

Luther, the Royal Psalms and the Suffering Church¹

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Abstract

The Lutheran church in the 1530s was not a comfortable community, the Evangelical Church was intimidated and persecuted. This essay is an attempt to indicate how Martin Luther brought pastoral insight to the church from his reading of five royal psalms (Psalms 2, 45, 82, 110, and 118) over a period of nearly 20 years (1513–1532). In providing comfort Luther acknowledged the severity of the troubles, expressed his own sense of vulnerability and put this serious pastoral problem of suffering into a wider context — that of the spiritual kingdom of Christ. Luther is able to bring pastoral comfort and advice through a reading of the royal psalms that, for him, clearly display Christ in his kingly authority and power. He showed spiritual insight into the gracious character of God in Jesus Christ, “the God who loves us and sustains us unto death, and again unto life.” In this respect, Luther is clearly a pastor who seeks to comfort, to encourage, and to strengthen God’s people in their daily suffering through a presentation of the power, authority and grace of Christ and his kingdom to those who experience distress and weakness in this life.

Introduction

The Lutheran church in the 1530s was not a comfortable community in which to exist and to which to belong. Undoubtedly, political, social, economic and ecclesial factors played their part to ensure that this was the case. Noticeably, for instance, Luther’s expositions of Psalm 2, covering nearly 20 years of his ministry (1513–1532), indicate a growing anxiety, a developing intensity of expression and pastoral urgency in the face of increased and explicit opposition. By the last lectures on Psalm 2, in 1532, the

¹ This article is a reworking of the concluding chapter of my forthcoming book, *Martin Luther’s Interpretation of the Royal Psalms. The Spiritual Kingdom in a Pastoral Context* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2009). It should be noted that the designation “royal psalms” is recent, of course; and, that Luther and his contemporaries certainly would not have employed it in the sixteenth century. However, it is a convenient way of limiting the subject to manageable length; but more than that it is in these psalms that the reformer most clearly focuses on the spiritual kingdom of Christ.

reformer frames his thoughts in an apocalyptic and confrontational mode, applying the psalm's message directly to sixteenth century Germany, and to a weak church struggling to keep its faith. Luther comments that "for the sake of the Word of God we are attacked by Satan and the world with force and deceit, with various offences, and every kind of evil."² This development should alert us to the realities of the situation faced by the evangelical church in that decade.³

Luther discerns the church's weakness and its capacity for suffering in sixteenth century Germany; and, his pastoral inclination is to strengthen believers, to give them hope and to empower them in their will to live faithfully in Christ. And, it is as a pastor, with the responsibilities that that office entails, that Luther is mindful of the difficulties⁴ — indeed, he is mindful of his own doubts and trials of faith.⁵ Nevertheless, throughout the 1530s he encourages suffering believers to be strong in the situation and to work out and to focus upon profoundly Christian priorities — priorities that are embedded in the gospel, centred in Christ and his spiritual kingdom. T. F. Lull is correct in saying that in later years Luther's work in the area of pastoral care "often took the form of commentaries on the Psalms,"⁶ and it is clear on a close reading that these priorities are demonstrated for Luther in David's royal psalms, for the declaration that God reigns is the centre of those psalms, and involves a vision of reality that is theological at its core.⁷ In a very real sense the assertion that God reigns is a metaphor that transcends concrete life and defines present reality at the same time.⁸ The reformer is well aware of this and calls upon his followers to grasp hold of its truth by faith and to persevere in their calling in Christ.⁹

In his application of the royal psalms Luther employs the concept of the kingdom of Christ (the spiritual kingdom — *das geistliche Reich*) to encourage and to comfort believers in their present distress. At times, this distress is caused by personal sin and temptation, but it is also the direct result of persecution and

² LW 12.5 (WA 40.195).

³ The Peasants' War (1525) casts a discernable shadow over Luther's writing of this decade.

⁴ On Luther the pastor, see L. W. Spitz, "Luther *Ecclesiast*. A Historian's Angle" in P. N. Brooks (ed.), *Seven-Headed Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 117; H. Junghans, "Luther's Wittenberg" in D. K. McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 25; D. M. Whitford, "Luther's Political Encounters" in McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, 180; D. S. Yeago, "The Office of the Keys: On the Disappearance of Discipline in Protestant Modernity" in C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (eds), *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 102–103. See also, D. A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 16. See also, E. Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 33; P. Brooks, "Martin Luther and the Pastoral Dilemma" in P. Brooks (ed.), *Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM, 1975), 97–117; O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 66, and Luther's *Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (translated by T. G. Tappert: Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003).

⁵ See E. Cameron, "The Search for Luther's Place in the Reformation," *JEH* 45 (1994), 485.

⁶ T. F. Lull, "Luther's Writings" in D. K. McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), 45.

⁷ There is tension here, of course. On the one hand, one of the central themes of the Psalms (perhaps *the* central theme) is that the Lord reigns (see, for example, J. L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Louisville: WJK, 1994), 12–22. The reformer certainly held this view with the same tenacity and unflinching adherence that the psalmists seem to have held it. However, on the other hand, the Lord's people are struggling in fear of their lives and in despair.

⁸ See, for example, W. Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); C. H. Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 177–85; J. A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 56–64; *ibid.* "The Psalms and the King" in D. Firth and P. S. Johnston (eds), *Interpreting the Psalms* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 101–118.

⁹ See P. G. Kuntz, *The Ten Commandments in History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 94.

hardship — or the fear of such. The following brief essay is an attempt, in summary form, to indicate how the reformer brings pastoral insight from his reading of five royal psalms — Psalms 2, 45, 82, 110, and 118.¹⁰

The pastoral problem

The evangelical church is feeling intimidated.

It becomes clear from reading Luther's later lectures on Psalm 2 (1532), for example, that the evangelical church is facing many difficulties that seem, at times, almost to overwhelm the believers who adhere to it. They are acutely aware of the weakness of the church at this time, its limited numbers and its apparent lack of success and progress. Understandably, believers feel intimidated by what they discern to be the greater power and influence of the Roman Church and its adherents. Together with this they are conscious of social unrest and discord that their opponents blame upon the novelty of the gospel they espouse. This, in itself, appears to demonstrate their opponents' conclusion that it is the "new" gospel that they profess that is in error. We can only imagine the disquiet that this would have engendered.

The evangelical church is being persecuted.

It is apparent throughout Luther's expositions of the royal psalms that the church is being physically persecuted by its opponents. At one point in his lectures on Psalm 82 the reformer comments that it is "as if it were a game or a joke to destroy people".¹¹ Elsewhere, he speaks of persecution taking on various forms: derision, contempt, ridicule, defamation, harassment, being hated, disgrace, and, more physically, as poverty, the loss of home and property, banishment, prison, chains, torture, drowning, hanging — being "trampled underfoot," and the like. Their cross-marked lives emphasise that the church is clearly under attack from what they perceive and experience to be a hostile world. Their adversaries are numerous and restless in their enmity. Believers naturally feel anxious, fearing for their lives.

The evangelical church is troubled.

Understandably, this situation seems to have given rise to feelings of fragility and sorrow, to troubled consciences and to an anxiety that is hard to suppress.¹² Believers are obviously disturbed by a sense of personal sin, a longing for peace and, at times, a desperate lack of hope. Apparently, some few have

¹⁰ These particular psalms were chosen because Luther's exposition of each of them occurs around the same troubled period of time. The reformer's exposition of Ps 110 is a series of eight sermons, the other expositions are series of lectures: Ps 2 (1532), *LW* 12.4–93 (*WA* 40.193–312); Ps 45 (1532), *LW* 12.197–300 (*WA* 40².471–610); Ps 82 (1530), *LW* 13.42–72 (*WA* 31¹.189–218); Ps 110 (1535), *LW* 13.228–348 (*WA* 41.79–239); Ps 118 (1530), *LW* 14.45–106 (*WA* 31.68–182). I have also examined Luther's earlier expositions of Ps 2 (1513, 1518) in order to discern his development: see *LW* 10.35–41 (*WA* 3.31–35); *LW* 14.313–49 (*WA* 5.48–74), respectively.

¹¹ *LW* 13.68 (*WA* 31¹.214).

¹² Expounding Ps 118, Luther speaks of anxiety being the habitual abode of the church, *LW* 14.58 (*WA* 31.92).

already committed suicide. No wonder Luther uses an extremely poignant phrase to describe these believers: he calls them, “those who sigh and breathe heavily beneath the cross,” underlining their despondency and cruciform existence.¹³ Luther himself asks, “What hope is there for the church?”¹⁴ — a question that appears to parallel questions being asked by those to whom he speaks: Does God really care? Why does God act in this way? Is he able to help? Can he protect and defend his own people? Where is our hope? It is in answer to such questions that Luther seeks to bring comfort and peace to those who are suffering.

Luther’s pastoral method

*Acknowledgement*¹⁵

Luther acknowledges his audience’s present and ongoing troubles and affirms the fact that it is terribly difficult to contend with the situation that they face on a daily basis. Pastorally, this is the first step in providing genuine consolation.¹⁶ He wants them to know that he is aware of their trials and that he empathizes with them in their anxiety. At one point he strongly asserts the idea that it is actually a defining quality of the true church to suffer and that each individual believer ought to be “ready to do and to suffer whatever he must.”¹⁷ In his exposition of Psalm 110, for instance, he assures them that suffering is a sign of the presence of the true gospel, not of its absence. In this way he can underline that they are on the side of truth, and on the side of Christ and his kingdom of truth.

Nevertheless, in acknowledging the church’s struggle, Luther often lists its adversaries¹⁸ — sometimes to the point of naming individuals and groups, always (and increasingly)¹⁹ including Satan who stands at the foundation of their mischief.²⁰ We see this particularly in his exposition of Psalm 2. Largely on the basis of the psalm’s first verse, Luther repeatedly names those he considers to be enemies of the gospel and of

¹³ LW 12.33 (WA 40.232).

¹⁴ LW 12.22 (WA 40.217).

¹⁵ See a similar section in N. R. Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 269–70, where he says that Luther affirms his audience’s present sorrow.

¹⁶ M. D. Thompson, “Luther on Despair” in B. S. Rosner (ed.), *The Consolations of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2008), 65.

¹⁷ LW 13.293 (WA 41.152).

¹⁸ Luther gains this sense of embattlement from experience, of course. Nevertheless, the psalms, themselves, add to his awareness. P. S. Johnston, “The Psalms and Distress” in D. Firth and P. S. Johnston (eds), *Interpreting the Psalms* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 68, says of the psalms, “Enemies abound in the psalms, and are explicitly mentioned in over a quarter of them. Several features mark their portrayal, including their actions, their words and their nature. They are overwhelmingly numerous and fiercely aggressive.” It is not at all surprising that Luther picks up on this in his context. See also, E. Busch, “Church and Politics in the Reformed Tradition” in J. E. Bradley and R. A. Muller (eds), *Church, Word and Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 163.

¹⁹ See Luther’s increasing use of this motif in his expositions of Psalm 2 – 1513, 1518, 1532.

²⁰ See G. Muller, “Luther’s Ethic in Present Day Crisis,” *JETS* 16 (1973), 209.

Christ.²¹ Strung together they establish a formidable list: kings, rulers, tyrants, princes, burghers, peasants, popes (“pontiffs”),²² bishops,²³ papists, monks, the orders,²⁴ Turks,²⁵ Jews,²⁶ nations, peoples, Anabaptists,²⁷ sacramentarians,²⁸ peace-disturbers, sectarians, pagans, the self-righteous²⁹ — that is, “the whole company of the godless.”³⁰ More specifically, he mentions by name Thomas Müntzer,³¹

²¹ For a general overview of this see M. U. Edwards, Jr., “Luther on his Opponents,” *LQ* 16 (2002), 329–48. See also, F. Rapp, *Christendom IV. Zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit (1378–1552)* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), 306–16, on Luther and the evangelical church in this confrontational context.

²² Elsewhere, Luther states that “our conflict with the pope is not over private and personal offenses and sins but over teaching and the hearing of the Word,” *LW* 12.271 (*WA* 40².571). He continues, “We forgive your sins, but we do not forgive you the blasphemies and denials of Christ, nor do we acquiesce in them. For Christ is greater than the church that you hold up against us,” *LW* 12.272 (*WA* 40².572). See also, *LW* 48.93–94 (*WA* Br. 1.253); *WA* Br. 1.567, 601–603; *LW* 31.280 (*WA* 2.20); *LW* 44.152, 166 (*WA* 6.425); *LW* 36.11 (*WA* 6.497); *LW* 39.49 (*WA* 6.285, 287); *LW* 41.90 (*WA* 50.578); *LW* 41.266, 288, 291, 298, 307 (*WA* 54.209, 227, 229, 235, 236, 243). J. M. Tonkin, “Luther’s Interpretation of Secular Reality,” *JRH* 6 (1970), 138, helpfully remarks that Luther’s repetitious description of the pope as the Antichrist “was not an impulsive term of abuse, but a precise theological judgement based on his reading of scripture.” He continues, “Luther’s central concern was not the moral issue [as in the judgement of Hus and Wyclif], but the theological issue of apostasy from the Word and corruption of the faith.” He cites Luther’s letter to Spalatin (March 13, 1519), *LW* 48.114 (*WA* Br. 1.359). Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 42, underlines the fact that Luther, a theologian of the cross, saw the papacy as theologians of glory — a theology to which the reformer was antagonistic. She states that “The pope becomes depicted as the Antichrist because of the theology of glory that provides the backdrop for the sacraments and other spiritual practices.” See also, x, 23, 102. S. H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), reminds us that the papacy’s opposition to Luther continued unabated. See also, R. Rosin, “The Papacy in Perspective: Luther’s Reform and Rome,” *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003), 407–426, particularly 407–26.

²³ See Luther’s earlier comment, *LW* 10.222–23 (*WA* 3.263), where the reformer complains about the bishops and then states that they should follow the example of Jesus Christ, who (unlike them) rules over the church, the people of God, in truth, in meekness and in righteousness.

²⁴ See Goertz, “What a tangled and tenuous mess the clergy is!” in Dykema and Oberman (eds), *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 499–519; J. M. Stayer, “Anticlericalism: A Model for a Coherent Interpretation of the Reformation” in H. R. Guggisberg and G. G. Krodel (eds), *Die Reformation in Deutschland und Europa* (Heidelberg: Güttersloher, 1993), 39–47. We might notice that some scholars argue against a pervasive anticlericalism: see, for example, E. Cameron, “The Cultural and Sociopolitical Context of the Reformation” in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 343; P. G. Wallace, *The Long European Reformation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 53. See also, P. Matheson, “The Reformation” in J. F. A. Sawyer (ed.), *Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 77.

²⁵ See the excellent, short treatment of this subject by G. J. Miller, “Luther on the Turks and Islam” in T. J. Wengert (ed.), *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 185–203, where he underlines the spiritual/religious nature of the Turkish threat, as Luther saw it. However, Tonkin, “Luther’s Interpretation of Secular Reality,” 139, suggests that Luther saw the Turks represented by the Beast of Revelation 13, because, he believed that they, “like the Roman Empire in New Testament times, threatened the Church from without by open hostility.” See also, an excellent extended treatment of this subject in A. S. Francisco, *Martin Luther and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), particularly, 67–79, on responding to Ottoman imperialism and 79–84 on the apocalyptic dimension of the threat. Francisco says that Luther thought of the Turks as “repugnant servants of the Devil” — but he cautions that this was similar to medieval apocalyptic perceptions before him (236).

²⁶ Jews and Turks are linked by Luther because, according to him, they both deny Christ his true worth as the Son of God and as mediator of divine grace. The centrality of the Word of God is also important. In his *Tabletalk* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 118, Luther says, “Mohammed, the pope, Antinomians, and other sectaries, have no certainty at all, neither can they be sure of these things; for they depend not on God’s Word, but on their own righteousness.” See *LW* 12.56 (*WA* 40.262–63). See also, M. U. Edwards Jr., “Luther’s polemical controversies” in McKim (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, 203; Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 336–45; Bodian, “Jews in a Divided Christendom” in Hsia (ed.), *A Companion to the Reformation World*, 471–85.

²⁷ J. S. Oyer, “The Reformers Condemn the Anabaptists” in J. D. Roth (ed.), “*They Harry the Good People out of the Land*” (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 2000), 3–16, recounts the charges brought against the Anabaptists. According to Oyer, they were considered to be sectarian and excessively subjective, making personal morality the centre of their religion.

²⁸ S. H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard* (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 54, defines sacramentarians as inclusive of “Protestants and dissenters who rejected infant baptism or the bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament.” See also, Edwards, “Luther’s polemical controversies,” 198–200.

²⁹ See M. Migotti, “Luther’s Word on Man’s Will: A Case Study in Comparative Intellectual History,” *RelStud* 20 (1984), 659.

³⁰ *LW* 12.64 (*WA* 40.274). Luther’s lists of adversaries become a continual refrain throughout the lectures. See also, *LW* 20.25 (*WA* 13.567); *LW* 19.37 (*WA* 19.187). In reference to Luther’s letter to Justus Jonas (26th Dec., 1542) N. R. Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 213, speaks of this as “ticking off a list of opponents, more typical of his polemical writings.”

³¹ See C. Windhorst, “Luther and the ‘Enthusiasts,’” *JRH* 9 (1977) 339–48; D. F. Wright, “Luther’s Quarrel with the *Schwärmer*” in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *Christian Experience in Theology and Life* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988), 55–82; Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 53–54.

Andreas Karlstadt and Huldrych Zwingli as those who disturb the peace of the church.³² However, behind all of these adversaries the reformer significantly posits Satan. We might notice, too, that elsewhere the reformer makes the point that attitude to the Word is central to how he decides who the church's opponents are. In his *Letter to the Princes of Saxony concerning the Rebellious Spirit*, Luther writes, "The pope, the Emperor, kings and princes lay hold on the Word with violence, and in madness would suppress, damn, blaspheme, and persecute it, without recognizing it or giving it a hearing." Then, having quoted Psalm 2:1-2, he says, "God has so blinded and hardened them that they rush on to their ruin. They have had warning enough. Satan sees this and knows right well that such raving finally accomplishes nothing."³³ It is not without significance that whereas Luther mentions Satan only once or twice in his 1518 exposition, here in 1532 he pinpoints Satanic activity no fewer than seventy-two times, often in the repeated, somewhat formalized phrase "Satan and the world [*Satana et mundo*]," but often not. The assertion is that behind each of these enemies lie Satan and his antagonism against the kingdom of Christ.³⁴

It seems to me that he lists the church's opponents for several pastoral reasons.

- The use of lists helps to establish the "true" church's self-identity. In times of difficulty and persecution it is fitting to be assured that those suffering do so because they belong, they are within the boundedness of a group that is somehow "true" because of Jesus Christ and his gospel.³⁵
- The rhetoric of listing opponents appears to cut them individually down to size — they are on a list, one of many. (Another method that Luther employs to reduce the opponents to a manageable size is the frequent use of images that indicate the futility of the enemies' wrath and the stability of the church under Christ.)³⁶
- These lists of opponents align the cause of the sixteenth century church with the cause of the apostles in Acts 4, for instance; and, more importantly, with Jesus Christ himself who also suffered for his faith and obedience before God.

³² For example, LW 12.7, 10 (WA 40.197, 202); LW 12.15–16 (WA 40.209). See also, LW 12.253 (WA 40².547).

³³ LW 40.49–50 (WA 15.210–11). See also, LW 30.258 (WA 20.683); LW 48.188–89 (WA Br. 2.242–43).

³⁴ For instance, at one point Luther speaks of the pope as "a special tool of Satan," LW 12.41 (WA 40.243). See LW 8.240 (WA 41.754); LW 41.178 (WA 50.653); LW 41.185–256 (WA 51.469–572). He speaks of the present Roman church leaders as "disciples and servants of Satan," LW 9.147 (WA 14.657). See also, Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 253–56. For general background to the subject, see H. C. E. Midelfort, "The Devil and the German People" in S. Ozment (ed.), *Religion and Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Kirksville: Northeast Missouri State University, 1989), 99–119; A. Jelsma, *Frontiers of the Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 25–39.

³⁵ See D. Brown, *Boundaries of our Habitations* (New York: State University of New York, 1994) generally for perceptive comments on this; particularly 77, 85, 114.

³⁶ This strips away the authority and mystery of the opponents. See C. M. Furey, "Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More," *HTR* 98 (2005), 475. Luther employs graphic imagery in this context: strong waves that fade away before doing damage; the ill-fated inhabitants of Sodom, empty bubbles that suddenly vanish, a man laying siege to a tower with a stick, a tiny spark next to the Sun (on Ps. 2); corpses in a lying on a battle-field (on Ps. 110); and so on.

- Lists give a sense of embattlement which, in turn, allows Luther to focus attention on Christ by stressing the enormity of the problem that confronts the church.³⁷

Luther believes that it will help if those who suffer know that their enemies (thus listed) are, in fact, essentially *Christ's* enemies, not merely *their* enemies. In his lectures on Psalm 110, for instance, he says that

[Christ] must deal with them as enemies who attack His person. Everything that happens to *the individual Christian*, whether it comes from the devil or from the world, such as the terrors of sin, anxiety and grief of the heart, torture, or death, He regards as though it happened to Him.³⁸

In their smug arrogance, says Luther, these opponents are enemies of Christ and that therefore the church suffers “for Christ’s sake.” It seems to me that this approach does not really ease the pain — they still suffer — but it puts that suffering into a worthy context as well as indicating that though the opponents defeat individual Christians they cannot ultimately overcome Jesus Christ. Therefore, according to Luther, believers must, by faith, “view [Christ] as the Enemy of our enemies.”³⁹ This is the assurance that Luther continually offers. Explicitly, in his lectures on Psalm 2 (1513), Psalm 45, and Psalm 110 (and elsewhere by implication) the reformer repeatedly emphasizes that Christ (or God) is intimately involved with his suffering church. Not only does he suffer injustice when we suffer it,⁴⁰ he also fights “for us” and “in us” — and that, according to Luther, renders the church invincible.⁴¹ In that limited context, the temporal kingdom *will* fail; the spiritual kingdom is bound to succeed — Christ, the King, will gain the victory. Being clothed in Christ, we must allow Christ to reign in us.⁴²

*Appropriate vulnerability*⁴³

It is clear that Luther, the pastor, chooses to be vulnerable with those to whom he speaks.⁴⁴ Having acknowledged their distress, he acknowledges his own. In expounding Psalm 2 (1532) Luther writes with evident despondency. If evangelical believers, generally, are troubled, he is troubled too. He admits that his faith is weakened, that he is sorrowful and that he sometimes experiences feelings of failure. He asks

³⁷ See S. Hendrix, “Rerooting the Faith: The Reformation as Re-Christianization,” *CH* 69 (2000), 558–577.

³⁸ *LW* 13.262 (*WA* 41.119), emphasis added. See also, *LW* 11.249 (*WA* 41.105).

³⁹ *LW* 13.262 (*WA* 41.120).

⁴⁰ *LW* 14.316 (*WA* 5.50). B. L. Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 354, aptly describes Christ in this context as “a King who reigns over his spiritual kingdom from the afflictions of the cross.”

⁴¹ *LW* 12.216 (*WA* 40².497).

⁴² *LW* 12.281 (*WA* 40².585).

⁴³ On this concept in pastoral ministry see the excellent short work, Vanessa Herrick, *Limits of Vulnerability* (Cambridge: Grove, 1997), particularly, 18–19.

⁴⁴ See M. D. Thompson, “Martin Luther: A theologian forged by trial” in M. Parsons and D. J. Cohen (eds), *On Eagles’ Wings* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 92–104. Though, see C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 155, who wrongly accuses Luther of ignoring those around him in his devotion to the glory of God.

the rhetorical question, “Shall we allow ourselves to be tormented to death on this account?”⁴⁵ Importantly, he continues,

For truly, I did so once and, since I wish to help heal these evils, I felt I was wounded, so that (God is my witness) my faith was gravely endangered and weakened. But finally through God’s kindness [*Dei beneficio*] I saw that these very thoughts, cares, sadnesses, and sorrows of the heart were born of a genuine ignorance of the kingdom of Christ and a harmful stupidity.⁴⁶

Luther’s own anxiety is implied in the following quotations as well.

[W]e are not held in esteem even by our own people. On that account they surely despise us and the Word which we preach and do not fear ruin or power, dignity, and riches. Consequently they laugh as at pleasant follies when we warn that sure punishments will follow upon such contempt of the Word. ... Even our own hearts oppose us and attempt to throw doubt on this consolation which we have through Christ.⁴⁷

This is the sin of Germany, which threatens certain ruin. For even if we exhort with great zeal to embrace the Word and cast aside impious rites, nevertheless bishops and some princes do not listen, but are even more inflamed against us. ... Nor can we today hear the blasphemies and the idolatry of the pope without great sorrow of heart. But what should we do? They do not wish to be healed.⁴⁸

He confesses to having been disheartened and humiliated by the laughter, to having been tempted to have wished that he had kept silent, to having been anxious. In his lectures on Psalm 118 Luther shows a similar sensibility. He admits that Satan has tempted him to think of himself as worthless; and he underlines the fact that it is even worse when the devil seeks to make the reformer glory in his own works. The reformer is open about his realisation that he can do little to maintain his faith and later bemoans “what an art it is to believe in Christ.”⁴⁹ In the same way, on Psalm 45 he uses similar self-disclosure and pastoral openness. His vulnerability allows him to demonstrate the normality of fear and anxiety in this difficult and ongoing situation, and enables him to commend Christ the more stridently — to commend him as the only powerful and effective answer to the problems that suffering believers are going through.

The spiritual kingdom

⁴⁵ LW 12.16 (WA 40.209).

⁴⁶ LW 12.16 (WA 40.209).

⁴⁷ LW 12.64, 65 (WA 40.274).

⁴⁸ LW 12.34, 35 (WA 40.233, 234). This same sense of failure is reflected later in his life in his comments on Noah in which he says, “The church is always a wall against the wrath of God. It grieves, it agonizes, it prays, it pleads, it teaches, it preaches, it admonishes, as long as the hour of judgment has not yet arrived but is impending. When it sees that these activities are of no avail, what else can it do than grieve deeply over the destruction of impenitent people?” – LW 2.51 (WA 42.298). He further asks, “What will happen when we are dead?” And again, “What will be in store for us in this insane state of a world that is growing old?” – LW 2.18 (WA 42.274); LW 2.85 (WA 42.322), respectively. See also, A. Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 213.

⁴⁹ LW 14.84 (WA 31.148); LW 14.98 (WA 13.175), respectively.

That being said, Luther still wishes to bring comfort and help where he can, so he puts the pastoral problem of suffering into a wider context — the context of the spiritual kingdom of Christ. As early as the reformer's lectures on Psalm 2 (1513) he maintains that the psalm's purpose is to point out and to underline Christ and his kingdom. Then, as late as 1535 Luther claims that the emphasis of Psalm 110, another royal psalm, is on the kingdom of Christ *in order* to "comfort ... all miserable, poor sinners and disturbed hearts" by which phrase he intends the church of his own day.⁵⁰ Clearly, the royal psalms with their stress on the spiritual kingdom, together with its King, give Luther the matrix in which he sees suffering and in which he responds to those who suffer.

Though both the temporal and the spiritual kingdoms originate with God, Luther gives eschatological priority to the spiritual kingdom over against the temporal one. The latter is primarily a holding and restraining realm; the former is a kingdom in preparation for the Last Day, a kingdom awaiting Christ's return. The reformer's exposition of Psalm 82 (his *Fürstenspiegel* — a manual of the Christian prince) clearly evidences an evaluation of the temporal kingdom which sees it as currently failing and which demonstrates an urgent "need for another kingdom."⁵¹ Over against this, the spiritual kingdom is often largely identified with the church and, though the latter is evidently not perfect, it *is* the dwelling place of Christ and the platform from which he speaks his Word, through the empowering of preachers by his Spirit. This has enormous ramifications for those who suffer: most importantly, it positions Christ, the King, within the church; and it centralises the church and its preachers in the divine program.

Christ is central to the church and its life. Because the church exemplifies the kingdom of Christ, the spiritual kingdom, believers can take heart that Christ, the King, is central to its life and existence — even in the midst of terrible suffering. In his comments on the psalmist's prayer, "Rise up, O God, judge the earth" (Ps 82:8), for example, Luther asserts that the coming of Christ and his present ministry among them are actually the divine response, the answer from a caring God to the psalmist's heartfelt cry. The psalmist

prays for another government and kingdom in which things will be better, where God's name will be honoured, His Word kept and He Himself be served; that is, the kingdom of Christ. ... This is the kingdom of Jesus Christ; this is the true God, *who has come and is judging*.⁵²

Christ is therefore pivotal to understanding the believers' lives.⁵³ Christ becomes for Luther the basis for certainty in an uncertain world.

⁵⁰ LW 13.335 (WA 41.215).

⁵¹ LW 13.72 (WA 31¹).

⁵² LW 13.72 (WA 31¹.218), emphasis added.

⁵³ The apostle Paul has something of this in mind in Colossians 3:4, "Christ, who is your life."

Luther claims that Christ is central to the church in two ways: (a) Christ is central in its preaching ministry. It is in that way that “God stands in the congregation” (Ps 82:1).⁵⁴ That, in itself, is a pastorally-charged statement for the reformer is attempting to give confidence to those who suffer for believing what is preached. The reformer asserts that the very purpose of Christ’s kingship is to preach the gospel, which he does today, says Luther, through the church’s preachers week after week, sermon after sermon.⁵⁵ The wisdom of Christ is channelled through those who open up the Word: through it Christ helps, comforts, raises up, justifies and gives life. The Word, thus preached, effectively changes and transforms peoples’ lives which, according to Luther, makes the church invincible because it is through the preaching that God accomplishes his purposes. Pastorally, this assures Luther’s audience that Christ *is* powerfully present in the church despite the opposition that they are currently facing. Especially is this true when Christ’s kingship is discerned and people gain a true perception of themselves and their situation. Through Christ preached God offers the grace to continue and eternal life.

(b) Christ is central to the church as an example of one who, himself, suffered. Luther often spells out the weakness of Christ in his human nature and experience, the apparent weakness of Christ’s incarnate life. This is particularly to be seen in his exposition of Psalm 110:7 in which he asserts that Christ was like any other man — poor, suffering, despised and a “damned human being.”⁵⁶ What Luther intends by this is to stress the paradoxical truth that Christ’s defeat is actually “the means and cause of his glorification.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, though Christ was humbled and rejected he could not be kept under death (the last enemy); he was resurrected to new life, divinely accepted and securely positioned at the right hand of God his Father. Therefore, pastorally, Luther intends for his audience to understand that in their impotence, yet humble and obedient willingness to suffer for Christ, they follow the perfect example of Christ, their King. He is the model to which they aspire; his is the faith to which they hold; his is the resurrection to which they move. This is Luther’s Christological basis for certainty.⁵⁸ This is also an urgent call for a living and strong faith in Jesus Christ — the sort of strong faith that can overcome the trials of life.

Second, the church is central to God’s purposes. Luther emphasizes the fact that Christ (who is equal to God and, therefore, who is God) has been established or appointed as King by God — it is a *fait accompli*

⁵⁴ See J. G. Silcock, “Theology and proclamation: towards a Lutheran framework for preaching,” *L TJ* 42 (2008), 131-140, particularly, 134-36, where he speaks of the sermon as “battle ground” (in which Christ battles against the forces of darkness) and as “speech act” (in which God speaks).

⁵⁵ “Christ speaks in us,” says Luther – *LW* 14.331 (*WA* 5.61).

⁵⁶ *LW* 13.345 (*WA* 41.237).

⁵⁷ *LW* 13.346 (*WA* 41.235); *LW* 11.361 (*WA* 4.229).

⁵⁸ See, particularly, on Ps. 110, though Luther speaks of this many times in his expositions of Psalms 2, 45, and 118. See W. J. Abraham, “On Making Disciples of the Lord Jesus” in C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (eds), *Marks of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 151.

within the divine plan. He possesses his kingship by right and on divine oath.⁵⁹ In his lectures on Psalm 45 (1532) Luther speaks of the church as Christ's for they have become one body. It is noticeable that he speaks of Christ as a "conquering King and a King of the miserable"⁶⁰ for the oxymoronic nature of the assertion is itself a pastoral plea to believe in the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over lives that appear to contradict that sovereignty. The King is unshakeable and undefeatable even though his people suffer, for his purposes are towards the "miserable" members of the true kingdom. At another point, Luther stresses "the glorious and unspeakable power" of Christ, a power which he freely bestows upon with the church. So when believers think of the spiritual kingdom as nothing but "a sloppy affair"⁶¹ Luther encourages them to reconsider — for Christ, he says, demonstrates his wisdom, authority and power by their opposites: foolishness, frailty and "nothing."⁶²

*Appearance and reality*⁶³

One of the persistent ways that Luther seeks to bring comfort and strength to struggling believers is by asserting the difference between the concrete life in which they now suffer and what he discerns to be the spiritual reality of the situation. This important theme significantly enters his discussion of Psalms 2, 45, 110 and 118, for example. This pastoral strategy is perhaps the most difficult to apply to people who are suffering trials and persecution for their cruciform experience appears to belie the reality that Luther wants them to grasp. However, the way he does this has two components. First, he acknowledges the experience of suffering and admits that that appears to define the church as weak, pitiful, forsaken, afflicted, "off-scourings" (1 Cor 4:13), "a beggar's kingdom."⁶⁴ Outwardly, he admits, the church is death and hell. But, second, he claims the spiritual truth that in Christ (that is, in reality) the church is the "fragrance of life" (2 Cor. 2:16), she "reigns and triumphs in Christ," he even speaks of its "glorious victory."⁶⁵ Luther, therefore, claims what he sees to be theological or spiritual reality over against temporal appearance: the true characteristics of the kingdom are hidden under their opposites.⁶⁶

If you look at the external aspect of this kingdom, everything is the opposite: where in this spiritual kingdom life is proclaimed, there, judging by appearances, is death; where glory is preached, there is the ignominy of the cross; where wisdom is preached, there is foolishness; where strength and victory are preached, there is infirmity and the cross. ... So everything you will now hear of Christ's

⁵⁹ See especially on Ps 2:6, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill." See also, on Ps 110:1, "Sit at my right hand."

⁶⁰ LW 12.229 (WA 40².514).

⁶¹ LW 13.247 (WA 41.103).

⁶² LW 13.253 (WA 41.110).

⁶³ See S. E. Schreiner, "Appearance and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare," *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003), 345–80.

⁶⁴ LW 13.250–51 (WA 41.106–107).

⁶⁵ LW 12.263 (WA 40².560).

⁶⁶ See, for example, LW 12.208 (WA 40².487).

kingdom you must understand according to the article “I believe in the holy church.” Whoever says “I believe,” does not see what the situation is like, but sees the opposite.⁶⁷

As the reformer recognizes, this inevitably sets up a crisis of belief, for those suffering affliction are asked to discern *in that affliction* its opposite. Nonetheless, the reformer claims that their experience of suffering is *not* ultimate reality, and urges those in his charge to embrace invisible things, to refuse to be overcome by circumstances and to abandon the feeling of sorrow. He calls upon them to discern what is happening, not as the world discerns it, but as God discerns it — that is, through spiritual eyes. This necessitates strong faith on their part, as well as skill and grace to discern reality, but in their daily struggles they are to behold God and Christ and to “ascend” to the Lord through the Word of his promise.⁶⁸ For Luther, this is not merely empty rhetoric, of course. On many occasions he speaks of the spiritual reality evidenced by transformed lives.

Eschatological perspective

In many ways an eschatological perspective is a natural or, rather, a theological consequence of a stress on the kingdom of Christ as much as it is a theological reaction against the worsening situation in which Luther and his followers find themselves during the 1530s. This is certainly reflected in the reformer’s reading of the royal psalms in this period. This is demonstrated, for example, by an examination of Luther’s developing understanding and application of Psalm 2. It is noticeable that, progressively, the exposition becomes more eschatological as the situation becomes increasingly confrontational, to the point at which (in 1532) the reformer calls upon his listeners to understand the eschatological moment in which they live. This moment can be primarily discerned through the antagonism between the church and its opponents — an antagonism that reminds Luther of Jesus’ sayings concerning the strong man in Matthew 12:29 — and, also, through the Scriptures themselves. Pastorally, Luther wants believers to be aware of the times in which they live. He requires them to discern “the latter days,” together with the enmity of Satan, himself. This allows them to make some sense of their own experiences of suffering, of course. He also calls upon them to pray for strength and grace. By defining the present moment in this way Luther is able to assert the certainty of Christ’s coming victory (in which they are involved) together with the certainty of judgement. In his sermon on the psalm’s words, “The Lord ... will shatter the kings on the day of his wrath” (Ps 110:5), Luther makes the following comment.

There you learn what the power and might of His right hand is and how serious He is about His intention to use it against them. ... *It only seems*, while they are busy raging against Christendom,

⁶⁷ LW 12.204 (WA 40².482).

⁶⁸ See, for example, LW 12.25–26 (WA 40.222). In this context C. A. Aurelius, “Luther on the Psalter” in T. J. Wengert (ed.), *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections in Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 237, says, “To the suffering person the situation appears no longer as helpless because the Word differs from what the person sees and feels and from which he or she draws conclusions. The Word *contradicts and rejects the experienced reality*,” original emphasis.

that they have succeeded in crushing it; and *they only appear* to sit firmly and strongly in their places, where no one is able to resist them or to weaken their power. But God says no! He is not that weak and powerless! He has such power over them that when He begins to take them on, they will be not merely beaten or overthrown but shattered and smashed as a potter's vessel is dashed to pieces (Ps 2:9). Together with their lands and people, they will lie in dust and ashes and never arise again.⁶⁹

Later, he uses a graphic image twice in close proximity to underline the gravity of his thought: "It will be like a massive defeat in a huge battle," he says, "where the field is full of corpses."⁷⁰ The rhetorical language of conquest makes victory seem assured.

Rigorous application

Though some of Luther's pastoral advice has been underlined in the previous section, here I want to emphasize briefly that the reformer does not want suffering believers to have what we might term a "victim mentality," to be intimidated into a depressed inactivity or lethargy. Though it would have been understandable for them to suffer passively, for the suffering in its diverse manifestations must have worn them down and tempted them to give up altogether, Luther urges them to work at a counter reaction, to apply all their energy at persevering in their faith and their walk with Christ.⁷¹ As a pastor he seeks to give his hearers an agenda that was specific and immediate, something *to do*. Luther encourages them to apply the gospel to their own lives. For example, he calls upon believers to realise that cross and persecution are inherently part of the Christian journey,⁷² to be ready to make sacrifices, not to let Satan get a grip, to be obedient — particularly within their specific vocation — to fix their hope on spiritual things (not upon temporal things), to believe the divine promises, to see and discern the works of God, to focus on reigning with Christ, to pray the royal psalms,⁷³ to hear the Word of God and to listen to Christ in it, to rejoice in tribulation, to be "ready to yield ... to suffering,"⁷⁴ to be patient, and to persevere. The infinitives are very significant, of course. They speak of action and imperative urgency in Luther's application.

⁶⁹ LW 13.338 (WA 41.220), emphasis added. This idea becomes a refrain in his sermon. See, for example, LW 13.338 (WA 41.221); LW 13.340 (WA 41.223); LW 13.341 (WA 41.225).

⁷⁰ LW 13.342 (WA 41.226). He uses almost the same words again, LW 13.342 (WA 41.227).

⁷¹ See, for example, LW 12.271 (WA².571).

⁷² LW 12.198 (WA 40².473). J. C. Clark, "Martin Luther's View of Cross-bearing," *BibSac* 163 (2006), 337, speaks appropriately of this issue (quoting internally from LW 51.198): "The reformer considered any instance in which Christians attempt to invoke Christ's suffering to ensure their own exemption from suffering as an occasion wherein both the Cross and the Christian life are denatured. 'For God has appointed that we should not only believe in the crucified Christ,' argued Luther, 'but also be crucified with him.' ... For Luther, then, cross-bearing is intrinsic to the Christian life." See also, J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1977), 360–61, who claims that "Participation in the apostolic mission of Christ ... leads inescapably into tribulation, contradiction and suffering" (361).

⁷³ See Pattison, *Poverty in the Theology of John Calvin*, 97.

⁷⁴ LW 13.279 (WA 41.138).

But mostly, the reformer centres his application on faith in Christ in the midst of his spiritual kingdom. He urges those who listen to grasp hold and to trust in Jesus Christ,⁷⁵ to put their confidence in him alone, to have a strong faith during difficult days. Faith, he claims, is not based on knowledge, human reason or what the senses discern. Rather, faith is a gift of God the Holy Spirit to those who look only to Christ, their King, for their security here and in eternity.⁷⁶ It comes through the faithful preaching of the Word, and through the creative activity of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, he asks from those with faith for a different level of perception in which everything is radically redefined by Christ and his kingdom.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Luther wants to comfort those who suffer trials and affliction. As a pastor he realises that men and women can only comfort in a very limited manner — he speaks of this as “miserable and uncertain comfort.” The sobering reason for this is that people die. Though they mean well their comfort is short-lived and limited because they, themselves, need the comfort that they seek to give to others. Therefore, Luther’s pastoral concern is to comfort suffering believers with the comfort that is uniquely a gospel-gift of God.⁷⁷ That comfort derives from divine grace that stems from faith in Christ through the Word of God.⁷⁸ Therefore, as we have seen, Luther is able to bring pastoral comfort and advice through a reading of the royal psalms that, for him, clearly display Christ in his kingly authority and power.⁷⁹ It is noticeable, then, that in the face of suffering and human inadequacy Luther turns to Christ.

In his interesting, short essay on “Martin Luther as Human Being,” J. McNutt states that

To seek to learn from Luther, to have him “speak” today, does not necessarily mean imposing a present day agenda on him, or ripping him out of his time so as to serve us in ours. It means allowing him to witness from the distance of his day and age.⁸⁰

Through his interpretation of the royal psalms Luther continually seeks to interpret what he sees and experiences; he deals with a very real human condition — that of suffering, persecution and

⁷⁵ See M. Mikoteit, “Dankbarkeit als Eigenschaft des Glaubens bei Luther” in C. Peters and J. Kampmann (eds), *Fides et Pietas* (Münster: Lit. Verlag, 2003), 43–55, who demonstrates from Luther’s reading of Psalms 51 and 122 (third series) that faith is a grasping hold of Christ with gratitude towards God.

⁷⁶ See R. C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 61–62.

⁷⁷ See, for example, LW 14.57 (WA 31.90). P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Augsburg: Fortress, 1977), 33, states that, for Luther, “Faith is not a human performance but a human deed of hearing and obeying initiated by God himself through the gospel.”

⁷⁸ Aurelius, “Luther on the Psalter,” 238, says that “Luther is intentionally concerned with enabling the people to live in and from the Word.” Leroux, *Martin Luther as Comforter*, 7, says, “The author of our consolation — that is, its source — is the Scriptures.” That is the reason for the repeated emphasis on the preaching and teaching of the Word.

⁷⁹ See D. Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 133.

⁸⁰ J. McNutt, “Martin Luther as Human Being: Reflections from a Distance,” *Ch* 108 (1994), 265–70; here at 266.

hardship. Mark Thompson helpfully states that “Struggle is a sign of life; indeed it is a sign of the genuine intersection of the work of God and the brokenness or hostility of the world.”⁸¹ Martin Luther appears to be aware of that. His pastoral concern is to bring the “work of God” as this is evidenced in and through Christ and his kingdom (as Luther interprets the royal psalms) to bear upon the cruciform existence of believers in his day.

In summing up Luther’s legacy Timothy George, claims that his true legacy “does not lie in the saintliness of his life”, nor upon “his vast accomplishments as a reformer and theologian,” but in “his spiritual insight into the gracious character of God in Jesus Christ, the God who loves us and sustains us unto death, and again unto life.”⁸² In this respect, Luther is clearly a pastor who seeks to comfort, to encourage, to strengthen God’s people in their daily suffering and one of the ways he attempts that, as we have seen, is through rigorous application of the royal psalms into their fragile and difficult lives — presenting the power, authority and grace of Christ and his kingdom to those who experience distress and weakness in this life.

⁸¹ Thompson, “Luther on Despair,” 64.

⁸² T. George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 106.