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# Luther's Care of Souls for Our Times

Reinhard Slenczka

## Introduction

Over 450 years have passed since the death of Martin Luther (February 18, 1546). All Protestant churches should be grateful for the work of the Reformer, but especially those churches that—against his express will—call themselves “Lutheran.” However, do we, as Lutherans in proclamation and catechesis, still uphold the chief concern of the Reformation? Reformation, that is, re-formation, aims at the elimination of deformations, abuses, and defects that invade and appear in the church at all times. In this sense, thinking about “Luther’s care of souls for our times” is not only about remembering a godly man, but also about examination of our church today.<sup>1</sup>

This examination starts with the questions: What actually is pastoral care? What is the current state of pastoral care and pastors? No doubt, this theme is of high and immediate interest for the (continuous) education of theologians at theological research institutes, academies, conventions, and retreats, especially in the context of the ever-increasing supply of counseling agencies and pastoral care given by phone. The number of internal and external needs is high in our times. Therefore, there is a high demand and a corresponding supply in this field of church activity. Counseling in situations of moral conflict is doubtlessly in the limelight, and here pertinent knowledge and training are required in order to understand and help. It is not surprising that conflicts in the areas of marriage, family, and raising children, as well as economic concerns, are in the foreground. However, it might be worthwhile asking to what extent such counseling in the name of the church and in facilities owned by the church is done in accordance with the foundations of the Christian faith. Psychology as “the science of the soul,” or, as the German author Thomas Mann translated this word, “the dissection of the soul,” is the precondition and method for meeting needs.

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was presented in part at a meeting of the Friends of the Evangelical Academy Tutzing on September 24, 1996, in Dinkelsbühl, Bavaria, Germany. The concluding part, “Luther as pastor for Livonia,” was added later.

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But what is the soul? In modern psychology, the soul is almost exclusively equated with consciousness and subconsciousness; that is, that which moves man in his reasoning, feeling, and desiring. Consequently, satisfaction and self-consciousness are goals of such care and counseling.

Yet, the expansive conceptual domain of "soul," in connection with heart and conscience, has a thoroughly biblical foundation. The soul has to do not only with self-consciousness. Rather, throughout both the Old and New Testaments it is about the relationship between God and man. This is clear in the double commandment of love of God and the neighbor: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, with all your *soul*, and with all your strength" and "you shall love your neighbor as *yourself*: I am the Lord" ([Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18] compare Matthew 22:37-39).

It is noted here that according to the meaning and use of the word "soul," physical and psychical dimensions coincide because "soul" denotes both the conscience and the act of breathing. We know that the same holds true for the heart, as this blood pump reacts to internal and external impulses. This is why it is so telling that the soul can be addressed in direct speech: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise him, the help of my countenance and my God" (Psalm 42:11; Psalm 43:5). The soul is also the center of responsibility before God. For example, the Rich Fool says to his soul: "'Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?'" (Luke 12:19-20).

The admonitions in the epistles of the New Testament are always meant as a reminder of baptism. They are also aimed at the soul, as can be seen in the First Epistle of Peter: "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1:22-23).

The following admonition is also directed at the soul: "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable" (1 Peter 2:11-12). In the Epistle of James this relationship between God and soul established by

means of the word is also addressed: "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Additionally, a warning is issued for the congregation in view of its responsibility for those who have fallen from the truth and are to be led back: "He who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:20).

More examples could easily be given, but those mentioned are enough to demonstrate that, according to the Bible, the soul is not something like an organ or the limited area of the conscious and the subconscious. Rather, it has to do with man as a whole in his relation to God; that is, in his communion with God that is established by word and sacrament and consummated in faith. About the hope founded therein it is said: "This (hope) we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil" (Hebrews 6:19). This anchor of the soul enters the communion with Jesus, the High Priest, unto eternity. This means time and eternity are connected here in the communion with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One needs to keep these facts in mind in order to be able to understand what Christian care of the soul is all about.

To conclude these preliminary considerations, the question might be raised whether pastoral care can be taught and learned at all. This is obviously presupposed for programs of education. Consequently, the content and methods of pastoral care have become more and more independent in theory and practice. This is, however, only a quite recent development. Originally, pastoral care's field of activity was confession and repentance; that is, acknowledgment and confession of sin and the declaration of forgiveness. It might again be a serious question whether, and in which form, pastoral care deals with the acknowledgment of sins and forgiveness today. Yet what is necessary here are not certain methodical insights, but spiritual authority, which is founded on and limited by Jesus Christ's word, His gift to His disciples, and His commission of them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, spiritual gifts are not gained by training and effort, but conferred and awakened. It is an old, but now forgotten, rule

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<sup>2</sup>John 20:22-23; Matthew 16:19; 18:18.

that pastoral care is learned by receiving pastoral care. Consequently, it has also been forgotten that pastors need pastoral care. This, too, is a shortcoming in our times.

We now have presented several observations regarding the duties, problems, and, above all, the presuppositions of pastoral care and being a pastor in our times. Let us now consider the topic in Martin Luther's thought and practice.

### Foundation, Contents, and the Place of Pastoral Care in Luther

When one attempts to extract the nature of pastoral care from Luther's life biographically and in his writings thematically, one quickly finds that this is not feasible.<sup>3</sup> Life and the work form a unit in Luther, and person and subject matter are inseparably connected. The much cited "quest for the propitious God" was Luther's own plight, which led him into the monastery and forced him time and again into confession and acts of penance. The declaration of the justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ alone is the glad tidings that shaped Luther's pastoral care throughout the remainder of his life. Everything is defined and permeated by the fact that he had experienced the deep fear of God's judgment and that the light of forgiving love had dawned on him in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Be it his sermons and letters, hymns and prayers, academic lectures and disputations, or even pamphlets, doctrinal writings, and catechisms—everywhere there is what one might call pastoral care received and passed on.

Thus, he tells his students at the beginning of the semester in his Lecture on Psalms: "And this is what I see, that he is not a theologian who knows great things and teaches many things, but he who lives holy and

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<sup>3</sup>Compare, among others, Theodor Brandt, *Luthers Seelsorge in seinen Briefen* (Witten, Germany: Luther-Verlag, 1962); Ute Mennecke-Haustein, *Luthers Trostbriefe* (Gütersloh, Germany: Gütersloher Verlags-Haus Mohn, 1988); Gerhard Ebeling, "Der theologische Grundzug der Seelsorge Luthers," in *Luther als Seelsorger*, edited by J. Heubach (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1991): 21-48; Gerhard Ebeling, "Trostbriefe Luthers an Leidtragende," in *Kirche in der Schule Luthers: Festschrift für D. Joachim Heubach*, edited by B. Hägglund and G. Müller (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1995), 37-48. Meanwhile, a comprehensive and impressive presentation of this theme has been published: Gerhard Ebeling, *Luthers Seelsorge: Theologie in der Vielfalt der Lebenssituationen an seinen Briefen dargestellt* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1997).

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theologically [that is, according to the word of God]. The more I become estranged from this life, the more I dislike my profession."<sup>4</sup>

Luther engaged in a fierce battle with Erasmus of Rotterdam concerning the freedom and bondage of the will and the testimony of Scripture, according to which God says: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated" (Romans 9:13, Malachi 1:2, 3). How does one comprehend that some understand and some are hardened, that God wants all to be saved, yet some are lost? At all times one is tempted to solve this contradiction, for example, by a principle of general love and final restitution of all things. Luther perceives the problem very clearly – and thereby also humanity's opposition: "It has been regarded as unjust, as cruel, as intolerable, to entertain such an idea about God, and this is what has offended so many great men during so many centuries. And who would not be offended?" It is one thing to stand before a problem trying to solve it; it is yet another thing to endure a problem. Thus Luther continues: "I myself was offended more than once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created a man, before I realized how salutary that despair was, and how near to grace."<sup>5</sup> Here we arrive at the center – the nature of grace. The question of what grace is, whereby it is recognized, and how it is received, will be treated in what follows.

Whenever the quest for the propitious God is perceived as the starting point of the Reformer's realization, then the question is quickly raised whether this is still the quest of humankind today. Many claim that today's humankind does not ask about God, but that it is rather moved by the questions: How do I get a propitious neighbor? How can I make sense of my life? What can we do, and what do we have to do, in order to save humanity's *lebensraum* from self-destruction?

Luther describes how priests in his time used the pulpit to generate the fear of judgment: "Hence the expression in the pulpit when the general confession was recited to the people: 'Prolong my life, Lord God, until I

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<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 58 volumes (Weimar, 1883-), 5:26,18-21. Hereafter abbreviated as *WA*.

<sup>5</sup>J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann, editors, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes (Saint Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 33:190. Hereafter abbreviated as *LW*.

make satisfaction for my sins and amend my life."<sup>6</sup> Yet, and this is how Luther continues, the flaw of this proclamation does not lie in the urgency of its call to repentance, rather, "There was no mention here of Christ or of faith. Rather, men hoped by their own works to overcome and blot out their sins before God."<sup>7</sup>

When the quest for the propitious God leads one to attempt to propitiate God, then it is a wrong quest, caused by flawed proclamation and catechization. Luther, reflecting on his own experience, once told his congregation in a sermon on the baptism of Jesus how it should be:

Oh, when would you finally become pious and do enough to have a propitious God? Thoughts like these drove me into monkery where I tortured and vexed myself with fasting, freezing, and a strict life. Yet I did not accomplish anything with this except that I lost dear Baptism myself, even helped deny it. . . . Therefore, in order not to be seduced by such, let us uphold this teaching pure that, as we see and grasp here, baptism is neither our work nor doing, and maintain a great and deep difference between God's works and our works.<sup>8</sup>

The remembrance of baptism as the work that God does to us is therefore the right answer to the wrong quest for the propitious God.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue that needs to be explored regarding Luther's pastoral care is God's word of Holy Scripture. When we, in today's pastoral care and catechization, are confronted with the difficulties of having to translate Holy Scripture as a text from times long past into today's situation and hermeneutical presuppositions, then the Bible may seem to be alien and outdated to us. In Luther, however, we encounter an immediate use of Scripture that is thoroughly defined by the fact that

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<sup>6</sup>One might also inquire whether and where people today are called to repentance and confession. Rather, are not consciences calmed and reassured by telling them in proclamation, catechization, and in public statements: "In our situation and according to the latest scientific discoveries this and that is to be seen and done differently"?

<sup>7</sup>Smalcald Articles III, 13-14, in Theodore G. Tappert, translator and editor, in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, Arthur C. Piepkorn, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959). Hereafter abbreviated as Tappert.

<sup>8</sup>WA 37:661,23-27, 35-38.

<sup>9</sup>This might raise the question of how we deal with the remembrance of baptism and the responsible administration of baptism in the Christian congregation.



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God Himself is present in His word, in which He speaks and through which He acts. This is something entirely different than understanding and consenting. This might be illustrated by an example from Luther's exposition of the narration of the fall in Genesis 3. One needs to remember that the word "sin" is not used in this story, but certain events, relations between the creatures of God, and their relation to their creator are described. The word is the means of relation between God and man, and this begins with the permission, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat," and the prohibition, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). The fall begins when the creatures, the serpent and Eve, engage in a discussion about the question, "Has God indeed said . . ." (Genesis 3:1). Here the exegesis starts with the discussion about wording, validity, and application of God's word. Thereby salvation and condemnation, death and life is decided.

The biblical narrative has a foundational meaning for all times, and it is this point that Luther makes clear in his exposition. The temptation to sin starts by rendering God's unequivocal word problematic: "Unbelief is the source of all sins; when Satan brought about this unbelief by driving out or corrupting the Word, the rest was easy for him." What happens here, therefore, does not take place apart from the word, it is rather done to the word and through the word. This is why the text goes on: "'Every evil begins in the name of the Lord.' Therefore just as from the true Word of God salvation results, so also from the corrupt Word of God damnation results. By 'corrupt word' however, I do not mean only the ministry of the spoken Word but also the inner conviction or opinions that are in disagreement with the Word."<sup>10</sup>

Luther continues, "For if God and his will can only be known through the Word of God of Holy Scripture, then we are dealing with a false god and an alien will, if this Word is deformed or if we turn away from it. This is why it is true that 'this is the beginning and the main part of every temptation, when reason tries to reach a decision about the Word and God on its own without the Word.'" In relation to the word and through the word, our relation to God and, conversely, God's relation to us are decided. Another important observation that Luther passes on to his students is part of this: "This is what the devil is wont to bring about in

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<sup>10</sup>LW1:147.

all his temptations, that the farther man draws away from the Word, the more learned and the wiser he appears to himself."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, for Luther, the way we understand is the effect of God's word on us. The effect of God's word, however, takes place in law and gospel. Yet this, too, is not a teaching that one may appropriate or that one may or may not understand; it is rather something to be learned, and this happens by listening to God's word of Holy Scripture. This directly touches on the care of souls because here the human soul is touched by the word of God.

So far we have been considering examples from the academic realm. Now let us look at examples from Luther's table talk. In these conversations, which his student guests recorded, Luther frequently narrated what he personally experienced and taught. Three aspects of this effect of the word of God in law and gospel will be illustrated by quotes.

1. The first points to the fact that no one can be a theologian without the understanding of this distinction between law and gospel:

Anybody who wishes to be a theologian must have a fair mastery of the Scriptures, so that he may have an explanation for whatever can be alleged against any passage. That is to say, he must distinguish between law and gospel. If I were able to do this perfectly I would never again be sad. Whoever apprehends this has won.

Whatever is Scripture is either law or gospel. One of the two must triumph: the law leads to despair, the gospel leads to salvation. I learn more about this every day. . . . The gospel is life. The pope drove me to this; he opened my eyes to it. It is as Augustine said to himself: the heretics provoke us to search the Scriptures. Otherwise nobody would think about them.<sup>12</sup>

Let us look closely here: Despair and salvation – but correspondingly also judgment and grace, understanding and hardening – are part of the effect of God's word in law and gospel. Luther can say accordingly: "Every word of God terrifies and comforts us, hurts and heals; it breaks down and builds up; it plucks up and plants again; it humbles and exalts

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<sup>11</sup>LW1:154, 160.

<sup>12</sup>LW54:111, #626 (1533).

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[Jeremiah 1:10]."<sup>13</sup> Thus, human experiences are not simply addressed, they are triggered; and it is worthwhile considering whether we do not miss or get in the way of this experience because we think that we first have to introduce preparations and adaptations in order to understand the word of God.

2. The second insight is that the distinction between law and gospel is not caused by the ability or knowledge of the reader or listener, but that it is the gift and effect of the Spirit of God in God's word:

There's no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish between the law and the gospel. We may think we understand it when we are listening to a sermon, but we're far from it. Only the Holy Spirit knows this. Even the man Christ was so wanting in understanding when he was in the vineyard that an angel had to console him [John 12:27-29]; though he was a doctor from heaven he was strengthened by the angel. Because I've been writing so much and so long about it, you'd think I'd know the distinction, but when a crisis comes I recognize very well that I am far, far from understanding. So God alone should and must be our holy master.<sup>14</sup>

To realize and to confess ignorance is evidence of the effect of God working through His word.

3. The third reference from a table talk on the effect of and the distinction between law and gospel is aimed at the devil. One is not to be fearful of the devil, but one is to recognize him and avoid him. According to the testimony of Scripture, the narration of Jesus being tempted by the devil is of foundational significance (Matthew 4:1-11). After the Sonship of Jesus was revealed in the word on the occasion of His baptism, He is led by the Spirit (of God!) into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Each of the three temptations aims at one manifest proof of the Sonship of Jesus Christ: "If you are the Son of God. . . ." The temptation is fended off time and again by the persistent reference: "It is written. . . ." The second temptation shows how the devil himself refers to the word and says: "It is written. . . ." Finally, the decisive stage is reached when worship and the First Commandment are at stake, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve." The Son of God has

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<sup>13</sup>LW 42:37.

<sup>14</sup>LW 54:127, #1234 (1531).

overcome this temptation for us. Yet, His example shows us how the rebellion against God is triggered and revealed by the word of God. This would be impossible without the word. This also holds for law and gospel, as it is stated:

It's the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel. If I can hold on to the distinction between law and gospel, I can say to him any and every time that he should kiss my backside. Even if I sinned I would say, "Should I deny the gospel on this account?" It hasn't come to that yet. Once I debate about what I have done and left undone, I am finished. But if I reply on the basis of the gospel, "The forgiveness of sins covers it all," I have won. On the other hand, if the devil gets me involved in what I have done and left undone, he has won, unless God helps and says, "Indeed! Even if you had not done anything, you would still have to be saved by forgiveness, for you have been baptized, communicated, etc."<sup>15</sup>

The examples that have been presented show the direct effect of the word of God, which we evade when we think we first have to enable or find an intellectual access by bridging the historical distance. The pertinent, serious pastoral question for us here is what actually remains of God's word of Holy Scripture when we — pushing it back into the past and distancing us from it historically — completely overlook how it is present and having an effect in our times, namely, at the center of the Divine Service.

A last observation regarding the foundation, content, and place of pastoral care in Luther relates to the catechism. The catechisms of Luther emerged from a series of sermons, and this might serve as a reminder that they are actual proclamation and catechization. They are, therefore, not to be put back on the shelf like a common book. In the preface to the Small Catechism we find two observations that are foundational for pastoral care. On the one hand, Luther states that every member of the congregation — not only the children — needs to know this basic knowledge of the Christian faith, that is, needs to memorize it. Having memorized the text, then they can begin to integrate and apply it to their life.<sup>16</sup> Luther's thrust is that the language of the faith must be learned first and must be memorized. To use more than one form will confuse things,

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<sup>15</sup>LW 54:106, #590 (1533).

<sup>16</sup>Small Catechism, Preface 14; Tappert, 339.

for "... young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. They are easily confused if a teacher employs one form now and another form . . . later on."<sup>17</sup>

The other aspect Luther points to in the preface to the Small Catechism is the foundational significance of the parts of the catechism, not only for the existence of the Christian congregation but also for the surrounding community. This has to do with the specific formation of the consciences and their preparation for the distinction between good and evil, between justice and injustice. Here also the foundations for the existence of a human community in family, society, and state are at stake. This is why Luther stated:

You should also take pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and man.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in the catechism—as summary of God's word—the Christian responsibility for the two kingdoms, for that of the heavens and that of the world, is concentrated. This is not simply a question of the possibility of adaptation, but one of the necessity of existence.

This opens a vast horizon for the responsibility of the Christian congregation and its members. Luther gave many practical instructions in this regard, especially the main parts of the catechism. They are a summary of God's word in its different aspects, as it addresses the Christian life and work. Concerning this he says in the small tract "A Simple Way to Pray" that all parts should be meditated under different aspects in a practicing form of contemplation: As a teaching to learn what God requires of me; as a thanksgiving by acknowledging what I receive from God; as confession by admitting what I have left undone; and finally, as a prayer whereby I bring before God what I lack.<sup>19</sup>

This is the foundation, content, and place of pastoral care, as well as the introduction to what happens to us and what ought to happen through

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<sup>17</sup>Small Catechism, Preface 7; Tappert, 339.

<sup>18</sup>Small Catechism, Preface 19; Tappert, 340.

<sup>19</sup>Compare *LW* 43:200.

us. The many practical examples of pastoral care that could be listed have this as their common presupposition, namely, that God is present and active in His word.

### Consolation – Admonition – Support

Consolation, admonition, and support are the three meanings of the Greek word παράκλησις; παράκλητος, by which the person and the work of the Holy Spirit are characterized. It might also be translated as demand and gift, and this is the process of pastoral care, namely, to provide consolation, admonition, and support with the word of God.

The following section presents three examples for this, mostly from Luther's letters. Usually, these letters begin with the salutation "Grace and peace in the Lord" – *gratiam et pacem in Christo!* We find this phrase at the beginning, and at times at the end, of the epistles of the New Testament. This is no empty formula. "Grace" means gift, pardon of deserved punishment or guilt. "Peace" means reconciliation after war or wrath. "In Christ" means through Him these things are given, with Him we are also connected with each other, and this is what the Spirit-caused essence of the Christian church is all about.

#### *An Example of Consolation*

"Consolation" is commonly used in a way largely defined by the biblical language, even if this is not clearly recognized. The biblical words for "consolation" and "consoling" describe how one encourages a child or a sick person to take heart again. The opposites of consolation and consoling, however, are fear, anxiety, dejection, grief, and despair. In a person's life there are many occasions for the latter, yet we often do not know what to say to someone suffering with these feelings. Even pastors have difficulties in this respect and may not know what to say. Genuine pastoral care consoles with God's word of Holy Scripture. This is what Luther himself experienced, passed on, and offers for our edification in the present.

Luther spent the summer of 1530 at Coburg Castle, while the cause of the Reformation was debated at the Diet of Augsburg. Since 1521 he had been outlawed and banned, therefore he could have been killed by anyone. On the border of the Saxon territory at the Coburg he was safe. From here he corresponded with his colleagues at the Diet.

During this time he wrote an exposition of Psalm 118: "Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For his mercy endures forever." This psalm is a song of thanksgiving in view of internal anxiety and external persecution. It says, in part: "The Lord is my strength and song. And He has become my salvation" (14). "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord. The Lord has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death" (17, 18).

In his dedication to the "*Beautiful Confitemini*" Luther wrote to a friend:

This is my own beloved psalm. . . . Sad to say, there are few, even among those who should do better, who honestly say even once in their lifetime to Scripture or to one of the psalms: "You are my beloved book; you must be my very own psalm." The neglect of Scripture, even by spiritual leaders, is one of the greatest evils in the world. Everything else, arts or literature, is pursued and practiced day and night, and there is no end of labor and effort; but Holy Scripture is neglected as though there were no need of it. . . . But its words are not, as some think, mere literature; they are words of life, intended not for speculation and fantasy but for life and action. But why complain? No one pays any attention to our lament. May Christ our Lord help us by His Spirit to love and honor His holy Word with all our hearts.<sup>20</sup>

Verse 5 of this psalm reads: "I called on the Lord in distress; the Lord answered me and comforted me." Luther views this as a description of the human situation. Further, though, he believes that it indicates what will happen when God, in His acting, is identified and addressed with God's word. Some examples:

In Hebrew the word "distress" means "something narrow." I surmise that the German noun for distress [*angst*] is also derived from an adjective meaning narrow [*eng*]. It implies fear and pain, as in a process of clamping, squeezing, and pressing. Trials and misfortunes do squeeze and press, as is indicated by the proverb: "The great wide world is too narrow for me." In Hebrew "in a large place" is used in contrast to "distress." "Distress" means tribulation and need; "in a large place" denotes consolation and help. Accordingly this verse really says: "I called upon the Lord in my

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<sup>20</sup>LW 14:45-46.

trouble; He heard me and helped me by comforting me." Just as distress is a narrow place, which casts us down and cramps us, so God's help is our large place, which makes us free and happy. Note the great art and wisdom of faith. It does not run to and fro in the face of trouble. It does not cry on everybody's shoulder, nor does it curse and scold its enemies. It does not murmur against God by asking: "Why does God do this to me? Why not to others, who are worse than I am?" Faith does not despair of the God who sends trouble. Faith does not consider Him angry or an enemy, as the flesh the world, and the devil strongly suggest. Faith rises above all this and sees God's fatherly heart behind His unfriendly exterior. Faith sees the sun shining through these thick, dark clouds and this gloomy weather. Faith has the courage to call with confidence to Him who smites it and looks at it with such sour a face.<sup>21</sup>

To us, this might seem easier said than done. Luther himself says that this happens by no means out of our own reason and strength. Rather, "this is skill above all skills. It is the work of the Holy Spirit alone and is known only by pious and true Christians."<sup>22</sup> It is all too human to see prosperity and well-being as God's grace, but misfortune as God's wrath and punishment.

Human nature cannot acquire this skill. As soon as God touches it with a little trouble, it is frightened and filled with despair, and can only think that grace is at an end and that God has nothing but wrath toward it. The devil also adds his power and trickery, in order to drown it in doubt and despondency. The situation is aggravated by the provoking sight of God showering abundant blessings on the other three groups. Then human nature begins to think that the others have only the grace of God and none of His anger. Then the poor conscience becomes weak; it would collapse were it not for the help and comfort that come from God, through pious pastors, or by some good Christian's counsel.<sup>23</sup>

The word of God, however, that is given us and placed in our mouth teaches us to recognize God's presence and power over everything and

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<sup>21</sup>LW 14:59.

<sup>22</sup>LW 14:59.

<sup>23</sup>LW 14:59 and following.



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to claim them and to cling to them and be held by them. Then one comes to recognize:

[God] wants to drive him to pray, to implore, to fight, to exercise his faith, to learn another aspect of God's person than before, to accustom himself to do battle even with the devil and with sin, and by the grace of God to be victorious. Without this experience we could never learn the meaning of faith, the Word, Spirit, grace, sin, death, or the devil. Were there only peace and no trial, we would never learn to know God Himself. In short, we could never be or remain true Christians. Trouble and distress constrain us and keep us within Christendom. Crosses and troubles, therefore, are as necessary for us as life itself, and much more necessary and useful than all the possessions and honor in the world.<sup>24</sup>

In the same way as Luther himself was comforted by God's word, so he was able to comfort others. An example of this is one of the letters that he sent from the Coburg to Philip Melanchthon in Augsburg, where there were great difficulties in the negotiations. The delegation of theologians from Saxony had doubts whether they would be able to withstand. Luther wrote to Melanchthon, whom he addressed as "beloved brother and disciple/student of Christ." He emphatically stated that he was not arguing his own case, but God's case: "Should it be a filthy lie that God has given his Son for us, then let the devil or one of his creatures be man in my stead. But if it is true, what should we do about our tiresome fears, trembling, worries, and sadness? Should not he who has given his Son help us with easier affairs, or should Satan be more powerful than he?"

This is not about success in a superficial way, in which one makes one's own way. Rather, the point is to strengthen the certainty that God's will prevails. Thus he warned Melanchthon not to attempt to penetrate the hidden mystery of the glory and counsel of God.

"He who searches the Majesty, will be slain by its glory," or, as the Hebrew text [of Prov. 25:27] reads, "He who searches heavy things, will be weighed down by them." And this is true for you. May the Lord Jesus preserve you "that your faith should not fail" [Luke 22:32] but grow and prevail. Amen. I pray for you, have prayed for you, and will pray for you, and I do not doubt that I will be heard.

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<sup>24</sup>LW 14:60.

I feel this Amen in my heart. If what we want does not happen, it will still happen what is better. For we wait for the coming kingdom when all things in this world will have disappointed.<sup>25</sup>

Luther wrote to Justus Jonas at the same time:

Philip is tormented by his philosophy [according to which he thinks everything depends on himself] and by nothing else. For [our] affairs are in the hands of him who dares to say in the most audacious manner, "No one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28). I do not want them to be in our hands, and it would not be well advised, either. I had so many things in my hands and have lost everything, I have not retained one thing. Yet what I have been able to throw out of my hands onto him, this I have retained save and sound unto this day. For it is true, "God is our refuge and strength" (Ps. 46:1) (A Mighty Fortress is Our God...), "Who was ever put to shame who put his hope in the Lord?" (Sir. 2:11) – thus asks the Sage, and again, "You, Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you" (Ps. 9:10).<sup>26</sup>

One quote from Scripture follows the next. Clearly, only he who knows that God speaks and acts in His word that is given to us as a gift is able to write in such a manner.

*Admonition (or Rebuke)*

Admonition (or rebuke) is the second element of the care of souls. Whoever shrinks away from this or rejects it altogether needs to remember that in the Bible this aspect is included in the same word that also means "to comfort." Admonition, however, means that a person who is on the wrong track is rebuked and called to repentance by the word of God. We are called and led back to what we have received and to what we are through baptism, cleansing from sin, and walking in the Spirit. God's commandments – which are, contrary to the opinion of many, unchangeable – are the standard for this simply because they are also the standard, perceptible in time, for the judgment of the living and the dead at the end of all times.

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<sup>25</sup>WA Br 5:411,13-412,18; 413,56-63, #1611 (June 30, 1530).

<sup>26</sup>WA Br 5:409,18-25, #1610.

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From the pulpit and the lecturing desk it is easy to denounce issues that are against God's will or to demonstrate that absentees have violated the commandments. However, it is extraordinarily difficult—even impossible—to make an individual person respond to his violation of a commandment of God. For, according to human etiquette, this is offensive and is considered an intrusion upon one's privacy. Yet, Scripture portrays the matter differently. It is not about the condemnation of the sinner, but about his salvation from condemnation through repentance and forgiveness. From this insight stems the urgency with which Paul writes to the Corinthians in view of the many defects in their congregation: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; Galatians 5:19-21).

True pastoral care aims at salvation from condemnation. The commandments are the standard for the knowledge of sin; the gospel is the glad tidings of forgiveness for the repentant. This task of the pastor is necessary for salvation, yet many times in human relations it is difficult.

In Luther's sermons and letters we find numerous instances of this personal rebuke and recall. Two letters will suffice as examples. The first, written on July 10, 1531 to the preacher Conrad Cordatus in Zwickau, is about "the official duty of the Christian preachers to punish the sin of the people."<sup>27</sup> The second, written on January 27, 1543 to "a certain city council," asserts "that pastors cannot be removed from office because they severely punish public vices."<sup>28</sup> Both cases are about conflicts between the pastor and the city council. In the first letter the pastor is encouraged and emboldened to exercise his office and not to remain silent out of fear; otherwise he would neglect his office of a watchman:

It is not appropriate for the pastor to remain silent concerning the sacrilege and injustice committed by the council to him, much less to approve of them, especially because they defend their sin as right and well done. For there is no forgiveness of sin unless the sins are recognized and confessed; and there is endurance of violence and injustice only with those who publicly confess that they are enemies

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<sup>27</sup>*Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, edited by Johannes Georg Walch (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880-1910), 10:1606-1607. Hereafter abbreviated as *SL*.

<sup>28</sup>*SL* 10:1624-1629.

of the Word. Yet the sins of those who glorify themselves as brothers cannot be tolerated by devout pastors; they need to be punished (Matt. 18:15). The pastors cannot remain silent, much less approve of sin, or else they have to bear the terrible judgment according to Ezekiel 3:18, "His blood I will require at your hand." Therefore, if they want to glorify themselves as brothers, that is, Christians, they have to have their sins punished, have to confess them, and have to amend their lives. Yet if they want to defend their sins as something rightly done, let them for the time being confess that they are not Christians but persecutors and enemies of divine doctrine.<sup>29</sup>

Luther does not mention here, like in so many other letters, what had been the cause for this argument. The pastoral letters of Luther are not talkative and their point is above all not to describe sin, but to lead to repentance and forgiveness.

This letter encourages a pastor to exercise his office and to seek what serves the salvation of the flock entrusted to him. In the second letter, Luther defends a pastor against a council that wants to remove him from office. Luther carefully examines whether the minister did something wrong. Since there is, even after the hearing of witnesses, nothing that speaks against the pastor, Luther emphatically admonishes the council. The core of this admonition and rebuke is that, according to Luke 10:16, Christ Himself speaks in the word of the preacher:

The first case is this that, if you should scorn and hate your pastor without any reason – this means to scorn Christ himself, the highest of all pastors – you will stumble at the stumbling stone and burn yourselves with the consuming fire. For a single pious, devout pastor is more important to him than all political authorities of the whole world. For their office does not serve him to his heavenly kingdom, as does the office of the pastor. By this office he manages to shut up their hearts and mouths because they do not believe, so you cannot pray, praise, nor lift up your heads before God in any trouble, as he says, Matthew 5:24, "Leave your gift there before the altar and be reconciled first." Then you would not be Christians anymore, would have excommunicated yourselves; that is terrible.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>SL 10:1606-1607.

<sup>30</sup>SL 10:1625-1626.

It should be clear to everyone that the word admonition (or rebuke) touches on a sensitive aspect of our church life that is relevant for pastors and congregations alike. Yet it should be clear also that the clarity and the urgency of the admonition according to the standard of the unchangeable commandments of God is fearfully revoked to the same extent to which the interest is solely motivated by human sympathy and antipathy. The fear of the judgment of men — by whom one wants to be liked, whom one does not want to lose or exclude — then becomes greater than the seriousness of God's judgment out of which the sinner is to be saved through repentance and forgiveness.

### *Intercessor*

Intercessor (or proxy) and support describe the third aspect of the activity of the Holy Spirit that defines pastoral care. In addition to consolation and admonition, one intercedes for one another and acts, like an attorney, in another's stead. Romans 8:26-27 reads: "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself makes intercessions for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. Now he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

It is important to see here how the Spirit of God is in us. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is distinguished from our own spirit, especially when our spirit is weak, lacking the courage to turn to God in prayer. Conversely, it is said of the same Spirit: "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16). The Spirit's acting as intercessor (or proxy) first of all leads to the recognition that we do not have faith or lead our life in faith out of our own resources. Secondly, it thereby becomes obvious that God is close to us — even within us — in a way that we are only able to recognize through God's word.

The last example showed how Luther pointed a Christian city council to the fact that Christ Himself is present, speaking, and acting in the word of the preacher. The third example I have selected points us to the way in which Christ is present in the sick, the poor, and the captives.

In February 1520 Luther wrote the book "Fourteen Consolations."<sup>31</sup> These fourteen chapters correspond to the Fourteen Defenders from all evils (the Fourteen Saints) who were to be invoked for some particular disease or danger. This book was written for the sick Elector Frederick the Wise. However, instead of the Fourteen Defenders, Luther presented defenses from the word of God by which the Christian is surrounded, filled, and supported. Christ Himself enjoins pastors to visit the sick; and this is how the dedication commences: "Our sweetest Beatifier, most serene, high-born elector and most merciful lord, has commanded all of us to visit the sick, to free the captives, and to devoutly fulfill all the works of mercy toward our neighbor."<sup>32</sup>

As Christ is the example of the service to be rendered to sinners, so He also makes us aware of the judgment of those who did not fulfill His commandment of love. "Then he will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me'" (Matthew 25:41-43).

Because Christ is present and suffering in the sick Christian elector, the pastor is summoned and led to him.

For the Christian is not sick when he is sick but Christ, our Lord and Beatifier, himself is, in whom the Christian lives, Gal. 2:20, according to what the Lord Christ himself says Matt. 25:40, "Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"; and although one should regard this commandment of Christ, our Lord and Beatifier, to visit and comfort the sick as the most general commandment toward all men, it nevertheless must be rendered, practiced, and kept more toward the household of faith, as also St. Paul distinguishes, and mostly toward our friends and neighbors. Gal. 6:10.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>WA 6:104-134 (translated in LW 42:117-166). The following quotes are taken from SL 10:1816-1917.

<sup>32</sup>SL 10:1816, compare LW 42:121-122.

<sup>33</sup>SL 10:1818, compare LW 42:122.

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It is remarkable here how the reality of God's presence is disclosed by the word of God. This is an example of how the Holy Spirit supports us. No human abilities or techniques are developed, but the word itself is active. In fact, the Holy Spirit works consolation and admonition, and also lifts us up. Thus, the office of the minister is not a particular rank, but precisely the ministry through which God Himself in Christ and through the Spirit ministers to us unto our salvation.

### The Image of Christ and the Formation of the Christian

We look at images with great frequency; yet we also know – especially since we are flooded by televised images – how images influence the consciousness. This holds true even more for the subconscious and the unconscious. In this way, they form and impress man at the center of his existence; that is, in that realm we have called soul, heart, conscience, and consciousness. How humans are formed is displayed by their actions and their behavior. Yet besides image and formation there is also imagination; and the latter consists of ideas of oneself or of others which, however, do not correspond to reality. The realm of image, formation, and imagination represents an unfathomable realm of human nature. In this realm lie the roots of fear and hope, of confidence and despair, of joy and sorrow, and, therefore, of true and false faith.

The old care of souls, taught by Holy Scripture, knew about the power of images. Consequently, we find also in Luther's sermons and writings of consolation the reference to the significance and effect of images. In the above-mentioned book from 1520 for the ill elector, Luther put together fourteen images in which salvation and damnation become visible through the words of Scripture.

A similar theme appears in an Easter sermon in which the congregation is instructed to contemplate the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Now it is not enough to know the stories, one should also learn to which this serves us and how to use this. . . . Yet we must, if we want to comprehend the use of the resurrection of our Lord Christ, imagine two different images. The one is the sad, miserable, shameful, dreadful, bloody image of which we've heard on Good Friday, how Christ hangs there right among murderers and dies under great pain. Of this image you've heard, how we're to contemplate it with an undoubting heart, that this all happened because of our sins, that he as the right eternal priest gave himself as

a sacrifice for our sin, willing to pay for it by his death. . . . Therefore, as often as we think of, or contemplate, this sad, bloody image we're to meditate nothing but that we see our sin there.<sup>34</sup>

Contrasted with the sad and horrible image of cross and death of Jesus Christ is the joyful image of His resurrection:

For just as earlier your sins were hanging around his neck and fixed him to the cross, now you see in this other image that there's no sin anymore in him but plain righteousness, no more pain nor sadness but plain joy, no more death but plain life, namely, an eternal life that's far above this temporal life. One should be able to rejoice in such an image always. The first image certainly is, contemplated externally, something rather dreadful; but contemplating the cause, one cannot wish anything better. For as you see that God has taken your sin away from you, which you were unable to bear but would have to go down because of it, and laid it upon his Son who is eternally God and strong enough to deal with sins, there leave your sin; for you won't find a better place where to put them so that they might not weigh you down so much and burden you less.

After this, however, place also this other image before you, in which you see how your Lord Christ, who became so dreadful and miserable because of your sins, is now beautiful, pure, glorious, and happy, and how all sins in him have disappeared. Consider therefore further this: if your sins are not upon you because of the suffering of Christ but are taken away from you and laid upon Christ by God himself, and if they aren't on Christ on this Easter day, after his resurrection, anymore either, where will they be?<sup>35</sup>

For just as we see in the first image on the Silent Friday (Good Friday) how our sins, our curse and death are upon Christ, so we see on Easter a different image where there is no sin, no curse, no disfavor, no death anymore, but plain life, grace, bliss, and righteousness in Christ. With such an image we're to lift up our hearts; for it is placed before us and given us because we aren't to embrace it in another manner than as if God had raised us from the dead with Christ today. For just as you don't see sin, death, and

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<sup>34</sup>WA 52:246,32-247,8.

<sup>35</sup>WA 52:247,23-40.



curse in Christ anymore, you're to believe that God, for the sake of Christ, wills to not see them in you anymore either when you embrace his resurrection and find comfort in it. Faith brings us such grace. Yet when it will be that Day, one will not believe it anymore, but see, touch, and feel it.<sup>36</sup>

It is the image as it is portrayed by the word of Holy Scripture: "before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified" (Galatians 3:1).

A key document where Luther develops the idea of contemplating and the effect of images is the 1519 "Sermon on Preparing to Die."<sup>37</sup> One may already have experienced that the sick and the dying are literally assailed by images. The images virtually wrestle with each other, and good pastoral care calls us to help our people as they wrestle with these images.

Caring for the dying first of all aims at the "farewell from this world and all its activities," which is about putting the estate in good order. The other aspect is to "also take leave spiritually," and this starts with asking for, and receiving, forgiveness from persons with whom one has had conflicts. Finally, one is led to realize that the day of death is the Christian birthday (*dies natalis*); and everything depends on this: "Therefore, we must believe this and learn the lesson from the physical birth of a child, as Christ declares (John 16:21)." The right preparation of a Christian for death takes place through care with word and sacrament. This is so important because it is not only about understanding, but also about the whole effect and gift. The word of Christ announces and makes visible what Christ is and does. Consequently, only from this word can be recognized what happens to and in man through word and sacrament. This is the context for the wrestling with images in the hour of dying. Image as perception, imagining as impressing, and in all of this the image as a power that seizes and dominates the whole human being – this is what goes on in this wrestling with the images.

The wrestling in the time of dying revolves around three images, namely, the image of death, the image of sin, and the image of hell. These are the "non-images," the "images of condemnation," not just because

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<sup>36</sup>WA 52:250,36-251,6.

<sup>37</sup>LW 42:99-115.

they are horrifying in themselves, but because they assail and fill humans with horror. In opposition to these “images of condemnation” there are three different images, the “images of grace.” They have their cause of cognition in Holy Scripture and their center at the cross of Christ, which means to see death in light of the death of Christ, sin in light of the grace of Christ, and hell in light of the redemption through Christ.<sup>38</sup>

The conflict of images is nothing but the conflict between our own human experience and the divine revelation in Scripture and in the gift of the sacraments. The wrestling, however, consists in whether a person clings to the images that assail his conscience: whether he is tied-up, even knocked out by them, or whether he beholds the picture of Christ and imagines it, impresses it on himself; also whether it is presented to and impressed on him from word and sacrament in caring for the dying:

Similarly [as foreshadowed in Judges 7:16 and following], death, sin, and hell will flee with all their might if in the night we but keep our eyes on the glowing picture of Christ and his saints and abide in the faith, which does not see and does not want to see the false pictures. Furthermore, we must encourage and strengthen ourselves with the Word of God as with the sound of trumpets.<sup>39</sup>

The biblical testimony, to which Luther returns time and again, shows how the perception of the image of Christ is intimately connected to the formation of the Christian through word and sacrament in the deepest layer. In the beginning, God created man in His own likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). In this consists his dignity, which is not the result of development and behavior, but of God’s act. Man is created by God like God, but he himself is not God. However, Exodus 20:4-5 says: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.”

Thus, man, created by God in the image and likeness of God, shall not make for himself an image of God out of the things created by God.

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<sup>38</sup>We are familiar with the process unfolded here from the tenth stanza of Paul Gerhard’s “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (*The Lutheran Hymnal* 172): Be thou my Consolation / My Shield, when I must die; / Remind me of Thy Passion / When my last hour draws nigh. / Mine eyes shall then behold Thee / Upon Thy cross to dwell / My heart by faith enfold Thee. Who dieth thus dies well.

<sup>39</sup>LW 42:106.

Rather, the relationship between God and man lies in the word of God and in the speaking to God thus made possible (Deuteronomy 4). The word of God rules out making Him visible in artifacts and experiences; a fact often overlooked and forgotten when one talks about "just words" and looks for concretizations. The fall of man from God through the violation of His commandment entails man putting himself into God's place to "be like God" (Genesis 3:5) and results in separation from God.

It is testified of Christ, the Son of God made man, that He is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4); He is "the brightness of his glory and the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3). Here the relation between image and formation comes to a full circle when we not only reencounter the origin of creation in the person of Jesus Christ, in His word and work, but when the salvific will of God is carried out through the renewing gift of the Spirit: "For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren" (Romans 8:29).

Thus, in the image of Christ what is formed anew and shaped in the Christian through the work of Christ becomes visible. This happens in baptism, concerning which Romans 6:3-5 says:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of his death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of his resurrection.

Our likeness with Christ is accomplished by being "grafted" in him through baptism.

With the image of Christ and the formation of Christians a reality is addressed that cannot be seen when God's word is merely perceived as a text of antiquity; when the sacraments are solely understood as passage rites; and when the communion between God and man is reduced to the purely symbolic. Consequently, human existence is often perceived only within the boundaries of birth and death. The trivialization of death and advocacy of euthanasia – both common in contemporary culture – are an inevitable consequence of the incorrect proclamation of Christ's victory

over sin, death, and devil, as well as the resurrection of the dead and the eternal life.

The image of Christ and the formation of the Christian take as their starting point that the word of God is engraved in and received by the heart in faithful regularity. This happens only in listening to God's word and in speaking with God in prayer. In caring for the dying it becomes apparent whether a formation of heart and conscience, of soul and mind has taken place through the images in the contemplation of Christ from His word. This is the foundation, content, and result of true pastoral care through word and sacrament.

In light of this, it certainly becomes clear that the true care of souls is not only about the limited realm of inwardness, but about the whole human being in soul and body. The biblical understanding of salvation always encompasses body and soul, external and internal health concurrently. Who focuses on the empirical corporeality will always live according to the principle: a maximum of joy and contentedness and a minimum of pain and suffering. The theological and also the medical wisdom of earlier times held a different view, as the observations of a doctor in a monastery, taken from the Chronicle of Lorsch from about A.D. 800, show where a key passage reads, "A disease can be quite salutary when it breaks open the heart in its hardening; and very dangerous is a health that simply seduces man to indulge in his vices further."<sup>40</sup>

### Luther as Pastor for Livonia

Finally, several writings from the vast realm of Luther's pastoral care will be mentioned briefly, namely, those he wrote to the Christians in Riga, Tallinn, Tartu, and to all Livonian Christians.<sup>41</sup> The Reformation

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<sup>40</sup>Translated from Heinrich Schipperges, *Die Kranken im Mittelalter*, third edition (München, Germany: Beck, 1993), 13.

<sup>41</sup>Leonid Arbusow, *Die Einführung der Reformation in Liv-, Est- und Kurland* (Leipzig: Heinsius, 1921; reprint Aalen: Scientia, 1964); Janis Matulis, "Die ersten Schritte der Reformation in Riga," in *Luther und Luthertum in Osteuropa: Selbstdarstellungen aus der Diaspora und Beiträge zur theologischen Diskussion*, edited by G. Bassarak and G. Wirth (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 354-362; Rudolf Keller, "Luther als Seelsorger und theologischer Berater zerstreuter Gemeinden," in *Kirche in der Schule Luthers: Festschrift für D. Joachim Heubach*, edited by B. Hägglund and G. Müller (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1995), 58-78.

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had already started to spread in this area by 1521. Individual pastors and city council members entered into correspondence with Luther, a portion of which has been preserved. However, I would like to highlight three writings that were written to all the Christians in Livonia on specific issues.

The first, in chronological order, is a letter written in 1523, "to the chosen dear friends of God, to all Christians in Riga, Tallinn, and Tartu in Livonia, my dear sirs and brethren in Christ, from Martin Luther."<sup>42</sup>

This is a doctrinal letter that takes into consideration what is already being taught and preached in the Baltic congregations. The letter begins as follows:

I have learned from written and oral sources, dear sirs and brethren, how God the Father of our Lord and Savior has begun working his miracles also among you and visits your hearts with his merciful light of truth; additionally, he has blessed you so much that you sincerely embrace it with gladness as a veritable Word of God, as it is in truth, which many among us here do not want to hear or tolerate; rather, the richer and greater the grace is God offers to us here, the more insanely princes and bishops strive against it, they blaspheme, condemn, and persecute until they have imprisoned many; most recently, they have burnt two by which they have sent Christ new martyrs from our days to heaven. This is why I can joyfully call you blessed who, like the Gentiles in Acts 14, receive the Word at the ends of the world with all pleasure.<sup>43</sup>

Then, section after section, the message of the gospel is unfolded:

This, then, you have heard and learned that whoever believes that Jesus Christ through his blood, without our merit, has become our Savior and the Bishop of our souls according to the will and the mercy of God the Father, that the same faith without any works certainly appropriates and receives Christ in just the same way as faith believes; for, of course, Christ's blood does not belong to you or to me because we fast or read but because we thus believe, as Paul says in Rom. 3:28: "We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." This faith gives us a glad, peaceful heart

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<sup>42</sup>WA 12:147-152.

<sup>43</sup>WA 12:147,7-148,4.

toward God and must prevail in love because it sees that it is God's will and the merciful inclination of his goodness toward us that Christ deals with us in this way. This, then, is to come to and to be drawn to the Father and to have peace with God through Christ, to expect death and all accident with a certain and joyful mind. Where this faith is absent, there is blindness, no Christendom, nor any spark of God's work or favor.<sup>44</sup>

Not some private teaching is proclaimed here, but rather the foundation and content of the Christian faith of all ages and what constitutes the difference between the true church and the false church.

The second writing, "(T)o all dear friends in Christ in Riga and Livonia," is an exposition of Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. . . ."<sup>45</sup> Psalm 127 deals with the life in the family, with work, and with the order of the political life in the city and the country. Several precepts given in the exposition follow.

First, Luther reminds his addressees how important it is to prepare schoolteachers and pastors. They have an important role to play in the formation of the youth and in the introduction to the foundations of human social life. For where the consciences are not formed, there the political community falls apart, unless it is held together by force — all this is also part of our present experience.

King Solomon, the author of Psalm 127, unites in his personality the enlightenment through the Holy Spirit and the experience of daily government.<sup>46</sup> He has, as Luther puts it, "experienced in many ways how vainly unbelief burdens itself with worries that it might take care of the belly, although everything depends on God's blessing and guarding. For where God does not bless, there no labor helps; where he does not guard, there no worry helps."

This is why the exposition focuses on the question of how worry and work are related to each other. The Psalm reads, "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so he gives his beloved while they sleep" (Psalm 127:2). How, then, does God's action relate to what humans do? Solomon, Luther says, does want to confirm

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<sup>44</sup>WA 12:148,21-149,2.

<sup>45</sup>WA 15:360-379.

<sup>46</sup>WA 15:363,12-17.

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working, but at the same time refute worry and stinginess. The error lies in the presumptuous imagination that we could bodily sustain and uphold ourselves by our labor. The labor

does not do it; God has to do it. Therefore, labor that you do not labor in vain. For you labor in vain when you worry and trust in your labor that it may sustain you. You are to labor indeed, but the sustaining and the preserving belong to God alone. This is why you have to keep these two—laboring and house-building or sustaining—as far apart from each other as are heaven and earth, God and man.<sup>47</sup>

Luther points out with a great number of examples from history how the human quest for wealth and power is frequently enough thwarted by God's inscrutable ways. This holds above all for the preservation and fall of entire nations that, once risen to power, soon collapse again. We know this also from our own times. Everything, however, that people do for the sustenance of their lives and the preservation of their community is placed under the will of God. This is why Christians should know that the toils of their work are under the will and the providence of God. This does not lead to indifference, but is specified in a surprising way:

You have heard now how the political authority has to watch, be industrious and do everything that pertains to its office, shut the gate, preserve doors and walls, put on harness, furnish supplies, in short, just act as if there were no God and they had to save and govern themselves, just as the head of the house is to labor as if he wanted to sustain himself by his labor.<sup>48</sup>

Yet what does give God His beloved while they sleep? This means,

he very well lets them labor and be industrious, yet in such a manner that they do not worry nor be impudent, but walk away joyfully and do not burden themselves, commend it to him and live well in a quiet way and with their heart at rest, just as one who sleeps securely and sweetly and does not undertake anything and who is nevertheless kept well and alive.

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<sup>47</sup>WA 15:367,2-7.

<sup>48</sup>WA 15:372,25-373,4.

He calls back to mind Psalm 55:22: "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he shall sustain you," and 1 Peter 5:7: "Cast all your care upon him, for he cares for you." The point here is only the worrisome care, the stinginess, and the unbelief, not the labor itself.<sup>49</sup> This clearly shows that the vanity of worry is not about the necessity of work, but about the faith that puts its trust not in itself, but in God. Faith does not depend on the success of one's work; also, it does not shatter in view of the failure of one's efforts; rather, it is carried by the promise from the word of God that "all things work together for the good to those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

Finally, the third text is Luther's epistle "To all beloved Christians in Livonia with their pastors and preachers, grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>50</sup> This letter is related to letters by John Bugenhagen and Melchior Hoffman. The reason for all three epistles are enthusiastic movements, which lead the congregations into unrest and division. Confusion was creating tension and prompted the complaint, "No one knows what he should believe or with whom he should side," and the common demand for uniformity in doctrine and practice."<sup>51</sup> First, Luther calls back to mind 1 Corinthians 11:29: "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." Thereby it is made clear that where the truth of the word of God is proclaimed, there will inevitably be contention about the truth; and this begins in each one of us through the struggle between the flesh of sin and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, between the old and the new man within us. Such conflicts are, therefore, part of the effect of proclamation, and it is consequently impossible to avoid them.

However, Luther says that such conflicts cannot be countered by coercion because this would replace the freedom of faith out of the power of the Holy Spirit by coercive laws. Luther's pastoral admonition points to the example of the Apostle Paul:

Therefore, we will deal with factions in our time as St. Paul dealt with them in his. He could not check them by force. Nor did he want to compel them by means of commands. Rather, he entreated them with friendly exhortations, for people who will not give in willingly

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<sup>49</sup>WA 15:374,27-31.

<sup>50</sup>LW 53:45-50 (45).

<sup>51</sup>LW 53:46.



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when exhorted will comply far less when commanded. Thus he says in Philippians 2 [1-4]: "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing through strife or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Then he adds the example of Christ, who in obedience to the Father made himself the servant of all.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in the midst of their divisions the congregation is led back to what it is through Christ and what it sees in Christ's example.

Yet the consequence of this admonishing contemplation is by no means indifference; rather, Luther explicitly warns against the abuse of freedom.<sup>53</sup> The clarity of the teaching is not compromised by being considerate of existing customs. Yet it has to become clear that the congregation is edified by it, and this takes place through the untiring teaching of God's Holy Scripture, for in it God Himself is active. Thus this epistle ends:

Receive this my sincere exhortation kindly, dear friends, and do your part to follow it as well as you can. This will prove needful and good for you and be to the honor and praise of God, who called you to his light. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ, who has begun his work in you, increase the same with grace and fulfil it to the day of his glorious coming, so that you together with us may go to meet him with joy and remain forever with him. Amen.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>LW 53:46-47.

<sup>53</sup>LW 53:47-48.

<sup>54</sup>LW 53:50.