

Marquette University

**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

---

Summer 2013

## Retrieving Luther?

Mickey Mattox

*Marquette University*, [mickey.mattox@marquette.edu](mailto:mickey.mattox@marquette.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac)



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mattox, Mickey, "Retrieving Luther?" (2013). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 371.  
[https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo\\_fac/371](https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/371)

# RETRIEVING LUTHER?

Mickey L. Mattox

---

Franz Posset

*The Real Luther: A Friar at Erfurt and Wittenberg* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), xxii + 195 pp.

William J. Wright

*Martin Luther's Understanding of God's Two Kingdoms: A Response to the Challenge of Skepticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 208 pp.

Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm, eds.

*Transformations in Luther's Theology: Historical and Contemporary Reflections* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 286 pp.

---

As Jared Wicks, SJ, recently reminded readers in these very pages, the year 2017 marks the five hundredth anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's "ninety-five theses," and with it the supposed beginnings of the Reformation/s of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> As the much-anticipated anniversary year draws near, scholars and publishing houses alike are increasingly busy making their arguments and pushing their products. The anniversary is being made much of in Germany, including plans for a

---

Mickey L. Mattox, Associate Professor of Theology, Marquette University, PO Box 1881, Milwaukee, WI 53201-1881

---

1. Jared Wicks, SJ, "Review Essay: Recent Theological Works on Luther," *Pro Ecclesia* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 448. See also the memoir by Father Wicks that appears elsewhere in this issue.

celebratory international Luther Congress in the now fully post-DDR city of Lutherstadt-Wittenberg in 2017, an event that promises to be as much concerned with Protestant identity as with the Luther of faith and history. By comparison, preparations on this side of the Atlantic have been relatively quiet thus far. As the three books reviewed here suggest, however, the relative quiet will soon be replaced by a good deal of scholarly conversation and argument about the man Martin Luther, his theology, and his historical impact, as well as his potential to contribute to theology today. If these volumes are any indication, moreover, interesting, indeed paradigm-shattering, times indeed lie ahead.

---

### LUTHER'S THEOLOGICAL BEGINNINGS, HISTORICALLY RECONSIDERED

---

Franz Posset's *The Real Luther* is only the most recent book from a scholar whose productivity and careful work in the historical sources of Reformation history have gained widespread acclaim and recognition. Posset is perhaps best known as a scholar of Luther's relation to Bernard of Clairvaux and, more broadly, to the antecedent Catholic theological tradition as a whole. More recently, he has published a lengthy biography of Johannes von Staupitz, Luther's father confessor and academic mentor at the monasteries of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt and Wittenberg, respectively.<sup>2</sup> For present purposes, it is also important to know that Posset, a Catholic, counts among his teachers and formative influences Hans Küng, Walter Kasper, and Joseph Ratzinger (all at Tübingen) along with Kenneth Hagen, with whom he completed his Marquette PhD. In *The Real Luther*, the industrious and ecumenically minded Posset offers a thoroughgoing rereading of Luther's early theological development, as well as a close examination of what the sources really tell us about the unfolding of the *causa Lutheri*. He sees the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux on the Annunciation as crucial to Luther's so-called discovery of a gracious God. On this, more later.

First, the work of historical reconstruction designed to reveal the "real Luther." One should not underestimate how unsettling Posset's claims are for both Protestant and Catholic standard readings of the young Luther. In the present work as in some of his earlier studies, Posset offers a close reading of both the original sources and the rather dense secondary

---

2. See *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999); *Luther's Catholic Christology* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1988); *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation: The Life and Work of Johann Von Staupitz* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003).

literature to reach an innovative conclusion. The early Luther, he argues, should be understood not as a *Reformer*, but as a particularly theologically industrious late-medieval pastor (*Seelsorger*): "The historical Luther is the pastoral Luther" (9). Luther's so-called Reformation breakthrough, over which so much ink has been spilled, quite simply never occurred. Luther's theology of grace and faith was not the end result of a long and tortuous hermeneutical journey capped by a sudden insight into one or another biblical text (typically the Psalms or Romans). Nor should it be understood as marking indelibly a new theological or ecclesial beginning. To the contrary, the young Luther's interest in "reform" (and Posset notes, following Heiko Oberman, that Luther never called himself a *Reformer*) was strictly pastoral, which suggests that his efforts should be understood not as a battle cry for Reformation but as a particularly forceful example of a widespread movement for the improvement of pastoral care underway on the German scene since the fifteenth century.

The subsequent legendary transformation of pastor Luther can be seen, Posset argues, in the later labels applied to the writing commonly known as the ninety-five theses, as well as in the traditional retelling of how this text came to be. The iconic portrayals of Luther as "the Reformer" nailing his "theses" to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg do not appear, Posset notes, until the eighteenth century. Moreover, until the nineteenth century the anniversary of the Reformation was celebrated on June 25, the date of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession in 1530, which Posset sees as evidence that "the 'Posting' was not always understood as the decisive event that would call for celebration" (11).

What was posted? According to Posset, there were no "theses." Instead, Luther posted what he himself variously labeled *propositiones*, *Sprüche* ("sayings"), *positiones*, or *disputationes* ("talking points"). Moreover, Luther never referred to these as *Thesen* ("theses"). Following Volker Leppin, Posset notes that Luther's own original term for the document itself was "*schedula disputatoria*," which would be well translated as "a little slip of paper for a disputation" (14). Clearly this does not suggest a firebrand's manifesto for "Reformation without tarrying for any," to borrow a later phrase. To the contrary, Luther was anxious that he be understood as acting and thinking in accord with the church's own best pastoral intentions, and to limit the conversation to trusted friends and to the appropriate ecclesial authorities. Indeed, Posset notes, Luther submitted his 1518 defense of these propositions ("*Resolutiones disputationum de indulgentiarum virtute*") both to Albrecht of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz, and to bishop Jerome Schulze, whose diocese included Wittenberg. From Schulze, Luther later received a letter approving his "*Resolutiones*" as "wholly Catholic" (18). The standard narrative of the early Reformation as beginning with the defiant posting of ninety-five theses thus does an injustice to history and wrongly wrenches the story

out of the framework of pastoral care intrinsic to the concerns of many in the early sixteenth century and into a fictional academic and ecclesial call for Reformation. Here lie the roots of the Luther legend.<sup>3</sup> The confusion of the real historical unfolding of the life and work of the early Luther has been wrongly conflated with his supposed *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Posset argues, whether seen from an adoring Lutheran or a vilifying Catholic perspective. Posset's "real Luther," then, stands in contradistinction to both.

Further supporting his case for the unhistorical development of the legendary Luther, Posset briefly deconstructs some of the other stories scholars and others like to tell: that Luther was caught in a thunderstorm near Stotternheim and in fear vowed to "become a monk"; that he had a bad case of the scruples in the Augustinian monastery and engaged in a long and lonely struggle to "find a gracious God"; and that he boldly declared at Worms in 1521, "Here I stand, I can do no other" (36 ff.). Posset's reconstruction of Luther's real theological beginnings is provocative, to say the least. The influence of Bernard of Clairvaux, he declares, was both historically prior and theologically more important than the influence of Augustine. The key source for substantiating this claim is Philipp Melanchthon's preface to the second volume of the "complete works" of Martin Luther printed at Wittenberg in 1546. Posset offers the reader not only an interpretation of the development of Luther's early theology informed by this text, which he says has been wrongly neglected in other historical studies of Luther, but also his own fresh translation. An appendix offers a revised chronology of the early Luther's theological work and development.

In the 1546 preface, Melanchthon recalls Luther saying that in the monastery he was "often strengthened by the words of a senior friar," whom Posset says was probably Johann von Greffenstein. Melanchthon says this senior directed Luther to a sermon of Bernard on the Annunciation in which the latter says, per Melanchthon, that forgiveness of sins is given "to you" (TIBI) in announcement of the gospel. Afterward, Luther connected what he had learned from Bernard with Paul's teaching in Romans and so set his conscience at ease. Only later did he read Augustine to confirm what he had learned from Bernard. Similarly, Posset firmly situates Luther's biblicism in the theology and practice of his teachers (notably Jodocus Trutfetter, a "scholastic humanist" at Erfurt) as well as in the Constitutions of the Hermit Order of St. Augustine, which called the friars to the avid and devout study of the Sacred Scriptures. "Luther," Posset writes, "is the personification of this medieval directive" (67).<sup>4</sup> His

3. For a perceptive theological reflection on this transformation, see Risto Saarinen, "Luther the Urban Legend," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009).

4. Cf. the extensive work of Eric Leland Saak on the *Ordo Eremitica Sancti Augustini* in the later middle ages: *High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform between Reform and Reformation, 1292–1524* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 13–31.

reading of Scripture more broadly can only be properly understood when set in the context of the monastic *lectio divina*. Here we find the real origins of Luther's emergence as a biblical humanist, and not therefore in a long and lonely search for a gracious God through the development of a "new hermeneutic."<sup>5</sup>

Posset's work should be seen as a courageous and vigorous rejoinder not just to the received Protestant wisdom on Martin Luther, but to the Catholic as well. Indeed, building on the work of scholars like Otto Hermann Pesch, Posset rejects commonplace Catholic readings of Luther (from Grisar to Lortz and Küng) that trace his "error" to an excessively Pauline "subjectivism." To the contrary, Luther's point of departure for his understanding of faith was not Paul but the Gospel of John. Posset's work here includes as wide-ranging a familiarity with this important secondary literature as I have seen in print. His argument, moreover, for the necessity of reading the early Luther's history and development anew is in many respects convincing. If nothing else, it should provoke some interesting responses from the Luther guild.

It is curious, moreover, that this book should have been published by Concordia Publishing House, the official publisher of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a body not generally considered a too-easy hotbed of Lutheran ecumenism. Indeed, Posset so problematizes the heroic tale of the early Luther as to constitute a considerable challenge to Lutheran self-understanding, at least insofar as it is based on the received narrative of the Luther affair in the 15-teens. However, Posset's insistence on the full catholicity, indeed the deep dogmatic traditionalism, of the early Luther's theology could well support a broadly catholic understanding of Lutheran identity, one that could in turn be contrasted to post-Reformation Roman Catholic faith and practice.

My occasional reservations about Posset's work have mostly to do with his reliance on Melancthon's memoir. The text Posset so helpfully offers in English translation here clearly constitutes a relatively advanced stage along the way in the early development of the Luther story. Narrating that by now familiar story, Melancthon emphasizes the virtues not only of Luther himself, but of his mother and father as well. He shows how well educated he was, what a model friar he became, how pious he was, and so on. He even recounts that Luther's anxiousness in the monastery began with the death of a friend, a point that seems to place the story of Luther's fateful evangelical conversion alongside that of Augustine and, just so, to vindicate it as a drama divinely directed. Melancthon's Luther is pious, and he is an oracle, moreover, of "true doctrine." In the context of this hagiographical reading of Luther's life, the connection to Bernard functions rhetorically as a crucial point of contact with an ante-

---

5. For a study that to the contrary interprets Luther's early development in just this way, see Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

cedent tradition of true doctrine to which Luther was heir. This move sets Luther's theology forth firmly as a recovery and restatement of Catholic truth, not as an innovation over against it.

Melanchthon's argument here is suggestive, then, of the dense polemic that had already emerged between Lutherans and Catholics, and between Lutherans and Reformed as well, over the reception of the Church Fathers, and of continuity in the apostolic faith. In the memoir, Melanchthon offers a distinctively evangelical and humanist periodization of five "ages" of church history after the apostles: the first when Origen lost the distinction between law and gospel; a second when Augustine partially [*sic*] recovered it; a third, when fathers from Prosper to Bernard retained this Augustinian heritage; a fourth, when the Dominicans and Franciscans betrayed that heritage, particularly in their reliance on the philosophy of Aristotle, but also in their idolatrous understanding of the Mass; and last of all, a fifth age in which Luther emerged to restore pure doctrine. This periodization suggests considerable artifice and interpretation on Melanchthon's part, which makes one wonder how much the historian can rely on his reconstruction of Luther's early development, including the connections to Bernard. Simply put, Melanchthon had a considerable interest in portraying Luther as the heir of authentic Catholic tradition, and the memoir was intended to do just that. It reminds us, moreover, that in the years between Luther's early discoveries, whatever they may have been, Luther himself and the movement he had founded, intentionally or not, had come to view their age through lenses that were deeply tinted with an apocalyptic view of history. A real Luther whose history remains uninterpreted is no more to be found in the memoirs of Melanchthon than in the works of a Harnack or a Grisar.

The reservations notwithstanding, in his careful historical rereading of the sources Posset has made an important and original contribution to Luther studies, one that deserves to be taken seriously on all sides. The legendary Luther must be tempered, if not by the "real" Luther, then certainly by careful work in the sources such as that epitomized here.

---

## THE DIFFERENCE THESIS, RESTATED

---

There is perhaps no more controverted and misunderstood teaching to be found in the writings of Martin Luther than that of the "two kingdoms." In the years following World War II, critics of Lutheranism not infrequently pointed a finger of blame at this distinctive Lutheran idea for its supposed role in rendering the Lutheran tradition itself quietist in the face of the radical social evil embodied in National Socialism. Justified in the "kingdom God," so the argument went, through faith alone, the Lu-

theran Christian was free to be bad as ever he or she needed to be in the "kingdom of this world." This of course was not at all what Luther meant, and numerous studies have sought, with varying degrees of success, to sort out Luther's political thought and so vindicate it from the charge of having given the Christian license to behave badly in the kingdom of this world.

William Wright wades into the oft-muddied waters of what is typically assumed to have been a political teaching with an interpretation of the two kingdoms that underscores its centrality in Luther's thought and at the same time thoroughly de-politicizes it. According to Wright, the two kingdoms notion embodies in a nutshell Luther's conception of the real, indeed Luther's *Weltanschauung* (15). The language Wright adopts is stark. The two kingdoms—the mundane and the heavenly—are "different worlds," and as such they are "totally alien to one another and opposite in nature" (12). This is not a Platonic dualism, Wright claims, because Platonism would relate the world of things to the forms that stand behind them. To the contrary, he insists, these are separate, alien realities that are united only by the fact that God rules over them.

The book's first chapter offers an important and informative literature review. Some scholars have identified Christoph Ernst Luthardt as the nineteenth-century source of an interpretation of the two kingdoms that divides them into separate spheres of human existence, the one autonomous from the other. Wright argues to the contrary, insisting that Luthardt, following Luther, did not see the state as morally autonomous but instead as dependent on and ruled over by God's law, including the natural law. The real mischief, as Wright sees the matter, begins with Reinhold Seeberg, who seems to have been the first to use the term *Eigengesetzlichkeit* ("autonomy") to describe the independence of state and church from one another. Beginning with Ernst Troeltsch, Wright sees the further development of a notion of the two kingdoms that does include mutual autonomy, which he identifies as different from Luther's view. Troeltsch, per Wright, innovatively connected the compartmentalizing notions of two autonomous spheres of life—internal spiritual versus external civil—with Luther's distinction between law and gospel. The genealogy of this false interpretation of Luther's thought continues through H. Richard Niebuhr and Max Weber, who, on Wright's account, further connected the notions of autonomy and the two spheres of life to the "western process of rationalization" (29).<sup>6</sup> A relatively brief review of some of the developments in this conversation surrounding the rise of National Socialism and the well-known criticisms of Karl Barth over against his Lutheran opponents is followed by an analysis of more recent

---

6. Wright is quoting here from Per Frostin, *Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994), 5.

trends—critical and appreciative—in interpreting the two kingdoms motif. Wright applauds Gerhard Ebeling's claim that Luther's two kingdoms theory has to do most fundamentally with Luther's theology of the Word, and he draws attention to important studies of Gerhard Gloege, Gustaf Wingren, F. Edward Cranz, and others. The effect of this chapter is to direct the reader's attention to a positive and constructive reception and development of the two kingdoms teaching as understood in what one might call mainstream Lutheranism.

Wright's argument for the importance of Italian humanism and, especially, the influence of Lorenzo Valla on Luther in developing his understanding of the Word, and hence of the two kingdoms, will probably catch many readers by surprise. While many might suppose that the skepticism in the book's title would refer to William Ockham, Wright argues to the contrary that Ockham's philosophy was oriented toward the resolution of doubt. Instead, he says, it was the methods of humanist scholarship (textual analysis and rhetoric), with which Luther was quite familiar, that created an atmosphere of intellectual uncertainty with which Luther, like many others, struggled.<sup>7</sup> Following a trail blazed long ago in the work of Lewis W. Spitz Jr.,<sup>8</sup> Wright identifies a specific stream of humanist thought, "rhetorical humanism" (and not, therefore, the kind of speculative Neoplatonic humanism associated with such figures as Marsiglio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola), as the seedbed for Luther's notion of the two kingdoms. Valla combined a humanist critique of Aristotelianism and scholastic theology with a biblicism that reached back to Cicero and Quintilian for an understanding of how the Scriptures could become the foundation for the practical knowledge in which the Christian life is expressed. For Valla, Wright argues, "rhetorical logic based on the Scriptures was all Christians needed for certainty in matters of faith. . . . Ultimately, divine things could be known only by faith" (67). Scripture combined with rhetoric to uncover the interior *sensus* of Scripture, and this in turn provided the only source that could properly move people in accord with Christian charity. For Valla, the human will, love for God, is more basic than the false scholastic value of *prudentia*. According to Wright, moreover, it was Valla who pioneered new ways of reading Paul that stood opposed to the kind of neat ethical parsing associated with scholastic exegesis. Valla's influence on Luther, then, was both epistemological and exegetical.

---

7. This is not the place to explore it, but there is an interesting overlap of Wright's work with the path-breaking new study of Susan E. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). At the very least, it now seems clear that certainty as a central theological and philosophical problem antedates the seventeenth century.

8. *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

In Luther's day, Wright shows, ideas like those of Valla and other Italian thinkers were combined eclectically in that heady brew historians have long labeled "northern humanism," where philology, love for classical antiquity, rhetoric, and the like were mixed with Cabalism, hermeticism, and other streams of mystical thought. Northern humanists like Erasmus and Philipp Melanchthon, whose connections to Luther require no demonstration, were heir to all this, and they put it to work in developing their own distinctive approaches to articulating Christian theology, approaches that were very much influenced by the doubt and uncertainty occasioned by humanist scholarship. This skepticism, Wright argues, was in some respects more prominent in Erasmus than in Luther, as evidenced by their well-known debate over "free choice" in the 1520s. Both Luther and Erasmus, however, were biblical humanists, and in some respects the former's debt to humanist skepticism ran deeper than the latter's, for the spiritualizing Erasmus represented the Neoplatonic side of humanist thought, which located human reason in the spirit, the inner man, and so, unlike Luther's two kingdoms notion, offered a ready connection between the divine and the human.

Attempting to trace out Luther's distinctive appropriation of humanist thought and his dependence on Valla in particular, Wright draws attention to Luther's citations from Valla in the *Dictata super psalterium* (1513–1514), his exegetical use of Valla's Annotations on the New Testament for his commentary on Hebrews (1517–1518), as well as a reference to Valla's *Dialecticae disputationes* in the Heidelberg Disputation. Elsewhere, Luther refers admiringly to Valla as a "good Christian" (97) and contrasts him favorably with Erasmus. For Luther, neither reason nor experience could point the way forward against uncertainty. "However, Valla showed that faith provided a way to certainty in dealing with religious matters without the weaknesses of reason and philosophy. Hence . . . the Bible . . . was the only reliable source on Christian matters" (98). Wright further substantiates his claims by appeal to the Lectures on Genesis (1534–1545), where he asserts that, as a consequence of the Fall, reason and the senses can offer only probable, and therefore fallible, knowledge, while the Scriptures offered certainty not only of material causes, but of efficient and final ones as well.

Pressing his case further, Wright argues that even Luther's notion of vocation can be seen as a version of the humanist promotion of the active life over the contemplative. When one fulfills one's duties within one's this-worldly vocation (located within family, church, and society) with an authentic spirit of Christian charity, then one lives a truly authentic Christian life. The "dualism" that some have associated with Luther's two kingdoms is thus only apparent, for it is precisely the dualism of Neoplatonic tradition, including its humanist appropriations, that Luther rejects. According to Wright, the two kingdoms teaching provides an alternative,

indeed the "necessary substitute" (104), for the metaphysical systems on which so many, both scholastics and humanists, were dependent. Reason, too, is limited to the mundane, although it is crucial within it, even for theology and preaching. Every human capacity, then, from the sense of touch to ratiocination itself, is confined to this side of the great divide between the divine and the mundane. The kingdom of God, utterly alien to the kingdom of this world, can be known only when it breaks through, inexplicably, in the Word.

Luther's two kingdoms teaching on Wright's reading should not be confused either with the "two swords" theory of medieval Christendom, or with the two cities of Augustine. Luther, he argues, "replaced the medieval view of the institutional church with the idea of the church as the invisible body of Christ himself. In this true church, the members were related to Christ personally and individually" (108). Here Luther may, Wright allows, have been influenced by William of Ockham. Unlike Ockham, however, Wright sees Luther as articulating a coherent system of thought on these matters centered around "law versus grace, visible versus invisible, or active versus passive righteousness" (109). In the case of Augustine, Wright positions Luther much nearer, noting their common struggle against admittedly different forms of skepticism. Augustine's notion of the two cities, per Wright, was not an undigested bit of a lingering Neoplatonism, in spite of his assertion that the city of God on this earth is a "shadow" of the heavenly one. However, in spite of the similarities between Augustine and Luther in this broad area, Wright finds, as other scholars have argued, that Luther developed his own views out of Paul and used Augustine only as a resource for recovering the genuine meaning of the Bible. Two final chapters explore Luther's application of the two kingdoms teaching (including in the context of his "three estates" teaching: *die Dreiständelehre*), as well as its place in the Christian's struggle for faith and faithfulness.

There is much to like in Wright's work. It offers in many ways an advance on the antecedent literature, and it is informed by an admirably broad reading in the dense secondary literature. Wright's claim that the two kingdoms are more fundamental in Luther's thought than its restriction to the political would allow strikes me as basically right. His attempt to situate Luther decisively in the context of sixteenth-century Christian humanism, moreover, is a reminder to all of us who work on Luther of his creative dependence on an extraordinarily diverse cast of characters well beyond the stereotypical scholastic milieu. Wright's claims are so broad, however, as to give one pause. They necessitate a wide-ranging sampling across the full range of Luther's work as a theologian over the course of nearly forty years. The footnotes run back and forth through the Weimar Ausgabe in a manner that seems to emphasize systematic coherence at the cost of historical change and particular context. The Luther we meet

here, in other words, is a historically composite construction—that is, a systematic theologian whose fundamental principle is the two kingdoms, not the historical Luther in constant motion responding ad hoc to first one challenge and then the next.

James Stayer has taught all of us on this side of the Atlantic to receive systematic construals of Luther's thought that purport to offer the "real Luther" with a certain skepticism, so to speak.<sup>9</sup> Occasional overstatements in the text further the skepticism. It is surely wrong, for example, to say that Luther "replaced" the institutional church with the "invisible" one. Luther himself heard this critique and decisively rejected it. The visible church was both essential in Luther's theology and at the center of his reforming work. As the late James Kittelson's aptly titled "Luther the Church Bureaucrat"<sup>10</sup> reminded us, however apocalyptic Luther may have been, however starkly he may have at times seemed to draw the line between the Truth of faith and the truths of this world, nevertheless he was committed to the reform and renewal of the church as institution, as a this-worldly reality. Wright's insistence on the radical opposition between the truth that is God and the truth one knows in this world also makes Luther sound a little too, well, Barthian, which suggests that his work should be received as representative of the kind of solid, though not unassailable, systematic-existential readings of Luther's thought we have come to expect from scholars inspired by great thinkers like Gerhard Ebeling. Such interpretations of Luther's thought have long underscored the notion that the tradition of Luther differs fundamentally from the Catholic tradition, whose metaphysics and commitment to a congruence between nature and reason with grace and faith cannot be reconciled with Luther's "totally alien" God. For those of us who believe that readings of Luther like Ebeling's represent the past and not the future of Luther studies, Wright's work may seem distinctly backward looking, but in just that sense it powerfully demonstrates the abiding significance of the "Ebeling school," also for the future of Luther studies. As the next work reviewed here shows, however, Ebeling's is now only one of many possible readings, and perhaps not the one with the most wind in its sails.

---

## AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

---

Since the groundbreaking publication of her *The Trinity and Martin Luther* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1999), Christine Helmer has made a habit of publish-

---

9. *Martin Luther, German Saviour: German Evangelical Theological Factions and the Interpretation of Luther, 1917–1933* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

10. *Concordia Journal* 13 (1987): 294–306.

ing singularly insightful and provocative research on Martin Luther. In *Transformations in Luther's Theology*, she joins forces with Danish scholar Bo Holm to offer an edited collection of conference essays from a group of talented theologians addressing broadly the theme of the necessary "transformation" of Luther's theology, for his time and ours. The volume is divided between "historical" and "contemporary" transformations, where the former denotes historical reevaluations of Luther's thought and the latter constructive-systematic appropriations of it for contemporary purposes. The latter is oriented toward recovering insights from Luther (not uncritically) and bringing them into conversation with the needs and challenges of contemporary theology, and in some cases with the needs and challenges of historically Lutheran societies. As the editors point out in their introduction, however, it may well be the contemporary reader whose ideas and commitments endure transformation in the encounter with Luther. The net effect of the thirteen essays offered here is to provide a challenging and sometimes exciting overview of readings of Luther that represent both sides of that exchange, theologies that are challenged or changed by Luther, as well as challenges to Luther from contemporary points of view. There is not space to examine, much less to summarize, each of these essays here. What is offered here instead is only a sampling of some of the more interesting and provocative ones.

Philip Stoellger leads off the collection with a somewhat meandering examination of the fates of "Reformation theology" in the twentieth century and beyond. He begins with a blast against the "essentialism" on which he says doctrinal ecumenism depends—that is, the notion that truth is given and can be stated in propositions, which for Stoellger is "symptomatic of a Platonic hermeneutic." Such notions of truth, he complains, undergird exclusivist and imperialist theologies. The pluralism of early Christianity, he counters, is superior to the presumed ecumenical goal of visible church unity based on exclusive claims to hold the truth, particularly one that ends in a "new Roman 'ultramontanism' under the primacy of the bishop of Rome" (21). Protestant thought as he sees it centers properly in a "theology of the cross" that includes or entails a perspectivalism that ever negates any claims to the possession of truth. Truth itself, then, is ever fleeting from either the individual's or the community's capacity to grasp; therefore, truth is not about what we can name or know. Instead, it is a regulative concept that leans in the direction of a perpetual self-correction. This seems to offer little more than a breezily intellectualized version of the oft-repeated slogan that the church reformed is ever to be reformed (*ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*), and frankly gets the book off to a less-than-promising start.

Some of the essays that follow, however, are noteworthy examples of new and interesting approaches to Luther's thought. Friederike Nüssel examines the supposed dynamic understanding of the *communicatio idi-*

*omatum* in Luther and Lutheranism, and shows the surprising ways this develops in the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. Heinrich Assel's contribution, on the other hand, offers a close reading of the problem of political freedom as it has been handled by Luther scholars—Ebeling, Karl Holl, Rudolf Hermann—since the Luther Renaissance. Assel focuses, understandably, on Luther's 1520 tract on Christian freedom, tracing varying ways scholars have understood the reciprocal representative relationship between Christ and the Christian. This rich essay also brings Luther into conversation with a diverse group of modern and contemporary political thinkers, including Oliver and Joan O'Donovan, and attempts to press forward political thought inspired broadly by Luther and his tradition(s). Elsewhere in this first section, Paul Hinlicky stakes out his claim for the necessity of a "Leibnizian" transformation of Lutheran theology, and Peter Widman offers his reflections on both the central achievements of Lutheran theology and the unresolved problems now facing Lutheran tradition.

Christine Helmer offers a stimulating chapter that describes and defends her scholarly journey from Luther studies to Schleiermacher studies and back again. Hers is easily the most far-reaching and programmatic of these initial chapters, and it throws down a gauntlet against those who would maximize the gap between Luther and Schleiermacher by making them the antithetical poster boys for postliberalism and liberalism, respectively. As far back as Protestant Orthodoxy and Pietism, she rightly observes, Protestant thinkers have been about the business of transforming Luther's insights into "the intellectual and cultural idioms of the day" (106). Thus, Ritschl's nineteenth-century neo-Kantian transformation of Luther under the slogan "no metaphysics, no mysticism" (107) has been transcended in the latter half of the twentieth century by the transformation of Luther by Oswald Bayer into a "'word of God' theologian" (107). In the latter instance, she argues, Luther becomes the Lutheran's answer to Karl Barth, as like Barth, a word of God theologian, but unlike Barth, one for whom God's word is twofold. Helmer emphasizes the differences between Ritschl and Bayer, and she criticizes the latter for emptying Luther's ethics in the attempt to secure God's sole agency in justification. What unites them, she points out, is their common willingness to transform Luther's thought in order to put it to work in the present. Hegel, she says, did much the same thing when he rendered "Luther's personal and ecclesial account of justification . . . in the modern speculative categories of the God-world relation" (109). These examples demonstrate, Helmer believes, that the move to update and even to improve on Luther is in fact business as usual in Protestant tradition. Given that this is so, why worry about a Schleiermacherian transformation? Helmer finds the answer in a convergence of interests between conservative theologians of the word like Bayer and evangelical Catholics, who, following George

Lindbeck, privilege a cultural-linguistic understanding of theology that gives the language of faith primacy over the experiences so crucial to Schleiermacher and his heirs. Both, she argues, transform Luther by appropriating him to the interests of their respective theological program. Over against them both, she argues, attention to experience, and hence to Schleiermacher, promises new and necessary transformations of Luther for a new day.

The seven chapters in "Contemporary Transformation," Part II of the book, bring Luther into dialogue with several different streams in contemporary theology and life. Risto Saarinen and Jan-Olav Henriksen both explore the theology of the gift from the perspective of Luther's thought. Saarinen's essay is typically paradigm-shattering, as he literally charts out the potential of a theology of giving to gather up central Lutheran concerns under its cover and so function as a comprehensive Lutheran theology. Examining that possibility, he makes a striking argument for a Lutheran appropriation of the category of "transcendentals" (love, goodness, truth, beauty—which are typically associated with Catholic theology) in order to fill in the conceptual horizons of Lutheran thought. Three final essays set Luther in contemporary contexts. Elisabeth Gerle examines Luther's potential to contribute to Scandinavian societies struggling with the challenge of immigration, which requires openness to change and difference. Pantheistic tendencies she finds in Luther's thought—a stretch, I fear—help her identify promising trajectories toward openness and generosity. Vitor Westhelle sets Luther's understanding of the "three estates" (church, home, state) in the context of his alleged rejection of the medieval *corpus christianum*. The essay is intellectually energetic, and he quite rightly emphasizes Luther's disdain for usury, but it is loosely connected to Luther's theology. Svend Anderson's examination of Luther's political thought in the book's last chapter adds an interesting voice to the conversation charted out in the analysis of Wright, above. He lays out the critique of Luther's presumed anthropological pessimism offered by the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, and he sets it alongside the conservative Julius Stahl's Lutheran political theology, in which, Anderson argues, political freedom is dissolved into obedience to the divinely established state. Anderson finds an answer to the stalemate between the two in the distinction between the gospel and Christian love. Although the state in Luther's thought cannot be ruled by the former, he argues, it can be transformed—there's that word again—by the latter. The means for this transformation, so Anderson, is the "role exchange" he sees at the center of Luther's understanding of the freedom of a Christian. Anderson fittingly quotes Luther: "Therefore, as God has helped us for nothing through Christ, the same way we should not do otherwise than, by our body and its works, help our neighbor" (251). Talk of role or place exchange quickly moves to a discussion of gift and reciprocity, and from there to an argu-

ment for Lutheran liberalism that brings Luther, surprisingly enough, into conversation with John Rawls. For readers for whom Rawlsian liberalism may have long since become problematic, particularly in regard to the relationship between religious belief and public reason, Anderson's essay is a learned reminder that many still take modern liberalism itself as a blessing, and do their best to see to it that Luther remains, if not the gatekeeper of liberal modernity, at least its German *Hebamme*. When we consider essays like this one alongside the other two books reviewed here, we get a glimpse of the interesting times to come in 2017 and beyond.