# Lutheran Synod Quarterly

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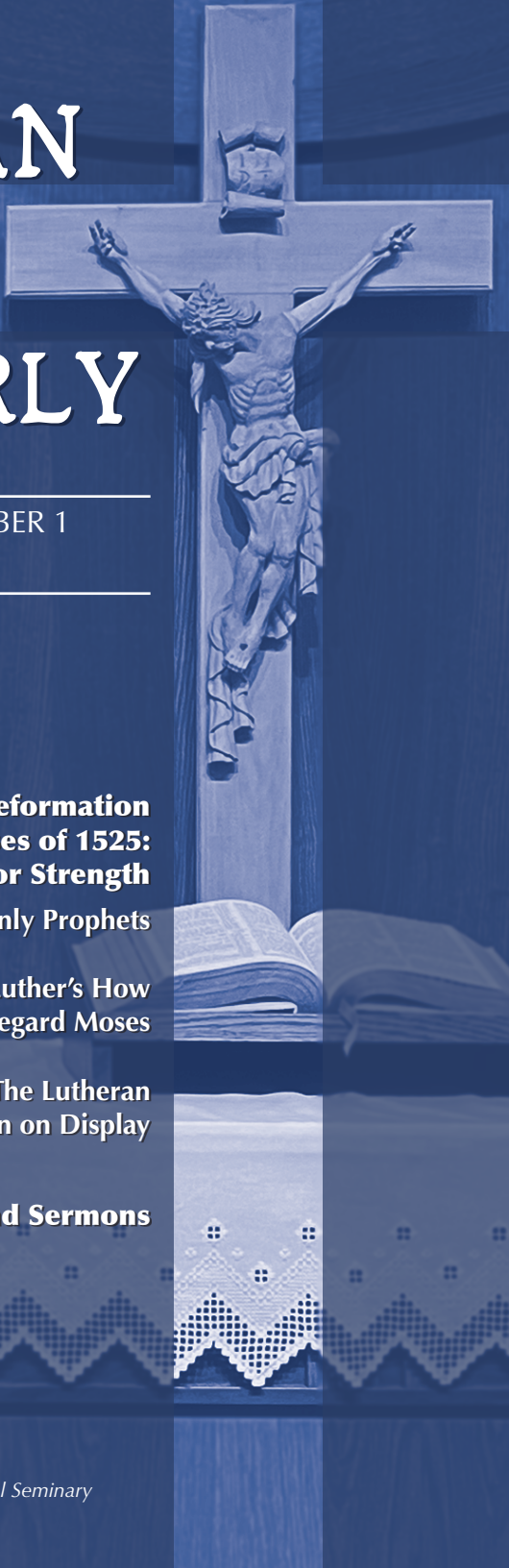

**2025 Bjarne Wollan Teigen Reformation Lectures: Luther's Great Treatises of 1525: Not by My Own Reason or Strength**

Against the Heavenly Prophets

An Exploration of Luther's How Christians Should Regard Moses

De Servo Arbitrio: The Lutheran Reformation on Display

**Book Review and Sermons**

*The journal of Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary*
*ISSN: 0360-9685*

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The *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* is a continuation of the *Clergy Bulletin* (1941–1960). The purpose of the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, as was the purpose of the *Clergy Bulletin*, is to provide a testimony of the theological position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and also to promote the academic growth of her clergy roster by providing scholarly articles, rooted in the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

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*LSQ* Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2026)

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**Book Review and Sermons**

# Foreword

*LSQ* Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2026)

IN THIS ISSUE OF THE LSQ, WE ARE PLEASED TO share with our readers the annual Bjarne Wollan Teigen Reformation lectures delivered October 30–31, 2025, in Mankato, Minnesota. These lectures are sponsored jointly by Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. This was the fifty-seventh in the series of annual Reformation Lectures. The purpose of these lectures is to increase an interest in and knowledge of the Reformation period and the application of Reformation theology for today. Justification by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone, is the heart and center of the Lutheran Reformation and its theology. It continues to be the article upon which the church stands or falls and therefore, it remains as the heart and center of the church today. Just has the Old Evil Foe fought against Martin Luther and the Reformers, he continues to attack the church today so that the Gospel in Word and Sacrament might be lost again. We belong to a church militant.

In the lectures for 2025, we turned to a difficult time in Luther's life—**the year 1525**—a year of great struggle and great writing. Armed not with sword or shield, but with his quill, Luther defended the Gospel against threats both within and outside the Reformation movement. Our theme was: **"Luther's Great Treatises of 1525: Not by My Own Reason or Strength."**

Luther's pen was sharp and precise. He cut straight to the heart of the matter and exposed how the chief article of the faith was under attack—even by former allies. These treatises remind us that every

generation must return to the Gospel as the only source of truth and strength.

We explored three of those treatises:

- **Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller** began with *"Against the Heavenly Prophets."*
- **Prof. Mark DeGarmeaux** presented the second lecture on *"How Christians Should Regard Moses."*
- **Dr. Keith Wessel** closed the series with Luther's *"The Bondage of the Will."*

Here is a little about the lecturers.

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller is pastor of St. Paul and Jesus Deaf Lutheran Churches in Austin, Texas. He is the author of Lord, Teach Us to Pray (2023), Take They Our Life: Martin Luther's Theology of Martyrdom (2019), A Martyr's Faith for a Faithless World (CPH, 2019), Has American Christianity Failed? (CPH, 2016) and Final Victory: Contemplating the Death and Funeral of a Christian (CPH, 2010). He is host of What-Not, The Podcast, posts videos on YouTube at wolfmueller1, and has a number of other theological projects that all end up on his blog, www.wolfmueller.co. Bryan is a member of the Doxology Collegium. He and his wife Keri live with their children in Round Rock, Texas.

The Rev. Mark DeGarmeaux was born in 1958 in LaCrosse, Wisconsin. He attended Luther High School in Onalaska, Wisconsin; Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota; and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary. He also holds the Master of Sacred Theology (S.T.M.) degree from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He was ordained on July 14, 1985, at West Paint Creek Lutheran Church in Iowa. He served East and West Paint Creek Lutheran Churches (1985–1994) and Saude and Jerico Lutheran Churches (1988–1995). In 1995, he accepted the call to Bethany Lutheran College, where he continues to serve with his wife, Rebecca. He was co-editor of the *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* and has translated several devotional, historical, and theological works, including items for the recent volumes of *Luther's Works*. He also has a several-volume anthology of original and classical organ music called *Every Sunday Organist.*

Keith C. Wessel teaches Latin, Greek, and Theology at Martin Luther College (MLC), New Ulm, Minnesota, at the undergraduate level and is a member of the graduate faculty as well. After graduating from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1991, Keith was assigned to

tutor at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Michigan, where he taught American Literature. Subsequently, he was reassigned as pastor at Beautiful Savior Lutheran, Marietta, Georgia, where he served as associate pastor from 1994-2002. In 2002, Keith accepted the call to MLC, in which he currently serves. As for synod service, he served for fourteen years on the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR), WELS One Europe Team for three years, and was a member of the Executive Committee for *Christian Worship 2021*, overseeing the revision of the *Agenda* and the *Pastor's Companion*. He served on the Northwestern Publishing House Board of Directors for twelve years, and also as a visiting professor for a semester in 2009 at Asia Lutheran Seminary, Hong Kong, where he taught the Gospel of Matthew and a survey of Intertestamental history.

Keith and his wife Liz have been blessed with five children and four grandchildren. In addition to graduating from Northwestern College ('87) and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary ('91) with an M.Div degree, Keith also holds a PhD in Classical Civilizations from the University of Florida, and a Graduate Certificate in Philosophy and Ethics from the Harvard Extension School. He enjoys reading and woodworking, and definitely prefers Fender guitars to Gibson.

Also included in this issue are a series of sermons from the Undaunted Retreat, a couple of other sermons, and a book review.

— TAH

# Against the Heavenly Prophets

*Bryan Wolfmueller*
*St. Paul Lutheran Church*
*Austin, Texas*

*LSQ* Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2026)

IN ONE OF THE MOST PIERCING THEOLOGICAL insights outside the Scripture, in his Smalcald Articles Martin Luther identifies *enthusiasm* as "the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy."[1] Enthusiasts are "spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure."[2] The trouble with Rome, the Anabaptists, and even Islam is all the same. There is, according to Luther, only one heresy: enthusiasm.

> All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words.[3]

From the Garden of Eden until the Lord's return in glory, the true teachers of the Word are fighting this prime arch-heresy that would exalt the internal Word over the external Word. Luther has his finger on it, he's given it a name. We are ready for his exposition and demolition of this dangerous false teaching, and he says, "But of these matters

[1] Smalcald Articles, III.VIII.9. All references from the Book of Concord are taken from the *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. Bente and Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

[2] SA III.VIII.3

[3] SA III.VIII.5

there is not time now to dispute at greater length; we have elsewhere sufficiently urged this subject."[4]

That "elsewhere" is his 1524–25 book *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, and to that text we will turn for inoculation against the theological disease of enthusiasm.[5]

## Reformation in Three Acts, and the Context of *Against the Heavenly Prophets*

I like to imagine the Reformation as a play in three acts. Act One: Against the Pope (1517–1521), has all the heroic stories we love to tell: posting the Ninety-Five Theses, the interview with Cajetan, the Leipzig Debate with Eck, the bold confession at the Diet in Worms and the kidnapping and hiding in the Wartburg Castle. Act Two: Against the Sacramentarians (1521–1529), is a shift in attention from Rome to those teachers who claim to be fellow Reformation travelers, but hold to false teachings about the Sacraments, the Word, the Office, etc. Luther does most of his writing at this time, and he writes more about the right understanding of the sacraments than any other theological topic. Act Three: Re-Building (1529–1546) is perhaps the most important but least interesting time, when all the medieval civic and religious institutions have been overthrown by the Gospel, and the family, church, and state are all being reshaped by the Word of God.

Our attention in this essay is in Act Two, right in the heart of the controversies over the Word and Sacrament. These were fights with

[4] SA III.VIII.6

[5] This condemnation of enthusiasm is also captured in Augsburg Confession V, "That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. *They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word* [*externum verbum*]*, through their own preparations and works*." Note also the Lutheran Confessions direct and refer the Christian reader to *Against the Heavenly Prophets* as a faithful defense of the Lutheran teaching on the Lord's Supper, giving this text a semi-confessional status. See FC.SD VII.91, ref. Wolfmueller, "Martin Luther's Works Quoted in the Lutheran Confessions," accessed October 3, 2025, https://wolfmueller.co/martin-luthers-works-quoted-in-the-lutheran-confessions/. We also note, in passing, that Karlstadt is mentioned by name in the Lutheran Confessions, Apology XVI.3, "The Gospel does not introduce any new laws about the civil estate, but commands us to obey the existing laws, whether they were formulated by heathen or by others, and in this obedience to practice love. It was mad of Carlstadt to try to impose on us the judicial laws of Moses."

those who started as friends, in the case of *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt.

Karlstadt was born 1486 in Karlstadt am Main. He overlapped Luther at the University of Erfurt (Karlstadt 1499–1503, Luther 1501–1505), studied at Cologne for two years, and then received his masters (1505) and doctorate (1510) from the University of Wittenberg, where he subsequently became the chair of the theology department and chancellor of the university. In 1512 Karlstadt awarded Luther his doctorate.[6]

Karlstadt studied in Rome 1515–1516, and upon return published 151 theses against indulgences. In 1519 Johann Eck invited Luther and Karlstadt to a debate in Leipzig about grace, free will, and especially the authority of the pope. Karlstadt started, but Luther finished the debate.[7] Trouble between the Reformers begins after 1521, when Luther, returning from the Diet of Worms, and after a visit to his grandmother in Mohra, is "kidnapped" and taken to the Wartburg. Karlstadt takes up preaching in St. Mary's church, and begins a series of hasty reforms, including both kinds in the distribution of the sacrament, conducting the service without robes, and preaching against images in the church. These reforms become rebellious, and Luther would return from exile to deliver his *Invocavit Sermons* and restore order. Karlstadt is censured by the University, seeks council with the already persecuted Muntzer, and begins to retreat from Wittenberg, first to his farm fifteen kilometers west of Wittenberg, and then to Orlamünde where he was archdeacon.[8]

A small event on February 3, 1523 would foreshadow the coming dispute. Two former Augustinians were being promoted to doctor under Karlstadt's chairmanship. Karlstadt called the graduation "godless" because Christ had forbidden calling anyone "master."[9] Luther would often recall this event, even as the beginning of Karlstadt's "decline."[10] The letters of Luther in 1524 indicate that Karlstadt is *in abstentia*, and

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[6] "Andreas Karlstadt," *Wikipedia*, last modified August 14, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andreas_Karlstadt.

[7] Find Luther's recounting of this debate in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 34:333ff.

[8] Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: Shaping and Defining the Reformation, 1521–1532*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Fortress Press, 1990), 157.

[9] Brecht, 157.

[10] See LW 54:54, also 12:42 and 2:220, where Luther seems to be lecturing on Genesis in the same room that the event had occurred some twenty years earlier. "And we ourselves once heard Carlstadt say at this very place, when he was conferring a doctor's degree, that he knew that it was a sin to create doctors of theology, but that he was doing it nevertheless."

attempts were being made to recall him to Wittenberg.[11] In August 1524 Luther traveled with two other theologians on a visitation to Jena and Orlamünde.[12] In Jena he preached against fanaticism. Karlstadt was in the audience disguised in a felt hat. They met later at the Black Bear Inn, where Luther gave Karlstadt a gulden if he would promise to put his complaints in writing. In Orlamünder Luther disputed with congregation about the proper use of images. It didn't go well. "As he departed, the Orlamünders consigned him to the devil and threw stones at him."[13] As Luther left town Karlstadt preached a sermon against Luther "calling him an unfaithful servant of God and a perverter of the Scriptures."[14]

Karlstadt was publishing against Luther, and the texts reached Luther in the fall of 1524.

> While I am thinking thus and abiding in my faith, Jack Absurdity, Dr. Karlstadt, comes blustering and jolting against me with his heavenly prophets and directs a book against us. In it he chides us Wittenbergers for being murderers of Christ, crucifiers of Christ, new papists, etc., and becomes very rude and repulsive. Yet he had no other reason than that we were elevating the sacrament.[15]

Luther responds with *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*. The first part was published in December 1524, the second in January 1525.[16]

With this background, we turn our attention to the text. I'd like to offer enough of Luther's own words that each reader is enticed to take up and study *Against the Heavenly Prophets* on their own.

[11] See, for example, LW 49:83–84, Brecht, 158–159.

[12] Brecht, 159–160.

[13] Brecht, 161.

[14] Ibid.

[15] LW 38:314–315.

[16] While Luther's polemic is sharp, he notes that this is done to rescue, not destroy. "Our King does not strike in order to destroy men but in order to save them. So I fight against Carlstadt, Zwingli, and others, because I would rather have them live than die and come to naught. We injure not in order to damn men, but in order to heal them and to eradicate errors. We want to preserve them, not destroy them; as Christ said (Luke 9:56; John 12:47), 'I have come not to destroy the world but in order that it may live.' Thus our sword sets forth the Word of salvation, life, and righteousness, and it attempts to bring people back to the right way." (LW 12:218). This might be seen in the history. Only a few months after *Against the Heavenly Prophets* was published, Karlstadt made an appeal for reconciliation to Katie Luther, and he lived secretly in the Luther home for eight weeks from June 27, 1525. Fleeing Saxony, he spent the balance of his life teaching in Switzerland. He died of the plague in 1541. See Brecht, 171.

## *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Martin Luther's Refutation of Enthusiasm

*Part 1.*

*1. Introduction*

Luther begins *Against the Heavenly Prophets* with his own summary of the situation.

> Doctor Andreas Karlstadt has deserted us, and on top of that has become our worst enemy. May Christ grant that we be not alarmed, and give us his mind and courage, that we may not err and despair before the Satan who here pretends to vindicate the sacrament, but has much else in mind. For since he has not thus far been able to suppress with violence the whole doctrine of the gospel, he seeks to destroy it with cunning interpretation of Scripture.[17]

Luther summons us to prayer and theological vigilance, and then frames the argument.

> So our concern here should now be that we keep these two teachings far apart from each other: the one that teaches of the main articles, to govern the conscience in the spirit before God; the other, which teaches of things external or works. For more depends on the teaching of faith and a good conscience than on the teaching of good works.[18]

Luther diagnoses Karlstadt's obsession with externals: rites, rituals, images, which is not a furthering of the Reformation program, but rather a return to Romanism. To put everything in order, Luther then gives the five chief articles of faith. "Now in order that we do not open our mouths too wide and marvel at the skill of these false spirits, and thereby abandon the main articles, and thus deceitfully be led off the track (for thereby the devil succeeds through these prophets), I will here briefly recount these articles of the Christian faith to which everyone is above all things to pay attention and hold fast."[19]

First, the law must be preached to show us our sin. Second, the "the comforting word of the gospel and the forgiveness of sins" is preached

[17] LW 40:79.
[18] LW 40:81.
[19] LW 40:82

to the terrified conscience.[20] Third is judgment, "the work of putting to death the old man," the discipline and suffering of the Christian.[21] Fourth, works of love and service to the neighbor. Fifth and last comes "the law and its works, not for the Christians, but for the crude and unbelieving," which includes rules, rites, ceremonies, and other matters of temporal authority.[22]

> However, we must see to it that we retain Christian freedom and do not force such laws and works on the Christian conscience, as if one through them were upright or a sinner. Here questions are in order concerning the place which images, foods, clothing, places, persons, and all such external things, etc., ought to have. Whoever does not teach according to this order certainly does not teach correctly. From which you now see that Dr. Karlstadt and his spirits replace the highest with the lowest, the best with the least, the first with the last. Yet he would be considered the greatest spirit of all, he who has devoured the Holy Spirit feathers and all.
>
> Therefore I beg every Christian who observes how we bicker in this matter to remember that we are not dealing with important things, but with the most trivial ones. Bear in mind that the devil is eager to spruce up such minor matters, thereby drawing the attention of the people so that the truly important matters are neglected, as long as they gape in his direction.[23]

Luther understands the theological argument as spiritual warfare, and he alerts us to the demonic tactic of putting the focus on the things that don't matter so we forget the things that do.

### *2. Images*

The next section takes up the question of images, where Luther had already begun "the task of destroying images by first tearing them out of the heart through God's Word and making them worthless and despised."[24] Karlstadt, on the other hand, "pays no attention to matters of the heart, has reversed the order by removing them from sight and leaving them in the heart."[25] Luther talks about the proper order of

[20] Ibid.
[21] LW 40:83.
[22] Ibid.
[23] LW 40:83–84
[24] LW 40:84
[25] Ibid.

reform together with the proper understanding of images from the Old Testament.[26] The Christian conscience should be free.

> However to speak evangelically of images, I say and declare that no one is obligated to break violently images even of God, but everything is free, and one does not sin if he does not break them with violence. One is obligated, however, to destroy them with the Word of God, that is, not with the law in a Karlstadtian manner, but with the gospel. This means to instruct and enlighten the conscience that it is idolatry to worship them, or to trust in them, since one is to trust alone in Christ. Beyond this let the external matters take their course. God grant that they may be destroyed, become dilapidated, or that they remain. It is all the same and makes no difference, just as when the poison has been removed from a snake. Now I say this to keep the conscience free from mischievous laws and fictitious sins, and not because I would defend images.[27]

Luther then teaches how a Christian should read Moses and understand the teaching of the law.[28] Here Luther concludes:

> Of this I am certain, that God desires to have his works heard and read, especially the passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart, just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes? This is especially true since the heart is more important than the eyes, and should be less stained by sin because it is the true abode and dwelling place of God.[29]

Luther recounts an event that happened in his visit to Orlamünde. When teaching that the prohibition of images was the prohibition of idolatry, a man stood up with contempt to confront Luther. Luther recalls,

---

[26] See LW 40:84–92.
[27] LW 40:91.
[28] See LW 40:91–101.
[29] LW 40:99–100.

> So he continued and said, "If you will not follow Moses, you must nevertheless endure the gospel. You have shoved the gospel under the bench. No, no! It must come forth and not remain under the bench."
>
> I said, "What then does the gospel say?" He said, "Jesus says in the gospel (I don't know where, though my brethren know it) that the bride must take off her nightgown and be naked, if she is to sleep with the bridegroom. Therefore one must break all the images, so that we are free and cleansed of what is created." So far the words of our conversation.
>
> What was I to do? I had come among Karlstadt's followers and then I learned that breaking images meant that a bride should take off her nightgown, and that this was to be found in the gospel.[30]

The illustration of the bride and her nightgown is mysticism. Like the embrace of husband and wife, the soul is united to God with nothing in between, no mediation. The mystic reduces all spiritual activity to the realm of the heart, but this attempt to internalize makes one obsessed with externals.

This event serves as a parable to capture all that is wrong with Karlstadt's teaching.[31] It doesn't know the Bible. It confuses the Gospel. It produces pride and contempt for the truth. It presents itself as spiritual, but it is really only concerned with externals.

### *3. Karlstadt's Expulsion*

Luther must address Karlstadt's complaint that he was exiled without cause.[32] Luther defends the Saxon Princes from the public complaints made by Karlstadt following his expulsion from the territory. He argues that Karlstadt had been justly expelled because he despised the divinely ordained temporal order by running and teaching without a proper call, usurping the prince's rights and possessions by taking over the Orlamünde parish, and leading the masses toward rebellion and disobedience. Luther insists that such factious behavior demonstrated that Karlstadt was possessed by a disorderly spirit that sought to spread poison and murder, justifying the princes' authority to remove him from the land for the sake of maintaining order.

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[30] LW 40:100–101.

[31] Luther returns to this story a number of times in his essay. See LW 40:110, 132, 137, 182.

[32] LW 40:102–117.

We will note, in passing, Luther's diagnostic tool for assessing the claim of an "inner call."

> However if such mischief is to occur "out of the inner call of God," then it is necessary that it be proved with miraculous signs. For God does not change his old order for a new one unless the change is accompanied with great signs. Therefore one can believe no one who relies on his own spirit and inner feelings for authority and who outwardly storms against God's accustomed order, unless he therewith performs miraculous signs, as Moses indicates in Deut. 18[:22].[33]

### *4. Concerning the Mass*

Part I concludes with a discussion of the term "mass," which was still being used in Wittenberg. After answering a number of the linguistic complaints Luther turns to Karlstadt's critique of the elevation of the Body and Blood in the Lord's Supper. When Karlstadt makes such a big deal of such a small thing Luther sees through it to the heart of the matter.

> [Karlstadt] would make captive what Christ would have free. However in this respect the profile of the factious spirit differs from that of the pope. They both destroy Christian freedom, and they are both anti-Christian. But the pope does it through commandments, Dr. Karlstadt through prohibitions. The pope commands what is to be done, Dr. Karlstadt what is not to be done. Thus through them Christian freedom is destroyed in two ways: on the one hand, when one commands, constrains, and compels what is to be done, which is nevertheless not commanded or required by God; on the other hand, when one forbids, prevents, and hinders one from doing that which is neither prohibited nor forbidden by God. … Here Christ is driven away by both parties. One pushes him out of the front [door], the other drives him out the rear [door].[34]

Further:

> Now, dear sirs, we are speaking of minor matters, insofar as the doing is concerned. For what does it mean to elevate the sacrament? But when the teaching is taken into account we are dealing with

[33] LW 40:113.
[34] LW 40:128, 129.

> the most important matters. The factious spirit is too frivolous and meddles all too impudently in this matter. He has such a low regard for teaching and such a high regard for the doing that he does not see the beam in his own eye, and is too much concerned with the splinter in our eye [Matt 7:5]. For with teaching he manhandles conscience, which Christ has won with his own blood, and kills souls, which God has dearly purchased, with commandments and sins. For thereby the kingdom of Christ will be destroyed and everything that the gospel has brought us exterminated. For Christ cannot remain in the conscience that goes whoring after alien teaching and the commandments of men. There faith must perish. Therefore let everyone know that Dr. Karlstadt has a spirit which is hostile to faith and to the whole kingdom of God, which he in turn would destroy with his conceit and human nonsense, as you may well understand from this part of the discussion and concerning which you will hear more later.[35]

St. Paul warns us about the danger of losing our Christian freedom (especially Galatians 5:1ff). The Gospel is at stake. "This matter of Christian liberty is nothing to joke about."[36] "Everything depends on the conscience." Karlstadt knows nothing of this, but "enticing consciences away from an understanding of grace to external works and appearance, so that Christ is denied, his kingdom destroyed, and the gospel reviled."[37]

*Part II.*

*5. Concerning the Lord's Supper*

The second part begins with an extended treatment of the Lord's Supper. Luther addresses the word "sacrament",[38] the Body and Blood truly in the sacrament,[39] on the Greek word *touto* "this" which Karlstadt interprets as Jesus pointing to His own body,[40] Karlstadt's spiritualizing the Lord's Supper,[41] and how we are to read and interpret the Scriptures.[42]

[35] LW 40:131.
[36] LW 40:134.
[37] LW 40:141.
[38] LW 40:149–154.
[39] LW 40:154–161.
[40] LW 40:161–177.
[41] LW 40:177–188.
[42] LW 40:188–191. "In general, their interpretation is so stupid that it makes one feel like vomiting." (LW 40:188).

Luther dives into the details of the argument, wrestling with the words, the grammar, the history and theology, but he always has the big picture in mind, Karlstadt's meta-error of enthusiasm.

> Now when God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him… Observe carefully, my brother, this order, for everything depends on it.[43]
>
> Do you not see here the devil, the enemy of God's order? With all his mouthing of the words, "Spirit, Spirit, Spirit," he tears down the bridge, the path, the way, the ladder, and all the means by which the Spirit might come to you. Instead of the outward order of God in the material sign of baptism and the oral proclamation of the Word of God he wants to teach you, not how the Spirit comes to you but how you come to the Spirit. They would have you learn how to journey on the clouds and ride on the wind. They do not tell you how or when, whither or what, but you are to experience what they do.[44]

Luther sees[45] that Karlstadt's teaching is not only wrong, but dangerous. It robs pious consciences of the Lord's comfort. "But sincere hearts who are concerned about conscience and faith are surely not satisfied with such jesting and words of abuse and sacrilege. They want the Word of God."[46] The devil is behind Karlstadt's deceit. "I have often

[43] LW 40:146.

[44] LW 40:147. Luther will return to this overarching critique again and again. For example, "Because of the perverted nature of his spirit, he makes everything spiritual and inward which God has determined should be outward and bodily; on the other hand he makes that outward and bodily which God wills should be inward and spiritual, as I have already said." (LW 40:178–179) "In brief, this is the spirit of whom I have already said that he makes inward whatever God makes outward." (LW 40:184)

[45] Or perhaps "smells," which is Luther's preferred sense for recognizing false doctrine. See, for example, LW 40:145.

[46] LW 40:176.

asserted that the ultimate goal of the devil is to do away with the entire sacrament and all outward ordinances of God."[47]

We will do well to note Luther's reflections on hermeneutics and Bible interpretation. Karlstadt offered only a spiritual and allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Luther wants the plain and natural meaning first and foremost.

> Brother, the natural meaning of the words is queen, transcending all subtle, acute sophistical fancy. From it we may not deviate, unless we are compelled by a clear article of the faith. Otherwise the spiritual jugglers would not leave a single letter in Scripture.[48]
>
> For it is dangerous so to play with the Word of God by which conscience and faith are to be guided. Therefore, interpretations of God's Word must be lucid and definite having a firm, sure, and true foundation on which one may confidently rely.[49]
>
> If he lets the natural meaning remain inviolate, I will let him interpret allegorically and spiritually, juggle and play, until he tires. If someone will permit me to retain the meaning that Peter, according to the scriptural sense, did walk on the sea and sank, etc., it is no longer my concern how he interprets it afterwards, provided no harm is done to faith.[50]

In concluding this section Luther compares and contrasts Karlstadt with the pope.

> The pope has lied in the same manner. But his spirit has rather busied itself in making spiritual things bodily, as he transforms a spiritual Christendom into an outward, bodily community. This sectarian spirit, [Karlstadt], on the other hand, is mostly concerned about making spiritual what God makes bodily and outward. We therefore proceed between the two, making nothing spiritual or bodily, but keeping spiritual what God makes spiritual, and bodily what he makes bodily.[51]

[47] LW 40:191.
[48] LW 40:190.
[49] Ibid.
[50] LW 40:189.
[51] LW 40:191–192.

### *6. "Frau Hulda", that is, Shrewd Reason*

Luther finishes the word with thorough treatment of theological method, especially a critique of the use of reason in theology. In *The Quest for Holiness*, Adolph Koberle outlines three ladders with which humanity attempts to climb into heaven: moralism, mysticism, and rationalism.[52] We tend to characterize mysticism as *ir*rational, and rationalism as materialistic and anti-mystical, but Luther sees how these two are related, and two sides of the same coin. Mysticism and rationalism both diminish the Word of God. Mysticism (and Enthusiasm) exalts the emotions, feelings, and inner life over the Word. Rationalism exalts the mind and reason over the Word. Both are wrong and dangerous.

The command of our Lord Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength place all of our thinking, doing, and even feeling in submission to the Scriptures. Lutherans have long discussed the ministerial versus the magisterial use of reason, that all our mind's skill is mustered to understand the Word, but not to lord over the Word. We add to that list the ministerial use of our will and our emotions. These, also, are to serve the Word, keep the commandments, believe the promises, and receive the wisdom and comfort of God.

This rationalistic approach turns the Gospel into Law, the promise into a command, and the Lord's intended comfort in the Supper is destroyed.

> [T]he body and blood of Christ is given for me, for me, for me (I repeat), in order to take away my sins, as the word in the sacrament affirms, "This is the body, given for you." This knowledge produces joyful, free, and assured consciences. This is the meaning in Isa. 53[:11], "By his knowledge he will make many to be accounted righteous." This teaching is as hostile as death to Dr. Karlstadt's spirit, and in his desire to eradicate it he makes a great ado about "passionate, heartfelt, earnest knowledge of the body of Christ," as if he were much in earnest, yet he really stifles it.[53]

"So you can clearly see how the devil makes a commandment out of a promise of Christ and in place of faith institutes a human work, as I

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[52] Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Investigation*, trans. John C. Mattes (Harper & Brothers, 1936), "Moralism, mysticism, speculation, these are the three ladders on which men continually seek to climb up to God, with a persistent purpose that it seems nothing can check; a storming of heaven that is just as pathetic in its unceasing efforts as it is in its final futility", 2.

[53] LW 40:206.

have said of him above."[54] It's the comfort of the Gospel that is at stake. Luther knows that the Lord Jeuss has instituted the Supper to forgive sins and give life and salvation. " For Christ has placed the strength and power of his suffering in the sacrament, so that we may there lay hold on it and find it according to the word, 'This is my body, which is given for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"[55]

As Luther is bringing his argument to a close he offers a broad and brilliant summary of the evangelical teaching. He distinguishes between the winning and the delivery of the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is won on the cross and distributed in the Word.

> So that our readers may the better perceive our teaching I shall clearly and broadly describe it. We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture. But now there is neither need nor time to do so.
>
> If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross. Therefore, Luther has rightly taught that whoever has a bad conscience from his sins should go to the sacrament and obtain comfort, not because of the bread and wine, not because of the body and blood of Christ, but because of the word which in the sacrament offers, presents, and gives the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for me. Is that not clear enough?[56]

[54] LW 40:207.
[55] LW 40:210.
[56] LW 40:213–214.

There is a profound simplicity to Luther's theological approach: Where does Jesus forgive sins? Baptism, absolution, the Supper are all instituted for forgiveness.[57] This provides a theological framework to pierce to the heart of the errors of Karlstadt and Rome. Karlstadt imagines that the cross is the winning and delivering of forgiveness, and thus denies the gracious efficacy of the external Word: there is no Body and Blood in the Supper, but worse, there is no promise of forgiveness.

Rome, on the other hand, makes the sacraments, and especially the Lord's Supper, the winning of the forgiveness of sins.

> And forasmuch as, in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated in an unbloody manner, who once offered Himself in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross; the holy Synod teaches, that this sacrifice is truly propitiatory and that by means thereof this is effected, that we obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid, if we draw nigh unto God, contrite and penitent, with a sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence.[58]

While Rome offers the sacrifice of the mass, it does not offer the forgiveness of sins. "If any one saith, either that the principal fruit of the most holy Eucharist is the remission of sins, or, that other effects do not result therefrom; let him be anathema."[59]

The typical framing of the branches breaks down under Luther's criteria. Typically, the Protestants (those who have inherited Karlstadt

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[57] For baptism, see Mark 1:5, 16:16, Acts 2:38, and 22:16. For the absolution, see John 20:22–23 and Matt 9:8. For the Lord's Supper, see Matt 26:27.

[58] *General Council of Trent, Twenty-Second Session*, "Chapter II: That the Sacrifice of the Mass is propitiatory both for the living and the dead," Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed October 3, 2025, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/twenty-second-session.htm. "If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema." (*Trent*, Session XXII, Canon III).

[59] *Trent*, Session XIII, Canon V. Papal Encyclicals Online, accessed October 3, 2025, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/thirteenth-session.htm. See also The Catechism of the Catholic Church where one is hard pressed to find the forgiveness of sins as a fruit of the Supper. Even when quoting Ambrose regarding the forgiveness of sins, the Catechism can only speak of "separation," "cleansing," and "preservation." (See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part II, Section Two, Chapter I, Article 3, "VI. The Paschal Banquet," Q. 1393. Vatican, accessed October 3, 2025, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P42.HTM).

and Zwingli's denial of the Body and the Blood) are understood to have the Word without the reality of the Sacraments. Rome, on the other hand, has the Sacramental reality without the unique authority of the Word. Luther would flip this on its head. Because Karlstadt rejects the sacramental reality of the body and the blood, he loses the power of the Word. Because Rome rejects the unique authority and saving strength of the Gospel, they lose the benefit of the Sacrament.

Protestantism is not pro-Word; it is anti-Sacrament, and this robs the Word of all its power. Rome is not pro-Sacrament; it is anti-Word, and this robs the Sacraments of their benefit. All of it is enthusiasm, a rejection of the external Word. "Everything," Luther reminds us, "depends on the Word."[60]

> The Word, the Word, the Word. Listen, lying spirit, the Word avails. Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours.[61]

Through the preached Word and the promises bound to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus Himself comes to us. He forgives our sins, breaks the power of death and the fear of it, rescues us from the devil, and gives life and salvation. He grants peace and joy to the heart, comfort and cleansing to the conscience. By His Word of promise He pours out His Spirit, gives faith toward Him, love for God and for one another, and hope in the life to come.

Through His Word His kingdom comes and His will is done on earth as in heaven. His Word shines with light and heavenly wisdom. It carries us through the troubles of this life and leads us at last into the new heavens and the new earth, where righteousness dwells. "Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments."[62]

May God grant it for Christ's sake. LSQ

[60] LW 40:214.
[61] LW 40:212–213.
[62] SA III.VIII.10.

# An Exploration of Luther's How Christians Should Regard Moses

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IN OUR LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS, PHILIPP Melanchthon says: "Nothing can be stated so clearly it cannot be misunderstood."[1] However, Martin Luther could have used a good editor. Luther's writings reflect the rhetorical style of his time, with hyperbole, exaggeration, and personal attacks. He seems to contradict himself, and sometimes he probably does. After all, his writings span several decades, as he went from pious and loyal medieval monk, concerned about certain church teachings of his time, to renowned Reformer who condemned the papacy for rejecting the gospel. Luther's sermon *How Christians Should Regard Moses* demonstrates direct pointed attacks amidst his deep theological and pastoral concern.

Lutherans recognize that we live with paradoxes in many aspects of life and theology: law and gospel, saint and sinner, the Trinity, the two natures in Christ, two kingdoms, etc. These are realities that go beyond human reason.

Luther expressed himself in so many different ways that a Roman Catholic opponent assembled a book of seven different "Luthers," just using quotations from his various writings. The title was the Seven-Headed Luther. We need to examine the context of Luther's writings to understand his maturing theology.

[1] Melanchthon: "Nothing can be said so simply that it cannot be distorted by caviling [quibbling, fussing, making unnecessary objections]" (Apology XII, 84, Triglotta 277). — *Nihil tam simpliciter dicitur, quod non queat depravari cavillando. / Denn so einfältig, so gewitzt und rein, so klar kann man nichts reden oder schreiben, man kann ihm mit Worten eine andere Nase machen.*

## Context of the Sermon: Karlstadt and Müntzer

Luther's writings of 1525 come at a time when he is battling false teaching and misapplication on every side. He is also maturing in his understanding of Scripture and its chief doctrines of justification, law and gospel, and the sacraments. These years brought challenges from Andreas Karlstadt who opposed images and statues in church, and from Thomas Müntzer who incited the Peasants' Rebellion.[2]

1521–1522 Luther's stay in the Wartburg Castle
1522 Luther's return to Wittenberg and the Invocavit sermons (against iconoclasm)
1523 German translation of the Pentateuch
1523–1527 Weekly sermon series on the books [of the Pentateuch]
1525 January: ***Against the Heavenly Prophets*** in the Matter of Images and Sacraments
1525 February: Deuteronomy commentary
1525 March: the Peasants' Wars
1525 May: *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*
1525 May: the Battle of Frankenhausen; Thomas Müntzer beheaded at Mühlhausen
1525 June: Luther and Katharina married
1525 August 27: sermon on Exodus 19: ***How Christians Should Regard Moses***
1525 The ***Bondage of the Will***
1525 Sermons on Exodus, lectures on the Twelve Prophets
1526 May: *How Christians Should Regard Moses*; a sermon pamphlet published
1528 *How Christians Should Regard Moses* included in *Explanation of the Ten Commandments*[3]

In 1521 at Christmas, Karlstadt introduced changes into the Wittenberg church services. Luther had not wanted to confuse the people with sudden changes without instructing and educating them first. In January 1522 Karlstadt wrote *On the Removal of Images*[4] and the city council approved the removal of statues from the churches. City councils were often in charge of church order in those times. In March,

[2] For more details, see How Christians Should Regard Moses in *The Annotated Luther*, 128–129

[3] Timeline from "How Christians Should Regard Moses, 1525." *The Annotated Luther: Word and Faith*, edited by Kirsi I. Stjerna et al., Augsburg Fortress, 2015, 127–52.

[4] *Von abtuhung der Bylder.*

Luther preached his Invocavit sermons about following the Word of God, and instructing the people before making changes in the church and the church service. In 1523 Luther began lectures on Deuteronomy. A recent book, cleverly titled *How Luther Regards Moses,*[5] explores how Luther's lectures on Deuteronomy, the "Fifth Book of Moses," had a large impact on his interaction with Karlstadt and Müntzer.

These were turbulent times for Luther. Foes wanted to kill him. Friends caused him distress. In *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, Luther takes Karlstadt and Müntzer to task for disrupting German society and misleading Christian believers. These two radical reformers misuse Scripture to destroy Christian art and to cause rebellion in German society. They purport to base their "principles" on Scripture, but they misunderstand the meaning and intent of God's Word.

Luther directs them to look at the context of Scripture and see to whom God is speaking. Is this Scripture passage for Old Testament Israel or for people of all time? Luther gives a great example of the importance of knowing to whom one is speaking.

> Here is an illustration. Suppose a housefather had a wife, a daughter, a son, a maid, and a hired man. Now he speaks to the hired man and orders him to hitch up the horses and bring in a load of wood, or drive over to the field, or do some other job. And suppose he tells the maid to milk the cows, churn some butter, and so on. And suppose he tells his wife to take care of the kitchen and his daughter to do some spinning and make the beds. All this would be the words of one master, one housefather. Suppose now the maid decided she wanted to drive the horses and fetch the wood, the hired man sat down and began milking the cows, the daughter wanted to drive the wagon or plow the field, the wife took a notion to make the beds or spin and so forgot all about the kitchen; and then they all said, "The master has commanded this, these are the housefather's orders!" Then what? Then the housefather would grab a club and knock them all in a heap, and say, "Although it is my command, yet I have not commanded it of you; I gave each of you your instructions, you should have stuck to them." … If, now, the housefather should say, "On Friday we are going to eat meat," this would be a word common to everybody in the house (LW 35:172).[6]

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[5] Hopgood, Miles. *How Luther Regards Moses: The Lectures on Deuteronomy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023).

[6] This statement is not intended to stereotype labor, but to illustrate authority.

This is a question we must always ask: "To whom is God speaking here?" Otherwise, the Bible can quickly become a book of rules, a way to tell fortunes, like horoscopes or tarot cards or the Chinese *I Ching*. The Bible is divine, but not for divination.

> One must deal cleanly with the Scriptures. From the very beginning the word has come to us in various ways. It is not enough simply to look and see whether this is God's word, whether God has spoken it; rather we must look and see to whom it has been spoken, whether it fits us. That makes all the difference between night and day. … The word in Scripture is of two kinds: the first does not pertain or apply to me, the other kind does. And upon that word which does pertain to me I can boldly trust and rely, as upon a strong rock. The false prophets pitch in and say, 'Dear people, this is the word of God.' This is true, we cannot deny it. But we are not the people to whom he speaks, God has not given us the directive (*How Christians Should Regard Moses*, WA, 16.385–386.26 ff.; LW 35:170).

The Scriptures are the inspired and inerrant Word of God, whether their message is intended directly to us or to tell us what God did for His people in the past, or what He instructed them to do. The Bible is history and prophecy, law and promise, prayer and poetry.

Luther's *Instruction on How Christians Should Regard Moses* (WA 24:1–16) is a powerful, but also intricately-woven sermon on how we should understand Moses' writings, especially the Old Testament law, or laws. The word "law" is used in various ways, even in our English religious context. When we speak of law, we may mean legal issues, or commands of God, or instruction. Moses, or Law of Moses, is mentioned about fifty times in the Lutheran Confessions. The Confessions also quote *Against the Heavenly Prophets* and *Bondage of the Will*, but not *How Christians Should Regard Moses.* When Luther says "Moses", he sometimes means the person, sometimes the writings of Moses, sometimes specific Old Testament laws, sometimes the whole law of God. Miles Hopgood tries to sort out Luther's confusing language.

> Here (as elsewhere), [Luther] is apt to use 'Moses' as shorthand or metonym[7] for the Mosaic Law[8] or the Pentateuch in addition to referring to the person of Moses. Yet he also refers to this abrogation as doing away with "Moses and all his laws." So there is a sense that not just the Law but something about Moses, even when rightly understood, has now been put away. Remarks like these are what have led some scholars to regard Luther as contradicting himself, but with the help of the lectures on Deuteronomy, we shall see that what Luther argues is internally consistent in how it approaches Moses (Hopgood, 183).

The fact that we are dealing with a sermon helps us understand the style. However, this sermon was also published twice during Luther's lifetime: as a preface to his *Sermons on Genesis*, and as a preface to his 1528 *Exposition of the Ten Commandments*.[9] Luther's rhetoric here was not a personal attack, but a repudiation of false teaching and wrongful action. Luther does not mention them by name in this sermon, but it is clear he is writing against Karlstadt's cavalier changes to worship and daily life, and Müntzer's reckless rebellion against authority. *The Annotated Luther* comments:

> Luther viewed Karlstadt and Müntzer as cut from the same cloth, and thus his arguments against [Karlstadt] regarding images and against [Müntzer] regarding the cause of the peasants are strikingly similar. For him, both share the error of attempting to impose Mosaic law on contemporary German church and society, and both,

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[7] To understand metonymy, consider how we speak of "Washington" to mean the United States government, or Congress, or the whole nation of the United States, or bureaucracy. "Washington" speaks to the world for the United States. But citizens want "Washington" to act with justice and fairness, to promote peace, and to defend our nation. So, for Luther, Moses can mean many things.

[8] We also have the difficulty of translating the word "law". The Greek gives us nomos (*νόμος*), which means "principle" or "law." The Hebrew has "judgment" (or justice, *mishpat*, מִשְׁפָּט) "command" (*mitzvah*, מִצְוָה), but also "statute" (חֻקָּה), and especially *torah* (תּוֹרָה) which means "instruction" but is also translated "law." The related word *moreh* (מוֹרֶה) means "teacher" or "instructor." The Law of Moses (תּוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה) is Moses' Torah, Moses' Instruction, not just the commands and judgments. Torah also means the Five Books of Moses. These books include history, genealogy, prophecy, and promises of God. When we read texts like Psalm 119, it is not just about "do this", but also "God has done this." The Ten Commandments in Hebrew are simply called the Ten Words (עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים Exod 34:28, Deut 4:13).

[9] WA 16, 363–393, text "A."

> through their failure to understand Moses correctly, threaten the peace and well-being of the land.[10]

Melanchthon states this plainly in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

> Neither does the Gospel bring new laws concerning the civil state, but commands that we obey present laws, whether they have been framed by heathen or by others, and that in this obedience we should exercise love. For Carlstadt was insane in imposing upon us the judicial laws of Moses (Triglotta Ap XVI:55).

The Peasants' War was a horrible event in European history. The death toll from battles and executions may have reached 100,000 or more. Modern society has a difficult time understanding some of the issues. Peasants were not free to move and work wherever they wished. In feudal society, lower classes were bound to stay on the same land and work for the same lord, while paying high taxes to government and church. The ideal of "freedom" was a novelty, and a dream previously unimaginable for many. The Peasants' War has been characterized from reckless rebellion to righteous revolution. Luther takes issue especially with the fact that Müntzer misused Scripture to justify his actions. Karlstadt's and Müntzer's actions are some of the events that led Luther to write this sermon.

In the sermon Luther finds three main things to look for in Moses:

> Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely, the **commandments** …
>
> In the second place, I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature, namely, the **promises and pledges of God about Christ**. This is the best thing. …

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[10] Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses, 1525," in *The Annotated Luther: Word and Faith*, ed. Brooks Schramm, Kirsi I. Stjerna et al. (Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 130.

Luther also wrote this on his view of reformation vs. revolution: "In short, I will preach the word, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no one 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. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe" [LW 51:77].

> In the third place, we read Moses for the **lovely examples of faith, love, and the cross**, [as shown] in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From these examples we should learn to trust and love God.[11]

## Eden: God Wrote Natural Law Into the Hearts of Mankind

Saint Paul in Romans summarizes the idea of conscience, and natural law being written in the hearts of all people, even if they do not have the written law of Moses:

> "for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness." (Rom 2:14–15 NKJV).

Natural law is known by people of all nations, not only Jews, but also Gentiles.[12] Every nation has laws against murder, stealing, and giving false testimony. Our conscience directs us to natural law to know that we are not perfect, to know that we owe our life and existence to God, and to know that things like murder, theft, adultery, and slander are wrong and make us guilty before God and mankind. The law was written in the heart of mankind from Creation. C. S. Lewis notes this also in his appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, quoting from Egyptian, Babylonian, Hindu, Jewish, Greek, Latin, Norse, English, and Chinese sources. He speaks of things such as family duties, justice, honesty, and mercy.

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[11] Luther: "How Christians Should Regard Moses, 1525." *The Annotated Luther: Word and Faith*, 143, 143, 149. The bracketed sections here are not in the translation in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, but supplemented from the Weimar Edition.

[12] "The existence of a natural, moral law grounded in creation is also basic, however, to Luther's own ethics. Just as was the case in the scholastic tradition of his day, Luther referred to Paul's teaching in Rom 2:15 as fundamental to his understanding of natural law. Paul's argument that God has written his law on the hearts of all men, a fact to which man's conscience bears witness, is taken up by Luther in Lectures on Romans (1515–1516) and equated with the Golden Rule and the Rule of Love: Natural law 'is impressed upon all, Jews as well as Gentiles; and all are therefore bound to obey it. In this sense our Lord says in Matt. 7:12: 'All things therefore whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also unto them; for this is the law and the prophets.' The whole law handed down to us is, therefore, nothing else than this natural law which everyone knows and on account of which no one is without excuse' (Luther 1961, 46). Or, as explained in the treatise *Temporal Authority* from 1523: "'Nature teaches, as does love, that I should do as I would have done to me'" (WA 11, 279:19; Kofoed, 117).

This understanding of natural law is also presented in the Lutheran Confessions, as in the *Formula of Concord*:

> "We therefore unanimously believe, teach and confess that in its strict sense the law is a divine teaching in which the righteous, unchanging will of God revealed how human beings were created in their nature, thoughts, words and deeds to be pleasing and acceptable to God" (SD V, 17, quoted in Nestingen).

Luther recognizes the natural law of God as universal, eternal, and unchangeable. It "cannot be unknown to anyone."[13] Korey Maas finds Luther to be consistent about this, quoting phrases from various lectures, including: *Bondage of the Will*, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, *Lectures on Genesis*, and *How Christians Should Regard Moses*.

> In a vein similar to Melanchthon, who understood this law to express 'the eternal and immutable wisdom and justice of God',[14] Luther also understood the divine will to be 'immutably just'; as God's 'nature never changes, so neither does his justice'.[15] Though the moral law might indeed be revealed most clearly in the Decalogue [Ten Commandments],[16] and similarly in the 'Golden Rule',[17] Luther also held with tradition that such biblical laws were merely republications of the natural law 'written by nature' on the hearts of all.[18] Most relevantly, the immutable status of natural law, and the contingent nature of the Mosaic law, prevented Luther, at least in principle, from subordinating the former to the latter (Maas, 72).

Luther writes very simply and plainly about natural law:

> To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text

[13] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1516), LW 25:180, quoted in Maas 72.
[14] Philip Melanchthon, *Oratio de legibus* (1550), CR 11:909.
[15] Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), LW 33:37.
[16] Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets* (1525), LW 40:98.
[17] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–36), LW 1:277–278.
[18] Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), LW 35:164.

> does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts (LW 35:164).
>
> Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature, etc. (LW 35:168; WA 16, 373:14).
>
> "Now where the law of Moses and natural laws are one and the same, the law remains and is not abrogated externally, except spiritually through faith, which is nothing else than fulfilling the law" (*Against the Heavenly Prophets* LW 40, 97; Kofoed, 123).

This law of our conscience accords with the eternal and immutable will of God. Natural law corresponds for the most part to the moral law of the Old Testament, summarized in the Ten Commandments. And yet Luther at times will say: Moses' Ten Commandments have nothing to do with us.[19] He is consistent, when we look at the context of why he uses different expressions.

Franz Pieper is also clear on this distinction between natural law, written in the human heart, and the Commandments as given to the Jews in Exodus 20.

> Only that is divine Law for all men which is taught in Holy Writ as binding on all. Not even the Ten Commandments in the form in which they were given to the Jews (Exodus 20) are binding on all men, but only the Ten Commandments as set down in the New Testament. (Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:532, quoted in Kofoed, 124).

### *Corrupt Conscience*

Living in a corrupt world, our understanding of law can become dulled. Sin inside of us and outside of us can wear us down and become so common that we no longer recognize what is right and wrong. We can become numbed to the feeling of guilt in our conscience. We rebel against God and establish our own corrupt ways. This necessitates God's

[19] LW 35:164.

written law, given in Holy Scripture, through Moses.[20] "Since [these precepts] are now obscured by sin, however, reason fails to identify them correctly, and humans must rely on God's proclaiming them outwardly" (Brown 64). Jesus and the apostles repeat and affirm these commandments of natural or moral law in the New Testament.

Luther's pastoral concern recognizes the effect of the law on the conscience in the life of the believer. He knows this from personal experience and what he sees in troubled parishioners. As a monk, Luther never felt that he had done enough to make up for his sin. He considered his sins so great and so many. The law in our conscience drives us to a sense of guilt and remorse. Luther says: "dear saints cannot bear the wrath of God."

> The [natural] Law is written in the depth of the heart; it cannot be removed, as one can see quite well in the psalms of lamentation where the dear saints cannot bear the wrath of God; this cannot be anything else but the feeling of the law's sermon in the conscience (WA 50, 471:23, *First and Second Disputation Against the Antinomians*, quoted in Kofoed 117–118).

Luther saw the monastic system as a way of choosing a path to earn favor with God, a system which says: "*These* prayers, *these* acts of worship, *this* schedule of work—*this* is what God wants." This happens throughout history. At Dan and Bethel, King Jeroboam of Israel set up altars as rivals to God's established place and system of worship in Jerusalem. The Pharisees and their spiritual descendants set meticulous stipulations for what constitutes "work" on the Sabbath. Christian Pietists do the same, forbidding what they consider worldly or frivolous or sinful—things that are not defined this way in Holy Scripture. In this way, we humans can try to convince ourselves that we have "kept the law."

The Law of God does not allow such wiggle room or such loopholes. The Commandments of the moral law and natural law are clear and all-encompassing. The purpose of the law is to make our sins clear and obvious to us.

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[20] "Luther considered Moses essential as an 'interpreter and illustrator of the biblical commandments in the minds of all men' (WA 39.1, 454:3, 15) precisely because man's depravity had obscured the natural law instinct. Without the biblical confirmation of what had been obscured by the fall, i.e. the natural law given in creation to all men, there would be no *Christian* ethics, only a dim, unreliable light," Kofoed 122.

> Thus, we see that these many laws of Moses were not only given so that no one might choose their own way of doing good and living well, as was said above, but much more so that sins might simply become numerous and be piled up beyond measure. The purpose was to burden the conscience so that the hardened blindness would have to recognize itself and feel its own inability and nothingness in the achieving of good. Such blindness must be thus compelled and coerced through the law to seek something beyond the law and its own ability, namely, God's grace promised in Christ who was to come. For every law of God is good and right, even if it only refers to carrying manure or gathering straw. Accordingly, whoever does not keep this good law—or keeps it reluctantly—can neither be pious nor of a good heart. Thus, nature itself can do nothing other than keep it reluctantly (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament* 57–58).

Luther also recognized that the "law" and the Commandments can be misunderstood and misused. It is not just outright murder, stealing, and adultery that are condemned, but we are required to show love for our neighbor in all that we do. In the *Small Catechism*, he says we should not get our neighbor's money or goods "in ***any dishonest*** way"; we should not lie against our neighbor, nor "***craftily*** seek to gain our neighbor's inheritance or home, nor get it by a ***show of right*** [legal maneuvering]"; we should not "***coax away*** from our neighbor his wife or his workers." Love for God and for our neighbor should be the motivation that drives us to treat our neighbor fairly and justly, as we wish to be done to us. Jesus says the greatest commandments are: "Love the Lord your God" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39, NKJV). Saint Paul summarizes this: "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:10, NKJV). Luther writes:

> For nature teaches the same as love: I ought to do what I would have done unto me. And therefore I may not rob another, however good my claim, since I myself do not want to be robbed. What I would wish in such a case is that the other person should relinquish his right; and therefore I ought also to relinquish mine. And this is how ill-gotten gains should be treated, whether they were come by secretly or openly, so that love and natural law will always prevail. For when you judge in accordance with love, you will distinguish and decide all things easily, without law-books.[21]

[21] WA 11,279: 19; Kofoed 119, quoted from Tappert 1967, 128; *Temporal Authority*, 1523. The quotation continues: "But if you remove the law of love and nature, you will

*Catechisms*

Luther treasures the Ten Commandments and places them first in his Catechisms. The Commandments are to be part of our Christian life—not merely for display, but recited and put into practice. "Luther wrote that he recited the Decalogue every morning—together with the creed, the Lord's Prayer, and some psalms—and suggested a daily 'hymn on the Ten Commandments' for morning family devotions" (Brown, 65).

> Therefore, it is not without reason that the Old Testament commands men to write the Ten Commandments on every wall and corner, and even on their garments. Not that we are to have them merely for display, as the Jews did, but we are to keep them incessantly before our eyes and constantly in our memory (*Book of Concord* 410; compare 360, quoted in Brown, 65).

Luther even wrote a hymn on the Ten Commandments to make these teachings easier to remember. It was published in the first Lutheran hymnbooks in 1524. Stanza 11 notes the purpose of the law to show us our sinfulness.

1. These are the holy Ten Commands
Which God the Lord placed in our hands
Through faithful Moses in the cloud,
On Sinai's mount, high and proud.
Have mercy, Lord!

2. I am your only God and Lord;
No other gods shall be adored.
But you shall fully trust in Me,
With all your heart, loving me.
Have mercy, Lord!

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never hit on what is pleasing to God, even if you had swallowed all the law-books and the lawyers. On the contrary, the more you think about [what you learn from them], the more insane you become. Good judgment is not to be found in books, but from free good sense, as if there were no books. But it is love and natural law, with which all reason is filled, that confer such good judgment. From the books come oppressive and uncertain judgments."

11. To us God gave these Ten Commands
That you might learn, O child of man,
Your sinfulness and also know
To live for God, as you go.
Have mercy, Lord!

12. Lord Jesus Christ, now help us all,
Our Mediator from the Fall,
Our works are all so full of sin,
But You for us heav'n did win.
Have mercy, Lord![22]

When Jesus teaches the Ten Commandments in the New Testament, He makes them expansive and internal, not just a matter of outward actions—as we associate with the Pharisees and modern Judaism—but a matter of the heart. Jesus removes any possibility of misunderstanding the intent of the commandments, directed to the heart and soul.

> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matt 5:21–22, NKJV).

Karlstadt sought to control outward actions of idolatry by removing statues and artwork.[23] Luther understood that sin is in the heart and not simply in outward gestures. This is why he explains each commandment with the phrase: "We should fear and love God…"[24]

[22] ELH 490.

[23] "[W]ith regard to Karlstadt's iconoclasm, idolatrous images in the heart must be removed and not merely statues of wood and stone. As a matter of the heart, idolatry cannot be reduced to mere human artifacts." Mattes 80, his review of Miles Hopgood's *How Luther Regards Moses*.

[24] "Of these two parts the adversaries select the Law, because human reason naturally understands, in some way, the Law (for it has the same judgment divinely written in the mind); [the natural law agrees with the law of Moses, or the Ten Commandments] and by the Law they seek the remission of sins and justification. Now, the Decalog requires not only outward civil works, which reason can in some way produce, but it also requires other things placed far above reason, namely, truly to fear God, truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that God hears us, and to expect the aid of God in death and in all afflictions; finally, it requires obedience to God, in death

### *Motivation*

The law can only have a negative effect, always accusing us (*semper accusans*). It can never motivate us to love. It is the **mirror** that shows our sin. It is the **curb** that checks us when we are going astray. It is the **guide** for Christian life, but never the driving force to carry out that Christian life; only the Gospel can do that.[25]

Divine law shows us that we cannot fulfill it and therefore we need salvation.[26] This devastates all man-made practices that seek to earn favor with God. "Do this and you shall live" applies only to divine commands, and never leads to salvation, but intends to bring about repentance.

Luther also notes that the Commandments of God are holy and correct, in accord with the eternal and immutable will of God. Self-chosen and man-made works cannot save us, even if we were able to keep them perfectly, which we are not. The commands of God are beyond our ability to fulfill because we are sinful and surrounded by sinfulness. We cannot be "holy and perfect as your Father in heaven is holy and perfect" (Matt 5:48, NKJV). God's Commandments drive us sinners to seek the mercy and compassion of God.

> We are therefore not surprised to read, in his concluding comment, that the commandments "are precious, and dear above all other teachings (*omnibus aliis doctrinis*), the greatest treasure given by God." Elsewhere, Luther applied this language to Jesus Christ and to the gospel that proclaims him, but there is no contradiction. He believed that, by instructing humanity about God's will for all of life, the Decalogue provided the scaffolding for a form of life that has the gospel at the center. The first commandment implicitly insists upon that center, for it tells us to "fear, love, and trust God

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and all afflictions, so that we may not flee from these or refuse them when God imposes them" (Ap IV 7–8).

[25] "Luther lectures his congregation in this sermon on the folly of legislating our response to the neighbor, whether by the natural law or any other system of moral rules. As he describes it, the law is purely negative in its function: it cannot tell us (because of our sin) what is the good that we should do, but can only work to prevent us from doing evil…" Kofoed, 119, quoting Pearson (2010, 19; 26).

[26] George Lindbeck makes an interesting observation that, in the Catechisms, Luther never called the Ten Commandment "law" (*lex, Gesetz*), but calls them teaching (*doctrina*) or commandments (*praeceptum, Gebot, mandatum*).

> "In these texts, though not always elsewhere, 'law' never refers to God's commandments, but only to human enactments, especially papal ones that illicitly claim divine sanction" Brown, 63.

> above all things," and we cannot do this without the gospel, "which teaches us to know God perfectly… in order to help us do what the Ten Commandments require" (Brown, 65-66; Tappert, 411).

Luther talks about self-chosen works as opposed to the eternal laws of God.[27] It is easy to make our own laws so that we can live up to them and fulfill them. But God's laws are universal and deal not only with actions, but also our minds and our hearts. They include our relationship to God as well as our fellow man.[28] In our sinful state and in our sinful world, we can never keep the law of God, because we are sinners. Moses' purpose then is to show our guilt, to expose the fact that we cannot save ourselves.

## Sinai: God's First Great Public Sermon. God Gave Written Law Through Moses (Exodus 19–20)

Luther frames his sermon *How Christians Should Regard Moses* around what he calls two great public sermons from heaven. These sermons were spoken with the voice of God: the first, from Mount Sinai; the second, on Pentecost. Luther notes that God had spoken with patriarchs many other times, but on Mount Sinai, God made himself known in fire, smoke, earthquake, trumpet, and "by voice."

> God has spoken many times through and with men on earth, as in the case of the holy patriarchs Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others, down to Moses. But in none of these cases did he speak with such glorious splendor, visible reality, or public cry and exclamation as he did on those two occasions [at Mount Sinai and at Pentecost]. …
>
> Now the first sermon is in Exodus 19 and 20; by it God caused himself to be heard from heaven with great splendor and might.

[27] Luther treated the denigration of uncommanded works as liberating, rather than limiting. He argued that humans invent laws that they can fulfill in order to escape from the impossibility of fulfilling divine commands, but find their own laws oppressive precisely because salvation is made to depend on their fulfillment. The divine law, therefore liberates from the expectation of fulfillment. Luther had in mind, specifically, the suffocating medieval panoply of ascetic, monastic, and religious practices, which, he argued, were unwarranted by Scripture and turned people away from "all that God wishes us to do or not to do," namely, the Ten Commandments, Brown 64; Tappert, 411.

[28] "In addition to teaching men consideration for one another as it is formulated in the Golden Rule, Luther, in *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525) adds a second characteristic trait of natural law in that it teaches all men the duty of worshiping God: 'Nature provides that one should call upon God; the pagans attest to this, too. For there has never been a pagan who did not call upon his idols'" (LW 35:168; Kofoed, 119).

> For the people of Israel heard the trumpets and the voice of God himself (LW 35:161).[29]

This caused fear among the people.

> Now all the people witnessed the thunderings, the lightning flashes, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off. Then they said to Moses, "You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exod 20:18–19).

Luther distinguishes between the Commandments as part of natural law, and the Commandments as given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

> But the other commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men] by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others equally fine which I wish we had too. Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely, the commandments to which I am not bound except insofar as they are [implanted in everyone] by nature [and written in everyone's heart] (LW 35:168).

The commandments given to Moses included items specific to the Jewish people. We know this because of how God addresses the people, both at Sinai and also in other places, including the New Testament.

> These are two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men (LW 35:164).

Luther boldly "rejects" the Ten Commandments as given through Moses, because they are in a context of God doing specific things for Israel. And so, these words are directed here to Israel as the chosen Old Testament people of God. Here again we must ask: To whom is God speaking? To Israel? To all people? These *are* the words of God.

[29] "Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice." (Exod 19:18–19, NKJV).

In Scripture, we sometimes learn what God has done for Israel or what He wants them to do. We sometimes learn what God has done for the Apostles or what He wants them to do. We sometimes learn what God has done for us and all people or what He wants us to do. We are not bound to the words and commands specifically spoken to others.

> That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved from Exodus 20:1, where God himself speaks, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that [TAL: just leave that be]. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law (LW 35:164).
>
> For example in the account of the ten lepers, that Christ bids them go to the priest and make sacrifice [Luke 17:14] does not pertain to me. The example of their faith, however, does pertain to me; I should believe Christ, as did they (LW 35:174).

### *Moses' Other Laws*

Besides a clear, written repetition of natural law, Moses also gives additional laws that pertain to the religious and civil life of Old Testament Israel. These laws were a shadow to show the sacrifice of Christ, God's own Son, for the sins of the world.

> Now, see with what force Moses conducts and performs this office of his. For in order to put nature to the utmost shame, he not only gives laws like the Ten Commandments that speak of natural and true sins, but he also makes sins of things that are by nature not sins. … But that one is not to eat leavened bread at Passover, or not to eat an unclean animal, or that one is not to make a mark on one's body, and everything else that the Levitical priesthood deals with as sin—these are not by nature sin and evil. They become sins only because they are forbidden through the law, a law that can now be abrogated. The Ten Commandments, however, cannot be abrogated, for there is sin here, even if there were no commandments, or even if they were not recognized—just as the heathen's unbelief is sin,

even though they do not know or regard it as sin (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament* 57).

Circumcision and the law of Moses, however, were not implanted in men's hearts; they were first imposed by Abraham and Moses on their people (LW 47:90; Kofoed, 126).

Circumcision and the law of Moses are only valid until the Messiah comes, and then the Messiah will teach them another law (Deut. 18[:18]), which he in fact did. But they did not want to accept it (TAL, *Schem Hamphoras*, 657).[30]

These laws of Moses were for the people of Israel, either as a religious community or as a nation. Moses was both religious prophet or spokesman for God, and also the national leader of these people who had been delivered from slavery in Egypt.

Here the law of Moses has its place [*TAL: pertaining only to the Jews*]. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. (*How Christians* LW 35:164)

Moses' legislation about images and the sabbath, and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null and void, and is specifically given to the Jewish people alone. It is as when an emperor or a king makes special laws and ordinances in his territory, as the *Sachsenspiegel*[31] in Saxony, and yet common natural laws such as to honor parents, not to kill, not to commit adultery, to serve God, etc., prevail and remain in all lands. Therefore one is to let Moses be the *Sachsenspiegel* of the Jews and not to confuse us gentiles with it, just as the *Sachsenspiegel* is not observed in France, though the natural law there is in agreement with it (LW 40:98; Kofoed, 125).

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[30] Side note in TAL: A consistent teaching of Luther's: the law of Moses terminates with the coming of the Messiah. Thus, rabbinic Judaism follows and explicates a law that is no longer in force. This is what he means when he says that "the Jews do not have a single word of or from God." See esp. his sermon How Christians Should Regard Moses, TAL 2:127–51; LW 35:161–74.

[31] Lull, *How Christians*, 111fn2 on *Sachsenspiegel:*

"This 'Saxon code of law' was a thirteenth-century compilation of the economic and social laws obtaining in and around Magdeburg and Halberstadt; it was influential in the codification of German law until the nineteenth century. The radical Reformers sometimes sought to replace it with the law of Moses or the Sermon on the Mount."

The "Law of Moses" did not pertain to other nations, nor to us today. For Christians, the Law of Moses has ended because it has been fulfilled in Christ.

> While Luther acknowledges that there are different kinds of laws, such distinctions between laws do not matter when it comes to how the Christian relates to the Mosaic Law. To accept any by virtue of Moses's authority or command is to accept them all, for in that light they are interconnected and cannot be separated from one another. For Luther, the authority of Moses to command cannot be selectively preserved or applied. Thus, he rejects the interpretation of Mosaic Law as a command which is binding on the Christian, regardless of its form or content (Hopgood, 184–185).

Since Luther begins his Catechisms with the Ten Commandments, perhaps it is surprising and astonishing when he writes that "Moses has nothing to do with us."[32] But this is not an indiscriminate statement. We must read it in context and according to Luther's intention. Luther does not reject Moses and the Ten Commandments. But Luther says he rejects the Ten Commandments ***as given by Moses***, because Moses also includes provisions in the Commandments that are not part of moral law or natural law.

Moses has a prohibition against making graven images. This was not for all people of all time. It was for the people of Israel because they were so prone to go after foreign idols like the golden calf of Egypt, and later after Baal and Asherah of the Canaanites. Even that prohibition was not against all making of images, statues, and art. God **commanded** His Old Testament people **to make decorations** for the Temple. God **commanded** Moses to make a **bronze serpent** to save the people from the punishment of the poisonous snakes. Israel kept that bronze serpent until the people later began to offer incense to it. When it became an idol, it was destroyed by King Hezekiah. Joshua and Samuel set up **memorial towers of stones** to commemorate God's work at the Jordan River and at Mizpah.[33] Solomon built **statues of bulls** to hold up the laver, the sacred wash-basin, of the Temple. **Israel made graven images at God's command, but not to worship them.**

[32] LW 35:164

[33] Hopgood, 177–178

*Biblicism Tries to Apply Old Testament Laws to Christians Today.*

The use of images and statues had been a church controversy in the past, but the church saw the use of images and even the veneration of icons not as worship of idols but as veneration of the "reality of what is there represented," according to the Second Council of Nicea in AD 787.[34]

There are times when Luther himself seems to speak against images. If they become the object of our worship and admiration, they can become idols or false gods. Images, properly used, should direct our hearts and our thoughts to the blessings of God. A cross or crucifix should remind us that Christ died for our sins. A painting of an event in Jesus' life in church or home can direct our thoughts to our Savior. A painting or sculpture can be a representation of the teachings of God's Word, without actual words.

A painting of Adam and Eve can remind us of God's creation of Paradise. It also reminds us of our sin. A statue of Moses can remind us of the Ten Commandments. David and his harp remind us of the many psalms we know and use to honor our God. Scenes of the nativity, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Christ speak Law and Gospel in their own way.

Karlstadt, on the other hand, speaks very strongly against images, even advocating violent destruction, based on the example of Gideon destroying the pagan idols in the Old Testament. In Karlstadt's mind, this "Commandment" not to make graven images advocated for destroying statues and paintings in the church. He was misreading and misunderstanding the commandment. God was not speaking to all people, but to Old Testament Israel. Karlstadt said:

> Thus images bring death to those who worship or venerate them. Therefore, our temples might be rightly called murderers' caves, because in them our spirit is stricken and slain. May the Devil reward the popes who thus bring death and destruction upon us. It

[34] The Second Nicene Council (AD 787) states that "according to ancient custom" "salutation and honourable reverence" may be offered to images, vestments, pictures, paintings, mosaics, artistic representations and allows reverence or veneration but not worship of these images. "For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 14, 1021–1022.

> would be a thousand times better if they [the images] were set up in hell or the fiery furnace than in the houses of God (Karlstadt, 22).[35]

Karlstadt's understanding even leads to a different numbering of the Commandments in various denominations. Lutherans and Roman Catholics speak of the Second Commandment as "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." But for the Reformed and for Judaism, the Second Commandment is "You shall not make for yourselves any graven image." There are churches yet today that forbid paintings and statues. Some will not even allow a cross in their churches. Sadly, that is part of the legacy of Karlstadt and the fanatics.

According to Luther, Karlstadt reads the command about images through the single word "**make**"—"do not **make** for yourselves any graven [or carved] image."[36] Luther says we should understand all the commandments through the complete sense of the First Commandment. "*You shall have no other gods*." If we "**fear, love, and trust in God** above all things," as Luther explains, then all the other things will follow. The prohibition against images was not so much about making them, as not to worship them or bow down to them. There were not to be idols, competing with the true God. The complete prohibition reads:

[35] Luther opposed this action by Karlstadt, Müntzer, and others.
"Here I must digress to discuss our new prophets," writes Luther, "who boast that they are impelled by the First Commandment (even though they are not Jewish, but Christian) to destroy images by resorting to violence." Though, like Müntzer, Karlstadt is never mentioned here by name, we can be confident that he is the one Luther has in mind for several reasons. First, in 1522, Karlstadt had published a treatise on the removal of images which opens with an appeal to the First Commandment: "To have images in churches and houses of God is wrong and contrary to the First Commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me.'" Not only is this a direct reference to the First Commandment, but Karlstadt makes clear that he understands that command is applied to Christians exactly as it is applied to Jews. "I cannot deny and must confess," he writes, "that God rightly says to our alleged Christians what he here says to the Jews." Not only the commands but the teachings of Moses help provide Karlstadt his support. "Moses says, 'Teach your children the word of God from their youth onward' [Deut 4:10]. [Pope] Gregory [I], however, says, 'Let lay persons use images instead of books.'" The implication is, of course, that by permitting images Gregory went against Moses, whose authority remains intact. With Moses as his centerpiece, Karlstadt will articulate a relationship between the old and new law that all but abolishes a distinction between the two. Recall again how strongly Karlstadt argues for the preservation of Mosaic Law in Christianity (Hopgood, 135–136).

[36] "[T]hese spirits cling to the little word 'make' and stubbornly insist, 'Make, make is something else than to worship,' … It is not valid, however, to pick out one word and keep repeating it. One must consider the meaning of the whole text in its context." [*Against the Heavenly Prophets*, WA 18:69; LW 40:86], noted in Hopgood, 176.

> You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; **you shall not bow down to them nor serve them.** (Exod 20:4–5, NKJV).

"You shall not make; you shall not bow down" are additions to clarify what it means to have another god, in other words, to "fear, love, and trust" in something other than the true God "who brought you out of Egypt." Even Karlstadt did not apply this command universally. He did not object to other graven images on coins or jewelry.[37] So even his contention against "making" images was inconsistent. Karlstadt is inconsistent and does not apply the whole law of Moses.

> [Luther notes] that Karlstadt is being selective in what parts of the law are binding. "The command to kill Gentiles is as explicit here as the command to destroy images," writes Luther, "if they affirm the one, they must necessarily concede the other." (Hopgood 137)

*Fanatics Impose Sabbatarianism and Prohibit Art and Music.*

Luther recognized the danger of accepting Moses' law as binding on Christians. It is similar to what Saint Paul dealt with. To impose one part of Moses' ceremonial law would be to put oneself under all the regulations of the Old Testament. "To apply Moses as Karlstadt does and make the laws binding on Christians is 'to draw us into Judaism,' Luther remarks."[38]

> We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, 'Thus says Moses,' and so forth. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service. (LW 35:164; Ilany 44)
>
> For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to

[37] Hopgood, 178
[38] Hopgood, 138

> be clever, and think they know something more than is presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before (LW 35:164; Hopgood, 138).

Karlstadt and Müntzer did not consider the context and audience of Moses' laws. They simply noted that it was "God's word, God's word," without asking who the audience is. (LW 35:174)

> For many religious radicals, the Bible, including the Old Testament, provided a model for conduct, religious observance, and even for solving intellectual and scientific problems. This was more than irrational bibliolatry, but rather in their eyes the practical application of the divine knowledge revealed to the Jews in the word of God. So too had Thomas Munzer and his rebellious German peasants in the 1520s raised the cry of "God's word, God's word." "But my dear fellow," Luther objected, "the question is whether it was said to you" (Katz, 65, referencing LW 35:171).

### *Sabbath, A Day of Rest*

The Sabbath prohibition on work (whether on Saturday or Sunday) was another of Karlstadt's concerns. Moses has a command not to work on the Sabbath, inserted into the Ten Commandments.

> Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. (Exod 20:9–10 KJV).

There are groups today that insist that worship must be on Saturday, the Old Testament Sabbath, and also that no work must be done on those days. This is one form of Sabbatarianism. Some even insist on following the dietary laws of Leviticus with clean and unclean animals. But we should remember that the early Christians gathered on Sundays (1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10), commemorating our Lord's rising from the dead, on Easter Sunday. We have freedom in this because our Lord Jesus made it clear that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). Regarding food and festivals, the Lord sent His vision to Peter (Acts 10:9-16) to declare that all food is

now available to eat. Saint Paul also refuses to let people judge believers for food or drink or ceremonies, while at the same time, in certain circumstances, voluntarily abstaining from certain foods for the sake of weaker consciences. These ceremonies are "shadows of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Col 2:16-17).[39] Luther comments:

> It is not necessary to observe the Sabbath or Sunday because of Moses' commandment. Nature also shows and teaches that one must now and then rest a day, so that human beings and beasts may be refreshed. This natural reason Moses also recognized in his Sabbath law, for he places the Sabbath under human beings, as also Christ does (Matt. 12[:1ff.] and Mark 3[:2ff.]). For where [Sabbath] is kept for the sake of rest alone, it is clear that one who does not need rest may break the Sabbath and rest on some other day, as nature allows. The Sabbath is also to be kept for the purpose

[39] "They add hereunto testimonies of Scripture. Christ, Matt 15, 3, defends the Apostles who had not observed the usual tradition, which, however, evidently pertains to a matter not unlawful, but indifferent, and to have a certain affinity with the purifications of the Law, and says, 15, 9: In vain do they worship Me with the commandments of men. He, therefore, does not exact an unprofitable service. Shortly after He adds: Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man. So also Paul, Rom 14, 17: The kingdom of God is not meat and drink. Col. 2, 16: Let no man, therefore, judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy-day, or of the Sabbath-day; also: If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances: Touch not, taste not, handle not! And Peter says, Acts 15, 10: Why tempt ye God to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. Here Peter forbids to burden the consciences with many rites, either of Moses or of others. And in 1 Tim 4, 1. 3 Paul calls the prohibition of meats a doctrine of devils; for it is against the Gospel to institute or to do such works that by them we may merit grace, or as though Christianity could not exist without such service of God" (Ap 26: 22–29, Triglotta).

Again, the authors of traditions do contrary to the command of God when they find matters of sin in foods, in days, and like things, and burden the Church with bondage of the law, as if there ought to be among Christians, in order to merit justification a service like the Levitical, the arrangement of which God had committed to the Apostles and bishops. For thus some of them write; and the Pontiffs in some measure seem to be misled by the example of the law of Moses. Hence are such burdens, as that they make it mortal sin, even without offense to others, to do manual labor on holy-days, a mortal sin to omit the Canonical Hours, that certain foods defile the conscience that fastings are works which appease God that sin in a reserved case cannot be forgiven but by the authority of him who reserved it; whereas the Canons themselves speak only of the reserving of the ecclesiastical penalty, and not of the reserving of the guilt. (Ap 28: 39–41, Triglotta).

of preaching and hearing the word of God (LW 40:98, quoted in TAL, *Large Catechism* Side-Note, 88).

Sabbatarianism insists on setting a specific day for rest and worship in a legalistic way. Sabbatarian legalism became an even more important issue among the Reformed later on, especially in England, and in other lands strongly affected by Pietism. Work and entertainment were forbidden by law in these places. Luther made a point of confession against this, and so did Calvin and some other reformers.

> "If anywhere the day is made holy for the mere day's sake," Luther advised, "then I order you to work on it, to ride on it, to feast on it, to do anything to remove this reproach from Christian liberty."[40] Calvin made a point of playing at bowls on Sunday to demonstrate his own attitude to the question. [41] Tyndale protested that "we be lords over the Saboth (*sic*) and may yet change it into the Monday, or any other day, as we see need… Neither needed we any holy day at all, if the people might be taught without it"[42] (Katz, 61).

There is an astonishing statement from England about this prohibition against work on Sunday. Breaking this "commandment" by working or enjoying entertainment on Sunday was seen as equally evil as committing adultery.

> Until the later sixteenth century, the English Protestant position regarding the Sabbath was similar to that which prevailed in Reformed circles on the Continent. During the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI the Church in England took a middle ground: with the Lutherans they denounced the superstitious observance of the Lord's Day, but with the Catholics they promoted Sunday as a day given over in normal circumstances to worship, good works, and religious education.[43] By 1573, however, Richard Fletcher, a future bishop of London, could complain that it "is said crediblelly in the

[40] Katz' footnote: Quoted in C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, 2nd ed. (Secker & Warburg, 1967), 210.

[41] Katz' footnote: R. Cox, *The Whole Doctrine of Calvin about the Sabbath* (Edinburgh, 1860), 91.

[42] Katz' footnote: William Tyndale, "An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue," ed. H. Walter, Parker Society 38 (1850): 97–98.

[43] Katz' footnote: Knappen, Puritanism, 445–446; Hill, Society, 149–150: see for example, 5 & 6 Edw. VI, c.3 (repealed under Mary but re-enacted in 1604) which authorized harvest labour on Sunday "or at any times in the year when necessity shall require to labour, ride, fish or work any kind of work, at their free wills and pleasure."

> countrie that sell him in fayre on the Sunday; that it is as ill to play at games as shouting [shooting], bowlinge on Sundaye as to lye with your neyghbors wiffe on Munday"[44] (Katz, 61).

As remnants of these Sabbatarian concerns, there are still some "blue laws" in America today.

Our Lutheran Confessions reject this legalism and embrace the freedom brought through the work of Christ.

> Scripture has abrogated the Sabbath-day; for it teaches that, since the Gospel has been revealed, all the ceremonies of Moses can be omitted. And yet, because it was necessary to appoint a certain day, that the people might know when they ought to come together, it appears that the Church designated the Lord's Day for this purpose; and this day seems to have been chosen all the more for this additional reason, that men might have an example of Christian liberty, and might know that the keeping neither of the Sabbath nor of any other day is necessary (Ap 28: 59–60, Triglotta).
>
> For the Gospel frees us from these Levitical impurities [from all the ceremonies of Moses, and not alone from the laws concerning uncleanness] (Ap 23: 41–42, Triglotta).

### *Moses' Main Office Was Lawgiver: to Proclaim the Law, to Convict Sinners*

All Scripture ***IS*** the Word of God. All Scripture has the point and purpose of proclaiming Christ as Savior of the world. This was done particularly through the Old Testament people of Israel, to keep the promise alive, and to fulfill God's prophecies in their Descendant, Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and the Son of David.

Luther believes that Moses' main office in the Old Testament was to proclaim law in order to convict sinners so that they will turn to Christ. In *The Annotated Luther* on *Preface to the Old Testament*, Brooks Schramm notes:

> It is in this context that Luther explicates Moses's proper office in the lives of Christians, namely, the revelation of sin and of human inability, and of death as the punishment for the same. On the one hand, Christians should not confuse Moses with Christ[,] or law

[44] Katz' footnote: Dr. Williams's Lib., MS Morrice B II, f. 9v: quoted in P. Collinson, "The Beginning of English Sabbatarianism," *Studies in Church History* 1 (1964): 208.

> with gospel; yet, on the other hand, Christians must recognize the indispensable and ongoing role that Moses and the law play in the service of Christ (Introduction by Schramm in TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament*, 45).

For Luther, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is central to both Old and New Testament. He notes that Moses had the express purpose of being the **lawgiver for Israel** to proclaim God's law and to bring about repentance.

Moses was the ultimate judge appointed by the people, and he was assisted by elders of Israel. We expect a law book to be written and organized according to categories: moral law, civil law, ceremonial law. But Moses records these laws in a seemingly disorderly fashion. Luther also understands the chaotic nature of life. Luther was not a systematician. Perhaps that helped him be more comfortable in Moses' writings which intersperse topics here and there. He explains the disorderly arrangement of the laws as being a record of events as Moses dealt with them. Luther understands this to be the way events happened for Moses. He dealt with this case and then another among the people. Civil and ceremonial laws were recorded, mixed together, as events happened, almost like a pastoral or judicial log of verdicts. Moses dealt with keeping vows, with manslaughter and injury, with damage done by domestic animals, with stealing of property. Luther views this as a picture of life as it happens.

> But why does Moses arrange the laws in such a disorderly manner? Why does he not put the secular ones together in one group, the spiritual ones in another, and the ones concerning faith and love in still another? In addition, he sometimes repeats a law so often and inculcates the same kind of thing so many times that it becomes tedious to read it or listen to it. The answer is that Moses writes as the situation demands, such that his book is an image and example of governing and living. For this is the way it happens in real life: sometimes this work has to be done and sometimes another. Insofar as life is to be lived in a godly manner, no one can so arrange their life that they practice purely spiritual laws on one day and purely secular laws on another. Rather, God governs with all the laws mixed together— like the stars in the heavens and the flowers in the fields—such that a person must be ready for anything at any time and do whatever the situation requires. Thus, the book of Moses is a

mixture of different kinds of laws (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament*, 54).

Luther regards Moses as the "consummate lawgiver." Moses had given the Law already at Mount Sinai. The people then wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. During this time, countless law cases arose for Moses and his assistant judges to settle. In his fifth book (Deuteronomy), Moses gives the law again and also lists many individual circumstances, indicating the outcome and judgment. Deuteronomy, the Greek name for this Fifth Book of Moses, which we have adopted into English, means "second law," because it is a second giving of the law.

> In the fifth book [Deuteronomy], after the people have been punished for their disobedience, and God has enticed them a little with grace, in order that by the benevolence of giving them the two kingdoms they might be moved to keep God's law with delight and love, Moses then repeats the entire law. He repeats the stories of what had happened to them (except for that which concerns the priesthood) and explains anew everything that belongs either to the bodily or to the spiritual government of a people. Thus, Moses, as a consummate lawgiver, fulfilled all the duties of his office. He not only gave the law but was also there when it was supposed to be practiced. When things went wrong, he explained and re-established it. But this explanation in the fifth book [Deuteronomy] really contains nothing else than faith toward God and love toward one's neighbor, for all of the laws of God come to that. Therefore, down to the twentieth chapter, Moses, with his explanation, opposes everything that might destroy faith in God; and from there to the end of the book he opposes everything that hinders love. (TAL *Preface to the Old Testament* 51)

In this office, Moses exposes sin. Because of God's universal moral law, written in the hearts of mankind, there is no escape. Saint Paul summarizes what the Psalmist also says: "There is none that does good, no, not one" (Ps 14:3, Ps 53:3, Rom 3:12). This is why Luther so boldly and adamantly states in his explanation to the Third Article of the Creed: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." The law reveals our sin and our helplessness.

> In the third place, the true meaning of Moses is that through the law he reveals sin and puts to shame all presumption as to human

> ability. For this reason St. Paul, in Gal. 2[:17], calls him "an officer of sin," and in 2 Cor. 3[:7] he calls his office "an office of death." In Rom 3[:20] and 7[:7] he says, "Through the law comes nothing but the knowledge of sin"; and again in Rom 3[:20], "Through works of the law no one becomes pious before God." For through the law Moses can do no more than indicate what one ought and ought not to do. However, he does not provide the strength and ability for such doing and not doing, and thus leaves us stuck in sin. When we are stuck in sin, death quickly presses in upon us as vengeance and punishment for sin. That is why St. Paul calls sin "death's sting," because it is through sin that death has all of its rights and power over us. (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament*, 55)

One of Moses' main purposes was to bring about repentance, so that believers would seek salvation not in their own works, but in God's promises, fulfilled in Christ, and delivered in the means of grace. Luther says:

> See, then, Moses's office is necessary for driving away this blindness and hardened presumption. Now, he cannot drive them away unless he reveals them and makes them known. He does this through the law, when he teaches that one ought to fear, trust, believe, and love God; and, in addition, one ought to have or bear no evil desire or hatred for anyone. But when nature hears this correctly, it must be frightened, for it surely perceives neither trust nor faith, neither fear nor love toward God, and neither love nor purity toward the neighbor. Rather, it perceives pure unbelief, doubt, contempt, and hatred toward God, and pure evil will and desire toward the neighbor. But when it finds these things, then death is quickly before its eyes, wanting to gorge on such a sinner and to gobble them up in hell. (TAL *Preface to the Old Testament* 56)

Old Testament and New Testament have distinct purposes, but the same content of law and gospel. Luther uses "Moses" and "Christ" as shorthand for the distinction between law and gospel, but Luther recognized that both testaments contain law and gospel.

> There is no book in the Bible that does not contain both. God has placed them side by side in every way—law and promise. For he teaches through the law what there is to do, through the promise whence it should be taken. But the New Testament is primarily

> called gospel above other books because it was written after the advent of Christ, who fulfilled God's promise and through oral preaching publicly disseminated that promise which was before hidden in the Scripture. (WA 10.1.2, 159:7; Kofoed 127)

Moses prophesied another Prophet to come after him, one who would also speak the Word of God. This prophet is indeed the Son of God, the fulfillment of the Law and all the Old Testament.

> For this reason, then, when Christ comes the law ceases, especially the Levitical law which, as has been said, makes sins of things that by nature are not otherwise sins. The Ten Commandments also cease, not in the sense that they are no longer to be kept or fulfilled, but in the sense that Moses's office in them ceases. It no longer strengthens sin through the Ten Commandments, and sin is no longer death's sting. For through Christ sin is forgiven, God is reconciled, and the heart has begun to be friendly toward the law. Moses's office can no longer chastise the heart for the sin of not having kept the commandments and, thus, for being guilty of death, as it did prior to grace and before Christ came (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament*, 58).
>
> So Moses himself has also indicated that his office and teaching should last until Christ, and then cease, when he says in Deut. 18[:15-19], "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your brothers—him shall you heed," etc. This is the noblest saying and certainly the kernel in the entire Moses, which the apostles also elevated and made much use of, in order to strengthen the gospel and abolish the law. All the prophets, as well, drew heavily upon it. For since God here promises another Moses whom they are to heed, it necessarily follows that he would teach something different than Moses did; and Moses gives up his power and yields to him, so that people will heed him. The same prophet cannot, then, teach law, for Moses has already done that in superior fashion. There would be no need to raise up another prophet on account of the law. Therefore, this was surely said about the teaching of grace and about Christ (TAL, *Preface to the Old Testament*, 59–60).

**Calvary: Christ Fulfills the Law, Keeping It Perfectly. The Law of Moses Is Not Binding on Christians.**

Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. He placed Himself under the Old Testament law through His circumcision on the eighth day. The lesson of the Boy Jesus in the Temple shows that He was obedient to the Fourth Commandment, honoring His earthly father and mother. His miracles are all done to help and befriend His neighbor, and to support His neighbor's good name and property. We can go through each of the Ten Commandments and see how Jesus fulfilled them with His holy, sinless, and innocent life of love for God and neighbor. This we call His active obedience or working obedience, where He carries out and fulfills the eternal and immutable will of God for mankind. The ELS Catechism Explanation asks this question after many of the commandments: "How has Jesus fulfilled this commandment?"

Then we see also how He suffered and paid the punishment for the sin of the whole world by His "Fasting and Temptation; His Agony and Bloody Sweat; His Cross and Passion; His precious Death and Burial," as we say in the Litany (ELH p. 137). This we call His passive, or suffering, obedience, where He takes on Himself the hellish punishment that we sinners deserve. He suffers hell in our place.

Because Jesus fulfills the law, it no longer truly threatens the believer. Yes, the law still accuses us because we are "saint and [still] sinner at the same time." But the law is now fulfilled and completed, even abrogated and done away with. The Gospel proclaims forgiveness to all who hear.

> For the law as it was before Christ did indeed accuse us; but under Christ it is placated through the forgiveness of sin and thereafter it is to be fulfilled in the Spirit. Accordingly after Christ, in the future [the law] will remain, having been fulfilled, and then the new creature himself will be what [the law] in the meantime demanded.[45]

Luther follows Saint Paul in declaring freedom from the law because of Christ's fulfillment of the law. In Romans 8:2, Paul says: "For the law [principle] of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (NKJV).

> The *lex Christi* [law of Christ] gives way to a *libertate Mosi* [liberty of Moses], for by coming to know Moses, Luther can make sense of Mosaic Law, finding in it Moses's intent that it be read through

[45] WA 39.1:356,45–47, quoted in Nestingen, 262. The original article cites WA 35, but WA 39 must be correct.

> faith in Christ and for Christian freedom. Thus Luther regards Moses as one who could speak not only in former times but in these last days as well, in union with Christ, "to the end that faith in him [Christ] might be established that he may not only be Christ, but Christ for you and me." (Hopgood 198; the final quotation is from *The Freedom of a Christian*, WA 7:58; LW 31:357)

In this sense Christ becomes the "end of the law." "End" here can mean that the law has ceased, at least in its Old Testament sense. Christ is the "end" of the law so that we no longer bring sacrifices to church, we no longer are compelled to rest on Saturday, or to abstain from foods that were forbidden by the Law of Moses.

> "I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel [that is, those that concern external matters]." (*How Christians* TAL 141; LW 35:166. Bracketed words are supplemented from WA 16:376, 8; 24:8, 6–7.)
>
> "The ceremonial part [of the Mosaic law] is already abrogated. For these ceremonies were given to last until the time of Christ" (WA 39.1, 374:5). And because Christ fulfilled the whole law, the Mosaic law—both as natural and positive law—is abrogated as a whole: "Christ fulfilled the whole law. For he himself is the end of the law, not only of ceremonial and judicial law, but also of the Decalogue itself… If this argument about Mosaic law is understood, then all this is true. For Christ ended the Mosaic law because it was temporal" (WA 39.1, 453:9, 22–23). Luther, in *Prefaces* (1523) even goes as far as to say that, though we should still keep the Ten Commandments, they have ceased "in the sense that Moses' office in them ceases" (LW 35, 244). (Kofoed 131)

Christ is the "end of the law" in the sense also that the law pointed to His one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. "End" can mean "fulfillment." The end of something is its purpose and its completion. The Greek word *telos* (τέλος) is the same root as Jesus' word from the cross, *tetelestai* (τετέλεσται), "It is finished."[46] Christ is the "end of the law," the "fulfillment of the law." In Christ the law is "finished, completed." Nestingen states that in Luther's later *Galatians Commentary* the term "**end of the law**" "**in the sense of termination became a virtual**

[46] The Hebrew translation of the New Testament gives us נִשְׁלַם, related to שָׁלֵם (completed, perfect) and שָׁלוֹם (peace, health).

**christological title. Christ is the end of the law just as he is Savior and Lord."**[47]

Because Christ fulfilled the law and became the end of the law, Luther says that Moses has nothing to do with us. The law of Moses is not binding on Christians. He says this because the law as given through Moses includes commands that are not part of natural or moral law, such as the command about graven images. These were commands for Israel.

Christ is Lord over law and sin and death. We are free and liberated by the Gospel, by Christ's saving work in keeping the law (active obedience) and suffering our punishment (passive obedience).

> So, for example, in one of his great sermons, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, Luther personifies the law in Moses' name to declare, "Moses is dead." Not one iota of Moses concerns us. "We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and have Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer" (LW 35:164; Nestingen 259–260).
>
> Let Moses remain on earth; let him be the teacher of the letter, the taskmaster of the Law; let him crucify sinners. But the believers, he [Paul] says, have another teacher in their conscience, not Moses but Christ, who has abrogated the Law, overcome and endured sin, wrath, and death. He commands us to look to Him and believe. Then it is time for the Law to go away and for Moses to die in such a way that no one knows where he is buried (Deut 34:6). Neither sin nor death can harm us anymore. For Christ, our Teacher, is the Lord of the Law, sin, and death; therefore he who believes in Him is liberated from all these things (LW 26:151, *Galatians Commentary*; Landeen, 10).

The distinction between Law and Gospel is a classic theme for Lutherans, but it is not a Lutheran invention. It is Scriptural. The Apostle John speaks of this distinction, contrasting Law and Gospel as Moses and Christ: "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17, KJV). Yet, the way of salvation—by grace through faith in Christ—is clear in both Old and New Testaments, as Ylvisaker and Nestingen make clear.

[47] Nestingen, 259.

> This does not imply that there was no grace or forgiveness in the Old Testament; both were available, not in the strength of the law, but wholly through the Christ that was to come. He followed in the wake of Israel; He was the rock from which they drank. God might reveal His grace to sinners of the old covenant; for what He determines is in His mind already accomplished, although grace was in reality purchased and won through Jesus' suffering and His death. Jesus therefore occupies a position in His relation to grace and truth different from that of Moses and respect to the law. And if this be true, it follows as a matter of course that our relation to Jesus will determine whether we are to partake of His grace—He must become our property and possession. For the first time the evangelist [John] employs the name of the new Mediator [Jesus]. Step-by-step, he has, in the prologue [John 1:1-18], approached the historical personality, whom he now mentions by name, (Ylvisaker, 51).
>
> So if Christ saves, the law cannot. If Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life," the law cannot be; if Christ has the last word, the law must fall silent before him (Nestingen, 259).

Matthias Loy has two hymns[48] that outline this distinction of purposes for law and gospel.

The Law of God is good and wise
And sets His will before our eyes,
Shows us the way of righteousness,
And dooms to death when we transgress. (ELH 492:1)

The Gospel shows the Father's grace,
Who sent His Son to save our race,
Proclaims how Jesus lived and died
That we might thus be justified.
(ELH 233:1)

This proclamation of the work of Christ is a saving reality for believers. The Holy Spirit uses this to create and strengthen faith, to deliver from death and the devil, and to renew spiritual life within the believer.

[48] ELH 492 and ELH 233.

> Melanchthon explicitly states that … "Christ took away the curse of the law and the right it had so that even though you have sinned, even though you now have sin … yet you are saved. Our Samson has shattered the power of death, the power of sin, the gates of hell." What was later termed "the new obedience" properly follows: "Those who have been renewed by the Spirit of Christ now conform voluntarily even without the law to what the law used to command" (Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 123; Nestingen 260–261).
>
> So as Luther proclaims him, Christ Jesus is not an idea or an ideologue but the living presence at work in his word to justify the godless and raise the dead (Nestingen, 265).[49]

Even though Christ is the "end of the Law," the Ten Commandments still express natural law as the eternal will of God and therefore we Christians are instructed to keep them—because they agree with natural law and because they are recognized and repeated in the New Testament by our Lord Jesus and His apostles. Luther begins his catechisms with the Ten Commandments.

Jesus speaks powerfully about the commandments. Perhaps it seems Moses only forbids outward actions. That's all earthly governments can do. They cannot legislate thoughts. But Jesus clarifies the moral and theological content: The commandment about adultery is not just about sexual relations, but even lust with our eyes and in our heart; the law about murder goes beyond legal definitions, to the state of our words and our thoughts:

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[49] Nestingen continues: The Small Catechism provides one of the best examples. Christ's work is not a distant abstraction but a concrete, accomplished reality: "he has saved me, a lost and condemned person, bought and freed me…" (SC II, ii, 4). In the same way, the verbs that give the explanation of the third article of the Creed such movement are all cast in the present perfect: the Holy Spirit "has called … has enlightened … has sanctified … and has kept me in the true faith" (SC II, iii, 6). Since all of this is the work of the triune God who justifies his enemies, the work is complete in itself even as it is now continuing.

Yet at the same time, what is now realized goes on into the future. So the explanation of the second article concludes with the words, "All this he has done that I may be his own" (SC II, ii, 4). And the use of the present perfect in the third article explanation indicates that what has begun continues in a way that as justified the believer remains a sinner who confesses: "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him" and who therefore depends on the ministry of the church, in which "day after day, he fully forgives all my sins" until the last day, "when he will raise me and all the dead (SC II, iii, 6), Nestingen 265–266.

> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire." (Matt 5:21–22).

Luther also does this with his explanations of the commandments in the Small Catechism:

> We should fear and love God, so that we lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed, and that husband and wife each love and honor the other. We should fear and love God, so that we do no bodily harm to our neighbor, but help and befriend him in every need.

### *Moses' Civil Laws Can Be a Good Example for Christian Leaders*

Moses' secular guidance should not become universal law, but is a model for justice. "What was specific to the ancient Israelites and later Jews should be compared, in Luther's thought, to other specific, secular, and historically contextualized laws of other peoples in the world" (Kofoed, 124). Luther compares Moses' law to the *Sachsenspiegel*, an important law book for the Holy Roman Empire.

> I would even be glad if [today's] lords ruled according to the example of Moses. If I were emperor, I would take from Moses a model for [my] statutes; not that Moses should be binding on me, but that I should be free to follow him in ruling as he ruled. For example, tithing is a very fine rule, because with the giving of the tenth all other taxes would be eliminated. For the ordinary man it would also be easier to give a tenth than to pay rents and fees. Suppose I had ten cows; I would then give one. If I had only five, I would give nothing. If my fields were yielding only a little, I would give proportionately little; if much, I would give much. All of this would be in God's providence. But as things are now, I must pay the Gentile tax even if the hail should ruin my entire crop. If I owe a hundred gulden in taxes, I must pay it even though there may be nothing growing in the field. This is also the way the pope decrees and governs. But it would be better if things were so arranged that when I raise much, I give much; and when little, I give little (LW 35:166–167).

Luther lived in what was considered a Christian nation, the Holy Roman Empire. He sees in Moses an example of a good leader for a Christian nation, one who recognizes God as Ruler over all. Moses is a good model for modern rulers, not that they should simply impose Mosaic law, but they should deal with people as Moses did, with firm application of natural law, but with compassion and justice—upholding love for neighbor, and bringing justice to the innocent. For example, Moses recognizes the difference between murder and manslaughter. Moses recognizes that it is hard to control animals, so a second offense by a rogue ox, for example, receives a harsher punishment.[50]

> As a ruler, Moses's laws overflow with care and consideration for the poor and needy, and though Luther is insistent that Moses's laws are just for all people, he sees Moses holding those at the bottom of society in special care. This is due in part to their inability to affect the law, but even more because of how much of the law of Deuteronomy—and of the prophets in general—is focused on the protection of the poor. (Hopgood 151)

"God is love. … Love is the fulfillment of the Law. … Love the Lord your God with all your heart… and your neighbor as yourself."[51] Jesus calls these the greatest commandments. In Western civilization, churches and other religious institutions often took on the role of providing for the poor and needy. They built, funded, and staffed hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the elderly and others who need special care. Think of names you might know: Immanuel Lutheran Hospital, Bethesda Lutheran Home, St. Joseph Hospital, Mercy Hospital, Sinai Hospital, Parkland Lutheran Children's Home.

## Jerusalem: Promises In Moses, Fulfilled In Christ and at Pentecost

Luther writes: "**In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ. … This is the best thing**" (LW 35:168). Moses is a great preacher of the Gospel. In his books we find powerful prophecies of the Messiah. The whole purpose of Moses' writing is to point to Christ,

[50] "If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall be acquitted. But if the ox tended to thrust with its horn in times past, and it has been made known to his owner, and he has not kept it confined, so that it has killed a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death" (Exod 21:28–29).

[51] 1 John 4:8; Rom 13:10; Matt 22:37–39.

the Great Prophet to come, promised by God. Moses made the bronze serpent at God's command, and God promised that all who look to it shall live (Num 21:8). This was a foreshadowing of Christ lifted up on the cross (John 3:14). **Moses is a Christian** because he believes in the promised Messiah, yet to come.

Luther does not see the Old Testament as Law, and the New Testament as Gospel. Rather, distinguishing between Law and Gospel is a key to understanding holy Scripture. For Luther, "Moses" is often synonymous with Law, in all its accusing harshness. The law condemns us. Paul reminds us: "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law" (1 Cor 15:56, NKJV).

And, of course, Paul takes this word "law" in Romans 8:2 also in the sense of "principle." "For the law of the Spirit of life[52] in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death." Luther translates this: "The law of the Spirit which 'makes alive' [*lebendig machet*] in Christ Jesus has freed me from the law of sin and death."[53]

The Second Great Sermon of God is the Gospel message that He proclaims loudly through His apostles at Pentecost—this time not with thunder and lightning, but with tongues of fire and speaking in many languages. God Himself speaks to the world through that sermon, and He proclaims salvation through Christ who was crucified by His own people.

> In the second place God delivered a public sermon through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost [Acts 2:2–4]. On that occasion the Holy Spirit came with great splendor and visible impressiveness, such that there came from heaven the sudden rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach and speak in other tongues. (LW 35:161)

Three thousand were baptized after they heard that message. The Law convicted them and the Gospel comforted them. The apostles and the apostolic church proclaim to all nations the "wonderful works of God." Luther says the best thing we find in Moses is the promises of Christ. This is why we read Moses today. With the Holy Spirit as the

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[52] ὁ γὰρ νόμος τοῦ Πνεύματος τῆς ζωῆς.

[53] «*Denn das Gesetz des Geistes, der da lebendig machet in Christo Jesu, hat mich frei gemacht von dem Gesetz der Sünde und des Todes*.» [I recommend listening to Bach's motet on Jesus Priceless Treasure (*Jesu, meine Freude*), BWV 227].

true Author, all of Scripture is unified around this one proclamation: Jesus Christ is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, NKJV).

> In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God about Christ. … This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. … Many are these texts in the Old Testament, which the holy apostles quoted and drew upon (LW 35:168–169).
>
> [W]e read Moses for the sake of the promises about Christ, who belongs not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles; for through Christ all the Gentiles should have the blessing, as was promised to Abraham [Gen 12:3] (LW 35:173).

As the Old Testament church trusted in God "who brought them out of Egypt," the New Testament church trusts also in the Father who gave us His only-begotten Son, in Christ who died for us on the cross, in the Spirit who is the "Lord and Giver of life." [54] Jesus sends His Apostles into the whole world with this saving message: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The Gospel makes no demands. The Gospel is pure gift, pure love, because Christ, out of love, fulfilled the law for us. The whole Bible proclaims Christ, directly or indirectly. The Old and New Testament both focus our attention on Christ as the Promised Savior of the world. That's why Luther calls Moses a "true Christian" who "strongly prophesies Jesus Christ our Lord."

> But we have Moses, whose unconstrained word, whose natural way of speaking, is in such hearty and good accord with the New Testament. And even if he must rule the obstinate evil people of his time in the Old Testament, he nevertheless also strongly prophesies Jesus Christ our Lord… I believe and know for certain that I and all

[54] This is, after all, an anniversary year of the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed of AD 325 did not contain this phrase. It was added in the revised Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381.

> Christians have Moses on our side and that he is a true Christian, indeed, a teacher of Christians… In his heart, faith and confession, he embraced Christ the Son of God and joined himself unto Him (LW 15:335, in Kofoed, 128).

Luther is famous for a pithy statement that "All Scripture proclaims Christ," (*Die ganze Schrift treibt Christum*).[55]

> The Lutheran movement can be considered a proposal to the whole Christian church about what should be considered the center of Scripture: the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Bible is sometimes referred to as the Lutheran "canon within the canon." This means that in the interpretation of Scripture, the Lutheran confessions instruct us to give priority to the message of the gospel. … The ultimate truth of Scripture is that we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Lutherans claim "Christ alone" as the Bible's central teaching. Texts that function as prescriptions of the law are to be taken with great seriousness by the church. But finally, texts of legal significance are relative to the message about the justifying grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is not antinomianism. It is properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. The penultimate law always is heard in relationship to the ultimate message of the gospel, God's justifying grace in Jesus Christ (Nessan, 23).

Luther's sermon on *How Christians Should Regard Moses* has classic statements and descriptions of law and gospel and how to distinguish between them.

> Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." The gospel, however,

[55] Thus in the Lectures on Romans Luther claims that "the entire Scripture deals only with Christ everywhere." (Ellingson, 405) [Ellingson's footnote 39: Lectures on Romans (1515-16): WA, 56.414.15; LW, 25:405: "…*Quod universa Scriptura de solo Christo est ubique, si introrsum inspiciatur, licet facietenus aliud sonet in figura et umbra*"].

> does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, "This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake." So, then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men. Just as we and God are separated from one another, so also these two doctrines are widely separated from one another. For the gospel teaches exclusively what has been given us by God, and not—as in the case of the law—what we are to do and give to God (TAL, 133–134; LW 35:162).

Jesus Himself says that the Scripture was written to testify of Him. Moses "wrote of Me" (John 5:46). One of Luther's later writings on the *Last Words of David* expresses this idea that all Scripture proclaims Christ, so that we may have eternal life in Him, as John 20:31 says: "*these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*" (NKJV).

> Thus all of Scripture, as already said, is pure Christ, God's and Mary's Son. Everything is focused on this Son, so that we might know Him distinctively and in that way see the Father and the Holy Spirit eternally as one God. To him who has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him … (LW 15:339; quoted in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People* 193).
>
> Thanks and praise be to God in all eternity that we Christians know that Messiah is God's one eternal Son, whom He sent into the world to take our sins upon Himself, to die for us, and to vanquish death for us. Thus Is. 53[:6, 10]: "All we like sheep have gone astray… and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. … He made Himself an offering for sin, etc." Therefore we exult and rejoice that God's Son, the one true God together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, became man, a servant, a sinner, a worm for us; that God died, and bore our sins on the cross in His own body; that God redeemed us through His own blood (LW 15:339; quoted in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People*, 193).
>
> This is particularly clear in the Gospel of St. John, in which practically every other word, as it were, proclaims that Jesus is God and Man in one Person. This same John, together with the other apostles, evangelists, and many thousands of their disciples, were also Jews, or Israel and Abraham's seed by birth, much more

purely and more definitely than the present-day Jews, or Israel, are (LW 15:339; quoted in *Martin Luther, the Bible, and the Jewish People*, 194).

### *Third Thing: Examples of Faith In Moses' Writings*

Luther closes his sermon rather abruptly. This is his entire statement on the "third thing" we find in Moses.

> In the third place we read Moses for the beautiful examples of faith, of love, and of the cross, as shown in the fathers, Adam, Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the rest. From them we should learn to trust in God and love him. In turn there are also examples of the godless, how God does not pardon the unfaith of the unbelieving; how he can punish Cain, Ishmael, Esau, the whole world in the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc. Examples like these are necessary. For although I am not Cain, yet if I should act like Cain, I will receive the same punishment as Cain. Nowhere else do we find such fine examples of both faith and unfaith [TAL: unbelief]. Therefore we should not sweep Moses under the rug. Moreover the Old Testament is thus properly understood when we retain from the prophets the beautiful texts about Christ, when we take note of and thoroughly grasp the fine examples, and when we use the laws as we please to our advantage (LW 35:173).

Luther has already "said his piece" and properly focused our attention on Christ. This third part is a simple encouragement to consider and follow the examples of faithful believers of the past, and to find these "fine examples" in Moses' writings.

Luther then offers a conclusion. He encourages reading Moses' books. He notes the distinction between law and promises. He warns against the fanatics.

> I have stated that all Christians, and especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses aright. Thus where he gives the commandments, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do, and leave undone. However it is true that Moses sets down, in addition to the laws, fine examples of faith and unfaith—punishment of

> the godless, elevation of the righteous and believing—and also the dear and comforting promises concerning Christ which we should accept. …
>
> Many great and outstanding people have missed it, while even today many great preachers still stumble over it. They do not know how to preach Moses, nor how properly to regard his books. They are absurd as they rage and fume, chattering to people, "God's word, God's word!" All the while they mislead the poor people and drive them to destruction.
>
> Many learned men have not known how far Moses ought to be taught. Origen, Jerome, and others like them, have not shown clearly how far Moses can really serve us. This is what I have attempted, to say in an introduction to Moses how we should regard him, and how he should be understood and received and not simply be swept under the rug. For in Moses there is comprehended such a fine order, that it is a joy, etc. [Not to mention that he describes many outstanding, lovely things, as you have heard, which are not only not to be thrown away but are to be highly esteemed and accepted with an earnest heart, so as to encourage and strengthen our Chrisian faith, through which we as well as the dear holy ancestors are saved] (LW 35:173–174. Bracketed section added in TAL from WA 16:393 27-31 and 24:16 13-18).

How are Christians to regard Moses? Luther regards Moses as a prophet and servant of God, a lawgiver who condemns sin, a teacher who proclaims law and gospel, but especially a preacher who proclaims salvation through the promised Christ.

Moses was given certain messages for the Old Testament believers until the time that Christ fulfilled them. Moses speaks the law in strictest judgment, but also with compassion on weak and sinful human beings who are *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time saint and sinner). Moses is a prophet and spokesman for God to proclaim God's promises of release from captivity, and liberty in the promised land. Moses' life is a prophetic real-life presentation of the life and work of Jesus and His church.

There are not seven Luthers, but one Luther who grew in his understanding and appreciation of the Gospel and spoke clearly about Moses and Christ, about law and gospel, about judgment and salvation.

Let us find the best thing in Luther and the best thing in Moses. It is the same. It is the best thing in Scripture. It is the One Thing Needful,

the saving Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who died that we might have eternal life. This is God's message for all people. LSQ

## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ELH | Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary |
| KJV | King James Version |
| LW | Luther's Works: American Edition |
| NKJV | New King James Version |
| SC | Small Catechism |
| SD | Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord |
| TAL | The Annotated Luther |
| Triglotta | Concordia Triglotta |

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https://www.iheart.com/podcast/269-christian-combatives-109562333/episode/martin-luther-sermon-how-christians-119310204/.

# De Servo Arbitrio:
## The Lutheran Reformation on Display

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DEAR SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE LUTHERAN Reformation:

Years ago, a dear member of my congregation came to my office mid-week and wanted to talk about one of the readings from Sunday. It was the Pentecost account in Acts, the verse where the NIV renders St. Luke's Greek as, "Those who accepted his message were baptized…" She knew her Small Catechism well; the word "accepted" had caught her ear, and she wanted to talk about that. It happened to be the Acts 2 text that day, but it easily could have been the words of Moses heard just recently from many lecterns on Pentecost 13: "Now choose life so that you and your children may live…" (Deut 30:19, NIV). Our conversation morphed as in her sincere zeal to safeguard against decision theology she was somewhat implying that God determines our every action. "But you decided to wear jeans this morning," I commented. "I would like to think that God is guiding my every action," she replied.

Fast forward several years to my office at Martin Luther College, a school where faculty members routinely meet with their advisees. It is common for us to express interest by asking about their lives. "Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked one. "No," he replied, "I'm just waiting to discover the one that God has already picked out for me." I refrained from elaborating upon the thought that, in reality, any Christian man and any Christian woman who each understand the love of God in Christ should, *theoretically*, be in a position to marry. Instead, I just nodded, all the while thinking, "Hmm. Interesting." Sometimes, the

*habitus practicus* of the theologian also means knowing when not to speak.

Lutheran Christians of all walks (not just pastors) are often unexpectedly confronted with questions and opinions that touch upon the topic before us today, the nature of the will—my will, God's will. Frequently, questions about the will of God arise in that familiar context of theodicy, that is, the problem of evil in the world and why a good God allows this or that tragedy to occur. "It was God's will," we answer, realizing that this answer can be troubling even to Christians and certainly is offensive to unbelievers. Just as frequently, opinions about the will of man arise, fostered by a world and culture that celebrates self-betterment and achievement. People like to compare lives, and the natural self wants nothing more than to condescendingly think, "I made better choices. He did not."

Luther's theological masterpiece, *De Servo Arbitrio*, still serves a vital role in addressing such issues as touch upon the will of God and the will of man. Though Erasmus envisioned his *Freedom of the Will* to be nothing more than a catalyst for a cordial theological discussion, his work unleashed a theological assault from Luther's pen, nearly four times as long and certainly four times as forceful as the elegant Latin prose in which the Dutch humanist had written.

Over the centuries, much ink has been spilled on *The Bondage of the Will*, and this essayist is under no illusion that on this 500th anniversary of its writing, he has uncovered shocking new insights into this famous piece. That said, I offer this: *The Bondage of the Will*, while certainly the longest exposition of the topic, may not be the best exposition of the doctrine of the will that Lutheran theologians have ever produced.[1] While Luther's treatise certainly is valuable for understanding the doctrine, it has a deeper, more lasting value for us. For in the *Bondage of the Will,* we see the entire Reformation on display. We see how Luther did theology and how the enduring Reformation principles of *sola gratia, sola scriptura,* and *sola fide* guided his approach to this challenging topic. This is the very approach that we have learned from our forefathers, and by God's grace, it is the approach that still governs our preaching, teaching, and worship. Indeed, it must.

[1] In this essayist's opinion, Article II of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, is the clearest, most beneficial exposition.

## I. Battle Lines

### *An Ancient Battle*

The battle over the doctrine of the will began long before 1524. The debate has ancient roots, as Chemnitz shows us in his *Loci*.[2] In the Early Church era, first came the "dualists"—Marcion, Valentinus, and, later, the Manichaeans. These eliminated human responsibility for sin by assigning the cause of sin not to will, but to an evil principle (god) operating in the world. Then the Euchites appeared (ca. 380 A.D.), ancient enthusiasts who believed God spoke in dreams to give experiences that triggered the Spirit's work in us, which causes all spiritual struggles to cease and makes the will perfectly free. However, perhaps the most well-known struggle over this doctrine of the will, though, was the theological battle that Augustine waged with the British monk Pelagius, who taught "that there is no need for grace and the aid of the Holy Spirit, but man, by his own natural powers, can fulfill all the commandments of God."[3] The Augustinian Luther was also familiar with this history, as seen in *The Bondage of the Will*.[4]

The dawn of the Middle Ages also saw the rise of monasticism, which, to a lesser or greater degree in all its orders, embraced aspects of Pelagius' teachings. Some solitary figures stood firm.[5] However, once the Dominicans and Franciscans gained control of the university teaching chairs, Pelagius's error found new life as it was nuanced into a more palatable doctrine, which we call semi-Pelagianism today. The names are well-known: Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, Bonaventura, and others. Some spoke out against it: John Wycliffe (1350), Jan Hus

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[2] Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (Concordia Pub House, 1989), 1:251ff. Chemnitz surveys the history of debates involving free will, from the early Church up to his present day. See Chapter VIII of Locus VI: *Human Powers or Free Choice.*

[3] Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 1:252.

[4] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33: Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Fortress Press, 1972), 136. He essentially accuses Erasmus of being a full-blown Pelagian. Coincidentally, *The Oxford Handbook of the Pelagian Controversy* was just released in early September 2025.

[5] Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 1:255. Chemnitz especially mentions Bernard of Clairvaux, whom he says seemed to have temporarily saved orthodox teaching on this matter in his book, *De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio Tractatus* ("Treatise concerning Grace and Free Choice").

(1416),[6] Lorenzo Valla (ca 1430),[7] Jean Gerson (d. 1430). Chemnitz notes that Gerson tried to call out this error at the Council of Constance in 1416 (the same that burned Hus), "But he did not have the courage of the man who appeared in 1517."[8]

## *Luther's Growth in Understanding*

By the time that the man Luther appeared, then, debates about the nature of the will had a long paper trail in doctrinal history. Luther's understanding of the nature of the will and its relation to faith undoubtedly had been shaped in part by the Nominalists,[9] under whose tutelage Luther had studied at Erfurt as he followed the *Via Moderna* curriculum.[10]

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[6] The articles for which Wycliff and Hus were specifically condemned can be found in the proceedings of the Council of Constance 1414–1418, found online at: www.papalencyclicals.net.

[7] "Luther does mention Valla favorably elsewhere, especially for the denial of freedom of the human will in Valla's *De Libero Arbitrio* and for Valla's exposure of the *Donation of Constantine* as a forgery." Martin Luther, "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation with Proofs of the Philosophical Theses, 1518," in *Disputations I*, ed. Paul R. Hinlicky and Eric G. Philips, trans. Eric G. Philips, with Christopher Boyd Brown, Luther's Works (LW) (Concordia Publishing House, 2025), 72:89–90.the Luther's Works series consists of Martin Luther's Bible commentaries, sermons, prefaces, postils, disputations, letters, theology, and polemics, translated and published in English for the first time.Volume 72 contains theses which Luther drafted (sometimes with the help of his colleague Philip Melanchthon

[8] Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 1:256.

[9] The Nominalists derive their name from the Latin *nomen,* "name." While Plato had asserted that there exists beyond the senses and ideal world of which our present material world is but a poor reflection or copy, the Nominalists (following Aristotle), asserted that the name of a given object is inseparably bound to its form. Thus, there is no ideal chair (or the idea of "chair-ness") in an unseen realm; a chair comes into being in the material world when we create it and call it "chair." This touches upon the truth that caused Aristotle to be disregarded by Christian writers for the first millennium: Aristotle denied the existence of a perfect world beyond our senses. By doing so, he also denied the immortality of the soul, making his metaphysical teaching incompatible with Christianity. The Scholastics revived Aristotle primarily for his logic and developed their systematic theology accordingly. For Luther and Aristotle on immortality, see Luther, "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation with Proofs of the Philosophical Theses, 1518," 88.the Luther's Works series consists of Martin Luther's Bible commentaries, sermons, prefaces, postils, disputations, letters, theology, and polemics, translated and published in English for the first time.Volume 72 contains theses which Luther drafted (sometimes with the help of his colleague Philip Melanchthon

[10] Theodor Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian: His Positive and Negative Use of Nominalism and Realism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 32. "Thus, the relation between philosophy and theology was the underlying agenda in the conflict between the 'ways.' While the *Via Antiqua* insisted on a close connection between the arts faculty and the

In the High Middle Ages, the Nominalists battled the Scholastics over understanding the will and its role in Christian faith. John Duns Scotus (b. 1260) and Aquinas diverged on that question Plato and Aristotle had wrestled with: what leads to the greatest happiness for mankind? For Aquinas, heavily influenced by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the truly blessed life consists in *contemplating* God, an act primarily of the intellect and reason.[11] However, Scotus and later Nominalists asserted that the greatest happiness for man consists in *loving* God, and this is an act primarily of the *will.* Thus, the Nominalists held that the will dominates reason in man and, accordingly, man's relationship with God.

Luther's early years as a professor in Wittenberg were naturally shaped by his years at Erfurt. However, as Hieko Oberman notes, a dramatic reversal of Luther's position on the doctrine of the will came within a half-year period spanning 1515–1516.[12] From that point onward, Luther began to assert more and more the utter incapacity of man's will to strive toward spiritual things, much less them. We can trace the development:

- The very first disputation over which Luther ever presided at Wittenberg was on the nature of the will.[13]
- In 1517, Luther broke from the Nominalist understanding of the will in his *Disputation Against the Scholastics*.[14]

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theological faculty, interpreting Aristotle as consonant with faith, the *Via Moderna* emphasized the differences between natural insight (Aristotle) and supernatural faith, and pointed to tensions and contradictions between them." On the nature of the *Via Moderna,* Kittleson has a solid summary *Luther the Reformer*, 67–74.

[11] For more on the Scholastic position, see Kenneth A. Cherney's essay, Core Like a Rock: Luther's Theological Center (pp. 4–6), presented at the Reformation Symposium and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, October 2, 2017, as well as the official reaction to the same by Rev. Nathaniel J. Biebert. Available at the WLS Online Essay File.

[12] Heiko Oberman, "Facientibus Quod in Se Est Deus Non Denegat Gratiam: Robert Holcot O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology," in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 99–100. Oberman drew this conclusion from comparing Luther's notes for his lecture on Psalm 113:1 (1515) and a lengthy gloss he wrote on Romans 14:1 (1516).

[13] Martin Luther, "Disputation on the Powers and Will of Man Without Grace: Sententiarius Disputation for Bartholomäus Bernhardi, September 19[?], 1516," LW 72:51–52. September 19[?], 1516," LW 72:51–52. The disputation targeted the theology of the Nominalist Gabriel Biel.

[14] Luther opened his disputation (Theses 5–11) by clarifying his understanding of the nature of the will. It was a traumatic event for Luther to turn his back and break his allegiance to the academic university that had nurtured him. Normally, graduates were expected to be loyal to the university principle throughout their entire academic career. Luther wrote a heartfelt letter to his former (and much-admired) teacher Jodocus

- In 1518, some of the *Heidelberg Theses* state themes that would become foundational for *The Bondage of the Will*.[15]
- In 1519, the opening topic for debate between Karlstadt and Eck at Leipzig was, "How much free will does man have in attaining salvation?"[16]
- In 1521, Luther responded to Leo X's papal bull of the previous year with his scathing *Assertio,* which also irritated Erasmus because of its strong statements about sin and free will.[17]
- In 1521, writing from the Wartburg, Luther replied to the attacks of the Louvain theologian Jacobus Latomus, in which he blamed an interpretive gloss by Jerome for many problems concerning a proper understanding of the will.[18]
- In 1524, the first Lutheran hymnal clearly proclaimed Luther's position in *Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice* (v. 3):

*Nein güte Werk die golten nicht, es war mit in verdorben*
*Der frey will hasset Gotts gericht, Er war zum güt erstorben.*[19]

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Trutfetter explaining himself and indicating that his path would now be a different one. For text of the disputation, see Martin Luther, "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology," in *Luther: Early Theological Works by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A.*, Ichthus Edition, ed. M. A. James Atkinson, The Library of Christian Classics (The Westminister Press, 1962).

[15] Luther, "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation with Proofs of the Philosophical Theses, 1518," 96–97.the Luther's Works series consists of Martin Luther's Bible commentaries, sermons, prefaces, postils, disputations, letters, theology, and polemics, translated and published in English for the first time.Volume 72 contains theses which Luther drafted (sometimes with the help of his colleague Philip Melanchthon Th.1: "The Law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance a human being toward righteousness but rather stands in the way." Th.13: "After sin, free will is a thing only in name, and so long as it does what is in it, it commits mortal sin." Th.16: "A human being who supposes that he will attain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he is made doubly guilty."

[16] The text of the Leipzig Debate is found in LW:35.

[17] Erasmus was especially troubled by the following statements: 1) Article 31: "A righteous man sins in all his good works." Article 36: "Since the fall of Adam, or after actual sin, free will exists only in name, and when it does what it can, it commits mortal sin." From the *Heidelberg Theses* of 1518 found in Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther: Early Theological Works by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A. by James Atkinson, M.A.*, Ichthus Edition, ed. M. A. James Atkinson, The Library of Christian Classics (The Westminister Press, 1962).

[18] Martin Luther, LW 32:152–156.

[19] "No good work availed for anything, it was entirely spoiled; my free will hated God's judgment, it was dead to good" (overly literal).

*Pinning Down Proteus the Eel*

If Luther's growth in understanding what the Scriptures say about free will led to bolder and bolder assertions, just the opposite was true for Erasmus. Throughout *The Bondage of the Will,* Luther refers to his opponent as Proteus,[20] the shape-shifting god of Greek mythology who cleverly devised means to either hide or escape. Erasmus was a strategic positioner, and it frustrated many. Luther, like many, had been a great admirer of the scholar from Rotterdam, but he gradually came to perceive the true nature of the man, commenting at the Luther Haus table one night: "Erasmus is an eel; only Christ can grab him."[21] Such positioning became a hallmark of Erasmus's entire career. One historian says it well:

> There is, then, an Erasmian enigma. His contemporaries recognized it, and the contradictory verdicts of posterity derive from it. One of Luther's favorite stories was of how Frederick the Wise at Worms in October 1520 had asked Erasmus for a judgment on Luther's case and got instead an epigram. "What a wonderful little man that is!"—the prince smiled ruefully—"You never know where you are with him."[22]

Henry VIII received a similar answer a few months earlier when he pressed Erasmus for an opinion on Luther. Erasmus "disingenuously claimed that Luther was too good a scholar for someone with as little learning as himself to be able to form an opinion about him."[23]

There may be room, though, for being somewhat understanding of Erasmus. His early years were hard, and one senses that his driving concerns for peace, acceptance, and self-preservation may have stemmed from this. Born the illegitimate son of a Catholic priest and his housemaid, he was orphaned at thirteen and saw little option but to eventually enter the Augustinian monastery near the town of Gouda. Erasmus hated monastic life and tried to leave after his novitiate. However, his superiors barraged the young man with dire pronouncements, from his

[20] Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33*, 17. Also 33:22, 30, 82, 113, 162, 166, 224.

[21] E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Ichthus Edition, The Library of Christian Classics (The Westminster Press, 1969), 2.

[22] A.N. Marlow and Benjamin Drewery, "Introduction," in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Ichthus Edition, ed. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, The Library of Christian Classics (The Westminster Press, 1969), 2.

[23] Michael Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*, Illustrated edition (Harper, 2018), 405.

being labeled a social pariah to jeopardizing his eternal soul.[24] Browbeaten, the twenty-year-old Erasmus languished in that environment for another six years.

But during those six years, Erasmus found his true love and calling: books. He drank deeply of classic texts and imbibed the humanistic spirit from the books of Petrarch and the massive *De Elegantiae Linguae Latinae* ("Elegances of the Latin Language") of Lorenzo Valla.[25] A linguist was born, but Erasmus also found it prudent to keep his newfound passion in check, as some of his literary interests raised eyebrows.[26]

In 1493, a twenty-six-year-old Erasmus received a special dispensation to leave monastic life —somewhat hush-hush—because the nearby bishop of Cambrai needed a competent Latin secretary.[27] However, Erasmus did not find an instantly better life outside the monastic walls. To make a long story short, his short stint as the bishop's secretary opened few doors for him. Eventually, he became a journeyman-scholar. He worked hard, traversed Europe in days when travel was not easy or safe, often lived in harsh conditions, was frequently ill, and begged for financial support from more than a few. Eventually, though, success and recognition came. His *Adages* (1500)[28] and *In Praise of Folly* (1509)[29] were well-received by the literary society of Europe, and he began making a name for himself.

However, Erasmus's compilation of an authoritative Greek text (1516), rooted in textual criticism of various manuscripts, made Erasmus

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[24] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 30.

[25] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 45. Massing notes that Valla "opened his eyes to how sloppy language can obscure meanings and conceal abuses and how a knowledge of usage and idiom could be applied to challenge the claims and presumptions of ruling institutions."

[26] For instance, Valla had been condemned by the Church for some of his writings, especially his revelation (based on the careful study of language) that one of the bulwarks of claims for the medieval papacy's power, the *Donation of Constantine*, was, in fact, a forgery. Luther mentions Valla in Luther, "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation with Proofs of the Philosophical Theses, 1518," *Luther's Works, Volume 72*, 89–90.

[27] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 46. So here was irony: Erasmus left the Augustinian monastery to embrace the world with its opportunities, while only a few years later, a young Luther, all set up for success in the world, left it behind to embrace the Augustinian cowl.

[28] Erasmus put out a number of updated and expanded editions of his *Adages* throughout his life. The book was a collection of proverbs and wise sayings rooted in Classical studies.

[29] Martin Franzmann lauds *In Praise of Folly* in his little collection of prayers, *Pray for Joy* (CPH, 1970).

even more well-known. This work showed the influence Europe's humanists had gained in scholarly circles.[30] With their main rallying cry of "*ad fontes*" ("back to the sources"), humanists pored over old manuscripts not merely for curiosity's sake; they were interested in texts that could shed light on how Europe, awakening from a long medieval nap, could emulate those societies of old and build a better world.[31] One historian describes the Renaissance humanists as "editors of texts." But by this work, the humanists were promoting the subversive idea that textual authority should far outweigh any reputed, unchallenged authority acquired solely by gaining an ecclesiastical office.[32] Erasmus's *Annotationes* accompanied his Greek text, a collection of textual notes, comments, and interpretations. The *Annotationes* drew several reactions, including a harsh rebuke from Dr. Eck in 1518, accusing Erasmus of indirectly suggesting that the Gospel writers could make textual mistakes.[33] The *Annotationes* also caught Luther's attention, but Luther, too timid (at that point) to write the great man himself, asked George Spalatin in a letter if he could humbly point out to Erasmus that his understanding of Romans 5:12 was off, for it undermined the effects of original sin.[34]

Erasmus also retranslated the Latin Vulgate, and this also ruffled more than a few Catholic feathers for questionable word choices and textual decisions.[35] Some of these brushed up against things sacred to

[30] See Michael C. Thomsett, *The Inquisition: A History* (McFarland, 2010), 112–13. We should *not* think of the term "humanism" in a manner similar to the way in which the term is employed today.

[31] For a fascinating history of the importance—and danger—of a single text at the dawn of the Renaissance (in this case, the text of the Epicurean Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*) see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).

[32] See the entire discussion on Renaissance humanism in Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 2005), 77–83.

[33] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 296. Massing notes also that Eck was particularly irritated that Erasmus preferred Jerome over Augustine. But it was Jerome's textual work he did in his production of the Vulgate that lifted him to the status of being the patron saint of scholars in Erasmus' day.

[34] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 250. Also p. 590.

[35] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 324, 384. For instance, Erasmus rendered the famous opening of John's Gospel with *In principio erat sermo…* (instead of the beloved *Verbum*); "In the beginning was the ongoing conversation that God has with man…" for "In the beginning was the Word…" Having ploughed through Valla's book on Latin elegance, for Erasmus, it was nothing more than the more appropriate word for the concept of the incarnation. Its reception was quite similar to what Jerome experienced when a riot broke out in church one Sunday, as Greek-speaking congregants vocally dissented from the manner in which Jerome had rendered certain words in Jonah 4 from the LXX into

the Roman church, such as the sacrament of penance and the person of the Virgin Mary.[36] Erasmus was on the radar of some ecclesiastical authorities. However, other of Erasmus's books were celebrated and widely-read, such as his *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* ("Handbook for the Christian Soldier"), a popular devotional text emphasizing simple Christian piety and morality.[37] His *Colloquies* found a spot in the Lutheran curriculum that Melanchthon designed following the Saxon visitations (1528).[38] Some of Erasmus' writings were even translated into Aztec in the 1520s.[39]

## *The Choice is Made*

As all of Europe polarized over the Catholic and Lutheran positions, neutrality was a luxury few churchmen, scholars, and politicians were granted…or could afford. Yet unlike other opponents of Luther, Erasmus was not itching for a fight with the professor in Wittenberg. There were some aspects of Luther's teachings that Erasmus agreed with, others he did not. He appreciated Luther's scholarship, but cringed (along with many others) at the Reformer's often overly blunt language. Like Luther, he greatly desired reform and did not hesitate to raise important issues. However, unlike Luther, Erasmus prized the unity of Christendom above all and was unwilling to break from Rome.

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Latin. The episode is recorded in a terse latter Augustine subsequently wrote to Jerome about the incident (Augustine, *Ep.* 71A, 3.5).

[36] Noteworthy is how Erasmus handled the famous *comma Johanneum* (1 John 5:7); he followed Jerome's opinion and dropped it from his revised Vulgate due to lack of manuscript evidence. There was also his rendering of Luke 1:28 when he changed Gabriel's greeting to Mary from "*Ave gratia plena*" ("Hail, O one full of grace") to "*Ave gratiosa* ("Greetings, beloved one"). Finally, there was his alteration of the Baptist's cry from "*Ponitentiam agite*" to "*poeniteat vos*" ("Do penance" to "Repent"), a change which some saw as a direct challenge to one of the pillars of the Catholic faith, the sacrament of penance. On penance, see MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, and his discussion of the pillars of the medieval Church, 10–42. Further, also his discussion of the person of Erasmus, 97–105.

[37] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 252: "Here, as throughout his notes, Erasmus sought to cast the New Testament as a summons to virtuous living rather than a collection of disconnected citations."

[38] See LW 40:316. The *Colloquies* was a collection of dialogues that addressed and undermined superstitious practices of the day. Melanchthon considered them "useful and edifying for the children."

[39] Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*, 1st Edition (Viking, 2017), 358. On a side note, within what must have been only a couple of weeks before Luther was condemned at Worms, Emperor Charles V received a letter from Cortez indicating that he was about to begin his final assault on the Aztec capital.

He stated as much: "I will put up with this Church until I see a better."[40] Erasmus especially admired Luther's boldness born of conviction, but freely admitted that he had no interest in dying for a cause, even the cause of the gospel: "Let others court martyrdom; it is an honor of which I find myself unworthy."[41]

However, as he tried to position himself as a neutral observer of those momentous events unfolding in Europe, Erasmus ended up making enemies on both sides, Lutheran and Catholic.[42] The University of Louvain's faculty, led primarily by Jacobus Latomus, was particularly hostile both towards Erasmus as a person and his liberal arts curriculum, which he was developing.[43] The Sorbonne, which had been watching Erasmus for a while, condemned his *Colloquies* and imprisoned his French translator for participating in the spread of dangerous ideas.[44] Others accused Erasmus of directly or indirectly encouraging Luther, stating that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched."[45]

Erasmus did, though, also have friends in high places. Before he succeeded Leo X, Pope Adrian VI (Adriaan Floriszoon, the only Dutch pope in history) had been a long-time friend of Erasmus. The new pontiff prioritized reining in Lutheranism, so he called upon his friend Erasmus in 1523 to take up the pen against Luther. Henry VIII did the same, as did other English and continental scholars.[46] Yet even

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[40] Marlow and Drewery, "Introduction," 3. *Fero igitur hanc Ecclesiam donec video meliorem*. (*Works*, X.1258.A)

[41] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 418. Quoting Erasmus (*Works*, VIII.1167)

[42] See pp. xlvii–lvi in Desiderius Erasmus, *Controversies: De Libero Arbitrio Diatribe Sive Collatio; Hyperaspistes I*, ed. Charles Trinkaus, trans. Peter Macardle and Clarence H. Miller, vol. 76, Collected Works of Erasmus (University of Toronto Press, 1999). Erasmus's attempts to appease both sides and safeguard his own name can be seen in his letters of the period 1521–1523, when he wrote his friend Justas Jonas, the faculty of Louvain, Pope Leo X, papal curia member Paolo Bombace, friends in England, and Pope Adrian VI. A general theme is that Erasmus yearns for unity and concord, but "holds Luther responsible for the hostility he encounters against his own humanistic goals for Christian revival" (li).

[43] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 677–678. Latomus published three volumes against Erasmus. On another note, Latomus, along with Aleander, led the procession on July 1, 1523, in Brussels of Hendrik Voes and Johann van Esschen to the stake, where these two were burned to death as the first Lutheran martyrs (www.lutheranforum.com).

[44] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 678.

[45] Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era: 1500–1650*, 4th edition (The Macmillan Company, 1958), 166.

[46]Luther had his suspicions that Erasmus had greatly assisted Henry in writing his 1521 rebuttal of *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, the work that earned the monarch from the pope the title of *Defensor Fidei*, a title which British monarchs still bear to this day. Erasmus was close friends with Thomas More as well, and even

though they came from friends, these were more than mere encouragements. Erasmus fully understood that he was being summoned to show precisely where his loyalty lay.[47]

The topic he chose for his showdown with Luther was the freedom of the will. In Erasmus's mind, here was an innocuous topic that afforded room for a respectful exchange by which he could showcase his academic prowess, slap Luther on the wrist, all without doing any real damage to either his own reputation or his attempts at working renewal from within the structure of the church.[48] Then, once he wrote, Erasmus could slip away again to his world of texts and books, and perhaps the voices of satisfied onlookers would grow quiet. He could not have been more mistaken in his calculation.[49] Luther deemed it time for a man presuming to be a teacher of the faith to be judged more severely (Ja 3:1).[50]

## II. Sola Gratia: The Heart of the Debate

### *Erasmus Frames the Issue*

Erasmus's treatise, *Diatribe on the Freedom of the Will,* has the Latin title, *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio* ("Concerning Free Choice, Discussions and Comparisons"). It appeared in September of 1524, and a copy soon found its way into Luther's hands. The title grabs

provided a preliminary review of an advance copy of More's *Utopia* that the author had sent to him.

[47] Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 360. "In order to make this clear to the church and to show his final fealty to it, Erasmus was asked by King Henry VIII of England to write something against Luther. So, the dance Erasmus had been able to dance in, which he contrived to have his cake and eat it too, had come to an end. The church wished him to make clear that these were two different cakes."

[48] James A. Nestingen, "Introduction: Luther and Erasmus on the Bondage of the Will," in *The Captivation of the Will: Luther Vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Fortress Press, 2017), 1–2. He writes: "For this purpose, Erasmus chose an issue that he considered peripheral theologically, one in which he assumed that there ought to be some room for differences of opinion. that way, he could give Luther's ears a public boxing without doing any real damage to the coalition moving reform." Similarly, Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2017), 13–14.

[49] Nestingen, "Introduction: Luther and Erasmus on the Bondage of the Will," 19. "What he had offered as a marginal correction came back against him in a full-scale assault that left him publicly exposed and grasping."

[50] "However, if I seem to be rather too hard on your Diatribe, you must forgive me; for I do it in no malicious spirit, but out of concern because by your authority you have been seriously damaging the cause of Christ, though for all your erudition you have as a matter of fact made out no case at all." LW 33: 246.

our attention right away because of his choice of terms. Erasmus was seeking only a *diatribe*—a restrained, professional, "discussion" of the topic at hand. He had thought that Luther's response to Rome's papal bull entitled "Assertions" was too strong a term that drew lines in the sand.[51] He further warned his readers at the opening of *The Freedom of the Will* that they should not expect "a regular gladiatorial combat" between the two men.[52]

Then there is the Latin term *arbitrium*. Properly translated as "choice" (not "will"), the word reflects accurately the topic at hand and was a term with historical precedent.[53] In the Erasmus-Luther debate, the argument was not over the essence of man's will (*voluntas*) but rather over what that will has the natural ability to do, especially in spiritual matters. The will *(voluntas*) is always willing; that is its nature. The question is more about how the will expresses itself or gives evidence of its activity. The primary way that the will is seen to be active is through "choice" (*arbitrium*). But what choices does it have the ability to make, especially in spiritual matters? That is the nub of the issue.[54]

Complicating the issue, though, is that Erasmus tends to use the terms *philosophically*, whereas Luther employs the terms *theologically*. Hoenecke explains in his dogmatics text that if we consider the difference between *voluntas* and *arbitrium* strictly in the context of philosophy,

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[51] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 37. "And, in fact, so far am I from delighting in 'assertions' that I would readily take refuge in the opinion of the Skeptics…"

[52] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 36. Erasmus wrote: "So let us pursue the matter without recrimination, because this is more fitting for Christian men, and because in this way the truth, which is so often lost amid too much wrangling, may be more surely perceived. To be sure, I know that I was not built for wrestling matches: there is surely nobody less practiced in this kind of thing than I, who have always had an inner temperamental horror of fighting, and who have always preferred to sport in the wider plains of the Muses rather than to brandish a sword in hand-to-hand fight."

[53] Augustine, Bernard, Aquinas, Wycliffe, Valla, Lombard and others had used the term.

[54] *Vero, similitudo omnis claudet…* If we were to try to illustrate this difference in concrete terms, imagine Erasmus and Luther sitting down for lunch in a pub and watching the behavior of another patron of the establishment. This man's behavior is erratic. He's obviously starved and wants to eat. But he apparently cannot read the menu, tries to bite the salt shaker, and nibbles on the napkin. Irritated, he gets up and starts digging in the garbage, mistaking the trash for food. Finally, he throws open the maintenance closet and sees a jug of green liquid. He grabs it and starts drinking it because thirst requires liquid, even if it is a floor cleaning solution. His *voluntas* (desire, innate drive) is working just fine, but his *arbitrium* (reasoned choice) is not.

there really is no essential difference between the two terms.[55] "But," Hoenecke continues, "theologically, *liberum arbitrium* is understood not only as the essence of the will but as the efficacy of the will, and then *liberum arbitrium* and will are not identical. Theologically, man certainly has the essence of the will but does not have *liberum arbitrium*."[56]

From the onset, the two doctors approached the topic from different places and with differing motives. Erasmus would use a classic, scholastic philosophical methodology. Oberman notes that this conservative move brought nothing new to the table.[57] However, for Luther, from start to finish, this was a theological issue that touched upon everything—sin, death, man's nature, God's nature, justification, salvation, sanctification, and, above all, the glory of the gospel revealed in Jesus Christ. Erasmus had gone for the jugular,[58] perhaps without even realizing it, and his choice (sic!) of topic prompted Luther to defend his teaching on the will not with a barrage of proof passages (as Erasmus had tried to handle the subject)[59] but with an entirely integrated Lutheran theology, rooted in the three *sola*'s.

The "ground rules" for the debate were that points would be proven by Scripture, and, as necessary, it would be appropriate to hear those venerated voices of the Church Fathers for clarification. That said, Erasmus offers his definition of the locus at hand:

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[55] Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Richard A. Krause and James Langebartels (Northwestern Pub. House, 2009), 2:449. "Fundamentally and really, *liberum arbitrium* and will are the same." We see those blurring of lines even today when we make a statement such as "I will do this!"—not really emphasizing the tense (future) but rather the desire that led to a decision to act towards something that we wish to accomplish.

[56] Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, 2:450.

[57] Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*, 24. Kolb also cites Oberman's conclusion: "It was precisely in his confrontation with Luther…that the outstanding Bible scholar was more scholastic and medieval than ever before. His polemical treatise was oriented toward the past; it was extremely conservative in its rejection of public discussion of unauthorized, untried, and hence unacceptable solutions and biblical interpretations." (*Luther: The Man Between God and the Devil*, 216).

[58] LW 33:294.

[59] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 85. Erasmus attempted to overwhelm Luther with some 200+ scriptural references. He stated: "Hence, all the passages in the Divine Scriptures which speak of help serve also to establish free choice, and they are innumerable. I shall already have won the day if the issue is settled by the number of testimonies."

> By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.[60]

So that his thesis did not sound crassly Pelagian, Erasmus eventually (near the end) made sure to emphasize the grace of God, which plays a vital role in the process of salvation as it acts upon the will of man:

> Thus, to those who maintain that man can do nothing without the help of the grace of God, and conclude that therefore no works of men are good—to these we shall oppose a thesis to me much more probable, that there is nothing that man cannot do with the help of the grace of God, and that therefore all the works of man can be good. [61]

*But what is grace?*

It appeared that Erasmus highly prized grace…but Luther saw it right through it.[62] So Luther pressed the issue. "What is grace? What do you mean by that term? You say, Erasmus, that grace is necessary… but how much? Moreover, where is grace to be found? Is it a latent quality in man that needs to be awakened and can then be rewarded? Alternatively, is grace something outside of us (*extra nos*) that belongs to God and moves him to act like he does towards sinners?" To a humanist and self-made man such as Erasmus, who had forged a respectable life for himself, the answer was clear. But to a former monk who had once lived constantly under the oppressive weight of God's holy law and in the fearful shadow of eternal judgment, the answer was also clear.

Luther noted the progress of Erasmus's inconsistent logic on this matter of grace and called him out for it. The many contradictions heightened Luther's disgust with the entire venture of responding to Erasmus, and that he was not saying anything new. Erasmus had begun by describing the human will, without grace, as a dead thing incapable of anything. But then he mentions that reason has been "wounded by sin,"

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[60] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 47.

[61] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 85. Erasmus attempted to overwhelm Luther with some 200+ scriptural references.

[62] "No doubt your conscience warned you that, no matter what powers of eloquence you brought to the task, you would be unable so to gloss it over as to prevent me from stripping away the seductive charm of your words and discovering the dregs beneath, since although I am unskilled in speech, I am not unskilled in knowledge, by the grace of God." Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33*, 16.

implying that it was not entirely dead.[63] Suddenly, we hear of his attitude toward certain philosophers who pursued "good" without a proper knowledge of God. He took issue with "those who argue that all these works, even though morally good, were detestable to God…"; he called it a "hard opinion."[64] Erasmus saw in the lives of ancient nobles some proof that there is still a remnant of good in the will of natural man.

We should note that these opinions of the Dutch scholar were squarely in line with medieval Scholastic teaching, which delineated various "levels of grace," as Erasmus explained to his readers. The first (lowest) level was *prevenient (natural)* grace,

> implanted by nature and vitiated by sin (but, as we said, not extinguished), which some call a natural influx. This is common to all, and remains even in those who persist in sin: …Nor are there lacking those who, bearing in mind the manifold goodness of God, say that man can so far make use of benefits of this kind that he may be prepared for grace and so call forth the mercy of God.[65]

The next level was *peculiar (operative)* grace—an intermediate step—where "God in his mercy arouses the sinner wholly without merit to repent, yet without infusing that supreme grace (third level, *cooperating* grace) which abolishes sin and makes him pleasing to God."[66]

We can also sense that Erasmus embraced some of the Nominalist teaching, that when man "did what was within him," (*facere quod in se est*), that is, used his natural gifts to pursue good and seek to love God, God was obligated to reward this effort with grace (*de congruo* –"merit of fitness") Thisearned grace, then, put man in a position to do actual good works earning additional merit, a "merit of worthiness" (*de condigno*).[67] The process continued until enough grace was acquired to attain salvation.[68]

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[63] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 51.

[64] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 51.

[65] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 52.

[66] Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 52.

[67] Luther, "Disputation on the Powers and Will of Man Without Grace: Sententiarius Disputation for Bartholomäus Bernhardi, September 19[?], 1516," 60.September 19[?], 1516," 60. "Second Conclusion: Man, apart from God's grace, is entirely unable to keep His commandments or to prepare himself for grace, either by congruous or by condign [merit], and instead remains by necessity under sin."

[68] Note that justification then becomes a *process,* and not a proclamation (forensic decree) by a holy and merciful God that all has been accomplished on the sinner's behalf.

Luther exposed, though, what Erasmus was actually saying about grace and man's abilities. Luther tracked how Erasmus first went from saying free will is dead apart from grace, to saying that it played a little role in earning grace, to saying that if free will does not exist, there can be no such thing as merit and the rewards merit earns.[69] So Luther needed to repeatedly hammer the point home that if you allow free will to make even the slightest contribution salvation, you have to give free will credit for doing all of it; it is an all-or-none principle: "For throughout the discussion you forget that you have said that free choice can do nothing without grace, and you prove instead that free choice can do everything without grace."[70]

This, for Luther, was no mere trifling about how best to put doctrinal concepts into neat theological boxes. What was at stake was a proper understanding of grace.[71] What was at stake was the certainty of how the sinner becomes right with a holy God. For if man's will contributes even the slightest amount, there will always be an element of doubt. Did I do it right? Did I do it hard enough? Did I do it with pure love for God or my neighbor or not? And, especially, will God accept what I did? In contrast,

> But when a man has no doubt that everything depends on the will of God, then he entirely despairs of himself and chooses nothing for himself, but waits for God to work; then he has come close to grace, and can be saved.[72]

### *Working Backwards*

In a sense, Erasmus's approach to the entire topic was weak from the outset. How so? Erasmus began with man, that is, with anthropology. Perhaps many of us would also have seen this as a logical place to start, were we penning the piece. God created man. Man fell into

[69] LW 33:267. "And although they protest both in speech and writing that they do not seek to obtain grace by condign merit, and in fact do not use the term, yet they are only playing a trick on us with the word, and holding on to the thing it signifies just the same."

[70] LW 33:129. Kolb also notes this: Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*, 25.

[71] LW 33:35. "Indeed, as you should know, this is the cardinal issue between us, the point on which everything in this controversy turns. For what we are doing is to inquire what free choice can do, what it has done to it, and what is its relation to the grace of God. If we do not know these things, we shall know nothing at all of things Christian, and shall be worse than any heathen."

[72] Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33*, 62.

sin. How can man be restored to his former state? What must happen for man to get from point A to point B? This is not an incorrect way, of course, to unwrap the message of Scripture. However, in Erasmus's case, it is clear that his primary focus is on man's role in the plan of salvation. Erasmus's humanism undoubtedly reinforced this vantage point, as he believed that natural man has a remnant of goodness in him.[73] In fact, Erasmus considered it an offensive thought that man played no role in his earthly or eternal betterment; it belittled the dignity of man.

Luther, in contrast, brilliantly begins with soteriology, not anthropology.[74] As he countered Erasmus's arguments for the freedom of will in man, Luther began with God and his plan of salvation, for the Scriptures are all about God's work, not man's. Luther's logic runs this way: "Let us begin here: Why did Christ have to come? Why did Christ have to die? Why did God pay such an inconceivable cost? In short, what problem existed that needed such powerful and drastic intervention by God himself? The problem was sin. The result was death. All creation was affected, but especially the crown of creation, mankind. Only God could fix the mess." Luther did not see Scripture presenting such a rosy picture of man as Erasmus apparently did. Instead, Luther saw nothing but sin, disobedience, and death in the fallen will of man.[75]

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[73] Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, trans. Ernest F. Winter, Milestones of Thought (Continuum, 1961): "For Erasmus, Christianity is morality, a simplicity of life and of doctrine. He wants to resolve the problem philosophically. In current terminology, Erasmus displays an anthropological concern, but employs essentially theological tools, without being or ever wanting to be a theologian… Both proceed from different vantage points. Erasmus dismisses both the excessive confidence in man's moral strength, held by the Pelagians, and what he believed to be St. Augustine's view, the excessive hopelessness of a final condemnation passed on man. He identified Luther with the latter. Erasmus calls Scripture to help in outlining his reasonable and conciliatory middle way, really a philosophical and pragmatic statement of man's essential freedom. Luther interprets this to mean assigning free will to divine things, because his interest lies in the practical implementation of a classical Christian paradox, which he thought solved. His solution is 'faith alone sets us free'" (x).

[74] Nestingen, "Introduction: Luther and Erasmus on the Bondage of the Will," 3. "Luther began with God's act in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus instead of the long tradition of domesticating grace into a process of moral reform that begins with human initiative and response. The God who creates out of nothing and raises the dead does not depend on levels of personal appropriation to balance the divine effort. Rather, Luther put it this way in the form of a thesis: 'the love of God does not find but creates that which is pleasing to it."

[75] Johann Gerhard, *On Sin and Free Choice: Theological Commonplaces* (Concordia Publishing, 2014), 231. "We confess loudly as we assert with Ambrose (or Prosper, *De vocat.gent.*, bk.1, ch.3) that man has not been deprived of his will but of the soundness of his will."

A former seminary professor made an off-hand comment in class one day that has stuck with me over the years: "How many, many errors in the history of the church have their root in not understanding the depth of original sin." We can coolly fault Erasmus for his lack of understanding on this point—or his resistance to believing it[76]—but we, too, need to remind ourselves that our own *opinio legis* fights against God's own assessment of our situation with every fiber of its being. Indeed, the Formula accurately describes the state of every person born into this world: "What and how great this hereditary evil is no reason knows and understands but, as the *Smalcald Articles* say, it must be learned and believed from the revelation of Scripture." (FoC, *Th. Decl.* I.8). We are each born into this world aware of our sin through conscience but believing that it is merely a little problem. That is how big a problem sin is.[77] Luther chides Erasmus*:* "I mean, she (i.e., *Diatribe*) does not consider what it means and how much it involves to say, 'Man has lost his liberty, is forced to serve sin, and cannot will anything good."[78]

Luther understood man's dire predicament better than Erasmus, if we are to judge from the corpus of writing of the two men. We cannot forget that Luther's entire theological career began in fear as he cried out in a thunderstorm. In his writings, we hear of his near despair over his sins, his long confession sessions in the Augustinian Charnel House, his sheer terror of God's righteous judgment, etc.[79] In contrasting the two men, Forde has a thoughtful insight:

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[76] Marlow and Drewery, "Introduction," 12fn15 records Erasmus's views: *Male habet Lutherus quod Diatribe non tantum exaggerat pronitatem ad malum quantum ipsi commodum est. Fateor in quibusdam ingeniis bene natis ac bene educatis minimum esse pronitatis. Maxima proclinitatis pars est non ex natura, sed ex corrupta institutione, ex improbo convictu, ex assuetudine peccandi malitiaque voluntatis."* (Erasmus, *Works,* X.1454.F) ["Luther wrongly holds the opinion that the *Diatribe* had emphasized the proclivity towards evil only to the extent that it was advantageous for itself. I confess that in certain individuals, well-born or well-educated, there is a minimum of such proclivity. The greater part of this proclivity does not come from nature but from corrupt instruction, from unhealthy association, from the habit of sinning and maliciousness of will." — KCW].

[77] Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther Vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, Lutheran Quarterly Books (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), xvi. The author says it well: "Writing a book on Luther's *Bondage of the Will* is a foolhardy business—not because the arguments are so hard to understand but rather because they are difficult for sinners to take."

[78] LW 33:116–117.

[79] There are so many scattered references. But the account he himself gives of his spiritual state during his monastic years in his preface to his Latin writings is memorable.

> There is an essential theological lesson here. If you start from freedom, you will end in bondage. If you start from bondage, you are more likely to end in freedom. Luther experienced how close he was to grace in the depths of despair…[80]

However, once the Spirit opened his eyes to see and his mind to understand the grace of the gospel of Christ, it was as if the very doors of heaven were flung open.

> For in the New Testament the gospel is preached, which is nothing else but a message in which the Spirit and grace are offered with a view to the remission of sins, which has been obtained for us by Christ crucified; and all this freely, and by the sole mercy of God the Father, whereby favor is shown to us, unworthy as we are and deserving of damnation rather than anything else.[81]

For Luther, where there is no proper understanding of the immense corruption sin brought to man, there will also be no true understanding of what grace truly is. Nor can we dream that grace is something found inside of us, some latent quality that God awakens bit by bit in varying degrees. If that were the case, there could be no solution to the problem of sin, no certainty about our salvation. Thus, free will is nothing—it *must* be nothing—and can contribute nothing towards man's salvation.[82]

In contrast, there is nothing but the highest comfort in the truth that grace exists outside of us, in the heart of God. In his unfathomable mercy, the only One with a genuinely free will, freely chose to deal with us in grace through Christ instead of treating us as our sins deserve (Ps. 103). And then, God freely chose to make known to us the riches of his grace and sent his Spirit into our hearts to create that very faith needed to believe it, because we cannot by our own reason or strength. The fact that our salvation is entirely God's work, not ours, gave Luther, as it gives us, nothing but peace and joy. The fact that Jesus Christ came, lived, obeyed, suffered, died, and rose "for us and for our salvation" proves that these are things *only* God can do. The fact that "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last…" (John 15:16, NIV) proves the same. And if God alone can do these things, they were done right. The good

[80] Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 52.

[81] LW 33:150.

[82] LW 33:174. "Let all the free choice in the world do all it can with all its might, yet it will never produce any evidence of its ability either to avoid hardening if God does not give the Spirit, or to merit mercy if it is left to its own devices."

news of God's grace is that he did do it and freely gives the blessings of his work—forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—through faith to all who believe.

## III. Sola Scriptura: The Lutheran Hermeneutic

However, for mankind to believe this good news, God's grace and work outside of us must become ours, where God continues his work inside us. Article 5 of the Augustana would later explain how God does his work: "For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith when and where it pleases God."[83]

There is no doubt that Erasmus had a high regard for Scripture and, as a translator, knew the Scriptures well. "The same Scriptures are acknowledged and venerated by either side," he wrote in the *Diatribe's* introduction.[84] However, as touches upon our second point, *sola scriptura,* it is fair to say that Erasmus's understanding of Scripture fundamentally differed from Luther's, and their battle over the nature of the will also reveals this. Erasmus continued, "Our battle is about the meaning of Scripture."[85] Nearly a decade earlier, Luther had noted something was amiss when he wrote in the aforementioned letter to Spalatin:

> I always give Erasmus the highest praise and defend him as much as I can. Still, if I have to speak as a theologian rather than a philologian, there are many things in Erasmus which seem to me completely incongruous with a knowledge of Christ.[86]

Erasmus may well have been a gifted linguist who was well-read and scholarly. But he was no theologian, at least not to the same degree as Luther. Consequently, when Erasmus compiled a concordance-style list of "proof" passages to throw at Luther,[87] the reformer responded by putting his Lutheran hermeneutic on display.

[83] AC 5, cited from *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* (Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 45.

[84] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 43.

[85] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 43.

[86] LW 48:53–54.

[87] Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 23–24. "But the real problem came immediately to the fore in the fact that Luther understood the argument from Scripture in a manner radically different from that of Erasmus, and, we shall have to say, different from most exegetes ever since. Erasmus seems to have thought scriptural argument was a matter of collecting passages and authorities for and against the issue at hand and then weighing them and totaling up the 'box score.' It was a kind of 'word study' method. The number of times a word occurs in a treatise is supposed to be of decisive import for its

### *Ad Fontes*

First, Luther clarifies to Erasmus that God's Word alone is the supreme authority in matters of doctrine and faith. This was a point, though, that irked Erasmus, despite his professed veneration of Scripture. He mentioned in his *Diatribe* that "Luther does not acknowledge the authority of any writer, of however distinguished a reputation, but only listens to the canonical Scriptures…"[88] We cannot help but note the irony; the humanists' cry of *"Ad fontes!"* was also a call for textual authority to rule, and yet when Luther puts this principle into practice and insists on returning again and again to the text of Scripture, Erasmus criticizes him for it. The Dutch humanist gladly welcomed the testimony of the Church Fathers and other learned men, and regarded them as necessary for correctly understanding Scripture, especially in those places where a given passage seems unclear or obscure. Erasmus considered the collected wisdom of recognized teachers necessary to help establish an unclear passage's meaning (of which he believed there to be many).

How Luther generally regarded the "Fathers" and their commentaries on Scripture is an interesting topic beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is quite clear from *The Bondage of the Will* that Luther, while appreciating the witness of the ancients, did not give them an equal seat at the table with Scripture.[89] "Luther felt little tension between his respect for the sanctity of the Fathers and his acknowledgement of their fallibility."[90] He noted Erasmus' deference to them (or preference for them) when he wrote:

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interpretation. Luther, however, was not at all persuaded or moved by such methods. The epigraph over this chapter leaves no doubt. Numbers do not and cannot settle the matter of powers of the will. If there were only one passage, one text against free choice, that single occurrence would be decisive" (cf. LW 33:161).

[88] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 42.

[89] "Theologians can fail; Scripture cannot. Expositions from the writings of orthodox fathers of any era can serve only in a supporting role." John A. Moldstad, "Commitment to Our Lutheran Confessions in Light of Scriptural Hermeneutics," in *My Savior's Guest: A Festschrift in Honor of Erling Trygve Teigen*, ed. Thomas Rank et al. (Lulu.com, 2021), 175.

[90] Erik Herrmann, "Luther's Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Irene Dingel et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 80. "The enormous importance that Luther ascribed to Augustine as an exegete and theologian does not, however, preclude criticism of this church father…' Let me know put my trust in Augustine; let us listen to the Scriptures' (WA 7.142, 30–31)."

> Nor is this surprising, for it is *Diatribe's* one concern that the Scriptures of God should be everywhere ambiguous so that she may not be obliged to use them, and that the authority of the Fathers should be certain so that she may misuse them.[91]

Earlier in 1521, when he answered the papal bull of Leo X with his *Assertio*, Luther had made his position clear concerning his relationship with towering figures of the past:

> "This is my answer to those also who accuse me of rejecting all the teachers of the Church. I do not reject them, but because everyone knows that they have erred at times, as men will, I am willing to put confidence in them only so far as they give me proofs for their opinions out of the Scriptures, which never yet have erred. This St. Paul commands me in 1 Thessalonians, the last chapter, where he says, 'First prove and confirm all doctrines; hold fast that which is good…
>
> 'No one can ever prove a dark saying by one that is still darker; therefore, necessity compels us to run to the Bible with all the writings of the doctors, and thence to get our verdict and judgment upon them; for Scripture alone is the true overlord and master of all writings and doctrines on earth. If not, what are the Scriptures good for? [92]

But to be in a position to judge whether what a given teacher—ancient or modern—is teaching that which agrees with Scripture, one must (to state the obvious) know the Scriptures. Moreover, to know the Scriptures, one must know the languages in which they are written. One unmistakable impression we get from reading *The Bondage of the Will* is the importance Luther placed upon proper exegesis of Scriptural texts. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that *Bondage* is an exegetical *tour de force* as he dismantles Erasmus's arguments one by one, by nothing more than proper exegesis. For Luther, this skill is vital to the proper handling of the Word of truth, faithfully done so that those who preach and teach may have the confidence, "This is what the Lord says." In the quiet of his study, when a pastor sits down with his Greek or Hebrew text to prepare his sermon, here is the heartbeat of the ministry. Moreover, the humble student of the Word grows closer to his Lord through such

[91] LW 33:235.

[92] Luther, "An Argument in Defense of All the Articles of Dr. Martin Luther Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull, 1521 (*Assertio*)," LW 3:16.

concentrated study. For by it the Spirit is at work in the pastor's heart to guide him into all truth and strengthen him for the work he has been called to do.[93] We leaders in our Lutheran churches do well to follow Luther's lead in this regard. For him, the priority of every Lutheran pastor and teacher must be to know the Scriptures above all else.

It must have galled Erasmus, though, the curator of the authoritative Greek text of the New Testament and translator of a new Vulgate, to have been taken behind the grammatical school's woodshed and given a thrashing by the former friar of Wittenberg. Especially since, as Massing notes, Erasmus promoted the study of grammar in his writings so that all could better understand Scripture. His thinking was that if everyone would honestly study the Scriptures to ascertain the text's meaning grammatically, then the temperature of theological debates in Europe could be lowered exponentially.[94] In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther put this advice into practice (focusing on grammar, that is, not lowering the temperature), and undermined nearly everything Erasmus had set out to prove.[95]

Luther's thorough knowledge of verb moods,[96] for instance, undermined one of Erasmus's main arguments in his *Diatribe*. Erasmus, believing in the latent ability of man's free will, could not get past the idea that if God has commanded us in Scripture to do something, doesn't that imply that we must have some ability to do so?[97] Surely, Luther, that makes sense!" But it was as if Luther replied, "Do you even know what a subjunctive is, Erasmus? Or an imperative?"

> But Diatribe is so overwhelmed, drowned, and corrupted by the thought of this ungodly ["fleshly, carnal"] idea that it is pointless

[93] August Pieper, "Paul, a Model of the Certainty of Faith, Especially for All Servants of the Word," in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, trans. John Jeske (Northwestern Pub House, 2000), 3:226. Pieper writes: "If our study of the Word has not brought us to a personal fellowship with Jesus Christ, our ministry will remain without purpose and power." And, "A preacher or teacher or professor may be able to speak and teach fluently and skillfully, but if he studies the Word infrequently or not at all, he is a sorry specimen."

[94] Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 628.

[95] LW 33:248. Even in matters such as St. Paul's use of Hebraisms and how to correctly understand the Greek definite article in its context.

[96] LW 33:125. "For it is well known that the Hebrews frequently use the future indicative for the imperative, as in Exodus 20[:3, 13 f.]: "Thou shalt have none other gods"; "Thou shalt not kill"; "Thou shalt not commit adultery"; and countless similar instances."

[97] Erasmus especially made the interpretation of Ecclesiasticus 15:14–17 an issue with Luther. LW 33:117 ff.

> to command impossibilities, that whenever she hears an imperative or subjunctive verb she cannot help appending her own indicative inferences, to the effect that if something is commanded, then we can do it, and we do it, otherwise the command is stupid.[98]

Or again:

> Heap up, therefore, all the imperative verbs (from the major concordances, if you like) into one chaotic mass, and provided they are not words of promise, but of demand and the law, I shall say at once that what is signified by them is always what men ought to do and not what they do or can do. [99]

The above quotes display yet another vital hermeneutical principle Luther grasps that Erasmus does not: the proper distinction between the law and the gospel. Erasmus the moralist naturally reads passages revealing the will of God in imperatives as mandates for self-improvement. As seen above, Luther sees them as passages where the law operates in its primary function: to demand and threaten punishment and, in the process, confront man with his utter inability to obey or even begin to do anything in spiritual matters. "If through the law sin abounds," says Luther, commenting on Romans 5:20, "how is it possible that a man should be able to prepare himself by moral works for the divine favor?"[100]

In their debate, Luther was further annoyed by Erasmus's reliance upon and praise of "tropes" that commentators on Scripture regularly employed. These "tropes" were study notes, usually interpretative comments clarifying or illustrating a passage of Scripture.[101] Valuable and informative as many of these tropes were, Luther told Erasmus that they also had been the source of many false teachings over the centuries, and so

[98] LW 33:210.

[99] LW 33:127.

[100] LW 33:219.

[101] Nicholas von Lyra (d. 1349) had written a large collection of such notes, known simply as *The Gloss*. Luther had a copy, as did most theologians, and found it generally useful. In fact, there arose a popular saying, *Si Lyra non lyrasset, Lutherus non cantasset.* ["If Lyra had not played his lyre, Luther would not have sung."] *The Gloss* was good in that "the literal sense of the text is the meaning originally intended by its author, accessible through an understanding of the historical context." Herrmann, "Luther's Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation and His Use of the Church Fathers," 76.

> Let us rather take the view that neither an inference nor a trope is admissible in any passage of Scripture, unless it is forced on us by the evident nature of the context and the absurdity of the literal sense as conflicting with one or another of the articles of faith.[102]

Noteworthy in this passage are other principles of Luther's exegesis as well, namely, the importance of identifying the context of a given passage, as well as making sure any interpretation does not either alter the plain meaning or conflict with other passages and the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith.[103] In the end, Luther shows Erasmus that many of the passages Erasmus considered to be obscure were, in fact, relatively straightforward and clear.[104]

Luther's exegetical method is on display throughout *The Bondage of the Will* as he rebuts Erasmus's points one by one. But to demonstrate how they all are present and work together, let us briefly examine how Luther masterfully handles the opening verses of Isaiah 40.[105] Erasmus focused on this passage that Luther cited in his *Assertio* as proof of God's choosing to deal with mankind in grace. However, Erasmus follows Jerome's gloss where Jerome interprets "she [Jerusalem] has received from the Lord double for all her sins" (40:2) in terms of the divine vengeance, not of grace given in return for our evil deeds."[106] Erasmus argues that the Isaiah passage is another example of where God seeks to motivate a change in behavior with threats, and free will, of course, has the capacity to comply. Again, he misuses the law doctrine by inferring that the law can motivate morality, preparing a soul to receive grace. Luther, in his rebuttal, shows us his hermeneutic principles at work as he addresses various aspects of this passage:

- Study the text, not what someone says about the text: "I see! Jerome says so; therefore, it is true! I am discussing Isaiah, who speaks in

[102] LW 33:162.

[103] Compare Luther's comments on how to approach Romans 1: "But all this would be mere empty talk were it not so compellingly confirmed by the drift of Paul's argument itself." And further, "But let us hear Paul himself as his own interpreter!" LW 33:248, 252. The latter emphasizes that Scripture interprets Scripture.

[104] LW 33:267. In commenting on Paul's clear passage in Ephesians that we are justified by grace through faith without works, "You cannot complain of obscurity and ambiguity; the facts and the words are very clear and very simple." In particular, Luther marvelously dismantles Erasmus's gloss that the word "nothing" in John 15:5 actually (to Erasmus) means "something, a little bit." So, "Without me, you can do nothing" was interpreted by Erasmus to mean, "Without me, you can only do a little bit." (LW 33:234 ff.)

[105] LW 33:216–222.

[106] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 75.

the very plainest terms, and Jerome is thrown at me, who (to say no worse of him) is a man quite without either judgment or application." [LW 33:216]

- Context helps establish meaning: "The whole chapter of Isaiah speaks of the forgiveness of sins proclaimed by the gospel, as the Evangelists show where they say 'the voice of one crying' refers to John the Baptist." [LW 33:216–217]. This also demonstrates the hermeneutical principle that Scripture interprets Scripture.
- The text means what it says unless context suggests otherwise. "Can we let it pass, then, when Jerome in his usual way puts forward Jewish blindnesses as the historical sense and his own ineptitudes as the allegorical? Are we to let grammar be turned upside down, and to take a passage that speaks of forgiveness as speaking of vengeance?" [LW 33:217].
- Study the original text: "But let us look at the words themselves in the Hebrew. 'Comfort ye (it says)…Then follows: 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and preach to her.' To 'speak to the heart' is a Hebrew expression, and it means to speak good, sweet, and tender things, as in Genesis 34[:3]…' Later, "For the Hebrew expression 'iniquity is pardoned' implies gratuitous goodwill; and it is by this that the iniquity is pardoned, without any merit and indeed with demerit." [LW 33:217–18]. And again, "The Hebrew says 'in all sins,' which means the same as 'for or on account of sins' in Latin;" [LW 33:219].
- Handling law and gospel: "Isaiah, therefore, is announcing that the service of the people of the law is to be brought to an end because under the law they have been oppressed by a burden too heavy to bear (as Peter say in Acts 15[:10]), and when they have been freed from the law they are to be transferred to a new service of the Spirit" [LW 33:218].
- Clarity…again: "There are no obscure or ambiguous words here. He says the warfare is to be ended because the iniquity is pardoned…" [LW 33:218].

*"They testify of me."*

However, one more vital hermeneutical principle of Luther's to highlight is his Christocentric approach to Biblical interpretation.[107] Luther heard the words of our Savior in John's Gospel and took them seriously: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39, NIV). Or, as he bluntly asked Erasmus at the opening of *Bondage,* "Take Christ out of the Scriptures, and what will you find left in them?"[108] See how the Reformer puts this into practice as he continues analyzing Isaiah 40:

> And this is the point of what follows: For "she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." This includes, as I have said, not only the forgiveness of sins, but also the end of the warfare; and that means nothing else but that with the removing of the law, which was the power of sin [1 Cor 15:56], and the pardoning of sin, which was the sting of death [*ibid.*], they reign in freedom from both through the victory of Jesus Christ. This is what Isaiah means by "from the Lord's hand," for they have not obtained these things by their own powers or merits, but have received them from Christ the conqueror and the giver.[109]

This quick overview of Isaiah 40 is just one small case study of how Luther put on display his hermeneutical principles, nurtured through his deep study of the Psalms and Romans, in his answer to Erasmus. What Luther gave to the world was a breathtaking, fresh approach to Biblical interpretation. He practiced pure "exegesis"; he "drew out" the truths of Scripture from the Spirit-given text instead of reading preconceived theological notions into them, and then pointed to Christ.[110] And

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[107] Taras Khomych, "Luther's Assertio: A Preliminary Assessment of the Reformer's Relationship to Patristics," *Annali Di Storia Dell'Esegesi* 28, no. 1 (2011): 9. See especially footnote 39 for an excellent summary of Luther's Christo-centric approach to Scripture.

[108] LW 33:26.

[109] LW 33:218–219.

[110] John Warwick Montgomery, *In Defense of Martin Luther*, 2nd ed., The NPH Classic Series (Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 73. Montgomery quotes J. Pelikan: "His [Luther's] exegesis sought to derive the teachings of the Scriptures for the particular statements of the Scriptures rather than from the *a priori* principles of a theological system. Not even to his own theological speculation, therefore, would Luther consciously accord the status of an *a priori* principle that would dictate his exegesis, even

he left us, his spiritual descendants, with a model to follow so that the Holy Spirit, working through the Scriptures, may create, nurture, and sustain true faith in Christ through our humble efforts of preaching, teaching, and sharing his Word.

## IV. Sola Fide: We Live by Faith

What is left for us to explore in this last section is that concept, which is, admittedly, the most difficult for man's limited human reason to try to grapple with. Erasmus had jumped all over Luther for using the word "necessary" in the *Assertio* written to Leo X, which said that everything that happens happens by absolute necessity.[111] This statement was a reiteration of what Luther had stated in his Heidelberg Theses of 1518. In *Bondage of the Will*, Luther says more plainly: "Hence the proposition stands, and remains invincible, that all things happen by necessity."[112]

But what did that statement mean to Erasmus, or, perhaps better, what did he take it to mean? We gather that Erasmus understood Luther's position to be what modern philosophy texts call "hard determinism."[113] In this view of the world, choice is an illusion. Man becomes nothing more than a puppet on strings. He is subject to the whims of Fate; everything is beyond his control. As the Stoics taught, there is nothing for man to do but to bravely, dispassionately deal with it all. Disturbed by this thought, Erasmus was concerned not only with the implications for the dignity of man but also with public morality in general.[114] What would happen if we went around telling people that

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though it cannot be denied that in his exegetical practice he sometimes operated with such *a priori* principles," 73fn82.

[111] LW 32:8. However, as the editors of Vol. 32 make clear (fn10), the *LW* American edition is translated from the last German version of the *Assertio* that Luther penned. This was published in 1520 "for more popular consumption, reads more mildly, making no mention of 'necessity'." Erasmus, of course, would have read the Latin version.

[112] LW 33:40.

[113] Hard determinism is still appealing to many philosophers who, rooted in modern scientific perspectives, believe that the laws of nature are unalterable. Since all things are comprised of atoms that follow the laws of nature, there can be no option of things being otherwise, and there certainly is nothing such as 'chance' …or even 'choice.' If I walk into an ice cream shop and order a vanilla bean cone, that had to happen because the atoms within me created that impulse before any seeming conscious choice I made. However, this past half-century's discovery of the quantum realm, where particles *do* seem to operate randomly and unpredictably, has proven challenging to the hard determinist's mechanistic cosmology.

[114] Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Baker Book House, 1972), 98. Charles V's

they had to sin…and had no choice but to sin?[115] What would happen to law and order? Can we even arrest and punish people for violating the law when, in reality, they had no choice but to break the law, since everything (even sin) happens by necessity? What becomes of our view of God, who apparently works sin in us and then punishes us for it? From the *Diatribe*:

> Let us, therefore, suppose that there is some truth in the doctrine which Wyclif taught and Luther asserted, that whatever is done by us is done not by free choice but by sheer necessity. What could be more useless than to publish this paradox to the world? Again, suppose for a moment that it were true in a certain sense, as Augustine says somewhere, that "God works in us good and evil, and rewards his own good works in us, and punishes his evil works in us"; what a window to impiety would the public avowal of such an opinion open to countless mortals! …What evildoer will take pains to correct his life? Who will be able to bring himself to love God with all his heart when He created hell seething with eternal torments in order to punish his own misdeeds in his victims as though he took delight in human torments? For that is how most people will interpret them.[116]

Intimately packaged together with this issue of necessity is the truth of God's foreknowledge of all things. Luther insists that if God foreknows something, that thing must come to pass. If it does not, then God's foreknowledge is not perfect. If it does, that has implications for the doctrine of predestination and other things. Without explicitly saying it, we can tell Erasmus has a problem with the whole idea that God would create a human being who is, just by virtue of birth, dead in sin and, consequently, unable to do anything but sin—thus incurring God's wrath both in this life and in the one to come. The very thought was repulsive to Erasmus. As he said, "Who could love a God like that?"

The Scholastics had wrestled with these questions centuries before the Erasmus-Luther exchange.[117] One of their solutions to the conun-

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Edict of Worms, published in May of 1521, accused Luther of this very thing: "for he teaches a loose, self-willed life, severed from all laws and wholly brutish; and he is a loose, self-willed man, who condemns and rejects all laws."

[115] Or, conversely, as some understood Luther to be preaching, freedom in Christ means we're free to do whatever we want.

[116] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 41.

[117] See Luther's comments on the "Sophists'" labors over this teaching. Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 33*, 39–40.

drum was to distinguish between a "necessity of the consequent" (*consequentis*) and a "necessity of consequence" (*consequentiae*).[118] The first refers to an absolute necessity, the second to a conditional necessity. The first maintains the principle that if God foreknows something, it is his will that this thing will happen. The second is much more appealing to human reason and softens the blows of God's majesty hammering upon our tiny brains. The "necessity of consequence" means that whatever God wills to happen will happen, but conditionally. Why? God is under no obligation to will it in the first place (absolutely free), but if he does will it, it will happen…but it also will happen in the way God wants it to happen, either absolutely or conditionally.[119] With this view, we can satisfactorily understand such statements in Scripture as "So the Lord relented (KJV "repented of") concerning the disaster He said He would bring on His people" (Exod 32:14, NIV). This way, there can be variables in the formula that make all this somewhat comprehensible: there are different types of necessity, so there is room for God's will not being set in stone but adaptable or responsive to man's decisions and actions, etc. And, of course, this means that there is room for free will to play some part in affecting the outcome. Luther noted their concern: "To put it briefly, merit or reward is a matter of either worthiness or consequence."[120] But he also dismissed these concerns as a mere trifling with words.[121]

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[118] See Dieter, "Luther as Late Medieval Theologian: His Positive and Negative Use of Nominalism and Realism," 42.

[119] Marlow and Drewery, "Introduction," 20. Perhaps this is all somewhat akin to the popular multi-verse theory dominating the MCU right now: *Loki; Dr. Strange and the Multi-verse of Madness; Spiderman: Into the Spider-verse; Avenger's: End Game* (with the Time Stone). "Necessity of consequence" would say that God foresees all possible outcomes to an event, and whichever one comes to pass, God can still say, "I knew that would happen," thus keeping his foreknowledge perfect. His will determines that one of these options should happen. If he dictates, in his absolute power, which one of the options will happen, it will happen. But if he allows one of the other ones to happen, he still will know the outcome of it, and there won't be any conflict between his foreknowledge and will, for he has willed for all the options to be on the table. From Erasmus's perspective, this accounts for free choice.

[120] LW 33:152.

[121] LW 33:190–193. "That is why there has been such sweating and toiling to excuse the goodness of God and accuse the will of man; and it is here the distinctions have been invented between the ordained and the absolute will of God,[36] and between the necessity of consequence and consequent, and so forth, though nothing has been achieved by them except that the ignorant have been imposed upon by empty talk and "contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" [1 Tim 6:20]."

### *Let God be God*

But is Erasmus right? In saying that all things happen by necessity, is not Luther implying that God, ultimately, is the cause of sin both in the world and in my life? If so, how can he hold me accountable? If he works evil in me, what choice do I have but to sin? What about Judas? Are you saying he *had* to betray Jesus because Jesus, as God, foreknew this would happen? Did he have no choice in the matter? Further, if God knows who will be on his right or left for eternity—and what God foreknows must necessarily come to be—how can this *not* mean that God predestined people to hell? Erasmus felt he had played a trump card.

Luther sensed, however, that Erasmus had not really understood how he had used the word "necessity" in his earlier writings. So, he explained to Erasmus that what he wrote about was a "necessity of immutability," not a "necessity of compulsion." Luther complained in *Bondage* that "necessity" was not the best word to describe the situation, but he felt it adequately conveyed what he was asserting:

> I could wish indeed that another and a better word had been introduced into our discussion than this usual one, "necessity," which is not rightly applied either to the divine or the human will. It has too harsh and incongruous a meaning for this purpose, for it suggests a kind of compulsion, and the very opposite of willingness, although the subject under discussion implies no such thing. For neither the divine nor the human will does what it does, whether good or evil, under any compulsion, but from sheer pleasure or desire, as with true freedom; and yet the will of God is immutable and infallible, and it governs our mutable will…[122]

Luther emphatically rejected the concept of "necessity of compulsion," i.e., that we are forced to do this or that—or evil—by external forces. Instead, he explained that the "necessity of immutability" means that the fallen will in man is what it is, and it has no ability of its own to mutate into something better. The sinner, thus, sins *necessarily* in the sense that his nature is fallen, and he cannot do otherwise. But the sinner also sins willingly; he desires to do what he does, and no one compels him.[123] The choice to sin has its source in the will, and the will

[122] LW 33:39.

[123] LW 33:64–65. "Now, by 'necessarily' I do not mean 'compulsorily,' but by the necessity of immutability (as they say) and not of compulsion. That is to say, when a man is without the Spirit of God he does not do evil against his will, as if he were taken by

is always actively willing. Moreover, since the fall into sin, man's will can only will what is contrary to God. Thus, the will of natural man always and only chooses evil, and happily does so.[124] Further, since his choice originates in his will, man, not God, is culpable for evil. In perhaps his most famous analogy in *Bondage of the Will*, Luther compares the will to a beast and rider:

> Thus the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says: "I am become as a beast [before thee] and I am always with thee" [Ps 73:22 ff.]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.[125]

To be sure, Luther also conceded to Erasmus that human reason retains a limited ability to make choices and decisions regarding "lower things," i.e., concerning everyday life. We can decide which clothes to wear, career to pursue, town to live in, etc. However, he also made it clear that in respect to "higher things," i.e., spiritual things, the things of God, man's will is downright hostile and his *arbitrium* is, of necessity, also dead.

> We are not disputing about nature but about grace, and we are not asking what we are on earth, but what we are in heaven before God. We know that man has been constituted lord over the lower creatures, and in relation to them, he has authority and free choice, so that they obey him and do what he wills and thinks. What we are asking is whether he has free choice in relation to God, so that God

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the scruff of the neck and forced to it, like a thief or robber carried off against his will to punishment, but he does it of his own accord and with a ready will. And this readiness or will to act he cannot by his own powers omit, restrain, or change, but he keeps on willing and being ready; and even if he is compelled by external force to do something different, yet the will within him remains averse and he is resentful at whatever compels or resists it. He would not be resentful, however, if it were changed and he willingly submitted to the compulsion. This is what we call the necessity of immutability: It means that the will cannot change itself and turn in a different direction, but is rather the more provoked into willing by being resisted, as its resentment shows. This would not happen if it were free or had free choice. Ask experience how impossible it is to persuade people who have set their heart on anything."

[124] Radu Bandal, "Voluntas as Liberum Arbitrium at Saint Augustine and Three Meanings of the Servum Arbitrium at Martin Luther," *Philobiblon* 17, no. 2 (2012): 414.

[125] LW 33:65–66.

> obeys man and does what man wills, or rather, whether God has free choice in relation to man, so that man wills and does what God wills and is not able to do anything but what God wills and does.[126]

There were other troubling passages that Erasmus marshalled against Luther, not so much in defense of free will but rather to attack Luther's concept of "necessity," which makes God the source of evil. "If you believe, Luther, that God 'necessarily' controls all things, doesn't this imply that he raised up Pharaoh for the purpose of hardening his heart? How could he do that—work rejection and death in a man when it is his expressed will that all be saved?" Erasmus also had much trouble with the potter and clay metaphor that St. Paul uses in Romans 9 to illustrate the mysterious way God works all things out in keeping with his eternal election. It was troubling to Erasmus that the potter had so much control over the clay and could do with it whatever pleased him. For it is evident that the clay is man. "Why then does He still find fault? For who can resist his will?" (Rom 9:19, NIV) Or, as he says near the end of his *Diatribe:*

> For when I hear that the merit of man is so utterly worthless that all things, even the works of godly men, are sins, when I hear that our will does nothing more than clay in the hand of a potter, when I hear all that we do or will referred to absolute necessity, my mind encounters many a stumbling block.[127]

Ahh. The passage is telling. It is a problem for our human minds to grasp the ways of God. In the end, Luther adopted the attitude of St. Paul: "But who are you, a mere man, to talk back to God?" (Ro 9:20). But, more pointedly, in the context of this topic, we see clearly a profound difference between Luther and Erasmus. Luther was always comfortable with paradoxes and their inherent tensions, holding on to two seemingly contradictory statements of Scripture and letting both be true because they *are* in Scripture. In his *Diatribe*, Erasmus had reproached Luther for his use of paradoxes.[128] However, Luther often preferred using them to describe the workings of the *Deus absconditus*

[126] LW 33:284–285.

[127] Erasmus and Luther, *Discourse on Free Will*, 87.

[128] Cf. LW 33:58–64, 112–114. But also Melanchthon's attitude in Luther, "Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation with Proofs of the Philosophical Theses, 1518," 72fn15. the Luther's Works series consists of Martin Luther's Bible commentaries, sermons, prefaces, postils, disputations, letters, theology, and polemics, translated and published in English for the first time.Volume 72 contains theses which Luther drafted (sometimes

("the hidden God"). Luther maintained that the hidden God owed us no explanation for how he did things in his world. Luther's mind did not stumble as Erasmus's did, mainly because, for Luther, the truths of Scripture were something to be apprehended by faith, not by logic. The truths that God has foreknowledge of all things and yet chooses some for salvation are not truths that need to be reconciled; they are simply to—and can only be—grasped by faith. The same holds for the great truth of Christ's incarnation: he is fully God and fully man. The same holds for the dearest epithets that the Reformer passed down to his theological heirs: that believers in Christ are *simul iustus et peccator* ("at the same time a saint and sinner"). There are other examples, of course. For Luther, true faith must let Scripture speak, and let God be God.

Years later, however, Luther clarified his thinking behind insisting on the word "necessary" in *Bondage of the Will*. In his *Theological Commonplaces*, Gerhard raises the question: "Does Dr Luther deprive God of freedom of choice?" Gerhard answered:

> Necessity is meant in regard to creatures but not in regard to the Creator himself… As far as the matter itself is concerned, we admit that Dr. Luther (*De servo arbitrio*) writes that all things happen out of an absolute necessity, but he explained his intent very clearly in his commentary on Genesis 26.[129]

So, what did Luther say in his classroom comments on Genesis 26:9?

> I have wanted to teach and transmit this in such a painstaking and accurate way because after my death many will publish my books and will prove from them errors of every kind and their own delusions. Among other things, however, I have written that everything is absolute and unavoidable; but at the same time, I have added that one must look at the revealed God, as we sing in the hymn: *Er heist Jesu Christ, der HERR Zebaoth, und ist kein ander Gott*, "Jesus Christ is the Lord of hosts, and there is no other God—and also in very many other places. But they will pass over all these places and take only those that deal with the hidden God. Accordingly, you who are listening to me now should remember that I have taught that one should not inquire into the predestination of the hidden God but should be satisfied with what is revealed through the calling

with the help of his colleague Philip Melanchthon"Melanchthon, too, was uncomfortable with them: see his May 12, 1536, letter to Erasmus, MBW T7:1735)."

[129] Gerhard, *On Sin and Free Choice*, 265.

> and through the ministry of the Word. For then you can be sure about your faith and salvation and say: "I believe in the Son of God, who said (John 3:36): 'He who believes in the Son has eternal life.'" Hence, no condemnation or wrath rests on him, but he enjoys the good pleasure of God the Father. But I have publicly stated these same things elsewhere in my books, and now I am also teaching them by word of mouth. Therefore, I am excused.[130]

### *Let God Save Us in His Way*

As this particular passage so emphatically underscores, for Luther, much more was at stake than merely coming out on top in some verbal contest of logical gymnastics. "Erasmus set out to win a debate. Luther sought to comfort and rescue the lost."[131] The "lost" in need of comfort had started with him, a former monk who at one point had convinced himself that he was, under God's absolute power and decree, among those predestined for hell.[132] He existed in the Erfurt monastery, longing for and looking for comfort. He did not find it until God revealed it to him through Luther's study of Psalms and Romans. There, he found a gracious and compassionate God who had used his absolute power to take mankind's salvation into his own hands. The once despairing monk was overcome with joy and peace.

For Luther, if we have the ability to figure out everything God does—how he does it, why he does it—there is no room for or need to live by faith.[133] "If, then, I could by any means comprehend how this God can be merciful and just who displays so much wrath and iniquity, there would be no need of faith."[134] Indeed, the only way any sinner can be sure of salvation is if God is completely in control of our salvation—yes, of all things—from beginning to end.[135] "For if you doubt or

[130] LW 5:50.

[131] Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 25.

[132] Marlow and Drewery, "Introduction," 22.

[133] Bengt Hägglund, "Was Luther a Nominalist," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 28, no. 6 (1957): 449: "Luther sees in the tension between faith and reason something other than a problem connected with the theory of knowledge. For him, this tension is primarily a theological problem. The knowledge that faith gives is altogether inaccessible to reason, not only because the natural intelligence is insufficient here, but chiefly because human reason is blinded by original sin and it lacks that spiritual light without which man is incapable of understanding revealed truths….Natural reason is, therefore, an obstacle to faith."

[134] LW 33:63.

[135] Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 68. "Erasmus asks how there can be faith, ethics, true piety, in short, true Christian life if God rules all things by immutable

disdain to know that God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them?[136]

For Erasmus, this entire encounter was to be a debate about understanding man and, along the way, also understanding how God works things out concerning our salvation. For Luther, the entire matter was much deeper than that. It was, at its core, about trusting God and placing the care of one's eternal soul into his hands. If God wants to save us in His way—incomprehensible as that might be to our limited reason—that is God's business, and Luther, the man of faith, was okay with that. By God's grace, the Spirit led Luther to want to be saved God's way, through faith alone in promises of God, revealed in his holy Word.

## V: The Aftermath

In the years immediately after 1525, the issue of free will continued to be debated. Erasmus immediately replied to Luther's attack with two volumes in 1526 and 1527, respectively, entitled *Hyperaspistes*.[137] Erasmus had been stung deeply by Luther's work, and he sought to strike back with equal—if not greater—force. However, in his counter-attack, Erasmus, probably quite unknowingly and unwillingly, actually reinforced the core theological fault lines between the Lutheran and Catholic positions that Luther had identified in *Bondage of the Will.* As Erasmus revisited his original arguments, it is interesting to note where most of his effort in these treatises was directed:[138]

1) Grace: Erasmus doubled down on his argument for human cooperation.
2) Scripture: Erasmus would not budge from insisting on Scripture's obscurity.
3) Faith: Erasmus continued to appeal for a "reasonable" theology that could harmonize with philosophy.

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necessity. Luther maintains that faith cannot be sure of itself unless God does so rule.

[136] LW 33:42.

[137] "The very title, "Hyperaspistes", gives an indication of the kind of philological play and bitter sarcasm that often permeated these exchanges. The term derives from the adjective meaning "protected by a shield" and implies that the work is Erasmus's self-defense. However, there is more to the term than that. Luther had occasionally referred to Erasmus as a "viper" (*vipera* in Latin, ἀσπίς in Greek), and Erasmus seems to imply that he is playing the role of a "super snake"." From the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/luther/notes.html.

[138] Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 76.

So, rather than advancing his discussion with Luther, as was his original hope (or feigned intent) for a scholarly back-and-forth announced in the *Diatribe*, Erasmus reiterated his positions, albeit more forcefully. Luther never responded.

In subsequent years, disputes about the doctrine of (free) will would continue between Catholic and Lutheran theologians, between Lutheran and Calvinist theologians, and, finally, between Lutheran theologians rallying around various positions. Melanchthon continued to revise his 1521 *Loci,* and his wording in the articles concerning free will became increasingly nebulous.[139] The word "necessity" that Luther had so forcefully used in *Bondage* and other writings before 1525 particularly bothered Melanchthon. But, then again, Luther's death left Melanchthon with the task of staving off harsh Catholic critics who continued to insist that if all things happen necessarily as Luther claimed, then God, ultimately, is the source of evil. Melanchthon aimed to solve this issue in language the Catholics would understand, by philosophical reasoning.[140] It would, however, divide the Lutherans among themselves.[141]

As for others, arguments over this same doctrine of the will would eventually rise between the Lutherans and Calvinists, involving debates over the doctrines of conversion, election, and predestination.[142] Finally, the Catholics, too, would eventually formalize their position on the nature of the will. Free Will was one of the main agenda items that the Council of Trent, Session I, would address.[143] Meeting on and off over the next twenty years, the Council of Trent would declare the Roman church to be Thomistic.[144] It essentially remains so until this day, judging from their 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*

[139] Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*, 111.

[140] While Melanchthon certainly was a humanist, it seems an oversimplification to characterize his changing stance on free will merely as one motivated by some belief in the natural goodness of man.

[141] I refer interested readers to Robert Kolb's outstanding study covering this topic from 1525 to the writing of the Formula fifty years later, when Article II solidified the Biblical, Lutheran understanding of the will to which we still subscribe today. Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method*.

[142] Pastor David Jay Webber's fine convention essay from this past June covers this material well. It is greatly beneficial for scholarly pursuits and for providing solid, Lutheran pastoral guidance when discussing these issues today. "The Bondage of the Will" at els.org.

[143] See Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent: 4 Volume Set*, trans. Fred Kramer, vol. 1 (Concordia Pub House, 1971), 409–453.

[144] Something that undoubtedly would have delighted Cardinal Tommaso Cajetan (d. 1534), who was reputed to be able to recite by heart all of Aquinas' *Summa*; it had

In the world of philosophy, though, discussions about free will versus strict (or mild) determinism continue.[145] No philosopher—whether soft or hard determinist, compatibilist, or free will advocate—has provided the world with a satisfactory philosophical solution to the problem of free will and, running on the hamster wheel of fallen human reason, they never will.[146]

Sometime on Thursday, December 31, 1525, the solitary figure of Martin Luther walked his manuscript of *De Servo Arbitrio* across Wittenberg to his printer, Hans Lufft.[147] The year had begun with the rise of the Anabaptist movement. His faithful protector, Frederick the Wise, passed away in May.[148] Ten days later, the Peasant's Revolt ended violently at the Battle of Frankenhausen. Luther had been blamed for that, and disillusioned people stopped supporting him. That year, Luther had already penned two other major treatises and now this third one, all on top of trying to shoulder the load of teaching, preaching, and guiding the Reformation in German lands. He had dragged his feet in replying to Erasmus for several reasons, but now it was done.[149] 1525 had been a challenging, watershed year.

But there had also been bright spots. In June, he married Katie. William Tyndale had also visited Wittenberg that year and had finished translating the New Testament into English. The first Lutheran ordination had taken place, and just days earlier (on Christmas), Luther's *Deutsche Messe* had been used for worship for the first time. Certainly, different than our lives by degree, nonetheless, I like to think that Luther would have considered 1525 to be what any Christian considers God's

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been his dream to restore Thomism to its central place in the Church. Trent saw to it that it happened.

[145] Shaun Nichols, *The Great Courses: Great Philosophical Debates: Free Will and Determinism*, has twenty-four lectures that provide a survey of the current state of debates.

[146] A good, one-volume historical overview and primary source reader for the reference shelf is Derk Pereboom, ed., *Free Will*, Second Edition, 2, Hackett Readings in Philosophy (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009).Inc., 2009

[147] We assume this date from the dedicatory letter in *The Bondage of the Will*, first edition printing. Whether that is the date the printer received it or the date that the first edition appeared is difficult to ascertain.

[148] Perhaps Luther delayed responding until Frederick had passed, for Frederick, being a tremendous admirer of Erasmus, "had in his ducal library every book of Erasmus's that Spalatin had been able to find." Massing, *Fatal Discord*, 263.

[149] Luther opened *The Bondage of the Will* by apologizing to Erasmus for his delay in writing, "contrary to everyone's expectation and to my own custom." LW 33:15.

gift of time to be—a year of grace in which a faithful God preserved us by the means of grace in the midst of earthly life, where powers of sin, death, and hell assail us.

We are grateful that Luther roused his spirit, took his pen in hand, and answered Erasmus. In doing so, he left us more than just a dogmatic exposition on the nature of man's will. Instead, the Reformer left us a model to follow when we are faced with defending the faith entrusted to the saints (Jude 1:3). It is a model that teaches us to anchor our defense in Christ, who in the mystery of God's love, chose of his own free will to deal with us in grace—a grace we know only through his enduring Scripture, which the Spirit uses to work the very faith that receives it. LSQ

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# Book Review

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*LSQ* Vol. 66, No. 1 (March 2026)

Timothy D. Grundmeier. *Lutheranism and American Culture: The Making of a Distinctive Faith in the Civil War Era.* Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2025. xiv + 300 pp. $50.00.

In perhaps the most important book on American Lutheran history published in a generation, Martin Luther College history professor (and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary alumnus) Timothy D. Grundmeier radically reorients our understanding of confessional Lutheranism in the United States. Grundmeier persuasively argues that confessional Lutheranism is not a European import. Rather, it is distinctively American.

The success of *Lutheranism and American Culture* (a title derived from George Marsden's influential *Fundamentalism and American Culture*) is that Grundmeier places confessional Lutheran history in conversation with the field of American religious history. It is not a traditional denominational history focused on the institutional development and internal theological disputes of the General Synod, General Conference, and Synodical Conference varieties of Lutheranism. That has been done (and done well) by other historians. Instead, Grundmeier retells a familiar story through the lens of the American Civil War and surrounding debates over slavery, the relationship between religion and politics, and Reconstruction Era reform movements.

Grundmeier's first chapter rehearses a familiar narrative of Lutheran origins in America. Following other historians, he distinguishes

between "New Lutherans" (represented by Samuel Simon Schmucker), "Moderate Lutherans" (such as the Ohio Synod), and "Old Lutherans" (those associated with C. F. W. Walther). All three schools were "shaped by the nation's religion, politics, and culture" (16). New Lutherans, primarily residing on the East Coast and descended from colonial-era Lutheran immigrants, were more friendly to Anglo-American Protestantism, revivalism, and the temperance movement. They did not accept every teaching found in the Augsburg Confession, rejecting the real presence in the Lord's Supper as a regrettable holdover from Catholicism.

Walther's Old Lutherans, on the other hand, held closely to the Lutheran Confessions. Provocatively, Grundmeier writes that "Walther's understanding of Lutheranism bore a resemblance to the primitivist movements that arose in the antebellum United States," which sought to restore original, pure doctrine. For instance, Walther claimed that Luther was "the chosen and sanctified instrument of God, through whom the old apostolic doctrine and church were restored in their original form" (32). Nevertheless, the Old Lutherans adapted to America. According to Grundmeier, "rather than a replication of European Lutheranism, the newly founded Missouri Synod … was distinctively American" (36). This was especially the case in the synod's congregationalist, democratic polity complete with synod constitutions, officer elections, and congregational voting (37).

Moderate Lutherans were united by "a discomfort with the New Lutherans' theological modifications and embrace of revivalism…and an aversion to the rigidity and harshness of Old Lutheranism" (38). While New Lutheranism's doctrinal laxity disturbed the Moderates, they were unwilling "to declare [the General Synod] outside the bounds of Lutheranism" (42).

In Chapter Two, Grundmeier notes that the 1850s was a time of unity and optimism within American Lutheranism. While German immigration increased, the influx of newcomers did not transform American Lutheranism. Instead, debates revolved around issues originating in the 1840s, particularly the weight and authority of the Lutheran Confessions. In 1855, Samuel Simon Schmucker offered the *Definite Platform*, which sought to purge "Romish errors" from the Augsburg Confession (55). Unlike other historians, Grundmeier argues that the widespread pillory was not New Lutheranism's last gasp. Little changed within the General Synod. However, it increased Old and Moderate Lutheran suspicion towards the General Synod.

Oddly, the *Definite Platform* possessed a silver lining for Walther. The resulting furor made him more optimistic about the state of American Lutheranism. The *Definite Platform* inspired more virulent opposition than Walther expected, indicating there was more promise in American Lutheranism outside of his Missouri Synod than he expected.

Additionally, the *Definite Platform* "catalyzed a nascent confessional movement within the General Synod" (59). Charles Porterfield Krauth, a member of the General Synod, read deeply in the Book of Concord and Lutheran theological tradition and, as a result, became convinced of Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper and other Lutheran distinctives which had been dismissed by General Synod leaders. Confessionalism within the General Synod grew, attracting a new generation of pastors who were multi-generational Americans. As a result, Lutheran theological unity increased in the 1850s. This distinguished them from contemporary Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists, who were increasingly divided over the issue of slavery. Lutherans largely avoided the issue (67).

That changed with the Civil War. In his third chapter, Grundmeier argues that, during the secession crisis and the early years of the Civil War, "Lutherans were principally shaped by the political and cultural climate of the various states in which they lived" (76). Therefore, southern Lutherans quickly gave their allegiance to the Confederacy. Most Northern Lutherans supported the Union cause. The Missouri Synod was somewhat ambivalent. Walther supported the Union, but he did not condemn secessionism (81). "More than anything," Grundmeier writes, "the leaders of the Missouri Synod simply wanted to avoid the war entirely" (82), viewing it as "a tragedy brought on by the nation's transgressions, including its tolerance of 'false prophets,' 'fanatical sects,' and 'unbaptized Christians'" (87).

While many General Synod and Scandinavian Lutheran pastors engaged in "political preaching" extolling the Union cause, the Missouri Synod refrained. Grundmeier argues that the Civil War provided the context for the development of the Missouri Synod's "two kingdom" approach to politics and religion. Missouri Synod pastors avoided opining on politics unless doctrine was at stake. However, the line between politics and religion was porous, as Walther felt obliged to denounce "democratic radicalism" which subverted proper political authority. Walther's vehement reaction to German revolutionary politics (which more recent German immigrants brought with them and influenced their participation in the Union war effort) inspired

conservative political outbursts from the pulpit and Missouri Synod journals. Whether or not it was fully recognized (and Grundmeier implies that it was not), the Missouri Synod's selective quietism was driven by the political conservatism of the Missouri Synod's leadership. Its avoidance of politics was political.

Nearly all major Lutheran church bodies avoided identifying the emancipation of slaves as the underlying cause of the Union war effort. Many New Lutherans avoided discussing abolitionism. Krauth and Moderate Lutherans, on the other hand, "viewed emancipation as a salutary, if ancillary, outcome of the conflict" (92).

Old Lutherans, more than New or Moderate Lutherans, wrestled with slavery and the Bible. This was especially the case in the Norwegian Synod. While many laity believed that slavery was sinful, many clergy took the position that slavery was not inherently sinful. Norwegian Synod pastors wrote to the theological faculty of the University of Christiana, seeking support for their position. When the faculty replied that "slavery, as practiced in the United States, was sinful," the conservative Norwegian Synod appealed a second (and third) time. H. A. Preus argued that antislavery agitation "is merely a single paragraph in the present-day anti-Christian program" leading to political, social, and theological anarchy (97). A deep fissure developed in the Norwegian Synod over slavery, which would only be solved by a division following the Civil War.

The conservative approach taken by some Norwegian Synod clergy echoed that of Walther and the Missouri Synod. Walther rejected abolitionism as a "child of unbelief" and "brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism, and communism" (99). William Sihler, a Missouri Synod pastor in Fort Wayne, Indiana, defended American race-based chattel slavery, citing the "curse of Canaan" and the inferiority of the Black race (99). While Old Lutherans cited the Bible to defend slavery, Grundmeier argues that Walther, Sihler, and other Missourians "were oblivious to how political concerns and racial prejudice informed their interpretation" (99–100). In other words, the Missourians' political conservativism helped shape their interpretation of Scripture on the era's most contested issue.

In Chapter Four, Grundmeier chronicles the schism within the General Synod. Ironically, unlike other contemporaneous schisms in American churches, it had nothing to do with slavery. Instead, it was about the role of the Augsburg Confession within the General Synod. However, the debate was framed within the language of secessionism

and union. Krauth's conservatives argued that their schism was justified because they were attempting to uphold the Augsburg Confession, which they compared with the U.S. Constitution. They identified their cause with the Union war effort, since they were merely defending the "Constitution." The New Lutherans, on the other hand, compared Krauth to southern secessionists.

The net result was that American Lutherans became more conservative, as Grundmeier argues in Chapter Five. Krauth and other disgruntled conservatives within the General Synod formed the General Council, which was decidedly confessional. While Walther's Missouri Synod represented a small minority of American Lutherans, Krauth and the General Council moved in their direction, fully accepting the authority of the Augsburg Confession.

After the war, Lutherans promoted national and ecclesiastical unity. Grundmeier notes that "along with many other white Americans in the Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states, the vast majority of northern Lutherans viewed the primary objectives of Reconstruction as being reconciliation and reunion" (137). In doing so, they avoided discussing the status of emancipated slaves. Indeed, the Missouri Synod and Norwegian Synod doubled down on their proslavery position. Grundmeier writes, "Over the course of the nineteenth century the disputes over slavery would fade, but the underlying skepticism about some of the nation's liberal, democratic principles would persist" (140). Grundmeier connects American Lutheranism's growing confessionalism to its political conservatism during the Reconstruction: "In an era of perceived 'radicalism' and 'extremism,' fidelity to the church's historic confessions offered a sense of order and certainty" (153). Even the General Synod became more confessional, acknowledging the Augsburg Confession as a true summary of biblical doctrine.

Therefore, by the time another wave of German and Scandinavian immigrants arrived in the United States after the Civil War, American Lutheranism had already become more confessional than it was before the war. While doctrinal differences persisted among the General Synod, General Conference, and Synodical Conference, they shared a broad, conservative confessionalism and a suspicion of political radicalism.

Therefore, confessional Lutheranism "was *not* a European importation but a distinctively American creation" (195, emphasis in original). Lutheranism emerged from the Civil War and Reconstruction more united, more conservative, and more confessional than it was previously. The transformation was primarily wrought by multi-generational

American pastors and theologians, not immigrants. Even the theology of Walther's Missouri Synod was shaped by its American political and theological context.

Grundmeier challenges the common understanding of confessional Lutheranism as the product of immigrants toting their theology with them from the "old country" or Walther "repristinating" Reformation-era theology. Instead, confessional Lutheranism is innovative, and it is thoroughly American. Perhaps confessional Lutheranism is not as immune to outside influence as we might want to think. LSQ

# Hopeful, Cheerful, and Undaunted

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THE ELS RETREAT FOR PASTORS AND WIVES *"Hopeful, Cheerful and Undaunted"*, was conducted on February 3–5, 2026, in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. The Pastoral Support Committee seeks to share with you the sermons used in the devotions conducted throughout the retreat.

In thinking about what we heard at the retreat I thought of the many "parsonages" recorded for us in Scripture. One that first came to mind as an ideal parsonage was that the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. John grew up to remain a faithful follower of the Christ. Although we probably could guess there was some turmoil and even conflict when Zechariah returned home from his priestly duties at the temple unable to speak and yet had to communicate with his wife what God had revealed to him.

Now we recognize the patriarchs were considered God's prophets and what do we find in those ancient "parsonages"? We assume they trained up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but consider their adult children's behaviors:

- Adam and Eve ended up with their firstborn becoming the presumed first murderer and their second-born the murder victim.
- Abraham and Sarah had their two sons—Isaac, the son of promise, but not before Ishmael, the son born of distrust and doubt.
- Isaac and Rebecca had the competing twin sons—Esau and Jacob.
- Jacob had 12 sons who had a sorry history of sibling rivalry, with Judah being the one who would carry the seed of Christ involved in several unsavory and consequential misbehaviors.

- Aaron, Moses' brother had four sons, two of which on account of their idolatrous ways were vaporized by God.
- Eli had two sons which were the literal death of him.
- Samuel, who was called by God to warn Eli, ended up having wayward sons himself

Perfect parsonages? Never. Satan has always viewed the parsonage as a place to vex at an intense level, so that the prophets, priests and pastors struggle to keep their offspring on the narrow path which leads to life everlasting.

> I've got some bad news and some good news for you. The bad news is that you're on the hot seat. Since you've been called and ordained into the office of the holy ministry, charged with preaching and administering the means by which God the Holy Spirit goes on calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying a holy people, you're targeted. You and your wife and your children are going to come under spiritual assault; there's no way around it. Sadly, Satan doesn't fight fair and square. He doesn't always attack you directly, sometimes he targets those you love instead: your family and your closest friends. But by any means possible, the devil and his minions strive to drive a wedge between you and your Lord. His favorite tactics are misbelief or despair. If he can distract you with chronic worry over your loved ones or bring you to the point of giving up hope, then he's got you where he wants you.
>
> Yet there is good news too. We're not alone in this battle; we have a hero who fights for us. Like a medieval champion that took on challengers on behalf of his liege lord, Christ Jesus has fought against Satan in our place and won the victory. In his death and resurrection, he routed all the forces of death and hell. And he still fights on our behalf, interceding for us before the throne of his Father on the basis of the atoning sacrifice in his blood. Keep that in mind next time you come under spiritual attack. Never attempt to go it alone and fight these battles by yourself.[1]

I trust these well-crafted sermons will be a blessing to you as Lutheran pastors who have a variety of experiences in your "parsonages." Even though you are led to squirm under the Law concerning the qualification of a pastor: "he must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for it someone does not know

[1] *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart, by Harold Senkbeil, Lexham Press, 2019, pp. 198–199.*

how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:4&5), you will hear the blessed absolution in each sermon. You may wish to read them together with your wife as a devotion and discuss afterward. Both Lisa and I appreciated them and found them to be a highlight of the retreat. Enjoy!

– Glenn Obenberger
ELS President

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**Philippians 3:7–16: "We Press on *in* Christ, *with* Christ, and *to* Christ."**

Merciful God and Father, we give You most hearty thanks that in Your Word You have graciously revealed the goal toward which we should ever strive; and we humbly ask You, keep and direct us by Your Holy Spirit upon the way of truth, that, when our course is run, we may obtain the crown of righteousness; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, companion altar book for *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 79)

**Text:** *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 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 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. / Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if*

*in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. (Philippians 3; ESV)*

IN CHRIST JESUS, WHO IS NEAR WITH HIS CHEER, never will He leave us (ELH 377, v. 1), dear fellow redeemed:

When a Christian man and woman get married, their perspective about their life and their future together could be accurately described as "hopeful, cheerful, and undaunted" (*ELH* 377, v. 4). God has joined two people who love no one else on earth more than each other. They look forward with excitement to what God has in store for them—home, family, employment. They know the future won't be perfect, but they can't imagine anything they won't be able to face side-by-side, together.

The traditional marriage vows try to give some idea of the daunting challenges and obstacles ahead. The bridegroom and bride promise to love one another "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, until death parts us." But it is hard to actually imagine these things or prepare for them at the marriage's beginning. Who can imagine the dark and difficult days ahead, the money problems, the health issues, the strain of parenting, the miscommunications, impatience, bitterness? How can love come so easily at the beginning and with such hardships down the road?

You know the answer as well as I do. Marriage and life in general come with such trials because of sin. It's not only—or even especially—the sin of the people around us. It's the sin that comes from our own hearts. If we did what God commands—love Him with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves—marriage and every relationship would come easily and be filled with perpetual joy. But our love is often misdirected. We turn it toward places and pleasures that do not glorify God. We turn it inward, toward our selfish selves.

The members of our parishes might think that the marriage of the pastor and his wife is about as healthy and strong as a marriage can be. They comment on how good our children are, and how happy our home must be. But any collection of sinners in one space is going to result in sin against one another, which is certainly common within the walls of our parsonages. One of the benefits of a retreat like this one for pastors and wives, is that we don't need to feel like the spotlight is on us. Unlike Sunday mornings when we have so much to *do*, we have made the trip this week primarily to *receive*.

The apostle Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes about this receiving. In the verses before today's reading, he first wrote about all that he had accomplished as a devout Pharisee. But then he continued, *"whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."* Paul would have likely had a prominent position in Jerusalem among the Jews. He might have enjoyed *"the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others" (Mat. 23:6–7)*.

But he counted all this as *"rubbish."* Why? Because he had been baptized into Christ. That was far better than any glory on earth. You have the great honor of being baptized into Christ like Paul was. And for you who are married, you also have the great honor of living with another who is baptized, a fellow member with you in the body of Christ. That is truly a remarkable thing! We can see the sin in each other easily enough, but we don't always see the grace and glorious life that each of us has in Christ through our Baptism.

As hard as it can be to love one another at times, *"while we were still weak… ungodly… while we were still sinners… while we were enemies [of God] we were reconciled to [Him] by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:6,8,10)*. In His mercy and grace, God chose us to be His own. He cleansed us *"by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present [us and every believer] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing… holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:26–27)*.

That description comes from the great marriage passage in Ephesians 5. The marriage of Christ and His Church is what our marriages are built on and grow from. Before God made you one flesh with your spouse through marriage, He made you one with Him. The Son of God took on your flesh to redeem you by His death and resurrection, and then He joined you to Him through Holy Baptism. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27)*.

That means your purpose in life and your path forward is clearly laid out. You are bound to Jesus—your life to His life. You are going where He is. You are following after Him. But He is not somewhere out there, far away or even just beyond your reach. He is present with you as God and Man, your Savior from sin and the Conqueror of your death. He is with you in power, coming to you with His grace and life. You meet Him where He promises to be found—in His Word of absolution and in the Holy Supper of His body and blood.

He visits you to forgive you, comfort you, give you rest, strengthen you. He comes, as Paul writes, *"that [you] may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."* Your Lord tells you that as the world hated Him, it will hate you (Joh. 15:18). You will have trouble in this life. There will be suffering. But you do not suffer alone, *"because Christ Jesus has made [you] his own."*

You know well your failings as a pastor, a husband, a brother; as a parishioner, a wife, a sister. But those failings don't make God love you any less. He does not regret calling you to be His child in Baptism, or calling you to the public service of His Church. You are immeasurably valuable to Him and cherished by Him. If anyone had reason to be overcome by the guilt of bad things done and good things undone, it was Paul. But Paul was comforted to know that he was covered in *"the righteousness from God that depends on faith,"* just as you are.

Paul did not live in the past, either in his atrocities or his accomplishments. He wrote: *"forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Those of you who are married have the privilege of pressing forward together, hand in hand. You have a common goal, a common focus. You are going to the same blessed place by the grace of God.

There is no going back to when you were younger, when life and love may have seemed to come more easily. There is no going back to try again, fix, or change anything. All the sins of the past from me to you and you to me, from husband to wife and wife to husband, are cleansed by the blood of Christ. His mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:23), including this morning. So we go forward.

The author of Hebrews describes this straining toward the prize of heaven: *"since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us."* We don't look down at our own feet stumbling along, gasping for breath. We don't look this way and that, worrying about how we are doing compared to others. We stay laser-focused on Jesus, *"the founder and perfecter of our faith" (12:1,2)*. He won the victory before us and is waiting to crown us with the same glory when are finally summoned by *"the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

The course of our life is laid out before us. It was in place when we were claimed by God in Baptism—and even before then, when He chose us in Christ from eternity to be His own. We may see many obstacles and challenges ahead, but we have the promise of our Lord

that He will work through all these things for our good (Rom. 8:28). So we press on "hopeful, cheerful, and undaunted." **We Press on *in* Christ, *with* Christ, and *to* Christ.**

– Peter Faugstad

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**A Spirit of Gentleness.**

OUR LORD GAVE THE PRESIDING MINISTERIAL office of the Church a duty to oversee the flock and the ministry in a particular location. The parish. Dr. Walther memorably wrote: "that place ought to be to him the dearest, most beautiful, and most precious spot on earth. He should be unwilling to exchange it for a kingdom. Whether it is in a metropolis or in a small town, on a bleak prairie or in a clearing in the forest, in a flourishing settlement or in a desert, to him it should be a miniature paradise." (L&G 207)

As with so many things under the cross, experience may seem to contradict reality. The problem is sin. We love the people in our parishes. Yet they continue to be people. We love the place, yet it continues to be in this world. We serve those people in this place, praying and working for their eternal well-being. Perhaps even temporal well-being. But sometimes that's not how the pastor's actions and words are understood. A burden on the cheerfulness of both pastor *and* spouse.

It creates a somewhat hidden snare for the pastor's family. Seeking the understanding we so desperately need, we commiserate at home. Perhaps with trusted friends. You've done this. It's inevitable. Perhaps there was even what they call "venting."

But in the midst of such words, we cross a line. Maybe a few lines. Wives are burdened with knowledge they don't need. Children learn about new sides to the adults in their church, vulnerable sides that ought to have been protected. They and we may lose a sense of respect for the saints, for leaders, for the church.

In all of this, the pastor's family may rightly feel isolated. Yet it's a small step from there to feel like they are the *better* Christians. The *more*

*faithful*. The *spiritual* ones. Some may think they *should* be. Others may think they need to disprove it!

Now, it's true that someone somewhere should try to model the actions of faith. It doesn't speak well for *any* Christian household to respond, "That's definitely not going to be us!" It sounds like worldiness!

But it's also a mistake to *expect* the pastor and his household to be more righteous or more spiritual. We're all sinners! The actions of faith are not found without sin. A household of faith is not without sin, without temptations, without the contradictions that we experience under the cross.

The actions of faith relate to what we do with our guilt and with our temptations. That's what St. Paul addresses in our text in Galatians 6.

> [1] Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. [2] Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

The Law of Christ is what He commanded on the night He was betrayed: that we love one another as He has loved us. So the actions of faith show up in repentance and forgiveness. The apostle here is writing against the sin of *vainglory*: excessive vanity, empty pride, or boastfulness. It's on the far side of that small step that begins with misunderstanding and isolation.

Pastors sometimes commit the sin of vainglory in a visible way. So do our wives, and children. That doesn't tend to help any misunderstandings in the parish. But far more often, I suppose, this sin is committed internally. Within the walls of your house. In the privacy of your mind. Yet God sees it. And He warns, "[3] For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." You can deceive yourself, but not God. He knows the thorns that Satan can plant in a pastor and in his household. He knows that such sins all too often cause offense leading to a loss of faith. He sees how you have fallen, and still struggle.

His answer is not to come raging at you. The law of Christ is the principle of *His* love. He opens your eyes to your own spiritual condition. As soon as it alarms you to repentance, He receives you with open arms, like the father of the prodigal son. Gently, He cleanses you with His absolution and restores your baptismal garment. He sends you to speak to one another like this: "Jesus has taken your vainglory, your

pride, your hasty and loveless thoughts and words upon His cross. He died for them and buried them forever in His tomb, never to return."

Instead of fuming about the faults of the flock, "Let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." What you find when you examine your own relation to Jesus is truly joy, for your own sins are forgiven. If you'd like to hear this in a most personal way, seek out a father confessor and unburden your conscience.

St. Paul has a section here meant for the ears of the pastor's flock. But the conclusion remains for us all, and it's inevitable when each of us has received the happy status of those whose sins are forgiven, whose vainglory has been destroyed, whose cheerfulness is rooted in being a beloved child of God.

> Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. [10] Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Dear fellow redeemed, living under the blessed cross: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? That would be impossible. May this cheerful fact, day by day, build and restore that little paradise in your home and in your parish, until you see both of them fulfilled in the beaming countenance of your gracious Savior.

– Jesse Jacobsen

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## The Cheerful of Heart has a Continual Feast

**Text:** *A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed. The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly. All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast. Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. Better is a dinner of herbs*

*where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it.(Proverbs 15:13–17; ESV)*

PEOPLE LOVED BY GOD,

Would you say that Adam and Eve were cheerful in the garden of Eden before the fall?

We certainly couldn't picture them as melancholy, could we? **A glad heart makes a cheerful face.**

But by today's standards, they didn't have very much.

They didn't have a house or any kind of accumulated wealth (Roth IRA, 401Ks, or bank accounts). They didn't have lots of friends or even much family.

They always got the Sabbath off, but we don't hear of any river cruises or two-week vacations. They didn't have much of what we have—that supposedly is to make us happy/cheerful…

And yet, in another sense, they had it all.

They had a pure **knowledge** of God, and were not afraid to be with Him…

They had work to do, tilling and working the garden which gave its strength for them…

And they had a perfect relationship between them, caring for each other with impeccable love.

Ever since the fall, it has been the desire of humanity to find that perfect state of **cheerful**ness again. We have a yearning, a longing for that ideal, and people have tried to go about it in different ways. We have tried to find our cheer in the accumulation of "wealth".

While there are those who seek it to the extreme, as if "he who dies with the most $$ wins," my guess is that among us, we would probably be satisfied, simply to live comfortably, and would be happy with "just a little more." We have sought after the illusion of fame.

And while there are certainly those whose lives are consumed with the idea and put their name on everything and boast about what they have accomplished, if you boil it down, "fame" is really the desire that people like you and appreciate you, that they honor your reputation and speak well of you.

And so, if more people like and respect me, then that will cheer me up.

But there is also the reality that in this world of sin, **affliction**, **sorrow**, and **evil** can seem to **crush** us. And so humanity has also tried to

find **cheer** in the bottom of a glass (Cheers!), a prescription, by dodging and shirking responsibilities, or (now) even fleeing to the virtual world.

Whether because of something they have done, or something that was done or that happened to them, that cheer is sought in an escape from reality, even if only for a few fleeting moments.

…

I would venture to guess that ELS pastors didn't seek the office, nor their wives seek their husbands, thinking that this was the way to achieve fame and fortune. And my guess is that we all probably know the dangers of escapism… even as we doom scroll.

But whether we seek after happiness to an extreme or simply want a little bit more cheer in our lives, realize that chasing after cheer is as illusive as chasing after the wind, as one inspired author noted. Like greed, the more cheer you seek, the more cheer you feel you need to be cheerful—and often, the more disappointed/frustrated you are when your vacation didn't go as planned, or your Shepherd's Plan isn't growing, the bottle isn't numbing, or the news on the screen is scaring you even more.

But consider the things of that initial paradise, that though they didn't have a lot, they were cheerful. Adam and his wife knew God perfectly.

They knew He is loving and gracious, that He is wise and powerful, that He is just and holy. And this knowledge did not scare them.

No doubt they were **seeking that knowledge** while they walked with Him in the cool of the day. But they had clean hands and pure hearts, in other words, they had clean consciences.

In this world, as you well know—and on account of the sin of these very same two people—our hands, hearts, and consciences are not by-nature clean.

And so it can seem a scary thing to seek knowledge from the Lord.

We know we will learn some less-than wonderful things about ourselves in the mirror of the law, and then be faced with some fearful judgments about our sin and guilt.

But without God's revealed knowledge given only in His Word, we would never hear of Jesus Christ. We could never be exhorted to "**be of good cheer for your sins are forgiven**" (Matt 9:2), because sin is only forgiven through Jesus' righteousness and blood, lived and shed for you.

And so to know Jesus, to seek more and true knowledge of your Savior, is to bring cheer to a heavy, burdened, scared, troubled, or terrified conscience.

And while you live with the Old Adam in sin and guilt, as a baptized child of God, you also live with the New Man in Christ.

You have a seat at God's table, a continual feast of grace and mercy… AND cheer, even in the midst of evil, sorrow, & affliction that would crush us otherwise.

You are rich, already possessing all things. You are an heir of the new heaven and the new earth.

You are famous. The God of the whole universe, your heavenly Father knows you, by name, and loves you. And what a difference in perspective a forgiven and clean conscience gives you!

As Proverbs says, **All the days of the afflicted are evil, but the cheerful of heart has a continual feast**. It gives you a different perspective on the realities of this world—even on work and children.

When God created Adam and Eve, He gave them work to do, something that gave them fulfillment. They were to have dominion over God's new creation, and to till the earth, and to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it.

They would have feelings of accomplishment, and receiving (and enjoying) the fruits of their labor.

And as the Lord had made the woman as a helpmeet and companion of Adam, they found great delight in each other— appreciating the similarities and the differences.

And there was the promise that the Lord would bless their union with children who would take part in their good work and dominion over creation.

In our culture, it is not uncommon to hear of work—good, honest labor—as a drudgery and a bane of human existence, something to be avoided whenever possible. It's not unusual to hear of children as burdens: financially, socially, emotionally.

And even for the most loving of parents, home situations can get … hairy… at times, But what cheer there is to look back at a job blessed by the Lord, even when it didn't turn out the way that you had desired.

Or to see the blessings of the Lord in your children and loved ones, even as you wrestle with the Lord in prayer for them.

Our cheer is not in the abundance of fame or fortune, nor in the escape of this life's realities—as the Proverbs says, **Better is a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble with it.**

But having clean hands and a pure heart, namely a clear conscience, there **the cheerful of heart** will have **a continual feast,** and lack no good thing from the Lord.

Dear Brothers and sisters in Christ, "**Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you** in Christ Jesus our Lord."

– Samuel Gullixson

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**Text:** *The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. 3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident. 4 One thing I have desired of the Lord, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord, And to inquire in His temple. (Psalm 27:1–4; NKJV)*

Lord, our God, You are merciful and kind, true and faithful. Preserve us in Your Word, and guard Your Church against all oppressors and faithless leaders. Grant peace to our country, and wisdom to our government to protect right and truth, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Reading the Psalms with Luther*, CPH, p. 68)

DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST, bought by His precious blood, baptized into His name, called to be His own and live under Him in His kingdom:

Are you hopeful about the future of the Church? Are you hopeful about the future of your congregations and the faithfulness of its members? Are you hopeful about your family, that the ones you love the most will remain in the faith and be gathered with you to the Lord's eternal presence?

There is much in this life that would steal away our hope. Enemies of Jesus work against the Church to destroy it. From the outside, power-brokers and politicians increasingly want the Church to comply with their plans. From the inside of the visible Church, false teachers twist everything, so that people become convinced that down is up and wrong

is right. And then there are our congregations, most of which are small with perhaps an aging or all-too-distracted membership.

Are you feeling discouraged? Is that partly why you are here? Those whom God has called to lead in the Church will feel this pressure. The devil will not let the preaching of God's powerful Word go unchecked. You can have peace in the world—at least a sort of peace—but you can't have peace in the world and peace with God. You have *"peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1)*, which means *"In the world you will have tribulation."* But what does Jesus promise? *"Be of good cheer,"* He says, *"I have overcome the world" (Joh. 16:33)*.

Jesus is telling you that things are not as they seem. The Church is not losing. Neither you nor your congregation are failing. Your efforts have not been wasted. This is no time to look for other work, no time to run and hide.

David could have justified doing this in his own mind. In Psalm 27, he described the evildoers who surrounded him and wanted to destroy him: *"The wicked came against me To eat up my flesh."* They were attacking him especially with words, false words, lying words. *"For false witnesses have risen against me,"* he said, *"And such as breathe out violence" (v. 12)*.

And yet David was not afraid, even though an army may encamp against him. Why not? He sang: *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid?"* If we look at our small, imperfect synod, if we look at our small imperfect congregations, if we look at our small, imperfect abilities, we have every reason to be afraid. What can we do against the great and terrible enemies all around us?

But the Church does not rest on us. The Church does not depend on our strength. The Church does not go forward by the power of our word or the determination of our will. The Church belongs to Christ. It stands on Him, depends on Him, grows from Him. *"Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body" (Eph. 5:23)*.

He is your Savior. He kept the holy Law of God perfectly for you. He fully atoned for your sins. He conquered your death. Not only that, but He chose you to be His own in Holy Baptism, chose you to be a member of His body, chose you to eat and drink His body and blood. Then He chose you for special work that very few are called to do. My brother pastors, He chose you to shepherd His flock. My sisters in Christ, He chose you to marry these under-shepherds and support them in their work.

Not many young men dream of becoming pastors when they get older. Probably fewer young women dream of marrying pastors someday. (In fact, for some of you here, you might have once said that is something you would never do!) But *"we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10)*. This is the life He prepared for us and prepared us for, which means this is where He will bestow His rich blessings.

And He certainly does. Of all His dear people in the world and throughout time, Christian pastors and their families are among those who are most closely connected to His Word. Our lives revolve around Sunday morning, where Jesus meets us with His grace in Word and Sacrament. The Lord's gracious presence was David's greatest joy: *"One thing I have desired of the Lord, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord, And to inquire in His temple."*

What an honor it is to preach and listen to the holy Word of God, to live by His Baptism, to receive His holy body and blood. We are not worthy of this work. We do not deserve the privilege. But Jesus is ever-gracious toward us. He knows who He is working with and through. He sees the discontentment, impatience, and bitterness that can trouble the parish and the parsonage. He sees it all, and He forgives all of it—both the sins you commit against others, and the sins others commit against you.

Jesus is not sitting on a throne somewhere far off, hardly aware of what's going on here. He is present here, present in power, present with peace. Where Jesus is present, there is always hope. Because He rules at the right hand of the Father, the Church—His Church—is not losing. Because He comes through the Means of Grace, neither you nor your congregation are failing.

Many enemies would steal our hope away and make us despair. But **In Christ, We Are Always Hopeful.** He is the Boldness in our voice; He is the Strength in our hearts; He is the Courage in our confession.

Hopeful, cheerful, and undaunted
Ev'rywhere They appear
Who in Christ are planted.
Death itself cannot appal them,
They rejoice When the voice
Of their Lord doth call them.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* #377, v. 4)

– Peter Faugstad

# Sermon on Hebrews 2:11–15

*Thomas L. Rank*

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**Text:** *For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren,* **12** *saying: "I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You."* **13** *And again: "I will put My trust in Him." And again: "Here am I and the children whom God has given Me."* **14** *Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil,* **15** *and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2:11–15; NKJV)*

DEAR FELLOW REDEEMED IN CHRIST,

Epiphany is the Son of God from eternity showing Himself also to be true man, born of the virgin Mary. This is the foundation for our confession of faith as we state in the ecumenical creeds in which many faithful Christian congregations join every Sunday throughout the year. It matters whether or not you confess that Jesus is true God; it matters whether or not you confess that Jesus is also true Man. Saving faith in the God revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures is trusting in this Son of God and Son of Mary. There is not and cannot be compromise on this. To lose this revealed truth about Jesus is to lose salvation. As St. Luke wrote in the book of Acts: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, NKJV).

Through the weeks of Epiphany, we see the boy Jesus in Jerusalem, and His first miracle at Cana. We are told of His Transfiguration, the

time when He allowed Peter, James, and John to see a glimpse of His true divinity, hidden beneath His true humanity.

The book of Hebrews is a strikingly Christological book—that is, an in-depth writing of who Jesus is and what that means, with chapters teeming with Old Testament quotations and allusions. Here in this brief text from chapter two we hear Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8. These quotations serve to emphasize the truth that Jesus came to be in solidarity with His brothers, that is, with those who believe in Him. And not only that, but to show what that solidarity with you and me means.

He is not ashamed to call you His brethren. He certainly had cause to be ashamed of us. We are sinners, and that means we are those who are connected by flesh and blood to the original sin, the sin of rejecting God and His promises, doubting His Word, His truth, and living in ways that show that doubt and rejection time and again. Yes, there are reasons for God to see you and be ashamed of you.

But He is not. In fact, the Son of God came to be connected with us. He shares in our blood and flesh—true solidarity in a way beyond what we could ever expect. Jesus' humanity is not mere appearance, but substantial. He is not playing with words to make us feel good, He is showing us how much He desires us to be one with Him, in flesh and blood.

The quotation from Psalm 22 helps us understand this. You may recall that Psalm 22 was prayed by Jesus when He was crucified. "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me!" a lament of profound sorrow. Yet the lament of Psalm 22 has a turning point, a change from lament to hope, and it is right here with this verse 22 of the Psalm. From the lament of one forsaken comes the confession of trust—He finally has not been abandoned. He is saved; the holy One will not see corruption. The Son will rise again the third day. The power of Satan, the power of death, is defeated by Jesus. And you are one with this Jesus, true God, true Man. This means death is defeated for you.

Isaiah 8 is another key Old Testament text. It is part of a three chapter section of Isaiah, Isaiah chapters seven through nine, in which the prophet chastises the king of Judah, Ahaz, for his unbelief and proclaims the need for faith in the true God in the time of national crisis: trust the promise, God is with you. Trust that the virgin will conceive and bear a Son and call His name, Immanuel—God with us! Ahaz would not trust, but in the centuries that followed we move toward the fulfillment of that promised Immanuel, and here the author of Hebrews makes it plain—it is Jesus.

And what does this mean? Well, we've already heard it: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Remember these words of Hebrews as we sing our closing hymn and get to stanza six of "Come, Your Hearts and Voices Raising:"

From the bondage that oppressed us,
From sin's fetters that possessed us,
From the grief that sore distressed us,
We, the captives, now are free (ELH 128:6).

In the powerful text of the hymn's author, Paul Gerhardt, we join our voices in confessing what it means to be one with Son of God, the One who is not ashamed to say that you are His family. Because that is what you are through faith in Jesus: He, the Son of God, is your brother. And you are united with Him. God be praised for His glad tidings. Amen. LSQ

# Identity Revealed:
## Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One

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**Text:** *1. "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. 2. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. 3. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; 4. he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope." 5. This is what God the Lord says—the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: 6. "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, 7. to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:1–7; NIV).*

THE BIBLE IS NOT JUST AN AMAZING BOOK—IT'S a miraculous one. It describes itself in 2 Timothy chapter 3 when it says "**16 All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness"** (2 Tim 3:16, EHV). This means that every single part of scripture is applicable to your life today, even those sections that were written thousands upon thousands of years ago. And it means that they're not just applicable to you, but to every Christian who came before you, and to every Christian will come after you.

The book of Isaiah is an awesome example of this. This was prophecy written first for the Israelites as a promise following a warning. That

warning was that because of Israel's unfaithfulness, a foreign nation would conquer them and bring them into exile—but the servant will come. And when that servant comes, He will bring justice and healing.

As far as we know sitting here today, being carried into exile is not something that we need to worry about. And yet, this promise remains the same. Whether for the Israelites or for us: the hope and the comfort that is held out to us from our God is this servant.

The season of Epiphany that we're in right now is all about revealing to us who that servant is. This morning we're focusing on how Isaiah's words are fulfilled in Jesus. How at His baptism He was anointed and the Holy Spirit was poured out on Him, and in these things—Jesus is revealed to be the Christ. That word Christ is the same as the Old Testament word Messiah and they both translate to the same thing in English, *the anointed one*.

Isaiah tells us that this Christ, this anointed one, the fulfiller of prophecy would be the perfect savior and the perfect substitute. What would you want in a savior? Oftentimes you have to pick between something being strong and being gentle—but Isaiah tells us that this servant will be both. In His gentleness He will not shout or cry out or raise His voice in the streets. If you are a bruised reed, if you are a smoldering wick—if you feel like you aren't strong enough, or you're not good enough— this servant, the Christ, will not throw you to the side as useless. He comes in love and in genuine care for every single one of His people.

This gentleness, though, doesn't mean that He comes without strength. He comes to bring justice, he'll bring it forward in faithfulness and will not stop until it's established on the earth. He is the chosen one in whom God delights, the one on whom he places His Spirit. And it is with the help of the maker of heaven and earth himself that this servant will be made into a covenant for all people- restoring sight, freeing captives releasing those who sit in darkness.

This is who Isaiah said the Savior, the Christ, would be. Does this line up with what we see and hear about Jesus? Our Gospel text, as short as it is, gives us a resounding "Yes!" This is the one promised by God, prophesied by Isaiah. Jesus is the Christ.

We know why we are baptized—Peter says in the book of Acts **"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"** (Acts 2:38, ESV). So, if one of the primary benefits of baptism is the forgiveness of sins, why was Jesus, who is sinless, baptized?

John the Baptist seems to be wondering the same question—resisting Jesus at first—but Jesus tells him, **"It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness"** (Matt 3:15, NIV).

To understand what that means, we need the benefit of hindsight. At His baptism, Jesus is stepping out of the background and into the spotlight. What He had been doing for His whole life up to this point, He is now going to continue doing in a much more public way.

Jesus is about 30 years old as this takes place, and we point to this is the moment as the beginning of His public ministry. A public ministry that lasts about three years, starting here in the Jordan and continuing all the way to Calvary: to the cross and to the Tomb. His public ministry was not just teaching and preaching; it was fulfilling all righteousness. To be the perfect Savior, the one Isaiah said was coming, the chosen servant in whom God delights, He had to be the perfect substitute. This is so essential for us to understand.

As I teach confirmation class for our 7th and 8th graders, I ask this question almost every single class, "Why do you think you are going to heaven?"

And, at first, I get a perfectly wonderful answer. "Because Jesus died on the cross for me."

That's a wonderful answer, there's nothing wrong with that—this is the heart of the gospel that we should be teaching even to our preschoolers. But that's what I call that answer—the preschool answer. By 7th grade I tell our confirmation students that it's time to start understanding and appreciating your salvation more fully. Because it's not just Jesus's death that saves, it's His life. Before Jesus dies for you, first He lives for you!

The servant came to be a substitute, a stand in, a replacement. To be our substitute, in order to exchange our sin for His righteousness, He needed first to be righteous. He needed to fulfill the law. He had to live as a human being and to live a lifetime as one who is holy and perfect, just as our Heavenly Father is holy and perfect. To be our substitute in death, Jesus first needed to be our substitute in life, and that starts here, publicly, at His baptism. Jesus doesn't just get baptized for Himself, He gets baptized for us! We have the command to be baptized, so Jesus fulfills this command as well.

The paradox and the mystery of all this, though, is that it *was* also for Him. Isaiah prophesied that God would pour out His Spirit on this servant, and that the Creator of the heavens and earth would take hold of His hand and that God himself would go with Him. Matthew tells

us in our Gospel text that this happened—the Spirit of God descended like a dove, resting on Jesus here at His baptism, and that Creator spoke from heaven affirming Jesus's identity.

But, if Jesus is God, why does He need this? If He and the Father and the Spirit are the same essence, why does He need the Spirit poured out on Him? Why does He need guidance and strength from the Father? The answer, again, is because Jesus came to be our substitute. Jesus *is* God, He *is* divine, yet in His love and His gentleness, He sets aside the full use of that divine, Godly power. He sets it aside in order to live as one of us; so that He can face temptation, so that He can live under the law, so that He can be our substitute by fulfilling all righteousness. And in that state of humility, He needs the Spirit, and He needs the Father to help Him accomplish His mission.

That mission begins publicly here at His baptism, but really it was carried out through His entire life. Living perfectly, obeying every single law, every single command. And the entire time thinking of you. It was this righteousness that He brings to the cross, so that when He dies there—His suffering is not for His own sins, but for yours. He suffers the punishment, the agony, the wrath of God Himself that *we* deserve for everything that *we* have done wrong. And in doing this, He wins heaven. And by rising to life again, He wins the victory over the grave and over death itself.

And still the Servant doesn't stop serving. He doesn't just win all of this for us, but He comes to us, personally, and He takes our hand and he places these gifts there and He closes our fingers around them by giving us the gift of faith. He gives to us this incredible blessing of the Sacrament of baptism— He gives us even the very words to speak, the Word that bring power to the water that is poured on our heads. This Word gives baptism the power to unites us to Christ and His baptism. The power to unite us to Christ in His death, and to unite us to Christ in His resurrection. Baptism takes everything that Jesus won, everything that He earned, and it credits all of it to you. It makes you His child. Our eyes blinded by sin are opened. Our captivity, our slavery to sin is broken. We sat in the darkness and doom of contemplating our own death, our own destruction, but now we are free. Free to live as God has declared us to be: His forgiven and loved people, people who have a perfect savior and a perfect substitute in Christ, the Messiah the anointed one—in Jesus. Amen. LSQ

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