

Luther Lecture XIII, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Finding a Credible Faith: The Passion of Christ and Luther's Struggle to Believe

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November 4, 2009

Even the most casual familiarity with the Christianity of the later Middle Ages, the kind you might get, for example, from a visit to an art museum, would show you that the passion and death of Christ were a focus of medieval Christian devotion rivaled only by devotion to the Virgin Mary. Jesus' passion and death were, especially from the thirteenth century onward, the very center of medieval piety, woven into a rich and complex tapestry of theological concepts and devotional practices and verbal and visual imagery.

In my work in this area I have studied the development of the traditions of passion-piety in themselves, but in a particular I am interested in what this rich tradition meant in the life of the young monk and rising theologian Martin Luther, and how he both reacted against, but in a sense also continued, the well-established tradition of devotion to the passion. More scholarly attention has been devoted to the early period of Luther's life (up to 1520) than to any other, but strangely Luther's piety has received fairly little attention. Perhaps this is due to the lack of specific documentary records of Luther's early experiences: obviously the few references Luther makes in his old age about the piety of his youth are often negative, filtered through the screen of his bitter thirty-year struggle with Rome.

Further, Luther's religious experiences (first as a young layman, then as an Augustinian monk) seem at least to him to have been unremarkable—even if his early monastic career was perhaps somewhat more than usually successful by the standards of the time.¹ In his very "ordinariness," and because of the lack of indications to the contrary, it is likely that Luther's experiences were similar to those of his monastic contemporaries; it is a reasonable assumption that whatever strongly affected the religious environment in which Luther lived, affected Luther to some degree as well.

What I wanted most to know was how a man of Luther's very typical background came to such a profound and radical new understanding of how God relates to humans through grace. To get at this, I decided to ask two narrower questions: first, how devotion to the cross and passion of Christ, particularly as manifested in late medieval devotional writings, might have helped Luther to deepen his understanding of the meaning of Jesus' sacrificial suffering and death through reading and contemplation; and second, how Luther's emerging understanding of faith led him gradually to reject parts of this devotional tradition while preserving and further developing other aspects of it.

The narrow approach to these questions I want to share with you today should not be seen as illuminative of the whole of either Luther's thought or of the richness of the entire late medieval devotional tradition, but is a kind of "core sample" enabling us to probe what was at issue at a decisive moment in Luther's life, a moment of dramatic overlap between old practices and new ways of thinking. Today, using one text, Luther's 1519 Lenten sermon

“On Meditating on the Holy Passion of Christ,”² I want to capture a “freeze-frame” view of his understanding of the cross and passion in its threefold meaning—as a historical event, a theological truth and a devotional object—in the particular historical moment in which he preached and soon thereafter published, that sermon. Our central question is: how do piety and faith interconnect for the young Luther, and how does for Luther the practice of devotion to the cross through structured meditation connect to an intellectual and spiritual understanding of what God has done through the cross for the believer? Luther is critical of the pious practice of his time, but as we will see, he does not reject it entirely. In some ways, he seems here to be re-framing the question of the relationship between faith and works by focusing on complicated issue of a devotional activity (a work) whose purpose and goal was to awaken, intensify, or revive faith in the person who practiced it.

Luther’s March 1519, in its German title “*Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi*” was delivered and then published during a period of great productivity and rapid development for Luther, its quick publication and frequent re-publication fueled by a strong and growing demand for the writings of the increasingly famous and controversial young theologian. In the remainder of the year 1519 alone, at least six different editions of this one sermon were printed in German: two in Wittenberg, two in Leipzig, and one each in Munich and Basel. At least nineteen other German editions were issued in undated versions in the years immediately following; a translation into Latin, approved but probably not done by Luther himself, was published in Wittenberg in 1521.³

Of the events surrounding the sermon’s original delivery we know very little, though in a passing remark in a letter to a friend dated the First Sunday in Lent (March 13), 1519, Luther makes reference to a sermon on meditating on the passion of Christ he has just given, but says he does not know when he will find time to prepare it for publication.⁴ Apparently he did find some time in his busy schedule, for the first printed edition was already available for Luther to forward to that same friend on the Tuesday after the Fourth Sunday in Lent (April 5), 1519.⁵ It is entirely possible that this sermon was Luther’s sermon in the city church of Wittenberg on that First Sunday in Lent, and it was certainly preached in German, to an audience who could be supposed to be familiar with the notion of meditating on the passion of Christ as a Lenten or Holy Week exercise. Luther’s pastoral concern is apparent throughout; the whole point of the sermon is to prepare and instruct the faithful regarding the spirit in which such meditation should or should not be done. Later the sermon becomes, as a printed text, a form of meditation in itself; decorated with a handsome woodcut of Christ’s crucifixion beheld by the pious believer, the sermon could be considered an evangelical substitute for older forms of passion meditation; perhaps this characteristic accounts in part for its great popularity.⁶

Luther’s text is divided into fifteen numbered sections, but this pattern is more artificial than integral to the structure of the argument, which moves from sharp, direct criticism of what Luther regards as harmful ways of meditation on the passion through criticism of ways which are less harmful but still misguided, and which confuse the devotional means

with the spiritual ends. After this summary discussion, which fills the first three sections, Luther devotes the next eight sections to outlining ways one might practice a worthy kind of “meditation,” and leads into the remaining four sections, which serve as a kind of “instruction book” for right meditation and conclude with a brief reprise of criticism of contemporary practice.

The sermon’s printed text begins rather abruptly: “Some people, when they think about the passion of Christ, do so in such a way that they just become angry with the Jews....”⁷ In considering the passion this way, Luther goes on to say, it is Judas, not Jesus, who is their central focus, and Luther insists that what such people do is not meditating on Christ’s passion at all, but rather a cultivation of their existing anger toward the Jews. By concentrating on Jesus’ betrayal and execution as being the work of Jesus’ Jewish opponents, they thus nourish their own anger and resentment, whether toward the Jews specifically, or more generally against their own enemies.⁸ As Luther insists, this approach is both completely wrong and misses the point entirely; people who engage in this sort of meditation simply reinforce their usual prejudices and evil tendencies, and lose sight of Christ. Such meditation is not about Christ at all, Luther insists, but really about the misdeeds of Judas and the Jews, and as such is unworthy of serious discussion.⁹

By putting this particular criticism in first place, Luther ranks this misuse of the passion as the most obvious and least defensible one. No subsequent misunderstanding is worthy of greater scorn than this. Why? Was agitation against Jews during Lent something that happened regularly in Luther’s Wittenberg? We do not have clear information on this, but evidence from other contexts of particular baiting of Jews in Lent and Holy Week suggests that it was possible, even commonplace in Germany;¹⁰ as does the fact that Luther alludes in his sermon not only to cursing Judas but also singing about him. The popular religious song of the time to which Luther alludes here described Judas’s self-inflicted misery and its punishment in one of its stanzas.¹¹

The second error in meditating on the passion of Christ is in Luther’s judgment almost equally bad. This mistake is believing that such meditation on Christ’s passion is an end in itself, achieving divine reward simply by the fact of its accomplishment without regard to any change in the people who do it. This is an understanding of meditation that such people simply defend by recourse to authorities, in particular, Luther says, to the 13th century theologian Albert the Great, who is said to have written that meditating once on the passion of Christ is better than to have fasted for an entire year or to have prayed the whole Psalter every day.¹² This mechanical understanding of such meditation’s effect is, Luther feels, bad enough; but it is made worse by a superstitious understanding of its benefits. Luther points out that people who believe in this automatic effect are also those who carry on their person pictures, crosses, prayer books, and other reminders of the passion story around with them in the hope that these material things will somehow protect them from specific earthly dangers, like drowning, attack, or fire.¹³ Luther claims

that those who understand meditation on the passion of Christ in this way simply “make out of Christ’s sufferings a blessing for themselves, quite against the nature of the thing.”¹⁴

A third group, more subtly erroneous by far but also ultimately wrong, are for Luther those persons whose meditation, though compassionate and deeply felt, is not focused on the story’s deeper significance for the believer. Here Luther engages the medieval tradition of meditation on the passion of Christ as a way of altering one’s feelings by focusing on a single point in the story very intensely. Here Luther is less critical of the attitudes of those doing the meditation than of the actual method of the meditations themselves. The people Luther next describes indeed feel their meditation quite deeply, and their apprehension of the story is anything but superficial; in fact they are believers whose meditation brings them real pain, real suffering along with Christ, an authentic *compassio*. Luther does not question the depth or authenticity of their feeling; in fact, he compares the intensity of their compassion with that of the women who followed weeping after Christ on the road from Jerusalem, the women whom Jesus reproaches and tells them it was indeed well for them to weep, both for themselves and for their children (Luke 23:27-28).¹⁵

But here Luther becomes a textual critic, focusing in on the content of passion meditations. It would take a lecture in itself to describe these passion-meditations as literary texts, but suffice it to say that the kind of meditations Luther has in mind are stories of the Passion written out in many chapters, blending the gospel accounts of the passion story with medieval embellishments, and interspersed with prayers, instructions, and exhortations to the reader. Typical of these (and the one I believe Luther had in mind at this moment) is one called *Meditationes vitae Christi* (*Meditations on the Life of Christ*), an originally 13th century text attributed to St. Bonaventure. It is important to keep in mind that late-medieval audiences, due to the low levels of literacy at the time, often experienced such texts as read aloud. Monastics and priests like Luther, however, would know these texts primarily as private reading, and they were frequently used as Lenten exercises or by people preparing themselves for death.

Instead of challenging the way people meditate, here Luther criticizes instead what they choose to meditate on. Luther attacks these meditative texts for dividing the passion story into discrete and separate units, making each a becoming a meditative end in itself. Persons who use these books, Luther says, “tear the passion story apart, and elaborate much on things like Jesus’ parting scene at Bethany, and on the sorrows of the Virgin Mary, and as a result never get anywhere.”¹⁶ But doing violence to the story line and embroidering the story with unnecessary and unscriptural details are not the main problem for Luther; instead he returns to his earlier point that people make a mistake by thinking of the effect or result of such meditation as something automatic. In this Luther makes explicit what was only implied before: that this understanding of meditation on the passion of Christ as a work meritorious in itself is closely related to the equally problematic but equally prevalent popular misunderstanding of the Mass: that it has spiritual value for

the believer as a God-pleasing act in itself, without regard to the believer's own state of belief.¹⁷

Here Luther introduces one of his deepest theological insights, a point that echoes again and again in his theological and spiritual writings: the idea that the validating, truly constitutive part of such devotion (or any devotion) is the realization that the passion of Christ is only rightly considered when it is considered in light of what it says about one's own standing before God—the famous “*pro me*” that in its strongest expression also undergirds Luther's understanding of the right use of the Eucharist. Luther says here quite clearly of the Mass that it “is not instituted for its own worth, but for the value it has for us, especially for the sake of *making us consider* the passion of Christ.”¹⁸ In reminding us of Christ's passion, the Mass fulfills one of its most important functions: it makes clear to us that this sacrament, like the passion itself, is “for us.”¹⁹ Luther goes on to make the connection between right meditation and right reception of the sacrament even more explicit by comparing the futility of finding blessedness through mere emotional compassion with thinking that simple attendance at Mass “can procure a benefit that is not rightly sought there at all.”²⁰

Luther's connection between the Eucharist and meditation on the passion of Christ has two implications, one very profound and direct, the other more subtle: first, that both depend on a prior correct understanding of the matter in itself—that both, at their deepest levels, reflect God's actions *for* the believer, rather than prescribing the believer's response *to* God—and second, that both, though similarly misunderstood and misused, have real, enduring spiritual value and importance. In spite of their common misuse, neither is to be neglected but both instead *rightly* understood and used. Here again Luther's use of the example of the daughters of Jerusalem is *à propos*: Jesus does not reproach the women for weeping out of sorrow at his suffering, but for failing to understand what is really happening before their very eyes: that he is being made to suffer not for his own sins but for theirs. Their weeping at his suffering should instead be for their own sinfulness and that of their offspring.

Next, Luther quite naturally turns to explain “right” meditation on Christ's passion: “They, however, rightly meditate on the passion of Christ who look at him in such a way that their hearts shrink back in terror and their consciences sink in despair.”²¹ This “shrinking back” and despairing comes from a full understanding of the wrath God rightly feels toward sinners and their sin, a wrath so fierce that only God's sacrifice of the Son could make sinners free of it. The atonement is, for Luther, at the same time both the most profound proof of the depravity of humans and the greatest possible demonstration of the mercy of God: “that so infinitely great a person must take this on, and suffer and die for it...”²² Luther calls this fact an “inexpressible, unbearable profundity,” and insists that one who “considers this truly deeply” will be “more frightened, the more one considers it.”²³

For Luther, in the end, the story of the passion of Christ is every believer's story: "[D]o not doubt that you are the one for whom Christ was martyred, and that it was your sin that did this."²⁴ He reminds his audience, in an allusion to Peter's sermon to the Israelites in Acts 2:36-38, that all humans, Jews and Christians alike, are responsible for Jesus' death by their sinfulness: "Therefore, whenever you see the nails of Christ piercing his hands, know surely that this is your work; when you see his crown of thorns, know that it was for your evil thoughts..."²⁵ Luther goes on to describe the passion story as a story of sufferings felt by Jesus that would more appropriately be felt by the sinner, indeed be felt more sharply: "[W]here one thorn pierces Christ, surely more than a hundred thousand thorns ought to pierce you..."²⁶ This extravagance of guilty feeling is no exaggeration for Luther; Christ's passion, he insists, is an absolutely convincing indication of the extremity of human culpability and debt. The passion of Christ shows us the human situation in a way that is both accurate and inexorably frightening: "This grim mirror, Christ, does not lie nor mock us."²⁷ The punishment earned by human sin must be suffered somehow by someone—as Luther puts it, it must be "fulfilled in abundance"—and that "someone" was clearly Jesus.²⁸ This alarming insight casts, for Luther, the believer's culpability in sharp relief, and causes the passion of Christ to be in the first place a source of anxiety and fear, since the intensity of Jesus' sufferings mirrors so precisely the extent of human sinfulness.

Here, in the face of the despair each believer must feel when confronted with the enormity and intensity of Christ's suffering in the passion and crucifixion, Luther comes to his main point: that the passion of Christ represents an opportunity for the believer to come to a deeper understanding both of his or her sinfulness and thus of God's mercy; specifically to be "frightened and overcome" by the passion for one's own sake. "The whole of the benefit of the passion of Christ for us depends on this," Luther says, "that one should come to an understanding of oneself, and be frightened and overcome for one's own sake."²⁹ It is necessary for each believer to be confronted with, and recognize, this truth for himself; for each person who does not come to this insight, "for that person the sufferings of Christ have been for naught."³⁰ This realization Luther calls the "actual natural work" of the passion of Christ, "that it should make that person *conformed* to Christ, so that in the same way Christ was martyred in the body and soul, like him we too should be martyred in conscience on account of our sins."³¹

What is the nature of this "conformity"? In the very next sentence Luther calls it "conforming to the image and suffering of Christ."³² He seems to be saying, in perfect concert with the main emphasis of the late medieval meditative tradition, that this "*gleych formig werden*," this conformity to Christ's suffering means actually feeling it, whether, as Luther puts it, either "in this life or in hell."³³ In one way or another, Luther goes on to say, each person will inevitably feel Christ's suffering for herself or himself, whether willingly in this life through meditation and prayer, or unwillingly in purgatory. It is an important mercy of God for the believer thus to be able to meditate fruitfully; one should pray to God to permit such meditation.³⁴ The grace of such meditation, Luther says, lies in God's gift

alone; only by God's implanting it in their hearts are humans able to meditate thoroughly and deeply (*gruntlich*) on Christ's passion.³⁵

Such meditation, in Luther's view, is actually transformative; it lifts one out of oneself, and accomplishes that which the Christian chiefly needs: to be able to seek and desire God's grace, at the same time knowing that its reception is achieved only through God's grace and not through one's own efforts.³⁶ Through the grace God gives to consider the passion of Christ rightly, the believer comes to deeper awareness of human dependence on God's grace and mercy. In sharp contrast, all meditation on the passion that proceeds out of one's own "merits and imagination" can only consider Christ's sufferings "solely humanly and [thus] unfruitfully."³⁷

But with God's grace, such "right" meditation is possible. Such meditation, Luther exults, is indeed that of which it may rightly be said that to do it for a day, or even an hour or a quarter-hour, would be worth a year's fasting or praying the whole Psalter daily, or even hearing a hundred Masses;³⁸ for this meditation, this right consideration

[c]hanges the person in his very substance, and almost like baptism, gives him a new birth. This is the *right, natural, noble work* of the passion of Christ, that it kills the old Adam, drives out all the evil desires, evil joys, and false confidence that we derive from creaturely things....³⁹

But as this right meditation begins not in human desire, but in God's gift, Luther insists that it is not in human hands simply to decide to do it rightly. One can only pray for right meditation as a favor, and if one does not receive it, then one must persevere in prayer. True meditation may then come at an unexpected time, unsought, "as God wills and only God can know, for God is free and unbound."⁴⁰ Luther makes the point that repentance alone is not sufficient; that it may well be possible for a believer to be troubled in conscience, to recognize her own depravity, and yet "not know that the sufferings of Christ have accomplished this" in her.⁴¹ Conversely, familiarity with the passion story, even ardent attempts to meditate on it, may itself accomplish nothing; some people "hang on their thoughts of Christ's passion, and still fail to come to any understanding of themselves."⁴² It is not enough, in Luther's view, to have a troubled conscience to apprehend the passion, nor is it sufficient in itself to be intimately familiar with the passion story, even to the point of emotional involvement with it. In both cases what is lacking is God's grace, the added component that makes the passion effective for the believer. But what does this "effectiveness" entail for Luther?

Luther's language at this point in the sermon is both highly evocative and paradoxical, and he sets up opposing parallels between two ways of misunderstanding the full meaning of the passion. First, Luther speaks of those whose consciences are burdened, but who in striving after merit do not understand that Christ died for their sins, as being people for whom the passion of Christ is "concealed but real"; they are on to the essence of the thing—

that they are in deep need—but they do not understand what the story really means.⁴³ In contrast, in the case of those who immerse themselves in the passion story in deep emotional intensity, yet fail to gain self-knowledge of their sin and guilt, Luther maintains that the passion of Christ is “apparent”, but at the same time “illusory.”⁴⁴ Their knowledge of it is superficial and ineffective, however emotionally charged. He then restates the parallel again for clarity, attributing it to the paradoxical workings of God: “God’s way is often to turn the page, so that those people understand the passion who do not meditate on it. . . while those who listen, hear nothing.”⁴⁵ Again, Luther draws an analogy between meditation on the passion of Christ and attendance at the Eucharist; “truly hearing” the Mass is not the same as “listening” to it.⁴⁶

This is the challenge that confronts the hearers and readers of his sermon right now, Luther insists, to make their Lenten observance meaningful and valuable by understanding what is really at stake, and by seeing things as they really are. For Luther, this spiritual task means first being fully aware of one’s sinfulness and horrified by it, but then taking care that the sin does not remain in the conscience but is understood as being forgiven through Christ. “As soon as our sins have flowed out of Christ and become recognizable to us,” Luther says, “we must pour them on him again, and empty our consciences onto him.”⁴⁷ Here Luther immediately thinks of the myriad human ways of “emptying” the conscience that he sees being practiced around him, and against which so much of his recent writing had been aimed: the vain striving after “good works”; the completion of devotional satisfactions such as pilgrimages; and the purchase of indulgences. This kind of comfort Luther calls a “false confidence,” common though he believes it is.⁴⁸ Even anguished repentance, Luther insists, is futile if it simply aims through intensity of regret to effect release from guilt through one’s own effort.⁴⁹

The only answer, Luther insists to his listeners, is to “cast your sins from you onto Christ” by believing that Christ’s wounds and Christ’s passion are your sins, “which he carries and for which he pays.”⁵⁰ Citing Isaiah, Peter, and Paul, Luther says that Jesus’ sacrificial, representative suffering is the only firm foundation for the believer’s “trust and dependence.”⁵¹ This is a realization, Luther claims, which for mere humans must lead inevitably to despair. “For our sinfulness is too strong for us, and when we try to deal with it only within our own consciences and in ourselves, it will live on in us.”⁵² One chief thing is necessary: to see that one’s sins “lie on Christ” and have been “consumed in his resurrection.” They have been “annihilated,” Luther proclaims, and they are dead in Christ’s death, wiped out by Christ’s resurrection.⁵³ It is the resurrection that proves this fact: Christ’s resurrected body, glorified and free from the agony of the passion, shows forth the elimination of human sins. Luther reiterates the point with an interpretation of Romans 4:5, in which Paul identifies Christ as the one “who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” In this passage, Luther maintains, “death for our trespasses” means that in the passion, Christ makes the believer aware of his sinfulness and destroys it, while through the resurrection, Christ frees the believer and makes her righteous, as hard as this is to believe by human standards.⁵⁴

That such belief is difficult and not to be expected of all people or all at once is clear to Luther. He encourages those who find it hard or impossible to believe this truth of faith now to continue to ask God's help, for (as Luther puts it) "this gift is in God's free hand."⁵⁵ That God will give this gift to the faithful believer seems clear to Luther, whether it is given openly or secretly, but the method he recommends for the pious reflections of the faithful is quite conventional: he advises that the Christian not concentrate on Christ's suffering, but look "through it" to Christ's joyful heart, full of love for the believer.⁵⁶ This, Luther believes, will lead the devout person to see that Christ's loving heart also carries the burden of her sinful conscience, and in turn lead the believer's heart to become "sweet toward" Christ, strengthening the confidence of her faith.⁵⁷ In this process, then, Luther describes a sort of spiritual ascent of the believer's heart to God through this insight:

Thereafter climb further, through Christ's heart to God's, and see that Christ would never have shown you all this love, but that God wanted you to have his eternal love, for which Christ has been obedient with his body. Here you will find the divine, good, paternal heart, and be taken up, as Christ himself said, though Christ to the Father.⁵⁸

For Luther, this is what it means "rightly to understand God": to see God not in God's power or wisdom, which only convict and condemn, but in goodness and love.⁵⁹ Such an insight is the basis of all faith, all confidence in God, and makes one as "newly born" in God.⁶⁰

Now, for this newborn heart, the suffering of Christ takes on a fresh perspective. Luther describes this change as "becoming sin's enemy through love, not out of fear of pain," and maintains that this insight will make the passion of Christ a model and example for the Christian's whole life, bringing with it "a whole new way of thinking about" the passion.⁶¹ For what up to now the believer has felt working *in* her, she now feels working *through* her, in living a faithful life. All of the obstacles and pains of ordinary life are now seen for Luther through the passion of Christ as through a kind of lens or prism, refracting human experience into new patterns. All human miseries, great or small, take on their proper proportion by thus being seen in the light of Christ's suffering, and in all of the struggles of earthly life, in the face of temptation from within and opposition from without, the believer can still find strength and encouragement in Christ. Understanding this and living it, Luther insists, is "a proper meditation on Christ's passion," the true fruit of Jesus' suffering.⁶² And this comprehension is better than any external devotion, even hearing "every Mass that is read." It earns those who have the grace to pursue it the name of "true Christians, in whom Christ's life and name is shown forth in their own lives."⁶³ As Luther claims, "[T]he passion of Christ must not just be dealt with in words and appearances, but in life and truth."⁶⁴

But, as Luther reminds his audience, unfortunately such meditation in his day had "become extraordinary and unusual, though the letters of St. Paul and St. Peter are full of it."⁶⁵ In a

final reference to the misuse of such meditation in his own time, Luther ends his sermon almost as abruptly as it began, by taking a parting shot at mechanical, unspiritual meditation on the passion: “We have turned the substance into a mere appearance, and only think about the sufferings of Christ as they are shown to us in pictures and painted on the walls.”⁶⁶

Throughout the entire sermon, Luther raises serious questions about and sharp criticisms of conventional ways of understanding the passion story. But what precisely is he criticizing here? Is it the meditation texts themselves, as expressions of an understanding of devotion that he is rejecting as works-centered? Or is it simply their common contemporary misuse? What is striking on the surface of this homily is that Luther criticizes this particular form of devotion while still not venturing far from the conventional language it uses, like the concepts of “meditation” as a path to deeper understanding and “conformity” as a way of achieving greater closeness to Christ. Similarly, while Luther seems to decry passion meditation in its conventional practice as futile and selfish, he sees his own understanding of the Passion’s meaning both as a key to the heart’s ascent to God through Christ and as a way of leading a truly Christian life. But how different are they, really, at their heart? Is this less perhaps a critique of passion-meditation in itself than it is the description of a new angle of approach to an old practice?

And what is the dynamic at work in Luther’s analysis and critique? How does the “concealed/apparent” paradox he presents relate to the “real/illusory” parallel? Clearly Luther sees “suffering,” both that experienced by Christ in his passion and that experienced by individual humans in their lives, as building a profound connection between humans and the God made flesh. But does passion-meditation help or hinder the believer in connecting God’s mercy with the believer’s need? Luther is trying to help his audience see that there are two things at issue here: understanding what Jesus endured in the passion, and understanding the meaning and purpose of the passion in the scheme of salvation. The tradition taught that it lay within the abilities of the truly devout person to understand—indeed gain—salvation by focusing on the passion; Luther wants to turn the order around and say that only by internalizing God’s offer of grace can faith then open up the passion to human understanding, and that neither salvation nor the passion can be fully understood without the assistance of God’s grace.

What does this say about Luther’s understanding of both the methods and the ends of traditional affective meditation of the passion of Christ, and his reasons for rejecting some parts while accepting or restating other parts? What does he see himself doing here? Is Luther’s procedure, as some scholars have maintained, part of a multi-front attack on the principal devotional practices of late medieval Catholicism? Or, as Luther’s most thorough modern biographer suggests, is this discussion of the custom of meditating on Christ’s passion of relative unimportance in comparison with the other criticisms Luther levels in 1518 to 1520 against church abuses?⁶⁷ Neither of these is a fully satisfying conclusion.

More convincing to me is that Luther is exploring the edges of his own experience here—thinking about how the practice of meditating on the passion story is deformed by human need and human sin. At the same time, Luther understands, it is the story of the saving work of God in Christ, and understood through grace is a rich and appropriate reminder of what God has done for humankind. What is clear, is that the young theologian Martin Luther is wrestling here with both deep-rooted old customs and dramatic new insights, trying to pour the new wine of his understanding of faith into the old wineskins of medieval piety. It is not surprising that there are a few leaky places he will have to patch later.

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NOTES

¹ Luther's monastic career was at first marked by rapid advancement; he was raised up unusually quickly to positions of responsibility. See Brecht, I:65-82; and Heiko A. Oberman, *Martin Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1982), pp. 132-155.

² Luther's 1519 *Sermon von der Betrachtung des heiligen Leidens Christi* is found in WA 2,(131-35) 136-142. The standard English translation is that of Martin H. Bertram ("A Meditation on Christ's Passion") in *Luther's Works* (American Edition), J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann, eds. (St. Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1955-1986). Bertram's translation is found at Am 42,(3-6) 7-14.

³ This and all citations of the work are in the author's own translation.

⁴ WA 1,355,##.

⁵ WA 2,131; Brecht, I:335

⁶ Almost every one of the printed editions of the sermon is decorated with an appropriate devotional woodcut, in most cases a crucifixion scene, with or without Mary and John, in one case with an unidentified contemporary kneeling figure. One of the early editions shows Jesus as the "man of sorrows" crowned with thorns and seated on a rock; two others bear another conventional depiction of the same: Jesus' upper torso surrounded with the implements of the passion. In two other versions, Jesus' anguish in the garden of Gethsemane is the frontispiece illustration. WA 2,(131-35). Plate Six (p. 261) is an example of the "man of sorrows" title page.

⁷ "Zcum ersten bedencken ettlich das leyden Christi alßo, das sie uber die Juden tzornig werden. . . ." WA 2,136,3-4.

⁸ ". . .andere leuth zu clagen und yhre widdersacher vordamen und vorsprechen." WA 2,136,6-8.

⁹ "Das mocht wol nit Christus leyden, sondernn Judas und der Juden bösheyt bedacht heyßen." WA 2,136,8-10.

¹⁰ The literature on anti-Jewish feeling and action in the later Middle Ages and Reformation has grown appreciably in the last two decades: see particularly Heiko A. Oberman, *Wurzeln des Antisemitismus: Christenangst und*

Judenplage im Zeitalter von Humanismus und Reformation (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1981) and Walther Bienert, *Martin Luther und die Juden* (Frankfurt: Ev. Verlagshaus, 1982). For a discussion of the heightened late-medieval antagonism toward and regulation of Jews in Germany, see Ruth Gay, *The Jews of Germany: A Historical Portrait* (New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 1992), pp. 20-31.

¹¹ The hymn Luther alludes to in the sermon (at WA 2,136,4) can be found in P. Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied*, vol. 2, pp. 467-8:

O du armer Judas, was hastu getan
 das du deinen herren also verrathen hast!
 Darumb mustu leiden in der helle pein,
 Lucifers geselle mustu ewig sein.
 Kirie eleyson.

¹² “Darzu geht yrre eyn spruch, S. Albert zu geschriben, das es besser sey, Christus leyden eyn mal oben hyn uber dacht, dan ob man ey gantz jar fastet, alle tag eyn Psalter bettet, etc.” Unfortunately, this reference to Albert has not been verified. WA 2,136,12-14.

¹³ “Darumb tragen sie sich mit bildelein und büchlein, brieffen und creutten, auch ettlich szo ferne faren, das sie sich vor wasser, eyßen, fewr und allerley ferlickeit zu sichern vormeynen, und alßo Christus leyden eyn unleyden yn yhn wircken sol widder seyn art und natur.” WA 2,136,16-20. One wonders if Luther is thinking of the reference at the beginning of the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (and repeated in many other passion meditations) to St. Cecilia’s habit of wearing the gospel texts near her heart.

¹⁴ WA 2,136,19-20.

¹⁵ “Zcum dritten haben sie eyn mit leyden mit Christo, yhn zu clagen und zu beweynen alß eynen unschuldigen menschen, gleych wie die weyber, die Christo von Jerusalem nach folgeten, und von yhm gestrafft wurden, sie solten sich selb beweynen und yhre kinder.” WA 2,136,21-24; cf. Lk. 23:27-30.

¹⁶ “Der art seynd, die mitten yn der passion weyt auß reyßen und von dem abschied Christi zu Bethanien und von der Junckfrawen Marien schmerzen viel eyntragen und kummen auch nit weyter.” WA 2,136,24-27.

¹⁷ “In dieße rote gehörenn auch die, die erlernen, wie große fruchte die heylige meße habe, und yhrer eynfeltigkeyt nach achten sie es gnug, wid sie die messe hören, da hyn man uns furet durch etlicher lerer spruch, das die messe opere operati, non opere operantis, von yhr selber, auch an unßer vordienst und wirde angenehmer sey, gerad als were das gnug, so doch die messe nit umb yhr selbs wirdickeit, sondernn unß zuwirdigen ist eyn gesetzt, ßonderlich umb des leydens Christi willen zu bedencken.” WA 2,136,28—137, 4.

¹⁸ WA 2,137,4. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ “. . . dan was hilfft dichs, das gott got ist, wan er dier nit eyn got ist?” WA 2,137,6.

²⁰ “Und zubeßorgen ist, das man es mit vielen messen nit besser macht, wan man nit die rechte frucht darinnen sucht.” WA 2,137,8-9.

²¹ “Die bedenckenn das leyden Christi recht, die yhn alßo ansehen, das sie hertzlich darfur erschrecken und yhr gewissen gleych sincket yn eyn vorzagen.” WA 2,137,10-12.

²² “Es muß eyn unsprechlicher, untreglicher ernst da seyn, dem ßo eyn große unmeslich person entgegen geht und da fur leydet und stirbt. . . .” WA 2,137,16-18.

²³ “. . . und wan du recht tieff bedenckst, das gottis sun, die ewige weyßheyte des vatters, selbst leydet, ßo wirstu wol erschrecken, unnd yhe mehr yhe tieffer.” WA 2,137,19-21.

²⁴ WA 2,137,23. This strong stress on the viewer’s culpability is not entirely absent from the older passion meditations, but is usually downplayed in favor of the enormity of Christ’s accomplishment in suffering. Luther’s position as stated here becomes a commonplace in the theology and devotion of his adherents; Melancthon picks it up in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (CA,4; Ap,4). Nor is it new or distinctly Lutheran: cf. the similar positions taken by Francis of Assisi (*Admonitions*, V.) and the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (I,4).

²⁵ WA 2,137,27-29.

²⁶ WA 2,137,30-2.

²⁷ WA 2,137,34-5: “dan dißer ernster spiegel, Christus, wirt nit liegen noch schimpfen....”

²⁸ WA 2,137,36.

²⁹ WA 2,138,15-17: “und fur yhm selbs erschrecke und zurschlagenn werde”.

³⁰ WA 2,138,19-20.

³¹ WA 2,138,21-22: “dan das *eygene natürlich werck* des leydens Christi ist, das es yhm den menschen gleych formig mache”. Emphasis added.

³² WA 2,138,35-36.

³³ WA 2,138,36.

³⁴ WA 2,139,1-4.

³⁵ WA 2,139,3.

³⁶ WA 2,139,4-7.

³⁷ WA 2,139,9-10: “auß yhrenn eygen vormügen eygene weyße darzu erfunden, gantz menschlich und unfruchtbarlich”.

³⁸ WA 2,139,11-15.

³⁹ WA 2,139,15-18: “Hie wircket das leyden Christi seyn rechtes natürlich edels werck”. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ WA 2,139,22-23.

⁴¹ WA 2,139,23-24.

⁴² WA 2,139,24-28.

⁴³ WA 2,139,28: “heymlich und warhafftig”.

⁴⁴ WA 2,139,28: “scheinbarlich und betrieglich”.

⁴⁵ WA 2,139,29-31.

⁴⁶ WA 2,139,30.

⁴⁷ WA 2,139,36-38.

⁴⁸ WA 2,140,5.

⁴⁹ WA 2,140,2.

⁵⁰ WA 2,140,7-8.

⁵¹ WA 2,140,11-12: “Auff diße und der gleychenn spruch mustu mit ganntzem wag dich vorlassen....” Luther uses Is. 53:6, 1 Peter 2:24, and 2 Cor. 5:21 as his authorities.

⁵² WA 2,140,13-15.

⁵³ WA 2,140,18-20.

⁵⁴ WA 2,140,22-26.

⁵⁵ WA 2,140,28-29

⁵⁶ WA 2,140,32: “durch hyn dringen”.

⁵⁷ WA 2,140,34-35.

⁵⁸ WA 2,140,35—141,2.

⁵⁹ WA 2,141,3-5.

⁶⁰ WA 2,141,5-7.

⁶¹ WA 2,141,11: “auff eyn anderweyß dasselb bedencken”.

⁶² WA 2,141,31-32.

⁶³ WA 2,141,32-34.

⁶⁴ WA 2,141,37—142,1.

⁶⁵ WA 2,142,5-6.

⁶⁶ WA 2,142,6-8.

⁶⁷ Brecht, I:335-339.