

The History of Discipleship in the Lutheran Tradition

Robert Kolb

If we wished to be fundamentalistic, we could make this a very short lecture. Even though Luther used the words for “disciple” and “discipleship,” in his translation of Scripture, the word itself did not become a part of Lutheran theological vocabulary until much later, perhaps first in the twentieth century – Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Nachfolge* (he did not think it was necessary to mention the cost in the title) being the first, or at least one of the first, major work promoting the vocabulary in our tradition.

On the other hand, trying to survey in forty-five minutes, what Lutherans have emphasized in their teaching of the Christian life is an impossibly large task since different cultural situations and different eras have made a variety of demands on Christian leaders’ thinking about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. So this lecture will only try to use some examples and observations, mostly from the first two centuries of Lutheran history, to provoke our thinking about our own following in the footsteps of the one who has buried our sinful identities and raised us up to walk in his footsteps as trusting children of God.

The lecture will offer some positive examples of faithfulness to Luther’s insights into the nature of the life of faith, fostered in repentance through the proper distinction of law and gospel, but negative examples of straying from Luther’s insights also abound. The lesson to be drawn from this historical picture

admonishes us to remember that we stand always in the midst of the eschatological battle between God and Satan, between the truth of Jesus and devil's deception, which seeks to weaken and misdirect the faith that creates the believer's person as a child of God.

The dynamic equivalent of "disciple" in Wittenbergese was simply "believer" [*Gläubiger*] or "listener" [*Zuhörer*] or "child in the congregation" [*Pfarrkind*]. Some in our day may protest that "believer" is something less than a disciple, only the starting point. But Luther, Melanchthon, their students, and their students' students believed that if you trusted in the Lord above all that he had made, you would do what the logic of faith makes inevitable: those who have been buried with Christ and raised with him walk in his footsteps.

Many Reformation historians today are emphasizing the continuities between late medieval piety and Luther's thought; the continuities should not surprise us since the most original of human geniuses have been the products of their time and carried much of whatever traditions they inherited with them into their new way of thinking. At the same time, however, Luther remains the most celebrated sixteenth century denizen of the planet not because of the continuities but because he transformed the basic definition of what it means to be Christian. He abandoned the definition of the Middle Ages – a religion conceived of within the framework of pre-Christian Germanic worship of the gods, in which ritual performance of sacred rites and practices insured the relationship between God and human creatures. If ritual secured the individual Christian's life, the hierarchy secured the life of church and society in this system.

Luther turned instead to the definition he found to be biblical – a life of trust in the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, who

is a God of conversation and community, a life which proceeds from God's address to his human creatures in his Word, in all its several forms. In that definition the entire life of the Christian is determined by the fundamental relationship of love and trust that stems from listening to God's Word and turns into a life of praise to God and service to other people. Ritual and liturgy are not absent from the life of the church in his vision of Christian living; they serve as vehicles and setting for the proclamation of God's Word in all its forms and the response in the believers' praise and prayer. The daily life of believers is complicated by the presence of sin and evil, which create the situation in which God's law must crush false faiths and their symptoms, so that his gospel promises can re-create that trust that defines the fullness of our humanity. Medieval ritual performance gave way to faithful hearing of God's Word as the key to the dynamic equivalent of what we call discipleship.

The Dynamic Equivalent of Discipleship in Luther's Thought

The first element of Luther's understanding of discipleship focused on the communicating God and the trust that defines human life by defining him as the source of all good and a refuge in every time of need – the ultimate source of our core sense of identity, security, and meaning. On the basis of this redefinition of what a Christian is – a hearer of God's Word, one who trusts in him through Christ, and who lives a life as a joyful child of God in Christ –, Luther also transformed the word "*fromm*" "upright," the kind of person you want for a neighbor, into a word which carried the connotation of a faith-based life of new obedience – "pious" in the best sense of the word. Brian Brock notes that "the preoccupation of antique conceptions of ethics with individual flourishing is displaced in Luther by an inquiry into what it means to live with God, in

which the dramatics of fellowship are emphasized. ... Luther's emphasis is on transformation into the form of Christ understood in terms of *Nachfolge*, the following of ... a God who is leading in time. ... Luther's is a dialogical ethic of hearing and speaking *with* God."2 The relationship between loving God and trusting child of God and hearer of his Word determined all of life. Luther presumed that God's newborn, re-created children reflect the fact that they are chips off the old block. That Luther seldom used the word discipleship need not distract us from the fact that he was very much concerned about *Nachfolge*, as the sense and shape of the life of faith. For instance, his Small Catechism was designed to serve as a handbook for Christian living, on the basis of the personal acquaintanceship which its text, particularly that of the Creed, fosters.

The second element of Luther's understanding of discipleship stems from his placement of repentance – being turned from false gods to Jesus Christ – at the heart of daily Christian living. Luther's conception of how human life proceeds within God's greater history of dealing with his people shaped the reformer's understanding of daily life. He struggled his entire life with the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized. Emerging from the penitential piety of the monastery, which had burdened him with his guilt over his sins in ways that the ever-easier pastoral discipline of the fifteenth century failed to alleviate, Luther recognized in the pattern of Israel's apostasies, God's call to repentance, Israel's return to faith and faithfulness, and its subsequent falling away a pattern for each individual believer's own history. He defined true biblical repentance as the heart of the daily Christian life: "the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance ... and daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity

forever.”³ Indeed, “the whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance,”⁴ of daily dying through the surrender of sinfulness to the buried Christ and the daily resurrection to a new life defined at its core by trust in the one in whose footsteps faith dares to follow. Convinced of the devil’s power, Luther viewed everyday life in both the realm of faith and that of life as battlefields on which God’s truth battled Satan’s lie, Christ’s gift of life stood under attack from the legions of the murderer, the great deceiver (John 8:44). The whole life of the Christian is part of the great eschatological conflict between God and Satan. His reordering of the medieval program for instruction, the catechism, in his handbooks for catechism, placing law before gospel and the Christian life thereafter reflects this fundamental conviction about the shape of the believer’s life.

A third element in Luther’s understanding of faithful hearing and following in Christ’s footsteps emerged from his supplanting of the medieval exaltation of “sacred” activities and the entire religious realm over the “profane,” the everyday. He did not ignore those activities that reflected faith in Jesus, such as prayer and praise, but he emphasized that everything done in faith is God-pleasing (Rom. 14:23). Thus, he added to the instruction he gave in carrying out God’s commands and practicing human virtues, e.g., in the Large Catechism, the framework of service in the responsibilities, the callings, of everyday living in home, economic activities, and the wider society, the *politia*.⁵ To provide clues for living out this life Luther concluded his Small Catechism with instructions for daily meditation on God’s Word and prayer and a table of succinct pointers on how to live within the structure of God’s ordained situations according to his callings and commands.

A fourth observation about the shaping of Lutheran piety, from the days in which, according to a recent issue of *The Economist*,

"Luther went viral"⁶ until now. James Nestingen has pointed out that Luther's catechisms provided not only a linguistic but also a cultural translation of Latin models of conveying the faith.⁷ Yale missiologist Lamin Sanneh points out that when such cultural translations take place, the culture experiences change from the input of the Christian message, and the message is shaped by the language and perceptions of the culture.⁸ Among many very important cultural factors was the use of media, especially in two forms. The Reformation developed the potential and place of the sermon, locally prepared and delivered for the most part, as the most effective way of shaping minds and lives of villagers, townspeople, and courtiers alike. It exploited the half-century-old but not yet fully developed potential of movable type for shaping minds and lives across a wide geographical area. Luther's catechetical revolution rode on the development of Gutenberg's way of printing as well as the rhetorical rules for oral delivery of the message which Melanchthon was developing precisely for this purpose, among others. The development of the relationship of love and trust in God, as he has revealed himself as Jesus Christ, the daily dying and rising accomplished in repentance through the use of God's law and his gospel, the cultivation of new obedience through the motivation of the gospel according to instruction given in the law all took place through the use of God's Word, in oral, written, and sacramental forms. It is a commonplace that, although the Wittenberg Reformation took place to a large extent as an oral event, it was fueled and driven by effective use of the printing press.⁹ We dare not lose sight of both verbal components as integral parts of this Way of the Word: Lutherans have always lived from what was said and what was read. Sermons, absolution, and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another live from and foster the reading of the Word in Scripture and every other form of Christian literature as the agents by which repentance and faith are

created and new obedience finds its forms.

A negative cultural factor in the development of the Lutheran way of ecclesiastical life came with the inevitability of continuing close association with political power. All cultures need a religious element, but they need it for social and political purposes. Establishment as such an official religion always brings with it social-cultural obligations that always fall in the realm of the law, not necessarily but often to the disadvantage of the gospel. Lutheran churches were not unaffected by such developments.

The Second Generation

To a large – though varying – Luther's students and adherents in the sixteenth century caught these profound changes in the understanding of basic concepts and conceptions of the faith. Throughout the following centuries the most perceptive of those claiming the name "Lutheran" have understood that, as Erik Erikson told us without being Luther's disciple, trust determines human personhood and personality, and that the object of our ultimate and absolute trust determines much of the way we act, or at least want to act.

Luther's students and adherents also used many of the same rhetorical tools and other methods which they had learned from him and Melanchthon. Lutherans were initially, for the most part, listeners because many could not read or write. During the last half millenium, they have generally recognized that, as Luther observed, oral forms of communicating the gospel that arise from Scripture, such as the sermon and catechism instruction as well as absolution and the mutual conversation and consolation of Christians with one another, have played an important role in Lutheran cultivation of Christian living in every era. But the printing press did serve Luther and

Melanchthon well, and their followers put its technology to use with skill. Devotional literature, catechisms, sermon books, and hymnals have cultivated Lutheran following in Christ's footsteps in every era.

In the first and second generations after Luther and Melanchthon had launched the profound alteration in the perceived form and shape of Christian faith and life, the emphasis on trust in the suffering and dying Savior, and on his resurrection, remained clearly at the heart of Lutheran preaching. The sermons in the postils and other printed homiletical works, including funeral sermons, focused on what Christ has done for sinners and on their need for the working of both law and gospel in their daily lives. The mortification of the flesh and the call of the Holy Spirit to cling to Christ remained a key to at least the published preacher's message. But even as Luther had been most concerned about giving his hearers and readers clear, forthright instruction in what to do to live in trust toward God by following his plan for human living – for instance, in his Wartburg Postil of 1521/1522 – so his students and followers also focused repeatedly and strongly on helping their congregations understand what God wanted them to do as his trusting children, where many of them were straying from his plan, and how they should carry out their callings by obeying his commands.

Much Lutheran literature aimed at the fostering of trust in the Savior and care for the neighbor by grounding the hearer's understanding of human existence in the Scriptural address of the sinner/saint and deepening the desire of believers to fear, love, trust God above all else and to love the neighbor as oneself. Luther had designed his Small Catechism for use by parents in cultivating the faith of their children and servants. His ideal of a life guided by meditation on the catechism took concrete form in the second section of the Small Catechism, in

which children were to learn the discipline of consideration of the content of Scripture in the form of the commandments, creed, and Lord's Prayer and response in prayer.

His colleagues and students were convinced of the importance of home devotions for the nurture of faith and new obedience: Some sixteen years after Luther's death his friend Nikolaus von Amsdorf penned a critique of parental irresponsibility in neglecting the regular preparation of children and servants for Sunday morning services, and the review of the sermon, particularly its admonitions and its comfort, afterwards.¹⁰

This devotional discipline did take place in the home of the Saxon court physician and municipal physician, Matthaeus Ratzeburger, whose personal practice of the devotional life is chronicled in the account of the doctor's dying days by his pastor Andreas Poach. Before he turned to Hippocrates and Galen, the physician began the day by reading a half or whole chapter of the Bible, along with Luther's interpretation of the passage. Early mornings he read Luther's commentaries on Genesis, Joel and other prophets, and his Galatians commentary (which he had read several times), as well as the volumes of Luther's Works as they came from the presses, first the Wittenberg edition and then the Jena. His volumes contained underlining, little crosses in the margin, and other notations. Afternoons and evenings at table he read the German Bible or the appropriate sermons from Luther's Hauspostille or Kirchenpostille or some other German work of Luther for his wife and children. On Saturday evenings he read to his children and servants from Luther's Large Catechism and heard their recitation of the Small Catechism. Sunday mornings he read his older sons passages from the Latin Bible or Luther's commentary on Genesis. Ratzeburger read the Bible and Luther's works not only for his own benefit. He also applied their message to others. When visitors stopped by, the physician often told them what he had been reading and "applied

it to our own times and activities, for our instruction, comfort, and warning.”¹¹

In fact, most families seem not to have been capable of meeting Luther’s expectations and Ratzeburger’s example, but the tradition of catechetization remained strong in late sixteenth and seventeenth century Lutheran churches. Preaching the catechism, continuing the chief medieval mode of offering instruction, was mandated in most church orders, but increasingly pastors or schoolteachers also used Luther’s catechisms and the flood of expansions of them that appeared throughout the period to train up children in the way that they were to go. At every level of learning, from primary school to university catechetics, throughout the period, from Johann Spangenberg’s early supplements to Luther from 1541 and 1542 to Conrad Dietrich’s range of catechisms and university textbooks, pastors and professors contributed to the burgeoning body of manuals of the faith, which sometimes justified the judgment of Hans-Jürgen Fraas, who saw an *“Akademisierung des Katechismus”* – a trend toward theoretical language and detailed information .¹² This judgment compares apples and oranges, to a large extent, for the expansions of the catechism were aimed at upper level students in many cases. Nonetheless, most perpetuated Luther’s understanding of the catechism as instruction not only for the head, but for heart and hand as well. The way of life that this instruction molded found its grounding in faith in Christ even when the balance of emphasis shifted to the law, as it inevitably does in instructing children, also through the Lutheran catechisms, which strove to serve as handbooks for Christian living.¹³

The catechisms taught people who also absorbed the faith from a variety of other forms of literature. In sermons and devotional literature the successors of the Wittenberg reformers continued to present God’s structure for daily life in terms of his

calling his people into specific vocations in home, economic life, society, and congregation. There they were to live the life of new obedience to God's commands, living out the virtues that God had designed for good human living, avoiding the vices that Satan was trying to seduce them to practice. The charge of some social historians that Lutheran pastors functioned merely as agents of socialization in slavish service of their rulers is false; it ignores not only Luther's call that preachers serve as critics and consciences for their princes but also the bare facts of continuing, often sharp, criticism and calls for repentance for abusing powers that came from Lutheran pulpits throughout the early modern period.

But a kernel of truth lies behind the charge, too. For good Christians make good citizens and subjects, these preachers were convinced. They rebuked and condemned the practice of vice as well as the failure to trust in God, and they, like Luther, offered many positive suggestions for the practice of new obedience, in the realms of family life and economic activity especially. Yet many were anything but the legendary toadies of princes they are often reputed to be. Repeatedly in their postils they admonished princes and municipal counselors to behave according to God's law and to practice justice. Repeated stories of the exiles of Lutheran pastors throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – most prominently, the hymnist Paul Gerhardt – confirm that they followed Luther's admonition to preserve the peace by calling rulers to repentance so that their subjects would have no cause for discontent and their God would not send his wrath upon their unjust practices.

These sixteenth-century disciples of Luther and Melancthon continued to emphasize that the Christian life is a life of repentance, in the midst of an eschatological battle with Satan and all his minions, they also believed. About mid-century new literary genre arose and flourished for a generation in the

Wittenberg circle – and was peculiar to it – as a means of calling for repentance and for instructing in the new obedience which flows from faith: the “devil book,” the *“Teufelsbuch.”* The devil played a relatively small role in this genre, but he provided the occasion for focusing on a variety of sins that plagued the baptized of the later sixteenth century. While placing full responsibility for violating God’s law on sinners, these works also highlighted the devil’s wiles and the formidable conflict, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, that confronts the baptized. Several of these works addressed problems of faith: Andreas Fabricius’ *Holy, Clever, and Learned Devil, opposing the First Commandment of God, opposing Faith, and opposing Christ* (1567), Simon Musaeus’s *Melancholy Devil*, Andreas Lange’s *The Worry Devil, or Against the Pagan Worry over the Belly or Bodily Sustenance* (1573).¹⁴ Others addressed the actual sins of peasants, artisans, merchants, and nobles, with implications for personal behavior and social deviation. Andreas Musculus’s *Trousers Devil* excoriated the rich young men, burgher and noble, of Frankfurt an der Oder for their sexually explicit mode of dress and called them to repentance with fierce threats of God’s judgment. The hunting practices of the nobility and the consequent losses suffered by peasants for the sake of the hunt brought Cyriakus Spangenberg’s expression of God’s wrath down upon his superiors.¹⁵

The Ratzeburger home may not have been typical in German, Nordic, Baltic, and Slavic Lutheranism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the large number of devotional books in one form or another indicates an increasing use of such materials for personal and family edification.¹⁶ Sermon books served the purpose – and not only German homiletical collections but also the first work published in Latvian, the postil of Georg Mancelius (1654), aimed at such a cultivation of trust in

the Savior and the practice of a life which reflected his love.¹⁷ Similarly Bernhard Liess's study of the published sermons of Johann Heermann, pastor and hymn-writer, focuses on Christ's person and work, the use of the means of grace in personal devotion as well as congregational life, and on personal repentance.¹⁸

Mancelius wrote for use by preaching pastors and the devotion-leading heads of households, but others wrote specifically for individual or family meditation. Never completely free from the mystical side of the monastic piety which had sustained Luther in part on his way to his evangelical maturation, Lutheran tradition contains some formative thinkers who returned to certain elements of that way of coping with reality in the late sixteenth and seventh centuries. One example of this literature is found in the writings of a Silesian pastor, Valerius Herberger (1562-1627), who suffered persecution from Counter-Reformation forces in Fraustadt, where Lutherans were thrown out of their church but did get to build a chapel. He promoted a strong personal trust in Jesus with meditations on Bible texts, which found symbols of aspects of the person and work of Christ at every turn but which did little to cultivate new obedience in daily interaction with other human beings. His works treated the passion stories, the Psalms, the pericopes, and Genesis, among others. They reflect a change of mood from the mid-sixteenth century, a more "spiritual" kind of engagement and exchange with God.

Luther's style of piety requires exertion, for loving the neighbor in the boring grind of the every day is hard work and often not at all exciting. Luther preached the joys which await us in heaven but focused largely on surviving Satan's assaults and taking care of family and neighbors on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps because other forms of religiosity seem more religious, or perhaps because life in the seventeenth century was evermore

grueling and arduous, due particularly to the war, Lutheran piety took a turn toward the other-worldly in a more intense way than we notice in its first two generations. That is seen both in the relatively little attention paid to service in vocation in the daily course of life as well as a more emotional and also other-worldly expression of devotion to Jesus.

Herberger's reflections on the verses of Genesis sought to exposit "the mysteries of Christ" found there, training readers to think upon the Savior in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, and with a focus on his suffering and death. He began: "Dearest Reader! Since 'no one can call Jesus "Lord" except in the Holy Spirit', and no one can say, write, or think anything beneficial, comforting, or noteworthy about Jesus without God's Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit's particular work of grace is to reveal Jesus Christ to our heart and to make Him known: therefore may you first begin by appealing to God the Father in the name of our sweet Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for the light and grace of the Holy Spirit, that you may be able to read this beneficial, comforting work profitably, piously, and to your betterment."¹⁹ The attitude of total reliance upon Christ led Herberger to pray with his readers, "'If I am wrapt in sickness and the anguish of death, if language escapes me and my lips cannot speak, nevertheless, I will groan in my heart, O Lord Jesus, essential Word of the heavenly Father! . . . Prove now that You are my Spokesman, my Advocate, and my Witness."²⁰ The Wittenberg heritage combined with incipient Baroque style to shape the readers' thinking through the use of intricate literary devices, including metaphors or allegories elaborating on words and phrases of the biblical text, sometimes with more, sometimes less connection to the text itself. Mention of the mustard seed which served as a red dye recalled the blood of Jesus; the use of mustard seeds smoked over coals to ward against snakes reminds readers that Jesus was placed as an

offering on the coals of the Father's wrath to repel Satan's forces.²¹ The "fish and birds" of Genesis 1:21 produce the comparison of Jesus with seven birds; the honeybee provides ten points of comparison with Jesus, the "broody hen" eight.²² The shedding of Abel's blood opened a discussion of the vicarious atonement in twelve points of comparison.²³ Not careful exegesis nor the intent of the author but rather the edification of the pious of his own time commanded Herberger's *modus operandi* as he moved from the text to Christ's work in the first century and its significance in the seventeenth. Herberger's aids for meditation cultivated a sense of repentance in readers but provided little direct encouragement for serving the neighbor and fulfilling one's callings in home, occupation, society, or, for that matter, the congregation. The charge that Lutheran Orthodoxy perpetrated an individualization and spiritualization of the faith seems justified in Herberger's work.

Out of this mood of devotional writing grew the concept of an "unio mystica" that united Christ and the believer, propagated, among other sources, by the posthumously edited writings of the Wittenberg-educated Saxon pastor Valentin Weigel (1533-1588). In part out of independent roots, in part to counter the mystical, neo-platonic approach found in the Weigel bequest, forms of piety developed within the "Orthodox" teaching at the university that developed significantly different emphases than Luther had accented while trying to remain within the structure of Christian faith and life which Luther had constructed.²⁴ The publication of Weigel's ideas attracted the immediate criticism of Wittenberg professor Nikolaus Hunnius of Wittenberg. His colleague Friedrich Balduin also rejected Weigelianism but argued that a certain union between God and his human creatures takes place through the Word in which God is present and which establishes trust in Christ, who through faith dwells in believers' hearts. This indwelling is not substantial, however,

he insisted. Balduin's ideas formed the basis of the thinking of one of the most popular of Lutheran writers, who cultivated the life of following Christ through the seventeenth century and into the twentieth, Johann Arndt. Arndt's opposition to the introduction of Calvinism had earned him exile from Anhalt, and as superintendent of the Lutheran church of Braunschweig-Lüneburg he authored some of the most widely-read devotional materials in subsequent Lutheran history. Some scholars have argued that Arndt fully abandoned reliance on the means of grace for an inward spirituality that posited a substantial union between believer and God. Eric Lund has recently shown that in his pericopal sermons, published and widely distributed in his own day, Arndt indeed was proclaiming to his hearers a piety rooted in the external word of promise that forgives sins and moves God's children to lives of devotion and communion with God through the Word as well as service within the callings of daily life to the neighbor.²⁵ His *True Christianity* and *Little Garden of Paradise* did seek to cultivate a practical piety but did so by emphasizing the spiritual communion and union of the follower of Christ with the Lord in mystical expressions.

Other parish pastors in Arndt's generation and the next found the mystical union a helpful description of the relationship between God and his chosen children but stressed that this union does not result in any substantial "divinization" of the human being. Philipp Nicolai and Statius Buscher (d. 1641), superintendent in Lübeck, both Orthodox in their teaching, insisted that the relationship of bride and bridegroom, a union which preserves and enhances the distinct identities of the two, bound believers to their Lord in working for common goals, and this viewpoint persisted over the century. The Orthodox dogmatician and parish pastor David Hollaz (1648-1713) distinguished the formal or relational union of faith with its personal object, God, from the mystical or sanctifying unity of

God and believer: faith justifies and results in indwelling of (the totally distinct) Creator; God is present in the believer's repentance and justifying faith and that presence produces the life of devotion and service that marks the children of God.

In differing forms of expression this mood of devotional writing is found in the two most popular authors of the genre: the parish pastor and ecclesiastical official Johann Arndt (1555-1621), whose *Four/Six Books on True Christianity* and *Little Garden of Paradise* attracted criticism in his own day as spiritualistic and continue to be read in that manner today, and Johann Gerhard (1582- 1637), perhaps the most prominent of the so-called Orthodox Lutheran dogmatists and who had found in Arndt's personal counsel the peace of conscience for which Luther had striven. Eric Lund has shown that Arndt's postils demonstrated a more traditional, means of grace based sense of the pious life than he displayed in his devotional bestsellers,²⁶ and Gerhard's work certainly did that. Both sought to nurture an intimate trust in Christ and the rhythm of repentance that turns in horror and sorrow from sin to him.

Gerhard's *Sacred Meditations* grew out of a bout with serious illness as a young man, and it begins with thoughts on "the true recognition of sin": "every hour I think about death because death is looming everh hour. Every hour I think of Judgment because an account must be rendered for every day at the Last Judgment. ... My actions are vain and useless, and many of my words are vain, and many of may thoughts are even vainer."²⁷ He responds, "To whom, then should I flee? To you, O holy Christ, our only Redeemer and Savior. My sins are great, but your satisfaction is greater; my unrighteousness is great, but your righteousness is greater."²⁸ Indeed, "the foundation and beginning of a holy life is salutary repentance."²⁹ It leads to faith, "a lively and efficacious apprehension of Christ," uniting us again with our Savior, and producing all virtues.³⁰

Without Herberger's allegorical improvisations on biblical images, and with a strong emphasis on the use of the oral, written, and sacramental forms of God's Word, Gerhard moved on to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love and harmony, who "joins us to Christ through faith, ... to God through love, and ... unites us with our neighbor through loving affection."³¹ The *Meditations* does not offer instruction in the conduct of daily life as Gerhard does in his postils, but Meditation Twenty-Eight does present "general rules for a godly life": "Live dutifully toward God, upright with regard to yourself, and justly toward your neighbor. Act graciously toward your friends, patiently with your enemies, benevolently toward everyone, and also generously, as far as are able. While you live, die daily to yourself and to your vices, so that when you die, you may live unto God. Show mercy always in the disposition of your mind, kindness in your countenance, humility in your manner. Modesty in your dealings with others, and patience in tribulation."³² The focus on the personal attitude and disposition received here no guidance for taking larger social responsibilities seriously though that realm was not neglected in the preaching of the period.

Jonathan Strom's study of the reform efforts of the "orthodox" clergy of Rostock in the third quarter of the seventeenth century shows a deep concern among clergy and other civic leaders over the increasing "unfaithfulness" of the laity, despite active participation by most in the religious obligations of worship attendance and outward conformity to the commandments. The sermonic call for repentance sounded constantly from their pulpits.³³ Johann Jakob Fabricius' promoted reform efforts in behalf of the integrity of the church over against secular authorities and the lives of the faithful in Schwelm (county of Mark), earning dismissal from office.³⁴ Princes could also support the cultivation of piety: Ernst the

Pious of Saxe-Gotha was a good example of the pious prince who strove to inculcate religion among his subjects, though with at best mixed success.³⁵ Alongside any question of "success" is the question of how skillfully any of these authors actually employed Luther's distinction of law and gospel, to what extent they grounded the performance of the Christian in the promise of life fashioned by God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These examples from "Orthodox" church leaders remind us that the work of Philip Jakob Spener, who regarded himself as Orthodox and was so regarded by many who claimed the title themselves, did not inaugurate concern for abuses of the gospel in the people's and the clergy's way of life. Many "Orthodox" preachers and professors anticipated Spener's hope to enlighten "eyes of understanding to discern what is the hope of our calling, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance for his saints, and how boundless is God's strength in us who believe that his mighty power is effectual, " to foster "diligence and zeal to be of good cheer and to strengthen others who may grow faith," as well as " strength and courage " to pursue the Christian life and "blessing and success to observe with joy that the Word that goes for from God's mouth ... shall not return to God empty but shall accomplish that which he purposes and prosper in the thing for which he sent it."³⁶ Spener criticized civic leadership, clergy practices, and "defects in the common people," especially lovelessness, unfaithfulness in hearing and reading God's Word, drunkenness, resort to law courts to gain advantage over one another, selfishness and exploitation of the poor, and neglect of public worship. Spener believed that he was reviving the "reformational" program of Luther and his colleagues. Indeed, that program continued to be reflected in a variety of ways and combinations in Lutheran churches throughout subsequent generations. As with many of the representatives of the

tradition mentioned throughout this essay, Spener understood the various elements of Lutheran piety or discipleship in his own way, but he did strive to deliver God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms to call sinners to repentance and to comfort and console the repentant, and to move them to service to God and the neighbor in their various callings.

The Enlightened cultural domination of the Lutheran churches in Germany and, in milder form, in the Nordic lands, during the eighteenth century considerably weakened Lutheran piety because it altered perceptions of Christ, sin atonement, and the nature and power of God's Word. It at least partially gave way to the confessional revival of the nineteenth century. Both periods demand more study.

A few disconnected observations about these more recent eras in Lutheran history. In this lecture we have ignored Nordic church life. It reflected many of the same tendencies of the German scene, but especially in the nineteenth century the history of efforts to cultivate faithful living in daily life cannot be written without taking into account the varied efforts of Hans Nielsen Hauge and others in Norway, Carl Olof Rosenius and his Swedish comrades in the revival of Lutheran piety, figures like Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig or Johann Vilhelm Beck in Denmark, and Lars Levi Laestadius, whose influence crossed into Finland, where Fredrik Gabriel Hedberg and others led comparable revivals of the faith and life in the Lutheran tradition.

Such movements emphasized foreign and domestic mission, outreach with the gospel to those outside the church and outside the faith. They often cultivated small group Bible study and prayer, as did Wilhelm Löhe, for they followed Luther and Spener in their belief that faithful hearing and reading of Scripture lay at the heart of the cultivation of piety or discipleship.

Another stray observation about this later period: It is easy to misrepresent Lutheran views of the active participation of the Christian in society in the nineteenth century, for it is such a multi-faceted topic. As in many other sectors of European society, some who had earlier advocated a loosening of royal power turned against political Liberalism in the wake of the revolts of 1848..³⁷ Despite the efforts of those such as Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881) and others, congregations in the larger, industrializing cities failed to minister to the boys and girls from peasant villages who came to better themselves in the new factories of the burgeoning manufacturing areas or in the homes of their managers and owners. The church's failure to address the social and spiritual needs of these internal emigrants from the villages produced the turn to Marxist labor unions that significantly reduced the Christian role in central and northern European lands.

Yet "quietist" cannot describe all nineteenth century Lutherans. Lutherans were active in giving cultural and political leadership in some lands in the nineteenth century though not all were equally pious in terms of their personal faith. Louis Kossuth (1802-1894), a Hungarian nobleman and faithful member of his local congregation as well as the larger church, led the revolt of his people against Austrian Habsburg domination in 1848-1849. Kossuth escaped the clutches of the Habsburg government and lived in exile until his death. Another case of Lutheran cultural leadership took place in Hungary's Slovakian domains. A Lutheran pastor, an opponent of a proposed merger of Lutheran and Calvinist churches in the Hungarian kingdom, the Slovak Jozef Miloslav Hurban (1817-1888), along with his brother pastor Michal Miloslav Hodza (1811-1870), and the author and politician Ludovit Stur (1815-1856), created literary Slovak through their linguistic and author and were active in opposition to Hungarian domination of their people. These

Slovaks campaigned against the abuse of alcohol among their people as fiercely as did Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824) in Norway. These church leaders all took some latter-day version of Luther's understanding of the callings of daily life, which had not been clearly passed on in the great theological works of the periods, seriously. They understood that God had placed them in positions of service to their societies and cultures.

We have not only ignored Nordic and eastern European Lutherans, but we have also neglected to mention that in the Majority World churches, both immigrant and mission, new forms of piety have developed among Lutherans, a mixture of their heritage brought by the missionaries and their own cultures. They have experienced and experimented with how to take Wittenberg theology seriously at the level of daily life in ways that can be helpful as those in the lands of historic establishment Lutheranism and their cousins in the lands of emigration, as we move into the new situations imposed upon us by the weakening of the Christian tone of traditional Western cultures.

Perhaps, however, the most important question we face as we look at the more recent history of Lutheranism is why in the last two hundred years, and particularly in the last fifty years, have Lutherans not done a better job at the task of the cultural translation of our understanding of the pious Christian life into the world of today. Many answers may be offered, from the power of media and our failure to capitalize on new developments as quickly as Luther did, to the demise of the culture and more immediate communities around us that supported that piety instead of undermined it. But the most basic reasons that command our attention lie at the foundation of our existence as believers, hearers, disciples, children of God in his congregation. We need to examine again the ways in which we deliver the promise of life from and in Jesus Christ to his people. We need to work on the ways in which both the law and

the gospel speak to people who conceive of sin and evil and of life, its sources and its several dimensions in much different ways than their parents and certainly than their forbearers several generations ago.

From Lamin Sanneh we have learned that the church cannot help but be enculturated, by the very design of the Creator, just as the culture in which the proclamation of Christ is heard cannot help but be bent at least a little out of its old shape by the presence of the biblical message. These facts bring both blessings and dangers, especially since sinners seem sinfully naturally to tend to two false perceptions of fundamental reality. The first divides the spiritual and the material, the "sacred" and the "profane," ignoring the more fundamental demarcation between Creator and creatures, often because there is no grasp of the personal and speaking nature of the Ultimate and Absolute. The second, perhaps because of the absence of the personal God who can be gracious and who likes to be in conversation, involves the focus on human performance of one kind or another as the defining action for humanity rather than recognizing that human actions only proceed from God's performance as the Creator and Re-Creator, in the cross and resurrection. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we have no ears to hear that re-creative Word that proceeds from cross and empty tomb.

These false teachings are bad because they lead to false trusting and false living, that is, to false following, which bends the core of our persons and personalities out of shape. Bent personalities produce bent actions, twisted works, no matter how good they appear. In the face of that phenomenon Luther called good works detrimental to salvation and Gerhard Forde received his sweatshirt stating "weak on sanctification." Both were avid advocates of discipleship, in fact, but discipleship just looks different in a Lutheran context. It

begins with listening and it never stops listening, even as the words it hears from the mouth of the Lord drive it into action – common, ordinary ways of action in the midst of details of daily life that are the mechanics of God's created order.

Therefore, our challenges include experimenting with how best to dedicate all the developing forms of communication and the cultural phenomena they foster and by which they are nurtured, so that the Word that kills and makes alive can do its tasks anew. We need to figure out how to speak with those whose sense of personal responsibility and desire to justify themselves on their own terms does not permit them to hear the law as accusing and killing. For them the conversation can still begin, in Luther's language in any of its crushing and terrifying forms. Today's hearers also need what Lutherans have not needed in most of their cultural settings previously: aid within God-forsaking societies to raise up their children in the ways that they are to go, in the footsteps of Christ, when the culture no longer helps point the way but designs detours through life that derail and disorient. For them the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, which they must finally hear, can be prefaced by the good news of God's justifying those whom the world dedignifies and renders unworthy for any number of reasons. For Christ died and rose to give life and deliverance also from all that others do to us to make us victims of their sins. In a world in which speech is recognized as performative, the additional insight of how God's speech re-creates and renews is one of our easier tasks. Luther's affirmation of the God-pleasing goodness of life in this world, in all its realms and situations, is also tailor-made for adaptation to twenty-first century hearers. Like Luther, we follow in Christ's footsteps, pushed along by the Holy Spirit, into the world that belongs to our Father, and we are moving to reclaim it and its inhabitants for the family.

References:

- 1 Prominent among them has been Bernd Hamm; see the collection of his essays, *Religiosität im späten Mittelalter. Spannungspole, Neuaufbrüche, Normierungen*, ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).
- 2 Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God. On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 165-166.
- 3 SC Baptism 4, BC 360.
- 4 SC, Table of Christian Callings, BC365-367
- 5 SC Confession and Absolution, 20, BC 360.
- 6 "How Luther went viral," *The Economist*, December 17th, 2011: 93-96.
- 7 James A. Nestingen, "Luther's Cultural Translation of the Catechism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001), 440-452.
- 8 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).
- 9 Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), e.g., 1-2, 11, 37, 172.
- 10 Robert Kolb, "Parents Should Explain the Sermon, Nikolaus von Amsdorf on the Role of the Christian Parent," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (1973): 231-240.
- 11 *Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors Bericht durch Andream Poach Pfarherrn zun Augustinern in Erffurdt/ vnd andere/ So dabey gewesen/ kurtz zusammen gezogen.*

Anno Domini M. D. LIX. Mense Ianuario (Jena 1559), A2b-A3b. See Robert Kolb, "Ars moriendi lutherana, Andreas Poachs Schrift 'Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben . . . Matthei Ratzenbergers' (1559)," in *Vestigia pietatis. Studien zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit in Thüringen und Sachsen. Ernst Koch gewidmet*, ed. Gerhard Graf, Hans-Peter Hasse et al. (Herbergen der Christenheit: Sonderband 5; Leipzig, 2000), 95-112.

12 See Hans-Jürgen Fraas, *Katechismustradition. Luthers kleiner Katechismus in Kirche und Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 72. Fraas suggests that Melanchthon's *Catechesis puerilis* (1540) is an early example of an academic catechism.

13 See Gerhardt Bode, "Instruction of the Christian Faith by Lutherans after Luther," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture, 1550-1675*, Robert Kolb, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 159-204.

14 See Heinrich Grimm, "Die deutschen 'Teufelbücher' des 16. Jahrhunderts. Ihre Rolle im Buchwesen und ihre Bedeutung," *Archiv für die Geschichte des Buchwesens* 16 (1959)..

15 These works by Musculus and Spangenberg are discussed in Robert Kolb, "The Devil & the Well-Born. Proclamation of the Law to the Privileged in the Late Reformation," in *Let Christ Be Christ, Theology, Ethics & World Religions in the Two Kingdoms, Essays in Honor of . . . Charles L. Manske*, ed. Daniel N. Harmelink (Huntington Beach, CA: Tentatio, 1999), 161-171.

16 See Christopher Boyd Brown, "Devotional Life in Hymns, Liturgy, Music, and Prayer," in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture*, 205-258; cf. on the use of such literature and other forms of popular piety, see Robert Christman, "The Pulpit and the Pew: Shaping popular Piety in the Late Reformation," *ibid.*, 259-303.

17 Jānis Krēsliņš, *Dominus narrabit in scriptura populorum. A Study of Early Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Teaching and*

Preaching in the Lettische lang-gewünschte Postill of Georg Mancelius (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1992).

18 Johann Heerman (1585-1647): *Prediger in Schlesien zur Zeit des Dreißigjährigen Krieges* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003).

19 Valerius Herberger, *The Great Works of God. Parts One and Two: The Mysteries of Christ in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 1-15*, trans. Matthew Carner (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010), 15.

20 Ibid., 58.

21 Ibid., 83.

22 Ibid., 96-101. 23 Ibid., 245-251.

24 The following discussion relies heavily on Theodor Mahlmann: "Die Stellung der unio cum Christo in der lutherischen Theologie des 17. Jahrhunderts, in *Unio. Gott und Mensch in der nachreformatorischen Theologie*, ed. Matti Repo and Rainer Vinke, Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft, 1996, 72-199.

25 Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus': The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's Postilla," in: *Hermeneutica Sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Torbjörn Johansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger (eds.) (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

26 Eric Lund, "'modus docendi mysticus.' The Interpretation of the Bible in Johann Arndt's Postilla" in *Hermeneutica sacra. Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16.- und 17. Jahrhundert / Studies of the Interpretation of Holy Scripture in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Torbjörn Johansson et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010).

27 *Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Meditations and hymns*, ed. Eric Lund (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 43. 28 Ibid., 45.

29 Ibid., 48.

30 Ibid., 71.

31 Ibid., 94-95. 32 Ibid., 112.

33 Jonathan Strom, *Orthodoxy and Reform: The Clergy in Seventeenth Century Rostock* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

34 Harm Klueting, *Reformatio vitae Johann Jakob Fabricius (1618/1620)-1673. Ein Beitrag zu Konfessionalisierung und Sozialdisziplinierung im Luthertum des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2003). 35 See note 60 above.

36 Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 30-31. The historical introduction to this edition is filled with errors and so must be used with caution.

37 Angelika Dörfler-Dierken, *Luthertum und Demokratie. Deutsche und amerikanische Theologen des 19. Jahrhunderts zu Staat, Gesellschaft und Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001).

[Crossings2012Nachfolge \(PDF\)](#)