



# Jamesian Pragmatism and Practical Lutheranism

TRYGVE THRONTVEIT

## A. INTRODUCTION

*Simul iustus et peccator*. “Simultaneously justified and sinner.” This is the core of Luther’s theology: we who are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ are fully righteous and fully sinful—not by turns, not by shares, but always and all at once.<sup>1</sup> Though the subject of the *simul* is the Christian, its meaning is the cross. Were we to diagram Luther’s anthropology (in the chiasmic spirit of this special issue’s honoree),<sup>2</sup> the mystery of the cross and the death and life it brings would be central:

<sup>1</sup> Among the earliest full statements of this doctrine is Martin Luther (hereafter ML), *Selected Commentaries on Psalms* (1532), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958–86; hereafter LW), 12:21: “[The Gospel] promises that we will be righteous before God when we embrace Him in faith, even though we are sinners before ourselves and the world.”

<sup>2</sup> This essay is dedicated to my father, chiasmic enthusiast Mark Alan Throntveit, whose balance of interest in Scripture’s living meanings and fidelity to its historical character and context mirrors his purposeful yet gracious pastoring, teaching, and parenting—and whose investments of time and thought in our conversations

*Two more different thinkers could hardly be imagined than Martin Luther and William James. Yet, when it comes to imagining the practical moral life of the Christian believer, Jamesian pragmatism might help to solve issues in Luther’s understanding of the moral life.*

- A. God gives us life to steward creation
- B. Sin corrupts us and righteousness eludes us
  - C. Death defines our lives
    - X. Christ dies and rises
  - C'. Life defeats our death
- B'. Faith justifies us and sin dogs us
- A'. God renews creation to give us life

The *simul* doctrine is Luther's response to mysteries often deeply vexing for Christians seeking to make a practice of their faith. We are assured by Christ's crucifixion that his righteousness is imputed to us, and by his resurrection that no evil—not even the suffering and death of God—can “snatch” that gift away.<sup>3</sup> Yet we also know that evil is at work in our world and that we are among its cleverest tools; “forgiveness is indeed real,” but “sin is not taken away except in hope.”<sup>4</sup> The *simul* is Luther's theological and practical solution: it tells us that, justified in spite of our sinfulness, we can do our best to sail by Christ's star and swim back to our baptism should we plunge into the sea.<sup>5</sup>

It is perhaps a better theological than practical solution. As any Lutheran pastor or seminary professor can attest, many believers find it difficult to *live* a faith that renders them both totally righteous and radically evil. How do our actions—indeed, our earthly lives—matter if our justification is already achieved and forever guaranteed? If they do matter, on what solid ground can we make our particular path through life, or any single step of it, given the workings of sin in our minds and hearts?

Nor do the most obviously relevant of Luther's other doctrines offer comparably obvious solutions. Writing on “good works” in 1520, for instance, Luther taught that the righteous work is any and every work proceeding from “certainty” of God's saving work through Christ.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, writing on “Christian freedom” that same year, Luther taught that faith frees us from all fear of earthly trials or divine judgment to serve God and neighbors in purest love, with the law to guide us.<sup>7</sup> Yet, then and later Luther insisted that even after our death and rebirth in Christ, our old, faithless selves cling to and hobble us, and the law, impossible to

have been a constant source of comfort and inspiration to me. Many thanks to two other Marks—Mark Granquist and Mark Tranvik—for helping me keep the fourth commandment in this small and imperfect way.

<sup>3</sup> ML, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:288.

<sup>4</sup> ML, *Lectures on Romans* (n.d.), LW 25:262.

<sup>5</sup> ML, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), LW 36:11–126, esp. 61.

<sup>6</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), ed. Scott H. Hendrix (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 19 (quoted), 29–31, 35–36.

<sup>7</sup> ML, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), LW 31:343–77, esp. 358–59. Any mention of “law” is bound to make some Lutheran, somewhere, wince—especially if words such as “guide” are interpreted too literally. For overviews reflecting my intended connotations of “inspiring” and “situationally orienting” (rather than “prescriptive” or “dispositive”), see Risto Saarinen and Derek R. Nelson, “Law in Doctrine and Life According to Martin Luther,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 29, 2017), <https://www.tinyurl.com/yaqw3aon>; and Gerhard O. Forde, “Gospel as the End of the Law,” in Forde, *The Essential Forde*, ed. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2019), 59–79, esp. 60–61.

follow, convicts us as faithless by the evidence of our works.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the incapability of sin is the predicate of justification: were we capable even of partial progress toward righteousness, we would bend our attention on it until we grew convinced of our merit or despairing of our failure—either way forfeiting the faith that justifies and saves us. “Life is a help only to those who are dead,” Luther explains, “grace only to sin.”<sup>9</sup>

However confident, then, of our *status* in God’s sight, how are we to muster even a speck of confidence in the motives and consequences of our *conduct* in the world—a world we are called by God and impelled by the joy of salvation to steward and improve?

The conundrum is not unlike that faced by a much later and otherwise very different sort of reformer who sought, quite consciously, to do for modern philosophy and ethics what Luther did for Christian theology and faith. That reformer was William James, and the intellectual toolset he first labeled *pragmatism* in the late 1890s can help us fine-tune and adapt Luther’s theological solution for practical Christian living today.<sup>10</sup> James believed the universe was vast and unfinished, that even our best-founded knowledge and longest-standing truths were partial and provisional, and that any pretensions to intellectual or moral certainty ignored the inescapable imperfection of the world and everything in it—ourselves included. Yet James also believed that an unfinished universe was an improvable one, that careful inquiry and courageous action could make it better, and that humans were naturally equipped for such a life of constraint and freedom—evolved through natural selection to think out their acts, act out their thoughts, learn from their actions, and act on their learning in a constant effort to bring a changing world and their own frail ideals into some sort of harmony.

In short, James understood human agency and fallibility as inextricably linked and even mutually constitutive, much as Luther understood justification and sinfulness. The rest of this essay explores the extent to which James’s pragmatist strategies for thinking and acting under such circumstances can help us meet the challenges of the Christian life as Luther conceived it.

<sup>8</sup> ML, *Freedom of a Christian*, 346–47, 360–63. Luther’s most vigorous treatment of this theme is, of course, his *Bondage of the Will* of 1525.

<sup>9</sup> ML, “Answer to . . . Goat Emser in Leipzig . . .” (1521), LW 39:185.

<sup>10</sup> The best introduction to James’s pragmatism is the one he wrote himself: William James (hereafter WJ), *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1907); for his comparison to the Reformation see 121. *Pragmatism* is most fruitfully read in conjunction with WJ, *The Meaning of Truth: A Sequel to Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), published expressly to clarify misconceptions of his pragmatic method and its deeper implications. Note that I am not suggesting that James was a “Lutheran” or that Luther was a proto-“Jamesian”; for a stimulating but problematic (at least for Luther scholars particular to *sola gratia*) effort along these lines, see Claudio Marcelo Viale, “*Sola Fides* at the Core of *Varieties*: Luther as Religious Genius in William James’s Thought,” *The Pluralist* 10.1 (2015): 80–106, esp. 89–90. My purpose is to explore how certain Jamesian concepts—none primarily religious in character—can enhance Lutheran teachings. For deeper treatments of James’s religious thought see Michael Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Trygve Throntveit, *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* (New York: Palgrave, 2014), ch. 2.

## B. THE PROBLEM FOR LUTHER

James developed pragmatism in part because he thought philosophers had become distracted by verbal games from questions that really mattered: too often, he lamented, philosophers argued over the proper words to describe problems and their solutions rather than addressing the problems themselves, or even establishing their relevance to actual living persons. The first step in any pragmatist analysis, therefore, is to define the problem at hand in terms of its expected consequences for human life.

The problem confronting Luther when he was developing the *simul* doctrine was not a philosopher's game. Lives temporal and eternal were at stake.<sup>11</sup> The attack on the selling of indulgences by which Luther unwittingly launched the Reformation in 1517 soon developed into a systematic critique of the church. A central target of that critique was the church's definition and promotion of "good works": acts of religious devotion done to counterbalance sin and improve the odds of salvation.

In Luther's view, this good-works doctrine represented in microcosm a church that put its own traditions, authority, and interests above God, whose gift of faith through grace, encountered in God's word alone, is our sole means of salvation.<sup>12</sup> In promoting the doctrine, the church damaged countless lives and communities, not least by encouraging among individual Christians a self-centered, competitive focus on personal (and artificial) virtues rather than loving attention to the genuine needs of neighbors. Worse, it was leading Christian souls—the young monk Luther included—into contempt for their salvation and hatred of an impossibly exacting God.<sup>13</sup> For in Luther's view—aptly distilled by James in 1902—the essentials of a justifying faith were two: "Faith that Christ has done *his genuine work*" and "assurance . . . that I, this individual I, *just as I stand, without one plea . . . am saved now and forever.*"<sup>14</sup>

In responding to this crisis, Luther could not take a purely negative stance. Simply to inform Christians that their salvation was out of their hands and their virtue an affront to God would replace one distorted image of God for another and drive believers away in despair. The *simul* was Luther's solution. It tells us that we as Christians have "a double vocation, a spiritual and an external": that the bitter acknowledgment of our sin is also a happy reminder that the task of salvation belongs solely to God, who has already completed it, and who thereby calls us to

<sup>11</sup> On the context and development of Luther's critique of the Roman Church see Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250–1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980); Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981); Robert Kolb, *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530–1580* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., ML, "On the Papacy in Rome . . ." (1520), LW 39:55–104.

<sup>13</sup> ML, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545), LW 34:336–37.

<sup>14</sup> WJ, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 246.

faith and frees us to work for a better life and world with assurance that when we fail, our failure will not be final.<sup>15</sup>

### C. THE PROBLEM WITH LUTHER

Theologically, the consequences of the *simul* are salutary in several ways. It presents us with a just God who loves us as we are, not as we should but never can be. It proclaims a message of salvation that cannot be qualified or gainsaid by appeal to human folly, yet does not deny our experience and weariness of sin. And it affirms that we can express our gratitude to God and act on our desire to improve God's creation without insisting on our virtue or despairing of our capacities.

Practically, however, the results are mixed, particularly regarding our grace-born desire to enact our faith through love for others—a desire Luther, following Paul, attributes to genuine faith.<sup>16</sup> To act on this impulse in light of the *simul* is difficult. For how, as sinners, can we trust our judgment of what is right and loving versus what is prideful and selfish? How can we be sure we are not doing more harm than good? Luther has not so much banished our fear of failure as shifted its locus, from fear for ourselves to fear of our impact on others and our world.

In describing the *simul* paradox in his commentary on Psalm 2, for instance, Luther makes clear that “the Gospel does not condemn good works”; it rather enjoins us to do good and resist evil works. But what does the gospel *promise* regarding these works? “It promises that we will be righteous before God when we embrace Him in faith, even though we are sinners before ourselves and the world.” Put more starkly, the gospel “promises that we will be powerful, even though we are infirm; wise, even though we may be foolish in the sight of the world.”<sup>17</sup> Luther seems to be saying that our repaired relationship with God does nothing to improve our character and judgment on earth, and yet we are free to act as though we are “powerful” and “wise” regardless. Indeed, writing on Galatians, Luther asserts that despite the “uncleanness and inner diseases of the heart” afflicting saved and unsaved alike, “any Christian is a supreme pontiff,” an unimpeachable steward of the law—though not because our righteousness makes us wise or good. No, Luther is clear: righteousness is entirely “outside us, solely in the grace of God. . . . Meanwhile sin truly remains within us.”<sup>18</sup>

These passages highlight two major obstacles to a practical Lutheran faith. First, Luther's intense focus on our relationship with God in these commentaries

<sup>15</sup> Luther quoted in Karlfried Froehlich, “Luther on Vocation,” in Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 121–33, at 130.

<sup>16</sup> See especially ML, *Freedom of a Christian*. See also Marc Kolden, “Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith,” in Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden, eds., *By Faith Alone: Essays in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 267–88, esp. 272–73; and Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> ML, *Selected Commentaries on Psalms* (1532), LW 12:21.

<sup>18</sup> ML, *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), LW 26:230, 233–34.

relegates our relationships with God's other children to a fatalistic afterthought; nowhere in their pages does Luther provide guidance for navigating the slippery social terrain of this world. Indeed, several writings in which Luther *does* discuss our behavior toward others leave us thrashing about in the same ethical quicksand. Luther wrote extensively on the Ten Commandments, for instance, emphasizing their capacity to guide us in fulfilling our temporal obligations. Yet these writings can seem frustratingly circular, even solipsistic. Whoever would "perform good works," Luther writes, "needs only to learn God's commandments"—the first of which is to put all faith in God. Those who still find God's other commandments difficult to apply should simply return to step one: "If their hearts are confident that their work is pleasing to God, then it is good." Yet even if God's pleasure in our conduct were enough to assuage our anxiety over its social consequences, we remain on sinking sand; after all, "is it not true that the first commandment by itself demands more than anybody can do?"<sup>19</sup> Luther's major work of Christian anthropology, *The Freedom of a Christian*, presents the dilemma starkly. The "perfectly free" Christian "is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all," Luther writes. But good luck being one: for "the moment you begin to have faith you learn that all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful, and damnable."<sup>20</sup>

Herein lies the second and most forbidding obstacle that Luther—at least in many writings—raises for Christians aspiring to active faith: the potentially fatalistic and even selfish implications of radical humility. Knowing that sin condemns us to death, yet bursting with joy over God's victory for our own lives, we seek guidance in supporting and enriching our neighbors' lives too—and are told instead not to worry about it, because *we* will be okay. Luther often seems unaware that, for all the time we spend wondering how to save our skins, the good news of Christ's death and resurrection prompts us, at least occasionally, to ask a different question: How shall I love?

## X. WHERE LUTHER MEETS JAMES

James can help us answer that question without abandoning Luther or twisting his words. First, we can employ James's pragmatist hermeneutic to seek what we desire through a purposeful but not tendentious reading of Luther's work. As James wrote in *The Will to Believe* (1897), our "passional tendencies" frequently "run before" and scout the path to our conclusions, though the "facts" with which we pave that path exist "quite independently of us." Put briefly, we have every right to the most satisfying and useful interpretation of Luther that the facts of his words and their contexts will bear.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 17, 21, 31.

<sup>20</sup> ML, *Freedom of a Christian*, 344, 346–47.

<sup>21</sup> WJ, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897), 11, 20. On pragmatism as intellectual-historical method, see James T. Kloppenberg, "Thinking Historically: A Manifesto of Pragmatic Hermeneutics," *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 1 (2012): 201–16.

A pragmatist sensitivity to the context in which Luther wrote presents an opening. Especially early in his reforming career, Luther was chiefly distraught by the prevailing doctrine of works that put justification in sinners' hands. It is therefore not surprising that so many of his writings emphasize the impossibility of self-justification and the sublimity of "passive" righteousness.<sup>22</sup> But that need not stall our hermeneutic quest for a Lutheran principle of social action. Rather, it suggests putting Luther's expressions of the *simul* in the context of his other writings, to see how their respective meanings inflect, delimit, and define one another.

Crucial here is Luther's account of creation and its implications for the synergy of law and gospel in Christian life. Motivating Luther's frequent criticism of monasticism was his conviction that God's creative action is ongoing, shaping and renewing all things, including the ordinary stuff of daily life.<sup>23</sup> Whatever God's plan for us, it is not to retreat from God's creation, and certainly not to climb our way to a higher one. It was just such arrogant rejection of human creatureliness that got Adam and Eve expelled from Eden.<sup>24</sup> Instead, God's commandments remind us that, despite our fallen state, we are simultaneously supported by and responsible for a web of relationships. These are not ours to choose but remain ours to shape. They include relationships with family, neighbors, and above all God, whom we—like the ancient Israelites—are to worship by *working* on the relationships structuring creation as well as *resting* in the knowledge that God calls them good.<sup>25</sup> The gospel makes us co-creators with God through the law, awakening the law's spirit in us and moving us to embrace both our dependence for meaning on creation and creation's dependence for meaning on us.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness," in Wengert, *Harvesting*, 38–55.

<sup>23</sup> On God's continuing creative activity, see ML, *Lectures on Genesis* (ca. 1535), LW 1:74–77. See also Johannes Schwanke, "Luther on Creation," in Wengert, *Harvesting*, 78–98.

<sup>24</sup> For this reading of the fall and its importance to Luther's theology see Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 52–61.

<sup>25</sup> See ML, *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Kirsti I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 300–51, esp. 311–12 (on the Sabbath), 303 (on God's goodness flowing to us through human beings), 347 (on Christ intending the Golden Rule "to encompass all commandments concerning our neighbor"). On the Decalogue as a statement of essential values for keeping the blessings and relationships of creation in clear focus and good repair, see Terrence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 157–58. On the centrality of worship through work and rest to the relational message of the Ten Commandments—or better, "ten sayings"—see Mark A. Throntveit, "The So-Called 'Ten Commandments' and the Relational, Vocational Decalogue," *Word & World*, Supplement Series 5 (2006): 73–82, esp. 76, 76n11; and Mark A. Throntveit, "What If the Ten Commandments Aren't?" in David Willgren, ed., *God and Humans in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond: A Festschrift for Lennart Boström on His 67th Birthday* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2019), 251–65.

<sup>26</sup> Saarinen and Nelson, "Law in Doctrine and Life," esp. § 6. Although the idea of co-creation is often associated with Charles Hartshorne—who credited James with significant influence on his theological adaptation of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy—Ted Peters's version is closer to Luther's account of creation and, in my view, more compatible with James's metaphysics. See, e.g., Charles Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process* (New York: Hafner, 1971); Ted J. Peters, "Science and Redemption: The Future of Creation," in *The Science and Religion Dialogue: Past and Future*, ed. by Michael Welker (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014), 93–106; and Ted J. Peters, "Naturalisms: Scientific? Religious? Theological?" *Theology and Science* 15, no. 3 (August 2017): 302–20. For a reading of Luther emphasizing the essential passivity of human creatureliness, see Notger Slenczka, "Luther's Anthropology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 212–32.

Of course, one does not need James to read Luther in context. Yet the value of James's hermeneutic is not restricted to interpreting texts. James's insistence on the mutual responsiveness of subjective interests and objective reality infuses his writings on metaphysics, psychology, and ethics—all of which can further help us utilize Luther's theology as a resource for ethical reflection and social action.

First, James's metaphysics naturalizes Luther's notion of human life as a paradox of two total states. For James, the universe—at least as we know it—*must* be unfinished, “waiting to receive its final touches at our hands.”<sup>27</sup> Were it not, life would be meaningless. If our actions make no difference to the course of the universe, we have no grounds for joy or regret over anything we do, and no basis—historical or passional—on which to make choices. Simply to function as conscious beings we must *act* as if we live free and therefore meaningful lives. Simultaneously, of course, the universe shapes *us*. In doing so, it frequently resists our meaning-making efforts, thwarting our intellect and mocking our heroics with unpredictable and unwelcome responses. Put starkly, evil is real, and our actions—even the best-intentioned and seemingly successful—are among its sources. But its amelioration is also real, again through our actions. “The solid meaning of life is always the same eternal thing,” James wrote: “the marriage, namely, of some unhabitual ideal, however special, with some fidelity, courage, and endurance; with some man's or woman's pains.”<sup>28</sup> From a Jamesian perspective, then, the condition of the Christian described in Luther's *simul* seems not so much mysterious and paradoxical as it does familiar and natural.

Second, James's evolutionary psychology reinforces the naturalness of a free, yet determined, existence and begins to tell us how to live it. Against contemporaries who interpreted Darwin's theory of natural selection to mean that all thought and feeling is predetermined by physical laws, James argued the opposite. In his view, the empirical, universal human experience of choice was evidence that our species, under selective pressure, had evolved a distinctive ability to reflect upon the consequences of the various instincts motivating our behavior, resist some, and follow others.<sup>29</sup> And what occasions this reflective, choosing process? The dual nature of our experience. While our personal experience of the natural world yields useful knowledge about it, such knowledge can never be certain, for future experience might refine or refute it. Ironically, we are forced to act on a freeing faith, guided by beliefs, not certainties, about the future in which our actions will unfold and leave their mark: beliefs informed by the world we encounter as well as by the world we envision.<sup>30</sup> In effect, James's evolutionary psychology emphasizes our creatureliness to explain what is special about our humanity.

<sup>27</sup> WJ, *Pragmatism*, 255.

<sup>28</sup> WJ, *Talks to Teachers on Psychology; and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt, 1899), 299. On every good entailing bad, see WJ, *Will to Believe*, 203–4.

<sup>29</sup> See Trevor Pearce, “James and Evolution,” in *The Oxford Handbook of William James*, ed. Alexander Klein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018–): <https://www.tinyurl.com/yyc35ol3>.

<sup>30</sup> WJ, *Will to Believe*, esp. 1–31, 82–110.



Finally, James's ethical writings provide guidelines for making use of our freedom while respecting and empowering our neighbors. Given life's variability and uncertainty, these guidelines do not codify specific actions so much as commend general attitudes toward our social world—much like God's law in the wake of faith. In James's philosophy, all inquiry, belief, and activity begin in individual experience, through free acts of choice that contribute to the stuff of reality itself. No matter how we affect reality, however, it will always include other minds of equal freedom and potency, with distinct experience—and therefore knowledge—of the world we share. In this way, our dual nature as free and constrained agents establishes both the essential moral agency and equality of human beings as well as the inherently collective and negotiated character of human action.<sup>31</sup>

For some readers familiar with James, this last point will require elaboration. James's brief for a free, interested, generative consciousness has earned him a reputation as an arch-individualist. In fact, James's metaphysical pluralism led him to emphasize the frequently social origins and inescapably social operations of consciousness. "The facts and worths of life need many cognizers to take them in," he explained.<sup>32</sup> Each of us depends on others to generate and distribute the majority of the knowledge we "trade on" in our private pursuits. Our "wishes," James insisted, "are only one condition" of our conscious action. Above all, "other individuals are there with other wishes and they must be propitiated first. So Being grows under all sorts of resistances in this world of the many, and, from compromise to compromise, only gets gradually organized into what may be called a secondarily rational shape."<sup>33</sup>

It is in this pragmatist account of experience—as conjunctive, dynamic, and growing through our relations with others—that we find James's most direct contribution to practical Lutheranism. That contribution is best understood through an arresting metaphor for both the empirical and the ideal state of moral life as James understood it: "an ethical republic."<sup>34</sup> In James's view, any ethics assumes that each individual has distinctive ideals, requiring cooperation or acquiescence from other individuals for realization. Through such ideals, all individuals impose hypothetical obligations on others. The *practical* validity of ideals and obligations, however, can only be established in the course of moral life, as their consequences are considered and judged by the community—the ethical republic—whose lives are affected. From this pragmatist perspective, the job of ethics is to help people reflect on, test, and revise their ideals to accord with the general republican reality of moral life, while also helping them alter that reality to accommodate as many other ideals as possible. "We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race's moral life," James asserted in his seminal essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891). "In other words, there

<sup>31</sup> Throntveit, *Ethical Republic*, ch. 3.

<sup>32</sup> WJ, *Talks to Teachers*, v.

<sup>33</sup> WJ, *Pragmatism*, 206, 287.

<sup>34</sup> WJ, *Will to Believe*, 198.

can be no final truth in ethics any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say.”<sup>35</sup>

Democracy, then, is the criterion of practical ethics. This is so not simply because every individual is the moral equal of others and deserves a say in the life of the whole, but also because every individual is the intellectual complement of others and contributes wisdom to the ordering of the whole. Operationalizing such a moral and epistemic ideal of democracy depends less on formal institutions (though these are important) than on “civic” practices and values, including empathic reasoning, personal and historical reflection, individual and collective experimentation, and sacrifice of lesser goods to promote the foregoing critical virtues.<sup>36</sup> In James’s view, the universal human desire for *some* means of organizing the empirical chaos of moral life should inspire us *all* to “throw our own spontaneous ideals, even the dearest, impartially in with that total mass of ideals which are fairly to be judged.” It should call us to determine together, as neighbors dependent on and depended upon by others, which ideals are most compatible with others and which must be tossed, and to adopt as our “guiding principle” the duty “to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*”—or as James more precisely put it, to achieve “the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together.”<sup>37</sup>

Is Jamesian democracy the key to Luther’s vocational theology? Luther would not have said so, but Lutherans might. For James, our evolved will to believe in a more personally satisfying world obliges us to think as we find Luther urging: in relational terms. It compels us to inquire into the myriad ideals of the other souls who constitute our ethical republic, and to explore the value of our own to the overarching goal of widespread human flourishing. Or as Luther might say, it impels us to neighborliness. James’s entire *oeuvre* suggests that our principle means of such neighborly exploration should be what later pragmatists call “deliberation”: an open-minded exchange, comparison, and negotiation of ideas and ideals that depends above all on trust, humility, and a sense of shared fate. The highest goal of deliberation, in this pragmatist sense, is not to reach consensus but to foster a “leveling insight” informing actions as inclusive of others and as generative of mutually caring relationships as possible. James equated this insight with “the religion of democracy”; Luther might ascribe it to “a truly Christian life” in which “faith is truly active through love.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, Luther himself wrote of the social character of earthly existence, and of the importance of other people’s opinions in faithfully navigating it. For Luther, our capacity for language, which allows us to communicate, build relationships, and collaborate across our differences to continue the process of creation, is God’s

<sup>35</sup> WJ, *Will to Believe*, 184.

<sup>36</sup> Trygve Throntveit, “Civic Renewal: William James’s Moral Equivalent of War,” *William James Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 20–41.

<sup>37</sup> WJ, *Will to Believe*, 199, 201, 206.

<sup>38</sup> WJ, *Talks to Teachers*, 278; ML, *Freedom of a Christian*, 365.

greatest gift to us.<sup>39</sup> It gives us “dominion” over creation, but a common dominion, achieved through cooperative use. “God does not give out his gifts so that we can rule and have power over others or so that we should spurn their opinion and judgment,” wrote Luther in his commentary on Genesis 11, “rather so that we should serve those who are in such a case as to need our counsel and help.”<sup>40</sup>

That counsel and help is not unidirectional, but reciprocal. Even when discussing the first commandment and our utter dependence on God, Luther explains that much of God’s goodness “comes to us from human beings,” and that to “spurn” the gifts of God’s creatures would be arrogant folly.<sup>41</sup> At least in his more reflective moments, Luther counted both believers and non-believers among the creatures from whom we could and should take guidance. “Is it possible,” Luther asks, that the millions of “excellent people” who never could or never did believe in the God of Israel or the message of Christ therefore “accomplished nothing?” Far from it. Rather, Christ’s “poor, wretched” flock could learn much from “the heathen” and “how well they have governed lands and people, established law and order, maintained peace and discipline, fostered knowledge of many kinds.”<sup>42</sup> This egalitarian strain in Luther’s thinking surfaced even in his political writings. Though emphasizing order and hierarchy, Luther’s scheme for God’s secular (as opposed to heavenly) kingdom nevertheless assigned all persons to all three traditional estates: clerical, political, and economic. All believers partook of the common priesthood, all magistrates were members of households, and all clerics and householders were members of the polity. Further leveling the distinctions of his time and era, Luther celebrated labor as the foundation and sustainer of all the estates, entailing dignity and commanding consideration.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, a pragmatist reading of Luther suggests that our earthly gifts are meant to be shared, but we need to define what “sharing” means for a justified yet sinful soul. It does not mean serving others in hierarchical fashion, condescending from some supposed spiritual height to the benighted and derelict. Nor does it mean abandoning all reflection on our actions and “doing our thing,” confident that God will put us to some good use. Instead, sharing our gifts means adopting the “gentle manner” of the fifth commandment, the “discipline” of the sixth, the “generosity” of the seventh, and the solidarity of the eighth, ninth, and tenth.<sup>44</sup> It means talking, reflecting, and, above all, working together with both humility and courage enough to fail, learn, and grow as God’s people, not God’s persons.

<sup>39</sup> Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” 94.

<sup>40</sup> ML quoted in Schwanke, “Luther on Creation,” 95.

<sup>41</sup> ML, *Large Catechism*, ed. Stjerna, 303–04.

<sup>42</sup> ML, *Sermons on John* (1537), LW 24:227–28, quoted in Scott J. Hendrix, “Martin Luther’s Reformation of Spirituality,” in Wengert, *Harvesting*, 242–43. See also Jan-Olav Hendriksen, *Religious Pluralism and Pragmatist Theology: Openness and Resistance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), drawing primarily on later pragmatists to argue that Christianity must incorporate critical engagement with other religious and secular worldviews to remain a practical response to God’s gift of salvation.

<sup>43</sup> Eike Wolgast, “Luther’s Treatment of Political and Societal Life,” in Kolb et al., *Oxford Handbook*, 397–413.

<sup>44</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 113, 117, 121, 126–30.

It means sinning boldly *together*, never forgetting that examination, repentance, and transformation of practice for the richer flourishing of life are duties of a Christian church as well as of a Christian soul—and, one might add, marks of a healthy democracy.

### C. THE PROBLEM WITH JAMES

Thus, James seems a great resource for Lutherans who feel God's call to *act* rather than simply to *be* Christians. Indeed, James has never been more relevant to Lutheran theology and practical Christianity generally, as scholarship increasingly emphasizes Luther's discussions of faith as a phenomenon embodied in our physical actions and their consequences, and thus critical to our social identities and roles.<sup>45</sup>

But there is a huge problem: the cross. James defended "theists" against those who insisted science had made religion moot, highlighting the very real and beneficial consequences of religion for individual and social life. While defending many types of believers, however, James was less hospitable to their objects. The only God James would directly defend—and that only as a hypothesis—was a finite deity, a "helper, *primus inter pares*," of human beings; in other words, a God who could never do what the Gospels say God did and does do: die for our sins, rise from the dead, and take us along.<sup>46</sup>

In one way, this problem is easily solved. Interpreting Luther's theology in the spirit of James's pragmatism does not require us to accept every result of James's inquiries. Not even James would insist on that.<sup>47</sup> We can relate to James just as James suggests we relate to others: as a potential communicator of useful but partial truths, which depend for their value on the use to which we put them.

In another way, however, the problem of the cross remains huge. For it is not a problem with James but a problem for us: a challenge to living as Christians in the unfinished and fragmented world that James described and that Christ came to save.

### B. THE PROBLEM FOR LUTHERANS

Like it or not, we live in a pluralistic universe, particularly at the human scale. Whether we live in unabashedly heterogeneous democracies or ostensibly homogeneous autocracies, we must, as Lutherans, live as both lords and servants.<sup>48</sup> The

<sup>45</sup> Justin Nickel, "The Body Justified: Hauerwas, Luther and the Christian Life," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2017): 65–78; Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life*.

<sup>46</sup> WJ, *Pragmatism*, 298. On James's rejection of Christ and any suprahistorical meaning of the cross, see Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 71–80.

<sup>47</sup> James made clear that he could "not speak officially as a pragmatist here" but could only state that "my own pragmatism offers no objection" to a "superhuman" but not omnipotent God (*Pragmatism*, 293, 298).

<sup>48</sup> ML, *Freedom of a Christian*, 344.

Lutheran faith is a worldview; and as a Christian faith in a personal God, it mounts a challenge to other worldviews—non-Christian, differently Christian, even differently Lutheran—while existing alongside them in environments co-constructed with them.

Read in a Jamesian light, Luther's *simul* doctrine allows us to approach these other worldviews and their holders both critically and charitably, for they, like we, are comprised by the creation Christ is even now transforming through and for us. James does not help us believe that Christ's death and resurrection are the source of such transformation. But he can help us understand how our faith in such transformation can be abiding while its forms—practical and even doctrinal—remain provisional. He does this by reminding us that "the meaning of life," as quoted earlier, has always depended on "the marriage of some unhabitual ideal" with "some man's or woman's pains"—and that such meaning is *always being made*. Our problem is to recognize that the cross does not give life meaning. Rather, it is the meaning of the life God wants us to live—a meaning we can grasp most fully through daily effort to reconcile our provisional glimpse of the cross with all the other signals God sends us through creation, including that most beloved of its parts: human beings.

The problem for Lutherans, in short, is to view our practical response to the cross not in terms of *works*, but of *work*: work that is ongoing, uncertain, and democratic in its richest sense. We must take Luther seriously when he warns us not to let "human opinion, laws, or dealings" determine our response to the gospel—our faith is not subject to majority vote. But we must also acknowledge Luther's hope that Christians "shun self-chosen works" and "devote themselves with the utmost zeal to those tasks which their calling brings with it and demands," recognizing that any tasks God gives us for the maintenance of the human family "are truly divine works, whether you are a pupil and learn letters, a maid and sweep the house with brooms, or a servant and tend horses or do other things."<sup>49</sup> The works that fall to us may change, as they did for Luther. But the work does not stop; rather, since "human nature requires us at every moment to be doing something," we as Christians should "abound in good works, practicing faith in every situation and learning constantly to do everything with that trust."<sup>50</sup> And the best way—or at least the pragmatist way—to practice a faith that affirms simultaneously the frailty, the co-creative agency, and the utter interdependency of its adherents and all human beings is to practice it in the company of human beings and the light of their collective experience.

<sup>49</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 18; ML, *Lectures on Genesis* (1539), LW 3:218.

<sup>50</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 31. Church and intellectual historians might here be reminded of N. F. S. Grundtvig's "living word" theology and its educational embodiment in the Danish folk-school movement.

## A' CONCLUSION

*Simul iustus et peccator*, then, is indeed the core of Luther's theology. But no doctrine or set of doctrines can exhaust faith's meaning. James helps us see the resources Luther offers for practicing faith, and to understand how uncertainty can be an asset rather than a hindrance to such practice. "The pragmatism or pluralism which I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees," James wrote, for only by embracing uncertainty and living life as a series of trials and errors can we avoid the arrogance that seals out the world and its nourishments and forecloses growth.<sup>51</sup>

The gospel, as Luther read it, calls us to a similar life of trial and error, but turns the paradox of our freedom and impotence into an even greater instrument for growth than James recognized. For the gospel assures us that neither success nor failure will ever cause God to reduce or withhold love and care for us, and thereby lends us a courage that "irreligion," as James admitted, can hardly muster.<sup>52</sup> Christians "must be uncertain about their works," wrote Luther, because uncertainty in earthly affairs is the price of a faith "that does not expect judgment but only divine grace, favor, and mercy."<sup>53</sup> It is also, however, one of the many gifts of such faith: a reminder that our earthly affairs do not exhaust the life God gives us, and a proof that, however well or poorly we think we are managing them, those affairs can always be more lovingly pursued and thus better arranged than they are.

After all, Luther reminds us, Christians are "obligated to watch out for their neighbors as much as for themselves"—and well supported in their efforts to do so. For "God, who is all-powerful, has placed before us Christ not only as the one in whom we should confidently believe but also as an example of such trust and good works, so that we might trust him, follow him, and abide forever in him, as he says in John's Gospel: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'"<sup>54</sup> ⊕

*TRYGVE THRONTVEIT is Lecturer in Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development and Dean's Fellow for Civic Studies at the University of Minnesota. He is the editor of the journal The Good Society: A Journal of Civic Studies.*

<sup>51</sup> WJ, *Pragmatism*, 290.

<sup>52</sup> WJ, *Will to Believe*, 213.

<sup>53</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 36.

<sup>54</sup> ML, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Hendrix, 127, 129.