

CONCERNING ALLEGORIES,  
Luther's Works, v. 2, p.150-164

At last we have finished the story of the Flood, which was related by Moses at considerable length as an awful example of the vast and almost boundless wrath of God, which no words can adequately express. **It remains for us to say something about the allegorical meaning, although I have often asserted that I take no great delight in allegories.**<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, I was so enchanted by them in my youth that under the influence of the examples of Origen and Jerome, whom I admired as the greatest theologians, I thought that everything had to be turned into allegories. Augustine, too, makes frequent use of allegories.

But while I was following their examples, I finally realized that to my own great harm **I had followed an empty shadow and had left unconsidered the heart and core of the Scriptures. Later on, therefore, I began to have a dislike for allegories. They do indeed give pleasure, particularly when they have some delightful allusions.** Therefore I usually compare them to pretty pictures. But to the same extent that the natural color of bodies surpasses the picture—even though, as the poet puts it, the pictures are adorned with the colors of an Apelles, which closely approximate nature<sup>35</sup>—the historical narrative itself surpasses the allegory.

**Allegory**, A historical narrative is interpreted by means of symbolism or metaphor to convey a meaning that is not explicitly set forth in the narrative.

In our own age the unlearned mob of the Anabaptists, no less than the monks, are in the clutches of an excessive zeal for allegories.<sup>36</sup> **Because of this they have a great affection also for the more obscure books, such as the Revelation of John and the worthless fabrication going by the name of Ezra, which appears in translation in the last two books.**<sup>37</sup> **There one is free to fabricate anything whatever.** We recall that Münzer, that rebellious spirit, turned everything into allegories.<sup>38</sup> But truly, he who either fabricates allegories without discrimination or follows such as are fabricated by others is not only deceived but also most seriously harmed, as these examples show.

**Hence allegories either must be avoided entirely or must be attempted with the utmost discrimination and brought into harmony with the rule in use by the apostles,** of which I shall say something a little later. Let us not fall into these abominable and ruinous absurdities because of the example not only of the theologians but also of the canonists, or rather the “asinists”—something to which the decretals and decrees of His Most Execrable Lordship, the pope, bear witness.

**Correct Use of Allegories**

Yet these remarks must not be understood to mean that we condemn all allegories indiscriminately, for we observe that **both Christ and the apostles occasionally employed them. But they are such as are conformable to the faith, in accordance with the rule of Paul, who enjoins in Rom. 12:6 that prophecy or doctrine should be conformable to the faith.**

When we condemn allegories, we are speaking of those that are fabricated by one's own intellect and ingenuity, without the authority of Scripture. The others, which are made to agree with the analogy of the faith, not only embellish doctrine but also give comfort to consciences.

**Analogy of the faith** = All Scripture harmoniously agrees. Thus, the whole body of doctrine cannot be contradicted at any point. And thus the allegory must agree with and "be conformable to" the teaching of "Christ, the church, faith, and the ministry of the Word" (last paragraph of this section).

## 1 Flood Allegory of Baptism

Thus Peter turns this very story of the Flood into a beautiful allegory when he says in **1 Peter 3:21–22**: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves us, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a dear conscience, through the resurrection of Christ from the dead," who is at the right hand of God, swallowing up death in order that we may be made heirs of eternal life, and "who has gone into heaven, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to Him." **This is truly a theological allegory, that is, one in agreement with the faith and full of comfort.**

2 Of the same nature is **Christ's allegory in John 3:14 about the serpent** that was raised up in the desert and those who looked up at it and were healed from its bite.

3 Likewise Paul's (1 Cor. 10:4): "**Our fathers all drank from the supernatural rock.**" **These allegories are such that they not only agree nicely with the subject matter but also instruct hearts about faith and are profitable to the conscience.**

## False Use of Allegories

Consider, on the other hand, the majority of the allegories of Jerome, Origen, and Augustine. These men do not concern themselves with the faith when they devise allegories; **they look for philosophical ideas**, which are profitable neither for morals nor for the faith, not to mention that they are even rather silly and absurd.

We have previously heard Augustine's allegory about the creation of the man and the woman. He applies it to the upper and the lower part of the human being, that is, **to reason and the emotions.**<sup>39</sup> But, I ask you, what is the value of this fabrication?

The pope deserves praise for piety and learning in the matter of allegories when he thunders thus from his exalted position: "God made two large luminaries, the sun and the moon. The sun is the papal office, from which the imperial majesty derives its light, just as the moon does from the sun."<sup>40</sup> Oh, such audacious insolence and such villainous desire for power!

Similarly, in this historical account **they compare the ark to their own church**, in which the pope is with his cardinals, bishops, and prelates.<sup>41</sup> The laity, however, is swimming in the sea; that is, it is involved in secular affairs and would not be saved unless those helmsmen of the ark, or the church, held out to the swimmers either planks or ropes to draw them into the ark. The monks everywhere have used such a picture to depict the church.

Origen has better sense than the popes, for he usually devotes his allegories **to matters of morality**. Nevertheless, he should have observed Paul's rule, who enjoins that **the analogy of the faith must be preserved in prophecy**; for this edifies and is truly applicable to the church. Concerning morals the philosophers of the heathen, too, are capable of giving instruction, although they are completely without a knowledge of faith.

**Continues Flood Allegory of Baptism  
combined with Red Sea Allegory of Baptism**

**1 Corinthians 10:1-2**, "Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...."

**4** In his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:2) Paul declares that the Israelites were baptized under Moses in the cloud and in the sea. If in this passage you look merely at conduct and words, then Pharaoh, too, was baptized, but in such a way that he perished with his men, while Israel passed through safe and unharmed. **Similarly, Noah and his sons are preserved in the baptism of the Flood, while the entire remaining world outside the ark perishes because of this baptism of the Flood.**

**These are fitting and learned statements, for Baptism and death are interchangeable terms in the Scripture.** Therefore Paul says in **Rom. 6:3**: "As many of us as have been baptized, have been baptized into the death of Christ." Likewise, Christ says in **Luke 12:50**: "I have a Baptism to be baptized with, and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" And to His disciples He said (**Mark 10:39**): "You will be baptized with the Baptism with which I am baptized."<sup>42</sup>

In accordance with this meaning, **the Red Sea is truly a baptism**, that is, death and the wrath of God, as is manifest in the case of Pharaoh. Nevertheless, Israel, which is baptized with such a baptism, passes through unharmed. **Similarly, the Flood is truly death and the wrath of God; nevertheless, the believers are saved in the midst of the Flood.** Thus death engulfs and swallows up the entire human race; for without distinction the wrath of God goes over the good and the evil, over the godly and the ungodly. The Flood that Noah experienced was not different from the one that the world experienced. The Red Sea, which both Pharaoh and Israel entered, was not different. Later on, however, the difference becomes apparent in this: **those who believe are preserved in the very death to which they are subjected together with the ungodly, but the ungodly perish. Noah, accordingly, is preserved because he has the ark, that is, God's**

**1 Peter 3:18-22**, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, <sup>19</sup>by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup>who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. <sup>21</sup>There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him."

**promise and Word, in which he is living; but the ungodly, who do not believe the Word, are left to their fate.**

<u>Type</u> <b>Flood</b> Eight souls are saved from death in the ark Those not in the ark perished	<i>symbolizes</i>	<u>Antitype</u> Baptism/Death Believers are saved through resurrection God's Word and Promise
<b>Red Sea</b> The Israelites were saved through water Pharaoh and the Egyptians die in water	<i>symbolizes</i>	Baptism/Death

This difference the Holy Spirit wanted to point out in order **that the godly might be instructed by this example to believe and hope for salvation through the mercy of God, even in the midst of death.** For they have Baptism joined with the promise of life, just as Noah had the ark. Hence even though the death of the wise man and of the fool is the same (Eccl. 2:16)—for Peter and Paul die no differently from the way Nero and other ungodly men die later on—they nevertheless believe that in death they will be preserved for eternal life. Nor is this an idle hope; for they have Christ to receive their spirits. On the Last Day He will revive also the bodies of believers for eternal life.

**This allegory is of great value and serves to comfort our hearts, for it points out how differently things will turn out in the end.** If you heed the eyes of the flesh, Solomons statement is true (Eccl. 2:16) that the wise man and the fool die alike and that the righteous man dies as though he were not beloved of God. But here the eyes of the spirit must be applied and the difference noted: Israel enters the Red Sea and is saved, but when Pharaoh follows on the heels of Israel, he is submerged by the waters and perishes. Therefore the death by which the godly and the ungodly perish is the same; indeed, the death of the godly is almost always ignominious, while that of the ungodly is grand and magnificent. But in the eyes of God the death of sinners is the worst, while the death of the saints is precious (Ps. 116:15); for it has been sanctified by Christ, through whom it becomes the beginning of eternal life.

**Death Serves Life**

Just as **the Deluge and the Red Sea are helpers**, as it were, to deliver Noah and Israel from death and to preserve their life, so our own death, if we abide in the faith, is clearly the opportunity for life.

When the Children of Israel were in extreme peril, the sea suddenly opened and stood to the right and to the left like an iron wall, so that Israel passed through without danger. Why did this happen? **Manifestly in order that in this manner death might serve life.** For this is the divine power by which the assaults of Satan are overcome, as was the case in Paradise. There, too, he was endeavoring to kill the entire human race with his poison. But what happens? Through what was truly a “happy guilt,” as the church sings,<sup>43</sup> it was brought about that the Son of God came down into our flesh and delivered us from such great evils.

Accordingly, this allegory teaches, comforts, and encourages us in an excellent manner. As a result, we fear neither death nor sin but disdain all dangers while we give thanks to God for calling us and dealing with us in such a way. **Death itself, by which the entire world perishes,**

**is compelled to serve life, just as the Flood, in which the rest of the world perished, was the occasion to preserve Noah; and the Red Sea, by which Pharaoh was destroyed, served the welfare of the Children of Israel.**

This must be applied also to other trials. We must learn to disdain dangers and to have hope even when no hope appears to be left, so that when death or any other danger befalls us, we may encourage ourselves and say: **“Behold, here is your Red Sea, your Flood, your baptism, and your death.** Here your life—as a philosopher used to say about those who were going to sea<sup>44</sup>—is barely a handbreadth away from death. **But do not be afraid. This danger is like a handful of water, whereas through the Word you have a flood of grace. Therefore death will not destroy you but will be a thrust and aid toward life.”** Far from being able to destroy the Christian, death is the most immediate escape from death. For the death of the body immediately precedes the liberation of the spirit as well as the resurrection of the flesh. Similarly, in the Flood it is neither the earth nor the trees nor the mountains that carry Noah; it is the Flood itself, even though it kills the rest of the human race.

Therefore the prophets have reason for their frequent praise of the wonderful deeds of God, such as the passage through the Red Sea, the exodus from Egypt, and the like. For there the sea, which by nature cannot do otherwise than overwhelm and destroy man, is compelled to stand still and protect him, lest he be covered by its waves. Hence that which by its nature is nothing but wrath becomes grace for those who believe; that which is nothing but death becomes life. Thus whatever misfortunes there are, of which this life surely has countless numbers and by which our bodies and goods are beset—all this will be turned into salvation and joy if you are in the ark, that is, if you believe and lay hold of the promises made in Christ; for death, which carries you away, must be turned into life, and hell, which engulfs you, into a way to heaven.

**1** It is for this reason that in **1 Peter 3:21** Peter declares that we, too, are saved through water in Baptism, which is symbolized by the Flood, because pouring water over us or immersing us is death. And yet from that death or immersion there arises life because of the ark in which we are preserved, that is, because of the Word of promise to which we hold fast. **The canonical Scriptures put forward this allegory, and it is something not only trustworthy but also worthwhile in every way. We should consider it carefully, for it provides glorious consort even in extreme perils.**

5 To this allegory the fathers added another, one derived from **the geometrical shape and proportion of the ark.**<sup>45</sup> From the crown of the head to the sole of the foot the human body is six times longer than it is wide. Now the ark was fifty cubits wide; but its height was six times greater, namely, 300 cubits. **Hence they declare that the ark signifies the man Christ, to whom all promises apply.** Therefore those who believe in Him are saved; and in the Flood, that is, in death itself, they remain alive.

This thought is not unscholarly. Nor is it unattractive. **I am most pleased that it is conformable to the faith.** Therefore even if there were an error in the application, the basis nevertheless is sure and solid. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit used various ways to depict the promises that were to be realized through Christ and the wonderful way in which the human race was to be saved through faith in Christ. **If one devises allegories in this manner, therefore, they are nevertheless not ungodly or offensive, even though they may be somewhat inappropriate.**

Thus if someone should state that Christ is the sun and the church the moon, illuminated by the grace of Christ, he might be in error; nevertheless, his error is such that it rests, not on an incorrect basis but on a solid one. But when the pope declares that the sun is the papal office and the moon is the emperor, then not only is the application silly and foolish, but even the basis is evil and wicked. Such allegories are thought out and devised, not by the Holy Spirit but by the devil, the spirit of lies.

**In order to comfort and strengthen our hearts, allegories must be directed toward the promises and toward the teaching of the faith, as the example of Peter teaches us. Because he sees that Noah is delivered in the midst of death and that the ark is the means of life, the ark is properly made to signify Christ.** For it takes a divine power to save in the midst of death and to carry across to life. Thus in Ps. 68:20 Scripture calls God the One who delivers from death and makes death an occasion or even an aid to life.

Augustine, writing against Faustus, quotes from Philo that, according to geometrical computation, the ark had the proportions of the human body.<sup>77</sup> **When a human being lies on the ground, his body is ten times longer than it is high and six times longer than it is wide.** Thus three hundred cubits are equal to six times fifty and ten times thirty.

These facts are later applied to the body of Christ, that is, to the church, which has an entrance, namely **Baptism**, through which the clean and the unclean enter without distinction. Even though the church is small, it is nevertheless the ruler of the world; and the world is preserved on its account, in the same way as the unclean animals were preserved in the ark. Others have applied them also to **the body of Christ, which had a wound in its side, just as the ark had a window.** These allegories, if not actually scholarly, are nevertheless harmless, inasmuch as they contain no error; and one may use them—except in debates—for the sake of embellishment.<sup>78</sup> (Vol 2, p.68)

<u>Type</u>		<u>Antitype</u>
<b>The Ark</b>	<i>symbolizes</i>	The Christian Church
Dimension of human body		Christ's human body
Enter into the ark		Entrance into the Body of Christ/Church
Door in the side of the ark		The spear wound of Christ

As a result of this, there arose those common expressions in the Holy Scriptures in which afflictions and perils are compared to **an intoxicating cup**. Surely, a striking understatement.<sup>46</sup> Thus in Ps. 110:7 the passion of Christ is called a draught from a brook, as though one were to call it a medicinal potion or syrup, which, though bitter, heals by its bitterness and makes alive through its killing action. These disparaging terms have the effect of comforting us, that we may learn to disdain death and other perils, and to endure them with a more ready heart.

Satan, too, has his cup; but it is a sweet one and one that intoxicates to the extent of bringing on vomiting. Those who have been seduced by its sweetness and drain it lose their life and die an eternal death. Such was the cup that the Babylonian drained, as the prophet says (Jer. 25:15). Let us, therefore, receive the salutary cup with thanks, just as Paul says that the believers glory in tribulations (Rom. 5:3).

**7. Raven, 8. Dove** Now that we have presented this picture of the ark and the meaning of the Flood on the basis of the canonical Scriptures, something must also be said about the remaining portions of the historical account: about the raven which did not return; and about the doves, the first of which returned when she did not find a place where she could set her foot, the second returned and brought back an olive branch, and the third did not return, because the earth had now been cleared of water.

In our discussion of **the historical account** we stated that these events took place for the comfort of Noah and his sons, **to give them the assurance that the wrath of God had come to an end and that He was now reconciled**. It was not through her own effort that the dove brought back the olive branch; this was a divine power and miracle, just as the serpent in Paradise did not speak by its own effort but through the influence of the devil, by whom it was possessed. Just as in that instance the serpent spoke under the influence of Satan and seduced mankind into sin, so in this instance the dove did not bring back the olive branch through her own effort and instinct but under God's influence, in order that Noah might derive sure comfort from this most delightful sight. For the fruit of the olive tree is not the food of a dove, which likes wheat, barley, or peas.

**It is certain, therefore that this miraculous action had some particular meaning**, especially since the prophets also frequently mention doves in their prophecies about the kingdom of Christ, such as Ps. 68:13 and Is. 60:8. In the Song of Songs, Solomon also seems to take special delight in the name of the dove.<sup>47</sup> Therefore the picture that **this allegory** presents should not be regarded with complete indifference; it should be treated with fitting skill.

**7** The allegory that the scholars fabricated about the raven is familiar.<sup>48</sup> They were of the opinion that because ravens are fond of carrion, they represent carnal people like the Epicureans, who delight and indulge in carnal pleasures. The thought is indeed good, but it is not fully satisfactory; for **this allegory is merely moral and philosophical**, the sort that Erasmus has been accustomed to fabricate, somewhat after the pattern of Origen.

**We for our part should look for a theological allegory.** Those moralists fail to note, in the first place, that Scripture praises the raven for not leaving the ark of its own accord; it is sent out by Noah as his messenger, to investigate whether the waters have ceased and the wrath of God has come to an end. But the raven does not return, nor is it the bearer of a favorable omen. It remains outside the ark; and although it goes and comes, it does not let itself be caught by Noah but remains outside the ark.

**All this agrees most beautifully with the ministry of the Law.** The black color characteristic of the raven is a symbol of sadness, and the sound of its voice is unpleasant. All the teachers of the Law who teach a righteousness of works are of the same kind: they are ministers of death and of sin. Thus Paul calls the ministry of the Law the ministry of death: “The Law kills” (2 Cor. 3:6); “the Law brings wrath” (Rom. 4:15); “the Law causes sin to increase” (Rom. 5:20).

<u>Type</u>	<u>Antitype</u>
<b>The Sending of the Raven</b> <i>symbolizes</i> Raven brings back no comfort	The Ministry of the Law The Law works knowledge of sin/wrath
<b>The Sending of the Dove</b> <i>symbolizes</i> Dove brings back good news	The Ministry of the Gospel The Gospel comforts with forgiveness

And yet Moses is sent by God with this doctrine, just as Noah sends out the raven. **God wants people to be instructed about morals and a holy life, and He wants His wrath and sure punishments announced to the transgressors of the Law.** Nevertheless, such teachers are nothing else than ravens; they fly back and forth around the ark and bring no sure pronouncement of a reconciled God.

**It is characteristic of the Law that its teaching cannot make fearful consciences sure, strengthen and comfort them.** Rather it frightens them, because it does nothing else than teach what God demands from us, what He wants us to do. Moreover, it bears witness against us through our conscience, because not only have we not done the will of God revealed in the Law, but we have even done the opposite.

Hence it is correctly stated about the teachers of the Law in Ps. 5:9: “There is nothing sure in their mouth.” (Our translation has: “In their mouth is no truth.”)<sup>49</sup> For when they present their doctrine in their most perfect manner, they say: “If you do this and if you do that, you will be saved.” Therefore when the scribe gives a superb formulation of the teaching of the Law, Christ answers him ironically (Luke 10:28): “Do this, and you will live.” He shows him that the teaching is holy and good, but that since we are imperfect, the guilt lies on us, who neither keep nor can keep it.

We, therefore, declare correctly that by the works of the Law—not those dealing with ceremonies but those chief ones dealing with the love of God and one’s neighbor—we are not justified. The reason is that we cannot perform them.

What is more, we have the right to censure the effrontery of our opponents, who shout that when we deny the righteousness of works, we are forbidding good works and condemning the Law of God.<sup>50</sup> We would be doing this if we did not acknowledge that the raven had been sent out from the ark by Noah. We do assert that the raven was sent out from the ark; but this we



deny, either that there was no raven or that it was a dove. Yet all the shouts, calumnies, and abuses of our adversaries aim to force us into the lie of making a dove out of the raven.

Yes indeed, examine their books, and give careful consideration to their doctrine. Is it not merely a doctrine of works? They say: "This is fine, this is honorable, this you must do. That is detestable and disgraceful. Therefore shun it." When they teach this, they consider themselves true theologians and teachers. But how about showing<sup>51</sup> that there is anyone who either has done or will do all those things, especially if you carefully set before him not only the Second Table, as they do, but also the First?

**Therefore he who stands on the teaching of the Law is actually nothing but a hearer (James 1:22), who learns nothing else than to know what he ought to do.** For those who want to learn nothing else, it would be enough to provide Cato's poem or Aesop, whom I consider the better teacher of morals.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, it is profitable to put both into the hands of young people. Let the older ones learn Cicero, to whom, to my surprise, some prefer Aristotle as a teacher of morals. This is, in a sense, a course in rational conduct. So far as moral precepts are concerned, one cannot find fault with the industry and earnestness of the heathen. Nevertheless, they are all inferior to Moses, who gives instruction not only in morals but also in the worship of God. Yet it is true that he who stops with Moses has nothing but the raven flying back and forth outside the ark; of the dove and of the olive branch he has nothing.

**Hence this is a picture, not only of the Law given by God but of all human reason and wisdom, of all laws and of all philosophy.** They merely state what one must do, but they do not supply the ability to do it. Therefore Christ's statement in Luke 17:10 is true: "When you have done all that is commanded, say: 'We are unworthy servants.' "

**The raven is indeed sent out: God wants the Law to be taught,** and He Himself reveals it; nay, He even writes it upon the hearts of all human beings, as Paul demonstrates in Rom. 2:15. From this natural knowledge have originated all the books of the more sensible philosophers, such as Aesop, Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, and Cato.<sup>53</sup> It is a good idea to set these books before uneducated and unruly individuals, that their wicked impulses may in some measure be counteracted through this training.

**But really, if you inquire about peace of conscience and a sure hope of eternal life, they are like the raven, which flies back and forth around the ark and finds no peace outside, but does not seek it inside the ark either. It is as Paul says about the Jews (Rom. 9:31): "By following the righteousness of the Law Israel did not attain righteousness." The reason is that the Law is like the raven: it is the ministry of death and sin, or it makes hypocrites.**

Now let anyone who wants to do so enlarge on this allegory and investigate the peculiar features of this bird. It is an impure animal, black and gloomy in color, with a hard beak and an unpleasant and doleful voice. It scents carrion from any distance, and for this reason men shudder at its voice as though it were a sure sign of an impending funeral. It feeds on carrion and likes places that are horrible because they are used for public executions.

Even though we do not apply all these features individually to the Law, yet who is not aware that they fit the papists, priests, and monks very well? These men were not only richly fed as a result of the consciences that were murdered through their false doctrine; but they also drew on carrion for their support by making use of vigils, anniversaries, holy water at graves, and even of purgatory to provide money. In fact, their concern for the dead brought them greater gain than their concern for the living.

**They are truly ravens,** for they live on carrion and screech dolefully while they sit on it. These characteristics fit the papists and the ravens well; but truly the entire ministry of the

papacy, even at its best, does nothing but mangle and murder consciences. It does not lead to true righteousness; it merely produces hypocrites, just as the Law does too.

In Ezek. 13:19 there appears among the other sins of the false prophets also this one, that for a handful of barley and a piece of bread they put to death souls that are not dying and keep alive souls that are not living.

**This is characteristic of the ravens, or the teachers of the Law.** They declare righteous those who live according to the precept of the Law, but these are actually souls that are not alive. On the other hand, they condemn those who violate the traditions. The Pharisees similarly condemned the disciples for plucking ears of grain, not washing, and not fasting. This is the doleful and deadly voice of which the ravens should remind us as they sit on the carrion.

When the Greeks wanted to invoke evil, they used the expression: “To the ravens with you!”<sup>54</sup> The Germans do likewise when they tell someone to become the food of ravens: “I hope the ravens devour you!”<sup>55</sup> If we give this curse a place in the allegory, it surely is a very serious one. What can be more ruinous than to have teachers who, when they do their best teaching, do nothing but commit murder? They involve consciences in difficulties from which it is impossible to be disentangled.

**Someone may say that this allegory about the raven has been improperly applied to the ministry. Nevertheless, it is true, and it agrees with the basic principle.<sup>56</sup> Besides, it is not only suited for teaching; it is also very profitable.**

**8** What Moses relates about the dove is really a delightful likeness of the Gospel, especially if you carefully trace **the characteristics of the dove**, which are ten in number: (1) it is devoid of malice; (2) it does no harm with its mouth; (3) it inflicts no damage with its claw; (4) it picks up clean grain; (5) it feeds other young birds; (6) instead of singing, it moans; (7) it stays near water; (8) it flies in flocks; (9) it nests in a safe place; (10) it flies swiftly. These ten characteristics have been summed up in the following six lines:

*Felle columba caret, rostro non laedit, et unguis  
Possidet innocuos, granaque pura legit.  
Estque frequens ad aquas, pennaque per aëra fertur  
Praepete, pro cantu lugubre voce gemit.  
Educat alterius pullos, volitatque gregatim,  
Et studet in tutis nidificare levis.<sup>57</sup>*

**The New Testament relates that the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove. Therefore we rightly apply the allegory to the ministry of grace.**

**Moses relates that the dove did not fly to and fro about the ark, like the raven; but she was sent out, and when she did not find a place to light, she returned to the ark and was caught by Noah.**

**This dove is a figure of the holy prophets, who were indeed sent to teach the people;** but the Flood, that is, the era of the Law, had not yet come to an end. Thus although David, Elijah, and Isaiah did not live to see the era of grace or of the New Testament, they were nevertheless sent to be messengers of the end of the Flood, even though it had not yet ended. **After they had performed their mission, they returned to the ark,** that is, they were justified and saved without the Law through faith in the Blessed Seed, in whom they believed and for whom they were waiting.

After this dove another is sent out; it finds the earth dry and not only the mountains but also the trees free of water. This one alights on an olive tree and brings to Noah a branch she plucked.

Scripture suggests this allegory also, since in several passages it compares **olive oil to grace or mercy or the forgiveness of sins.**<sup>58</sup> This the dove brings in its mouth, to represent the outward ministry or the spoken Word. For the Holy Spirit does not—as the enthusiasts and the Anabaptists, truly fanatical teachers, dream—give His instruction through new revelations outside the ministry of the Word. God wanted the branch of a green olive tree brought to Noah by mouth, to make us realize that in the New Testament, when the Flood or the era of wrath comes to an end, God wants to reveal His mercy to the world through the spoken Word.

**The messengers of this Word are doves, that is, devout men and without malice, full of the Holy Spirit.** Isaiah (60:8) likewise compares the ministers of the Gospel, or of grace, to doves that are flying to familiar windows. **Even though Christ commands His disciples in Matt. 10:16 to imitate doves in their simplicity,** that is, to be sincere and without venom, He nevertheless urges them to be wise as serpents; that is, they should be on their guard against insincere and treacherous people, and they should be cautious, the way a serpent in a fight is said to protect its head with extraordinary skill.

That the olive tree is green, this agrees with the Word of the Gospel, which endures forever and is **never without fruit.** The psalm (1:3) also compares people who apply themselves to the Word to a tree whose leaves do not fall. We heard nothing like this when we spoke about the raven flying to and fro near the ark. Hence this dove, the second one to be sent out, is a type of the New Testament, where forgiveness of sin and grace are plainly promised through the sacrifice of Christ. That is why in the New Testament the Holy Spirit wanted to appear in the form of a dove.

The third dove did not return. When the promise of the Gospel, announced to the world through the mouth of a dove, has been fulfilled, **there is nothing left to do, and no new doctrine is expected.** All we still expect is the revelation of the things we have believed. Hence this also serves to give us a sure testimony that this doctrine will endure until the end of the world.

The text also expressly mentions the time. It states that after Noah had sent out a dove for the first time, he waited seven days. **These seven days are the time of the Law, which had to precede the time of the New Testament.**

Similarly, it is said of the second dove that it returned to the ark toward evening and was carrying an olive branch. The last age of the world is set aside for the Gospel. Nor should any other kind of doctrine be expected. For this reason Christ compares the Gospel to a supper (Matt. 22:2; Luke 14:16).

**The doctrine of the Gospel** has been in the world ever since our first parents fell, and by various signs God confirmed this promise to the fathers. The earlier times knew nothing of the rainbow, circumcision, and other things that were ordained later on. But all ages had the knowledge of the Blessed Seed. Since this has been revealed, there is nothing left except the revelation of what we believe and our flight with the third dove into another life, never to return to this wretched and distressful life.

## Luther's Concluding Thoughts on Allegories

These are my thoughts about this allegory. I wanted to present them briefly. **Allegories do not deserve as much time as do the historical accounts and the articles of faith.**

Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and Bernard allegorize a great deal. The trouble is that since **they spend too much time on allegories, they call hearts away and make them flee from the historical account and from faith, whereas allegories should be so treated and designed that faith, to which the historical accounts point in every instance, may be aroused, increased, enlightened, and strengthened.** As for those who do not pay attention to the historical accounts, it is no wonder that they look for the shade of allegories as pleasant bypaths on which to ramble.

We see that in the papacy the music of the chants is very pleasing, although the words are commonly not only inappropriate but even wicked and contrary to Scripture. Thus with their foolish allegories the scholars have often corrupted the good sense of a historical account, the sense that was profitable for faith.

I have often stated what kind of theology there was when I began to engage in this sort of study. It was continually stated that the letter kills (2 Cor. 3:6).<sup>59</sup> **Therefore I disliked Lyra above all other exegetes, because he tried to ascertain the literal meaning with such care. But now, just because of this commendable quality, I prefer him to almost all other interpreters of Scripture.**<sup>60</sup>

**I urge you with all possible earnestness to be careful to pay attention to the historical accounts. But wherever you want to make use of allegories, do this: follow closely the analogy of the faith, that is, adapt them to Christ, the church, faith, and the ministry of the Word.** In this way it will come to pass that even though the allegories may not be altogether fitting, they nevertheless do not depart from the faith. **Let this foundation stand firm,** but let the stubble perish (1 Cor. 3:12–15). But let us return to the story.

### An Old Testament "Allegory" on the Flood from Isaiah 54:8-9

- 8 With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment;  
But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you,"  
Says the Lord, your Redeemer.
- 9 "For this is like **the waters of Noah** to Me;  
For as I have sworn  
That the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth,  
So have I sworn  
That I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you.