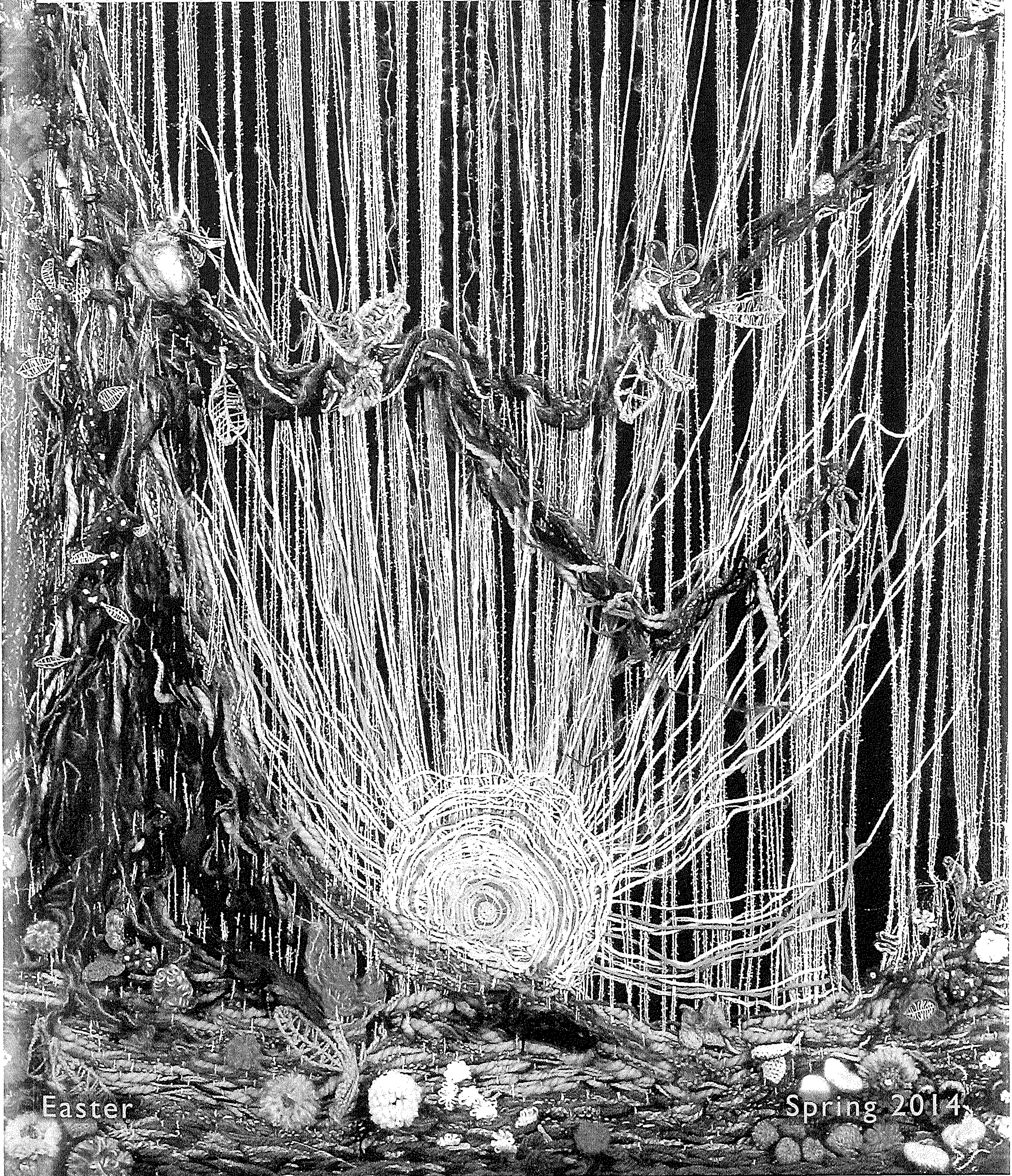
LUTHERAN FORUM



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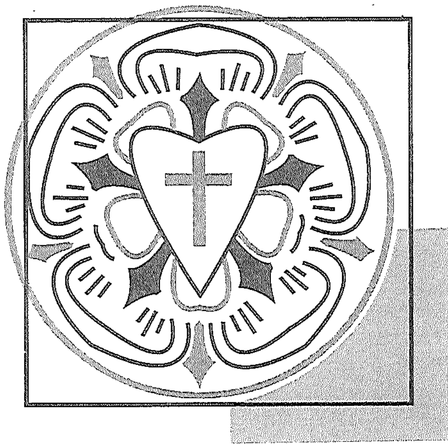

Why Luther Still Matters

Paul R. Hinlicky

When Bishop Mauney charged me with this presentation, he asked me to answer the question as to why Luther still matters and to answer that, in part, with one of his own favorite Luther texts, the sermon on "Two Kinds of Righteousness." I myself was interested in presenting the Luther who still matters in the light of some recent scholarship that I will refer to below. As I pondered this assignment, it became clear to me that there is a certain premise involved. The premise is this: if, but only if, as the Epistle to the Hebrews proclaims, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," then Luther still matters as an indispensable witness to Jesus Christ. Let me acknowledge this premise; it is certainly not to be taken for granted. But it is the premise of my presentation that, because Christ still matters, Luther as an indispensable witness to Christ also still matters.

To make this premise even clearer: Luther does not matter to us anymore as a champion of the rights of conscience, or foe of papal authoritarianism, or pioneer of everyone-his-or-her-own-priest-or-priestess spirituality, or inaugurator of biblical criticism. He certainly does not matter to us anymore as early modern patriot of German nationalism, with its dark side of xenophobia and anti-Judaism. Truth be told, George Washington is more relevant to us today—and truth be further told, most of us know less about Luther than we do about Washington—and that ain't saying much! Only if "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever" does Luther matter and in this respect is still our contemporary, one who can still teach us a thing or two about what it means, even in our very different circumstances, to be ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"God's work—our hands." Now there's a motto for ministry; if we take it seriously, it is a daring vision about what it means to be ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the church that is the living body of Jesus Christ in the world. That Pauline ecclesiology, the body of Christ, can seem like a metaphor worn out and worn thin, a mere cliché. So let me try to pump some life back into it again, along the lines of "God's work—our hands."

Wouldn't it be great if we could be Jesus, in the dynamic sense of following Jesus as true disciples, doing Jesus, that is, the very messianic deeds of Jesus? Filled with the Spirit of the Lord, bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, enacting the jubilee year of the favor of the Lord? Nothing, surely, could be greater. Here is the segue. So also thought the young Martin Luther—and I am not being the least bit facetious—so thought the young Luther when he entered the monastery and took the solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Poverty, to be like Him Who had no place to lay His head in the church of the poor; chastity, to be like Him Who fixed His face forward on the plow and did not look back; obedience, to be one who left behind free-thinking philosophical quibbles and quarrels and speculations and debates simply do what was required as a follower of Jesus.

Despite Luther's much better known later polemics, recent scholarship has recognized how profoundly this ideal of monastic life as authentic discipleship shaped Luther—just as scholarship today has also rediscovered the original vision of monasticism, never entirely lost, of the authentic discipleship of following Jesus: to live already now the death-defying life of the resurrection people of God in the world by voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience. As I just alluded to Luther's later polemics, however, most of us have the contrary picture in our minds from old man Luther himself: of the monastery as a sordid place of sublime religious self-seeking, abandoning the world to the devil in order to save one's own soul by morbid works of self-hatred.

This polemical depiction of corrupt monasticism was amplified by the nineteenth-century German theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, who influentially generalized Luther's polemic against monasticism into an updated theology of secularization: that true Christianity consists in faithfulness to one's secular calling in the world. The target of this updated theology of holy secularity was Protestant Pietism, which in Ritschl's view had retreated from Luther's advance into the world as the place of Christian calling and invented a new Protestant form of monasticism that

focused on saving one's own soul and keeping it clean from contamination in the world. In America, Ritschl's student, Walter Rauschenbush, further developed this line of Luther's polemic against monasticism as egotistical and individualistic religious escapism. He updated and redirected Luther's critique of monasticism against what we today call Evangelical revivalism or "born-againism," as Eric Gritsch of blessed memory once put it. Ritschl and Rauschenbusch laid claim to Luther's legacy to stigmatize Pietism and revivalism, respectively, in favor of a new theology for the Social Gospel. They called modern disciples of Jesus to work for social justice in secular society. I owe to Rauschenbusch my opening question: wouldn't it be a great thing and real Christianity if we were to be Jesus, doing Jesus, working to Christianize the social order in deeds of justice and love? God's work, our hands!

But in fact there is more continuity than meets the eye between the monastic ideal of discipleship, at least at its best, and these critics of it from the old Luther to Ritschl to Rauschenbusch. The young monk Luther also aspired to be Jesus in the dynamic sense. His order of Augustinian friars was not a cloistered one given to contemplation; it was a teaching order engaged in works of pastoral ministry and education in society. The Luther movie of a few years back, based on the new scholarship I mentioned earlier, rightly shows us the monk Luther, not quaking in fear at an inscrutable and wrathful deity in existential angst, as depicted in the middle of the last century by Roland Bainton and portrayed in the 1950s movie starring Niall MacGinnis. Rather we saw a humorous, engaged, passionate pastor and teacher. We can safely say today that the monk Luther was less the agonized proto-existentialist projected in the middle of the last century, desperately searching for a gracious God, than he was an Amos, God's angry prophet, denouncing the complacency, superstition, and false security inculcated by the prevailing powers, through which they exploited the little people who were kept in woeful ignorance of the good news of God that can and must be known from the Scriptures. In this, the young monk Luther was indeed trying to be Jesus, to do Jesus, the very messianic deeds of Jesus to set the captive free and bring down the mighty from their thrones.

Here is a famous example of the young biblical prophet Luther, from the Ninety-Five Theses: "Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Peace, peace,' and there is no peace! [Jer. 6:14] Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Cross, cross,' and there is no cross! Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their head, through penalties, death, and hell; And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace [Acts 14:22]."[1]

One might object that the Ninety-Five Theses already reflect Luther's break with Catholicism. Historically speaking, however, that objection is plain wrong. Luther did not shed the monk's cowl until four years later. At the time of the indulgence controversy, Luther appealed to the pope himself, fully expecting the vindication of his critique of the indulgence system on the basis of Catholic and biblical theology stemming from Augustine, including a summons to true discipleship as exemplified in monastic discipleship. Indeed it was the *shock* of his excommunication that brought Luther to the unsavory turn in his theology of apocalyptic demonization of the papacy as the Antichrist, just as later on he demonized the peasants (more precisely, his former student, Thomas Müntzer, who was agitating the revolt), and finally the Jews. In any case, notice how the monastic ideal of true discipleship is literally embedded in those very stirring words just cited from the conclusion of the Ninety-Five Theses: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in *following Christ*, their head, through penalties, death, and hell..." The sale of indulgences, as if to bribe God, was wrong not least because true disciples are those who wouldn't want to pay a bribe, even if that were possible. True disciples want to follow Christ's way in the world, eschewing false security based on the blasphemous superstition that God's favor might be bought and sold. True disciples are ready, like Don Quixote, to march into hell for a heavenly cause.

So indeed, wouldn't it be great if we could be Jesus, in the dynamic sense of following Jesus, doing Jesus, doing his messianic works of freedom and justice in the world, defying death, hell, and devil? It surely would be. Indeed, nothing less is demanded of us. Call it the most holy law of God our creator, spoken in the *imago Dei* text of Genesis 1:26–28, actualized afresh in Jesus' summons to us denizens of a fallen humanity to sell all, give to the poor, and "Come, follow me!" Luther, you see, became a reformer not because he wanted to release people from the rigor of the call to discipleship but in order to restore it; he became a reformer *insofar as* he recovered the obscured ideal of Christian life as self-abandoning discipleship and raised this ideal up in judgment against the profitable system of "self-chosen" religious bribes emblematized by the sale of indulgences.

We know today that monasticism arose long before, in the fourth Christian century, as a way of keeping alive the radical "politics of Jesus," as Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder has called it in our times. Monasticism arose in the time after the church was established by the Roman Empire and inevitably became as subservient to its imperial interests as it became popular with the half-converted masses. Luther rediscovered this ancient ideal, radicalized it, and turned it against a corrupt ecclesiastical establishment. It was the papists who were the innovators, not he! This insight applies even in that connection where on the surface Luther seems most to have

broken from monasticism, that is, in renouncing sexual renunciation and getting married. But as Luther scholar Susan Karant-Nunn has argued, with no little irony from her feminist perspective, Luther took the vow of chastity out of the cloister and installed it in the bedroom. To be sure, what constituted chastity was, in the process, transformed.

Luther expected his rediscovery of the gospel to transform people's lives. When it did not, he came to virtual despair—again, just because the call to discipleship was the presupposition of his life's work and remained in force for him to the end. He was so angry at his congregation in Wittenberg for its lax morals and coldness of heart that at the end of his life he frequently threatened right from the pulpit to quit preaching altogether. In fact, he died away from home on a diplomatic mission that he'd undertaken in order to get away from his congregation for a few months. The ungrateful self-indulgent swine, he complained, have quickly mastered the fine art of abusing Christian liberty. It would serve them right one and all to be swept back under papal tyranny. At least when they had to pay for the bribes to get God's favor, they took it seriously!

Well, let the dead bury the dead, we might say. As for us, with Luther, wouldn't it be great if we could be Jesus? do Jesus? be his very body in the world, "Christ existing as community," as that latter-day Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer would put it, who also got the deep connection with discipleship to Jesus Christ and something like a monastic "Life Together" as the true form of the church? Indeed yes. But our radical young monk, precisely because he had embraced this Sermon-on-the-Mount way of life, made a further discovery, not that he always grasped all its implications, let alone lived consistently in its light. It was a discovery made precisely because he took with relentless prophetic passion the call the discipleship, the monastic ideal. It was a discovery akin to that of Peter in the gospel narrative, one that was possible only because Peter had embraced the demand to be a doer of the word and not a hearer only, to follow Jesus even unto death. Peter, privileged above all the disciples with an insight not of flesh and blood but revealed to him from above by the heavenly Father, this very Peter had vowed to follow Jesus through death, penalties, and hell, just as Luther summoned in the peroration of the Ninety-Five Theses. But Peter did not. He failed. Only the merciful initiative of the risen Lord, having died for Peter's sins and for the sins of the whole world, recalls and reconfigures the fallen Peter, now to make him by grace and the Spirit what he had tried and failed to be under his own power and resolve: a genuine follower of Jesus.

Here comes Luther's discovery: no one can follow Jesus apart from the very same Spirit that led Jesus through the cross to the crown. Without the Spirit, our striving is in vain. As Augustine said, it is the Spirit Who teaches us to pray, "Command of us whatever You will, O Lord. But give us what You command!" And this is what Luther learned in his so-called Reformation breakthrough. The faith that justifies is this gift of the Spirit; it is "divine faith" that comes from outside the self in order to transform the self from the inside out. Faith is not a human decision but a divine conviction, a veritable new birth from above, a total reorganization of the affects. It is faith that gives the will, the heart, the desire to do what God commands; first of all, the command to believe the gospel.

Let us revisit what early Lutheranism actually said about this. The faith that justifies is the one that "believes that one is received into mercy on account of Christ" (AC IV.2, Latin).[2] The formulation here very precisely weaves together objective and subjective aspects of the event of justification. Faith is not a meritorious work in itself but gives all the glory to Christ the mediator, on Whose account faith justifies, as it believes that He lives and His work is valid even and also for me. Christ embodies the righteousness that comes from the outside as help to the helpless and so as truly good news.

Consequently, faith also believes something about one's own self, namely, that on Christ's account I also am received into mercy. This latter reflects Luther's celebrated *pro me*, which distinguishes justifying faith from the *fides historica* that even the devils have. The Augsburg Confession here holds both aspects together, which in the course of Lutheran history came apart into the sibling rivals of Orthodoxy and Pietism. Hence, the Apology affirms *both* that righteousness is imputed to faith on account of Christ (the objective pole, Christ's work of righteousness, not ours) *and* that faith regenerates (the subjective pole, receiving the new self-understanding of the justified). "And because faith receives the forgiveness of sins and reconciles us to God, we are first regarded as righteous by this faith on account of Christ before we love and keep the law, although love necessarily follows. And this faith is no idle knowledge, nor can it coexist with mortal sin; but it is a work of the Holy Spirit that frees us from death and raises and makes alive terrified minds... [O]n account of Christ and by faith alone we are justified, that is, out of unrighteous people we are made righteous or regenerated" (Apology IV.114–5, 117).[3] Thus, the faith to receive the gift of Christ's righteousness is itself a gift, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit "where and when it pleases God" (AC V.3, Latin).[4]

Luther learned this—that faith is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit through the word about Christ—by reading the Bible. He turned to the evangelical narrative of the Scriptures, now equipped with the new tools of his Renaissance times in Greek and Hebrew learning, and freshly rediscovered this crucial twist in the narrative of following Jesus, enormously significant for the right

interpretation of the monastic ideal of discipleship that he already passionately held. He learned from it to interpret anew his own endeavor to be Jesus in the world. And grasping this twist—once again, not in spite of the summons to discipleship, the radical "politics of Jesus," the Sermon on the Mount, or the monastic ideal, but precisely *on account of* taking them seriously—he rediscovered something about Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" that has everything to do with the continuing relevance of Martin Luther as our teacher in the faith, today in our post-Christendom world.

Here's a sample of that newly discovered theological breakthrough, proceeding from the radical demand of following Jesus, being Jesus to the world, doing Jesus for others, to the all-the-more-radical idea of God's love for failed disciples. This comes from his sermon, Two Kinds of Righteousness, published shortly after the Ninety-Five Theses. Luther begins:

> There are two kinds of Christian righteousness… The first is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith, as it is written in I Cor. 1[:30]: "Whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." In John 11[:25–26], Christ himself states: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me… shall never die." Later he adds in John 14[:6], "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did." Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride's and she all that is his…[5]

We might be put off by the Latin world "alien" in Luther's characterization of Christian justice as in the first place an alien justice or righteousness. It might sound to us, as does our modern English word derived from it, like something that remains forever strange and distant, external to us, on account of which we remain unaffected, unchanged, unmoved. But as we have already heard, such a reading would not jibe with the life-transforming effect of Spirit-given faith, according to Luther. Rather, the word "alien" simply means something that I myself did not cause or possess already by nature or by right; something that someone else caused, yet now gives to me as a gift, yes, truly a gift, to possess as my very own. Notice thus how Luther immediately ascribes this alien property of justice or righteousness, caused by Christ, as something coming to us like a wedding gift of the bridegroom to the bride.

It is a social transaction. Like any gift, we do not give it to ourselves. Such a self-given "gift" from self to self would in reality only be a soliloquy, not a social transaction. It would be the act of rewarding ourselves, not a bad thing in itself, like a cold beer after mowing the lawn on a hot day, but also not a social transaction landing us in a new community of joyful exchanges in the world. But a genuine gift comes from outside, from another, gratis, just to express free favor and esteem. By the same token, as we receive this "alien" gift gracefully in good faith in the goodwill of the Giver, it truly becomes our very own and so changes us receivers. It becomes our own, not simply by grasping it like a new toy, but rather as Paul the Apostle put it, in "having as not having." That means in honoring the Giver in the gift, enjoying the loving intention of the Giver as expressed in the gift.

That is what Luther means by "faith," like a lover's faith in the beloved's vows or the ring or the roses or the card, the trust that erupts when one is touched and persuaded of the giver's goodwill as objectified in the gift. So it follows that by faith, as Luther says, "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did."[6] Mine, that is to say, is Christ's own obedience, poverty, chastity. Mine is Christ's own discipleship Who followed His Father's will through Gethsemane to Golgotha, even also for me who, like Peter, failed to do it. Christ gives not trinkets or "benefits" other than Himself; rather He gives His very self, the achieved justice, so to speak, of His own historical life of poverty, chastity, and obedience, even to death on a cross, not for His own sake but for the sake of others who tried and failed. All this justice of Christ's becomes ours by gift, even by the Spirit's gift of faith to receive this gift gracefully now as our very own, changing us indeed from the inside out. And this giftedness, this being a recipient of favor, is, in the first place and always in the first place, the "alien" righteousness or justice of the Christian, who *forever* is and remains before God not the Giver but the gifted—even, if not especially in the return of thanksgiving by the gift of the Spirit.

Such was Luther's theological breakthrough. Christ is the savior, also of His Christians, not just at the beginning but at every step along their way in following Him. To be gifted in this way with Christ Himself is not the distant goal of the striving self but the secure foundation of the Christian life—a *vita passiva*, a life of receiving begun in baptism. We become disciples, emphatically not by doing or being Jesus under our own powers and by our own resolve, but rather when and where Jesus by His word and the Spirit succeeds in being Jesus and doing Jesus for us, as for failed Peter, on Easter morn.

Does this imply that apart from Christ-for-us we are failures? It might, if we are still imitating Peter

who tried and failed to imitate Jesus rather than following the crucified but risen Lord in the power of His own Spirit by faith. This is the work of God, says the Gospel of John, that we believe in Jesus Christ and in God Who has sent Him. Oh, if only discipleship were a matter of willpower! Here is God's work, here are our hands, let's put them together and get the job done! But Luther continues in Two Kinds of Righteousness that this alien justice of Christ is "set opposite" a far deeper human predicament than we had ever imagined. It is set, he writes, opposite "original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone."[7] We are born children of a fallen humanity, as we say in the rite of holy baptism. That means that we are one and all caught up—Republican and Democrat, conservative and progressive, Christian realist and Christian pacifist, LCMS and ELCA and NALC and LCMC—one and all we are caught up, before we can think or do otherwise, in structures of malice and injustice that not only dominate over us but actually form our subjectivities from within. What in this human mess we call "God's work" but take into "our hands" is not likely, therefore, to be so simply and clearly God's work. Manhandling God for our sectarian and partisan purposes in this way, whether by ecclesiastical or political identifications, we may even be found to be opposing God—like Saul the Pharisee found out on the road to Damascus.

Usually, in today's discourse, an objection is voiced at this point that Luther's view of human sinfulness pervading even our best efforts for social justice paralyzes efforts to ameliorate matters, that all the wind is removed from the sails when we teach that the more we strive the more we sin; all efforts to improve things are, then, in vain. But clearly that is not what Luther was saying, who, let us never forget, *actually went on in his times to change the world for the better*. No, what Luther was saying here, among us, in our human mess, is that there is one man Who is righteous, Jesus Christ, so that we become righteous when, first and always first, we let Him be and do His righteousness for us. For us, that is, who are in bondage to sin even when we strive to be righteous and who therefore really cannot free ourselves. Let there be good works, in other words, only let them be the work of Jesus Christ! And let us clearly see that the sole alternative to this one Christ at work through us for others is the work of another, the old Adam.

Several times now I have mentioned Walter Rauschenbusch, the American father of Social Gospel theology. Unlike many contemporary theologians who have otherwise followed

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him, Rauschenbusch argued that "we ought to get a solidaristic and organic conception of the power and reality of evil in the world" as the "Kingdom of Evil" into which we are born. While he was critical of versions of the doctrine of original sin that fixated upon its supposedly natural transmission by sexual intercourse, he seized upon Luther's definition of original sin as incurvation, being curved into oneself, egocentrism, and argued that accordingly "salvation must be a change which turns a man from self to God and humanity." Rauschenbusch thus wrote provocatively, "I take pleasure… in defending [the doctrine of original sin]. It is one of the few attempts of individualistic theology to get a solidaristic view [of the human race]… as a great unity, descended from a single head, and knit together from all ages by a unity of origin and blood,"[8] albeit knit together in a "Kingdom of Evil" or what I call the structures of malice and injustice. Perhaps thinking of this very passage, Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked that even if Rauschenbusch's belief that the social order could be simply "Christianized" was naïve (since the state is always a fallen order monopolizing the means of violence), his analysis of the structures of malice and injustice in which we humans are always already placed was by an infinite magnitude more realistic than the individualistic and escapist revivalism that preceded the Social Gospel.

This insight into the reality of being in Adam—that means our being as unwitting but willing pawns of the structures of malice and injustice—comes to light by the advent of our new being in Christ. As Romans 5 taught Luther and ought also to teach us: it is Christ the New Adam Who reveals our being in the old Adam. Just so, this revelation of sinfulness leads *not*, as I have stressed, to a renunciation of the monastic ideal as the Christian way of life but rather to its reaffirmation, albeit with a significant change in direction, very much along the lines that Rauschenbusch and his teacher Albrecht Ritschl, following Luther, had urged: proceeding not out of the world in a quest for personal tranquility but into the world where the suffering neighbor needs our love. This change in the *direction* of discipleship toward society, but not in the *calling* to discipleship, goes back to Luther. It is, to be exact, the second kind of righteousness from Luther's sermon that we have been considering.

This second kind is what Luther calls our own "proper righteousness," in the sense that being recipients of Jesus' merciful justice every day, from baptism day to resurrection day, we do arise from the watery grave of baptism endowed with the Spirit to follow Jesus into the world to do His messianic works, "not because we alone work it… but because we work [now] with that first and alien righteous-

ness,"[9] that is, with Jesus' righteousness, as Spirit-moved cooperators. What follows from this Spirit-wrought cooperation are the human works that are truly good in the world.

Luther lists three Spirit-moved works, truly good, of genuine discipleship. First, "slaying the flesh and crucifying the desires with respect to the self."[10] Talk about a new monasticism! For sure, apart from Christ and the Spirit, this good work sounds like masochism, like some kind of absolute self-emptying or self-annihilation or self-hatred by which to earn divine approbation. And that definitely would be something sick. The truth is, however, that unbelieving critics can't help but take it that way, just as falsely believing Christians have in fact taken it in that sick way. But this first deed of discipleship comes in Christ by the power of the Spirit; it is gift before it is task, this Pauline work that our Lutheran ancestors called the *mortification of the flesh.* In fact, it means the disciple's discipline of personal freedom that liberates from bondage to self by confessing sins rather than protesting them, that makes repairs where injury has done damage rather than boasting religiously of getting off the hook, that masters sin rather than yielding to it in the conduct of bodily life. So personally and biographically we may be set free for God in faith and for the neighbor in love and for the creation in hope. What a world of work in prayer, self-discipline, pastoral care, and spiritual counseling is envisioned in Luther's first work of discipleship!

Second, says Luther, "this righteousness [of our own] consists in love to one's neighbor."[11] Neighbor-love for Luther is a function of self-discipline, the discipleship of the self, that I just referred to: it arises from the imaginative capacity to put oneself in the place of another possible now because Christ has put Himself in my place and given the Spirit Who sheds abroad in our hearts the love of God, working the compassion that feels another's needs and sorrows and the energy to aid in each concrete case without calculation or expectation of return, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The opposite of such neighbor love is not anger. For Luther, love gets angry at the structures of malice and injustice that ruin the earth and human life upon it; with the prophets, love speaks truth to power. For Luther, the opposite of such passionate love of the Spirit working through faith in Jesus is apathy, literally a lack of feeling, care, or energy for others. In this, Luther follows Paul's injunction in Romans 12:9, "Let love be genuine. *Abhor* what is evil; hold fast to what is good!"

And third, Luther writes, our own proper righteousness as disciples of Christ consists in "meekness and fear toward God."[12] Here, dear friends, I just want to sigh. We are so "chummy" with "the Lord" nowadays. The holiness of God is the last thing we seem to encounter in our worship services. Of these three truly good works that characterize the life in Christ of true disciples, this third work of the true fear of God is the one most remote from our sensibilities. "Of course God will forgive me," as Heinrich Heine quipped. "That's His job!" The Lutheran heresy of cheap grace turns the costly forgiveness of our sins into an abstract principle of unconditional divine permissiveness. True, perfect love casts out fear; but is our love so perfect that we should feel no fear? For Luther the realization that the Lord of the universe had stooped meek and vulnerable to lay suckling on Mary's breast was awe-inspiring. But "awesome" has become a word in popular culture akin to "liking" on Facebook.

Be that as it may, for Luther there is something properly liberating about living meekly before the God of the gospel: fearing nothing in life but the judgment of God gives us the strength to be different and the power to resist the tide. To be different and therefore to resist—no longer conformed to this world but transformed, as Paul puts it in Romans 12:2—is what it means not to be Adam any longer but rather to be Jesus, to follow Jesus, and therefore rightly to do Jesus in the world, His work through our hands. We get to be, follow, do Jesus because, first of all and always forever first, Jesus is the one righteous person, "the Man for Others" as Bonhoeffer put it, and also for us—believing for us in our unfaith, loving us even in our loveless greed and envy, interceding and reigning for us even in our hopeless, callous disregard of this good earth and future generations upon it. If that does not precede and inform every step along the way, all our good works are just self-chosen religious bribes that use others to make us feel good about ourselves. But the truly good works of God, making use of even our dirty hands, are the works of Jesus Christ for us, and through us for others.

Such a pointed witness to Jesus Christ as the one righteous person is the service Martin Luther still renders to Christians today. If Jesus Christ still matters to us, so also does this sharp witness, his servant and our teacher, Martin Luther. LF

PAUL R. HINLICKY is the Tise Professor of Lutheran Theology at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. This address was presented at the Virginia Synod Ministerium in October 2013.

Notes

1. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 31:251.
2. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 41.
3. BC 139. The emphasis on Spirit-given faith as regeneration is not marginal in the Apology: see among others IV:12, 45–48, 62–68, 72, 110, 114–18.
4. BC 41.
5. LW 31:297.
6. Ibid.
7. LW 31:299.
8. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 57.
9. LW 31:299.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.