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Lecture III
Captive to the Text:
Luther's View of Literature and Meaning

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He is standing at the seam of ages. He stands in the place where one way of learning and communicating overlaps with a new way--a frightening and exciting spot. What can he, what must he pack up from the past? What can he, what must he appropriate from the new age?

Who is the man at the seam between the ages? He is William Shakespeare, who brought the ear, the imagination, and the vibrancy of the oral culture into the discipline, close analysis, and wide distribution of the new culture of text and printing. He is Martin Luther, who brought the treasure of the Church and the art of the classics into the hearts and minds of the Renaissance/contemporary world. He is your pastor and your church, who are standing at the seam of the ministry of the word and the ministry of the message.

Luther can help us as we consider what we can and must take from the passing age. And perhaps the reformer can also help as we think hard about what we can and must make our own from this time to communicate the gospel to our world. We can make this transition with confidence knowing that, as the prophet at the seam of Scripture recorded, "I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6)¹. We should also step across the ages with our eyes and methodologies and media wide open. Another prophet, who was fully aware of the destruction coming on an ungodly world, knew that the future also would be wonderful with opportunities of grace, "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23). The old unchanging but also new every morning--can we be that too?

The gospel is at the heart of our faith and lives: "It is the power of God that brings salvation" (Romans 1:16). This essential message we have considered for half a millennium to be primarily a text, a series of words written down. And so texts have been the lifeblood of the church. We are grateful for what God did through Luther in the Reformation as he, using the ideas and tools of the Renaissance, refocused Christians on the text, the written unchanging words that revealed the mystery of God's grace and will. We too want to be grounded in and dedicated to the inspired text of the Bible.

Today I want to look closely at something else Luther understood and said about texts, especially about the inspired text. The Bible, God's communication to people, for Luther was a text, but it was a rich text. It was literature. It was poetry. The art of the Bible did not make it any less inspired, less trustworthy, less of a rock and foundation. Luther seems to suggest also that the poetic nature of the Bible does not make it any less clear. The literary features of God's word can give us a fuller sense of the gospel. So perhaps the art in Scripture will help us see more possibilities for expressing it today, making use of today's art in media. Luther was devoted to an inspired text of the Gospel. He also understood that it was more than a logical series of words, it was a rich text expressing the gospel with art.

¹ All Bible passages are from NIV 2011.

As we stand at a critical seam between the age of print and the age of electronic media, Luther's understanding of literature will help us negotiate this transition. We can and must hang onto the text of God's Word. Luther also suggests we can and must see the artistic or literary nature of Scripture, "God is the poet, and we are his verses."² The connection between God and literature seems for Luther close to the life giving function of vine and branches. With a dedicated and close attention to the rich gospel, we will both understand the Gospel fully and express it effectively in our media age--text with art.

The Challenges We Face Today in Handling the Sacred Text and Media

If you want to scare a literature professor these days, conduct a poll among his students: "How many films/movies do you watch in a month? And how many books do you read in a year, including the ones assigned for your classes?" I don't want to know the answer. Students want to study the movie version, not the printed text. In Shakespeare class the request, "Why can't we watch the film instead?" has more justification, because he wrote the plays to be performed and watched, not read.

But I have held my (high) ground for text: I want students to be better readers of text, including challenging poetic texts. Then I play my trump card: God's revelation to us is a text, and a challenging one, much of it in poetry. What we know about him will always be grounded in a text. There will never be a divinely inspired movie version of the gospels. We don't call it the "Ministry of the Visual Aid;" it is the "Ministry of the WORD."

I still think that way, but I wonder if we will (or have already) moved on to the "ministry of message" or even the "ministry of the media." Our hold on God's revelation to us will always be founded on a text. Ministers of the gospel need to be able to work well with texts. How the new generation will communicate that gospel to the people they will serve in the coming decades, I don't know. But the connection to God's will and promises, and the connection of every generation until Jesus comes again, will be wrestling with the text, a sequence of words. Is then the means of grace, apart from the sacraments, limited to the gospel in a text form?

This dependence on text is why the media age can frighten us. The age of the text, the dominance of print media, is waning. We are told that people, in particular young people, don't read much, don't read the same way, and perhaps don't even think the same way as generations before.³ What follows is a brief overview of text and media issues. My main purpose is to keep in mind the serious challenges the church and especially Christian higher education faces related to texts as we get deeper into the media age. We need to understand and react to these changes, but not overreact. Luther's hold on the text, a text with art, can help us find that narrow Lutheran middle.

Interpretation is just a matter of opinion

In the introductory literature course I teach, I wait nervously for the question to come: "How can you say my interpretation of this story is wrong?" I am surprised and somewhat disappointed that I don't hear the question more often. Subjectivity in interpretation is a key issue, a necessary one today, but without an easy answer, or at least without an answer that satisfies most people. If I don't answer that question in a sound way about Hemingway or T.S. Eliot, the same query will surface about God and the Bible. There is both a theoretical and practical link between what we teach about literature and what we say about Scripture.

The current forces of modernism and postmodernism have moved from the theoretical discussions in classrooms to the practical debate and pain of Christians over marriage and sex, fellowship, and why God would ever say . . . In particular the notions of "pluralism. . . non-objectivism," and the resulting

² Luther, "Genesis Lectures," *Luther's Works: American Edition (LW)* 7:366.

³Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" This is Carr's well-known article from *The Atlantic*. The book-length version of his argument and research is *The Shallows*, Norton, 2010.

“cynicism/pessimism”⁴ have made discussions about God different. And hard for us--we have spent years lining up the wonderful Scripture verses that support, reveal, and illustrate what God has said on the key issues and religious debates. At the end of a heartfelt and competent sharing of the Word of Life, the response these days may be, “So?” “That’s just your opinion.” Texts, in particular the biblical texts, may have lost currency today. Is our gold uncoined in today’s marketplace?

Constructivist theories of education and learning are popular, but we need to consider how they affect our hold on God’s Word. If you believe, and teach accordingly, that the text and the audience together construct or establish meaning, you will couple textual authority with some measure of sinful human nature. This is an attractive, even perhaps a realistic, relationship but not a marriage made in heaven. While co-constructivism will account for different interpretations and allow individual focus and freedom, it will raise harder questions about why and how Scripture functions differently than all other texts. Yes, the Holy Spirit is the necessary and sanctified counselor as we read and interpret the Bible,⁵ but does that mean the inspired text itself functions in a way outside of other secular readings? This leads, again, to theoretical and practical text problems. On what basis can we say the words of Scripture function differently than other words? And, more problematic, can we expect people who are raised and trained to read and construct their own meaning in literature class to flip the switch when they read the Bible?

Deep waters of modern literary theory--I can’t swim here but I will wade on a bit. In addition to constructivism and reader-response approaches noted above, we have in the past century run into other movements that have limited the value and authority of texts. A key issue has been the relationship between a word and its meaning, between the sign and the signifier. Is language representational, do words have a discernible and trustworthy connection to reality? Or has the life-line been severed and texts are incapable of communicating a stable or clear meaning? These sound like very modern questions. Some, though, have said Luther also addressed the sign-signifier relationship, but in different terms, such as “*res* and *verba*” and “linguistic signs and sacramental signs.”⁶ More on this later, but for now consider that Luther, in a complex era of rigorous debates, was able to hold on to and proclaim an inspired gospel that was faithful and accessible and stable. Luther believed the connection between the Lord’s *verba* and the world’s *res* was not arbitrary nor even figurative. In Luther’s view there still was a text, and a solid, shared, and clear meaning of the text was still possible.

Temptations to handle meaning from the outside the text

Luther’s approach for a stable meaning, though, was not Rome’s way, nor the way of the enthusiasts, who both went for clarity by cutting the text out of the gospel or reducing it. Both temptations face us as we try to hang on to a text focus today. Rome decided to cut through the complexity and dangers of interpretation, which are certainly there, by its authority. The text of Scripture means what the church says it means. Because interpretation is a messy business, and there are many loud competing forces and ideas when you wrestle with what the Bible says, Rome said the container of the gospel was the church, not the text. Perhaps they believed the inspired text was inadequate, or at least unclear. Perhaps they believed the people were inadequate to find and understand the meaning of Scripture.

⁴ Kelm, “Understanding and Addressing a Postmodern Culture,” 4-5. At the end of his analysis, Kelm sees how God may use even the severe trial of contemporary thinking to the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose: “In a changing culture the church rediscovers in Scripture truths and purposes and possibilities that the previous culture obscured. Postmodernism, for all that is inimical to Christianity about it, may free us to see in God’s Word truths and purposes and possibilities that modernism--equally inimical to the faith--obscured.” p.8 An This raises an interesting question--what may have the age of print/text/close textual analysis obscured in Scripture for the past 500 years?

⁵ See 1 Corinthians 2:13-14, “. . . discerned only through the Spirit.”

⁶ Anderson in, *Words and Word in Theological Perspective*, 341, 348-9.

Both these reasons can be seen in modern literary theory's rationale for minimizing the text. Deconstructionist say language is slippery and texts are incapable of communicating a clear and consistent message. Social theorists say that people are so stuck in their particular culture and way of thinking, or that people are so pressed by society's power structures, that they are incapable of expressing themselves or understanding others except through particular lenses or filters. Interpretation is challenging. So, like modern literary theorists, Rome gave up on the text of Scripture because the Bible does not express a stable and clear message, or because the people won't understand one. Meaning, then, is found in the church, apart from the text.

In an overreaction to Rome's heavy-handed authority to control meaning, the enthusiasts ended up also limiting the voice of Scripture. They cut loose from the text by stressing their inner light or spirit, by privileging, in a very modern way, the individual interpretation. The text means what I say it means. John Dryden, a sharp observer of the nonconformists in England in the late 1600s, described this approach and result with a vividness reminiscent of Luther:

Study and pains were now no more their care:
 Texts were explain'd by fasting, and by prayer:
 This was the fruit the private spirit brought;
 Occasion'd by great zeal and little thought.
 While crowds unlearn'd, with rude devotion warm,
 About the sacred viands buzz and swarm,
 The fly-blown text creates a crawling brood;
 And turns to maggots what was meant for food.⁷

God's word, the word of life, becomes in the hands of the enthusiasts a mess you can't eat. Or it is the proverbial book chained to the wall by ecclesiastical authority. Both extremes happen when meaning is controlled by something outside the text.

Luther faced incredible challenges in understanding and communicating the gospel. Rome was pushing from one direction and the enthusiasts from another. We see the same pressures today, increasing pressure for ecclesiastical control--tell us, church, what God means. Increasing desire for individual interpretations and allowances. And added to all of this are the newer issues of media. God's word comes to us in many different forms (text, audio, visual), from many different sources (ones sometimes not easily discernable), and with uncontrolled access, experimentation, comment, and reaction. If the Word of life had for Dryden in the 1600s become "a fly-blown text," how would he describe some of the expressions of Scripture today? From bull-horn admonitions at funeral processions, John 3:16 signs at football games, cartoons with biblical characters as vegetables, to political opportunist prophets? There are plenty of good reasons to be worried about understanding and communicating God's Word today. Plenty of good reasons to get really busy to make sure God's genuine voice is heard above all the media noise.

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. . . .and it will not be taken away" (Luke 10:41-42).

There will always be Scripture to listen to, the essential word, and a rich word.

GRASPING SACRED TRUTH AND HANDLING IT SKILLFULLY AND HAPPILY

With the challenges and opportunities that his own new era presented, Luther said we need to do a surprising thing to preserve and communicate God's word. We need to study literature; we need to understand how literary texts work, both to see Scripture clearly and to express it effectively in our world. In a letter to the Reformation poet Eoban Hess, Luther wrote:

⁷ John Dryden in "Religio Laici or a Layman's Faith," lines 413-420.

I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. There is, indeed, nothing that I have less wish to see done against our young people than that they should omit to study poetry and rhetoric. Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily. . . . Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.⁸

The rest of the paper will look at Luther's surprising claims in this passage. We will see how Luther's value of literature may both help us hold on to the rich text of Scripture and offer it to our world. There will be four parts: the connection between literature and theology, Luther's understanding of poetry, his use of narrative, and closing hermeneutical or interpretive issues.

Grasping Sacred Truth--The Connection between Literature and Theology

Luther in the quotation above gives the vivid picture of literature studies as John the Baptist, preparing the way for the gospel. Clearly this was the case surrounding Luther and the Reformation. The "rise and prosperity of languages and letters" provided the reformers with great tools to better understand the Bible. We immediately and rightly think of how in the Renaissance the biblical languages became a focus and method for the serious study of the theology. Greek and Hebrew are the sheath for sword of the Spirit, God's Word. But to the *ad fontes*⁹ emphasis, the reformers valued and added "bonae literae"--"good letters" or secular literature. Wengert outlines this movement in Wittenberg under Luther and Melancthon, where "trifling philosophisers" of Scholasticism were gradually replaced by genuine classic literature. For example Thomist logic was removed and Ovid's *Metamorphosis* was added to the curriculum.¹⁰ Wengert comments, "So-called 'secular' vocations had new worth--in this case the studies in the humanities were not inimical to studying the gospel but instead formed an essential propaedeutic [preparatory instruction] for it."¹¹

Melancthon had much to say about the value of literature for theology. "I believe that, as music, so also poetry was given to men at the beginning in order to conserve religion, and because that power to write poetry is without any doubt a kind of heavenly way, so it behooves the poets to use that power in illustrating divine matters."¹² Melancthon gave some particulars on how poetry can serve this way,

I see that those who do not attain poetry speak somewhat more tediously, and merely crawl on the ground, and have neither weightiness of words nor any strength of figures of speech. . . . Those who make poems judge correctly about the rhythms of fine speech. . . . When people begin to despise poetry . . . it comes about that the ornaments and splendour of words are not held in high regard, people write with less care, everything is read more negligently, and the zeal for inquiring into things flags, a pretext for sloth.¹³

⁸ Smith and Jacobs, 176-177. The *LW* reference is Vol. 49:34, which is based on the Smith translation.

⁹ *Ad fontes*--"to the source," to the original languages of the Bible.

¹⁰ Wengert, 3-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² As quoted in Anderson, 212.

¹³ Melancthon, "Praise of Eloquence", 72-73. With "sloth" here, Melancthon may have been thinking of what Augustine said about the value of the challenging literary features of the Bible: "The fusion of obscurity with such

Perhaps Melanchthon started out a bit too zealous here for poetry, but he did see a real benefit the study of poetry has for Christians, and for pastors and teachers in particular. Poetry can teach the power of words and effective expression. To study poetry is to train our eyes and minds to be more discerning--of words and texts in particular, but also to see more clearly people and ideas with their concrete images or expressions. Melanchthon claimed that poetry can help provide people with a number of valuable personal qualities and attitudes.¹⁴

Later in the same oration, Melanchthon tries to win over students and, at the same time, demonstrate his point with a strong simile. He warns that earlier students for the ministry “did not apply themselves to elegant writings [and] rushed into the best and weightiest disciplines like swine in to roses. Theology was utterly overwhelmed by stupid and ungodly questions.”¹⁵ Luther adds milder but still vivid similes about earlier theologians who didn’t know literature and the languages well:

Even when their teaching is not wrong, [they] are of such a nature that they very often employ uncertain, inconsistent and inappropriate language; they grope like a blind man along a wall, so that they frequently miss the sense of the text and twist it like a nose of wax to suit their fancy.¹⁶

The biblical languages were the sheath of the sword of the Spirit, the case where the truth and power of God were kept. But the study of secular literature was also a gift of the Renaissance to the Reformation. Poetry may be seen as the training ground, the exercises for the sword of the Spirit. In literature theologians learn how to wield God’s word in our world.

Grasping the Sacred Truth: The Real Presence in Poetry

To see more how literature can aid in understanding the Bible, we will look at a complex case history--Luther’s battle over the real presence in the Lord’s Supper. This debate illustrates many interpretive and historical issues, most of which are beyond the scope of this paper and presenter. But the key point here is how poetry can help a believer see the great gift God has given in Holy Communion. In the sacraments we especially see God as a poet giving us through *verba* and *res* his grace. And the blessing is not figurative. Luther understood this better than Zwingli, in part because Luther was a better poet. Or at least, Luther understood better how poetry works in the Bible.

The difference between Zwingli and Luther’s poetics on the real presence can be seen in Zwingli’s objection about Jesus’ body being in so many places. How can Jesus, he reasoned, be present everywhere the sacrament is celebrated when the Bible says our Savior ascended to the right hand of God? We respond that clearly the Bible is using the well-known figure of speech anthropomorphism. When I quiz my freshmen students on figurative language, they always get this one right. Actually Zwingli, too, did understand the anthropomorphism, and, as Sasse points out, Zwingli agreed that God’s right hand was everywhere.¹⁷ The Swiss reformer’s argument was that only Christ’s divine nature could be in so many places, not his humanity. The communication between the two natures of Christ, then, is the stumbling

eloquence in the salutary words of God was necessary in order that our minds could develop not just by making discoveries but also by undergoing exertion” Book 4 of *On Christian Teaching*, 106.

¹⁴ A good question is whether Melanchthon and Luther would praise poetry so much if they were referring to modern poets and their work. A quick response is that there is poor poetry out there today, either the too-personal confessional poems or the professional self-referencing works (where poets are only writing to other poets or teachers of poetry). Both categories are nearly inaccessible to regular readers today. Even so, there are current poets who are very readable and who demonstrate the insight and vivid expression that Luther and Melanchthon valued. See, for example, Billy Collins and Jane Kenyon.

¹⁵ Melanchthon, 77.

¹⁶ Luther, “To the Councilmen,” 116.

¹⁷ Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 148.

bloc. The division between Luther and Zwingli remains on this point for a less poetic but still basic reason--rationalism. Sasse says that Zwingli believed God "has bound himself to logic, which requires that a body cannot be in more than one place at the same time."¹⁸ Zwingli bound himself to logic; Luther bound himself to the text, to a rich text.

It is an overstatement convenient for me to say that the Real Presence issue was a debate about poetry. But poetry was a big part of what Luther argued. Some of his statements and argumentation remind me of the twists and turns of poetic expression, the challenges readers--even good readers--have when handling poetry.¹⁹ In this case we see Luther's insistent focus on the text and his belief in an accessible, clear, stable meaning even when the text is rich in poetic language.

We are familiar with the figurative crux in the Real Present debate. Zwingli said Jesus' words, "This is my body," were a figure of speech, a metaphor. His point was that Jesus meant his body was not really present in the bread of Communion. Zwingli said Jesus' "is" meant "represents." Luther takes what seems the unpoetical route and says "is" means "is." Jesus is not offering a figure or sign in the Lord's Supper, he is handing to us the real presence of his body and blood. There are some interesting lessons in poetry, though, in a fuller look at Luther's response.

First of all, Luther had a healthy fear of figurative language. He struggled with the allegorical interpretation of Bible, and later he struggled against it. He illustrated the problems with this method when he commented on the wild use of figures in a Corpus Christi song:

In it the Scriptures are so forced and pulled in by the hairs that God's worst enemy must have composed it, either that or it is the dream of a poor senseless idiot. Here Melchizidek is remembered, who offered bread and wine; then the lamb comes into it which the people sacrificed of old, and the cake of Elijah, the manna of the fathers, and Isaac, who was to be sacrificed, and I don't know what has not been thought of. All these have had to serve as figures of the sacrament. It is a wonder that he did not include Baalam's ass and David's mule.²⁰

With good reason Luther wanted to stick with the text Scripture gives us: "For anyone who ventures to interpret words in Scripture any other way than what they say, is under obligation to prove this contention out of the text of the very same passage or by an article of faith."²¹ Luther did not deny that there were figures of speech in the Bible, but he looked for the text itself to lead the reader to a nonliteral sense.

In fact Luther did say Jesus was using poetic language when he said "This is my body"--a synecdoche. Luther, though, insisted that this wasn't figurative like a metaphor. The debate here goes beyond Poetry 101. Luther defines "synecdoche" as "A very common figure of speech in sacred Scripture, where the part is put for the whole. Paul says 'uncircumcision' to mean Gentiles, and 'circumcision' to mean Jews."²² In the Marburg Colloquy he gives an extended explanation direct to the real presence:

Synecdoche is a form of speech to be found not only in Holy Scripture, but also in every common language, so we cannot do without it. By synecdoche we speak of the containing vessel when we mean the content, of the content when also including the vessel, as e.g. when we speak of the mug or

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁹ See Strand's "Slow Down for Poetry," 36. Some of my literature students groan when we start the poetry unit. The poet Mark Strand outlined why readers, even capable readers in other genres, have trouble with verse--the unfamiliar way poetry works, "verbal suspension," multiple senses, and lack of (rational) closure. The Real Presence controversy presents some of the same challenges, especially the lack of rational closure. .

²⁰ Luther, "Misuse of the Mass," LW 36:181-2.

²¹ Luther, "This Is My Body," LW 37:32.

²² Luther, "Lectures on Galatians," LW 26:62.

of the beer, using only one of the two to denote also the other. Or, to take another example, if the king tells his servant to bring his sword, he tacitly includes the sheath. Such an understanding is required by the text. The metaphor [as argued by Oecolampadius and Zwingli] does away with the content, e.g. as when you understand “body” as “figure of the body.” That the synecdoche does not do. . . . Figurative speech removes the core and leaves the shell only. Synecdoche is not a comparison, but it rather says: “This is there, and it is contained in it.” There is no better example of synecdoche than “This is my body.”

Philip, you answer. I am tired of talking.²³

In a sense the figure of synecdoche gave Luther a way, a legitimate poetic way,²⁴ to express the real presence between those who claim transubstantiation and those who say only representation. The poetic term “synecdoche” did seem a great resolution, but Luther says in an aside in the Marburg Colloquy, “We admit the synecdoche in order to satisfy the sophists.”²⁵ Sasse points out, “Luther was quite clear about the fact that the synecdoche is only an attempt to describe a fact that defies human explanation.”²⁶ We don’t have a rational closure here, as is typical in poetry. What we have is a text, an attempt to explain the ineffable, and it works.

Luther was grounded in the text in a literal way that was not literalistic. He was aware also of the mystery and the transcendence of the sacrament without leaving the concrete text or turning it into only a figure. How are both the divine and the earthly really present? Sasse explained Luther’s balance:

For Luther the bread is the body in an incomprehensible way. The union between the body cannot be expressed in terms of any philosophical theory or rational explanation. It is an object of faith, based solely on the words of Christ. . . . The objection especially by Zwingli, that thus Luther himself [using the term “synecdoche”] did not understand the sacramental words literally, but figuratively, was refuted by Luther as not being to the point, because the reality of the body was not denied. . . . The synecdoche takes the reality of the elements as well as the reality of the body and blood seriously.²⁷

Poetry, like Jesus’ parables, is a way to combine the two realities in a way that goes beyond the rational but stays earthbound. Poetry is a way to express the ineffable but with clarity and power to all ears, a text stable and accessible. Poetry, for Luther, preserved the text and made it work in amazing ways.

But how can poetry be clear? Luther insisted on the poetic character of Scripture, but he also demanded that the rich texts be clear for practical and theoretical reasons.

For the text must be quite ambiguous and plain, and must have a single, definite interpretation if it is to form the basis of a clear and definite article of faith. But they [Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Karlstadt on the Lord’s Supper] have a great diversity of interpretations and texts, each contradicting the others. . . . Not one of them has the text in this topic, and thus the whole crowd must celebrate the Supper without a text. For an uncertain text is as bad as no text at all. Now what kind of supper can that be in which there is no text or sure word of Scripture?²⁸

²³The Marburg Colloquy, Second Session, in Sasse’s *This Is My Body*, 254.

²⁴ Luther’s explanation and use of the term “synecdoche” fits the classical and current definitions. See “synecdoche” in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, which says “there is an evident connection, conceptual or physical between the figurative word and what it designates, whereas no such connection exists in the case of metaphor” p.1261.

²⁵ Sasse, 254

²⁶ Ibid., 163.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” *LW* 37: 163.

Over a hundred pages later, Luther answers his question: “Are these not pitiable people, who not only lose the substance, i.e. the body and blood, in the supper but also the sign or figure besides, and have nothing more left than peasants have in a common tavern?”²⁹ In the rich text we have the treasure of Lord’s Supper.

But does the rich poetic text actually have an “unambiguous and plain” meaning? It did for Luther. We can explain this stable and accessible meaning in two ways. A simple one is that figures of speech in Scripture, beyond the literal, are still controlled by the text. Therefore readers, as they pursue the sense of a text, led by that text, will come to the basic understanding. This may involve the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as promised to and required by all those who believe. Another explanation that perhaps is saying the same thing, goes like this:

Because metaphorical language embodies the metaphorical content of Scripture, it is itself essence and reality, not something to be decoded. . . .Luther posits a kind of metaphor-sense based on the concrete and inescapable interrelatedness of things and words.³⁰

This metaphor plus explanation may be Luther’s answer to the current literary critics who see no real connection between the sign/word and the signified/reality.³¹ There is a real and discernible connection when we communicate. There can be a stable, accessible, and shared meaning. We are not lost in a subjective and relative world. We have a text, we have a rich text that expresses a concrete relationship. There is a real presence of meaning in Scripture, in poetic expression.

The clarity of Scripture, though, does not mean the text is simple or simplistic. There certainly are complex passages and even ones that seem contradictory. We do a disservice to the Bible when we try to oversimplify God’s word, ignore the cruxes, and so reduce it to something we can more easily manage and understand.³² Meaning from a text can be messy and very hard with the competing voices, the challenges of language, and the ever present sinful human nature. But the difficulty of meaning should not lead us, as it seems to have done with contemporary literary critics, to give up the pursuit. Nor should our desire for clarity in meaning lead us to hermeneutical arrogance. One should never be smug when holding onto a greased pig.

How can we negotiate the challenges of interpretation and the complexity of the texts? How can we pursue meaning without reducing the text or wandering into the clouds of subjectivity? Luther tells us, again in the context of the real presence debate, we have two gifts to pursue meaning, God’s text and faith:

So against all reason and hair-splitting logic I hold that two diverse substances may well be, in reality and in name, one substance. These are my reasons: First, when we are dealing with the works and

²⁹ Ibid., 296.

³⁰ Anderson, 405. See also her comments on p. 317: Luther “insisted that each word has one basic meaning, even when used metaphorically, figuratively, or allegorically (since these uses then became the basic meaning of the word).”

³¹ Luther has interesting explanations about how what seem to be metaphors in the Bible are not figurative but real and concrete. For example, when Scripture says “‘Christ is the true vine’The text irresistibly compels us to regard ‘vine’ as a new word, meaning a second, new, real vine, and not the vine in the vineyard. Therefore ‘is’ cannot be metaphorical here, but Christ truly is and has the essence of a real, new, vine.” Likewise Luther says Christ IS the Lamb of God, he does not signify or represent it. *LW* 37: 174.

³² This is an understandable tendency when we study poetry and when we study Scripture. In our search for meaning and clarity we want to reduce the text. We want to present a neat package. Interpretation, though, is sometimes like gift-wrapping a puppy. The text may not sit neatly in our box. Be careful that in an effort for a nice present, we don’t cut off an unruly part or even press the life out of it. See the later discussion on analogy of faith and Wauwatosa theology.

words of God, reason and all human wisdom must submit to being taken captive. . . . Secondly, if we take ourselves captive to him and confess that we do not comprehend his words and works, we should be satisfied. We should speak of his works simply, using his words as he has pronounced them for us and prescribed that we speak them after him, and not presume to use our own words as if they were better than his. . . . Here we need to walk in the dark and with our eyes closed, and simply cling to the word and follow. For since we are confronted by God's words, "This is my body"--distinct, clear, common, definite words, which certainly are no trope, either in Scripture or in any language--we must embrace them with faith, and allow our reason to be blinded and taken captive. So, not as hairsplitting sophistry dictates but as God says them for us, we must repeat these words after him and hold to them.³³

We have the solid, accessible, and shared treasure of the sacrament because we have God's text, and we are captive to it. We have this meaning not because we fully understand it, not because it is rational, not because it is consensus. We are wrestling with Scripture not to control it, but to be controlled by it. We have meaning because we are captive to God's rich text.

Grasping the Sacred Truth--The Uses of Literary Narrative/Story

Poetry is a great training ground to understanding words and God's word. The poetic elements or techniques helped Luther understand and express the mysteries of God, the truths that are on a level above the rational. Luther also valued the more down-to-earth side of literature--narrative. Story telling is a way to help us understand the Bible narratives and, especially, to grasp the law. The particular case history I will use for this section will be Luther's project to produce his version of Aesop's Fables.³⁴

First a note about Luther's sense of literary genres. When Luther uses the term "poetry" in his letter to Hess,³⁵ he is using the word in a broad sense. He is referring to verse as we understand it, but included is all literature. In the following passage about Joseph in Genesis 44, Luther ends up touching on all three traditional categories of literature: poetry, drama, and fiction or regular story (as a part of the narrative Genesis). And at the end he broadens the definition to the highest compliment. Joseph's fiction or silver-cup stratagem is, according to Luther,

a very beautiful game and a most excellent poem of this poet. . . . From this it is clear that Joseph was a very outstanding man and an illustrious theologian. . . . Accordingly, since a good nature and the Holy Spirit were joined, he had to become a distinguished poet . . . a man of the highest talent and spirit. . . .

Therefore Joseph plays this comedy in a very kindly manner and leads his brothers to despair, destruction, and hell; and when all is lost, the element of comedy appears [a welcomed resolution] and scatters all danger.

When matters are in such a bad way and so desperate that no hope of deliverance is seen, we should know that it is the epitasis or the climax of the comedy and that the catastrophe is very near. For such is the nature of God's poems, as Paul neatly says in Ephesians 2:10: "We are his poem."³⁶ God is the poet, and we are his verses or songs he writes. Accordingly, there is no doubt that all our works and actions are pleasing in God's eyes on account of the special power and grace of faith.³⁷

³³ Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," *LW* 37: 296. Luther's comments here sound similar to poets who resist paraphrases, reductions, or explanations of their poems. "Just read what I have written!" they say. "That's what I meant."

³⁴ In this section, as you will notice, I depend heavily on Carl Springer's study and translation, *Luther's Aesop*.

³⁵ See pages 4-5 above.

³⁶ The Greek word for "work" or "handiwork" (NIV 2011) is the same root for "poem."

³⁷ Luther, "Genesis Lectures," *LW* 7: 365-6.

The Bible is great literature, and law and gospel can be understood in such drama or literary terms. Luther clearly sees theology and literature not as opposite forces, nor even as separate items as he moves between them. This combination of the secular and the sacred and, especially, Luther's high estimation of classical literature can be seen in several surprising ways in Luther's plan to publish a new edition of Aesop's fables.

In a particular piece of writing Luther gave his well-known advice to fathers--read to your children around the dinner table. After the reading, Luther directed fathers to ask their children "What does this . . . mean?" Luther was talking about his Small Catechism, right? No, but you are close, in a sense. Luther gives this encouragement in his Preface to Aesop's Fables.³⁸

Another testament to Luther's value for story-telling is the time period when he worked on Aesop. As Springer points out, it was in the spring of 1530 while Luther was in Coburg, during the weighty times of the imperial diet that would result in the *Augsburg Confession*. A pivotal moment in the Reformation, and Luther is working on Aesop? Even more surprising is what he wrote at that time to Melancthon:

We have finally arrived at our Sinai, dearest Philipp, but we shall make a Zion out of this Sinai and build three tabernacles on it, one for the Psalter, one for the Prophets, and one for Aesop. But the latter is temporal.³⁹

Before we claim Luther is elevating the fable master too much, we should read on in Springer, where he explains that Luther here is cleverly outlining his writing agenda. He planned to spend his time at Coburg working on his Psalms commentary and his Old Testament translation of the prophets, as well as the fables.⁴⁰ Even so, Luther puts Aesop in some pretty strong company.

Why did Luther see Aesop's narratives as so valuable? This question is important because our objections to Aesop's fables as a part of Christian instruction may parallel the reasons some resist the use of new media and other storytelling techniques. Luther in his Preface to Aesop explains that he does

not know of many books, outside of the Holy Scriptures, which should be preferred to [*Aesop*] when it comes to speaking about our outward life in the world, if you want to take into consideration usefulness, art, and wisdom rather than high-falutin' yammer. For one finds in its plain words and simple fables the most exquisite teaching, admonition, and instruction.⁴¹

Notice that Luther is defining the scope of the fables' usefulness to "our outward life in the world." He understands that there are some things secular literature cannot tell us--the divine truths, the gospel. Luther said, "Smoke of the earth has never been known to lighten heaven, rather it blocks the stream of light over the earth. Theology is heaven, yes even the kingdom of heaven; man however is earth and his speculations are smoke."⁴² In its proper place, that is in teaching about our life in this world, in teaching the law, Aesop shines, he doesn't obscure. Springer says the Luther "seems to take a positive delight in the seductive way these untrue narratives [*Aesop's*] can help teach timeless truths, a paradox inherent in the fable."⁴³ And Springer suggests, "It is possible that Luther believed that fictional stories can illustrate how things work in reality as well as (or even better than) nonfiction."⁴⁴

³⁸ Luther, "Preface to *Aesop's Fables*, Springer, 9.

³⁹ Springer, 1. His Luther quotation is translated from *WA Br.* 5:285.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴² Luther, "Commentary on Lombard's Sentences" as quoted in Anderson, 163.

⁴³ Springer, 174.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

There are several particular reasons for the effectiveness of such lively but obviously fictive stories. Luther in his preface explains why the truth of fools like Aesop and his protagonists is more acceptable than other instruction. “For fools they can tolerate and heed. They [the great lords and leaders] will not and cannot otherwise endure the truth from the lips of any wise man. Yes, the whole world hates the truth when it hits home.”⁴⁵ Do we hear some bitter experience of Luther expressed here? After more than ten years of trying to get through to the lords and leaders with reasoned and not so reserved polemics, Luther was perhaps ready to try another approach. Luther continued the comment or complaint above with, “Well then, nobody wants to hear or endure the truth and yet we cannot do without the truth. So we are going to decorate it and coat it with a covering of pleasant lies and lovely fables.”⁴⁶ Again the tone here may need some comment. Was Luther conceding here or endorsing the proclamation of truth by fiction? Sarcasm or encouragement?

Luther did use vivid narrative in his own writing for the truth to hit home. He did this with his earthy language, which hardly fits the descriptors “decorate. . . pleasant. . . lovely.” He also used his strong sense for narrative more positively in studying and talking about the Bible. Springer compares Luther’s commentary with the dry rational, academic critics: “The lively exegetical instinct that so often brought scriptural stories vividly to life for his congregation and his students had a more powerful hold on him than the strict objectivity that characterizes the interpretive work of modern biblical scholars.”⁴⁷ In reading Luther today, sometimes his polemics are rough and probably not for emulation. But his commentary on the Bible is wonderful to read--enlightening, edifying, and exemplary. Much of the depth of insight and sharpness of expression is due to his understanding of drama and narrative. Springer says that Luther’s “real literary genius is more clearly in evidence in his exuberant exegesis of biblical narratives (especially his lectures on Genesis to which he devoted the last years of his life) than in dogmatic treatises.”⁴⁸ That is what a strong sense of story can give you--exuberance. It will only be actual “exuberant exegesis,” though, if you are also captive to the text.

When Luther encouraged fathers to read Aesop’s fables to their children, it was partly because these are great stories. The other part was because Aesop’s wit and wisdom give such a great look at people and our world. The fables are filled with vivid illustrations of the law, how the world works. This is why, perhaps, Luther seems to link the use of Aesop with his catechism, to the law sections. Though the moral focus limits Aesop’s stories, he still provides needed instruction and a key role, as the law does. Springer explains,

In [Luther’s] view, even the purist proclamation of the gospel would never render the fallen world a perfect place to live, so it was important for Christians in particular to be on their guard, to be aware of their own native inclinations, and not to be naive about those of others. . . .The fables of Aesop consistently underscore the importance of knowing one’s place in the society (as opposed to self-improvement or social betterment), fitting rather neatly with Luther’s conviction that living in the end times makes irrelevant all grandiose schemes proposing dramatic social revolution.⁴⁹

Literature is good at countering grand optimism about humanity. It may be fiction, but if developed well the stories will be true to life: Novels can vividly show the pain of our actions. Classical tragedies and the new postmodern ones use pervasive irony and deception to display our lack of our control and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 84. This function of a fool is seen well in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The wise and loving Cordelia and Kent were banished when they tried to talk sense to Lear. The only one left to tell the truth was his fool, and Lear did listen to him, even though the truth drove the king insane.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 159.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 172.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 98-99.

understanding. Some criticize literature today for not reinforcing traditional values, for not offering answers to the human dilemmas, for being dark and twisted, for not building up civilization. Well, if this is what we expect literature to do, we need our grandiose literary schemes exposed. Literature does not give us the answers we need, but it can show us that we need them, showing us our sins.⁵⁰ Good storytelling builds our understanding of and our thirst for the greatest narrative—the gospel.

Grasping and Handling Sacred Truth--Hermeneutics: Recognizing both the art and authority of Scripture

Above Springer calls Luther's interpretive method "exuberant exegesis." We can see both of our emphases here, art and meaning in the text, in a balance that honors the authority and also makes use of the richness of God's inspired text. This is how Luther modeled the benefit of poetry and rhetoric for students of the Bible. Dig into the text! And pay attention to the literary features. This will answer many of our hermeneutical questions, and will also raise a few more concerns.

One striking example of how to deal with God's rich text is the ongoing debate about translating the Bible. Ernst R. Wendland for decades has worked with Scripture translation issues, and he has written extensively about the need to be focused on the text and on its literary features if we want to faithfully express what God has told us. Below are two quotations from his *Translating the Literature of Scripture: A Literary-Rhetorical Approach to Bible Translations*. The first one highlights the practical method and text focus we need, contrasted with interpretive theories that are not text-grounded:

In considering the artistry of the Scriptures, our focus is on the microstructure of the discourse--on those stylistic devices that serve to embellish and at the same time highlight or sharpen the texture of the text. It is a form-functional emphasis that encourages a clear perception of the lower-level artistic features, devices, and techniques of biblical discourse. This is different from the older historical "behind-the-text" studies and also from the contemporary vogue, reception criticism ("before-the-text studies"), in that it adopts a primarily "in-the-text" interpretive viewpoint.⁵¹

The artistry of the Bible need not lead us astray from the meaning, but rather it encourages us to see more of the meaning by seeing more of what the text itself is doing. The literary features in the Bible give us plenty to do, and to do it in the right place--"in-the-text."⁵²

The artistic features in the Bible, Wendland also explains, are not some add on decoration. Rather they are essential parts of the Holy Spirit's method and meaning:

The Bible stands as "literature" because it deals with momentous themes of continued existential and eternal relevance. . . . Not only is cognition affected, but also human emotions and volition as well. Indeed, one could argue that excellent artistic technique is absolutely essential for the communication

⁵⁰ Springer comments on Aesop's fables functioning as the law does, and he points in a footnote, p. 98, to the three uses of the law in the Formula of Concord. Why not teach fiction, especially modern secular fiction as a curb, mirror, and guide? Mann says literature "functions quite effectively as the law does in Luther's theology: to curb society's excesses, to reflect our own shortcomings, and demonstrate faith [or lack of it]" p. 129.

⁵¹ Wendland, 139.

⁵² I think Wendland's categories or labels here work well to summarize the complex array of theories of literary criticism, especially "in-the-text studies." When in literature class I explain drawing inferences from the clues and hints in stories or poems, students sometimes say, "Oh, now I get it, professor. You want us to read between the lines." I respond, "No, I am not asking you to see what isn't there. Look more closely at what is there, what is actually in those lines."

of religious subjects, which by its very nature as the Word of God requires a distinctive, unconventional, captivating, and convincing method of communication in terms of genre and diction, if not style as well: [quoting Eugene Nida] “Any attempt to relate infinite realities to finite experience almost inevitably calls for figurative language, since there are not natural models which combine infinite and finite elements.”⁵³

In other words, God had to become a poet to communicate with us, just as Jesus became a storyteller to bring the heavenly truths to us in earthly form. Luther says,

God in His essence is altogether unknowable; nor is it possible to define or put into words what He is, though we burst in the effort.

It is for this reason that God lowers Himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents Himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for Him to be made known to us.⁵⁴

We could be immoderate here and link literature to the incarnation. God wanted to dwell among us to more fully reveal who he is, so the Word became flesh. And in a sense, God became a poet. He expressed his truth in a concrete/flesh image.

Back on the ground and more direct to hermeneutical issues, God used literature in an essential way to reveal himself in the Bible. Those artistic expressions are integral to the inspired text, and, as they are so necessary, they can be (God in his providence will make sure they are) accessible and clear to the readers. As interpreters then, we need to keep asking “What does this mean?” As we dig into the text, we can be confident Scripture will answer that question.

But this won’t be easy. A rich text will always be a debated text, not because of some deficiency in the text (that needs the church’s imprimatur or the inner light’s revelation) but because our natures are corrupt. The answer to the debates over interpretation is to hold to the text. Luther says, hold to the simple or natural meaning of the text. “For anyone who ventures to interpret words in Scripture any other way than what they say, is under obligation to prove this contention out of the text of the very same passage or by an article of faith.”⁵⁵

Sounds great, but practically how do we do this? How do we arrive at a natural meaning in a contested text? First we think of the Reformation’s “let Scripture interpret Scripture.” This principle is so ingrained in us that we may take it for granted. But Spitz points out that Luther was “the first [exegete] in a millennium to propose the simple religious criterion by which dark passages are to be understood in the light of a clear passage.”⁵⁶ This is sound advice and a key stage in stable hermeneutics, but Luther in the quotation above wants the interpretive warrant in the verse in front of him. He wants to be even more captive to the text.

Another methodological suggestion for a text-grounded interpretation has to do with timing. When should we ask, “What does this mean?” In his *Aesop’s Fables*, Luther says we should wait to ask that key question until after we read the story. This sequence seems common sense, but it runs counter to other editions at that time.⁵⁷ If you start with a principle before you read a text, you likely will skew your reading. You then may be looking for something in the text, rather than looking intently at the text.

⁵³ Wendland, 141. The Nida quotation is from Nida *et al. Style and Discourse*. Capetown: Bible Society of South Africa, 1983. 154.

⁵⁴ Luther, “Genesis Lectures,” *LW* 2: 45.

⁵⁵ Luther, “This Is My Body,” *LW* 37: 32.

⁵⁶ Spitz in “Luther and Humanism,” 85-86.

⁵⁷ Springer, 106.

Does this apply also to the “by an article of faith” consideration in Luther’s quotation above? Here we can find an example and a warning about our interpretive methods, especially when we are handling the rich texts that tend to be debated. When and how do we apply the answers we have come up with to “What does this mean”?

Luther’s interpretive method sounds close to what has been called “narrative exegesis.” Mark Ellingsen did an instructive analysis of Luther’s hermeneutics compared with the principles of the narrative approach. The key idea in this style of exegesis is the text “means what it says,” a refreshing and simple, natural way of reading. “If a text does not mean what it says but has its meaning conditioned by the interpreter’s life-perspective, it is quite possible for the text to be reduced to ‘whatever the interpreter wants it to mean.’”⁵⁸ So, was Luther’s reading of Scripture conditioned by his “life-perspective,” and therefore subjective? Before we respond, “Of course not,” we should consider the definitions and examples of life perspectives. Ellingsen explains that some see Luther’s law-gospel “dialectic” and his focus on justification by grace as themes he looks for in the Bible, ideas that may be external to the literal-grammatical sense of a text. These overriding articles of faith, critics argue, make Luther’s exegesis “arbitrary and individualistic.”⁵⁹ When we share these themes or life-perspectives with Luther, we don’t see such exegetical problems, but others do. At least we need to recognize our hermeneutical method and interpretive lenses that we use, even when they are justifiable and well-grounded in Scripture.

We need to ask and honestly answer--are we seeing the text as it is, or as we want it to be? Our exegesis can be too exuberant. And this temptation is greater with poetic or narrative texts that have more play in them. One check on this problem is to first ask, “What does the text say?” Only after we have struggled well with that question are we ready to ask “What does this text mean?”

Do we see the text as it is? An example of where an overriding theological perspective may skew the reading of Scripture is the issue of analogy of faith. Should the understanding of a passage ultimately be controlled by the text, or by the body of teachings derived from the Bible as a whole? This is a complicated issue, which was made even more so by the context of the analogy of faith debate--the predestination and election controversy of the early 1900s.

The Ohio and Iowa Synods of that time appeared to ask “What does this mean?” too early. They argued that the relevant election passages should be understood through the lens of established doctrines, which sounds good. “Now the doctrines of Scripture cannot contradict one another, but must be in harmony with one another. It is, therefore, the task of the theologian to discover this harmony, which must also be recognizable by our reason, and present the doctrines in this sense.”⁶⁰ But listen to where this reasonable line of interpretation took them.

In the explanation of the so-called *loci classici* of the less clearly revealed doctrines, the expressions that contradict the clear doctrines of Scripture will have to be stripped of their usual, immediate meaning and be weakened or modified according to the pattern of other clear doctrines of Scripture.⁶¹

With good intentions--in pursuit of harmony and consistency--the Synods of Ohio and Iowa were willing to strip and weaken what a divine text said. They wanted the passages to fit into their interpretive box, the analogy of faith.

Koehler responded that we have to live by and live with the text, even when it doesn’t fit what we think it should say.

⁵⁸ Ellingsen’s “Luther as Narrative Exegete,” 396.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 397. To summarize what Ellingsen concluded: Luther’s “spirit-letter” distinction in the meaning of Scripture is open to the charge of an “arbitrary and individualistic exegesis” (p. 400). Ellingsen sees this problem in Luther’s polemic situations and contexts, not in his commentaries.

⁶⁰ J.P. Koehler’s “The Analogy of Faith,” 222.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The Synodical Conference maintains that in explaining the so-called *loci classici* or the *sedes doctrinae* one may not, when it is a question of obtaining a doctrine, deviate from the grammatical-historical sense that is immediately and clearly contained in these passages. And if these passages contain terms that according to our human understanding even seem to contradict other doctrines of Holy Writ, one may not modify (*umgestalten*) these terms according to these other doctrines, provided that they are clearly present in these *loci classici*, and are integral parts of this particular doctrine.⁶²

Sometimes being text-grounded is hard and frustrating. The natural sense of a passage may not fit well with other passages, or more often not fit with our understanding of other passages.

In cases such as the predestination controversy and its analogy of faith debate, I think poets and students of poetry have a distinct advantage. People who have spent time studying rich literature, especially poetry, are used to contradictions, reaching beyond the reasonable, and are not overly frustrated by a lack of interpretive closure. Poetry students learn hermeneutical humility; they do not insist that the text fit into their interpretive package. They wrestle with the text, they follow the artistic features and figures, and at the end as they try to make sense of all it, they may only be able to conclude, “I can’t say any more that what the poet wrote here.” But that is still worth all the effort. Based on just the quotations above, I would say Koehler had studied more art and literature than his opponents. He didn’t want to trim rich texts that wouldn’t fit in his box. I think he learned that from Luther.

Grasping and Handling the Sacred Truth Skillfully and Happily Today

Perhaps we can learn a few things from Luther that will help us handle or proclaim the sacred truth in our time, as we stand at the seam between the age of the printed text and the digital age.

One of my professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, in a church history class, observed that Lutherans have a habit of celebrating major anniversaries of the Reformation by doing questionable things. Then he added, “I’m glad I won’t be around in 2017.” How are we going to observe the 500th? One project that has received much attention is the making of a new Luther documentary film. Would that sainted seminary professor rank this up there with the Prussian Union? The yoking together of the sacred text with the unholy and unruly media? I don’t think it has to be a problem.

Perhaps confessional Lutheran films are how we, like Luther, are developing for the gospel a new Reformation vernacular. Perhaps we can take the gifts of the past ages and express them well in a new language, text to film, if we learn from Luther how to do it well.

We may be leaving the golden age of the printed text; perhaps we have already left it. But we must always be grounded in the words God has inspired. Luther also teaches us that to understand a biblical text well, we need to see it in its full, rich literary dimension. And to proclaim the gospel truth? With great art God told us his grace. With great art we can share his grace. With Luther may we always be captive to the gospel text, and captivated by it.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 221

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