ERICH PRZYWARA’S LATE RECEPTION OF LUTHER

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Abstract

Erich Przywara’s late career writings have to this point received little attention in English. While Przywara’s earlier writings include both significant dialogue with Protestant theologians (most prominently Karl Barth) and occasional references to Martin Luther, Luther takes on a new prominence in his work after the Second World War. This article seeks to describe Przywara’s late reception of Luther, including its historical circumstances and Przywara’s engagement with Luther scholarship, and to assess Przywara’s use and sharp criticism of Luther in his theology of exchange. Since exchange is positioned as the material theological center of the analogy of being, Przywara has drawn important concepts from Luther into the heart of his own theology. This article further argues that at a key point Przywara’s criticism of Luther fails, leaving his relation to Luther ambiguous. A concluding attempt is made to show both the overlooked ecumenical potential of Przywara’s engagement with Luther, and to illuminate the fundamental fissure that still separates their theologies.

Introduction

If John Betz is correct to speak of an ongoing “Przywara renaissance” (for which he gives ample evidence),¹ it remains a somewhat ecumenically lopsided affair. This is understandable; Przywara describes his own signal contribution as a “fundamental Catholic form.”² Major voices – Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Josef Pieper, Edith Stein, and Benedict XVI, among others – attest his seminal influence on twentieth-century German Catholic theology, and through them on modern theology more broadly, if indirectly. By contrast, the Jesuit’s place in relation to

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¹ John R. Betz, “The Analogia Entis as a Standard of Catholic Engagement: Erich Przywara’s Critique of Phenomenology and Dialectical Theology,” Modern Theology 35, no. 1 (January 2019): 81–102. One could add to Betz’s list of recent Przywara publications Philip John Paul Gonzales, Reimagining the Analogia Entis: The Future of Erich Przywara’s Christian Vision (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019) and Graham James McAleer, Erich Przywara and Postmodern Natural Law: A History of the Metaphysics of Morals (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

² Erich Przywara, “The Scope of Analogy as a Fundamental Catholic Form,” in Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 348–99.

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Protestant theology remains uncertain, and is still often viewed through his dialogue with Karl Barth. Barth’s very prominence, especially in the English-speaking world in which his works are widely available and Przywara’s are not, can lead to the unintentional reduction of Przywara to a supporting character or foil within the hero’s journey of the Swiss theologian. Consequently, the breadth of Przywara’s engagement across confessional boundaries is obscured. A fuller picture of Przywara’s theological concerns demands attention to his diverse conversation partners. In fact, Przywara’s writings from the 1920s on include occasional but broad engagement with Protestant theologians – Barth, but also Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Emanuel Hirsch, Werner Elert, Herman Sauer, and others – in reviews, essays, and lectures.

These discussions of Protestant theology frequently display a concern for the influence of Martin Luther as the Protestant forefather, the source and type of what is essentially Protestant. Through the beginning of the Second World War, Luther is rarely cited or approached directly but distilled from the primary Protestant interlocutors, Barth outstanding among them. Following the war, however, a quite different engagement emerges in Przywara’s writing: Luther, cited directly, discussed in explicit distinction from the tradition bearing his name, and usually without much reference to Barth. Even more, we find that Luther has left an enduring mark, as his formulations are taken up into the heart of Przywara’s later theology.

To this point, little work has been done on the later Przywara, virtually none in English, and none considering his reception of Luther in light of Luther’s own texts or modern Luther scholarship. Secondary literature on Przywara, particularly in German, does attend in some measure to his Luther engagement. Bernhard Gertz deals insightfully with Luther’s significance for Przywara, but his treatment is one-sided to the extent that it does not assess Przywara from the perspective of the Luther texts he employs. More recently, Martha Zechmeister and Ralf Stolina have addressed Przywara’s program of negative theology and given some consideration to Luther’s place in it, but again, do not ask basic (from the perspective of Luther studies) questions about the later Przywara’s engagement with Luther.

3 There are some recent cases of Protestant theologians engaging Przywara in his own right, rather than in connection with Barth. See, for example, Kenneth Oakes, “The Cross and the Analogia Entis in Erich Przywara,” in The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Anti-Christ or the Wisdom of God?, ed. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 147–71, and Rowan Williams, Christ the Heart of Creation (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 224–52. Both of these also recognize the later Przywara’s use of Luther, though neither offers much analysis of it.

4 Erich Przywara, “Protestantische und katholische Ur-Einstellung. Zur Aussprache zwischen Paul Tillich und Gerhardt Kuhlmann,” Theologische Blätter 7 (September 1928): 226f. Przywara, “Kairos,” Stimmen der Zeit 119, (1930). Przywara, “Tragischer Welt,” in Ringen Der Gegenwart 1 (Augsburg: Filser-Verlag, 1929), 356–59. Przywara, “Primal Christian Terms: Kerygma, Mysterium, Kairos, Oikonomia,” in Analogia Entis. An account of Przywara’s engagement with Tillich as an ecumenical encounter can be found in Thomas F. O’Meara, “Przywara and Tillich at Davos,” Gregorianum 87, no. 2 (2006): 227–38.

5 Erich Przywara, review of Emil Brunners Lehre von der ursprünglichen Gottebenbildigkeit des Menschen, by Hermann Volk, Stimmen der Zeit 137, no. 4 (1940): 132.

6 Erich Przywara, “Luther Konsequent,” Scholastik 12 (March 1937): 386–92. Przywara, “‘Grenze’ und ‘Flucht’,” Stimmen der Zeit 130, no. 2 (1936): 126–29.

7 Erich Przywara, review of Morphologie des Luthertums 1. Bd.: Theologie und Weltanschauungs des Luthertums, by Werner Elert, Stimmen der Zeit 121, no. 6 (1931): 472. Przywara, review of Morphologie des Luthertums 2. Bd.: Soziallehren und Sozialwirkungen des Luthertums, by Werner Elert, Stimmen der Zeit 125, no. 1 (1933): 67–68.

8 Erich Przywara and Hermann Sauer, Gespräch zwischen den Kirchen (Nürnberg: Glock und Lutz, 1956).

9 I am indebted to John Betz for initially drawing my attention to Przywara’s use of Luther.

10 Bernhard Gertz, Glaubenswelt als Analogie: Die theologische Analogiellehre Erich Przywaras und ihr Ort in der Auseinandersetzung um die analogia fidei (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1969), 372–84.

11 Martha Zechmeister, Gottes-Nacht: Erich Przywaras Weg negativer Theologie (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 1997).

12 Ralf Stolina, Niemand hat Gott je gesehen: Traktat über negative Theologie (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 49–66.
questions about Przywara’s use of Luther. Which texts did he rely upon? Which secondary literature, if any? How does his interpretation of Luther comport with interpretations of the period, and with major developments since? For their part, Luther scholars have entirely neglected Przywara’s contribution, and appear generally unaware of the interaction.13

In hope of filling some of these deficiencies, this article will outline the historical circumstances of Przywara’s engagement with Luther (Part I), set out the major positive features of Przywara’s main foray into Luther scholarship (Part II), and examine his constructive use of Luther in subsequent writings and his later theology as a whole (Part III). Having established something of Luther’s importance for Przywara, the article will examine his main criticisms of Luther (Part IV), assess this Luther reception (particularly the criticism) against Luther’s texts (Part V), and offer a brief analysis of where, given the successes and failures of Przywara’s Luther reception, the two stand relative to one another as theologians in ecumenical encounter (Part VI).

I. Przywara’s Encounter with Luther in its Historical Setting

Erich Przywara was born in 1889, six years after the 400th anniversary of Luther’s birth. In 1917, the year of the 400th Reformation anniversary, he published his first book, *Eucharistie und Arbeit*.14

The intervening years saw the Dominican Heinrich Denifle’s rediscovery of Luther’s 1515–1516 Romans lectures in the Vatican archives, and a subsequent scholarly carpet-bombing of Luther’s reputation in the form of his monumental *Luther und Luthertum in der ersten Entwicklung* (1904), along with the Jesuit Hartmann Grisar’s biography *Luther* (1911–1912).15 The Protestant reaction to these new efforts at Catholic Luther scholarship, in conjunction with the Luther anniversaries, proved a considerable spur to a broad, long-term scholarly effort at recovering Luther, commonly known as the Luther Renaissance. As Thomas O’Meara suggests, German Protestantism after the first World War was animated by the twin spirits of Luther and dialectical theology, and so it was natural that Przywara, aware of both, would connect Barth and Luther.16

In practice, this meant that Luther could be treated as legible within the ideas of Barth and other contemporary Protestant figures. *Luther Konsequent* (1937) exemplifies Przywara’s earlier approach. Taking up two recent works standing in apparent opposition, Barth’s fiftieth birthday festschrift17 and a book by Emanuel Hirsch on the relation between the Old and New Testaments,18 Przywara notes a deeper commonality in the interplay of conflicting ideas. Hirsch’s flight from mute nature as mask of the *deus absconditus* to the face of the loving Father, and that Barthian appropriation of the *theologia crucis* which refuses every form of human mediation, appear as opposite sides of an in-built polarity, one which has repeatedly expressed itself in the history of Lutheranism since the Reformation. Luther is the father of a false binary: either destructive, revolutionary enthusiasm (against which he nevertheless polemicized), or the inwardness of

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13 Demonstrating a negative is difficult, but Przywara’s absence from review articles on modern Catholic interpretation of Luther is telling. E.g., Otto H. Pesch, “Twenty Years of Catholic Luther Research,” *Lutheran World* 13 (1966): 303–16, and Wolfgang Thönissen, “Martin Luther in Roman Catholic German-Language Theologies,” in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Accessed online 30 June 2019. https://oxfordre.com/religion/abstract/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-305

14 Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 14.

15 Thönissen, “Martin Luther in Roman Catholic German-Language Theologies,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 

16 Thomas F. O’Meara, O.P., *Erich Przywara, S.J.: His Theology and His World* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 101.

17 Ernst Wolf, ed., *Theologische Aufsätze: Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1936).

18 Emanuel Hirsch, *Das Alte Testament und die Predigt des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1936).
bourgeois individualism. Proceeding in this way, Przywara can see both Hirsch and Barth as heirs to Luther.

The Gestapo’s 1941 closure of *Stimmen der Zeit,* the Jesuit journal at which he was lead editor, marks a break in Przywara’s work and in his approach to Luther. Unsteady living and working situations and faltering health limited his output in the following years, but several details can be marked out. A series of sharply apocalyptic sermons delivered in Munich and Vienna in late 1943 and 1944 suggests attention to Luther. One in particular, “Alte und Neue Reformation,” deals in broad Reformation themes – Word alone, Christ alone, etc. – lifting up their necessity (in a reconsidered, Catholic form) for the situation of the modern church. Luther is not clearly distinguished from the Protestant Reformation as a whole, but the eventual focal point of Przywara’s Luther studies, the exchange between the sinful human and God in Christ, is here presented as the heart of the Reformation’s “Christ alone.”

A chance meeting towards the end of the war appears decisive for Przywara’s study of Luther. In late 1944, the Evangelical High Consistory (*Evangelische Oberkirchenrat*) evacuated Berlin for Stolberg in the Harz Mountains. Around the same time, Cardinal Faulhaber, the Archbishop of Munich, had similarly sent Przywara to Stolberg for rest and recuperation. Stolberg Castle thus played host to both the Jesuit theologian and leading members of the local and national Protestant judicatories in the first half of 1945, and so presented the opportunity for extended conversation as well as access to study Luther’s writings.

Those studies bear their most evident fruit in a twenty-five page essay within Przywara’s sprawling 1952 book, *Humanitas.* This essay is Przywara’s primary published scholarly foray into Luther. In a lengthy endnote, Przywara offers thanks to his friend Georg Oeltze of the Stolberg consistory, as well as the members of the Berlin High Consistory, especially Heinz Brunotte. He credits them with providing access to the Weimar critical edition of Luther, and, one can infer, encouragement in its use. Also thanked are the Protestant theology faculty of the University of Vienna, and K. A. Meissinger, who had worked on the text of Luther’s Romans lectures for the Weimar edition. Przywara then provides a short bibliography of his publications dealing with Luther, and notes some of his unpublished works: August 1931 lectures from

19 Przywara, “Luther Konsequent,” 391–92.
20 Przywara, *Analogia Entis,* 25.
21 Erich Przywara, *Vier Predigten über das Abendland* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1948), 18–36.
22 Bernhard Gertz, “Erich Przywara (1889–1972),” in *Christliche Philosophie in katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts,* ed. Emerich Coreth (Graz: Styria, 1988), 2:575. Partially quoted in O’Meara, *Erich Przywara, S.J.*, 101.
23 Erich Przywara, *Humanitas: Der Mensch gestern und morgen* (Nürnberg: Glock und Lutz, 1952), 873. Oeltze served on the local consistory, which had historically been a “princely” consistory, under the oversight of the princes of Stolberg-Stolberg, from 1935–1948. Brunotte was called to the chancellery of the EKD in 1936, and after the war served for many years as its president. As a churchman and theologian, he was a leading figure of post-war German Protestantism. See Heinz Boberach, Carsten Nicolaus, and Ruth Pabst, *Handbuch der deutschen evangelischen Kirchen 1918 bis 1949: Organe – Ämter – Verbände – Personen. Band 1: Überregionale Einrichtungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2010) and Karl-Heinz Fix, Carsten Nicolaus, and Ruth Pabst, *Handbuch der deutschen evangelischen Kirchen 1918 bis 1949: Organe – Ämter – Personen. Band 2: Landes- und Provinzialkirchen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2017).
24 Complete as of 2009, but still an ongoing project at the time of Przywara’s work, the *Weimarer Ausgabe* (hereafter *WA*) today runs to well over 100 volumes and scores of thousands of pages. *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlaou, 1883–1993).
25 For Meissinger’s role, see foreword to *WA* 56: v, xxxi-xxxi.
26 These texts as listed by Przywara include: *Ringen der Gegenwart* 2 (Augsburg: Filser-Verlag, 1929), 669–725; “Die dialektische Theologie,” *Schweizer Rundschau* (March 1928); “Katholizismus und Protestantismus heute,” *Christentum und Wissenschaft,* (July 1929); “Das katholische Kirchenprinzip,” *Zwischen den Zeiten* 7 (1929); “Luther konsequent,” *Scholastik* 12 (1937); and “Alte und Neue Reformation,” *Scholastik* 20/24 (1949), 206–20.
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Salzburg on the topic of “The Problem of Theology”; a sequence of four investigations into the controversial doctrines of the Reformation, which was ready for publication in *Stimmen der Zeit* at the time of the journal’s shuttering in 1941; manuscripts from 1944–1945 engaging Protestant and Catholic scholars on Luther; and an article assessing various scholarly opinions of Luther.27 A portion of that article28 reviewing and offering methodological critique of pre-war Luther scholarship (to be discussed in Part II, below) concludes the endnote. This body of work confirms and illuminates Przywara’s long term interest in Luther.

II. The Luther Essay

The essay in *Humanitas* is not self-contained, but sits within a longer discussion in the chapter “Power,” which traces from Plato’s Symposium, through Plotinus and Origen, and then through Albigensian Manichaeism. Luther is presented as this ancient thread’s unlikely culmination, and so the gateway to modernity. Przywara describes him as the only theologian whose treatment of exchange stands against Plato (specifically, eros and sacrifice in the Symposium), and at the same time, and despite Luther’s overt antipathy toward it, as the explosive fulfillment of Manichaeism.29

Przywara laments that Luther never had an opponent in his lifetime who truly understood him.30 Philipp Melanchthon’s theology did more to shape later Lutheranism, and Protestantism broadly, than Luther’s own. As a result, Catholic responses, even the Council of Trent, have not addressed the true Luther. While he does not directly discuss Luther’s sixteenth-century opponents, Przywara’s ambition to correct their failings invites comparison between their engagements and his. As shall be discussed in Part VI below, something of a historical rhyme emerges between Przywara’s dialogue with Luther and that of Tommaso de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan, who saw clearly enough the basis of the emerging division.

Przywara shows significant awareness of contemporary Luther scholarship, offering brief evaluations in the aforementioned endnote of the contributions of the Catholic scholars Heinrich Denifle, Hartmann Grisar, Franz X. Kiefl, and Josef Lortz, as well as of the Protestants Ernst Troeltsch, Karl Holl, and of course Karl Barth. Denifle and Grisar, whatever their scholarly merits, have no sense of Luther’s theological center. Significant advances in this direction are made by Troeltsch and Kiefl, as well as by Holl, but these are misunderstood by Lortz, and finally neither his nor Barth’s presentations correspond to the real Luther.31

Przywara gives four principal reasons why Luther had not yet been fully apprehended.32 First, important sermons were long unknown and unavailable (this was a common concern of major Luther Renaissance figures); second, the significance of the Romans commentary, rediscovered by Denifle at the turn of the century, was still being assessed (this too is straightforwardly true for the early phases of the Luther Renaissance); third, inadequate attention had been given to the relation between Luther’s work on the Psalms and Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, especially as regards the theme of the whole Christ, head and body (this is a distinctive concern of Przywara’s, in comparison to most contemporary Luther scholarship); fourth, key texts – *The Freedom of a Christian*, *The Bondage of the Will*, and the 1535 Galatians lectures – had been read so as to harmonize with Melanchthon.

27 Przywara, *Humanitas*, 873–74.
28 Originally prepared for the *Zeitschrift für Aszese und Mystik*. Date indeterminate, but almost certainly post-war.
29 Przywara, *Humanitas*, 365.
30 Ibid., 376.
31 Ibid., 874.
32 Ibid., 378.
This final point rests on Karl Holl’s influential and strongly drawn contrast between Luther and Melanchthon, which Przywara critically appropriates. Melanchthon’s better known theology has eclipsed Luther’s radical edge. Melanchthon is dismissed by Przywara as one half of the dialectic (Calvin as the other) that informs typical Protestantism – emphasizing a simple and overly subjective correlation between Word and faith, and leaving aside the objective and subjective mystery of salvation as nuptial exchange, commercium. Przywara adds that, as a consequence, Luther’s Mariology – a key to understanding Luther – receives no attention at all.

The way to this “real Luther” is paved through a pattern of writings spanning Luther’s career, which will unfold his central theological concern. The road map includes the 1514 Christmas sermon, Romans commentary (1515–1516), a sermon of 29 September 1518 (as summarized in a letter to Georg Spalatin), the Operationes in Psalmos (1519–1521), The Freedom of a Christian (1520), The Bondage of the Will (1525), and the later Galatians lectures (1531/1535).

It is exchange – the objective and subjective, bodily and spiritual interplay of Christ and the Christian, Christ and the Church – which Przywara identifies as the ground of Luther’s doctrine of justification, and so of grace, and the center of his theology. The term exchange, katallagē, is drawn from 2 Corinthians 5 – the ministry of reconciliation, understood as an economic metaphor, the settling of accounts. Irenaeus and Augustine develop the Pauline concept further, but it falls largely dormant until its powerful revival by Luther.

If this is Luther’s center, in what does it consist? Przywara traces out its development, beginning with the 1514 Christmas sermon. He quotes: “As the Word of God has become flesh, so it is surely necessary that flesh also become Word . . . therefore, wisdom becomes foolish, that folly becomes wisdom, and so . . . He accepts all that is ours in order to teach us His.” Here the pre-Reformation Luther is not far from the traditional, essentially Patristic expression of the admirabile commercium as it appears in the language of the old Christmas antiphon:

O wonderful exchange:
the creator of humankind,
taking on a living body,
deigned to be born of a virgin:
and becoming human without seed,
bestowed his divinity upon us.

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33 See the section “Luther gegen melanchthonische Protestantismus,” ibid., 378f. Likewise, “Luther gegen calvinistische Protestantismus,” ibid., 380f.
34 Ibid., 378.
35 WA 1, 20–29.
36 WA 56; Luther’s Works [LW] 25, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, and Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955–1986).
37 WA Briefwechsel 1, 284–87.
38 WA 5.
39 WA 7, 12–73; LW 31, 327–77.
40 WA 18, 551–787. LW 33.
41 WA 40.1 and WA 40.2, 1–184; LW 26 and LW 27.
42 Przywara, Humanitas, 379.
43 Ibid., 380; quoting Luther, WA 1, 286. “. . . quod sicut verbum Dei caro factum est, ita certe oportet et quod caro fiat verbum . . . ideo sapientia fit stulta, ut stultitia fiat sapientia, et sic . . . omnibus nostra assumptis ut conferret nobis sua.”
44 Latin text from Cynthia Kaldis, Latin Music Through the Ages (Wauconda, IL: Balchuzey-Carducci Publishers 1991), 17.
The thought has progressed further by the 1515–1516 Romans commentary: “God cannot become wise, righteous, true, brave, good, etc. in his words, unless we, believing in Him, and yielding to Him, confess ourselves to be unwise, unjust, untruthful, weak, evil.” These antitheses are presented as the first of three characteristics of Luther’s dialectic—a dialectic which holds both Luther’s value and his supposed downfall. Christ is to be preached “through conflict and contrast.” Przywara understands this antithesis correctly when he focuses on Luther’s distinction between God’s alien and proper works. God damns in order to heal, disturbs the conscience in order to pacify, consumes, scatters, and tears out in order to raise up, gather, and plant, in two distinct words and works. However, as we shall see, Przywara makes an inference from Luther’s statements about God’s opposed works and words to an antithesis in his being—an inference drawn without recognition that in this step he has abandoned Luther.

The second part of the dialectic is as follows: the whole of salvation, and so the whole God in Christ is preached as hidden under his opposite, that is, under the suffering and death of the flesh, under sin. God is not to be known in sovereign, all-working majesty, but in the concrete materiality of the manger and the cross. Przywara connects this description with Luther’s view of the sacraments—as, for Luther, grace comes to expression in the physicality of the preached word of promise, which includes the absolution, Baptism, and the Sacrament of the Altar. Przywara perceives this aspect of Luther as anti-Protestant, and especially as anti-Calvin, opposed to an idolatry of abstracted God and idealized community. Christians must flee from the naked, absolute God to the clothed God, to God wrapped in the flesh of Christ and immersed in his promises. In the former, there is only wrath; in the latter, grace.

Third, this mystery hidden under its opposite, in tension and conflict, is precisely the mystery of exchange, of the marriage of God and human in Christ. This means that Christ and the Church, and in it every Christian personally, are one body. At this point, Przywara suddenly piles up (against his usually spare citation habits) references to six different works by Luther, spanning the whole of his career. Here he is surely eager to demonstrate the concrete physicality of Luther’s conception of the Church and the whole Christ, and feels that without weight of evidence the point will be overlooked. It is in light of that concrete physicality that the next point has such startling force. This bodily union of Christ is specifically with sinful humanity, with a sinful church, so Christ actually becomes sin and curse. It is in Luther’s development of the Pauline

45 Przywara, Humanitas, 380; quoting WA 56, 218f. Written in table form: “Deus in sermonibus suis non potest sapiens, iustus, verax, fortis, bonus etc., fieri, nisi nos ei cedendo et credendo confiteamur nos insipientes, iniustos, mendaces, infirmos, malos esse.”

46 Ibid.; quoting WA Briefwechsel 1, 284f. “Prior forma facit ex nihilo aliquid, imo omnia; posterior facit ex omni nihil, et ex aliquo non aliquid; ascendit illa, descendit istsa.”

47 Ibid., 386f.

48 Ibid., citing WA 18, 782; LW 33, 287. “. . . per contentionem et antithesis praedicet . . .”

49 Ibid., citing WA 56, 392; LW 25, 382f.

50 Ibid., 383.

51 Calvin’s writings are not cited, and the engagement leans heavily on the subsequent theological tradition bearing his name. This is a rough parallel to Przywara’s earlier approach to Luther.

52 Ibid., 387. His citations (which do not include specific quotations) are WA 5, 493; WA 7, 49ff.; WA 25, 342, 375; WA 40.II, 556ff.; WA 56, 279ff.; WA 40.III, 646ff.; WA 7, 54. These correspond to the Operationes in Psalmos (1519–1521), The Freedom of a Christian (1520), Lectures on Isaiah (1527–1529), Lectures on Psalm 45 (1532), Lectures on Romans (1515–1516), Lectures on Isaiah 9 (1543–1544), and The Freedom of a Christian (again).
“became sin for us” of 2 Corinthians 5 that Przywara sees Luther as advancing the theology of exchange to its limit:

But since in the same person, who is the highest, greatest, and only sinner, there is also eternal and invincible righteousness, therefore, . . . all sin is defeated, killed and buried in Christ, and righteousness remains victorious and rules forever . . . He made such a happy exchange with us, took on himself our person of sin and gave us his innocent and victorious person . . . Therefore, there is no Sin, no death, no curse anywhere in the world, but only on Christ, who is the lamb of God, who has taken away the sins of the world.53

Having identified this distinctive form of exchange as Luther’s theological center, Przywara, perhaps surprisingly, locates Luther’s Mariology within it. Mary is the exemplar of the vita passiva, passive life, understood in terms of a wholly passive righteousness, “in which we do or repay nothing, but only receive and suffer another working in us, namely God.”54 Attending to Luther’s frequent use of childbirth language – womb, labor, baby, milk – Przywara highlights the connection between Mary and the believer: if we remain in the word, we “co-suffer with Christ, as the mother co-suffers when the child is delivered.”55 This is a deadly struggle, of one piece with the apocalyptic suffering and death denoted by Christ’s becoming sin and curse. The old person, the “person of sin,” dies, and a new righteous one comes to birth in Christ.

This exchange in suffering, in which Mary is the form of the Christian, occurs in the concrete – in Christ, in the Church, in the word of promise, which for Luther is the “womb of God.” It is not idealized or spiritualized, but must remain bodily, else the end result is a “spiritualized Mariology,”56 a Mary abstracted from the one whose body bore the material God, and so implying faith in some other God than the one incarnate in Christ. Here the concrete physicality of Luther’s theology is a ward not simply against Protestantism, but against the larger specter of Manichaeism which Przywara sees haunting the West. The centrality of the personal and bodily exchange thus serves to protect theology, as it entails Luther’s revised definition of the theological task. Theology, says Luther, concerns the relation of the human being who sins and the God who justifies, and here Przywara nods in agreement.57

III. Przywara’s Subsequent Use of Luther

Przywara’s debt to Luther is evident in his works subsequent to Humanitas. Luther sometimes appears by name in historical discussions or, especially, in connection with the exchange theme.

53 WA 40.1, 438–45; LW 26, 281–85. Quoted in Humanitas, 391. Przywara cites this passage frequently in various late works, e.g., Erich Przywara, Logos: Logos, Abendland, Reich, Commerciun (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1964), 127f.

54 Przywara, Humanitas, 392, citing WA 40.1, 41. “Ibi enim nihil operamur aut reddimus Deo, sed tantum recipimus et patimur alium operantem in nobis, scilicet Deum.”

55 Ibid., 393, citing WA 25, 295. The English translation in LW 17 (roughly page 191) does not follow closely at this point. “Si enim in puro verbo manserimus, habemus Christum compatientem, sicut mater compatitur, cum enititur foetum.”

56 The spiritualization of Mary (and so of the Church and the Christian) is a key element of Przywara’s analysis of Albigensian Manichaeism in the section preceding the Luther essay. Considerably more could be said regarding the theme of bridal mysticism in the (rather complex) Humanitas essay, and specifically in its relation to Przywara’s interpretation of Luther on Mary, but I have intentionally limited that discussion here.

57 Przywara, Humanitas, 385. Luther’s remark, “Subiectum Theologiae homo reus et perditus et deus iustificans vel salvator,” is from his exposition of Psalm 51 in WA 40, II, 328; LW 12, 311. For a thorough discussion of this definition of the topic of theology, see Oswald Bayer, Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 29–43.
However, at least as informative are those passages which make use of concepts drawn from Luther without citation, as these demonstrate the degree to which Przywara has integrated Luther into his own thinking. As a full examination of such use could quickly turn into a broad study of Przywara’s late theology, I will limit discussion here to a few works and instances.

Przywara’s commentary on the Gospel of John, Christentum gemäss Johannes, was published in 1954, only two years after Humanitas. Przywara’s foreword presents it as neither a technical exegetical work nor a systematic one. Its method, rather, is to highlight the analogy of faith, the material inner correspondence of the testimony of the Old and New Testaments, which nevertheless is rendered transparent in that relation of creator and creation expressed formally as the analogy of being. That is, despite a very different mode of presentation, Przywara sees the work as in essential continuity with his earlier Analogia Entis and Deus Semper Major (a lengthy commentary on the Spiritual Exercises).  

Luther is mentioned only once in more than three hundred pages. Discussing John 1, Przywara quotes the young Luther as summing up the mystery of the incarnation: “Therefore the word became flesh, that flesh might become word.” There is nothing distinctive to Luther in this remark, and no obvious reason to have cited him at all. However, the words of Luther are followed by a discussion of exchange invoking the familiar verses of 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:10–13, and so aligning the Johannine “Word became flesh” with the Pauline “became sin” and “became a curse,” which Przywara understands as Luther’s distinctive emphases. The presentation appears strategic. Unobjectionable Athanasian words from early Luther are employed to introduce a more radical interpretation of exchange, which is treated as straightforwardly biblical. Przywara has adapted Luther’s theology without weighing down his own commentary with justification of that unusual choice.

Slightly further on, a discussion of exchange mentions Augustine, but again proceeds to concentrate on Christ as becoming sin and curse in language more typical of Luther. This Lutheran interpretation of Christ and sin is repeated throughout the commentary. In Jesus’ baptism by John, the Lord confesses himself as the sinner of the sins of the world. Indeed, in his basic office, Christ is understood as the one who bears the world’s sin, and so is the “only sinner.” Przywara even extends this into a discussion of the Trinity. The whole Trinity, the creator God of Genesis 1 and of John 1, is “the God of exchange (commercium) with the world,” in particular, with the world of sin and curse.

Luther’s contribution to exchange theology finds its way even into discussion of analogy. What is formally the analogy of being is materially agapē, wherein agape is the mystery of cross and resurrection, the encounter of the human being in thrall to Satan with the “thrice-holy God who in Christ becomes sin and curse.” This exchange is what 2 Corinthians 5:18 means by katalagē, and what Irenaeus, Augustine, and the liturgy (here Luther is omitted in name, if not in content) call commercium. Analogy is agape as exchange.

A later work, Logos (1964), again reinforces the importance of Luther to Przywara’s theology of exchange, and sheds further light on the relationship between exchange and analogy. The fourth part of Logos, titled Commercium, treats exchange biblically and historically. Luther is not the focus, but is mentioned in succession after Paul, Irenaeus, and Augustine – the principal tradents in

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58 Erich Przywara, Christentum gemäss Johannes (Nürnberg: Glock und Lutz, 1954), 7f.
59 From WA 1, 28.
60 Przywara, Christentum gemäss Johannes, 40f.
61 Ibid., 44.
62 Ibid., 56–59.
63 Ibid., 239–40.
the exchange theology. Exchange itself is identified in that chapter as the central Christian reality,\textsuperscript{64} the heart of Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and Christian ethics.\textsuperscript{65} Przywara does not mean this as a deviation from his commitment to the analogy of being as the Catholic structure. Rather, exchange is identified as the factual, concrete expression of analogy.\textsuperscript{66}

Przywara cautions that exchange and the analogy of being are not derivable from one another – one cannot recognize any concrete order between God and the creature merely on the basis of analogy. Analogy in this sense is the purely formal expression of the relation between God and the human. Just so, it functions as a kind of negative limit on the exchange, and as a measure for all theological expression of it: human proximity to God is found in the similarity-within-dissimilarity of the bodily death and resurrection of Jesus. This double relationship appears fundamentally similar to that previously expressed in his 1940 article, “The Scope of Analogy as a Fundamental Catholic Form.” There it is made clear that “the formula of analogy thus contains the three components of the one factical economy of salvation,”\textsuperscript{67} a “factical economy” Przywara came to identify as commercium. In that same article Przywara is careful to ward off any potential for a gnostic spiritualism: “As Christ is essentially the descending God, so too the ascent of our ‘participation in God’ occurs solely through participation in God’s descent. The glory of God (the core of deification) is found within the scandal of the cross (the core of redemption).”\textsuperscript{68}

The in-and-beyond structure of analogy rests upon unilateral divine movement not reducible to any immanent process or philosophical scheme. Therefore, neither can this divine movement be considered merely as an abstract principle, else the principle itself would be deified. It is God who acts in Christ. Przywara has thus entangled Luther, through the theology of exchange, in that which he understands as formally laid down by the Fourth Lateran Council: “One cannot note any similarity between Creator and creature, however great, without being compelled to note an even greater dissimilarity between them.”\textsuperscript{69} For Przywara, to understand exchange as analogical is to understand it in terms of this similarity within ever greater difference – a suspension and swinging divine movement within a polarity, ascent within descent.

Luther is invoked as a corrective to tendencies in Catholic thought which might undermine this analogical character of exchange. His apocalyptic antitheses are therefore to be set opposite and in analogical relation to a picture of ordered rational harmony which, on its own, would lose the scandal of the cross. Likewise, straightforward growth in righteousness cannot be allowed to replace the ever new repentance of the sinner. In these discussions we can hardly miss the shades of Luther’s emphasis on God hidden under the form of his opposite, and of a daily dying and rising as the structure of Christian life.\textsuperscript{71} The latter is most prominently located in Luther’s explanation of baptism in his Small Catechism: “What then is the significance of such baptism with water? Answer: It signifies that the old creature [literally, “Old Adam”] in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other

\textsuperscript{64} Przywara, Logos, 126.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 129f.
\textsuperscript{67} In Analogia Entis, 364.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 368.
\textsuperscript{69} Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum, forty-third edition, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012), 269.
\textsuperscript{70} As Betz notes, Przywara is inclined to read the Fourth Lateran's maior dissimilitudo in the direction of the Ignatian “ever greater.” Przywara, Analogia Entis, 73.
\textsuperscript{71} Przywara, Logos, 155.
hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."72

In summary, Przywara’s late works place exchange at the center of theology, not as an alternative to the analogy of being, but as its proper, material sense. Within this exchange theology, Luther is given a decisive place. Przywara has not simply lifted a few phrases from Luther, as it were, rhetorical flourishes which could be overlooked without impacting the whole. Instead, Luther contributes a distinctive reading of the relation between God and humanity, God and the world, and so touches the resulting structures of Christology, soteriology, the Christian life, the doctrine of God, and the task of theology. However, neither can Przywara simply swallow Luther whole. Even as he strives to include something of Luther within his expansive analogical vision, Przywara works to establish a limit to his adoption of the theologian he calls “highest mystic and highest heretic.”73 In order to properly understand Przywara’s use of Luther, his criticism of Luther must next be examined.

IV. Criticism of Luther

While Przywara in his later works does not minimize the difference between himself and Luther, several earlier criticisms are abandoned or altered in the Humanitas essay. Further, some obvious points of disagreement are passed over or judged far more mildly than might be expected, as Przywara drives towards a root distinction.

Luther is absolved of the fundamental Protestant errors, as Przywara sees them, of God abstracted as sovereign will and majesty, and of an unbalanced subjectivism in theology.74 These are instead laid at the feet of Calvin and Melanchthon, respectively, while Luther is elevated as an effective counter to both.75 In earlier writings, Przywara had often grouped Luther together with Barth as instances of “theopanism,” perceiving in the opposition and non-relation between God and creature a covert nullification and therefore absorption of the creature into God.76 The Humanitas essay, however, differentiates Luther’s understanding of the all-working power of God from that of Protestantism at large and particularly that of Calvin (and thereby, Barth), and the specific accusation of theopanism is absent.77 Luther’s thoroughgoing embrace of God’s work through creaturely mediatio blunts that charge.

The framing of the human being as simul justus et peccator, at once righteous and sinner, is nuanced. As a direct, formal description of the Christian, Przywara rejects it. But in his judgment, this is not Luther’s meaning. Rather, it is first to be understood Christologically, and then

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72 The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 360.
73 Przywara and Sauer, Gespräch zwischen den Kirchen, 67. Cf. Gertz, Glaubenswelt als Analogie, 379.
74 This in contrast to, e.g., his judgment in the essay, “St. Augustine and the Modern World.” There Przywara does distinguish to a degree between Luther and Lutheranism (the latter as a Luther-Melanchthon synthesis), but suggests that the earlier Luther differed by way of a greater similarity to Calvin. Erich Przywara, “St. Augustine and the Modern World”, trans. E. I. Watkin, in A Monument to St. Augustine (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), 269n1.
75 Przywara, Humanitas, 378ff.
76 For example, “The Barth-Thurneysen theology of the ‘negation’ [das Nicht] of the creaturely is at bottom simply the instantiation of Luther’s primal vehemence, in which, in his radical experience of the night of sin, he, so to speak, forced God into his arms. . . . Luther’s God is ultimately the deification of his tempestuous longing.” Przywara, Ringen der Gegenwart, 497, quoted in Analogia Entis, 20n62. This view of Luther is precisely what Przywara does not maintain in the later works.
77 Relevant here is Przywara’s explicit refusal of Alleinwirksamkeit as usually attributed to Luther; “. . . and the actual Luther, for whom everything is the ‘actual work of God’ (of course not in a formal Alleinwirksamkeit, as Holl thinks, rather in the revelation-mystery of admirabile commercium, the ‘marvelous exchange’).” Humanitas, 377.
applied to the Christian via the logic of exchange: just as Christ is in himself righteous, but in the hiddenness of the cross the greatest and only sinner, so the human, sinner in himself, is righteous as he loses himself and is hidden in the word of Christ.78

Przywara does criticize Luther’s ecclesiology, but does not fixate there. This criticism returns, in altered form, under the problem of antithesis and negation in Luther. Przywara finds Luther’s explicit ecclesiology somewhat lacking, but not the basic problem. He finds weak evidence of “spiritualized Mariology” in the form of Luther’s highly unusual Song of Songs commentary, which rejects any interpretation of the book as about Christ and the Church, but ultimately finds Luther inconsistent on this point.79

Instead, Luther is painted as an ironic fulfillment of the Manichaean thread running through the West from antiquity.80 The distinctions between law and gospel, wrath and mercy, are not understood merely from the perspective of distinct works or words of God but as a fissure within God’s being, an essential antithesis. In alignment with this interpretation, the theology of the Romans lectures appears to support a kind of salvation by negation, not as two distinct movements – the death of the old sinner and the birth of a new and righteous creature – but as if negation were in some fashion salvific. “And universally, our affirmation of anything good whatsoever is hidden under its negation, so that faith may have its place in God, who is negative essence and goodness and wisdom and righteousness, and cannot be possessed or touched unless by the negation of all our affirmatives.”81 Thus, Przywara understands self-negation as the sign of love of God, and so of election for Luther. Furthermore, this theology is inflated to a cosmic scope – a theology of the “cross through the whole world.”82 The universalized cross is therefore an idealized and abstracted cross. In place of the dynamic polarity of analogy, Luther has a radicalized tension, a static identity of opposites, with the effect of a standoff and a lit fuse. It manifests not in the movement of similarity within ever greater difference, but in world-negation and rupture.

From here, the line is clear to Luther’s unexpected heirs: from Jacob Boehme, to Friedrich Schelling, to the revolutionaries Bakunin and Nietzsche (and on further to Przywara’s sometime interlocutor, Paul Tillich). Luther’s negation ultimately denies every outward, concrete thing – and most especially the bodily glory of Christ. Przywara, for all his appreciation of Luther – indeed, naming him as the greatest power within Christian theology and philosophy since Origen (not an ironic criticism, as Przywara is highly appreciative of Origen) – settles on this judgment: Luther is bifurcated, dualistic. On the one hand, the “naked cross” of Protestantism, denuded of the bodily glory of God and of the works of love, and so wordless, as everything external comes to destruction. On the other, just as wordless, but pagan and mythic, is the naked gallows of Yggdrasil, the world-tree of Germanic mythology, on which Odin hung himself – symbolizing

78 Przywara, *Humanitas*, 388f.
79 Luther’s commentary on the Song is an outlier in the history of interpretation. Rejecting both the common medieval view of the book as Christological allegory (as, e.g., in the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux), and historicization as secular love poetry, Luther interprets the Song as political allegory, Solomon’s love song to the historical kingdom of Israel. This does not appear to have anything at all to do with Mariology, spiritualized or otherwise. See Jarrett A. Carty, “Martin Luther’s Political Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *The Review of Politics* 73, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 449–67. Also Jack Kilcrease, “The Bridal-Mystical Motif in Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65, no. 2 (April 2014): 263–79.
80 Przywara, *Humanitas*, 399. “So Luther, in his deepest real form, is the fulfills of Albigensian Manichaeism.”
81 *WA* 56, 392f. and *LW* 25, 383. Quoted in Przywara, *Humanitas*, 388f. “Et universaliter omnis nostra affirmatio boni cuiuscumque sub negatione eiusdem, ut fides locum habeat in Deo, Qui Est Negatiusa Essentia et bonitas et Sapientia et Iustitia Nec potest possideri aut attingi nisi negatis omnibus affirmatiuis nostris.”
82 This phrase from an April 1516 letter to Georg Leiffer. *WA Briefwechsel I*, 37f. “Crux Christi divisa est per totum mundum...” Quoted in Przywara, *Humanitas*, 397f.
both the world-cross referenced by Luther and the fiery end and ever-new beginning of Ragnarok.83

“Wordless” is perhaps the sharpest criticism Przywara could hang on Luther, as it indicates a basic failure to follow through on his own intentions. The verbal, bodily concreteness of promise that underlies Luther’s sacramental theology (and in fact, his doctrine of God) and so elevates Luther above Protestantism at large collapses into sheer abstraction. That theology which most strongly wants to flee from God hidden in se to God in his word ends up removing the word (and so the world) entirely. Therefore, it appears that the earlier charge of theopanism has to some extent re-emerged in the claim of Manichaeism, but in significantly altered form. Rather than identifying a basic opposition between God and the world, Przywara has pointed to an antithesis within God.

While this judgment has been dismissed as overheated by one interpreter of Przywara,84 I propose taking it more seriously. There is at least a superficial resemblance between Luther’s dialectic and the modern thought-forms to which Przywara points as its unfortunate fruit. Indeed, Luther is sometimes embraced precisely on this account.85 It is fair to ask whether Przywara has understood Luther correctly on all points – and indeed, he has not, though the reading is insightful in several respects. Resolving that question is reason enough to reconsider Przywara’s use of Luther.

Przywara has not merely attempted to summarize Luther in his essay, but to struggle with and finally account for him. It is, as Gertz says, a fight,86 and if Przywara feels himself in some sense the victor in this night-long struggle, he can only limp away into the dawn, permanently marked by the encounter. As noted, Przywara has assimilated Luther’s definition of theology and much of his account of exchange. Luther is in that moment judged to be at one with the Catholic liturgy; true Christianity is only that of the encounter between the human sinner and the merciful God.87 Przywara’s continued use of Luther invites the question of whether the adopted elements might still pose an unresolved challenge.

V. Przywara’s Luther Reception Evaluated

Despite certain flaws, Przywara’s interpretation of Luther has several distinct strengths. It demonstrates broad acquaintance with Luther scholarship as it then existed, and draws from a diverse sampling of major texts rather than over-relying on a few early or late works. Any identification of a single, central theological concept for Luther is a fraught affair, but locating Luther’s center in “exchange” manages to passably hold together a number of the Reformer’s major themes and emphases. By viewing the doctrine of justification through Luther’s understanding of preaching and the sacraments, Przywara keeps the objectivity of the divine promise in proper relation to faith. Luther’s Christological focus comes to the fore throughout, emphasizing the closeness of the interchange with the believer without falling into a wordless mysticism. Finally, Przywara does well to recognize at least some of the significance of Luther’s teaching on God hidden within and outside his word, though his understanding of this matter is incomplete. The common

83 The association of Luther’s apocalyptic with Germanic mythology is repeated, in somewhat less polemical form, in Erich Przywara, Mensch: Typologische Anthropologie (Nürnberg: Glock und Lutz, 1959), 275–76.
84 Zechmeister, Gottes-Nacht, 218. In particular, she sees the connection to Germanic mythology as embarrassing and forced.
85 For a clear recent example, see Marius Timmann Mjåland, The Hidden God: Luther, Philosophy, and Political Theology (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).
86 Gertz, Glaubenswelt als Analogie, 379.
87 Przywara, Humanitas, 385.
mistake of understanding all hiddenness as God’s hiddenness sub contrario, under the form of his opposite (namely, as the Crucified), \(^\text{88}\) is largely resisted. Had the essay in *Humanitas* been more widely received, it might have been counted a significant contribution to Luther scholarship.

However, Przywara has made a historical mistake that impacts his understanding of Luther. In leaning on the 1515–1516 Romans commentary, he has overlooked this early work’s discontinuities with Luther’s mature theology. \(^\text{89}\) In particular, the understanding of the Gospel as a concrete divine promise which bestows and constitutes what it says in the human act of proclamation (e.g., “This is my body . . .”, “Your sins are forgiven . . .”, “I baptize you . . .”), is not yet present. \(^\text{90}\) There is in the Romans commentary, however, a somewhat different soteriology, that element of negation-as-salvation which Przywara mentions but does not recognize as merely a transitional step, quickly abandoned, in Luther’s theological development. \(^\text{91}\) For the later Luther, salvation comes as a word of unconditional promise, that is, of new creation, and not as sheer negation. Language of negation, of death, even of self-hatred, remains in Luther’s writing, but belongs to a distinct moment, a distinct word, from that of promise and life. It is only the old unbelieving creature, not the new person in Christ, who is brought to death in the word of the cross, and so this can never be a matter of self-surrender or self-negation. Luther can also speak of the cross as laid on human life in various trials and sufferings, but just as there is no movement of self-negation, neither is there an abstract or idealized cross, a “cross through the whole world” – only the concrete matter of being handed over by baptism into death, and that death working its way to completion in the particulars of worldly existence. Consequently, the violent rupture which Przywara opposes to a true doctrine of analogy is not quite as he describes.

One can hardly miss the presence of antithesis within Luther’s mature theology, but properly locating such antithesis requires some care. It was earlier noted that Przywara draws a mistaken inference from a conflict between God’s words and external works to an opposition in God’s being. This is the decisive theological error. Przywara lauds the concreteness of Luther in dealing with God not as abstract majesty or absolute will, but clothed in his Word. He draws this from various of Luther’s later writings, but in particular cites *The Bondage of the Will*. Thus Przywara shows familiarity with a distinction most famously explicated in that work, between the immutable and omnipotent God as hidden outside his Word, where he wills not to be found, and hidden within it, where he gives himself as a promise – or, more simply put, between God not preached, and God preached:

We have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not

\(^{88}\) Variations of this mistake are common to, among many others, Karl Holl, Walther von Loewenich, Werner Elert, and Gerhard Ebeling. For a detailed account of the reception of Luther’s doctrine of the hidden God in modern German Protestant theology, see Joshua C. Miller, *Hanging by a Promise: The Hidden God in the Theology of Oswald Bayer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 41–114.

\(^{89}\) This is fairly typical of the early Luther Renaissance. The outlines of Luther’s development through the 1510s did not come into clearer view until the 1960s, through the work of Ernst Bizer and his student, Oswald Bayer.

\(^{90}\) Without entering into a complex discussion as to the precise timing of Luther’s Reformation turning point, or whether we speak of a singular turn at all, Bayer is surely correct that this understanding of unconditional promise becomes central for Luther’s theology from the latter part of 1518 onward. See Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1971), and Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 44ff.

\(^{91}\) Zechmeister is correct in her brief observation that Przywara’s incautious reading together of early and late Luther texts is a weakness in his analysis. Zechmeister, *Gottes-Nacht*, 219.
offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours.\(^92\)

It is one thing to experience a conflict between God’s words, and quite another to make an inference from this regarding God’s essence. The former takes place as we deal with God in his promise, as he is preached, but daily experience that promise as controverted this side of the eschaton. This is the concrete of grace, of exchange, the clothed God which Przywara admires in Luther. Just so, the latter is not a move which Luther judges as epistemically off-limits, but as representing an entirely different relation to God, outside his word of promise (and so under wrath and unreliable). The outlines of this distinction are present already in Luther’s Romans commentary, in a passage which Przywara cites: “God cannot become wise, righteous, true, brave, good, etc. in his words, unless we, believing in Him, and yielding to Him, confess ourselves to be unwise, unjust, untruthful, weak, evil.”\(^93\)

It seems that Przywara has not wholly grasped the import of Luther’s odd formulation “in his words.” The distinction between God hiding outside his word and God hiding within it only comes to clarity for Luther when combined with the theology of promise – or, more precisely, comes to clarity in the liturgical delivery of that promise, in the act of preaching itself. Certainly Przywara sees this as useful in guaranteeing the concreteness of exchange in Luther’s theology, but misses its full consequences. The question about God’s inwardness, his essence, is refused to the extent that it would seek to bypass or transcend the specific means by which God communicates himself. As Luther has it, “God does many things which he does not disclose to us in his word; he also wills many things which he does not disclose himself as willing in his word. Thus he does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. It is our business, however, to pay attention to the word and leave that inscrutable will alone, for we must be guided by the word and not by that inscrutable will.”\(^94\)

This is, at bottom, merely a reaffirmation of what Luther takes as the basic definition and ground of theology – the encounter of the human who sins and the God who justifies. To infer a conflict in God’s essence is precisely to abandon the distinction between God hidden outside and in his Word. It is excluded because it seeks to pass from God preached to God not preached, from God in a promise to God without a promise, and so is outside exchange, which takes place in the promise of Christ. What is received in this promise is the whole God, but this can only ever be claimed on the basis of the promise, not from some imagined observation point overlooking all.\(^95\)

Przywara may, of course, proceed by way of such inference, as does much of modern theology – but he may not maintain that in this he explicates Luther. On the contrary, he has unwittingly removed a pillar of Luther’s theology. Without this distinction, Luther really might be vulnerable

\(^92\) WA 18, 685 and LW 33, 139. “Aliter de Deo vel voluntate Dei nobis praedicata, revelata, oblata, culta, Et aliter de Deo non praedicato, non revelato, non oblato, non culto disputandum est. Quatenus igitur Deus sese abscondit et ignorari a nobis vult, nihil ad nos.”

\(^93\) WA 56, 218f. and LW 25, 204. Cited in Przywara, Humanitas, 380.

\(^94\) WA 18, 685 and LW 33, 140. “Multa facit Deus, quae verbo suo non ostendit nobis. Multa quoque vult, quae verbo suo non ostendit sese velle. Sic non vult mortem peccatoris, verbo scilicet, Vult autem illam voluntatem illa imperscrutabili. Nunc autem nobis spectandum est verbum relinquendaque illa voluntas imperscrutabilis. Verbo enim nos dirigir, non voluntate illa inscrutabilis oportet.”

\(^95\) Here, consider Luther’s treatment of predestination and the hidden God in his treatment of Genesis 26: “Therefore the godly should beware and be intent only on learning to cling to the Child and Son Jesus, who is your God and was made flesh for your sake. Acknowledge and hear Him; take pleasure in Him, and give thanks. If you have Him, then you also have the hidden God together with Him who has been revealed.” (Si hunc habes, tune etiam Deum abscenditum pariter cum revelato habes). WA 5, 461, and LW 5, 48.
to the accusation of Manichaeism, as the inference results in an opposition within the divine essence. With this distinction, God’s all-working immanent power no longer threatens the human sinner (as it does without any promise), but becomes for her without reserve in the preached promise. Przywara’s accusation of Manichaeism does not hold, as no essential antithesis is in view in Luther’s doctrine of God.

As a result of these errors, the outcome of Przywara’s encounter with Luther remains unsettled. Luther is not to be found suspended between the naked cross and Odin’s gallows, and his wrestling match with Przywara is not over. If his theology does not fall into the Manichaean trap, does not collapse into irreconcilable antithesis, then the possibility remains that it stands as a viable alternative to Przywara’s account of analogy. The case between Luther and Przywara will have to be judged on other grounds.

VI. Conclusion: An Ecumenical Encounter

An early review of Humanitas, published by Przywara’s one-time employer Stimmen der Zeit, highlights the ecumenical potential of the Luther essay. Despite its occupying only twenty five pages out of eight hundred, more than half the review concerns this essay, pointing to its importance as a resting point for the work as a whole. Nevertheless, a caution is raised: perhaps exchange should not be granted such weight. It is, after all, merely one element in the fullness of Christ, and not necessarily central to scripture or the Church fathers. This somewhat backhanded praise bears a certain irony. It is characteristic of Luther’s most appreciative critics to declare that he would be acceptable, even praiseworthy, if only certain extremities in his thought could be sanded down a little, set in more appropriate balance with the fullness of Christian teaching. It is almost enough to suggest a paraphrase of Luther’s wry response to his old adversary Cajetan’s (fairly controversial) biblical comments: Przywara in his later days has become Lutheran.

Przywara’s engagement with Luther (not a “becoming Lutheran”) does represent a creative and rather bold ecumenical overture. As noted earlier, serious Catholic historical scholarship on Luther originated a half century before Przywara’s essay. However, whether we speak of a very critical assessment of Luther like that of Denifle, or a more irenic take as in Lortz, we are still dealing with Luther predominantly in historical terms. Przywara’s use of Luther represents one of the very first significant theological uses of Luther by a twentieth-century Catholic theologian. Otto Pesch suggests that such engagements were initiated by Hans Küng’s Justification, a judgment that we must partially reject in recognition of Przywara’s contributions half a decade earlier. Furthermore, Küng’s eye is mainly on Karl Barth; while Luther is discussed, there is no sustained or direct engagement with his works. Pesch is correct only in the sense that Przywara’s efforts have, to this point, been too little recognized to be counted a major influence on Catholic engagement with Luther.

Pesch himself cites Humanitas as an example (among others) of Catholic scholarship on Luther, on the first page of his 1967 monograph Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin

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96 For a detailed discussion of Luther’s doctrine of divine hiddenness and promise in relation to the doctrine of God, see Steven D. Paulson, Luther’s Outlaw God, Volume 1: Hiddenness, Predestination and Evil (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).

97 August Brunner, S. J., review of Humanitas: Der Mensch gestern und morgen, by Erich Przywara, Stimmen der Zeit 150, no. 12 (1952): 462–65.

98 The original remark, “Cajetan in his later days has become Lutheran,” comes from W4 Tischreden 2, 596. Cited in Tommaso De Vio Cajetan, Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy, ed. Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1978), 36.

99 Pesch, “Twenty Years of Catholic Luther Research.”
Erich Przywara’s Late Reception of Luther

Luther und Thomas von Aquin. He makes no reference to its content at any point. Later in the same book, a footnote speaking of Przywara as a theologian who has written on analogy suggests limited familiarity with his work. If Pesch in fact ever read the Luther essay, its significance eluded him. This is plausible, as the piece requires a certain appreciation of Przywara’s overall project to evaluate properly – his primary interest is not to act as a historian, as Lortz, or Denifle before him, but as a theologian in critical and constructive encounter with Luther.

Just as in his earlier dealings with Karl Barth, and as with an assortment of other Protestants, Przywara seeks after the essentially Catholic by way of dialogue beyond the familiar confessional boundaries. The turn to Luther is a critical but hopeful turn to the Reformation in search of Catholicism’s future: “the Catholic not before the Reformation, and not simply alongside and against the Reformation,” That Przywara credits Luther with the recovery and advancement of the Catholic theology of exchange, not as simply preserving a fragment of what the Church possesses in full, but as re-voicing something necessary that had fallen silent, indicates an ironic *simul*: Luther, at once irreconcilable heretic and true Catholic.

This is also what renders the Luther encounter a true dialogue: while judging against him, Przywara invites Luther to continue speaking.

It should be kept in mind that Przywara could have continued his dialogue with Protestant theologians without ever reaching back to Luther so directly. Instead, while maintaining clear objections, he rendered Luther internal to his own project. The risk is apparent enough from the review by a member of Przywara’s own order, but the reward might be more subtle. Przywara has not overcome Luther – at least, not as he thought he had – and so effected a clear, if one-sided, reconciliation. What then to make of Przywara’s ecumenical endeavor? We are left with a view of two powerfully generative theologians standing in the closest possible proximity that their respective theological approaches allow, and so the inner nature of those approaches is made evident.

However close their rapprochement, Przywara and Luther remain separated by a somewhat greater dissimilarity, a dissimilarity that Przywara recognized even as he misinterpreted it. The difference between them is not that Luther is a Manichaean whose theology needs rescue from a fiery explosion, nor that Przywara is anything less than a theologian of divine revelation in the person of the Crucified. Here, one must again note the unfortunate consequence of reading Przywara disproportionately through his engagement with the outsized figure of Barth, in such a way that each comes to be defined as a pure opposite, a photo negative of the other. The simplistic impression of Barth the biblical, dogmatic, and doggedly Christocentric Protestant theologian creates a misleading parallel image of Przywara the purely speculative, abstract Catholic philosopher. Przywara’s use of and fundamental difference from Luther demonstrates the error in such stereotypes.

100 Otto H. Pesch, *Die Theologie der Rechtfertigung bei Martin Luther und Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1967), 609.
101 Przywara, *Humanitas*, 312. Quoted in Zechmeister, *Gottes-Nacht*, 190.
102 Note that Przywara’s favorite expressions of exchange theology in Luther are drawn from the 1531 Galatians lectures, delivered a full decade after Luther’s excommunication. Przywara has not attempted a clean separation of Luther into “early/Catholic” and “late/Protestant” phases, but allows for a simultaneity in Luther.
103 A similar dismissal from the Catholic side can be heard in von Balthasar’s remark, “It is no accident that Przywara never produced a Christology,” suggesting that the strongly disjunctive character of Przywara’s account of analogy would preclude such a thing. As a matter of historical fact, Przywara did not produce a Christology as such. However, attention to the theme of exchange in Przywara’s later works, and to its Christological center, leaves little doubt as to the unfairness of von Balthasar’s judgment. Comment in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. 3 (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1992), 221n51.
oscillating movement of similarity within ever greater difference; for Luther, God arrives to the sinner in a preached promise with eschatological certainty, and so in that promise all oscillation comes to an end.

Likewise, Przywara’s early tendency to read Luther through Barth, and so to find in Luther the ur-Protestant, is more a source of confusion than light. Luther’s distinction between God preached and not preached cannot be understood as a simple negation or inversion of Przywara’s analogy, or of the Fourth Lateran Council. Similarity and difference not only remain in the promise, but only come into their proper sense when God is preached as for the sinner without reserve. Apart from this preaching, radicalized immanence (pantheism) and transcendence (theopanism) still stand as unresolvable threats, which is simply to say that God remains inscrutable. Neither does Przywara’s judgment on Barth’s actualism of the preached word apply easily to Luther, despite a superficial resemblance. What appears to Przywara as theopanism is the “immediate” presence of Christ in the event of proclamation. Luther refuses all immediacy as an attempt to grasp God outside his Word.

The analogy of being and the distinction between God preached and God not preached thus stand as near (but not quite) parallels in their respective systems. The meaning of the gap between them, and the offense presented by each against the other, is visible as we move from abstract formalism to the concrete of Christian life – through exchange, to its expression in the problem of assurance and the proclamation of the Church. The Luther of the Romans lectures can hope only in the sign of negation. Against this, analogy’s swinging polarity is an evidently stronger (and more pastorally sensitive) position. In Luther’s mature theology, however, faith rests in the unshakeable (and therefore final) promise given from the mouth of an ordinary preacher. Here there is no suspension, no ever onward, but a definite answer, a surety: election arrives, materially, in the form of a word from a preacher, and along with it everything that Christ is and does. This – a fissure between Luther and his most prominent Catholic interlocutors since Cajetan – still stands between Luther and Przywara.

Notwithstanding Przywara’s conviction that no Catholic opponent of Luther had truly understood him, we see in Cajetan’s assessment of Luther the first clear recognition of this fundamental point of conflict. The shape of their conversation in October 1518 was, no doubt, heavily determined by Cajetan’s mission of extracting a recantation from the wayward Augustinian – a condition sub-optimal for theological exploration. Even so, their starkly different positions on the question of assurance (the disagreement emerging from Luther’s then recently published explanation to Thesis 7 of his 95 Theses) constituted a clear and accurate line of demarcation. Cajetan and Luther divided on a basic premise of the Christian life.

Where Cajetan saw the Christian via as necessitating suspension between despair and pride, Luther saw it as the certainty of faith, not as psychological self-certainty, but as trust in the God
whose word cannot fail to do as it says.\textsuperscript{107} For Luther, it is assurance in the promise that marks off Christian from non-believer; he is convinced that in giving it up he would risk heresy. To Cajetan, this certainty would be pride itself and a severing of that careful suspension – hence the end of the Christian’s striving. Such would look very like death or damnation, and a church established on such ground could only be a new church, not Christ’s church.\textsuperscript{108} In the judgment of Oswald Bayer, “A misunderstanding is present here only in that deep sense in which a variety of approaches for assessing the same issue divides participants in a fundamental way.”\textsuperscript{109}

To embrace the Christian life as analogical is, for Przywara, to see in it unending tension and movement, as he expressed in a 1926 lecture: “He is the infinite light that becomes ever more distant the closer we come to him. Every finding is the beginning of a new searching . . . No morning of mystical marriage is a definitive embrace of His fullness; no mystical night of despair a detachment from his presence . . . this indissoluble tension of proximity and distance to Him is but the innermost revelation of His own primal mystery, by which He is in us and beyond us . . .”\textsuperscript{110}

Przywara, for all his considerable difference from Cajetan on analogy, is disturbed at the same point. He has more appreciation than his predecessor for the discontinuous in Luther, but revolts at a theology in which the human creature comes to an end without remainder or suspension – one might note here his description of Luther’s “eschatologically extreme realism of the naked cross,”\textsuperscript{111} – and so likewise at a certainty of faith that renders such journey moot. For his part, Luther cannot but interpret this objection, and any theology which must maintain it, as hesitation regarding the one needful thing in all of creation, namely, a word that gives life without condition or reserve, by an unthwartable divine promise: “Your sins are forgiven.”

\textsuperscript{107} Luther’s contemporaneous account of his interview with Cajetan in Augsburg in October 1518 describes the disagreement in some detail, and fixes on this matter of faith as the certainty of the promise. See \textit{WA} 2: 6–26; \textit{LW} 31, 259–92. Here the judgment of Heiko Oberman describes the theological divergence well: “The characteristic of Luther’s doctrine of justification can therefore be designated as the reunification of the righteousness of Christ and the justice of God by which the sinner is justified ‘coram deo,’ which forms the stable \textit{basis} and not the uncertain \textit{goal} of the life of sanctification, of the true Christian life.” Heiko A. Oberman, \textit{The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 124.

\textsuperscript{108} For commentary on Cajetan’s remark describing this as the instantiation of a new church, “Hoc est novam ecclesiam construere,” see Bayer, \textit{Martin Luther’s Theology}, 85.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{110} Przywara, \textit{Schriften} vol. 2 (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1962), 281. Quoted in \textit{Analogia Entis}, 60.

\textsuperscript{111} Przywara, \textit{Humanitas}, 399.