

# REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



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# REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL



## Description

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## From Rutherford Hall

**Dr. Jerry O'Neill**

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*President of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

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So what's the big deal about the Protestant Reformation? Why are so many people celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther posting the 95 Theses on the doors of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany? What is so special about what happened in Germany five-hundred years ago? Is it not a matter of just a few doctrines that Christians will forever be divided on?

No, no, a hundred times, no. It is a matter of life and death importance. If you are in Christ today, you owe your very salvation, humanly speaking, to Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Protestant reformers who, by God's grace, delivered (part of) the church from the hands of the enemy. The Roman Catholic Church was by far the most powerful institution in Europe in Middle Ages, and it was utterly corrupt. In fact, when Martin Luther's father learned that his son was wanting to become a monk, he was stunned, in large part because the church was so corrupt.

Of course, there has been a remnant of true believers in all ages, and names like John Wycliffe, Peter Lollard, and Jan (John) Hus stand out in church history as those who were faithful during the later Medieval Period. But it took the Protestant Reformation to unshackle the true gospel, which had been so obscured by the Roman church through its belief in baptismal regeneration and, later, the sale of indulgences.

The Protestant Reformation insisted on the "five *solas*:"

- *Sola Scriptura*, the Scripture alone;
- *Sola Fide*, faith alone;
- *Sola Gratia*, grace alone;
- *Solus Christus*, Christ alone; and
- *Soli Deo Gloria*, the glory of God alone.

As you read this journal, rejoice in how God used pilgrim Reformers who went before us, leaving us a treasure of immeasurable worth. As revealed in the Scripture alone, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Rejoice and be glad!

For Christ's Crown and Covenant,

Jerry O'Neill

## **If Ever a Monk Got to Heaven by His Monkery: The Life of Martin Luther**

Dr. William VanDoodewaard

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*Professor of Church History  
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### **The Late Medieval World**

To step into late medieval Saxony is to step into another world—a world very different from that of the present day, and yet at once very much the same. It was an agrarian world with peasant farms dotting hillsides and filling valleys. The narrow dirt or stone streets of towns and cities were walled by two- and three-story homes. Shops and businesses stood at street level. The pungent mixture of wood-smoke, manure, and sewage odors mingled with the better smells of baking and cooking. Soaring above the streets, pointing heavenward, were the steeples and spires of the churches, which loomed large and glorious at the center of every community and reflected the central reality of medieval Christendom in all of life. In the streets, shops, churches, and countryside were men, women, and children with hopes and dreams, sin and sufferings. Many of them were deeply religious. In the midst of this highly devout world, the centuries-long, slow loss of Biblical Christianity, centered on the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, was hidden to most. The incredible church buildings, soaring, glorious architecture, rich artistic beauty, drama, pageantry and ritual, crowds of people, pilgrimages and acts of devotion, all masked a loss of true spiritual life.

Yet, the veneer of medieval “Christendom” was thin. Among bishops and priests, sexual immorality was rampant; even the worst cases often led to a temporary suspension, followed by a quick reshuffling to a new location in the Church. Added to this were bribery, greed, gluttony, misuse of church funds, manipulation of church offices for self-promotion, and wealth-promotion. William Langland, a 14<sup>th</sup> century English writer depicts the religious reality as follows:

A heap of hermits with their hooked staves went to Walshingham on pilgrimage, with their wenches following after. These great long loafers, who loathed work, were clothed in clergy’s capes to distinguish them from laymen, and behaved as hermits for the sake of an easy life. I found the friars there too ... preaching to the people for what they could get for their bellies. In their greed for fine clothes, they glossed the gospel to suit themselves ... their money and their merchandise of preaching march together ... the worst mischief on earth is mounting up fast ... There also preached a pardoner ... he brought forth a document with bishops’ seals on it, and said that he had power to absolve all the people from broken fasts and broken vows. The laymen believed him and liked his words. They came up kneeling to kiss his documents. He blinded their eyes with his letters of indulgence thrust into their faces, and with his parchment raked in their rings and

broaches. Thus you give your gold to help gluttons, and lend it to louts who live in lechery.<sup>1</sup>

Calvin, a century or so later, described a Church filled with “monstrous abuses” led by priests and bishops who outdo all men in their

notorious ... excess, effeminacy, voluptuousness, in short, in all sorts of lusts; in no order are there masters more adept or skillful in every deceit, fraud, treason and treachery; nowhere is there a greater cunning or boldness to do harm. I say nothing of their arrogance, pride, greed and cruelty. I say nothing about the dissolute license of their entire life... there is scarcely a bishop, and not one in a hundred priests, who, if his conduct were to be judged by the ancient canons, would not be subject either to excommunication or at least to deposition from office.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, society in general was in much the same place; the people were no better than their leaders. This is not to say there was no true Christianity at all in the late medieval era—the Lord did preserve his church in the Lollards, Hussites, and others, including some within the walls of Roman Catholicism. But they were minor fringe movements compared to the mainstream of medieval Roman Catholicism.

### **Birth and Youth of Martin Luther**

Into this world of medieval rite and corruption, on the feast day of St. Martin in the town of Eisleben, principality of Saxony, November 10, 1483, a little boy, named Martin, was born to Hans and Margareta Luther. Just six months after his birth the family moved to the nearby town of Mansfeldt. Here, little Martin’s father worked his way from poverty as a younger son of a farmer, who did not inherit the family farm, to become a successful copper miner and smelter and eventually a member of the town council. Martin later said, “my parents were very poor ... they endured the severest labor for our sakes.”<sup>3</sup> Martin’s parents had great respect for learning. As their condition improved, his father often invited local clergy and the local schoolmaster to his table for meals and conversation—a pattern which formed a deep impression on the young Martin. The family was devoutly Roman Catholic in a typical late medieval German kind of way, mingled with a great deal of superstition. They very much believed in a world under a Triune God but also steeped in medieval superstition. It was a world of rituals, amulets, and charms, a world in which Mary was elevated as the Virgin Queen of heaven, and saints interceded and worked miracles, even by their remnant relics. While in some ways Luther’s family had become more of what today would be called middle class, Luther was clearly of peasant stock and status,

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<sup>1</sup> For the original source of this adaption see William Langland, *Piers Ploughman: Critical Text – Prologue* (Piers Ploughman Electronic Archive), <http://piers.chass.ncsu.edu/texts/Bx/P?view=critical>. Accessed September 12, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1995), 355-356, 361-32. This quotation comes from 4.5.7 and 4.5.14 of the *Institutes*.

<sup>3</sup> Merle D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 50.

of which he was never ashamed. “I am a peasant, I am the son of a peasant; my father, my grandfather, and my ancestors were all peasants.”<sup>4</sup>

Martin’s childhood was marked by hard work, schooling, and stern discipline. Corporal punishment was part of his life—perhaps as evidence of his stubbornness, he later recalled that one morning in school he was flogged fifteen times by the teacher. His father paid for Martin to attend this school, the Latin school in Mansfeldt, the best in the town. This period of early education did result in some foundational biblical and theological learning. Here he learned the Ten Commandments, the Apostle’s Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, along with other prayers and some hymns.

While his home life was difficult at times, he loved his parents and would later write about them with deep affection. Martin’s parents taught him to pray to God and the saints and also steeped him in frightening stories of witches, goblins, and demons. These vivid descriptions of active spiritual darkness and evil would remain with him; throughout his life, he regarded Satan as a vicious, personal enemy who wanted to destroy him. While crucifixes, and awareness of Christ’s divinity, humanity, humility, passion, and exaltation were common, there was no gospel clarity. Instead, there was a penance-based, works righteousness, a mentality that hoped to, rather than did, attain salvation.

In 1497, at the age of 14, Martin’s father Hans resolved to send him to the Franciscan school in Magdeburg. It was a hard transition: Martin found himself friendless and impoverished. His father’s funds having gone to his tuition, Martin had to beg for food, going from house to house. When his parents became aware of the situation, they sent him to a school in Eisenach, where they had many relatives, but things were not much better here. The family failed to help him, and young Martin once again had to alternate studying with scrounging and begging for food.

One day, while being mocked and rejected in his begging, a wealthy woman named Ursula overheard the harsh words, saw the disheartened and depressed young teen, and took him home for a meal. Her husband, Conrad, enjoyed talking with young Martin. A few days later the couple invited Martin to live with them while he continued his studies. Later reflecting on Ursula, Martin wrote: “There is nothing sweeter on earth than the heart of a woman in which piety dwells.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did this family care for Martin, they also helped refine his manners—an invaluable asset for his life in the future.

In 1501, Hans sent the 18-year-old Martin to the University of Erfurt to study law. Here at Erfurt, Martin Luther engaged the writings of medieval philosopher-theologians, like Occam, Scotus, Bonaventure, and Aquinas. Martin thoroughly enjoyed study; he loved to learn. He was blessed with an excellent memory and vivid imagination. Yet at the same time, he sensed the immediacy of the presence of God, the glory of God, the justice of God. He prayed often, and in the library for the first time he encountered and read the Bible. It fascinated and captivated him, and he came back again and again to read it. While not all of Martin’s time was devoted to study—he loved to play the lute, loved the outdoors, and enjoyed friendships and hospitality—his devotion to hard study, late hours, eventually led to him becoming seriously sick. Now his

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *Tabletalk*, vol. 54 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 178, 458.

<sup>5</sup> D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 53.

mind filled with thoughts of death. Luther recounted that an old priest came to visit, and kindly encouraged him to take courage, telling him that he would not die, but would be used to console many: “For God lays his cross on those whom he loves, and they who bear it patiently acquire much wisdom.”<sup>6</sup>

While he did recuperate, around the same time a close friend died, making him think all the more about death and the coming judgment. Not long after, likely in the year 1503, on his way home for Easter, carrying his sword for safety in travel, Martin tripped accidentally cutting himself. He nearly died of blood loss before someone came along to help. That night the wound opened up again, and he cried out to the Virgin Mary and fainted. Once again, he recuperated.

Martin’s studies at Erfurt continued. Soon his father, thrilled at Martin completing his degree, proudly referred to him as *Sie* rather than *du*—adopting a polite term of respect ordinarily reserved for elders, or those with a higher station in life. With his MA completed, he was now ready to enter the law program, achieving his father’s dream for him. Returning from a visit to his family home, Martin was caught in a sudden and violent thunderstorm. Fearing an impending death, he was filled with terror of God’s wrath and judgment. He cried out to St. Anne that he would become a monk if his life was spared.

Luther later reflected, “Neither willingly nor by desire did I become a monk but surrounded by the terror and agony of sudden death, I vowed a forced, unavoidable vow.”<sup>7</sup> To his father’s irritation and anger, Martin now stubbornly held that he had to become a monk. Rejecting his father’s directives, Luther joined the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt on July 17, 1505, two weeks after the thunderstorm. This caused a substantial breakdown in the relationship between Hans and Martin. Hans had hoped to arrange for Martin a rich and honorable marriage, and he was also concerned that monastic life might make his son lazy and corrupt. And beyond that, the life of a monk would leave no resources for supporting his parents in their old age. Hans angrily wrote Martin, telling him he was disinherited and had forfeited the rights and relationship of a son.

### **Luther the Monk**

The change in lifestyle brought by entering a monastic order, including vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, was dramatic for Martin. But Martin was at times dramatic himself—Roland Bainton describes him as “extraordinarily sensitive and subject to recurrent periods of exaltation and depression of spirit. This oscillation of mood plagued him throughout his life.”<sup>8</sup> While a portion of his time was allotted to studying, which provided opportunity to read both Scripture and the church fathers, much of his time was consumed with monastery duties: sweeping the chapel, cleaning cells, winding clocks, scrubbing halls, doing laundry, and weeding gardens. And he also found himself expected to wander the streets, begging from house to house for his daily bread. In between, there were eight daily times of prayer, masses, and numerous fasts. Much of the day was spent in silence. Luther seized all of this with energy, commitment, and devotion—driven by the profound sense of need and desire to be right with God.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2016), 8.

Despite the fact that the monastery bore the name of the Augustinian order, it was not actually very Augustinian in its theology, but would be better characterized as semi-Pelagian. This was the kind of theology Luther had imbibed already to this point in his life, but here he took hold of it with a new zeal, earnestly engaging the daily exercises of life in the monastery as a novice. Roland Bainton narrates, “To the monastery he went like others, and even more than others, in order to make his peace with God.”<sup>9</sup> Luther himself would later recount,

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.<sup>10</sup>

Martin did keep on for a good while. Seeking to satisfy his conscience, he did all that was required and went regularly above and beyond the call of duty. Initially, this seemed to work; his conscience seemed assuaged.

In the medieval mind, joining “holy orders” was much like baptism: both were viewed as cleansing, giving a fresh beginning before God. After a period of testing as a novice, there was a formal entrance into committed life as a monk. Two years of monastic life passed by quickly for Martin, and there seemed to be the development of some reconciliation with his father, especially after Martin’s two brothers died of the plague—which his father supposed might have been a judgment upon him for his anger towards his son’s monastic turn.

Now having completed his period of testing as a novice, and formally entering holy orders, there came a major milestone for both son and father. Martin was to perform his first mass, and he took the occasion as a good one to invite his father, in the hopes of furthering their reconciliation. It was a weighty event. The Roman Catholic priesthood, with all its ceremony and ritual, was perhaps even more detailed and precise than the Old Testament priesthood from which it drew patterns. As the mass was believed to be the occasion of the actual transformation of the bread and wine into the body of Christ, this was a vastly serious matter and needed to be done just right. Luther recounts that as the moment arrived, he froze in fear. Having stated the words, “We offer unto you, the living, the true, the eternal God...”, he was suddenly, in his own words,

utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, ‘With what tongue shall I address such Majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine majesty? The angels surround him. And shall I, a miserable pygmy, say ‘I want this, I ask for that?’ For I am dust and ashes and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal, and true God.<sup>11</sup>

Luther felt so terrified that he had to force himself not to run away.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



His conversations with his father afterward did not go well either. Martin decided it was a good time to plainly ask his father why he had been opposed to his entering the monastery. His father's anger surged: "Have you never read in the Bible that you should honor your father and your mother? And here you have left me and your dear mother to look after ourselves in our old age."<sup>12</sup> Martin replied that his prayers would do more for his parents than a money-earning vocation would—and that he had been called by a voice from heaven during the storm. Hans retorted, "God grant that it was not an apparition of the devil."<sup>13</sup>

Both the experience of his first mass and the exchanges with his father left him disquieted. Doubts and questions—as often before—filled his mind. His thoughts repeatedly took him to this pressing question: "How could man abide God's presence unless he were himself holy?"<sup>14</sup> Martin now found himself on a quest for holiness, for assurance of salvation. He longed for peace with God, but it proved incredibly difficult for him to attain. At the same time, terror of divine justice often loomed over him. He feared the coming judgment of Christ and for all his efforts there seemed no solution. Late in life, he wrote of his futile attempts in this way:

The word is too high and too hard that anyone should fulfill it. This is proved not merely by our Lord's word, but by our own experience and feeling. Take any upright man or woman. He will get along nicely with those who do not provoke him, but let someone proffer only the slightest irritation and he will flare up in anger... if not against friends, then against enemies.<sup>15</sup>

As he looked within, Luther, in spite of all his efforts at penance and holiness, could not find what was necessary for his salvation. He wrote, "How can I dare believe in the favor of God, so long as there is no real conversion in me? I must be changed before he will accept me."<sup>16</sup> His self-perception was accurate, but as long as he sought to effect this change in himself instead of looking to Christ's sufficiency, he found himself tied up in impossibility. In the midst of this struggle, there were some in the monastery who proved helpful to him, even though they did not have a full grasp of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Chief among these was Martin's monastic superior, Johann von Staupitz.

Unlike most of Martin's contemporaries, Staupitz was Augustinian in his theology. Having a pastoral heart, he took interest in his junior monk. Aware of his willing care, Martin regularly shared his struggles with him. At one point, Staupitz challenged him,

Why do you torment yourself with all these speculations and high thoughts ... Look at the wounds of Jesus Christ, to the blood that he has shed for you: it is there that the grace of God will appear to you ... throw yourself into the Redeemer's arms. Trust in him—in the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 62.

righteousness of his life—in the atonement of his death... Listen to the Son of God. He became man to give you the assurance of divine favor.<sup>17</sup>

On another occasion, Staupitz counseled: “There is no real repentance, except that begins with the love of God and his righteousness... if you desire to be converted, do not be curious about all these mortifications and all these tortures. Love him who first loved you.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps most significant was his encouragement to the young monk to pour himself into the study of the Scriptures. “Let the study of the Scriptures be your favorite occupation,” Staupitz directed.<sup>19</sup> While Staupitz pointed in the right direction, his counsel lacked full gospel clarity. Despite his mentor’s patience, Luther remained troubled, if not increasingly desperate.

### **The Beginning of Luther’s Conversion**

In his account of Luther’s life, Merle D’Aubigne relates that one day, as he lay in bed sick and in despair, an old monk “entered his cell ... Luther opened his heart to him, and made known the fears by which he was tormented ... The venerable old man was incapable of following up that soul in all its doubts, as Staupitz had done; but he knew his Creed, and had found in it much consolation to his heart.” Leading Luther back to the Apostles’ Creed, the old monk repeated with kindness: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins ... you must not believe only in the forgiveness of David’s and of Peter’s sins, for this even the devils believe. It is God’s command that we believe our own sins are forgiven us.”<sup>20</sup> This, somewhere in the year 1507, was a key turning point, though there would still be some years to go before Martin fully grasped Scripture’s teaching on the person and work of Christ in salvation.

In the winter of 1508, Luther was sent to study and teach for a semester at the newly established University of Wittenberg: physics and dialectics, branches of medieval philosophy. But he also continued to immerse himself in theological study, learning the original languages of Hebrew and Greek and studying the Scriptures themselves. By the end of 1509, he had obtained his Bachelor of Divinity.

### **The Trip to Rome**

Soon after, Luther was called back to Erfurt, and in 1510, he was sent on a journey to Rome. The thousand-mile walk ended in a city that led to deep and profound disillusionment with the heart of Roman Catholicism. The corruption of the clergy was on blatant display, as were the masses who were either desperately seeking spiritual solace or simply giving themselves license for their sin. Luther later reflected,

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

No one can imagine what sins and infamous actions are committed in Rome ... they must be seen and heard to be believed. Thus, they are in the habit of saying, 'If there is a hell, Rome is built over it: it is an abyss from which issues every kind of sin.'<sup>21</sup>

Climbing on his knees up the Scala Sancta stairs as an act of penance, the Scriptures he studied came to mind and turned him even more deeply against the superstition and false teaching he was for so long caught up in.<sup>22</sup>

## **Luther Transformed**

Reflecting on Luther's journey, D'Aubigne states:

Luther quit Rome and returned to Wittenberg: his heart was full of sorrow and indignation. Turning his eyes with disgust from the pontifical city, he directed them with hope to the Holy Scriptures—to that new life which the Word of God seemed then to promise to the world. This word increased in his heart by all that the church lost. He separated from the one to cling to the other. The whole of the Reformation was in that one movement.<sup>23</sup>

Back at the university, Luther was called and appointed by his order to serve as "Doctor of the Holy Scriptures," publicly vowing on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1512 "I swear to defend the evangelical truth with all my might."<sup>24</sup>

As part of his weekly teaching, by 1513 he began a series of expositions of the book of Psalms. He followed this with expositions of Romans and Galatians, in 1515 and 1516, respectively. When Luther came to Psalm 22 in his consecutive exposition, he was profoundly struck by the reality that the only reason that Christ could have so suffered was that he was bearing the iniquity of his people. By the time Luther came to Psalm 85 in late 1513 to mid-1514, greater clarity was developing. Commenting on Psalm 85:4, Luther told his students,

[The Psalmist] is now speaking also about spiritual conversion and wrath. This is therefore, supremely necessary, because this cannot be done by human strength, only by divine strength. This is true because God is hidden in the flesh [in Christ], so that no man can recognize Him unless having been enlightened by God's spiritual grace. Hence blessed Peter, who had been thus converted and said, 'you are Christ, the Son of the living God...' If we are converted to the truth, God's wrath is turned away from us ... Therefore be converted if you want to turn away the wrath. But as I have said, this is impossible for us on our own, unless we seek to be converted by God."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>22</sup> Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (London: The Bodley Head, 2016), 64; D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*, vol. 2 of *Luther's works*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1976), 156.

Luther's expository teaching now sounded the clear note of the necessity of sovereign grace for salvation.

Even greater clarity was found in relation to the person and work of Christ in salvation. In commenting on Psalm 85:10<sup>26</sup>, Luther stated that this and the preceding verses were a continuous prophecy and

prayer for Christ's advent ... mercy and truth ... have come together in one Person. For by the mercy of God the Word took on flesh for the purpose of fulfilling the truth of the promise made to the fathers of the Old Testament ... both are in Christ. If he had not given freely but on the basis of merit, then righteousness and truth would have met each other, and it would not have been either mercy or grace, but a debt. But now he has freely given, so that he might be mercy and grace, and true nevertheless ... Lyra says, 'Christ provided righteousness for us and thus gave us peace, appeasing the things that are in heaven and the things that are on earth. For by his suffering he made satisfaction for us according to the way of righteousness, etc.' A good gloss! For as God, angry because of our unrighteousness, did not have peace with us, so having been turned, he sent this righteousness for us by which he also sent peace at the same time ... Righteousness and peace have kissed because the same Christ is both.<sup>27</sup>

It was in coming to know Christ as Savior that Luther's study of the Psalms was a profoundly influential aspect of his spiritual transformation.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately after completing his expository lectures on the Psalm, Luther began to work through Paul's epistle to the Romans. There he came to chapter 1 verse 17, which, citing Habakkuk, states, "the just shall live by faith." This passage that had so often filled him with fear now became clear: faith was not worked by human achievement, but it was the gift of God, coming through the hearing of his Word, and the work of the Spirit. Years later Luther recounted:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, "the justice of God," because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the

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<sup>26</sup> Psalm 85:10 in the King James Version: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed *each other*."

<sup>27</sup> Luther, *Works*, 2:163-169.

<sup>28</sup> Michael A. Mullett, "From the Psalms to the 95 Theses" in *Martin Luther* (London: Routledge, 2004), 50-75.

“justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven ...

If you have true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love. This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger or ungraciousness.<sup>29</sup>

How was this blessing of the grace of God possible? Luther knew it was because of the cross, because Christ had made a fully sufficient, complete atonement once for all. Nevertheless, while Luther grasped the objective reality of justification by faith alone through the full and free sufficiency of Christ alone as he lectured through Romans, it seems a full, personal grasp of this doctrine still took some time to work out in his life.

Luther’s expositional teaching had already attracted substantial numbers to his classes, but this season of spiritual transformation and growth gave new vitality to his lectures. Soon he was asked to occasionally preach in the Wittenberg chapel. D’Aubigne summarizes the attraction of his pulpit ministry:

The great seriousness that pervaded all Luther’s sermons and the joy with which the knowledge of the Gospel had filled his heart, imparted to his eloquence an authority, a warmth, and an unction that his predecessors had not possessed ... soon the little chapel could not hold the hearers who crowded to it ... the council of Wittenberg then nominated Luther their chaplain, and invited him to preach in the city church ... this was the beginning of new life for Luther.<sup>30</sup>

Along with continuing teaching, his life was now saturated in the study of the Scriptures, preaching, and pastoral care for the people of the town and university of Wittenberg. This was profoundly evident in his plain, heartfelt gospel preaching from the pulpit. Taking up a sermon series on the Ten Commandments he expounded and applied Exodus 20:3 for his flock:

All the sons of Adam are idolaters, and have sinned against this first commandment ... in it there are two kinds of idolatry—one external, the other internal. The external in which man bows down to wood and stone, to beasts and the heavenly host. The internal, in which man, fearful of punishment, or seeking his own pleasure, does not worship the creature, but loves him in his heart, and trusts him ... What kind of religion is this? You do not bend the knee before riches and honors, but you offer them your heart, the noblest portion of yourselves ... you worship God in body, but the creature in spirit. This idolatry prevails in every man until he is healed by the free gift of the faith that is in Christ Jesus ... how shall this cure be accomplished? Listen. Faith in Christ takes away from you all trust in your own wisdom, righteousness and strength; it teaches you that if Christ had not died for you, and had not thus saved you, neither you nor any other creature would have been able to do it ... Nothing now remains for you but Jesus Christ—Christ alone—Christ all-sufficient for your soul. Hoping for nothing from any creature, you have only Christ, from whom you hope for everything, and whom you love above

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<sup>29</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 48.

<sup>30</sup> D’Aubigne, *History of the Reformation*, 66-67.

everything ... Christ is the one, sole, and true God. When you have him for your God, you have no other gods.<sup>31</sup>

It was this Martin Luther, even as he was being spiritual transformed, growing in understanding of the God's Word and salvation, who was thrust into increasing prominence. There is no indication that Luther ever desired a Germany wide ministerial influence, let alone a European significance—but this is what inexorably developed.

### **Going Public, Inadvertently**

From his intent for a local disputation on the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517, their unexpected print publication thanks to some of his students, and the willingness of printer after printer multiply them, Luther suddenly found himself in a very public role of the reforming monk-priest in Germany and beyond. He found himself grasping the gospel and, at the same time, standing at odds with the religious-political power that dominated every European nation: the papacy and hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. He encountered complaints, debates, ecclesiastical examiners, councils, diets, excommunication, death threats, kidnapping, emperor, and pope seeking to bring him to an end—and through the tumults, the Lord's steady, gracious protection. Princes like Frederick acted to keep Luther safe, and themselves became persuaded increasingly of the rightness of his teaching. Spiritual fruit spread as more and more of German and European society came to understand the gospel and find new life in Christ.

There is much to learn from Luther as a man, his struggles, his passion, his great sense of humor, his love for Christ. There is much to learn from Martin as a husband to his Katie, and father to his children, and the orphans he loved. There is much to learn from the commentaries, sermons, letters, and essays written over the remainder of his life. It is all perhaps best summed up in these words from one of his sermons on the Lord's Prayer:

We must preach Jesus Christ alone ... you ask, what is it to know Jesus Christ ... what advantage is derived from it? ... I reply: To learn and to know Jesus Christ is to understand what the apostle says: Christ is made unto us of God, wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption ... to believe is none other than to eat this bread from heaven.<sup>32</sup>

In observing Martin Luther, the monk who could never get to heaven by all his monkery, transformed from death to life in Christ, one can only respond by joining the Psalmist and declaring: "You, O LORD, have made me glad by your work, at the works of your hands I sing for joy" (Psalm 92:4).

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 117.

# The 95 Theses and Luther's Doctrine of Repentance

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## 95 Theses: Man, Moment, and Motive

Great events of church history, like the Reformation, are liable to be oversimplified as the passage of time brings greater distance from the many factors that brought these events about. Of course, the providence of God is the determinative factor, but on the historical level, Reformation history is an intricate web of personalities and influences, stretched over time and space, each playing a different part in the unfolding event that known as the Reformation. That is why the study of the Reformation remains a fertile field, with much room for edifying research. Still, the basic historical outlines of the Reformation have become distinct through hindsight, and certain men, certain moments, and certain motives are identified as the defining features of the Reformation. Ongoing research brings different men, moments, and motives to our attention, but only a few of these are universally recognized as being decisive to the initiation and the outcome of the Reformation. One such decisive combination of a man, a moment, and a motive will be the topic of this paper. The man is Martin Luther. The moment was October 31, 1517, when he made public his *Disputation on the Power of Indulgences*, now famously known as the 95 Theses. His motive, however, was more than a simple objection to the sale of the indulgences which the Roman Catholic church claimed to guarantee forgiveness of sins. There was a very pastoral concern that prompted Luther to speak out when he did. Luther feared that the sale of indulgences, along with other institutional practices of the Roman Catholic Church, would replace the sense of need for personal repentance in the believer's life. This oft-overlooked motive behind the 95 Theses will be the subject of this paper.

## Preaching against Indulgences and for Repentance

The Roman Catholic Church had been selling indulgences to reduce punishment for sins for centuries, but by 1517, the practice had reached a level of absurdity, overtly preying on people's fears for profit. In 1476, Pope Sixtus IV extended the benefit of papal indulgences to the souls in purgatory.<sup>1</sup> So, when Johann Tetzel, a Dominican monk, was appointed commissioner for the sale of indulgences in the province of Magdeburg in 1517, his sales pitch became, "When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Playing on the fear and guilt of his audiences, Tetzel would exhort his hearers to have pity on their dead relatives, to not let them languish in purgatory, but to free their souls to glory in return for cash down.

Luther was not the first to raise questions about this kind of abuse of church authority for profit. By 1517, however, the abuse of authority had become pervasive, as the sale of indulgences had almost entirely commercialized and institutionalized the concept of forgiveness. The free grace of God through Jesus Christ and personal contrition and repentance on the part of the sinner

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Mullet, *Martin Luther* (London: Routledge, 2004), 70.

played no part in the kind of forgiveness that the church put up for sale. Albrecht von Hohenzollern endorsed the indulgence of 1517 by saying, “Nor is it necessary for those who contribute to the fund for this purpose to be contrite or to confess.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the sale of indulgences had entirely displaced any sense of the need for personal repentance. The corruption of power for profit in the church was, of course, one of Luther’s main points of contention. However, Luther was not entirely against the very idea of indulgences. At the time when he wrote the 95 Theses, he still thought the indulgence had a narrow yet legitimate place, which should not be abused by the church.<sup>3</sup> The 95 Theses were a call to end the *abuse* of indulgences for profit, but even more importantly, they were a call to restore the doctrine of personal repentance as part of true saving faith. Later in life, in the year 1541, Luther recollected his main objections to the 1517 indulgence, saying Tetzel preached “that it was not necessary to have remorse, sorrow, or repentance for sin, if one bought an indulgence”<sup>4</sup> The false security of indulgences discouraged any sense of the personal need of repentance, and this struck a very deep nerve in the pastoral heart of Luther.

Luther’s great concern for a true, biblical doctrine of personal repentance had deep roots in his own conversion experience, which he documented well. The need for personal repentance, therefore, became a lifelong focal point in his preaching and teaching, and in particular, the preaching and teaching that led up to his 95 Theses. For his opening lectures on the Bible at the University of Wittenburg in 1513, Luther chose the Psalms, which he dearly loved, and in which he often found opportunity to expound on the pressing need for personal repentance. For instance, while lecturing on Psalm 4:4, “Speak within your heart on your bed, and be silent,” Luther highlighted this as a call to secret, heartfelt repentance:

The meaning of these words seems to me to be that repentance should be done inwardly before God and in secret, not before the eyes of men for the purpose of vain boasting ... Therefore, “speak these things,” that is, say and speak and confess your evils from your whole heart and “in your hearts...”<sup>5</sup>

After lecturing on the Psalms, Luther began a series of lectures on the Book of Romans in 1515, which again provided him many opportunities to reflect on the necessity of personal repentance. It was clear that, even in this early stage of his public life, he found little comfort in the institutional practices of confession and penance as any kind of substitute for personal repentance. While commenting on Romans 13:11 he observed:

A species of men in our day is most portentous and numerous. They practice the repentance established by Christ in the form of temporal and external matters, and when

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<sup>2</sup> Mullett, *Luther*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> Thesis 41 reads: “Papal indulgences must be preached with caution, lest people erroneously think that they are preferable to other good works of love.” See: Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Lund, ed., *Documents from the History of Lutheranism 1517–1750* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 10 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1974), 65. Luther’s lecture on Psalm 32 provides another example of his preaching on repentance in this period. In this lecture, he declared, “Sin which is not washed away by repentance soon draws to another sin by its own weight, as is clear in the case of David” (Luther, *Works*, 10:147).



they have done this, they think they are righteous. The result is that this kind of confession is frequently practiced to the detriment of this wretched trust in oneself, because it does not take away what they presume it does.<sup>6</sup>

In these and many other instances, Luther's writings respond to the religious apprehensions produced by an atmosphere where the notions of repentance and forgiveness were institutionalized, and ultimately, commercialized by the sale of indulgences.<sup>7</sup> Luther zealously sought to restore the biblical doctrine of genuine, individual repentance that leads to personal trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness. This concern of Luther's came to a head in 1517 and it came to expression in his 95 Theses.

### **Repentance in the 95 Theses**

The first four theses speak to the biblical doctrine of true repentance, and this emphasis serves as the foundation for all the following theses on the topics of papal authority and indulgences. Thus, Luther's criticisms of indulgences and papal corruption sprang from his protest over what the doctrine of repentance had become and his passion about what it should be.

Luther's first thesis reads, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."<sup>8</sup> In this first thesis, Luther utilized the Greek New Testament to challenge the Latin Vulgate translation of Matthew 4:17, which translates to English as "From that time, Jesus began to preach, and to say, 'Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" In 1518, Luther published a further explanation of his 95 Theses, in which he expounded further on the Greek word *metanoieite*, showing how the word refers to personal repentance rather than the sacrament of penance.<sup>9</sup> Luther also pictured repentance as a continual, lifelong duty, pointing out that we are taught to always pray "forgive us our debts" (Matt 6:12). The lifelong duty of true repentance stood in stark contrast to the momentary, false assurances of penance or indulgences. This leading emphasis on repentance in the Christian life is the thematic thread binding the 95 Theses together as a reminder that the true believer can only find true forgiveness through true repentance. Means contrived by the church provide no substitute for such repentance.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. 25 of *Luther's Works*, trans. Walter G. Tillmanns and Jacob A. O. Preus, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 479. In his lectures on Galatians in 1535, Luther would call the institutional practices of confession and penance "human traditions" that do not allow the conscience to find peace. See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians Chapters 5-6 (1535) and Chapters 1-6 (1519)*, vol. 27 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 13.

<sup>7</sup> As an example of another instance in Romans where Luther found opportunity to preach on repentance, consider his words about the Roman Catholic Church in his commentary on Romans 3:13 (Luther, *Works*, 25:229): "Such teachers do not bite, therefore they do not chew and grind, that is, do not criticize people, do not humble them, do not bring them to repentance, do not pull them down and break them. But as they are they swallow them whole in their faithlessness, as we read in Lam. 2:14, "Your prophets have not exposed your iniquity to call you to repentance."

<sup>8</sup> Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 84.

Luther clarifies his position on repentance, and the meaning of the word *metanoieite*, in Thesis 2, which states: “This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy.” Luther would later explain that the command to repent entailed a lifelong mindset of humility and a continual seeking after Christ. He made a sharp distinction between sacramental penance, which he did not completely reject in the 95 Theses, and evangelical penance, which he called “the unceasing sacrifice which is called a contrite and humble heart.”<sup>10</sup> Luther went on to say, “Sacramental penance is only external and presupposes inward penance, without which it has no value ... Sacramental penance can be a sham; inward penance cannot exist unless it is true and sincere.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, it seems that whenever Luther spoke of the sacrament of penance, it was always to point out its limitations, its institution by the church rather than Christ, and its utter meaninglessness in the absence of true, inward repentance. In Thesis 2, and in his later writings, Luther located the spring of true repentance in a heart transformed by grace, rather than in the rituals of the church.

Luther’s first two theses portray true repentance as inward, personal, and continual, rather than what the Roman Catholic Church had made it – outward, formal, and institutional. However, his third thesis takes the next biblical step to say that true inward repentance will have genuine outward manifestations, which again cannot be equated with the sacrament of penance. The third thesis reads: “Yet it [*metanoieite*] does not mean solely inner repentance; such inner repentance is worthless unless it produces various outward mortifications of the flesh.”

In his later writing, Luther would go on to explain that true inner repentance has manifestations in the form of turning away from sin and following the commands of Christ. Further, if these efforts are to be genuine, they cannot be dictated or forced by church authority. Taking his cue from the Sermon on the Mount, Luther identified the outward manifestations of repentance under the categories of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. While he did allow for the church to prescribe the manner and time for the penitent sinner to engage in these duties, he feared that people would be lulled into a false sense of security by the practice of institutional confession and sacramental penance. Concerning these practices, he wrote in his commentary on Romans,

Thus of necessity they make men proud and cause them to think they are already entirely righteous when they have performed certain outward works. And thus they are not at all concerned about declaring war on their evil lusts through unceasing prayer to the Lord.<sup>12</sup>

It was this inner war on evil lusts – a genuine, personal hatred and turning from sin – that Luther saw as the true fruit of repentance. In his later commentary on thesis 3, Luther insisted that “all mortifications which the conscience-stricken man brings upon himself are the fruit of inner penance.”<sup>13</sup>

Luther’s fourth thesis puts the last touch on his burden for the topic of true repentance, but the language of the statement demands careful analysis. The fourth thesis reads: “The penalty of sin remains as long as the hatred of self, that is, true inner repentance, until our entrance into the

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<sup>10</sup> Luther’s Works, 31:85.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Luther’s Works, 25:263.

<sup>13</sup> Luther’s Works, 31:86.

kingdom of heaven.” By saying “the penalty of sin remains,” Luther did not imply that we remain unforgiven, and under the wrath of God until death. Nor was he saying that we can have no true assurance of forgiveness. Luther later clarified this phrase by saying, “At least the punishment of death remains in every case.”<sup>14</sup> So, by saying “the penalty of sin remains,” Luther was simply characterizing the life of sanctification as an ongoing struggle with remaining sin, and noting the reality that every believer must face the final consequence of death.

The main point of thesis 4, however, is that the Christian life will always be a life of repentance. The nature of our struggle with sin demands it, and the believer will always feel sorrow over, and hatred for, the sin that yet remains and will always remain this side of glory. Luther later explained:

The cross of repentance must continue until, according to the Apostle, the body of sin is destroyed (Rom 6:6) and the inveterate first Adam, along with his image, perishes, and the new Adam is perfected in the image of God. But sin remains until death, although it diminishes daily through the renewing of the mind.<sup>15</sup>

In this thesis, Luther also characterized true inner repentance as “the hatred of self,” which is a phrase and a concept found often in his writings. Commenting on John 12:25, where Christ said, “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” Luther explained how the life of faith views itself, and its remaining sin, in accord with the will of God, who hates sin.<sup>16</sup> This results in a hatred of self, or a true despising over sin as part of repentance. In his commentary on Romans 3, Luther expounded on how the redeemed man is transformed in his own self-estimation. Turning from a self-righteous estimation of ourselves, we must “adopt another mode of thought (which comes from God) whereby we believe from our heart that we are sinners, that we are acting, speaking, and living wickedly, that we are astray, and thus we come to blame ourselves, to judge, condemn, and hate ourselves.”<sup>17</sup> This is not the kind of language you would find in very many modern discussions of repentance, since the notion of self-esteem has gained an influential status, and hatred is a strong word many are cautious to use. But Luther was trying to highlight the violent inner struggle that accompanies true repentance, and the humbling results it brought. Luther saw this intimate, emotional, and personal dimension of repentance as in danger of being obscured by the policies and practices of the church in 1517.

Thus, the true nature of repentance was the leading doctrine of the leading document of the Reformation.<sup>18</sup> Luther’s criticism of indulgences, and even the more established practice of sacramental penance, sprang from a positive and pastoral desire for people to know the grace of true, personal repentance before a holy God. A year after his posting of the 95 Theses, he preached a sermon called “A Sermon on Indulgence and Grace,” in which he said:

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<sup>14</sup> Luther’s Works, 31:89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Luther’s Works, 25:382.

<sup>17</sup> Luther’s Works, 25:218.

<sup>18</sup> “So the 95 Theses, the fountainhead of the Reformation, is a portfolio promoting repentance.” Mullett, *Luther*, 73.

Let me state that it cannot be proved from Scripture that God's righteousness requires or demands some suffering or satisfaction from the sinner other than his sincere and genuine contrition and reform, with the resolution to carry Christ's cross from then on...It is a grievous error for anyone to think that he can make satisfaction for his own sins. God always forgives them out of His priceless grace and demands nothing more than a good life thereafter.<sup>19</sup>

Luther's concern for the biblical doctrine of repentance, unvarnished by the teachings of Rome, may have been freshly prompted by the sale of indulgences, but it had deeper roots in Luther's pastoral concern for the religious needs of people who had become cogs in the wheel of scholastic theology. To Luther, nothing exhibited true faith more clearly, and nothing was more deeply personal, than genuine repentance and the assurance of grace that followed. He was disturbed that such notions had been reduced to mere transactions between the individual and the church. Finally, he was outraged when these impersonal transactions became financial ones. It might fairly be said that the crux of Luther's protest in 1517 was that a personal God demands personal faith and repentance and that the church had no right to institutionalize, much less monetize, what God intended to spring from the heart. This personal dimension of faith is well captured in Luther's Small Catechism from 1529, as he explains the three articles of the Apostle's Creed. He uses the language of personal faith: "God created *me*... Christ redeemed *me* ... the Holy Spirit called *me*."<sup>20</sup> In effect, the 95 Theses was a declaration that God calls *me* to repent, and no dictated act of penance, or sale of an indulgence, can ever take the place of *my* personal repentance.

With this point firmly established in the first four theses, the remainder of the document goes on to question and expose the cheap substitutes for personal repentance and divine forgiveness that were so much a part of the ecclesiastical landscape in 1517. The final ninety-one theses are pure Luther, with a mixture of deep biblical reasoning and raw satire. He questions the scope of the church's power in relation to the forgiveness of sins and challenges the value and legitimacy of indulgences from biblical, moral, and practical angles. Since the benefit of indulgences had recently been extended to souls in purgatory, he questioned this idea extensively, not denying the doctrine of purgatory, but wondering out loud how the pope could presume to impose canon law on those who have already died.<sup>21</sup> Through all of his questions and criticisms, Luther always returns to the point that true forgiveness comes through genuine repentance and belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thesis 36 says, "Any truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of penalty and guilt, even without indulgence letters." And, in contrast to the treasure the church sought to raise through the sale of indulgences, Luther said in thesis 62, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

Thus, the motive behind the 95 Theses was not purely to criticize the sale of indulgences – though the practice deserved to be criticized. Luther reacted to what he saw as an even greater threat – the loss of the Gospel itself, and particularly, the idea of gospel repentance. The legacy of Luther's emphasis on repentance is well reflected in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, composed by Philip Melancthon, but based upon Luther's wording in the Schwabach Articles of 1529. Article XII of the Augsburg Confession reads:

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<sup>19</sup> Kurt Aland, ed., *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 64–65.

<sup>20</sup> Lund, 91–92.

<sup>21</sup> Thesis 13: The dying are freed by death from all penalties, are already dead as far as the canon laws are concerned, and have a right to be released from them. Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 22.

Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace. Then improvement should also follow, and a person should refrain from sins. For these should be the fruits of repentance, as John says in Matthew 3: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”<sup>22</sup>

When most people think of Luther’s legacy, they think of the doctrine of justification, but his zeal for the doctrine of gospel repentance provided the more immediate catalyst to his publication of the 95 Theses. As John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord by preaching repentance, it was fitting that a call to gospel repentance would be the first thesis of the first document that sparked a Reformation. If the 95 Theses rightfully indicate the beginning of the Reformation, then the Reformation began with these words of Luther’s first thesis: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lund, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 21.

## Katharina Luther (1499–1552)<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Rebecca VanDoodewaard

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*Author of Reformation Women:  
Sixteenth-Century Figures Who Shaped Christianity's Rebirth*

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### Introduction

Katharina Luther stands out among women of the Reformation era. Her faithful service and her high-profile, high-maintenance husband earn her a high place. She is known for her work as a wife that enabled her husband to do his seminal work of reforming. In between reviewing Luther's writing, hosting his students, and raising their children, Katharina brewed beer, butchered pigs, and read her Bible. Without her, Luther would not have been as healthy, productive, or happy. Her work facilitated and furthered the Reformation. When considering the breadth of Katharina's work after marriage, her background is, in fact, quite surprising.

### Preparing for Reform in a Convent

In 1499, Katharina von Bora was born to a noble family in eastern Germany.<sup>2</sup> Before she was six, her mother was dead, and when her father remarried, Katharina was dropped off at a cloister school. Around her ninth birthday, her father sent her to a Cistercian convent for good.<sup>3</sup> While not all of her father's reasons are known, one of them was that he was financially tight, so giving away a child would save money.

How she coped with abandonment growing up is unknown. What is known is that as an adult she displayed a deep love for children, and especially for orphans. Together, Katharina and Martin had six children: Johannes, Elizabeth, Magdalena, Martin, Paul, and Margarete.<sup>4</sup> And they adopted orphaned or poor relatives: George, Andreas, Cyriacus, Fabian, Elsa and Lena Kaufmann; Hans Polner; Martin Luther Jr.; Anna Strauss; Hanna von der Saale; Florian von

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a talk given at the Puritan Reformed Seminary Conference, August 25, 2017, Grand Rapids, Michigan. That talk is a forthcoming chapter in *The Beauty and Glory of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018) and is published here with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 53.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst Kroker, *The Mother of the Reformation*, trans. Mark E. DeGarmeaux (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Press, 2013), 293.

Bora, and possibly two others.<sup>5</sup> That makes a total of at least seventeen children that Katie cared for.<sup>6</sup>

Katharina's care for children did not happen in an emotional void; it took deep inner motivation. Part of it would have stemmed from understanding her own adoption into God's family; part of it had to come from her own suffering and a desire to keep other children from the same grief. Katharina knew what it was like to be bereaved and abandoned at a vulnerable age. Her willingness to welcome and love children who were threatened with the same trials showed that she wanted to protect others from what she suffered. The hardship of her childhood prepared her to show compassion for hurting children as an adult.

In the convent as a child, young Katharina was inserted into the strict order of monastic life. The hardship there was not the order or the quiet; it was the falsehood in which Katharina was immersed. Convents were pseudo families with pseudo "mothers" and "sisters" offering a pseudo gospel. For many years, Katharina did not realize that she was experiencing the hardship of spiritual abuse. She was simply part of the religious community there. The convent had a considerable collection of relics, which the nuns venerated. There were regular prayers, worship of Mary, and the isolation, silence, personal poverty, and strict hierarchy that seemed normal to any late medieval European because of the Church's control over the population.<sup>7</sup>

But again, the Lord designed the convent experience for Katharina's good. What Katharina could see is that the convent was actually giving her a huge skill set that she would later use to help the man who started the Reformation. The convent was in a lovely setting, with forest and gardens; there were lots of animals, too. Though Katharina did not do a lot of physical work herself, she saw gardening and food production happening around her.<sup>8</sup> She saw animal husbandry.<sup>9</sup> She saw that a small community could be quite self-sustaining because of a few hard-working women.

The convent served as a pilgrimage destination; the nuns often housed these guests and, thus, Katharina saw the importance of hospitality and community. Care for the sick was also part of monastic life; Katharina showed herself to be an excellent nurse later in life.<sup>10</sup>

One huge advantage that nuns had over other women in this period is education – nuns were taught how to read. Katharina read German as well as Latin, which she also spoke to some extent.<sup>11</sup> She was exposed to theological works, too. This prepared her very specifically for living as the wife of an author and intellectual.

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<sup>5</sup> "We hear Luther talk about these eleven foster children only occasionally. And there may have been more." Kroker, *Mother of the Reformation*, 122–152.

<sup>6</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Kroker, *Mother of the Reformation*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Kroker, *Mother of the Reformation*, 15–17.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>11</sup> This is known from Luther's letters to her, which include Latin parts. See, for example, Martin Luther to Katharina Luther, October 4, 1529, in *The Letters of Martin Luther* ed. and trans. Margaret A. Currie

The convent not only gave her practical skills, it also pressed into her a routine of personal devotion. Later in life, she expressed appreciation for the habit of frequent, fervent prayer that the convent taught her. So, God prepared Katharina to be involved in reform before she realized that it was a possibility.

### **Converting, Serving, and Marrying**

In 1523, Katharina realized that reform was not only a possibility but also a necessity. The printing press allowed the production of Protestant literature, particularly pamphlets, and these writings were smuggled into convents across Germany. Katharina's convent was no exception; Luther's writings reached it likely in 1519.<sup>12</sup> She and a few other nuns were converted and eventually decided that they must escape. They fled to Wittenberg on Luther's advice.<sup>13</sup>

Escaped nuns were a huge problem for the Catholic church in 1523. These nuns who had broken serious vows made Rome angry. Even people helping them were subject to execution if caught. The nuns also made enemies of their families who were embarrassed by their conversion. The nuns were awkward in society, too; these single women needed to integrate into a quickly changing city. They had not interacted with men or children for most of their lives and had few opportunities for employment. They were leaving a very secure, stable environment and future for totally unpredictable ones.

Luther understood this challenging environment, and he helped the nuns find places to live and work. Katharina became a domestic servant for two Wittenberg families. Thus, the next trial Katharina faced was servanthood.

Although Katharina did bring some skills from the convent, she had never seen how a family, let alone a Christian one, functions. And this is what she learned in these homes. Her two mistresses seem to have been excellent homemakers, so Katharina saw how to manage money and servants, children and visitors. She saw that families are not as predictable as convents, and she learned how a wife and mother deals with changing situations. She saw Christian marriages functioning. God gave Katharina good examples that would serve her well.

Despite the good environments in these homes, or perhaps because of them, it appears Katharina wanted her own home. In her first year as a servant, just months after leaving the convent, Katharina met a university student, Jerome Baumgartner. The two fell in love—it was known in the town that they were a couple—though there was no formal engagement. Jerome had to leave town later that year, and he did not come back. Katharina heard nothing from him. In 1524, Luther wrote to Jerome, "... if you intend marrying Katharine von Bora, make haste before she is given to someone else... she has not yet gotten over her love for you."<sup>14</sup> You can imagine what Katharina went through here: living as a servant in someone else's home with a

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(London: MacMillan and Co., 1908), 197. There are also records of her speaking Latin occasionally. Bainton, *Luther*, 295.

<sup>12</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Kroker, *Mother of the Reformation*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> He added, "I wish that you two were married." Martin Luther to Jerome Baumgärtner, October 12, 1524 in *Letters*, 129.



broken heart while the Protestant leadership tried to figure out what was happening to the relationship. And what happened was Jerome's family. They were wealthy, politically involved, and very aware of the social-legal consequences of having an ex-nun for a daughter-in-law. Jerome was forced to choose between his family and Katharina, and he chose his family. He was not the only suitor Katharina had in these years, but he was the only one whom Katharina loved. This additional abandonment must have sunk deep into her, since it affected her physically at the time.<sup>15</sup>

At this point, the story took a now well-known turn: she married Dr. Luther himself in 1525. And he did not marry her because he loved her; he married her to please his father, and to "spite the Pope and the Devil."<sup>16</sup> Luther was a great man, but he was not an easy man: moody, sometimes depressed, intense, sometimes crass, walking around under a death sentence, complaining about his bowels. She cared for him, often brought him to his senses, and made him eat regular, healthy meals.

Part of Katharina's love for him must have come from his faithfulness to her. Abandonment from both a father and a suitor would certainly produce thankfulness for a faithful man. Thus, it appears that Katharina's devotion to and patience with her husband is in part a deep appreciation for his steadfastness and care for her.

Because, of course, he did fall in love with her. Luther's letters show how quickly and completely Katharina swept him off his feet.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the first year of marriage, Luther said, has a lot to get used to. He wrote, "You wake up in the morning and there on the pillow are a pair of pigtailed that were not there before."<sup>18</sup> The surprises, though, did not weigh down his affection. "Katie," he told her, "you have a husband who loves you. Let someone else be empress."<sup>19</sup> She did, for the rest of her marriage Katharina's past experiences informed and powered her service as a wife and mother.

Luther had a range of titles and nicknames for Katharina that reflected not only his love for her but also her multi-faceted work: kind wife, dear rib, most-loved, my heart-love, the Virgin, brewer, deeply learned lady, morning star of Wittenberg, rich lady at Zulsdorf, friendly beloved lord, self-tormentor, gracious lady, Lady of the house, Sir Katharina, beloved housewife, theologian, most holy Mrs. Doctress, beautiful lady, resident of the sow-market, gardener, your Holiness, preacher—and most often, dear Katie.<sup>20</sup>

### **Sticking to Christ as a Faithful Wife**

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<sup>15</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Bainton, *Luther*, 288.

<sup>17</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 56

<sup>18</sup> Bainton, *Luther*, 290.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>20</sup> These terms of endearment are scattered throughout Luther's letters to his wife from early in their marriage to his last letter to her, February 14, 1546. See for example, *Letters*, 197, 240–241, 246, 299, 390, 471, 473–474.

In observing God's providence in this situation, looking back from Katharina's fruitfulness in marriage, providence is so clear. The Lord knew exactly what she would have to do as Luther's wife, and He gave her an education that prepared her for it. Katharina's training was so specific to the calling here, moving from abandoned child to nun to servant to Reformer's wife, unknowingly gathering tools for ministry along the way. God knew just what Katharina would need to do to contribute to reform, and He provided before she realized what her role in that would be.

After marriage, her role was very clear, and so was her zeal. Katharina made comfortable the Black Cloister, the Luther family home. Her first year of marriage involved much cleaning, since the building was filthy, right down to moldy bedsheets.<sup>21</sup> Her convent upbringing ushered cleanliness and order into the home, which she had renovated to better serve the family. She produced food and bought land. She frequently welcomed guests in addition to lodgers—up to 120 at a single meal, but 30 to 40 was normal.<sup>22</sup> She bore children and adopted others.

Katharina had a significant impact on Luther's pastoral and academic work, too. Her husband became known for evening dinner discussions, known as Table Talk. If it were not for Katharina, these discussions would not have happened. She not only grew, prepared, and served the food but also sat down with Luther and the students to join the discussion. That was highly unusual at the time for a woman to join a "man's" conversation. Even more unusual were the occasions when she disagreed with Luther in front of guests. Some students were shocked, but Luther knew his wife too well to be surprised or silenced or offended.<sup>23</sup> In the evenings, she often read Luther's writing projects and gave him feedback. Someone called the Luthers' house a "*domus academus*."<sup>24</sup> This example of openness and recognition of Katharina's gifts helped raise the status of women to Biblical levels.

Her influence on Luther was strong. Everyone knew it. Some did not like it. They "feared that she 'ruled' the reformer to the same degree that she ruled their house."<sup>25</sup> Katharina's strong opinions, voice, and drive made her formidable. But her husband was more than a match for her. Instead of being ruled by Katharina, he delegated huge responsibility to her, respecting her not only as a wife but also as a fellow Christian with significant skills. This is reflected in his letters to her, which talk about children, money, and weather, but also theology, publishing, and international politics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>22</sup> Besides Luther, the children, Auntie Lena, lodgers, and student "regulars," there were often out-of-town guests, visiting family, local friends, and the occasional dignitary.

<sup>23</sup> Kroker, *Mother of the Reformation*, 160; Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Martin Luther to Katharina Luther, September 15, 1530 in *The Letters of Martin Luther* ed. and trans. Margaret A. Currie (London: MacMillan and Co., 1908), [https://archive.org/stream/lettersofmartinluth/lettersofmartinluth\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/lettersofmartinluth/lettersofmartinluth_djvu.txt), accessed October 24, 2017.

It is clear that Katharina's work directly impacted those whom she served. But this biblical lifestyle also challenged the Roman Catholic church's teaching on clergy, marriage, and more. Not only was Katharina living a quiet, fruitful life, working with her hands, but God also used her obedience, along with other Protestant housewives, to complete a shift in European culture.

Think about how convents and monasteries functioned before the Reformation: they served as hospitals, basic education facilities, hostels, and places of personal devotion. Believing housewives proved that they could care for the sick, read, foster an intellectual climate, host travelers, garden, and pray just as well as monks and nuns had for centuries. Protestant housewives did much to make monasticism socially obsolete. As their lives conformed to a biblical pattern, they showed that society could function without the Roman Catholic institutions that had been propping it up. Though their work was not always visible, Protestant wives—Katie at the head—attacked Catholic presuppositions by their domestic work, putting Rome on the defense.

One biographer writes of Katharina:

She apparently loved life, she was spirited and filled with energy from her commitment to support her spouse, the church, and the Reformation with which she was very much involved both as Luther's spouse and as a believer herself. On her deathbed, she proclaimed her Lutheran Christian faith with confidence: 'I will stick to Christ as a burr to a top coat.'<sup>27</sup>

A former monk and a former nun in a former monastery gives us a picture of Protestant home life in the Reformation. But it gives us more than that; it gives us a picture of what biblical marriage and womanhood can be and how this blesses the Church and honors the Lord.

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<sup>27</sup> Stjerna, *Women of the Reformation*, 67.

# The Very Gate of Paradise to Me: The Development of Protestantism's Teaching on Justification by Faith

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## **I. Introduction: Luther's (1483-1546) 95 Theses.**

This paper traces the glorious Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone from Luther's developing understanding to Calvin's clearer exposition.

This doctrine developed out of the overall darkness of the system of Roman Catholic theology. The particular issue which generated Luther's 95 Theses, and is the exclusive topic of each of those theses, was the presence of indulgence preachers in Germany. For the purpose of funding St. Peter's Basilica, preachers offered papal forgiveness and release for those who were bound in purgatory. Only the holiest people, like monks, had assurance of direct access to heaven, so indulgences meant that a possessor could obtain the release of souls of less than perfect loved ones dearly departed. Luther's 95 Theses were against those preachers, sent from Rome, and the papal theology behind the indulgence. When one reads the 95 Theses in their historical context, there is no question that because of this terrible situation, Luther was looking for a fight.<sup>1</sup> In looking at these theses, however, there is not a word on justification in any of this opening salvo of the Reformation from 500 years ago. The articulation of this doctrine came later for Luther. This paper will now move from the 95 Theses to an examination of Luther's articulation of the doctrine of Justification.

## **II. Luther's Doctrine of Justification.**

### **A. Human Nature.**

Analysis of the doctrine of justification must begin with Luther's concept of human nature. Luther rightly argued that the natural state of the human heart is not at all inclined toward God's holy Law – it does not want to conform to it. Human nature also does not admit its frailty

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<sup>1</sup> After 70 arguments against Indulgences and the theology behind it, Luther announced in thesis 71: "Let him who speaks against the truth concerning papal indulgences be anathema and accursed." He followed in 72: "But let him who guards against the lust and license of the indulgence preachers be blessed." This is something of the flavor of Luther's polemical writing. The 95 theses close with these final blasts 92: "Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace!" 94: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell." His final judgment was 95: "And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace." These translations of these theses may be found in Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 27-29.

and sin.<sup>2</sup> He believed that the human heart is in bondage to sin and is addicted to this world.<sup>3</sup> Luther's biblical view of human nature did not fit into contemporary Roman Catholic teaching.

### ***B. Salvation and Works.***

As Luther understood the Roman notion of justification, a person can and does perform certain good works prior to their actual justification before God. The Roman system argued that those good works are fully acceptable to God.<sup>4</sup> After coming to faith, the Christian adds *further* good works to their justification. Luther, of course, totally disagreed with that teaching.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, Luther distinguished between a man and a man's works. It is individual men who stand either justified and saved by God – or judged and condemned. A person's "works" *per se* are neither justified nor condemned.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, for a "work" to be accepted by God, it is the person who does the work that must first be accepted. If an individual is not accepted or justified before God, then his work simply cannot be justified. Thus, it is not possible properly to speak of someone having any type of good works before their own justification.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, no one can "add" to their justification by their works – simply put, no man can be justified by his works. This biblical teaching is not contradicted by the apostle James' statement, argued Luther, that without works faith is dead. Luther underlined that God acknowledged good works, but that those were the works performed by men who were already justified.<sup>8</sup>

### ***C. The Law.***

A third necessary component to Luther's view of justification includes understanding the role of the Law. Luther observed that God threatens great punishment for those who transgress his Law. Thus, the Law brings fear into people's lives.<sup>9</sup> The Law itself teaches that it requires a new

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "The Method and Fruits of Justification," in *Great Sermons from Master Preachers of All Ages*, ed. Theodore W. Engstrom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> A man must be justified first and then his works may be acceptable to God. It cannot be the case that works are first acceptable and then the man is justified. Luther, "Method and Fruits of Justification," 32-35.

<sup>8</sup> He soundly condemned supposed good works approved by the Roman Catholic Church. See, *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

and regenerate mind.<sup>10</sup> The Law makes demands that are impossible for any person to fulfill in the natural state.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, now consider Luther's doctrine of faith.

#### **D. Faith.**

Luther ridiculed Catholic theologians who taught that faith played a small part in justification while works enjoyed a large role.<sup>12</sup> For Luther, justification was by faith and not through any type of works.

Faith was the sole instrument of salvation for Luther.<sup>13</sup> The type of faith that is salvific is that type that produces a certainty of salvation. Faith for Luther is resting in God through Christ.<sup>14</sup> It is by faith alone that believers are made sons of God.<sup>15</sup>

Luther acknowledged that Roman Catholic theologians thought that his view of faith was nothing more than impious arrogance.<sup>16</sup> The papal church condemned and persecuted those who held such a biblical notion of faith. Catholic theologians argued that if such confidence of salvation by faith came to some biblical figures like King David, it was only *via* special revelation.

However, as Luther studied the book of Galatians, he was convinced that those Christian converts in Galatia had been seduced by false prophets wrongly to believe that salvation must be completed by works of the Law.<sup>17</sup> It is this Galatian heresy that is the actual teaching of the Roman Church. The next step for Luther included receiving a new will.

#### **E. New Will or Conversion by Grace.**

The redeemed sinner is then transformed by the Holy Spirit – receiving a new will. This conversion is a work of divine grace.<sup>18</sup> Luther made the process easy to comprehend: hear the preached word, believe in the Christ who is preached, and thus be saved.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35. That truncated view of faith held by Rome to which Luther refers is termed *historic faith* in systematic theology.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>18</sup> In "Method and Fruits of Justification," see page 40 on the new will and page 41 on motivation.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

Nothing is required unto justification but to hear Jesus Christ as Savior and to believe in him, which is an act of grace.<sup>20</sup> It is a righteousness that is not by law nor is it by nature.<sup>21</sup> Justification is release from bondage and reception of the Holy Spirit by faith.<sup>22</sup> It is being adopted as sons.<sup>23</sup> The converted heart then knows that it has forgiveness of sins.<sup>24</sup>

It is this type of redeemed person who can and does perform good works. From that new foundation flows the believer's good works.<sup>25</sup> The convert then can do such works from a proper heart attitude.<sup>26</sup> For Luther, good works are directed toward neighbors and not toward God.<sup>27</sup> Now, consider how Luther's thinking developed.

### **III. Development of Luther's Understanding of Justification.**

#### ***A. Introduction.***

##### 1. Development is Normal.

In this section, the development of this great Protestant doctrine will be observed. Everyone knows that people mature and develop through life, not just physically and mentally but theologically as well. In the same manner, Luther developed in his understanding of the nature of Christ's salvation.

The goal of this analysis is not to bury Luther but to praise him. Nevertheless, a close examination of Luther's teaching on justification by faith reveals some rather surprising conclusions. In fact, Luther himself was not as clear on the forensic character of justification as were later Lutherans. To advance further in this discussion, clear definition of terms is necessary.

##### 2. Define Terms.

One way to define justification is by not using the adjective *forensic* common to later Protestant understanding. Those who do not use this word generally use the adjective *effective* or *renewal* as the descriptive term. That understanding of justification is one which observes moral effects (thus, effective) in the converted sinner's life. In this view, justification renews the sinner and moves him or her toward holiness. Effective or renewal justification is the classic Roman Catholic definition.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 37, 41, 49. See also A. Chacko George, "Martin Luther's Doctrine of Sanctification with Special Reference to the Formula '*Simul Iustus Et Peccator*': A Study in Luther's Lectures on Romans and Galatians." (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1982).

The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone is termed *forensic justification*. Forensic is a word that means *legal*. To have forensic justification is to be considered legally righteous by God. For example, when a condemned thief has served his prison sentence and is released from incarceration, he is considered forensically righteous relative to his thievery. That verdict does not mean that he did not do the crime, but there are now no legal grounds further to incarcerate him for what he did.

## ***B. Luther's Imprecise Elements.***

### 1. Introduction.

Yet, even in Luther's theologically mature teaching, there were imprecise elements about his handling of justification from a systematic perspective.<sup>28</sup> Luther said that there was a way to receive righteousness and to become acceptable to God. One must hear Christ's words, rest upon him, and deny himself. This is done by faith, which is a gift, whereby Christ remits the person's sins.<sup>29</sup>

When Luther deals with "man's salvation" he oftentimes uses a notion of justification that clearly includes what would generally be termed *works*.<sup>30</sup> Luther, at times, included being made holy within a discussion of justification. As an example, he describes saving faith as faith that "justifies a man, and makes him godly indeed."<sup>31</sup>

### 2. Problems from Current Scholarship?

Turning to current Luther scholarship, European Lutherans have been moving toward ecclesiastical union with other Protestants as well as the Roman Catholic church. Thus, one should not be surprised that current Luther scholar Olli-Pekka Vainio would claim that "Luther's doctrine of justification cannot be classified with simplistic categories like 'forensic' and 'effective.'"<sup>32</sup> He judges such categories as too elementary and misleading. More liberal European scholars define justification in a "narrow sense" where justification is forensic and judicial, and a "broader sense" where justification includes union with Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit and producing effective change in the believer. They argue that Luther embraced both of these definitions in his view of justification, depending on the context.<sup>33</sup> However, the "broader

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Online preview of "Martin Luther and Justification" by Olli-Pekka Vainio in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.336?rskey=GlZcjs&result=43>, accessed October 19, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> See Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Martin Luther and Justification": "Depending on the context, Luther may use both narrow and broad definitions of justification." "On the one hand, justification means imputation of Christ's alien righteousness to the believer without merits. On the other hand, faith involves effective change in the believer that enables one to believe in the first place. This change is not meritorious because it is effected by Christ indwelling in the believer through faith. Thus, Christ gives two things to the



sense” of justification precisely fits the Roman Catholic definition! The question that this paper must answer is whether the charge is true: did the great Protestant reformer still hold to Roman Catholic notions of justification?

### ***C. Luther’s Teaching and Development.***

Martin Luther argued in his *Lectures on Galatians* in 1531 that to be justified means, “that by faith only in Christ we are pronounced righteous.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, it would be incorrect to assert that Luther denied forensic justification: no one wants to make Luther a Roman Catholic on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation!

Yet, an argument can be made that Luther held to some renewal concepts in his doctrine of justification. This would stand in contrast to the definitive *Formula of Concord*, produced after Luther’s death, which states that the notions of renewal, sanctification, or good works are not to be any part of the teaching of justification.<sup>35</sup>

To demonstrate the thesis that Luther’s doctrine was not as clear as later Lutheranism, examining some of Luther’s early uses and definitions is needed. His doctrine of justification developed historically.

Luther argued in 1520 – three years after the 95 Theses – that to preach Christ means, “to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it.”<sup>36</sup> This definition of “preaching the gospel” includes more than forensic justification alone. He added that faith, “will fill believers with so great a righteousness that they will need nothing more to become righteous.”<sup>37</sup> The phrase “to become righteous” is an important theological term that specifically means what theologians call *renewal*. As Luther developed in his understanding of justification he was engaged in a battle with the Roman Catholic charge that when someone preached justification by faith alone that such teaching would produce licentiousness.

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sinner: *gratia*, that is, the forgiveness of sins, and *donum*, that is, Christ himself. The media through which Christ offers his mercy are the word and sacraments. Thus, Luther’s sacramental theology, Christology, and soteriology form a coherent whole. Because justification involves union with Christ, which means participation in Christ’s divine nature, Luther’s doctrine of justification has common elements with the idea of deification.”

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, “A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (Selections)” in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 116 as cited by Peter A. Lillback, “Calvin and Forensic Justification” in *Justified in Christ*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 72.

<sup>35</sup> “Sometimes ... the words *regeneratio* and *vivificatio* are used in place of justification, and then they mean the same thing, even though otherwise these terms refer to the renovation of man and distinguish it from justification by faith.” Epitome, III. 5 in “Confessions of the ELC,” in *The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 474, quoted in Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 58.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Selections*, 55 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 73.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” in *Selections*, 56 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 73.

Two years later (1522), in discussing justification, the German reformer said of the Christian, “thus made righteous, he would live in eternal bliss.”<sup>38</sup> He continued, in “[Christ’s] passion and death ... he makes us righteous, and gives us life and salvation.”<sup>39</sup> Luther was very clear when he concluded “that a man is given righteousness, life, and salvation by faith.”<sup>40</sup> Luther defined his terms carefully, using the renewal terms to be “made righteous,” that Christ “makes us righteous” and that man is “given righteousness” especially in contrast to “salvation.” These definitions specifically mix phrases that were prohibited to be united by the *Formula of Concord*.

Even the much later and carefully edited 1531 *Lectures on Galatians* articulated at times the renewal concept in his doctrine of justification: “Because you have laid hold upon Christ by faith, through whom you are made righteous, begin now to work well.”<sup>41</sup> The issue is not a purely legal or forensic righteousness, but being *made* righteous. The differences may at first appear subtle, but they are important.<sup>42</sup> In conclusion, to demonstrate the problem, in the vast corpus of Luther’s writings, the term *forensic*, relative to justification, never appears!<sup>43</sup> In contrast, we need to turn very briefly to later Lutheran expressions on justification.

#### ***D. Lutheranism’s Classic Doctrine of Justification.***

Justification as a forensic category alone is found in the Lutheran centerpiece *Formula of Concord* from 1577. Section III, called “The righteousness of Faith before God,” reads:

Neither renewal, sanctification, virtues, nor good works are at all a form, part, or cause of justification, that is, our righteousness before God. They are not to stand or be set up as a part or cause of our righteousness. They are not to be mixed into the article of justification under any pretext, title, or name whatever, as though they are necessary and belong to justification. The righteousness of faith stands alone in the forgiveness of sins out of pure grace, for the sake of Christ’s merit alone. These blessings are brought to us in the gospel promise and are received, accepted, applied, and appropriated through faith alone.

Notice the carefully articulated theology in this foundational Lutheran creed. The term *justification* was defined as “our righteousness before God”.

The *Formula* states that the notions of renewal, sanctification, or good works are not a form, nor a part, nor a cause of justification. Also, these terms are not to be mixed into the doctrine of

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<sup>38</sup> Luther, “Preface to the New Testament,” in *Selections*, 16 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Luther, “Preface to the New Testament,” in *Selections*, 17-18 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72-73.

<sup>41</sup> Luther, “Galatians” in *Selections* 111, as cited by Lillback, *Justified* 73. Antiquated English translation updated by the author.

<sup>42</sup> Since Luther had lectured on Galatians already in 1519 and 1523, this theologically mature treatise would not inadvertently insert a renewal element into an exclusively forensic notion of justification.

<sup>43</sup> Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72.

justification because they do not belong to the doctrine of justification. Rather, out of grace that is found in Christ, righteousness is by faith alone and is applied through faith alone. There is much about which to rejoice in this great presentation of the gospel! It is in accord with Reformed expressions of justification.

In conclusion, it is clear that there was a development in Luther's thinking and that it is difficult to prove that he taught exclusively the later proper theology of the *Formula of Concord*. Next, it must be analyzed how the doctrine of justification developed from Luther who died in 1546 to the Formula of Concord of 1577. The answer is found via Rome's counter push against the Protestants.

#### **IV. Roman Catholic Opposition: The Council of Trent.**

The Roman Catholic counter-position on justification was codified at Trent beginning in 1547, the year after Luther's death. It is not possible to understand the Protestant doctrine of forensic justification without analysis of the doctrines of Trent. As Luther fought against Catholic notions of justification, Trent made Roman Catholic doctrine clear.

With the valiant Luther removed from the scene, Catholic doctrine had to be combatted. John Calvin and others took up the task. Calvin had already published on the doctrine of justification before the doctrinal statements of Trent. The first edition of the *Institutes* did not have a separate chapter on justification, but the topic was treated at the close of the chapter on the law. Thus, justification did not carry thematic prominence. However, in the 1539 edition, which was seven times the size of the 1536 edition, there was a separate chapter called "Concerning Justification by Faith and the Merits of Works," situated between his chapters on repentance and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This chapter was a polemical confrontation with the Roman Catholic notion that justification had its basis in grace-assisted meritorious works performed by the baptized.<sup>44</sup> The third edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1543 and included a clear statement that justification included the imputation of Christ's righteousness.<sup>45</sup>

A few years after this third edition, Calvin replied at length to the Council of Trent as a whole and to its teaching on justification in particular in his *Antidote to the Council*. The theology of the Council of Trent is divided into Sessions and within the Sessions, there are various heads of doctrine. The sixth session of the council dealt with the doctrine of justification.

#### **A. Justification.**

##### 1. Original Sin.

Calvin argued that they began incorrectly in their second head of doctrine on original sin.<sup>46</sup> Original sin has left the human will only weakened, they wrongly argued, instead of totally

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<sup>44</sup> See Richard B. Gaffin, "Justification and Union with Christ" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, ed. Hall & Lillback (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 249-51 and Lillback, "Forensic Justification," 60.

<sup>45</sup> *Institutes* III. 11.2. See Lillback, "Forensic Justification," 61.

<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, "Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris in reference to matter of faith at present controverted with *The Antidote*" in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,

depraved. While there is a human will, Calvin countered, that will is not simply prone *towards* sin but is made subject *to* sin.<sup>47</sup>

## 2. Baptism.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> head of that sixth Session, Trent taught that baptism was necessary for salvation. Thus, unbaptized infants were excluded from God's kingdom. Calvin countered that infants have been adopted into God's kingdom, not through the rite of baptism, but because of God's promise.<sup>48</sup>

## 3. Prevenient Grace.

In the sixth head, Trent argued that justification comes when someone co-operates with God's preventing, or what we now term *prevenient*, grace.<sup>49</sup> Calvin countered that such teaching disagreed with both Paul and Augustine. The human will must be fully re-formed by God moving from that which is bad to the good. There can be no sharing in salvation between God and ourselves!<sup>50</sup>

## 4. Not Faith Alone.

The eighth head argued that justification was not by faith alone. Justification is not the forgiveness of sins, they argued, but includes renovation and sanctification.<sup>51</sup> Calvin, of course, thought that the Scriptures denied such a position. He taught that the definition of justification was to be set free from the liability of sin and to be regarded as righteous in God's sight because Christ expiated the believer's sins.<sup>52</sup> Any notion of righteousness must be from faith and not from works. Like law and gospel, faith and works cannot be confounded, the very mistake made by the theologians of Trent. For Calvin, while justification and sanctification are joined, nevertheless, they are not the same. When Christ justifies, he will also sanctify.

Calvin argued that the dispute between the Reformers and the Roman church revolved around the cause of justification. Trent asserted that the cause of justification was twofold: one part

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1958), 93. "That free-will was by no means extinguished in them, though weakened in its powers and under a bias."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 108-09.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 110. "In virtue of this promise they are admitted to baptism, because they are considered members of the church."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 94. "The commencement of this Justification in adults is to be derived from the preventing grace...; by his existing and assisting grace disposed to turn in order to their own justification by assenting freely to the same grace, and co-operating with it."

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 110-13. "That will in man is one thing, and the free choice of good and evil another; for freedom of choice having been taken away after the fall of the first man, will alone was left; but so completely captive under the tyranny of sin, that it is only inclined to evil" (113).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 95. "Justification, which is not the mere forgiveness of sin, but also Sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man."

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 114-115. Justification "without doubt means acquittal...the imputation of righteousness."

forgiveness and another part spiritual regeneration.<sup>53</sup> Calvin stood opposed to the Catholics and argued that justification was one and simple, wholly included in God's gratuitous acceptance. Instead of the Roman Catholic partial justification, Calvin countered with a whole righteousness of the believer who flees to Christ and is found in him.<sup>54</sup>

### 5. Role of Faith.

In the ninth head of doctrine, the Tridentine theologians made a twofold argument. First, faith was described by them as the beginning or foundation of justification that is thus gratuitous because no merit precedes it.<sup>55</sup> Calvin replied to this error with clear exegetical arguments. Faith is no mere beginning of justification, but it is its inception and complete accomplishment.<sup>56</sup> Concerning faith's gratuitous character relative to meritorious works preceding it, Calvin simply countered that the Bible teaches that *no* works are meritorious relative to justification. Faith must always be gratuitous.<sup>57</sup>

Second, the theologians at Trent also addressed the perceived vain confidence of the so-called Protestant heretics.<sup>58</sup> This supposedly vain confidence was holding with certainty that the believer's sins were forgiven and then finding rest in that certainty. However, Calvin boasted in that confidence and remarked that such certainty gave Protestants confidence boldly to address their Father in heaven. This deep assurance is sealed on the hearts of God's children by the Holy Spirit's power.<sup>59</sup>

### 6. Increasing Justification.

The eleventh head of Tridentine doctrine argued for a person's ability to increase his or her justification. Calvin acknowledged that a believer should daily increase in good works and that those good works may be acceptable to God and even be judged as righteous. Yet for Calvin, the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 116. Or Trent said it was "partly of imputation, partly of quality." Calvin further countered, "It is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists in *quality*, or in the habit which resides in us, and that we are righteous (justified) only by gratuitous acceptance" (117).

<sup>54</sup> Also, instead of viewing baptism as the instrumental cause of justification, Calvin countered that the gospel itself had first place. The Roman mistake is similar to someone, per Calvin (*Antidote*, 117), who "call[s] a mason's trowel the instrumental cause of a house!"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 97. "That we are, therefore, said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of salvation, the foundation and root of all justification."

<sup>56</sup> John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 122. "As far as a fixed and immovable station is from a transient passage, so far are they in this dogma of theirs from the meaning of Paul."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 122-24. "Who see no gratuitous righteousness of God, except in the very vestibule, and think that the merit of works pervades the edifice?"

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Antidote*, 97-98. Consider language from Canon X: "Boasting a confidence and certainty of the forgiveness of his sin."; "Neither is it to be asserted ... that acquittal and justification are obtained by this faith alone."; "seeing that no man can know with a certainty of faith ... that he has obtained the grace of God."

<sup>59</sup> Calvin, *Reforming the Church*, 125-27.

person's justification, as well as his works, are acceptable through Christ by faith. Calvin vehemently denied that God freely justifies and then leaves the believer to procure further righteousness through his own obedience to the law.<sup>60</sup>

#### 7. Sin, God's Commands, and the Christian Walk.

Trent's twelfth head of doctrine combined three different, though related, topics. First, the Roman Catholic Church argued that a justified man is able to keep God's commandments. Calvin took issue and argued correctly that fallen humanity is not able to keep God's law. Instead, believers must flee to Christ's grace.<sup>61</sup>

Next, Protestants and Catholics found completely different ways of understanding the Christian walk. They agreed that believers both suffer and do good works through their lives. However, the Roman theologians argued that suffering for Christ's sake merits eternal life. In other words, they articulated that suffering forms part of the believer's righteousness and thus, the suffering believer does not depend solely on God's grace. Furthermore, they denounce the Protestants for rightfully arguing that the righteous also sin when they perform good works. Calvin lamented that it was too plain that no believer is motivated by a perfect love for God when he obeys God's commands.<sup>62</sup>

#### 8. No Certainty.

The thirteenth head of Trent's Acts assailed the Protestant notion of having a certainty of salvation. In contrast, Calvin argued that this certainty does not flow from the knowledge of God's secret council. Rather, certainty is rooted in Christ's historic work that the believer knows (Calvin adds "feels assured") has been applied to him.<sup>63</sup> However, Calvin's development of the doctrine of forensic justification was not complete simply with the writing of his important *Antidote* to Trent. The next historical document that helped to develop Protestant thinking on justification is the German *Interim*.

### **V. The German *Interim***

#### ***A. Historical Background.***

The *Interim* was published in 1548 as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's response to the massive problems which flowed from the Protestant Reformation. The discord and disruption from the Reformation had now poured into other nations besides Germany. Charles V believed that something had to be done.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 129: "It is execrable blasphemy against God for any mortal to give way to such presumption as to award eternal life to the observance of his own traditions."

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 130-31. The Roman theologians then added that even holy men fall into daily sin. Calvin shot back that the lightest sin is inconsistent with the law's observance.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 132-34.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 135-36.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 190-92.

The *Interim* was not submitted as a hypothetical document subject to public debate in the manner of Luther's 95 Theses. The Holy Roman Emperor, who controlled all of Europe except France and England, required that all states under his Lordship must submit either to Roman Catholic teaching or to his *Interim*.<sup>65</sup> In fact, there would be no toleration for anyone to teach, write, or to preach against the *Interim*.<sup>66</sup>

Under the threat of enraging the Emperor, John Calvin entered the fray with a relatively short work with a long title: *The Adultero-German Interim to which is added the true method of giving peace to Christendom and of Reforming the Church*.

### **B. Calvin's Opposition.**

Calvin's response was literarily sophisticated and unquestionable in its denunciation of the *Interim*. The real-life situation in Europe was clear – theologically, it was truly a struggle between life and death. To oppose the *Interim* meant nothing short of persecution. Calvin chided supporters of the *Interim* because they were willing, in his opinion, to abandon Christ in the face of death.

The *Interim* offered what Calvin termed “a half Christ” that stained with falsehood every part of doctrine related to him.<sup>67</sup> The overall argument of the *Interim*, thought Calvin, was to keep the “fundamentals” safe and not to worry about other doctrine.<sup>68</sup> However, it was sacrilegious, according to Calvin, to tear away a part of Christ's gospel. Believers were forbidden to mingle human figments with God's pure truth. His response was a presentation of those vital points of doctrine which could never be yielded.<sup>69</sup>

### **C. Calvin's Positive Teaching.**

For Calvin, a proper presentation of the statement that believers are justified by faith includes a number of corresponding topics, including the nature of corrupted humanity and God's character and grace toward sinners.

#### 1. Human Corruption and God's Grace.

Turning to human nature, Calvin argued that the starting point was to acknowledge the great depth of human depravity, the reality that man's only hope was that God give cold and lifeless hearts the breath of life. Hand in hand with that reality, for Calvin, was the corresponding

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<sup>65</sup> States that were under Charles V rule included Burgundy and the Low Countries, Spain, Italy (Kingdoms of Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, Duchy of Milan) as well as the Holy Roman Empire. The Kingdom of France was wholly encircled by Charles V's lands.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Reforming the Church*, 192.

<sup>67</sup> John Calvin, “Letters of Pope Paul III to the Emperor Charles V” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 240-41.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 192. Charles V argued that the *Interim* was supposedly not at variance with true catholic religion and doctrine. However, it mandated two massive changes: that the people receive both bread and wine at Communion and that priests be free to marry.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 242-43.

notion of God's awesome righteousness. The salvific question was the application of that unparalleled righteousness to human beings. Calvin asserted that in justification the regenerated are able to come to God's tribunal because, by faith, they are convinced that they, through Christ, approach him as their Father. Through the free remission of sin, the regenerated know that they are regarded as righteous in his sight. That righteousness comes solely and entirely through Jesus Christ.<sup>70</sup>

## 2. True Righteousness & Truly Renewed.

Calvin's view of justification was carefully presented and nuanced. He said specifically that God is unlike an earthly judge who only acquits the person under trial. In addition, argued Calvin, God also bestows true righteousness.<sup>71</sup> Thus, for Calvin, the believer's righteousness in Christ is full and complete and in no way requires human addition. Furthermore, when so regenerated, when regarded as righteousness by Christ's great merit, the believer is truly renewed by the Holy Spirit to live a holy life and glory in free adoption in God.<sup>72</sup>

## 3. Paul & James.

Calvin then answered the objection that arises from comparing Paul's teaching on justification with that of James. Paul, at Romans 10, taught that righteousness was externally granted to the redeemed and not a quality infused into them. Such external righteousness provided for the certainty of faith. Christ's righteousness is given exclusively by grace. The apostle James, Calvin argued, used the word *justify* to speak of the approval of righteousness. James' *justify* was to furnish credible evidence of an internal disposition. James' reference is not toward God (that human actions can merit divine salvation) but toward men in that actions can demonstrate man's regeneration.<sup>73</sup> In fact, while God does reward good works, the ground for that reward is divine gratuitous acceptance and not the merit or worth of the work itself.<sup>74</sup>

Calvin then summarized his teaching: Christ expiated his people's sins, appeased the Father's wrath, and then adopted his children. By faith, God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's obedience to them. Calvin then moved to a discussion of the nature of faith. True faith will include love and is never exclusively knowledge.

## 4. Faith & Justification.

Calvin argued that the doctrine of justification requires a proper definition of faith. Faith justifies because it makes believers put on Christ and by the Holy Spirit's power unites those believers to Christ. Faith is a certainty of conscience which embraces Christ; it is an evidence of

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 244-45.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 245. Calvin already answered the antinomian question that perplexed the Westminster divines. For more information see W. G. Gamble, *Antinomianism and the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, forthcoming). Consider as well as the contemporary objection of N. T. Wright who argues that in justification God only acquits and does not confer righteousness.

<sup>72</sup> Calvin, *Letters*, 246.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 247-48. Calvin was very clear that God does not reward good works as a debt. Righteousness must be measured by perfect obedience to the law- which no man can do.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 248-49.



adoption.<sup>75</sup> Calvin concluded that faith is an undoubting persuasion of the truth of God's word that focuses on the divine free promises in Christ and produces a confident hope of salvation.<sup>76</sup> This faith does not reside in the mind but produces heartfelt affections which spring from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>77</sup> Such faith is not possessed by all men but by those who are ordained to eternal life.<sup>78</sup> Calvin concluded that all of these parts of faith must be included in a true doctrine of justification.<sup>79</sup>

#### ***D. Calvin's Polemics Against Rome.***

##### 1. Nature of Justification.

A counter-argument by Roman Catholic theologians revolves around the true nature of justification. Calvin repeatedly instructed that justification is based upon the expiation of the believer's sins in Christ. A second counter-argument was specifically the notion that the apostles were invested with the power of binding and loosing. Calvin turned to exegesis and church history to argue that when the apostles exercised the power of binding and loosing that it was through preaching the gospel and not through hearing someone's confession. History demonstrates that there was no priestly confession for the church's first thousand years.<sup>80</sup>

##### 2. Confession of Sin.<sup>81</sup>

The *Interim* also proposed a lessening of the need to confess sins to a priest.<sup>82</sup> But, Calvin argued, if forgiveness were truly dependent upon a priest, then how could someone deduct confessing any sin without fear of falling under divine condemnation?

At the end of his analysis of the Roman notion of priestly confession, Calvin turned to a theme hinted at earlier and repeated later – that if the church mandates something beyond Scripture as

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 249-50. This vital faith obliterates a supposed distinction between “informal” and “formed” faith. This faith “could by no means apply to mere knowledge” (252).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 251. Calvin cited various passages from Paul and concluded that “these words plainly denote a mutual relation between faith and the free promises of God.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 252: “he does not place faith in the brain.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 250-52, 253, Calvin identifies this as “effectual calling.” [251: we must study brevity]

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>80</sup> John Calvin, “Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 256-57.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 255. After his positive presentation on faith, Calvin went on the offensive against the Roman Catholic notion of the need to confess sins to a priest to obtain forgiveness. Calvin truly went on the offensive! “It is an atrocious insult to God to arrogate so much to man as to make the Remission of Sins depend on their pleasure.” “When men rise up and lay their veto upon Christ to restrain his grace, is it not more than sacrilegious audacity?” “Here a mortal man interposes, and dares to preclude access.” They “rob him [Christ] of part of the honor and transfer it elsewhere.”

<sup>82</sup> Instead of confessing every possible sin it was supposedly only those that came to mind after examination.

being necessary for salvation, then, “consciences shall be brought into bondage, the grace of Christ prostituted, and faith oppressed.”<sup>83</sup>

### 3. Satisfaction for Sin.

Calvin next turned to the Roman Catholic practice of making satisfaction for sin. The Roman position was that eternal punishment is forgiven in Christ but that temporal divine punishment (not civil) was exclusively eliminated by the sinner’s own satisfaction. Calvin was offended by a notion that men could somehow appease God’s wrath through offering some type of compensation or satisfaction. Rather, a believer ought to practice true humility and repentance to avenge his own sin, not wanting to experience God as an avenger. If satisfaction would have a use in the church it would be as an example and not as an aid to spiritual justice. Calvin concluded his analysis of this theme with a warning not to be lulled by a siren song that this was only a small matter of doctrine which could be admitted into the church with no great danger. Even the least deviation from the gospel was a downward path to death.<sup>84</sup>

### 4. Justification & Worship.

Calvin’s next topic was worship. He refused to separate the doctrine of justification from proper worship because worship consists of true religion. One cannot separate the mode of how one is saved from the mode in which God is worshipped. Thus, true worship, according to Calvin, consists of two equally necessary parts: inward worship of the heart and worship acts that conform to the divine command.<sup>85</sup>

Supporters of the *Interim* argued that the Protestants were too strict in their form of worship and that their rigidity destroyed freedom. Bracketing actions done in worship relative to decency and order, Calvin focused on works, which his opponents argued were supposedly pleasing to God in themselves and by which he was duly worshipped. But adding anything human to divine worship, which is spiritual righteousness, argued Calvin, overthrows proper religion.<sup>86</sup>

Having examined a number of Luther and Calvin’s writings, it is safe to conclude that there was a maturation and development in both of their teachings on forensic justification. Such development is a normal part of theological growth. Together we can thank God that in both the Lutheran and Reformed creedal statements, this celebrated Biblical teaching is both prominent and emphasized.

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-59. Rather, such teaching leads to ungratefulness to Christ and is treacherous to salvation.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 261. Concerning divine command, Calvin argued that God desires obedience to him in worship. “All modes of worship devised contrary to his command, he not only repudiates as void, but distinctly condemns.” Any work undertaken without divine command perverts godly living. This drew him into a short excursus on supposed works of supererogation. First, for Calvin there were no such possible works because God’s law commanded all to love him with all their heart. But no man has fully accomplished this command. Also, biblical examples of Christ commanding the rich young ruler to sell all does not warrant as an act of supererogation. Neither does someone who practices celibacy.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 263. “I deny, therefore, that any worship of God is legitimate, save that which is required according to his will.”

# Here I Stand: Human Conscience and Ecclesiastical Authority

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## Introduction

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience ... May God help me, Amen.<sup>1</sup>

On April 18, 1521, Martin Luther appeared before Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and protector of the Holy Catholic Church, at the Diet of Worms, and uttered these words of defiance against Rome's charges of heresy. Originally summoned to Rome for trial, Luther's protector, Duke Frederick of Saxony, had prevailed upon the Emperor to intervene and conduct the proceeding in the German city of Worms.<sup>2</sup> But in appearing before Charles V, it was ultimately to the Pope, Leo X, that the Wittenberg monk answered; for the central issue did not concern authority over man, but over man's faith. And by refusing to submit to the church as the ultimate authority, Luther dramatically illustrated the operative principle of the Reformation that a believer's conscience is bound to Scripture alone: a principle that effectively turned the emerging medieval society of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century upside-down.<sup>3</sup>

Although the reformer's stand at Worms has at times been styled a precursor to modern concepts of religious liberty of conscience and toleration of religion, such views were entirely foreign to Luther. By declaring independence from Rome's spiritual bondage, Luther was not rejecting the Holy Catholic Church's authority to declare – and enforce – what the Scriptures taught. What Luther did seek was a fundamental reconfiguration of the church's hierarchy – where pope, bishop, and priest maintained their offices but answered equally to the rule of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer II*, vol. 32 of *Luther's Works*, ed. George W. Forell, trans. Charles M. Jacobs (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 112. In this volume, the words "Here I stand" do appear in the accounting of the trial. However, these words do not appear in the multiple transcripts from the trial. They do appear, however, in the Wittenberg pamphlet about the proceedings – possibly an editorial flourish to provide a more conclusive ending. The phrase has been popularized for over two generations in Roland Bainton's work, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 2016). Bainton suggests that the words overwhelmed those recording the event. Regardless, it was quickly assimilated into the popular understanding as symbolic both of Luther's work and the Reformation's trajectory. For more on this, see James Atkinson, *The Trial of Luther, Historic Trial Series*, ed. J.P. Kenyon, (London: Batsford LTD, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 165-170.

<sup>3</sup> James Atkinson, *The Trial of Luther*, 9-10.

Scripture in exercising spiritual authority and oversight. In this sense, Luther ushered the late medieval Christian into a radically new relationship with church rule, one established not by fiat, but by a liberated conscience that brought a willing obedience to the church through service. Commenting on this new relationship, historian Heiko Oberman remarks that at Worms, “Luther liberated the Christian conscience, liberated it from papal decree and canon law, but he also took it captive by the word of God and imposed on it the responsibility to render service to the world.”<sup>4</sup> Luther, with his penchant for paradox, described the mutual obligation of this liberty and service in this way:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.  
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.<sup>5</sup>

Such a paradox, however, is readily explained by fallen man’s deliverance from sin through faith in Christ. The sinner is liberated from the dominion of Satan and self and bound to Christ. Therefore, the Christian must “empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant ... as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.” This service the believer renders freely, out of conscience, “having regard for nothing but divine approval.”<sup>6</sup> For Luther, true peace of conscience meant that the believer experienced in his heart the approval of God for true obedience to Christ and his Word.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Crisis of Conscience: “‘peace, peace’ but there is no peace.”**

By the time of Luther’s birth near the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the meaning of conscience had long been altered. The church claimed to be the only interpreter of Scripture, a claim that gave the church final authority over conscience. Further, the very acts by which conscience judged a Christian’s obedience to God had been dramatically altered, with works expressing faith being replaced by works demanding righteousness. These changes left the common saint with a conscience which, although unable to speak peace, could clamor loudly of guilt and judgment. Luther himself suffered the terrors of such a conscience, and despite his best efforts to seek reconciliation with God through all the means the church offered, his conscience spoke only

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<sup>4</sup> Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 204.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31 of *Luther’s Works*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 344.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>7</sup> While Luther never examined the subject systematically, he wrote frequently about conscience, seeing it as a faculty of the soul, which when bereft of Scripture as the final measure of service and of faith as the true motive to good works was left wholly unable to speak a true and sustaining peace. Luther derived his understanding of conscience from centuries of medieval scholastic thought, notably by Aquinas, then later by Ockham and Gabriel Biel. Even in his declaration at Worms, that “to go against conscience was neither safe nor right,” he evidenced standard medieval piety where it was advisable never to go against conscience. For more on this matter, see Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 88 and Michael Baylor, *Action and Person: Conscience in Late Scholasticism and the Young Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 119-156.

condemnation.<sup>8</sup> Only after experiencing the true meaning of Christ's sufficient work did the troubled monk understand the source of true peace of conscience. This experience, combined with his relentless questioning as a university professor and pastor at Wittenberg, made Luther uniquely qualified to challenge the church, calling on it to make known the grace and peace of Christ to troubled consciences.<sup>9</sup> But what coalesced Luther's theological and pastoral concerns into a moment of action was not a theological thunderbolt. Instead, it came through a relatively mundane church practice: the sale of indulgences.

### ***Indulgences disturbing the peace***

Indulgences had become central in early 16th-century piety. Indulgences promised simple Christians access to the overabundant merit left by great saints through the ages, a treasury deposited for the church to dispense. Through indulgences, the common saint hoped to lessen the seemingly insurmountable debt of suffering owed in purgatory for venial sins, a debt which remained even after the sacrament of penance. As an act of devotion, the practice had come to provide the church with a source of revenue which, despite administrative abuses, often supported useful services such as charities. Luther, however, found the promise of forgiveness offered in indulgences as theologically and pastorally bankrupt. Indeed, indulgences represented a church unable to offer the penitent sinner peace of conscience.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Luther saw indulgences as not only theologically flawed but also pastorally misguided since a believer's suffering served to strengthen peace of conscience, for "a Christian who is truly contrite seeks and loves to pay penalties for his sin."<sup>11</sup>

Although by 1517 Luther had not yet reached the point of condemning all indulgences, such as those which supported charities, he found the tone of the plenary papal indulgence of 1515 particularly dissonant, especially as it was being touted by John Tetzel with great success to his own Wittenberg parishioners.<sup>12</sup> Issued to help build the church of St. Peter's in Rome, the papal indulgence distilled much of what was wrong with the church theologically, pastorally, and ecclesiastically. For Luther, the practice epitomized the church's control over conscience as it offered assurance of God's forgiveness apart from immediate faith in Christ. For the more

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<sup>8</sup> David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 7-11.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Wengert, *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 1-29.

<sup>10</sup> Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 25. This quotation comes from Thesis 40 of the 95 Theses. Similarly, Luther addresses those who seek to avoid suffering as those who prefer, "works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil". See: Gerald O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 120.

extreme indulgence sellers, even repentance or confession was not required for forgiveness to be granted to one buying the indulgence.<sup>13</sup>

Central to the “power and efficacy of indulgences”<sup>14</sup> was the church’s claim to establish the terms by which punishment was pardoned. The pope, as the direct apostolic successor of Peter, held the apostolic keys of the Kingdom to “bind” and “loose.” These keys applied to not only the binding and loosing of men’s souls but also to unlocking the articles of faith and declaring what works were worthy of merit.<sup>15</sup> The church had largely come to endorse a theology of works righteousness where good works stood as the means of righteousness rather than the evidence of faith. This school of teaching adopted a style of neo-Pelagianism, in which man’s best efforts were graciously accepted by God as meritorious. Man, on his part, was disposed to offer “the best that was within him,” having both free will and a nature inclined to good.<sup>16</sup> Yet, although able to do good and receive merit, man still sinned and required some token of God’s approval to quiet conscience. This pastoral provision came in the form of the sacrament of penance where the sinner, by offering contrition, confession, and penance, received from the priest forgiveness in the form of absolution. Yet such peace was momentary and soon the cycle of penance with its demand for good works was repeated. Of the futility of these efforts by the church to offer the saint hope or peace, Luther exclaimed, “Oh unhappy Christians, who for their salvation can trust neither in their good works or in their good conscience.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Restoring Conscience within the Church: The Reformation of Grace, Christian Living, and the Church**

Living the life of freedom in Christ means becoming one in Christ through the church. Paul, Luther explains, “describes the church as one body, one bread ... altogether in Christ, members one of another.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the obedience that comes through freedom in Christ is powerfully expressed through submission to his church and the community of saints it represents. But such submission involves the urging and approval of conscience. It is the approval of God in obedience to Christ alone that compels the believer to serve the body of Christ. But in order for Christians in Luther’s day to again sense the direct approval of conscience in serving the church, a redefinition of grace and good works – and how they operate within a different model of church authority – was necessary.

#### ***The Reformation of Grace***

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<sup>13</sup> E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 306-311.

<sup>14</sup> Luther’s 95 Theses were formally titled as the “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.”

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40 of *Luther’s Works*, eds. and trans. Earl Beyer and Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 324.

<sup>16</sup> Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 72-73.

<sup>17</sup> Luther, *Works*, 31:180.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:190.

In restoring a biblical understanding of conscience, Luther, first of all, sought to promote a biblical doctrine of grace. This effort began in earnest in 1517 when Luther quietly set in motion the work of reform by opposing the practice of indulgences and the theology which supported it. The first volley came in the early fall when the professor of theology offered 97 theses for disputation, targeting the church's popular neo-Pelagian teachings, and stressing "we do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds, but, having become righteous, we do righteous deeds."<sup>19</sup> Over thirty times, Luther affirmed the Augustinian doctrines of grace "in opposition to" a litany of presumed authorities including "common opinion," "Cardinals," "dialecticians" and "scholastics."<sup>20</sup> Luther was quite familiar with this form of scholastic theology. This familiarity undoubtedly contributed to the assured tone with which he focused on the core issue of man's inability to do any good work apart from the grace of God. He declared, "Grace as a mediator is necessary to reconcile the law with the will."<sup>21</sup>

Shortly after the 97 theses, Luther followed with the 95 Theses where he addressed the pastoral implications of the scholastics' erroneous theology. Here Luther sought to protect Christians from the false assurances of the church illustrated by indulgences. Instead, Luther affirmed true repentance and looking to Christ alone. Only in service to Christ can the believer be made "confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace [Acts 14:22]."<sup>22</sup> Such restoration of the doctrine of grace was the first step toward restoring the biblical view of conscience away from the snares of indulgences.

### ***The Reformation of the Christian Life***

Luther's doctrine of the Christian life also drew people toward a more biblical view of conscience. In the three years following the 95 Theses, Luther issued a flood of publications that consolidated and advanced the work started in 1517. He focused on basic themes of Christian living, such as good works, confession, penance, prayer, proper obedience, and Christian freedom. His commentaries on the Psalms and Galatians further presented eminently practical expositions of the Christian life.<sup>23</sup> To keep up with the reformer's quill, three printers were needed to feed the eager market, which often required multiple editions of each title.<sup>24</sup> Many of

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 269. This quotation comes from Thesis 40 of the *Disputation against Scholastic Authority*.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Works*, 31:266-273.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 31:272; Luther was trained in the *via moderna* theology of Ockham and Biel at Erfurt. See William Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 114.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 166.

<sup>23</sup> Examples in 1519 include *Lectures on Galatians*, *The Sacrament of Penance*, *A Sermon on Preparing to Die* and *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*. For 1520, examples include *Fourteen Consolations*, *Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made*, *Treatise on Good Works*, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. Margaret Currie (Toronto: MacMillan, 1908), 66.

these works were written in German, rather than the Latin expected of an academic. Luther preferred to address the troubled believer rather than the recalcitrant cleric.

Rome's efforts to silence the writings of the "drunken German" helped advance Luther's teaching on the Christian life while highlighting his opposition to papal authority. The Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 failed to silence Luther, but instead won him supporters, including the future reformer of Strasbourg, Martin Bucer.<sup>25</sup> Further attempts to intimidate and refute Luther in Augsburg (1518) and Leipzig (1519) only pushed Luther to openly deny papal authority and eventually declare the pope as antichrist. Finally, in June 1520, Rome issued a papal bull demanding, upon threat of excommunication, that Luther retract his attack on "the holy pontiff" and on the Holy Catholic Church's "true interpretation of Sacred Scripture." Thirty-four of the forty-one charges of heresy detailed in the papal bull targeted the reformer's views on the authority of the church in the life of the saint. They addressed Luther's teachings against the sacraments, contrition, confession, absolution, indulgences and good works, as well as the doctrine of purgatory and the authority of the pope to pardon. Quite simply, the church saw that Luther's reformation of conscience in the Christian life was indeed a direct affront to papal authority.

The direct confrontation with the papacy drove Luther to press more assertively for a reformation of the view of the Christian life. Writing for simple believers for whom the Christian walk had become something to be inventoried, weighed and measured, Luther recast good works as limitless opportunities for expressing faith through self-denial and true submission to Christ and his church. In 1520, he published *A Treatise on Good Works*, which was an immediate best seller.<sup>26</sup> Essentially a pastoral theology, the treatise unfolded the true nature of service in the Christian life by expositing the Ten Commandments as a means to not only show sin but also to sound out the depths of a life of faith – both to God and neighbor.

To help the faithful in negotiating this change in the Christian life, Luther published a brief pamphlet just before leaving for the 1521 Diet of Worms. In the pamphlet, he offered instruction to believers as they moved from a life rooted in blind obedience to ecclesiastical rule to one rooted in obedience to Christ by faith.<sup>27</sup> This change involved not only an understanding of faith and works but of conscience as well. Luther described this mix of faith and conscience as occurring in three levels, which he compares to the familiar layout of a church building. The first level is the "churchyard" Christian, who beholds the church from the outside and remains tied to the external actions of the church for gaining peace. Such saints Luther described as only five cubits high, for their conscience is weak and guided primarily by their senses. Second, the "nave" Christians are those saints who have entered the church's interior aisle. These saints are near God and possess sufficient faith to perform daily acts of service to please Him, but their consciences remain prone to doubt and fear. Third, Luther spoke of the "sanctuary" Christian,

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<sup>25</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 63.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, ed. Timothy Wengert, *The Annotated Luther Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 261.

<sup>27</sup> The pamphlet was entitled *A sermon on the three kinds of good life for the instruction of consciences*. See Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, vol. 44 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 232-242.



whose strong faith stands wholly outside self and is placed firmly in Christ. These believers appear before God with a conscience that finds peace even in the midst of great suffering.<sup>28</sup>

### ***The Reformation of the Church***

Ecclesiastical authority was Luther third focal point for reframing human conscience. In the *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther's exposition of the fourth commandment provided him a valuable opportunity to introduce the boundaries of ecclesiastical authority.<sup>29</sup> The injunction to honor father and mother required that the church, as "spiritual mother," is to be honored and obeyed, and that "we must conform" to what its leaders "command, forbid, appoint, ordain, bind, and loose." In short, "we must honor, fear, and love the spiritual authorities as we do our natural parents, and yield to them in all things that are not contrary to the first three commandments."<sup>30</sup> Thus, obedience to the church assumes the level of moral obligation, except when it conflicts with another commandment of God. In that event, no one, "neither bishop, pope, nor angel – has the right to command or dictate anything that contradicts, hinders, or fails to promote those three commandments with their works ... We commit sin if we obey or follow such things or just stand by and allow it."<sup>31</sup>

Fundamental to restoring this proper understanding of authority in the church was denying Rome's claim to the keys of the kingdom as described in Matthew 18. Luther offered an interpretation of the church where the keys of the kingdom no longer resided with the privileged center of spiritual authority. On the contrary, the keys bound the church's rulers, as they did all believers, to a life of obedience. For, as Luther wrote, "The keys or the authority of St. Peter is not an authority at all but a service; and the keys have not been given to St. Peter but to you and me."<sup>32</sup> Thus, it belonged to all believers to understand the Scriptures and admonish their brother when necessary as part of the "priesthood of believers." Since all members of the church were spiritually equal, rulers claimed oversight only by common consent. No longer viewed as the spiritual elite, church leaders served by having an obligation to those under them. Luther asked, "What, then, are the priests and bishops?" To this question, he answered, "Their government is not a matter of authority or power, but a service and an office, for they are neither higher nor better than other Christians." He continued, "Their ruling is rather nothing more than the inculcating of God's word, by which they guide Christians and overcome heresy."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> commandment of the Protestant Church is the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment in the medieval Holy Catholic Church.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, 337-338.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I*, vol. 35 of *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 16. Here Luther sees the power of the keys for believers as described in the Matthew 18 call to correct a brother.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed, 1523" in *The Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Walther I. Brandt, trans. J. J. Schindel (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 117.

The principal means by which the church inculcated the Word was preaching. Luther more often described the church as a community of believers than as an institution, and what united the saints in the church was the leading of the Holy Spirit “through the preaching of the Gospel.”<sup>34</sup> The Holy Spirit builds up the communion of the saints through the church. Luther drew this definition from the Apostle’s Creed, writing, “It is this that we confess in the Creed: ‘I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy, catholic church.’ What else is it to believe in the holy church but to believe in the communion of saints?”<sup>35</sup> By preaching, therefore, the Holy Spirit guided believers, as a community of saints, to see Christ and his perfect example of service and their need to follow that image in selfless service to God and the body. To this call to service, for Luther, is the conscience truly bound.

### **The True Liberty of Conscience**

Although Luther proclaimed freedom of conscience at Worms, his view differed vastly from modern cultural and ecclesiastical conceptions of freedom, liberty, and toleration. Rather than promoting a liberty of conscience that constituted a natural freedom to choose and believe, Luther advocated a bondage of the conscience to willing obedience to Christ. This bondage obliges the believer by faith to follow the Savior’s example, seeking only the approval of God in a life of service to God and others. Thus, freedom in Christ is the ability to serve Christ, with good works displaying the fruit of faith in the life of the believer who serves the society of the church and the world at large.

Further, Luther was not displaying any tendency toward toleration of religion. Instead, for Luther, the conscience is bound to accept the Word of God as it unfolds a plan of faith and life meant for all mankind. Christians, as the priesthood of believers, are individually called to examine and understand Scripture as it contains this plan. Nevertheless, it is the church’s exposition and application of the Word through preaching that advances this design and unites the church in a single understanding of faith and life. Luther observed, “The church should be united in a single expression of faith. Accordingly, regardless of whether a thousand miles separates them physically, they are still called one assembly in spirit, as long as each one preaches, believes, hopes, loves, and lives like the other.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, from Luther’s stand at Worms, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century believer is reminded that true liberty of conscience is not found individually, but corporately within the church as it proclaims the example of Christ and instructs the body in service and unity. Luther reminds the church that Christ demands that believer’s lives must give tangible evidence of love toward neighbor. Luther asserts that it is Christ who says:

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<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, *Devotional Writings I*, vol. 42 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Martin O. Dietrich, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 162.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons I*, vol. 51 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. John W. Dobersterin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 167.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Papacy in Rome, Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig, 1520” in *Church and Ministry I*, vol. 39 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. and trans. Eric W. Gritsch and Ruth C. Gritsch, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 65. Moreover, Luther saw the church as a parent administering spiritual correctives when necessary to protect believers from error and disunity.

It would please Me, and I would be satisfied, if you, as members of one body under one Head, show one another fidelity and benevolence, friendship, service, and assistance; if you do not stir up factions and schisms among one another and thus destroy love ... And although the works of love do not justify and save, they should follow as fruits and signs of faith.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, vol. 24 of *Luther's Works*, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 251-252.

# The Word Did It All: The Bible and the Priesthood of All Believers

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This paper will explore the doctrinal foundations, articulations, and implications of Martin Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The foundation of the whole of Luther's view on universal priesthood will first be found in his view of Scripture.

## Luther's View of the Scriptures' Power in the Reformation Movement

Martin Luther's explanation of what happened in the Reformation is as insightful as it is characteristic of the Reformer. Stated in his typically blunt and earthy style, Luther said:

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 [cf. Mark 4:26-29], 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.<sup>1</sup>

An early proponent of the Reformation doctrine *sola scriptura*, Luther believed, lived, and taught that the Word of God, not human logic or effort, should be relied upon to bring the necessary changes to the church.

For example, in discussing the idolatrous practice of the mass, Luther urged a reliance upon the Scriptures to persuade people of the need to reform:

It should be preached and taught with tongue and pen that to hold mass in such a manner is sinful, and yet no one should be dragged away from it by the hair; for it should be left to God, and his Word should be allowed to work alone, without our work or interference.<sup>2</sup>

In an age when so much reform was attempted by papal decrees or magisterial order, why did Luther think God's Word alone should be used to change minds? Luther answered this exact question, declaring:

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons I*, vol. 51 of *Luther's Works*, eds. John W. Doberstein and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 77-78.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. by W. R. Russell and T. F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 292-294.

Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion the hearts of men as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure [Ecclus. 33:13]. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I force anyone to have faith. That is God's work alone, which causes faith to live in the heart.<sup>3</sup>

What was Luther's expectation that God alone could produce faith? He declared,

Therefore we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the *jus verbi* [right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

Luther believed that preaching and hearing God's Word was the highest form of worship. He viewed the pulpit as the throne for the Word of God, for Scripture teaches that the Lord's voice is the ultimate one heard as preachers expound the Scriptures.

Luther conducted his ministry in accord with this conviction. In Wittenberg, Luther would preach some two hundred messages a year in his prime, often two or three times during the week in addition to messages on the Lord's Day. He knew that this would result in God himself having sway over his people rather than earthly rulers or ungodly church leaders. A. Skevington Wood said of Luther's preaching,

The salient feature of Luther's preaching was its biblical content and reference. It was subject to Scripture throughout. Luther submitted to a rigorous discipline. He was bound by the Word. His preaching was never merely topical. He could never turn a text into a pretext. 'I take pains to treat a verse, to stick to it,' he explained, 'and so to instruct the people that they can say, "That is what the sermon was about."<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Luther worked tirelessly to translate the Bible into the Germanic language so the Scriptures would be accessible to his own people. Tucked away in the Wartburg Castle, he translated the New Testament into German in just eleven weeks in 1522. Through the next years, Luther led a group of other scholars, whom he affectionately called his "Sanhedrin," to complete the Old Testament translation in 1534. He wanted the common people to be able to read the Bible for themselves and understand it. Luther said, "I try to speak as men do in the market place. In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, by focusing on traditions and sacerdotalism, the priests had starved the medieval church from the Word of God. As Luther and others began reconnecting the people of God to his Word, the laity began to discover their place in the kingdom of God as key texts unveiled to the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> A. Skevington Wood, *Captive to the Word: Martin Luther, Doctor of Sacred Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950), 327.

people their rightful positions in the church. Ultimately, what members of the church discovered was Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and its implication for life in the church. Yet before directly addressing Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of believers, two key theological commitments of Luther derived from his own study of God's Word need to be addressed. In these commitments is found the undergirding and shaping of Luther's approach to the universal priesthood.

### **The Danger of Being a Theologian of Glory Rather than a Theologian of the Cross**

Luther's 95 Theses called for a debate regarding the practice of indulgences and in so doing, generated a discussion about the nature of theology itself. About six months after Luther posted his Theses, in April of 1518, his Augustinian order, headed by Johannes von Staupitz, called Luther to give an accounting of his teachings. In what became known as his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther laid out with precision a series of twenty-eight statements, or theses, which he referred to as "theological paradoxes" to contrast the growing Protestant understanding of the gospel with the reigning Catholic theology of the day. The importance of this presentation is seen in that a number of the early reformers, such as Martin Bucer, were in attendance and were greatly influenced by Luther's teaching.

In Gerald Forde's analysis of the *Disputation*, he shows the four stages through which Luther's thoughts progressed. Theses 1-12 speak of man's works in light of man's sin. The next six theses show that sin impacts the very will of man. Theses 19-24 explain the differences between the theology of the cross and that of glory. The last four theses help reveal the love of God in Christ. Luther created with these twenty-eight theses an arc that moved from the law of God to the love of God, and central to his theology in the *Heidelberg Disputation* is the cross.

Luther taught that a proper look at the cross exposes a sinner's ongoing hypocrisy so that he constantly sees his need for the blood of Christ to cleanse him. He sought to move the motivation for good works and obedience from belief in law-keeping to being motivated by the love that God has shown in Christ. As Luther states in the twenty-first article of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the theologian of glory manifests himself this way. "This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil."<sup>7</sup> Luther was seeing from his study of Scripture that

the Lord humbles and frightens us by means of the law and the sight of our sins so that we seem in the eyes of men, as in our own, as nothing, foolish, and wicked, for we are in truth that. Insofar as we acknowledge and confess this, there is 'no form or beauty' in us, but our life is hidden in God (i.e. in the bare confidence in his mercy), finding in ourselves nothing but sin, foolishness, death, and hell.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

<sup>8</sup> The *Heidelberg Disputation* (HD) is quoted from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 31: Career of the Reformer*, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 39-58. HD Article 4.

Thus, Luther stressed that “man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Luther went on to say,

Because men do not know the cross and hate it, they necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on. Therefore they become increasingly blinded and hardened by such love, for desire cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of those things which it desires.<sup>10</sup>

When pastors and leaders do not necessarily deny the cross but rather de-emphasize it in their eagerness to point to other doctrines that they view as more acceptable, glorious, neglected, or visionary, they slide toward being theologians of glory. As Carl Trueman states, theologians of glory “build their theology in the light of what they expect God to be like” while theologians of the cross “build their theology in the light of God's own revelation of himself in Christ hanging on the cross.”<sup>11</sup> Recognizing this distinction is not an easy task. “Indeed, one of the difficulties in the attempt to set the theology of the cross apart from the theology of glory is that the differences between the two are often very subtle.”<sup>12</sup>

Though the differences between a theologian of glory and theologian of the cross may be difficult to discern, they are profound. Luther, in examining the priesthood in the light of Scripture, saw the former, and he called the church toward the latter. In so doing, this development in his early theological framework – perhaps a year or so before he was truly converted – was one of the strong factors moving him toward his understanding of the priesthood of all believers.

Now, consider the second key theological commitment of Luther that underpinned his view of the laity.

### **The Development of Ecclesiology from Pneumatology with Its Reliance on the Centrality of God's Word**

In his treatise “On the Councils and the Church,” Martin Luther suggests that ecclesiology (the study of the church) cannot be properly understood apart from pneumatology (the study of the Holy Spirit). Speaking of the believer's possession of holiness provided by the Spirit, Luther states:

Christian holiness, or the holiness common to Christendom, is found where the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ and thus sanctifies them, Acts 15 [:9], that is, he renews heart, soul, body, work, conduct, inscribing the commands of God not on tables of stone, but in heart of flesh, II Corinthians 3 [:3].<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> HD Article 18.

<sup>10</sup> HD Article 22.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Trueman, “Luther's Theology of the Cross,” *New Horizons* (October 2005): 6.

<sup>12</sup> Forde, *Theologian of the Cross*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *Church and Ministry III*, vol. 41 of *Luther's Works*, trans. Eric W. Gritsch, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 145.

In Luther's thinking, as the Spirit grants faith in the gospel of Christ to the people of the church, holiness then issues forth from their lives. A relationship is seen, therefore, between the preaching of the gospel with the faith in it given by the Holy Spirit and the holy practices which the Spirit of God produces in the church. Thus, in the words of Reinhard Hütter, "Luther unequivocally associates pneumatology and ecclesiology by way of the concept of 'works' of the Holy Spirit as tied to distinct church practices."<sup>14</sup>

This pneumatological-ecclesiological connection led Luther to identify what he believed were the seven principal church practices or parts of the church produced by the Spirit. He identified them as "the pure administration of the Word, of baptism, of the Lord's Supper, and of the keys of the kingdom, the lawful choice of ministers, public prayer and education, and the cross."<sup>15</sup> As Luther's theology developed, however, he especially saw two of these parts as essential, for as Bavinck points out, "elsewhere he only mentioned two: the pure administration of the Word and sacraments."<sup>16</sup> For instance, *The Augsburg Confession* of the German church, published in 1530 by Philip Melancthon under Martin Luther, displays these two marks when it states, "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered according to the gospel."<sup>17</sup> Luther referred to these principal parts or marks as "holy possessions."<sup>18</sup>

Three important observations can be made regarding these holy possessions that will give further insight into Luther's development of the priesthood of all believers. First, the Holy Spirit, through his ministry in the lives of believers, marks those who are truly God's people with these holy possessions. In other words, to determine where Christ's church is truly present on the earth one should look for the Spirit's presence. God's Spirit is present where God's Word is proclaimed faithfully, the sacraments are administered, and discipleship is practiced. Hütter shows the importance of this in Luther's theology when he says,

Luther is arguing implicitly pneumatologically; insofar as the Spirit makes these 'holy possessions' accessible to faith as the marks of the church, it is comforting the afflicted conscience by showing concretely where the 'church' is to be found even in a time of fundamental ecclesiastical conflict. The church is grounded in precisely these holy possessions, and as such is a work of the Holy Spirit...<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 312. Note that Luther meant by the last item on the list, the cross, the suffering of discipleship.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



God's people should look for and find comfort in dwelling in those congregations where the Holy Spirit is exhibiting his presence with these holy possessions.

Second, Luther acknowledged variation exists in the attributes considered as holy possessions. He also was emphatic that certain possessions were more vital than others. Thus, Luther is showing that these holy possessions can be categorized and ranked in importance. For instance, Luther stressed repeatedly that the faithful preaching of the Word with the proper administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are chief among the possessions the church is to exhibit. These primary workings of the Spirit identify the church *with marks of essentiality*. Consequently, greater importance should be given to these essential marks of the church than to other attributes the Spirit produces. Following Luther's line of thought, holy possessions that would be considered less observable and central to the church's identity, such as suffering for the gospel or experiencing unity, could be viewed as *attributes of faithfulness* that are dependent upon and radiating out from the core identifying marks of the church. Similarly, further fruits or activities of the church, such as members engaging in evangelism or serving the needs of the community, can be regarded as *signs of healthiness*. These lesser attributes are not to be thought of as unimportant or as disassociated from the greater ones, but rather reliant upon and produced by them. Given that they all come from the person of the Holy Spirit, this should only be expected.

An analogy is helpful here. Consider this author's wife. In her identity, she is made in the image of God. As one created by God, he has endowed her with certain attributes, among which quietness and compassion could be mentioned. From her God-bestowed gifts, she practices such works as hospitality and praying with other women. Thus, central identity, certain attributes, and particular acts can be seen as distinct from one another yet related to each other. Similarly, the Spirit identifies the church as Christ's bride and unique possession with marks, bestows on the church certain characteristics or attributes, and produces in the church good works done as a result.

Third, Luther argued Scripturally that the holy possessions are an inheritance that the Trinity gives to all members of the church. In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul describes the church in Trinitarian fashion. Paul writes, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Commenting on this passage, Luther describes how the three persons of the Godhead work together to give these possessions to the church:

So he here distinguishes the three — one God, Lord, and Spirit — and gives to each His own work through which He is revealed. One person is God (the Father), from whom all powers are derived as the source and the first person. The second is the Lord, that is, Christ, the Son of God, from whom, as the Head of the Church, all offices flow. The third is the Spirit, who produces and distributes all gifts in the Church. Nevertheless, these three are all one divine, almighty, and eternal essence. Accordingly, these three are all called and truly are one, since God must be one inseparable essence.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther, *Church Postil IV*, vol. 78 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Benjamin T.G. Mayes and James L. Langbartels (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 339.

As the Triune God operates in the church, God's people have gifts bestowed on them, avenues of service in which to utilize these gifts, and varied activities to fulfill this rendered service. As Luther put it, "However, it is the Christian's own skill, and the chief thing which distinguishes them from the heathen, that they know and recognize such gifts, offices, and powers come from God and the Lord Christ and the Holy Spirit."<sup>21</sup>

With Luther's cross-centered theological focus and Spirit-powered ecclesiological structure now in place, his belief regarding the place of the laity can be established.

### **The Distillation of the Priesthood of All Believers in Reformation Theology and Practice**

Martin Luther, in his first communion as a Catholic priest, trembled because he thought that he was handling the actual body and blood of the Lord. He had experienced firsthand the incredible magisterial weight the papacy had placed upon the priesthood. Yet as he looked anew at the Roman priesthood, with his mind alive with the desire to be a theologian of the cross and to give due credence to the Spirit's work in the church, he became incensed by what he saw.

Luther was so committed to preaching the Word alone that he could not tolerate those with that responsibility who failed to do so. In the preface to his *Small Catechism*, Luther denounced the false priests in the strongest possible terms because of their lack of attention to the Word of God. He cried out,

O ye bishops! [to whom this charge has been committed by God,] what will ye ever answer to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the people and never for a moment discharged your office? ... You do not care in the least [while you are utterly without scruple and concern] whether the people know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or any part of the Word of God. Woe, woe, unto you forever!<sup>22</sup>

In the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, he further expressed his disdain over the Catholic priests:

They have sought by this means (i.e. ordination) to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth, to the incredible injury of the grace of baptism and to the confusion of our fellowship in the gospel. Here, indeed, are the roots of the detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity. Trusting in the external anointing by which their hands are consecrated, in the tonsure and investments, they not only exalt themselves above the rest of the lay Christians, who are only anointed with the Holy Spirit, but regard them almost as dogs and unworthy to be included with themselves in the church.<sup>23</sup>

In Luther's mind, these priests were theologians of glory in the worst possible way. For they withheld the very holy possessions they were to mark the church with and use to lead its

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>22</sup> *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 238.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 244.

members into service of Christ. Luther could not bear this pomposity against the people of God. He said,

Thus [the pope] removes and eradicates our Christian priesthood with this damnable priesthood, for hardly anyone knows of any other priesthood except that of the pope. As soon as anyone hears a priest mentioned he imagines one who is tonsured, anointed and dressed in long garments.<sup>24</sup>

Luther overcame this false priesthood by first establishing the ultimate priesthood of Christ. In his commentary on Psalm 110, where Christ is declared to have the superior priesthood of Melchizedek, Luther said, "We have only one single priest, Christ, who has sacrificed himself for us and all of us with him."<sup>25</sup> Luther reasoned that since it was the "priest's task to teach God's Word and intercede for his people, Christ is the supreme priest because he performs these functions supremely."<sup>26</sup> As this psalm goes on to indicate, Christians "derive their priesthood from Christ's because they are 'children' of the High Priest."<sup>27</sup>

The believer's derivative priesthood from Christ does not involve the idolatry of sacrificing Christ in the Mass for our sins, for there is no more sacrifice needed for sin and the one who died was raised never to die again. "For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God" (Rom. 6:10).

Thus, Luther taught that with Christ's

priestly sacrifice we are priested not to offer sacrifices for our sins – he has done that – but to offer ourselves, no longer forfeited to death by our sins, but alive by the forgiveness that delivers us from the dominion of sin, death, the devil, and the Law. We are living sacrifices whose lives are poured out in sacrifice to him where he has put himself to receive the sacrifice of our lives, that is our neighbor in his need.<sup>28</sup>

One key passage of Scripture in Luther's thinking on the believer's priestly, sacrificial call was I Peter 2:9-10, which reads:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament II*, vol. 36 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 202.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>26</sup> Uche Anizor, *Kings and Priests: Scripture's Theological Account of Its Readers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 144.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Norman Nagel, "Luther and the Priesthood of All Believers," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (October 1997): 280.

Luther worked this passage out carefully. In promoting the priesthood of all believers, he did not want to communicate that the laity were priests in the same way they had witnessed in the Roman office, where every member has some type of run-away, self-authenticating power. “What Dr. Luther says against the Roman priests is not to get rid of them in order to put ‘the priesthood of all believers’ in their place. That would be to replace one piece of popery with another.”<sup>29</sup> Further, Luther maintained a proper place for the ordained pastoral office as a ministerial one. Commenting on this text, Luther explains,

“It says in 1 Peter 2, ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a priestly kingdom. In this way we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. There are indeed priests whom we call ministers. They are chosen from among us, and who do everything in our name. That is a priesthood which is nothing else than the Ministry.’”<sup>30</sup>

Luther taught that such pastoral ministers should be selected by the congregation they served. Furthermore, the ministerial office did not preclude God’s people themselves from ministering the Word of God. “Even though not everybody has the public office, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary.”<sup>31</sup>

Luther further substantiated the priesthood of all believers from passages that described our Christian life in priest-like terms, such as “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit” (Ps. 51:17); “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1); “let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15); Paul’s description of his calling “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:16); and Paul’s life as “already being poured out as a drink offering” (2 Tim. 4:6). As such a priesthood, the church is to offer spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God through Jesus Christ. Luther knew that the anticipatory word of Isaiah which saw the Gentiles coming into the kingdom, and said, “You shall be called the priests of the Lord; they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God,” has arrived (Isa. 61:6). Clearly, the whole church is to be holy in their conduct and service as priests to God.

These sacrifices God’s people are to make were to be offered not only in their special religious exercises but also in their daily vocations. Luther saw the monastic life he had once lived as ultimately self-serving, as the piety they exercised did not help their neighbor and thus fell short of the second great commandment. Luther brought dignity back to common labor of all varieties, be it in the home, field, or business. In these places, God’s people were to also minister by serving their fellow man. As Gustav Wingren puts it succinctly in capturing Luther’s teaching, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 281.

<sup>30</sup> Luther, *Works*, 36:112-113.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms II*, vol. 13 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. by Jaroslav Jan Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 333.

<sup>32</sup> Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Evansville: Ballast, 1994), 10.

Luther's teaching on the priesthood of believers transformed church and society as the doctrine spread across nations with such impact that it shook kingdoms. For example, when Luther's doctrine reached the land of England, it was not only the pope's priests and bishops that felt threatened and lashed out against them. None other than King Henry the VIII (1509-1547) himself responded. Believing Luther's teachings would upset the social order upon which his throne depended, the king wrote a lengthy rebuttal entitled *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, or *Defense of the Seven Sacraments*. This work led Pope Leo X, who by this time had excommunicated Luther, to confer on Henry the ironic title "Defender of the Faith." In this work, Henry attacked Luther's hermeneutical method. He mocked Luther for thinking that I Peter 2:5-9 teaches that we are all really priests, saying, "Does 'ye are gods' make us equal to God? Does royal priesthood make us all kings?"<sup>33</sup> Henry thought that Luther's teaching that all Christians are priests and kings equally was a doctrine designed by the devil. This historical incident highlights that a church committed to the gospel, living in sacrifice to Christ, becomes a direct threat to the beloved order of rulers.

With the articulation and immediate implications of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers substantiated, a final question may now be considered: How should this doctrine be retained and promoted today?

### **The Duties that the Reformed Church Half a Millennium Later Must Retain and Promote**

First and foremost, if the word did it all, then the word must still do it all. If the preaching of the word is the chief holy possession of the church, marking the church as the true people of God, then those whose duty it is to teach and preach it must do so with all due diligence. Yet they must be careful as they do. As demonstrated, pastors do not process the magisterial authority *above* the people of God as the priests of old. But they do possess a ministerial authority *among* the people of God. Seminaries, sadly so often a corrupting influence on ministers and the church, must retain the centrality of God's word in their training and instruct pastoral candidates. They must remind students that they are not to become theologians of glory who conduct themselves with the air of magisterial supremacy. Instead, seminaries must train theologians of the cross in a ministerial role that displays humility and willingness to sacrifice for the sake of Christians. Like Luther, pastors should devote their full energies toward being theologians of the cross by bringing people into contact with the pure word of God.

In light of these reformation truths, the second duty for pastors, elders, and the congregations they serve is the structuring of ministries so that the holy possessions are properly arranged. At the core of a congregation's identity should be the primary marks of the church, namely the word, sacrament, and discipline. Today's age is increasingly seeing the Protestant church return to visual forms and expressions in worship in a manner that the Roman Catholic Church sadly still depends upon. With such a regression to visual worship forms, Protestant churches demonstrate, if not actually verbalize, a dissatisfaction with the pure preaching of God's word. Preachers and congregations once again must be urged to demonstrate a sole reliance on the

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<sup>33</sup> Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *Royal Priesthood in the English Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 99.

power of the gospel. In so doing, congregations should guard against a focus on or trust in programs or other activities that in actuality could be taking the people of God away from their primary priestly duties.

The third duty in light of the believer's priesthood is the call to sacrifice that comes from the preaching of the gospel. Ministers must view the word of God as the inheritance of God's people and instruct them clearly in their priestly duties. The gospel must call every member of the church to follow Christ by taking up his or her cross. They should be instructed and taught how to offer up the incense of prayer. The Word must guide them in how to care and lay down their lives for their brothers. They must see that it is not only the minister's duty but also their own to take the gospel to those who are still apart from Christ.

Yet with this third duty comes a fourth and final one that protects against a hyper-spiritualization in the understanding of Luther's development of the believer's priesthood. Members of the church should be taught that fulfilling the second great commandment in their vocations is holy work. Luther related the second great commandment to the priesthood of the believer, saying:

If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone, then you should know that that work is not a good work. For each one ought to live, speak, act, hear, suffer, and die in love and service for another, even for one's enemies, a husband for his wife and children, a wife for her husband, children for their parents, servants for their masters, masters for their servants, rulers for their subjects, and subjects for their rulers, so that one's hand, mouth, eye, foot, heart, and desire is for others; these are Christian works, good in nature.<sup>34</sup>

As history has shown, fulfilling these duties is how reformation began, and this is how reformation will continue to spread.

### **Conclusion: The 95 Theses, the Start of the Reformation, and the Priesthood of All Believers**

Certainly, Luther developed the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers over his lifetime. However, returning to his initial theses with the doctrine in mind reveals that these seeds of concern were there all along, although they lacked the purer, direct expressions Luther would later formulate regarding the role of God's people in the church. To those who replaced the true preaching of the Bible with something else, Luther declared, "53. They are the enemies of Christ and the pope who forbid altogether the preaching of the Word of God in some churches in order that indulgences may be preached in others," and "62. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." To theologians of glory who denied the cross with their practices he spoke directly, "79. To say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers is equal in worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy." And to the faithful believer, upon whom Christ has bestowed the position of priest, Luther reminded them of their true position, "37. Any true Christian, whether living or dead,

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<sup>34</sup> Wingren, *Vocation*, 120. Wingren is offering this translation of Luther's *Adventspostille* of 1522 (not available in English).

participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters.”<sup>35</sup>

Believing and living according to these truths is how reformation began, and this is how reformation will continue to spread.

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<sup>35</sup> For the translation of these theses, see Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 22-25.