Luther's Theology of Glory

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Luther’s bold contrast between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross is often interpreted as the key passage unlocking the door to his entire thought. In the famous theses 20 and 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation (1518), Luther insists that only a theologian of the cross can “comprehend... the visible and manifest things of God,” and can correctly “call a thing what it is.”¹ The knowledge of the Christian God is accessible solely at the place of God’s deepest humiliation, the rock on which every human ambition for glory is shattered: in “suffering” and on the “cross.”² As the starting point for theological reflection, Luther’s theology of the cross cannot be considered to exhaust all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ (Col. 2:3).³ In this brief essay, I intend to show that, for Luther, a theologian “deserving of this name” can also be fascinated by the glory of the triune God. On the basis of Luther’s explanation to the Creed in the Large Catechism, I suggest that Luther’s theology of glory consists of two interwoven narratives of trinitarian glorification. Together, they can be illustrated as a double helix of glorification: God is glorified for who God is, as well as for what God does.

I. The confession of faith

A consideration of genre is crucial when the object of study is Martin Luther. When the focus is directed to the catechetical rather than to the controversial-theological Luther, the task becomes one of determining how the subject matter is shaped by the genre of the confession of faith.⁴ Articulated in the first-person singular, the confession is structured by

¹ WA 1, 354, 19–20. 21–22. [Translation by the author.]
² Ibid., 354, 19.
³ W. von Loewenich has powerfully influenced Luther scholarship by arguing that the theology of the cross decisively shapes Luther’s thought. Walther von Loewenich, Luther’s Theology of the Cross, Witten, 1967, 14–15. It must not be forgotten that, for both John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle, the glory of God is hidden in Christ: John 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:6.
⁴ George Lindbeck distinguishes between the catechetical and the controversial-theological Luther. George A. Lindbeck, “Martin Luther and the Rabbinic Mind,” Understanding the Rabbinic Mind (SFSJ 14), Atlanta, 1990, 141.

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The economic Trinity is what one scholarly line of interpretation takes the catechetical Luther to mean by the "entire and complete" knowledge of God. This view takes as its warrant both Luther's division of the Creed into the three works of creation, redemption and sanctification, and his explanation to each article according to a three-way grammatical intersection. The name of the person responsible for an activity and the verb of action are both derived from the work. Through grammatical ingenuity and pedagogical simplicity, Luther makes the theological point that each trinitarian person is related to what each person does. The economy of works plays perfectly into the hands of some scholars.

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2 In the Large Catechism (1529), Luther formulates his explanation to the Apostles' Creed in the first person singular. "Ich glaube an..." WA 303, 183, 8. The first-person plural is used in the catechetical hymn, known as the German Crede, "Wir glauben all als einen Gott." WA 35, 431, 1—452, 10.

3 WA 303, 183, 7 (Explanation to the First Commandment, Large Catechism).

4 In view of both clergy and laity, Luther laments the sorry lack of familiarity with the basic content of the Christian faith. Ibid., 125, 1—10 (Neue Vorrede, 1530); Ibid., 131, 7—16 (Vorrede, 1529).

5 Ibid., 183, 22—23. In the Large Catechism, Luther uses the oblique form — indicated by das — to introduce the answer. "Answer: Das meine und glaube ich, das ich..." Ibid., 183, 32.

6 WA 45, 14, 9—10 (Elbe Wasserspiegel von den Anfängen des Glauens, in Schriften der Jenaer Gesellschaft, Febr. 11, 1527, Böer transcript).

7 WA 303, 182, 21—22; 186, 3. Although the Decalogue spells out the knowledge of what God commands to be done or avoided, the Creed reveals God "ganz und gar." The Creed00 closes the "depths of the Father's heart." Ibid., 181, 34—35, the knowledge of what can be expected from God, and what is given by God. Ibid., 192, 18—22.

8 In technical terminology, the work is correctly referred to as an appropriation. Luther uses the German verb, "zustellen." See WA 303/III, 581, 39, 382, 1, 4 (Der Segen, so man nach der Meß spreicht über das Voll, aus dem vierten Buche Moses, am 6. Capitel, 1532).

9 For example, the work of redemption is accomplished by the Redeemer, who "mich erlogen hat von sünde, vom Teufel, von rede und allen unglücklich." WA 304, 186, 12—13.

10 Luther's famous idiom sums up the relation of absolute trust: "Denn die zwey geho[en]zen zulauffe, glaube und Gott." An inquiry into the knowledge of the self and God not prohibited by the confession's structure that on the surface seems to articulate only the relation obtaining between the extremes. In fact, Luther's contribution to the history of piety rests precisely on his explanation to the Creed's confession of faith in the triune God. Luther formally structures his catechetical explanation in such a way as to open up a space between the self and God in which a process of growth in knowledge can take place. Inside the region of faith, the answer is guided by the question: "Lieber hastu fur ein Gott, was weisestu von ihm?" Luther's own answer directs the individual to a life-long study of both the I as "meines Gottes wurtle und Creaturlin," and God "ganz und gar." 10

11 The distinction between "Gott fur uns" and "Gott an sich" is one that is often attributed to Luther. Its meaning, however, is modified considerably when the term is used anachronistically in a neo-Kantian sense. Lo. Adolf von Harnack, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, vol. 3, Die Entwickelung des kirchlichen Dogmas, Tubingen, 1902, 860.

12 For this view, see Albrecht Peters, Kommentar zu Luthers Kategorien, vol. 2, Der Glaube, Göttingen, 1941, 40.


14 WA 303, 183, 5—7.

15 The precise modern equivalent of "to glorify" is "verherrlichen." However, the German, verb, "verklären," as it is used in the sixteenth century, covers a variety of meanings which can be translated into English by the number of terms mentioned above. I interpret the range of meanings of "verklären" to flesh out the full concept of glorification. See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Verklären." Deutsches Wörterbuch, vol. 120, Leipzig, 1856, 650—4. In a sermon preached in 1528, Luther describes "verklären" as the act of "preisen und hoch leben, heilich und berufert machen, das alle welt davon zu singen und sagen wisse." WA 28, 79, 29—30 (Wochenspredigen über Joh. 16—20, 1528/29, Aug. 8, 1528,
to the Trinity, a double view of glorification becomes manifest. What God does, or the outer-Trinity, is the quintessence of the Aaronoic blessing, the shining of the Father’s face on creation. The more intimate side to God, the inner-Trinity or who God is, is a matter of the Spirit’s revelation. It is to the narrative of inner-trinitarian glorification that I will now turn.

II. The inner-trinitarian glorification

The first narrative begins with the Father, and his story is plotted by a special characterization of the divine essence. Luther strategically identifies the divine nature with the verb “to give.” “Das meine und gleube ich,... das ist, das er mir geben hat...” The literary fact has been noted by Bayer and Sells, two Luther scholars who have, respectively, shown its theological significance for determining the relation between the Father both to creation and to the trinit essence. When the interpretive focus is adjusted by “to give,” rather than by “to create,” Luther’s cathectical intention comes to light. For Luther, giving characterizes the Father in a way identifying him as the origin of two types of gifts. Giving is first used to determine the Father’s outer work of creating. The result is Luther’s rich picture of the Father as the giver of all the “temporal goods” that preserve and sustain the existence of corporeal life. Further, the same verb marks the transition to the second article, so that the Father is also seen as the giver of the “eternal goods,” the Son and the Spirit. With a description of the divine essence of giving, the origin becomes transparent to the convergence between the Father’s outer-trinitarian work and his inner-trinitarian relations. At this point, Luther’s view dovetails with the medieval dogmatic formulations that regulate, according to a double grammar, the biblical identification of ἀποκάλυψις — without an article — with ἀποκάλυψις. According to this tradition, the Father, as the particular suppositum of the divine essence, is both the Father of the Son, and is identified with the divine essence in a special way. By marking the first trinitarian person with giving, the work of creation reflects light from the inner-Trinity itself.

Through the point of origin, Luther renders the outer-trinitarian giving of the temporal goods transparent to the mystery of the inner-Trinity. When Luther specifies the economic giving as a complete and utter self-giving (ganz und gar), he makes a claim concerning the relations between the eternal goods. Giving characterizes the way in which the Father transfers the divine essence to the Son, and then to the Spirit. As the origin of the inner-trinitarian relations, the Father gives all the divine attributes constituting the divine essence to the Son. Luther portrays this eternal giving as a communication of the Father’s attributes, the “eternal and omnipotent being, life, truth and righteousness,” to the Son, “the Lord of life, righteousness, all good things and blessedness.” With respect to the third article of the Creed, Luther establishes a structural similarity between Christ’s work and the Spirit’s work. The Spirit works “vergebung,” and freedom from “sünd, tod und allem unglü[c]ck,” by virtue of the divine attributes transferred to the Spirit from the Father and Christ. The Father’s giving constitutes the inner-trinitarian relations of origin. Nothing is held back as an undefined metaphysical rest, which would undermine the definition of the divine essence as giving and compromise the truth of trinitarian revelation. In an intriguing way, giving

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22 Gal. 1:3; Phil. 2:15; 1 Thess. 1:1.
24 Peter Lombard, Sent., I, d. 5, c. 1 (15); Fourth Lateran of 1215 (DS* 804); Also: CA I (BLSK 59), 7–16.
25 In his essay on the Decalogue, Luther uses the “ganz und gar” terminology to specify complete obedience to the ten commandments ["... yhn ganzt und gar damit zutinnen, wie er durch die zehe gospel gesehe und betroffen haben."] WA 30/1, 387–388, as well as the divine aid in keeping them ["... wie sic Gott gantz und gar mit allem das er hat und verstand, uns gibt zu hold und stetem, die zehe gospel mahlzeit."] Ibid., 192, 26–28.
26 These attributes are listed in a sermon on John 17:9; WA 28, 155, 25–27.
27 WA 30/1, 186, 23–24.
28 Luther uses a rhetorical strategy in order to establish the similarity between the two eternal goods. “Gleich wie... Also richtet der Heilige gesetze die heiligung aus...” Ibid., 187, 37–38, 1. See also Ibid., 192, 2.
29 Ibid., 191, 1, 7–8. For the same formulation under the second article of the Creed, see Ibid., 186, 12–13 (or foootnote 12).
30 “... sondern wie er sich ganzt und gar ausgescha[c]tet hat und nichs behalten, das er nicht uns gegeben habe.” Ibid., 186, 2–4.
III. The outer-trinitarian glorification

The Spirit is the terminal point of the narrative of giving, and the pivot around which another narrative unfolds. Similar to the first narrative, the second narrative is determined by a verb that is subsequently conjugated through the three persons: "to bring." What this narrative accomplishes is not only to mirror the narrative of giving into creation, but also to transform human impossibility into the capacity for both receiving the gifts and recognizing the giver.36 When the inner-trinitarian glorification is reflected onto the outer-trinitarian activity, creation is transformed to reflect the glory of the triune God.

The second narrative begins when the Spirit brings individuals together in an action that creates the church. In the article presenting Luther with a conceptual difficulty, and in the longest of the three explanations, Luther subsumes two essential moments of sanctification under the verb "to bring."37 The first moment of the church's existence comes about when the Spirit brings individuals together.38 With this understanding of the church as the sum of particulars gathered together to form a common group, Luther's proximity to William Ockham's metaphysics is exposed. For Ockham, only particulars exist in reality.39 For Luther, the Spirit's action of bringing individuals together constitutes their sanctification through the elements (Stücke) mentioned in the article of faith: the church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection, and eternal life.40 Although perpetually connected to the span from the present into the future, the Spirit's work stretches towards a second moment, the latter then extending beyond the bounds of the former.41 At this second site, the Spirit brings the church to Christ; Christ's redemption is here "brought home to us."42 The narrative of bringing is incomplete without the final

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36 When Luther's development is traced from the 1523 sermon on the casuism to the 1529 Large Catechism, it appears that Luther changed his mind regarding the conceptualization of the third article. A shift is evident in the way Luther conceives the Spirit's work in relation to the church. The shift from sanctification in 1523 [WA 11, 53, 10 (Predigt über das Symbolum, March 6, 1523)] to sanctification in 1528 results in the tighter connection of all articles under the church to the Spirit's activity: Peter, 177–8.

37 "... , welcher die Christliche kyrche weiber, bis[n]er[s]er zusammen bringt,... " WA 30/1, 189, 1–2; "... durch den Heiligen geist daher gebracht und eingeleitet,... " Ibid., 190, 9–10.

38 Luther translates "communio sanctorum" as "ein gemeine [not as "Gemeinschaft!"] daery ein heiligen sind, oder doch nothleizt der heiligen gemeine." Ibid., 189, 29–30, 1. The church is a gathering of individuals; the group is holy by virtue of the sanctifying action of the Spirit. Luther conceives the church according to Ockham's metaphysics of particulars in order to reject an understanding that the individuals are holy by virtue of participating in the church's essence of holiness, and to stress the Spirit's work of sanctifying individuals, an action that is one and the same as the creation of the church. On Ockham's claim that only particulars exist in reality, see Marilyn McCord Adams, William Ockham, vol. 1, Notre Dame, 1997, 15–69. 143–67.

39 WA 30/1, 191, 9–12.

40 "... und das will der HERRN Christo bringen,... " Ibid., 191, 9–12. 19–21. Luther temporizes the four elements as follows: the creation of the church and the forgiveness of sins take place in the concomitant present tense. The final two elements of resurrection and eternal life are deferred to the future.

41 "... und das will der HERRN Christo bringen,... " Ibid., 188, 14–15. Also "Das der [e]n sich das heiligen nicht anders denn zu dem HERREN Christo bringen, was der güt [e]n will geben, dazu wir von uns selbs nicht komen kúndigen." Ibid., 188, 15–17. Similar to: "... dass der er uns predigt zu Christo bring." Ibid., 188, 4–5.
move into the Father's domain. Under the second article, Luther portrays redemption as a movement away from the region of the devil, and a return back into the “Father's grace and favor.” To articulate this return, Luther uses the verb *wiedergebracht*, rather than *bringen*, in order to stress the sacrificial connection of Christ's redemptive work. The narrative culminates with the point at which the narrative of giving began: the first article of the Creed.

The terminal point of bringing, however, is not exactly identical with the starting-point of giving. Through the process of bringing, a successive restoration of sight is accomplished that renders visible a particular way of glorification differing from the first structure. Unlike giving, bringing renders visible the inner-Trinity, not through the relations of origin, but through the trinitarian work of incorporating individuals, the church and ultimately creation into the sight of the Trinity. Luther establishes the inclusion into the glorification through the action of bringing. As the Spirit brings the church to Christ, the work of sanctification serves to transfer the focus onto Christ and his redeeming work. The Spirit detaches from his own glory by immediately referring the totality of sanctification to Christ. Apart from the riches hidden in Christ, the “poor” Spirit knows nothing. In a further unfolding of the essence as a glorification of the other, Christ returns those he redeems into the Father's domain, thereby bringing creation into the light in which the Father and his generous giving can be seen. Through this action, Christ glorifies the Father (John 17:4), but not without the church, and ultimately creation. Through the Spirit's and the Son's work, creatures are transformed in order that all creation might reflect the trinitarian glory. The end of creation is the sight of the Trinity that is accomplished through the bringing. At the point of return, the confession of faith culminates in the glorification of who God is for what God does.

For Luther, the quintessence of the confession of faith is to know who God is, “the entire divine essence, will and work.” In this genre, Luther renders the divine nature manifest both in terms of the Trinity and the relation of the three persons to their works. In this essay, I have offered an interpretation that structures both aspects according to two narratives of glorification. Beginning with the Father, the narrative of giving makes visible the inner-trinitarian glorification; moving in the opposite direction and beginning with the Spirit, the outer-trinitarian narrative of bringing incorporates all creation into the divine glory. The metaphor of the double helix can be used to illustrate the superimposition of the second narrative onto the first; both narratives are woven into each other, yet the difference between inner and outer is maintained. When Luther considers the “visible and manifest things of God” in the trinitarian sense of persons and their works, he can be called a theologian of glory.

**IV. Conclusion**

For Luther, the entire divine essence, will and work.

Many dynamic verbs illustrate the rapid movement away from the “jaws of hell” [Ibid., 186, 25], such as “geissen, gewonnen, frey gemacht und widerbrachyn des Vaters huld und gnade...” [Ibid., 186, 25–26].

*44* Ibid., 186, 26. Similar is: “Haec est ultima scientia, das er sich finden korner zum vater.” WA 28, 60, 7–8 [Sermon on John 16:25].


*46* “... blei her auf den Jesus Christum, quem unum principalis spiritus sanctus, der arm spiritus sanctus wie sonst nicht.” WA 36, 181, 8–10 [Predigt am Freitagsmontag im Hauses, May 20, 1532, Römer transcrip].

Luther makes this point in a sermon on John 16. When we are brought back to the Father, “so wird er [zu uns verleihet durch den glauben und belehret.” WA 28, 138, 13–14 [Sermon on Sept. 12, 1528]. The verb, “verleihet” is mentioned in connection with the Spirit's work of transfiguring the body. “... yan einem neuen unsterblichen und verleierten leib.” WA 30, 191, 8.

*47* Ibid., 191, 28.
Nicht Nachwort, sondern Machtwort

Die Grammatik des Geistes in Luthers »Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis«

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¹ Der Text (WA 26, 261–309) wird im Folgenden nur mit Seitenzahl und Anfangszeile angegeben.


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