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# Killing and Making Alive as the Vital Work of the Spirit in Preaching According to Martin Luther

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KILLING AND MAKING ALIVE AS THE VITAL WORK OF THE SPIRIT  
IN PREACHING ACCORDING TO MARTIN LUTHER

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of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
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requirements for the degree of  
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by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	<i>Augsburg Confession</i>
AD1	<i>First Antinomian Disputation</i>
AD2	<i>Second Antinomian Disputation</i>
AD3	<i>Third Antinomian Disputation</i>
Ap	<i>Apology of the Augsburg Confession</i>
BC	<i>Book of Concord</i>
FC SD	<i>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration</i>
LW	<i>Luther's Works</i>
SA	<i>Smalcald Articles</i>
SC	<i>Small Catechism</i>

CHAPTER ONE  
KILLING AND MAKING ALIVE IN THE THEOLOGY OF LUTHER AND THE  
LUTHERAN TRADITION

Gerhard Forde in his book *Theology Is For Proclamation* laments what has happened to Christian preaching in recent years.

The sermon turns into a lecture about the supreme wisdom and virtue of Jesus, which, held before us as examples, end only by being a rather tiresome business, occasions for us to exercise our free choice and test our moral fiber—if we are foolish enough to take such outrageous pulpit oratory seriously. Mostly we nod appreciatively at the splendid eulogy for Jesus, sigh regretfully at the impracticality of it all, and then go home and forget it.<sup>1</sup>

That is his characterization of liberal preaching, but it is not much better among the evangelicals: "For the most part, however, serious Christology is on the wane and even preachers whose theology may be quite traditional and orthodox preach a sentimental Jesusology from the pulpit."<sup>2</sup> Too much preaching today is simply what Forde calls "explanation," that is, secondary discourse that only talks about God's grace and salvation. It does not, however, move to "proclamation," that is, primary discourse that gives God's grace and saves the hearer.

Many evangelical preachers today do not understand the concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 71.

<sup>2</sup> Forde, *Proclamation*, 70.

"proclamation," since they are guilty of the sins of preaching that Forde described above. They are content to explain a pericope or explain what Jesus has done for Christians. The very idea of "gospel" as "promise," as "Spoken Word" versus "Written Word," is unknown or not practiced. We find ourselves fighting a problem of the distinction between primary and secondary discourse. The Protestant Reformation involved a recovery of just this distinction between primary and secondary discourse, and not only the distinction, but the priority of "primary" discourse, that is, the necessity of Gospel as the Word that forgives in the here and now.

But the Word that forgives is to be preceded by the Word that accuses—that is, the law. An important way of talking about the preaching of law and gospel is the language of "killing and making alive." Gerhard Forde and Regin Prenter have drawn attention to "killing and making alive" in the early theology of Martin Luther. Prenter shows these acts to be the work of the Holy Spirit according to Luther. Forde contends that although this death-life language was prominent in Luther's early writings, it was lost as the Reformation progressed and was quickly replaced by the legal language of justification. However, I will show from the writings and sermons of the mature Luther (from the late 1520s onward) that this language was not exclusive to the early Luther. I focus especially on his *Antinomian Disputations*, written at the height of the mature development of his theology, to demonstrate Luther's contention that the Holy Spirit works through the external Word "to kill and to make alive" through the

preaching of the church. I will also show that such motifs are present in other later writings. Luther's teaching of proclamation as "killing and making alive" went right through to the last decade of his life, as will be demonstrated in the second chapter. Prenter shows that Luther began to develop from early on the understanding that the Holy Spirit was responsible for these two works in the lives of Christians, not only the making alive, but also the killing that precedes it. The *Antinomian Disputations* also show how Luther developed his understanding of the Spirit's work through killing and making alive still further in the later years of his life. The third chapter will demonstrate this premise. Finally, the last chapter will use this foundation to help us to draw modern implications and conclusions: How does one preach following these themes?

Before turning to these matters, it may be helpful first to look at how this death-life language developed for Luther. Already at the time of the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Martin Luther was beginning to formulate an understanding of the work of God as killing and making alive. In Thesis IV of the *Disputation*, he formulates this position by discussing the works of God. "Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits."<sup>3</sup> What are the works of God that Luther believes are "unattractive" in his thesis? He defines them in his explanation of Thesis IV.

That the works of God are unattractive is clear from what is said in Isa. 53 [:2], "He had no form of comeliness," and in I Samuel 2 [:6], "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up." This is understood to mean that the Lord humbles and frightens us by means of

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<sup>3</sup> LW, Vol. 31, 44.



the law and the sight of our sins so that we seem in the eyes of men, as in our own, as nothing, foolish, and wicked, for we are in truth that. Insofar as we acknowledge and confess this, these [sic] is no form or beauty in us, but our life is hidden in God (i.e. in the bare confidence in his mercy), finding in ourselves nothing but sin, foolishness, death, and hell, according to that verse of the Apostle in II Cor. 6 [:9-10], "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as dying, and behold we live." And that it is which Isa. 28 [:21] calls the alien work of God that he may do his work (that is, he humbles us thoroughly, making us despair, so that he may exalt us in his mercy, giving us hope), just as Hab. 3 [:2] states, "In wrath remember mercy."

In this way, consequently, the unattractive works which God does in us, that is, those which are humble and devout, are really eternal, for humility and fear of God are our entire merit.<sup>4</sup>

Already in this early writing, Luther has rediscovered the alien and proper works of God through the Word: convicting us of sin and showing mercy, killing and making alive. And these are not to be secret works of God, but public and open, that which will be seen and commented on by people around us. Luther understood God doing these works through the public proclamation of the Word, (i.e., the Spoken Word) in the lives of believers.

The continued development of these themes can be seen, for instance, in the writings of Melancthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which we can view not only as his personal theology, but as consistent with Luther's theology:

Wherever Paul describes conversion or renewal, he almost always distinguishes these two parts, putting to death and making alive, as in Colossians 2[:11]. . . . There are two parts here. The first is putting off the body of sins, the second is being raised again through faith [Rom. 6:2, 4, 11]. . . . Instead, putting to death involves genuine terrors like those of the dying, which nature could not endure unless it were raised up by

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<sup>4</sup> LW, Vol. 31, 44.

faith. . . . Moreover, making alive should not be understood as a platonic mirage, but as consolation that truly sustains a life that flees [sin] in contrition. Therefore, these are the two parts, contrition and faith.<sup>5</sup>

He calls it an alien work of God to terrify, because the proper work of God is to make alive and console. But he terrifies, he says, in order to make room for consolation and vivification, because hearts that do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation in their smugness. In this way, Scripture makes a practice of joining these two things, terrors and consolation, in order to teach that these are the chief parts of repentance: contrition and faith that consoles and justifies.<sup>6</sup>

For these are the two chief works of God in human beings, to terrify and to justify the terrified or make them alive. The entire Scripture is divided into these two works. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The second part is the gospel, that is, the promise of grace given in Christ. This promise is constantly repeated throughout the entire Scripture: first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illuminated by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and offered by Christ among the Jews, and spread throughout the entire world by the apostles. For all the saints have been justified by faith in this promise and not on account of their own attrition or contrition.<sup>7</sup>

These paragraphs use some of the same passages that Luther does in the very same way. Melancthon's use of this terminology at the time of the Apology (1530) shows that the death-life language of Luther was being retained and used by the Reformers to describe the work of justification in Christians.

We find the same in the Solid Declaration. Luther had been dead many years by the time of the writing of the Formula of Concord in 1577, but here we can discover a good summary of his theology of killing and making alive. In the Formula of Concord on Law and Gospel, it is written:

Therefore, the Spirit of Christ must not only comfort but through the function of the law must also "convict the world of sin" [John 16:8].

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<sup>5</sup> Ap 12, 46 (BC 194).

<sup>6</sup> Ap 12, 51-52 (BC 195).

<sup>7</sup> Ap 12, 53-54 (BC 195).

Thus, in the New Testament the Holy Spirit must perform (as the prophet says [Isa. 28:21] an *opus alienum, ut faciat opus proprium* (that is, he must perform an alien work—which is to convict—until he comes to his proper work—which is to comfort and to proclaim grace). For this reason Christ obtained the Spirit for us and sent him to us. That is why he is called the comforter.<sup>8</sup>

Here the Holy Spirit is described as using the Word of God for two purposes, an alien work (to convict the world of sin) in order to lead people to his proper work (to comfort them with the Gospel and to proclaim God's grace). Both of these works, which we call killing (his alien work) and making alive (his proper work) are important and necessary works of the Spirit. Martin Luther and the Protestant reformers grew in their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God: that He wants to confront believers with their sins, to kill them, and then to heal them with the Gospel, to make them alive again.

The call to life and death preaching came to Europe at a time when good preaching was on the wane or was not emphasized in the Mass. Philip and David Schaff lament the lack of sermons and the poor quality of sermons in pre-Reformation preaching:

Preaching was the special function of the bishops, but sadly neglected by them, and is even now in Roman-Catholic countries usually confined to the season of Lent. The Roman worship is complete without a sermon.<sup>9</sup>

In ridiculing the preaching of his day, Erasmus held forth the preachers' ignorance, their incongruous introductions, their use of stories from all departments without any discrimination, their old women's tales and the frivolous topics they chose.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> FC SD V, 11 (BC 583).

<sup>9</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882-1910), 490.

<sup>10</sup> Schaff, vol. 6, 678.

The Reformation resurrected the primacy of preaching in the life of the church, indeed a return to preaching that emphasized killing and making alive in the lives of Christian believers.

## CHAPTER 2

### KILLING AND MAKING ALIVE IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE *ANTINOMIAN* *DISPUTATIONS* AND LATER LUTHER

Gerhard Forde, in his book *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life*, makes the claim: "The fact is that the legal language [for justification] tends to become dominant if not exclusive in the confessional documents of the Reformation while the death-life language recedes and often disappears altogether."<sup>11</sup> In other words, according to Forde, legal vocabulary and images took over and became the primary and exclusive means of talking about justification at the expense of the death-life or other metaphors for justification. He attributes this to the difficulty of dealing with the death-life language versus our comfortability with the application of the legal metaphor. Before we look at the application of Luther's themes of killing and making alive in his later writings, let us first determine whether the themes were present in his early writings.

Take, for example, some excerpts from his early writings. At the beginning of his pamphlet on *Two Kinds on Righteousness* (1519), Luther says that repentance and faith connects us with an alien righteousness, and thereby with the death of Jesus.

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<sup>11</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; reprint, Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1990), 3.

The first [kind of Christian righteousness] is alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith. . . . This righteousness, then, is given to men in baptism and whenever they are truly repentant. Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: "*Mine are* Christ's living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did." Just as a bridegroom possesses all that is his bride's and she all that is his—for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh [Gen. 2:24]—so Christ and the church are one spirit [Eph. 5:29-32].<sup>12</sup>

In Luther's *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig* (1521), Luther clearly shows the two works of God in the lives of Christians, killing and making alive, and also shows the importance of the Holy Spirit in these works.

But even though we are already in the New Testament and should have only the preaching of the Spirit, since we are still living in flesh and blood, it is necessary to preach the letter as well, so that people are first killed by the law and all their arrogance is destroyed. . . . So [the letter] prepares the people for the preaching of the Spirit, as it is written about St. John [the Baptist], that he made the people ready for Christ through the preaching of repentance [Matt. 3:1-12]. This was the office of the letter. After that he led them to Christ, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away all the sins of the world" [John 1:29]. This was the office of the Spirit. These then are the two works of God, praised many times in Scripture: he kills and gives life, he wounds and heals, he destroys and honors, as is written in Deuteronomy 32 [:39], I Kings 2 [I Sam. 2:6-8], Psalm 112 [:7-8], and in many other places. He does these works through these two offices, the first through the letter, the second through the Spirit. The letter does not allow anyone to stand before his wrath. The Spirit does not allow anyone to perish before his grace.<sup>13</sup>

A little later in the same work, Luther again shows how the law drives us to death and to seek the Holy Spirit, who brings life and gives power to live gladly in accordance with the law through faith.

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<sup>12</sup> LW, Vol. 31, 297. Emphasis mine.

<sup>13</sup> LW, Vol. 39, 188.

But, as the law discloses, things are quite different with man; he is evil, unjust, sinful, carnal, and out of harmony with the law in every measure. This disharmony brings him eternal death, God's wrath, and disgrace before God, who wants his law fulfilled (as is only right) to the last letter and iota. Thus man recognizes himself in the mirror and in the face of the letter or the law—how dead he is and in what disgrace he is with God. This knowledge makes him afraid and drives him to seek the Spirit, who makes him good, godly, holy, spiritual, brings all things into accord with the law, and leads him to God's grace. The law then becomes dear to him, and the letter never kills him. Instead, he lives in the Spirit as the law demands; indeed, he no longer needs any law to teach him, for he knows it now by heart. Everything the law demands has become his nature and essence through the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

So indeed Luther strongly understood this killing and making alive work of the Spirit in the early years of his ministry. But one criticism of scholars such as Gerhard Forde is that Luther lost his call to primary discourse and of “killing and making alive” as his theology matured through his life. Yet an examination of his later writings shows that he continued to hold and promote these views to the very end of his life and to influence their inclusion in the Lutheran Confessions. Such views were not just an early development that Luther outgrew, but a continuous emphasis through his ministry.

An important source revealing Luther's later views on killing and making alive is the *Antinomian Disputations* of 1537 and 1538. These *Disputations*, originally written in Latin and contained in the Weimar edition of Luther's *Werke*, et al, have only recently been translated into English and summarized by Dr. Jeffrey Silcock in his 1995 doctoral dissertation, *Law and Gospel in Luther's*

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<sup>14</sup> LW, Vol. 39, 188-189.

*Antinomian Disputations, with Special Reference to Faith's Use of the Law.*<sup>15</sup>

Luther's continued reference to killing and making alive comes out especially clearly in his debates about law and gospel in the *Antinomian Disputations*. First, I will show how the *Disputations* address the Holy Spirit killing sinners through the law in order to raise them to new life again through the Gospel. Then I will show how the *Disputations* address a second type of killing, the continuing death of the sinful nature in Christians.

First, Luther points out the inevitability of death through the law. The threat of the law is undone by death, so if there is going to be freedom from the law, there needs to be a "death" first. Luther shows that the law, sin and death are inseparable, and the law no longer applies to the dead.

1. The law rules people for as long as they live.
2. But they are free from the law so long as they are dead.
3. It is necessary therefore for people to die if they want to be free from the law [cf. Rom. 6:7].
4. And if the law rules the living, sin also rules them.
5. Therefore, it is necessary for people to die if they wish to be free from sin.
6. For the law is the power of sin, but the sting of death is sin (1 Cor. 15:56).
7. These three: law, sin, and death are inseparable.<sup>16</sup>

What is the means of that death which frees us from law? Just as in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and the *Answer to . . . Emser*, Luther understands the office of the law as "killing" the sinner. Luther says that the law is important

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey G. Silcock, *Law and Gospel in Luther's Antinomian Disputations, with Special Reference to Faith's Use of the Law*, (Th.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> AD3, th. 1-7 (Silcock, 415).



because it drives us to see our need for Jesus Christ. The threat of death could lead us to despair if not for the promise of Christ.

For instance, in the *First Disputation* he argues:

28. The order of things is such that death and sin are in nature before life and righteousness.

29. For we are not righteous or alive, to be given over to sin or death, but we are already sinners, and dead through Adam, and must be justified and vivified by Christ.

30. Therefore, Adam (that is, sin and death) is to be taught first; he is the form of the future Christ, who is to be taught after this.

31. Indeed, sins and death must be revealed, not through the word of grace and comfort, but through the law.<sup>17</sup>

God in his nature and majesty is our adversary, he enforces the law and threatens transgressors with death. . . . For if they abolish the law they also abolish death and hell. For if there is no accusing and condemning law, what need do I have of Christ who gave himself up for my sins? But when death comes you will certainly feel that sin accuses and condemns you so terribly that you would despair if you were not lifted up by the promise of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, without the law we would be much worse off, because then the disease of sin and its product of death would be hidden from us, as Luther says: "In summary, to remove the law and to leave sin and death is to hide the disease of sin and death to bring about the destruction of people."<sup>19</sup>

And where is sin done away with? Luther says in a mock conversation with sin that it is to the cross that sin should go and be killed.

[L]et Christians rouse themselves and say unperturbed: So you are still here I see, Master Sin, it is good you have come. Where were you? Where have you been amusing yourself so long? Surely you are not still alive? Of what use are you to us? Off with you to the cross!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> AD1, th. 28-31 (Silcock, 117).

<sup>18</sup> AD1, arg. 4 (Silcock, 141).

<sup>19</sup> AD3, th. 69 (Silcock, 420).

<sup>20</sup> AD3, arg. 3 (Silcock, 439).

But Luther does not stop with simply describing the work of the Holy Spirit through the law as killing and death; he must also describe the goal of repentance and justification, which is new life through the gospel. For Luther, the resurrection of Christ shows the Christian what his new life is like. As he explains,

- 36. In the risen Christ certainly there is no sin, no death, no law to which he had been subject while living.
- 37. But the same Christ is not yet perfectly risen in his faithful ones, but indeed has begun to be raised from the dead in them, as the first fruits.
- .....
- 40. Insofar as Christ is risen in us, we are without the law, sin and death.
- 41. On the other hand, insofar as he is not yet risen in us, we are under the law, sin and death.<sup>21</sup>

In at least two passages from the *Disputations*, Luther declares both death and life as the work of the Holy Spirit through law and gospel. Luther describes the move from death to life in the *First Disputation* when he explains the use of the law in repentance:

- 4. Only the first part of repentance, namely, sorrow, arises from the law. The second part, namely, the good intention, cannot arise from the law.
- 5. For people who are terrified at the sight of sin cannot purpose to do good by their own powers, since not even those who are secure and at peace can do that.
- 6. But troubled and overwhelmed by the power of sin they fall into despair and hatred of God, or they descend into hell, as scripture says.
- 7. Therefore, the promise or the gospel must be added to the law to pacify and raise up the terrified conscience that it may purpose to do good.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> AD3, th. 36-37, 40-41 (Silcock, 417-418).

<sup>22</sup> AD1, th. 4-7 (Silcock, 115).

Luther shows that indeed the law kills, but the Word of Christ is the source of our resurrection as believers in this life.

But on account of Christ, the fulfiller of the law, believers are not driven to despair by the accusation and terror of the law, but are raised up again by the Word of Christ. Secondly, on account of the same Christ, the victor over sin, they are dead to sin and sin to them. However, insofar as they have the flesh, the law and sin have dominion over them.<sup>23</sup>

Luther also addresses another major area of killing. Not only does the law bring sorrow, death and hell to prepare for justification, but the law also brings about the continuing death of the sinful nature in believers. Luther is describing the process of sanctification by which we daily die to self and the old Adam nature and are raised again to newness of spiritual life.

13. However, as reality itself and experience testify, the righteous are themselves also still being given up daily to death (cf. 2 Cor. 4:11).  
.....
19. Since you see that the righteous die daily, how foolish it is to think that they are without the law.
20. For if there were no law, there would be neither sin nor death.<sup>24</sup>

The following passage gives the best exposition of Luther's understanding of death to the law and sin.

That is, through the grace which Christ brings and bestows, we die to the law that accuses and condemns us. Thus through Christ, who was made a sacrifice for sin and through whom sin dies, we die to sin in order that it can no longer rule in us. Therefore, insofar as we have died to the law and sin through faith in Christ, and have been buried together with him, sins are dead to us, that is, they cannot rage or exercise their tyranny over us [Rom. 6:5-11]. This is not dangerous, but a salutary death.<sup>25</sup>

Luther clarifies how Christ has become the death of sin for us.

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<sup>23</sup> AD1, arg. 18 (Silcock, 195).

<sup>24</sup> AD3, th. 13, 19-20 (Silcock, 416).

<sup>25</sup> AD1, arg. 18 (Silcock, 194-195).

Therefore, since we cannot fulfill the law on account of the sin reigning in our flesh and taking it captive, Christ came and killed that sin through sin, that is, through the sacrifice that was made for sin, in order that in this way the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, first through the imputation, then also in substance, but not by us, but by the grace of God, who sends his Son in the flesh.<sup>26</sup>

Luther pictures the battle with sin through the law as a war in which Christians are the soldiers. He creates the paradox that Christians are at the same time dead and alive, because they are simultaneously saint and sinner.

But on the other hand, to the extent that Christians are soldiers and engaged in battle, here they are also still under the law and under sin, because they are still in this life, daily experience and expect the attack of their flesh, and only as thus placed can they be said to live, as Paul laments in Romans 7: In the flesh I live to the law of sin [Rom. 7:25]; again, I see another law in my members at war with the law of my mind [Rom. 7:23]. Thus the Christian is dead and alive, but from different viewpoints.<sup>27</sup>

So we can see that Forde's charge that "the legal language [for justification] tends to become dominant if not exclusive in the confessional documents of the Reformation while the death-life language recedes and often disappears altogether" is difficult to defend based on a reading of Luther in the *Antinomian Disputations*. Luther shows time and again in these theses and arguments that the Holy Spirit works death and life, killing and making alive.

Not only in the *Antinomian Disputations*, but also in the writings of Luther later in his life, we see his continuing emphases on killing and making alive. Luther addressed the work of the law in killing sinners in the *Smalcald Articles* (1537), which became part of the Lutheran Confessions:

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<sup>26</sup> AD1, arg. 14 (Silcock, 172-173).

<sup>27</sup> AD3, arg. 10 (Silcock, 479-480).

The foremost office or power of the law is that it reveals inherited sin and its fruits. It shows human beings into what utter depths their nature has fallen and how completely corrupt it is. The law must say to them that they neither have nor respect any god or that they worship foreign gods. This is something that they would not have believed before without the law. Thus they are terrified, humbled, despondent, and despairing. They anxiously desire help but do not know where to find it; they start to become enemies of God, to murmur, etc. This is what is meant by Romans [4:15]: "The law brings wrath," and Romans 5[:20], "Sin becomes greater through the law."<sup>28</sup>

Luther does not in this section talk about the use of the Word in making alive, since this section of the Articles was "Concerning the Law," but he develops this understanding elsewhere in his writings, as when he talks about killing and making alive with the resurrection of the new man in his Small Catechism:

What then is the significance of baptism with water? Answer: It signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.<sup>29</sup>

## Summary

The *Antinomian Disputations* of 1537 and 1538 show Luther's mature understanding of the application of law and gospel as he debated the Antinomians on the proper use of the law in the lives of Christians. Since it was not their primary purpose, the *Disputations* are less clear on the theme of killing believers and making them alive through the Word. However, in numerous arguments, Luther shows how the law kills both believers and unbelievers in

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<sup>28</sup> SA 2, 4-5 (BC, 312).

<sup>29</sup> SC on Baptism IV, 12 (BC, 360).

order to drive them to the gospel and Jesus Christ. He makes the distinction between the death that the law brings all people for their sins and the death to sins that Christians live in. Even though the *Disputations* defended the use of the law, Luther often has opportunities to speak of the new life and resurrection that takes place in the lives of believers through the Gospel.

## CHAPTER 3

### KILLING AND MAKING ALIVE AS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE *ANTINOMIAN DISPUTATIONS* AND LATER LUTHER

Regin Prenter, in his work on Luther's understanding of the Holy Spirit, *Spiritus Creator*, shows how Luther made a break with the medieval/ Augustinian conception of the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, the early Luther still retained the traditional terminology. As Prenter observes:

In Luther's lectures on the Epistle to the Romans during 1515-1516, we read in the notes on Romans 2:15: "From this I believe that the sentence 'let the law be written in their heart' says the same thing as 'Love is infused into the heart through the Holy Spirit.'"<sup>30</sup>

That last phrase is a classic medieval/Augustinian expression. Behind the phrase was an understanding of the Holy Spirit as a transcendent cause of a sublimated idealism. The Spirit was understood as a force infusing man with grace to reach toward the distant goal of God.

Although he was using the same terminology, Luther was changing his understanding of the concepts that lay behind the words. The Spirit could no longer be understood as a transcendent force since Luther now understood the Holy Spirit as the direct presence of God. God in us through the Holy Spirit then

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<sup>30</sup> Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1953), 3.

brings a hatred of self, *odium sui*, that drives us to despair of our own works and find our salvation only in Jesus Christ. As Prenter summarized his theology:

Luther no longer thinks of the Holy Spirit in terms of the scholastic tradition as a transcendent cause of a new (supernatural) nature in man producing infused grace. . . . The Holy Spirit is instead proclaimed as the real presence of God. God himself as the Spirit is really present in the groanings of the anxious and tempted soul held in the grip of death and hell. . . . No form of divine power other than that of God's own presence is available for the sinner in his conflict.<sup>31</sup>

Luther had his own struggle with inner conflict during his time at the monastery, but it drove him to see that only God the Holy Spirit can help us by interceding for us with groans that words cannot express. Luther retained and used the Augustinian expressions throughout his life, but their content was changed to incorporate this new understanding of the helplessness of man to overcome his inner conflict and the conformity with Christ in suffering which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. Luther changed the medieval conception to see the Holy Spirit coming to man where he was, addressing his sinfulness and inciting an inner conflict. The Holy Spirit did not help in a process of making man progressively better until he reached God. The Spirit worked by first killing the sinner and then bringing him to life again. In this way, the Spirit conformed the sinner to the life and death of Christ.

Regin Prenter brings out a necessary link in Luther's understanding of the alien and proper work of the Holy Spirit. Note his connection that the balance of

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<sup>31</sup> Prenter, 18-19.



the Spirit's work in *opus alienum* and *opus proprium* makes Him the *spiritus creator*.

But through the cross of inner conflict God wants to teach us to hope only in his pure mercy. Like every other cross and all other works of wrath in the believer, the inner conflicts are God's *opus alienum*, which prepares the way for his *opus proprium*. He takes all peace away from the conscience in order to give it peace. This is the order of salvation of God. He puts to death before he makes alive. Our will cannot be made to conform to the will of God unless it is first put to death.<sup>32</sup>

The true knowledge of God is only gained in conformity with Christ and faith in Christ which is the work of the Spirit. In this conformity God condemns when he releases, puts to death when he makes alive, and sends to hell when he gives eternal bliss. In the unity of his *opus alienum* and his *opus proprium* God is in us the *spiritus creator* who gives us his life by taking ours, who gives us his holiness by making us sinners, and who also gives us his enlightenment by making us blind.<sup>33</sup>

Prenter says that for Luther the Spirit is the divine sphere where Christ is present and that the Word is the means of the Holy Spirit. We are compelled to wait on the Holy Spirit to change the outward word of Word and sacrament to the inward word that changes our hearts. For no one can rightly understand the Word of God unless it comes from the Holy Spirit.

Luther, in a number of places in his early writings, establishes that it is the Holy Spirit who kills and makes alive. Luther writes about the Holy Spirit coming through the Word to kill and give life in his *Answer to . . . Emser* (1521):

Christ's tablets, or (as he says here) Christ's letters, are the hearts of Christians in which not letters, as in Moses' tablets, but the Spirit of God is inscribed through the preaching of the gospel and through the offices of the apostles. . . . This Spirit can never be contained in any letter. It cannot be written, like the law, with ink, on stone, on in books. Instead, it is inscribed only in the heart, and it is a living writing of the Holy Spirit,

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<sup>32</sup> Prenter, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Prenter, 189.

without [the aid of] any means. That is why St. Paul calls it Christ's letter and not Moses' tablets, for it is not written with ink but with God's Spirit. Through this Spirit or grace man does what the law demands. He pays what he owes the law, and thus becomes liberated from the letter which kills him, living now through the grace of the Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

Prenter's argument relies on the early Luther. But if we examine Luther's writings in the *Antinomian Disputations* of 1537 and 1538, we see that he continues to see the Holy Spirit as the source of killing and making alive. The Antinomians wanted to claim that the Holy Spirit only worked with the Gospel and therefore couldn't use the law. As in his early theology, however, Luther insisted that both killing and making alive were the work of the Spirit. "Thus, the Spirit also first convicts the world of sin that he may teach faith in Christ, that is, the forgiveness of sins [John 16:8]."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Luther points out that the Spirit works with the law as the hidden God and with the gospel as revealed God, where He comes to us as gift, bringing new life.

Thus, the Holy Spirit, when he writes the law with his finger on Moses' stone tablets, is in his majesty and assuredly exposes sins and terrifies the heart. But when he is involved with tongues and spiritual gifts [Acts 2], then he is called gift, and sanctifies and vivifies.<sup>36</sup>

What, then, is the purpose of working contrition? Luther asserts that the purpose of the Holy Spirit working contrition through the law is not to kill us eternally, but to drive us to consolation and salvation in Jesus Christ.

But neither the Holy Spirit nor Christ in the gospel saddens us like that for he drives us to despair in order to save us, not to kill us. For he exposes and reveals sins and leads you to a knowledge of yourself that you may look to Christ the more quickly and eagerly. He says: Look, you have

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<sup>34</sup> LW, Vol. 39, 182-183.

<sup>35</sup> AD1, th. 37 (Silcock, 118).

<sup>36</sup> AD1, arg. 4 (Silcock, 141).

been saddened and afflicted, you have been led to hell through the law and the deadly cholera that torments you, but do not despair. The best rhubarb [remedy] by far is here, namely Christ; take him and you will live.<sup>37</sup>

Luther believes that the law is not required for justification and the Holy Spirit is not given through the law, but the law is the material through which the Holy Spirit prepares ground for the seed of the Gospel. Here is the reason why we need both law and gospel in balance:

It is true that God gives his Holy Spirit on account of the word that is heard, given or preached to the world through Christ. . . . The law indeed does not give the Holy Spirit, as through the gospel, but in the mean time the material is prepared by the Holy Spirit through the law, in which he can later manifest his power and virtue, namely, in the poor, the troubled, and the contrite. For otherwise the Holy Spirit is given neither through the law nor through the gospel unless the material first has been prepared through the law in order that it may have need of such a physician and comforter.<sup>38</sup>

However, Luther clarifies that while the Holy Spirit works through the Law, moving contrition in our hearts is not his proper work:

Therefore, the law does not expose sins without the Holy Spirit, although when we say that we are not speaking about the Holy Spirit in the proper sense. For when we talk about the Holy Spirit we generally mean him whom Christ sent to us from the Father as a gift, to be our vivifier and sanctifier etc. Therefore, we do not ascribe contrition to him as gift, consoler, and Spirit of truth, but to God, the author of the law, who wrote it on tablets of stone.<sup>39</sup>

Not only in the *Antinomian Disputations*, but also in his other later writings Luther shows that it is the Holy Spirit who kills and makes alive. So he described the association of the Holy Spirit with the Word in the *Smalcald Articles* (1537):

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<sup>37</sup> AD2, Arg. 2 (Silcock, 269).

<sup>38</sup> AD3, Arg. 40 (Silcock, 604-605).

<sup>39</sup> AD1, Arg. 17 (Silcock, 189).

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, the "spirits," who boast that they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure.<sup>40</sup>

Again, Luther says in the same article:

Therefore we should and must insist that God will not deal with us human beings, except by means of his external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil.<sup>41</sup>

The later sermons of Luther also show the central role of the Holy Spirit in killing and making alive. In his *Exposition of Genesis*, Luther ponders that the work of the Holy Spirit hovering over the waters at creation was connected with his proper work of "making alive" in the lives of Christians.

The Father creates heaven and earth out of nothing through the Son, whom Moses calls the Word. Over these the Holy Spirit broods. As a hen broods her eggs, keeping them warm in order to hatch her chicks, and, as it were, to bring them to life through heat, so Scripture says that the Holy Spirit brooded, as it were, on the waters to bring to life those substances which were to be quickened and adorned. For it is the office of the Holy Spirit to make alive.<sup>42</sup>

It is significant that Luther sees that "making alive" is the office of the Holy Spirit; He is the primary person of God responsible for both killing and making alive. Therefore He is also the primary person of God working in preaching and sanctification. In a sermon for Holy Trinity Sunday on John 3:1-15 (1538), Luther discusses the tools that the Holy Spirit uses in this very

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<sup>40</sup> SA 8, 3 (BC 322).

<sup>41</sup> SA 8, 10 (BC 323).

<sup>42</sup> LW, Vol. 1, 9.

important work of making alive: the Word and baptism, Christ's promise, and Christ's death and resurrection. Through the application of and faith in these, we receive a new heart, a new mind and a brand new person, that is, we are "made alive" from death.

By water and the Spirit, Christ says, by the proclamation of the gospel and baptism; in other words, through the external gospel ministry of the church, the Holy Spirit works in the heart of man. . . . Where the Word and baptism are applied, the Holy Spirit is effectual to excite and awaken the heart to faith, and to lay hold of Christ's promise confidently, with fear and trembling. If a man, through the Holy Spirit, firmly believes that Christ, the Son of God, was lifted up on the cross to die for our sins, this produces a new heart and a new mind, and consequently a brand new person by the Word in the soul.<sup>43</sup>

In Luther's Twenty-Fourth Sermon on the Gospel of John [3:8], dated 4 May 1538, he writes of the Holy Spirit's work in reproof and comfort of the sinner.

The Holy Spirit reproves us because of sin (John 16:8-9), and He also comforts us. When I receive the absolution from my brother and derive comfort from it, what I hear is the voice of the Holy Spirit, His blowing and whistling.<sup>44</sup>

## Summary

Martin Luther rediscovered the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God in the lives of believers as killing and making alive. Beginning with his early writings and continuing throughout his life, he wrote extensively about this connection and the work of the Spirit. Also his sermons supported these views, and he used his preaching to promote these emphases throughout his life. He could speak about the transformation in many different

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<sup>43</sup> Eugene Klug, ed., *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), vol. 2, 220-221.

<sup>44</sup> LW, Vol. 22, 301.

terms, but the basic principle is that the Holy Spirit would kill the believer through the letter and the law and raise them to new life through the proclamation of the gospel. These passages have shown that Luther believed that both killing and making alive were works of the Spirit, not just making alive. Although it was not their primary purpose, this study has shown that the *Antinomian Disputations* also give a clear insight into the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God as law and gospel. Since the Antinomians denied the work of the Holy Spirit through the law, Luther was forced to show how the Holy Spirit works through both law and gospel to justify sinners and direct them to Christ. Along with the *Smalcald Articles*, the *Disputations* show that this was not just an early development of Luther's theology that passed away as he matured, but that to the very end of his life he saw the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word as killing and making alive.

CHAPTER 4  
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

**Implications**

I have shown that the mature Luther's theology retained the theme of "killing and making alive" and that it remained a theology of the Spirit. How then does one preach following these themes? As the Confessions say,

Through [the Gospel and the sacraments], as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith, when and where he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.<sup>45</sup>

True, but the Holy Spirit produces faith by killing and making alive, as we have seen previously. Then we must acknowledge that preaching is not simply or primarily talking about killing and making alive or how the Holy Spirit is the one who does these works. Preaching is killing and making alive, as the Holy Spirit works through the word to bring us death and then to raise us again to new life.

The ministry that we are called to as pastors and church workers is to proclaim the word and to let the Holy Spirit have free course with it in the lives of our fellow believers and even unbelievers, whom He leads to faith.

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<sup>45</sup> AC V (BC 40).

## Direct Encounter between the Believer and Jesus

Arnold Carlson, in his dissertation on Luther's pneumatology, moves Luther's soteriology away from identifying it with a past and accomplished "satisfaction" to a present struggle between the believer and God:

It makes salvation a present experience occurring right now in the presence of God and by God's present activity, not some remote future goal which will transpire some day in the heavens. Nor is it some event fully accomplished in the past, at the moment of Christ's death upon the cross. This means that in the framework of Luther's total theology, the concept of 'satisfaction,' implying an atonement accomplished through a certain amount of pain and agony on a particular date in history, does not properly belong. Luther affirms this most emphatically. "For this reason also this word 'satisfaction' shall hereafter in our Church and our theology be null and dead, and referred to the judiciary and the schools of law where it properly belongs and whence the papists borrowed it." [Luther, Church Postil, Vol. II, No. 2. p. 333] It means that God is active now, struggling to redeem man in the very midst of man's damnation and death.<sup>46</sup>

While we should avoid the implication that Luther did not regard Christ's life, death, resurrection as redemptive, we can also see that the conclusion reached by Carlson about salvation "as a present experience occurring right now" is consistent with the conclusions reached in this essay. As one can see from the preaching and writing of Luther above, Luther did not picture the justification of Christians as something that took place two thousand years ago and which resulted in a state that Christians are called to and live in now. He sees the application of the Word by the Spirit as an encounter with the living Christ, who "kills and makes alive" at each encounter between Christian, Word and Spirit.

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<sup>46</sup> Arnold E. Carlson, *The Relevance of Luther's Understanding of the Holy Spirit for Contemporary Theology*. (ThD Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1962), 37.



Prenter shows that Luther does not talk to the Christian "about" Christ, but he allows the Christian to truly encounter Jesus Christ, being killed in each encounter with the living God and then raised again with Jesus in his resurrection.

Where [Christ] is merely present as the ideological content of the Word, as part of the law, as a description, there the Word is dead. Where he, however, is present in the Word as a living person, as the gift of the gospel, there the Word is alive. And whether Christ is in the Word in the one way or the other, depends solely on the Spirit. Only in the moment when the Spirit, by the outward Word, makes Christ truly present are the Word and the Spirit directly one. But this free intervention of the Spirit. . . is an event promised by the Word itself, because it concerns itself with Christ. Even though the Word and the Spirit are separated. . . they are separated as promise and fulfillment, as prayer and the answer to prayer, as a sign and as a reality. The two ideas meet in Christ himself as a unity of the promise and the fulfillment.<sup>47</sup>

[T]he center in the Word of God is the risen Christ himself, and the outward Word does not become the Word of God until the Spirit causes the risen Christ to live his life in that Word. It is this living presence mediated by the Spirit which produces the previously mentioned motion of faith from the law to the gospel.<sup>48</sup>

Preaching is to bring the listener into a direct encounter with the living Christ. That is the true goal of preaching. One does not need only to hear sermon messages about Jesus Christ. But as the preaching brings us into a direct encounter with the living Christ, He will not leave us the same. Jesus challenged many people about their lives and beliefs during the days of his public ministry, and he is continuing to do so today. Luther saw this. Preaching is a matter of bringing Christ to people today.

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<sup>47</sup> Prenter, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Prenter, 112.

Moreover, Luther saw that it was the office of the Holy Spirit to bring about this encounter. As Prenter explains:

But it is the work of the Spirit to realize this real presence of Christ. In the last section we observed that Luther's view of the Spirit was realistic. Luther holds that the Spirit is God himself who is near and struggling in us right in the midst of our condemnation and death. He is near in the sense that he takes the crucified and risen Christ out of the remoteness of history and heavenly glory and places him as a living and redeeming reality in the midst of our life with its suffering, inner conflict, and death. The very fact that our life is able to contain suffering, inner conflict, and death that are not a mere series of events in our life but the entrance to restoration and to life, is because of the fact that the Spirit has put the crucified and risen Christ into our life as a present reality. The groanings which cannot be uttered are themselves the most elementary manifestations of the faith in Christ which flees from all its own to God, that is, to Christ, through whom alone God has graciously come to meet us.<sup>49</sup>

### **Caught in the Act**

Not only do believers have a direct encounter with Jesus through the Spirit and the Word, but they are also caught in the act of their sins, of their rejection of Jesus through such Spirit-directed preaching. Gerhard Forde believes, following the teaching of Luther, that preaching must go beyond presenting the teaching of Jesus to actually proclaiming Jesus, must go beyond Jesus as example to confrontation with Jesus that kills the believer and raises him to life.

Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his "Father." The problem, however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him. And just so we are caught in the act. Every mouth is stopped once and for all. All the pious talk about our yearning and desire for reconciliation and forgiveness, etc., all our

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<sup>49</sup> Prenter, 53-54.

complaint against God is simply shut up. He came to forgive and we killed him for it; we would not have it. It is as simple as that.<sup>50</sup>

[T]hough the will is bound, it can be changed. The very fact of the proclamation is evidence of this. The proclamation takes place because there are those who have been set free to say it, those who "were dead through trespasses and sins" and have been "made alive" (Eph. 2:1). The change that takes place, however, fits none of our known schemes of human transformation, smooth or violent. The Scriptures speak of it as a dying and being raised through proclamation of Christ. It means that we can be reached by one who comes "from without," something "no eye has seen, nor ear heard" (1 Cor. 2:9) in this age.<sup>51</sup>

We do not like being caught in the act of our sins and rejection of Jesus Christ, but as we confront it and accept it, we are freed up for the new life in Jesus Christ which such confrontation and killing of our sinful nature brings to us. It is not comfortable, but it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us through the Word, and it brings us into an encounter with God that is the basis of eternal life (John 17:3).

How then does one preach following these themes? I wrote a sermon on the text, Matthew 16:21-26, in September 2002 which applies this death-life model. The basis for the sermon was the first two verses of the text, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" First the text has to confront the hearer and kill him.

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<sup>50</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," *Word and World* 3, no. 1 (1983): 26.

<sup>51</sup> Forde, *Proclamation*, 55.

But why did Jesus have to die? Why could not God just up and forgive? But that is just what God did! The problem is that we could not accept that. And so we killed him. He came to forgive and we killed him for it; we would not have it.

We have been caught in the act. We find that we ourselves are responsible for the death of Jesus, for rejecting him and forcing him to go to the cross for us. And we cannot deny it. We cannot get away from our responsibility for killing Jesus. We needed him to go to the cross for us.<sup>52</sup>

Then the sermon has to raise up to new life the hearer confronted by the killing word.

But Jesus did not give up on Peter. Peter was one of his chosen disciples, and so Jesus forgave him for failing to understand his mission and for trying to turn him aside from it. Peter would later deny Jesus three times on the night of his predicted trials, and Jesus forgave him and restored him for those denials. And Jesus forgives you when you fail to understand the call He places on your life. You may not be able to say "Yes" when the question is asked of you. You may not be able to suffer for Jesus. You may not die to yourself each time when the call comes upon your life. But Jesus says, "I forgive you. I restore you too, and I will continue to work with you throughout your earthly life to be ready for the call."<sup>53</sup>

Peter and the other disciples got so caught up in the bad things that Jesus was saying he must suffer that they forgot to listen to the rest of the story. Jesus told his disciples "he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." They got so caught up in thinking about his suffering and death that they forgot to hear about the promised miracle of his resurrection. Wow! Yes, there was suffering and death in store for Jesus. But then he was going to triumph over death by rising again to new life. He gives the same promise to us. We may have to suffer and die to ourselves and our own ambitions because of our relationship with Jesus Christ. But he also gives us the promise, "You will be supernaturally raised to life, not earthly human life that can again be cut short in this world, but heavenly eternal life with God." And the bulk of our existence is not the 40 or 70 or 100 years of trouble on this earth, but that heavenly life with God that begins now and goes on forever. All of your momentary

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<sup>52</sup> Peter Kirby, unpublished sermon on Matthew 16:21-26. "*Caught in the Act.*" 1 Sept 2002: 3-4.

<sup>53</sup> Kirby, 5-6.

suffering and troubles now will seem like one night's bad dream in the light of your eternal life with God.<sup>54</sup>

The text confronts the modern hearer in the same way that the original words of Jesus confronted those disciples. It was no fun for Peter to receive the rebuke from Jesus. But Jesus did not abandon him; he forgave him and promised to use him in the service of his kingdom. He moved beyond the death of Peter's misunderstanding to the resurrection and new life of forgiveness and restoration. So today we are caught in the act, but also loved and restored by Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions place a high priority on killing and making alive as descriptions of God's way of saving sinful humans. This was shown to be the work of the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God in the Confessions, in the early writing and preaching of Luther, and in his later disputations with the Antinomians. Therefore, I have shown that Luther did not outgrow this view of justification as killing and making alive, but that it permeated his theology throughout his life.

Luther taught that the Holy Spirit does not simply teach us about Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, but brings us into a direct encounter with Jesus through the proclamation of the Word. Therefore preaching and proclamation are the primary tools used by the Holy Spirit to kill believers and make them

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<sup>54</sup> Kirby, 6-7.

alive. This is the proclamation that the church needs to regain in order to see the life and work of the Holy Spirit truly restored in the church. It is only as He is allowed to do His work of killing and making alive that believers will be freed to know God and to serve Him aright. It is only as the Holy Spirit is allowed to do His work of killing and making alive that the Word of God will have free course to work in the church and in the world. Therefore it is essential that we understand and promote such proclamation of killing and making alive in the church.

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