

Preaching Christ Alone in an Age of Pluralism: Insights from the Wittenberg Tradition

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Introduction

I am thankful to the Crossings conference planners for this invitation to speak with you. This topic of preaching Christ alone is crucial for considering how we might live into God's mission for us today. My goal in this paper will be to gather insights about "Preaching Christ Alone in an Age of Pluralism" from the witness of the Lutheran reformers.

I start with that terrible thing that historians always say: we cannot impose our present-day situation onto the past. The Lutheran reformers did not live in an "age of pluralism," so it would be anachronistic to simply import their words into our time. For that reason, I will compare today's pluralism with the historical situation of the Lutheran reformers. In their efforts to balance faithfulness to the gospel with practical secular reforms, the reformers employed a lively dialectic, a set of principles that can be applied to different situations, including our own. After explaining this dialectic as a variation on Luther's "two kinds of righteousness," I will conclude by applying the Crossings method to the issue of religious diversity. Throughout, I will give examples of how

Martin Luther and colleagues like Philip Melanchthon and Johannes Bugenhagen expressed faith in Christ alone in concrete ways that can inform ministry today.

1. Pluralism in the United States

In this paper, I am speaking of pluralism in a political sense as the legal non-establishment of religion in a country. In the United States, the non-establishment of a single state church is set forth in the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." This clause was a key political decision, because this was a religiously diverse place already in colonial times.¹ The colonies in the south were mostly Anglican, the mid-Atlantic colonies were governed by influential minorities like Catholics in Maryland and Quakers in Pennsylvania, and much of New England was led by Puritan Congregationalists, with the notable exception of Baptists in Rhode Island. Which tradition ought to have become the established one? The framers of the constitution chose to establish no single church, with the Enlightenment rationale that tolerance was better than coercion.²

In addition to its pragmatism, there is a Christian spiritual value in American pluralism worth embracing, namely, the application of Matthew 7:12: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This word of Jesus reminds me that I am Lutheran, I am happy that I am free to be Lutheran, and I would not want to be forced into another tradition. Since I prefer freedom of religion for myself, I gladly share this freedom with my neighbors of other faiths or no faith, so that the various houses of worship in my corner of Philadelphia remind me to give thanks that I am – as Zechariah sang in Luke 1 – "free to worship God without fear." In the case of the United States,

pluralism can be understood as a theologically-neutral political context. Christians can also view it positively as providing a structure for living out values like civil rights, domestic tranquility, and treating others as we would like to be treated.

2. The Medieval Context: Western Christendom

Our pluralistic context is very different from the political and religious setting of the Lutheran reformers. Martin Luther was born in 1483 into the world of Western Christendom in which the many thrones, dominions, rulers and powers of Western Europe shared one religious foundation, the Roman Catholic Church, whose ecclesiastical laws were legally and spiritually binding within individual lands and across national and ethnic borders.³ One exception to this broad religious unity was the Jewish people, who sometimes had fragile rights in places like the Holy Roman Empire but who could also be routinely harassed, ruthlessly persecuted or even exiled entirely, as happened in thirteenth century England, fourteenth century France, fifteenth century Spain and sporadically throughout Germany.⁴

The spread of the Turkish Ottoman Empire across North Africa and Eastern Europe posed another political and religious challenge to Western Christendom.⁵ By the 1520s, the Turks had conquered Budapest and were at the gates of Vienna. In fact, the Turkish threat was a major reason why Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had to work *with* German Protestants in the 1520s and '30s instead of crushing the Reformation immediately.⁶ In God's mysterious providence, we might say that Lutherans might not exist if not for Islam! Although it seems that Luther never said he "would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than a foolish Christian," he did write, "It is said that there is no better temporal rule anywhere than among the Turks, who have neither spiritual nor

temporal law, but only their Koran.”⁷ While Luther often viewed the Turks and Islam very negatively, they did sometimes provide an interesting foil against which the reformers could consider their relationship to the rest of Christian Europe.

A third exception to the medieval church’s dominance came in the form of homegrown reformers and dissidents.⁸ Some, like the Franciscans, were incorporated into the big tent of Christendom. Others, like Waldensians in France, Lollards in England and Hussites in Bohemia, were condemned as heretical and had to go underground, though by Luther’s time the Hussite movement was so popular that it had achieved local mainstream status. Nevertheless, these exceptions prove the rule that the Roman Catholic Church defined the religious life of the period leading up to the Reformation, able to survive even such potentially destructive eras as the investiture controversy and the Avignon papacy.

3. The Reformation as an Age of Confessionalization

Although Luther was famously not interested in departing from this Christendom model, by the time of his death in 1546 the external unity of Western Christendom was shattered. But we cannot jump from Luther to an “age of pluralism” yet. Instead, historians have come to describe the period that followed Luther’s break with Rome as a time of “confessionalization.” This was the gradual process of lands establishing local church polities and institutions.⁹ The hard-won 1555 Peace of Augsburg allowed territories in the Holy Roman Empire to follow either the church of Rome or to worship and teach according to the faith of the Augsburg Confession. It set the provision of *cuius regio, eius religio*, which meant that rulers of a territory were free to decide which confession their land would embrace. Though

the nobility or city councils did the deciding from the top down, they often made decisions in light of popular opinion in order to avoid civil unrest.¹⁰ Confessionalization describes this process of how leaders of church and state worked to shape new institutions in evangelical Lutheran lands.

What did this process involve? Before the Reformation, public institutions like hospitals, schools and poor relief were funded through monastic orders, religious foundations or local parishes. These systems were built theologically upon what can be called "an economy of salvation."¹¹ The upper classes donated money to charitable causes to receive spiritual benefits for themselves or their loved ones. Working people could contribute to their salvation as they were able by participating in the penitential system, performing works of merit like fasts or pilgrimages, purchasing indulgences or viewing relics. They were also taxed through a system of tithes and rents that went to local parishes and religious houses, whether or not there was a priest residing in that parish to serve the community. The poor were blessed in spirit, making poverty itself a source of merit and a situation that the upper classes need not alleviate.

After the Reformation had begun, however, a salvation-based economy of social welfare no longer existed in Protestant lands. There was no time in purgatory to reduce through donations or good works. There were no more guarantees that forgiveness would come through buying religious products like private masses or indulgences. Poverty came to be seen as a social problem rather than a spiritual blessing. Though the new theology of justification by faith alone had a strong scriptural foundation and sincere goals for social reform, a critical question remained: would reforming lands be able to support the structures that had previously been funded through the economy of salvation?¹² Would preaching justification through Christ alone build up the common good or destroy it?

Lutherans answered these questions through the gradual legal establishment of evangelical faith, practices and institutions. This process of confessionalization began as soon as lands like Electoral Saxony or the free city of Nuremberg made reforms of church and society in defiance of the papal bull of excommunication and the imperial edict of Worms, which together spiritually and legally cast Luther and his followers out of Christendom in 1521. Because they went ahead with reforms outside of Christendom, these lands were truly doing something new.¹³

As modern as that may sound, a significant factor separates Luther's time from ours: in the age of confessionalization, church orders and confessions of faith were also the law of the land. That is, in conversation with political leaders like nobility, lawyers and city councils, reformers were not only promoting the saving faith of the heart but institutionalizing a new social order. Reformers participated in such secular rules and processes early on, for instance, in the Leisnig Church Order of 1523 which established a "common chest" for poor relief.¹⁴ Written by a local congregation and its reforming pastors, Luther endorsed this church order and had it published along with a preface he wrote for it. Liturgical reforms of the following years can also be viewed as attempts to provide a basic order for worship that might serve faith without supposing that following such a liturgy would itself deliver salvation *ex opera operato*, by the mere performance of the rite.¹⁵

The 1528 Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony¹⁶ and the Augsburg Confession of 1530 fit this model of a principled yet flexible foundation for reform of church and society, as do the many church orders written by Johannes Bugenhagen, Justus Jonas and others in those decades. In the case of the Instructions and the church orders, reformers began with a summary of the faith, then outlined an evangelical

liturgy, described the work of ministers and church leaders, and finally provided practical guidelines for establishing schools, poor relief and other public institutions.¹⁷ The shape of these orders show how the reformers' theology moved from inner faith to outward service in daily life. Our contemporary model constitutions similarly begin with statements of faith and then move to an orderly establishment of structures that serve the ministry of the gospel.

But again: unlike our model constitutions today, those church orders and confessions were also the law of the land. Preachers could be arrested, disciplined or exiled for teaching against the local church order or a confession of faith like the Augsburg Confession or the Formula of Concord.¹⁸ Lay people could also be brought before the local parish consistory for offenses against morality or the local religious orders.¹⁹ Such cases of church consistories overseeing the private lives of citizens are why some view the age of confessionalization as a time when the powers-that-be increased their social control through religious means, so that evangelical faith became a tool to gain and consolidate social power from the top down.²⁰ More generally, however, I view this process as the natural result of religious and political leaders attempting to foster internal faith and promote the common good by adapting institutions they already had. As Luther preached against too great an emphasis on rule-making: "I can drive no man to heaven or beat him into it with a club."²¹ Still, if the Lutheran reformers knew that faith cannot be legislated or coerced, why did they get involved in this process of confessionalization?

4. The Three Estates

Even though faith is a matter of the heart, the Lutheran reformers did not shy away from organizing church and society.

This theological concern for earthly welfare can be found in their view of the three estates that God created to serve human life: “the household, the state, and the church.”²² God created the household to provide personal stability and care of the body through family life, home economies, socially beneficial trades and labor, and the mutual efforts of masters and servants. Family members take care of each other, while people managing or employed in household economies contribute to the shared prosperity of the entire group.

The second institution created by God to serve human well-being is the state, the body politic, whose main task is to serve and protect through structures that support education, employment, care for the poor and sick, just laws and fair law enforcement. Like the family, God established the state for the sake of human welfare and earthly justice;²³ in the Small Catechism, the petition for “daily bread” includes our praying for “upright and faithful rulers, good government” and peace.²⁴ The reformers also knew that the form of a government can be flexible, since the Bible itself shows God at work in many different forms of government from the times of the patriarchs, the judges and the kingdom of Israel to the exilic period and the Jewish diaspora. Though never means of salvation in themselves, households and governments can serve souls by setting good physical conditions for faith to grow and by providing good access to gospel preaching and the means of grace.²⁵

The third estate, the church on earth, was instituted by God for a different purpose: to give souls the good news of Jesus Christ through word and sacrament. Though this a spiritual task concerned purely with what is of God, good preaching and ministry also serve secular society by teaching people how to live out Christ’s love in their daily callings as family members, workers and citizens. In the age of confessionalization, it was deemed good and right for civil

society to support gospel preaching and teaching, because the gospel teaches a love, service and harmony that benefits secular life. At the same time, it was good for the church to support the common good so that the gospel itself could be preached, heard and experienced in healthy settings. The reformers knew that it is hard for people to hear the gospel when they are afraid for their lives or struggling to meet basic physical needs.²⁶

Against the critique that the reformers merely blessed the status quo and preached blind obedience to earthly authority, we have the clear word of article 16 of the Augsburg Confession, which invokes Acts 5:29 as a conscience clause: “if a command of the political authority cannot be followed without sin, one must obey God rather than any human beings (Acts 5:[29]).”²⁷ Luther’s explanation to the fourth commandment in the Large Catechism also includes an echo of Acts 5 as he says that parents and others in authority “should keep in mind that they owe obedience to God, and that, above all, they should earnestly and faithfully discharge the duties of their office, not only to provide for the material support of their children, servants, subjects, etc., but especially to bring them up to the praise and honor of God.”²⁸ Finally, when confronted with the notion that Lutherans teach political quietism, I like to remember that Luther himself is one of the most famous scofflaws in world history. Even so, the letter that Luther wrote to Pope Leo which introduces The Freedom of a Christian gives a great example of how Luther could at once risk everything to resist the papacy while also being genuinely willing to pray for and support the pope as a fellow Christian and human being.²⁹

5. The Two Kinds of Righteousness,

Squared

Given the reformers' concern for the three estates and the common good, how can we describe their systematic efforts to reform church and society? Since the nineteenth century, the reformers' political theology has often been called the "doctrine of the two kingdoms." Because that label was not used during the Reformation and comes with significant baggage in modern history, I will not be speaking of a "two kingdoms" theory in Luther, even though it can certainly be done.³⁰ Instead, I prefer to see the reformers' attempts to balance earthly and divine matters as a dialectic, a principled pattern of thinking that can be applied in a variety of settings. In conflicts with the papacy, for instance, Lutherans used this dialectic to affirm the freedom of a Christian. In conflicts with radical reformers, Lutherans affirmed the goodness of this world and its institutions to say that people could indeed serve God by serving society.

Based on a source I found in my research on Luther's colleague Johannes Bugenhagen, I would like to describe this dialectic as "the two kinds of righteousness, squared." This idea comes from Bugenhagen's 1550 Jonah Commentary, which contains an extended defense of justification by faith alone. To advance his argument there, Bugenhagen included the story Luther used to tell him about how he first learned the gospel of Christ's righteousness. Speaking in Luther's own words, the text says,

I [Luther] did not know that through the preaching and the Holy Scripture of Christ's church there was a twofold judgment of God, one of the law and another of the gospel, and likewise a twofold righteousness of God, one of the law and another of the gospel. In the world the judgment and righteousness of the law is known, but it is not performed; but – as the prophets announced – David's son, our Lord Jesus Christ, would bring

about the judgment and righteousness of God through the gospel when he was upon the earth, as in Jeremiah 23[:5]: “He will make judgment and righteousness on the earth, etc.”³¹

Concepts like law and gospel, God’s judgment and God’s righteousness are perhaps already familiar to us. Luther described the distinction between law and gospel in many places, including a Table Talk in which he said, “In theology there are law and gospel, and it must be one or the other.”³² In the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon described the twofold effect of law and gospel as “putting to death and making alive.”³³ The “two kinds of righteousness” can be seen in Luther’s 1520 sermon by that name³⁴ and in his introduction to the 1535 Galatians lectures.³⁵ By combining these ideas, however, Bugenhagen’s reformulation invites us to see how God is beneficially active in all aspects of life. To help explain this dialectic, I have made a chart for the “two kinds of righteousness, squared” below.

Chart 1: The Two Kinds of Righteousness, Squared

	Active Righteousness	Passive Righteousness
Righteousness of God	Righteousness of the Law (<i>civil righteousness, 3rd use of the law</i>)	Righteousness of the Gospel (<i>righteousness of faith, imputed righteousness, etc.</i>)
Judgment of God	Judgment of the Law (<i>1st use of the law</i>)	Judgment of the Gospel (<i>2nd use of the law</i>)
	Known in the world	Known through Christ, church, etc.

As in the two kingdoms doctrine or the two kinds of righteousness, this description differentiates between an earthly or civil righteousness and a spiritual righteousness that comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time,

the addition of the law and gospel dynamic shows God at work not only in righteousness but also in judgment. For the reformers, this judgment can serve not only negative but positive and beneficial purposes.

5a. The Righteousness of the Law

Starting in the upper-left section, we see Bugenhagen describing the righteousness of the law. God wants goodness in our personal, social and religious lives. As Paul wrote in Romans 1 and 2, all people have known some form of moral, natural and even inspired religious law. Even at our best, however, this righteousness only comes through God's grace; Luther wrote in his Galatians commentary, "by the righteousness of the Law we do nothing even when we do much; we do not fulfill the Law even when we fulfill it."³⁶ Because original sin includes an inborn lack of trust in God,³⁷ the Wittenbergers cut off any chance that the righteousness of the law might be achieved and become truly righteous in either the civil or heavenly sense. As Melancthon wrote in the Apology, "Paul teaches that we are acceptable on account of Christ and not on account of the observance of the law, because our observance of the law is imperfect."³⁸

As an aside, it seems that the "righteousness of the law" is a good place to understand the so-called "third use of the law," as described in Formula of Concord VI: "Believers... do without coercion, with a willing spirit, insofar as they are born anew, what no threat of the law could ever force from them."³⁹ While some theologians have disputed this use of the law, Bugenhagen's lifelong interest in the proper relationship between faith and good works makes this a fairly simple point.⁴⁰ When Christians do God's will, then that is good and holy, even though such works never justify and are never done apart from the Holy Spirit and faith. As Augsburg Confession VI states, "faith

should yield good fruit and good works.”⁴¹ As we attempt to preach Christ alone in an age of pluralism it is good for us to keep in mind that God delights in works of love and concern for the good of all our neighbors. That is, good works of love and righteousness in this earthly life are blessed godly effects (but never causes) of justification.⁴²

5b. The Judgment of the Law

Of course, it is vain to imagine that we spend our lives enjoying the righteousness of the law. As Bugenhagen cited from Luther, “In the world the judgment and righteousness of the law is known, but it is not performed.” Instead, we live most of our lives under the condemnation of the law, in which people and institutions do not willingly serve the common good, act according to God’s commandments or love others as Christ loved us; this includes Christians. Commenting on the fourth commandment, Luther asked, “Why do you think the world is now so full of unfaithfulness, shame, misery, and murder? It is because all want to be their own lords, to be free of all authority, to care nothing for anyone, and to do whatever they please. So God punishes one scoundrel by means of another, so that when you defraud or despise your lord, another person comes along and treats you likewise.”⁴³ By wanting to be our “own lords” we have not only broken the fourth commandment but the first, so that our lives are marked by vicious cycles of one scoundrel being punished by another.⁴⁴

Even though punishment for civil unrighteousness does not belong to God’s saving righteousness, it is nevertheless also righteous, since God is just in condemning sin. This is where the life-preserving first use of the law is at work. The world is a better place when people drive on the proper side of the road, do not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, and so on. Stated positively, the “judgment of the law” is where

so much important work takes place on earth. We need good laws, good education, good science, good health care, and good law enforcement, imperfect though these things will be on this side of heaven. Here Paul's exhortation in Romans 13 to obey authorities and pay taxes finds its proper place, since "rulers are not a threat to good conduct, but to bad." While such judgment is rightly called God's alien work, the judgment of the law is nevertheless holy and blessed because here too God is working to promote life and goodness in creation.

This is where I would put most efforts to reform church and society, including the confessionalizing church orders of the Reformation and our own efforts to live out the ELCA slogan "God's work, our hands" today. Because of original sin, it is not a question of *if* we need rules for daily life but rather how beneficial and effective our structures and actions will be. We need government, education and strong public institutions like we need daily bread. Though our efforts never result in our achieving even a true active or civil righteousness, they can still beneficially curb sin and assist neighbors in need. Further, in the theology of the cross, the "judgment of the law," the thankless and – in this life – endless work of serving the neighbor, becomes a holy expression of faith active in love.

5c. The Judgment of the Gospel

The judgment of the gospel begins where people have no interest in or strength for serving our neighbors, for this judgment announces that we suffer not simply from practical problems but from a fundamentally spiritual affliction which cannot be solved by better adherence to civil, moral or religious law. This was Luther's great insight: his attempt to live according to the righteousness of the law kept getting undone by the judgment of the gospel, so that the words "In your righteousness, deliver me, O Lord" sounded like a threat. In God's righteousness, God

punishes sin, which makes seeking the ever-elusive active righteousness of the law a fool's errand and a torturous task. Instead of seeking righteousness through an active or cooperating love, Luther started to find comfort in the purely external word of God, which comes first as judgment and then as promise. According to historian Berndt Hamm,

God's speech – the biblical word about Christ – encounters sinners as a word of judgment and promise, *iudicium* and *promissio*. People respond to both sides of this divine speech in faith. The judgmental word exposes and condemns them in their profound evil. At that point, faith means admitting the truth of this judgment, recognizing the desperate condition before God, and prayerfully confessing sins to God by personally applying that divine judgment that accuses, judges, and condemns... they apply the truth of the judgmental word of God to themselves, realizing that, as sinful creatures, they truly are nothing before God...⁴⁵

Civil, moral or religious laws cannot give us any solution to our chronic spiritual problem. We learn this only through the revelation of God's righteous judgment against our fundamental lack of faith and goodness. As revelation, the judgment of the gospel is a heavenly message. But because this revelation begins with condemnation, in a fascinating phrase the writers of the Formula of Concord described such gospel judgment as "an alien work of Christ."⁴⁶

As a divine word, the proclamation of God's law is a proper work of the church.⁴⁷ Through such preaching, faith first assents to God's true judgments against sin and then passively experiences its justification as pure gift. As Formula of Concord II says,

Through these means (the preaching and hearing of his Word), God goes about his work and breaks our hearts and draws

people, so that they recognize their sins and God's wrath through the preaching of the law and feel real terror, regret, and sorrow in their hearts. Through the preaching of the holy gospel of the gracious forgiveness of sins in Christ and through meditating upon it, a spark of faith is ignited in them, and they accept the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake and receive the comfort of the promise of the gospel. In this way the Holy Spirit, who effects all of this, is sent into their hearts.⁴⁸

In the world we know the righteousness of the law, even though we do not achieve anything that comes close to the love, harmony and service that the law requires. But God has sent us a remedy: the preaching of a message that first condemns our unrighteousness and lack of faith in order to deliver a saving righteousness and liberation that comes from the Lord alone.

5d. The Righteousness of the Gospel

The gift that the Christian Church offers the world is a righteousness that occurs beyond merit, morality or law. Instead of leaving us on our own to achieve unattainable ideals, Christ frees us from the demands and vicious cycles of the law. By trusting the promise that God forgives sin and makes all things new, this righteousness is ours. While the family and the state might have a role in supporting this good news, it is the church on earth that God graciously created to be the steward of this message of salvation.

In this light, we see how "although later numbered as a separate article," Augsburg Confession V simply continues the Holy Spirit's justifying work of article IV.⁴⁹ Article V states, "to obtain such [saving and justifying] faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who

produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel.”⁵⁰ The church is the delivery system for the gospel.⁵¹ What happens when the gospel is received? The answer to that question comes in article VI, which says that this faith yields good works like a good tree bears good fruit. Taken together, articles four, five and six present a Spirit-based progression from the faith that justifies, to the church as the means of receiving this justification, on to the good effect of that free justification: a new obedience to God’s will and true service to the neighbor.

Sharing this saving message and blessed effect is why the church exists in every age. In a world of impossible law, the gospel of Jesus Christ remains fresh and life-giving, today as much as ever. As the reformers clearly and repeatedly said, the gospel does not remove believers from this fallen world. For since the way of Jesus Christ is the way of the cross, Christians follow their Lord not by escaping the world but by serving it. As Gerhard Forde asked, “What are you going to do, now that you don’t have to do anything?”⁵² What we are going to do is get back to the holy orders and spiritual vocations that God gave us in the first place: to be loving sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, parents and teachers, masterful servants and servant leaders, people who freely embrace the toil God has given us to toil with. Within the single holy order of baptism, some of us will be preachers, teachers, musicians, bishops and other leaders in the church. Such “church vocations” are not calls out of the world or higher callings than anyone else’s but are calls to be stewards of the gospel, just as other callings involve stewardship of households, land, possessions and communities. To emphasize the practicality of this Lutheran dialectic, I have revised my chart to show God’s good effects in each part of life.

Chart 2: The Benefits of the Two Kinds of Righteousness, Squared

	Earthly	Heavenly
Righteousness of God	Thanksgiving for earthly blessings	Thanksgiving for Gospel freedom
Judgment of God	Call to serve in daily life	Call to repent and believe (Oct. 31, 1517: Thesis #1)

In light of God's unmerited grace in supporting daily life, the benefits of earthly righteousness begin with simply knowing where our blessings come from. Since our life on earth remains marked by sin, the benefit of God's judgment is that we know and practice Christ-like service to the world. The benefit of heavenly righteousness is our free and totally unmerited justification received through faith. And 494 years later, the first of Luther's 95 Theses continues to call to us with a word that condemns sin and daily drives us back to Christ: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."⁵³

By giving us this dialectic that I have called "the two kinds of righteousness, squared," the Wittenberg tradition handed down not a set distinction between church and state but a lively way of thinking about how the gospel brings light to all aspects of life. In such a dialectic, we can say: yes, the church is holy and of God even as it is a human institution and not identical with the kingdom of heaven; and yes, while we know that earthly order and institutions are not the same as the righteousness of Christ, such mundane things are in fact holy and beneficial because they are God's creations and our incarnate means of serving one another.

6. Crossing Religious Diversity in the Wittenberg Tradition

As a final step towards offering some insights for preaching Christ alone in an age of pluralism, I will end this paper by applying the six-step analysis of the Crossings Community – itself a law and gospel dialectic – to this conversation. Crossing religious diversity in the Wittenberg tradition means that we first look for a presenting symptom.⁵⁴ One surface problem of religious diversity is that our secular and religious lives are marked by difference rather than unity and cooperation. Why can't we all just get along? This relatively shallow external problem of difference exposes a deeper internal sin. We want to control the spiritual, moral and physical lives of others. Let's confess it: we want Christendom! But that's precisely the desire for secular and spiritual control that Luther condemned in both the papacy and the radical reformers. It is also the wrongheaded desire that Christ challenged when he said, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). Religious diversity forces us to see that we are not in control of others and have not been willing servants (let alone slaves) of all.

Christ's word also points to the eternal problem that confronts us in religious diversity: no one but Christ has been given as a ransom for others. We are not God and we do not give, create or sustain life for ourselves or for anyone else. Christ alone has brought us to life by giving his life as a ransom. Our attempts

at religious coercion, spiritual discipline and social control of others are signs that we have idolatrously set ourselves up in the place of God. Religious diversity confronts us with the eternal challenge that the Lord alone is creator, judge and savior of the nations. In this case, Christ's word to us may be, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21-23). This word of gospel judgment identifies the hell that comes from our zeal to lord it over others.

As the reformers wrote in tall letters for fast-moving people like us to see clearly all these centuries later, the ransom of Jesus Christ becomes ours through faith. Instead of our need to be lords, God can be God and we can be ourselves, free of the need to lord it over others. See how our Christian freedom means freedom for others! I mean this not only in a political sense, as when we tolerate others because the first amendment tells us to, but also in a spiritual sense. Having been set free by Christ without respect to merit, we are free to love and serve others without respect to their merit. Neighbors do not need to be the right kind of neighbor for us to serve them. A final gospel change then occurs not in the blessing of the status quo but in the total transformation of society. In Christ, we no longer live in a world of competing ideologies, moralities or even salvations. In Christ, we are free to love this world as Christ loves it: selflessly and totally. The government does not have to be the right kind of government for us to work for the common good. The economy does not need to be made righteous before we do the right things within it. We are free to love and serve God without fear even when – and especially when – our neighbors do not look like us or worship like us. For us in the Wittenberg tradition, this message and ministry is what it means to preach Christ alone in an age of pluralism.

Thank you for your attention.

References:

1 Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1972), 124-213.

2 For instance, Kant's "categorical imperative" or Rousseau's "social contract."

3 The role of ecclesiastical law in motivating church reform is especially visible in the English Reformation, as in A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State, 1989), 106-129. See also, Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 41-55.

4 For more on Luther and Judaism, see Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531-1546*, (Ithaca: Cornell, 1983), 115-142; Heiko Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*, James I. Porter, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and Steven Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 99-100.

5 For more on Luther and Islam, see David Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009) and Gregory Miller, "Luther and Islam" in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, Timothy Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 185-203. 6 BC 30.1.

7 LW 44:203 (Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation).

8 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 41-55.

9 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 357-359.

10 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 246-247.

11 Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 17-94, especially 92.

12 Tim Lorentzen, "Theologie und Ökonomie in Bugenhagens Fürsorgekonzept" in *Der Späte Bugenhagen* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 151-174, especially 173-174.

13 Berndt Hamm, "Pure Gabe ohne Gegengabe – die religionsgeschichtliche Revolution der Reformation" in *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 27 (2012), 241-244.

14 LW 45:159-194. See also, Albrecht Steinwachs, "The Common Chest as a Social Achievement of the Reformation" in *Lutheran Quarterly* 22, 2 (2008), 192-195.

15 Gordon Lathrop and Timothy Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 42-43.

16 LW 40:269-320.

17 Lathrop and Wengert, 115; Lindberg, *Beyond Charity*, 139-145.

18 Charles Arand, Robert Kolb and James Nestingen, *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 247-249.

19 Robert Christman, "The Pulpit and the Pew: Shaping Popular Piety in the Late Reformation" in *Lutheran Ecclesiastical Culture: 1550-1675*, Robert Kolb, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 289-294.

20 Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 357-363.

21 LW 51:79.

22 LW 7:312.

23 LW 7:312.

24 BC 357.14.

25 BC 400.103-410.178 and 449.71-452.84 (Luther's explanations to the fourth commandment and "daily bread," respectively).

26 LW 51:70-100 (The Invocavit Sermons).

27 BC 50.7. This conscience clause also appears in article 28 of the Augsburg Confession, in the Apology, and in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (BC 102-3.75, 292.21, 294.25, and 336.38, respectively).

28 BC 409.168.

29 See Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 172-189.

30 William J. Wright, *Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 17-43.

31 Cited in Martin Lohrmann, *Bugenhagen's Jonah* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 125.

32 LW 54:42-43, number 312.

33 BC 194.46.

34 LW 31:293-306.

35 LW 26:4-12.

36 LW 26:8. Note the same use of "the righteousness of the law" described by Bugenhagen.

37 BC 36.1-38.3.

38 BC 155.231.

39 BC 503.7.

40 Lohrmann, 141-152.

41 BC 40.1-3.

42 See also BC 56.35-39 (AC XX).

43 BC 407-408.154.

44 See also the reformers' use of 1 Peter 4:17 ("the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God"), as in BC 214.151.

45 Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 74-76.

46 BC 501.10.

47 BC 500.6.

48 BC 554.54 (on free will). See also LW 31:364.

49 BC 40, note 47.

50 BC 40.1-3.

51 Lathrop and Wengert, 60.

52 Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 51.

53 LW 31:25.

54 For examples of the Crossings method, visit www.crossings.org.

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