

**“The whole Bible painted in our houses”:  
Visual Narrative and Religious Polemic in Early Lutheran Art**

Samuel Torvend

*The Presence of the Word*

In his discussion of the psychodynamics of orality, the Jesuit linguist and philosopher Walter Ong writes that “the interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence. In most religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life ... In Christianity, for example, the Bible is read aloud at liturgical services. For God is thought of always as ‘speaking’ to human beings, not writing to them ... [Indeed] the Hebrew word *dabar*, which means word, means also event and thus refers directly to the spoken word.”<sup>1</sup>

A gathering such as this—of Lutheran historians, theologians, and pastors—may not be surprised by such sentiments. When Luther speaks of God, he does so in terms of speech. God is the One who speaks. When he speaks of the Christian community, he invokes the same image: “Since the church owes its birth to the word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, in his explanation of the Apostles’ Creed, Luther writes of the Holy Spirit who

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<sup>1</sup>Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 74–75. See his *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 176–191, for a discussion of the word-event character of the New Testament epistles, intended to be read aloud as the early Pauline communities listened. In *Orality*, 75, Ong notes the often overlooked distinction in Christian Trinitarian theology which consistently refers to the second person as “Word,” not human written word, but the human spoken word. “‘The letter kills, the spirit [breath on which rides the spoken word] gives life’ (2 Corinthians 3:6).” In this context, consider as well his trenchant comment on the distinction between speaking and reading: “When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be reestablished only when oral speech begins again,” 74, emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup>*Concerning the Ministry* (1523), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 56 vol. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–86), 40:37. Hereafter, *LW*.

*calls out* to people through the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Christian community<sup>4</sup> is that people “who hear the voice of their shepherd” and follow him.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, in hearing these words, you will be reminded of yet another distinction the reformer makes in which his delight in the linguistic pun is apparent: the Christian community is not a “writing house” (*schreiben-haus*)—some fifty-five volumes of Luther’s writings in English notwithstanding—but a “speaking” or “mouth house” (*schreien-haus*).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, it is the spoken word, the public proclamation of the gospel that enters the consciousness of the hearers—Ong’s “recesses of the psyche”<sup>7</sup>—that serves as a critical theological insight for Luther. Everything else flows from this living address: the Christian community itself, the “means of grace” (the gospel preached and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper administered according to the gospel), the “mutual conversation and consolation” among the members of the community, and the service of one’s neighbor.

Not surprisingly, then, some contemporary commentators suggest that such an essential insight has nurtured a “spirituality of the word,”<sup>8</sup> an

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<sup>3</sup>The *Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther for Ordinary Pastors and Preachers*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 345.

<sup>4</sup>Luther’s preference for *Gemeinde*—community or gathering—in contrast to *Kirche*—church—should be noted.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), in *LW* 37:367.

<sup>6</sup>Cf., *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels* (1521), in *LW* 35:123: “The gospel should really not be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures ... This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke ... a proclamation that is spread not by pen but by word of mouth.” Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 72, summarizes Luther’s thought: “The Scripture has its source and exists for the sake of oral proclamation.”

<sup>7</sup>Ong, *Orality*, 105. One is reminded of Augustine’s deeply introspective and psychological interpretation of the Trinity.

<sup>8</sup>By “spirituality,” I am referring to a way of understanding and living in the world as guided by a particular religious vision. See the following sources for the descriptive, historical, and analytical dimensions of the academic study of Christian spiritualities: Jon Alexander, “What Do Recent Writers Mean by ‘Spirituality’?” *Spirituality Today* 32:3 (1980), 247–256, for one of the earliest critical articles tracing the use and definitions of the term since the 18<sup>th</sup> century; Walter Principe, “Spirituality, Christian,” in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 931–938, for a more systematic treatment of the term; Louis Bouyer, *Orthodox Spirituality and Protestant and*

“environment” shaped by and dependent on speech. The human spirit can live without anything but the word of God, writes Luther. When it has the word, it possesses justice, truth, wisdom, freedom, and an overflowing of everything that is good.<sup>9</sup>

Luther recognized, as did his colleagues, that while the proclamation of the word was intended to create a “gracious environment” and that preaching itself could be imagined as one of the greatest art forms,<sup>10</sup> it was, nonetheless, a mediated form of communication that was exercised within a context: an assembly of people gathered for the proclamation of scripture and its interpretation, the occasional celebration of baptism, and the regular keeping of the Lord’s Supper. According to Luther (and, we might add, the *Augsburg Confession*<sup>11</sup>), these “events”—the people gathering, the water-washing, and the eating and drinking—find their origin in the word. They are “word-events”—visual, tangible, wet, edible, drinkable “proclamations.” To use the more familiar confessional term, they are “means” of encountering and receiving God’s grace. Given Luther’s emphasis on God’s gracious regard for humans and the embrace of humanity in the incarnation, I would suggest that these events—gathering, preaching, washing, and eating—were intended, in his mind, to set forth a “free space,” an “open field” where a participant was no longer obliged to please the deity or engage in the ancient Roman practice of “do ut des.”<sup>12</sup>

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*Anglican Spirituality* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 63–77, on Luther and Lutheran spirituality; Bradley Hanson, *A Graceful Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999); Marc Lienhard, “Luther and the Beginnings of the Reformation,” in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 268–299; Frank Senn, “Lutheran Spirituality,” in *Protestant Spiritual Traditions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 9–54, but especially 9–20 on Luther; Jared Wicks, *Luther and his Spiritual Legacy* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983), especially 12–153.

<sup>9</sup>*The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *LW* 31:345.

<sup>10</sup>Note the comparison he makes between preaching and singing, both oral forms of communication: “God has preached the gospel through music, too, as may be seen in Josquin [de Prez], all of whose compositions flow freely, gently and are not forced or cramped by rules,” *Table Talk*, in *LW* 54:129–130.

<sup>11</sup>Article VII, The Church, in *The Book of Concord*, 32–33.

<sup>12</sup>The practice of bribing a political or economic patron in order to gain favor. Thus, the application of social-scientific methods (as used in the study of the Jesus movement and early Christianity) to the “spiritual-political economy” of late 15<sup>th</sup>–/early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Germany. If such a correlation were possible—especially in terms of the proposed critique of Temple economy by Jesus—it would shed light on the surprising attraction to, use, and significance of the Temple-cleansing story (Mark

In this regard, we find Luther and his companions faced with two unsatisfying alternatives. The ontological argument of medieval scholasticism—with its emphasis on the “thingness” of ministers, water, oil, bread, or wine and the transformation of earthly elements into “something” else—would not do. The human mind would focus on possession of the “thing” rather than the “promise” of the word and the encounter with a God who speaks. Luther rejected the “transformationist” understanding of the late medieval church (bread transformed into “body”—substance changing but accidents remaining—a thing to behold) because he believed it could lead to idolatry or be construed as the grounds for placating God.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, the aggressive iconoclastic and “spiritualizing” tendencies among the radical reformers—in particular Andreas von Karlstadt, Luther’s colleague at the University of Wittenberg—were equally unsettling to the evangelical reformers. While Luther adamantly rejected any body-spirit dualism that would diminish the force of the incarnation and the embrace of humanity, Karlstadt, it seems, was deeply suspicious of the body. Inspired by the words of Jesus in John’s gospel—“It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail” (6:63)—Karlstadt insisted that since God is a spirit, God should be worshipped “spiritually.” Karlstadt was among those who believed that one was to pay attention to the immediate impulse of the Spirit and act upon those impulses even if they led to violence or destruction. Here, a

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11:15–19, but John 2:13–22) by evangelical reformers and artists. See: ‘Christ Driving the Money-changers from the Temple,’ Pieter Neeffs the Elder, 1640–50, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington.

<sup>13</sup>Thus, one of the central evangelical criticisms: the church of the late Middle Ages had allowed the sacramental “system” to become an approach *toward* God, an attempt to reach upward, buttressed by a spiritualized political economy. Grace, as God’s regard for human beings, had become, in their eyes, “quantified” and consequently “purchasable.” Thus, the condemnation of indulgence sales—for the building of a new “temple” in Rome—and the payment of mass stipends for the living and the dead. From more psychological and economic perspectives, it would seem that a religiously-motivated desire to acquire “quantities” would inevitably produce a “competitive” rather than a “open communion” environment (“communere”—the sharing, rather than the hoarding, of gifts). In the former, some win and some lose. “[They] have turned the holy sacrament into mere merchandise, a market, and a business run for profit.” By the beginning of the sixteenth century, writes Joseph Lortz, the upper classes in many northern German cities were endowing altars and anniversary masses for the dead in such great quantity that the priests were incapable of keeping up with the demand. See Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, trans. Ronald Walls, 2 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), I:109–143.

singular mistrust of the created order<sup>14</sup> seemed to call into question and undermine the evangelical insistence on the relationship between the incarnation and the created means (e.g., speech, food) through which the Christian community is called, gathered, washed, and fed by the word.

In opposition to the Roman position, Luther advanced the notion that the grace of God comes to humans freely, addressed to them in the word. This encounter cannot be quantified or turned into an act of appeasement. In Luther's mind, grace is not a substance: holy water would no more ward off evil than the purchase of many masses would grant eternal life. On the other hand, the grace of God, while graciously given, is addressed to human beings in their finite, historic existence. Thus, the gifts of the word—"life, health, and salvation"—cannot be construed as "spiritual" in the sense that they stand over and against bodily, fleshly existence (as the spiritualists seemed to argue). The ears listen, the skin feels, the tongue tastes, the lips speak, and the eyes see. Between scholastics and spiritualists, we find Luther.<sup>15</sup>

For those of us gathered here, this is no late-breaking news flash. My purpose is simply to offer an orientation for the subsequent discussion on the development of Luther's thought concerning the visual arts.

### *Luther's Developing Thought on the Visual Arts*

At first glance, one might assume that a religious vision or "spiritual environment" rooted in speech, in "orality," would have little interest in the image or the visualization of faith through artistic media. Such a facile generalization has led some commentators, historians, and theologians to conclude that the Reformation simply replaced the image with a book. For instance, Leonard Shlain, in his national bestseller on the alphabet and the goddess, argues that Martin Luther repudiated the colorful ritual of the

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<sup>14</sup>For a more balanced view of Karlstadt, see E. Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth, 1969), 49–162, and Ronald Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: The Development of His Thought, 1517–1525* (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1974).

<sup>15</sup>Lorna Abray, *The People's Reformation: Magistrates, Clergy, and Commons in Strasbourg 1500–1598* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 21, offers an interesting typology. "By the 1520s Strasburghers looking for answers to their questions about church organization and doctrine ... could choose among the five reforming currents: conservative, humanist, evangelical, radical, and spiritualist"—a veritable theological buffet.

Mass, rich with icons. “The nexus of the Reformation,” he writes, “was the rekindling of the age-old conflict between written words and images.”<sup>16</sup>

A more discriminating and nuanced argument has been proposed by Carl Christensen<sup>17</sup> and John Dillenberger<sup>18</sup> in their tracing of Luther’s developing thought and his close association with the elder and younger Cranachs. I do not propose to recount the details of their work, but to highlight the fluid and changing line of Luther’s thought on the visual arts.

On the one hand, in 1515, Luther would write in his *Lectures on Romans* that it does not belong to the “new law” to build churches and adorn them with altar decorations, statues and any other “paraphernalia”: “For all these things are shadows and signs of the real thing and thus are childish.”<sup>19</sup> Yet within fifteen years, he was proposing appropriate subjects for panel paintings, Bible illustrations, funeral monuments, and wall paintings. Ten years later, in the 1540s, he was collaborating with the Cranachs on the placement of biblical figures and contemporary Germans in altarpiece paintings that would frame (and I would argue, interpret) the communal celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Such keen interest in visual images was to have momentous consequences for the development of an

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<sup>16</sup>Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 325. While I think Shlain’s comments on the Reformation and Luther are off-key, his argument concerning alphabetic and visual literacies is intriguing. For a more nuanced analysis in which the author applies feminist and social-historical principles to actual works of art, see Margaret Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), in particular her discussion of early Christian and sixteenth-century art works.

<sup>17</sup>Carl Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*, Studies in the Reformation, vol. 2 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979); see also his *Princes and Propaganda: Electoral Saxon Art of the Reformation* (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992); “Reformation and Art,” in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 249–270; and “The Significance of the Epitaph Monument in Early Lutheran Ecclesiastical Art (ca. 1540–1600): Some Social and Iconographical Considerations,” in *The Social History of the Reformation*, ed. Lawrence Buch and Jonathan Zopy (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 297–314.

<sup>18</sup>John Dillenberger, *Images and Relics: Theological Perceptions and Visual Images in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially 79–114 on Luther and the Cranachs and 173–188 on the “repositioning” of visual images among the Protestant Reformation theologians.

<sup>19</sup>*LW* 25:487.

iconographical “canon” that both expressed and interpreted biblical and doctrinal emphases.<sup>20</sup>

Why such a shift in his thought—from skepticism to open collaboration—on the use of visual images in evangelical churches? Both Christensen and Dillenberger suggest a chronological sequence which I have organized thematically:

1. *Criticism of the papacy*, in particular the rebuilding and adornment of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, a project funded in part by the sale of indulgences. Here, Luther’s skeptical regard for the visual arts touches on a religiously-motivated concern for the poor. “If the pope knew the exactions of the indulgence-preachers,” he writes, “he would rather [have] the church of St. Peter reduced to ashes than be built with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep ... the pope would be willing to sell St. Peter’s and give his own money to many of those from whom the pardon-merchants conjure money.”<sup>21</sup>

2. *Criticism of patronage*, directed toward wealthy Christians who are able to fund building projects or art works. This criticism is directed at (a) the motive of supporting patrons who believe that the donation of buildings, altarpieces, paintings, or monuments will gain them favor in the sight of God and (b) the “spiritualized economy” that sanctions and encourages such belief. For Luther, this is nothing less than a form of “works righteousness,” but one which bears on social ethics. What of the poor? The first good work which flows *from* faith, Luther notes, is to give to the poor, lend to the neighbor in need, or come to the aid of anyone who is suffering.<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he writes, “Let the main stream [of money] flow towards God’s commandments, so that among Christians charitable deeds done for the poor would shine more brightly than all the churches of wood and stone.”<sup>23</sup>

3. *Criticism of pilgrimage centers*. In his “An Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality,” Luther calls for the destruction of churches and chapels that cater to pilgrims. Such centers are evil “tricks” that will “increase avarice, ... establish a hallow and fictitious faith, ... weaken [compete with] parish churches, ... multiply taverns [the tourist trade!] ...

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<sup>20</sup>Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*, 54.

<sup>21</sup>John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 495. For criticism of religious art and architecture as an assault on a “spiritualized economy,” see n. 13 above.

<sup>22</sup>*Explanation of the Ninety-Five Theses* (1518), in *LW* 31:199.

<sup>23</sup>*Trade and Usury* (1524), in *LW* 45:284–286. See Miles, *Image as Insight*, on Renaissance women patrons.

and lead humble folk about by the nose.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, Luther is stating what everyone knows to be true: the pilgrims arrive at the center, see and—in some instances—touch a work of art and consequently gain merit that can be used to pay off the “spiritual debt” imposed by the church. Implicit in this criticism of these centers is that in addition to robbing poor people of their money, they also foster magical thinking: touch the statue of Mary the Beautiful at Regensburg, and you will be healed.<sup>25</sup>

4. *Ambivalence in light of iconoclasm.* While Luther was in “protective custody” at the Wartburg Castle, he was forced in 1522 to make a speedy return to Wittenberg after receiving news that Karlstadt and his more radical colleagues from Zwickau had inflamed the crowds to enter churches and, with force if needed, to remove and then to destroy all images. Upon his return to Wittenberg, Luther preached eight sermons in which he criticized the iconoclastic eruptions in the city.

We should note, however, that the primary issue for Luther was not so much the use or misuse of the visual arts (“images”) as an outbreak of what he considered another form of legalism. In the name of the “gospel of freedom,” Karlstadt and his colleagues demanded the destruction of images, altars, and churches. In Luther’s eyes, they had become new “popes,” transforming what should be free into a heavy burden. The existence of abuses,<sup>26</sup> he writes, is not a warrant for the unilateral destruction of images.<sup>27</sup> Some people worship the sun and moon, but that does not mean that people should try to pull the sun or the moon out of the sky. That some men drink too much and play around with women does not

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<sup>24</sup>Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, 456–457. “Where pilgrimages are poorly attended, a movement is set on foot to canonize saints, but not for the sake of honoring the saints who would be revered without canonization; rather it is to draw crowds and cause money to flow,” 457.

<sup>25</sup>See “The Pilgrimage to Mary the Beautiful at Regensburg,” Michael Ostendorfer (1520) in Carl Christensen, *Art and the Reformation in Germany* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979), 111.

<sup>26</sup>Criticisms 1–3 above.

<sup>27</sup>Is Luther backtracking here, especially after his call to tear down pilgrimage centers? It’s hard to tell. Or is the troubling issue that the eruption of iconoclasm in Wittenberg took place in his absence and without his approval? Or is it that such violent behavior would only beget more violence ending in bloodshed? “... the devil does not care about image breaking. He only wants to get his foot in the door so that he can cause shedding of blood and murder in the world,” *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), in *LW* 40:105. In a manner quite distinct from Karlstadt and the radical reformers, Luther consistently counsels patience in implementing reforms and the clear need to educate people as to the reasons for reform. In all things, he says, there must be love.

mean that one should abstain from wine or put women to death. Abuses are corrected by a persuasive preaching of the word that is intended to enlighten the heart.<sup>28</sup>

By 1525, Luther had published an extensive work entitled “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments,” a rebuttal to Karlstadt and his supporters.<sup>29</sup> Here he affirms and elaborates key principles in evangelical thought, but especially this: that the proclaimed word puts images in their proper place, that is, they may be used freely so long as their presence is not construed as a work pleasing to God, as a new law, or as an excuse to overlook the Christian’s duty to care for the poor.<sup>30</sup> Luther would not condemn those who destroyed “divine” or “idolatrous” images, but “images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated ... And they are not only to be tolerated, but for the sake of the memorial and the witness they are praiseworthy and honorable.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as he comes to the conclusion of his discussion, he notes with deadpan irony that his critics—Karlstadt and company—quote his own translation of the Bible *against him*, yet the pages of his published translation are filled with illustrations of biblical stories.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, it is better to paint pictures on walls of how God created the world, how Noah built the ark, and whatever other good stories there may be, than to paint shameless worldly things. Yes, would to God that I could persuade the rich and the

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<sup>28</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), in *LW* 40:91.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 79–223, of which the first quarter of the text concerns images, 79–101.

<sup>30</sup>Here we note a difference in the enumeration of the Ten Commandments, Luther maintaining the practice of including the prohibition of images under the first commandment and Karlstadt (and Calvin) separating the prohibition into another commandment. “I say at the outset that according to the law of Moses no other images are forbidden than an image of God which one worships. A crucifix, on the other hand, or any other holy image is not forbidden. Heigh now! you breakers of images, I defy you to prove the opposite!” *LW* 40: 85–86.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>32</sup>And by virtue of the juxtaposition of one image to another image—Old Testament next to New Testament, pope next to Christ—an interpretive matrix, a *visual hermeneutic* is formed. “I have myself seen and heard the iconoclasts read out of my German Bible. I know that they have and read out of it, as one can easily determine from the words they use. Now there are a great many pictures in those books, both of God, the angels, men and animals, especially in the Revelation of John and in Moses and Joshua. So now we would kindly beg them to permit us to do what they themselves do,” *LW* 40:99.

mighty that they would permit the whole Bible to be painted in our houses, on the inside and outside, so that all can see it. That would be a Christian work.<sup>33</sup>

5. *Promotion of the visual arts.* Although Luther never wrote so extensively on the visual arts as in “Against the Heavenly Prophets,” he by no means abandoned the subject. Dillenberger suggests that the period from 1525 onward marked another shift in Luther’s thought as the pastoral project of establishing evangelical churches proceeded. “Symbolically, Luther’s abandonment of the garb of a monk and his marriage signal new directions.”<sup>34</sup> Maybe so. But what needs to be mentioned is the role friendship played in Luther’s guidance of the evangelical project in Wittenberg. Quite simply, two of his closest friends and collaborators were artists: Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) and his son, Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515–1586). Indeed, of the five witnesses at the wedding of Luther and Katharina von Bora, two were Cranachs.

From 1521, by fits and starts, either Philip Melanchthon or Luther collaborated with the Cranachs in passionnal book images, Bible illustrations, law and gospel paintings, pulpit and portal reliefs, altarpieces, and individual paintings of biblical figures or events.<sup>35</sup> Yet before 1525, Cranach the Elder must have wondered at times if he would receive outright encouragement from a friend who could appear ambivalent toward the creation of Christian visual images. But in the period between 1525–1529, it seems that as he contemplated the pastoral tasks of preaching and teaching (especially after the depressing reports on parish visitations in 1528–1529), Luther began to recognize an educational role for the visual arts so long as they corresponded with the proclamation of the gospel. Already in 1522, he promotes the use of images for children and “simple folk,” since they are apt to remember and understand stories better when “taught by picture and parable than merely by words or

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 92. See also James M. Kittleson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 213; Wicks, *Luther and His Spiritual Legacy*, 109; and Peter Manns, *Martin Luther* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 101, for a modest consensus on this shift in focus toward the pastoral project (including the Diet at Augsburg in 1530).

<sup>35</sup>See John Cook, “Picturing Theology: Martin Luther and Lucas Cranach,” in *Art and Religion: Faith, Form and Reform* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

instruction.”<sup>36</sup> By 1530 in his *Commentary on Psalm 111*, he is proposing appropriate subject matter for evangelical altar paintings to be created at the Cranach workshop:

Whoever is inclined to put pictures on the altar ought to have the Lord's Supper painted with these two verses written around it in golden letters: "The gracious and merciful Lord has instituted a remembrance of His wonderful works." Then they would stand before our eyes for our heart to contemplate them, and even our eyes, in reading, would have to thank and praise God. Since the altar is for the administration of the Sacrament, one could not find a better painting for it. Let other pictures of God or Christ be painted somewhere else.<sup>37</sup>

Here Luther joins word and image in much the same way he joined word and sacramental matter: the latter is the creation of the former, the former interprets the latter. The image is a "creature" of the word. But it was his singling out of the Lord's Supper theme that was to have a direct influence on the shape of Lutheran art and perceptions of evangelical worship.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>*Personal Prayer Book* (1522), in *LW* 43:43. See Robert Scribner, *For Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Kenneth Strand, *Reformation Bible Pictures: Woodcuts from Early Lutheran and Emserian New Testaments* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1962).

<sup>37</sup>*Commentary on Psalm 111* (1530), in *LW* 13:375.

<sup>38</sup>Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*, 54. Christensen lists the themes in sixteenth-century German Lutheran altar images, the most popular being the Last Supper. Klaus Lankheit, in "Duerers 'Vier Apostel'," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 49 (1952), 238–54, suggests that the remarkable popularity of the Last Supper theme can be traced to its *communal meal symbolism*. This is in contrast to the *sacrificial action symbolism* repugnant to Luther and so prominent in medieval eucharistic theology and practice. Well before the early sixteenth century, the eucharistic liturgy, the Mass, had developed into an act of "watching" the elevation of the host ("the gaze that saves") with a corresponding infrequent communion by the people. When they received communion, only bread was offered, the cup being reserved for the priest and deacon. Thus, a greater use of the crucifix or crucifixion scene juxtaposed next to or on the altar in medieval churches. In contrast, the Lutheran intention to celebrate a weekly communion in which all baptized members received both bread and cup emphasized a participatory symbolism.

## *The Wittenberg Altar*

In April 1547, a large triptych was installed in Wittenberg City Church (*Stadtkirche St. Marian*).<sup>39</sup> While the work is attributed to Cranach the Elder, in all likelihood his son participated in the completion of the altarpiece. Oskar Thulin has argued that the selection of the subject matter was worked out in close consultation with Melancthon and Luther prior to Luther's death in 1546.<sup>40</sup> At first glance, the three panels and predella—paintings of baptism, the Lord's Supper, confession, and preaching—are a kind of visual narration of the Lutheran understanding of the Christian community as the place where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel. The artist, however, has offered other details which broaden such an interpretation.

The Wittenberg altarpiece displays what appears to be the first truly monumental treatment of the Last Supper theme in a Lutheran church. The central panel shows Jesus with the disciples seated around a circular table for the Passover meal: on a large serving tray in the center of the table is a roasted lamb. To the left, Jesus is portrayed in the act of touching the beloved disciple who has embraced him as he places a piece of bread in the mouth of Judas who holds—but hides—a bag of money.<sup>41</sup> On the right side of the table, a male servant dressed in sixteenth-century attire (Lucas Cranach the Younger?) proffers a cup of wine to a thirteenth disciple—Luther as the bearded 'Duke George,' his alias while under protective custody in the Wartburg. Clearly the scriptural inspiration for

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<sup>39</sup>See: "Wittenberg Altarpiece," Cranach Workshop, 1547, in Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 104. See also the Last Supper altarpiece at the castle church of St. Mary in Dessau, painted by Cranach the Younger in 1565, in Christensen, *Art and Reformation in Germany*, 119. Christ is seated at the center of the table, surrounded by eleven sixteenth-century evangelical "disciples," among them Luther, Melancthon, Bugenhagen, Jonas, and the lonely figure of Judas the betrayer seated opposite the rest of the crowd, on the viewer's side of the painting.

<sup>40</sup>Oskar Thulin, *Cranach-Altaere der Reformation* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 9. See also his still helpful study of Last Supper themes in early Lutheran art, "Reformatorsche und frueprotestantische Abendmahldarstellungen," *Kunst und Kirche* 16 (1939), 30–34.

<sup>41</sup>Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of the Reformation*, 141, suggests that "Judas is shown as a small, Negroid figure [?] much as Karlstadt is said to have been. At any rate that is how he was regarded by his former comrades and colleagues: the lost leader who had made the great refusal."

the central panel is John 13:21–30, Luther’s favorite gospel.<sup>42</sup> Jesus announces that the one with whom he will share a piece of bread will betray him. By having Luther receive the cup at the Last Supper, Cranach suggests that in evangelical churches, the cup of wine will be given to the congregation (rather than withdrawn as in Roman practice). Such a visual narration also underscores the community’s belief that the Lord’s Supper is truly being celebrated in the Wittenberg church. It is an implicit rejection of the Roman criticism that without ‘true orders’ (priests ordained by bishops, the successors to the apostles), there can be no valid sacramental celebration. In the Cranach panel, it is the figure of Jesus who “presides” at the meal. There is no intermediary standing before a crucifix. He is the host at this supper, symbolized by the juxtaposition of the first century (Jesus) with the sixteenth century (Luther).<sup>43</sup>

But why a ‘betrayal’ scene rather than an ‘institution of the supper’ scene? Perhaps the artist is offering a twofold interpretation that corresponds with Luther’s own teaching. Christ’s giving of the “sacrament” to the one who will betray him signals that the Christian community may experience “betrayal” or at least, on a more theoretical plane, a mixture of “pure” and “impure,” whose faith is known to God alone. At the same time, the giving of the bread to Judas the betrayer points to the crucifixion. In the meal, the death of Christ is invoked by the sharing of a piece of bread that is “broken” as his body is “broken” in death. In the predella panel directly beneath the Supper scene—which I consider the interpretive key to the whole work—Luther points to the figure of the crucified Christ. It seems to me that with the selection of the Passover meal as the visual hermeneutic for what is happening in the actual communion being celebrated in the Wittenberg church, the artist and his advisors are declaring that those who participate in the Holy Communion are an extension of the original circle of disciples. The “old story” is made to express a “new thing,” and that “new thing” is an exchange of gifts rather than an act of appeasement.

In the left panel, Melanchthon—the lay professor of classics at Wittenberg and Luther’s close colleague—is baptizing an infant in a font large enough to dunk a child or an adult. To the left, Lucas Cranach the

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<sup>42</sup>“John’s Gospel and St. Paul’s epistles, especially that to the Romans, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the true kernel and marrow of all the books.... [These] are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know,” *Prefaces to the New Testament* (1546), in *LW* 35:361–62.

<sup>43</sup>Cf., with Luther’s teaching on the ubiquity of Christ, especially in his disagreements with Zwingli on Christ’s presence in the Supper.

Elder holds a towel while Melancthon's assistant holds open a book that reads, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but who does not believe will be damned."<sup>44</sup> While the parents of the child are standing to the far left, the font itself is surrounded by a large group of Wittenbergers. The viewer is intended to see that this is a public rather than a private event. And given its public character, perhaps the artist wants the viewer to see that it is a *layperson*, rather than a priest or minister, who is administering the sacrament of baptism. And if it is a layperson, are we intended to "read" Luther's insistence that in an emergency any layperson may administer baptism? Medieval iconography would place a priest or John the Baptist (himself a layperson) at baptismal scenes.<sup>45</sup> In their place, Cranach has situated a lay professor of the classics. But notice that the baptized is a chubby German *infant*. At this public gathering of adults, a child is washed in a font big enough for adults, as if to say, "infants are welcome here" in contrast and opposition to the Anabaptist wing which reserved baptism only for adults.<sup>46</sup>

In the right panel, Cranach has painted Johannes Bugenhagen, pastor of the Wittenburg church and Luther's confessor. He is seated on a large wooden chair and holds a large key in each hand. To the left a man kneels in front of him, while to the right a bearded fellow with a buckled dagger is beginning to walk away, his hands bound by cords. Here the artist

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<sup>44</sup>See Luther's baptismal hymn of 1541, "Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam," intended to accompany his explanation of baptism in the catechism, "who trusts and is baptized, each one is thereby blessed forever," in *LW* 53:301.

<sup>45</sup>In early Lutheran art the figure of the Baptist is found prominently, but not exclusively, in the many "law and gospel" panel paintings where he points with one hand to a skeleton (Adam, "the old man") and with the other to the crucified or risen Christ ("the new Adam").

<sup>46</sup>Luther retained and defended the baptism of infants on theological premises, among them the insistence that an infant can do nothing but receive the grace of God. In this regard, it seems that Melancthon's baptism of an infant both affirms the Lutheran theological position (and its professed continuity with the practice of the ancient church) and criticizes the Anabaptist practice of baptizing only adults into a community of "pure" or "true" believers. See *Concerning Rebaptism*, and *Infiltrating and Clandestine Preachers*, in *LW* 40:229–267; 383–394. "If now we have no particular passage of Scripture on the baptism of children, they on their side have just as little of Scripture which bids us baptize adults. But we have the command to offer the common gospel and the common baptism to everyone, and herein the children must be included. 'We plant and water and leave the growth to God,'" *Concerning Rebaptism*, in *LW* 40:258. Luther is worried that that which is intended to be given freely—baptism—will be turned into a new "law" that either excludes some or becomes the grounds for a new "work."

interprets the sacrament of confession and absolution, the individual on the right receiving the word of forgiveness, while the one on the left, his hands bound, presumably represents the unrepentant.

Does Cranach play a pun on the keys? In Matthew, Jesus says to Peter: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gate of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (16:18-19). It may be worth our while to remember the link established in Rome between Peter, the papacy (the See of Peter), and the power to forgive and bind the sinner. Here in Wittenberg, the power of the keys—to loose and to bind—is exercised by an evangelical pastor in a Lutheran community. Bugenhagen sits in the place of Peter and now holds the keys that in medieval iconography were placed in the hands of St. Peter or the pope.<sup>47</sup>

To return, then, to the remarks I made earlier: for Luther, the sacraments are wet and edible proclamations of the living word; they are events in which the spoken word—“I baptize you”; “The blood Christ shed for you”; “I announce to you the forgiveness of all your sins”—interprets the action taking place. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the predella—which seemingly undergirds the three panels—depicts Luther, standing in the pulpit of the city church, pointing to the figure of the crucified Christ as the congregation gazes toward the cross. Does Cranach intend us to see Luther as a new John the Baptist, the penitent thief, or the Roman soldier who announced that this crucified Jew was ‘truly the Son of God’? As a symbolic form of communication—one which always contains a surplus of meaning—it is hard to say. Maybe we see only Luther the preacher who points to the visualization of his *theologia crucis*, a central element in his theological project and the principle by which the reform of the “media”<sup>48</sup> would be undertaken.

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<sup>47</sup>See *A Short Order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man* (1529), in *LW* 53:116–118.

<sup>48</sup>By “media” I mean those oral, aural, visual, tactile, kinetic, and olfactory “languages” through which people communicate with each other. Thus, the “reform” of the “media” includes, for instance, the rearrangement of space, the adoption of free-standing altars with the clergy facing the people, the creation and strategic placement of paintings with carefully selected themes, the elimination of other images, vernacular texts (spoken and interpreted through preaching), hymn texts that imagine a “reformed” vision of God or Christ or the community, the careful selection of subjects to be included in illustrated Bibles and catechisms, and the reception of real bread and wine with the use of “interpretive” words.

Finally, on the left we see a young boy in the front row resting his hand on the knee of a woman. The boy is Luther's son, Haenschen. He leans against his mother, the former nun. Perhaps it is fanciful to ask the question, but are mother and son placed in the forefront so that the viewer will see the wife and the child of a Christian pastor, an utterly unsurprising image in 2000, but a shocking and revelatory one in 1547? For we might argue that one of the singular achievements of the Protestant Reformation was the establishment of a married clergy and a new appraisal of the family as a necessary and legitimate center of religious education.<sup>49</sup>

### *Speculations*

It should come as no surprise to us that the one sixteenth-century Protestant reformer who wrote more about education than any other would be well aware of the pedagogical value of the visual arts. Indeed, one might say that evangelical worship could be understood as an 'educational' event. After all, the Augsburg Confession states that "the chief purpose of all the ceremonies is *to teach people* what they need to know about Christ."<sup>50</sup> Echoing Gregory the Great, Luther suggested that such rites and ceremonies, illustrations and paintings are of great value to children, the "simple," and the weak<sup>51</sup>—a veritable *biblia pauperum* in the sixteenth century. I wonder, though, if Luther, given his own imaginative processes, included himself among the "simple people":

Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his words heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will it or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart ...<sup>52</sup>

Is it any wonder, then, that the Cranachs painted Luther simply pointing to "a man hanging on a cross" as the visual hermeneutic through which the whole altarpiece and the entire gathering could be understood?

My suggestion is quite simple—perhaps too simple. By condemning the substantialist motives in late medieval theology and practice, rejecting the anti-materialist tendencies in the radical wings of the Reformation, and

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<sup>49</sup>Thus, his writing of the *Small Catechism* for use in the home.

<sup>50</sup>*The Book of Concord*, 56.

<sup>51</sup>*Personal Prayer Book* (1522), in *LW* 43:43.

<sup>52</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets* ... (1525), in *LW* 40:99–100.

promoting the pedagogical value of the image, Luther actually opened the door, if ever so slightly, to an evangelical apprehension of the visual arts.<sup>53</sup>

When God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure of order, the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward.<sup>54</sup>

In his newly-published study of popular American Protestant religious images, David Morgan writes that much conventional [academic?] wisdom views art as the handmaid [mute cousin] of religion or the artist as a free agent whose creations may or may not converge with the specific concerns of religion. "But surely the relationship is much more complex than this simplistic opposition suggests. Visual piety offers a different way of thinking about art and religion ... [It] cancels the dualistic separation of mind and matter, thought and behavior."<sup>55</sup> Images—paintings, someone giving me a cup, a table you can touch, a man hanging on a tree—structure the experience of the sacred. Luther's "outward factors" or "material signs" not only educate people about a great idea or scriptural principle; they "affect"—they construct—an inward experience and participate in the formation of a religious world view.<sup>56</sup>

What, for instance, do you see in the Wittenberg church? I see a young boy with his mother and know that children can come here. But I also see that only men lead and speak. I notice that my classics professor

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<sup>53</sup>Dillenberger opines that his initial opening was never fully realized in Lutheran circles: "In Luther, there had been hints of a wider understanding of the arts than was actually developed. The interpretation of Scripture, as well as of the visual arts, in terms of an imagination formed by faith, was full of possibilities that were never actualized," *Images and Relics*, 191.

<sup>54</sup>*Against the Heavenly Prophets* ... (1525), in *LW* 40:146.

<sup>55</sup>David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 2. See his discussion of a "rhetoric of immediacy" in Luther's understanding of preaching and the sacramental acts (65–66), but also note the comments above on Cranach's desire to situate the ancient Passover in his own parish church, a "visualization of immediacy."

<sup>56</sup>Thus, the anxiety and anger over the *power* of images in pilgrimage centers. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially his discussion of censorship.

is engaged in an activity usually reserved for a select group. I begin to wonder if traditional roles have been temporized, if not overturned, in this place. I see a baby being splashed with water over a large pool in which it would drown if dropped. Why so much water? Why not a few drops? I kneel between my father and my sister around a table, and as I gaze upward I see that our gathering is mirrored in the painting's gathering. My roommate is in the picture offering a cup to someone. My sister nudges me from distraction so that I see Lucas standing before me, offering me a cup. He is there in the picture and here standing before me. My drinking and that drinking become confused. Am I also drinking with them?

You may hear these imaginary reflections on finding oneself five hundred years ago in the Stadtkirche and wonder if there is more delusion than imagination. Maybe so. Perhaps my problem is that with many of you, I have learned to hear, to read, and to write but have never been formed in critical and imaginative seeing. I have not left Ricoeur's first naivete: a picture is just a picture for so many of us. "The visual as the bible of the illiterate or the unlearned, as the older tradition expressed it, has been transformed into the visual illiteracy of the learned."<sup>57</sup>

To imagine how a religious world view, a spirituality, is "constructed" with sound and sight and with word and image is to ask many of us to speak an unfamiliar language. Yet we live in a visual culture. My suggestion is that we open the door a bit wider and walk in.

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<sup>57</sup>Dillenberger, *Images and Relics*, 191.