Take Every Thought Captive – Make It Obedient to Christ

On Being a Lutheran at "Reformation 500"

Discussion Starter

It started with a bang – and I'm not talking about the nailing of Martin Luther's theses. In order to elicit a reaction, the presenter announced: "21st century Lutherans have lost confidence in what it means to be a Lutheran." Immediately there were shouts on both sides: "Absolutely" sounded from one corner; "No way" came from another. What do you think?

The statement was designed to be a discussion starter. Some here are wondering how "Lutheran" was meant to be defined – Is it to be understood as a general term for all who call themselves Lutheran? (Not all Lutherans are really "Lutheran," are they?) Should I be thinking about my own Lutheran church body? What exactly does it mean to "be Lutheran"? Does this statement intend to reveal an identity crisis? What about this concept of "lost confidence"? What could give that impression? Is this how I feel as I consider my own confessional identity? Isn't 2017 a "year of celebration" – why introduce the element of apprehension?

Historical Review – Nothing New

While you ponder how you would address this statement, it might be valuable to review, briefly, the historical context of the past centennial anniversaries of the posting of the "95 Theses." We will find that in each instance Lutherans faced what might be called an "identity crisis." When Lutherans commemorated the 100th anniversary in 1617, religious tensions inside the Holy Roman Empire were at a breaking point. The very next year marked the beginning of what would be one of the bloodiest "religious wars" in modern times – the Thirty Years War. In 1617 Lutherans inside the Empire were engaged in a struggle for their confessional identity, challenged both by Calvinistic Reformed movements and a resurgence of Roman Catholic power and prestige.

The 1717 anniversary came just a couple of years after the death of the French king Louis XIV. His attempt to extend France's influence into central Europe also promoted a revival of Roman Catholicism – his revocation of religious toleration resulted in a mass exodus of French Calvinists to all parts of Europe and beyond. At the same time, German Lutherans were wrestling with the effects of a popular movement called "pietism," which found fault with the practice of orthodox Lutheranism and encouraged a more personal, practical exercise of faith. Lutherans observed yet another significant Reformation anniversary in the face of social and cultural pressures to relax their confessional stance. Those pressures were intensified by the rationalist designs of the early "Enlightenment" which undermined doctrinal differences and advocated tolerance.

The strain did not wane as 1817 approached. At the outset of the 19th century Europe was adjusting to "life without Napoleon." His far-reaching, yet ephemeral, Empire had subjected most of Europe to his political and military whims. After his defeat many European governments reacted by attempting to regain a sense of national identity. In Prussia (there was no "Germany" yet), Frederick William III used the 300th anniversary to initiate an ecumenical blending of Reformed and Lutheran churches in what was called the "Prussian Union." Frederick initially promoted the Union by means of a new worship "Agenda." In a September 1817 decree he wrote:

> Under the influence of a better spirit, which sets aside the nonessential and holds fast to the fundamentals of Christianity on which both parties are agreed, I wish to see this God-pleasing work accomplished in my territories and to have it initiated at the coming centennial of the Reformation, to the honor of God and to the welfare of the Christian church. Such a truly religious union of both Protestant churches, which are separated only by external differences, is in accord with the great purposes of Christianity; it agrees with the first intention of the Reformers; it lies in the spirit of Protestantism; it furthers the ecclesiastical consciousness; it has wholesome effects on familial piety; it will be the source of many improvements in church and school which until now have been prevented only by confession differences.
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> To this wholesome unification, already so long and now so loudly desired and often attempted without success, in which the Reformed will not become Lutheran and the Lutheran will not become Reformed, but both will become one vital Evangelical Christian Church in the spirit of its holy Founder, no obstacle which has its source in the nature of the matter remains, as soon as both parties seriously and honestly desire such union in the true Christian spirit. In that spirit they will worthily express the thanks which we owe divine Providence for the invaluable blessing of the Reformation; and the memory of its great Founders will be honored in the continuation of their immortal work by this deed.[1]

How would confessional Lutherans in 1817 have reacted to the statement: "19th century Lutherans have lost confidence in what it means to be Lutheran"? The "Evangelical" church remains the dominant influence in German Protestantism to this day. And very few confessional "Lutheran" churches remain in the very place of Luther's reform. (Note history's warning.) Significantly, those who opposed the Prussian Union were among the founders of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods in America.

One hundred years later, in 1917, the world was embroiled in the catastrophe and convulsions of the Great War. The Germans in Germany wanted to celebrate Luther as a national hero; some Lutheran church bodies in America (including our own Wisconsin Synod) saw this 400th

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[1] Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 58.

anniversary as an opportunity to forge new alignments. Not all of the mergers were the product of genuine unity. In an essay titled "Luther at Marburg," written to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Reformation, Prof. R. D. Biedermann (Concordia, Springfield, IL) closed with this caution:

> The *spirit* of the Zwinglians and of the Strassburg peacemakers, – frivolous treatment of Scripture-passages; twisting of the text to meet the demands of human reasoning; tendency to unite by ignoring doctrinal differences, or finding formulas pleasing both parts, – this "spirit so different" from that of Luther and his colaborers, is seeking entrance into each and every Lutheran synod or congregation, no matter how firmly they may have formerly held to the tenets of our dear Church. Let us beware![2]

The centennial commemorations of the past were celebrated in the midst of social, political and spiritual anxieties and challenges to the heritage of Lutheran identity. (And what a testimony to God's grace! Confessional Lutheranism survived through significant and serious assaults. That is the value of studying history – not only does it provide comparative perspective for present situations, it always supplies evidence of God's enduring grace.) Are circumstances really any different today? We are living in a climate of terrorist insecurity, and the "progressive" nature of our advanced "millennial" culture seems to threaten anything that appears "old" or "outdated." We find ourselves asking questions about how to stay "relevant" and "authentic." It occurs to us that we live in a subjective (first-person, borderline narcissistic) world that is searching desperately for some sort of truth, but society is less and less accepting of anything that claims to be objectively true. Trends and statistics reveal a precipitous decline in church membership, attendance and involvement. To borrow a line from the hymn "Abide With Me": "Change and decay in all around I see." Much of our cultural milieu is anti-Christian, and, therefore, anti-Lutheran. But even "Lutheran" is not clearly understood or defined. Our church body, for instance, is not in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the largest Lutheran entity in our country, for doctrinal and confessional reasons. Lutheran church bodies all stake a claim to an identity as "Lutheran" that is rooted in confessional statements, but how these should be comprehended or used is not uniformly understood or practiced.

There is, of course, nothing new under the sun. Martin Luther's own reformation movement was, in many respects, a confrontation with decadent medieval culture. He was asking many of the questions that we still ask about how to preach and teach the Word of God to people who live in a setting that opposes the will and ways of God. Listen to Luther speaking toward the end of his life:

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[2] R. D. Biedermann, "Luther at Marburg," in *Four Hundred Years – Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), 87.

> The longer the world stands, the worse it becomes. It seems that now, too, the world's wickedness is increasing. This is actually comforting to us Christians. Now, too, the more we preach, the less attention people pay. . . . People are bent on increasing wickedness and wantonness at an overwhelming speed. We cry out and preach against this; we say that the princes should hinder it. But what good does it do? It does, however, do us good in that we may expect the Last Day sooner.[3]

This should not be considered cold resignation on Luther's part, as though he had given up on the urgency of gospel proclamation. He remained a tireless preacher of Christ to his final days, but he was realistic about its impact (even as he was continually able to perceive the "good" even in the midst of "evil"). In the end, Luther's method and message was always a refocus away from self and directly on Christ. It is our goal to consider the elements of Luther's model of reform as we wrestle with the practice of our Lutheran faith in the 21st century. What is necessary and enduring, and why?

As we approach this 500th anniversary we are faced with questions about how to make Lutheranism "more attractive" in our present cultural context. We are asking questions about the viability and sustainability of the church. Put simply, the issue is about continuity and change – with continuity, generally speaking, considered the problem, and change the necessity. (Consider, for instance, the set of church-related conferences held under the ominous-sounding title "Change or Die." That may be enough to cause a 21st century Lutheran to lose confidence in what it means to be Lutheran.) Ultimately we are asking, in the name of Lutheranism, what must not change? We must be wary of feeling defeated as the world rushes past us and ahead of us. This is no time for fatalism, despondency, pessimism or any attempt to justify less-than-vigorous outreach efforts. If anything, the consideration of our Lutheran identity should reinvigorate the desire to evangelize – to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ and his forgiving love to the world around us. We look for answers in the Word and insights from the history of the church.

Take Every Thought Captive – Paul's Ministry Standard

Before we think more on and about Luther and the Reformation, we must pause for a moment to reflect on an episode from the ministry and teaching of St. Paul. This is more than just an aside. It seems to me that what follows supplies the church with essential guidance as it confronts challenges both to its message and its methods. It goes without saying, but there is a lot of Paul in Luther. The emphasis established by Paul in this bit of instruction from 2 Corinthians was precisely the paradigm Luther used in the process of reforming the church.

As Paul defended his approach to ministry in the face of opposition, he wrote:

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[3] Quotation found in Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: CPH), #2172.

> For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:3-5, NIV84)

The title of this essay comes from the final phrase, and I think that the value of this instruction cannot be overestimated – especially when it comes to assessing matters of doctrine and practice. Paul was militant here, using the vocabulary of war – with fighting and weapons and demolishing strongholds and taking captive. He was not engaged in a mere "war of words"; this was a battle, "life or death" – so serious are such matters and decisions. Detractors had raised doubts about Paul's methods and his message, his integrity and his authority. His "theology of the cross" seemed a bit weak and passive and even foolish; frankly, they preferred a "theology of glory." So much of Paul's writing to the Corinthian congregation is a defense of his theology and an appeal to find unity in Jesus Christ. Paul's ways were so "un-Greek" – didn't he understand the culture in which he was working? So much of the criticism leveled against Paul was rooted in comparison and competition.

There was more at stake than personal reputation. The "arguments" and "pretensions" (ὕψωμα, literally, "lofty thoughts") were full of self-centered arrogance, pride and conceit, and they stood in opposition to the very "knowledge of God." Paul's "theology of the cross" (1 Corinthians 2:2) demolished such satanic lies with the truth of the hidden God in Christ. Perhaps we think here of Luther's famous line from "A Mighty Fortress": "One little word can fell him."

"Pretensions" were not just first-century phenomena. Luther encountered similar issues, and so do we. Human arguments may take the following form (partial list):

- That salvation is a matter of personal effort
- That God didn't create this world in perfection
- That God doesn't have control of this world
- That there is no moral absolute
- That gender is a personal construct
- That baptism is simply a sign or symbol
- That the Lord's Supper is just a meal
- That the Church is just humanly "organized religion"
- That the Bible is contradictory and the product of editing

Paul strengthens his point with a final piece of instruction: "We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." The image used here is that of a prison (Greek: αἰχμαλωτίζοντες). It was Paul's way of saying that he did not allow any freedom (any license) to thoughts unless or until they conformed to the will and ways of Christ. If the message or method did not fall in line with the "theology of the cross," it did not fall in line with the gospel of Christ. What Paul

did say was disciplined by the teaching of Christ. This is the Jesus Christ whom the writer to the Hebrews called "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13). So, as we wrestle with our own place in time and culture, we must continue to discipline our thoughts in this same way.

Lessons from Luther's Reform

During this 500th anniversary year, we do well to consider the lessons that can be learned by reviewing the "model" that is Luther as he "took every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ." Luther set a pattern to follow for a church that wants to "watch its life and doctrine closely" (1 Timothy 4:16). Luther's reform remains relevant, pertinent and applicable; there are aspects of his theological "rediscovery" that we *must* continue to teach as precisely and distinctly and carefully as he taught them.

Dr. Erik Herrmann (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) explained perceptively that "Luther's 95 Theses were written as a protest against bad pastoral care."[4] Indeed, Luther's reformation transformed church practice from the cold, indifferent, "institutional" rituals of medieval Roman Catholicism to a model of personal pastoral care. Luther could debate theology with any scholarly theologian, but doctrine was not about the "ivory tower" for Luther. He wanted peasants and politicians, craftsmen and knights to hear the true Word of God and to nurture their lives as Christians. He had the mind of an academic but the heart of a pastor.

It should be recalled that the first of Luther's theses was about the proper understanding of repentance. "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matthew 4:17] he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." There is, perhaps, no more basic message in all of Scripture than "Repent." Yet the biblical understanding of repentance, especially in its broadest sense or usage, is not always very clearly taught. In Luther's day, the Roman Catholic teaching about repentance was woefully inadequate, if not confusing, false and corrupt. Priests taught that sinners needed to come to confession and recall their sinful behavior. They would then grant absolution and assign some sort of "satisfaction" for the temporal punishment due sin. Indulgences were involved in the last part of this process. Catholics were not supposed to understand the granting of indulgence as though it were absolution – or the forgiveness of sins. Indulgences were simply part of the restoration process, a way to "fill in the holes" left by the damage of past sin. Sinners could tap into the "treasury of merits" – the bountiful supply of saintly works – to assist in this effort. And, unfortunately, that is exactly what people began to think – that repentance was a matter of personal effort, a kind of occasional *quid pro quo* exchange.

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[4] Erik Herrmann, "Reformation Remembered," http://lutheranreformation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ref500-paper-ReformationRemembered.pdf, 2.

Instead, Luther understood that "repentance" was God's work in the hearts of believers by his Word and Spirit which both convicted and comforted sinners (through the application of law and gospel). He also taught that contrition and repentance (sorrow and faith) was a part of "daily" life (cf. the "Fourth Part" of Luther's explanation of "Baptism" in *The Small Catechism*). For Luther the life of faith was a life of repentance. Believers were, at one and the same time, sinners and saints. The *simul iustus et peccator* paradox was at the core of Scripture's portrayal of Christian life, and the implications were wide-reaching. It meant that justification (being declared righteous) and sanctification (living in the righteousness of Christ) were both "by grace alone." Believers have the status of "saints" before God, but life will always remain a struggle between the "old nature" and the "new creation" (Romans 6 and 7). Sanctified living is not an effort to make the "old nature" better – some sort of personal reform movement. The "old nature" does not leave Christians once they come to faith. Nor can we reform the "old nature" and make it better. Neither are Christians partly sinner and partly saint. The "Formula of Concord" offered this explanation:

> For the old creature, like a stubborn, recalcitrant donkey, is also still a part of them, and it needs to be forced into obedience to Christ not only through the law's teaching, admonition, compulsion and threat but also often with the cudgel of punishments and tribulations until the sinful flesh is completely stripped away and people are perfectly renewed in the resurrection.[5]

Luther was a master of teaching Scripture's paradoxes – its seeming contradictions – and of making important distinctions in Scriptural usage. He appreciated that the gospel itself was a paradox – that Christ conquered by a cross, that death brought life, that the "last would be first," that the "humbled would be exalted."

In his treatise on the evangelical application of Christian freedom titled *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther wrote: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."[6] Luther was picking up on the paradox of Christian life – Christians are at one and the same time free and duty-bound. We are free from condemnation to eternal death. Christ has set us free from any sense that we must follow a prescribed set of laws to merit our salvation. We are free from any bondage to sin or Satan. We are free to love because we live in the security of our salvation, surrounded by the perfect love of Christ. Our freedom, then, is not an end in itself, nor is it a license to indulge our personal desires. Gospel freedom values the guidance of God's Word. And faith creates a sensitivity to the needs of others – that they too can enjoy the love and peace we have through faith in Christ.

In Luther's time, when "radical reformers" were making impatient adjustments to worship rites and practice, people were becoming confused, discouraged and misled. In their "freedom," these people falsely thought that reformation was rooted in casting off the restraints of Roman

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[5] "Formula of Concord," Solid Declaration, VI:24.

[6] *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 31, 344.

Catholic principle or procedure. The radicals, for example, were destroying images and instruments, as though these things were fundamentally wrong. They also urged monks and priests to marry – disregarding their freedom to make a choice in the matter. Luther urged patience, instruction and moderation. He did not want the people to equate reform with revolution. He did not want them to think of reform as merely consisting of outward changes. For Luther this was about matters of faith, and such matters required the application of love and the Word – "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Luther made the important distinction between "two kinds of righteousness." These are sometimes distinguished by the terms "passive" and "active" – or, as Luther perceived them, *coram deo* (before God) and *coram mundo* (before the world). The Reformation breakthrough that "the righteous will live by faith" (Romans 1, Galatians 3) was just such a "lightbulb" moment because, by the Spirit's guidance, he understood that there was a distinction in the use of the word "righteous" or "righteousness." People are righteous before God when, by faith, they receive the righteousness of Christ – his obedience, perfection and forgiveness. This is a declaration of God that believers receive passively. With this new identity, believers actively live in love and obedience "before the world." The distinctions between law and gospel and between justification and sanctification are no less integral to the use and understanding of "righteousness" in the Scripture, even as they are basic to the teaching of the "saint-sinner" paradox. Luther uncovered the true sense and meaning of grace. Since we are passive in conversion, grace was genuinely a free gift of God's love. All Roman Catholic pretension about "infused grace" by which sinners would work out their salvation was shown to be fabricated and false.

Luther came to appreciate that salvation came from God to people – not in any way the other way around. There was no synergism involved in salvation. The means of grace were given by God through Christ to supply sinners with the promise and guarantee of salvation. The sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper were ways that God came to sinners with the blessed assurance of forgiveness in Christ.

A proper understanding of the sacraments was at the core of Luther's Reformation teaching. Roman Catholicism, for instance, had allowed the "mass" to become a meritorious work by which the participant received a measure of God's favor merely by participating in the sacrament. Catholic theologians referred to the supper as a "sacrifice." Catholic doctrine tended to emphasize participation (the "work" itself) at the expense of faith (trust in God's promises of grace). The entire Roman Catholic "sacramental system" (which also included baptism, confirmation, penance, marriage, ordination and last rites) stressed the merit of participation. Luther called for a return to the biblical interpretation and historical practice. He underscored that the plain words of Scripture involved a "mystery" that was grasped by faith alone.

Even some reformers at Luther's time did not agree with his perspective. They wanted to create distance from Roman Catholicism by heading in an opposite direction. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss

theologian, taught that Christ was present at the Lord's Supper only in a spiritual, not bodily, sense. For Luther this explanation failed to correspond with the Bible's teaching. Zwingli and Luther famously disputed about this doctrine when they met personally at a castle in Marburg, Germany, in October of 1529. Luther also battled with other reformers regarding the doctrine of Baptism. The Anabaptist movement, which started in the 1520s, rejected the practice of baptizing infants because it did not seem reasonable to them. Those who had been baptized as babies were "rebaptized" as adults, hence the term "Anabaptist." Ultimately, for many who rejected Roman Catholic theology, Baptism became a sign that a believer had come to faith. The shift from an objective rite to subjective ritual was obvious.

For Luther the sacraments were an application of the forgiveness of sins. He labored passionately to put the focus back on what God was giving – real forgiveness in his Word and promise – through the sacrament. He used explanation and illustration to make things clearer, but he instructed that the blessings and benefits were a product of faith.

In 1525, Luther wrote one of his most famous treatises, called *On the Bondage of the Will*. He was responding to a piece by the humanist theologian Desiderius Erasmus titled *On the Freedom of the Will*. While Luther did not agree with Erasmus' position, he praised Erasmus for confronting "the heart of the issue." From his perspective the theological questions that revolved around the matters of the will were some of the most important and relevant issues to clarify. The very nature of "grace" was at stake. Salvation could not be a product of grace alone if the will (human assent) were part of the equation. Luther summarized the Bible's teaching in his explanation to the 3rd Article of the Apostles Creed (*Small Catechism*). He wrote: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

For Luther the will was "bound" in sin and in slavery to Satan until freed in grace by the gospel. By faith the believer, then, has a new master and is bound to Christ. The idea that the human will was completely free to make its own decisions and choices in spiritual matters was scripturally foreign to Luther. But we should not extend Luther's perspective too far. He does not say that there is no such thing as a free will in humans. He limits the scope of that will to matters which are "under us"—that is, to secular matters.

The issue had been disputed by theologians for centuries before Luther, and the debate would continue after Luther's death, even among some of his closest colleagues. For Luther the resolution was found only in statements of Scripture, as contrary to human reason or experience as they might appear.

Luther wrote in his commentary on Genesis:

> We have, of course, in a certain sense a free will in those things which are under us. For the divine mandate has constituted us lords of the fishes of the sea, of the fowls of the

> air, and of the beasts of the field. These we kill whenever we please. We enjoy the food and the other useful things they supply. But in things pertaining to God, in matters which are above us, man has no free will at all. He is in reality as clay in the hand of a potter, clay which is merely worked on by power from without and is not active itself. Here, then, we choose nothing; we do nothing.[7]

Clarity about the biblical doctrine of the will is important because of the pervasive and, to some extent, persuasive appeal of "decision theology." People like the sense that they play an important part in their coming to faith. Proponents of decision theology also claim that the Lutheran position is morally irresponsible—it does not demand enough "action" or "change" from the believer. Lutherans respond that God's active work on the hearts of believers causes a change in attitude and action. Repentance, as described above, is truly "God's work" as the Spirit operates through the means of grace to turn hearts and minds to the obedience of faith. To a great extent, this doctrine demands that we disregard what is appealing to reason and take God at his Word. That is what Luther learned to do – to "take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ." Such teaching and preaching demands thorough, careful, precise, confessional expression.

Luther was ahead of his time in understanding the power of narrative to express and impress truth on hearers. His own personal reformation came through the experience of Scripture's story – he fought the battles of the prophets, he lived the lives of the apostles. This was all very real to him. Most of all he came to understand that the life of Christ was, by faith, his life. Even as Christ's death was his death, and Christ's resurrection was his new life. Hermann noted:

> Luther gave more intentional thought to how the Scriptures functioned as the Word of God. There is a saying that 'there are some books that you read, and then there are some books that read you.' For Luther the Bible was that second kind of book. He does not see the Scriptures primarily as the object of our interpretation, but rather we are the object as the Scriptures interpret *us*. Now this is not to say that Luther thinks there is no need to try to understand the text, or that Scripture requires no study and no explanation. It's simply that for Luther the primary function of the Scriptures is to shape us, form us, to lead us into the new creation, to kill us and make us alive again.[8]

From the narrative of Scripture, Luther came to understand that the theology of the Word is the "theology of the cross." This concept is multi-faceted and rich, with important (relevant word – "huge") implications about how the gospel is communicated. It is a truth that requires reflection and meditation. It is the product of the Spirit's insight and the wisdom of faith.

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[7] Quotation translation found in Ewald Plass, ed., *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: CPH, 1959), #4669. Also found in *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 1 (Lectures on Genesis 1-5), 84-85.

[8] Erik Herrmann, "Reformation Remembered," http://lutheranreformation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ref500-paper-ReformationRemembered.pdf, 4.

Already in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther proposed that the true knowledge of God is "hidden in his suffering." He perceived through Scripture that God revealed himself by hiding himself in Christ – what paradox! Luther's theses compared and contrasted the "theology of the cross" with what he called the "theology of glory," which is the religion of a person's natural self. Shortly before his Transfiguration, a passing and partial glimpse of his glory as God, Jesus said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Followers of Jesus are called to a life of trust and self-denial. Christian life is a life of endurance and weakness and love. Thesis 21 of the "Heidelberg Disputation" reads: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."[9] Luther expanded on that "hard saying":

> This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. . . . God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.[10]

The "theology of the cross" is clearly counter-cultural – it runs contrary to our natural religious sensibility, and it most definitely runs counter to 21st century American standards. And so? Lutheran theology does not fear to meet such resistance head on because the truth of Scripture and the power of God's Spirit is behind such confession. And it should be abundantly clear, after this partial and cursory review of Luther's scriptural insights, that the mode and means of expression need to be precise, reflective of paradox and doctrinal distinctions.

"Reimagining" Luther

How is "Lutheran" defined today? This is a question for our time; in Luther's day the definition was, arguably, more clear. The lack of uniformity, in doctrine or practice, is confusing to people. A variety of factors, too numerous to detail, are involved in what has become the wide array and spectrum of "Lutheran." Identifying some of the "pitfalls" can be instructive.

Reconstructing Luther's history and his theological formation is not an easy task. The vast amount of literature on Luther and his theology testifies to that fact. Lutheran churches are constantly grappling with questions about what aspects of Luther's teaching still resonate. The

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[9] *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 31, 53.

[10] Ibid.

500 years of distance between Luther's time and our present setting make it impossible for Luther to "speak" to every imaginable situation that affects our particular cultural context. That half-millennium gap, and all of the intellectual and scientific "progress" that has occurred since the 16th century also make Luther less "relatable" for some. For many this is a ready-made excuse for changing and adjusting Lutheran theology. They reason that Luther, a university professor, would surely follow the pattern of modern scholarship. As if to say, "We cannot fault him for what he did not know in his time, but we consider that he would clearly espouse such teachings as, for instance, evolution or higher biblical criticism." So Luther is "modernized."

This is the kind of Luther that can be found in a book such as Timothy Lull's *My Conversations with Martin Luther*. Lull, who was the president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (ELCA) in Berkeley, CA, wrote about imaginary conversations he had with Luther in his seminary office. The convention may seem a bit "hokey," but it allows the reader to understand the approach of a more "liberal" view of Luther and his theology. For Lull the issue of changing times and mores, the things "we *now* know," would have made Luther more amenable to interpretations and developments that a more conservative Lutheran might question. According to this perspective, changing societal norms mean that doctrine must adjust accordingly.

Precisely this type of thinking is behind the adage that asserts: "The reformed church is always being reformed." That expression did not originate with Luther, but there are those who claim that it conveys his spirit. The perspective has some merit if we understand it to mean that each generation needs to make the truths of God's Word its own – in a sense to rediscover them for themselves. Believers must communicate clearly God's truth to the next generation – from age to age. Luther would support whatever it takes to do just that – adjustments in language or style but never a departure from the doctrine of the Word. There is an expanded version of the phrase – "The reformed church is always being reformed by the Word of God" – which may reflect better how Luther might understand the church's "ongoing" reformation.

There is also a tendency to deconstruct Luther's teaching in search of its fundamental parts. To ask: what "themes" are a part of Luther's legacy? To boil Lutheranism down to a few basic features without comprehending the interconnectedness of Lutheran theology. There is a popular notion, for instance, that Luther's reform was chiefly about "freedom," so to be Lutheran is to promote freedom movements of all kinds – religious, social, political. In its extreme form, this view of Luther has led to support for the false teaching of "liberation theology" and its activism against political injustice. In a similar vein, some think that Lutheranism is about "protest." Since Lutherans were the first to be called "Protestants," at the Second Diet of Speyer in 1529, "protest" is essential to the name. To be Lutheran, according to this perspective, means to be imbued with a spirit that is willing to challenge anything that sets itself up as authoritative – even as Luther stood up to the pope and Roman Catholic authority. This type of reasoning may be especially attractive to post-modern thinkers.

Perhaps you have heard that to be Lutheran means to "preach the gospel." Who would disagree with that statement? But Lutherans, even in Luther's time, took this to an extreme and claimed that any teaching of the law would do damage to the pure gospel of grace. They reasoned that if justification by grace through faith was the doctrine by which the church "stands or falls," then Lutherans should avoid such rules (laws) that put limits on grace. Antinomianism, as this teaching is called, is still alive and well. Today's antinomianism is rooted in an understanding of God's law as a vague and general directive to love, not in the objective delineation of God's immutable moral will in its specific formulations. "Love" then becomes a legal command to demonstrate "acceptance" or "toleration." The only sin, then, is to be "unloving." To put it another way, anything which would restrict the free expression of love is wrong.

Another prevalent "theme" that is often highlighted, and misapplied, is Luther's teaching of the "priesthood of all believers," which has had ramifications for the doctrines of the church and its ministry. Some have taken this to be a license to serve and practice "ministry" according to personal design and desire. As a corollary there is often a strain of anticlericalism among those who misuse this tenet of Lutheran doctrine. In reality, Luther was merely mirroring the words of 1 Peter 2:9 – "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Luther meant to emphasize that in Christ, the great High Priest, believers are justified, sanctified and made holy for service in his kingdom. He was undermining as artificial the Roman Catholic distinction that certain modes of living were "more holy" or privileged. Luther explained:

> For although we are all priests, this does not mean that all of us can preach, teach, and rule. Certain ones of the multitude must be selected and separated for such an office. And he who has such an office is but a servant of all the others, who are priests. . . . This is the way to distinguish between the office of preaching, or the ministry, and the general priesthood of all baptized Christians.[11]

Some time ago a Lutheran pastor, whose congregation no longer followed what he termed "traditional" practice, was asked what made his congregation "Lutheran." He responded, "We have the sacraments." For him the most distinctive marks of Lutheran identity were teaching the "real presence" and "baptizing infants." There is no doubt that these are defining features, but confessional Lutheran theology, as we have shown, is not limited to its sacramental theology or practice. No doubt the pastor answered rather glibly; we are certain that he was more sensitive to Lutheran doctrine than his answer suggested. But his quick response may also have indicated that in terms of perception, those were the only features by which an observer could distinguish his congregation from other "mainline" Protestant churches.

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[11] "Exposition of Psalm 110," *Luther's Works* (American Edition), Vol. 13, 332.

This litany of misapplications was meant to illustrate how dangerous it is to focus too much on a part at the expense of the whole. These attempts to catch the "spirit" of Lutheranism tend to be, generally speaking, well intentioned, but their narrow scope creates a caricature, not an enduring representation. They also tend to divide rather than unite. Scripture's doctrine, like the human body, is both simple and complex, held together under one head, which is Christ.

Promote a "Lutheran Culture"

Writing at the turn of the 21st century, former president of Concordia University Irvine (CA), J.A.O. Preus III acknowledged:

> Today we [the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod] seem always to be pulled in two opposite directions. In our search for order and stability in the face of the incursions of mainstream Evangelicalism, many of us today are looking to Rome and Constantinople. Many believe that the antidote for the cultural accommodation characteristic of American Evangelicalism is to be found there. Those who lament our catholic (or non-American) tendencies would pull us toward Geneva or Pasadena. But Lutheranism, if it wishes to remain faithfully confessional for our times, cannot allow itself to go in either direction. Both Rome and Geneva may offer many fresh insights that can be of service to us as we attempt to grapple with the challenges of today. At the same time, both of those directions take us to places we shouldn't go. In fact, the core of Lutheran theology in the Confessions was articulated to a large extent in opposition to the theology of Rome and of Geneva.[12]

There is a good deal of insight in Preus's perspective. The tendency when confronted with a challenge is, as he describes, to head in opposite, often extreme, directions, rather than seeking what Prof. Daniel Deutschlander has termed "the narrow Lutheran middle" – in this instance, the place of the Lutheran Confessions. Perhaps, we might wonder, whether the axiom is holding true – that the WELS trends about a generation behind the LC-MS. It seems to me that we are, in our time and culture, being forced to struggle with the question: What does it mean to be Lutheran? To ask: How does one preserve "Our Great Heritage . . . From Age to Age"?

If you would ask me if I have lost confidence in what it means to be a Lutheran, I would humbly, yet confidently, answer "no." That is because "to be a Lutheran" means to trust that the Spirit of God uses the means of grace (Word and Sacrament) to call, gather, enlighten and strengthen the church. We profess that the Lutheran Confessions (*norma normata*) provide an accurate explanation of the doctrine of Holy Scripture (*norma normans*). That does not mean that I am "anxiety free." What gives me a nagging, pit-of-my-stomach sense is, quite honestly,

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[12] J.A.O. Preus III, "What Does It Mean to Be Lutheran Today? Addressing Contemporary Issues with the Historic Christian Faith," in *The Pieper Lectures. Vol. 4 – What Does It Mean to be Lutheran?*, edited by John A. Maxfield and Jennifer H. Maxfield, (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute & The Luther Academy, 2000), 83.

history. All of us have heard the adage that those who do not learn from history are destined (or doomed) to repeat it. And yet, it seems, that very few lessons are actually learned. History so often does repeat itself – though rarely in exactly the same ways, often in similar ones. When addressing this issue with students I pose this question: What does history teach us – what path not to take, or how to take a bad path better? You catch my drift. Far too often we think that "learning from history" means that we can wander along a route that, in the past, led to serious problems, but, since we have identified the issues, we can be more successful in retracing these steps. The historical "wild card" is always the sinful human nature, which is unreformable and opposes the will of God at every turn. That is why the path of daily repentance is so vitally important. Does that mean there is no room for change? By no means. Time moves and institutions must adapt. But change should not occur without historical cautions in place and without regarding the value of the past – traditions are time-honored for a reason. At the same time, tradition does not need to be bound as closely to form as it does to principle and substance – although we should not be too quick to dismiss the link between substance and style.

So what does history teach?

- That Roman Catholicism did not end with Luther's Reformation, and its appeal remains strong, in some respects, specifically because of its enduring history.
- That the interaction between Lutheranism and Reformed theology (in its many and varied forms) has never turned out well. Because it is born out of doctrinal indifference, the Lutheran (Scriptural) distinctions are always blurred.
- That the spirit of pietism is always lurking.[13] And that spirit appeals especially to the desire for a subjective and emotional experience of God's presence. It lingers especially where there is much criticism of church's method and message.
- That you reap what you sow. I do not mean this in a Galatians 6 sense. Rather, we should not be surprised if the seeds of a false theology grow and choke out the flora of Lutheranism.

We cannot become paralyzed by the past. We must not sit on our hands in passive resignation or complacency. We ought, with great urgency and energy, do all that we can to spread the gospel in the days of grace that God provides. Truly, this is the goal of every day "the LORD has made" – to serve the cause of the gospel.

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[13] I have said very little specific to pietism, but I would recommend that you read Robert Koester's study titled *The Spirit of Pietism* (NPH, 2013). A review of pietism is beneficial because it presents a historical analogy for the confrontation between Lutheran orthodoxy and the spirit of evangelicalism. Koester concludes: "Pietism teaches us that there are two basic versions of Christianity. In spite of similar themes and vocabulary, these two versions are quite different. One stresses morality and the other stresses peace with God through forgiveness in Christ. The real fault of the Pietists is not that they stressed sanctification more than justification, as they are often accused of doing. Rather, their fault was that they changed true sanctification into morality – which we might define as good works cut loose from the foundation of the Scripture's message of grace in Christ" (401).

Hear the urgency in Luther's tone as he lobbied leaders to support schools for children to hear and learn the Word of God (which, historically, is also part of a "Lutheran culture"):

> O my beloved Germans, buy while the market is at your door; gather in the harvest while there is sunshine and fair weather; make use of God's grace and word while it is there! For you should know that God's word and grace is like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it has once been. It is highly necessary, therefore, that we take some positive action in this matter before it is too late; not only on account of the young people, but also in order to preserve both our spiritual and temporal estates. If we miss this opportunity, we may perhaps find our hands tied later on when we would gladly attend to it, and ever after have to suffer in vain the pangs of remorse.[14]

Surely, to frame this in "contemporary" terms, leadership and vision matter – Luther supplies ample evidence of this. So does passion, again Luther provides a remarkable example. He also understood the value of forging and nurturing personal relationships. And . . . he would advise each of us to spend our energy on substance over style.

Read and teach "Lutheran" theology. That bit of encouragement may sound simplistic, but the challenges of this unbelieving generation have caused so many to lose confidence that the "means of grace" actually work (which is the extreme case of losing confidence in what it means to be Lutheran). And, as we have seen, Scripture's theology runs counter to reason and is sometimes difficult to grasp and explain. Even the disciples often had trouble grasping what Jesus taught them. And Peter admitted that St. Paul wrote "some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3). Diligently examine the Bible so that you are able to teach the truth and evaluate the "winds of change." Read the Lutheran Confessions. They are a gold mine of insight, expression and explanation. Teach the Catechism. Read Luther – not just "about Luther," but what Luther wrote. You may find yourself disagreeing with Luther on interpretation from time to time, but it is right for a "Lutheran" (even if Luther himself bristled at this label) to read what Luther wrote. I know that this is "anecdotal evidence," but the incident is worth citing. When I was in college, I distinctly remember a conversation in which several students voiced the objection of "reading too much Luther." Several of those involved in that discussion were ordained as WELS pastors. Not one of those who "protested" is a WELS pastor today. (History makes me anxious!)

Promote and embrace a "Lutheran culture" by taking every thought captive and making it obedient to Christ. We have every reason to be confident. In the midst of his emotional distress, God whispered to Elijah in the "still, small voice" and said, "Go back the way you came . . . *I reserve* seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal" (read all of 1 Kings 18 and 19 when you feel spent and distressed). Recall the lesson of God's

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[14] "To the Councilmen of all Cities in Germany That They Maintain Christian Schools," *Luther's Works*, (American Edition), 352-353.

power in the promises of his Word from the account of "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16): "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. . . . If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." A "theology of the cross" does not mean that we lose heart. Rather, we "give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord" because our "labor in the Lord is never in vain" (1 Corinthians 15).

I am not suggesting that there is no room for change or modification based on cultural context. It would be a mistake to think that Lutheran practice has to conform to the style of 16th century Saxony, or even to the form of the apostolic church. It is equally a mistake to disavow the historical past and adopt wholly a more culturally relevant (dare I say often "Evangelical") form. The Christian church is a communion of saints – there is a line of faith that connects across time. I regularly say to students that "each generation needs to add its voice to the choir." I then follow with the caution: "Just remember: you're not the only voice in the choir." I cannot say strongly enough that worship matters. Much of "our great heritage" as Lutherans is found in hymns and liturgical songs. I fear that we would be losing a lot if any generation decided on its own that the heritage of hymns no longer mattered and replaced the songs of worship with compositions that derive from and reinforce another theological perspective. If that should happen, the time will come when we will wonder what we have lost.

I am merely sounding a caution. Be sensitive and discerning when digesting the material of mainstream church builders and mega-church experts. They may understand cultural trends, but they are often theologically vapid and even deceptive. In a 2011 essay titled "Lutheran and/or Evangelical? The Impact of Evangelicalism on Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Pastors," Rev. Harold Senkbeil offered this perceptive set of characteristics of Evangelicalism (abridged here):

> First, among Evangelicals the Gospel is essentially mere historical information. It is information about Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross, it's absolutely true, and it's crucial information. But that's all it is. It's information. From there on, it's up to you. You must do something with that information by an act of the will and accept it for it to be of any benefit to you. In contrast, Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions define the Gospel as the "power of God for salvation" (Rom 1:17); it is an efficacious Word that does what it says.
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> Second, generally speaking Evangelicals seem to view sin as a moral blight, a glitch in the human character that can be overcome by making the right choices. Armed with the forgiveness of sins we are now freed to make those right choices and improve our lot. . .
>
> Third, if sin is merely a blight rather than a cosmic disaster, then salvation becomes a repair job rather than a rescue story. And this repair job is a do-it-yourself job.
>
> Finally, there is a limited understanding of God's law among Evangelicals. The Law is understood as a friend to humankind. It stands to reason that if sin is a glitch rather

> than a tragedy and if the Gospel is merely information rather than the efficacious power of God for salvation, then the Law will be understood inadequately.[15]

The pursuit of cultural relevance will inevitably draw the church closer and closer to Evangelical practice because it suits our "American style." So the cautions have a place. At the same time, we must do all that we can to avoid a sectarian spirit that does not fully appreciate the *Una Sancta*.

The wisdom of Hermann Sasse is apropos as we conclude. He remarked in the "Foreword" to his notable study *Here We Stand*:

> We are, of course, deeply grieved by the ridicule of the world, which points out that churches claim to be bringing to men the saving truth of the Gospel but cannot agree what this truth is; but the best thing we can do is to take seriously the doctrinal differences which divide the churches. For the Lord's promise that the Holy Spirit will guide the church into all truth will certainly not be fulfilled unless we fear error and take the truth seriously.
>
> . . . Our [Lutheran] church has never been ashamed to learn from other churches. Nor will it ever spurn what is good in them, what is correct, and what is in conformity with the Word of God. But in the Reformation's *sola fide* our church has been entrusted with a heritage which it must preserve for all Christendom, even for those who still do not understand it today.[16]

A final thought: For some the convention theme "Our Great Heritage" sounds a bit too triumphalist. After all, the heritage is not about "us" – it is a gift of grace, and "great" is just too . . . much. But, to be faithful to the origin of the theme, it is truly "God's word" that is "our great heritage" – the emphasis was not intended to be placed on the pronoun as if we were the source of significance. There are also some who consider that "heritage" is exactly what is wrong with the WELS. From this perspective, too much history equals too little progress. Too much history results in static, complacent practice. Admittedly, this could be a temptation, but we are not advocating a nostalgic Lutheranism, which would not fit the model of Luther himself. Christ's command is clear: to make disciples by going into the world with the means of grace. In obedience to Christ, we will also teach, "with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4), "everything" that he commanded.

† Soli Deo Gloria

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[15] Harold Senkbeil, "Lutheran and/or Evangelical? The Impact of Evangelicalism on Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Pastors," in *The Pieper Lectures. Vol. 12 – Evangelicalism and the Missouri Synod*, ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute & The Luther Academy, 2011) 25-26.

[16] Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand*, translated by Theodore Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), Foreword, x.

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