



Church and State in Ethiopia: The Contribution of the Lutheran Understanding of the Community of Grace

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Ethiopia is currently suffering from political unrest caused by broader social, economic, and political grievances shared by many citizens, particularly the two largest ethnic groups, the Oromo and Amhara. Citizens are being imprisoned, tortured, and killed for demanding their God-given human rights. According to one human rights report, the country has registered a high death toll and mass arrests in just the past few months.¹ The present government, which promised democracy and a prosperous life when coming to power twenty-five years ago, has turned out to be the most brutal and dictatorial regime Africa has ever seen.

Changing the Ethiopian situation requires all kinds of institutions, religious and nonreligious, to become involved in public matters. Nonreligious entities such as opposition parties, civic organizations, journalists, academicians, and political

¹Human Rights Watch, “Such a Brutal Crackdown: Killing and Arrest in Response to Ethiopia’s Oromo Protests.” See <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/16/such-brutal-crackdown/killings-and-arrests-response-ethiopia-oromo-protests> (accessed January 11, 2017); Amnesty International “Annual Report,” <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/ethiopia/report-ethiopia/> (accessed January 11, 2017).

Ethiopia is in turmoil again, with regional and ethnic tensions causing great suffering for the country. The Christian churches are important parts of Ethiopian society, and a Lutheran theology of community engagement may allow them to find a path towards a constructive engagement with their society.

groups are already participating in large numbers to determine Ethiopia's future both within and outside the country. Religious institutions, however, are being criticized for ignoring their public responsibility by remaining silent.

The approach of religious institutions (the church in particular) to Ethiopia's public life can be described in two ways. They have been either more closely identified with the government than the people they serve, or are totally withdrawn from the public life of the community. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) has functioned within a "Christendom" concept. As Paul Balisky has rightly noted, leaders of this church "viewed all of Ethiopia, whether pagan or Muslim, as their domain."² At present, even though the EOC no longer fully follows this "Christendom" model, it does continue to work hand and glove with the government. On the other hand, Evangelical Christian institutions in Ethiopia have considered their mission as only evangelistic, focusing primarily on "soul saving." With a narrow definition of the Great Commission, they emphasized spiritual services over the social, economic, and political roles of a church. This led to a situation where they withdrew from all kinds of constructive public engagements.

This leaves the following question: How should the Christian churches influence Ethiopian public life? Is there a better alternative than total assimilation to the government, or disappearing from public life? Based on Luther's understanding of the church as the community of grace, this article proposes a prophetic challenge to social, economic, and political fragmentation and violation of human rights as alternative to the abovementioned characteristics of churches in Ethiopia.

THE STATE IN ETHIOPIA: THE DYNAMICS OF "CENTER" AND "PERIPHERY"

Ethiopia, as it is today, was formed about a hundred and twenty years ago when Emperor Menelik II of Showa conquered areas in the southern part of today's Ethiopia between 1886 and 1894. Some scholars describe Menelik's act as the expansion of his kingdom or "reunification of modern Ethiopia" rather than a colonial act that left the southern people under subjugation.³ This incident, however, resulted in a radical change in the life of the conquered people. The people living in these conquered areas were subjected to brutal, systemic, socioeconomic exploitation, and political subjugation by those in authority.⁴

The land in the conquered territories was distributed among the soldiers, local administrators, and the EOC. The landowners laid a system in which they were able to exact tribute and tax from the peasants who lived on those lands. This system was named the *gebbar* system, from the Amharic word *gebbar*, translated as

²Paul Balisky, "Ethiopian Church and Mission in the Context of Violence," in *Mission in the Context of Violence*, ed. Keith E. Eitel (Pasadena, CA: William Cary Library, 2008) 226.

³Oyvind Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974–85* (Oxford: J. Currey, 2000) 15.

⁴Arne Tolo, *Sidama and Ethiopia: The Emergence [of] the Mekane Yesus Church in Sidama* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1998) 61; Ulrich Braukämper, *Geschichte Der Hadiya Süd-Äthopiens: Von D. Anfängen Bis Zur Revolution 1974* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980) 443.

“tribute giver.” The conquered people were forced to pay tax or tribute to the landlords. In other words, Menelik introduced a tributary mode of production whereby there existed “a structural relationship where peasant communities are in the possession of the land they till, but the production is collected by outside rulers who appropriate portions of peasant surplus by exacting a tribute.”⁵ In short, the imperial regime operated based on a policy that dichotomized the people between the “center” and “periphery” and thus was predatory by its very nature.

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The “center” and “periphery” is a metaphor used by many researchers to describe the sociocultural and sociopolitical context created by emperor Menelik, a context that continued to define the Ethiopian dynamics to the present time. In his book *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, Øyvind Eide defines the Ethiopian community from two perspectives: the “center” and the “periphery.”⁶ Those in Ethiopia described as the “center” are communities that have been beneficiaries of the political and economic system of the country for the last few centuries. At the “center” of the community are ruling parties (predominantly from one tribe in the northern part of the country) and from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). Those on the “periphery,” however, are those people who are oppressed and marginalized by a system that only favors those that are at the “center.” As described above, Ethiopia as it is today was formed by Emperor Menelik with clear dichotomy between the subjugator and the subjugated, the subjugator as a “center” and the other as a “periphery.”

Upon coming to power in 1931, Haile Selassie I (1931–1974) named himself the Elect of God and the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and sought to lead the country into a new face of modernization. He introduced the first constitution in Ethiopia as his first step towards achieving his goal. In this constitution, he included a section dealing with the need to reform the land tenure system as part of his plan to “modernize” Ethiopia.⁷

The emperor introduced a new taxation system under a centralized government structure. Feudalism was introduced as a new mode of production, replacing a tributary mode of production. According to the feudal mode the rulers were given the right to appropriate the land, and peasants were reduced to tenants in

⁵Michael Ståhl, “Ethiopia, Political Contradictions in Agricultural Development” (Uppsala: Political Science Association in Uppsala, 1974) 10.

⁶Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 12.

⁷Ta’a Tesema, “The Political Economy of Western Central Ethiopia: From the Mid-16th to the Early-20th Centuries” (PhD thesis, Michigan State University, 1986) 209.

such a way that they were attendants to the rulers or the landowners. According to studies conducted on this tenant system, the tenants were required “by law to hand over up to three-fourths of their produce to landlords, who often were absentee.”⁸ This system laid a huge burden on the peasants, since the central government continued to favor the landlords (rulers) rather than the tenants, and the livelihood of the peasants came under the mercy of their rulers, since each household became subordinate to the landlords. In this system, where the landlords became the “center” of the system, those at the “periphery,” the southern people, were forced again into paying heavy tax, and injustice and poverty continued to prevail over the people.

The imperial regime came to an end in September of 1974, and it was replaced by what eventually became a Marxist-Socialist regime known as the Derg (1974–1991). The first two years of the socialist government gave hope to the people that were oppressed by the previous governments. The separation of church and state was officially declared, as well as equal status of all religions before the law. The feudal system was also eradicated, and the Derg formed peasant associations (*Gebere-maheber*) at the grassroots level. Marxist-Leninist ideology became a general framework in which Ethiopian history, economy, cultures, religions, and societies were analyzed in academic institutions.

The Derg, however, was no better than the previous governments. According to John Markakis, the Derg can be characterized as “garrison socialism” in reference to its ideological orientation and military background.⁹ Despite its Marxist-Leninist orientation, nation building continued the previous imperial approach that made a distinction between the “center” and the “periphery.” This division was enforced by following the ideology of previous Ethiopian emperors that had an uncompromised position on religious unity as a means for securing the national unity of the country.¹⁰ Like its predecessors, the Socialist government adopted the same traditions and legitimized the superiority of the “center” (Amhara culture and EOC traditions). Just as previous hegemonic governments, the Derg regime also declared a manifesto emphasizing that the ruling party is determined to “aim at the united country without ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural differences.”¹¹ All forms of ideologies that seemed to either question or challenge the homogenized and inherited Empire of Ethiopia were subverted. With the inherited legacy of imposition and absolutism, Ethiopia became a militarist state under the dictatorial leadership of Mengistu Hailemariam.

⁸Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 30–31; Mekuria Bulcha, *Contours of the Emergent & Ancient Oromo Nation: Dilemmas in the Ethiopian Politics of State and Nation-Building* (Cape Town: Center for Advanced Studies of African Society, 2011) 504–506.

⁹See introductory section in John Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹⁰J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Christian Church and Missions in Ethiopia (Including Eritrea and the Somalilands)* (London: World Dominion Press, 1951) 68–71.

¹¹Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 17.

At the formation of the present government in 1991, a historic opportunity seemed to have presented itself to the Ethiopian people. A multiparty democracy was introduced for the first time in Ethiopian history, and religious freedom was granted as a constitutional right. The administrative structure of the country was divided into nine member states of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). These states are demarcated on the basis of settlement patterns, language, and the consent of the people concerned. According to the Ethiopian constitution, Article 39, the unconditional right of self-determination, including secession, is given to nations, nationalities, and the people.¹² This constitution defines nations, nationalities, and peoples as “group(s) of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture, or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, and who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory.”¹³ While Amharic is constituted as a working language of the federal government, regions are allowed to use their mother tongue in primary education and local administrations.

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During the transitional period of the current government, the constitution as a whole and the way the country is structured (the federal system) gave a positive impression to many Ethiopians. It was widely perceived that Ethiopia was finally over with the system that divided the nation as a “center” and “periphery.” It was believed that the country was in a transition from a dictatorial and oppressive regime to freedom and democracy.

What happened, however, was a change of the “center” and the “periphery.” The Tigrians, who were at the “periphery” of the previous regimes, became the “center” while the “Amharas” and all other tribes were left at the “periphery” of the system. The minority Tigrians, who are six percent of the total population, controlled the economic and political dynamics of the country. They used ethnic federalism as a means to keep all other states apart as a means of control. They knew that their existence was endangered if other groups were united, and therefore used this system as a divisive force that can evoke divisions, hatred, and enmities between these groups. The fact that Ethiopia has experienced a series of violent clashes between people of different ethnic groups testifies to this reality.

Ethiopia today is still crippled from a lack of democracy. The government has not been able to abide by the constitution it ratified. As many would agree, not enough was done to make the constitution practical. The transition from dictator-

¹²Quoted after the English translation from the Amharic original of the FDRE constitution, 1994.

¹³Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1994) Constitution, ratified by the National Constituent Assembly, 8 December 1994, Art., 46, 47.

ship to a democratically elected government did not materialize. As Samuel Huntington tried to suggest, this probably happened because “Ethiopia has no democratic traditions” in the first place.¹⁴ Elections held in the last three decades (1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015) indicate that the government’s intention was not to dedicate itself to the real democracy that it promised to the people. Those elections were characterized by compulsion, threats, imprisonments, and unfavorable treatment of non-EPRDF candidates.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT OF ETHIOPIAN CHURCHES

Ethiopia is a country of diverse religions. Among these religions, Christianity was the first welcomed in the fourth century CE, being first introduced to the royal court and from there gradually penetrated among the common people. This created a phenomenon whereby the Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity became a state religion from its beginning to the coming of the socialist government in 1974. Evangelical churches, however, started at the time when King Menelik conquered and annexed territories beyond the Abyssinian border. This happened with the arrival of Swedish Evangelical Mission missionaries in 1868, and their subsequent effort to evangelize the Oromo through indigenous missionaries in the early twentieth century.

The EOC started at the center of the empire, while evangelical Christianity started among those at the “periphery.” The EOC theology and service is related to the privileged communities while the evangelicals preached to a people that had been deprived of social, cultural, economic, and political rights and had been reduced to second-class status within the Ethiopian empire. Most evangelical churches in Ethiopia, including the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY), one of the largest Lutheran church in the world with a membership of 8.7 million, were born out of those communities that were at the “periphery.”

The EOC functioned as a state church until 1991, and still considers itself as allied to the government. One of its role as a state church was to legitimize the power and actions of the kings. When Ethiopia was constituted in its present form, Menelik’s actions were legitimized by the state church. In fact, the EOC used the opportunity to expand its spheres of influence. The church gave divine sanction to Menelik’s act in conquering territories of other people.¹⁵ During the feudal period, the EOC played similar role by legitimizing Haile Selassie’s policy of integration (assimilation), which demanded religious and language homogeneity for national formation.

During the military government, again the EOC worked hand in hand with the government. As Donald Donham notes, “the result was cultural reaction in

¹⁴Samuel Huntington, “Political Development in Ethiopia: A Peasant-Based Dominant-Party Democracy,” in *Report to USAID/Ethiopia on Consultations with the Constitutional Commission* (1993).

¹⁵Haile M. Larebo, “The Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Politics in the Twentieth Century: Part I,” *North-east African Studies: Incorporating Ethiopianist Notes*, *Northeast African Studies* 10/3 (1987) 379; Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 151.

which Marxist-Leninism was overlaid on Old Orthodox Christian notions of the nation.¹⁶ In order to implement its policy with regard to religious unity, the Derg officially began to financially back the EOC, and 1,729 patriarchate workers of the EOC received an annual subsidy of two million pounds as salary, while its higher officials received a monthly allowance of eleven thousand pounds from the Ministry of Finance.¹⁷ On the other hand, the evangelicals were persecuted by the central government for decades. As churches that emerged from within the communities at the “periphery” of the empire, they suffered with the people. They were labeled as *mete haymanot*, which means “foreign” religions, and antirevolutionary. Under the banner of the national unity, which government officials thought could only be attained through religious and cultural uniformity, with the EOC behind them, they harassed the evangelical Christians.¹⁸

The evangelical Christians’ response to such reaction from the government is different. Some churches, particularly the EECMY, have actively engaged the public in the past regardless of the fact that its active participation sometimes resulted in mistreatment of its members and the society it serves (in the 1960s and 1970s). At present, however, this church is divided between allegiance to the government and silent approach to politics. Some declared allegiance to the government by choosing to be a member of the ruling party while others are converts to the evangelicals’ theological position of church’s separation from public life.

Luther’s theology of grace sets a premise for how a church as a community of grace can live out its prophetic role in public

Ethiopian society is still in crisis, and many faithful men and women too often fail to find appropriate responses to their life problems. Churches in Ethiopia would do much better for the society if they directly engaged their public concerns. They could build on the theological insight of Martin Luther, particularly his theology of grace alone, *sola gratia*, and its implication for what it means to be a church as a community of grace.

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF GRACE

Lutheran understanding of *sola gratia*, grace alone, speaks emphatically about the Christian’s responsibility to each other and the public. Luther’s theology of grace also sets a premise for how a church as a community of grace can live out its prophetic role in public. It dismantles the church’s total allegiance to brutal and

¹⁶Donald L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 137.

¹⁷Haile Larebo, “The Orthodox Church and the State in the Ethiopian Revolution,” *Religion in Communist Lands* 14/2 (1986) 153.

¹⁸Eide, *Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia*, 149.

tyrannical governments and challenges the theology that leads to the church's disappearance from public life.

What is grace? As Robert Jenson noted, the right approach to understanding the meaning and significance of grace is through a theology of triune self-giving. Based on the Apostle Paul's description of grace as the favor and gifts that God bestows on his creation, he argues that grace is nothing else but the self-giving of God.¹⁹ God the Father, "the ungifted giver," gives himself in Christ and the Holy Spirit, and this is what we call grace given to or bestowed on human beings and the whole creation.

What is a community of grace? A community of grace is a coming together of those who are loved by God unconditionally and therefore join in solidarity and share with one another the transforming grace of God. By joining together as a community, they let themselves to be strengthened and transformed by the grace of Triune God and become an embodiment of God's grace to each other and their neighbors. Grace is what enables each individual to free themselves from egoistic self-love and connect with his/her neighbor.

This community is a missional community of grace—a church. For Luther, the missional community of grace (church) is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is proclaimed and sacraments are properly administered.²⁰ The Augsburg Confession describes word and sacrament as the "means of grace." The word "means" refers to how and where grace happens. It happens when the word is preached and sacraments are administered within and among the believing community, the missional community of grace.

According to Luther, the gospel is what leads to the "communion of saints." The gospel mediates the Holy Spirit, who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."²¹ In other words, it is the gospel mediated by the Spirit that opens the way for us to share the life of the Triune God by virtue of which we are also enabled to commune with each other and share God's grace.

According to Luther, "the significance or effect of sacrament is fellowship of all the saints."²² To take part in Holy Communion is to have fellowship with Christ and all the saints.²³ In the Eucharist, the Triune God shares his Godself with us through bread and wine, and "we become united with Christ, and are made one body with all the saints." As Luther contended, while partaking in the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, "all the spiritual posses-

¹⁹Robert Jenson, "Triune Grace," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

²⁰Augsburg Confession, Article VII.

²¹Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 124. Small Catechism II, 6.

²²Martin Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, ed. Theodore Bachmann and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 50 (hereafter *LW*).

²³*LW* 35:59.

sions of Christ and his saints are shared with and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament.”²⁴ Furthermore, according to Luther, in eucharistic fellowship “we are [also] to be united with our neighbors, we in them and they in us.”²⁵

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For Lutherans, there exists a connection between Eucharist and the life and ministry of the church. When we participate in Holy Communion as a community of grace, we take part in “his life and good works, which are indicated by his flesh.”²⁶ To participate in Holy Communion means to share the life of the Triune God (his abundant love and blessing) with the whole of creation—which is manifested through our involvement in the ongoing creative work of God. In taking the blood under the wine, we also take part in “his passion and martyrdom, which are indicated by his blood.”²⁷ We take part in the suffering of Christ that was meant for our salvation, and in the suffering of the whole creation.

For Luther, to take part in the sacraments means,

Take to heart the infirmities and needs of others, as if they were [one’s] own. Then offer to others [his/her] strength, as if it were their own, just as Christ does for [him/her] in the sacraments. This is what it means to be changed into one another through love. . . . To lose one’s own form and take on that which is common to all.²⁸

THE CHURCH’S ROLE IN ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

The concept of grace as a self-giving of the Triune God has a significant contribution to understanding how to relate faith in the Trinity with a practical expression of that faith at all levels of social life. Understanding church as a community of grace also helps us constructively and critically engage with the role of church in public in the Ethiopian context.

The major problem in Ethiopia is that the political dynamics of the country have created a fractured community grouped in to what the researchers define as the “center” and the “periphery.” This division has proved to be the root cause for

²⁴LW 35:51.

²⁵Ibid. As Luther emphasizes, “by the means of this sacrament, [grace is communicated in that] all selfseeking love is rooted out and gives place to that which seeks the common good of all; and through the change wrought by love there is one bread, one drink, one body, one community.” LW 35:67.

²⁶LW 35:60.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸LW 35:61–62.

national and ethnic fragmentation. Therefore, it is vital for the church to address the question on how Christian communities in Ethiopia are able to naturalize and provide healing to communities affected by such problems.

The churches in Ethiopia have not been able to provide answer to the above question because they are either too closely identified with the government or withdrawn from public engagement. On the one hand, the EOC has been serving hand and glove with the government following the “Christendom” model. It has legitimized oppressive governments, and has given itself to be used by the governments as a unifying force. On the other hand, most evangelical churches follow the teaching that the gospel has nothing to do with social and political engagement. In their ministry, they emphasis evangelism over social, economic, and political service. At their worst, they perceive their Christian responsibility as mere “soul saving.”

Neither of these two positions are supported by what it means to be a community of grace. They are contrary to the foundational teaching of Christianity—serving our neighbors. Those transformed by God’s grace are those who reach out to their neighbors and the whole world and empower them in every sphere of their human life. This understanding of God’s grace and its implication in our social life negates both the Ethiopian churches’ nationalistic approach (in the case of the EOC), as well as the approach of those who would limit church mission to evangelism. The mission of the church should be the same in every context, participating in God’s ongoing creative work by sharing God’s grace with every human being—which leads to the empowering and transformation of individuals and communities.

The main problem with churches that follow the “Christendom” model is that they present themselves as masters and lords rather than servants. However, as described above, grace is founded on the Triune God’s self-giving, which means that God’s intention to bestow his grace on humankind is founded on the sacrifice he made by offering his Son as a sacrifice. Christ, God’s gift to humanity, came as a servant and shared this grace by laying down his life for all. The church shares this grace the same way, by serving others as servants. As Luther states, a Christian should “empty himself [and] take upon himself the form of a servant [so that he is able] to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.”²⁹

When it comes to evangelical churches on issues concerned with the public, they argue that submission is the only option as described Rom 13, and therefore disappear from public life.³⁰ But Christians have immensely more to offer in situa-

²⁹Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimes and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957) 366.

³⁰Gemechu Olana, *A Church under Challenge: The Socio-Economic and Political Involvement of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (Berlin: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013) 137. Gemechu Olana, “An Empowering and Reconciling Presence: Public Ministry in the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, A Brief Historical Perspective Review with Some Prospective Remarks,” in *Emerging Theological Praxis: Journal of Gudina Tumsa Theological Forum*, ed. Samuel Yonas Deressa (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012) 65–66.

tions of oppression than just service and solidarity. To bring justice to the social, economic, and political relations in Ethiopia, the church needs to participate in the work of the Triune God because, as Luther contends, God “does not work in us without us, because he has created and preserved us that he might work in us and we might cooperate with him, whether outside his Kingdom through his general omnipotence or inside his Kingdom by the special virtue of his Spirit.”³¹

Christianity has enormous human and material resources (people, buildings, etc.), communications and social networks, and very rich and dynamic spiritual and cultural traditions and modes of thought and practice, which have centrally informed democratizing movements such as the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa, or the freedom movement in the American South. Theology has the potential to enrich our understandings of both the complexity and the vast agentic potential of the human person, which many modes of thought (modernist and postmodernist) eclipse or suppress.

In the Eucharist, the Triune God shares the entire perichoretic life with the Christian community and the whole creation, and the Christian community is formed and transformed as a result. As Christians, we focus on Christ and his sacrificial love for all humanity. He gives the gift of himself to other people in need. In Christ, we are given the crisp and clear picture of what it means to give of ourselves to others. ⊕

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³¹Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Philip S. Watson and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 33 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972) 243.