love for God. He saw the call to love God as a call to flee earthly things, or at least not to get too attached to them, since they threaten to pull our devotion away from God, our highest good.¹⁵

Luther's rejection of eudemonism. Like Augustine, Luther also addressed the issue of human self-sufficiency. All his talk about our need to live by faith is directed against our deluded belief that we can be self-sufficient. Yet Luther was also keen to address our self-interest, and this was his primary focus when he described human sin by saying we are curved in on ourselves. Luther could see that the human problem is not simply that we need to direct more attention to God instead of trying to live without him. Rather, our human perversion reveals itself in our religious strivings as clearly as anywhere, since even when we seek God, we seek him for our own advantage. When we try to pull created things into our orbit it is bad enough. When we treat God as if he must revolve around us and our desires it is even worse.

¹⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 12.6, 12.8.

¹⁵ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 482–512; Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*, 19–21; Dera Sipe, “Struggling with Flesh: Soul/Body Dualism in Porphyry and Augustine,” *Concept* (2006), <http://www.publications.villanova.edu/Concept/2006/Sipe.pdf> (accessed April 29, 2010), 2–18.

For Luther, eudemonism cannot be Christianized, as Augustine attempts to do.¹⁶ Instead, those who seek after their own joy and self-interest will never find it. Even those who seek the joys of heaven will never enter if they seek it simply for their own benefit. Luther writes,

The other error made by many who pray this petition [Thy kingdom come] is to think of nothing but their own eternal bliss. They suppose that the kingdom of God is composed of sheer joy and happiness in heaven. Inspired by their carnal sense and by their dread of hell, they seek only their own benefit and advantage in heaven. These people are unaware that God's kingdom consists of nothing other than piety, decency, purity, gentleness, kindness, and of every other virtue and grace; they do not know that God must have his way in us, that he alone must be, dwell, and reign in us. We must strive for that goal first and foremost. We are saved only when God reigns in us and we are his kingdom. We need not seek, desire, or pray for joy and happiness and all other desirable things, for they will all be ours when his kingdom comes. A good wine will naturally and inevitably produce joy and happiness when it is drunk. Even more, when grace and virtue (that is, the kingdom of God) are perfected, they result in joy and peace and bliss, and in every delight, naturally and surely and without our aid. Therefore, to turn our eyes away from false and selfish goals, Christ bids us to seek and to ask for God's kingdom itself and not for the fruits of the kingdom. Those people, however, begin at the far end and seek first that which should be last, meanwhile neglecting the first or valuing it solely because of the ultimate fruit. Consequently, they will receive nothing at all. They do not desire that which comes first, and therefore that which follows will not be theirs either.¹⁷

For Luther, to love God because he is *our own* highest good, and it benefits us to do so, is not what it means to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." This reveals that Luther had a different understanding of love than Augustine. Instead of regarding love as the desire to acquire good things for oneself, he regarded it as that which "seeks not its own,"¹⁸ but seeks the good of the other without thought of self.¹⁹ If we only love those who love us, or are attractive to us, this is more an expression of self-interest than of love, and our kindness to them will cease as

¹⁶ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 683, 726–27.

¹⁷ *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:41–42 = WA 2:98.29–99.10.

¹⁸ 1 Cor 13:5; LW 14:204; 17:198, 317; 21:339; 25:107, 352, 427, 505; 27:98; 28:328, 373; 29:227; 30:269, 304; 31:10, 41, 57; 37:201–2; 44:124, 248; 51:269–70.

¹⁹ Phil 2:4.

soon as it conflicts with our self-interest.²⁰ In the same way, if we only love God when he blesses us and gives us good things, this is more an expression of self-love than genuine love for God. If we approach God with a “mercenary spirit,” and strive to please and obey him out of fear of punishment or hope of reward instead of from genuine love for him, we are idolaters as far as Luther is concerned.²¹ We have made our fear of punishment or desire for blessing our ultimate concern instead of God,²² and we are trying to use him as an idol to serve our desires.²³

Like Luther, Augustine also spoke about loving God for his own sake, rather than for the sake of any created enjoyments. Yet there is a subtle but significant difference between the two. For Augustine, the focus is still on us and our enjoyment. The issue is whether we enjoy God himself, or use him so that we may enjoy his creatures.²⁴ For Luther, the focus is not on us and our enjoyment. The issue is whether we love God simply because he is good, even when he hides his face from us so that we cannot enjoy him.²⁵

Flesh and spirit: The whole self as it lives either by true faith or idolatry. Luther works out his understanding of human love in terms of the Pauline distinction between flesh and spirit. This he sees as a distinction between true faith and idolatry. This also means a distinction between love of self and love of God. Like Augustine, he did not regard the flesh/spirit distinction as a contrast between different faculties within the self, but a matter of how the whole self is oriented. For Luther, the flesh is the whole self—body, mind, and soul—as it is born in a

²⁰ *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), LW 31:57 = WA 1:365; cf. Matt 5:46.

²¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.345–46; LW 14:295; 33:152–53; 21:319; 27:219; 25:295.

²² *Explanations of the 95 Theses* (1518), LW 31:201 = WA 1:599.

²³ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:346 = WA 56:356–57.

²⁴ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 503–12.

²⁵ *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1521), LW 21:309–10 = WA 7:556–57.

natural way and curved in on itself through the corruption of original sin. He also refers to it as “the old self,” “the old Adam,” or “the sinful nature.” This old self lives by a false faith, and is defined by its idolatry. The spirit on the other hand is the whole self as it is born again through the Holy Spirit. This new self lives by faith in Christ and the Spirit’s power, and this is what defines it.²⁶ When the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in someone and creates faith, this means a reorientation of the whole person. Luther writes that whatever fills the heart fills all the members, eyes, ears, mouth, nose, body and soul.²⁷ When the Holy Spirit dwells in the human spirit, then the whole person is sanctified and follows the Spirit’s leading.²⁸ Thus even the body is made new. It is no longer an instrument for unrighteousness, but a living sacrifice given to God, a temple for the Holy Spirit, and a vessel God is preparing for resurrection.²⁹ Yet the sinful nature resists this transforming work of the Spirit, so a contest takes place between the two.

The sinful self loves itself above all things. The chief characteristic of our sinful nature according to Luther is self-interest. “The flesh seeks its own but not the things that are of God.”³⁰ This does not simply mean that we seek earthly things instead of heavenly things, but rather that we pursue our self-interest in all things, regardless of whether they are physical or spiritual, in heaven or on earth. Indeed, those who live according to the sinful nature can be extremely religious. They are often outwardly pious and keep God’s law. Yet the whole time they are

²⁶ WA 10.I.ii 301.15 – 302.2; LW 11:522; 17:12; 21:303–6; 25:350–54; 27:87–91; 30:119; 33:288; Jaroslav Pelikan, “Luther’s Works on the New Testament,” in *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and the Magnificat*, Vol. 21 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), n.p.; Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*, 66–71.

²⁷ *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Lord* (1530). LW 38:107 = WA 30.ii:603.

²⁸ *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1521), LW 21:303–7 = WA 7:550–54.

²⁹ 1 Cor 6:19; Rom 12:1.

³⁰ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:12 = WA 31.ii:269.5–6; cf. LW 25:291, 313, 344–47; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.69–70.

looking at what they can gain for themselves. They are driven by things like fear of God's punishment, desire for human praise and other earthly benefits, and the hope that God will reward them.³¹ So although they may keep God's law in an external manner, they do not genuinely love God or neighbor, since the love God calls for "seeks not its own."³² This sort of love comes only from the Holy Spirit.³³ Instead, beneath a veneer of external righteousness their real goal is to use both God and their neighbor for their own ends.³⁴ They treat God as an idol, and their stomachs are their real gods.³⁵ Luther calls such people mercenary and false,³⁶ rebels under the appearance of obedience and fear of God.³⁷ They are,

impure and perverted lovers, who are nothing else than parasites and who seek their own advantage in God, neither love nor praise His bare goodness, but have an eye to themselves and consider only how good God is to them, that is, how deeply He makes them feel His goodness and how many good things He does to them. They esteem Him highly, are filled with joy and sing His praises, so long as this feeling continues. But just as soon as He hides His face and withdraws the rays of His goodness, leaving them bare and in misery, their love and praise are at an end. They are unable to love and praise the bare, unfelt goodness that is hidden in God. By this they prove that their spirit did not rejoice in God, their Savior, and that they had no true love and praise for His bare goodness. They delighted in their salvation much more than in their Savior, in the gift more than in the Giver, in the creature rather than in the Creator. For they are not able to preserve an even mind in plenty and in

³¹ LW 21:155; 25:245–46.

³² 1 Cor 13:5; LW 14:204; 17:198, 317; 21:339; 25:107, 352, 427, 505; 27:98; 28:328, 373; 29:227; 30:269, 304; 31:10, 41, 57; 37:201–2; 44:124, 248; 51:269–70.

³³ LW 2:125; 9:68; 14:295; 25:350–52; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.23–25; 2.45, 48–55; 2.410 (sic).

There is an error in the pagination in vol. 2 of this edition of Luther's *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*. Pages 261–308 have been incorrectly numbered 381–428. Then on page 309 the correct pagination resumes, so that 381–428 are eventually repeated. Throughout this dissertation the pages that have been incorrectly labeled 381–428 will be marked (sic) to distinguish them from the pages that have been correctly labeled 381–428.

³⁴ LW 9:297; 13:186; 17:160; 18:221, 244; 20:271.

³⁵ LW 18:391; LW 9:54–55; 18:57, 394–95; 20:237.

³⁶ LW 14:295; 21:319; 25:295; 27:219, 332–33; 33:152–53; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.345–46.

³⁷ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:244 = WA 56:258.

want, in wealth and in poverty; as St. Paul says (Phil. 4:12): “I know how to abound and how to suffer want.”³⁸

This means that the true test of faith is the cross.³⁹ Idolaters despise the cross.⁴⁰ Those who follow the prudence of the flesh may praise God when all is going well, but quickly turn from him when tribulation comes.⁴¹

This self-interested self cannot simply be reeducated so that it becomes more enlightened in its self-interest. Salvation from the flesh does not mean training it to seek higher, spiritual pleasures and goods instead of lower, earthly goods, so that it becomes a more refined Epicurean. Instead, the flesh is at its worst when it seeks after spiritual things. Therefore it must die. The old Adam with its assertion of “I,” “Me,” and “Mine” must be put to death so that no “selfdom” remains.⁴² Therefore Luther can say that true love of self is hatred of self,⁴³ that is, to despise self-seeking.

The spirit loves God’s “bare” goodness. In contrast, the new self that is born again through the Holy Spirit has a completely different orientation from the old sinful nature. Instead of its love being curved in on itself it is directed to God and neighbor. When Luther talks about the contempt of self,⁴⁴ and calls self-love a great and grievous sin,⁴⁵ he is advocating contempt

³⁸ *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1521), LW 21:309–10 = WA 7:556.25–557.5.

³⁹ By “the cross” Luther means the suffering that God lays upon the Christian. Luther’s views on the cross of the Christian will be addressed more fully in chapter 8.

⁴⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.213.

⁴¹ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:295 = WA 56:308.

⁴² This language comes from *A German Theology* (*Theologia Germanica* 13–14), which did not originate from Luther’s pen. Yet Luther gave it his endorsement and expressed similar thoughts throughout his career. Note for instance how he describes the baptismal life in his *Small Catechism* (SC IV 12 = WA 30.i:382.6–383.2).

⁴³ *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), LW 25:382, 512 = WA 56:392, 516–17.

⁴⁴ LW 7:183; 31:84.

⁴⁵ LW 26:297; 28:327; 36:203; 43:21; 45:118.

for the sinful self with its self-preoccupation. The cure for this self-love is not to wallow in self-loathing. That is just another form of self-focus. Instead the cure is to despise the self-preoccupied self by forgetting about oneself, to stop looking at oneself and to start looking to Christ.⁴⁶ Unlike the flesh, the new self is not wrapped up in itself, but has been taught by God's Spirit to forget about self so it can genuinely seek the good of the other.⁴⁷ It does not need to be coerced with rewards or punishments, since God has instilled in it a new love that delights in God for his own sake and does his will freely.⁴⁸ Since it has died to self-will and is alive to God's will it keeps God's law simply because it is good, without any self-interest.⁴⁹ Its love does not turn sour when it faces hardships. Instead, it endures these with patience, without being turned from its love of God by thoughts of self, but rather trusting that even when he brings us the cross he is good.⁵⁰ It says to Christ, "I seek not Thine, but Thee; Thou art to me no dearer when it goes well with me, nor any less dear when it goes ill."⁵¹ Since it regards God as the highest good to which nothing can be compared it loves him even when everything else is taken away.

The spirit delights in God's will and loves all creatures for his sake. For Luther, God's call for us to love him above all else does not mean we should despise or forsake his creatures.⁵² This brings us to a crucial difference between the theology of Augustine and Luther. For Augustine the chief characteristic of the flesh is that it is curved down towards earthly things that are of low value in the great chain of being and not worthy of the attention we give them. The

⁴⁶ LW 9:70; 14:169; 31:15.

⁴⁷ LW 25:512–13; 27:355–56; 35:67; 52:35–36.

⁴⁸ LW 1:93–94 = WA 42:71; 31:358–62; 9:68–69; 22:144–45.

⁴⁹ LW 14:295; 21:319; 25:292, 346–47; 33:152–53.

⁵⁰ LW 5:319–20; 12:374; 14:295; 22:144–45; 25:295–96, 347.

⁵¹ *Commentary on the Magnificat* (1521), LW 21:311 = WA 7:557.36–37.

⁵² *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:69 = WA 14:610.

greatest obstacle to our loving God is this love for created things, and love for God always means a certain detachment from created things. For Luther there is no great chain of being, just the Creator and his creation. The chief obstacle to our love for God is our love for ourselves, and this is the same obstacle preventing us from loving our neighbor. Therefore when the Spirit leads us to die to our self-love and to love God as we ought, this also renews our love for neighbor. We are finally free to genuinely seek the good of our neighbor without self-interest getting in the way. Not only this, but the Spirit teaches us to delight in God's will. This means showing our love for God by loving and serving those around us as he commands,⁵³ and by receiving his gifts with thanksgiving.⁵⁴ For Luther, to flee from worldliness or carnality did not mean giving up earthly things through monastic renunciation. Instead, "If the Lord has given one a wife, one should now hold on to her and enjoy her."⁵⁵ Luther taught that all sorts of earthly activities such as loving one's spouse, rearing children, honoring parents, and obeying the magistrate should be embraced by Christians as spiritual activities when they are done as fruits of the Spirit.⁵⁶ Worldliness consists instead of covetousness and anxious striving to acquire for ourselves things that God has not deigned to give us, as if possessing these things is of ultimate importance. Fleeing from worldliness therefore means accepting what God has given with contentment and thanksgiving without striving to go beyond the bounds of what he has prescribed.⁵⁷ It does not mean renouncing the good things of God's creation, but rather refusing to turn them into idols.

⁵³ LW 7:315; 18:221; 20:271; 25:350–52; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.23–25; 2.45, 48–55; 2.410 (sic).

⁵⁴ LW 1:245; 13:366.

⁵⁵ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:30 = WA 20:36.14–15.

⁵⁶ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:216–17 = WA 40.i.:347–48.

⁵⁷ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:8, 30 = WA 20:10–11, 35–36.

Whereas for Augustine the problem is that we love created things too much, for Luther the problem is that we love ourselves too much. The value of his insight can be seen from the following anecdote. One of my friends among my fellow pastors in Australia is an adult convert to the church. When he first started taking an interest in the Christian faith, one thing in particular held him back. He thought, “If I become a Christian I will have to put God first in my life and my wife second, and I love her too much to do that.” Yet in the end he found the gospel so exciting that he became a Christian anyway. His wife then noticed a difference in the way he treated her—he started treating her much better than he ever had before. This impressed her so much that she decided she wanted to become a Christian too. This change in my friend’s behavior makes perfect sense from Luther’s perspective. When he no longer treated his wife as an idol, but as a good gift of the true God, he was able to show her more love, not less. On the one hand this can be explained through the work of the Holy Spirit, who produces love in our hearts. On the other hand, this change in him has something to do with the nature of idolatrous love. Idolatrous love is an expression of the flesh, which always seeks its own in the object of its desire. It is therefore grasping, obsessive, and manipulative. When through faith we are enabled to treat the things of creation as just that—good things created by God, but not gods that we must possess and control as if our lives are at stake—then we are freed to seek their good without our self-interest constantly getting in the way.

Vita passiva: Love for God and neighbor flows from the receptive life. This relates to the trust we place in ourselves and in created things. When we make idols of ourselves by thinking that we have to provide for our own needs, then we will constantly be searching and grasping for things to fill our needs. Yet when we learn through the gospel to trust that God will care for our needs out of pure generosity we are freed from this concern. He’s got our backs. We can leave it in his hands. We are then free to pursue God’s will wherever it may lead.

Luther's rejection of Eudemonism is not antithetical to his view of God as the generous Giver of every good thing. Instead, it flows out of this view. He regarded God as so kindly and benevolent that he wants to freely give us every good thing, including blessings we cannot even imagine let alone expect or seek.⁵⁸ He is "an Almighty and exceedingly rich Bestower,"⁵⁹ who runs ahead of us with good things, even before we seek them. Before he created the first humans he furnished the earth with rich gifts for their provision. Before we come to faith, he provides us with a Savior, who searches for us to draw us to himself.⁶⁰ Before we enter heaven he prepares heavenly mansions for us filled with every kind of joy.⁶¹ This is what frees us from constantly pursuing our interests. Indeed, Luther was so confident that God is good to us that he was even willing to regard the suffering God brings us as good.⁶² Luther was not ignorant of those parts of Scripture that tell us to ask, seek, knock, pray, and present our needs to God. Yet he did not view this seeking as some arduous task we must perform, as if we must climb up to God in heaven.⁶³ God wants us to ask and seek, not because he is distant or reluctant to give, but so that we would learn to acknowledge him as the Giver.⁶⁴ He simply invites us to confess his generosity and grasp hold of the gifts he has readily placed at our disposal. This frees us from constant concern regarding our needs. Even if something God has promised is lacking, we need not be concerned, but can wait patiently until he fulfills his promise.

⁵⁸ "For since He gave us Christ, His only Son, the highest Good, He, through Him, also gives us all His good things, riches, and treasures, from which the angels in heaven derive all pleasure and joy." (*Sermons on First Peter* [1522], LW 30:24 = WA 12:280.12–14)

Cf. LW 3:158; 6:158–59; 7:174–75; 9:69; 12:205; 21:328, 338; 25:351, 386; 27:47; 29:136; 42:89–90, 156; 44:50, 52, 59–60; 52:252; Eph 3:20.

⁵⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:359 = WA 43:676.34.

⁶⁰ LW 24:148, 259; 35:374.

⁶¹ LW 1:39; 45:48.

⁶² We will explore this them more fully in chapter 8.

⁶³ Cf. Rom 10:6–8.

Luther recognized early in his career that pure love for God means loving him for his own sake, without thought of ourselves.⁶⁵ Yet he experienced this as the crushing demand of the law. Later he was able to see that as sinners this demand to love God purely will always accuse and crush us, since in our sinful self-orientation we are not capable of loving God in this way.⁶⁶ Yet even once he came to distinguish this demand of the law that cannot justify us from the gospel of forgiveness and acceptance in Christ,⁶⁷ he did not discard this call. Instead, he recognized that love for God and neighbor is something God works in us once we are already justified.⁶⁸ It is a fruit of the gospel, that grows in those who recognize how kind God is to us.⁶⁹

Luther connects his discovery of the gospel to a transformation in his understand of love. The gospel led him to see that God's love for us is primary, not our love for him.⁷⁰ Yet his love

⁶⁴ *The Sermon on the Mount* (1532), LW 21:143–45 = WA 32:417–19.

⁶⁵ Luther's vision of what is entailed in the call to love God is shaped by his own reading of Scripture, as well as by various currents in medieval piety that focused on dying to self and self-will for the sake of following Christ and his will. The clearest influence on him is a revival group from the fourteenth century called "The Friends of God." The Friends of God lived through a dark time when the Black Death was ravaging Europe and the Interdict of 1324 brought great turmoil to the church (Bengt Hoffmann, "Introduction," in *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. Bengt Hoffman [New York: Paulist Press, 1980], 3–5, 9). They focused on the renunciation of self and the mystical union between Christ and the believer. They consisted of both clergy and laity, and included Johann Tauler and "the Frankfurter," the anonymous author of a work both Luther and his father confessor Staupitz cherished (Ibid., 2–9, 24). This work delighted Luther so much that in 1516 he published it as his very first publication, and then republished it in 1518 (Ibid., 41–43). He called it *Eyn Deutsch Theologia* (now generally known by its Latin title, *Theologia Germanica*) and added a subtitle to describe its content: "the right understanding as to what Adam and Christ mean and how Adam must die within us and Christ must rise" (Ibid., 41). *A German Theology* teaches that the essence of the fall is the assertion of "I", "Me", and "Mine" (*Theologia Germanica*, 2–5, 47), and that all who do not follow the light of Christ are turned in on themselves (Ibid., 38). Therefore the old self with its "selfdom" and concern with self-will must die so that the life of Christ may dwell in us, and his will may become our will (Ibid., 9–10, 13–14, 17–18, 20–26, 32–44, 47–53, 55–56). When his will becomes our will we forget about self and delight in freely following his call to love and serve his creatures (Ibid., 21, 28, 30–31, 33, 44–45). Then we also find bliss and joy as a byproduct, since we have learned to concern ourselves only with that which is truly good, with God and his will (Ibid., 9, 30, 44).

⁶⁶ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:68 = WA 14:609.

⁶⁷ Luther says that to think we can be justified through our love for God instead of through God's love for us in Christ is to set up our love as an idol (*Lectures on Galatians* [1535], LW 26:398 = WA 40.i:605–6).

⁶⁸ Yeago, "The Catholic Luther," 18–26.

⁶⁹ LW 26:217; 36:40–41; 44:30.

⁷⁰ LW 54:442–43 = WA TR 5:210.

for us produces love in us for both him and our neighbor. Christian love does not originate in us, but comes from receiving God's love. Luther writes that deliverance from idolatry is something we receive passively⁷¹ as God's mercy transforms our will.⁷² Likewise, Christian love is something we receive passively. Luther likens the Christian to a tube. He receives God's love and blessing from above, and these then flow through him to his neighbor.⁷³

The gospel for Luther is not something that excuses our sin but then leaves us to wallow in it. Instead, God forgives us so that he may restore us to what he created us to be. Central to the good he wants for us is for us to recognize him as the highest and all-sufficient good, and to be genuinely in tune with him and his will. This means dying to our self-centered will. We are simply not created to have the world revolve around us. Luther's vision of the world, as God created it and is redeeming it to be, is not of us each striving individually for our own benefit. Instead, as God loves us and we love each other everyone is cared for, and our joy is multiplied through our life together.

The Futility of Idolatrous Self-Love: "For Whoever Would Save His Life Will Lose It, but Whoever Loses His Life for My Sake Will Find It." (Matt 16:25)

Luther's thought is so antithetical to the usual human way of thinking that it is easy to misunderstand him. When Luther talks about dying to self-love and our own self-centered desires this does not mean he was a masochistic kill-joy. He is not calling for the extinction of human desire, but rather its transformation through a radical shift in the center of gravity around which our lives revolve. The goal of his theology is for us to be swept up into the joy and beauty

⁷¹ By "passive" Luther means "receptive," not "inactive." As the power of God works in us it leads us to action, yet it does not originate in us, but must be received from outside.

⁷² *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:246 = WA 42:437.

⁷³ WA 10.i.ii:100.9–16. An English translation of this passage is give in Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 735. Cf. LW 51:269–70; Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22.

of life when it revolves harmoniously around God as it ought, instead of the ugliness that results when we try to make it revolve around us. Yet Luther recognized that this cannot take place without pain. Our idolatrous sinful nature fights tooth and nail to retain its place at the center of the universe. This must be put to death, and this is a painful process for us. Yet God makes us go through it so that the wonderful new life Christ gives us can rise within us.

To put this another way, when God's law is applied to our hearts, it demands that our love and our will be guided by what God calls good, not by what we find pleasing. Luther writes, "To love God is at the same time to hate oneself and to know nothing but God. We must make our will conform in every respect to the will of God ... So that we not only will what God wills, but also ought to will whatever God wills."⁷⁴ This means we are called to love and desire God's will even if it means suffering for the sake of God or neighbor, or giving up something we deeply desire. For the new creature of God, born in us through the Holy Spirit, these two things become one thing, since God's will is pleasing to us. Yet Luther took seriously how much we struggle against the sinful nature in this life, and how completely God's will goes against the grain for the sinful nature. Therefore it is not safe to be guided by what seems pleasing to us, even as redeemed people. We must be guided by God's word, even when it does not appear good. Only God's word can teach us to distinguish what is truly good from what is an idolatrous illusion.⁷⁵

In rejecting eudemonism Luther is not teaching a new asceticism or advocating misery as a virtue. He had no time for those who impose on themselves self-chosen crosses,⁷⁶ or think God is pleased when they flee happiness and make themselves gloomy. Instead, he taught that when

⁷⁴ *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517) Theses 95 and 97, LW 31:15 = WA 1:228.

⁷⁵ "For idolatry is recognized only through the word of God." (*Lectures on Genesis* [1535–38], LW 2:250 = WA 42:440.14)

⁷⁶ LW 4:22; 7:113–14; 17:49–50, 294; 20:261–62, 329–30; 22:55; 30:109–10; 40:81; 43:165, 183–84; 51:198–99.

God gives us happiness or any good thing we should receive it with thanks.⁷⁷ He was not teaching that desire must be quenched in the Christian, or we should cultivate a Stoic apathy,⁷⁸ but rather that we must be filled with new, holy desires that faith and the Spirit bring.⁷⁹ He was not denying that God is the highest good, or that those who find him receive every good thing.⁸⁰ What he was denying is that we are able to recognize that God is the highest good while we are wrapped up in the idolatry of our sinful nature.⁸¹ He saw that we cannot truly rejoice in God while we are still fixated on ourselves and the benefits we hope to receive from him. True happiness comes to those who delight in God and his will so that his will becomes their will regardless of what it means for themselves.⁸² Therefore true life and joy must be found on the far side of the death of the sinful self and the resurrection of the new. The sinful self that strives after its own interest without concern for the will of God must die,⁸³ and Christ must rise within us. Life is not to be obtained by trying to grasp it for ourselves, but by giving it up for the sake of Christ. Joy is not to be found by trying to pursue it for ourselves, but must be received as a gift from him. Luther therefore had a deep sense that God brings about our good through a great reversal. While we are still intent on serving the idol of the self and seeking our own joy we will not find it. Instead, God gives joy to those who learn to deny themselves and follow Christ wherever he leads. Luther writes that a person

⁷⁷ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:30 = WA 20:10–11, 35–36.

⁷⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 7:315 = WA 44:533.

⁷⁹ “For in those who have been baptized a new light and flame arise; new and devout emotions come into being, such as fear and trust in God and hope; and a new will emerges.” (*Lectures on Galatians* [1535], LW 26:352–53 = WA 40.i:540.30–32)

LW 9:69; 14:294–97; 27:139–40.

⁸⁰ LW 9:69; 12:205; 21:338; 25:351, 386; 27:47; 29:136; 30:24; 42:156; 44:50, 52; 52:252.

⁸¹ LW 2:124–25; 7:177; 22:134; 25:240; 36:180; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.21–22, 78.

⁸² LW 14:297–98 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:34–36.

cannot have more good than God has given him, even if he seeks it. Man does indeed seek beyond what God has done, but he does not find. God has given happiness, and you seek for more happiness but you will not find it. For no one can add even a particle to the works of God. If the Lord God has decided something, you will not add anything to it. When the heart is filled with happiness, it is not able to be sad, and vice versa. Thus God determines everything, so that you may learn to be content with what He has offered and will use even that moderately; then your joy will be in the Lord.⁸⁴

This means that all our attempts to grasp happiness for ourselves are futile, since joy is a gift of God's Spirit that involves trusting in the Lord and contenting ourselves with his will.⁸⁵

This is worth spelling out in more detail. For Luther, true joy involves the following:

Thankfulness and contentment. In his lectures on Ecclesiastes Luther reflects on how joy is a gift of God that eludes those who try to grasp it for themselves. He concludes that joy comes from being satisfied with God's word and work, and receiving his gifts with thanksgiving and contentment. The restless, anxious yearning and striving of the sinful nature cannot lead to joy, since the sinful nature is always coveting what it does not possess. It does not thank God for the things it has or stop to enjoy them, but vexes itself with many troubles as it tries to heap up more—more riches, more glory, more honor, more fame. It cheats itself of the blessings it has in the present by uselessly troubling itself about a future it cannot control. Instead of appreciating what it has it is constantly seeking after things it cannot attain, or, even if it does attain them, that it does not enjoy, since it soon despises them and seeks after something else. As wealth increases, so does greed. The more honor or power someone receives, the more they covet.⁸⁶ Luther gives the following examples. A man is alone and looks for a wife, but then when he

⁸³ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:29–32 = WA 20:35–38.

⁸⁴ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:121 = WA 20:141.21–28.

⁸⁵ Gal 5:22–24.

⁸⁶ *Lectures on Habakkuk: The German Text* (1526), LW 19:187 = WA 19:385.

finds one he quickly becomes bored with her. People with healthy eyes rarely stop to take pleasure in them or to reflect on what a good gift of God they are. Yet if they lost them they would give great treasure to get them back. Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great toiled mightily for power, but when they achieved it were not satisfied, but perished still striving for more.⁸⁷ Luther concludes that these examples demonstrate that,

What sinners heap up belongs to the pious,⁸⁸ because only they use it with thanksgiving and joy, even when they have very little. The impious, on the other hand, for all their anxiety and trouble, do not even use it. In short, the pious truly possess the whole world, because they enjoy it with happiness and tranquility. But the impious do not possess it even when they have it.⁸⁹

A peaceful conscience. The anxious striving of the sinful nature cannot bring joy, since deep peace of heart and mind requires a good conscience. This is something we cannot acquire for ourselves. Luther writes that “faith in God, or the light of the countenance of God, gladdens the heart, and diffuses throughout the inward man a solid and true joy, while it produces a peace on account of sins forgiven, and gives the man a sure confidence in God even in the midst of sufferings: for there can be no joy, no peace, but in a pure conscience.”⁹⁰

The joy and honor of serving God through serving one’s neighbor. Daily work is painful and tedious for the sinful nature. This is because it does not delight in pleasing God or serving its neighbor but cares more about its own leisure. The flesh is particularly reluctant to work at tasks that are low and despised in the eyes of the world. This makes much of life distasteful, since our vocations force us to serve our neighbor if we are to live. In contrast, the

⁸⁷ LW 15:7–8, 10–11, 47–48; 19:187; cf. LW 14:47–53.

⁸⁸ Cf. Eccl 2:25–26.

⁸⁹ *Lectures on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:48 = WA 20:57.36–40.

⁹⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.169 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:119.26–29. Cf. 1.264; LW 16:152; 17:110–11; 18:44; 34:131.

Holy Spirit places in the believer a new heart that delights to show love by serving its neighbor, and derives joy from doing those things that are pleasing to God.⁹¹ Love is only drudgery for the old self, not the new.⁹² This brings new joy into daily work. For the believer it is “a laudable and happy thing to imitate the example of Christ in His deeds, to love one’s neighbors, to do good to those who deserve evil, to pray for one’s enemies, and to bear with patience the ingratitude of those who requite good with evil.”⁹³ Even if the work God calls us to do is as menial as hauling manure, the Christian can do this with honor and joy, knowing it is pleasing to God and beneficial for one’s neighbor.⁹⁴

Delighting in the Lord as the highest good, even in trials. The deepest joy in the Christian life comes from the gospel itself. Luther writes that “faith in Christ makes life happy, even though we may fall at times [into sin].”⁹⁵ This is because Christ says ‘Your sins are forgiven.’⁹⁶ Yet one fruit of the gospel is that we are also able to delight in God’s law, so that all of God’s word become pleasing to us. In his comments on Psalm 1, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked ... but his delight is in the law of the Lord,” Luther concludes that this is the secret to happiness.⁹⁷ Only those who have faith in Christ can do this. Even when we live by faith our sin still clings to us, so only Christ delights in God’s law perfectly.⁹⁸ We on the other hand “must through a humble faith in Christ pray ... that the desire

⁹¹ LW 26:133; 30:88; 35:374–75; 46:241; 52:38–39.

⁹² Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation,” *Word and World* 3 (Fall 1983): 389.

⁹³ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:247 = WA 40.i:389.29–31.

⁹⁴ LW 4:285; 21:266.

⁹⁵ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:152 = WA 31.ii:108.6–7.

⁹⁶ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:152 = WA 31.ii:108.7.

⁹⁷ LW 14:287, 297 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:26–27, 34–35.

⁹⁸ LW 14:295 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:33.

be sent down from heaven.”⁹⁹ This desire for God’s law is not natural to us, but “as the Heavenly Father plants and cultivates, and transplants us out of Adam into Christ, it is conferred on us from heaven.”¹⁰⁰ Since fallen human nature is inclined to evil, unbelievers can at best carry out the law in an external manner out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. Inwardly they will hate the law.¹⁰¹ This means that life for them will be unpleasant, since God’s law confronts us constantly in his creation.¹⁰² Yet when through faith our desire becomes one with God’s will “as love unites the lover with the beloved,” then we will also “taste how good, sweet, pure, holy, and wonderful is the Word of God, the greatest good.”¹⁰³ When God and his will become our highest joy, then our desire “will be elevated over all creation.”¹⁰⁴ We will be able to withstand all kinds of hardships that would shatter the blessedness of other people.¹⁰⁵

Luther concludes that the blessedness and prosperity of the righteous in this life is a hidden prosperity. It is hidden under troubles and persecutions, but is experienced by those who have faith.¹⁰⁶ When God is our Lord, this gives us an inner confidence and joy that can sustain us even when outwardly we are troubled. When we have the peaceful conscience that flows from sins forgiven, a delight in God’s will and abundant goodness, and the knowledge that he will care for us and sustain us even when all other things are taken away, then we can bear all burdens easily. We can be confident, bold, and courageous, even when others despise us or troubles assail.¹⁰⁷

⁹⁹ LW 14:297 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:35.26–27.

¹⁰⁰ LW 14:300 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:37.26–27.

¹⁰¹ LW 14:295 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:33.

¹⁰² LW 14:287 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:26–27.

¹⁰³ LW 14:297 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:35.4–7

¹⁰⁴ LW 14:297 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:35.2.

¹⁰⁵ LW 14:297 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:35.

¹⁰⁶ LW 14:298–99, 304 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:36–37, 41.

¹⁰⁷ LW 9:111–13; 26:133; 35:374.

Conclusion

The nature of sinful human beings is to love themselves more than God and all things, and to use all things including God as a means to serve their own desires. This ultimately leads to frustration, when God and his world do not confirm with our sinful desires, and we discover our inability to furnish ourselves with joy. God on the other hand calls us to love him and his will without thought of ourselves. When we die to ourselves in this way, the paradoxical result is that we find joy as a byproduct, as we discover that God and his will are good.

Contemporary Application

As we have seen, Luther's understanding of the first commandment is that it demands that we recognize the Creator as the true center of gravity around which life must revolve. Not only does this mean recognizing him as the source of every blessing, so that we give all thanks to him and place all confidence in him as the one who provides for our needs, it also means recognizing him as the goal to which all our desires must be directed. This demands a radical reordering of the normal *modus operandi* for our fallen human nature. It means giving up our attempts to place ourselves at the center of the universe and to demand that it revolve around us and our self-centered desires. Only then will we discover the joy of life as God created it to be.

So how does our society shape up when we examine it in this light?

Our Fundamental Self-Interest

It is not hard to gather empirical evidence from contemporary society for the pervasive nature of human self-love. Witness for instance the success of free market economics, which assumes that humans are self-interested and tries to balance out competing interests, as opposed to communist economics, which assumes greater altruism and community spirit. As Langdon Gilkey points out, politicians, advertising people, lawyers, policemen, and economists all know

that people act out of self-interest with great predictability, and devise their policies on the basis of this knowledge.¹⁰⁸ Or as the Duke psychologists Michael and Lise Wallach point out, the vast majority of clinical and experimental psychologists need no convincing that humans act out of self-interest. The far more difficult task is to convince them—as the Wallachs try to do—that human beings can also be genuinely altruistic.¹⁰⁹

In his book *Shantung Compound*, Gilkey relates his experience as a prisoner in a Japanese internment camp during World War II. This experience dramatically revealed to him the self-interest at the heart of human nature. Gilkey was raised on modern liberal assumptions about the goodness of human nature, and came into the camp convinced that old ideas about “fallen existence” and “original sin” were outdated. He thought people were basically moral and rational, and in a crisis their innate goodness would come shining through. What he discovered was that under the pressure of living with little more than they needed to survive the veneer of easy virtue and generosity fell away to reveal a deeper self-interest. While people did still show good humor and concern for each other, this rarely extended to genuine sacrifice, such as sharing precious commodities like food and living space in more than a token way.¹¹⁰

One anecdote Gilkey tells to illustrate this involves a violent dispute that broke out when the American Red Cross delivered to the camp 1,550 packages filled with food and other valuable supplies. The Japanese commander decided that each of the 1,450 prisoners would receive one package, except for the 200 Americans, who would each receive 1 ½. Yet most of the Americans were convinced that since the packages came from America they should each

¹⁰⁸ Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 93–95.

¹⁰⁹ Michael and Lise Wallach, *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness: The Error of Egoism in Theory and Therapy* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1983), 1–29, 196–225.

¹¹⁰ Gilkey, *Shantung Compound*, 89–95.

receive 7 ½ packages while the rest of the prisoners received none. They protested so loudly that the commander decided to withhold all the packages until he received a ruling from Tokyo (where his superiors decided that each prisoner should receive 1 package and the remaining 100 should go to other camps). What stunned Gilkey was not only the callousness of his compatriots towards their fellow prisoners, but also that few of them could recognize their attempts to hoard the packages for themselves as selfishness. The vast majority had no difficulty coming up with rationalizations for why they had a moral right to this wealth. Incidents such as this convinced Gilkey that humans remain moral enough to be hypocritical, and to concoct excuses for their selfish behavior. Yet this just reveals that we are so thoroughly bent towards serving our own welfare that we enlist reason, religion and morality in this endeavor. This means we are hardly able to recognize our selfishness, let alone to extricate ourselves from it.¹¹¹

The Culture of Me

One trend a number of scholars have observed in contemporary American society is a rise in narcissistic behaviors and attitudes. People on average have become more focused on the pursuit of their desires, and less constrained by moral concerns or by loyalty to other people. A generation ago Philip Rieff spoke about the rise of “therapeutic man,” who lives for bread and circuses, and for his own subjective wellbeing.¹¹² He predicted in 1966 that religion would not disappear in the future, but would be pressed into the service of therapeutic man, who desires to be pleased rather than saved. Religion would therefore not focus on right doctrine, but on doctrines that amount to permission for people to live as they please.¹¹³ As we will see when we

¹¹¹ Ibid., 96–116.

¹¹² Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 1–65, 199–223.

¹¹³ Ibid., 19–20.

look at Christian Smith's recent studies of religious beliefs and attitudes, this prediction has proven remarkably insightful. Or in 1978 Christopher Lasch observed that American culture was becoming increasingly Narcissistic.¹¹⁴ Thirty years later there is increasing data to back up this claim. The research psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell summarize this data,¹¹⁵ and conclude that since Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism*, narcissism has grown in American culture in ways that Lasch could never have imagined.¹¹⁶

The best known characteristic of narcissism, as described by modern psychology, is that it involves an inflated view of oneself that bears little relation to one's actual abilities or achievements.¹¹⁷ We will talk about this aspect of narcissism in the next chapter when we talk about self-justification. For now we will focus on another characteristic of narcissism, its self-absorption. When Lasch talks about the growing narcissism in American society, he focuses largely on the tendency for people to live simply for themselves and their subjective feelings of wellbeing, so that they act out on their impulses and desires with little thought of any loyalty to anything or anyone beyond themselves.¹¹⁸ Twenge and Campbell draw attention to the sense of entitlement that goes with narcissism. Narcissists tend to think they are entitled to have

¹¹⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 3–51.

¹¹⁵ For instance, they report on data from 16,275 college students who filled out the Narcissistic Personality Inventory between 1979 and 2006. This measures narcissistic traits on a sliding scale. They found that by 2006 two thirds of students scored above the 1979–85 average, a 30% increase in just over 20 years (Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* [New York: Free Press, 2009], 30–31). They also report on a study conducted by the National Institutes of Health that asked a representative sample of over 35,000 Americans if they had ever experienced the symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder during their lifetimes. This is the more extreme, clinically diagnosable form of narcissism. They found that 6.2% of Americans had suffered from NPD at some point in their lives, but this included just 3.2% of those over 65 and a massive 9.4% of those in their twenties (Ibid., 35–36)

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 19–20.

¹¹⁸ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 6–13.

everything they want. They will frequently use other people to get what they want or explode with rage when they do not get it, with little concern for those they hurt along the way.¹¹⁹

This trend in contemporary society to be more narcissistic and to pursue our desires in an unrestricted manner does not prove that people today are more self-interested than people in previous ages who showed more discipline and restraint.¹²⁰ From Luther's perspective, it may just mean people have become more crass and obvious in their Epicureanism. Yet it does make the self-interest of human nature more evident, and reveals to us some of the consequences of trying to construct our lives on the basis of the pursuit of our desires.

Luther predicts that the unrestrained pursuit of our own peace and happiness will not lead to peace and happiness. This prediction has been borne out in contemporary society. As Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn wrote in 2006, "we embrace a gospel of personal happiness, defined as the unbridled pursuit of impulse. Yet we remain profoundly unhappy."¹²¹ Twenge and Campbell refer to narcissism as "the fast food of the soul." It tastes great in the short term, but in the long run has dire consequences.¹²² Twenge adds the following subtitle to her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. She reports on data that indicate that rates of depression, suicide, and anxiety have all increased dramatically amongst young Americans in the last few decades.¹²³ This rise in

¹¹⁹ Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 19–20, 196–97, 230–43.

¹²⁰ Cf. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 32.

¹²¹ Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, introduction to *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*, by Philip Rieff (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), .

¹²² Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 259.

¹²³ Twenge reports that of Americans born before 1915, only 1–2% had a major depressive episode during their lifetimes, even though they lived through the great depression and two world wars. Today the figure is more like 15–20%, although some studies put the figure closer to 50%, and the rate is higher among young people. One 1990s study showed that 21% of teens between 15 and 17 had already experienced major depression (Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* [New York: Free Press, 2006], 105). In 2002 alone, 8.5% of Americans took an antidepressant at some

anxiety and misery in our society has coincided with the rise in narcissistic attitudes and the unbridled pursuit of our desires. This does not prove that one has caused the other, but is extremely suggestive. If giving free reign to our desires was supposed to make us happy and carefree, it has not succeeded. The Prozac soaked minds of the 21st century support Luther's contention that this is not the path to joy.

Christianity that Reflects this Focus on Personal Wellbeing

This idol of self-interest is also evident among people who confess faith in the Triune God. All too often they try to combine faith in God with this idol. Luther suggest that "Satan readily lets God be the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, some little deity, and he permits Him to be enthroned above the cherubim, but that he should be God alone, this Satan opposes."¹²⁴ The constant struggle for the Old Testament prophets was not simply to get the Israelites to worship the Lord, but to get them to worship him alone, rather than thinking they could worship other gods as well.¹²⁵ The situation is no different today. For instance, according to the 2008 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than three quarters of Americans claim membership in a Christian denomination,¹²⁶ and 39% claim to attend worship services at least once a week.¹²⁷

time (Ibid., 106), and in 2003, 16.9% of high school students admitted they had seriously considered committing suicide in the past year (Ibid., 108). Some people have suggested that one factor in this rise in depression rates is an increase in the rate at which it is reported. Yet researchers have concluded that the trend is too large and consistent across studies for this to be the primary factor (Ibid., 105–6). Twenge also collected data on thousands of college students and children aged 9–17 who completed measures of anxiety between the 1950s and 1990s. She found that the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s. With children the trend was even more dramatic. The change was so large that normal children in the 1980s reported higher levels of anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s (Ibid., 107).

¹²⁴ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:317 = WA 31.ii:235.4–6.

¹²⁵ E.g. 1 Kings 11:1–8; 18:21; Jer 7:9–10.

¹²⁶ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant." June 2008. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (accessed Jan. 28, 2010), 110.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 117.

Yet a 2005 survey by the Barna Group found that only 15% of Americans considered faith in God to be their highest priority in life, including only 23% of those who attend Protestant churches. Despite this, when pastors were asked to estimate how many of their people saw their faith as their highest priority, the average pastor put the figure at 70%. These results show that 85% of the American population and 77% of people who attend Protestant churches are self-confessed idolaters, and most pastors are out of touch with the scale of the problem.¹²⁸ Therefore the challenge for the church is not merely to understand the idolatry of the surrounding culture so we can proclaim the gospel into this culture. The challenge is also to resist this idolatry ourselves, so it does not constantly undermine our faith and our ministry. Only then can we denounce the idols of our culture without hypocrisy, and show people a genuine alternative.

Moralistic therapeutic deism. At the top of the list of idols in our culture is the pursuit of personal happiness. This is not only true for those outside the church. The same is true for those inside. The vast majority of religious believers in America are convinced that the purpose of religion is to serve their own wellbeing.

This is one of the major findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, the most comprehensive study of religion and spirituality among young Americans ever undertaken. This study looked at the religious beliefs and practices of American teenagers in 2002–2003, and then followed up the same group of people five years later when they were young adults. It involved both a nationwide survey to gain quantitative data, and hundreds of in-depth face-to-face interviews to provide a qualitative picture to go along with this data.¹²⁹ One of the most

¹²⁸ Barna Group, “Surveys Show Pastors Claim Congregants Are Deeply Committed to God But Congregants Deny It!” Jan. 10, 2006, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/165-surveys-show-pastors-claim-congregants-are-deeply-committed-to-god-but-congregants-deny-it> (accessed Jan. 28, 2010).

¹²⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6–7, 292; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell,

significant findings of this study is that although the vast majority of young Americans identify themselves as Christians, this is not the creed that most of them espouse when they are asked to articulate for themselves the content of their faith. Instead, the dominant religion among young Americans—even among those who regularly attend Christian congregations—is not orthodox Christianity, but what the researchers call moralistic therapeutic deism.¹³⁰ The researchers found that although many young Americans are worshipping members of a religious tradition—evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, Hindu, or whatever—they have mostly failed to absorb the substantive content of the historical tradition to which they belong. Instead, the core of their faith is moralistic therapeutic deism. Some elements of their faith tradition are usually mixed in, but without these elements changing the core content.¹³¹ Furthermore, the study found that most of these young people learnt this faith from their parents or other adults who modeled it for them.¹³² Therefore it is safe to assume that this is not only the dominant religion among this age group, but is widely popular in the American population as a whole. The researchers outline the creed of moralistic therapeutic deism as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–4.

¹³⁰ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–71; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 154–56.

¹³¹ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163–67, 171.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 166, 170, 261; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155, 285.

5. Good people go to heaven when they die.¹³³

In subsequent chapters we will tease out the moralistic and deistic elements of this creed. For now we will focus on its therapeutic aspect.

The researchers found that when young people were asked to talk about their faith, they made few references to the traditional content of the Christian faith, such as sin, repentance, grace, forgiveness, salvation, the Triune God, fear, love, or trust in God, or love for one's neighbor. Instead, their words focused on personal happiness, feeling good about oneself, and feeling personally satisfied and fulfilled.¹³⁴ The researchers conclude that the primary purpose of moralistic therapeutic deism is to provide therapeutic benefits to its adherents. They write,

This not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to solve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.¹³⁵

The god of moralistic therapeutic deism is a god who makes few demands that might prevent us from doing what we want. Indeed, he cannot be demanding, since his job is to solve our problems and make us feel good about ourselves. When he fails to deliver his promised therapeutic benefits we have the right to feel grumpy with him.¹³⁶ As one 16-year-old mainline Protestant boy complained in his interview, "Well, God is Almighty, I guess. But I think he's on vacation right now because of all the crap that's happening in the world."¹³⁷ Or as one 14-year-

¹³³ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162–63; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 154.

¹³⁴ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 167–68.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

old conservative Protestant boy said, “God is an overall ruler who controls everything, so like, if I’m depressed or something and things aren’t going my way I blame him.”¹³⁸

This suggests an obvious reason why an outward profession of Christianity often does not result in a transformed life. Those who have co-opted Christ’s name in service of the idol of personal happiness are still shaped by the same primary commitment as the secular people around them. Therefore we have no reason to expect their lives to look much different.

Extrinsic vs. intrinsic faith. Just as narcissistic self-interest has not yielded greater wellbeing for society as a whole, it has not yielded greater wellbeing for religious people either. This has been shown by studies in the psychology of religion. When people use religion primarily for the sake of personal therapeutic benefits they have what is called in the psychology of religion an extrinsic faith. Those with an intrinsic faith treat their faith as a supreme value in its own right, whereas those with an extrinsic faith take a utilitarian approach to it. They use it as a means for gaining other things such as social standing, interpersonal connections, self-justification, and personal therapeutic benefits. Studies that have examined this distinction have found that whereas an intrinsic faith correlates positively with measures of mental health, extrinsic faith correlates negatively. Those with an intrinsic faith on average demonstrate more self-control, greater personal adjustment, a greater sense of wellbeing, more emotional stability, less neurosis, less fear of death, and less anxiety than the rest of the population. The reverse is true for those with an extrinsic faith.¹³⁹ This suggests that Luther’s distinction between loving God for his own sake and using him for personal gain is highly significant even in terms of

¹³⁸ Ibid., 165.

¹³⁹ Eva Jonas and Peter Fischer, “Terror Management and Religion: Evidence That Intrinsic Religiousness Mitigates Worldview Defense Following Mortality Salience,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91 (2006): 554–55.

earthly benefits. Those who seek first the kingdom of God by loving him above all else are likely to reap additional rewards even in this life. Yet when people use God as an idol for the sake of their own wellbeing, this attempt is likely to be counter-productive even in this world.

The church that panders to the idol of the self. So what part has the church played in the rise of moralistic therapeutic deism? Is it merely that the church has failed to communicate the content of the faith effectively enough, so that people have formed their own view of God based on the messages of the culture and their own idolatrous hearts? Or has the church actively contributed to the rise of this faith?

This is a question each church has to ask for itself, since the church is too diverse to paint all congregations or denominations with the same brush. Yet a case can be made that several trends in contemporary Christianity in America have contributed to this therapeutic mindset.

One trend has been the use of human-centered psychology to inform pastoral practice. E. Brooks Holifield, professor of American church history at Emory University in Atlanta, has chronicled trends in pastoral care among American Protestant clergy from the early 17th century until the end of the 1960s.¹⁴⁰ He suggests that over this time the focus of conversations between pastors and their parishioners shifted from an emphasis on repentance and otherworldly salvation to psychological wellbeing and self-realization.¹⁴¹ He tries to identify the ideal that shaped pastoral care in different periods of America's history, and suggests that this ideal shifted from self-denial to self-love, from self-love to self-culture, from self-culture to self-mastery, and from self-mastery to self-realization.¹⁴² Holifield then suggests that this transition in the consciousness

¹⁴⁰ E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 11–13.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11, 355–56.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 12, 351.

of Protestant clergy from a focus on eschatological salvation to a focus on self-fulfillment in this world has played a significant hand in the rise of the therapeutic culture Rieff describes.¹⁴³

L. Gregory Jones, the dean of Duke Divinity School, gets to the heart of the problem when he says that when the church adopts the therapeutic mindset and tries to translate the gospel into psychological categories, it loses the eschatological focus of the gospel.¹⁴⁴ The therapeutically focused church easily adopts language that sounds like the gospel: community, confession, brokenness, compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, peace, healing, and so on.¹⁴⁵ Yet when sin becomes psychological brokenness instead of rebellion against a God who will judge us on the last day, we have significantly reduced its seriousness. When we are urged to forgive in order to restore our own emotional wellbeing, instead of because forgiveness is the means by which God builds his eschatological community, we have distorted forgiveness. When the goal of pastoral care becomes psychological healing, instead of conformity to Christ's image by the power of his Spirit, we have shortchanged our people by allowing them to settle for a goal that is a distant second-best. Ancient pastoral care tools such as confession and absolution, repentance, forgiveness, prayer, thanksgiving, guidance from God's word, the practice of charity, the

Twenge and Campbell point out that self-actualization, at least as Abraham Maslow defined it, means reaching one's full potential, and includes sharing one's benevolence and sympathy with other people. Maslow placed self-actualization at the apex of his hierarchy of needs and believed it was extremely difficult to achieve. Yet one rung below it on his hierarchy he placed self-esteem, which is much easier to achieve. Twenge and Campbell then note that as the human potential movement evolved from the 1960s into the 70's and beyond the notion of self-actualization was eclipsed by the much easier concept of self-esteem. Now self-actualization is rarely discussed, but talk about self-esteem is everywhere (Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 60). Perhaps if Holifield had continued his account past the '60s he would have included another category, self-esteem.

¹⁴³ Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America*, 12, 16.

¹⁴⁴ L. Gregory Jones, "The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States," in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 107–12.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 102–5.

sacraments, and blessing can all bring psychological peace and healing, but they resist being reduced to their psychological impact.¹⁴⁶

Another trend in contemporary western Christianity has been to focus on people's felt needs as the hook for getting them into church. For instance Rick Warren, a popular author and leader in the church growth movement, encourages evangelism focused on people's felt needs.¹⁴⁷ He suggests that if a church is to be successful in evangelism, every sermon should begin with the felt needs of the unchurched to attract their attention and draw them into the biblical message.¹⁴⁸ He also suggests that this was Jesus' approach to evangelism. He writes, "People crowded around Jesus because he met their needs—physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and financial. He did not judge some needs as being 'more legitimate' than others."¹⁴⁹ "Whenever Jesus encountered a person he'd begin with *their* hurts, needs, and interests."¹⁵⁰

When Warren says this, he overlooks all the gospel stories in which Jesus refused to give people what they were seeking or directed them away from their felt needs to what he judged to be truly important. For instance, in the case where a man asked him, "tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me," Jesus refused, and instead responded with a lesson on the dangers of covetousness and the importance of seeking true treasure in heaven.¹⁵¹ It is not hard to multiply

¹⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 106–7.

¹⁴⁷ In this Warren is by no means alone. For example, Christian A. Schwarz, head of the Institute for Natural Church Development in Germany, proposes eight "quality characteristics" that he claims—if they are all present in a congregation to a sufficiently high degree—will guarantee that the congregation will grow numerically (Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* [St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2000], 40–41). One of these quality characteristics is "need-oriented evangelism," which focuses on the questions and needs of non-Christians (*Ibid.*, 34–35).

¹⁴⁸ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 293–96.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁵¹ Luke 12:13–34.

such examples.¹⁵² In fairness to Warren, he tries to counterbalance these statements by saying that the felt needs of seekers should not drive the church's agenda,¹⁵³ and we are called to live for God's purposes rather than our own self-actualization.¹⁵⁴ Yet Warren virtually admits that this is a bait and switch. He suggests that it does not matter how selfish our motives are when we ask Christ to save us, since he can change our motives later.¹⁵⁵

If we are to judge by the prevalence of moralistic therapeutic deism within the American population, people have done a better job of swallowing the bait than the church has done of effecting the switch. The problem with need-oriented evangelism is that one of the greatest needs we have is to be less focused on our own needs. Need-oriented evangelism plays on a half-truth. The gospel does ultimately fulfill our deepest needs, and Christ does call us to love our neighbors and to care for their needs. Yet at the same time the law addresses our preoccupation with our own needs, and calls us to die to this sinful self-focus. Jesus did go around caring for the needs of others, but he never tried to effect a bait and switch. Instead, when he called people to follow him he was completely upfront that this means counting the cost,¹⁵⁶ dying to oneself, bearing a cross,¹⁵⁷ taking last place,¹⁵⁸ and surrendering our attachment to earthly peace and wellbeing for the sake of God's kingdom.¹⁵⁹ The potential danger with need-oriented evangelism

¹⁵² E.g. Matt 12:38–42; Mark 10:17–22, 35–45; Luke 9:57–62; 10:38–42; John 6:15.

¹⁵³ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 79–80.

¹⁵⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 17–18.

¹⁵⁵ Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 219.

¹⁵⁶ Luke 14:25–33.

¹⁵⁷ Matt 16:24–25.

¹⁵⁸ Mark 10:35–45; Luke 14:7–14.

¹⁵⁹ Matt 6:19–33; 10:34–39; John 16:33.

is that, taken to an extreme, it can muddy the distinction between law and gospel, and present people with a false gospel focused on the fulfillment of the felt needs of their sinful nature.

This becomes especially clear when it comes to a third trend in American Christianity, the prosperity gospel. Popular preachers such as Joel Osteen have proclaimed a gospel of self-esteem and earthly success. Osteen tells us that we cannot love others until we love ourselves,¹⁶⁰ and therefore we must learn to like ourselves by refusing to listen to accusing voices,¹⁶¹ speaking words of affirmation to ourselves to build up our self-esteem,¹⁶² having confidence in ourselves,¹⁶³ and regarding ourselves as champions.¹⁶⁴ Then we can live the lives of victory and prosperity in every area of our lives that God wants for us,¹⁶⁵ since “God didn’t make you to be average. God made you to excel.”¹⁶⁶ This is a message the idolatrous flesh can readily accept.

At first glance these errors appear difficult to avoid, since they all play on half-truths. Surely it is legitimate to talk about the psychological benefits of the gospel? After all, as Luther emphasizes, the New Testament frequently speaks about the peace and assurance the gospel brings to hearts and minds. Surely it is legitimate to talk about the gospel as the answer to human need? How else can we present it in its sweetness? And surely it is legitimate to talk about acceptance and victory in Christ? Yet two dangers need to be avoided. The first is that law and gospel become blurred into each other instead of being properly distinguished. This is what Osteen does when he runs two messages into each other: we can accept ourselves because of

¹⁶⁰ Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (Large print ed.; Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 176.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153–88.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 189–206.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207–26.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁶⁵ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Time Warner Book Group, 2004), 82–90.

God's mercy in Christ, and we can accept ourselves because God has made us to be star performers.¹⁶⁷ The second danger is that the eschatological message of salvation gets distorted into a message of earthly success and prosperity here and now. This is what psychologized Christianity tends to do, and what Osteen does with his message of prosperity. The prosperity God intends for us cannot sidestep repentance or the death of the self-focused sinful nature, nor can the "little while" that Luther saw as so important to faith be forgotten. Otherwise we are pandering to the idolatrous sinful nature, which does not want to die and live by faith, but wants immediate gratification. When Christianity has balked on these two issues it has contributed to the rise of the therapeutic mindset. This in turn will ultimately lead to misery, not joy.

Are People Really that Selfish?

Yet despite all the evidence that fallen human beings are self-interested, is it really true that they *always* act out of self-interest as Luther asserts? The most obvious way to challenge Luther's view would be to find examples of genuine altruism among non-Christians. Such examples are not hard to find. For instance, one of the best known humanitarians in my home country is an eye doctor called Fred Hollows, who was honored as Australian of the Year in 1990.¹⁶⁸ When Dr Hollows realized that many people around the world were needlessly going blind from treatable diseases like trachoma and cataracts, he dedicated his life to giving the gift of sight to these people. This meant travelling to many of the poorest and most remote regions of the world to treat people who could never afford to pay for his services. Yet Dr Hollows is someone who turned his back on the Christian faith of his youth, and died as a self-professed

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶⁷ Osteen, *Become a Better You*, 153–226.

¹⁶⁸ Fred Hollows Foundation, "About Fred," <http://www.hollows.org/AboutFred/> (accessed May 18, 2010).

atheist.¹⁶⁹ So does Luther's views on the ubiquitous egoism of unbelievers really hold up when confronted with people like Fred Hollows?

I contend that it does, for two reasons. First, Luther had no difficulty acknowledging that humans in their fallen state can exhibit what he calls civic righteousness. They can be kind and virtuous in their outward dealings with other people.¹⁷⁰ Luther even refers to such righteousness as a gift of God.¹⁷¹ Second, when he talks about ubiquitous self-interest he is not saying that this always displays itself in a crass and obvious manner. He is not saying there is no such thing as natural human sympathy or affection, or that people in their fallen state have no genuine concern for the welfare of anyone but themselves. What he is saying is that those who are outside of Christ will ultimately use even the most noble things of which we humans can boast for self-serving purposes. Luther says that whatever the saints do is sanctified, even when they fall into sin, and that God works all things together for their good, even their failings. For instance, when they fall into sin, this teaches them humility, and leads them to cry out to God for help, so that in this way their faith is increased. Yet the opposite is also true. "With the crooked Thou dost show Thyself perverse."¹⁷² Luther interprets this to mean that for the ungodly even their good works and greatest gifts work together for them for evil, since they misuse God's gifts. They do not use their good works to glorify God, but instead take credit for themselves, and thereby become more proud, self-secure, and inclined to act like their own little gods.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Joe Hildebrand, "Fred Hollows Remembered at Ceremony in Bourke," *The Daily Telegraph*, Feb. 11, 2008, <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw-act/a-vision-well-remembered/story-e6freuzi-111115519873> (accessed May 18, 2010).

¹⁷⁰ LW 27:219–20; 33:270; 35:385; 46:99–100; WA 2:43–44.

¹⁷¹ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:4 = WA 40.i:40–41.

¹⁷² Ps 18:26, as cited in LW 3:335.

¹⁷³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:333–36 = WA 43:114–16.

In the case of Fred Hollows a third factor is also involved—the impact of Christianity in shaping western values. The actions of Fred Hollows would neither have been found nor valued among pre-Christian Romans.

One way to unpack this further is to consider the work of Robert Spitzer, the Jesuit priest and former president of Gonzaga University. Spitzer has examined the long tradition of western philosophy to learn what the greatest human minds have regarded as the path to happiness and fulfillment.¹⁷⁴ On the basis of this study he has identified four levels of things that bring satisfaction into our lives. This scale moves from the lowest level, which brings gratification that is immediate and often quite intense but is shallow and short lived, up to the highest level, where satisfaction may not always be so intense but is deeper and more lasting.¹⁷⁵

The first level is basic physical stimulation.¹⁷⁶ I see the hamburger, I eat it, and it gives me pleasure.

The second is ego gratification. This involves bringing the universe outside ourselves under our control in some way to gratify our egos. When we win, achieve our goals, or gain power, admiration, or popularity, it makes us happy.¹⁷⁷ I crush you on the tennis court, or I succeed in business, and it feels good.

Unlike level one and two, which involve basic, obvious, tangible gratification, level three and four deal with the intangibles of life. They involve seeking after transcendent goods, which Spitzer refers to as Love, Truth, Goodness, Beauty, and Being.¹⁷⁸

Level three involves looking for the good beyond the self and contributing to the world around us because we want our lives to matter and we want to make a positive difference. It

¹⁷⁴ Robert J. Spitzer, Robin A. Bernhoft, and Camille E. De Blasi, *Healing the Culture: A Commonsense Philosophy of Happiness, Freedom, and the Life Issues* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 58–62; Robert J. Spitzer, “Toward a Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement: Personhood, Rights, and ‘Purpose in Life,’” Jan. 27, 2006, The Maclaurin Institute, http://www.maclaurin.org/mp3_group.php?type=MacLaurin+Campus+Lectures (accessed Jan. 17, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi, *Healing the Culture*, 61–62, 65.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 64–66; Spitzer, “Towards a Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement.”

¹⁷⁷ Spitzer, “Towards a Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement.”

¹⁷⁸ Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi, *Healing the Culture*, 62.

involves things like love and service towards others and striving for a better world in which there is more love, truth, justice, beauty, and so on.¹⁷⁹ Spitzer refers to the work of Victor Frankl, a psychologist who survived the Nazi concentration camps. Frankl observed that there were two basic groups among his fellow prisoners. One group could find no higher reason to live apart from level one or two gratification, and since this was all taken away from them in the camps they fared poorly. Many of them staked all their hopes on the Allies liberating them by Christmas, and when this did not happen they gave up and died.¹⁸⁰ Yet those prisoners who could find a higher reason outside themselves for which to live, such as “If I get out of here I’ll never let this happen again” or “I’ve got to find my kids” or “this other prisoner needs my help,” they tended to survive, and often went on to do great things.¹⁸¹

Spitzer then observes that humans do not just want a measure of goodness, truth, love, beauty, and being, such as can be found in earthly things. Instead, they want absolute knowledge, and unconditional love, and perfect justice and beauty, and being that is absolutely solid, and they always end up dissatisfied when they are forced to settle for something less. This drives the artist or philosopher or scientist or lover or social activist to keep seeking for more beauty or truth or love or justice, and to be dissatisfied with the imperfect measure of these things that can be found on earth. The fourth level of happiness for Spitzer comes when we stop trying to extract these transcendent goods from the imperfect things of this world and seek after Truth itself, Love

¹⁷⁹ Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi, *Healing the Culture*, 62, 65, 77, 91.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 97.

¹⁸¹ Spitzer, “Towards a Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement.”

This is Spitzer’s summary of Viktor Frankl’s book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. In the first half of the book Frankl relates his concentration camp experiences. He observes that the prisoners needed a rich inner life, a firm grasp on their moral and spiritual selves, and a purpose to live for if they were to both survive and resist the degenerating influences of the camps (Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* [New York: Washington Square Press, 1985], 55–64, 70, 83, 86–87, 90–101, 110–15).

itself, Goodness itself, Beauty itself, and Being itself. For Spitzer, this means seeking for God.¹⁸²

The purpose of this excursus is this. When Luther speaks about human self-interest, it should not be assumed that he is merely talking about crass self-interest, such as one finds at level one and two in Spitzer's scheme. He is also talking about the highest, most refined, and most spiritual kinds of self-interest. In order to make the case that humans do not always act out of self-interest, the Wallachs make a distinction between what they call trivial and non-trivial self-interest. They suggest that egoism is trivial, and should not really be regarded as such, if we find happiness or pleasure from pursuing higher things like justice or the common good.¹⁸³ They then argue that such enlightened pursuits are the best way to serve our own psychological wellbeing.¹⁸⁴ This is an admission that these enlightened pursuits can be self-serving, even if the Wallachs do not think they deserve that label. This distinction between trivial and non-trivial egoism is a significant distinction when it comes to earthly matters. Our communities need more people who find joy in seeking the common good rather than merely their own individual good. Yet Luther rejects the value of such a distinction when it comes to our standing before God. *Coram Deo* there is no trivial self-interest as far as he is concerned. We are called to honor God and serve our neighbors, not to pursue self-interest. It is Christ who looks out for our interest by seeking us through the gospel. Spitzer is more Augustinian in his approach. His goal is to get people to lift their eyes from lower kinds of self-interest to higher and more refined types of gratification, and in this way to bring people as close as possible to the point where they can come to faith in God.¹⁸⁵ For Luther there is no smooth path of self-interest leading to God.

¹⁸² Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi, *Healing the Culture*, 94–95, 104–8; Spitzer, “Towards a Philosophy of the Pro-Life Movement.”

¹⁸³ Wallach, *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness*, 200–202.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 227–74.

¹⁸⁵ Spitzer, Bernhoft, and De Blasi, *Healing the Culture*, 104–17.

Instead, pursuing enlightened self-interest may just make us more secure Pharisees. In Keyes' terminology, pursuing enlightened self-interest apart from faith in Christ means pursuing a far idol that we hope will bring purpose, meaning, and coherence to our lives. This is just as much an expression of rebellion against God as pursuing a near idol. For Luther, this means pursuing self-justification. Luther does not regard fallen human beings as brute beasts who only seek after crass pleasures. He acknowledges that they also have moral and spiritual concerns, and can do noble things, since they still retain some knowledge of God's law in their consciences. Yet one of their most powerful spiritual concerns is for justification, and this means that even when they do noble things their self-interest is revealed. Instead of giving all credit for their good works to God, they try to use them to justify themselves before him. Therefore they use even these best things in the worst way.¹⁸⁶ They use them to justify their own existence, win glory for themselves, and settle their consciences. This is all self-interested, even when it looks selfless. This is the topic of our next chapter.

Conclusion

Luther's challenge to the idolatrous self-interest at the heart of fallen human nature provides a radical challenge to our therapeutic culture of me. It also challenges the church's efforts to baptize this self interest and pander to the sinful nature. Life cannot revolve around us and our desires, and we only heap up misery when we try to force it to do so. True joy is not found in selfishly pursuing our own interests, not even in a spiritual way. Like all forms of idolatry, this self-love proves empty in the end. Instead, joy is a byproduct of forgetting about ourselves and delighting only in the Lord. He is the one who will then provide us with joy and every good thing by grace—without the aid of our efforts to strive for what we want or need.

¹⁸⁶ *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), LW 31:41 = WA 1:358.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE SECOND ARTICLE: THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE SINNER

Introduction

In the previous two chapters we examined how the idolatrous human heart sets up idols as substitutes for the Creator. In this chapter we will discuss how fallen human beings create idols to take the place of the Redeemer. Luther's teaching is simple: it is Christ's job to justify us with a righteousness that is not our own.¹ If we refuse to be justified by him we will inevitably try to justify ourselves. This means setting up our righteousness as an idol in his place.²

The goal of this chapter is to challenge the reader to see the ubiquitous nature of this form of idolatry and to recognize different forms of it for what they are. Just as those who will not trust in the Creator to provide for their earthly needs are compelled to find substitutes for his provision, so those who refuse to be justified through Christ are compelled to find some other means of justification. God's law, which is written on their hearts and is an inescapable part of the created order, demands that they do so. They will not have peace of heart and mind until its accusing voice is silenced, and therefore they must construct an idol to take Christ's place.

One form of self-justification should be obvious to anyone who has any familiarity with Reformation teaching, and that is the self-righteousness of those who seek to win God's approval and save themselves on the last day through their moral good works or religious piety. Since this

¹ LW 12:328, 367, 390; 16:120; 22:157; 31:297, 299.

² LW 9:104; 13:374–75; 14:202; 16:249, 262–63; 17:401; 18:167; 22:456; 26:257–59; 27:88; 31:350; 51:17.

is the main form of self-justification Luther attacks, and is still prevalent today, I will spend some time addressing it. I will demonstrate that what appears very pious—all kinds of activity aimed at winning God’s favor—is for Luther the height of impious idolatry, since it puts the human self in Christ’s place. Yet I won’t spend overly long on it, since works-righteousness has received extensive treatment in the theological literature of the Protestant world, and examples of it are easy to identify. Instead, I will spend the majority of this chapter attempting to demonstrate two things about self-justification that are far less obvious.

The first is that works-righteous legalism is not the only strategy people can adopt in their quest to justify themselves—they can also attempt to deny or silence God’s law. As we noted in chapter 1, Tim Keller identifies two ways people can attempt to be their own savior. They can try to be really good and keep all the rules, or they can be really bad and attempt to write their own rules. Likewise, Luther identified two basic strategies for self-justification: the strategy of the legalists and the strategy of the antinomians. Unless we are able to recognize antinomianism for what it is, an attempt at self-justification, we will fail to discern the mechanism by which enormous numbers of people around us justify themselves and therefore feel no need for Christ.³

The second is that it is not just religious people who attempt to justify themselves before God and his law, but secular people do too. At first this may seem absurd, since thoroughly secular people do not even acknowledge that there is a God. Yet I will contend that not only are they still answerable to God’s law, on some level they know this and feel compelled to deal with this knowledge. Just like religious people they can deal with it in one of two ways. They can try to be good, and then say, “Since I am a good person, not only should other people think well of me, but if there is a God or higher power, then he/she/it should smile upon me.” Or else, they can

³ Cf. Keyes’ discussion of Freud in chapter 1, page 14.

be unapologetically bad. They can deal with their knowledge of God's law through vehement denial. They can refuse to admit that there is any God to whom they are accountable, and rewrite his law to form their own, claiming all the while that their law is better than his. Both are forms of self-justification, which prevent people from hearing the gospel as good news.

The one thing a person cannot do is simply ignore the whole question of justification before God as if it is irrelevant to them. As Luther concludes on the basis of Romans 1 and 2, there are no true atheists in the world, since a natural knowledge of God and his law has been imprinted on the human heart. Luther writes,

Such a light and such a perception is innate in the hearts of all men; and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished. There are, to be sure, some people, for instance, the Epicureans, Pliny, and the like, who deny this with their lips. But they do it by force and want to quench this light in their hearts. They are like people who purposely stop their ears or pinch their eyes shut to close out sound and sight. However, they do not succeed in this; their conscience tells them otherwise. For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they know something about God, "because God has shown it to them."⁴

This means that even thoroughly secular people cannot escape the voice of conscience that tells them they stand condemned by God and need to be justified before him. They have to deal with this guilty knowledge in some way.

The material from psychology in the second half of the chapter is intended to do two things. First it is to stimulate thought regarding what self-justification might look like for secular people. Second, it is to challenge the reader to consider that what often appears to be a secular activity—justification before the court of human opinion regarding mundane matters—cannot be easily separated from justification before God. Those who know they have been justified by God can say, "It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?"⁵ They may still seek human approval, yet

⁴ *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text (1526)*, LW 19:53–54 = WA 19:205.35–206.6.

⁵ Rom 8:33–34.

without the same compulsive need, since this should now be a penultimate rather than an ultimate issue for them. Yet those who do not have a secure knowledge of God's approval will be compelled to seek approval from other sources. Then, even if they obtain it, they will not be able to silence the nagging knowledge that this is not enough, since God is watching and his higher law stands over their lives. Therefore their need for justification will have no end, and we would expect to see in them a compulsive need for validation. This is ultimately a need for God's approval, even though they seek to fulfill it in the secular domain. This is what we see in psychology, that humans have a compulsive need to be justified. I would like to challenge the reader to consider that the level of drivenness with which secular people seek justification cannot be explained purely in terms of the desire to secure favors from other people by winning their approval. Often our attempts at self-justification achieve just the opposite. As we try to pass the buck, to show why our victims deserve the poor treatment we give them, or to demonstrate why we have the moral high ground over others, we often do more to aggravate others than to win their favor. What do I gain when I start an argument with my wife by blaming her when I am at fault? This only annoys her. So why do I have to fight this tendency in myself? Or, as we will see when we look at terror management theory, people feel more compelled to justify themselves when they are confronted with the knowledge that they will die than at other times. Yet why should this be the case? What good is human approval in the grave? This only makes sense if people are ultimately trying to be justified before a higher court of judgement.

Thesis

Christ must justify us sinners with a righteousness that is not our own; all who attempt to justify themselves are idolaters.

Luther's Teaching

Whereas justification through Christ lies at the heart of true faith, self-justification lies at the heart of idolatry. Luther writes that “Whoever falls from the doctrine of justification is ignorant of God and an idolater.”⁶ Furthermore, “the opinion that we are justified by works apart from faith is the source of all idolatry.”⁷

Luther introduces this theme in the *Large Catechism*, where he writes,

There is, moreover, another false worship. This is the greatest idolatry that has been practiced up to now, and it is still prevalent in the world. Upon it all the religions are founded. It concerns only that conscience which seeks help, comfort, and salvation in its own works and presumes to wrest heaven from God. It keeps account how often it has made endowments, fasted, celebrated Mass, etc. On such things it relies and of them it boasts, unwilling to receive anything as a gift from God, but desiring by itself to earn or merit everything by works of supererogation, just as if God were in our service or debt and we were his liege lords. What is this but making God into an idol—indeed, an “apple-god”—and setting up ourselves as God? This reasoning, however is a little too subtle to be understood by young pupils.⁸

What Luther regarded as too subtle for children he addressed at greater length when addressing adults. Luther returned to this theme repeatedly throughout his career, including in virtually all his biblical commentaries after his evangelical breakthrough,⁹ from his lectures on Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Galatians, Titus, 1 John, and the Psalms, to his preaching on the gospel of John.¹⁰ He also addressed it in

⁶ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:395 = WA 40.i:602.12–13.

⁷ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:114 = WA 31.ii:351.20. Cf. LW 17:17, 21–23, 107; 16:263; 20:332; 54:340; Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.179.

⁸ LC I 22–23 = WA 30.i:135.17–27.

⁹ Judging by Luther's own comments (*Preface to Luther's Latin Writings* [1545], LW 34:336–37 = WA 54:185–86), as well as by the contents of his writings, I regard this breakthrough to have taken place no earlier than at some time during his lectures on Romans, so that his earliest lectures on the Psalms and much of his work on Romans are prior to this breakthrough.

¹⁰ LW 1:14, 149; 4:68, 159, 165, 171, 235–39; 9:53–54, 104; 12:322, 378–79, 389; 13:174–75; 14:33–34, 168–69, 202, 348; 16:14–15, 78, 229, 249, 262–63; 17:16–17, 21–24, 107–14, 162, 401, 412; 18:4, 9–10, 167, 255; 19:55–56, 115; 20:332; 22:152, 154–55, 456; 26:257–59, 395–401; 27:87–90; 29:48–49; 30:246; Luther,

The Freedom of the Christian,¹¹ his *Treatise on Good Works*,¹² and in numerous other places.¹³

He continually reiterated the point that

Whoever seeks righteousness apart from faith and through works denies God and makes himself into God. This is what he thinks: “If I do this work, I shall be righteous. I shall be the victor over sin, death, the devil, the wrath of God, and hell; and I shall attain eternal life.” Now what is this, I ask you, but to arrogate to oneself a work that belongs to God alone, and to show that one is God?¹⁴

Rejection of the Ladder of Merit

For Luther, Christ alone must be our Savior. He writes that

mercy must be alone. It allows nothing to be joined with it in which a person may hope at the same time. For that would be for the feet to spread apart and limp between two ways, and like the Samaritans to foolishly worship God and an idol at the same time. No one can worship God except by a pure and undivided faith in his mercy alone. Otherwise we will not sing and give thanks to God alone, but also to our idol, which has cooperated with him. God forbid such a thing as this!¹⁵

This means that our redemption cannot be a self-salvation project in any way. Luther rejected the semi-Pelagianism he found in many of his theological forebears such as Gabriel Biel,¹⁶ and taught that we must be saved by grace alone. Yet he went further than this. He also

Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms, 2.52, 2.117, 2.122, 2.179; WA 5: 390.34–39; 40.3: 357.5–11, 358.13–17, 359.6–9.

¹¹ *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), LW 31:350 = WA 7:54.

¹² *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:29–33 = WA 6:209–12.

¹³ E.g. LW 36:216–17; 38:106–7; 44:319–20; 51:17; 54:340, 436.

¹⁴ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:258 = WA 40.i:405.15–19.

¹⁵ *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:390.34–39. Author’s own translation.

¹⁶ Biel taught that humans in their fallen state still retain a measure of free will that enables them to love God, abstain from sin, and prepare themselves to receive grace (E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective*, [St. Louis: Concordia, 1950], 169). He wrote that “meritorious acts depend on two factors, our free will and grace. There is no human merit that does not depend partly on free will” (Gabriel Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” in *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents*, ed. Heiko Oberman [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 170). Biel’s maxim was that God will not desert the person who chooses to do what is in him (*facere quod in se est*), by which he meant that if we exercise our free will and turn to God he will respond by giving us his grace (Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Medieval Nominalism* [Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1983], 53, 128–45). Similar statements were made by Bonaventura, Occam, and others (Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 167–69;

rejected the Augustinian and Thomistic understanding of grace. Augustine and Aquinas taught that we are saved by grace alone, yet for them this involved infused grace that enables us to love God and ascend to him through our meritorious deeds.¹⁷ They acknowledged that God descends to us in Christ to give us everything we need, but then we must use what he has given to ascend to him. As far as Luther is concerned, this still makes salvation a human achievement. It still depends on our works. This view fails to distinguish justification and sanctification, and puts justification beyond our reach because of the sin that still clings to us. For Luther, a Christian may grow in the sanctified life, yet this is as one who has already been justified and united with Christ through faith, and will never reach perfection until the last day.¹⁸ He totally rejected the Catholic doctrine of merit, and taught that salvation is through faith alone.¹⁹ Any suggestion that we are justified on the basis of our love for God or neighbor or our newness of life—regardless of whether these things are infused into us by God or not—is to replace Christ with an idol.²⁰

Many scholars have characterized the medieval path of salvation as a human ascent to God via the ladders of virtue, speculation, and mysticism. God has done his bit in the incarnation to give us the help we need, but now we must do our bit to ascend to him via the paths he has provided.²¹ Luther rejects all such attempts to climb up to God as futile. He frequently talks about

LW 25:497). Luther explicitly rejected such ideas (LW 12:341–42; 25:497; 26:173–74; LW 33).

¹⁷ “Accordingly, even the life eternal, which is surely the wages of good works, is called a grace of God by the Apostle. ... We are, therefore, to understand that even man’s merited goods are gifts from God, and when life eternal is given through them, what else do we have but ‘grace upon grace returned’?” (Augustine, *Enchiridion* 28.107)

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2[1].109.3–10, 2[1].114.1–9; Thomas Aquinas, *On Charity*, trans. Lettie H. Kendzierski [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1960], 22; Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 513–14.

¹⁸ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:68–71 = WA 40.ii:87–90.

¹⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.114 = WA 5:444.

²⁰ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:398 = WA 40.i:606.

²¹ Anders Nygren gives examples of this in the theology of Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, the Monastic Rule of Benedict, John Climacus, Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Erigena, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Aquinas, Bonaventura, and Bernard of Clairvaux (Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 512–32, 576–637); Irving Singer finds additional

a ladder between us and heaven. Yet this ladder is always Christ and his word, to the exclusion of human works, merits, and speculation.²² Christ “is the first, the middle, and the last rung of the ladder to heaven.”²³ Luther writes,

Thus the pope also has his own ladder and his own path leading to heaven. Each monastic order has its own way of ascent too; the Franciscans want to be saved by their rules, and the Augustinians want to go to heaven by theirs. ... But the only way, ladder, and bridge for ascending into heaven is Christ, the Son of man, who is the only one ever to ascend into heaven. Any other way, ladder, or bridge is invented and dreamed up, yes, useless and vain. ... The Turks say: “Whoever observes the Koran ascends into heaven.” The Jews claim: “Whoever keeps the Law of Moses has a way of ascending into heaven.” The pope declares: “Whoever obeys me ascends into heaven.” There is no end or limit to the variety of methods. But they all prescribe heavenward journeys on which the travelers will break their necks.²⁴

This is because,

The whole lot of them are seeking heaven with lamps that have no oil [Matt. 25:1–13]. In other words, they seek heaven by means of their own works. Without their own works they expect nothing of God, for this is what their way of life and their vows teach them. But a Christian man ascends to heaven by virtue of the works of another, and that other is Christ.²⁵

In chapter 7 we will discuss the paths of speculation and mystical experience by which people attempt to come to God. In this chapter we will look at the ladder of works.

examples in Hugh and Richard of St Victor (Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther* [New York: Random House, 1966], 173–74, 189–92). Cf. Berndt Hamm, *The Reformation of Faith in the Context of Late Medieval Theology and Piety: Essays by Berndt Hamm*, ed. Robert J. Bast (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2004), 89–90; Robert Norman Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c. 1215 – c. 1515* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 195.

²² LW 1:13–14; 3:274–77; 5:197, 215–24, 249–50; 6:104; 17:326; 22:200–209, 305–6, 329–36, 366–68; 23:55–56, 80, 102; 24:48; 26:30; 29:111; 40:147; 43:54–55; 44:319; WLS 1160–61 (3715).

²³ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:48 = WA 45:504:37–38.

²⁴ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:330, 334 = WA 47:58.6–10, 21–25; 61.36–39.

²⁵ *The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows* (1521), LW 44:319 = WA 8:618.28–31.

Works Righteousness: Self-Justification through Keeping (a Version of) the Law

The most obvious way to justify ourselves is to claim that we keep the law. Luther calls this making an idol of our righteousness,²⁶ and worshipping the work of our hands.²⁷ It is to make an idol of ourselves by making ourselves equal to God, since God alone is righteous.²⁸ It is to deny Christ who redeems us,²⁹ and to set up ourselves in his place.³⁰

Luther's primary target of attack was the works-righteousness he found in the church of his day. Yet he also thought his critique applied to Judaism, Islam, pagan idolatry, and human life in general.³¹ The sinful nature hates to have its sins exposed and hear that its righteousness is nothing before God.³² Refusing to hear this message, people constantly think there is some work they can do, or some ceremony they can perform, to obtain divine favor and blessing.

This involves a false picture of God's law. Since none of us are genuinely righteous apart from Christ, the self-righteous must always tailor God's law to suit themselves.³³ They do this through the following means:

First, they have to omit the chief work of God's law, the first commandment, since this can only be fulfilled through faith in Christ, and excludes self-righteousness.³⁴

²⁶ LW 4:148–49; 9:104; 14:202; 16:249; 36:217; 51:17.

²⁷ LW 4:165; 18:255.

²⁸ *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), LW 14:348 = WA 5:73.

²⁹ LW 14:34; 36:216–17.

³⁰ LW 4:68; 26:257–59; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.117.

³¹ LW 17:22–23; 22:330; 26:395–96; 27:88; 29:48–49; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.115–16, 229.

³² Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.417–18 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:657.

³³ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:14 = WA 31.ii.9.

³⁴ LW 26:257; Cf. LW 44:29–33; 4:68–69; John 6:29.

Second, the self-righteous focus on outward works. They forget that the law is spiritual and goes right to the heart.³⁵

Third, the self-righteous focus on a few works while ignoring the rest. As Luther writes,

The repentance of the Papists, Turks, Jews, and all infidels and hypocrites is similar in all aspects. ... It consists in experiencing sorrow and doing satisfaction for one or more actual sins, in then being secure regarding other sins or original sin. ... Yet their repentance is partial and temporal, only about some sins in some part of life.³⁶

Finally, the works the self-righteous choose are frequently not works that God commands. Instead, they prefer self-chosen works, and annul God's commands so they can set up their own.³⁷ This is because the works and worship of God mortify the sinful nature and only appeal to the eyes of faith.³⁸ The works we choose nourish the sinful nature instead.³⁹ These works glitter in the eyes of the world, since "all forms of idolatry have the semblance of piety,"⁴⁰ and "nothing is prettier, better, or holier in the sight of men than idolatry and godlessness adorned with hypocrisy and a show of piety."⁴¹ This makes such works dangerous and deceptive, since they lead people away from faith in Christ and faithfulness to his word.⁴²

³⁵ LW 9:63, 71, 75–76, 102, 260.

³⁶ Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Press, 2008), 229 = WA 39.i:345.16–29.

³⁷ LW 17:17; 22:367.

³⁸ *Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord* (1530), LW 38:106–8 = WA 30.ii:602–4.

³⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.161–62 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:474.

⁴⁰ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:185 = WA 31.ii:130.2–3.

⁴¹ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:165 = WA 14:668.11–13.

⁴² LW 16:263; 20:235–38; 26:399; 27:88; 39:192.

External religion. One common form that self-justification takes is external religion. People perform some religious duty and then feel very holy, while despising the real content of God's law, which is faith and love.⁴³

Many of the outward acts of worship people perform are neither good nor bad in themselves. What makes them idolatrous is the opinion attached to them—that one can be justified through them. Luther writes,

Superstition and idolatry would not be idolatry and superstition if being sanctified and cleansed were not added. God has no objection if the papists are shaved and anointed to the point of wearing out the barbers, or whether they eat this or that. But when they add sanctification and trust, this God cannot put up with.⁴⁴

Luther likens a Franciscan's rope and a Carthusian's cowl to a heathen idol. A heathen takes a piece of wood. He burns half as fuel for his fire. With what is left he makes an image to appease his god.⁴⁵ A Franciscan takes a rope. He uses one part to tie up his wagon. He ties the rest around his waist to win God's favor.⁴⁶ Luther continues,

To wear the cowl is not yet idolatry ... but to attach the name and form of justification to that cowl, this is an idol. In itself fasting is not idolatry, but the opinion attached to it is idolatry. If anyone does not put his trust in these works but simply does them, he does not sin.⁴⁷

Often idolatrous religion is an imitation of godly worship in some way, since the devil and his followers ape the true God. Yet they despise the kernel and admire the husk. They imitate the outward forms but remove the gospel and faith in Christ.⁴⁸ Luther uses the example of the Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Christ, but which the pope made into idolatry by removing the

⁴³ LW 27:31, 59, 61, 221.

⁴⁴ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:412 = WA 31.ii:582.4–8.

⁴⁵ Isa 44:13–20.

⁴⁶ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:22–23, 112–13 = WA 31.ii:277–78, 349–50.

⁴⁷ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:23 = WA 31.ii:278.18–21.

⁴⁸ LW 4:235–38; 15:183; 16:14–15, 331; 44:29–33.

promise of the gospel and turning it into a meritorious human work.⁴⁹ Therefore Luther says that all false religion is *ex opere operato*, and that every *opus operatum* is idolatrous.⁵⁰ Idolaters all try to please God by the mere performance of some work, apart from faith in Christ.

The conclusion Luther draws from this is not that we should discard external things. If Christ has commanded us to baptize with water, celebrate the Lord's Supper by eating and drinking, or perform other outward acts like honoring our parents, then we must do them. Yet our faith must also look to the words and promises God has attached to these things.⁵¹ If we forget God's promises we will not rid ourselves of idolatry even if all physical idols are taken away. We might remove the idols from before our eyes, but not from our hearts. We will be like the Pharisees and Sadducees, who had no gods of wood or stone, yet set up many idols in their hearts as they tried to justify themselves.⁵²

This involves a false picture of God and of ourselves. The self-righteous have a false picture of God. The true God is gracious. He gives his favor as a gift. He gives to all people and receives nothing in return. Yet those who seek to earn his favor deny that he is merciful and turn him into a huckster whose favor must be bought.⁵³ They picture him as an angry judge who must be appeased by their works.⁵⁴ One imagines a god who has regard for his rope.⁵⁵ Another dreams

⁴⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:236–37 = WA 43:304–6; Cf. LW 13:314; 23:207; 35:91, 101; 36:148; 39:168.

⁵⁰ LW 54:436 = WA TR 5:198.

⁵¹ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:113 = WA 31.ii:350.

⁵² *Lectures on Zechariah: The German Text* (1527), LW 20:332 = WA 23:651.

⁵³ LW 9:53–54; 12:322, 389; 13:374–75; 18:9–10; 19:115; 38:106–7; 44:30–31; 54:340; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.52.

⁵⁴ LW 17:108 = WA 31.ii:345–46; 22:365–66.

⁵⁵ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:112–13 = WA 31.ii:349–50.

up a cowed god, who wants to save anyone who wears a cowl.⁵⁶ Others think God will reward them for their fasting, chastity, or labor, and that without these God will give them nothing.⁵⁷ They do not deny that there is a God, but they deny that he is compassionate and good.⁵⁸ They make him out to be a liar by refusing to believe his promise of salvation through Christ.⁵⁹

The self-righteous also have a false picture of themselves. They reject God's verdict on them, that they are sinners, so in effect charge God with lying.⁶⁰ Since they refuse to recognize their sin, they also fail to recognize God's mercy, and cannot glorify him as the one who brings salvation.⁶¹

Instead of accepting God's verdict on them, or his word about himself,⁶² the self-righteous fashion and shape God according to their own opinions. They act as if they are the creators and he is the creature. They manufacture a god in their hearts, molding and shaping him according to their own thoughts and intentions. They imagine a god who will bless them for their petty self-chosen deeds, though no such god exists.⁶³

Antinomianism: Self-Justification through Silencing the Law

The second strategy that one may adopt to justify oneself is to silence God's law. This is the strategy of the antinomians.

⁵⁶ LW 1:14; 17:16–17, 22.

⁵⁷ LW 17:162; 19:55–56; 22:152, 154–55; 29:49; 30:246.

⁵⁸ LW 4:68; 17:24.

⁵⁹ *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), LW 31:350 = WA 7:53–54.

⁶⁰ LW 4:159; 14:168.

⁶¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.389–90 (sic) = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:542–43.

⁶² LW 14:168–69; 16:78.

⁶³ LW 9:54; 12:378–79; 17:16–17, 22, 24, 107–9, 112–13; 18:9–10; 29:49; 30:246; 38:106–7; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.119, 122.

Antinomianism is driven by the sinful nature, which does not want to die through repentance, but wants to indulge its desires instead.⁶⁴ The sinful nature cannot receive the righteousness that comes from God's Spirit.⁶⁵ Yet although it is not righteous, it does not want to admit it. It hates to be reproved and have its conscience burdened or its pretend righteousness denounced.⁶⁶ Therefore it reacts in anger when its sins are rebuked.⁶⁷

Antinomians often try to silence the law in the name of God's mercy.⁶⁸ Yet they want mercy without repentance.⁶⁹ They are without faith, since genuine faith casts out love of sin.⁷⁰ Ultimately they despise both God's word and his mercy.⁷¹ Luther's final verdict on those who use the gospel as a license to sin is that they are worse idolaters than the Papists.⁷²

Antinomianism is really a form of the righteousness of the law. Antinomians do not want to be justified by God's mercy, but want to establish their own righteousness. Therefore they cannot accept that the law condemns them, and try to silence any law that challenges their presumption of virtue. They want their sins approved, not forgiven, and they spring to their defense. Therefore Luther suggests that antinomians are self-righteous and proud of their own sanctity.⁷³

⁶⁴ LW 3:221–24, 240; 4:50–51, 63, 241–42, 404–5; 54:308; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 375.

⁶⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.230 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:518.

⁶⁶ LW 1:169; 3:221, 223; 4:49–50; 22:389–90; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.230.

⁶⁷ LW 3:221, 281.

⁶⁸ LW 3:222; 4:49–52, 241–42, 404–5; 41:113, 147; 54:308; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 237.

⁶⁹ LW 3:222–24, 240; 4:241–42, 404–5; 41:113–14, 147; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 237.

⁷⁰ LW 22:389; 26:155.

⁷¹ LW 4:405; 22:389.

⁷² *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:51 = WA 40.ii:64; cf. Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 53.

⁷³ LW 1:169; 3:239–40, 314; 4:49–53; 22:389; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 375.

This point needs to be stressed: Luther does not merely charge antinomians with lawlessness,⁷⁴ but also with self-righteousness. He called antinomianism “an alien and new way of teaching justification,”⁷⁵ and recognized that it is really a strategy for self-justification: “When sin is ignored, a false innocence is presumed.”⁷⁶ We noted earlier that Luther regarded the repentance of all who are outside of Christ as the same. They all practice partial repentance by repenting of some sins, while remaining secure regarding the rest. Luther asserted this in a disputation against the antinomians. This means he was lumping antinomians together with legalists. We noted earlier how no legalist can actually keep God’s law. They all change it to suit themselves. They commend themselves for keeping certain laws, but are antinomians regarding the rest.⁷⁷ Indeed, the more they try to justify themselves through the law the more they hate it. They get worn out by its demands, and hate God’s true, spiritual law, since it convicts them.⁷⁸ Antinomians on the other hand can never expel the law. At one point Luther says that the antinomians are worse than the Papists, since the Papists teach a partial repentance, whereas the antinomians teach none at all.⁷⁹ Yet Luther also recognized that try as they might, antinomians can never get rid of the law. It always creeps back in. They cannot remove it because it is written on the heart and cannot be erased.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the law, sin, and death all go together. One

⁷⁴ Although he talks about this too, stressing how God’s law is needed to restrain chaos and anarchy. (LW 22:389; 54:233, 248; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 373)

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁷ Tae Jun Suk notes that in his Galatians commentary Luther treats legalism and antinomianism as two sides to the one coin (Suk, *Luther’s Concept of Idolatry*, 72). He accuses the papists and the sectarian fanatics of trying to impose “a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1) while at the same time setting aside God’s true law and wanting to use their “freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal 5:13; LW 27:8, 52–54).

⁷⁸ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.414 (sic), 2.417 (sic).

⁷⁹ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 235, 237.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 233; LW 47:110–11, 113.

cannot eliminate the law unless one can eliminate all three.⁸¹ Therefore both antinomians and legalists end up with a partial law, designed to justify themselves.⁸²

This means that the conscience can actually drive people to commit evil. A knowledge of God's law in the conscience, when it is not combined with faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, leads people to commit all kinds of sins against the truth in an attempt to silence this accusing voice.⁸³ Therefore the law increases the trespass⁸⁴—not because the law is evil, but because the human will is perverse.⁸⁵

Like legalism, this involves a false view of God and of ourselves. Although antinomians can talk much about Christ and his grace, Luther says they have neither Christ nor his grace, but rather an idol.⁸⁶ They talk about God, Christ, faith, law, grace, etc., but understanding them as much as a parrot understands his “hello.”⁸⁷ The true God is no antinomian.⁸⁸

Antinomians begin by eliminating the fear of God. They teach people to be unconcerned about God's wrath and judgement, as if there is no death or hell.⁸⁹ They act as if we can remain

⁸¹ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 241, 243; LW 47:110.

⁸² Cf. SD V 1.

⁸³ For a helpful contemporary reflection on this point see: J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of the Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 1999), 20–35; and J. Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2003), 139–60.

⁸⁴ Rom 5:20; cf. SA III ii 2.

⁸⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.417–18 (sic) = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:559.

⁸⁶ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:51 = WA 40.ii:64.

⁸⁷ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 375.

⁸⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:336 = WA 43:116.

⁸⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:241–42 = WA 43:308–9.

securely in our sins without repenting or struggling against sin and still be forgiven.⁹⁰ Thus they foster smugness and false security.⁹¹

This means they have a false view of both God and themselves. Luther suggests two ways in which antinomians can maintain the belief that God's wrath need not be feared. The first is to reject the biblical picture of a holy God who hates evil and cannot ignore injustice, and replace him with a lenient or distant god who does not judge human sin.⁹² Luther at one point suggests that antinomians hope "the devil is across the ocean and God is tucked in our pocket."⁹³ They think God is tame or indulgent, and we have nothing to fear from him or the devil. At another point Luther suggests that all secure sinners—in whose ranks he includes the antinomians—give no thought to God and his word when they are engrossed in sinning. They act as if he does not see what they are doing, but is asleep, blind, dead, impotent, far away, or non-existent.⁹⁴

The other suggestion Luther makes for how this belief can be maintained is to claim that we are already so holy and pleasing to God that we don't need any repentance.⁹⁵ Maybe we think our sin is nothing—so trivial that God will not be bothered by it.⁹⁶ Maybe we think that some physical prerogative such as ancestry, circumcision, fasting, pilgrimages, or wearing a cowl makes us so holy that we are above God's law and are guaranteed his favor.⁹⁷ Maybe we dream that we are still as righteous as Adam was in paradise,⁹⁸ or as the elect will be at the parousia.

⁹⁰ LW 22:389; 41:114.

⁹¹ LW 3:222, 239–40, 314; 47:119.

⁹² *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:220–21 = WA 43:33.

⁹³ *Against the Antinomians* (1539), LW 47:114 = WA 50:473.40; c.f. LW 47:11, 19.

⁹⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:219–22 = WA 418–19.

⁹⁵ LW 3:225; 4:49–50, 52, 237–43; 54:233–34.

⁹⁶ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:240 = WA 43:308.

⁹⁷ LW 4: 49–50, 52, 237–43.

⁹⁸ LW 54:308, 233–34.

Since sanctification in us is never complete in this world,⁹⁹ Luther says that the only people for whom the teaching of the antinomians is relevant have already been taken from this life.¹⁰⁰

Next, Luther argues that the antinomians eliminate Christ.¹⁰¹ Those who eliminate the condemnation of the law eliminate our need for a Savior.¹⁰² Those who belittle the disease belittle the cure.¹⁰³ Satan knows the law cannot be erased from our hearts, nor can its consequences be removed from our lives apart from Christ. Yet Christ can be taken away from us, and this is the devil's goal.¹⁰⁴ When antinomians remove the law, they leave sin and death behind. This means they conceal the disease of sin and death and lead people to destruction.¹⁰⁵ The diabolical purpose at work is to accustom people to ignore the law so they do not flee to Christ.¹⁰⁶

Finally, Luther says that antinomians reject the Holy Spirit and his sanctifying work. It is the work of the Spirit to convict us of sin, lead us to repentance, and mortify our sinful nature. He does this through the law. He then raises up new life within us through the gospel, so we may be who we were created to be: creatures of God who do his will freely.¹⁰⁷ One can know that the antinomians have rejected Christ's Spirit since they do not struggle against the sinful nature.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 43, 245.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 234, 235.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 247, 249.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 57, 137; LW 47:110–13.

¹⁰³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 420–21 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:659.

¹⁰⁴ *Commentary on Psalm 147* (1532), LW 14:110–13 = WA 31:432–35.

¹⁰⁵ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 249.

¹⁰⁶ LW 47:110–11; cf. Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 139, 373; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 420–21.

¹⁰⁷ LW 2:218–19; 41:143–44; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 37, 45, 139, 141, 239, 245, 247, 249.

¹⁰⁸ LW 4:241–42; 41:113–14, 145–47.

Luther says that although the antinomians teach about Christ, grace, forgiveness, and redemption, when they preach Christ against the Holy Spirit it is evident that they have no Christ.¹⁰⁹ He writes, “it is certain that they neither have nor understand Christ or the Holy Spirit ... they teach Christ and yet destroy him through their teaching.”¹¹⁰ This is because faith in Christ and sanctification cannot be separated, and when antinomians separate Christ from the gift of the Spirit they proclaim a new, false Christ. As we noted earlier, Luther taught that all the commandments of God hang on the first one. When the Holy Spirit works in us fear, love, and trust in God through Christ our Savior, this leads us to love God’s will and keep his commandments. When there is no intention to do God’s will, and people do not struggle against sin but live securely in it, then Christ and the Spirit are absent, and people should not count themselves as Christians. They have forgotten that Christ purchased us so that his Spirit might transform us into new people who live for righteousness. They therefore take away Christ at the same time as they proclaim him!¹¹¹ In effect, they have set up an idol to justify their sin.

The Consequences of Self-Justification

Try as we might to justify ourselves, the idols we establish for this purpose all fail to make us righteous or win for us God’s approval.

Enduring guilt. Since no idol can atone for sin, or take away our guilt and shame, they leave people under God’s wrath. Though idolaters try to cast out fear they have everything to

¹⁰⁹ *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), LW 41:113–15 = WA 50:599–600.

¹¹⁰ *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), LW 41:147 = WA 50:627.29, 33.

¹¹¹ *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), LW 41:113–15, 145–47 = WA 50:599–600, 626–27.

fear, since God will judge them and they will perish.¹¹² The self-confidence of those who try to justify themselves must be destroyed or they will never be saved.¹¹³

Unstable conscience. This inability to eradicate guilt means that idols cannot give us a peaceful conscience. Instead, the conscience they deliver is unstable.¹¹⁴ Luther writes that “by the works of the law, men either become proud and presume, or else, they fall into despair and hate God.”¹¹⁵ The same project of self-justification can lead to either pride or despair, or both, as the conscience vacillates between the two.

Those who justify themselves feel proud and secure when things go well. They are arrogant towards God and look down on other people.¹¹⁶ Luther says that those who feel secure on the basis of the law are impenitent and contemptuous of God.¹¹⁷ All their righteousness is a sham designed to honor and lift up themselves.¹¹⁸ Indeed, “a self-righteous person is a thief of the divine glory and also an idolater, because he lays claim to God’s glory for himself.”¹¹⁹

Yet this pride can easily turn to dismay. The righteousness of the law provides no genuine security. The same people quickly become despondent, discouraged, and despairing as soon as things go badly, or God’s wrath is experienced, or the conviction of sin cannot be assuaged.¹²⁰

¹¹² LW 2:223–25; 3:222–24, 278–82; 4:63, 158–59, 241–42, 404–5; 12:322; 14:348; 16:106; 17:110, 116; 18:39, 167, 308; 20:236, 239–40; 22:158, 389–90; 23:121; 27:80; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.167; 2:239–40.

¹¹³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:53 = WA 43:173.

¹¹⁴ LW 9:291; 12:164; 17:162; 18:254–55; 20:235; 22:158; 29:49; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.415 [sic].

¹¹⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.390 [sic] = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), WA 5:543:24–25; cf. Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 27.

¹¹⁶ LW 9:273; 19:57; 21:217; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.414–15 [sic].

¹¹⁷ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 235.

¹¹⁸ LW 3:336; 9:54; 14:34; 17:162; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.390 [sic], 2.419.

¹¹⁹ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:162 = WA 31.ii:387.31–32; cf. 44:319–20.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.413–15 [sic]; LW 1:169–72; 2:222–23; 12:378–79; 16:160–61; 17:109–10; 19:57; Luther,

Just like self-righteous pride, this despair is a form of impenitence. It is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, a denial of his compassion, and a refusal to give up the goal of self-justification.¹²¹

Hypocrisy. Self-justification always leads to a hypocritical pretense of righteousness rather than the real thing.¹²² Even when people strive to keep certain parts of God’s law, this law can only change the works, not the doers of the works.¹²³ Only the gospel can change our hearts so that we keep God’s law from the heart, with love for God and neighbor. The law by itself can convert the hand but not the heart.¹²⁴ It therefore makes people hypocrites. Though they perform works outwardly, they do them without the love and affection that comes from the Spirit,¹²⁵ and they do them reluctantly or with a view to their own advantage.¹²⁶ Since their righteousness is a sham, they live a lie and sin in secret.¹²⁷

Exhaustion. All that idols ultimately do for their devotees is make them weary and anxious. Luther calls the self-righteous “the devil’s martyrs.”¹²⁸ They sacrifice all their strength serving idols they hope will justify them. Luther gives two reasons why idols exact great toil from those who follow them. The first is that the works of the law have no end for those who seek to be justified by them. They can never forgive sins or deliver a quiet conscience. Therefore

Antinomian Theses and Disputations, 33, 35 = WA 39.i:345.16–346.29.

¹²¹ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 235 = WA 39.i:352.22–27; LW 4:68–69; 16:14–15.

¹²² LW 20:237–38; 29:49; 39:192; 44:33–34; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.413–15 [sic].

¹²³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.391 (sic) = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:544.

¹²⁴ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.410 (sic); *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532), LW 12:87 = WA 40.ii:304.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.228–29, 2.407–9 (sic).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.22.

¹²⁷ LW 16:229; 35:372–73.

¹²⁸ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:110, 112, 299 = WA 31.ii:348.14, 349.16, 491.1.

those who seek to be justified by them keep piling up more in the vain hope that eventually they will have enough.¹²⁹ The second is that all idols are based on deception, and “a lie requires much labour and care to make it appear like the truth.”¹³⁰

Summary

Luther writes that “for peace of conscience they ‘multiply idols’ to themselves.”¹³¹ He teaches that whenever people are without faith in Christ’s justifying work, they will inevitably be driven by guilt to create idols in the false hope that these will justify. This involves two basic strategies: self-justification by attempting to keep the law, and self-justification by attempting to silence the law. In practice both strategies end up at the same point: self-justification through tailoring the law to excuse our sins and commend our works. This is a highly unstable enterprise, since it is based on self-deception regarding the true content of the law and our standing before God. It leads to arrogance while the self-deception holds, but despair when the cracks appear.

Contemporary Application

If Luther’s assessment of the human condition is accurate, then we should expect to see fallen people engaged in a never ending quest for self-justification, driven along by a guilty conscience that knows God’s law but can find no rest from its accusations apart from Christ. In the remainder of this chapter I will highlight some ways in which this is evident in our society.

¹²⁹ LW 17:110–12, 116; 20:235; 26:406; 33:288–89; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.121–24, 2.415 [sic], 2.417 [sic].

¹³⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.121 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:448.34–35.

¹³¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.124 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:450.10.

The Pervasiveness of Self-Justification

In the culture of Papua New Guinea in which I lived as a child, the wisest leaders in the church and the community knew that in order to resolve any conflict it was necessary to provide one's opponent with the opportunity to save face. If an opponent was backed into a corner from which they could not escape without losing face they would turn and fight like a cornered dog and the conflict would drag on interminably. Yet if they were given the opportunity to back down without being shamed the conflict could often be resolved. This wisdom, distilled from much practical experience, reveals how desperately people seek to be justified.

A similar form of cultural wisdom is present in western society, and this is the message the culture has absorbed from psychologists that self-esteem is an essential component in mental and emotional wellbeing. A whole range of psychologists from Carl Rogers to Abraham Maslow, Fritz Perls, and Erich Fromm have regarded lack of self-esteem to be one of the most basic human problems.¹³² From the perspective of Luther's theology this diagnosis is accurate. People do have a deep seated need to be justified, and thereby to be able to hold their heads up instead of hanging them in shame. Luther would disagree with the prescription that is usually given, that we should redouble our efforts to justify ourselves by reducing the demands we place on our selves (i.e. silencing the law) or by constantly affirming ourselves or trying to excel (i.e. trying to measure up before the law). Yet he would whole-heartedly agree with the diagnosis.

The description of self-justification from social psychology. The human tendency to justify ourselves has been described in recent decades by social psychologists. One obvious way to do this is to pass the buck and blame everyone but ourselves for our moral failures. As the

¹³² Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 8–10.

social psychologist David Myers points out, we look in vain for anyone to take responsibility for atrocities such as My Lai or Auschwitz.¹³³ Another strategy when we can't disown our actions is to justify them instead. The psychologist Karl Menninger writes, "Every slayer finds reasons for making his particular violation an exception, a non-crime if not a non-sin. Hitler had his reasons for killing the Jews. Custer had his reasons for killing the Sioux. Our military men had reasons for killing the Viet Cong soldiers, and the Viet Cong had their reasons for killing ours."¹³⁴

In the previous chapter we noted Langdon Gilkey's observation of how his compatriots in the internment camp rationalized their selfish behavior. This same tendency to rationalize has been observed in experimental psychology. Elliot Aronson, one of the leading researchers of the phenomenon known as cognitive dissonance, says it is more accurate to refer to humans as rationalizing animals than rational animals.¹³⁵ Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that when people's behavior challenges their cherished beliefs about themselves as moral and rational, they find ways to rationalize this behavior to remove the dissonance.¹³⁶

This has been confirmed in many experiments. One finding is that before people make a decision they look for as much information as possible about the different alternatives, but after they have made a decision they look for confirmation that they have made the right decision and minimize or ignore disconfirming evidence. So for instance, a person who has just built a home on the San Andreas Fault will be far less receptive to information about the danger of earthquakes than a person who is merely renting, since to acknowledge the validity of this

¹³³ David Myers, *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 22.

¹³⁴ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1973), 14.

¹³⁵ Elliot Aronson, "The Rationalizing Animal," in *Psychology is Social: Readings and Conversations in Social Psychology*, ed. Edward Krupat (2nd ed.; Dallas: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1982), 76.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

evidence would be to admit to folly. Aronson points to instances where people have literally lost their lives through such efforts to justify themselves.¹³⁷

Another finding is that people shift their views of others and of the boundary between right and wrong to justify their behavior. For instance, in one experiment, children were first asked about their attitudes to cheating. Then they were put in a competitive situation in which it was impossible to win without cheating, and were observed without their knowledge. After the competition their attitudes to cheating were retested. Those children who had cheated had now become more lenient in their attitudes to cheating, while those who resisted the temptation had become more strict.¹³⁸ This agrees with Luther's contention that people fit the law to their works. Or else, in experiments where subjects are induced to inflict cruelty on others, it has been found that these subjects start to convince themselves that their victims are stupid or mean or deserve the cruel treatment in some way. Ironically, the more the people inflicting the cruelty think of themselves as kind, the more they can be induced to denigrate their victims, since maintenance of their self-image demands that they find an excuse for their cruelty.¹³⁹

David Myers, in agreement with Freud, suggests that the most powerful justifications are moral and religious. He points out how prayer services were held in support of the Hiroshima bombing crew and the white-ruled government of South Africa, and how the most common way to refer to the distinction between whites and blacks in seventeenth-century slave owning America was to speak of Negroes and Christians.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid., 77–78.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 80–81.

¹⁴⁰ Myers, *The Inflated Self*, 28–29.

This human tendency towards self-justification is so pervasive that it is not only evident when it comes to matters of great moral importance, but also in very mundane settings. This is what social psychology experiments have uncovered—a tendency to distort our perceptions of ourselves and others in self-justifying ways in all kinds of everyday situations. Psychologists refer to this as the self-serving bias. One way this manifests is in our attribution of causality. We tend to take credit for our successes yet blame others or circumstances for our failures. For instance, students who receive a good mark on an examination tend to accept it as a good measure of their abilities, whereas students who receive a poor mark tend to criticize the exam as unfair.¹⁴¹ Or in group tasks, the members of the group all tend to claim responsibility for the performance of the group when it succeeds, but not when it fails.¹⁴² Another way the self-serving bias manifests is called the “above average effect”. When rating ourselves we tend to overrate our abilities and the contributions we make to society. For instance, one survey of American high school seniors found that 60% rated themselves in the top 10% when it came to their ability to get along with others, and 25% rated themselves in the top 1%. Or in marriages, both partners tend to estimate that they do more than their fair share when it comes to supporting the household.¹⁴³ This is all evidence that self-justification is part of the standard human *modus operandi*. And if we are all such nice, intelligent, easy to get along with people, who make such an outstanding contribution to society, why would we need Christ?

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 21–22.

¹⁴² Ibid., 21, 25–26.

Another example is conflict situations, in which people tend to view the toughness of others as nastiness, but their own as justified (Ibid., 22). When America puts missiles near the Russian border in Turkey it is to protect the free world. When the Soviets put missiles in Cuba it is an act of hostile aggression (Ibid., 30). A further example is games that combine skill and chance, in which winners tend to attribute their success to skill, while losers attribute their failure to chance. If I win at Scrabble it is because of my verbal dexterity. If I lose it is because I received a Q but no U (Ibid., 21).

¹⁴³ Ibid., 22–27.

Self-justification in terror management theory. A more recent development in social psychology that also reveals the human tendency to justify ourselves is the experimental research project spawned by Terror Management Theory.

TMT is based on the premise that humans must have a belief system that promises them immortality of some kind, or else they will be overwhelmed by the fear of death. The logic of TMT is as follows: All people know they will die, and despite their instinct to preserve their lives, they can at best delay death but not prevent it. This causes immense anxiety. Nevertheless, few people are crippled by this fear, since we have a defense mechanism against it: our belief systems that promise us immortality. These may include religious beliefs that promise real immortality, or secular beliefs that promise symbolic immortality. We may hope to live on through an earthly legacy that will survive our death, such as our children, our work or creative achievements, the ideals for which we have fought, the people we have helped or inspired, or the nation we love. Such things convince us that our lives have a greater significance that will live on, and help us cope with our approaching death.¹⁴⁴

This premise has led to a testable hypothesis: Assuming that effective management of the fear of death requires (1) faith in a worldview that promises real or symbolic immortality, and (2) the belief that we measure up according to the standards of this worldview and can therefore expect to cash in on its promised rewards, then (3) when we are confronted with death we will seek to bolster both our immortality-promising beliefs and our self-esteem.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Jonas and Fischer, "Terror Management and Religion," 553; Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 11–27, 83–84; Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal: Twenty Years of Terror Management Theory and Research," in *Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology*, ed. Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, and Tom Pyszczynski (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 13–20.

¹⁴⁵ Jonas and Fischer, "Terror Management and Religion," 553; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 20–21.

This hypothesis has been rigorously tested and confirmed.¹⁴⁶ The experiments involve calling death to the participants' conscious or subconscious attention, and then seeing if this sparks a "worldview defense" in comparison with a control group.¹⁴⁷ For instance, when a group of judges were reminded of death and then asked to set bail for a case, on average they set bail nearly 10 times as high as the control group. This was the expected outcome according to TMT, since it was assumed that judges would cherish the belief that they are serving the greater good by upholding law and order, and when confronted with death would reaffirm this commitment.¹⁴⁸ Other experiments found that reminding people of death makes them express more patriotism, less openness towards those who criticize their country, less acceptance of those who challenge their religious views, more aggression towards those who challenge their political views, less willingness to treat icons such as an American flag or a crucifix with disrespect, more willingness to give money to charity, more self-esteem bolstering behavior, etc.¹⁴⁹ Yet people who already have high self-esteem were found to be less affected by reminders of death.¹⁵⁰ So were those with an intrinsic religious faith.¹⁵¹ Evidently people with high self-esteem or an intrinsic faith feel less need to justify themselves and their beliefs than the rest of the population.

¹⁴⁶ Jonas and Fischer, "Terror Management and Religion," 554; Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 37–92; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 24.

¹⁴⁷ Jonas and Fischer, "Terror Management and Religion," 556; Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 45–46, 52–53; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 20–21.

¹⁴⁸ Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 45–47.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47–54, 71–81; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 21–23.

¹⁵⁰ Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 38–44, 81–82; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 22–23.

¹⁵¹ Jonas and Fischer, "Terror Management and Religion," 564.

See chapter 4, page 118 for the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic faith.

The vast majority of the religious participants in this study were Christians (*Ibid.*, 557, 560, 562). Therefore one could expect that one component of their faith was the gospel of Jesus Christ. The study was only designed to test the difference between an intrinsic and extrinsic faith, not to test whether the doctrinal content of a person's creed makes a difference. If one adopts Luther's perspective, one would expect that a faith that centers on the gospel of Jesus Christ (including belief in a genuine resurrection!) would do more to allay the fear of death than a religion

The literature on TMT is couched in secular terms and assumes a materialistic, Darwinian framework. Yet the empirical evidence supports Luther's view of the world equally well. When confronted with death we cling to our gods and try to justify ourselves before them, hoping they will protect us from what we fear. Yet the proud feel more secure in this endeavor, and people of faith feel less need of it. This suggests one reason for why idols so easily gain a powerful hold on the human heart: we desperately need something to calm our fears, and above all our fear of death. Indeed, TMT was developed to explain why people's worldviews have such a powerful emotional hold on them.¹⁵² As the book of Hebrews tells us, Christ came to "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."¹⁵³ And what does our fear of death enslave us to if not the idols that we hope will give us life?

Low self-esteem or pride? So what should we make of these findings that show the pervasiveness of human attempts at self-justification? Do they prove that humans are proud and egotistical? Or do they prove that they have a deeper insecurity and lack of self-esteem that drives them to constantly seek affirmation?

According to Luther we should expect that both are true. When people attempt to justify themselves and establish a righteousness or worth of their own apart from Christ, this is an egoistic enterprise. It places the self rather than Christ center stage, and will lead to pride when people succeed. Yet it is also a highly insecure enterprise. The self-righteous live in a fool's paradise that can only be maintained through much self-deception. Therefore they are in constant danger that reality will break through and plunge them into despair.

of the law. This has not been examined by psychologists as far as I know, but would make an interesting study.

¹⁵² Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 11–12; Solomon, Greenberg, and Pyszczynski, "The Cultural Animal," 13–14, 25–26.

¹⁵³ Heb 2:15.

The St Louis psychologist Terry Cooper has arrived at a remarkably similar conclusion after grappling with the debate amongst psychologists and theologians regarding whether pride or low self-esteem is the more fundamental human problem. Theologians such as Augustine and Reinhold Niebuhr have suggested that pride is the basic human problem, and have been supported by psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Ralph Greenson, Paul Vitz, and David Myers. Yet psychologists such as Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, Abraham Maslow, and Fritz Perls have suggested that lack of self-esteem is the real problem, since below the outward manifestations of human pride lurks a more fundamental insecurity. In this they have been backed up by theologians such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Norman Vincent Peale, and Robert Schuller.¹⁵⁴ Yet Cooper suggests that both sides are right and both are wrong, since pride and low self-esteem are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin. To show how this is the case he draws on the work of the psychoanalyst Karen Horney, and suggests that what she described in neurotic patients is simply a more pronounced case of what takes place within us all.¹⁵⁵

Horney suggests that both pride and self-contempt in neurotic patients are products of what she calls “the pride system.”¹⁵⁶ She writes that “Pride and self-hate go inseparably together; they are two expressions of the one process.”¹⁵⁷ Horney suggests that neurosis develops when people are confronted with their anxieties about life and their own sense of inadequacy, yet instead of facing this fear head on, or building up self-confidence through real achievements or genuine character development, they enlist their imagination to produce a fantasy about themselves.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Cooper, *Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance*, 7–20.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 112–47.

¹⁵⁶ Karen Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 110–11.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 86–91.

This means projecting an ideal image of themselves in place of their real selves to give them a sense of security. They then try to live up to the demands of this idealized self, and to convince themselves and others that this is who they are.¹⁵⁹ They do this through heroic feats of rationalization.¹⁶⁰ Yet the larger the gap becomes between their ideal self and their real self, the harder it becomes to maintain this illusion, and the more contemptuous they become of their real self, since it keeps holding them back from what they imagine themselves to be.¹⁶¹

This attempt to construct an ideal image of oneself is an egoistic enterprise, even if it does not always appear egotistical. Horney suggests that a person's ideal image may be quite self-effacing.¹⁶² For instance, a person with a deep need for acceptance from others may think of themselves as a saint or martyr. They may go to extraordinary lengths to comply with other people and never upset them. Yet this is just as egoistic as a person who projects an image of strength and has a win-at-all-costs mentality. Both are trying to live up to an ideal of perfection they can never ultimately attain.¹⁶³ This fits perfectly with Luther, who talked about how our sinful nature is so perverted that we even take pride in our humility.¹⁶⁴

What Horney describes among neurotic patients, Luther suggests takes place within us all, unless we despair of the attempt to justify ourselves and grasp hold of Christ. Since we are in reality sinners, self-justification always involves constructing a perception of ourselves that does not match the true state of our character or behavior. It therefore shares one of the leading

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 17–39, 86–91.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 22, 94.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 86–154.

¹⁶² Ibid., 214–58.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 18–26; Cooper, *Sin, Pride, & Self-Acceptance*, 112–47.

¹⁶⁴ LW 16:263, 332–33, 346–47; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 424–25 [sic].

characteristics of narcissistic neurosis, an inflated and unrealistic view of oneself.¹⁶⁵ The attempt to justify ourselves always means constructing a false image of ourselves that we imagine to be true, and leads to an inability to look at our true selves without despairing. This false image is an idol, a phony that supplants Christ. Only in Christ can we face who we truly are, in all the depths of our sin, and still hold our heads up because of what he has claimed us to be.

Summary. Luther suggests that all who are outside of Christ—Jews, Muslims, hypocritical Christians, the irreligious, and even genuine Christians when they fail to live in accordance with their confession of faith in Christ—will all attempt to justify themselves in one way or another. Indeed, they must, since they are driven by a knowledge of how God’s law accuses them. This means that even those who are not overtly religious, and appear to only be concerned with justification for the sake of this earthly life, are at a more fundamental level trying to justify themselves *corum deo*. When contemporary psychologists describe in the general population exactly the sort of behavior Luther predicts—self-justifying behavior that is linked to an unstable combination of pride and insecurity—we should recognize this for what it is. It is the idol of the self at work, which wants to displace Christ by establishing its own worth apart from him.

Self-Justification through Keeping the Law: “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”

It is now time to consider some examples in our society of the two major strategies of self-justification that Luther identifies. We will begin with self-justification through keeping the law.

Much of what passes as Christianity in contemporary society is better described as moralism in a Christian guise. It is more focused on good morals than on salvation through faith in Christ. It therefore follows the path of self-justification through keeping the law.

¹⁶⁵ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New

As we noted in the previous chapter, one of the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion is that the de facto dominant creed in America is moralistic therapeutic deism. As the name suggests, this is a form of legalism. The majority of young people in America, as well as the adults who taught them this faith, believe the primary purpose of religion is to instill morals.¹⁶⁶ It is about being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, and doing one's best to be successful.¹⁶⁷ This is coupled to a belief that all religions are basically the same, since they all teach belief in God and the need to be good, and their other teachings and practices (it is assumed) are peripheral.¹⁶⁸ It is also coupled to the belief that people can be good and work out what is right and wrong without religion. Therefore religion is non-essential for performing its central role. It may be useful for teaching children, but once someone has learned what there is to know they can graduate and leave it behind. Some people may decide they still need it to keep them on track, but that is just their own lifestyle choice.¹⁶⁹ Since moralistic therapeutic deism is not only common among the unchurched, the dechurched, and non-Christians, but also among churchgoers of all denominations, the researchers write,

Viewed in terms of the absolute historical centrality of the Protestant conviction about salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone and not by any human good works, many belief professions by Protestant teens, including numerous conservative Protestant teens, in effect discard that essential Protestant gospel.¹⁷⁰

Later they write,

A significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian

York: Free Press, 2009), 19–20.

¹⁶⁶ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 124–27, 136, 155, 163, 167–68, 171; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 82–83, 145–49, 154–56.

¹⁶⁷ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

¹⁶⁸ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 82, 145–48.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 82–83, 148–49; Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155–56.

¹⁷⁰ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 136.

tradition, but has rather morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions. The language, and therefore the experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.¹⁷¹

This finding is backed up by the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. This survey found that the majority (52%) of people in America who identify themselves as Christians believe that at least some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life.¹⁷² This should be expected if large numbers of people think religion is primarily about morality, since non-Christians can be moral too. This was another finding of the same study. It found that of all the people in the U.S. who are affiliated with a religion, 91% are Christians (not including Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses).¹⁷³ Yet when asked what determines if a person receives eternal life, only 17% of religious people said faith in Jesus Christ. 29% said a person's actions, 10% said a combination of beliefs and actions, 13% said belief in God or other generic beliefs, 21% either didn't believe in eternal life, didn't know, or refused to answer the question, and 10% gave other answers.¹⁷⁴ This means that there are more people calling themselves Christians in the United States who think that salvation depends at least partly on our good works than who believe in salvation through faith in Christ alone.¹⁷⁵ For Luther, it is the ultimate form of idolatry when Christ gets supplanted in this way.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 171.

¹⁷² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life," <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=380> (accessed Jan. 29, 2010).

¹⁷³ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic," June 2008, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (accessed Jan. 28, 2010), 5.

¹⁷⁴ Pew Forum, "Many Americans Say Other Faiths Can Lead to Eternal Life."

¹⁷⁵ This tendency to focus on moralism within American Christianity is also observed by the sociologist Wade

Self-Justification through Silencing the Law

The second strategy for self-justification that Luther identifies is to silence the law. This is just as evident in contemporary society as self-justification through keeping the law.

Moral relativism in society. It is impossible to get a handle on ethical discourse in our society without grappling with the basket of views and attitudes that go by the name of moral relativism. By moral relativism people usually mean the belief that moral norms are not fixed for all people in all times and places, but change according to individual or cultural beliefs and circumstances. To count as moral relativism, this must be more than just a recognition that circumstances should be taken into account when it comes to applying moral norms. Instead, it involves the belief that the norms themselves are not fixed, but ever changing.¹⁷⁶

If we are to take Luther's understanding of natural law seriously, thoroughgoing moral relativism cannot be lived out consistently. Try as a person might to expel the absolute demands of God's law they will not succeed, since the law is built into the fabric of creation, and its central tenets do not change along with culture or our whims. So despite the rhetoric of moral relativism, the law will always sneak back in. This is what we see in our society, that moral relativism is accompanied by a new brand of legalism.

Clark Roof. He talks about mainstream religion in America as "Golden Rule" religion, centered on doing good deeds, caring for other people, and building good relationships with them (Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999], 195–96, 268–69). He puts a positive spin on this, saying it is not a rejection of orthodoxy, but "a different orthodoxy" (Ibid., 269). Yet as far as the New Testament is concerned, when we adopt "a different gospel" by supplanting Christ with our works, we have no gospel at all (Gal 1:6–7).

¹⁷⁶ In judicial law there is a distinction between a crime that is *malum prohibitum*, evil because society prohibits it, and one that is *malum in se*, evil in itself. Moral relativism denies this distinction, and reduces all evils to the level of *malum prohibitum*. I don't know of any educated person who denies that certain norms are *malum prohibitum*, and change from one society to another. The question is whether all norms can be reduced to that level.

This can be seen in every level of society: in popular attitudes, in academia, in the highest level of public life, and in the church. For the sake of brevity I will restrict my comments to popular attitudes and the church.¹⁷⁷

First we will look at popular attitudes. A 2002 survey by the Barna Group found that 64% of adults and 83% of teens agreed with the statement that moral truth always depends on the situation, as opposed to 22% of adults and only 6% of teens who said there are unchanging moral absolutes. Even among born again Christians,¹⁷⁸ just 32% of adults and 9% of teens said they believed in moral absolutes.¹⁷⁹ Yet this result was contradicted by the 2008 Pew Forum's Religious Landscape Survey. It found that when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, "There are clear and absolute standards for what is right and wrong," 78% agreed.¹⁸⁰ Evidently the result one obtains depends on how the question is asked. Yet this conflicting result makes sense when one considers the results obtained by the more sophisticated questioning involved in the National Study of Youth and Religion. This study found that young people in

¹⁷⁷ Two places to go for a discussion of relativistic moral theory within the academy, and how it masks certain moral commitments that it doesn't openly acknowledge, are Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin, 1999), 59–75; and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3–32, 53–107, 317–40, 495–521. For an assertion of the right of the individual to construct their own morality by the U.S. Supreme Court—a body that could never live out such a creed—see United States Supreme Court, *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania et al. v. Casey, Governor of Pennsylvania, et al.* 505 U. S. 833 (1992), <http://supremecourtus.gov/opinions/boundvolumes/505bv.pdf> (accessed Jan 29, 2010), 851; and Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know*, 22–23. For another example of moral relativism in American public life, and a discussion of how this reveals a degenerate form of natural law, see Joseph Biden, "Opening Statement, Senator Joseph R. Biden, Chairman of the Judiciary Committee Hearing on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas to be an Associate Justice to the U.S. Supreme Court," Sept 10, 1991, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/senate/judiciary/sh102-1084pt1/6-21.pdf> (accessed May 12 2009), 8–20; and Phillip E. Johnson, "Nihilism and the End of Law," *First Things* (March 1993), http://www.firstthings.com/article.php?id_article=5101&var_recherche=natural+law (accessed May 14, 2009).

¹⁷⁸ Defined as those who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who indicated they believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they had confessed their sins and accepted Christ as their savior. Respondents were not asked to describe themselves as "born again."

¹⁷⁹ Barna Group, "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings," Feb 12, 2002, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/67-americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings> (accessed Jan 28, 2010).

¹⁸⁰ Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Beliefs and Practices," 61.

America are very conflicted when it comes to the question of whether there are moral absolutes or not. On the one hand most of them have a strong ethos that forswears judging any ideas or people that may be different.¹⁸¹ This involves the conviction that everyone should have the right to choose what is right for themselves, and to criticize anyone for their choices is intolerant and unloving. This means that most young adults react negatively to words such as commitment, duty, faithfulness, obedience, calling, obligation, accountability, and responsibility, since they judge such things to be coercive, and antithetical to the sovereign freedom of the individual.¹⁸² On the other hand, the same people often draw clear moralistic lines and make decisive judgements on matters of right and wrong that they regard as self-evident to any reasonable person. “Well, obviously you shouldn’t hurt someone else,” or “It’s totally wrong to have sex with someone you don’t really care about.”¹⁸³ Their moral relativism does not stop them from being moralistic therapeutic deists, who assume that the purpose of religion is to inculcate an ethic of niceness, which they think is not relative but common to all religions.¹⁸⁴ So the researchers conclude that in practice they “continually seesaw, with little self-awareness that they are doing so, between their individualist Jekyll and moralistic Hyde selves, incapable of reconciling their judgements with their anti-judgementalism, and so merely banging back and forth between them.”¹⁸⁵ In practice, most of them end up adopting an ethic of pragmatic consequentialism, guided by the silver rule of “don’t hurt others,” yet without much ability to analyze or defend what they are doing apart from saying “it feels right to me.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 48–53.

¹⁸² Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 49.

¹⁸³ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144; cf. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 46–47.

¹⁸⁴ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 82–83.

¹⁸⁵ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144–45.

¹⁸⁶ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 47, 51–52, 292–94.

What we see here is not genuine moral relativism, but the construction of a new morality by grasping certain tenets of the law and using them to trump the rest. It is what Luther says the self-righteous always do: keep one or two laws with self-righteous zeal, so they can feel secure about their neglect of the rest of God's law.¹⁸⁷

The political and ethical philosopher J. Budziszewski accurately describes what is going on when he talks about "cannibalizing the conscience." Since the conscience is powerful and inescapable, we cannot simply ignore it, or invent a new morality out of thin air. If people want to suppress their conscience, they need something equally powerful to do it. This they find in the conscience itself. Although in reality the different tenets of the law are in harmony with each other, if we twist them it then becomes possible to use one to oppose another. So the institution of marriage is attacked in the name of love, homosexual marriage is promoted in the name of fairness, the murder of children in the womb is justified in the name of compassion for women

¹⁸⁷ The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor hints at this phenomenon when he suggests that the contemporary western world has espoused certain goods, such as freedom and benevolence, yet has failed to recognize that these goods do not stand alone, but belong together with a plurality of other goods that we should be pursuing (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 495–521).

G. K. Chesterton talks about the same phenomenon when he writes,

The modern world is not evil; in some ways the modern world is far too good. It is full of wild and wasted virtues. When a religious scheme is shattered (as Christianity was shattered at the Reformation), it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful. For example, Mr. Blatchford attacks Christianity because he is mad on one Christian virtue: the merely mystical and almost irrational virtue of charity. He has a strange idea that he will make it easier to forgive sins by saying that there are no sins to forgive. Mr. Blatchford is not only an early Christian, he is the only early Christian who ought really to have been eaten by lions. For in his case the pagan accusation is really true: his mercy would mean mere anarchy. (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2002, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/chesterton/orthodoxy.html>], [accessed June 21, 2010], 16)

Chesterton has described the phenomenon accurately, even if in my estimation he has falsely attributed the cause of this problem to the Reformation. Luther described this phenomenon centuries before Chesterton. He attributed it to "Papists, Turks, Jews, and all infidels and hypocrites," all who wish to justify themselves rather than trusting totally in Christ, and therefore twist the law for the purpose of self-justification.

and respect for their freedom, Communists excuse all kinds of injustice in the name of ending human need, and the Nazis stilled their consciences regarding their murder of the Jews by vilifying their victims, so that the slaughter could be carried out in the name of retributive justice and the greater good.¹⁸⁸ To this we could add that the first table of the law has been used to justify all kinds of breaches of the second table of the law, from the crusades to 9/11. This is the best way to understand moral relativism in contemporary society. As a number of scholars have pointed out, moral relativism is defended in the name of certain moral commitments, such as to benevolence, tolerance, understanding, humility, a respect for human freedom, or love.¹⁸⁹ It is an attempt to justify our neglect of certain virtues by silencing them in the name of others.

The gospel of inclusivity within the church. The belief that moral norms are relative is more common among non-Christians and nominal Christians than among committed Christians, yet it is still common among regular church attenders.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, something very similar to moral relativism is being defended in many segments of the church.

William Abraham, professor of theology at Southern Methodist University in Texas, contends that inclusivism is the working ideology of many churches today, particularly “mainline” churches like his own United Methodist Church. Abraham correctly identifies inclusivism as a new form of moralism. He suggests that this ideology began with the legitimate quest to eliminate racism and the patriarchal domination of women, yet has now expanded

¹⁸⁸ Budziszewski, *What We Can't Not Know*, 186–90.

¹⁸⁹ E.g. Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 65–74; Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 88, 155–56; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 321–40; Oswald Bayer, “Law and Freedom: A Metacritique of Kant,” in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154–55; Smith and Ludquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144.

¹⁹⁰ Pew Forum, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices,” 61–63; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 264–65; Barna Group, “Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings,” Feb 12, 2002, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/67-americans-are-most-likely-to-base-truth-on-feelings> (accessed Jan 28, 2010).

beyond all bounds as it seeks out new victims to liberate and new oppressors to castigate. He suggests that the result, at least in his own denomination, has been that the oppressed have claimed the moral high ground and used it to become the oppressors, with the result that people are constantly walking on eggshells, wondering when they will become the next target of the thought police.¹⁹¹ This is an example of the phenomenon described above. A legitimate virtue, in this case a concern for justice for the oppressed, has been espoused with self-righteous zeal, to the extent that it has been blown out of all proportion and used to trump other virtues.

Yet even worse than this misuse of the law is when this new moralism is called the gospel. Philip Turner, former dean of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, suggests that the current division over homosexual marriage and ordination within his own Anglican Communion is ultimately not about ethics. Instead, the split is between those who teach a gospel of redemption and those who espouse a gospel of acceptance or inclusivity instead. The old gospel focused on forgiveness. It called for repentance and faith, and led to holiness of life. The new gospel redefines God's love as affirmation of us for who we are. It dispenses with God's judgement on sin and his call to repentance, and therefore with his forgiveness, since there is no longer anything to forgive.¹⁹² David Yeago, professor of Systematics at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in South Carolina, argues that something similar is happening within worldwide Lutheranism. Instead of the gospel being taught as the forgiveness of sins that liberates us from the condemnation of the law, it is frequently taught as something that liberates us from the law altogether. This view regards the law as oppressive because it is law, rather than

¹⁹¹ William J. Abraham, "Inclusivism, Idolatry and the Survival of the (Fittest) Faithful," in *The Community of the Word: Towards an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 131–38.

¹⁹² Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things* 154 (June/July 2005): 10–12; cf. Abraham, "Inclusivism, Idolatry and the Survival of the (Fittest) Faithful," 140.

because we are disobedient and stand condemned by it. Therefore we are not liberated by Christ so that we may learn to love God's law and freely live in harmony with his will, as Luther taught,¹⁹³ but so that we may discard the law instead.¹⁹⁴ This is simply antinomianism.

If the current debates in the church about homosexuality were simply about how to interpret God's law, they would be far less serious. Ultimately they are debates about the gospel, not the law. The permissive stance that many churches are taking over sexual ethics is being defended in the name of the gospel. Yet the gospel has been perverted to justify our sin instead of justifying us sinners. As Luther tells us, the struggle against antinomianism is ultimately a struggle to preserve the gospel, not the law. Antinomianism is a strategy for self-justification. It is about establishing a righteousness of our own by silencing the accusing voice of the law. This does away with the need for Christ. It is "another gospel," and is even more serious than the false works-righteous gospel that Paul confronted in Galatia. As Luther notes, the works-righteous usually leave some room for repentance and forgiveness. The antinomians do away with them altogether. If the current debates in worldwide Christendom were merely about sexual ethics, they could possibly be resolved. Yet when our sexual liberation is proclaimed in the name of the gospel it must divide the church, since the church can only have one gospel. Any other gospel is self-righteous idolatry.

Conclusion: So Why Does All This Matter?

The effort to establish a righteousness that is our own is just as big an obstacle to faith in Christ in our day as it was in Luther's. We still try to establish our righteousness by fitting the

¹⁹³ E.g. LW 14:287–300; 26:352–53; Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 141, 245 = WA 39.i:350.3–6, 356.3–24.

¹⁹⁴ David Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Cost of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 (Winter 1993): 38–46.

law to our works: self-righteously keeping certain laws that agree with our conduct, and silencing others that do not. The purpose of this chapter has been to alert the reader to some of the ways in which self-justification manifests itself in our society. Only when we are sufficiently alert to this form of idolatry can we effectively challenge it with a focused proclamation of law and gospel, and avoid a simplistic preaching of law and gospel that people can co-opt for the purpose of justifying themselves. This is something we must do, since no idol provides a more direct challenge to the gospel of Jesus Christ than this one.

Self-justification is destructive of faith in two ways. First, it breeds a sense of entitlement.¹⁹⁵ If we have a righteousness that is our own, then God owes us, and how dare he bring misfortune upon us! Luther observes that if we justify ourselves we will condemn God. If we consider our will to be holy we will condemn his as unholy whenever it conflicts with ours. In particular, we will charge him with injustice when trouble comes upon us. Yet if we justify God and his will we will condemn ourselves as sinners. Only then will we recognize that any hardship he brings upon us is less than we deserve, and any good he gives us is unmerited kindness.¹⁹⁶ Only then will we learn to thank him and trust him for all his goodness to us. Second, self-justification prevents people from seeing their need for Christ, and therefore prevents them from hearing the gospel as good news.¹⁹⁷ Who needs Christ as a Savior from sin when one is already good and worthy?

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Horney, *Neurosis and Human Growth*, 40–63; Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, 19–20, 196–97, 230–43.

¹⁹⁶ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.18, 80, 86, 159–63, 205; 2.33–34, 192, 234–39, 427–28 (sic).

¹⁹⁷ “The glory of God cannot be declared unless the baseness and vileness of man be declared at the same time. Nor can we preach forth God as true, righteous, and merciful, unless we at the same time set forth men as liars, sinners, and miserable” (Ibid., 2.389 [sic] = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), WA 5:542.38–40). Cf. 2.215–16, 427–28; LW 22:157–58.

This is what Richard Keyes observed about Sigmund Freud. Since he justified himself, he condemned God, and felt no need for the gospel. This is what C. S. Lewis noted about the average person in England in his day. Since they had very little sense of their own sinfulness they acted as if God were on trial and not them.¹⁹⁸ This is also what the authors of the National Study of Youth and Religion concluded about moralistic therapeutic deists in America today. They feel little need for repentance, but instead feel like they have the right to get cranky at God when he fails to fix their problems or make them happy.¹⁹⁹ Unless we can expose the root of this problem the gospel will always fall on deaf ears.

¹⁹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 243–44.

¹⁹⁹ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 165.

CHAPTER SIX

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE SECOND ARTICLE: INCARNATION

Introduction

In the previous chapter we looked at the idol of the self in relation to Christ's role of justifying the sinner. In this chapter we will look at the idol of the self in relation to Christ's role as the incarnate mediator who bridges the gap between God and humankind so we can know him and worship him. To put it differently, the previous chapter focused on Christ's atonement, which overcomes God's anger and brings us his forgiveness and approval. This chapter will focus on Christ's incarnation, which overcomes God's hiddenness and distance from us by revealing and bringing him to us. This is related to his work of atonement, since our sin is one of the greatest barriers that prevents us from being close to God. Yet this chapter will focus more on the metaphysical barrier between the heavenly God and his worshippers on earth.

Christ's role as incarnate mediator means that he is the one who stands at the heart of Christian worship.¹ Christ did not come to earth to bring us merely theoretical knowledge of God. Instead, he came so we could know God in the sense of worshipping him and receiving his benefits.² Therefore we cannot look at idolatry as it relates to the Person of Christ without looking at his role of providing the down-to-earth focal point for Christian faith and worship.

¹ Every time the New Testament refers to Christ as the mediator it is within the context of worship (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24).

² As Melancthon wrote in his 1521 *Loci Communes*, a work Luther praised most highly, "to know Christ means to know his benefits" (Philip Melancthon, "Loci Communes Theologici," in *Melancthon and Bucer*, Library of Christian Classics, ed. Wilhelm Pauck [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 21). Cf. LW 26:287–88; 30:29–30, 152.

We noted in chapter 1 that idolatry is something that was first defined in the cultic domain. Luther took this seriously. It is true that he regarded idolatry as ultimately a matter of the faith in one's heart, and since this faith spills out and affects all of life it is a much larger issue than merely what cultic rites one observes. Yet it would be wrong to assume that Luther ever divorced faith from concrete acts of worship. The worship rites people observe reveal more than anything what Luther calls "incarnate faith,"³ faith not in the abstract but as it is lived out in real life. We misread Luther if we fail to see that all his talk about idolatry is centered in the question of what we actually do in our *cultus*. Do we go on a pilgrimage to some holy site in the hope of earning merit with God? Do we buy indulgences, join a monastery, wear a hair shirt, or fast? Do we pray to the saints and ask them to intercede for us in our troubles? Do we sit in the lotus position, chant "OM," and try to get in touch with the universe? Do we go surfing on Sunday mornings, or go to work instead of to church, thinking that as long as we live a good life we don't need organized religion? Or do we get down on our knees and pray to the Father in the name of his Son to graciously help us in our needs? Do we go to hear the preaching of the gospel, to be baptized in the name of the Triune God, to confess our sins and receive forgiveness, and to partake of the Supper of our Lord? In this chapter we will examine Luther's answer to the question of what constitutes true Christian worship, and what is merely idolatry.

This leads directly to a discussion of the incarnation, since a central question that must be answered in any discussion on worship is how the gap between God in heaven and his worshippers on earth can be bridged. Luther answers this by pointing to the incarnate Person of Christ, as he comes to us now through the gospel.

³ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:264–68 = WA 40.i:414–18; cf. LW 2:77, 266–27; 21:205; 22:393; 35:370.

Luther is more than anything a theologian of the incarnation. In his hymn *A Mighty Fortress* Luther says of Jesus Christ that “there is no other God.”⁴ This is not a throwaway line, or a denial of the Trinity in favor of some sort of Christomonism, but a statement about the importance of the incarnation. If we will not know and worship God as he comes down to earth in Christ we will never know the true God, but only an idol produced by our imagination.

Thesis

The incarnate Christ who comes to us in the gospel bridges the metaphysical gap between God in heaven and his people on earth so that we might know him and worship him; all who devise their own picture of God or worship of God apart from Christ and the gospel are idolaters.

Luther’s Teaching

The Lutheran liturgical scholar John Kleinig traces the foundation for Luther’s theology of worship back to a sermon he preached on John 6:51, in which he comments, “If you want to have God, then mark where He resides and where He wants to be found.”⁵ Luther then tells us where this is: in Jesus Christ who is present with us through the gospel.⁶

Luther recognized that God’s transcendence poses a two-sided metaphysical problem for us. The first side of this problem is ontological: God is eternal, whereas we are bound to time; God is almighty and all-knowing, whereas we are limited in knowledge and power; God is spiritual and fills heaven and earth, whereas we are finite, bodily creatures who are bound to this earth. Therefore we cannot grab hold of him unless he condescends to give himself to us in a way we can handle. The other side of this problem is epistemological: since God is so much

⁴ “Er heist Jhesu Christ, der Herr Zebaoth, Und ist kein ander God” (WA 35:456). Cf. 1 John 5:20.

⁵ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:121 = WA 33:187.18–21. Cited in John Kleinig, “Where is your God? Luther on God’s Self-Localisation,” in *All Theology Is Christology. Essays in Honor of David P Scaer*, ed. Dean O. Wenthe et al. (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 118.

greater than us his thoughts are higher than ours, his ways are strange to us, and he is beyond the reach of our knowledge unless he condescends to reveal himself to us. Since he is almighty he is free from all necessity and is not bound to any earthly reason or law, except to the extent that he freely chooses to bind himself to covenants and promises. Therefore it is impossible for us to begin with creation or with human rational principles and work our way up to an adequate knowledge of him. We can only truly know him if he tells us about himself.⁷

Luther's solution to both sides of this problem is simple: we need to go to where God has chosen to reside, in Christ and the gospel. When we do this we both know him and have him, as he reveals himself and gives himself to us in this place.

True Worship is Worship through Faith in Jesus Christ

Since God has chosen to bridge the gap between him and us in Jesus Christ, we have only two options. We can try to form our own picture of God and find our own path to him, or we can know and worship him through faith in Christ as God calls us to do. Only when we do the latter are we worshipping the true God and fulfilling the first commandment. Luther observes that the first commandment is applied by the Old Testament prophecies and their New Testament fulfillment to Christ. The first commandment tells us to adore God alone. Yet Scripture then points us to the Lord's anointed, and tells us to adore him. Whereas in the Old Testament God was worshipped through the ceremonies God gave to Moses, the New Testament transfers this worship to Christ, so that the first commandment is fulfilled through faith in him.⁸ Luther writes,

⁶ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:120–21 = WA 33:185–87.

⁷ See footnote 5 in chapter 3, which discusses how Luther inherited this understanding of God's transcendence from the *via moderna*.

⁸ LW 12:285–89; 14:277; cf. 13:325; 15:313.

the worship of God [*cultus Dei*] is now the adoration of this King, not the ceremonies of Moses, the pope, monks, heathen, or Turks. That means laying hold of this King and believing He is the Son of God, who suffered for us and rose again; moreover, acknowledging Him in reverence, accepting His Word, believing, and doing everything through faith in Him, to His glory, so that everything may take place, as Paul says, “in the name of Jesus” (Col. 3:17).⁹

Luther spells this out as he reflects on the theology of the incarnation in John’s gospel. In his preaching on this book Luther stresses the centrality of Christ to all true worship and knowledge of God. In particular he uses Jesus’ words in John 14 to establish this point, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,”¹⁰ and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”¹¹ On this basis he concludes that whenever we form our own picture of God or path to God we grope blindly and grasp an idol instead of the true God, since only Christ can reveal God to us and teach us how to come to him.¹²

In his reflections on John 1:14–18, Luther says that although it is possible to have a “legal knowledge” of God apart from Christ, true “evangelical knowledge” comes only through Christ. Through natural reason we can know something of the Creator’s power, and the law he has

⁹ *Commentary on Psalm 45* (1532), LW 12:289 = WA 40.ii:595.20–25.

¹⁰ John 14:6.

¹¹ John 14:9; LW 22:494; 23:53–54, 90; 345–46; 24:56–59, 65; cf. 2:49; 3:297; 12:84–85; 15:311–12; 16:55; 17:386; 30:222, 285–86.

Luther also draws on many other pictures from this gospel to illustrate why Christ must stand at the center of our faith. Just as the Jews were commanded not to worship on every hilltop or under every tree, but only at the mercy seat in Jerusalem, so Christ is our temple and mercy seat. Only through him does God promise to forgive sins and answer prayer (LW 22:248–50, 366–67; 23:120–21; 24:23–24; cf. John 1:14; 2:21; Rom 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10; LW 17:61; 19:80; 26:273; 27:64; 30:223; 31:64; 37:364; 51:277–86; Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.208–9). Christ is Jacob’s ladder, who has opened heaven through his incarnation, and ushers us into God’s presence (LW 22:200–203, 207–9; cf. John 1:51; LW 5:217–24). In no other way can we climb up to God, neither by works nor by wisdom (LW 22:328–335, 366–68; 23:55–56, 80; 24:48; cf. 5:223; 26:30; 29:111; 43:54–55). Christ is the bread of life who must feed us, the fountain of life who must give us drink if we are to live (LW 22:135; 23:55–56; John 4:13–14; 6:35–51). He is the road, bridge, and doorway to heaven, the leader who must guide us through the dark, and the lamp that must light the way (LW 22:305–6; 23:56, 319–21; 24:48; cf. John 8:12; 10:9, 14–16; 14:6; LW 29:111; WLS 1160–61 [3715]).

¹² LW 22:366–68; 23:55–56, 80; 19:53–57; cf. Matt 11:25–27; John 1:9; 8:12; 10:1–16; 12:35–36; 14:6; 15:5; 1 John 2:23; LW 29:111; 43:54–55; 52:57–61.

embedded in nature. Yet this partial knowledge is not yet true knowledge, since it does not give us any certain knowledge of God's attitude towards us, nor enable us to come to him. Instead, it leads people to fabricate idolatrous works and worship in the hope that these will please him. Thus those who devise their own worship based on their natural reason always fall into some kind of futile works righteousness. What we need if we are to have fellowship with God is the evangelical knowledge that comes through Christ. We need to see the face of Jesus, who reveals to us God's mind and his true plan of salvation. Then we will look into God's face and see into his heart, and know that he is kind and friendly towards us and wants to save us through Christ.¹³

The devil does not want us to have this knowledge of Christ or be saved through him, so he rages against this article of the faith.¹⁴ Luther writes,

I have also noticed that all error, heresy, idolatry, offense, misuse, and evil in the church originally came from despising or losing sight of this article of faith in Jesus Christ. And if one looks at it correctly and clearly, all heresies do contend against this dear article of Jesus Christ, as Simeon says of him, that he is "set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against" [Luke 2:34]. ... St. John also gives no other or more certain sign for recognizing false and anti-Christian spirits than their denial of Jesus Christ [II John 7].¹⁵

Therefore Luther concludes that if we are to avoid idolatry, we must be immune to every other message that induces us to seek salvation somewhere else, no matter how wise, clever, or lofty it may be. Instead we must go to the one place God wants to be found. Otherwise we will never find God, but only an idol.¹⁶ We must conclude, "I know of no other God in heaven or on

¹³ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:135, 149–59 = WA 46:653–54, 666–74; LW 24:59–61, 97–99; cf. 3:276–77; 12:84–88; 29:211.

¹⁴ LW 22:332, 368; 24:62.

¹⁵ *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith* (1538), LW 34:207–8 = WA 50:267.14–20, 23–26; cf. 24:320.

¹⁶ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:487–89 = WA 47:195–97 ; *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:22–24 = WA 45:480–83.

earth than of this One, who talks to me and treats me as I see Christ doing.”¹⁷ “I must and will hear or see no work, no worship of God, no spirituality, no holy life other than that of this Man Christ, or that which He transmitted to the apostles, and the apostles, in turn, transmitted to the preachers. When I hear these, I hear Christ Himself; and when I hear Christ, I hear the Father.”¹⁸ “Outside this Man Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary and who suffered, you must not seek God or any salvation and help; for He is God Himself.”¹⁹ We must know no other God, for there is no God outside of him.²⁰

When Luther says there is no God apart from Jesus Christ he is not denying any part of Trinitarian theology, but rather asserting that Christ is the point at which we gain access to the whole Trinity. Through Christ we gain access to the Father, since he is the perfect image of the Father and reveals the Father to us.²¹ Through Christ we also gain access to the Holy Spirit. He is the font of the Holy Spirit,²² who alone pours out on us the Spirit,²³ so that we can be truly spiritual people, renewed in God’s image.²⁴

True Worship is Worship through Christ’s Humanity.

When Luther stresses that we must find and worship God in Christ and nowhere else, he specifically means the incarnate Christ who has come down to earth for us. Jesus’ humanity is

¹⁷ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:62 = WA 45:517.10–12.

¹⁸ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:70 = WA 45:524.23–27; cf. Matt 17:5; John 5:19; 7:16.

¹⁹ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:494 = WA 47:202.5–7; cf. 12:84–87; 44:318–19.

²⁰ LW 22:368, 463; 23:124, 246, 366; 24:98, 403; cf. 3:338; 5:50; 12:101, 352; 14:103; 15:305; 17:86; 19:80; 26:29; 38:46, 82, 258, 309; 41:165; WA 25:94.5–19; 35:456; See also 1 John 5:20, “He is the true God and eternal life.”

²¹ LW 12:47–48; 15:339; 22:19–20; 34:220–21; 38:275; cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3.

²² *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:134–35, 487–89 = WA 46:652–54; 47:195–97.

²³ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:131 = WA 40.ii:168.

²⁴ LW 1:60–65, 68, 339–40; 2:141; 22:285–90; 26:352–53, 356–57; 27:139–40; 31:89, 358–59; 34:140, 177; cf. Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:20–24; Col 3:10; 1 John 3:2.

the new temple of God, where we must go to find him.²⁵ Luther emphasizes that we must say with Paul, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”²⁶ This means going to the child on Mary’s lap and the sacrificial victim on the cross, and knowing that in him are hidden all the treasures of the godhead.²⁷ We must place all our reliance on this man and seek salvation nowhere else.²⁸ Since Christ’s humanity has been inseparably united in one person with God’s Son, when we see the man Jesus we see God himself.²⁹ Only the eyes of faith can recognize this man as God, yet this does not make it any less the case.³⁰ The man Jesus shares in all the glory and properties of God, since in him the whole fullness of God dwells bodily.³¹ Furthermore, the Holy Spirit dwells in him fully.³² It is this man whom Scripture calls God and Lord over all.³³ God’s angels marvel to see that the one who is above them, enthroned in incomprehensible majesty at the Father’s right hand, is at the same time the lowest of all, in the manger, on the cross, despised, rejected, subjected to every creature, bearing the sins of all. When they see this they race to adore him and submit themselves to this lowest one.³⁴

When Luther emphasized that we must know God through Jesus’ humanity, he was specifically objecting to speculation about God in his majesty. Luther repeatedly charged scholastic theologians like Gerson, as well as other reformers like Zwingli, Schwenckfeld,

²⁵ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:248–50 = WA 46:760–63.

²⁶ 1 Cor 2:2.

²⁷ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:276–77 = WA 43:73; Col 2:3.

²⁸ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:489, 494 = WA 47:197, 202.

²⁹ LW 15:308–10; 5:222; 12:101.

³⁰ LW 22:203–4; 24:59–60.

³¹ LW 5:224; 12:87–88; 22:487–89, 494; 26:30; Col 2:9.

³² *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:487–89 = WA 47:195–97; John 3:34.

³³ *Commentary on Psalm 8* (1537), LW 12:101 = WA 45:209–10.

³⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:218–21 = 43:579–81.

Carlstadt, and Oecolampadius, with neglecting Christ's humanity and trying to gain speculative access to his divinity, as if they were able to exalt themselves to heaven or gain direct access to God.³⁵ In contrast he asserted that only when we hold onto Christ's humanity will his true divinity become manifest.³⁶ When Oecolampadius said to him at the Marburg colloquy, "You should not cling to the humanity and the flesh of Christ, but rather lift up your mind to his divinity," Luther replied, "I do not know of any God except him who was made flesh, nor do I want to have another. And there is no other God who could save us, besides the God Incarnate."³⁷

The reason why speculations about God in his majesty are useless is that God has decided that he wants us to know him through the incarnation alone. Luther writes,

The humanity is that holy ladder of ours, mentioned in Gen. 28:12, by which we ascend to the knowledge of God. Therefore John 14:6 also says: "No one comes to the Father but by Me." And again: "I am the Door" (John 10:7). Therefore he who wants to ascend advantageously to the love and knowledge of God should abandon the human metaphysical rules concerning knowledge of the divinity and apply himself first to the humanity of Christ. For it is exceedingly godless temerity that, where God has humiliated Himself in order to become recognizable, man seeks for himself another way by following the counsels of his own natural capacity.³⁸

Those who try to investigate God's majesty apart from Christ's humanity are seeking things they cannot know, since God in his majesty is hidden from them. Therefore instead of gaining true knowledge, they end up weaving fantasies about a god they have invented. Since they are sinners, even if they were to encounter God in his glory they would discover that he is a

³⁵ LW 3:276; 12:49; 23:101–2; 26:28–30; 38:46, 82; 54:22.

³⁶ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:101–2 = WA 33:154–55.

³⁷ Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 203.

Sasse's account of the dialogue at Marburg is a reconstruction based on several different eyewitness accounts.

³⁸ *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517–18), LW 29:111 = WA 57:b99.3–10.

raging fire who must consume them. Only Christ incarnate reveals the true God to us in his mercy, and prepares us to meet him in glory on the last day.³⁹ Therefore Luther concludes,

Whenever you are concerned to think and act about your salvation, you must put away all speculations about the Majesty, all thoughts of works, traditions, and philosophy—indeed, of the Law of God itself. And you must run directly to the manger and the mother’s womb, embrace this Infant and Virgin’s Child in your arms, and look at Him—born, being nursed, growing up, going about in human society, teaching, dying, rising again, ascending above all the heavens, and having authority over all things. In this way you can shake off all terrors and errors.⁴⁰

For

“In Him alone is salvation, grace, and life. Whatever you think about God aside from Him is vain speculation and mere idolatry.”⁴¹

True Worship is Worship through the Gospel.

The Christ that Luther is speaking of is not any Christ we might imagine, but the Christ who comes to us through the gospel.⁴² For us to know Christ means to know him through the gospel. It is not sufficient that Christ came down from heaven to earth at one place and time. If we are to receive him he must also come to us. This he does in the gospel. Luther’s theology of the incarnation is always closely tied to his theology of the word and the sacraments. These are the means through which Christ descends to us now. We cannot grasp Christ directly as he once walked the streets of Galilee or as he now dwells in glory in heaven. Instead, we must grasp him

³⁹ LW 16:55–56; 17:330–31; 26:28–30, 39.

⁴⁰ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:30 = WA 40.i:97.28–98.13.

⁴¹ *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532), LW 12:88 = WA 40.ii:305.21–22.

⁴² Cf. Tae Jun Suk’s working definition of idolatry for Luther as “any worship apart from faith in Christ who is revealed in the Word” (Tae Jun Suk, *The Theology of Martin Luther between Judaism and Roman Catholicism: A Critical-Historical Evaluation of Luther’s Concept of Idolatry* [Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2001], 126–27).

sacramentally, as he comes to us in the gospel, hidden under the form of created things.⁴³ Any Christ we claim to possess apart from the gospel is a false Christ, an idol.

Luther regarded the incarnation as paradigmatic for all God's dealings with us this side of eternity. Just as God has come to us under the covering of Jesus' humanity, so he always deals with his people on earth not in majesty, but covered by external words, works, signs, and images.⁴⁴ In biblical times he came to his people under the external coverings of the tabernacle, the ark with its mercy seat,⁴⁵ the pillars of cloud and fire,⁴⁶ a voice from heaven, a dove descending from heaven,⁴⁷ his appearances in human form, his words in human language,⁴⁸ and ultimately through his incarnate Son.⁴⁹ Today he still comes to us under the coverings that

⁴³ For Luther, the gospel is always sacramental. It doesn't just tell us about Christ, but brings Christ and his blessings to us. He writes:

All the words and stories of the gospels are sacraments of a kind, sacred signs by which God works in believers what the histories signify. Just as baptism is the sacrament by which God restores us; just as absolution is the sacrament by which God forgives sins, so the words of Christ are sacraments through which he works salvation. Hence the gospel is to be taken sacramentally, that is, the words of Christ need to be meditated on as symbols through which that righteousness, power, and salvation is given which these words themselves portray.... We meditate properly on the gospel, when we do so sacramentally, for through faith the words produce what they portray. Christ was born; believe that he was born for you and you will be born again. Christ conquered death and sin; believe that he conquered them for you and you will conquer them. (*Sermon on Christmas Day* [1519], WA 9:439, 442. Translated in John Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2008], 101–2.)

⁴⁴ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.208; LW 1:11; 2:45–48; 3:274–75; 24:67–71.

Luther continually stresses that we are not able to receive God in his majesty. Not only is God in his infinite majesty beyond the level of our comprehension, so that we cannot understand him unless he condescends to meet us at our level, but as sinners we cannot look at God's face unveiled without being consumed by his wrath against sin (LW 1:11–14, 309; 2:46–48; 3:275–76; 4:61; 6:128–29; 16:55–56; 22:157; 24:65, 67; cf. Ex 33:18–20; Rom 11:33–34; 2 Cor 3:7–4:6).

⁴⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.208; LW 1:11, 309; 2:46.

⁴⁶ LW 1:11, 309; 2:46.

⁴⁷ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:45 = WA 42:294.

⁴⁸ LW 4:61; 43:200.

⁴⁹ LW 2:45, 48–49; 3:275–77; 24:68–71.

constitute the gospel, as Christ and his Spirit come to us through the word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution,⁵⁰ and in people who believe and proclaim the gospel.⁵¹

This means that Luther's Christological emphasis should not be played off against his emphasis on God's written, proclaimed, and enacted word. The two belong inseparably together in his thought. Luther says that "we do not separate, or differentiate between, God and His Word or ministry, given to us through Christ; ... By no means should we become so foolish as to sever and separate God, Christ, and His Word from one another."⁵² When we hear his servants proclaim his word as he commanded and administer the sacraments he instituted, we hear him speaking and see him at work.⁵³ The word and sacraments are like pipes that draw water from the spring of Christ.⁵⁴ For Christ has "put himself into the word."⁵⁵ God "wraps Himself up in Baptism, in absolution, etc.,"⁵⁶ and through blessing, preaching, and the sacraments he descends to speak to us.⁵⁷ So wherever people receive these gifts in faith they can be assured that Christ is present with them, together with the Father and the Spirit.⁵⁸ Therefore it is no surprise that just as Luther refers to Christ as the image of the Father, he also talks about God's word, Baptism, the

⁵⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2:209; LW 1:11, 309; 2:46, 48; 3:275; 6:128–29; 24:67–71.

⁵¹ LW 22:202–4, 488–89; 23:56; 24:70; cf. SA III 4.

⁵² *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:67 = WA 45:522.3–5, 20–21.

⁵³ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:66–67, 70–71 = WA 45:521–22, 524–25.

⁵⁴ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:70–71 = WA 45:524–25.

⁵⁵ *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics* (1526), LW 36:343 = WA 493.21; cf. LW 52:46.

⁵⁶ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 1:11 = WA 42:10.6.

⁵⁷ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:197 = WA 43:564; *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:202–3 = WA 46:712.

⁵⁸ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:209 = WA 46:718–19; cf. John 14:23.

Lord's Supper, and absolution as "divine images" and the "tabernacle of God" through which we come to see and know and meet with God.⁵⁹

Luther is quite clear that we cannot have Christ apart from the gospel.⁶⁰ He writes,

How, then, do we have Christ? After all, he is sitting at the right hand of the Father; he will not come down to us in our house. No, this he will not do. But how do I gain and have him? Ah, you cannot have him except in the gospel in which he is promised to you.⁶¹

Yet when we have this gospel, we can be certain that we have Christ:

When you open the book containing the gospels and read or hear how Christ comes here or there, or how someone is brought to him, you should therein perceive the sermon or the gospel through which he is coming to you, or you are being brought to him. For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him. When you see how he works, however, and how he helps everyone to whom he comes or who is brought to him, then rest assured that faith is accomplishing this in you and that he is offering your soul exactly the same sort of help and favor through the gospel. If you pause here and let him do you good, that is, if you believe that he benefits and helps you, then you really have it. Then Christ is yours, presented to you as a gift.⁶²

For Luther, the created means through which God comes to us are indispensable. Just as we must refuse to worship any God apart from the one who gives himself to us in the man Jesus Christ, so we must not worship a Christ we dream up for ourselves, or any of the false Christs presented to us by the devil.⁶³ Instead, our faith in Christ must be enclosed within God's word and fixed to the external signs of favor God has given us, or we will be tossed around by every wind of doctrine and wander away to serve idols produced by our own speculations.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:47 = WA 42:295.4; *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:179 = WA 43:265.8–11; cf. LW 6:172–73; 52:46.

⁶⁰ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 35.

⁶¹ *Two Sermons Preached at Weimar* (1522), LW 51:114 = WA 10.iii:349.17–21; cf. John 14:23.

⁶² *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), LW 35:121 = WA 10.i:13.19–14.7.

⁶³ LW 30:251–58, 285–88; cf. Matt 24:23–24; 1 John 2:18–24; 4:1–6; 2 John 7–9.

⁶⁴ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.208–9; LW 6:128–29.

True Worship is Worship that God has Instituted

Luther had one simple justification for directing all this attention to Christ, and that is that God tells us to focus such attention on him. Luther regarded a Christocentric approach to worship to be the necessary consequence of his more general principle: that we cannot know or worship the true God unless he teaches us how. Luther teaches that the root cause of all idolatry is that people ignore what God has prescribed in his word and presume to devise their own means of approaching and worshipping God.⁶⁵

Luther spells this out at length when he discusses idolatry in the “Preface to the Prophets” that he wrote for his *Luther Bible*. There he proposes the following rule:

Gottesdienst without God’s word is *Teuffelsdienst* [worship of the devil]. In contrast, let everyone see to it that he is certain his *Gottesdienst* has been instituted by God’s word, and not invented by his own pious notions or good intentions. Whoever engages in *Gottesdienst* to which God has not borne witness ought to know that he is worshipping not the true God but an idol that he has concocted for himself.⁶⁶

In this preface and his other expositions of this subject Luther wastes little time attacking the obvious idolatry of those who worship false gods and have no intention of worshipping the God of Israel. Instead, he focuses nearly all his attention on those who think they are worshipping the God of Israel, but worship him in their own self-chosen way. This, Luther contends, is no different from worshipping a false god, since it amounts to an attempt to remake God according to our own thoughts and intentions. People who do this act as if God must conform to them and their piety by assuming he will be pleased with their self-chosen worship.⁶⁷ Luther says this is equivalent to inventing a new god, since the real God does not accommodate

⁶⁵ LW 1:159; 2:284, 356; 8:230; 16:160; 17:16–17; 18:184; 19:11; 20:332; 24:327–28; 27:87–90; 35:270–73; 52:90–92.

This means that Luther identifies idolatry with the sin of *avodah zarah*. See chapter 1, page 21.

⁶⁶ *Preface to the Prophets* (1545), LW 35:273 (translation altered) = WA DB 11.i:15.13–16.

⁶⁷ LW 19:11; 36:147.

himself to our opinions in this way. It is acting like we are the creators who can shape him according to our ideas.⁶⁸ Thus those who invent their own worship end up worshipping a false god they have dreamed up for themselves.⁶⁹

As one would expect from an Old Testament scholar, Luther finds examples of such worship amongst the Israelites. God commanded the Jews to worship him only at the mercy seat in Jerusalem, yet they chose to worship in every place that pleased them.⁷⁰ King Jeroboam led the way. When he saw the people going up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord he was afraid their political loyalty would shift to the king of Judah, so he invented his own place and manner for worshipping the Lord to hold the people to himself. Thus he became an idolater, though he had no intention of defecting from the God who brought the people out of Egypt.⁷¹

Luther found even more examples in the church of his day.⁷² Under the papacy people were taught that God must be worshipped by fasting, observing holy days, praying to the saints, and performing other works commanded by the Pope, while faith in Christ was set aside.⁷³ Likewise, they were taught that the mass is a sacrifice, though God's word teaches that Christ has been sacrificed once for all.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the monks thought they could worship God through their cowls, ropes, tonsures, bare feet, and holy orders, though no word of God has established such worship. Therefore Luther says they create a false god, since they imagine a god who can be

⁶⁸ LW 1:149; 17:17; 9:54; 40:60–61; 52:84–85.

⁶⁹ *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text (1526)*, LW 19:55–56 = WA 19:207–8.

⁷⁰ LW 22:366–67; 24:24; 35:269–70.

⁷¹ LW 17:17; 35:269, 272; 1 Kings 12:28.

⁷² LW 35:270, 272–73.

⁷³ LW 22:367–68; WA 28:610–20; LC I, 11, 22 = WA 30.i:134.7–12, 135.17–26.

⁷⁴ *The Misuse of the Mass (1521)*, LW 36:147 = WA 8:493.

reconciled through such self-chosen works.⁷⁵ The Sacramentarians like Zwingli reasoned that Christ is not present in the Lord's Supper since he is up in heaven, despite Christ's promise.⁷⁶ Therefore Luther says that all these people are idolaters, since they give up the word and worship God according to their own thoughts.⁷⁷ For "it is idolatry to establish worship [*cultum*] as a result of one's own choosing and not as the result of a command of the Lord."⁷⁸ When people do this they "shape God according to their own worship,"⁷⁹ as if he must bless whatever they choose.

Luther observes that whenever people depart from what God has instituted and fashion their own worship, their worship becomes a form of self-righteousness. Since natural human reason knows nothing of Christ or the gospel, it concludes that one must become godly and enter God's kingdom through good works, and devises works accordingly. Yet God's word teaches that one becomes godly and a member of his kingdom through faith in Christ.⁸⁰ Therefore the true God will only be found by the hungry soul who "relies on the words and seeks God nowhere but in the Christ who lies in the manger, or wherever He may be—on the cross, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, or in the ministry of the divine Word, or with my neighbor or brother."⁸¹

The Self-Localizing God

Central to Luther's theology of worship is his conviction that we only have access to the transcendent God where he chooses to make himself immanently available to us. John Kleinig describes this theology of God's self-localization in the following way:

⁷⁵ LW 1:14; 17:17; 19:55–56; 22:22, 152, 154–55.

⁷⁶ LW 23:80; 30:258.

⁷⁷ LW 1:149; 12:48–49; 17:108.

⁷⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38) LW 2:284 = WA 42: 465.

⁷⁹ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:16–17 = WA 31.ii:273.2–3.

⁸⁰ LW 1:11, 14–15; 17:16–17; 22:55–56, 368–69; 23:55–56; 24:229–30; 52:58–60.

⁸¹ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:56 = WA 33:81.37–42.

As he [Luther] reworked his Catholic heritage evangelically ... he repeatedly reflected on the apparent localisation by God of himself at the temple in Jerusalem. He, as it were, took up the ancient taunt of the pagan idolaters against the Israelites for their lack of idols and asked himself: 'Where is your God?' His answer was that the process of divine self-localisation, which had begun in the Old Testament, culminated in the incarnation of our Lord. In the man Jesus God localised himself once and for all far more physically and completely than any pagan god in any statue.⁸²

Luther insists that although God is infinite and fills all things, he is not present in the same way in every place. Only in clearly defined places does he give people full access to himself.⁸³ It is one thing for God to be present in creation, and another for him to be present for us in such a way that we can grasp hold of him.⁸⁴ In the Old Testament he did not choose to make himself available to his people on every hilltop or under every tree, but only where he chose to put his name and promised to be present in blessing.⁸⁵ Likewise he now makes himself available to us in the body of the man Jesus, who in turn comes to us in the word, in the water, in the bread and in the wine of the gospel. Just as he once made himself available in the created tabernacle and temple, so now he is available in his new temple, Jesus' created body.⁸⁶ Thus if we want to find God we do not turn our eyes upwards to heaven towards the infinite God in his glory, nor do we turn our eyes inwards to find the spiritual God within. Instead, we turn our eyes outwards to the

⁸² Kleinig, "Where is your God?" 117.

⁸³ "Although he is present in all creatures, and I might find him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for he certainly is there, yet he does not wish that I seek him there apart from the Word, and cast myself into the fire or the water, or hang myself on the rope. He is present everywhere, but he does not wish that you grope for him everywhere. Grope rather where the Word is, and there you will lay hold of him in the right way. Otherwise you are tempting God and committing idolatry" (*The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics* (1526), LW 36:342 = WA 19:492.19–25).

Cf. LW 37:214–30.

⁸⁴ *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 37:68–69 = WA 23:150–52.

⁸⁵ Exod 20:24; Deut 12:5–14.

⁸⁶ The main passages in which Luther develops this theme of God's self-localization are LW 1:94–95, 248–50, 309, 330; 2:284–86; 3:108–10, 163–64, 168–69; 4:178–83; 5:241–51; 6:127–29, 265–66; 12:352; 13:33–37; 19:44–45, 79–80; 23:120–25, 128–30; 35:268–70; 37, 68–69; WA 16.530f; 25.94; 25.236f; WA 40.III.51–57, 335–39, 399–443. See also Luther's discussion on three possible modes of presence in LW 37, 214–30, parts of which are quoted in SD VII, 93–103.

particular external things in which the infinite God has chosen to become locally present, and the transcendent God has made himself available within his creation.

Luther in Contrast to Other Approaches to Worship

Luther's answer to where we must look to find God distinguishes him from pagan idolaters, Roman Catholics, and the Reformed. His assertion that we can only know and worship God through Jesus Christ is obviously a rejection of all non-Christian theology and worship. Yet by itself this assertion is relatively uncontroversial in Christian circles. All orthodox Christian theology places Christ at the center of God's revelation and at the heart of Christian worship. What is more controversial is the way Luther identifies Christ so closely with the means of the gospel. This sets him at odds with both Catholics and the Reformed.

Luther and pagan idolatry. Luther is in full agreement with pagan idolaters that God can make himself available within sacred places or holy things within creation. The point of disagreement is over the question, "what places, and which things?" Luther's incarnational, sacramental theology is highly specific. It is not some theory about created things in general, and how they serve as vehicles of the divine. Instead, it is an assertion that God has chosen particular places and things as the means by which he comes to us to bless us.⁸⁷ The error of pagan idolatry as far as Luther is concerned is not that pagans try to worship God by means of created things, but that they use self-chosen things instead of the things God has designated in his word. The difference between the worship before the ark in the temple in Jerusalem and the worship before

⁸⁷ Phillip Cary, professor of philosophy at Eastern University in Pennsylvania, characterizes the medieval theology of the sacraments, as well as Luther's theology that grew out of it, as a piety of the external and the particular. He contrasts this with the spirituality of the Augustinian tradition, in which the things that really count are always inward and universal (Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], vii).

the golden calves at Bethel and Dan is not that one employed visible, created things and the other did not. They both did. Instead, it is that one was instituted by God whereas the other was not. This means that God had attached himself and his blessing to the one and not the other.⁸⁸

To help us see Luther's position clearly we should note the contrast between Luther and Calvin on this point. For Calvin, one key problem with pagan idols is that they are physical and visible. He writes, "we must cling to this principle: God's glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him. ... God's majesty is sullied by an unfitting and absurd fiction, when the incorporeal is made to resemble corporeal matter, the invisible a visible likeness, the spirit an inanimate object, the immeasurable a puny bit of wood, stone, or gold."⁸⁹ To prove this point he appeals to various passages of Scripture that censure or mock pagan idolaters for worshipping inanimate objects,⁹⁰ or for thinking that God can be compared to an image of metal or stone created through human imagination and skill.⁹¹ Yet as far as Luther is concerned, these passages do not prove Calvin's point. The problem he sees in these passages is not that the pagan idols are visible and physical, but that they lack divine institution. This means they also lack God's Spirit. Luther contends that these passages condemn not just physical images made of wood or stone, but any pictures we form of God apart from his word, including mental images.⁹² To Luther's way of thinking, the prophets are right to mock pagan idolaters for worshipping blocks of wood. Yet the problem is not that the wood is physical, but that the worshippers lack the word. A block of wood apart from the word is just a block of wood, just as

⁸⁸ LW 9:81; 17:17; 22:366–67; 24:24; 35:268–73; 36:259; 40:87–88.

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.11.2.

⁹⁰ Ps 115:4, 8; 135:15; Isa 41:29; 44:9–20.

⁹¹ Deut 4:15–16; Isa 40:18; 41:7; 45:9; 46:5; Acts 17:29; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.11.2–4.

⁹² LW 9:58; 17:21–22, 37–39, 59, 107–14, 140–41.

water apart from the word is only water. Only when God's word is attached to a physical thing can it be God-bearing and life-giving.⁹³

Luther's response to pagan idolatry is ultimately Christological. If we are to worship God only in the place where he tells us he has descended to meet us, then we must worship him through Christ. This is most obviously the case now that Christ has come in the flesh, and says, "No one comes to the Father except through me."⁹⁴ However, Luther also considered Christ to be the focal point of Israel's worship in the Old Testament. He saw this worship—from the serpent Moses placed on the pole to the sacrifices offered in the temple—as a covering for the pre-incarnate Christ who was already with Israel, and as a sign pointing to the incarnate Christ who was to come.⁹⁵ Luther suggests that God forbade the people of Israel from making any other images or worshipping before them since this would divert them from Christ.⁹⁶ Faith must look to him alone, since he alone is the mercy seat at which we can grasp hold of God.⁹⁷

This is a profound critique of pagan idolatry. It gets to the heart of the function cultic images played in the pagan worship of the Ancient Near East. The purpose of cultic images was to function as mediators between the gods in heaven and their worshippers on earth. The key characteristic of these images was not that they visibly resembled their gods. Sometimes they were thought to do so, but in other cases they were only intended as symbols of the deity or as focal points for the presence of the transcendent god. Examples of the latter include standing

⁹³ LW 17:113; 36:341; SC IV 9–10 = WA 30.i:381.6–11.

⁹⁴ John 14:6.

⁹⁵ LW 15:313; cf. 1 Cor 10:4, 9; Col 2:16–17; Heb 10:1.

⁹⁶ *Commentary on Psalm 2* (1532), LW 12:87–88 = WA 40.ii:305.

⁹⁷ LW 17:61; 19:80; 22:248–49, 366–67; 23:120–21; 24:23–24; 26:273; 27:64; 30:223; 31:64; 37:364; 51:277–86; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.208–9.

stones, open air sanctuaries, or empty chariots pointing to an invisible god.⁹⁸ Instead, what was important about them was that they were believed to be physical vessels in which the spirit of a god was believed to dwell so that they functioned as representatives of that god on earth and a means by which people could gain access to the god.⁹⁹ In other words, when humans construct such images they are attempting to bring about an incarnation, to bridge the gap between heaven and earth by bringing the power and presence of the gods down to earth in a tangible way. Thus pagan cultic images directly challenge Christ's place in the economy of salvation. Therefore the best rationale for forbidding them is that they are counterfeits of the real incarnation.¹⁰⁰

Luther and Roman Catholicism. Much of Luther's attack on idolatrous worship is directed against Roman Catholicism. Luther attacked all of the following as idolatrous: works of supererogation such as fasting and holy orders;¹⁰¹ indulgences,¹⁰² including pilgrimages to see holy relics or sites through which people hoped to gain satisfactions;¹⁰³ the cult of the saints;¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Tryggve Mettinger, *No Graven Image?: Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1995), 18–35.

Many scholars who have studied the iconography of the Ancient Near East have concluded that Jeroboam's golden calves were intended this way, not as visible depictions of God, but as depictions of the steed on which the invisible God rode. This would make them analogous to the ark of the covenant, the visible throne of the invisible God (Tryggve Mettinger, "The Veto on Images and the Aniconic God in Ancient Israel," in *Religious Symbols and Their Functions*, ed. Haralds Biezais [Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1979], 21–22; Othmar Keel and Christoph Uelinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998], 192; Mettinger, *No Graven Image?*, 19).

⁹⁹ Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Idolatry," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 8.1232–33; John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 57–61; G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 64–70.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. the view of Paul Achtemeier, chapter 1, pages 23–24.

¹⁰¹ LW 1:14; 17:17; 5:259–60; 19:55–56; 22:22, 51, 152, 154–55, 367–68; 35:406; WA 28:610–20; LC I, 11, 22 = WA 30.i:134.7–12, 135.17–26.

¹⁰² LW 4:179; 8:230; 22:51; 31:201; 34:16–17; 35:406; 41:222, 237;

¹⁰³ LW 4:130; 34:16–17; 35:406; 39:241–43; 40:92; 48:339–42; SA 2.11–24.

¹⁰⁴ LW 1:179; 8:203; 17:378; 24:22, 74, 369; 36:299–300; 41:204; 43:211; 44:32; 47:45–46; WA 28: 611, 615–20; SA II 2.25–28.

the Mass when it is turned into a meritorious human work;¹⁰⁵ and any act of worship, from the observance of holy days to the erecting of religious images, if it is done without the gospel in the belief that it will earn merit with God.¹⁰⁶ Luther's key criticism is that although the Papal church claims to teach Christ, it effectively denies him. This is because it denies that Christ alone is our righteousness, and replaces Christ's merit with self-invented human works.¹⁰⁷

When Luther objects to worship practices invented by the Catholic Church without God's word, his objection is the same as his objection to pagan worship. Although the worshippers have pious intentions and think they are worshipping God, their worship is not God-pleasing, but is directed to an idol. This is because they are looking for God in the wrong place. By seeking God in their human speculations,¹⁰⁸ their monastic rules and observances,¹⁰⁹ their pilgrimages to Rome and Santiago,¹¹⁰ their altars and chapels,¹¹¹ their fasts,¹¹² their alms,¹¹³ their indulgences, their sacrifices for the dead,¹¹⁴ their pope,¹¹⁵ their traditions and ceremonies,¹¹⁶ and their saints,¹¹⁷ they have lost sight of the one place God wants to be found, in the gospel of Christ.

Luther agreed with his Catholic opponents that God is to be found in concrete things on earth. The point of contention was over the question, "In what things in particular?" Unlike many

¹⁰⁵ LW 13:314; 23:207; 27:89; 28:86; 34:31; 35:91, 101; 36:142, 148, 288; SA II 2.1–11.

¹⁰⁶ LW 9:82; 35:270–73; 51:84.

¹⁰⁷ LW 22:451; 30:252–53, 285–86.

¹⁰⁸ WA 40.3:335–39; LW 6:128–29.

¹⁰⁹ WA 40.3:51–57; LW 3:109, 168; 4:180–82; 5:247; 6:127; 23:121, 128–30.

¹¹⁰ LW 3:107–9; 4:179–80; 5:247; 6:128–29.

¹¹¹ LW 4:179; 6:127.

¹¹² *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 3:168 = WA 42:668; LW 23:121.

¹¹³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 3:168 = WA 42:668.

¹¹⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 4:180 = WA 43:266.

¹¹⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:244 = WA 43:597.

¹¹⁶ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:245–47, 251 = WA 43:598–600, 602.

of the other Reformers, Luther never attacked the Catholic Church for its sacramentalism per se, or for its use of visible, created things in worship. He never denied the sacramental power of Baptism, the Lord's Supper, or absolution. He simply objected that much of the sacramental system of the Catholic Church had insufficient basis in God's word, and that even the genuine sacraments had been twisted so that the promise of the gospel attached to them had been obscured.¹¹⁷ Luther's goal was never to draw his opponents' attention away from physical things to spiritual things, or from earth to heaven, but rather from self-invented things to the God-ordained place of worship in Christ and the gospel.

Luther and the Reformed. The controversy between Luther and the Reformed is also about the place of worship. Yet here there is not basic agreement that God can make himself available to us in particular places or things within creation. For the Reformed, God gives us signs within creation that point us to the God who transcends all created things. This is not the same as giving himself to us through created things. Luther and the Reformed are in agreement that true worship of God is worship through faith in Jesus Christ. The division is over the question of where we find Christ. Do we find him here on earth in particular, external, created things? That is, do we find him in the means of the gospel? Has Christ put himself into the bread and wine and word and water, so that we find him there? Or is the gospel a sign that does not actually give us Christ, but directs us to find Christ elsewhere, either in heaven or in our hearts?

Phillip Cary, professor of philosophy at Eastern University, articulates the difference between Luther and the Reformed when he writes,

For Luther the Gospel is not, as the old Protestant saw it, like one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread. That would mean the minister's job is to instruct

¹¹⁷ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:128 = WA 33:199; WA 28:607–20.

¹¹⁸ For a full treatment of this subject see *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, particularly LW 36:18–92.

people in how to meet the conditions necessary for salvation—how to get from here to where the true bread is. Instead, for Luther the gospel is one beggar simply giving another beggar the bread of life.¹¹⁹

For Luther the gospel gives us Christ. For the Reformed it directs us to find him somewhere else.

This question is part of a larger dispute between Luther and the Reformed about “incarnational” issues. The tip of the iceberg in this dispute is a different attitude towards religious images. For Luther, if the Old Testament ban on images teaches us anything,¹²⁰ it is that we must not put our confidence in any self-chosen worship. He did not consider religious images to be inherently idolatrous, but only potentially idolatrous, if people attach an idolatrous opinion to them by worshipping them or trusting in them.¹²¹ The general Reformed attitude is that the Old Testament ban on cultic images expresses an eternal truth about God’s nature. It teaches that he is transcendent over all visible, physical things, and that it demeans his majesty to be associated with such things.¹²² Therefore they apply this piece of Old Testament ceremonial law to

¹¹⁹ Phillip Cary, “Why Luther is not quite Protestant: Logic of Faith in a Sacramental Promise.,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (Fall 2005), 461.

¹²⁰ Luther did not regard any part of the Mosaic law to be directly binding on Christians. His basic position was, “We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law” (LW 35:165; cf. LW 9:79–81; 35:164–68; 40:92–98; Matt 12:1–12; John 5:16; 7:22–23; 9:14–16; Col 2:16–17; Acts 10:1 – 11:18; 15:1–29; 1 Cor 8:1–13; Gal 2:1–14; 4:10–11; 5:1–13; Phil 3:2–3; Heb 8:1–13; James 2:10).

¹²¹ LW 9:81–82, 85; 35:268–70; 36:259–60; 40:85–88, 90–91, 99; 51:79–81, 84.

¹²² Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1–3, 7–8, 24, 28, 31–36, 40–41, 43–44, 47–62, 66, 69, 72–73, 77–78, 84–87, 91–93, 98, 168, 171, 173, 177–80, 184–89, 197–98, 200–201, 205–33, 311–13, 318. Randall C. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 58–59, 78, 231; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.11.1–3; 4.17.19; John Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, ed. and trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 66; John Calvin, “Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord and Only Saviour Jesus Christ,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 159, 166.

Christians in a broad brush manner,¹²³ and treat sacred images as inherently idolatrous regardless of whether people worship them or not.¹²⁴

If it demeans God's majesty to be associated with any physical thing, what then of the sacraments? The basic Reformed opinion in the sixteenth century was that the rejection of idolatry also entails a rejection of the church's sacramental system. Although they retained Baptism and the Lord's Supper, they spiritualized them. They interpreted them symbolically, rejected the veneration of the host, and denied that God or his power can be present within the elements. For instance, Zwingli insisted that external things such as the external word or sacraments can have no saving effect on the soul, nor can they be vehicles of the Spirit, since God cannot be bound to any created thing.¹²⁵ Even Calvin, who attributed more power to the sacraments than most of the Reformed, still treated them as visible pledges that God would perform the thing signified through the parallel operation of his Spirit, rather than as vehicles of divine power or presence in a strict sense.¹²⁶ Calvin calls it a great error "to think that a hidden power is joined and fastened to the sacraments by which they of themselves confer the graces of the Holy Spirit upon us, as wine is given in a cup ... They do not bestow any grace of

¹²³ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 24, 56, 58, 92, 226; cf. Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 3; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.11.2, 1.11.13.

¹²⁴ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 13–17, 59–60, 205–16, 225–28; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.11.5–7, 1.11.13.

¹²⁵ Huldrych Zwingli, *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Emil Egli et al., Corpus Reformatorum 88–101 (14 vols.; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982–91), 2.110, 3.263, 3.761, 3.787, 5.622, 5.626; Huldrych Zwingli, *Huldreich Zwingli's Werke*, ed. Melchior Schulero and Johannes Schultess, (7 vols.; Zürich: Friedrich Schulthess, 1830–41), 4.10, 4.13, 4.37, 4.284, 6.1.569; Gottfried W. Locher, *Zwingli's Thought: New Perspectives* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1981), 12–13, 56, 180, 225–27.

¹²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 4.17.5–6, 4.17.9–37; Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of our Lord," 163, 165; John Calvin, "The clear explanation of sound doctrine concerning the true partaking of the flesh and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper: to dissipate the mists of Tileman Heshusius," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 263–64, 267–68, 270, 276–78, 287, 289, 298, 301, 308–9, 314; John Calvin, "Confession of Faith concerning the Eucharist," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 168; Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 306–13, 323–42.

themselves.”¹²⁷ Indeed, we must “place no power in creatures ... [and therefore] neither ought our confidence to inhere in the sacraments, nor the glory of God be transferred to them. Rather, laying aside all things, both our faith and our confession ought to rise up to him who is author of the sacraments and all things.”¹²⁸ Calvin enacts this view in his liturgy of the Lord’s Supper, in which he writes,

Let us lift up our spirits on high where Jesus Christ is in the glory of His Father, whence we expect Him at our redemption. Let us not be fascinated by these earthly and corruptible elements that we see with our eyes and touch with our hands, seeking Him there as though He were enclosed in the bread or wine. Then [only] shall our souls be disposed to be nourished and vivified by His substance, when they are lifted up above all earthly things, attaining even to heaven, and entering the kingdom of God, where He dwells. Therefore let us be content to have the bread and wine as signs and witnesses, seeking the truth spiritually where the word of God promises that we shall find it.¹²⁹

Thus we can see that even for Calvin, the most sacramental of the Reformed theologians, we are not to seek God in the sacrament, but above it. The basic assumption is that even when God institutes created means, the real action must be elsewhere: never in the bread or wine or word, but always beyond these things in God. This is not a mediating position between Luther and Zwingli, but a clear rejection of Luther’s sacramental realism as an idolatrous fixation with created things. Calvin makes this clear in a letter to Bucer, in which he writes, “what else is the adorable sacrament of Luther but an idol set up in the temple of God?”¹³⁰

In complete contrast, Luther regarded a high view of the sacraments as essential if we are to avoid idolatry. That is, he regarded the rejection of Christ’s sacramental presence with us as a

¹²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 4.14.17.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.14.12.

¹²⁹ John Calvin, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, trans. and ed. Elsie Anne McKee (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 133.

¹³⁰ John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 2., ed. Jules Bonnet [Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858], 234.

rejection of the incarnate Christ that must inevitably lead to idolatry.¹³¹ He states this in his commentary on 1 John, where he reflects on John's statement about how the spirit of the antichrist will deny that the Son of God came in the flesh.¹³² Luther applies this to the "fanatics" and "Sacramentarians" and calls them "antichrists in part."¹³³ He does not call them antichrists in full like the papists, since they do not deny the merits of Christ.¹³⁴ Nevertheless he writes,

He, however, who denies Christ in one place denies Him everywhere. Thus those who say: "It is not Christ who has His body in the bread and His blood in the wine" do not have Christ. Indeed, they have an idol of their hearts. For they deny the chief attribute of the divinity, namely, the presence of Christ....

The spirit of the Sacramentarians denies grossly that Christ came in the flesh when they say that Christ's "flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63), likewise that the spirit must do everything, that Baptism amounts to nothing.... Christ has flesh, but in it there is the full Divinity. God has offered Himself to us in Christ. Christ came into the flesh to be with us in Baptism and at the Holy Supper. Every spirit who is at pains to teach that Christ does everything through the sacraments is of God, is glad to hear about Christ, and gives thanks. For he understands that Christ is his and that He came in the flesh. Therefore this has been stated emphatically: Behold, this is the test of a spirit, whether he is of God or of the devil.¹³⁵

This may seem like an overly harsh judgement, yet we should attempt to understand the rationale behind it. Luther's concern is that the Sacramentarians "convert Baptism, faith, and the Lord's Supper into nothing but Law and commandment."¹³⁶ For Luther, the sacraments are gospel, and the gospel is sacramental. If we say that the means of the gospel do not actually deliver Christ and his grace to us, then they are not gospel. Instead they are laws that teach us how to express our piety or vainly direct us to climb up to God. And if the means of the gospel

¹³¹ LW 1:149; 8:133; 12:48–49; 17:108; 23:157, 187–88; 37:130–31.

¹³² 1 John 2:18–23; 4:1–3.

¹³³ *Lectures on First John* (1527), LW 30:252, 287 = WA 20:669.28, 730.24.

¹³⁴ *Lectures on First John* (1527), LW 30:252 = WA 20:669.

¹³⁵ *Lectures on First John* (1527), LW 30:258, 286 = WA 20:682.37–40, 727.36–728.24, 728.35–37.

¹³⁶ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:99 = WA 33:150.24–26.

are not gospel, then we have no gospel. Nor do we have Christ, since Christ can only be grasped sacramentally through the gospel and not by some self-invented law. Luther writes,

The Anabaptists claim that Baptism is nothing if one is not previously sanctified. They do not want to acquire holiness through and from Baptism, but by their piety they want to make Baptism holy and wholesome. As I see it, this is to lose the Cornerstone completely and to be justified, not through the grace of Christ in Baptism but through one's own self, so that Baptism gives nothing, creates nothing, brings nothing. Instead, we bring and give everything to Baptism beforehand, so that it is nothing but an unnecessary symbol by which one is supposed to be able to recognize such pious folk.... The fanatics do the same thing with their Sacrament, which does not sanctify or bring grace but shows and demonstrates how blessed and holy they are without the Sacrament.¹³⁷

Luther never responded directly to Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper, which is that Christ is truly offered to us, provided that by faith we climb up to him in heaven. Yet it is doubtful that this departure from the Zwinglian position would have improved matters much in Luther's mind. This still leaves us in the position of having to climb up to God, rather than simply receiving him as he climbs down to us. Christ bids us to look to the sacrament, "given for you for the forgiveness of sins." Calvin invents a new law and bids us to look to heaven instead.

Equally serious as far as Luther is concerned is the Reformed understanding of Christ's incarnation. This can be seen most clearly in Luther's debates with Zwingli. Zwingli tried to draw a sharp line between the infinite, spiritual Son of God and the finite, physical Son of Man. Although he said there is only one person of Christ, he refused to draw the necessary conclusions from this. He went on to treat the two natures as if they are two persons who can still act independently of each other, like Siamese twins instead of one integrated person. This is because he denied that the attributes and actions of each nature must be applied to the whole person of Christ in fact, not just as a figure of speech.¹³⁸ Luther replied that this produces "a kind of Christ

¹³⁷ *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), LW 14:39 = WA 31.i:257.10–18, 21–23.

¹³⁸ Huldrych Zwingli, "Friendly Exegesis, that is, Exposition of the Matter of the Eucharist to Martin Luther,

after whom I would not want to be a Christian.”¹³⁹ That is, it produces a false Christ, an idol. The most crucial issue was that Zwingli insisted that only the human nature suffered and died, and the divinity did not share in this suffering.¹⁴⁰ Luther recognized, as did the early church in the case of Nestorius,¹⁴¹ that this turns Christ’s death into something that is merely human and has no power to save us.¹⁴² Yet many other problems resulted from this division within Christ. For instance, Zwingli asserted that Christ was only referring to his divine nature when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” and “whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”¹⁴³ For Luther, this leaves us speculating fruitlessly about the naked God in his majesty, instead of knowing him in his incarnation. Furthermore, Zwingli insisted that at the ascension Christ’s human nature ascended into heaven in such a way that it is now absent from the earth, and that his promises of

February 1527,” in *Huldrych Zwingli Writings*, Vol. 2, translated by H. Wayne Pipkin (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1984), 319–36; cf. LW 15:341–43; 28:265–67; 37:212–13; 41:101–4.

¹³⁹ *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), LW 37:209 = WA 26:320.8–9.

¹⁴⁰ Zwingli, “Friendly Exegesis,” 321, 324.

Calvin also refused to say that God truly shared in the sufferings of Christ on the cross so that the merits of his death were divine merits and not merely human merits (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.14.2, 2.17.1, 4.17.30; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. and ed. John Owen [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1950], xviii–xix [from dedicatory epistle to commentary on Jeremiah]).

¹⁴¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 70, 132; Cyril of Alexandria, “The Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Harvey (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 351, 354; Second Council of Constantinople, “The Anathemas of the Second Council of Constantinople (Fifth Ecumenical),” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Harvey (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 379–81. Third Council of Constantinople, “The Statement of Faith of the Third Council of Constantinople (Sixth Ecumenical),” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Harvey (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 383–84; Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Seven Ecumenical Councils, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 14. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 217–18.

¹⁴² LW 28:264–65; 37:209, 231; 41:103–5.

¹⁴³ Zwingli, “Friendly Exegesis,” 325.

Although he shared some of Zwingli’s tendency to divide the two natures, Calvin was more sensible than Zwingli at this point, and recognized that the human nature is an essential part of God’s revelation of himself to us in Christ. (John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. John and the First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1961], 149 [commentary on John 17:22]; Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 262.)

his ongoing presence with his disciples apply only to his divine nature.¹⁴⁴ As far as Luther is concerned, this robs us of Christ, since there is no Christ apart from the incarnate One.¹⁴⁵ Instead we must believe that he is with us in the bread and wine at his table, and even in the dungeon, in torture, and in death. Otherwise we are robbed of Christ where we need him most.¹⁴⁶

As we noted earlier, behind all of these points of disagreement lies a different understanding of God's transcendence. For the Reformed, God's transcendence over creation must be preserved at all costs lest we fall into idolatry. Carlos Eire, professor of history and religious studies at Yale, identifies what he calls a "hermeneutic of transcendence" in the Reformed theology of the sixteenth century. By this he means a metaphysical outlook that draws sharp boundaries between matter and spirit, and stresses to a high degree God's transcendence over all finite earthly things. The basic assumption is that it is impossible for the infinite, invisible, spiritual God to be too closely associated with any finite, visible, physical thing.¹⁴⁷

From a Lutheran perspective the hermeneutic of transcendence is an alien imposition on Scripture that results in a one-sided reading of it.¹⁴⁸ It latches on to those parts of Scripture that

¹⁴⁴ Zwingli, "Friendly Exegesis," 325–35.

¹⁴⁵ *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), LW 37:207, 218–19 = WA 26:317, 332–3.

¹⁴⁶ *The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ—Against the Fanatics* (1526), LW 36:342–43 = WA 19:492–93; cf. LW 22:209.

¹⁴⁷ Eire, *War Against the Idols*, 1–3, 7–8, 24, 28, 31–36, 40–41, 43–44, 47–62, 66, 69, 72–73, 77–78, 84–87, 91–93, 98, 168, 171, 173, 177–80, 184–89, 197–98, 200–201, 205–33, 311–13, 318.

¹⁴⁸ Eire calls this a scripturally based metaphysics (*War Against the Idols*, 3). Yet he also observes that most of these reformers were influenced by the Platonism of humanists like Erasmus (*ibid.*, 28, 31–36, 200, 231). In the case of Calvin, possible sources of Platonic influence include Erasmus and the other sixteenth century humanists, Calvin's favorite church father Augustine (Charles Partee, "The Soul in Plato, Platonism, and Calvin," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 [Sept. 1969]: 294), and Calvin's own reading of Plato (Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin*, 15–17). Charles Partee argues persuasively that Calvin cannot be called a Christian Platonist in the strong sense (Partee, "The Soul in Plato, Platonism, and Calvin," 287, 294–95). He regarded the study of Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the only source of doctrine, and his goal was to develop a biblical theology, not some fusion of faith and philosophy. Nevertheless, he did use philosophy selectively as an aid to the study of the Scriptures (Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* [Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1977], 13–22), and often argued on the basis of Scripture and "common sense." This "common sense" had the flavor of French humanism. As Quirinius Breen points out, Calvin was already well into his twenties and a seasoned humanist by the time he came to evangelical faith. This means that the mindset of French humanism, including its

speaking about God's transcendence, but can never fully account for all the "incarnational" elements in Scripture, where the transcendent God makes himself present and available to his people through created things.

Luther's willingness to acknowledge that God has bound himself to created means does not mean he was any less convinced of God's transcendence. Quite the opposite. It was his belief in God's almighty power that led him to assert that if the Creator chooses to join himself to part of his creation and to unite the infinite with the finite by becoming incarnate, he is able to do so.¹⁴⁹ If he decides to join himself to words spoken in human language, put himself into the bread at the Lord's table, wrap himself in Baptism and absolution, and break into the human soul to dwell there, these things are not beyond his ability.¹⁵⁰ If he chooses to bind himself to concrete promises, this is not us binding him, but him choosing to bind himself, and he is free to do so. If we are to say that he must obey the preconceived metaphysical limits our human minds place upon him, and cannot do the things he has told us he has done in his word, then we are placing a human limit on him. In response to Zwingli's assertion that God could not be contained within the physical elements of the Lord's Supper, Luther wrote,

There is no need to enclose him here, as this spirit dreams, for a body is much, much too wide for the Godhead; it could contain many thousand Godheads. On the other hand, it is also far, far too narrow to contain one Godhead. Nothing is so small but God is still smaller, nothing so large but God is still larger, nothing is so short but God is still shorter, nothing so long but God is still longer, nothing is so broad but God is still broader, nothing so narrow but God is still narrower, and so on. He is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that can be described or imagined.¹⁵¹

Platonic elements, was already ingrained, and it would have been almost impossible for him to leave it completely behind (Quirinius Breen, *John Calvin: A Study in French Humanism* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1931], 146). The influence of Platonism is therefore one possible explanation for the spiritualizing tendency in Calvin's theology, and in Reformed theology in general.

¹⁴⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:219–20 = WA 43:579–80.

¹⁵⁰ LW 1:11; 23:165–77; 26:356–57; 36:343; 37:207.

¹⁵¹ *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), LW 37:228 = WA 26:339.36–340.2.

In other words, human metaphysical rules, or the limits of the physical universe such as time and space, do not apply to an almighty God. To apply such limits to him is to foolishly think he is bound by human limitations. Instead of figuring out what God is like or has done on the basis of human metaphysical rules we must be guided by God's word.

Luther also rejects the Reformed notion that God's heavenly glory would be debased if he came to us through created things. He argues instead that God's glory is revealed most in his willingness to enter into our world and the lowest depths for us. When Oecolampadius argued that it would demean Christ to be present in the elements on the altar, Luther replied,

According to Oecolampadius' wisdom, it is true, Christ has no other glory than to sit at the right hand of God on a velvet cushion and let the angels sing and fiddle and ring bells and play before him, and to be unconcerned with the problem of the Supper. But according to the faith of us poor sinners and fools, his glory is manifold, when his body and blood are present in the Supper ... it is a glory and praise of his inexpressible grace and mercy that he concerns himself so profoundly with us poor sinners and shows us such gracious love and goodness, not content to be everywhere in and around, above and beside us, but even giving us his own body as nourishment ... Now, we poor fools hold that glory appears when someone shows his virtue, mercy, and goodness to others. For anyone to permit himself to be glorified and served by others is a mean sort of glory, not a divine glory. Therefore one might do well to take the fanatics to school to learn what glory means. ... Meanwhile, you do not see that if your conclusion were good and convincing, I also would brag and boast that the Son of God was not born of a woman, as the heathen bragged against SS. Cyprian and Augustine. Why? Because it is not glorious for God to be born from the frail body of a human. Again, it is not glorious for Christ to be led by the devil out of the wilderness to [the pinnacle of] the temple and the high mountain, therefore it did not happen. Again, it is not glorious that he was crucified, therefore it did not take place! ... But the glory of our God is precisely that for our sakes he comes down to the very depths, into human flesh, into the bread, into our mouth, our heart, our bosom.¹⁵²

¹⁵² *That These Words of Christ, "This Is My Body," Etc., Still Stand Firm Against The Fanatics* (1527), LW 37:70–72 = WA 23:155:15–19, 32–36, 157.2–7, 19–25, 30–32.

Summary

For Luther there are only two options. Either we can know and worship God through Christ, or we can form our own faulty picture and vain worship of God apart from Christ. Yet since we can only grasp hold of Christ as he comes to us sacramentally in the gospel, to worship God through Christ means the same thing as to worship him through the created means of the gospel. Far from it being demeaning to God's heavenly majesty for him to be present in the flesh, God is glorified above all by his presence with us in the incarnation and in the gospel. When we separate God from the gospel we detract from his glory by turning him into a false god who must be served by our self-invented laws and acts of worship.

Contemporary Application

Idolatry: Religion apart from Christ

The most obvious implication of Luther's teaching is that any worship, faith, or spirituality that is not centered in Jesus Christ is idolatrous. All such piety involves a distorted knowledge of God instead of the true knowledge that comes through Jesus Christ. It also lacks divine power, since it grasps hold of a dead idol instead of the living God.

What sort of God is it that you do (or do not) believe in? The goal of Christian proclamation is not to direct people to a generic god, but to a very specific God, the God who reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. No other version of God will do. If Luther and the New Testament are to be believed, at some level all people know there is a God, even if this knowledge is deeply buried.¹⁵³ The bigger problem is what people have done with this knowledge. They have twisted and distorted it into a false picture of God. This suggests that the

¹⁵³ Rom 1:19; 2:15.

greatest challenge for Christian proclamation is not to prove to people that there is a God, even if in some cases it may be necessary to uncover this buried knowledge or challenge the rationalizations that have been used to suppress it. The greater challenge is to give them an accurate picture of God in contrast to all the false pictures that abound. This means proclaiming Christ and allowing him to dethrone all idols.

Many people whose view of God is not shaped in a significant way by Christ still believe in a transcendent god of some kind. Yet such a god can never save them. Those who do not know God through Christ can only have a legal knowledge of God, not an evangelical one. A legal knowledge of God makes God unbearable unless his teeth are pulled in some way, since his law crushes and condemns us unless we are in Christ. One such toothless tiger is the god of moralistic therapeutic deism, a benevolent but distant and undemanding god.¹⁵⁴ Such a god is too much of a lightweight for us to need a Savior to deliver us from his wrath. Thus it should be no surprise that even those moralistic therapeutic deists who call themselves Christians place little importance on the doctrine of Christ.¹⁵⁵

Such a view of God as too harmless to be anything other than benign should never be mistaken for the gospel, or regarded as accurate knowledge. The resultant god is an idol who will fail people on the last day. Even before that happens he will fail those who are more sensitive to the weight of God's law and his curse upon creation. One such person is Tom, an atheist I met a couple of years ago. Tom told me he didn't believe in God, but that if God did exist and ever showed up, he would spit in his face, and hoped the President would call out the military to fight

¹⁵⁴ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 164–65.

¹⁵⁵ Smith and Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 136, 167–68; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145–48.

him to the death. At one stage Tom had been a churchgoer. Then his son developed schizophrenia, and Tom concluded that if God exists he must be malicious to bring this disease on his son. He decided he would rather live in a world where such tragedies are thrown up by the blind forces of nature than a world run by a tyrant from whom there is no escape. Another person like this was Charles Darwin. He was too sensitive to the cruelty present in this fallen creation to be convinced by facile talk about how it all comes from the hand of a benign Creator. This was one significant force that drove him to deny that God has shaped this world and to attribute it to natural forces instead.¹⁵⁶ Likewise, when the modern Darwinist Richard Dawkins dismisses the God of the Bible as a malevolent bully, and uses this to justify his atheism,¹⁵⁷ he is expressing sensitivity to the reality that God is a cruel tyrant to those who view him outside the lens of Christ. The true God is not a god who is so tame that we need not fear him, but a God whose wrath against human sin and curse upon creation has been overcome in Christ.

This suggests that the great challenge for Christian proclamation—even when addressing atheists who purport to have no belief in any God—is to address people’s idolatrous legal knowledge of God with an evangelical knowledge of him. For many people this will involve addressing their false belief that they can worship God apart from Christ. For some it will mean addressing the legal knowledge of God that is the suppressed binary opposite of their atheism.

Vacuous spirituality. Many people in contemporary society think they can be spiritual without Christ.¹⁵⁸ This amounts to a belief that the gap between us and God is easy enough for us to cross on our own without Christ.

¹⁵⁶ Cornelius G. Hunter, *Darwin’s God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 9–18, 127–43.

¹⁵⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 31.

¹⁵⁸ For instance, a 1998 survey in Australia found that 74% of respondents said they believed in a higher power

For Luther it is quite clear that all such spirituality lacks divine power, since only through the man Jesus do we have access to the Triune God.¹⁵⁹ Therefore any spirituality that we claim apart from Christ must either be an expression of the human spirit or the product of an evil spirit. It is therefore carnal, worldly, or perhaps even demonic, but not spiritual in a biblical sense.

This has the obvious implication that this spirituality will fail a person on the last day. Yet it will also guarantee that a person will fail to achieve wholeness and spiritual wellbeing in the present. As we noted earlier, Luther defines a human being as *hominem iustificari fide*,¹⁶⁰ one who is created to live by faith. This means that faith is absolutely central to our humanity, so that we need faith in Jesus Christ to be truly human. Only through Christ, the perfect image of God,¹⁶¹ can the image of God be renewed in us so that we are what we were created to be.¹⁶² He pours out on us the Holy Spirit, who works faith in us and begins to transform us after the image of Christ, until our transformation is finally completed on the last day.¹⁶³ This involves giving us a new mind and will that delight in the gospel and the will of God. This then produces in us new eyes and ears that hear and see differently than they did before, new lips and a new tongue that

of some kind and two thirds said that a spiritual life was important to them, yet only 35% said they believed in a personal God (Peter Kaldor et al., *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches*, NCLS Research [Adelaide, South Australia: Openbook Publishers, 1999], 8–9). Likewise, in one Gallup Poll in the United States almost a third of respondents chose to define spirituality without any reference to God or a higher authority, but rather as “a calmness in my life,” “something you really put your heart into,” or “living the life you feel is pleasing” (George H. Gallup Jr., “American Spiritual Searches Turn Inward,” 2003, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7759/Americans-Spiritual-Searches-Turn-Inward.aspx> [accessed July 27, 2010]). These results suggest that in the minds of many people spirituality has little or no connection to the doctrine of Christ.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Matt 3:11; John 7:39; 14:6–17, 26; 15:26; 16:13–14; Acts 2:38; Rom 5:1–5; 8:1–16; 1 Cor 6:17, 19; 12:3; Gal 3:1–5, 14; 4:6; Eph 2:18; Heb 10:19–22; 1 John 4:2–3.

¹⁶⁰ *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536), WA 39.i:176, thesis 32.

¹⁶¹ LW 1:224; 12:47–48; 15:339; 22:13, 19–20; 34:220–21; 38:275; Cf. Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3.

¹⁶² LW 1:61–68, 90, 142, 338–40; 22:30, 285; 31:358–59; 34:177, 194; 39:177, 194; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.261; Col 3:10; Eph 4:20–24; 1 Cor 15:49; Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:2.

¹⁶³ LW 1:65, 68, 338; 2:141; 34:140.

praise God and proclaim his mercy, new limbs that live to love and serve our neighbors, and ultimately eternal life.¹⁶⁴ In this way we put on Christ and become little “Christs” to each other.¹⁶⁵

This helps us make sense of why those who make and worship idols become like them: blind, deaf, dumb and lifeless.¹⁶⁶ This is God’s judgement on idolatry, and it is not an arbitrary judgement. Instead, God is enforcing the natural consequences of idolatry.¹⁶⁷ We have been created to be filled by God’s Spirit. He is the one who gives us eyes to recognize God, ears to hear his word, lips to praise his name, and hearts to do his will. He is the one who fills us with life and vitality, and defines us by making us to be like Christ. Pagan idols were intended to give their worshippers access to the gods and their spirit. Modern religions and spiritualities attempt to do the same. Yet only Christ can bring us the true God and his Spirit. If we replace Christ with some idol we will be filled and defined by a very different spirit. This will either be an evil spirit that is destructive and death-dealing, or the human spirit, which has been defiled by sin and has no independent life of its own. Thus we will be blind and dead to God and his life-giving power, and our lives will be devoid of the kind of vitality God intends for us.¹⁶⁸

Idolatry: Christianity apart from the Gospel

A more subtle form of idolatry occurs when people claim the name of Jesus Christ, but separate this name from the gospel. As far as Luther is concerned this effectively means denying Christ. Since this form of idolatry is harder to identify than when Christ is denied outright we will spend more time examining it.

¹⁶⁴ LW 1:64–65; 22:285–90; 26:431; 27:139–40.

¹⁶⁵ LW 26:352–53; 31:367–68.

¹⁶⁶ Ps 115:4–8; 135:15–18.

¹⁶⁷ Isa 6:9–10; Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 41–49.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Luther’s treatment of Isa 44:9 and Ps 115:5 at LW 17:107–8 = WA 31.ii:345–46.

Anonymous Christians. One attempt to separate Christ from the gospel is the teaching on anonymous Christians proposed by the Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner. On the one hand Rahner affirms that salvation is through Christ alone. On the other hand he says that people who follow their conscience but do not explicitly believe in Christ can still be saved. He holds these two things together by proposing that there must be anonymous Christians, people who are saved through Christ even though they do not explicitly know him or the gospel.¹⁶⁹ Rahner's views were endorsed by the Second Vatican Council in the document *Lumen Gentium*:

Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Mohammedans, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.¹⁷⁰

Rahner and *Lumen Gentium* declare a salvation that is supposedly in the name of Christ, yet has been divorced from the proclamation of the gospel. Luther explicitly rejects such ideas. He asserts that God's Old Testament people should not be compared to pagans who do not know the gospel, since from the earliest times they had explicit gospel promises to which they could

¹⁶⁹ Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews 1965–82*, ed. Paul Imhof and Hubert Biallowons, translation ed. Harvey D. Egan (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 135.

¹⁷⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, paragraph 16.

cling.¹⁷¹ He rejects Zwingli's suggestion that upright pagans could be saved, and says that although God is wont to gather for himself believers from among heathen people, such as Ruth the Moabite and Rahab the Canaanite and Jethro the priest of Midian, this does not take place without Christ's word.¹⁷² The closest he comes to saying that someone who has not heard the gospel could be saved is when he suggests that the prayers and longings of Christian parents to bring their children to Baptism might be accepted by God as efficacious for salvation if the children die before they can be baptized. Yet even here Luther is not saying that some kind of faith or works or piety apart from the gospel could be saving, but rather that the parents might be able to save their children through the faith the parents have in Christ and the gospel.¹⁷³

Sacramental absence and reflective faith. A more subtle separation between Christ and the gospel takes place in Reformed theology. This is due to weak sacramental theology.

Luther is sometimes unduly harsh in his treatment of the Reformed. He overstates the case when he says that anyone "who denies Christ in one place denies Him everywhere."¹⁷⁴ Without doubt the Reformed preach the gospel, proclaim forgiveness in Christ's name, baptize in the name of the Triune God, and so on. In this way they bring Christ to people regardless of what theories they hold about what they are doing. Nevertheless, it is still true that theories that separate Christ's presence and his forgiveness from the external means of the gospel have the danger of undermining the gospel, and directing us to look elsewhere to find assurance of salvation and of God's presence with us.

¹⁷¹ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:70 = WA 46:596; Gen 3:15.

¹⁷² *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:135–36 = WA 44:678–79; cf. LW 14:9; 33:281; 54:57.

¹⁷³ *Comfort for Women who have had a Miscarriage* (1542), LW 43:247–50 = WA 53:205–8.

¹⁷⁴ *Lectures on First John* (1527), LW 30:258 = WA 20:682.37–38.

Luther accused the Reformed of denying Christ's presence with us by denying his presence in the means of grace.¹⁷⁵ Five centuries later, the American evangelical John Jefferson Davis from Gordon-Conwell Seminary laments that contemporary evangelical worship lacks much sense of God's presence.¹⁷⁶ From Luther's perspective, this is the expected outcome of Reformed theology. Davis prescribes a renewed focus on Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper as a remedy for this malaise.¹⁷⁷ With this Luther would whole-heartedly agree. However, the understanding of Christ's presence that Davis prescribes is Calvinistic rather than Lutheran. He insists that Christ is not physically present in the elements, but spiritually present through the bond the Holy Spirit creates between Christ and the believer.¹⁷⁸ From a Lutheran perspective, this is not strong enough medicine for at least two reasons. First, Calvin rejects simple faith in Christ's word—"This is my body, this is my blood"—and replaces it with a speculative theory about how Christ can be physically absent yet spiritually present. Speculative theories cannot bring Christ to us or anchor our faith the way Christ's promise can. Second, on a Calvinistic understanding Christ's presence cannot be guaranteed for all who come to the altar. Instead, only those who ascend to Christ by faith commune with Christ.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, Calvin asserts that "there is no communion of the flesh of Christ except a spiritual one, which is both perpetual and given to us independently of our use of the Supper."¹⁸⁰ This means that our own faith is the necessary and sufficient condition for communing with Christ, whereas the external means of the

¹⁷⁵ *Lectures on First John* (1527), LW 30:258 = WA 20:682.

¹⁷⁶ John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of the Real Presence* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 7–12.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 113–70, 203–6.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 12, 34–35, 94–95, 109–10, 116, 128, 164, 203–5.

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 4.17.5, 4.17.31–33.

¹⁸⁰ Calvin, "The clear explanation of sound doctrine concerning the true partaking of the flesh and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper," 295.

sacrament are neither necessary nor sufficient. This automatically shifts our attention away from the sacrament to the faith and piety we can have apart from the sacrament, since this alone can guarantee Christ's presence with us.¹⁸¹

Philip Cary refers to this kind of "faith in our own faith," as "reflective faith." He regards this as characteristically Reformed, and contrasts it with the "unreflective faith" of Luther. Both Luther and the Reformed agree that we are saved by faith alone. Yet Cary suggests there is a subtle disagreement over the nature of this faith, and whether to some extent faith must be its own object. He illustrates this with the following syllogisms. First, the Reformed syllogisms:

Major Premise: Whoever believes in Christ is saved.
Minor Premise: I believe in Christ.
Conclusion: I am saved.¹⁸²

Or else:

Major premise: Christ promises absolution of sins to those who believe in him.
Minor premise: I believe in Christ.
Conclusion: I am absolved of my sins.¹⁸³

This results in a reflective faith. In order to know if I am saved I need to look into my own heart and know that I have faith and therefore meet this condition of salvation. Therefore to some extent my faith must always be based on itself, and not just on God's promise.

What enables Luther to avoid such "faith in my own faith" is his sacramental theology. That is, he doesn't just operate with the general promise of the gospel, but also the specific promise of the gospel "for me" in the sacraments.¹⁸⁴ Luther's understanding of the sacraments is that in them Christ literally addresses the individual recipients and promises them forgiveness

¹⁸¹ Cf. *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), LW 14:39 = WA 31.i:257.

¹⁸² Cary, "Why Luther is not quite Protestant," 450.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 458.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 452–61.

and salvation. Therefore when I go to receive the sacraments he promises salvation “for me.”¹⁸⁵

This means that the logic works differently:

Major premise: Christ told me, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth.

Conclusion: I am baptized (i.e., I have new life in Christ).¹⁸⁶

Or likewise:

Major premise: Christ says, "I absolve you of your sins in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Minor premise: Christ never lies but only tells the truth

Conclusion: I am absolved of my sins.¹⁸⁷

Furthermore, I must believe this, otherwise I am calling Christ a liar when he makes this promise to me. For Luther, faith in Christ is equivalent to faith in Baptism, absolution, etc. It means believing that Christ speaks the truth when he says, “I baptize you.”¹⁸⁸

This promise still calls for faith. A person can reject this salvation and call God a liar, and in that case will not receive what was promised. Yet Luther contends that the promise remains true: God has given me salvation whether I accept it or not. It is like money deposited in a bank in my name. It is mine whether I believe in it or not, or ever benefit from it by withdrawing it. It is not as if the money is withdrawn and given to someone else if I refuse to accept it. Since this gift is unconditional, I am free to have faith in the promise given to me, without needing to reflect on whether my faith is sufficient to make the promise mine.¹⁸⁹ Luther is quite clear that faith always depends on the promise, rather than the promise depending on faith. He writes,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 458; *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), LW 35:17 = WA 2:717–19.

¹⁸⁶ Cary, “Why Luther is not quite Protestant,” 451.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 458.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 457–59; *The Sacrament of Penance* (1519), LW 35:13–17 = WA 2:717–19.

¹⁸⁹ *The Keys* (1530), LW 40:367 = WA 30.ii:498–99; Cary, “Why Luther is not quite Protestant,” 460–61.

There is quite a difference between having faith, on the one hand, and depending on one's faith and making baptism depend on faith, on the other. Whoever allows himself to be baptized on the strength of his faith, is not only uncertain, but also an idolator who denies Christ. For he trusts in and builds on something of his own, namely, on a gift which he has from God, and not on God's Word alone.¹⁹⁰

For Luther, the faith of the Christian is not interested in itself, and its own experience and feeling. Instead, it is wholly captivated by Christ and what he says when he addresses us as the objects of his love and salvation. He regards faith that reflects back on itself and its own experience to find assurance as a subtle form of idolatry that takes the focus off Christ and his word and puts it back on the self.

This is related to the way Luther deals with the question of predestination. In his Genesis commentary Luther wrote what he intended to be his final word on this subject.¹⁹¹ Here he makes a distinction between the hidden God and the God revealed in the gospel. He cautions people against trying to search out the hidden counsels of God rather than contenting themselves with God as he is proclaimed in the gospel. He writes,

For God did not come down from heaven to make you uncertain about predestination, to teach you to despise the sacraments, absolution, and the rest of the divine ordinances. Indeed, He instituted them to make you completely certain and to remove the disease of doubt from your heart, in order that you might not only believe with the heart but also see with your physical eyes and touch with your hands. Why, then, do you reject these and complain that you do not know whether you have been predestined? You have the Gospel; you have been baptized; you have absolution; you are a Christian.¹⁹²

Since for Luther we find God in the gospel itself, rather than above or beyond it, this is a perfectly natural way to deal with the problem of predestination. How do I know that God has made me the object of his saving plans? He has baptized me. He has absolved my sins. He has

¹⁹⁰ *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528), LW 40:252 = WA 26:164.40–165.5.

¹⁹¹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:42–50 = WA 43:457–463.

¹⁹² *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:45 = WA 43:460.4–11.

preached to me the gospel. When he does so he means what he says. This is all I need to know. Luther is not dodging the question of predestination, but answering it on the basis of what God has revealed “for me” in the gospel. This word tells me that God is well disposed towards me and is not secretly plotting to damn me for all eternity, unless I dare to doubt it and call God a liar. This word revealed in the gospel trumps any speculations about God’s hidden counsels.¹⁹³

Yet for a person like Calvin, who does not believe that the real action is ever in the external efficacy of the word or the sacraments but always in the more fundamental eternal decree of God to which they point, this will always appear like an evasion of the real issue.¹⁹⁴ Without a sacramental theology the gospel gives us nothing more than a general promise to the elect, and we need some other means of determining whether we are among the elect to whom it applies. Calvin expressly denies that the gospel by itself can provide this proof of election.¹⁹⁵ Instead, we must also look for the inner call of the Spirit to assure us that we are among the elect.¹⁹⁶ Calvin still says that we should seek from the word of the gospel assurance of salvation. Yet by this he does not mean that the words themselves give a firm promise “for me,” but instead that we should look for this word to produce in us an inward call.¹⁹⁷ It is this inward call that Calvin says cannot deceive us and is the ultimate sign that we will be saved on the last day.¹⁹⁸

This has led to a tendency in Reformed theology to include the experience of faith as part of the content of faith. My faith must look not only to the promise of the gospel but also to some inner call in my heart before I can know I am saved. If all that one is looking for is simple assent

¹⁹³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:49 = WA 43:462.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 3.21.3–4.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.24.1.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.24.2–3.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.24.4–8.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.24.2–3.

that the promises of the gospel are true, this would not be so bad. Yet Calvin is looking for more than this. He is looking for an inner assurance that I am among the elect, which in his view no outer word of Christ can tell me. Calvin intensifies the problem further by distinguishing between those who have true faith and can never fall away, and those who appear to have faith but can fall away.¹⁹⁹ This has led later generations of Calvinists to ask themselves whether they have true faith, or only apparent faith. Since the gospel cannot tell them this, they have to look for signs in themselves that their faith is genuine. This has led many to look for things like a personal conversion experience, or the experience of inner renewal and holiness, as signs of election.²⁰⁰ Yet when people do this their faith is not looking to the gospel alone to find assurance of salvation, but also to their experience of their own faith or holiness. This is not how Luther teaches justification by faith. He urges us to look away from ourselves and to direct all our attention to Christ and his promises. It sounds like Luther's theology, since salvation is still "by faith alone." Yet since the object is not Christ's promise alone, this is not "faith alone" in the Lutheran sense. The minute the object of our faith is our own faith, then faith becomes a new inward Protestant work that corresponds to the outward works of Catholicism. In both cases, assurance of salvation is grounded in God's renewing work in us instead of Christ's promise for us, and in a subtle way the pious self takes the place of Christ as the focus of our confidence. That is, it becomes an idol.

The theology of abstractions. Another way of subtly undermining Christ and the gospel is to resort to a theology of abstractions. At face value a theology of abstractions stresses the vastness of the metaphysical gap between God and us. Yet from Luther's perspective it does not

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.24.7.

²⁰⁰ Cary, "Why Luther is not quite Protestant," 475–81.

take this gap seriously enough. On the one hand it denies God's absolute freedom to cross this gap whenever he wills, which is a failure to recognize that unlike us he is truly almighty. On the other hand it attempts to cross this divide through human speculation.

In chapter 1 we noted Halbertal and Margalit's observation that theological reflection regarding idolatry tends to run in one of two directions. On the one hand theologians can accept the anthropomorphic images such as adultery and rebellion that the Bible uses to describe idolatry, with the concrete, personal view of God that this entails. On the other hand they can take a more philosophical approach and deal with idolatry by positing an unbridgeable metaphysical gap between God and creation. If the second option is taken, avoiding idolatry means purging anthropomorphisms and other concrete elements such as corporeality, locality, visibility, and emotion from one's view of God.

Luther adopts the first of these options. Although he recognized that God transcends any anthropomorphic description of him, he did not think it is possible for us to get beyond the earthly pictures God gives us of himself, nor did he think these pictures deceive us. At one point he comments that the anthropomorphites were unjustly condemned by Rome for speaking about God as if he has ears, eyes, arms etc. He thought no one should be condemned for holding to the descriptions God gives of himself in Scripture, nor can we improve on them. Instead, we can only grasp hold of God under the earthly wrappings in which he presents himself to us.²⁰¹

This not only puts Luther at odds with Zwingli and other sixteenth century Reformers who tried to draw a sharp line between God and all earthly things. It also puts him at odds with much contemporary theology that stresses God's transcendence to the point where it turns him into an abstraction. This can be seen with someone like Ellul. In contrast to Luther's focus on the

²⁰¹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 1:14–15 = WA 42:12; LW 2:45–46.

incarnate Christ and his created word, Ellul stresses that God cannot be tied to any image, created thing, or concrete predication about him. He says that not just visible images but also mental images should be avoided. He attacks not only images but also human language, and suggests that all biblical literalism or fixed doctrinal formulations must be renounced if we are to avoid idolatry. In this he is following the approach to idolatry that posits and an unbridgeable metaphysical gap between God and us. This approach treats the freedom of God as something that forces him to remain free from creation and prevents him from bridging the gap, rather than something that allows him to bind himself to created means and concrete promises if he freely chooses. If God cannot be represented by created things, it makes sense that he cannot be represented by human language either, which is after all a part of creation. If he cannot bind himself to any created thing, then he cannot bind himself to the promises of Scripture that form the heart of Christian doctrine. If visible images of God are impermissible, it makes sense that mental images should be avoided too. Luther saw this as the logical conclusion of unqualified iconoclasm. He said that if the iconoclasts are absolutely serious that we must have no images of God, they should stop reading Scripture lest they form a mental image of him.²⁰² Ellul's theology heads in this direction. However, he never follows this line of thought consistently, something he could not do without ceasing to be Christian. Instead, he tries to hold it in dialectical tension with God's use of the incarnation and the Scriptures. Yet this makes everything in his theology uncertain, since everything he asserts on the one hand on the basis of Christ and Scripture he negates on the other hand through his assertion of God's transcendence over all assertions.

Theologians such as Lash and Ellul see this as a virtue. They regard abstract or dialectical theology as necessary to prevent us from getting a "fix" on God or laying hold of him as a

²⁰² *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:82 = WA 14:622; *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), LW 40:99–100 = WA 18:83–84.

possession, and thereby asserting our mastery over him. This might be a cause for concern if the doctrine of Christ were of human devising, or if God were a petty idol who is so easily mastered. But if our doctrine is God-given, and in it we encounter the true and living God and not some idol, then we are the ones in danger of being mastered and not him. In Luther's estimation we need God to master us and fix our attention on Christ, or we will inevitably wander away to serve self-chosen idols. He regarded abstract theology, which speculates about God instead of being tied down by Christ and his word, as every bit as idolatrous as the worship of gods of wood or stone. Through its refusal to hold to God as he encounters us in the specific doctrinal formulations of Christ and the gospel, abstract theology leaves us at the mercy of our sinful selves and the deceptions of the devil. It leaves the field wide open for us to make up a faith of our own devising, focused on ourselves and whatever idols suit our fancy. As Taber points out, if God is an "ineffable mystery," who does not encounter us in binding and concrete ways, then he cannot provide much of a challenge to the concrete, functional gods we pursue in day to day life.

David Yeago observes that a form of abstract theology has been common among Protestants over the last century. This has been promulgated in the name of Luther and his distinction between law and gospel.²⁰³ Yet this is not law and gospel as Luther understood them, but law and gospel divorced from their theological context and transformed into abstract dialectical principles: one of the letter that enslaves us to rules and other fixed forms, the other of the spirit that liberates us from the constraints of such order. This new theology agrees with Luther that the gospel liberates us from the oppressiveness of the law, yet misconstrues how this

²⁰³ Yeago draws examples of such theology from the work of theologians as diverse as Gerhard Forde (David S. Yeago, "Lutherans and the Historic Episcopate: Theological Impasse and Ecclesial Future," *Lutheran Forum* 26 [Nov. 1992]: 36–40), Werner Elert, Rudolph Bultmann, and Paul Tillich (David Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Cost of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2 [Winter 1993]: 39–49). Yet his goal is not to critique the theology of any individual theologian in its entirety, but rather to identify a wider trend within theology (*ibid.*, 45).

takes place. For Luther, the law is oppressive because of our situation in the larger theological context, not because the law is oppressive in itself. The law is oppressive not because it is inherently oppressive to conform to God's order, but because we are in rebellion against it. We find the law enslaving because of our sinful disorder and non-conformity to Christ. The law condemns us, and in that sense is our enemy, because it condemns everything that is outside of Christ.²⁰⁴ The solution is therefore faith in Christ that reunites us with him and brings us both forgiveness and renewal.²⁰⁵ Yet for much contemporary Lutheran and Protestant theology, the oppressiveness of the law is seen to be grounded in the law itself and its very nature as constraint or demand. The law is oppressive simply because it is law and binds us to fixed forms. Under this construal, the gospel cannot mean a change in our situation in relation to an unchanging law, so that we no longer stand condemned by it. Instead, the gospel can only be good news if it means putting an end to the law altogether. Therefore this theology is necessarily antinomian. What is more, it is also necessarily Gnostic. Since this theology sees concrete forms as the problem, it is antithetical to the doctrine of the incarnation. Once form and order per se are equated with enslavement, then doctrine that binds us to a God who took particular incarnate form must also be enslaving, and the incarnate God must be an enslaving God. Under such a construal it makes perfect sense that the charge of legalism would be leveled against all who insist on fixed doctrine, including the doctrine of Christ.²⁰⁶

This turns Luther's theology completely on its head. For Luther, the gospel cannot be separated from the doctrine of Christ with all its concrete shape and content. It is about the Son of God who is undialectically identified with the man born of Mary, who comes to bring God's

²⁰⁴ *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), LW 31:41 = WA 1:354.

²⁰⁵ *Kasper Cruciger's Summer Postils* (1544), WA 21:458–59.

²⁰⁶ Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology," 38–49.

undialectical grace to those caught in undialectical sin.²⁰⁷ The gospel as an abstract principle set in dialectical opposition to the law is no gospel at all. It is simply idolatry. The only gospel that is worthy of the name is the one that reconciles and unites us with God in the concrete form of the man Jesus, as he comes to us in the particular means he has instituted.²⁰⁸

Conclusion

In contrast to all the contemporary theologies and spiritualities that attempt to deal with God apart from Christ and the gospel, Luther directs all our attention to God as he comes to us in his prescribed way: through his incarnate Son who speaks to us and gives himself to us in the gospel. This is what must inform our picture of God, and this is what must bring God to us if we are to know him and worship him. When we try to reach up to heaven and grasp hold of God in our own way, by developing our own picture of God or path to God or worship of God, we remain on earth and grasp hold of an idol of our own creation instead.

²⁰⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 47, 49.

²⁰⁸ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:129–30 = WA 33:201–2.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE THIRD ARTICLE: REASON AND THE WORD

Introduction

In this chapter we will look at idolatry in relation to Luther's view of God's word as the light that is needed to inform the human mind if it is to have an accurate understanding of God. In the previous chapter we began to look at Luther's view of the external word of the gospel, and therefore we will be touching on some of the same ground. However, in the previous chapter the focus was on Christ, with the word being relevant as the means by which Christ is sacramentally present with his church on earth. In this chapter we will focus on the word itself. In particular we will be focusing on the written word as the voice of the Holy Spirit that enlightens the human mind concerning the things of God and norms all our thinking about him.¹

The chief idol Luther identifies in this area is human reason, or more particularly, human reason that refuses to be enlightened and regulated in this way. In this chapter I will argue that Luther's theology of idolatry is key to understanding his ambivalent attitude towards human

¹ For Luther, Scripture is authoritative for two reasons. The first is that it has authority because of its content, that points us to Christ and brings Christ to us (see for instance David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority," *Interpretation* 35 [July 1981], 267–73, who argues—albeit one-sidedly—for this way of understanding Luther's view of scriptural authority). This is sometimes called the material principle. The second is that it has authority because of its nature as God's word, composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is sometimes called the formal principle. The two are not in conflict, and so should not be played off against each other. I have chosen to deal with the authority of Scripture under Pneumatology instead of Christology for the following reasons: (1) whenever Luther gives us a summary of his economy of salvation, such as in the *Large Catechism* or in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, he deals with the written and proclaimed word under Pneumatology, since it is the role of the Holy Spirit to publish the work of Christ (LC II 38–46; LW 37:366); and (2) when Luther defends the authority of Scripture in polemical contexts he usually does this on the basis of its inspiration (e.g. LW 24:109–110; 32:11; 36:135–37; 39:164–66).

reason. On the one hand Luther can praise it as God's gift.² On the other he can spurn it as the devil's whore.³ The way to reconcile these apparently contradictory statements is to be aware of Luther's distinction between the ministerial and magisterial use of reason in the vertical, spiritual domain. Reason is valuable when it comes to earthly matters; it is also valuable in spiritual matters when it is enlightened by God's word. Yet when it puts itself in place of the word and presumes to be competent to deal with spiritual matters on its own it is transformed into an idol. Since reason is a great gift, its potential for abuse is also great, and it makes a potent idol.

Thesis

The Holy Spirit reveals God to us through his word; all who bypass the Spirit-breathed word and attempt to know God by means of their own reason are idolaters.

Luther's Teaching

Luther teaches that when humans attempt to know God by the power of their own reason—instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to instruct them through the word—they fall into a two-fold idolatry. First, they turn their reason into an idol by putting it in the place of the Holy Spirit. Second, their reason then devises a false picture of God so that they end up worshipping a figment of their imagination instead of the true God. In this way human reason can function both as an idol and as the source of other forms of idolatry.

² LW 34:137; 54:71; WA 40.iii:612.31.

³ LW 40:174–75, 216; 51:374; cf. LW 41:227.

Luther's Confidence in Scripture

In his doctoral dissertation on Luther's views of Scripture, Mark Thompson, Senior Lecturer in Theology at Moore College, Sydney, notes that Luther's view of Scripture was profoundly connected to his view of God. He writes that

He [Luther] was convinced that one could not tamper with the Scriptures without tampering with God. One could not describe the Scriptures as obscure without blaspheming God. Further, he insisted that the Scriptures had a vital role in what he saw as the basic structure of the Christian life: God addresses his people in human words and calls upon them to believe the words that he has spoken.⁴

The working assumption for everything Luther says about the idol of human reason is this conviction that the Scriptures are a clear and authoritative word addressed to us by God to which our reason should bow. While it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of Luther's view of Scripture within the scope of this dissertation, the following themes are directly relevant to his thoughts on idolatry.

The inspiration of Scripture. Luther was convinced that the whole of Scripture is the word of God who cannot lie.⁵ In 1543 he wrote,

⁴ Mark D. Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 2004), 284.

Luther never composed a dogmatic treatise on Scripture. He had no shortage of things to say on the topic, but his views need to be pieced together from comments scattered throughout his works. The above dissertation, completed under Alister Mc Grath at Oxford, is the best recent attempt to do this. Thompson not only gives a clear and comprehensive survey of the relevant material from Luther, he also deals with previous attempts. This means he is able to build on the strengths of previous research while responding to some of its weaknesses.

⁵ Many scholars have tried to paint Luther as a proto higher critic, and to dispute that he held to a doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration. As evidence they produce a number of critical comments that Luther made regarding certain parts of Scripture, most notably the book of James. The problem with this view is that these critical comments are extremely rare, whereas statements from Luther in which he either asserts or implies that Scripture in its entirety is nothing less than the inerrant word of God can be multiplied almost endlessly. Therefore a more balanced position is that these critical comments do not represent Luther's considered position on Scripture, but should be accounted for in other ways. For instance, Luther's comments on James can be viewed as candid wrestlings with this difficult part of Scripture that never crystallized into a final position or overturned Luther's fundamental confidence in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. Thompson provides a detailed discussion of these issues, as well as a thorough response to those who dispute that Luther regarded the whole of Scripture as God's inerrant word (Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 68–90, 112–46).

“No prophecy ever came by the impulse of man; but moved by the Holy Spirit, holy men of God spoke.” [2 Pet 1:21] Therefore we sing in the article of the Creed concerning the Holy Spirit: “Who spake by the prophets.” Thus we attribute to the Holy Spirit all of Holy Scripture and the external Word and the sacraments.⁶

The Danish Luther scholar Regin Prenter, among others, has argued that “to Luther the Word in its real sense is Christ,”⁷ and that “When the living Christ himself is the Word, then the outward Word as such, whether we find it in the Bible, in the sermon, or in the sacrament, can never directly be identified with God’s own Word.”⁸ This is hard to square with Luther’s own statements on the matter, since Luther says the exact opposite, that both Christ and the written word are God’s word:

Holy Scripture is God’s Word, written and spelled and formed in letters, just as Christ is the eternal Word of God veiled in human flesh.⁹

Furthermore, since Scripture is God’s word it cannot err and compels our allegiance:

The Word is so irreproachable that not a single iota can err in the Law or the divine promises. For that reason we must yield to no sect, not even in one tittle of Scripture, no matter how much they clamor and accuse us of violating love when we hold so strictly to the Word.¹⁰

The clarity of Scripture. The conviction that Scripture is inspired and inerrant is not by itself sufficient to establish it as an authoritative guide for us. The message of Scripture must also be clear, otherwise it cannot function as our guide, but must in practice give way to whatever interpreters or interpretations are able to illuminate it. Luther rejects any suggestion of this, and

⁶ *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), LW 15:275 = WA 54:34–35.

⁷ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jenson (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹ *Sprüche aus dem Alten Testament* (1541), WA 48:31.4–6.

¹⁰ *Commentary on Psalm 45* (1532), LW 12:242 = WA 40.ii:531.

insists that Scripture is “in and of itself most certain, simple, and clear, its own interpreter, testing, judging, and illuminating everything else.”¹¹

The most obvious challenge to the clarity of Scripture is the empirical fact that the world is full of people who claim to follow the Bible, yet come to different conclusions regarding its message. Luther faced this challenge head on in his career, first when he was told to abandon his interpretation of Scripture in favor of the authoritative interpretation of the church, and then later when the Reformed challenged his right to take a stand on the words, “This is my body.” In response Luther asserted both the need and the right to take a stand on the clear words of God.¹² He defended this by reiterating the Bible’s claims about itself, that it is a bright and clear light shining in a dark place.¹³ He also appealed to the nature of Scripture as the word of the Holy Spirit, who is wise and capable enough and knows his subject matter well enough to express himself clearly using the conventions of human language.¹⁴ From this he concluded that any darkness that exists is in the hearts and minds of the interpreters, not in Scripture.¹⁵ Furthermore, the way to dispel this darkness is to direct our attention to Scripture in preference to all human interpreters, who are always less clear than the text they purport to illuminate.¹⁶ For,

a man ought not to presume that he speaks more safely and clearly with his mouth than God spoke with his mouth. He who does not understand the Word of God when it speaks of the things of God, ought not believe that he understands the words of a man speaking of things strange to him. No one speaks better than he who best understands; but who understands the things of God better than God himself?¹⁷

¹¹ WA 7:97.23–24.

¹² Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 193–205.

¹³ *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig* (1521), LW 39:164 = WA 7:639.

¹⁴ LW 19:152; 32:244; 33:93–94.

¹⁵ LW 33:28.

¹⁶ LW 32:11–12, 217; 39:164–65; cf. LW 31:266; Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 197–200.

¹⁷ *Against Latomus* (1521), LW 32:244 = WA 8:118.

Luther's conviction that Scripture is clear took on systematic importance for him. It guided his interpretation of Scripture, and helped him to see that many who claim to be interpreting Scripture are in reality evading its message. In particular Luther makes the following two points in relation to the clarity of Scripture:

The first is that Christ is the key to understanding all of Scripture. An essential step in interpreting any text is to identify the author's central thesis. This then helps to make sense of the rest of the text. Luther was convinced that Scripture clearly tells us what its central thesis is: the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Luther's conviction that Christ is the essential content of Scripture was not a critical principle he foisted onto Scripture from elsewhere and used to suppress other themes in Scripture. Rather, he regarded the gospel of Christ as the central theme that is clearly taught in Scripture and makes sense of all its other themes: from the law, which points us to our need for Christ, to the grace that we ultimately find in Christ. In this he was treating Scripture as a consistent and united whole.¹⁹ He then asserts that those who fail to grasp this central message that is so clearly taught in Scripture cannot claim to understand anything in Scripture, since they have failed to see the light that illuminates the whole.²⁰

The second point Luther makes is that if Scripture is clear, its meaning should be found in the words of Scripture, not in extra-biblical sources. If we claim to be interpreting Scripture but cannot point to clear words of Scripture to establish our interpretation we are in reality evading Scripture. Luther encountered this with people like Cajetan and Eck, who asserted that the papal

¹⁸ Luther points to the following as proof that Scripture gives us the key to its own interpretation: Revelation 5 identifies the Lamb of God as the one who opens the scroll with the seven seals;¹⁸ Jesus said that he is the light of the world,¹⁸ and that all of Scripture points to him;¹⁸ and Jesus preached himself from Scripture,¹⁸ as did his apostles, who explained how he both fulfils and makes sense of the Old Testament.¹⁸ If the Old Testament is ultimately about Christ, then how much more is the New!

¹⁹ Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 152–83.

²⁰ LW 8:287–88; 15:268–69, 339; 16:92–93; 22:156–57, 366–68; 33:26; 35:132, 245–48; 52:205, 207; WLS 68–70 (199, 204–8), 80–83 (241, 248–50, 252–53), 98 (304).

interpretation was correct while Luther's was false, yet could not show him from the words of Scripture why this was the case.²¹ Luther identifies the following evasions:

- Simple laziness, an unwillingness to devote ourselves to Scripture and read it over and over again and compare one part to another until we develop enough familiarity with it that its meaning becomes clear to us.²²
- Paying more attention to human interpretations and opinions—such as those of the church fathers, theologians, traditions, and counsels—than to Scripture, and judging Scripture in the light of these instead of the other way round.²³
- Claiming direct illumination from the Spirit, and using these private revelations to judge Scripture. Luther agrees that prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit is essential for biblical study, yet stresses that the role of the Spirit here is to impress on our hearts and minds the words of Scripture, not to teach us something that is not contained in these words.²⁴
- Importing thoughts and definitions from philosophy into Scripture, instead of carefully reading Scripture to see how it uses terms and ideas.²⁵

²¹ LW 31:266–67; 32:67–68; 44:133–34.

²² LW 3:114; 33:27; 34:286; 39:163; cf. LW 45:363–64.

²³ LW 32:11–12, 217; 39:164–65; 41:19–27, 121–31.

²⁴ *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings* (1539), LW 34:285–86 = WA 50:659.

²⁵ Holger Sonntag, who translated Luther's Antinomian Disputations into English, argues that Luther's approach to academic disputations at Wittenberg reveal his efforts to purge theology of philosophical definitions of God, humanity, righteousness, sin, etc., and to replace them with Scriptural ones. Although Luther clearly understood formal logic, and he and his students employed it in these disputations, Luther rarely bothered to correct his students' mistakes in logic. Instead, he focused most of his effort on ensuring that in their premises and conclusions they defined their terms in a biblical way instead of importing worldly definitions into theology (Holger Sonntag, "Translator's Preface," in *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag [Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Press, 2008], 18–21). See also Erling T. Teigen, "The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (April–July 1982): 154, 158–59; LW 8:261; 12:310; 13:125; 34:137–39, 142; 38:239.

- Obscuring the words by ignoring grammar and context, or by reading Scripture selectively and failing to read these parts in the light of the rest of Scripture.²⁶
- Evading the natural meaning of the words by resorting to allegories, special pleading, or inventing figures of speech where context or articles of faith established elsewhere in Scripture do not demand them. Luther's belief that God wants us to understand him and therefore speaks clearly led him to eschew obscure or esoteric interpretations of Scripture and to prefer the simplest possible interpretation of any given passage.²⁷

It is only against the backdrop of this confidence in the clarity of Scripture and its ability to function as our guide that Luther's teaching on the idolatry of human reason makes sense.

Reason as an Idol

Luther teaches that idolatry begins when we try to set up ourselves as teachers above God and his word. In his Isaiah commentary, he writes,

Last time I began to set forth the fountain and source of all idolatry, because our perversity refuses to be taught and formed but would rather teach and form God. ...
Summary: All idolatry comes from our wisdom, whereby we appear upright to ourselves and have no regard for what God commands.²⁸

Luther agrees with Augustine that pride is "the mother of all heresies."²⁹ This is because the proud refuse to be taught by God.³⁰ Instead, they want to be considered learned themselves, and

²⁶ WA 2:361.16–20; LW 15:313; 19:42; 24:104; 27:29; 35:170–71; 37:242–43.

²⁷ LW 29:181; 33:162–63; 36:15–16, 30, 279–80; 37:211, 270; 39:165, 178; 40:157–58, 190.

²⁸ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:17 = WA 31.ii:273; cf. LW 52:59–60.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 1:180 = *Operationis in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:126.37; cf. 54:378–79.

³⁰ *Church Postils* (1521–22), LW 52:59–60 = WA 10.i.i:205–7; cf. LW 12:309 = WA 40.ii:323–25.

set themselves up as masters over God and his word.³¹ They elevate their own opinions to the heavens, and presume to be smarter than God.³² They act as if they can correct God's word, and thus "Everyone poses as God's teacher, and He must be everybody's pupil."³³ By disregarding God's word and elevating their own thoughts above his, they turn themselves and their opinions into an idol they set in his place.³⁴

When Luther talks about reason as an idol he is working with a broader view of reason than the narrow rationalism of the Enlightenment. Luther does not start with a theory about human reason and then construct a theory about idolatry on this basis. Instead, he starts with confidence in God's word, and when he then sees how frequently human wisdom is opposed to this word he rejects all such wisdom as idolatrous. Luther is not particularly concerned whether this reason is rationalistic or religious in nature. His concern is whether it is established by the word or not. Therefore he makes little distinction between the natural theology of the scholastic theologians, the canons and traditions of the papacy, the opinions of the radical reformers, and the religious convictions of heathens, Muslims, and Jews. Even though many of these claim divine inspiration, Luther treats them all as merely products of human reasoning, since their claims cannot be established by the word. He writes,

The Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, and the papists are all idolaters—not because they worship stones and pieces of wood, but because they give up the Word and worship their own thoughts.³⁵

When Luther attacks human reason, he is not suggesting that we should be unreasonable. Instead, he is fighting for a particular view of what counts as true reason when it comes to divine

³¹ LW 13:234; 16:95; 21:37; 23:51, 231; 51:387.

³² LW 15:303; 23:208, 232, 252; 24:156; 25:167.

³³ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:208–9 = WA 33:329; cf. LW 17:19–20; 23:79.

³⁴ LW 1:149 = WA 42:112; 13:375; 14:202; 19:115; 31:350; 41:122; 52:107; cf. LW 11:289.

matters. Brian Gerrish, Distinguished Service Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary, suggests that Luther talks about human reason in three different ways that need to be carefully distinguished:

(1) natural reason, ruling within its proper domain (the Earthly Kingdom); (2) arrogant reason, trespassing upon the domain of faith (the Heavenly Kingdom); (3) regenerate reason, serving humbly in the household of faith, but always subject to the Word of God. Within the first context, reason is an excellent gift of God; within the second, it is Frau Hulda, the Devil's Whore; within the third, it is the handmaiden of faith.³⁶

It is reason in this second sense that concerns us in this chapter. Only when reason trespasses on the domain of theology and sets itself up in opposition to God's word can it be idolatrous. Luther is happy to say that we should follow the light of natural reason when it comes to judging earthly things that fall within the area of human experience. What he has in mind here are those areas of earthly life where we have no word from God, such as how to build a house or bridle a horse or milk a cow.³⁷ Since reason as it operates in this domain may be wise or foolish

³⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 1:149 = WA 42:112.

³⁶ B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 26; See also 10–27, 76–82.

³⁷ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:84 = WA 33:127; cf. LW 1:143; 17:110; 23:84; 33:98–99; Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 12–17, 71–75.

The following statement is typical:

It is necessary to make a distinction between God and men, between spiritual and temporal things. In earthly, human affairs man's judgement suffices. For these things, he needs no light but that of reason. Hence God does not in the Scriptures teach us how to build houses, to make clothing, to marry, to wage war, to sail the seas, and so on. For these, our natural light is sufficient. But in divine things, the things concerning God, and in which we must conduct ourselves acceptably with him and must secure happiness for ourselves, human nature is absolutely blind. (Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, ed. J. N. Lenker, trans. J. N. Lenker et al. [8 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995], 6.319 = WA 10.i.i:531.5–13)

However, we should note that for Luther all of earthly life is spiritual in some sense, since God is the Creator of all, and in all of life we are responsible to our Creator. Therefore Luther believed that even when it comes to earthly life reason has its deficiencies (Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* [Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1999], 60–68. For instance, he writes:

He who knows God also knows, understands, and loves the creature, because there are traces of divinity in the creature. ... But the godly alone observe this difference in the creatures. The ungodly have no knowledge of it; for they know neither God nor the creatures, far less their use. (*Lectures on Genesis*

but not idolatrous, it is irrelevant to our discussion in this chapter. It is reason as it operates in the domain of faith that concerns us here. In this domain Luther consistently distinguished between reason that sets itself up as master and judge over God's word, and reason that humbly submits to the word and uses the word to direct its thinking.³⁸ He spurned the first while praising the latter.³⁹ This should tell us that his attack on reason was not driven by a belief that faith should be unreasonable, but rather by the conviction that in the realm of theology our reason must be informed by a higher wisdom or else it will judge falsely.⁴⁰ The question is, when it comes to our knowledge of God, will we allow our every thought to be taken captive by God's word,⁴¹ so that we are taught by God?⁴² Will we acknowledge that his thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and his ways than our ways?⁴³ Will we concede that his wisdom turns ours into foolishness?⁴⁴ Or will

[1538–42], LW 4:195–96 = WA 43:276.27–28, 30–32)

Thus our entire knowledge or wisdom is based solely on the knowledge of the material and formal cause, although in these instances, too, we sometimes talk disgraceful nonsense. The efficient and final cause we obviously cannot point out ... Therefore let us learn that true wisdom is in Holy Scripture and in the Word of God. This gives information not only about the matter of the entire creation, not only about its form, but also about the efficient and final cause, about the beginning and about the end of all things, about who did the creating and for what purpose He created. Without the knowledge of these two causes our wisdom does not differ much from that of the beasts, which also make use of their eyes and ears but are utterly without knowledge about their beginning and their end. (*Lectures on Genesis* [1535–38], LW 1:124–25 = WA 42:93.19–22, 94.3–8)

³⁸ LW 14:15; 20:244; 23:51, 80–81, 84, 229; 24:109; 28:70; 34:208; 40:197; 51:379; 54:71.

³⁹ Luther asserts that “Reason, speech, and all gifts and created things are therefore different in believers and Christians than in unbelievers” (LW 54:184 = WA TR 3:106.9–10). This is because reason undergoes “regeneration through the Word” (LW 54:183 = WA TR 3:105.24). When asked in 1533 whether things like logic and the tools of arts and nature are useful in the study of theology, Luther replied that “good tools—for example, languages and the arts—can contribute to clearer teaching,” yet he then went on to distinguish the right use of these things—by those whose minds are illuminated by the Holy Spirit through the word—from their frequent abuse (LW 54:71 = WA TR 1:191).

⁴⁰ “Our nature is so corrupt that it no longer knows God unless it is enlightened by the Word and the Spirit of God. How, then, can it love God without the Holy Spirit? It is true that there is no desire for anything that is unknown. Hence our nature cannot love God, whom it does not know; but it loves an idol and the dream of its heart.” (*Lectures on Genesis* [1535–38], LW 2:124 = WA 42:349)

⁴¹ 2 Cor 10:5; LW 12:269; 23:230–31; 32:112.

⁴² Isa 54:13; John 6:45; LW 17:243–45; 23:96–100; 36:151; 48:53–54.

⁴³ Isa 55:8–9; LW 9:54.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor 1:18–25; LW 13:253; 26:227–28.

we set our thoughts above his and judge his word on that basis?⁴⁵ When we do the latter, we turn our reason into an idol. We also become fools.⁴⁶ Far from acknowledging that this kind of reason is truly reasonable, Luther calls it “a blind fool,”⁴⁷ and urges us to “show the Holy Spirit the honor of conceding that He is smarter and wiser than we are.”⁴⁸

Tae Jun Suk and Philip Watson both suggest that when Luther calls reason “the devil’s whore,” he is not merely using a colorful insult. Instead, he is making a theological point by picking up on a common image for idolatry in the Old Testament. He is saying that when the human mind does not cling to Christ and his word it becomes idolatrous by whoring after another master.⁴⁹ What Suk and Watson fail to mention is that Luther himself supplies this interpretation of this image. In a sermon on 1 Peter in 1522 he says,

Just as a virgin is physically pure and blameless, so the soul is spiritually blameless because of faith, through which it becomes the bride of Christ. But if it falls from faith into false doctrine, it must go to ruin. For this reason Scripture consistently calls idolatry and unbelief adultery and whoring, that is, if the soul clings to the teachings of men and thus surrenders faith and Christ.⁵⁰

Likewise, in his Heidelberg disputation he stresses the need for the human mind to be wedded to Christ if it is to reason well:

Just as a person does not use the evil of passion well unless he is a married man, so no person philosophizes well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian.⁵¹

⁴⁵ LW 23:230–32; 38:257.

⁴⁶ LW 23:163, 165; 28:174.

⁴⁷ *The Sermon on the Mount* (1532), LW 21:260 = WA 32:515.

⁴⁸ *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:109 = WA 45:560; cf. 23:80.

⁴⁹ Tae Jun Suk, *The Theology of Martin Luther between Judaism and Roman Catholicism: A Critical-Historical Evaluation of Luther’s Concept of Idolatry* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2001), 46–49; Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God!: An Interpretation of the Theology of Luther* (London: Epworth, 1947), 87–88; Ezek 6:9; 16:1–63, 23:1–49; Hosea 1–4.

⁵⁰ LW 30:26 = WA 12:282.19–24; cf. LW 9:214; 15:257; 24:309–10; 41:207–8, 218–20, 227.

⁵¹ LW 31:41 = WA 1:355.4–5.

Luther's point is clear. He is saying that in spiritual matters the human mind cannot be autonomous.⁵² It has been created to be wedded to Christ and his word. When it refuses to listen to this word it does not become autonomous, but rather prostitutes itself to a new master. It aligns itself with God's enemy, and falls captive to one deception of the devil or another. Therefore Luther urges us to have one bridegroom only. By this he means that we should listen to the voice of Christ alone, and not to any human teaching that takes his place.⁵³

Luther charges every non-Christian religion with committing idolatry in exactly this way. He accuses them of mistaking human wisdom for divine wisdom by putting their own natural reason and knowledge of God in place of the Holy Spirit and his word. Luther acknowledges that there is a natural knowledge of God implanted in every human heart. Yet he contends—in harmony with Romans 1—that this does not lead people to know the true God, but rather to construct idols.⁵⁴ Thus it is a poor substitute for the inspired word.

Luther makes the same charge against all who claim to be Christians, yet teach their own doctrine instead of the doctrine contained in God's word. Here he has in his sights both the Catholics, with their traditions and magisterium, and the left wing of the Reformation, with its rejection of scriptural teaching on matters such as baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁵⁵ Against the church of Rome he asserts that "all canons, laws, decretals, and councils are idolatry wherever they do not agree with the voice of the Bridegroom. Thus all human doctrine is idolatry."⁵⁶ In

⁵² Cf. LW 33:65–66.

⁵³ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:452–53 = WA 47:166–67.

⁵⁴ Rom 1:18–25; LW 1:46–62; 2:250; 3:117; 4:145–46; 7:336; 9:52–54, 58; 9:130–31; 16:152, 160; 17:140, 157–58; 18:138, 184, 221; 19:11, 53–57; 20:10; 26:397, 399–401; 22:17–19; 27:87–90; 29:235; 52:58–60, 90–91; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2:45.

⁵⁵ LW 1:229; 2:284, 355–56; 17:53; 19:11, 55–56; 27:87–90; 51:374–77 .

⁵⁶ *Sermons on John* (1537–40), LW 22:442 = WA 47:157; cf. LW 17:38–39; 22:430; 41:122, 130, 223, 311; 53:35; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.132.

1545 Emperor Charles V promulgated against Luther a set of theses that taught papal infallibility, and the authority of the church to compel belief without an express word of Scripture.⁵⁷ To this, Luther replied with some theses of his own:

1. Whatever is taught in the church of God without the Word is a godless lie.
2. If it is declared an article of faith, it is a godless heresy.
3. Whoever believes it is an idolater and worships the devil instead of God.⁵⁸

Luther was not ignorant that both the papacy and the radical reformers claimed that they were guided by the Holy Spirit, and not merely following the dictates of their own reason. Yet Luther would not grant that they were taught by the Spirit when they departed from the external word that the Spirit inspires. Instead, he accused them of mistaking their own foolish ideas for the voice of the Holy Spirit:

Whatever ideas occurred to some fool, whatever he dreamed up, or whatever appealed to his fancy, was called an inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Everyone held his own thoughts to be the Holy Spirit and revelation.⁵⁹

But the devil's bride, reason, the lovely whore comes in and wants to be wise, and what she says, she thinks, is the Holy Spirit. ... It walks about, cooks up fanaticism [*Schwärmerei*] with baptism and the Lord's Supper, and claims that everything that pops into its head and the devil puts into its heart is the Holy Spirit.⁶⁰

Luther writes that while these "Enthusiasts" claim to be full of the Spirit, in reality they subject God's word to the mastery of their own human spirits, as they doubt it and twist it and carve it up so that it comes out the way they think it should.⁶¹ In opposition to all such claims to have direct access to the voice of the Spirit, Luther directs us to the external word as the place where God has promised to grant his Spirit:

⁵⁷ *Against the Thirty-two Articles of the Louvain Theologians* (1545), LW 34:350–51 = WA 54:419–21.

⁵⁸ *Against the Thirty-two Articles of the Louvain Theologians* (1545), LW 34:354 = WA 54:425.

⁵⁹ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:174 = WA 33:274.

⁶⁰ *Last Sermon in Wittenberg* (1546), LW 51:374 = WA 51:126.

⁶¹ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:229–30 = WA 33:361–65; LW 33:90.

Christ does not want to give you the right to run to and fro in search of the Spirit, to lose yourself in reverie and say: “I have this by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” Actually, it may be the devil who inspired you! Thus they alleged in the edict issued at the Diet of Augsburg: “The church is holy; therefore it follows that its proclamations are holy and given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” Christ does not recognize such inspiration. He binds us solely to His Word. He does not want to see the Holy Spirit divorced from His Word. Whenever you hear anyone boast that he has something by inspiration of the Holy Spirit and it has no basis in God’s Word, no matter what it may be, tell him that this is the work of the devil. Christ does not bind you to anything but His mouth and His Word. He does not want to leave you wandering aimlessly about; He wants you to hear His Word. He declares: “The words which I speak are spiritual. Therefore if you want to obtain the Holy Spirit, you must adhere to My words; for they are spirit and life.”⁶²

When Luther accuses his opponents of an idolatrous attachment to human reason, he is really accusing them of corrupting the Christian faith with the natural religion of humankind, and worshipping a philosophical god instead of the true God.⁶³ As a result Luther says that the same basic faith is “common to all the heathen, the papists, the Jews, the Mohammedans, and the

⁶² *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 23:173 = WA 33:273–74; cf. 3:275–77; 12:287–88; 17:60–61, 243–44; 22:367–68; 23:229–30; 40:146–48; SA III 8.1–13.

Luther’s rule of thumb is that “God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil.” (SA III 8.11) As a general rule he is scathing towards those who seek to know God by means of their own contemplations or spiritual experiences, or by seeking direct revelation from God, rather than by paying attention to the word that God has already given in Scripture as the common possession of the church (LW 1:234–35; 3:274–75; 13:110–11; 25:287–88; 36:109; 54:112; cf. Gerhard O. Forde, “When the Old Gods Fail: Martin Luther’s Critique of Mysticism,” in *The Preached God*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007], 56–68; Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag [Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Press, 2008], 87–91 = WA 39.i:345.22–23; Heiko A. Oberman, “Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism,” in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986], 130–45). Does this mean that Luther was a complete cessationist, who could never admit the possibility of a person today receiving a direct revelation from God, as did the prophets of old? Not entirely. On a few occasions he does admit that this is possible. Yet when he does, he stresses 3 things: 1) Extreme care needs to be taken with all such revelations, since the devil can easily produce counterfeit signs and revelations; 2) all such revelations must be thoroughly tested (LW 9:129–30, 187–90; 18:109; 21:270–80), and if they cannot be tested then we should take the advice of Gamaliel and postpone judgement (LW 48:365–67); and 3) although such revelations may be helpful in providing us guidance in temporal matters, they are not necessary for our faith and cannot compare with what has already been revealed and attested in the Scriptures (LW 24:365–71). For a particularly instructive passage in which he gives a nuanced account of his view, see LW 3:166–67.

⁶³ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:124–25 = WA 42:349–50; LW 4:145.

sectarians. ... they all have the same reason, the same heart, the same opinion and idea.”⁶⁴ Thus Luther agrees with contemporary pluralists that all religions are the same!—apart from the one true religion that has been revealed from heaven through Christ and his word. The reason all other religions are fundamentally the same is that they all stem from the same source, the same idol: the natural reason of humankind, which people have put in place of Christ’s inspired word.

Reason as the Source of Idolatry

Not only does Luther regard it as idolatrous for us to elevate our thoughts above God’s thoughts, he contends that whenever we do this it leads to further idolatry, since we then form a false picture of God. When we ignore God’s word and try to grasp God by means of our reason instead, we end up worshipping a false god we have dreamed up. Luther makes this point in his discussion of the fall in Genesis 3. He says that Eve fell into sin before she ate the fruit, since she set aside faith in God’s word and listened to another teacher instead. The serpent’s line of attack was to cast doubt on God’s word, and to encourage her to think about God and his will on the basis of a different word than the one God himself had given. In this way he presented to Adam and Eve a new god of his own invention without them even noticing. Our first parents took the bait by forming their impression of God apart from his word. In the same way, whenever we attempt to deal with God on our own terms, apart from his word, we slip into idolatry.⁶⁵

So why is it inevitable that the portrait of God derived from human reason will diverge from the one God gives us in his word? If a natural knowledge of God is available to the human

⁶⁴ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:396 = WA 40.i:603; cf. Suk, *Luther’s Concept of Idolatry*, 71–72, 228–29; Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 56.

⁶⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 1:146–62 = WA :110–22.

mind apart from the word,⁶⁶ then why is it that the world does not know God through its wisdom?⁶⁷ Luther gives two main answers to this question. The first is that human reason is too limited to know God as he truly is, a God who wants to show us mercy through Christ. Although it knows certain things about God, it does not know the gospel. The second is that the human mind is distorted by the sinful human will.

Natural human reason does not know the gospel. Luther's main complaint about the natural knowledge of God is that it is impossible for us to know the gospel in this way. Gerrish provides a helpful summary of Luther's thoughts on this point. He writes that the problem with general revelation for Luther is not that its content is false.⁶⁸ The problem is that it is partial and superficial, and therefore people draw false inferences from it. In particular, general revelation reveals God's power and justice, without revealing his grace in Jesus Christ. Reason concludes from God's power that it will be useful to have him on one's side, and reason concludes from his justice that the way to get him onside is good works. It therefore leads people to construct a false eudemonistic and legalistic conception of religion.⁶⁹

In the previous chapter we noted Luther's distinction between the "legal knowledge" of God that is available to natural reason, and the "evangelical knowledge" that only comes through Christ. Luther frequently asserts that human reason knows there is a God, and knows something of his power and law and justice. Yet it does not know God's true identity, as the Father of Jesus

⁶⁶ Rom 1:18–25; 2:15.

⁶⁷ 1 Cor 1:21.

⁶⁸ At one point Luther defines idolatry as "an erring notion or conscience devised about the true God" (*Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:130 = WA 14:648). For Luther, idolatry is always more than just the projection of human desires or the product of human imagination. It always involves some genuine knowledge, as limited or as distorted as this knowledge may be (cf. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], 48–55).

⁶⁹ Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 100–103.

Christ who wants to show us mercy through him. Therefore it gropes blindly after God and assigns divinity to the wrong object.⁷⁰ Moreover, since it does not understand the gospel, it adopts a legalistic opinion regarding whatever god it chooses to worship.⁷¹ It is this legalistic opinion that Luther regards as that common rationale behind every idolatrous religion:

Whoever surrenders this knowledge [of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ] must necessarily develop this notion: “I shall undertake this form of worship; I shall join this religious order; I shall select this or that work. And so I shall serve God. There is no doubt that God will regard and accept these works and will grant me eternal life for them. For He is merciful and kind, granting every good even to those who are unworthy and ungrateful; much more will He grant me His grace and eternal life for so many great deeds and merits!” This is the height of wisdom, righteousness, and religion about which reason is able to judge; it is common to all the heathen, the papists, the Jews, the Mohammedans, and the sectarians. ... Therefore there is no difference at all between a papist, a Jew, a Turk, or a sectarian. Their persons, locations, rituals, religions, works, and forms of worship are, of course, diverse; but they all have the same reason, the same heart, the same opinion and idea. The Turk thinks the very same as the Carthusian, namely, “If I do this or that, I have a God who is favorably disposed toward me; if I do not, I have a God who is wrathful.” There is no middle ground between human working and the knowledge of Christ; if this knowledge is obscured, it does not matter whether you become a monk or a heathen afterwards.⁷²

As the above quote suggests, when Luther says that reason does not know the gospel, this does not mean that it cannot know anything of God’s undeserved kindness and mercy. Luther acknowledges that God’s undeserved goodness is evident in creation,⁷³ and that natural reason can recognize that God is kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent in a general sense.⁷⁴ Yet for Luther the gospel is not some general notion regarding God’s benevolence, but a firm promise

⁷⁰ WA 28:608–14; LW 7:336; 19:53–57.

⁷¹ LW 1:149 = WA 42:112; 3:117–18; 4:119; 12:403–4; 19:11, 54–56, 115; 22:149–59; 23:55–56, 80; 26:113, 399–400; 27:87–88; 52:56–60, 107; LC II 66–68; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 54–56.

⁷² *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:396 = WA 40.i:603.

⁷³ SC II 2 = WA 30.i:365.2–3; cf. Matt 5:44–45; 6:26, 28–30.

⁷⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:117 = WA 42:631–32; *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text* (1526), LW 19:54 = WA 19:205–6.

through Christ that God's mercy is "for me." What reason lacks is such a promise regarding the extent of God's mercy. Therefore when the conviction of sin strikes, or trouble overtakes us and makes it appear as if God is against us, we easily doubt that he will be gracious to us.⁷⁵ Without any promise of mercy, the anxious conscience has no certainty, and seeks refuge in the law.⁷⁶

Natural human reason is distorted by the human will. The second reason Luther gives for why people do not know God through their reason is that the human mind has been corrupted by the sinful human will. Just as Paul says that idolatrous people wilfully suppress the truth,⁷⁷ and seek out teachers to suit their own sinful passions,⁷⁸ so Luther contends that "The ungodly world wants to be deceived."⁷⁹ Far from picturing fallen people as engaged in an unbiased quest for truth, Luther says that our sinful presumption causes us to see God "through a colored glass,"⁸⁰ rather than as he really is.

Luther gives three main reasons why our sin leads us to distort our picture of God and turn him into an idol. The first is that in our pride we don't want God to tell us what to think.⁸¹ Luther regards this as more than just intellectual arrogance. It is ultimately an expression of the divine aspirations of the sinful human will, which wants the power to judge and shape all things

⁷⁵ *Commentary on Jonah: The German Text (1526)*, LW 19:54 = WA 19:205–6; LW 29:235; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 48–50; Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 15; cf. LW 12:403–4.

⁷⁶ One is reminded here of Islam, in which one of the 99 names for Allah is "the merciful one." Nevertheless, Islam remains a religion of the law. The reason for this is that Allah never binds himself to any promises of mercy, but always remains free. Therefore I can never count on him to be merciful to me, and am thrown back on the law as the only way to improve my chances with him (Jens Christensen, *Mission to Islam and Beyond: A Practical Theology of Mission* [Blackwood, South Australia: New Creation Publications, 2001], 276–80).

⁷⁷ Rom 1:18–25.

⁷⁸ 2 Tim 4:3.

⁷⁹ *Lectures on Isaiah (1527–30)*, LW 17:249 = WA 31.ii:453; cf. LW 2:17, 19, 354; 18:221; 28:81; 41:127

⁸⁰ *Lectures on First John (1527)*, LW 30:237 = WA 20:637; cf. LW 15:228; 17:108, 140; 51:282, 287; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 159–60.

⁸¹ Cf. *Lectures on Isaiah (1527–30)*, LW 16:216 = WA 31.ii:153–54; LW 20:10; 52:60

including God as it sees fit. Luther writes that when we dream up our own notion and worship of God, “This is nothing else than to want God to be shaped by us, not ourselves to be shaped by God. It is to want to adjust the plans and thinking of God to our plans and thinking.”⁸² Furthermore, “It is the nature of every ungodly man to mold God for himself and refuse to be molded by God.”⁸³ Therefore people become “artificers who shape God according to their own design and purpose,”⁸⁴ and “whittle God according to their purpose.”⁸⁵ The problem that Luther identifies is not merely that sin leads people to have the wrong idea about God, but that it leads them to be at cross purposes to him. And this purpose is to be gods themselves. Luther writes,

This is what it means to fashion God: He becomes the creature, and I the creator. ... Man begins to fashion God and to control Him and to be lord for himself, because this is the way the devil deceived us in the beginning: “You will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). That ambition to be God still inheres in us. We, too, want to be gods. ... [Hence] we fashion God and teach Him according to our own opinion.⁸⁶

Luther would agree with Keyes that idolatry is what sinful people do with the stuff of revelation when they do not want to face the true God who threatens their autonomy.⁸⁷ In contrast to people like Feuerbach and Freud, Luther would never regard any religion as purely a projection of human wants and needs. It always involves an element of genuine revelation. Yet this revelation is twisted by human desires. Since people don’t want God to threaten the purpose they have chosen for themselves, they end up believing what they want about him, and molding him into something that will fit with their desires.

⁸² *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:54 = WA 14:589; cf. LW 17:108–9, 140; 19:11; 25:157.

⁸³ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:16–17 = WA 31.ii:273.1–2.

⁸⁴ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:17 = WA 31.ii:273.5–6.

⁸⁵ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:17 = WA 31.ii:273.6–7.

⁸⁶ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:17 = WA 31.ii:274.31–34, 275.19–20; cf. LW 17:20 = WA 31.ii:275.22–24; Michael Parsons, “Luther on Isaiah 40: the Gospel and Mission,” in *Text and Task*, ed. Michael Parsons [Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005], 69–70; Suk, *Luther’s Concept of Idolatry*, 175.

⁸⁷ See chapter 1, pages 5–6.

The second reason Luther identifies for why people willfully distort the knowledge of God is that our sinful nature has no love for his law. This is partly because it is too bound up in its love for created things to love God or pay attention to him.⁸⁸ It is also because it is unable to live up to the law's demands, and feels condemned by it. Therefore it finds it oppressive and derives no joy from listening to it.⁸⁹ Instead of loving God and his will, its bad conscience causes it to flee from him in fear, supposing that he is not merciful and good but a judge and a tyrant.⁹⁰ As a result, those who live according to the flesh are unwilling to listen to God's law as it really is. Instead, "they fit the words of the lips of God to their own works."⁹¹ They invent their own law, and call whatever pleases them good.⁹² Thus they call good evil and evil good.⁹³ If they do love some small part of God's law, it is not because they truly love God and his will, but because they think they can use it for their own advantage, such as by using it to justify themselves.⁹⁴

This leads us to the final reason people deliberately distort what can be known about God, and that is that they despise the gospel and seek to justify themselves instead. The reason they despise the gospel is that their goal is to glorify themselves through their own righteousness, rather than glorifying God by receiving righteousness from him. Therefore they resent the gospel, since it reveals their righteousness to be nothing.⁹⁵ Instead of rejoicing in the gospel, they

⁸⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:124 = WA 42:349.

⁸⁹ LW 14:294–300, 310; 52:59–60, 107; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.20–27; 2.310–11; 2.417–18 (sic); cf. John Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 97–98.

⁹⁰ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 7:336 = WA 44:549; LW 12:309 = WA 40.ii:324.

⁹¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.163.

⁹² LW 12:308–9; 14:294–95; 20:10; 52:58–59; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.534–35.

⁹³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.524–27; 1.581; Isa 5:20.

⁹⁴ LW 14:295; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.535–36.

⁹⁵ LW 9:54; 22:157–58; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.215–16, 2.310–11; 2.389 [sic]; 2.417–18; 2.427–28.

twist the law to justify themselves, and invent works by which they imagine they can make themselves pleasing to God. Thus they worship an imaginary god who is pleased with their works, whom they have manufactured after the pattern of their works.⁹⁶ This then leads them to despise the gospel even more, since as soon as they feel secure in their own righteousness they feel no need for the gospel. Luther writes,

“Here I am, for I am the Lord thy God, full of mercy.” ... these words are but cold things, when they are sounded out of their place and season, (that is, before a soul that is secure and full).⁹⁷

This tendency of the human will to pervert revelation means that there is a kind of bibliolatry for Luther, but it is not what many modern scholars call bibliolatry: the doctrine of verbal inspiration or inerrancy.⁹⁸ Instead, it is to misuse Scripture to create an idol through which we attempt to justify ourselves. Just as God can be used for idolatrous purposes, so can his word.

Conclusions

Luther’s basic understanding of the genesis of idolatry is that the human desire to be like God leads people to twist all knowledge of God and construct a false view of him, as one who allows them to be the sort of gods they want to be. They imagine a god who does not tell them what to think, but fits in with their views and opinions. They concoct a god that does not tell them how to behave, but approves of the same things they do. They dream of a god who is as pleased by their righteousness as they want him to be. Such a god is a tame god who does not threaten their aspirations to divinity. Such a view of God is only possible when people refuse to let God teach them, and set themselves up as teachers over him.

⁹⁶ LW 9:54, 130–31; 17:16–20, 107–9, 140; 19:11; 51:281–82; 52:59–60, 107.

⁹⁷ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.564 = WA 5:351.15–16, 19–20; cf. LW 51:287

⁹⁸ E.g. Peterson, “Bible-olatry in American Protestantism,” 121, 125; Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 125; cf. 115.

Idolatry is therefore bound up with the noetic effects of sin. Luther's discussion of the limitations of general revelation should not blind us to his basic point of view, which is that unredeemed humanity is wilfully ignorant of God. Siegbert Becker, in his study of Luther's view of reason, summarises Luther's view accurately when he writes, "Luther held that the fault for man's failure to know God and to read the record correctly lies not at the doorstep of the revelation, whether in the works [general revelation] or in the Word [special revelation], but in the depravity of human nature."⁹⁹ The limitations of natural human reason do not excuse people of their failure to pay sufficient attention to the word, or of the way they twist both special and general revelation to suit themselves. Humans may be blind, yet they are culpable for their blindness, since it results from their attempts to elevate their own wisdom, their own will, and their own righteousness above God's. To put it differently, idolatrous views of the God who transcends the self are primarily a product of the idol of the self.

This idol of the self can oppose the knowledge of God in a couple of ways. The first is when our idolatrous faith in our own natural reason leads us to think we have no need of God's word and can neglect it. Luther counters this by calling us back to the word, and insisting that if we are to know the true God we must rely on his instruction and not our wisdom. The second is when we attempt to master God's word and twist it so it conforms to our ideas. Luther writes,

"What I have observed is this, that all heresies and errors in connection with the Scriptures have arisen, not from the simplicity of the words, as is almost universally stated, but from neglect of the simplicity of the words, and from tropes or inferences hatched out of men's own heads."¹⁰⁰

Luther's call for us to return to the word is grounded in the conviction that the Scriptures speak clearly and therefore can function as our teacher, rather than being "a waxen nose" that we

⁹⁹ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ *The Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:163 = WA 18:701.11–13.

mold to our own opinions.¹⁰¹ Yet although the Scriptures are clear, they are not clear to us when we wilfully resist their message,¹⁰² and interpret them through the colored lens of our own idolatry.¹⁰³ Therefore the human will needs to be converted if it is to receive God's word with true understanding. This primarily involves conversion to the gospel. Only then will we embrace the central message of Scripture, love the true God and his will, and desist from our attempts to twist the biblical message in a vain attempt to justify ourselves and our rebellion. Luther writes,

“Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God's and Mary's Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.”¹⁰⁴

How this conversion of the will takes place will be the subject of the next chapter.

Contemporary Application

Luther presents a challenge to all theology that starts “from below,” and uses our own thoughts and experiences as its foundation.¹⁰⁵ For Luther, theology is a thoroughly theocentric activity.¹⁰⁶ Not only is God the subject matter of theology, but he must be the teacher. The word of this teacher certainly intersects with the things of this world, and finds points of contact within

¹⁰¹ *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), LW 14:338 = WA 5:66.

¹⁰² LW 16:243; 19:152; 32:11–12; 33:25–29; 89–100; 39:163–65; Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand*, 191–235.

¹⁰³ LW 17:108–9 = WA 30.ii:345–46; LW 21:216–17; 23:240–41; 27:28–29; 30:237; 36:337; 37:20; 44:50; 51:281–82.

¹⁰⁴ *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), LW 15:339 = WA 54:88–89.

¹⁰⁵ Luther frequently speaks about the importance of experience in shaping our faith, and can even say that “experience alone makes the theologian” (LW 54:7 = WA TR 1:16). Yet as Oswald Bayer points out, when he says this he does not mean experience per se, but experience with the word of God (Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008], 37). The truly Christian experience is experience that is shaped and informed by the word, not experience that is put in place of the word. See footnote 29 in chapter 8 for more on this topic.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Watson, *Let God Be God!*, 88; Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 63, 70

the realm of creation that are accessible to the eyes and ears and minds of all.¹⁰⁷ It comes to us under the covering of created things, and speaks not only of heavenly things but also of earthly things, as it addresses us in our situation as earthly creatures. Yet it is still a word from above. The movement cannot be reversed. We cannot start with what we know of things below and work our way up to God.¹⁰⁸

Luther's thought also presents a challenge to many types of theology that claim to be "from above," but are really "from below" as far as he is concerned. God has told us to pay attention to one particular word "as to a lamp shining in a dark place."¹⁰⁹ This is the Christ-centered word of the apostles and prophets, recorded in holy Scripture. This is the word that is truly from above. Any other word that is not derived from this is from below, despite what anyone may claim.¹¹⁰

The purpose of this chapter is not to give a comprehensive account of Luther's approach to Scripture, or to respond to all the hermeneutical questions that confront us today. Instead, the purpose is to expose the epistemological root of all idolatry, the human presumption that we can deal with divine matters by ourselves without carefully heeding what God has to say. This

¹⁰⁷ LW 40:97; Watson, *Let God Be God!*, 84–85; Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 28–29, 60.

¹⁰⁸ LW 26:28–30; 31:40, 52–53.

¹⁰⁹ 2 Pet 1:19.

¹¹⁰ This of course presupposes an established canon of Scripture. The purpose of this chapter is not to answer contemporary challenges to the biblical canon or to persuade people who are not already convinced that this canon is God's word. As important a task as that may be, Luther never applied himself to it. This is not particularly surprising, given that he lived in a society in which the formal authority of Scripture was rarely questioned. Nevertheless it is possible to infer from Luther's general approach to Scripture how he would be likely to respond to such challenges if he had had to face them. For instance, Luther always treats Scripture as a first principle, something you argue from not argue to, something that judges all human thoughts not the other way round. Secondly, he treats God's word as its own best defense, since it alone has the power to create faith in human hearts. Therefore, if confronted with modern challenges to Scripture he would be likely to point primarily to the self-attesting power of God's word, rather than relying on history or tradition or science or other authorities that can at best confirm the authority of Scripture, not establish it (for more on this, see chapter 8, including the section on apologetics). However, Luther never developed these thoughts in a systematic way, unlike later theologians who were inspired by him such as Calvin and the dogmatists of Lutheran orthodoxy (Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-Century Lutheran Dogmatists* [St Louis: Concordia, 1957], 88–118; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 1.7.4–5).

presumption obviously affects unbelievers who have no intention of listening to Scripture. Yet it also affects people who acknowledge that Scripture is God's inspired word, but nevertheless co-opt it to suit their own human thoughts or experiences. Indeed, most of Luther's thoughts on this subject were given in response to those who acknowledged the formal authority of Scripture, yet failed in practice to heed Scripture or submit their thinking to it.

Formal Acknowledgement but Practical Neglect

A contemporary example of how a person can acknowledge Scripture's authority in theory yet fail to norm their thinking by it in practice is provided by the apologist Norman Geisler. As one of the drafters of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* and the author of the recent book *Defending Inerrancy*,¹¹¹ Geisler has been a staunch defender of biblical inerrancy. Yet in at least one key area his theology is shaped more by human reason than by God's word.

One of Luther's strongest defenses of scriptural clarity comes in *The Bondage of the Will*.¹¹² Evidently Luther was convinced that Scripture is clear enough on this issue to settle the matter, and he marshalled much evidence from Scripture to demonstrate that the human will after the fall is in bondage to sin and can only be freed by God's mercy.¹¹³ In contrast, Geisler has published a book in which he argues that the will of fallen and unredeemed people is not bound, but free to choose for or against God. Geisler's book is replete with Scriptural references and quotations, yet his arguments are rationalistic rather than scriptural. Indeed, his arguments bear an uncanny resemblance to those of Erasmus. His chief arguments are: (1) "ought implies can," (2) reward

¹¹¹ R. C. Sproul, "Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary," 1980, International Council on Biblical Inerrancy Foundation Series 2, http://65.175.91.69/ICCP_org/Documents_ICCP/English/White_Papers/01_Biblical_Inerrancy_Paper.pdf (accessed Oct. 25, 2012), iii; Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

¹¹² LW 33:24–28, 89–100 = WA 18.606–9, 652–59.

and punishment, praise and blame are unjust unless those who are rewarded or punished are free to merit it,¹¹⁴ and (3) many church fathers teach free will.¹¹⁵ He produces not one passage of Scripture to prove his chief contention, unless one first accepts his rationalistic premises that he expects us to accept without Scriptural proof. That is, when he tries to demonstrate scriptural support for his position, his evidence consists of this: any time Scripture presents us with an “ought,” or talks of praise or blame, or even talks of choice or will or faith,¹¹⁶ he takes this as proof of his position.¹¹⁷ He then runs through countless Bible passages that teach the opposite—that fallen human beings are in bondage to sin unless they are elected by God and liberated by God’s grace¹¹⁸—and tries to find a gloss to get around every one of them.¹¹⁹

Two points are worth noting. The first is the way Geisler gives the appearance of scriptural argumentation by multiplying biblical citations, while his arguments are in fact derived from human reason. The second is the way he ends up contending for human merit against the grace of God. To echo Luther’s response to Erasmus, in this way he seeks to purchase God’s favour more cheaply than Pelagius. Pelagius at least set the price of God’s favour high, and insisted on great effort and many works. Geisler contends that it can be bought cheaply with a tiny act of human

¹¹³ LW 33:246–89 = WA 18:756–83.

¹¹⁴ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 29–31; cf. LW 33:120–32, 141–44, 147–55.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150–59.

¹¹⁶ Here he is begging the question, and assuming that choice must mean free choice, will must mean free will, etc.

¹¹⁷ Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 33–35.

¹¹⁸ Geisler does concede that we all need the aid of God’s grace to overcome sin or move towards God (*Ibid.*, 30–31, 36–37). Thus he is not a full-blown Pelagian, merely a synergist. Yet he treats this grace as something that has been given to all people, believers and unbelievers alike, apart from the means of grace, so that in practical terms our salvation now hinges entirely on our free choice.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 58–96.

free will.¹²⁰ As Luther predicts, since he starts by forming his picture of God on the basis of human reason and not the word he ends up devising a form of self-justification.

Resultant Distortions in our Picture of God

Luther contends that whenever human thinking eclipses the word we will end up distorting our picture of God in particular ways, as we remake God as we see fit. First, we will turn him into a tame god, one who does not threaten our purposes and desires, but can be manipulated to serve our ends. Second, we will adopt some kind of legalistic opinion concerning this god, and will fail to know the true God who wants to save us through the gospel. It is therefore worth looking at a few examples of how idolatrous “theology from below”—that pays insufficient attention to God’s word while placing greater store in human thoughts, feelings, experiences, or traditions—distorts our picture of God in the way that Luther predicts.

Gods that resemble ourselves. Since at least the time of Xenophanes of Colophon—who observed in the fifth century B.C. that the Egyptians made their gods dark and snub nosed, whereas the Thracians made them red haired and blue eyed¹²¹—observers of religion have noted the tendency for humans to worship gods that resemble themselves. Recently a team of behavioural scientists led by Nicholas Epley from the University of Chicago decided to study this phenomenon empirically. They conducted a series of studies on religious believers in the United States, and confirmed that the subjects did indeed adjust their picture of God to bring him into alignment with themselves. The researchers asked the subjects to indicate what position they

¹²⁰ LW 33:268 = WA 18:770.

Geisler is fully cognisant of the fact that he is opposing *sola gratia*, since he openly confesses his synergism (Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 241–43).

¹²¹ Anthony Kenny, *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 5.

held on a range of issues (abortion, affirmative action, the death penalty, the Iraq war, marijuana legalisation, and same-sex marriage). They then asked them to indicate what position they thought God, Bill Gates, the average American, and George Bush would hold. The result was a strong correlation between the “Self” and “God” responses, and only weak correlations between the “Self” and any of the other responses. To eliminate the possibility that this strong correlation was due to the subjects trying to line themselves up with God, rather than lining God up with themselves, the researchers did further studies in which they manipulated the subjects’ opinions on the issues in question. What they found was that this manipulation flowed on to the subjects’ assessment of what God would think, without affecting their assessment of what other people would think in a significant way. Furthermore, brain scans of the participants showed that when they reasoned about God’s thoughts they used similar mental pathways to when they reasoned about their own thoughts, but different pathways when they reasoned about other people. This suggests that they were reasoning about God egocentrically.¹²² These results led the researchers to conclude that,

“Intuiting God’s beliefs on important issues may not produce an independent guide, but may instead serve as an echo chamber that reverberates one’s own beliefs. ... People may use religious agents as a moral compass, forming impressions and making decisions based on what they presume God as the ultimate moral authority would believe or want. The central feature of a compass, however, is that it points north no matter what direction a person is facing. This research suggests that, unlike an actual compass, inferences about God’s beliefs may instead point people further in whatever direction they are already facing.”¹²³

¹²² Epley, N., et al., “Believers’ estimates of God’s beliefs are more egocentric than estimates of other people’s beliefs,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 106 (2009), <http://www.pnas.org/content/106/51/21533.full.pdf+html> (accessed 28 Nov. 2011), 21533–38.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 21533, 21537.

These results agree with Luther's contention that without a fixed compass outside ourselves in God's word, we distort our picture of God in egocentric ways. We turn him into a tame god who doesn't challenge us, since he always agrees with what we think.

Making Christ in our image. This egocentric distortion of our picture of God extends to our picture of Christ. Stephen Prothero, chair of the Department of Religion at Boston University, has conducted a historical study that charts different portraits of Jesus that have achieved popularity in the American mind at different stages of U.S. history and among different segments of the population. He concludes that "Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image."¹²⁴

Prothero chronicles how one generation of Americans after another has changed its portrait of Jesus to suit its own fancy. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, Deists, Unitarians, and biblical critics remade Jesus into an enlightened moral teacher and existentialist philosopher.¹²⁵ In the spirit of individual liberty of the early republic, the Calvinist God of the colonial era—centered on the sovereignty of the Father—looked too much like King George, and Calvinism steadily gave way to an Arminianism centered on Jesus.¹²⁶ In the popular revivals of the Second Great Awakening and the sentimentality of the early Victorian era, Jesus became gentle Jesus meek and mild, a sweet and somewhat feminized Savior.¹²⁷ During the progressive era, from the late nineteenth century through the World Wars, Jesus was made over in more masculine terms, as a manly fighter, a social crusader, a savvy business executive, and a dynamic leader and

¹²⁴ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–42.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43–56.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56–86.

celebrity.¹²⁸ In more recent times he has morphed from the alternative lifestyle dude of the “Jesus Freaks” in the hippie era, to the rocking superstar of Contemporary Christian Music.¹²⁹ During the civil rights movements, African Americans embraced Jesus as a “black Moses;”¹³⁰ members of the Nation of Islam claimed him as a Black Muslim prophet;¹³¹ “womanist” theologians claimed that the face of Jesus could be seen most clearly in African-American women;¹³² while to the KKK he was a Klansman.¹³³ Mormons may have ditched the Christian creeds, but have embraced Jesus as their great white elder brother.¹³⁴ Even Jews and Hindus have gotten in on the act, the one claiming Jesus as a Jewish rabbi distinct from the Christian Christ,¹³⁵ the other depicting Jesus along the lines of a Hindu avatar.¹³⁶

On the one hand, Prothero’s study should tell us something of the richness of Christ. Most of the portraits Prothero describes latch onto a genuine characteristic of the biblical Christ, who is so multi-faceted that an enormous variety of people can find something in him to embrace. On the other hand, most of these portraits skew the biblical picture of Christ in some way, often to the point where it can no longer be called Christian in a biblical or creedal sense. Furthermore, if all we see in Jesus are those things that fit with our biases and preferences, he can never

¹²⁸ Ibid., 87–123.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 124–57.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 200–228.

¹³¹ Ibid., 218–19.

¹³² Ibid., 207–8.

¹³³ Ibid., 8, 299.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 161–99.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 229–66.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 267–90.

transform us. As Prothero comments, “In the United States, Jesus is widely hailed as the ‘King of Kings.’ But it is a strange sort of sovereign who is so slavishly responsive to his subjects.”¹³⁷

One of the movements Prothero examines is the higher biblical criticism spawned by the Enlightenment, with its various quests for the historical Jesus.¹³⁸ Prothero notes the critique of Albert Schweitzer and George Tyrell, that far from uncovering the real Jesus, scholars engaged in these quests tend to see their own reflections instead.¹³⁹ This critique is worth noting, since this same spirit is evident in many of the other movements that Prothero describes, a spirit that is willing to judge the biblical portrait of Christ as defective. Furthermore, higher biblical criticism remains extremely influential in contemporary academic theology.

The issue with higher criticism is not with scholarly or historical investigations of the Scriptures per se, nor with the different analytical tools that biblical scholars use. Rather, it is with the pre-commitments scholars bring to their work. Do they approach Scripture with “faith seeking understanding,” or do they hold the veracity of its contents in doubt until their truth can be established by means of their own investigations? Is their purpose to understand the text, or to judge whether or not to believe it? When a clash occurs between Scripture and some other historical source or some scholarly theory, which takes precedence? In other words, what is their highest authority? Where have they placed their faith? Or, more bluntly, who is their God?

¹³⁷ Ibid., 297.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 32–41.

¹³⁹ “Whatever Jesus was, He was in no sense a Liberal Protestant.” (George Tyrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1910], xxi)

“The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” (Ibid., 44)

Prothero, *American Jesus*, 34; Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 4–6.

The late Old Testament scholar James Barr argues that underlying the shift in biblical scholarship that took place at the time of the Enlightenment was a change in “the conditions under which people were prepared to believe.”¹⁴⁰ He writes,

What made the difference in the eighteenth century was not biblical criticism as such, but a more critical theological attitude to the sources of all belief, of which the Bible was first or at least central. ... By criticism, when used of theology, I mean this: that the establishment of theological truth does not take place by a mere passive acceptance of data given by the sources of revelation, but takes place through a critical and estimative weighing of these data. The theologian asks “Is this true?”¹⁴¹

Barr is right that during the Enlightenment there was a change in the conditions under which people were prepared to believe. Yet he is wrong in suggesting that for the first time people became genuinely critical towards sources of belief such as the Bible. The suggestion that people in the past were somehow “pre-critical,” and simply received the data of revelation without questioning it, is false. If it were true, Luther would not have had to fight so hard for the primacy of scriptural authority. In every age there have been people who have adopted a critical stance towards Scripture—at least in practice, if not in theory—and judged the Bible in the light of their own thoughts and opinions, or by appeal to other authorities. Luther’s struggle against this critical stance is evident in a letter to Hieronymus Dungersheim, one of his early Catholic opponents, in which he writes, “We want Scripture to be judge, you want to be judges against Scripture.”¹⁴² The issue is not whether we think critically or not, but what gets critiqued in the light of what? In other words, what is our highest authority? The truth behind Barr’s comments is that people are now likely to use different authorities to judge the Bible than they did before. In Luther’s day people were likely to judge Scripture in the light of the philosophy of Aristotle, or

¹⁴⁰ James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 121.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁴² WA Br 2, 301:125.11–12.

the traditions of the Catholic Church, or their own religious experiences. In modern times they are more likely to judge it on the basis of their scientific or historical investigations. Yet the game remains the same. We are still trying to subject Scripture to one human authority or another, so that God becomes our pupil.

The result of this will be that we end up seeing in Jesus our own reflection. We will end up telling him who he must be, instead of allowing him to teach us about himself. Historical and scientific investigations will only reveal the kind of things that history and science can reveal—that is, human and earthly things—and they won't always reveal these with a high degree of certainty. The result will be a human and earthly Jesus, with our picture of him being uncertain, changing, and malleable enough for us to mold to our whims. The method will not allow us to rise above this to the true, unchanging, divine-human Son of God.

This also reveals why Christ can never be played off against Scripture, as many modern day Lutherans and Protestants are wont to do. If we do this we will quickly end up with a false Christ, who constantly changes according to our whims. As we noted in the previous chapter, Luther's Christ is always the one proclaimed in the Bible, not some Christ we think we can have or know apart from it. Therefore Luther warns against those who "delude the people by using the name of Christ."¹⁴³ He cautions us to "stick to the Word of God. Ignore every other word—whether it is devoid of Christ, in the name of Christ, or against Christ, or whether it is issued in any other way."¹⁴⁴ If we want to retain Christ, we must not import our own ideas into Scripture.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 22:51 = WA 47:165.

¹⁴⁴ *Sermons on John* (1530–32), LW 22:51 = WA 47:165.

¹⁴⁵ "The cupidity of a greedy man is as nothing compared with a man's hearty pleasure in his own ideas. He then brings these fine ideas into the Scriptures, and this is devilishness pure and simple. ... then assuredly the true doctrine is soon lost, however willingly one preaches and willingly one listens. Then Christ is gone. Then they fall down before the devil on the mountain and worship him." (*Last Sermon in Wittenberg* [1546], LW 51:377 = WA 51 = WA 130.34–41)

If we want to faithfully preach Christ, we must proclaim all the doctrines of Scripture.¹⁴⁶ If we want to know Christ, we must pay attention to his word, lest the devil “mislead us through Christ himself,”¹⁴⁷ and we end up constructing a false Christ.¹⁴⁸ We saw in the previous chapter Luther’s emphasis on Christ as the one who must show us what God is like. Yet the Scriptures are what we need if we are to know what Christ is like. Luther’s emphasis on Christ and Scripture cannot be played off against each other. If one is lost, both are lost, and we are left with an idol.

The god of Natural Theology.

Luther’s attack on human reason can be legitimately construed as an attack on natural theology. It is not an attack on natural revelation per se. Luther asserts often enough that such revelation is genuine. The problem is what people inevitably do with natural revelation if they give insufficient attention to special revelation. The Swedish Luther scholar Ingemar Öberg summarizes Luther’s position succinctly when he writes,

Natural theology speculates about the divine majesty (*theologia gloriae*). Both within Christendom and in the heathen world, natural theology is characterized by rationalism, legalism, and moralism, by the Law and self-righteousness. True and saving knowledge of God looks only to God in Christ (*theologia crucis*). Only the theology of the cross leads to true knowledge of God, to his heart, his will to save, and to justification and salvation.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ “We teach nothing save Christ crucified. But Christ crucified brings all these doctrines with Him.” (Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston [London: James Clarke & Co., 1957], 107–8)

“If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. No, they would treat it with the utmost respect; they would put their faith in it without any disputing or doubting; and they would know that one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond.” (*Lectures on Galatians* [1535], LW 27:38 = WA 40.ii:47.30–34)

¹⁴⁷ *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), LW 40:134 = WA 18:116.

¹⁴⁸ Luther said of Karlstadt that “he constructs his own Christ,” (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:135 = WA 18:117) by insisting that we must imitate the works of Christ, while paying insufficient attention to his words.

¹⁴⁹ Öberg, *Luther and World Mission*, 63.

On the one hand this means that we can never mount an adequate defense of the Christian faith on the basis of natural theology. It is true that Luther never completely dismissed the value of rational arguments in defending the Christian faith, provided that they are in agreement with Scripture. Siegbert Becker, in his studies on Luther's views on reason and apologetics, demonstrates how Luther both advocated and engaged in a kind of negative rational apologetics against opponents of the Christian faith. That is, in socratic style he turned their use of reason against them, to demonstrate the unreasonableness of their objections to the Christian faith.¹⁵⁰ Becker also demonstrates how Luther regarded the natural knowledge of God and his law as both genuine revelation and a point of contact for Christian proclamation.¹⁵¹ Luther writes,

Were it not naturally written in the heart, one would have to teach and preach the law for a long time before it became the concern of conscience. The heart must also find and feel the law in itself. Otherwise it would become a matter of conscience for no one. However, the devil so blinds and possesses hearts, that they do not always feel this law. Therefore one must preach the law and impress it on the minds of people till God assists and enlightens them, so that they feel in their hearts what the Word says.¹⁵²

Yet although Luther saw some value in natural revelation in this limited way, he was opposed to all attempts to build faith on this foundation.¹⁵³ This is partly because of the weakness and instability of natural reason, as we will see in the next chapter. But even more it is because of the inability of natural reason to know the gospel. Since natural reason only knows the God of the law and not the God of grace, it will always provide a distorted picture of God. The danger then in relying too heavily on natural theology without always subsuming it under the higher revealed word is that we end up presenting to people a false god of the law. In our attempts to

¹⁵⁰ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 176–84; Siegbert W. Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 10 (Oct. 1958), 754–59.

¹⁵¹ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 25–60

¹⁵² *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, LW 40:97 = WA 18:80.35 – 81.3. Cf. WA 16:447.27–39.

¹⁵³ Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 154–75; Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," 750–54.

bring people to God we then might achieve the opposite, by appealing to the self-righteous and making them secure in their idolatry, while crushing broken sinners without binding them up through Christ. Natural theology might succeed in a limited sense in that it can raise the right questions, but it fails in that it does not supply the right answers, which only come via God's special revelation in his word. By nature we know the accusing voice of the law, but not how to silence this accusation through the gospel. By nature we can know there is a God, but not his true identity in Christ. By nature we can see our need for divine help in times of trouble, but not where to find it. By nature we reason that a wise ruler rewards the innocent and punishes the guilty, but we are totally unprepared for the surprise that in Christ God punishes the innocent One and lets the guilty go free.¹⁵⁴ If we try to supply these answers for ourselves, we will end up constructing a false god based on some form of legalistic thinking.¹⁵⁵ The only way to avoid this is to allow the true God to speak, as he reveals himself to us by the Spirit through the word.

An example of a god of natural reason is the god of moralistic therapeutic deism we encountered in previous chapters. The authors of the National Study of Youth and Religion note that adherents of this creed show little interest in absorbing or adhering to any authoritative doctrine, apart from "what seems right to me."¹⁵⁶ This is more than simple neglect. It often involves an aversion to the very idea of religious authority, as if to be persuaded by a higher

¹⁵⁴ Luther, *Church Postils*, 8.12; LW 17:221, 228 = WA 31.ii:432, 438; Becker, "Luther's Apologetics," 744.

¹⁵⁵ Note Luther's insight, discussed in chapter 5, that both legalism and antinomianism are two sides of the same coin. They are both expressions of thinking that is shaped by the law and not the gospel.

¹⁵⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 131–37, 165, 262; Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 156–57.

authority is an affront to the sovereign right of the individual to choose his or her own beliefs.¹⁵⁷

The authors then go on to describe the resultant god in the following terms:

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. ... God sometimes does get involved in people's lives, but usually only when they call on him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved. In this sense, the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs. ... Like the deistic God of the eighteenth-century philosophers, the God of contemporary teenage Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is primarily a divine Creator and Lawgiver. He designed the universe and establishes moral law and order. But this God is not trinitarian, he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill and transform people through his Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.¹⁵⁸

From Luther's perspective nothing in this creed is surprising. When the sinful nature rears its ugly head, people rebel at the thought of being instructed by authority from above, and choose to be their own teachers instead. When they do this, they may retain aspects of true belief that can be known by natural reason, such as belief in a divine Creator and Lawgiver. Yet they will lose those things that can only be known through special revelation, such as knowledge of the Trinity and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore they will adopt a legalistic opinion concerning whatever god they worship. Then, even this remnant of knowledge will become twisted in self-serving ways. In the case of moralistic therapeutic deism, the moral law gets watered down to make it non-threatening, and God gets turned into a tame god who is at our beck and call. Thus

¹⁵⁷ Smith and Ludquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143–45; Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 156–57.

¹⁵⁸ Smith and Ludquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, 164–65.

the moralistic and therapeutic aspects of moralistic therapeutic deism flow quite naturally out of its deism—its attempt to approach God from below, using human thoughts as its guide.

Conclusions

If we want to know the true God, then we need to listen when he speaks. The true God is not silent. Christ has sent his Spirit to inspire his Apostles and prophets and to lead his church into all truth, so that light would shine in our darkness, and we would know the true God. If we think we can be self-enlightened, and can set up ourselves as teachers in place of the Spirit and his word, then we will know neither Christ nor the Father, no matter how much we claim that we teach in their name. Instead we will serve a tame idol we have molded in our image, that we think we can serve on the basis of some legalistic notion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE IDOL OF THE SELF AND THE THIRD ARTICLE: REPENTANCE

Introduction

In the preceding chapters we diagnosed the human condition. We identified various ways in which idolatry manifests itself, and carefully distinguished between idolatrous and non-idolatrous faith. So now that this diagnostic work has been done, what is the cure? How can our hearts and minds be turned from their idolatry to faith in the living God?¹

For Luther, God must work repentance and faith in us through his Spirit. We cannot work this change in ourselves.² This recognition reveals another subtle form of idolatry to us. If we think we can purify our hearts from idolatry by our own willpower, instead of relying on God's Spirit, we have again put ourselves in God's place.

Thesis

The Spirit must free us from our idols and create true faith in us; all who think they can produce true faith and its fruit without relying at all times on him are idolaters.

¹ The topic under consideration here is not merely the initial conversion from unbelief to faith in a person's life, but also the ongoing repentance that Luther regarded as a daily struggle for every Christian (LW 31:25; SC IV 12 = WA 30.i:382.6–383.2). Each day we must turn from our sin and the idolatry that stands at the heart of it, and turn again in faith to the true God.

² Luther's teaching at this point is echoed by a number of contemporary scholars who have reflected on the topic of idolatry, as we noted in chapter 1. Beale, Powlison, and Keller all stress that liberation from idolatry is a work that God alone can perform, and that he does this work through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Keller also echoes Luther's view that God uses suffering to expose the futility of our idols, and to teach us that we have been looking for blessing in all the wrong places.

Luther's Teaching

The Holy Spirit Must Deliver Us from Idolatry and Work True Faith in Us

Luther teaches that only the Holy Spirit can create faith in Christ in our hearts. His best known articulation of this is in his Small Catechism, where he writes,

I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.³

What is less well known is how Luther develops this thought with explicit reference to idolatry. Luther teaches that only the Holy Spirit can destroy idolatry and create true faith in us. While human hands can smash statues and destroy sacred groves, they cannot cleanse the heart.⁴ This means that our best human efforts to eradicate idolatry cannot succeed, since one “cannot praise God with an idolatrous mouth or an unbelieving heart.”⁵ Instead, the Holy Spirit must cleanse our hearts from idolatry. Then the external idols will also fall, for “once the truth is known, once the Holy Spirit has been sent, the idols topple by themselves. The Spirit—not mortal hands—breaks them.”⁶ The Spirit does this by working through the proclamation of the gospel, which sweeps away idolatry and establishes genuine good works and worship of God.⁷

If we think we can create true faith in our hearts through our own free will, and keep the first table of the law through our own powers, then we have made our will into an idol. We have put our will in place of the Holy Spirit, and stolen the credit for the Spirit's work. This claim that

³ SC II 6 = WA 30.i:367.4–368.3.

⁴ LW 20:145; cf. Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 2.153–54.

⁵ *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), LW 14:9 = WA 31.i:229.1–2.

⁶ *Lectures on Zechariah: The Latin Text* (1526), LW 20:145 = WA 13:663.37–38.

⁷ LW 13:378 = WA 31.i:418; LW 14:9 = WA 31.i:228–29; LW 20:145 = WA 13:663; LW 26:224–25 = WA

we can keep the first table of the law by our own powers is itself a violation of the first table of the law.⁸ Instead, a person must recognize that “This blessing of deliverance from idolatry has its source, not in his own merits or powers but solely in a God who pities and calls.”⁹ It is God’s work to create us as new creatures who are holy to the Lord.¹⁰ The Spirit must put to death our idolatrous flesh and raise up in us confidence in God’s grace.¹¹ He must purify us through his word and regenerate us so that we trust in God our Father, praise his name with a cheerful heart, and delight in his word.¹² To think there is something we can do to work saving faith and its fruits in ourselves is presumption. It is to trust in ourselves when we must trust wholly in God.¹³ Therefore it is idolatry of the self. This presumption cannot be purged by human effort, but God must teach us to despair of ourselves and to rely on him completely.¹⁴ Luther writes,

Because man is conceived and born in sin and is a child of wrath he can do nothing but sin and daily fall deeper and deeper into the wrath of God, until he finally hears and believes that Christ is his Savior and has died for him to redeem him from his sins. Through this hearing, the Spirit of God comes into his heart and he is permeated with God’s grace and love, so that he loves God, praises and hallows his name, rests and keeps still and lets God accomplish His own work in him. Thus, no one can fulfil these three commandments [the first table of the law] without Christ. And yet they consider Christ unnecessary and superfluous, because they say that natural reason, without Christ’s help, is able to avoid sin. They raise up and erect in Christ’s stead the free will of man, and in God’s stead an idol of their own hearts.¹⁵

40.i:357–58; LW 35:351 = WA DB 12:315–16.

⁸ *The Misuse of the Mass* (1521), LW 36:217 = WA 8:552–53.

⁹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 2:246 = WA 42:437.2–3.

¹⁰ *Sermon on St Thomas’ Day, Ps 19:1* (1516), LW 51:18–22 = WA 1:111–15.

¹¹ *Preface to Romans* (1522), LW 35:370–78 = WA DB 7:9–23.

¹² LW 20:9 = WA 13:550–51; LW 22:144–45 = WA 46:661–63; LW 24:110–12 = WA 45:560–62.

¹³ *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:61–62 = WA 18:632–33.

¹⁴ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:49–50 = WA 31.ii:298–300.

¹⁵ *The Misuse of the Mass* (1521), LW 36:217 = WA 8:552.32–553.5.

Luther insists that the life of faith is purely passive. By this he does not mean that faith is inactive, since he also insists that faith is “a living, busy, active, mighty thing.”¹⁶ What he means is that it is receptive. On the one hand it receives from God a righteousness that is not its own but comes through the merits of Christ.¹⁷ On the other hand the very faith by which it receives this righteousness is also a gift. A person must receive it through the working of God’s Spirit. We can only lie like clay in the potter’s hand as he purges away all our trust in ourselves and in any creature, and renews our minds and wills so that we trust in God alone. He must move us, carry us along, form us, cleanse us, and impregnate us with God’s word if our faith, hope and love are to be anchored in him. Only as he puts us in motion are we able to cooperate with him in any spiritual good such as praying or working.¹⁸ Even when this work is begun in us we cannot advance it by ourselves. Instead we must pray that God would increase our faith, and turn to the word of the gospel so that through it he may do his work in us.¹⁹

This means that God is the one who must build his church and tear down the idols that oppose it. Christ alone can defend his church against idolatry and lies and destroy them by attacking the devil’s kingdom.²⁰ He is the one who must defeat the Antichrist by the word of his mouth,²¹ and he is the one who must turn the enemies of the church into its friends by changing their hearts.²² We can only cooperate in this struggle when we use the spiritual tools he gives us. We must put all our confidence in him through prayer and perseverance, and then use the sword

¹⁶ *Preface to Romans* (1522), LW 35:370 = DB 7:11; cf. LW 26:11–12 = WA 40.i:50–51.

¹⁷ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.247–48; LW 3:102; 26:4–11, 25, 259, 392.

¹⁸ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.258–62 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:175–77; cf. LW 1:84–85; 2:246; 5:258; 13:137; 26:392; 33:157–58; 54:260.

¹⁹ *A Meditation on Christ’s Passion* (1519), LW 42:11–14 = WA 2:138–42; LC I 101–2.

²⁰ LW 12:222 = WA 40.ii:494–501; LW 34:213–15 = WA 50:270–73.

²¹ LW 36:263 = WA 10.ii:37–38; cf. Dan 8:25; 2 Thess 2:8.

²² Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.411, 1.459–63 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–

of the Spirit.²³ God's word is the only sword by which we can attack the Antichrist and actually achieve something.²⁴ To believe otherwise is to have an idolatrous trust in human beings.²⁵ Luther uses the example of his struggle against the papacy, with its idols such as indulgences. In this struggle he knew he could achieve nothing apart from God's power contained in the gospel.²⁶

The Spirit Tears Down Idols and Plants True Faith

In order to create faith in us and build the church God must carry out a twofold work. He must put to death the idolatrous sinful self, and plant in its place a new believing self. Luther refers to this as God's alien and proper work, and attributes both to the Holy Spirit. He writes,

The Holy Spirit speaks to us in this manner: "I am a God who kills and brings to life, brings down to Sheol and raises up, makes poor and makes rich (cf. 1 Sam. 2:6–7). Not separately or disjunctively. Killing is not the only thing I do. No, this would be devilish. But I am a God who kills and brings to life. I bring down to Sheol, but in such a way that I bring back."²⁷

God's alien work is the work of his law by which he puts to death our idolatrous sinful nature. This involves both the proclamation of the law and our experience of the law as we deal with its consequences in our lives. God's proper work is the work of the gospel by which he raises us up as new creatures who live by faith in him. This involves the proclamation of the gospel, and also our experience of the gospel as we receive a foretaste of God's promised blessings. In his antinomian disputations Luther talks about four ways in which God instructs us towards salvation: he terrifies by threats, comforts by promises, admonishes by afflictions, and

21), WA 5:261–62, 289–91.

²³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.349–50, 1.363, 1.508–9, 2.312–13, 2.321; LW 8:245; 12:176–77; 14:54–56, 333–35; 16:99; 36:263; 46:32.

²⁴ *Preface to the First Book of Maccabees* (1533), LW 35:351 = WA DB 12:315–16; cf. Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.39; 1.68–69; 1.360–61; 1.363; 2.192–93; 2.312–313; 2.321.

²⁵ *Commentary on Psalm 118* (1530), LW 14:67 = WA 31.i:105–14.

²⁶ LW 7:134–35 = WA 44:397–99; LW 34:16 = WA 30.ii:281–83; LW 14:67; 36:263.

attracts by benefits.²⁸ This is an elaboration on the alien and proper work of God. By talking about four ways Luther is indicating that both the alien and proper work of God take place in our experience as well as in our hearing.²⁹

God's alien work: The Spirit dethroning our idols. God's alien work is focused on putting to death our sinful nature. Luther frequently refers to it as the mortification of the flesh. This also means the destruction of our idolatry. As we noted in chapter 4, the flesh for Luther is not one part of the self but the whole self as it is curved in on itself through original sin. It is the idolatrous self that is wrapped up in its self-idolatry and strives to use everything around it including God as idols to serve itself. Therefore mortification of the flesh means destroying our idolatrous self-love and self-confidence and the idols we use to support this chief idol.

The first way the Spirit carries out this alien work is by publishing God's law. This exposes our sin and the idolatry that lies at the root of it, and calls us to put it to death.³⁰ Aided by the Spirit we can do this,³¹ yet left to ourselves we do not heed this call.³² Our flesh despises God's

²⁷ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:10 = WA 44:586.25–29.

²⁸ Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran Press, 2008), 247 = WA 39.i:357.7–12.

²⁹ On the one hand Luther emphasizes that the Holy Spirit works faith in us through the word, and we are to trust this word even when it is contrary to our experience (e.g. LW 4:94; 8:199; 15:207–8; 17:328; 26:387; 52:68). Yet on the other hand he frequently speaks about the importance of experience in training us in faith and the knowledge of God (e.g. LW 2:283; 4:321, 358, 376; 7:138, 326; 8:309; 9:93; 12:406; 14:60–61; 17:410; 21:306–7; 22:209, 378; 24:51, 87, 151–52; 26:323–24; 27:27, 234; 28:107, 304; 34:287; 35:61; 36:340; 38:224; 40:66, 276; 50:21; 54:7, 371; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.117–18). At first glance these two themes seem to contradict each other. Is experience contrary to faith, or does experience strengthen and confirm faith? Yet the contradiction is only apparent. As Oswald Bayer points out, when Luther says that “experience alone makes the theologian” (LW 54:7) he does not mean experience per se, but experience with the word of God (Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008], 37). He means experience that can only be gained when we live by faith in God's word. Only when we cling to God's promises in the face of troubles that seems to contradict them do we truly discover how powerful and sweet God's word is, and experience that his promises are ultimately vindicated in the lives of those who live by faith. This experience then confirms our faith and strengthens it to face future trials.

³⁰ Luther, *Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 245; LW 24:336 = WA 39.i:356.19–24.

³¹ *Preface to Romans* (1522), LW 35:377 = WA DB 7:21–23.

word and does not want to be put to death.³³ It is smug, and does not believe God when he threatens judgement.³⁴ It does not want to give up its sin,³⁵ submit to God's will,³⁶ denounce its own righteousness,³⁷ or live by faith in God's promises.³⁸ Nor will it give up its fixation with its own wellbeing. Those who live by the flesh will only follow the Lord when he is serving their true god, themselves, not when he calls them to suffer or die to self.³⁹ The flesh howls miserably when it experiences misfortune. Unwilling to wait for God's deliverance, it demands immediate and visible consolation and help.⁴⁰ So the ungodly resist the discipline of the Lord. The godly on the other hand recognize that the flesh must be mortified. Yet weakened by the flesh they cannot carry out this work by their own strength but must allow God to do it in them.⁴¹

Since we are poor at heeding God's law, the Spirit must cause it to penetrate our hearts so that we feel it.⁴² He does this not only by infusing his proclamation with his power,⁴³ but also by allowing us to experience the law at work in our lives as we come under its judgement. That is, he allows us to taste in some way the shameful and destructive consequences of our sin and the futility of the idols we serve.⁴⁴ This means bringing suffering and the cross upon us.

³² *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:232–33 = WA 31.ii:166–67.

³³ LW 11:230 = WA 4:81–82; LW 14:335, 337–39 = WA 5:63–65.

³⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:202–4 = WA 44:726–28.

³⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.39 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:389.

³⁶ *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:48–49 = WA 2:104–5.

³⁷ *Sermon on St Thomas' Day, Ps 19:1* (1516), LW 51:18–22 = WA 1:111–15.

³⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 5:206–7 = WA 43:570–71.

³⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.164–69; 2.158; LW 23:393.

⁴⁰ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.485–486; LW 5:203–4; 7:131–32; 14:49, 58, 89.

⁴¹ LW 5:319–20; 7:132–34; 8:8–11; 16:229–30; 20:330; 44:77–78; 51:21–23.

⁴² LW 12:372; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.204; 2.420 (sic).

⁴³ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:64 = WA 14:604–5.

⁴⁴ LW 12:372–73; 17:5; 19:99–102; 20:12–13; 26:117, 341; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two*

By the cross of the Christian Luther means the trials and sufferings that God brings upon his people. Luther acknowledged that God does not work evil directly, but we experience evil because the devil, the world, and our sinful selves stand in opposition to God. Yet Luther did not think this gets God “off the hook,” as if anything can happen without his knowledge and permission. Since God allows this evil to persist for a time and allows us to experience it, it is true to say that he brings it upon us. Yet even when he does this he is gracious and merciful. He is turning around what his fallen creatures intend for evil and using it for his saving purposes.⁴⁵ One of Luther’s favorite texts for talking about the cross of the Christian is Romans 8:28, “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.”⁴⁶

Luther identifies two saving purposes that God advances through Christian suffering. The first is his alien work of purifying our faith by purging us from sin. The second is to use us as agents of righteousness, who suffer for the sake of righteousness in a world that hates Christ and the righteousness he brings.⁴⁷ In a letter he wrote to Frederick the Wise to comfort him when he was ill, Luther says that Christians either suffer because of their sins or because of their righteousness, and both kinds of suffering have been sanctified by Christ.⁴⁸ He regarded both as necessary if we are to be conformed to Christ’s image: we must suffer to mortify our sin, and we

Psalms, 1.146.

⁴⁵ LW 12:372–74; 13:135; 24:197, 201; 29:134–37; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.46, 1.54, 1.304, 1.501–2, 1.513.

⁴⁶ LW 2:378–79; 3:333–36; 5:304; 6:59, 73, 181, 236; 7:222, 273; 8:37, 328; 17:184–85; 19:16, 21, 27; 31:354–55; 32:66; 42:158; David Jonathan Terry, *Martin Luther on the Suffering of the Christian* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Service, 1991), 20–21.

⁴⁷ Thus Luther’s view of the cross of the Christian differs significantly from that of John Howard Yoder. Yoder insists that Christians are only bearing the cross in a New Testament sense when their suffering is innocent, and they suffer because they are imitating their Lord’s servanthood and his forgiving love towards their enemies. (John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994], 127–33). Luther acknowledged this as one part of the cross the New Testament calls Christians to bear. Yet he also acknowledged another aspect to the cross, whereby our flesh with its worldly passions is crucified (cf. 2 Cor 4:7–12, and Luther’s interpretation of Gal 5:24 and 6:14 at LW 27:96–104, 133–37).

⁴⁸ LW 42:140–42; cf. LW 43:27; 51:207–8; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.383.

must join with Christ in suffering for the sake of righteousness.⁴⁹ Luther had much to say about the suffering Christians experience because of righteousness, as we struggle to be faithful to our callings against the opposition of the devil, the world, and our sinful selves. He regarded such suffering as a mark of the church, and a necessary part of living a Christ-like life in this fallen world that opposes our Lord.⁵⁰ Yet to deal with this theme in detail would take us outside the scope of this dissertation. Therefore we will merely note it and focus on the second saving purpose God advances through suffering: his alien work of putting to death our idolatry.

When Luther describes God's work of putting to death our sin as his "alien work," he is borrowing an expression used for God's wrath against sin in Isaiah 28:21. Luther latched on to this as an apt expression, since he recognized that God's true nature is to show mercy, not to vent his wrath. His proper work is to heal and give life, not to work death.⁵¹ Yet in order to carry out his proper work in a sinful world he must first carry out his alien work. When Christians experience God's judgement against sin they should know that he does not judge them out of hatred but out of love. When "He kills our will that His may be established in us ... [and] subdues the flesh and its lusts that the spirit and its desires may come to life,"⁵² he is acting as a Father who disciplines the children he loves.⁵³

⁴⁹ LW 13:347; 16:229–30; 17:233; 20:41; 29:136; 30:23, 117–18, 127; 31:89, 225; 35:375; 43:165, 184–85; 51:19–20, 198–99, 206–8.

⁵⁰ LW 4:22; 12:222; 13:259–63, 333–34; 14:56–58, 85–86, 89, 96; 16:310–11; 19:183; 20:41; 26:418–22, 428, 450–57; 27:3, 6, 19, 24, 43–45, 133–37, 143–44; 30:84, 117–18; 34:215; 41:164–65; 42:13–14; 43:184; 46:29–31, 36; 51:199–201, 206; 54:275–76; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.51, 1.178, 1.360–61, 1.412–13, 1.436, 1.540, 1.558, 2.424.

⁵¹ LW 2:134; 29:134–37; 51:18–19.

⁵² *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), LW 14:335 = WA 5:64.2–4; cf. Gal 5:16–24.

⁵³ LW 7:131–33, 226; 22:144–45; 21:301; 24:193–94; 42:125–26; 44:77; Heb 12:5–11.

Luther also draws on many other biblical images to speak about this. God diagnoses our disease and forces us to recognize it so that we see our need for the cure (LW 19:57–59; 22:143–45; 51:19–23; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.42). He purges the rotten and unclean disease of sin from us so that he can make us clean and holy (LW 8:5–13; 24:211–13; 29:130; 35:375, 377–78; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two*

Above all, subduing the flesh means destroying the idolatry that is the chief work of the flesh and the root of all its evils.⁵⁴ Thus it is not sufficient for the cross to purge us of lesser sins. It must purge us of the false belief that is the cause of all sins.⁵⁵ It must teach us to give up our idols and trust in God alone.⁵⁶ Therefore God may cause us to hunger for a time so that we learn that he is our God and not our bellies, and that his word is more important than bread. Likewise, he may take away wealth or other temporal blessings for a time, so that we learn to rely on him instead of on earthly things. In this way he trains us to put our hearts and hopes in him at all times, in want and in abundance.⁵⁷ The cross teaches those who are led by the Spirit to take their eyes off temporal things and to focus them on God and his word.⁵⁸ Luther writes that many people claim that the Lord is their God, until he begins to show them that he alone is their good, by taking everything else away—their wealth, good name, life, righteousness, and all they possess. It then becomes evident whether he was their God or not, and the faith of many is proved to be skin deep.⁵⁹ Yet those whose faith is genuine will be driven to prayer and the word, and their faith will be strengthened and refined as they taste God's power and his promised aid.⁶⁰

Psalms, 1.184, 1.586–87, 2.26, 2.424 (sic); Ps 51:7; 103:3; Ezek 36:25–27; Hos 6:1–3; Mal 3:1–4; Luke 5:31–32). He prunes away the unfruitful branches so that we may bear more fruit (LW 24:193–201, 209–10; John 15:1–2). He plows us and uproots the weeds so that he can plant good seed in us and make his flowers grow (LW 16:234–37; Isa 28:24–29).

⁵⁴ LW 11:522; 17:12; 21:303–6; 25:350–54; 27:87–91; 30:119; 33:288; Gal 5:19–20.

⁵⁵ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.309 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:567.

⁵⁶ LW 30:119; 44:30–31.

⁵⁷ LW 5:202–3; 8:200–201; 9:93–96; 27:405.

⁵⁸ *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), LW 14:343 = WA 5:69–70.

⁵⁹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.116, 2.156–57; cf. LW 19:21; Luke 8:13.

⁶⁰ LW 13:334; 14:49–50, 59–61; 20:151; 30:17, 126–27; 34:286–87; 35:12, 19; 42:185–86.

Luther stresses that God must put to death one idol in particular—the self—so that we no longer act like proud and self-satisfied gods.⁶¹ This means destroying our self-righteous presumption by teaching us that we are sinners. It also means destroying our confidence in our own wisdom and strength.⁶² We must be stripped of everything in which the self may trust or boast—works, property, health, honor, and wisdom—if we are to have a pure hope in God.⁶³ This means we need to experience the cross,⁶⁴ which God gives us to destroy our empty pride.⁶⁵

When God comes to kill this idol it will appear that he is our enemy, except to the eyes of faith.⁶⁶ Since we are our own worst enemies, when God slays our great enemy he seems to be fighting against us, when in reality he is acting as our truest friend. Luther writes that by instructing us to pray, “Your will be done,” God “teaches us that we have no greater enemy than ourself.”⁶⁷ Whereas we want our will to be done, he bids us to pray against ourselves and our self-will and to ask him to put it to death so that his will may be done. This means asking him to bring us the cross.⁶⁸

Luther summarizes many of these thoughts in his Isaiah commentary, where he writes that,

The cross and the chastening of God casts this idol down that we may abide in God’s First Commandment, that we may fear and dread and love God. ... those who in their presumption trust in their own power, wisdom, and wealth, these choose their own

⁶¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.184 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:128–29.

⁶² LW 3:333–35; 4:44; 8:5–11; 9:68, 70, 104; 16:216, 233–36, 346–47; 17:49–50; 19:21, 114–15; 24:210–11; 27:404–5; 33:61–62; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.184, 1.391, 1.395, 2.53; 2.213–14, 2.220, 2.422.

⁶³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.239–40, 1.248–54, 1.291; LW 14:94–95; 35:236; 44:108.

⁶⁴ LW 43:184; 52:246; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.72, 1.331.

⁶⁵ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 27:101–4 = WA 40.ii:129–33.

⁶⁶ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.148–49 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:108–9.

⁶⁷ *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:48 = WA 2:105.

⁶⁸ *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:42–49 = WA 2:99–105.

things as divine worship and spurn God, as we see in tyrants, heretics, and hypocrites. These rely on their own power, wisdom, and wealth contrary to God's First Commandment. This is what it means to commit idolatry. The saints and godly, however, are kept by the cross and chastening in the fear of God and are estranged from trust in themselves. This is the fruit of the chastisement of God, that it teaches us not to flee but to approach God and, what is greatest, that it kills that supreme idolatry, trust in oneself. This killing is much greater than the outward mortification of the flesh, of lust, and of other outward things that cannot be compared with this killing. But the cross casts out this idol so that we do not rely on ourselves. Even so all hypocrites on the basis of a little good (as it seems) have such confidence in themselves that it knows no bounds, as happened to me once upon a time. How much pride came over me when I correctly celebrated one Mass! Shame on you! So it happens also to all other hypocrites with their glittering works. They defend their idolatry with their works. This idolatry God's unique chastisement casts out. ... Thus with the chief presumption of the heart removed, we will not easily fall into another kind of idolatry. All the prophets who were active against this idolatry were slain because of it, since the flesh cannot bear to have its own opinion cast aside. Therefore the Lord's chastening is necessary.⁶⁹

Since our fallen human hearts are naturally bent in the direction of idolatry, God must chasten us all. He does this by showing us through experience that our idols are not God. When we invest idolatrous trust in ourselves and created things, God exposes the futility of this faith by allowing these things to fail. When our love and joy are bound up in earthly things and earthly wellbeing, God allows these things to disappoint us or to be taken away. This is not because he is cruel. Rather, it is because he does not want these things to blind us to where true joy is found or where our confidence must reside. Indeed, Luther insists that God gives us the cross out of kindness, and it leads to a joy the world cannot know.⁷⁰ This is not because Luther downplayed in any way the genuine pain that comes with the cross,⁷¹ but because he recognized that the cross drives us to cling to the one who alone is God and the true source of every joy. Luther writes that

⁶⁹ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 16:215–16 = WA 31.ii:153.21–154.11.

⁷⁰ LW 8:47; 12:296; 17:407; 30:23; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.263–71.

⁷¹ Cf. *Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering* (1530), LW 51:198–99 = WA 32:28–30.

Anyone who has come to the point that he can see and feel in the Scriptures the Father's love toward us will easily be able to bear all the misfortune that there may be on earth. On the other hand, anyone who does not feel it cannot be genuinely happy, even though he is bathed in pleasure and joy throughout the world.⁷²

Furthermore,

It is impossible that he should not be filled with sorrow, who does not hope in the Lord, when any tribulation shall come upon him. ... On the other hand, it is impossible that he should not rejoice, who hopes in God: and even if the whole world should burst upon the head of such an one, he would stand unmoved amid the falling ruins.⁷³

Thus God trains us through adversity to know through experience that he can give us joy even in adversity, so that we would learn to look to him and not the fleeting things of this world as the ultimate source of joy.

God's proper work: The Spirit raising up true faith. God carries out his alien work simply to clear the ground for his proper work. His proper work is to work life and salvation, to create faith in us that grasps hold of God's mercy.⁷⁴ This faith is a new work of creation,⁷⁵ produced not by us but by God alone.⁷⁶ The Holy Spirit must enlighten our hearts and give us faith in Christ, and he must preserve us in this faith. He accomplishes this by working through the gospel to awaken and nourish in us true faith.⁷⁷ This takes place first and foremost through simply hearing the word. Yet for those who cling to this word it is also confirmed by experience.

⁷² *Preface to The Four Psalms of Comfort* (1526), LW 14:210 = WA 19:553.14–18.

⁷³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.270 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:182.3–4, 9–11.

⁷⁴ LW 13:135; 14:335; 16:233; 26:314; 29:135; 44:77; 51:19–20.

⁷⁵ *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–38), LW 1:17 = WA 42:14.

⁷⁶ LW 15:277; 23:181; 30:6, 14, 39; 31:56; 43:233.

⁷⁷ LW 24:171, 212, 297–98; 26:64, 208; 36:301–2; 38:86–87; LC I 101; II 38–45, 58–64.

The reason why God's word has the power to create faith is that it is not merely information, but a vehicle by which the Spirit comes to us and does his work in us.⁷⁸ Luther writes that "Holy Scripture's inseparable companion is the Holy Spirit,"⁷⁹ and "It has thus pleased God to impart the Spirit, not without the Word, but through the Word."⁸⁰ Indeed, Luther insists that the Holy Spirit works nothing without the word and the sacraments.⁸¹ He therefore urges us to seek the Spirit in these external means and nowhere else.⁸² At the Marburg Colloquy he asserted that,

Faith [in Christ] is a gift of God which we cannot earn with any works or merit that precede, nor can we achieve it by our own strength, but the Holy Spirit gives and creates this faith in our hearts as it pleases him, when we hear the gospel or the word of Christ.⁸³

Through this insistence that the Spirit does his work through the external word, Luther is able to avoid quietism while at the same time directing all confidence away from ourselves to God. Luther acknowledges that we can cooperate with God in furthering his work of creating faith in human hearts. We can preach the word. We can administer the sacraments. We can turn to the word ourselves and allow it to do its work in us.⁸⁴ Yet this does not mean trusting in our own strength or contributing something of our own to this work. Rather, it means receiving the gifts God has given us and trusting that they will be powerful and effective in the way he has promised. In the end we must say with Luther, "I did nothing; the Word did everything."⁸⁵

⁷⁸ LW 24:212; 26:64, 208; 38:86–88; 40:147; WA 47:184; Eugene Klug, *From Luther to Chemnitz: On Scripture and the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 76–80.

⁷⁹ *Exposition of Psalm 90* (1534), LW 13:111 = WA 40.iii:543.

⁸⁰ *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:154 = WA 18:695.28–29.

⁸¹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:275 = WA 43:71.

⁸² LW 24:141; 29:83.

⁸³ *The Marburg Articles* (1529), LW 38:86 = WA 30.iii:163.7–14; cf. LW 36:217.

⁸⁴ *Lectures on Genesis* (1538–42), LW 3:274–75 = WA 43:71.

⁸⁵ *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), LW 51:77 = WA 10.iii:17–19.

Not only does the Holy Spirit use the word and its promises as his tool for creating faith, but the faith that God calls for is always faith in these promises. Luther identifies confidence in God's promises as a mark for distinguishing true faith from idolatry. He writes,

[1 Peter 5:7]: "Casting every care upon Him, because He Himself takes care of you"; and Ps. 34:10: "Those seeking God shall lack no good thing." To understand these and similar wonderful and faithful promises of God is truly to understand the promise of the First Commandment, in which He says: "I am the Lord your God." "Yours, yours," He says, "who will show and display Myself to you as God and will not forsake you, if only you believe this." All such promises depend on and flow from the First Commandment. On the other hand, not to believe them is indeed not to understand the Commandment but to have other gods.⁸⁶

For what more sinful idolatry can there be than to abuse God's promises with perverse opinions and to neglect or extinguish faith in them? For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise.⁸⁷

This was the cause of all the idolatry among the people of Israel ... For they wanted to be led and governed in such a way that they did not live from faith in the promise but from what was actually present."⁸⁸

Idolatrous faith judges spiritual matters by what its eyes can see. It looks to what is temporally and visibly present and is characterized by impatience. It concludes that God is favorable when temporal things go well, and that his favor has turned away when trouble comes.⁸⁹ This means that it misjudges, since God loves the afflicted.⁹⁰ When his promises are in the process of coming to fulfillment our experience frequently contradicts them, so that we are forced to cry out "how long O Lord!"⁹¹ This is not a sign that he has abandoned us, but that he is

⁸⁶ *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), LW 9:94 = WA 14:631–32.

⁸⁷ *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:42 = WA 6:516.

⁸⁸ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:200 = WA 44:725.

⁸⁹ LW 4:28–30; 19:176–77.

⁹⁰ LW 5:319–20; 12:406; 21:299–302.

⁹¹ *Lectures on Genesis* (1543–45), LW 8:199–200 = WA 44:724–25.

giving us opportunity to put our faith into practice. Through such testing our faith is shown to be genuine. It is also strengthened and purified as we learn through experience that God is for us and is our only refuge in every trouble.⁹² Idolaters fail this test. When God appears slow in carrying out his threats and fulfilling his promises they despise his word, and seek after a god who will bless them immediately. Yet when we cling to God's promises instead we are assured that he loves us whether temporal things are going well or badly, and are taught to trust him whether the temporal things we need are at hand or absent.⁹³ When we do this we discover two things: first, that he is able to sustain us inwardly and give us joy even when outwardly we are afflicted;⁹⁴ and second, that in his good timing he fulfills all his promises so abundantly that they outweigh everything we may suffer while we wait.⁹⁵

The Fruit of Faith vs. the Fruit of Idolatry

The result of this killing and raising work of God is that the believer is sanctified from the inside out. The faith that God creates in the heart makes a person inwardly righteous, and this inner righteousness then produces outward manifestations in the believer's life. Idolatry on the other hand stems from a covetous and self-centered heart, and can at best lead to an external righteousness but not a righteousness of the heart.

⁹² Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.81; 1.116–20; 1.123–24; 1.239; 1.141–42; 1.145–46; 1.151; 1.156–57; 1.169–70; 1.173; 1.246; 1.260–61; 1.281–82; 1.313; 1.325–26; 1.330; 1.455; 1.458; 1.564; 2.116; Rom 5:3–5.

⁹³ LW 4:30; 44:77–78; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.236, 2.344.

⁹⁴ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.32, 1.169–71, 1.234, 2.314; LW 7:326; 16:300–301; 20:32; 26:133; 27:22.

⁹⁵ LW 5:202–7; 7:131–38, 313–16; 8:4–13, 200–204; 9:92–96; 13:347–48; 14:58, 62, 68, 86–88, 342–43; 16:237; 29:129–30; 30:23; 42:157–52; 43:185–86; 51:199–205; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.100–102; 1.106–12; 2.15–16; 2.42–43.

Luther writes that when the chief work of faith in the true God is absent, all other works “are nothing but mere sham, show, and pretense with nothing behind them.”⁹⁶ He acknowledges that the law by itself can restrain outward behavior to a certain extent. He even says things like “Externally there is not much difference between the Christian and another socially upright human being.”⁹⁷ Yet for Luther this is faint praise, since he constantly stresses that a righteousness that does not penetrate the heart is seriously defective. Thus the righteousness of idolaters is a hollow shell. They may at times keep the letter of the law outwardly, yet even when they do the spirit is wrong.⁹⁸ They may not kill anyone, but they are angry; they may not steal, but they are greedy; they may not commit adultery but they are filled with lust. And since they are bent on justifying themselves they will judge and condemn others.⁹⁹ Inwardly they will hate God’s law and will only keep it when it is convenient or suits their purposes in some way, not when it is difficult or calls them to bear the cross with no expectation of personal reward.¹⁰⁰ Ultimately this lack of inner righteousness will find outward expression. So Luther writes,

Did not the Romans enact the most excellent and salutary laws? Did they not curb and restrain proud nations by justice? Why then did they so bitterly persecute Christ and his Christians? Why, but because their righteousness was only an external appearance in the sight of men, and was nothing in the sight of God?¹⁰¹

Faith in the true God on the other hand brings with it hope and love. It moves people to love God and their neighbor from the heart, and ultimately to keep all God’s commandments.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:31 = WA 6:210.16–17; cf. LW 27:131–32.

⁹⁷ *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:376 = WA 40.i:573.

⁹⁸ *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), LW 44:30–33 = WA 6:209–12.

⁹⁹ LW 21:217; 51:22.

¹⁰⁰ LW 14:295; 22:141–44; 35:366–67, 375–76; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.22; 2.228–29; 2.391 (sic); 2.407–10 (sic); 2.418 (sic).

¹⁰¹ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.466 = *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:293:26–29.

¹⁰² LW 35:36:374; 42; 44:30–31; 51:23.

It brings with it fruits such as peace and joy, and in the midst of trouble produces confidence, assurance, boldness, courage, and hope.¹⁰³ It also leads those who have experienced mercy to show mercy to others.¹⁰⁴ The result is people who genuinely love God's law and regard it as holy and good, rather than merely keeping it out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. Therefore those who live by faith are steadfast in doing good and do not flinch when God calls them to suffer for the sake of righteousness.¹⁰⁵ Luther talks about such faith in the following terms:

Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith. Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God who has shown him this grace. Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire. ... Pray God that he may work faith in you. Otherwise you will surely remain forever without faith, regardless of what you may think or do.

Righteousness, then, is such a faith. It is called "the righteousness of God" because God gives it, and counts it as righteousness for the sake of Christ our Mediator, and makes a man to fulfil his obligation to everybody. For through faith a man becomes free from sin and comes to take pleasure in God's commandments, thereby he gives God the honor due him, and pays him what he owes him. Likewise he serves his fellow-men willingly, by whatever means he can, and thus pays his debt to everyone. Nature, free will, and our own powers cannot bring this righteousness into being. For as no one can give himself faith, neither can he take away his own unbelief. How, then, will he take away a single sin, even the very smallest?¹⁰⁶

For Luther it is clear that true faith and idolatry must produce different fruit in a person's life. Idolatry is the root of all evil and cannot produce good fruit.¹⁰⁷ It may at times lead to eternal

¹⁰³ *Preface to Romans* (1522), LW 35:374 = WA DB 7:17.

¹⁰⁴ LW 16:215; 51:18; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.134–35; 1.137; 1.161–63.

¹⁰⁵ LW 14:59–61, 295, 297, 300; 22:144–46; 35:375–76; Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2.416–19 (sic).

¹⁰⁶ *Preface to Romans* (1522), LW 35:370–71 = WA DB 7:10–13.

¹⁰⁷ *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527–30), LW 17:160 = 31.ii:386.

good deeds in keeping with the law, but can never root out things like covetousness and selfishness from the heart. Christian faith on the other hand brings with it things like peace, joy and perseverance, and love that comes from the heart.

Summary

Luther teaches that we must depend on the Holy Spirit to produce every spiritual good in us. He must deliver us from idolatry, and he must create true faith in us so that we may be saved. Furthermore he must produce the fruits of faith in our lives. He does this through his alien work of mortifying our idolatrous sinful nature, and his proper work of giving new life through the gospel. To think that we can produce faith or other spiritual good by our own powers is to set up ourselves as idols in place of the Spirit.

Contemporary Application

Luther insists that only God can liberate us from our idols. What is more, he also identifies God's method of carrying out this work: his alien work of mortification and his proper work of the gospel. This knowledge of how God works enables us to avoid both quietism and self-reliance when it comes to the church's work of producing true faith and its fruits in people. The call is not for us to do nothing; nor is it for us to build the church by our own reason and strength. Instead it is to take up our cross—as Christ has called us—and to faithfully carry out the task of proclaiming the gospel—which he has given us—all the while trusting that in this way he will be at work in and through us.

This reveals two ways in which the contemporary church can hinder the Spirit's work of building the church, instead of acting as his faithful instrument. First, we can flee the cross that he gives us. Second, we can neglect the proclamation of the gospel and substitute for it our own efforts to influence and persuade.

Mortification of the Idolatrous Self and the Contemporary Flight from Suffering

In chapter 4 we noted that both contemporary society and the contemporary church frequently display an obsession with personal happiness and subjective wellbeing. The consequence of this is an aversion to suffering. For moralistic therapeutic deists and prosperity gospel preachers it is God's job to shield us from suffering and make us happy. Therefore suffering shouldn't play a big part in the Christian life. This view is promoted in no uncertain terms by the prosperity preacher Kenneth Copeland:

One of the major deceptions Satan is sowing in the Church today is that our problems, our trials and our temptations are sent to teach and develop us spiritually, physically and in other ways. The very extreme of this says that God is the author of our troubles, or that God is the One Who makes us sick in order to teach us something. This is absolutely against the Word of God. The basic principle of the Christian life is to know that Jesus bore our sin, sickness, disease, sorrow, grief and poverty at Calvary. For Him to put any of this on us now would be a miscarriage of justice. ... A loving God doesn't send or even *permit* death and destruction in His children's lives to instruct them.¹⁰⁸

For Luther, the first problem with this sense of entitlement to a suffering-free life is that it builds up false expectations. He writes,

God has allotted us much tribulation in this world, and, at the same time, offered us no other consolation than his holy Word. Thus Christ has promised us, "In the world "you will have tribulation, but in me you will have peace" [John 16:33]. Therefore, if you are willing to have God's kingdom come to you and have God's will be done, do not resort to evasive measures. It cannot be otherwise: God's will is done only if yours is not done. That is to say, the more adversity you experience, the better is God's will done; this is especially true in the hour of death. It has been ordained—and no one can alter this—that in this world we find unrest, and in Christ we find peace.¹⁰⁹

Since God neither promises nor delivers a trouble-free life in this world, this leads to a second problem. When we are led to believe that this is something we should want and expect,

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Copeland Ministries, "Understanding Chastisement," <http://www.kcm.org/real-help/article/understanding-chastisement> (accessed July 9, 2011).

we end up trying to manufacture it for ourselves. This means attempting to be our own saviors. Luther writes that those who think they can rid themselves of the trouble God allots them, instead of standing their ground faithfully and waiting for God's deliverance, show thereby that "they want to be their own saviors and redeemers and are unwilling to wait for God to relieve them of their cross."¹¹⁰

This does not mean that Luther thought we should seek out suffering. He rejected self-chosen crosses,¹¹¹ and was convinced that any cross we choose for ourselves will only nourish our sinful nature by feeding our pride. He taught that only God's law and the trials he tailors to our individual needs can successfully mortify our flesh.¹¹² However, Luther also taught that we must not flee suffering if God brings it upon us. We must always be willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness, and must not flee suffering if doing so would mean disobeying God's commandments or abandoning the callings he has given us.¹¹³ To flee this suffering would be to flee the saving work that God wants to do in and through us in a futile attempt to save ourselves.

A theology that refuses to face up to the alien work of God hinders the work of God's Spirit in at least two ways. First, it builds up in people an expectation that they can and should avoid the cross, instead of teaching them to patiently endure the Lord's discipline and to rejoice in the privilege of suffering with Christ. Instead of training them to faithfully carry the crosses God has called them to bear, it breeds unfaithfulness to the hard work of Christian vocation. Second, it comforts the self-secure while heaping up more affliction on the afflicted. It reverses

¹⁰⁹ *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:50 = WA 2:106.

¹¹⁰ *An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen* (1519), LW 42:50–51 = WA 2:106–7.

¹¹¹ LW 4:22; 7:113–14; 17:294; 20:261–62, 329–30; 22:55; 30:109–10; 40:81; 43:183–84; 51:198–99.

¹¹² LW 17:49–50; 20:330; 27:31; 43:165.

¹¹³ Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 1.151, 1.283; 1.285; LW 1.214–15; 20:330; 43:120–22.

the beatitudes, and says, “Blessed are you who are rich and full and laugh now, and blessed are you when all people speak well of you, for this is a sign that God loves you; but woe to you who are poor, hungry, weeping, or persecuted, for not only does this world hate you, but obviously your life is not right with God, for he does not seem too concerned about caring for you either.”¹¹⁴ Thus it fails to humble those who are rich in this world and to teach them to hope in God alone. Instead, it sets them up for a fall by teaching them carnal security. At the same time it fails to comfort the poor and afflicted with the knowledge that they are loved by God, and that he will use even their sufferings for their benefit. It robs them of the joy they should derive from their suffering, that through it God is developing in them endurance, character, and hope.¹¹⁵

The Proper Work of the Gospel and Human Persuasion

For Luther, the gospel alone can produce true faith. This has enormous practical significance for the church’s mission. Other means of persuasion may be successful in leading a congregation to grow by getting those who are already Christian to hop from one congregation to another. Other methods of persuasion may perhaps be effective in preparing the way for the gospel by gaining a hearing for it. Yet only the gospel can convert the heart from idolatry to faith in the living God. The Lutheran theologian C.F.W. Walther echoes Luther’s position accurately when he writes, “the Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe in a manner as if a person could make himself believe or at least help toward that end, instead of preaching faith into a person’s heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.”¹¹⁶ This provides

¹¹⁴ Cf. Luke 6:20–26.

¹¹⁵ Rom 5:3–5.

¹¹⁶ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), 260.

a clear focus for all the church's efforts in mission: to preach faith into people's hearts by proclaiming the gospel.

The church growth movement. From Luther's perspective, many contemporary church growth strategies are misdirected because they have lost this singular focus. By giving as much if not more attention to human methods of persuasion as they do to the power of the gospel, they have enthroned human strength and ability as an idol alongside the Spirit-filled word.

One example of this is provided by Rick Warren, who talks about God's power and human effort as if they are virtually equal partners in God's mission. Warren rightly warns against the dangers of both "practical humanism" and "pious irresponsibility" when it comes to ministry. On the one hand he identifies the error of thinking that all it takes to grow the church is organization, management, and marketing. On the other hand he notes the error of quietism, which says that our only role in mission is to sit back and watch God do his thing.¹¹⁷ He then seeks to avoid both these errors by placing God's power and human effort side by side. He teaches that prayer and dedication to God's word are important, but not sufficient to lead a church to grow. Instead, human skill must be added to the word.¹¹⁸ With this thought in mind he writes,

Church growth is a partnership between God and man. Churches grow by the power of God through the skilled effort of people. Both elements, God's power and man's skilled effort, must be present. We cannot do it without God but he has decided not to do it without us!¹¹⁹

Warren bases his thoughts here on Paul's words in 1 Cor 3:9, "we are God's fellow workers,"¹²⁰ and he is right to say that God works through us. He is right to reject the attitude that

¹¹⁷ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 58–59.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 56–60.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

it is enough for us to be hearers of the word, without also being doers of it as it impels us to faithfully use all the gifts God has given us in vocation. Where he is wrong from a Lutheran perspective is in his suggestion that prayer and dedication to God's word are not enough, and to put human skill on the same level as God's power. He latches on to one verse but fails to pay sufficient attention to what Paul says only two verses earlier, "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."¹²¹ What Warren lacks to help him hold these two verses together is a strong theology of the means of grace as the instruments by which the Holy Spirit does his work both in us and through us. He can see the dangers of both human activism and pious inactivity, yet the only way he can see to avoid both is to prescribe a little bit of each. What he fails to adequately consider is that the competency required for ministry is itself a product of the word.¹²² For Luther, the word shapes us into what we need to be if we are to be effective workers in God's kingdom, and the same word is what we need to proclaim to others if they too are to be transformed. Therefore the word is always enough! It will do its work where and when it pleases God, and we cannot add anything to make it more effective other than using all means at our disposal to get it out, as it impels us to do. The result of Luther's theology is not pious inactivity but receptive activity that's driven by the word, so that when our activity has ceased we can say, "I did nothing; I let the Word do its work."¹²³

A second example is the work of Christian A. Schwarz on natural church development. In contrast to Luther, the premise behind Schwarz's work is that the Holy Spirit is not the

¹²¹ 1 Cor 3:7.

¹²² "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who makes us competent to be ministers of a new covenant." (2 Cor 3:5-6)

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16-17)

¹²³ *Eight Sermons at Wittenberg* (1522), LW 51:77-78 = WA 10.iii:17-19.

inseparable companion of Scripture, and that Scripture by itself is dead and lifeless.¹²⁴ Schwarz makes a distinction between the static/institutional pole of the church's existence and the dynamic/organic pole, and assigns things like doctrine, the biblical canon, the sacraments, and the proclamation of the gospel to the static pole.¹²⁵ Only when the Spirit is added so that a word-event takes place does it become God's living word that is able to produce dynamic things like faith, love, spiritual gifts, and evangelism—something that Schwarz distinguishes from the proclamation of the gospel.¹²⁶ The dynamic pole is where the real action takes place in leading a church to grow. Schwarz does not advocate dispensing with the static pole, since he recognizes that it is frequently useful in producing the dynamic pole, but says that we should feel free to modify it based on our perception of its functionality in producing the dynamic pole.¹²⁷ He then proposes eight quality characteristics of healthy churches, and contends that if they are all present in a sufficiently high degree the church is guaranteed to grow.¹²⁸ These characteristics are empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.¹²⁹ Whereas the New Testament always equates spiritual health with sound doctrine,¹³⁰ Schwarz equates adherence to fixed doctrine with unhealthy legalism,¹³¹ and excludes

¹²⁴ Christian A. Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999), 70–71.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 99; Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2000), 95.

¹²⁶ Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift*, 112, 116–19, 199.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18, 65–74, 108–11, 121–23.

¹²⁸ Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–37; Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift*, 21.

¹³⁰ Apart from Jesus' ironic statement in Luke 5:31, every time the New Testament talks about health (ὑγιαίνω and its derivatives) in a spiritual rather than physical sense it explicitly connects this health to sound doctrine (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 1:13; 2:1–2; 2:8; 3 John 2).

¹³¹ Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift*, 26; Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 26.

it from his list of quality characteristics. Yet the main problem with these characteristics from a Lutheran perspective is not with the categories themselves, which can all be given a Lutheran slant. For instance, when relationships in the church reflect the love that flows from the gospel, when the spiritual lives of church members reflect the joy of the gospel, when the Holy Spirit inspires God's people in worship through word and sacrament, and when the pastors of a church empower their people by equipping them with the doctrine of Christ, few would disagree that these are signs of a healthy church. The problem instead is with the premise that lies behind Schwarz's categories and his suggestions for how these qualities should be measured and instilled. The premise is this: that the word is not enough, and something else must always be added to give that word life. Therefore many of Schwarz's proposals amount to techniques for finding that something extra,¹³² and confidence in the word itself fades into the background.

This assumption that the word is not enough has been the working premise of the church growth movement ever since Donald McGavran—widely regarded as the founder of the movement—made a distinction between the proclamation of the gospel and evangelism, between sharing the good news and persuading people to believe it.¹³³ For those who are steeped in a church growth mentality it would therefore be surprising to discover that the word itself stands unrivalled as a means for converting people to the Christian faith. This was the finding of a recent study by Thom Rainer, dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth. Instead of interviewing unchurched people and asking them what they would want in a church—as many other church growth researchers have done—Rainer decided to

¹³² Christian A. Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998), 47–122.

¹³³ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), 34, 44; Donald A. McGavran and Winfield C. Arn, *Ten Steps for Church Growth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 51–54.

interview recent converts and ask them what had made the difference.¹³⁴ He then published his results in a book entitled *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*. The most “surprising” result from a church growth perspective was that biblical preaching and teaching was the top response. When Rainer asked the open ended question of “What factors led you to this church?” 90% of the participants listed the pastor and his preaching, and 88% listed the church’s doctrine. Each of these had nearly double the response rate of the next highest response.¹³⁵ The next most common group of responses to the question of why they joined the church clustered around personal relationships and contacts. Yet Rainer discovered that personal connections, though important, were frequently not essential and were rarely sufficient by themselves to explain why a person joined the church.¹³⁶ When they were asked a follow up question to determine what in particular about the pastor and his preaching influenced them, the top response was preaching that taught the Bible and Christian doctrine.¹³⁷ From a church growth perspective these results may be surprising, but from Luther’s perspective there is no surprise at all. Rather, it confirms Luther’s emphasis on the importance of the word in changing the hearts of those who are outside God’s kingdom. Even the importance of interpersonal relationships is an expected result for Luther, when we remember that he lists the “mutual conversation and consolation of brethren” as a means of the gospel.¹³⁸ In other words, he would expect personal relationships to be a means of converting people, provided that they are used as a vehicle for sharing the gospel.

¹³⁴ Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched: and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 22–23.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

When the participants were asked more directly if these two things were factors, the responses were even higher (97% and 91% respectively) (*Ibid.*, 46, 55).

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 74–79.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57–59.

¹³⁸ SA III 4.

Apologetics. Just as evangelists can be tempted to replace the power of the gospel with human efforts to influence and persuade, so can those who work in the closely related field of apologetics.

Luther's consistent position is that God's word is its own best defense.¹³⁹ In his comments on the *locus classicus* for apologetics, 1 Peter 3:15, Luther affirms that every Christian should be prepared to give an account of the reason for their faith. From this Luther concludes that every Christian must be a student of Scripture, so they can defend their faith on the basis of Scripture. In particular he emphasizes that they should know those parts of Scripture that tell us most clearly about Christ and salvation through him.¹⁴⁰ He insists that Christians must take their stand on God's word alone, and not substitute a human word in its place, neither the statements of the pope or the church fathers, nor Aristotle and the light of natural reason.¹⁴¹

As we saw in the last chapter, it would be wrong to conclude from this that Luther granted no validity to arguments based on natural reason, at least when they concur with Scripture. It would also be wrong to conclude that he assigned no place to the natural knowledge of God when it comes to Christian proclamation, at least when it comes to finding a point of contact for the proclamation of the law. Furthermore, it would be wrong to conclude that Luther was against

¹³⁹ Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1999), 161–68.

¹⁴⁰ As we noted in the previous chapter, it would be wrong to conclude from Luther's emphasis on the doctrine of Christ and the gospel that he considered the other doctrines of Scripture to be unimportant or expendable. Since Scripture provides a comprehensive worldview it speaks to all of life in one way or another, and gives immense scope for addressing alternative truth claims. Luther's emphasis on the biblical word as the best defence of the Christian faith should not be misconstrued to mean that once we've preached a few select themes like justification by faith we've done our job, and no further defence or engagement with the culture is necessary. Luther's views are not inconsistent with the emphasis of the L'Abri Fellowship, which is that defending the Christian faith means using the word of God to engage with every area of life: "because Christianity is true it speaks to all of life and not to some narrowly religious sphere and much of the material produced by L'Abri has been aimed at helping develop a Christian perspective on the arts, politics and the social sciences etc." (L'Abri Fellowship, "History of L'Abri," <http://www.labri.org/history.html> [accessed Aug. 4, 2011]).

¹⁴¹ *Sermons on First Peter* (1522), LW 30:105–8 = WA 12:360–62.

using human reason to point out the logical weakness of the attacks that people make against the truth as taught by Scripture.¹⁴² What he refused to do was to take the next step and attempt to establish the Christian faith on the basis of human reason.

In the previous chapter we noted Luther's primary objection to natural reason, that it doesn't know the gospel. However, this is not his only objection. A second objection is that reason is too uncertain and fragile a basis on which to build faith. Luther writes,

No reason is so firm that it can not again be overthrown by reason. There is no counsel, no matter how wise, no thing, no edifice, no matter how magnificent or strong, which cannot again be destroyed by human counsel, wisdom, and strength. And this can be seen in all things. Only the Word of God remains to all eternity.¹⁴³

Furthermore,

the attempt to guard or to base God's order upon reason, unless previously it has been grounded in and illumined by faith, is the same as if I wanted to illumine the sun with a dark lantern or use a reed as the foundation for a rock.¹⁴⁴

The final limitation that Luther sees in natural reason when it comes to apologetics and evangelism is that it does not have the power to change the human heart that opposes the truth of God. God's word alone bears the Spirit's power to change the dark and rebellious human heart and give it the gift of faith in Christ.

Much ink has been spilled in recent times regarding apologetic method. Should apologetics focus on logical proofs, and logical criteria for evaluating the validity of competing worldviews? Should it focus on grounding the Christian faith in empirically verifiable facts? Should it focus on critiquing the fundamental presuppositions of non-Christians? Or should it focus on reasons of the heart, and the value of the Christian faith in meeting existential needs? Luther would see a

¹⁴² Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 168–76.

¹⁴³ WA TR 1:530.14–18. Translated by Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 37–38.

¹⁴⁴ *On the Papacy in Rome, Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig* (1520), LW 39:63 = WA 6:291.8–11.

certain validity in all these approaches when it comes to responding to objections to the Christian faith, in pointing out the inadequacy of competing worldviews, or perhaps in finding a point of contact for Christian proclamation. However, he would absolutely object to any attempt to modify God's word to make it "reasonable" according to a human standard of reason.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, his focus and confidence would always be elsewhere, on God's Spirit-filled word and its power to defend itself and change the human heart.

The words of Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher from the 19th century, echo the spirit of Luther on this point:

Extenuations, explanations and apologies may be produced from the best of motives. But too often they suggest to opposers that it is admitted that God's most Holy Word contains something in it which is doubtful, or weak, or antiquated. It looks as though it needed to be defended by human wisdom. Brethren, the Word of the Lord can stand alone, without the propping which many are giving it. These props come down and then our adversaries think that the Book is down, too. The Word of God can take care of itself and will do so if we preach it and cease defending it. See that lion? They have caged him for his preservation—shut him up behind iron bars to secure him from his foes!

See how a band of armed men have gathered together to protect the lion. What a clatter they make with their swords and spears! These mighty men are intent upon defending a lion. O fools and slow of heart! Open that door! Let the lord of the forest come forth free. Who will dare to encounter him? What does he want with your guardian care? Let the pure Gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ "Now this is the will of the Father, that we be intent on hearing what the Man Christ has to say, that we listen to His Word. You must not cavil at His Word, find fault with it, and dispute it. Just hear it. Then the Holy Spirit will come and prepare your heart, that you may sincerely believe the preaching of the divine Word, even give up your life for it, and say: "This is God's Word and the pure truth." But if you insist that you be heard, that your reason interpret Christ's Word; if you presume to play the master of the Word, to propound other doctrines; if you probe it, measure it, and twist the words to read as you want them to, brood over them, hesitate, doubt, and then judge them according to your reason—that is not hearing the Word or being its pupil. Then you are setting yourself up as its schoolmaster. In that way you will never discover the meaning of Christ's Word or of His heavenly Father's will." (*Sermons on John* [1530–32], LW 23:229 = WA 33:362–63)

Cf. LW 23:51, 80; 23:229–30; 28:69–70; 40:197; Becker, *The Foolishness of God*, 93–114, 153–61.

¹⁴⁶ Charles Spurgeon, Sermon No. 2004, 4; cf. Spurgeon, Sermon No. 2467, 2–3.

Summary. Luther is clear that only the Spirit-filled word of the gospel can change the human heart and work in it true faith. This exposes a danger for all who seek to build the kingdom of God: that we attempt to do it in our own strength instead of using the tool that God has given us. Yes, we need to think about how best to get the word out and ensure that it's heard. Yes, we can point out the weakness of the objections to the Christian faith. But we cannot build faith on any other foundation than the Spirit-breathed word that points us to Christ. Whenever we replace this with human efforts to influence and persuade we will find that we have put a hollow idol in the place of the Spirit's sword, and are leaning on a flimsy reed instead of a rock.

The Fruit of Idolatry: Hypocrisy

The final theme in this chapter is the contrast between the fruit of idolatry and the fruit of faith in Christ, and how only the gospel can produce the fruits of the Christian faith in us. This provides us with a useful tool for diagnosing a person's spiritual state. When professing Christians fail to practice what they preach, or put on an outward show of sanctity with little sincerity behind it, this should tell us they have a problem with idolatry.

Christians have often been accused of being hypocrites, who fail to live up to the standards they seek to impose on others. The sociologist Os Guinness has compiled a list of academics who have made this charge,¹⁴⁷ including the following:

Friedrich Nietzsche: "in truth, there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross."¹⁴⁸

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "every Stoic was a Stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian?"¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Os Guinness, "The One Unanswerable Objection to the Christian Faith: Christians," March 13, 2006, Veritas Forum, <http://www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#!/v/216> (accessed Aug. 6, 2011).

¹⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 612.

Bertrand Russell: “‘If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor.’ That is a very excellent maxim, but, as I say, it is not much practised.”¹⁵⁰

The philosopher C. M. Joad, before he converted to Christianity: “For God’s sake don’t touch the Church of England. It is the only thing that stands between us and Christianity.”¹⁵¹

And finally, a widely reported quip by George Bernard Shaw: “Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it.”¹⁵²

The opinion that Christians are poor representatives of the faith they profess is not restricted to such academics from the past. For instance, a research study published in 2007 by the Barna Group looked at the attitudes that 16 to 29 year old non-Christian Americans have towards Christians, and found that the attitudes were predominantly negative.¹⁵³ The most common complaints were that Christians are:

- Hypocrites, who act as if they are morally superior when they are not.
- More focused on winning converts than genuinely caring for people.
- Unloving towards homosexuals.
- Sheltered, and unwilling to get involved in the grit and grime of people’s lives.
- Too political and focused on legislating a right wing agenda.
- Judgemental towards others rather than loving.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 1993), 36.

¹⁵⁰ Bertrand Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian,” in *Bertrand Russell: Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Topics*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Touchstone, 1967), 15.

¹⁵¹ C. E. M. Joad, *The Present and Future of Religion* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 27.

¹⁵² I hesitate a little to repeat this quotation, since although it is widely attributed to Shaw (e.g. in Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003], 103), I have been unable to track down the original source of the quote. However, even if the quote has been falsely attributed to Shaw, it captures both his gift for memorable one liners and his attitude towards Christianity.

¹⁵³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity ... and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 24–29.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28–30.

Many things could be said in response to such accusations. Many of the attacks against Christians are deeply unfair and factually untrue, and say more about the people making the attacks and their antipathy towards Christ than they do about Christians. Jesus told his followers to expect unfair treatment, and said “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”¹⁵⁵ Many attacks also show little understanding of the central Christian claim, that we are forgiven sinners who can boast of no moral perfection but instead “proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.”¹⁵⁶ Yet such responses only go so far. Jesus did expect that although we remain sinners, who struggle daily with our sinful flesh, our faith in him would still make a significant enough difference in our behavior that we would be like a city on a hill, with our love and good deeds being evident to all.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, it is not just the enemies of the church who have observed the failure of its people to live up to the teachings of Christ, but countless Christians down through the centuries have lamented the failure of church members to live lives worthy of the gospel.

One who has bemoaned this sad reality is Tim Keller. He calls it the great scandal of our church that so many who confess faith in Christ fail to exhibit changed lives. He then suggests a reason for this, that we as a church have failed to discern and expose people’s idols, and have allowed people to worship the Lord and their idols too.¹⁵⁸ As a result, their most fundamental commitment in many areas of their lives is not to the life changing gospel of Jesus but to some idol instead.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, he suggests that in many cases the Christian faith itself has become

¹⁵⁵ Matt 5:11.

¹⁵⁶ 2 Cor 4:5.

¹⁵⁷ Matt 5:13–16; John 13:35; 1 Pet 3:16.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. the thoughts of Charles Taber in chapter 1, pages 6–8.

¹⁵⁹ Timothy Keller, “The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry,” April 20, 2005, The Gospel Coalition, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/video/The-Grand-Demythologizer-The-Gospel-and-Idolatry> (accessed March 3, 2010).

idolatrous, because it has become centered in a moral performance narrative that breeds self-righteous contempt for others, instead of the gospel that breeds graciousness and love. What needs to happen if the lives of professing Christians are to display genuine love for others is that they need to be truly centered in the One who gave his life for sinners, and who used his dying breath to pray for the forgiveness of his enemies.¹⁶⁰

If Christian Smith and his colleagues are correct, and moralistic therapeutic deism is really the dominant religion in America even amongst professing Christians, then hypocrisy is what we should expect. Such a faith cannot produce the kind of gracious love that Christ calls for in his followers. Moralistic therapeutic deism is idolatrous in relation to all three articles of the creed: it is centered on love of self rather than love of God; it places confidence in human righteousness rather than the righteousness of Christ; and it is informed more by the natural light of human reason than by God's word. It is what Luther identifies as the natural religion of the law rather than a genuine expression of the Christian faith. When people claim the name of Christ but live out a creed like this instead they will inevitably bring dishonor to his name.

Our efforts as Christians to denounce the idolatry of our culture will always be hindered if we fail to provide an alternative by modeling repentance from it. Before we take the speck out of anyone else's eye we need to take the plank out of our own. So how do we do that? Not by our own strength, or we will be attempting to root out one idol with another. Instead we need to use the God-given sword of the Spirit. We need to proclaim God's law in such a way that it not only denounces surface level sins but also unmask the idolatry that lies at the heart of the problem. Then we will be able to apply the gospel not merely to surface level problems, but to the fundamental perversion of our hearts. In this way our Savior will lodge deep within us.

¹⁶⁰ Timothy Keller, "A Conversation with Tim Keller: Belief in an Age of Skepticism?" March 4, 2008, Veritas Forum, <http://www.veritas.org/Media.aspx#!/v/47> (accessed Aug. 5, 2011).

Conclusion

Just as Luther exposes our idolatrous self-focus in every area of the Christian life, so he exposes our idolatrous self-reliance when it comes to our attempts to liberate ourselves and others from idolatry. His answer is to rely not on ourselves but on the Spirit and his twofold work: the alien work of the law that dethrones our idols, and the proper work of the gospel that puts Christ in their place.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding Luther's Thoughts on Idolatry

Luther talks about idolatry in relation to every domain of life, including all three articles of the creed. In relation to the first article he talks about idols we use to provide for ourselves, and to orient our existence. In relation to the second article he talks about idols we use to justify ourselves, and to climb up to God to secure his favor and blessing. In relation to the third article he talks about idols we use to enlighten and empower our hearts and minds. In all these domains the self is always the greatest idol. Although we cling to many idols apart from ourselves, we recruit these with the intention of making them serve ourselves. The problem is as follows: in relation to the first article, we want divine self-sufficiency, and want the universe to revolve around us and our desires; in relation to the second article, we want to claim that we are righteous in and of ourselves, and if we acknowledge a God above us, we want to relate to him on our terms; and in relation to the third article we want to claim that we are enlightened and wise, instead of acknowledging that our minds are dark unless they receive light from above.

Luther approaches the question of idolatry in much the same way a bank teller detects a counterfeit note or an art critic detects a forgery: by being well enough acquainted with the genuine article to know the difference between it and a fake. Luther first asks the question, "who is God?"¹ He then answers this question in specific ways. He is a God who calls us to fear, love, and trust him with all our hearts. He is also a God who reveals and gives himself to us in a highly specific economy of salvation, as the Father who created us and provides for us, as the Son who

has redeemed us and reveals to us the Father, and as the Spirit who speaks to us through the word to enlighten and empower us. When we realize that this God calls us to trust him completely in all these areas of life, it is easy to identify idols. They are all the things we trust more than him.

This approach to idolatry stands in contrast to that of many other scholars, who attempt to address this question more directly, as if they can derive a theoretical or metaphysical description of idolatry apart from the question of who the true God is. They try to focus on some absolute distinction between creature and Creator, between matter and spirit, or between things that are immanent and the transcendent God. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, the true God has chosen to join himself to his creation in Christ, to bind himself to commands and promises issued in human language, and to give himself to us by means of created, material things such as bread and wine and water. Therefore an approach to idolatry that focuses too heavily on the distinction between the transcendent, spiritual Creator and his immanent, material creatures may actually lead us away from the true God. It may lead us to declare the God who comes to us in this down-to-earth way to be an idol, and to put a philosopher's god in his place. Second, a God who is so totally transcendent over his creation that he is unable or unwilling to bridge the gap between him and us by entering into his creation in some way can have nothing to do with us. As Charles Taber contends,² if we stress that God is an ineffable mystery, remote from us in his transcendent otherness, this can actually be a strategy for getting God out of the way so that our functional gods can reign supreme. Furthermore, if God has not climbed down to us by entering his creation, then we are forced to engage in some idolatrous self-salvation project by climbing up to him, unless we want to remain forever distant and estranged from him. In contrast to this metaphysical approach to the question of idolatry, Luther's approach has more in

¹ Cf. LC 11 = WA 30.i:132.34–133.1.

common with that of Jewish scholars such as Halbertal, Margalit, and Rabinowitz. They begin by asking, who is the God of the covenant, who has betrothed us to himself so that he can be our husband and lord? Furthermore, what has he prescribed for our worship? If we answer these questions correctly, then idolatry becomes obvious, as any other god is an idol, and any other worship is idolatrous *avodah zarah* (nonprescribed worship or cult).

Luther of course diverges from these Jewish scholars in that he identifies the God of the covenant with the Triune God, who is revealed particularly in Jesus Christ, and whose Spirit inspires not only the Old Testament but also the New. Since Luther's understanding of God and the economy of salvation is thoroughly Trinitarian, it should be no surprise that his theology of idolatry also takes a Trinitarian shape. After all, how does Luther arrive at his theology of idolatry? By considering the true God, and all the ways we seek to supplant him and his work.

As I studied Luther's theology of idolatry I received a pleasant surprise, and that is the extent to which it yielded insights into his theology as a whole. In hindsight this should not be surprising. To borrow an image from Halbertal and Margalit, studying idolatry is like making a map of the wall that surrounds the city of God and separates the community of the faithful within from the strange gods without.³ This wall defines both what is outside the boundary and what is within. Since true faith and idolatry are binary opposites, a precise understanding of one necessarily entails a precise understanding of the other. It is in this regard that this dissertation can make a contribution to Luther studies as a whole. As we noted in chapter 1, the topic of idolatry has been largely neglected in Luther studies. Yet if all we ever examine is Luther's thoughts regarding true faith and the true God, not false faith in false gods, then our

² See chapter 1.

³ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, translated by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 236.

understanding of his picture of God will always be fuzzy around the edges. Only when we consider the enormous amount of thought that Luther gave to the binary opposite of saving faith will we be able to see both sides of his theology clearly. For instance, most scholars contrast Luther's theology of the cross with the theology of glory, without realizing that "theology of glory" is just an expression Luther used at one brief stage of his career and then never used again. For the rest of his career he talked about idolatry instead.⁴ If we fail to see that the most significant contrast for Luther is between the theology of the cross and idolatry, then we will fail to fully understand this important aspect of Luther's thought. Or to give another example, if we fail to see Luther's concern with how easily human reason gets turned into an idol, we will fail to understand why Luther can praise reason with one breath and curse it with the next. Or, to give a further example, the Reformation was essentially a battle against idolatry, which the reformers believed had corrupted the church. Unless we understand that Luther had a more covenantal and less metaphysical understanding of idolatry than people like Calvin and Zwingli, we will never fully understand why his reform took a different turn from theirs.

Luther's Value in Understanding Contemporary Idolatry

The original goal of this study was to aid in the spiritual diagnosis of our society, and to sharpen our proclamation of law and gospel within it. It is an attempt to use the first commandment in its "theological use," to get to the heart of our sinful opposition to God. For this purpose Luther's theology of idolatry is both vast in scope and readily applicable.

One of the greatest benefits of Luther's view of idolatry is that it is far reaching enough to describe every aspect of human rebellion against God. Prior to studying Luther's thoughts on idolatry in detail, I was familiar with some of his thoughts on this subject via the *Large*

⁴ See chapter 2, footnote 24.

Catechism, and had tried to use them in my preaching. In hindsight I realize my understanding was one dimensional. I primarily thought of idolatry as a first article issue, and when I identified idols, I invariably thought of things like money that people use as functional substitutes for the Creator and his work of provision. Then I stumbled on the work of Richard Keyes, with his talk of near and far idols, and this challenged me to reflect on how people use different idols to fulfill different existential needs. Later I came across the work of Tim Keller, and the insight he gleaned from Luther, that one of the primary functions people use idols for is self-justification. Finally, I delved into Luther in more depth, and discovered that he opens up the scope of idolatry even further. Luther describes idols that supplant the place of the Father and his work of providence, idols that usurp the place of Christ and his work of redemption, and idols that take the place of the Holy Spirit and his word. This provides a comprehensive framework for reflecting on how idolatry stands at the root of every aspect of fallen human life.

Luther's thought is also readily applicable to a secular context, where many of the idols people worship are not obviously religious in nature. Luther's description of idolatry as primarily a matter of faith—with idols being defined in terms of the function we expect them to play in our lives—should reveal to us the religious nature of many things that at first glance appear secular. Whenever we expect any earthly thing to fill a place in our lives that only God can fill, we have effectively turned it into an idol.

This combination of vast scope and ready applicability gives Luther's theology enormous potential as a tool to get at the heart of human rebellion, so that we can challenge it and provide an alternative in the gospel. Here we can take our cues from Jesus in the gospels. The gospels devote much attention to Jesus' clash with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not idolaters in an obvious sense, since they did not bow down to gods of wood or stone. Yet Jesus challenged their idolatry on at least three levels. He challenged their greed (first article idolatry), and exposed its

idolatrous nature by telling them they could not serve both God and money.⁵ He challenged their self-righteousness (second article idolatry), and showed how out-of-step this made them with the will of the Father and the Savior he had sent.⁶ He challenged their devotion to human traditions (third article idolatry), and told them that by setting aside God’s word for the sake of their traditions they showed that their hearts were far from him.⁷ Luther’s theology should provide encouragement to us to take a similar approach when speaking to people today: to challenge their idolatry on all of these different levels, and to redirect their faith to the true and living God. If we fail to see the multifaceted nature of idolatry, and the corresponding richness of the answer we have in Christ, our preaching of law and gospel is likely to be one dimensional, and less effective than it could be.

Recently someone asked me what I was writing my dissertation on. When I told him I was writing on idolatry, he responded, “That must be a depressing topic to spend so much time on.” Yet I have not found it depressing at all. Instead, it reinforces who the true God is, a God who wants to give us everything by grace, in every article of the creed. Furthermore, since idols enslave us and choke the life out of us, every time we uncover a new idol we discover a new avenue for life and freedom. If we have hitched our wagon to the wrong star, it is liberating to realize this, and to see that we have a brighter star who will not disappoint us.

Luther’s insights into the idolatry of the self—and how the deepest idols we struggle with amount to an idolization of ourselves and our own human power—reinforce this point. What could be more oppressive than attempting to shoulder a burden we cannot possibly bear, the

⁵ Luke 16:13–15.

⁶ Luke 5:27–32; 7:36–50; 15:1–32; 18:9–14.

⁷ Mark 7:1–13.

responsibility of being gods? What a joy to relinquish this burden and to come to the One whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light! As Luther writes:

No one who believes in Christ is strong by his own power, but is weak and suffers all things. Nor does he avenge or liberate himself, even if he is able, but he gives glory to God, and waits for his liberating and avenging power. ... No one [who believes in Christ] is wise in his own wisdom, but becomes a fool in his own eyes and before all people, and gives the glory of wisdom to God alone, who, when he has been tested, will give him the glory of wisdom in heaven. In the same way no Christian is righteous in his own righteousness, but gives the glory of righteousness to God.⁸

What Luther teaches about idolatry can be summed up in this way: What a burden it is to have to secure my earthly wellbeing by the strength of my own arm! How liberating to know that God the Father will provide for me, and to trust in his power. What a burden it is to be bound up by my own self-love! How liberating to be caught up in love for the Lord instead. What a burden to have to justify myself with my own paltry righteousness! How liberating to be justified by the righteousness of Christ. What a burden to vainly grope for an unknown god, and to have to invent ways to climb up to him or please him! How liberating to know and worship the God who comes down to me and is pleased with me through Christ. What a burden to have to make myself wise with my puny brain and limited vision! How liberating to receive heavenly wisdom through the word. And what a burden to engage in ministry by my own strength, to strive by my own power to instill faith and its fruits in myself and others! How liberating to know that God feeds our faith and makes it fruitful by his Holy Spirit through the word.

Soli Deo Gloria

⁸ *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21), WA 5:250.26–33.

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