PRAISE FOR *THE UNHOLY TRINITY*

Michael Lockwood shows that God's use of the Law—for Christians as well as for non-Christians—includes the sufferings of life that destroy our self-sufficiency, which is the root of all idolatry. His book is full of practical suggestions for pastoral care and evangelistic outreach and will be an enormously helpful resource for pastors.

—Gene Edward Veith, PhD
Professor of Literature, Emeritus
Patrick Henry College

In *The Unholy Trinity*, Michael Lockwood eschews simple causes and facile explanations of the problem of idolatry in the individual and society and takes a deeper and more systemic approach to the issue. Lockwood presents multiple examples from Luther's teaching as well as other contemporary authors. An advantage to his perspective is that being Australian as well as a pastor and scholar, he is able to observe American culture as a relative outsider, yet he has done the work and lived in the USA enough to make a fair assessment and bring to bear solutions to actual issues and problems. In so doing, he succeeds in making the issue of both idolatry and its cure in the Gospel of Jesus Christ relevant to the work of today's pastors, missionaries, laity, and theologians alike.

—Rev. Timothy P. Dost, PhD
Associate Professor of Historical Theology
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

In two ways, Michael Lockwood has done us all a great service: he has rendered a fundamentally important theme in Luther's theology accessible, and he's shown us why it matters. In nine, deeply researched and highly readable chapters, Dr. Lockwood not only describes Luther's analysis of idolatry, but he also explains how idolatry functions. For Luther, idolatry is false faith. It's a lethal trust in the wrong thing in the wrong way. Luther didn't regard idolatry as misplaced philosophy, with merely academic consequences, but as a deadly peril because of what it actually *does*. Functionally, idolatry unseats faith in each of the persons of the Godhead, replacing it with a counterfeit trust, not just in "god" generically, but by creating a bogus equivalent of each person. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each and all supplanted by "me, myself and I." Michael Lockwood's writing is saturated with Luther in the best possible way. He shows not only

what Luther said in the past, but why it's important to keep hearing it in the present. This volume is not just an important contribution to Luther studies, it's a seminal book for understanding the distinctive work of Christian ministry and the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel.

—Rev. Dr. Noel Due
Ministry and Mission Support Pastor
Lutheran Church of Australia, SA/NT District

How does a preacher best commend the Christian faith to people who have no need for the Gospel, let alone any desire to participate in the Divine Service? Dr. Lockwood provides us with a diagnostic tool for effective proclamation by his excellent analysis of Luther's teaching on human idolatry and the impact of its delusive claims. Luther held that the cause of idolatry lay in the mistrust of God and his Word. The human heart relies on its own idols, rather than God's Word, to secure, justify, and empower itself. It replaces the triune God with the unholy trinity of Me, Myself, and I. These idols are debunked and destroyed by the proclamation of God the Father, who loves us and provides for us; God the Son, who justifies us and gives us access to the Father in the Divine Service; and God the Holy Spirit, who enlightens and empowers us spiritually through his Word. This thoroughly biblical, culturally relevant study is a joy to read.

—Rev. Dr. John W. Kleinig
Professor Emeritus of Biblical Theology
Australian Lutheran College
Author of *Grace Upon Grace* (CPH, 2008)
and *Concordia Commentary: Leviticus* (CPH, 2004)

Luther's reading of the First Commandment interlocks with his catechetical exposition of the Apostles' Creed. Michael Lockwood has provided an attentive reading of Luther's theology while drawing out insights for a robust and engaging apologetic in our culture populated by idols fabricated by the self-justifying mind. This is a book that will be appreciated not only by Luther scholars and missiologists, but also by pastors and ordinary Christians seeking to sharpen their confession of Christ in today's world.

—John T. Pless
Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry & Missions
Director of Field Education
Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN

Saint Augustine spoke of idolatry as worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshiped. John Calvin spoke of the human mind as a perpetual forge of idols, daring to imagine a god suited

to its own capacity. And now we have mighty Luther, who shares the stance of Augustine and Calvin, but whose many statements on idolatry have never before been gathered together or considered in such a substantial, accessible, and pastorally fruitful manner. In carefully drawing out Luther's triune-shaped theology of idolatry and applying it to the contemporary scene, Dr. Lockwood reminds us of at least two realities. First, five hundred years after sparking the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther is still to be studied with great profit. Second, each of us is an idolater at heart and in need of the liberating love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Given the light that is shed upon Luther's theology as a whole and the fact that readers will find themselves pointed afresh to Christ and the Gospel, I truly hope this helpful and stimulating volume will be read by many within (and well beyond) evangelical Lutheranism.

—Mark P. Ryan
Adjunct Professor of Religion and Culture, Covenant Theological Seminary
Director, Francis A. Schaeffer Institute

Today, secularism is seen as social policy, agnosticism and atheism appear to be respectable, and the ranks of the "nones" are swelling, while indifference to religious views and affiliations grows. So at first glance, idolatry is an unpromising topic for the church's life and witness. But, as Michael Lockwood shows, a deeper look at idolatry, especially through the eyes of Martin Luther, is revealing and compelling. Tying together many strands and uncovering varied connections in Luther's thought on false gods, Lockwood presents a rich trinitarian account of idolatry and uses it to uncover and overcome the idols hiding in plain sight today.

—Joel P. Okamoto, Th.D.
Waldemar and Mary Griesbach Professor of Systematic Theology
Chairman, Department of Systematic Theology
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO

The Unholy Trinity

It is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol. . . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.

—Luther, Large Catechism I 2–3.

For You are my God [Psalm 143:10]. That is, I do not make for myself an idol out of my wisdom and righteousness, as my enemies do; instead, I cling to Your grace and receive from You wisdom and righteousness, which are found in You and endure forever.

—Luther, *The Seven Penitential Psalms* [1525], WA 18:527.34–37 = LW 14:202.

The highest forms of religion and holiness, and the most fervent forms of devotion of those who worship God without the Word and command of God, are idolatry. . . . every such form of religion, which worships God without His Word and command, is idolatry. The more spiritual and holy it appears to be, the more dangerous and destructive it is; for it deflects men from faith in Christ and causes them to rely on their own powers, works, and righteousness.

—Luther, *Galatians Commentary* [1535], LW 27:87–88 = WA 40.ii:110.14–25.

The Unholy Trinity

Martin Luther against the Idol of Me, Myself, and I

Michael A. Lockwood

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Abbreviations

LC	Large Catechism
LW	Luther, Martin. Luther's Works, American Edition. 56 Volumes. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86.
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism
SD	Solid Declaration
WA	Luther, Martin. "Schriften." Part 1 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 88 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. luther.chadwyck.com.
WA BR	Luther, Martin. "Briefwechsel." Part 3 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. Part 3, 18 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. luther.chadwyck.com.
WA DB	Luther, Martin. "Die Deutsche Bibel." Part 4 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 15 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. luther.chadwyck.com.
WA TR	Luther, Martin. "Tischreden." Part 3 of *Luthers Werke im WWW: Weimarer Ausgabe*. 6 Vols. Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2000–2010. luther.chadwyck.com.
WLS	Luther, Martin. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*. Compiled by Ewald M. Plass. St. Louis: Concordia, 1959.

Abstract

As Christians we know that Christ is the solution to the human plight. Yet what exactly is this plight? And why do so many people feel no need for the solution he provides? Luther's answer is that we feel no need for the true God until we are disenchanted with the false gods we have put in his place, which we think can provide all we need.

This book provides a trinitarian account of Luther's theology of idolatry, and is the first comprehensive systematic study of this area of Luther's thought. It then uses this account as a tool for understanding contemporary society and its resistance to the gospel. Luther's view—that anything we fear, love, or trust more than the true God is effectively our god—is widely applicable to the contemporary Western world, and unmasks the religious nature of many of our ostensibly secular commitments.

In particular, Luther can teach us that: (1) the self-seeking and self-reliant self is always the greatest idol and the driving force behind other idols; and (2) when we refuse to fear, love, and trust the true God we are compelled to find substitutes for him and all the work he does for us in his plan of salvation. This means finding substitutes for the Father and his work of providence, the Son and his work of redemption, and the Holy Spirit and his work of enlightening those who believe. It also means replacing God as the goal of our life and the object of our love. Applied to contemporary society, Luther's analysis reveals things like human activism, the cult of self-esteem, human rationalism, and the pursuit of personal happiness to be key idols, as we seek to provide for ourselves, to justify ourselves, to walk in the light of our own understanding, and to make the world revolve around us and our desires. Only when the futility of these projects is exposed can the gospel be heard as good news: that the true God gives us by grace all the good things we have vainly sought to provide for ourselves.

Introduction

Why Study Luther on Idolatry?

Spiritual Diagnosis

The first step in treating any disease is an accurate diagnosis. A wrong one may kill you; it certainly will not cure you. This is true not only for diseases of the body, but also for those of the soul. If we as Christians are to be servants of the great Physician, bringing his healing to a world sick with sin (Luke 5:31–32), then it is vital that we recognize the true nature of this illness.

So what diagnostic tools do we have at our disposal? Do we rely on human powers of analysis, and gravitate toward human disciplines like psychology, sociology, and philosophy to lay bare the secrets of our souls? If so, we may gain many insights, but we will not get to the bottom of our problem. As the prophet Jeremiah tells us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17:9). Or as the psalmist asks, "Who can discern his errors?" (Ps 19:2). Yet "he [God] knows the secrets of the heart" (Ps 44:21; cf. Ps 139:1–4).

This book is based on the conviction that if we are to truly understand ourselves and our spiritual malaise, then God must reveal to us the true nature of our disease. This means that we must rely on the diagnostic tool that God himself has given us—his Law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. This Law acts as a mirror to show us our sin, and thereby our need for repentance, forgiveness, and renewal. This "theological" use of the Law makes the Ten Commandments an indispensable tool for understanding what ails us and our society.

This is especially true for the First Commandment, "I am the Lord your God. . . . You shall have no other gods" (Exod 20:2–3; Deut 5:6–7). This commandment is not only first in number but also first in importance. When we put first things first, and seek first the Lord and his kingdom, then secondary things fall into place. Not only does he provide us with everything we need, but our hearts also find their right alignment. If we fear, love, and trust the true God above everything else, then we will delight in following his will and

keeping the rest of his commandments. Yet the reverse happens when we set our hearts on other things as if they are more important than he is. We then look for help in the wrong places, and the rest of God's commandments become burdensome, since we are ruled by these new allegiances instead of by love for him and his will. This means that not only do we lose sight of the most important thing in life, but the rest of life starts to unravel as well.

Like all the commandments, the First Commandment both defines what is good and reveals what is evil. Positively, it tells us what spiritual health is: to fear, love, and trust the true God above everything else. Negatively, it exposes the disease of our idolatry. That is, it reveals our propensity to turn things that are not God into false gods by investing in them the fear, love, and trust that belong only to God.[1] As painful as it may be, this exposure is the first step in our healing. In this way God drives us to Christ, who alone can restore our fellowship with the true God, and thereby make us whole.

DETHRONING CHRIST'S RIVALS

The true and living God has always opposed all pretenders to his throne. In the Old Testament, he rescued his people from slavery to the gods of Egypt (Exod 12:12; Num 33:4; Josh 24:14),[2] prohibited them from worshipping any gods besides him (Exod 20:3–6), and sent his prophets to battle the gods of the surrounding nations that threatened to seduce his people. Likewise, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul describes conversion to Christ as turning from idols to serve the living God (1 Thess 1:9; Gal 4:8–9). In the Western world today we are more likely to talk about conversion as turning from sin to faith in Christ. This, too, is a biblical way of speaking. Nevertheless, the danger with it is that we forget that idolatry lies at the heart of all sin, and therefore we always need to repent of more than just the obvious sins we see on the surface. Repentance that goes right to the heart must also include renunciation of the underlying idolatry. Therefore we cannot convert anyone without disenchanting them from their idols in some way.

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[1] This is how Luther defines idolatry (SC I 2 = WA 30/1:354; LC I 1–25 = WA 30/1:133.1–136.3), and is the understanding of idolatry that I will be using throughout this book. When referring to cultic images, the other common meaning of the word *idol*, I will call them cultic images, unless I am stressing their role as false gods rather than their nature as images.

[2] Pharaoh was regarded by the Egyptians to be divine (Samson Najovits, *Egypt, Trunk of the Tree: A Modern Survey of an Ancient Land* [New York: Algora, 2003–4], 2:13, 71–75). He was also responsible for all state religion and for the maintenance of Ma'at, the sacred order the Egytians believed was essential for their nation's flourishing (ibid., 2:137; Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001], 3–6). Therefore service of Pharaoh entailed service of the gods of Egypt, and victory over Pharaoh was victory over these gods.

Missionaries to foreign lands have long observed that the existing religious commitments of a culture have a significant impact on people's receptiveness to the Gospel. For instance, animists around the world have readily embraced the Christian faith in large numbers,[3] whereas Muslims and Buddhists have been far more resistant. In other words, Christian missionaries have found it easier to disenchant animists of their old gods than to destroy people's faith in Allah or the teachings of the Buddha. Likewise, missionaries to India have had significant success in converting low caste Hindus, but have struggled to convert those from high castes. This makes sense, as the gods of the Hindu pantheon offer more to a Brahmin than to a Dahlit.

Pastor Simon Mackenzie, the first Lutheran missionary to be sent from Australia to Thailand, recently returned to Australia after eight years of service. Although Christian missionaries have been working in Thailand for centuries they have gained only a small number of converts. However, my friend was working in a new mission field among the Lua people of northern Thailand. These people have been converting to Christianity at a rapid rate. So what is the difference? Most obviously, the ethnic Thais are Buddhists, whereas the Lua are traditionally animists.

Experiences like these should not lead us to conclude that attempts to convert Buddhists or Muslims or high caste Hindus are a waste of time. These efforts still have some success, and Christ calls us to bring the Gospel to all people. Nevertheless, they should help us to see that the existing gods of a culture matter when it comes to evangelism. Christian proclamation always assaults these gods, as Christ comes to dethrone all rivals. Therefore any competent missionary should understand the particular gods that he or she is up against and the barrier they present to the Christian faith. This is just as true in the Western world as in any foreign land.

I was born and raised in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where my parents were part of a large Lutheran effort to bring the Gospel to the people of PNG. The first Lutheran missionary to PNG was sent from Australia in 1886, and many more followed. It is now estimated that there are 1.3 million Lutherans in PNG, many of whom refer to the Lutheran Church of Australia as "mother church." Yet the LCA, of which I now serve as a pastor, boasts less than 75,000

[3] It is true that animists who convert to Christianity frequently combine their new faith with vestiges of their old beliefs. This leads many Christians in the West to question the genuineness of these conversions by saying things like "African Christianity is a mile wide and an inch deep." While this is a legitimate concern, we should hesitate to dismiss the faith of these people simply because we see elements of syncretism in their beliefs, or because we see many nominal converts along with the genuine ones. We have no shortage of nominal Christians in the West, and none of us is free from syncretism. Before we judge, we should remember that syncretism is easier to see in others than in ourselves. This book is an attempt to open the eyes of Western Christians to our own syncretistic beliefs.

active members and is both aging and declining in numbers. So why have our efforts to bring the Gospel to our own people borne so little fruit, when our endeavors overseas have yielded so much? It is not as if we have tried less hard to reach our own people. So why are secular Australians so resistant to the Gospel? And why is this story being repeated around the world, with churches in the Western world struggling while churches in many other parts of the world are flourishing? A significant part of the answer is the barriers that the gods of secular Western culture create for the Gospel, and our frequent failure to even identify these gods let alone address them.

THE NEGLECT OF IDOLATRY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL

Idolatry is a much-neglected topic in contemporary theology in the Western world. Even scholars who are interested in how the Gospel relates to the wider culture rarely talk about the idolatry of the culture or seek to analyze society through this lens.[4] Instead, they have made many attempts to analyze and engage with contemporary people using human tools derived from sociology, psychology, and philosophy. They have discussed at length whether people are modern, postmodern, post Constantinian, post Christian, or post postmodern. They have talked about target audiences such as the Baby Boomers or Generation X or Generation Y. They have debated the merits of evidentialist vs. presupposionalist apologetics, and whether we should use a foundationalist or a non-foundationalist epistemology. They have discussed different theories of communication and education, proposed strategies for managing our resources and programs more effectively, and attempted to repackage the church to grab people's attention and appeal to their felt needs. I do not want to dismiss all this talk. When such discussions are conducted wisely and kept in perspective, they can be examples of faithfully using the gifts of reason God has given us. Yet they cannot replace the analysis of the human situation God has given us in his Word. Only God can look past all outward appearances to see the human heart and its plight clearly, and only he can provide the solution. Therefore, if we truly want to understand the fallen state of our society and the people we hope to reach, we cannot ignore the analysis of their situation given in the Bible. Central to this analysis is the First Commandment.

It is easy to see why people would overlook idolatry as a useful category for understanding secular Western society. After all, in a secular society peo-

[4] When I reviewed the contents of leading missiological journals from recent decades I found hardly any mention of idolatry. One author even suggested that secularization and atheism have had the benefit of clearing away the idols from society and thereby preparing the field for the proclamation of the unknown God, as if secularism does not have idols of its own (Tomas Halik, "The Soul of Europe: An Altar to the Unknown God," *International Review of Mission* 95 [Jul–Oct. 2006]: 269).

ple's primary commitments are worldly rather than religious, at least at first glance. Few people in our society bow down to gods of wood or stone in a literal sense, and the society as a whole claims to have no public commitments to any gods. Furthermore, while religions besides Christianity are a part of the private commitments of a significant minority within our multi-cultural society, they are not the main things that draw people away from the Christian faith. Therefore it is easy to conclude that the study of idolatry is not much use in our context. Only when we reflect more deeply on the First Commandment—and see that anything we fear, love, or trust more than the true God is an idolatrous substitute for him—does its diagnostic value become plain. We have no shortage of things that we love and trust more than the true and living God, and the First Commandment unmasks the religious nature of these ostensibly secular commitments.

A second reason why idolatry has rarely been utilized as an analytical tool is the lack of a systematic framework for this analysis. If idolatry is to function as a diagnostic tool for assessing false belief, then we need to do more than simply catalogue idols. We also need to reflect on the underlying spiritual dynamic that drives people to create idols, and causes these idols to have such power. If people latch onto idols at random without any rationale for their devotion, then a theology of idolatry will be of limited diagnostic value. Yet if we can discern a deep structure to idolatry we can use it to understand and predict many hidden aspects of the heart.

In my training as a Lutheran pastor I was taught to use the Ten Commandments diagnostically, to expose my own sin and the sins of my people to prepare us for the hearing of the Gospel. I also learned from Luther's Large Catechism to treat the First Commandment as primary, and to see idolatry at the root of all sin. Yet, because I lacked a systematic framework for analyzing idolatry, I struggled in my early years of ministry to deal with contemporary idolatry in more than a superficial way. I was able to identify obvious idols like money and sex and power, but my thinking rarely went deeper than that. When I discussed this topic with colleagues, I discovered that their thinking was no deeper than mine. Therefore it is no surprise that we only put this category to limited use.

Since then I have discovered a handful of contemporary scholars who have bucked the general trend and used idolatry as the primary category for talking about the false beliefs and commitments of our culture. Some of these scholars have made significant steps toward developing a framework for analyzing this idolatry, and inspired me to see that such a framework is possible.

Yet none of them has proposed a framework that is truly comprehensive, and their work calls for further development.[5]

LUTHER'S CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTANDING IDOLATRY

It is here that Luther can be helpful. Scattered throughout his writings are literally thousands of references to idolatry, from comments on idolatry in the biblical text to reflections on how idolatry manifests itself in a culture where the obvious gods of paganism have been replaced by subtle idols of the heart. When Luther's thoughts are drawn together in a systematic way they provide a framework for analyzing idolatry that is both comprehensive and profound.

Moreover, Luther's theology of idolatry is solidly grounded in Scripture. In common with his general approach to theology, Luther resisted philosophical speculations regarding idolatry and instead developed his views primarily through his close reading of Scripture.[6] This lends credibility to his thought, at least for those who share Luther's respect for biblical authority. Furthermore, this devotion to Scripture means his thoughts share in the richness and clarity of biblical truth, and are able to transcend his age to speak to ours as well. Luther's genius is his ability to draw together biblical teachings and draw out their implications in ways that might seem obvious once pointed out, yet escape the attention of most of us when we read the Bible by ourselves.

Unfortunately, Luther's thoughts on idolatry are not readily accessible. This is partly because Luther never drew them together into one place or laid them out in systematic form. The closest he came to doing this was in his treatment of the First Commandment in his Large Catechism. Yet here he was acutely aware that he was producing material for family heads to teach to their households, and did not want to confuse the children with his more subtle insights.[7] If one wants to find his theology for mature adults, such as he taught to his students at the university, then one needs to look elsewhere, particularly his biblical commentaries.

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[5] Some of the more helpful works include those by Richard Keyes, Charles Taber, David Powlison, Paul Achtemeier, Greg Beale, and Timothy Keller that are listed in the bibliography.

[6] From early on in his career Luther's stated goal was to eschew philosophical speculation and strive for a biblical theology (*Letter to Johann Braun* [1509], WA BR 1:17.42–46). This led him to delve into Scripture like few before or after him. As the Luther scholar Eugene Klug points out, Luther took an oath of fealty to Scripture when he was made a Doctor of Theology in 1512, and considered it his sacred duty for his whole life to be a Doctor of the Holy Scriptures (Eugene F. Klug, "Word and Scripture in Luther Studies Since World War II," in *Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives: Viewpoints from Trinity Journal*, ed. Douglas Moo [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997], 117). The more I have studied Luther and the Scriptures in parallel the more I have come to realize what an outstanding exegete Luther was, and the extent to which his theological insights emerged from prolonged wrestling with Scripture.

[7] LC I 23 = WA 30/1:135.27.

The other reason this area of his thought is not readily accessible is that it has been largely neglected by Luther scholars. While most discussions of Luther's theology mention how important the First Commandment was to him, scholars rarely go beyond the Large Catechism to give a more detailed treatment of his views on idolatry. Many Luther scholars have dealt with idolatry tangentially as part of a discussion of faith, worship, the theology of the cross, or the catechisms, yet few have made Luther's theology of idolatry their specific focus or attempted to draw it together in a systematic way.[8]

The first goal of this book is to do exactly that, to examine the copious number of places in Luther's writings where he talks about the First Commandment, or uses terms like *idolum*, *idolatria*, *Abgott*, and *Abgötterei*, and to pull his thoughts together in a systematic and accessible way. When one attempts to do this, it becomes evident that although Luther generally did not write in a systematic manner he thought in an orderly and consistent way, with key themes and insights that tied all his thoughts together. In particular, we can learn from Luther that:

1. Since idolatry lies at the heart of all sin, idolatry is everyone's problem.
2. The human self is always the most significant idol that lies at the heart of all other outward expressions of false belief and devotion.

[8] The most significant exception is a PhD dissertation completed at Drew University: Tae Jun Suk, *The Theology of Martin Luther between Judaism and Roman Catholicism: A Critical-Historical Evaluation of Luther's Concept of Idolatry* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2001). However, Suk is more interested in an historical approach to Luther's theology on idolatry, and how it explains his polemics against Catholics and Jews, than he is in giving a systematic account of Luther's thought that can be of use to us today. Other works that discuss some aspect of Luther's theology of idolatry include: Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1954], 67–84, 125–48; Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 65–73; Charles P. Arand, "Luther on the God Behind the First Commandment," *Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (Winter 1994): 397–423; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch, ed. Victor I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 46–55; Michael Parsons, "Luther on Isaiah 40: the Gospel and Mission," in *Text and Task*, ed. Michael Parsons (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 69–70; B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 100–113; John A. Maxfield, "Martin Luther and Idolatry," in *The Reformation as Christianization: Essays on Scott Hendrix's Christianization Thesis*, ed. Anna Marie Johnson and John A. Maxfield [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012], 141–68; Ingemar Öberg, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007), 37–81; Albrecht Peters, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms: Ten Commandments*, ed. Charles P. Schaum, trans. Holger K. Sonntag (St Louis: Concordia, 2009), 103–48; Randall C. Zachman, "The Idolatrous Religion of Conscience," in *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 19–39.

3. When people refuse to fear, love, and trust the true God they are compelled to find substitutes for him and all the essential roles he plays in human life. This means finding substitutes for all three members of the Trinity and all the work they do in God's administration of his creation.

My aim in pulling these thoughts together is not primarily historical. Instead, it is to retrieve from Luther what is of value for us in understanding idolatry today. This leads to the second goal of this book, which is to engage with Western culture—as described by contemporary psychology, sociology, philosophy, and theology—to illustrate how Luther's thoughts can be reappropriated to unmask and critique contemporary idolatry. The goal is not to give an exhaustive account of our culture's idolatry, but to demonstrate the usefulness of Luther's framework for analyzing idolatry, and to stimulate further thought and discussion. To limit the scope, most of the examples will be drawn from U.S. society, although occasional references will be made to my home country of Australia, which shares similar issues.

The final goal of this book is to help to focus the church's proclamation of Law and Gospel in contemporary society. If we proclaim the Law in terms of the other commandments, without identifying how our sins against these commandments relate back to our failure to keep the First Commandment (i.e., our idolatry), we have only proclaimed the Law superficially without going to the heart of the problem. If our diagnosis of the problem through the lens of the Law is superficial, then our administration of God's remedy in the Gospel will also be superficial. Therefore an understanding of idolatry is vital to our proclamation of Law and Gospel, and our efforts to call people in our society to repentance and faith. The ultimate reason to study idolatry is not to wallow in negativity, but to bring freedom through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When I first became interested in the topic of idolatry my interest was sparked by a concern for evangelism. I wanted to understand the non-Christians around us as a first step to bringing the Gospel to them. Yet the more I studied the idols of those outside the church, the more I realized that I struggled with the same idols, as did the rest of the church. Therefore an understanding of idolatry is just as useful in shaping the message we give to ourselves and our own people as it is in focusing our proclamation to outsiders. If Luther can sharpen our thinking regarding the idolatry of our culture, this means he can aid us with every part of Gospel proclamation: from evangelism to preaching to catechesis to pastoral care.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In part one of this book I will introduce the three key themes identified above that give shape to Luther's theology of idolatry. I will also briefly sketch

out the biblical justification for understanding idolatry this way. In parts two, three, and four I will look in more detail at how Luther develops these themes in relation to each person of the Trinity, with each part focusing on a different Article of the Creed. Each chapter in these parts will focus on a different aspect of God's saving plan. It will begin with a summary of Luther's thought, proceed to an analysis of contemporary Western society in this light, and conclude with some thoughts on how this can aid us in proclaiming the Gospel.

PART ONE

LUTHER'S REAPPROPRIATION OF A BIBLICAL THEME

Chapter One

Idolatry Is Everyone's Problem

Idolatry is everyone's problem, because the true God looms so large over all of life that everyone has to deal with him. If God were distant and uninvolved in human affairs, or a figment of wistful imagination like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, then it would be possible to live as truly secular people, and simply ignore God most of the time without this causing any difficulties. But the true God is not like this. When we turn our backs on him he still casts an enormous shadow over life. This means that even the lives of the most adamant atheists are shaped by what they seek to deny, and their attempts to compensate for that they claim does not exist.

Luther recognized that the triune God plays too big a part in human life for us to be able to abandon him without attempting to fill the resultant void with something. He writes, "The human heart must necessarily have something to love, and something to believe and trust in."[1] The one thing we cannot do is live with a spiritual vacuum. Therefore idolatry is not optional. We may not think of ourselves as religious, but if we refuse to fear, love, and trust the true God in any part of our lives we are compelled to construct some idol to take his place.

Luther considered this idolatry to be the fundamental human problem, and the root cause of all human sin. Therefore he spoke of the First Commandment as the primary commandment, and "the chief source and fountainhead that flows into all the rest."[2] By this he means that when we keep the First Commandment—by fearing, loving, and trusting the true God—we will also be happy to do all the other things he calls us to do, such as revering his name, delighting in his Word, honoring father and mother, and doing good to our neighbors. Conversely, whenever we break any of these other command-

[1] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, trans. Henry Cole (2 vols.; London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 1:141 = WA 5:104.14–15.

[2] LC I 329 = WA 30/1:181.21–22; cf. Luther, *Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, 2:45 = WA 5:392.26–35; LC I 321–28 = WA 30/1:180.3–181.24; LW 1:329; 9:69–70; 13:150; 31:353; 34:154.

ments it is evident that we have a deeper problem with the First Commandment at that point in our lives. This not only means we have failed to love and trust the Lord as we ought, it also means we have put something else in his place by prioritizing it ahead of him. For example, the Lord commands us to tell the truth, yet despite this "all mankind are liars" (Ps 116:11). So why do we lie? Perhaps we lie because we are afraid of what others will think of us if they know the truth. In that case, at that point in our lives human opinion is more important to us than the God of truth, and we have turned human opinion into an idol. In a similar way, one form of idolatry or another lies beneath every sin we commit. Therefore everyone with a sin problem has a deeper idolatry problem; and since we all sin, idolatry is everyone's problem.

IS THIS BIBLICAL?

Instead of merely focusing on those types of idolatry that involve belief in supernatural beings or the use of cultic images, Luther defines an idol as anything that supplants God as the focus of our trust and devotion.[3] He challenges us to see that we all live by faith, and that all faith commitments are ultimately religious in nature, regardless of how secular they may appear at first glance. Our faith must either be centered in the one true God, or else it will be centered in some idol that takes his place. Such a broad understanding of idolatry makes it broadly applicable, and is necessary if we are to use the category of idolatry to critique things like the secularism or the dis-incarnate spirituality that are prevalent in Western culture.

Yet is this legitimate from a biblical perspective? Has Luther enlarged the category of idolatry to the point where it is no longer the same phenomenon that is dealt with in the Bible? Or does the Bible itself talk about idolatry in these terms?

The main scriptural warrant for looking at idolatry this way is provided by the words of the *Shema* (Deut 6:4–9),[4] as they are recorded in Deuteronomy and reiterated by Jesus in the Gospels: "You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30; cf. Deut 6:5; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27; 1 Cor 8:5–6). This way of stating the First Commandment suggests that anything we are more devoted to than God has usurped his place. Furthermore, there is precedent in Scripture for calling anything that supplants him in this way a false

[3] LC I 2–28 = WA 30/1:133.1–136.26.

[4] These verses, either by themselves or recited together with Deut 11:13–21 and Num 15:37–41, are known as the *Shema,* and have been used as a creed in Jewish liturgies from biblical times up to the present day. The title *Shema* comes from the first word of Deut 6:4, and means "hear" in Hebrew.

god or idol. Habakkuk says that the Babylonians made their own might their god (Hab 1:11). When the people of Judah put their confidence in their alliance with Egypt to keep them safe instead of trusting in the Lord, Isaiah accused them of rebelling against the Lord and trusting in a false god (Isa 31:1–3). In Ephesians and Colossians, Paul calls πλεονεξία (*pleonexia*) idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). Πλεονεξία literally means "wanting more." This usually means the desire for more wealth, but can include any kind of covetousness such as the desire for more power, fame, pleasure, and so on.[5] Therefore all these "secular" things can be idols as far as the New Testament is concerned (e.g., Luke 16:13). In Philippians, Paul talks about the enemies of Christ whose "god is their belly" since their "minds [are] set on earthly things" (Phil 3:19). Finally, although he has not made any mention of gods of wood or stone, John summarizes his First Epistle by concluding, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." Earlier he had spoken about the love of the world (1 John 2:15), "the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and pride in what one has and does" (1 John 2:16; author's translation),[6] the attachment to our possessions that prevents us from giving to those in need (1 John 3:17), and the devil's deceptions that lead people away from Christ (1 John 2:3–6, 22–23; 3:4–10; 4:1–6; 5:19). His conclusion reveals that his theme all along was idolatry, and that he regarded all of these as idols.

Once we start to look at idolatry this way, it becomes evident that idolatry is an enormous theme in the Bible. In fact, a strong case can be made that the First Commandment and how we relate to it is the number one theme in Scripture. This is not to downgrade other themes such as Law and Gospel, but to point out that the First Commandment provides the essential background for such themes as judgment and grace. This is particularly clear in the Old Testament. The teachers of the Law in Jesus' day recognized that the command to worship God alone, as expressed in the First Commandment and the Shema, is the most important commandment in the Law (Luke 10:25–27). Jesus concurred that this is the linchpin of the Old Testament (Matt 22:24–40). Unless we see the importance of the First Commandment, most of the Old Testament remains opaque: from the way the Deuteronomic history (Joshua–2 Kings) views Israel's faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God as the decisive factor in determining the course of its history, to the way the

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[5] Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 6:266–68.

[6] Βίος (*bios*) can mean either mean "manner of life" or "means of subsistence" (Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 141). Therefore "pride of life" can mean both pride in the way we live or pride in our possessions.

prophets interpret the exile, to God's rejection of Saul (for sins that are trivial or perhaps even commendable from a modern secular perspective), to his commendation of the adulterer and murderer David as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Kings 11:4; 14:8; Acts 13:21–22).

While the Old Testament prophets never stop railing against idolatry, at first glance there appears to be far less mention of idolatry in the New Testament. Yet here we must keep in mind two things. First, after the Babylonian exile the Jews no longer bowed down to gods of wood or stone. Therefore, if idolatry was present among the Jews of Jesus' day, it was of a more subtle kind, which might not immediately appear to be idolatry. Second, the Old Testament is always in the background for the New Testament writers. Only when one is sensitive to this do a number of key references to idolatry become apparent. For instance, Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9–10 in all four Gospels, as does Luke in his conclusion to Acts:

> Go, and say to this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive." Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. (Isa 6:9–10)[7]

A reader who is well versed in the Old Testament will note that Isaiah 6 is a fulfillment of Psalm 115 and its parallel passage in Psalm 135. Psalm 115 reads,

> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. (Ps 115:4–8)

It then becomes evident that God's judgment on Israel in Isaiah 6 was not a random judgment for sin, but a specific judgment for idolatry. God was forcing them to experience the natural consequence of their idolatry, to become as blind, deaf, and lifeless as their idols.[8] Therefore, when Jesus quotes and applies these words to the people of his day, he is suggesting that their hardness of hearing is a result of their idolatry. Likewise, when Jesus says of

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[7] This passage is quoted in Matt 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; 8:17–18; Luke 8:10; John 12:39–40; and Acts 28:26–27. It is also alluded to in the common New Testament refrain, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt 13:9; Rev 2:7 i.a.). Cf. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 163, 198–200, 271.

[8] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 36–64.

the Pharisees, "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt 15:9), an astute reader will observe that he is comparing the worship of the Pharisees to the idolatry condemned by Isaiah and the self-chosen worship of Jeroboam, who set up the golden calves (Isa 29:13; 2 Kings 12:25–33; 2 Chron 13:8–12).

Paul continues with this theme by charging his fellow Jews with idolatry, despite the fact that they did not bow down to gods of wood or stone. This is most obvious in Romans 1–3. Here Paul begins by censuring the gentiles for their idolatry, but then says that the Jews share the same guilt. He brings this to a head in Rom 3:9–12, where he says, "Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all." For "no one seeks for God. All have turned aside." This is a stunning conclusion, that the Jews, with all their zeal for God's Law, were not seeking God. So what were they seeking? Perhaps they imagined that godliness is a means for gain (1 Tim 6:5). Perhaps they were seeking human praise (Matt 6:5, 16; 23:5). Perhaps they were so focused on justifying themselves through their own rules and traditions that they had forgotten what the true God requires (Matt 15:9). Perhaps their religion was more focused on manipulating God into giving them the things they really wanted, such as wealth or political power, than it was about seeking him (Luke 16:14; John 11:47–50). One way or another what they were really seeking was some idol, not God. In Galatians, Paul makes a similar accusation against the Judaizers.[9] He says that if Christians think they must be justified on the basis of Jewish laws and ceremonies they have turned from God and become enslaved to that which is not God (Gal 4:8–10).

From this it should be evident that when Luther treats idolatry as a central theological theme, and extends it to anything that usurps God's place in our hearts, he is faithfully echoing Scripture. If idolatry was a problem for first century Jews, who would never dream of bowing to a pagan image, then it is legitimate for Luther to conclude that idolatry was a problem for Christians in his day. Likewise, it is legitimate for us to extend this analysis to the secularism that effects people today. The book of Revelation tells us that the bulk of humankind will never repent of their idols until the last day (Rev 9:20). Therefore idolatry is a problem for all times and places.

[9] The Judaizers were Jewish Christians in the first century who wanted to insist that Gentiles could only become Christians if they submitted to circumcision and other parts of the Old Testament Law.

GRACE AND FAITH: THE FUNDAMENTAL INGREDIENTS OF HUMAN LIFE

Luther's contention that idolatry is the fundamental human problem flows naturally from his understanding of the God of the Bible and his relationship with humankind. The author of Hebrews presents all of Israel's history from Abel to Christ as a story of faith: that is, of a God who makes gracious and reliable promises, and of human life that is shaped by people's trust or distrust of these promises (Heb 3:1–4:16; 11:1–12:2). In the same way, Luther interprets the whole sweep of the biblical narrative as the story of God the gracious Giver, who calls us to live by faith in him as he gives us himself and all we need.

The main character in this story is God, the exceedingly rich Giver. Luther spells this out in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* of 1528:

> These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts.
>
> But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it. He does this both inwardly and outwardly—inwardly by means of faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly through the gospel, Baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, through which as through three means or methods he comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation.[10]

Here we can see how Luther talks about all of life—from our original birth as God's creatures to our new birth as his children—as a gift of the God who is the exclusive Giver of every good thing. Furthermore, we can see how God's primary gift to us is himself.

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[10] LW 37:366 = WA 26:505.38–506.12.

As the other characters in this story, our lives are shaped by our relationship to this gracious Giver. God's nature as the Giver of every good thing compels us to relate to him as recipients of his gifts. Since God gives from pure generosity, without any merit in us, it is right for us to thank and love him in return. Since we remain dependent on him for his ongoing provision, we must live by faith in him or else flounder. Since our faithlessness has caused us to flounder ever since the fall, only a restoration of faith can bring us healing. This all means that the call of the First Commandment to love and trust God with all that is in us is not an arbitrary imposition, but the only just and sane response to God and his gifts.[11]

Luther talks about how central faith is to all human life in his *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536). The philosophical tradition defined human beings as rational animals. Instead of accepting this definition, Luther consulted the words of St. Paul, "we hold that a person is to be justified by faith apart from works" (Rom 3:28).[12] On this basis he defined the human person as *hominem iustificari fide*, "a human being is to be justified by faith."[13] By giving this definition he is saying that our need to live by faith is not merely one aspect of our nature among others, but the most fundamental characteristic of our being. He then spells out three dimensions to this: only through God our Creator can we receive life;[14] only through God our Redeemer can we be freed from sin, death, and the devil, and receive eternal life;[15] and only through God can our lives find their glory and fulfillment as he remolds and perfects us in his image.[16] Therefore we must live by faith when it comes to every aspect of our lives: our creation, redemption, and final glorification.

If faith is really as central to human life as Luther's reading of Scripture would indicate, then whenever we refuse to live by true faith in the true God we inevitably live by false faith in false gods. This is as much the case in a secular society as in a pagan one. To illustrate this, consider the observation of Charles Taber, the past president of the American Society of Missiology and the Association of Professors of Mission. Taber notes that ancient pagan divinities were often personifications of different powers in the world that are

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[11] I am indebted to Oswald Bayer for this perspective on Luther's theology (Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008], 95–105). Bayer summarizes Luther's theology of the Trinity as a "theology of categorical gift" (ibid., 254).

[12] As quoted by Luther in *Disputation Concerning Man* (WA 39/1:176, thesis 32). Author's own translation.

[13] WA 39/1:176, thesis 32. Author's own translation.

[14] *Disputation Concerning Man* (1536), Theses 14, 17, and 21 (LW 34:138 = WA 39/1:175–76).

[15] *Disputation Concerning Man,* Theses 22–34 (LW 34:138–39 = WA 39/1:176–77).

[16] *Disputation Concerning Man,* Theses 35–38 (LW 34:139 = WA 39/1:177).

real but not divine. People in our society rarely personify these powers in the same way, yet this does not mean we are any less fixated on harnessing them for our own advantage. People continue to worship Eros, the god of sexual pleasure; Dionysos, the god of wine and self-indulgence; Mammon, the god of wealth; Prometheus, the god of human power and achievement; and Mars, the god of race, land, and nation. In one regard these faith commitments are even more dangerous in a secular society, since they are generally not identified as idols, and people are invited to join the church without being asked to renounce them.[17] Luther urges us not to be fooled in this way.

[17] Charles R. Taber, "God vs. Idols: A Model of Conversion," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 3 (1987–88): 23–29.