

TRANSFORMATIONS OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY IN VIEW OF SCHLEIERMACHER

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Historical figures are often turned into theological positions in the abstract constructive enterprise known as theology. The names of Luther and Schleiermacher are popularly bandied about either to support or to discredit theological claims. But when things get personal, theological positioning is cast in a new light. My move from Luther studies to Schleiermacher studies brought with it an element of discovery.

The reactions among Luther scholars to my interest in Schleiermacher after the publication of *The Trinity and Martin Luther* were disturbing.¹ The reactions were, as is usually the case with Luther scholars, brutal in their forthrightness. »Say it ain't so«, one Luther scholar exclaimed upon hearing of my turn to Schleiermacher. Another scholar of Luther and the Lutheran tradition confronted me directly. »Christine«, he asked with both surprise and perplexity in his voice, »I have one question, only one question for you: Why Schleiermacher?« And on another occasion, I was met with the immediacy of unbridled anger. When a particular Lutheran theologian heard a phrase from Schleiermacher that I playfully used to cast the inner-trinitarian relationship of the Son's utter dependence on the Father, he banged his fist on the table.

These were reactions of surprise, disgust, consternation, even anger. The move was incomprehensible to most, scandalous to some, but the consensus was clear: Schleiermacher was an unwelcome intruder in Luther studies.

I am now merely amused at the Luther guild's reactions to my foray into enemy territory. Yet I remain intrigued. What is so *incompatible* about an

¹ CHRISTINE HELMER, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study On the Relationship Between Genre, Language and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523-1546)*, VIEG 174, Mainz 1999.

academic relationship between Schleiermacher and Luther, at least from the perspective of Luther scholars? This chapter is my attempt to probe the issue of incompatibility in order to survey more broadly, beyond Luther studies, the lay of the contemporary North American theological land. It is my observation that a division characterizes theological positioning in (at least) North America and that the divide is represented by two German theologians, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Martin Luther. Furthermore, these figures do not represent today their respective original historical-theological positions. Rather, both names are taken as contemporary theological types that stand for the divide between liberalism and postliberalism. The »postliberal Luther« and the »liberal Schleiermacher« set the coordinates of theology today.

This essay is divided into three sections. In the first section, I test a hypothesis concerning the reason for the »postliberal Luther's« opposition to modernity. Luther's Reformation theology tends to be deemed uniquely anti-modern because of its emphasis on God's agency that appears to detract completely from human agency. Yet on closer investigation, the categories used to interpret Luther's Reformation thought in contemporary theology are indebted to modernity. Hence the alleged anti-modern positioning of Luther is coincidentally cast in modern terms. Luther should be deemed compatible with Schleiermacher – but he isn't. In the second section, I take another approach in figuring out why Luther is not brought into hospitable range of Schleiermacher. I show that Luther's theology of the word is taken as representative of a postliberal theological understanding of language. Postliberal theology's »Luther« is then used to identify Schleiermacher as »liberal«, although the determination is established on postliberal ground. In the third section, I blur the division between the postliberal Luther and the liberal Schleiermacher in a constructive attempt to use Schleiermacher as an interpretative tool for getting a second look at Luther. It just may be that Schleiermacher can help get at a Luther who is much more medieval and much more liberal than his postliberal alias!

I THE »LUTHER« OF MODERN THEOLOGY

The great Lutheran theologian, Albrecht Ritschl, delivered a speech on Nov. 10, 1883 at the four-hundredth anniversary of Luther's birthday. Ritschl made a programmatic claim. Luther's sixteenth-century Reformation was, in some important respects, incomplete. It would be Ritschl himself, who would

»complete« the Reformation.² Although Ritschl expressed his right to Luther's legacy, his self-inscription into the historical line of Luther's Reformation was not unusual. It had been the task, at least since Protestant Orthodoxy and Pietism in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, to guarantee the endurance of the Reformer's insights by interpreting them in the intellectual and cultural idioms of the day. Any claim to a living Reformation tradition required transforming its central concerns into relevant religious and theological terms. Every Luther scholar in the post-Reformation Lutheran tradition inherited the task to claim Luther for the concerns of the day. Given the consensus, what was so novel about Ritschl's claim?

The answer rests not with the content but the form in which Luther's Reformation thought would be updated. Ritschl was focused, like any other Luther scholar, on justification, Luther's great insight and according to Lutheran tradition, »the article by which the church stands or falls.«³ Yet Ritschl thought that Luther's version of justification, although it articulated the revolutionary insight that faith alone is an act of God that effects the justification of the sinner, did not adequately address the question of how justification is actualized in human thoughts and deeds. If justification is attributed entirely to divine agency, then how can the human »participate in« or »demonstrate« a faith that is alive in works of love? Lutheranism had been haunted from its beginnings with this question left open by Luther's understanding of justification by faith alone. Modernity's orientation to human subjectivity pressed theology all the more to deal with this question. Ritschl saw his chance.

It is precisely at this juncture that we can see a powerful conceptual factor at work that is characteristic of Ritschl, but that can be used to understand the dominant strand of Luther scholarship of the past one hundred and fifty years. The neo-Kantian conceptual framework deployed by Ritschl dominated the first half of twentieth-century Luther scholarship that, by virtue of its synonymy with German Protestantism, can be considered one of the most influential trends in modern theology. The framing of Luther in neo-Kantian categories can be paradigmatically seen in Ritschl's move to interpret justification in terms of the soul's »effects«. Ritschl rejected any »Platonic« understanding of the soul that he judged to lie behind Protestant Orthodox ex-

planations of justification in the metaphysical terms of Christ, or Trinity, indwelling in the soul.⁴ Rather, Ritschl deemed that the reality of the soul could only be metaphysically located in the soul's effects, meaning its expressions in empirical reality. Ritschl's slogan »no metaphysics, no mysticism« in theology distinctly pointed out a neo-Kantian emphasis on an empirically construed theological anthropology. Ritschl understood justification in the ethical terms of the victory of spirit over nature, while the doctrine of reconciliation completed justification by exhibiting justification's effects in the life of the believer. Justification's victory was instantiated in an ethically robust reality, Luther's open question completed with the help of neo-Kantian categories.

Ritschl's interpretation of Luther seems remarkably at odds with recent interpretations of Luther's Reformation theology. Oswald Bayer published his *Martin Luther: Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (also available in English translation) in which he explicitly recontextualizes Luther's Reformation insights for today. For Bayer, Luther's key Reformation idea is the *promissio*, the word of the promise of the gospel that is identified with its fulfillment. The *promissio* speaks the word of forgiveness and creates this reality by its oral communication. With this privileging of the word in Luther's theology, Bayer situates Luther as a »word of God« theologian. And Luther differs from another word of God theologian, namely Karl Barth, by his assigning to God a »twofold« word. The word of the divine promise that announces forgiveness of sins is a word that is entirely unexpected. It is a word that is alien to the word of law naming the human condition. Humanity is captive to the vicious law of self-justification, a situation that is terminal. The gospel announces a new situation, a new being, in fact, for the sinner. God's twofold word identifies God's twofold disposition towards the sinner that, in turn, corresponds to two realities for the human condition. God is against me in the law that governs my everyday existence; God is for me in the gospel that frees me from the law of everyday existence.⁵

In addition to the twofold word, there is another aspect of God that Bayer qualifies theologically. There are in human experience indeterminate terrors, which are expressed as human lament to the God who does not re-

² ALBRECHT RITSCHL: Festrede am vierten Seculartage der Geburt Martin Luthers, in: FRANK HOFMANN (ed.): Kleine Schriften, Theologische Studien-Texte 4, Waltrop 1999, 173.

³ See THEODOR MAHLMANN: Art. Articulus stantis et (vel) cadentis ecclesiae, in: RGG⁴, 799-800.

⁴ I summarize Ritschl's position as found in ALBRECHT RITSCHL: Theologie und Metaphysik (1881; 1887), in: HOFMANN (ed.): Schriften, 68-142.

⁵ OSWALD BAYER, *Martin Luther. Eine Vergegenwärtigung*, Tübingen 2007; in English: *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2009, 50-62, 224. [Citations refer to the English translation.]

spond.⁶ Bayer assigns theological space to the divine silence, all the while acknowledging that the divine word has the first, and last, say in Luther's theology.

The cornerstone of Luther's Reformation theology is given two very different interpretations. Ritschl is concerned with justification and its effects, while Bayer is concerned with preserving the divine primacy of the word as agent in justification. Ritschl assumes that the effects of justification are historically tangible, while Bayer insists on human passivity as the appropriate human disposition when God works to justify the sinner. Ritschl's neo-Kantian interpretation of Luther correlates theology with the reality of ethics, while Bayer's word-oriented interpretation of Luther is committed to the word as constitutive of reality. Bayer's notion of human passivity has been debated in recent discussion concerning distinctions between passivity, receptivity, and reciprocity.⁷ Yet Bayer's important emphasis on Luther's idea of human passivity in the justification event remains uncontested. Maximal agency must be ascribed to God because God accomplishes what humans are incapable of doing. Even human receptivity for the divine work must be created by God.

There is a loss in translating Luther's Reformation theology from beginning to end of the twentieth century. Between Ritschl and Bayer, the relationship of justification to ethics is shortened to just justification. Human agency is cut off from justification while God's agency is safeguarded by this move. The effects of justification are no longer included in an account of God's justifying gospel but are subsumed under »law«. Bayer theologially holds God's two words apart from each other so that the word of gospel carries the weight of divine agency. The passive human cannot twist God's gospel into a law governing personal agency. Ritschl is concerned with justification's effects, while Bayer preserves divine agency in justification as God's sole prerogative. The loss of ethics is the gospel's gain.

The divergence between Ritschl and Bayer on justification in relation to its effects is remarkable. Yet a point of similarity is also striking. Both Ritschl and Bayer frame their interpretations of Luther in modern categories. Ritschl completes Luther's Reformation with the help of the neo-Kantian distinction between spirit and nature, while Bayer casts Luther's word-oriented theology

⁶ Ibid., 339.

⁷ See BO KRISTIAN HOLM / PETER WIDMANN (eds.): *Word - Gift - Being: Justification - Economy - Ontology*, RPT 37, Tübingen 2009.

in the modern category of a performative utterance. For Ritschl, the distinction between two aspects of reality serves to conceptualize justification as the victory of spirit over nature and justification's effects as the glimpses of victory by ethical success. For Bayer, the twofold word of God distinguishes two aspects of the divine that are then fitted to each other in order to convey justification as the new word of the gospel spoken over and against the old word of law. A conceptual determination of divine disposition according to two words establishes the intersection at which justification is situated.

Both Ritschl and Bayer transform Luther's understanding of justification in the process of interpreting it. In Ritschl's case, justification is construed in the neo-Kantian terms of a rightful ordering of nature to spirit. In Bayer's case, Luther makes a linguistic turn. Justification is construed in the face of a divine word designating reality under the law and as the divine word freeing reality for new possibilities. Modern categories are responsible for both transformations.

There is another more speculative tradition of interpreting Luther in the categories supplied by modernity. This tradition is one that is not generally acknowledged by Lutherans as a distinctly Lutheran tradition. Its heterodoxy may perhaps be a bit too uncomfortable for Lutherans to claim as their own, yet it is a Lutheran tradition with a distinctly metaphysical take on Luther's Reformation theology. The German nineteenth-century Lutheran philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel deploys a speculative metaphysic in order to position the God-human relationship. The point of metaphysical unity between divine and human introduces redemption into the reality of history, while world history is governed all along by the idea of redemption and its inevitable unfolding in history to its universal goal. In Hegel's thought, Luther's doctrine of justification undergoes a metaphysical transformation. The gospel's novelty is fitted ontologically with historical necessity. Divine and human are brought into tight relationship so that divine agency acquires its reality in human agency. Luther's personal and ecclesial account of justification is rendered in the modern speculative categories of the God-world relation. Although Hegel's account should be considered a viable transformation of Luther's theology, it has not been as influential in Lutheran theology as Ritschl and Bayer have been. Yet all three positions converge on the point of Luther's transformation in modern terms.

The history of Luther interpretation in modern theology shows a fundamental agreement. It is perfectly acceptable to update Luther's insights into categories of modern thought, even to the point of articulating those insights better than the Reformer did. Luther's Reformation theology, if it is in fact to

inform a living tradition, requires transformation in new cultural and historical contexts. The doctrine of justification in at least the above three significant examples is understood through the lens of different philosophical conceptualities, each trying to relate the powerful impact of Luther's idea of justification to individual, community, and world. These interpretations have established the parameters of contemporary Lutheran theological discussions and debates. They inform the interpretative options and possibilities for understanding Luther today.

In the face of these modern conceptual options, the question, however, remains. »Why Schleiermacher?« Why does Schleiermacher stand out today, excluded from debates swirling around the modern transformations of Luther's theology?

The problem I am addressing here is a very particular one. Schleiermacher's spirit can be seen to favorably haunt some very specific discussions recontextualizing justification for modern times, even in Lutheran circles. Twentieth-century theologian Rudolf Bultmann, for example, stands as a Lutheran in comfortable proximity to Schleiermacher. The tradition that I am pointing out as explicitly inhospitable to Schleiermacher is a more recent one. Bayer, for example, singles out Schleiermacher – and Schleiermacher's influence on Bultmann – for special critical consideration in Bayer's advocacy of a distinct understanding of theology as *Konfliktwissenschaft*.⁸ By controversy, Bayer means a categorical opposition between Reformation and modernity. The criterion Bayer uses to distinguish sharply between and to evaluate critically the two epochs for doing theology (even if in Bayer's case Reformation can be unproblematically appropriated in contemporary context) is the distinction between exteriority of the gospel and interiority of God in human consciousness. Bayer's Luther assigns the sole means of justification to divine agency that is located exclusively and entirely in the external word; God's external word (*verbum externum*) is categorically distinct from any human word. Bayer's Schleiermacher interiorizes God in human self-consciousness so that God's word, if it can even be called a word, is conmingled with human consciousness to the point of confusing God and human. The truth of the Reformation's gospel is undergirded by its complete exteriority; the falsity of modernity's quest for justification resides in the interiority of self-justification.

⁸ Bayer aligns both theologians in: OSWALD BAYER, *Theologie, Handbuch systematischer Theologie 1*, Gütersloh 1994, 115, 208, 327.

In light of a closer examination of Bayer's category of the word, however, Bayer's interpretation of Luther's *promissio* is seen to be indebted to modern conceptualization. A particular modern theory of language hovers in Bayer's interpretation of the *verbum externum* in Luther's understanding of justification. The spirit of the linguistic turn haunts Bayer's approach. Bayer's *Konfliktwissenschaft* cannot therefore be taken to mean a categorical rejection of modernity. The explicit rejection of Schleiermacher cannot be sustained on the mere grounds of modernity. Rather, another issue is at stake. I now probe this question by moving it from Germany to North America. In the North American discussion, the controversy surrounding Schleiermacher from Lutheran theological perspective takes on sharper contours.

2 THE »POSTLIBERAL« LUTHER AND THE »LIBERAL« SCHLEIERMACHER

The question addressed at this juncture concerns what Luther has come to mean, and by implication Schleiermacher, on the contemporary North American theological landscape. The question no longer concerns the various interpretational frameworks that help *reconceptualizing* Luther's understanding of justification for today. Rather, I address the *recontextualization* of Luther as he has come to represent a distinct theological position, and how this »postliberal Luther« affects the way Schleiermacher is positioned. Luther makes an opponent of Schleiermacher, constructing the »liberal Schleiermacher« from his postliberal vantage point. How has this situation come about?

The postliberal Luther, on my reading of the situation, seems to be a construction of two dominant tendencies in Luther studies in North America today. The two tendencies are strange bedfellows when considering their many respective diverging claims and intentions. One tendency is represented by theologians who advocate the primacy of the word in Luther's Reformation theology. The other tendency is represented by theologians associated with the »evangelical catholic« movement in Lutheran circles. Their alliance is indeed strange. The word-preoccupied group prefers a Luther whose thought is distinctly »Lutheran«, while the evangelical catholic group rallies round a »Catholic Luther« who can facilitate ecumenical rapprochement with Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. The word-privileging theologians prefer a doctrine of justification as the golden hub around which all other Lutheran doctrines spin, while evangelical catholic theologians relate justification to »Scrip-

ture and Tradition». ⁹ In sum, the Reformer who heralded a new church seems an unlikely match with the Reformer who is regarded in temporary exile from Rome. ¹⁰ Yet the two positions seem to lay aside their competing interests in coopting Luther and in joining hands in opposition to Schleiermacher.

While the common object of polemic is Schleiermacher, the issue at stake is much deeper. One point of unity between these two theological approaches seems to be the way »word« is related to reality. The relationship between language and reality is a serious philosophical question. When it is transposed into theological register, the word-reality relation conveys the weighty matter as to what serves as vehicle of eternal salvation and as guarantor of the transhistorical continuity of an efficacious distribution of salvation. Language and reality become then an intensely theological issue.

The postliberal framework of Christian theology has been successful in mustering the support of both word-oriented Lutherans and evangelical catholics who both hold up Luther's word-theology as a key ally. The similarities between proponents of the word-oriented approach and evangelical catholics, respectively Oswald Bayer and George Lindbeck, are remarkable. For both, a philosophical affinity to the linguistic turn permits an ontological privileging of language over reality. What this means theologically is that for Bayer, Luther's understanding of the word of God, specifically the gospel, is the sole vehicle by which God creates faith and thereby communicates the gospel of salvation. God's word constitutes the reality of forgiveness, creating the novelty of forgiveness *ex nihilo*. For Lindbeck, the specific language of Christianity, its first and second order linguistic deployments, constitute a Christian reality in such a way that it becomes the all-encompassing worldview and interpretative matrix for alien cultural elements. ¹¹

⁹ The capitalization of S and T in »Scripture and Tradition« occurs with some frequency in writing by evangelical catholics. This literary rhetorical move seems to indicate a polemic against those who do not take the authority of scripture and tradition in the same authoritative sense of a transhistorical Christian orthodoxy. This (one) sense seems to be underwritten at the expense of the historical recontextualizations and reconceptualizations of scriptures in traditions.

¹⁰ It is striking to count the number of (male) theologians from the evangelical catholic group who have recently crossed the Tiber. The swim is all the more striking when one considers Roman Catholicism's anti-modern stance on women's and queer issues today as well as its systemic cover-up over decades of the sex abuse scandal.

¹¹ GEORGE A. LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia 1984, 33.

Furthermore, the status of the Bible in assuring the transhistorical continuity of the gospel's proclamation is related to the theological issue of its unity. Both Bayer and Lindbeck advocate a return to a pre-critical hermeneutic in order to lift up a type of biblical interpretation that yields a canonical whole: in Bayer's case, Luther's hermeneutic of law and gospel, in Lindbeck's case, strategies from the early church. ¹² The Bible is to be read as a unity, and as unity, it functions as canonical norm for the church. Irenaeus's rule of faith serves as the early church's precedent for reading the Bible as a normative doctrinal unity. Furthermore, particular hermeneutical strategies must be applied to the Bible in order to render it a canon for the church. Biblical interpretation appeals to intra-biblically approved strategies, such as allegory or typology, in order to yield an ecclesially normative canon in the first place. The word of God in the Bible is transhistorically normative in Christianity by virtue of its function as a canonical unity. For postliberal theologians, the primacy of the word of God as distilled by the rule of faith is the transhistorical guarantor of Christian truth.

How does this postliberal co-opting of a word-oriented Luther articulate its contrast with Schleiermacher? Again, one of the key issues at stake is how language and reality are related. If a postliberal position sees Christian discourse as constitutive of a particular Christian worldview, then it attributes the opposing case to the liberal position. From the postliberal perspective, the liberal position is seen in terms of a language-reality difference; language is ontologically rendered as secondary to a deeper underlying reality. Reality is undifferentiated linguistically and as such offers possibilities for translation, analogy, or equivocation. Schleiermacher is singled out as representative of this position. Bayer, Lindbeck, and more recently Bruce Marshall ¹³ identify Schleiermacher's theology in the terms opposing their own understanding of language's primacy – respectively language's external primacy in the gospel, as constitutive of a cultural-linguist system, and as epistemically primary. The liberal (foundationalist) position of Schleiermacher is construed respectively as privileging interiority, as privileging a generic experience over its linguistic expression, and based on the »given« of an »inward Christian experience«. ¹⁴ Reality as ontologically prior is generic and universal. It is only

¹² See GEORGE A. LINDBECK: *Scripture, Consensus and Community*, in: GEORGE A. LINDBECK: *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James J. Buckley, Grand Rapids 2002, 204–208.

¹³ Bruce D. Marshall devotes two chapters (chs. 3 and 4) of BRUCE D. MARSHALL, *Trinity and Truth*, Cambridge 2000 to a sustained argument against Schleiermacher.

¹⁴ BAYER, *Theologie*, 440; LINDBECK, *Doctrine*, 21; MARSHALL, *Trinity*, 55.

particularized at a secondary step when language (and concepts) are invoked to express the prior reality. Language has an »expressive« rather than »constitutive« function, rendering generic reality in secondary form.

Nothing less is at stake from a philosophical perspective than a philosophy of language over a philosophy of consciousness. And nothing less is theologically at stake than the truth of the particular Christian religion.¹⁵ From the postliberal perspective, the liberal position advocates an instrumental role of language that facilitates translating an ontologically prior universal into the particular that has secondary status. By this instrumental function of language, language is relativized by virtue of translating universal into particular.

But truth according to a postliberal position resides solely at the level of particular language. The truth of Christian particularity can reside neither in a generic pre-linguistic reality nor in its secondary linguistic expression. Rather it must be constitutive of Christian language that renders the truth of Christian reality across time. The unity of the Bible is identical with the truth of a stable Christian narrative that is linguistically available to successive generations of Christian communities. What precisely opposes the postliberal commitment to the transhistorical continuity of normative Christian discourse is the positing of a reality enduring underneath and prior to language. The notion that Christian discourse is invoked by experience is an idea that overturns the very foundations of the postliberal commitment to language's primacy over experience. From postliberal perspective then, the opposing position is set up. The terms of the opposition are the very terms established by the parameters of postliberal theology.

A lot for the postliberal Luther rides on this particular construction of language. The primacy of the word seems to be the issue at stake in guaranteeing the transhistorical stability of Christian doctrine through the ages. Bruce Marshall's treatment of language in *Trinity and Truth* adds to the issue the notion that specific Christian claims have epistemic primacy in a Christian worldview.¹⁶ This means that statements such as »Christ is Lord« articulate the central commitments of Christians. As statements in language, their very linguistic deployment construes their centrality to the Christian community throughout time. The claim that language bears transhistorical truth ascribes to specific deployments of Christian discourse a normative status. Not every

¹⁵ LINDBECK, *Doctrine*, 77.

¹⁶ MARSHALL, *Trinity*, 120.

statement bears this burden. Epistemically primary statements are isolated as the claims in the ecumenical creeds about the triune God. Specific linguistically articulated claims about the Trinity are taken as epistemically necessary for the endurance of Christian truth through time. The result is that specific orthodox formulations are assigned the transhistorical role of providing the epistemic building blocks for Christian faith. Luther's *verbum externum* seems to have been transformed into a guarantor of Christian orthodoxy.

The explanation of how Christianity has so far succeeded at transhistorical endurance is given very different terms by Schleiermacher. The terms differ considerably from the explanation constructed from the postliberal perspective that assigns to the liberal position the view of language's hopelessly diminished relation to truth. Schleiermacher's own philosophical commitments are poised at the intersection between a philosophy of consciousness and a philosophy of language. In fact, recent research in Schleiermacher studies has taken the *Dialektik* seriously as a text on the relation between experience, knowledge, and language, and has interpreted this philosophical text in view of another philosophical text, the *Hermeneutik und Kritik*.¹⁷ The results of this research show that Schleiermacher understands human consciousness to be shaped by deployments of language that are culturally and historically specific. Furthermore, consciousness is also structured by an intersubjective orientation that makes language a necessary mode of expression. Language constitutes community by its intersubjective performance and it serves as the cultural-historical matrix that makes experience possible in the first place. Consciousness is interlaced with language, while language is central to both thought and experience; consciousness cannot be explained without language's central role in it. Language however cannot be identified with thought and experience but is related to them through complicated processes of consciousness as consciousness interacts with others and the world. Any explanation of transhistorical continuity in Schleiermacher's system must take linguistic change as a function of its historicity seriously. The bearer of transhistorical truth is complicated by the historicity of human consciousness.

The postliberal difficulty with an alleged generic or abstract religiosity as the foundation of linguistic expression also seems remarkably at odds with

¹⁷ For more detail see CHRISTINE HELMER: Schleiermacher, in: DAVID FERGUSSON (ed.): *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, Edinburgh 2010, 31-57.

Schleiermacher's strong commitment to the positivity of religion. By positivity, Schleiermacher means givenness in history. The structure of givenness for Schleiermacher has to do with the ways in which religious communities are experientially and linguistically oriented around common ideas, liturgies, and practices. Human consciousness is formed by religious ideas and practices, while it is also affected in transformative ways by experiences that are constitutive of the respective religion's givenness in history. Christianity in Schleiermacher's case is grounded in a distinct experience of the Redeemer that has distinct characteristics. Consciousness is transformed to such a degree that its basic orientation is changed so that the healing of one's integrity is facilitated. A unique experience evokes a unique linguistic utterance of an acclamation. To Christ is attributed the work of transformation and his identity with a divine cause. »Truly this man was God's Son«, says the Roman centurion upon observing Christ's death (Mk 15:39). The transhistorical significance of the acclamation and the experience eliciting the honoring of Christ as author of transformation is evident throughout the history of Christianity. Individuals are transformed and participate in the church's praise of Christ through the ages.

Nowhere in Schleiermacher's theological texts does the notion of a generic religiosity occur. The reference to »religion in general« in the postscript to paragraph 6 of *The Christian Faith* is polemical, not at all supportive.¹⁸ Other statements orienting specific concepts to more abstract concepts are distinctly assigned conceptual, not empirical space. The famous phrase in the *Brief Outline*, for example, of a logical space above Christianity, should be taken to mean the conceptual space assigned to the concept of religion to which Christianity is related as species of a genus.¹⁹ Christianity then in turn »hovers« to use Schleiermacher's idiosyncratic term above as

¹⁸ FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, *The Christian Faith* (1830/31), ed. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Stewart, trans. D. M. Baillie et al., Edinburgh 1999, §6, postscript (30): »If the expression »*Religion in general*« be employed, it cannot again signify such a whole. Nothing can fitly be understood by it but the tendency of the human mind in general to give rise to religious emotions, always considered, however, along with their expression, and thus with the striving for fellowship, i. e. the possibility of particular religions (but without regard to the distinction between fluid and defined fellowships).« [Italics in original.]

¹⁹ FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study* (1811/1830), trans. Terrence N. Tice, *Schleiermacher Studies and Translations* 1, Lewiston 1990, §33 (19–20): »The point of departure of philosophical theology, therefore, can only be taken »above« Christianity, in the logical sense of the term, that is, in the general concept of a religious community or fellowship of faith.«

genus to its constitutive species of Eastern and Western Christian Churches. The concept of religion is not a generic religion from which the particular is deduced but is the construction of an abstract concept for the purpose of showing where distinctive sites are located in a conceptual scheme. The issue at stake is the systematic presentation of knowledge where system is constructed in the dialectical process between deduction and induction.

As a »positive science«, theology for Schleiermacher requires system as its mode of presentation. The academic structuring of the body of theological knowledge furthermore is related to the historical communities that theology studies in the first place. »Positive« is Schleiermacher's designation of an academic discipline whose constituent parts of study are determined by the existence of an organization found outside of academy. Christian theology is a positive science because its object of study is reproduced in the distinct fields associated with theological education. The origins, past, and present of Christian churches as Christianity's history are represented in ideas, liturgies, and practices as the subject of the study of biblical, historical, and theological disciplines.

But back to the central import of this story: What is at stake in pitting the postliberal Luther against the liberal Schleiermacher? At this point in my argument, there is a bifurcation between theologically opposing positions that is predicated on a postliberal position that liberalism calls the central claims of postliberalism into question. Language's particular shaping of belief and morals is compromised if a universal reality is posited as ontologically prior. Language's stabilizing function in guaranteeing the transhistorical continuity of Christianity as it has been articulated at its particular origins, without deterioration through time, is destabilized by the instrumental-translation view of language that dares to render the uncontrollable and alien truth of Christianity into the domesticated form of culture. When the gospel is translated into terms that, by theological definition, are solidly alien in both form and content, then the human renders God under its control. The very issue of theology is at stake, its task to hold open the gospel's claims as alien claims of a God who cannot be cultured by human control, and to guarantee that those claims remain transhistorically true in this theological sense of preserving their alien source. The very terms that are at stake are the Lutheran terms of law and gospel. The language of supercessionism used to frame the debate gives the precise clue.

The postliberal judgment on liberalism by having superceded it is, in Lutheran theological terms, the judgment that the gospel issues against the law. This judgment is translated into the terms of modern theology where lib-

eralism has been touted as antithetical to Christianity's most closely held beliefs: Christianity, at least from human perspective, threatens to confuse humans with God. The supercessionist terms of gospel over law appear in disguised form, but the terms of the judgment are clear: postliberalism's intention is to safeguard the particularity of Christianity's uniqueness over and against the human condition. And with this intention, it has translated Luther's understanding of the twofold word of God into a justification of its own truth. The contested terrain of liberalism is precisely the terrain that is theologically assigned to law, requiring the interruption of the gospel in order to preserve Christianity's truth. Nothing less than the heart and soul of Luther's own theology of the word is at stake. The terms indicting the liberal Schleiermacher are the postliberal terms of Luther's theology of law and gospel.

3 LUTHER AND SCHLEIERMACHER

There are a number of possibilities that might help treat the divided postliberal/liberal condition. A historical analysis might show just how deeply indebted to a liberal paradigm the postliberal position really is. A religious analysis might show how power is embedded in the postliberal alliance with orthodoxy. And a constructive theology might explore different venues for conceiving the relation between reality, experience, and language.

I offer a more modest proposal to conclude this paper. I suggest a few areas in which my study of Schleiermacher has helped me disclose a Luther who is less word-oriented than is usually supposed. My aim is to make an initial move to diminish the preoccupation with a word-theology in order that Luther might be freed from his captivity to a philosophy of language. By using Schleiermacher to get a better view of Luther's theology, I aim to let specific aspects of Luther's thought peek out from under their domestication by a postliberal agenda.

Lutheranism, at least as I construe it, seems to point to a contradiction at its core doctrine. The contradiction has to do with how key elements seem to contradict the basic intention of justification. On the one hand, justification is about the most significant transformation, the most central event, that effects original and unfettered freedom for being a whole person in relation to self, others, and God. On the other hand, Lutheran theology has placed formidable taboos around the concretization of the sinner's justification. The terms of law and gospel shape justification as an experience that cannot be

equivocated with the types of experience available to humans in an ordinary sense, sense experience or aesthetic experiences. Gospel safeguards God as sole agent of justification and the word of the gospel is the only term in which the experience can be described. Law allocates experience in the ordinary sense to the realm of sin. Faith is contrary to experience, as the common Lutheran position goes. The experience of justification then is a contradiction. The postliberal taboo of experience highlights this contradiction. The postliberal Luther assigns experience a location outside the particularities of a language game, beyond the mere bounds of the Christian community.

How can Schleiermacher help deconstruct this taboo? Schleiermacher's turn to anthropology and the ways in which humans necessarily communicate with each other opens a perspective for understanding how experience is embedded and available in community. For Schleiermacher, experience is located in an experiential-linguistic matrix that constitutes any historical community. Communities are formed by intersubjective communication, while subjective reaches into intersubjectivity are necessary enactments of being human. Experiences are conveyed by gestures, impressions, and words, while these personal actions in turn facilitate their experience by others. Transformation by interpersonal contact inevitably leads to the contagion of experience.

When viewing Luther's description of justification from Schleiermacherian perspective, one can appreciate the rich language of experience that Luther deploys to describe justification. Language bursts with emotion when Mary expresses her praise of God in the *Magnificat Commentary* of 1521. Birgit Stolt translates Luther's German more accurately than the version in *Luther's Works*, as she claims, by rendering Mary as the one who rejoices »with a soul dancing for happiness at having been regarded tenderly by the Lord«. ²⁰ The soul leaps for joy. On the occasion of justification there is inexpressible exuberance, dancing, and singing. The forgiveness of sins is the experience of »a happy wedding feast«, as Stolt appeals to the older German meaning of the term *eine fröhliche Wirtschaft*, a »sumptuous meal celebrating a wedding with many guests«. ²¹ Justification is not a transcendental »experience within an experience« as the neo-Kantian interpretation would hold, but an ordinary real experience of extraordinary proportions.

²⁰ BIRGIT STOLT: Luther's Faith of »the Heart: Experience, Emotion, and Reason, in: CHRISTINE HELMER (ed.): *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, Minneapolis 2009, 147; quoting WA 7:548. 31–33 [= LW 21:301].

²¹ STOLT, Faith, 149 (also n. 67).

Schleiermacher's account of how Christ is «circulated» in the community also provides a necessary corrective to the postliberal emphasis on the epistemic dimension to the Christian religion. For Luther, Christ's presence is an experience that must be repeated over and over again, experienced in the strange world of sacramental communication and ecclesial intersubjectivity. Justification is neither an epistemological nor an epistemic category for Luther, although it has epistemological implications for understanding God's presence in a world that doesn't seem to shine forth the divine goodness. Justification for Luther forays into mystical intimacy with Christ that effects an exchange of attributes. The descriptive language in *The Freedom of a Christian* is metaphysical and bridal, not doctrinal or propositional. Christ and bride are united as «one flesh», as Luther writes in dialogue with Saint Paul (Eph 5:30)²². Christ's work is not preoccupied with the bride's acquisition of an epistemically privileged position. Rather, his presence is couched in the language of intimacy, relationship, metaphysical exchange, and gift.

Another area of exploration in Luther studies that can be invigorated by Schleiermacher's perspective is the area of questioning «how justification happens». Luther scholars tend to prefer substantive theological claims, meaning claims that are not queried as to how they arose – the question of the production of theology in a historical situation – or how one even is able to make the claims that are made – the epistemological question. The attempt to speculate into the divine majesty risks, as Luther is famous for saying, «falling off the ladder and breaking one's neck».

The place where Schleiermacher begins doing theology is precisely the place where substantive theological claims are made. Theological claims (that might also function as clichés) provide not the end of discussion but the opportunity for it. Questions probe the epistemically familiar. They help break apart assumed connections for more careful examination and then reconnect discrete pieces in new and creative combinations. Schleiermacher's argument for hermeneutics is the intractability of intersubjective communication. He assumes that for any intersubjective communication to be (minimally) successful, whether written or oral, understanding must take place. His presupposition is that communication and understanding do not take place unless hermeneutical effort is made. The «art of understanding» must be deployed in every situation in order to «understand the written discourse of another

²² MARTIN LUTHER, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in: LW 31:351.

person correctly»²³, as Schleiermacher defines hermeneutics. If theology is to stay alive in the spirit, it must query the letter, and press it to deeper exploration and richer explanation.

Justification can, for example, be pressed in a few directions. It can be queried as to the mechanism by which it is received, the reality it creates and affirms, and the types of descriptive discourses communicating its reality in worship and academy. Theology is an intellectual enterprise that stays alive by questioning givens and assumptions. And it can move beyond its current division by questioning the assumptions on which contemporary theology is established.

²³ FRIEDRICH SCHLEIERMACHER, *Hermeneutics and Criticism And Other Writings*, trans. Andrew Bowie, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, Cambridge 1998, 3.