

Vernunft philologischen Schriftverständnisses die *Sache* und die *Summe* der Glaubenswissenschaft vertiefen und schafft als *verbum creatrix divinitatis* das in Zeit und

Ewigkeit geltende Einverständnis mit der persönlichen Rechtfertigung allein aus Gnade um Christi willen durch den Glauben.

A Postmodern Luther? *Enarrationes in Genesin* in Conversation with Philosophical and Theological Reconsiderations

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This seminar engaged Luther's *Enarrationes in Genesin* (1535–1545) along roughly two lines of inquiry: (1) How might the postmodern turn open up new avenues for research into the historical Luther's thought? (2) How might Luther's thought contribute to a constructive post-modern theology?

Mark Mattes addressed the theme of faith and reason. Luther praised reason highly within the sphere of its earthly competence. He also held that, when schooled by the grammar of faith, reason could become a fit servant of public inquiry into theological truth. Left untutored, however, reason tends to transgress its proper bounds (e.g. *in articulo iustificationis*). Luther

therefore shied from strategies of correlation and analogy that sought commensurability between faith and reason. Instead, he favored a kind of scripturally-ruled Dionysian apophaticism that endured the contradictions of reason in order to celebrate the joyful paradoxes of the Gospel. As neither rationalist nor irrationalist, Luther charts a path for theologians seeking to ground their work, not in the eccentricities of experience, but in the objectivity of the Word.

Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth compared Augustine and Luther on various loci suggested by their respective exegeses of Genesis 1–2, e.g. Augustine's more contemplative orientation toward eternity

versus Luther's historical timefulness; simultaneous versus successive theories of creation; allegorical versus literal-historical hermeneutics; and, decisively, the aspiration for spiritual ascent *ex mundo* characteristic of Platonism's metaphysical axiology of The Good versus the this-worldliness of faithful life in *oeconomia et politia* issuing from the sheer imputation of goodness bestowed in justification. In this last instance, the contrast between Augustine's philosophical essentialism and Luther's proto-existentialism emerges as the underlying explanation of their respective differences.

Dennis Bielfeldt argued that, in Luther's theology of creation, God acted causally to create all that is out of nothing. Previous scholarship has allowed its own modern assumptions about causality and ontology to obscure Luther's basic continuity with late medieval semantic and metaphysical theory. Johannes Schwanke,¹ for example, argues that Luther's *creatio ex nihilo* should be interpreted not primarily in the theoretical terms of ontologi-

cal causality, but rather as expressive of the existential relationship of absolute dependence (*schlechthinige Abhängigkeit*) obtaining between creature and Creator. On the basis of close textual analysis of the *Enarrationes*,² Bielfeldt demonstrates that in fact Luther was a realist who believed God created causally, and suggests that it is this real causal relation that forms the prior ontological condition for the creature's *Gefühl* of absolute dependence upon God.

Kjell Ove Nilsson reflected on Luther's understanding of the *mandatum dei* in its intrinsic relatedness to the human person. For Luther, abstract metaphysical thought about either the divine or the human is impossible, for to be human means to exist under God's will and to receive one's total existence from God. God's *mandatum* is his creative Word, the very principle of life, through which humans are rightly related to God and the world. Since its *raison d'être* is the mystery of the human created to live in indissoluble communion with God, its content is not re-

1 J. SCHWANKE, *Creatio ex nihilo. Luthers Lehre von der Schöpfung aus dem Nichts in der großen Genesisvorlesung (1535–45)*, 2004.

2 E. g. WA 42; 8, 31–33; 13, 16–19; 37, 16–22.

ceived as discrete and manipulable data (whether by *lex naturae* rationalistically construed, or by *lex scripta* in a fundamentalist sense) but discovered and experienced as an existential factor suffusing and forming everyday human life.

Knut Alfsvåg brought insights from Luther's exegesis of the story of the Tower of Babel to bear on the incredulity toward meta-narrative and predilection for alterity characteristic of postmodernity. Luther regarded linguistic difference as the result of the divine punishment of human self-glorification recounted in Genesis 11. Because he thought language structured and constituted reality rather than merely reflecting it, this loss of linguistic unity was for Luther an especially baneful happening in human history. For linguistic conflict leads to political and ecclesial division, and inexorably so: apart, that is, from the hope of humanity's restoration to holy harmony through the Evangelical and Pentecostal *nova lingua* spoken by Jesus Christ. Whereas postmodernity's celebration of difference is ultimately self-defeating – for difference itself becomes a universal concept (»Alterity«), no less totalizing than the classical or modern predecessors which it means to dethrone – Luther's deeply suggestive presen-

tation of Christ's *nova lingua* – as unifying truth that coexists with cultural and linguistic difference without being conquered by it – secures the very goal, or receives the very gift, that postmodernity strives vainly to attain.

Mickey Mattox re-examined Luther's interpretation of Abraham's unique role in history as the *gubernator tertii millenarii* in light of the Reformer's apocalypticism. For Luther, Abraham is not only a choice case study in the doctrines of election and justification, but an eschatological gatekeeper of a radically new age in the history of the unfolding of the Promise. His singularity as *gubernator* consists in his receiving the *nova promissio* that the Messiah will descend from his own flesh. This promise is confirmed in his encounter with Melchizedek, the »King of Righteousness,« in whom Abraham glimpses the eschatological kingdom and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ. Reading Abraham in this way afforded Luther the occasion to interpret his own position in the last days of an earth grown old. If the fierceness and assuredness of Luther's apocalyptically-charged polemic gives reason to pause, his admirable determination to situate his own life within the overarching

context of eschatological origins and ends challenges an earth grown purposeless and bored.

Jeffrey Silcock mined Luther's exegesis of the story of Jacob's Ladder for resources with which to revise modern metaphysical assumptions. Following medieval precedent, Luther explains that the ladder signifies literally the incarnation of God's Son, allegorically the union of Christ and the believer by faith, and spiritually the worshipping Church gathered around Word and Sacrament as the *porta coeli* on earth. Particularly this latter, earthly localizing of God's presence, strikes the modern ear as downright untoward, predisposed as it is to privilege inwardness and downplay external things as (at best) mere starting points for more elevated forms of spirituality. But with the help of Luther's theological exegesis and Johann Georg Hamann's (1730–1788) genuinely Lutheran philosophy, the post-modern thinker can begin to re-imagine a robustly scriptural and sacramental ontology that welcomes the *perichoresis* of spiritual and material reality.

Phillip Anderas explored Luther's theology of holiness on the basis of his exegesis of Jacob's *summa tentatio* at the Ford Jabbok in Genesis 32. Luther states expressly

that Jacob's sanctification involves the death of the stubborn remnants of his »old Adam« in temptation. But when considered in light of the Reformer's proto-logical anthropology, it becomes clear that Jacob's triumphant victory over God by faith entails nothing less than his restoration to the natural holiness enjoyed originally by Adam before the Fall. According to Luther, God's *donum Spiritus et fidei* finds in Jacob a vitiated shadow of what Adam was created to be, and restores him *per contraria* to that act which is his nature's perfection: that is, to faith's eucharistic sacrifice, offered to the praise of God's glory by a redeemed and deified heart radiant with drunken joy in God.

Paul Hinlicky discussed Luther's reconsideration of God's power, wisdom, and goodness in regard to his theodicy of faith, as epitomized in the story of Joseph. Luther did not criticize *ratio's* fleshly metaphysical speculation because it grasps nothing true at all about divine attributes, but because it cannot grasp these very truths truly (like a cow staring at a new door). A new theological subjectivity, fluent in the *nova lingua* of the Spirit, must come into being in order for Joseph to hold on to a practical knowledge of God's power, wis-

dom, and goodness amidst affliction and suffering. When Joseph is abandoned by the Spirit into the world's cruel hands but remains steadfast through the »patience« of faith, he is in fact created anew by God in true righteousness and holiness, conformed to the image of Christ. Only thus does he come to know in truth the fiery (and complex) furnace of the Holy Trinity's power, wisdom, and love.

Ralf Wüstenberg assayed traces of Luther's thought in the political ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Bonhoeffer follows Luther in articulating a »theology of distinctions,« e.g. worldly-spiritual, preservation-redemption, office-person. On the other hand, he also follows Luther, though not the Lutheranism of his days, in resisting any clean break between the worldly and the spiritual; for God's preservation of the world is ordered to its redemption. But Bonhoeffer does maintain a certain openness in his

reinterpretation of Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms via his distinction between ultimate and penultimate things. For Bonhoeffer, it is possible to see ultimate things *within* the penultimate, that is, to recognize signs of Christ's forgiveness within the scope of the political.

Perhaps it is fitting that no single master-narrative united the themes of the seminar. That said, the working thesis that sees in post-modernity an opportune moment for reappraising Luther's thought was generally well received. The more spirited conversations tended to come back to divergent responses to a basic question: ought the theologian take advantage of the post-modern situation to *retrieve* a substantially pre-modern theology? Or instead, should he or she *revise* traditional positions in novel directions? Of course, an assuredly correct answer to that question is ultimately eschatological.