

AND NOW

FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT  
**THE BOOK THAT COST  
 A COW: A LUTHERAN  
 TESTIMONY (OF SORTS)**

**Piotr J. Małysz**

*1. The Book*

The book held pride of place in one of the kitchen cabinets. You could see it very well through the glass door: its thick black covers, the paper yellowish with age. Life at my grandparents' house revolved around the kitchen, where the most basic necessities of life were always present, where life itself happened. The book belonged to the basic stuff of life.

On Saturday or sometimes Sunday mornings (especially when, because of old age, my grandparents were not able to make it to church), my grandmother would walk over to the cabinet, take out the heavy tome, and solemnly take a seat at the head of the table. Only a loaf of bread was handled with similar care: you made the sign of the cross on it with your thumb to thank God for His daily provision before you sliced it. The family, and whoever else was present, would already be seated. We watched my grandmother attentively, even though we all knew the ritual. I had been brought up to know that the book was special: it had been purchased by my grandmother's grandparents, and at that time its price was as much as a cow! Whatever else that sum meant, it clearly was a lot of money. A lot of money for mountain folk trying to make a living from their meager land.

What was the book? Well, it was not the Bible. The Bible and the hymnals, both Polish and Slovak, had their place in the living room. This book bore the rather ponderous title, typical of the time when it was first published in the seventeenth century, *Sermons, or Expositions of the Holy Gospels [as those are] Orderly Appointed for the Sundays throughout the Year. Gathered from Holy Scripture and the Doctors of the Church, according to the ancient teaching and order of the true Christian Church, to the honor and glory of the Mighty God and the Savior Jesus Christ. By the Reverend Samuel Dambrowski, shepherd of the Evangelical Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, etc.*<sup>1</sup> It was a Lutheran postil: a collection of sermons covering all the Sundays, feasts, festivals, and saints' days of the year. Later on, to my surprise, I found there was even a sermon for the feast of Corpus Christi and another for the feast of St. Barbara (a saint, as we now know, who was very much

fictitious), and also one for the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Each sermon was preceded by the text of the Gospel lesson given according to the lectionary, of which the sermon was an exposition. In the earliest edition, a woodcut accompanied the Gospel narrative.

Once my grandmother was seated, she would lead what in effect was a house service or extended devotion, centered on the Gospel lesson and its sermonic proclamation. She would hold the postil with great solemnity and read the sermon to great dramatic effect. A picture of Luther was used as a bookmark. There were prayers and sometimes also a hymn. Hymns, especially the much-loved ones, were generally known by heart. Not only "A Mighty Fortress" with its four stanzas but also a favorite from the nineteenth century: "The paternal home is a veritable paradise, a gift of the Heavenly Father; were you to travel far and wide, more beautiful is none other."<sup>2</sup>

House services at my grandparents' belong to my most cherished childhood memories. The image of my grandmother (never my grandfather) with the Dambrowski postil is the first picture that comes to mind when I think of my own journey of faith. Now, as a Christian, as a thinker, a lot of the time an over-thinker, I do of course reflect on my own journey of faith. Much of this reflection belongs to prayer. Not all of it is as idyllic as the image I have just depicted. Much of it is deeply personal, intimate, and for this reason has the character of a confession. So let me confess something else before I go on. I do not even remotely have Augustine's persistence, insight, eloquence, or talent for self-reflection—a talent for giving an account of oneself in which every moment of delight and every moment of excruciating self-confrontation point unambiguously beyond themselves to God's pursuit of the sinner, to God's goodness, to God's promised rest. As a Christian, I do reflect on my faith journey. How could I not? But as a Lutheran Christian, I also worry (and this is just one of my worries) about the ease with which even a well-intentioned narrative of one's faith journey can get all wrapped up in the self; caught in a raptured, nostalgic, and even voyeuristic thrall to the self.

Especially when these narratives are told in a worship

context, I worry that God's work *may* turn into a pretext for a well-told story that has it all: love and betrayal, sex and jealousy, money and drugs, beautiful women, powers and dominions—as if the great scriptural arc of salvation didn't already have most of these in the first place! As a Lutheran Christian, my clear preference, rather than to preach about myself, is to proclaim God's work where it took place *decisively*—at the cross. My preference is to announce God's work where it now still takes place *unambiguously*—in the midst of the worshipping assembly. My preference is to point to God where He promises always to be without fail, where He offers himself to us. This is my Lutheran instinct: I know nothing but Christ and him crucified!<sup>3</sup>

Christ crucified, certainly! Yet it is *I* who know him. It is *I* who have come to know him. Can my story be told, too? I believe it very much can. But since telling the story, as opposed to merely reflecting on the story, is a new genre to me, I cannot do it without simultaneously reflecting on what the story is and how it is being told. My goal here, in other words, is to present you with certain biographical images (to speak as a Christian) and to offer a running commentary (to speak to those images also as a theologian). This goal will lead me to consider testimony under three rubrics: proclamation, community, and history.

## II. Proclamation

Let me begin with proclamation. As I reminisced about the devotional services at my grandparents' place, I was struck by how quickly the center of that image shifted from the kitchen, the table, my grandmother at the table's head—to the word. The word understood with utmost specificity: we didn't gather simply to talk about the Scriptures, we didn't just study the Scriptures to get a better grasp of the text. Scripture wasn't *just* being explicated, expounded, and explained so that we might all go away richer in knowledge, intellectually stimulated, and morally encouraged, each of us sent away with a gobbet to chew on for the next couple of days. No, the word was being proclaimed. And what that meant in the first place was that this house service was a time of rest. We were at rest, and something was being done to us. A Gospel narrative was read, and then in the words of the sermon, through the mouth of my grandmother, the word repeatedly announced itself, saying: "All this is for you! All this for you!"

What still strikes me in that image even after all these years is the overwhelming sense of peace. The kitchen—the kitchen!—seemed no longer a welter of activity and the busy hub of farm life. We were no longer in martial-law Poland (1981–1983). Something was taking place in our very hearing. God was speaking His "Let there be!" and His "Amen!" When I think back to this image, very much part of *my* story, I realize now that much more took place on those weekend days than God speaking His story within my own. For as God did so, as God spoke His story,



Frontispiece from Dambrowski's *Postil*

a reversal became transparent: my story was recognizably included in God's story! God's story wasn't just an incident within mine, something I got to hear about every now and then. It was rather my story that belonged to the story of God's faithfulness; my story belonged within the story of divine grace and mercy.

A Christian, theologically speaking, does not really have a story of his or her own—at least not in the conventional sense. For God has looked upon my story and understood it better than I could ever understand it myself: "O Lord, thou hast searched me out and known me, Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, Thou understandest my thoughts long before" (Psalm 139). And God has relieved me of the burden, even tyranny, of my past: God Himself has assumed responsibility for my story's missteps, loose ends, dead ends, twisted plotlines, and unresolved conflicts, its vain dramas and needless sensationalism. When God said, "It is finished" (John 19:30), it was also my story that came to an end upon that hill. And now it is God Who tells my story, and as He tells it to me, so it is: "God has set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings" (Psalm 40). "[Thou, O Lord, shalt] lead me forth beside the waters of comfort... Thy loving-kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life" (Psalm 23). What then is a Christian's story but a proclamation of the work of God?

We can see this transition from story-as-burden to story-

as-proclamation, from my story to God's story, in Luther's own autobiographical account, which he wrote down a year or so before his death.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on his Reformation breakthrough, Luther begins the whole narrative as very much his story: "I lived as a monk without reproach." Now, there's very little sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll here; there is rather more floor-scrubbing, earnest study, and soul-searching. But it is very much Luther's story. And for this reason, as we suddenly become aware, the story's trajectory is by no means a given. Actually, the story is about to run into the ground under its own weight, like a television series that falls prey to overconfidence in its own meandering plot. There is no doubt what the critical reception will be: thumbs down! This leads Luther to confess: "I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners." "I was angry with God," he bursts out; God, the seemingly never-satisfied critic and judge!

And then suddenly we come upon the words, "At last, by the mercy of God..." What Luther came to understand while wrestling with Paul's Epistle to the Romans is that divine righteousness is an attribute that God communicates, bestows, and makes into His gift. "Here," Luther says, "I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates!" And having said that, Luther now goes on to proclaim "the work of God; that is, what God does in us; the power of God, with which He makes us strong; the wisdom of God, with which He makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God." In other words, though Luther began with a story of his own, he now proclaims the story of God, which God shares with us, the only story that can see our story through to a happy, ripe, and glorious conclusion.

### III. Community

My story, then, belongs within the story of God's faithfulness. This

observation points to another aspect of Christian testimony: it proclaims, but proclamation does not happen in a vacuum. Rather, where proclamation happens, a community also forms as the gathering of those called into God's peace.

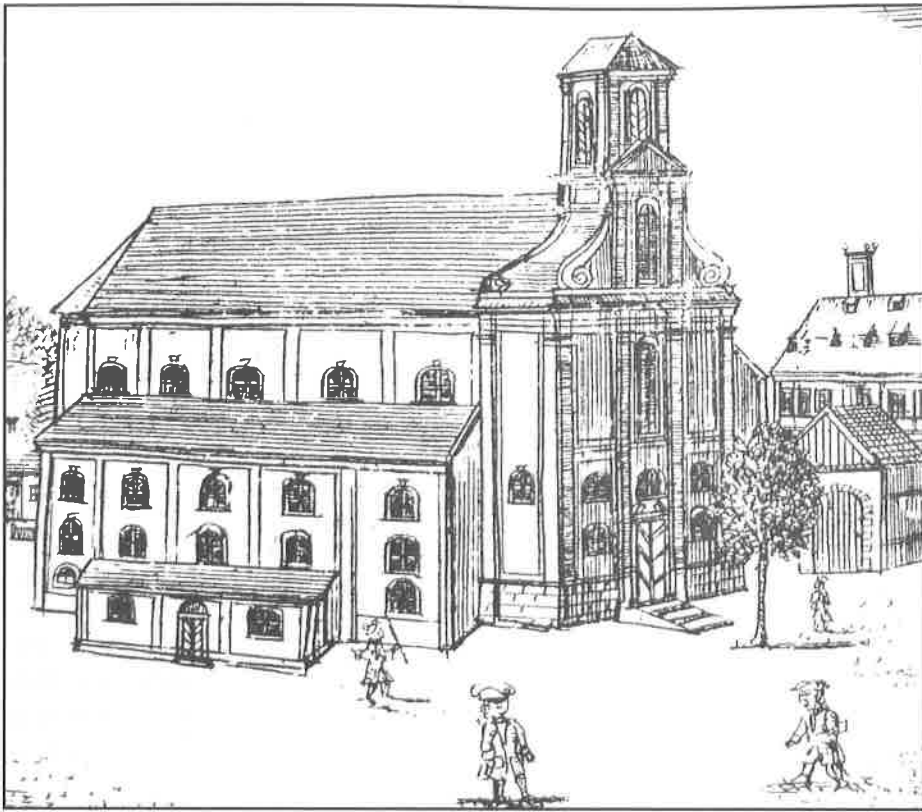
When I think back to the house services in my grandparents' home, I see not only the immediate family and the occasional friend seated in the kitchen. The postil, the book that had once cost a cow, handed down from generation to generation, was itself testimony that God's faithfulness transcends the confines of the kitchen: in space, to be sure, but also in time. My grandparents did buy religious books. But the most important books, the Bible, the hymnal, and the Dambrowski postil had been in the family for several generations. They were used often, and each use was, as it were, a glimpse into the church triumphant. The faithful departed were implicitly recognized as those who had passed on the faith and now rested in the final victory of God. If God had seen them through their race, then we too could be assured of the outcome of our pilgrimage. And what a race *they* had had to run!

The first edition of the Dambrowski postil came out in 1620, and it was followed by many others. It gradually became the beloved book of Polish-speaking Lutherans in Silesia, and by the early 1900s almost every household owned a copy, even though the books were prohibitively expensive. In the course of more than three hundred years, the postil contributed decisively to the preservation of the people's faith, and coincidentally also to the preservation of the Polish language: all this in an environment that not only was rather hostile to Lutheranism, but where the powers-that-be also demonstrated a clear and forceful preference for the German tongue.

To give a better perspective here, we need to go for a moment as far back as the Reformation itself. The dukes of Cieszyn (the area where I come from) converted to the Wittenberg theology in the middle of the sixteenth century.

As the rulers converted, so did their subjects, and by the late 1500s the entire duchy was Lutheran. Lutheranism became the confession even of the peasant folk living in remote hamlets in the mountain valleys. But tragedy struck in less than a century: in 1653 the ducal line became extinct. The duchy then passed into the hands of the Austrian Hapsburgs. As staunch Catholics, the Hapsburg rulers mandated that the entire population convert back to Roman Catholicism. The Lutherans lost all their churches. Lutheran worship was banned. Pastors were expelled. It took sixty years for the Hapsburg emperors to permit, grudgingly, the construction of one non-Catholic church in the entire territory, provided it was outside the town center, had no steeple, and its entrance did not face the street.<sup>5</sup> Another century and a half was needed before Lutherans were granted confessional equality.

The memory of the persecution, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, remains very much alive to this day. In my hometown of Ustroń, there is still a place in the woods close to the top of one of the mountains, Mount Równica, that is remembered as the location of secret Lutheran services in the seventeenth century. The spot is marked by a rock with a book and a chalice carved in it, along with the words of God to Moses, "Remove your shoes, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). In the remote past, news probably traveled by word of mouth and in deepest secrecy that an itinerant pastor was coming and a service would be held "at the stone" (as people referred to the place). I picture a group of men and women huddled together under the rustling canopy of beech trees, the men sheltering their wives and children from the cold mountain wind. All of them serious-faced, determined, with many faces furrowed by the hardships of life, yet all somehow joyful and profoundly grateful. I picture them listening attentively. I picture them with their heads



*The Jesus Church in Cieszyn*

bowed down in prayer. Then the bread and cup would be passed around. Probably no baptisms: in those days, infants were likely to be baptized by their fathers or the midwives; life was too precarious and child mortality too high to risk the uncertainty of a long wait for a pastor.

We can look at this image both as a cherished memory and an underlying historical reality. Either way, what it emphasizes is the community of faith in space and time. These are not just disparate believers, cherishing their faith in the depths of their hearts. Nor is this meeting simply a community of resistance or of human solidarity in the face of oppression. No, it is rather a community that recognizes that the gospel is more than a message. The gospel is the risen Lord at work among his people: through the mouth of the preacher who points to the cross; who by God's command speaks the absolution; who consigns the past to the past and opens up God's future. The gospel is the risen Lord touching through the water, burying and raising, birthing a people for himself. The gospel is

the risen Lord, offering his body to eat and his blood to drink. God at work, still at work!

When I think of my forebears, the community gathered at the stone, I am struck by their profound insight, or instinct, rather. Faith, however strongly it believes, however fierce its commitment, however uncompromising its stance, does not live by itself; it cannot live by itself. Faith does not look to itself. Faith does not build on itself. Rather, faith is only that which grasps, clings to another. Faith lays hold of another and this other's strength.

The apostle Peter understood only some of this truth at first (Matthew 14:22–33). He understood that it is God Who draws out faith. God alone commands that one step out of the boat and enables one to do so. God's promise, implicit in God's call, is what makes the impossible possible. It makes possible trust against all odds. What Peter did not yet understand is that faith is not a thing unto itself. For when the strong wind comes, when fears rise, faith, mere faith, will seem weak, all too human, easily over-

whelmed. Faith has no strength of its own. And it won't find such strength by rummaging for a memory of its former intensity, a memory of greater and easier days. No! Faith must be taken out of itself, out of its precarious confidence in itself. It must cling to Christ and to his strength. It must cling not to the God it remembers, God within faith, but to God as He calls and works outside faith and for the sake of faith. God at work, still at work—now—in the places where He promises we can find Him.

The Silesian Christians, who braved the wind for over sixty years and the more metaphorical tempests of life, understood what Peter did not understand. Up in the mountains, secretly gathered at a place marked by a rock, they sought the nourishment of their faith in the work of God on their behalf. There, with God in their midst, calling, touching, and feeding, they became a people of God. They became God's church.

#### *iv. History*

Testimony, as we have seen, is ultimately proclamatory. And proclamation brings with itself not just an individual story but the story of the community of faith: many stories embedded in God's story. To the community of faith belong not only those presently gathered but also the entire cloud of witnesses who also once proclaimed and passed on the faith. The church's historical dimension is inescapable: it stretches as far back as God's own faithfulness. That historical connection, like my grandmother's postil, like the rock on Mount Równica, can sometimes be very tangible. But what does this history mean for us as individual Christians and as communities? Specifically, what does history mean for us who are telling our stories within it? This is the third and final aspect of testimony that I would like to reflect on.

Faith, as I have said, does not look for God in its own memory, hankering after the spiritual elation of the past and desperately trying to conjure up

its spirit. Faith does not simply grasp God within itself, but it always grasps God outside of itself, where God is at work, still at work for us. If this were not true, Christian churches would be little more than societies of mutual admiration. Now, what applies to the believer applies to the community itself. The community is not to be self-referential, any more than is the individual believer. One of the great temptations that God's people face is to dwell on the faith of the ancestors and to try and kindle its spirit, its zeal, its very motions in ourselves. If they had it, why can't we? What happens as a result is a dehistoricization of history: history loses its historical aspect. It now becomes a law for us, the ideal of which we fall short and to which we must live up. Instead of history, we get nostalgic moralism.

But the cost is even higher, and God pays the price. When history is history, it belongs to God, Who is the God of history. When history is history, it tells the story of God's work in the lives of many. When history is history, it tells the story of God's faithfulness: of servants sent time and again to a rebellious vineyard (Matthew 21:33-46); of God's Son killed like a common criminal and raised from the dead by the Father. It tells of powers and dominions conquered, of lives transfigured by grace, of courage trusting in God's help, of God speaking through human mouths, distributing the benefits of the cross in the most unlikely places. History tells of God's faithfulness from generation to generation. The very existence and persistence of the community attests to this faithfulness of God. The community must recognize it, but the community dare not live from this history. If it tries to do so, its own past will tyrannize it. It will be stuck within itself, delivered to its own judgment upon itself, navel-gazing with no way out, God's work long brushed aside by the community's quest for itself.

What we must all remember is that we do not, in the end, stand on the shoulders of giants. Not at all! We stand by the faithfulness and mercy of



*Memorial Stone at Mount Równica*

our God, new to us every morning. The great cloud of witnesses in the Epistle to the Hebrews is only that: a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 11:1-12:2). The witnesses are not models to imitate; their lives are very much their own. But they all alike testify to the ongoing work of God, to God's provision, to God's grace. Their lives are not held up before us so that we might hijack them for the purposes of our own soul-searching and self-improvement. They are presented to us to highlight God's involvement in

history, His lordship over it, His judicial "No!" to it, and His resounding "Yes!" to His people. For if God was with them, how can He not be with us?

Awareness of history is crucial to testimony. When history is history, it tells of God's grace. But when history is reduced to example, it is always judgment: the present is now made to bear the burden of past events to live down or to live up to. To testify is to proclaim the work of God as historical, as ongoing. The Almighty showed mercy

to those who fear Him from generation to generation; and now He has also done great things for me (cf. Luke 1:49–50). To testify is therefore not to fit into a genre, to try to find your own story in someone else's. Abram under the starry sky, Saul blinded on a dusty road, Augustine the refined sex addict, Luther the pious God-hater: they all tell their stories in a way that reverberates through history. But there are countless Christians whose quiet lives, whose daily struggles, whose weaknesses forgiven, whose sins pardoned, whose earnest seeking for God's face tell this story just as well and just as eloquently. When told well, the story does not rest on conformity to a biographical genre with a requisite concoction of dramatic ingredients. It does not represent a sort of tragedy with a silver lining intended to elicit a cathartic reaction from the audience. Rather, when the story is told well, it is the announcement that God is still at work, even among us, even at the eleventh hour. God is still at work, calling us to walk on the water and saying "Trust Me!" This is a story of grace upon grace.

I remember Saturday mornings when I was seven and eight years old. I had to walk to church for religious instruction just as a cartoon version of Don Quixote was playing on television. And I was annoyed. I remember my great-grandmother teaching me prayers, and I remember the joy of being able to repeat the words after her. I remember my mother read-

ing me Bible stories in the evening. I remember the painting of the Last Supper above the altar in our church, the creases in the white tablecloth rendered with perfection, and Jesus seated in the midst of the disciples. Ever since I could remember, I was surrounded by saints, younger and older, who in the rather bleak reality of Communist Poland believed with quiet persistence. And I remember one more thing: I remember becoming aware that Jesus Christ was not just their God but also mine. My Lord and my God! In the core of my being; mine, because He had first claimed me. I was awakening to the fact that the word spoken over me in baptism years before was indeed God's promise *to me*, and that God had actually long since made good on it. And I remember peace. The rest is history. And because it is history, it has forgiveness, lots of forgiveness; and mercies, mercies new *every* morning. But I won't bore you with the details.

#### v. A Final Word

This essay has been both a testimony, or at least some autobiographical glimpses, and a Lutheran reflection on what it means to testify. If I have left you with too little drama, too few narrow escapes, it is by design. When I tried to tell about myself, I realized this narrative was a story about Christ proclaimed right from the get-go. I realized further that the story makes no sense without the faithful community of which I was a part. And I

realized that the very presence of the community testified to the ongoing work of God, faithfully distributing His gifts again and again from generation to generation. If I'm leaving you unsatisfied, I have good news for you. The story isn't over yet! For God is still at work, and He will see it through to the appointed end! His will be the final Amen! And I praise God that we are now in this story together. **LF**

PIOTR J. MAŁYSZ is Assistant Professor of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. This essay was originally delivered as a chapel message for Beeson's Christian Testimony series in the spring semester of 2014.

#### Notes

1. Samuel Dambrowski, *Kazania albo wykłady porządne...* (Toruń, 1620), followed by some fifteen editions, the last in 1896.

2. "Ojcowski Dom, to istny raj," written by the Silesian poet Jan Kubisz (1848–1929).

3. Compare I Corinthians 2:2 and II Corinthians 10:5.

4. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545), *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 34:336.

5. This was the Jesus Church (Kościół Jezusowy) in the town of Cieszyn. Its construction began in 1709 on the basis of the Treaty of Altranstädt (1707) between the King of Sweden, Charles XII, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Joseph I.