

LUTHERAN SYNOD QUARTERLY



VOLUME 58 • NUMBER 4
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**Luther's Invocavit Sermons: The Wittenberg
Professor's Pastoral Perspective in Preaching**

**Learning Pastoral Care from Luther's
Letters of Spiritual Counsel**

The Evidence for Easter

Luther's Discovery of the Gospel

Book Reviews and Index

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The journal of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary

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Foreword

LSQ Vol. 58, No. 4 (December 2018)

IN 1522, LUTHER HOMILETICALLY PREVENTED chaos, revolution, and retribution in Wittenberg by preaching eight sermons, known as the *Invocavit* sermons. These sermons are the proof of his famous quote: “I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; ... I did nothing.... [T]he Word did everything.” The Rev. Timothy Buelow centers his attention on these sermons in his essay “Luther’s *Invocavit* Sermons: The Wittenberg Professor’s Pastoral Perspective in Preaching.” Pastor Buelow serves Faith Lutheran Church in Carthage, Missouri.

Pastoral care of souls is a vital part of the work of a Lutheran pastor. He is to be a true *Seelsorger*, curate of souls, applying Law and Gospel to all in his parish. The Rev. Michael Dale uses Luther’s letters to point out aspects of his pastoral care in his essay, “Learning Pastoral Care from Luther’s Letters of Spiritual Counsel.” He is a pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in Port St. Lucie, Florida.

The proof or evidence for Easter brings one into the field of apologetics or the defense of Christianity. Christianity is based on the death and resurrection of Christ. The evidence for Easter shows that there is no other explanation for the empty tomb than the resurrection of our Lord. The resurrection is not myth but fact based in history. This is the point of the essay, “The Evidence for Easter,” written by Mr. Allen Quist, who is a member of the Doctrine Committee of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

When Luther came to understand the truth of the Gospel, he said, “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.” The Rev. Glenn Smith charts how Luther came to understand the heart of the Gospel, in the essay, “Luther’s Discovery of the Gospel.” Pastor Smith serves Christ Lutheran Church, Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Also included in this *Quarterly* are two book reviews by the Rev. Joseph Abrahamson, who is pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in Clara City, Minnesota, and the index to volume 58.

– GRS

Luther's *Invocavit* Sermons: The Wittenberg Professor's Pastoral Perspective in Preaching

Timothy H. Buelow
Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church
Carthage, Missouri

LSQ Vol. 58, No. 4 (December 2018)

Timeline:

- 1520 August: Luther publishes *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, which enunciates the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers and denies that the pope is the final interpreter of Scripture.
- 1520 October: Luther publishes *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, attacking the seven-sacrament system by which the church exerted total control over every Christian conscience.
- 1520 November: Luther publishes *On the Freedom of a Christian*, the first thesis of which would be used to justify iconoclasm, the second thesis of which would later form a major basis of the *Invocavit* sermon rebuttal to Karlstadt and company.
- 1521: Luther appears at the Diet of Worms; then is “kidnapped” and taken to the Wartburg Castle near Eisenach and begins work on the translation of the New Testament into German.
- 1521: Melanchthon publishes his *Loci Communes*. This is the very beginning of the systematization of Luther’s theology. Luther praises the little volume from the Wartburg. Subsequent events show that there remains much to be sorted and fleshed out.
- 1521: While Luther is in exile, Karlstadt sees himself as the leader of the “Wittenberg Movement.” On Christmas Day he leads worship at St. Mary’s in peasants’ garb, conducts the service entirely in German, distributes communion in both kinds and encourages

the laity to take the bread and chalice from the altar with their own hands.

- 1521 Late December: The Zwickau Prophets arrive in Wittenberg. Markus Stuebner, a former Wittenberg student among them, confounds even Melanchthon with his prolific ability to quote Scripture and his claims of direct revelation from God.
- 1522 January 6: The Augustinian Chapter meets in Wittenberg and declares that monks are free to abandon their monastic vows.
- 1522 January 11: Zwilling leads the Black Cloister monks in destroying the side altars of the Cloister Chapel and burning them together with statuary and the oil used for extreme unction.
- 1522 March 6: Luther returns to Wittenberg and on March 8 begins preaching his eight *Invocavit* sermons.
- 1522 April: Luther publishes a summary of his sermons as the tract *On Partaking the Sacrament in Both Forms*.
- 1522 October: Luther tries to resolve matters in Erfurt and is not as well received by those not of his own flock.
- 1524 November/December: Luther and the population of Wittenberg finally compel the Castle Church to stop the practice of the “Silent Mass” using Law, rather than Gospel.¹

Introductory Observations

DEAR BROTHERS IN CHRIST AND IN THE HOLY ministry,

I thought I had become increasingly adept at saying “no” to assignments. However, the opportunity to read and study Luther during the five hundredth anniversary year of the Reformation, even if by compulsion, was too difficult to resist. It is primarily from the perspective of studying Luther that I have approached this paper. Homiletical and other applications will follow but not be central in my presentation. As I read, reread, and then reread Luther’s *Invocavit* sermons again, it became clear that I should allow Luther to speak for himself.

Luther’s *Invocavit* sermons are one of the most common assigned readings from Luther in college and seminary classes for aspiring pastors. Chances are you have read them yourselves at some point in time. Having studied them for this paper anew, I would recommend that you consider doing so yourself. Nevertheless, knowing pastoral

¹ E. C. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 544.

duties and time constraints first hand, I hope to convey what Luther said and accomplished in this relatively brief review.

I will also say that when I first heard “Luther’s *Invocavit* Sermons” in the assignment, it wasn’t homiletical applications that first came to mind, but liturgical. The *Invocavit* Sermons set the tone for “The Conservative Reformation,” as Charles Krauth termed it. To paraphrase what Paul Masson said more than a century ago, Luther would “make no change before its time.”

It is tempting to draw too many specific conclusions from these sermons about liturgical practice, and attempt to make modern applications to local congregations and national synods, but that would not be wise.² We can glean much more on liturgy from Luther after he settles back into life in Wittenberg than we can from the first week of his return from the Wartburg exile. As we review these sermons and their context, it is perhaps the immediate context that stands out most clearly, namely, that these sermons are directed at *one* congregation—albeit larger than most of ours, encompassing an entire large town—by one very trusted pastor. Luther’s *Invocavit* sermons were successful in quelling the disorder in Wittenberg because a shepherd preached them to his own sheep. They knew him and he knew them. They knew he loved them and cared for them. He preached to them as a father to his children, and they responded as children to their father. Luther’s fatherly style in these sermons would not translate as well elsewhere, such as Erfurt and Orlamünde, because those were not his people and he was not their personal shepherd.

It might even be said that Luther’s patient approach in Wittenberg in the spring of 1522 and the subsequent failure, humanly speaking, of the Gospel to sweep the entire continent forthwith, led to later bouts of depression and the “orneriness” often attributed to the “later Luther.” The *Invocavit* preacher is the Gospel optimist who wrote *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborener Jude sei*.³ Thus, as with all historical situations, it can be said that what happened in Wittenberg and how Luther dealt

² There is too much history between us and this story, such as the adiaphoristic controversy, to draw specific conclusions. In addition, Luther spoke of delaying change, not prohibiting it. Furthermore, liturgical practice varied between university churches and small town parishes and from territory to territory. A vernacular version of the *Formula Missae* is as common in modern Lutheranism as are variations on the *Deutsche Messe*, etc.

³ *That Jesus Christ was born a Jew*, 1523. Luther expected that the Gospel, preached clearly in its truth and purity, would lead many Jews to convert. When they did not, an older Luther wrote *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* [*On the Jews and their Lies*] 1543.

with it is a singular situation that cannot be duplicated. Rather, “What is past is prologue.”⁴

While Luther urges patience, caution, love, and trust in the power of the Word in these sermons, we nevertheless get a prophetic glimpse into the “impatient” side of Luther’s personality—which will show itself more fully later in his life—when he threatens in these sermons to leave Wittenberg and its people for good if the Gospel doesn’t produce better fruit in their midst. While on the one hand, he is effectively applying the Law with these statements, on the other hand, he is giving word to the private thoughts many a pastor has had at times when he says, “If you are not going to follow me, however, then no one need drive me away from you—I will leave you unasked, and I shall regret that I ever preached so much as one sermon in this place.”⁵

With those and many other words, Luther preaches judgment, while still keeping the focus on the Gospel—that Jesus Christ earned salvation for all. He confidently trusted the Gospel to work inner reform in the hearts of his people and there produce faith that bears fruit in love. Albert Collver wrote:

Although Luther at the time of the *Invocavit Sermons* in 1522 had not yet developed the language of *externum verbum* found in the Augsburg Confession written eight years later, the issues addressed in the *Invocavit Sermons* can be categorized along the lines of internals and externals. In particular, when all the externals are eliminated, nothing but matters internal to the Christian are left. The dispute over celibacy, images, crucifixes, vestments, confession, fasting, the mass—private, in Latin, or in the vernacular—and communion in both kinds revolve around questions of what faith requires and what it permits, what is a must and what is free, what is internal and what is external. Ultimately the answer to this question is a proper distinction between the law and the gospel.

Once again, although Luther does not use the language of a distinction between law and gospel in the *Invocavit Sermons*, nor will he for another decade (in 1532), he does follow the

⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 2, Scene 1.

⁵ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522,” in *LW*, 51:91. Unless otherwise indicated, all English references to Luther’s writings are based on Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Publishing House, 1955–). References will be abbreviated *LW*.

pattern of distinguishing between the law and the gospel in the *Invocavit* Sermons.... Although the terms had not yet been developed, the distinction between internals and externals naturally flows from a distinction of law and gospel.⁶

That the sermons are brilliant is clear from their effectiveness in quelling the unrest in Wittenberg in one week (!), and rescuing the conservative, Gospel-centered Reformation from devolving into "Protestantism" in its various forms. These sermons show why of all the 16th-century Reformers, Luther had the greatest impact. Some consider these sermons the high point of Luther's pastoral and writing career,⁷ a height which he never perfectly again attained, as disputes roused his fiery anger and disappointment weighed down his evangelical optimism.⁸ But no one argues Luther could not preach it home.

One more thing to note, before we turn to the sermons themselves, is that Luther preached to a packed house, with a mixed crowd. While the ordinary townspeople of Wittenberg were there, so were students as well as professors from the university. Zwilling and Karlstadt were there. One of them repented and one grew bitter. Melancthon was there, as was Luther's friend, artist, and mayor, Lukas Cranach. Luther is preaching to people of widely varying levels of education at a time of tension. He makes his sermons simple enough for all to understand, and he includes direct barbs for those who helped bring about the unrest.

The Sermons:

Sermon 1 – March 9, 1522, Invocavit Sunday

Luther begins with no smooth introduction. He is not about to cajole his listeners as if they do not know and trust him. He plunges right in and makes it clear that they have been focusing on minutiae and missing the forest for the trees. He goes straight to the core issue of the Reformation: being able to stand before God, which we cannot do apart from Christ's work for us. The very first words out of his mouth are, "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another.

⁶ Albert Collver, "Luther's *Invocavit* Sermons: A Distinction between Internals and Externals, between the Law and the Gospel," (Academia, presented 2012), https://www.academia.edu/12721665/Luthers_Invocavit_Sermons_A_Distinction_between_Internals_and_Externals_between_the_Law_and_the_Gospel.

⁷ Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, Volume 6, *The Reformation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 367.

⁸ Schwiebert, 550.

Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone.... In the first place, we must know that we are the ‘children of wrath,’ and all our works, intentions, and thoughts are nothing at all.”⁹ Here Luther is quoting Ephesians 2 with his phrase “children of wrath,” and he makes this application: We must have clear, strong Bible passages such as this one as the foundation of our core beliefs, so that we can be confident before God in our faith. Yes, that is even true of passages that preach the Law as a hammer. While he does not say it out loud yet, with these words Luther is intentionally implicating Karlstadt and the others who have been convoluting the Bible and confusing the congregation while leading them away from the central teaching of God’s grace in Christ.

It’s all about God’s grace in Christ, so Luther just as quickly and abruptly dives into the Gospel: Jesus died for us. Here too, to paraphrase, “You had better know your Scriptures and your Scripture answers personally.” “Secondly, that God has sent us his only-begotten Son that we may believe in him and that whoever trusts in him shall be free from sin and a child of God, as John declares in his first chapter, ‘To all who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God’ [John 1:12]. Here we should all be well versed in the Bible and ready to confront the devil with many passages.”¹⁰

Now, already, after only a three-paragraph summary of sin and grace, Luther turns to the elephant in the room: the matters of externals which have jeopardized not only the peace of Wittenberg, but of Saxony and even the empire. The terms Luther uses for Law and Gospel are Love and Faith.¹¹ Faith comes first, and now comes love for neighbor. Love must govern our hearts and actions if we want to remain right with God and rightly carry out the Reformation: “Thirdly, we must also have love and through love we must do to one another as God has done to us through faith. For without love faith is nothing, as St. Paul says” (I Cor. 2 [13:1]).¹²

Karlstadt and the other radicals had reduced the Reformation to a movement dedicated to changing outward practices. Through misuse

⁹ LW 51:70.

¹⁰ LW 51:71.

¹¹ Luther was following the pattern he had laid out in his booklet *The Freedom of a Christian* which he had published in 1520, and which was familiar to his congregation. There Gospel and Law are phrased thus: “A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything” and “A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.” Translation from Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹² LW 51:71.

of Scripture, they had convinced the uneducated that God was calling for a new world order, and had riled them up to action. They thought they were serving God by setting up a visible kingdom—a sort of new Israel. In effect, they were no different from Rome, Luther will point out. While Rome demanded certain practices be carried out under canon law, the radical reformers demanded that certain practices now be carried out under their own new law.

Luther further chides his “competitors” for using the Bible in a fundamentalistic way, impressing people with their “knowledge” while not practicing true Christianity by actually putting Christ’s love into action:

I notice that you have a great deal to say of the doctrine of faith and love which is preached to you, and this is no wonder; an ass can almost intone the lessons, and why should you not be able to repeat the doctrines and formulas? Dear friends, the kingdom of God,—and we are that kingdom—does not consist in talk or words [I Cor. 4:20], but in activity, in deeds, in works and exercises. God does not want hearers and repeaters of words [Jas. 1:22], but followers and doers, and this occurs in faith through love. For a faith without love is not enough—rather it is not faith at all, but a counterfeit of faith....¹³

Fourthly, he says, we also need *patience*. This is a key word and theme for Luther at this stage in the Reformation. Later, Luther will be less patient with those who have heard the pure Gospel repeatedly and clearly and refuse to act according to it. This will happen within a year and a half at All Saints, the Castle Church in Wittenberg, where Elector John’s relics remained housed and admired, and in later dealing with Karlstadt at the elector’s behest. But for now, Luther wants patience with the weak to be the rule of the day and no force to be used in bringing about the Gospel’s reign.

If all mothers were to abandon their children, where would we have been? Dear brother, if you have suckled long enough, do not at once cut off the breast, but let your brother be suckled as you were suckled. **I would not have gone so far as you have done, if I had been here. The cause is good, but there has been**

¹³ LW 51:71.

too much haste. For there are still brothers and sisters on the other side who belong to us and must still be won.¹⁴

And there you have a summary of Luther's thinking at the time, a tack that would persist in principle, despite tweaks befitting later circumstances. It is not without reason that Luther's Reformation is called "conservative." Within a year, Luther would adapt this policy to circumstances and ask his elector to intervene in several cases. Luther believed there was a limit on patience in waiting for the Gospel to work—much as the most patient pastor eventually will pursue church discipline. Yet the Lutheran Reformation would be ever known as the "conservative Reformation" both complimentarily and derogatorily. When the Lord works all things together for our good (Rom. 8:28), that includes pairing a reformer to a particular congregation in a specific time and place, and using these circumstances to influence his direction and decisions. Luther did not operate in a vacuum, but within the community of fellow faculty and students at his little university, in friendship with his mayor and artistic accomplice Lucas Cranach, and as pastor of his congregation at St. Mary's.

Furthermore, for Luther, it was not just a matter of conservatism for its own sake, or even a matter of patience alone. It was also an issue of order. He saw God as the God of order, who commanded that things be done "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Even if the cause is good, orderliness under God was paramount to him in bringing it about.

Therefore all those have erred who have helped and consented to abolish the mass; not that it was not a good thing, but that it was not done in an orderly way. You say it was right according to the Scriptures. I agree, but what becomes of order? For it was done in wantonness, with no regard for proper order and with offense to your neighbor.¹⁵

Luther said this because the Church/City Council was not involved in the decision Karlstadt had made to shock and awe the city with the Christmas Day vernacular/street clothes/communion-in-both-kinds-service. Surely there are direct pastoral applications for today in Luther's rebuke. There are times and places where well-meaning changes have been rashly introduced by a pastor who acted on his own without

¹⁴ *LW* 51:72.

¹⁵ *LW* 51:73.

involving the Church Council or the voters, and caused unrest in the local parish or circuit.

On just such matters of changes being introduced, Luther shares with his people a simple explanation of adiaphora and rebukes them. Here he may have been looking and pointing directly at the culprits, Karlstadt and Zwilling, for not knowing this as Christians:

Here one can see that you do not have the Spirit, even though you do have a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. Take note of these two things, "must" and "free." The "must" is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit any one to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before every one. But "free" is that in which I have choice, and may use or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a "must" out of what is "free," as you have done, so that you may not be called to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise of liberty.¹⁶

Finally, Luther concludes by explaining his fundamental goal as Reformer, namely to win others over through Scripture's teaching of the Gospel. What is to be gained if we succeed in getting people to do the "right things" for the wrong reasons? It is unloving to be impatient with the Spirit's persuasion through the Word.

Let us, therefore, feed others also with the milk which we received, until they, too, become strong in faith. For there are many who are otherwise in accord with us and who would also gladly accept this thing, but they do not yet fully understand it—these we drive away. Therefore, let us show love to our neighbors; if we do not do this, our work will not endure. We must have patience with them for a time, and not cast out him who is weak in faith; and do and omit to do many other things, so long as love requires it and it does no harm to our faith. If we do not earnestly pray to God and act rightly in this matter, it looks to me as if all the misery which we have begun to heap upon the papists will fall upon us. Therefore I could no longer

¹⁶ *LW* 51:74.

remain away, but was compelled to come and say these things to you.¹⁷

Sermon 2 – March 10, 1522

On the next night, Luther spoke even more eloquently of the power of the Word, so much so that Luther is frequently quoted from this sermon, without people even realizing it. He begins with a brief summary of what he has spoken of in the first sermon. While he announces his theme as dealing with the question of images, it is *nuda scriptura* which is the true emphasis. Here there is comfort for today's preachers. We cannot add to the effectiveness of God's Word, but should rather preach it clearly and let the Holy Spirit do His work.

[God's] Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure [Ecclus. 33:13¹⁸]. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force any one to have faith. That is God's work alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.¹⁹

Luther applies his principle to the immediate question at hand, namely the false practices that must eventually be abolished. As stated, there will come a time to make the final decision to end private masses, distribution in one kind, etc. by council decision. But first, Luther believes, the majority should be won over so that it comes as a natural result and consensus. "We must first win the hearts of the people. But that is done when I teach only the Word of God, preach the gospel."²⁰ First you win the heart, then false practices end without decree or law. Luther gives the scriptural example of St. Paul in Athens. When Paul arrived in the city, he observed many idols, but he did not "kick down

¹⁷ LW 51:74–75.

¹⁸ "Like clay in the hand of the potter, to be molded as he pleases, so all are in the hand of their Maker, to be given whatever he decides" (NRSV).

¹⁹ LW 51:76.

²⁰ LW 51:76.

a single one of them.” Rather he preached the Gospel and idol worship disappeared in time through the power of the Word of God. Luther says he would have done the same as Paul in Athens if he had come there and found them observing the Roman mass. Again he backs up his claim with a paean to the Word, one of the most famous quotes of Luther, and rightly so:

In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise **I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.**²¹

Luther concludes his shorter Monday sermon with a historical example. After the apostolic time had passed, circumcision became a non-issue, until the time of Jerome who wanted it outlawed. St. Augustine opposed him, but Jerome outlived him and now an adiaphoron was codified in law, which grew into “a thousand laws until they have completely buried us under laws. And this is what will happen here, too; one law will soon make two, two will increase to three, and so forth.”²²

Sermon 3 – March 11, 1522

Luther begins sermon three agreeing with Karlstadt that private masses are contrary to Scripture and must be abolished. However, doing so in a way that does not spiritually harm those whose consciences are weak is the theme of his Tuesday evening sermon. Luther begins by again reminding his audience that each person must and will answer to God. He warned them that if they were doing “religious things” only because someone led or compelled them to do it, they were giving an opening to the devil to plague their consciences at the hour of death. Will we be able to back up what we ourselves have done with clear Scripture?

²¹ *LW* 51:77.

²² *LW* 51:78.

See to it that you can stand before God and the world when you are assailed, especially when the devil attacks you in the hour of death. It is not enough to say: this man or that man did it, I followed the crowd, according to the preaching of the dean, Dr. Karlstadt, or Gabriel, or Michael. Not so; every one must stand on his own feet and be prepared to give battle to the devil. You must rest upon a strong and clear text of Scripture if you would stand the test. If you cannot do that, you will never withstand—the devil will pluck you like a parched leaf.²³

Gabriel Zwilling was a fellow monk with Luther at the Augustinian Cloister in Wittenberg. In Luther's absence, he had joined Karlstadt in pushing and preaching in favor of the immediate reform of the mass. Following Luther's return, he would soon admit his error, reconcile with Luther, and serve as a Lutheran pastor throughout his life (d. 1558). But Luther makes humorous use of his name in his sermon by adding the archangel Michael to his list, giving us a glimpse into his winsome preaching style. Zwilling had led the monks two months before Luther's return in destroying all "the side altars of the old convent church, in which Luther had preached his first sermon and burned the oil used for the Extreme Unction. All images were burned in their fanatical zeal"²⁴ five days after the Augustinians had met in Wittenberg on January 6 and decided the monks were no longer bound by their vows. Zwilling was a fiery preacher and was quickly nicknamed "the second Luther" by the Wittenbergers.

Luther transitions to specific applications of this principle of approaching adiaphora from the perspective of a scripturally formed conscience which can answer Satan's accusations. Monks shouldn't leave the monastery or get married because someone told them it's a good idea to do so, or that they must, but because an informed conscience compels them to do so or not. Liberty should never be made law:

Therefore I say, what God has made free shall remain free. If anybody forbids it, as the pope, the Antichrist, has done, you should not obey. He who can do so without harm and for love of his neighbor may wear a cowl or a tonsure, since it will not injure your faith. The cowl will not strangle you, if you are already wearing one.

²³ *LW* 51:79–80.

²⁴ Schwiebert, 536.

Thus, dear friends, I have said it clearly enough, and I believe you ought to understand it and not make liberty a law, saying: This priest has taken a wife, therefore all priests must take wives. Not at all. Or this monk or that nun has left the cloister, therefore they must all come out. Not at all.²⁵

Neither should images be commanded or forbidden by law. Referencing the historical iconoclastic controversy of the past, Luther says both sides were wrong, because both made absolutes out of an adiaphoron. He tells the Wittenbergers, "They wished to make a 'must' out of that which is free. This God cannot tolerate."²⁶

Karlstadt had made a great number of decrees about how the Wittenbergers should live and worship based on Old Testament practices and laws. For example, Karlstadt published a tract in late January, 1522 called *On the Abolition of Images, and that There Should Be No Beggars Among Christians*, in which he argued that "since there is begging, Wittenberg must not be a Christian city." He claimed that the year of cancelling debts outlined in Deuteronomy 15 was still required of Christians in the New Testament era. Karlstadt also wrote 53 theses in 1521 in which he argued that Gregorian chant was unacceptable for evangelical worship, as was the organ, which he felt should be relegated to "theatrical exhibitions and princes' palaces." Again using the Old Testament as his basis, he argued that any and all images should be removed from churches, since Moses forbids graven images in Exodus 20. Because some had defended them for their teaching value, he wrote, "Since Scripture speaks so clearly against images, he will not tolerate considering additional pedagogical or evocative powers of visual art."²⁷

Karlstadt was a gifted preacher himself. He did not only use argumentation that would impress other scholars. In fact, he preferred appealing to ordinary laymen with his rhetoric. His most powerful argument against images had been an emotional admission that he was personally tempted by them:

I now wish and am compelled to tell all Christians that they have idols in their hearts if they reverence images. With a sigh I must confess my secret thoughts before all the world. I

²⁵ *LW* 51:80–81.

²⁶ *LW* 51:82.

²⁷ Neil R. Leroux, "In the Christian City of Wittenberg: Karlstadt's Tract on Images and Begging," in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34, no.1 (Spring 2003): 96.

admit that I am fainthearted. Though I know I ought not fear any image, and I am certain that God demands of his own not to fear idols.... I also know that God is as small in me as my reverence of idols is great. For God desires to indwell my whole and total heart and cannot in any way tolerate my having an image in my mind's eye. And when I trust God with all my heart, I need never fear his enemies.... But (heaven help me!), my heart has been trained since my youth to give honor and respect to images and such a dreadful fear has been instilled in me of which I would gladly rid myself, but cannot. Thus I am afraid to burn a single idol. I fear that the devil's fool might insult me.... Had I not read God's Word and heard the spirit of God denouncing idols, I would have thought that I loved and feared no image. But now I know how, on this matter, I stand toward God and images, and how firmly and deeply images are rooted in my heart. May God grant me his grace that I will fear the heads of devils (as saints in churches are commonly referred to) no more than I fear stone and wood. And may God grant that I never honor stone and wood in the appearance and name of a saint. Amen. Read Jeremiah 10:2-5 on this.²⁸

Karlstadt's reasoning had been impressed on the hearts of the Wittenbergers in the previous few months by his preaching. Luther needed to speak to their hearts as well. But he also needed to show them the limitations of the "simple layman armed with Scripture" by showing that interpreting God's Word was not child's play. Laymen need to know their Bibles well, so as not to be manipulated by false preaching. Perhaps Luther was preaching directly to the university students in the audience, who had been swept up in the passion of the movement unfolding as they listened to the "scholar" Karlstadt, or the heavenly prophets who had even confounded Melancthon.

So Luther turns to Old Testament examples himself to cast doubt on the simplistic proof texting Karlstadt and others had used. Luther had said that unless you can quote an absolute command of Scripture for what you believe and do, Satan will attack your conscience, especially on your deathbed. Now Luther literally plays "devil's advocate" in his counter arguments to the many pronouncements of Karlstadt. His goal is to create doubt about "doubtful matters," to put the "indifferent" back into adiaphora. "You want to use the Old Testament to prove images

²⁸ Ibid.

are sinful? Then I'll use the Old Testament to challenge your cocksureness."

Now let us see! When our adversaries say: The meaning of the first commandment is that we should worship only one God and not any image, even as it is said immediately following, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them" [Exod. 20:5], and when they say that it is the worship of images which is forbidden and not the making of them, they are shaking our foundation and making it uncertain. And if you reply: The text says, "You shall not make any images," then they say: It also says, "You shall not worship them." In the face of such uncertainty who would be so bold as to destroy the images? Not I. But let us go further. They say: Did not Noah, Abraham, Jacob build altars? And who will deny that? We must admit it. Again, did not Moses erect a bronze serpent, as we read in his fourth book? How then can you say that Moses forbade the making of images when he himself made one? It seems to me that such a serpent is an image, too. How shall we answer that? Again, do we not read also that two birds were erected on the mercy seat, the very place where God willed that he should be worshipped? Here we must admit that we may have images and make images, but we must not worship them, and if they are worshipped, they should be put away and destroyed, just as King Hezekiah broke in pieces the bronze serpent erected by Moses. And who will be so bold as to say, when he is challenged to give an answer: They worship the images. They will say: Are you the man who dares to accuse us of worshipping them? Do not believe that they will acknowledge it. To be sure, it is true, but we cannot make them admit it. Just look how they acted when I condemned works without faith. They said: Do you believe that we have no faith, or that our works are performed without faith? Then I cannot press them any further, but must put my flute back in my pocket; for if they gain a hair's breadth, they make a hundred miles out of it.²⁹

Therefore it should have been preached that images were nothing and that no service is done to God by erecting them; then they would have fallen of themselves. That is what I did; that is what Paul did in Athens, when he went into their

²⁹ *LW* 51:82–83.

churches and saw all their idols. He did not strike at any of them, but stood in the market place and said, "You men of Athens, you are all idolatrous." He preached against their idols, but he overthrew none by force. And you rush, create an uproar, break down altars, and overthrow images! Do you really believe you can abolish the altars in this way? No, you will only set them up more firmly. Even if you overthrew the images in this place, do you think you have overthrown those in Nürnberg and the rest of the world? Not at all. St. Paul, as we read in the Book of Acts, sat in a ship on whose prow were painted or carved the Twin Brothers [i.e., Castor and Pollux]. He went on board and did not bother about them at all, neither did he break them off. Why must Luke describe the Twins at this point? Without doubt he wanted to show that outward things could do no harm to faith, if only the heart does not cleave to them or put its trust in them. This is what we must preach and teach, and let the Word alone do the work, as I said before. The Word must first capture the hearts of men and enlighten them; we will not be the ones who will do it. Therefore the apostles magnified their ministry, *ministerium* [Rom. 11:13], and not its effect, *executio*.³⁰

Luther's concluding sentence on Tuesday could well be made into a plaque for pastors' studies. Let the word alone do the work! Concern yourselves with administering the Word, rather than the results. Those words are comforting in an age which is results oriented, especially as numbers in the visible church of the West are dwindling.

Sermon 4 – March 12, 1522

On Wednesday evening, Luther began in his usual fashion, summarizing and tweaking what he has said thus far. In this case, he makes a strong point of admitting that images are abused; that some people do, in fact, worship them. He singles out the act of those who donated or contributed toward them in the first place. Who would give them, he asks, if they didn't think they were doing God a favor, a good work? Nevertheless, we shouldn't denounce everything that is abused. Luther shows how ridiculous it would be if we did so:

God has commanded us in Deut. 4 [:19] not to lift up our eyes to the sun [and the moon and the stars], etc., that we may not worship them, for they are created to serve all nations. But there

³⁰ LW 51:83.

are many people who worship the sun and the stars. Therefore we propose to rush in and pull the sun and stars from the skies. No, we had better let it be. Again, wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool of him [Ecclus. 19:2; 31:30³¹]; so we kill all the women and pour out all the wine. Again, gold and silver cause much evil, so we condemn them. Indeed, if we want to drive away our worst enemy, the one who does us the most harm, we shall have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart.

... If you want to fight the devil you must know the Scriptures well and, besides, use them at the right time.³²

Luther's next topic concerned ecclesiastical food laws. His first point is that if you are sick, eat whatever you need. Secondly, if the pope says you can't eat meat on Friday, eat it just "to spite him." Thirdly, importantly, and surely applicable today, *treat the weak totally differently than the stubborn*:

Thirdly, there are some who are still weak in faith, who ought to be instructed, and who would gladly believe as we do. But their ignorance prevents them, and if this were preached to them, as it was to us, they would be one with us. Toward such well-meaning people we must assume an entirely different attitude from that which we assume toward the stubborn. We must bear patiently with these people and not use our liberty; since it brings no peril or harm to body or soul; in fact, it is rather salutary, and we are doing our brothers and sisters a great service besides. But if we use our liberty unnecessarily, and deliberately cause offense to our neighbor, we drive away the very one who in time would come to our faith.³³

Here Luther cites St. Paul's example regarding circumcision. In order to prevent simple people from taking offense that Paul's assistant Timothy was a gentile when he was doing mission work among Jews, Paul had him circumcised. On the other hand, he refused to have his assistant pastor Titus circumcised, because it was being demanded, as though circumcision were necessary for New Testament Christians.

³¹ "Wine and women lead intelligent men astray, and the man who consorts with prostitutes is reckless." "Drunkenness increases the anger of a fool to his own hurt, reducing his strength and adding wounds."

³² *LW* 51:85, 86.

³³ *LW* 51:87.

He also cites the case of Peter in Antioch. As Luther put it, Peter was “eating pork sausages”³⁴ with the gentiles until the Judaizers came to town. Then he abstained. In the same way that Paul confronted Peter face to face, so we must stand up for our Christian liberty when stubborn individuals insist on man-made rules. Yet we must use restraint when trying to win over weak brothers and sisters.

Sermon 5 – March 13, 1522

The unrest in Wittenberg began before Christmas 1521, but it was on Christmas Day that it began to cause major concern, which only grew. On Christmas Day, Karlstadt decided to officiate the Divine Service in street clothes, conduct his revised liturgy entirely in the vernacular, and observe the Lord’s Supper in both kinds, with the laymen taking the bread and cup into their own hands for the first time. That was quite a series of radical changes for one service, and it indicated that the Reformation had taken a more radical direction. Of all of these changes, the latter two were still literally “the talk of the town.” Luther finally addresses them on Thursday evening.

He began by mocking foolish canon laws that wink at priests sleeping with their maids, while crying “horror!” if a nun touches the altar linens. But then he slams his listeners with this charge: “But now you go ahead and become as foolish as the pope.” How?

... in that you think that a person *must* touch the sacrament with his hands. You want to prove that you are good Christians by touching the sacrament with your hands, and thus you have dealt with the sacrament, which is our highest treasure, in such a way that it is a wonder you were not struck to the ground by thunder and lightning. All the other things God might have suffered, but this he cannot allow, because you have made a *compulsion* of it.³⁵

Here Luther gets to the heart of the distinction between his and Karlstadt’s views. While for Luther everything is about having a right conscience with God, for Karlstadt and his many, many spiritual heirs, it’s all about “doing the right thing in the right way” in order to live up to God’s standards. It could be argued, in fact, that “Karlstadtians” had missed the point of the Reformation—the pure Gospel—as fully as had the medieval Romanists. While canon law was filled with man-made

³⁴ *LW* 51:87.

³⁵ *LW* 51:89.

rules, the Gospel is not about following Bible rules, but rather about Jesus Christ fulfilling and keeping God's righteous requirements for us, offering Himself up as the propitiation for our sins on the cross, and imputing to us His righteousness through faith. In a way, Karlstadt could be considered a spiritual forefather of the "Restorationist" movement. In many ways his theology resembled that of the Church of Christ with its forbidding of musical instruments and claims to be the early church restored. Karlstadt came to advocate illiteracy and shun medicine, so desperate he was to imitate some imagined past Christianity. More than of Zwingli even, Luther could have said of Karlstadt, "You have a different spirit," and in not so many words did. The biggest difference between Karlstadt and Luther is that Luther's reformation was about peace for the soul—understanding, and then proclaiming how the tormented sinner can be free before God to live for him and "serve him in everlasting, righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." Those who are not panged by conscience have an inbuilt roadblock to the Gospel. They see themselves as actually capable of doing the right thing. It is sad that Roman Catholic theology still teaches that horrendous error. But it is sadder that so-called "evangelicals" betray the true Reformation by teaching it too. Luther was blessed to have his personal *opinio legis* destroyed by God. We all have it, and for this reason need to be preached to hell, so that we can be preached to heaven. Through the years, I have preached to what I perceive to be "Karlstadtians"—people who never wrestled with a guilty conscience, and who seem to think the main thing Jesus has done for them is give them tips on how to "keep their act together." I take comfort in the fact that even Luther was unsuccessful in converting the original Karlstadt. (On the other hand, it seems God eventually did through hardship, and Luther took him in.)

Historians often point to Luther's grouping of Karlstadt together with Thomas Müntzer and the Zwickau Prophets as an unfortunate painting with too broad a brush, which then led to his inability to win the man over. Karlstadt resented being grouped together with the more radical spirits as just one more of the "Schwärmer." But what Luther lacked in distinction in his writing—whether out of misunderstanding, or for well-thought-out, purely rhetorical purposes—he made up for in spades by his innate ability to "sense" when something more than a phrase or tack was wrong, but rather a foundational perspective. In the same way Lutherans today often have a hard time defining pietism but sense it and perceive what it will finally lead to, if left unchecked, Luther knew where this all would end, if he did not oppose it directly

and strongly. There are scholars (and non-scholars) aplenty who will fault Luther's bull-in-a-china-shop responses—as though Luther were guilty of abusing Twitter. But no one can deny Luther's ability to sniff out a devilish danger via its subtle false emphasis from a mile away, based on the hellish struggles he had endured in his own *Anfechtungen*. Through these trials of soul, Luther knew when the emphasis was askew and burdened rather than freed the troubled conscience. And he could not abide that.

While conceding it was not wrong to take the bread in one's hands and hold the chalice, Luther had to point out the obvious. While Karlstadt was eager to trumpet Christian freedom in the face of papist rules, he was really turning such "freedom" into a new law. Luther called him on it publicly:

If you want to show that you are good Christians by handling the sacrament and boast of it before the world, then Herod and Pilate are the chief and best Christians, since it seems to me that they really handled the body of Christ when they had him nailed to the cross and put to death. No, my dear friends, the kingdom of God does not consist in outward things, which can be touched or perceived, but in faith.³⁶

After urging his followers to be more careful in their practices and reforms, and to make sure they are standing on solid scriptural ground, Luther vocalizes a principle wise pastors still consider core today in pastoral practice: "Therefore no new practices should be introduced, unless the gospel has first been thoroughly preached and understood."³⁷ That is the principle, upon which follows the application. As clear as it is that Jesus distributed both the bread and the wine, his body and his blood, Luther still believes offering the sacrament in both kinds should be introduced more gently, allowing the Gospel to do the work of convincing the people that this is the scriptural way to receive the Lord's Supper. "It must not be made compulsory nor a general law. We must rather promote and practice and preach the Word, and then afterwards leave the result and execution of it entirely to the Word...."³⁸ Further, Luther admonishes them for actually bragging about their new practice, as though they had done a meritorious good work. If it has caused harm

³⁶ *LW* 51:89.

³⁷ *LW* 51:90.

³⁸ *LW* 51:90.

to the kingdom by driving away people who otherwise might have been willing to be instructed, it is in fact a bad work.

Luther must have been pretty animated as he came to the conclusion of his sermon, judging by his words: "If you are not going to follow me, however, then no one need drive me away from you—I will leave you unasked, and I shall regret that I ever preached so much as one sermon in this place.... I may say that of all my enemies who have opposed me up to this time none have brought me so much grief as you."³⁹

Sermon 6 – March 14, 1522

On Friday night, as Luther mounted the pulpit, he continued where he had left off: namely, on the reception of the sacrament. He emphasized that while we receive Christ's body and blood in communion, it is nevertheless necessary that these gifts be received in faith. "There must be faith to make the reception worthy and acceptable before God, otherwise it is nothing but sham and a mere external show, which is not Christianity at all. Christianity consists solely in faith, and no outward work must be attached to it." He then defines true faith. "But faith (which we all must have, if we wish to go to the sacrament worthily) is a firm trust that Christ, the Son of God, stands in our place and has taken all our sins upon his shoulders and that he is the eternal satisfaction for our sin and reconciles us with God the Father."⁴⁰ It's precisely for this reason that there should not be laws commanding reception of the sacrament, as though it were a work we do, rather than receiving in faith God's good gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation. Luther singles out the pope's command that one "must" commune at Easter. He asserts that command has caused people to commit more sin during Eastertide than at any other time of the year, since many are partaking of the Lord's Supper as a mere outward duty, rather than in faith. On the other hand, those who do understand that Christ is their Substitute and trust that He is offering them forgiveness and salvation will gladly follow Christ and hurry to the Lord's table on their own.

In what I find a daring analysis, Luther then adds, "But, of course, we do not all have such faith; would God one-tenth of the Christians had it!"

See, such rich, immeasurable treasures [Eph. 2:7], which God in his grace showers upon us, cannot be the possession of

³⁹ *LW* 51:91.

⁴⁰ *LW* 51:92.

everyone, but only of those who suffer tribulation, physical or spiritual, physically through the persecution of men, spiritually through despair of conscience, outwardly or inwardly, when the devil causes your heart to be weak, timid, and discouraged, so that you do not know how you stand with God, and when he casts your sins into your face. And in such terrified and trembling hearts alone God desires to dwell, as the prophet Isaiah says in the sixth chapter [Isa. 66:2]. For who desires a protector, defender, and shield to stand before him if he feels no conflict within himself, so that he is distressed because of his sins and daily tormented by them? That man is not yet ready for this food. This food demands a hungry and longing man, for it delights to enter a hungry soul, which is constantly battling with its sins and eager to be rid of them.⁴¹

Even more daring, Luther then gives this advice: “He who is not thus prepared should abstain for a while from this sacrament, for this food will not enter a sated and full heart, and if it comes to such a heart, it is harmful.”⁴² Put these statements together, as Luther forcefully preached them, and consider their implications. Yes, it should be remembered that this is a “territorial church” situation, so that it is safe to conclude some come to the divine service out of a sense of civic duty, somewhat akin to what happened in small towns in America in the 1950s. On the other hand, Luther knows these people. They are his congregation, and he tells them to abstain from communion until they truly, inwardly grasp what we say in the confession of sins each Sunday: that they really are poor, miserable sinners who merit nothing but God’s wrath. That way they can appreciate the greatness of their need for Christ’s forgiveness, offered them at the table. Can any of you pastors think of someone you have thought of giving such advice to? Rare would be the individual you’d dare to say this to for fear of being legalistic. Yet Luther says it to the entire congregation. Yes, these words reflect exactly what Luther wrote in the “Christian questions and answers” of the catechism. But in this sermon, Luther is preaching them from the heart in direct application to his people, while giving a numerical judgment (one in ten)!

Yet it perfectly echoes Luther’s overall theme for the week, and is a guide-star of his Reformation theology: true reformation must start in the heart, not in outward practices. If the heart is not won over by a true

⁴¹ *LW* 51:93–94.

⁴² *LW* 51:94.

understanding of Law and Gospel, no act of outward piety—be it the removal of church art, or grabbing the chalice with the hands—brings one closer to God. On the contrary, it simply leads to more of the same self-righteousness as before the Reformation began.

Luther seems to back up just a little from his seeming disinclination to the sacrament before the close of his sermon. Those who are most terrified and troubled by death and the devil are “most” worthy, “and they are the ones to whom it is most opportunely given...”⁴³

This is what Christ did when he was about to institute the blessed sacrament. First he terrified his disciples and shook their hearts by saying that he was going to leave them [Matt. 26:2], which was exceedingly painful to them; and then he went on to say, “One of you will betray me” [Matt. 26:21]. Do you think that that did not cut them to the heart? Of course they accepted that saying with all fear and they sat there as though they had all been traitors to God. And after he had made them all tremble with fear and sorrow, only then did he institute the blessed sacrament as a comfort and consoled them again. For this bread is a comfort for the sorrowing, a healing for the sick, a life for the dying, a food for all the hungry, and a rich treasure for all the poor and needy.⁴⁴

With his preaching of the Law in this sermon, it is likely Luther greatly increased the percentage of worthy communion guests from his 10% projection.

Sermon 7 – March 15, 1522, Eve of Reminiscere

As had been his practice, Luther begins his next sermon with a very brief summary of the last.⁴⁵ He reiterates that whoever does not fear death and hell should refrain from coming to the sacrament until “God also takes hold of him and draws him through his Word.”⁴⁶

Luther brings his sermon series full circle in the seventh sermon, as he preaches on the fruit of the sacrament, namely love. Using 1 Corinthians 13, Pastor Martin says, “Love, I say, is a fruit of this

⁴³ LW 51:94.

⁴⁴ LW 51:94–95.

⁴⁵ What is extant of Luther's sermon is very short, lending credence to those who say that the written versions of the sermons we have might have left uncopied an exposition of the Gospel appointed for the day. On the Eve of Reminiscere, Luther may well have spent more time on the text before continuing his topical series.

⁴⁶ LW 51:95.

sacrament. But this I do not yet perceive among you here in Wittenberg, even though you have had much preaching and, after all, you ought to have carried this out in practice.... If you do not want to show yourselves Christians by your love, then leave the other things undone, too....”⁴⁷

During Luther’s absence, Karlstadt had claimed that Wittenberg was not a Christian city because there were poor people there. He wanted the year of Jubilee from the Old Testament instated in town, and had pressed the city council to enact it by law. Luther appears to concede the point that lack of Christian welfare is not a good sign in a Christian town. At the same time he is subtly accusing the would-be Reformers of having been unsuccessful in changing anything during his absence, despite their vigorous efforts to do so through legalism. Luther references his own writings on the topic, to make clear he has always considered acts of charity and love to be an essential sign of faith: “If anybody is helped, well and good; but nobody looks after the poor to see how you might be able to help them. This is a pity. You have heard many sermons about it and all my books are full of it and have this one purpose, to urge you to faith and love.”⁴⁸

But Luther has primarily the ecclesiastical nonsense of outward “reforms” in mind when he talks of lovelessness, for in his conclusion he threatens a plague from God if they do not cease “all kinds of tomfoolery which does not amount to anything.”

Sermon 8 – March 16, 1522, Reminiscere

Finally, Luther covers the topic of private confession in his Sunday sermon. Private confession has always been a bellwether issue in discerning one’s understanding regarding the centrality of the means of grace. There was no public confession and absolution in those days to “compete” with private confession. The only alternative was to wrestle privately in prayer with God over one’s sins. Luther had done more private wrestling than most, and even before his own understanding of justification grew clearer, he treasured the times he could go to his Augustinian “father confessor,” Johannes Staupitz. While he loathed the forced recounting of sins imposed on laymen—especially the once-a-year required confession before the once-a-year required communion at Easter—he felt equal disdain for those radical reformers who would deprive ordinary Christians of the joy of personal absolution. Once

⁴⁷ *LW* 51:96.

⁴⁸ *LW* 51:96.

again, Karlstadt had been striving to ham-handedly throw out “the baby with the bathwater.”

Luther begins by outlining the form of confession found in Scriptures, namely in Matthew 18. He describes it the very same way we define church discipline in our churches, and states, “this confession is commanded by God in Matt. 18.... Anybody who was able to re-establish it would be doing a good work. Here is where you should have exerted yourselves and re-established this kind of confession, and let the other things go.”⁴⁹ While we may mourn the rarity of private confession in our churches today, we should rejoice that this specific wish-list item of Luther is in fact our practice in our non-territorial, independent, confessional, Lutheran churches around the world today.

Secondly, Luther also commends confession directed privately to God, in which we humble ourselves and repent of our sins in prayer.

Thirdly, Luther arrives at personal private confession to a fellow Christian. He condemns the pope for making it mandatory. Yet he continues, “Nevertheless I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me.”⁵⁰ Here again Luther returns to the thought of *tentatio*, i.e., the personal struggles of faith that have shaped him like a hammer on an anvil into one who must flee for refuge again and again to God’s infinite mercy, seeking and imploring his grace. Just as with proper preparation for communion, one must wrestle with the devil’s accusations to appreciate God’s merciful pronouncement of forgiveness. Who else but one who has endured *Anfechtung*, *tentatio*, can really appreciate the Gospel? It is precisely because of the absolution that confession is worthwhile. And while there are many forms of absolution, such as praying “forgive us our trespasses” in faith, hearing the Gospel preached, the comfort of a brother in the faith, the remembrance of our baptism and receiving Christ’s body and blood in the Supper, we *need* many absolutions and God has ordained them all:

Moreover, we must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God. Therefore, no man shall forbid the confession nor keep or draw any one away from it. And if any one is wrestling with his sins and wants to be rid of them and

⁴⁹ LW 51:97.

⁵⁰ LW 51:98.

desires a sure word on the matter, let him go and confess to another in secret, and accept what he says to him as if God himself had spoken it through the mouth of this person. However, one who has a strong, firm faith that his sins are forgiven may let this confession go and confess to God alone. But how many have such a strong faith? Therefore, as I have said, I will not let this private confession be taken from me. But I will not have anybody forced to it, but left to each one's free will.⁵¹

The "short summary" of Luther's sermon, as it is labeled by the transcriber, concludes:

... Because we must fight against the devil, death, hell, and sin, we must not allow any of our weapons to be taken away.... For you do not yet know what labor it costs to fight with the devil and overcome him. But I know it well, for I have eaten a bit of salt or two with him. I know him well, and he knows me well, too. If you had known him, you would not have rejected confession in this way. I commend you to God. Amen.⁵²

Concluding Observations

The proof is in the pudding. Luther homiletically prevented chaos, revolution, and retribution in Wittenberg by preaching eight sermons. These sermons are the very proof of his famous quote: "**I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word.... I did nothing; the Word did everything.**"

One of the amazing firsthand reports of the power and effect of Luther's preaching that week is given by Capito, a representative of the Archbishop of Mainz, who "visited Wittenberg as soon as he heard that Luther had returned. During 1521 and early 1522 he had repeatedly complained that Luther's writings and followers helped incite revolution and bloodshed.... One student reported,

On March 14, Fabricius Capito came to Wittenberg to reconcile himself (or so they say) with Luther, whom something in his letters had offended to such an extent that (again they say) he was called a virulent beast by Martin. Yes, there is already

⁵¹ *LW* 51:99.

⁵² *LW* 51:99–100.

a beautiful harmony between them.... Whatever displeased Capito is beginning to satisfy him. By chance, we caught sight of him listening to Martin preach in the Wittenberg church.

On his way back to the archbishop, Capito wrote to a friend,

Learned men had written to Luther; they urged him to continue in a candid and steadfast manner. He is therefore now in Wittenberg. He is preaching daily and he plucks at his followers. He is rebuking those who did not maintain respect for the simple folk. At the same time he is not forgetting to contribute what he contributed in the beginning. Already, the people are flowing together as if into a procession and then continuing on into the liberty of Christ.⁵³

Kittelson then reports: "Within a year, this official from Mainz had moved to Strasbourg and become a leader of the Evangelical movement there."⁵⁴


Here are some of my concluding observations that I present for discussion:

1. Luther was not afraid to preach boldly when calling his congregation on the carpet. Of course, Luther knew those to whom he preached and they knew him. In their eyes, he had a two-fold status that allowed him to preach as he did. They recognized him as the father of the Reformation, and they recognized him as their spiritual father.⁵⁵ You may not want to try this at home. If you preach just like Luther, your results may vary.
2. Luther was impassioned about the heart of the Gospel more than anything else. Outward forms might have plenty of usefulness and significance, but only if they are fruits of faith. Doing the right things for the wrong reasons does not bring anyone closer to God and may even hinder their entrance into the kingdom. Luther's goal was to win people over through the almighty Word, which he credits with all the progress of the Reformation hitherto.
3. Luther was not afraid to preach freely using a quite populist style in order to counteract the populism and style of Zwilling.

⁵³ James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 183–184. Citation is Wolfgang Capito, qtd. in James M. Kittelson, *Wolfgang Capito from Humanist to Reformer* (Leiden, 1975), 83–84.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵⁵ Luther had been regularly preaching at St. Mary's, the city church, since 1514.

4. Luther was not afraid to engage his hearers intellectually, challenging the pseudo-scholarship of his antagonists, in order to give them good apologetical reasons to question fiery newcomers.
5. Let no one imagine for a minute that Luther was staring down at a manuscript during any of these sermons. Had he, he would have been imitating the failing Karlstadt with his stack of books at the Leipzig debate, for whom Luther had no patience either then in 1519, nor now in 1522.
6. That said, Luther was well prepared for his sermons. He poured much thought and preparation into what he said, even though he preached far more frequently than any of us today, and especially so during these eight days surrounding the ides of March in 1522.
7. Luther was apocalyptic in his preaching, expecting his hearers and himself to stand soon before Christ and give an account for their faith.
8. Luther “got it” about the Gospel, and thus the Law. He ached and trembled at God’s terrifying judgment. Thus he thrilled and rejoiced over justification. That’s what made him the best preacher of his time and the greatest reformer in history. May we strive and struggle to “get it” too, that we may preach into our hearers’ hearts, as did brother Martin, of blessed memory! 

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Learning Pastoral Care from Luther's Letters of Spiritual Counsel

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“IT IS ENOUGH TO TERRIFY ME FROM WRITING when they are immediately borne away to the printers against my will; for among close friends one writes more confidentially than it would be advisable to spread abroad.” - *Letter from 1524 to Wolfgang Capito*¹

Part I

“... moved thereto by a sense of the duty I owe you.”
—Letter to Albrecht of Mainz, October 31, 1517²

As the freshly-inked Ninety-five Theses evoke astonishment (and perhaps already, outrage) on the church door in Wittenberg, on that same day, October 31, 1517, a messenger delivers Luther's letter to Albrecht, the Archbishop of Mainz.

The Reformation comes to life in this letter. We learn Luther's own thoughts on what he has posted as he proceeds to explain it to the Archbishop. Also, we see the pastoral heart that reached out to protect the flock of Christ from wolves who would devour it. His stated reasons for posting the theses are in many ways as interesting as the theses themselves. They demonstrate that he cares for the people who

¹ Martin Luther, *The Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. Margaret A. Currie (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1908), 127.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

are being deceived to the peril of their own souls, not to mention the depletion of their savings. He must act on their behalf.

Luther has become convinced that behind the practice of indulgence selling is something unseemly.³ He writes to the one responsible for it in that territory.

Consistent with the historical practice of the indulgence itself,⁴ this particular indulgence had a conspicuously dark motivation behind it. Prince Albrecht of Brandenburg, of the house of Hohenzollern, began collecting archbishoprics in Germany in exchange for money at the age of twenty three (too young even to hold such an office). Already holding two, and having been elected to a third, that of Mainz, the Pope refused to give approval (at least not without the payment of a vulgar sum of money). Albrecht borrowed the money and obtained the third bishopric. The pope declared an eight-year indulgence for the benefit of St. Peter's Church in Rome so that Albrecht might replenish himself.⁵

Luther is troubled by the traveling indulgence preachers' tone, but even more so by what he calls "the false meaning, which the simple folk attach to their message."

³ 1520: "I wrote of indulgences two years ago, but in such a way that I now greatly repent having published that book. For at that time I was stuck in a sort of superstitious reverence for the tyranny of Rome, wherefore I did not think that indulgences should be altogether reprobated, since they were approved by the common opinion of mankind. It was no wonder that I thought so, for I alone rolled this rock away. But later, by the kindness of Prierias and his brothers, who strenuously defended indulgences, I understood that they were nothing but a mere imposture of the Pope's flatterers, alike destructive to men's faith and fortunes. Would that I could persuade all booksellers and all who have read my books on them to burn what I then wrote and substitute this proposition: 'INDULGENCES ARE THE INIQUITIES OF THE POPE'S FLATTERERS.'" From Luther's "Babylonian Captivity of the Church" (Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914], 92).

⁴ **History of the Indulgence:** Luther was moving to protect the people from an institution in the indulgence that had a long and sordid history. The Crusades elevated the significance of the indulgence as sort of the Catholic version of Mohammed's "kill the other side and you will have paradise" motivation. In 855, Leo IV promised heaven to the Franks who died fighting the Muslims. Later popes recruited crusade fighters by this same promise. This idea of *an agreement with the church that makes satisfaction for sins* continued to grow. Eventually, it led to people purchasing, in an indulgence, assurance for themselves of God's forgiveness by paying the price that it would cost for a person to fit out one soldier as if he had gone to fight in the crusades himself. The indulgence outlasted the Crusades (which ended in the 13th century). Later popes liked its cash value too. It was first offered to those making pilgrimages to Rome, and then, later, made even more convenient for purchase to people who chose to remain at home (Smith, 38–40).

⁵ Smith, 40–41.

The poor souls [believe] that when they have purchased such letters they have secured their salvation, also, that the moment the money tingles in the box souls are delivered from purgatory, and that all sins will be forgiven through a letter of Indulgence, even that of reviling the blessed Mother of God, were any one blasphemous enough to do so. And, lastly, that through these Indulgences the man is freed from all penalties!⁶

Even though Luther was still open to the idea of benefit in indulgences,⁷ he had come to have a pretty firm handle on the power and source of forgiveness, as evidenced in his April 8, 1516 letter to fellow Augustinian George Spenlein: "Now I should like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness, is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ." Luther notes that they live in an age in which it is common for people to "try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits." He remembers that Spenlein, like himself previously, held to this erroneous opinion. Luther acknowledges that he himself still fights against it. He urges:

Therefore, my dear brother, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to pray to him and, despairing of yourself, say: "Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou has taken upon Thyself what is mine and hast given to me what is Thine. Thou has taken upon Thyself what Thou wast not and hast given to me what I was not." Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account he descended from heaven, where he dwelt among the righteous, to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation.⁸

⁶ Martin Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 17–19.

⁷ They were of the church, after all, which hadn't yet convinced him entirely of its lostness. A few years later, in his dedication to *An Address to the Christian Nobility*, he would write: "In short, at Rome, there is a buying and selling, a change and exchange, a crying and lying, fraud, robbery, theft, luxury, whoredom, rascality, and despite of God in every way, so that it would not be possible for Antichrist to outdo Rome in iniquity. There all things are sold and all laws can be abrogated for money" (Smith, 86).

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 110.

Someone who knew Christ as the righteousness of sinners could not permit charlatans to hawk phony assurance by any means, even of the church. Luther continues his letter to the archbishop by reflecting upon the responsibility that that shepherd has toward poor souls committed to his care. He will be “required to render an account” for these who are being convinced that the way of salvation is to be worked out not with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), as the apostle says, but by buying an indulgence.⁹ Luther knows that directing people toward indulgences in this way means directing them *away* from Christ.

Finally, Luther concludes his letter by stating that a bishop refusing to act in a situation so dire as this will find himself answering to Christ for *dooming the gospel to silence, while the cry of indulgences resounds through the land*. Luther humbly begs him to look into this matter apparently happening without his knowledge (because how would it ever happen *with his knowledge, right?*)¹⁰ and to glance at his enclosed theses.¹¹

The theses on the door are more official. The letter is *deeply* personal. What he has written about in his theses affects real people, and he knows that. Living souls are in danger, danger that has been authorized by the church.

The faithful shepherd comes to the aid of the flock when it is attacked by false teachers and false doctrine.

Part II

“... ought we not to fight for Him, and offer up our own necks for Him?”

—Letter to Johann von Staupitz, February 9, 1521

Luther had naively envisioned intimate scholarly debate¹² as the result of his Ninety-five Theses and his letter to Albrecht of Mainz. Just shy of three years later, he wrote to his mentor Johann von Staupitz.¹³

⁹ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 18.

¹⁰ In December of 1521, Luther wrote a letter to Albrecht in which he recounted that he had at first given him the benefit of the doubt in this matter, but since had learned that he had done so mistakenly (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 89–91).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

¹² Especially on the methods of indulgence preachers in Germany

¹³ Frederick the Wise became elector of Ernestine Saxony in 1486 and founded Wittenberg University in 1502. He appointed the Augustinian Order’s Vicar General, Staupitz, as its first dean of the faculty of theology, “intending that most of the professors should be monks of the Augustinian order, which had a chapter at Wittenberg” (Smith, 20–21).

The situation had escalated significantly in the meantime, with “vendors of Indulgences thundering at [Luther] from the pulpit,”¹⁴ murmurings of his potential assassination,¹⁵ his conclusion that he must “proceed in earnest against the Roman pontiff and Romish pride,”¹⁶ and his publication of decidedly non-Romish propositions on the improvement of the Christian estate.¹⁷

The February 29, 1521 Staupitz letter is exemplary of Luther's exhortative letters. He has so much passion. He aims to pull the other person along with him like the stronger one in a tug-of-war. It is as if he is saying, “I'm putting *all this* on the line; *will you put just a little bit on the line too?*”

In a Table Talk from February 18, 1542, Luther pointed to Staupitz as the one who brought him comfort when he was struggling with the concept of predestination. “Why do you trouble yourself with these speculations of yours?” he had asked tenderly. “Accept the wounds of Christ and contemplate the blood which poured forth from his most holy body for our sins—for mine, for yours, for those of all men. ‘My sheep hear my voice.’”¹⁸

As is evident in his letter, Luther would have wished his beloved friend, Staupitz, to show more resolve against the strong-arm tactics of the Pope who accused Staupitz of being an adherent of Luther's. Staupitz simply was not up to it and had folded by capitulating to the Pope somewhat in the matter.¹⁹

¹⁴ **March 21, 1518:** “Vendors of Indulgences are thundering at me from the pulpit, and telling the people that I shall be burned in fourteen days, another says a month.” – **Letter to John Lange** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 24).

¹⁵ **July 10, 1518:** “Our vicar, John Lange, says that Count Albrecht of Mansfeld has warned him not to let me leave here, as some great people have given orders that I should be suffocated or drowned.... From the beginning God's word is on this wise, that all who cleave to it must with the apostles be hourly prepared to suffer the loss of all things, nay, even to meet death itself. – **Letter to Wenzel Link** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 31–32).

¹⁶ **February 20, 1519:** “I often say that up till now it has only been child's play. But from henceforth I must proceed in earnest against the Roman pontiff and Romish pride.” – **Letter to Christoph Scheurl** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 42).

¹⁷ **August, 1520:** “The time to keep silence is past and the time to speak has come, as Ecclesiastes says. I have, according to our plan, brought together some propositions on the improvement of the Christian estate, and have addressed them to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, to see whether God will help his Church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom such matters rather belong, has become entirely heedless of them.” – “Dedication of An Address to the Christian Nobility,” to Nicholas von Amsdorf (Smith, 83).

¹⁸ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 134.

¹⁹ Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 64.

Disappointed, Luther humbly presumes to switch roles with his mentor in this letter. He becomes the one reminding of what is really important, namely, faithfulness to the true Christ, to whom Staupitz himself had once enlightened the young Luther.

Luther refers to Staupitz's "too complaisant answer" to the Pope. He regrets the possibility that "that wolf might derive more satisfaction than he should receive," fancying Staupitz to have repudiated Luther.²⁰ He urges:

Therefore, if you love Christ, may this letter lead you to recant, for all you have preached and taught up till now of the mercy of God is condemned in this Bull. And it appears to me that as you are well aware of this, you cannot, without insulting Christ, appoint one of His opponents as judge—one whom you see emptying the vials of his wrath against the word of grace—for it was your duty to rebuke him for such godlessness. This is no time for cowardice, but for raising the alarm when we see our Lord Jesus slandered and condemned. Hence, as you admonish me to humility, so much the more would I exhort you to pride. For, you are far too humble, while I am too proud. This is a serious matter. When we see the beloved Savior, who gave Himself for us, being held up to derision everywhere, ought we not to fight for Him, and offer up our necks for Him? My dear father.²¹

The child continues to instruct the parent, pointing out the consequences of refusing to stand in this critical moment. After all, being called the Pope's enemy could not be as bad as "keeping a godless silence when the Lord cries: 'I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul'" (Psalm 69:20).²² Luther's fear is that Staupitz "will hover in suspense between Christ and the Pope, although they are at open defiance with each other." He says that he has seen "another Staupitz than he who was wont to preach free grace and the cross."²³

The faithful shepherd defends the faith. He acts to "strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees" (Isaiah 35:3 ESV).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 64–65.

²² Ibid., 65.

²³ Ibid.

Part III

“... they are their own little invention to get money and property without helping either the dead or the living.”

—Letter to Bartholomew von Staremburg, September 1, 1524

Three years after Luther's stirring letter to Staupitz, he reached out in consolation to Bartholomew von Staremburg, whose wife had recently died. In the meantime, Luther had stood firm, refusing to recant anything at the Diet of Worms,²⁴ submitted to being hidden for a time at the Wartburg Castle for his safety²⁵ (though he didn't so much like the visual of it),²⁶ written and published prolifically despite his *exile*,²⁷ aided twelve nuns in escaping from the Cistercian Convent in Nimbschen (including one Catherine von Bora),²⁸ and written words of consolation to Christians who were beginning to suffer for their newfound Evangelical faith.²⁹

²⁴ **March 19, 1521:** “I have received the articles they ask me to recant, with the list of things they want me to do. Doubt not that I shall recant nothing.” – **Letter to George Spalatin** (Smith, 114).

²⁵ **April 28, 1521:** “I shall submit to being hidden away, and as yet do not know where. I would have preferred being put to death by the tyrants, especially by the furious Herzog George, but was obliged to follow the advice of friends, and wait my time....I imagined His Imperial Majesty would have assembled many doctors, who would have overcome me in a straightforward manner, but they only cried, ‘Are the books yours?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Will you retract them or not?’ ‘No.’ ‘Then get away.’” – **Letter to Lucas Cranach** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 68–69).

²⁶ **May 12, 1521:** “I feared it might look as if I were fleeing from the conflict, but I thought it best to give in to those who had arranged it thus. I long earnestly to encounter my enemies and vanquish them in the strife.” – **Letter to Philip Melancthon** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 73).

²⁷ **June 10, 1521:** “I am at one and the same time both idle and very busy. I study Greek and Hebrew, and write without ceasing.” – **Letter to George Spalatin** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 78–79).

December 18, 1521: I shall remain here in seclusion till Easter, and write postils, and translate the New Testament into German, which so many people are anxious to have. I hear you also are occupied therewith. Go on with what you have begun. Would to God that every town had its interpreter, and that this book could be had in every language, and dwell in the hearts and hands of all. – **Letter to John Lange** (Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 94).

²⁸ In an April 10, 1523 letter to Spalatin, Luther had told of twelve nuns who ran from the Cistercian Convent in Nimbschen, Saxony with the help of Luther's friend, Leonard Koppe. Three were taken in by their families, nine were not. Luther agreed to help them in Wittenberg, and here wrote to ask Spalatin to intercede for them at court.

²⁹ **January 9, 1524:** “Christ, who is in you, has given me abundant testimony that you do not need my words, for He Himself suffers in you and reigns in you. He is oppressed in you and triumphs in you.” – **Letter to Lambert Thorn**, the third of the

Bartholomew von Staremburg, a member of the Austrian nobility with apparent Evangelical³⁰ sympathies, was unknown to Luther personally. This letter was requested by a mutual acquaintance. Luther proceeds with caution in the letter, getting to the heart of the matter quickly, but recognizing the tender moment at which his words reach this grieving man.

Luther notes their friend's testimony that the man's wife, Magdalene, has "departed this life in God," and that the man "has been trying hard to help her soul with services and good works, particularly with Masses and vigils."³¹

Luther begins his counsel by turning to Job, who says, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; as it seemed good to the Lord, so hath he done" (1:21). Luther tells Bartholomew that he should "sing the same song to a dear and faithful God who gave you a dear and faithful wife and has now taken her away. She was his before he gave her; she was his after he had given her; and she is still his (as we all are) now that he has taken her away."³²

It hurts us when the Lord takes His own from us. Luther would not be so foolish as to deny that, but he urges Bartholomew to consider for his comfort that "God is immeasurably better than all His gifts [even of the man's wife!]. In this case, His will should be esteemed more than the best wife."³³ In fact, God's will is so precious that Bartholomew can cheerfully give God what is His, and consider this "strange barter" to be a blessed exchange with God. Luther is encouraging the man to see who God is, and to see God's goodness even in the death of his wife.

Luther's next order of business is an even more tender matter, which Luther nonetheless takes head on. Using specifically Reformation-esque theology, he writes, "Secondly, honored sir, I ask you to discontinue those Masses and vigils and daily prayers for her soul."³⁴ Especially regarding

Augustinians arrested in Brussels for Evangelical leanings, the one not burned at the stake, but who spent the last five years of his life in prison without recanting (Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 197–199).

³⁰ Meaning Lutheran.

³¹ Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 53.

³² *Ibid.*, 53–54.

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Luther's advice on prayer as our communication to God that we offer sincerely, rather than mechanically or thoughtlessly is certainly good counsel. He apparently also tells Bartholomew that he might reasonably "pray God once or twice for her" *after she has died*. If that is what he means, obviously that advice reflects an earlier stage in Luther's scriptural understanding. We teach our children, based on Luther's Small Catechism, that we should never pray for the dead. Hebrews 9:27 "Man is destined to

the Masses and vigils, Luther calls them “unChristian practices which greatly anger God.” He points to the lack of earnestness and faith in vigils. They are “a useless mummery . . . a mockery of God,” he says.³⁵

The Mass, on the other hand, was instituted to be “a sacrament of the living and not an offering for the dead.” He calls “shameful and terrible” its improper use as a “good work and a sacrifice for the dead.” Luther urges Bartholomew to beware “not to be a participant in this horrible error which priests and monks have invented for the sake of their bellies.”³⁶

Luther concludes by referring him to their mutual acquaintance, who can speak to him further on the matter. He hopes that Bartholomew will take this well, and will “not be led astray by those who oppose their own prattle and human notions to the Word of God.”³⁷

Pastors speak to their audience in whatever ways are effective for their particular time and place (even in any given time and place one pastor's manner and choice of words differs from another's). Luther's purpose in his letter of consolation for the bereaved Bartholomew von Staremburg is twofold: he aims to comfort him in his grief, and he aims to correct him in the error of superstitions and human understandings associated with the dead. He is sensitive to the challenge of this. He wants his reader to be comforted and not perturbed (as can be the case for people in times of grief and crisis).

The faithful shepherd comforts even as he may need to gently and lovingly correct with God's Word for the eternal benefit of his hearer(s).

Part IV

“No one may forsake his neighbor when he is in trouble.”

—Letter to John Hess, November, 1527

Three years after Luther's both tender and firm letter to Bartholomew von Staremburg, he gave timely and critical advice to Christians terrified by the plague and needing guidance as to what fleeing would mean in terms of their faith and their responsibility toward their neighbor. In the meantime, Luther struggled against an alternative Reformation

die once, and after that to face judgment” (Martin Luther, *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* [Mankato: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001], 157).

³⁵ Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

that had sprung up in Wittenberg and elsewhere, worked to bolster the struggling Wittenberg University, and ... well, got married.

In November of 1527, Luther wrote to John Hess³⁸ on the topic of whether Christians should flee the plague. Luther mentions that this letter is being published as an open letter, as, at the time of its writing, the plague was threatening Wittenberg and other places as well.³⁹

Luther notes that some believe strongly that God sends such “punishments,” and that Christians must patiently endure them without fleeing. His advice is complex here. He commends strong faith that “willingly submits to the scourge of God,” even comparing it to Jesus’ words, “Be not afraid of them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do” (Luke 12:4).⁴⁰

Perhaps controversially, Luther implies that any, or at least many, who would flee do so because of “weak faith,” citing Peter, at first strong in faith, walking on the sea, and then weak in faith, nearly drowning (Mark 16:18).⁴¹ Luther’s insistence upon himself staying in Wittenberg during the height of the pestilence even after the university had been moved to Jena temporarily because of it would seem consistent with this position.⁴²

However, Luther recognizes that there are good reasons to stay and good reasons to leave. Preachers and pastors, for instance, need to stay as ones who reflect the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep rather than the hireling who flees and leaves the flock in danger (John 10:11, 12). God’s Word and Sacrament are necessary comfort and strengthening for those who are facing death (he makes an exception in places where there are enough pastors available so that adequate ministry can be provided even if some leave for safety).⁴³

Officers in the secular realm are obliged to stay as well. God has established government so that peace and order might be kept. As St. Paul writes in Romans 13, “Government is God’s minister to keep the peace,” etc., officials of the government must stay and care for the

³⁸ “On account of his leadership in the introduction of the Reformation there, John Hess (1490-1547) is commonly called the reformer of Silesia” (Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 230).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 231.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² On July 9, 1535, Luther wrote to Elector John Frederick, who had advised him to leave Wittenberg on account of the pestilence. Luther respectfully downplays the need to evacuate Wittenberg. He jokes about the students welcoming an excuse to have a break from their studies” (Ibid., 245-246).

⁴³ The author doesn’t know what that’s like.

community over which they have charge, unless they are able to make arrangements with a sufficient number of others who can see to their functions.⁴⁴

Servants and masters, maids and mistresses, parents and children all have the same responsibility toward one another. Physicians, etc., have responsibility toward those whom they serve. Close relatives must care for any who would be in need among them: neighbors, the same toward one another.

In all such cases these words of Christ are to be feared: "I was sick and ye visited me not." [Mathew 25:43] These words of Christ bind each of us to the other. No one may forsake his neighbor when he is in trouble. Everybody is under obligation to help and support his neighbor as he would himself like to be helped (Matthew 7:12).⁴⁵

That said, Luther writes, "The instinct to flee death and save one's life is implanted by God and is not forbidden, provided it is not opposed to God and neighbor." He points to Paul's statement in Ephesians 5:29: "No man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourishes and cherishes it."⁴⁶ Numerous Old Testament patriarchs fled in situations in which their lives were in danger, including Jacob and his sons, who fled the famine in their country and went to Egypt, as recorded in Genesis 40–47.⁴⁷

Luther puts forth a number of scenarios as food for thought to those who condemn out of hand anyone fleeing to save life and limb: "Am I to suppose that if a war or the Turk comes, no one should flee from a village or town but must await God's punishment there at the hand of the sword? Very well. Let him who is so strong in faith stay, but let him not condemn those who flee."⁴⁸ No one should run out of a burning house, "or attempt to rescue those inside because fire is a punishment of God?" Someone having fallen into a lake should not swim out, but rather drown as punishment from God? A person having broken a leg or having been wounded or bitten must avoid medical aid, enduring "God's punishment" until it heals itself? Should someone stay out in the cold and frost, enduring God's punishment until it becomes

⁴⁴ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 232.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 234–235.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

warm again? Finally, Luther brings this sort of reasoning to its silliest conclusion:

According to this opinion there would be no need for apothecary shops, medicine, and physicians, for all sicknesses are punishments of God. Hunger and thirst are also great punishments and forms of martyrdom. Why, then, do you eat and drink and not allow yourself to be punished by these until they stop of their own accord? This notion will finally carry us so far that we will abolish the Lord's Prayer and cease praying: "Deliver us from evil, Amen," inasmuch as all kinds of evil are God's punishments and we could henceforth no longer pray to be delivered from hell and could not avoid it because it too is God's punishment. What would this lead to?⁴⁹

Luther instructs that Christians should be faithful to the Lord, acknowledging themselves to be in His gracious hands whether they should stay to aid their neighbor, or flee without doing harm to neighbor. Neither staying nor fleeing is a guarantee of life or death. All is in God's hands.⁵⁰

He cautions about sinning too much on the left hand by refusing our neighbor in time of need. Also, he cautions about sinning too much on the right hand, being "too daring and foolhardy," tempting God, neglecting what He has provided (medicine, etc.) for our protection from pestilence or death. Such a person might say, "It is God's punishment. If he wishes to protect me from it, He will do it without medicine and any effort on my part." Luther calls this not a trusting, but a *tempting* of God who created these things for our benefit. He strongly states that a person who lives by such an attitude "runs the risk of being a suicide in God's sight," and even a mass murderer if he recklessly infects others who may, then, die from the pestilence.⁵¹

The faithful shepherd instructs the members of the flock of Christ on loving and serving their neighbor, and on trusting in the Lord's protection and provision as they do so.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Pless points to Luther's morning and evening prayers as expressive of the same, in the fact that "God gives His holy angels charge over us" to watch over us, and to protect us, "in ways that exceed our imagination" (John T. Pless, *Martin Luther: Preacher of the Cross: A Study of Luther's Pastoral Theology* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013], 70).

⁵¹ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 241–242.

Part V

“... our common God and Creator made us and bound us to each other with mutual ties.”

—Letter to Margaret Luther, May 20, 1531

On May 20, 1531, Luther wrote to his mother, Margaret Luther, who was ill.⁵² Luther's letter to her at the end of her life (much like a similar one to his father at the end of his) becomes another testament to Luther's skill in applying the comfort of the true gospel to people in need of it. Also, of course, it is a testament to Luther's love for his parents and especially in this case for his dear mother.

Luther regrets that he cannot be with her in person, and must settle for being with her in this letter. He recounts that she had long ago “taken God's comforting Word into [her] heart.”⁵³ He recognizes that there have been faithful “preachers and comforters” seeing to her spiritual needs. He will add himself also, because, he says, “I have a duty to perform to you as my mother, for our common God and Creator made us and bound us to each other with mutual ties.”⁵⁴

Luther calls the sickness a “gracious, fatherly chastisement” that she should accept with thankfulness as a token of God's grace, recognizing how slight a suffering it is (even if it be a sickness unto death) compared with the sufferings of his own dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did not suffer for himself, as we do, but for us and for our sins. The cross puts our suffering into perspective. Christ made atonement for our sins through suffering. A Christian boasts all the more gladly of his weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon him (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Luther's main consideration is heaven. He does not necessarily look at this earthly human life as a long-lasting proposition. Whereas a pastor of today might be hesitant (especially in light of modern psychology) to apparently diminish someone's suffering or death by comparing it to others' or to Christ's suffering and death, Luther's basic assumption is that all of us would rather be in heaven with Christ than suffering in this world, even if it means a short life in this world.

He points his mother's attention to Jesus Christ, “the cornerstone, who will not waver or fail us, nor allow us to sink and perish, for he is

⁵² Her illness proved to be fatal on June 30, 1531 (Ibid., 33).

⁵³ Embraced the Evangelical faith (Ibid.).

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Publishing House, 1955–), 50:18. References will be abbreviated *LW*.

the Savior and is called the Savior of all poor sinners, of all who face tribulation and death, of all who rely on him and call on his name.”⁵⁵

Luther draws a distinction between the works-reliant papal error that he and his family had believed⁵⁶ and Christ, who says, “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” He seems to recall monastic Luther, who simply could not be comforted by those words. Knowing what he knows now, he says, “Whoever is unwilling to be comforted by these words does the greatest injustice and dishonor to the Comforter—as if it were not true that he bids us to be of good cheer, or as if it were not true that he has overcome the world. If we act thus, we only restore within ourselves the tyranny of the vanquished devil, sin, and death, and we oppose the dear Savior.”⁵⁷

The son counsels his mother, that if there be a moment when death frightens, she should say,

“Behold, dear soul, what are you doing? Dear death, dear sin, how is it that you are alive and terrify me? Do you not know that you have been overcome? Do you, death, not know that you are quite dead? Do you not know the One who has said of you, ‘I have overcome the world’? It does not behoove me to listen to or heed your terrifying suggestions. I shall pay attention only to the cheering words of my Savior, ‘Be of good cheer, be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.’”⁵⁸

Luther reminds his mother of St. Paul’s defiance of the terrors of death: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:54, 55) He tells her that she may set her heart at rest, to be thankful that God has brought her to the truth and rescued her from reliance on works, though they had once seen the Savior as only a severe judge and tyrant from which to flee.⁵⁹ He points to Jesus Christ as “our mediator, our throne of grace, and our bishop before God in heaven, who daily intercedes for us and reconciles

⁵⁵ *LW* 50:19

⁵⁶ “Luther’s teachers taught that the church possessed the means of grace. Through these means of grace, or sacraments, the church’s ministers could add the grace of Christ to human initiative and effort. When the sacraments were administered, human thoughts and actions became clothed in divine grace” (James M. Kittelson and Hans H. Wiersma, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016], 35).

⁵⁷ *LW* 50:19.

⁵⁸ *LW* 50:19.

⁵⁹ *LW* 50:20.

all who call upon and believe in him.”⁶⁰ Luther reminds her of God's calling of her in Baptism, and His nourishing of her in the Sacrament of the Altar.

The Reformer speaks the doctrine of the Reformation when he says,

We are unable to help ourselves in such matters. We are unable to accomplish anything against sin, death, and the devil by our own works. Therefore, Another appears for us and in our stead who definitely can do better; he gives us the victory, and commands us to accept it and not to doubt it. He says, “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world”; and again: “I live, and you will live also, and no one will take your joy from you.”⁶¹

The faithful shepherd directs the suffering person to Christ and to the joys of heaven.

Part VI

“... yet so strong is natural affection that we must sob and groan in heart under the oppression of killing grief.”

—Letter to Justus Jonas, September 23, 1542

On September 23, 1542, just three days after the death of his fourteen-year-old daughter, Magdalene, Luther wrote to Justus Jonas. Astonishingly, he has other business to attend to in the letter, and seems almost to tack this on in the last paragraph. He is a man so busy that work cannot simply stop, but who is distracted with overwhelming grief. It pours out of him even in business letters. He writes as the one usually offering comfort who is evidently in need of comfort himself.

Luther is perhaps at his most vulnerable in this paragraph. He is stunned. Kroker writes:

The loss was too great for the parents to ever get over it. Little Elisabeth, who died in 1528, flesh and blood of their flesh and blood had already passed away, but with Magdalene's death they felt as if they had been killed. Their daughter's image would not leave their hearts. They kept seeing her face, hearing her voice,

⁶⁰ LW 50:20.

⁶¹ LW 50:21.

feeling her hands, in death just as in life. Katie sobbed for weeks in bitter pain when she thought about her dear child.⁶²

Luther's letters certainly bear this out. Three years later, on June 3, 1545, he wrote to console Andrew Osiander, whose wife and daughter had died on the same day. Luther writes:

I know from the death of my own dearest child how great must be your grief. It may appear strange, but I am still mourning the death of my dear Magdalene, and I am not able to forget her. Yet I know surely that she is in heaven, that she has eternal life there, and that God has thereby given me a true token of his love in having, even while I live, taken my flesh and blood to his Fatherly heart.⁶³

He goes on to give Osiander counsel difficult for Luther himself to receive: Osiander must yield up his dear Isaac as a burnt offering and for a sweet-smelling savor to God, not his wife or his daughter, for Luther says, "These live and are blessed in the Lord." The *Isaac* he must give up is "that affection that asserts itself too powerfully in us."⁶⁴

That is consistent with Luther's frequently expressed view of this life as short and troubled, and God's kingdom as the thing toward which we should be constantly straining.

And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone,
They yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth.⁶⁵

That line from Luther's "Ein Feste Burg" (tragically, a line most likely to be translated *out of* modern hymnbooks) speaks the same

⁶² Ernst Kroker, *The Mother of the Reformation: The Amazing Life and Story of Katharine Luther*, trans. Mark DeGarmeaux (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 143.

⁶³ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 80.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," in *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc., 1996), 250:4; see *LW* 53:285.

sentiment. It is distinctly Christian,⁶⁶ Pauline,⁶⁷ scriptural. If all of these things that we treasure in this life, even loved ones and our very lives, are taken from us, we have, then, what is even better, God's kingdom. Satan cannot have that, no matter what he takes from us, because Christ has already won it for us.

That is what Luther knows intellectually. He knows it as he writes to Justus Jonas that he and his wife "should only joyfully give thanks for such a felicitous departure and blessed end, by which Magdalene has escaped the power of the flesh, the world, the Turk, and the devil; yet," he says, "the force of [our] natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in [our] hearts, or even without experiencing death ourselves."⁶⁸

He had said something similar in a letter on October 21, 1531 to parents mourning the loss of a Wittenberg University student: "Your son has cheated the world and the devil while we are still in danger of being overcome by them and are exposed to all the perils against which he is now secure."⁶⁹

Caspar Heydenreich, who was present when Magdalene died, heard Luther say, "I am angry with myself that I am unable to rejoice from my heart and be thankful to God, although I do at times sing a little hymn and thank God."⁷⁰ A couple of years later in a December 13, 1544 letter to George Hoesel, the father of another young man who died as a student at Wittenberg University, Luther wrote:

I too am a father, and have lived to see several of my own children die.... [W]e must resist these pains and comfort ourselves with the knowledge of eternal salvation. God wishes us to love our children and to mourn when they are taken from us. But our sorrow should be temperate and not too severe. Our faith in eternal salvation should be our comfort.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Matthew 16:25-27: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done" (ESV).

⁶⁷ Philippians 3:8: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (ESV).

⁶⁸ LW 50:238.

⁶⁹ Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

On the day of this letter (three days after his daughter's death), it was time for Luther to mourn. It was time for him to turn away from his daughter's bedside at one point, and say, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. I love her very much. If this flesh is so strong, what must the spirit be?"⁷² Heydenreich heard Luther comforting his wife Katie when she wept loudly. He said,

Remember where she is going. It will be well with her. The flesh dies but the spirit lives. Children do not argue. They believe what they are told. To children everything is plain. They die without anxiety, without complaint, without fear of death, without great physical pain, just as if they were falling asleep.

Whether or not they feel "great physical pain" is certainly debatable. No doubt, Luther was searching for any comforting thing he could think of to say to his sobbing, heartbroken wife at that moment. The rest of it would seem to apply in the case of Luther's daughter. Heydenreich reports in his Table Talk from that day:

When his daughter was very ill [Luther] said: "I love her dearly, but if it is thy will, dear God, to take her, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee." Later, when she was lying in bed, he said to his daughter: "Magdalene, my little daughter, you would gladly remain here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father in heaven?" The sick girl replied: "Yes, dear father, as God will." He said, "Dear daughter!"⁷³

The faithful shepherd comforts the bereaved with the joyful message of heaven as provided by the one who says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Conclusion

So many things are encompassed under the term "pastoral care." Among them are the things we see in this small selection of Luther's hundreds of letters.

Luther's letter to Albrecht of Mainz on October 31, 1517, the same day he posted the Ninety-five Theses, demonstrates pastoral care as it

⁷² Ibid., 51.

⁷³ Ibid.

applies to defending the flock of Christ. The faithful shepherd concerns himself with the safety of the souls under his protection. When he sees danger, he sounds the alarm. That is what Luther did in the Theses, certainly, but even more directly in the letter addressed specifically to the one with power to act in the situation.

Luther's letter to Johann von Staupitz on February 9, 1521 demonstrates pastoral care as it applies to defending the Christian faith. The faithful shepherd acts to remind the one fleeing of nerve of Christ's words: "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:33 ESV). Gently, Luther does this. The love of Christ is on full display, even as he must speak in the strongest terms of the importance of standing firm before "the kings of the earth [who] set themselves, and the rulers [who] take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed" (Psalm 2:2 ESV).

Luther's letter to Bartholomew von Staremburg on September 1, 1524 demonstrates pastoral care as it applies to comforting and correcting. The faithful shepherd leads a sufferer to the One in Whose presence he need fear no evil (Psalm 23), but also, with the greatest care, leads him away from error that opposes God and threatens his very soul. Luther is sensitive to the man's grief even as he speaks directly to correct his error.

Luther's letter to John Hess in November of 1527 demonstrates pastoral care as it applies to instructing in Christian love and responsibility toward the neighbor. The faithful shepherd acts to impress upon believers in Christ that to serve their neighbor is to serve Him (Matthew 25:31–46). As surprising as it may seem, in some situations the believer may be called upon to risk life and limb. The faithful shepherd is sensitive to the concerns people have about protecting their own lives.⁷⁴ However, the faithful shepherd also reminds that the Spirit is at work in the believers, enabling them to act as Christ's people with a higher calling than seeing to their own needs. Their neighbor needs them too. The Lord, who considers them of more value than many sparrows will provide for them whatever is necessary (Matthew 10:31).

Luther's letter to Margaret Luther (his mother) on May 20, 1531 demonstrates pastoral care as it applies to comforting the sick or dying. The faithful shepherd acts to direct the suffering person to where comfort may be found, in the atoning blood of Christ, the Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). There, our temporal concerns end, and the joy of heaven begins. The faithful shepherd aims to ground the suffering

⁷⁴ Luther even states that that instinct is implanted in us by the Creator (*Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 233).

person in the heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20), which comforts in any case, whether the person lives on in this world or leaves this world to be with Christ.

Luther's letter to Justus Jonas on September 23, 1542 demonstrates pastoral care as it applies to comforting the bereaved. The faithful shepherd empathizes with the suffering person(s), even drawing on his own experience, as this sort of encouragement is one of the great benefits of the fellowship believers have with one another in the Church (Hebrews 10:25). Even more importantly, he emphasizes God's grace that sent His only-begotten Son to die for the world's sins so that all who believe might be saved (John 3:16). He stresses *this life* as one that ends for all of us, but *the next* as eternal and blessed. LSQ

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The Evidence for Easter

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THIS TOPIC, “THE EVIDENCE FOR EASTER,” BRINGS us into the field of Christian *apologetics*. Christian apologetics may sound like a difficult subject, but it really is not. Christian apologetics focuses on one question, that being: Is Christianity true? Christian *doctrine* is the study of the teachings of Christianity. Apologetics, in contrast, is the study of whether or not these teachings are true.

The goal of biblical apologetics is leading people to faith in Jesus the Christ and for strengthening the faith of those who believe. And how is this accomplished? Paul, in Romans 10:17, said, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.” This means that both doctrine and apologetics must be based on God’s Word.

Paul also said in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (NASB). For this reason Christian apologetics must not only rely on God’s Word, it must focus in particular on the saving message of Christ crucified and raised again for our justification. This message is where the power to save lost sinners resides.

In describing Christian apologetics, one of my students once said, “Wow, this is a whole new way of looking at things.” I agreed with him, but then thought better of it and added, “This is really the old way of looking at things.” Apologetics takes us back to the first century—to a time when you could not assume that your audience believed that Jesus

rose from the dead, nor that the Bible is true, nor that God is triune, nor that Jehovah is the one true God. In our time, we are rapidly approaching a climate similar to that of New Testament times. Two generations ago evangelist Billy Graham could prove his points by simply exclaiming, "The Bible says." We cannot do that anymore, at least not as effectively.

It was in this pagan New Testament world that Peter told Christians, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15 NIV). Peter here admonished us to be ready to give our reasons, our evidence, for being Christians. What if, for example, you were asked, "Why should I believe that Jesus rose from the dead?" What would you say? You could reply, "Because the Bible says so." But what if this person then says, "I don't believe the Bible." What would you say then? Someone could also ask you, "Why should I become a Christian instead of a Muslim?" How would you respond to that question? These are the kind of questions Peter said we should be ready to answer. Most Christians, however, find it difficult to answer questions like these.

To the second question—Why should I become a Christian instead of a Muslim?—you could give this simple, one-sentence answer: "You should become a Christian instead of a Muslim because Christianity is true and Islam is not." You could then add, "Did you know that there is a wealth of objective, historical evidence to prove that Jesus actually did rise for the dead?" It is really quite amazing. When you explain that there is good historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead, you are telling people an important truth that most of them have never heard before. Christianity is all around us, but most people have never heard that there is sufficient, objective evidence that Jesus rose from the dead.

Many individuals, probably most, think that Christianity is a blind leap of faith. It is not. Christianity is a matter of faith, but it calls for a faith based on good and sufficient evidence. Every other religion or religious position of the world requires a blind leap of faith. The Christian religion is unique in that it is the only religion based on objective, historical evidence. In Isaiah 41:21, God said through Isaiah, "Set forth your case." God here challenged all religions to present objective evidence for their truthfulness. Isaiah then clarified that only Christianity can do so. No other religion can present such evidence. I am speaking here of the kind of evidence that can stand up to cross-examination as in a court of law.

The issue, of course, is not how I think questions like those above could be answered. The real issue is this: If Jesus is who He claimed to

be, and if the apostles have accurately described what Jesus said and did, then the real question is how Jesus and the apostles answered these questions. We will begin with Jesus himself. How did He answer the question as to why we should believe that He rose from the dead?

A starting point for doing so is recorded in Acts 1:8 where Jesus told his disciples, "... you will be my witnesses (Greek: *martyreo*, the word from which we get our term *martyr*)..."¹ What did Jesus mean when He said the disciples would be His witnesses? Did He mean that His followers would do evangelism and mission work? No. In the New Testament, to be a *witness* does not mean to evangelize. In the "Great Commission" Jesus had already admonished His disciples to do evangelism and mission work. Jesus was not repeating Himself when he told His disciples they would be His witnesses. To be a witness in the New Testament meant that the apostles would present evidence, especially eyewitness evidence, to substantiate the truth of the gospel message they proclaimed.² Jesus established a number of eyewitnesses to certify that the resurrection actually happened.

Martyreo is a legal term, used largely for court proceedings. It means to provide evidence for a particular point of view, usually evidence in the form of eyewitness testimony. The New Testament borrowed this Greek legal term *martyreo* to identify those who could testify to the truth of the resurrection and other events because they were there and saw and heard it for themselves. They were the eyewitnesses.³

Interestingly, the Greek word for *apologetics* is a legal term too. The Greek word for apologetics, *apologia*, usually referred to a speech in a courtroom where persons would give evidence to support their position. The New Testament compares each of us to an attorney speaking to a jury and presenting evidence and explanation intended to convince the jury that his side is the side of truth. This courtroom analogy is a major theme of the entire New Testament.

Along these lines, here is a Bible trivia question for you, except that the answer is not trivial, it very important. Luke began his Gospel narrative with the Angel of the Lord appearing to Zachariah and prophesying that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son. Luke's narrative then described the angel appearing to Mary and telling her that she

¹ The Greek word in this text is the noun form of *martyreo*, that being *martyron*. For simplicity's sake in this treatise, I will only use the verb form, *martyreo*,

² J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 65.

³ William Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 389.

would have a son also. Luke's Gospel then proceeded to give substantial detail about the birth of John the Baptist and especially about the birth and early life of Jesus, the Christ. John's Gospel, in contrast, begins some thirty years later, with John's baptism of Jesus. Why does John begin his biography of Jesus so late?

The answer is given by John himself at the end of his Gospel when he said, "This [John] is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24 ESV). In that sentence, John used the Greek word *martyreo* twice. John was emphasizing that he recorded that which he had personally seen and heard, that for which he was an eyewitness. That is why he began with the John's baptism; John was not an eyewitness of anything before that. The Apostle John had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and he then became Jesus' disciple after His baptism. The Apostle John began at that point because he was there, where he saw and heard it for himself. At the end of his Gospel, the Apostle John explained to us that we can trust the truthfulness of everything he wrote because he was an eyewitness of what he wrote and could certify that it was all true. This is how John answered the question of how we can know for certain that Jesus rose from the dead. In his Gospel, John used a form of *martyreo* (witness) forty-seven times. He obviously wanted to emphasize that there was strong evidence for the truthfulness of everything that he wrote.⁴

You can see where this is going. We can explain that there is good reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead because numerous eyewitnesses—just like those who are eyewitnesses in a court of law—have certified that it really happened. In addition, these eyewitnesses were willing to seal their testimony with their own blood. People will not die for something unless they are absolutely convinced it is true.

The New Testament uses the word *witness* 295 times. This fact tells us that there is considerable emphasis in the New Testament for presenting the evidence for its truth: the many eyewitnesses certify for us that the resurrection and other details of Jesus' life and death are true. These accounts are not "cleverly devised stories" as Peter said, but they are the accurate accounts of those who were "eyewitnesses of His majesty" (2 Peter 1:16).

So how can we know that Jesus rose from the dead? And how can we know that the New Testament is true? We know all this is

⁴ Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: William P. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969), 121.

true because it was given to us by eyewitnesses who knew what really happened. But is that enough? Maybe their memory became a bit hazy. Maybe their memory was just plain wrong. Any trial attorney will tell you that eyewitness testimony is extremely important in a court of law, but they will also say that people's perceptions and their memories of what happened are far from perfect.

No one was more aware of these limitations than Jesus Himself. Accordingly, the Apostle John recorded that Jesus said, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26 NIV). In this way, Jesus explained that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to the disciples to guide them in what they said and wrote and to thereby ensure that they were completely accurate in everything. The Holy Spirit would give them total recall as well as the ability to interpret correctly what Jesus had said and done. We call this phenomenon *verbal inspiration* and also conclude, therefore, that Scripture is *inerrant*. So we actually have two good reasons for recognizing the accuracy of the New Testament: It is all eyewitness testimony and its writing was guided by the Holy Spirit.

We should also recognize that the New Testament emphasis on the eyewitnesses is dramatically illustrated in the missionary sermons recorded in Acts. These addresses do not read like the lectures of a college professor. They are far more like the closing argument by an attorney in a court of law. They consist of explanation then evidence, explanation then evidence, repeated until the end of the speech. These sermons are not expository; they are persuasive. They appeal to objective, historical evidence.⁵

And the question here is not limited to why we should believe that Jesus rose from the dead, nor is it restricted to why someone should become a Christian instead of a Muslim. The question can just as well be asking about becoming a Christian instead of an atheist, or a Hindu, a Buddhist or a pantheist. Every religion or religious position of the world, except for Christianity, as noted above, is a blind leap of faith, a commitment for which there is no genuine evidence (Isaiah 41:21-29). I am again speaking of the kind of evidence that can stand up to cross-examination as in a court of law. When it comes to evidence that theoretically can be verified or falsified, Christianity is the only game in town.

⁵ The apostles also used fulfillment of prophecy and Jesus' many miracles as additional evidence to substantiate the claim that He was the Messiah of God.

Regarding atheism, for example, famous atheist Bertrand Russell said, “I do not pretend to be able to prove that there is no God.”⁶ Only Christianity can be substantiated with good and sufficient evidence—evidence that is objective and historical in nature.⁷ Even atheism is a blind leap of faith.

In order to illustrate these important truths, we will today compare Islam and Christianity on this one all-important question: Did Jesus rise from the dead? Jesus Himself, when asked for evidence that He was the Messiah, said the one over-arching sign (proof) for His being the Messiah would be His resurrection from the dead (John 2:19). Conversely, Paul said, “And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14 ESV). But if Jesus actually did rise from the dead, then Christianity is proven true and a central doctrine of Islam is proven false because Islam insists that Jesus did not die, nor did He rise from the dead (Surah 4:157–158). Islam teaches that Jesus was a great prophet, but He was not God. Islam denies the Trinity. The resurrection, if true, proves Christianity true and proves a critical doctrine of Islam false at the same time.

But what evidence is there for the Muslim view that Jesus didn’t die? To answer this question, we will apply three primary criteria for critically evaluating historical documents. They are: (1) Is the document early? (2) Does it contain or is it based on eyewitness testimony? (3) Is there corroborating or conflicting evidence? We will apply these criteria to the Muslim view one at a time.⁸

1. *How early is the document?* Muslims say the Quran was completed in the year AD 632. This means that the source for the Muslim view that Jesus did not rise from the dead was written 600 years after the crucifixion, which likely occurred in AD 33.⁹ A

⁶ “Bertrand Russel Quotes About Atheism,” http://www.azquotes.com/author/12791-Bertrand_Russell/tag/atheism.

⁷ Lutheran scholars have always recognized the importance and necessity of the *ministerial use of reason*. We cannot understand what the Bible says without using our reason.

⁸ Another important criterion is the bibliographical test, that being: Do we have the document in the form it was originally written? In the case of the New Testament, there is broad agreement among scholars that we do have the original content with very few and relatively insignificant disputed content areas. Other tests include: Is the content of the document embarrassing to the author? Is the document internally consistent? Does the document purport to convey historical truth? Is the document believable?

⁹ The Greek historian, Phlegon, said that in the “fourth year of the 202nd Olympiad [i.e., AD 33] there was the greatest eclipse of the sun” and that “it became night in the sixth hour of the day [i.e., noon] so that stars even appeared in

600-year gap is far too great for a document to have any historical credibility unless it was based on reliable earlier sources, which is not the case here. On a scale of 0 to 10, “0” for not meeting the criteria at all, and “10” meaning the criteria is met extremely well, this claim of Islam scores a “0.”

2. *Is the source an eyewitness or is it based on eyewitness testimony?* Islam has no eyewitness accounts to support its claim that Jesus did not rise from the dead. The Muslim view of the resurrection gets a “0” on the second test also.

3. *Is their corroborating or conflicting evidence that Jesus didn't die?* Muslims cite no supporting evidence for their claim that Jesus didn't rise. The Muslim denial of the crucifixion fails the third test as well and scores a “0” once again.

All this means that by using normal standards of historical research, the Quran's view that Jesus did not rise from the dead has no historical basis. *The Muslim view of the resurrection is a blind leap of faith.*

But there is more. There is also conflicting evidence. Muslims admit that Jesus' followers believed that He had risen from the dead. How can that be explained? Most Muslim scholars say that a body-double died on the cross, not Jesus. Really?

Let us suppose that I just learned that I will be arrested, taken before a kangaroo court, and found guilty of blasphemy. I will then be spit upon, brutally beaten, ridiculed, whipped almost to the point of death, have a crown of thorns forced down on my head, and then nailed to a cross and left there until I am dead. Who would like to volunteer to take my place?

As far as body-doubles are concerned, my wife and I have identical twin daughters. They are genuine body-doubles. As college students, their professors commonly could not tell them apart. I sometimes wondered if the young men who dated them were ever certain about who they were with. At the same time, their mother and I had no difficulty telling them apart. Their mother knows. If Jesus had a body-double who died for him, this means that even Mary, Jesus' own mother, could not tell the difference. Not very likely.

It also means that Jesus' disciples and enemies could not tell the difference, and it means that the body that was crucified was still in the

the heavens. There was a great earthquake in Bithynia, and many things were overturned in Nicaea.” This has to be the same darkness and earthquake reported in the Gospels; it would date the crucifixion in AD 33 (<http://www.freechristianteaching.tv/the-ad-33-date-of-the-crucifixion-according-to-phlegon-a-secular-greek-historian>).

tomb. The Jewish leaders could have simply produced the body to stop the rumors of a supposed resurrection. But they never did. Why not? Because the tomb was empty. Both the death of Jesus on the cross and the empty tomb are among the best-attested facts of history.

How can people actually believe in such nonsense? The reason Muslims believe doctrines like this is because they have been aggressively indoctrinated from the time they were very young always to believe Muslim authorities and never to question what these authorities say. They are indoctrinated with a blind faith in the authority of the Quran and of Muslim authorities.¹⁰ Nabeel Qureshi said it this way, “The Quran required me to close my eyes to the evidence and believe solely on faith.”¹¹ Christians, in contrast, are instructed to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1); that is, not blindly to accept what religious authorities say, but to examine carefully what is being said to determine if it is true.

Christianity includes an abundance of objective evidence for its truthfulness. Christianity calls for faith, but it does not call for blind faith. It calls for faith based on good evidence. For example, when it came time to replace Judas, who had committed suicide, Peter described one prerequisite for anyone to be eligible to fill the place of Judas and become the twelfth disciple. Said Peter, “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness (Greek *martyreo*) to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21, 22 ESV).

That is, for anyone to be eligible to replace Judas, he had to have personally been there for the entirety of Jesus’ ministry, from His baptism by John to His ascension into heaven. He had to have been there every step of the way. He had to have seen and heard it all firsthand. And why? This person, like the other disciples, had to be able to give an eyewitness account of Jesus’ life, death, and especially His resurrection. With this very specific, objective, and all-important prerequisite, the listeners of the new disciple would be assured of both the accuracy and the truthfulness of what this disciple said. This is what is meant by being a *witness* to the resurrection.

But, how do we know that we can trust what Luke-Acts tells us? We will now apply the same historical criteria to these New Testament

¹⁰ Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 28–256.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

documents that we applied to the Muslim assertion that Jesus did not die. (The fact that Matthew, Mark, Luke-Acts, and John are included in our Bible does not in any way reduce their value as historical documents.)

Criterion 1. How early are the documents? Luke-Acts was written in about AD 61, a mere 30 years after the crucifixion. When it comes to ancient history, this is very early, within the lifetime of numerous eyewitnesses of the important events. In comparison, the earliest documents we have about Alexander the Great were written 300 years after his death—ten times longer than we have with the New Testament documents. On this criterion of being early, Luke-Acts rates a “10.”

Criterion 2: Is the account based on eyewitness testimony? Luke told us:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4 ESV)

Luke here clarified that he personally interviewed the eyewitnesses and did so with great care. He clarified that he carefully examined the numerous written accounts of eyewitness as well to ensure that he would be completely accurate in all that he wrote and so that, he states, his readers can know the certainty of all that he said. On a scale of 0 to 10 regarding the question of being based eyewitness accounts, Luke’s documents are rated a “10” once again.

Criterion 3: Are the documents corroborated by other evidence? The resurrection described in Luke is substantiated by six other eyewitness accounts, and, again, all these documents were written by, or based on, the testimony of eyewitnesses who were willing to die for what they said. I am speaking of the accounts of Matthew, Mark, John, Peter, James, and Paul. In historical research of the ancient world, if there are even two early documents saying the same thing, the accuracy of the accounts is considered to be very good. Imagine the situation where there are six authors, all being eyewitness in

nature, all substantiating the testimony of Luke. In a circumstance like this, the accuracy of the accounts is virtually beyond question. When it comes to historical documents of the world 2,000 years ago, the New Testament documents, once again, are in a class by themselves.¹² On the criterion of corroborating testimony, Luke rates a “10” once again.

We even have non-biblical accounts of the resurrection. That is, we can actually substantiate the gospel message by using documents not in the Bible. One such written record comes from Clement of Rome (AD 30–100). Clement had been instructed by the apostles themselves, so he would have known what these eyewitnesses said regarding the resurrection. Clement stated:

[The apostles] having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand.¹³

Clement here explained that the apostles were totally convinced that Jesus had risen. He also said that the reason their lives had been completely transformed was because of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit. In so doing, Clement provided non-biblical confirmation of the Gospel accounts, and especially the resurrection.

Similarly, Polycarp (AD 69–156), a disciple of the Apostle John, stated unequivocally that Jesus had risen from the dead. Polycarp actually referred to the resurrection six times in his letter to the Church at Philippi. Like Clement, as an associate and student of the eyewitnesses, Polycarp was in an excellent position to know what had happened. Polycarp said, “For they [the disciples] loved not this present world, but

¹² Some will ask, “How do we know that we have the New Testament documents as they were originally written?” In answer, we have over one hundred manuscripts of all or portions of the New Testament that were written within three hundred years of the crucifixion. If we compare that to the records we have of Alexander the Great, for example, we have no manuscripts written within three hundred years of Alexander’s death. What does this tell us? Non-Christian New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman said, “Essential Christian beliefs are not affected by textual variants in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament” (quoted by Greek scholar Daniel Wallace in Qureshi, 307). This means that it is known today that we have the New Testament as originally written with the exception of very minor questions of no doctrinal significance.

¹³ Clement, “Epistle to the Corinthians,” 42.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (reprint Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:16.

Him who died for us, and for our sakes was raised again by God from the dead.”¹⁴

Ignatius (AD 35–108) was another close associate of the apostles who claimed they had seen and touched Jesus after His resurrection. In his letter to the Church at Smyrna, Ignatius said:

For I know that after His resurrection also He was still possessed of flesh, and I believe that He is so now. When, for instance, He came to those who were with Peter, He said to them, “Lay hold, handle me, and see that I am not an incorporeal spirit.” And immediately they touched Him, and believed, being convinced both by His flesh and spirit. For this cause also they despised death, and were found its conquerors. And after His resurrection He did eat and drink with them, so being possessed of flesh, although spiritually He was united to the Father.¹⁵

Because Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius wrote shortly after the resurrection of Christ, and because they were personal associates of the eyewitnesses themselves, their testimonies carry enormous historical credibility. They had every reason to know what the apostles said had happened. In addition, the apostles, as eyewitnesses of everything Jesus had said and done, themselves had every reason to know what had taken place. If Jesus had actually risen, these apostles knew it was so. This brings us now to ten very early sources who say that Jesus actually rose from the dead: seven who were eyewitnesses or wrote based on eyewitness testimony, and three who were taught by the eyewitnesses.¹⁶ No event in ancient history has corroboration that is anything even close to this.

We even have several non-Christian historians who corroborate the New Testament to a large degree, the most prominent being the Jewish historian Josephus, a historian who was commissioned by the Roman government to write the history of the Jews. He wrote in the late first century and would have had access to all the government records as well as access to numerous other written records and even to numerous eyewitness. Josephus includes fascinating details in his histories. For example, how do we know the name of the daughter of Herodias who danced before Herod the Great, a dance that led to the death of John

¹⁴ Polycarp, “The Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippian,” para. 9, *Ante-Nicene*, 1:33.

¹⁵ Ignatius, “Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans,” chapter 3, *Ante-Nicene*, 1:87.

¹⁶ The ten are: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Clement, Polycarp, and Ignatius.

the Baptist? (Her name was Salome.) The gospels do not mention her name, but Josephus does. Josephus is recognized as being a superb historian, and he was not sympathetic to Christianity, which makes his testimony even more impressive. Josephus said this:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive; accordingly he was perhaps the messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.¹⁷

This statement from Josephus establishes the following historical facts (other historians, such as Tacitus, mention several of these facts also):¹⁸

1. A man called “Jesus” lived in Palestine in the early first century.
2. He was known to be a good and virtuous man.
3. Many people, both Jews and Gentiles, became His followers.
4. He was sentenced to death by crucifixion by Pontius Pilate.
5. The movement He began continued after His death.
6. Jesus’ own disciples (the eyewitnesses) claimed He had risen from the dead.
7. Many people, both Jews and Gentiles, believed He was the promised Messiah.

All these details of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth described by Josephus are historical facts. It is pointless to question any of them. Even the Muslim scholars accept all of them as true. Perhaps the most important fact that Josephus documents is that it was the eyewitnesses themselves who claimed they had personally seen and heard Jesus after His resurrection. It was the eyewitnesses who insisted Jesus had risen

¹⁷ Josephus, *Works of Josephus*, 379. Note: This text actually says, “He was the Christ.” Because this language is disputed by those who say this wording must have been added by a Christian writer, I have, at this one point, used the language of the Arabic version of Josephus instead, which says, “he was perhaps the Messiah.” There is good agreement that Josephus said at least this much. See Habermas and Licona, *Case for the Resurrection*, 266–70.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Annals*, Book XV, para 44, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, ed. Moses Hadas, trans. Alfred Church and William Brodribb (New York: Random House Inc., 1942), 380.

from the dead. We also know they were willing to die for what they said. People will sometimes die for a lie, but they will not die for what they know is a lie. These eyewitnesses were absolutely convinced that they had seen the risen King. It is difficult to take the position that all these eyewitnesses were wrong. For this reason, we have very good evidence for the resurrection from a highly reliable and non-Christian source that we have every reason to believe is accurate.

But going back to the New Testament documents, how do we know that these accounts were actually written by the people they were attributed to? We have an abundance of historical evidence that such is the case. Church leader Papias, a disciple of John writing in about AD 110, for example, said:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore, Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For one thing he took special care, not to omit anything he had heard and not to put anything fictitious into the statements.¹⁹

Papias also said, that Matthew "put together the sayings of the Lord in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them as best he could."²⁰

These are extremely important statements because Papias, writing in the early second century, as a disciple of John, would have had reliable information about the New Testament documents he described. Papias was a scholar who said that he received much of his information directly from John. He made it clear that the Gospel of Mark is authoritative because it was based on the testimony of eyewitnesses. He said that the Gospels of Matthew and Mark were written by Matthew and Mark themselves. Papias indirectly clarified that the primary criteria used by the New Testament church to determine which documents were trustworthy and which were not is that to be accepted, the document must have been written by an eyewitness (an apostle) or directly based on the

¹⁹ Papias, "Fragments of Papias," *Ante-Nicene*, 1:154-55.

²⁰ Eusebius, III, *Ante-Nicene*, 39:16.

testimony of eyewitnesses. Any testimony that was not eyewitness in nature was not accepted.²¹

Along the same lines, Justin Martyr (100–165) said, “For the Apostles, in the memoirs composed by them, which are called Gospels, have thus delivered unto us what was enjoined upon them; that Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, said, ‘This do in remembrance of Me.’”²² In this way, Justin Martyr clarified that the Gospels were known to be the *memoirs* of the Apostles. Once again, Justin Martyr was clarifying that for a document to be accepted as authoritative, it must have come from the apostles, the eyewitnesses.

In addition to Papias and Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons in AD 180 and a student of Polycarp, who in turn was a student of the apostle John, said:

Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own tongue, when Peter and Paul were preaching in Rome and founding the church there. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, himself, handed down to us in writing the substance of Peter’s preaching. Luke, the follower of Paul, set down in a book the gospel preached by his teacher. Then John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned on his breast himself produced his Gospel, while he was living at Ephesus in Asia.²³

Irenaeus made it clear that the Gospels he was describing are the same four Gospels that are included in the New Testament. Irenaeus also clarified that these Gospels were accepted because they were, directly or indirectly, the testimonies of the apostolic eyewitness. Second century scholar, Tertullian, (AD 160–220), was very explicit in making the same observations when he said,

The same authority of the apostolic churches will afford evidence to the other Gospels also, which we possess equally through their means, and according to their usage—I mean the Gospels of John and Matthew—whilst that which Mark

²¹ Papias was a scholar who wrote five books. We know that later church leaders made use of his books because they frequently quoted them. It is incorrect to say that the second and third century church leaders relied on oral traditions. Why would they use oral traditions when they had written records at their disposal? We know that they used them and did so extensively.

²² Justin Martyr, “The First Apology of Justin,” *Ante-Nicene*, 1:185.

²³ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies II,” *Ante-Nicene*, 1:258–59.

published may be affirmed to be Peter's whose interpreter Mark was. For even Luke's form of the Gospel men usually ascribe to Paul. And it may well seem that the works which disciples publish belong to their masters.²⁴

This statement by Tertullian was made in the context of determining which documents were authoritative and which were not. Tertullian clarified that for any religious writings to be accepted as trustworthy by the New Testament church, they had to have been written by eyewitness, such as the gospels of Matthew and John, or based directly on the testimony of eyewitnesses, in this case the gospels of Mark and Luke.

People commonly ask why the books we have in the New Testament were accepted while others were not. The answer to that question is clear: only those books were accepted that were the actual testimony of the eyewitnesses or were based on eyewitness testimony. Any other documents, such as the Gnostic gospels of the second century and later, made famous by several novels and by Hollywood cinema like *The Da Vinci Code*, were rejected because they were not based on eyewitness testimony.²⁵

Because of the evidence described above, and much more like it, we know that the New Testament documents meet the highest standards of historical reliability. They deserve to be taken very seriously.

There is one more area of corroborating historical research that needs to be mentioned, however, that being the discovery of numerous and important physical artifacts. As time has gone on, we have come to possess more and more artifacts that corroborate the story of the history and geography of the New Testament times and that substantiate the New Testament message. It is not difficult to retrace the missionary journeys of Paul, for example, by simply following the Book of Acts. Many individuals have done just that. That feat demonstrates that the book was written by an eyewitness who was there himself and was part of the journeys.

Apologist Frank Turek states that archeological research has documented the accuracy of over 100 historical and geographical details in the Gospels of John and Luke-Acts alone.²⁶ The only way to explain that

²⁴ Tertullian, "Against Marcion," 4.5, *Ante-Nicene*, 1:350.

²⁵ There were two other criteria of lesser value that were also used. After the New Testament books that we now have were recognized as authoritative, any later writing had to be in agreement with those that were known to be authentic. A third criterion was acceptance by the New Testament churches.

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OuiSFAVdIQw&t=2617s>.

kind of accuracy is to recognize that Luke was a careful historian who either got his information firsthand or received it from those who had firsthand knowledge. Dr. Paul Maier has personally documented many of these details in the Book of Acts, and I highly recommend his books and lectures on YouTube.²⁷ For our purposes here, however, we will take the time to consider two historical artifacts that substantiate the New Testament record, the two that are probably the most sensational. We first take up the ossuary of James the Just.

The James Ossuary

The James ossuary was discovered just outside Jerusalem and announced on October 21, 2002. An ossuary is a limestone box used by Jews from about AD 20 until AD 70 for storing the bones of the dead. The body of the deceased was left in a cave for a year, and then the bones were collected and placed in an ossuary. This method of burial was common in Jerusalem because burial space was limited. The name of the dead person was usually engraved on the outside of the ossuary. The James ossuary is made of limestone and is twenty inches long, twelve inches high and ten inches wide.²⁸

Thousands of these ossuaries have been discovered. The James ossuary bears an inscription in Aramaic, and when translated into English, reads, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” This means the ossuary is that of James the Just, son of Joseph and the brother of Jesus.²⁹ The ossuary’s patina, a superficial discoloration resulting from age that covers the exterior, is exactly the same in the lettering as on the sides of the container. This demonstrates that the lettering and the box are of the same age.

James was so prominent that Josephus wrote about him. Josephus wrote that James was martyred in Jerusalem in the year AD 62 and that James was the brother of Jesus “who was called Christ.”³⁰ James was frequently mentioned in the New Testament. Paul, for instance, said, “Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:18–19 ESV).

It is extremely unusual to mention a brother of the deceased on an ossuary, and there are only one or possibly two out of several thousand

²⁷ See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAN3kQHTKWI>.

²⁸ Dr. Rochelle I. Altmann, “Official Report on the James Ossuary,” http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Official_Report.shtml.

²⁹ This could be a half-brother, a step-brother, or a cousin.

³⁰ Josephus, *Works of Josephus*, 423.

besides the James ossuary that identify the brother of the deceased. It would have been done only if that brother was a very important person. In this case, Jesus was important—in fact, He was the most important person who ever lived. In this one artifact, therefore, we have powerful testimony to the reality and prominence of both James, the brother of Jesus, and of Jesus Himself.

The Shroud of Turin

A second important artifact is the Shroud of Turin, a rectangular linen cloth measuring 14.5 feet long by 3.7 feet wide housed in the chapel of the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist at Turin, Italy. There are significant indications that this artifact is the actual linen cloth that covered the body of Jesus from the time of His burial until His resurrection.

The shroud is the most intensely studied historical artifact of all time³¹ and the evidence of its authenticity is very strong. This linen cloth bears an actual photographic negative of a man killed by crucifixion. It pictures someone who was killed in or around Jerusalem and was killed at a time that coincides with the death of Jesus of Nazareth. The photograph reveals that it was produced by an energy source unknown to modern science coming from inside the body itself. This energy was apparently released when the body of Jesus was transformed from a dead body into a living body with far different qualities than it had before. There is no known scientific explanation, no naturalistic explanation, for how the image on the shroud was formed or even how it could have been formed.

All four Gospels indicate that a linen cloth was used to wrap the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. Luke, for example, said, “And he [Joseph of Arimathea] took it [the body] down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid” (Luke 23:53 ESV).

As stated above, the linen cloth bears the photograph of a man killed by crucifixion. The negative image of the shroud was first observed in 1898 on the reverse photographic plate of photographer Secondo Pia who was the first person to photograph the shroud. He did so while it was on display at the Turin Cathedral. There are numerous factual indications that point to the genuineness of the shroud as being the actual burial cloth of Jesus. Some of the many indications follow:

³¹ Gary Habermas, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEg7kpo6WY0>.

1. As Secondo Pia was developing his negatives, he was amazed to see a positive image emerge from his film. (A negative of a negative photograph gives a positive image.) It would have been impossible to fake a photographic negative long before the world had any knowledge of photography.
2. The energy source for the photograph must have come from within the body itself. The image on the shroud contains the body image from both the front and back sides and has no shadows. It would have been impossible for external lighting to make such a photograph.³²
3. Close inspection of the image on the shroud demonstrates that it is an x-ray image as well as a photographic image. Skeletal features can clearly be observed, revealing once again that the energy source for the image must have come from within the body. Science knows of no energy source that could have produced such an image.
4. The image on the shroud demonstrates that the person was crucified with nails through the wrists, not through the hands. It was not until 1902 that it was demonstrated that the flesh in a person's hands cannot bear the weight of a body in a crucifixion; for that reason nails had to have been driven through the wrists.³³ The Greek and Aramaic words for *hands* also refer to and include the *wrists*.
5. Written records of the Sudarium of Oviedo (the linen cloth that was used to cover Jesus' head from the time of His death to His burial; so named because it is stored at the Cámara Santa [Holy Chamber] in Oviedo, Spain) is dated to the first century and to Jerusalem. The Gospel of John specifies that there were two cloths—apparently the Shroud and the Sudarium—that were visible inside the tomb after the resurrection (John 20:6–7). Scientific study of these two linen cloths has revealed that they are stained with same blood type, and the stains are the same shapes and are in the same places on both cloths. These two linen cloths covered the same body.
6. Several Mideast pollen grains on the shroud, which also match certain plant-bearing flowers pictured on the shroud, are from plants that exist only in and around Jerusalem. The identified

³² For other indications, see Antonacci, *The Resurrection of the Shroud*, 252.

³³ Ian Wilson and Barrie Schwartz, *The Turin Shroud: The Illustrated Evidence* (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 2000), 59.

flowers from these plants are known to bloom in the spring-time, the time of Jesus' crucifixion. In addition, particles of limestone on the Shroud match the limestone in and around Jerusalem.

7. Some of the pollen grains on the shroud are from a plant that grows in Palestine and is known for its sharp thorns. Those pollen grains are especially numerous around the head of the image on the shroud, apparently left there by the crown of thorns.
8. Bruise marks that are a perfect match for those left by a Roman flagrum (a whip used to scourge criminals) are evident on the shroud. These scourge wounds are clearly seen on the back, front, and thighs of the victim of the crucifixion. Bruises on the side of the man's face also match the description of how Jesus was beaten before being crucified.
9. Magnification of the image on the Shroud has revealed that coins had been placed over the man's eyes, a common practice in ancient times. These particular coins were minted by Pontius Pilate during a six month period in the 16th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, that being AD 29.³⁴
10. The man pictured on the shroud had been scourged before he was crucified. He also had a crown of thorns forced down on his head. He had been beaten and stabbed in the side by a lance matching the type of lance used by Roman soldiers.

The chance of any man other than Jesus matching all these details is extremely remote. In addition, no normal dead man would have possessed the energy needed to produce a photograph of his resurrection on a linen cloth which, again, points to Jesus of Nazareth as the man pictured on the Shroud.³⁵ There is no credible evidence indicating that the Shroud is a fake. None whatsoever.

The evidence is so one-sided that attorney and former agnostic Mark Antonacci said this evidence in great specificity matches the time, place, participants, and other details in the historical accounts of the crucifixion. Antonacci added that this evidence is far superior to that which supports many of the other important events in history such

³⁴ <http://people.duke.edu/~adw2/shroud/jewish-coins.html>.

³⁵ Even some nonbelievers have come to this conclusion. They may not believe that Jesus is God, but they are convinced that the shroud pictures Him in the tomb.

as Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon or Martin Luther's nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg.³⁶

Because of the scientific evidence for the authenticity of the Shroud, several skeptical scientists and other scholars who were part of the scientific study of the Shroud issued in 1981 converted to Christianity, as has Mark Antonacci.³⁷ This should not surprise us because the Shroud pictures the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and, as Paul said, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16 ESV). It is fair to say that all the genuine scientific evidence compiled over the past years has reinforced the authenticity of the Shroud. At the same time, however, science can never conclusively prove any miracle. Science is limited to describing the way nature usually works. It cannot prove exceptions to the norm. It can prove what the Shroud is not; it cannot prove what the Shroud is.

In addition, we have God's assurance that He brings people to faith by means of His Word and sacraments. We have no such promise with any artifacts including the Shroud. We also have God's promise to send His Holy Spirit to guide the apostles in all they said and wrote. We have no such promise regarding any of the artifacts. The Shroud, for these reasons, has far less importance than the Gospel records. At the same time, however, both Peter and Paul employed nonbiblical evidence to support their claim that Jesus was the Messiah of God.³⁸ There is no reason why we cannot do the same.

As stated above, every religion and religious position, except for Christianity, is a blind leap of faith. You would not buy a car without seeing it first. You might want to sit inside. You might want to drive it. You might want to kick its tires. You would not buy it unless you were sure it was real. So why would you buy into a religious position without knowing if it is true or not?

There is only one religion that has objective evidence for its truthfulness, that being Christianity. As mentioned above, this truth is the message of Isaiah 41:21 where God says to all the religions of the world, "Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob" (ESV). God's message to all religions is this: Prove to us that you are real. There is only one religion that can meet this challenge, Christianity, and it meets the challenge in spectacular fashion.

³⁶ Antonacci, *The Resurrection of the Shroud*, 252.

³⁷ Wilson and Schwartz, *The Turin Shroud*, 121.

³⁸ Acts 2:22 and 26:26.

So what difference does it make? What difference does it make for there to be good objective, historical evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead? It matters because it means that the message of the cross is true.

The balance scales are a universal symbol of justice. You will find artworks of these scales in most, if not all, the major nations of the world, and some of these artworks date back several millennia. The balance scales are a picture of natural law: the inborn recognition of right versus wrong including the recognition that punishment must fit the crime. Daniel 5:27 includes an unmistakable reference to the balance scales when Daniel told King Belshazzar, “You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting” (NIV).

Imagine that all the misdeeds of every person who has ever lived and will live are on one side of the scales. Imagine that your own misdeeds as well as mine are on that side of the scales. What would it take on the other side for the scales to balance? The Prophet Isaiah answered that question this way:

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6 NKJV)

This means that the life, suffering, and death of God’s own son, Jesus the Christ, have been placed on the other side of the scales. And Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is God’s proclamation that the scales of justice now balance (Romans 4:25). He invites us all to make this truth our own by faith in Jesus the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. May God grant that we have received this glorious message. [LSQ](#)

Luther's Discovery of the Gospel

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AS HEIRS OF THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION, WE rejoice in the central teaching of Scripture: that God justifies sinners by His gift of grace alone, through faith alone in Christ, without any works or merit on our part. In the ELS *Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, Question 211 asks, "How can God declare sinners righteous?" Answer: "God can declare sinners righteous because, on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ, He has acquitted all people of the guilt and punishment of their sins, and has imputed to them the righteousness of Christ; He therefore regards them in Christ as though they had never sinned (general or objective justification)."¹ Even the faith by which we receive this justification personally is a gift of God. These truths are taught, for example, in Romans 3:23–24, 28: "... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (NKJV).

Martin Luther the Reformer also came to rejoice in this central teaching of Scripture. However, his understanding of the true gospel of justification as a gift of God's grace alone came by a process of discovery, guided by the grace of God through His Scripture alone. In his early years, Luther agonized over the question, "How can I become righteous

¹ *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (Mankato: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001), 143.

before the holy God? How can I know that I am fully forgiven all of my sins? How can I know that I stand in God's favor, ready to enter eternity in good standing?" Indeed, later in life he would recall his struggle to understand the meaning of the gospel and the righteousness of God, as the apostle Paul described in Romans 1:

But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner...²

But then, through study of the Scriptures, he was guided by the Holy Spirit to a right understanding:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.³

In order to understand Luther's discovery of the true gospel by the grace of God, we will attempt to trace theological influences shaping the Church of his time, his struggles as a monk and a professor, and at last his eventual reliance on the true teaching of Scripture alone.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Publishing House, 1955–), 34:336. References will be abbreviated *LW*.

³ *Ibid.*

I. Religion of the 16th Century

The religion practiced by people of the 16th century was much like the world in which they lived. They struggled to gain spiritual security, just as in their daily lives they struggled to achieve material security. Salvation was something to be earned, and so theirs was a religion of work.⁴

What else is new? The natural religion of man has always assumed, according to human reason, that if one is to get right with God (or the gods), then like anything else in life, it will depend on his own work and merit—at least to some extent. This was the prevailing religion of the day when Luther was born in 1483. The *opinio legis* (opinion of the law) is the opinion that natural man is not so badly fallen and corrupted by sin that he is unable to keep the law and so please God, but that he is able to cooperate with God, at least to some extent, in earning his salvation. This was the “reasonable” solution offered in the Roman Church for the question, “How can I become righteous before God?”

There was no question that God Himself was righteous. He gave His holy law to man and righteously demanded obedience: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.... And ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–39 NKJV). The command was simple enough, but who could fulfill it? Even the sinner’s greatest effort to love God and his neighbor was only partial at best, and motivated by selfishness. Therefore, Luther came to hate the “righteousness of God” as it was taught as an “active righteousness ... with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner....” Thus:

First of all, Luther met the view, common to the religious people of all times, that God looks with favor upon those who have done their best to obey His Law. He rewards good deeds and punishes evil deeds. In theological terminology this is called the “active” view of justification, because, according to it, man is acceptable to God if he is just in his activity, that is, if his behavior and walk conforms to the demands of the divine Law.⁵

⁴ James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 40.

⁵ Uuras Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel*, Concordia Heritage Series (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), XIII.

If left there, sinful man, being weak and prone to error, could never fulfill the law and measure up to the righteousness of God.

But here the Roman Church provided its “reasonable” solution. True, you cannot attain to the righteousness of God by yourself alone, but you can with help from God and the Church. The Scholastic⁶ theologians taught that natural man, though fallen in sin, still has a leftover spark of the divine, which they called the *synteresis*. This spark gave man a conscience that convicted him of thinking, feeling, and doing evil, and it also prompted him to decide to do better next time. Kittelson explains:

Even after the fall, therefore, there remained an ember of the divine fire that could be fanned, partially good behavior that could be encouraged, a decent disposition of the mind that could be enhanced. No one could attain the perfection of God, but people could be improved simply by appealing to the spark of goodness that lay within them.⁷

However, such self-improvement alone was not enough for salvation. The Church knew from Scripture that salvation was by grace alone (Ephesians 2:9). No matter how holy one’s outward life might be, sin still reigned within.

Yet there remained one more potential source for this missing ingredient. Luther’s teachers pointed out that the church mediated the grace of Jesus Christ which, if added to human initiative, could complete the partial work of human beings and make it pleasing to God. More specifically, the church provided the seven sacraments through which human actions were clothed in divine grace. After birth there was Baptism, later there was confirmation, for those who chose it there was marriage, and for all there was confession and penance, the Mass, and, at death, extreme unction. For those who wished to do more and be

⁶ “Scholasticism, the philosophical systems and speculative tendencies of various medieval Christian thinkers, who, working against a background of fixed religious dogma, sought to solve anew general philosophical problems (as of faith and reason, will and intellect, realism and nominalism, and the provability of the existence of God), initially under the influence of the mystical and intuitional tradition of patristic philosophy, and especially Augustinianism, and later under that of Aristotle ... and above all subservient to Roman Catholic theology” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scholasticism>).

⁷ Kittelson, 72.

absolutely certain of their salvation, there were holy orders and the life of self-denial.

The theology that Luther was taught therefore amounted to a contract between God and human beings. God graciously initiated the contract for the sake of Christians, the elect. God did so by creating a world that included the church and human beings who strove for self-preservation. In this way, grace was protected by locating it both in the church and in the makeup of human nature. At the same time, a place was found for human initiative. Individual Christians had active roles to play in their own salvation. All that was necessary was to fulfill the human side of the contract.⁸

This theology was summarized in a well-known slogan, "God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them." One preacher commonly exhorted his congregation, "Do what is within you! Use well your natural powers and whatever special gifts God has given you!" Salvation would follow. Christians could earn the grace of God simply by doing their best.⁹ Thus:

... Luther learned to know the official teaching of the Roman Church, according to which man is justified by being healed from his sin-sickness and corruption so that he is able to love God and his fellow men and thus to fulfill the Law. He becomes acceptable to God, or righteous in His sight, by this grace-wrought renewal *and* the ensuing righteous activity, or good works. Thus, man is both "passive" and "active" in justification: he receives the healing and renewing grace as a gift of God, that is, "passively," but he is "active" in doing good works by which he merits eternal life.¹⁰

To human reason, this "Do your best, and God will do the rest" theology seems to make sense. If I just put in an honest enough effort, applying the natural goodness within me, God will look on me with grace and favor.

Justification was seen as a process. God's grace was infused into sinners in parts. In the Sacrament of Baptism, God's grace might be poured out on an infant. Baptism, as a beginning in God's grace, washed

⁸ Ibid., 72–73.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Saarnivaara, XIII–XIV.

away the penalties of original sin; it brought one into the ship of God's Church and salvation. But after that, it was necessary to find grace for one's actual sins in daily life. When one sinned and fell out of the ship, and out of grace with God, he would be lost in the sea unless he grasped at the "second plank" provided through the Church in the Sacrament of Penance. This included confessing one's sins to a priest and hearing absolution. However, absolution was not just a simple declaration of full and free forgiveness because of the work and merits of Christ alone as Savior. Brecht explains:

As private confession developed, the sinner was indeed absolved immediately, but penitential acts were imposed upon him to be performed subsequently as satisfactions. In addition, he was liable to receive temporal punishment from God for his sins, even though eternal punishment was remitted through forgiveness.

If the penance or temporal punishment were not completed in this life, the person would have to atone after death in purgatory, an intermediate state between heaven and hell. The usual piety that said a Christian should die in a state of grace, absolved from his sins, now directed its interests and anxieties more and more toward purgatory and avoiding it. At this point the church came to the aid of this piety with the institution of indulgences. An indulgence, or kindness, as one may translate the Latin word, meant the commutation or reduction of penitential acts and temporal punishment for sin by the church.... At any rate, the prerequisite for obtaining an indulgence was a contrite attitude and act on the part of the person involved, which could consist of praying, making pilgrimages, giving alms, or making payments.¹¹

In this way, sinners were always kept in fear between hell at worst or purgatory at best, doing their best, and hoping God would do the rest by indulging them with grace. Whatever sins were not confessed and made up for in this life by works of penance would have to be made up for in the afterlife.

Behind the system of indulgences lay the teaching of a so-called treasury of surplus merits. These were the merits of Christ and the saints which could be applied to sinners to help reduce temporal punishments.

¹¹ Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation, 1483–1521* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 176–177.

Christ, by His sinless life, had His own extra merits to share. Moreover, the church taught that the Virgin Mary and other saints had lived better than they needed for their salvation, thereby earning surplus merits for others. The saints were suffering no temporal punishment for sins in purgatory, but had gone directly to heaven where they could intercede for others. From this treasury of supermerits, the pope was said to have authority to grant indulgences, pardoning temporal punishments to sinners, not only for those on earth, but even for those in purgatory.¹²

When it came to seeking indulgence from the righteous God, there was no direct route through His Son as the all-sufficient Savior of sinners. Christ Himself was portrayed as an unapproachable Judge. A familiar figure in illustrated books of the day shows Christ on the Day of Judgment, sitting upon a rainbow. A lily extends from His right ear, signifying the redeemed, who below are being ushered by angels into paradise. From His left ear protrudes a sword, symbolizing the doom of the damned, whom the devils drag by the hair from the tombs and cast into the flames of hell. Luther had seen pictures like these and testified that he was utterly terror-stricken at the sight of Christ the Judge.¹³

For this problem, the church directed sinners to the saints, who could approach the righteous Judge in their behalf. If one could not seek relief with God through the intercession of His Son, perhaps the Son could be swayed through the intercession of His mother, Mary. And if Mary were remote, one could enlist her mother, St. Anne, or some other saint.¹⁴

In any case, it behooved the individual to stick close to the Church, seeking God's grace throughout life by participating in the Sacraments of Penance, the Mass, Confirmation, Marriage; and if by the end of one's life salvation were not sure, the oil of Extreme Unction could be applied for one last shot of grace.

II. Luther's Struggles as a Monk—1505–1512

If this system of "Do your best and God will do the rest"—works plus grace—was meant to bring any measure of gospel comfort to sinners, it did not. In the end, it could only lead the sinner in one of two directions: either to spiritual pride or despair, and either way away from faith in Christ alone. In his early days, Luther constantly struggled with

¹² Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 46–47; Brecht, 177.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

temptation to despair. How could one ever know if he had done his best and if he had ever done enough to merit the grace of God to do the rest?

It was the fear of God and Christ as the righteous Judge that spurred Luther to enter the monastery in 1505. His plan had been to pursue the study of law at Erfurt University, as his father desired. But one day on his way back to Erfurt after traveling home to Mansfeld to spend time with his parents, he was suddenly overtaken by a severe thunderstorm.

He sought shelter under a tree near Stottenheim. Suddenly the tree was struck by a bolt of lightning, and Luther was thrown to the ground. Once again he was overcome by the fear which had long been nearly an obsession with him, a fear of sudden death brought on by his intense feeling of guilt caused by his consciousness of sin. Gripped by that fear he cried out: "Help, St. Anna, I will become a monk!"¹⁵

St. Anne was the patron saint of his father's mining profession. But this was not the first time Luther had called on a saint, terrified in the face of death as a young man. A couple years earlier, while traveling home at Easter time, he accidentally wounded a main artery of his leg with a sword. While a friend ran for a doctor, Luther pressed the wound tightly to stop the bleeding. But as death came close, he cried out to the Mother of God, "Oh, Mary, help." Later, Luther was quoted as saying, "If I had died at that time, I would have died in the name of Mary."¹⁶

The vow to become a monk was made purely out of deathly fear of God (and hatred of His righteousness), but it was considered binding nonetheless. Luther's father was extremely displeased, but for Luther there must have been some measure of hopefulness. After all, among the sacraments, Ordination was considered one of the best ways to attain to the mercy and grace of God. Bainton explains:

St. Thomas Aquinas himself declared the taking of the cowl to be second baptism, restoring the sinner to the state of innocence which he enjoyed when first baptized. The opinion was popular that if the monk should sin thereafter, he was peculiarly privileged because in his case repentance would bring restoration to

¹⁵ Erwin Scharf, "Martin Luther, The Reformer in the Making" (essay, Pastors' Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, September and October, 1983; Pastors' Institute for the Northern Conference of the Michigan District, Lansing, Michigan, April 24-25, 1984), 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

the state of innocence. Monasticism was the way par excellence to heaven.¹⁷

Among several cloisters available at Erfurt, Luther chose the way of the Observant Augustinians. The order studied the writings of the church father St. Augustine (Bishop of Hippo from AD 396–430) in the way he was interpreted by medieval theology.¹⁸ The Order in Erfurt was the most important Augustinian order in Germany, considered the foremost center for cultivation of the ascetic ideal. It was said that among the Augustinians at Erfurt Luther could hope soonest to reach the goal of “evangelical perfection.”¹⁹

It began with a probationary year, to determine whether the novice was fit for the severity and self-denial of the monastic life. During the acceptance ceremony, the prior asked the candidate, “What do you seek here?” The proper reply of the candidate, lying prostrate on the floor, was, “The gracious God and your mercy.”²⁰ When he was ordered to stand

Then the prior held up before the applicant the severity of life in the order: the renunciation of one's own will, the simplicity of diet, the rudeness of clothing, the vigils during the night, the work during the day, the castigation of the flesh, the disgrace of poverty, the shame of begging, the fatigue from fasting, the weariness of seclusion.²¹

The prior's last words to the novice at the end of the ceremony were the exhortation, “Not he who begins but he who perseveres to the end will be saved.”²²

Life in the monastery was indeed difficult, particularly for a conscientious and diligent monk like Luther. He made sure to keep the seven appointed hours of daily prayer around the clock, believing that “through masses, canonical hours, and rosaries, one could atone for sin, appease God, and become holy.”²³ Clothed in the black garb of the Black Cloister, He tended to his daily work in silence: eyes downcast,

¹⁷ Bainton, 33.

¹⁸ Brecht, 52.

¹⁹ Scharf, 22.

²⁰ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 128.

²¹ Brecht, 58.

²² Oberman, 128.

²³ Brecht, 64.

refraining from laughter; and he spent much time in solitude in his seven by ten foot cell.²⁴ Later, Luther would comment:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I might say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.²⁵

Some of the greatest hardships Luther experienced in the monastery were those he brought on himself, in his unrelenting pursuit of attaining to the righteousness of God. To this end, Luther made regular use of the confession, seeking to make satisfaction for his sins through penance. Since it was taught that only those sins that were confessed could be forgiven, he confessed frequently, often daily, and for as long as six hours on a single occasion. He would repeat his confessions, and to be sure of including everything would review his entire life until the confessor grew weary. Even still, having left confession, he would remember some other sin and run back to the priest. "We exhausted the confessors," he later recalled. Yet, even after all this, one could not be sure of forgiveness. The formula of absolution made forgiveness dependent upon true contrition and the performance of satisfaction. Luther acknowledged that often he had but gallows repentance, regretting only the ills brought upon himself through his sin, rather than repenting of his offense against God. Even after endless self-examination and confession, there would be nagging questions: Was my contrition genuine? Have I done enough works of penance to satisfy the righteous God? Who knows whether God forgives me my sin?²⁶

His great unhappiness over his sins and guilt drove him to thinking that if he were to torture himself, he might be able to drive evil out of his body. He was known, too, to fast far beyond the required fasting mentioned earlier. The story is told so frequently that, although it is not documented, it is regarded as history, telling of the evening when Staupitz missed Luther in the supper lineup. He had heard that Luther had been fasting excessively. This evening he decided to go to Luther's cell to investigate. Upon his arrival he found him lying prostrate on

²⁴ Scharf, 23.

²⁵ Bainton, 45.

²⁶ Brecht, 68; Bainton, 54–56.

the cell floor, looking emaciated and half-conscious, with a knotted scourge lying beside him.²⁷

And so the endless cycle of trying to do his best to curry God's favor brought Luther no gospel comfort, but only drove him to despair. He could only imagine Christ the angry Judge, not pleased with his best works. He only felt the grinding sense of being utterly abandoned by God's grace, unable to be saved, and lost eternally, a feeling he called *Anfechtung*. Luther later wrote about such times of despair:

Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them. And so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half an hour, even for one-tenth of an hour, he would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes. At such a time God seems so terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse.... In this moment, it is strange to say, the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed.²⁸

Luther's unrest, even after intense self-examination and confession, was understandable. The form of absolution used among the Augustinian monks was unevangelical: "I absolve thee from thy sins through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the sake of the contrition of thy heart, the confession of thy mouth, and the intercession of the saints."²⁹ This conditional absolution made forgiveness dependent on the adequacy of the contrition and confession of the sinner.

But every time he tried to fan his own spark of goodness, he found that all he was doing was focusing his attention on himself. From his own teachers he knew that to think of himself was to be in his most sinful state. How then could he "do what was within him" without yielding to the basest of motives, the desire to save his own skin? How could he possibly confess every one of his sins when he knew that he did so only for the purpose of currying the favor of a righteous God who would surely condemn him for them? Every act of confession therefore

²⁷ Scharf, 24.

²⁸ Brecht, 80.

²⁹ Saarnivaara, 27–28.

became yet another sin. The sincerity of the confession and of the acts of penance that followed was always in question. And if he himself questioned his motives, how could they not have been more than dubious in the mind of a God who knew all and was always right?³⁰

It is no wonder that, after becoming ordained as a priest in 1507, while celebrating his first Mass, Luther was filled with great anxiety. Purity from sin was demanded as a prerequisite for celebrating the Mass, for changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, let alone receiving it for one's good. But never feeling that he had become pure enough and lacking the assurance of forgiveness, Luther approached the altar with fear and trembling, seeing Christ as Judge. Later, he recounted that in saying the sacred words, "This is my body," he almost dropped the bread; and in saying, "This is the New Testament is my blood," he almost dropped the cup. He was so terrified by the words of the Eucharistic Prayer that he almost ran from the altar.³¹

But here we meet one of the greatest influences in Luther's life and development on the road to discovering the true gospel: Johann Staupitz. He was the Vicar General of the Augustinian Order and one of Luther's confessors. The more Luther tried to work out his salvation with fasts, prayers, and the vigils with which he afflicted his body, the less peace he knew. He frequently came to Staupitz, confessing his doubts, sins, and outright hatred of a righteous God, who could only punish him for his failures. Staupitz moved Luther's focus away from himself to "look to the wounds of Christ" as his Savior, and to trust the forgiveness provided in absolution. This included a reshaping of Luther's understanding of repentance. In 1518, in a letter to Staupitz, Luther would recount Staupitz' helpful influence in this regard:

I remember, Reverend Father, that in one of your delightful and wholesome talks, by which the Lord Jesus usually gives me wonderful comfort, mention was made of the word "repentance" (*poenitentia*). I received your word as coming from Heaven when you said that repentance is not genuine unless it begins with a love of righteousness and God ... and that what the torturers consider to be the end and consummation of repentance is rather its beginning.... At once I began to compare it with the Scripture texts on repentance. And, behold,

³⁰ Kittelson, 80.

³¹ Brecht, 73-74; Kittelson, 54.

I had a most pleasant surprise ... so that the word “repentance” which had been the most bitter term in the whole Bible to me, although with great zeal I pretended even before God and tried to exert myself to a feigned and forced love ... now became to me the most sweet and pleasant-sounding word of all. For thus the commands of God become sweet when we understand that they are to be read not only in books, but in the wounds of the sweetest Savior. Afterwards it happened that studying learned men, who render great service in teaching us Greek and Hebrew, I discovered that the original meaning of this Greek word *metanoia* ... is coming to one's right mind again.... Next I saw, as I made progress, that *metanoia* ... can ... signify a change of mind and affection, indicating, it seems, not only the fact, but also the method of the change, that is, the grace of God.... Clinging fast to this conclusion, I took courage to think that they were wrong who attributed so much to the works of penance that almost nothing was left of repentance except stiff satisfactions and a most laborious confession. They were led astray by the Latin word “*poenitentiam agere*,” which sounds as if it referred to an action rather than to a change of mind and in no wise does justice to the Greek *metanoiein*.³²

Staupitz helped Luther see that his salvation did not depend on a perfect state of heart in confession. Staupitz taught as follows. We are incapable of “perfect” repentance. All that is in us is deficient. But God is satisfied even with imperfect repentance as long as it is sincere. True penitence or contrition flows out of love for God and righteousness. Such love does not originate in man's efforts; rather, it is the work of God in the heart. God first reveals His love and the sufferings and death of Christ, and this kindles a reciprocal love in the human heart, so that man begins to love the will of God and to hate sin. Thus is created in him true repentance. Conviction of sin and the resultant anguish of self-accusation is the work of God, not an accomplishment of man. Only the law of God and the revelation of His love in Christ can bring it about in the human heart. The sinner's concern should not be in examining his own heart to find a worthy contrition to qualify him for divine grace; rather, being burdened with his sins, he should pay attention to the divine promise of pardon pronounced to him in absolution, firmly believing that in this assurance of forgiveness he has the pardon of God.

³² Saarnivaara, 19–20.

The merits of Christ “cover” also the lack and weakness of contrition. And finally, a complete enumeration of sins is not necessary in penance. One should only confess actual sins against the Ten Commandments, those sins which one knows and which burden the conscience. The significant importance of penance lies not in the confession, but in the absolution, through which God forgives sins.³³

Staupitz would give similar advice later when Luther experienced feelings of *Anfechtungen* related to the question of whether or not he was among the elect. Again, Staupitz’ advice was to look to Christ, or, more precisely, to the wounds of the suffering Christ, and in that contemplation the dispute over election would fade away. Luther should devote himself to Christ, not to God the Father in His unfathomability.³⁴ “Doctor Staupitz said to me, when one desires to discuss predestination, it is better not to think of it, but to start with the wounds of Christ and to set Christ carefully before the mind’s eye. That takes care of predestination—God foresaw the suffering of His Son for sinners. He who believes in Him is predestined, he who does not believe is not.” Commenting on his doubts and afflictions over the question of election, Luther later wrote, “If Dr. Staupitz, or rather, God through Dr. Staupitz, had not helped me out of it, I would have succumbed therein and been in hell long ago.”³⁵

Thus, Johann Staupitz was a major factor in pointing Luther simply to trust in Christ for forgiveness and salvation. We should trust in Christ as the one God permitted to suffer for our sins, not as the threatening Judge but as the loving Savior. This is why Luther would later write in a 1523 letter to Staupitz that through him he had come to know the gospel of grace in a personal way: “We ought not to forget you and be ungrateful to you, through whom the light of the Gospel began to shine the first time from darkness into our heart.” Another time he said that Staupitz had “started the doctrine” by pointing them to the incarnate Son of God.³⁶

An important part of Luther’s development was the reading of the Bible. When Staupitz became Vicar General of the Augustinian monastery, he introduced a new code of statutes, one of which was an assiduous program and Bible reading:

³³ Ibid., 24–29.

³⁴ Brecht, 81.

³⁵ Saarnivaara, 20, 21.

³⁶ Ibid., 21–22.

He saw to it that every monk upon reception into the monastery received a Bible of his own—to make it distinctive, it was bound in red. Before long it was spoken of as the “Red Bible of the Augustinians.” We know, of course that Bible reading was no new experience for Luther. He had been doing piecemeal reading of the Bible ever since his early school days all the way through Mansfeld, Magdeburg, Eisenach, and even Erfurt. But now he did it so eagerly and learned it so devoutly that he knew large portions of his Red Bible by heart. This was, to be sure, in the Latin text.³⁷

Luther's “piecemeal” reading of the Bible prior to the monastery should be emphasized. In those days, the Bible itself was not in the hands of the common people. Bibles were expensive, and they were usually found only in libraries or in the homes of priests and wealthy people. During his youth, Luther had come into contact with biblical texts through the liturgy and lessons of the worship services, all of which were in Latin. Already at a young age, he learned Latin while in school at Mansfeld (1492–1497), and by the time he finished sixth grade, he knew most of the Mass well and could speak and write in Latin with ease. Further study increased his understanding of religious music, ancient literature, history, and those parts of the Bible that were used in the church services.³⁸ Through his teenage years, while at schools in Magdeburg and Eisenach (1497–1501), he had opportunity to read postils (books of sermons) that contained Scripture passages. Yet, the first time he actually saw a complete Bible appears to be as an adult, during his time at the University of Erfurt (1501–1505):

Luther claims that he had never seen a Bible even at the age of twenty, when he came across one in the Erfurt university library—he was then a master—and read for the first time the story of Samuel. Until then he had believed that the only texts in the Bible were those which also appeared in the postils. Whether at that time Luther already possessed a postil or knew it only from the lessons read in the bursa cannot be determined. Another statement puts the young master's Bible reading in the

³⁷ Scharf, 23–24.

³⁸ Frederick Nohl, *Martin Luther: Hero of Faith* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 5–6.

first half of the year 1505, connecting it to his *Anfechtungen* at that time.³⁹

As a monk, in his times of temptation and despair, Luther would turn to reading the Bible, seeking comfort. Yet, much of the Scripture was read through the Scholastic teachers, leaving him unsatisfied and unsettled:

What I would have given, if anyone (had freed) me from the mass and the terror of conscience, and (would have opened) to me the understanding of one Psalm, of one chapter of the Gospel! I would have crawled on my knees to St. James (in Compostella in Spain).⁴⁰

The more Luther studied the church fathers, the less they satisfied him. The more he studied the Bible, the more he believed that it alone had the final answers to life's problems. Yet, it would still be several years before Luther's "tower experience"—his understanding from Scripture alone the doctrine of God's justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith alone in Christ. As Luther would later comment:

I did not learn my theology at once, but had to seek ever deeper and deeper after it. That is where my spiritual distress led me; for one can never understand the Holy Scriptures without experience and tribulations.... If we do not have such a Devil, we are nothing but *speculativi Theologi*, who handle their thoughts badly and speculate about everything with their reason, that it must be like this and like that; just like the way of the monks and monasteries.⁴¹

III. Luther's Development as a Doctor of Theology at Wittenberg

Staupitz had long noted Luther's spiritual sincerity and intellectual ability. He thought to put it to good use:

Staupitz then cast about for some effective cure for this tormented spirit. He recognized in him a man of moral earnestness, religious sensitivity, and unusual gifts. Why his difficulties should be so enormous and so persistent was baffling. Plainly

³⁹ Brecht, 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴¹ Oberman, 185.

argument and consolation did no good. Some other way must be found. One day under the pear tree in the garden of the Augustinian cloister—Luther always treasured that pear tree—the vicar informed Brother Martin that he should study for his doctor's degree, that he should undertake preaching and assume the chair of Bible at the university. Luther gasped, stammered out fifteen reasons why he could do nothing of the sort. The sum of it all was that so much work would kill him.... A young man on the verge of a nervous collapse over religious problems was to be commissioned as a teacher, preacher, and counselor to sick souls. Staupitz was practically saying, "Physician, cure thyself by curing others." He must have felt that Luther was fundamentally sound and that if he was entrusted with the cure of souls he would be disposed for their sakes to turn from threats to promises, and some of the grace which he would claim for them might fall also to himself.⁴²

When Luther began his work as a doctor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, there was still quite a bit of inconsistency and unrest in his understanding of Scripture and the doctrine of justification. His struggle with that single word in Romans 1:17 belonged to this period of development as a professor from 1512–1518: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed.... For I hated that word 'righteousness of God.'"

Staupitz had started the doctrine and the light of the gospel had began to shine. Through further study of Scripture, Luther would gradually leave behind the many errors of the Roman Church. Yet he had not yet received the full light on the doctrine of justification.

This statement of Luther concerning the "one little word" which barred his way indicates that prior to his tower experience there were conflicting elements in his faith and theology. On the one hand, he believed in Christ as his Savior; he knew God as the Father who loved sinners and sent His Son to suffer and die for their salvation; he believed in the forgiveness of sins in Christ and His redemptive blood, as it was proclaimed in the Gospel and personally applied in the absolution. On the other hand, there was this "little word," "the righteousness of God," which troubled him, because he understood it as an expression of the retributory justice of God. This conception was concealed in

⁴² Bainton, 59–60.

the Augustinian-Catholic doctrine of justification, according to which man must become righteous and sinless in the whole of his life and being in order to be able to stand in the judgment of Christ.⁴³

As an Augustinian, Luther was largely influenced by the teachings of Augustine, including the following: in the fall into sin, man's nature was so corrupted that he no longer sought his good in God. He had no freedom of will in spiritual matters, but his spirit was in bondage to his flesh. The law of God demanded willing obedience, but man was not able to fulfill this. The law revealed to him his weakness, sinfulness, and the sickness of his will. But when such a man heard the good news of the grace of God, a hunger and thirst for salvation was created in him. He began to pray for pardon and the renewing grace which would enable him to love God and his neighbor. God bestowed this grace through Baptism, and those who had fallen from baptismal grace were restored through repentance. In this way, man had his ailing nature and will cured and was enabled to seek his good in God and obey His commandments. The Holy Spirit aided the human will in the pursuit of righteousness, writing the law in his heart, inspiring him more and more to love God and what is good.⁴⁴

Augustine had stated in his writing, *On the Spirit and the Letter*:

“Being justified freely by His grace.” It is not, therefore, by the Law or by their own will that they are justified; but they are justified freely by God's grace—not that the justification takes place without our will; but our will is shown to be weak by the Law that grace may heal its infirmity, and thus healed, it may fulfill the Law.⁴⁵

The principal work of the grace of God, therefore, was to heal the nature of fallen man. Justification was seen as a gradual process of healing of human nature. Saarnivaara comments:

The words “divine aid makes possible for us the achievement of righteousness” implies that righteousness is not something that is received complete, but rather a gradual process of becoming righteous in which the renewed will of man co-operates with the grace of God. Man must constantly long and pray for

⁴³ Saarnivaara, 106.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3–4.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.

righteousness or justification, that God may give him greater power to turn away from the world and to fulfill the Law in love and obedience.⁴⁶

According to this understanding, while the believer is in the process of being purified and made righteous, God forgives the sins remaining in him, not imputing them as guilt. The fact that justification continued to be throughout this life in its initial stages meant that forgiveness of sins must constitute the greater portion of the salvation of man.⁴⁷ Yet, so much depended on his own efforts before the righteous God.

Thus there were actually two conceptions of salvation simultaneously striving for superiority in the soul of Luther: (1) a personal faith in the grace and forgiveness of God in Christ; (2) the view that God requires perfect obedience of heart and life of those who are to be saved. This latter conception, even in its Augustinian form, destroyed to an extent the peace and confidence he had found through the help of Staupitz.⁴⁸

When Luther began as a professor at Wittenberg in 1512, he was still influenced by these ideas. When it came to becoming righteousness, Luther was still under the spell of the teaching of the day: God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them. Do what is within you, and salvation will follow! There is evidence that Luther still agreed with one of the central theological ideas he had been taught: the idea of the *synteresis*. In two early sermons of 1510 and 1512, he insisted that everyone had that spark of goodness with the natural God-given inclination to seek God in His glory. Human beings had within them both a yearning for God and the guide for how to reach Him. It was only human weakness that made the task impossible, if unaided. Luther still saw the solution to be found in confession, penance, and the Mass.⁴⁹

We learn much about Luther's developing understanding of the righteousness of God and justification through notes preserved from his lectures at the university.

Nothing remains of his presumed lectures on Genesis during his first year as a professor. But then the track becomes clear. There are highly revealing notes for the lectures that followed

⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 106–107.

⁴⁹ Kittelson, 79.

on the Psalms (1513–1515), Romans (1515–1516), Galatians (1516–1517), Hebrews (1517–1518), and once again on the Psalms (1518–1521).⁵⁰

Lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515)

In Luther's lectures on the Psalms, he held to the exegetical rules of his day, seeking a fourfold meaning in the text (*Quadrigena*): 1) Literal (historical), 2) Allegorical (figurative), 3) Tropological (moral), and 4) Anagogical (eschatological).

Precisely in the Psalms the literal sense was identified with the christological, for it was assumed that the Psalms were actually spoken by David in the person of Christ. The tropological sense presented the significance of the text for mankind, primarily its moral aspects. The allegorical sense related the text to the church, and the anagogical focused on the significance for the last times.⁵¹

When it came to the doctrine of justification, the tropological sense of Scripture was most important. According to it, scriptural statements about Christ pertain also to those who are His own. As Christ humbled Himself and entered glory through shame, suffering, and death, His own also must walk in the footsteps of their master. Christ becomes the pattern of the way of salvation. God justifies man by curing and cleansing him of sin. This He accomplishes through humility, mortification of the flesh, and resurrection to new life.⁵²

Therefore, when it came to man's quest to attain the righteousness of God, one of the key focuses in Luther's lectures on the Psalms was that of humility and mortification of the flesh. In many sessions of these first lectures, Luther argued that absolute humility was a necessary precondition to saving grace. Kittelson remarks:

It was "judgment of the self," he said, that brought the human mind into harmony with God. At one point he declared, "Humility itself is judgment." Later he said, "[A]nd this is judgment ... that is, to accuse and to judge oneself." However much faith might be necessary to salvation, Luther still put the traditional virtue of humility first. "No one is justified by faith

⁵⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁵¹ Brecht, 89.

⁵² Saarnivaara, 61–62.

unless first through humility he confesses himself to be unjust.” At another point he insisted that “your true righteousness is humility and the confession of sin, the accusation of yourself.” He could even write, “Humility alone saves.”⁵³

By humbly confessing one's sinfulness, accusing and condemning oneself, man honored and “justified” God, admitting that the divine judgment in His Word is just. In so doing, man was at one with God, thinking and saying of himself the same as God said of him. Such a man was justified by God, who raised him to a new spiritual life. In light of Psalm 51:6 Luther said, “For it is impossible that he who confesses his sin would not be righteous, since he tells the truth.... But it is evident that sins will not be remitted to those who do not accuse themselves; neither are they raised again nor justified.”⁵⁴

In his lecture on the Psalms, Luther struggled with “the righteousness of God,” in its retributive meaning. In one place he wrote, “Justice ... recompenses to each his due ... [while] equity distinguishes between merits, justice rewards. God judges the earth with equity (because He is the same to all, willing that all should be saved). He judges with righteousness, because He gives each one his deserved reward.” When it came to the words in Psalm 31, “Deliver me in Your righteousness,” Luther's reaction was similar to that found in Augustine's commentary: “Not in mine, which is nothing.”⁵⁵

While interpreting Psalm 71, “Deliver me in Your righteousness,” Luther's discussion of “the righteousness of God” added something new to the retributive sense. It included the meaning of the righteousness of God as something He gave to man in the process of justification. Here Luther explained to his students, “[T]his is what is called the judgment of God: like the righteousness or strength or wisdom of God, is that with which we are wise, just, and humble, or by which we are judged.” In light of this explanation, Kittelson observes:

Something revolutionary was happening. He had told them that the righteousness of God had two different meanings, but he had only been taught the second one: God's righteousness was God's possession and the quality by which he found sinners wanting. But Luther's first and longer explanation was powerfully opposed to this traditional teaching. There he spoke

⁵³ Kittelson, 90.

⁵⁴ Saarnivaara, 62, 63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

of God's righteousness as a quality *God gave to believers* and by which he made them acceptable in his presence. This was a radically new explanation, but for the moment Luther uttered it in the same breath as the older view that he had been taught as a student.⁵⁶

Yet through his lectures on the Psalms, Luther continued to follow Augustine in describing justification as a process of renewal or making righteous, stating:

We are always sinning, we are always impure ... wherefore we who are righteous are constantly on the move, always being justified.... The starting point is sin, from which we must constantly depart. The goal is righteousness, toward which we must move unceasingly.⁵⁷

Given his understanding of justification as a process of being made righteous, including the cooperation of man, Luther was not yet able rightly to distinguish the law from the gospel. He stated in his lectures, "Spiritually understood, the Law and the Gospel are the same." The Old Testament law commanded but did not give power for its fulfillment; the New Testament law—that is, the gospel—created a new will and power, making it possible for man willingly to observe the law of God. Luther saw the gospel as "flowing" out of the law. In this sense, he made no distinction between Moses and Christ "except in regard to time and perfection."⁵⁸

Lectures on Romans (1515–1516)

In the course of Luther's lectures on Romans, we find some new influences in his interpretation of Scripture. In February of 1515, the Greek New Testament was published with annotations by the humanist editor, Erasmus of Rotterdam. Luther would criticize Erasmus' comments, but the original text itself would be very helpful in achieving a literal translation. At this point, Luther turned from preferring the Latin Vulgate to interest in the original text and grammar.⁵⁹

In addition, beginning with the lectures on Romans, the fourfold sense of Scripture recedes more and more, and the recognition grows

⁵⁶ Kittelson, 89.

⁵⁷ Saarnivaara, 66–67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68–69.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 74, 115–116.

that biblical texts have only a single sense, namely the literal, which Luther equates with the spiritual.⁶⁰ Saarnivaara comments on this development:

The formula of the fourfold meaning of Scripture played a significant role in the Augustinian-Catholic interpretation of justification. Therefore, not only did it not help, but it actually hindered Luther in his search for the true meaning of the biblical statements concerning the righteousness of God. Not until after its rejection was it possible to arrive at the new understanding of these statements.⁶¹

Another influence that became important during this period was that of mysticism, particularly through the writings of Johann Tauler. There would be some aspects of mysticism that would be of help in Luther's development, but others he would continue to reject. Back in the monastery, Luther had already felt some influence of mysticism through Staupitz. In his constant struggle with failures in confession and pleasing the righteous God, the mystics turned the focus from outward striving to inward meditation. They taught that the soul had its origin in God, so human beings possessed a part of themselves that was truly divine (a different twist to the *synteresis* spark of goodness the Scholastics assumed in man). Salvation was to be achieved by meditations in the quiet places of the soul, and not so much by outward works such as going to mass or confession. Not only monks, but anyone, could remove themselves from the hustle and bustle of the world around them, and pray, meditate and contemplate the magnificence and purity of God. In this way, their souls would be elevated from earthly things to God, and their souls would find at least a partial peace by returning to their origin in God. The mystics had a term for complete surrender to God: *Gelassenheit*, meaning complete passivity and willing submission to the will of God in all things. Since man is weak, let him cease to strive; let him surrender himself to the being and the love of God. However, in Luther's struggles to rise up to the expectations of a righteous God, and the resulting *Anfechtungen* feelings of despair, he had not been comforted by this advice: "Love God? I hated him!"⁶²

But the aspect of mysticism that Luther did find helpful, particularly in his lectures on Romans, was related to his understanding that

⁶⁰ Brecht, 89.

⁶¹ Saarnivaara, 115.

⁶² Kittelson, 76; Saarnivaara, 75; Bainton, 56–58.

sinful man should completely humble himself before God, confessing his sinfulness so as to justify God's judgment, passively casting oneself upon the grace of God who would make him righteous.

German Mysticism found a strongly sympathetic response in the soul of Luther, because of the fact that it condemned all thoughts of human merit and rewards based on such merit. He was in full agreement with its view that sin is primarily a fault and perversity of the will of man. It is selfishness, love of sin, and repugnance toward the will of God. The teaching of man's complete passivity and utter helplessness in the matter of salvation also appealed to Luther. He found much in the writings of these Mystics that substantiated his emphasis upon humility, self accusation, and self-condemnation. Tauler and the *German Theology* taught with Luther that before man can receive the grace of God and be born again, he must be convicted of his sins and experience anguish and pangs of conscience, fear and even despair. Man can never taste heaven unless he first tastes hell. Here he travels the way of Christ and becomes conformed to Him (*conformitas Christi*). Such afflictions are to be considered, therefore, as signs of divine election, for that is the way in which God prepares His elect for salvation. Man needs to surrender to the will of God in unreserved humility.... The primary reason why Luther admired the works of the Mystics was that his own conception of salvation was still very closely related to theirs. He found that their works confirmed him in his conviction that the way of humility, self-denial, and the cross is the true way that leads to God.⁶³

In Luther's lectures on Romans, there is a move away from some basic assumptions of Scholasticism. Early in his lectures, he still spoke of *synteresis* in the traditional way: "For we are not wholly inclined to evil, because a remnant is left to us which is inclined toward good things, as is evident in the synteresis." But as he progressed through the lessons, this concept disappeared. Scripture changed his concept about human nature so that he could declare against the Scholastic teachers, "And this tiny motion toward God which someone can perform by nature, they dream to be an act of loving God above all things. But look! The whole person is full of selfish desires, this tiny movement notwithstanding." Even when human nature yearned for God and wished to

⁶³ Saarnivaara, 75, 76-77.

be truly good, even this was done in a self-serving way. Luther told his students, "It is said that human nature has a general notion of knowing and willing what is good, but that it goes wrong in particulars. It would be better to say that it knows what is good in particular things but that in general it neither knows nor wills the good." When people hated or behaved badly toward their neighbors, they were not just committing a single sin for which they should seek forgiveness. They were acting in perfect accord with their basically selfish nature. Therefore Luther asked, "Where is 'free will' now... Where are those who would have it that from our own natural strength we can perform an act of love to God above all things?"⁶⁴

Through his study of Romans, Luther saw that human beings were so sunk in sin that they could not even recognize their own condition. They deceived themselves into believing that their works could make them righteous before God. He wrote, "The term 'old Adam' describes what sort of person is born of Adam... The term 'old Adam' is used not only because he performs the works of the flesh but more especially when he acts righteously and practices wisdom and exercises himself in all spiritual works, even to the point of loving and worshiping God himself." Just when they thought they were being most spiritual, human beings sought themselves and their own advantage, seeking to "use God." Therefore, the works of man were completely worthless: "For the judgment of God is infinitely exact. And nothing is done so minutely that it will not be found gross in his sight, nothing so righteous that it will not be found unrighteous, nothing so truthful that it is not found to be a lie, nothing so pure and holy that it is not polluted and profane in his sight."⁶⁵

Here, Luther began to develop a different understanding of humility from that seen in his lectures on the Psalms. He still saw this state of being utterly drained of self worth as being necessary for salvation, but he now understood that it was God Himself who graciously taught and provided humility: "The whole task of the apostle and his Lord is to humble the proud and bring them to a realization of this condition, to teach them that they need grace, to destroy their own righteousness, so that in humility they will seek Christ and confess that they are sinners, and thus receive grace and be saved."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Kittelson, 91–92.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

The book of Romans taught Luther a new understanding of the law. Earlier, he had found the law within the gospel, with the Holy Spirit writing the law in the heart to empower the sinner to works of righteousness. But now he realized that the purpose of the law was to reveal one's sin and unrighteousness and drive him to Christ alone. The law, like a hammer, smashed human pride and made room for God's love; then, faith simply trusted God's promises. Thus when God was most terrifying and most righteous, He was in fact most gracious, drawing the sinner to trust Christ alone for righteousness.⁶⁷

Where was the release from accusations of God's Law and conscience? Now Luther answered, "Nowhere save from Christ and in Christ. For if some complaint should be registered against a heart that believes in Christ, and testify against it concerning some evil deed, then the heart turns itself away, and turns to Christ, and says, 'But he made satisfaction. He is the righteous one, and this is my defense. He died for me, he made his righteousness mine and made my sin his own; and if he made my sin his own, then I do not have it, and I am free.'"⁶⁸

Through direct study of Scripture, Luther was turning medieval theology and religious practice on its head. The monastic life of poverty and asceticism, the personal life of self-denial, the mystical life of spiritual exercises and other worldliness—all of these availed nothing. Only the gospel revealed salvation.⁶⁹ Luther wrote:

Now, righteousness and unrighteousness are understood in the Scriptures very differently from the way in which the philosophers and the lawyers interpret them ... for they assert it to be a quality of the soul, but in the Scriptures righteousness depends more on the imputation of God than on the essence of the thing itself. It is not he who possesses a certain quality who possesses righteousness; rather, this one is altogether a sinner and unrighteous; but he has righteousness to whom God mercifully imputes it and wills to regard as righteous before him on account of his confessing his unrighteousness and his imploring of God's righteousness. Thus we are all born and die in iniquity,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 93–95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

that is, unrighteousness. We are just solely by what the merciful God imputes to us through faith in his Word.⁷⁰

In his lectures on Romans 3:20, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (NKJV), in his marginal notes Luther interpreted the righteousness of God as he would describe in 1545: as a liberating discovery. As a sinner, man could achieve nothing before God but could be justified by grace alone, a grace that could be obtained by faith alone in the word of Christ. Yet Oberman points out:

The voice of the now “Reformation” exegete still sounds unpracticed, and a series of discoveries still remain to be made. The experience of inner contrition, what Luther called “plowing oneself,” was still the precondition for justification by faith. Not until the beginning of 1518 would faith be understood as such great trust that the Christian as confessant could and should rely totally on the word of absolution. Henceforth he was encouraged to disregard his inner state; the last precondition had been eliminated.⁷¹

Saarnivaara points out that in his lectures on Romans Luther's basic understanding of justification yet remained Augustinian—as a process of being made righteous, a process of healing by the grace of God. He quotes Luther:

Our Samaritan, Christ, takes a sick man, who is practically dead, into the inn to heal him. He has already begun to make him well, promising perfect health in eternal life and not imputing sin, that is, concupiscence, for death. Meanwhile He prohibits, in the hope of health that is promised, such doing and omitting of things as hinder that cure and increase sin, that is, the evil lust.⁷²

Thus one is “simultaneously sick and well,” or “simultaneously sinful and righteous.” But he is counted righteous only in view of the process begun by God in making him well. Luther said:

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁷¹ Oberman, 164.

⁷² Saarnivaara, 79.

No saint considers himself, or professes to be, righteous, but constantly longs and waits for justification. On this account they are imputed righteous by God, who looks upon those who are humble. Thus Christ is the King of the Jews, that is, of those who confess that they remain continually in sin. Nevertheless, they possess in their hearts a desire for justification, and they abhor their sins. Therefore God is wonderful in His saints, for He reckons righteous those who acknowledge that they are sinners and experience sorrow on that account; but he condemns those who regard themselves as righteous.⁷³

Luther speaks of the non-imputation of sins for Christ's sake: "The saints are sinners at the same time that they are righteous. They are righteous because they believe in Christ, whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them." Yet Saarnivaara comments:

Here Luther speaks of the non-imputation of sins for the sake of Christ. However, justification does not mean the imputation of the fulfillment of the Law accomplished by Christ or of His righteousness. The manner of expression here is typically Augustinian. Christ covers the remaining sins. The real healing or renewal which has begun is, at least in part, the basis of the non-imputation. God reckons man healthy and well, because He has started to make him such and has given the sure promise that He will bring it to perfection.⁷⁴

Thus, Luther's idea of justification is not yet that of his mature understanding following his "tower discovery." It is not completely an alien righteousness, the righteousness imputed by God to the sinner because of the perfect obedience of Christ under the law, together with His perfect satisfaction for sin on the cross. For Luther at this point, justification still has to do with something in himself:

In 1515–16, at the time of his lectures on Romans, he believes that a man can know with certainty only the fact of his sinfulness, and can only hope and postulate (*postulare et sperare*) God's imputation. Obviously the reason for this is that in 1515–16 Luther does not know the art of distinguishing aright between the Law and the Gospel. He does not understand that

⁷³ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 81.

the fulfillment of the Law, which is accomplished in faith, is not an element in justification. He still teaches that justification means the fulfillment of the Law in man through grace. As a consequence of this deficient distinction between the Law and the Gospel, Luther's certainty of salvation rests, at least to some extent, upon his progress in justification (sanctification). In practical piety his own humility, endeavors, prayers, and conduct enter in as partial condition for his acceptability before God. Therefore he is never able to feel quite safe and secure in the grace of God, inasmuch as he is unable to put his full reliance upon the "alien" righteousness of Christ.⁷⁵

IV. Luther's Understanding of Justification in 1517–1518

But from this point, Luther's understanding developed quickly, through study of Scripture alone. Brecht comments:

Luther's theology of 1516 unmistakably shows important reformatory elements, chiefly in its emphasis upon the salvation which is given from without. But in its stubborn orientation toward the attitude of humility it is still obscure. The reason, therefore, why Luther research still disputes whether or not the Luther of the lectures on Romans was already a reformer lies in the ambiguity of the subject itself. He was, and yet he was not yet. But in the following lectures on Galatians Luther's way of speaking is already much freer. There he is no longer oriented so much toward one's own righteousness. On the basis of the epistle text, humility takes a backseat to freedom.⁷⁶

The lectures on Galatians took place from 1516–1517. He then continued with lectures on the epistle to the Hebrews from 1517–1518. Here Brecht comments:

They reveal that he had advanced considerably beyond the lectures on Romans. The text of the Hebrews lectures suggest that what was increasingly prominent in Luther's field of vision was the doctrine of Christ and his redemption, no longer only the humble attitude of man.... It is not works of the law which make a person pure, but faith, which relies on Christ. Christ is

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷⁶ Brecht, 136–137.

now the one who with his death has overcome the terrors of death for us, has freed us from the fear of death, and thus has manifested the power of faith. Now comes the joyous exchange and substitution of Christ's righteousness for my unrighteousness. Christ is the mediating priest for us, to whom we flee from judgment.... Everything depends on faith, for faith perceives the word of forgiveness.... Faith believes the forgiveness through the blood of Christ; as with all the heavenly goods, it can be received in no other way.⁷⁷

In the course of his lectures on Hebrews, Luther pounded the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Even at the time of this iconic act associated with the beginning of the Reformation, Luther's theology was still in development. The main concern for Luther in these theses was the proper place of indulgences in the life of the Christian, and the concern that the selling of indulgences was leading Christians away from true repentance and genuine good works.

As discussed earlier, indulgences had long been a part of the doctrine of the church. Baptism was said to wash away penalties for original sin, but after that Christians still had to "do what was in them" to be saved. This included the sacrament of Penance, confessing one's sins and doing works of satisfaction, whereby one could begin to purge away the stain of sins and reduce punishments expected in Purgatory. It was taught that the Pope was able to dispense the supermerits of the saints to the penitent, indulging sins at least in part before death so that they need not be paid for in Purgatory. But from time to time, the Pope would offer a plenary indulgence, promising that all sins committed since Baptism were wiped away. Such indulgence could be purchased by the living in behalf of the dead.

At this time, Pope Leo X was seeking a way to fund the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. In order to raise a large amount of money, his solution was to issue a plenary indulgence. A preacher named Johann Tetzel was sent into Germany to raise cash for Rome. When he came to Wittenberg, he was heard crying:

Do you not hear the voices of your dead relatives and others, crying out to you and saying, "Pity us, pity us, for we are in dire punishment and torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance"?... Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and immortal soul safely and securely into the homeland of paradise?

Then, producing a money chest and a supply of blank indulgences, Tetzel exhorted his listeners, "Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!"⁷⁸

At this time, Luther still considered indulgences gifts which were obtained through the merits of Christ and the saints. Therefore, they should be received with all reverence. But he saw that they had become purely a scheme for making money; the indulgence agents only demanded that people pay, neglecting teaching on repentance. So people were led to believe that they had complete remission of sins and the kingdom of heaven, while neglecting genuine repentance.⁷⁹ The first of Luther's 95 Theses declared, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent!' (Matt. 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."⁸⁰ Repentance was not merely something consisting of sacramental confession and satisfaction, or payments of money. Inner repentance was the ongoing, lifelong change of heart producing mortification of the flesh.

But as Staupitz had impressed on his student, true repentance is love, a response to the love of God, and not fear of Hell. And true repentance leads through temptation, death, and Hell, for it is the path in imitation of Christ, which no one may spend money to evade. *Penance* is a misleading word, for genuine repentance is not imposed; it is granted as a gift.⁸¹

Without true repentance there were no indulgences (Theses 35–36). But with true repentance, "Every true Christian participates in the treasures of the Church, even without letters of indulgence" (Thesis 37). And "this treasure is the Gospel of the glory and grace of God" (Thesis 62).⁸²

Yet at this point Brecht comments:

When Luther became involved in the indulgence controversy he was not yet "evangelical." According to his understanding at that time, a person had to accept with humility the way he

⁷⁸ Kittelson, 103–104.

⁷⁹ Brecht, 188–189.

⁸⁰ Oberman, 190.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 190–191.

always appeared before God, namely as a sinner... Because he saw in indulgences an attempt to effortlessly avoid guilt and its punishment, he therefore had raised his voice. The attack on indulgences was undertaken, therefore, on the basis of a strict late medieval theology and piety. In his later lengthy, significant reminiscence, Luther expressly reported that he had been a monk and a fanatic papist when he began the matter, so drunk and drowned by the teachings of the pope that he would not have said anything against him. He expressly apologizes for the many concessions to the Pope which are still found in his early writings (from 1517 to 1519).⁸³

But his understanding was developing quickly. About the time Luther was finishing his lectures on Hebrews, he participated in the Heidelberg Disputation. The German Augustinians held a convention in Heidelberg in April 1518, for which Luther drew up a number of theses. His primary focus was to destroy all forms of human righteousness and reliance on works, and to point to salvation as a gift of God's grace alone. Included in his theses were these:

13. "Free will" after the fall is nothing but a word, and so long as it does what is within it, it is committing deadly sin.

16. Anyone who thinks he would attain righteousness by doing what is in him is adding sin to sin, so that he becomes doubly guilty.⁸⁴

Near the end of the disputation, Luther clearly distinguished between law and gospel: "The law says, 'Do this!' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this man!' and immediately everything is done."⁸⁵ The Heidelberg Disputation was a clear attack on Scholasticism. On his way home, he wrote to one of his former professors "that it will be impossible to reform the church unless the canon law, the decretals, scholastic theology, philosophy, and logic, as they now exist, are absolutely eradicated and other studies instituted."⁸⁶

The next month, in May of 1518, Luther completed his *Resolutions Concerning the 95 Theses*. Here he included his letter of dedication to Staupitz, who had helped him come to a scriptural understanding of

⁸³ Brecht, 221–222.

⁸⁴ Kittelson, 111–112.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

repentance: not as mere outward deeds, “doing penance,” but as an inner change of heart and mind. He critiqued the system of confession, penance, and outward works. When it came to the absolution pronounced by a priest, he stated, “Christ did not intend [by the power of the keys] to put the salvation of people into the hands or at the discretion of an individual.” A person was not to depend upon the power of a man to absolve, not even the Pope; instead, everything depended “believing only in the truth of Christ’s promise.”⁸⁷

Oberman comments on Luther’s development by early 1518:

Two of the three principles of the Reformation have now been combined: “unmerited grace” and “pure Scripture,” *sola gratia* and *sola scriptura*.... [B]efore Easter of 1518, Luther adds a third Reformation principle: *sola fide*, God demands and wants faith alone. There is no specific level of contrition necessary to obtain the forgiveness of sins. Trust in the divine Word. “Your sins are forgiven” is what counts before God—“*cum sola fides iustificet*.”⁸⁸

In September of 1518, at the Diet of Augsburg, Cardinal Cajetan demanded that Luther recant his teachings on three points: the treasury of merits, the necessity of faith for justification and sacramental grace, and the sufficiency of papal authority for the preaching of indulgences.⁸⁹ Luther had challenged the practice of indulgences and the treasury of merits. He had insisted that faith alone justified sinners. But one of the biggest developments in the Diet was Luther’s public statement about the authority of Scripture over the Pope:

The cardinal reminded Luther that Scripture has itself to be interpreted. The pope is the interpreter. The pope is above a council, above Scripture, above everything in the Church. “His Holiness abuses Scripture,” retorted Luther. “I deny that he is above Scripture.” The cardinal flared up and bellowed that Luther should leave and never come back unless he was ready to say, “*Revoco*”—“I recant.”⁹⁰

But Luther could not; for he was bound by Scripture alone. Cajetan met with Staupitz, urging him somehow to get Luther to recant, but this

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 113; Brecht, 224.

⁸⁸ Oberman, 192.

⁸⁹ Kittelson, 122–123.

⁹⁰ Bainton, 96.

was not possible. It was at this point that Luther's longtime mentor and friend released him from his monastic vow. Kittelson remarks, "So that he would not be hindered if he were forced to flee for his life, Staupitz secretly released him from his vows of obedience as an Augustinian monk."⁹¹

Yet by now, the unfettered friar was finding his true freedom in a scriptural understanding of the doctrine of justification, by grace alone through faith alone in Christ. It would find full and mature expression in his writings by the end of 1518. Toward the end of the year, Luther published a "Sermon on the Threefold Righteousness." The first of these he identifies as sin and righteousness of Old Testament civil law, not Christian righteousness. Then he went on to say:

The second sin is essential, inborn, original, alien, of which Psalm 51 says: "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." The righteousness that corresponds to this is in a similar manner inborn, essential, original, alien—which is the righteousness of Christ.... The Apostle says in Romans 5 that Adam is a figure of Him that was to come, namely, as Adam made all who were born of him guilty by the one sin, his own sin, which to them is an alien sin and gave them what he had, in the same manner Christ makes righteous and saves by His own righteousness all who are born of Him. To them it is alien and unmerited, in order that as we are condemned on account of an alien sin, so we may also be saved by an alien righteousness.

The third is actual sin, which is the fruit of original sin. These are the sins proper, namely, all the works we do, even the works of righteousness which we accomplish prior to faith.... The righteousness that corresponds to this is the actual righteousness, flowing out of faith and the essential righteousness.... Therefore, whether you sin or not, rely always upon Christ and that essential righteousness.... And so the works of such faith are most acceptable, even though in regard to you and in themselves they may be most unworthy.⁹²

⁹¹ Kittelson, 125; Bainton adds: "He may have wished to relieve the Augustinians of the onus, or he may have sought to unfetter the friar, but Luther felt that he had been disclaimed. 'I was excommunicated three times,' he said later, 'first by Staupitz, secondly by the pope, and thirdly by the emperor'" (96).

⁹² Saarnivaara, 92–93.

Shortly after that sermon, Luther published another on the same subject: "Sermon on the Twofold Righteousness." This contains an even clearer expression of his new insight:

The righteousness of Christians is twofold, even as the sin of men is twofold. The first is the alien one.... By it Christ is righteous and justifies us by faith, 1 Corinthians 1: "Who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." ... This righteousness is bestowed upon men in Baptism and every time they truly repent, so that man may confidently glory in Christ and say: All that Christ has accomplished by His work and Word, all the blessings of His suffering and death are mine, as if I had done it all, lived, acted, spoken, suffered, and died.... Thus through faith in Christ the righteousness of Christ becomes our righteousness, and so all that He has, even He Himself, becomes ours. Therefore the apostle calls it the righteousness of God, Romans 1: "The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel, as it is written: The righteous shall live by faith." This is an infinite righteousness, and it swallows up all sins in a moment ... because it is impossible that sin should inhere in Christ. On the contrary, he who believes in Christ cleaves to Christ and is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as He has.⁹³

Luther then identifies "the second righteousness" in terms of the life of sanctification, which follows justification, and in which

we cooperate with that first and alien righteousness. This is that good conduct in good works, first in the mortification of the flesh and the crucifixion of evil lusts ... secondly, also, in love toward our neighbor, and, thirdly, in humility and fear toward God.... This righteousness is the work of the first righteousness, its fruit and effect.⁹⁴

Luther's study room was located on the third floor off the cloaca tower. Late in 1518, having finished his university lectures on Hebrews, he prepared for his second lectures on the Psalms, to which he would bring his new insights. It is at this point that we can place his "tower experience"—his discovery of the gospel and the righteousness of God

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 95–96.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

in Romans 1:17. We base this on Luther's words later in his 1545 Preface,⁹⁵ where he recounts his spiritual conflict and resolution in the true gospel:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies

⁹⁵ "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings."

us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God's righteousness with which we are justified was taught. Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter. And the work would have grown into a large commentary, if I had not again been compelled to leave the work begun, because Emperor Charles V in the following year convened the diet at Worms.

I relate these things, good reader, so that, if you are a reader of my puny works, you may keep in mind, that, as I said above, I was all alone and one of those who, as Augustine says of himself, have become proficient by writing and teaching. I was not one of those who from nothing suddenly become the topmost, though they are nothing, neither have labored, nor been tempted, nor become experienced, but have with one look at the Scriptures exhausted their entire spirit.⁹⁶

And so we meet Martin Luther, a man whose understanding of the true gospel of justification came by a process of discovery. Through his spiritual struggles as a sinner, he was guided by the grace of God, through His Scripture alone, to trust in Christ alone as his righteousness and redemption. And with Luther we say:

To God alone be the glory! LSQ

⁹⁶ *LW* 34:336.

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Book Reviews and Index

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Book Review: Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction

Biblical Archaeology: A Very Short Introduction. By Eric H. Cline. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 156 pp. \$8.51.

Dr. Cline is Professor of Classics and Anthropology and Director of the GWU Capitol Archaeological Institute in the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences of The George Washington University. He is probably more widely known for his 2014 book *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*, published by Princeton University Press.

Summary of the book

After delineating what he means by “biblical archaeology” in his introduction to the book, Cline divides

his book into two main parts with six chapters each. The first part, “The evolution of the discipline,” traces a history of the development of biblical archaeology through six eras. For the most part these eras are periods of different kinds of social and political stability separated by wars. In each era, Cline names the main personalities and organizations involved in the exploration and recovery of the ancient past in Bible lands. For each of these personalities and organizations Cline highlights their principal contributions in method, theory, and the sites and locations they worked.

In his second part, Cline has five chapters discussing selected findings of archaeology as they relate to the biblical text. For each of these he summarizes both their implications and some main issues surrounding the interpretation of these finds. The final chapter is a brief discussion on the impact of forged antiquities on the field of archaeology as it relates to the

Bible. Cline closes with an epilogue briefly highlighting a few new and promising directions in archaeology.

The little volume includes a listing of references for each chapter, a short list of recommended readings on topics in biblical archaeology, and an index.

Evaluation

Cline defines biblical archaeology in terms of William Devers' geographical classification of *Syro-Palestinian Archaeology*. Biblical archaeology is a subset which "sheds light on the stories, descriptions, and discussions in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament from the early second millennium BCE ... through the Roman period in the early first millennium CE" (1). The task of archaeology is not "either to prove or disprove elements of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament." The goal of archaeology is to "reconstruct the culture and history" of the regions mentioned in the Bible that may "bring [the texts] to life." There is significantly greater emphasis in biblical archaeology on the Hebrew Bible over the New Testament simply due to the fact that the time span is so much greater and the area so much wider than the period of the New Testament and the geographical locations covered in it.

For Cline the Bible "is a source that can be used—with caution—to shed light on the ancient world" in the same way that archaeologists "use Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions covering the same time period.... What is not always known in advance, however,

is the accuracy of the accounts either in the Bible or in the Egyptian, Neo-Assyrian, or Neo-Babylonian inscriptions." But "[i]t is in the question of the historical accuracy of the texts where the interests of professional biblical archaeologists and the educated public overlap."

Cline then, does not view the Bible as history. He views it as a text that may have some historical value but which has to be evaluated on the basis of the results of archaeology. In Cline's view, professional archaeologists are no longer interested in proving aspects of the Bible or in filling out the background of the events of the Bible. Professional archaeologists "have generally moved on to more anthropologically oriented topics."

The foundational assumptions behind biblical archaeology and the guiding questions of the field are based in evolutionary anthropology.

We turn to the first part of the book, "The evolution of the discipline." This section is chronological, covering major developments in archaeology, the individuals associated with those developments, and, where significant, the excavations at which these techniques were developed. World geopolitical issues often intersected with archaeological exploration. Through the first six chapters, Cline also briefly describes how the nature and source of funding for archaeological expeditions changed through these eras.

His starting point is "The nineteenth century: the earliest explorers." Cline begins with Edward Robinson and Eli Smith in 1838 travelling through Palestine trying to identify

biblical sites. This is the first historical and biblical geography of Palestine.

I believe it was an editorial decision point to exclude the 1798–1801 French campaign in Egypt and Syria. Egyptian archaeology is its own field. Oxford's *Very Short Introduction* series discussed the French campaign in at least two previously published introductions.

There are large overlaps between biblical archaeology and Egyptian archaeology both with regard to the development of the discipline of archaeology and with the interpretation of the past where the biblical text includes interactions with Egypt. The French campaign was particularly important with regard to the recovery of the history of writing in the region and the documents which are part of that history. It was during this campaign that Napoleon brought 167 scholars to document the geography and antiquities of Egypt. The French campaign recovered the Rosetta Stone in 1799 which led to the decipherment of Egyptian writing by Champollion in 1822.

Chapter two is titled "Before the Great War: from theology to stratigraphy." Here Cline highlights how biblical archaeology became a professional field with its own formal methods and improved standards. From here to chapter six he highlights the significant changes and improvements in the field. The coverage is quite good for so brief a work.

There are, of course, some significant persons and issues in the history of biblical archaeology which are not included, particularly the formation of Historical Criticism through

J. Wellhausen and the responses to it by scholars and archaeologists such as A. H. Sayce. Sayce was, perhaps, the preeminent voice in the close of the 19th century to formulate the notion that archaeology was a discipline which could independently test the conclusions of biblical criticism (Thomas W. Davis, *A History of Biblical Archaeology*, Ph.D. dissertation, Adv. William Dever, University of Arizona, 1987, 43–54, <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/184053>).

C. S. Fisher is mentioned, but missing is his introduction of the "American Method" over against W. F. Albright. Also missing are G. E. Wright and J. P. Free. Their contributions to biblical archaeology were significant, but their advocacy of the Bible as history may have provided too much complication in covering issues for so short an introduction. Olga Tufnell's contributions are, sadly, not mentioned, particularly given the significance of the discoveries at Lachish and her publication of Volume 2 of the report on Lachish in the wake of J. L. Starkey's murder. Another significant methodological tool not mentioned in this work is the reconstructive studies for ceramic typology by H. J. Franken at Deir 'Allā in Jordan. The list could go on a bit longer.

In order to keep this book fitting within the scheme of being a "Very Short Introduction," there are significant gaps in the history presented. I do not doubt that Cline would like to have been more thorough. But I pointed out these examples to highlight two points:

- 1) Much of the debate about the nature of evidence—whether archaeological, epigraphical, or biblical—has been left out. The result is a relatively smooth narrative with significant gaps on issues of import to a wide variety of archaeologists, historians, and biblical scholars. It is a narrative that implies that archaeology is a much more objective or neutral discipline than it actually is. In an ironic way, this demonstrates an inherent problem with archaeology itself, the problem of sample size. I will discuss this briefly at the end of this evaluation.
- 2) While the text is handy, brief, and accessible in what it does cover, an instructor or interested student will need to expand on it significantly to gain a more accurate overview of the history of biblical archaeology.

In chapter six, “The 1990s and beyond: from nihilism to the present,” Cline introduces the debate between biblical minimalism (the Copenhagen School) and biblical maximalism. At this point Cline begins drawing more heavily on interpretive points of ancient inscriptional material involved at the center of the debate on historical issues related to archaeology and the Bible. He had discussed the Mesha Inscription, the Siloam Tunnel Inscription, the Merneptah Stele and the Gezer Calendar briefly in the previous chapters. Cline’s attention to the importance of inscriptional interpretation in this chapter is useful and instructive. This makes the beginning of the next section all the more

puzzling for what he leaves out of the discussion.

The second part is titled “Archaeology and the Bible.” Cline’s final chapter 12, “Fabulous finds or fantastic forgeries,” stands somewhat outside the theme of this section. However, he arranges the chapters leading up to this roughly on a biblical era scheme: Chapter 7—“From Noah and the Flood to Joshua and the Israelites”; Chapter 8—“From David and Solomon to Nebuchadnezzar and the Neo-Babylonians”; Chapter 9—“From the silver Amulet Scrolls to the Dead Sea Scrolls”; Chapter 10—“From Herod the Great to Jesus of Nazareth”; and Chapter 11—“From the Galilee Boat to the Megiddo Prison Mosaic.”

In each of these chapters, Cline discusses a few archaeological issues relevant to each chapter as examples of how archaeology and the Bible relate to each other. In this section, Cline frequently takes issue with the pseudo-archaeological publications which misrepresent the archaeological record. “These expeditions are often supported by prodigious sums of money donated by gullible believers who eagerly accept tales spun by sincere but misguided amateurs or by rapacious confidence men” (71).

This is a very good point to make about archaeology, especially with regard to biblical archaeology. Cline’s main example of the difficulty for finding evidence of biblical events is Sir Leonard Woolley’s publication of the discovery of silt from Noah’s flood. In this context, Cline brings in discussion of Mesopotamian flood stories from cuneiform tablets which

he asserts are the predecessors to the biblical account. But here he fails to bring in the academic discussion from respected Assyriologists with respect to the differences between these accounts. On account of these literary differences a genetic relationship between the Mesopotamian accounts and Genesis is widely rejected by serious Assyriologists (K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 425f.).

Likewise with the Exodus, Cline focuses upon the lack of archaeological evidence while neglecting the inscriptional evidence. Kenneth Kitchen, respected Egyptologist and Assyriologist, and others have been writing about the literary forms of covenants in the Ancient Near East since the 1950s. Cline lists Kitchen's 2003 *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* as a resource reading. It would have been helpful to point out that in that volume Kitchen sums up the literary inscriptional evidence recovered by archaeology which shows the forms of the covenants as literature in the Pentateuch each fit best within the period attributed to each of them by the Bible's dates: not before, not after, and certainly not a millennium after these conventions fell out of use in the Ancient Near East. The notion that a later redactor from the 3rd century B.C. or even as far back as the 7th century B.C. would have the kind of literary knowledge of these treaty forms to represent them with historical accuracy to the period is unreasonable (Kitchen, Chapter 5 on the Exodus and Chapter 6 on the Patriarchs).

Recently Kitchen has published a comprehensive examination of the inscriptional material in Kenneth A. Kitchen and Paul J.N. Lawrence, *Treaty, Law, and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, 3 volumes (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

It would have been good if Cline included at least some of the inscriptional vigilance he demonstrated in chapter 6. A few other examples could be given. But we will turn back to the positive.

Cline's emphasis on the dangers of pseudo-archaeological publications is worth promoting. He lists particular individuals, like Bob Cornuke and his *Bible Archaeology Search and Exploration Institute*, and their expeditions for Noah's Ark; also Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino who worked with filmmaker James Cameron to promote a book on the "Lost Tomb of Jesus," where they made outrageous claims about the Talipot Tomb.

Cline's closing chapter presents some very good considerations about forgeries, what they are, and how they distract and damage actual archaeological, historical, and biblical research. Most of the known forgeries were done for money from collectors. If undiscovered, they poison the well of information about the past with false information. It is difficult enough to interpret the archaeological data without false information. This brings me to a final consideration, as mentioned above.

Particularly absent is a discussion on the issue of sample size. Archaeologists are overwhelmed with

data. There is simply too much for any individual to know. But this data is from the small percentage of sites which have actually been excavated, most of which have been excavated only in small areas. There are a few whole-site excavations. The situation is that we only have a very small fragment of the data available from the past. Our sample size is very, very small. Historians, archaeologists, and anyone else who interpret the past on the basis of the archaeological data are dealing with a very incomplete picture. Additionally, this picture they have is filtered through the lenses of many different presuppositions. This is what makes inscriptions so important.

For example, two years after Cline published this book, an archaeologist and historian named Nadav Na'aman presented a study on the highlands of Judah, the Shephelah, in the period of the Amarna Letters. In his paper, he pointed out that the events, politics, economics, population, and warfare the Amarna Letters describe taking place in this region were totally invisible to archaeology. Archaeologically, these people and events did not exist (Nadav Na'aman, "The Shephelah according to the Amarna Letters," in I. Finkelstein and N. Na'aman (eds.), *The Fire Signals of Lachish. Studies in the Archaeology and History of Israel in the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Persian Period in Honor of David Ussishkin* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 281–299).

In 2013, Oded Lipschits presented a paper to The Oriental Institute in Chicago on *The Myth of the Empty Land and the Myth of the Mass Return*

in which he described the same kind of problem with the archaeology of the Judean countryside during the Babylonian Exile compared with the inscriptional material and the biblical record for the period (Oded Lipschits, "The Myth of the Empty Land and The Myth of the Mass Return: A New Look on the History of Judah under Babylonian and Persian Rule," *The Oriental Institute*, published on July 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ3a9oTt5kk>).

Biblical scholars and others have been pointing out this type of limitation upon archaeology for a very long time. Many of the old claims against the historicity of the Bible—e.g., "The Hittites were not a significant nation in Canaan," "King Belshazzar did not exist," etc.—fell by the wayside as archaeological sites were discovered with inscriptions that recorded these peoples. Before their discovery, they were archaeologically unknown and invisible. Great events like the Battle of Kadesh are missed by archaeology without the texts to enable interpretation.

Cline's introduction has many points to recommend it. There is just too much information to summarize biblical archaeology in such a brief book. Some important things are missed as if they never happened, and the story goes in a direction controlled by the author more than by the available data.

Cline highlighted how modern archaeology enlists all kinds of professional disciplines to interpret the debris of the past. But even with all this help, archaeology itself suffers from too much data to handle, and

that from much too small of a sample size. Perhaps for the foreseeable future, archaeology will continue to spin too large a yarn out of too little thread.

– Joseph C. Abrahamson

LSQ

Book Review: Linguistics & Biblical Exegesis

Linguistics & Biblical Exegesis. Vol. 2, *Lexham Methods Series*. By Douglas Mangum and Josh Westbury, eds. Lexham Press, 2017. 232 pp. \$24.99. ISBN: 9781577997054.

This volume is not designed to teach the reader how to use linguistics in their own analysis. Mangum and Westbury have provided a tool for readers interested in better understanding what biblical scholars are saying about the Bible when those scholars use various types of analysis based in the field of modern linguistics. As such, this volume is not an introduction to linguistics and its use in biblical exegesis. It serves as a topical reader's guide directing the student to other resources for further study. This approach has some costs and some benefits. Each of the chapters and sections are fairly brief and to the point. The authors do not go into extensive discussions or applications of particular linguistic technique.

The arrangement of the chapters builds incrementally in detail. This means that there is some repetition of earlier information. This can serve both to reinforce what was written previously, and this strategy allows

the later chapters to be read without requiring reading of the prior.

The Publisher

Lexham Press is publishing house of Faithlife Corporation that focuses on producing scholarly works in digital format first. They term this “digital-native” publishing. Faithlife chose to make digital-native publishing primary in order to ensure smooth integration of these works with their flagship product, Logos Bible Software. Lexham Press also produces printed editions.

The Lexham Press website states their editorial position: “As an evangelical publisher, all our works are harmonious with the beliefs and traditions of the Christian church as reflected in the Apostles’ Creed and the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association’s Statement of Faith” (http://www.ecpa.org/?page=about_ecpa).

The Series

The purpose of the Lexham Methods Series is to introduce readers to a variety of interpretational models and approaches that have strongly influenced biblical scholarship. The series surveys “broad movements in biblical criticism that have helped define how biblical scholars today approach the text” (ix). The goal of these introductory surveys is to “help illuminate the assumptions and conclusions found in many scholarly commentaries and articles” (ix). Each volume covers distinct fields of research: literary criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism, form criticism, etc. The aim is to give the reader a brief account of the origins,

terminology, methods, personalities, and use of these approaches so the reader is better able to understand these fields of scholarship, their assumptions, and their limitations. The editors state, “Our discussion of a particular method or attempts to demonstrate the method should not be construed as an endorsement of that approach to the text” (xi).

The Editors

Douglas Mangum “is a contributing editor for the *Faithlife Study Bible* and co-author for the *Studies in Faithful Living* series. The first volume in the series is *Abraham: Following God’s Promise*. He is also an editor for the *Lexham English Bible*, a regular contributor to *Bible Study Magazine*, and an editor and contributor for the *Lexham Bible Dictionary*.”

“Doug is a PhD candidate in Classical and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Free State; he holds a Master of Arts in Hebrew and Semitic Studies from the University of Wisconsin–Madison” (Logos Website: <https://www.logos.com/products/search?q=Douglas+Mangum&Author=4112%7cDouglas+Mangum&redirecttoauthor=true>).

Josh Westbury “holds a PhD in Biblical Languages from the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa. He also holds an MA in Biblical Languages from the University of Stellenbosch, a Master of Divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary with a focus on exegesis and Biblical Languages, and a BA in Theology and Biblical Languages from Houston Baptist University. Josh currently

serves as a Scholar-in-Residence at Faithlife. His primary academic focus is on the description and explanation of linguistic phenomena at the syntax-discourse interface, utilizing a cognitive-pragmatic theoretical approach.”

“Josh is the co-creator of the *Lexham Hebrew Discourse Bible* and the *Lexham High Definition Old Testament*, and he is the author of the forthcoming *Discourse Grammar of the Hebrew Bible: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis*” (Logos Website: <https://www.logos.com/about/bio/westbury>).

The Book

Perfect Binding, 232 pages, 8 chapters by various authors, bibliography, subject and scripture indexes. This volume is intended to introduce the reader to the academic field of linguistics and its use in biblical scholarship.

1. *Introduction to Linguistics and the Bible*, by Wendy Widder

The chapter introduces the basics of the academic field of linguistics and surveys the historical methods of language study in biblical scholarship, with a focus on the shift from philology to linguistics. Widder notes that this current volume will not address Graphemics (9).

Widder’s example for “THE BENEFIT OF DRAWING ON LINGUISTICS” (7) is a bit puzzling. This example is the application of a linguistic study on the word הִנֵּה. In this section, the author contrasts the simple glosses “lo,” “behold,” and “look” with the complexity of 10 different contextual glosses found in

Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm's *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. The linguistic study she cites draws upon the concept of *mirativity*. Widder quotes the article, stating that this term "refers to the linguistic marking for indicating that the information conveyed is new or unexpected to the speaker." Later she states that the authors concluded "that the 'most typical and central use' of the biblical Hebrew particle is indicating mirativity, and in cases where it does not, their study explains how the word functions instead" (8).

The employment of this study is a missed opportunity because she does not use examples from this study to demonstrate advantages in understanding הִנֵּה contextually. The main summary statement quoted from the study about "new or unexpected" information does not offer greater explanatory power. This leaves the reader puzzled as to why the example was given. Indeed, Brown-Driver-Briggs conveyed the same general sense in 1906: "making the narrative graphic and vivid, and enabling the reader to enter into the surprise or satisfaction of the speaker or actor concerned." BDB also surveyed deictic, conditional, logical, and temporal uses.

The stated purpose for this example was to demonstrate "the benefit of drawing on linguistics" but what the reader gets is a new term for something already long known.

Chapters 2 through 5 focus on particular areas within the field of linguistics. The primary goal of these chapters is to introduce concepts and terminology. Examples from biblical

Hebrew and Greek are sometimes given to demonstrate the application of linguistics to the biblical text. Each chapter contains short annotated bibliographies for recommended further study on particular topics. Chapter 2 focuses on language structure, Chapter 3 on language use in context, Chapter 4 introduces more complex topics, and Chapter 5 introduces sub-fields and schools of thought in linguistics.

2. *Linguistic Fundamentals*, by Wendy Widder

This chapter provides a general introduction to the studies of phonology, morphology, semantics, and syntax with examples of application to biblical Hebrew and Greek.

Widder's first two subsections are introductions to phonology and morphology. She does not include a discussion of the relationship of the writing systems of the Bible to the phonemes of the spoken languages. She may have left these considerations out for the sake of brevity. But I think a brief explanation of the difference from phonetics (study of spoken language production) and its relationship to graphemics (the study of the written symbols of language and their relationship to the spoken language) would have been helpful.

In section 2.1.2.a, Widder focuses on an application of phonology to biblical Hebrew presenting the vowel changes in the theoretical reconstruction of segolate nouns using מִלֶּךְ. Left out of the discussion in this example is the phonological change in the letter כ depending upon whether it closes a syllable, follows a closed syllable, or follows an open syllable,

and the change of grapheme for the same letter depending upon its position as word-final or non-final. I think this is an editorial choice of how much detail to include in an introduction.

The subsections on phonology and morphology describe the main advantage as an aid in learning Hebrew and Greek. While this may be the case for many readers, and it is a nice benefit of understanding these approaches to language, the chapter misses the opportunity to aid the reader by giving examples of how phonology or morphology provide an explanatory advantage over traditional grammar in exegesis.

The third section of the chapter turns to the topic of semantics. Widder chose to limit her discussion in this section to lexical semantics. This limitation is a good idea in an introductory work. For her discussion, she also chose to leave aside issues of *authorial intent* and *perceived meaning*, but not without some initial confusion. With regard to *authorial intent* she writes, “The author meant something, although without direct access to an author, we cannot be certain we have correctly understood what that was. Deciding what the author meant requires a degree of subjectivity” (28).

Then with respect to *perceived meaning* she writes:

A third meaning that can sometimes help us get at the author’s meaning is the perceived meaning, that is, what the **original audience** may have understood the author/speaker to mean. This

can be especially helpful with the biblical text, since the distance in time and culture between the author and a modern audience is enormous. (28, emphasis added)

From there she cites an example from Cotterell and Turner’s 1989 *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation*. However, there is a significant problem with this example: If the temporal and cultural distance between the author and interpreter is too great to overcome, why is the original audience a more reliable gauge? Do not the same cultural and temporal distances exist between not only the modern interpreter and the author—from whom we have a text where he expressed his meaning—but also between the modern interpreter and the original audience—from whom we have no texts where they express their interpretation(s)?

The example given by Widder from Cotterell and Turner is not to the point of the issue Widder raised. Cotterell and Turner are describing the interaction between Jesus and those at His trial (Luke 22:70f). This is an issue between the persons recorded within the text. It is not an issue of a modern interpreter struggling with a text that Jesus wrote without authorial context. It is a text written by Luke, and that author has provided context. That is, the author himself explains Jesus’ meaning to the reader. Thus, we know Luke’s intended meaning. But we cannot find out how contemporary readers of Luke’s Gospel reacted or understood this in their immediate context. We

have no record of their interpretations. Endeavoring to determine the author's intended meaning through gauging the original audience's perceived meaning is an act of appealing to creative imagination. If we want to see how readers understood this author through the ages we can look through Patristic writings to see how this text was used in sermons, apologetical writings, etc. But the context within Luke's Gospel is clear enough for us to determine the author's intended meaning.

I must return to point out that Widder chose not to focus on authorial versus original audience semantics. Her main focus is on lexical semantics. Here she lays out some of the basic terminology and issues in clear ways. Her discussion of componential analysis is clear, along with a good summary of its problems, limitations, and failures. She turns to conceptual or cognitive semantics.

Widder addresses the application of semantics to the study of the biblical languages. With respect to both biblical Hebrew and New Testament Greek, she provides examples of how semantic arguments enable the reader to correct faulty interpretations. But there are no examples of how semantic analysis can be used to aid in determining meaning of a word or phrase in a text. Thus, the impression is that semantic analysis is able to give helpful negative critique, but the reader is left without a demonstration of positive use.

Widder's final section is on the linguistic study of syntax. Syntax is a term used both by linguists and by traditional grammarians. Many of the

concepts overlap between these two approaches. And a clear distinction between the use of one approach or the other is not often made within publications of biblical scholarship.

What is missing in this is any discussion of differences between a grammarian approach and a linguistic approach. For this work to be about linguistics it would be of great service to have the advantages of a linguistic approach made clear. What explanatory power does a linguistic approach have over traditional grammar and syntax. Are they identical? If so, that should be made clear. If not, then how do they differ?

In her closing sections applying syntax to biblical Hebrew and New Testament Greek, no distinction is made between the approach of traditional grammar over that of linguistics. She summarizes a discussion of the Hebrew verbless clause: "This example illustrates the importance of linguistics and biblical study" (44). Yet she did not show any contrasts between the handling of syntax by traditional grammar and the handling of the data by linguistics. The same can be said of her example of ellipsis in Hebrew. The quotations from Miller-Naudé's study "A Linguistic Approach to Ellipsis" are not quotations demonstrating the method or value of their linguistic analysis.

Widder's use of Cotterell and Turner's "kernel sentences" in analyzing long New Testament Greek sentences is more helpful. However, she leaves this only as a brief description without actually working through an example from New Testament Greek. Reducing long sentences to

“kernel sentences” is not an objective method but an interpretive process strongly influenced by the presuppositions of the interpreter.

3. *Language in Use*, by Jeremy Thompson and Wendy Widder

The chapter introduces the topics of Pragmatics, Context, Speech-Act Theory, Discourse Analysis, Discourse Grammar; Sociolinguistics, Language Culture and Thought, Linguistic Determinism, Language Variation and Change. These topics are outside the scope of traditional grammar and language instruction. Widder and Thompson do not go into great depth, but they do convey the basic issues within each of these techniques. They also do a good job at highlighting their limitations. These techniques are introduced as a way of pointing the reader to biblical exegetical and linguistic writings for further education.

4. *Language Universals, Typology, and Markedness*, by Daniel Wilson and Michael Aubrey

Wilson and Aubrey introduce the concept of Markedness, Generative Universal Grammar, Crosslinguistic Universals, Linguistic Typology and a special focus on Markedness. These introductions are also informative and clear, but a bit brief. The authors are cautious about covering too many topics. I believe a main reason for the topics that they do cover has to do not only with importance to the field of linguistics, but also because there are fairly accessible examples of these particular tools applied to biblical exegesis.

5. *Major Approaches to Linguistics*, by Jeremy Thompson and Wendy Widder

Thompson and Widder cover a great deal of history, scholars, concepts, and criticisms in a very readable and brief manner. Topics they introduce include:

- Comparative Philology, Diachrony, Language Families;
- Structural Linguistics, Synchrony vs. Diachrony, Langue and Parole, Signifier and Signified;
- Functionalism, Functional Grammar, Systemic Functional Grammar, Role and Reference Grammar, Important Concepts of Functionalism;
- Generative Grammar, Noam Chomsky, Universal Grammar, Deep Structure, Transformations
- Discourse Analysis,
- Cognitive Linguistics, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, Prototype Theory, Frames.

Throughout these chapters (3–5) the reader is not necessarily given or shown an example of how these concepts and methods are applied to biblical exegesis. The authors introduce the readers to the works of others who apply these methods and concepts to the text of Scripture.

The last three chapters focus on only on a small number of linguistic issues and tools. This helps to highlight the overlap and the great differences between their application to biblical Hebrew and New Testament Greek. These chapters take some of the linguistic tools discussed in the previous chapters and briefly discuss some main works of authors who

have applied these specific tools of linguistics.

6. *Linguistic Issues in Biblical Hebrew*, by Wendy Widder

Beginning with the issue of problems with the data, the author points out that there is not enough data. The actual body of linguistic data upon which we can draw is the Old Testament and a few documents and inscriptions up to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Widder summarizes historical and linguistic discussion on the Hebrew verbal system. She aptly presents the issues surrounding semantics and lexicography where a lack of data leads to comparative philology and the difficulties following out of Barr's structuralist critique and the later correctives to Barr's structuralism. She summarizes the thorny issue of word order in classical Hebrew and draws her chapter to a close with a short but very helpful discussion of the issues surrounding the chronology and typology debate of biblical Hebrew.

7. *Linguistic Issues in Biblical Greek*, by Michael Aubrey

Aubrey covers the same issues in this chapter that Widder covered in the previous, but here the application to New Testament Greek demonstrates how different the issues can be between the two Testaments. With New Testament Greek the problems with the data is that there is simply too much data. In contrast to the paucity of Classical Hebrew literature, there is an overwhelming abundance of Greek literature. Aubrey looks at studies on the Greek verbal system with respect to current theories on tense and aspect. He covers semantics and lexicography, giving

useful brief descriptions of the scholarly lexicons available to the student. He follows with a discussion on how New Testament Greek is studied in linguistics with respect to word order.

These two chapters are very good at showing how very different exegesis has been historically between Old Testament and New Testament interpreters both with regard to treatment of text, language, and with regard to lexicographical research; and how applying the same standards in linguistics to both testaments leads to consideration of the quantity and quality of evidence.

8. *The Value of Linguistically Informed Exegesis*, by Michael Aubrey

This concluding chapter restates the claim that the tools of linguistics give greater precision and explanatory power. To demonstrate this claim the author exhibits the use of two linguistic methods, applying them to issues in the biblical languages and text: discourse features and language typology.

Evaluation

All academic fields change through time. As an academic study, linguistics is not immune to such change. There are already a handful of introductions surveying the application of linguistics to the biblical languages. So the question is what advantage(s) this volume offers in contrast to these others?

The goal of this work is not to be an introduction to linguistics. The book is meant as a stepping-stone into the works of biblical exegesis that use tools and approaches from the field of linguistics. One great value is how

concisely the topics are presented. As a short gateway into more in-depth works, it is useful for those who lack experience with the field of linguistics. The annotations the authors make on their recommended reading lists are particularly helpful.

Perhaps due to brevity, the reader is often left with the implication that the numerous approaches offered in the field of linguistics are inherently more objective and offer greater explanatory power than arguments made by scholars without degrees in linguistics. At the same time, the chapters often miss the opportunity to demonstrate how these tools and methods are more objective or explain things better.

While the book does present some of the contended issues between linguistic approaches, the authors do not address some foundational philosophical, political, and economic assumptions at the base of some of the linguistic approaches the work covers. Linguistics as an academic field has been a significant tool of political, economic, social, philosophical, and religious advocacy. In part, this is because as a field it presents itself as objective and scientific. Some aspects of linguistics may not be as greatly

influenced by presuppositional bias and may be measurably more objective (e.g., phonology, morphology). But at levels of abstraction above this such foundational assumptions carry greater weight, strongly shaping the kinds of questions, arguments, and conclusions that the linguist addresses.

This is not a text I would use for a course on exegesis, but I think it can serve those who wish to find out if they want to learn what linguists and Bible scholars are doing and saying. It is, in essence, a beginner's field guide, not unlike Peterson First Guides to astronomy, the weather, or geology. I gave more detailed criticisms on the first two chapters to show, hopefully, part of the tradeoff that an author or editor needs to make when producing such a concise introduction as this. Readers with experience in linguistics and with the application of linguistics to biblical interpretation are going to have opinions on the relative value of various linguistic subfields, etc. And within the use of linguistics, those interpreters can and do often have strong differences of opinion about theory, data, and application.

– Joseph C. Abrahamson

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