

Martin Luther and the Flow of Faith

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All Christian teaching, work, and living can be summarized in a short and clear fashion by these two principles: faith and love. Thus a person stands between God and her neighbor and acts as a vessel or pipe through which she continually receives God's love from above and channels it to her neighbors below.¹

Martin Luther's radical and revolutionary understanding of God's love in Christ entails a new kind of theological language. He makes a decisive break with any notion that human beings cooperate, even at a minimal level, in their relationship with God. The self does not initiate a relationship with God nor does the self cooperate with grace in an ongoing attempt to complete a process begun by faith and only fulfilled by love. For Luther, divine love is dynamic, powerful, and even dangerous. He therefore needs a language to express the disruptive and surprising character of God's active presence in human life.

Luther will use a variety of word-pictures to communicate the reality of this love. Not surprisingly, many are drawn from scripture. Among his favorites are pairs of words laden with tension (and therefore generative) such as bondage/freedom or death/life. These express well his eschatological understanding of faith as something fresh and new. But perhaps overlooked is a family of words linked together by the flow of water. This essay will explore Luther's use of word-pictures connected with the images of "fountain" and "flow" or "overflowing."² I will argue that Luther finds these metaphors particularly congenial to his new understanding of justification by faith and the respective roles played by God and humanity. I will conclude with some systematic reflections on how the use of these "watery" words can help convey the dynamism of grace to listeners today.

A Watery World

We should begin by noting the prominent presence of water in Luther's own experience, beginning with his calling as an interpreter of scripture. Of course, water is everywhere in the biblical landscape—from the watery beginnings of Genesis 1 to the stream flowing from the throne of God in Revelation 22. And, in between, the text is, well, drenched with references to water. Among numerous examples there is the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the life-giving water from the rock as the Israelites traveled in the desert (Exodus 17), the allusion to God's people as those who are planted next to streams of water (Psalm 1), the healing waters of the pool of Siloam (John 9) and the frequent references in the New Testament to our being joined to Christ in baptism.

Luther collects these themes most dramatically in his so-called "flood prayer" (*Sindflutgebet*) for his baptismal liturgy. He underlines water's danger in the condemnation of the world in Noah's time and the drowning of Pharaoh and his army. He emphasizes water's saving power in the path of Israel through the Red Sea and the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. He even says the latter act has made all water a "saving flood and a rich and full washing away of all sins."³ Then the prayer funnels this story of Jesus and John the baptizer from fifteen hundred years ago directly into the life of the one being baptized. He or she now stands through baptism as the recipient of the same saving flood.

Of course, water is also reflected in Luther's baptismal theology. The incorporation of believers into the body of Christ in baptism is central for the Reformer. Oswald Bayer says that baptism is the "point of rupture between the old and new eon."⁴ David Lotz claims that baptism for Luther is "justification enacted."⁵ Because of the sacrament's centrality in his thinking we should not be surprised to discover references to flowing water as an analogy for God's love in his sermons on baptism.⁶ In his important 1519 sermon, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, he speaks of how God *pours* into the baptized his grace and Holy Spirit, which then go to work slaying the old person, a process that will only be complete on the last day.⁷ And in his preaching at the baptism of Bernhard of Anhalt, he speaks of the preacher as the "aspergillum" or the brush used to sprinkle

holy water on the congregation. How does this work? Luther says that by preaching the gospel the preacher sprinkles listeners with the precious blood of Christ that has been *poured* out for the sake of the whole world for the forgiveness of sin.⁸

The language of flow was often incorporated into mystical theology. Luther's affinity for the writings of Johannes Tauler has been documented.⁹ Tauler's sermons contain several references to the flow of God's love, most notably in his sermon on John 7:37 where Jesus says "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me." At one point he describes the love of Christ as akin to drinking from "the sweetest of all fountains, in long drafts, from the fountainhead which is God's paternal heart." Later in the same text he exclaims, "Oh what a delectable and pure stream the soul receives from this source! With all its powers the soul lets itself sink deep into these waters."¹⁰ There are similar references to God's love as water that flows or overflows in *The Theologia Germanica*, the work of an anonymous late medieval mystic. Luther was so impressed by this text that he saw editions into print in 1516 and 1518.¹¹

Finally, water was everywhere in Luther's own city of Wittenberg. The town had streams and rivers that bisected and surrounded it. Most prominent, of course, is the mighty Elbe River, which skirted the southern edge of the community. As might be expected, Luther makes frequent reference to this body of water that sustained the life of his town.¹² Also, as visitors to modern Wittenberg also know, there are two streams (the Rischenbach and Trajuhnscherbach) that flow freely through the center of the city. It was the daily experience of the townspeople to hear and see this rushing water in their midst, to say nothing of its many domestic uses.¹³ Finally, flowing streams were not the only source of water. Like most medieval towns, the main square and marketplace had a fountain. Given his surroundings, it is not hard to see how Luther's own fertile theological imagination, shaped so deeply by scripture, would also benefit from the presence of the rivers, streams, and fountains in his midst.

A Gracious Flow from God

As we think about Luther's use of the flow of water as a metaphor for grace, it is important to be mindful of the two ways this

happens. Luther will speak of the flow of God's love to us and to the world. And he will also underline how love flows through us to the neighbor. In other words, there is a vertical flow from heaven to earth which then causes a horizontal flow in the realm of creation. We will begin with the former, using the images of a fountain and stream.

It is not surprising that one of Luther's key early works uses the image of the fountain or well to refer to God's love in Christ. In his all-important introductory paragraphs in *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther says that the power in even a "small taste" of faith is a "spring of water welling up to eternal life," a reference to the words of Jesus in John 4:14.¹⁴ Thinking of God's love and mercy as a fountain is also found in *The Large Catechism*. In his explanation to the First Commandment he says that God is "an eternal fountain who overflows with pure goodness and from whom pours forth all that is truly good."¹⁵ Also in his explanation to the second petition of the Lord's Prayer ("May your kingdom come"), Luther exhorts his readers to be prodigal in their petitions because God's extravagant love is "like an eternal, inexhaustible fountain, which, the more it gushes forth and overflows, the more it continues to give."¹⁶ Perhaps Luther is most expansive on the image of God as a fountain in his preaching on the gospel of John. He comments on John 1:16 ("From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."):

Whoever wishes to be safeguarded from the devil's might and to escape sin and death must draw from this well, Christ; from him flows all salvation and eternal bliss. This fountain is inexhaustible; it is full of grace and truth before God; it never fails no matter how much we draw from it. Even if we all dip from it without stopping, it cannot be emptied, but it remains a perennial fount of all grace and truth, an unfathomable well, an eternal fountain. The more we draw from it, the more it gives. . . . Even if the whole world were to draw from this fountain enough grace and truth to transform all people into angels, still it would not lose as much as a drop. This fountain constantly overflows with sheer grace.¹⁷

And while it lacks the image of a fountain, mention should be made of Luther's comments in his *Heidelberg Disputation* on the flow of God's love. In Thesis 28 he contrasts the usual understanding of

love that comes into being because of being attracted to something with the divine love of God that does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it:

. . . the love of God which lives in a person loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore, sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.¹⁸

Besides the image of a fountain, Luther also pictures God's grace as a river or a stream. In his preaching on the saying of Jesus, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me . . ." (John 7:37), Luther notes that just as a natural thirst is a "good bartender," so a spiritual thirst is caused by the law. It creates a "hounded, tortured, and terrified conscience."¹⁹ But Christ comes and satisfies this deep longing. He does not do this merely with a spoon or tap it from a spigot. Instead, he brings a mighty stream of life that is able to flush throngs of devils out of the heart, just as the river Elbe carries refuse downstream.²⁰ Perhaps the power and force of God's river of grace is illustrated best in Luther's comment on the famous passage from Amos 5:24 ("Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"). In contemporary preaching and teaching this verse often functions as exhortation to the faithful to create a more equitable world. However, Luther sees it as harbinger of Christ and an example of the clout of God's Word: "He (Amos) is signifying the power and efficacy of the Word. You see, the Word bursts forth and runs even when the madness of Satan and its foes stand in its way. Whether the princes are willing or not, it breaks through like a stream."²¹

Swept into God's World

Fundamental to Luther's use of metaphors involving water, fountains, and streams is the idea that grace not only flows into us but also sweeps us out into the world. The movement or flow of how the vertical love of God moves us into the world of the neighbor is expressed clearly in the second part of *The Freedom of a Christian*:

This teaching [the gospel] tells us that the good we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all. Everyone should “put on” the neighbor and act toward him or her as if we were in the neighbor’s place. The good that flows from Christ flows into us . . . The good that we receive from Christ flows from us toward those who have need of it.²²

This idea is echoed in Luther’s sermons on John, where he picks up on the idea that God’s watery love runs into us and out to the neighbor. Luther has Jesus speaking thusly:

From me will flow streams of living water. Whoever comes to me I will not only satisfy and refresh their own thirst, but I will also enable them to be sturdy, earthen vessels endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They in turn will flow to other people in order to save and comfort them, just as they were served and comforted by me.²³

In his first commentary on Galatians, Luther links the flow of God’s love with a sense of freedom and spontaneity. The law can frustrate or block the love of a Christian, even when those admonitions aim at the improvement of the self or the well-being of the neighbor. But a heart liberated by the gospel streams forth into the world for the sake of the neighbor. It is no longer hemmed in by the law.

. . . how many describe what must be said, what must be done, what must be endured, what must be thought! . . . For how many commandments the tongue alone requires! How many the eyes! How many the ears! How many the hands! . . . When [through the gospel] the emotion of the heart has been set on its right course, the other parts no longer need any commandments, for everything flows out of this disposition of the heart.²⁴

In his *Table Talk*, Luther uses the flow of music to illustrate the difference between law and gospel:

What is law doesn’t make progress but what is gospel does. God has preached the gospel through music, too, as may be seen in Josquin [a contemporary composer], all of whose compositions flow freely, gently, and cheerfully, are not forced or cramped by rules, and are like the song of the finch.²⁵

It is important to note the contrast here between Luther and, as noted above, the mystical tradition that shaped his understanding of

flow. The mystics that Luther admired and knew best saw the goal of life as union with God. This can be seen in *The Theologia Germanica* where it says “the union is to be without will so that the created will flows into the eternal Will and ceases to be therein, becomes nought . . .”²⁶ Also Tauler, in a sermon reflecting on the “overflowing measure” (Luke 6:38) that accrues to the saints, says this reward “overflows with the riches of God’s gifts far beyond anything it had ever contained. Everything flows out of the measure and back to the source from which it originated, straight back to it, to lose itself there completely.”²⁷ In other words, the flow of grace comes from God and returns to God. But for Luther the flow moves *outward* toward the neighbor. Instead of the material world hindering the stream of grace it is actually the object of the flow.

Flow and Agency: Some Systematic Reflections

Luther’s use of metaphors involving fountain, streams, and flow would seem to work well with his understanding of a God who justifies the ungodly in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These word-images complement nicely Luther’s emphasis on the freedom of faith. Perhaps it might be useful at this point to make some further links with Luther’s time as well as the period of Lutheran orthodoxy immediately following the sixteenth century. We will conclude by looking at some trends in our own period.

Luther came to resist the more static understanding of grace that he inherited from the late-medieval church, whether that understanding stemmed from the so-called schools of thought known as the *via antiqua* or the *via moderna*. Scholastics often described God’s grace as something infused in the soul (*gratia infusa*).²⁸ But a sense of dynamism is missing in this structure because the stream of grace still requires an operation of the will to be effective. To continue using the water metaphors, it appears the stream will be blocked unless the human recipient operates a lever that releases the flow. Luther’s opposition to this anthropology was consistent throughout his life because it necessitated a self with at least some control over its destiny.²⁹ For him that was tantamount to asking drowning persons to save themselves. However, the gospel has the power to save despite our resistance. God’s Word overwhelms our self-righteousness and

proclaims an unfathomable love for the unlovable. There is no mystery as to why Luther found images like fountain, stream, and flow helpful as he tried to explain *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. They help capture the movement of the Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of rebellious and clueless sinners.

But as is well documented, this Aristotelian anthropology never disappeared among Lutherans and resurfaced with a vengeance in the period of Lutheran orthodoxy, defined here roughly as the seventeenth century.³⁰ This was especially evident in the development of what became known as the *ordo salutis* in the work of many systematians. The issue is no longer the intrusion of free will into the understanding of salvation. Rather, orthodox theologians attempt to define in detail the various parts of the effects of justification. While the schemas varied, most included a sequence like (1) vocation, (2) illumination, (3) regeneration or conversion, (4) mystical union, (5) renovation or renewal.³¹ Even though there were disavowals of these steps as distinct and separate states, the inevitable effect is to suggest some sort of progression that appears at odds with the spontaneity and flow of the gospel into the lives of its hearers.³² Such a sense of progressive continuity has to presume a continually existing self, a viewpoint that has at least some partial lines back to Aristotle.

Finally, as we move to our own time, we need to recognize the presence of “flow” in psychological and self-help literature. The most prominent advocate is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote a best-selling book called *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. This can be seen as one strain in the positive psychology movement that has developed over the last thirty years.³³ Seeking to move from a “disease” model to a “health” model, the emphasis falls on accentuating positive attitudes and good experiences to achieve happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi’s work on flow is quite complicated but might be summarized as an attempt to understand and capture the sense of well-being that envelops a person when they are intensely preoccupied with a task so that they lose a sense of both themselves and of time.³⁴ This is *flow*. An athlete knows this when she is running a strong race. An author knows this when he is deeply engrossed in writing a story. Csikszentmihalyi believes we can discipline our ourselves to “achieve mastery over one’s life.”³⁵ This is possible through

“control over consciousness, which in turn leads to control over the quality of experience.”³⁶ Time and space considerations forbid a detailed explanation of how this might work, but it will not surprise readers to learn that it involves a series of steps by the self (attention, focus, making goals, and so on) to move into the “flow.”

Of course, most of us have had a sense of being “in the flow” at one time or another in our lives. It is not surprising that some would try to isolate this experience and package it for more general consumption. But two things should be stressed when comparing Csikszentmihalyi with Luther’s use of flow. First, Luther would utterly reject the idea that the self somehow has the ability or tools to acquire some type of “mastery” over its passions and appetites. Indeed, for him the self is the problem and what is needed is something *outside* the self—the flow of God’s grace—to mend the brokenness that keeps it from knowing and experiencing true life, which for him happens in Christ. Second, the end or goal of life for Luther is not one’s own happiness but rather love of neighbor. The flow or flood of God’s grace to us moves through us and flows into the world of the neighbor, especially the person or community that is suffering, vulnerable, or neglected.

I have argued in this essay that we would do well to pay attention to Luther’s use of the family of words associated with “flow” to better understand his dynamic understanding of both God’s grace for us and our action in the world. Too much timidity attends our preaching and teaching. We take Luther’s powerful ideas and domesticate them. Often his notion of a “flood of grace” becomes a mere trickle in our mouths. And then we ponder the desiccation of our faith communities and wonder why people find secular options based upon a superficial view of happiness more attractive. Much better would be to proclaim the flow of God’s unfathomable love for the unlovable and see how this stream of living water might green things up and maybe even cause some wild growth.

NOTES

1. Martin Luther, “Kirchenpostille on Titus 3:4–7 (1522),” *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 71 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–), 10(I): 1:100. (Hereafter cited as WA.) Translation mine.

2. The German words are fließen (to flow), strömen (stream), der Brücken (font). The Latin is fluere (flow).

3. Martin Luther, “*The Order of Baptism, Newly Revised*” (1526) in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–) 53:107. (Hereafter cited as LW.) WA 19:539.

4. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology. A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 9.

5. David Lotz, “The Sacrament of Salvation: Luther on Baptism and Justification,” *Trinity Seminary Review*, 6:1 (Spring, 1984), 3.

6. However, Luther’s sermons on baptism do tend to be more polemical and didactic than proclamatory. Because the meaning of baptism was highly contested in the sixteenth century, his preaching is often devoted to explaining how his views differ from that of Rome and the Anabaptists.

7. LW 35:33; WA 2:730.

8. LW 51:326; WA 49:132.

9. See the article “How Mystical Was Luther’s Faith?” in Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther. Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 190–232. Also Volker Leppin, “Mysticism and Justification,” in *The Medieval Luther*, ed., Christine Helmer (Tübingen: Mohr and Siebeck, 2020), 181–93.

10. Johannes Tauler, *Sermons*, trans. Maria Shrady (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1985), 57–59. (Hereafter cited as Tauler, *Sermons*.)

11. See the references in *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed., Bengt Hoffman (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 61, 66, 86, 96, 120. (Hereafter cited as *Theologia Germanica*.)

12. A cursory overview of Luther’s works in English reveals at least thirty references to the Elbe.

13. In comments on Psalm 147, Luther scolds his audience for taking this water for granted: “How many people right here in Wittenberg have thanked God for the two streams . . . from which for years they have brewed and drunk many a pleasant drink and which in their homes have used generously for every need . . . ?” *Commentary on Psalm 147 (1531)* LW 14: 116; WA 31I:438.

14. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), trans. and ed., Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 49. (Hereafter cited as Luther, *Freedom*.)

15. Martin Luther, “The Ten Commandments,” in *The Book of Concord*, eds., Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 389. (Hereafter cited as BC.)

16. BC, 447.

17. LW 22:134; WA 46:653.

18. LW 31:57; WA 1:365

19. LW 23:270; WA 33:429.

20. LW 23:274; WA 33:436.

21. LW 18:166; WA 13:187.

22. Luther, *Freedom*, 88.

23. WA 33:434. Translation mine.

24. LW 27:349–50; WA 2:576.

25. LW 54:129–30; *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Tischreden* 6 vols. (Weimar: 1912–21) 2:11–12.

26. *Theologia Germanica*, 96.

27. Tauler, *Sermons*, 134.

28. See Aquinas' sections in his *Summa Theologica* on the infusion of grace and the necessity of the will's cooperation in *Aquinas on Nature and Grace. The Library of Christian Classics*, ed., A. M. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 156–74.

29. The later commentary on Galatians provides good evidence for Luther's opposition to any human cooperation with God's grace:

They say that we must believe in Christ and that faith is the foundation of salvation, but they say that this faith does not justify unless it is 'formed by love.' This is not the truth of the gospel; it is falsehood and pretense. The true Gospel, however, is this: Works or love are not ornament or perfection of faith; but faith itself is a gift of God, a work of God in our hearts which justifies us because it takes hold of Christ as the Savior. LW 26:88; WA 40:164.

In other words, there is no need for a dam in the stream of grace. Just let it flow!

30. Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 112–14.

31. See Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1899), 441–91.

32. Karl Barth notes that when the *ordo salutis* becomes temporal and then psychologized the path is clear toward an exclusive focus on some interior state of mind to the exclusion of genuine theological thinking. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), IV/2:502–503.

33. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow. The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990). Of course, "positive thinking" goes back much further. Over a century ago William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* noted the prevalence of "healthy-minded" religion in nineteenth century America. (To be cited as Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*.)

34. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 14. Csikszentmihalyi sees himself as a "reformer," providing a way beyond religion.

35. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 22.

36. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 22.