



LUTHER AND THE STORIES OF GOD

Biblical Narratives as a Foundation
for Christian Living

Robert Kolb

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ARG *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* [journal]. Gütersloh.
- BoC *The Book of Concord*. Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- BSLK *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*. 11th ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992.
- CP *The Sermons of Martin Luther* [the Church Postils]. Edited and translated by John N. Lenker. 8 vols. 1905; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983.
- EA² *Dr. Martin Luther's sämmtliche Werke* [Erlangen Ausgabe]. Erlangen ed., 2nd. ed. Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Heyder & Zimmer, 1862–85.
- FS *Festival Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*. Translated by Joel R. Baseley. Dearborn, MI: Mark V, 2005.
- HP *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*. Edited and translated by Eugene F. A. Klug. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996.
- LQ *Lutheran Quarterly*. Gettysburg, PA.
- LuJ *Lutherjahrbuch*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- LW *Luther's Works*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958–86.
- TR Martin Luther. *Tischreden* [Table Talk]. 6 vols. in WA.
- TRE *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*. Edited by Gerhard Krause and Gerhard Müller. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977–2004.
- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke* [Weimarer Ausgabe]. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993.

INTRODUCTION

Luther the Storyteller and His Cultivation of the Christian Life

All books in the entire Scripture are either reports or historical narratives; they offer examples, sometimes of laws, sometimes of the activities of God, and they all teach faith. The Pentateuch, in which the law is comprehended, reveals the origin of the human creature and sin. The prophets identify sin and pray to Christ, who takes sin away. John points to Christ as the Lamb of God. Christ takes away sin and brings salvation.¹

Early in his career as reformer, Martin Luther wrote these words as he prepared to preach on Genesis 14 in 1521. By that time a veteran preacher and somewhat seasoned university lecturer, he had already defined the nature of God’s revelation as centered on his actions in the form of speech (heard, or unheard as in Genesis 1) and his mysterious guidance of human and natural events, all embedded in human history, and interpreted authoritatively by the prophets and apostles in the Holy Scriptures. Luther recognized that God’s unfolding plan for his human creatures constituted what today is labeled a “metanarrative,” a master narrative that makes sense of incorporated specific stories. This metanarrative—beginning with creation and the fall into sin in Genesis, focused on Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, ending with his return at the end of time—guided and framed the history of God’s people as it was reported in both broad strokes and minute, personal details throughout the Bible.

1. *D. Martin Luthers Werke* [WA = Weimarer Ausgabe] (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993), 9:353.8–10.

Luther used several rhetorical forms in his preaching and exegetical lectures to expose the meaning of the text and apply it. Sometimes he presented careful exposition of the biblical text; at other times he employed a catechetical approach, organizing his discourse to teach the truths and applications of the truth he found in a text. But the Wittenberg exegete also believed that God had created human beings to experience reality in the flow of history. Luther believed that the stories constituting this flow reveal something of the larger story of God's creation and preservation of his world. Therefore the retelling of biblical stories, supplemented on occasion with other stories, both from his own experience and reading and from the experiences of his congregation, enriched his conveying of the biblical text. This volume focuses particularly on Luther's recounting stories as he cultivated the Christian way of living, providing instruction and direction for his hearers' and readers' participation in the unfolding drama of God's governance of human history.²

Martin Luther as Storyteller

Luther indeed recognized not only the usefulness but also the ambiguity of the biblical stories. In 1532 Conrad Cordatus recorded his mentor's observation that "the stories of the Old Testament are particularly clear, but to those who read them superficially, they are deadly. To the faithful they are alive." To support this observation, Luther used the rather peculiar example of the resultant childlessness of Jephthah (*Judg.* 11), who sacrificed his only child to fulfill a vow. Luther contrasted Jephthah's fate with that of Hannah, who received a child, Samuel, as a gift from God (*1 Sam.* 1–2).³ The example may be curious, but the point of the reformer's observation—that readers should not, like Jephthah, take matters into their own hands, attempting to control or set the rules for their own lives—remained the underlying guideline for his use of stories, biblical and nonbiblical, in his bringing the Word of God to hearers and readers. In his *Preface to Galeatius Capella's History* (1538), and on the basis of the ancient Roman historian Marcus Terentius Varro's statement, Luther thus declares: "The best way to teach is to add an example or illustration to the word, to aid understanding and retention. Otherwise, when a speech without examples is heard, no matter how appropriate and good it may be, it does not move the heart as much and is not as clear and easy to remember."⁴

2. Compare Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 102–10.

3. WA TR 2:632, §2753a. On treatments of Jephthah, cf. John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Cannot Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 33–47.

4. WA 50:383.1–8; LW 34:275. See John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 155–56.

Fifteen years earlier the same theory of narrative had guided his treatment of biblical texts in his preaching in Wittenberg. Mary and Joseph had not understood what their twelve-year-old had meant when he explained that he had to be about his father's business. They had despaired of finding him and had questioned God's love for them. "Such examples are very useful for us. We need them to show us how also among the saints, who are God's children and are above others given God's favor, weakness nonetheless remains, so they often stray and make mistakes. Sometimes they stumble badly, although not intentionally or willfully, but from weariness and misunderstanding." The apostles had such experiences. These stories teach God's people to find comfort in God and to cling to his Word.⁵

The biblical accounts of God's action and the actions of both saints and sinners need to be interpreted and applied within the context of the contemporary proclaimer's hearers and readers. With that provision, Luther was convinced that these accounts of human experience and God's intervention in history are valuable means for demonstrating who God is and what it means to be human. He also was convinced that such stories need to be interpreted within the context of the larger framework of God's revelation—Luther's metanarrative.

Indeed, Luther used a variety of stories to explain his larger vision of God's revelation of himself and what it means to be human. These include references to experiences from Luther's own life and memory. Such recollections occurred more frequently, to be sure, at the supper table than in the lecture hall or pulpit. His stories also include tales from ancient myths and classical history, as well as from the history of the church, and even from its tradition of the legends of the saints. His narrative depictions of God in action include also the professor's own fables, such as scenes from Christ's battle against Satan, that have an almost Tolkiennesque ring. But in addition, Luther fostered faith and piety from the pulpit and in his exegetical exposition through the retelling of biblical stories. He often imaginatively filled in details in a way he believed was consistent with what was happening in the text, details that provided his hearers and readers with special insight into its significance for their lives.

Luther and the Bible

Although he left few reports of the initial impact that hearing its accounts made upon him, Luther experienced the Bible early in his life. Undoubtedly, he heard its stories first as a child. His student and amanuensis Veit Dietrich recounted the professor's supper-table telling of his fascination, while still a

5. WA 17.2:26.38–27.9; CP 2:46.

“boy,” with the story of “Samuel’s mother.”⁶ The Latin *puer* can be a fairly young boy but may also refer to an adolescent. Dietrich’s first comment might imply the former: “The book made him marvel, and he thought he would be very happy if he could possess such a book.” But his recollection continues, “A little later [Luther] bought a postil [sermon collection]; it did please him a great deal because it contained so many Gospel stories”;⁷ such a purchase seems unlikely for a younger child. Whatever the age, one of Luther’s earliest encounters with Scripture involved a story of God’s calling a servant to the ministry of his Word.

The Bible confronted the young Martin above all in liturgies that echoed psalms and other parts of Scripture. He heard some preaching as a child, not exclusively on the biblical texts but also on the tales of the saints and their adventures. Once he began his schooling, biblical texts formed part of the reading material that brought him ever deeper into the Latin language. His entry into the monastery propelled him into reciting psalms daily, hearing Scripture read frequently at meals, and reading the Bible itself on occasion. In pursuing theological study as a monk, he became familiar with more of Scripture. As a member of his monastic community, he began to preach on it to his fellow Augustinians and lecture on it in their monastic program of instruction. By the time he reached the apex of his study of theology and the Doctor in Biblia degree was bestowed upon him in 1512, he knew the sweep of divine revelation well. Emanuel Hirsch, a prominent scholar of the twentieth-century Luther renaissance, has noted the rhetorical and theological development revealed by Luther’s sermons. His first sermons were topical, following a certain medieval model common within scholastic circles, but during the 1510s his biblical studies turned him into an expository preacher.⁸ He was not the first: older contemporaries, such as Johann Geiler von Kaisersberg, had renewed a much older tradition of using an expository method alongside a topical focus. In medieval religious practice, however, the sermon did not serve as a medium of grace, as the sacraments did. Sermons functioned at best as a warm-up for the reception of sacramental grace, argues David Steinmetz.⁹ Luther incorporated the sacraments into his broader concept of the forms of the Word of God, which arose from the biblical page in oral, written, and sacramental modes of divine power and presence.

The exact progress of his growth in biblical knowledge is not clear; it also is hard to precisely trace Luther’s move from more typical medieval conceptions of authority and sources of truth to his confidence in Scripture alone as the

6. WA TR 1:44, §116; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 8–9.

7. WA TR 1:44, §116.

8. Emanuel Hirsch, “Luthers Predigtweise,” *Luther* 25 (1954): 1–2.

9. David Steinmetz, “Luther, the Reformers, and the Bible,” in *Living Traditions of the Bible*, ed. James E. Bowley (St. Louis: Chalice, 1999), 164–66.

only and unchallenged authority for faith and life. Whatever this chronology might be, however, it is important to recognize that absolute biblical authority never meant that Luther excluded a wide variety of other authors from his quiver of citable authorities so long as they confirmed what he believed stands in Scripture. Against Satan's lies, everything that could serve to convey God's will and ways to his people could be drafted into the battle for God's truth, which the Wittenberg reformer perceived to be taking place whenever preachers of the gospel of Christ bring his Word to his people. Yet all other sources stood under the ultimate and absolute authority of Scripture.

The role of narrative and metanarrative in systematic theology—as well as in biblical studies and several elements of practical theology, especially preaching—has attracted scholarly treatment in the past three decades. In this period Luther's various means of communicating—including his rhetoric,¹⁰ preaching,¹¹ and lecturing¹²—have been studied from a variety of angles. But in view of how important “narrative” has been in recent scholarly discourse, amazingly little attention has been paid to his use of storytelling apart from Michael Parsons's monographic study of Luther's and Calvin's treatments of Old Testament stories¹³ and a few periodical articles.¹⁴

Most helpful is a 1983 essay by Richard Lischer, which noted that Luther's use of storytelling did not fit into three of the five categories in current discussion of narrative.¹⁵ In his public utterances the reformer did not focus on his own biography: occasional references to his own memories and experiences are rare apart from his Table Talks. He did not use parables to convey images from Scripture to an audience with little sense of the biblical story, as do many modern “narrative preachers.” He did not see narrative as “an aesthetic form [that] represents the linguistic confines of Christian existence.” However, Luther did, according to Lischer, display two other characteristics that mark the work of twentieth-century narrative theologians: (1) He elaborated biblical

10. Ulrich Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums: Luther als Prediger, Pädagoge und Rhetor* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972).

11. Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983); Elmer C. Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935); Harold J. Grimm, *Martin Luther as a Preacher* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1929); and Eberhart Winkler, “Luther als Seelsorger und Prediger,” in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, ed. Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 1:253–78.

12. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis*.

13. Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives: Reformation Thought and Narrative Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004).

14. E.g., Mark Ellingsen, “Luther as Narrative Exegete,” *Journal of Religion* 63 (1983): 394–413; Ellingsen focuses particularly on the place of Luther's use of narrative within the context of “Yale school” discussions of the time, including the critique of Luther's use of narrative under the domination of his metanarrative.

15. Richard Lischer, “Luther and Contemporary Preaching: Narrative and Anthropology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983): 487–504.

stories and dialogue in contemporary terms to convey their message to his hearers; and (2) he used the larger biblical history as a “plotted sermon structure, an unfolding over time which results in concrete, vivid, and novel expressions of God’s relationship with human beings.” This structure framed his sermons with “a dramatic or narrative logic by which the sermon begins in the midst of some human ambiguity and proceeds through complications to a moment of insight (or recognition) and on to a resolution.”¹⁶ This metanarrative guided the Wittenberg expositor not only in his general approach to Scripture but also in his application of individual accounts within it to his hearer’s lives.

Luther drew individual reports from the lives of biblical figures, connecting them to the larger framework and sweep of God’s history of interacting with his human creatures. These stories served to cultivate the faith and piety of parishioners, whose religion and fundamental view of reality Luther wished to change. He gradually came to believe that the religious way of life in which he had grown up had so seriously misrepresented God’s will for his people that it needed reform and reconstitution at its very base. Luther perceived that the direction of medieval piety ran from the human performer of God-pleasing actions—above all, ritual actions in the sacred realm—to the Creator. His earliest extant sermons attack false confidence in practices that he regarded as superstitious, among which ritualistic observances were prominent.¹⁷ Whatever role the word “grace” may have played in the various theological systems he encountered from his boyhood instruction and from his scholastic professors at the university, the belief of his contemporaries focused largely on what they did to please God and thus secure human well-being. Yet not every medieval theologian thought of humans as initiating God’s goodwill. Luther believed that, from Genesis 1:1 and throughout the entire Bible, God is in charge. He never denied that God had created human beings to be responsible, obedient, loving human beings: that is their God-given design and God’s expectation of them, he tirelessly taught. But he believed that to be human involves first of all the receptivity of creatureliness, the trust that comes from experiencing God’s love, which creates the only true relationship between the divine Creator and the human creature.

Luther’s Cultivation of a New Christian Worldview

Throughout his career as reformer, Luther strove to cultivate this relationship between God and those who heard his lectures and sermons or who read his works. Among his many rhetorical devices for delivering the metanarrative, his refashioning of the biblical reports of God’s intervention in human history did not predominate. But his rehearsing the stories did form one vital element

16. Ibid., 488–89.

17. Kiessling, *Early Sermons*, 111–19.

of his cultivation of a godly way of life among the people of God; it was an effective tool for fostering faith and piety. The retelling became a key tool in what contemporary communication theorist Charlotte Linde calls “narrative induction”: “a process of being encouraged or required to hear, understand, and use someone else’s story as one’s own.”¹⁸ She defines this as “the process by which people come to take on an existing set of stories as *their own story*.” Memory, she contends, is “a social process of construction and reconstruction” and thus serves as “a key to identity and to the acquisition of identity.”¹⁹

Luther strove to place the personal memory of each person who heard or read his proclamation within the context of the story of God’s people from Adam and Eve through his own time, particularly from creation to the time of Christ and the apostles. What John Maxfield says about Luther’s university lectures—“Luther attempted to form in his students a new identity”—describes the preacher’s goal for those who heard him from the pulpit as well. Maxfield continues, “Luther’s Genesis lectures shed light on how he used scripture to instill in his students a worldview that reflected the ideals of the Lutheran Reformation and that, therefore, contributed to the break between Evangelicals and those who remained within the papal church.”²⁰

Linde’s own work focuses on how commercial and industrial firms build an esprit de corps and how they model, for instance, good salesmanship and dedication to the firm and its goals. But she views that process as akin to “religious conversion narratives.”²¹ Indeed, Luther’s stories told what Linde labels a “non-participant narrative,” which delivers the story of another person, such as the founder of a sales firm. Such a narrative functions as a “paradigmatic narrative”: it “offers the framework for understanding life and interpreting reality apart from the actual presence of that person.” The process includes coming to learn the institution’s story and throughout one’s career being reminded of “both facts and their official meanings,” which are the larger framework for interpreting the institution’s reality, the metanarrative. This process also incorporates this larger story into one’s own biography, one’s own way of life.²² “Paradigmatic narratives” represent “the ideal life course within an institution” and present the stories of others as exemplary.²³

Not all of Luther’s retellings of biblical stories directly convey a positive paradigmatic narrative, which instructs hearers in how to conduct their lives. Indeed, some warn against sin or provide consolation for sinners when they see the mercy of God toward the likes of Abraham, even when he sinned. But

18. Charlotte Linde, “The Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story: How History Becomes Memory and Identity,” *Ethos* 28 (2000): 608–32, here 608, 613.

19. *Ibid.*, 608.

20. Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis*, 2; cf. 216–21.

21. Linde, “Acquisition,” 609.

22. *Ibid.*, 614–15.

23. *Ibid.*, 621.

the Wittenberg professor strove through nonparticipant narratives to foster a new historical memory and identity for his hearers and readers. This historical memory was intended to lead them to place their own lives within the context of the biblical paradigms for faith in God and obedience to him and love for their fellow human beings. Luther wanted to give them a new sense of group identity, not merely as religious pilgrims who must find their own way to God or as religious athletes who must continually improve their performance to gain and retain God's favor but as children of God, who could approach God as "beloved children approach a beloved father," as he said in explaining the introduction to the Lord's Prayer in his Small Catechism. He was cultivating a worldview centered on God's conversation with his people, in contrast to the attempt to approach God through ritual performance, which had informed much of the piety with which he had grown up. Paul Hiebert defines the oft-used but not always precisely defined concept of "worldview" as "the assumptions underlying a culture [which] provide a more or less coherent way of looking at the world," "models of *reality*, . . . which describe and explain the nature of things—and models *for action*," which "provide us with mental blueprints that guide our behavior."²⁴ This was Luther's purpose in retelling the stories of biblical figures as set in his own context: to lay a new foundation for his hearers' and readers' viewing of reality and their conduct of daily life, centered in trusting God and being his children in his world.

Luther's Use of Oral and Printed Communication

Like most human beings, Luther first learned to communicate orally. He was raised and educated in an oral culture. As a monk who was assigned to preach, he learned the art of homiletics in the fashion of the late Middle Ages. As an instructor who was assigned to teach, he learned to seek the truth in academic disputation, which matched wits, and he judged them on the basis of oral performance. He was assigned to convey the truth in lectures, which gave a living voice to the written texts of medieval theologians like Peter Lombard, ancient fathers such as Augustine, as well as the prophets and apostles.

The oral vehicles were not only the media of choice for Luther, but they fit his theological perception of God and his human creatures as well. He believed that God is a God of conversation and community and that God fosters community among his human creatures by having them communicate with himself and also with each other face-to-face. Gerhard Forde reflects Luther's understanding, even if not his general practice in preaching, in stating that the native form of God's speaking his word of new life is in the "I" to "you" language of absolution: "I forgive you your sins in the name of

24. Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 28.

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ When Luther told stories about others and through them explained in the third person what God was accomplishing for his hearers, he often made it explicitly clear that God was acting “for you.” When he did not repeat this “for you” or “for me” explicitly, he usually led the congregation to understand the implication that their lives paralleled that of the biblical persona whose experience with God and the world he was depicting. They heard a living voice that was conveying the Word of God to them.

That living voice addressed both the Wittenberg populace and the Wittenberg students, the former only in the worshiping congregation, the latter both there and in the lecture hall. The German Reformation scholar Heinrich Bornkamm describes the challenge of Luther’s “acclimatizing” the people of Wittenberg to the Bible and what he perceived the biblical view of reality to be—in contrast to medieval conceptions of religion:

Medieval preaching was overrun by playing around with allegorical interpretations, the legends of the miracles of the saints, the extolling of the church’s means of cultivating piety such as indulgences, the rosary, and other forms of prayer, and moralizing. All that vanished in Luther’s sermons. He preached precisely and exhaustively on the text, not on a dogmatic topic at hand in the text. To be sure, he did not just stay with the exegesis or exposition of the text, but he led his hearers into the enduring truths in and behind each word of Scripture that were still applicable even as they had been when they were written.²⁶

He intended that this message would effect a revolution in the way his audiences perceived God and themselves.

Luther’s Audience

The medieval age is often called an age of faith, but a closer glimpse at records of all kinds indicates that that was not the case. The population of medieval Europe may seem gullible and superstitious to modern eyes, as we also may appear to a later generation. But most people were hardheaded survivors, forced by the exigencies of disease, weather, and other human personalities to calculate carefully how the family and the village might survive the near future. In that day as well as in the twenty-first century, heaven could wait. In a sermon on those who blasphemed by accusing Christ of casting out devils by Beelzebub (Luke 11:14–23), Luther himself observes that three kinds of hearers receive the proclamation of the gospel:

25. Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 146–90.

26. Heinrich Bornkamm, “Erneuerung der Frömmigkeit: Luthers Predigten, 1522–1524,” in *Wahrheit und Glaube: Festschrift für Emanuel Hirsch zu seinem 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Hayo Gerdes (Itzehoe: Die Spur, Dorbandt, 1963), 50–51.

Some stand in wonder before him. They are the pious, true Christians, who take him so seriously that they are just beside themselves. Others blaspheme, as did the Pharisees and learned of his day, who were annoyed that they were not able to do as much as he and were worried that he would be more highly respected by the people than they. Still others tested him, wanting signs. He was supposed to perform them, as they thought he should. They are just making a game of what he was doing, just as Herod desired such a sign from Christ (Luke 23:8).²⁷

Luther wanted to converse with the first category in communicating the teaching of Scripture, but he was well aware that his congregation in Wittenberg contained many who fit the other two categories, or were at best lukewarm to his proclamation. Thus Ulrich Nembach's judgment that Luther's sermons addressed "the not quite serious Christian" often seems to be true,²⁸ although it is a presupposition that the reformer probably did not carry into his lecture hall. However, he conceived of his lectures as preparing his students to preach to those same not-quite-serious Christians, a fact that the homiletical quality of his lectures often reveals.²⁹ Furthermore, although he may have presumed that his hearers were not all taking his message as seriously as they should, he did have confidence that God's presence in the proclamation of his Word was conveying his power and promise. He was convinced that God works through human speech as he created it, in its natural forms of communication, to people in a variety of situations. Nembach has shown that Luther's sermons follow the form of Quintilian's address to a popular, unlearned audience that needed to be taught. Critical in such speech is the "detailed concretization" of the lessons to be learned.³⁰ Narrative serves as an effective tool for focus on the concrete failures of sinners, the concrete promise of God in Christ and his faithfulness to his people in daily life, and God's concrete plans for their actions in daily life. Therefore Luther believed that his preaching was making a significant difference in the hearers' lives. Both lectures and sermons give us some indication of how he thought he might use "narrative induction" to cultivate the identity of "child of God" in his hearers.

The reformer himself expressed his desire to have Christians go directly and only to Scripture, but he recognized, as he wrote his first model sermons for parish priests in 1521, that many needed help in reading the text. His intention in this postil was to depict the Christian life in such detail

27. WA 17.2:215.9–16; CP 2:156–57.

28. Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums*, 68, 82.

29. On the similarities between Luther's lectures and sermons, see Ulrich Asendorf, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 17–18.

30. Nembach, *Predigt des Evangeliums*, 139–42. See also Gerhard Heintze, *Luther's Predigt von Gesetz und Evangelium* (Munich: Kaiser, 1958), 50–65. Neither Nembach nor Heintze comments specifically on the pedagogical or proclaimatory use of stories in Luther's preaching.

that enough is said to inform a Christian individual of what is necessary for salvation. Would to God that my interpretation and those of all other teachers would perish and every Christian take the Scripture alone and just God's Word for themselves. You see from my verbosity how immeasurably different God's Word is in comparison to every human word, how no human being can sufficiently grasp and explain with all his words what is there. . . . Therefore, into the Scriptures, dear Christians, and let my interpretation and those of all other teachers be only a scaffolding for the building itself, that we may grasp the simple Word of God itself, taste it, and remain in it.³¹

This volume focuses on cultivating the identity of God's children as Luther pursued it through the particular instrument of the narrative, especially the retelling of biblical stories. To listen to Luther's practicing the task, we turn to his printed works, which purport to offer what he said in lectures and sermons. Of course, they do not do so precisely. They are not recordings by electronic means but rather are filtered through the brains and pens of his students and amanuenses, sometimes touched up by his own editorial oversight, sometimes not. Lischer bemoaned this fact. He recognized the "problem of accessibility to an oral event," which "makes it impossible for us to reproduce Luther's preaching through characterizations of his voice and bearing, as well as of the congregation's response."³² As regrettable but also inevitable as that is, marks of orality do indicate that editors did not intend to eliminate the experience of hearing the reformer completely. These marks of orality included references to current events, among others. The reformation that arose in Wittenberg, while indeed an oral happening, also exploited the medium of print in revolutionary ways.

Luther's concept of authorial authority differs from that of the twenty-first century. He regarded himself and an extensive group of colleagues as members of a team: for the most part he apparently trusted his colleagues and presumed their reworking of his material would serve the common cause. In addition, it is certain that he knew well the difference between the impact his writings made in print and the impact his speaking made in person. Both served the cause: Luther's retelling the stories of Scripture provided a new paradigmatic narrative for the lives of his contemporaries.

His recitations of these stories took place within the framework of what scholars in the last quarter century have come to call a "metanarrative." This volume begins with a brief attempt to summarize the Wittenberg hermeneutic that may define the term for Luther. The following chapter provides an overview of how Luther fits into the conception of narrative theology set forth by a few of its leading proponents these past three decades. Five chapters follow,

31. WA 10.1.1:728.5–22; CP 1:455.

32. Lischer, "Luther and Preaching," 487.

studying Luther's telling of stories in order that his hearers and readers might trust God well, view suffering well and put their sinful desires to death well, obey God in praising him and praying to him well, obey God in loving the neighbor well, and die well. This is the story of a preacher and teacher who believed that the Holy Spirit was aiding him as he strove to tell God's story well as a means of cultivating such a life through the paradigmatic patterns that Scripture presents.



This study began in the preparation for a lecture at the eleventh International Congress for Luther Research, held in Canoas, Brazil, in July 2007. The Congress Continuation Committee invited the author to explore the topic "Models of the Christian Life in Luther's Genesis Sermons and Lectures." This lecture appeared in the 2009 *Lutherjahrbuch*, volume 76, much improved by the editorial insight and guidance of Helmar Junghans, whose friendship and support since 1981 have contributed a good deal to my work as a student of Luther's life and thought. He has been a model of good scholarship and of the kind of life described in this volume. With his encouragement and that of his successor as editor of the *Lutherjahrbuch*, this study has emerged.

This volume also incorporates, sometimes rather directly, material from other article-length studies written by the author: "David: King, Prophet, Repentant Sinner: Martin Luther's Image of the Son of Jesse," *Perichoresis* (2010), 203–32 (in chaps. 4 and 6 below); "Luther's Recollections of Erfurt: The Use of Anecdotes for the Edification of His Hearers," *Luther-Bulletin* 20 (2010): (forthcoming) (in several chapters below); "Die Josef-Geschichten als Fürstenspiegel in der Wittenberger Auslegungstradition: 'Ein verständiger und weiser Mann' (Gen. 42, 33)," in *Christlicher Glaube und weltliche Herrschaft: Zum Gedenken an Günther Wartenberg*, edited by Michael Beyer, Jonas Flöter, and Markus Hein (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 41–55 (in chap. 6 below); "'Life Is King and Lord over Death': Martin Luther's View of Death and Dying," in *Tod und Jenseits in der Schriftkultur der Frühen Neuzeit*, edited by Marion Kobelt-Groch and Cornelia Niekus Moore (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 23–45 (in chap. 7 below); "'Ein kindt des todts' und 'Gottes Gast': Das Sterben in Luthers Predigten," *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 31 (2007): 3–22 (in chap. 7 below); "'The Noblest Skill in the Christian Church': Luther's Sermons on the Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 301–18 (in chap. 1 below). Thanks go to the editors of those periodicals or volumes for their help as well.

1

THE WHOLE LIFE OF A CHRISTIAN AS A LIFE OF REPENTANCE

Luther's Metanarrative

The word *metanarrative* cannot be found in dictionaries even a quarter century old. The term was invented to designate the framework of the narrator's thinking and the skeleton for the construction of the stories being told. A metanarrative constitutes a fundamental view of reality; it lays down principles of interpretation; it forms the hermeneutic that guides the composition of new stories and the manner in which old stories are re-presented. It is not only, as a literalist might interpret "meta," *after* the story, although it does help the narrator summarize what has been told and indicate to the hearers what they should make of the story. It also takes place *before* the story: it is a perception of ultimate truth that shapes the narrator's selection of the stories to be recited, the emphases on various elements within them, and the significance assigned to the story and its parts.

The narrator is first of all the hearer or reader of the story; as one who repeats or recasts the story, the narrator always speaks from one's own social location. In Luther's case that meant that he recounted his stories out of his own personal piety and out of his calling to proclaim God's Word, a calling that came to him as a monk and was intensified by his reception of the

doctorate, as a “teacher of the Bible.”¹ Thus the location from which Luther told the story embraced his concerns, as a university lecturer and preacher, to deliver the message of Scripture and to change his hearers’ and readers’ false perceptions of how to live the Christian life, to change their orientation for life into faithfulness to God and service to his creatures. Luther’s concerns certainly reflected his larger social, political, and economic environment, which shaped, limited, and defined his horizon for thinking. This location helped form his expression of what scholars today might label his metanarrative, because metanarratives are always in dialogue with the circumstances of daily life. It provided a path along which he strove to connect God’s revelation in Scripture with the daily life of his contemporaries.

God Reveals Himself and His Human Creatures in History and Stories

Viewing the Christian hermeneutic as narrative or metanarrative recognizes a key part of the biblical writers’ perceptions of reality. They all ground their truth and its expressions in the dynamic, interactive person of God. What all of them have to say relates to the unfolding course of human life, which takes place in the series of happenings labeled “history.” From Genesis’s garden of Eden to the streets of gold over which the saints will tread in the new Jerusalem, the biblical message is grounded in place and time. No biblical writer conceived of the subject matter under consideration apart from the historical unfolding of the story of who God is and what it means to be human.

So it was for Martin Luther. He had no concept of God apart from God in relationship to his human creatures. In April 1518, as he first explained his theology to his Augustinian brothers from across Germany in a meeting held in Heidelberg, he distinguished between God “hidden” and God “revealed.” This distinction formed a part of his “theology of the cross,” which teaches that coming to know God’s true nature requires the crucifixion of human reason’s attempts to fathom the Divine. It also teaches that the climax and apex of God’s revelation of his nature came on Christ’s cross.²

1. See Luther’s comment in 1530 in his lecture on Psalm 82: WA 31.2:212.12–18; LW 13:66.

2. A sampling of the rich literature on the “theology of the cross” begins with Walther von Loewenich’s *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), first published in German in 1929, which treats, above all, Luther’s concept of faith and reflects the context of the discussion of existentialism at that time. Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947), focuses more on what this *theologia crucis* means for Luther’s concept of divine revelation and of the atonement of Christ for sinners. Further bibliography may be found in Robert Kolb and Christian Neddens, *Gottes Wort vom Kreuz: Lutherische Theologie als kritische Theologie* (Oberursel: Lutherische Theologische Hochschule, 2001); and in Robert Kolb, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross Fifteen Years after Heidelberg: Luther’s Lectures on the Psalms of Ascent,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 61 (2010): 69–85. The topic is also treated in standard overviews of Luther’s theology.

Because Luther did not know he was inventing terminology that would be used for generations as technical theological vocabulary, he was not always careful when he used these terms. Thus the “hiddenness” of God is defined in three different ways in his writings. It sometimes refers to God as he exists in human imaginations, refashioned by sinful and thus inadequate, if not rebellious, fantasies about a manageable deity who fits the sinner’s needs and demands. In its first sense, however, it refers to the aspects of God that lie beyond human grasp, in part because the sinful mind is no longer able to see God as he really is, and in part because by definition the creature simply cannot grasp the whole of the Creator. In Heidelberg (April 1518), that use of the term stands over against the “revealed” God, meaning God as he lets himself be known, and lets himself be known by his human creatures precisely through his interaction with them. However, Luther inadvertently muddied the waters by pointing out that God’s revelation of himself takes place in ways that human reason cannot understand (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Therefore the revealed God is hiding from falsely functioning human reason in (from reason’s perspective) highly unlikely places, such as “crib” and “cross.”

This revealed God reveals himself in human history, through the message of the prophets and the proclamation of the apostles and through the written record from both. Kevin Vanhoozer explains that God unfolds his own story in a drama that is composed of word and deed, a drama that actually reveals both who God is and what it means to be human.³ In this written form, Luther was convinced, God’s people hear God’s voice.⁴ Luther moved beyond what medieval theologians understood to be the Bible’s ultimate authority for the teaching of the church within the context of the church’s formal authority to interpret Scripture and set forth its only meaning. He was able to do so because he could capitalize on the rich resources he carefully mined from its mother lode as a monk, as a reluctant but dedicated student climbing the academic ladder from degree to degree, as lecturer and preacher. His command of Scripture and his multifaceted exposure to its contents in the monastery could not help but lead his mind into formulating operating summaries to guide his interpretation, and they arose out of the biblical narrative, filtered through his Ockhamist education, his sensitive spirituality, and his experiences within the church and in the society of his time. His own formulations fulfilled Alister McGrath’s prescription, “The genesis of doctrine [or metanarrative] lies in the uncritical repetition of the narrative heritage of the past,” only if it can be conceded that he did indeed receive

3. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 39, cf. 37–56.

4. Robert Kolb, “The Relationship between Scripture and the Confession of the Faith in Luther’s Thought,” in *Kirkens bekjennelse I historisk og aktuelt perspektiv: Festschrift til Kjell Olav Sannes*, ed. Torleiv Austad, Tormod Engelviksen, and Lars Østnor (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, 2010), 53–62.

the medieval tradition critically in his effort to return to a straightforward repetition of the biblical message.⁵

Gordon Wenham identifies a fundamental presupposition behind the stories in Genesis that helps clarify the significance of Luther's understanding of the revealed God: the presumption that humankind is "intended to enjoy such intimacy (as described in Psalm 84:2) with God. In the garden of Eden story Adam and Eve and their creator seem to be on the friendliest terms until the serpent upsets it. The LORD worries about Adam's loneliness. He brings the animals to him, and then having created Eve out of a rib, presents her to him as a benevolent father-in-law would. Their intimacy is perpetuated by them all walking together in the cool of the day. Expulsion from Eden ends this age of intimacy."⁶ Luther certainly shared this presupposition, and God's efforts to restore that intimacy of Eden in creating faith in Jesus Christ did guide and direct his delivery of the biblical message.

Luther believed that the culmination of God's revelation of himself and his re-creating, salvific restoration of humanity came in the person of Jesus Christ, truly God and at the same time truly a human being. Christ and his impact on the life of the sinner whom he transforms into God's child form the center and framework for Luther's reading of Scripture and communication of its message. Preparing sermons on Genesis in 1521, he comments, "The first chapters of the book of Genesis embrace the full message of the entire Scripture, . . . [which] contains the incarnation of the eternal Son, the mortification of the old nature, and the life of the one who has been resurrected, that is, the new person."⁷ God the Son, incarnate as this human being, Jesus, thoroughly historical, was born, matured, spent time with disciples, died, and—rewriting the history of his human family—rose from the dead, body and all, retaining the scars of his death and the ability to eat fish. But as God reveals himself in history, he is hiding himself from sinful reason by coming in forms that do not match the sinful imagination's projection of what the Ultimate and Absolute, the pinnacle of reality, should act like and be like. For no one should expect to find God in a crib, on a cross, in a crypt. It is this third use of the "hiddenness" of God in Luther's usage that sometimes confuses scholars and diverts their view from one or both of the first two. All three are vital for an understanding of Luther's teaching regarding God.

Luther presumed that the revealed God reveals himself from the beginning—in the beginning (Gen. 1:1)—as a person who is speaking. God creates through speaking, and he begins conversation with his human creatures immediately. When they sinned, the first human creatures heard God, heard his sound as he

5. Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 7, 58–59.

6. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 81.

7. WA 9:329.10–14.

was walking, apparently to the place where they usually met to converse (Gen. 3:8). When they were not there, he called to them, asking not what they had done but where they were (3:9). The problem was that this God of conversation and community (community almost always involves conversation) wanted to be in relationship with his human creatures, and that involves meeting as well as conversing. Luther made a great deal out of both God's conversation with human beings and his community with them as he preached (early in his reforming career, 1523) and lectured (in the last years of his career, 1535–45) on Genesis.⁸ The entire biblical record that follows rehearses conversations and communications of God with human beings. The only God whom Luther can discuss is God in relationship to his human creatures.

The Creator and His Human Creatures

Likewise, the relationship of the human being to God is at the core of Luther's definition of what it means to be human. Relationship offers a good vantage point from which to assess how God, his human creatures, and indeed his whole creation actually function and therefore what the foundation or structure of reality is. On the basis of Luther's exegesis of the Psalms, Brian Brock states, "All creatures, says Luther, participate in a great cosmic web of reciprocal relations. The sun does not shine for itself, water does not flow for itself, plants do not give fruits for themselves; every creature lives by the law of love, sharing freely of itself with its neighbors."⁹ The relationship between God and his human creatures is not only, but most importantly, a matter of conversation. "If God is a speaking God, then we are always in the midst of learning from him what our grammar is about. Language is not simply 'there,' but we are learning what it means, and thus what it is, by listening in the form of prayer" and, looking beyond the psalm text on which Brock is commenting, above all by listening to preaching or proclamation in any form. "Language is the place God has given so that he can use it to claim us"¹⁰ and the place where we respond.

The human being is first and foremost a creature of God.¹¹ In the Wittenberg reformer's basic instruction for children, they learn before all else that the first commandment of the Decalogue means that "we are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things."¹² In his Large Catechism this first command of God

8. The sermons are found in WA 14:97–488 (printed versions, 1527, in WA 24:1–710); the lectures in WA 42–44; LW 1–7.

9. Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 188.

10. Ibid., 177.

11. Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, vol. 2, *Disputatio de homine*, part 3, *Die theologische Definition des Menschen* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1989), 92–96, 545–622.

12. BSLK 507; BoC 351.

for his people means that “you are to regard me alone as your God.” Like psychological theorist Erik Erikson more than four hundred years later,¹³ Luther defined trust as fundamental to human personality. In contrast to Erikson, Luther applied this observation to the human creature’s relationship to God. Gods of any sort are “that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart; . . . it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol.”¹⁴

The distinction between Creator and creature structured Luther’s thinking about both God and the human being. As Jewish exegete Meir Sternberg has observed about the Old Testament record, the Bible “directs much of its narrative energies” “against [a] humanizing conception of the divine order.” Instead, it “inculcates a model of reality where God exercises absolute sway over the universe (nature, culture, history) in conspicuous isolation and transcendence.”¹⁵ But this absolute Lord of creation is, also in Sternberg’s view, a God who desires conversation and community with the people he has made. “God shapes the world plot with a view to getting his creatures to ‘know’ him. Biblical history therefore stretches as a long series of demonstrations of divine power followed by tests of memory, gratitude, inference from precept and precedent, or, in short, of ‘knowledge,’ with further demonstrations staged in reward or punishment.”¹⁶ Luther defined the content of the demonstrations as both divine punishment and the display of God’s mercy and love; yet he also understood that the “metanarrative” guiding human history is above all God’s desire to be known by his human creatures and to enjoy a relationship of love and trust with them. Retelling stories of God’s dealings with his people repeats his promise to be their faithful God in the future, to be the same God for them tomorrow as he was yesterday for patriarchs, disciples, and all their successors among the people of God.

Luther believed that all stories in Scripture occur, as all other events in human history, in a sequence that began with creation and will end with Christ’s return to judge. He “experienced history as a movement or progress in which God was ever active” as he led his human creatures through time. History on the move, as the ever-changing chain of divine and human actions and interactions, has its ultimate purpose, John Headley argues, in bringing human beings “to a knowledge of God through His works.” Even though historical knowledge

13. Erik Erikson, *Child and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950); Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964), esp. 81–107; Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), esp. 91–141; Erikson, *Life History and the Historical Moment* (New York: Norton, 1975).

14. BSLK 560–61; BoC 386.

15. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 101.

16. Ibid., 48.

apart from God's revelation provides only indirect and often obscure glimpses of God's presence in the world, God, according to Luther, is present in the course of human events. Based on what Scripture reveals, his people could gather some sense of what he was about through observing these events.¹⁷ Since history "is God's work," the historical accounts of Scripture reveal what God was doing in behalf of his people, alongside telling the story of human action, in sin and in trust and obedience toward God. Therefore the reformer's treatment of such biblical accounts, in commenting on them or in reshaping them with pointed detail, reflects his convictions about both God and human creatures, at the time of the accounts and in his own day.¹⁸ According to Headley, "faith and unbelief" constitute the history of humankind, particularly of the church. "And at the vortex is the Word, this veritable attack of God upon human history" and sinful rebellion against God. This attack creates the church and leads it into the struggle against all that opposes God.¹⁹

The oft-repeated judgment that "Luther was not a systematic theologian" must be qualified in the light of what has been observed here. He may not fit the twenty-first-century definition of the systematic theologian, and he certainly departed from the medieval model for constructing a theological system, a system governed by Aristotle and Peter Lombard. But Luther worked with the inner logic and coherence of a worldview that flowed from the personal claim he experienced in the Bible, the claim of the person of God upon his human creatures, expressed throughout human history and above all in the incarnation of Christ.

With this understanding of God's revelation as embedded in history, the Wittenberg reformer fits the Yale school's systematic theologian Hans Frei's observation about the long succession of biblical commentators that Augustine also exemplifies: they "envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories . . . from creation to the final consummation to come."²⁰ The Wittenberg reformer believed, as Frei's colleague George Lindbeck expresses it, that the Bible is "a canonically and narrationally unified and internally glossed (that is, self-referential and self-interpreting) whole centered on Jesus Christ, and telling the story of the dealings of the Triune God with his people and his world in ways which are typologically . . . applicable to the present."²¹

That sequence began with creation, God's act that set the framework for all reality, including the unfolding of human history. In the beginning was

17. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 42.

18. Ibid., 42–55.

19. Ibid., 55.

20. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 1.

21. George A. Lindbeck, "Scripture, Consensus, and Community," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 75.

God, it is stated in Genesis 1:1, and everything that constitutes reality flows from his saying, “Let there be. . . .” His speaking in Genesis 1 was speaking that determined reality: creative speaking. The next significant milestone in the unfolding of the human story was the fall into sin. For Luther, as for the apostle Paul (if Ben Witherington’s analysis is correct), history repeated a cycle of apostasy, repentance, and obedience that can be seen in Genesis 1–11, repeated in the entire history of Israel, a third time in Jesus’s encounter with the world, and finally in the lives of Paul and of every other person among God’s faithful.²² The fall determined that sinners hear God’s speaking only in terms of his anger over their not being what he had created them to be. They hear only the demands of the law and its diagnoses of their state apart from their Creator. The center of the story comes with the interruption of this sinful rebellion by the appearance of Jesus Christ on earth. Clearly Luther viewed the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity as the key, the turning point in the world’s history.

In composing his Wartburg Postil in late 1521, Luther prepared a letter of dedication to Albert, count of Mansfeld. It provides “instruction on what to look for and expect in the Gospels” and focuses on the gospel as “a discourse or story about Christ, just as happens when someone writes a book about a king or prince, telling what he did, said, and suffered in his day.” Some tell the story succinctly, others not. In whatever form, this gospel “is supposed to be nothing but a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling what he is, what he did, said, and suffered; . . . in briefest form, the gospel is a discourse about Christ, that he is the Son of God and became human for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been made Lord over all things.”²³ Luther’s “summary” of the gospel repeats these thoughts: “It is the story . . . of Christ, God’s Son, David’s son, who died and rose and was placed as Lord” at God’s right hand.²⁴ Christ’s restoration of human life through his death for sin and his resurrection to restore righteousness (Rom. 4:25) enables human history to proceed, with his faithful people trusting in him and serving him as they love his other creatures.

They are, however, involved in a lifelong struggle with the person of Satan and his forces. Luther taught that human history after the fall takes place on the battlefield between God and Satan, between truth and deception. John Maxfield’s reading of Luther’s Genesis lectures concludes that he “reconstructed the Christian past in such a way as to provide a clear picture of how Christian existence, caught in the cosmic battle between God and the devil, had endured since the beginning and would endure until the last day.”²⁵ Indeed,

22. Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 5.

23. WA 10.1.1:9.11–20; LW 35:117–18.

24. WA 10.1.1:10.6–11.

25. John A. Maxfield, *Luther’s Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008), 179.

this recital of the history of God's people encourages believers in the midst of present conflict. This story supports and sustains them amid strife. In that struggle preaching played a key role, as the proclamation of God's law (revealed not only against the backdrop of human sin but also of the devil's lies) and as the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. The sword of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6:17) counters Satan's claims on the sinner with God's re-creative action in Christ's death and resurrection.²⁶ "As Luther exercised himself and his students in the word of God from the book of Genesis, he utilized the narrative to develop in his students a perception that the present, like the past, is caught up in apocalyptic warfare, and the future is to be placed in God's hands."²⁷ This eschatological battle will find its end, nonetheless, when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead and to consummate the restoration of the righteousness of his chosen people. This sequence outlined the biblical view of human history, which Luther accepted and used.²⁸

The grand sweep of human history repeats itself, Luther observed, in the daily lives of all God's chosen people. By delivering the metanarrative, and all the brief narratives that make up the Scriptures, Luther strove to bring God's active and re-creative Word into the heart of his hearers' and readers' lives. In 1531, when Luther reflects on the "success" of his efforts over the past decade, he comments, "It has, praise God, come to this, that men and women, young and old, know the catechism and how to believe, live, pray, suffer, and die."²⁹ In *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, written in 1519, he outlines the Christian life on the basis of Titus 2:12. That life consists of living soberly (crucifying the flesh), justly (in regard to the neighbor), and devoutly (in relationship to God).³⁰ Said another way: in 1525, in his work *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, he outlines the five chief parts of Christian teaching for parish pastors:

1. preaching the law to reveal sin and terrify the conscience,
2. preaching the gospel to bestow the forgiveness of sins,
3. putting to death sinful desires,
4. encouraging works of love toward the neighbor, and
5. continuing to emphasize the law for those without faith.³¹

Scott Hendrix has found a worthy summary of Luther's goals in pulpit and lectern in his book *On the Two Kinds in the Sacrament* (1522): the reformer

26. See Fred Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 25–27.

27. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures*, 212.

28. Headley, *Church History*, 1–55, 224–65.

29. "Aber nu ists / Gott lob / dahin kommen / das man vnd weib / jung vnd alt / den Catechismus weis / Vnd wie man gleubten / leben / beten / leiden / vnd sterben sol"; in *Warnung an seine lieben Deutschen*, 1531: WA 30.3:317.32–34; LW 47:52.

30. WA 2:147.4; LW 31:299.

31. WA 18:65.9–66.11.

sought “to provide a religious environment in which believers would develop as fully as possible into the model Christians described by him in *Freedom of a Christian*: free through faith to serve others in love. The creation of these ‘real Christians’ [as the sense of Luther’s phrase is effectively rendered with the addition of the adjective] took precedence over other agendas that interpreters have occasionally tried to impose on Luther.”³² Hendrix quotes Luther: if his readers would abandon “unfaithfulness, hatred, envy, wrath, and unbelief,” then “we would at last become again a group of real Christians, whereas at present we are almost completely pagan and only Christian in name.”³³

With two words Hendrix aptly recapitulates what Luther meant when he talked of Christians as those who have been restored to their true humanity. The first is *righteousness*—Luther’s conception of what one is supposed to be and only is by faith—a sense of identity in relationship to God and a sense of identity in relationship to God’s creatures, human and other. The second word is *piety*: Luther himself transformed “piety,” the German word *Frömmigkeit*, from a term for general upright and honorable living to a designation for living a life of faith in God that produces love and service to others.³⁴ Helmar Junghans has aptly deemed Luther’s “Christianization” of German culture as the exercise of the Christian “office of salting,” of being the salt and light of which Christ speaks in Matthew 5:13.³⁵

On the basis of the linguistic theory he had learned from his Ockhamist instructors, Luther presumed that God’s Word does not merely provide information or point to a reality in heavenly forms. God’s Word for Luther is active and serves as God’s tool to achieve certain goals in human history. Luther’s use of that Word presumed that “in the beginning there was not a big bang but the creative word, not a mute principle, an idea, existence in general, mere material, but living speech, communication that creates understanding, the creative and liberating devotion in this word from the Creator. This word is to be treasured so highly because it is the divine coming together of meaning and power and action.”³⁶ Scripture engaged him, Luther believed, not as “true information about, or even an accurate running commentary upon, the work of God in salvation and new creation, but as taking an active part *within* that ongoing purpose. . . . Scripture is there to be a means of God’s action in and

32. Scott Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 37.

33. Ibid., 41; *Von beider Gestalt des Sakraments zu nehmen*, WA 10.2:39.1–14; LW 36:264.

34. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 59–60; cf. Walter Sparn, “Wahrlich, dieser ist ein frommer Mensch gewesen!” Überlegungen zu einem evangelischen Begriff von *Frömmigkeit*, in *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Henri A. Krop, Arie L. Molendijk, and Hen de Vries (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 447–65.

35. Helmar Junghans, “Luther und die Kultur,” *LuJ* 52 (1985): 164–83, here 172–83.

36. Joachim Ringleben, “Die Bibel als Wort Gottes,” in *Die Autorität der Heiligen Schrift für Lehre und Verkündigung der Kirche*, ed. Karl-Hermann Kandler (Neuendettelsau: Freimund, 2000), 21.

through us.”³⁷ More than the “performative” speech of contemporary literary scholars,³⁸ God’s promise of a restored relationship with himself is creative, or re-creative, speech. On the basis of Romans 10:17, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (NKJV), Luther formulated a concept of the prevenient Word: “The Word has to come first, and it initiates salvation.”³⁹ God’s Word, Luther believed, continued to foster trust, fight evil lusts, and activate the God-pleasing life of service and love.

The “righteousness” that God’s Word creates in the sinner establishes a new identity in a manner similar to that described by Charlotte Linde’s “narrative induction.”⁴⁰ The rebel becomes a child of God; the person infatuated with and possessed by Satan’s lies becomes Christ’s disciple. Luther’s perception of how God works in his Word anticipated the assertion of David Kelsey that “God ‘uses’ the church’s various uses of scripture in her common life to nurture and reform the self-identity both of the community and of the individual persons who comprise it.”⁴¹ From different angles Luther set forth his understanding of how the Word of God actually accomplishes the creation of a righteous, pious person in the context of daily life and how it fosters the expression and practice of one’s new identity. His understanding of the nature of that Word, as it becomes concrete in oral, written, or sacramental forms in the mouths or hands of Christians, approximates the analysis of human speaking as “deputized discourse,” as advanced by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Luther believed that God, in order to convey his will to his chosen people, had placed his own authority in the words of preachers. God gave his own words via Scripture to the church, Luther taught, in the manner of Kevin Vanhoozer’s “canonical-linguistic” perception of how the Holy Spirit works.⁴² Luther believed that the Spirit entrusts something to the preachers ordained to deliver his promises and commands to the people publicly, and to all Christians in personal conversation—namely, a measure of “superintendence” over the formulation of the message that God speaks in Scripture in their delivery of the message to others.⁴³

The Christian life that Luther strove to cultivate involved first of all trust in God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. As Wolterstorff states, a system of

37. N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 22.

38. Especially J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

39. WA 17.2:201.5–7; CP 2:149.

40. See Introduction: “Luther the Storyteller and His Cultivation of the Christian Life.”

41. David Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 214.

42. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 15–25, and *passim*.

43. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42–51.

relationship based upon speaking requires the hearer's trust in the truth and reliability of what is said.⁴⁴ Luther's examples from biblical figures served to nurture dependence on God and confidence in his merciful disposition toward his baptized children.⁴⁵ Luther took for granted that suffering of all kinds determines much of life on earth, and so he turned to the likes of Abraham and Joseph, for example, to demonstrate how his hearers and readers could flee to the refuge and haven of their providential Creator and Savior for support and comfort in times of suffering. Such a daily life embraces two aspects of righteous or pious activity for a preacher with convictions about sin as strong as Luther had. He emphasized the need to "mortify the flesh," to continue to beat back and defeat the temptations to stray from trusting in God and loving the neighbor. Such mortification aimed toward the practice of humanity as God had designed it, toward worship of God and love for other people. That love proceeds out of the trust that God gives in reestablishing the relationship between himself and his human creatures. Luther found a natural part of trusting in God to be in conversing with this God who created through his Word and proved himself to be a God of conversation and community. Thus Luther looked to patriarchs and prophets as models of hearing God's Word, of repeating it to others, and of praying. Luther also regarded the God-pleasing conduct of daily life as a significant element of piety. That conduct expresses itself in the practice of community, of mutual love and support, with other human beings and the whole of creation. Included in such exemplary living is exemplary dying. For Luther, as for medieval pastors, preparation for dying belongs to the rhythm of daily life. To be sure, Luther treated these aspects of pious living on the basis of a variety of biblical genres, but important among them were the models for such living that sprang from the biblical narratives on which Luther preached and lectured.

The Hermeneutical Functions of Luther's Metanarrative

The first of his postils, the Wartburg series of sermons (1521–22), begins with an introduction that explains what the gospel is and how to proclaim it effectively to God's people. In it Luther borrows language from Romans 12:7–8: preaching involves "teaching and admonition. Teaching is when one preaches on what is not known, in order to bring the people knowledge and understanding. Admonition is when one urges them and encourages them to do that which everyone already knows. Both are necessary for the preacher."⁴⁶ As Luther later developed his insights, teaching concentrates on the delivery

44. Ibid., 89–93.

45. Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 23–24.

46. WA 10.1.2:1.18–2.3.

of the gospel that creates or restores new life in Christ, while admonition applies both consolation and instruction to daily Christian living. Eberhard Winkler describes how Luther practiced both proclamation and pastoral care in view of these parallel biblical claims: “The decisive priority of God’s action in no way excludes the appeal to human insight. The pastoral comfort [that stems from God’s commitment to love his people] therefore . . . points to a component that sets [human] activity in motion.”⁴⁷ Together these two activities constitute the good work that God has called preachers to perform. Preaching was the most important good work that Christ performed in his earthly ministry. Where Christ is present, the gospel will certainly be preached. When preachers proclaim Christ, they make him present for their hearers.⁴⁸

Luther presumed that Scripture held the ultimate authority for the proclamation of God’s Word. The fact that Luther and his followers did not fix a definite list of canonical books officially changes nothing in that observation.⁴⁹ The Bible held that authority because the Holy Spirit had given it and because God is present in it and in the message that arises from its pages. Fred Meuser speaks of Luther’s belief in “the real presence of Christ in proclamation.”⁵⁰ The reformer informed readers of his Church Postil that “God is everywhere, but he is really to be found in the Holy Scriptures, in his Word, more than anywhere else.”⁵¹ For Scripture is “the Holy Spirit’s own special book, writing, and word.”⁵² William Graham interprets Luther’s correlation of these three terms as asserting that the book, which originated from the act of writing, nonetheless is designed to issue into “oral speech or spoken message.”⁵³ Thus for Luther this “book” becomes more than pages within a binding: it is an event in God’s care for his people on earth. Graham admits that “Luther’s statements about the word of God . . . take on a concreteness and immediacy that most of us today are able to grasp only with difficulty, if at all.” He continues, “Nevertheless, if it was natural to him and his audience for the written word of scripture to be experienced and conceived of as an oral word, it was also much more natural to them than to us today to conceive of and perhaps to experience God’s direct speech in the reading of scripture (or in the preaching of a sermon).”⁵⁴ Graham also

47. Eberhard Winkler, “Luther als Seelsorger und Prediger,” in *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, ed Helmar Junghans (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 1:228.

48. WA 10.1.2:154.10–15; CP 1:94.

49. William A. Graham (*Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 121) asserts that Calvin and Zwingli were like Luther in this regard. This does not alter the fact that the churches of the Reformed tradition generally did fix the canon in their confessional documents.

50. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher*, 13.

51. WA 12:413.32–34; CP 2:23.

52. WA 54:474.4.

53. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 152.

54. Ibid., 153.

observes, “Luther’s understanding of the word of God, that most central theme of Reformation thought, was indissolubly bonded to the role of scripture as the tangible embodiment of the Word. If he commonly juxtaposed ‘the spirit’ (*spiritus / der Geist*) and ‘the letter’ (*litera / der Buchstabe*) of scripture, to the advantage of the former as the ultimate source of Christian faith and life, this in no way lessened his concern with the written word of scripture as the palpable authority for that faith and life.”⁵⁵ Medieval preachers had largely followed the definition of the preaching task as “instruction for morals and faith,” as set forth by Alan of Lille at Paris in the late twelfth century.⁵⁶ Luther likewise believed that preachers taught and admonished with those goals in mind. In addition, Luther’s sense of God’s performative Word, as the instrument of his accomplishing his creative and re-creative will, indeed posited God’s presence in both its oral and written forms, albeit in a different way and different form than he viewed God’s gift of the true presence of Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of sins in the Lord’s Supper. But God’s presence made itself known in the power of the gospel for the salvation of those who trust it (Rom. 1:17), according to Luther. This proclamation engages God’s chosen people in conversation with their Creator, Luther believed, and that conversation creates the trust in God that permeates and transforms life. As Vanhoozer notes, “Scripture, in addressing our imaginations, speaks to our minds, wills, and emotions alike.”⁵⁷ Therefore, preaching God’s promise generates the assurance that God is and will remain present in the hearer’s life. In his analysis of Augustine’s and Luther’s ways of “singing the ethos of God,” Brian Brock states that “the preoccupation of antique conceptions of ethics with individual flourishing is displaced in Luther by an inquiry into what it means to live with God, in which the dramatics of fellowship are emphasized. . . . Luther’s emphasis is on transformation into the form of Christ understood in terms of *Nachfolge*, the following of . . . a God who is leading in time. . . . Luther’s is a dialogical ethic of hearing and speaking *with* God.”⁵⁸

Critical, then, is the question of how God and his human creatures conduct this dialogue. Early in his ministry, Luther departed from a medieval precedent that saw the spirit/letter distinction as a contrast between inner and outer forms of communication, especially written words. Instead, he interpreted “spirit” in terms of his own definition of “gospel” in contrast to his understanding of “law.”⁵⁹ This means that the Wittenberg reformer took for granted what

55. Ibid., 145.

56. Mark Zier, “Sermons of the Twelfth Century Schoolmasters and Canons,” in *The Sermon*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzle (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 325.

57. Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 12.

58. Brock, *Singing the Ethos*, 165–66.

59. Erik Herrmann, “‘Why then the Law?’ Salvation History and the Law in Martin Luther’s Interpretation of Galatians 1513–1522” (PhD diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2005), *passim*, esp. 236–47.

Graham calls the “relational” aspect of sacred writings. God speaks from the pages of the Bible and through those who present its message. He is a God of conversation, who through the word that he speaks in Scripture creates community, the “sensual” or “affective” aspects along with the cognitive that foster and structure them.⁶⁰ God the Holy Spirit transforms the spirit of his chosen children as he repeats his words found on the biblical page, whether through its reading or through hearing it—in preaching, conversation, or in connection with the material signs of the sacraments. “The oral dimension [of the use of Scripture] is, however, the one most intimately bound up with the major personal communal roles of scripture in religious life, especially those that move not only in the intellectual or ideational realm but also in that of the senses—as, for example, in ritual or devotional use,”⁶¹ both in the home or private use and in public worship.

There was never a time when God’s written message for his people—at first in the reading of the Old Testament, then in Gospels and Epistles of the New—did not occupy a central place in Christian worship and congregational life: not a single Sunday in the history of the church passed without reading the Scripture in public worship.⁶² But that reading, in oral form itself, always led to proclamation, applying the message that the preacher found in the pages of the Bible to the concerns of the audience in the midst of life as its members were experiencing it. As Graham observes, “The Protestant Reformation in Europe was in many ways a conscious effort to recover the early Christian kerygmatic orientation—the direct preaching and teaching of the word of God to all who would listen.”⁶³ That orientation, of course, never completely disappeared from the medieval church, though it was often lacking on the local level.

Despite God’s presence in the pages of the Bible, its text could be misinterpreted. Therefore the preacher had to depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That is necessary, Luther told the Wittenberg congregation, because every biblical teaching had been attacked and rejected by heretics.⁶⁴ His recounting of Herod’s encounter with the wise men led Luther to point out that the king made it look as though he wanted to learn the truth as he gathered the learned to search the Scriptures (Matt. 2:4). But he did so deceitfully, seeking to accomplish what he wanted and intended, not what Scripture commanded. He desired to do the opposite of what God’s Scriptures said: he sought to muffle God’s Word. This treatment of his Word served as an example that should bring fear to the consciences of Christians so that they might avoid this kind

60. See Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 6.

61. Ibid., 155.

62. Contra Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 123.

63. Ibid., 120.

64. WA 21:230.21–38; CP 2.293.

of abuse of the Bible, Luther observed.⁶⁵ For “the spiritual Herodians do not deny the gospel outwardly but learn it from true Christians, but only with the intention of using it for their own wanton purposes.”⁶⁶ On Easter Monday 1523 Luther reminded his hearers that “the Word without the Spirit is useless. But God almighty himself says . . . that his Word which he has preached will not return empty. Therefore we cannot be indifferent to preaching since it is God’s will that the Holy Spirit be given us through the Word, and he will not stand for our shutting our traps and waiting until he sends miracles from heaven while the Word and the Sacrament just sit there.”⁶⁷

Luther’s presumption that God is present in Scripture created the reformer’s conviction that the divine Word there is powerful. In 1523 he told his audience that Isaiah 55:11, with its promise that God’s Word will not return empty, “should make us bold and joyful when we are already cold. We have by God’s grace the very Word of God, for which we should raise our hands in thanks to God.” Because God promises that his Word will bear fruit, “you will undoubtedly feel and experience something when you take it in hand and not make a mockery of it but deal with it seriously. You cannot have such evil thoughts in your heart if you take something from Scripture and read it or go to someone else and talk with him about it. That will calm your evil desires and your flesh.”⁶⁸ Luther cultivated his new piety of conversation with God in this way.

Luther came to define the ultimate purpose of the daily use of God’s Word in teaching and admonition as the fostering of the life of repentance. For his entire life he wrestled with the mystery of how sin and evil continued in the lives of those who trusted in Christ. He became convinced that the pattern Paul defines as dying to sin and being raised to walk in the footsteps of Christ, set in baptism (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:11–15), takes place on a daily basis through the use of other forms of God’s Word. He begins his 1517 attack on indulgence practices in his Ninety-five Theses with the sentence “The whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance.”⁶⁹ Scholars differ on the extent to which, at this point in his theological development, he was only echoing the words of Johann Tauler and other medieval theologians who stressed the continuing need for sorrow over sin, and to what extent his exegetical studies were bringing him to a new perception of repentance.⁷⁰ He expresses his new understanding best when he claims in his Small Catechism that the Holy Spirit’s baptismal

65. WA 10.1.1:632.6–10; 10.1.1:633.14–19; CP 1:376–77.

66. WA 10.1.1:668.15; CP 1:407.

67. WA 12:503.33–504.6; CP 2:278–79.

68. WA 12:500.33–501.17; CP 2:275–76.

69. “The Ninety-Five Theses on Indulgences,” 1517, in WA 1:233.10–11; LW 31:25.

70. Theo Bell, *Divus Bernhardus: Bernhard von Clairvaux in Martin Luthers Schriften* (Mainz: Zabern, 1993), 62–71, 124–33; Volker Leppin, “Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit”: Zur Aufnahme mystischer Tradition in Luthers erster Ablaßthese,” ARG 93 (2003): 7–25; Leppin, “Transformationen spätmittelalterlicher Mystik bei Luther,” in *Gottes Nähe unmittelbar erfahren: Mystik im Mittelalter und bei Martin Luther*, ed. Bernd Hamm and Volker Leppin

action is repeated in daily repentance: “The old Adam in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand, a new person is daily to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”⁷¹ Luther firmly believed in the continuity of God’s promise of salvation, no matter in what form it first claimed the sinner. He did not attempt to explain why that promise does not come to perfect fruition when it is made. He only knew that sinfulness still besets those who have the promise of salvation, and so he dedicated his every sermon to addressing the need to die to sin and be raised to the life of God’s promise day in and day out.

The Three Distinctions of Luther’s Hermeneutics

Guiding Luther in his study and proclamation of the biblical message were three essential distinctions that clarified what the writers of Scripture were saying. These three points of orientation included a description of what God says to his human creatures (the distinction of law and gospel), a description of what it means to be human (the distinction of two kinds of righteousness), and a description of the two realms or relationships in which God speaks and human identity is displayed (the distinction of the vertical and horizontal realms. [Luther himself did not use the terms “vertical” and “horizontal” but instead spoke of the “heavenly” and “earthly/temporal” realms, or the realm of God’s right hand and the realm of his left hand.]).⁷²

The story of Jesus presented the Messiah as both “sacrament” or “gift”—as Savior from sin and evil (which is God’s action)—and as example (which reveals the requirements for human performance). “When you have Christ as the foundation and chief benefit of your salvation, then comes the other part, that you grasp him as example and dedicate yourself to serving your neighbor, since you see that God has given you this neighbor. So faith and love work together.”⁷³ Luther tells his postil readers that the gospel for Oculi (third Sunday in Lent), Luke 11:14–23, “like all the gospels, teaches us faith and love, for it presents Christ to us as a most loving savior and helper in every need on the basis of his great love.” He pours out his love on believers “so that, according to the nature of love, we should do to others what he has done for

(Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2007), 165–85; and Martin Brecht, “Luthers neues Verständnis der Buße und die reformatorische Entdeckung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 101 (2004): 281–91.

71. BSLK 516–17; BoC 360.

72. See summaries of these distinctions in Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), *passim*; and Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther, Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50–55, 64–68.

73. WA 10.1.1:12.12–15.

us.”⁷⁴ Christ brings both the free gift of salvation and the renewal of the life that God designed for us to serve the neighbor. This “teaching” could find its proper expression, Luther believed, only if preachers can distinguish what God does for his human creatures and what he expects them to do themselves. He designated these two divine actions as gospel and law respectively. Luther could use the two words in different senses, but when they appear together, they are inseparable yet sharply distinct: what God gives to his human creatures dare never be confused with what he demands from them: their performance. He gives life and core identity as his children; he requires obedience to his plan for human life.

Law and Gospel

This distinction between God’s creative, life-bestowing word or way of acting and his prescribing word, which expresses his design for life, guided and framed all of Luther’s use of God’s Word. He bestows believers’ core identity as his children upon them through the gospel, which restores humanity to its original relationship of love and trust in God. In that relationship God expects his children to perform the activities he has designed them to do. Luther began to employ this distinction as his formal hermeneutical guide to biblical interpretation by 1519,⁷⁵ and in his lectures on Galatians in 1531 he observed, “Whoever knows well how to distinguish the gospel from the law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.”⁷⁶

Luther does not elaborate on the distinction between law and gospel in his Smalcald Articles of 1537, a programmatic writing setting forth his agenda for discussion at the ecumenical council called by the pope. Yet he does define each word in such a way that its text provides a basis for perceiving how he understands these two inseparable but distinct messages from God. God’s law, his expression of his expectations for human performance, has two purposes: to keep order in society through threats of punishment and promise of reward, and to reveal the root of our sin and all its fruits in the sins we commit. The law that keeps order in society often has other than the intended result: it provokes some people to sin worse to prove that they are in charge of their own lives, and it encourages others to rely on their works to please God rather than to use them to love the neighbor.⁷⁷ The law’s most

74. WA 17.2:214.30–215.3; CP 2:156.

75. See Lowell C. Green, *How Melanchthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict, 1980), 201–3; Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel: New Light upon Luther’s Way from Medieval Catholicism to Evangelical Faith* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 43–46, 68–71.

76. WA 40.1:207.3–4; LW 26:115.

77. Smalcald Articles 3.2; in BSLK; and in BoC 311–12.

significant function is to reveal God's wrath as the "thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint and allows no one to be right but drives the whole lot of them into terror and despair." Luther sees the law as the hammer that breaks the rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29). To those whom the law drives to repentance, the Holy Spirit sends the gospel, "the consoling promise of grace," for which the law, like John the Baptist's preaching, has "prepared the way for the Lord, so that they could receive grace and await and accept from him the forgiveness of sins." Luther bases this distinction on Luke 24:47, Christ's command to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins.⁷⁸

The Wittenberg reformer repeated his contrast often to make it clear to his students and to his lay hearers as well. The distinction of law and gospel as such never became the subject of a major work of his, but he did publish two sermons he had preached at two critical points in the 1530s on this distinction: the first in 1532, when the pure proclamation of the gospel seemed at stake anew in polemics with Roman Catholic theologians, and the second in 1537, amid heated dispute with his own student Johann Agricola, whose dismissal of the role of the law in the Christian life seriously threatened the proper understanding of both law and gospel, in Luther's opinion.⁷⁹ He depicted the contrast in various ways throughout his life, but with a great deal of consistency. Quotations from the 1532 sermon may illustrate this: "The law is for the old Adam, the gospel for the troubled conscience."⁸⁰ "The law makes me a sinner. The gospel says, 'Your sins are not to harm you, but rather you shall be saved.'"⁸¹ From Galatians 3:23 Luther reminded his hearers that the law had made them its prisoners.⁸² Luther's amanuensis and editor Georg Röer expands the text in the Jena edition of the reformer's works: "The law demands perfect righteousness from everyone." The law tells us "what he commands us to do, what we should do. It demands works from us." That, Luther judged, was easy to accomplish *in causa formali* but very difficult *in causa finali*: it is easy to ascertain what should be done and make some token show of obedience, but it is difficult to fulfill the law's true goal, obedience with a heart that loves God without reservation.⁸³

Five years later Luther was deeply concerned about a proper understanding of the law in the face of Agricola's antinomianism. In a 1537 sermon he states that the law reveals "what the human being is, what he was, and what he will

78. Smalcald Articles 3.2; in *BSLK*; and in *BoC* 312–13.

79. See Robert Kolb, "'The Noblest Skill in the Christian Church': Luther's Sermons on the Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 71 (2007): 301–18, from which much of the following material is taken.

80. WA 36:22.28–30; cf. 36:41.13–14, 30–32.

81. WA 36:19.35–36.

82. WA 36:21.4–25.

83. WA 36:13.25–27; cf. 36:30.19–35.

become once more.” Its first description and prescription is “‘You shall love God with your whole heart.’ . . . You had this treasure in paradise and were created so that you could love God with your whole heart. You have lost that and must return to it. Otherwise you cannot come into God’s kingdom.” Luther then addresses what he fears—perhaps falsely—is a libertine streak in his disciple’s thinking. He rejects the idea that a person who loves neither God nor neighbor and commits grievous sin will suffer no spiritual harm “if you just believe.” Sin brings condemnation; to confirm this, Luther cites Galatians 5:19–21; Matthew 5:17–18; 12:36; and Romans 8:3–4; 3:31.⁸⁴ Luther’s experiences with God’s demands continued to make their mark on him: “When I measure my life against the law, I see and feel all the time its opposite in my life.”⁸⁵ Even believers battle their own sinful desires and therefore need the law’s calling them to Christ as “helper and Savior.”⁸⁶

Christ helps sinners in two ways. First, he takes our part against God and serves as “the cloak that is thrown over our shame—ours, I say, the cloak over our shame because he has taken our sin and shame upon himself—but in God’s sight he is the mercy seat, without sin and shame, pure virtue and honor. Like a brooding hen, he spreads his wings over us to protect us from the hawk, that is, the devil with the sin and death that he causes. God has forgiven this sin for Christ’s sake.”⁸⁷ But the gospel does not only effect the removal of sin. It also bestows upon the believer the power and strength to live as a child of God. By means of that forgiveness, God has bestowed on sinners this new identity as his children. “He not only covers and protects us, but he also wants to nourish and feed us as the hen nourishes and feeds her chicks. That is, he wants to give us the Holy Spirit and the strength to begin to love God and keep his commandments. When Christ demanded that the man give up everything to follow him (Matt. 19:16–25), he was saying that keeping God’s commandments involves knowing and having Christ.”⁸⁸

The gospel does not demand our works or tell us what to do, Luther proclaimed in 1532. Instead, it tells us to receive, to accept a gift, so that we are passive. That is, the gospel affirms that God promises and says to you:

“This and that I impart to you. You can do nothing for it; you have done nothing for it, but it is my doing.” Just as in baptism I did nothing; it is not of my doing in any way. It is God’s doing, and he says to me, “Pay attention. I baptize you and wash you of all your sins. Accept it, it is yours.” That is what it means to receive a gift. This is the distinction of law and gospel. Through the law a demand is made for what we should do. It presses for our activity for God and

84. WA 45:146.25–147.33.

85. WA 45:151.5–9, 26–28.

86. WA 45:153.26–32.

87. WA 45:153.33–154.14.

88. WA 45:153.15–154.36.

the neighbor. In the gospel we are required to receive a gift. . . . The gospel is pure gift, freely bestowed, salvation.⁸⁹

Because Luther believed that theology is a discipline that trains for practical application, he developed this hermeneutical approach to interpreting God's Word while being quite sensitive to the pastoral care it provided, particularly for anxious consciences. Faith receives a message from heaven so that "the law cannot make its demands on the troubled heart any longer; it has tortured and smothered us enough and must now give place to the gospel, which God's grace and mercy gives us."⁹⁰ The gospel directs its hearers to Christ,

your treasure, your gift, your help, comfort, and Savior. When the conscience weighs heavy upon sinners, forcing them to despair, they cannot tell the difference between God's promises and his command, between what he gives and what he expects. The consciousness of sins or impending death, the stresses of war, pestilence, poverty, shame, and the like, all amplify the voice of the law: "You are lost. I demand this and that from you, but you have not done it and cannot do it." When it comes to this, it terrifies people to death, stomps on them, and they must despair. Whoever can make the distinction in this situation, make it! For here this distinguishing is absolutely necessary!⁹¹

"War, pestilence, poverty, and shame" along with guilt impress upon sinners their need for God and the necessity of fearing, loving, and trusting in him above all that he has made. Every form of evil—whether the misdeeds that sinners perpetrate or the wicked works through which others make them sufferers and victims—terrifies those who have strayed from God and makes them feel the despair and hopelessness of death.⁹² Rörer described the goal of the law as pointing to Christ by "terrifying the unrepentant with God's wrath and displeasure."⁹³ At the end of this sermon Luther speaks of the terrified conscience facing the demands of the law. "Performance is very difficult, particularly when the law wants to put its claim on the conscience. Then a person must grasp the promise, and so that you do not fall under his justice, do not leave it with the law, for whoever denies the gospel must thrash about in the hope that God does have a gospel, that he will not play with me according to the standards of justice but rather will deal with me on the basis of grace for Christ's sake, that he forgives you all that you have failed to do out of grace, and that he will give you what you cannot do."⁹⁴ Rörer paraphrases the text: "See to it that you grasp the promise and not let the law gain the upper hand

89. WA 36:14.22–34; cf. 36:31.16–31.

90. WA 36:22.18–21.

91. WA 36:15.30–16.25.

92. WA 36:17.23–24; cf. 36:1–35.

93. WA 36:26.19–20.

94. WA 36:22.30–23.12.

and rule in your conscience. That will bring you under judgment if you deny the gospel. You must cast yourself upon and grasp the word of grace or the gospel of the forgiveness of sins.”⁹⁵

Luther practiced this distinction throughout his preaching and teaching. Already in 1518 he had reoriented the pious practice of meditation on Christ’s passion toward producing sorrow over the believer’s sinfulness and faith in Christ’s redeeming death and resurrection.⁹⁶ The two sermons found their place in his Church Postil for Good Friday, instructing readers on how to read the story of Christ’s suffering. Proper meditation on Christ’s suffering begins with terror that brings the conscience to despair because of sin. A sense of personal responsibility for Christ’s death arises out of hearing the story of the week before the crucifixion. But the resurrection of Easter morning frees the conscience and cultivates the faith that clings to Christ and rests assured in his forgiveness and love. This comfort fosters a life lived following Christ’s example in the battle against all vice and bad habits.⁹⁷ To the end of his career, as the two sermons from the 1530s indicate, this pattern of law and gospel shaped and guided Luther’s application of the biblical message.

Two Kinds of Righteousness

God’s two words, the first that gives life and the second that reveals its shape or proper form, described both his disposition and his mode of acting toward his human creatures. Therefore law and gospel reveal something, though not everything, of God’s nature. Luther’s corresponding view of what it means to be human expressed itself also in the inseparable but distinct dimensions that he first labeled human righteousness from “outside oneself” (*justitia aliena*) and righteousness that the person practices in his own actions (*justitia propria*). Later he used the terms “passive righteousness” and “active righteousness” for these two dimensions of the human creature. Passive righteousness is what makes people who they are at their core, their fundamental identity. The Creator gives them this identity, and from it proceeds their character. Their character shapes their decisions and actions, which constitute the active righteousness, the actions that God designed them to perform. Luther also calls this distinction of two kinds of human righteousness “our theology” in his Galatians lectures of 1531. As part of his initial orientation to the lectures

95. WA 36:41.37–42.21.

96. *Two Sermons on Christ’s Passion*, 1518, WA 1:336–49; and *A Sermon on the Meditation on the Holy Sufferings of Christ*, 1519, WA 2:136–42; LW 42:7–14. See Martin Elze, “Das Verständnis der Passion Jesu im ausgehenden Mittelalter und bei Luther,” in *Geist und Geschichte der Reformation: Festgabe Hanns Rückert*, ed. Heinz Liebing and Klaus Scholder (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 127–51.

97. WA 2:137.10–142.8; LW 42:8–14.

for the students, he explains: "By this we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits."⁹⁸ A simple illustration explains this to the students: "As the earth itself does not produce rain and is unable to acquire it by its own strength, worship, and power but receives it only by a heavenly gift from above, so this heavenly righteousness is given to us by God without our work or merit. As much as the dry earth of itself is able to accomplish and obtain the right and blessed rain, that much can we human creatures accomplish by our own strength and works to obtain that divine, heavenly, and eternal righteousness. Thus we can obtain it only through the free imputation⁹⁹ and indescribable gift of God."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, as the dry earth then produces its fruits when the rain empowers it, so the Christian produces the fruits of good works. But for the conscience, especially when it is oppressed by guilt, Luther adds the reminder that it should tell itself, "I do not seek active righteousness. I ought to have and perform it; but I declare that even if I do have and perform it, I cannot trust in it or stand up before the judgment of God on the basis of it. Thus I put myself beyond all active righteousness, all righteousness of my own or of the divine law, and I embrace only the passive righteousness, which is the righteousness of grace, mercy, and the forgiveness of sins."¹⁰¹

From his first postils in 1521/22 to his last lectures and sermons in 1545, Luther devoted much of his proclamation of God's Word to the preaching of the law as a call to repentance, as an instrument of death for the sinful identity, to be sure, but also as instruction for the living of daily life. Likewise, during this entire quarter century, he continued distinguishing the two dimensions of what it means to be human, and his focus fell first on the gift of the Christian's identity as child of God: passive righteousness provided the foundation

98. WA 40.1:45.24–27; LW 26:7. The observation of Emanuel Hirsch ("Initium theologiae Lutheri," in *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther*, ed. Bernhard Lohse [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968], 75, from Hirsch's *Lutherstudien*, II [Gütersloh: Mohn, 1954], 9–35) that Luther first spoke of passive righteousness after 1525 can only be true in a very literalistic sense. The concept is present from 1519 onward and very apparent in *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520) and *Judgment on Monastic Vows* (1522); see Robert Kolb, "Die Zweidimensionalität des Mensch-Seins: Die zweierlei Gerechtigkeit in Luthers *De votis monasticis Judicium*," in *Luther und das monastische Erbe*, ed. Christoph Bultmann, Volker Leppin, and Andreas Lindner (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 207–20.

99. Luther appropriated the previously relatively seldom used verb *imputare* from scholastic vocabulary to express what God does in creating a new reality by assigning through his re-creative word a new identity, existence, or persona—righteous child of God—to the sinner. God's imputation, whether interpreted as his regard or way of viewing a person or as his word that creatively assigns a new status or identity, is the basis of reality in Luther's ontology of God's Word.

100. WA 40.1:43.18–25; LW 26:6.

101. WA 40.1:42.26–43.15; LW 26:6.

for active righteousness. In the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in believers' lives, the active righteousness was always imperfect, not always visible. In spite of that, passive righteousness, confidence in God's promise of this new identity in Christ, could not help but move those who trust the promise to obedience, the performance of the fruits of faith.

The stories of this relationship between Creator and creature take place within a framework that Luther found in his reading of Scripture. His paradigmatic narrative leaves unanswered precisely *how* the responsibility that God assigns to himself and the responsibility that he assigns to his human creatures fit together, but he attributed to God the almighty power and total responsibility for his world of which his Ockhamist instructors had spoken.¹⁰² At the same time, Luther found—in God's address to the creatures to whom he had given identity as his children and creatures—the demand for performance that expresses that unconditionally and freely given identity. Meir Sternberg has posed the problem: "Does the Almighty control the human heart? If no, where is his omnipotence? If yes, where is man's free will, hardly less novel in terms of ideology and equally underscored at the beginning of Genesis? Biblical narrative gives no straightforward answer because the question is unanswerable, and no consistent treatment except for the consistency of maneuvering between the two extremes."¹⁰³

Luther's sense of the mystery of what it means to be human plotted another solution to the tension between narratives that focus on God's power and responsibility and those that focus on human responsibility and calling to obedience in God's world. Occasionally he at least glanced at this tension as he presented the biblical stories to students and parishioners. He did not presume to unravel the mystery of how God and human creature can both be responsible within the functioning of God's creation, but he did believe that God is at work when it appears as though human agents are in charge. At the same time he nonetheless insisted that God requires human beings to carry out the responsibilities he has given them. Luther found concrete stories to be a suitable way of exploring this tension between God's giving of life and his expectations that human creatures produce the fruits he created them to produce.

The Two Realms

These fruits occur in two realms or relationships, Luther taught, often with the expression "two kingdoms [*Reiche*]." That working terminology was dogmatized by scholars in the nineteenth century, but its usage has been problematic

102. Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 36–47.

103. Sternberg, *Poetics*, 110.

for two reasons. Some scholars seriously misinterpreted it as grounds for a separation, not merely a distinction, between the human relationship with God and the human relationship with God's creatures, especially the human. But Luther, unaware that he was fashioning technical vocabulary, did not use the term consistently. Occasionally he could talk about the institutions of church and temporal political government as "two kingdoms." Much more frequently he designated the rule and manner of rule exercised by God and by Satan as the conflict of "two kingdoms." But Luther also quite often used the word "kingdom" to refer to God's design for human life in the inseparable but distinct spheres or realms of the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationships with all his other creatures, especially the human ones.¹⁰⁴

The vertical realm, the relationship between the human creature and God, is the sphere of the human being's core identity. God's chosen children receive their core identity from God's word of gospel. It constitutes their passive righteousness. God's law commands these children to respond to God in this realm with faith, praise, and prayer, and these human "actions" constitute the active righteousness of the vertical sphere. The horizontal realm, the relationship between the individual human creature and all other creatures, is the sphere of the individual's own performance. God's chosen children are moved by the gospel to love God with their obedient response to his commands, which they receive in his law. The passive righteousness that motivates them displays their faith in God's gospel and identifies them as God's children as they act like his children, as they learn the godly pattern of life from the instruction of God's law.

The Distinctions as Key to the Eschatological Conflict

As simple as the relationship between parent and child, as complex as the intricate nature of daily experience in this world, Luther's three distinctions (see above) never earned in his own writings extensive abstract treatment or the kind of theoretical formulation presented here. Yet from some time around 1520 to the end of his life a quarter century later, these distinctions framed and guided his preaching and teaching. Rather than a "breakthrough to the gospel," it is better to speak of his "evangelical maturation." By 1520 this maturation solidified the reformer's framework for biblical interpretation and its application for those under his tutelage. It arose out of his personal experience; his lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews in the 1510s; and his conversations, academic and pastoral, in those years. These tools served to take the story of God's love in Christ for sinners and convey it to the hearers and readers whose lives the reformer strove to shape in what he

104. Kolb, *Luther, Confessor*, 176–77; Kolb and Arand, *Genius*, 55–71.

perceived to be biblical fashion. These tools convey God's Word as the sword of the Spirit against Satan on the battlefields of human lives. Throughout his career Luther continued to refine and sharpen that sword, but he did not depart from the basic framework for teaching that he had formulated by about 1520.¹⁰⁵

Luther's metanarrative not only had a plot that focused the audience's attention on the biblical text and on life; it also had a setting. Luther believed that the fall of Satan with his crew and the fall of Adam and Eve with all their descendants had placed the history of humanity within a setting of conflict. This eschatological battle between life-giving truth and deadly deception was ultimately—as is all reality—personal: the clash between God, whose essence is love and mercy, and Satan, who is hell-bent on deceiving and murdering God's human creatures (John 8:44). Because at the root of his creative nature God is a speaker, the war is conducted first of all with words, with truth and deception. God's law continually labels the devil's way of life fraudulent and fatal; his gospel continually re-creates those caught in its death grip. This means that every day once again brings the necessity of dying to sin and being raised to new life in Christ.

This story Luther told each time he mounted the pulpit and entered the lecture hall, and frequently also in conversations. "Luther's style of preaching," according to Elmer Kiessling, combined expository and topical methods. "Rarely is there a really exhaustive textual exposition even in his homilies." Individual lessons, verses, and words of Scripture became "signposts pointing the way to what he considered the great central fact of Christianity, justification by faith."¹⁰⁶ "Justification by faith" in this case stands for the metanarrative that is grounded in God's creating human beings and re-creating sinners into his children through Christ's death and resurrection, which integrates these sinners into God's family through a life-transforming trust in Christ. To be sure, each element of the "metanarrative" can be (and was) used quite apart from the telling of a particular story or repeating a biblical account of God's interaction with his people. But the metanarrative—which stands behind all other forms of Christian proclamation, whether expository or catechetical or admonitory—does assist in applying these accounts from Old and New Testaments to the concrete situation of the hearers in new historical circumstances, as their present or their future makes specific claims on them or subjects them to specific problems. Michael Parsons correctly observes that "'story' as a theological category probably cannot sustain the weight sometimes placed upon it." He notices that Luther and Calvin did not make that clear since for them narrative was not a theological category; rather, they worked with the presupposition that they needed to move beyond the text, "allowing the nar-

105. Kolb, *Luther, Confessor*, 42–71.

106. Elmer C. Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935), 62.

rative to point beyond itself to theology and further to experience of God. . . . What matters is that believers are pointed beyond the narrative *per se* to their own encounter with the living and faithful God, through the Word by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰⁷

Thus Luther transformed the past of the Bible into a confrontation with the contemporary sinfulness of hearers and readers and into an encounter with the love and mercy of their Creator, who had come as their Redeemer, and who was in the process of sanctifying them through his Word. He illustrated and modeled how faith receives the gift of passive righteousness and how it shapes the Christian’s way of thinking using stories of the people of faith, such as Abraham and Sarah. The reformer illustrated and modeled how faith acts out its trust in obedience to God’s commands within the structure of his callings with the stories of these people, such as Joseph and David. All these elements, or members, of God’s story had their specific places and functions in God’s address of the human situation. Re-membering places the parts of the story in the new context of the present. This recombination of its elements for relevance to living hearers requires analysis that identifies what is true and significant, both in the setting of the biblical account and in the lives of the preacher’s contemporary hearers or readers. To this task Luther dedicated his life.

107. Michael Parsons, *Luther and Calvin on Old Testament Narratives: Reformation Thought and Narrative Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2004), 230–31.