

Luther's *Nova Lingua* against the Grammar of Death

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1. Introduction: The Culture of Death as a Linguistic Crisis

THE CONTEMPORARY WEST OFTEN IMAGINES that its deepest disagreements concern matters of ethics. It interprets disputes about abortion, euthanasia, trans-humanist enhancement, and the management of dying as arguments that call for clearer reasoning or more coherent moral frameworks.¹ I contend that these controversies arise not because we lack moral clarity but because we inhabit a linguistic world in which the grammar required to receive our creaturely limits as gift has largely disappeared. A culture that no longer possesses the forms of speech by which birth and death may be welcomed as revelatory events will inevitably treat these events as intrusions upon autonomy, as occasions for management rather than occasions for reception.²

The problem, therefore, is not first moral but grammatical.³ Our prevailing grammar takes reality to be structured by possibility. Accordingly, obligation is thought to imply ability, and even divine or transcendental agency is expected to conform to the conceptual forms through which we understand ourselves.⁴ A society governed by such assumptions will be unable to speak of death truthfully, for death will appear only as negation, and life will be construed merely as the arena for the expansion or contraction of human projects. To speak of life as a divine gift requires more than a revision of moral premises; it requires a different *form* of speech.⁵ The *nova lingua* of faith does not supplement the grammar of autonomy but contradicts it at its root,⁶ for it arises not from the agent who calculates possibilities but from the God who speaks realities. In Luther's terms, theology must learn to speak "outside every sphere,"⁷ not because it abandons reason but because the act that grants meaning here is not human predication but divine address. Only this new speech—this language formed by promise rather than project—can disclose the creature as received, dependent, and beloved. Within such a linguistic universe, abortion and

euthanasia cannot even appear as moral aberrations; they emerge instead as the predictable outcomes of the conceptual structures that govern public discourse.⁸

Luther recognized the difficulty of speaking meaningfully under such conditions. In *De servo arbitrio*, he discerned that the structures of reasoning that shaped Erasmus's claims were not merely mistaken in their conclusions but were themselves incapable of sustaining theological speech.⁹ Luther's response did not consist in adjusting Erasmus's position or supplying a more nuanced account of human power. Instead, he identified the grammar that rendered Erasmus' argument plausible and exposed it as a grammar that cannot accommodate divine agency. In doing so, he inaugurated what later writers have called the *nova lingua*, a form of speech grounded not in the conceptual possibilities of autonomous reason but in the divine act that both reveals and gives what it signifies.¹⁰

Andrea Vestrucci has recently shown, by formal reconstruction, that this break is not rhetorical but structural. The old grammar is governed by modal and deontic conditions that determine how concepts may be combined and what counts as a meaningful assertion. Luther does not refine this grammar but replaces it with one in which freedom is not possibility but promise, in which obligation does not imply ability, and in which divine action determines the meaning of language rather than being determined by it. The result is a linguistic world in which the gospel is not an exception to an already stable conceptual order but the act that establishes the very order within which theological concepts can be spoken at all.¹¹

If this is correct, then the contemporary culture of death is best understood as the cultural embodiment of a grammar that Luther dismantled in the sixteenth century. The problem is not merely that modern culture rejects Christian morality but that it *cannot speak* in ways adequate to the realities that morality presupposes.¹² Having absorbed the post-Enlightenment conviction—now axiomatic in much analytic philosophy after Sellars—that experience itself is shaped by the concepts we possess, our culture inhabits a grammar in which birth and death can appear only within the horizon of self-sovereignty. A grammar ordered to autonomy cannot receive birth or death except as threats to self-possession; it cannot sustain a world in which life is received as gift and death entrusted to God. It can sustain only a world in which both life and death must be managed, because they can be spoken only within the conceptual space that autonomy permits.

The church's pro-life witness must therefore be understood not as a moral intervention within public dispute but as the enactment of another grammar. It is the speech of a community whose language is grounded in the divine act by which the Word gives reality and whose linguistic world is ordered by promise rather than possibility. Such a language can speak *pulvis es* ("you are dust") without resignation, can receive natality and mortality as occasions of divine disclosure, and can confess

the resurrection of the body without reducing it to metaphor or moral aspiration. In speaking thus, the church not only proclaims life but also exposes the inadequacy of the grammar by which the surrounding culture attempts to speak of life and death.

II. Luther's *Nova Lingua* and the Formal Break with the Old Grammar

READERS OF *DE SERVO ARBITRIO* OFTEN TREAT the work as a polemical exchange with Erasmus, yet its deeper significance lies in the way Luther identifies a prior difficulty concerning the conditions under which theological language may be spoken at all. Erasmus articulates his position within a conceptual universe governed by the priority of possibility, by the claim that obligation is meaningful only when ability is present, and by the assumption that divine action must conform to the categories through which human agency is ordinarily grasped. These assumptions do not merely inform particular judgments; they shape the entire space in which theological reasoning takes place. Luther therefore does not challenge isolated conclusions within this conceptual field. He challenges the intelligibility of the field itself.¹³

The logic that governs Erasmus's reasoning is discursive. It presupposes that concepts possess a structure independent of divine action and that theological meaning is achieved by locating revelatory claims within a pre-existing conceptual order. Luther's central insight is that revelation does not enter such an order as one datum among others. Revelation creates the linguistic and conceptual world in which its own meaning may be received. The old grammar is governed by the entailments of autonomy; the new grammar arises from the divine act that addresses and constitutes the creature. In this new grammar, meaning is secured not by the coherence of concepts but by the divine speech that gives what it declares.¹⁴

Vestrucci has argued that this shift must be understood formally. Luther does not adjust the modal or deontic structures inherited from the older grammar. He replaces them with a grammar that cannot be generated from the old by conceptual extension. It is not an enrichment of what preceded it but a different order of language grounded in a different order of causality. In the old grammar, divine action must be conceptualized according to human categories. In the new, divine action establishes the categories within which the creature may understand itself and speak truthfully about God.¹⁵

This new language does not negate the old in the sense of abolishing it. It presupposes the old as the material through which it is formed. Luther is unequivocal that the gospel does not unfold from the law, yet the gospel cannot be spoken except through linguistic forms shaped by the law. In this respect, the *nova lingua* arises neither *ex nihilo* nor as a dialectical development from the old. It arises through an act that grants new meaning to the linguistic material inherited from the old, so

that familiar terms may now signify realities that exceed the conceptual capacities that formerly governed them.¹⁶

The emergence of this new language may be understood only by attending to the way revelation alters the conditions of signification. In the older grammar, meaning is achieved when concepts are arranged in patterns judged coherent by autonomous reason. In the new grammar, meaning is granted by the divine act that stands behind the words and, in standing behind them, determines their truth. The divine Word speaks reality into being, and human language attains its referential force only by participating in that speech. The grammar of possibility and obligation is thus replaced by a grammar of promise, for promise is not an extension of possibility but the establishment of a new order in which the creature may receive what it could never produce.

Luther's insistence that the gospel is not an extension of the law must be interpreted in light of this alteration. The law orders human existence within the structures of creation, and its grammar is accordingly tied to human capacities and their failures. The gospel, however, is not tied to this order. It addresses the creature in a manner that does not presuppose a latent ability within the creature to receive it. The gospel creates the very capacity it commands.¹⁷ Luther's claim that the divine promise "does what it says" is therefore not rhetorical but grammatical. Were the promise not to do what it says, the grammar of the gospel would collapse into the grammar of the law, and the *nova lingua* would be absorbed into the very conceptual order it was meant to overcome.

For this reason, the *nova lingua* is a language in which divine action grounds both meaning and reception. It is not that the creature possesses an antecedent conceptual order into which revelation may then insert new content. It is that revelation provides the conditions under which the creature may think at all about God's relation to the world. Luther recognizes that language, when left to its own conditions, will invariably attempt to fit divine action into the structures that govern creaturely agency. God will be understood as a magnified version of the human actor, divine causality as an intensified form of human willing. The *nova lingua* prevents this reduction by embedding creaturely speech within the divine act itself. In this way, the new grammar does not oppose the old but reorders it. Words that once bore one set of entailments now bear another, not because their definitions have changed, but because the act that grants them meaning is different.¹⁸

In Vestrucci's analysis, this shift marks a transition from a language governed by conceptual determination to a language governed by formal determination.¹⁹ In the old grammar, the meaning of a statement is determined by the conceptual relations among its terms. In the new grammar, the meaning of a statement is determined by the divine act that renders the statement felicitous. Felicity is not merely pragmatic.

It is metaphysical. A statement is felicitous when spoken within the conditions created by the divine promise, and it is true when the divine act grants it reality. The distinction between felicity and truth persists, but it is now theologically interpreted: felicity belongs to the internal order of the gospel, while truth belongs to the divine act that interprets creation.

This explains why Luther consistently resists attempts to treat the promise as a proposition that might be evaluated independently of faith. Within the old grammar, a proposition is judged true when it corresponds to what already is. Within the new grammar, the promise does not correspond to a prior reality. It brings that reality into being. Its truth is inseparable from its performative character. Spoken by God, it constitutes what it declares. Meaning is no longer a function of conceptual organization but of divine agency.

The consequences for theological language are therefore profound. The *nova lingua* does not merely alter doctrinal content. It alters the very possibility of doctrine. It establishes a linguistic world in which creaturely concepts may be taken up, reordered, and granted new significance. This is not a rejection of conceptuality but its transformation. The law remains, and its grammar remains operative, but its function is to disclose the creature's incapacity to speak truthfully about God apart from the divine act. In this way, the law prepares not by conceptual anticipation but by revealing the limits of all conceptual spaces not constituted by the Word.

Luther's *nova lingua* is therefore not an alternative vocabulary within the same conceptual horizon. It is the formal reconstitution of the horizon itself. Promise, rather than possibility, becomes the fundamental category. Divine action, rather than human ability, determines the meaning of theological claims. And human language, rather than standing apart from divine agency, participates in the act by which the Word speaks the world into being.

The implications for contemporary culture follow immediately. A culture that speaks within a grammar of possibility cannot understand promise except as metaphor. A culture that organizes moral reasoning around the entailment that obligation requires ability cannot grasp the character of divine command as gift. And a culture that refuses to receive death except as negation cannot hear the gospel's declaration that life is given precisely where death appears.²⁰ To recover the *nova lingua* is therefore to recover the means by which our speech may again be anchored in the divine act that gives reality rather than in the conceptual structures that attempt to secure it.

III. The Modal and Deontic Grammar of the Contemporary West

THE CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES THAT LUTHER identified in Erasmus have not vanished. They have migrated into the grammar by which modern Western culture understands

human agency, moral responsibility, and the meaning of life itself. Although the explicit theological content of Erasmian reasoning has faded, the underlying modal and deontic assumptions remain operative. What has changed is not the grammar but the world in which this grammar is employed. It is now a secular world, yet it retains conceptual habits that were originally formed within a theological context and renders them absolute within an immanent frame.

The most fundamental of these assumptions is the identification of freedom with possibility. In contemporary discourse, to say that an individual is free is to say that the individual possesses a range of potential actions that remain open until chosen. Freedom is measured by the width of the field of possibility rather than by the character of the act that orders a person's life toward others or toward God. Any constraint on this field is treated as a threat, and any condition that limits the capacity for choice is regarded as a diminishment of agency. Under such a grammar, freedom is conceived not as reception but as control, and life is judged according to its ability to sustain autonomous decision-making.

A similar structure governs the deontic sphere. The belief that obligation implies ability, which Luther rejected as both logically and theologically incoherent, now functions as an unexamined axiom in public discourse. Moral claims are evaluated not according to their truth but according to whether they can be integrated into the domain of human capability. If a moral norm requires the reception of life or the acceptance of death in ways that transcend the field of autonomous choice, the norm is judged unreasonable. What cannot be chosen cannot be morally demanded, and what cannot be morally demanded cannot be recognized as an authentic obligation. The consequence is that moral discourse collapses into a discourse about capacities, and capacities are themselves measured by the standards of individual self-direction.

These modal and deontic assumptions do not stand alone. They sustain a typology of human life in which birth and death are interpreted as conditions to be managed. Birth is not received as the appearance of a life whose meaning precedes the structures of choice but as an event whose significance is determined by the desires, fears, and plans of those already present. Death is not received as the moment in which the creature's life is entrusted to God, but as a failure of agency that must be forestalled, mitigated, or, in some cases, eliminated through the exercise of self-determination. The imagination required to see death as the site of divine promise has no place within this typology. Death is understood only in terms of its negating power, and life is understood only in terms of its instrumental value.

The contemporary culture of death therefore arises not from a rejection of morality but from the kind of morality that prevails. It arises from a moral vocabulary

that has lost the ability to speak in terms other than those of autonomy and control. When moral discourse is governed by the grammar of possibility and capability, the vulnerable cannot be received as gifts but must be interpreted as burdens. The unborn child appears only as a potentiality or an interruption. The dying human being appears only as a diminishing agent or as a problem for others to solve. The cultural logic does not intentionally aim at death; it simply lacks the conceptual resources to interpret life differently.

This grammar is further reinforced by technological rationality. The modern imagination is shaped by the conviction that human beings possess an obligation to overcome the limitations imposed by nature. When possibility is equated with freedom, and when technology expands possibility, technology appears as the guarantor of freedom. The management of birth and death becomes a moral imperative, for failure to manage is perceived as a failure to exercise properly the autonomy by which the individual is defined. The technological sphere becomes the arena in which the grammar of possibility finds its most forceful expression. Life is evaluated according to its malleability, and death is evaluated according to its resistance to control.

The result is a world in which the grammar of autonomy reigns even when explicit commitments to autonomy are questioned. The secular West does not need to articulate a theory of freedom in order to be governed by one. Its cultural practices presuppose the modal and deontic structures that Luther identified as inimical to the gospel. These structures persist because they organize the world in a manner that accords with the immanent desires of human beings who seek to avoid dependence and vulnerability. Such a grammar cannot but produce a culture of death, for death is the moment in which all autonomy fails and in which the creature cannot avoid the truth of its own finitude.

The task of the present argument is therefore to display this grammar in its conceptual shape so that its theological inadequacy may be seen. A culture that speaks only within this grammar cannot receive the realities that theological language seeks to name. It cannot hear promise except as metaphor, cannot accept dependence except as threat, and cannot recognize life except as a project whose value must be continually justified. To speak life truthfully, another grammar is required, one grounded not in possibility but in promise, not in the entailment that ability must accompany obligation, but in the divine act that gives before the creature can receive.

This new grammar is the subject of the next section, for it is the Spirit's act of interpretation that makes theological speech possible and that enables language to name death and life not according to the logic of autonomy but according to the logic of divine gift.

IV. The Typology of Birth and Death in a Secular Grammar

THE GRAMMAR OF POSSIBILITY AND AUTONOMY does not merely generate particular moral failures. It yields a world in which birth and death can no longer appear as events given in themselves but only as interruptions of the self's ongoing project of managing and extending its agency. When a culture understands freedom as the expansion of options and obligation as constrained by ability, the events that mark the beginning and end of life resist integration. They emerge at the edges of the conceptual field, and because they cannot be spoken within its grammar, they appear as problems to be solved rather than disclosures of meaning. Birth and death stand at the borders of a linguistic world that has lost the capacity to interpret its own limits.

In this respect, death functions as the primary limit-condition of a secular age. It marks the point at which the grammar of autonomy reaches its terminus, for the dying person cannot preserve sovereignty over possibility. To be dying is to be acted upon in ways that the cultural imagination cannot assimilate. The dying body is not a field of choices but a reality that resists choice, and so it is interpreted as a failure of the very structures that define personhood. When life is rendered meaningful by its capacity for self-direction, death becomes the negation of meaning. It becomes unintelligible except as a medical or technological challenge or as a burden imposed upon others.

This typological crisis becomes still sharper when death is no longer imagined within a horizon shaped by divine promise.²¹ In earlier Christian cultures, death was interpreted not as an absolute negation but as a site in which divine action would be manifest. The grammar of promise allowed the church to speak of death without denying its reality and to speak of life without reducing it to the expression of human will. The contemporary secular grammar, however, excludes such possibilities. It treats death as a brute fact that must be managed or, if management fails, concealed. The cultural imperative to maintain autonomy extends to the very end of life, and the inability to sustain autonomy is interpreted as a diminishment of personhood itself.

A similar crisis emerges at the beginning of life. Natality, which Hannah Arendt identified as the fundamental condition of human existence, no longer appears as the arrival of a life whose meaning precedes human decision.²² It appears instead as an interruption within a system organized around established projects and the management of risk. In the absence of a grammar capable of receiving life as gift, the unborn child is interpreted through categories of burden, limitation, and potentiality. The child becomes an entity whose value is not intrinsic but derivative, depending upon whether it fits within the field of possibility that adults regard as desirable.

Thus, both birth and death become unintelligible within the dominant typology.²³ They indicate realities that the contemporary grammar cannot assimilate. The result

is not merely moral confusion but a deep inability to speak truthfully about the fundamental conditions of creaturely existence. A society that cannot speak truthfully about birth and death cannot speak truthfully about life, for life is framed by these two limits and receives its meaning in relation to them.

This typological crisis points back to the deeper theological crisis identified earlier. The secular age's inability to receive death without denial is the direct consequence of a grammar that has severed language from divine action. When the meaning of a life is determined solely by internal capacities and external possibilities, the moment in which these capacities fail will appear as a collapse of meaning. Death then becomes something that must be hidden, euphemized, or eliminated. The grammar cannot allow death to speak. It cannot allow the event to disclose anything. It cannot allow the creature to be addressed by a promise that does not depend upon capability.

Under such conditions, the typology of death becomes inseparable from the typology of control. The dying human being is surrounded by technologies that promise to sustain autonomy, and when those technologies fail, new technologies arise to supply an exit from dependence. Euthanasia appears not as a rejection of life but as the logical extension of the grammar that defines life as self-direction. The crisis is not primarily one of moral intention but of conceptual possibility. A grammar that cannot speak of death as promise can speak of it only as negation, and in that negation, the desire for control becomes absolute.

The typology of birth follows the same pattern. Here too the grammar of autonomy transforms a reality once received into a reality that must be chosen. The unborn child becomes a potentiality, and potentiality becomes subject to evaluation. The result is that life at its beginning is spoken of in terms of risk, burden, and cost. The grammar offers no other way of speaking, and so the culture cannot imagine another way of receiving.

The typological crisis of secular modernity therefore reveals the deeper need for a language capable of receiving finitude as gift. Only a grammar shaped by divine promise can speak of birth and death truthfully. Only such a grammar allows death to be seen as the moment in which God's act is fully determinative and life to be received as the reality granted by that same act.²⁴ Without this grammar, the culture remains trapped within the conceptual field that Luther dismantled. It remains unable to speak life precisely where life most needs to be spoken.

The next section will therefore turn explicitly to the grammar of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit's act of interpretation that renders theological language capable of naming death without denial and life without illusion.

V. The Spirit's Grammar and the Reconstitution of Speech

IF THE TYPOLOGICAL CRISIS OF SECULAR modernity arises from a grammar that can no longer speak truthfully of birth or death, the theological response must begin with an account of the way language itself is transformed by the divine act. The grammar inaugurated in Luther's *nova lingua* does not consist simply in a new set of terms or a fresh conceptual arrangement. It is the result of an act in which the Spirit interprets the creature to itself by making the divine Word present. In this act, language is not merely clarified; it is reconstituted. It becomes capable of speaking of realities that cannot be named within the structures of autonomy, and it receives the capacity to say what would otherwise remain inexpressible.

For this reason, the *nova lingua* cannot be understood apart from the Spirit. Revelation is not an event that delivers information to be processed by an already existing linguistic faculty. It is an act in which the Spirit grants the conditions under which the Word may be heard and under which human speech may participate in what the Word gives. This participation is not metaphoric. It is the theological form of the creature's dependence, for the creature does not possess within itself the means by which divine realities may be spoken. The Spirit does not supplement human linguistic capacity but creates the very possibility of theological meaning.

At this point, the distinction between felicity and truth becomes theologically significant. In the secular grammar, truth is judged by correspondence or coherence, and felicity is relegated to the pragmatic sphere. In the theological grammar, felicity marks the condition under which language is rightly ordered to divine action, and truth marks the divine act that renders that language effective. The Spirit authorizes the speech of the church by placing it within the space opened by the divine Word. Without this authorization, theological language may remain grammatically well formed, but it cannot secure what it proclaims. It may gesture toward life and promise, but it cannot speak them.

To say that the Spirit interprets is not to claim that the Spirit clarifies meaning in the manner of a commentator. It is to confess that the Spirit grants the creature the capacity to hear the Word as Word, thus granting the capacity to speak of God in a way that is bound to God's act rather than to conceptual possibility.²⁵ Interpretation is not the extraction of meaning from a text; it is the divine act by which the text becomes revelation. In the act of interpretation, the Spirit gives what the language declares. This giving grounds the external truth of theological claims, for the creature cannot, by its own powers, verify the realities to which theological language refers. The Spirit alone secures this reference by uniting the creature's language with the presence of the Logos.

Within this grammar, statements about life and death take on a meaning they cannot otherwise possess. To speak *pulvis es* is not merely to utter a judgment about human mortality but to participate in a divine act that names the creature truthfully. Such naming is not destructive. It is gracious, for it places the creature within the horizon of promise. Likewise, to speak of resurrection is not to speculate about the prolongation of biological life but to confess the act in which God overcomes death. The Spirit's interpretation grants these statements their referential force. Without the Spirit, they remain pious or aspirational; with the Spirit, they become truthful.

This account of linguistic participation is central to any theological response to the culture of death. Without it, the church risks speaking within the secular grammar rather than from its own. It risks engaging in moral argumentation that presupposes the very conditions it seeks to challenge. The Spirit's grammar does not engage the grammar of autonomy on its own terms. It speaks from a different order, one in which life is given rather than managed and in which death is interpreted rather than denied.

To speak life truthfully, then, is not to offer a more persuasive moral argument. It is to speak from within the act by which the Spirit unites creaturely language with the divine Word. Such speech has a different character. It does not persuade by conceptual force; it bears witness by participating in divine reality. This witness is not abstract. It becomes concrete precisely in those moments where the secular grammar fails, for it is in the face of death that the promise of life becomes visible. The Spirit grants the church the capacity to speak in these moments, not because the church possesses superior moral insight, but because it participates in the grammar of the Word.

The next section will therefore turn to the public character of this grammar, for the church's witness in the present moment is not the dissemination of moral propositions but the enactment of a linguistic world grounded in divine promise. It is in this enactment that the truth of life becomes visible, and it is here that the culture's denial of death is most profoundly challenged.

VI. The Public Grammar of the Church

IF THE SPIRIT GRANTS THE CONDITIONS UNDER which theological language may be spoken, the church becomes the community in which this language is embodied. Its speech is not an alternative moral discourse within the same conceptual order but the public manifestation of another grammar. This grammar is not chosen. It is received. It arises from the Spirit's act of interpretation and is enacted whenever the church speaks in the confidence that the divine Word gives what it promises. In this manner, the church becomes visible not primarily through its institutions or its programs but through the form of life constituted by the language it speaks.

Such speech does not aim to persuade by appealing to shared conceptual assumptions. It seeks rather to reveal another order of meaning. Its force derives not from its ability to move within the grammar of the liberal order but from its ability to speak in a way that cannot be absorbed by that order. When the church speaks of life, it does not refer to the expansion of possibilities or the preservation of autonomy. It refers to the divine act by which life is given, sustained, and redeemed. When it speaks of death, it does not describe a failure of agency; it acknowledges a moment in which the creature is addressed by God. The church's speech, therefore, exposes the inadequacy of secular discourse by offering a grammar in which birth and death retain their theological significance.

This public grammar is not primarily doctrinal, though doctrine is essential to it. Nor is it primarily ethical, though it has ethical consequences. It is liturgical in the broad sense that it arises from the worship of the triune God. In worship, the church is constituted by the Word that speaks it into being. It hears the promise that interprets its life, and in hearing that promise, it receives the language by which it may bear witness in the world. The liturgy is therefore not an internal practice confined within sacred walls.²⁶ It is the matrix from which the church's public speech emerges. It is the place where the grammar of divine promise is learned, rehearsed, and enacted.

In this respect, the church's witness cannot be reduced to moral advocacy. Moral advocacy remains within the grammar of the surrounding culture and seeks to change outcomes by persuasion or legislation. The church's witness proceeds differently. It speaks by manifesting a form of life in which death is not denied and life is not possessed. It speaks by acting in ways that presuppose the reality of divine promise. It speaks by interpreting weakness, dependence, natality, and mortality as moments in which God's action is disclosed. This interpretive stance cannot be abstracted from its theological basis. It is grounded in the Spirit's grammar, which gives the church the capacity to understand death and life as realities interpreted by God.

Such a witness does not evade public responsibilities. It confronts the culture of death directly, yet it does so by exposing the grammar that makes such a culture possible. It shows that the grammar of autonomy cannot sustain a meaningful account of birth or death, for it hovers above the concrete givenness of life in what Luther once called *walking in the clouds*. The church, by contrast, speaks a different grammar. That grammar is not speculative. It is performative. It is enacted whenever the church speaks the Word that speaks it into being, and in speaking that Word, it reveals a world ordered not by possibility but by promise.²⁷

This public enactment is most visible in those moments when the secular grammar reaches its limits. When the church stands beside the dying, it refuses to speak in the language of negation. It does not interpret death as the failure of life but as the moment in which life is entrusted to the One who gives it. When the church

receives the unborn child, it refuses to speak in the language of burden or potentiality. It speaks instead in the language of gift. These acts are not moral gestures. They are grammatical enactments. They reveal that life is not defined by capacity and that death is not defined by negation. They reveal that the grammar of promise can interpret what the grammar of autonomy cannot.

In this way, the church becomes a sign of contradiction. It speaks a language unintelligible to the prevailing order and yet capable of naming the realities that this order cannot bear to acknowledge. Its witness is not an argument but a display. It displays a world in which divine promise is determinative and in which human speech participates in the act that grants life. Such a witness cannot be confined to private belief. It is a public performance of a linguistic world grounded in divine action, and it is this performance that challenges the culture of death at its foundations.

The next section will bring this movement to its concrete conclusion by showing how the church's pro-life witness, understood in this way, is not an ethical position within a contested public square but the enactment of a grammar in which the Word speaks life where the world speaks negation.

VII. Pro-Life Witness as the Enactment of a Grammar of Life

THE ARGUMENT OF THIS ESSAY HAS BEEN that *the crisis of contemporary Western culture is not first ethical but grammatical*. A society that cannot receive the givenness of birth or the finality of death cannot sustain a coherent account of life, for life is framed by these two limits and derives its meaning from the way they are interpreted. When life is understood as the expression of autonomy and when death is seen as the negation of that autonomy, the culture's moral failures become inevitable, because the grammar that shapes its discourse cannot allow these realities to appear truthfully. They become problems to be solved or burdens to be managed. They cannot be received.

The church's witness does not address this crisis by offering an alternative ethical platform. It addresses it by enacting a language grounded in divine promise rather than in human possibility. Such enactment does not occur only in doctrinal statements or in moral teaching, although both are necessary. It occurs whenever the church speaks from within the act by which the Spirit unites creaturely language to the divine Word. In this speech, the church reveals a world in which life is given rather than achieved and in which death is interpreted by God rather than by the conceptual structures of autonomy.

This witness becomes particularly clear at the points where the secular grammar reaches its limits. When the church stands before the reality of death, it refuses to adopt the language that treats death as failure. It speaks *pulvis es*, not as a decla-

ration of futility but as a naming of the creature that places its existence within the horizon of promise. Such speech does not deny death. It acknowledges death as the moment in which the creature's life is entrusted to God. Conversely, when the church receives the unborn child, it refuses to speak in terms of potentiality or burden. It receives the child as gift, and in receiving the gift, it reveals that life has its meaning not from the desires of others but from the act by which God gives it.

These practices are not moral assertions. They arise from a grammar that interprets reality differently. They display the theological world in which life is not owned and death is not feared. Such a world cannot be made visible by argument alone. It must be enacted. The church enacts it whenever it speaks and acts from within the promise that sustains its existence. The witness that results does not persuade by demonstrating the insufficiency of the grammar of autonomy. It persuades by manifesting a grammar in which the creature's dependence upon God is not a limitation but the very condition of its life.²⁸

This form of witness exposes the culture's inability to speak truthfully of its own condition. It shows that the grammar of autonomy cannot sustain a world in which human beings can be received as gifts. It shows that this grammar cannot interpret death except as negation and cannot interpret suffering except as failure. It shows that life, when constructed within this grammar, becomes a project that must continually justify itself. By enacting a different grammar, the church reveals a different world.

For this reason, the church's pro-life witness cannot be reduced to a set of positions within the public square. It is a public enactment of a grammar that speaks life where the world sees only negation. It is the performance of a linguistic world grounded in the divine act, a world in which birth and death are interpreted not by their relation to autonomy but by their relation to God. It is the manifestation of a community that speaks not from its own resources but from the Spirit who interprets the world through the Word.

In this way, the church offers the culture what the culture cannot supply for itself. It offers a grammar capable of receiving life as gift and death as promise. It offers a linguistic world in which the creature may be understood in relation to God rather than in relation to its own possibilities. It offers a form of speech that does not deny the reality of death but declares that death has been taken up into the life of God. Such speech is not an ethical alternative. It is truth. And in speaking it, the church bears witness to the world that life is not reducible to capacity and death is not reducible to negation.

This grammar, grounded in the divine promise, is the only grammar capable of speaking life truthfully in a culture that has forgotten how to speak of death without denying it. It is the grammar the church must learn again, for only in speaking from

within it can the church reveal to the world that its deepest crisis is not moral failure but the loss of the language by which life may be named as gift and death as promise.

VIII. Conclusion

IN THE END, THE QUESTION BEFORE US IS NOT whether the culture will adopt a different set of moral judgments but whether it can recover the language in which life may be received as a divine gift. The grammar that now governs public speech cannot sustain such reception, for it has severed the bond between language and the act of God that gives reality to what words declare.²⁹ A culture that speaks within the grammar of autonomy cannot name birth except as interruption or death except as negation, and it cannot name life except as a project that must justify itself. Yet the church continues to speak in a grammar formed by promise rather than by possibility, and in speaking thus, it reveals that the crisis of our age is not finally the collapse of moral consensus but the disappearance of the linguistic world in which human beings may understand themselves truthfully before God. The task, therefore, is not to refine the grammar of autonomy but to inhabit the grammar of the Spirit, for only in that grammar can the creature be named as dust and yet beloved, and only in that grammar can life be spoken where the world sees only death.³⁰ In that speech—in the language that arises from the Word who interprets creation—the church bears witness that life is given, that death is taken up into promise, and that a world which has forgotten how to speak truthfully may yet learn again to hear.

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Notes

1. See Charles Camosy, *Resisting Throwaway Culture: How a Consistent Life Ethic Can Unite a Fractured People* (New York: New City Press, 2019).
2. Without the proper words, we cannot inhabit the proper world. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.6: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt.” (“The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”)
3. Because this issue is not primarily one of ethical intervention, the church cannot be what the ELCA's *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* document imagines, that is, that the church commits itself to being a community of moral deliberation, and that it will

support its members in their moral deliberation and act to influence society through moral deliberation. See ELCA, *Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*, 1991, p. 5.

4. Luther speaks explicitly about the impossibility of mapping theological truth to philosophical possibility. See Luther's "Verbum caro factum est," in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 39.II:3.3-4: "In theologia verum est, verbum esse carnem factum; in philosophia simpliciter impossibile et absurdum." Hereafter WA; Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament IV*, ed. by Martin E. Lehmann, vol. 38, p. 239 in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–): "In theology it is true that the Word was made flesh; in philosophy the statement is simply impossible and absurd."
5. Luther spoke of the language of faith as grounded not in the conceptual structures of philosophy but in the divine act that gives reality to what it declares. Thus, in his 1539 *Verbum caro factum est* he insists that philosophy must remain in its own sphere, for theology requires a genuinely new speech: "Rectius ergo fecerimus, si dialectica seu philosophia in sua sphaera relictis discamus loqui novis linguis in regno fidei extra omnem sphaeram" (WA 39.II:5.35–36); LW 38:242: "We would act more correctly if we left dialectic and philosophy in their own area and learned to speak in a new language in the realm of faith apart from every sphere." In the *Disputation de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (1540) he asserts the semantic transformation that occurs when words are spoken in Christo: "Certum est tamen, omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere in eadem re significata. Nam creatura veteris linguae usu et in aliis rebus significat rem a divinitate separatam infinitis modis" (WA 39.II:94.17–20). English: "For "creature" in the old usage of language and in other subjects signifies a thing separated from divinity by infinite degrees." Martin Luther, "Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ (Circular Disputation) (February 28, 1540)," in *Luther's Works: Disputations II*, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Christopher Boyd Brown, vol. 73, *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 255.

Luther applies this *nova lingua* with particular force to the way Christians speak of life and death. In his 1545 *Sermon on Cantate Sunday*, he declares that the gospel overturns the natural judgments of reason: "Sic nobiscum loquitur nova lingua: qui effertur mortuus, sol nicht heißen: es ist verloren." (WA 49: 726.11–13). The new tongue refuses the verdict of *sensus communis*, renaming the dead not as "lost" but as those sown in hope. Elsewhere in his *Genesisvorlesung (Lectures on Genesis)*, he notes—in a passage frequently misquoted in modern collections—that what we call "life" is in truth a continual movement toward death: "Nam etsi vitam, quam hic vivimus, non volumus appellare mortem, tamen profecto aliud nihil est quam perpetuus cursus ad mortem." (WA 42:146.21-22). LW 1:196: "Although we do not wish to call the life we live here a death, nevertheless it surely is nothing else than a continuous journey toward death." A parallel dynamic pervades the *Genesisvorlesung*, where the inherited linguistic and conceptual resources of *ratio* are shown to be inadequate for the works of God, whose creative Word brings about realities that natural reason cannot name without contradiction. Luther repeatedly argues that the Spirit must teach the church how to speak truthfully of God's acts—revealing, for example, that what reason calls "impossible" (e.g., creation *ex nihilo*, divine preservation, or the creature's total dependence upon God) is in fact the most certain truth

- of all (e.g., WA 42:36–39; WA 42:146.20–22; LW 1:47–52, 196). While this lecture series does not employ the technical phrase *nova lingua*, it fully exemplifies Luther’s persistent distinction between the old tongue of fallen reason and the Spirit-given speech by which the church learns to name God’s acts truthfully.
6. See WA 39.II:5:33–34: “Quanto minus potest idem esse verum in philosophia et theologia, quarum distinctio in infinitum maior est quam artium et operum.” LW 38:242: “How much less is it possible for the same thing to be true in philosophy and theology, for the difference between them is infinitely greater than that between liberal arts and crafts.”
 7. WA 39.II:5:35–6: “Rectius ergo fecerimus, si dialectica seu philosophia in sua sphaera relictis discamus loqui novis linguis in regno fidei extra omnem sphaeram”; LW 38:242: “We would act more correctly if we left dialectic and philosophy in their own area and learned to speak in a new language in the realm of faith apart from every sphere.”
 8. On the semantic incommensurability at the heart of Luther’s *nova lingua*, see WA 39.II:5:13–39, LW 38: 240–242, where Luther insists that philosophical usage cannot govern theological predication because words change signification when spoken in Christ.
 9. See WA 18: 600–787; LW 33:33–295.
 10. Andrea Vestrucci argues that Luther’s “*De servo arbitrio*” does not merely dispute Erasmus on the bondage of the will but reconfigures the very conditions of *meaningfulness* presupposed in the debate. Erasmus operates within inherited modal and deontic grammars in which freedom, obligation, and intelligibility are mutually entailed; Luther instead suspends these conditions through the concepts of *Deus absconditus*, *justification*, and *predestination*, thereby opening a new logical space in which revelation determines the grammar of thought rather than answering to it. In Vestrucci’s reconstruction, theology becomes a formal practice whose concepts function as *operations upon conceptualization*, not as philosophical extensions—freeing language from the tyranny of modality and locating meaning in the divine act that gives it. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Theology as Freedom: On Martin Luther’s “De servo arbitrio”* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2019).
 11. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology: Towards a Logic of Religious Discourse* (Cham: Springer, 2020), whose methodological program has been reviewed as a pioneering yet demanding attempt to articulate a logic proper to theological discourse; cf. reviews in *Modern Theology* 37 (2021); *Journal of Analytic Theology* 10 (2022); and *Religious Studies Review* 47 (2021). These reviews frequently observe that Vestrucci’s formalism, for all its rigor, stands in need of an explicit *ontological articulation* showing how the logical transformations introduced by revelation relate to the being of God and the creature, a development his framework gestures toward but does not yet supply.
 12. Wilfrid Sellars’s critique of the “Myth of the Given”—that perceptual claims such as “this looks red” already presuppose the concept *red*—has become foundational in analytic philosophy, establishing that experience is conceptually mediated rather than delivered as a pre-linguistic datum. See “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 1, ed. Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 253–329. Subsequent developments by McDowell, Brandom, and Brewer reinforce this point: a culture’s conceptual grammar determines the space of intelligibility itself, shaping what can count as a “birth,” a “death,” or a “gift,” and thus conditioning the moral and theological possibilities available within that form of life.

13. On this point, see my extended analytic-theological development of Luther's *nova lingua*, where I argue, following Vestrucci, that the Reformer's break with Erasmus is not merely argumentative but conceptual. See "Theology as Freedom: The New *Lingua* Comes of Age" (forthcoming in *Promissio*, vol. I, no.1, January 2026). I suggest that theological semantics cannot arise within extensional, non-agentive logical frameworks, since theological meaning depends upon *divine act*, not structural correspondence. I further develop this in "Constitutive Satisfaction: Divine Agency and Truth in Theological Model Theory" (forthcoming from ILT Press, 2026) which develops the *nova lingua* within a semantics of constitutive satisfaction.
14. Luther grounds the *nova lingua* in the performative character of the divine Word itself: "*in Deo dicere est facere*"—in God, to speak is to do. See WA 42:34–36; LW 1:46–48; cf. LW 1:29–30.
15. Luther declares that theology is a language that exceeds the structures of reason. See footnote 3. Luther, *Verbum caro factum est*, WA 39.II:4. 32–35: "...materia quae in angustias rationis seu syllogismorum includi non potest.... Sed est extra, intra, supra, infra, citra, ultra omnem veritatem dialecticam." LW 38:240–241: "...matter which cannot be enclosed in the narrow confines of reason or syllogisms."
16. Just as the gospel presupposes the law, but is not derivable from the law, the new grammar presupposes the old—yet does not unfold from the old. The content is genuinely new. Luther warns that the gospel cannot be poured into the inherited conceptual forms of philosophy without destroying both, for "novum vinum in veteres utres mittimus, ut utrumque perdamus" (WA 39.II:5.37–38); LW 38:242: "...if we put new wine in old wineskins, both of them perish."
17. Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1: *The Doctrine of God*, 2nd ed., trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds., G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1975), §4.
18. I argued in *Luther, Logic, and Language-Games* (University of Iowa dissertation) that theological meaning arises only when a divine act *reconstitutes* the semantic field of inherited terms, granting familiar words a range of signification that exceeds the conceptual conditions that previously governed them. Already there I employed Max Black's interaction (tension) theory of metaphor to explain how meaning is not a function of lexical definition but of a *semantic event* in which previously unrelated domains interact to produce new entailments. I extended this argument in three essays that map the emergence of Luther's *nova lingua* precisely through this donated semantic surplus: "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," *Modern Theology* 6, no. 2 (1990): 21–35; "Luther on Language," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (2002): 195–220; and "Luther and the Strange Language of Theology: How New is the *Nova Lingua*?" in *Caritas et Reformatio*, ed. David Whitford (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002), 221–44. These studies converge on the thesis articulated here: the *nova lingua* does not derive new meanings from old definitions but receives them from the divine act that grants words their new intelligibility, and thus create entailments that cannot be translated back into the old grammar of philosophy even though they presuppose it as material.
19. See Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology*, esp. Chapter 2.
20. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
21. *Typological* here refers to the classical Christian conviction that temporal events, persons, and narratives receive their intelligibility from a divinely given pattern or *type* that precedes and interprets them—Israel's history prefiguring Christ, the old creation anticipating the

- new, and the creature's end appearing in light of God's promise. Without such a divinely grounded pattern, death can appear only as an isolated biological terminus rather than as an event whose meaning is disclosed by God's redemptive action.
22. Andrea Vestrucci, *Formalizing Theology*, esp. Chapter 2.
 23. Luther insists that ordinary terms (*homo, voluntas, vita, mors, iustitia, Deus*) take on new signification when placed within Christological predication or the communicatio idiomatum. Under the gospel, words receive their meaning from the divine act rather than from natural possibility. See WA 39, II, 94:17-20: "Certum est tamen, omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere in eadem re significata. Nam creatura veteris linguae usu et in aliis rebus significat rem a divinitate separatam infinitis modis." LW 73:255: "For 'creature' in the old usage of language and in other subjects signifies a thing separated from divinity by infinite degrees." See also WA 42:78–81; LW 1:102-107.
 24. See *Disputationes de divinitate et humanitate Christi*, WA 39:104.24–26: "Spiritus sanctus habet suam grammaticam. Grammatica omnibus modis valet, sed quando res maior est, quam ut comprehendi possit grammaticis et philosophicis regulis, relinquenda est." LW 73: 265: "The Holy Spirit does have His own grammar. Grammar is useful everywhere, but when the subject is greater than can be comprehended by the rules of grammar and philosophy, it must be left behind."
 25. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).
 26. Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).
 27. Luther's critique of speculative grammar is explicit in the *Disputatio de divinitate et humanitate Christi* (WA 39 II, 93–121). He notes that human judgment often prefers alternative formulations—"Verbum est incarnatum seu carneum factum"—to the Evangelist's "*Verbum caro factum est*" (WA 39 II, 94:5–6), yet insists that theological grammar must follow the church's received usage rather than human linguistic aptness (94:7–8). For this reason, he forbids speculative linguistic methods: "cavendum est... ab etymologia, analogia, consequentia et exemplis" (94:11–12). Grammar itself teaches the limits of such procedures—"nomina heteroclita et verba anomala non patiuntur etymologiam, analogiam seu exemplum" (94:13–14)—and usage frequently overrides rule: "usus saepe praescribit contra regulam" (94:15–16). Thus, all vocabulary applied to Christ undergoes semantic transformation—"omnia vocabula in Christo novam significationem accipere" (94:17–18). What the *vetus lingua* signifies as separation—"creatura... rem a divinitate separatam" (94:19–20)—the *nova lingua* signifies as inseparable union with the divine person—"novae linguae usu significat rem... inseparabiliter coniunctam" (94:21–22). Hence terms such as *homo, humanitas*, and *passus* become "new words" in their Christological use (94:23–24), and speculative appeals to analogy or etymology collapse into confusion, unable to distinguish equivocation (94:29–30) or avoid category mistakes denied by the entire Christian tradition (94:31–32, 35–36).
 28. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).
 29. For Luther, "Philosophia et theologia sunt diversa, non contraria."—Philosophy and theology are different, not contradictory. See WA 39.II:27–28; LW 38:259-260. cf. WA 42:79–81 (LW 1:103-106), where Luther describes the inadequacy of the old language to bear the realities of justification, resurrection, and divine action.

30. Luther's *nova lingua* does not merely alter the sound of words; it alters their very *signification*. Accordingly, it gives creaturely terms a meaning they do not possess within the old philosophical usage. Luther declares that although "vitam, quam hic vivimus, non volumus appellare mortem, tamen profecto aliud nihil est quam perpetuus cursus ad mortem" (WA 42:146.21-22), reason refuses to call this life "death." But the gospel names it truly. Accordingly, where experience perceives only decay, the new tongue declares life: "Per baptismum autem ad vitam spei, seu potius ad spem vitae restituimur. Nam haec demum vera vita est, qua coram Deo vivitur." (WA 42:146.27-28; LW 1:196: "Through Baptism we are restored to a life of hope, or rather to a hope of life. This is true life, which is lived before God."). In this way Luther's *nova lingua* overturns the judgments of *ratio* and *sensus*, enabling the church to speak of death and life not as they appear to autonomous reason, but as they are given in the divine promise.

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