

JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 55

JUNE 2015

NUMBER 2

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Trinity Sunday Sermon — John 3:1-17

Our God is so gracious there are some things He cannot do.

Frank Gantt

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

In the children’s spiritual song “*My God Is So Great*” children are taught to acknowledge how there is no problem so great that our God cannot overcome it. He is “*so great, so strong, and so mighty—there’s nothing my God cannot do.*” This truth is based on very clear passages of the Bible, such as the angel’s response to Mary, who wondered how she, a virgin, would ever conceive and bear a son in her virginity. “How?” she asked; “*For with God, nothing shall be impossible*” was the reply. Jesus said the same thing but in the opposite way when speaking to His disciples about it being difficult for the rich person to enter the kingdom of God. They in great astonishment had said, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus replied: “*With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible*” (Matt. 19:23-26 ESV).

We rightly take great comfort in this truth when loved ones are dying of some incurable disease or when we ourselves are stricken by some great tragedy. It gives hope to Christian parents who are distraught at the waywardness of one of their children. It sets us at ease when calamities, storms, or dangers are all around us. “Our God is so great, so strong, and so mighty, there’s nothing our God cannot do.”

Today, on this festival of Trinity Sunday [May 31, 2015], as we ponder the great mystery of the triune God—who is three distinct Persons, each equally and fully God, and yet one divine essence that cannot be divided, so that there is but only one God—we also will learn that our God is so gracious there are some things our God cannot do. We keep that thought in mind as we read our text from John 3:1-17 (English Standard Version):

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no

one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

1. In case you are wondering, you heard me correctly. Our God is so gracious there are some things our God *cannot* do. That seems like a contradiction, doesn't it? How can nothing be impossible for God and yet some things not be possible for God? Admittedly, it's a mystery in the biblical sense, like the doctrine of the Trinity; yet both truths are indeed taught in God's Word. For example, in Hebrews 6:18 we are told: *It is not possible for God to lie.* Or again, in 2 Timothy 2:13 we read, *“If we are faithless, He is faithful; He cannot deny Himself.”* Or once more, in James 1:13 it is said in the passive that *“God cannot be tempted by evil.”* God is not able to do or be those things because He is holy, holy, holy, as we heard in our Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 6:1-8). So the Bible has established there are some things that God cannot do, even though with God all things are possible.

In our sermon text we find that there are other things that God cannot do, and He cannot do them because He is *gracious*—that is, He is perfectly loving toward us sinners. The first thing we learn that God cannot do because He is gracious is to force sinners into His kingdom. Jesus told Nicodemus in our text: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”* After Nicodemus expressed his confusion, Jesus repeated the truth, adding this clarification: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

What Jesus is essentially saying is that as each and every person comes into the world, not one is fit for God's kingdom. From our conception we begin life in sin and are therefore in constant rebellion and enmity against God. The only way for any sinner to be brought into God's kingdom is for God Himself to bring about what the Bible refers to as a new birth. That new birth occurs whenever the Holy Spirit works a miracle of repentance and faith in the heart of the sinner. He accomplishes this miracle through the Word of God, whether spoken to the ears and heart or applied to the person with the earthly element of water—what we know as the Sacrament of Baptism. The result of that new birth is that the individual sinner becomes a believer in Jesus Christ as his Savior from sin, and thereby he also becomes a citizen and heir of the kingdom of God.

Sometimes we might wonder: Why did God choose to do things this way? Why didn't He just decide to bring all people to heaven? Wouldn't that be the loving thing to do? And the answer to that question is No. In love God certainly does desire that all people are saved. The Scriptures teach as much in several places. What God cannot do, however, because He is gracious, is to drag people, kicking and screaming, into His kingdom. The kingdom of God at work in this world is not about force and compulsion; it's about grace, even as Jesus lamented His own people rejecting Him in Matthew 23: *“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”* His desire was to have them all as His disciples, but He did

not come to take them all captive and force them into subjection. He came to call them—through the Word and through Baptism—into a relationship of peace with God through the forgiveness of their sins received by faith in Him.

God still desires the salvation of all people, but He does not force anyone to believe in Jesus. Because He is gracious, God simply cannot force the unregenerate into His kingdom. Instead, by His grace at work through the means of grace, He accomplishes a change in the heart, mind, and will of the sinner so that the sinner now clings to Jesus in faith, receiving that forgiveness which alone gives a person entry and access to the kingdom of God. God's kingdom thus includes all such believing citizens, who also by grace inherit eternal life.

2. The second thing that our God cannot do, again because He is so gracious, is to speak anything except what He knows and sees. He cannot lie to us about sin and death or about how we may be saved from that. Our text continues:

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony."

In our day pastors all over the nation are perplexed at what to do about the growing apathy in our society in regards to spiritual matters. I've heard recently that the number of people in our nation who confess to be Christians has dropped by almost 8 percentage points in the last ten years. Fewer and fewer people desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and fewer and fewer who call themselves His disciples actually bother to learn from Him through the hearing of His Word.

One way that some denominations attempt to combat this trend is through something known as "Gospel reductionism." What is Gospel reductionism? It sounds bad, right? Well, it's much worse than one may think. Gospel reductionism is the teaching that since God is love and desires all people to be saved, He doesn't really care whether or not a person believes in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. He doesn't even care if they acknowledge Him, the Triune God, to be the true God. He only cares that people are faithful to whatever they have chosen to believe, and He will accept them into heaven, no matter what. In this reduction of the Gospel—which is actually a denial of the Gospel—there is no need for repentance and therefore no need to talk about sin, death, or hell. People don't want to go to a church that talks about such things. They only want to hear that everything is just fine between them and God.

You know, the people of Jesus' day also had a problem with apathy toward spiritual matters. They didn't want to hear that they needed to repent of their sins or that they needed Jesus to die for their sins on the cross. They didn't like Jesus pointing out their sins and speaking about the condemnation of death and hell. They especially didn't like Him saying that He would give His life for the life of the world, as the atonement for all sin. If the theologians of our day are right, then Jesus did it all wrong. He could have gained more followers if He would have just told them that God loves them just the way they were.

Perhaps, one may suppose, but God is too gracious for such nonsense. He is so gracious that He cannot speak except what He sees and knows. He cannot lie to us about how bad our situation is because of the sin within us, nor can He lie about how the forgiveness of sins is obtained. He sees our sin and He knows how we can be saved. He sees that sin of every kind is a barrier that stands between mankind and Him. He knows that impenitence in regards to sin goes hand in hand with rejecting the Gospel, just like a person who denies his sickness will refuse the treatment that can make him better. God sees the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross as the full payment and cure for all sin. He knows that those, and only those, who trust in Christ—for the promise of the Gospel can only be received by faith—will inherit the kingdom of God. Because He is gracious, He tells us what He sees and knows so that we turn from our sin in true sorrow and find salvation in Christ, who bore all our sins on the cross. More people might start coming to church if God had told us there are no eternal consequences for sin, but such a lie would lead us all straight into hell—which certainly means that it wouldn't be a loving thing for God to say. Our God is so gracious He cannot speak except what He sees and knows.

3. Finally, our God is so gracious that He cannot abandon the world to hell. In the last four verses of our text Jesus says:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Granted, these words specifically tell us what God did without any reference to what He could not do. However, we should understand exactly why God did what He did when He sent His Son to die on the cross for our sins. Every once in a while, in an attempt to draw a distinction between God’s righteous justice and God’s grace, a person might say something along these lines: God could have left us all to die in our sins. He could have waited until we arrived at Judgment Day and then send us all straight to hell. Or the claim is made that because He is holy, He could have just condemned the whole world.

Yet what does it mean that God is holy? It means that He is completely without even the slightest hint of sin in all His thoughts, all His words, and all His actions. Now consider what sin is. Sin is thinking and acting without love. Sin doesn’t care about the well-being of others or the will of God. Sin is always contrary to God’s nature, and God cannot go against His own nature. In other words, God is the holy, holy, holy Lord of hosts precisely because He is gracious, always doing and saying what is loving. In Him both the Law and the Gospel find perfect harmony inasmuch as He never sins and always does what is gracious and loving. Or to put it another way, God is so gracious that He cannot just abandon the whole world to hell. It simply wouldn’t be the holy, that is, the loving thing to do.

So what did He do? He loved us. And how did He love us? He sent His only-begotten Son into the world to bear the punishment for our sins and for all sins on the cross, to bleed and to die, to be put to grief by God Himself in the place of every sinner that has ever come or will come into the world. He couldn’t stand by and watch us all spend eternity in hell. He did what love called for, what His own gracious nature determined was the loving thing to do—He gave us a perfect substitute.

Yet He did more than that. It wasn’t enough for Jesus to take away our sin. Remember, such forgiveness can only be received individually by faith. And since God cannot drag us into His kingdom kicking and screaming against Him, He sent His Holy Spirit to work faith in our sinful hearts through the preaching of the cross of Christ. Now, as people who believe in Jesus as our Savior, we have entered into the kingdom of God. God even preserves our faith so that we will not perish but have eternal life—all because God cannot just abandon the world, you and me included, to the judgment of hell.

See what an amazing thing it is that our God is so gracious there are some things He cannot do! It’s a paradox, to be sure, that He is so great, so strong, and so mighty there is nothing our God cannot accomplish, while at the same time He is so gracious there are also some things He cannot do. Rather than walk away confounded by this great mystery, let us take refuge in the fact that our God is so much more than what you and I can possibly comprehend. Take refuge in that because you need Him to take care of the problems that you cannot possibly solve—especially the problem of sin and death! In His power and might He is ever able to protect you, to heal you, and to provide for you in every situation because there is nothing your God cannot do. In His steadfast love toward you in Christ Jesus, He can and does save you, forgive you, and grant you eternal life—yes, also because there are some things your God in His grace cannot do. Amen!

A Study of John 3:5-6

Michael Roehl

*** The following essay was first presented to the CLC West Central Pastoral Conference that met in September of 2014. It was not written then, nor is it presented here, as a comprehensive study of the verses noted in the title. The scope of its content is narrowly defined in the writer’s introduction below. Unless indicated otherwise, passages quoted below are from the English Standard Version.**

The section under study John 3:1-8

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Introduction

The topic of this essay was originally assigned in the form of the this question: "A Study of John 3:5-6—If being born of 'water and the Spirit' is a reference to Holy Baptism, does Jesus then require baptism?" To ward off an ill-advised foray into the hypothetical, we shall assume that the original essay title embraces two questions, the first of which was begged or assumed in order to ask or address the second. The first question that needs to be explored, then, is this: *Is Jesus referring to baptism in John 3:5-6? Only if the answer to that is yes should the second question then be relevant: If Jesus is referring to baptism, does He thereby also require baptism of every person in order to be saved?*

The first question obviously has to be explored and answered first, since if Jesus is *not* referring to baptism in this section, the second question is moot. In fact, one of the challenges in understanding this section is to avoid the temptation to assume a negative answer to the *second* question (i.e., No, Jesus does not require baptism in order to be saved) and to use that assumption to guide or dictate our answer to the first question. In other words, since no one among us believes that baptism is absolutely necessary for salvation, the natural tendency would be to try to explain how Jesus is *not* referring to baptism in this section. Obviously that is the sort of eisegesis that we want to avoid.

One reason why this section has received so much attention down through the ages is the fact that at least three interpretations of what Jesus meant by "*unless one is born of water*" appear to be grammatically and contextually possible. All three can also be understood in such a way that they do not conflict with any other doctrine set forth in the Scriptures.

Obviously this may create a certain tension for the parish pastor, especially one who is taught that in doing exegesis on any given text, he must arrive at a proper understanding of the Spirit-intended meaning and then present the Word accordingly. Many are not comfortable with such a mandate. While we would all agree with the principle that the "literal sense is one," just what that one literal sense or meaning of a given passage is cannot always be decisively identified. We certainly cannot formulate doctrine based on a passage that can be understood in more than one way. It is our intention, therefore, first to discuss the pros and cons of each of three possible understandings of "*born of water*" and then to apply the fruit of our study to the crux or main focus of this section that is contained in the second question: *Is Jesus here teaching that baptism is necessary for salvation?*

Three potential answers to the first question

The first question, again, is this: *To what was Jesus referring when He spoke of being "born of water"?* Three explanations as to what Jesus meant by "*born of water*" are grammatically and contextually possible. These are:

- 1) *Physical birth*, where "water" refers to a mother's amniotic fluid;
- 2) *Baptism*, in which "water" would obviously refer to the earthly element in the sacrament;
- 3) "Water" understood in the sense of the *Word or the means by which God's grace is conveyed*.

Grammar and lexical notes

Verse 3 γεννηθῆ ἄνωθεν

γεννηθῆ subjunctive aorist passive 3rd singular of γεννάω: *to bear, to beget*.

ἄνωθεν BDAG lexicon has the following definitions and glosses:

- 1) **In extension from a source that is above**, *from above*, esp. heaven Mark 15:38; John 19:23; James 3:15; 2) From a point of time marking the beginning of something, *from the beginning* Luke 1:3; 3) For a relatively long period in the past, *for a long time* Acts 26:5; 4) At a subsequent point of time involving repetition, *again, anew* Galatians 4:9.

In John 3:3, 7 ἄνωθεν “is purposely ambiguous and means both *again* and *from above*” (BAG).¹

Note that ἄνωθεν can mean either “from above” or “again.” Nicodemus clearly takes it as born “again” rather than born “from above.” Several grammarians and commentators (see Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich above) believe that Jesus was masterfully including both meanings in His statement to Nicodemus. In fact, “born from above” also carries with it the idea of “born again,” since being born from above involves the event of a second birth.

Verse 5 γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος

Note the one prepositional phrase having two objects with no articles. This would suggest that ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος indicates not two, but one action having two components—one birth (or rebirth) that is brought about by “water” and the “Spirit.” Some take this to mean that Jesus in His reference to one action with two components is indicating baptism. The same argument could be made, however, by those who believe that “water” here refers to the Word of God. Jesus would then be saying that the necessary rebirth is accomplished by means of the “living waters” (the Word of God) through which the Holy Spirit works. That too fits the grammar used to express one rebirth with two components.

Context and Setting

There appears to be no definitive evidence from the grammar, context, and setting, since commentators and grammarians are divided, though by no means evenly, on what Jesus was referring to when He spoke of a person being “*born of water*.” One could argue that the context and setting would lend some credence to the position that Jesus was referring to physical birth (option 1 above). We note, for example, how Nicodemus understood it that way: “*How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?*” Yet Jesus also criticized Nicodemus for his shallow, non-spiritual way of thinking: “*Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?*”

Those who take Jesus’ words “*born of water*” as a reference to physical birth also point out that the understanding of and full appreciation for baptism was not what it is now when Jesus first spoke these words. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 had not yet been given. In fact, the argument carries some weight in that it is really only our post-Apostolic era experience that leads one to read baptism into the words of Christ in John 3. Baptism is not mentioned by name in this section, though it is mentioned by name later in this same chapter.² The challenge, then, is to understand the words in their chronological-historical context in which they were spoken. This, of course, is a necessary part of doing faithful historical-grammatical exegesis. Though it is true that Jesus was also baptizing prior to the Great Commission (or perhaps his disciples were baptizing in His presence), the followers of Jesus at this time did not yet enjoy the full understanding of baptism that we enjoy today. Their ears should have been tuned, however, to another sense, a metaphorical sense of the word “water,” which will be discussed below.

The context of Jesus’ words also needs to be taken into account. Given the fact that Nicodemus had just made reference to physical birth in verse 4 (*Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”*), it would not be unfair to assume that Jesus was building upon what Nicodemus had just said when He spoke the words we are seeking to understand: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he*

cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Those who hold to this view would then place emphasis on the *καὶ* of verse 5: “*unless one is born of water* (given physical life) *and the Spirit* (given spiritual life), *he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*” The sense would then be: *One cannot enter the kingdom of God by strictly physical means. He must be born and he must be born again—spiritually.* This argument is, I believe, mitigated to a certain extent by the grammar of verse 5, namely, the anarthrous ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος, though it must be noted that this is by no means definitive.

In the end most scholars seem to regard physical birth—and “water” as reference to a mother’s amniotic fluid—as the least probable of the three possibilities. Although that explanation is in keeping with the context of what Nicodemus said in response to Jesus, the Lord’s subsequent rebuke of Nicodemus’ ignorance is sufficient grounds to assume that Jesus was taking a wholly different approach with His entire answer in verse 5. Some who opt for the physical birth understanding also suggest that Jesus may well have been addressing the common misconception among the Jews that they are favored by God (and will therefore be saved) simply because of their lineage. Jesus would then be saying: *Your physical birth is not enough. You must also have a spiritual rebirth if you hope to be saved.* The counter-argument is the fact that being born a Jew means nothing at all. Jesus could not, it is argued, be saying, “*You need to be born a Jew, but you also need to be born again,*” since the first part of that statement is just not true. Yet it could be true if Jesus were actually trying to disabuse Nicodemus of any pride or confidence in his lineage. Those supporting the concept of physical birth also cite verse 6: “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*”; they regard those words of Jesus as expository in relation to verse 5 and γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος. The argument is that Jesus must be referring to physical birth with γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος because he clearly does so in verse 6 when He says, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh.*”

One of the most compelling arguments against a physical birth understanding is the fact that nowhere else in Scripture is physical childbirth described as being “born of water.” In fact, “water” does not seem to be used in that context at all.³ While proponents of this understanding would argue that the concept of baptism must be imported, the same would apply even more so to the importation of an understanding of γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος that is completely foreign to anything else found in Scripture. Yet even here, the possibility that this is what the Savior had in mind cannot be categorically excluded. Based on grammar and the usage of Scripture, however, it does seem to be the least likely of the three options.

The second possible explanation, which is also the most prevalent among conservative commentators and grammarians,⁴ is that γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος refers to rebirth through the waters of baptism. The real problem with this understanding, which will be addressed in more detail below, is created by those who not only view γεννηθῆ ἐξ ὕδατος as baptism, but also regard it as an action or event separate and distinct from καὶ πνεύματος, which they regard as “Spirit baptism.”⁵

Taken both grammatically and contextually, the understanding that Jesus is making reference here to baptism is certainly possible. Though the Great Commission had not yet been given, baptism was certainly in existence at this point in the ministry of Christ. Even if it had not been, Jesus could well have been preparing the New Testament Church for the power He was even then placing at their disposal in connection with this great sacrament. Proponents also cite Matthew 3:11, where John the Baptist used “water” and “Spirit” side by side in connection with baptism: “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*”

The apostle Paul also joined ὕδατος and πνεύματος in passages that are almost universally taken as references to baptism, including Titus 3:5-7: “... *he saved us, ... , by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*”

Arguments *against* this understanding typically take the form of arguments *for* one of the other positions. In other words, it *can’t* refer to baptism because ὕδατος refers to human or natural birth. Or, it *can’t* refer to baptism because ὕδατος refers to the Word of God. The most serious objection that is raised is the idea that if Jesus is here referring to baptism, then He is also thereby turning baptism into a work that man must do that is necessary for salvation. We will explore this objection in greater detail below.

The third way of understanding the sense of γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος is that these words refer not to natural birth nor to baptism, but to the spiritual birth brought about by the Word.

Many passages, including other statements made by Jesus Himself, repeatedly refer to the soul-saving Word of God as water, or to the spiritual cleansing of that water, and they also connect such water references to the Spirit. In the Old Testament we find such passages:

Psalm 51:2 *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!* (also Ps. 51:7)

Isaiah 55:1 *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”*

Ezekiel 36:25 *“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.”*

In the New Testament are the same such passages, including these words of Jesus:

John 4:10 *Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”*

John 7:38-39 *“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.*

John 13:5-10 *Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.”*

John 15:3 *“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”*

1 Corinthians 6:11 *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Hebrews 10:22 *Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

While some may argue for a reference to baptism in one or more of these passages, baptism is clearly not possible in several, if not most. The point is that at the moment Jesus spoke the words under study to Nicodemus, the concept or picture of water as symbolic of the soul-saving Word of God had been clearly established and would also help to explain Jesus’ rebuke of Nicodemus. While baptism was a relatively new concept in its New Testament sense, water as the saving Word of the Gospel was well established in the Old Testament and should have been known by someone of Nicodemus’ standing, education, and occupation as “the teacher of Israel.” This view also removes any debate about baptism being necessary for salvation, if in fact Jesus is not here referring to baptism. The water-as-Word option also fits the anarthrous objects in the phrase of verse 5 (γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ πνεύματος): one event (conversion) accomplished by two contributing factors, that is, the Word through which the Spirit works His miracle of conversion.

The last two options seem to be the more compelling: water as baptism or water as the Word of God. Rather than dogmatically pronounce one or the other to be the one intended sense, perhaps it would be a wiser course of action to adopt a view that could encompass each—something the Lord was certainly capable of intending. To this end I am quite comfortable saying that the γεννηθῆναι ἐξ ὕδατος indicates or refers to the means of grace, while the καὶ πνεύματος refers to the Holy Spirit who works through the means of grace. Both or either of the two options (baptism or the Word of God) would fit into such an interpretation. Jesus would then be saying: *Unless one is reborn by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, he cannot be saved.*

The second question

The second question—arguably the exegetical crux of the assignment—is whether or not Jesus is here mandating baptism for salvation. Clearly the question is obviated if ἐξ ὕδατος refers to something other than baptism. If, however, Jesus really did have baptism in mind, would we then be compelled to conclude that Jesus requires of baptism for salvation?

We know that no doctrine of Scripture can be established on the basis of anything other than the clear passages of Scripture. All such clear passages are capable of only one intended sense. The passages under study, however—with more than one exegetical possibility—do not qualify as any sort of *sedes doctrinae* on baptism.

That said, we could still answer the question in the negative even if Jesus *was* referring here to the water of baptism. Context, again, is critical here. The whole point of what Jesus said is to counter a work-righteous mindset in Nicodemus.

Nicodemus began with a platitude that carries an undercurrent of work-righteousness thinking: ***“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”*** With His answer, which appears at first glance to be rather incongruous, Jesus has cut right to the heart of both the problem and the solution: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** In effect, Jesus is saying that entrance into God’s kingdom requires not something that man does for God, but something that God does for man (i.e., that He works in, gives to, provides for). Just as a human being cannot will himself to be born physically, so also no human being can will or earn his way into the necessary spiritual rebirth. Both physical and spiritual life are a gift from God. Nicodemus clearly understood none of this, as evidenced by his reply, which was still predicated on what a person can or must do: ***“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”***

Note the direction that was necessary in Nicodemus’ work-righteous mentality: *How can a man even do something like that?* Jesus’ point, of course, is that man can’t—which brings us to the Lord’s reply expressed by the verse in question: ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*** The point is that even if Jesus did have baptism in mind when He spoke these words (the definitive determination of which I believe to be impossible), His statement would, even then, be speaking not to the need for baptism to be saved but to the fact that man can in no way earn that salvation. That rebirth is, and must ever be regarded as God’s gift, God’s working, God’s grace. His point, then, has nothing to do with the need for doing the work of being baptized. It has everything to do with the need for the gift of rebirth, which alone comes always and only from the Holy Spirit who works through the means of grace, whether it is the Gospel in the Word preached or the Gospel in the sacrament administered.

This fact is further supported by the verses that follow: ***“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*** While flesh is *doing*, the Spirit is *giving*. As a person cannot know exactly from where or to where the wind is blowing, so also the workings of the Holy Spirit in the human heart remain a mystery. These truths make sense only in the context of man receiving an outside gift, not in the sense of man earning something by his actions. The point of Jesus, therefore, is this: *Unless man is converted (which is something the Holy Spirit must accomplish in him), he cannot be saved.* Note again: *Be saved*—which stands in direct contradiction to the salvation plan of human nature. The whole context and flow make no sense if Jesus was making a statement about the necessity of baptism as some kind of prerequisite we must fulfill before we (or anyone) can be saved.

Jesus was and is the Great Master. He did not do random. He did not do careless. His words were always precisely what He wanted to convey. As omniscient God the Holy Spirit knew how His inspired words could and would be misunderstood and manipulated. They stand, therefore, not only as correct, but

as exactly what He intended to say. Had the Holy Spirit wanted to communicate to the New Testament Church that baptism was always necessary for salvation, He would have done so unequivocally and unambiguously. Such information would never be left to a relying on passages whose words could be understood in more than one sense. Rather, we would be left with no doubt on the answer to a question that significant.

In fact, mere moments after Jesus spoke the words of our text, He *did* lay out for all mankind exactly and only what was necessary for salvation in **John 3:16-18**: ***“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”*** It is beyond reasonable to assume that Jesus would ambiguously allude to the need for baptism to be saved in verse 5, and then bring that whole doctrine into question just a few sentences later by listing only faith (believing) as the one thing that is necessary.

Clearly faith in Christ alone is credited by God as righteousness; yet the Holy Spirit was also well aware that such a truth had to be communicated in such a way that the importance of the means of grace, including especially baptism, was in no way diminished or played down. Baptism is, after all, a means whereby the Holy Spirit works faith, but it is just as clearly not the only means. However, since Baptism was to be such a potent, miraculous power in the New Testament Church for the remainder of time, its tremendous value—not its absolute necessity for salvation—had to be stressed. This the Bible has certainly done with engaging clarity, if not in this section, then clearly in others. In fact, the argument could be made that any confusion in this area is not the result of the plain words of Scripture, but only the result of confusion created and injected by man.

Endnotes

¹ *BDAG* refers to the 3rd edition lexicon of Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich. *BAG* refers to the first edition lexicon of Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich.

² **John 3:22-26**: *After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized (for John had not yet been put in prison). Now a discussion arose between some of John’s disciples and a Jew over purification. And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing, and all are going to him.”*

³ Of some significance here is the only earlier occurrence of γεννάω in the Gospel of John: “. . . children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (1:13). The Greek text has: οἱ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ’ ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. It seems very likely that John’s own expression for physical birth is the first one recorded in verse 15: born “of blood” (ἐξ αἱμάτων).

⁴ So also Lenski, Kretzmann, and Ylvisaker. Luther, in a Trinity Sunday sermon on John 3:1-15, seemed ambiguous.

⁵ Most, but not all, Pentecostals so teach, including the various Assembly of God churches *et al.*

Election: Doctrine of Comfort

Luke Bernthal

* The essay below had as its target audience both pastors and laymen who participated in a recent CLC area delegate conference. We offer it here to our readers as a fitting, practical follow-up to the “Election of Grace” essay that appeared in the last issue (March 2015). Unless indicated otherwise, passages below are quoted from the New King James Version. Quoted material is cited per MLA guidelines.

Election. Predestination. What thoughts and feelings rise up in your head and heart when you hear those biblical terms? Do you feel a headache coming on when you think of how mind-bendingly impossible this Bible doctrine (teaching) is to understand completely? Does it make you uneasy to think of this Bible doctrine because you know there has been disagreement and controversy among Christians for centuries concerning this teaching? Do you feel confusion because you aren’t really sure what the Bible teaches about election? Do you feel fear when you think of the doctrine of election because it naturally brings up the question in your mind: How do I know if I am one of God’s “elect”?—and that thought produces doubt, uncertainty, and *more* fear, and yet another question: What if I’m not one of the elect?

If these are some of the thoughts and feelings you have when you think about the doctrine of election, then you are not alone. Many Christians have had the same experience over the centuries. Luther himself confessed “that for a time the mere thought of eternal election filled him with terror rather than comfort” and also that “uncertainty about his election would have killed him if Dr. Staupitz [his overseer in the monastery during his days as a monk] had not delivered him from” it by pointing him to Christ (Pieper 475).

Doubt, uncertainty, confusion, and fear are not the thoughts and feelings that our God and Savior wants to produce in us through His doctrine of election. His words to us in the Scriptures on this subject are very clear, and they are meant for our comfort. It is my hope and aim here to present very simply and succinctly the comfort that the doctrine of election provides to us, who are God’s elect.

The doctrine of election, as defined by a number of clear passages in Scripture, is the teaching that God, from eternity—before He even created the world—by His grace in Christ, chose individuals whom He would call and bring to faith in time and finally glorify forever in eternity in heaven. The apostle Paul put it this way in Ephesians 1:4-5:

He [the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.

Paul’s words make it clear that our election is an “**election of grace**” (Rom. 11:5). Entirely by His grace it is God who “**chose**” us (the Greek verb used here is the one from which we get the term “the elect, ”ἐκλέγω). It is God who “**predestined**” us (from the Greek word that means to “*decide on beforehand, determine in advance,*” προορίσας) “**before the foundation of the world**”—before He ever even said, “Let there be!” This “*choosing*” He made, not apart from Christ and the salvation He would come to accomplish for us, but rather “**He chose us in Him** [Christ]. . . **in love. . . having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself.**” Paul also notes that God “**chose us in**” [Christ] to “**be holy** [sanctified] **and without blame before Him.**” This sanctification includes the Holy Spirit’s work of bringing us to faith, preserving us in that faith, and producing the fruits of faith (“good works”) in our lives. All this He did “**according to the good pleasure of His will,**” in other words, because He wanted to, and not because of anything we did or any special quality in us. Rather, it was because of that special quality of divine grace in Him!

The doctrine of election can only truly give us comfort if we, as Scripture does, consider it in connection with the whole of God's plan for and His completion of our salvation in Christ Jesus—NOT as something separate from it!

Our Lutheran forefathers understood this fact very well and stressed its importance. Francis Pieper, in volume 3 of his Christian Dogmatics, states:

Hence we have the right conception of our eternal election only if we ever and firmly bear in mind how it actually occurred in eternity, namely, not without regard to the means, or absolutely, but in such a way as to provide for the preaching of the Gospel and the operation of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel for the generation of faith. . . .

With this Scriptural view of the mode of election, we look to Christ and the Gospel to determine whether we are elected, and we are happy to find that all our distress has vanished. . . . If a person asks: "Am I chosen to salvation?" he should in turn be asked: "Do you sincerely believe in the Gospel?"

This is the point so emphatically stressed by the Formula of Concord . . . that the election to eternal life is not "to be considered in God's secret, inscrutable counsel in such a bare manner as though it comprised nothing further, or as though nothing more belonged to it, and nothing more were to be considered in it than that God foresaw who and how many were to be saved, who and how many were to be damned. . . ." But the correct manner of thinking and speaking of eternal election, the Confession continues, is "that the entire doctrine concerning the purpose, counsel, will, and ordination of God pertaining to our redemption, call, justification, and salvation should be taken together." (476-77)

Consider also these words from the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI on "Election":

God's eternal election, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but by God's gracious will and pleasure in Christ Jesus it is also a cause which creates, effects, helps, and furthers our salvation and whatever pertains to it. (Tappert 617 ¶8)

This means that we must always take as one unit the entire doctrine of God's purpose, counsel, will, and ordinance concerning our redemption, call, justification, and salvation, as Paul treats and explains this article (Rom. 8:28ff.; Eph. 1:4ff.) and as Christ likewise does in the parable [laborers in the vineyard] (Matt. 20:2-14). . . . (Tappert 619 ¶14)

If we stay with this and hold ourselves thereto, it is indeed a useful, salutary, and comforting doctrine, for it mightily substantiates the article that we are justified and saved without our works and merit, purely by grace and solely for Christ's sake. Before the creation of time, "before the foundation of the world was laid" (Eph. 1:4), before we even existed, before we were able to have done any good, God elected us to salvation "according to his purpose" by grace in Christ (Rom. 9:11; II Tim. 1:9). (Tappert 623 ¶43)

God has told us clearly and unequivocally in Scripture that He has chosen and predestined us to salvation. He tells us this so as to instill and confirm firmly in our hearts and minds the blessed message that from beginning to end—from eternity to eternity—we are saved by His grace alone! He has revealed to us His doctrine of election, not as something separate from the doctrine of salvation by God's grace alone through Christ Jesus, but as one of the fundamental parts of it.

Think of what should be said if someone were to come to us troubled and wondering, "How can I know for sure that I am saved and going to heaven?" We would probably point him or her to the fact that they've been elected by God, but we wouldn't point only to their election all by itself. God doesn't do that in His Word either.

Let's briefly consider now some of the key sections of Scripture that speak of our election and thus realize how God's words about our election are intertwined with the Gospel message and the fact that He Himself brings about our salvation in time:

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 *But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

2 Timothy 1:9-10 *[God] who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,*

1 Peter 1:1-2 *Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied.*

Romans 8:28-30 *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

What was taught by the apostles we also hear from the Lord Jesus who sent them:

“You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16).

“My sheep listen to my voice. . . . I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28 NIV).

On one occasion Jesus even pointed His disciples to their election as reason to rejoice:

“Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

God’s message to us in these and other similar passages concerning our election is this: God did not just reach down randomly or blindly and pick out our souls as one of the “elect.” He knows you, and, in fact, “*foreknew*” you from eternity. He loves you and He is so concerned about your salvation that your conversion, your justification, your sanctification, the preservation of your faith, and your eventual glorification in heaven have all been planned out, and your name has been written down in “**the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world**” (Rev. 13:8). *God has given us this doctrine of election, in all these Scriptural contexts, for our comfort.*

We begin to be troubled when we forget this fact, or when we look anywhere else but to the Gospel of Christ and the grace of God in Christ for the assurance of our salvation. Luther writes, “If we consider election in this manner, even as Paul does, it is comforting beyond measure. If we proceed in a different manner, the thought of election will be terrifying” (qtd. in Pieper 484). In his paper on “What Election Means” Pastor Adam Horneber writes:

God wants me to be confident of my eternal future with him. He wants this purest gospel to be my comfort. But I cannot discover my place among the elect by researching the eternal past, or by prying into the very mind of God. I cannot deduce it by the power of human reasoning, for to my clouded thinking too much about God’s ways seems unreasonable. I don’t look for proof in some inner feeling, or in some immediate, special revelation from God. . . . (2)

Election teaches us to look to Christ and to find our peace in what he’s done for us. Pieper comments, “The recognition of one’s election and faith in the Gospel are identical.” (8)

How does the comforting truth of our election in Christ play out in our lives? Professor Daniel Deutschlander, in his book *The Narrow Lutheran Middle*, describes what this truth does for the heart of the troubled believer:

It is simply impossible to exhaust the comfort for each penitent sinner that comes from this truth. Am I good enough for God to choose me? Is my faith strong enough for God to elect me? Away with all such questions! They have nothing to do with God’s choice. Your faith is neither your own work nor

the result of your own merit nor the consequence of a coincidental birth in a Christian family or near a Christian church. No, it is all God's arrangement. It is all the result of his will in eternity, worked out in time, reaching its blessed fruition in you in the here and now. Have you been baptized? God arranged all of history so that you would be baptized. Do you at least in your mind's eye fall down before the altar of God in church on Sunday to confess that you deserve nothing but wrath and punishment? It is God's effective ruling over history that you hear in the voice of the pastor, Jesus' own voice: "Be of good cheer! Your sins are forgiven! The one who comes to me, I will never cast out!" (106)

Take comfort! God has chosen you—by His grace, in Christ Jesus, from eternity, forever!

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The Blessings of the Lutheran Confessions

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* The writer is a CLC member living in the Denver area, who presented the following essay at the Foundations of the Faith seminar held on May 9, 2015, in Loveland, Colorado. Quoted material is cited per MLA guidelines.

Introduction

History is often a maligned discipline of study. It has at times been described as dry, boring, and of little usefulness. The recommendation is made that one's time is better spent on subjects that look to the future or can be applied to life in the present. I have never held that point of view. Ever since discovering the history section of my high school library as a freshman, I've had a steady interest in things of the past. For some people reading history is fun. And, as proponents of historical studies strongly claim, there is great practical value in examining history. They point out how there is very little in our world that is new. The issues that confront us in the twenty-first century have been around for a long time, differing in many of the specifics perhaps, but at their root being fundamentally the same. If we study the record of how events of the past were handled—on some occasions with good judgment and wisdom, and on other occasions with poor judgment (which comes from all the effects of mankind's fallen condition)—we can draw insights into what we might do in a given situation. I tend to agree with this assessment. Knowing the record of human history is both interesting and, at least in some cases, of great practical value.

So what relevance does all this have to the topic at hand? Well, this presentation has the title "The Blessings of the Lutheran Confessions," and the Lutheran Confessions are historical documents. But before we move further into the topic, let us first take a look at the root word "confession." There are many situations in which it can be applied. A criminal confesses to a crime before a judge and receives his sentence. A young man confesses his love to the young woman he wants to marry. A penitent sinner

confesses his sins both privately and corporately and receives the assurance of God's forgiveness for the sake of Jesus and His atonement on the cross. The word "confession" even holds a prominent place in the name of our church body, the Church of the Lutheran Confession. And so also it appears here in the title of this paper. But at this point a clear distinction should be made.

You will notice that the word "confession" as used in the name of our church body is singular. This singular form was carefully chosen by our founding fathers because the Lutheran Confession, singular, is different from the Lutheran Confessions, plural. The singular form was chosen because it is broad. It is a word which, as used here, embraces all of the teachings of the Lutheran Church. That is, it embraces all of the teachings of Holy Scripture.

At this point I will take a quick aside and mention that in the context of this presentation, when I refer to Lutherans, Lutheran teachings, or the Lutheran Church, I mean true Lutherans, Lutherans who firmly stand on the evident doctrines of Scripture as they were re-established by Martin Luther and other reformers of the Reformation. In this day and age many groups and organizations claim to be Lutheran and use "Lutheran" in their names and labels. But to varying degrees and for various reasons they have abandoned true Lutheran doctrine. I am not talking about them. The true Lutheran Confession, as used in our church name and pursued in our church mission, embraces ALL of Scripture, adding nothing in and leaving nothing out. It does not massage any part of the Word in order to make it more palatable to contemporary sensitivities. Rather, it bows before all of the Bible, from the very first word to the very last, understanding that these are the very words of Almighty God given to us by Him.

The Confessions

The Lutheran Confessions, on the other hand, are different, for they are the writings of men. Nevertheless, we hold them in high regard because the men who wrote them had placed themselves under the authority of Scripture and let it guide them. These Confessions, in the estimation of Lutheran scholar Robert Preus, "represent the result of more than 50 years of earnest endeavor by Martin Luther and his followers to give Biblical and clear expression to their religious convictions. The important word in that definition is the word 'convictions.' This word reveals the spirit in which the Lutheran Confessions were written, not a spirit of hesitation or doubt but of deepest confidence that Lutherans, when they were writing and subscribing the Confessions and creeds, because their content was all drawn from and supported by the Word of God, Scripture, were affirming the truth, the saving truth" (Preus 11).

So what are the Lutheran Confessions? They are not just any sound and scriptural writings of faithful Lutherans from the past. They are, rather, quite specific and were collected into what is called *The Book of Concord*. This was first published in German in the year 1580. The authorized Latin version came out in 1584, and since that time it has been made available in many languages. Numerous editions have been published in the United States, and it is now available online. How many documents are contained in *The Book of Concord*? How many of us know? I wasn't sure how many there were until I started working on this paper. Most published versions of *The Book of Concord* list eight main parts, although I found indications that some editions have one or more sections grouped together or divided.

Well, how many of you here today know what they are? The pastors present at this seminar would know because they study the Confessions—or symbols of the church as they are sometimes referred to—as part of the seminary curriculum in courses called symbolics. The Lutheran Confessions contained in *The Book of Concord* are:

1. The three ecumenical creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, Athanasian).
2. The Augsburg Confession.
3. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession.
4. The Smalcald Articles.
5. The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther.
6. The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther.
7. The Epitome of the Formula of Concord.
8. The Formula of Concord

The Book of Concord, it should be noted, is more than a diverse collection of writings. Each section or part was written in response to needs or problems within the church or in response to outside attacks and threats, and they present the true doctrines of Scripture. Since it is beyond my ability and the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth study of these confessions, a brief glimpse of each will have to do.

1. The *three ecumenical creeds*, written during the time of the early church, preceded the Reformation by many centuries. They relate to the fundamental qualities and characteristics of the Triune God, referring to who He is and to what He has done as revealed by Scripture. Many false teachings and heresies arose during the first centuries after the ascension of Christ as men tried to apply reason to the person and nature of Christ and to the idea of three distinct persons in one God. The creeds firmly establish only what God tells us about Himself and go no further than that. They were included in the Book of Concord to demonstrate that the Lutherans were not forming a new church, as the papists claimed, but rather that their teachings were the same as those of the early church fathers and that they were, in fact, re-establishing the ancient apostolic church. We today regularly use these same creeds in our worship services.

2. The *Augsburg Confession* came about when in 1530, Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and King of Spain, called for a diet to convene in Augsburg, Germany, in April of that year. A “diet” in this sense was a meeting, a conference in which the business of the Holy Roman Empire was conducted. It was a meeting of the state headed by the emperor, and while imperial diets were normally held at regular intervals, special diets could be called at the discretion of the emperor. Councils, on the other hand, were meetings of the church and were headed by the pope or his representative. In 1530 princes, nobles, and delegates representing all the political entities of the empire were invited to come to Augsburg. Because this was a special meeting with a particular purpose, theologians and religious leaders from both the Roman Catholic Church and from the reformers who had left the church were also invited. Luther was not able to be there since he was still under the ban of the empire, placed upon him by Charles during the Diet of Worms in 1521.

The invitation indicated that the purpose of the meeting was to end the division of the church. In essence it said that if both sides would compromise some, the break could be mended. Charles was a devout Catholic, but not a theologian. He was a man of the world, and while he did desire the break in the church to be mended, his primary motivation was to gain political unity among the constituent parts of the empire in order to present a strong unified military front against the Turks who were threatening his territories from the east. Of course, those attending the meeting knew this. Even so, there was real temptation for the princes who supported the Lutheran cause to yield points of doctrine for the sake of political power and advancement, as well as for the sake of peace at home. And Luther, while under protective custody in the fortress at Coburg, was afraid of that very thing. But the Lutherans, both the theologians and the princes and noblemen, would not yield even the smallest point. To give voice to their convictions and to set forth a public witness for all to see, the lead theologians drafted the confession which took the name of the city in Germany in which it was presented to the emperor. This document stands to this day as a witness to the truth of the Lutheran doctrine and as a testimony to the working of the Holy Spirit.

3. The *Apology (Defense) of the Augsburg Confession* was written during the Diet of Augsburg when the Catholics, contrary to the spirit of theological discussion that had been promised in the invitations to attend the Diet, wrote a rebuttal of the Lutheran Confession entitled “Pontifical Confutation of the Augsburg Confession” and had it read publicly. It was presented in the name of the emperor who had commissioned it. A statement attached to it said that he had ruled in favor of this document and that he expected the Lutherans to accept it too. In fact, he demanded it, with implied threats of war. There was real fear among the Lutherans at this point, and many began to waver in their resolve. But here Luther, who had been closely following the proceedings with reports brought to him regularly, had a real effect on the outcome. It is often said that fear is contagious. It is also true that courage is contagious. Luther wrote letters to the confessors showing from Scripture that this was God’s fight and that He would

support and protect them in their hour of need. With renewed courage they then drafted the document known as the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. As the longest document in *The Book of Concord* it offers the most detailed Lutheran response to the Roman Catholicism of that day, as well as an extensive Lutheran exposition of the doctrine of justification.

4. The *Smalcald (Smalkald) Articles* were written by Luther in response to a request of Elector John Frederick of Saxony, Luther's patron and protector, to summarize the biblical truths that had been brought to light in the Reformation. They were to be presented at a council held in the town of Smalkald in central Germany. Smalkald was the center of the Smalkald League, formed in 1531 by nearby cities and principalities to lend support to each other in the effort to maintain the true doctrine and to provide a united military defense, should Emperor Charles try to turn them with force. The 1537 meeting of this league was chosen as the place where the Lutheran theologians and princes would meet to counter the special council called by the Pope and to be held at Bologna, Italy, ostensibly to debate and resolve the theological differences that were dividing the church. Many of the Lutherans had, by this time, lost all confidence that a meaningful theological discussion could take place at a papal council. So they organized their own.

When the Schmalkaldic League met, Luther became very ill and was unable to attend the meeting. The league ultimately determined not to adopt the articles Luther had written. They were influenced not to adopt them by Philip Melancthon, who was concerned that Luther's writing would be regarded as divisive by some. Melancthon was then asked to write a clear statement on the papacy, and this he did—a document adopted at the meeting as the "Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope," a solid work which was, years later in 1580, included with Luther's Smalcald Articles in *The Book of Concord*. In the Smalcald Articles Luther summarized what he regarded to be the most important teachings in Christianity. The Articles were highly prized by Elector John Frederick, who ordered that they be made a part of his last will and testament. And though they were not adopted at the meeting of the Schmalkaldic League, they were widely used and were incorporated into *The Book of Concord* in 1580 as one of the Lutheran Confessions of the faith.

5. In regard to *The Small Catechism* it can be noted that Martin Luther was not the first to author the type of book called a "catechism." These had been around for a long time before him, but the use of catechetical study had, for all practical purposes, been abandoned by the church of Luther's day. It was felt that common folk knew enough if they could list the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther realized that the common people, especially the young, of the churches and territories that had left Catholicism were so ignorant of even a basic knowledge of the Christian faith. As a result of a visitation he made to the Saxon congregations in 1528, it became clear to him that the churches were full of members who were Christian in name only and did not seem to have a saving faith, for they knew nothing of Christ, Christian doctrine, or the Bible. Instead, they had used their newly found, so-called "Christian freedom" to neglect worship and God's Word even more than when they were under the priests and bishops. How could the Gospel survive, much less thrive in such a spiritual wasteland? Who would provide for these lost souls?

Thus Luther took upon himself the task of writing a new catechism. First and most urgently needed was a book of instruction for the young. "How unjustly," Luther wrote, "do we deal with the poor youth entrusted to us, failing, as we do, to govern and instruct them!" (qtd. in Bente 67). The earlier catechisms had three chief parts, which were the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. To these Luther added three more: Holy Baptism, the Office of the Keys and Confession, and the Lord's Supper. For Luther a working knowledge of these six chief parts was a bare minimum for an adult Christian, a starting point on which a life-long study of Scripture would build. We still think this to be so. And Luther's *Small Catechism* still is at the center of the doctrinal training that we give to our children.

6. In our day, when pastors complete many years of intensive theological study, learning both Greek and Hebrew in order to access the Word of God in the original languages, and thus can authoritatively teach Scripture to others, it is hard to imagine the condition of the church in the days of the

Reformation. As he was with the laity, Luther was bewildered at how ignorant of the Bible and its doctrines many of the pastors were, some being found who could not even recite the Apostolic Creed or the Lord's Prayer.

The *Large Catechism* was written in large part to provide some doctrinal support for the many under-trained pastors of the early Lutheran churches. Somewhat more advanced than the *Small Catechism* in its theological content, it was still not university-level material and as such was intended for use also by laymen who had learned the basic doctrines of the *Small Catechism*. Intended for those who have the capacity to understand, it is not meant to be memorized, but to be repeatedly reviewed so that the *Small Catechism* could be taught with understanding primarily by fathers to their children. The *Large Catechism* does not follow the question-and-answer format of the Small, but rather is in paragraph form, which lends itself well to our own use today as a devotional book. We also agree that the primary responsibility for the theological training of our children is to be upon us fathers.

7. *The Formula of Concord*, written in 1577, is an authoritative statement of faith that in its two parts, the Epitome and the Solid Declaration, makes up the final section of *The Book of Concord*. It was produced forty years after Luther's death by a committee of theologians led by Martin Chemnitz at the request of the Elector of Saxony to provide a common focus of doctrine to which all Lutherans could subscribe. Subsequent to its completion, it was signed (subscribed to) by three electors of the Holy Roman Empire, twenty dukes and princes, twenty-four counts, four barons, thirty-five free imperial cities, and over 8,000 pastors. These constituted two-thirds of the Lutheran Church in Germany at the time. The fact that the other third did not sign it is an indication of the need for it. Many divergent theological opinions and controversies had developed after Luther died, and the church was fragmenting. The Elector of Saxony realized that a clear statement was needed.

Besides being a correct exposition of the teachings of Scripture, it also provides a blueprint for dealing with doctrinal controversies in our day. The presentation of points of doctrine take the form of theses, which state what the scriptural truth is on a given point, and also the form of antitheses that state the false doctrine to be rejected. By following this format, the authors eliminated ambiguities and unacceptable generalities and made crystal clear both what they believed and what the Bible teaches. Confessional Lutherans follow this model to this day. When doctrinal controversies arise, and they do, Scripture is studied and the truth is stated in the thesis along with the false doctrine rejected in the antithesis. In the last several decades the CLC has used this very format over against points of false teaching and practice that have confronted our confession and practice.

Also to be noted is that the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, as a concise summary of the Formula of Concord, was intended for congregational use and study.

Blessings

We now ask the question: What blessings are inherent to us today in these Confessions? Robert Preus offers a detailed reply in his *Getting into The Theology of Concord*; his words on "The Importance of Doctrine" are quoted below at length:

According to the Lutheran Confessions, true doctrine, i.e., correct teaching about God and His activity toward us, is not some remote possibility but a marvelous fact, the result of God's grace; and this doctrine is demonstrated in the Confessions themselves. Those who wrote our Confessions were convinced of this. . . ; but more than that, they were persuaded that true doctrine . . . is of inestimable importance to the church and to individual Christians. Why?

1. It is first and foremost by pure doctrine that we honor God and hallow His name, as we pray in the First Petition of the Small Catechism. "For," Luther says [in his Large Catechism], "there is nothing he would rather hear than to have his glory and praise exalted above everything and his Word taught in its purity and cherished and treasured" (LC, III, 48).

2. It is by agreement in the pure doctrine that permanent concord and harmony can be achieved in the church. "In order to preserve the pure doctrine and to maintain a thorough, lasting, and God-pleasing concord within the church, it is essential not only to present the true and wholesome doctrine

correctly, but also to accuse the adversaries who teach otherwise (I Tim. 3:9; Titus 1:9; II Tim. 2:24; 3:16)” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 14).

3. Doctrine is important to Lutherans because they believe that Christian doctrine is not a human fabrication but originates in God. It is God’s revealed teaching about Himself and all He has done for us in Christ. Therefore Luther says confidently and joyfully: “The doctrine is not ours but God’s” . . . And he will risk everything for the doctrine, for to compromise would do harm to God and to all the world. Luther’s spirit is echoed throughout our Confessions as they affirm that their doctrine is “drawn from and conformed to the Word of God” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5, 10).

4. Pure Christian doctrine is important for our Lutheran Confessions because it brings eternal salvation. It “alone is our guide to salvation.” . . . For this reason our Confessions call it “heavenly doctrine” and they never fail to show and apply this saving aim of evangelical doctrine.

This emphasis on the importance of Christian doctrine is often not understood or appreciated in our day of relativism and indifference.

How often do modern church leaders declaim that the church will never achieve purity of doctrine; nor is it necessary! Therefore [they say] we should concentrate our efforts toward ministry to people in their needs. . . . (Preus 12-13)

We confessional Lutherans should be concerned about the physical needs of people, but never place them above their spiritual needs. Thus we can agree with Preus as he continues: “Today when people are leaving the church in droves and abandoning the faith, we must keep our priorities straight. Luther says:

The great difference between doctrine and life is obvious, even as the difference between heaven and earth. Life may be unclean, sinful, and inconsistent; but doctrine must be pure, holy, sound, unchanging . . . not a tittle or letter may be omitted, however much life may fail to meet the requirements of doctrine. This is so because doctrine is God’s Word, and God’s truth alone, whereas life is partly our own doing. . . . God will have patience with man’s moral failings and imperfections and forgive them. But He cannot, will not, and shall not tolerate a man’s altering or abolishing doctrine. For doctrine involves His exalted, divine Majesty itself ([Weimar Ed.], 30 III, 343-4).

Strong words! But this is the spirit of confessional Lutheranism” (Preus 13-14).

Will this always be the spirit of our own synod and congregations in the Church of the Lutheran Confession? I pray that it will and am convinced of it being so if we give heed to St. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1:10:

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

With that scriptural mandate in heart and mind let us always face up to doctrinal differences wherever they arise and impinge upon our unity. Let us always seek and treasure the doctrinal unanimity that God has given us, based solely on the Word of God, of which our Confessions speak. Then we truly may call ourselves Lutherans.

Preserve Thy Word and preaching,
The truth that makes us whole,
The mirror of Thy glory,
The power that saves the soul.
Oh, may this living water,
This dew of heavenly grace
Sustain us while here living
Until we see Thy face!
(TLH 264:5)

Works Cited

- Bente, F. *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1965 (1921).
- Preus, Robert D. *Getting into The Theology of Concord—A Study of The Book of Concord*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1977.

The Impact of the Reformation on the Culture of Germany **A translation of a portion of J. P. Koehler's *Kirchengeschichte*** J. P. Koehler / Edmund Reim

* The reprint below first appeared in the May 1965 issue of the *Journal* (5:2, pages 1-21). It began with this "Editor's Note":

The following is a translation in full of two chapters in Koehler's *Kirchengeschichte* prepared for the use of our Seminary students in a course which otherwise consists of condensed notes from the original German. Since much of the material is of general interest, it is published here for the benefit of our readers. (*Journal* 5:2, p. 1)

Original editor's notes also occur within Reim's translation of chapter II and at the end. The beginning point of the each chapter is noted with boldface Roman numeral I and boldface Roman numeral II. Words underlined indicate original emphasis (that of either Koehler or the translator) or serve to highlight the topic of a paragraph.

I. The course of the Church's history is determined not merely by the motives that underlie a given religious movement. Even among those who represent that movement there are spiritual and worldly considerations, things divine and things that are human, all going along side by side. This is even more evident when one takes a comprehensive view of a specific movement in the church. To an even greater degree the influence which this has on the culture of the age depends on particular interests that originally did not even pertain to that movement. If ever, therefore, it is necessary at this point to distinguish between Luther, the Reformation, and the culture of the Germany of the 16th century.

The person of Luther

The last years of Luther's life were lived under the shadow of illness and grave disappointments. His illness (kidney stones) made him irritable, and the course of the Reformation did not serve to cheer him. Melanchthon's ways caused him no end of trouble by playing into the hands of Philip of Hesse and Butzer with their diplomacy, providing many a Catholic schemer with an opportunity to practice a little intrigue of his own. An added point was that, contrary to Luther's entire way of thinking, considerations of secular policies and politics were becoming so interwoven with the work of the Reformation that an individual person could hardly follow a course of his own without stepping entirely out of the area of active participation in the work. Luther had lost confidence in the people, in the Princes, and also in the leaders of the church. This was not a mood of pessimism, but was rather based on an accurate evaluation of the circumstances in which he found himself. Thus it was sometimes hard for him to bear the various reverses with equanimity and confident trust in God, particularly since the earlier stages of the Reformation had been marked with such vigorous progress. That Luther was not always able to maintain a cheerful spirit has given his adversaries an opportunity to cast their invidious reflections on him and his stand.

That is why it is in place at this point to sum up the chief features in the image of the Reformer. This is no simple matter, indeed, if one wishes to do justice to this powerful personality without idealizing it. Even his contemporaries, and much more so the men of a later day, have invariably according to their own particular ideals arrived at one-sided judgments. "Orthodoxy saw him as the one who restored the

right doctrine; Pietism saw him as the hero of prayer and faith; the Enlightenment as the pioneer of reason and opponent of superstition, even as the era of the Freedom-fighters saw him as the hero of German nationalism, etc.” He has been compared with Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin, and according to their particular preferences men have with reference to specific individual aspects either overrated or underestimated him. Beginning with John Cochlaeus and continuing down to Janssen, Denifle, Grisar, and others, his opponents have reviled him, sometimes in a most obscene manner. But this very fact enables one to recognize that here we have the most important figure of history since the days of the Apostles, one to which one can simply not remain indifferent.

Luther was indeed what his adherents of various eras have claimed and for which they have praised him in their rather one-sided manner, but he himself was anything but one-sided. He differed from Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin because he did not have that unilateral interest that prevailed among them. It has been said that Luther knew nothing of scholarly form and method, that he was neither a dogmatician nor an exegete. But if one understands dogmatics to mean that one perceives the various doctrines of Scripture in their inner connection as well as with regard to the careful line of demarcation that exists between them, and that one presents them in the same careful manner, then Luther was the greatest dogmatician of them all. He did not indeed have the particular interest that his contemporaries had, namely, the scholastic interest which overemphasizes the intellectual side of any particular question. Furthermore, he was an outspoken opponent of the philosophical method of systematizing—and that was just where his particular strength lay. It is a mistake to think that the clarity of doctrinal concepts gained anything from the dogmatical method that was subsequently in such general vogue. Actually the concepts were diminished thereby, as is invariably the case where intellectualism prevails.

The same is true of exegesis. If one takes this term to mean that one recognizes the language of the Scriptures as normal human speech which God has taken into His service with all its inherent peculiarities of origin and expression, as well as of comprehension on the part of the hearer or reader; if one understands that He has done this in order to reveal His super-mundane Gospel here on earth; if one keeps in mind that therefore this language of the Scriptures must, as to its form, in every respect be taken and understood in the same manner as other speech and tongue; if one sees that with sensitive perceptivity we must follow the thought of the sacred writer in order to observe how for him the form and expression came to be just what it is in the text that lies before us (excepting only that we approach and treat this text with the faith that is wrought by the Gospel itself, namely, that this is indeed the Word of God)—then Luther was the greatest exegete of them all. To present his thoughts in concise form as did Melancthon and Calvin, for this Luther was granted neither the time nor the opportunity. But that he could be concise, of that his Small Catechism furnishes convincing proof. But on the other hand he also knew that scientific form and method, taken by themselves, are not enough.

It is said that Luther was no organizer as Zwingli was, or Calvin. But if one understands that the term organization implies also this that out of the thoughts that constitute the Gospel, there were produced the forms which in the society of his day made for an orderly, yet perfectly free course for the Gospel, then Luther was the greatest organizer of them all. And he did make use of this gift. But he was not a contriver, one who for the sake of expediency would by law and regulation create one-sided forms, forms which, however, would become hindrances for true evangelical freedom.

Luther was a plain, simple Christian. That is what he had become by the Gospel that had worked in him, and his entire work reveals this same quality. What a simple Christian believes and how he comes to believe it, that is something that Luther, having first learned it from the Gospel, now studied and restudied with all the scholarly aids of that day. And the result of this intensive labor of mind and soul was simply what the Holy Spirit had already wrought in him, the simple faith (*das einfaeltige Christentum*) of a child. Nor did it ever become anything else. This is what is greatest in Luther. This was his strength with the people. This was the source of the powerful influence of this great personality. Therein lies the significance of the intellectual labors of this man, whom experience had so thoroughly matured. This made for the truthful sincerity that marks the entire activity of this so eminently practical man, an activity which had but a single interest, the saving of souls: a goal toward which this man could contribute nothing out of himself, for which he could invent nothing, could not systematize, could not

organize anything by himself, for which he desired only that the Gospel might be given free course. Simple though this is, yet it is something found so rarely among those who are called to work at the high levels of leadership. But that Luther was such a person, that is what makes him “a great man,” and at the same time one who like no one else was a true disciple of Paul.

But even so, he was a man like other men. It is wrong to saddle him with an indictment for his crudities. But it is likewise a mistake to idealize or perhaps even imitate these features. It is a matter of learning to know and to understand those times, and Luther, the man who lived in those times. Then one will understand that many of the disappointments and reverses that beset the Reformation must be ascribed not only to Luther’s co-workers, but in part to Luther himself.

There is a question whether Luther’s advice to Lambert in connection with the organizing of the Church in Hesse was sound. But at the same time it is wrong to charge Luther with inconsistency because in the case of Saxony he had spoken of the Princes as temporary, emergency bishops (*Not-bischoefe*) after having previously in the case of the Bohemians emphasized their spiritual priesthood. Luther’s yielding in the case of the Wittenberg Concord is undoubtedly to be attributed to the exigencies of the situation rather than to Luther’s real attitude, while the attitude of Butzer and Melancthon, which adapted itself to the wishes of the Princes, here carried the day. It would also seem that Luther’s counsel regarding the bigamous marriage of Philip of Hesse was the result of the pressure of the outward circumstances rather than simply out of the merits of the case itself. As to the Smalcaldic League, Luther’s position was the only correct one. He represented the conscience of his times in the matter of obedience to the imperial government. At the same time he left the decision in this secular matter in the hands of the political counselors of the Princes and committed the entire matter to God. Only by thus evaluating Luther just as any other man does it become possible to demonstrate just which the issues are where, almost alone among the men of his day, Luther was right. Only thus does one come to understand Luther’s basic ideas in these matters, namely, that whatever was done right is to be attributed solely to the grace of God and the power of the Gospel.

The Reformation

The name given this period links it together with earlier medieval reform movements, and so there are many who emphasize the thought that the Reformation is still a part of the Middle Ages. The incorrectness of this view appears as soon as one comes to the real thoughts of Luther, thoughts which also were received quite correctly by his adherents and particularly by the common people. The issue turned about the very heart of religion, the forgiveness of sins. Luther took this concept just as it is given in Scripture, even as it has ever and again been taken by the common Christian in its essence, and as it was then presented in further detail in Luther’s teachings.

By faith a Christian is assured of the forgiveness of his sins by the blood of Christ. Even though he may become conscious of it only by degrees, this involves, *eo ipso*, an unqualified trusting in God and in His grace in every respect, and thus also in His Word (verbal inspiration, rightly understood!). Confidently one attributes this grace to the God of eternity, even before the foundations of the earth were laid—relying on this grace for the assurance that thereby our salvation is made secure even unto eternity. This faith is not merely that one accepts the doctrine of a church as true, but rather a miraculous experience wrought by the Holy Spirit by means of the Gospel. With this faith is given a life of sanctification, a life which seeks to be guided by the Word of God.

This sanctification consists in an affirmative testimony (*Bewaehrung*) of the justifying grace of God. Since the Fall of Adam this world is in a state of corruption. Under these conditions the role of the Christian is simply to do the work of his calling and to keep himself unspotted from the world. No created thing is sinful in itself. It is an *adiaphoron*. But monastic withdrawal from the world is, as a matter of ascetic discipline, a morbidly unsound thing in any case. For example, fasting can come into consideration only as a matter of outward training or custom. But the sin which injects itself into every phase of life, not only into the life of the state or the community, but also of the church, even into the

personal practice of the Christian life by the individual believer (original sin!), all this is something the Christian earnestly attacks, in expectation of the glory of the Lord's Return.

In two different respects Luther has been faulted for this view of life (*Weltauffassung*), but without reason. Generally it is said that thereby Luther in certain respects still remained a child of the Middle Ages. That would be said with reference to his pessimistic view of the world, his concept of asceticism, and his stand on Scripture (verbal inspiration, the "Paper Pope"). But comparing the outline given above with the corresponding presentations of the Middle Ages will reveal that these respective articles of Luther's doctrine are not to be found in the Middle Ages, at least not in that form, but that these articles were drawn directly from the Scriptures.

On the other hand, there is an equal impropriety in the fact that Luther has been praised by some for taking a more liberal attitude toward the canon of the Bible and the doctrine of inspiration that was the case with his later followers. The same observation is made in regard to his interpretation of Scripture as compared with theirs. That he did not go farther in this direction is then laid to the fact that his age was still deficient in knowledge concerning the origin of the New Testament and its canon. This subjective judgment has its basis in a specific attitude towards Scripture itself, an attitude which, however, cannot be found in Luther. If one wishes to understand Luther aright and thus gauge correctly his position and his importance, both in the world and in the Church, then one must take the same position toward Scripture as did Luther. Only then will one arrive at a true evaluation of Luther and his era.

That Luther and his contemporaries were in many outward matters still bound by medieval concepts is self-evident and calls for no further elaboration in view of the processes of historical development (note Melancthon's interest in astrology, also the witch trials of the 17th century).

The work of Luther, therefore, was the Reformation of the Church, a renewing of original Christianity, not of the Empire Church but of the Church of the Apostles: a rediscovery of the Gospel (hence the name "Evangelicals"). Very properly, therefore, Luther considered the Romanists to be the apostates. The reason why Luther's estimate of the Empire Church is different from what has been presented in the first part of this book is the fact that for him there was no particular occasion for making an accurate analysis of those things. Furthermore, the Lutheran Church would have to pass through its own stages of development before one could arrive at such comparisons as then afford a deeper insight into the entire history. But what Luther did find in the Ancient Church is something that he recognized also in certain specific episodes in the Middle Ages, even as it is a fact that Luther's ideas are simply the basic ideas of the Gospel which are met in every era and which, in spite of all other differences, are always found, at least in the deeply felt emotions of their faith, in those who call Jesus their Lord.

II. Since De Wette, Twisten, and Dorner a frequently recurring view appears in the historical works of these times. This view holds that over against the principle of tradition as it was held by the Church of Rome, the Reformation elevated Scripture to the level of a principle, and that the Lutheran Church gave greater emphasis to the material principle (the doctrine of justification), while Calvinism stressed the formal principle (the authority of Scripture). Lutheranism is then said to have observed the proper middle course between these two extremes, also in all subsequent developments. All this is meant well, but since the terms are by no means well chosen, it can be gravely misunderstood.

The technical terms have a philosophical background, and so lend themselves to Melancthon's later concepts of doctrinal presentation. They likewise adapt themselves to the subsequent formalism of the doctrinal methods of 17th century dogmatics. It is rather something entirely different from either of these, since both have the same type of externalism and legalism in common.

Because of Luther's faith in the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Scriptures by which God has proclaimed this Gospel to the world became for him *eo ipso* the norm of faith and life. For by the very fact that the Gospel makes this proclamation as such, this claim of Scripture is included, to be received with simple faith. Excluded thereby is any one-sided emphasis on one or the other of the "Scripture-principles." On the other hand, the term "principle" is not well suited because neither justification nor the authority of Scripture are given for the sake of being subject to further development. This way of

speaking fits rather into an intellectualistic method of systematizing, even as to legalism in general—whether these traits be found among Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans, or anyone else.

On the other hand, the evangelical attitude of Luther upheld the authority of the Scriptures in the highest sense of the word. On the other, he retained an inner freedom over against the fact that Scripture is clothed in human language and as such subject to human processes of change (*menschliche Sprache mit menschlicher Entwicklung*). This is something quite different from either the formal or material principle, and better than either it forestalls that disparaging of Scripture which was implied by Calvinism's emphasis on the formal principle, or as Rationalism used it, or as it was abused by the emphasis given to the *analogia fidei* by the later Lutheran dogmaticians.

In regard to worship and art the Reformation has had an influence which has not always been properly evaluated. The Swiss Reformation was opposed to every form of art (cf. the removal of images, organs, bells, Liturgy, and poetry). This puts it on the same plane as the Papacy by the very radicalism of its opposition to Papal sacramentalism. For in the same false and pessimistic manner both Rome and the Swiss judged creatural things to be sinful. But while the former therefore invested them with sacred qualities (*vergotteten sie*), the latter simply abolished them. This is the very essence of legalism.

On the other hand, the forms that developed among Lutherans lie on an entirely different plane, that of the Gospel. Liturgy, art, music—these things were received as gifts of God and therefore used and developed according to the requirements of the prevailing conditions. The Lutheran Church has created no new style of architecture. For on the one hand, there was no immediate need for building new churches, and in the case of those structures that were available, no offense was taken at the general forms. They were retained as effective vehicles of the Gospel. Only those forms were abolished that stood in the service of manifest error, e.g., the sacramental tabernacle and the monstrance. Thus the “high altar” was retained, as well as the custom of giving to churches the name of apostles and “saints,” including the forms of sculpture and architecture that were connected therewith. These things Lutheran art would not have created out of itself.

Just so it was with regard to divine worship. With sound conservatism Luther had retained the liturgical forms of the Mass. Only that was changed or abolished which was positively wrong. Where the musical forms had become artificial and overdone, they were simplified and thus restored to their high artistic level. For the benefit of his Latin students Luther even retained the use of that language in the liturgical forms of some of the Minor Services. But the Pericopes, the Rite of Exorcism, and many other forms are something that the Lutheran Church would hardly have developed out of itself. The clerical robes of our times are products of a later age.

But Luther did influence music and poetry to an outstanding degree. As a form of art the Lutheran hymn is a work of the highest order. Previously the writing of sacred verse and music had passed through a certain preliminary stage. Now the Reformation brought it to full artistic maturity. Luther himself took the lead. At first it was practical considerations which provided the occasion. With the touch of a master he made use of these arts for the sake of providing the congregation with an opportunity for independent participation in the service. And so, just as true works of art always develop, there grew out of these beginnings a structure of text and music that stands unsurpassed to this day. To a limited degree this is true also of pictorial art.

A new form of the divine service is the examination of catechumens. This took the place of the Catholic rite of confirmation. For this purpose Luther wrote his Catechism. This brought out the worth of the individual, even as did also the other phases of Luther's teaching. The injection of pedanticism and intellectualism into the simple *Christenlehre* (the teaching of Christians) is the manner only of a later day. But here the form answered to a need that arose when Luther's preaching encountered the current lack of even a most elementary kind of indoctrination on the part of the people.

Also in regard to political science Luther's position was not medieval but biblical. According to the Moral Law government is ordained by God. Its outer form is a product of historical development. That is why Luther acquiesced in the way the final stage in the development of the territorial-sovereignty system was achieved by the Smalcaldic League, even though he was aware that, as always, so also here

much violence and injustice were involved. His business as a citizen was to obey the government which held the power. (Here, as also in cultural and sociological matters, Zwinglianism and subsequently Calvinism have often operated with legalistic coercion.)

A direct consequence was the development of the territorial-church system. Since the issue was not decided by the Word of God, it was in itself a matter of indifference for Luther when the Princes assumed the responsibility of caring for the church, not only by protecting orthodoxy but by the suppression of heresy. His one concern was that the Gospel be granted free course, also by their particular way of handling such matters. This does not run counter to his statements saying that the Gospel seeks to be accepted without coercion; or that in the case of the Bohemians, 1520-23, he had spoken up for the autonomy of those congregations. But now the system of directing the affairs of the Church by consistories came into being, a system by which jurists and theologians would, in the name of the territorial ruler, conduct the external administration in every detail. Eventually this became a situation where the churches and their doctrine were subjected to harsh, coercive measures. But this is a degenerative process, similar to the tyranny of priests or mob-rule by the laity, and is in no way a consequence of Luther's theoretical ideas, or of the practical measures which he employed.

At this time this combination of Church and State made for the expansion of the Church and in some instances was carried out in a manner entirely unobjectionable. On the other hand, because of the unevangelical interests of all concerned, it did lead to many an unsound situation, such as: the German tendency toward fragmentation of political units; the system of court theologians; the secularizing of monasteries and church properties for the enriching of the Princes; an exaggerated conservatism in all areas of life; the manner of distinguishing between divine and natural Law as it was cultivated at that time. Frequently this combination of Church and State also determined the political alliances of states and their relations with each other as well as with foreign lands.

The Reformation influenced the entire educational system to a significant degree, an influence that must be given an accurate evaluation. The very fact of the rise of Luther served to liberate and at the same time to stimulate the spirit of men. In giving his inaugural address at Wittenberg in 1518, Melancthon spoke on "*De corrigendis adolescentiae studiis*," Concerning Improvements in the Studies (viz. courses) of Youth. In his Address to the German Nobility in 1520 Luther discussed the reforming of the universities; 1524 he called on the German magistrates to provide for Christian schools (*Lateinschulen*); in his Sermon of 1530 he advised that all children, boys and girls, be given an education. To this end he called for additional schools, libraries, as well as for laws making attendance at schools compulsory. Results began to appear at the schools and universities. But when in many territories the Catholic Church began to decline and thereby the endowments for Masses became less and less, and when in addition the Revolt of the Peasants destroyed many of the existing schools, the entire educational system suffered a serious reverse. For this one will, of course, not hold the Reformation accountable. But when order was restored and the situation had returned to normal, there followed a flourishing of Protestant education such as the Middle Ages had never known.

Certainly, this was not yet true popular education, schooling for all. Widespread poverty did not permit this. Where something of that kind did exist, it was because the sexton or verger (*Kuester*) of the congregation instructed the servants and children in religion according to Luther's Catechism. Yet compared with the Middle Ages even this was eminent progress, and the book itself has not been surpassed to this day. The cities had their Latin schools after the model of Johannes Sturm's *Gymnasium* in Strassburg. In the Lutheran territories the universities were organized by Melancthon. Everywhere the ecclesiastical and theological disciplines outranked all others. Humanism as such lost ground, becoming an auxiliary discipline, albeit a valuable one. What is today spoken of as the academic freedom of the sciences did not yet exist. Yet it would be wrong to say that in the period of the Reformation the sciences were fettered in any way. That did not happen until the 17th century. In Luther's day the way was open for scientific investigation of every kind.

So there was, for instance, a reinvigorated study of exegesis. Luther would have nothing to do with allegory, and his hermeneutical principles really sum up everything that is to be said on the subject.

At the same time, what Luther says about the subject is said with a spirit of unsurpassed freedom and naturalness. Yet no one can emphasize the principle of verbal inspiration more strongly than did Luther. That would indicate that these two qualities probably go together. Many instances of this kind are scattered here and there throughout Luther's exegetical writings, and stand in a firm, clearly defined inner relationship to each other, so that only dogmatical one-sidedness could fail to notice it.

Anti-Papal polemics led to a critical study of history and thereby opened the way for a deeper understanding of processes of history. Shortly after Luther's death Matthias Flacius Illyricus and others published the "Magdeburg Centuries," (1559-1574, in 13 volumes, each covering a century of church history). Only after Luther's death did the growing influence of Melancthon create a situation where dogmatics was hailed as the Queen of Sciences. It was, of course, meant to be only the *ancilla theologiae*, the hand-maid of theology, which it in fact remained, as far as the inner attitude of the theologians was concerned. But in its outward form and because of the Aristotelian influence, it soon manifested that desire to dominate in various ways, which soon became detrimental to Lutheran theology.

The Lutheran parsonage served to elevate the plane of family life. Elimination of the negativism of Catholic marriage laws made for the possibility of divorce. The social order did not change greatly since that is dependent on economic conditions to a greater degree than on the intellectual factors. The per capita income of the people at large was raised indirectly by the spirit of liberalism which the Reformation had engendered among the Princes and their officials, as well as the direct observations made in connection with the visitation of the churches, even though not all German territories participated to the same degree. Because of the influence of the cities the southwestern and western areas along the Rhine had a distinct advantage.

Public morality was affected by the Reformation in a twofold way. Whenever old institutions break down, there is always an outbreak of immorality and crime, conditions which previously were held in check by the coercion of outward discipline. Nor had all who were followers of the Reformation experienced that inner transformation which is a fruit of the Gospel. Nevertheless, that power of God did manifest itself in the congregations by the fact that now an entirely different, higher view of life began to assert itself. The doctrine of the freedom that is created by faith proved itself in the life of the Lutheran citizens, grew stronger, and steeled them for the test that finally came in the Smalcaldic War, a test in which the people as a whole did not fail.

Another institution to experience the influence of the Reformation was the system of jurisprudence. The severity of the penal code was indeed not ameliorated. Torture and the trial of witches were continued for another hundred and fifty years. But Canon Law was abolished, whereas Roman Law, which did not come to Germany until this 16th century, but which in its codification by Justinian had acquired a certain Christian style and tone, now by Melancthon's efforts became firmly entrenched.

So also the spirit of national pride was strengthened by the fact that Luther was completely uninhibited in his wrath against "*die Welschen*" (those foreigners—here particularly with reference to Italy, but sometimes including France and even England). It was not merely by chance that the man through whom the Pauline thoughts were finally in all their heart-felt profundity brought again to the light arose and flourished in Germany. And that the German people understood their Luther was due in large part to the fact that in his Bible translation he had given them a common language, something that made possible a certain feeling of intellectual unity in spite of all their political fragmentation. This trend toward unity in the development of the language had been making itself felt in the various chancelleries since the 14th century without anyone being particularly conscious of such a goal. But in this great work of Luther it found its great and universal significance. Closely connected, however, with this factor of nationalism is the other fact that in the Reformation the two trends of Protestantism went apart. Calvinism is essentially English and French. That contributed to their separating from Germany, doing so in this twofold way [German nationalism and the divergent religious trends—Ed.], just as since that day the other nations have consistently arrived at positions hostile to Germany.

With all their willingness to meet other nations halfway, the Germans because of a certain intellectual superiority have a way that, on the one hand, strikes others as arrogance, yet on the other,

causes them to look down on the Germans with contempt. These antagonisms to the German way were fastened on Calvinism when in the following period it took its course to the Western nations of Europe. But to a certain extent they were an inherent consequence of Calvinism itself. The inwardness of the German way was deepened and ennobled by Luther's work. The externalism of the West-Europeans has been intensified by their Calvinism.

Editor's Note: The foregoing, particularly the last paragraph in this broad survey of the impact of the Reformation on the general culture of the Germany of that day, may cause some lifting of eyebrows. It could have been omitted. But it seems that a man of Koehler's stature needs neither such petty correction nor feeble protection. But there is something that we may learn here.

The book was published in 1917, prior to the entry of the United States into World War I, but in a time when the feelings of men were deeply involved. We value Koehler for his sometimes uncanny perceptiveness and profound understanding of past events, above all for the way in which his every judgment is related to the Gospel. We feel for him as one senses that his emotions are becoming involved, surely in spite of his conscious efforts to eliminate this subjective element. It is pointless to speculate what his attitude might have been had he lived to see the rise of Hitlerism and the events of World War II. It is enough to take what he wrote in the frame of the time in which he wrote and against the background of those events, and so seek truly to understand him.

But for the sake of rounding this survey of Koehler on the impact of the Reformation on the general culture of Germany, we present another chapter (§197) in which he discusses the final phases of the Protestant Reformation and the beginnings of the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

The *substance of the history of this period from 1555 to 1580* is not easy to determine. It is during this period that the savage struggle between Catholicism and Calvinism was fought in Western Europe. There is an obvious connection between this and the fact that after the initial shock over the outbreak of the Reformation, Catholicism had recovered its composure and at the Council of Trent had organized its forces for the counter-attack. So one is inclined to count this period as part of the Counter-Reformation. One may also note that with the year 1548 (the Leipzig Interim) there began also for Lutheranism a new period, one that extended beyond 1580 into the time of Lutheran scholasticism. In spite of the conflict between Gnesio-Lutherans ("genuine Lutherans") and Philippists (followers of Melanchthon), the theological method of Melanchthon prevailed, and his foremost pupil, Martin Chemnitz, came to be the chief architect of the Formula of Concord. So one might like to combine the period from 1548 to 1580 with the activities of the dogmaticians of the 17th century, particularly because they concerned themselves chiefly with an elaboration of the confessional writings.

Nevertheless, it is in both of these cases better to locate transition from Reformation to Counter-Reformation in the time between 1580 and 1598. The real Counter-Reformation is the campaign launched from Rome and carried out under the leadership of the Jesuit Order with the objective of regaining the lost territories, first by means designed to win the minds, then by the use of military power in the great Thirty Years' War. Of this the West European War against Calvinism is not yet a part. It is rather a parallel to the struggles of the Evangelicals in Germany from 1521 or 1531 to 1555, first against the enforcement of the Edict of Worms and then against the terms of the Diet of Augsburg [Ed. 1547: the Interims, leading finally to the second phase of the Smalcaldic War]. This was the first military conflict, something that Protestantism had to endure everywhere, primarily for the sake of securing its right to outward existence.

This brought out the difference between the character of the Evangelicals in Germany and that of the Calvinists in England, France, and Holland. To a certain extent the former was derived from Luther's evangelical influence, though certainly in part also from the characteristically German lack of a sense of common purpose. That was the cause of their hesitation, their mutually conflicting courses of action, and the indecisive treaty of peace. The Calvinists share the qualities of the West European nations which were quicker to unite for common action and to defeat the foe with his own weapons. This in turn was well suited to the quality of hardness with which Calvin had imbued his followers. This gives Calvinism an edge in outward affairs, but at the same time involves a lack of inner depth where it does succeed. That is

why the first religious wars of Western Europe are to be treated as counterpart to the Smalcaldic War in the time of the Reformation.

A similar judgment is called for by the further intellectual development of Protestantism, not only in Germany but also in the western nations. The doctrinal controversies that grew out of the Leipzig Interim still are a part of the Reformation. They involved the church in the problem of becoming aware of the broad inter-connection of these hard-won doctrines, as well as the regaining of unity after a struggle over divisive issues. In this conflict *The Book of Concord* demonstrated the victory of the Lutheran party over Philippism. The Lutheran principles which oppose all attempts at artificial construction and systematization still prevailed, drawing their vitality directly from Scripture. But after the Lutheran Church had received its confessional symbols, there came the era of Lutheran scholasticism, a method which took the doctrinal content as a whole and now, contrary to the manner of Luther, attached greater importance to the perfecting of the system than to drawing the doctrine directly out of Scripture itself. In this respect the work that preceded 1580 still belongs to the Reformation era; the dogmatics of the 17th century to a period when the original spiritual vigor had declined.

In the Reformed Church things took a somewhat different course. During the military conflicts confessions were still drawn up in a number of countries on the basis of Calvin's *Institutio* and against Catholicism. These were then defended by force of arms. But when internal issues were taken up at the Synod of Dort, 1618, the various schools of thought began to go apart. Here again the difference appears between the Lutheranism of Germany and the Calvinism of other lands. Where in spite of their natural individualism the Germans were in their religion drawn together by the Scriptures, the West-Europeans with all their natural inclination for common action were nevertheless divided by their religious individualism. Even as Lutheran scholasticism, so also this rise of individualism is the result of an intellectual exhaustion. That is why the Counter-Reformation of Catholicism was given an opening for an attack.

As for the history of Catholicism it must, of course, be granted that the founding of the Order of Jesuits could be considered the beginning of the Counter-Reformation, if that were the only point of consideration. But if one notes that at the end of the 16th century everything, also among Catholics, went into a state of intellectual decline [Ed. in this connection Koehler notes the regeneration of the Jesuit Order by Aquaviva], and if one further notes that all of this is tied together with the sum total of world events, then it is better to count this first recovery of the Catholic Church and its occasional moderation toward Protestants as part of the Catholic Reform movement and its tendency to compromise which began in the thirties and continued to the end of the century.

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* Here ends the translation of the chapter, at which point in the original article Reim says in closing about Koehler's next section: "The following chapters then supply the detail for these rather general introductory observations" (*Journal* 5:2, p. 21).

Book Review

Andrew E. Steinmann: *From Abraham to Paul—A Biblical Chronology*, Concordia Publishing House, 2011, hard cover, 421 pages, 38 preliminary pages.

If pastors desire to humble their confirmation classes or Bible study groups or even their fellow-pastors, an almost sure way to do that is to give them a list of Bible events or Bible characters and ask them to list them in chronological order. No doubt, they may get Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in the

proper order, but how about Jehoshaphat, Athaliah, Isaiah, Ahab, Elisha, Ezra, Hezekiah, Jeremiah, Josiah, and Daniel? Or how about listing the towns of Paul's mission journeys in the order in which he visited them? Americans are not generally strong in such matters of history or chronology.

I am quite sure, however, that Andrew Steinmann would pass any such test with flying colors. His book on the order of events from the time of Abraham to the time of Paul is packed with details from both Bible history and secular history that present plausible dates for almost all of the events and persons playing a role in the vast expanse of time from 2166 BC (when Abraham was born) until AD 68 (when Paul was executed in Rome).

In three preliminary chapters Steinmann argues for the value of knowing Bible chronology and explains the methods that he used in determining specific dates. One key question needing to be answered in order to determine the chronology of the period from Genesis to King Solomon's reign is the date of the exodus of Israel from its Egyptian captivity. Steinmann's conclusion, based on 1 Kings 6:1 and corroborated by a careful study of secular history, is that "Solomon reigned 971t-932t, and the exodus from Egypt took place in Nisan 1446 BC. From these two anchor points we can reconstruct a chronology of OT events from Abraham to the end of the post-exilic period" (p. 65). The late-date theory that is accepted by many Bible scholars cannot stand—simply because we can determine definitely when King Solomon reigned, and the Bible definitely states: **"And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of the LORD"** (1 Kings 6:1). Since we believe that it was God who gave the author of 1 Kings the words he wrote down, we must agree with Steinmann's conclusion; and we can be thankful that this date is corroborated by other evidence provided through Steinmann's studies.

Chapters 4 through 9 take the reader from the birth of Abraham (2166 BC) to Nehemiah's return to Jerusalem (Neh. 13:6-7) in late 429/early 428 BC. Steinmann argues that Israel's time in Egypt was 430 years (1876-1446 BC), contrary to the claim of some that it was only 215 years. Steinmann asserts that "there is little to support the theory that Israel was in Egypt 215 years. Instead, the MT's [Masoretic Text] 430 years should be accepted as accurate" (p. 70).

The chronology of the time of the Israelite judges is complicated, but Steinmann has been able to establish definite dates for all the judges, and he maintains: "This timeline for the judges is consistent with archaeological finds from this period" (p. 107). According to his timeline Samuel and Samson were contemporaries, Samuel serving as judge from 1060-1049 BC, while Samson's activity extended from 1068-1049 BC. Steinmann, however, does allow for the possibility that Samson "could have begun his activity earlier. . . . However, this is unlikely" (p. 104).

The years given in the Bible for the kings of the divided kingdom after the death of Solomon have puzzled Bible students for a long time. Most of the apparent discrepancies were resolved by Edwin Thiele's book, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (3rd Ed., 1983). Steinmann has made use of Thiele's work as well as the work of a few others and has made a few corrections in Thiele's figures. The conclusion is that the Bible's apparent discrepancies are only apparent, not real.

There was a time when Old Testament history was regarded by secular historians as mostly fiction. In view of archeology's discoveries, however, this is not so much the case today. The mention of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel continues to be puzzling, since his name has not been found in the historical records currently extant. On this matter Steinmann concludes: "The problem of the identity of Darius the Mede has been much discussed in studies of Daniel. However, the most likely solution to the problem is that Darius the Mede is another name for Cyrus, whose mother was a Median princess" (p. 176).

After one brief chapter on the period between the Old and New Testaments, Steinmann devotes three chapters to the life of Jesus and one lengthy chapter to the period from Pentecost to the end of Paul's ministry. It is Steinmann's contention that the usual date of 4 BC that is given for the death of Herod the Great is incorrect, and that therefore it is not necessary to believe that Jesus was born before 4 BC. He states: "Once again, we are led to conclude that Herod's 37 year reign ended in 1 BC" (p. 229). The date for the birth of Jesus would then be late 3 or early 2 BC.

The chronology of Holy Week is discussed in great detail. On the basis of information provided in the Bible, there are only two years possible for the death of Christ: AD 30 and AD 33. Steinmann presents strong arguments for AD 33.

There was a time when historians had little confidence that Luke's book of Acts was historically and geographically accurate. Nor were they willing to accept many of Paul's letters as genuinely his. Steinmann, however, accepts the authenticity of all of Paul's letters in the New Testament, as well as the historical accuracy of the book of Acts (p. 299). Reputable historians recognize that the claims of present-day agnostic concocters of far-fetched theories (one thinks of Dan Brown) are not in line with honest archeology.

One area of controversy with regard to Paul's chronology is whether Galatians 2:1-10 refers to the famine relief trip of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem or to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. Steinmann argues that Paul in Galatians 2:1-10 is most likely referring to the Jerusalem council. That is, he says, the majority view. This reviewer has preferred the other view, which seems to make better sense of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Steinmann does not establish a definite date for when the letter to the Galatians was written, but he does not defend the notion that Galatians was written before 1 Thessalonians. It has seemed better to this reviewer to consider the letter to the Galatians as written even before the Jerusalem council, and thus it would have been the first of Paul's New Testament letters to be written.

I think it would be good for every pastor and teacher of New Testament history to have access to this book. But its price may put it out of reach for many. This is not a book of vague theories, but one that is packed with detailed arguments based on the evidence, though some are quite technical in nature. Steinmann has definitely done his homework. His bibliography of twenty-nine pages gives evidence of that.

For those who may wonder why Steinmann's chronology begins with Abraham and not with Genesis 1:1, he answers in his preface that "the heavily intertwined chronological and theological issues surrounding the period in Genesis before Abraham would require a book at least as large as the present volume to treat adequately and would detract from an otherwise nearly complete and comprehensive overview of biblical chronology. Such a project is best put aside for a later time and, perhaps, a different author" (pp. xxvi-xxvii). If such a book is written, we hope it is written by someone like Steinmann, who is convinced that Holy Scripture is the Word of God and that all its information with regard to time and place is totally accurate and reliable.

- David Lau