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Luther's Media for Pastoral Education

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Abstract: Luther's revolutionary placing of the proclamation of God's Word at the center of the life of the church called for changes in the understanding of the pastoral office and of preparation for the pastorate. Because thousands of parish priests could not retool at universities, Luther and his Wittenberg colleagues launched programs of continuing education and distance learning through the media of their time, printed materials, chiefly postils and commentaries, to aid parish priests to become proclaiming pastors. Today Lutherans throughout the world are using the latest in media blessings to convey the biblical message and to train local pastors for people on six continents.

Luther's Redefinition of Being Christian

Martin Luther's transformation of the definition of what it means to be a Christian also altered his understanding of the office of pastor, and with it what was necessary as preparation for exercising that office. Luther grew up with an understanding of being Christian that centered on the performance of the proper ritual by the village's sacred, divinely connected contact person, the priest. Although he undoubtedly often heard the word *grace*, he clearly got the message that the connection between God and little Martin depended on Martin's performance of certain activities assigned to the Creator's human creature. First of all religious activities were the sacred works. Luther's instructors at the university reinforced that image of being a Christian. Luther's own biblical studies convinced him that the fundamental direction in the relationship between God and sinners is not from us to God but from God to us. God approaches us as the Creator who spoke the universe into existence. His Word creates reality. On the basis of His action as the Word made flesh, He has come to change individual human histories and the history of His collected people. He did so as Jesus



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of Nazareth, dying and rising to restore sinners to being children of God. His Word of absolution, from Baptism on throughout life, creates the reality of this forgiven child of God.¹

That profound alteration in the understanding of what it is to be Christian required a significant shift in the definition of the pastoral office. Luther believed firmly in the supporting role of liturgy and other ritual practices as tools of reinforcing the proclamation of God's message of law and gospel for His people. He believed firmly that the priesthood of all the baptized must have leadership, the leadership of a pastor, a preacher and *Seelsorger*. But he no longer depicted the pastor as primarily a priest who goes to God and who comes back from God to deliver the goods. All the baptized exercised those assignments from God. The pastor was the public proclaimer of the Word. That required a corps of shepherds who knew God's Word and who were dedicated to bringing people to repentance and to giving them the forgiveness of sins, in order that they might bring His love to others.

The whole people of God needed to know God's Word, so when he had the opportunity—at the Wartburg in 1521 and 1522—Luther translated the New Testament for those who could read it to those who could not. His New Testament translation for the people of the German-speaking lands could not be read by the roughly 90 percent of the population—who could not read. But it could be read by those in villages and in the households of artisan and merchant families in the town and read to others—and it was.

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Luther's Program for Distance Learning and Continuing Education

Simultaneously, Luther recognized the need for continuing education for the hundreds of parish priests whose education had been minimal. Most parish priests could read and write by 1500, but relatively few had any formal study at the university. Even fewer had heard lectures in theology. When they had, these lectures were more likely to have treated Peter Lombard's *Sententiae* rather than a book of the Bible. Priests had to say the liturgy of the mass; they had not had to preach on a regular basis.

Luther therefore set about to prepare a program for continuing education while still at the Wartburg. By 1521 he had become convinced of the utility of a new medium for educating learners who could not come to the university lecture hall. His first attempts in 1516 and 1517 to use the printing press to spread his ideas had not evoked much reaction. No theologian had discovered the potential of publishing. Luther brought about a revolution in public communication and discourse in the next few years. The publication of the Ninety-five Theses on Indulgences in late 1517 by four printers outside Wittenberg had not earned spectacular sales, but it did bring his name

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to the attention of a wide audience. Luther tried again to use the printed word with his German explanation of his concerns in the Ninety-five Theses, his *Sermon on Indulgence and Grace* of early 1518. Sales were stunning.² During the course of 1519 and 1520, Luther had learned to master the art of reaching large audiences through print. That launched what *The Economist* labeled in its December 2011 issue Luther's "going viral," the first major public relations event in European history.³

Luther faced formidable challenges to his call for reform, including the disposition of the clergy. Most parish priests had had little theological education and had also been raised with the medieval definition of being Christian. In 1529, as he introduced his Small Catechism to the public, Luther noted and bemoaned the miserable state of the knowledge of the clergy for the task of shepherding God's people. "Unfortunately, many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers."⁴ (*Teaching* was a word that the Wittenberg theologians used for all forms of conveying God's Word to others, including preaching.) A year later, in his revised preface to the Large Catechism, Luther sharply criticized those who did not take advantage of resources at hand, called them "better suited to be swineherds and keepers of dogs than guardians of souls and pastors."⁵ It was not until the nineteenth century that Lutheran churches attained for most of their pastorates the level of pastoral education that Luther and Melancthon envisioned.⁶ Luther recognized the desperate need for tools to refit these priests, who under no circumstances could return to classroom learning, for evangelical proclamation and pastoral care.

Luther began working on this effort before he set himself in organized fashion to the task of translating the New Testament.⁷ He fashioned his initial remedy for the dire situation among parish priests by appropriating the medieval genre of the postil.⁸ This genre had evolved into a collection of model sermons on the pericopal lessons for the Sundays and festivals of the church year over two hundred years. The term was used for biblical commentary, for instance, in earlier times, most famously for the comment of the Parisian Franciscan Nicolas of Lyra (c. 1270–1340), whose work Luther used—and sometimes criticized—in his own lectures. Those late medieval preachers who could read had at their disposal some postils, which Luther criticized in his preface to the Large Catechism because he knew that they too often fulfilled the purpose that their titles announced: *Sermons that Preach Themselves, Sleep Soundly* [because the author had the next day's sermon already prepared for him in the book], and *Be Prepared*.⁹ Luther had a different goal in mind. He knew that pastors of his time needed models of a different kind of preaching—different from his own initial preaching in his Augustinian cloister, which had emphasized devotion to the saints and performance of good works.¹⁰ His curriculum was simple. It aimed at cultivating proper understanding of the biblical message and also an effective method for delivering that message. It cultivated the method by providing concrete instructions and also a model for good sermons. Benjamin Mayes points out that Luther fashioned his postils in two ways: some were long explanations of the text, "most far too long to

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be preached, even by sixteenth-century standards.” Later, the postils contained sermons that Luther had preached, recorded, and then edited by students who took careful notes on what he actually was saying from the pulpit.¹¹

Luther began his instruction on how to be a proclaiming pastor with “a brief instruction on what to look for and expect in the gospels,” a method of interpreting the text for those priests who wished to become evangelical preachers.¹² It aimed to deconstruct medieval ideas about the very definition of the word *gospel* and return readers to the biblical understanding of their basic task, sharing the story of Jesus Christ, “how he is the Son of God and became man for us, that he died and was raised, that he has been established as Lord over all things.”¹³ Out of this witness from the evangelists, Paul “spins out” the message of Jesus’ dying for our sins and rising for our justification. Luther warned against making Christ into a new Moses, further leading readers away from their medieval presuppositions. They were to “grasp Christ, his words, works, and sufferings, in a twofold manner.”¹⁴ Here Luther adapted the medieval distinction of Christ as *sacramentum et exemplum*, building on something with which many were familiar, recrafting it by emphasizing that “before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own.”¹⁵

Much of the success of Luther’s call for reform arose from those who heard him and his colleagues teach and preach in Wittenberg.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the phenomenal, rapid spread of his message depended also on the printed message.¹⁷ Luther and his printers designed the print media for a broad audience.¹⁸ The two most popular of his works were his catechisms and his postils.¹⁹ The nature of the need for this educational program for preachers changed over the course of the sixteenth century, but the need for training those already in pastoral service did not diminish. The university classroom was one method of meeting that need; the carefully conceived use of the new media techniques was equally important.

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In the Wake of Luther’s Postils

Luther’s concern for cultivating the pastoral skills, particularly in preaching, was shared by his Wittenberg colleagues. They produced what Timothy Wengert has called “the Wittenberg commentary”—as today the Concordia Commentary series or the Anchor Bible series offer readers various levels of preparation material for teaching God’s message. Wengert points out that in the years leading up to late 1524 there

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appeared in print what seems to be “a coordinated effort by Luther, Melanchthon and Spalatin to provide the theologians and clerics of the Empire with an appropriate ‘scaffold’ for interpreting the New Testament.”²⁰ Melanchthon treated Matthew and John; a “guest instructor” in Wittenberg, Franz Lambert, commented on Luke; Justus Jonas on Acts; Melanchthon on Romans; Luther on Galatians; Bugenhagen on the epistles from Ephesians to Hebrews. Johannes Oecolampadius, later an opponent of Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper, was still within the Wittenberg circle, and he published a commentary on 1 John at this time. Luther’s own sermons on 1 and 2 Peter and Jude appeared a few years later.²¹ Johannes Petreius, who printed Johannes Bugenhagen’s treatment of Paul’s letters, labeled this work an “index” rather than a “commentary,” that is, it was designed to provide the framework for understanding and using Paul’s thought for the reader’s own teaching.²² It provided a handbook for learning to interpret the Scriptures for good teaching.

In addition, Melanchthon’s treatment of the fundamental topics of Christian doctrine in his *Commonplaces*, which he first conceived as a handbook for reading Romans and proclaiming its message, served a similar purpose. He gathered relevant materials under the topics he believed foundational for good biblical teaching, gathered into an outline that reflected not the traditional organization of the teaching of the church by Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* but rather Luther’s distinction of law and gospel.²³ This handbook aimed at the same goal of improving skills of some in pastoral ministry and providing others with their initiation into how to serve as a minister of the gospel. He did so by a different route than the postil texts which directly modeled sermons. The *Loci communes* taught those who could not come to Wittenberg’s lecture halls how to teach the faith.

The use of the postil exploded in the wake of Luther’s continuing production of sermons that modeled how to preach. The need to aid the many pastors with less formal education did not diminish.²⁴ Some included specific instructions on how to preach; in these continuing education programs, homiletical coaching continued to play a large role.²⁵

Controversy accompanied the production of postils in the later sixteenth century over the question of whether such helps should be provided to parish pastors. Some argued that pastors should not depend on others but be able to compose their own sermons independently. In editing the sermons of the Wittenberg professor Paul Eber (1511–1569) into a postil, his disciple Johannes Cellarius argued that the resources at hand for even pastors in towns, to say nothing of those in the villages, were meagre at best. Guidance from those versed in Scripture would certainly make the ministry of these whose resources were minimal more edifying. Cellarius countered objections by observing that many in both town and village never have access to the texts of the learned Fathers. Self-directed learning provided by the postils would prevent them from wandering off into their own speculation about texts they could not master.

Thanksgiving to God for those who teach us, as Paul listed them in Ephesians 4:11, should bring us to use the wisdom of others in such forms, according to Cellarius.²⁶ His viewpoint won the day. The practice of aiding Lutheran pastors with various levels of formal education continued throughout the seventeenth century and beyond.

For Luther's Heirs

Luther's use of his new educational tool of print for cultivating pastors who were already in office and those who were being ordained with little or no formal university education to meet the need of the spreading Reformation provides a model for us today. My own recent experience has demonstrated how electronic means can marshal human and print resources to educate those entrusted with pastoral tasks of leadership in local congregations around the world. Both those with the equivalent of our seminary education who need continuing instruction—as we all do—and those just entering into the public service of the Word can benefit from the household of faith in other places. A long-time friend, Dr. Samuel Meshack, who was principal of Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai when the College invited me to teach there a decade and more ago, is now pro-chancellor at Martin Luther Christian University in Shilong, Meghalaya state, in India's Northeast. When the University began online instruction in the wake of the outset of the Corona virus pandemic, Dr. Meshack invited me to offer a fourteen-week semester lecture course on the Lutheran Confessions. Within days, thirty-two pastors, laypeople, and theological students had enrolled. They treated me to an exciting new look at the Book of Concord as we read it together and discussed its significance for ministry in India today. As always in my encounters with those from outside North America, they taught me more than I taught them.

Such possibilities have lain on our agenda for some time. Over the years, instructors on another continent have invited me for one-time guest appearances via Skype (or some other media service) to talk with their seminars across the Atlantic. But in 2020 the Lord has awakened us to the potential for this relatively new instrument of instruction to increase our ability to share insights at a distance. Invitations from Norway, Sweden, Russia, and India to participate in conferences are making this possible in 2020 for me.

As one crisis after another shakes confidence around the world in the way things have been going, the harvest to which the Lord calls us (Mt 9:37–38; Lk 10:2; Jn 4:35–38) is getting riper and riper. The urgency, as He observed already two thousand years ago, for the sending of those who can give witness to Him rises up to challenge us with increasing earnestness (Rom 10:8–17). To aid us who were insufficient in reaching across national boundaries to other parts of the world—despite very commendable efforts throughout Lutheran history—the Lord has enabled others to come to our nation. Lifting up leaders to gather those who desperately need a new spiritual

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homeland as well as an earthly place to settle is a pressing and vital imperative in many of our congregations. Marshalling the new electronic gifts that the Creator has plopped into our hands is enabling us to cooperate in teaching the faith and giving witness to the Lord of the harvest.

As Luther imaginatively put the newest medium that God provided in his day to use with great effectiveness, so the Lord who calls and sends is asking on us to raise up the leaders for God's people. These shepherd-proclaimers are sorely needed in this time people around the world face crises of great proportions in every land. Luther and his colleagues illustrate that Lutherans hold in tension the ideal of a well-educated public ministry with the realities of the needs of the church for pastoral leadership in every circumstance. The judgment of God rests upon those who pass up what the Lord offers for that most important task of giving witness to Jesus Christ among all nations.

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Endnotes

¹ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God. The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–6, 35–42.

² Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's 95 Theses with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), xl–xliii, 37–39.

³ “How Luther went viral,” (December 17, 2011), <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2011/12/17/how-luther-went-viral>.

⁴ Irene Dingel, ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014) [henceforth BSELK], 852/853; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [henceforth BC], 347.

⁵ BSELK 914/915; BC 379.

⁶ Luise Schorn-Schutte, *Evangelische Geistlichkeit in der Frühneuzeit. Deren Anteil an der Entfaltung frühmoderner Staatlichkeit und Gesellschaft* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 162–199, esp. 191–192; Thomas Kaufmann, “The Clergy and the Theological Culture of the Age: The Education of Lutheran Pastors in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Protestant Clergy of Early Modern Europe*, ed. C. Scott Dixon and Luise Schorn-Schütte (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 120–136.

⁷ Cf. the excellent introduction to the postils by Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Introduction to the Luther-Cruciger *Church Postil* (1540–1544),” *Luther's Works* 75 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2013), xiii–xxxii.

⁸ John M. Frymire, *The Primacy of the Postils. Catholics, Protestants, and the Dissemination of Ideas in Early Modern Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁹ BSELK 914/915; BC 379.

¹⁰ Elmer Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and Their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935).

¹¹ Mayes, “Introduction,” xxv. Mayes surveys the development of several editions of the postils.

¹² *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993) [henceforth WA], 10,1,1: 8–18, *Luther’s Works 35* (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958–1986) [henceforth LW], 117–124.

¹³ LW 35, 118.

¹⁴ LW 35, 119.

¹⁵ WA 10,1,1: 11,1–12,3; LW 35:118–119. See Norman Nagel, “*Sacramentum et Exemplum* in Luther’s Understanding of Christ,” in *Luther for an Ecumenical Age*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (Saint Louis, Concordia, 1967), 172–199.

¹⁶ Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2–3, 11.

¹⁷ Edwards, *Printing*, 14–28.

¹⁸ On the teamwork of Luther and his printers, see Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

¹⁹ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther as Prophet, Teacher, and Hero. Images of the Reformer, 1520–1620* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 156–157.

²⁰ Timothy Wengert, *Philip Melancthon’s Annotations in Johannem in Relation to Its Predecessors and Contemporaries* (Geneva: Droz, 1987), 31, cf. 31–42.

²¹ Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word*, 245–246.

²² *Annotationes . . . in decem Epistolas Pauli . . .* (Nuremberg: Johannes Petreius, 1524), a1b.

²³ *Melancthon’s Werke in Auswahl* [Studien-Ausgabe], 6 vols. ed. Robert Stupperich (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1951–1975), 2,1:1–163; *Commonplaces. Loci Communes 1521*, trans. Christian Preus (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2014).

²⁴ Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word*, 398–404.

²⁵ Kolb, *Luther and the Enduring Word*, 331–335. Such instructions occurred also in seventeenth century postils, cf. Robert Kolb, “‘A Time of Shadows and Signs’. Johann Gerhard’s Use of the Old Testament in Early Homiletical and Devotional Writings,” in Markus Friedrich, Sascha Salatowsky, Luise Schorn-Schütte, eds., *Konfession, Politik und Gelehrsamkeit: Der Jenaer Theologe Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) im Kontext seiner Zeit* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2016), 149–151 (147–162).

²⁶ Paul Eber, *Postilla/ Das ist/Auſlegung der Sonntags vnd fu[e]rnehmsten Fest Euangelien durch das ganze Jar. . . .*, ed. Johannes Cellarius (Frankfurt/Main 1578), :(1a-):(4b).