THE SCHNEEBERG ALTARPIECE: IMAGE, ALTAR, AND WORSHIP IN THE
REFORMATION

Amanda L. Jaskowak ’07

Department of Art & Art History

May 2007

Submitted: 5/4/07
INTRODUCTION: Iconoclash

Commentary on images was widespread throughout the Reformation, but agreement on the role images should play, if any, in the worship service was not. Writers such as Andreas Karlstadt condemned the use of images in the worship of God, stating “It would be a thousand times better if they [images] were set up in hell or the fiery furnace than in the houses of God.”¹ Images were not only a violation of the Ten Commandments, Karlstadt reasoned, but also a medium for false doctrine within the Church. On the other hand, theologians such as Johannes Eck supported the use of images in the church arguing that if images were removed, then one should remove all physical signs of the sacraments from the worship space, including all religious ceremonies, and even the text of scripture.² Though originally against images earlier in his life, Reformers such as Luther gradually supported the use of images for their pedagogical value.

---

This array of responses is symptomatic of the inherent paradox in the attitude towards images during the Reformation: although the Reform movement generally did not support religious images, it adroitly deployed them in prodigious quantities to communicate evangelical ideas, and ultimately revolutionized the way images were conceptualized, disseminated, and used in the worship service.

It is only recently that scholars such as David Freedberg have asked whether the Reformation inadvertently emphasized the power of the image, even for those aiming to destroy it. Provoked by Reformers’ pamphlets and sermons against icons, crowds destroyed images violently or in a ritualistic manner. Statues were burned in effigy, paintings torn apart and sculptures dismembered or hung upside down, tacit acknowledgement of their power. Most paradoxical, less than twenty years after the iconoclastic riots in Wittenberg ended in 1523 supporters of the Reformed Church began investing in creating its own liturgical art and the process of institutionalizing its spiritual message through the visual arts.

As both image and object, no other entity better crystallizes issues of doctrine, image, and liturgy during the 16th century than the “Reformation Altarpiece.” This paper examines the first example of such: the Schneeberg Altarpiece by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Long neglected by art historians, the Schneeberg Altarpiece is nonetheless an important lens through which to study the institutionalization of Lutheran ideology in the context of a “re-formed” altarpiece. It inaugurates a sequence of altarpieces made by Cranach and his workshop for the Reformed Church, including the 1547 Wittenberg Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City Church at Wittenberg and the 1555 Weimar Altarpiece in the City

---

Church of Weimar. As a part of the reformed worship service, all of these works have a different theological context, aesthetic strategy, and function than Catholic altarpieces.

Begun around 1530, the Schneeberg Altarpiece, made by Cranach and his workshop for the Saint Wolfgang’s Church in Schneeberg, was installed in 1539. The circumstances of its commission are not completely known. However, scholars surmise that the massive triptych was a gift of the Elector of Saxony, John Frederick, and his half-brother, John Ernest, based on the donor portraits found at the base of the left and right wing panels when the altarpiece is completely opened.

The altarpiece is double-sided, with a closed and two open positions on the front, and one closed and open position on the back (see Diagram 1). When in the closed position, the Flood and Lot and his Daughters are depicted on the front. When the wings are opened in the first position, viewers see the Allegory of Law and Grace spread across the four front panels. In the second opened position, the central panel illustrates the Crucifixion. On the left, the wing panel depicts Christ in Gethsemane with the donor, John Frederick below; on the right, John Earnest is depicted on the bottom of the panel with the Resurrected Christ above him. The predella depicts the Last Supper, which is visible from the front in all positions. When the altarpiece’s wings are closed, the back depicts the Last Judgment. In the first opened position, the Flood, and Lot and his Daughters move to the back of the altarpiece with the Flood on the right side and Lot and his Daughters on the left; this remains the same in the second opened position. The raising of the dead is illustrated in the predella, which is also visible from each of the rear positions. Each wing is approximately 39 inches in width and 110 inches in height. The
center panel is approximately 82 inches in width and 102 inches in height.\(^4\) When the altarpiece is completely open, it is approximately 180 inches long and 110 inches high.

The in-depth study of the Schneeberg Altarpiece has been inhibited by a number of historical factors. In 1633, the retable became plunder of the imperial troops during the Thirty Years’ War and did not resurface until sixteen years later in 1649, when the panels were returned to Schneeberg and reinstalled in the church in 1650. At that time, only the Crucifixion and the Last Supper panels were placed in a new frame and installed in the church (Fig. 1). In 1719, the altarpiece survived a town fire, but in 1945 during World War II, Saint Wolfgang was bombed: the church was destroyed but the altarpiece was pulled from the fire. The Crucifixion and Last Supper panels were damaged but survived; the other panels suffered no damage.

As a result, the altarpiece, in all its parts, was restored at the Institut für Denkmalpflege in Dresden.\(^5\) Owing to its long seclusion in the former East Germany, the altarpiece was relatively inaccessible to western scholars before 1989. Indeed, prior to 1998, the only scholars to write on the altarpiece were German and since the second World War, primarily Eastern German scholars. Nonetheless, since the fall of the Communist Bloc, the growing number of western scholars interested in the work has been steadily growing.\(^6\)

\(^4\) The central panel is shorter in height than the wings because the panel was cut down when it was taken and placed with the predella in a Baroque frame in 1650.


Until recently, the scholarship on the Schneeberg Altarpiece has typically focused on its authorship, iconography, and physical history.\(^7\) The first work to offer a relatively thorough formal description of the altarpiece was written by Christian Schuhardt in 1851 in his larger study of Cranach’s life and work.\(^8\)

The first and most extensive discussion of the iconography of the Schneeberg Altarpiece came from Oskar Thulin in his 1955 study *Cranach-Altäre der Reformation*. His volume focuses on the Schneeberg, Weimar, and Wittenberg altarpieces and the ways in which the Lutheran doctrine of justification is depicted in each. Thulin uses the Schneeberg altarpiece, among the three others, to demonstrate a direct connection between Cranach and Luther. By Thulin’s account, Luther conceived the theological aspects of the altarpiece while his close friend Cranach visually executed Luther’s design. Thulin’s study of the Schneeberg Altarpiece is part of his larger interest in Lucas Cranach as an artist working in support of the Reformation. He presents the Schneeberg Altarpiece as a passive reflection of evangelical theology, secondary to the theology it embodies.\(^9\) Thulin’s approach is thus a more traditional one, reflecting the Panofskian model in its emphasis on iconography as the most important means of interpretation.\(^10\) Nonetheless, Thulin’s work has been greatly influential, forming the basis for later interpretations of the altarpiece.

\(^7\) Many sources are inventories of the city of Schneeberg’s treasures while other sources are records of the church’s properties.


More recently, Joseph Koerner and Bonnie Noble approach the Schneeberg Altarpiece as a “Reformation Altarpiece,” shifting attention to the work in the total context of the Lutheran reform with respect to religious imagery. As Koerner shows, Cranach broke all the conventions of traditional Catholic iconography, creating an entirely new aesthetic for the new Protestant ethos. Koerner’s argument focuses on the characteristics of the “image,” not the altarpiece in its context within the church.11 Bonnie Noble’s study more particularly examines the iconography of the Law and Grace panels, how these panels fit into Luther’s theology of Justification, and how worshippers visually read this allegory.

Koerner and Noble differ in two or three essential ways. In The Reformation of the Image Koerner studies Cranach’s altarpiece as a lens for the reinterpretation of images in the 16th century. Unlike Thulin, Koerner does not concern himself with the iconography of the image and how that iconography reflects Lutheran doctrine. Methodologically, he is less concerned with the thematic intricacies of the altarpieces as much as how the appearance and iconography of the image change the interaction that occurs between the image and the worshipper. Koerner views the iconography as part of an intricate system of signs that presents the viewer with a choice: salvation or damnation; the Schneeberg Altarpiece is evidence of the permanent place religious imagery holds in the worship space. Thus, his study aims to distinguish the emergent Reformation identity, focusing less on the particulars of the Schneeberg Altarpiece in favor of how it fits into the visual revolution of images during this time period.

The Reformation of the Image continues from Koerner’s previous publication, The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art, in which he studies the theme of law and grace as it pertains to the changing image of the self during the 16th century. Although much of the book is dedicated to the work of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien, Koerner contextualizes Cranach’s iconography of Law and Grace in Schneeberg’s panels, and its subsequent inclusion in the Wittenberg and Weimar altarpieces as evidence that the viewer or self as a free-acting agent was gaining power in art. That is, Koerner begins with Luther’s belief in the individual’s power to read and interpret scripture on his or her own play an integral part in the redefinition of self during this period. Koerner sees the Law and Grace panels as unique because they give the viewer the opportunity to interpret them and subsequently, make a choice. Understanding the panels is not limited to priests or high officials; the panels are didactic in order to instruct the common congregant. As Koerner writes, “Since Luther maintains that all people’s salvation depends on their personal response to Scripture, then each believer’s understanding of the law and gospel, indispensable to reading Scripture, carries a universal soteriological burden.”

Prior to the Reformation, artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Albrecht Altdorfer, and Hans Baldung Grien designed works as “art”—as clear indices of their inimitable skill. Skill such as Dürer’s became an asset that ultimately led to a recreation of the artist and a revaluing of the artist over the subject of the work. The Reformation acts as a catalyst

that reduces the need for artistic complexity and showmanship but aggrandizes the need for interpretative complexity.

Koerner contends that if words alone, not images, led the worshipper to salvation, then religious imagery would have disappeared altogether during the Reformation. Since Protestants manipulated the function of the image rather than abolished it, Koerner argues that the paradoxical nature of Protestant religious imagery is to be at once both iconic and iconoclastic. As he shows, Cranach, breaking all the conventions of traditional Catholic iconography, created an entirely new aesthetic for an emerging Protestant ethos.

Koerner sees the newly invented “Reformation image” as one that necessitates a choice on the part of the viewer, making his argument through an in-depth study of the visual signs within the Wittenberg Altarpiece. Through a series of visual indicators, the viewer arrives at a full understanding of the implications of Lutheran theology. The engineered aesthetic complexity of the image does not hide the interpretative complexity the Lutheran doctrine brings to the worshipper, but the manner in which the message is portrayed performs the exegetical work for the worshipper. As Koerner writes, “Shaped less of a picture to be interpreted than as the interpretation of a picture, the Reformation image mirrors the interpretative enterprise in which it here stands.”

Noble on the other hand examines Cranach’s Reformation altarpieces almost exclusively in the context of Lutheran doctrine. She studies the iconography of the three altarpieces first and foremost, hoping to describe the reception of Lutheran concepts such as “sola fides” as it is transferred into visual form. Noble plots a thematic continuum from the Schneeberg Altarpiece to the Weimar Altarpiece, focusing exclusively on

---

iconographic and formal analysis. Unlike Koerner, whose methodological inclinations cause him to interpret the images free of any Lutheran text, Noble uses Luther’s writings and sermons as acolyte to the images. The Schneeberg Altarpiece, as Noble contends, stands at a discrete phase of evangelical painting; the Schneeberg Altarpiece is still bound to pre-Reformation devotional forms of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century but moves away from the strict didacticism of earlier evangelical images and prints.

Using reasoning similar to Koerner, Noble concludes that the Schneeberg Altarpiece as the first designated “Reformation Altarpiece,” critiques and reconfigures the function of religious art of the preceding period. She sees the Schneeberg Altarpiece as an object caught between the traditional Catholic triptych form and a new visual mode of interpretation that originates directly from the written word of the Gospel. Aside from the changes the altarpiece itself evinces, what are more important are the physical and thematic changes it perpetuates.

For Noble, the Schneeberg Altarpiece innovates from traditional Catholic altarpieces in that it becomes “a kind of primer for the basic ideas that prepare the Lutheran for the Mass,” designed to teach elements of evangelical doctrine. As the physical marker of the altar table where communion took place, the altarpiece celebrated the sacrament devoid of any holy hierarchies: both the clergy and the laity took part in the wine and wafer. According to Noble, the Schneeberg Altarpiece’s pictorial arrangement

16 Noble designates the Schneeberg Altarpiece as the first Lutheran altarpiece because it was installed upon Schneeberg’s reception of the Lutheran faith. Noble outlines her conclusions on the Schneeberg Altarpiece in her dissertation, “Lutheran works of the Cranach Workshop.” She also published an article called, “The Schneeberg Altarpiece: A Work in Which in the Angels are Wont to Rejoice.” Noble, Bonnie. “A work in which the angels are wont to rejoice’: Lucas Cranach’s Schneeberg Altarpiece.” Sixteenth Century Journal. Volume 34: No. 4 (Winter 2003).

hinges on the worshipper’s understanding of the Lutheran doctrine of law and grace. What makes the Schneeberg Altarpiece especially “evangelical” is not its aesthetic appearance or its existence separate from the communion table, but rather, the fact that it teaches aspects of Lutheran doctrine, its representation features Luther’s unique understanding of the human’s relationship to God as one that encapsulates a lawful God and a merciful God. The altarpiece acts as a messenger to the viewer; one need only believe in God to receive his grace. Thus, Noble considers it more a pedagogical tool than a holy artifact.

Both Koerner and Noble choose, in their research, to link all three altarpieces—the Schneeberg, Wittenberg, and Weimar panels—together, in order to form a unified commentary on the three as a group. They see the three altarpieces as forming a progression in the visual interpretation of Lutheran ideas. The Schneeberg Altarpiece is the least studied of these, due in part to the controversial history of the object as it was dismantled and reassembled.

While I do not disagree with Koerner and Noble—and in many instances build from their work—this paper focuses on the Schneeberg Altarpiece in a somewhat different light. First, I see it as a representation of the institutional assimilation of the rhetorical structure adapted from Reformation broadsheets. It is central to my thesis that the importance of the migration of images from the Reformed, educated public to the religious worship space within the church is atypical of religious art before the Reformation and is therefore, an integral part of the development of the Schneeberg Altarpiece. The transformation of word and popular image of the reformed movement represents the successful harnessing of institutional identity through the Altarpiece, and
the means by which the “Reformation Altarpiece” was created. To clarify, the Schneeberg Altarpiece is not a combination or distinct mixture of these elements; it is influenced by and created out of these different modes of interpretation, such as the rhetoric set forth by Luther and visual imagery as exemplified in prints and broadsheets.

Secondly, I explore the significance of the fact that the Schneeberg Altarpiece is a retable, a distinction that is both a physical and symbolic break from the Catholic tenet that the altarpiece was not only attached to the altar but also played an integral role in the Eucharistic Rite. Although Luther condoned the use of images in the church space, they had to follow certain guidelines so that the worshipper could easily understand the imagery’s message. Using the altarpiece as a pedagogical tool meant the imagery required a different means of interpretation. Likewise, given the fact that the retable did not play a direct role in Communion, its structure and placement in the spatial field of the church is also important to the discussion of the Schneeberg Altarpiece.

Koerner and Noble largely ignore these elements in the study of the Schneeberg Altarpiece. Although my study and interpretation falls closer to Noble’s analysis, there are inherent gaps in Koerner and Noble’s studies that my work will attempt to fill. Even though Noble and Koerner elect to treat the Schneeberg Altarpiece as part of a group of altarpieces, I elect to study it as one object, separate from the Wittenberg and Weimar Altarpieces. Indeed the Schneeberg Altarpiece stands at a critical juncture in the history of the image itself, but more importantly, it is the moment at which the Lutheran denomination begins a path towards institutionalizing its doctrinal message.

The first chapter discusses the allegory of Law and Grace in relation to the Schneeberg Altarpiece. Cranach the Elder was a close acquaintance of Luther; art
historians generally accept that Cranach worked closely with Luther in designing much of what was to develop into the theme of “Law and Grace.” Yet Luther’s rhetoric is not the only influence on the Schneeberg Altarpiece, for there are ample visual predecessors as well. Many of the individual vignettes within the Law and Grace theme were developed separately within prints and earlier panel paintings. The second chapter deals with this aspect in the Altarpiece. In the fourth chapter, the context for the Schneeberg Altarpiece as part of the Lutheran service is set against the Catholic uses of altarpieces. The context of the altarpiece in the worship service also strikes a contrast to Catholic forms and uses: whereas the altarpiece was once used to initiate pathos towards Christ’s suffering, the Schneeberg Altarpiece is the first of a new visual pattern whose primary use is to instruct the laity on the significance and proper administration of the sacraments.
CHAPTER 1: The Iconography of the Schneeberg Altarpiece and its relation to Luther’s Doctrine of Salvation

The Schneeberg Altarpiece was installed in the church of Saint Wolfgang in Schneeberg in 1539 (Figs. 2-5). It was the first Lutheran retable of its kind, and unofficially marked Schneeberg’s status as a fully reformed, Lutheran city. The Ernestines, including the patrons of the Schneeberg Altarpiece, were all supporters of Luther.\textsuperscript{18} Its installation coincided with John Frederick’s control of the city, the emergence of Schneeberg’s Lutheran identity, and the consequent removal of Catholic art from Schneeberg’s churches.\textsuperscript{19} One year later, by 1540, the building of Saint Wolfgang was completed, and the church was consecrated; the Catholic priests were dismissed and Lutheran ones installed.

The Schneeberg Altarpiece was commissioned from Lucas Cranach the Elder and his workshop by John Frederick the Magnanimous, the Elector of Saxony and John Ernest\textsuperscript{20}, Duke of Saxe-Coburg, perhaps as early as 1530.\textsuperscript{21} Art historians generally contend that Cranach himself designed the composition and iconography, but it is a

\textsuperscript{18} The Ernestine line was a dynasty of German royalty that ruled in the province of Saxony.


\textsuperscript{20} John Ernest was also known as John the Serious and is referred to as such in some sources.

\textsuperscript{21} Ziessler, 3. The altarpiece was designed and finished in Wittenberg, and only brought to Schneeberg upon its completion by wagon. In the following chapter, I discuss the significance of this earlier design date.
matter of debate as to who actually executed the work, though it is generally accepted
that Cranach’s workshop carried out its execution.

Scholars have also long accepted the relationship of Schneeberg’s iconography
with Lutheran thought, specifically his idea of “justification by faith.” Throughout the
sixteenth century, the theme of justification stood at the heart of a confessional dialogue;
the Schneeberg Altarpiece reflects the need to answer Luther’s question of “How may I
gain salvation in the face of God?” At first glance, the aesthetic appearance of the
Schneeberg, in relation to more involved medieval altarpieces, yields the impression of
an aesthetically simple, if not crude work owing to its thinly-painted surface, lack of
robust modeling, and the somewhat caricatured quality of the figures and scenes.
Nonetheless, conceptually the Schneeberg panels are sophisticated, the first to
institutionalize the Lutheran doctrine concerning salvation in visual form and the first to
attempt to articulate these doctrinal complexities within the church space. Even in textual
form, Lutheran doctrine itself is sophisticated; in order to fully realize the meaning of the
Schneeberg Altarpiece and its iconography, some knowledge of Lutheran’s
understanding of how the Christian gains salvation is essential.

Luther developed the idea of “Law” and “Grace” as a didactic means of
explaining man’s relationship to God, and as part of Luther’s larger discussion on how
man can secure salvation. The evangelical doctrine of justification demonstrates a radical
break with the medieval heritage of ideas concerning how the Christian is redeemed in
the face of God at final judgment, for it spoke of an outright promise of unconditional
salvation. In the medieval church, the believer participated in a process or a cycle of
salvation. Mankind was tempted to sin, the sinner then went to confession, the priest
granted absolution, fixed a penance and with the penance the sins were forgiven and the repentant returned to a state of grace.\textsuperscript{22} Luther rejected this cycle, declaring that the believer could do nothing to contribute to his or her salvation. Being justified through God was through faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone, a theological perspicacity that was expressed by the Latin phrase, “sola fide” or faith alone. Being that there was no longer a process of renewal or an infusion of God’s grace via penance and indulgences, righteousness in Lutheran doctrine became a state of being beyond the self won by the intervention of Christ (with this intervention culminating in the Crucifixion). This idea was also known by its Latin tag, \textit{extra nos}.

The Schneeberg Altarpiece is the visual articulation of the evangelical belief in man’s salvation by faith rather than good works, a visual articulation that is reflected throughout the entire altarpiece but is most apparent in the Law and Grace panels, to which I shall return. The Reformation concept of faith derives its nature from rejecting reliance on good works and from idea that giving “good works” has a close connection with the word of the Gospel.\textsuperscript{23} Reformers, specifically Luther, claimed that the Gospel constitutes an absolute, unconditional promise of eternal life. That is to say, sanctification is given without condition of the fulfillment of the commandments.\textsuperscript{24} There can be no valid cause for man to be justified before God; not even God himself stands in such a causal relation to man and his actions. The acceptance of God, his bestowal of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{23} Hamm, 78.
\bibitem{24} Ibid., 67.
\end{thebibliography}
Grace on his creatures, is not subject to reasons or conditions, although justification always has consequences in the shape of sanctification.

With respect to salvation and the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification by Faith, God is portrayed as having two polar personalities, one in judgment and the other in mercy. One must not confuse the Law and Grace panels as two separate and distinct views of “God” as an entity; rather, these are aspects of God’s relationship to man that cannot be separated. In light of this, law is understood in a new way and remains part of life and death. Believers understand that the Law, having left them in despair, is also an instrument that can, in making humans aware of sin, place them before the possibility of faith. As Luther writes in his essay, “Freedom of a Christian:”

…it is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: rules and promises. The rules certainly teach us what is good, but what they teach is not forthwith done. For they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself that through them he may learn his own impotence for good and may despair of his own strength. For this reason they are called the Old Testament, and are so.25

Nonetheless, humans must still live with the law because the law reminds them that even as believers they are still sinners.

In being aware of sin, but realizing the breadth of God’s grace, one need not focus on maintaining God’s law, because the idea of gaining faith alone despite man’s sins seemingly gives the Christian man or woman full reign to sin without consequences. However, Luther develops the concept of the “Freedom of the Christian Man,” which

---

states that, however uncompelled Christians are to the law, they still freely and willingly serve God and their neighbors.

Luther defines his understanding of the Law and the Gospel in his lectures and writings, “Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians.” More than most of his other writings, Luther’s “Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians” hones in on the center of faith, here expressed in an analysis that is almost dizzying in terms of its dialectical turns on law and gospel. Given that Luther contended that everything a Christian needs to know is found in a comprehensive understanding of law and gospel, it is not surprising that this motif should become the cornerstone of Cranach’s reformation works.

Let us turn now to the Schneeberg Altarpiece, for its sequence of panels is essential to comprehending how Luther’s interpretation of salvation becomes visually apparent. The Schneeberg Altarpiece is a functional retable, with a central panel, several moveable wings (flügeln), and a predella. There were originally a total of twelve painted panels in the Schneeberg Altarpiece (Figs. 6-11)—the panel depicting the Raising of the Dead was burned in the bombing of 1945.

Much like earlier Catholic altarpieces, the Schneeberg altarpiece has three separate positions, according to Holy Days and Feast Days. In the closed position on the front of the altarpiece, the scenes in the wings depict, on the left, Lot and his Daughters, Lot’s daughters offering Lot alcohol in front of the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Fig. 6) and on the right, the Flood. (Fig. 7) Beneath these panels in the predella, which is visible in every position, is the Last Supper (Fig. 8), deemed by Luther to be an appropriate subject for religious painting.

---

To clarify, this title can refer to both the lectures and the written commentary since the commentary was dictated from Luther’s lectures on the subject.
The first opened position reveals the theme of *Law and Grace* spread across four discrete panels (Fig. 9). The two left-hand panels contain scenes illuminating the nature of Law. On the far left, Death and the devil pursues Adam (or the “Everyman”) into the fiery mouth of Hell with Christ enthroned looking down from above. In the adjacent panel, Adam and Eve consume the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. In the foreground, Moses and other prophets from the Old Testament stand and gesture towards the figure of Death. The two right hand panels illumine “Grace:” the “Everyman” stands with John the Baptist beholding Christ on the cross. On the far right panel, the resurrected Christ, triumphant over Death, defeats the devil. In the background, the Virgin Mary willingly receives the spirit of the Unborn Christ child.27

The second opened position shows the donors in the wings below the Agony in the Garden on the left (Fig. 10) and the Resurrection of Christ on the right, with a Crucifixion scene in the center (Fig. 11). On the top left panel, Christ prays in Gethsemane with the donor, John Frederick, depicted below (Fig. 12); on the right panel is the risen Christ with John the Serious, the eighteen-year-old half brother of John the Frederick, beneath (Fig. 13). Thus on Sundays and Feast Days, three different manifestations of Christ are shown: suffering, crucified, and resurrected. In the center panel of the opened position the two crucified thieves frame Christ in the center of a dense crowd. Below the three crucified figures are a crowd of believers, non-believers soldiers, and onlookers. In the scene, there are many figures, some being attacked, and others in rapt attention, and with horses on the right balancing the centurion on his horse.

27 Significantly, these panels are the only panels in the altarpiece to be labeled with inscriptions from scripture, which guide the viewer through the sequence of images See Chapter 3 for further explanation of the scriptural inscriptions.
on the left.\textsuperscript{28} To Christ’s left, the Virgin Mary and a group of women cry and grieve. Across from them on Christ’s “sinister” side, a mob of men fights violently and viciously.

When the altarpiece is closed, the back of the retable depicts the Last Judgment in the central panel (Fig. 14). In the first opened position, the Flood, and Lot and his Daughters change places to the back of the altarpiece with Lot and his Daughters (Fig. 7) on the left. Across from this fiery inferno in the right wing is Noah and the Flood (Fig. 6), as described in Genesis 6:5-8:22. This arrangement remains the same in the second opened position. The raising of the dead was illustrated in the predella, which was always visible from each of the rear positions until it burned in 1945; this twelfth, destroyed panel, was described by Schuhardt in 1871.\textsuperscript{29}

The Schneeberg Altarpiece in its entirety studies the relationship of God to man rather than the relationship of man to Christ’s suffering, a belief that is a small piece of Luther’s views on salvation. Although the Crucifixion panel is prominent in the Schneeberg Altarpiece, it is included to meet a different objective. The Crucifixion panel is situated between the panels of Lot and his Daughters and Noah and the flood. Taken as a whole, the Crucifixion is the act that saves mankind from the fate of Lot or Noah’s contemporaries. The Crucifixion panel in the Schneeberg Altarpiece serves as proof of God’s grace in-between exemplars of God’s lawfulness. The possibility of faith and salvation rests in what God’s gift to mankind: his son, Jesus Christ. With Jesus Christ’s

\textsuperscript{28} This placing of the Crucifixion in the large central panel, with the Last Supper below, is repeated in other works, including Cranach’s subsequent altarpiece at Wittenberg, where a depiction of the Last Supper occupies the main panel and the Crucifixion scene occupies the predella.

crucifixion, God has taken on human sin; consequently, sins are buried with Christ. As Luther writes,

God made Christ which knew no sin, to become sin for us, that we in him might be made the righteousness of God… He verily is innocent, because he is the unspotted and undefiled lamb of God. But because he beareth the sins of the world… To be brief: our sins must needs become Christ’s own sin, or else we shall perish for ever.30

The Last Judgment on the back panel represents divine judgment at the end of Christian history,31 the ultimate event where divine justice and human action converge. Humanity is called upon to account for itself. The panels of Lot and His Daughters and Noah and the flood thematically echo this panel, suggesting that all three stories point to the same conclusion. The story of the flood is about God’s total destruction of the world, while the story of Lot and his Daughters is about the burning of two cities that the daughters interpret as the end of the entire world. It is the Crucifixion in the central panel that brings hope to mankind. Worshippers must believe that Christ died for their sins in order to avoid God’s unforgiving destruction of humankind upon the final judgment.

All of the panels in the altarpiece reference the Law and Grace panels; it is these panels that tie the altarpiece together interpretatively. The allegory of Law and Grace that is played out on the front of the altarpiece is a more holistic version of evangelical belief. The Law and Grace panels inflect the correlating images with Lutheran principles, and the other panels in turn magnify and reinforce the focused doctrinal scope and expand the parameters of Law and Grace. This expansion of the Law and Grace theme in altarpiece form and the application of its lessons to other Biblical and pictorial

30 Dillenberger, 95.
subjects demonstrates that Law and Grace has evolved into the backbone of Lutheran painting and through, giving the Schneeberg Altarpiece a Lutheran identity and inherently, Lutheran means of interpretation.

The style of the altarpiece is equally of note; not only did the Schneeberg Altarpiece present Biblical passages differently to viewers, but also did so in an entirely different aesthetic framework. In comparison to some of the Cranach’s previous work, it becomes evident that he deliberately changed the methods and manner in which he applied and built up paint onto the canvas. The result is a work that is thinly painted overall. The individual figures lack convincing three-dimensionality and have a somewhat caricatural quality. The panels of the Schneeberg Altarpiece are devoid of the painterly artifice that might have created the illusion of living figures and thus provoked idolatrous impulses.32 It was largely this lack of painterly artifice that caused many early historians such as Thulin and Carl Christensen to condemn the Schneeberg Altarpiece as “aesthetically debased.”33

One can realize the marked difference in Cranach’s painting technique by comparing the Schneeberg Altarpiece to painted panels completed by the artist before 1539. For example, almost forty years before Cranach finished the Schneeberg Altarpiece, he painted a Crucifixion panel with a similar composition to the main crucifixion panel in the Schneeberg Altarpiece (Fig. 32). Despite identical subject matter however, the two panels vary in essential manners of technique. In the earlier 1503 panel, the main focus of the image invariably falls upon the suffering of Christ, manifest in his attenuated but fleshy corpse. Color strategically highlights Christ’s body against a

33 Thulin, 34 and Christiansen, 140.
vibrant blue sky. The blood of Christ and the two thieves are juxtaposed and recalled against the red from the women’s dresses and even the horse’s harness and saddle blankets. In the Schneeberg panel, color is much more subdued, and is less intense in terms of its saturation. The emphasis no longer placed on the physical depictions of Christ’s agony. Christ’s body shows no apparent sign of physical suffering.

Topically, the Schneeberg Altarpiece is also an anomaly among its Catholic contemporaries. Clearly, the Allegory of Law and Grace was an invention of Luther’s that was articulated visually by Cranach, but even the strictly Biblical scenes were inconsistent with the most common scenes featured on Catholic altarpieces at the time. Obviously, the Crucifixion was popular, as well as the Annunciation, but surprisingly the Last Supper was rarely featured in painted panels. The Last Supper was usually reserved for refectories, as Creighton Gilbert contends, and infrequently used in the church, much less in the main altar. As Gilbert writes, “In a Last Supper, the figures might mirror the eating monks… the identity of the painted world and the real world is posited more emphatically… when the painting is called not a window but a mirror.” For example, in Dirk Bouts’s The Last Supper of 1467 (Fig. 15), the event is located in a contemporary Flemish setting with members of the sponsoring confraternity presiding over the event on the side. Even the scenes from the Old Testament, such as Lot and his Daughters and Noah and the Flood, were rarely depicted in panels of the main altarpiece. The Schneeberg Altarpiece’s topical incongruence further reflects the notion that Cranach is

35 Ibid., 372.
deliberately making decisions outside of the engrained Catholic aesthetics in order to create a new visual dialogue that is entirely Lutheran in nature.

And so, the Schneeberg Altarpiece reflects a shift from its Catholic contemporaries in terms of the painting techniques, iconography, and topical renderings. The Schneeberg Altarpiece aims to depict Luther’s definition of salvation through the vehicle of the Law and Grace panels and its corresponding Biblical scenes. The artist, Cranach the Elder, shifts his artistic focus, whose representation is palpably different from his earlier works with known Catholic patrons. The Schneeberg Altarpiece also illustrates unconventional Biblical topics which magnify the altarpiece as unique and following a trajectory of Lutheran thought. Although the altarpiece itself may lack a complex, painterly design, its theological implications aim to explicate a complicated new theological view.
CHAPTER 2: The Rhetoric of the Sermon

A feature of the German Reformation that has never failed to fascinate historians is the speed with which new religious ideas were so widely spread throughout Germany, precipitating within a few months what became one of the major social and intellectual upheavals in European history. Many scholars attribute this rapidity to the impact of printing. The printed word provided the vehicle for an unstoppable momentum towards religious reform, so that the views of Luther and others Reformers became accessible to the literate public almost as soon as they were written or recited. Indeed, this reading mass of people ultimately formed a dynamic force behind the Reformation movements of the 1520s.

For scholars, the enormous production of prints and broadsheets are also an efficacious way to study the diffusion of ideas from Luther to a broad audience. But one must also realize that the printed word provides a narrow focus into the dissemination of Reformation ideas: at this time, literacy was still a prized distinction among the general populace. 37 Prints and broadsheets were easy enough to understand without being able to read, but pamphlets of Luther’s sermons and writings no doubt had a more limited

---

37 Keith Moxey and R.W. Scribner both agree that it is impossible to quantify how many persons were literate in Germany at the time. Scribner generally contends however, that literacy was confined by geographic and social constraints. That is, it was more concentrated in towns and limited largely to the higher social classes. See Keith Moxey, Peasants, Warriors, and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation. Chicago: University, 1989. See also R.W. Scribner, Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany. London: Hambledon Press, 1987.
audience that excluded the illiterate, who accounted for perhaps as much as ninety-
percent of the population.\(^\text{38}\)

In light of the largely illiterate public, oral transmission was the primary mode of communication. Specifically within the church, the pulpit was the site of the major and most formal means of communication. Most public announcements were proclaimed from here. This makes sense when one considers that the religious reform movement was first and foremost a powerful preaching revival. Within the sermons of Luther, there is an inherent valuing of God’s word and the Scripture. Likewise, it was not sufficient to read printed tracts or even the Bible; worshippers desired to hear the word. Preachers held an important status in the framework of the community. Thus it should be anticipated that relative to the printed word, the sermon as a medium for spreading religious ideas would have had an equally important, if not more important, role in the Reformation.

Despite the significance that the sermon held in Reformation Germany, no fundamental or altering changes were made to the form of the sermon itself.\(^\text{39}\) Popular preaching in the vernacular had been going through a revival for at least a generation before. What was different about the Reformation sermon was its emphasis on the Bible as the source of religious truth. Using scriptural references was important to the validation of the sermon’s message, and became especially important in evoking a resonating effect with the congregation.\(^\text{40}\) Sermons were logical vehicles designed to

\(^{38}\) Scribner 51.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) The dramatic effect evoked by Reformers and their sermons was reinforced by the practice of interrupting and answering back the preacher. This practice apparently originated when a preacher who did not preach the “pure word of God” was heckled, but the practice
convey rational propositions and generally followed a means of discourse called the "old homiletic." The characteristics of the preaching of the “old homiletic” were an extraordinary use of Scripture, not a mere introducing of the sacred text as an accretion, but such a use as comes from entwinement with the preacher's own thought so that it would almost appear as if preachers knew the Scriptures by heart. Effective sermons used scriptural references throughout, so that the illiterate listener not only heard scriptural interpretation, but the corresponding verses as well.

Luther’s sermons generally followed the less formal mode embodied by Christ’s example: it cannot be said that his preaching was structured in the sense of a modern sermon, which is usually organized around a single theme. Instead, Luther’s aim was to broadcast the word of God to his listeners. Although Luther was interpreting the scripture for his congregants, all present would have assumed that Luther correctly comprehended and explicated God’s word. The goal is always that God may speak his word to the congregation through Luther’s sermon. This is not to say that Luther’s sermons did not have one main point or topic; they were usually based on one occurrence, verse, or even Biblical book, but often, in the midst of incorporating other scriptural references, the theme was not always clearly delineated. In practically all of his sermons the development follows the text verse by verse or deals with its parts in a simple, direct flow.

evolved into a means of participating in evangelical sermons. Eventually, the practice was halted as church officials officially adopted the Reformation faith and the practice came to be seen as the work of “sneaks and hedge-preachers,” or individuals with subversive intentions towards the Reformed movement. In order to suspend the practice of answering the preacher but maintain the active participation of the congregation, reading aloud during the worship service became popular as communal exchange of ideas between preacher and congregation. During the worship service, literate members of the congregation were encouraged to read aloud; the entire congregation was often encouraged to repeat scripture and prayer after the preacher. And so, the sermon became both an important vehicle for the propagation of ideas and the center of the Reformation worship service.
of speech. The inner coherence that holds the sermon together is that everything Luther says serves to expound and proclaim the text. Scripture was not always sourced from one book in the Bible, nor was it limited to the Old or New Testament. Luther viewed the Bible as a whole whose parts, Old and New Testament, were constantly in dialogue with one another. As I will discuss, this understanding of the Bible as a circuitous, self-reflexive document deeply informs the logic of the Law and Grace Panels in the Schneeberg Altarpiece.

Although Luther did not invent a new type of sermon structure, he is distinguished from Catholic contemporaries and even his fellow reformers by his simplification of the established scholastic structure of the sermon. Luther put more emphasis on logic than learned prolixity. Contemporary Catholic sermons usually featured a long introduction or exordium, but Luther omitted the introduction and immediately delved into the topic at hand. Luther’s sermons, especially after 1521, become increasingly expository, rather than thematic, the aim of the sermon being to help his listeners to thoroughly understand the text.

Given the importance of the sermon and the spoken word during the Reformation, it is worth considering that the visual arts produced in Luther’s circle followed or reflected the pattern of the spoken word. Indeed, the compositional structure of the Schneeberg altarpiece seems to reflect rhetorical methods set forth in sermons by Martin Luther. The context for this relationship between word and image plausibly is suggested by the presence of both Luther and Cranach in Wittenberg: the Schneeberg Altarpiece was created in Wittenberg by the Cranach workshop and then transported the 150 miles

---

41 Luther, sermons, xvii
south to Schneeberg by wagon, at the time Luther was preaching in the city church of Wittenberg from 1522 to 1545.\footnote{Dillenberger, John. *Images and relics: theological perceptions and visual images in sixteenth-century Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 101. Although Luther was preaching in Wittenberg prior to this date, he returned to Wittenberg secretly in 1522 after leaving Wittenberg and assuming the identity of Junker Jorg, literally “Knight George,” who was the alter ego Luther assumed while in hiding.}

Home to the University where Luther was Professor of Theology from 1508 and the Augustine monastery where he resided, Wittenberg was the nexus of Reformation activity. It was one of the first fully Reformed cities in Germany, and a hub from which Luther’s sermons and other printed materials were produced. In 1519, Luther wrote to Melchoir Lotter the Elder, asking him to send a printer to Wittenberg to handle the enormous volume of his works which daily needed publication.\footnote{Ehresmann, Donald. “The Brazen Serpent: A Reformation Motif in the Works of Lucas Cranach the Elder and his Workshop.” *Marsyas* (1967), 18.} Subsequently, Lotter sent his son, Melchoir Lotter the Younger, who aided Luther in publishing his sermons and treatises. Many of Luther’s sermons were transcribed into written format to be printed and disseminated throughout Wittenberg. Indeed, Wittenberg produced massive amounts of Luther’s work, sometimes totaling twice the amount of print material as in other German cities.\footnote{Edwards, Mark U. *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994, 22. This number is based on the number of editions that were published in the city of Wittenberg in the vernacular.} Given Luther’s request to Lotter, he clearly understood the power of the printing press in the spread of evangelist thought and indeed, without the emphasis on their publication, many of Luther’s documents and sermons may not have survived.

Luther emphasized the role of Justification by Faith in his sermons and writings, thus it is not surprising that the theme of Law and Grace, which articulates the theology behind salvation became one of the visual representations the most integral to the
Reformed movement at this time. Luther’s sermons continually included references to the evangelical theology of Justification by Faith and the relationship of God to man. However, the single most important text with respect to the formulation of Protestant thought is Luther’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. Published in 1531, this pamphlet was a compilation of several of Luther’s sermons on the subject from the years 1519 and 1523. Luther considered these lectures and the ideas inherent in them integral to the understanding of evangelical thought and the pursuit of religious truth. As he writes in the introduction of the commentary, “Wherefore this doctrine can never be taught, urged, or repeated enough. If this doctrine be lost, then is also the whole knowledge of truth, life and salvation lost and gone.”

The Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians centers on law and gospel, and can be seen as a summation of ideas presented about a decade before the commentary was published. With respect to salvation, law and grace are portrayed as opposites, for it is only in the free gift of grace that humans can stand before God. But in the light of grace, law is understood in a new way and remains part of life and death. Believers understand that the law, having left them in despair, is also an instrument that can, in making humans aware of sin, place them before the possibility of faith. Simultaneous realities are: human beings have lasting sin lasting all their life, righteousness is won for

---

45 Luther lectured on the Galatians in 1519 and 1523, which form the basis for the pamphlet and commentary. When the commentary was published, Luther approved the contents and provided an introduction to the topic.


us by Christ and faith is what saves man from damnation. Finally, it is only after death that humans find liberation from their sinful natures and complete renewal.

All of the topoi found particularly, though not exclusively, in the Galatians commentary find their way into Cranach’s works on Law and Gospel, sin and redemption. These include, among others, the Lord’s Supper, Baptism, the Crucifixion, death and the devil, Moses, the lamb of God, the brazen serpent, which Luther even refers to as “that brazen serpent Christ hanging upon the cross.”  Indeed, if the Galatians commentary is a kind of summation in which the entire scripture is mirrored, the emerging Cranach works on the subject can be said visually to display what Luther has delineated as the pivotal points around which faith gravitates.

Much of the material in Luther’s “Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians” is polemical in nature. Luther views Law and Grace as differing extremes that must be separated in order for the Christian to fully understand his position in relation to God. As he states in the Commentary: “This is our divinity, whereby we teach how to put a difference between these two kinds of righteousness, active and passive: to the end that manners and faith, works and grace, policy and religion should not be confounded, or taken one for the other. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their bounds.”

Luther defines Biblical instances of Law and Grace in the commentary as well. These are the elements that are important to Luther’s description of “Justification by Faith.” For example, Luther distinguishes Moses and the prophets, as an instance of Law: “For the law hath his bounds unto Christ, as Paul saith afterwards: ‘The end of law is Christ’; who being come, Moses ceaseth with his law, circumcision, the Sabbaths, yea,

---

48 Dillenberger, 95.

49 Luther, Martin, “A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians,” 104.
and all the prophets.” In the Law and Grace panel of the Schneeberg Altarpiece, Christ on the cross is almost directly across from Moses and the prophets, who point to death chasing Adam or the everyman into Hell.

There are also important images that Luther constructs in his commentary that are replicated visually: the Law and Grace panels in the Schneeberg Altarpiece are separated by the limbs of a tree; on the Lawful side, the tree’s limbs hang lifeless but on the right side, the side of Grace, the tree’s limbs are leafy and verdant. The image resonates against Luther’s words: “The righteousness of the law is earthly and hath to do with earthly things, and by it we do good works. But as the earth bringeth not fruit except first it be watered and made fruitful from above (for the earth cannot judge, renew, and rule the heaven, but contrariwise the heaven judgeth, reneweth, ruleth, and maketh fruitful the earth…” The leafy tree represents a promise for the purging of sins and everlasting life, should the worshipper exhibit faith in God.

The fact that the scene of the Brazen Serpent, taken from the Old Testament, is featured on the side of Grace further suggests the manner in which the Law and Grace panels create a dialogue between themselves rather than a simple contrast. This represents a refinement in the developing iconography of Law and Grace. In some of the visual representations of the Law and Grace theme, the Brazen Serpent was featured on the side of the “Law.” In the Schneeberg Altarpiece, it is featured above Christ’s

---

Luther references Galatians 3:24 and Romans 10:4 here. They read as follows:

“Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we may be justified by faith” (King James Version) and “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

Luther, Martin, “A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians,” 104-105.

The Brazen Serpent was depicted in the “Law” side of the Prague panel and in one of Cranach’s pen and ink drawings. Both are dated to approximately 1529.
crucifixion. This change is also evident in Luther’s commentary as he associates the Brazen Serpent with Christ: “Therefore when I feel the remorse and sting of conscience for sin, I behold that brazen serpent Christ hanging on the cross.”

Although this story is related in the Old Testament, Luther viewed it as evidence of the importance of faith.

Luther’s rhetorical didacticism does not end with his writings; it is apparent in his sermons as well. Luther’s sermons use scriptural reference with every argumentative point, but underlying this rhetorical move is Luther’s assumption that he is able to accurately interpret God’s word as truth. For instance, in Luther’s sermon on the Sunday after Christmas in 1522, Luther uses the Biblical, polar pairing of Cain and Abel to describe the refutation of good works and how the Christian may be justified before God.

As Luther said,

We must know it is one thing to handle the subject of good works and another that of justification; just as the nature or personality of an individual is one thing and his actions or works another. Justification has reference to the person and not to the works. It is the former, not the latter, which is justified and saved, or is sentenced and punished… Therefore, it is settled that no one is justified by works; he must first be justified by other means. Moses says, ‘Jehovah had respect unto Abel and to his offering.’ First, he had respect to Abel the person, and then to his offering. Abel being godly, just and acceptable in person, his offering was acceptable. The sacrifice was accepted because of the person, and not the person because of the sacrifice. ‘But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect.’ In the first place, God had not respect unto Cain the person; hence later he respected not his offering. From this quotation we may conclude it is impossible for any work to be good in God's sight unless the worker first be good and acceptable. Conversely, it is impossible for any

---

53 Luther, Epistle to the Galatians 121. The Book of Numbers relates that after the Lord sent a plague of serpents to punish the Jews for their lack of faith, Moses interceded with God and was instructed: "Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live" (Genesis 4:4-5).

54 Here Luther references Genesis 4:4-5.
work to be evil before God unless the worker first be evil and not acceptable.\textsuperscript{55}

For Luther, the Bible was the ultimate source of religious truth. Luther uses the two brothers, Cain and Abel, to prove that producing good works does not justify the Christian before God; one must be righteous on his own in spite of his works.

Luther also rhetorically questions his audience and then answers using scriptural references and referring back to his model of Cain and Abel:

Do you ask: "What then am I to do? How shall I make myself good and acceptable in person to begin with? how secure that justification? The Gospel replies: "Hear Christ and believe in him, utterly despairing of yourself and resting assured you will be changed from a Cain to an Abel and then present your offerings" just as faith is proclaimed without merit or work on your part, it is also bestowed regardless of your works, without any of your merits.\textsuperscript{56}

Although Luther does not necessarily invent a new type of sermon, he engages his audience in a different manner from Catholic sermons of the time. By preaching in the vernacular and administering the Eucharist in the vernacular, he enabled congregants to comprehend the meaning of the service more deeply than before. This however, is a different tactic from that of rhetoric or imagery. Likewise, Luther’s emphasis on scripture can be understood as two-fold: firstly, he wishes to verify his authority by showing that the Bible and inherently scripture is his sole reference to God but also, by reciting scripture continuously throughout his sermons, he is able to educate the illiterate congregant with Biblical references.


In addition to the inclusion of more scriptural references, Luther’s sermons and writings use a mode of exegesis that differs from contemporary Catholic counterparts. Luther views the Bible as a narrative guide; that is, rather than instruct worshippers on paradigms for how they should live their life, Luther viewed the Bible as a continuous story.\(^{57}\) This is not to say that the Bible in its entirety follows a narrative format; the books of Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes are anomalies to the novelistic aspects of the Bible. However, these books can be seen as commentaries upon the biblical narratives overarching story of creation, fall, and atonement or redemption.\(^{58}\) This appreciation of Scripture’s narrative form yields several interpretative opportunities for Luther. First, it offers an interpretative framework that can account for the massive chronological span of the biblical text and still provide a credible way of talking about its unity. For Luther, the connections and parallels between the Old and New Testaments become particularly pivotal as the differences between Law and Gospel often crystallize around the two books.\(^{59}\) This is a critical departure from the Catholic use of the Old Testament as a typological pre-figuration of the New Testament.

An appreciation and understanding of Scripture provides a framework for the reception of Grace and for presenting the Gospel in a relevant manner that allows the worshipper to relate vicariously to the biblical scene. Narratives and stories captivate our


\(^{59}\) This is not to say that the theme of Law and Gospel can be thus defined by differences in the Old and New Testament books. Luther’s definition of man’s relationship is more complicated than the simple division of these two books, but as seen in the Law and Grace Panels in the Schneeberg Altarpiece, the instances of Law and Grace are often exemplified by occurrences in the Old and New Testament, respectively.
attention and shape our outlook on reality. Luther’s sermons place the Biblical as the center of religious truth but there is an inherent understanding that the occurrences and parables presented within The Book have the potential to occur in the present life with similar outcomes. By presenting the Bible in this context, Luther implies that Scripture is best construed as providing a world with which interpreters can identify by regarding themselves as characters in the Bible’s dramatic world.  

Luther’s narrative exegesis implies, specific to his ideas concerning “Justification by Faith,” that while Christians understand Adam and Eve’s original sin and fall from grace, they also understand the means by which Adam and Eve were tempted and subsequently took from the Tree of Knowledge. Moreover, the narrative exegesis involves the ability to place one in the event’s context. This narrative method is attractive inasmuch as it appeals to the common sense of the faithful; the Bible is read very literally which does not leave room for extensive allegories within the Scripture. This method also indirectly preferred the ordinary Christian; the layman could easily decipher and comprehend Biblical messages.

---

60 Ellingsen, 395.
61 Ibid.
62 Critics have disparaged Luther’s interpretation of scripture based on grammatical nuances or literal interpretation in reference to his narrative exegesis. The best-known example of such originates in Luther’s interpretation of Christ’s words at the Last Supper, taken from the Biblical book of Luke: “And [Christ] took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, this is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.” Luther argued that the body and blood of Jesus is present "in, with and under" the bread and the wine, a view known as consubstantiation. The substance of the bread is both the bread itself and a symbolic remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice. Luther’s interpretation of Christ’s words emphasizes the word “remembrance,” whereas the Catholic interpretation emphasized the phrase “this is my body.” Since the Catholic faith required a belief in transubstantiation, or the literal transformation of the bread into Christ’s body, Luther’s interpretation of Christ’s words, and inherently, the meaning of communion became one of the keystones of the new Evangelical faith. Later, this conflict becomes even more significant with respect to the visual world as the Last Supper becomes popular in Lutheran altarpiece panels, including the Schneeberg Altarpiece.
As suggested earlier, the Schneeberg Altarpiece may be considered the visual adaptation of a Lutheran sermon, built around narrative exegesis and rhetorical didacticism. Luther’s insistent interpretations of “not this, but that” find their way into the composition of the Schneeberg Altarpiece; the division between the two panels and the visual parallels between them emphasize the worshipper’s choice: the lawful God or the forgiving, merciful God. For instance, on the left, Death and the Devil pursue Adam or the Everyman into the fiery mouth of Hell with Christ enthroned looking on from above. Its visual counterpart on the far right is the image of the resurrected Christ, triumphant over Death, who topples the devil with a similar thrusting motion as the devil on the opposite side. Adam and Eve pick from the Tree of Knowledge and consume the forbidden fruit, a scene that is located directly above Death pursuing Adam. Moses, holding the Tablets of Law stands with other prophets from the Old Testament and gestures towards the figure of Death. On the grace side, their complement is a scene in which a second man (identical to the Adam or the Everyman stands with John the Baptist, who points just like Moses, but to Christ on the cross, the figure of salvation. The figures face the right of the composition, a “mirror” to the prophets’ gestures. This visual structure mirrors Luther’s explication of justification by faith: humans still have to abide by God’s laws, but man is a naturally sinful creature who gains salvation by believing in the saving power of Christ’s sacrifice. Thus, it presents man with a choice and a view of the consequences of that choice; in law, damnation, and in grace, salvation.

Oskar Thulin suggests that the Schneeberg Altarpiece was designed as early as 1530, although it was not executed until almost a decade later; this date is highly significant when one considers that the Schneeberg Altarpiece was actually designed in
Although there are unresolved questions regarding the identity of the donors, Thulin assumes that John Frederick, who became the Elector of Saxony in 1532, and his half-brother John Ernest Duke of Saxe-Coburg (b. 1521) were the donors since their portraits are featured on the altarpiece panels. However, “historical tradition” claims John Frederick and his father John the Constant (d. 1532) commissioned the altarpiece. This evidence comes from the seventeenth-century inscription commemorating the retable’s reinstallation in the church, which was written by the minister at the time, Christoph Schindler. This earlier date for the design of the altarpiece is significant because Luther was still preaching in Wittenberg at the time. Although Luther’s output of printed sermons and other printed materials was waning, his ideas had permeated Wittenberg. Luther and Cranach were both prominent citizens of Wittenberg and were close personal friends. Indeed, in addition to the plethora of imagery based on the allegory of Law and Grace that appeared around 1529, Cranach’s workshop seemed to serve as a production arm for Lutheran imagery. The possibility of Luther’s rhetoric and publications being an influence in the design of the Schneeberg Altarpiece only increases with this earlier design date.

For these reasons, some scholars have claimed that Luther directly led Cranach through the design of the Schneeberg Altarpiece, although it is difficult to prove a one-

---

63 Thulin, 23.
64 Noble, “Lutheran Paintings of the Cranach Workshop, 119.
65 Edwards, 24.
66 In 1522, when Luther was going into hiding, he wrote a letter to Cranach, in which discussed the counsel he received to go into hiding and his best wishes to Cranach and his wife. Luther, Martin, Works. Jeroslav Pelikan, et.al. Vol. 48. Saint Louis: Concordia Publication House, 1951, 201-203. Cranach was one of three witnesses when Luther married in 1525, and in 1526 became godfather to Luther’s first born son.
on-one working relationship. While documentary sources substantiate a relationship between Cranach and Luther, it is not a clear indicator that Luther helped Cranach design the Schneeberg Altarpiece. Since Luther was not the patron of the altarpiece nor was the altarpiece being placed in the church at Wittenberg, there is no readily apparent reason why Luther would assist Cranach directly in its design. Regardless, Cranach surely was familiar with Luther’s ideas and was a friend of Luther’s from the outset of the Reformation, perhaps even hearing his sermons directly, or reading the commentaries.

Luther’s emphasis on narrative and polemic antithesis within his sermons and publications influenced the manner in which Lutheran approached the sermon and scripture. The didactic pairings and visual narrative depicted in the Law and Grace panel of the Schneeberg Altarpiece suggests that Cranach was influenced by Luther’s rhetoric, or possibly guided by Luther himself. The Law and Grace panels mirror much of the material Luther mentions in his sermons on the Epistle to the Galatians as well as his written commentary on the same subject. Irrespective of whether Luther directly assisted in the design of the Schneeberg Altarpiece as some historians have asserted, the Law and Grace panels themselves represent an attempt to assimilate the altarpiece’s panels into the worship service as an aid to the spoken word.

---

67 Scholars also find it difficult to prove that Luther and Cranach were involved professionally in designing the three “Reformation Altarpieces” since Cranach catered to a wide variety of patrons, including Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg, who was considered Luther’s mortal enemy. (See Friedlander, Max. The Paintings of Lucas Cranach. New York: Cornell University Press, 1978 for a full description of Cranach’s works.) This is also true of Hans Holben, whose work I will discuss in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER 3: Printed Broadsheets and Propaganda

Although as I posit, Cranach’s knowledge of Luther’s writings and sermons undoubtedly played a substantial role in the development of the Schneeberg Altarpiece, the written word was not the only influence; the dissemination of Reformed theology was not limited to textual publications. One of the most important defining characteristics of late-medieval popular culture was that it was intensely visual relative to popular culture before it. No doubt, the massive outpouring of pamphlets and broadsheets tremendously influenced this shift. Although scholars such as R.W. Scribner contend that the Reformation’s influence on 16th century visual culture has been overrated, little attention has been paid to the influence of prints and broadsheets on the development of religious imagery within the Reformed church. The Schneeberg Altarpiece is nonetheless evidence that the imagery and compositional structure from these popular prints was effectively translated and adapted to the form of an altarpiece.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of Lutheran propaganda, but regardless of the number of people these publications reached, they were the “proving ground” for a new Lutheran Iconography. The major sources for popular propaganda are the woodcut broadsheet, with or without text, book illustrations, titlepages and illustrated books. Artists such as Cranach integrated and imitated the compositional make-ups of prints, such as the pairing of two antithetical scenes around a central axis, into paintings of religious imagery. Cranach’s workshop was instrumental in developing and refining the
iconography and compositional strategies of Lutheran imagery. Undoubtedly, the format must have had some degree of structural effectiveness for artists to adopt it past the simplistic form of woodcuts and broadsheets. Indeed, Reformation propaganda created a new framework and value system as well as a new set of intentions with respect to mass produced art.

The task of Reformation propaganda was primarily to spread and win allegiance to the evangelical message and cause. Communicating the evangelical message posed several problems, however. The message had to be transmitted in clear and accessible form; there was also the need to decompose old patterns of thought and values, hundreds of years of engrained theology, practice, and rituals. One also had to create powerful symbols that would be associated with the new movement. Finally, these had to be integrated into a reordered structure of values and loyalties.

It seems that the development of Reformation iconography was an adaptive process, responsive to changing political circumstances and needs. Since the Reformation spanned over several decades, it is not surprising that the nature of the printed propaganda that supplemented this movement changed from beginning to end. At the beginning of the Reformation, portraits of Luther as a monk were the most popular images put forth. Strategically, these prints gave the movement a face to the leader of the Evangelical movement. As a corollary to these images, representations of the Catholic clergy or monastic orders were also popular as a means of contrast to Luther; it makes sense that the image of Luther living a pious Christian life should have been

---

compared with a personification of monastic vices. Although these images were not theological in nature, they were tactically designed to disintegrate the figure heads who supported the Catholic regime, an “old world” view.

The manner in which the subject matter was depicted is as important as the subject matter in Lutheran prints. Throughout the Reformation, the composition of many woodcuts remains the same: two sides are simultaneously contrasted and linked. For example, in Leonhard Beck’s 1523 woodcut, *The Monk and the Ass* (Fig. 16), the monk is compared to a donkey with a spinning wheel between them. This binary structure is also mirrored visually; the monk and the ass both have a similar posture and face one another on the same spatial plane. Birds fly over their heads with inscriptions in their mouths, mirroring each other. The binary structure is used in this instance to suggest equivalence rather than antipathy. In using the antithetical structure, the meaning becomes self-evident. The monk is much like the ass, who lives in ignorance of his sins. Most often, however, the composition typified by *The Monk and the Ass* was a means of contrast, one that essentially prevailed throughout print culture during the Reformation.

*The Monk and the Ass* is not a woodcut based on theological discourse, but as the Reformed movement progressed into the mid-1520s, the subjects of woodcuts became more topically complicated, pertaining to theological and doctrinal matters. Monks and

---

69 There was already a long tradition of popular criticism of the clerical laxity before the Reformation movement began, from the humanist movement and before.

70 Scribner and Moxey, who describe this print, do not discuss the significance or meaning behind the spinning wheel.

71 The inscription above the monk reads: “As one who would spin in a basket—much is lost and little is won.” Above the donkey, who is clad in a jester’s costume, the inscription reads: “If I could not spin yarn thus, one would abuse me as an ass.” The inscriptions emphasize what is realized visually, that even a fool and an ass can be more successful at practical labor than the monk and the nun, who is seated in a basket on the monk’s back.
clerics were not simply lampooned as sources of corruption within the Catholic Church; they were also attacked visually because Luther saw them as vehicles for the misinterpretation of the gospel and man’s salvation. They were the means by which indulgences and good works were received into the church and the instrument of a corrupt church, using indulgences as a means of “buying” salvation. For example, the woodcut True and False Forgiveness (Fig. 17) by Hans Holbein the Younger, was used to condemn the Catholic Church as an institution. The scene depicts the false forgiveness offered by the Catholic faith, a form of forgiveness that must be purchased with cash. On the right, the pope sits enthroned in a church. Attended by a retinue of cardinals and other members of the clerical order, the pope bestows a bull to a kneeling monk. In the right foreground, two priests hear confession. One places his hand on the head of the penitent worshipper in a gesture of absolution and indicates with his rod a chest of money before the stall; the penitent is thus expected to pay for this absolution. A stooping woman places her moneys in the chest. On the left side of the church, monks sell indulgences. Those requesting indulgences are of all classes and positions, but only the well-off are granted absolution; a woman pays for her indulgence, a burgher waits for his turn. A ragged beggar resting upon a crutch gestures towards a monk who is already completing indulgence forms. The beggar is being turned away because he cannot pay the fee for indulgences.

The selling of indulgences is separated from the depiction of “true” forgiveness on the left-hand side, which takes place outside, by the church’s crumbling wall. David and Manasses, Old Testament Kings who represent the penitent sinner beg forgiveness from God the Father. Behind them stands the simple figure of a “public sinner”, the
“Everyman” who bows his head in repentance. These penitents humbly ask for God’s forgiveness; in turn, God’s forgiveness is freely given.

Unlike *The Monk and the Ass*, *True and False Forgivness* delves into a theological issue and strives to define the doctrinal differences between the Catholic and the Reformed Faiths. *True and False Forgivness* specifically reflects Lutheran ideas on penance and forgiveness, parts of the larger doctrine of justification by faith. The woodcut infers that salvation is not contingent on “good works,” a condition of wealth. Alongside kings and princes, even beggars can receive forgiveness.

Holbein’s woodcut is typical of prints that began to appear in the mid to late 1520s in as much as it utilizes compositional strategy where two scenes are presented simultaneously to the viewer. It’s presented as a spatial continuum that one can also contrast. In *The Monk and the Ass*, the spinning wheel really separates the monk from the ass so that the viewer can easily see them as two separate images. Likewise, the figures of the monk and the ass are represented as portraits whereas the Holbein print focuses on a sequence of events. In the Holbein print on the other hand, the scene within the church is meant as a contrast to the outdoor scene, but it is still possible to read the image as a spatial continuum. This slightly nuanced contrast offers a more subtle position—a spiritual “landscape;” salvation can be achieved “outside” the institutional church.

The compositional structure used by Beck and Holbein and other artists eventually began to be adopted more widely. Around 1529, Lucas Cranach and his workshop produced a series of woodcuts and painted panels whose subject may be said to
be sin and redemption, but whose theme is cast specifically in terms of Law and Grace.\textsuperscript{72} Much of the propaganda that arose in the mid to late 1520s was related to conveying Lutheran Doctrine in a simplified visual form; the contrast between the Law and the Gospel arguably became the most recognizable of these forms.\textsuperscript{73} The Law and Grace theme appears in a group of paintings and woodcuts that accumulate into a visual cluster of this imagery, an output that served as a prologue to the Schneeberg Altarpiece.

Around 1529, Cranach and his workshop created two woodcuts\textsuperscript{74}, two painted panels, one in Gotha and one in Prague, and two pen and ink drawings on the subject. The pen and ink drawings were probably created as preparatory sketches, but it is impossible to pinpoint for certain which of the works the drawings may correspond. Two pen and ink drawings of 1529 and 1530, one in Dresden and the other in Frankfurt as well as the woodcuts more closely follow the Gotha work, in which two nude figures are present\textsuperscript{75} and personify the Everyman through his journey of faith through the “Law” and the “Gospel” (Fig. Likewise, the two panels were created by Cranach and taken to the cities of Gotha and Prague, respectively and hung in the cities’ Reformed churches but scholars give no explanation for their purpose.\textsuperscript{76}

This schema or visual interpretation for “Law and Grace” became one of the defining pictorial representations of the Reformation, largely because it captured so

\textsuperscript{72} All of these works are dated to 1529. There is debate as to which of these works came first; the general consensus by Dillenberger and Scribner is that the woodcut appeared before the painted panels.

\textsuperscript{73} Scribner 216.

\textsuperscript{74} These two woodcuts are essentially the same; they are, however, from two separate impressions. See Joseph Koerner, The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art, 370.

\textsuperscript{75} Dillenberger, 98.

\textsuperscript{76} Christensen, Dillenberger, Koerner, and Scribner all discuss these panels, but none of them mention what use these panels had within the worship space.
effectively the essence of Luther’s doctrine. It was a wholly Biblical depiction and relied on signs recognizable to Christians, Catholic and Reformed alike, of the time. Above all, it was completely different from its contemporary evangelical woodcuts in that it established a uniquely evangelical position, without direct reference to Catholic dogma. Between these works, there are several nuanced differences as I will discuss, but what the panels, woodcuts, and the altarpiece panels have in common are the inscriptions below the illustration include scriptural reference, emphasizing and communicating in written form what is depicted visually above. These correlated inscriptions become standard for all of Cranach’s later depictions of Law and Grace.

Like Beck and Holbein’s images, Cranach’s prints, The Law and the Gospel (Fig. 18) were based on a division between two outlooks, much like the Schneeberg Altarpiece (Fig. 9). However, the woodcut’s composition is not identical to the Schneeberg’s Law and Grace Panels, although it bears the seeds for it. In the print, the Biblical events

77 The side of “Law is headed by a citation from Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men.” The Gospel is headed by a verse of Isaiah 7.14: “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son.” This reference shows the prophetic link between the Old and New Testaments and even further strengthens the continuous dialectic that exists between the theme of Law and Grace. Beneath the depiction of the Law are quotations exemplifying its significance: Romans 3:23 (For there is no distinction since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God), 1 Corinthians 15:56 (The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.), Romans 4:15 (For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.), Romans 3:20 (For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin), and Matthew 11:13 (For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came). The Gospel is likewise supplied with texts on faith: Romans 1:17 and 3:21 that assert that the just live through faith. John 1.29 (The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!,” 1 Peter 1:2 (Who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance.) and 1 Corinthians 15:55 (Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?) also express the hope of salvation.
portrayed are all given relatively equal space in the composition but in the Schneeberg panels, scenes such as Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge and, in the side of Grace, the brazen serpent, are pushed to the background and reduced in size. This formal compositional change emphasizes the scenes of the Everyman being driven in the fires of Hell and the Crucifixion. The prominence of these scenes in the altarpiece, in turn also promotes the connection in the pointing gestures across to the panels from Moses, who points to Death chasing the Everyman, to John the Baptist who points to Christ on the Cross.

Iconographically, scenes have been moved and simplified between the woodcut and the altarpiece panels. For instance, the scene of Christ as Lord of the world sitting in judgment, with the sword and the lily in his ears as John the Baptist and the Virgin plead for man, which was located at the top of the law panel in the woodcut has been simplified in the Schneeberg Altarpiece, so that it is smaller and only features Christ. In the altarpiece, it is paired with a Christ’s ascension on the side of “Grace,” but viewers can only see Christ’s feet. The Crucifixion and paschal lamb have been moved from above Christ’s tomb in the woodcut to directly in front of John the Baptist in the altarpiece. Similarly, the second illustration of Christ actively stabs death outside of his tomb as opposed to the more passive stance in the woodcut, where he points with John the Baptist to the Crucifixion scene.

The iconography of the Law and Grace theme seems to have been created by Cranach, but it was pervasive throughout Evangelical imagery and was not limited to the workshop of Cranach the Elder. For example, it later became a popular theme for title

---

78 Scribner 217. These symbols reference the Last Judgment.
pages. Although the elements are slightly rearranged and more polemical than Cranach’s version, the 1541 Wittenberg edition of the New Testament in Low German used the theme as its title page (Fig. 21). Here the devil wears a cardinal’s hat and a monk and the pope are writhing in the flames of Hell. The Brazen Serpent is placed on the side of Law so that only episodes from the Old Testament are associated with “Law” and likewise, only stories from the New Testament are related with “Grace.”

Cranach the Elder and his workshop were the nonetheless the most well-known architects of the representation of Law and Grace. Unlike the 1541 Wittenberg title page, Cranach’s many representations of Law and Grace were not strictly defined in terms of the Old and New Testament; neither are the representations identical throughout. In the Schneeberg Altarpiece, the images Cranach assembles as connected with “Grace” are the irreducible elements of belief: Christ’s virgin birth, the brazen serpent, death on the cross, and Christ’s resurrection all relate to man’s faith in God. Similarly, the images Cranach places in the compositions as consequences or instances of man’s disobedience: Adam and Eve partaking from the tree of knowledge, being condemned by Moses for breaking the Ten Commandments, and Final Judgment in Hell.

Cranach and his workshop designed and executed two painted panels in Gotha (Fig. 22) and Prague (Fig. 23), respectively; between the Gotha Panel and the Prague panel there are differences in not only what is depicted but also the scriptural references that describe what is illustrated. The Gotha panel seems more closely related to the prints: on the left side, death and the devil chase an Everyman toward Hell and on the right side, John the Baptist points the Everyman toward the Crucifixion; this is much like the printed version. However, in the Prague panel, a decomposing body in a coffin
manifests death under the law, while an Everyman sits in front of the centrally placed tree. His body turns toward the side of “Law”, while his face follows John the Baptist’s finger, which points toward the Crucifixion. Rather than illustrate Moses in the foreground holding the Tablets of the Law, he is located in this panel in the upper background kneeling and receiving the Tablets from the hands of God, which extend from out of the clouds.79 There are also differences in the side of Grace. A new subject, the Virgin Mary receiving the infant Christ child, is shown in the upper background. The Crucifixion and the figure of the triumphant Christ with the banner change places in the Prague panel, and the lamb, which in the Gotha panel tramples on the figures of Death and the Devil, stands alone on top of the tomb in the Prague panel.

The differences between the Gotha (Fig. and the Prague panels are subtle but the Gotha panel visually places more stress on the connection between the individual vignettes of the panel. In the Prague panel, the dominant gesticulations of the figures point to Christ upon the Crucifix. The scenes that are depicted are similar to those in the Gotha panel, but they lack the visual links that established between the Gotha scenes. Whereas in the Prague panel, the fingers of John the Baptist, the Everyman, and Christ all point to the same scene, the Gotha panel creates on a system of gestures. Death’s poking action, which drives the Everyman into Hell, is paralleled by the Moses’ finger pointing to the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The viewer is immediately averted to the pointing gesture of John the Baptist, who points to the Crucifixion scene. From there, the light of sight travels from the end of the cross to the ascension of Christ, who finishes the cycle of pointing by gesturing towards Heaven. Each scene in the Prague panel,

79 Ehresmann, 8.
especially on the side of “Law” is more sequestered from its counterparts, which weakens the connection and replication of gestures depicted more strongly in the Gotha panel.

In the Prague Panel, the everyman is an exemplar and the viewers are witnesses to his decision. Koerner posits that the composition of the Prague Panel, with its central focus on the Everyman’s choice, is prefigured on the Renaissance motif of the choice of Hercules (Fig. 24). The focus of the viewer in the Prague panel is the Everyman and the figures, John the Baptist, a second Everyman, and Christ, who all point to the Crucifixion. The act of deciding itself is explicitly incorporated into the meaning of the work. The condition symbolized by the Prague Panel is that of homo viator in bivio: man the wanderer must choose between two alternate paths. The viewer functions merely as a witness to the scene.

On the other hand, the Gotha panel, Cranach depicts man, the viewer, at the crossroads. The Gotha Panel places the viewer, in many respects, in the position of the Everyman who is confronted with the possibilities and consequences of living under the rule of Law and Grace. As Koerner writes, “Cranach implies that there can be no distance, no critical interim between the image and the beholder, for in the moment when we grasp the message of the law or the gospel, we will experience its effect of damnation or justification.” In the Gotha panel, the Everyman becomes part of the illustration of the consequences of living by the tenets of “Law” and “Grace.” Since the choice lies on

---

80 Cranach was familiar with the motif and produced several paintings of it, including Fig. 21, which was executed by Cranach’s workshop in 1537. In the story, Hercules is forced to choose between Virtue and Vice. As he takes the hand of virtue, his choice demonstrates the courage of a moral choice. For further discussion of this, see Joseph Koerner, The Moment of Self-Portraiture in German Renaissance Art, 385.
81 Ibid., 385
82 Ibid., 383.
the viewer, the panel is more dynamic and dramatic as a result. In the Gotha Panel, the act of driving the Everyman’s damnation is dramatically shown with death mercilessly shoving the Everyman into the Fires of Hell whereas in the Prague Panel, the Everyman is already dead in the coffin. In the Prague panel, the Christ simply points to the Crucifixion with the lamb standing on top of the tomb. In the Gotha Panel, the lamb also topples Death and the Devil as Christ ascends to Heaven. Unlike the Prague panel, it is the viewer who becomes the exemplar in the Gotha panel. This is a much more forceful means of articulating the theological issue of redemption as opposed to Christ’s less lively gesture of pointing in the Prague panel.

An analysis of these panels would not be complete without an inclusion of the scriptural inscriptions that accompany them. The Prague panel contains more scriptural references in addition to those featured in the woodcuts and the Gotha panel. The Gotha panel also features the same scriptural references as the woodcut version. In this sense, the Gotha panel becomes the norm, or the most common illustration of the theme, and subsequently, the closest to the Law and Grace Panels on the Schneeberg Altarpiece.

Cranach’s nuanced representation of Law and Grace is one of the reasons historians have surmised that Luther helped him design the iconography. While this connection is difficult to establish, many of the scriptural references that occur and reoccur in the woodcut version, the Gotha panel, the Prague panel, and ultimately, in the

---

83 Bach-Nielsen, 151. On the side of the Law, Romans 6:23 (For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord) has been added. On the side of Grace, Mark 1:7 (John proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.) Jes 16:1, Exodus 12:5 (Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats.), Matthew 4:11 (Then the devil left him, and suddenly the angels came and waited on him.), and Psalms 91:11 (For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways) have been added.
Schneeberg Altarpiece originate from Luther’s Sermons and *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*. From the Gotha Panel and the original woodcut created by Cranach and his workshop, eight of the Bible verses\(^{84}\) used in the corresponding inscriptions are featured in Luther’s printed commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians. Although Luther uses more than eight scriptural references in his commentary, these eight verses appear in all of the representations of Law and Grace produced by the Cranach workshop.

Overall, all of these panels and woodcuts and drawings represent the attempt to summarize the basis of Reformation doctrine in a simplified and accessible visual format, one that also managed to stress the importance of scripture. These challenges were met by pairing imagery with explicative text, a combination that was not used prior to the creation of the Law and Grace panels.\(^{85}\) Even though the image is readable without the scriptural references, it is clear that they were in reference to the spoken word. Since the Law and Grace theme was originally articulated in the form of woodcuts, it may have been deemed necessary to include scriptural references to recall the words of Luther’s

\(^{84}\) The verses from Romans 3:23, I Corinthians 15:56, Romans 4:15, Romans 3:20, Matthew 11:13, Romans 3:28, Job 1:29, and I Corinthians 15:55-57 repeat from the commentary to the Law and Grace panels, woodcut, and the Schneeberg Altarpiece. \(^{85}\) Inscriptions are used in Albrecht Dürer’s 1526 work, *The Four Holy Men*, but the inscriptions themselves are not used to explain the depiction of the Four Men. The Four Apostles, witnesses to the faith, were to simultaneously function as a warning. For this, their figures had inscriptions affixed that the calligrapher Johann Neudörfer had added to the bottom of the panels, which reproduced biblical passages from the 1522 Biblical translation of Martin Luther. The first line of both are references to the Apocalypse of St John (22:18 ff.), but the essential content has another origin: it is a reproach to the secular powers not to conceal the divine word in seductive human interpretation. Moreover, it reads that everyone should take the warning of the "four excellent men" to heart: almost a formulation of the symbolic program represented in the choice of the four figures, of three apostles and an evangelist, Mark, an unusual choice that Dürer does not explain or illustrate.
sermons. However, as the Law and Grace theme migrated into panels and altarpieces, the scriptural references remained as evidence of the importance of the sermon and the worship service. Viewers of the Schneeberg Altarpiece heard the sermon, looked upon the imagery panels, and also referenced the inscriptions simultaneously. It was therefore impossible to “see past” the altarpiece in the theological sense as more than a visual representation and guide to what was already being heard.

In the beginning of his career, Luther focused intently on the publications of his sermons and treatises as a means of propagating religious Reform, but the drastic decrease in printed output after 1525 suggests that Luther may have shifted his attentions to supporting printed imagery.\(^{86}\) It has been suggested by Donald McColl that this decrease is evidence of Luther’s growing emphasis on producing prints and broadsheets.\(^{87}\) While this is a very tenuous point, it is indisputable that Luther’s publications reached their peak in the years from 1521 to 1525, when as many as 300 editions were printed in Wittenberg alone.\(^{88}\) After 1525, the number of publications diminished by half.\(^{89}\) Given so many editions were printed in Wittenberg alone, one assumes that by 1525, Luther’s ideas and theology was well-circulated throughout the city of Wittenberg, where Cranach resided and where the Schneeberg Altarpiece was designed.

\(^{88}\) Edwards, 22. Printers did publish Luther’s work outside of Wittenberg, but I include only the city of Wittenberg because those editions published by Lotter’s workshop were revised and approved by Luther himself.
\(^{89}\) Ibid.
Indeed, and more importantly perhaps, the imagery in the Schneeberg Altarpiece transfers what was depicted first in woodcut format into the realm of the sacred church space. The depictions of Law and Grace, including the Schneeberg Altarpiece, followed a trajectory that began with the first antithetically paired woodcuts and prints. Not only does the antithetical composition communicate well to educated and uneducated viewers universally, but it was also a form that required little textual accompaniment. The Law and Grace theme was also conducive to this pairing from Luther’s dialectical and didactic means of explaining the topic in his sermons and his writings. It aimed to depict the central core of Lutheran belief in an easily discernible and engaging form. From Luther’s commentary on the subject, one might posit that Cranach was influenced by Luther’s *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, whether or not that influence came from Luther himself. From the progression of the printed form to the Schneeberg Altarpiece, the altarpiece can be seen as evidence of the first “Lutheran” altarpiece as imagery drawing from sources outside of the sacred church space.
CHAPTER 4: The Retable Form and the Schneeberg Altarpiece

Although Bonnie Noble distinguishes the Schneeberg Altarpiece as a retable, she does not delve into why this distinction is important. In this chapter I shall discuss the significance of the retable format to an understanding of the Schneeberg altarpiece. In particular, I want to suggest that as a retable, the Schneeberg Altarpiece is the physical manifestation of the attempt to resolve the many contradictions within Martin Luther’s views on images relative to worship.

In his 1526 treatise on the Mass, Luther writes that the altar table is a highly sanctified space, a space that should not include religious images.\(^{90}\) Although Luther’s views towards images became increasingly positive, he still held that images, including religious imagery such as depictions of the saints or Biblical passages, were “indifferent things” (adiaphora—morally acceptable or unacceptable by God based upon the motive and end of the doer) and unnecessary to the worship service. Scripture was the most powerful means of communication for Luther, not only between God and the worshipper, but also between the priest and congregant. At the same time, Luther wrote later in his 1528 essay, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper,” that considered “images or pictures taken from the Scriptures... very useful.”\(^{91}\)

Given his conflicting views on images, and also by virtue of the fact that he never wrote a complete treatise on his stance regarding religious imagery within the church space, Luther’s writings allow the potential for religious imagery around the altar.


\(^{91}\) Ibid., 105.
Within Lutheran thought, however, there remains a tension between properly treating the altar as a sanctified space and appropriately educating the worshipper to the meaning of the service and the importance of the Eucharist. As Luther suggested in “The Misuse of the Mass”, the priests and officiates should face the congregation during the ceremony and share the chalice universally, practices that did not occur during the Catholic Eucharist. The Lutheran worship service transformed its Catholic predecessor into one in which the sermon and the scripture are central to the service. This shift from God’s words as manifest in images to God’s word as manifest in scripture creates an apparent tension in the placement of a Lutheran altarpiece behind the altar table, for although Luther valued the truth in God’s word, he also understood the power images had in conveying messages as well. As he wrote in his lectures on the book of Galatians, “For ordinary people are caught more easily by analogies and illustrations than by difficult and subtle discussions; they would rather look at a well-drawn picture than a well-written book… External images, parables, and signs are good and useful; they illustrate a thing so that it can be grasped and retained.” Thus, there remains a pull between the importance of scriptural references and the appeal of incorporating visual imagery around the worship service.

The Schneeberg Altarpiece was an effort to resolve some of these tensions, first in the altarpiece’s physical form. The Schneeberg Altarpiece revives a form of the altarpiece that was established in the early Christian church, called the retable. The retable is an altarpiece that exists separately of the altar table; instead standing behind the altar table. In fact, the word “retable” originates from the Latin word, “reredos,” which

---

92 Ibid., 97.
93 Dillenberger, 93.
means “behind the table.” Eventually this form lost its popularity in the Catholic Church, but in the Reformed Church the retable format gained a new significance in relation to Lutheran ideology.

In its earlier, Catholic uses, the retable originated in the context of acting as a “label” for the altar and marking the visual focal point of the mass. The retable served as a pedestal or shelf for cult statues, and as a marker for the congregation during the ceremony of the Eucharist. In 1310, the Synod of Trier ruled that every altar must be identified with an inscription statue or picture, clearly depicting the Saint to which the altar was dedicated. This is because the altar was at once functional and symbolic. Functionally, it held the chalice and paten used in the ceremony of the Eucharist. Symbolically, the altar was regarded as the tomb of Christ. Altars were also dedicated to a special personage or mystery, requiring that they be distinctively marked. This function was met by cult statues, which stood in a very direct sense as witness around the “tomb,” palpable surrogates for the saint (or saints) themselves. During the Mass, these figurines were placed on the tabernacle behind the altar and then removed after the service, the retable acting as a shelf for these objects, which were placed there for the worship ceremony. Indeed, this function is vestigially present in many painted altarpieces as well as retables: altarpieces such as that in Blaubeuren, dating ca. 1450, depict a row of standing saints, a set-up that recalls the cult statues set in a line across a shelf. (Fig. 25)


95 Michael Baxandall and Shawn Kemp disagree on the placement of these cult images. Baxandall argues they were placed directly on the altar table along with the chalice, paten, and sacred books. Kemp argues that these objects were not placed directly on the altar for fear of “corrupting” the table where the sacrament of communion was performed. See Baxandall, 52. See also Shawn Kemp, et. al., The Altarpiece in the Renaissance, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 91.
As the retable became more popular, its appendages also increased in size and intricacy. Rotating flügeln, or wings, were attached to the main section as a protective covering for the central panel. Each of these wings usually depicted four stories taken from the Passion or depictions of the saints for whom the altar was named (Fig. 26). At first, the flügeln were fixed in place. Gradually however, the uncovering of the main panel in the worship service became a ceremony in and of itself so that the flügeln became functionally mobile and could be moved to hide or show the main panel, which was shown on important feast days and during the offering of Communion.

Eventually, the retable as a form was overtaken in the late medieval period by an altarpiece that was attached to the table itself; this attachment made evident the physical “marking” of the altar. It also manifested even further the iconographic connection between the body of Christ, his crucifixion and sacrifice (as manifest in the host and wine) with the service of communion. The Catholic Mass was an elaborate drama with definite roles assigned to the participants and a plot whose ultimate significance is nothing less than a renewal of the whole plan of redemption through the re-creation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Thus the altarpiece was not just part of the communion ceremony; it played a critical role in the Catholic mass as an elaborately staged drama, a living event in which the priests assumed the identity of Christ and symbolically reenacted of Christ’s sacrifice.

---

96 Kemp, 100.

In German art, the parts of the altarpiece were even named to emphasize the symbolic connection between itself Christ. The central panel was called the “corpus” or body. Originally a shallow box holding elaborate sculptural figures or a narrative tableau, the corpus by the sixteenth century was replaced by a painted panel. The predella, a platform or base for the altarpiece, was called the “sarg” or sarcophagus. In Germany this element was not added until the fifteenth century, introduced for the height it gave to the altarpiece. It raised the corpus above the altar table so that it was visible and allowed the full movement of the wings, which by this time had developed to the point of full movement.

The Catholic faith believed the wine and wafer were transformed into the literal body of Christ, the mystery of transubstantiation. When worshippers witnessed the Eucharist, the wine and the wafer was not believed to be a simple symbol; it was the literal body of Jesus Christ. Since the Catholic Eucharist was intended to remember Christ’s sacrifice, the figurative elements appearing in an altarpiece often strengthened the imaginative presence of Christ’s body during the service. For example, the Crucifixion was often depicted in the “corpus.” The sarg, which often had a depiction of Christ’s body or the Entombment, also strengthened this association. Itself a symbolic receptacle, the sarg / sarcophagus was in the closest proximity to the chalice and paten on the surface of the altar, containers for the blood and body of Christ. Visually, symbolically, and materially, altar and altarpiece together were the nexus for the Mass:

---

98 Baxandall, 66.

99 A crowning piece, appropriately named the Auszug, was also added to the altar. Often it contained elaborate finals and foliage. The Auszug was almost always sculptural and in high relief. This piece served no purpose and had no metaphorical significance but was purely decorative.
the worshipper witnessed the transubstantiation of the wine and the wafer into Christ’s body though the Eucharistic ceremony but also through the connection between the consumption of Christ’s body and the altarpiece’s reminder that Christ sacrificed himself for man’s sins.

These relationships are dramatically depicted in Albrecht Dürer’s 1511 print, The Mass of Saint Gregory, a vivid interpretation of the nature of transubstantiation and the meaning of the Catholic Mass (Fig. 27). During a Mass at Saint Peter’s, a Roman matron scoffed at the idea that the Host is transformed into the body of Christ at the moment of consecration. Appalled by her disbelief, Saint Gregory placed the consecrated Host on the altar and prayed devoutly. Miraculously, the risen Christ appeared displaying the stigmata and the skeptic was immediately converted and received Communion. As Hardison notes, beyond the plausibility of this story, it represents the article of faith that suspended reality in the Catholic theology. The boundary that normally falls between authentic faith and the tangible realities of life has been pierced.\(^{100}\) In Dürer’s print, Christ, powerfully alive, rises from the altar, which has suddenly become the sepulchrum Domini. The chalice rests on the altar below his body creating a direct relationship between the kneeling priest who bows before the chalice and Christ’s body.

Dürer’s print is tangible manifestation of the belief in the altar as the tomb of Christ. It also makes evident the spatial disposition of the celebrants at this critical moment, a practice that changed from the early Christian to the medieval church. In the first thousand years of the church, the celebrating priest stood behind the altar and before

\(^{100}\) Hardison, 35.
the retable to celebrate the Eucharist, facing the congregants. However, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries it became more and more of a standard practice for the officiating priest to join the other celebrants in front of the altar, as indicated in Dürer’s *The Mass of Saint Gregory* (Fig. 27) and others (Fig. 28). This shift in the spatial organization of the celebrants obviated the need for a space between altar and retable, allowing the physical attachment of the altarpiece to the *sepulchrum Domini* as a focal point for the Eucharistic rite.

To a degree, the development of the altarpiece in the Catholic Church was responsive to the Church’s institutional position that worshippers were more easily moved by images than spoken words. Church officials believed that human beings suffered a sluggishness of emotions and were not easily moved to devotion by words. Worshippers, it was thought, are more readily moved by visual stimulation than auditory affect. Human beings forget what they have heard, but visual images are imprinted more easily in the mind. While this position did not grant license to idolatry, by exploiting the altarpiece as mediator between physical form and spiritual reality, the potential was increased for worship of the material image rather than the message it aimed to communicate. High medieval altarpieces are by nature designed to invoke deep pathos inspired by the lives of the Saints and the life of Christ. Because of the inherent belief that worshippers cannot experience Christ’s suffering through scripture alone, the altarpiece played an integral part in depicting and intensifying what the word alone ostensibly could not. Especially for those who could not access scripture, could not read,

---

101 Baxandall, 63. This procedural order was stated in the Orders of the Mass as late as the twelfth century.
102 Baxandall, 53.
or did not speak Latin, the altarpiece and its images became the bridge between the worshipper and Spirit.

The image in late medieval altarpieces provoked the recollection of sensuous feelings associated with the physicality of Christ’s suffering using vivid pictorial means. This articulation often went beyond an empirically observed representation of reality. Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* (Fig. 29) shows Christ’s fingers and toes bony, broken, and bent to the point of grotesqueness. Christ’s flesh is also malformed and mutilated. Such representations were not limited to painted altarpieces. For instance, the Altarpiece in Saint Mary’s Church of Cracow, completed in 1489 (Fig. 30), similarly emphasizes the pathos of the Virgin’s death in sculptural form. In the high altar at Tiefenbronn, the altarpiece combines sculptural figures in the main panel and painted panels for the *flugeln* (Fig. 31). In the main corpus, the top depicts the Deposition and the bottom features the Entombment. In both scenes, the body of Christ and the surrounding figures are sculptures. The effect of these three-dimensional objects is that the suffering of Christ is no longer set against a flat frame, but protrudes towards the viewer into the altar’s space. Likewise, the compositional set-up of the main panel emphasizes the body of Christ laying over those carrying his body. To heighten the emotional strength of the image, the *flugeln* depict scenes from the Passion, most notably Christ’s arrest in the Garden and his Resurrection.

The physical structures of the German altarpiece only served to further emphasize the fine line between images used for devotion and those that had the potential to spawn idolatrous acts. Conventionally, German retables and their parts were set within an architectural frame that required sculptural woodworking and rigid distinctions between
panels. As Kemp writes, “At the very least, medieval cult images had always been set within an architectural frame—a niche, a pedestal, a tabernacle, or simply a tracery surround—in a way that served to emphasize the character of the image as a representation.” Already, after 1300 the sculptures used in winged retables became fixed objects; that is, they could no longer be removed from the altarpiece—nominally to prevent acts of physical adoration, such as touching or kissing the object. Yet again by the beginning of the sixteenth century, the altarpiece’s elaborate form itself served less as a reminder to its identity as a holy object, a framework for Biblical scenes, and more to its identity as an awe-inspiring quasi-architectural object that could easily be taken out of the sacramental context and worshipped as an idol.

For instance, in the altarpiece of Veit Stoss, the subject of the altarpiece (the death of Mary in the presence of the twelve apostles) is not completely evident but it lacks no attention to the detailed tabernacles or finial designs, although these designs would not have been the object of worship (Fig. 30). Elaborate architectural designs, highly sculptural forms, and vibrant polychromy were all hallmarks of the German late medieval altarpiece.

Ironically, the altarpiece—once a response to freestanding cult images that had threatened the sanctity of the altar—evolved into a kind of image with the same potential for idolatrous worship. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the need to legitimize altarpieces as vehicles for worship rather than objects to worship became clear. Church officials responded by discouraging the excessive use of polychromy; monochrome winged altarpieces began to be produced, praised for their “unfleshy” colorlessness, an

103 Kemp, 100.
emblem of the Catholic attempt to reform religious images inside the worship space.\textsuperscript{104} It is at this point in the history of altarpieces as liturgical forms that Martin Luther intervened with his critique of Catholic imagery and his reconceptualization of the Mass.

In Luther’s view, the manner in which the Catholic Church used visual images to “instruct” the illiterate was misleading. Visual images were only descriptive, they conveyed a different, lesser order of knowledge. The painfully physical description of the Saints and Christ’s suffering was one of the artistic devices Reformers criticized. Regarding this particular point, Luther wrote: “...from the image of the crucified Christ you learn only about the suffering of Christ in the flesh, how his head hung down and the like.”\textsuperscript{105} As a representation of Christ’s passion, the symbolic relationship that the Church had come to set between the ceremony of the Eucharist and the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice was, for Luther, also fundamentally false. In his 1520 essay, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” Luther contended that it was blasphemy for the minister to identify with Christ, to reenact his movements, his gestures.

Nonetheless, Luther understood the power of images and also the need for the visual confirmation of God’s works.\textsuperscript{106} In Luther’s critique, narrative images carried a pedagogical potential beyond the simple invocation of emotion. Images should correlate with scripture or occurrences from the Bible. When images depict events from the Bible rather than simply images of the saints, they narrate and instruct in similar ways to the

\textsuperscript{104} Kemp, 101.


\textsuperscript{106} Christensen, 136.
Biblical text itself. The narrative image is thus a permissible alternative to the prohibited cult image.

By using a form such as the retable, religious imagery existed separately of the altar table itself. The use of the retable format in the Schneeberg Altarpiece negates the idea that the altarpiece is a metaphor for the body of Christ.

We can return here to the Schneeberg Altarpiece. Though it maintains the compositional framework of the altarpiece, as a retable it first of all aims to erase these metaphorical links between the altarpiece and the ceremony of the Eucharist. For Luther, the altarpiece only stood as a guide through the ceremony of Communion; it could not be connected to the altar table physically or symbolically. The altar was the Communion table, not a symbolic representation of Christ’s tomb; nor was the wine and the wafer of Christ’s body and blood.

The retable as compositional form is well suited for use in a Reformed Church because it exists separately from the altar. This distinction was necessary for Reformers such as Luther, who saw the altar, or the table around which communion took place as a highly sanctified space that should not be tainted with images. Retables by definition existed separately from the altar table itself, so that it still called attention to the altar table without giving the retable a sanctified position above the surface where communion was dispensed and taken. This detachment of the altarpiece from the altar table signified a higher break with the Catholic belief that not only was the altarpiece metaphorically connected to the body of Christ, but the wine and the wafer literally transformed into Christ’s flesh and blood each time the Eucharistic rite was carried out. At the same time, Luther understood that the communion ceremony was a representation of an event that
needed to be fully explained to worshippers for them to appreciate the efficacy and purpose of the communion ritual.

The use of the retable also fits into Luther’s desire to revive the early Christian form of the Mass, where the preacher stands behind the altar table rather than in front so that he faces the congregation. This is significant for a number of reasons. First, it means there has to be a space created behind the table, which would not be possible with the attached altarpiece. Second, the retable itself is an early Christian form, hence appropriate to Luther's attraction to the early Christian church.

Luther did not simply adapt the early Christian form of the retable; the style, form, and content was also altered from the Catholic predecessor. It is central to an understanding of Luther’s theology that one grasps the importance for him of outward or material forms as vehicles of divine grace to be inwardly received. Luther rejected the medieval idea that viewers witness a Biblical historical scene and then “see through” that scene to imagine the creation of the Godhead to transcendence. Using the imagination to “see through” to the sacred was what encouraged idolatry as man’s imagination was deluded and prone to sin; using intellect and rationale is consequential. To this end, Luther recommended a simple style and obvious symbolism that would enable simple folk to access its didactic charge. His writings, Luther cited the Bible as having virtually conceived examples to enforce its teaching; Luther referred often to the visual

---


indications and instructions provided by Jesus in his parables. In this context, visual examples were viewed as an extension of the word, the teaching of Christ.

Since the Eucharist was in remembrance of the Last Supper, Luther emphasized the importance of depicting the Lord’s Supper as an inference to the Communion ceremony. Luther specifically mentions the Lord’s Supper in conjunction with images in his 1530 commentary of Psalm 111, where he wrote: “Whoever is inclined to put pictures on the altar ought to have the Lord’s Supper of Christ painted…Then [images] would stand before our eyes for our hearts to contemplate them, and even our eyes, in reading, would have to thank and praise God. Since the altar is the designated place for the administration of the sacrament, one could not find a better painting for it.”

Luther valued painted representations of the Last Supper because they reminded viewers of the sacrament’s connection to the life of Christ. Subject matter was different under the Lutheran critique of religious imagery within the church; the altarpiece’s imagery had to be relative to Biblical truths or lessons.

Key to an understanding of Luther’s critique of images is the significance of the word paired with the image. Through the Bible’s authentic words, “one can have God’s work and word also and everywhere before one’s eyes.” Luther desired that “mottoes” be added to pictures; that is, he wanted images to be appropriated to text so that misunderstanding the image—or, worshipping the depiction rather than the message at hand—was impossible. A Lutheran painted image, unlike Catholic motivations to invoke

---

110 Tonkin, 49.
111 Dillenberger 93.
emotion and indirect suffering, acted as an illustration of the word, or the deeds of God recorded by the word, within the church space.

The “Reformation Altarpiece” as it has come to be termed is conceptually different from Catholic prototypes through its physical form and imagery. Thus, it necessitates a different means of interpretation that is founded on the ideas of Martin Luther. The Schneeberg Altarpiece has an instructional purpose rather than a commemorative one; viewers witness the grace of God through the salvation of man. The altarpiece is not meant to serve as a metaphorical reference to the ceremony of the Eucharist; it is meant to educate worshippers on why the ceremony of the Eucharist is significant. Remembering Christ by participating in the Eucharist brings hope akin to the Crucifixion panel; by partaking of the wine and wafer and remembering that Christ died for our sins, we may gain hope for our own salvation.
Bibliography


Harbison, Craig. *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*.


Chicago: University, 1989.


Ozment, Steven. *The Age of Reform 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe.*


Scribner, R.W. *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany.*  


