

Perichoretic Preaching, or: Dancing for Your Neighbor

Luther's Trinitarian Homiletic as a Path to Preaching Social Justice

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Abstract

How can we preach on current political and social issues without simply adding Christ's name to a political philosophy? More precisely, how can those who claim the heritage of Luther and the early Reformation do this? Luther withdrew from advocacy for the poor around 1525, and central parts of his theology (and the tradition that bears his name) emerged only after this withdrawal. This article argues that Luther's theology of preaching, which conceived of proclamation as part of the Trinitarian economy, provides a doctrinally sound method for preaching on matters of social justice. After establishing the early Luther's record on advocacy founded in the commandment to love neighbor and assessing reasons for Luther's about face on poor relief in 1525, the article examines Luther's understanding of preaching as "perichoretic," part of the movement of the Trinity. As such, preaching joins in God's mission to move people to acts of love of neighbor, sometimes acts that constitute great personal or material risk.

"As long as he doesn't preach politics from the pulpit!" That was the condition a Congregation Council member laid down for calling me as their pastor. While the ELCA parish I serve embraces social action, those sentiments were not entirely unknown within the fabric of congregational life, and probably would have prevailed at most mainline Christian congregations. Reasons vary, and I am not here to assess them all. I am interested in preaching that is faithful to Jesus' life, and to the call Jesus issues to us. In 2017, churches the world over marked the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, and acknowledged that since the Reformation is felt in every corner of Christianity we all have at least a little to do with Luther and his theology. As that anniversary recedes into the background, a fair question is, "What now?" Contrary to Luther's late-in-life assertion, Christ has a *lot* to do with politics and social justice. Must the Church today leave Luther behind in order to preach faithfully on contemporary political matters?

This is not an idle question. A draft of this essay took shape the same day that a group of interfaith clergy was arrested at the US Senate Office Building for protesting a bill that would cut taxes for the rich and corporations, while giving the poor little and eventually taking that little away.

That is political theology in action outside of worship. Can we talk about it in the pulpit? Can I preach it, being faithful to my understanding of Christ as Luther describes it? Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, reduced to its simplest form in De Lamar Jensen, states, "The church is necessary to comfort and strengthen believers; the state is to protect, supervise, and discipline them."¹ In such a worldview, the preacher must preach the gospel, and trust that the listener will act properly within the state. Experience argues this may be the best option: the most famous engagement with politics by the heirs of Luther's theology was in support of the Third Reich.² Nazis now march in American streets and political discourse has begun treating fascism as merely "right-leaning" political philosophy. Given Lutherans' legacy, the question may not merely be "can we" preach politics, but also "is it a good idea?"

In this essay, I will argue that Martin Luther's trinitarian homiletical theory provides an avenue for preaching on matters of current political importance. We need not merely thank Luther for starting the Reformation, then jettison him; his theology provides a strong doctrinal grounding for preaching on social justice. He does not, however, offer a clearly articulated template for such preaching. Luther cannot be treated in a vacuum; his work always responds to something in his life, and his interpreter must be aware of this. Thus, the essay begins with a description of the early Luther's work for social justice. Nonetheless, this is an essay, and I need to keep the scope manageable. The central point of this is Luther on preaching. Luther argues that preaching is a trinitarian act. After explaining what he means by that, I will explore what he thinks happens to believers when they hear preaching. This necessitates discussions of Luther's doctrine of ubiquity (how the God preached is really present in the world), and Luther's concept of suffering for the sake of one's neighbor. While these two concepts are rich and much can be said about them, I will keep the discussion centered on preaching. I will argue that Luther's trinitarian homiletic provides a path for preaching on political matters and sets conditions for what that can be.

1. Luther With and Against the Poor

It is commonplace among Luther and Reformation scholars to divide Luther's life into three periods. The demarcations differ, but usually involve a young Luther (from the start of his teaching career until roughly 1521 and his confrontation with Charles V), a Luther in mid-career (ca. 1521–1531, encompassing his confrontations with other reformers), and a later Luther (up to the end of Luther's life, and including his more shameful writings). By nearly any chronology, it is the young Luther who deals with matters of social justice most clearly.

¹ *De Lamar Jensen*, *Reformation Europe. Age of Reform and Revolution*, Lexington, MA 21992, 73.

² On the 455th anniversary of Luther's birth, the Lutheran bishop of Thuringia, Martin Sasse, joyfully celebrated *Kristallnacht*: "On November 10, 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany"; cf. James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword. The Church and the Jews*, New York 2001, 428.

1.1 The Young Luther on Social Justice

The young Luther became something of a folk hero for his attention to the poor. Poverty was one of the driving forces of the early Reformation. While precise figures were not kept and estimates are necessary, something on the order of 50 to 65 percent of the German population in 1517 lived day to day, and perhaps a quarter of the whole population was “chronically underfed.”³ Luther’s early writings emerged in this situation. His *95 Theses* declared that it was better to give to the poor than to buy indulgences, and better for the poor to use their money on necessities than on indulgences.⁴ Having gained the spotlight, Luther called for comprehensive poor relief. In *To the Christian Nobility* Luther decried the rampant begging in Germany. The problem was twofold: the grinding poverty caused by the general economy was compounded by mendicant orders that lived by begging. Luther branded these as “vagabonds and evil rogues,” and calculated that the average city was “laid under tribute” by one or another order sixty times a year.⁵ Luther addressed the “Christian Nobility” of Germany, writing, “nobody ought to go begging among Christians. It would even be a very simple matter to make a law to the effect that every city should look after its own poor, if only we had the courage and intention to do so.”⁶

Luther also attacked money lenders. Luther doesn’t conclude *To the Christian Nobility* without taking a shot at the bankers, writing, “We must put a bit in the mouth of the Fuggers and similar companies.”⁷ On the matter of usury Luther combined two dense sermons – known, cleverly, as the “Short” and “Long” sermons on usury – and with some additions, published in 1524 the pamphlet *Trade and Usury*. It contained such radical claims as lending at interest is permitted, as long as the lender also lends to the poor from whom the lender will never receive (or require) repayment.⁸

Luther pressed the issue of social justice within the Church and university with *The Freedom of a Christian*, written in Latin and published in November of 1520. After arguing that human inner nature, or the soul, cannot be changed by works but must be changed by Christ, Luther focuses on

³ Poverty figures are from *Catharina Lis* and *Hugo Soly*, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Atlantic Highlands 1979, 53–96. The figure on nutrition is from *Lee Wandel*, *Social Welfare*, in: Hans Hillerbrand (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, New York 1996, 4:77. Both references are in *Samuel Torvend*, *Luther and the Hungry Poor*. Gathered Fragments, Minneapolis 2008, 17.

⁴ So, Thesis 43: “Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences.” And Thesis 45: “Christians are to be taught that he who sees a needy man and passes him by, yet gives money for indulgences, does not buy papal indulgences but God’s wrath.” And Thesis 46: “Christians are to be taught that, unless they have more than they need, they must reserve enough for their family needs and by no means squander it on indulgences” (LW 31:29).

⁵ LW 44:190. Luther does not cite any sources or methods on this.

⁶ LW 44:189.

⁷ LW 44:213.

⁸ “What He wants is that we should lend not only to friends, to the rich, and to those we like, who can repay us [...] but that we lend also to those who are unable or unwilling to repay us, such as the needy and our enemies” (LW 45:291).

what the changed person does. Chiefly, she whose inner nature has been justified performs works of love for her neighbor.

Although a Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in human form, and to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.⁹

Lest there be confusion regarding what Luther means by “deal with his neighbor,” Luther writes that a Christian ought to think: I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor,” and that a Christian, “does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness, but he most freely and most willingly spends himself and all that he has, whether he wastes all on the thankless or whether he gains a reward.”¹⁰ Christian Freedom is to be enjoyed as the freedom for costly love of neighbor.

As late as 1523, Luther was trying to help the city of Leisnig implement a parish structure for poor relief, trades education, general education, etc. The Elector of Saxony asked Luther to help enact the restructuring of parish finances now that parishes were calling their own pastors. The leaders of Leisnig parish wrote a “Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Leisnig.” Luther endorsed the agreement, wrote a preface to it, and caused it to be published no later than July 6, 1523.¹¹ The agreement itself, not from Luther’s hand, lays out comprehensive poor relief within the city, including the election of directors, definitions of who was genuinely poor (i.e. not a mendicant, professional beggar), and so on. In the preface, Luther anticipates those who will argue that such poor relief will be abused: “We have to expect that greed will creep in here and there. So what?”¹² Poor relief is not simply a pet cause of Luther’s. It has theological and biblical roots. In that very “Preface,” Luther indicated attention to social welfare was inherent in the practice of the earliest church. Samuel Torvend notes Luther’s use of Acts 2:44f., commenting, “Next to the sharing of bread was set the sharing of all things commonly held.”¹³

Then, the Peasants War happened.

1.2 The Peasants War

After the War, Luther ceased with the calls for comprehensive poor relief, the chief social justice issue of his day. Why? Arguments that he was a “conservative” reformer fail to account for his

⁹ LW 31:366.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cf. LW 45:167.

¹² LW 45:173.

¹³ *Torvend* (note 3), 106.

radical work.¹⁴ Arguments that Luther was concerned for the inner person only fail to account for his focus on society.¹⁵ However it is undeniable that Luther later in life said “Christ has nothing to do with politics,” and that following the Peasants War he “allowed himself to be understood” as repudiating the relevance of the Gospel in public matters.¹⁶ To understand why the Luther who wrote such radical tracts as a young man would deny Christ’s involvement in politics, one must understand the War.

Luther had his role in the Peasants’ War thrust upon him. In 1524 and 1525, peasant revolts broke out, centered in Swabia, Franconia, and Thuringia. While each group had its own aims and demands, the document known as the *Twelve Articles* became the most prominent articulation of the peasant position. In it the peasants requested power to appoint their own pastors, tithes to be handled by parishes, freedom from their condition of economic slavery, the right to hunt for game and to cut wood for fuel, freedom from forced labor and forced service to a noble beyond that already required by law, fairer rents, a return to German law (as opposed to new, Roman law), the return of common property seized by nobles, and an end to the “death tax” (a fee paid to a lord upon the death of a tenant). Finally, they offered to submit to correction if their demands could be shown to be in disagreement with the Word of God.¹⁷ The peasants’ leaders later appended a “list of acceptable judges” of theological matters, which included Luther and his right hand man, Philip Melanchthon.¹⁸

Luther had to respond. He received the *Twelve Articles* sometime in April of 1525, and took seriously the peasants’ offer to submit to theological correction. By this time, the peasants had burned castles and monasteries in Thuringia, and Luther encountered hecklers on his preaching tour. Towns were surrendering to the peasant army, and atrocities were being reported to Luther. Luther prepared a long tract, the first half of which was an “Admonition to Peace,” addressed to the peasants of Swabia, the second half of which was addressed to the “Other, Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants.” His publishers broke this into two, separate tracts published days

¹⁴ For example, *De Lamar Jensen* says of Luther, “He was not ready for an all-out reform of both church and society at large”; cf. note 1, 70. One can only hold this position by determining that Luther’s proposals were not meant literally, or by leaving unspoken the claim that when push came to shove, Luther could not go through with his own reforms (and I can’t comment on what an author could have said). As *Lindberg* argues, “‘radical’ in its fundamental sense of going to the roots (radix) equally applies to Luther’s conviction that Scripture alone is the norm of Christian faith”; cf. *Carter Lindberg*, *The European Reformations*, Malden (MA) 2010, 12.

¹⁵ Indeed, his shameful *On the Jews and Their Lies*, a comprehensive program for destroying a people because of their religion, was written in 1543. If Christ had nothing to do with politics, an angry Luther still did.

¹⁶ Both quotes come from *Hans J. Hillerbrand*, “Christ Has Nothing to do with Politics:” Martin Luther and the Societal Order, in: *Seminary Ridge Review* (13:2), Spring 2011, 9–24. The Luther quote, Hillerbrand translates from *Walther Kohler*, *Dogmengeschichte als Geschichte des Christlichen Selbstbewusstseins*. *Das Zeitalter der Reformation*, Zurich 1951, 64.

¹⁷ Cf. LW 46:8–16.

¹⁸ *Lindberg* (note 14), 156.

apart in early May 1525, and omitted the word “Other” from the title of the latter half. Thus, in fairness to Luther, it appeared that he had suddenly changed his mind when in fact he did not.¹⁹

In the *Admonition to Peace. A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants of Swabia*. Luther attempts to mediate the dispute, writing to the princes and lords, “we have no one on earth to thank for this disastrous rebellion, except you princes and lords;”²⁰ and to the peasants, that their mob mentality threatens to replace the lords’ injustice with another.²¹ Luther admonishes both peasants and lords, “Scripture and history are against you.”²² In *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, Luther judges the peasants guilty of three sins: deliberate violation of oaths to their lords, rebellion, and blasphemy (they call themselves Christians yet act this way). Luther urges the lords to pray to God, and then take up the sword. In terms disturbing to read today, Luther assures anyone killed fighting on the side of the rulers that they will die true martyrs, and assures the princes that the truly merciful action in this situation is the swift killing of the peasants.²³

In late June or early July, Luther tried to explain his position in *An Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants*. In it, Luther speaks of Two Kingdoms and the failure of the peasants to distinguish between them, as well as the way in which the “temporal sword” is in fact merciful.²⁴ There was no avoiding or wiggling out of the fact that Luther never really deviated from his initial claim on the matter, addressed to the starving peasants: “No matter how right you are, it is not right for a Christian to appeal to law, or to fight, but rather to suffer wrong and endure evil; and there is no other way.”²⁵ Considering Luther’s repeated appeals to the nobles of Germany on other matters, this statement was not kindly received.

All the complexity of the situation aside, there is one basic reason Luther supported the princes: *he* needed them. Luther, facing difficult odds in the Church, had asked the state for help in carrying out his reforms. The state and Luther were now in this together.²⁶ Hans Hillerbrand writes,

Luther realized as early as January 1522 that reform – defined as the public establishment of the new forms of worship together with the dis-establishment of Catholic institutions, such as monasteries—would not succeed against the will of the political authorities.

¹⁹ Ibid., 158.

²⁰ LW 46:19.

²¹ LW 46:23–37.

²² LW 46:41.

²³ LW 46:49–55.

²⁴ LW 46:63–85.

²⁵ LW 46:31.

²⁶ As *Roland Bainton* noted, “Luther never dreamed that he was subordinating the Church to the state [...]. Luther’s concern was always that the faith be unimpeded. [...] If the prince would render assistance, let it be accepted. If he interfered, then let him be disobeyed”; *Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand. A Life of Martin Luther*, New York 1995, 245.

Accordingly, he gave priority to a concept of reform which had reformers and government proceed hand in hand [...].²⁷

In other words, Luther realized that he had cast his lot with the princes, upon whom he depended for his reforms. The Peasants' War threatened Luther's protectors. Luther could side with the peasants only by turning against the Elector who had challenged the Emperor on his behalf. Luther stuck with his Elector. I think this is the best explanation for how Luther could be so deeply concerned for the plight of the peasants prior to 1525, and then side with the princes and largely cease with comprehensive calls for poor relief after 1525.

2. What to do with Luther

I am Lutheran. I claim Luther's heritage, for better or for worse. Considering Luther's about face on caring for the vulnerable, why not just jettison Luther? Or, if not all of Luther, at least jettison the later Luther who has backtracked on justice? First, if nothing else, Luther provides a case study on how social justice preaching can get us into trouble, and how such a towering figure can be a cowering figure given the right circumstances. That is not, however, reason enough to retain his later works. Thus, secondly, Luther did important work later in his career. Luther's doctrine of ubiquity – or “real presence” – is what distinguishes “Lutheran” theology from other strands of the Reformation. Luther in middle and late career also developed his approach to the Trinity in a way that can be helpful today. These two doctrines, Trinity and Ubiquity, also provide a path to preaching on social justice. Moreover, they provide a path to such preaching that is rooted in doctrine and can potentially withstand the charge that it is simply attaching Christ to a political project.

2.1 *The Trinity*

Luther was Trinitarian. Pekka Karkkainen's essay, “Trinity,” reminds us not to be surprised by this.²⁸ Karkkainen walks the reader through Luther's early comments on Lombard and Augustine, and his rejection of Scotus' claim that “the enjoyment of one Trinitarian person without the enjoyment of another is not contradictory”²⁹ before assessing developments according to the usual mid-career (ca 1521–31) and late career (1531–1546) divisions. Karkkainen argues that throughout Luther's works, he always assumes the Trinity. Karkkainen writes,

The Knowledge of God comes about in a Trinitarian form from the outset, first through the work of creation attributed to the Father, then through redemption attributed to the Son. Both of these are received through the gifts of the indwelling Spirit, who makes the

²⁷ *Hillerbrand* (note 16), 18.

²⁸ *Pekka Karkkainen*, “Trinity” in *Engaging Luther. A (New) Theological Assessment*. Ed. Olli-Pekka Vaino, Eugene (OR) 2010.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

work of the Trinity a reality *for us* through faith and incites us to love, which is the fulfillment of the law.³⁰

The Trinity is not tacked on as an afterthought, but is rather a crucial piece of Luther's thought through which he directly undergirds his practical theology, in this case, his preaching.

Luther describes a developed doctrine of the Trinity in his commentary on John 14–16. This work exists in English translation as Volume 24 of the American, *Luther's Works*, entitled *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*. As is often the case with the American Edition, the title is misleading. They are not sermons. Sometime after March 14, 1537 Luther began preaching on St. John, apparently in a timeframe roughly congruent to the Easter Season. Casper Cruciger took notes on what Luther said, removing all indications of where sermons began or ended. The result was a “sermonic commentary,” which was published in three volumes in 1538 and 1539.³¹ They aren't sermons anymore; the finished book is a commentary. Luther called this commentary, “the best book I have written.”³² Luther in late career says here what he wants known about the concepts in these rich chapters.

The heart of the matter is John 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth. For He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak.”³³ Luther says that “here Christ makes the Holy Spirit a preacher.”³⁴ Luther sees this preaching commission as having to do with the “Enthusiasts,” reformers who believed they possessed and spoke a revelation of the Holy Spirit apart from Christ. According to Luther, here in John 16:13 Christ assures us that the Holy Spirit preaches only the Word, or *Logos*. “Christ sets bounds for the message of the Holy Spirit Himself. He is not to preach anything new or anything else than Christ and His Word. Thus we have a sure guide and touchstone for judging the false spirits.”³⁵ In other words, if preaching contradicts Christ then the preaching cannot come from the Holy Spirit because the Spirit only speaks Christ and Christ promises us that right here in John 16:13. We are to judge a sermon by its adherence to Christ.

How does the Holy Spirit preach? Luther argues that in John 16:13–14 Jesus proves that the Holy Spirit is a true Being, a Person distinct from the Father and Son. The logic is simple. “If He [the Spirit] is to come [...] to be sent or to proceed, also to hear and to speak, He must, of course, be something.”³⁶ He cannot be the Father because the Father does not come and is not sent. Nor

³⁰ Ibid., 106.

³¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, in: LW 24:ix.x.

³² LW 21:x.

³³ The translation is that of LW 24.

³⁴ LW 24:362.

³⁵ LW 24:363.

³⁶ LW 24:364.

can he be the Son, because the Son *already* came and is preparing to return (and is telling us about someone else who is about to come). Luther asks that we consider the natural flow of conversation. Scripture calls Jesus a Word which the Father speaks with and in himself. “Thus,” Luther reasons, “there are two distinct Persons: He who speaks and the Word that is spoken, that is, the Father and the Son.”³⁷ This is not much of a conversation, however, as you simply have speaker and word spoken. That wouldn’t happen (apparently) with God. “It stands to reason that there must also be a listener where a speaker and a word are found. But all this speaking, being spoken, and listening takes place within the divine nature and also remains there [...].”³⁸ Therefore, as all three persons are coeternal and coequal, “the Holy Spirit is the Listener from eternity.” Thus, in just a few pages, Luther lays out the developed concept of the Trinity in the preaching act. The Father speaks the Son to the Spirit, who preaches Christ to people through proclamation. Preaching falls into perichoresis, the “dance of Trinity.”

2.2 Ubiquity

Who is the Christ preached by the Spirit? To answer that, we turn to Luther’s doctrine of ubiquity. Briefly stated, the doctrine of ubiquity says that Christ is everywhere, but only of any value to humans (as the Gospel) when he is bound to the Word and Sacraments. As with most of Luther’s theological positions, ubiquity developed in response to current events. Luther in mid-career faced two major controversies. I already mentioned the “Enthusiasts” who believed that they now had the Spirit, who could speak freely through them in new ways. From the opposite direction, Luther faced Zwingli and his circle, who argued that Christ had ascended to the right hand of the Father and thus was not bodily present anywhere. The easiest response to either challenge was for Luther to side with the other, to fight the Enthusiasts by joining Zwingli or vice versa, but doing so would cause Luther to abandon much of his teaching.

Instead, Luther secured the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and opposed the Third person of the Trinity to both opponents. Prior to the controversies, Luther had held that the Holy Spirit took the written Word of God – within which Christ is merely an idea or example – and turned it into a Christ who is present, literally as the words of proclamation.³⁹ In the early Luther, Scripture is divided into letter and spirit, Law and Gospel. The Word as Letter is law: it places us alone in the world and demands that we act as it instructs. When preached, however, the Word becomes the promise of God because the Holy Spirit makes the Word Christ’s saving presence among us.⁴⁰

³⁷ LW 24:364

³⁸ LW 24:364f.

³⁹ *Regin Prenter*, Spiritus Creator. Luther’s Concept of the Holy Spirit (Tr. John M. Jensen), Philadelphia 1953, 108.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 114f. and 122.

In response to the Enthusiast claim to have the Spirit, Luther argued that the Spirit not only made the law into gospel, but also preached the law. One can read the law without having the Spirit. Such a reading is in the law's "First Use," and therefore does not work knowledge of sin. The law in its "Second Use," working knowledge of sin, is the proclamation of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹ The Holy Spirit, Luther says, is present either naked in her majesty or clothed in her gifts. When preaching the second use of the law, the Holy Spirit is unveiled as the power of the law. When preaching the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is enveloped in her gifts, herself a gift to the faithful.⁴² The Enthusiasts, Luther said, failed to see the Spirit clothed in her visible gifts – especially the Word and Sacraments – and therefore only had in their possession the God who judged them.⁴³ Rather than downplay the work of the Spirit, Luther had played up her responsibilities.

Luther undertook a similar path in using the Son to fend off Zwingli, amplifying the divinity of the man Jesus and declaring him present in two senses. Luther responded to Zwingli in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528). Luther cites the work of Occam and Biel, and their claim that there are three modes of being present in a particular place: the local, the definitive, and the repletive. Something is present *locally* when the space and object correspond exactly. (E.g. there are 20 oz of coffee in my cup, present locally.) Something is present *definitively* when the object or body is palpably in one place and is not measurable according to the dimensions of the place where it is. (Luther cites the expression "the devil is present in this house" and "the devil is present in this city" – clearly, the devil is not measurable or spread thinner when he moves beyond a house into the whole city.) Something is present *repletively* when it is simultaneously present in all places, in its wholeness yet without being measured. This mode of existence belongs to God alone.⁴⁴ This philosophical framework gave Luther a vocabulary for describing the real presence of Christ in communion.⁴⁵

That philosophical framework was also available to Luther in discussions of the incarnation not proximately related to the Eucharistic Controversy. As Marc Lienhard writes, "The humanity must have its part in this omnipresence, for God cannot be separated from the man Jesus [...]."⁴⁶ Lienhard does not use the phrase *hypostatic union*, but that is what he means. "To admit that God can be in any place independent of the man Jesus would be, according to Luther, fundamentally to

⁴¹ Ibid., 215.

⁴² Ibid., 216.

⁴³ Ibid., 254–266.

⁴⁴ "... Scripture irresistibly forces us to believe that Christ's body does not have to be present in a given place circumscriptively [i.e. 'locally'] or corporeally, occupying and filling space in proportion to its size. For it was in the stone at the grave, but not in that circumscribed mode; similarly in the closed door, as they cannot deny. If it could be present there without space and place proportionate to its size, my friend, why can't it also be in the bread without space and room proportionate to its size?" (LW 37:215f.).

⁴⁵ LW 37:216f.

⁴⁶ Marc Lienhard, Luther. Witness to Jesus Christ (Tr. Edwin H. Robertson), Minneapolis 1982, 226.

put in question the incarnation itself and the revelation of God hidden in the humanity.”⁴⁷ Consider Luther’s words on the matter:

Here you must take your stand and say that wherever Christ is according to his divinity, he is there as a natural, divine person and he is also naturally and personally there [...]. But if he is present naturally and personally wherever he is, he must then be man there, too, since he is not two separate persons but a single person. [...] [I]f you can say, ‘Here is God,’ then you must also say, ‘Christ the man is present too.’

And if you could show me one place where God is and not the man, then the person is already divided and I could at once say truthfully, ‘Here is God who is not man and has never become man.’ But no God like that for me!⁴⁸

Christ *has to be* everywhere, because Christ is God, and God is everywhere and God is revealed in Christ alone. Just as the Spirit may be present in one of two ways, so may Christ. Christ has a “General Presence” such that he is everywhere, but we cannot comprehend him in this way. We see Christ only in his “Personal Presence,” in which “Christ freely binds himself to a particular place by the Word.”⁴⁹ Christ is “useful” to us as the Gospel only when bound to the Word.

The Holy Spirit solved Luther’s problem. If the Holy Spirit is she who makes Christ useful and present to us as the Word, then the Spirit’s work has defeated both Zwingli and the Enthusiasts. In one fell swoop, Luther deals with both positions. For, the Spirit who makes Christ present as the Word and thus defeats Zwingli is the clothed Spirit, the gift, whom the Enthusiasts do not have. Luther’s doctrine of the ubiquity deals with both controversies. The Enthusiasts cannot claim to have the Spirit as gift, because the Spirit as gift preaches Christ who does all the justifying work for us. Zwingli cannot defend the claim that the Son is not really present at Holy Communion, because the Spirit testifies to his presence in the Word.

Ubiquity would define Luther over against the rest of the Reformation, and it still does. Martin Brecht writes, “The unity of protestantism was destroyed by this problem [the Eucharistic controversy] and could not be restored.”⁵⁰ However, Ubiquity was for Luther a consequence of taking seriously the doctrine of the Trinity. The persons of the godhead were God. When Luther says, “Wherever you place God for me, you must also place the humanity for me,” he was arguing from the position of Chalcedon.⁵¹ The Spirit preached law and gospel, making the Son present; the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ LW 37:218.

⁴⁹ *Lienhard* (note 46), 237.

⁵⁰ *Martin Brecht*, Martin Luther. Shaping and Defining the Reformation 1521–1532 (Tr. James L. Schaaf), Minneapolis 1990, 293.

⁵¹ LW 37:219.

Son did not show up without the Spirit preaching him. Luther did not consider this some newfangled theological innovation; it was the logical consequence of God being triune.

3. The Holy Possession of the Cross

Thus far, the conversation has existed in the arcane world of the theology classroom (or the closest drinking establishment thereunto). The goal I stated in the introduction was to get Luther the preacher into the political arena again. Despite the later Luther's claim that Christ has nothing to do with politics, that same Luther also argued for a Christ who was simultaneously the Second Person of the Trinity in ongoing perichoretic dance, AND present in Word and Sacrament in the real lives of real people. If preaching is to be both faithful and have something to do with politics, then the Word and Sacrament must have something to do with politics. Is the preached God open to politics? In asking this question, we stay with Luther's "best book," the John Commentary. If the Spirit who preaches is pointing us to political action and Luther mentions it here, we can assume he means it, even in his later years.

Luther opens the door to politics by returning to a theme of his early work: love of neighbor. Luther comments on John 14:21 (*He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me*):

This is precisely what we have always taught and still teach, namely, that where there is faith, the works of love must follow. I mean the good and genuine works, like those of the apostles and preachers who preached fearlessly and faithfully, as well as the readiness of others to hear God's Word and to adhere to it with their life and goods.⁵²

The presence of Christ via the Holy Spirit's preaching is supposed to result in "genuine" works, works that actually help people, and not simply in giving to mendicants. The beneficiary of your faith is to be your neighbor. I do not presume to have the key to all of Luther in my hand as I write this. It strikes me that the issue with Lutheran preaching on social justice—i.e. love of neighbor—may boil down to the infamous question, "But who is my neighbor?" Luther after the Peasants War stopped his calls for wholesale social reform, and focused instead on the personal struggle to remain faithful. But did he reject preaching useful work on the neighbor's behalf?

On the contrary, the Christian was to save her neighbor from an evil world. Luther describes the world as a place where "everyone relies on his mammon or on his prince against his neighbor", but the proper arrangement is supposed to be reliance on Christ against the devil.⁵³ The neighbor should not occupy the devil's place in our thinking. Rather, "as long as you sojourn here on earth, you must lead a fine, moral life, practice obedience, and perform works of love toward your

⁵² LW 24:147.

⁵³ LW 24:19f.

neighbor.”⁵⁴ We have, again, the classic Luther’s understanding of faith and works: “in order to obtain mercy before God and eternal life we must first have only this Christ through faith; and then we must also do good works and demonstrate our love.”⁵⁵ If Luther provides little in specific detail, he provides a wide scope – works of love for neighbor could take many forms. In comments on John 15:13–16, Luther sounds like his younger self: “You are not asked to sacrifice life and limb for [your neighbor], as Christ did for you. ‘But,’ says Christ, ‘I am only commanding you to prove your faith by serving and helping your neighbor, *by promoting his welfare*, by showing him fidelity and love.”⁵⁶ The emphasis is mine, lest the phrase be overlooked. While not exactly the essay *On Usury*, it is a call to love neighbor by promoting the neighbor’s welfare.

Welfare is not merely spiritual well-being. Luther expects the Christian to offer material aid, and to do so as part of Christ’s battle against the devil.

[The Christian] must reverse the order of the world, realize that he receives all that is necessary for salvation from above, and then proceed to dispense this to his neighbor here below. For we have received such an ample supply of good from God, both eternal and temporal, that we can easily help our neighbor.⁵⁷

Neither is this simply giving the neighbor some of our surplus. Temporal assistance to the point of great personal risk is the mark of a Christian. “When a person is willing to risk life, goods, and honor for Christ’s sake, is eager to bring all to the faith, serves his neighbor faithfully, treats him justly as a brother – then you have a sure sign that such a person is a sincere and believing Christian.”⁵⁸ Serious material aid is a basic part of Christian living. This is not a faith that stays locked up inside the person without engaging the world.

This neighbor-loving faith comes via the Holy Spirit. It is ongoing spirit work, part of the perichoresis Luther describes elsewhere in the book.

When I am baptized or converted by the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is present. He takes me as clay and makes of me a new creature, which is endowed with a different mind, heart, and thoughts, that is, with a true knowledge of God and a sincere trust in His grace. [...] My holiness, righteousness, and purity do not stem from me, nor do they depend on me. They come solely from Christ.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ LW 24:41.

⁵⁵ LW 24:52.

⁵⁶ LW 24:250.

⁵⁷ LW 24:261.

⁵⁸ LW 24:263.

⁵⁹ LW 24:226.

Here we see again the same pattern as in preaching: the Holy Spirit imparts to the believer Christ and the faith to trust him. The Christian thereby knows all that she has from Christ. “Thus Christ and the Christian become one loaf and one body, so that the Christian can bear good fruit [...]. The hands with which [the Christian] toils and serves his neighbor are the hands and members of Christ, who, as He says here [John 15:5] is in him; and he is in Christ.”⁶⁰

We see in the later Luther a developed concept of perichoresis in which the Father speaks the Son to the Holy Spirit, who speaks the Son to humans, and thereby causes the human to grow into Christ and Christ into the human. This believer is now the “hands and members” of Christ who can and must provide for her neighbor’s welfare at great personal cost. Preaching lies in this perichoretic dance. Preaching is how the Spirit gets from Godhead to listener. There is, then, a path to preaching social justice even in the later Luther. It lies through the Trinity. Luther’s retreat from his strong position on social justice may tempt us to jettison Luther, certainly from mid-1525 onward. Doing that, however, would cost us Luther’s own trinitarian homiletic which provides a doctrinal basis for preaching social justice. Were we to jettison Luther completely, we would be throwing out this baby with the bathwater. Luther does not claim a comprehensive call to political action originating within the Godhead. He *does* say that Christ made present by the preaching of the Holy Spirit changes people to act as Christ would. Such actions are not futile; they should change the world. As Scott Hendrix writes, “Luther believed the human will first had to be turned around by the Spirit and then held on the path of faith and love.”⁶¹ The sermon’s place in the dance of Trinity can lead the faithful to dance the Trinity in the streets, or in the halls of power.

Considerations Going Forward

Does that open Pandora’s Box? At the same time American Christians are being arrested for protesting the treatment of the poor, other American Christians are advocating for legislation that would allow them to launder money for political candidates. Is that where I want to take Luther? A homiletic wholly informed by political considerations is no more faithful to Luther than is a homiletic that eschews the political. Luther offers a nuanced view that may prove helpful in today’s climate.

Luther provided a groundwork for preaching on political matters. He does not overtly state that a pastor should preach on political matters. But political preaching is possible because of Luther’s trinitarian homiletic: the Spirit will preach, and give us Christ, and we will love our neighbors and look out for their welfare. A homiletic that wants to be faithful to Luther *can* preach on political matters. One will not find a ready-made blueprint for this in Luther. In other words, if

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *Scott Hendrix*, *Recultivating the Vineyard. The Reformation Agendas of Christianization*, Louisville 2004, 66.

I, as a preacher, want to get from “supplying temporal good to my neighbor” to a specific proclamation regarding a contemporary issue, I have to do that work myself. I can do it, though, without leaving the tradition.

Luther’s trinitarian homiletic provides important clues for what faithful proclamation can and cannot be. For Luther is adamant, in the John commentary and everywhere else, that faithful proclamation preaches Christ who is both crucified and risen.

Preaching Christ crucified, I cannot preach false hope or triumphalism, as so many do, say, at every change of presidential administration. Suffering is a part of being Christian. Preaching on a political matter must speak of the suffering Christ endures for the sake of loving neighbor, and the suffering we as Christians are expected to endure on behalf of *helping* our neighbors.

Preaching Christ risen, I preach grace. Christ is the sermon I preach, and if he is going to be present in my sermon it will be through the Spirit as love, grace, and forgiveness. Any *Luther-an* sermon that calls people to political action will emphasize Christ and his limitless love. It will underscore that all who hear the proclamation receive Christ freely, and on account of Christ receive all that is good, and that no recalcitrant public, no stubborn refusal of the world to believe this, can snatch Christ away from the faithful.

Finally, the sermon’s goal is love of neighbor, not reliance on any power *against* the neighbor. The goal is that the church serve. There can be no personal target, no life to ruin as part of a political program. For preaching is the work of the Spirit. As Luther summarizes:

First, He will convince and assure their hearts that they have a compassionate God; secondly, He will enable them to help others by their supplication. The result of the first is that they are reconciled to God and have all they need for themselves. Then, when they have this, they will become gods and will be saviors of the world by their supplication. Through the spirit of compassion they themselves become children of God; and then, as children of God, they will mediate between God and their neighbor, and will serve others and help them attain this estate too.⁶²

Preaching may lead the faithful to take to the streets; its goal is that even the tyrant in the fortress tower will come down and join the dance of the Trinity.

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⁶² LW 24:87.