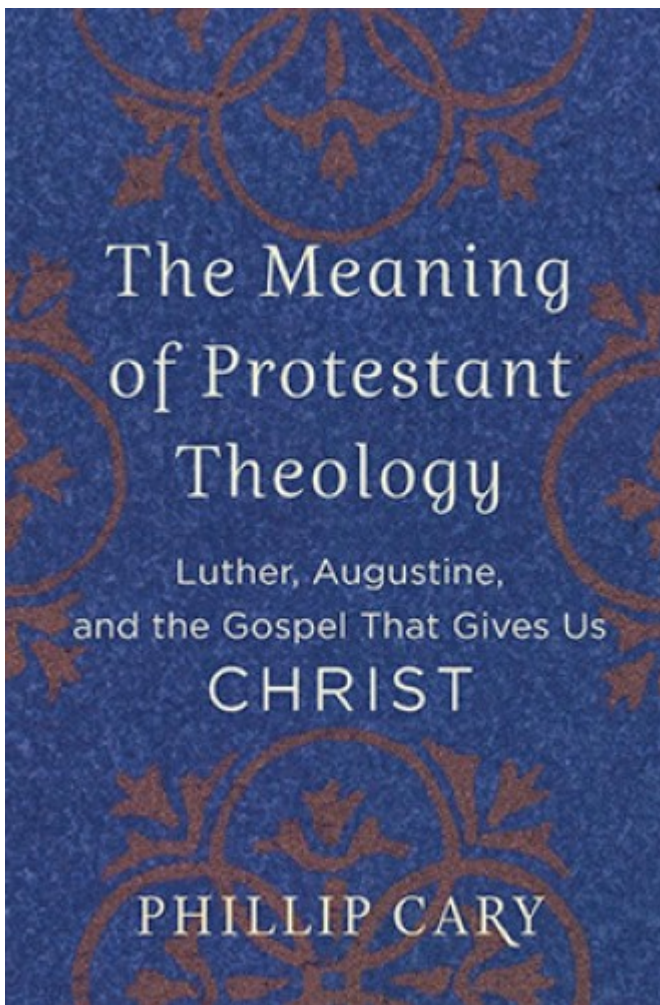


Why be Protestant?

Phillip Cary locates the heart of Protestantism in the gospel promise it reveals.

by [Jason Micheli](#) in the [June 3, 2020](#) issue

In Review



The Meaning of Protestant Theology

Luther, Augustine, and the Gospel That Gives Us Christ

By Phillip Cary
Baker Academic

Weeks before Christians acclaimed their hosannas while hunkered down in their Zoom rooms, I paid a pastoral call to a 97-year-old shut-in from my congregation. Vince was worried that “when the virus finally gets here, I’m exactly the kind of geezer who will have a bad go of it.”

“I try to have faith,” he told me, sipping his Folgers. “Sometimes it feels like I have Jesus in my heart, but other times I don’t know. I’ve tried to be good, and I’ve always gone to church and done for others, but I’ve not been perfect.” He went on in that vein for a few minutes more, somewhere between anxious and genuinely terrified by the truth that none of us is getting out of life alive.

Finally, I interrupted him: “Christianity isn’t about trusting what’s in your heart. That wouldn’t be good news. Christianity’s about trusting Christ, who promises that you’re forgiven and loved. Hold fast to that promise; don’t look into your heart.” Vince looked skeptical. I stood up, made the sign of the cross over him, and said, “Vince, in the name of Jesus Christ and by his authority alone, I declare unto you the entire forgiveness of all your sins.”

As I sat back down, Vince wept. “How is it that I’ve gone to church my whole life and I’ve never once heard something so good?”

I couldn’t help but wonder: Do Protestants have a reason for being if we can’t comfort souls with the gospel—or, for that matter, if we aren’t producing believers who can recognize it?

The Meaning of Protestant Theology presses this same question. In our linked and ecumenical setting, Phillip Cary writes, Protestants are more acquainted than ever with the riches of the traditions represented by Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians. Do Protestants likewise have a distinctive gift to offer the body of Christ? Or are we simply unadorned alternatives, different for the sake of difference? Few people these days believe that you need to be Protestant to be saved, so why be Protestant?

For Cary, there’s an irony to the question because the ancient liturgies of the non-Protestant traditions reliably offer what contemporary Protestant preaching so rarely gives. “The great sacramental liturgies give us Christ, not advice about how to live

the Christian life. In Luther's terms, they preach the gospel not the law. They focus not on telling us what to do but on telling us what Christ does, thus directing attention away from our own works to Christ himself."

Cary locates the distinctive contribution of Protestant theology to the body of Christ not in its divergence from the great sacramental traditions of Catholicism or Orthodoxy but in its correspondence to them. The gift of Protestantism to the whole church is not its ceaseless innovation. It's in Protestantism's application of sacramental theology to the gospel itself.

The promise of the gospel is—as much as water, wine, and bread—a means through which God gives to us nothing less than God's beloved Son. Thus the gospel functions as an auditory sacrament, enacting the very reality of the thing signified, such that to believe the gospel is to receive Christ himself.

The reason to be Protestant in the 21st century is no different than it was in the 16th century. Protestantism, argues Cary, offers "a piety of the word of God that clings to the gospel alone as the way God gives us his Son." The gospel promise, for Protestantism, conveys Christ.

When Protestantism emerged it represented "an intensification of faith in the sacrament." In the words "this is my body broken for you," God invades the present moment and calls into existence, as Paul says, the things that do not exist. Particular doctrines, such as justification by faith alone or *sola scriptura*, are not merely parts of the Protestant message. They're means of understanding the gospel as the promise that gives us Christ.

What sets this book apart is the way Cary shows how Luther's grace-centered gospel produces the very thing many critics assume it fails to provide: changed and transformed Christians.

Preachers and church leaders who turn to exhortation, moralism, and practical lessons do so for understandable reasons. Their desire to see transformed lives and communities is Christ's own desire. But what Robert Capon called the "grim pills of religion" are not the medicine that can heal us, Cary contends. We're not transformed by being told we ought to straighten up and fly right. We're not even transformed by time-tested, doctor-approved wisdom about how we can transform our lives.

The words of the gospel, the promise that gives us Christ, make us new from the inside out, Cary argues. Christ enters our hearts through our ears. To make his case, Cary explicates how Luther turned to Aristotle's theory of perception to show how the mind gradually takes on the form of the external thing it perceives. Faith makes us truly and inwardly righteous, Cary insists, "because by faith our hearts take on the form of Christ himself."

We become more compassionate not through the practice of serving the poor but by hearing again and again how Christ became poor and emptied himself for us, his enemy. Learning the message of *done for you* is what equips and emboldens us to *go and do likewise* with gladness. The gospel alone can produce what the law commands. It does so by working on us like a favorite song, Cary explains. "When Christ the Beloved gives himself to us in the gospel, he gets into our hearts through our ears, like music, reshaping everything and remaking us from the bottom up."

The words I spoke to Vince that day were nothing more than the gospel that had gotten into my heart and reshaped me from the bottom up. This is how the church works. In a world of suffering, God has created a community of care.

In the present moment, we cannot visit the sick or accompany the dead to their graves with songs of alleluia. We cannot gather to praise or receive Christ in bread and wine. In this time of fear, Cary does more than remind us of the God whose promise is so important to our identity as Protestants. *The Meaning of Protestant Theology* provides the balm that God is no farther from us than God's promise on our ear. And that is a form of care the church can offer even when it's hunkered down.