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REALITY RESTS ON THE WORD OF THE LORD: MARTIN LUTHER'S UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WORD

Robert Kolb

We must take note of God's power that we may be completely without doubt about the things which God promises in his Word. Here full assurance is given concerning all his promises; nothing is either so difficult or so impossible that he could not bring it about by his Word.¹ —Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, 1535

The thought of the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther has been encapsulated in a number of phrases, as a "theology of the cross," a "theology of the justification of the sinner," a "theology of God's wrath and mercy," or of "Law and Gospel." These designations and many more can be used to summarize the Reformer's approach to interpreting the Bible and applying its message to people's lives. But the sinews that hold the body of his proclamation of the Gospel together—the nervous system that gives the impulses to make his public teaching function in the lives of his hearers—derive from his understanding of what the apostles and prophets meant when they spoke in various ways of the Word of God. Luther's theology is above all a "theology of God's Word."

Luther acknowledged the many sides of the biblical concept "Word of God." He treasured God's revelation of himself in "the Word made flesh" (John 1:1, 14),² and he recognized that God had begun to reveal himself and his will for humankind through the Old Testament prophets. But, as Hebrews 1:1-2 teaches us, his self-revelation came to

its completion and climax in Jesus— “in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.” Beyond the Word made flesh Luther recognized that God’s communication of himself took place in human language through the proclamation of his prophets and through the Holy Scriptures breathed by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21; 2 Timothy 3:15-18). From the pages of Scripture God’s people delivered his Word into the lives of others in oral, written, and sacramental forms. The fundamental reality of human life rests on God’s address to his people in these forms of the Word.

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF LUTHER’S CONCEPT OF GOD’S WORD

Throughout human history people have had different concepts of what words—religious or non-religious words—are and can do. Some people have regarded certain words or phrases as magical formulas through which they can manipulate divine power. Others have believed that mere human words are at best no more than symbolic shadows of some distant, perhaps heavenly, ultimate realities. Others perpetrate the myth that while sticks and stones can break our bones, words can never hurt, nor really help, us.

A different conception of human language governed Luther’s way of thinking. He viewed words which convey the message of Christ as the tool of the Holy Spirit, for these words are God’s Word, as he has placed it in human language. God acts through these words; they are instruments through which he accomplishes his will and actualizes his presence. Luther not only rejected elements of medieval piety which employed certain phrases from the Bible or pious usage in a magical way. He also refused to spiritualize God’s Word in the fashion of some sixteenth-century reformers, who had been shaped by the movement designated as “biblical humanism.”

Their call for the reform of education and life was

grounded upon the conviction that true learning and piety had to be based upon knowledge of the biblical texts and other ancient works, whether Christian or philosophical Greek. Many scholars in this movement were influenced by the revival of Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas. Though devout and dedicated to biblical learning, these theologians often let presuppositions from the spiritualizing traditions that proceeded from Plato’s thought determine their reading of Scripture. Therefore, for example, they could only conceive of the material realm as somewhat inferior to the realm of the invisible or spiritual. They failed to recognize that for the biblical writers the decisive divide lay not between material and spiritual but rather between the Creator and the created, whether the created had spiritual or material form. These learned, pious thinkers were convinced that human words and the objects of the material could only be shadows of heavenly reality. Their eyes tended to ignore ways in which God had taken material covering for his presence among his Old Testament people. They believed that the Word had become flesh as God assumed humanity in its fullest for his purpose of saving sinners, but they failed to extend the logical consequence of the Incarnation to God’s use of other forms of his Word as he assumed human language and sacramental elements to exercise his saving power. These theologians believed that the nature of things (as Plato had understood it) prevented God from selecting certain elements of his creation to be the instruments of his power for restoring true human life in relationship with himself to those who had fallen into sin.

Luther did not share these presuppositions even though he used many of the tools the biblical humanists had prepared for the study of Scripture. His orientation for reading the Bible came from professors trained in the philosophical and theological system called nominalism. At the heart of Luther’s reform lay his sharp rejection of

nominalist views of salvation that required human contribution and merit to establish a proper relationship with God. However, from his nominalist instructors Luther had also learned that God was in himself unlimited and according to his absolute power could have constructed any kind of world he wanted. In fact, this Almighty God had pledged himself to abide by rules that he had laid down for his creation and human creatures. To these rules and structures God remains faithful; he does not act in arbitrary fashion toward his creation.

The nominalists believed that human speculation over what God might have done or might be capable of doing according to his absolute power could never penetrate the mystery of God behind his revelation. His creatures must be content with what God himself has revealed concerning himself and his way of dealing with humankind (even though they can exercise the gift of reason to explore the world he created and placed within their sphere of responsibility). Although Luther departed from many of the insights of his nominalist teachers, he always presupposed that he was completely dependent on God's revelation of himself for his knowledge of God and the divine plan for human living. Luther was convinced that the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, was the center and the climax of God's disclosure of his person and the delivery of his love to his people. He was also convinced that Scripture, given by God to the prophets and apostles, is the only reliable source for the continuing disclosure and delivery of God's mercy to human creatures. In it, and the proclamation based upon it, Luther experienced the power and presence of God.

THE WORD REVEALS GOD

In the last ten years of his life, Luther lectured on Genesis on a regular basis. In comments on the creation of the universe, he reflected his convictions concerning God's

Word as the only trustworthy source of God's revelation of himself and as the ultimate expression of his power in the midst of his earthly creation.

God also does not manifest himself except through his works and the Word because the meaning of these is understood in some measure. Whatever else belongs essentially to the Divinity cannot be grasped and understood, such as being outside time, before the world, etc.³

The Reformer recognized that there is a lot more to God than what we can know of him. He also knew that human beings can and want to construct their own pictures of what God ought to be like, even if these pictures tell us more about those who are imaginatively forging their own images of the ultimate than about the true God. Therefore, he differentiated the hidden God from the revealed God. This distinction reflects the nominalists' demarcating the mysterious God who could have done anything according to his absolute power (but whose nature is inaccessible to human wisdom and human investigation) from the God who has given his promise to human beings in covenants, which set nature and the moral order within fixed bounds. To attempt to venture beyond what God has told us of himself can only lead us into our own imaginations. Luther wanted to turn his hearers from the misdirection of their own fantasies to the God who reveals himself in his Word:

Perhaps God appeared to Adam without a covering, but after the fall into sin he appeared in a gentle breeze as though enveloped in a covering. . . . It is folly to argue much about God outside and before time because this is an effort to understand the Godhead without a covering, or the uncovered divine essence. Because this is impossible, God envelops himself in his works in certain forms, as today he

wraps himself in baptism, in absolution, etc. If you should depart from these, you will get into an area where there is no measure, no space, no time, and into the merest nothing, concerning which, according to the philosopher, there can be no knowledge."⁴

GOD'S WORD DELIVERS HIS POWER

God not only reveals himself through his Word. He actually accomplishes his will through his speaking. His words bring reality into being. God's original creation of all reality also served for Luther as the model for his re-creating activity in bringing sinners back to himself. Luther observed to his students regarding Genesis 1:

God is, so to speak, the Speaker who creates; nevertheless, he does not make us of matter, but he makes heaven and earth out of nothing, solely by the Word which he utters. . . . The light, Moses says, was not yet in existence; but out of its state of being nothing the darkness was turned into that most outstanding creature, light. Through what? Through the Word. Therefore in the beginning and before every creature there is the Word, and it is such a powerful Word that it makes all things out of nothing. . . . Paul cites this first work of the Creator as an extraordinary work (2 Corinthians 4:6): "Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness?" "By his command," he says, "he made that light." This, therefore, is sufficient for the confirmation of our faith: that Christ is true God, who is with the Father from eternity, before the world was made, and that through him, who is the wisdom and the Word of the Father, the Father made everything. But in this passage this point should be noted: that Paul regards the conversion of the wicked—something which is also brought about by the Word—as a new work of creation."⁵

For Luther, reality issues from God's speaking. He believed that the Old Testament witness to God's way of

doing things established reality from the Word of God. That Word not only set reality in place. It also preserves it and continues to keep that reality going. Behind the preserving and providing activity of God in his world stands his Word.⁶

GOD'S WORD CONSTITUTES HIS RELATIONSHIP TO HIS CHILDREN

God's Word revealed who he is to his creatures. God's Word, according to Luther, instituted and constituted the Lord's relationship with his human creatures. God loves to talk, and God wanted his human creatures to be his conversation partners. The first conversation continued as long as Adam and Eve trusted God and delighted in his conversation. When they no longer trusted his Word, their doubt destroyed that relationship. The break of this fellowship of conversation between God and human creature is the essence of sin. Sin resulted from Satan's luring them to question whether God meant what he had said (Genesis 3:1):

This also reveals Satan's cunning. He does not immediately try to allure Eve by means of the loveliness of the fruit. He first attacks the greatest human strength, faith in the Word. Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God, just as, on the other hand, the source and root of righteousness is faith.⁷

Denial of the reliability of God's Word meant the cessation of the conversation, the end of the relationship. That doubt exploded into a variety of defensive actions which divided Adam and Eve from their God and voided the claim and the comfort, conveyed in his Word.

Therefore Satan here attacks Adam and Eve in this way to deprive them of the Word and to make them believe his lie

after they have lost the Word and their trust in God. . . . Unbelief is the source of all sins; when Satan brought about this unbelief by driving out or corrupting the Word, the rest was easy for him. . . . Therefore just as from the true Word of God salvation results, so also from the corrupt Word of God damnation results.⁸

The source of all sin truly is unbelief and doubt and abandonment of the Word. Because the world is full of these, it remains in idolatry, denies the truth of God, and invents a new god."⁹

Renewal of the conversation could only come from God's side. Dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1), human creatures were corpses in their relationship to God. They could only return to their original relationship with God through his action, through his act of re-creation. As with his original act of creation, God re-creates his chosen children out of sinners through the action of his Word.

GOD'S WORD RE-CREATES FALLEN HUMAN CREATURES

Luther believed that God had placed his re-creating Word in various forms, which could be classified in three basic categories: oral, written, and sacramental. In preparing a text for the believers' confession of sin to their pastors, Luther had the pastor ask the parishioner why he wanted to receive the sacrament in addition to the absolution which he had just received. The parishioner was to answer that he desired the grace and strength which God's Word would give with the sign. The pastor asked whether absolution had not already bestowed forgiveness. The parishioner retorted, "So what! I want to add the sign of God to his Word. To receive God's Word in many ways is so much better."¹⁰

Although Luther believed that God had first spoken

with his people through the oral proclamation of the prophets, he also believed that the authority of the written Word in the Scriptures was primary and fundamental to all uses of the Word in God's world. Only in the Bible could God's voice be heard with absolutely certain authority. All other writings which conveyed God's love and mercy, as well as all Gospel preaching or conversation and the sacramental forms of delivering God's forgiveness and salvation had to be derived from and faithful to the infallible Scripture.

Luther did many things to cultivate the proper reading and use of Scripture as a "means of grace," an instrument of salvation, among his students, who would leave the University of Wittenberg to care for God's people in congregations. He also worked hard to bring the biblical message to those parishioners through writings especially designed for their use—devotional materials, hymns, his translation of the Bible, and his catechisms. Toward the end of his life the Reformer also set forth advice for the daily engagement of believers with the biblical text, the facilitating of the conversation with God through study of the written Word because "you should know that the Holy Scriptures constitute a book which turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness, because not one teaches about eternal life except this one alone." He suggested three elements necessary for fruitful listening to what God was saying in the pages penned under the Holy Spirit's guidance by the prophets and apostles. He summarized them in the Latin words *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), and *tentatio* (the struggles and temptations of daily life).

Proper listening to God's Word begins with prayer (*oratio*).

Kneel down in your little room and pray to God with real humility and earnestness, that he through his dear Son may

give you his Holy Spirit, who will enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding. Thus, you see how David keeps praying—"Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me."

Second, Luther directed his students to concentrate on the text, for in it the living Word of the Lord comes to human creatures (*meditatio*).

You should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word; so take your cue from that.

Luther presumed that this conversation with God that arises from reading the biblical text takes place in the midst of a world in which evil is always at hand. Believers never come to the text apart from experiences that arise from their own sinfulness and their being plagued by the sinfulness of others. Therefore, Luther advised them that the reading of Scripture involved, thirdly, *tentatio*, in German *Anfechtung*, (the trials or temptations of daily life).

This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.¹¹

The restored conversation with God takes place within the struggles and weakness of the human condition in a world beset by evil.

Therefore, Luther regarded "purity" of teaching—proper, correct conveying of the content of Scripture—as critical.

Since God's Word was not a matter of magical formula or of approximate equivalence of some heavenly mystery, it was of vital (that is, life-giving) importance that the Word deliver God's intent. For God's Word was conversation between a God who wanted his people to know him by knowing what he had to say to them, in the Word made flesh and in his expressions of mercy and love throughout Scripture. God's Word was the active, two-edged sword which conveys a new reality, the reality of new life in Christ, to those who died to the possibility of conversation with God. Luther's scholastic training in the academic disputation had taught him the importance of precise description of the truth. His colleague Philip Melancthon, one of Germany's leading biblical humanists, impressed upon him the rhetorician's concern for accurate communication of ideas designed to move the human mind and heart. His conviction that God is a God of truth and that Christ's truth sets sinners free to live fully human lives once again required "purity" of teaching. The purity of teaching he required meant communicating what Scripture said without interference from any other human presuppositions. Luther refused to be bound by human rules of reasoning.

Thus when God proposes the doctrines of faith, he always proposes things that are simply impossible and absurd—if, that is, you want to follow the judgment of reason. It does indeed seem ridiculous and absurd to reason that in the Lord's Supper the body and blood of Christ are presented, that baptism is "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), that Christ the Son of God was conceived and carried in the womb of the Virgin, that he was born, that he suffered the most ignominious of deaths on the cross, that he was raised again, that he is now sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that he now has "authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Paul calls the

Gospel of Christ the crucified "the Word of the cross" (1 Corinthians 1:18) and "the folly of preaching" (1 Corinthians 1:21), which the Jews regarded as offensive and the Greeks as a foolish doctrine. Reason judges this way about all the doctrines of the faith; for it does not understand that the supreme form of worship is to listen to the voice of God and to believe, but it supposes that what it chooses on its own and what it does with a so-called good intention and from its own devotion is pleasing to God. When God speaks, reason, therefore, regards his Word as heresy and as the word of the devil; for it seems so absurd. Such is the theology of all the sophists and of the sectarians, who measure the Word of God by reason. But faith slaughters reason and kills the beast that the whole world and all the creatures cannot kill. Thus Abraham killed it by faith in the Word of God.¹²

This quotation illustrates that Luther was aware that his own understanding of how God works through his Word fit neither into the Aristotelian logic he had learned at the university nor into the Platonic presuppositions regarding the separation of material and spiritual, and the unsuitability of the former to serve as an instrument of God's gracious will. Nonetheless, he remained convinced that the Gospel is God's power for the salvation of sinners (Romans 1:16). He called the various forms of the Word in which this power was imparted "means of grace," instruments through which the Holy Spirit created a new relationship, a new conversation, between God and those who had been alienated from him.

GOD'S WORD IN THE MEANS OF GRACE

In a sort of "doctrinal last will and testament," the Smalcald Articles (1537), Luther wrote that the Gospel of Jesus Christ "offers resources and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace." He listed five examples of the Word in oral and sacramental

form: the spoken word (the sermon), "by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world;" to it he added baptism, the Lord's Supper, absolution, and finally, the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another.¹³

Through these encounters with the Word Luther believed that God comes with the blessing of new life. Therefore, in commenting on Galatians 3:9 he emphasized that the blessing of God came to Abraham through the promise which created and sustained the Patriarch's trust in God. For Luther understood trust to be the human response to God's initiation of the conversation which constituted the relationship between Creator and creature.

To bless, then, is to preach and teach the Word of the Gospel, to confess Christ, and to propagate the knowledge of him among others. This is the priestly office and the continuing sacrifice of the church in the New Testament—the church which distributes this blessing by preaching, by administering the sacraments, by granting absolution, by giving comfort, and by using the Word of grace that Abraham had and that was his blessing. Since he believed this, he received the blessing. So we, too, are blessed if we believe it. And this blessing is something to boast of, not in the sight of the world but in the sight of God. For we hear that our sins are forgiven and that we have been accepted by God; that God is our Father and that we are his children, with whom he does not want to be wrathful but whom he wants to liberate from sin, death, and all evil, and to whom he wants to grant righteousness, life, and his kingdom.¹⁴

God's promise to re-create his children anew through his Gospel meant, Luther concluded in comments on Galatians 4:7, "sheer liberty, adoption, and sonship." How does this come about?

Because it is the Father who promises. But he is not a Father to me unless I respond to him as a son. First the Father offers me grace and fatherhood by means of his promises; all that remains is that I accept it. This happens when I cry out with that sigh and when I respond to his voice with the heart of a child, saying, "Father!" . . . There is only the Father here, promising and calling me his child through Christ, who was born under the Law. And I for my part accept, reply with a shout, and say: "Father!"¹⁵

For Luther the Word came not only in oral and written form as an instrument of the Holy Spirit. The means of grace also included the sacraments, instituted by Christ's command, bearing of God's promise of life. In his *Large Catechism* he dismissed the rejection of God's work and gift in baptism. Some ask, he asserted, how a handful of water could help the soul. The indignant reply from the Reformer:

Who does not know that water is water, if it is considered separately? But how dare you tamper thus with God's ordinance and rip out his most precious jewel in which God has set and enclosed his ordinance and from which he does not wish it to be separated? For the real significance of the water lies in God's Word or commandment and God's name, and this treasure is greater and nobler than heaven and earth.¹⁶

He later elaborated:

In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. Christians always have enough to do to believe firmly what baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of baptism are so boundless that if our timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they

could all be true. . . . Because of the throng of rich people crowding around, no one else would be able to get near. Now, here in baptism there is brought, free of charge, to every person's door . . . a treasure and medicine that swallows up death and keeps all people alive. Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us and say: "But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body."¹⁷

Baptism, like every other form of God's Word, was an act of God, according to Luther. He made that point in a sermon preached in 1528: "Baptism is not a human work, but it is God's work. . . . The divine majesty ordained it. It is his command, commandment, and word." That means that baptism will always remain an effective weapon in the battle against Satan.¹⁸ Here, too, Luther drew the specific parallel between God's creative action in baptism and his creation of all creatures through his Word.¹⁹ Because his thought was guided by an "ontology of the Word," he believed that God spoke, and the reality of salvation took place in the life of God's chosen people. In another sermon from 1528, Luther anticipated objections that baptism could have validity for children who could not reason. It is God who speaks the Word in baptism. God's Word remains valid for those who are sleeping; it aroused John the Baptist in his mother's womb (Luke 1:44); it does its work also on infants when God pledges his faithfulness to them in his baptismal word.²⁰

That did not mean for Luther that the treasures of baptism remained for those who had contempt for God's promise of life and salvation. Like Paul in Romans 6, he believed that baptismal identity condemned "sinning the more that grace might abound." The Reformer's entire

understanding of the use of the means of grace was integrated into his proper distinction of Law and Gospel. This principle guided Luther's admonition in the *Large Catechism* regarding the Lord's Supper as well as other forms of the Word. Of the "power and benefit" of the Supper, he wrote:

It is the one who believes what the words say and what they give (who receive that power and benefit), for they are not spoken or preached to stone and wood but to those who hear them, those to whom Christ says, "Take and eat," etc. And because he offers and promises forgiveness of sins, it cannot be received except by faith. . . . The one who does not believe has nothing, for he lets this gracious blessing be offered to him in vain and refuses to enjoy it."²¹

Luther strove to proclaim God's Word through his preaching, his writing, and his use of the sacraments to recreate and sustain the people of God. For in that Word alone, he was certain, human creatures could receive the gift of trust in Christ and thus find the peace and joy that God had made them to enjoy in the first place. Therefore, he prized his calling as a teacher of that Word and found in it the means by which God had given him, and all his brothers and sisters in Christ, true life.

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Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (Saint Louis, Missouri, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-1986), 1:49.
2. *Luther's Works*, 22:13-26, 102-24, Sermon on John 1, 1537.
3. *Luther's Works*, 1:11.
4. *Luther's Works*, 1:11.
5. *Luther's Works*, 1:16-17.
6. *Luther's Works*, 1:24.
7. *Luther's Works*, 1:162.
8. *Luther's Works*, 1:147.
9. *Luther's Works*, 1:149.
10. *Luther's Works*, 53:118.
11. Preface to his German Writings, 1539, 34:285-87.
12. *Luther's Works*, 26:227-28.
13. *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2000), 319.
14. *Luther's Works*, 26:245-46, on Galatians 3:9.
15. *Luther's Works*, 26:389-90, on Galatians 4:7.
16. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelische-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 693-694; *The Book of Concord*, 458; *Large Catechism*, 15-16.
17. *Die Bekenntnisschriften*, 699-700; *The Book of Concord*, 461-62; *Large Catechism*, 41-44.
18. *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1996), 27:33,3-14.
19. *Werke*, 37:278,15-22.
20. *Werke*, 27:49,12-50,3.
21. *The Book of Concord*, 470.