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Luther's Theology of the Cross

Christ in Luther's Sermons on John

DENNIS NGIEN

Foreword by Alister McGrath

Afterword by Carl R. Trueman



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LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Christ in Luther's Sermons on John

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In Thanksgiving on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation,
for their Friendship, Mentorship, and Scholarship:

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Foreword

It is a pleasure to commend and introduce this new study of Luther's "theology of the cross." In recent years, Dennis Ngien has established himself as a leading interpreter of Luther, with a most welcome emphasis on the importance of Luther's ideas for the life and witness of the church, as well as for the personal spiritual journeys of individual believers. This important new work will help scholars grasp the fundamental theological themes underlying Luther's approach, while helping a wider readership appreciate how this can inform and enrich the life of faith.

My own discovery of Luther's theology of the cross dates from the spring of 1979. I was working on Luther at Cambridge University, under the direction of Professor Gordon Rupp. At that time, I found its core ideas deeply puzzling. "Living, even dying and being damned, make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating."¹ Surely theology was about reading books, and trying to make sense of our world? Surely theology was basically about securing a better understanding of things? Luther seemed to have developed a theological trajectory that bore little relation to the rather academic theology that I knew at that time.

As I read on in Luther, I came across other terse statements emphasizing the centrality of the cross of Christ to faith. "The cross alone is our theology."² "The cross puts everything to the test."³ Luther's words seemed to extend the meaning of the cross far beyond theories of the atonement, suggesting that the cross of Christ was the key to Christian existence—to our knowledge of God, and the dynamics of the Christian life. Happily, I persevered in my engagement with Luther's "theology of the cross," and continue to find it a remarkable source of wisdom in times of uncertainty, difficulty,

1. WA 5.163.28–9: "Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando."

2. WA 5.176.32–3: "Crux sola est nostra theologia."

3. WA 5.179.31: "Crux probat omnia."

CHAPTER 1

St. John's Way of Speaking

The Person and Work of Christ

From the very beginning of his commentary on John's gospel, Luther advises that the church must be conversant with the Apostle John, particularly "his way of speaking."¹ We must acquaint ourselves with the Fourth Evangelist's logic and the manner with which he speaks powerfully of the subject and substance of the holy Christian faith, as already enshrined in the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds. Unless the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, reveals, no mortal soul can fathom what is said about God and his attitude towards sinners. It is St. John to whom is revealed the person of Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully man, and together with it the soteriological significance of dual-nature Christology: that Christ who is both very God and very man is the rock on which our eternal welfare and salvation rest. Luther's exposition of John 1 addresses major christological heresies, and his orthodox Christology begins to shine. Not speculation but revelation yields the knowledge of the Trinity and Christology, which he conceives as the central facts of salvation. This is St. John's way, to which we must cling, of apprehending Christ aright: the one indivisible person of Jesus Christ, altogether pure and innocent, has been granted to us by the Father to be our High Priest, redeemer, and humble servant. Christ alone, about whom John the Baptist testifies, toward whom Moses and the prophets point, and through whom God's grace, truth, life, glory, love, and forgiveness are revealed, is the unshakable ground of salvation he achieved for us. Just as the knowledge of sin is a predicate of God's revelation, not human

1. LW 22.5 (WA 46.540).

reason, so is the true and saving knowledge of God. God reveals through the law that we are drowning in sin, a condition only the Lamb of God can overcome. Sin must not remain in our conscience where the law has deposited it, lest despair and damnation are the outcome. Christians must learn the art of extolling these words with a joyful heart: "And the Word became flesh," and praising God for his infinite love bestowed upon the wretched human beings reflected in the self-humiliation of God by becoming one of us.

Chalcedonian Christology Affirmed

Luther quoted the Nicene Creed² to confess Christ as "begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God," and in time also very man, born of Mary. He affirms the orthodox doctrine of Christ formulated at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, in which Christ is fully God and fully man, but one Person. The heretics have attacked both natures of Christ. Cerinthius began to assail the second article of faith as early as the apostolic days, denying Christ's divinity; the Manichaeans impugned his humanity. Luther's contemporaries, who followed Kaspar Schwenkfeld,³ denied true incarnation, averring that because he was conceived solely by the Holy Spirit, Christ did not assume flesh like ours. Christ is a celestial being, and thus his flesh was heavenly, not earthly. Against this, Luther affirmed that Christ, our Savior, was "the real and natural fruit of Mary's vaginal womb," as is borne out in Luke 1:42: "Blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary gives rise not to Jesus' deity, which he has from eternity, but his humanity. Mary, "the mother of God's eternal Son,"⁴ imparts all that she is to Jesus.

St. John, for Luther, was pre-eminent among the apostles in his portrayal of the divinity of Christ. The evangelist affirms the pre-cosmic existence of the Son: "In the beginning was the Word." Cerinthius⁵ and other heretics abounded at this time (cf. 1 John 1:18; 4:1). Basing his proof on Moses, Cerinthius denied that the Word was God. The two texts he cited

2. LW 22.28 (WA 46.560).

3. LW 22.21, note 19, where Kaspar Schwenkfeld, Luther's contemporary, was cited. Luther also disagreed with his doctrine of the Lord's Supper.

4. LW 22.24 (WA 46.556).

5. LW 22.7, note 2, where Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Bk. I, ch. 26 was quoted: "He portrayed Jesus as not being born of a virgin but as the son of Joseph and Mary, born in the ordinary way . . . After His baptism Christ descended upon Him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Potentate and performed miracles. But at the end Christ left Jesus. Then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ, as a spiritual being, remained incapable of suffering."

as support of his position are Deuteronomy 6:4 ("The Lord our God is one God") and Deuteronomy 5:7 ("You shall have no other gods before Me"). St. John now quotes Moses in his attack against their heresies and repudiates them completely. Moses began with these words: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth . . . And God spoke a word, and there was light" (Gen 1:1-3). The phrase "in the beginning" antedates the creation of the universe and of any other creature. Based on this, St. John offered a far more explicit statement about the eternity of the Word, that "this Word was with God, that God was this Word, and this Word had existed from all eternity."⁶ Just as a human person has a thought, or word, or a conversation within himself, so too God from all eternity is pregnant with a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation within himself in his divine life. No one knew of this until the Word became flesh and proclaimed this to us. Thus John 1:18 says: "The Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed him to us." However a wide chasm exists between the thoughts, discussions and words of the mortal beings and those of the eternal and almighty God. Unlike created beings that exist in time, God is from all eternity. Luther articulates this with the medieval scholastic doctrine of divine aseity: "What [God] is, He is of Himself from eternity. On the contrary, whatever we are, we received from Him, not from ourselves. He alone has everything from Himself."⁷ The Word in which he engaged with himself in his divine essence and which reflects the thoughts of his heart is "as complete and excellent and perfect as God himself."⁸

In his defense against Cerinthius, Luther latches onto the two words used by St. John: "existed" and "created." That which is created did not exist before; heaven, moon, stars, and human creatures were created in the beginning. But that which was not begun, created, or made, and yet is and has its being must have existed antecedently. Thereby St. John attests that the Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), was not created nor made; for before the world, before all creaturely beings were made, and before the beginning of things, the speech or the Word was already in God, without whom nothing was made. Except God the Creator alone, everything was created, and has its being in God. Luther notes that John did not say "'God created the Word,' or 'The Word came into being,' but 'The Word was already in existence.'"⁹ And all things were made by the Word, as

6. LW 22.8 (WA 46.542-43).

7. LW 22.9, (WA 46.544) note 5, where Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologium*, ch. 6 was cited.

8. LW 22.10 (WA 46.545).

9. LW 22.14 (WA 46.548).

the following verse states: "All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made" (v.3). He must be God, if we grant the premise that the Word preceded all creatures. The Word cannot be numbered with the created order, as among the creatures, but with the uncreated order, thus receiving his eternal being in the Godhead.

With Augustine,¹⁰ Luther used the word "Person," as the fathers did too.¹¹ The word "Person" translates *hypostasis*, "an essence or substance" which comprises a class by itself, namely "God."¹² Verse 2, "He was in the beginning with God," reminds the reader of the distinction of persons within the one Godhead. Where was the Word? "He was with God, and He was God." The Word, which is the Son, is and remains eternal and true God together with the Father. Just as a human son receives his flesh, blood, and being from his father, so the Son of God, born of the Father, derives his divine essence and nature from the Father from eternity. However, the Father can impart his entire divine nature to the Son, constituting him one being with the Father; but a human father can impart only a fragment of it, not his complete nature. Unlike a human father, God's essence is indivisibly One. In the same Godhead, neither is there partition nor division of essence; there is no before or after, thus no chronological sequence; neither higher nor lower, thus no difference in ontological status; neither greater nor lesser, thus no order of rank in being. Though the Son receives his essence from the Father, the Son is co-equal with the Father in deity. He is fully God, just as the Father is. Likewise the Holy Spirit partakes of the one divine majesty and nature with the Father and the Son. These are not two gods, but two persons in the one and same Godhead, along with the Father.

Arius, says Luther, was "the most artful and subtle of all the enemies."¹³ In this text, "The Word was God," Arius alleged that the term "God" did not refer to "the true, natural God but to a titular deity."¹⁴ It refers to "the name and the commission: 'Be a god on earth!'"¹⁵ Divinity is Christ's, not by nature but by conferral. The title "God" is not intrinsic to his being; it is honorific, that he was named "God" because he was an unusual person who excelled all others. Whilst Arius acknowledged that Father and Son were two distinct persons, he distinguished between them by relegating Christ to

10. Cf. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, IV, ch. 20, par. 27 as cited in LW 22.16 (WA 46.549).

11. LW 22.16 (WA 46.550) note 13. Luther may have gained his knowledge of this from Augustine, *On the Trinity*, V, ch. 8, par. 9, 10.

12. LW 22.16 (WA 46.550).

13. LW 22.18 (WA 46.552).

14. LW 22.18 (WA 46.552).

15. LW 22.19 (WA 46.552).

a mere Creature. A line of demarcation is drawn between the uncreated order and the created order, and Christ belongs to the latter.¹⁶ However, Arius' position runs contrary to the text. Luther writes: "For, if He existed, then it is impossible that He should have been made or created; but together with the Father He was true and eternal God from all eternity, equal in power and majesty."¹⁷ Arius' blasphemous lie was convincingly refuted by the following verse: "All things were made through Him" (v. 3). With Augustine,¹⁸ Luther affirmed the perspicuity of this text concerning Jesus' deity. By "all," St. John includes every creature so that nothing creaturely is excluded from his creative work. In addition to affirming the Word as the Creator of all things, St. John now draws a negative inference: "Without Him [i.e., the Word] nothing was made." If everything has been created through the Word and nothing exists without him, then the Word cannot be ranked among the created order. He, the Word, who already existed in the beginning, is the Creator of all things. He not only antedated all creatures, but also he was a co-worker and equal Creator of all things with the Father. With respect to divine nature, there is no difference between him and the Father. As one God, both the Father and the Son work together in the economic work of creation. The Son is co-equal Creator with the Father, as is borne out in John 5:17: "My Father is working still, and I am working" (cf. Eph 3:9; Col 1:15-16; Heb 1:2). St. John's deity is not deistic; after completing creation, God does not take leave of absence without any concern for its maintenance. For just as God creates us through the Word without human aid and agency, so also God governs and preserves us without human participation. "For He is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all creatures."¹⁹

Verse 4: "In Him was life" differentiates between the eternal Creator and other earthly mortal workers. Whatever is temporal and transitory will pass and perish in time, except the Son of God who abides eternally. According to his divine nature, neither can he die nor come back to life. He is sheer life, not only in himself, but also in everything that acquires life from him, especially human beings. Human creatures are created in the image of God and for life eternal; they forfeited this life through the original fall and become subject to death. But they will be quickened through Christ (1 Cor 15:22). St. John writes: "And the life was the light of men." As life, Christ quickens; as light, he imparts light only to his own, that the Word reveals himself to his elect through the Holy Spirit and the oral Word.

16. See Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, ch. 4.

17. LW 22.19 (WA 46.552).

18. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, I, ch. 6, par.9.

19. LW 22.28 (WA 46.560).

As early as 1509, Luther noted in the margin of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard: "It is not so much a physical or logical determination as a theological one. It is as if someone were to say: 'What is Christ?' to which the logician replies: 'He is a person . . .' while the theologian says: 'He is the rock, the cornerstone.'"²⁰ The article that Christ is both very God and very man, for Luther, is the rock on which our eternal welfare and salvation are founded. The incarnation, the unity of two natures in Christ, is conceived in terms of the central fact of salvation. If the faith is impaired by Arians, who deny the divinity of Christ, we are lost. To divest Christ of his divinity, Luther avers, is to be bereft of all hope.

If Christ is not true and natural God, born of the Father in eternity and Creator of all creatures, we are doomed. For what would Christ's suffering and death avail me if Christ were merely a human being like you and me? As such He could not have overcome evil, death, and sin; He would have proved far too weak for them and could never have helped us. No, we must have a Saviour who is true God and Lord over sin, death, devil, and hell. If we permit the devil to topple this stronghold for us, so that we disbelieve His divinity, then His suffering, death, and resurrection profit us nothing.²¹

On the other hand, if Christ is divested of his humanity, as with the Manichaeans, we are lost too. "Our sin, misery, and distress are so enormous that they require a ransom too great for angels, patriarchs, or prophets to pay. For this God's Son had to become man, suffer, and shed His blood."²² For the Manichaeans, the creature is far too filthy for the holy, pure, and immaculate deity to adopt its nature.²³ They consider incarnation the greatest blasphemy and mockery to the divine majesty. Therefore they held that Christ had been born of the Virgin Mary without acquiring her flesh and blood. Others asserted that Christ had fashioned a heavenly body for himself and had caused it to be born of the Virgin Mary. "But if He were not true man," argues Luther, "He could not have suffered and died to achieve our salvation."²⁴ If Christ is without a real humanity, like ours, we receive no comfort from him.

20. See marginal gloss on *Sentences*, lib. III, d. 23; WA 9.91.22-24 as cited in Congar, "Christology of Luther," 376.

21. LW 22.21-22 (WA 46.554).

22. LW 22.22 (WA 46.555).

23. See LW 13.96, note 34.

24. LW 22.23 (WA 46.555).

But in His humanity He must also be a true and natural son of the Virgin Mary, from whom He inherited flesh and blood as any other child does from its mother. He was conceived of the Holy Spirit, who came upon her and overshadowed her with the power of the Most High, according to Luke 1:35. However, Mary, the pure virgin, had to contribute of her seed and of the natural blood that coursed from her heart. From her He derived everything, except sin, that a child naturally and normally receives from its mother. This we must believe if we are not to be lost. If, as the Manichaeans allege, He is not a real and natural man, nothing in common with us; then we can derive no comfort from Him.²⁵

Proper Meditation: “And the Word Became Flesh”

Discussing verse 14, Luther fleshes out at length the full salvific import of his two-nature Christology, and instructs us on the proper and improper usage of it. Now the Word acquires a new name. Earlier the evangelist called the Word “God.” Now he speaks of the condescension of the Word into our “flesh.” He did not become an angel or another excellent creature; he became man, one of us. Against Docetism, he is consubstantial with us in his humanity; he possesses not a seeming humanity, but a real one (John 1:14; Heb 2:16). Christians must learn to prize, esteem and sing these words—“the Word became flesh” (v. 14)—with a joyful heart and thank God for his immense compassion in becoming one of us. In the mass, when the Nicene Creed was sung, the congregation “genuflected”²⁶ at the words “from the Virgin Mary, and was made man,”²⁷ and removed their hats, showing reverence.

Angels are much holier than poor miserable sinners, yet God adopted our nature. This elicited awe in St. Bernard, who pondered the incarnation, and composed his thoughts on it, especially found in his devotions.²⁸ For Bernard, the incarnation has caused the downfall of the archfiend Lucifer and his eviction from heaven. Lucifer foreknew God’s eternal resolve to become like us poor bags of worms in time, not a magnificent angel, and

25. LW 22.23 (WA 46.555–56).

26. LW 22.103 (WA 46.625). The custom of genuflecting at the words “And was made Man” in the Nicene Creed started very late, in the Middle Ages. 1502 was the year for its official recognition.

27. LW 22.103 (WA 46.625). The words “from the Virgin Mary, and was made man” are from the Nicene Creed.

28. See Clairvaux, *Sermones de tempore*, as cited in LW 22.103 (WA 46.625).

that, Bernard supposed, has provoked his insolence against God. Lucifer regarded himself as more beautiful and noble in appearance than man. So he became envious of mankind, who alone was given the high honor of God's assumption of human nature. Lucifer and his hosts were humiliated by this act, when they recognized that God would bypass them and assume human nature. Thus they fell and were banished from heaven. On the contrary, the good angels rejoiced over God's act of being attired with the human nature; they remained in heaven and recognized Christ as their Lord and God. This is borne out in Matthew 28:6, where the angels say to Mary Magdalene and to other women: "Come, see the place where the Lord lay." Although Bernard's supposition does not constitute an article of faith, says Luther, it is quite plausible.²⁹ It indeed annoys us to see the divine majesty in the nature of a poor, feeble, and corrupt human nature, rather than in the nature of the holy, glorious angels. If we Christians were to ponder the matter, we too might arrive at the conclusion, as Bernard did, that it would have been far more reasonable and honorable for God to assume the nature of his noblest creatures, the angels, than that of vile human nature. God assumed every aspect of our human nature, except sin and guilt. The great miracle of the incarnation is ineffable, and anyone who believes it cannot help but wonder at the thought that God should deem humans dearer and nobler than an angel, although humans are really wretched creatures by comparison. Like Bernard, Luther took special delight and efforts in contemplating these words with reverence: "And was made Man," from which he had derived comfort and joy.

Luther went further to relate how people could find strength and deliverance in these words: "The Word became flesh," which he considered as equivalent to these words: "I am a Christian."³⁰ He assigns great value to the proper usage of these words to combat the devil's assault. A brief word spoken in faith such as this is effective to deliver him from his trouble and distress: "I am a Christian, of the same flesh and blood as my Lord Christ, the Son of God. You settle with Him, devil."³¹ The devil was unmoved when he heard "In the beginning was the Word." But he cannot stand to hear the words "God became man"; for these words vanquish all his thoughts and he vanishes.³² The godless misuse these words, supposing that by a mere

29. LW 22.104 (WA 46.626).

30. LW 22.106 (WA 46.627).

31. LW 22.108 (WA 46.629).

32. See LW 22, note 79. This is also recorded in his *Table Talk*, 1540, (Weimar, Tischreden III, No. 3669) where Luther writes: "There is nothing more vexing to the devil than speaking about dear Jesus and His incarnation. Therefore I like it that in church people sing loudly 'And the Word was Made' or 'And was made man.' The devil

repetition of them, though without faith, they could work miracles and charms (cf. Acts 19:13). As an example, Simon Magnus wanted to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit in order to work miracles without faith (Acts 8:18–19). “But, brother, not that way. You are making it a work without faith,”³³ Luther counters. “If faith is wanting, there is no power in the words.”³⁴ To utter the scriptural words “The Word became flesh” without faith is to abuse it; it also permits the devil to reinforce the error, that there is no difference between words uttered in faith and in unbelief. An unbeliever is impotent to bring about any desirable effects; he parrots these scriptural words of a believer without effect. However, by faith, it will be done to you according to these words; “they cannot but be effective.”³⁵

The Apollinarists, the followers of Apollinaris,³⁶ alleged that the true Son of God does not possess a soul, inferring this from the text, where the evangelist did not mention a soul but merely said: “And the Word became flesh.” Christ assumed only a human body, but not both body and soul. Such interpretation, Luther avers, does not carry weight, for it would be just as logical to infer that Christ had no body either, for flesh and body are not identical.³⁷ However, in scriptural parlance, the word “flesh” denotes a complete human being, as in John 3:6: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” Thus “of a woman both body and soul are born, not an inanimate mass of flesh, a physical being of flesh and blood, designated by Scripture with that one word ‘flesh.’”³⁸ Throughout Scripture, the word “flesh” encompasses “both body and soul, for without the soul the body is dead.”³⁹ The evangelist prefers “The Word became flesh” to “The Word became man.” With that word “flesh” he wants to indicate “its weakness and its mortality”⁴⁰ in connection with the inexpressible humiliation of the Son, an important constituent of Luther’s theology of the cross.

The words “And dwelt among us” speak against the heretical Manichaeans,⁴¹ who took offense at the statement that the Son of God had

cannot stand to hear this, and he has to retreat several miles.”

33. LW 22.107 (WA 46.629).

34. LW 22.107 (WA 46.629).

35. LW 22.107 (WA 46.629).

36. LW 22.110 (WA 46.632). Apollinaris regarded the divine logos as the soul of Christ’s human nature.

37. LW 22.110 (WA 46.632).

38. LW 22.110 (WA 46.631).

39. LW 22.111 (WA 46.632).

40. LW 22.111 (WA 46.632).

41. LW 22.112 (WA 46.633).

become man. They protested that the divine majesty, whose brightness exceeds that of the sun, should not submerge itself into sin-corrupted, impure and mortal flesh. By that they also rejected Mary as the true, natural and physical mother of Jesus. This is illustrated by the analogy of a red glass, which casts a red shadow on the wall, although the wall itself is not red in color. Only a shadow or phantom passed through Mary, like a ghost with no real body or soul. As such Christ had only resembled a human, but not a true human. This means the Romans crucified an incorporeal phantom, not the real Christ. However, by writing "Christ dwelt among us," the evangelist wants to demonstrate the connection between Christ's humanity and his own actions, by dwelling among the people, and assuming human experiences (eating, drinking, suffering) in the feeble and wretched human form and nature. And by writing "we have beheld His glory," the evangelist proceeds to demonstrate the correspondence between Christ's divinity and his own actions. Just as Christ's humanity is discernible in his acts, so also his divinity is found in the acts that he does. The deeds he did by his words were exclusively God's, proving that he was God by nature. For his Word is his deed; by his Word the deed is done. Just as God brought forth heaven and earth through the Word, he too performed all that he wished by a spoken word. As support, Luther cited several texts: "Little girl, I say to you, arise" (Mark 4:41); and: "Lazarus, come out!" (John 11:43); to the lepers: "Be clean!" (Matt 8:3).

This is the first time John introduces these words: "as the only-begotten Son of the Father" (v. 14) as a predicate of the term "Word." The term "Word" may be obscure, lacking clarity in any language; but now it shines, as the evangelist puts it plainly: "This is God's only begotten Son."⁴² The evangelist's own interpretation goes like this: "The Word, which was with the Father from eternity and is the Light of man, is called the Son, yes, the only-begotten Son of God. He alone is that, and no one else."⁴³ Luther provides another version: "The Word, of which I have spoken to you, is the only-begotten Son of God, true God and Creator with the Father, differing only in this, that He was born of the Father, and the Father was not from Him."⁴⁴ Christians should treasure this text, from which they could draw comfort; they are lifted out of distress, simply because they are children of the eternal bliss through the only-begotten Son of the Father, begotten of

42. LW 22.115 (WA 46.635).

43. LW 22.115 (WA 46.635).

44. LW 22.115-16 (WA 46.636).

him in eternity, and born of the Virgin Mary in time. Luther asserts: "[T]his is our Christian faith. This alone makes us Christians."⁴⁵

The same Word that became incarnate is "full of grace and truth." This expression sets Christ apart from, and exalts him above, all the patriarchs and prophets. The greatness or glory of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua and others is received from God, who works great miracles through them. "They proved themselves by word and deed, and the glory we perceive in them is divine, not physical and earthly."⁴⁶ However, their glory, no matter how brilliant it is, cannot be compared to that of the Word that became flesh. Whilst the other children of God possess only a measure of grace and truth, the only-begotten Son of God alone is "full of," or is "sheer grace and truth."⁴⁷ Being the natural Son of God, whose glory is intrinsic to his being, he ranks above all God's adopted children, whose glory is conferred as a token of his grace and mercy. To obtain a better understanding of this phrase, "full of grace and truth," Luther placed Adam and Christ in juxtaposition (Rom 5:12). "As Adam is the fountainhead of sin, misery, and death, and transmits all these to us, so that we now speak of sin upon sin, so Christ is the fountainhead of all grace, truth, and life, from whom we derive a fullness of grace, life, and truth."⁴⁸ In Adam we see nothing but God's wrath, damnation and eternal punishment; for the fall of Adam results in lapses: from grace to wrath, from truth to lies, from righteousness into sin, from life into death. The fallen world thus is "a veritable vale of tears, an abode of sadness, a cheerless desert."⁴⁹ By contrast, in Christ we see nothing but grace, peace, joy, and favor; all of these are profusely and exclusively his by nature, given that he is "the dear child"⁵⁰ of the heavenly Father. Whatever Christ says and does is sheer grace, love, and joy; for He is "the Favourite,"⁵¹ God's only-begotten Son, who can do nothing amiss. His words and acts are well-pleasing to God, as testified by the Father from above: "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him" (Matt 3:17; 17:5).

Luther considers the words: "And from His fullness have we all received grace upon grace," one of "the golden texts" in St. John's gospel.⁵² For Luther, the phrase "grace upon grace" speaks of two types of grace. The first

45. LW 22.116 (WA 46.636).

46. LW 22.117 (WA 46.637).

47. LW 22.117 (WA 46.637).

48. LW 22.138 (WA 46.657).

49. LW 22.119 (WA 46.639).

50. LW 22.119 (WA 46.639).

51. LW 22.120 (WA 46.639).

52. LW 22.130 (WA 46.649).

refers to Christ as the chief fountain of all grace, which he called "Christ's fullness," unfathomable and inexhaustible fullness from which all the saints down the centuries have drawn, and still do. This is "grace upon grace," that we all benefit from Christ's fullness—His righteousness, innocence, and obedience, which Christ imputes to us. The second refers to grace which we receive from him out of his free mercy, by which we are made pleasing to God. There was one verdict that St. John the Baptist pronounced on human creatures from Adam to the end of the world: we are all sinners and liars by nature, devoid of grace or divine favor. But concurrently he offers Christ as a remedy: "Christ alone must be the means. He alone makes us paupers rich with His superabundance, expunges our sins with His righteousness, devours our death with His life, and transforms us from children of wrath, tainted with sin, hypocrisy, lies, and deceit, into children of grace and truth. Whoever does not possess this Man possesses nothing."⁵³ Thus it is "a terrible and detestable blindness and a demonic presumption"⁵⁴ for any sinner to attempt atonement for sin through his works. It too is "a wretched arrogance"⁵⁵ for anyone to indulge in bragging and boasting of such things as beauty, riches, noble birth, wealth, honor and glory, when he is nothing but bags of worms or maggots before God. Grace alone, and of superabundance, moves God to be favorably disposed toward us. If we were to acquire grace and truth, "Christ's fullness must perform this."⁵⁶ God is pleased with believers, who through Christ's person and work become partakers of this grace and truth. For them grace will not terminate, nor will judgment enter, because of the appealing picture of Christ as "full of grace and truth," which are imputed to "all who received Him."

John the Baptist and His Office

The text says: "John bore witness to Him, and cried: This was He of whom I said: He who comes after me ranks before me, for He was before me. And from His fullness have we all received grace upon grace" (vv. 15–16). As witness, John the Baptist first acquainted the people with the Messiah's advent. This was made necessary because of the mean and inauspicious demeanor the Messiah bore, that is, in such an insignificant and abject form in which he appeared. John the Baptist was sent to preach the advent of Christ so that the people of Israel could not excuse themselves for their ignorance of Christ

53. LW 22.131 (WA 46.649–50).

54. LW 22.132 (WA 46.651).

55. LW 22.132 (WA 46.651).

56. LW 22.124 (WA 46.643).

and their failure to recognize him because of his lowly appearance. Even so, his work commanded no respect, as people were awaiting a messiah in some other form. Secondly, John's austere and saintly life should have lent support to his witness to Christ. Yet Christ was not received by the vast multitudes. But John persisted in his mission and faithfully fulfilled the task to which God had called him. Verse 15: "This was He of whom I said: He who comes after me ranks before me" refers to the time now past, before Jesus' public ministry and immediately after the cessation of his own work as a witness. Christ was born six months after John's birth. Christ did not precede John in his humanity; he precedes Christ in office. No one will succeed John, except Christ, who comes after him; no prophet or teacher will intervene between John and Christ. Both he and Christ bore the same content or doctrine. In divine being, Christ precedes, and excels, him. The child antedates his mother, his conception in his mother's womb, or his birth. Surely this has never occurred in nature, from which one could infer that he must be "an unusual child, that He must be God."⁵⁷

God gave John the command and office to preach, to baptize Jesus and usher in a new reign. At the baptism where the Son was standing in the water, the divine majesty manifested itself over Jesus, confirming "not only an inner and private call into the office with which He had been invested before the foundation of the world but also a public and visible call."⁵⁸ This is evident in the words spoken by the eternal Father on that occasion: "This is my beloved Son" (Matt 3:17), and in the descent of the Holy Spirit in the physical form of a dove. All three persons of the Trinity, together with the elect angels, were in attendance at Christ's baptism. From this we gather that baptism is not the work of humans but solely of God. Jesus' baptism ushers in a remarkable transformation in which "the Law, the Jewish priesthood, and the kingdom were to be abolished, and a new world was to be established through the Gospel."⁵⁹ John was to initiate a new reign, in which not only the Jews but all the nations were to be a people of God through Christ. In accordance with his office, John the Baptist points people away from himself to Christ the Lord, and testifies that he is the Light and Life of the world, the only Savior of the world, the Lamb of God, our shepherd, our abbot, our Bridegroom, and our Messiah. "That proclamation is the sum and substance"⁶⁰ of John's testimony and ours too. The testimony of the

57. LW 22.129 (WA 46.648).

58. LW 22.39 (WA 46.570).

59. LW 22.39 (WA 46.570).

60. LW 22.53 (WA 46.581).

Light was "most necessary."⁶¹ John was instrumental in our becoming the children of the Light. This is spoken against the Anabaptists who avow that the Spirit could work faith in the people independently of and apart from the external Word. "For God has decreed that no one can or will believe or receive the Holy Spirit without that Gospel which is preached or taught by word of mouth."⁶² Though John was not the Light that illumines people to life eternal, the Lord boldly calls John "a burning and shining lamp" in John 5:35. Just as he remains the instrumental light, though people reject him, so Christ is the only Light of mankind in the world, even when only a small minority of people are touched by it. Thus the evangelist issues a terrifying statement: "He came into His own, and His own received Him not" (cf. Isa 53:1-3). God had designated the people of Israel as "his own" through Moses who said in Exodus 19:5: "You shall be My own possession among all peoples." The evangelist here calls them the possession of Christ our Lord, as he says: "He came into his own" (v.11). His own did not accept Christ, for Christ's appearance did not coincide with the image of their imagination. They wanted a Messiah, like an earthly king, who would make them prosperous, great, and mighty lords so that they could have dominion over all the nations. Christ was to appear triumphantly like the earthly emperors, surrounded by worldly splendor, armaments, silver, and gold. Instead he appeared in poverty, as the prophet Zechariah had foretold. Luther paraphrased Zechariah 9:9: "Do not be perplexed and troubled in your minds because He comes in such dire poverty. Rather focus your attention on the fact that He comes to you to save you from sin and eternal death, and to give you eternal righteousness and salvation."⁶³ They not only rejected John's testimony of him but also Jesus' public office, as had been prophesied in the words of the Lord in Deuteronomy 18:15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among you, from your brethren." The true Light continues to shine for the benefit of those who wish to avail themselves of it and be enlightened as an outcome. Thus the evangelist issues an assuring statement in the next verse: "But to all who received Him, who believed in Him, He gave the power to become children of God" (v.12). Even when few believe the Word, or come to believe and to receive the Holy Spirit, through the Word, this negative outcome does not detract from the efficacy of the gospel.

John speaks of the difference between Christ's baptism and his own when he says in verse 33: "I myself did not know Him; but He who sent me

61. LW 22.56 (WA 46.584).

62. LW 22.54 (WA 46.582).

63. LW 22.43 (WA 46.573).

to baptize with water said to me: He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John could baptize with water; he does not give the Holy Spirit nor does he forgive sin. The aim of his preaching is to lead people to repentance and to prepare them for the advent of the Lord, who possesses the power to remit sin. In John's baptism forgiveness is promised, in Christ's baptism it is bestowed. John's baptism was "solely a prelude, as it were, and a preparation for the forgiveness of sin. John preceded Christ; Christ followed him."⁶⁴ Accordingly John's baptism is no longer valid, for it has been superseded by Christ's baptism. Christ accepts John's baptism of water, but he adds "the fire," that is, the Holy Spirit. "That is, He imparts the Holy Spirit, who kindles His virtues in us. And thus our baptism in Christ, in which He gives us remission of sin, baptizing us with the Holy Spirit and with forgiveness, remains and continues to be effective."⁶⁵ Though we have attained forgiveness of sin through Christ, the Old Adam still abides and therefore sins daily. The devil is alive, and he tempts our flesh to every evil. Therefore the preaching and practicing of repentance are necessary on earth until the Old Adam is dead and until the Last Day, when we will perform the will of the Spirit perfectly. Through the Holy Spirit whom Christ confers on us, we live under the forgiveness of sin, repenting daily and purging and cleansing the evil flesh, which strives against the Spirit.

Moses (Law) and Christ (Grace)

The Old Testament ends and the New begins with John. He no longer proclaims the Law of Moses but the grace that is to come through Christ. Against Antinomianism, Luther qualified: "[T]he Ten Commandments are still in force and do concern us so far as obedience to them is concerned."⁶⁶ Yet the law ceases to condemn believers because of what Christ has done. The curse of the law, not its contents, ceases. The law is given for a good purpose, as borne out in St. Paul's words in Rom 7:10–12: "It indeed promised life but it proved to be death to me. This, of course, is my fault, and not the fault of the Law; for the Law is good, holy, and God's glory." St. Stephen, too, asserts in Acts 7:38: "You have received the Word of life from Moses." The law has no capacity to impart life, not because it is imperfect but because we are inept in fulfilling it. The fault lies not in the law, but in us, who do not keep it. The law is holy and good, just as God himself from

64. LW 22.177 (WA 46.690).

65. LW 22.179 (WA 46.692).

66. LW 22.39 (WA 46.569).

whom it originates is holy and good. Although the law offers no grace and truth, its purpose was to point to eternal life, not impart it to anyone. "To point and to grant are two different matters, widely separated."⁶⁷ The law is "a sermon,"⁶⁸ like a hand that points to the right path, that is, to life, but it cannot give life.

The distinction between law and gospel corresponds to the offices of Moses and Christ. Each belongs to its proper sphere, without confounding the office and work of the other. Luther confessed that he was befuddled by this for more than thirty years, stretching from his birth in 1483 till the period between 1516 and 1519, when he had an evangelical breakthrough.⁶⁹ Formerly Luther had no delight in the law. But he now realizes that the law is precious and good, given to him for his life. It is "a lesson and a word of life, but only for the person who observes and fulfills all it prescribes."⁷⁰

Just as law precedes gospel, so "repentance precedes forgiveness"⁷¹—callous sinners must recognize their sins via the preaching of law and learn that they stand in need of forgiveness, which Christ's baptism can bring. To teach and understand the law aright, for Luther, is to lead the people to a realization of their sins and be terrified by the law, and then comfort and cheer them with the gospel. Those who are most profoundly terrified under the law are most profoundly comforted under the gospel, the former leading to the latter. So if we relinquish the law, we shall not long retain Christ and all that he is. Moses is of good use, for he teaches us in the three commandments of the First Table that we love, fear, and trust God. Thus his office is instrumental and his message is blessed, but only forasmuch as it teaches us what we must do and directs us to another man, namely, to Christ. "For after Moses, and beside Moses, Christ, the Son of God, was given to us as a preacher who informs us of what He Himself has done, namely, that He acquired grace and truth for us and He assists us in obeying the precepts of the Law; that is, He obtained remission of sin and a gracious God for us. Christ secured grace, that is, the forgiveness of sins, so that believers in Him would obtain that forgiveness."⁷² Through Christ's office, all are perfectly righteous, signified by the word "truth." This is the tenor of St. John: "From His fullness have we all received, grace upon grace."

67. LW 22.141 (WA 46.659).

68. LW 22.143 (WA 46.661).

69. LW 22.145 (WA 46.663).

70. LW 22.143 (WA 46.661).

71. LW 22.177 (WA 46.690).

72. LW 22.147-48 (WA 46.665).

Moses' Lamb Vs. the True Lamb of God

With these words, "The Law was given through Moses" (v. 17), John had in mind the sacrifice of a lamb every Passover, which the Jews did, as commanded by Moses. He then juxtaposes Moses' lamb that was butchered and Christ, the true Lamb that was ordained by God to bear on its back the sins of the world. John states: "Behold the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world" (v. 29). "God's own beloved Son" was called Jesus, because he was to save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21); this name is exclusively the Son's. This name reflects in essence who the Son is: the Savior of the world. The lambs procured from shepherds never succeed in expiating the sin of the people, a work only the Lamb prescribed by God could do. Christ was a man like all humans, but God made him the Lamb that should bear the sins of the entire world. Not in the law of Moses, but in the cross of Christ are the sins of the world exterminated. Luther advised: "Therefore a Christian must cling simply to this verse and let no one rob him of it. *For there is no other comfort either in heaven or on earth to fortify us against all attacks and temptations, especially in the agony of death.*"⁷³

No one can atone for their sins with alms and the like. The Word of God is clear enough: "This is the Lamb of God, who bears the sin of the world." This is not our invention, but God's prescription that this Lamb was the only atoner. God recognizes no other but this Lamb who, in obedience to the Father, assumed the sin of the entire world. As soon as reason is permitted to reign, it eventuates in "a hideous and terrible blindness" concerning the gravity of sin: "Sin is at your throat and it drives you and lies heavy on you."⁷⁴ Reason seeks to deal with sin by its own counsel, declaring: "I will reform and become pious."⁷⁵ On the contrary, St. John declares that the entire world is polluted with sin, which only the Lamb of God can take away. He shows us through the law that we are sunk in sin, a condition we cannot overcome except by clinging to the Lamb of God. Sin must not rest in our bosom where the law has deposited it. For if it were to remain there, distress and damnation are the outcome. The law places sins upon us; God takes them from us and lays them upon this Lamb. Reflectively, Luther had God say: "I see how the sin oppresses you. You would have to collapse under its heavy burden. But I shall relieve and rid you of the load—and from sheer mercy I shall place the weight of your sin on this Lamb, which will bear

73. LW 22.163 (WA 46.678). Italics from original text.

74. LW 22.165 (WA 46.679).

75. LW 22.165 (WA 46.679).

them.”⁷⁶ Through the law, God exposes our sins in order paradoxically to dispose of them through the gospel. Accordingly we are to ever cherish this thought, that Christ is made a servant of sin, or a sin-bearer, and the lowliest and most despised person. There is no greater bondage than that of sin, and yet Christ undoes it by himself. There is no greater service than that performed by “the beloved Lamb, the Son of the Exalted Majesty,”⁷⁷ who descends from heaven to become a servant of all and bears their sins. The profound humility the Son of God displays ought to induce wonder in us. The magnitude of the love of the Son of God for us is revealed precisely in this: the greater the stench of our sins, the more he cleanses, relieving us of the misery and burden of our sins by placing them upon his own back. On account of the humble service of Christ, in which he cumpers himself with our misery and sin, we hear the gospel of a joyous exchange, where God declares: “You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I am your substitute. You have not sinned, but I have. The entire world is in sin. However, you are not in sin, but I am. All your sins are to rest on Me and not on you.”⁷⁸ Christ has taken “all” the sins of the world upon himself, just as though he himself had committed them since its inception. He has “become the whole world,” and has “incorporated all people since Adam into [His] person.”⁷⁹

Left-Handed Versus Right-Handed Knowledge

The knowledge of law and gospel corresponds to what Luther called “legal knowledge”⁸⁰ and “evangelical knowledge”⁸¹ of God. The former is a “left-handed”⁸² kind; the latter is a “right-handed”⁸³ kind. Reason is confined to the first mode of knowing. It can arrive at the knowledge of God through law; it is conversant with the content of the Law of God; it can tell between right and wrong, as the Law is inscribed in our hearts (Rom 2:15). This knowledge is “natural and universal and was reinforced by the

76. LW 22.166 (WA 46.680).

77. LW 22.166 (WA 46.680).

78. LW 22.167 (WA 46.681).

79. LW 22.168 (WA 46.682).

80. LW 22.151 (WA 46.668).

81. LW 22.152 (WA 46.669). Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 259, where he contrasts between the demonic terror and evangelical terror, the former destroys while the latter saves.

82. LW 22.153 (WA 46.669).

83. LW 22.153 (WA 46.669).

Law of Moses.”⁸⁴ It is accessible to the heathen, the philosophers and all wise people. But it is not the true knowledge of God, which emerges from the gospel. The heathens progress to a point where they recognize God but they reject him. This is likened unto “sniffing the existence of God without tasting it.”⁸⁵ Reason possesses only “a left-handed and a partial knowledge of God”⁸⁶ through the law of nature and of Moses. But it is totally blind to and ignorant of the evangelical knowledge: the depth of God’s purpose, his wisdom, his heart, will and his attitude towards us. Of this John testifies: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made this known to the world.” The proper way to acquire a true knowledge of God is “the right-handed one,” which leads us into the inner thoughts and friendly will of God. The knowledge of who we are (that we are steeped in sin and eternally damned) and of who Christ is (that Christ, the Son of God, is the only source of grace and salvation) comes solely through Jesus Christ, and belongs to the domain of divine revelation, not reason. Such knowledge is “not Mosaic or legal knowledge but evangelical and Christian knowledge.”⁸⁷

For this [evangelical knowledge] is a new revelation from heaven, which not only acquaints us with, and instructs us in, the Ten Commandments but also informs us that we mortals are all conceived in sin and are lost, and that no one keeps the Law, but that those who want to be saved will be saved solely through the grace and truth of Jesus. Here is the depth of His nature; here is the will of God. May everyone be apprised, be he who he will—whether he has Moses on his side or whether he is totally submerged in his righteousness—that there is no salvation or knowledge of God outside Christ. No one is approved by God unless he is marked with the grace and truth of the Son. This knowledge is concealed from reason.⁸⁸

There is no inkling of the evangelical knowledge of God in nature, nor trace of it in the books of the jurists and sages or even in the law of Moses. It profits none for the Scholastics to debate the question whether humans, of themselves, can discover that there is a God. The question is not “How can God be known from the Law?” but “How can He be known from grace and truth?” The law by itself, in isolation, terrifies us; grace and truth

84. LW 22.154 (WA 46.670).

85. LW 22.152 (WA 46.668).

86. LW 22.153 (WA 46.669).

87. LW 22.153 (WA 46.669).

88. LW 22.156 (WA 46.671).

must accompany it, or else the law profits us nothing. "And the knowledge of God in His grace is the skill and the wisdom which the Son alone has revealed to us."⁸⁹ The first mode of knowledge—legal, natural, universal and left-handed—is carnal and earthly and issues from reason; the second mode of knowledge—evangelical, supernatural, specific, and right-handed—is spiritual and Christian and issues from faith. The text clearly informs us that no one has ever seen God; no one, of himself, can know God in the evangelical sense. Verse 18: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who sits in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known." Holy Writ applies the word "bosom" paternally, to a father, when normally the term is used maternally, of a mother holding children to her bosom. The Father enfolds the Son in his arms and caresses him. This peculiar mode of expression "to sit in the bosom of the Father" speaks of the intimacy between the Father and the Son, which constitutes the basis of the reliability and certainty of the self-revelation of God in the Son. The evangelical knowledge of God is a gift which we receive from the only Son of God, who clings to the Father and rests snugly in his arms. The Son is so intimately close to the Father that his knowledge of his Father's heart is absolutely reliable. Though no one has seen God, the existence of God is known to all, without exception, from the works of the creation, as Paul said, "so that they are without excuse" (Rom 1: 19ff). How do we reconcile Paul, who teaches that all humans know God, with St. John, who states that no one has seen God, unless the only Son of God reveals Him to us? Christ also tells the Jews in John 8:54-55: "You claim to know God, but you do not know Him; you call Him your Father but do not know who He is." Here Christ's words were directed not towards the godless or smug scorners, who show no interest in God, but the holy Pharisees, who were seeking God. Christ informs them that had the Son, whom the Father embraces in his divinity, not come to reveal God to us, no one would know him. The phrase "no one has ever seen God" excludes all those who are concerned about God and attempt to find him with their reason. Not by any rational edifice or any fabricated works of human righteousness but purely by the evangelical knowledge are we reconciled to God.

The sinful world by nature disdains God and thus lapses into God's wrath and damnation and subjects to the devil's power. From these contraries—sin, death and wrath—the world cannot break free except through God's Son, who lies in the bosom of the Father. "This is the true and thorough knowledge and way of thinking about God; it is called the knowledge of grace and truth, the 'evangelical knowledge' of God" which nature

89. LW 22.154 (WA 46.670).

knows nothing about.”⁹⁰ The Son of God, who is in God and who himself is God, and whom the Father embraces, is indispensable for the evangelical knowledge of grace and truth. To know God from the law is to know him left-handedly with “His back”⁹¹ turned to us. To know God aright, one must “walk around God”⁹² of the left-handed, and look directly into “God’s face”⁹³ of the right-handed, as seen properly in the only-begotten Son. “The knowledge of the Gospel is the face of God.”⁹⁴ When we behold his true countenance and his salvific plan in Christ, everything in us dies. Thus to know God aright is to come creeping to Christ and be found secured in the Son, attaining everything through his grace and truth. And whoever is drawn into the realm of God’s Son is also drawn into the proximity the Son has with the Father, and therefore really knows God in an evangelical sense.

90. LW 22.153 (WA 46.669).

91. LW 22.157 (WA 46.672).

92. LW 22.157 (WA 46.672).

93. LW 22.157 (WA 46.673).

94. LW 22.158 (WA 46.673).