Cranach’s well-known Wittenberg altarpiece from 1547 depicts the Wittenberg congregation listening to Luther’s preaching. In the middle of the scene, between the preacher in the pulpit and those hearing the word, hovers an image of the crucified Christ characterized by a kind of surreal realism. Christ’s image appears present to the congregation in a way that seems incongruous with the realism of the piece as a whole. Yet it is precisely the power of art to make present Christ in the midst of absence that makes the predella so attractive. In a post-Christian culture where the absence of God often seems more real than His presence, Cranach’s sixteenth-century altarpiece provides a commentary germane to the ministry of the church in our own time.

Lukas Cranach the Elder is an ambiguous historical figure. His work from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries consisted principally of portraits and commissioned religious pieces of a typically medieval Catholic persuasion: madonna and child, imagines pietatis, and the like. Though Cranach’s nudes are universally regarded as evidence of his artistic genius, he may be better remembered as a shrewd businessman and keen propagandist rather than a gifted artist or a devoted Lutheran. After meeting Luther in 1520, Cranach was won over to Luther’s cause either by virtue of Luther and Melanchthon’s convincing arguments or by the prospect of being employed by the reformers to illustrate fantastical antipapal woodcuts, allegorical images of the law and gospel, and portraits of the reformers themselves. It is interesting that well into the 1540s Cranach continued to receive many commissions from Rome for pieces of late medieval devotional art and allegorical portraits, including some commissioned by Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, Luther’s opponent for so many years. Simul justus et peculator indeed!

In the sixteenth century as today, when people thought of Luther, the image that often first came to mind was the product of Cranach’s brush. So closely associated were Cranach and Luther that in the late nineteenth century the Lutheran artist Heinrich Stelzner painted an image of Luther as a tribute to Cranach. The reformer is sitting for his portrait with a bookish Melanchthon half reading and half voyeuristically looking over the artist’s shoulder as he paints the great man (Cranach Painting Luther at Wittenberg, 1890). In the same way that Melanchthon served as the great systematizer of Luther’s thought, it was Cranach, his workshop, and the nascent means of print and woodcut reproduction in the sixteenth century that became the great popularizers of Luther’s reformation.

It is important for us to remember that the Lutheran appreciation of art was highly unusual within reforming movements. While second-generation reformers in continental Europe and the British Isles were putting torch and chisel to any remnants of Christian artistry in the iconoclastic destruction of the mid-to-late sixteenth century, Cranach contributed to the formation of Lutheran liturgical art by creating an evangelical altarpiece. The Wittenberg altarpiece is one of several altarpieces that served to frame the identity of Luther’s new evangelical church as both distinct from and an inheritor of the traditions of medieval Christianity. Built literally upon the rubble created by Karlstadt’s
iconoclastic cleansing of St. Mary’s Church in Wittenberg, Cranach’s altarpiece replaced what was most likely an image of Mary behind the high altar of the church.

It is important to understand the role of art in heightening one’s sense of participation in liturgical worship. Liturgical music, church architecture, and the pictorial arts are all designed to convey the worshipper into the greater mystery of God’s presence within the act of Christian worship. From a functional perspective, there is little difference between an elaborate liturgical celebration of the eucharist and the enthusiastic worship of Pentecostals and charismatic Christians. In either setting art, word, movement, and music are used as catalysts in the worshipper’s experience of the divine mystery. To this end, altarpieces provide a multilayered theological schema for the worshipper that gives a sense of both purpose and context for participation in the liturgy. We learn from Christian art why it is that we are doing what we do and with Whom we are doing it.

Lutheran altarpieces share a number of similarities with their medieval predecessors. As with other pieces of liturgical art, they convey a sense of historical and spiritual context to the communicant. They highlight the significance and purpose of the liturgical act. More importantly, they offer the communicant a sense of context by establishing the boundaries of Christian community. Lutheran art, more than Lutheran doctrine alone, reveals the truly revolutionary nature of Lutheran sacramental theology. In the Wittenberg altarpiece in particular, one becomes aware of the unique presence of Christ in the local community through the means of grace and the proclamation of the word. Lutheran altarpieces tend to be more didactic and overtly allegorical than their Catholic forebears in order to communicate their theological propria. One is reminded in particular of the allegory of the law and gospel that makes up the four panels of the Weimar altarpiece, or even Cranach’s preference for depicting the act of preaching itself, which is certainly central to the predella of the Wittenberg altarpiece.

The Wittenberg altarpiece highlights a number of distinctively Lutheran theological themes. The central panel of the triptych that extends from the predella provides a depiction of the last supper. Here, Christ extends two fingers of his right hand—in a gesture we would associate more closely with blessing than feeding—and appears to touch the mouth of a seated disciple who is literally feeding on Christ’s flesh. On the other side of the table, Martin Luther as Junker Jörg drinks from a cup offered to him by another disciple. Flanking the central canvas on the left wing is a scene depicting infant baptism and on the right an image portraying the sacrament of confession. We can interpret the altarpiece as a whole by reading it through the scene on the predella. Theologically, the altarpiece highlights the importance of the proclamation of the word of God (which has at its center the person and word of Christ) upon which is built the sacramental life of the church (baptism, eucharist, confession). The altarpiece furthermore reflects a very Lutheran ecclesiology, in that it is the Wittenberg congregation that is participating in the sacraments and in the hearing of the word. Rather than being filled by a pantheon of ecclesiastical greats (apart from Luther) and a raft of angels, the altarpiece is intentionally grounded in the contemporary Wittenberg community. True, the congregation is part of a broader communion of saints, but at this altar the life of this one particular church is being emphasized. Christ is found both in the whole church and in the particular congregation, as He can reliably be located wherever the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered.

The local Wittenberg congregation is constituted through the reception of baptism, eucharist, and confession and in the hearing of Christian proclamation. There are contextual, kerygmatic, didactic, and eucharistic themes aplenty in Cranach’s work!

This piece of art really comes alive only when taken somewhat tangentially, however. In the same way that Lukas Cranach is himself an ambiguous character, there is something ambiguous about the character of the predella itself. As we have discussed, the painting seems to be theologically correct—Christ is indeed the center of Lutheran proclamation and His presence does indeed mediate the proclamation of the word. Perhaps even the grave clothes that spin around His body signify His resurrected state; or, as they do in Cranach’s other altarpieces, suggest the ethereal Spirit Who hovers around Christ and likewise mediates His word to us (think of the Spirit’s work in the oratio, meditatio, and tentatio mentioned by Luther in the preface of the Wittenberg edition of his Works in 1539). Moreover, Cranach’s representation of the entire community at the preaching of the word is entirely appropriate. Old and young, male and female, even a pregnant woman, are all present in the worshipping congregation. It is an inclusive picture of community life; all are included in God’s gracious call.

What is problematic about Cranach’s piece is less obvious. From an artistic perspective, Cranach’s depiction of Christ seems downright strange. Christ appears in the midst of the preaching of the word, hovering beyond space and time in what is...
otherwise a temporally and spatially realistic painting. His presence belies the two-part allegory at the very core of this altarpiece. Cranach may be attempting to resolve the paradox of Reformation art in a post-iconoclastic period: how does one present the image of the invisible God? The visage of God (or the saints, or God’s immediate and mechanistic presence in the medieval theology of the eucharist) has been literally eclipsed in the Reformation by the preeminence of the word. God’s presence and person has disappeared behind the word in the work of so many other reformers. Art, which served as a book for the unlearned throughout most of the church’s history, was no longer viewed as an appropriate mediator of the divine image. The reformers’ preference for text emptied the material world of its potential holiness, removing the sacred from quotidian life and relocating it within the static printed word. The new technology of printing and a technical approach to preaching replaced the consecrated host. The elevation of the pulpit replaced the elevation of the sacrament. But Cranach, as a Lutheran sacramental artist, undermines this broader temptation toward Calvinism by depicting the sacred in the only possible way that Lutheran theology could allow: Christ’s presence in the midst of the gathered community. In so doing Cranach reasserts the Lutheran preference for the material world as a means of conveying divine grace. Thus the two allegorical messages of this piece point to two central Lutheran doctrines: Christ’s ubiquity and real sacramental presence.

Read through this image, the Lutheran doctrine of Christ’s ubiquity indicates that Christ is present in the midst of this worshipping community where we hear of and share in His passion and resurrection together. And how is this ubiquity chiefly mediated? By material elements taken up into Christ’s service through the speaking of His words. If bread and wine can be at once both bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ, then there is hope still that paint and wood, stone and glass, human acts and human speech can themselves offer grace to a grace-parched world.

And this is why Cranach’s attempt to visualize the invisible God speaks so powerfully to a post-Christian culture. For many within the church, the world around us seems devoid of God’s presence. But perhaps the problem with the apparent absence of God has less to do with divine abeyance and more to do with a deficiency in theological imagination. We can only see God in our surroundings in the same way that the Wittenberg congregation sees Christ in the midst of Luther’s preaching. The Christian vision of God is about reconstructing God’s image in the places where God ought most not to be. He ought not to walk in the garden with Adam, yet He is found at his side; He ought not to be present with the escaped slaves from Egypt, yet He is with them through His provision and protection; He ought not to be crying in a manger or crying from a cross, yet He is known to us through the narratives of His virgin birth and paschal sacrifice. Christian theology encourages us to see Christ where He ought not to be. For us the divine ambiguity becomes the locus for finding Christ when He is seemingly most absent but equally most powerfully present. Christian theology, as evidenced through sacramental art, challenges the church to see the everyday world through the lens of Christ’s promised presence amongst us. And the means of our seeing is the performance of our faith in word, in sacrament, and indeed in artistry.

We are taught to emphasize the alterations that the Reformation made in the seamless robe of the church’s history. It was a period of cutting, of sewing together, and of refashioning a faith that may not have fit the body or bodies of the church at the time. It is what the reformers decided to keep, however, that is the most telling, significant, and important aspect of our shared history. Radical traditionalism in the form of a readjusted attitude toward creativity, sacramentality, and culture is among those lasting characteristics of the church that Lutherans have maintained. The image of Christ present in the congregation through art, sacrament, and preaching reminds the church that God cannot be confined to the texts of a book, but that God is present wherever creativity, community, and humility converge.

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