

## *Luther's Seal as an Elementary Interpretation of His Theology*

DIETRICH KORSCH

Martin Luther's seal, the so-called "Luther rose," has become the primary symbol of Lutheran Christianity. As a result, the "Luther rose" is often the object of historical inquiry and a starting point for spiritual inspiration.<sup>1</sup> However, many of the historical problems about the origin and appropriation of the seal have yet to be clarified. Even more astonishing is that no one has explained in detail the one aspect of the content of the seal, which makes it a characteristic sign of the Lutheran understanding of Christianity. Luther himself prepared this basis with his own interpretation: namely, that the seal is a compendium of his theology. Thus it is the goal of this article, first, to exegete the seal, interpreting it as a key to an elementary understanding of Luther's theology, for which he alone is responsible. Secondly, I include a historical hypothesis about the seal's formation.

I begin with Luther's explicit explanation from his own letter, and examine it in the light of today's requirements for an elementary theology. Then I inquire into the historical circumstances under which the

---

1. Oskar Thulin, "Vom bleibenden Sinn der Lutherrose," *Luther* 39 (1968): 41-42. Michael Freund, "Zur Geschichte der Lutherrose," *Luther* 42 (1971): 39-47.

---

For Bernd Moeller on his 65th Birthday. Originally from a guest lecture at the Faculty of Theology, University of Erlangen, February 8, 1993. Translated by Amy Marga from "Luthers Siegel: Eine elementare Deutung seiner Theologie," in *Luther* 67 (1996): 66-87. This article first appeared in English in *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 409-31, under the same title.

sign became Luther's seal and under which his famous interpretation arose. Finally, following Luther, I give an exposition of *his* interpretation as my *own* attempt to produce an elementary theology, for which I alone am responsible.

### **Luther's Letter to Lazarus Spengler**

On July 8, 1530, Martin Luther wrote from the Castle Coburg to the city clerk of Nuremberg, Lazarus Spengler:

Grace and peace from the Lord. As you desire to know whether my painted shield, which you sent to me, has hit the mark, I shall answer most amiably and tell you my original thoughts and reasons about why my seal is a symbol of my theology.

The first should be a black cross in a heart, which retains its natural color, so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us. "For one who believes from the heart will be justified" (Rom. 10:10).

Although it is indeed a black cross, which mortifies and which should also cause pain, it leaves the heart in its natural color. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps one alive. "The just shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17) but by faith in the crucified.

Such a heart should stand in the middle of a white rose, to show that faith gives joy, comfort, and peace. In other words, it places the believer into a white, joyous rose, for this faith does not give peace and joy like the world gives (John 14:27). That is why the rose should be white and not red, for white is the color of spirits and angels (cf. Matt. 28:3; John 20:12).

Such a rose should stand in a sky-blue field, symbolizing that such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the heavenly future joy, which begins already, but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed.

And around this field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is ex-

quisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal.

This is my *compendium theologiae*. I have wanted to show it to you in good friendship, hoping for your appreciation. May Christ, our beloved Lord, be with your spirit until the life hereafter. Amen. From the wilderness Grubok [anagram of Coburg, used here for the first time] on July 8, 1530.<sup>2</sup>

### The Seal as Elementary Theology

A short letter as a compendium of Luther's theology: what a promise! The concentration of an entire theology is contained in the tersest of spaces. This promise was particularly appealing back then, when reliable guidance was sought after on all sides, like today. It promises basics in the face of new uncertainties today, which are also characteristic of postmodern indifference.

However, it is characteristic of our spiritual condition that the tools that would normally reduce such variety and make it more manageable, cannot grasp this new form of plurality. It does not do any good to let lofty, general concepts rise above diverse differences. Not even the building-up of structures, which are to be filled with life, is able to bring together the divergences. The opposing powers are too strong.

These facts, I think, are a new challenge to theology. Can a conclusion about the constitution of Christianity be reached that possesses structures but also allows justifiable individual interpretations? Can Christianity be flexible, depending on the situation, without losing its certainty?

I think yes. And I would like to make an attempt using Luther's seal and his interpretation in the famous letter given above. It seems to me that the letter is especially appropriate for such a task on three grounds.

2. WA Br 5:444f.; LW 49:356-59. The edition for our text is from Johannes Schilling, *Briefe. Auswahl, Übersetzung und Erläuterungen* in vol. 6, *Ausgewählte Schriften/Martin Luther*, ed. Karin Bornkamm and Gerhard Ebeling, with Oswald Bayer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel-Luther, 1982), pp. 122f.

First, a highly concentrated and reliable sign lies in the seal. The seal and its contents, through their iconographic boundaries and certainty, call for understanding, interpretation, and consensus. The image of the seal vouches for its own reliability. It indicates that the letter comes from the true sender, and guarantees privacy for the receiver. Further, the receiver can rely on its contents. From the other perspective, the sealing of the letter is an action of the author by which he symbolically confirms his own authorship. The one who pressed the seal onto the letter can really and truly be heard here. Thus, content and relationship mingle together in the seal. Subject and person coincide.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we have in Luther's writing to Lazarus Spengler the unique case where (in a sealed letter!) the meaning of the seal is interpreted by the author himself. These lines deserve special attention because in them the author elucidates how he finds himself expressed and interpreted through his seal and its contents. This concerns the contents, which are encoded in the seal. If we want to understand this movement from the interpretation of the seal to the interpretation of the actual person, we ourselves become active interpreters, and are responsible for our interpretation.

Third, with this, we stand before the question of whether the interpretation, which is encoded in the seal, also points to an interpretation of ourselves. But exactly then — and only then — when an interpretation of the subject merges into the interpretation of one's own self, does the elementary emerge. Elementary theology is therefore in no way the mere learning and making use of basic concepts, which are normally unsatisfying procedures since they do not allow us to reach the layer of self-interpretation. Theology is elementary when the features of the content are written into the features of one's own self; and exactly then, in this individual expression, the real thing is expressed.

Luther's seal as compendium of his theology promises to introduce us comprehensively to such an elementary theology.

3. For the relationship between person and subject in the seal, cf. Kristin Bühler-Oppenheim, *Zeichen, Marken, Zinken — Signs, Brands, Marks* (Teufen/Schweiz and New York: Hastings House, n.d.), pp. 46-47.

## On the History of the Seal and the Circumstances of Its Interpretation

Before I begin with an interpretation of the seal itself, I want to share what I can about the history of the seal.<sup>4</sup>

Luther's use of the well-known seal is traceable at least to December 11, 1517;<sup>5</sup> perhaps as far back as July 22, 1516.<sup>6</sup> In 1519 it surfaced for the first time in Leipzig as a sign of authenticity in the press.<sup>7</sup> In Wittenberg it became the trademark of the reliable imprints of Luther's works until the 1530s.<sup>8</sup> Later it turned from this function into an ornamental image.

4. I rely, especially, upon the following older works: Julius Köstlin, "Geschichtliche Untersuchungen über Luthers Leben vor dem Ablassstreite," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 45 (1871): 7-45; J. K. F. Knaake, "Stoffsichtung zur kritischen Behandlung des Lebens Luthers," and "Name und Herkommen," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 33 (1872): 462-90; Knaake, "Luthers Wappen," *Zeitschrift für kirchliche Wissenschaft und kirchliches Leben* 1 (1880): 50-54; Gotthilf Hermann, *Die Lutherrose. Martin Luthers Wappen* (Zwickau: Hermann, 1932); Johannes Ficker, "Luthers Siegel" in *450 Jahre Luther*, ed. Oskar Thulin, a special edition of the *Illustrierten Zeitung*, (Leipzig 1933): 13-15.

5. Knaake, "Luthers Wappen," pp. 54f.

6. If the seal of the letter in WA Br 1 Nr. 17 is the same (cf. WA Br 13:6, Nr. 1-Nr. 17), it must be checked against the original letter found in the Biblioteca Vaticana. On the one microfilm found in the Institut für Spätmittelalter und Reformation in Tübingen there is a wax spot visible but no recognizable image. (For the letter regarding this matter from January 10, 1993, I thank Dr. Gerhard Hammer in Tübingen.)

7. It does appear on the print which was published on the occasion of the Leipziger Disputation published by Wolfgang Stöckel, "Ein Sermon geprediget tzu Leipssgk/uffm Schloss am tag Petri vn pau/li im xviii Jar, etc.," together with one of the first public pictures of Luther. Cf. Knaake (note 6), p. 55. An illustration of this title page is found in: *Martin Luther. Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, ed. Gerhard Bott, Gerhard Ebeling, and Bernd Möller (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983), p. 121. The cross in the middle is difficult to recognize. It must be supposed on the basis of the completed letter seal that it [the cross] also belongs to the seal here.

8. On the title page, for example: "An die Ratsherrn aller Städte deutschen Lands" Wittenberg 1524. Illust. in *Martin Luther* [note 8] 195 or "Der Psalter deutsch," Wittenberg, 1524. Illust. in: Hans Volz, *Martin Luthers deutsche Bibel. Entstehung und Geschichte der Lutherbibel* (Hamburg: Wittig, 1978), p. 134 as a conclusion, for example (next to the picture of a lamb that carries the cross) in the first printing from Luther's translation of the Pentateuch 1524. Illust. in *Martin Luther* (note 8), 212. Here also is the following text: "this sign may be a witness/that such books go through my hands/for the wrong prints and books/this is done by many. Printed in Wittenberg." A summary of this problem is by Hans Volz, "Das Lutherwappen als 'Schutzmarke,'" *Libri International Library Review* 4 (1954): 216-25.

So far there is only speculation about the origin of the seal, which cannot be confidently attributed to either a heraldic<sup>9</sup> or an emblematic<sup>10</sup> tradition. It is most likely that Luther himself created his seal as a bourgeois "Seal of Vocation."<sup>11</sup> That had become customary, as one can see with his father, Hans Luder. When Hans moved from Möhra to Mansfeld, he advertised his new occupation in mining with a coat of arms that depicted two hammers.<sup>12</sup> My hunch is that Luther had reached back beyond the new coat of arms of his father to an old family coat of arms of the Luder family from Möhra, which depicted a crossbow sideways, with two white roses.<sup>13</sup> He had the crossbow erased and retained only one rose.

He could make further use of this element of the old shield, because the northeast window of the choir of the Erfurter Augustinian Church — the place where he lived as a monk — showed a flower motif, dominated by white roses with a red center.<sup>14</sup> In this way, as I interpret the matter, he was able to keep a continuity with his familial origins over and above the biographical break with his father that was caused by his entrance into the Order of the Augustinians.

In the center of the rose, which originated in family tradition but was also appropriate to Luther's own life context, he drew a heart. The heart was the main attribute of the saint of the Order, Augustine.<sup>15</sup> This meant that the innermost meaning of monasticism stood in the

9. Cf. Erich Kittel, "Bürger und Bauren," in *Siegel*, vol. 10 of *Library for Art and Antiquities* (Braunschweig: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1970), pp. 367-82.

10. Cf. "Herz, Rose, Kreuz, Ring," *Emblemata. Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI und XVII Jahrhunderts*, ed. Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1968).

11. Very informative for this question is the existing work by Julius Klanfer, coming out of the semiotic school of Karl Bühler, unfortunately only in manuscript. Julius Klanfer, "Theorie der heraldischen Zeichen," (Ph.D. diss., Vienna, 1933). Klanfer wrote about the possible free choice of shield pictures by non-noble persons, pp. 13-15; about farmers' shields, p. 43; about occupational symbols in shields, p. 105.

12. Knaake, "Stoffsichtung," (note 5), 480; "Luthers Wappen" (note 5), 53.

13. Knaake, "Stoffsichtung," (note 5), 53f. Illustration in Hermann (note 5), 20. On the doubling of the rose cf. Klanfer (note 12), 15.

14. A relationship between Luther's seal and this rose is also shown in the exhibition at the Augustinian cloister organized by Helmar Junghans. However, the references for this summary are not given there.

15. Cf. "Herz" in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Engelbert Kirschbaum et al., eds., vol. 2 (Rome: Herder, 1968), pp. 248-50; and "Augustinus" vol. 5, pp. 283f.

center of the Erfurt cloister life. But in the middle of the heart, Luther drew the cross. This is not an iconographic innovation, but is known from images of the Heart-of-Jesus depiction.<sup>16</sup> However, with this combination, from the foundation of the heart as the center of love, the cross stands as the only support of theology and faith. Thus, in the arrangement of the seal, Luther expresses a theology of the cross, which points to Augustinian monastic piety and the theology of the Order.

The reasons why the Erfurter monk Martin Luther may have taken steps to develop his own seal might lie in his assuming the office of a district vicar of the Order in 1516. In any case, a certain convergence of biography and theology within the seal points in this direction.<sup>17</sup> No matter how this hypothesis is regarded, one thing is certain: the image reaches relatively far back into Luther's origins, and the interpretation from 1530 is probably not the same as that of 1516; but the image itself has remained constant. That is a recipe for a successful elementary theology: one that can adapt to different situations.

What compelled Luther to reinterpret his seal in 1530? The obvious reason, as can be seen in the letter above, is an inquiry made by Lazarus Spengler<sup>18</sup> about the accuracy of the seal's "portrayal." The wording of

16. Cf. the illustration "Verehrung des Herzens Jesu" (1505) by L. Cranach the Elder in the *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 2, p. 252.

17. The seal may be, as suggested by Klanfer, a sign of "attributive representation," which expresses the "membership of an individual" with "an order," for example. The "members of an order take the shield of this order into its own 'family shield,' and use it next to the family shield or unite the family shield with it." Klanfer (note 12), 30. In this context, the heart in the center may also be an exaggerated self-presentation.

18. About him see *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, 3rd edition, pp. 18, 622-25; Hans von Schubert, "Lazarus Spengler und die Reformation in Nürnberg," H. Holborn, ed. (Leipzig, 1934); reprint [until 1524] (New York/London, 1971); Harold Grimm, *Lazarus Spengler: A Lay Leader of the Reformation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978); Berndt Hamm, "Stadt und Kirche unter dem Wort Gottes: Das reformatorische Einheitsmodell des Nürnberger Ratschreibers Lazarus Spengler," in *Literatur und Laienbildung im späten Mittelalter und in der Reformationszeit*, Publication of the Germanistische Symposien, vol. 5, ed. Ludger Grenzmann and Karl Stackmann (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), pp. 710-29; see also the biographical sketch and the illustration in "Martin Luther und die Reformation in Deutschland," Exhibition for the 500th birthday of Martin Luther at the German National Museum in Nürnberg in conjunction with the Verein für Reformationsgeschichte, catalog, Gerhard Bott, ed. (Frankfurt: Insel, 1983), p. 329.

the letter leaves open to debate whether Luther approved the portrayal or whether he was concerned to provide a correct version of it.<sup>19</sup>

Another scenario is also possible. Spengler's inquiry can be seen in the context of a signet ring, which the electoral prince, Johann Friedrich (the son of the prince, Johann of Saxony), had made for Luther as a thank-you gift for his translation of the Book of Daniel,<sup>20</sup> which Luther had dedicated to the prince. The prince presented the ring to Luther when he came to the Coburg Castle on the 14th of September, on his trip back from the Imperial Diet in Augsburg.<sup>21</sup> The prince would have had to commission the ring in Nuremberg, which would have coincided with a submission by Spengler and Luther of a model of how the ring should be cut. This scenario does not explain, however, why Luther talked about the colors of his seal (and why he talked about a portrayal) in the letter. Perhaps there were simply two independent events.

But much more important than these external circumstances is Luther's inner condition when he wrote this letter on July 8, 1530. On the 15th of June, and with the arrival of the Emperor, the Imperial Diet in Augsburg finally got underway. It was to decide the further fate of

19. Actually there were probably different variations and different colored versions of the seal in circulation, which was basically used only as an embossing seal. An early example is the colored illustration in an Erfurter schoolbook from 1521 of the Rector Crotus, in which Luther is set (next to Erasmus, Reuchlin, and Mutian) among the row of dominant teachers of the University of Erfurt. Cf. Franz Wilhelm Kampschulte, *Die Universität Erfurt in ihrem Verhältnisse zu dem Humanismus und der Reformation aus den Quellen dargestellt*, vol. 2 (Trier: Lintz, 1858/1860). Reprint in one volume (Aalen, 1970), p. 258. Illust. Nr. 36 in Reiner Groß, ed., *Martin Luther 1483-1546. Dokumente seines Lebens*, (Weimar: Böhlau, 1983), p. 63. However, in Wittenberg itself, variations on printings were used. For example, the seal has an additional type of shield in the outer circle. This can be seen on the title page of "Der Deusch Psalter" (Wittenberg, 1531), where it is next to the seal of Melanchthon, which has a crucified snake. On the 1541 edition of the Bible (Biblia: das ist "die gantze Heilige Schrift") the shield has a blossoming wreath around the rose. Cf. Volz (note 9), pp. 136, 182.

20. Cf. the illustrations, among which is the illustration of the dedication letter by Volz (note 9), 144f.

21. On July 25, 1530, from Augsburg, Jonas announced to Luther the intentions of Johann Friedrich for Luther. WA Br 5:393. On September 15 Luther reported to Melanchthon the giving-over of the ring. WA Br 5:623. A ring of this type (the original?) is found in a blue vault in Dresden. Illust. in Helmar Junghans, ed., *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers Festgabe zu seinem 500. Geburtstag*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1983), p. 1012. (There is also an illustration of the canopy, formed as the Luther rose, which is over the Katharine portal of the Wittenberg Luther house.)

the Reformation. Luther, who was banned from the Diet, had to remain in the Coburg Castle, which was the nearest place to Augsburg in the electorate of Saxony.<sup>22</sup> Thus, letters were the only connection to the Saxony's Electoral delegation in Augsburg — and the only possibility of influence that Luther had. Under such circumstances, every letter pressed with Luther's seal had special significance.

It was not only for reasons of distance that Luther felt himself to be far away from Augsburg. He felt virtually shut out from what was happening there. In the middle of May he received a draft of what would later be called the Augsburg Confession and had made a few scant comments. News about the important preliminary negotiations with the Diet failed to appear until the middle of June, about which he complained bitterly. Then the situation in Augsburg came to a complete climax: on June 25th the Confession was read out loud, and Luther then finally heard a (restrained) word from Melanchthon about it. This gave rise to a lively correspondence from Luther's side; on the 29th and 30th of June, he sent letters to six different receivers in Augsburg. Luther's reserve as compared to Melanchthon's negotiation strategy in Augsburg is well known, and appears everywhere in his letters.<sup>23</sup>

Spengler's inquiry about the accuracy of the image of the seal probably seems rather unimportant today. But if one can imagine oneself in the position of Luther, the letter writer who could not even bolster his own theological formulation at Augsburg, one can imagine how much weight Luther must have placed on his short letter to the Nuremberger confidante,<sup>24</sup> who in any case also viewed Melanchthon's action at Augsburg with some criticism, as is well known.<sup>25</sup>

22. Those details are in Hans von Schubert, "Luther auf der Koburg" in *Luther-Jahrbuch* 12 (Leipzig 1930): 109-61. An overview about Luther's time at Coburg is given in table form in Otto Matthes, *Zehn Briefe aus den Jahren 1523-1590*, owned by Johann Valentin Andreäs (a report of Veit Dietrich from July 8, 1530 about Luther's work as an author in Coburg in the year 1530) in *Blätter für württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 60/61 (1960/61), pp. 19-176 on 104-12.

23. Cf. Bernhard Lohse: "Philip Melanchthon in seinen Beziehungen zu Luther," in Hans Junghans, ed., (note 22) vol. 1, pp. 403-18, esp. 407-9.

24. What emerged at the same time, which Luther dedicated to Spengler, was the "Predigt, dass man Kinder zur Schule halten Solle," WA 30.II:508-88, dedication, 517-20; LW 46:213-58, dedication, 213-19.

25. Cf. the Nürnberger expert report, in which Luther's participation in the reworking of the Augsburg decision is challenged. "Der von Nürnberg Bedenken über die

In sum, it seems that the situation at the Diet of Augsburg, where a confession arose without Luther's participation, compelled him, in July 1530, to interpret the seal that he himself had chosen earlier. This seal showed Luther's characteristic position as a Christian and a theologian, and has come to be understood as an elementary Christian confession.

## **The Interpretation of the Seal**

I come now to the interpretation of the seal itself. Purely as an image, the seal is of noteworthy perfection. It contains the basic forms of geometry: a circle and an intersection of straight lines, the cross. It contains the elementary forms of life: the rose as an image of the plant world, the heart as a sign of animal life. It carries the elementary colors of red, blue, and yellow – and the limit of all color, black and white. These iconographic components alone invite meditation. Their imagery calls forth a certain completeness of content.

It is our method to follow Luther's letter and his own interpretation of his image. This way, we attempt to enter into a discussion with Luther's own understanding by taking him at his word and accepting the sign he proposes.<sup>26</sup> In the end, we will see whether we have an accurate theological interpretation.

I. Our starting point is the middle of the seal.<sup>27</sup> "The first should be a black cross in a heart, which retains its natural color." The center is

---

sogennante unbeschliesslich und unvorgreifliche Antwort der Protestanten . . ." *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, 2nd edition, vol. 16 (Gross-Oesingen: Verlag des lutherischen Buchhaus Harms, 1880-1910), pp. 1462-69, here p. 1468. Reprint in Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis. See also the letter of Spengler to Veit Dietrich from September 25, 1530 by Moritz Maximilian Mayer, *Spengleriana*, (Nürnberg, 1830), pp. 75-78 as well as Theodor Pressel, "Spengler und der Augsburger Reichstag," in *Lazarus Spengler. Nach gleichzeitigen Quellen* (Elberfeld: Friederichs, 1862), pp. 69-77.

26. The few additional references are taken predominantly from the writings and letters, which had emerged between Spring and Fall 1530 in Coburg.

27. According to the above-mentioned historical hypothesis, the cross in the middle of the seal makes the point. It is noteworthy that the interpretations of 1530 took their beginnings exactly there.

doubled — a cross and a heart, for the middle point cannot contain only one thing. It has begun with an original duality, and this duality must be maintained until the end. Let the alternatives be made clear. If the heart were left alone to bear a cross on its own, it would be a symbol of the burden and effort of life, the presentiment of the final defeat. If the heart were to be left to itself, its cross would be merely a symbol of the transitory nature of all finitude. If the cross were to be left by itself, it would be a sign for the end of a life that hangs on it and miserably dies alone. If the heart were under the cross, it would show a crucified life, burdensome hope, broken promises.

But now, both cross and heart are standing together. The cross is the epitome of the story of Jesus Christ, and the heart under this cross is a sum of human life. Both, being so different in their origins, have become inseparable in their togetherness. If we set this duality at the beginning and in the center, we conclude that Christ's cross approaches human life, and that human life dwells under the cross. Thus, it must be said that the external appearance of the cross is the precondition for a true inward contemplation of the heart, and the inwardness of the heart is the meaning and goal for the external appearance of the cross. When it comes to this unification of heart and cross, there is righteousness and justice: righteousness in that the heart does not need anything else for its fulfillment, and justice when this lack of need is rightly recognized.

However, this union perfects itself in none other than faith in the crucified. Why? The covering of the heart by the crucified is to be understood as a kind of covering over an external object (more precisely — over the only external object) that from its side (the only side) establishes the contemplation within. Among all the relationships that can be taken up by the human heart, it is through the relationship of the heart to the crucified alone that the heart could not be lost on another (in which case it is better for the heart to stay by itself). When the heart relates to the crucified, it wins itself back in a way that it could not do by itself. In this sense, it is to be understood that "faith in the Crucified One saves us. 'For one who believes from the heart will be justified' (Rom. 10:10)."

Regarding the union of the heart and the cross a special reminder is now necessary — as Luther says, "so that I myself would be reminded." One must be reminded, because the threat of abstraction is

always close by. The first abstraction is a mere historical understanding of the cross of Jesus Christ, within the horizons of his life that ends, either heroically or disastrously. The second abstraction is when the human heart only gains self-understanding by its own power, apart from the cross of suffering.

The “forming-into-one” of the original differences of the cross and the heart, symbolizing the conformity of humans to Christ in faith,<sup>28</sup> is the original reminder at the center of theology. This is a far-reaching reminder that carries within itself unspoken assumptions about God and the human heart, namely that God is “for us” but the human heart endeavors to remain “in itself.”<sup>29</sup> The uniformity of Christ and the human in faith, which expresses itself in the original duality in the center of Luther’s seal, leaves theology as an alternative to the opposition between a salvation history of objectivism and a believing subjectivism. Only the one who sees oneself in this alternative has done theology properly, according to Luther.

2. The cross is depicted in black within a naturally colored, red heart. The cross is complete in its contemplative nature, but only in a way that allows it to define this nature from itself. “Although it is indeed a black cross, which mortifies and which should also cause pain, it leaves the heart in its natural color. It does not corrupt nature, that is, it does not kill but keeps one alive.”

Now of course this is a deep paradox. But it is exactly this paradox that must be understood if the heart and cross shall remain together, interdependent on one another. I want to carry out my reflections on this fact in two steps.

First, the cross mortifies; but without the cross, the heart is undefined. If the heart does not want to lie unconsciously under heteronomy, then it will feel obligated to define itself and will do this

28. The cross is sent to us because God “wants to conform us . . . to his Son Christ” (Sermon on April 16, 1530) WA 32:36,22f.; LW 51:206.

29. “Cognitio dei et hominis est sapientia divina et proprie theologica, et ita cognitio dei et hominis, ut referatur tandem ad deum iustificantem et hominem peccatorem, ut proprie sit subiectum Theologiae homo reus et perditus et deus iustificans vel salvator” (Interpretation from Psalm 51, 1532.43) WA 40/II:327,II-328,2; LW 12:330-31. Cf. “Cognitio Dei et Hominis” in Gerhard Ebeling, ed. *Lutherstudien*, vol. 1. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971), pp. 221-72, esp. 255-72.

by choosing itself for its own selfish purposes. Further, the heart turns God into an idol when it piously exposes itself. Because it fears the sheer directness of self-determination, the heart chooses God, making its relationship to God into a mere self-serving dependency. The supposedly undefined, neutral heart is, in truth, predefined to be groundless and transitory. This is the heart that lifts itself, pious or godless, above God.

The character of self-choosing belongs to the nature of the heart. However, in this self-choosing, the one who has defined the human heart for this freedom of choice shifts out of focus. So although the human is a creature of God, it is not inscribed on the heart that it can only choose God alone. It is exactly this direct self-definition of the heart that is killed by the cross. Such a *mortificatio* is necessary if the abstract self-mightiness of the heart is to be deprived of power and defined anew. It is no wonder that such a change, such required renunciation, hurts.

The cross mortifies by marking the undefined heart. We can now partly understand the meaning of this. However, we enter ever deeper into the paradox, which is the second step of my reflections. For what does it mean that the cross mortifies but does not kill? *Mortificare*, translated, means nothing else than to bring to death, to kill. Where is the difference then?<sup>30</sup> As we witness in ourselves: there is no difference. To kill is to kill, and to die is to die, no matter which word we use for it. A distinction in the words does not produce a difference of meaning. When the self-defined human dies, it is real. Only through the cross of Jesus Christ is there a difference. How can this be thought through?

30. Cf. a parallel from Luther's interpretation of Psalm 118:18 (the Lord has chastened me fully, but has not given me over to death): "He has boasted that he will not die, but live. Thereupon the flesh, world, men, and princes speak up and would not weaken and discourage him: 'Is it not death if you are burned, beheaded, drowned, strangled, condemned, and exiled? I would think that you could tell whether this can be called life. Where is your God? Let Him help you! Of course, Elias will come and take you down (Matt. 27:49)!' To this he replies unshaken, and he comforts himself thus: 'On the contrary, this dying is nothing. It is only a fatherly rod, not wrath. It is only a foxtail, nothing serious. God is only chastising me as a dear father chastises his dear child. It may hurt a little, and it is not sugar; it is a rod. However, it does not kill, but rather helps me live.' This is surely a good interpretation and an effective confutation, to make a benevolent rod out of the word 'death.' Only the Holy Spirit and the right hand of God can teach this art." (*Das Schöne Confitemini* 1530) WA 31/1:158,17-30; LW 14:89.

The cross of Jesus Christ, the epitome of death, becomes the dividing line between death and life in that the crucified Jesus is resurrected. For however the resurrection is to be thought, it is not merely the sheer negation of the crucifixion, which would affect Jesus only as an individual and would amount to either the living again of a dead person or only as a cipher of a future completion. The resurrection of Jesus is, instead, the infinite deepening of his death, the true mortification, even though it did indeed establish for Jesus himself a new life in permanent nearness to God.

Jesus' death is the death of the godless: as Paul correctly cites the law, "cursed is everyone who hangs on wood" (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). The resurrection shows that Jesus' death is not the punishment for *his* godlessness, but rather it is much more for our own godlessness as indecisive, self-mighty choosers. This insight into the true sense of the death of Jesus is gained precisely when it coincides with a view of the real condition of our hearts:<sup>31</sup> when the actual proximity of one's own life to the death of Jesus is recognized. But if Jesus' death is truly that of the forsaken, which we all are, then our only option is his death. With it, the transitory character of our existence has come to an end, along with our self-established, godless religion.<sup>32</sup>

When we recognize in Jesus' death the death of the godless, we are put into a position where we can no longer choose; where we can only forsake ourselves. However, with this recognition we stand at the place where we are no longer in bondage to anything external. The death of the godless, like the end of an imprisonment, is the completion of negative freedom. It is precisely this negativity that is the beginning of a positive freedom, for if we have died with Jesus then will we also live

31. This idea of a representation that aims for conformity was expressed in an early sermon, "Igitur opus Dei alienum sunt passione Christi et in Christo, crucifixio veteris hominis et mortificatio Adae, Opus autem Dei proprium resurrectio Christi et iustificatio in spiritu, vivicatio novi hominis, Ut Rom 4, 'Christus mortuus est propter peccata nostra et resurrexit propter iustificationem nostram.' Ista itaque conformitas imaginis filii Dei includit utrumque illud opus." (Sermon on December 21, 1516 on Psalm 18 [19], 2) WA 1:112,37-113,3; LW 51:17-23.

32. That includes that one's own cross is to be carried in suffering in order to let the conformity to Christ be completed: "Though our suffering and cross should never be so exalted that we think we can be saved by it or earn the least merit through it, nevertheless we should suffer after Christ that we may be conformed to him." (Sermon from April 16, 1530) WA 32:29,3-6; LW 51:198.

with him (Rom. 6:4). However, we can only live by partaking in Jesus' life, and that means participating in his self-definition with God. This self-definition, as it comes to light in the resurrection, is presented in such a way that it does not choose directly and abstractly. Rather, it comes from God and has its source in the community of the Spirit.

The cross in the heart is, in other words, the true abyss. It is the boundary line between life and death, the necessary death and the real life of every human.<sup>33</sup> It mortifies, but does not kill. It mortifies because Jesus' death is the end of human self-determination by its own power; but the cross does not kill because Jesus' life is the beginning of human self-definition through God. To live with the sign of the cross means to live truly before God.

But this is by no means obvious! The cross is a real abyss and there is no bridge that stretches out across it. Only God's righteousness sustains us over the abyss, with his faithfulness watching over us. Only faith can cling to it,<sup>34</sup> so that the true life before God and the righteousness of faith are absolutely identical. To rely upon God means nothing else than to know that by a glance at Christ one is being carried over this abyss of the cross.<sup>35</sup> "The just shall live by faith, but by faith in the crucified."

3. I have forestalled explaining the white rose in order to interpret fully the cross in the heart, for the center of our seal possesses a dynamic, ex-

33. "Here you can see how the right hand of God mightily lifts the heart and comforts it in the midst of death, so that it can say, 'Though I die, I die not. Though I suffer, I suffer not. Though I fall, I am not down. Though I am disgraced, I am not dishonored.' This is the consolation. Furthermore, the psalmist says of the help: 'I shall live.' Isn't this an amazing help? The dying live; the suffering rejoice; the fallen rise; the disgraced are honored." (*Das Schöne Confitemini* 1530) WA 31/I:152,22-30; LW 14:86.

34. "Therefore the Scripture gives to faith the title that it changes the heart and makes the human being completely new; no work can change the human, for it is only faith that can and does it." (Sermon on September 15, 1530) WA 32:100,1-3.

35. "How can now sin and righteousness, death and life, remain next to each other? One must consume the other and one must bite the other off. So now the person is dead, and cannot die. And the flesh is dead and must stay alive for the sake of divinity. This insight and viewpoint makes you into a Christian and when you believe it and hold it for certain then you have the righteousness and the life which he has, for he does such a thing not for his own sake but rather for your sake and well-being." (Sermon on April 17, 1530) WA 32:43,15-23. This also is the heart of Luther's famous interpretation of the first commandment in the Large Catechism.

pansive power that pulls the surrounding elements of the image into itself.

“Such a heart is to be set in the midst of a white rose, to symbolize that faith gives joy, comfort and peace; and at the same time is set in a white joyful rose; for this faith does not give peace and joy as the world gives (John 14:27). That’s why the rose should be white and not red, for white is the color of the spirits and all angels (cf. Matt. 28:3; John 20:12).”

The rose is an ancient symbol for Christ.<sup>36</sup> This rose is the Christ rose, not only by appearance, but also by definition. It is bright white – like the light of the resurrection, which shines through the proclamations at the open grave. Its whiteness appears as the complete opposite to the blackness of the cross. In the rose, in Christ, this antinomy is embodied.

Characteristic of our seal and of Luther’s interpretation is that the contents of this picture are directly applied to faith. According to the Easter sermon of 1530 on the resurrection story, “it does not help much to know a story and to be able to tell a story if one does not know how it is useful to me and you.”<sup>37</sup> On the contrary: “this resurrection of Christ has now become yours through the Word, the Gospel carries it for you, that it should be your own. So you can now fasten your heart onto no other monstrence.”<sup>38</sup> The heart stands in the rose as it proceeds from the cross, but does not change its color because of the cross. It does not disappear out of the active ways of life. In its vitality, the heart is bathed in light – the resurrection light that at the same time holds the sharp shadow of the cross as a memory. Thus the rose is not red, for it is not just a portrayal of natural, ordinary life. Instead, it is white, symbolizing its paradoxical re-definition through the black cross – its continuation towards a new life.

In my opinion, the resurrection of Jesus does not have significance in and of itself. Instead, it finds its complete meaning in the life of the believer, whom it places into the story of Jesus Christ. This story is characterized by the opposition between death and life, for

36. *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Michael Buchberger, ed., 2nd edition, vol. 9 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1986), p. 44; overtones of the meaning of “paradise” can be heard here too.

37. Sermon on April 17, 1530. WA 32:39,22-24.

38. WA 32:44,6-9.

“whoever can now develop this victory within one’s heart is already blessed.”<sup>39</sup>

The white rose also shows the believers’ participation in Jesus’ new, true life before and with God. But this participation only earns its name by remaining near to human life, being felt and experienced. The truth of faith then, is its participation in Christ’s life, and its joy, comfort, and peace as it is given in the human sphere.

I want to take Luther at his word again. What produces the feeling of joy? It is knowing myself to be in correspondence to another who corresponds to me. Joy is indeed the inner resonance of positive feeling that comes out of this feeling of faith. The sources of joy become clear when we think back on the description of the choosing heart. If I am destined (or I could say damned) to choose, then joy sets in at that moment only when something I chose or did brings together my intention and my imagination. As soon as I can no longer secure the result of my intentions and imagination, or as soon as something ruins the result, my joy goes with it. Such joy would be that which the world “gives.”

The joy of faith is of another kind. For in faith I am not dependent on the products and completion of my choices. Rather, I know myself through God who defined me and liberated me to choose. In being chosen by God, I am brought into correspondence with myself. My nature is not corrupted, but preserved and supported. The joy of believing comes from the unity I feel within myself through God. Therefore I am free from the compulsion to unify myself through choosing. I can do nothing for this joy. I can only allow it. It would be gone if I were to try to acquire it and remove it from its source, which does not lie within me.

Because faith is such joy, it is also comfort. What is to be understood by comfort? In the course of life, it often happens that the inward correspondence, which produces our joy, is contradicted by outer failures. Although the believing human knows as an internal fact that it is in correspondence with itself through God, nevertheless the external fact is that life often does not run according to my plans and pleasure. The inner joy of faith and the outer joy of success are not congruent. Thus it stands to be tested which one is decisive: whether under the failure of my will and acts, the joy of faith wears off or whether the

39. WA 32:45,2.

joy of faith holds up as comfort through the pain of defeat, misconduct, and failure. Faith is comfort, says Luther. Thanks to God's loyalty, Luther reckons that the joy of faith is always maintained, even if it appears as a comforting image in the midst of sadness.

Could it be then, that a permanent opposition between inner joy and outer failures defines the life of the Christian? No, because faith is finally peace. In peace, the moment of faith that correlates inner and outer things is accentuated. Faith aims at such a correlation, so that I am integrated with myself and with the world, thank God. This happens to me as well as all humans. How can such a claim be made in the light of our thoughts here? The decision is based on the one who faith acknowledges as more capable: God. On the one hand, it is God who brought us godless ones into correspondence with himself and with ourselves: it is God who resurrected Jesus from the dead. On the other hand, we must want to choose our own lives as the starting point. But as choosers, we always miss ourselves, even with the most pious intentions. Thus the decision is clear: whoever believes can only trust God to offset the contrast between the fulfillment of faith and the failure of works. If we did not draw this conclusion, it would negate Christ's presence in the Spirit.

4. With that, I have necessarily advanced, without notice, to the next element of our seal. "Such a rose should stand in a sky-blue field, since such joy in spirit and faith is a beginning of the future heavenly joy, which begins already but is grasped in hope, not yet revealed." There is a difference between faith and life, a difference between the joy and the circumstances that make comfort necessary. The white of the rose does not dissolve the color of red (nor is it the indifferent light that is not yet broken into spectral colors), just as faith does not blot out life. However, the white rose makes the color bright indeed. It surrounds transparently itself with the heavenly blue.

Blue can be understood as an image of testing, as an index of temporal endurance. That the heaven wraps itself around in the form of a circle may stand for the fact that faith, joy, comfort, and peace are promised, and they are the future for all life on earth.

Whoever believes knows the difference between faith and life and accepts this difference in hope. Hope in this sense has a double meaning: it is the presence of the future, and the present that is not yet past.

A presence of the future is when the faith in true life is before God and through God. Then nothing else can be expected, nothing higher, nothing more certain throughout all the temporality of life, through all the changes of time. When an individual has faith based on the union of form with Jesus, then that which is called “resurrection” for Jesus is for us still to be expected – the present that is not yet past.

There is now continuity between the presence of the future and the “still here” of the present: the Spirit. “In Spirit” Jesus was resurrected. The community of the Father with the Son in Spirit has triumphed and proven itself against the severing power of death, to which the Son exposed himself. “By the Spirit” the righteousness and fidelity of God is united with the trust of humans and is formed into faith. The community of God – Father, Son, and Spirit – with humanity flows out from the community that God made with Godself. The *vinculum trinitatis* [bond of the Trinity] is also the *vinculum dei et hominis sive fidei* [the bond of God and human or faith].<sup>40</sup>

5. I have now come to the final element of our seal. “And around such a field is a golden ring, symbolizing that such blessedness in Heaven lasts forever and has no end. Such blessedness is exquisite, beyond all joy and goods, just as gold is the most valuable, most precious and best metal.”

40. “At this point we should learn the rule that whenever the saints deal with God in the Psalter and Holy Scripture concerning comfort and help in their need, eternal life and the resurrection of the dead are involved. All such texts belong to the doctrine of the resurrection and eternal life, in fact, to the whole Third Article of the Creed, with the doctrines of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection and everlasting life. And it all flows out of the First Commandment, where God says: ‘I am your God’ (Exod. 20:2). This the Third Article of the Creed emphasizes insistently. While Christians deplore the fact that they suffer and die in this life, they comfort themselves with another life than this, namely that of God Himself who is above and beyond this life. It is not possible that they should totally die and not live again in eternity. For one thing, the God on whom they rely and in whom they find their consolation cannot die, and thus they must live in Him. Besides, as Christ says, He is a God of the living, not of the dead and of those who are no more (Matt. 22:32). Therefore Christians must live forever; otherwise He would not be their God, nor could they depend on Him unless they live. For this little group, therefore, death remains no more than a sleep.” (*Das Schöne Confitemini*, 1530) WA 31/I:154,27-155,27; LW 14:87. Regarding the Third Article as the summary of the theology of Luther, cf. Eilert Herms, *Luthers Auslegung des Dritten Artikels*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987).

The golden ring surrounds everything, even the heavenly blue. For hope does not remain utopian: it has a definite place to which it points. The perfection of the circle, which encompasses everything, signals a definitive conclusion. However, one does not get further, for the circular track of the ring always returns one back to the starting point. One need not go further, for gold stands for the quintessence of worth, over which nothing more worthy is thinkable. One can stay here, because gold is durable and everlasting.

Faith is fulfilled with the golden ring. Here righteousness and salvation are united with each another. It is the epitome of the highest good. Here peace and good exist together: "should be" and "may have" no longer stand in contradiction to one another.

Why is it thus with faith? Only because God is originally perfect in Godself. But the eternity of the ring does not exclude temporality, for time goes back into infinity. However, this endurance is not the wheel of the "always-the-same" that wipes out differences. What remains is that which has the highest worth and gives value to all that it contains.

The perfection of faith is a reflection of the perfection of God. Indeed, God's perfection is his presence to us in the form of the Son through the power of the Spirit in faith. The trinitarian doctrine has, through and through, a soteriological sense.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Seal and the Course of Theology**

"This . . . *compendium theologiae* I have wanted to show you in good friendship." Now, at the end of this letter, in "good company," Luther's *compendium theologiae* is completed. For theology has reached its goal when the community of thoughts becomes friendship in Christ. A compendium contains everything, but in an abbreviated, elementary form. Over all it shows, especially in its compactness, the way to theology.

If we glance back at the course upon which Luther's seal has led us,

41. This is already developed in detail in the "Confession" from 1528: "that are the three Persons/and one God/who gave all of himself completely and fully with all that he is and has" (from *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*) WA 26:505,38ff.; LW 37:366. Cf. "Die Trinitätslehre als Summe des Evangeliums," in *Einsicht und Glaube*, Jörg Baur, ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), pp. 112-21.

then it can be seen that Luther boldly laid out his compendium as a strict congruence of human existential history and the history of God. From beginning to end it is true: God is for us and we are in God on the basis of being in the likeness of Christ. This congruence grows out of the burgeoning of existence, which seems to be undefined, but in truth concludes itself through the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> From the center out (as the seal was consequently read from inside to out), the logical presuppositions and implications of this event are decoded. Further, from the center out, the existential view of life is manifested in the completeness of congruence between the perfection of faith and the perfection of God. As Ulrich Barth has emphasized, “The necessity of existential learning finally results, not from the *intention* to learn, but rather out of the certainty of that which *is* learned. The intended object of faith is nothing other than the One wanting to be for us and wanting to be learned – Christ himself.”<sup>43</sup>

Although Luther’s way is exemplary for evangelical Christianity, it is not without its problems. This can be shown in the definitive, modern dogmatic conceptions of Schleiermacher and Barth, but also in a philosophical theology oriented by Hegel.

Luther composed his *compendium theologiae* in the symbolism of his seal. It could be said that the seal is the likeness of Christ himself, which was imprinted on Luther’s heart (Song of Sol. 8:6).<sup>44</sup> Luther signified and defined himself through his seal. It is no wonder that he can also call this seal a family coat of arms. The faith, the participation in God’s perfection, protects differently and better than any other shielding weapon (Eph. 6:16).

Martin Luther knew himself to be sealed and shielded, imprinted through the congruence of God and humanity established by Christ.

42. “[I]n Christo crucifixo est vera Theologia et cognitio Dei,” already describes the *probatio* to Thesis 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. See this movement in WA 1:362,18ff.; LW 31:52-53.

43. Ulrich Barth, “Luthers Verständnis der Subjektivität des Glaubens” in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 34 (1992): 269-91, here 287.

44. “But this is the correct main piece, ground and bottom, that I may learn to look at this Christ with nothing but my heart” (Sermon on April 17, 1530) WA 32:42,35f. “Nam in corde meo iste unus regnat articulus, scilicet Fides Christi, et quo, per quem et in quem omnes meae diu noctuque fluunt et refluunt theologicae cogitationes” (*Preface to the Galatians Commentary* 1535) WA 40/I:33,7-9; LW 27:145-49.

Because of its contents, however, Luther's seal is also open for all other individuals, since the story it tells is not merely Luther's private history.<sup>45</sup> This seal has served Lutheranism well; the whole story of its usage is not yet written.<sup>46</sup>

Luther's seal is an image that calls for an interpretation, so that the subject it describes can be understood. It is a compendium: an introduction to discovery but not the discovery itself. It is this characteristic feature of Luther's seal that challenges us to a richer, self-responsible unfolding. Thus: an elementary theology.

45. In *Das Schöne Confitemini* he says, related to Psalm 118: "But lest anyone, knowing that this psalm belongs to the whole world, raise his eyebrow at my claim that this psalm is mine, may he be assured that no one is being robbed. After all, Christ is mine, and yet belongs to all believers." WA 31/I:66,26-29; LW 14:46.

46. Older, less organized material is found in Urban Gottlieb Haussdorff, *Lebens-Beschreibung eines christlichen Politici, nemlich Lazari Spenglers . . .* (Nürnberg: Schmidt, 1741), pp. 164-71. Besides interpretive, poetic, and meditational texts of differing quality, one would encounter the very formal use of the seal as a sign of identification. For an example of an older interpretation of the seal, see Andreas Kreuch: *Sigillum Lutheri. Eine christliche und einfältige Predigt . . .* (Mühlhausen: self-published, 1579). An example of a newer, more meditative handling of the text is Christian Kröning, "Gedanken zur Betrachtung der Lutherrose" in *Lutherische Kirche in der Welt, Jahrbuch des Martin-Luther-Bundes*, vol. 32 (Neuendettelsau: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1985), pp. 16-23.