Mockingbird Mini-Conference at Christ Church, Pensacola FL 1/30/2010

Talk 2: Luther as Pastoral Theologian Dr. Mark Mattes

Theology has long found itself displaced as the "queen of the sciences." It is hard to say which discipline is governing the academy today, but it surely isn't theology. At best, some universities retain Religion Departments for the sake of "diversity," a haven for studying important aspects of other cultures such as the Islamic, Buddhist, or Taoist. In some places religion courses serve to fulfill core requirements in the liberal arts curriculum. But hardly any university today positions theology as its center or purpose for existence.

Theologians are not in the limelight and wonder about their status. Where do they fit in? How does Theology make a difference in the world? And so, theologians try to defend their work as relevant. That takes tremendous effort and work, but many theologians believe such a defense or "apology" is necessary.

The path less trod is one that is less apologetic. Instead of trying to find theology's relevance for the modern world, perhaps the world—even the world of the academy—is far more religious than many are willing to admit. No matter what the discipline in the university, scholars want to preserve their discipline's place and justify its existence. In some way or another, scholars believe that their discipline furthers the human venture—that it in some sense justifies life. Push them further and, chances are, you can find some theology hidden in their work. Scratch the surface of physics and you will find the metaphysical question: 'is the cosmos a result of design or chance?' Did a little deeper into mathematics and you can hardly avoid the truth that math and theology share the same home ground: infinity. Ultimately there is some kind of intangible standard by which to legitimate specific scholarly inquiry, whether that justification be "freedom," "creativity," or "truth." Such matters exude an aura of spirituality—and thus theology is not far behind, and, in many cases, at the core of what all kinds of secular people do, whether they acknowledge this or not.

No doubt, it is important that theology be "systematic" and attempt to find the common thread between doctrines. It is crucial that theology be "constructive" and attempt to state its truths for today. It is vital that theology be contextual and apply to where people are. But the most important task of theology is to be *pastoral*—centered on delivering the good

news to those bound in sin—the promise that for Jesus' sake your sins are forgiven and that you are God's own.

All people are theologians whether they are aware of this or not. Even those who never attend a church, synagogue, or temple have core beliefs about what's right or wrong, true or false, and upon what one ultimately should hang one's heart. Not all "gods" or "lords," however, are benevolent (1 Corinthians 8:5). Some, like Moloch of old, demand sacrifice, as do our contemporary gods of time, status, and control. In contrast to such religious violence, we need a theology which is true to the gospel, one which is *pastoral*—discerning God's commands, most faithfully summarized in the Ten Commandments (although nature itself testifies to their truth), and God's promise—most clearly given in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but which is likewise also testified to in nature itself (such as the rainbow as God's covenantal promise of providential care for humankind), and is clearly set forth in proclamation.

At the core of pastoral discernment is that God's law and his promise are not the same thing—either in their structure or their content. God's law commands us to do something—and accuses us when we fail to do it. God's promise, however, commands nothing, but guarantees that God will forgive, preserve, and sustain you. God's promise delivers gifts, while God's law makes demands upon us. If we rightly distinguish law and gospel, we will see to comfort those afflicted by the demands of the law but also afflict those who are self-righteous in their belief that they have consistently and perfectly fulfilled these very demands. At the center of a pastoral theology is discerning where the conscience lies.

Three Rules

Martin Luther was a master in developing such a pastoral approach to theology. From him, we have much to learn about becoming pastoral theologians—ones who discern where God's law hounds us and where we can receive God's liberating grace. In his commentary on Psalm 119 Luther specifies "three rules" for "the proper way to study theology": (1) prayer (*oratio*), (2) meditation (*meditatio*), and (3) spiritual attack (*tentatio*). These three rules teach us how to live as Christians in the church and the world. Through these three rules we enter into the world of Holy Scripture, the most important place for us to live. For Luther, it is *spiritual attack* (*tentatio*)—God's own accusation against us in the law (resulting in what he called *Anfechtung*) or his frightful absence from us, as Jacob experienced the night he fought

with an unnamed foe at the ford of the Jabbok (Genesis 32), that leads us to bend our knees to *pray* (*oratio*) for illumination, and finally to let *scripture interpret us* (*meditatio*). What these three rules do—among other things—is show us that it is not we who finally interpret scripture but scripture which interprets us. It is not we who hold authority over scripture, but scripture which holds authority over us. It is not we who define scripture but scripture which defines us. We have no clue about who we are or where we fit apart from scripture's address and claim on us.

A pastoral theology knows that we are all theologians to some degree or another, that we all have an "ultimate concern," as Paul Tillich put it, in which we trust and often which we publically advocate. Even more to the point, it recognizes that all theology comes with its agendas. The first theological question asked in scripture comes from none other than the adversary, "hath God said…" When that question was asked, it was to put God's word in doubt and perhaps to let one be one's own god or goddess for oneself. Pastoral theology recognizes that we need to focus on the true content of theology, which for Luther is nothing other than the sinful human needing God's justification and the righteous God, who for Jesus' sake, justifies.

For many, theology is gaining a "God's eye" perspective on reality—to tidy up our experience so that it makes sense to us in light of God. If our theology fails to square with metaphysics—the question of what's really real—then it isn't grounded in reality. As noble as that goal is, a "God's eye" view of reality is not something the human can pull off. It is not something given to us—at least in this life in which we only "see through a glass dimly." Our scope is finite and limited; and thus it will remain. Our thinking—this side of heaven—can only go so far. As Ecclesiastes (3:11) says, "[God] has put eternity in our hearts," and thus we can't help but ask metaphysical questions, but the scope of all reality is beyond our comprehension. On top of that, we are sinful and like remaining in control of our lives. The quest for a "God's eye" perspective, which is the goal of most metaphysical systems, asks the question "what's really real?" It can and should be unmasked as capable of being a spiritual disease. We all would wish we could be our own gods or goddesses (what Luther called *ambitatio divinitatis*), but that is just our problem. And much of metaphysics is the attempt to justify ourselves in light of our insignificance, our finitude, or to offer an explanation that might console us when we encounter pain, which so often seems so arbitrary and unmerited.

The Sinful Human and Justifying God

In that light, Luther defined theology as knowledge of God and humans (*cognitio dei et hominis*) in his interpretation of Psalm 51 (1532). For him, the only subject matter of theology is the knowledge that results from the relation between the sinful human (who needs justification) and the God who justifies. Theology is not primarily speculation that offers the grand narrative of cosmic and human history or a program for ethical or spiritual reform or reflection on the deepest feelings of our inner life. In a word, it deals not with metaphysics, morality, or mysticism. Instead it is to be found *where God meets us*—most clearly and specifically in the preached word, but also as encountered in all creation, since God speaks to us in all things (though not always clearly [Psalm 19]). And, here we should be unambiguous. Preaching at its best is not only a description of God's will and ways; rather, it actually gives the gifts it talks about. It does not merely enlighten but instead defines us as forgiven sinners.

Luther came to these insights about a pastoral approach to theology from his specific background. Luther's spiritual formation can be traced to the influence of both the monastery and the university. In the university of his day, scholastic theology practiced *disputatio*, debating over theses offered by professors to students. Luther was a master at the art of disputation. However, Luther's spiritual background was in the "monastic" tradition, which treasured the practice of meditating the hours with the Psalter. This is a liturgical theology which honors a pastoral use of scripture coupled with a cultivation of the affects, including the emotions, senses, desires, and imagination. This monastic approach involves meditating on the text, listening to the scriptural word, allowing it to do its work in us. While Luther always honors the university method of *disputatio* to establish doctrine, his spiritual counsel is framed from this meditative, liturgical tradition. Both the monastic and the scholastic traditions influence Luther's more systematic treatment of theology, which can best be described as catechetical, expositing the truth of the Ten Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, and the Lord's Prayer.

A pastoral approach to theology means that theology must be discerning. Luther distinguishes between sinners who feel their sins (*peccator sensatus*) and those who are unaware of their sins (*peccator insensatus*). This is one reason why law must be distinguished from gospel. Some sinners are smug in their sin and confident of their ability to escape punishment. They need to hear God's accusing voice—heard so clearly in Nathan's

address to David—"*you* are the culpable one. *You* are the one who stands condemned! (2 Samuel 12:7)." Others are lost in both their sin and the feared consequences of their sin. Trapped in themselves, their life becomes a living hell, a nightmare. They know that they've been caught in the act. And they have no program which can free them. Instead, all their self-help merely feeds the centrality of the self and aggravates the problem. They need instead to hear God's promise of grace and mercy, for Jesus' sake. As Luther puts it, the penitent is "individuated" before God (*principium individuationis*); this sinner confesses to God: "against you, you only, have I sinned." This person can and must hear that God is one who embraces the lost and welcomes them into his fold.

Hiddenness of God

As discerning, however, this pastoral theology realizes that some are not merely lost in their sin and guilt, but also experience something other than guilt—"diffuseness" we might say—that they have no center, that God has abandoned them. They experience what Luther called the "hidden God" (*deus absconditus*). Like the innocent sufferer Job experiencing God's abandonment, unjustly afflicted, they cry out, "Where is God?" They don't stand accused. Rather, they look to accuse God—and seek a lawyer to try God. Less burdened by guilt, it is more accurate to say that they experience confusion with respect to the justness of their experience and deal with a diffuseness of self. These people need to hear God's commitment of love to them and that God and his love is sufficient for them in their trials. Even when God is hidden, we can appeal to the God who we know is gracious and merciful in the love given in Jesus Christ.

No doubt, such dissociation or disconnection between God and humans, the experience of God as accusing or God as abandoning, is finally a result of a world in which God and humans are already separated, due to sin. And we have no bridge from our side by which to bridge the gap. There is no ladder (moral, metaphysical, or mystical) by which we can climb to heaven and decipher God's will and way with the world. Whether as sinners brought low, even reduced to nothing by sin, or as those wondering where God has gone, we experience separation from God—a painful, even fatal separation. Yet in such separation, Luther believes that the "naked God" as he puts it, "is there with humans in their nakedness." No speculative or moral or mystical bridge can stand in the face of this "naked God." This naked God is God in his absolute majesty, the absolute God. Without the word of absolution

we are brought to our end by this Absolute. With this God we can have nothing to "do," we cannot "handle" him, we cannot "deal" with him, we cannot "speak" to him, and we cannot even believe in him.

But such an experience with the naked God surely leads us to the despair of ourselves, or own attempt to fit God into a self-improvement program, whether through our "theology" or programs of moral or spiritual reform. For Luther, we are broken on the rock of God himself, if we seek to toy with God outside of Christ.

Such brokenness is so ably depicted by the Kierkegaard translator, Edna Hong: "Our God has chosen to become involved in the divine failure—humanity. Our Savior chose to share with us the pain, punishments, and penalties of being imperfect humans. And God's Secret Agent of Reform chooses to help us imperfect creatures respond to the terrible call to be new creatures in Christ. For it is a terrible call, and it is a long, long, painful journey. For there is so much to tear down before the Holy Spirit can build up. There are so many fake props to knock down. And the end of the painful road is not perfection, but perfect humility. Not morbidity and self-loathing, but a humble and contrite heart."

That should give us hope! Such a "humble and contrite" heart is one that has given up control of others and the self. Without the defense mechanism of control, one is open to this world on its own terms, and most importantly, to God on his own terms. Through such breaking down of defense, we are properly "ordered" to this world, become the creatures God would have us become, not by what we do or accomplish but by what we receive. Our being "ordered" to the Triune life has nothing to do with developing our potentiality to pattern ourselves according to eternal truth, beauty, and goodness. Rather, it is something that God is working in us as we rub shoulders with his world, encountering him underneath various guises and masks in other people and the creation just for the very purpose of his creative shaping us to become people of faith.

It is indisputable that God is God in his substance, his nature, and his person. Nevertheless, God is also and most importantly God in relation to us, specifically by his speaking to us and addressing us. Most specifically and with the greatest comfort, he addresses us in the word of promise, because he is so firmly committed to his creatures which he so dearly loves.

The End of the Law

Law is a strange thing. If we are given commandments, surely that indicates that we can do what is asked of us. Surely the law is offered as a kind of self-improvement program either for ourselves or others. And, given our desire—as caring individuals—to fix or rectify what is wrong with the world or even ourselves, we look to God's law as the best way to fix or rectify a broken and imperfect world. All we need to do is get on board with the program. However, we discover that the more we do the program—follow God's law in thought, word, or deed—the more we stay trapped in ourselves. We discover that the law can never deliver us from the self with its improvement ventures. We remain stuck in ourselves; even our spirituality keeps us fixed on ourselves. Our religion or spirituality doesn't fix us but traps us. The freedom we need is to be free of ourselves—our self-centeredness—but the law feeds this monster and does not really deliver us. Only Jesus Christ can do that.

The law is true and wise, until it shockingly reaches it end in Christ, specifically in the death of Christ upon the cross, since it is written, cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree (Deut 21:23). Christ, who according to St. Paul "became sin for us," did not become sin in his trial. He was innocent before his accusers. But at the cross the curse of the Lord came upon him and made him not a transgressor but the greatest of all sinners, beyond David, Peter, you, and me. Indeed, not just the greatest of sinners but sin itself.

Scripture makes clear that the law is valuable and true, until the cross. This is the logic from the cross. Apart from the cross, in this old world, the law remains in its entirety, not just in part, preserving life to some extent and accusing unto death. There the law is good, the law is holy, the law remains forever!

The fault is not with the law. But it doesn't have anyone else to convict once the cross of Christ ends 'this old world.' In the Old Testament there are clearly promises given that are fulfilled in Christ. This is why Paul makes the proper distinction between Moses and Abraham, and between the Abraham of the covenant of circumcision and the Abraham that was made righteous by faith alone.

In penitential prayer, we confess that God is right when he embraces and forgives the sinner for Jesus' sake. In such prayer, we ascribe righteousness to him, we attribute it to him and deny it of ourselves.

In his Commentary on Romans Luther notes that with respect to God's nature, of course, we can neither justify nor condemn God. However, God permits both in his word. "It [God's word] is condemned by those who want to be self-righteousness, and it is justified by sinners."

The Power of Faith

For Luther, then, with respect to our relation to God, everything hinges on faith. Perhaps for no other theologian of either the East or the West is the experience of faith so important. In his Lectures on Galatians (1531), Luther goes so far as to claim that faith is the "creator of the Deity." Not of course with respect to God's own person but only with respect to ourselves. Indeed, God wants nothing else "than that I make God." Or as he puts it, "It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol."

Now such radical statements need exposition. For Luther, it is clear that faith and God do not belong together because there is a general or basic unity between them, some kind of metaphysical symmetry, outside the word. No. The phrase "to make God" (*deum facere*) means to give or to attribute (*at-tribere*) to God what is his. We can only speak of God's attributes in the context of a verbal exchange (*in sermonibus tuis*).

But as we have seen, there is no conflict-free relationship with God. Luther is cognizant that where we encounter God, a power struggle will always ensue. In his mind, we want to be our own gods. As sinners, our first impulse is to trust ourselves and we resist putting our confidence in another or allow another to be there for us. In such an exchange between ourselves and God, a life-and-death struggle for mutual recognition, faith makes God. Faith acknowledges human impotency and need before God. Faith is thereby the creator of the Deity (*fides est creatrix divinitatis*). Unbelief, however, makes itself an idolater.

Christ's office and work is to put an end to the conflict between the naked God and sinful humans and to overcome such a fatal confrontation so that God can speak to sinners and mercifully rescue them. He saves them from death and from being curved in on themselves, which is the origin of idolatry.

The Receptive Life

Luther avoids Aristotelian alternatives, that theology is either grounded in *actio* (action) or *contemplatio* (contemplation). Instead he sees theology as an event and a path that is so different from anything else that it deserves to have its own name…the passive life (*vita passiva*) or receptive life. God is the active subject and the Christian is the object of God's action. The Christian life therefore is passive in the sense that it suffers, it undergoes God's work and so passively receives it. Thus, the receptive life is connected with a particular struggle—one I don't produce of myself but undergo as a sinner who of necessity struggles with God for recognition. In Luther's own words, "It is by living—no, not living, but by dying and giving ourselves up to hell that we become theologians, not by understanding, reading, and speculating."

How then are we made right before God? It is God's forensic decree of acquittal for Jesus' sake which does this. This forensic judgment is the vertical dimension to justification. But this vertical dimension carries with it a horizontal dimension as well—the whole of our lives as lived. Justification then is the fullness of life as it is granted to us by our creator. The "righteousness of faith" of which Luther speaks is wholly passive: we simply let God do his work in us. We find ourselves as clay shaped by the artful skill of the divine potter. And faith, for Luther, is highly experiential. I experience faith by letting God work it in me. But this experience of faith is painful. It is, as Luther puts it in his catechisms and elsewhere, nothing other than the death of old Adam or Eve in us. And for Luther, this is not mere picture language.

One of the most important deaths which the old being undergoes is the idolatry at its core. Much theology is perverse, the human's attempt to escape reality as it is given to us by God, since we refuse to trust in God's promise and goodness. In commenting on Genesis 6:5 and 8:21, Luther notes that the human being is a "rational being with a fabricating heart…[that] continually produces images in the mind, in other words, idols." Metaphysical concepts in particular can become idols quite quickly. For that very reason, a pastoral theology will be on the alert that the gospel as a word of promise is not turned into a theory. However, given the openness to life that the gospel evokes—the breaking down of defenses—it lends itself to wisdom (*sapientia experimentalis*), a path that unites theory and practice and

grounds both in a third: an experiential life, a receptive life. Such a life can include the scientific impulse which guides much of the university's inquiry.

Role of Reason

What then becomes of reason, in light of this pastoral approach? Aristotle held that the rule of many is not good; let one be the ruler. And that ruler, of course, is reason. A response to Aristotle which influenced Luther was that of Ockham's counter-metaphor: there is not just one king but many kings. We should be skeptical of one "reason" when in fact we deal solely with reasons when it comes to explaining matters or presenting truth. And, in that regard, theology properly understood is not primarily a study of principles but a study of history and experience. For Aristotle, nothing historical or empirical or experiential can be the object or even the ground of science. But for Luther, in contrast, theology is infinite wisdom because it can never be fully learned. As long as philosophy wants to control theology, theology will need to contradict it. We will therefore have to develop our theology in conflict with philosophy. At its best, theology connects monastic, liturgical spirituality and academic disputation with the wider catholic catechetical tradition.

Most properly, for Luther, theology is the interpretation of scripture. Scripture in Luther's judgment is the "Divine Aeneid," the inexhaustible book of experience which interprets our lives in light of its various genres and in tandem with its nearly four thousand year impact upon the world.

In Luther's judgment, *oratio*, *meditatio*, *tentatio* occur in the midst of "tumult," in the midst of a universal, violent, and immense battle, that rages from the beginning to the end of the world. From his perspective, believing as he did that we live in the last days, an apocalyptic battle rages all through time and in the heart of every individual.

In summary, for Luther a pastoral theology discerns the law as accusing, administers the gospel as promising and comforting, acknowledges God in hiddenness, in the face of disaster or illness. Ultimately it holds up the truth that God is for us and rubs God's own nose with it when and where we deal with as God as hidden or accusing.

The author is grateful to and indebted to the work of Oswald Bayer, especially Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation" for the insights presented here.