Preface

I became a student of Christian history at an early age. One weekend when we were about twelve years old, my best friend Brian stayed at my house while his parents went out of town. That Sunday, Brian—who grew up attending his local Roman Catholic parish—came with us to church in our Lutheran congregation. It happened to be Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday of October when Lutherans observe the Reformation that started with the appearance, on October 31, 1517, of Martin Luther's *95 Theses* on indulgences.

Having grown up Lutheran, it seemed like just another Reformation Sunday to me: remembering Martin Luther and giving thanks for his reforming ministry. To my Catholic friend, however, it was a scandal. "What was that all about?!" Brian fumed as we left church. "What was so terrible about Catholics that you guys had to throw 95 feces at our church doors?!"

After explaining the difference between theses and feces, I realized that I needed to learn more for myself about the Reformation and my Lutheran tradition. I wanted to know why a story I grew up cherishing could be so shocking to my best friend. I started to check out books about Luther from local libraries, read whatever I could find about the Reformation at church, school or home, and paid careful attention to religious conversations whenever they came up. I continued to study these themes in college, with majors in history and humanities and a minor in theology. My decision to pursue a career in Lutheran ministry also included a desire to learn more about my Lutheran heritage so

that I could interpret it in meaningful ways both for Lutherans and for people of other religious backgrounds. As I learned from Brian, a good starting place for those conversations comes from explaining the meaning of unusual words, like "theses," which can easily be mistaken for something else; in Luther's time, theses were points raised for the sake of discussion and teaching.

Of course, Brian had not simply misheard a new vocabulary word on that Reformation Sunday. He was right to think that the way the Reformation had been presented in my congregation had included putting down Roman Catholicism. He found himself on the receiving end of the powerful but faulty logic that asserts: since I know my religious tradition to be true and life-giving, then other traditions must be false and misleading to the degree that they differ from mine. Part of my own journey has included wrestling with the question of how members of faith traditions can balance commitment to their own religious heritage with respect for the commitments of others. While my interest in this topic started with a personal experience, it also now comes with a broader concern to cultivate the kinds of positive interpersonal and communal relationships that build people up rather than tear them down.

As easy as it is to slip into self-centered ways of thinking, the Golden Rule of Matt 7:12 provides a great corrective. Jesus said, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you." Applying the Golden Rule to my work as a Reformation historian and Lutheran Christian means that I hope to share some of the insights about God, the Bible, faith, and daily life that I have learned from the Lutheran tradition. I have personally found that Lutheranism offers rich ideas for today, especially in the consistent focus on how faith in Jesus Christ fills and re-forms everyday life with grace. As I first experienced on that Reformation Sunday with Brian years ago, however, my appreciation of this tradition should not come at the expense of others. Therefore, as I share insights from the Lutheran tradition in this book, I aim to do so in ways that honor the histories, views and experiences of neighbors in this diverse world. Simple as it may seem, the Golden Rule provides a

profound starting point both for claiming what is important to oneself and respecting others.

Even so, some readers may wonder why bother with Reformation history or with specific religious commitments? Aren't the conflicts of the past best left behind? Not necessarily. Rather than ignore differences in history and outlook, the Golden Rule suggests a far more interesting way to affirm both individuality and mutuality: taking time to notice uniqueness can open doors of acceptance rather than close them. When I think of myself as a boy, I remember wondering if my religious faith was something that would make my world bigger or smaller. Would my faith separate me from the people around me or encourage me to live well with others whose backgrounds differed from mine? Over the decades, I have discovered that learning about and living out my religious tradition has indeed opened new paths into a big and beautiful world, including learning from the people around me.

What This Book Is About

In 1580, Reformation-era documents central to Lutheran preaching, teaching, and church life were brought together in a collection called the *Book of Concord*, which is full of thought-provoking theology and fascinating historical contexts. While this study will cover those theological and historical aspects, it will also show that the *Book of Concord* is filled with a basic spiritual concern that people's lives be rich in meaning and in service.

More than just a source of dusty dogmas or a relic of history, the *Book of Concord* offers valuable insights for people today. As a spiritual resource, its pages passionately describe things like faith in God, care for human souls, and Holy Spirit-filled ways to live. As a practical guide, it offers concrete ways for people to live out their faith amid the complexities of the real world.

While this focus on Spirit and service may sound simple enough, a historical and theological irony has accompanied the *Book of Concord* from its outset: this work that aimed to serve as a platform for spiritual

harmony also contributed to the separation of Lutherans from Roman Catholic communities and from other branches of Protestantism. On that Reformation Sunday with Brian, for instance, centuries of division between Protestants and Roman Catholics became very real for us in our hometown of Walla Walla, Washington, far from the Lutheran Saxony or Catholic Rome of the 1500s. Such divisions have direct roots in Reformation-era writings like the *Book of Concord*.

Are divisions like these permanently built into the faith traditions people carry with them? Or—as in the discussion of the Golden Rule above—might mutually edifying encounters come when we respectfully address challenging points of difference and particularity? This study offers the view that the *Book of Concord*'s care for truth and service reveals the great extent to which the Lutheran reformers valued lives of faith, hope, and love more than their own partisan desire to be right; they offered an expansive rather than reductive vision of human life in a complex world. I would even like to suggest that we in the early twenty-first century have opportunities to live into their hopes for harmony in ways that people in previous times could hardly have imagined.

With a focus on the Holy Spirit and Christian service in the *Book of Concord*, this study will identify core characteristics of the Lutheran tradition, including some traits that Lutherans share in common with other Christians and some that remain distinctive. For a variety of historical and theological reasons, Lutherans occupy a strange place in the history of Christianity. Although obviously identified with the beginning of Protestant Christianity, Lutherans represent a relatively small portion of Protestants today. In very broad numbers, if there are about eight hundred million Protestants in the world, just under ten percent of them (around seventy million) are Lutheran. Thus, even though Lutherans have played an important role in Christian history, they represent a distinctive and frequently unfamiliar branch of global Christianity. This book will aid readers' general familiarity with the Lutheran tradition.

As a work of "public theology," this book aims to interpret the *Book*

of Concord in ways that both Lutherans and those outside the tradition might find enriching.[1] I hope that Lutheran readers will gain new or renewed appreciation for their tradition and that readers who may be less familiar with Lutheranism will learn some of the values and principles of this nearly five-hundred-year-old branch of Christianity. While I highly recommend that people read the documents in the *Book of Concord* for themselves sometime, this book does not assume or require familiarity with those sources.

Conversations between the Past and the Present

What does it mean to learn from the past? On one hand, the past can seem to stand above contemporary questions and experiences, as if to say: the way it was then is the way things ought to be now. While the stability of such a view can be reassuring, it can also impose past norms on the present in unhelpful ways. On the other hand, we may be tempted to think that people in the past were so different that we have nothing to learn from them; or perhaps we suppose that the past only contained the kinds of prejudices and ignorance that enlightened modern people need to leave behind. This study navigates these extremes, first by acknowledging that we can learn much from those who came before us, and second, by expecting that contemporary viewpoints will build upon the witness and wisdom of the past in inspiring ways.

For example, when revising his excellent 1984 two-volume study of Christian history for the 2010s, Justo González asked an important question: Why update history? In response, he described "the fascinating dialogue between the present and the past that is the very essence of history: a dialogue in which the past addresses us, but does so in terms of our present questions."[2] Although it may sometimes

1. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton, 2004), 112: "The vocation of theologians . . . is to make explicit the commitments implicit in a community's practices as an aid to reflective self-understanding. But their contribution to discourse outside of the church consists in a kind of thick description that allows fellow citizens to correct prejudice and misunderstanding concerning what believers think and care about." See also page 113: "If you express theological commitments in a reflective and sustained way, while addressing fellow citizens as citizens, you are 'doing theology' publicly—and in that sense doing public theology."

seem as if history is settled, the past speaks to us in new ways as we approach it from different perspectives. In this study, it is not that the *Book of Concord* has changed, but that we in the twenty-first century have new questions to ask it and new insights to harvest from it.

This lively interaction between old and new has been built into both the Christian tradition and the Lutheran Reformation. While I mentioned the Golden Rule above, another passage from the Gospel of Matthew similarly informs the study of history: Jesus said, "every scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matt 13:52). With this saying, Jesus invited people to see a life of faith as a continuous adventure of setting new treasures alongside old ones in fascinating and enriching ways.

A contemporary example of how past and present mutually enrich each other comes from the rock band U2. While preparing for another tour after decades of performing, the singer Bono explained how the band's efforts to balance the old and new would be the "dialectic of this tour."[3] That is, the band hoped to bring out the best of their old material and set it alongside its newer work to create an inspiring concert experience.

In a wonderful coincidence, Bono's word "dialectic" is a key word within Lutheran theology. It refers to the learning that happens through dialogue with others. The Greek philosopher Socrates provided classic examples of dialectical thinking, as he guided people to new learning through conversation. In Plato's dialogue *Meno*, for instance, Socrates taught basic principles of geometry to an uneducated boy, making sure that the boy came to all of the conclusions by himself as they worked on problems together.[4]

In a similar way, the Lutheran reformers of the 1500s valued dialectic as a tool for combining the wisdom of the past with the needs of the present. They taught people core concepts from the Bible and the

2. Justo González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, revised and updated (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), xvi.
3. Andy Greene, "Inside U2's 'Innocence' Spectacle," *Rolling Stone* issue 1236 (June 4, 2015), 33.
4. Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, translated by W.H.D. Rouse (New York: Penguin, 1984), 43–49.

Christian tradition, with the understanding that people and situations inevitably change across time and place. Rather than leaving their successors with a rigid theological system or a fixed set of answers that only fit their era, worldview or culture, the Lutheran reformers used dialectical thinking to provide a firm set of principles that could be meaningfully translated across a variety of settings. They aimed to identify clear central points around which all kinds of adaptation and uniqueness could exist in harmony.

With the understanding that the Lutheran reformers were aware of difference in situations and customs, it is fair to say that dialectic and change were built into the tradition. As the book proceeds, I hope to describe this tradition in such a way that "most Lutherans, most of the time" would agree with my interpretation. I expect that some Lutherans will not agree with everything I write here, which is itself a noteworthy side of the Lutheran experience. What does it mean for a community to embrace its internal diversity and to trust that harmony can exist alongside difference? This has been an important and lively theme among Lutherans since early in the Reformation.

Finally, this book contains the critical awareness that Lutheranism spans the globe and is not the cultural possession of certain European or North American groups. Themselves aware of 1500 years of diverse Christian witness, the Lutheran reformers fully expected that people would continue to have different ways of thinking about and living out the gospel message that God justifies the ungodly "as a gift on account of Christ through faith."[5] They knew that unity has long existed alongside diverse ways of being Christian. Our unique global perspectives in the early twenty-first century provide compelling reasons to revisit the past with fresh eyes. With so many pressing challenges in our closely-connected yet highly-fragmented world, ideas like concord, harmony, spirit and service are as important as ever.

We are all on a journey in life, individually and together. Learning

5. CA IV 39.1–41.2. The description of God "who justifies the ungodly" is from Rom 4:5.

from those who came before us offers a great way to enrich the experience, widen the conversation, and grow in knowledge and love.