

Babel, Tyranny and Totality: Reading Genesis 11 with Luther

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Abstract: In this paper, I consider Martin Luther's treatment of the tower of Babel narrative in his late *Lectures on Genesis* in order to display the continuing fruitfulness of a close reading of his exposition of Scripture for the task of contemporary political theology. Luther addresses the themes of, politics, tyranny, totality, and language with a theological attunement instructive to those of us formed within the societies and politics of late-modernity. In addition to attending to Luther's reading of Genesis 11 for its critical usefulness in interrogating our understandings of the mechanisms of political formation, I also look to his reading of the Eucharist in light of the Christological doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, and his exegesis of the account of the Syrophenician woman in the Gospels, to indicate constructive ways in which the idolatrous politics of Babel might be resisted and the politics of Pentecost embraced.

Key Words: Martin Luther, Babel, political theology, tyranny, Genesis, repentance

With the recent celebrations surrounding the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we find ourselves at a fortuitous moment for reconsidering its political legacy. However, this legacy is neither straightforward, nor uncontested. And in the case of the political thought of the Reformer Martin Luther, this is particularly true. Much contemporary scholarship suggests that if there is any element of Luther's legacy that ought to be left behind, it is his teachings and writings on politics and the political developments that followed in their wake. For example, the historian of political thought, Quentin Skinner, has argued that 'the main influence of Lutheran political theory in early modern Europe lay in the direction of encouraging and legitimating the emergence of unified and absolutist monarchies.'¹ This is the famous image of Luther as the lackey of princes, encouraging a quietist submission to

¹ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Vol. 2: The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 113.

political authority.² In a similar vein, in his highly influential *Politics and Visions*, Sheldon Wolin argues that Luther depoliticized the church such that political thought enjoyed a new-found autonomy from ‘the enclosing framework of mediaeval theology and philosophy,’ thus providing justification for authoritarian secular powers.³ On these readings of Luther, the Reformer’s contribution to the political thought of the West presents problematic quiescence in relation to political authority and is thus to be overcome, rather than being drawn upon to provide resources for gaining a truer picture of a faithful posture toward the political world.

In this paper, I seek to show that contrary to these interpretations of Luther, a close reading of his works, particularly his exposition of Scripture, proves fruitful for the task of contemporary political theology. I turn my attention specifically to Luther’s treatment of the tower of Babel narrative in his late *Lectures on Genesis*. Here we see him addressing the themes of politics, tyranny, totality, and language with a theological attunement instructive to those of us formed within the societies and politics of late-modernity. In addition to attending to Luther’s reading of Genesis 11 for its critical usefulness in interrogating our understandings of the mechanisms of political formation, I also look to his reading of the Eucharist in light of the Christological doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, and his exegesis of the account of Syrophenician woman in the Gospels, to indicate constructive ways in which the idolatrous politics of Babel might be resisted and a politics of Pentecost embraced.⁴ As such, a theologically nuanced account of politics comes forth that is irreducible to either quietist submission or “enthusiastic” hostility, but rather seeks to direct attention to the Word of God that calls for repentance and reconciliation in the midst of opaque worldly realities. In particular, Luther’s theology problematizes the structures of identity-formation, which in his day took the form of resisting ecclesial overreaching (hence, giving rise to the simplified accusations rendered against Luther by Skinner and Wolin), but which provides a heuristic for resisting such structures whatever form they take. The Luther encountered in his writings is far more

² For a refutation of this charge, see Uwe Siemon-Netto, *The Fabricated Luther: Refuting Nazi Connections and Other Modern Myths*, 2nd Edition (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2007).

³ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, Expanded Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 133.

⁴ Throughout this paper I use the term ‘Syrophenician’ woman given that this is the title given in the English-language edition of Luther’s sermon on Matthew 15:21-28. Martin Luther, ‘Second Sunday in Lent: The Faith of the Syrophenician woman, and the Spiritual Interpretation of this Gospel,’ in John Nicholas Lenker (ed.), *Sermons of Martin Luther*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 2:148-54.

subtle than the Luther encountered in most narratives of political modernity, and is surprisingly rich in theological insight into politics and its temptations.⁵

1. The Ambivalence of Primeval Politics

Nimrod's Tyranny

As in the Biblical account itself, Luther's interpretation of the tower of Babel begins with the birth of Nimrod, 'the mighty hunter before the Lord,' narrated in Genesis 10. In treating the Nimrod narrative, Luther displays his understanding of the danger that follows when political, economic, and ecclesial authority are held in singular hands. Luther ties Nimrod's story into the larger primeval narrative via the link to Enoch, the son of Cain who bore the name of the first city mentioned in Scripture. Luther notes that Enoch was the first person before the Flood 'to strive for sovereignty (*Imperium*) and to build a city (*Civitatem*).' In like manner, Nimrod was the first of Noah's descendants to 'strive for the sovereignty of the world' following the Flood.⁶ Nimrod is in the line of Ham, and Ham followed the path of Cain in setting out from 'his father and his godly brothers and set[ting] up a new kingdom for himself on the earth.'⁷ And like Cain, Ham too, strangely enjoys a degree of success. Luther finds the counsel of God on this point to be an offense to the spiritually weak, but this is how God has providentially ruled history from the beginning. Cain, the one cursed to be a wanderer, founds a city. Ham, the rebellious son of Noah, the one cursed by his righteous father, is the son who enjoys the best portion of the earth.⁸

Notable in Luther's reading of the Table of Nations in Genesis chapter 10 is the relative space he gives to interrogating Nimrod's drive and ambition in the build up to the Babel narrative in chapter 11. Again, like Cain before him, Nimrod sets out to build both a new city and a new church. The link between the church and politics is crucial for Luther given that he interprets the Babel narrative, as he does also the primeval narrative in Genesis generally, through the lens of the three institutions of church (*ecclesia*), politics or

⁵ For a developed defence of this claim, see my *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2016).

⁶ '...quesiuit orbis terrarum Imperium.' Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., Jarsolav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (eds) (Philadelphia, PA: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955-86), 2:196 (hereafter cited as *LW*); Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-2009), 42.400, 29-30 (hereafter cited as *WA*).

⁷ *LW* 2:210.

⁸ *LW* 2: 196. In the fallen world, Luther often finds blessing hidden inside of curse, and seeming blessings are often curses.

government (*politia*), and household-economy (*oeconomia*). In this respect, the sons of Noah imitate the sons of Adam and are responsible for the existence of the true and the false church in the world. ‘Cain left his father,’ Luther writes, and ‘established a special church without God’s command, and held the true church in contempt. The same thing happens here among the sons of Noah. From Ham, as from an ungodly and wicked source, the false and lying church takes its origin.’⁹ The contest between the true and false church that Luther reads throughout the primeval narrative continues and reaches a peak at Babel.

Further, it is by means of tyranny (*per tyrannidem*) that the false church obtains its place in the world. Nimrod became the first ‘mighty man’ on the earth through the tyrannical exercise of power.¹⁰ Luther conjectures that obtaining this distinction would have required ‘murder and bloodshed,’ as it was opposed to the will of the fathers as indicated in the Noahic blessings and curses. As with the cursed Cain before him, Nimrod is not satisfied until all aspects of human life are brought under his control.¹¹ That he is referred to as a ‘mighty hunter before the Lord’ Luther reads as indicating, first, that Nimrod wanted to be mighty in government (*politia*), and second that he wanted to be ruler in the church (*ecclesia*) as well (‘before the Lord’). Like his forbearer Cain, Nimrod’s drive is totalitarian.¹² The drive consists of an acquisitive imperial ambition combined with a senseless rage, a longing to possess undergirded by an anxious fear of loss.¹³ The tyrant both wants more than is his, and seeks to secure himself and his identity by his own means. At root, the tyrant is characterized by false faith, by a heart that clings to false idols that promise him all good things. Luther thinks that for Nimrod to achieve his tyrannical ambitions, it is necessary in the first place that he set up new forms of worship to replace those handed down from the sons of Noah, that he gather a people around him whose hearts likewise cling to the same idols. In the picture of Nimrod, Luther writes, ‘Moses wanted to present the story of all tyrants who would rage against the state and the church in later times.’¹⁴

⁹ LW 2:210.

¹⁰ LW 2:196-97; WA 42.400, 29-30.

¹¹ Jacques Ellul sees in both a response to having been cursed and an attempt at escaping the curse. *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 11.

¹² Totalitarianism is here understood following Oliver O’Donovan’s description of the term: ‘The essence of totalitarianism is the assumption of all independent authority, natural or spiritual, the authority of teacher, parent, priest, or artist, into a unified authority of political power.’ ‘History and Politics in the book of Revelation,’ in Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 37.

¹³ LW 2:220-21.

¹⁴ LW 2:199.

Nineveh's Repentant Faith

Given that the cities mentioned thus far in the Biblical narrative (those founded by Cain and Nimrod) are derived from self-aggrandizing passions that are undergirded by the institution of false worship, it might appear that the primeval narrative's reading of politics is wholly negative. However, Luther discerns an ambivalence given the rest of the account of the nations found in Genesis 10. Beginning in verse 11, we get the account of Nineveh, founded as Luther translates the verse, by Asshur.¹⁵ In contrast to the Nimrodian cities centered around Babel, the cities founded by Asshur were a result of the latter's migration out of Babylon in a foreshadowing of Abram's later being called out from the land of the Chaldeans. Asshur's motivation, according to Luther, was to escape the 'wickedness and violence' that characterized Nimrod's kingdom. And in contrast to Nimrod's aim of establishing new forms of worship, Asshur set out for and established Nineveh in order to gather 'a little church.' Reading the genealogy of Nineveh in this way, Luther argues, explains the Lord's fondness for this city in much of Scripture. Luther writes, 'Nineveh is called a city of God because it had the true religion and was preserved by God on account of the good man Asshur, who, being intolerant of idolatry, abandoned ancient Babylon and migrated toward the northern regions.'¹⁶ As such, Luther reads the city's later repentance in response to the word preached by Jonah as a return 'to the former way.'¹⁷

In his reading of the primeval narrative, Gerhard von Rad offers an interpretation highlighting this same ambivalence with regard to the nations. The derivation of all of the nations from Noah's descendants 'expresses, with a clarity unparalleled in the whole ancient world, the thought of the unity of mankind given in creation.'¹⁸ However, there is no evaluation of the nations, and no nation is considered to be at the centre. The nations seem, von Rod suggests, to be derived 'from God's wealth in creation; but at the same time they bear the deep scars of God's judging intervention.'¹⁹ This ambivalence concerning the nations, and about the task of city building, remains in Luther's reading of

¹⁵ There is some ambiguity as to the correct translation of Gen. 10:11. Ellul, for example, translates Asshur as a place, and hence reads Nineveh as belonging to the works of Nimrod. *Meaning of the City*, p. 12 n2.

¹⁶ LW 2:202. Luther believes Asshur 'to have been altogether a saint,' LW 2:214.

¹⁷ LW 2:202. Ellul likewise notes the distinctiveness of Nineveh. 'Nineveh is completely different and has a different destiny, although she, too, is a city and exhibits the characteristics of a city. What gives her a particular meaning is her status as the city of repentance.' *Meaning of the City*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

Babel, and means that openness to the need for repentance is at the forefront of his political teaching. As we will see, repentance is the key to resisting the politics of Babel.

2. The Tower of Babel

The Introduction of False Worship

Moving now to Genesis 11 and the Babel narrative proper, Luther sees the same pattern that characterized the Fall and the Cain narrative repeated in the narrative of the building of the tower of Babel—namely, false worship (idolatry) springing forth from the misplaced trust of the heart. Interestingly here, however, Luther makes more explicit how the false church serves as a motor undermining the other two institutions of politics and economics. In this case, Luther turns the critical function of the teaching about the true and the false church against the pretensions of the politics of Babel. As we have seen, Babel is in the pattern of Cain’s city, and like the former, begins with the building of a new church. The tower, in particular, is important for it signals the religious dimensions of the builder’s design. The fact that the tower is aimed at reaching heaven is not just an indication of its height, but rather it implies in the minds of the builders ‘that God was dwelling very close to this tower.’²⁰ In fact, for Luther, the political purposes in building Babel must be placed alongside the desire to make ‘a religious impression,’ to provide a place that would be considered ‘a habitation most pleasing to God.’²¹ And this is what makes the tower Satanic, namely, that it aligns itself closely to the appearance of godliness, and seems to reinforce its claim by the fact that its success can so easily be read as a sign of the divine favour.²²

Luther is careful to note, however, that the sin involved in building Babel ‘cannot be clearly understood from the text.’²³ Given what is narrated earlier concerning Nineveh, Luther argues that is it not a sin in itself to put up a tower or build a city, ‘for the saints did the same.’²⁴ Indeed, Luther thinks that Noah gave instructions to his sons to set out across the world and ‘to establish states and churches.’²⁵ Karl Barth reads the narrative along the same lines, holding that, ‘The enterprise is not formally directed against God, nor is it

²⁰ LW 2:213.

²¹ LW 2: 213.

²² ‘...they maintain that they are the people who are very close to God, to whom God listens, and to whom He grants success,’ LW 2:214.

²³ LW 2:211.

²⁴ LW 2:214.

²⁵ LW 2:193.

formally wrong in any respect. Attempts at civilization are never formally wrong.²⁶ In language similar to Luther, Barth argues that it is not ‘the thing itself’ that makes the undertaking sinful, but rather the intention behind it.

Again, the sin of the builders of Babel consists in the false worship driving it, what Luther speaks of as the false trust of the builders’ hearts. The builders are proud and pompous, but at the root of their pride is trust (*fidentes*) in the things of this world rather than God. He bases this read of their motives off of their statement in verse 4, ‘Come, let us build *ourselves* a city and a tower.’²⁷ We have already seen that in God’s strange counsel he allows the ripest fruits of the earth to go to those who belong to the false church. Given the abundance enjoyed by the divine providence, they believe that they stand in great favour before God and suppose, with self-sufficient pride, that they can accomplish anything that they please. Therefore, Luther says, the sin of the builders ‘was nothing else than extraordinary smugness and pride linked with contempt for God.’²⁸

Central in all of this for Luther is the Word of God. In fact, he argues, that this narrative is captured for us as warning ‘lest we fall away from the Word’ and become builders of Babel as well. And as in his description of the sin of the Fall, Luther here ties the builders’ sin to the Decalogue. It begins with a violation of the First Commandment, and hence is blasphemy of the name of God, from which follows violation of the all the rest of the Ten Commandments. At its core, ‘it is rank idolatry, by which the glory of the living God is changed into a calf, that is, into an idol of the heart.’²⁹ We see then, that for Luther, a people’s character is determined by its worship. Response to the Word of God, particularly in the form of the First Commandment, is determinative for all the rest of human life.

Punishment: Division of Languages

Refusal of the creative Word of God results for Luther in humans necessarily understanding themselves as self-creators. Luther surmises that the builders of Babel had heard from their pious father Noah that they would be punished by being scattered (similarly to Cain’s being set out as a wanderer) and in defiance respond, ‘Well, then let us be scattered! But first we

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (eds.) (London: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 314. Hereafter cited as *CD*.

²⁷ LW 2:212.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ LW 2:214.

shall build a city and a tower as a memorial to our achievements.’³⁰ While the tower builders are right to seek unity, they do so in a manner that turns it into an idol. Rather than the tower as a place for worship of the true God, a true temple, the builders seek through their tower, in Bernd Wannewetsch’s words, ‘a sense of being comfortably fixed in space through the presence of a temple at the city’s center.’³¹ But such fixation, of course, can only happen by stopping history. And that the aim of Babel is a city fixed in time is indicated by the single language its builders speak.

The singularity of language can only mean that life has ceased. Babel is static, a city of death.³² To put it as Walter Benjamin might, it is not open to translation in the sense of being opened to ‘continued life.’³³ Babel is the refusal to enter into the life of history. But this refusal means, as Jacques Derrida says, a refusal of the ‘sur-vival’ which enables the continuation of life. Sur-vival, the openness to other languages, ‘gives more of life, more than a surviving. The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author.’³⁴ This is precisely the error of the Babelites, in their self-chosen works, they are closed in upon themselves and refuse the ‘growth,’ ‘the holy growth of languages.’³⁵ They cannot join intimately with any ‘other.’ They refuse the arrival of a word from a neighbour not subsumed under their own pre-comprehension, and likewise attempt to close themselves off from the unanticipated arrival of the Word of God. They are self-sufficient, as Luther reads them, content that the end of history is located in their church-city (*ecclesia-politia*). And in this, as O’Donovan shows, totalitarianism demonstrates its ‘pseudo-messianic ideology,’ in which the earthly city promises its inhabitants eschatological fulfillment, the promise that all of their longings can be fulfilled in giving themselves over to its politics.³⁶

But if the mono-language of Babel means that the city is ultimately a city of death, then in what sense can we say that God’s confusion of tongues at Babel is a divine punishment rather than a gracious provision? John Howard Yoder, in fact, does not read the

³⁰ LW 2:220.

³¹ Bernd Wannewetsch, ‘Representing the Absent,’ in Gregory L. Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (eds.) *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), p. 173.

³² Peter J. Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast: America and Empires in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), p. 5.

³³ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Task of Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*,’ in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 72.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Des Tours de Babel*, in Joseph F. Graham (ed.) *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 179.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁶ O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection*, 37.

confusion of tongues as a punishment. Instead, he argues, it is ‘the gift of new beginnings, liberated from a blind alley.’ Yoder suggests that the scattered condition should be understood as the normative condition, that the Jeremian condition of resident aliens is to be understood as the proper condition for Israel. Babel is an attempt to ‘resist the diversification which God had long before ordained and initiated.’ As ‘the first foundationalists,’ the Babelites seek ‘to maintain a common discourse by building their own unprecedentedly centralized city’ and employing ‘their own cultural power to overcome historically developing diversity.’ Babel goes against the diversity which Yoder sees as the ‘original divine intent.’ He writes, ‘if God is good and diversity is good, then each of the many diverse identities which resulted from the multiplying of languages and the resultant scattering is also good.’³⁷ Is not the scattering at Babel simply the divine hand achieving what humanity was commanded in Genesis 1:28: ‘Be fruitful and multiply; and fill the earth and subdue it’?³⁸

But for Luther, there is no question, the division of languages is a punishment, which although it may appear to be light punishment, is in fact a ‘terrible one’ entailing ‘extreme hardships.’³⁹ Luther focuses on the way in which the confusion of language accomplishes such punishment, and notes how in this punishment life in all three institutions is affected. Specifically, human life in the home, government and the church is subject to confusion.⁴⁰ The reason for such confusion, Luther argues, is that the loss of a common language means that ‘customs are changed,’ ‘dispositions and endeavors altered,’ and most importantly, the unity of hearts enabled by common language is lost.⁴¹ As Luther writes, ‘If languages had not been confused, the unity of hearts would have continued. But now Babylon falls, Nineveh falls, Jerusalem falls, Rome falls—in short all kingdoms fall as a result of the confusion of languages, which gives rise to a disunity of hearts’.⁴²

In spite of the great disturbance to all three institutions caused by the confusion of languages and scattering, Luther does not see this as without a share in God’s grace. Specifically, he sees this as God’s way of preserving the true church from the tyrannical

³⁷ John Howard Yoder, ‘See How they Go with Their Face to the Sun,’ in Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (eds.) *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 189.

³⁸ This is how Liethart reads the narrative. Humans were created to spread throughout the earth, and Babel is the attempt ‘to arrest this scattering,’ *Between Babel and Beast*, p. 6.

³⁹ LW 2:214. For Barth, too, the scattering of the nations is ‘undoubtedly a work of divine wrath, even if with an undertone of grace,’ *CD III.4*, p. 313.

⁴⁰ LW 2:215-16.

⁴¹ LW 2:215.

⁴² LW 2:225.

desire of would-be Babelites to possess it.⁴³ In like fashion, Barth reads the punishment as showing signs of preserving grace, but as nonetheless severe. He writes, ‘If they can no longer conspire together as a totality against God and therefore to their own destruction, it is still true that they can no longer understand one another and *be together*. They will *dwell in different places* and therefore be preserved from common extirpation in consequence of their sin, but they will also be separated from one another in good.’⁴⁴ So the problem that remains is how to achieve unity of hearts among those who have been scattered without tyranny and without a totalitarian denial of particularity.

Having come to the tower of Babel narrative, Luther breaks off this portion of his commentary on Genesis, with this problem of the nations resonating in the background. The primeval history closes with the birth of Abram and the movement toward Canaan. And the answer to the question about the scattering is that the nations can find their way back to one another only as they find their way to Israel.⁴⁵ ‘Because the land of Canaan is promised to the descendants of Abraham and Christ was to be born of the descendants of Abraham,’ Luther writes, ‘it is sure that Christ will be born in the land of Canaan and from the Jews... Therefore there now arises almost a new church, because a new Word is beginning to shed its light.’⁴⁶

3. Pentecost: Unity without Tyranny

Longing for Unity

What, then, does it mean to long for the primal union of humanity in such manner that this desire does not slide into a tyrannical *eros* that would consume rather than commune with the other? The solution to the confusion of Babel is not a return to one language, but rather is found in the unity of faith. Luther points to Acts 2 as the true locus for the human desire for unity. Only in Christ can unity be had without the reification of Babel. Christ makes possible a unity of hearts in faith without a mono-language. In Christ’s reconciling presence, harmony is achieved, as Luther puts it, by Christ ‘speaking to us in a new language.’⁴⁷

However, Christ’s speaking does not mean reestablishment of a single language. It

⁴³ LW 2:219.

⁴⁴ Barth, *CD* III.4, p. 316.

⁴⁵ Cf. Barth *CD* III.4, p. 320.

⁴⁶ LW 2:237.

⁴⁷ LW 2:215.

would seem that somehow in a fallen world, a world into which suffering and oppression has entered, the confusion of language is a curse that contains within it the grace and promise that a multitude of nations will one day share a unity of hearts that does not omit their manifold languages that testify to the diversity of creation and witness to the irreducibly complex reality and significance of human history. Wesley Morris has recently argued that there is a spiritual power to be ‘found in articulating the pains, history and long-suffering of oppressed communities with language. ... The faithful power of language in suffering is and must be as contextual as the lives it describes.’⁴⁸ Babelic mono-language elides the ‘pains, history and long-suffering of oppressed communities’ by forcing that history into a rounded master narrative. The material language(s) of Pentecost, however, which are the many post-Babelic languages, make possible an articulation of these histories because a flourishing multiplication of languages and voices from those who have scattered throughout the earth is needed to even begin to witness to the ‘sheer epistemological density’⁴⁹ of the good creation and of the way in which creation has been crossed by human histories tied to lands and subjected against its will by displacement from lands. Babel is a refusal of the density of creation, of the multiplication of languages that necessarily results from language being materially formed as response to creation, and a refusal of the human vocation to witness to the glory of the Creator in language inflected through encounter and alignment within the manifold places given by God to all humanity to intimately inhabit in love—a love that is open and receptive to being transformed and repositioned by that place rather than by mastering and taming/enslaving space.⁵⁰

As Christians then, this would suggest that our role in the city is not architectonic or universal, and is therefore resistant to drives toward a singular language, or to bringing the whole of political reality under human control. The groundlessness of attempts to do so is always revealed in the collapse of the tower. But this doesn’t mean *simply* that we are wrong to seek what the builders of Babel sought. Our longing for union, our desire to *not* be scattered over the face of the whole earth, our longing for true communication, for the other(s), for the universal, for a lost wholeness, is not to be wiped out. Instead, it is to be focused on those places where God has promised to be God for us. It is focused on the

⁴⁸ Wesley Morris, ‘Prisoners of Politics,’ *Political Theology Network*, <https://politicaltheology.com/prisoners-of-politics/>, accessed 20 May 2018.

⁴⁹ I borrow this phrase from Willie James Jennings, ‘Disfigurations of Christian Identity: Performing Identity as Theological Method,’ in Charles March, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (eds.) *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 73.

⁵⁰ The language of alignment and positionality is, again, borrowed from Jennings.

mystery of the God who took on flesh, who invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood as this comes to us very particularly, concretely, and locally at the table. The only way that we can express and satisfy the desire for unity without consuming one another, without the city become bestial as in the Biblical portrayal, is to consume the particular flesh and blood of the risen Christ, who mediates God to us, and ourselves to one another.⁵¹

The Politics of the Eucharist

It is at this point that Luther's theology of communion, again often overlooked in treatments of his political thought, proves fruitful. In his treatise on the Lord's Supper, 'The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods (1519),' he argues that the Sacrament 'signifies the complete union and the undivided fellowship of the saints.'⁵²

Luther describes this fellowship in explicitly political terms:

Hence it is that Christ and all saints are one spiritual body, just as the inhabitants of a city are one community and body, each citizen being a member of the other and of the entire city. All the saints, therefore, are members of Christ and of the church, which is a spiritual and eternal city of God. And whoever is taken into this city is said to be received into the community of saints and to be incorporated into Christ's spiritual body and made a member of him. To receive this sacrament in bread and wine, then, is nothing else than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints. It is as if a citizen were given a sign, a document, or some other token to assure him that he is a citizen of the city, a member of that particular community.⁵³

Employing ancient imagery, Luther discusses how the actual materials on the communion table show its meaning. Just as the many grains are mixed together and form one loaf of bread, and as the many drops of wine become the common wine in the cup, 'so it is and should be with us.' Here Luther uses the logic of the *communicatio idiomatum*, which also characterizes his description of justification.⁵⁴ In both contexts (justification and the

⁵¹ Ellul: 'Man sacrifices man to build his cities, instead of accepting the only sacrifice which would enable him both to found them in truth and purify them of Satan's presence,' *Meaning of the City*, p. 171.

⁵² LW 35:50.

⁵³ LW 35:51.

⁵⁴ In his discussion of what unity without tyranny might look like, J. Kameron Carter likewise points to the Christological doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* as suggesting the proper understanding of such unity, though with reference to Maximus the Confessor rather than Luther. See his *Race: A*

communion table), he refers to the marital imagery from Ephesians, but in expositing the communion table, it is made even more explicit that the *communicatio* is not only between Christ and the believer, but also between the believers themselves, between the community of saints. ‘In this sacrament,’ Luther writes, ‘the believer is thus united with Christ and his saints and has all things in common...’⁵⁵ Thus, Luther’s understanding of the proper practice of the Eucharist funds a Christian imagination of the political that is hopeful and filled with longing, but that always finds this desire instructed in the receiving of a communion that can only be the work of God as the scattered nations re-gather around the Word of God.

The Politics of Repentance

Before we rush too quickly and presumptuously to the Eucharistic table, however, we ought to recognize the pattern of Pentecost itself and discern our place in the body gathered around the table.⁵⁶ Without prior (and continual) repentance there is a very real danger that we will fail to rightly ‘discern the body’ and presume on our place at the table such that we partake to our own danger. We are in danger of instrumentalising the Eucharist to serve as a location for affirming our own self-chosen identities (turning it into a tower of Babel), rather than in approaching it as repentant Ninevites whose identities are destabilized and problematized by the address of the God of Israel. Such discernment of the body begins, then, by recognizing ourselves as those begging for the crumbs that fall from the master’s table—not an easy feat for those benefitting from any form of privilege. The right discerning requires at least two things: first, a recognition that Eucharist and the story that it invites us into is first and foremost a divine work, and therefore not our work, and second, a recognition that we (insofar as we are not Israelites) are at the periphery rather than the centre of the story. Again, this second is particularly difficult for us to imagine if we come from places of privilege.

First, there is the recognition of the divine activity. The driving force for an anti-Babelian politics is not human activity, but rather the Word that kills and makes alive. As such, repentance precedes life—repentant response to the Word makes space for the life-forming work of the Word. The sermon at Pentecost, to which the people respond, ‘Brothers,

Theological Account (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 343-69.

⁵⁵ LW 35:52.

⁵⁶ In her recent article in this journal, Elizabeth Phillips likewise suggests the Eucharist as the place for healing catastrophic ruptures between peoples. She notes, however, that there is a danger that if we idealize the Eucharist, we may fail to ‘discern the body’ (1 Corinthians 11:29). I offer the suggestions that follow as indications of what such discernment might look like. See Phillips, ‘Narrating Catastrophe, Cultivating Hope: Apocalyptic Practices and Theological Virtue,’ *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31.1 (2018), p. 32.

what shall we do?,' is answered by Peter, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you...' (Acts 2:37-38). In opposition to the mono-language that calls the people to come and 'let us' build a tower, the multiple tongues of Pentecost call the people to repent and be baptized—be put to death. It calls for an un-handing, which becomes evident immediately in the next pericope, where Luke tells us, 'All the believers were together and had everything in common' (Acts 2:44).

Second, discernment of the body requires the recognition that we are not the centre of the story with a mission of drawing in the periphery. We are called to a posture that begins in an acknowledgment that we are not the heroes of the story, and we should not seek to be the heroes of the story.⁵⁷ Our role in the story is to be put to death, to share in the death of the saviour. Instead of the fantasy of the hero, our imagination would be better served if we view ourselves in the role of the Syrophenician woman in the Gospels; that is, as beggars at the table hoping merely for the crumbs meant for the dogs. Here again, Luther's reading of Scripture proves helpful as seen in his sermon on the Gospel account.

The Syrophenician woman, seeking healing for her daughter's demon-possession cries out that beggar's cry, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.'⁵⁸ The Lord, who has been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel replies, shockingly to our sensibilities, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'⁵⁹ Luther argues that the woman had no claim on God except for God's Word. The Word of God that the woman had heard, Luther insists, was the good news of God's grace revealed in Jesus. Rather than giving up, the woman clings firmly 'in her confidence to the good news she had heard and embraced concerning him.' Her faith is not in anything that she has to offer (she accepts the designation 'dog'), but rather her trust is in the goodness and mercy of Jesus that she had 'heard about him' (Mark 7:25). 'But oh,' Luther writes, 'how painful it is to nature and reason, that this woman should strip herself of self and forsake all that she experienced, and cling to God's bare Word...'⁶⁰ But, Luther says, this is what we all must do. We must first be humbled by the acknowledgment of our sins in order that we have a true knowledge of ourselves and

⁵⁷ See Amy Laura Hall's perceptive criticism of the superhero genre, 'I Don't Need Another Hero,' in *Writing Home, With Love: Politics for Neighbors and Naysayers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 91-93. In particular, Hall argues that the genre is profoundly undemocratic. She writes, "Democracy depends on cacophony—on the discord of disparate voices. Hero narratives assume cacophony is a problem to be overcome," p. 92.

⁵⁸ Matthew 15:22 (NRSV). Cf. Matthew 20:20, Mark 10:47, and Luke 18:38. The Gospel of Mark relates that the woman 'begged' (ἠρώτω) Jesus to heal her daughter.

⁵⁹ Mt. 15:26 (NRSV).

⁶⁰ *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 2:150.

therefore possess a longing for Christ. It is toward this longing, which is a longing for Christ's body—as found both in the sacrament and in our fellow saints of multiple tongues—that Luther's sermon drives. The story of this woman reveals the operation of the Word that kills to make alive. In this work, Luther says, Christ opens his heart and draws the woman in 'so that she is now no dog, but even a child of Israel.'⁶¹ But the work is preceded by the same repentance, says Luther, demonstrated by David in Psalm 51. And 'it must be so; if God is to be righteous in his words that teach you are a sinner, then you may claim the rights of all sinners that God has given them, namely, the forgiveness of sins. Then you eat not only the crumbs as the little dogs do; but you are also a child and have God as your portion according to the pleasure of your will.'⁶²

Willie James Jennings argues that the new communion that Jesus draws together in Israel carries with it 'of necessity the distinctive marks of his scandal.' In particular, Jennings notes that the call to this communion troubles kinship relationships without destroying them (he uses the language of 're-routing'). He summarizes the meaning of this awkward, painful, 'even dangerous,' call as follows, 'The point here is that there is a social and cultural instability engendered by involvement with Jesus before there is the formation of a new coherent community.'⁶³ We come to the community of the Eucharist only as those who have repented and loosened our grip on the identity markers that have served to stabilize and fortify us over against the other. Without repentance, we are too quick to presume our place in the new community because, as Jennings also notes, we fail to see ourselves as Gentiles who only enter in through God's 'Yes' hidden in God's 'No.'⁶⁴ We inhabit the story as the nations who have been scattered, as those living in the midst of ambivalent and opaque social and political realities, and yet we are so quick to rehearse the logic of Babel and read ourselves back into the centre.

At some point in the final days before his death, Luther famously penned the words, 'We are beggars. That is true.'⁶⁵ There is no ground in 'nature' or 'reason,' to use Luther's language, for our being brought near. Our identity in Christ is one that is received, not self-constructed (in fact, according to Luther, we must be stripped of self). We are those who

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 152.

⁶² Ibid., p. 154.

⁶³ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 264.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 262. Jennings is drawing from Karl Barth here, who himself is drawing from, in Barth's own words, 'Luther's inspired exegesis' of the Gospel account of the Syrophenician woman. Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics IV.2*, (London: T&T Clark, 1958), p. 170.

⁶⁵ LW 54:476.

were excluded from citizenship in Israel, who were once far away, but have now been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13). What a difference it may have made if Luther and those after him would have more fully remembered and insisted upon the context in which Paul is addressing this refusal of self-generated identity formation to Gentiles who have been made members of God's household built on the cornerstone of the Jewish flesh of Jesus of Nazareth? Perhaps they would have seen themselves, and the Western church, more clearly and thoroughly as Gentile foreigners—as those who come as beggars to Israel's Messiah in the posture of the Syrophenician woman and in the understanding that the church is grafted into Israel.⁶⁶ The impulse and the elements for such a posture are to be found within Luther's theology, especially in those places where he insists that we do not presume to be able fully to read both God's grace and judgment (the 'Yes' hidden in the 'No') even if, to our great pain, Luther did not always remain tied to the impulse.⁶⁷ However, if we attend closely to those impulses, and if we continually repent of our failure to remain tied to them ourselves, we continue to find in Luther surprising resources for challenging and enriching the contemporary Christian political imagination and the call to a politics of repentance and reconciliation rather than a politics of identity fortification.

⁶⁶ Jennings articulates the clear 'intertextual connection to the priority of Israel' in the story of the Syrophenician woman and how its meaning was distorted by the supersessionism of the colonialist imagination. *Christian Imagination*, p. 262.

⁶⁷ On the question of Luther and supersessionism, see Brian Brock, *Singing the Ethos of God: On the Place of Christian Ethics in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 233-37.