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Errata

There is an error on page 285 in the article by Charles A. Gieschen, “The Relevance of the *Homologoumena* and *Antilegomena* Distinction for the New Testament Canon Today: Revelation as a Test Case,” *CTQ* 79 (2015). The sentence in the first paragraph that reads, “It is ironic that the two primary proof-texts . . . are both from the *antilegomena*” should read: “It is ironic that one of the two primary proof-texts for the divine nature of the Scriptures, 2 Timothy 3:15 and 2 Peter 1:21, is from the *antilegomena*.”

The Editors

The Sacraments and Vocation in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*

Paul Gregory Alms

There are many surprises in Martin Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*. Luther's handling of the text is an unexpected mix of exegesis, polemic, and practical application of the lessons of the Scriptures. The commentaries are wildly unsystematic, and Luther brings in a wide-ranging group of seemingly unrelated topics to the stories of the patriarchs. Luther took up the text of Genesis in the latter part of his life, and he seems to comment on every aspect of his theology. While there have been questions about the theological reliability of the text of the lectures as they have been transmitted,¹ in recent years they have been a rich source for scholars looking for the mature Luther's views on a number of topics. Mickey Mattox, for example, has completed an in-depth study on how Luther interprets the role of women in Genesis.² In an even more ambitious study, John Maxfield has probed the motives and effects of the Genesis lectures in forming an evangelical community.³ In addition, other scholars have looked at the Genesis commentaries in view of Luther's use of the "divine game,"⁴ prayer,⁵ the

¹ See especially Peter Meinhold, *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1936).

² Mickey Mattox, *"Defender of the Most Holy Matriarchs": Martin Luther's Interpretation of the Women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesis, 1535–1545* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

³ John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008).

⁴ S. J. Munson, "The Divine Game: Faith and the Reconciliation of Opposites in Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*," *CTQ* 76 (2012): 89–115.

⁵ Mary Jane Haemig, "Prayer as Talking Back to God in Luther's Genesis Lectures," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 270–295.

use of the stories of the patriarchs to mold Christian life,⁶ and how Luther's interaction with the text is a model of biblical interpretation.⁷

One topic that is missing in all this attention on the Genesis lectures is that of vocation. Luther's thought on vocation has generated a lively and extensive literature. Wingren's treatment, translated into English in 1957, has become known as the starting point for exploring vocation in Luther.⁸ Generally taken as the standard work on the topic, Wingren's study has also resulted in much debate and clarification. Kenneth Hagen, for example, produced a significant dissent of Wingren's approach.⁹ While vocation has become a popular item in Luther studies,¹⁰ its place in the Genesis lectures has not received much attention.¹¹ However, the way Luther approaches the subject of vocation in the Genesis lectures is surprising. While he preserves the traditional threefold view of vocation that centers on family, state, and church, he also relates vocation to the life of a Christian within a sacramental framework. In these lectures, Luther sees God at work in vocation similar to the way he is at work in the sacraments. The similarities are revealing, for they show how deeply incarnational and Christological Luther's thinking was toward the end of his life. While Luther steadfastly kept the notion of works as merit out of the matter of the justification of the sinner, he did see God acting in similar ways in vocation and sacraments. In vocation, as in the sacraments, God operates on the basis of his promises and uses created means as a sort of fleshly covering for his work. Luther sees the need for certainty as important in both sacraments and vocation. In addition, both sacraments and vocation

⁶ Robert Kolb, "Models of the Christian Life in Luther's Genesis Sermons and Lectures," *Lutherjahrbuch* 76 (2009): 193–220.

⁷ James Nestingen, "Luther in Front of the Text: The Genesis Commentary," *Word & World* 14, no. 2 (1994): 186–194.

⁸ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

⁹ Kenneth G. Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 249–274.

¹⁰ For example, see John A. Maxfield, ed., *The Lutheran Doctrine of Vocation: The Pieper Lectures* (Northville, SD: Luther Academy, 2008); Robert Kolb, "Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther's Teaching on the Christian's Vocation," *Concordia Journal* 39 (2013): 133–141; and Vitow Westhelle, "The Word and the Masks: Revisiting Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine" in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹¹ One exception is Roberts Kolb's essay "Models of the Christian Life in Luther's Genesis Sermons and Lectures," but Kolb focuses on the Christian life in general and treats vocation in only one section of the article.

are incarnational for Luther and ultimately point to Christ in the forms they take.

I. Sacraments

In order to understand Luther's treatment of vocation in the Genesis lectures, it is important first to grasp how he discusses the sacraments.¹² Luther sees the sacraments as visible, created places where God is present to give forgiveness to the Christian. That assurance comes from the word of God. He emphasizes the need for a word from God to provide certainty in the matter of righteousness: "Righteousness is not fulfillment of the Law; it consists in believing God when He makes a promise."¹³ In the Genesis lectures, Luther repeatedly emphasizes the need for the Christian to be able find this God and to know where God can be located. It is the word and promise of God that provides this certainty. The word of God, his command or his promise, functions as a marker that God is to be found in certain places, namely preaching, absolution, and the sacraments. The various theophanies in Genesis are for Luther precursors to the sacraments. In both theophany and sacrament, God is present, speaks, and promises.¹⁴

Luther sees the fallen human being in constant need of these assurances of God's presence. For created, material people, these assurances must also have a material dimension. To meet this need, God paradoxically reveals himself by covering himself up. He uses created coverings or masks to come to the creature. These coverings are nothing other than the sacramental signs:

Let it be the concern of each one of us to abide by the signs by which God has revealed Himself to us, namely His Son, born of the Virgin

¹² See P. D. Pahl, "Baptism in Luther's Lectures on Genesis," *Lutheran Theological Journal* 1 (1967): 26-35; Naomichi Masaki, "Genesis as Catechesis Sacramental Instruction of Dr. Martin Luther according to His Lectures on Genesis, 1535 to 1545" (STM thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1997). The author is not aware of any major study of Luther's general use of the sacraments in the Genesis lectures.

¹³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelican, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 3:84; hereafter AE.

¹⁴ The story of Jacob's ladder, for instance, is the story of the certainty of God's presence marked by his word: "God's church is a place where God's Word resounds. . . . Wherever that Word is heard, where Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and absolution are administered, there you must determine and conclude with certainty: 'This is surely God's house; here heaven has been opened.' . . . Where God speaks, where Jacob's ladder is, where angels ascend and descend, there the church is" (AE 5:244).

Mary and lying in the manger among the cattle, the Word, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and absolution. In these images we see and meet a God whom we can bear, one who comforts us and lifts us up into hope and saves us.¹⁵

Luther insists that created persons need a created, visible place in which to find the presence of God. Human reason is unable to find God without visible markers that guide the person to where he is.¹⁶ Without such visible signs, men go astray and devise their own works and ways of worshipping, a fault Luther continually finds in the papal church of his day.¹⁷ Visible forms afford safety for sinful people and ensure them that they can indeed find God and his mercy:

We shall be safe . . . if we follow that visible form or those signs which God Himself has set before us. In the New Testament we have as a visible form the Son of God on the lap of His mother Mary. He suffered and died for us, as the Creed teaches. Besides we have other visible forms: Baptism, the Eucharist, and the spoken Word itself.¹⁸

Luther sees this "enfleshed" way in which God works not only in the sacraments but also in the person of the minister. In the Old Testament the many theophanies of God by which he appeared in extraordinary ways to the patriarchs are nothing, says Luther, compared to what a pastor does today. The pastor, when he does the Gospel tasks given to him by God to perform, is greater than the Old Testament appearances of God:

This happens to us too, however and indeed daily, as often as and wherever we wish. It is true that you hear a human being when you are baptized and when you partake of the Holy Supper. But the word which you hear is not that of a human being; it is the word of the Living God. It is he who baptizes you; it is he who absolves you for your sins. And it is he who commands you to hope in His mercy.¹⁹

Such visible signs indicate not only God's presence but also his gracious presence. They are for Christians the very face of the Lord for us: "When He addresses us in a winsome manner and shows His good will toward us by His words and deeds, then God shows His face. In this life this takes

¹⁵ AE 2:48.

¹⁶ AE 3:107.

¹⁷ AE 3:109.

¹⁸ AE 3:108-109.

¹⁹ AE 3:166. See among many other examples: "Nor is it the pastor who absolves you, but the mouth and hand of the minister is the mouth and hand of God" (AE 5:249). See also AE 8:145.

place only in the Word and sacraments.”²⁰ The gospel and sacraments are sure and certain marks of God’s presence and favor.²¹ It is the weakness and need of men that moves God to work in this way, and he has always done so. Sacrament and sacramental ways of working are not New Testament innovations; for Luther, they are the way a gracious Creator works. The sacraments are indications not of exceptions that God makes outside his regular working, but they are examples precisely of his normal way of dealing with his people: “All the sacred accounts give proof that by His superabundant grace our merciful God always placed some outward and visible sign of His grace alongside the Word, so that men, reminded by the outward sign and work or Sacrament, would believe with greater assurance that God is kind and merciful.”²²

The promises of God function in the Genesis lectures to give certainty to the Christian as to where he may find the gracious presence of God in the face of the eternal temptation to devise his own worship and means to find God. Luther again and again excoriates the papist piety and superstition that finds assurance and God’s presence in such man-made rituals as pilgrimages, indulgences, or monasteries.²³ But it is not only the papists who devise such errors. The Old Testament people of God did the same. It is a part of the sinful human nature, regularly shown by the patriarchal narrative from the Book of Genesis that Luther was expounding.²⁴ As Luther reads the stories of Genesis, he sees this “constant madness” by

²⁰ AE 6:172–173.

²¹ “For God governs us in such a way that wherever He speaks with us here on earth, the approach to the kingdom of heaven is open. This is truly extraordinary consolation. Wherever we hear the Word and are baptized, there we enter into eternal life” (AE 5:247).

²² AE 1:248.

²³ “And the pope has concerned himself with this one purpose: to do away with the fixed place or tabernacle, that is, the ministry of the Word. He does not bother about the Word and sacraments, nor does he make use of them; but he takes them away and horribly torments the people. He fills the entire world with his indulgences, and wherever there are places and self-chosen nooks, he dispenses indulgences in order to give support to his errors and his mania for idols” (AE 4:179).

²⁴ “This tabernacle God gave to Moses as a sure sign of the place He had chosen, and He added the promise that He would dwell there, be present, and hear the invocations and prayers of those who call upon Him. But that very people, which most of all had a sure and definite place of worship, wandered and strayed most of all in uncertain and self-chosen places. Such is the deplorable perversity of our nature that we do not keep what God commands or regard it highly; but whatever the devil prescribes, this we receive and observe with utmost eagerness and deference. We erect altars, chapels, churches; we run to Rome and to St. James. But meanwhile we slight Baptism, the Eucharist, absolution, and our calling” (AE 4:179).

which “men chase after pleasant groves, fountains and streams” that they themselves had chosen rather than approaching the temple that God had designated with his word.²⁵

The Christian is not only in a battle with the devil and the flesh over certainty, but he is also in a paradoxical, mysterious battle with God himself over that same certainty. God acts in strange and contradictory ways and often hides himself in opposites. He often acts as if he does not exist. The battle for a Christian then is also against God himself and his ways of disclosing himself: “For not only are we conquerors of the devil, sin, death, men, and this life but also of God.”²⁶ God intentionally plays a cruel and vicious game²⁷ with his children in which he hides his face²⁸ and in which he pretends that he is absent and acts as if he had forgotten all his promises. God, in allowing all sorts of illness and wretchedness and evil to befall his people, even death itself, is simply playing “a most pleasant and beautiful game of His goodness.”²⁹ The only way to overcome him and win at this “game” is through faith in the word, where he promises his presence and places it in tangible things. One must oppose God with his own word. This is the game at which we defeat God: “Indeed, He has given Himself to us. If it were not for that, we would not be conquerors of God. For He is ours through the promise, and He has said: ‘I will be your God; trust Me etc.,’ and from this it comes to pass that we come forth as conquerors of God.”³⁰

In the midst of such actions by God it is the word and sacraments that give certainty. Man must hold onto the word and promises of God at all costs, for it is that very word of God that is the only hope for mortals. God acts in opposites for the sake of the gospel; he does so to keep faith in the word. God’s aim is that we “learn to die according to the flesh and to depend on the Word.”³¹ This mortification—putting the old Adam to death—leads to faith in the Word alone: “Therefore the flesh and understanding of the flesh and reason must be mortified, and all human wisdom must be reduced to nothing. It must finally come to this! All things have been made and are restored through the Word; we are created from the Word, and we

²⁵ AE 7:299.

²⁶ AE 6:259.

²⁷ For Luther’s concept of God playing a “game” with his people, see S.J. Munson, “The Divine Game,” 89–115.

²⁸ See AE 6:140–141, 356–357 and 7:231–234, 357.

²⁹ AE 7:226.

³⁰ AE 6:259.

³¹ AE 6:344.

must return to the Word."³² At the moment of death and the threat of hell, it is the sacraments that give the only sure knowledge of God and his grace:

When I die, I descend into hell; I perish! What am I to do? No help remains except the Word: "I believe in God, etc." To this I firmly cling, however angry He may be, however much He may forsake, kill, and lead me down to hell. Why? Because I have been baptized and absolved; I have made use of Holy Communion. I believe this Word.³³

Luther finds a need for such sacramental certainty not only in the outward circumstances of life or in the trials and difficulties that God places upon us and allows to happen but also in the matter of theology itself, in the study of God. Luther sees in theology a constant temptation to engage in speculation, to allow one's curiosity or reason to propel oneself outside the revelation God has given. Such speculation is, by its very nature, uncertain. Any investigation that seeks "something more sublime above or outside the revelation of God" is devilish. All that happens is that we "plunge ourselves into destruction." In approaching the hidden God "there is no faith, no Word, and no knowledge; for He is an invisible God, and you will not make him visible."³⁴ A Christian ought not investigate such hidden matters as predestination. Predestination leads to despair or security, leading men to give up and think that all things are decided by God and that nothing can be accomplished, no matter what we do or say.³⁵ But God's hidden will is hidden for good reason, and we are not to seek it out. Rather we are to stick to God in those places where he shows himself, that is, his word and promise: "God will not let Himself be taken captive and forced within the limits of your wisdom. His foreknowledge and predestination are no concern whatever of yours. Indeed, lest you tempt God, you should rather listen to Him when He promises. Cling to him in firm faith."³⁶ Speculation about such matters is to try to "understand the Godhead without a covering." God cannot be found when he is "uncovered." Rather, Luther counsels seeking God precisely where he is covered up "as today he wraps himself up in Baptism, in absolution etc."³⁷

For Luther, the sacraments are ultimately Christological; Luther easily places Christ on the lap of the Virgin Mary, Baptism, the word, and the

³² AE 6:361.

³³ AE 6:361.

³⁴ AE 5:44.

³⁵ AE 6:105.

³⁶ AE 7:308.

³⁷ AE 1:11.

Eucharist in the same list.³⁸ The sacraments not only deliver God's presence but are incarnational in their form: "The incarnate Son of God is, therefore, the covering in which the Divine Majesty presents himself to us with all His gifts, and does so in such manner that there is no sinner too wretched to be able to approach him with firm assurance of obtaining pardon."³⁹ The flesh of Jesus and the reality of the sacraments function in the same way. They are God's way of coming to us in certainty so that we can grab hold of them and not be led astray. In the sacraments, there is the real presence of God, that is, the word covered with created things to give certainty to the believer. Luther is quick to recognize in this pattern a Christological reality. Christ is God himself covered and enfleshed, who has come to give salvific certainty. Luther lists Christ himself as a sign alongside of sacraments:

Let it be the concern of each one of us to abide by the signs by which God has revealed Himself to us, namely, His Son, born of the Virgin Mary and lying in the manger among the cattle; the Word; Baptism; the Lord's Supper; and absolution. In these images we see and meet a God whom we can bear, one who comforts us, lifts us up into hope, and saves us.⁴⁰

Christ himself is a "covering" in which the Divine Majesty comes to us in mercy.

This is the very same language that Luther uses of the word, the sacraments, and the office of the ministry. Just as the sacraments are low and humble, so too has Christ himself emptied and lowered himself for our benefit to give us his gifts.⁴¹ The ministry of the church is a Christological "condescension" whereby God comes down to us now in the same way he did in Christ's incarnation.⁴² In fact, in Luther's lectures, this is one and the same movement. The sacraments, the word, and absolution are Christ's coming down. They are, in a sacramental way, his incarnation now among us: "After Christ's coming I know nothing but Christ and Him crucified, who reveals Himself to us in visible forms: in the use of the Keys and in the Eucharist. I know that I find God there and that I receive the forgive-

³⁸ AE 3:108.

³⁹ AE 2:49.

⁴⁰ AE 2:48.

⁴¹ AE 4:66.

⁴² AE 4:61.

ness of sins there and nowhere else.”⁴³ The sacraments are like Christ in his incarnation, and Christ in his incarnation is like the sacraments.

II. Vocation

For Luther in his *Lectures on Genesis*, vocations are places where God is present in a manner similar to the sacraments. They are “sacramental” in that the word and promise of God is enfleshed in a particular person or action and in them God acts.⁴⁴ Vocations are worldly and physical matters in which God acts. The purposes are clearly different in sacrament and vocation. In the sacraments God is giving salvation and forgiveness; he is making a new person out of a dead, old one. In vocation, he is leading that new person to do his work in the world with certainty and confidence. The way in which he works is similar, but in both Luther sees God as the Creator who employs his word in connection with creation to his work. On one side, his work is justifying the sinner; on the other, it is serving the neighbor.

The presence of God through the word is intended to give certainty in the matter of vocation just as in the matter of the sacraments. Though it is a different kind of certainty in a different context, the pattern is the same, because God’s character and identity and way of working are the same. God is always the God who speaks and promises and is known and apprehended through his word. Similarly, he is also always the Creator, so that he uses and is present in and through created things, whether that is to give forgiveness and Christ’s body in the host or, as Luther might say, to give warm milk and a change of diapers to a baby. He is also a God of certainty in that he wishes his people to know and be certain of where he is and how to please him in the matter of justification as well as in the matter of good works and daily life.

In these lectures, the word is just as crucial to the matter of vocation as it is to the matter of sacraments. In vocations, God is the Creator through his word. He acts as the Creator by filling his creation with his presence and attaching his word to it. Furthermore, he commands the Christian what works to do. His word is crucial in this matter of works. Human

⁴³ AE 3:109.

⁴⁴ Oswald Bayer writes that Luther “became aware of the essentially worldly—not only in the negative but also in the positive sense—mediation of the spiritual, the spiritual significance of all worldly things in the positive sense was revealed to him.” Oswald Bayer, “Nature and Institution: Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Orders,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1998): 134.

beings are a kind of element to which the word is added.⁴⁵ Luther writes: "Nor do we ourselves pay sufficient attention to the fact that in our whole life the Word is the measure, the standard, and the most precious thing that guides our life, so that you can say 'I am doing this in the Word of God. The Lord has commanded this. This pleases God.'"⁴⁶ Christians acting in God-pleasing ways can know that God acts through them because his word says so. He commands Christians to be parents, to preach the word, and to wield the sword. He promises that when such actions are undertaken, he is the one working. It is the word of God, his command and promise, that elevates mere human actions to divine ones:

Since God himself is the Author of these offices, there are no grounds at all for thinking that the worship of God is hindered by these matters, but they are the most excellent and pleasing exercises of godliness toward God and men. For God wants the fetus to be borne in the womb and to be suckled and kept warm by the earnest care of mothers that it may be nourished and grow.⁴⁷

A comparison to the sacraments is instructive. Elements with no word from God are mere creatures. So it is with vocation: what may seem to be simple human actions are the divine holy work of the Creator God. His word says this is so, and the Christian hears the word and lives that reality. Though someone be a humble mother, she is doing high divine work for God has commanded such things.

Vocation and sacrament also come together in the matter of certainty for the Christian. God's word is attached to human actions and roles so that the person doing them may be sure that they are pleasing to God: "True obedience is not to do what you yourself choose or what you impose upon yourself, but what the Lord has commanded you through His Word."⁴⁸ Vocational confusion and uncertainty were great evils in Luther's mind, spawning the monasteries, monastic works-righteousness, and the denigration of the works of family and world. The works of the monks and the papists were self-chosen, which by their nature lead to uncertainty. Just as the papists chose to worship God with self-chosen worship practices, so

⁴⁵ Bayer investigates this matter of word and vocation carefully and aligns the traditional word/element framework of sacraments to the notion of vocation. Bayer, "Nature and Institution," 133-144.

⁴⁶ AE 5:70. See also 2:355: "We must appeal to our touchstone and look at the word of God. We must not simply give our tacit approval to such hideous sanctity but we must ask whether God has commanded such a thing."

⁴⁷ AE 6:347.

⁴⁸ AE 2:271.

also they tried to please him with self-chosen works. Who could know if such work was pleasing to God? The word gives vocational certainty:

For this reason all the lives of the monks, no matter how showy they may be in the eyes of the flesh, are nevertheless altogether nothing. . . . The flesh, the heart, the eye of man are taken in by these remarkable feats. But see whether there is a connection with the Word of God. Ask Antony whether he has a word by which he has been commanded to go into the desert and to torture his flesh.⁴⁹

What God really willed concerning daily life was clearly spelled out in the accounts of the patriarchs.⁵⁰ They did humble family chores, married, had children, worked, and all the other things pertaining to such life, and they were blessed by God for such work, which, unlike monasteries and monastic ventures, had the clear command and promise of God behind it:

In the accounts of the fathers this is the only and most desirable jewel, namely, that God speaks with them and with us. . . . Nor do we ourselves pay sufficient attention to the fact that in our whole life the Word is the measure, the standard, and the most precious thing that guides our life, so that you can say: "I am doing this in the Word of God. The Lord has commanded this. This pleases God." Thus from the highest station in life down to the lowest, we can be sure that God has commanded, that God has spoken.⁵¹

Thus, Christians can have certainty that the work they do is pleasing to God, for God has promised it by his word and also promised to work through them to do his work in the world.

This vocational certainty is also buttressed by Luther's thought on how faith and justification operate in the life of a Christian. Faith in the word is not a matter of simply removing outward sins. Rather, faith in Christ's atoning work through the preached word brings about an entirely new person. It is not a matter of whether or not a particular work is valuable or exalted or humble; rather, it is a matter of who does the work. The nature of the person doing the work was more important than the nature of the work itself:

But the learned theologian does not look at the bare works. He considers the person and the heart; and if the heart is full of faith, he concludes that everything he does in faith, even though in outward appearance it is most unimportant—such as the natural activities of

⁴⁹ AE 5:4.

⁵⁰ See Kolb, "Models of the Christian Life," 203–206.

⁵¹ AE 5:70.

sleeping, being awake, eating, and drinking, which seem to have no godliness connected with them—is a holy work which pleases God.⁵²

God has regard for Abel, “because He is pleased with the person. . . . God does not have regard for either the size of the quantity or even for the value of the work, but simply for the faith of the individual.”⁵³ If the person doing the work had been justified by faith, then that work done in faith is intrinsically valuable and noble and precious to God because that person is holy. People are holy on account of Christ alone through the faith that brings that holiness to them. The works they do, then, are holy whether or not they are esteemed in the eyes of the world. God looks at the person, cleansed by Christ, not the work. This is one reason why Luther finds such value in the accounts of the patriarchs. Where others see inconsequential or even scandalous detail, Luther sees the life of faith:

Thus in this passage the Holy Spirit gives a description of Lot’s management of his household, which has no appearance of sanctity; and yet these very works in connection with the household are more desirable than all the works of all the monks and nuns, be they ever so laborious and impressive. Lot’s wife milks the cows; the servants carry the hay and lead them to water. God praises these works, and Scripture calls them the works of the righteous. . . . For we observe that God did not consider it beneath His dignity to have these seemingly unimportant and paltry works recorded in His book. Whatever the godly do, even if it is a work that is not commanded, is pleasing to God and acceptable on account of faith. But if it is a work that God commands, there is that much less doubt that the obedience receives God’s approval.⁵⁴

God’s word and promise assure the Christian of God’s presence in the daily life of one’s calling.⁵⁵ This presence in the vocations of the Christian functions in two ways in these lectures. First, God is present in and through Christians in their vocations in order to serve others and the world. The focus is on the world and the neighbor being served. The mother, the prince, and the pastor are all vessels that God inhabits to do his work in the world. God wishes the baby to be fed, the criminal

⁵² AE 2:349.

⁵³ AE 1:258.

⁵⁴ AE 2:349–350.

⁵⁵ “God is in preaching, in baptism, in government. That is where you can find him.” Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 49:63; cited in Paul Althaus, *Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 54.

punished, and the sinner absolved, so he uses Christians to do it.⁵⁶ Christians in their vocations are the material elements to which God adds his word and promise and through which God keeps order in the world, raises families, and forgives in the church. He does not act directly, but mediately. When the magistrate or the parent or the preacher acts in his office, he does so as God under a mask—under the created element of a person.⁵⁷

In vocation, God wants to use externals. He does not want to work directly; he wishes to use his people to do his work, just as in the sacraments. He could work directly on the human heart apart from the word, but he wills to work through his preachers. Also in the matter of curbing crime or running the state or raising children, God wishes to use the external, humble means of flesh-and-blood people. God wishes to use the individual Christian as his instrument: "It is God's command that you should do your duty, and He wants to work through you."⁵⁸ With regard to the office of the ministry, God could well "teach and enlighten hearts" without the pastor, but "he does not want to do so." He could forgive sins without Baptism, but "He wants us human beings to have a share in His workings."⁵⁹

Luther not only sees God present in what the Christian does for others but also in what others do for the Christian. Here the focus is reversed and is on the Christian himself who is served by God through the vocations of others. If a Christian is looking for the presence of God in his life, he must look to the word of God and things such as Baptism or absolution. There, under the cover of material things, God has promised to be for the forgiveness of sins. But, in a parallel way, God is also present for the believer in the vocation of daily life where God sends others to serve the Christian.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ The household "is also defined by what God does through it: in this order the creator continues to give life to creature and creation, using wives and husbands as 'hands,' 'channels,' or 'masks' for this purpose." James Nestingen, "Luther on Marriage, Vocation, and the Cross," *Word & World* 23, no. 1 (2003): 35.

⁵⁷ "Man becomes God's mask on earth wherever man acts. . . . He is a tool in God's hand, bound before God, i.e. receiving and passive before God, but active outwardly, so that God reveals himself to others through man's actions." Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 137.

⁵⁸ AE 3:290.

⁵⁹ AE 3:288. See also 4:354; 5:140-141; 6:347; and 8:271.

⁶⁰ Carter Lindberg, as others have done, points out that for Luther the sacrament was the locus not only of divine grace but also Christian love that bound Christians to other Christians in service. Luther's ethics was "sacramentally rooted." Carter Lindberg, "The Ministry and Vocation of the Baptized," *Lutheran Quarterly* 6 (1992): 385-401.

The office of the ministry is the prime example of this for Luther: "The spoken Word is indeed the word of a human being, but it has been instituted by divine authority for salvation."⁶¹ The vocation of the pastor is a means by which God comes to the Christian bearing salvation. But God also "speaks with us and deals with us through . . . parents and through the government, in order that we may not be carried about with any wind of doctrine."⁶² The Christian can be sure that "God speaks with me, too, in the very station of life in which I live."⁶³ Indeed, Luther can say that we behold God's gracious face not only in the promises and sacraments⁶⁴ but "likewise in external blessings and gifts, in a gracious prince, a neighbor, a father, and a mother. When I see that the face of my parents is gracious, I see at the same time the winsome face of God smiling at me."⁶⁵ Luther can see the graciousness of God "in all His creatures," because they are his works.⁶⁶ God is the creator and uses his things to communicate himself, whether through the neighbor's vocational work or the sacraments.

The matter of hospitality in the Mosaic narratives gives Luther an opportunity to expand this thought of God present in the vocation and service of Christians in a surprising way. The Christian can be sure that God works through him when he exercises his vocation and that God is present to him when others serve him. Luther, however, also sees in the matter of hospitality and serving the poor or the persecuted a special way in which God comes to the Christian. In striking sacramental language, Luther extols this work: "He who receives a brother who is in exile because of the Word receives God Himself in the person of such a brother."⁶⁷ Luther is discussing the reception that Abraham accords the three visitors in Genesis 18, and he references Jesus' words from Matthew 25 that it is Christ himself that Christians serve when they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc. Luther takes the textual difficulty of Genesis 18 where the visitors who appear in the form of men are called angels on the one hand and "the Lord" on the other, and solves the riddle by relating it to vocation and hospitality. Moses, says Luther, "receives them and believes that in their

⁶¹ AE 3:273. See also 4:66; 5:23; 5:250; and 6:257, among many other examples.

⁶² AE 5:71.

⁶³ AE 5:71.

⁶⁴ Maxfield points out that Luther identifies the household as the true monastic state. Holiness and righteousness are played out in the midst of the difficulties and trials of marriage and family and civic attachments. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, 99–106.

⁶⁵ AE 6:173.

⁶⁶ AE 6:173.

⁶⁷ AE 3:187.

persons he is receiving God . . . And he is not mistaken; he is receiving God himself."⁶⁸ Moses can be sure of this, because Christ is present in the disadvantaged, exiled brother according to Matthew 25. Hospitality involves the presence of God. One receives God himself when he practices hospitality. Luther brings this example into the present lives of believers: "So we, too, when we show some kindness to the least in the kingdom of God, receive Christ Himself in a hospitable manner when He comes to us in the persons of His poor."⁶⁹ In being hospitable to a human being, we are "receiving the Son of God Himself."⁷⁰ This is sacramental language that Luther uses to describe good works. Under the material elements of a human being whom one "receives," one also "receives" the Son of God himself. Christ places himself in the person of the poor so that his people may receive him when they welcome that poor Christian.

There is another way in which Luther treats the close relationship of sacrament and vocation. In both he sees the concrete, material way in which God works as giving certainty in the midst of trials and the temptation to find God through speculation. Luther knows well that when a magistrate or a spouse in marriage enters their vocation there will be "hatred and enmity" and "grumbling and cursing."⁷¹ The easy way is to take the monastic road of escape to peace and quiet. But Luther advises staying in the vocations which God has commanded and which are pleasing to him even though they bring the cross.⁷² For they have the word of God: "Take care first of all that you have meditated well on the Word of God, in which the government is richly established . . . Likewise in marriage, whether one is a manservant or a maidservant, whether a teacher or pupil, they are sure of their station and the will of God. Just take hold of the Word, and bring forth fruits of the Word."⁷³

The matters of speculation and predestination also impact vocation. Luther points out that some Christians, misunderstanding predestination and thinking that everything will happen of necessity, abandon their vocations and the work God has given to them. Some go even further and dispense with created means in the matter of daily life and the protection

⁶⁸ AE 3:187.

⁶⁹ AE 3:184.

⁷⁰ AE 3:178.

⁷¹ AE 5:5.

⁷² Wingren repeatedly locates this mortification in the Christian's vocation. The purpose of vocation, according to Wingren's view of Luther, is precisely to kill the old self. See especially Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 63-77.

⁷³ AE 5:6. See also 4:94.

and providence of God. Some are drawn to contemplation and seeking out the hidden God. Just as Luther battled the enthusiasts on this score in the matter of sacraments, he does the same in the matter of vocation, insisting on the vocational means God has ordained: "These thoughts are wicked and impious, because God wants you to make use of the means you have at your disposal. He wants you to embrace the opportunity presented to you and to use it, since it is through you that He wants to accomplish the things He has ordained."⁷⁴

God could create and sustain life directly, Luther says, but he wants father and mother to be involved. The use of created means ties the human being down to the earth and prevents the lazy or the curious from referring all things to the hidden will of God in predestination or in seeking knowledge of God in speculation. John Maxfield demonstrates that in these lectures Luther locates the acquisition of the knowledge of God not in papistic or enthusiastic contemplation and speculation but in the cross-bearing arena of vocation in which the patriarchs lived.⁷⁵ God wants his creatures to be ignorant of his hidden counsels and "remain in your calling and within the limits of the Word, and use the means and counsels which God has ordained."⁷⁶ This advice is fitting for Luther both in the matter of salvation and sacraments as well as in the matter of calling and daily work.

Ultimately the vocational pattern that Luther employs is incarnational and Christological. The Word is made flesh and comes to his people to give gifts. Luther uses the terminology of incarnation when discussing the work of magistrates: "For governing is a divine power, and for this reason God calls all magistrates 'gods' (cf. Ps. 82:6), not because of the creation but because of the administration which belongs to God alone. Consequently, he who is in authority is an incarnate god, so to speak."⁷⁷ In vocation there is a Christological descent: "[God] descends and lives with us. He speaks and works in us."⁷⁸ This is God's will and way of working: "He wants us human beings to have a share in His workings."⁷⁹

As in other matters, the greatest example of such incarnational patterns is the office of the ministry. Luther identifies the descent or humbling

⁷⁴ AE 5:173.

⁷⁵ Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, 119-126.

⁷⁶ AE 6:105.

⁷⁷ AE 5:124.

⁷⁸ AE 5:250.

⁷⁹ AE 3:288.

of God, his self-emptying and taking human form, with the office of the ministry:

He speaks with us through the ministry of men and in this manner conceals His majesty, which is dreadful and unbearable for us. . . . Therefore let us recognize His exceedingly great and incalculable gift: that he emptied Himself in this manner and took on human form. Let us not on this account despise the Word; but let us fall on our knees and honor and prize the holy ministry through which God deigns to speak to us.⁸⁰

God dwells in the office of the ministry in a similar way as in Christ's incarnation: to shield his awful majesty ("He speaks with us through the ministry of men and in this manner conceals His majesty, which is dreadful and unbearable for us"⁸¹) and to give salvation ("The word which you hear is not that of a human being; it is the word of the living God. It is He who baptizes you; it is He who absolves you from sins; and it is he who commands you to hope in His mercy"⁸²). The office of the ministry functions as the very place of the knowledge and salvation of God just as Christ himself is: "Through them we know God and obtain eternal life."⁸³

III. Conclusion

In the Genesis lectures, Luther consistently views vocation in a sacramental framework. He portrays God at work in vocation in similar ways as he works in the sacraments. These patterns demonstrate how fundamentally incarnational, Christological, and sacramental Luther's thinking was as he treated the biblical text. Promise and created means are the ways in which God marks and "covers" his presence in vocation and sacrament. The human need for certainty pushes Luther to see an incarnational pattern in God's work in the church and in the world.

⁸⁰ AE 4:66.

⁸¹ AE 4:66.

⁸² AE 3:166.

⁸³ AE 3:167.