

Models of the Christian Life in Luther's Genesis Sermons and Lectures

By Robert Kolb

In his »Recultivating the vineyard« Scott Hendrix concludes that Martin Luther set out »to provide a religious environment in which believers would develop as fully as possible into the model Christians described by him in *Freedom of a Christian*: free through faith to serve others in love. The creation of these »real Christians« (to use his term) took precedence over other agendas that interpreters have occasionally tried to impose on Luther [...].«¹ Hendrix quotes Luther's treatise »On both kinds of the sacrament«: if his readers would abandon »unfaithfulness, hatred, envy, wrath, and unbelief«, then »we would at last become again a group of Christians«, in contrast to being »almost completely pagan and only Christian in name.«² Luther's concept of a »real« Christian incorporated two elements, Hendrix concludes. The first is »righteousness«, which signified for Luther that someone faithfully is and expresses what he or she is supposed to be. The second is »piety«, which Luther himself transformed from a word for general upright and honorable living to a designation for living a life of faith in God which produces love and service to others.³ As he communicated his call to his parishioners and students in Wittenberg to live the godly life in sermons and lectures, Luther cultivated a biblical sense of righteousness and piety through many means and rhetorical de-

1 Scott HENDRIX: *Recultivating the vineyard: the Reformation agendas of Christianization*. Louisville, KY; LO 2004, 37. The addition of »real« before Christians is not in the German but conveys the sense of Luther's comment.

2 Hendrix: *Recultivating the vineyard*, 40; Martin LUTHER: *Von beider Gestalt des Sakraments zu nehmen*, WA 10 II, 39, 10f ≅ LW 36, 264.

3 Hendrix: *Recultivating the Vineyard*, 59f; cf. Walter SPARN: »Wahrlich, dieser ist ein frommer Mensch gewesen!«: Überlegungen zu einem evangelischen Begriff von Frömmigkeit. In: *Post-Theism: reframing the Judeo-Christian tradition*/ ed. by Henri Andriën Krop; Arie Leendert Molendijk; Hendrik Johan Adriaanse de Vries. Louvain 2000, 447-465.

vices. Among them was the story, above all the biblical stories, which he retold and elaborated with suitable explanation and application to model the Christian life for his people.

I The Whole Life of a Christian Is a Life of Repentance

Luther's recultivation of the Christian life rested on several axioms. First, his own experience, as well as his reading of Scripture, had impressed upon him that the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized defied explanation, but the unshakable actuality of this mystery caused him nonetheless to define the Christian life as a continuing struggle. For the remnants of sinners' defiance of God and disdain for the welfare of other creatures disrupt the peace which God designed to frame human living.

For, he knew from his own experience, this mystery of continuing sin and evil in Christians' daily living made it necessary to wage a never-ending struggle against wickedness and impiety day in and day out. God and believers waged this struggle through the use of the law, which strikes sinners dead, and the gospel, which gives new life through Christ's death and resurrection. Although medieval antecedents framed what Luther meant when in 1517 he wrote, »the whole life of a Christian is a life of repentance«,⁴ it is clear that by 1529 his concept of repentance had come to focus upon the repetition of God's baptismal action of killing sinners and making them into children of God: »[...] the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand, a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever«, as he wrote in the Small Catechism.⁵ This action of God's condemning law and his life-

4 See Volker LEPPIN: »Omnem vitam fidelium penitentiam esse voluit«. ARG 93 (2003), 7-25, who demonstrates that in 1517 Luther was echoing the conviction of the fourteenth-century devotional writer and preacher Heinrich Tauler (circa 1300-1361) regarding the continuing necessity of humbling oneself before God. See also the critique of this position in Martin BRECHT: Luthers neues Verständnis der Buße und die reformatorische Entdeckung. ZThK 101 (2004), 281-291.

5 THE BOOK OF CONCORD: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church/ ed. by Robert Kolb; Timothy J. Wengert. MP 2000, 360 (12-14) ≅ BSLK 516, 29 - 517, 7.

restoring gospel permeated Luther's interpretation of both New and Old Testaments, according to Heinrich Bornkamm (1901-1977).⁶ In his lecture on Abraham's pleading for the people of Sodom,⁷ Luther repeated an earlier allegorical treatment of God's command not to take the lower and upper millstone from the needy at the same time,⁸ an interpretation that he had made more than a decade earlier in lecturing on Deuteronomy. Then he had not sketched the distinction of law and gospel with his later clarity:

»The lower and upper millstone are properly said to denote hope and fear, or law and gospel. The law is the word of wrath, the upper millstone; it preserves fear and humbles people through the recognition of sin. The gospel, the word of grace, preserves the conscience by faith, so that it does not tremble. The preaching of both is necessary.«

But then he counseled not to overdo either, neither punishing sin too strictly and terrifying too greatly nor treating the sinner too gently and consoling too strongly.⁹ In 1538 he stated,

»The upper millstone is the fear and judgment of God. This the lower millstone supports; it signifies the hope and feeling of mercy. Thus, the ministry of the Word should connect law and gospel, repentance and the forgiveness of sins.«¹⁰

Luther presumed that this struggle to leave godlessness behind and to practice true humanity, that is, to return to being a righteous or pious human being, took place in the two dimensions of human life that formed the heart of his anthropology. He understood that God had constructed humanness to be lived out in two relationships quite distinct from each other, though inextricably and inseparably linked with each other. He first set forth this anthropology at length in his treatises on three kinds and two kinds of »righteousness« in 1518/19,¹¹ and claimed that this distinction characterized »our theology« in 1531.¹² Sometimes

6 Heinrich BORNKAMM: *Luther and the Old Testament*/ trans. by Eric W. and Ruth C. Gritsch. Phil 1969, 262 f.

7 Gn 18, 29-33.

8 Dt 24, 6.

9 WA 14, 717, 3-10 ≙ LW 9, 244.

10 WA 43, 45, 2-5 ≙ LW 3, 237.

11 WA 2, (39) 43-47; (143) 145-152 ≙ LW 31, 297-306.

12 WA 40 I, 45, 24-27 ≙ LW 26, 7.

more explicitly, sometimes less explicitly, this anthropological foundation for his thinking accompanied his proclamation of the gospel throughout his career.¹³

For Luther, Christian living did not simply involve doing good works although he did define human activity as an essential element of piety. His more comprehensive definition of the faithful Christian life can be found in his »Warning to his dear German people« of 1531. There he reflected on the »success« of his efforts over the past decade, commenting, »It has, praise God, come to this, that men and women, young and old, know the catechism and how to believe, live, pray, suffer, and die«.¹⁴ This suggests that Luther gauged the success of his Reformation in terms of five elements that constituted for him the Christian life:

1) Trust in God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier replaces trust in false gods of human invention. Luther's use of examples from biblical figures served to nurture dependence on God and confidence in his merciful disposition toward his baptized children.¹⁵

2) Suffering of all kinds haunts much of life on earth. Luther turned to the likes of Abraham and Joseph, for example, to demonstrate how hearers and readers could flee to the refuge and haven of their providential Creator and Savior for support and comfort in times of affliction. Luther also regarded the God-pleasing conduct of daily life as a significant element of piety. That daily life embraced two aspects of righteous or pious activity for a preacher with as strong convictions about sin as Luther had.

3) »Mortifying the flesh«, that is, defeating temptations to stray from trusting in God and loving the neighbor is necessary as preparation for

4) the practice of humanity as God had designed it, in love toward other, performing God-commanded virtues within the context of callings or vocations.

13 See Robert KOLB: Die Zweidimensionalität des Mensch-Seins: die zweierlei Gerechtigkeit in Luthers *De votis monasticis iudicium*. In: Luther und das monastische Erbe/ hrsg. von Christoph Bultmann; Volker Leppin; Andreas Lindner. Tü 2007, 207-220; and Robert KOLB: God and his human creatures in Luther's Sermons on Genesis: the reformer's early use of his distinction of two kinds of righteousness. CJ 33 (2007), 164-184.

14 »Aber nu ists, Gott lob, dahin komen, das man und weib, jung vnd alt, den Catechismum weis, Und wie man gleuben, leben, beten, leiden und sterben sol, [...]«; WA 30 III, 317, 32-34 ≙ LW 47, 52.

15 Bornkamm: Luther and the Old Testament, 23f.

5) Exemplary living prepares for exemplary dying. To be sure, Luther treated these aspects of pious living on the basis of a variety of biblical genre, but important among them were those models for such living sprang from biblical narratives on which Luther preached and lectured.

II Luther as Narrative Theologian

»Narrative« became a major topic in biblical studies, homiletics, and systematic theology a quarter century ago. »Narrative« can refer in these settings to the style of preaching that relies on stories of real or imagined people and events from Scripture, history, or contemporary experience to foster the hearers' absorption of the preacher's message. It also refers to the biblical accounts of God's and human actions and reactions to each other. From that focus on the biblical text narrative theology also reached out to embrace discussions of the »metanarrative« that stands behind individual stories and/or the entire biblical report of God's interaction with this human creatures. Biblical narrative serves a number of purposes, among them specifically the cultivation of human righteousness and the pious life.¹⁶

According to the analysis of Yale systematic theologian Hans Wilhelm Frei (1922-1988), whose work has guided much recent thinking on »narrative«, »Western Christian reading of the Bible in the days before the rise of historical criticism [...] was usually strongly realistic, i. e. at once literal and historical, and not only doctrinal or edifying«,¹⁷ though for Luther it certainly was that, too. Like a stream of previous biblical preachers, above all Augustine (354-430), the Wittenberg reformer »envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories [...] from creation to the final consummation to come«.¹⁸ The reformer was convinced that neither the God who designed human life nor the course of human living had changed substantially between Abraham's time and his own. Luther's

¹⁶ Gordon J. WENHAM: *Story as Torah: reading Old Testament narrative ethically*. Grand Rapids, MI 2004.

¹⁷ Hans W. Frei: *The eclipse of Biblical narrative: a study in eighteenth and nineteenth century hermeneutics*. New Haven, CT 1974, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

practice in using Scripture also reflected Frei's observation about his time that »since the world truly rendered by combining biblical narratives into one was indeed the one and only real world, it must in principle embrace the experience of any present age and reader.«¹⁹

Frei acknowledged his debt to the literary theory of German-Jewish émigré scholar Erich Auerbach (1892-1957),²⁰ who used the contrast between Greek epic ways of telling tales of human life and the biblical record as the basis for his observations about the representation of reality in Western literature. Auerbach classified biblical narratives as intrinsically historical in intent – even though he did not necessarily regard them as historically true in point of fact –, contrasting them with those of Homer, and he found a deep cleft separating the two literary traditions. Readers gain full benefit from the story of Odysseus, Penelope, and Euryclea, Auerbach argued, without being compelled to believe they existed, »but the Biblical narrator [...] had to believe in the objective truth of the story of Abraham's sacrifice« of Isaac, and »had to believe in it passionately«. Auerbach labeled this not an orientation toward »realism« but toward truth that simply subjects readers to itself.²¹ And yet the biblical text's hegemony over its readers is not exercised so simply as this might make it seem. Biblical narratives depict human life through stories full of »gaps«, Auerbach emphasized. The episodic nature of the Old Testament »requires an interpreter even though the message does emerge clearly from the texts«. ²² The interpreter must retell its stories for new hearers in new times and places, filling in the gaps on the basis of the claim of the text to provide a new application of the story to real experiences and thus to authentic human life. Luther slipped easily into this role. He accepted the challenge which one of Auerbach's disciples, the Jewish exegete Meir Sternberg later saw in this style of narrative: the »ubiquity of gaps about character and plot exposes to us our own ignorance: history unrolls as a continuum of discontinuities, a sequence of non sequiturs, which challenge us to repair the omissions by our native

¹⁹ Frei: *The eclipse of Biblical narrative*, 3.

²⁰ Frei: *The eclipse of Biblical narrative*, vii.

²¹ Erich AUERBACH: *Mimesis: the representation of reality in western literature*/ trans. by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ 1953, 14-16.

²² Auerbach: *Mimesis*, 17.

wit.«²³ Luther employed the gaps in the biblical narrative to explain how God works in behalf of his human creatures and what he requires from them, while at the same time illuminating the mysterious nature of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized through these gaps. The hearer has no illusion of being able to take control of knowledge or direction in such situations: the children of God can only listen and hearken to the Word of the Lord.

Two other observations from Auerbach illumine Luther's use of Scripture. First, the biblical narrative engages the reader in the midst of daily life. This engagement with reality takes place because »a part of the genius of these stories is that they depict neither simple heroes nor, consistently, upper class life, as Homer did. The Old Testament figures [...] can fall much lower in dignity.«²⁴ Biblical people »are bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation [...].«²⁵

Second, »if the text of the Biblical narrative, then, is so greatly in need of interpretation on the basis of its own content, its claim to absolute authority forces is still further in the same direction.«²⁶ Sternberg attributed the biblical text's authority and hold on its readers to two factors:

1) the omniscience of the biblical narrator produces a view of his stories that is derived from the omniscience of God, whose servant and voice the narrator is; thus, the text claims irrevocably to be true.²⁷

23 Meir STERNBERG: *The poetics of biblical narrative: ideological literature and the drama of reading*. Bloomington, IN, 1985, 47.

24 Auerbach: *Mimesis*, 22.

25 Auerbach: *Mimesis*, 18.

26 Auerbach: *Mimesis*, 15.

27 Sternberg: *The poetics ...*, 12f. Sternberg describes the connection between the biblical presentation of the person of God and the authors' art in depicting him and his actions: »The building of supernatural premises into the action, the preference of the dramatic method over commentary, the foreshadowing-fulfillment structure of repetition, the manifold patterning of redundancy, speech as creative act, the manipulation of sequence in units ranging from the entire Bible to a verse, similarly variable play of perspectives, forms of serialization, shifts between overt and covert providence, spatiotemporal bounding, and so on: the strategy coordinating such an array bespeaks an ideological crux of the first magnitude. Anchored in this composition, moreover, the effect and the narrative stance of intermediacy from which it is generated afford an equally powerful explanation for a set of other measures, great and small. Above all, their ideological

2) the Old Testament narratives are, therefore, first and foremost the stories of God, his actions and his address of his human creatures. This »history unfolds a theology in action – one distinctively grounded in God’s control and providence [...] history-writing doubles as a sacred contract, uniquely explaining the processes of time by reference to a covenantal relation with divinity«.²⁸ Luther treated biblical narration in this way, taking for granted that readers of Scripture were engaging and engaged by the person of the Almighty Father and real human creatures who had interacted with him.²⁹ He trusted the biblical reports regarding God’s power and reliability as well as their reflection of the course of real human living.

Sternberg observes that in its narratives the Old Testament seldom tells the reader of the moral or theological significance of the reported events.³⁰ While this is true, those narratives are set in the context of such interpretations of God and human life. Luther’s application of the narratives did not simply retell the story and presume that sixteenth century hearers would understand. His use of the narratives involved extensive interpretive comment at several levels. This can be clearly in his several treatments of Genesis, which form the basis of this essay, from earlier sermons (1519-1521, 1523 [published 1527] and later lectures (1535-1545).³¹ The

imperative accounts for the narrator’s drastic self-effacement in the handling of a plot that foregrounds God’s omnipotence«; Sternberg: *The poetics ...*, 118.

28 Sternberg: *The poetics ...*, 44f.

29 Bornkamm makes this point; Bornkamm: *Luther and the Old Testament*, 6f. 261.

30 Sternberg: *The poetics ...*, 38.

31 See the commentary of the editor Ernst Thiele (1856-1922) in WA 9, 320-323 on the sermons and Glossa of 1519-1523. On the sermons preached in 1523/24, published 1527, see the introduction to the printed edition in WA 24, xiii-xlvii, and to the notes taken on the sermons as they were delivered; WA 14, 92-96. The text of notes from Georg Rörer (1492-1557) and Stephan Roth (1492-1546) are found in WA 14, 97-488. See J[ohannes] P. BOENDERMAKER: *Heet eerste word blijft gelden: Luthers preken over de vijf boeken van Mozes 1523-1525, inleiding en enkele teksten*. In: *Luther na 500 jaar: teksten, vertaald en besproken*/ ed. by Jan T. Bakker; Johannes P. Boendermaker. Kempen 1983, 99-123. The lectures are found in WA 42-44. I have dated individual parts of these lectures according to the analysis of Gustav Koffmane (1852-1915) in the introduction of WA 42, vii-viii. Despite some lingering doubts about the validity of the text of the Genesis lectures of 1535-1545, the more convincing argument is made by critics of the view advanced by Erich SEEGER: *Studien zu Luthers Genesisvorlesung: zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach*

comparison of these stages of Luther's interpretation of the book could form an interesting essay in itself, but because the fundamental elements of Luther's understanding of the Christian life are present in the early 1520s in his preaching and remained, with certain developments in detail and emphasis, to be sure, in his lectures in 1535-1545, we will not in this study pursue these comparisons.

Indeed, Luther employed other literary forms in cultivating the life of repentance, and he treated biblical stories as more than only recitals of how daily life works. He used »figural« interpretations of the people who inhabited biblical narratives, such as Leah and Rachel, in his treatment of Christ and his church.³² But he cultivated piety by retelling, refashioning, the stories of daily life and its encounters with God, sin, and neighbor. Already in 1521, as Luther dictated *Scholia* on Genesis, he noted that »all the books of the entire Scripture are either »historiae« or »historice narrationes, [scilicet] Exempla tum legum, tum operum divinorum, vel doctent fidem.«³³ God's law taught human beings what they should do, and the recital of God's work taught them the gospel and faith. The story of Samuel's mother had initiated his fascination with Scripture as a youth, Luther recalled at table.³⁴ David Steinmetz compares Luther's handling of Old Testament narratives to the techniques of modern authors who combine fictional elaboration with biographical or historical description, such as André Maurois and Gamaliel Bradford. Luther's »narrative imagination« – »his intuitive response to the Bible as a work of art« – »grasps his readers not only at the level of their discursive reason but also at the level of their imaginative participation in their common humanity.«³⁵

dem alten Luther. GÜ 1932, and Peter MEINHOLD: Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber. S 1936, critics such as Bernhard KLAUS: Die Lutherüberlieferung Veit Dietrichs und ihre Problematik. ZBKG 53 (1988), 33-47, and Ulrich ASENDORF: *Lectura in Biblia: Luthers Genesisvorlesung (1535-1545)*. GÖ 1998, 33-42.

32 Sabine HIEBSCH: *Figura ecclesiae: Lea und Rachel in Martin Luthers Genesispredigten*. MS 2002; see also David C. STEINMETZ: Luther and the blessing of Judah. LuJ 71 (2004), 159-178, on Luther's figural treatment of Old Testament passages.

33 WA 9, 353, 8-10.

34 WA TR I, 44, 16-20 (116); Bornkamm: Luther and the Old Testament, 8 f.

35 David C. STEINMETZ: Luther and the drunkenness of Noah. In: David C. Steinmetz: Luther in context. Bloomington, IN 1986, 110 f.

Luther's education had made him sensitive to the literary constructions of the biblical stories.³⁶ As a re-teller of biblical stories Luther presumed that only an osmotic membrane separated Jerusalem from Wittenberg, ancient Israel from contemporary Saxony. To be sure, Luther retold the narratives with some historical sensitivity in spite of his belief that human life was largely the same in Abraham's time and his own. The manner in which Joseph ran the civil government of Egypt³⁷ defied the professor's imagination, and he was quite sure it would not have worked in his day and place.³⁸ Nonetheless, Mickey Mattox's judgment in regard to Luther's »charitable« reading of Hagar accurately describes the underlying relationship of biblical text, history, and application: »While Luther's is a decidedly anachronistic interpretation in the sense that he lacks a modern sense of historical change, moreover, it possesses at least the advantage that it yields characters whose struggles parallel those of the contemporary Christian.«³⁹ Therefore, as Mattox has noted, Luther accepted the invitation of the biblical text to enter into its world of thought »enthusiastically, never hesitating to imagine the biblical characters into his world or himself into theirs.«⁴⁰ He presumed that he was fundamentally like all other readers of Scripture who read the text under the Holy Spirit's guidance, and he assumed the role of the teacher of other readers, whether present parishioners or future preachers.

36 Eberhard WINKLER: Luther als Seelsorger und Prediger. In: *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546: Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag/ im Auftrag des Theologischen Arbeitskreises für Reformationsgeschichtliche Forschung* hrsg. von Helmar Junghans. Bd. 1. B, 1983, 236. According to Ulrich NEMBACH: *Predigt des Evangeliums: Luther als Prediger, Pädagoge, und Rhetor*. NK 1972, 131-174, Luther's preaching followed the form of Quintilian's (um 30-96) genre of advice for the people, but Gerhard Krause (in a review of Nembach in: *ThLZ* 99 [1974], 274f) and Helmar Junghans (*LuJ* 41 [1974], 149f, and *DERS.*: *Rhetorische Bemerkungen Luthers in seinen Dictata super Psalterium*. Theol. Versuche 8 [1977], 97-128) placed his rhetoric in a broader stream of tradition. Bornkamm: *Luther and the Old Testament*, 35-42, details some of Luther's literary treatment of Old Testament texts.

37 Gn 47, 13f.

38 WA 44, 666, 5-13 ≙ LW 8, 119.

39 Mickey Leland MATTOX: *Defender of the most holy matriarchs: Martin Luther's interpretation of the women of Genesis in the Enarrationes in Genesin, 1535-45*. Leiden; Boston 2003, 165.

40 Mattox: *Defender ...*, 1.

In that way he replicated what Sternberg sees as the role of the biblical narrator at the same time he was in the process of examining the text literally and theologically. Sternberg conjectured that for the biblical narrator »the intervention of the Holy Spirit levels all the barriers that normally divide the far from the near, the private from the public, the interior from the exterior«,⁴¹ and Luther seems to have presumed something similar. American homileticist John McClure holds that preachers should »both ›textualize experience‹, thereby inviting their hearers to see their lives on the terms of the biblical narrative, *and* ›experientialize the text‹, thereby allowing current experience to illustrate the meaning and ongoing significance of the text.«⁴² Luther did both.

Bornkamm contended that Luther could do so because he experienced in Old Testament texts a »mirror of life« in sixteenth century Germany. Therefore, Luther explained biblical texts out of contemporary German life, as in the case of Lot's incest in a drunken state.⁴³ Luther regarded Lot's incest as an inadvertent rather than a purposeful sin, similar to a young boy's imprudently setting a fire and being spared by the law because he clearly was not an arsonist, or similar to »a brawl, in which angry people engage in a fight«, but are excused by civil authorities as having committed an imprudent sin due to circumstances. The biblical reports record not »impossible things« but rather things that are »natural and in harmony with experience.«⁴⁴ Likewise, Luther evaluated or explained contemporary German life on the basis of biblical texts.

Luther often commented on the usefulness of examples for teaching various elements of Christian living although he did not formulate a pedagogical-psychological theory as to how examples actually teach or motivate. He presumed that hearers would make the necessary associations, trusting in God's promise to them, obeying his commands for their lives. He did not presume this so completely, however, that he dispensed

41 Sternberg: *The poetics ...*, 76.

42 In a review of Charles L. CAMPBELL: *Preaching Jesus: new directions for homiletics* in Hans Frei's postliberal theology. Grand Rapids, MI 1997. In: *Journal for preachers* 21 (1998) number 2, 36, as quoted by David J. LOSE: *Confessing Jesus Christ: preaching in a postmodern world*. Grand Rapids, MI 2003, 123.

43 Gn 19, 31-33.

44 WA 43, 96, 36 - 97, 6 ≙ LW 3, 309f.

with his own commentary; it was designed to teach in very specific terms precisely what the hearers were to gain from the story. The stories hover in the background of discourses often pages long in print as the preacher or professor drew careful applications.

Luther marveled at the fact that God engages his human creatures in conversation and urged his readers and hearers to pay close attention to the stories in which God's personal dialog directed the lives of ancient believers.

»Those who read the bible stories perfunctorily regard them as though Claus Schmid were talking with Hans Mist, one person to another. But if you look at these stories correctly, it is a great and wonderful thing that the divine majesty talks with people as with a child. There is no more precious sign of God's grace and favor than when he lets himself be heard, and no greater plague than when he is silent.«

Therefore, the Wittenberg parishioners were to recognize the magnificence of God in these stories of his engagement with human beings and take them to heart as strengthening for their faith and encouragement to good works.⁴⁵ As Ulrich Asendorf noted, Luther found in the books of Moses »examples of faith, love, and the cross« in the patriarchs, who teach believers to trust and love God.⁴⁶

However, Luther also distinguished between good examples and extraordinary – he sometimes called them »miraculous« – interventions by God in the patriarchs' lives. The latter should not serve as models for breaking out of the framework God's plan for usual, normal human life had set. Thomas Müntzer (circa 1489-1525) had used the examples of Abraham's freeing Lot by the sword⁴⁷ and David's fighting the Syrians precisely in this manner,⁴⁸ and Luther admonished, »one should note that the examples of the saints and of the children of God must not be understood as something to imitate and as rules for all except when they follow the rule laid down in the Word«. ⁴⁹

45 WA 24, 294, 17 - 295, 26; cf. WA 14, 245, 9 / 30 - 246, 4 / 15. Cf. the similar comments on Genesis 26 and God's address of Isaac; WA 14, 334, 5 / 14 / 24 - 337, 1 / 11 / 32; 24, 447, 19 - 450, 25.

46 Ulrich ASENDORF: Die Theologie Martin Luthers nach seinen Predigten. GÖ 1988, 342, with reference to WA 24, 11, 26-12; 4, 15, 2-5.

47 Gn 14.

48 WA 42, 531, 7-13 ≙ LW 2, 374; WA 42, 570, 24-30 ≙ LW 3, 30 f; WA 43, 61, 33 - 63, 5 ≙ LW 3, 260-262; WA 43, 640, 32 - 641, 18 ≙ LW 5, 307 f; WA 43, 653, 12-34 ≙ LW 5, 325-326.

49 WA 43, 322, 39-41 ≙ LW 4, 261.

Luther often reminded parishioners and students that the biblical narratives reported on real, live, flesh and blood people because the Holy Spirit »delights in playing and trifling when describing things that are insignificant, childish, and worthless; and he hands this down to be taught in the church for its most significant edification.«⁵⁰ Luther's doctrine of the created order and its worth expressed itself in his reveling in the details of the common and ordinary. He assured the Wittenberg congregation that as long as sin is not in control, »no natural emotion is evil, as we see in Christ, who had feelings and affections according to his nature as any other human being«, as he talked of Jacob's love for his children and his »natural fatherly heart«, comparing his love to that of Mary for Jesus.⁵¹ To his students Luther commented on Abraham's emotions, frequently with a comment denying that the patriarch was a block of wood or stone.⁵² In the reformer's view Abraham and Jacob shared his own feelings and perceptions of human life.

In amplifying the humanity of the real people who crossed the biblical stage, Luther could not leave God out of the stories because he was unable to think of human creatures apart from their relationship to their Creator, just as he warned against trying to think about God apart from his revelation of himself to those human creatures, hidden beyond human grasp. Luther insisted on understanding what made God God in a different way than had his scholastic instructors. God's treatment of Abimelech after he had taken Sarah to himself⁵³ reveals that

»God's righteousness is not, as they have taught in the schools, the severity, sternness, or violent anger with which God condemns. It is the righteousness through which he has mercy on the humble as he protects them against unjust violence and punishes the guilty.«⁵⁴

⁵⁰ WA 43, 671, 32-37 ≙ LW 5, 352..

⁵¹ WA 14, 467, 12-23 / 28-34; 24, 15-27.

⁵² WA 43, 92, 12-14 ≙ LW 3, 303; WA 43, 162, 12-16 ≙ LW 4, 37; WA 43, 277, 10-24 ≙ LW 4, 196 f; WA 43, 285, 25-30 ≙ LW 4, 208; WA 44, 525, 38 - 526, 3 ≙ LW 7, 305. Cf. WA 43, 96, 15-22 ≙ LW 3, 309; WA 43, 149, 27 - 150, 11 ≙ LW 4, 19 f; WA 44, 187, 39 - 188, 13 ≙ LW 6, 253; WA 44, 395, 29-34 ≙ LW 7, 131; WA 44, 588, 36 - 589, 12 ≙ LW 8, 13; WA 44, 591, 4-7 ≙ LW 8, 16; WA 44, 593, 42 - 595, 14 ≙ LW 8, 20-22.

⁵³ Gn 20, 1-5.

⁵⁴ WA 43, 113, 6-9 ≙ LW 3, 331; cf. WA 44, 485, 25 - 486, 38 ≙ LW 7, 251-253.

When this God identified himself to Abram in Gn 17, 1, Luther again noted that God spoke not to stones, wood, or beasts of burden, but to real human beings, for »the word ›God‹ indicates a relationship. It refers to him whom the descendants of Abraham believe to be God and who, in turn, reveals himself to them as God and their eternal benefactor.«⁵⁵ For Luther the human story is a vital part of God's story, and God's story is the centerpiece of the human story, a key element in his definition of human righteousness.

III Fearing, Loving, and Trusting in God above All Things

Piety begins and ends with trust in God in which combat against Satan and love for the neighbor are enveloped. Luther presupposed that God had fashioned people with a two dimensional set of relationships that determined, first of all, their identity as his faithful children, and, second, their performance of his expectations for his children in his world.⁵⁶ Throughout both the sermons of the 1520s and the lectures of 1535-1545 Luther found examples in Genesis of the two dimensional nature of human life, or as he called it in describing Jacob, »two kinds of holiness«.⁵⁷ In introducing his sermons on Genesis in 1527 he reminded readers that God had given many examples and sayings in which he made it clear that faith alone lies at the basis of human living.⁵⁸ The first dimension of human righteousness focused on the First Table of the law and what God does for his human creatures, the second on the Second Table and what human creatures are made to do for God, as becomes clear at many points in the unfolding of Abraham's story.⁵⁹

The story of Cain and Abel revealed how human righteousness in God's sight depends simply and alone on God's favorable disposition toward his people.⁶⁰ In 1535 the professor told his students,

⁵⁵ WA 42, 609, 33-35 ≙ LW 3, 86.

⁵⁶ WA 2, 43-47. 145-152.

⁵⁷ »Duplex sanctitas«, that which the Word establishes in relationship to God and that which human creatures perform; WA 43, 575, 22 - 576, 35 ≙ LW 5, 213f; cf. WA 43, 588, 37 - 589, 37 ≙ LW 5, 232f.

⁵⁸ WA 24, 17, 14-19. Luther repeated this theme throughout the sermons, among many examples; cf. WA 24, 296, 19-37; 318, 30 - 321, 34.

⁵⁹ WA 43, 484, 6-17 ≙ LW 5, 79f.

⁶⁰ WA 9, 338, 24-30.

»This is the chief point [summa] of our teaching [...] that a person rather than his work is acceptable to God and that a person does not become righteous as a result of a righteous work, but that a work becomes righteous and good as a result of a person's being righteous and good. [...] Abel, rather than his work, was righteous and that work was pleasing because of the person, not the person because of his work.«⁶¹

Abraham served as Luther's prime instance of a life that clearly differentiated and united the two dimensions of what it means to be human. On the basis of Abraham's story

»we do not deny that works must be performed [...] faith and works indeed fit together well and are inseparably joined, but it is faith alone that obtains salvation. [...] faith alone justifies [...]. Works do not save; they do not have this glory. No, they are the fruits of the person who has been saved. Our righteousness comes through faith.«⁶²

Abraham is the classic paradigm for the way the Creator who brought the world out of nothing in Gn 1 re-creates sinners. Commenting on the call of Abraham in Gn 12, Luther told his students, »God chooses as patriarch an idolater, who is estranged from God and a prisoner of Satan«.

»Abraham is merely the material that the Divine Majesty seizes through the Word and forms into a new human being, into a patriarch. And so this rule is universally true, that of himself the human creature is nothing, is capable of nothing, and has nothing but sin, death, and condemnation, but through his mercy Almighty God brings it about that he is something and is freed from sin, death, and condemnation through Christ, the blessed seed.«⁶³

Again and again, Abraham's story revealed for Luther that the relationship between all believers and their Lord was created alone by God through his Word.⁶⁴

The stories of this relationship between Creator and creature take place within a framework which Luther found in his reading of Scripture, one that attributed to God the almighty power and total responsibility for his world of which his Ockhamist instructors had spoken.⁶⁵ At the same

⁶¹ WA 42, 190, 37 - 191, 5 ≙ LW 1, 257; cf. WA 42, 191, 5 - 192, 13 ≙ LW 1, 257-259.

⁶² WA 43, 256, 36-42 ≙ LW 4, 166.

⁶³ WA 42, 437, 42 - 438, 2; 437, 31-36 ≙ LW 2, 247.

⁶⁴ WA 42, 439, 9-13 ≙ LW 2, 249.

⁶⁵ Heiko Augustinus OBERMAN: *The harvest of medieval theology*, Gabriel Biel and late medieval nominalism. 3. ed. Durham, NC 1983, 30-56.

time Luther believed that God demands performance that expresses that unconditionally and freely given identity as his children. For he had given them responsibility for the working of his world. Sternberg posed the biblical problem:

»Does the Almighty control the human heart? If no, where is his omnipotence? If yes, where is man's free will, hardly less novel in terms of ideology and equally underscored at the beginning of Genesis? Biblical narrative gives no straightforward answer, because the question is unanswerable, and no consistent treatment, except for the consistency of maneuvering between the two extremes.«⁶⁶

Luther's sense of the mystery of what it means to be human plotted another solution to the tension between narratives which focus on God's power and responsibility and those which focus on human responsibility and calling to obedience in God's world. He kept these two responsibilities in tension and refused to homogenize and harmonize them by assigning partial responsibility to God, partial responsibility to human creatures.

Occasionally, he reviewed this tension in presenting biblical stories to students and parishioners. He did not presume to unravel the mystery of how God and human creature can both be responsible within the functioning of God's creation, but he did believe that God is at work when it appears as though human agents are in charge. In the sermon on Gn 6 Luther spoke of Noah's exercising his own responsibility for rescuing his family in the midst of the Flood. If you say, »God will sustain me«, and get lazy and not work, it will not happen.

»It is true that he gives all things; he sustains and preserves everyone. But if you do not want to use what you are able to put to use, that is tempting God. It is his will that you put to use what you have at hand, that he has given you and placed at your disposal, not that you close your mouth and let his creation go. He has given it to you. He will not perform a miracle for you when it is not necessary.«⁶⁷

At least twice in his lectures the reformer summarized Augustine's observation that »God governs the things he has created so that he nevertheless allows them to function with their distinctive impulses [...] God makes use of definite means and tempers his exercise of his miraculous powers so

⁶⁶ Sternberg: The poetics ..., 110.

⁶⁷ WA 24, 181, 6-9 / 19-26.

that he makes use of the service of nature and of natural means.«⁶⁸ Luther warned his students in lecture against saying »I am the pastor of a church about which I know that God is concerned. Therefore I shall do nothing and shall not be concerned about my ministry.«⁶⁹ God's total responsibility lies alongside total human responsibility, and Luther refused to harmonize and homogenize the two, preaching both as he distinguished God's gospel from the law that describes proper human actions.

God not only forgives sin and bestows new life and salvation in Christ. He also exercises his providential control over his universe. Although Luther's reading of Genesis often treated Christ in a variety of prophetic connections, his retelling of narratives of daily life often focused on God's providential care, a great comfort to Luther. That God sustained Jacob as he went to meet Esau⁷⁰ reminded Luther that the whole course of nature and human life reveals more good than evil, demonstrates that »a very small part of life is subjected to the devil's power«.⁷¹ This results alone from God's goodness and mercy. Even when the ungodly forget God and their obligations to him, he is leading and governing them as well as the godly in all their actions.⁷² Believers persist in trust, as Noah had, even when evil seems to triumph.⁷³ This trust clings to God on good days and bad days, not only for death but also for life.

IV Suffering as Child of God and Enemy of Satan

In the mystery of evil's invasion of the Creator's world, both suffering and sin shaped Luther's agenda. In daily life Christians continually flee to God, sometimes as victims of evils visited by others, sometimes as rebels who must be turned from defiance of God and changed to living in the consciousness of being his child.

68 WA 42, 316, 21-25 ≅ LW 2, 76; WA 42, 512, 19 f ≅ LW 2, 350. Cf. AUGUSTINUS: De trinitate 3, 4; Aurelius AUGUSTINUS: De trinitate libri XV: (libri I-XII). Turnholt 1968, 135-137. (Corpus christianorum: series latina; 50)

69 WA 44, 461, 37 - 462, 5; 463, 22-32 ≅ LW 7, 219. 221 f.

70 Gn 32.

71 WA 44, 67, 9 f ≅ LW 6, 90.

72 WA 44, 168, 1-27 ≅ LW 6, 92.

73 WA 24, 168, 31 - 169, 23.

One of the foremost characteristics of the pious or righteous believer was the presence of suffering in one of several forms. Luther taught how to deal with this variety of suffering on the basis of faith by calling attention to how the ancient patriarchs had done so. Abraham offered a number of good examples of the fact that »the godly who are burdened with a cross and in various ways are hard pressed and groan under this weight have need of God's promises in order to be buoyed up by them.«⁷⁴ Both confrontations with their enemies and the continuing childlessness of Abraham and Sarah tested the faith of the couple, Luther explained to the congregation.⁷⁵ In retelling Isaac's encounter with Abimelech Luther observed,

»you see how kind the Lord is to his saints. To be sure, he tests them, sends them into exile, lets them be exposed to danger to reputation and life, and permits them to be afflicted with famine and misfortunes of every kind; yet he provides excellent, quiet, and safe hospitality and grants peace in the midst of their enemies.«

This confirmed what he had shown on the basis of several of Abraham's experiences.⁷⁶

The worst of these sufferings come from God's afflicting his saints or seeming to be absent in the midst of afflictions, as Abraham experienced when he deceived Abimelech to protect himself.⁷⁷ Luther explained to the Wittenberg parishioners that God's delaying his promises to Abram laid a cross and suffering upon the patriarch, alongside the difficulties caused by being a stranger in Egypt. But God still was governing the course of Abram's and Sarai's life and gave them consolation in the midst of their trials.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ WA 43, 33, 19f ≅ LW 3, 221.

⁷⁵ WA 14, 221, 20 / 36 - 222, 24 / 30; WA 24, 248, 29 - 249, 23.

⁷⁶ WA 43, 465, 3-7 ≅ LW 5, 53; cf. WA 43, 436, 37 - 437, 8 ≅ LW 5, 12. On Abraham WA 14, 291, 3 / 23 - 292, 23 / 25; 24, 361, 29 - 363, 30; 42, 526, 32-37 ≅ LW 2, 369; WA 42, 533, 32-36 ≅ LW 2, 378f and above all, at the call to sacrifice Isaac WA 43, 200, 30 - 268, 10 ≅ LW 4, 91-183. Similar incidents provided for good narrative and similar observations in Hagar's life; WA 42, 599, 29-36 ≅ LW 3, 71f; in Jacob's life WA 43, 526, 32 - 529, 17 ≅ LW 5, 142f; WA 44, 174, 30 - 175, 8 ≅ LW 6, 235f; in Joseph's life WA 44, 390, 14 - 394, 35 ≅ LW 7, 123-129; WA 44, 419, 37 - 420, 32 ≅ LW 7, 161-164

⁷⁷ Gn 20; WA 43, 111, 28-36 ≅ LW 3, 329.

⁷⁸ WA 14, 224, 13-23 / 32-40. On Luther's use of his concept of the »hidden God« in depicting Abraham; see Juhani FORSBERG: *Das Abrahambild in der Theologie Luthers: pater fidei sanctissimus*. S 1984, 31-38.

As he introduced Joseph to the congregation in Wittenberg, he labeled the stories of this patriarch »the true ›golden legends‹, in which God »teaches how he boils and fries his saints, how he plays with them, as if everything he had promised was a lie«. ⁷⁹ God remained hidden for Joseph, but he continued to trust that God was with him even as Potiphar's wife tempted him and had him thrown into prison, the German version of his 1523 sermons explained to readers. ⁸⁰ Luther spoke of God's playing with the saints in a similar way to his students. ⁸¹ Nonetheless, Luther took seriously the terror and confusion of the saints when God is at work in their lives »under the appearance of the opposite« of his true disposition toward them. Luther's appeal to God's reliability and steadfast lovingkindness in these situations remained the closest he got to a theodical address of the problem. He refused to find explanations for questions regarding the origin of evil or its ultimate cause in human reasoning. Instead he looked to the person of his creator, whose demonstration of love for his rebellious human creatures in Christ's death on the cross provided all the justification God needed.

Satan and his minions are responsible for many of the attacks and afflictions of both a temporal and a spiritual nature from which Christians suffer, both from inside themselves and from others. The very presence of the faithful people of God provokes the devil to visit catastrophe upon them and their surroundings. The death of Abel at the hands of his brother Cain gave the preacher the opportunity to instruct the Wittenberg congregation regarding the persecution of God's people by evildoers. ⁸² In commenting on the famine at Isaac's time, Luther pointed out to the Wittenberg congregation that the devil attempts to disrupt lives of those who serve God through hardship and persecution as well as temptation. ⁸³ The whole life of the righteous is engaged in eschatological conflict.

⁷⁹ WA 14, 467; 24, 613, 31-33.

⁸⁰ WA 24, 632, 21 - 635, 26.

⁸¹ WA 42, 529, 37f ≅ LW 2, 373; WA 43, 218, 3-5 ≅ LW 4, 115; WA 43, 229, 36 - 230, 3 ≅ LW 4, 131; WA 43, 371, 24-39 ≅ LW 4, 326; WA 44, 97, 10-24 ≅ LW 6, 130; WA 44, 466, 22-26 ≅ LW 7, 225; WA 44, 536, 8-20 ≅ LW 7, 319; see Forsberg: *Das Abrahambild ...*, 39-41.

⁸² WA 24, 136, 28 - 136, 23.

⁸³ WA 14, 342, 2 / 16 / 21 - 344, 7 / 13 / 38; 24, 454, 29 - 458, 18.

V *The Mortification of the Flesh*

Abraham's lie to Abimelech⁸⁴ reminded Luther that »not only passive evils are inflicted upon us, bringing good upon us, but also the active ones, that is, the evils which we ourselves do«, for they produce the blessing of repentance.⁸⁵ Evil does not only invade the righteous and pious life from outside believers. It also comes from within, and therefore those who are sinful as well as righteous simultaneously are constantly engaged in the mortification of the flesh, the destruction of their own sinful desires and habits. Therefore, as Eberhard Winkler observes, the devil's inflicting suffering in the battle between Satan and God sometimes actually works against the Tempter's intentions. When this happens, »comfort is often closely associated with admonition«.⁸⁶

Scholars have noted that Luther's treatment of the sins of the patriarchs differs from other commentators in the medieval tradition and among his contemporaries, but this approach to those who were at the same time the saintliest saints and the most sinful of sinners conforms to Luther's understanding of the Christian life as a life in constant confrontation with the mystery of the continuation of sin and evil in the lives of the baptized.⁸⁷ His treatment of Judah's intercourse with Tamar gave his students insight into the larger context of the phrase »simul justus et peccator«.

»The very saintly fathers and sons of such great patriarchs, Judah and others, are described as men full of the weakness and the very great blemishes to which this wretched nature is subject. God guided them in a wonderful manner by his Holy Spirit, yet in such a way that he permitted them to bare their own inclinations, that is, the sin and fruit of the original evil.«

As these events teach and console God's people, they also call them to put their evil desires and deeds to death. Abraham and Isaac »were lights [...] of the whole world and of the church of God. [...]]. They were perfect in faith, hope, and love, but at the same time abysmal and horrible sin-

⁸⁴ Gn 20, 1-17.

⁸⁵ WA 43, 115, 7f = LW 3, 334.

⁸⁶ Winkler: Luther als Seelsorger ..., 228.

⁸⁷ See Bornkamm: Luther and the Old Testament, 20-27.

ners.« Their examples serve »the preaching of repentance and faith or of the forgiveness of sins, lest anyone be presumptuous because of his own righteousness and lest those who have fallen despair«. ⁸⁸ The struggles of the Old Testament paragons of faith served both to warn believers against falling into sin and to make clear their inherent weakness and inclination toward wrongdoing.

These warnings undergirded one of the most important constitutive elements of Luther's understanding of Christian piety in a sinful world. To attain the practice of active righteousness and to abolish the false gods that continually lure believers, they must actively strive to kill their own desires to live life on their own terms; mortification of the flesh is the negative side of the fulfilling of God's commands in the context of God's callings. Luther often repeated his principle that killing off the sinful identity of his people and bestowing or renewing their identity as his children is God's natural way of doing things in a sinful world. He used this description of God's activities among sinner-saints both in reference to their core identities in relationship to him and their practice of their callings in his world. In his portrayal of the relationship of Abraham with Sarah and Hagar, Luther found the patriarch mortified in regard to both the first and the second table of the law.⁸⁹ God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac constituted true mortification, »sitting in sackcloth and ashes«. ⁹⁰ In retelling the story of God's covenant with Abram in Gn 15, Luther noted,

»It is also the purpose of this passage to teach us what God's nature is. He is indeed the deliverer and liberator from death. But before he delivers, he destroys; before he makes alive, he plunges into death. He is accustomed to act in this way, »so that out of nothing he may make everything.« ⁹¹

He takes no pleasure in afflicting us but uses powerful and bitter remedies to make the deformity and foulness of the depraved sinful nature clear to his people and to cleanse them, as the story of Joseph's leading his

88 On Rebecca WA 44, 309, 29 - 310, 8 ≙ LW 7, 10 f; cf. on Isaac WA 43, 446, 37 - 447, 41 ≙ LW 5, 27; WA 14, 371, 1 / 10 - 373, 5 / 28; 24, 483, 19-34.

89 WA 43, 167, 22-34 ≙ LW 4, 44 f.

90 WA 43, 213, 29-31 ≙ LW 4, 109.

91 WA 42, 572, 21-23 ≙ LW 3, 33. Cf. the treatment of this concept in Luther's treatment of Joseph's mortification WA 44, 454, 36 - 456, 12 ≙ LW 7, 210 f.

brothers to repentance shows.⁹² Therefore, the believer's struggle against sin must be conscious and active, seeking to diminish or eradicate sin at every turn, as Reuben did by diverting his brothers from murdering Joseph.⁹³ His is not a perfect example of avoiding sin, but Luther moved beyond the text to make application for his students even though the story did not fit his point perfectly.⁹⁴ The mortification of the flesh constituted a critical element in the life of repentance.

VI Carrying out God's Commands in the Context of His Callings

Luther regarded the life of repentance in the believer's obedience to God's commands within the context of one's calling as the positive counterpart to the mortification of the flesh. The life of repentance is lived out of a faith that God has given; it does not change in so far as it is the trust that holds fast to God's gift of his love and the new identity of the child of God. But the fruits of faith can be renewed and expanded, trained and cultivated, as believers grow in their faithful expression of God's love. Luther pointed out to the Wittenberg congregation that the stories of Abram displayed the patriarch's love for the neighbor.

»Faith and love for God govern love for the neighbor, so that we do not love other human beings more than God. When love for God takes proper form, love for the neighbor will also. Love for the neighbor governs all external works, so that people perform what love demands. All commands are directed by love.«

Luther believed that this meant, first of all, converting others, both Jews and pagans, and bringing them to faith and then demonstrating every other kind of love that truly benefits the neighbor and does no harm to faith, even beyond specific commands of the law.⁹⁵ This concern remained a constant theme, also in Luther's later lectures. Faith produces a life of love that »advances daily, when we gradually learn more and more to hope, trust, and be patient. It is one and the same faith that begins, makes progress, and reaches perfec-

92 WA 44, 468, 22 - 469, 42 ≙ LW 7, 228-230; cf. WA 44, 569, 7-12 ≙ LW 7, 362; and WA 44, 582, 37 - 585, 38 ≙ LW 8, 5-8.

93 Gn 37, 21-22.

94 WA 44, 282, 16-19 ≙ LW 6, 377.

95 WA 24, 275, 19-32; cf. WA 24, 407, 17 - 410, 9.

tion,« Luther reflected as he placed the young Joseph before his students.⁹⁶ His desire to promote sound Christian living accompanied his desire to give assurance of God's love in Christ to his people throughout his life.

That growth takes place not in a religious environment set apart from this world but in the midst of daily life, Luther repeated with frequent polemical references to monasticism and other medieval religious observances.⁹⁷ God has liberated his people for the faithful performance of divinely ordained virtues within the believer's vocations. Luther presumed that the examples of the patriarchs, their families, and their contemporaries provided guidance for the conduct of daily life in the sixteenth century. Of Genesis 24 Luther could say in 1521, »there are several topics in this chapter that pertain to moral actions, for forming human life and training the spirit.«⁹⁸ His sermon on the chapter two years later elaborated on the lessons to be learned as sixteenth century Germans followed the example of their ancient fellow believers. These lessons included children's valuing their parents' planning of their marriages and all Christians' recognizing how God cares for his people, also in governing marriage and married life.⁹⁹ Even though many have only contempt for the common and ordinary details of family found in the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Luther was convinced that the Holy Spirit had intended to instruct all readers of Scripture in the proper way of conducting human life.¹⁰⁰ The reformer put to use a host of examples in his treatments of Genesis, which, rather than relating tales of extravagant

96 WA 44, 401, 30 - 402, 7 ≙ LW 7, 139. Luther clearly distinguishes between the justification by which God gives the person he calls to be his child identity as that child and the expectations which this newborn child of God meets through new obedience. Thus, Forsberg's assertion that in depicting Abraham's justification Luther taught that »incarnate faith« brings to the justifying of the sinner »secondly also the works, that is the love. ›In concreto‹ the human being is saved only through this incarnate faith«; Forsberg: *Das Abrahambild ...*, 83. In effect, Forsberg returns with this false interpretation of Luther to the medieval understanding of salvation by faith formed through love, »fides a charitate formata«, a view that Luther specifically and repeatedly rejected.

97 WA 43, 30, 20-34 ≙ LW 3, 217; WA 43, 108, 18 - 109, 11 ≙ LW 3, 325. See also Luther's long critique of monastic vows on the basis of the example of Jacob's vow to God in Gn 28, 20-22; WA 14, 387, 4 / 14 - 399, 2 / 11 / 34; 24, 499, 29 - 510, 21.

98 WA 9, 369, 17f.

99 WA 14, 317, 14 / 34 - 320, 13 / 29; WA 24, 419, 31 - 423, 19.

100 WA 42, 474, 1-5 ≙ LW 2, 296. On Luther's treatment of Sarah see Mattox: *Defender ...*, 117-128.

religious performances – as was the case in the medieval »*Legenda aurea*«, tell how »the fathers live in their households with their children, wives, servants, and cattle. Here there is no outward show of religion, but there is only one coarse sack of household life.«¹⁰¹ God's gift of a relationship with himself freed Abraham to serve in the world. Because God is

»gracious, ready to forgive, and kind, I go out and turn my face from God to human beings, that is, I tend to my calling. If I am a king, I govern the state. If I am the head of a household, I direct the servants; if I am a schoolmaster, I teach pupils, mold their habits and views toward godliness. [...] In all of our works we serve God, who wanted us to do such things and, so to speak, stationed us here.«¹⁰²

Luther's sketch of Christian living placed God's commands into the context of the callings God gives; he used the stories of Genesis to depict and describe the virtues to practice and the vices to avoid within the setting of vocation. The reformer's contrast of the lifestyles of the inhabitants of Sodom and of Lot's family¹⁰³ led him to assert that God has provided a specific structure for human living even though he has given human creatures a good deal of freedom in deciding the details of how to carry out his will as well.

»A human creature does not have such freedom that if God has commanded something, he can do it or not do it. So far as the commands of God are concerned, people are not free but must obey the voice of God or endure the sentence of death. Freedom is operative in regard to those things about which God has given no command [...].«¹⁰⁴

Jacob and Esau offered one contrast between the latter's smug pride and contempt for his brother and the former's modesty, humility, agreeable, and guileless.¹⁰⁵

The narrative of Genesis placed a large number of instances of the practice of godly commands or virtues at Luther's disposals, and he often made the most of them. He admonished hearers to live in peace with each other, to serve one another, and to be content and satisfied in fulfilling

¹⁰¹ WA 43, 432, 38-40 ≙ LW 5, 6.

¹⁰² WA 42, 632, 1-7 ≙ LW 3, 117.

¹⁰³ Gn 13.

¹⁰⁴ WA 42, 512, 21-24 ≙ LW 2, 350. Cf. similar statements in WA 43, 29, 34-39 ≙ LW 3, 216; and WA 43, 477, 29 - 478, 21 ≙ LW 5, 70-72.

¹⁰⁵ WA 43, 408, 28 - 409, 11 ≙ LW 4, 379.

their callings to help others and care for their needs. In the practice of the virtues which God commands, Abraham's intervention in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah presented a »magnificent example« of love for the neighbor.¹⁰⁶ Joseph's practice of a range of virtues also provided a model for Luther's contemporaries.¹⁰⁷

Luther often taught obedience to God's commands and the practice of the virtues he ordained by contrasting them with vices. Because the reformer laid so much worth on contentment with what God gives, he warned against grumbling as he lectured on the relationships within Jacob's family.¹⁰⁸ His sharp words of criticism rang out as he noted that Joseph's humility and acceptance of his lot in life stood in stark contrast to the pride and the impatience which it nurtures so common in his own day, a »diabolical poison« that interferes with devotion to God and service to others.¹⁰⁹

Luther did not trap himself in legalistic definitions of virtues and vices, however. Instead, he presumed a general standard for human behavior that he found in Aristotle's concept of *epieikeia*. Although he harshly criticized the influence of Aristotle's »Ethics« for its constructing a definition of what it means to be human apart from life's Creator,¹¹⁰ in assessing Joseph's life he turned to the balance and wisdom expressed in Aristotle's term. The reformer presumed that human beings are righteous in two ways, in two dimensions of life; they continue to be addressed both by God's promise and his commands. Therefore, »the law must not be cast aside because of the promise of grace but must be taught in order that discipline and the teaching concerning good works may be retained and we may be taught to know and humble ourselves after we have sinned«, so that people may »govern and direct their conduct in a godly and prudent manner according to the norm of the law«.¹¹¹ Beyond what Aristotle could prescribe stood the faith that exercised itself in study of God's Word and prayer as the pre-

106 WA 14, 276, 10 / 22 / 34 - 278, 4 / 19 / 32; 24, 337, 15-28.

107 WA 44, 591, 26-39 $\cong$ LW 8, 17.

108 WA 44, 238, 32 - 239, 31 $\cong$ LW 6, 320-321.

109 WA 44, 432, 3 - 433, 32 $\cong$ LW 7, 179-181.

110 Theo DIETER: *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles: eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie*. B; NY 2001.

111 WA 44, 703, 30-40 $\cong$ LW 8, 170f.

supposition for all performance of vocation and virtue in the horizontal relationships of human life. Repeatedly Luther emphasized the dependence of the Christian life on listening to God. Even though God had spoken directly to the patriarchs, for Luther's contemporaries, that meant hearing or reading God's Word from Scripture. When God speaks, his children not only listen but reply. Abraham's struggling in prayer to God on behalf of Sodom presented a model of prudent but resolute and unrelenting prayer, a pattern for bold beseeching that seemed to Luther to portray a prayer aimed at compelling God to forgive.¹¹² The practices of daily life began in conversation with God and proceeded to living out God's callings according to his commands.

VII Dying Well

Such a life lived within God's callings in accord with God's commands prepared the baptized to die well. Early in his career Luther adapted the medieval genre of the *ars moriendi* to his own message,¹¹³ and he continued to prepare his hearers for dying through good counsel on how to live in faith and love throughout his life from the pulpit and in his lectures. Noah lived in dependence on God, Luther reminded readers of his Genesis sermons, confident that his life was pleasing to God because of God's merciful regard for him. So must all live that they may be prepared to die.¹¹⁴

Baptismal death and resurrection shaped the words Luther used to describe God's blessing of departure from this life to the better life with him, for instance, in describing God's promise to Jacob as he was about to depart for Egypt.¹¹⁵ When death comes to God's faithful people they will have the peace that God gave Abraham, as Luther interpreted Gn 25, 8. Luther described death as a most pleasant sleep which holds no dread for those who know that Christ takes them from this life. Luther also knew

¹¹² WA 14, 282, 1 / 12 / 27 - 283, 3 / 21; 24, 342, 29 - 343, 29; 43, 41, 30 - 44, 9 ≙ LW 3, 232-236.

¹¹³ WA 2, 685-697 ≙ LW 42, 99-115. See also Robert KOLB: »Ein kindt des todts« und »Gottes Gast«: das Sterben in Luthers Predigten. LThK 31 (2007), 3-22, and Neil LEROUX: Martin Luther as comforter, writings on death. Leiden 2007, 45-80.

¹¹⁴ WA 24, 3-16.

¹¹⁵ WA 44, 637, 37 - 640, 26 ≙ LW 8, 79-83.

the questions Christians ask, and so he posed for his students the query, »Where did Abraham go?« What does it mean to be gathered to his people? These words Luther found to be »evidence of the resurrection and the future life, [...] a comfort for all who trust in God«.

»We have a clear and extensive knowledge about death and life since we are certain that our Savior Christ Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God the Father and is waiting for us when we depart this life. Therefore, when we depart from the living, we go forth to the Guardian of our souls, who receives us into his hands.«¹¹⁶

The example of the patriarchs could also be put to use in instructing parishioners in the proper reaction to the death of a loved one. Abraham provided such a model in his care for the burial of Sarah, a good work that the preacher commended to the Wittenberg congregation. He explained that Abraham's sorrow and tears had been recorded not as a bad example but because such sorrow and suffering is a result of the love for others that faith produces.¹¹⁷ Not fear of death but rather confidence in the promised resurrection in Christ typified Luther's attitude toward death.¹¹⁸ In living and dying trust in God that leads to love for God and neighbor governed Christian existence.

VIII Conclusion

Luther's desire to recultivate the garden of Christendom fit effectively together with his way of reading and conveying the biblical text as the record of God's addressing real, flesh-and-blood people in the midst of daily lives. God's message centered on his own love for his people that had led him to create them and, once fallen, to re-create them through the work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, God's commands reflected his original expectations of what would result from their recognizing him as God and themselves as his

116 WA 43, 357, 23 - 358, 14 ≙ LW 4, 309f. Luther continues with consolation for the dying and the grieving on the basis of Abraham's death, and with an extensive treatment of questions related to death; WA 44, 358, 15 - 364, 5 ≙ LW 4, 310-318.

117 WA 14, 311, 20 / 35 - 313, 20 / 35; 24, 408, 29 - 411, 35.

118 Robert KOLB: »Life is king and lord over death«: Martin Luther's view of death and dying. In: *Tod und Jenseits in der Schriftkultur der Frühen Neuzeit*/ hrsg. von Marion Kobelt Groch; Cornelia Niekus-Moore. Wiesbaden 2008, 23-45.

beloved human creatures; those commands do not set forth his expectations that had to be met to restore a relationship with him. For restoring that relationship, like creating it in the first place, lies beyond the capabilities of human creatures to create, whether sinners or not.

To carry out the task of recultivating the lives of God's people, to conduct the conversation between a life-restoring God and those dead in trespasses and sin, Luther turned to a number of communicative devices. One of them was the story of the faithful, for instance, as depicted in Genesis. Against the background of these stories, which he presumed matched and illuminated the experiences of his contemporaries, Luther cultivated the life of repentance that is based upon trust in God as he has revealed himself in Christ, a trust that sustains in suffering and puts to death the desires that lead to false gods and false living, so that believers may live out their callings according to God's command, and die as they have lived, relying on God.