The Meaning of Protestant Theology
Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel That Gives Us CHRIST

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In gratitude for the students and faculty of the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University, where I have had so much to learn.
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Is there a reason to be Protestant? For many people I know, this has become an urgent and life-changing question, as they consider that the answer might be “No.” It is a question that often arises for Protestants having their first robust encounter with the Great Tradition of the church, its admirable Christians, its profound writers, its beautiful liturgies. They discover that their own particular, sometimes narrow Protestant upbringing is missing the riches they find in more ancient ways of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Today’s ecumenical setting, in which members of the various churches and traditions have come to understand each other in a far more friendly way than before, makes the question all the more urgent. Apart from strenuous efforts to remain ignorant, no Protestant body today can plausibly claim to be the one true church or the only community that possesses the way to salvation. A Protestant learning the Great Tradition today soon realizes that not only other types of Protestants but Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox can truly be Christians—that they in fact include some of the most wonderful Christians in history, people from whom it would be foolish not to learn something about the way of Christ. Meanwhile, an older kind of urgency has begun to fade out of people’s lives. For many reasons—even some good ones—Christians today are much less anxious about their own individual salvation or damnation than people in the sixteenth century, when Protestantism first arose. So if you don’t have to be Protestant to be saved or to be a true Christian, why be Protestant?
Another level of urgency stems from dismay at Protestant theology and practice having fallen on hard times, with the drift toward a post-Christian future in some sectors of mainline Protestantism and the anxious narcissism of much contemporary evangelicalism. I have in mind the evangelicals who are taught in church to answer the question, What is your faith about? by making it fundamentally about themselves: it’s about “the experience of a transformed heart” or “having a relationship with God” or “God working in my life.” God is part of the story, but it’s my story and my job is to make God to fit in it. This kind of teaching is enough to drive many Protestants to Catholicism or Orthodoxy, or to a high-church sacramental Protestantism. What they’re looking for is worship that is not about me, my life, my experience, my heart, my relationship with God, and so on. The great sacramental liturgies give us Christ, not advice about how to live the Christian life. In Luther’s terms, they preach Gospel, not law. They focus not on telling us what to do but on telling us what Christ does, thus directing our attention away from our own works to Christ himself. The story they tell does include me, but that is because I get to be part of Christ’s story, not the other way round. Sacramental faith does not mean trying to fit Christ into my life but rather finding that I belong in his life.

In my experience, this is the most palpable source of the question: Why be Protestant? The Gospel, as Protestant theology has understood it ever since Luther, is found much more reliably and gloriously in the ancient liturgies than in any modern preaching you could name, including the kind you regularly find in various Protestant churches. Even Christians who have never heard of Luther’s law/Gospel distinction can feel the difference between a church service that is all about me and one that is about Christ, and they can recognize where the good news is: in words that direct our attention to our Beloved, who is God in the flesh. These are the words of the Gospel, which makes us new from the inside, not by telling us how to transform our lives but by giving us Christ in person.

The Protestant exodus to liturgical churches shows us something crucial, I think, about the meaning of Protestant theology: the central concept of Protestantism is not sheer innovation, as if it emerged full-blown in the sixteenth century having nothing to do with the Great Tradition of Christian thought, life, and worship that came before it. Rather, it is an insight about what the Gospel word has always done when received in faith. The Gospel, Protestant

1. Cary, Good News for Anxious Christians, addresses the anxieties of American evangelicals, but chap. 9 also contains a brief analysis of the post-Christian drift in mainline Protestantism.
2. In this way Luther’s concept of the Gospel exemplifies the premodern “direction of interpretation” identified by Hans Frei, Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, 3–6.
theology has taught ever since Luther, is God’s way of giving us nothing less than his own beloved Son. That is why believing the Gospel is how you accept Christ. This concept of the Gospel as giving us Christ is the most important contribution Protestant theology makes to the thinking of the Great Tradition. If we set this concept at the center of our understanding of the meaning of Protestant theology, we can see the best of Protestant preaching, teaching, and practice as a gift as well as a challenge—a contribution to the life of the whole church that need not divide the church.

Putting the Gospel at the center of Protestant theology means putting Christ at the center. This is hardly a new idea, but it is not done often enough. It means emphasizing what is most Christian about Protestantism rather than what is most distinctive about it. There are of course things that make Protestantism different from other Christian traditions, especially its distinctive doctrine of justification by faith alone. But these ought to be presented in light of its center in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the aim of the presentation should be to offer a gift of self-understanding to all Christians, asking, in effect: Isn’t this how things actually go? Isn’t it always the Gospel word that gives you Christ, and thus builds you up in faith, hope, and love? Hasn’t it always been this way, since the day the apostles began to preach and teach?

Making the Gospel central decenters the doctrine of justification by faith alone, precisely by locating its center in Christ, not in our faith or our justification. After all, what the doctrine teaches is that we are justified simply by faith in the Gospel, not by faith in faith nor by faith in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. So you don’t have to believe in justification by faith alone in order to be justified by faith alone. Justification is what happens simply because, as Christians have always done, you believe in the Gospel that gives you Christ. What believing the Protestant doctrine of justification adds to this is a measure of self-understanding and assurance: I really can count on Christ alone to be my savior, because it is not what I do but what he does that saves and justifies me, and he has indeed promised to save and justify me. Therefore I am free to confess myself a sinner and repent of my sins—even my sins of unbelief—without fear that my sin and unbelief merely prove that I am not a Christian, that I am lost and damned. It is a great consolation not to have to put faith in my good works or even in my own faith.

This consolation, it turns out, is particularly important for Protestants. It is Protestants who have done the most to keep alive the fear of damnation—what Luther describes as terror of conscience—that had grown to monstrous proportions by the time Luther was a young man in the early sixteenth century. The doctrine of justification by faith alone says, in effect: believe the Gospel rather than your fears. The word of God, not your conscience, is telling you...
the truth about yourself: that you are one of those for whose sake Christ shed his blood, for whom he intercedes with the Father, and to whom he presents his own life-giving flesh.

If you don’t have a terrified sixteenth-century conscience, you don’t have quite so much need for the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But of course that does not mean you have no need or desire for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What Protestant theology has to offer the whole church, in this and all times, is a piety of the word of God that clings to the Gospel alone as the way God gives us his own Son, along with a set of doctrines and practices designed to make that piety central to our lives. The most important reason to remain Protestant in our day is so that there may be communities that continue to present that piety to the whole church.

The aim of this book is to show why Protestantism is best understood as a form of piety based on faith in the Gospel as the word of God that gives us Christ. Its central claim is that Luther initiated the Protestant tradition when he came to understand the Gospel in this way. The book tells a story, some parts of which will be familiar, some not—and different parts will be familiar to different readers. So in this introduction I am providing a preview, allowing you to jump into the parts of the story you find most rewarding, whether that be the familiar or the unfamiliar. Many readers, I suppose, will want to go straight to the middle of the story in part 2, beginning in chapter 7, where the Gospel takes center stage. I would much rather have you do that than be bogged down in part 1 with my exposition of ancient Platonism and its presence in Christian thought, in case you don’t find that of interest. But by the time you get to the end of part 3, I hope you will see why you need to understand the presence of Platonism in Christianity in order to appreciate what Luther’s concept of the Gospel adds to the Western Christian heritage stemming from Augustine, that great Christian Platonist.

I should also warn you, there will be some difficult bits. Understanding always means seeing connections, and that is hard work—especially if what you’re seeing is unfamiliar. This is why I want to make it possible for readers to start with the bits that interest them, where they will find the hard work most rewarding and thus have an incentive to go on to the work needed for understanding things elsewhere. The hard work has two main dimensions. First, I often get into the weeds, aiming to furnish a convincing reading of particular texts by Augustine, Luther, and others, tying them to their pastoral work as teachers of the faith. Second, I’m interested in the exact lay of the land: I spend time setting out the logic that gets an author from point A to point B and point C and beyond, so as to clarify not just what he
thinks but why he thinks it’s true—and why you might agree that it’s true (or not).

Throughout all this hard work I aim to keep three central threads in view: (1) the divine carnality of Christ in the flesh, which is the central thread of Christian faith itself, (2) the desire for the intellectual vision of God as Truth, which is the central thread of Augustine’s Platonist spirituality, and (3) the hearing of the Gospel by which we take hold of Christ in faith, which is the central thread of Luther’s theology. The thesis that weaves them all together is that the third thread does justice to the first thread in a way that the second thread can’t. This is why the Augustinian tradition needs a Luther.

And now for the preview: first, part by part, then chapter by chapter. At the heart of the book is the concept of the Gospel as the word of God that gives us Christ, which is the topic of part 2, where I argue that it was by arriving at this concept of the Gospel that Luther gave us Protestant theology. It is important, however, to set Luther’s concept of the Gospel in the context of the Western Christian tradition before him, as well as to trace some of its most important consequences in the later history of Protestantism. Hence the story I tell proceeds in three stages, focusing on context, concept, and consequences. Part 1 presents the context, the Christian tradition within which Luther’s theology arose, focusing on the spirituality of Augustine, the great Western church father who was Luther’s favorite theologian. This part begins with ancient Platonism, because Augustine’s spirituality was built on a critical appropriation of Platonist philosophy, which I think was not critical enough. Part 2 presents the key concept, the Gospel that gives us Christ, examining how it arises out of the Augustinian context and leads Luther in a new direction that has deeper affinities with medieval sacramental theology and its faith in external means of grace than with Augustine’s Platonist spirituality and its inward turn to intellectual vision. Part 3 turns to the consequences of Luther’s teaching that receiving Christ by faith in the Gospel is how we know God. Luther steers Protestant theology away from the Augustinian spirituality of intellectual vision by teaching that the deepest knowledge of God comes from hearing the word of God, not from seeing for ourselves; for this is how we receive God in person, in the flesh of Christ hidden at the right hand of God. But because our knowledge depends on an external word, it does not give us the kind of certainty that Protestants themselves have often wanted.

In chapter 1, I begin with a very basic explanation of Platonism, which may be familiar to some readers but very unfamiliar to others. Platonist spirituality plays a much larger role in the familiar beliefs of the Christian tradition than most Christians realize. Modern theologians have often obscured this by drawing a far too easy and ill-defined distinction between Christian theology...
and Platonist philosophy. In its thinking about the spiritual being of God, his immateriality and eternity, the Christian tradition has genuinely benefited from Platonist metaphysics. But the Platonist contribution to Western spirituality, along with its role in Christian ethics and epistemology, is a different matter. In a nutshell, I argue that Platonism is often right about God, but wrong about how we know God and are united with him. Above all, I suggest we should be critical of the Platonist notion that there is a kind of mind’s eye or intellectual vision that gives us a deep understanding of the eternal Truth that is God. There is a great deal that is attractive about this Platonist notion, but it directs our attention differently from the Gospel that gives us Christ.

Chapter 2 turns to the fundamental point at which Christianity differs most clearly from Platonism or any other philosophy: the faith it puts in one particular human being, Jesus Christ, as God in the flesh. In place of human spirituality bringing us to God in a kind of ascent of heart and mind, the Gospel tells the story of a divine carnality, a descent of God to us. This is something too enormous and anomalous to be contained in any philosophy, and it ends up fracturing every conceptual framework you try to put it in. It demands its own distinctive form of thought, which is the task of Christian theology to develop as it works out the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation. The result is good news based not on the immortality of the soul but on the resurrection of the body, and a spirituality that is based not on intellectual vision but on the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, with whom heaven descends to us in the end.

But human spirituality is stubborn, especially in the conceptually and emotionally powerful form of Platonism. Chapter 3 presents the most powerful form of it in Western Christianity, the Platonist spirituality of Augustine, the most influential theologian in the Western Church. In Augustine’s spirituality faith seeks understanding, which means faith in Christ and his words sets us on a journey by the road of love to the destination of seeing God in Platonist intellectual vision. The meaning of Christ’s incarnation is thus defined by a Platonist goal, and the journey has no place for what Luther calls Gospel, an external word that gives us salvation and the ultimate knowledge of God in Christ incarnate. We can see this in depth by looking closely at an important programmatic statement of Augustine’s theology in his great treatise City of God.

Chapter 4 explains how Augustine’s spirituality develops into his doctrine of grace, which becomes the context of the sixteenth-century anxieties that Luther’s theology addressed. Above all, Augustine gives us an extraordinarily powerful picture of the dynamic of Christian love as a force of attraction and of union, which is fundamental to his account of the spiritual life of the
church, but which also leads to a view of grace that makes the problem of predestination inescapable. Augustine’s robust doctrine of predestination has often been blamed anachronistically on John Calvin, but it is shared by Luther and Thomas Aquinas as well. The deep disagreement between Luther and Augustine arises not from the doctrine of predestination but from Luther’s thinking about how external things such as word and sacrament can be means of grace. If you were to extend Luther’s concept of the Gospel so that it overshadowed and redefined Augustine’s concept of predestination, you would get something very much like Karl Barth’s doctrine of election, according to which predestination means that God has chosen from the beginning that the Gospel of Christ is the true story of the world.

Part 2 tells the story of how Luther’s concept of the Gospel arose, starting with two chapters on Luther’s early theology, where the concept is lacking. Chapter 5 looks at what Augustine’s spiritual journey had turned into by the sixteenth century, and how it generated anxieties and terrors of conscience that Augustinian theology was not equipped to handle. The journey had become a fundamentally penitential process, shaped by practices of confession that did not exist in Augustine’s time, which constantly confronted believers with their damnable moral imperfection. Young Luther developed an Aristotelian account of the Augustinian journey of justification that insisted we must be “always in motion,” never resting in the imperfection that is inevitably present in any process so long as it is still going on. At the same time, Luther repudiated the commonsense Aristotelian notion that virtue and righteousness could become a reliable habit of the soul, which meant there was nothing in ourselves we could build on in the effort to become righteous in God’s sight.

In chapter 6 we shall see how fiercely young Luther wanted us to internalize the sense of sin and penitence, to the point of hating ourselves and wishing to be damned. This was the core of his early doctrine of justification. At this point he already taught that we are justified by faith alone, but without a concept of Gospel as a word of grace, “faith alone” means putting faith in a divine word of accusation and agreeing that God is right to condemn and damn us. In a paradoxical joining of opposites (coincidentia oppositorum), we are justified in God’s sight to the extent that we sincerely agree with God’s judgment against us. The result is a kind of spiritual masochism that could only accentuate the anxieties of the terrified conscience.

Chapters 7 and 8 tell how Luther came to think of the Gospel as the gracious word of God that gives us Christ. These are the central chapters of the book and the basis for the corrections I seek to make in how the meaning and history of Protestant theology are understood. Chapter 7 focuses on Luther’s
concept of the Gospel as the promise of God authorizing a sacramental word that says “you” and means me. The concept emerges in Luther’s thinking about the sacraments beginning in 1518, starting with the word of absolution in the sacrament of penance. In a kind of double structure of God’s word, this sacramental word is based on Christ’s promise in Scripture, with the result that when I hear the absolution, I should be as certain my sins are absolved as if God himself had absolved my sins in person. My inward penitence or contrition is not what matters but only the fact that God is true to his word. The basis for everything is Deus verax, which means that God is true, though every man be a liar, as Paul says in Romans 3:4. Likewise in baptism, my faith should not be based on any reflective confidence in my own belief, but simply on the truth of the sacramental word, based on the promise of Christ in Scripture, so that it is Christ himself who makes me a Christian by telling me, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Finally, in the Eucharist what I am to believe is that I am united with Christ and receive every good thing that is his, including justification, salvation, and eternal life, in a wondrous exchange, in which all my evils, sin, and death become his and all his goods, blessings, and benefits become mine.

Chapter 8 traces how the concept of Gospel, expanding from the promise of Christ to the whole story of Christ, becomes the basis of Luther’s mature doctrine of justification. Luther adds a kind of codicil to the heritage of the Augustinian theology of grace, teaching that the Gospel is the external means by which God gives the inward grace of Christ, so that Augustine’s law/grace contrast becomes Luther’s law/Gospel contrast. Unlike later Lutheranism, however, Luther still thinks of justification as a process. It is a process that makes progress by always returning to square one, returning to one’s baptism and taking hold of Christ once again in the Gospel. Because the process is ongoing and therefore always incomplete in this life, believers are not only righteous by faith but also sinners by their remaining unbelief, and thus every Christian is “righteous and sinner at the same time” (simul justus et peccator). Therefore it is important that God, for Christ’s sake, does not count our sins against us or impute them to us. However, this “forensic” justification, as it is called, is not the foundation or the core of Luther’s doctrine but rather is a third element coming after union with Christ and then the wondrous exchange in which we receive every good thing that is his. This includes the righteousness of Christ, which is not simply his human merits imputed to us but the very righteousness of God (justitia Dei), which becomes our possession because Christ himself is our possession, like a bridegroom belonging to a bride with all that is his.
Part 3 considers some of the consequences of Luther’s theology of the Gospel as they unfold in the history of Protestantism. It begins, in chapter 9, by focusing on a serious bad consequence: the Protestant obsession with the wrong kind of certainty. Faith in the Gospel is grounded on the certainty that God will be true to his word, not the certainty of our theology and its interpretation of Scripture. These two kinds of certainty can and should be separated, for two reasons. One is illustrated by Luther’s vicious polemics against theological opponents, whom he accused of lying against their own conscience when they claimed certainty for their theological interpretations. This led to the sheer wickedness of Luther’s polemics against the Jews, which cannot be excused as a reflection of his times but are grounded in Luther’s distinctive demand for conscientious certainty in Scriptural interpretation. The other reason is that Protestant certainties, which looked plausible in the sixteenth century, generated all sorts of unintended uncertainties due to the ongoing squabbles of theologians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then ran altogether aground with the rise of modern biblical criticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The future of Protestant theology depends on remembering its place within the Christian tradition rather than being captive to the assumptions of the modern research university, which harbors a tradition of biblical scholarship that has no particular commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Protestant theology can benefit from the postmodern insight that even modern rationality is traditional, which should lead to an understanding of the rationality of traditions that I call “right-wing postmodernism.”

Chapter 10 focuses on a distinctively Protestant anxiety. Whereas Catholics get anxious about whether they are in a state of mortal sin, Protestants worry about whether they really have faith. Different worries stem from the logic of different theologies, which I illustrate for Protestantism by way of two sets of syllogisms, one Calvinist and one Lutheran. The Calvinist syllogisms represent the logic of pastoral care in pursuit of what Calvinists call the assurance of salvation, while the Lutheran syllogisms represent the logic of sacramental faith clinging to the word of God in the midst of what Luther calls Анфецтунген, or the trials and temptations of faith. The reason I prefer Luther as representative of Protestant theology is that his faith is logically unreflective, which is to say it does not require us to put faith in faith. Luther is more successful than any other theologian in showing us how to put our faith in the word of God alone, which is a fundamental intention of Protestant theology. This is illustrated by the fact that the Lutheran syllogisms do not mention faith but are premised solely on the truth of God’s word. This in turn is closely related to the fact that for Luther the Christian life is based
not on a conversion experience but on the word of God given to each of us personally in baptism.

In contrast to Augustinian inwardness, Luther’s faith is based on an outward turn to the Gospel as an external word. Chapter 11 connects Luther’s outward turn with his epistemology of hearing, his teaching that we must find God where we hear God’s word tell us to find him—above all in Christ’s flesh, which we must believe is present externally in the bread of the Eucharist, even though of course we do not see it. The difference between Luther’s sacramental theology and the teaching of other Protestant theologians who do not want us believing that God’s flesh is present in bread is therefore no trivial matter. To clarify the difference, it helps to understand the assumptions of Augustine’s sacramental semiotics, his account of sacraments as signs, which all parties to this sixteenth-century debate had in common. The crucial difference, which usually goes unnoticed, is that for Luther, following the view of medieval Catholicism, the body and blood of Christ is not just the thing signified by the sacrament (its \textit{res}) but is also the external sign in the sacrament (its \textit{signum}), which means it is present wherever there is a valid sacrament, even when unbelief separates the sacrament from the grace it signifies. The underlying assumption for Luther, as for medieval Catholicism, is that an external sign can by the will of God be the site of spiritual power, giving what it signifies. In this regard Luther is closer to Thomas Aquinas than to Augustine, whereas Calvin is closer to Augustine than Luther is.

Chapter 12 turns to the doctrine of the Trinity as the most important ground on which to contrast the epistemology of hearing, as a way of describing how God’s word gives us God in person, with the epistemology of intellectual vision championed by Augustine. As before, Augustine’s Platonism gives us an apt metaphysics (despite unconvincing attacks by twentieth-century theologians who thought his metaphysics of the Trinity was too “Western”) but not an apt epistemology. The point of the doctrine of the Trinity is not found in an Augustinian spiritual ascent to an understanding of the Trinity, but in the good news that the Son of God has chosen to descend to us by being none other than the baby born of Mary and the man crucified under Pontius Pilate. Faith seeks understanding not by ascending to beatific vision of the being of God but by awaiting the kingdom where we shall see in full how Christ keeps his word.

I came to the thoughts in this book over the course of many years, and it is worth saying a few words about the path that brought me here. It began with a philosophical thought: that we come to know other persons by hearing their word and believing it. Persons have a right to a say in how we know them, so
we are dependent on their willingness to give themselves to be known in what they say, and especially on their ability to be true to their word and keep their promises. So I have never been happy with the “expressionist” picture of our knowledge of another person, in which our task is to penetrate through the outer shell of words to get at the inner self that words signify and express. In reality the movement of knowledge goes in the opposite direction: we come to know people by letting their words into our hearts, so that what they say can reshape us. Such knowledge requires an outward turn, putting faith in the external authority of those we desire to know. We should respect and cherish this authority precisely in its externality, because externality is the mark of the otherness of other persons.

That philosophical thought was for me always in partnership with Protestant theologies of the hearing of the word, which fit biblical thinking about how we know God. I was much attracted to Karl Barth’s robust theology of the word of God, as well as his corrective to liberal Protestant versions of the inward turn, the turn to experience or “experiential-expressivism.” But I found myself dissatisfied with Barth’s “actualism,” his way of turning the word of God into an event that changes us but eludes our grasp. Luther’s sacramental conception of the word, by contrast, directs our attention to something we can cling to. Sacraments and preaching are indeed events, taking place at particular times and locations, yet they do not elude our grasp but give us something to cling to: promises we can count on and always return to, so that through them we may take hold of Christ himself (\textit{apprehendere Christum}), as Luther loves to say.

So my studies led me back from Barth to Luther. And then unexpectedly to Augustine. I knew I would find in Augustine the semiotics or theory of signs that underlay Luther’s treatment of both words and sacraments. I also expected that Augustine would provide the foundation for the medieval notion of sacramental efficacy that was indispensable for Luther’s arriving at the concept of the saving power of the Gospel. So I was surprised to find that Augustine actually had no place for the sacramental concept of external signs giving the inward grace they signify, and that he had his own version of the inward turn, and that more than anyone else, he deserved the title of inventor of the Western conception of the inner self. The motive for these developments in Augustine’s thought came from ancient Platonism rather than liberal Protestantism, but they did give liberal theology some of its key ideas.

4. For this term used to describe liberal theology, see Lindbeck, \textit{Nature of Doctrine}, chaps. 1 and 2.
5. Cary, \textit{Outward Signs}; Cary, \textit{Augustine’s Invention}.
many centuries later. More importantly, his devotion to the Platonist project of intellectual vision became the basis of the Roman Catholic spirituality of beatific vision. I became a critic of Augustine as well as an advocate of Luther because I think we know God by hearing, not seeing: by believing the word of the Gospel in which we hear of Christ coming to us, not by ascending to the vision of the supreme Good as in Plato’s allegory of the cave.

Yet I am not urging everyone to become Lutheran (I am not Lutheran myself but Anglican) nor even to become Protestant. I think the church, the one Body of Christ, needs Catholics and Orthodox as well as Protestants of various kinds, and that when the day comes that we properly understand the oneness of the church, we will be able to honor our differences without creating division between ourselves. Luther himself was not good at this, of course; he often failed to discern the presence of the Gospel among Christians who didn’t join his cause. But surely he was right about the centrality of the Gospel and its power to give us Christ. The more we bring Protestant theology into focus around that center, the less divisive Protestantism will be. Luther is my guide to the meaning of Protestant theology because I find him being clearer than any other theologian about this central point, which makes him more successful than any other theologian at carrying out the fundamental Protestant intention of putting faith in the word of God alone. This is why I take Luther’s thinking to be necessary to any properly Protestant self-understanding, and thus to the gift and challenge Protestant piety offers to the whole church.

One sign for me of the oneness of the church, from which I have benefited in ways past telling, is the myriad conversations I have had with all sorts of Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox who helped give shape to the thoughts in this book. In addition to my teachers Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, Robert Johnson, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, I want to thank especially my fellow student David Yeago for conversations that got much of my learning about Luther started many years ago. More recently, I have learned a great deal from my own students, including long arguments with Jeremiah Barker about Luther and Cajetan, which sharpened my thinking about important matters in chapter 7, and one particularly thought-provoking discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity with Kate Bresee that fed into chapter 12. Much of the initial shaping of this book took place while I was a fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, and the book got into its final shape with help from students in my senior seminar: Daniel Ennis, Madeleine Harris, Zachary Nelson, Anne Nussbaum, Jack Shephard, and Mason Waldhauser. I owe many years of intellectual challenge and stimulation to my colleagues R. J. Snell, Randall Colton, Ben Richards, and Amy Gilbert Richards, philosophers.
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