



FOUR SURPRISES

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In the midst of the ELCA's growing interest in a "Lutheran hermeneutic" for reading the Bible, I thought a reasonable method for finding this hermeneutic was to go not to secondary studies but to the passionate writings, lectures, and sermons of Luther himself. I sought simply to immerse myself first in his treatises and then in his lectures and sermons on Scripture. In so doing I strove to be neither a historian, reporting on exactly what Luther said and meant back then with no attempt to apply my findings to today, nor to be a theologian, seeking out hypothetical answers to questions we have now but Luther didn't. I strove simply to be a fellow Christian with Luther, one beggar asking another for help.

The treatises I read were:

- The Freedom of a Christian
- Preface to German Writings
- Preface to Latin Writings
- Disputation against Scholastic Theology
- The Heidelberg Disputation
- Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses
- Against the Heavenly Prophets
- The Bondage of the Will
- Confession Concerning Christ's Supper
- Against the Antinomians

Then I turned to Luther's lectures on the Psalms, Galatians, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Hosea, Amos, Micah; his sermons on Genesis (especially chapters 1 and 2 and the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph), the gospel of John, 1 Timothy, and 1 Peter. (I had already completed an extensive study of Luther's Romans commentary two years before.)

From my reading, four themes serendipitously emerged.

The eternal nativity

The discovery of the eternal nativity emerged first from reading Luther's commentary on Psalm 2:7 from 1518. He writes: "And how carefully and worthily the holy fathers have interpreted these words: 'Today I have begotten thee,' i.e. eternity! Eternity means that He has been begotten, is being begotten, and will be begotten without end. To Him

being a Son means that He is born of the Father. There is neither beginning nor end to His birth, but He is continually begotten by an ever-present nativity. Rightly He is said to be begotten 'today,' that is, always being begotten. For this 'today' has neither yesterday nor tomorrow but is always from day to day, as He says: 'Before Abraham was, I am.'¹

Later, in 1532, Luther wrote more extensively on Psalm 2:7. For instance: "The point of the present passage, then, is that we should believe and confess with this psalm that Christ, who is a teacher and king on Zion, is the Son of God, born of the Father from eternity, above, beyond, and before all creatures. He is not, therefore, a creature according to this birth; as Athanasius correctly says: 'begotten, not created.' For the voice of Christ is the voice of the invisible Father. Truly, the Son speaks from the mouth of the Father and the Father in turn from the mouth of the Son, for the Father and the Son are one (John 10:30). In this way, although the persons are different (that is, the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father), nevertheless the will and the Word are the same."²

A few pages later, Luther continues: "It follows that the adverb 'today' refers to that eternal nativity of the Son, which clearly proves that He is not a creature, since He was born 'today,' that is, in eternity, in the most present nativity, so to speak, without a beginning and without an end... it follows that His nativity is a twofold one, outside time and within time, and that this Person born of the Virgin Mary is at the same time true man and true God... Christ is the eternal Son of God."³

This "eternal nativity" image came to mind again as I read from Luther's 1535 sermons on Genesis 1. Luther refers to John's prologue: "This Word is God and yet is a Person distinct from God the Father, just as a word and he who utters a word are separate entities... Christ is true God, who is with the Father from eternity, before the world was made, and... through Him, who is the wisdom and the Word of the Father, the Father made everything."⁴

Luther proclaims in his sermons on Genesis that the Father thinks, intends, and purposes; and the internal Word of the Father speaks the will and word of the Father out-

wardly, creatively, through the power of the Holy Spirit that makes alive. The eternal nativity is the eternal ongoing intent of the reason, image, and wisdom of the Father happening in the present moment, through the Word's

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birth into the present moment, in the power of the Spirit. God declares in Psalm 2:7 the birthing of His Son.

In his sermon on Abraham's faith in Genesis 15, Luther spends several pages describing God's relationship with Abraham as one of God's unfolding "desire, want, promise, intent, thought, purpose, thinking." As the reformer explains it, "When the Divine Majesty thinks about me, that I am righteous, that my sins have been forgiven, that I am free from eternal death, and when I gratefully grasp this thought of God about me in faith, then I am truly righteous, not through my words but through faith, with which I grasp the divine thought."⁵

Divine thought creates faith in Abraham in the same way that divine thought creates order from chaos in Genesis. The "eternal nativity" takes place in the present moment of faith with Abraham. The divine intent through the eternal Word is spoken in the present moment of Abraham's faith and my faith.

I cling to the same eternal Word in, through, and under the chalice, and the Word in, through, and under the font's water, as a present moment of eternal nativity where the intent, purpose, promise, and desire of God is declared. Each moment is pregnant with the intent of the Father and His Son the Word in the power of the Spirit coming in the present tense to the present moment.

Luther's image of the Scriptures as the manger of the living Word is illu-

minating here.⁶ The manger is where the angels tell the shepherds that the Word, the savior of the world, may truly be found. The manger is utterly of this earth, but it is the site of the eternal nativity. It is a cold piece of limestone used to feed sheep. It is the pure essence of this earthly existence. Yet it is a very holy vessel for the shepherds who have been told and who cling to the announcement of the heralds of heaven. They believe that the living Word, who is the savior of the world, lies within the confines of that manger. In Bethlehem, at the traditional site of the manger, Latin words written in gold proclaim, "Here the Word *is* made flesh." Within the earthly vessel, the divine Word is made known.

Like the manger, the Scriptures continue to be a vessel where the living Word may be found, laid within any text, as the Father intends, purposes, promises, thinks, and loves the Word of wisdom, the creating Word, the redeeming, restoring, and rescuing Word, which is to be spiritually spoken, heard, echoed, enacted, effected, and accomplished in us all. Every text of Scripture may be a manger—or indeed a mine that explodes with insight—or a field that conceals and reveals the treasure of God. Every text is a valley of dry bones that can come alive by the power of the Spirit. Every text is like a petrified Narnian frozen in time until Aslan breathes on it.

The eternal Word

Luther constantly testifies to Jesus Christ being the eternal Word made flesh. I first noticed it in the sermons on the narratives of Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, where the patriarchs are able to act with hope because the Word made flesh is *already* declaring to them assurance of God's promises.

Abraham, for example, knew about the resurrection—in fact, he *had* to know about it, or his faith makes no sense. Luther explains the seeming impossibility thus. "Abraham understood the doctrine of the resurrection

of the dead, and through it alone he resolved this contradiction, which otherwise cannot be resolved; and his faith deserves the praise it receives from the prophets and apostles. These were his thoughts: "Today I have a son; tomorrow I shall have nothing but ashes. I do not know how long they will lie scattered; but they will be brought to life again, whether this happens while I am still alive or a thousand years after my death. For the Word declares that I shall have descendants through this Isaac, even though he has been reduced to ashes."⁷

For Luther, Abraham's grandson Jacob, in another apparently impossible move, wrestles with Christ at Peniel. "Without any controversy we shall say that this man was not an angel but our Lord Jesus Christ, eternal God and future Man, to be crucified by the Jews. He was very familiar to the holy

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fathers and often appeared to them and spoke with them. He exhibited Himself to the fathers in such a form that He might testify that He would some time dwell with us in the form of human flesh."⁸ The eternal Word, who eternally intended to take on human flesh, foreshadowed his incarnation in time to the Old Testament saints.

And Jacob's son, left to rot in an Egyptian prison, still dwells there in peace, precisely because he knows the God of the resurrection. "Joseph is threatened so often with death and killed so often that it can be said in all truth that he endured beyond death. But he resolved as follows: 'Why should I torment myself or rage against God?

I know that the Lord is my God not only in this life but also in the future life.’ Thus faith in the resurrection of the dead shone forth also in the Old Testament, although less copiously and clearly than in the New.”⁹

So even the patriarchal narratives are mangers of the word made flesh for the believing reader and listener! In this introduction to his commentary on the psalms, Luther writes about “the Preface of Jesus Christ, Son of God and Our Lord, to the Psalter of David,” and supports his connection of the psalms to Christ by reference to the New Testament texts of John 10:9 (“I am the door; if anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture”) and Revelation 3:7 (“The words of the Holy One, the True One, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens”).¹⁰ The psalms, too, shall become a manger for the Christ!

Even in his lectures on the unlikely candidate of Deuteronomy, Luther is consistent. He explicates 34 chapters on Moses, the law, the first commandment, and the second table of the commandments, and yet still makes steady allegorical reference to Christ and the church. In the very short section of chapter 18 that speaks about the future prophet—“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren—Him you shall heed”—Luther writes, “This is the chief passage in this whole book and a clearly expressed prophecy of Christ as the new Teacher.”¹¹ It is as if, in the very center of Deuteronomy, the Christ child has been laid.

Before reading so much Luther in one stretch, I would have smiled at his anachronistic placement of the Christ into Old Testament texts. But I now see that in Luther’s preaching and teaching there is such an integrity to his understanding of the eternal Word that the earthly-born, crucified, risen Christ does not enact or speak anything different from or inconsistent with what He intended before the

foundation of the world. What was spoken even at creation is still spoken in each present moment by the eternal Son of the Father.

In other words, the Christ, the son of Mary, *is* the eternal Son, the very Word, of the exact will of the eternal loving purpose of the Father. The eternal Word is alpha and omega!

This very point is so familiar to us from the Small Catechism that we might overlook it: “I believe that Jesus Christ—true God, Son of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary—is my Lord.” Put in more paradoxical and dramatic form, Luther preaches, “The infant Christ, who lies in the cradle and is suckled by the Virgin Mary, created heaven and earth,” and “The Son of God who is with the Father from eternity nurses at His mother’s breasts, is crucified, and dies.”¹²

For Luther, surely the Word spoken by God to Abraham contained within

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it the “grace given before the ages began,” the glory of the cosmic creation, the parental bonding in Israel’s history, the pathos of the prophets’ declarations, the joy in the baptizer’s announcement, the birth, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and parousia, all nestled within the eternal nativity of the present moment of revelation. It is the very same point made in 1 Peter 1:10–11: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the

Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory.”

There is an eternal unity between the Son and His Father, a unity of creation’s intent with redemption’s intent, spoken and enacted by the power of the Holy Spirit. Every word of the Word reflects the unity of the eternal triune.

*The triune movement of God in,
through, and under Scripture*

The first two surprises led me in turn to see a triune movement within Scripture. The pattern is best described in Isaiah 55:10–11: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Luther’s biblical hermeneutic is of a dynamic trinitarian energy abundantly active in, through, and under the text of Scripture. By “energy,” I mean an English translation of the Greek verb (*ἐνεργέω*). I think in particular of Colossians 1:29: “For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that He so powerfully inspires/energizes within me.” Paul refers to the power of God working upon and within him in his daily work. Just so, Luther perceives the power of God brooding over and inspiring readers and hearers of the Scriptures.

In one continuous thought, this is the pattern of movement I discovered in Luther:

The intent of the Father is to speak... A new creating Word of the Son... Effected by the Spirit... Upon the creature who... Through the Spirit’s power and... In the hearing of the Word is... By the power

of the Spirit and through baptism... United to the Son in a joyful exchange and... Restored to the Father.

The creature is embedded in the very center of this trinitarian movement. The Father desires to restore creation and creature to Himself, the very creation He brought into existence

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through the speaking of His Word and the brooding of His powerful Spirit. The Father so loved the world that He sent his only Son, the Word, that in seeing the Son, the one closest to the Father's heart, the world might see the heart of the Father through the illumination of the Spirit.

The whole movement needs to be one sentence, one intended, spoken, completed divine thought.

Luther accordingly writes: "The Father creates heaven and earth out of nothing through the Son, whom Moses calls the Word. Over these the Holy Spirit broods... so Scripture says that the Holy Spirit brooded, as it were, on the waters to bring to life those substances which were to be quickened and adorned. For it is the office of the Holy Spirit to make alive."¹³ He adds some pages later that "Paul regards the conversion of the wicked—something which is also brought about by the Word—as a new work of creation."¹⁴ The Word of creation and the Word of redemption go together. I see from this the wisdom of our confession that we have sinned against God in "thought, word, and deed," for in our sin we set ourselves against *God's* thought, word, and deed toward us.

The triune intention of God makes further sense of the eternal nativity. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—

wanted the faith of Abraham in 1800 BC, but He also wants me, right now, in 2007. There is in each new moment a new speaking, a new brooding, a new awakening, a new creation, because of the ongoing desire in this new moment of God who seeks, wants, comes to us to be our God. "Now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!" (II Corinthians 6:2).

For Luther, God is not a God Who came once. God is a God Who comes constantly, Who is willing to brood over our chaos, enter into our lament, a God who intends, thinks, promises, wants, and warns us through His Word so that we might hear the Word proclaimed, spoken, and enlivened through the Holy Spirit in this present moment.

In Luther, a number of triune patterns emerge:

Father→Son→Spirit
Divine Thought→Word→Deed
Intent/Promise/Want→ Word/
Speech→Echo
Sun→Brilliance/Light→Heat

Here the "thought of the Father" finds its echo in the thought of the human who clings in faith to the Word. They need not be two separate thoughts; the human thought of trusting faith is the completion of the intent of the Father, Son, and Spirit. It is the seed sprouting from the rain come down to water the earth.

And this means that the joyful exchange is not only with Christ but with the whole Trinity, with all of the Godhead! It is not only alien righteousness that is given but also the intent, the speaking, the enacting, the uniting, and the restoring of God to Himself that is given!¹⁵ Preaching on John 3:16, Luther said, "Christ wants to prevent us from thinking of Him as separate from the Father... 'Whoever beholds the Father's love also beholds Mine; for Our love is identical.'"

Expounding on the same verse, Luther then continues: "Whoever believes in the Son will have eternal life. *Cling* to His neck or to His garment... *cling* to death's Destroyer...

If I *cling* to Christ in true faith and remain in Him, it is impossible for sin and death to accuse and condemn me."¹⁶ The German verb translated here as "cling" is *hangen*, which means to hang on to, to set one's heart on, to be firmly attached to another. To the triune God a Christian must cling—this is Luther's fourth surprise.

To cling

I was amazed at the number of times that the verb "to cling" appears when Luther writes about faith, particularly as he writes and preaches in his commentaries on the Scriptures. As an experiment, I used a search engine to find every instance of "cling" and "clinging" in the American Edition of Luther's Works. The word appeared more than 550 times, taking up sixteen sheets of single-space printing in a small font!¹⁷

This term provides a nuance to justification by faith. Faith is not always a full understanding, not always a certainty, not always a definite assurance or knowing; faith is very, very often a clinging, a reaching out and holding on, a hanging onto as if your whole life depends on it. It is as though Psalm 63:8 were Luther's thesis statement on justification: "My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast!"

Here is where I love the use of the word "icon" to translate Colossians 1:15, so that Jesus is the icon of the God we cannot see. It is apt for our new computer age where the icon on

*God is not a God
Who came once.
God is a God Who
comes constantly.*

your screen rushes you into a whole new world that hides in, through, and under itself. For Luther, just as the Son is the icon of the Father we cannot see, so also the Scripture is an icon of the God we cannot see. Scripture

is full of the earth and also full of the divine intent. In the sacraments too, which are both earthly and divine, Luther perceives icons of the promise of God, a place where God's intent, Word, and enlivening action can be heard, received, and clung to. "I will uphold you with My victorious right

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hand... Grasp my righteousness and cling to it alone."¹⁸

I would go so far as to say that Luther applies a sacramental hermeneutic to Scripture. Accordingly I would adapt the third section on baptism in the Small Catechism to describe it: "It is not Scripture that does these things, but God's eternal living Word with the Scripture and our clinging to this living Word. Scripture by itself is only words, but with the living Word of God it is a life-giving witness which by grace gives new birth through the Holy Spirit."

The motif of clinging unites these various themes of Luther's into his distinctive scriptural hermeneutic. There is a sacramental mystery about the dynamic movement of the triune God speaking the whole spectrum of

the Word like an eternal nativity being born in me today in this earthly manger called the Bible. In Scripture an earthly word is knit together with a divine word. If one remarked on the holiness of Scripture, Luther might say, "Oh yes! But it is of the earth fully!" And likewise if one remarked on the earthliness of Scripture, Luther might say, "Oh yes! But it is fully of God!"

You cannot change the manger from being a manger; you cannot take the earthliness out of the holy and you will not find the holy except within the earthly. There is danger in identifying multiple scriptural "senses," as in the medieval fourfold hermeneutic. There is danger in the kind of eisegesis that transforms the earthly manger into a cultural cradle, a place of rest fit for a king but no good as a humble feeding trough in a back alley of Bethlehem.

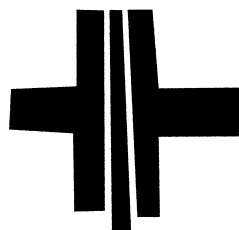
The Scripture is holy and earthly at the same time. Luther takes its earthliness so seriously that he's willing to contest the scriptural writers' choice of words. He'll label James a book of straw. But, after all, straw fits well in a manger. And Luther also takes Scripture's holiness so seriously that the book becomes the holy field, or mine, or manger where the divine activity of the Trinity meets the clinging soul in an eternal nativity about the eternal Word who speaks creation, redemption, restoration, and warning.

To the clinging soul, opening the Bible is no casual encounter. It is a kairos time for a discovery, a detonation, the eternal Word born in us today! *LF*

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Notes

1. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., Eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 14:330 [hereafter cited as LW].
2. LW 12:51.
3. LW 12:53.
4. LW 1:17. Luther is also following Augustine on this point.
5. LW 3:21.
6. "Here [in the Scriptures] you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds [Luke 2:12]. Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them." LW 35:236.
7. LW 4:96.
8. LW 6:144.
9. LW 7:116.
10. LW 10:6.
11. LW 9:176.
12. LW 22:352.
13. LW 1:9.
14. LW 1:17.
15. LW 22:355.
16. LW 22:356.
17. Whether the same German verb is used in every instance I do not know.
18. LW 17:42.



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