

THE LIFE TO COME: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LUTHERAN AND REFORMED
ESCHATOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how two recent theology texts, *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel*, express the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body and the life that comes afterward. Representing the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, these books offer different ways of speaking about key themes of the doctrine of eschatology including the intermediate state, the resurrection of the body, and the new creation. While they use different terms and emphasize different aspects of that hope, both seek to remain faithful to Scripture and confess the same core truth: Christ conquered death and will return to bring his people home with him. This thesis examines how *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* avoid end-time speculation and instead present doctrinal formation that brings real comfort to Christians living in a world marked by death, grief, and confusion about the life to come.

MORE THAN WHAT IS HOPED FOR

When someone dies, those who loved that person often search for words that bring comfort and soften the pain. The survivors speak about how they look forward to seeing their loved one again, believing that until then, their loved one is looking down on them from above. Obituaries promise eternal bliss by suggesting that the deceased is now reunited with his beloved dogs and running free with them in the fields beyond.¹ Popular songs raise toasts to an afterlife with roaring motorcycles, cold beer, and an eternal party.² These expressions come from a longing for peace, nearness to the deceased, and something more than pain and loss. But they also reveal how easily humanity's hope about what comes after death drifts into sentiments of imagination and even uncertainty, painting what comes after death to look like more of a backyard gathering than a biblical promise.

What many people call hope is often little more than a guess wrapped in good intentions. It tries to soothe the sting of grief, and perhaps it does bring a moment of comfort. But this hope cannot carry the full weight of sorrow. When sorrow cuts a person deeply, something stronger and truer than a guess and a moment of comfort is needed.

The Christian hope is not a vague optimism or a best-case scenario for a place unknown. It is a living confidence that is grounded in God's Word and the death and resurrection of Christ. This hope does not offer possibilities; it delivers promises. It declares that death is not the end of

¹ From actual obituaries. Names withheld.

² For example, HARDY, "Give Heaven Some Hell" (2020); The Righteous Brothers, "Rock and Roll Heaven" (1974).

a Christian's life. It proclaims that a loving Savior who has conquered the grave will return, and those who died believing in him will rise again. It points to a day when the broken will be made whole and all creation made new.

Christians have always confessed this hope. But the ways they have expressed it have taken different forms across different Christian traditions. The way Christians speak about death, the soul, and life after death is shaped by doctrinal frameworks, confessional traditions, and theological emphases that reflect the broader concerns of each tradition. These differences matter. While they do not necessarily disqualify a tradition from participation in the invisible Church, they do represent distinct theological judgments. These judgments must be evaluated in light of Scripture as traditions seek, some more faithfully than others, to articulate the hope which God has promised.

This thesis does not aim to settle every difference in doctrine or define each expression of Christian eschatology. Instead, it examines how each tradition, Reformed and Lutheran, articulates what happens after death, as represented by the books *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* respectively. This thesis does not seek to crown one tradition over the other but will explain how each tradition, shaped by their theological frameworks, presents the same gospel hope. In doing so, each turns to the heart of the Christian hope: not a vague wish for something better after death, but the living promise that Christ will meet them there and bring them to new life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviews of *The Christian Faith*

Two reviews of *The Christian Faith* help to show how Michael Horton's work has been received in different contexts. I chose these reviews because they evaluate fairly Horton's method and structure in his composition of *The Christian Faith*. The two authors of the reviews come from different traditions but take *The Christian Faith* seriously and engage with it thoughtfully.

The first is from Jeffery Bingham, a Christian theologian serving as a professor of historical and biblical theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. His review³ of *The Christian Faith* is appreciative but critical of Horton's overall system. Bingham highlights *The Christian Faith's* strengths, noting that it is grounded in Scripture, attentive to church history, and written in a way that makes it accessible to laypeople as well as scholars. He does raise a few concerns. Bingham suggests that certain parts of the book⁴ feel less developed than others. He also notes that Horton's strong covenantal structure may overshadow certain themes. Despite this, he treats the book as valuable and a valid presentation of Reformed theology.⁵

³ Jeffrey L. Bingham, "The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way," review of *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, by Michael Horton, *Themelios* 36, no. 2 (2011), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/review/the-christian-faith-a-systematic-theology-for-pilgrims-on-the-way/>.

⁴ Christology and eschatology.

⁵ There are no reviews of *The Christian Faith* in peer-reviewed journals.

The second is from Jady Koch, an Anglican priest and theologian who holds a PhD in systematic theology. In his review⁶ of *The Christian Faith*, he praises Horton's theological depth and pastoral care. Koch doesn't aim to criticize or analyze every detail; he simply encourages the reader to pick up Horton's book because of its accessibility and foundation in the Reformed tradition.

Reviews of *Confessing the Gospel*

Confessing the Gospel differs from *The Christian Faith* in that it is a collection of essays written by many theologians rather than a single author. Volume One of *Confessing the Gospel* includes a section identifying the primary contributors for each locus. In the case of the section on eschatology, titled "Last Things," two contributors are listed: Edward G. Kettner and Paul R. Raabe. For the sake of clarity and consistency, this thesis will refer to the work as *Confessing the Gospel* rather than by individual contributors.

Two published reviews of *Confessing the Gospel* show how the book has been received within confessional Lutheran circles. The following two reviewers approach *Confessing the Gospel* with an appreciation for its doctrinal clarity while also offering some critique. They also point out the strengths, weaknesses, and natural challenges of producing a multi-author systematic work. I chose these two reviews to show how *Confessing the Gospel* has been received within the confessional Lutheran traditions. They help to place the book in its

⁶ JDK, "Michael Horton's Systematic Theology: A Glowing Review," *Mockingbird*, May 6, 2011, <https://mbird.com/theology/michael-hortons-systematic-theology-a-glowing-review/>.

theological context and identify both the strengths and issues that are relevant to this paper's study.

David Scaer is a professor of biblical and systematic theology at Concordia Theological Seminary. He also serves as an editor of *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. In his review⁷ of *Confessing the Gospel* found in *CTQ*, he shows his appreciation for the book's clear commitment to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. On the other hand, Scaer also points out several chapters⁸ that could use more development or clarity. He recognizes that with a book like *Confessing the Gospel*, having multiple authors naturally means that the book cannot be one cohesive thought.

Jordan Cooper is a Lutheran pastor and theologian who holds a PhD in theology. His review⁹ of *Confessing the Gospel* offers appreciation as confessional Lutheran systematic theological texts have been sparse in recent years. That said, he raises some critiques, especially about how some terms¹⁰ that the book uses may be misunderstood in the present day. He sees the

⁷ David P. Scaer, "Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology," review of *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology*, ed. Samuel H. Nafzger, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 79, no. 1–2 (2015): 155–58, <https://www.ctsfw.edu/resources/concordia-theological-quarterly/book-reviews/confessing-the-gospel-a-lutheran-approach-to-systematic-theology/>.

⁸ Historical theology, Christ's descent into hell, resurrection, ascension, and second coming.

⁹ Jordan Cooper, "A Review of Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology," *Just and Sinner* (blog), Patheos, September 7, 2017, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/justandsinner/review-confessing-gospel-lutheran-approach-systematic-theology/>.

¹⁰ For example, the phrase "law/gospel polarity." In his review of *Confessing the Gospel*, he notes that this phrase can be misleading since it suggests that law and gospel are contradictory words of God. While the distinction between law and gospel is essential in Lutheran theology, using those two words alongside the word "polarity" risks introducing confusion

book as a valuable resource while also encouraging refinement as the LCMS¹¹ strives to clarify its doctrine.

General Reviews

Because this thesis compares Reformed and Lutheran eschatology by two modern dogmaticians, it is necessary to note the classical systematics that shaped each tradition. John Calvin and Herman Bavinck represent the historical Reformed framework that shaped *The Christian Faith*. Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard represent the Lutheran framework that shaped *Confessing the Gospel*.

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*¹² is likely the most influential theological work of the Reformed tradition. It was not written as a modern systematic theology, but it is used as one. For example, Calvin begins by explaining how a person is given evidence of God by creation. Then, it moves into topics like sin, salvation, and the life of a Christian, just as modern systematic theology books do. Calvin lays out the details of the Christian faith while repeatedly turning to themes like God's sovereignty, union with Christ, and the hope of the resurrection. Even though the book is nearly five hundred years old, it continues to shape how Reformed theologians like Horton speak of God's promises, especially his focus on redemptive history and the believer's union with Christ in death and resurrection.

¹¹ *Confessing the Gospel* is not a confession of faith for the LCMS, but is widely used in theological education with the Synod as a resource that aligns with the doctrinal position.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960).

Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*¹³ is a respected Reformed systematic theology book. Bavinck takes time to write about the history of Christian teaching before expressing his own teaching. His view of eschatology is not an add-on for the end of a theological book, but the natural conclusion of what God has been doing throughout Scripture. Bavinck avoids speculation and stays close to the biblical text. *Reformed Dogmatics* has influenced Reformed writers today. Bavinck's approach to Scripture shows up in *The Christian Faith* in places where Horton has the desire to connect "last things" to creation, the fall, or redemption, presenting them as the completion of God's covenant work.

Martin Chemnitz's *Loci Theologici*¹⁴ is a foundational work of Lutheran theology. In the book, Chemnitz draws heavily from Scripture to organize doctrine in a clear and logical way. His careful approach and treatment of these doctrines have shaped Lutheran teachings for centuries. His chapter on eschatology reinforces the Lutheran emphasis on the resurrection of the body and the comforting message of the gospel without speculating about matters of the end times. This approach can be seen in *Confessing the Gospel* as it deals with eschatology with a desire to avoid going beyond what God has revealed in Scripture. Instead, it focuses on what Christ has promised to believers.

Johann Gerhard's *Loci Theologici*¹⁵ is the largest and perhaps most detailed set of Lutheran systematic theology books written. It was the standard for Lutheran universities and seminaries in the seventeenth century. Gerhard's coverage of eschatology is clear about death,

¹³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

¹⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989).

¹⁵ Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006–2015).

the intermediate state, and the resurrection, all while carefully avoiding conclusions that go beyond what Scripture teaches. Gerhard's work shows the Lutheran instinct to bring the believer comfort in Christ, something that can be seen as an influence in works such as *Confessing the Gospel*. The same pastoral tone is used in the two theologies.

THE WORD "HEAVEN"

In what follows, I will avoid using the word "heaven" as a general label for the believer's final destination, eternal life. This decision is primarily because of the way Scripture itself uses the word "heaven." The most common OT word, שָׁמַיִם, has a broad range of meanings including:

- the visible sky
- the starry heavens
- the abode of God.¹⁶

The NT word, οὐρανός, has a broad range of meanings including:

- portions of the universe
- the sky as visible over the earth
- the starry heavens
- the atmosphere

¹⁶ BDB, 1029–30, s.v. "שָׁמַיִם."

- the dwelling-place of God
- the abode of angels.¹⁷

Often, the words “heaven and earth” occur in a pair. This refers to all of creation (Gen 1:1; Matt 5:18). The words are not technical words to denote the place where Christians go forever when they die, but terms whose exact definition must be determined by context.

In contrast, the typical vocabulary in Scripture for the believer’s ultimate hope after death include the following phrases:

- the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:31; Heb 6:2)
- eternal life (John 3:16; 12:50; Rom 2:7)
- the age to come (Mark 10:30; Eph 1:21)
- the kingdom of God (Luke 13:28; 1 Cor 15:50)
- the new Jerusalem (Rev 3:12; 21:2)
- paradise (Luke 23:43; Rev 2:7)
- new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17; 2 Pet 3:13).

In light of this, when the word “heaven” does appear in this thesis, it will be in the context of citing another author. In those cases, “heaven” may refer to the way it is used in contemporary speech as a label for life after death.

¹⁷ Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 737–39, s.v. “οὐρανός.”

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The Reformed Tradition

“Reformed theology is simply covenant theology.”¹⁸ Covenant theology understands the entire biblical narrative as structured by God’s covenants, viewing them as the means through which God reveals his character, establishes his relationship with his people, and unfolds his saving purpose from creation to new creation. Michael Horton understands Reformed theology as an effort to interpret biblical teachings within the framework of those covenants revealed in Scripture. Horton notes that many people today simply associate Reformed theology with John Calvin’s Five Points of Calvinism,¹⁹ which Horton views as an oversimplification of an issue.²⁰ While these Five Points do reflect key teachings of Calvinist theology, they were never meant to define the whole Reformed tradition. Calvin’s Five Points were originally a response to the Five Articles of the Remonstrants, a challenge from followers of Jacob Arminius. Therefore, Calvin’s Five Points only address a narrow section of doctrine. In contrast Reformed theology, which is covenant theology, is a much broader framework on which Reformed theology is built.

Horton describes covenant theology as the Bible’s own framework for understanding God’s relationship with humanity. Rather than treating Scripture as a collection of disconnected doctrines, moral lessons, and stories, covenant theology sees the entire biblical story, from creation to new creation, as unfolding through a series of divine covenants. Horton emphasizes

¹⁸ Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 10.

¹⁹ Horton, *God of Promise*, 10.

²⁰ These points are commonly referred to using the acronym “TULIP.”

two covenants: the covenant of works that God made with Adam before the fall into sin, and the covenant of grace that God initiated after the fall and fulfilled in Christ. All covenants that follow these in Scripture are just progressing stages in the overarching covenant of grace.²¹ Covenant theology is about God's unwavering faithfulness in redeeming his people through Christ. It unifies all of Scripture as one redemptive narrative which is centered on God's promises, fulfillment, and the believer's communion with God.

Understanding Scripture through the lens of covenant theology is important to Horton because he sees it as the framework for reading that Scripture itself provides for us.²² That framework allows the reader to study Scripture as a unified whole, rather than a disconnected collection of doctrines, stories, and lessons. The covenant is the backbone of all biblical history and theology, even when the word itself does not appear.²³

That's not to say the reader of Scripture shouldn't make a distinction between different types of covenants. Horton proves this example.

To read Deuteronomy as if it were timeless principles of blessing and cursing is to confuse this covenant concerning a national, geopolitical entity (i.e., the nation of Israel) with the eternal plan of redemption carried forward in the unconditional divine promise to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Covenant theology helps enormously in understanding both the continuities and discontinuities as we read Scripture. It helps us to see the basic *continuity between* the old and new covenants in terms of a single covenant of grace running throughout, as well as the *discontinuity* within even the Old Testament itself when it comes to the principle of a unilateral divine promise and an arrangement dependent on personal obedience to all that God commands.²⁴

²¹ Horton, *God of Promise*, 10.

²² Horton, *God of Promise*, 14.

²³ Horton, *God of Promise*, 51.

²⁴ Horton, *God of Promise*, 20–21.

This way of reading Scripture is not just a hermeneutical²⁵ preference for Horton, but a theological necessity. He indicates that to remove Scripture from its context is to misunderstand the covenant and its purpose of pointing forward to Christ.

Of ultimate importance for understanding all of Scripture through a covenantal framework is understanding that God never breaks a promise that he makes. Horton understands that humans live in a world full of broken promises.²⁶ They weave a tangled web of good intentions and commitment, but when that web comes under any kind of stress, the promises are broken.²⁷ Even the sincerest intentions can unravel under pressure, exposing the fragility of humanity's relationships. In contrast, God is revealed to us in Scripture as not only a promise-maker, but a faithful promise-keeper. That's because his covenants are not rooted in human stability, but in his own eternal nature. His very existence is covenantal in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁸ This faithfulness between the persons of the Trinity is the foundation of every covenant that God makes with his creation. That means the entire story of Scripture depends on God's unwavering faithfulness toward his people.

This is what gives covenantal theology its structural strength, why Reformed theology is covenantal theology. It continually points the reader to the God who speaks, acts, and commits himself to his people in every generation. From creation to new creation, each covenant reveals more of God's faithfulness until it culminates in Christ, the mediator of the new covenant. The

²⁵ The approach or set of principles someone uses to interpret Scripture. This shapes how the reader of Scripture understands the meaning and message of a biblical text based on factors like context, purpose, or emphasis. A hermeneutic influences how Scripture is read and applied to one's life.

²⁶ Horton, *God of Promise*, 9.

²⁷ Horton, *God of Promise*, 9.

²⁸ Horton, *God of Promise*, 10.

Reformed tradition sees Scripture as one, single, unfolding narrative governed by God and his unchanging and eternal commitment to his plan of redemption.²⁹

Horton embraces covenant theology in line with classical Reformed tradition. Before the fall into sin, God made a covenant of works with Adam that promised life based on his obedience. After the fall, God established the covenant of grace, where he promised to save his people solely because of his mercy. This is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. All the later covenants in Scripture, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant, are all different stages of the one overarching covenant of grace. With this structure, Horton and the Reformed theologians can approach every area of doctrine or theme of Scripture according to its place within God's plan of ultimate redemption.

The Lutheran Tradition

If Reformed theology is covenant theology, Lutheran theology is structured by the distinction between Law and Gospel and the centrality of justification by faith alone. "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel."³⁰ In the Lutheran tradition, that distinction is not just one teaching among many others, but the hermeneutical foundation that orders every other doctrine.³¹

²⁹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 277.

³⁰ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 9.

³¹ Walther, *Proper Distinction*, 199.

It shapes the reading of God's Word and determines the relationship between God and human beings. The Lutheran Confessions³² make note of this distinction repeatedly as the glorious light on which the comfort of the gospel stands.³³ Similarly, a portion of the Apology states:

All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ, either when it promises that Christ will come and on account of him offers the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life, or when in the gospel itself, Christ, after he appeared, promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life.³⁴

In the Lutheran hermeneutic the law reveals humanity's sin and desperate need for a Savior, and the gospel proclaims the forgiveness and new life won by Christ.

Lutheran theology reads all of Scripture as a witness to Christ and his saving work. The Lutheran Confessions repeatedly emphasize that all the promises that God makes reach their true fulfilment in Christ alone. He is the only savior and intercessor before God.³⁵ This Christ-centered focus gives Lutheran theology its foundation for being Christo-centric in preaching, doctrine, worship, and interpretation of Scripture. Christ's saving work is the centerpiece around which all other doctrines are organized.

The Confessions recognize that the fall into sin resulted in the corruption of human nature.

That not only is original sin (in human nature) such a complete lack of all good in spiritual, divine matters, but also that at the same time it replaces the lost image of God in the human being with a deep-seated, evil, horrible, bottomless, unfathomable, and indescribable corruption of the entire human nature and of all its powers, particularly of the highest, most important powers of the soul, in mind, heart, and will. Ever since the fall, the human being inherits an inborn evil way of doing things, an internal impurity of

³² All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*.

³³ FC SD V, 1–2.

³⁴ Ap IV, 5.

³⁵ AC XXI, 2–3.

the heart, and an evil desire and inclination, so that we all by nature inherit such a heart, mind, and way of thinking from Adam. Following its highest powers and in light of reason, this fallen heart is by nature diametrically opposed to God and his highest commandments. Indeed, it is hostile to God, particularly in regard to divine, spiritual matters.³⁶

Both physical and spiritual death are the result of this corruption of human nature. God alone can free human nature from the corruption that has affected it since the fall into sin. Despite the severity of the teaching of sin, the proclamation of Christ's comfort is much greater. For this reason, the Confessions move from describing human corruption to declaring God's promise of renewal. This freedom from corruption will take place completely through death.³⁷

Because this freedom depends entirely on God's grace and not on human effort, Lutheran theology approaches every topic in Scripture with the aim of comforting the conscience.

The gospel³⁸ accuses all people of being under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death and for Christ's sake offers the forgiveness of sins and justification, which are received by faith. The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promise of Christ, namely, that on his account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of those fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes us alive. For this consolation is a new and spiritual life.³⁹

From this theological foundation of comfort, the Lutheran tradition holds the sacraments as important instruments of Christ's comfort.⁴⁰ Lutherans confess that faith needs something solid

³⁶ FC SD I, 11–12.

³⁷ FC SD I, 48.

³⁸ The use of this word is to refer to the gospel of Luke, not the gospel message.

³⁹ AC XII, 3–5.

⁴⁰ Like the Reformed tradition, the Lutheran certainly longs for eternal life. The sacraments are a means of sustaining them until they reach eternal life.

to hold on to, so God attaches his gospel promises to visible and physical signs. In baptism, God does not just give a symbol or a reminder, but his actual saving work.⁴¹ It is brought to the believer, free of charge, as the treasure and medicine that swallows up death and keeps the believer alive.⁴²

Similarly, the Lord's Supper brings comfort in a personal way. "This treasure is conveyed and communicated to us in no other way than through the words 'given and shed for you.' Here you have both—that it is Christ's body and blood and that they are yours as a treasure and gift."⁴³ In the Solid Declaration:

He instituted this most holy sacrament, which is to be used until the end of the world with great reverence and in all obedience. It is to be a continual memorial of his bitter suffering and death and of all his benefits, a seal of the New Testament, a comfort for all troubled hearts, and a continual bond and union of Christ's people with Christ their head and among themselves.⁴⁴

The sacraments serve as God's tangible reassurance for the believer. Amid doubt, fear, and spiritual weakness, they are God's gift to the believer that offers something to grasp. They point the believer away from themselves and their own feelings and point instead to God's promise. They tell the believer that eternal life is found in and has already begun in Christ. The Lord who forgives and gives the gracious gift of the sacraments is the same Lord who will raise the believer up on the last day.

⁴¹ Ap XIII, 1–10.

⁴² LC IV, 43.

⁴³ LC V, 23.

⁴⁴ FC SD VII, 44.

Comparison

Although the Reformed and Lutheran traditions confess that Scripture is the inspired word of God, they have the tendency to “hear” and apply that Word in different ways. Both traditions uphold the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, but the frameworks they use often lead to different emphases on how Scripture is taken.

As mentioned, the Reformed tradition usually approaches the Bible as a single, unfolding story of redemption. When reading a passage, the Reformed instinct may be to ask: *where are we in the story?*⁴⁵ The interpretive instinct is to situate every passage within the broader covenantal narrative of God’s saving work. This way of reading comes from their confessional foundation. The Westminster Confession states that there are not two covenants of grace differing in substance, “but one and the same under various dispensations.”⁴⁶ In other words, even though God made different covenants with patriarchs like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, they are all a part of the one big covenant plan that leads to Jesus. This confessional way of reading encourages the Reformed to read passages in relation to the larger redemption story. “What unites [the themes of the Bible] is itself not a central dogma, but an architectonic structure, a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. That particular architectural structure... is the covenant.”⁴⁷

For the Reformed, covenants hold the Bible together. Themes like promise and fulfillment, exile and return, sacrifice and Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice are traced from beginning to end. This shows how God’s purposes develop and come together.

⁴⁵ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 14.

⁴⁶ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms: As Adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the OPC, 2005), 7.6.

⁴⁷ Horton, *God of Promise*, 13.

The Lutheran tradition tends to read or hear the Bible through the lens of law and gospel. Because of this, the Lutheran may be especially attentive to how specific verses of the Bible expose sin and then proclaim Christ's promise to the tormented conscience. The question is this: *what does this text do to the believer?* If a passage confronts the reader with God's demands, reveals the corruption of their heart, or shows the consequences of sin, it is law. If it speaks about forgiveness, comfort, and Christ's mercy and grace for sinners, it is gospel. This distinction is not necessarily a filter through which the text is read, but a recognition that God speaks in two different ways. These two different ways that God speaks work to accomplish different things in the life of the believer. The focus on the law and the gospel distinction doesn't draw the believer away from the biblical narrative, but it ensures that any doctrinal conclusion that is taken away serves Scripture's chief purpose: that a believer be convicted of their sin with the law, then comforted with the gospel.

It is also important to note that the Lutheran focus on law and gospel does not distract from the Bible's larger narrative or doctrinal themes. Instead, it ensures that each part of the Bible does lead the believer back to Christ crucified *because* of them, and Christ risen *for* them. This approach keeps the believer from turning the Bible into a book of moral improvement.

These different emphases and instincts show up in different ways. Take each tradition's key figure's treatment of Matt 5:17–19 for example. John Calvin hears Jesus' words through the lens of God's progressive covenant dealings with his people. He comments,

God had, indeed, promised a *new covenant* at the coming of Christ; but had, at the same time, showed, that it would not be different from the *first*, but that, on the contrary, its design was to give a perpetual sanction to the covenant, which he had made, from the beginning, with his own people...By these words he is so far from departing from the

former covenant, that, on the contrary, he declares, that it will be confirmed and ratified, when it shall be succeeded by the new.⁴⁸

This reflects the Reformed instinct to situate a text within the broader context of redemption history, to ask how each passage advances God's plan from the beginning to fulfill his covenant promises. Calvin does not hear Jesus introducing something new in this passage but affirming the consistency of the Messiah's role across the OT. In this view, the law, far from being abolished, finds its place in the continuing covenant of grace. The Reformed tradition often emphasizes that believers are no longer under the law as in a covenant of works, but the moral law still has a role as a guide for the Christian life. As stated in the Westminster Confession,

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly... The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works.⁴⁹

In this way, Calvin interprets the passage as Jesus reinforcing the enduring significance of the law. It's not a means of justification but a guide for sanctification within the life of the redeemed.⁵⁰ This fits naturally with the covenantal framework of the Reformed tradition.

In contrast, Lutheran sources interpret these passages through the lens of the accusing law and the consolation of the gospel. In Martin Luther's commentary, he simply points out that Christ magnifies the law to terrify smug hearts.⁵¹ But rather than framing the passage in terms of

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 277.

⁴⁹ *Westminster Confession*, 19.6.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:386 (2.7.14).

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21, *Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 69–70.

covenant continuity, Luther sees it as Jesus intensifying the law's demands to expose the self-trust of the human heart. The goal is not to guide the sanctified, but to expose sin. Luther continues,

We cannot be justified or saved through the teaching of the Law, which only brings us to the knowledge of ourselves, the knowledge that by our own ability we cannot properly fulfill an iota of it. Once we have become Christians through Baptism and faith, we do as much as we can. Still we can never take our stand before God on this basis, but we must always creep to Christ. He has fulfilled it all purely and perfectly, and He gives Himself to us, together with His fulfillment. Through Him we can take our stand before God, and the law cannot incriminate or condemn us. So it is true that all must be accomplished and fulfilled even to the smallest dot, but only through this one Man.⁵²

Luther's take also reflects a view of how Christ himself relates to the law. Christ is not a new prophet who came to issue greater demands of the law, but as the end of the law for all who believe. The Lutheran tradition places a high emphasis on Christ's obedience. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not a roadmap for spiritual achievement, but a testament to the holiness that only Christ has won and shared by his grace.

CONTRASTING ESCHATOLOGY

Anthropology and the Nature of the Human Being

To understand Christian eschatology, one must begin with a proper understanding of Christian anthropology. The two are inseparable. Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics systems begin with certain presuppositions about what it means to be human. These presuppositions flow from what God reveals in Scripture but are nevertheless shaped by each denomination's respective theological hermeneutic.

⁵² *LW* 21:72–73.

Rejected in both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* is the idea that human beings are divided: an eternal soul trapped in a temporary body. By rejecting this, both denominations push back against Platonic dualism, something that has influenced Christian thinking throughout the centuries. Instead, they promote a holistic anthropology in which body and soul are united, created to live together as a unified whole. How each denomination frames the unified human being and how they explain what happens in the life to come reveals some of the theological differences between the Reformed and Lutheran systems.

In *The Christian Faith*, Horton rejects Platonic dualism overtly as an extreme position⁵³ and critiques the myth of the exiled soul⁵⁴ by explaining that “immortality was the goal held out to Adam and Eve in the Tree of Life, and not merely for the soul but for the whole person.”⁵⁵ In other words, human beings were not meant to exist as disembodied souls nor as purely spiritual creatures. Humanity was created as a whole, body and soul, to live in covenant fellowship with God. Life and immortality were not something that was built into human nature, but something God promised to his people in a covenant.

This perspective shapes how Horton understands what it means to be human. We weren’t simply made to exist; we were made to exist in total communion with God in our whole being, body and soul. Jesus’ redemption of humanity, therefore, isn’t about just saving a person’s soul or body. It’s about bringing body and soul into the fullness of life that God has promised after death. Horton’s anthropology is teleological. He sees the life of a human being as being guided

⁵³ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 907.

⁵⁴ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 910.

⁵⁵ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 908.

toward an end goal. And that goal is not fulfilled in a disembodied life after death, but in the resurrection of the body and eternal life in unity with God.

Confessing the Gospel shares *The Christian Faith*'s desire to avoid Platonic dualism. *Confessing the Gospel* affirms that human beings were created as unified beings, body and soul, and that death disrupts that unity. It rejects the belief that the soul is naturally immortal, arguing that this idea stems from pagan philosophy rather than Scripture.⁵⁶ "To assert that the soul is inherently immortal circumscribes the effects of the fall and, even more important for a dogmatics written from the perspective of the gospel, compromises the resurrection of Jesus Christ and with it the resurrection of all believers through him alone."⁵⁷

In *Confessing the Gospel*, the idea of a naturally immortal soul is not treated as a mere academic issue. The concern isn't philosophical; it has implications for how salvation is understood. *Confessing the Gospel* insists that eternal life cannot be something that we work for, but something that God gives us in Christ. "Christians cannot earn their salvation by good works, but they have eternal life as a gift. They begin at once to share in the freedom of the gospel, having been delivered from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil through Jesus Christ's 'holy, precious blood.'"⁵⁸ *Confessing the Gospel* stresses that this is fundamentally important to remember. That's because even Christians have the tendency, by their sinful nature, to downplay or misunderstand death. The distractions of everyday life can easily push aside deeper questions about mortality and even the need for a resurrection.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1169.

⁵⁷ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1170.

⁵⁸ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1139.

⁵⁹ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1186.

To say that the soul is naturally immortal is to deny the need for the resurrection and the consequence of sin that is death. The world sees death as a natural part of life, but Scripture presents it as unnatural. It is a sign of God's wrath. Yet *Confessing the Gospel* reminds the reader that death is both a warning and a comfort. Yes, it is a consequence of sin, but because of Christ, it is the doorway to life. "For the Christian, death has lost its sting. It not only delivers God's people from every evil of this present life; it is also the gateway to the heavenly kingdom, the 'better' life lived in the presence of Christ."⁶⁰ Even though death is frightening and sin is present, God's grace has prevailed. *Confessing the Gospel* quotes Luther in his commentary on Ps 90:

There is far more grace to prevail over all sin, far more life to prevail over death, and far more God to prevail over all devils. In this [Christ's] kingdom sin, death, and the devil are nothing more than the black clouds of the material heaven. For a time they may well conceal heaven, but they cannot prevail. They must stay beneath the heavens and suffer it to remain, prevail, and rule over them, and at last they must pass away. Therefore although sin bites us, death frightens us, and the devil throws his weight around with temptation, these are only clouds. The heaven of grace prevails and rules; in the end they must remain below and surrender.⁶¹

Luther's words reflect how Lutheran theology connects its view of the individual human to the comfort of the gospel. For the Lutheran, the soul is not desperately trying to escape the body, to move on from this fallen world. Lutheran theology teaches that God has redeemed the whole person, both body and soul. Yet the believer will never be free from sin and its consequences while they walk the present earth. "Christians never reach perfection in this world. They will be totally free from sin only when they pass through physical death and awake freed from all sin

⁶⁰ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1127–28.

⁶¹ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

and its consequences.”⁶² The time that they were redeemed began at their baptism.⁶³ It will end when death comes and they are ultimately redeemed. *Confessing the Gospel* explains that death, when under the law, is a punishment for sin. But death is the liberator from sin when it is viewed in the light of the gospel.⁶⁴

Comparison

Both the Reformed and the Lutheran affirm the unity of the body and soul, but they emphasize different things about them. Horton approaches human nature through his lens of covenant theology. He sees human beings as created to live in relationship with God, to respond to his Word and promise with obedience, and to find their purpose within God’s redemptive plan. *Confessing the Gospel* emphasizes that God delivers promises through his word and sacrament. Purpose in life is found in God’s sustaining promise of grace.

Both texts reject the idea that the soul is naturally immortal. Both affirm that the resurrection of the body is the essential part of the Christian’s hope. But as this thesis will continue to unpack, *The Christian Faith* draws more attention to the story of creation and how salvation unfolded, while *Confessing the Gospel* leans into the proclamation of that story: how the gospel declares the sinner to be righteous in the eyes of God, and the assurance of their resurrection.

⁶² *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

⁶³ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

⁶⁴ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

The Intermediate State

Michael Horton identifies the intermediate state as being within the unfolding covenantal narrative of redemption. The intermediate state is the believer's temporary state after death and the final hope of the resurrection. It is a state of incompleteness, as believers await the resurrection of their bodies. Horton acknowledges that the soul is with the Lord after death,⁶⁵ but he warns against putting too much weight on this disembodied state as it can distract from the gospel's ultimate promise.⁶⁶ In fact, Horton seems to indicate that this temporary intermediate state is what most people call "heaven." "Going to heaven when we die is the way station, not the final hope announced in the gospel."⁶⁷

In Horton's covenantal framework, the intermediate state is a temporary necessity before the final reality. He is careful not to overstate what Scripture has not revealed about this period. While believers are with the Lord, the primary emphasis of the passages that speak of the intermediate state is on the future resurrection. Citing Rev 6:9–10, Horton indicates that while the souls of the martyrs are aware of how blessed they are to be with the Lord, they are also aware that their complete salvation has not yet been fully realized.⁶⁸

To the believer who wishes that more about the intermediate state would be revealed to them, Horton indicates that nearly all of the scriptural references concerning the believer's ultimate hope refer to everlasting life, not the intermediate state.⁶⁹ He gives a scriptural

⁶⁵ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 910.

⁶⁶ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 906.

⁶⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 906.

⁶⁸ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 913.

⁶⁹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 911.

encouragement to fix their hope not on the journey of their soul, however long God deems appropriate before the final judgment, but on the future place of eternal rest after the intermediate state.⁷⁰

Horton's overall interpretation of the intermediate states serves more to uphold the upcoming event of the resurrection rather than to describe the experience of the disembodied soul after death. Thus, the soul who is with the Lord in the intermediate state has hope, not in some unknown spiritual continuity, but the certainty of the full covenant fulfillment in the resurrection of the body as confessed in both the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds.⁷¹ This also aligns with Horton's overarching theme that death is not the end for a believer. More specifically, Horton believes true communion with God will take place after the resurrection of the body in the new heavens and new earth.⁷²

Confessing the Gospel also affirms the reality of the intermediate state. It speaks clearly about the soul's existence after death and its communion with Christ. It also takes care not to frame the intermediate state in speculative terms, but in the language of what God promises in Scripture.

Those who die in Christ are at once in his immediate presence, enjoying a life far better than the present (Phil 1:23). They are indeed "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). Although their bodies lie in the grave, they are nevertheless with Christ in paradise (Luke 23:43). There they experience God's everlasting love. The apostle Paul assures us that nothing, not even death, will be able to separate Christians from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 8:39). In the state of death Christians are at Abraham's side (Luke 16:23), in a state of blessedness where they rest from their labors (Rev 14:13). They are gathered to their people in peace and in the hope of the resurrection (Gen 15:15, 25:8; Ps 49:15, 73:24–26).⁷³

⁷⁰ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 910, 974.

⁷¹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 919.

⁷² Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 915.

⁷³ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1147.

The believer's hope is rooted in the finished work of Christ, and they are assured that not even death severs them from their Savior. *Confessing the Gospel* echoes the words of Eccl 12:7, noting that the body dies and returns to dust, but the spirit returns to God.⁷⁴ This interpretation avoids any speculation, speaking instead of the intermediate state only as the Holy Spirit inspired writers to speak.

Confessing the Gospel's treatment of the intermediate state is clearly influenced by the Lutheran emphasis on word and sacrament. Quoting one of Luther's sermons,

A Christian is a person who through faith begins to pass out of this life in heaven as soon as he is baptized. For him Christ is already the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and does not cease to be these things till his last hour. Indeed, a Christian always proceeds on this way, led by the truth, to the goal of eternal life. He has already caught the vision of the other shore and the haven of rest and is so prepared that whether he dies on the way this morning or tomorrow morning, or in one, two, or ten years, in spirit he has already crossed over through Christ.⁷⁵

Luther's imagery shows how the Christian life is a journey that begins at baptism. From that point on, the believer is found righteous because of Christ.⁷⁶ Everything that happens after that moment happens in their walk with Christ, led by his truth, and already experiencing the hope of eternal life. With this view, the Lutheran speaks about the intermediate state as a time of rest as they wait for the complete fulfilment of God's promises that come in the resurrection.⁷⁷

Lutheran theology emphasizes that God delivers those promises not through feelings or personal effort but concrete things: God's Word and the sacraments. This is how God gives grace

⁷⁴ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1113.

⁷⁵ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1175.

⁷⁶ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

⁷⁷ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1132.

and keeps his people in their faith. Even in death, the believer remains secure in what God has done and is still doing, trusting that the resurrection is yet to come, but promised now in Christ.

Comparison

Both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* affirm the idea that the soul exists consciously and at once with the Lord after death but before the resurrection of the body. They affirm that the soul lives on after death only because of God's grace, not because of any natural immortality. Both texts understand that the intermediate state, while a joyful period of time, is not what the Bible describes as eternal life. Rather, eternal life is the true Christian hope, and that will come along with the resurrection of the body.

How they talk of that reality is shaped by their different instincts. Horton's approach tends to speak about the intermediate state with restraint. It's real, it's meaningful, but it shouldn't overshadow the resurrection of the body. The emphasis should be on what is yet to come.

Confessing the Gospel, while equally committed to the resurrection of the body, focuses more on the promises that God has already given. Baptism is closely linked to the belief that eternal life has already begun, and the baptized believer is already walking in fellowship with Christ. That means when a believer dies, they don't go to a waiting room until the final resurrection. They enter the beginning of their rest, even if it's not the final rest. This shows up in how Lutherans talk about the baptized believer already having their name written in the book of life, even while they live on earth.

In short, *The Christian Faith* speaks about the intermediate state with more caution and looking forward to what will come, while *Confessing the Gospel* emphasizes the believer's

current comfort and participation in the Christian life. The resurrection is the end goal, but both texts take slightly different paths in how they describe the journey in between.

Excursus: Soul Sleep

While both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* affirm the soul's immediate presence with Christ, the biblical imagery of death as "sleep" has led some to different conclusions. One such view that often misunderstands sleep imagery is known as soul sleep. Those who advocate for soul sleep are sometimes also referred to as mortalists or conditionalists. While the concept of soul sleep is not a point of controversy between the Reformed and Lutheran traditions and is rejected by most modern Christian denominations, the idea may persist as a common area of confusion among many Christians. Soul sleep refers to the idea that after death, a person's soul enters a state of unconscious rest until the final resurrection.⁷⁸ Just as a person may drift off into sleep and not be aware of the happenings around them until they wake up, so the soul will be from death until judgment. This idea is based on the many times⁷⁹ that the Bible describes death as a sleep. Soul sleep is supported neither in *Confessing the Gospel* nor *The Christian Faith*.

John Calvin wrote an entire book rejecting soul sleep called *Psychopannychia*. In fact, Calvin was so opposed to the idea of soul sleep that he gave *Psychopannychia* the subtitle *A Refutation of the Error Entertained by Some Unskillful Persons, Who Ignorantly Imagine that in the Interval between Death and the Judgment the Soul Sleeps*. He views soul sleep as a great

⁷⁸ Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008), 11.

⁷⁹ I found 15 uses of death used as a metaphor for sleep between the OT and the NT.

error.⁸⁰ Similarly, the Westminster Confessions reject the idea of soul sleep. “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.”⁸¹

Although the Lutheran Confessions never explicitly reject soul sleep, they teach the ongoing conscious life of believers after death, rejecting the notion that the soul becomes unconscious. The Apology states that “concerning the saints we grant that in heaven they pray for the church in general, just as they prayed for the entire church while living.”⁸² Soon after, the Apology says “that the blessed Mary prays for the church.”⁸³ Such statements presume that believers who have died are living and active in the presence of Christ, not unconscious. In affirming the soul’s continued conscious existence, the Lutheran Confessions implicitly eliminate the possibility of soul sleep.

Martin Luther speaks about the state of the soul after death in ways that are not entirely consistent across his writings. While the concept of soul sleep was not articulated in a systematic way until the seventeenth century,⁸⁴ the idea behind it had been circulating in earlier centuries. Trevor O’Reggio, Professor of Church History at Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary, writes a distillation of Luther’s beliefs. On one hand, Luther frequently used the biblical

⁸⁰ John Calvin, *Psychopannychia: Or, A Refutation of the Error Entertained by Some Unskillful Persons, Who Ignorantly Imagine That in the Interval between Death and Judgment the Soul Sleeps*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1849), <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin/Psychopannychia%20-%20John%20Calvin.pdf>.

⁸¹ *Westminster Confession*, 32.1.

⁸² Ap XXI, 9.

⁸³ Ap XXI, 27.

⁸⁴ Ball, *The Soul Sleepers*, 43.

metaphor of sleep to describe death in sermons,⁸⁵ funeral or otherwise, and in letters.⁸⁶ He often spoke of death as a peaceful and dreamless state of rest in Christ in which the believer neither sees nor feels anything, waiting until the day that Christ calls them to rise. At the same time, Luther admitted that the whole topic was uncertain and was ultimately in God's hands.⁸⁷

In the early Reformation years, especially between 1522 and 1532, Luther gravitated toward the idea that the dead are unconscious, citing verses like Eccl 9:5. He even said that the dead "do not praise God."⁸⁸ However, Luther never included this in a written doctrine.

In his later years, as O'Reggio notes with reference to Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther at times speaks as though a believer's soul may be asleep while remaining ready for God to awaken it.⁸⁹ O'Reggio writes:

It seems that Luther is attempting to bring into line biblical texts that affirm the 'soul-sleep' and biblical texts that seem to affirm the conscious activities of souls like Moses, Elijah and Abraham. In trying to harmonize the two ideas, Luther comes to the ambiguous conclusion that souls who are asleep are at the same time available for God to be 'awakened' even before the judgment.⁹⁰

Once again, he calls these things a mystery.

Luther did not seem to feel the need to explain everything perfectly. His language shifted depending on the context. In personal letters and funeral sermons, he often emphasized comfort and hope, saying that the dead are with Christ and rejoicing. Yet he regularly returned to the

⁸⁵ Trevor O'Reggio, "A Re-examination of Luther's View on the State of the Dead," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 22, no. 2 (2011): 163.

⁸⁶ O'Reggio, "A Re-examination," 161.

⁸⁷ O'Reggio, "A Re-examination," 164.

⁸⁸ O'Reggio, "A Re-examination," 163.

⁸⁹ O'Reggio, "A Re-examination," 164.

⁹⁰ O'Reggio, "A Re-examination," 165.

metaphor of sleep. This wasn't to deny that the soul was alive with Christ at the moment of death, but to remind believers that death is not something to be feared because of Christ.

Whether the soul was awake or asleep, it is safe in the care of the Savior.

Rejecting soul sleep does not diminish the anticipation of the bodily resurrection. In fact, rejection reinforces the significance and importance of the resurrection. Rather than downplaying the seriousness of death or speculating in the mysteries of the soul's journey after death, this rejection of soul sleep points to something greater: that Christ knows and is with his people now and in death, and he will raise them up on the last day.

The Resurrection of the Body

The Christian Faith emphasizes that the resurrection of the body is not just another doctrine among the many, but the climax of the redemption story.⁹¹ For Horton, the resurrection of the body is not just about the hope of each individual believer; it's about God's covenant with his people being brought to fulfillment.⁹²

Horton roots this hope in the whole biblical narrative of creation, the fall, and redemption. Just as sin entered the world through Adam, the first man, so resurrection life comes through the second Adam, Christ.⁹³ Horton insists that the resurrection hope for believers cannot be separated from Christ's resurrection, which is the guarantee of the believer's future resurrection and glorification. For "if Christ is not raised bodily, then we will not be raised

⁹¹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 930.

⁹² Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 915.

⁹³ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 906.

bodily either.”⁹⁴ Horton considers the words of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor 15, “where Paul not only treats the resurrection of believers as belonging to the same event (though in two stages) as that of their forerunner, Jesus Christ, but also considers the way in which the renewal of all things takes place.”⁹⁵ This resurrection of the body will not just be a restoration of the old body, but the glorification. Citing various NT epistles, Horton writes that the resurrection is the *transformation* of human life into something new and incorruptible.⁹⁶

The future resurrection continues to affirm the original goodness of God’s creation and humanity. Horton pushes back against any idea that the material world must be escaped. Instead, he finds that resurrection underscores the idea that God intends to renew, not abandon, his existing creations. “The Christian hope is oriented not to the intermediate state (going to heaven when we die), but to the renovation of creation, including our natural bodies.”⁹⁷ Horton’s overall interpretation of the resurrection of the body is not only about the believer’s final destiny, but about the victory of God’s original covenant plan over sin, death, and decay. As Horton explains elsewhere, “Biblical eschatology moves forward, from promise to fulfillment, not in cycles. Already in Paradise creation is merely the anteroom for a fuller human purpose and destiny for creation.”⁹⁸

Confessing the Gospel affirms the resurrection of the body with similar clarity, but connects it more explicitly to Lutheran soteriology, specifically justification by faith alone. The

⁹⁴ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 916.

⁹⁵ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 916.

⁹⁶ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 916–917.

⁹⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 974.

⁹⁸ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 910.

authors quote the Augsburg Confession and the Apology.⁹⁹ They do not see the resurrection as the continuation of the life of salvation, but as the final confirmation of what the believer already knows in the intermediate state: God has declared them righteous. “Having been declared righteous through faith, they will be pronounced blessed by the Father and will inherit his everlasting kingdom.”¹⁰⁰

Confessing the Gospel describes the event of the resurrection as a public vindication of the believer, not only in front of God, but in front of their fellow believers. “They will be publicly vindicated, and their good deeds will be seen as a service to Christ and as evidence of their faith. Their exalted and glorious statues as the children of God will be seen by all the world.”¹⁰¹

Confessing the Gospel does not dwell as much on covenantal themes. It certainly highlights the covenant themes of the OT,¹⁰² but does not bring that thought into the present topic. It does emphasize the moment when what the believer possesses by faith, eternal life, is made visible. “They will be totally free from sin only when they pass through physical death and awake freed from all sin and its consequences.”¹⁰³

Additionally, *Confessing the Gospel* carefully presents the resurrection in terms of scriptural comfort and the Lutheran Confessions. The believer weighed down by guilt, grief, shame, and the fear of death is reminded that the resurrection means the final removal of those

⁹⁹ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1136.

¹⁰⁰ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1160.

¹⁰¹ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1160.

¹⁰² *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1110–12

¹⁰³ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1193.

things.¹⁰⁴ And quoting Luther, “there is far more grace to prevail over all sin, far more life to prevail over death, and far more God to prevail over all the devils.”¹⁰⁵

Comparison

On the topic of eschatology, one of the sharpest points of agreement between Reformed and Lutheran theology is the centrality of the resurrection of the body. Both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* affirm that Christian hope does not rest in a disembodied afterlife.¹⁰⁶ The whole person, body and soul, will be raised up one day. God’s intention is the redemption of his people, and this redemption will reach its fullness in the resurrection.

At the same time, *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* use different language to speak about this hope and frame this hope in different ways. Their theological lenses differ. Horton frames it from the covenantal standpoint. The resurrection of the body is primarily about God’s completed promise to his first people. *Confessing the Gospel* frames it from a pastoral standpoint. The resurrection is about the culmination of righteousness and healing that God grants to the sinner.

In summary, both books outline that the believer has something solid to put their hope in. It is not the abstract idea of spiritual bliss, but a concrete promise. Though the body is weak and sinful, they will one day be made new, raised in glory, and united with Christ forever.

¹⁰⁴ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1192.

¹⁰⁵ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1192–93.

¹⁰⁶ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1156.

New Creation and the Consummation of All Things

Horton places the doctrine of the new creation within a larger category of God's covenantal dealings with human beings. He makes the point that final redemption is not the undoing or destruction of creation, but its perfection and glorification. "Nevertheless, the biblical vision of a new heaven and a new earth is not the abolition of the old creation, but describes the new condition of the world that the Father has made and remade in his Son and by his Spirit."¹⁰⁷ Even the heavens will be made new.¹⁰⁸ Though in the end all things are made new, this does not divorce itself from the story of Scripture from the beginning, but instead brings the purposes of creation to their full realization in Christ.¹⁰⁹ Drawing heavily from Rom 8, Horton emphasizes that the entire creation groans as it awaits this renewal.¹¹⁰

In Horton's interpretation, since Christ is bodily raised and glorified, those united to him share in both his resurrection and the restoration of all things. He stresses that this new restored world will be physical and filled with all sorts of things that human beings interact with in this present world, only redeemed from sin. Horton takes Isa 65 very literally when it speaks of things in the new heavens and new earth.

Isaiah 65 speaks of a "new heavens and a new earth", with buildings and vineyards, trees, labor, and fellowship with all of creation. What is gone are not emotions, but "the sound of weeping and the cry of distress". Its inhabitants "shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit," enjoying the fruit of their labor rather than building and planting only to have their homes occupied by invaders. Not work itself, but the curse of tiresome, frustrating, and meaningless labor, will be no more. Children will be a blessing rather than a cause for distress over their future. No one will need to cry to

¹⁰⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 974.

¹⁰⁸ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 915

¹⁰⁹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 971.

¹¹⁰ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 974, 988, 990.

the Lord, for “while they are yet speaking I will hear”, and it is not the absence of wildlife but of danger that will characterize this Sabbath land.¹¹¹

Horton notes that the OT prophet isn’t the only place that speaks of the physical nature of the new heavens and the new earth.¹¹²

Just as Jesus ate and drank after his resurrection, there will be eating and drinking in the new creation, although this time at the consummated marriage supper of the Lamb, with Jesus drinking wine with us. The theme of eating and drinking in the presence of the Lord that we find throughout the Old Testament narratives and again so prominently in Luke’s Gospel will be fully realized in that day. Revelation 22 employs the imagery of a river flowing through the city, with the tree of life “yielding its fruit each month.” Again, it is apocalyptic imagery, but the purchase of such imagery is lost if there is no physical creation.¹¹³

Horton’s take on the new creation is not merely spiritual, but tangible and embodied life. He draws from biblical imagery to show that physicality is not abandoned, but perfected. He notes the shared meals with Christ, reflecting Horton’s view of the covenantal joy. And far from being symbolic, the river, fruit, and table fellowship all demonstrate a renewed creation where the senses are redeemed and perfected. Horton makes the case that the physical world matters, not just as our temporary stage, but as the eternal dwelling place of God with his people.

Confessing the Gospel also affirms the doctrine of the new creation, though the tone and emphasis of the new creation remain primarily comforting, not explanatory. It notes that Paul in Rom 8 may be implying “that the new dwelling place for the saints will be a transformation of the present universe rather than an entirely new and different creation.”¹¹⁴ But *Confessing the Gospel* does not engage in speculating about the details of the new heavens and the new earth. It

¹¹¹ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 987–988.

¹¹² Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 988.

¹¹³ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 988.

¹¹⁴ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1128.

does present the new heavens and the earth, however they may look, as the final fulfillment of God's promises to his people.¹¹⁵ It spends more time focusing on the things that the believer can be sure of: the presence of God,¹¹⁶ the end of sin,¹¹⁷ and everlasting life with Christ.¹¹⁸

In these ways, *Confessing the Gospel* truly focuses more on the new creation that is the resurrection of the body than the new creation that is the renewal of the present creation. This emphasis is on personal transformation, reflecting the Lutheran tradition of comforting the sinner with individual assurance of salvation. While the renewal of the world is mentioned, it is certainly not the focal point. *Confessing the Gospel* views what matters most as the renewal and restoration of the believer as they are free from sin and united with Christ forever.

Comparison

Both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* affirm the doctrine of the new creation. Once again, they approach the topic with different emphases. *The Christian Faith* provides a highly physical vision of the new heavens and the new earth. It views the specific scriptural images in the new earth¹¹⁹ as a tangible picture of the new creation. They are not metaphors, used only to cater to limited human minds, but indicators that the final state retains

¹¹⁵ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1194.

¹¹⁶ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1134.

¹¹⁷ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1142.

¹¹⁸ *Confessing the Gospel*, 2:1140.

¹¹⁹ Such as vineyards, rivers, houses, banquets, etc. See Isa 65.

real and bodily features which are glorified. The new creation is not a rupture from creation as we know it, but its completion in purity.

Confessing the Gospel gives comparatively little attention to the physical or material details of the new creation. It affirms that the cosmos will be made new, but primarily as the stage of the final state of the believer. In other words, what matters most is not the content of the new creation but the certainty of the believer being resurrected with Christ forever. There is little description of the features of the renewed world. When transformation is mentioned, it is often in reference to the believer, not the created order. This is certainly not a contradiction with *The Christian Faith*, but a different interest: *The Christian Faith* being interested in what the world will become, and *Confessing the Gospel* being interested in what the believer will receive.

Another contrast appears in the way Scripture is applied to the doctrine of new creation. *The Christian Faith* moves fluidly between biblical texts, connecting Isaiah, Romans, and Revelation into a more developed portrait of the renewed creation. In that sense, it proceeds more exegetically, lingering on specific Scripture and allowing its details to shape the doctrine. *Confessing the Gospel*, in contrast, cites those passages to affirm the reality of the new creation, but does not dwell on their imagery. It summarizes rather than explores what the renewed world may be like.

CONCLUSION

The Christian hope is not vague or symbolic. It is real, specific, and sure. The Christian believes that Christ died and rose again, and he will return to raise their bodies from the dead to bring them to the new creation. This hope is not grounded in speculation, but the promises of the God spoken through his word. That said, the doctrine of eschatology is not meant to feed the

Christian's curious mind about the future but to bring comfort in the present, especially in the face of death.

It is fair to conclude that while *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* stand in agreement on the core content of Christian eschatology, they proceed along different theological lines because of the framework which governs. *The Christian Faith* consistently unfolds itself from covenant theology. The resurrection of the body, the intermediate state, and the renewal of creation are all presented as different stages in the fulfilment of God's promise in Eden. That makes eschatology the completion of the story which began with Adam, was secured by the second Adam, and moves unstoppably to the coming renewal of the universe. The emphasis then is on continued creation. The believer's hope is secure because the covenant God has never failed to bring his purposes to their appointed end.

Confessing the Gospel unfolds itself from the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel. That doesn't mean it denies a larger redemptive story, but the instinct and focus is different. The intermediate state is described in terms of immediate consolation. The resurrection is a public proclamation that the sinner who died in Christ is justified. The new creation has little emphasis on continued creation, but more as the final removal of sin and the full realization of the righteousness received by faith. Where *The Christian Faith* often points out how the covenant will be fulfilled at the consummation of all things, *Confessing the Gospel* repeatedly points out how the consummation of all things will be a blessed end to sin and suffering. The eschatology of *Confessing the Gospel* moves outward from justification rather than forward from creation.

These differences alone do not amount to contradictory doctrines of eschatology. For example, both *The Christian Faith* and *Confessing the Gospel* reject Platonic dualism and natural

immortality. Both confess the conscious presence of the believer with Christ after death. Both affirm the bodily resurrection and the renewal of creation. Where they diverge is not in the confession, but how they arrive at that confession. It is therefore fair to say that while the two works confess the same resurrection, renewal of creation, and final victory over death, they approach the two promises from different theological starting points. Broadly considered, their eschatology is the same. In emphasis, procession, and detail, they differ.

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