Hello
My Name Is
Single
How I Learned to Ignore the World's Expectations and Trust God
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You’re single. You’ve been single. You met a single person once. You’ve dumped people, and you’ve been dumped by people. You’ve known great loneliness and worry and sadness. You’ve looked at couples, married or dating, and been jealous. You’ve wanted what they have, what the Lord has chosen not to give you right now. You’ve prayed. You’ve stopped caring. You’ve given up. You’ve tried harder. And some days, most days, you’ve wondered why, despite your cries to the Lord, He seems so silent. Your name—your very identity—hinges on a word: single.

All of that, all of those emotions you experience oh-so-acutely, are normal. It’s all right to feel them. We all deal with our singleness differently, and sometimes we choose not to deal with it at all. Throughout this book, you will do both: understanding better what it means to be and live as a single man or woman in this world while simultaneously realizing that the Lord’s plan for you may be very different than the one you imagined for yourself. You may feel vindicated; you may grieve. You may pray harder and worry less. Whatever the outcome, you will know, by the time you turn the final page, that the one who created this world—its pine trees and
sea horses and penne pasta and you—loves you and that you are not alone.

You won't find *Cosmo*'s “Three Reasons Being Single Is So Fabulous” in the following pages. You're not going to hear tips on how to spiff up your online profile so that you'll be more attractive to the opposite sex. You're not even going to have to decide if you should call yourself “single,” which implies an inherent aloneness, or “unmarried,” which presumes that your last step to being a complete human being is to dredge up the next breathing member of the opposite sex and swap rings.

I'm not even going to tell you that being single is fun and exciting, because a lot of days, it's not. I'm also not going to promise you that the Lord has someone in mind for you, because I don't know that either. Marriage, as we all know too keenly, is not meant for everyone.

But in this book, we will strive at all costs to be honest with one another. Here, you don't have to put on a brave front. You don't have to act like being single doesn't matter to you or that it doesn't find its way into your thoughts twenty times a day. For now, you get to just be who you are: single and suffering, single and content, single and wondering, single and alive. You get to be mad or sad or frustrated or happy or content or free. Reading this, you get to do what you want.

No matter how you feel about the Lord's will for your life right now, whether you're simply surviving being single or whether you hate every minute or whether you relish your independence, this book will help you to realize who you are. And if being single is painful to you, it will help you realize that eventually, the pain of not having a pious spouse will lessen. Maybe it will ease because the Lord will provide you with a godly husband or wife. Maybe it will be because He will teach you to be content in your singleness.

Through it all, you will endure. Even more, you will carry on in hope because, as my pastor reminds me, “God really is good and He does work all things, even really painful things, together for good. We live by faith, not by sight, in spite of the evidence, and we wait on the Lord. And that, of course, is the definition of hope.” You will recognize the burden for what it is, and it will no longer define you.
That’s the point of all this: You have hope, and that hope has a name, and the name is attached to a flesh-and-blood man, and He is Jesus. Look to Him, to the one who was nailed to a rough cross, bloodied and gasping for breath. Look to that Jesus, the one who knows your aloneness better than you know it yourself. Look to Him, to the one who endured the ridicule of the crowd, the torture of His captors, the taunts of the devil. Look to Jesus, who cried out in words you have sobbed too: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

He is your Jesus: He was broken, wounded, hurt, and suffering. He felt and experienced all of that for you, on your behalf. He suffered all that so that you—in your rawest, messiest moments and just as much in your contented, happy ones—may always have the assurance that He has taken whatever you may feel about your singleness onto Himself.

Just as He shoulders that weight, so always He heaps on you blessing upon blessing. He is your Jesus: risen from the dead and triumphant over your loneliness, shame, and discontent. He is present with compassion, with a peace so tangible and powerful that you can't fathom or understand it, with love that assures you that you aren't alone.

This Jesus—on the cross and outside the tomb, in the Word and in, with, and under the bread and wine delivered into your mouth on Sunday morning—feels what it means to be single more intensely than you do. He rejoices when you rejoice, and He mourns with you when you mourn. But He is yours, and you are His. And because He lives, because no feeling or emotion has any hold on Him, you live too, and those same feelings and emotions find their rest, their relief, in Him. When you are scared of being dumped, He promises never to leave you, even though your girlfriend might. When you fear your heart can't take any more rejection, He promises never to hurt you, even though your ex-husband did. And when you worry that you will never meet someone, that you will go through this life all by yourself, He promises to be with you always, even if He chooses never to give you that spouse.

You are loved. You are not alone. You are not defined by being single. No, you are a child of God: whole and perfect, broken no more.
Chapter 1

The Untouchables

It was the first Sunday after I started my new job. I was in a new town looking for a new church with a new pastor. As a single person, I was hoping to find a congregation like the one I’d just left: one where members ate meals together in the church basement on Christmas Day and families were so close that children sat with other parents on Sunday morning in Bible class. But this Sunday, sitting alone in a new space, I felt an odd affinity with the lepers who cried out to Jesus in the Bible—untouchable and unloved. I couldn’t shake the sense that the woman down the pew was giving me the stink eye, and I was confident that the usher in the back of the church had raised his eyebrow at me in a less-than-charitable fashion on my way in. Even if neither were true, I was experiencing what most singles feel all too routinely: we convince ourselves that all the sideway glances and hushed voices are directed toward
us. It doesn't matter if we've been married and are widowed, have never had a boyfriend or girlfriend, are divorced, or are simply not looking for a relationship. In the church and in the world, we feel different from everyone else. We feel isolated, unlovable.

We shouldn't. It's not like we're sick or falling apart. We're not diseased. You can't catch anything from hugging us. (All right, so there was that time in third grade when I gave my whole Sunday School class the chicken pox, but that was not my fault!) We don't live in colonies, set apart from the rest of the “normal” population.

No, single people are just people, with a set of lungs and a heart and a brain just like couples in relationships. And single Christians are baptized children of God, just like married Christians. But while we know in our heads and wish in our hearts that there weren't such differences between us and everyone else, we notice that divergence most particularly—and often painfully—within the church.

It makes sense when the world gives us the hairy eyeball. After all, we expect the culture to treat us differently as Christian singles. We know we’re in opposition to much of what it stands for and how it defines what relationships are and should be. We don’t buy into the lie of the random hookup, and we’re well aware to be on alert for temptation, mindful that pornography is available with a click or two on the Web. We’re prepared to do battle with those who would seek to devalue the worth of marriage and children, and we’re fully cognizant of the fact that these beliefs may be the cause of suffering for the sake of Christ on our part. But in our churches, in our congregations, we expect to feel accepted. We want—desperately—to fit in.

It’s frustrating when we don’t, especially because we’re aware of our differences in a socially awkward sort of way. We sit alone in the pew. We kneel for Holy Communion by ourselves. We pray alone. We even sit by ourselves in Bible class. Not that we want to. We want to be loved as a part of our church’s family, to feel just as valued as the couple with the two wild daughters pulling their dresses over their heads while wriggling around under the pew at
the early service. Stronger still is the growing feeling that we’re the problem, that something’s actually wrong with us. We convince ourselves that we’re not normal, that we’re deficient in some way, that we’re not good enough to be a part of the Body of Christ. We don’t have children, so we have no one to take to Sunday School. We have no husband to help tear down tables after a potluck, no wife to drop off a pot of soup for the new mom who’s resting up at home. We can’t help with Vacation Bible School because we’re at work, and we can’t make the weekly Bible study because it’s at 10 a.m., right in the middle of our work day. And so we start to think that the gifts and talents we have to offer the church are very small indeed—and when no one tells us otherwise, we actually start to believe it.

**Burdens upon Burdens**

Beyond feeling set apart, we’re also easily worn out. Being single can be exhausting, and it’s especially so for women. We were created and designed to be cared for and about. So when there’s no one there to watch out for us, no one to make sure that we are safe and all right, when we are the ones who have to be our own guardians, we’re done in. Something as simple as keeping track of all the bills and the grocery list and the next doctor’s appointment and when insurance is due requires feats of strength tantamount to the fist-clenching power of the Hulk. There’s no one to talk to about the weird ka-chunking noise the car is making; no one to bounce ideas off of about the annual Christmas card; no one to say, “You stay put, and I’ll pop a bag of popcorn—don’t leave the couch.” Instead, we are resigned to calling our fathers or brothers, mothers and best friends, admitting to them that we’re out of our league and that, once again, we need help. Suddenly, we’ve forgotten that our Lord gives blessings upon blessings. Now it simply feels like burdens upon burdens.

While I feel keenly the plight of single women, single guys don’t have it any easier. They’re made to defend women and children, to care for those whom the Lord has entrusted to them. But it’s hard
to care for people who don’t yet exist and harder still to have the energy even to want to, when women today don’t seem to want that kind of care in the first place. Not to mention the fact that there’s no warm house to come home to, no dinner to enjoy with a woman anxious to listen, no beautiful girl to go shopping for Christmas presents with. Life—it seems—is reduced to beer and pretzels, football games, and being the third wheel. And who wants that?

It’s why meeting another single person—male or female—feels like such a relief. “Here’s someone who understands! Here’s someone who knows! This person can commiserate. She’ll understand me.” We are like two Texans meeting up in the middle of Kansas. (Have you ever noticed how excited Texans get over meeting other Texans? I mean, really: it’s a little over the top.) We gravitate toward our own kind, toward people who are also alone.

In an instant, we form a connection. We share stories of failed relationships and frustrations and mutual hopes for the future. Among women, there’s a fair amount of male bashing, and men share knowing winks and elbows to the ribs. But male or female, we take comfort in simply knowing another single, in knowing that we’re not alone, in knowing that someone else out there gets us.

All of these feelings combine into a swirly, deadly concoction of worry, isolation, and exhaustion. The devil uses it to his advantage. He loves this trio. He comes to you in your weakest moment, when you are tired and alone, and asks you, “Why are you worried? Didn’t God promise never to leave you or forsake you? Then why do you feel like He has? Is it because, just maybe, He actually has ditched you?” He whispers, “I get it. You’re alone and feeling miserable. It stinks. But, hey, you’re alone—which means nobody has to know if you take a peek at that porn site. Oh, come on. It’s just between you and your Internet provider. You’ll feel better afterward. I promise.” He tempts you with “It’s been a long day. You must be wiped out. I thought Jesus told you to take His yoke because it was light and you would find rest. You don’t seem like you’ve gotten much rest to me. Is He leading you on?” His whispers work, and we believe him. Alone with our thoughts, we find it easy to fall into disbelief, not taking our Lord at His Word that He alone has met all our needs on the cross.

The devil is tireless. He never stops planting the seeds of lies and half-truths, fear and doubt, so thick that they grow quickly to
be tangled jungles of sin and death. And yet that mass of overgrown evil is the very thing that our Lord slashes down, hacking away and cutting down all our transgressions, all our doubts. He clears the path and makes the way straight. He tells us again that we are His and that we are safe: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27–28).

**THE FORGOTTEN ONES**

Our Lord sets the standard—the high bar—for how we as the Church are to care for those among us who are single. We realize by the way in which He shows love that a connection shouldn’t be formed just between singles—or Texans—but that pastors and grandmas and uncles and children ought to reach out to the singles among us in the same way. He causes us to realize that too often, we in the Church have failed to love our single neighbors. We have failed to care for them in a manner that points everyone with whom we come into contact to Him and to His gifts of mercy and, ultimately, of peace.

We spend a lot of time talking about the importance of marriage in the church. We teach about the gifts that are to be had in marriage, about the way in which our Lord created Eve for Adam, about the joy that comes from serving a spouse. Bible-study participants discuss the top ten ways to have a better marriage, and moms meet at church with their toddlers to discuss among themselves how children ought to be raised in homes with both a mom and a dad, and why those relationships are at the very core and backbone of our society. We have marriage retreats, and we order special after-service cakes for couples whose anniversaries fall on Sundays.

As singles, we get it. We support those conversations and actions and all they entail. And just as much as we can appreciate their value, we simultaneously loathe them with a burning sort of hatred that’s largely unhelpful and probably verging on psychotic. We love them just as we hate them. They remind us of what we long for. They give us hope that perhaps, one day, the Lord will place us
We are under the burden of being single.

into families of our own. They teach us what godly marriages look like and how men and women are made to interact with one another. And we despise them because they make it all too clear that we are under the burden of being single, that what we want is not ours, that those around us have been given what we don’t have.

We see these things lived out in our church families, and especially each Sunday. We are reminded of the way in which our Lord designed men to give themselves to and serve women, and the way in which women are made to receive the care of men. We watch each week in church at the way in which the Lord relates to His people, how He remains the Church’s faithful Head. We take great joy and comfort in knowing that we as the Church are His pure and chaste Bride. Through it all, we learn how men interact with women by watching the way in which the Lord interacts with His people. We watch. We pray. We hope.

Nevertheless, we leave unsettled, sighing to ourselves as we walk to our car, certain the church has forgotten to talk about us—the singles. More important, we worry that she has forgotten to talk to us. We are the forgotten ones. The church takes pity on the widows, and she remembers the orphans. Church members have the elderly into their homes, and they invite the youth group over for dinner. But the singles are forgotten. Or worse still, they’re often simply overlooked. And so the feeling of isolation, of being different and misunderstood, continues to grow, even among those who ought to care most for us.

Pastor Christopher Seifferlein, in a letter to his congregation, acknowledged that the church goes to great lengths to remember and celebrate weddings and anniversaries, but it rushes right past those who have no spouse.

_Do we have more to say to the widows, the unmarried, and the divorced than that their best years are either behind them, or else that the most they can hope for is someday to meet “Prince Charming?” Are single people second-class citizens . . . like people on the outside looking in?_
It may appear that in the church that we also present these false ideas. We have weddings in the church, but no special celebration for single people. There are flowers on the altar for those celebrating wedding anniversaries, but I have never seen flowers on the altar for someone celebrating their singleness. Imagine the bulletin: “The flowers today on the altar are for Ms. Jennifer Smith, who is thanking God for her 25 years of singleness.” Even in his preaching, the pastor may use examples from married life. This, of course, is expected, as he is married, but the question may be asked: With all this talk about marriage, does the Bible have anything to say about the state of singleness?

Waiting with Them

The church can and ought to mend this gaping wound. Christ has shown us how and has equipped His Church to be the best suited to dive into the gray of loneliness with the black-and-white clarity of His Gospel. We have been—indeed, we are—living in a pregnant moment.

We, the church's members, can love those among us who have no spouse to love them in return. We can invite them to sit with us at church, call to check in with them, drop them a note now and then, and remind them of their value and worth. We can give voice to the single person's unique and individual vocation, his or her God-given place in this life, the means through which God uses that person to serve those with whom he or she comes into contact. Some of the singles among us are aunts and sisters, uncles and brothers. They are editors and teachers and farmers. They are Sunday School teachers and elders, ushers and organists. They are family and friends. They are employees and co-workers. They do it all. Still, many of them pray that they might be given one more vocation: that of husband or wife. And while they wait, we wait too, reminding them of the place and plan God is using for them and on their behalf right now.

We can listen too. It's not easy; our tendency is to fill the silence. We want to offer advice: “Have you tried online dating?” “Maybe
you're looking too hard." “Have you thought about getting into a singles Bible study?” But sometimes—most times—our single brothers and sisters don't need advice. They've already heard it all, and they know it by heart. Instead, they just want to be heard. They need to know someone cares. They need to know they matter, that their opinion is valid. They need to be validated.

Even more than all this—more than understanding that they feel out of place, more than listening, more than dredging up, yet once more, feelings of loneliness—we can point them again and again to Christ. We can remind them of Him who puts the solitary into families, who loves the singles as much as He loves those who are married, who looks and sees a baptized child of God, who holds back nothing simply because of a relationship status.

This is, as Rev. Matthew C. Harrison said, our “fundamental gift and task”:

To bear witness to Jesus Christ—to His Gospel and all its facets (AC VII 2; FC EP X 7). This is our task toward each other. This is our task over against those who do not know Jesus. This is also the sacred vocation and ecumenical task of the Missouri Synod to world Christianity. We exist to bear witness—even to the point of suffering and death (and it may well come to that sooner than later here in the West)—to salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This Gospel is God’s own testimony about Himself. This is the very confession of Christ Himself. This is the witness of the apostolic Church and the Church of all ages. This is the witness sealed by the blood of Jesus, the blood of John the Baptizer, and the burning of John and Henry, confessed and sung by Luther.²

This is our charge as the church: to our single brothers and sisters, to those who are married, to the widowed, and to those whom the Lord has blessed with celibacy. If we never invite them to dinner or never ask them to join our small group, if we never help
to lift the burdens they bear and the pain they feel, if there is only one thing we do, let us be privileged to point them to Christ, no matter the cost. As we do, may we learn together, as the Body of Christ, that we are not so different from one another after all. Baptized into Him, we are one, and suddenly we are no longer alone.

**Leave Us Alone**

We can blame ourselves—in part—for how we feel. We foster a culture of aloneness. In fact, we’re exceptionally good at being alone. We are alone with our computers, alone with our thoughts, alone with our headphones and iPhones, alone with ourselves.

Family meals are no longer a priority. Moms take kids to church while dads go golfing. We blog instead of chatting; we text instead of talking. We go to dinner with friends and look at Facebook while waiting for our meal to arrive. We text our roommates instead of talking to them, and we play video games instead of going to baseball games. (Don’t believe me? Read Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone*.)

In truth, we don’t underhandedly foster solitude. We’re downright bold about it! At lunch with my family one day, my brother-in-law, a pastor, noticed a couple sitting at an adjoining table. They were young and obviously waiting on their food. She looked bored; he was studying his phone. She stared at the wall, while he stared at a screen. It was a sharp and dismal contrast: two people, together, but each of them most definitely, obviously, alone.

My brother-in-law, who was wearing his clerical collar, got up from his chair and went to the table. He put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Are you two related?” he asked.

The young man was startled. “No,” he stammered. “I mean, yes. She’s my wife.”

“That’s what I figured,” my brother-in-law smiled. “You should probably put your phone down and talk to her.”

The woman looked relieved and smiled ever so slightly that someone was advocating on her behalf.

“She’s beautiful,” my brother-in-law said. “Chat with her. Ask her about her day. This is a good thing, I promise you.”

He patted the stunned man on the shoulder as he walked away. “Have a good day, you two.”

It was something to behold: we have become a culture that must be told to interact with other humans.
The singles among us know differently. If there's one thing we don't want, it's to be alone. We're downright sick of it. Tired of it. Totally and completely over it. You wouldn't know it to look at us. From all outward appearances, singles look fine. (We won't, by the way, be wearing a scarlet letter S on our jackets, so you'll have to look hard to spot us. We're tricky that way.) We don't have kids to pick up from T-ball practice or spouses to fuss with. We don't seem sad or depressed. We have jobs and lives. We go to parties and crack jokes and laugh off our singleness when people bring it up. (And they do! Boy, do they.) And so our church families assume we aren't suffering.

Indeed, perhaps not all singles are. Perhaps some are given to singleness for the entirety of their lives. Perhaps some are simply waiting and praying. Perhaps they are doing the only thing they can do: clinging to those promises of God, holding the Lord to His own words that it is not good for man to be alone, praying for peace.

That's why it's a bit funny that we as Christians fuss and fret about mission work, anxious to support those who take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (and that, I might add, is good; that is the church at work), when we as singles are proof that there is much the church at home can be doing as well. If ever there were a mission field begging to be harvested—let us be clear—we are it! One-third of America's population is single. That's 102 out of 314 million people, many of whom are alone, frustrated, anxious to be in community, and eager to be loved.3

They are among us in our churches, beside us on the street, behind us at restaurants, and in front of us at red lights. They are in jobs, out of jobs, and looking for jobs, in our cities and in our rural and small towns. In their twenties and thirties—the years during which they ought to be at the height of marrying, having children, buying homes, settling down, and maturing—a majority of both men women simply aren't. Instead, they are and continue to be alone.

*Today, the numbers are more striking: 23.8 percent of men, and 19 percent of women, between the ages of 35 and 44 have never been married. Tick*
back a cohort to the people between 20 and 34—the prime-childbearing years—and the numbers are even more startling: 67 percent of men and 57 percent of women in that group have never been married. When you total it all up, over half of the voting-age population in America—and 40 percent of the people who actually showed up to vote this time around [2012]—are single. . . . How did we get to an America where half of the adult population isn’t married and somewhere between 10 percent and 15 percent of the population don’t get married for the first time until they’re approaching retirement?4

The number of singles on the rise doesn’t impact just the singles themselves. It has an effect on how our society functions, what families and congregations look like, the growth or decline of different kinds of religions, what kinds of things we place value on in this world, and how we exist as a culture. The theological implications of a nation at ease with and in support of such high levels of unmarried people affects the culture, and the way in which the separation of sex from marriage and family has further eroded the desire to be married and in a family ought to be explored. As the church, our confession about what it means to be alone and what it means to be put in a family—in a marriage—means something. We do not stay silent when the world around us derides the biblical understanding of marriage, claiming that it is an institution based on the feelings of adults alone. We speak up when others would have us say that “what’s true for us isn’t necessarily true for them.” We voice our support of marriage as God designed it: for one man and one woman. We are in a time that demands “the mind and the spine,” as Dr. William Weinrich, a professor of church history, told me.

Comfort and Care

The Church’s moment is now. Its moment always has been, and always will be, now. There is an enduring need for us as Christians to bear witness to Christ to those who do not know His comfort and His love. There is a profound need to show mercy to these singles who need our consolation and our care. And there is an opportuni-
ty to experience and enjoy a robust life together with a group that is desperate to be a part of something outside of themselves.

Even as we are reaching out and toward those outside the church, we must also wrap our arms around those already taking part in our congregations and Bible studies, those within our families and our circles of friends, those Christians already in the Body of Christ who struggle with being single. They are hurting, and they are in our midst. We as the church can and must bear their burden with them.

That’s why it’s so heartening that you—single and alone or married and concerned—are willing to engage in this discussion, to speak about and be open about what it means to be single. You as a Christian can help the church of today learn that it’s all right to engage in a conversation with those who are praying for and waiting for a spouse; that it’s all right for those who are married, who are living and rejoicing in a Christ-centered Christian marriage, to offer comfort to the singles among us.

You’re the ones who can help others understand what it means to be single, what to look for in a spouse, and what things to pray for in that regard. This conversation not only provides a platform for those in the church who are single to share their suffering but it also gives those who are married a chance to see the blessings of singleness that will be theirs one day in heaven. You are the ones who set the standard for what the contentedness of a Christian marriage can look like. You are the ones who give us hope that Christ will bless us too, even as we tell ourselves that there is no hope for people like us.

So whether you’re married or single, engaged or widowed, had fourteen boyfriends or no girlfriends, at the end of the day, you are a part of what it means to be the church: that we bear one another’s burdens and frustrations; that we are sinners in need of our Savior’s forgiveness; that we learn from and with one another; that when one of us suffers, we all suffer; and that we rejoice in the hope, the forgiveness, and the wholeness that is ours in Christ.

To you who are single, know that this hope and joy aren’t the kinds of hope and joy that you get from opening a Christmas
present to find the latest tablet device, or those thirty seconds of awesomeness when you find five dollars in the jeans you washed last week. This hope and joy come from Christ. They are His gift to you, to see you through all the blessings and challenges of living the single life. The joy isn’t a momentary, fleeting kind of excitement. It’s an enduring comfort, one that He gives you fully and constantly, the comfort that will see you through the lonely nights and the frustrating mornings, the good days and the hard ones. It is His joy, molded and shaped perfectly to fit exactly what you need, and it is all for you.

**Martin Luther: Second Sunday after Epiphany**

The highest and most significant point of this Gospel [John 2:1–11] is that we must give God the glory of being kind and gracious, even if He Himself acts and speaks differently, and all our mind and perception think differently. In that way our perception is killed and the old man perishes, so that only faith in God’s kindness remains, and no perception remains in us. Here you see how [Jesus’] mother retains an untroubled faith and holds it out as an example for us. She is certain that He will be gracious, though she does not perceive it. It is also certain that she perceives differently than she believes. For that reason she lets it be free and committed to His kindness, and determines for Him neither time nor place, neither manner nor measure, neither person nor name. He will do it when it pleases Him. If it does not happen during the banquet, then at the end or after the banquet. [She thinks:] “I will swallow this slap down: that He treats me with contempt and leaves me standing in disgrace before all the guests and speaks so unkindly to me, so that we all blush for shame. I know that He acts bitterly, but He is sweet.” Let us do the same, if we are true Christians.

*Church Postils II, Luther’s Works 76:244*