

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

JUSTIFICATION AND MORAL VALUE:
MARTIN LUTHER ON GOOD, EVIL, AND THE MORAL SELF

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MARCH 2016

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For Elizabeth,
John, Daniel, and Clara

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Abbreviations for Frequently Used References

- LW *Luther's Works* [American Edition], 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86).
- ST *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 5 vols. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Christian Classics, 1948).
- WA *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [Schriften], 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-1993).

Acknowledgments

One of the joys of completing the dissertation is realizing how much support I have had over the past few years. I feel deep gratitude for all the persons and institutions that have aided me along the way.

First, I would like to thank the University of Chicago Divinity School for accepting me into their doctoral program and providing me the financial stability to pursue my studies. I would also like to thank the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion for granting me a junior fellowship that provided me much needed research time.

I am very grateful to my dissertation committee—William Schweiker, Susan Schreiner, and Kevin Hector—who provided critical feedback and encouragement through this process. In particular, I owe an enormous debt to the insightful and critical eye of William Schweiker, who provided clear and incisive feedback on each chapter and the dissertation as a whole. The dissertation would be a very different document without his patient care and concern.

I would also like to thank faculty who were and continue to be formative in my education—Fred Ablondi, John Farthing, Margaret Falls-Corbitt, Lawrence Schmidt, Miroslav Volf, Serene Jones, Margaret Farley, Joe Jones, Kathryn Tanner, Richard Rosengarten, Franklin Gamwell, Ryan Coyne, and Cynthia Lindner. Each contributed deeply and uniquely to my intellectual formation and understanding of the theological task. My debt is far greater than I can acknowledge here.

I would like to thank my fellow students who provided feedback on my work. My colleagues in Professor Schweiker's monthly dissertation reading group, as well as the seminar participants in my group in the Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion, deserve special mention for their critical feedback. I would especially like to thank Lucy Pick and Loren Lyberger for their leadership and insight in my Marty seminar group.

Over the course of writing, I have been aided by the help of many. The project would not have been possible without the great patience and encouragement of my wife, Elizabeth Lerohl Hiller. She generously provide me with time to work and has read many drafts and versions of the various chapters. Our children, John, Daniel, and Clara, provided much joy and reminded me of the gift of life. I owe much to my parents, Mike and Janet, and my brother, Bob, for instilling in me a love for all things Luther. A special and heartfelt thank you is owed to Jobey Hendel, who graciously watched our oldest son, John, for two years while I worked on the early stages of the dissertation and “Papa Kurt,” who was rich in insight into all things Luther.

The following people deserve to be thanked for their insight and encouragement through the course of the project: Gaylen and Cindy Lerohl, Jim and Linda Hoepner, Steve Bendas, Harry Meyer, Josh Daniel, Cabell King, Kyle Rader, Daniel Schultz, Linn Tonstad, Josh Connor, Mary Emily Duba, Willa Swenson-Lengyel, Kristal Clayville, Myriam Renaud, David Newhesier, Rick Elgendy, Jeff Fowler, Hebert Lin, Sally Stamper, Daniel Strand, T.J. Dumansky, Steve Jungkeit, Erin Staley, John Anderson, Michael LeChevallier, Alisha Jones, my AmeriCorps teammates, Joel Winkelman, Evan Rogers, Amanda Baugh, Wesley Beal, Mike Nance, Christopher Simeone, Trey Anastasio, Mike Gordon, Page McConnell, John Fishman, Reed Meschefske, Ryan Adams, Will Oldham, Chris Wood, Elly McHan, John Bell, David Creech, Anne Mocko, Roy Hammerling, and my students at St. Xavier, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Minnesota State Community and Technical College, and Concordia College.

Chapter 1/ Introduction

The question that this dissertation addresses is posed by Iris Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of the Good*: “How is one to connect the realism which must involve a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the later idea becoming merely a consolatory dream? (I think this puts a central question in moral philosophy).”¹ The problem, according to Murdoch, is that most human conduct is motivated by egocentric energy. In regards to consciousness, this entails that instead of taking a clear-eyed view of the tragic and dark nature of existence, human beings flee to fantasies and false consolations to protect themselves. Many forms of religion fall under this category of false succor: more often than not, the belief in God is used as a self-protecting illusion to avoid a true view of the miseries of the world. The question she poses, then, concerns the very possibility of maintaining a conception of goodness while also viewing the reality of evil without false consolation.

Murdoch’s question becomes more difficult in the face of Christian theological commitments. In particular, Christianity has historically affirmed not only God as the transcendent good, but has also maintained the goodness of creation. This theological affirmation complicates the question: how is it possible to not only maintain the goodness of a transcendent God, but also that of the world, and yet neither lessen, lighten, nor ignore the manifold experiences of evil that structure and shape the world? The dangers here are that either a conception of the goodness of the world becomes a fantasy to protect the ego from viewing the misery of the world or the account of the misery can be so overwhelming that any account of goodness becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain. The former problem is most often seen in a degenerate piety or theology of

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 59.

prosperity; the latter problem appears most clearly in the struggles depicted in much contemporary literature and philosophy.²

The thesis of this dissertation is that Martin Luther provides a framework for contemplating evil in its diverse manifestations without minimizing it, offers a profound account of faith in the goodness of God, and also affirms and rejoices in the multiplicity of values in creation. Luther's ability to hold these positions in tension depends on the dialectical interrelationship between three concepts: first, a new concept of faith grounded in the promise of God; second, a theological distinction between creation and justification in which creation maintains its own integrity against distinctively Christian claims about justification; third, a concept of sin and evil based on both the lived experience of evil and theological reflections on the depth of sin and the hiddenness of God. These concepts develop slowly in Luther's thought and so one task of the dissertation will be to trace how these transformations arise in Luther's thought. The interplay of these three concepts allows Luther to simultaneously confront the horrors of evil, while claiming a profound faith and hope in God's goodness, even beyond human comprehension. This framework provides theological resources for both denouncing and protesting against sin, suffering with those who experience tragedy, and yet also placing profound hope in the goodness of God.

In order to show the precise argument and contributions the dissertation makes to scholarship, the introduction will first critically examine contemporary, prominent presentations of Luther's theology, namely Radical Lutheranism, the Finnish school, and Oswald Bayer's theological program. By doing so, I will locate and justify the methodology and argument that this dissertation adopts in the second section of the introduction —namely, by employing a historic-genetic reading of the development of Luther's thought, I aim to show the congruence between the radical critiques of the Luther of the early Reformation (a position emphasized by Radical Lutherans), his account of

² The clearest case of this is in the work of Cormac McCarthy.

sanctification in the 1520s (emphasized by the Finnish school), and his robust affirmation of creation found in his mature thought (emphasized by Bayer). The introduction will conclude with brief reflections on the contributions this dissertation makes to the wider theological community.

I. Which Luther?

In approaching Luther studies, it is useful to classify scholarship into those that are primarily geared towards understanding Luther in his historical context and those scholars who attempt to retrieve Luther's insights for contemporary theology. The former studies seek to provide a historically precise interpretations of the Luther's social, political, and intellectual context and his contributions to the Reformation,³ while the latter seek to offer interpretations on the continuing relevance of Luther for contemporary constructive thinking.⁴ While the dissertation draws heavily on the former approaches, the aim of the dissertation is constructive, that is, it seeks to examine Luther's contribution to an abiding intellectual problem, the problem of affirming the good in light of the problem of evil. As such, I will locate the particular contributions of the dissertation by

³ For excellent work on Luther's relationship to the medieval tradition, see Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation: Martin Luther to the Year 1521*, trans. J.W. Doberstein and T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1946); Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011); Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992). Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Steven E. Ozment, *Homo spiritualis: A Comparative Study of the Anthropology of Johannes Tauler, Jean Gerson, and Martin Luther (1509-16) in the Context of their Theological Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1969); David Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980); David Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2002); Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven E. Ozment, ed., *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971).

⁴ For a recent rich collection of essays in this approach, see Niels Henrik Gregersen et al., eds., *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Christine Helmer, ed., *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

examining three contemporary constructive retrievals of Luther's theology: Radical Lutheranism, the Finnish school, and Oswald Bayer's theological program.

(A) Radical Lutheranism

In 1987, as the various Lutheran synods in North America were in discussions to create the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Gerhard Forde wrote an article for the newly reestablished *Lutheran Quarterly* entitled "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America."⁵ In this programmatic essay, Forde poses the question facing the Lutheran church in the contemporary world: who exactly are we? What is Lutheranism at root and does it have anything to contribute to the world?⁶ While Forde recognizes that Lutheranism as a historical group cannot claim a reason to exist as such, he argues that the message at the heart of Lutheran theology, the radical gospel of justification by faith, provides the continued importance and significance of Luther's theology.⁷

In order to show the radicalism of this message, Forde contrasts it with what he fears is the predominant form of religion in North American Christianity, what he calls 'decadent pietism.' Unlike historical pietism which emphasized the importance of getting right with God through an experience of grace in conversion, decadent pietism simply assumes that God is love and is not wrathful. Because a God without wrath is not a serious factor in human life, the God of decadent pietism simply affirms human beings as they are. The moral task of decadent pietistic then is not so much to get right with God, as it is the attempt to get right with oneself. The religious task is one of self-affirmation and coming to love the self, instead of loving God. He writes,

⁵ Gerhard Forde, "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* I (1987): 1-16. Also in *A More Radical Gospel. Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 3-16. My page numbers reflect the original publication. For a recent collection of essay reflecting on the importance of this seminal essay see *Justification is for Preaching* ed. Virgil Thompson (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

⁶ Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 2.

⁷ Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 5.

Decadent pietism seems to hold that the way of the Christian is to become ‘affirming’ of others in their chosen life styles. Along with this there is a very often a rather sanctimonious ‘third use of the law’ piety centered mostly around current social causes and problems. No longer concerned with one’s own sins, and certainly not the sins of those one is supposed to affirm, one shifts attention to the sins of those other entities (more or less anonymous) which inhibit the realization of our affirmed and affirming human potential.”⁸

The gospel on this picture, Forde argues, is simply an exhortation to be permissive, affirmed, and affirming. The radical message is blunted by the social need to accept and permit all life-styles.

Against this, Forde proposes that Lutherans need to reclaim, or be reclaimed by, the radical message of justification by faith without the deeds of the law first proclaimed by Paul and then recovered by Luther. To describe this message of justification, Forde employs eschatological imagery: justification involves, not simply a change of attitude or moral improvement, but a total death to the sinner and a raising to new life; the Word itself kills and makes alive. For Forde, unlike the decadent pietism that seeks to affirm this world and the self who is in sin, the message of justification by faith involves the complete condemnation and death of the sinner. Far from seeking to affirm and be affirmed, this message attacks sin, kills the sinner, and, most radically, announces the new life given in Christ. For Forde, the terms are not simply metaphors for spiritual transformation, but eschatological realities⁹: “Justification by faith without the deeds of the law really involves and announces the death of the old being and the calling forth of the new in hope.”¹⁰

⁸ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 4.

⁹ See Gerhard Forde, “The Apocalyptic No and the Eschatological Yes: Reflections, Suspicions, Fears, and Hopes,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 17-32.

¹⁰ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 5. For an extended treatment of this metaphor of death and life and its relation to justification see Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

According to Forde, the entire edifice of Christianity stands or falls on proclaiming the uncompromising and unconditional form of this radical message of freedom in Christ.

Forde's theological picture is indebted to dialectical theology of the early Karl Barth¹¹ and to Hans-Joachim Iwand.¹² Like both of these figures, Forde emphasizes the radical nature of human sin, the bondage of the will, and the need for the wholly and utterly new word of God. On Forde's read, the bondage of the will directly attacks the heart of most all secular and theological anthropologies, particularly those associated with decadent pietism: against the natural belief in the freedom of the will, justification by faith demands an account of the will that is in utter and total bondage that can only be freed in Christ. The natural person is lost and can always only sin. Because of his heavy stress on the radical depth of sin, Forde argues that the message of justification is not one of merely repairing holes in old wineskins, but instead it is a message that creates a completely new being. This newness of grace means a complete end to the old self— there is no continuity with the old self, but, in Christ, there is a brand new creation. This announcement does not depend on the hearer, but is announced as accomplished in Jesus: in Christ, you have died and you are now stamped with Jesus' death and resurrection. Justification by grace is completely unconditional and total gift apart from all human cooperation, effort, or desires.

¹¹ The opening chapter of *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* begins with an endorsement of Karl Barth's imagery in *The Epistle to the Romans*. See Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 1. For Forde's thoughts on Karl Barth see Gerhard Forde, "Karl Barth on the Consequences of Lutheran Christology," in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 69-85.

¹² For an account of Forde's indebtedness to dialectical theology, and particularly the work of Iwand, see James Arne Nestingen, "Examining Sources: Influences on Gerhard Forde's Theology," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 10-21. For an introduction to Hans J. Iwand see Gregory Walter's introduction to Hans J. Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith according to Luther* ed. Virgil F. Thompson, trans. Randi H. Lundell (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

With this emphasis on the eschatological newness in Christ, Forde argues that the major problem in Lutheranism is that it ignores Luther's emphasis on the bondage of the will and instead tries to accommodate justification into an anthropology premised on the freedom of the will. Instead of listening to the proclaimed Word as a new event, Lutheran theology has consistently attempted to accommodate secular and theological anthropologies centered on an idea of the freedom of the will. While he thinks this is to be expected given the old Adam's desire to cling to freedom, Forde claims that any attempt to accommodate the old self with the new self is at the root of all theological errors.

The radical gospel of justification by faith alone simply does not fit, cannot be accepted by, and will not work with an anthropology which sees the human being as continuously existing subject possessing 'free choice of the will' over against God and/or other religious goals.

The radical gospel is the *end* of that being and the beginning of a new being in faith and hope.¹³

This entails that any and all ideas of continuity between the person living in sin and the new life of faith must be destroyed and torn down. Against the religious tendency to try and accommodate the message of justification by faith alone to an account of the freedom of the will, Forde argues, justification requires an eschatological break that interrupts, disrupts, and ultimately kills the sinner.¹⁴

There are many theological consequences to this emphasis on the newness of the Gospel. First, Forde argues that the gospel of justification by faith is a message to be proclaimed, and not something for rational reflection to evaluate and judge.¹⁵ The Word of God is not something which humans can ever control; rather, it is the good news that must be proclaimed unconditionally. As

¹³ Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 7.

¹⁴ Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 7.

¹⁵ See Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Gerhard Forde, "Whatever Happened to God? God Not Preached," in *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, 33-55.

such, the Gospel can only be properly presented as a proclamation, an announcement of what God has done in Christ. This proclamation is a dangerous activity, for it calls for the death of all the old ways of being in the world; yet it is only through death that the radical, unconditional message of grace can be heard. “We must somehow muster up the nerve to preach the gospel in such fashion as to put the old to death and call forth the new...Preaching the gospel of justification by faith alone *to* old beings in such a fashion as to leave them old can only be a disaster. The proclamation either makes the old beings worse, or it puts an end to them and makes them new.”¹⁶

Second, the emphasis on the proclamation of the Word entails a limit to the task of theology. For Forde, theology that does not assume a bondage of the will portrays the central theological problem as either a lack of knowledge or confusion on moral norms. The tasks of theology on these accounts are to provide speculation on the nature of God and to clarify ethical claims through rational analysis of concepts or historical rationality. Yet, if the problem is not one of knowledge, but the bondage of the will, the task of theology is not to solve theoretical problems, but to aid the proclamation of the Gospel. For Forde, then, theological reflection is a vital activity of the church, yet it only exists for the purpose of proclamation. Theology, he claims, must always remember that “one does not preach justification by faith alone or the bondage of the will and such doctrines. They are presuppositions for preaching. It is the proclamation that makes new beings, not theology, or even ethics.”¹⁷ Theology, he claims, must remember the sheer proclamation of grace and cede all ground to this proclaimed message. “Theology does not make new beings. It is precisely the business of theology which knows about bondage to see this, and thus to drive toward a proclamation in Word and Sacrament which by the power of the Spirit *ubi et quando visum est deo* will do it. When theology learns its task it will be relieved of its endless theoretical skepticism and can

¹⁶ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 11-12.

¹⁷ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 11.

proceed with regained confidence.”¹⁸ For Forde, the proclamation must be radical and uncompromising: sola gratia, sola fide. The whole point is to summon the dead to life.

Forde’s understanding of the importance of Luther centers on Luther’s understanding of sin, the radical nature of justification as an eschatological word, and proclamation in Word and Sacrament as the central elements of the church. This eschatological approach to Luther has continued to exert influence on many Lutheran theologians, perhaps most prominently in the work of Steven Paulson.¹⁹ Paulson shares Forde’s eschatological fervor and emphasis on the newness of the Gospel: for Paulson, the first task of theology is to destroy all the sources of comfort and consolation people take in earthly goods. In his recent book *Lutheran Theology*, Paulson writes, “Lutheran theology begins perversely by advocating the destruction of all that is good, right, and beautiful in human life. It attacks the lowest and highest goals of life especially morality, no matter how sincere are its practitioners.”²⁰ This destruction drives a wedge between faith in Christ and wider cultural notions of virtue, morality, aesthetics, and earthly knowledge: faith in Christ is not continuous with daily human excellence.²¹ This initial tearing down of idols, however, is done for the purpose of theology’s proper task, namely declaring the new, external righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ. Theology, on this picture, is again a matter of proclamation: the gospel promise cannot be known through speculation, but only through the announced Word alone.

The strength of this retrieval of Luther’s theology lies in capturing the anthropological assumptions and the eschatological framework at the root of Luther’s thought. Unlike those who seek to systematize the message of justification by faith, radical Lutherans capture the urgency in

¹⁸ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 12.

¹⁹ See also, Mark C. Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004). The popular work of Nadia Bolz-Weber is, to my mind, indebted to Forde. See *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York: Jericho, 2013).

²⁰ Steven Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 1.

²¹ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 4.

Luther's presentation of the Gospel as proclamation to sinners in bondage. Justification is not an idea for speculation, but the Word that creates new beings who are otherwise caught in sin.

In regards to the question of evil, this approach is also salutary. Because the emphasis is so strongly placed on God's creative action which is utterly discontinuous with human merit or will, Radical Lutherans are able to freely and openly describe the true misery of human sin.²² Instead of needing to justify human fault on some other grounds, Forde can call an action evil in itself. At that same time, he can declare the free forgiveness of sins made possible through Jesus Christ.

There are a few weakness with this presentation, however. First, in their strong emphasis on the disruptive power of justification, radical Lutherans tend to be vague on the goodness of creation. While it would be a mistake to accuse them of a crass dualism, the heavy focus on justification tends to obscure and downplay the goods of creation. Perhaps this problem is most pronounced in Paulson's presentation: by beginning with a posture of radical critique of "all that is good, beautiful, and right in human life," Paulson neglects major aspects of Luther's thought that rejoice in the created goodness of life. While Paulson is correct that Luther insists that there are no human works that merit God's favor, including works that humans normally rejoice in, his eschatological framework appears to undermine the creational grounding of Luther's thought. While ethics, music, and art are not salvific, Luther still consistently affirms them as gifts of God—not gifts of salvation, but gifts that God pours on all of creation.

This problem is perhaps most pronounced in the radical Lutheran approach to questions of the law and ethics. Forde and Paulson share a strong emphasis on the importance of the theological use of the Law—the law's primary function is to reveal sin and show human beings the need for grace. Once the law has served this purpose, however, the law is to be discarded for a new being has

²² See Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

been created in Jesus Christ. While the emphasis on newness is central to Luther, both Forde and Paulson shy away from all talk of sanctification and adamantly reject the possibility of a third use of the law in Luther.²³ Both Forde and Paulson see such attention to sanctification and the new Christian life as commitments to the old Adam; yet, as I will argue, Luther himself develops an account of sanctification as a part of the Christian life.

Partially, the problem here lies in the texts Radical Lutherans emphasize. That is, the Radical Lutherans presentation of Luther center on close readings of Luther's major texts on justification: his early disputations, the debate with Erasmus on the bondage of the will, and the later Galatians commentary. They pay much less attention to Luther's pastoral writings and his commentaries on Psalms and Genesis, in which he develops a more robust creational account. Nevertheless, Radical Lutheranism poses important questions about Luther's eschatological framework, the bondage of the will, and the nature of justification. A task of the dissertation, then, is to show how Luther moves from these early writings in which he adopts a radical posture of critique, to the more robust creational vision in his latter thought which undergirds his approach to the question of good and evil.

(B) The Finnish School²⁴

A second major school in Luther research is associated with Department of Systematic Theology at the University of Helsinki and particularly the work of Tuomo Mannermaa and his students. Unlike Radical Lutheranism, which stress the uniqueness of Lutheran theology against wider religious movements, the Finnish school of Luther research was born as an ecumenical

²³ For a defense of the third use of the law, see Edward Engelbrecht, *Friends of the Law: Luther's Use of the Law for the Christian Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011).

²⁴ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005); Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating? Modern Finnish Research," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert E. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Olli-Pekka Vainio, ed. *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010).

dialogue between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and Russian Orthodox Churches.²⁵

Looking for a point of contact between the two churches, Mannermaa turned to the Orthodox concept of *theosis* and to Luther's concept of Christ present in faith. For Mannermaa, this notion of the indwelling of Christ, in which Christ is present in faith and whose presence is identical with the righteousness of faith, entails a real participation in God that corresponds to the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. This concept not only provides the basis for ecumenical dialogue, but Mannermaa argues, lies at the very center of Luther's theology.²⁶

The animating argument of Mannermaa addresses concerns the ontological question of what happens in justification. Is justification simply a forensic declaration or does something substantive happen in and to the believer in justification? Against the traditional interpretations in which justification and righteousness are simply imputed to the believer, but effect no substantive change, Mannermaa argues that Luther emphasizes the real presence of God that occurs with the act of imputation. The believer is not only *declared* righteous, but is actually *made* righteous—justification entails both being declared forgiven and being made holy in union with God. Justification is not a legal fiction in which God declares a sinner righteous while they remain sinners, but instead justification grants God's real righteousness as a result of Christ's real-ontic presence in the believer. Justification is identical with *theosis*, as believers participate in the divine life in their very being due to the indwelling Christ.

This presentation of Luther contrasts with the received Lutheran tradition and much contemporary scholarship on Luther. Mannermaa insists that this discrepancy is due to the contrast

²⁵ This is still one of its major selling points. Robert Jenson writes "As a systematician, I have found I can do very little with Luther as usually interpreted. And the sort of Lutheranism that constantly appeals to that Luther has been an ecumenical disaster. With Luther according to the Finns, on the other hand, there can be much systematically and ecumenically fruitful conversation." Robert Jenson, "Response to Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?" in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, 21-24.

²⁶ Tuomo Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?," 2.

between Luther's own understanding of justification and one presented in the *Formula of Concord*—whereas Luther argues for the real-ontic presence of Christ in faith, the Formula, and subsequently Lutheranism, depict justification in a totally forensic manner.²⁷ Moreover, Mannermaa and his student Risto Saarinen, insist that the modern presentation of Luther in German scholarship was due to neo-Kantian philosophical presuppositions of Luther research. Instead of Christ being ontologically or substantially present in the believer, German research restricted justification to an external relationality and depicted Christ's presence in faith terms of an impulse or effect on the will. God on this picture remains outside of human reality, who nevertheless had an influencing effect on the human moral will.²⁸ The concept of Christ's being present in faith was seen as ontologically irrelevant—God's relationship to the believer concerned the influence or effects God has on the believer.

For Mannermaa, this externality contrasts with the strong emphasis on Christ's real presence in the believer in Luther's own thought. According to Mannermaa, the process of divinization in Luther occurs thusly: before God gives Godself to a person, God performs an alien work and destroys the believer's self-justification, what Mannermaa terms God's nihilizing work. Once one passes through the agony of being stripped of self-justification, God gives Godself in the spiritual birth of Christ in the faith of the believer. Drawing on the patristic understanding of the unity of the Logos and flesh, Mannermaa argues that this presence of Christ in the believer does not create a new different substance, but both God and humans retain the substance proper to them. Yet,

²⁷ Tuomo Mannermaa, "Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, 25-41.

²⁸ See Risto Saarinen, *Gottes Wirken auf uns. Die Transzendente Deutung des Gegenwart-Christi-Motivs in der Lutherforschung*. Veröffentlichungen des Institut für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Abteilung Religionsgeschichte, ed. Peter Manns, Bd. 137 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1989). Mannermaa and Saarinen argue that these Neo-Kantian interpretations influence most major German scholars, including Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Holl, Heinrich Bornkamm, Emanuel Hirsch, Hans Rückert, Erich Seeberg, Karl Barth, and Erich Vogelsang. For an overview of this dissertation, see Mannermaa, "Why Is Luther so Fascinating?," 4-9.

Mannermaa insists, the distinction of substance does not entail an ontological gap between effect and being—the believer not only has the Word of God in faith, but they are it as well.²⁹ For Mannermaa, Luther’s concept entails not only a union of wills, or a community of deed, but a community of being between God and humanity.

Mannermaa rejects attempts to understand the presence of Christ in faith in philosophical ontology, for the presence of Christ in faith is a theological ontology, grounded in the triune movement of God. For Mannermaa, divinization occurs through God’s being and nature, for God, in God’s trinity, is fundamentally the one who gives. Because the essence of God is identical with the divine properties, such as Word, justice, truth, righteousness, love, and goodness, and because God gives these properties to the believer in justification, “what God gives of himself to humans is nothing separate from God himself.”³⁰ When God gives righteousness to a person, in other words, God gives God’s very being. He writes,

God is in *relation* to himself in the movement of Word (*Deum Patrem sibi suum apud se verbum proferre*) at the same time that he is this movement of the Word. The being of God is relational, and as such has the character of *esse*. This understanding of the being of God is the basis for understanding the being-present-of-Christ in faith. In Christ the inner-trinitarian Word, which is the being of God, becomes incarnate. The presence of Christ’s word and the word about Christ in faith are the presence of God himself.³¹

God, who is active in the triune life, becomes incarnate in the Word. The Word of God, who became present in Christ, also becomes present in the believer through and in the word about Christ. In the substantial unity of God and believer, the believer receives and partakes in the divine properties: the righteousness of God becomes the believer’s righteousness; Christ is real-ontically

²⁹ Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating?,” 11.

³⁰ Mannermaa, “Why is Luther So Fascinating?,” 10.

³¹ Mannermaa, “Why is Luther so Fascinating?,” 12.

present in the believer; what belongs to Christ, belongs to the believer. The believer is not only declared righteous, but is righteous, as the believer shares in the divine nature of Christ.

For Mannermaa, then, faith entails participation in the being of God and the properties of God. Importantly, according to Mannermaa, justification is based upon this real-ontic presence of Christ in the believer. Justification is not just a declaration, but one is righteous because Christ is present and conferring Christ's righteousness to the believer. He writes, "Faith means justification *precisely on the basis* of Christ's person being present in it as favor and gift. *In ipsa fide Christus adest*: in faith Christ is present, and so the whole of salvation."³² Elsewhere, he writes, "Faith...justifies precisely because it 'takes hold of and possesses' the present Christ."³³ The grounds of justification are precisely Christ's real presence in the believer. Because God gives Godself to the believer in the act of becoming present in faith, the believer partakes in the essential properties of God, such as righteousness, wisdom, power, holiness, and love, and thereby *is* righteous.³⁴

This idea of Christ's presence in the believer, Mannermaa argues, is the key to understanding the various emphases of Luther's thought. Mannermaa argues that Luther's conception of love is grounded in the idea of participation in Christ. Just as Christ as Logos is born eternally of the Father, and becomes incarnate out of true love, the believer is born continuously in faith as God's children, and out of love, to aid and help the neighbor.³⁵ This love is not *caritas*, that is, it is not one of striving; rather, it is one of union in which God enters below into the human condition. So too, Luther's ethical thought centers around union which leads the believer to act for the good of the neighbor.

³² Mannermaa, "Why is Luther so Fascinating?," 14-15. Emphasis mine.

³³ Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 9.

³⁴ Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?," 16.

³⁵ Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?," 14.

According to Mannermaa, the idea of Christ's presence in faith is not only a central idea for Luther's thought, but it is *the* key Reformation insight: "The idea of participation in Christ and in his divine properties was thus the content of his so-call reformatory insight and at the same time the foundation of his criticism of scholastic theology."³⁶ The indwelling of Christ implies a real participation in God in which God gives to the believer all God's properties. This contrasts with the partial accounts of divine indwelling in scholastic thought that required faith to be formed by love in order to ascend to God.³⁷ For Luther, because God is already fully present in the believer in Christ, the believer does not need to be elevated to love, but has the fullness of God present in Christ.

Mannermaa and the Finnish school thus present a very different view of the importance of Luther for contemporary reflection. The contributions to the current understanding of Luther are many. First, the Finnish school has correctly revealed and criticized the neo-Kantian presuppositions of modern Luther scholarship. As Risto Saarinen has persuasively argued, the Kantian anti-metaphysical presuppositions assumed by Ritschl, Holl, and the existentialist reading of Luther emphasized by Ebeling assume a different picture of the world than the late medieval world of Martin Luther. These scholars are also correct in emphasizing that the presence of Christ in faith involves more than a mere effect. The ecumenical potential of this reading has also born fruit and has been met with great enthusiasm by thinkers like Robert Jenson.

There are, however, a number of serious scholarly concerns with this presentation. Carl R. Trueman argues that the Finnish school shows a lack of historical sensitivity to Luther's own context. The reading of *theosis* offered by Mannermaa is decontextualized from the late medieval world that Luther lived in—while Luther was not a Kantian, he also lived in a different world than the metaphysical understandings of *theosis* proposed by the Finnish scholars. Further, he argues, the

³⁶ Mannermaa, "Why is Luther So Fascinating?," 17.

³⁷ Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith*, 23-30.

Finns take aim at earlier schools of Luther scholarship, but fail to take seriously the work of Oberman and his students, such as David Steinmetz, who contextualize Luther in the late medieval world of thought. Given Oberman's influence and importance, this omission is glaring and shows a lack of historical sensitivity.³⁸ Timo Laato has shown the ways that Mannermaa has misinterpreted the distinction between gift and favor from Luther's own thought. For Luther, God's favor refers to God's forgiveness and removal of wrath, while God's gift refers to the self-giving of God to the believer. Laato argues that Mannermaa not only does not engage the central text where Luther develops this distinction, namely *Against Latomus*, but reverses Luther's order: whereas Luther emphasis grace over the gift, Mannermaa makes the gift the basis and prerequisite of grace. This reversal, however, destroys precisely what Luther is trying to maintain (we will return to this point in chapter 3).³⁹

In a recent piece, Javier Garcia offers an exegetical critique of Mannermaa's major work *Christ Present in Faith*.⁴⁰ Garcia shows the ways that Mannermaa selectively reads Luther's 1535 *Commentary on Galatians* and thereby misses the major framework of Luther's thought. Garcia makes two charges: first, while in the preface Luther emphasizes that the distinction between the law and the Gospel is the central theme of the work and continually returns to this dynamic as the summation of all Christian faith, Mannermaa's reading makes no reference to this distinction in his understanding of justification and in his reading of the Galatians commentary.⁴¹ As Mannermaa's exegesis ignores Luther's stated central thesis, Garcia argues Mannermaa engages in selective readings and misrepresents Luther's own thought. Instead of placing Luther's Christology within the

³⁸ Carl R. Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther Offered by the Helsinki Circle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 (2003): 231-244.

³⁹ Timo Laato, "Justification: The Stumbling Block of the Finnish Lutheran School," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72 (2008): 327-346.

⁴⁰ Javier Garcia, "A Critique of Mannermaa on Luther and Galatians," *Lutheran Quarterly* 27 (2013):33-51.

⁴¹ Garcia, "A Critique of Mannermaa on Luther and Galatians," 38.

framework of law and Gospel, Mannermaa selects passages in which Luther discusses the incarnation in general and uses these as the basis for his understanding of Christ's work. Garcia argues, however, that Luther's own Christology is grounded much more heavily on the cross than on the Incarnation--while Luther affirms the Incarnation, his own thought locates salvation on Christ's work on the cross. Second, Garcia argues that Mannermaa's reading of Luther's understanding of the *simul* cannot stand before the textual evidence in the Galatians commentary. For Mannermaa, the central metaphor for the *simul* is the leaven image that Luther employs in Galatians 3:25. When Christ enters a believer, Christ incessantly removes sin from the believer, just as leaven permeates the whole dough of bread. This entails a continual spiritual development in life—the ontological presence of Christ in the believer entails that all Christians are progressing in a linear continuum towards spiritual perfection. Because this righteousness is partial and never complete, God imputes Christ's righteousness to cover over the sins. Importantly, however, God's imputation depends on the deposit by which the sinner is already in progress toward full justification. Against this interpretation, Garcia argues that (a) Luther presents the *simul* in terms of the law and the effect of the law on the Christian conscience. By omitting the discussion of law, Mannermaa misses the central metaphor that determines Luther's discussion (b) Luther's own employment of the concept of leaving differs substantially from Mannermaa. For Luther, one must never look at the leaven, but only at Christ. It is precisely only by looking away from the self and towards the external Word that one can receive consolation. Thus, Garcia argues, Mannermaa's exegesis fails to provide a persuasive exegesis of the key text on which he bases his arguments.

Finally, in his recent work *Defending Faith: Lutheran Responses to Andreas Osiander's Doctrine of Justification, 1551-1559*, Timothy Wengert provides a historical critique of the Finnish school.⁴²

⁴² Timothy J. Wengert, *Defending Faith: Lutheran Responses to Andreas Osiander's Doctrine of Justification, 1551-1559* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

Osiander, like the Finnish school, taught that justification is due to the indwelling divine righteousness due to Christ's presence in our hearts. According to Wengert, the orthodox Lutheran theologians rejected Osiander's theology as an authentic representation of Luther's theology. Their critique centered on this point: "Indwelling of Christ might for these theologians (Osiander's opponents) be the result of justification, but it could never be its replacement—precisely because the effect would leave those terrified by their sin and doubting their righteousness (and, hence, Christ's indwelling) wondering how they stood before God. Osiander, in their view, rather than making life better for the Christian, had simply destroyed not only an article of faith but the very word on which faith stood, that is, the *substantia* of faith."⁴³ In other words, the importance of the forensic declaration of faith stemmed from the certainty of faith. If the indwelling of Christ is the basis for justification, and not the result of justification, then the certainty that comes from God's word is lost. For Wengert, the Finnish view jeopardizes the centrality of the objective external word, which God employs to comfort anxious consciousness.⁴⁴ Luther himself stresses the externality as the basis for this certainty: "And this is why our theology is certain: it snatches us outside ourselves so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."⁴⁵ Because Mannermaa makes the indwelling Christ the basis of justification, where Luther does not, and because of a lack of historical sensitivity to Luther's context, Mannermaa's texts must be read cautiously.

Nevertheless, the Finnish school has raised important issues concerning the interpretation of Luther. Their critique of the Neo-Kantian presuppositions of modern Lutheran scholarship are

⁴³ Wengert, *Defending Faith*, 100.

⁴⁴ Mark Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 129.

⁴⁵ LW 26:387; WA 40-I:589.17-28.

particularly incisive. Moreover, they have raised important exegetical points about the presence of Christ in faith and Luther's account of moral progress that stands in sharp contrast with the Radical Lutherans. A task of the dissertation, then, is to both (a) articulate Luther's understanding of the relationship between sin, justification, and sanctification (b) show how Luther develops his affirmation of moral life from his initial radical critique of sin.

(C) Oswald Bayer's Luther ⁴⁶

In recent years, there has been a third important reading of Martin Luther's theology by the Tübingen Lutheran theologian, Oswald Bayer.⁴⁷ Like the Radical Lutherans, Bayer emphasizes justification as the central event in theology. Like the Finnish school, Bayer works to correct narrow interpretations of justification promulgated by German scholarship. Yet, unlike the Radical Lutherans, Bayer provides a robust picture of Luther's creational vision grounded in an ontology of justification—justification entails a vigorous affirmation of creation and created goods. On Bayer's read, the event of justification for Luther not only has existential depth, but also social and cosmic breadth.⁴⁸

According to Bayer, Luther's doctrine of justification has often been attacked for its apparently empty, obsessive focus on sin. To illustrate this critique, Bayer cites Emanuel Swedenborg's sarcastic depiction of the paradigmatic Lutheran as one who is "locked up in a darkened room his entire life. Pacing back and forth in the room, unable to see anything, he searches

⁴⁶ The question of the ontology of justification and interpretation of Luther's ontology has been pursued by a number of major thinkers. See Robert W. Jenson, "Justification as Triune Event," *Modern Theology* 11 (4) 1995: 421-427 and "An Ontology of Freedom in the De Servo Arbitrio of Luther," *Modern Theology*, 10 (3) 1994: 247-252. Eberhard Jüngel, "The World as Possibility and Actuality: The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification," in *Theological Essays*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989); Gerhard Ebeling, "Luther's Understanding of Reality," *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. XXVII. 1 (Spring 2013), 56-75.

⁴⁷ As an indication of his influence, Bayer recently published his twenty-fifth article in the *Lutheran Quarterly*.

⁴⁸ Oswald Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," trans. Christine Helmer, *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 273-292.

for light by repeating only one sentence to himself: 'I am justified by faith alone; I am justified by faith alone; I am justified by faith alone.'⁴⁹ If the sole basis and subject matter of theology is the justification of the sinful human being, Bayer argues, then theology would be an extremely narrow field and Swedenborg's sarcasm would be well-directed. Justification would involve a denial of this-worldly relationships and would be an individualistic, egoistical salvific act.⁵⁰

Against this reading, Bayer argues that for Luther, justification not only has existential depth, but also social and cosmic breadth. In fact, Bayer argues that justification only has existential depth because of its social and cosmic scope. Justification does not merely involve a new relationship with God or self, but also renews the relationship with all creation and all time and space. Bayer thus claims, "Justification is not a separate topic apart from which still other topics could be discussed. Justification is the starting point for all theology and it affects every other topic. Not only concerned with me individually and my own life-story, it is also concerned with world history and natural history. Justification is concerned with everything."⁵¹ In particular, Bayer argues that for Luther justification has ontological significance.⁵² Justification is not simply the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, but belongs to the doctrine of creation; not only the forgiveness of sins, but all of life is a free gift given to us apart from merit. As categorical gift, given freely out of the beneficence of God, all of creation is grounded in justification. Drawing on the Lutheran hymnist Paul Gerhard, Bayer emphasizes that God does give in repayment for human goods, but rather, God's gifts always come first. All good gifts are freely and fully granted to us—God has already given to us.⁵³

⁴⁹ Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 273.

⁵⁰ Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 273-274.

⁵¹ Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 274.

⁵² Oswald Bayer, "The Doctrine of Justification and Ontology," trans. Christine Helmer in *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, 43 no 1 (2001), 44-53.

⁵³ Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 276.

Bayer argues that this understanding of the pure giftedness of life grounded in justification has radical implications for anthropology. Against the radical modern emphasis on the human being as doer and maker found in Fichte, Marx, and Sartre, in which a person produces himself or herself through labor and work, Bayer argues that the free categorical gifts stands at the root of our being.⁵⁴ Justification is not something added to the human being after he or she falls into sin, but instead stands at the very ontological basis of our being. “Justification by faith alone is not only limited to an event applied to an already existing creature who has fallen into sin. Luther’s thesis is to be interpreted according to its ontological significance. In this perspective, the thesis claims that human nature, being a human, consists solely in being justified by faith.”⁵⁵ In justification, the Christian is freed from the modern concern for self-formation through activity; instead of being and doing as the root of our identity, the person is fundamentally a receiver of pure and free gifts.

Bayer’s placement of justification in the first article of the Creed has important implications for the understanding of the nature of the Word of God. German Luther scholarship had been heavily influenced by Gerhard Ebeling’s interpretation of the ‘word-event’ that creates faith. A student of Bultmann, Ebeling saw theology’s task in hermeneutic terms: the task of Christian faith is translate the Christian message in such a way that the original word-event which creates faith can occur again in every new historical situation. Ebeling’s central concern was not the doctrinal content of the word, but existential reception of the word-event in faith.⁵⁶ Like Ebeling, Bayer stresses the word that addresses us as the basis of Luther’s thought. In ways akin to J.L. Austin’s theory on speech-acts, Bayer emphasizes that the *promissio* is a performative word that accomplishes what it

⁵⁴ Bayer, “Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology,” 277-278.

⁵⁵ Oswald Bayer, “The Doctrine of Justification and Ontology,” 48.

⁵⁶ See Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R.A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1963).

says: it forgives sins and grants life and salvation.⁵⁷ For both Bayer and Ebeling, the human being is constituted through linguistic address, in words of law and promise. Yet, unlike Ebeling, Bayer does not limit this address to the Christ-faith relation, nor does he reduce the word to the event of justification.⁵⁸ Rather, the whole world speaks of God and calls us to faith. Whereas Ebeling's reading of Luther centers on the individual's faith created by the word-event, Bayer's reading emphasizes the concrete address that occurs in all of creation. Bayer writes, "The central point of Luther's understanding of creation is that the whole world and all creatures call upon him [God] and that God uses this medium to promise and to give himself completely to us."⁵⁹ Creation itself is a medium for God, even if it can only be heard and received through faith. All of life, grounded ontologically in justification, addresses the goodness and categorical gifts of God. Against existentialist and neo-Kantian readings of Luther that limit the scope of justification to purely forensic declarations or mere effects, Bayer emphasizes the role of justification in the doctrine of creation.

Finally, Bayer's emphasis on the linguistic word-event has important implications for the understanding of the nature of justification and sanctification. Bayer shares Mannermaa's worry about reducing justification to a forensic declaration; instead of appealing to the real-ontic presence of Christ, however, Bayer emphasizes the performative power of the *promissio*. In declaring us forgiven, the promise enacts what is declared: sins are forgiven, and one has new life in Christ. Where once a person was incurred upon the self, the concrete speech act frees the sinner for a new

⁵⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 50-51.

⁵⁸ See Christine Helmer, "The Subject of Theology in the Thought of Oswald Bayer," *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000): 26.

⁵⁹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 111.

life of love and service.⁶⁰ Justification gives life to sinners through the good news of God's forgiveness.

Bayer's appropriation of Luther is robust and rich in its exegetical power and its implication for the church, for theology, and for missions. In chapter 4, we will have occasion to raise critical questions of Bayer, particularly of his claims about the ontology of justification. Against Bayer, the dissertation will argue that Luther operates with a clear distinction between creation and justification. While both are grounded in the pure graciousness of God, there are important theological reasons Luther separates the two categories and does not explicitly locate justification at the root of creation. A task of the dissertation then is to trace how Luther develops and distinguishes creation and justification, but nevertheless retains Bayer's sense of the goodness of all creation.

While there are certainly elements of overlap, these three pictures present very different views of the contemporary relevance of Luther's theology of justification. For Radical Lutherans, justification involves a radical critique of the goods of human life. Given the strong emphasis on the bondage of the will and the eschatological framework, Radical Lutherans deemphasize sanctification, the third use of the law, and moral progress. For the Finnish school, on the other hand, the central aspect of justification is the real-ontic presence of Christ in faith; sanctification and moral progress are thus the central elements in Luther's thought. For Bayer, the modern importance of Luther concerns his robust affirmation of creation grounded in the ontology of justification that stands in sharp contrast with Paulson's claim that justification destroys the good, the beautiful and the right.

While there are tensions between these positions, all three are grounded in Luther's theology. Radical Lutheranism draws heavily from Luther's early polemics against scholastic theology; the Finnish school emphasize the distinction Luther develops between God's *favor* and *donum* in the early

⁶⁰ Oswald Bayer, "Theological Ethics: Ethics of Freedom," in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 86-87.

1520s; and Bayer's emphasis on creation arises out of a wide ranging interpretation of Luther's later thought. Is it possible to hold all three positions in fruitful tension? The benefit of doing so would not only provide an internal critique to the extremes of some of the positions: Bayer's emphasis on the goodness of creation and the Finnish emphasis on effectiveness of justification provides a balance to the view of sin and justification in Radical Lutheranism. Likewise, the eschatological framework provides an important correction to the optimism of moral progress in the Finnish account. More relevant to our purposes, the Luther that emerges from these accounts provides an answer to Iris Murdoch's question: held together, the three pictures provide a realistic picture of sin, an account of moral action and moral improvement in a world shaped deeply by sin and evil, and yet, also a strong robust affirmation of the goodness of God and the giftedness of creation that does not undermine an account of evil. The task of the dissertation is to show how Luther's thought holds these various positions in tension.

II. Methodology and Argument

In order to investigate the possibility of holding all three positions, the dissertation adopts a hybrid methodological approach to Luther's thought. The aim of the dissertation is to answer the question as to how Luther both maintains a radical sense of sin and evil yet also radically affirms the goodness of creation. The question here is systematic in nature, yet I adopt a historical approach to answer it. I begin with Luther's early Reformational reflections on the nature of sin in his break from Scholastic theology. This discussion does not trace the development of Luther's concept of sin from his earliest writings, but instead begins with his reflections in the *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (1517).⁶¹ In the period preceding this, beginning from 1509 and onward, Luther is working through

⁶¹ Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the precise moment of Luther's Reformational breakthrough. Karl Holl in the early 20th century argued that the turning point occurred somewhere between the summer of 1511 and the spring of 1513. Ernest Bizer questioned this early dating by showing that central features of Luther's understanding of faith still remain undeveloped until 1518. Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex auditu. Eine Untersuchung ueber die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin*

his rupture with the medieval tradition. In the course of the *Dictata super Psalterium*, Luther parts way with the Occamist and Biel traditions before him. David Steinmetz argues that this break can be seen both through Luther's insistence on the only preparation for grace being election and the Augustinian contention that no human work is morally good without grace. At this early stage, however, Luther retains Occamist formulations, such as *syndresis, facere quod in se est*, even as he reinterprets them.⁶² The mature fruit of these ruptures are most sharply formulated and reach maturity in the *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam*. That is, there can be no debate that by 1517 that Luther had broken with the nominalist theology of justification that preceded him and had entered the early stages of his mature thought, even as this continues to develop.⁶³ The aim of this first chapter on sin and the break with the nominalist tradition are to present as accurately as possible Luther's thoughts on the nature of sin and the self in this period.⁶⁴ This focus on sin and the radical break with the prevailing theology provides the basis for Radical Lutheranism and so by beginning here, the text aligns with their intentions.

Luther, 3rd. ed. (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966). The difficulty in dating comes from many sources: debates on precisely what constitutes the reformational breakthrough; Luther retains vestiges of scholastic terminology, yet uses the categories in new ways; Luther's identification in 1545 of his new insight into Rom. 1:17, which scholars debate if there ever was, in fact, a moment of insight or if his reading here actually contains a reformational breakthrough. Bayer identifies the Reformational breakthrough with Luther's concept of *promissio* and dates the change to the summer of 1518. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 44-50. In *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Bernhard Lohse offers important cautions: 'In view of this state of research it might not be advisable in the future vigorously to represent a particular interpretation in opposition to others, but first to note this difficult state of affairs, to present one's own position in cautious debate with other views, then to concentrate on the theological movement in relation to the young Luther without isolating the topics of God's righteousness and our justification... At present no conclusion to this rather unsatisfactory debate is in sight.' 88.

⁶² Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 63-64.

⁶³ Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 96-97.

⁶⁴ The self is not a term or concept Luther himself would employ. Yet Daphne Hampson correctly argues "Luther would not have used the term 'self' and lacked a post-Enlightenment conception of the self, but this is the best word to use when translating his insight into a modern idiom." Daphne Hampson, "Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique," *Word and World* 8, no. 4 [1988]: 334.

The following chapters trace how Luther's thought develops from the radical account of sin to a robust affirmation of creation, which also leads to a more complex account of evil. The dissertation traces this development in terms of the emergence of a new conception of faith in the promise of God (chapter 2) and then examines the ramifications of this conception for understanding the nature of the ethical self (chapter 3). To discuss Luther's understanding of the nature of the self, I offer a detailed systematic-exegetical reading of the 1521 *Against Latomus*. This treatise is important for two reasons: first, it provides Luther's most developed account of the relationship of grace to moral improvement, and thus shows an alignment with the concerns raised by the Finnish school (even as I argue that they misread Luther's argument). Importantly, for our purposes, Luther's account of sanctification grows out of an argument on his early account of sin—in responding to charges against his rejection of Scholastic theology, Luther clarifies the relationship of sin to sanctification, and thus opens the possibility of a reconciliation between radical critiques and moral improvement. Secondly, the distinctions Luther makes in order to account for moral action leads to a development in Luther's understanding of God's action in creation. While only in its incipient form in *Against Latomus*, the distinction Luther draws in God's action provides the framework for a robust affirmation of creation in Luther's mature work (chapter 4). This understanding of the twofold reign and the nature of faith allows Luther to incorporate a complex understanding of evil (chapter 5) and the human experience of evil.

Yet, while the method is historical-genetic, the aim is systematic, that is, to give a comprehensive picture of Luther's understanding of the relationship of evil, sin, creation, and God's free gifts. It will be important for my argument, therefore, that the developments I trace are seen as developments and not contradictions—that is, the later affirmation of created life does not deny the early work critiquing sin, but can be held together in a single framework. The affirmation of God's presence in creation, of the good of human reason, need not be and are not in contrast to the strong

critique Luther levels against sin. In other words, by showing how Luther's radical emphasis on sin develops into an equally radical affirmation of creation through theological insights, the dissertation shows the possibility of holding both to the radical critique found in Radical Lutheranism and the affirmation of creation in Bayer's presentation.

Finally, the narrative I am tracing in some ways is idealized. Luther's thought does not develop in straightforward systematic fashion—Luther slowly works out the implications of his ideas and thus there are remnants of earlier positions, tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions in his work. The narrative I develop, however, investigates a systematic question and presents Luther's position based on a few central moves. This means two things: while I will indicate and discuss points of tension and contradiction in his thought, my work is not primarily concerned with the historical development as such; rather I am interested in his positions insofar as they lead to later systematic positions which can affirm both the radical nature of evil and the goodness of creation. Second, unlike a historian, I am not making claims that the texts I examine are the turning points or the documents in which Luther's thought changes. Rather, I selected the texts based on the way they illuminate Luther's systematic positions. This means my argument is idealized in the sense that it neither stress the historical situation nor the very important ways Luther's biography intersects with his thought. While this means that Luther's thought may appear disembodied, this method illuminates the question of how Luther balances the relationship between sin, creation, and the Word of God through examining the relationship between different moments in his thought.

The dissertation thus makes contributions to two distinct fields of scholarship. The primary contribution it makes is to contemporary retrievals of Luther's theology. First, by providing an exegetically precise reading of the development of Luther's thought, the dissertation shows both the inner coherence of Luther's theological moments from his radical critique of the prevailing theologies to his affirmation of created life. In so doing, as I outlined above, the dissertation corrects

and modifies major retrievals of Luther's thought. Second, the dissertation shows the ways that Luther's understanding of evil develops in conjunction with his account of the nature of goods. I argue that that Luther's early emphasis on sin develops into a multifaceted understanding of the nature of evil. This more complex understanding of evil reveals a richness in Luther's thought in addressing questions of evil and in the nature of the theological task.

Second, the dissertation also makes an intervention in wider contemporary theological discourses. First, by embedding Luther's theology of the word of God in the context of his struggle with the question of evil, the dissertation challenges the division in contemporary theology between the word of God and experience. While there has excellent recent work in theology on the question of evil,⁶⁵ much contemporary theology, particularly those associated with theology that claim to center on the Word of God, often occur in a framework divorced from lived experience. In her recent book *Theology and the End of Doctrine*, Christine Helmer traces the origins of this divorce between the Word of God and human experience in contemporary theology.⁶⁶ For Helmer, the division finds its roots in Albrecht Ritschl's neo-Kantian interpretation of Luther's teaching on justification by faith, in which Ritschl interprets ethics as a natural expression of 'effective justification' but rejects Luther's metaphysics and mysticism. Twentieth century theologians, such as Emil Brunner, adopted this division between the Word of God and experience and intensify it, such that nature, mysticism, and experience are seen as being wholly antithetical to the word of God. The ultimate fruition of this division occurs with the so-called Yale School of Theology, which,

⁶⁵ See, for example, Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010); Emile Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁶⁶ Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2014).

influenced by Wittgenstein's understanding of language games and Geertz's understanding of culture, views doctrine as the cultural-linguistic discourse that shapes, molds, frames, and constitutes experience for a particular community, but rejects the metaphysical and mystical elements shared by other Christians and the larger world.⁶⁷ The theological task under this picture is to examine the grammatical rules operative in Christian discourse and not to appeal or reflect upon the nature of experience.⁶⁸ For Helmer, this emphasis on doctrine as a language game cuts doctrine off, not only from shared human experience, but from the end and purpose of doctrine, namely to point to the living God; doctrine becomes merely a way to maintain a particular historical community's identity.⁶⁹

With Helmer, the dissertation wishes to challenge the sharp division between the Word of God and experience present in contemporary theology. The particular contribution of this dissertation is to show the ways the emphasis on the Word of God in Luther's theology occurs within a context of the question of good and evil. This context entails a very different understanding of the Word of God from many theologians who claim the word of God as the ground and basis for all Christian theology. While Martin Luther shares the belief that theology depends upon the Word of God, for Luther, the problem to which the Word of God responds is not primarily an

⁶⁷ See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), esp. 16-31.

⁶⁸ For excellent examples of the fruits of the so-called Yale School, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2004) and *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Tanner's methodology operates under this division. Her early work on God and creation, for example, investigates the grammatical rules surrounding the ways Christian theology has employed the concept of creation. The question here is about rules for discourse within a particular community and shows little interest in questions of experience, particularly the experience of evil. *Christ the Key*, in large part, is written in a hypothetical tone—if we take Christ to be the key to all existence, what follows? In her favor, this method presents a fallibilism to theological claims that recognizes the historical and cultural limitations of one's own theological positions; further, her bracketing of the questions that arise from experience frees Tanner to creatively explore the implications of ideas. Yet, the limitations are strong: her work seems to operate solely in the realm of ideas, such that the implied audience is an ideal knower and not, in the first place, a sinner needing redemption. The existential import of the argument is almost wholly left out of the work in favor of an incisive, but theoretical, examination of ideas.

⁶⁹ Helmer's argument here is particularly directed at Bruce Marshall.

epistemological question concerning revelation and the knowledge of God,⁷⁰ nor is doctrine merely a cultural-linguistic discourse that frames experience; rather the word of God is good news that comes to those who experience evil in the forms of sin, death, and the devil. While the Word of God is external, the reality of sin and evil are ever present elements of human life—the Word of God as Gospel is response to the rich experiences and texture of life. Implicit in this emphasis is the claim that only a theology that takes evil seriously is worthy of a hearing.

Second, the dissertation intends to reassert the importance of an affirmation of creation and created goods within the prophetic critique of sin and evil. Much contemporary theology engages in the necessary and prophetic critique of sinful systems of power. Given the widespread evils of genocide, displacement of citizens due to war, economic and sexual exploitation, racism, sexism, environmental destruction, dehumanizing labor practices, human rights abuses, and the injustices of empire and colonialism, this prophetic critique has been and is a compulsory and indispensable task. To not call out these evils is to ignore injustice and to allow the *status quo* to go unchallenged.⁷¹ In order to contest the implicit and explicit manners in which Christianity and theology cover over, ignore, and perpetuate the horrors wrought by misuses of power and privilege, much contemporary theological work draws heavily upon critical social theory and employs a hermeneutics of suspicion as means of exposing sin and power. These forms of critique, while necessary, run the risk of

⁷⁰ Here Luther diverges from Barth. While Luther and Barth share an emphasis on the fall of reason and the need for revelation, for Luther, the question of revelation is secondary to the question of good and evil, while for Barth, in a post-Kantian tradition, the question of revelation and knowledge occupy the primary place. This does not mean that Barth's theology can be reduced to the question of revelation; yet the question of revelation does receive stronger emphasis in Barth. For more on Barth, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), esp. 21-40 and 167-182. For an older, but still excellent study, see Hans Frei, *The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909 to 1922: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

⁷¹ See Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed., James Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 289-302.

denying the created goodness of existence that stands at the root of Christian faith. Unlike forms of philosophical analysis and reflection that engage in a totalizing critique of all existence, theology has an investment in affirming creation as God's gift, even in its state of sin. The question confronting theology, then, is how to engage in radical critiques of sin and evil, while also affirming the created goodness of existence.

The analysis of Martin Luther's theology, particularly his emphasis on the twofold reign of God provides a model for maintaining this balance. For Luther, theology must both critique sinful structures, but it also must see creation as the gift of God which is structured by God's goodness and love. While aspects of Luther's theological affirmations of God's role in creation may ultimately fall prey to some important contemporary critiques, particularly in relation to questions of gender, this dissertation nevertheless contends that he provides a framework for addressing the question of the relationship of good and evil.

Chapter 2/ Luther on Sin 1517-1518

The objective of this dissertation is to argue that Luther's mature thought provides a complex account of good and evil that both affirms the goodness of God and creation and, at the same time, maintains a realistic, multifaceted account of the nature of evil. The question of good and evil is one of the major animating forces in Luther's theology and, I claim, one of the abiding contributions Luther makes to contemporary thought. Luther's engagement with these questions, however, changes over time. In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I examine Luther's arguments concerning the concepts of sin and faith respectively in the early period of the Reformation (1517-1520). The purpose of doing so is twofold: first, these early engagements with sin and faith provide the basic framework for Luther's mature reflections. Attaining clarity on the character and implications of these concepts in this period will illuminate the developments and intellectual shifts in Luther's mature thought, show some of the reasons for these shifts, and, in future chapters, demonstrate how Luther both maintains a radical understanding of sin and evil without undermining the structures and motivations of the moral life.

Second, one of the major dialogue partners of this dissertation is Radical Lutheranism. In shaping their critique of contemporary religiosity and in articulating their normative vision of Lutheran theology, these thinkers draw heavily on Luther's early theological critiques. By examining these early texts, the dissertation will affirm with Radical Lutheranism the importance of Luther's robust vision of sin and the theological necessity of prophetically condemning it. At the same time, by tracing the ways Luther's thought develops beyond these early polemical engagements, the dissertation will argue that the prophetic critique of sin is not the only appropriate religious response to evil. As Luther's thought develops into more nuanced visions of the tragedies of life, Luther himself adopts a more pastoral approach to evil that seeks above all to care and console consciences. Theology itself, for Luther, is not simply prophetic condemnation, but also a form of pastoral care.

While Radical Lutheranism is thus correct in emphasizing this prophetic aspect of Luther's thought, their vision fails to capture the breadth of evil and the variety of responses to evil in Luther's mature thought.

In his 1515/1516 *Lectures on Romans*, Luther writes, "The whole purpose and intention of the apostle in this epistle is to break down all righteousness and wisdom of our own, to point out again those sins and foolish practices which did not exist (that is, those whose existence we did not recognize on account of that kind of righteousness), to blow them up and to magnify them (that is, to cause them to be recognized as still in existence and as numerous and serious), and thus to show that for breaking them down Christ and His righteousness are needed for us."¹ Just as Paul emphasizes sin so that its depth can be recognized in its true form, Luther's works from 1517 to 1519 magnifies the depth of the human sin to show the need for grace. Luther's understanding of sin in this period is radical: sin is not a mere weakening of the will, but a total bondage of the will to sin and a total perversity of self. All human being and doing are enmeshed in sin; neither good works, nor reason, nor free will, nor the very law of God provide grounds for justification. Because humans are so deeply entrenched in sin, one must begin theology with a radical critique that leaves a person no grounds for making a claim on God. Only through despair brought about through the recognition of sin will a sinner be able to properly receive God's grace as grace.

In order to explore Luther's radical understanding of sin and evil in this period, we will examine two central disputations, the *Disputatio contra scholasticam theologiam* (1517) and the *Disputatio Heidelbergae habita* (1518). In the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther's radical Augustinian understanding of sin leads him to reject the prevailing theology of his time. This chapter sets Luther against his scholastic interlocutors, particularly Gabriel Biel, in order to show the nature, structure,

¹LW 25:3; WA 56:3.

and implications of Luther's understanding of sin and how it requires a complete reconceptualization of ethics, soteriology, the law, Gospel, and good works. In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther advances and extends the account of sin developed in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*. In this work, Luther systematically dismantles all grounds for merit before God and shows the conditions on which one can please God—one can only be saved through God's free creative act. In order to receive this grace, a radical critique of sin is necessary; in this way, the Radical Lutherans correctly articulate Luther's early vision of the task of theology in response to evil.

Together these two works show the depth and power of Luther's understanding of sin. Sin is an all-encompassing power that effects all human motives and action apart from the grace of God. Even at its most sharp and polemical, however, I argue that Luther's concept of sin is formulated in relationship to the individual's fundamental trusts and thus never negates the goodness of created values. More specifically, because Luther does not critique all of human life as such, but the misuse and abuse that stems from inveterate self-love, even his radical critique of sin does not stand in contradiction to an affirmation of creation. By developing sin in terms of the fundamental trusts of an individual, Luther both provides the framework for a radical understanding of the depth and corruption of sin and yet, this understanding of sin does not deny a strong sense of God's presence in creation, even if he has not yet fully formulated this understanding.

I. The Late Medieval Context of Luther's Reflections: Gabriel Biel

The exact target of Luther's *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* has been a question of scholarly dispute. Many Catholic scholars have located the target exclusively with the nominalists, particularly with William of Occam and Gabriel Biel.² The reasons for this limitation are important: if Luther's polemic center only on nominalism, and nominalism can be shown to be an a-catholic

² See Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, trans. Ronald Walls (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1968), I:191-195.

tradition, then Luther's attack, right or wrong, deals with an already perverted form of faith. Luther's critique may be right, but it does not address important swaths of medieval Catholic thought; that is, Luther did not grasp the true Catholic tradition and so his critiques are not wrong, so much as limited to a very minor target.³

In an important article, "'*Iustitia Christi*' and '*Iustitia Dei*': Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," Heiko Oberman has shown that this argument fails on two fronts: first, both in the dispute and in later writings, Luther shows awareness of the difference between nominalists and the wider scholastic tradition. In the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther directs his critiques to specific groups. While in a number of these Luther directs his critique specifically against Biel and Occam,⁴ he also directs critiques against common teachings and opinions (*contra dictum commune* and *contra communenem*),⁵ against scholasticism more generally (*contra scholas*),⁶ against several authorities,⁷ against the philosophers (*contra Philosophos*),⁸ against the doctrine on morals (*contra Morales*),⁹ against the new dialecticians (*contra recen. Dialect.*),¹⁰ against the Cardinal (Pierre d'Ailly) (*contra Card.*)¹¹ and against all scholasticism (*contra omnes scholast.*).¹² Moreover, in his later *Disputation against the Antinomians* (1538), Luther argues that all the medieval theologians were Pelagians, but Occam and Biel were merely a more intense form.¹³ Oberman argues that Luther's ability to locate precise

³ See Heiko Oberman, "'*Iustitia Christi*' and '*Iustitia Dei*': Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 104-125.

⁴ Theses 10, 13, 20, 23, 43, 45, 54, 56, 57, 61, 90, 91, 92, 93.

⁵ Theses 1, 5, 18, 25.

⁶ Theses 31, 41, 50, 76.

⁷ Theses 33, 82.

⁸ Theses 39, 40.

⁹ Thesis 42.

¹⁰ Theses 46, 48.

¹¹ Theses 47, 48, 57, 93, 96.

¹² Thesis 35.

¹³ Oberman, "'*Iustitia Christi*' and '*Iustitia Dei*': Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," 109.

targets with different theses indicates he knew a wider tradition beyond his training in the *via moderna* and, therefore, that he saw Pelagianism not merely with the nominalists, but the wider preceding tradition. Second, Oberman argues that the central principle of Luther's thought, the identification of *iustitia Christi* with the *iustitia Dei*, that is, the claim that Christ is fully sufficient for salvation, stands as a critical principle over against all medieval theology, including Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent. Whereas in the medieval tradition, the *iustitia Dei* was the goal of the *viator* and that by which he or she was judged and the *iustitia Christi* was the motive grace that allowed a person to go on the way, for Luther, there is a complete identification of the two: the grace present in Christ is fully sufficient for salvation—no human act or conformity to grace need to be added to grace, for when one receives the righteousness of Christ, one receives the full righteousness of God.¹⁴ Luther's theology, therefore, has implications, not merely for the nominalist tradition, but for the entirety of the medieval tradition.

While Luther attacks more than merely the nominalist tradition, it is nevertheless true that the chief targets of his disputations are the nominalists.¹⁵ It will behoove us, therefore, to briefly examine central features of the late medieval and nominalist anthropology to see exactly how Luther develops his own account of sin.

¹⁴ Oberman quotes the extreme position of Biel: "If our merits would not complete those of Christ, the merits of Christ would be insufficient, yes, nihil." Oberman, "*Iustitia Christi*" and "*Iustitia Dei*": Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," 109.

¹⁵ The usefulness and legitimacy of the category "nominalism" is disputed. Obermann claims that there are four schools of nominalism, a conservative 'right wing,' a radical 'left wing,' an Occamist moderate position, and a syncretistic school. See Heiko Oberman, "Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism: With Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," *Harvard Theological Review* v. 53, No.1 (January 1960), 47-76. Damasus Trapp distinguishes two schools: a nominalist interested in 'logico-critical' and 'historico-critical' critiques of 13th century theology. Damasus Trapp, "Augustinian Theology of the 14th Century," *Augustiniana*, VI (1956), 146-274. William Courtenay sees three schools: the conservative Augustinian branch ('right-wing group' or 'historico-critical group'); the moderate, central or middle branch (Occam and Biel; 'logico-critical group'); and radical branch ('left-wing nominalism'). William Courtenay, "Nominalism and Late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Thought*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko Oberman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 26-58.

Nominalist anthropology centered around an ethic of holiness. Drawing on the epistemological claim that like can only be known by like, theologians assumed that one must become holy before one can stand before the holy God. The sacramental system of the Church functioned to aid the *viator* on the path towards holiness, from sin and death toward grace and eternal life. The beginning of the *viator's* path was in baptism which forgave the guilt of original sin, but did not remove the stain of concupiscence. Because concupiscence was still a part of the *viator*, he or she would fall into mortal sin in life and thus required the sacramental system of the church to restore him or her to grace. Through the sacrament of penance, the *viator* was restored into a state of grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) and could perform morally good works in a limited sense (*de congruo*) or truly meritorious acts (*de condigno*).¹⁶ At the end of life, the *viator* would hopefully die in the state of grace and then face the judgment of God. The basic condition for salvation was being made righteous or holy through cooperation with the grace of God.

A chief question for medieval thinkers concerned the predisposition for receiving grace and the meritorious of acts. For earlier medieval thinkers, like Thomas Aquinas, the *viator's* journey towards holiness began with an unmerited infusion of grace—one would receive the supernatural virtue of faith, which was a predisposition to act, and then, given this predisposition, one would in fact act and earn merits. While the early Thomas implies that God will not withhold grace to all who do their best, the mature Thomas maintains that human effort is itself the result of God's preparatory grace.¹⁷ In the later tradition, partially in response to the Condemnations of 1270 and 1277, which condemned, among other things, accounts of necessity that rendered human freedom

¹⁶ Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 38-39.

¹⁷ This brief summary follows Oberman's discussion in *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, trans. Paul L. Nyhus (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. 2002), 130. Late medieval thinkers tended to emphasize the early Thomas in response to the Condemnations of 1270 and 1277. As a result, the presentation of Thomas appeared semi-Pelagian.

moot, theologians shifted the relationship between human acts and divine acceptance. Duns Scotus, for example, denied that merits depended on supernatural infusions of love; rather, the merit was due to God's acceptance of moral actions—on this account, a human, by doing his or her very best, can merit grace apart from any supernatural infusion of *caritas*. The *viator* needed no extra grace or divine assistance in order to perform these moral actions—human nature was in itself sufficient to fulfill the commandments. Yet, for Scotus, this system avoids charges of Pelagianism because God predestined those whose works he would accept. Moreover, the relationship between God's grace and moral effort was not automatic, that is, God is under no external compulsion to recognize these moral works; rather, God covenanted in the *potentia ordinata* to give liberally to these small works.

Nominalist theology, especially the work of Gabriel Biel, adopted this understanding in large part. Yet, Biel put new emphasis on the *facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*, God does not deny grace to the one who does what is in him or her. Biel follows Dun Scotus in emphasizing God's acceptance of human works apart from a divine infusion of grace, yet he, like Occam, rejects Scotus' doctrine of predestination.¹⁸ For Biel, human moral effort apart from the divine infusions of grace or *caritas* was sufficient to earn God's favor. God does not eternally decide who will put forth this moral effort; rather, it was up to the individual to do what was in him or her. If one did what was in him or her, God would not refuse God's grace to the *viator*. While this seems to make human works the basis of salvation, Biel argues that human works as such do not compel God to dispense grace. God is no one's debtor and there is no direct proportion between God's reward and human acts;¹⁹ rather, in the *potentia ordinata*, God ordained and covenanted to give saving grace (*gratia gratum faciens*) to any person who will exercise his or her natural powers to love God supremely. While in *potentia absoluta* God was not required to give grace, God covenanted to this system of salvation so

¹⁸ Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 130.

¹⁹ Oberman, "Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism: With Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," 54.

that all those who do what is within them would receive grace. For Biel, once God decides to accept these actions, in the *potentia ordinata*, God is faithful to this covenant. While God rewards those who exert their effort to love God above all else, the system avoids charges of Pelagianism because God was under no compulsion to covenant to this system: God graciously accepts moral effort, and gives far more generously than the acts require. The preparation and condition for receiving grace, therefore, was doing everything within one's power to love God.

For Biel and Occam, the *facere quod in se est* entails an optimistic anthropology with a strong emphasis on human freedom. While Biel recognizes that human beings are *spoliatus a gratuitis et vulneratus in naturalibus* and that God alone can remove the stain of sin, he argues that original sin neither alters the freedom of the will nor does it destroy *syndresis*; rather, it merely weakens our rational capacities and our will.²⁰ Because the human will retains its freedom and its direction towards the good, humans are able to fulfill the commandments based on their own ability. In fact, Biel thought the natural person was not only able to fulfill the second table of the commandments, but even was able to love God absolutely without the assistance of grace. Biel describes a natural process by which a person ascends from a possessive self-love (*amor amicitie sui*) to a love of everything which is to his advantage (*amor concupiscentie*), including the highest good, God. Because the natural person can see that God is good for him or her, he or she can see that God is God as such, and thus moves to a pure love of God above all else (*amor amicitie*).²¹ This action can be an entirely natural movement, born of philosophical reflection on the good and through determined human effort.

²⁰ Gabriel Biel, "The Circumcision of the Lord," in Heiko Oberman *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 167. See also David Steinmetz, "Luther and Hubmaier on the Freedom of the Human Will," in *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 61.

²¹ Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967).

While Biel strongly emphasizes the ability for natural human capacities to love God above all else, he does not deny grace as such. In a sermon preached at the Cathedral of Mainz around 1460, “On the Circumcision of the Lord,” Biel describes the relationship between grace and human action. For Biel, human sin is of a serious nature such that only God can forgive sin and restore the original righteousness that belongs to the soul. Biel insists that only God removes sin and only God can confer grace, since “grace cannot be acquired through our works like other moral habits...If grace could come from the creature, a grace which would suffice unto salvation, then any creature would be able to save himself by his own natural powers, that is, do what only grace can do.”²² Biel insists that if we assume that grace is within human power, we are guilty of the error of Pelagius.

While Biel is conscious of the dangers of Pelagianism, he nevertheless puts a strong emphasis on human action as the grounds for receiving grace. Biel describes the effects of grace under three headings: grace (a) makes the recipient acceptable to God (b) it justifies (c) makes the works which result from it meritorious and worthy of eternal life.²³ For Biel, grace makes human nature acceptable to God through the ordained will of God: over and above normal moral action, God deems certain human actions worthy of eternal life through a special acceptance. Because God deems that these works are good, when one performs these works, grace makes the sinner acceptable to God, and thus grace justifies the sinner. This grace in response to human action entails both the forgiveness of sin and acceptance to eternal life. Finally, grace entails that one who is in a state of grace can perform meritorious actions.

For Biel, grace is both a reward for moral action and a necessary condition. That is, Biel argues that for an act to be truly meritorious, an act must be not simply performed correctly, in

²² Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” 167-168.

²³ Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” 168.

accordance with the letter of the law, but it must be prompted by grace.²⁴ The human is free to fulfill the commandments through his or her own power; yet God will only accept those formed in grace. That is, in order to please God, one must not only fulfill the law according to the substance of the act (*quoad substantiam actus*), but also according to the intention of the lawgiver (*quoad intentionem precipientis*). According to the substance of the deed, the goodness of the act depends on its conformity to the dictates of right reason; according to the intention of the lawgiver, some good acts may require special conditions beyond the demands of the law. For example, it is possible for the sinner to love God in accord with the substance of the command, yet God will only accept as meritorious those works which are performed in cooperation with infused charity.²⁵ The infusion of grace is thus necessary in order for God's acceptance of the action. Biel's reasoning here rests on the grounds that the moral actor must be a friend of God and not an enemy to receive rewards and only God can make this covenant. So, while the sinner cannot promote himself from a state of sin to a state of grace, for this requires the infusion of grace, the sinner can get to the position where he stops sinning and loves God for his own sake, a position in which God, at a certain point, will not refuse God's grace.²⁶

While Biel argues that grace is thus necessary for God's acceptance, it is not sufficient for meritorious moral action. Biel adopts an extreme position: Christ's work is nothing without human effort: "If our merits would not complete those of Christ, the merits of Christ would be insufficient, yes, nihil."²⁷ In order for an act to be meritorious, the free will is required. "Grace does not determine the will. The will can ignore the prompting of grace and lose it by its own default. The

²⁴ "No act should be accepted as meritorious unless it be prompted by grace." Biel, "The Circumcision of the Lord," 170.

²⁵ Oberman, *Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, 160-184. Steinmetz, "Luther and Hubmaier on the Freedom of the Will," 63.

²⁶ Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 175.

²⁷ Quoted in Oberman, "'Iustitia Christi' and 'Iustitia Dei': Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification," 102

prompting of grace is toward meritorious acts for the sake of God.”²⁸ This grace prompts us to love God above all things and in all things, that is, to seek after the glory of God as the goal of every action, and to prefer the ultimate above one’s self and everything else, yet it is the free will which implements these promptings. It should be clear here that while grace is supernatural, it depends upon human action—grace is the recognition of good human action and does not determine human action as such.

For Biel, grace is not an acquired virtue, but it is infused. Like an acquired habit, grace accomplishes something in the soul similar to a naturally acquired habit, although in a more perfect fashion. Whereas natural acts become permanent qualities of the soul through repetition and prompt the individual to repeat the same act, grace elevates human power beyond itself, so that acts that had been turned towards evil are now redirected towards God. While Biel employs the language of infusion here, his meaning differs significantly from Thomas. Whereas for Thomas grace is infused supernaturally and then becomes a habit, Biel rejects all supernatural *habitus* as a threat to human freedom. For Biel, the merit of the action is not due to a supernatural infusion, but to God’s covenant to accept the actions as meritorious. The actions themselves do not require supernatural power under the *potentia ordinate*, but can be performed *ex puris naturalibus*. Grace is not a supernatural action at all, but is part of the goodness of God’s general rule of creation.²⁹

For Biel, grace leads, assists, and directs in order that one may be prompted to correspond with divine love. Because sin does not fundamentally leave the sinner in bondage, but is a weakening of the will that can be overcome through moral effort, grace does not fundamentally alter the person nor remove sin as such, but rather strengthens the human power against the remaining pull of sin. Biel employs the illustration of a bird with a stone tied around its neck: if sin is the stone, grace does

²⁸ Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” 170.

²⁹ Oberman, “Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism: With Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance,” 65-66.

not remove the weight so much as gives strength to the wings so that the bird no longer notices it. Thus, while the individual can love God through his or her natural powers alone without grace, the individual can never love God as perfectly or as easily as with grace. That is, grace makes it easier to perform tasks that otherwise could be performed naturally. Grace is an aid and a necessary condition. Oberman argues that Biel limits the role of grace, as he is concerned to protect human freedom. He writes, “Here not sin but grace appears to be the rival of freedom...Sin is not a power *per se*, depreciating the powers of the will, but only so in relation to God. Grace, always understood as the neutralizer of sin, does not liberate and heal the will; but it is only a status required of man by God, making grace a harmless competitor of free will.”³⁰ While sin makes it harder to do the good, the will is free to choose good and to love God above all else.

It is important here to stress two points: first, for Biel, God is gracious in awarding good deeds with eternal salvation, not because of the inherent merit of the work, but because of the divine covenant to accept these works as such. Second, however, because God’s choice is definitive, salvation in fact depends entirely on the *viator’s* efforts.³¹ Through doing what is in one, one can reach the preparatory status to receive grace. Once grace is received, one is still responsible to employ free will in obeying God’s commands. Oberman argues, for Biel, grace is not the root, but the fruit of the preparatory good work.³²

For Biel, the *viator* thus must make himself or herself worthy to receive this grace by doing what is in him or her. He writes, “Thus God has established the rule that whoever turns to Him and does what he can will receive forgiveness of sins from God. God infuses assisting grace into such a

³⁰ Oberman, “Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism: With Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance,” 65-66.

³¹ Louis Dupré, *Passages to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 205.

³² Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 164.

man, who is thus taken back into friendship.”³³ This *facere quod in se est* was a universal demand, in that everyone had to do what was in them, yet it admitted to different interpretations depending on one’s ability and knowledge. Because Christians have received the new law in Christ, more was required of them, that is, they must detest sin and adhere to God more fully than those who did not receive the new law.

Biel provides an illustration to describe this relationship between God’s grace and human efforts. He describes the *ordo salutis* thusly: imagine a king who shows mercy to anyone who will embrace his friendship, provided they mend their ways and follow his commands. Because the king is gracious, he gives a ring to all who accept his friendship and promises to reward everyone beyond the value of the act itself whenever they do something to benefit the king. The king not only decides to accept these works, but puts stones in the ring that encourages and strengthens the bearer to resist sin and perform morally good actions. Biel argues that the king resembles God: God graciously set up a system in which God will save all those who commit themselves to loving God above all else, and provides grace to strengthen them on their way. Biel writes, “How could one ever praise highly enough the clemency and the preciousness of the gifts of such a king? Behold, such is our King and Savior! The gift is grace, which is bestowed abundantly on us, which is to the soul what the ring is to the body in the parable.”³⁴ This illustration makes clear that the *facere quod in se est* applies not only to the preparation for grace, but to the entire life of the Christian: while grace makes it easier to love God, the demand is never lessened by the infusion of grace. While it becomes easier as the will is made stronger, the human will is still responsible for the actions, while God is responsible for rewarding these actions according to the covenant. Moreover, God on this picture is always responsive—while God has foreknowledge of who will and will not meet the conditions,

³³ Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” 173.

³⁴ Biel, “The Circumcision of the Lord,” 173.

God does not predestine them as such. God rewards moral effort, but does not choose who will put forth this effort.

While Biel recognizes that human beings can love God above all else for God's own sake and that God would grant mercy to those who do their best, this was not an easy requirement to meet. Biel's sermons emphasize that God will punish those who do not do what is in them and will only save those who put forth effort.³⁵ Yet, this hope was always uncertain: while the *viator* can be certain of the conditions of grace and forgiveness, that God is faithful to the covenant, he or she could not be certain if he or she had in fact done his or her best. Without a special revelation from God, no one could be absolutely certain if he or she was saved. For Biel, one could have conjectural certainty of salvation—for example, Biel thought that if one delighted in good works or had a feeling of peace of conscience, then there was grounds for hope; yet Biel warns such signs might also be deceptions of the devil. Thus one always lived between hope and fear, in a pious doubt without any final certainty of salvation.³⁶

In summary, for Biel, salvation depends on God's grace and on human work. It depends on God's grace insofar as human works naturally do not merit salvation and only receive their dignity insofar as God covenanted to accept them. Within the ordained power, however, humans must continually strive to do all that is in them to love God above all else. The human will has both the power and ability to love God—while sin weakens the will, one who commits himself or herself to God can overcome this error and choose the good.

II. *Disputation against Scholastic Theology (1517)*

Martin Luther's early reflections on sin and the nature of religious subjectivity focus on dismantling Biel's and, more generally, scholastic theology's, understanding of anthropology, grace,

³⁵ Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 21-23.

³⁶ Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 204-230; See also Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 37-44.

and God's work. David Steinmetz argues that Luther's rejection happens in two steps: in the early work, up until 1515, Luther retained a number of the same formulations as Biel and the nominalist tradition;³⁷ during the *Lectures on Romans* (1515-1516) through the *Bondage of the Will* (1525), he refined his critique and rejected the nominalist theological language as itself inimical to proper theology.³⁸ The *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* is the sharpest indictment of the movement and the culmination of his earlier reflections. As a genre, the disputation was designed either as a way for a professor to test a student's ability to argue and analyze a topic through a series of theses or as a way for colleagues to discuss a contentious topic. Robert Kolb argues that the theses did not necessarily represent the views of the authors nor were they fully developed arguments—rather, they were a way to discuss central issues through articles for dispute.³⁹ As academic theses, however, they raised sharp, incisive critiques and problems that required academic and rational acuity.⁴⁰

Luther's critique of the scholastic system takes aim at dismantling Biel's anthropology. Luther's concern here is for an accurate account of what it means to be a self. Luther does this by drawing a division between Augustinian anthropology focused on sin and grace and the underlying philosophical anthropology of Biel and Scholasticism, which Luther claims derives from Aristotle.⁴¹ Luther's central claim in the disputation is that if one takes an Augustinian doctrine of sin seriously, the entire edifice of the preceding theology falls apart. For Luther, a true understanding of the depth

³⁷ Steinmetz, "Luther and Hubmaier on the Freedom of the Will," 63-67. For a short discussion that summarizes recent research into the early Luther, see Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 45-84. See also Heiko Oberman, "Facientibus Quod In Se Est Deus Non Denegat Gratiam: Robert Holcot O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology," in *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 84-103.

³⁸ Steinmetz, "Luther and Hubmaier on the Freedom of the Will," 63.

³⁹ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 18-19.

⁴⁰ Christine Helmer, "God from Eternity to Eternity: Luther's Trinitarian Understanding," *The Harvard Theological Review* vol. 96, no. 2 (April 2003), 127-146.

⁴¹ WA 1:224; LW 31:9. Theses 1-3. Luther began his study of Augustine in the autumn of 1509, using an edited edition titled *Aurelii Augustini opuscula plurima*. In the winter semester of 1509-1510 at Erfurt, Luther annotated *De Trinitate* and *De Civitate Dei* and saw even then a deep contrast between Augustine and Aristotle. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 159.

of sin requires a recasting of all theology. Luther structures his arguments to show this difference: he begins by announcing the seriousness with which he will take Augustine's understanding of sin as it is opposed to Aristotle's anthropology (theses 1-3) and then describes what this means for the freedom of the will (4-26). If the will is in bondage and does not therefore possess the type of freedom Biel ascribes to it, then the nature of salvation and predestination (27-36), ethics and the relationship of Christianity to philosophy (37-53) must be rethought. Finally, he argues that the central theological terms of law, works, and grace must be given a new interpretation (53-97). This structure shows the extent and depth of sin: for Luther, sin is not a mere weakening of the will, but is a total bondage that infects all areas of human life.

For Luther, the basic presupposition of Biel's anthropology is the *facere quod in se est*. As we have seen, this entails that one possesses a relatively healthy mind that can know and will the good, and the person is rewarded as they put forth moral effort. In his early works, Luther agreed to this view—in the early parts of his *Lectures on Romans*, for example, Luther writes, “To be sure, I admit that it is true that a person with this attitude can do and will some good things, but not all of them, for we are not so entirely inclined to evil that no portion which is inclined toward the good remains in us, as is clear in the *synteresis*.”⁴² Even as Luther argues we have a natural inclination towards the good, he worries that we are inevitably curved in on ourselves and that we can do nothing but love ourselves. Over the course of the *Lectures on Romans* Luther abandons even this small account of natural goodness and argues that the natural incurvature corrupts the human will so deeply that even the *synteresis* is corrupted and the very idea of a natural love of God is nothing but a pious illusion. Even as we seek to love God, we only do so for ourselves—we naturally do not love God, but we inevitably use God and all goods for our own ends. We have some sense of the good and what

⁴² LW 25:222; WA 56:236. Translation mine. The English translation does not include the “not” in “for we are not so entirely inclined to evil” and thus misses the entire thrust of Luther's argument here.

things are good, yet Luther argues, we only ever use the good for our own selfish ends. In commenting on Romans 8:3, Luther argues:

It is certainly true that the law of nature is known to all men and that our reason does speak for the best things, but what best things? It speaks for the best not according to God but according to us, that is, for things that are good in an evil way. For it seeks itself and its own in all things, but not God...Hence knowledge and virtue and whatever good things are desired, sought, and found by natural capacity are good in an evil way. For they are not brought into relation to God but to the creature, that is, to oneself.⁴³

Because we love all in relation to ourselves, the one who does what it is in them can only bring things into their own self-love and never learn to love God alone.

Retaining this Augustinian theme of the natural incurvature of the self, Luther begins the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* by claiming that at root, the person is evil. Drawing on Matthew 7:17-18, in the fourth thesis, Luther announces the central thesis of the disputation which he will develop throughout: “It is therefore true that man, being a bad tree, can only will and do evil.”⁴⁴ Just as a bad tree cannot bear good fruit, if at root human nature is evil, the person cannot do good works. This thesis, even though brief, introduces a radical sense of evil: sin and evil are not to be identified merely with sinful actions (sins) but with the total corruption of the individual, a corruption that goes to the root of the person. The problem is not that the visible actions of a person are malformed, but the tree, the deep root of action, is evil. Luther does not argue for this position nor provide a straightforward history of the idea of sin or a narrative into its origins—rather Luther merely asserts the depth of human corruption and then traces the consequences of this view. This claim uproots the central idea of the *facere quod in se est*: if the person does what is in

⁴³ LW 25:344-345; WA 56:355-356. See James M Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 91-94.

⁴⁴ LW 31:9; WA 1:224. Thesis 4.

them, and the person is at root evil, no matter what they do, they will not do good, but always only evil. Sin runs to the very core of the person.

Due to the depth of sin, Luther attacks the scholastic understanding of the will. Whereas Biel argued that will was free to choose to love God above all else through its own natural capacities, Luther emphatically denies this freedom. Because the fundamental disposition of the self is evil, again a claim he simply takes as axiomatic, he claims that the will by nature cannot choose between good and evil. The will is not in a neutral position from which it can choose the good for its own sake; rather, the will is always already structured by a perverse self-love that loves one's own good above the common good. Moral decisions are not neutral, but already weighted toward self-centered love—the will is therefore not free to choose the good, but is in bondage.⁴⁵ Luther is careful here to claim that the will itself is not by nature or essentially evil for this would lead to Manicheanism; nevertheless, he argues that the will is innately and inevitably evil and corrupt apart from the grace of God.⁴⁶ One is naturally in bondage to self-love at the expense of God.

It is important to see here that Luther's understanding of the total corruption of the will is not concerned with outward action as such, but with the relationship of the person's trusts and loves to God. While one can outwardly conform to the good, that is, one can do acts that appear good to others, by nature one cannot conform to the law's demand for the pure love of God. In fact, the will is in a state of rebellion (*rebellio*)⁴⁷ against God: instead of allowing God to be God, the human wills to be God. "17. Man is by nature unable to will God to be God. Indeed, he himself wills to be God,

⁴⁵ 5. It is false to state that man's inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free, but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion. 6. It is false to state that the will can by nature conform to correct precept. This is said in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel. WA 1:224, LW 31:9. Theses 5 and 6.

⁴⁶ LW 31:9-10; WA 1:224. Theses 8 and 9.

⁴⁷ LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 30.

and does not want God to be God.”⁴⁸ For Luther, instead of obediently loving God’s goodness, the person naturally wants to follow his own desires and therefore makes himself a god over his own life. Because the self wills to be God, and this is its fundamental, natural disposition, it is impossible to love God by nature—the very idea of loving God, of overcoming our innate self-love to love the highest good, is “a fictitious term, a chimera.”⁴⁹

The bondage of the will, this natural love of self against the love of God, entails that all actions apart from the grace of God are performed in sin. Luther insists on the full perversity of corruption: it is not merely that the will sometimes chooses good and other times chooses evil; rather, the human will is so corrupt that it always conforms to errors apart from the grace of God.⁵⁰ Any act done according to nature alone apart from the grace of God, therefore, is an act of concupiscence against God and is therefore evil.⁵¹ Prior to receiving grace, there are no good works, but only rebellion against grace.⁵² The will thus cannot love God, but can act out of a perverse self-love.

Luther’s picture of the self entails that the self fundamentally only trusts and loves itself. This conception of sin undermines the edifice of Biel’s thought, soteriologically and ethically. Soteriologically, Luther argues, that if the self is completely corrupted apart from the grace of God, then the person cannot prepare himself or herself for grace. If every act is born of a perverse nature, then no matter how hard one works to love God, one will always only reproduce the state of corruption. Doing all that is in one (*facere quod est in se*) does not remove obstacles to grace,⁵³ nor can

⁴⁸ LW 31:10; WA 1:225. Thesis 17. (Translation mine). Oswald Bayer argues that the phrase “*potest homo naturaliter velle deum esse deum*” is a direct quote of Occam and Biel and thus the thesis is highly polemical in nature. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 182.

⁴⁹ LW 31:10; WA 1:225. Thesis 18.

⁵⁰ LW 31:10; WA 1:224. Thesis 15.

⁵¹ LW 31:10; WA 1:225. Theses 21-22.

⁵² LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 30.

⁵³ LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 33.

humans approach God or turn to God through their own ability.⁵⁴ The soteriological claim that God will not refuse grace to do those who do what is in them, therefore, is rendered moot by the claim of the total corruption of the self. Doing what is in one, if one is at root evil, merely reproduces evil.

Against Biel's understanding of salvation, of human works meriting God's acceptance, therefore, Luther strongly emphasizes that grace alone is sufficient for salvation. Whereas for Biel, grace was a response to human effort, for Luther, grace produces conversion.⁵⁵ Because grace precedes moral action and does not result from it, grace entails predestination. This again contrasts with Biel—whereas Biel argued that God foreknows the predestinate, but does not determine who is predestined, Luther declares that predestination is the only means to receive grace: “The best and infallible preparation for grace and the sole disposition toward grace is the eternal election and predestination of God.”⁵⁶ Luther emphasizes the particularity and efficacy of predestination: predestination does not merely entail God covenanted to certain conditions for salvation that the human can or cannot conform to; rather God elects individuals such that the predestined, once chosen, cannot be damned.⁵⁷ God's election does not depend upon merit, nor human effort, nor, as in Biel, does God respond to human action; rather, God gracious election saves wholly from itself. By declaring that God's eternal election is the sole basis for salvation, Luther undermines any human grounds for a claim on God—God's predestination is particular to the individual person and utterly sufficient for salvation and human action cannot change God's decisions.

Ethically, Luther argues that this understanding undermines the philosophical grounds on which Biel, and more widely, medieval anthropology stood, namely Aristotle's anthropology. In this disputation, Luther's critiques against Aristotle are strongly worded: “41. Virtually the entire *Ethics* of

⁵⁴ LW 31:10-11; WA 1:225. Thesis 26.

⁵⁵ LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 27.

⁵⁶ LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 29.

⁵⁷ LW 31:11; WA 1:225. Thesis 31.

Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This in opposition to the scholastics. 44. Indeed no one can become a theologian unless he comes one without Aristotle. 50. Briefly, the whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light.”⁵⁸ In a letter he sent to his teacher, Jodokus Trutfetter, just prior to the public disputation, Luther wrote, “Should Aristotle not have been a man of flesh and blood, I would not hesitate to assert that he was the Devil himself.”⁵⁹ Theodor Dieter notes that scholars must be careful in assigning a reference to Luther’s understanding of Aristotle: by ‘Aristotle,’ Luther can mean the historical Aristotle, the medieval employment of Aristotelian ideas in philosophical or theological works, the medieval curriculum, philosophy generally, or reason.⁶⁰ In the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther’s target is both the historical appropriation of Aristotle (‘the whole Aristotle’),⁶¹ the role of Aristotle, particularly his logic, in theological training,⁶² and the writings of the philosopher. We will focus on the anthropological assumptions.

For Aristotle, ethics as such aim at the specifically human good, happiness. Aristotle assumes that the human being as such can be made good—that just as there is such thing as a good shield, a good painter or a good musician, there is also a good human being as such. One becomes good

⁵⁸ LW 31:12; WA 1:226. Theses 41, 44, 50.

⁵⁹ WABr I.88, 22-89, 29; 8 Feb 1517. Quoted in Heiko Obermann, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 121.

⁶⁰ Theodor Dieter writes that for Luther Aristotle is “a multifaceted entity. Since Luther refers to the Aristotle that can be found in his works (today) and to the Aristotle that has been received and transformed by philosophy, as well to the Aristotle of Scholasticism that has been integrated with theology, his relation to “Aristotle,” from a critically distanced perspective, can only be described by a series of antithesis with different referents. These forms of ‘Aristotle’ differ from one another in somewhat far-reachign ways, despite the obvious commonalities; even a grace criticism of Aristotle in the Middle Ages can appear as an interpretation. If we ignore this diversity and simply speak of “Aristotle” without any further qualification, we will be dealing with an abstract entity devoid of any specificity (which is gained through a particular context of thought).” Theodor Dieter, *Der jugne Luther und Aristoteles: Eine historisch-systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Berlin: Theologische Bibliothek Tapelmann, 2001), 217, 633. Quoted in Oswald Bayer, “Philosophical Modes of Thought of Luther’s Theology as an Object of Inquiry,” in *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Hockenberry Dragseth, trans. Jeffrey G. Silcock (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 16.

⁶¹ LW 31:12; WA 1:226. Thesis 51.

⁶² LW 31:12; WA 1:226. Theses 43-48.

through the development of fine and just habits, where a good habit is understood as an activity of the soul in accord with virtue over a complete life.⁶³ The key assumption is that one can achieve *eudemonia*, a happiness proper to humans, through the repeated exercise of virtue in accord with right reason.

Luther argues this understanding of human ethics lies on a faulty anthropology and therefore misconstrues human nature. Because we are corrupt to our core, we are not masters of our actions, but are always enslaved to sin.⁶⁴ Because the core of the self is corrupt, doing righteous deeds will not make us righteous—one cannot start from a crooked base and become upright through good acts; in fact, good acts themselves are impossible for one who is fundamentally corrupt. Only one who has been made righteous in their core, by the power of God’s grace, can perform righteous deeds.⁶⁵ Instead of good actions making one a good person, a fundamental reorientation of the self must occur by which one is able to do good deeds at all. To redeploy Luther’s favorite metaphor, fruits do not change the nature of the tree; rather, the tree determines the nature of the fruit. As such, Luther argues that Aristotle’s view of happiness contradicts Catholic doctrine⁶⁶—happiness cannot be achieved through human effort, because humans are too corrupt. The work of God’s grace must fundamentally reorient one’s being if one is to perform good actions.

Having argued that scholastic theology is grounded on the wrong sort of anthropology, and that this poses problems for both soteriology and ethics, Luther argues in the next set of theses that if the understanding of sin is correct, theology must rethink the relationship of grace, law, and human works. Concerning grace, Luther argues that grace does not simply make performing certain acts easier, nor is it a necessary condition for divine acceptance, rather, following his earlier claims

⁶³ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terrence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1985), Book I, Chapter 7 §15.

⁶⁴ LW 31:11; WA 1:226. Thesis 39.

⁶⁵ LW 31:12; WA 1:226. Thesis 40.

⁶⁶ LW 31:12; WA 1:226. Thesis 42.

about predestination, Luther claims that grace is fully sufficient for salvation. Whereas Biel argued that while grace is necessary for divine acceptance, it is not sufficient and requires supplementation by the free will, Luther argues that either grace is sufficient for an act to be meritorious or it means nothing.⁶⁷ Grace does not need supplementation through human free will, but is fully justifying. Because God's predestination is sufficient and determinative, the human will adds nothing to God's work for God has already done all that is needed.

Because God's grace is completely justifying, Luther therefore rejects Biel's understanding of meritorious actions. For Biel, as we have seen, one must draw a distinction between the substance of the act (*quoad substantiam actus*) and the intention of the lawgiver (*quoad intentionem precipientis*), such that God only accepts actions that both agree with the command in substance and, through grace, accord with the intention of the lawgiver. Against this, Luther argues that Biel does not understand the nature of grace. On the one hand, Luther argues, Biel makes grace into a new law—if one can do a good work according to the substance of the act, but can only be accepted if grace is given, then grace does not aid the person, but becomes a new burden one must meet. For Luther, this entails that grace is actually a new law that “is more hateful than the law itself,”⁶⁸ for meritorious acts would require conditions impossible for humans to fulfill. On the other hand, this understanding entails that one can fulfill the law naturally outside of the grace of God. This means that human sin is not perverse, but can operate well without God's aid, which not only posits a too positive view of human anthropology, but also makes God's action seemingly unnecessary for salvation.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ LW 31:13; WA 1:226. Thesis 54.

⁶⁸ LW 31:13; WA 1:227. Theses 57-60.

⁶⁹ LW 31:13; WA 1:227. Thesis 59. Luther returns to this argument in the 1521 *Against Latomus*; “They quench and disembowel it by adding this insipid gloss: “God's commandments may be fulfilled in two ways: one way according to the actuality of the deeds; another, according to the intention of him who commands.” By finding this way of escape, how neatly they have cheated the truth! From this they deduce that grace is not needed in order to fulfill God's commands, but only for the fulfillment of a divine intention which is exacted above and beyond the commandments. Thus God is an unjust overseer who is not satisfied with the carrying out of the orders, but demands

Given his rejection of Biel's understanding of grace, Luther similarly rejects Biel's understanding of the law. For Biel, the law can be fulfilled through natural human effort—the commandments are clear and can be fulfilled through human determination. The preacher's job for Biel is to encourage moral effort and conformity to the moral law through publicizing the law and offering threats and hope for rewards. Conformity to the law leads to salvation. For Luther, on the other hand, the total corruption of the self entails that the law not only cannot be fulfilled, but stands as an oppositional force to our natural inclinations. Unlike in his mature thought, Luther here does not describe the law in terms of its ability to reveal sin (theological use), nor its ability to constrain evil (political use); rather, he focuses on the disjunction between the law's demands and the human ability to fulfill them. More precisely, because of spiritual pride and the deep corruption of the self, Luther argues that it is utterly impossible to fulfill the law in any way without the grace of God.⁷⁰ Luther affirms the goodness of the law: the law is God's law and expresses God's will. It is important to see here that Luther is not an antinomian—the law is not the problem, for the law perfectly expresses God's will. Rather, the problem is with human sin and our inability to fulfill the law. Precisely because the law is good, the law is bad for the natural human will.⁷¹ When the evil will encounters the good law, Luther claims a war results: “71. Law and will are two implacable foes without the grace of God. 72. What the law wants, the will never wants unless it pretends to want it out of fear or love.”⁷² Luther does not deny that the one can outwardly conform to the law⁷³ —in fact, he argues that while the will always opposes the law, the hands are always ready to do the works of the law.⁷⁴ Yet, he argues, the will, the center of the self, never affirms the law itself, but naturally

that they be carried out by grace. So grace is not grace, but a sort of exaction. Free will certainly satisfies Gods' law, but God is not content with this.” LW 32:152-153. See chapter 3.

⁷⁰ LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 68.

⁷¹ LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 70.

⁷² LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 71.

⁷³ LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 76.

⁷⁴ LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 77.

always only seeks to conform to the law for self-serving reasons.⁷⁵ No matter how much it outwardly conforms to the law, the will secretly wishes that there was no such thing as the law at all, so that the will could be entirely free of constraint. The will naturally opposes having the law imposed on it; if it does desire the law, it is only done out of self-love.⁷⁶ Either way, the will hates the law of God, which demands the individual to love God above all else. Because the law is good, and yet the will hates it, Luther concludes the will must be evil.⁷⁷ Because of the perverse desire at the root of moral conformity, Luther polemically writes “79. Condemned are all those who do the works of the law,”⁷⁸ but he adds “80. Blessed are all those who do the works of the grace of God.”⁷⁹

For Luther, because the will hates the law and can always only hate the law, merely proclaiming the law cannot reconcile the will to it. Neither the ceremonial law⁸⁰ nor the Decalogue itself⁸¹ are able to effect this conformity for the corruption of the will runs too deep. Against Biel’s sermons focusing on moral encouragement then, Luther argues that the sole cure to overcome the will’s natural intransigence is grace. In the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther defines grace as precisely that power which is able to reconcile the will to the law. He writes: “89. Grace as a mediator is necessary to reconcile the law with the will. 90. The grace of God is given for the purpose of directing the will, lest it err even in loving God.”⁸² Luther is careful here: grace does not merely make it easier to conform to the law nor does grace make good acts more frequent; rather, without grace, there are no acts of love at all. Grace is both necessary, such that outside of God’s grace it is impossible to fulfill the law,⁸³ and sufficient, if one receives God’s grace, one is justified.

⁷⁵ LW 31:14; WA 1:228. Thesis 78.

⁷⁶ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Theses 85-86.

⁷⁷ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Theses 87-88.

⁷⁸ LW 31:14; WA 1:228. Thesis 79.

⁷⁹ LW 31:14; WA 1:228. Thesis 80.

⁸⁰ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 82.

⁸¹ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 83.

⁸² LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 89-90.

⁸³ LW 31:13; WA 1:227. Theses 62-63.

That is, whereas Biel sees grace in quantitative terms, as that which makes conformity to the law easier, Luther sees grace in qualitative terms, where without grace good works are impossible.⁸⁴ Here, Luther describes grace as the good law (*lex bona*) in which one lives in the love of God, spread in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (which, as we will see, he will abandon the identification of law and grace by 1518).⁸⁵ Through this grace, we are able to love God above all else, even to the point of hating the self and loving God alone.⁸⁶ The person in grace aims rejects his or her will so thoroughly that he or she not only wills what God wills, but also aims to will whatever God wills, no matter its content.⁸⁷

For Luther, once one receives grace, one is not passive, but good works naturally flow from one who has been graced. Grace itself is always active and the person in grace performs good works—that is, Luther does not deny the importance of good works in the life of the Christian, though he does worry about the significance assigned to them.⁸⁸ Luther affirms that the grace of God has tangible effects in the life of the redeemed: while it is impossible for the natural person not to be angry or lust, by the grace of God one does not lust or become enraged;⁸⁹ the grace of God makes justice abound through Jesus Christ (75); grace directs the will to love God (90).

It is important to see here that Luther holds in 1517 that the sinner can do good with the grace of God—whereas Luther later will argue that the individual always sins even in grace (*simul*), Luther here holds that grace allows for good works. In this text, he recognizes that even in grace, the sinner is not able to fulfill the law perfectly, yet he wants to describe grace as that which makes the sinner able to fulfill the law.⁹⁰ Luther's struggles stem from Biblical passages that on the one hand

⁸⁴ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 91.

⁸⁵ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 84.

⁸⁶ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 95.

⁸⁷ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 96.

⁸⁸ LW 31:13; WA 1:227. Thesis 55.

⁸⁹ LW 31:15; WA 1:227. Thesis 67.

⁹⁰ LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 65.

indicate the continuing presence of sin in the redeemed and those that claim that the redeemed no longer sin. In 1517, he reconciles this by claiming that even good works are partially sins; as we will see, as he develops the idea of the two realms of existence, he will shift this partial answer for an account in which a person is both simultaneously completely a sinner and completely a saint.⁹¹ This new account of the two realms of existence, developed in response to the question of sin, will provide the framework for affirming the goods of creation, while also affirming the depth of evil.

Thus, in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther overturns the reigning understanding of the self. The understanding of human works, God's relationship to creatures, grace, the law, have all been reversed: works do not merit grace, but grace performs works; God does not accept human works, but God chooses those to save in predestination; doing what is in one does not lead to moral righteousness, but to self-pride. This work in particular shows the depth of Luther's critique: sin effects all aspects of human life. The *Heidelberg Disputation* intensifies this critique by examining the noetic effects of sin which do not appear here. Nevertheless, Luther's claim here is that the self is totally corrupt, unable to love God or to do the good.

Luther's break from the medieval tradition centers on the category of sin. For Luther, in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, the grounds for sin refer to the disposition in the self towards self-love, the natural incurvature of the self. Sin is not a category that is only disclosed in revelation, but it displays itself in human action consistently, even as it hides behind apparently good action. This is not to say that Luther thinks that sin is totally transparent to humans—as we will see in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues that sin cannot be understood in its depth without the mediation of the law and cross. Yet, while not directly experienced in its depth, Luther nevertheless thinks sin

⁹¹ See F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought On Justice, Law, and Society* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 1998), 41-71.

is an anthropological concept that describes a bound will. Sin refers to actual human dispositions and states that are daily known and experienced.

Because the category of sin is developed in relation to the idea of self-love, the fundamental construal of the problem of human life centers on misdirected trusts. Two consequences follow from this: first, because sin is entangled with a person's fundamental will, the response to sin requires a total transformation away from the bondage of the will towards the love of God. Gerhard Forde's description of justification as a matter of life and death is accurate: the sinner must die to sin and be raised to new life. That is, whereas Luther's contemporaries thought one could progress towards holiness, Luther argues that justification requires a qualitative action from God. Second, by locating sin in a person's trusts, Luther does not negate the values in creation. Sin is in the sinner's mistrusts and not in the constitution of the world as such. Creation is not the problem, but the sinner as sinner, is. If the world as such is not under a divine No, then the Christian response to various spheres of existence does not have to be limited to protest and rebellion, but instead can affirm various spheres of good

III. *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518)

In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther advances and radicalizes his interpretation of sin. The fundamental question of the *Heidelberg Disputation* concerns how an individual can be made righteous, or, what is the same thing for Luther, what grounds God's love for creatures. Whereas many interpreters focus on the epistemological implications of Luther's theology of the cross, I argue that the disputation is a tightly structured argument that progresses systematically in order to

reveal the full depth of sin.⁹² The first thesis poses the question of righteousness through the law;⁹³ the last thesis describes the grounds for God's love;⁹⁴ in between, Luther carefully constructs an argument that reveals the radical nature of sin. The disputation is structured to systematically to take down every possible avenue for the individual to make a claim on God: Luther shows the limits of God's law, human good works (1-12) the free will (13-17); and human reason (18-24). Sin not only effects the motive spring of action, but also infects the mind, reason, and one's basic perception of the world. After having declared a no against all human action (25-28), Luther describes the sole possibility for righteousness: God's action in creating beloved creatures.⁹⁵

The *Heidelberg Disputation* represents an advancement of Luther's doctrine of sin beyond the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* to a more positive theological program. Luther's argument aims to transform the reader: because of the depth of corruption, human pride and self-assurance must first be destroyed before the good news of God's graciousness can be proclaimed. The law, that which reveals the nature, depth, and breadth of sin, must come *first* so that one can hear the good news of the Gospel as good news. The radical doctrine of sin is thus deployed, not merely as an accurate anthropology, but as a way to prepare the reader to receive grace. The *Heidelberg Disputation*, therefore, is not a mere exercise in speculative theology, but as the theology of the cross more generally, is intended to develop a spiritual wisdom (*sapientia experimentalis*) that shapes the theologian into one who can hear and receive the word of God.⁹⁶ The work thus shows the ramifications for

⁹² See, for example, Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) and Ronald Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross: Resource for a Theology of Religions," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times* ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 228-246. I owe the insight into the unity of the Heidelberg Disputation to Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

⁹³ LW 31:39; WA 1:353. Thesis 1.

⁹⁴ LW 31:41; WA 1:354. Thesis 28.

⁹⁵ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 21.

⁹⁶ Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross: Resources for a Theology of Religions," 231.

Luther's doctrine of sin, both as it concerns the full corruption of the self and as it opens itself up to a new form of religious life.

(A) *The Law and Human Works: Theses 1-12*

The opening theses strike again at the heart of a form of religiosity that centers on human works. Unlike in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther does not make a general claim about the depth of corruption, but instead poses the living question about how an individual can be made righteous. Luther is not interested in an abstract account of the structures of human action, but in a concrete, existential question concerning the significance of human existence. In the first thesis, Luther gives a radical answer: "The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him."⁹⁷ Luther's thesis drastically recasts traditional religious understanding and takes a step beyond his position in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* concerning the law. To see the radical nature of the claim, it will be useful to contrast Luther's claim concerning the law, not with Biel as his place in Catholic theology is often questioned, but with the great doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas. This comparison will highlight the radical nature of Luther's claims.

For Thomas, as for Luther in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, the work of the Holy Spirit is identified with the new law. To see the significance of this identification, and its implications for religious life, it is necessary to examine his understanding of the concept law. For Thomas, a law is a rule and measure of acts which either commands or restrains action. More precisely, the law is "an ordinance of reason for the common good made by him who has care of the community and that is promulgated" (ST Ia-IIae, 90.4). The aim and purpose of the law is to lead its subjects to their proper virtue and to make those to whom it is given good (ST Ia-IIae, 92.1). Aquinas describes four types of laws: the eternal law, the natural law, human law, and the divine law. The eternal law is

⁹⁷ LW 31:39; WA 1:353. Thesis 1.

God's unchanging plan for the universe by which God rules, measures, and guides the whole of creation. Since the eternal law is a description of God's providence, Thomas argues that the eternal law is promulgated in the constitution of creaturely being: the eternal law is imprinted on each creature as the inward motive principle which drives it towards its proper end (ST Ia-IIae, 91.2, 93.4).⁹⁸ Rational creatures are subject to the eternal law in a special manner: while, like the rest of creation, they have an inward motive principle which leads them towards their end, they also have some knowledge of the eternal law imprinted on their minds (ST Ia-IIae, 93.6). Rational creatures are not only naturally inclined toward happiness, they also have some knowledge of what this happiness entails. This knowledge, however, is imperfect: because the eternal law is God's providential plan for creation, God alone knows the eternal law as it is in itself (ST Ia-IIae, 93.2). Nevertheless, rational creatures have a limited knowledge of God's providential care according to their mode of being (ST Ia-IIae, 91.3 ad.1). That whereby the rational mind is inclined toward the good and has knowledge of the eternal law is the rational creature's participation in the eternal law, that is, the natural law. The natural law is our share in the eternal law, whereby we have a natural inclination to our proper end (ST Ia-IIae, 91.2) The natural law promulgates general moral rules--the first principle of practical reason is simply "Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided" (ST Ia-IIae, 94.2). Because of its general nature, the natural law does not instruct in particular cases and thus requires reason to be applied in particular cases. The particular determination of natural law are human laws—because human reason does not fully participate in divine laws, human reason is necessary to make particular determinations. These laws are good insofar as they accurately reflect the eternal law and are virtuous, just, possible, according to custom, suitable to time and place, necessary, useful, clear, and framed by the common law. Because natural

⁹⁸ We will see Luther adopt a modified view of this understanding of law in his mature thought. See Chapter 4.

law only directs towards our natural ends, and because of the uncertainty of human judgment, Thomas argues the divine law is also necessary (ST Ia-IIae, 91.4). The divine law is the specific commandments given in Scripture and it is necessary because it is only through the divine law that we are directed to our true last end, eternal happiness.

For Aquinas, the divine law is divided into the Old Law and the New Law (ST Ia-IIae, 91.5). Aquinas draws the division in terms of the Old Law being imperfect law in relation to the New Law. For Aquinas, the Old Law is imperfect in that it aimed at sensible earthly goods, it only orders humans externally, and is observed out of fear. The New Law, however, is perfect in that it aims at intelligible, heavenly goods, it orders humans internally, and, instead of acting out of fear, those who receive it, act out of love poured in them. Importantly, Thomas describes the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Gospel, as the New Law: “That which is preponderant in the law of the New Testament, and whereon all its efficacy is based, is the grace of the Holy Ghost, which is given through faith in Christ. Consequently the New Law is chiefly the grace itself of the Holy Ghost, which is given to those who believe in Christ” (ST Ia-IIae, 106.1). While the grace of the Holy Spirit is primarily inscribed onto our hearts, it is also written in the teachings of faith and in those commandments that direct human affections and action. Thomas is insistent that the healing power of the New Law retains primacy over the promulgation of new rules, for the New Law would kill us unless there was an inward presence of healing grace. Yet, as the New Law is given it allows humans to act of love instead of fear and by it humans are healed, it nevertheless is a law in that directs human action and aims to make them better. Thomas admits that in some way the New Law is more burdensome, as it forbids certain interior moments (ST Ia-IIae, 107.4) and leads to a harsher judgment for one who falls into sin (ST Ia-IIae, 106. 2, ad.2) but the healing power of the Holy Spirit mitigates these fears. The key point for our purposes is the identification of the Holy Spirit with the law—the gift of the Holy Spirit is the New Law.

As we have seen, in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther also described the work of the Holy Spirit as the good law (*lex bona*).⁹⁹ In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther, like Thomas, identifies the law with the law of God (*Lex dei*). Luther stresses the goodness of the law in the highest terms—the law of God is *saluberrima vitae doctrina*, the most salutary doctrine of life; it is holy, unstained, true, and just.¹⁰⁰ In the first thesis of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, however, Luther rejects this identification of the law, even in all its glory, with grace and the Holy Spirit. This represents a major conceptual shift in the understanding of the law. Whereas for Aquinas the New Law is both the Holy Spirit’s gracious infusion of love and, as a law, a rule and norm for behavior, for Luther the structure of any law, whether it is understood as the Decalogue, the ceremonial laws, or even the holiest law of God (*sanctissima lege Dei*) is fundamentally incapable of advancing humanity toward righteousness. This means that whereas Thomas sees the meaning and the purpose of the law as being that which makes humanity better, Luther rejects this function of the law. In thesis 23, Luther argues that the law functions in the exact opposite way: the law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges and condemns everything that is not in Christ.¹⁰¹ Thomas himself recognizes this function for the law; yet, for Thomas, the accusatory power of the law applies only to the Old Law, while for Luther this is inherent in the law as such (ST Ia-IIae. 106.4).¹⁰²

This shift in the understanding of the law leads to a different understanding of the ways in which the law fails. For Luther, the law does not fail merely because the human law interpretation misunderstands or misinterprets the eternal law, nor is the law a mere human invention and therefore limited; rather, the very standards and norms that God intends for the world, the law in its

⁹⁹ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 84.

¹⁰⁰ LW 31:15; WA 1:228. Thesis 1.

¹⁰¹ LW 31:40; WA 1:354. Thesis 23.

¹⁰² This comes in the context of Thomas’s argument for the appropriateness of the New Law coming after the Old Law. “The New Law is the law of grace: wherefore it behooved man first of all to be left to himself under the state of the Old Law, so that through falling into sin, he might realize his weakness and acknowledge his need for grace.”

most fundamental form, is, as such, insufficient for creating human righteousness. The basic human problem does not concern a failure of the law or a failure of knowledge: the problem is not that we do not know the law nor that we merely need more motivation and then we will be able to enact the law; rather, Luther argues the problem runs much deeper. The nature of human corruption is such that the very law of God, at its very best, is incapable of correcting the basic crookedness of human existence.

The opening thesis, then, is intended to be totalizing: if the very law of God and the moral rules articulated therein are the highest good imaginable, and yet they are incapable of advancing humans towards righteousness, then no moral instruction can aid in helping humans attain righteousness. The second thesis makes this exact claim: “Much less can human works which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.”¹⁰³ If the law of God does not lead a person to the good, than no human activity or human work will be able to do so.

For Luther, the inability of the law of God and human actions to advance the creature towards righteousness leads to a reevaluation of human action. Whereas for medieval thinkers the moral order mapped onto the religious order, such that morally good acts could earn merits, for Luther, there are no good human action as such. This critique again is radical: Luther is not simply arguing that all human actions are crimes—in thesis 5, he explicitly argues that this is not the case, for crimes are acts that are clear and easily condemned and do not require theological reflection.¹⁰⁴ Nor is Luther concerned about the fact that saints sometimes sin and sometimes do morally good acts—he claims everyone already knows this. Rather, in theses 6 and 7, Luther argues that *all* acts,

¹⁰³ LW 31:43; WA 1:357. Thesis 2.

¹⁰⁴ 5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good) as though they were crimes. LW 31:45; WA 1:357.

even the good acts of the righteous person, are mortal sins if they are not done with the proper fear of God. Even when a righteous person does good actions, he or she still sins.¹⁰⁵

Luther's arguments about the nature of sin are based on a particular vision of the nature and order of the self. To examine this, we will briefly turn to Luther's 1521 commentary on the Magnificat, particularly his commentary on Luke 1:46 which will clarify ideas that are otherwise implicit in Luther's argument here.¹⁰⁶ In commenting on Mary's declaration, "My soul magnifies God, the Lord," Luther argues that Scripture divides the self into three parts: the spirit, the soul, and the body.¹⁰⁷ This division does not map onto moral qualities, for each of these parts and the nature of the person as a whole can be divided between the moral qualifications 'spirit' and 'flesh.' Rather, Luther claims the three parts refer to the basic structures of the self. For Luther, the spirit refers to the 'highest, deepest, and noblest part' of the individual by which the individual lays hold of the Word of God; it represents the basic forms of trust that inform all human actions. Unlike in Augustine or Plato, Luther sees trust as the basic category of the person, and not love. The soul is the same part of the person in nature, but performs different functions, namely it gives life to the body and is identified with reason. Yet there is an important difference between the soul's reason and the spirit's: whereas the spirit lays hold of incomprehensible things, the soul deals with reason and the visible and bodily things. The body refers to the physical body and its role is to carry out and apply in the world and in one's vocations that which the soul knows and believes.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ 6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless. 7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God. LW 31:45-46; WA 1: 357-358.

¹⁰⁶ While this text comes from a later period, this point helpfully highlights Luther's concern in the *Heidelberg Disputation*. Moreover, Luther's commentary on the *Magnificat* is a primary and central text in Luther's *theologica crucis*.

¹⁰⁷ In his more mature thought, Luther does not always retain the trichotomist idea of human nature. Nevertheless, Luther retains the idea that (a) a person's trusts are the fundamental and basic aspect of the self (b) the true location of sin is in the dispositions and faith.

¹⁰⁸ LW 21:302-309; WA 7:549-556.

For Luther, there is a hierarchy to this division: everything depends upon the soul being properly ordered in faith. To illustrate this, Luther compares the ordering of the soul to the tabernacle in Exodus. The tabernacle had three areas: the holy of holies, where God dwelled and there was no light; the holy place which was illumined by candlesticks; and the outer court which was open to the full light of the sun. For Luther, the Christian resembles this: like the interior darkness of the holy of holies, God dwells in the darkness of faith where there is no light and the Christian is called to trust and believe in the unseen grace of God that is far beyond comprehension; the spirit consists of reason, discrimination, knowledge, and understanding of the visible and bodily things; and the body manifests the Christian's works and his or her manner of life. If the spirit is not holy, if the center is not properly ordered, then nothing can be holy. That is, in a properly ordered soul, the spirit must be controlled by the light of faith so that it can enlighten reason, for reason is too feeble to deal with things divine; and reason must direct the body in accord with faith. Yet, the centrality of the spirit is complicated precisely because it depends on complete trusts: Luther describes it as the scene of the sorest conflict and the source of the greatest danger, because it requires radical faith in the promises of God which are themselves unseen and unproven.¹⁰⁹

Luther's account of human action, then, centers on the fundamental trusts and basic dispositions of the self. On his account, human action as such is a fruit and a consequence of the individual's basic trusts. The basic trusts that stand in the center of the soul are disjunctive and competitive. That is, at its root, the soul always trusts either God or the self—the self, in its sinful state, is in competition with God. Whenever a person acts, the act has a theological content—the act expresses either a fundamental trust in God or in oneself. To trust in God is to deny the self, while to trust in the self is to deny God and to take God's honor for oneself. In the explanation of thesis 7 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, he writes: “To trust in works, which one ought to do in fear, is

¹⁰⁹ LW 21:302-309; WA 7:549-556.

equivalent to giving oneself the honor and taking it from God, to whom fear is due in connection with every work. But this is completely wrong, namely to please oneself, to enjoy one's works, and to adore oneself as an idol. He who is self-confident and without fear of God, however acts entirely in this manner."¹¹⁰ Luther denies any neutral ground between these basic trusts—theologically evaluated, there are not neutral or indifferent actions, for actions always express the central trusts of the self.¹¹¹ One can either trust God or the self, but not both. This idea of trust in self should not, however, be interpreted crudely, as if self-love always appears as crass selfishness: rather, the *Heidelberg Disputation* precisely deals with the ways in which the trust in self drapes itself in forms of religiosity, concern for good works, humility, and care for the neighbor.

This theological anthropology that views the self in terms of basic trusts stands at the basis of Luther's claims in the theses 3-12 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, which concern the structures of moral action. In thesis 3, Luther argues that the external attractiveness of action is not theologically significant: in all likelihood, good works are mortal sins grounded in self-love.¹¹² Just as he argued that the perverse will is always ready to do externally good works in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, so here he claims that externally good actions are deceiving. This claim depends on a picture of the self that ranks the fundamental trusts above external actions. No matter what works appear in the light of day, the central theological dynamic concerns the moral and spiritual center from which the act springs.

Because the fundamental disposition of the self is naturally geared toward self-love at the expense of God, Luther argues that a person cannot change his or her own fundamental disposition; rather, only God can do this. To destroy the entrenched self-love, God must perform an alien work

¹¹⁰ LW 31:46; WA 1:358.

¹¹¹ 10. Indeed it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin. LW 31:47; WA 1:359.

¹¹² 3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins. LW 31:43; WA 1:356.

(*opus alienum*). Drawing on I Samuel 2:6, “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up,” Luther argues that this alien work is total: God cannot merely improve or modify a few aspects of the self or give a little bit more strength, but rather, God must kill the sinner in order to bring them to life.

For Luther, God performs this alien work by giving the sinner true self-knowledge through the law. Whereas the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* did not discuss this theological use of the law, that is, the function of the Law to reveal the depth of sin, in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues that the very purpose of the law is to shine light on the sinner’s true perversity. The law does this by showing us our nature: in light of the law, we see that we are “nothing, foolish, and wicked, for we are in truth that” and we find “in ourselves nothing but sin, foolishness, death, and hell.”¹¹³ The law makes one displeased with his or her own work—in all the work that we thought was beautiful, moral and good, there is in fact only ugliness, pride, and sin. This knowledge brings despair, such that God’s work appears unattractive and evil. Yet, because the despair in self opens up room for hope in God, God’s action here actually is an eternal good, for through it, the sinner learns to trust in God alone. God thus accomplishes God’s proper work (*opus proprium*), salvation, through its apparent opposite (*opus alienum*), death and destruction. Because God must kill and destroy the sinner, in thesis 4, Luther writes, “Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.”¹¹⁴ This creates a basic contrast: whereas human works appear good, but are actually evil, God’s work appears evil, but it is actually good.

When the sinner has been humbled, God works in the sinner and performs actions through her or him. Whereas in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther is unclear on the status of works performed with the grace of God, here he argues that, these new works are neither merits in

¹¹³ LW 31:44; WA 1:356.

¹¹⁴ “4. Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.” LW 31:44; WA 1:356.

themselves nor are they sinless.¹¹⁵ All works, even the works of the righteous are sinful. Drawing on Ecclesiastes 7:20, “Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins,” Luther argues that the phrase, “there is not a righteous man who does good,” entails that every act, even good acts performed with the grace of God, bear the trace of sin.¹¹⁶ Because only the righteous person could possibly do good, and because this verse denies that possibility, Luther argues no one ever performs truly righteous actions that God must recognize or accept. The sinfulness of the creature is too deeply entrenched for humans to perform truly good works. Luther argues that God’s action is like a skilled craftsman cutting with a rusty hatchet: even though the worker (God) is good, the rusty hatchet means the work is filled with bad, jagged, and ugly gashes. Even as God shows the creature his or her sin, and even as one learns to hope in God, one’s works are not thereby perfect or meritorious, for the creature is still deeply malformed.¹¹⁷ In a second commentary on the *Heidelberg Disputation* written later in 1518, Luther expounds upon this claim. Drawing on Paul’s argument in Romans 7:19, in which Paul claims he cannot do the good that he wants to do, Luther argues that this passage depicts the true state of the sinner who performs a righteous deed. Drawing on experience, Luther argues that when we attempt to do good, there is always an unwillingness, difficulty, or resistance to doing so. Yet, Luther argues, the law demands that we perfectly love God without any resistance. Because sin is to do less than one ought, to do righteous deeds with any internal resistance is to do less than the moral law demands. That is, if there is resistance to the law, then there is not a perfect love of God; if there is not a perfect love of God, then we fail to do all that the law requires of us, yet if we fail to do all the law requires, even in doing

¹¹⁵ 6: “Non sic sunt opera Dei merita (de iis quae per hominem fiunt loquimur), ut eadem non sint peccata.” The work of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless. LW 31:45; WA 1:353.

¹¹⁶ LW 31:45; WA 1:353.

¹¹⁷ LW 31:45; WA 1:357.

good deeds, then sin is always present, even in doing good. Even in doing good, the righteous person sins.¹¹⁸

For Luther, because the basic dynamic of the self is trust, only those acts done with the proper disposition towards God can avoid sin, arrogance, and pride in self.¹¹⁹ This entails that the works of the righteous can never become the object of faith, for then they would become mortal sins. Instead one must always only act out of a pious fear of God.¹²⁰ The proper disposition is one that constantly fears God's judgments and refuses to trust in the merit of the human action. Every work of the sinner must be done out of despair in the self and with full acknowledgment that God will judge all works. In thesis 7, Luther writes, "The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sin by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God." In thesis 8, Luther advances this argument by claiming that if one finds security in one's works, no matter how good the work is, then the work is a mortal sin: "By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security." When one trusts in works, one does not trust God; in order to trust God, one must fear and despise one's works. He writes, "Where there is no fear there is no humility. Where there is no humility there is pride, and where there is pride there are the wrath and judgment of God, for God opposes the haughty."¹²¹ For Luther, then, one must operate in constant fear and trust in God, which comes about through recognizing the deep perversity of the creature and the inability for the creature to do good before God.

¹¹⁸; LW 31:60; WA 1:365-366

¹¹⁹ "11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work. 12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal. LW 31:48; WA 1:359.

¹²⁰ "7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God." LW 31:45-46; WA 1:358.

¹²¹ LW 31:47; WA 1:358.

The first 12 theses function as an argument against human presumption: neither the law of God, nor human works merit God's favor. Drawing on an anthropology that privileges the motivation and internal dispositions, the deepest part of human agency, Luther argues the only grounds for good action are those that are done in the fear of God and that thereby despair in one's own natural abilities. Even these actions however, are still steeped in sin and can only be accepted by God through the forgiveness of sins.

(B) *Free Will: Theses 13-18*

In theses 13-18, Luther draws out the implications of this argument, applies it to the will and addresses the doctrine of the *facere quod in se est*. The reason for addressing the free will in the context of this dispute stems from the aim of forming the reader in faith: Luther is systematically taking down every possible avenue for the individual to make a claim on God through human works. That is, one could imagine an interlocutor agreeing with Luther that naturally the law and human works do not merit God's acceptance, but this only applies to the natural person. Despite the depth of sin, one could change one's life through the power of the free will and choose to love God above all else. Luther's argument in these theses aims directly at this objection. For Luther, this type of objection assumes that the will is free to choose between good and evil and thus has power to set itself towards the good. As we have seen in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Luther denies such a neutral state for the will. He advances and sharpens this argument in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, clarifying the powers of the free will.

Most basically, Luther denies that humans have free will (*liberum arbitrium*) after the fall. In thesis 13, Luther however flatly denies the reality of the freedom of the will: "Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is in it (*facere quod in se est*), it commits a mortal sin."¹²² Luther understands this thesis to simply affirm Augustine's understanding of the bondage of

¹²² LW 31:48; WA 1:359.

the will and cites John 8:34, “Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin...So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Yet, Luther’s denial of free will (*liberum arbitrium*) is not a denial of the human capacity to make choices in life, that is, Luther does not deny that humans have a will, for, as he writes, the will is not nothing. Clearly we can make choices between options even in the state of bondage. Rather, the rejection of free will is the rejection of the idea that the will of its own abilities has the capacity to choose between good and evil. For Luther, the will is not free to do anything except sin—the inherent self-love runs so deep, that it can do nothing but love itself and act in its own self-interest. The will is not free to choose God or the good, but is in bondage to itself and is captive. The idea that the will can set itself toward the good, Luther argues, is a fiction.

Luther clarifies his understanding of the power and ability of the will in thesis 14 and 15—
“14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity (*potentia subiectiva*), but it can always do evil in an active capacity (*potentia activa*). 15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.”¹²³ The distinction between the *potentia subiectiva* and *potentia activa* concerns the inherent potential of a thing to produce a change: the *potentia activa* can produce a change from within its own powers; the *potentia subiectiva* has the potential to change, but only through an external force operating on it. Luther provides the example of a dead body—the dead body, precisely as dead, cannot do anything to make itself alive—it does not have the *potentia activa* to effect change. Nevertheless, it has the potential for life in a passive capacity (*potentia subiectiva*), such that it can again gain life if God raises it from the dead.¹²⁴ In claiming that the free will only has the power to do good in a passive capacity (*potentia subiectiva*), Luther argues that the will can only do good if an external force operates on it; inherently

¹²³ LW 31:49; WA 1:360.

¹²⁴ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 54-56.

as such, in an active capacity, while it can always will and make choices, it can only act out of a perverse self-love. The will needs an exterior force—God. Just as only God can raise the dead, so too only God can correct the perverse nature of the will and lead it to do good. Luther, interestingly, does not think that this is merely a result of the Fall: even in the state of innocence, the will had to depend upon God’s action in it to do the good. The human being is so structured that the will was never free in such a way that it could ever do good apart from God’s grace; the will as such always depends upon God in order to do the good and has no capacity apart from God for the good. The importance of this later claim is that it again denies any possible grounds for creatures to make a claim on God.¹²⁵

Luther’s argument concerning the free will here is extremely provocative.¹²⁶ As we saw earlier, the *facere quod in se est*, was understood by scholastic theologians to be the basis of salvation and grounded the sacramental system of the church. In thesis 13 and 16, however, Luther not only denies that this is a mistaken understanding of salvation, but he also claims that the *facere quod in se est* itself is a mortal sin and that to believe it “adds sin to sin so that [one who does so] becomes doubly guilty.” The theology of the schools, including the theology being taught by those who attended the disputation itself, endangers souls and is itself a sin.¹²⁷

Luther’s argument follows from the anthropology we have already seen—to do what is in one is simply to continue on in sin. To ignore that one is perpetuating sin and to think that one is earning merits, in fact, is to not only sin, but to sin doubly, as one both sins and does not acknowledge the evil. Luther writes, “While a person is doing what is in him, he sins and seeks

¹²⁵ This will become a point of debate in the confessional period. Luther here denies that the free will ever would have been sufficient to merit grace.

¹²⁶ The bull, “Exsurge Domine,” for example, condemned thesis 13 alone from the *Heidelberg Disputation*.

¹²⁷ For more about the disputation itself see Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and his Work*, trans. Larence W. Deneff (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 121-127.

himself in everything. But if he should suppose that through sin he would become worthy of or prepared for grace, he would add haughty arrogance to his sin and not believe that sin is sin and evil is evil, which is an exceedingly great sin.”¹²⁸

These first 16 theses strip all claims of moral righteousness from the sinner. The law of God, good human works, and the free will are unable to create righteousness in the sinner or make a claim on God. No human ability or action, no matter how good it appears to us, merits God’s grace. The unrelenting negativity of Luther’s attack here, however, is not solely destructive; rather, the theses aim at re-grounding the self in Christ. Once the sinner is made aware of the depth of sin, the proper response is not moral indifference, but a humility in the self and a profound trust in something extrinsic to the sinner, namely the mercy and grace of Christ. The whole purpose of the trenchant critique of human ability is to become aware of sin and human inability so that one may become humble and receive God’s grace. In the explanation to thesis 17, Luther writes, “They cannot be humble who do not recognize that they are damnable whose sin smells to high heaven. Sin is recognized only through the law.”¹²⁹ The preaching of the law does not result in an ultimate despair, but a profound hope: “It is apparent that not despair, but rather hope, is preached when we are told that we are sinners...Yearning for grace wells up when recognition of sin has arisen. A sick person seeks the physician when recognizes the seriousness of his illness...To say that we are nothing and constantly sin when we do the best we can (*facere quod in se est*) does not mean that we cause people to despair (unless they are fools); rather, we make them concerned about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³⁰ In thesis 18, Luther succinctly summarizes this argument: “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”¹³¹ It is

¹²⁸ LW 31:50; WA 1:360.

¹²⁹ LW 31:51; WA 1:361.

¹³⁰ LW 31:51; WA 1:361.

¹³¹ 18. Certum est, hominem de se penitus oportere desperare, ut aptus fiat ad consequendam gratiam Christi.

precisely here that Luther sees the greatest danger with the *facere quod in se est*: when someone acts in accordance with his or her ability and believes that he or she is thereby doing something good, she does not despair of her own ability and learn to trust in God alone. Instead, she maintains focus on herself and relies on her actions, instead of Christ. But, for Luther, the work of Christ creates an ecstatic relationship; one is not grounded in anything internal, but in the grace and mercy of Christ.

(C) *Knowledge of God and the Cross: Theses 19-24*

Having dismissed the law of God, human works, and free will as grounds for righteousness, and having indicated that one's relationship to God is a relationship grounded in humility and trust, in theses 19-24, Luther raises the question of the knowledge of God. These theses are usually taken to be the central elements of Luther's theology of the cross and when described, they are often abstracted from the setting of the *Heidelberg Disputation*.¹³² For Luther, however, the discussion of the knowledge of God occurs within a larger context concerned with human sin. Because humans are always already engaged in a competitive relationship with God, one marked by sin and rebellion, the discussion of revelation can only occur after one has undergone a profound self-reflection in which one comes to see and experience one's own sin. Gerhard Forde argues that the belief that we can speak about God without first referring to human sin is part and parcel of the theology that believes that one's relationship to God depends upon doing what is in one. The belief that the will can choose to love God depends upon a belief that it knows God's will and understands what God wants. Or, more basically, it assumes that the reason retains enough of its original created goodness to perceive God's will. The critique of reason, then, occurs within a wider anthropological project that seeks to strip all grounds for human righteousness before God.¹³³

¹³² See, for example, Walhhter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*; Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947); Ronald Thiemann, "Luther's Theology of the Cross: Resource for a Theology of Religions," 228-246.

¹³³ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 69-73.

In introducing the question of the knowledge of God, Luther does not discuss this knowledge abstractly, as if one could know God in a neutral position, but instead discusses the theologian (*theologus*) who knows or attempts to know God. It is central to Luther's argument here that there is not a theology of the cross per se, that is, a theory of the cross that abstractly reflects upon the work of the atonement or the reasons for the cross; rather, the question of the cross concerns the being and the nature of the theologian.¹³⁴ Luther claims that there is a fundamental division in the ways one can be a theologian: one can either be a theologian of glory or a theologian of the cross. For all of the sharpness of the way he will draw these distinctions, Luther's target is subtle: he is not simply concerned with the theology of indulgences or a prosperity gospel or other crass distortions of the Christian faith; rather, Luther sees theologians of glory as those theologians who operate under the aegis of the Church, proclaim what appear to be Christian affirmations about Christ, God, and the Church, and yet subtly praise themselves and human ability over against the sufficiency of God's grace. The theologian of glory may make claims for ascetic lifestyles, fasts, etc., and may discuss Christ, the Trinity, and the cross, yet is still denying God and the power of God insofar as they keep human works as the ultimate basis for human justification. The explicit content of their theology matters far less than the relationship they draw between human and divine works.

Drawing on the distinctions that he already established, Luther claims that theologians of the cross are those who despair of themselves and depend fully upon God, while the theologians of glory are those who retain trust in their own ability to have purchase on God. This division leads to contrasting approaches to the knowledge of the divine. Luther describes the difference thusly:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

¹³⁴ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 10-18.

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theologian of the glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.¹³⁵

In drawing this distinction, Luther maintains his emphasis on the fundamental trusts of the person: the vision (19/20) of the theologian (“the theologian looks upon”) is the basic problem; the particular pronouncements of a theologian are secondary (“theologian calls” (21)) to the more fundamental category of sight.¹³⁶ For Luther, the fundamental trust of the person determines his or her vision and understanding—that is, sight is not a neutral category, but how we see and what we see, are deeply religious and ethical activities. The basic division between these theologians concerns how the theologians see: the theologian of glory looks away from the visible things and “looks upon” the invisible things of God, such as virtue, godliness, wisdom, and goodness. The theologian of glory relies on speculation, analogical reasoning, and the reflection on superlatives to determine the being and nature of God. For Luther, to rely on this speculative method entails *looking past* the events of history or determining *a priori* the meaning of the cross and thus being left unchallenged by the folly of the cross. That is, the cross in this schema becomes at best an example or a token of these divine virtues, and does not challenge the basic conceptual framework of the theologian of glory. One looks through and beyond the cross to confirm the basic vision one already operated with. The cross is simply an event that requires theoretical explanation in terms of an already decided theological schema. Because one looks past where God manifests Godself, Luther argues that the theologian of glory does not deserve to be called a theologian at all, but perhaps a philosopher, an ethicist, or a speculative thinker.

¹³⁵ LW 31:52; WA 1:362. Theses 19-21.

¹³⁶ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 71.

The theologian of the cross, on the other hand, does not project a prefigured understanding of goodness onto the cross, nor does he or she look through the cross to the transcendent God, but instead looks at the cross in all of its folly and sees God in the suffering. The theologian of the cross is able to see the cross as a stumbling block and a challenge to human self-understanding. Instead of straight-forwardly manifesting the invisible virtues, in the cross, God makes Godself known under the contrary of what one would expect, through the “back and visible things” namely, God’s human nature, weakness, and foolishness. God does not make Godself known in power, but only through suffering and weakness. Ronald Thiemann describes Luther’s approach here as an “epistemological realism” that is, “an approach to theology that discourages metaphysical speculation and encourages a sober descriptive realism. The goal of theological reflection is not to hypothesize about the invisible attributes of an unknown transcendent God, but to describe the visible and manifest works of a God become flesh and thereby hidden in suffering and the cross.”¹³⁷ The theologian attends to the physical, bodily presence of God in suffering and in history and does not attempt to see the invisible God. One does not look *through* the cross, but looks *at* the cross itself and this vision shatters one’s self-love.

For Luther, the difference in approach to knowledge is thoroughly ethical and spiritual. The problem with the theologian of glory’s recognition of God’s invisible virtues is that they do not make him or her wise (“The recognition of all these things does not make one worthy or wise”). Merely knowing that God is powerful, wise, etc. does not help the believer acquire these attributes; in fact, Luther argues that the exact opposite happens. In thesis 22, Luther diagnoses the problem thusly: “22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.”¹³⁸ By trusting in one’s own powers to know God, the

¹³⁷ Thiemann, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Resource for a Theology of Religions,” 231.

¹³⁸ LW 31:53; WA 1:362. Thesis 22.

theologian of glory merely reinforces and hardens his or her own spiritual pride. For example, in saying that God is good and one should also be good, one merely works at becoming good and depends upon human works and ignores the activities and actions of God. The reflection on virtue merely leads to imagine oneself to be virtuous instead of reflecting on God's work on the cross.

In the explanation to this thesis, Luther describes the problem as rooted in the nature of desire, including higher desires. For Luther, the shape of human desire as such is such that it cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of the thing it desires (*impossible est enim, quod cupiditas satietur his, quae cupit, acquisitis*). Desire always wants more, even as it acquires that which it seeks. For example, the love of money is not extinguished by having more money, but grows the more one acquires more money; the same, Luther argues, applies to wisdom, power, virtue, etc. Because the love of self runs so deep, acquiring virtues do not extinguish natural self-love, but instead they lead to a greater desire for the self to become wiser, more powerful, and more virtuous. As such, seeking the invisible things of God, that is, in seeking justice, wisdom, virtue, etc., one does not lead one toward recognizing the God who suffers and dies, who challenges the basic schema of self-love, but instead reinforces the natural self-love and acquisitiveness. For Luther, those who desire virtues can only become more and more desirous, more and more proud, and less able to receive the Word of God and the scandal of the cross.

On the other hand, the recognition of God in suffering and on the cross destroys entrenched human pride. Luther argues that the only cure for the desire for wisdom, knowledge, etc. is not to try to satisfy these desires, but instead to extinguish them. He writes,

The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it. In other words, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking folly. Likewise he who wishes to have much

power, honor, pleasure, satisfaction in all things must flee rather than seek power, honor, pleasure, and satisfaction in all things. This is the wisdom which is folly to the world.¹³⁹

The scandal of the cross occurs precisely in this reversal. The God who is powerful appears under the opposite because wisdom, virtue, and all good things must be destroyed in order to see the God who suffers on the cross. Because of human pride and our inability to look beyond ourselves to God, God does not appear as humans want God to appear—that is, a God who would appear in glory, beauty, and honor would not challenge the self-love and pride of human reason. The God who appears in the cross and suffering, however, does not fulfill our projections, but instead remains a scandal for us. The cross itself is the stumbling block that cannot be avoided, but must be the place to know God. He writes,

Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering...Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise...For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ.¹⁴⁰

For Luther, this fundamental division in vision and in approaching the cross has profound consequences for describing reality. In thesis 21, he claims that a theologian of glory mistakes everything: he calls evil good and good evil, while the theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. The problem here is precisely the failure to recognize the relationship between divine and human action. When a theologian of glory assumes that he knows God's will, that he can look through and

¹³⁹ LW 31:54; WA 1:363.

¹⁴⁰ LW 31:52-53; WA 1:363.

beyond the cross, and please God through his action, he assumes that God prefers works to suffering and glory to the cross. Instead of seeing the good that God has done in the cross, he calls this suffering evil and calls his own works, which are evil, good. “Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and in general, good to evil.”¹⁴¹ Precisely because these people prefer goodness and their own good works, Luther claims that these are the people that Paul attacks as the enemies of the cross of Christ, “These are the people whom the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’ for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good.”¹⁴²

For Luther, against this, the theologian of the cross call a thing what it is—whereas the theologian of glory must always attempt to justify the goodness of his actions, the theologian of the cross can recognize the presence of evil, the persistence of sin, and see God in suffering. The theologian of the cross does not need to justify the cross, to look for God beyond the suffering, but can see God in the cross and allow himself or herself to endure the complete denial of the self that this entails. Luther writes,

God can be found only in suffering and the cross...Therefore, the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross the works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.¹⁴³

The theologian of the cross allows good to be good and evil to be evil. Robert Kolb argues that the theology of the cross allows Luther to confront the horrors and banalities of evil in all their

¹⁴¹ LW 31:53; WA I:362.

¹⁴² LW 31:53; WA I:362.

¹⁴³ LW 31:53; WA I:362.

perversity. He writes, “The theology of the cross reminds those caught in evil that evil is truly evil, the opposite of what God wants for his [sic] human creature...Instead of justifying God’s failure to end evil today, or justifying human actions that are truly evil, it justifies sinners so that they may enjoy true life, life with God, forever. The problem with ‘theodicies’ is that they have to tell less than the truth, they have to avoid some part of the problem, at one point or another.”¹⁴⁴

For Luther, this vision also has more direct ethical consequences, in particular in relationship to the law. For the theologian of glory, the law is always something humans must do to please God—instead of rejoicing in God’s actions, the theologians continually attempts to please God through the law. Luther affirms that the law is holy and like every other gift of God is good, but he claims that without the theology of the cross the theology can only misuse the best in the worst manner. He writes, “He who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God.”¹⁴⁵ In boasting in the law, one actually boasts in one’s condemnation. For the theologian of the cross, however, the law is something God does to the self. In thesis 23, he claims “The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not Christ.”¹⁴⁶ In the law, God performs an alien work, but nevertheless, God works in the law. The law is not to be evaded or ignored, for it is precisely here God acts to create space to be God for the creature. Luther describes this as an emptying of the self: “He, however, who has been emptied through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether man does works or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he

¹⁴⁴ Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 49.

¹⁴⁵ LW 31:53; WA 1:362.

¹⁴⁶ LW 31:55; WA 1:363.

disturbed if God does not do good works through him. He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more.”¹⁴⁷

(D) *God's Love and Human Righteousness*: Thesis 25-28

The Heidelberg Disputation has thus far stripped every grounds for presumption for trust in human action: neither the law of God, nor human works, nor the free will, nor human reason supply grounds to make a claim on God or provide an independent basis to reflect on God. The aim throughout has been to produce despair in human ability. If the first 24 theses functioned as a sharp critique of human ability and, on this basis, drew a sharp division between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross, the final four theses describe the nature of God's love and the creation of human righteousness.

These theses finally provide the first positive answer to the question posed in the first thesis, namely, how can one become righteous? This central claim of these theses is that the only grounds for human righteousness are, objectively, God's love of the creature, and, subjectively faith in Christ's righteousness. For Luther, human righteousness does not arise through a person frequently repeating good actions, but instead, it is objectively imparted by God actions on the cross and is subjectively received through faith. The objective and subjective belong together.¹⁴⁸

In thesis 25 and 26, Luther argues for the sufficiency of faith in Christ for human righteousness. He claims, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.”¹⁴⁹ For Luther, righteousness does not arise through a believer's actions or inactions as such—Christ's work is sufficient. The believer simply must receive the accomplished work of Christ, a reception which is faith. In thesis 26, Luther clarifies the nature of this faith. Again, he sets

¹⁴⁷ LW 31:55; WA 1:363.

¹⁴⁸ B.A. Gerrish, “Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation,” in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38-57.

¹⁴⁹ LW 31:55; WA 1:364. Thesis 25.

up contrasts: “26. The law says, “do this” and it is never done.” Grace says, “Believe in this,” and everything is already done.”¹⁵⁰ While the law shows us what we ought to do, it does not give us the power to fulfill it. The impotence of the law, however, contrasts directly with grace, which in not commanding action, fulfills all that the law requires.

This claim follows from the anthropology discussed above. Because Luther’s theological concern is the motive spring of human action, the “holy of holies,” the primary action of righteousness must restructure one’s basic trusts. If the basic trust is the law, where the law is understood as a command for human action, then one will maintain a basic trust in one’s own ability. Grace, however, does not demand any action at all—this is precisely why Luther rejects the identification of the Holy Spirit with the New Law—rather, grace is the reception of the work done for us and this trust reformulates one’s basic moral dispositions.¹⁵¹

This trust is not simply an affirmation of life, but is deeply Christological. For Luther, the trust is most basically that Christ is sufficient for us for righteousness. For Luther, this work of Christ becomes ours in faith—only in seeing that Christ is sufficient for me, for the individual believer, can one’s basic trusts be restructured. This receptivity of Christ’s action is powerful—in and through faith, Christ truly dwells in us. “For through faith Christ is in us (*per fidem Christus in nobis*), indeed one with us.”¹⁵² Because Christ has fulfilled all the commandments by overcoming sin on the cross, and because Christ is truly present in the believer in faith, the believer receives all the benefits of Christ, including Christ’s righteous. Luther writes: “Christ is just and has fulfilled all the commands of God, wherefore we also fulfill everything through him since he was made ours

¹⁵⁰ LW 31:55; WA 1:364. Thesis 26.

¹⁵¹ Berndt Hamm, “Why Did Luther Turn Faith into the Central Concept of the Christian Life?” in *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 59-85.

¹⁵² LW 31:56; WA 1:364. We will return to the question of the nature of Christ’s presence in faith in chapter 3.

through faith.”¹⁵³ What Christ has accomplished now belongs to us. Righteous does not come through any human action, but through the divine work in Christ.

The pure reception of God’s action, however, does not entail that the Christian life is inactive. The passivity Luther commends is a receptivity at one’s center to God’s actions, not a political or social passivity. In fact, because the receptivity is in terms of one’s fundamental dispositions, Luther argues that the Christian is always active in doing good. The goodness of the actions, their significance and motive, however, are completely transformed. Whereas Luther understands the tradition to be arguing that works make one righteous, and thus all works have a selfish motive, Luther claims that good works flow freely from us. Grace precedes good actions and is not a result or a reward of these acts. Luther writes, “Works contribute nothing to justification. Therefore man knows that works which he does by such faith are not his but God’s. For this reason he does not seek to become justified or glorified through them, but seeks God. His justification by faith in Christ is sufficient to him.”¹⁵⁴ As Christ dwells in us, we, like Christ, are active in doing good works. In thesis 27, he writes, “Since Christ lives in us through faith he arouses us to do good works through that living faith in his work, for the works which he does are the fulfillment of the commands of God given us through faith. If we look at them we are moved to imitate them...If his action is in us it lives through faith, for it is exceedingly attractive.”¹⁵⁵ Luther here includes both a real presence of Christ in the believer and an imitation: Christ acts in and through us and the believer imitates Christ in his actions. The accomplishment of faith occurs at the deepest level of the person, in terms of the fundamental disposition and actions. It does not excuse one from

¹⁵³ LW 31:56; WA 1:364.

¹⁵⁴ Deinde, quia opera, quae ex tali fide facit, non sua sed Dei esse novit, Ideo non se per illa iustificari aut glorificari querit, sed Deum querit: sua sibi sufficit iusticia ex fide Christi, id est, ut Christus sit eius sapientia, iusticia &c. ut 1. Corinth.1 dicitur, ipse vero sit Christi operatio seu instrumentum. LW 31:56; WA 1:364.

¹⁵⁵ 27. Recte opus Christi diceretur operans et nostrum operatum, ac sic operatum placent Deo gratia operis operantis. LW 31:56-57; WA 1:364.

seeking righteous in the body, but it gives one faith in Christ and the ability to act out of the new self.

The final thesis arrives at the aim of the whole disputation: the basis upon which God loves creatures. Luther has argued that there are no human grounds on the basis of which God loves human creatures: creatures are fundamentally opposed to God and neither the law of God, nor human works, nor the free will, nor reason can repair this rupture. The human being considered in terms of his or her own capacities cannot make himself or herself worthy of God's love. Instead, Luther declares, God loves the creature out of divine beneficence: God creates the lovable object and does not depend on the object to first make itself lovable. Luther writes, "28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."¹⁵⁶ The structure of the disputation has prepared this thesis: given the depth of human sin, God acts on the sinner through the Law to show the sinner's true nature; through Christ's action, the sinner is transformed and receives the benefits of Christ. The creation of the lovable creature occurs through the Law, which breaks down the sinner and produces despair, and the Gospel, which grounds the person in a new hope in Christ.

To explain the nature of God's creative action, Luther draws a distinction between two concepts of love, the love of humans and the love of God.¹⁵⁷ For Luther, human love is always dependent upon what is or what exists. Drawing on Aristotle, Luther argues that the object of love is the cause of sensation and the power of the human soul is passive and receptive in relation to that which it loves. Human love is always dependent on the presence of that which is, and loves things that are pleasant and good. In his commentary on the *Magnificat*, Luther expands on this insight and argues that humans naturally love, not simply what is, but those things that imbued with power,

¹⁵⁶ LW 31:57; WA 1:365.

¹⁵⁷ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther's Religious World*, trans. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

strength and goodness. He writes, “The eyes of the world and of men, on the contrary, look only above them and are lifted up with pride. This we experience every day. Everyone strives after that which is above him, after honor, power, wealth, knowledge, a life of ease, and whatever is lofty and great.”¹⁵⁸ For Luther, this looking up and focusing on what is comes at the cost of the poor and despised,

On the other hand, no one is willing to look into the depths with their poverty, disgrace, squalor, misery, and anguish. From these all turn away their eyes. Where there are such people, everyone takes to his heels, forsakes and shuns and leaves them to themselves; no dreams of helping them or of making something out of them... We experience daily how all strive after that which is above them: honor, power, riches, knowledge, the good life, and everything that is lofty and great... No one wants to peer into the depths, where poverty, humiliation, want, lamentation, and fear are; from this all avert their eyes. Where such people are, everyone runs away, flees, shuns, and leaves them alone.¹⁵⁹

God’s love, by contrast, is directed toward that which is nothing. God does not find objects to love or depend on the already present object, but creates them. Whereas humans are passive and receptive in love, God is creative. Whereas humans naturally only love things that are good and holy, God can peer into the depth and love that which in itself is unlovable and unworthy. Luther writes, “The love of God which lives in man loves sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong. Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ LW 21:300; WA 7:547.

¹⁵⁹ LW 21:300; WA 7:547.

¹⁶⁰ LW 31:57; WA 1:365.

The contrast with scholastic theology here is sharp. The fundamental premise of the schema of salvation of medieval scholasticism, as we have seen, is that like can only be known by like—in order to approach the holy God, one must become holy, which occurs through the sacramental system of the Church. Luther here argues the direct opposite: in order to be known by the Holy God, one must become a sinner—God does not only seek what is like God, but only that which is most unlike God: the ugly, the despised, the disinherited. God peers into the depth, to the poor, needy, and humble and confers love and blessing on them. God does not first require holiness, but creates holiness and love in the creature.¹⁶¹

The division between these loves is not simply in relation to the type of object, but also is a difference in activity. Human love is acquisitive and born of a desire for more or for a greater self-affirmation. When one loves one seeks to gain or to enhance oneself in some ways. Moreover, because human love is always born in relation to that which it exists, it is limited in its love to the present features of the object. Human love naturally loves appearances, it is a respecter of persons, and loves what can be seen. By contrast, Luther argues, God’s love does not love in order to gain, but instead pours out love and goodness freely. God’s love is not determined by the external features of the object, whether they are good, high, and mighty, but instead creates a fundamental equality among persons, and loves the poor and forgotten as well as the rich and the mighty.¹⁶² God’s love is fundamentally non-acquisitive and non-self-seeking, but giving: “This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.”¹⁶³

Luther’s contrast on the two types of love bears direct ethical consequences. In his commentary on this thesis, Luther argues that the poor, in the eyes of the world and natural human

¹⁶¹ Watson, *Let God be God*, 132-137.

¹⁶²See Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love: Martin Luther’s Religious World*, 14-18.

¹⁶³ LW 31:57; WA I:365.

love, do not exist: “For the intellect cannot by nature comprehend an object which does not exist, that is the poor and needy person, but only a thing which does exist, that is the true and good.”¹⁶⁴ The problem here, Luther implies, is that the theologian of glory is so concerned with the invisible things of God, the good, the beautiful, and the true, that he or she always looks through what is given for these goods. Because the poor and needy are neither good nor true, the theologian looks beyond them, just as he or she looks beyond the cross. For Luther, however, God looks into the depths; on the cross, God took on the full horror of death. As such, the theologian of the cross, precisely in viewing the cross, no longer seeks human glory, but can see the lowly and despised and all those things the human intellect naturally rejects. The theologian of the cross knows, in other words, that new life does not come through self-action, but as Gerhard Forde argues, through death and resurrection.¹⁶⁵ The theologian can see the death precisely because he or she knows that God works beyond it for new life. In fact, the motivation for the theologian of the cross, that is, for one who has been killed by the law and raised to new life through the love of God, begins to mirror the love of God; one no longer operates out of self-love, but can now begin to work solely for the benefit of the neighbor. In the *Magnificat*, Luther writes, “But the bare goodness of God is what ought rather to be preached and known above all else, and we ought to learn that, just as God saves us out of pure divine goodness, without any merit of works, so we in our turn should do the works without reward or self-seeking, for the sake of the bare goodness of God. We should desire nothing in them but His good pleasure, and not be anxious about a reward.”¹⁶⁶ The theologian of the cross, in recognizing that God’s love is not born from the self, can see reality. The theologian does not need to mask the harsh nature of reality, but instead can call a thing what it is and yet still hope in the love and glory of God.

¹⁶⁴ LW 31:57-58; WA 1:365.

¹⁶⁵ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 114.

¹⁶⁶ LW 21:312; WA 7:557.

The *Heidelberg Disputation* thus performs a powerful spiritual transformation on the reader. Through the disputation, the sinner is shown the limits of the law and human works. The disputation functions as a single argument that strips away every possible ground of justification: neither the law, nor reason, nor free will lead to a sinner's justification. This negative work of exposing and damning sin, however, is done for positive theological ends. Only in seeing the end of human work can a person be opened up to receive the creative love of God, which creates new creatures. The new creature has a new motive spring and can see reality for what it is. The investigation into the depth of sin ultimately occurs within the context of a vision of resurrection and new life. Only in seeing the redemption created out of the free act of God, Luther claims, can we see the truth depth and horror of sin.

IV. The Concept of Sin

The *Heidelberg Disputation* and the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* detail Luther's rupture with scholastic theology and the *via moderna*. The central concern in these texts is the concept of sin and the ways that this intersects with other goods and values. The critique of sin is totalizing: there is nothing in the human sphere, including God's own law, that can merit God's love. There are, however, a number of subtle clarifications that must be made clear before further tracing Luther's development of the idea of sin and value.

(1) Luther does not think the concept of sin is a direct, empirical concept nor is it directly accessible to human reflection. While both of the disputations focus on the concept and its effects, sin as such is not directly discussed as a concept. Luther does not discuss sin in terms of a narrative of its origin in Adam nor does he discuss the abstract question of the nature and extent of sin as if sin were something one could intellectually master; rather sin is discussed through its effects on the law, the will, and reason, and through the metaphor of a tree and root. The indirect approach indicates the depth of sin for Luther: sin is not a mere peccadillo that can be easily mended, but it is

the condition for all of our thoughts, words and deeds that contextualizes, determines, and infects every human action. As the depth of the self which infects every human choice, sin is too fundamental and too infectious to receive a straightforward or simple interpretation. Sin is not a simple concept, but a condition that conditions us and therefore can only receive indirect discussion. Because it is the condition for thought, thought cannot think sin directly nor grasp its depth, but can only examine the operations of sin in our lives. Luther here agrees with Jason Mahn who in a recent study of Kierkegaard's understanding of sin writes, "Against all efforts to contextualize and moralize sin...sin contextualizes us. We are unable to say what he or she means about sin, we can only confess it."¹⁶⁷ Sin can only be known in its true depth through seeing the full demands of the law and the horror of the cross.

While Luther sees sin as a mediated concept, and claims that it can only be fully known through the cross, he does not claim that the theological concept is disjunctive with all human experience. Instead, theological interpretation intensifies and highlights a concept we already have and experience. For Luther, we experience the effects of sin and can see it daily. Sin is not only known through the cross, but through our self-reflection on our own inability to love God and overcome our own self-seeking love. Because the referent of sin is not simply the cross, but human life, Luther's thought takes seriously the fabric of life and attends to the individual. For Luther, the cross intensifies the concept of sin, but is not the sole basis for this knowledge. What one can know about sin and human life is given its real determination in the cross.

(2) The dissertation wishes to argue that Luther provides a robust affirmation of created life, yet, at this point, Luther's focus is on the categories of sin and salvation. Luther's focus and energies at this point are directed at the forms of thought prevalent in medieval scholasticism—he has not

¹⁶⁷ Jason Mahn, *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 209. For a slightly different take on indirect approaches to conceptualizing evil see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

yet thought through the goods of creation or developed a strong affirmation of created life.

Nevertheless, even at this early, critical stage, where his focus is on the depth of sin, Luther does not equate sin with the values of the world. Luther in fact maintains the goodness of the created world, and locates the problem not in the fact that the world is not the divine will as such, but in the *way sinners interact with good things*. Sin is portrayed not as an ontological or epistemological claim about the world as such, but about the ways humans (mis)use the goods of creation.

This interactive account of sin is most clear in his explanation of thesis 24 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. Luther here begins affirming the goodness of creation and the values presents in it—“Indeed the law is holy, every gift of God good, and everything that is created exceedingly good, as in Gen 1”—but, he argues, these good gifts can be misused—“But, as stated above, he who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God.”¹⁶⁸ Value for Luther is not located in an interpretation of the divine will as such, but in the goodness of the created order. The order as such is not negated, in fact as we will see, Luther sees God’s abiding presence in all of creation; rather, the ways sinners misuse and misplace their trust in creation poses the central problem. This limits the understanding of sin to not seeing the world as such under the No and thus, as I will trace, opens up Luther to a greater affirmation of cultural forms and to a different account of Christian ethics.

There are three important consequences of this difference. First, Luther shows no compunction about the way religious claims intersect with the self. For Luther, theology intersects with the person at the person’s deepest level, at the level of fundamental trusts and dispositions. While Luther does not discuss it in terms of a point of contact, Luther sees the work of the cross addressing the deepest part of the self, the soul, which is always already active in relationship to

¹⁶⁸ LW 31:55; WA 1:363.

God. The cross addresses an aspect of the self that naturally exists; we always act out of our fundamental trusts.

Second, because the cross addresses one's fundamental trusts, Luther's theology addresses the sinner in the midst of life. Theology is a process of self-knowledge: the dominant metaphor is one of a mirror and coming to a self-knowledge about the way we are. The problem we face is that we are stuck in fantasies about our moral worth and the merits of our actions. For Luther, theology is a matter of self-knowledge that intersects with us exactly where we are. It is a matter of seeing what has always been the case in our phenomenal life, not a new knowledge that was otherwise inaccessible. Luther's metaphor is not the real versus the phenomenal, but instead requires a transformation of vision—one comes to see more truly, to speak truly of things that have been clouded over by sin. The theologian of the cross can call a thing what it is. This emphasis on vision is important. Luther's metaphor of a mirror and a coming to self-knowledge entail acquiring a new understanding of one's self. What we will see develop in the next section is that Luther in fact takes this route: through seeing the extent of God's love on the cross, the theologian of the cross has a transformed vision of God, and now sees the many good gifts of life.

Third, this understanding of sin entails that Luther shows a great interest in the subjective reception of grace, faith. For Luther, an objective description of God's action is insufficient to combat sin; rather, one must receive God's action in faith. This emphasis stems from the priority Luther gives to the bondage of the will—for Luther, the self is always competitive with God at root, so faith must transform one's loves. That is, for Luther it is not sufficient to recognize that God has acted in Jesus, unless one recognizes that God has acted for me and has saved me. The objective action must become one's own in and through faith.

In this chapter, I have examined Luther's break with the medieval nominalist tradition based on the category of sin. I argued that even at its most sharp and polemical, Luther's concept of sin is formulated in relationship to the individual's fundamental trusts. Sin qualifies our basic relationship of trust to God: one either trusts in God or self. This concept of sin is comprehensive in that it effects all human being and doing and thus requires God's action on the cross to reveal sin and to reset the person's trust in Christ. Yet, Luther's understanding of sin never negates the goodness of created values or good; the problem with sin lies in the sinner and not in the constitution of the world.

In the next chapters, we will examine a second major component of Luther's response to evil: the concept of faith. Luther's new concept of faith nuances the account of sin presented here and from this new account of sin, Luther will develop an account of the created goods of life.

Chapter 3/ The Development of Martin Luther's Concept of Faith 1515-1520s

The central contention of this dissertation is that Luther's theology provides a useful framework for contemplating evil while also affirming the goodness of God and creation. In the last chapter, I examined the fruit of Luther's reflections on sin and the nature of selfhood in the period from 1517-1518. I argued that the doctrine of sin leads to Luther's break with medieval theology and that it leads to a realism in regards to the nature of evil: for Luther, the theologian of the cross alone can call a thing what it is. Luther's robust response to evil, however, is multifaceted and is not simply centered on the concept of sin; it also involves a new concept of faith. This new concept of faith, which initially is formulated in relation to the sacraments, shifts Luther's understanding of the religious life away from a theology centered on the humility of the *viator* towards one centered on trust in the *verbum externum*. Because faith focuses on the promised word of God, and not on an individual's habits or in any created form as such, faith is granted a new security: no matter how evil life may appear, faith is grounded in the promise of God which provides comfort and consolation against all appearances. This new understanding of faith not only transforms the basic framework of Luther's understanding of sin, moral action, and the goodness of created life but also bolsters Luther's realism and provides the theological framework that allows Luther to hope for the goodness of God in the face of evil. The new concept of faith is an essential element in understanding Luther's theological response to evil.

In this chapter, I trace the development of this concept of faith in the period from 1515 through the early 1520s. Drawing upon the work of a number of Luther scholars, I argue that the development of the concept occurs in three stages: first, in the 1515 *Lectures on Romans* and earlier, Luther operates with a theology of humility in which sin is identified with pride and security in salvation is seen as a damnable offense. Second, in 1518, following Jared Wicks, I argue a major shift occurs in which Luther orients faith away from humility as such towards one centered in the word

of promise given by the priest in the sacrament of penance. At this point, Luther begins to identify faith with the subjective certainty of salvation and begins to see his earlier pious doubt as an offense against the honor of God. Finally, in the 1520s, Luther develops an account of Christianity on the basis of the promise/trust dynamic, causing him decisively to sever ties with the Roman Church.¹ This new concept of faith has many implications: in the concluding section of this chapter, I examine the consequences of this idea for both Luther's mature understanding of the Christian life with particular attention to the concepts of faith and idolatry. In future chapters, I argue that this account of the work of grace opens up the framework for an understanding of the twofold reign of God and, with it, a robust creational ethic and provides the framework for Luther's response to evil in its multiplicity of forms. Thus, this chapter provides a narrative on a central shift in Luther's thought that provides the framework for his mature understanding of God, creation, and value.

I. The New Concept of Faith and the Promise

In 1518, during his debates with Cajetan over the 95 theses, a major shift occurs in Luther's conception of faith and the nature of Christian belief: Luther goes from a theology centered on humility before God towards one centered on faith in the word of promise.² The question of the development of Luther's concept of faith and the promise is closely tied to the question of the

¹ See Jared Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," *Gregorianum* Vol. 65. 1 (1984), 53-87, idem, *Man Yearning for Grace: Luther's Early Spiritual Writings* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1969) and idem, *Luther's Reform: Studies on Conversion and the Church* (Mainz: Verlag P. von Zabern, 1992). My own understanding is due to Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

² For sources on Luther's encounter with Cajetan, see Jared Wicks, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1978); *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue III: The Eucharist as Sacrifice*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965); David Bagchi, *Luther's Earliest Opponents: Catholic Controversialists 1518-1525* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Michael J. Tori, "Luther and Cajetan on the Sacrifice of the Mass," *Logia*, 9 no. 4 Reformation (2000), 29-36.

Reformation breakthrough. Before turning to the development of the concept of faith, it is necessary to comment on this scholarly discussion.

One of the most persistently debated questions in Luther scholarship in the twentieth century concerns the moment and exact content of Luther's Reformation discovery. The debate is complicated as it involves both historical and normative positions: in order to date the Reformation breakthrough, one must make a claim about what exactly constitutes this discovery. There are many options for this, however, as the Reformation is a complex movement. One could justifiably locate it in Luther's discovery of the biblical meaning of repentance, the forgiveness of sins, the righteousness of God, the distinction between the law and the gospel, or the nature of the papacy.³ Even once one spells out the content of the Reformation breakthrough, however, many of Luther's ideas took time to germinate and develop and so it is difficult to locate a moment of change. For example, in 1545, Luther famously provides an autobiographical *Rückblick* account of his Reformation breakthrough as occurring through a transformed understanding of the phrase "the justice of God" in Romans 1:17. This account has led many scholars to look for a "tower experience" or a precise moment in which this insight occurred. Most recent scholars, however, have been unable to historically locate this event and most admit it provides a normative retrospective of what Luther took to be the essential content of the Reformation. Even those who do locate a moment when this change occurred argue against making the insight into an event. Heiko Oberman, for example, finds evidence that this change occurred in Luther's 1515-1516 *Lectures on Romans*, particularly in reference to Romans 3:20, yet he notes, even if this is true, it took many years for Luther to appreciate the consequences and implications of the position.⁴

³ This list is taken from Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, trans. Martin J. Lohrmann (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 28. For a bibliography of each of these changes, see *ibid*, 28 n7.

⁴ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 164.

The debate into the Reformational breakthrough began in earnest with the research of Karl Holl in the early part of the 20th century. Holl did extensive research into Luther's early lectures and dated the turning point sometime between the summer of 1511 and the spring of 1513, and thus before the first Psalms lectures.⁵ This position dominated scholarship for the first half of the twentieth century. Ernest Bizer's *Fides ex Auditu* challenged this early dating by showing that Luther did not yet have a concept of the subjective certainty of salvation prior to 1518.⁶ Jared Wicks has confirmed this thesis by showing the ways that even in the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther does not operate with a notion of certainty in salvation, but instead relies upon the category of humility as the dominant motif.⁷ This association of the Reformational insight with the subjective certainty of salvation, the identification of *iustia Dei* with *iustia Christi*, and the development of the concept of *promissio*, has gained widespread scholarly consensus as Luther's pivotal discovery.

This dating is not without dangers, however. Bernhard Lohse, for example, argues that Bizer overemphasizes the pre-Reformational aspects of Luther's early lectures and fails to see the ways that Luther's thought develops prior to 1518 and is continuous with his mature positions.⁸ Moreover, Berndt Hamm and Heiko Oberman have both independently and convincingly argued that important elements of Luther's early thought remain throughout his career. Oberman argues, for example, that while he breaks with the nominalist understanding of justification and sin, Luther retains the nominalist understanding of the primacy of God's Word over human reason and the emphasis on experience over authority. For Oberman, Luther remained a nominalist in important

⁵ Karl Holl, "Der Neubau der Sittlichkeit," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921; 7th ed. 1948).

⁶ Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex Auditu: Eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther* (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereines, 1958). This discussion follows Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 85-95.

⁷ Jared Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace: Luther's Early Spiritual Teaching* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1969) and idem, *Luther's Reform: Studies on Conversion and the Church* (Mainz: P. von Zabern, 1992).

⁸ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 88.

ways throughout his career.⁹ Berndt Hamm agrees that Luther has not yet developed the subjective certainty of salvation prior to 1518; yet he argues that in the 1513-1515 *Psalms Lectures* Luther operates with a developed concept of *Anfechtung* and emphasizes the importance of experience for the theologian, both of which can be seen as central to Reformation spirituality.¹⁰ Bizer's account thus only provides one aspect of Luther's spiritual vision and thus does not see the ways that Luther maintains aspects of his early reflections in his mature thought.

Because of these continuities, much contemporary scholarship argues for viewing the breakthrough as a series of changes instead of a single tower experience. Hamm describes Luther's development through a series of new insights and changes: "What seems essential to me is that he did not cast his theological biography in light of all-defining central change or conversion. He spoke of important clarifications, which took place within a contextually specific and defined theological scope."¹¹ Likewise, Oberman argues a central movement can only be seen in retrospect, while historically many changes had to occur: "A series of discoveries that proved only retrospectively to be steps in the same direction freed him from the fundamental notion common to all medieval schools of thought."¹² Bernhard Lohse agrees: "The Reformation breakthrough marks an especially important caesura within a development extending over several years, rather than a total change in face of theological questions."¹³ The benefit of these positions over against Bizer is that they can read Luther's early writings as part of a continuous development. Instead of seeing a radical rupture and thereby viewing all prior insight as a period of darkness, these scholars are able both to read

⁹ Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 120.

¹⁰ Berndt Hamm, "Impending Doom and Imminent Grace: Luther's Early Years in the Cloister as the Beginning of His Reformation Reorientation," in *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, 26-58.

¹¹ Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 29.

¹² Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 152.

¹³ Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 86.

continuities in Luther's work and, perhaps more importantly, see Luther's position relative to the traditions that preceded him, be they nominalism (Oberman) or medieval piety (Hamm).

The recognition of many shifts is important, and no doubt accurate, particularly from a historical point of view. Oswald Bayer, however, argues that theologians must attempt to articulate the normative content of the Reformational change, particularly for the proclamation of the church. If one does not coherently convey the central features of the breakthrough, Bayer fears, one is only left with contingent historical change. What is transformative in Luther's thought, how his thought continues to speak to and challenge the church, can be lost to either an emphasis on change as such ('always reforming') or too vague and misleading formulations, such as *simul iustus et peccator* or the *solus*.¹⁴ Like Bizer, Bayer argues for a late dating and locates the change in the development of the concept of *promissio* and the assurance of salvation. For Bayer, the insight into the relationship of faith and the promise is the good news of the Gospel and thus has currency across historical change.

These debates are important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that they provide aid in interpreting Luther's arguments and clarify the contours of his thought. For the purposes of this argument, however, they provide two points of guidance: first, they warn of drawing too firm a boundary between Luther's early writings and his post-Reformational thought. While in 1518 Luther does arrive at an innovative notion of faith in the promise and this concept of faith bears fruit elsewhere in his theological anthropology, Luther maintains continuity with his earlier thought on the relationship of experience and faith and on the depth of sin. For all the innovativeness, there are strong continuities with what came before. Second, with Bayer, it is necessary to affirm a normative content to the Reformation. Luther's Reformation is not simply a historical protest against current ethical abuses in the Church, but instead he puts forth substantive

¹⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 44-67.

claims about the nature of God, Christ, and salvation that must be taken seriously as truth-claims. The following discussion, therefore, while examining points of development, does not deny the continuity with the earlier thought discussed in the last chapter (though it will point out innovations), and yet, it maintains that faith, promise, and Christ's work are the central claim that Luther offers to the Church and the abiding content of the Reformation. This continuity in development is important for it shows the ways that Luther retains his strong account of sin, even as he develops a new understanding of the promise and, ultimately, creation.

(1) As we saw in the last chapter, in his work prior to and through 1517, Luther identifies sin with inordinate self-love.¹⁵ In his 1515-1516 *Lectures on Romans*, he argues that humans naturally always only seek their own advantage and always love themselves above all else.¹⁶ Luther describes this as an incurvature of the self upon itself and argues that it knows no bounds: human beings not only misuse all the good gifts of life, but they even use God for their own ends.¹⁷ For Luther, this self-love is not simply a particular or occasional act, but he identifies it with the radical tinder (*fomes peccati*) from which all acts spring.¹⁸ Good works are a problem in this scheme as they arise out of this radical root: by doing good works and by attempting to become virtuous, one merely reinforces the entrenched self-love. Luther's attack on the scholastic *facere quod in se est* revolves around the issue of being made righteous: a tree cannot be changed by its fruit; rather fruit comes from the tree. Because one is at root unrighteous, one cannot love God by his or her own powers.¹⁹

¹⁵ The following discussion presents Luther's development in a straight-forward systematic manner. Joseph Lortz reminds us, however, that Luther's own thoughts, even on the sacraments, was often fluid, prolix, ever shifting and given to rhetorical excess. While there is a development, Luther's own writings are far messier than the narrative presented here; nevertheless, shifts do occur and this narrative presents these changes. Lortz quoted in Wicks, "'Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518,'" 80.

¹⁶ LW 25:344-345; WA 56:355.

¹⁷ LW 25:345; WA 56:355.

¹⁸ LW 25:300; WA 56:313.

¹⁹ See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 70-72.

Because the human problem is self-love and pride (*superbia*), in his early writings, Luther identifies the chief virtue for Christian faith as humility.²⁰ Drawing upon medieval mystical traditions of self-emptying, Luther employs the language of the necessity of stripping the self of its attachments and dispositions (*exuere*). To receive grace, a person must inwardly become empty and discarded even of her or his own righteousness.²¹ Luther's metaphors entail that only the one who is empty of pride and self-justification, who is formless and like a *tabula rasa*, can be filled with the grace of God.²²

Humility is thus productive: God treats the humility of faith (*humilitas fidei*) as the precondition for justification and bestows grace upon those who are sufficiently humble.²³ While God does not recognize good works or moral virtue, God recognizes and rewards humility as such.

²⁰ For an account of medieval concepts of humility see Berndt Hamm, "Why Did Luther Turn Faith into the Central Concept of the Christian Life?" in *The Early Luther*, 65-68. The question of Luther's relationship to medieval concepts of humility has spurred much scholarly discussion. Ernst Bizer argued that Luther's early concept of faith in the *Dictata super Psalterium* represented nothing more than the monastic notion of humility; *Fides ex Audit*, 20. Heiko Oberman, following Heinrich Bornkamm and Regin Prenter, argued against this and claimed that Luther's concept of humility, even in 1513-1515, must be read in relationship to his new concept of faith. See Heiko Oberman, "Wir sind Pettler, Hoc est verum: Bund and Gnade in der Theologie des Mittlealters und der Reformation," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 78 (1967), 232-252.

²¹ LW 25:204; WA 56:219.3-6.

²² LW 25:204; WA 56:218-220. Luther's relationship to the mystical tradition is complex. Partially this is due to the vagueness in relationship to the concept of mysticism; partially it is due to the vast amount of Luther's writings. David Steinmetz argues that early 20th century German theologians often used mysticism as a foil against which to contrast Luther's new religious vision. This led to a misleading separation of Luther against mysticism. Heiko Oberman, as in many other areas, made major contributions to Luther's relationship to mysticism by tracing Luther's usage of central concepts to discover how he employed them. Luther, he argues, rejects any form of mysticism that bypasses the role of Christ and redeploys terms to support faith in the promise of God. Heiko Oberman, "*Simul Gemitus et Raptus: Luther and Mysticism*," in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 219-251. David Steinmetz, "Religious Ecstasy in Staupitz and the Young Luther," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 1980), 23-38. For an examination of recent scholarship on this question, see Berndt Hamm, "How Mystical Was Luther's Faith?" in *The Early Luther*, 190-232; and Sven Grosse, *Der junge Luther und die Mystic: ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Werden der reformatorischen Theologie* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

²³ See Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Third edition. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

In commenting on Romans 1:1, Luther argues that God reckons the humble righteous on the basis of this humility:

Even though a person with all his natural and spiritual gifts may be wise before men and righteous and good, God will not on that account look upon him as such, especially if he regards himself so. Therefore we must in all these things keep ourselves so humble as if we still had nothing of our own. We must wait for the naked mercy of God, who will reckon us righteous and wise. This God will do *if we have been humble* and have not anticipated God by justifying ourselves and by thinking that we are something.²⁴ (*Quod tunc facit Deus, Si ipse humilis fuerit et non preuenerit Deum Iustificando seipsum et reputando*) (Emphasis mine)

Justification here depends upon the sinner being sufficiently humble. This position remains consistent throughout the Romans commentary—in discussing Romans 14:14, for example, Luther emphasizes that humility is the basis for God’s favor, stating bluntly: “They seek and sigh, and by this humility they cause God to be favorable toward them.”²⁵ Because humility is that which receives God’s favor, Luther claims that humility is the central message of Scripture: “What else does Scripture teach but humility, in which we are subject not only to God but also to every creature?”²⁶ For Luther, in Scripture, humility simply means the acknowledgment of sin, the recognition that one is unable to please God and is radically entrenched in evil.²⁷ This understanding of humility cannot be intentional or self-generated for this leads to a vicious circle, that is, if one intends humility, one does it for oneself and thereby reinforces the entrenched self-love instead of overcoming it. Rather, humility comes through an encounter with God. God’s first task in encountering proud humanity is an alien work (*opus alienum Dei*): God must kill the sinner by making her or him aware of his or her

²⁴ LW 25:137; WA 56:159.9-15.

²⁵ LW 25:498; WA 56:503.20-21.

²⁶ LW 25:183; WA 56:199.30.

²⁷ Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 50.

radical involvement in sin. In encountering God, one discovers God's righteousness and, in light of this, one's own sin and evil—a true self-evaluation is humility.²⁸

In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther identifies this humble self-recognition with righteousness itself. To be righteous is simply to recognize one's inability to please God and to be mired in sin. Righteousness is not an achievement of moral virtue so much as an acknowledgement of one's inability to attain the moral virtue that would please God. Luther repeatedly identifies humility with righteousness: "Then we will have fulfilled total humility (*totam humilitatem*) both against God and against man, that is, complete and perfect righteousness (*totam perfectamque Iustitiam*)."²⁹ "Therefore the only, complete righteousness is humility."³⁰ This acknowledgement is not a one-time event, but is the nature of the religious life. Because sin is in the tinder of our being and continues throughout one's life, righteousness is a constant pleading for forgiveness throughout one's entire life.³¹ Humility is thus both the precondition for justification, given in the encounter with God, and the nature of the righteousness itself.

Because of the strong emphasis on humility and the persistence of sin in the believer, Ernst Bizer argues that for Luther in this early period the object of faith is a future total release from sins and not the promise of God.³² While it is undoubtedly true that one hopes for a future righteousness, in the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther nevertheless describes faith in relationship to the promises of God. In the face of the terrifying God (*prescientia terrentis Dei*) of predestination, for example, Luther argues that we must hold to the truth of the God of promise (*in veritatem promittentis*

²⁸ Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace*, 45-51; 60-73.

²⁹ LW 25:183; WA 56:199.28-29.

³⁰ LW 25:441; WA 56: 449.8-9.

³¹ LW 25:220-221; WA 56:235.31-38. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 51.

³² Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex Auditu*.

Dei).³³ In explaining Romans 3:7 and Israel's rejection of Jesus, Luther maintains that God operates by means of the promise and has shown Godself to be truthful to the promise in Jesus Christ.³⁴ Likewise, Luther maintains the unity of the promise and faith—he describes faith in terms of trust in the faithfulness of God: “But according to my understanding I believe that ‘faith’ (*fides*) here does not refer to the faithfulness of God but means trust (*credulitas*) in God, which is the actual fulfillment of the promise, as it is clearly seen in many passages. For it is the righteousness which comes from faith which has been promised (*Quia Iustitia ex fide promissa*).”³⁵ The central development between Luther in this period and his later reflections, therefore, does not consist in a shift from hope for justification to one of the word of promise.

Rather, the chief development occurs in terms of the *content* of the promise. In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther sees the promise in general terms: God's faithfulness is manifested in Jesus and is not directed at the individual as such. Because the promise is general, Luther denies that there is certainty in salvation and in one's own justification. Because righteousness is always in process, one cannot be certain that one will finally be made righteous. In his early scholia on Romans 8:38-39, drawing on the traditional interpretation of Ecclesiastes 9:1, Luther argues that while one can be certain that the elect are saved, one cannot be certain that one is among the elect unless, like St. Paul, one receives a special dispensation.³⁶ He writes, “The apostle is speaking in his own person and in that of all the elect, because he was certain by revelation that he was a ‘chosen instrument’ (Acts

³³ “Therefore he should boldly lay hold on the truthfulness of the God who promises and thus free himself from his former idea of a terrifying God and be saved and elect.” LW 25:378; WA 56:387.25-26.

³⁴ “God has now fulfilled His promises and is shown to be truthful, and they do not believe Him or receive the promises. Therefore will it be untrue that God has fulfilled His promises, and will this truth which has now been made manifest be taken away, and will it be said that the promise has not been fulfilled, only because they have not believed? By no means....” LW 25:209; WA 56:224.16-19.

³⁵ LW 25:209; WA 56:224.21-23.

³⁶ Wicks, “‘Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518,” 58. See also Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 53-54.

9:15) and we are all certain of the elect and of all of us. For even though it is certain that the elect of God are saved, yet no one is sure that he has been chosen because of the general rule."³⁷ Salvation for the individual is never a matter of knowledge, but should be one of pious doubt.³⁸

This denial of the subjective certainty of salvation is a necessary correlate to the emphasis Luther puts on humility. For Luther, those who are self-confident and secure in their salvation become indifferent towards God and towards loving the neighbor. If one knows he or she is saved, he or she no longer approaches religion seriously, but instead becomes smug, indifferent, and self-righteous. The only way to maintain the constant fear of God that pours forth in good works, he claims, is through maintaining the humility that denies the self and constantly implores God for grace.³⁹ Uncertainty is central to the humility of faith: the best sign of faith is to fear and tremble before God and to doubt one's worthiness for salvation and one's justification.⁴⁰

This account of humility and the constancy of sin does not lead to an ethical indifference, however. Because sin remains in a person, one must remain humble and constantly plead with God for mercy and forgiveness for the radical sin that remains. The humble person is the one who constantly works to overcome sin through practices of self-mortification and acts of love towards the neighbor. Luther depicts this humility as a sanative process in which there is a gradual removal of sin and a growth in righteousness: "Their life is not a static thing, but in movement from good to better, just as a sick man proceeds from sickness to health."⁴¹ Luther argues this process of healing by which a person becomes righteous occurs partially and by degree. In a remarkable interpretation on Romans 12, Luther interprets the stages of Christian life in terms of metaphysical categories:

³⁷ LW 25:78; WA 56:86.19-24.

³⁸ Bernhard Lohse writes, "This much is certain, that genuine assurance of salvation is not yet to be found in the Romans lecture." Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 77.

³⁹ LW 25:497-498; WA 56:503.18-504.3. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 50-53.

⁴⁰ LW 25:377-378; WA 56:387.21-26.

⁴¹ LW 25:433; WA 56:441.15-17. Wicks, *Man Yearning for Grace*, 104-128.

nonbeing, becoming, being, action, and being upon; or using Aristotle, privation, matter, form, operation and passion.⁴² For Luther, nonbeing corresponds to a person in sin, while being refers to the final arrival at a state of righteousness. The movement from nonbeing to becoming occurs through repentance, in which one receives the infused grace of God and gradually becomes purified. This healing is justification and is always a state of becoming. Luther writes:

Through his new birth he moves from sin to righteousness, and thus from nonbeing through becoming to being. And when this happens, he lives righteously. But from this new being, which is really a nonbeing, man proceeds and passes to another new being by being acted upon, that is, through becoming new, he proceeds to become better, and from this again something new. Thus it is correct to say that man is always in privation, always in becoming or in potentiality, in matter, and always in action. Aristotle philosophizes about such matters, and he does it well, but people do not understand him well. Man is always in nonbeing, in becoming, in being, always in privation, in potentiality, in action, always in sin, in justification, in righteousness, that is, he is always a sinner, always a penitent, always righteous. For the fact that he repents makes a righteous man out of an unrighteous one. Thus repentance is the medium between unrighteousness and righteousness. And thus a man is in sin as the *terminus a quo* and righteousness as the *terminus ad quem*. Therefore if we always are repentant, we are always sinners, and yet thereby we are righteous and we are justified: we are in part sinners and in part righteous, that is, we are nothing but penitents...No one is

⁴² As mentioned in the last chapter, Luther has a complex relationship to Aristotle and his relationship should not be reduced solely to his stringent condemnations of Aristotle. While Luther critiques the sole dependence of theology on Aristotle, he is willing to apply the fruits of Aristotle's insights for the service of the Gospel. Aristotle cannot be the basis for theology, but can be used to serve the purposes of proclamation.

good that he does not become better, and no one so evil that he does not become worse, until at last we come to our final state.⁴³

Importantly, the language of being righteous and a sinner is a partial account: one is not totally a sinner and totally a saint simultaneously here; rather one is partially both. While one was once fully a sinner and in nonbeing, one is now becoming better through the infusion of grace; nevertheless, some sinful remnants remain in the person. One is becoming righteous, but is not yet righteous. Justification is partial and in process.⁴⁴ According to Luther, “This life, then, is a life of being healed from sin, it is not a life of sinlessness, with the cure completed and perfect health attained. The church is the inn and the infirmary for those who are sick and in need of being made well. But heaven is the palace of the healthy and the righteous...Righteousness does not dwell here, but it is preparing a dwelling place for itself here in the meantime by healing sin.”⁴⁵ While one hopes (*in spe*) to one day be fully righteous, and is becoming more righteous through infused grace, one in fact (*in re*) remains sinful.⁴⁶

Humility is thus the norm of faith: it is that which God recognizes and creates; it is active in all aspects of faith and it keeps one from becoming smug and proud. Justification here is a gradual healing process in which one constantly repents and strives for an interior healing that will finally be completed in the afterlife.

⁴³ LW 25:434-435; WA 56:442.7-22; 25-26.

⁴⁴ F. Edward Crantz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society*, 26-29.

⁴⁵ LW 25:262-263; WA 56:275.26-28; 276.2-3.

⁴⁶ Karl Holl, “Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über den Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewissheit,” in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928), 1.111-54. For Holl, this account of justification remains consistent throughout Luther's career. Holl interprets Luther as arguing proleptically: because justification is a process in which one is progressively made righteous (*reale Gerechtmachung*), God declares a person presently justified in anticipation of the final sanctification and future righteousness. For Holl, justification is an analytic judgment.

(2) Luther's conception of faith, humility, and certainty undergo alteration in 1518.⁴⁷ The changes here involve a radical new sense of grace grounded in the promise of God. Whereas the promise in 1515 concerned God's action in Jesus Christ and was not made to individuals as such, in 1518, Luther begins to describe the promise as being a living word coming to the individual in the sacraments. This personalization of the concept of the promise leads to new understanding of the subjective certainty of salvation and, as I will demonstrate later, a differentiated understanding of the nature of the self.

One of the first indications of a change in Luther's thought occurs in the 1518 *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*.⁴⁸ In expositing the 7th thesis, "God remits guilt to no one unless at the same time he humbles him in all things and makes him submissive to his vicar, the priest,"⁴⁹ Luther argues that this claim poses a problem. On the one hand, it seems to indicate that forgiveness must first take place on earth before it takes place in heaven; yet, on the other hand, Luther, with the church affirmed that grace must be infused prior to seeking the remission of sins or having guilt forgiven. The passage thus presents a contradictory picture: one needed an infusion of heavenly grace in order to seek forgiveness, yet heavenly forgiveness seems to depend upon earthly activity.

⁴⁷ A number of recent scholars agree about 1518 being the year of the decisive change for Luther. See, for example, Ernst Bizer, *Fides ex auditu*; Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518;" Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*; Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 54; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 96-109. My own analysis here follows Wicks, Schreiner, and Bayer in locating a recognizable shift in the debates with Cajetan and the *Explanations of the 95 Theses*. Note, for Wicks, the decisive Reformational change occurs after the posting of the *95 Theses*.

⁴⁸ Oswald Bayer locates the change earlier in the 1518 *Pro veritate inquierenda et timoratis conscientia consolandis*. Like the *Explanations of the 95 Theses*, this text concerns the sacrament of penance and the relationship of penance to the promise. See Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 24 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), 164-202.

⁴⁹ LW 31:98; WA 1.539.33-34. Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," 60. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 54.

To solve this conundrum, Luther argues that God produces the humility that seeks forgiveness in the sacrament. Maintaining the position he developed in the *Lectures on Romans* and the *Heidelberg Disputation*, he maintains that because humans are to their core sinful, God must perform an alien work (*opus alienum deus*) by destroying one's entrenched pride by showing that person his or her sins. The alien work causes the believer to reach a profound despair and utter humility in one's own ability. Luther identifies this despair with the experience of infused grace: grace does not come as a compliment to one's natural abilities, but is experienced as suffering, humility, and guilt as it reveals the sinfulness of a person.⁵⁰ For Luther, this humility is necessary and must be apparent as one comes to confession. If and when the priest witnesses this despair and humility in the penitent, he can announce the forgiveness of sins in accordance with Matthew 16.⁵¹ This announcement solves the conundrum of work: God's alien work produces the despair that leads to confession; in the absolution, God's proper work occurs, namely loosing those who are bound. The grounding for the loosing is God's prior activity, but the loosing itself is distinct from the alien work: while humility prepares one for grace, the word of absolution is a new word pronounced on the sinner. The forgiveness offered by the priest, moreover, looses on behalf of God, but God is the active agent forgiving.

This account bears similarities to the earlier emphasis upon humility in seeking forgiveness, yet the role of humility has changed. In the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther depicted humility as the very nature of the Christian life, such that one must always remain humble before God. If there was any

⁵⁰ "When God begins to justify a man, he first of all condemns him; him whom he wishes to raise up, he destroys; him whom he wishes to heal, he smites; and the one to whom he wishes to give life, he kills....God works a strange work in order that he may work his own work." LW 31:99; WA 1:540.8; 23-24.

⁵¹ "When the priest sees such humility and anguish, he shall, with complete confidence in the power given him to show compassion." *Hic sacerdos talem videns humilitatem et compunctionem de fiducia potestatis sibi ad faciendam misericordiam traditae plenissime praesumat et solvat solutumque pronunciet, ac sic pacem ei conscientiae donet.* LW 31:100; WA 1:540.38-41. Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," 60.

comfort or certainty, it could only be found in one's own despair and in one's continued lack of certainty—that one was unsure of her salvation granted her conjectural certainty of salvation. Here, however, Luther claims that humility and despair are only a necessary first step in a person's spiritual life, but they are not sufficient, for they do not bring peace and consolation. He writes, "However, as long as he remains in this wretched, perplexed state of conscience, he has neither peace nor consolation, unless he flees to the power of the church and seeks solace and relief from his sins and wretchedness which he has uncovered through confession. For neither by his own counsel or his strength will he be able to find peace; in fact, his sorrow will finally be turned into despair."⁵² Humility is necessary as it makes one seek the ministry of the church; yet it is no longer the full nature of the Christian life.⁵³

Rather, Luther now stresses the importance of faith in the priest's words of absolution, which bring comfort, peace, and certainty.⁵⁴ The announcement of the forgiveness of sins to the sinner becomes the promise towards which faith is directed. This promise, however, has undergone conceptual development: whereas in the *Lectures on Romans* the promise was directed towards God's faithfulness in sending Jesus to the world in general, the promise now is addressed specifically to the penitent in the sacrament. When the priest looses one's sins, he makes a promise directly to the person. Because the promise in the sacrament is made *pro me*, one is called to believe in the application of the promise to oneself. This thus changes the role of certainty in faith: whereas doubt was holy and certainty was seen as a form of spiritual pride in the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther now emphasizes that one should never doubt one's own salvation, for this is to doubt the promise given

⁵² LW 31:100; WA 1:540.34-38.

⁵³ Berndt Hamm, "From the Medieval 'Love of God' to the 'Faith' of Luther," in *The Early Luther*, 1-26.

⁵⁴ Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," 62. Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 54-55.

in the sacrament, and thereby the truthfulness of God. In order to have certainty and peace, one must have faith in the sacramental promise delivered by the priest.⁵⁵

By locating faith in the priest's external word (*verbum externum*), Luther transforms his earlier understanding of the nature of the religious life.⁵⁶ Whereas in the period before 1518 Luther rejected the *via moderna* on the basis of works, but retained the notion that God recognizes humility, he now emphasizes that one should not place trust in any subjective state, but only the promise given by the priest. This trust in the external promise shifts the weight of the sacrament of penance: whereas before one had to fully confess one's sins and be perfectly contrite in order for the sacrament to have full effect, now Luther argues, the promise trumps one's interior self-appraisal and feelings of contrition. Even if one is not perfectly sorrowful for his or her sin, the promise is still given to her.⁵⁷ Because Jesus Christ promised to remit those sins that one looses on earth, and the promise looses one of sins, one must trust that the word of forgiveness is effective. Precisely because it comes from Jesus Christ, one must trust this word above all other grounds of experience:

For if he is uncertain of the anguish of his conscience (as it must always be if it is a true sorrow), yet he is constrained to abide by the judgment of another, not at all on account of the prelate himself or his power, but on account of the word of Christ who cannot lie when he says, "Whatever you loose on earth." For faith born of this word will bring peace of conscience, for it is according to this word that the priest shall loose. Whoever seeks peace in another way, for example, inwardly through experience, certainly seems to tempt God and desires to have peace in fact, rather than in faith. For you will have peace only as long as you

⁵⁵ Wicks, "Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther's Development in 1518," 62-64.

⁵⁶ Hamm, "The Ninety-Five Theses: A Reformation Text in the Context of Luther's Early Theology of Repentance," in *The Early Luther*, 107-108.

⁵⁷ Bayer, *Promissio*, 164-225.

believe in the word of the one who promised, “Whatever you loose.” Christ is our peace, but only through faith.⁵⁸

This shift towards the concept of promise also changes Luther’s account of the nature of certainty and security.⁵⁹ Whereas he earlier argued that security results in prideful sloth, Luther now claims that one must put full trust in the promise and treat the declaration of the forgiveness of sins as certain. Because the word is grounded in the promise of Christ, one must trust that Christ will be true to his word—if the priest looses one, one really is loosed in heaven and completely forgiven. While experience and reason leave one uncertain, the word of the priest grants certainty and peace. Whereas Luther saw certainty as vice, he now sees the peace and certainty born from faith in the promise as among the greatest gifts of God.⁶⁰ He writes, “This peace, therefore, is that sweetest power, for which, from the depth of our hearts, we ought to give the greatest thanks to God, who has given such power to men—that power which is the only consolation for sins and for wretched consciences, if only men will believe that which Christ has promised is true.”⁶¹ This peace and consolation, however, only comes to one who has faith and who remains confident in the promise. Confidence and security are necessary conditions for receiving the gifts. According to Luther, “As long as we are uncertain, there is no remission, since there is not yet remission for us. Indeed, one would perish woefully unless it should become certain, for he would not believe that remission had taken place for him.”⁶² Confidence, instead of being a vice, is now a necessary part of receiving God’s grace, such that peace can only be received by one with assurance.⁶³

⁵⁸ LW 31:100; WA 1:540.41-541.9.

⁵⁹ Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 56.

⁶⁰ Wicks, “Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther’s Development in 1518,” 64-65.

⁶¹ LW 31:100; WA 1:541.12-15.

⁶² LW 31:100; WA 1:541.22-24.

⁶³ Hamm, “The Ninety-Five Theses,” 107-109.

In the 1518 *Acta Augustana*, Luther further develops the concept of the necessity of faith in the promise.⁶⁴ In this text, Luther recounts his confrontation with Cajetan, and comes to see that his concept of the promise is the chief theological issue separating him and the Roman Catholic Church. Whereas Cajetan maintained the traditional belief in the necessity of pious doubt, Luther insists on the certainty and assurance of faith, a position Luther argued Cajetan could not understand: “I stated that no one can be justified except by faith. Thus it is clearly necessary that a man must believe with firm faith that he is justified and in no way doubt that he will obtain grace. For if he doubts and is uncertain, he is not justified but rejects grace. My opponents wish to consider this theology new and erroneous.”⁶⁵

To defend the innovativeness of the doctrine, Luther puts forward a deductive argument that relies heavily on Scripture: first, drawing on Romans 1, Matthew 17:18-19, and the First Commandment, he claims that no one is righteous unless they have faith in God. Because faith is always disjunctive, that is, one either trusts God or in oneself, only a person who trusts in God may live righteously. To be righteous, therefore depends entirely on faith in God.⁶⁶ Second, he claims that faith is an intentional act, that faith always has an object, namely, the promise of God: “Faith, however, is nothing else than believing what God promises and reveals.”⁶⁷ Citing Abraham’s faith, and Isaiah 55, he argues that the promise as a mode of address calls for a response, where the only proper response is faith.⁶⁸ The heart of his argument, however, hinges on the third premise, “A person going to the sacrament must believe that he will receive grace, and not doubt it, but have absolute confidence, otherwise he will do so to his condemnation.”⁶⁹ Luther’s proof for this again

⁶⁴ Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 56-57.

⁶⁵ LW 31:270; WA 2:13.6-10.

⁶⁶ LW 31:270; WA 2:13.12-17.

⁶⁷ LW 31:270; WA 2:13.18-19.

⁶⁸ LW 31:271; WA 2:13.19-22.

⁶⁹ LW 31:271; WA 2:13.23-25.

adheres closely to two biblical texts: first, from Hebrews 11:6, (“For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him”), Luther argues that this text binds us to believe that God rewards all those who seek God. If we seek God’s forgiveness in the sacrament, then we must believe that God gives grace to us. Second, from Matthew 16, Luther claims that we must believe in Christ’s words concerning binding and loosing—if we trust in the words of Christ concerning the forgiveness of sins, then we will be absolved and set free. Faith is necessary—if we do not have faith in these words, Luther warns that we face condemnation: “If you come to the sacrament of penance and do not firmly believe that you will be absolved in heaven, you come to your judgment and damnation because you do not believe that Christ speaks the truth when he says, “Whatever you loose.” And with your doubt you make of Christ a liar, which is a horrible sin.”⁷⁰ Because faith makes us righteous, and the object of faith is the promise, one is only righteous if he believes Christ’s words of forgiveness.

Because of this promise, Luther now even more strongly than before emphasizes that one’s worthiness or subjective preparation do not make one worthy for the sacrament.⁷¹ Whereas before the priest would only absolve the penitent if he saw the proper despair, Luther now insists that what ultimately matters is not the sinner’s preparation, but faith in the promise of God. In fact, he denies that one could ever have sufficient preparation, as sin runs deeper than any possible contrition. He writes,

If, however, you say, “What if I am unworthy and unfit for the sacrament?” I answer as I did above. Through no attitude on your part will you become worthy, through no works will you be prepared for the sacrament, but through faith alone, for only faith in the word of Christ justifies, makes a person alive, worthy, and well prepared. Without faith all other things are

⁷⁰ LW 31:271; WA 2:13.33-14.4.

⁷¹ Wicks, “Fides sacramenti—Fides specialis: Luther’s Development in 1518,” 64-66.

acts of presumption and desperation. The just person lives not by his attitude but by faith. For this reason you should not harbor any doubt on account of your unworthiness. You go to the sacrament because you are unworthy and so that you may be made worthy and be justified by him who seek to save sinners and not the righteous. When, however, you believe Christ's word, you honor it and thereby are righteous.⁷²

Luther does not deny the importance of humility here—he believes that the faithful will still experience their sin and feel deep contrition, especially in light of God's grace. Yet, he insists that the grounds for righteousness are not located in one's contrition or preparation, but, in Christ's powerful word given by the priest.⁷³

The central dynamic of the Christian faith has thus shifted from humility and internal preparation towards the category of faith in the promise, a promise which is always *extra nos*. More so than in the *Explanation of the 95 Theses*, Luther insists that the promise is directed specifically at the individual. Drawing on numerous Gospel stories in which individuals were called to trust in specific promises made for them, Luther argues that faith must be directed to one's own forgiveness offered in the sacrament. He differentiates general faith, which he recommended in the *Lectures on Romans*, from specific faith, and claims that the latter is necessary in view of the promise given in the sacrament. Because we seek forgiveness in the sacrament, because Christ offers forgiveness there, and because Christ promises to loose what is loosed on earth, all is forgiven to the individual in the binding and loosing. The sacrament involves the declaration of forgiveness and so the believer must now believe he or she is in fact forgiven.⁷⁴

Thus, in reflecting on the sacrament of penance in 1518 and 1519, Luther shifts the grounds for justification from the internal state of humility towards the external word of promise given by

⁷² LW 31:271; WA 2:14.4-12.

⁷³ Hamm, "The Ninety-Five Theses," 107-109.

⁷⁴ LW 31:271; WA 2:14.1-4.

the priest in the sacrament. This central development occurs within the concept of promise itself: instead of God being truthful in general, God's promise comes to the person specifically and one is called on to trust in the forgiveness of sins for him or herself. This relocation of faith is central to Luther's understanding of sin and evil. As we saw in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues that a faith that trusts in works or operates with a theological vision of merit cannot call evil evil; instead, Luther argues, these theologians must call human works good in order to maintain their theological system. A theology that does not center on subjective states, however, is free from this burden. More precisely, because faith is centered on a word given to a person and the person is not evaluated on his or her moral purity, the theologian is free to call things what they are: evil is evil, sin is sin. Because faith is entirely directed to the word of promise, the sinner does not need to justify himself or herself through meritorious action or wrongly evaluate the nature of their acts. The word of promise frees a person from all self-evaluation and allows true vision of the nature and depravity of sin.

(3) In the 1520s, Luther develops and expands the emphasis on the promise, such that the promise becomes identified with the Gospel itself. The elements that emerged from his debate with Cajetan, such as the *verbum externum*, the necessity of faith to complete the promise, and the subjective certainty of faith, come to define the central elements of Luther's mature theology. The promise also expands into new areas: it leads to a radical break with the Roman sacramental system, to a new understanding of God's action and finally, to seeing the relationship of faith and promise as the ultimate dynamic of human existence. This section will trace the expansion of the concept of faith in the central Reformation text *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which Luther most clearly spells out the promise and its consequences.

In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther attacks the heart of the Roman church, the sacramental system, on the basis of the category of the promise.⁷⁵ The treatise is radical and far-reaching: Luther not only denies the validity of five of the seven sacraments, but also argues that the Lord's Supper and Baptism have been held captive under the tyranny of the papacy. Luther's argument against the other sacraments is grounded in the concept of promise: a sacrament, he claims, is simply those promises in Scripture that have signs attached to them.⁷⁶ The traditional sacraments of confirmation, penance, marriage, extreme unction, and ordination, while they may serve some good purpose in society and in the church, do not have the word of promise attached to them in Scripture and thus cannot be sacraments.

Luther's main concern in the treatise, however, is with the tyranny he sees present in the Lord's Supper, the way the institution of the sacrament is abused. Instead of being a gift of love from God to the creature, Luther argues that the sacraments are being held in captivity by the papacy. Luther's argument here is not primarily aimed at the ethical abuses in the church, such as transforming a sacred right into an economic exchange or placing more emphasis on the external ceremonies instead of one's internal dispositions, though he does worry about these too.⁷⁷ Rather, Luther claims that the central element of the sacrament, the gracious promise instituted and confirmed by Jesus Christ, is lost when the mass is understood as a sacrifice. The gift of God is transformed from a divine action into a human work, and thereby God's activity is denied. He claims there are three forms of this captivity: the first captivity is the withholding of the cup from

⁷⁵ For the relation of the promise to the sacramental system in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, see Mark D. Tranvik, "Luther on Baptism," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and Church*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 23-37. See also Berndt Hamm, "Luther's Discovery of Evangelical Freedom," in *The Early Luther*, 154-171 and Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 255-281.

⁷⁶ LW 36:124; WA 6:572.10-11.

⁷⁷ LW 36:35; WA 6:512.9-15.

the laity, for which Luther finds no scriptural precedent;⁷⁸ the second is the doctrine of transubstantiation, which Luther argues leads to Christological errors, as it seems to deny that the two natures can both be present in substance while retaining their integrity;⁷⁹ the third error, the one that Luther identifies as the most wicked abuse of all, is the idea that the mass is a good work and a sacrifice.⁸⁰ Instead, Luther argues, the mass should be understood as a promise from God freely given to creatures.⁸¹

Luther's argument for the central role of the promise in understanding the mass is grounded in the words of institution: "Take, eat: this is my body, which is given for you. Drink of it all of you, for this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me."⁸² For Luther, these words contain the whole power, nature and substance of the sacrament: nothing is omitted that pertains to the essence, use, or blessing of sacrament and nothing is superfluous to it.⁸³ Most fundamentally, Luther latches onto the language of testament and maintains that this definition is both necessary and sufficient for understanding the sacramental system: the sacraments are nothing but a testament given to creatures by Christ. If we understand the nature of a testament, Luther claims, we also will understand the nature of the mass and all the sacraments.⁸⁴

For Luther, a testament is a promise made by one who is about to die. Every testament has two elements: first, a testament, unlike a promise, involves the death of the testator; second, a testament promises an inheritance to a specific heir.⁸⁵ In the words of institution, Christ provides

⁷⁸ LW 36:27-28; WA 6:507.

⁷⁹ LW 36:28-35; WA 6:508-512.

⁸⁰ LW 36:35; WA 6:512.

⁸¹ See Carl F. Wisloff, *The Gift of Communion: Luther's Controversy with Rome on Eucharistic Sacrifice*, trans. Joseph M. Shaw (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964).

⁸² LW 36:36-37; WA 6:512.37-513.5.

⁸³ LW 36:36; WA 6:512.33-34.

⁸⁴ LW 36:37-38; WA 6:513.22-23.

⁸⁵ LW 36:38; WA 6:513.24-26.

both elements: Christ foretells his death when he identifies the cup with his blood that will be poured out; he designates the inheritance as “the forgiveness of sins” and appoints the heir, “For you and for many.”⁸⁶ For Luther, the nature of the mass is simply a testament and a promise: in it, we receive the forgiveness of sins and this has been confirmed to us by the death of the Son of God. Christ promises the forgiveness of sin to all who eat and drink of the bread and wine and this promise is effective for all who believe. The promise of forgiveness is irrevocable, as Christ sealed it with his life. Luther expresses this sheer graciousness of the promise given by Christ to creatures beautifully:

According to its substance, therefore, the mass is nothing but the aforesaid work of Christ: “Take and eat, etc.” as if he were saying: “Behold, O sinful and condemned man, out of the pure and unmerited love with which I love you, and by the will of the Father of mercies, apart from any merit or desire of yours, I promise you in these words the forgiveness of all your sins and life everlasting. And that you may be absolutely certain of this irrevocable promise of mine, I shall give my body and pour out my blood, confirming this promise by my very death, and leaving you my body and blood as a sign and memorial of this same promise. As often as you partake of them, remember me, proclaim and praise my love and bounty toward you, and give thanks.”⁸⁷

In the sacrament God promises forgiveness and mercy, a love that does not wait on the sinner, but promises overflowing love. The purpose of the mass, of the gathering of the church, is simply to announce God’s mercy and love given in the promise to the congregation.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ LW 36:38; WA 6:513. 27-31.

⁸⁷ LW 36:40; WA 6:515.17-26.

⁸⁸ LW 36:41; WA 6:516.6-9. “Actually, during the mass, we should do nothing with greater zeal (indeed, it demands all our zeal) than to set before our eyes, meditate upon, and ponder these words, these promises of Christ—for they truly constitute the mass itself—in order to exercise, nourish, increase, and strengthen our faith in them by this daily remembrance.”

This identification of the promise as the essential element of the Sacrament of the Altar both retains and extends Luther's reflections on faith developed in relation to the sacrament of penance. First, the shift away from humility to the word *extra nos* is retained: where Luther saw the promise in the words of the priest in the binding and loosing earlier, he now sees the promise as the very essence of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. What matters is the Word of the promising God, not the preparation or motive of the believer. Because God promises to give, all human works are excluded from this action.

If the mass is a promise, as has been said, then access to it is granted, not with any works, or power, or merits of one's own, but by faith alone. For where there is the Word of the promising God, there must necessarily be the faith of the accepting man... That is to say, that the author of our salvation is not man, by any works of his own, but God, through his promise; and that all things depend on, and are upheld and preserved by, the word of his power, through which he brought us forth, to be a kind of first fruits of his creatures."⁸⁹

While Luther maintains that one who has received the promise will be contrite in view of God's mercy, the humility and contrition is now a *consequence* instead of a *preparation* for the sacrament. The promise made is not simply given to one who confesses his or her sin with a contrite spirit; rather, the promise is given to those who come to the altar to receive the bread and wine.

Second, he retains and expands the emphasis on faith as necessary for the promise to be effective. For Luther, here, a promise is a social action that aims at the creation of a new relationship grounded in the terms of the promise. The notion of promise has two aspects for Luther: first, in making a promise, the promiser makes herself responsible to the listener. In promising, one claims responsibility for a future action and thereby binds herself to a future course of action. In having promised us mercy, God obligates Godself to us and takes responsibility for our salvation. Second,

⁸⁹ LW 36:38-39; WA 6:514.12-14; 21-25.

the saying of the promise binds the promiser and the listener in a new relationship. A promise is made in a specific situation to a specific person; when God promises to save, God promises to save the individual, the promise is made *pro me*. In baptism, in the table, and in the proclamation the promise is made that God acts, not simply for the world, but also for the individual. In baptism, the Word of promise is joined to the water and a personal declaration of salvation is made for the individual.⁹⁰

In order for a promise to accomplish its purpose, it must be acknowledged and received by the heir in faith that the testator will fulfill the obligation. Faith is therefore necessary to the promise—the promise must be received in faith in order for it to create a new fellowship. Likewise, the promise is necessary to faith—for Luther, there is no bare faith without an intentional object; faith does not exist apart from the promise.⁹¹ Luther writes, “For anyone can easily see that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith.”⁹² The indissoluble bond of the promise and faith is due to their specific content: in promising to forgive, God promises to do everything necessary for us for salvation. As God promises to be sufficient for salvation, faith is the pure receptivity and acknowledgment of God’s action.⁹³ Faith is not a work, but that alone which trusts these promises, believes Christ to be truthful to his word, and does not doubt that these blessings will be bestowed upon us.⁹⁴ This faith is not something

⁹⁰ For more on the concept of promise see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 50-57; idem, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989; original 1971).

⁹⁰ LW 36:63-64; WA 6:531.7-25.

⁹¹ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 50-51.

⁹² LW 36:42; WA 6:517.8-10.

⁹³ For the concept of pure receptivity, see Berndt Hamm, “Martin Luther’s Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation,” trans. Timothy J. Wengert. *Lutheran Quarterly* 39.2 Summer 2015, 125-161.

⁹⁴ LW 36:40-41; WA 6:515.27-33.

humans can produce or give to God, but rather God produces it in us: “For faith is a work of God, not of man, as Paul teaches. The other works he works through us and with our help, but this one alone he works in us and without our help.”⁹⁵ God gives both the promise in the sacrament and the faith that receives it. Importantly, faith is sufficient—the promise of forgiveness and the reception of it are sufficient for salvation. According to Luther, “If you would be saved, you must begin with the faith of the sacraments, without any works whatsoever. The works will follow faith, but do not think too lightly of faith, for it is the most excellent and difficult of all works. Through it alone you will be saved, even if you should be compelled to do without any other works.”⁹⁶

For Luther, because the sacrament is simply a promise with a visible sign attached to it, and a promise can only be consummated in faith, the sacrament is only effective if it is received in faith. In the 1519 “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods,” Luther argues that faith is a necessary element of the sacraments—without faith the sacraments are ineffective. Opposing an interpretation of *opus operatum*, by which grace was supposedly infused simply by having the action properly performed, Luther argues that which ultimately matters is not the physical sign, but the promise attached to it.⁹⁷ In an innovative move without precedent in the tradition, Luther describes sacraments in terms of the sign, its significance, and faith.⁹⁸ The sign is the external marking, such as bread or water; the significance is the fellowship of the saints with Christ. Luther argues, however much objective power these signs have, they only truly perform their work if the person has faith:

⁹⁵ LW 36:62; WA 6:530.16-17.

⁹⁶ LW 36:62; WA 6:530.12-16. See Hamm, “From the Medieval “Love of God” to Luther’s ‘Faith’: A Contribution to the History of Repentance,” and “Why Did Luther Turn Faith into the Central Concept of the Christian Life?” in *The Early Luther*, 1-25; 59-84.

⁹⁷ See Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 127-136.

⁹⁸ LW 35:49; WA 2:742.5-14.

For it is not enough to know what the sacrament is and signifies. It is not enough that you know it is a fellowship and gracious exchange or blending of our sin and suffering with the righteousness of Christ and his saints. You must also desire it and firmly believe that you have received it... Then do not doubt that you have what the sacrament signifies, that is, be certain that Christ and all his saints are coming to you with all their virtues, sufferings, and mercies, to live, work, suffer, and die with you, and that they desire to be wholly yours, having all things in common with you. If you will exercise and strengthen this faith, then you will experience what a rich, joyous, and bountiful wedding feast your God has prepared for you upon the altar... Then your heart will become truly free and confident, strong and courageous against all enemies... For if you doubt, you do God the greatest dishonor and make him out to be a faithless liar; if you cannot believe, then pray for faith.⁹⁹

In *The Babylonian Captivity*, Luther repeats the claim that the visible sign and performance of the ritual are given on behalf of the promise; faith therefore completes and makes the sacrament effective. He argues that what ultimately matters in the sacrament are not the visible elements, but the promise and its response in faith:

Therefore let us open our eyes and learn to pay heed more to the word than to the sign, more to faith than to the work of use of the sign. We know that wherever there is a divine promise, there faith is required, and that these two are so necessary to each other that neither can be effective apart from the other. For it is not possible to believe unless there is a promise, and the promise is not established unless it is believed. But where these two meet, they give a real and most certain efficacy to the sacraments.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ LW 35:60-61; WA 2:749.31-35; 750.7-11; 15-16; 24-26.

¹⁰⁰ LW 36:67; WA 6:533.29-34.

By making this move, Luther is not denying that the sacrament has objective power, but he is tying together the promise and faith: the sacrament is a promise and it is only completed if one trusts the word.¹⁰¹

Third, Luther expands upon the subjective certainty of salvation. Faith does not merely hold that Christ saves the elect; rather, because the promise is given to an individual in the sacrament, one stands firm in the belief that he or she is among the elect. This saving faith, this trust, is therefore intensely personal and existential: faith itself necessarily holds that the individual is included in salvation. For Luther, the specificity of the promise requires one to apply it personally: “Who can receive or apply, in behalf of another, the promise of God, which demands the personal faith of each one individually?... Therefore, let the irrefutable truth stand fast: Where there is a divine promise, there everyone must stand on his own feet; his own personal faith is demanded, he will give an account for himself and bear his own load.”¹⁰² Although this self-application is bold, Luther argues that assurance follows from the nature of the promise as something that is outside of us (*extra nos*): if God promises to save and forgive us, then the person can have full assurance that he or she is in fact saved based on the promise alone. In promising, God binds Godself to fulfill the action in the promise. Even though there is nothing in the self on which to ground one’s confidence, Christ’s testament that his blood is poured out for us and given to us individually in communion provides full confidence in salvation. Luther locates this confidence in both sacraments: in describing the Lord’s Supper, he argues that salvation is promised and granted to those who will receive it: “And so it finally came to the most perfect promise of all, that of the new testament, in which, with plain words, life and salvation are freely promised, and actually granted to those who believe the

¹⁰¹ B.A. Gerrish, “Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation,” in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 48.

¹⁰² LW 36:48-49; WA 6:521.21-23.

promise.”¹⁰³ Even more explicitly, he claims that all who are baptized are saved, provided that they trust the word of promise given to them: “But we must so consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that, once we have been baptized, we are saved.”¹⁰⁴ The event of the sacrament, in which a promise is made to the individual with a visible element, grounds the subjective certainty of salvation.

While Luther extends the promise given from penance to be the defining element of the sacraments, he also applies the concept of promise to new areas. Most importantly, Luther now interprets all of God’s action in the world in terms of the promise. Luther argues that the narrative of Scripture is structured around the promise and faith: after the Fall, God promised Adam a descendent who would crush the head of the serpent; Noah was given the promise of a rainbow; Abraham the promise of seed; Moses the promise of land; David the promise of an eternal kingdom and Christ. In each instance, the patriarch was called to trust in something for which they could not know the result. In promising salvation in Christ, therefore, God is not acting in a substantively new way. For Luther, Christ is not distinguished by being a promise as such—the Old Testament, as well as the New, is structured by the promise/law dynamic—rather, Christ is the pinnacle and perfection of the promise in that Christ renews the spirit, whereas other promises were for earthly goods.¹⁰⁵ Drawing on this biblical material, Luther argues that the fundamental nature of the creator/creature dynamic occurs through the prism of promise and faith: God always only interacts with creatures through the promise; creatures likewise, must always trust in God’s promises. Luther writes,

For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a word of promise, as I have said. We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather we deal

¹⁰³ LW 36:40; WA 6:515.5-7.

¹⁰⁴ LW 36:59; WA 6:527.36-38.

¹⁰⁵ LW 36:39-40; WA 6:514.25-515.4.

with men and with ourselves on the basis of works. But God has need of this: that we consider him faithful in his promises, and patiently persist in this belief, and thus worship him with faith, hope, and love. It is in this way that he obtains his glory among us, since it is not of ourselves who run, but of him who shows mercy, promises, and gives, that we have and hold all good things.¹⁰⁶

Promise, thus, has become the central category for understanding God's action in the created life. As we will see in a future chapter, Luther's mature response to the question of good and evil depends on this shift to the category of promise.

Because promise is the basic category of God's action, faith becomes the comprehensive category of the Christian life.¹⁰⁷ If God is the one who promises, then faith is the proper human response. The basic content of faith is in the Word of God that promises salvation, life, and the forgiveness of sins. God's Word proclaims God's grace: in spite of one's persistent sin, in spite of one's rebellion, God loves and accepts the individual. The Word of God as Gospel is precisely that which shows that God is a merciful loving parent to us, the one who freely gives all good to us, and that shows that we are fully and completely forgiven through Christ and that we are now saved. The Word of God, in showing us the God who loves freely and wholly, is the Word of life that enlivens the heart and creates in us, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the love of God.

Moreover, as we will see in future chapters, the structure of faith in the promise provides a means to engage the problem of evil. Faith in the promise involves trusting in the words given beyond all reason, knowledge, and sight. In the word of God, a person receives a promise for which he or she has no evidence: a person can be a damnable sinner and yet God claims that this person is forgiven and now a saint. Despite all evidence to the contrary, a person is called to hold to the faith.

¹⁰⁶ LW 36:42; WA 6:516.30-517.1.

¹⁰⁷ Hamm, "Why Did Luther Turn Faith into the Central Concept of the Christian Life?," in *The Early Luther*.

This understanding of faith that is not amenable to reason provides a way to encounter evils that themselves are beyond justification: because faith is in the promise, the Christian is called to cling to the word of God, even beyond one's own reason and experience. This transformation of the understanding of faith, in other words, opens itself up to a profound hope beyond all evidence.

Finally, the shift to the concept of promise and faith provides the framework for the distinction between two kinds of righteousness and the distinction between the law and the Gospel, which will become the basic categories of Luther's mature understanding of the nature of the self. Because the promise is completely God's work for the sinner, the sinner has an alien righteousness which is the righteousness of Christ given freely to the creature. Because this freely given grace has effects in the sinner's life, the sinner has an inherent or proper righteousness, which Luther describes as the slaying of the flesh, love of neighbor, and fear of God.¹⁰⁸ The distinction of these two kinds of righteousness entails two modes of evaluation of action: because righteousness is *extra nos* and given freely, good works contribute nothing to salvation and must be categorically denied in this realm; yet the works are important in the earthly sphere. The two kinds of righteousness thus entail both a distinction between law and the Gospel: the law understood as a realm of human action and the promise is God's. In the *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther argues that this division between divine and human action must be kept central, lest we mistake a joyful response for a meritorious action. While we should pray, do good works, and give back to God, these are not the basis of our relationship to God, but the fruit. Luther writes,

We must therefore sharply distinguish the testament and sacrament itself from the prayers which we offer at the same time. Not only this, but we must also bear in mind that the prayers avail utterly nothing, either to him who offers them or to those for whom they are

¹⁰⁸ LW 31:297-299; WA 2:146.35-147.18.

offered, unless the testament is first received in faith, so that it will be faith that offers the prayers; for faith alone is heard, as James teaches in his first chapter.¹⁰⁹

Therefore these two things—mass and prayer, sacrament and work, testament and sacrifice—must not be confused; for the one comes from God to us through the ministration of the priest and demands our faith, the other proceeds from our faith to God through the priest and demands his hearing.”¹¹⁰

The promise thus leads to a sharp division between divine and human works. This division becomes central as Luther expands upon the notion of promise in future works: just as God gives the promise, God gives in all God’s actions in creation; just as we receive the promise, the creature is called to receive all of life as gift. In the next chapters I will argue that these developments in the concept of faith and promise will provide the basic structures of Luther’s mature reflections on the relationship between God, creation, and the anthropology: God is the one who gives freely and generously; creatures are those who receive good gifts.

(4) In this chapter, we have traced the emergence of faith and the promise as the central categories in Luther’s understanding of the Christian life. I have argued that the shift in the concept of promise opens Luther’s theology up for a moral realism in regards to evil: because the promise is external to the person, a person can truly confess their own sin and depravity. Moreover, because the promise comes *sub contraria specie* the structure of faith lends itself to a profound trust in the face of radical evil. In this concluding section, I will argue that Luther’s new concept of faith entails a new emphasis in the doctrine of sin: sin is no longer seen primarily in terms of pride, but instead, it is conceptualized as idolatry. To show the power of the concept of idolatry, I will connect the anthropological focus on one’s interior dispositions developed in the last chapter with Luther’s

¹⁰⁹ LW 36:50; WA 6:5222.30-35.

¹¹⁰ LW 36:56; WA 6:526.13-16.

concept of faith articulated here. I argue that Luther's emphasis on one's fundamental dispositions leads to a strong emphasis on the First Commandment as the chief moral and religious task of theology. Faith alone, in this vision, honors God; because faith, and not humility is the good, idolatry and not pride, is the chief sin. This concept of idolatry shows an expansion away from the focus on pride in the early Luther to a more deeply theological account of sin and a deeper understanding of the nature of evil.

In the last chapter, I argued that Luther's central concern with sin was with the fundamental dispositions of a person. Just as sin concerns one's basic trusts, so too, the primary place where faith in the promise intersects with human life is in terms of one's fundamental trusts and dispositions. Because of the central role one's basic trusts have in the ordering of life, in the 1529 *Large Catechism*, Luther argues that the correlate of one's basic trusts is one's god. To have a god is to have confidence and trust in something, such that one's whole orientation to life is geared around that thing. As such, all persons have a god—the central question is how one understands the nature of this god. Luther writes:

What does 'to have a god' mean or what is God? Answer: A 'god' is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart. As I have often said, it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that makes both God and an idol. If your faith and trust are right, then your God is the true one... For these two belong together, faith and God. Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, is really your God.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ *Large Catechism*, Ten Commandments, 1-3, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 386-37.

This means, for Luther, that the question of God and the question of the self belong together. The subject of theology is not God alone, nor the human being as such, but, as he writes in his commentary on Psalm 51: “the sinning human being and the justifying God.”¹¹² The question of God concerns one’s basic trusts, and one’s basic trusts concern God.

This precedence of one’s relationship before God entails that Luther reads the Decalogue as being arranged in order of significance. The central demand of the law is the First Commandment, “We are to love and trust God above all things,” while all the other commandments explicate and explain this. In commanding the love of God, the First Commandment deals with the basic dispositions, trusts, and orientation of the person that determine the moral and religious shape of the person.¹¹³ The theological use of the law reveals this precise situation: that is, the law does not reveal sin merely to be a certain class of actions that we elsewhere know as crimes nor does it refer primarily to external actions at all, but rather, to the motives in the depths of a person’s heart. Luther writes in the 1522 *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, “You must not understand the little world *law* here in human terms, as if it were a teaching about work that needs to be or not, as if it were the case with human laws, even if the heart is not in it. God looks to the depths of the heart, and therefore God’s law requires a response from the depths of the heart; it is not content with works.”¹¹⁴ The law is thus spiritual and can only be fulfilled through the depths of one’s heart assenting to it. Precisely here, the law reveals sin—because everyone experiences resistance and reluctance in loving God and the neighbor above the self, and because the law reveals that what

¹¹² LW 12:311; WA 40 II:328.1f.

¹¹³ Oswald Bayer, “I am the Lord your God...”: The Significance of the First Commandment as a Basis for Ethics,” in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies* trans. Jeffrey Cayzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57-68.

¹¹⁴ *Luther’s Spirituality*, ed. Philip D.W. Krey and Peter D.S. Krey (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 105.

matters is not the external actions, but the internal motive, the law shows that all are in sin at their core.

Because the law centers on the First Commandment, the chief question of the Christian life concerns how a person can come to love and trust God. For Luther, the law is incapable of instilling this love and trust, for the law only tells what we must do, but does not give us the power to do it. Rather, Luther argues that one's fundamental loves can only be reshaped through the good news of the Gospel and through the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. The good news of the Gospel is the *promissio*: that which is to be believed is the promise of God, which proclaims that God will forgive all our sins and save us through no merit of our own. Only because God promises forgiveness, a mercy that is complete and constant regardless of personal merit, can one develop a love and trust in God and thus fulfill the First Commandment.¹¹⁵ According to Luther, the "chief point of all Scripture is that we should not doubt but hope with certainty, trust and believe that God is merciful, kind, and patient and that he does not lie and deceive but is faithful and true."¹¹⁶ The only way to trust the goodness and mercy of God, in other words, is to see God's promise of grace as total and sufficient.

Because the object of faith is not knowledge as such, but the promise of God in Christ, the nature of faith is always one of hope and trust that God will be faithful to the promise given to us. Because a promise is neither an indicative nor an imperative, faith cannot be converted into a form of knowledge; faith in God is rather a radical, existential hope.¹¹⁷ This is particularly true here, because God's promise does not come with external wrappings that would recommend it to reason. Rather, as we saw in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues that the promise will come and be experienced under its opposite. Instead of the promise being accompanied by external signs that

¹¹⁵ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 50-52.

¹¹⁶ LW 26:386; WA 40-I:588.12-14.

¹¹⁷ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 50-57.

serve to verify it, the promise comes in seemingly lowly things, such as a baby in a manger, the baptismal water, and wine and bread.¹¹⁸ In fact, Luther argues that the Word is accompanied by persecution and rejection by the world. Luther describes this situation in his commentary on John 14:1: “For if you are My disciples and true Christians, you must not always continue to see and feel external comfort; but you must progress in the Christian art of believing unwaveringly that I can and will help you, even if you neither see nor feel this but see and feel the opposite, namely suffering and need. Even though everything else disappoints and fails you, you must cling to this comfort that you have God and Me.”¹¹⁹ Faith is always a radical hope that God is good and will treat us graciously, despite all evidence to the contrary.¹²⁰

In his mature thought, Luther continues to emphasize the subjective certainty of salvation. Because the promise comes to an individual, faith involves a person’s own self-understanding and self-evaluation.¹²¹ Faith does not merely involve the claim that Christ is Lord and Savior, or that God forgives the world in Christ; rather, it requires one to see that God saves the individual as such. Because the promise of grace is made to the individual, faith involves applying the benefits of Christ to oneself. In *A Sermon on the Afternoon of Christmas Day, 1530*, Luther writes,

Therefore this is the chief article, which separates us from all the heathen, that you, O man, may not only learn that Christ, born of the virgin is the Lord and Savior, but also accept the fact that he is your Lord and Savior, that you may be able to boast in your heart: I hear the Word that sounds from heaven and says: This child who is born of the virgin is not only his

¹¹⁸ LW 24:18-19; WA 45:477.

¹¹⁹ LW 24:17; WA 45:476.

¹²⁰ Jacqueline Bussie, “Luther’s Hope for the World: Responsible Christian Discourse Today,” in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 113-128.

¹²¹ Birgit Stolt, “Luther’s Faith of ‘the Heart: Experience, Emotion, and Reason,’” in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 131-150.

mother's son. I have more than the mother's estate; he is more mine than Mary's, for he was born for me, for the angel said, "To you" is born the Savior. Then ought you to say, Amen, I think thee, dear Lord. But then reason says: Who knows? I believe that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior and he may perhaps help Peter and Paul, but for me, a sinner, he was not born. But even if you believed that much, it would still not be enough, unless there were added to it the faith that he was born for you.¹²²

Because God has bound Godself in the promise to us, because the promise of grace is total and sufficient, and because the promise is made to the individual, Luther argues that the promise grants the individual the subjective certainty of salvation. When one receives the promise in baptism or in the Word, one can be certain that God has obligated Godself to the individual. Because grace is total, and because God comes to us in the Word individually, one ought to have the boldness to apply the promise to one's self, to see God as being for me personally, and that I am saved. Luther thinks that this is necessary if we are to love God and fulfill the first commandment: if we are to truly love God, we cannot constantly fear for our own eternal salvation, but must approach God boldly and with confidence.

Faith, thus, is nothing but having the right knowledge of God, not in general, but as God relates to us and acting on this knowledge from the depths of the heart. Faith gives glory to God and acknowledges God to be God. He writes on Galatians 3:7:

Faith is nothing else but the truth of the heart, that is, the right knowledge of the heart about God... Thus truth is faith itself, which judges correctly about God, namely, that God does not look at our works and our righteousness, since we are unclean, but that He wants to be merciful to us, to look at us, to accept us, to justify us, and to save us if we believe in His

¹²² LW 51:211-18; WA 32:261-270.

Son, whom He has sent to be the expiation for the sins of the whole world. This is the true idea about God, and it is really nothing other than faith itself.¹²³

For Luther, faith in God's *promissio* thus fulfills the demands of the law. The primary demand of the law is to love and trust in God; the Gospel declares that God is merciful and loving and sufficient for salvation; in faith, we trust this and love the God who is goodness itself. If we are to truly love God, we cannot constantly fear for our own eternal salvation, but must approach God boldly and with confidence that God treats us under mercy.

The glory of faith is that it trusts the one who promises to be faithful to the promise, that is, faith alone allows God to be God, to be the one alone who can save. For Luther, faith is a pure receptivity that acknowledges that power of God to save, and gives God all the glory. Faith thus alone sees God as truthful. In a remarkable passage in the 1535 *Galatians Commentary*, Luther writes,

Paul makes faith in God the supreme worship, the supreme allegiance, the supreme obedience, and the supreme sacrifice.... Faith is something omnipotent, and that its power is inestimable and infinite; for it attributes glory to God, which is the highest thing that can be attributed to Him. To attribute glory to God is to believe in Him, to regard Him as truthful, wise, righteous, merciful, and almighty, in short to acknowledge Him as the Author and Donor of every good. Reason does not do this, but faith does. It consummates the Deity; and, if I may put it this way, it is the creator of the Deity, not in the substance of God but in us. For without faith God loses His glory, wisdom, righteousness, truthfulness, mercy, etc., in us; in short, God has none of His majesty or divinity where faith is absent. Nor does God require anything greater of man than that he attribute to Him His glory and His divinity; that is, that he regard Him, not as an idol but as God, who has regard for him, listens to him, shows mercy to him, helps him, etc. When He has obtained this, God retains His divinity

¹²³ LW 26:238; WA 40:376.

sound and unblemished; that is, He has whatever a believing heart is able to attribute to Him. To be able to attribute such glory to God is wisdom beyond wisdom, righteousness beyond righteousness, religion beyond religion, and sacrifice beyond sacrifice.¹²⁴

Luther's bold claim here, that faith creates Deity, clearly does not mean that the human actually creates God.¹²⁵ Instead, Luther emphasizes that any stance besides faith refuses deity to God. Salvation, Luther argues, are God's province—if salvation is portrayed as being based upon human action at all, humans attribute divinity to themselves and deny it to God. Faith consummates the Deity, because, as pure receptivity, it alone allows God to do God's work.¹²⁶

Because Luther locates faith as the chief element of the Christian life, his understanding of sin undergoes modification. For Luther, because faith, and not humility, is now the chief virtue of the Christian life, sin is now conceived not primarily in terms of pride or self-centeredness, but as unbelief and idolatry.¹²⁷ Luther develops the concept of idolatry as the negative image of faith: whereas faith trusts the promises of God and allows God to be God, idolatry casts doubt on the promise and puts the self in the position of God. Whereas faith graciously receives this gift of the promise, idolatry refuses the gift and casts doubt on the sufficiency of the promise. Luther repeatedly argues that doubting the promises of God does God a great dishonor: God freely gifts salvation and only requires the reception of this promise in faith. To doubt God, however, is to deny God's beneficence and to think that God requires more than God has given in order to be appeased.

¹²⁴ LW 26:226-227; WA 40:359-360.

¹²⁵ Gregory Walter, "On Martin Luther's Statement, '*Fides Creatrix Divinitatis*,'" *Dialog*, Vol. 52.3, September 2013, 196-203.

¹²⁶ Hamm, "Martin Luther's Revolutionary Theology of Pure Gift without Reciprocation," 125-161.

¹²⁷ For the question of Luther on idolatry see Carlos Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 54-72; Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 323-334; John Maxfield, "Martin Luther and Idolatry," *Lutheran Quarterly* v. XXVIII.1 Spring 2014, 70-74. B.A. Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Old Protestantism and the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 131-149; Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 27-49, 58-111.

To believe God requires something more, however, is to deny that God is good and merciful, and instead portrays God as a judge needing assuaging. To attempt to please God through works is to assume God is angry, even though God in reality freely gives to those who merit nothing.¹²⁸ Even if one affirms God exists, this angry God is not God at all. In the Isaiah commentary Luther writes, “Thus the Carthusian does not deny God, but he denies that God is good, he seeks to make God merciful, well-disposed, and kind by his own works and therefore endeavors to appease God. This is the same as making a god. To think of God as wrathful is to believe in no God. The self-righteous person says that God has been appeased, but he also says, “Without me He cannot be kind. Therefore I will strive to make God well-disposed.”¹²⁹ To fashion one’s own God, to portray God as one who depends upon human merit and action, is to deny that God is good and thus sins against the first commandment. One cannot love someone that one must constantly appease.

Idolatry, for Luther, is not restricted to explicitly religious action, but infects all human action after the Fall.¹³⁰ While idolatrous images of God can be and are codified in religious rituals, such as the sacrifice of the mass, Luther sees idolatry as occupying a much deeper position in the human psyche. Idolatry constantly springs up as a postulate of practical reason and not necessarily an explicit belief. While one may cognitively affirm that God is good, gracious, and loving, he or she still may practically attempt to please God through his or her works. Whenever there is an assumption that something else must be added, Luther argues, the goodness of God is denied and replaced by the elevation of human works.

The precise danger of idolatry, this attempt to shape God in one’s own image, is that instead of allowing God to be a living and active God, fully able to save, salvation falls squarely in human hands. In the 1527-1530 Isaiah commentary, Luther argues that the heart of idolatry is the refusal of

¹²⁸ LW 17:26; WA 31-II:280.

¹²⁹ LW 17:24, WA 31-II:278.

¹³⁰ Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise*, 331.

letting God be God, and instead seeking to make oneself God. Instead of allowing God to be active in salvation, the idolater sets himself or herself as the active agent in salvation. Instead of listening and trusting God, the idolater fashions God according to his or her image and purposes. Luther describes it thusly:

It is the nature of every ungodly man to mold God for himself and refuse to be molded by God. Just so the ungodly self-righteous shape God according to their own worship and prescribe for themselves a god according to their own opinion. Thus the heretics prescribe their own worship and their cowed righteousness and say, “Here is God and His work.” All of these are understood to be and are artificers who shape God according to their own design and purpose. They want to whittle God according to their purpose. Thus the monk says, “If anyone assumes the cowl and the rule, he has a gracious God.” Just as the heathen worshiped God in wooden form, so our self-righteous people internally by a hypocritical appearance fashion God for themselves in their hearts. This is what it means to fashion God: He becomes the creature, and I the creator. They are molders of God and imagine that God needs their works and their righteousness. They fashion a cowed god, patterned after and adorned with their own works.¹³¹

This whittling down of God and erecting the self as an idol is not only an offense to God, it destroys religious practice and piety. For Luther, those who have faith in the promise trust that God will provide all good things for them and they call upon God in the time of trouble. They look to the Word of God and seek to be taught by God, who is loving and kind. In seeking to appease God, by contrast, idolaters seek to give God something and, at root, seek to help God. If God needs help, Luther claims, one can no longer depend on God or seek God in trouble, but one can only help

¹³¹ LW 17:17; WA 31-II:273.

him. In shaping God, that is, one assumes that God is not God.¹³² Or, even more directly: “All the self-righteous are involved in this desire. They want to educate God, teach God.”¹³³

This shift in the concept of sin from pride to idolatry is subtle, as the two concepts are closely related. The whittling down of God in idolatry is done out of a form of pride in which one seeks to claim God’s territory in salvation. The central difference, though, is that idolatry is necessarily theological: whereas pride is cured by humility, idolatry can only be cured by reliance on God’s promise. Moreover, humility itself can be a form of idolatry, even in its humble state. This is most clearly seen in the relation to the subjective certainty of one’s own salvation. In the 1515 Romans commentary, as we have seen, Luther affirms that in order to remain humble, one should always maintain a pious doubt about one’s own salvation and depend upon one’s work. If one becomes certain of salvation, Luther argued, one will become complaisant and lose the fear of God. With the shift to the promise and faith, however, Luther sees this humility as a damnable position that casts doubt on the trustworthiness of God. To doubt one’s own salvation is to doubt the Word of God and to call God a liar. While the external humility appears to be praising and fearing God, in fact, it casts doubt on God’s promises and is thus guilty of idolatry.

The development of the concept of promise in relation to the sacrament represents a major breakthrough in Luther’s Reformational thought. The understanding of the Christian life is radically revised: the Christian life is neither one’s work nor one’s humility, but faith in the external word that promises salvation in the sacrament. Faith then is not a work, but pure receptivity to a word that comes *extra nos*. Faith thereby frees a person from all subjective conditions of salvation, allows a person to see the true nature of evil, and provides a framework for a new profound concept of

¹³² LW 17:24; WA 31-II:278.

¹³³ LW 17:19; WA 31-II:273.

hope. In the next chapter, we will trace the implications of this understanding of faith for Luther's articulation of the nature of moral selfhood and subjectivity.

Chapter 4/ The Development of the Concepts of Sin, Grace, and Good Works: *Against Latomus*

In 1520, Latomus, a member of the theological faculty of Louvain, publically condemned Luther's writings on behalf of his institution.¹ Drawing heavily on Luther's thesis in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, Latomus attacked Luther's understanding of justification and sin on two central issues. First, he argued, Luther overemphasizes the category of sin: if Luther was right, if sin infected all human action such that one could not naturally conform to divine precepts,² then God commands the impossible. Appealing to the Church fathers, particularly Jerome's decree, "Whoever says God commands the impossible is anathema," Latomus condemned Luther as a heretic. The danger, Latomus thought, is that the understanding of justification makes God the lawgiver to be unjust: if God commands actions that humans cannot fulfill, then God appears to be an unreasonable lawgiver and harsh judge, condemning without merit. The second problem Latomus identifies centers on the remainder of sin after baptism. Both Latomus and Luther agreed that the guilt of original sin was washed away in baptism and yet one retains some remnant of the original infection. For Latomus, what remains is a weakness, the penalty for sin, and an inclination towards sin, but he argues that these dispositions did not qualify as sin in its true meaning, "for he in whom evil desire and its appetites are present commits sin only when he consents to engage in a forbidden act."³ For Luther, by contrast, and this will be his central contention in this text, what remains is sin

¹ *Articulorum doctrinae Fratris Martini Luther: per theologos lovanienses damnatorum Ratio* (Antwerp, 1521).

² Latomus cited thesis 68 of the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, "Therefore it is impossible to fulfill the law in any way without the grace of God." LW 31:14; WA 1:227. Thesis 68.

³ From the work by Latomus, cited by Erwin Iserloh, "Gratia und Donum: Rectefertigung und Heiligung nach Luthers Schrift, "Wider den Löwener Theologen Latomus (1521)," in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation: Festschrift E. Bizer* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), 145. Quoted in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Midcareer: 1521-1530*, ed. Karin Bornkamm, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 184.

in all its evil. For Latomus, Luther undermines the very nature of grace and the foundation of responsible action, *facere quod in se est*.

Latomus gives voice to a concern that has been, and continues to be, raised with Luther's theology, namely that his account of the justification and the depth of sin undermines the possibility of moral action.⁴ Precisely because Luther classifies all human action as sin, it seems that he undermines all grounds for moral discrimination and moral improvement.⁵ This critique is important, not only historically, but for the purposes of this dissertation: if Luther's theology ultimately undermines moral action, the benefits of his understanding of evil are severely curtailed. While there may be some good in coming to a realistic picture of the nature of sin and evil, this good is ultimately for naught if it ends in a crippling despair or moral nihilism.

In the 1521 text *Rationis Latomianae confutation* (hereafter *Against Latomus*), Luther responds to these objections. In this text, Luther synthesizes the two aspects of his thought that we have examined so far: his reflections on the depth and pervasiveness of sin and the power of God's promise. More precisely, the new understanding of promise leads to a revision in Luther's anthropology and his account of sin that maintains a comprehensive doctrine of sin and a total account of justification, while also promoting the importance of ethical action, work on the self, and the love of neighbor. In future chapters, we will see, that this account of sin and justification provides the conceptual framework for Luther's mature thought on the central theological categories

⁴ For recent versions of this critique, see Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 173-196; and Peter C. Hodgson "Luther and Freedom," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 32-48.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation: II Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1943, 1949), 188.

of creation, grace, and Christ.⁶ Here, however, we will examine the new understanding of the nature of the self as a way to respond to these ethical objections.

Luther's response to Latomus operates on two fronts: first, Luther disputes the nature of authority and hermeneutics in establishing theological claims; second, Luther responds to the particular challenges and describes his understanding of sin, grace, and justification. The two movements, the hermeneutical and the reflections on justification, are closely intertwined.⁷ For Luther, the authority and the certainty for justification come from the clarity and perspicacity of Scripture. Luther's account of justification and sin are meant at all points to be an exegesis of Scripture. On the other hand, the reliance on Scripture provides a critical principle against Latomus's appeals to the Church Fathers. For example, Luther rejects Jerome's anathema because it does not have precedent in Scripture and therefore has no authority over him.

The animating question of *Against Latomus* centers on the universality of sin and the presence of sin in the baptized believer: more precisely, the text concerns the precise relationship between sin and grace. In the previous texts we have examined, Luther also attempted to work out this relationship, but the relationship was left unclear. In the 1517 *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, for example, Luther emphasizes that all works apart from the grace of God are sin.⁸ Luther does not

⁶ For work on this text see Erwin Iserloh, "Gratia und Donum, Rechtfertigung und Heiligung nach Luthers Schrift „Wieder Den Löwender Theologen Latomus," in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation. Festschrift für Ernst Bizer*, (Neukirchen 1969), 141-156; Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," in *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 42-69; Bo Kristian Holm, *Gabe und Geben bei Luther: Das Verhältnis zwischen Reziprozität und reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2006), 132-170; F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought On Justice, Law, and Society* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler 1998).

⁷ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther in Midcareer*, 183-198.

⁸ While my argument is indebted to F. Edward Cranz's excellent study, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on Justice, Law, and Society*, I disagree with his dating of changes. Cranz locates the development of the idea of the simultaneity of two distinct realms of Christian existence in the period of 1518-1519. While he is correct that there is a development between 1517 and 1518, his own evidence does not support the dating for the wider change. Strangely, a significant portion of

say that God commands the impossible, only that all works outside of grace are sin. With the grace of God, on the contrary, he argues that the works done in faith are good, though he notes that even the saint does not always perform completely perfect acts in this life. Grace in this picture primarily entails a healing from one's natural sin, even as one in grace may still experience resistance and can be infected with self-love. In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, by contrast, Luther more clearly affirms that even the works performed with the grace of God are still sins. Even as God is active in the creature God employs poor and crooked tools, such that the works while good, are not perfect. This shift requires a shift in the understanding of the concept of grace—in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, grace is defined as that which makes us able to conform to the law. In the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues for a more radical understanding of grace, one centered on the experience of baptism: grace kills the old sinner and raises the person to new life. This new person, in whom Christ dwells, is active in love for the neighbor. The beginnings of Luther's mature position, namely that the sinner is a New person in Christ, and yet, even as God works in her or him, the New person is still a sinner, are indicated here, yet the exact relationship between sin and the nature of good works is still not resolved. In *Against Latomus*, and drawing on his developed concept of faith, Luther provides his most succinct explanation of the relationship between these concepts that both builds on and contrasts with what has come before.

Like in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the central claim Luther wants to maintain in this text is that not only bad works, but even one's good works are infected with human sin. Luther is not interested in merely claiming that the saint sometimes does good works and sometimes sin, a position he

his evidence for the general reorientation of 1518 and 1519 comes from texts in the 1520s, particularly *Against Latomus* (1521) and *The Magnificat* (1521). It seems more appropriate to speak of the general reorientation of 1518-1522, as the developments in *Against Latomus* are after the period of 1519.

believes everyone already knows.⁹ Rather, his central contention is that all righteous deeds, even the best deeds of the purest saint, are polluted by sin and, as such, no one can ever earn merit before God.¹⁰ The human condition is such that sin infects the doing and being of every human activity and person, and there are no human acts that escape this existence in sin. This is not to deny that there are good works that are important and truly benefit the neighbor; moreover, it is not to claim that good works require a special revelation to know what is truly good. Luther argues, in fact, that what good works are, the type of action required of us, are clear to everyone; if they were not, no one would be able to act correctly in society.¹¹ Rather, Luther's claim is that because every *actor* has sin as an attribute, every good work bears the traces of sin. As long as the actor is infected by sin, sin inheres essentially in good works.¹² For Luther sin here does not refer to solitary actions that deviate from the law (sins), but to the state of rebellion in which we all live (Sin).¹³ Sin is first an attribute of the actor, the radical ferment from which actions spring, and not a description of the moral act, though it applies to that too.¹⁴ Just as an apple tree produces apples, so one who is in sin can only produce sinful acts.

⁹ LW 32:188; WA 8:78.6. "Who, I ask, doubts that the saints sometimes sin?...No one disputes with you regarding these [that saints sometimes sin]."

¹⁰ LW 32: 169; WA 8:65.15-18. "This means that all righteous deeds are polluted to such a degree that absolutely no one has anything which in Thy sight is good enough to cause Thee to restrain Thy anger."¹⁰

¹¹ LW 32: 193; WA 8:81.40-82.9. "If one must doubt what good works are, who would be persuaded to do them? Who would want, knowingly and with foresight, to run doubtfully and aimlessly (as the Apostle says) and box as one beating the air? Surely there will never be any peace, if it is necessary to have good works, and no one in his whole life knows when he has them. Wherefore God cares admirably for us by making us certain of two things. First, he teaches in Gal. 5 what good works are manifest. [On the other hand], He has made us certain that they [the good works] are not sinless and faultless (so that our trust is not in them), with the result that we can acknowledge in a confession without doubt or falsity that we are sinners in all our works and are men whom mercy has found."

¹² LW 32: 186; WA 8:77.10-11.

¹³ LW32: 223; WA 8:103. He writes, "As yet I do not know whether sin ever refers in Scripture to those works which we call sin, for it seems almost always to refer to the radical ferment which bears fruit in evil deeds and words."

¹⁴ LW 32: 202; WA 8:202.

For Luther, the nature of sin is also straightforward. Against the scholastic attempt to describe that which remains after baptism not as sin, but as the cause of sin, the effect or punishment of sin, a sacrifice for sin, and the guilt by which the soul stands accused,¹⁵ Luther argues that the clear meaning in Scripture of sin “is simply that which is not in accord with God’s law.”¹⁶ For Luther, the multiplication of distinctions obscures the pure meaning of sin: sin is simply an offense against God and a transgression of God’s law. Sin is that which is opposed to the law. All human beings, insofar as they are in sin, oppose God’s law.

Luther bases this claim for the universal and inescapable presence of sin on scriptural passages and on theological argumentation. To see his argument, a few brief words about his hermeneutical approach to Scripture are in order. Luther argues that when we interpret a text, we must assume the author was able to employ the concepts, terms, and phraseology to adequately convey the message he or she intended. This is especially important with Scripture—because Scripture deals with divine things that God wants known, Luther argues that we must assume that God has provided the biblical writers with an adequate vocabulary so that the meaning present is what God intends:¹⁷ “Believe me,” he writes, “the Holy Spirit is quite capable of expressing his meanings in suitable words, so that there is no need for human inventions.”¹⁸ Because Luther assumes that the Scripture possesses coherence and integrity, he argues that a proper interpretation is one that most adequately captures what the text itself says. When debating the meaning of a passage, it is not sufficient to establish that a given interpretation of the passage is possible; rather, one must show that the given interpretation is the best possible interpretation.

¹⁵ LW 32:193-194; WA 8:82.

¹⁶ LW 32:195; WA 8:83.

¹⁷ “The words of the Apostle are easy, open, and sure (*facilia, aperta, fidelia*). Their most bright and burning rays need no human illumination.” LW 32:245; WA 8:118.15-17.

¹⁸ LW 32:194; WA 8.83.3-5.

This reliance on the most convincing interpretation is Luther's basic response to Latomus's accusations against him. Contrary to Latomus's claim that God cannot command the impossible, Luther cites Matthew 19:26: "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible," and argues impossible here does not mean difficult, but impossible apart from the grace of God. The terminology must be taken at its face value—the task of interpretation is not to make the text conform to previous thought, but for thought to conform to even strange claims, such as impossibility. Similarly, he argues for the impossibility of the law to justify from passages like Romans 8:3-4, "For what the law, weakened by the flesh could not do, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" and Acts 13:38-39—"Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone that believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses." Latomus explained these passages by arguing the law here refers to the ceremonial law and circumcision and thus, the moral law was not impossible to fulfill, but rather the ceremonial law was insufficient for salvation. Against this, Luther argues that these interpretations can only be upheld by doing violence to the text. Because the texts give no evidence to restrict the law to the ceremonial law and because they set the grace of God in Jesus against the law, the passages must mean the law itself cannot justify. If the law cannot justify, then no human work can merit God's favor, and thus all human work is sin.

More directly to the question of the universality of sin, Luther rejects Latomus's claims that sin as such does not remain after baptism, but instead the penalty of sin or weakness remains. Latomus interprets Paul's employment of the term 'sin' in passages like Romans 7 to mean 'weakness' or the 'penalty of original sin.' While this interpretation may be possible, Luther argues, there is nothing in the text to indicate that this is what Paul actually means. In order to prove his point, that Paul actually means weakness when he uses the term sin, one must show not merely this

is what he *could* mean, but this is in fact what he meant. Otherwise, one abandons the meaning of the text for pure free-floating speculation. Luther argues, “Let him stop saying ‘So and so can be said,’ and give us, ‘Such and such must always be said.’ He ought to do this, because those who are approved by the bull have judged, condemned, and burned, and so it would be dishonorable of them to rely on what merely ‘can’ be said, and not that it ‘must’ be said... Unless they ‘must’ have this meaning I am ready to let them go and consider them mere opinions.”¹⁹ Taking the pure, simple, and original sense of the meaning entails trusting the author at his or her word and attempting to interpret him or her as accurately as possible. This means that passages such as Romans 3:11-12, “All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong. No one understands; no one seeks for God; no one does good;” and Isaiah 64:6, “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags,” must also be taken at face value. Whereas Latomus argues that the universal statements (no one) has a particular reference (a certain group of sinners), Luther argues that the plain meaning of the text entails that the universal statement be taken universally—all have turned aside means that everyone, even the apparently righteous, are sinful before God. If the righteous deeds, and not the unrighteous deeds, are like filthy rags, then sin must infect all human doing. For Luther, the clear interpretation of these biblical passages is that sin, and not merely weakness or fault, remains after baptism.

Beyond the scriptural exegesis, Luther puts forth a number of theological arguments to support this idea of the universal nature of sin. First, Luther sees the affirmation of the depth and constancy of sin as a means of properly glorifying the grace of God. For Luther, theological claims that extol human work and merit in salvation obscure the graciousness and kindness of God. Instead of recognizing God as one who freely creates and saves creatures out of pure divine goodness, the emphasis on works and human goodness makes God a receptive judge who has to

¹⁹ LW 32:184; WA 8:75.10-15; 20-22.

recognize human merit. Instead of God being praised, implicitly and explicitly, the human receives the glory for his or her salvation. Properly recognizing the glory of God, therefore, means seeing the sheer graciousness of God's salvific action: what is impossible for humans, is possible for God.²⁰

Second, Luther argues that the denial of the presence of sin leads to absurd consequences, consequences that are morally and theologically repugnant. Suppose, Luther argues, that there are good works that are without sin and are perfectly done. If one can perform moral actions that are not tainted by sin, then one would no longer need to depend on the mercy and grace of God and, instead, one could be saved by appealing to God's justice. If there were truly good works, God would be forced to recognize the moral worth of these actions. One would not need to pray to God for forgiveness, but merely praise one's own moral perfection. This position, Luther argues, would lead to self-pride over against the humility appropriate to faith. He writes,

If it is a good work without sin and entirely faultless, they could stand with appropriate humility before God and speak in this fashion: "Lord God, behold this good work which I have done through the help of Thy grace. There is in it neither fault nor any sin, nor does it need Thy forgiving mercy. I do not ask for this, as I want Thee to judge it with Thy strictest and truest judgments. In it [my work] I can glory before Thee, because Thou canst not condemn it, for Thou art just and true. Indeed, I am certain that Thou canst not condemn it without denying Thyself. The need of mercy which, as Thy petition [in the Lord's prayer] teaches, forgives the trespass in this deed is canceled, for there is here only the justice which crowns it'...The truth is that a work without sin deserves praise, needs no mercy, and fears not the judgment of God. Indeed, it is proper to trust and hope in it and in the gift of grace

²⁰ LW 32:156; WA 8:56.9-14. "For Christians should preach nothing but the glory of God, that is, to confess our impossibility and God's possibility even as Christ does here. All the shameful obstructions—of which this decretal is one of the greatest—able to establish and inflate free will must be removed so that the knowledge of the pure grace of God and of our misery may be preserved."

which has been [once] received, for we have something with which to encounter God himself, and his judgment and truth, so that we ought no longer fear him, nor rely on his mercy.²¹

To retain the proper humility, to keep the Christian in a position of reception of divine gifts, Luther argues, one must affirm the presence of sin in every seemingly good action.²² To claim that a work in and of itself is good is to deny honor to God.

Third, and relatedly, Luther argues from the perfect demands of the moral law and God's righteous judgment. For Luther, if God deals with sin under the law and judgment, then there is no hope for human redemption, for no human action can withstand the judgment of God. Because God's judgment on human action is perfect—it requires an absolute and complete fealty to the love of God and to the good of one's neighbor— and because no human action can attain this naturally, God's righteous judgment shows all human works to be sin. Even our best works cannot bear the judgment of God, and so all works require God's forgiving mercy.

Finally, to prove this claim concerning the necessity of God's forgiving mercy, Luther examines Isaiah's description of the Babylonian captivity in Isaiah 64. For Luther, Israel, like all human communities, was made up of both righteous and unrighteous people. The community had people who were truly righteous—they feared God and were good to their neighbors. Before their conscience and the community, they were perfectly blameless.²³ Yet, Luther argues, despite their apparent moral purity, their acts were not sufficient to avoid God's wrath against human sin and they, along with the impure, were sent into captivity. Even those who apart from judgment were godly could not appeal to their own justice, for, before the exacting law and judgment of God, they

²¹ LW 32:190; WA 8:79.19-80.2.

²² Even after the transformation in the concept of faith we traced in the last chapter, humility continues to play an important role in Luther's theology. While faith is the chief form of the Christian life, faith involves a humility before the grace of God.

²³ LW 32:173; WA 8:67.28-30.

were treated like the most polluted sinners. He argues, in “these times of wrath in which, although there are just and good men, still righteousness cannot rise up because it is checked and restrained by the wrath of God. The godly are destroyed with the ungodly, for their righteousness is accounted as nothing, and God’s wrath does not let them accomplish anything whatsoever.”²⁴ When God deals with sin in judgment and wrath, there is no hope for creatures. Drawing on language that sounds almost tragic, Luther describes the impossibility of goodness when God’s wrath reigns:

But now when Thine anger rages and the times are sad, we are nothing but sinners; Thou dost not meet, nor art Thou found or adhered to. Although there are those who are good and righteous, yet there is not one of them who rises up and adheres to Thee or calls upon Thy name for us. He does not dare. There is now no praise to Thee for benefits, but only lamentation over our misfortunes. Just as in the time when justice flourished, the sins of those others were made white as snow, and Thou didst not punish them—indeed, didst not account them sins—so in these times of wrath when justice is destroyed, Thou dost reckon even all our righteousness unclean, and dost punish it [the righteousness] together with the sin of the others, dost overwhelm it together with evil, thrusting us into the power of our iniquity, and letting that happen to us which our sins deserve, so that it is as if all of us were filthy. Thus when mercy is removed, our iniquity carries us away like wind, and all our righteousness is helpless against it.²⁵

While Luther’s argument almost makes it sound as if God is unjust, in that God’s wrath appears indifferent to moral purity, Luther does not accuse God of cruelty. Rather, he takes it as axiomatic that God’s goodness and justice entails that God never wrongs anyone unfairly: God would not

²⁴ LW 32:173-174; WA 8:68:1-5.

²⁵ LW 32:174; WA 8:68.12-23.

condemn one who is wholly blameless, for crushing an innocent person would make God unjust.²⁶ Instead, Luther argues, because God always only judges truly and righteously, it must be the case that the righteous who are under judgment and wrath are, despite their righteousness before their own conscience and the social community, also actually unclean and sinful. The righteous saints must also have sin in them, lest God be unjust. Luther writes, “For apart from forgiving mercy, God treats good works in the manner of which we hear Isaiah complaining. Yet the Just Judge would not thus deal with them unless they were truly evil and unclean.”²⁷ For Luther this means that sin is not simply a matter of the purity before one’s conscience nor societal norms, but inheres deeply in every human being and doing, even beyond the realm of all appearance and experience. If sin inheres in every action, such that none can merit God’s acceptance, then, Luther argues, all human acts must depend on the forgiving mercy of God and therefore the acts must be sin.

These claims concerning sin pose a particular problem for Luther: on the one hand, due to the scriptural text, he is committed to claiming that sin, the rebellion of nature that opposes God’s law, remains after baptism in the saint; yet, on the other hand, he does not want to undermine the effects of grace or the importance of the moral life for believers. To deny the presence of sin is to deny the need for grace and to claim an independent basis for salvation; to deny the effects of grace, however, is to deny the work of the Holy Spirit. In his early work, particularly in the *Lectures on Romans*, he proposes a partial account of the relationship of sin and grace: in humility, one still has sin, though one is progressively becoming better due to the influence of grace. What occurs in this text however, is a transposition of categories that both retains the partial account of moral

²⁶ Interestingly, in later works, Luther sees this argument as being part of the torment of Christ on the cross and his feeling of abandonment. He seems to indicate in this context that this sort of argument belongs to reason, and not to revelation: “He felt what his cry expressed, that he was forsaken by God, as if to say: “God is just. He would not abandon a just man. You must then be his enemy.’ Reason always comes to this conclusion on the basis of appearance.” WA 37.355.21-32.

²⁷ LW 32:175; WA 8:69.8-10.

improvement while also introducing an account of the total nature of grace as fully justifying the believer in line with the development of the concept of promise.²⁸ This transposition occurs through two nuances of the category of sin.

First, Luther draws a distinction between the substance of sin and its operation in life. While, rhetorically, Luther finds this method of theologizing “barbarous,” he employs it to provide clarity to his claims concerning the presence of sin in the believer. Drawing on Quintilian’s understanding of the categories, Luther argues that from the point of view of substance, all sin is the same—sin, considered in its essence or nature, is simply an offense against God or that which does not accord with God’s law.²⁹ While some sins may be greater or stronger in their effects, all sin is equally sin from the point of view of substance. Luther claims that even the ‘sophists,’ that is, scholastic theologians, partially grasp this understanding of sin—they too see sin as disobedience to God’s commands. Yet, he argues, when they seek to articulate the nature of sin, they fail to correctly employ the categories they learned from Aristotle.³⁰ To understand sin one must examine, not simply its essence, but its quantity, quality, relation, action, and passion.

For Luther, while the substance and essence of sin is the same in everyone—both the baptized and unbaptized truly have sin in them—the chief difference is in the quantity, quality, and action of sin. For the unbaptized, sin rules tyrannically over all of their life. Luther describes the condition of sin outside of grace in terms of sin as the absolute power active in their life:

But what could [sin] do [before baptism]? It made us guilty before God, tyrannically plagued the conscience, dragged us day by day into greater and greater evil, was mighty in quantity, quality, and action, governed in time and place, for it prevailed always and everywhere in all

²⁸ F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther’s Thought*, 44-50.

²⁹ LW 32:202; WA 8:80.

³⁰ To be clear, Luther intentionally follows Quintilian and not Aristotle. Luther does think, however, that if the ‘sophists’ paid closer attention to Aristotle, they should have been able to make these distinctions too. Bornkamm, *Luther in Midcareer*, 192-194.

our powers and at every hour. The category of passion did not apply to it, for it did not suffer the law's accusation, nor would it even be touched. It was situated in the heart, turned its face downwards, and hastened to hell. Further, it was the relation of all the worst things which were opposed to grace and subject to the anger and wrath of God. Thus it ruled, and we served it.³¹

The quality, quantity and action of sin in the unbaptized is that which rules in their life.

For the baptized, however, the quality of sin is different. The power of baptism, while not completely eradicating sin, breaks the ruling power of sin.³² Through the waters of baptism, sin no longer tyrannizes the believer nor does it govern or retain its overwhelming power, though it is still present. Rather, by the grace of baptism, believers in the kingdom of faith gain power over sin and its powers are destroyed.³³ Luther insists that while sin is present, the ruling power of sin is completely judged and appointed to end, and thus it can no longer take the upper hand over the saints. According to Luther, "So also through baptism, sin in us is arrested, judged, and wholly incapacitated so that it can do nothing, and is appointed to complete annihilation. We ought to believe that sin is condemned, and that this judgment is just, and we ought also to carry out that judgment."³⁴

³¹ LW 32:202-203; WA 8:88.

³² LW 32:202; WA 8:202. "After baptism and the infusion of the power of God, the condition of sin is such that it is not yet entirely reduced to nothing, but it is so subjected and broken down that it cannot now do what it once could." LW 32:203; WA 8:88-89. "Now when the kingdom of God arrived [the other] kingdom was divided, the prince of the world was cast out, and the head of the serpent was trampled down even to the refuse and remains which by our care are at last to be eliminated. Similarly, after the children of Israel had entered into the land of Canaan, killed absolutely all the kings and destroyed their power, there still remained a natural and genuine part of the annihilated peoples of the Canaanites, Jebusites, and Amorite. They did not rule, nor were they equal to, the children of Israel, but were tributaries and servants, until at last David, having established the kingdom, wiped them out."

³³ LW 32:203; WA 8:89. "So also we, having been called into the kingdom of faith by the grace of baptism, gain the rule over sin, for all its powers are smitten. Now only grumbling remnants, possessing the nature and character of what was destroyed, remain in the members."

³⁴ LW 32:206; WA 8:91.

For Luther, then, the sin that is in the believer after baptism is, according to its substance, sin. Yet, according to its quantity, quality, and action, it is different. In the unbaptized, sin rules, while in the Christian, the believer rules over sin. This means that while the Christian still experiences sin daily, he or she still gets angry, still lusts, still is prone to idolatry, sin never completely rules the believer. The radical disobedience is still present; the believer, however, is not ruled or determined by this sin.³⁵ As such, the presence of sin will always be a part of the Christian life. Being baptized does not free one from the struggles of life—if anything baptism and the awareness of sin through the law makes life more uncomfortable, for the Christian life will always be a struggle against the natural power of disobedience. It does, however, mean that the tyrannical power of sin no longer rules over the believer. The Christian will continue to labor under sin and will die, but the law of sin and death, the power over the Christian's life, has been broken.³⁶ The Christian is no longer in bondage to sin, but ruled by the power of the Spirit; the Christian is no longer enslaved, but free. In terms of an account of sin and evil, this entails that Luther is able to both recognize the depth of corruption of sin, for all are corrupted even when they have received the Spirit, and yet, also the limits of evil, for God has ultimately defeated these powers, even in the life of the Christian now. While there is sin, the Christian knows that this sin and evil does not have the final word.

³⁵ LW 32:207; WA 8:91. “Thus sin in us after baptism is in its nature truly sin; but only according to its substance, and not in its quantity, quality, or action, for it is wholly passive. The motion of anger and of evil desire is exactly the same in the godly and godless, the same before grace and after grace; but in grace it can do nothing, while outside of grace it gets the upper hand.”

³⁶ LW 32:207; WA 8:92. “Indeed, Christ once and for all absolved and freed everyone from sin and death when He merited for us the law of Spirit of the Life. But what did that Spirit of Life do? He has not yet freed us from death and sin, for we still must die, we still must labor under sin; but in the end He will free us. Yet He has already liberated us from the law of sin and death, that is, from the kingdom and tyranny of sin and death. Sin is indeed present but having lost its tyrannical power, it can do nothing; death indeed impends, but having lost its sting, it can neither harm nor terrify.”

In making this argument, Luther transforms the medieval concept of sin.³⁷ For the tradition, sin was always tied to condemnation—to sin was to deserve condemnation, a mortal sin would damn absolutely and was always accompanied by wrath. Luther, however, uncouples sin from punishment. While sin is present in the believer, it is dead, harmless, and free from wrath.³⁸ There is sin, but no condemnation on account of that sin.³⁹

Second, Luther draws a distinction between two perspectives on sin and grace. Luther argues that Scripture deals with sin in two ways: through the law of God and through the Gospel. Citing Romans 3:20, Luther argues that the law deals with sin only in order to reveal it. This revelation, likewise, has two aspects: first, it reveals the corruption of nature and sin; second, it shows the wrath of God. Luther argues the first revelation of the law reveals something inward, something that deals with the moral actor as such. This revelation is of a deep corruption that inclines towards evil over the course of life. In particular, Luther argues that the law reveals that the wellspring of human motives, such as greed and covetousness, are as sinful as those sins that natural reason recognizes as crimes, such as theft, fraud, and murder. While inward motives always bear fruit, which are various and should not be identified with one particular sin, Luther argues that most people restrict the concept of sin to blatant crimes; the law, however, shows that sin is much deeper and more universal than a simple subset of human action; it is a universal corruption of nature in all its parts.⁴⁰

³⁷ Bornkamm, *Luther in Midcareer*, 189.

³⁸ “LW 32:229; WA 8:107. “In the meantime, while this is happening, it is called sin, and is truly sin in its nature; but now it is sin without wrath, without the law, dead sin, harmless sin, as long as one perseveres in grace and his gift.”

³⁹ LW 32:239; WA 8:114.

⁴⁰ LW 32:224; WA 8:104. “It is the law which reveals that what was before unknown and dead is properly speaking sin, and that it is very much alive, though hidden under the false works of hypocrites. Yet it can never remain hidden so that it does not produce its fruits (which are of different sorts in different people, for you are not able to indicate any single evil work to which you can consign all men, for there are many).”

Secondly, drawing on Romans 4:15, Luther argues that the law reveals the wrath of God. Whereas the law first designates all persons as liars and sinners, the law also reveals the wrath of God which punishes people and consigns them to the dangers of hell and death. Whereas corruption is internal, the wrath is outward and inflicted by God. Luther argues that wrath is a greater evil than sin, for we naturally hate punishment more than guilt. Even if sin were revealed to us, we would not sufficiently hate it unless we also saw the wrath of God against it.⁴¹

For Luther, the wrath of God stands against both what humans take to be evil and the apparent goods of life. Because the wrath judges absolutely, it shows that there is nothing ultimately profitable in what humanity takes as goods, such as, “arts, talents, prudence, courage, chastity, and whatever natural, moral, and impressive goods there are.”⁴² Despite the way in which the virtues seem good to us, Luther argues that the law’s prophetic task is to show the insufficiency of these ostensible goods and thereby call to mind higher goods. This task involves nothing more than rigorously applying the law to human life and showing the true nature of supposed goods—precisely because people glory in these goods, the law’s prophetic task is dangerous. Luther is careful here: the goods and virtues in themselves are still good, because they are gifts of God: “It must be added that God himself does not deny that these [virtues] are good—for this cannot be denied—but he rewards and bedecks them with temporal benefits, such as power, wealth, glory, fame, dignity, honor, enjoyment, and the like.”⁴³ Nevertheless, the law shows that these virtues are evil, not in themselves, but rather, because people place their trust in them. The virtues, in other words,

⁴¹ LW 32:224; WA 8:104. “Up to this point the light of the law instructs us, teaching us that we are under corruption and wrath, and designating all men as liars and sons of wrath. We would perhaps have disregarded corruption and been pleased with our evil unless this other evil, which is wrath, had refused to indulge our foolishness and had resisted it with terror and the danger of hell and death, so that we have but little peace in our wickedness. Plainly wrath is a greater evil for us than corruption, for we hate punishment more than guilt.”

⁴² LW 32:225; WA 8:104.

⁴³ LW 32:225; WA 8:104-105.

reinforce the innermost nature of sin and evil, for they displace trust, pleasure, and glory in God and lead to a sense that grace is unnecessary. Because they believe themselves to be morally righteous on account of the virtues, they no longer feel the need for grace nor listen to Christian proclamation, for they believe they fulfill the law.⁴⁴ The wrath of God stands against this presumption and shows that no human act merits God's favor.

The law, therefore, shows us the universality and depth of sin and the wrath of God and thereby induces despair. The aim and purpose of the law, however, like in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, is to induce the believer to seek grace. For Luther, just as the law reveals two things, so too the Gospel preaches two things: the righteousness and the grace of God, or grace and the gift of God (*gratia* and *donum*). Righteousness corresponds to sin: just as sin is an internal corruption, righteousness refers “to an innermost root whose fruits are good works.”⁴⁵ Righteousness occurs through the gift (*donum*) of faith in Christ—because the innermost root of sin is distrust in the grace of God, righteousness occurs through trust in God. This gift of faith cleanses the internal corruption of sin and flowers forth in good works. Alongside the gift of faith, however, Luther argues that the gospel announces the good will (*favor*) of God. Whereas the gift (*donum*) refers to an internal healing

⁴⁴ LW 32:226; WA 8:105. “Therefore it is only the law which shows that these [virtues] are evil—not, to be sure, in themselves, for they are the gifts of God, but because of that deeply hidden root of sin which is the cause of men being pleased with, relying, and glorying in these things which are not felt to be evil. This is now and always the innermost evil of sin, for trust, pleasure, and glorying must be in God alone, as Jer. 9 says: ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the might man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches.’ All these are goods, but they are freely distributed among the evil more often than among the good... Yet as I said, all these fall under wrath and the curse, nor do they profit anyone, nor indeed, prepare a ‘congruence to grace,’ but rather fatten the heart so that it neither desires nor senses the necessity of grace... In the midst of so much wisdom, goodness, righteousness, and religiousness, they will not admit to be evil, nor can they recognize that they are, because they do not listen. You see, therefore, how incomparably the law transcends natural reason, and how bottomless is the sin of which it gives knowledge. Therefore all are under wrath, since all are under sin.”

⁴⁵ LW 32:227; WA 8:106.

of sin and responds to our natural corruption, the good will of God, (*gratia*), refers to God's disposition concerning us and responds to God's wrath. *Gratia* here does not refer to a quality of the soul or to any human state at all, but instead, following his understanding of the promise, refers to God's merciful disposition towards us. Grace (*gratia*) means that we are beloved, accepted, and have a loving God. This grace is necessary for us and a necessary supplementation to the gift—if we were healed but were unaware of God's feeling towards us, Luther argues, we could never truly rejoice and be happy in God. Yet, in knowing God's disposition towards us, we can rest in the joy of faith, act boldly in the world, and overcome the powers of sin, death, and the devil. He writes, "This grace truly produces peace of heart until finally a man is healed from his corruption and feels he has a gracious God. It is this which fattens the bones and gives joy, security, and fearlessness to the conscience so that one dares all, can do all, and in this trust in the grace of God, laughs even at death."⁴⁶ Because the decision of God is final, Luther argues that it is a far greater gift than the creation of righteousness. Whereas *donum* is a partial gift that fights and works to overcome throughout our life, *gratia* is a total gift that declares the person forgiven, at peace with God, and ultimately and completely righteous.⁴⁷

The twofold grace articulated here depends upon the development of the promise developed in the sacraments. Whereas in the period from 1515-1517, grace only referred to the healing which works on sin, grace now retains this partial aspect under the category of *donum* and introduces a total aspect under the concept of *gratia*. Under *gratia* and the word of promise, one is entirely a saint,

⁴⁶ LW 32:227; WA 8:106.

⁴⁷ LW 32:227; WA 8:106. "Hence, just as wrath is a greater evil than the corruption of sin, so grace is a greater good than that health of righteousness which we have said comes from faith. Everyone would prefer—if that were possible—to be without the health of righteousness rather than the grace of God, for peace and the remission of sins are properly attributed to the grace of God, while healing from corruption is ascribed to faith." For a schematic mapping of this relationship, see Iserloh, "Gratia und Donum, Rechtfertigung und Heiligung nach Luthers Schrift „Wieder Den Löwender Theologen Latomus" in *Studien zur Geschichte und Theologie der Reformation. Festschrift für Ernst Bizer*, (Neukirchen 1969), 154.

entirely beloved, and entirely favored by God. Because *gratia* does not refer to a human state, but to God's disposition towards the sinner given in the promise, the one whom God receives in grace is completely received and favored. In *gratia*, the whole person is loved and accepted entirely, just as in wrath the whole person is rejected entirely. Whereas gifts are partial and divisible (one may have certain virtues but not others), grace is total and encompasses the entire person. Luther writes,

Now it follows that these two, wrath and grace, are so related—since they are outside us—that they are poured out upon the whole, so that he who is under wrath is wholly under the whole of wrath, while he who is under grace is wholly under the whole of grace, because wrath and grace have to do with persons. He whom God receives in grace, He completely receives, and he whom He favors, He completely favors. On the other hand, He is angry at the whole of him with whom He is angry. He does not divide this grace as gifts are divided... As we said, grace must be sharply distinguished from gifts, for only grace is life eternal, and only wrath is eternal death.⁴⁸

For Luther, then, faith alone justifies and imparts grace for us, not because of any internal merit or virtue on the part of faith, but because faith's object is Christ. Faith in Christ is simply the act of clinging to Christ and finding safety and comfort in him. Using the imagery of a hen and chicks, Luther describes Christ's work as drawing us to himself and keeping us safe under his wings. "Observe, faith is not enough" he writes, "but only the faith which hides under the wings of Christ and glories in his righteousness... Faith is to cleave to him, to presume on him, because he is holy and just for you."⁴⁹ Faith here is not a human action, but the gift of God, that makes us certain of God's love so that we can stand before God.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ LW 32:228; WA 8:106-107.

⁴⁹ LW 32:235-236; WA 8:112.

⁵⁰ LW 32:236; WA 8:112. "Observe that this faith is the gift of God, which the grace of God obtains for us, and which purging away sin, makes us saved and certain—not because of our works, but

In this text, Luther argues that there are two movements of righteousness that occur in our relationship to Christ. The first comes from Christ's work as the expiator of sin. Because Christ overcame sin completely on the cross, Christ can no longer be condemned. Because the believer clings to this Christ, the believer receives the benefits of Christ and therefore is completely forgiven and safe in Christ.

Christ is himself the expiation. They are safe in his grace, not because they believe or possess faith and the gift, but because it is in Christ's grace that they have these things. No one's faith endures unless he relies upon Christ's own righteousness, and is preserved by his protection. For, as I have said, true faith is not what they have invented, an absolute—nay, rather obsolete—quality in the soul, but it is something which does not allow itself to be torn away from Christ, and relies only on the One whom it knows is in God's grace. Christ cannot be condemned, nor can anyone who throws himself upon him. This means that so grave a matter is the sin which remains, and so intolerable is God's judgment, that you will not be able to stand unless you shield yourself with him whom you know to be without any sin. This is what true faith does.⁵¹

The second benefit of Christ is righteousness. Luther draws the closest identity between righteousness and Christ—Luther argues that righteousness not only comes through Christ or from him, but it is in Christ. Because righteousness is itself in Christ, Christ's righteousness is unchanging and lacks nothing.⁵² When one clings to Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness, which is

because of Christ's—so that we can stand endure in eternity, even as it is written: 'His righteousness endures forever.'"

⁵¹ LW 32:239; WA 8:114.

⁵² LW 32:235; WA 8:111. "His righteousness is perpetual and sure; there is no change, there is there no lack, for he himself is the Lord of all. Therefore whenever Paul preached faith in Christ, he did so with the utmost care to proclaim that righteousness is not only through him or from him, but even that it is in him. He therefore draws us into himself, and transforms us, and places us as if in hiding "until the wrath passes away" [Isa. 26:20]."

righteousness itself, becomes one's own. This transforms the moral life: instead of seeking to develop virtues and to become righteous through practice, in faith one seeks to cling to Christ, and then Christ's righteousness flow through him or her. In faith, Christ is present in the believer and this presence leads to a transformed life of righteousness.⁵³ Because we are always dependent on Christ for the movement of righteousness, one never rests content in their attainment of virtue, but instead always seeks to receive more so that he or she may become more fully transformed into Christ.⁵⁴ Thus, clinging to Christ means both that we are fully forgiven as we receive Christ's righteousness and that we constantly work to receive and enact this righteousness in this life, *gratia* and *donum*.

The nature of the relationship between Christ, *gratia* and *donum* has become a contentious issue in Luther scholarship. The scholars associated with the Finnish school argue that the Lutheran tradition, from the Formula of Concord forward, have severely misunderstood this relationship. According to Simo Peura, whereas Luther includes the gift and the renewal of life within the sphere of the doctrine of justification, the Formula of Concord reduces justification to the reception of forgiveness and the confidence of faith. Everything concerning the renewal of the sinner and God's presence in the believer is rejected from the doctrine of justification and are instead treated as mere consequences of *gratia*.⁵⁵ This exclusion reaches its apex in neo-Kantian German theology, in which

⁵³ Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," 56-60.

⁵⁴ LW 32:235; WA 8:111. "He wants us to rely on Christ so that we will not waver in ourselves and in these gifts, not be satisfied with the righteousness which has begun in us unless it cleaves to and flows from Christ's righteousness, and so that no fool, having once accepted the gift, will think himself already contented and secure. But he does not want us to halt in what has been received, but rather to draw near from day to day so that we may be fully transformed into Christ."

⁵⁵ Simo Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift (donum): The Challenge of Luther's Understanding of Justification," 45.

the gift is almost wholly excluded, such that the gift at most means a new consciousness in relationship to God or a change in one's self-understanding.⁵⁶

Against these readings, the Finnish school emphasizes that union with Christ is the key to understanding Luther's account of salvation, and this union is something ontologically real which transforms the believer. More precisely, Peura argues that while the grace and gift must be properly distinguished, they must not be separated, for both are grounded in the presence of Christ in the believer. Wherever Christ is, there is both the favor of God and the gift of God.⁵⁷ The presence of Christ entails that the believer does not receive the gift as a *consequence* of justification; rather, Peura argues, the gift *grounds* divine favor; only on the basis of the gift is one also justified. The gift, that is, the struggle against sin and the growth in righteousness, is the grounds upon which one also receives God's favor. He writes, "The whole person of the Christian is favored by God, since the gift purifies the Christian from sin and opposes it. Unless the gift continuously labors to expel sin, the Christian cannot receive favor in God's judgment... Thus, the gift also is always a permanent condition of grace and of God's favorable intention."⁵⁸ Although the gift is the basis of the favor, Peura argues that this does not mean one is justified by works, for both the gift and grace are due to the ontological presence of Christ in the believer and not the independent work of the believer.

This interpretation is undoubtedly correct in stressing the poverty of neo-Kantian interpretations of Luther's account of the relationship of gift and grace. It is also correct in arguing that Luther affirms the union of Christ with the believer—this terminology is present throughout Luther's writings. However, Carl Trueman correctly notes that the meaning of union with Christ is not straightforward, for there are many different forms of union—legal unions, marriage unions, ontological unions. The central claim of the Finnish school depends upon the claim that union

⁵⁶ Ibid, 46.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 58-59.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 58.

entails an ontological presence in Christ that resembles the Orthodox notion of theosis.⁵⁹ Trueman argues, however, that none of the passages that the Finnish school uses to support this particular interpretation lend themselves to an ontological interpretation. Only by doing serious historical and contextual violence to the text can they make a convincing case that Christ's ontological presence in the believer stands at the root of justification. Moreover, Trueman argues, Luther employs realist language everywhere in his thought, but this does not entail an ontological account leading towards divinization. For example, Luther employs a realist notion of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, but this does not mean that the bread and wine are divinized; quite the opposite, they retain their essential features as bread and wine even with Christ's true presence in, with, and under them. Trueman writes, "Thus, to move from language which speaks of the real presence of Christ by faith in the believer to an understanding of salvation based upon some notion of transforming divinization or theosis is thus a not inconsiderable leap and needs to be established on foundations of a contextual reading of the said language in the narrower context of the Luther texts within which it occurs and the wider theological and historical context of Luther's own life and work."⁶⁰ Because of the ahistorical and selective reading that the Finns employ, Trueman finds that the emphasis on a real ontological presence of Christ that leads to divinization is unconvincing.

Timo Laato, in a similar vein, argues that Mannermaa's and Peura's reading of *Against Latomus* misses the thrust of Luther's argument.⁶¹ While the Finns prioritize the gift over grace, such that the gift is the basis and prerequisite of grace, Laato argues that Luther takes the opposite view. For Luther, he claims, grace comes before and maintains priority over the gift. Laato's argument is largely exegetical, but the particular strength of his argument is he shows how

⁵⁹ Carl Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther Offered by the Helsinki School," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65 (2003), 231-244.

⁶⁰ Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning?," 239.

⁶¹ Timo Laato, "Justification: the Stumbling Block of the Finnish Luther School," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 72 no 4 (Oct 2008), 327-346.

Mannermaa and Peura engage in selective reading. By showing the surrounding passages of many of the passages the Finns employ in their argument, Laato shows the exegetical error in reading the gift as prior to grace.

The priority of grace is central to Luther, Laato argues, for deeply theological reasons. First, and most importantly, Laato argues that the ultimate grounds for divine favor are not the individual as such, but in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It is only because Christ died on the cross and was raised (favor) that Christ now dwells in the heart (donum) in faith. Only on the basis of Christ's victory on the cross is the divine wrath overcome and thus, is Christ able to live in the heart. Favor precedes donum, precisely because Christ's work precedes the marital union with the believer by which the believer receives Christ's benefits. The gift only conveys grace because of the preexistent favor of God won on the cross; the priority is with the favor and gratia, not donum.⁶²

Second, Laato argues, Luther prioritizes gratia and favor over donum because Christ alone, as the *verbum externum*, provides comfort and consolation precisely because Christ is external.⁶³ To trust in the gift as the basis for grace is to lose the confidence of faith, for any focus away from the objective external word leads to doubt. Laato quotes Luther in *Against Latomus*, "They could have their security in grace, *not because they believe and because they have faith or the gift*, but because they have these by the grace of Christ. For no one's faith will endure if he does not rely on Christ's own righteousness and if he is not protected in his care."⁶⁴ The central grounds for confidence, that which allows the sinner to fight sin, is the favor of God grounded in Christ. In later writings, this emphasis becomes even more pronounced, such that the Finnish school seems to be, as is often argued, an ahistoric misreading of Luther's central arguments.

⁶² Timo Laato, "Justification: the Stumbling Block of the Finnish Luther School," 332.

⁶³ This is also the chief argument of Timothy Wengert.

⁶⁴ LW 32:235-236; WA 8:111.29-112.15. Quoted in Timo Laato, "Justification: the Stumbling Block of the Finnish Luther School," 333. (Emphasis his).

On historical, exegetical, and theological concerns, the critiques against the Finnish school are correct—Peura and Mannermaa are wrong to prioritize *donum* over *favor* in Luther’s thought. Luther clearly prioritizes favor over donum in a passage like this: “The second foundation is the gift they have received, through which they neither walk according to the flesh, nor obey sin. However, the first foundation is the stronger and more important, for although the second amounts to something, it does so only through the power of the first.”⁶⁵ Moreover, the lack of attention to the context of Luther’s usage leads to serious distortions in the employment of terms and how Luther intends key phrases.

However, Luther’s own thought is not as straightforward or as clear as the reader would desire. Even in a disciplined, analytic work like *Against Latomus*, Luther’s thought sometimes seems to endorse views that he earlier and strenuously dismissed. For example, Luther writes, “For God has made a covenant with those who are in Christ, so that there is no condemnation if they fight against themselves and their sin.”⁶⁶ The language Luther employs, surprisingly, sounds almost exactly like the language of the *facere quod in se est*, God will forgive those who do what is in them. Jennifer Herdt argues that this shows that Luther is unable to account for human agency and is thus left in a bind between medieval nominalist accounts of justification, which grant human agency, and his own, which, she claims, denies it.⁶⁷ While this seems to overstate the trouble, the passage is troubling in its seeming inconsistency. Peura’s exegetical arguments at least do justice to the passage by showing how the passage could be read consistently: namely, if both donum and favor are granted in and through Christ’s presence with the believer. While ultimately the Finnish school fails to prove its case for a real-ontic presence of Christ and for the priority of the gift over grace, the case in Luther’s

⁶⁵ LW 32:239; WA 8:114.

⁶⁶ LW 32:239; WA 8:114.

⁶⁷ Jennifer Herdt, *Putting On Virtue*, 187-188.

text is not always as clear as Laato presents it. Despite the overwhelming instances in which Luther affirms the greater importance of God's favor, there are still passages that resist systematization.

For Luther, however, the central point in *Against Latomus* is that a righteous person always has both grace and the gift. Under *gratia/favor*, the person is fully a saint and wholly pleasing to God and totally saved from wrath, while under *donum*, the person is a sinner who is being healed from sin and corruption. Due to *gratia/favor*, the sinner is wholly accepted by God.⁶⁸ This acceptance is not due to merit or to a human state, but to God's favor. While God's acceptance is always external, it also *always* transforms the believer. Grace does not leave a person ruled by sin, but instead attacks and fights sin through the gift *donum*, even as this fight will not be consummated in this life. *Gratia* is total, while *donum* is a partial healing that overcomes sin. Luther writes, "Everything is forgiven through grace, but as yet not everything is healed through the gift. The gift has been infused, the leaven has been added to the mixture. It works so as to purge away the sin for which a person has already been forgiven, and to drive out the evil guest for whose expulsion permission has been given."⁶⁹ The account of *donum* mirrors the account of grace in the *Lectures on Romans*, yet here it is seen as an effect of *gratia* instead of the full nature of grace. The life of the Christian is one that has the full confidence of mercy of God and confirms this grace through a lifelong struggle against sin and a growth in righteousness through union with Christ.

Luther finds that this articulation of the twofold nature of grace solves the dilemma concerning sin and good works. His description of the presence of sin in the believer is able to account for the many biblical passages that claim sin remains after baptism. While sin remains, he does not deny the power of God to work against sin, not only in its total dimensions, but also in

⁶⁸ LW 32:229; WA 8:107. "It is therefore most godless to say that one who is baptized is still in sin, or that all his sins are not fully forgiven. For what sin is there where God is favorable and wills not to know any sin, and where he wholly accepts and sanctifies the whole man?" Peura, "Christ as Favor and Gift," 56-57.

⁶⁹ LW 32:229; WA 8:107.

daily life. The Christian constantly struggles against sin through *donum* and gains in virtue. The life of the Christian is one in which Christ lives in a person and transforms a person to be more and more conformed to Christ's grace. The remainder of sin, while still present in its essence, does not rule the person; rather, in and through Christ, the person will be active in growing in virtue, loving the neighbor, and disciplining the flesh.⁷⁰ The Christian undertakes these actions, not in order to gain merit, but from the reception of *gratia* and the freedom it brings. One is free to love the neighbor, even as sin, death, and the devil still provide resistance.

This ethical vision introduces the idea of the *simul iustus et peccator*. For Luther, because of the nature of grace as promise, the moral agent is simultaneously sinner and saved; he or she is simultaneously righteous and is filled with sin.⁷¹ Considered in oneself (*coram mundo*), a person is carnal and in sin; considered before God (*coram Deo*), due to the totality God's grace, the sinner is declared to be a saint. The notion of simultaneity does not divide the person ontologically—there are not two wills or two persons—but instead there is one person standing in two relationships.

As we saw in the *Lectures on Romans*, Luther had long held that the saints are also sinners. The newness here, however, introduced through the concept of promise, is the totality of these states. Whereas before, sin and grace were both partial aspects of the one sinner, Luther now holds that under the promise, under *gratia*, one is totally a saint and on earth, totally a sinner. Luther retains the account of sin and moral improvement with the category of *donum*, such that the believer considered *coram Mundo* is both partially a saint and partially a sinner, the *simul* now refers to the total nature of these states. Before God, one is totally and completely a saint, totally saved, while on earth one partially is each.⁷²

⁷⁰ For an account of the relationship of Lutheran ethics to the virtue tradition see Joel Bierman, *A Case for Character: Toward a Lutheran Virtue Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

⁷¹ LW 32:110; WA 8:110. "Sin and trust [fiducia] are simultaneously present in us and in all our works as long as we are on this earth."

⁷² F. Edward Cranz, *An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought*, 44-50.

The acceptance by God in *gratia* entails one is a new creature, different than before. Whereas the self outside of grace finds meaning, purpose and self-identity within the bounds of the self, the self in grace is a new creature and subject to a new evaluation—God’s grace. As before, the new creature has sin in him or her; what is different is the nature of evaluation, both from God’s perspective and one’s own.⁷³ This new evaluation means that, on account of grace and the gift, the sin is not held against the actor. The one whom God deals with in mercy truly sins and truly harms others in the world; yet, because God’s grace and gift are given to the person and truly within the person, these sins are not imputed to the actor.⁷⁴

While one is evaluated differently before God, and this justification is forensic in the sense that it comes to the sinner from without by God’s judgment alone, it is neither purely formal nor extrinsic—the gift (*donum*) reorients one’s loves. Most particularly, through the gift, one comes to be made righteous and thereby loves and approves of God’s law.⁷⁵ Luther argues that this delight in the

⁷³ LW 32:248; WA 8:120. Explaining Romans 7:17, Luther writes, “Who is this ‘I’ who now does not do what it has just been said to do? It is the ‘I’ which I spiritually am, because according to this ‘I,’ I am now looked at in terms of the grace which does not allow me to be looked at in terms of the sin which makes me carnal. Everything is washed away, and now there is a self different from the one before grace, for that one was evaluated in terms of sin as wholly carnal.”

⁷⁴ LW 32:248-249; WA 8:121. “I truly do it (sin), for a part of me does it; but now I am not evaluated in terms of it. When my hand does evil, it is imputed to me unless my soul is innocent; but the reason for this is not that the hand does evil, but because it is not imputed—and it is not imputed because of the innocent soul. So sin is truly sin, but because grace and the gift are within me, it is not imputed; not on account of its innocence—as if it were not truly harmful—but because grace and the gift reign within me.”

⁷⁵ LW 32:251; WA 8:122. “Paul here explains himself very clearly, for to delight in the law of God is precisely to be a godly and righteous man. He who is not just neither fights nor cares to fight against the law of the members. Further, Paul does not call the law of the mind ‘natural law,’ as they term it, but he opposes it to the law of the members. Therefore he is rather giving a name to the will of the spirit which delights in the law of God, and which is opposed to that law of the members which delights in the law of sin. Thus also the law of the members is a will which is contrary to the will of the spirit. He says that it is at war...for it is certainly evil to war against the law of God. Now he does not only say that it does not obey, but—and this is most serious—that it is ‘at war.’ He does this so that you may not underestimate the sin which remains after baptism. It is immense, and it is an immense gift of God which removes it, and it is an immense grace which forgives it for the sake of the spirit which delights in, rather than wars against, the law of God.”

law is not natural, but only comes to the spiritual person who clings to Christ. Precisely because the person still has sin, however, this new delight in the law creates a struggle within the self. Drawing on Paul's language of the war between the spirit and flesh in Romans 7, Luther argues that the one who receives grace and the gift is put at odds with the old self—the person who affirms the goodness of the law and wishes to enact the law in all their life is constantly frustrated by the presence of sin in this life. Sin constantly disturbs, hinders and torments the saint, for, like all persons, it dwells in the flesh.⁷⁶ Sin does not become lighter with grace and the gift;⁷⁷ if anything, righteousness intensifies sin, because one feels the full force of sin's power over the self, whereas the wicked consent to evil without struggle. This struggle is particularly difficult, Luther argues, because sin is not one thing, but constantly shifts; for example, sometimes a person is angry, sometimes lustful, sometimes greedy, but never one of these constantly.⁷⁸ Although the spirit does not consent to sin, it still is in bondage and performs the acts of the flesh. Luther argues

The 'I' is here one and the same man ...Not only do I have sin, but I serve it or (what seems to amount to the same thing) my flesh serves it. But what is it to serve sin? Isn't it to do its will, and to act contrary to the law of God? The flesh does this when it so serves sin as to be

⁷⁶ LW 32:248; WA 8:121. "Sin daily disturbs us, hindering our way, and even tormenting us, so that unless it is courageously cleared away, we shall thrust ourselves against it and shall stumble. Indeed it is an evil guest, and yet it dwells within us, in our flesh, in our land, without our borders. Therefore there is nothing good in the flesh, indeed, as I said, there is *nothing* good, not simply a penalty, but sin."

⁷⁷ LW 32:252; WA 8:123. "The evil thoughts of the godly are stronger than those of the ungodly, and yet they do not pollute and damn, while they truly do pollute and damn the others. Why is this? Isn't it the same in both? It is indeed the same sin, but the godly have an antidote, while the others have none. Thus the godly do not sin in the midst of a greater onslaught, while the others do sin in the midst of a lesser one. Sin is in both, so this redounds to the glory of God's grace, not of evil natures. If grace were lacking, sin would truly damn, but now grace prevents it from damning evil natures."

⁷⁸ LW 32:253; WA 8:124. "It is indeed true that there is not one passion ceaselessly driving us to distraction. Anger does not always burn, evil desire does not always rage, we are not constantly tormented with envy, but one of these succeeds the other...Sin is a living thing in constant movement, changing as its objects change."

at war, when it makes captive, when it rages; but because the spirit is neither obedient to nor vanquished by these ragings, it is not damned. The service of sin becomes empty, for all its impulses are frustrated. Nevertheless, this bondage does not therefore disappear, it does not stop being evil. Although it now serves in vain and its master sin does not prevail, the flesh does not cease to sin in this is evil servitude, but rather because of this deserves to be crucified and killed so as to stop serving in this way....The essence of sin is truly in them, but it can no longer do what it could.⁷⁹

The basic difference is, then, the saint serves sin the flesh, while the sinner serves sin absolutely.⁸⁰

This notion of *simultaneity* of the Christian as saint and sinner is thus a dynamic concept: the spiritual person alone is the one who wants to do good and yet experiences evil daily. The *simul* is thus not an ontological feature of the person, but refers only to the Christian who has grace and the gift of faith.⁸¹ The nature of the Christian life is not a simple peaceful growth in virtue, but a constant war with sin.⁸² Because of this dual nature, that is, because the individual is always still in

⁷⁹ LW 32:254; WA 8:124-125.

⁸⁰ LW 32:256; WA 8:125-126. "Servitude is not the name of a work but of a state which includes all the strivings of the entire life...The righteous serve God absolutely, for that has to do with the person, but the hypocrites serve him only with the flesh, because they do so only with works, not with faith from the heart."

⁸¹ LW 32:251; WA 8:122. "Therefore it is necessarily the sin which dwells within me which does it; and so it is impossible to understand this passage as referring to anything except a spiritual man, for it does not refer to those who carry out wicked deeds. Paul here says that these two factors interfere with each other, although in such a way that the spirit prevails, so that it is attributed to him [the spirit] that he does not do nor will the evil...Since it is the spirit which complains and accuses the flesh, it is evident that the flesh, instead of dominating, is a rebel and irksome to the ruling spirit...A carnal man standing outside of grace would not do this."

⁸² LW 32:251; WA 8:122. "Thus also the law of the members is a will which is contrary to the will of the spirit. He says that it is at war...for it is certainly evil to war against the law of God. Now he does not only say that it does not obey, but—and this is most serious—that it is 'at war.' He does this so that you may not underestimate the sin which remains after baptism. It is immense, and it is an immense gift of God which removes it, and it is an immense grace which forgives it for the sake of the spirit which delights in, rather than wars against, the law of God."

sin and serves sin in the flesh, the sole source of comfort is in the mercy of God. One can never rely upon one's own merit or success in the struggle, but will always rejoice in the grace and gift of God.

Yet, and many interpreters have missed this point, this account of the simultaneity of the saint and sinner does not entail an ethical passivity or quietism. Because grace and the gift overcome sin, the believer must constantly not only seek the forgiveness of sin, but also repent. For Luther, repentance is the cleaning of corruption and the discipline of working to overcome sin. To recognize God's grace is to repent of past behavior and to work for moral improvement. He writes,

Repentance is the transformation of corruption and the continual renewal from sin which is effected by faith, the gift of God, and the gift of grace is forgiveness, so that in that case the wrath against sin ceases...There must be repentance and renewal so that sin may be expelled as long as there is preaching, as long as there is life...What is this [repentance] except to change one's life, as is done by faith in purging away sin, and to be under the rule of God, as is accomplished by forgiving grace?⁸³

Grace requires the moral agent to actively purge sin and fight against it. The remainder of sin, in other words, does not mean that one rests content in sin and sins at will; rather, because sin is forgiven and overcome, one seeks to overcome it. The Christian who has faith in the forgiveness of sins is always and necessarily active in the fight against sin. Grace does not free one from the struggle against sin, but frees one to fight in full confidence of the victory of God over evil.

This fight is neither automatic nor spontaneous, but instead involves the believer in actively self-disciplining and taming the flesh. In the *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther argues that while justification creates a joyful heart that loves God, the person remains in this mortal body with its passions and desires. In order that these passions and desires do not thwart the intentions of the Spirit, the Christian must engage ascetic self-disciplines. Luther writes,

⁸³ LW 32:232; WA 8:109.

In this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline and to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check...Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God. Hence a man cannot be idle, for the need of his body drives him and he is compelled to do many good works to reduce it to subjection....In this way everyone will easily be able to cultivate himself (*seipsum erudire*)⁸⁴ to limit and to have discretion concerning his bodily castigations, for he will fast, watch, and labor as much as he finds sufficient to repress the lasciviousness and lust of his body.⁸⁵

The daily mortification of the flesh, however, cannot ever be undertaken to earn salvation or to attempt to please God—this would be to deny the freedom created by Christ. Rather, the ascetic disciplines are taken on behalf of the neighbor—one cultivates oneself, not to earn God’s love, but so that one can more actively love the neighbor. The gift thus requires spiritual discipline and self-denial, but always only for the good of others.

These emphases on *donum* and spiritual disciplines entail a different picture of the nature of the ethical life than presented by Radical Lutheranism. As we discussed in the introduction, in order to capture the radical nature of justification, Gerhard Forde argues that justification ought to be construed in terms of death and life. In justifying us, God does not simply improve our situation by degree, but instead the divine imputation is “a shattering of all such schemes. It does not come

⁸⁴ Translation mine. The translator in Luther’s Works has “In this way everyone will easily be able to learn for himself the limit and discretion.”

⁸⁵ LW 31:358-359; WA 7:59-60.

either at the beginning or end of a ‘movement.’ Rather, it establishes an entirely new situation.”⁸⁶

Forde emphasizes this in terms of the total aspect of grace: the *simul iustus et peccator* is not a partial state, but it demands two total situations—the person is both totally a sinner and totally justified.⁸⁷

To be justified is to die to sin and be raised to new life; there is no continuity with the old life, but all is new through God’s radical act of forgiveness.

Because of this eschatological understanding of the nature of justification, Forde finds most talk of sanctification misplaced. Instead of recognizing the new life as new, the old Adam attempts to retain power apart from God by wishing to ignore the freedom of justification and praise human work.⁸⁸ Properly understood, sanctification is simply the recognition of one’s justification. Forde argues, “Sanctification is simply to believe the divine imputation and with the it the *totus peccator*... Only those who stand still, who know that they are sinners and that Christ is for them, only they give God the glory. Only they are sanctified.”⁸⁹ Because Forde identifies sanctification with forensic justification, he argues that there is no movement or development in terms of one’s ethical life; rather, there is only the qualitative transformation that takes place in being justified, the movement from death to life.⁹⁰ Forde, thus, makes bold claims such as “Put audaciously, perhaps even irresponsibly, one might announce that the problem is that Luther does not have any ethics!...He was first and foremost concerned about the eternal salvation of lost sinners. And ethics, at least as he knew it, hindered more than helped in that concern.”⁹¹ Forde’s position on the

⁸⁶ Gerhard Forde, “Forensic Justification and the Christian Life: Triumph or Tragedy?,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸⁸ Gerhard Forde, “Luther’s ‘Ethics,’” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 137-155.

⁸⁹ Forde, “Forensic Justification and the Christian Life,” 122.

⁹⁰ Forde, “Forensic Justification and the Christian Life,” 124

⁹¹ Forde, “Luther’s ‘Ethics,’” 138.

question of sanctification and ethics is that theology must first and foremost begin with words against ethics; that is, we must be saved from ethics before we can begin to think about the Christian life properly, namely by dying and being reborn in Christ.⁹²

This initial rejection of ethics and the emphasis on justification does not mean that Forde completely rejects the partial account of *donum* that Luther develops here. Following Wilfried Joest,⁹³ he argues that Luther's partial account of sanctification can only be understood if it is set against all traditional accounts of moral progress—instead of moving from a partial account towards the whole, Forde argues that Luther always moves from the whole to the partial. Complete sanctification is not the *goal*, but the *source* of all good works. He writes, “It is always as a whole that it attacks its opposite in the form of both despair and hypocrisy. Good works are not ‘building blocks’ in the ‘progress’ of the Christian, they are fruits of the whole, the ‘good tree.’”⁹⁴ Sanctification for Forde is not a movement towards the goal of moral improvement or a purified life, but instead, it is the goals movement towards us—it is the divine action continually stripping away the old Adam of sin. Because sanctification always comes from the whole, it always involves the death of the old life and the beginning of the new. Forde quotes Joest to support this claim:

The progress of the sanctified Christian life...can be compared with an immanent moral movement, with no continuous psychological development in the realm of the identity of the ethical subject with itself. Furthermore: wherever that progress takes place—whether in the beginning or further on—it always happens as a whole. If it takes place extensively only in little steps, or in isolated actions against particular sins, intensively the whole is always

⁹² Forde, “Luther’s ‘Ethics,’” 140-141.

⁹³ Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1956).

⁹⁴ Forde, “Forensic Justification and the Christian Life,” 127.

there, the total crisis, the entire transformation of the person, death and becoming new is wholly present.⁹⁵

For Forde, this means that the relationship between the *totus peccator* and *totus iustus* is not one in which the sinner increasingly becomes more moral through effort; rather, it is one in which grace from above draws one more and more towards the death of the sinner and the rising to the pure love of God.⁹⁶

Forde's eschatological vision captures very well Luther's understanding of sin and the nature of justification. He is most certainly correct to emphasize justification as the declaration of forgiveness and God's favor as the heart and center of Luther's theological vision. Although he does not employ the terms of *gratia* and *donum*, his stress on the total aspect influencing the partial aspect is also correct. However, Forde's exclusive stress on the death and new life metaphor and the eschatological framing of these questions means that he fails to take seriously its partial aspect of grace that Luther adopts in *Against Latomus*. In every attempt to describe this partial aspect of moral change, Forde falls back into the eschatological language of death and new life. He is too quick to dismiss any partial moral change as hypocrisy or false consciousness—surely not all moral change can be easily dismissed as hypocrisy?⁹⁷ While he recognizes that Luther employs these categories and attempts to account for them, Forde always only thinks in terms of qualitative and total change. He is unable reconcile the relationship between the total aspect of sin and grace, which do involve death and new life, with Luther's emphasis on the partial account of the gift that effects moral transformation. As I have shown, Luther does speak about moral change, moral effort, and the deliberate adoption of moral disciplines and practices. These are all partial acts that do not simply

⁹⁵ Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit*, 95, quoted in Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Christian Life," 127.

⁹⁶ Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Christian Life," 128-129.

⁹⁷ "Any view of sanctification as a progress in 'partialities,' a changing of 'properties,' a mere 'removing of sins,' would be nothing but hypocrisy." Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Christian Life," 127.

flow from justification without intention and effort on the behalf of the person standing in grace.

Forde's emphasis on the radical nature of sin and grace, therefore, are unable to theorize the account Luther develops here.

Beyond the exegetical problems, however, Forde's inability to discuss partial moral change is pastorally troubling. To employ categories that Heiko Oberman uses in regards to late medieval religious life, Forde's thought operates in the confessional sphere, that is, in a system of praise for the great work that God has done. This confessional aspect is central to the life of faith in confessing God's love and grace from the perspective of faith. Confessional theology, however, is different from pastoral theology, in which people ask questions of daily moral life and leaders are asked to provide instruction.⁹⁸ Because of the distinction between God's favor and the gift, Luther's theology is able to do both: it primarily calls people to rejoice in God's love and forgiveness, but it also offers moral exhortation and ethical instruction on daily issues as part of the gift. This distinction is important because in daily life, one must practice self-discipline and make moral improvements in order to overcome the abiding presence of sin. Even as a confessional perspective realizes that this work is ultimately grounded in God's grace and God's gift to the believer, from a pastoral perspective, it still requires effort and work.

Forde's theology, however, is unable to maintain this distinction. While a confessional theology that proclaims justification must be a central task of the church, if this proclamation precludes a partial account of moral experience, it misses many of the pastoral and exhortational aspects of Luther's own thought and, more worrying, to be unable to speak to people in the midst of life. While these metaphor of death and new life are rich and powerful, if they are unable to be translated into partial accounts of moral experience, they have limited usefulness for sinners in the midst of life. Justification should never be minimized, but justification, according to Luther, always

⁹⁸ Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 123-141.

also has partial aspects that help purify the sinner of his or her sin. Luther's accomplishment in *Against Latomus*, then, is to maintain the radical nature of sin and forgiveness, while also maintaining the partial aspects of the moral life.

In *Against Latomus*, Luther retains his account of the totality of sin that he developed against the scholastics, yet, due to the totality of the promise, he now thinks in terms of the total states of being a saint and a sinner. This account allows him to avoid charges of ethical quietism, while also not undermining the uniqueness of God's role in salvation. The sinner is both wholly justified and also always working to overcome sin in this life through Christ's gift. The next chapter will further explore Luther's ethical vision. I will argue that the distinctions drawn in *Against Latomus*, particularly between the twofold evaluation of the person, provide the conceptual tools for Luther to think in terms of two kingdoms and, thereby, to affirm a robust creational vision grounded in God's activity as creator.

Chapter 5/ Luther on the Goodness of Creation

Luther's intense focus on sin, the word of God, and the event of justification has led interpreters to see Luther's theology as focused solely on the ego to the expense of creation.¹ Emanuel Swedenborg's sarcastic depiction of the paradigmatic Lutheran as one who is "locked up in a darkened room his entire life. Pacing back and forth in the room, unable to see anything, he searches for light by repeating only one sentence to himself, 'I am justified by faith alone; I am justified by faith alone; I am justified by faith alone,'" portrays the nature of religious life often associated with Luther.² In scholarly appropriations of Luther, this assessment of Luther as a subjectivist also has had strong influence. In his important *The Reformation in Germany*, Joseph Lortz argues Luther was never able to leave his own religious experience. He writes, "Down to his roots, Luther was cast in a subjectivists mold."³ As we have seen, Luther does in fact place strong emphasis on the subjective aspects of faith: in hearing the good news of the Gospel, one cannot simply recognize that Christ has saved in general, one must also apply this to oneself.⁴ Yet, these readings are one-sided and miss the importance of creation for Luther's thought.

In this chapter, I argue that far from being a subjectivist who is only concerned about the ego, Luther operates with a robust creational vision. For Luther, God is active in and throughout creation. Because creation is God's, all of the world is a gift of God. Nature and institution, reason

¹ Paul Hacker, *The Ego in Faith: Martin Luther and the Origin of Anthropocentric Religion* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1970). Oswald Bayer offers strong critiques of Hacker in *Martin Luther's Theology*, 166-173.

² Quoted in Bayer, "Justification as the Basis and Boundary of Theology," 273.

³ Joseph Lortz, *The Reformation in Germany*, trans. Ronald Walls (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1968), I:185. Quoted in Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 210. Schreiner provides a nice history of the scholarly debate on Luther's subjectivism in relation to Biblical authority here.

⁴ B.A. Gerrish, "Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in the Lutheran Reformation," in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

and law, vocation and church are good gifts created by God for the love of neighbor. Because God orders the world, God is present in and throughout creation.

While Luther affirms creation throughout his writings, his mature thought displays a particular vision of creation as gift. In this chapter I argue that this particular vision develops out of the concepts we traced in the last two chapters: the promise and the distinction between the total and partial aspects of grace. From his account of promise, Luther argues that if God's promises are to be believed as trustworthy, God must work all in all. To account for God's work in creation, Luther draws on his account of the total and partial aspect of grace: from the total aspect, Luther argues that God is the savior and source of salvation; from the partial, Luther argues that God's operation is not limited to salvation, but God is creator, active in and throughout creation. This distinction between creation and salvation allows Luther to affirm creation and human experience as a source of good, while also retaining the salvific Word as the central dynamic of human life. In Luther, this twofold account allows Luther to see God's presence and gifts in all aspects of life.

The chapter will proceed in three steps. First, drawing primarily from Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, I will trace the development of Luther's affirmation of God's activity and presence in creation and the associated distinction of God's twofold reign. Second, I will examine two prominent interpretations of Luther's understanding of creation and show how they importantly misrepresent the relationship between creation and justification by focusing too heavily on justification and not heeding the distinction between the two realms. Third, I will offer the category of gift, and not justification, as the central category at play in God's relationship to creation. Here, I will briefly examine Luther's understanding of the multitude of gifts of creation in reason, law, and vocation. Against claims of a narrow focus on justification, this argument will thus show the basis, distinction, and implications of Luther's creational affirmation.

I. Two Realms and God's Activity in Creation

Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* is a major text in the history of the Reformation. In *The Age of Reform*, Steven Ozment argues that the debate between Luther and Erasmus is a pivotal moment in the development and division of Western religious thought. He writes that the debate is "prophetic of subsequent developments in Western intellectual and religious history" and "may have been portentous as each believed, dividing the world between atheism and fundamentalism."⁵ At issue in this debate are questions about the freedom of the will, the nature of bondage to sin, and ultimately, the nature of salvation. While many scholars focus on Luther's account of sin and salvation, Susan Schreiner has argued that Luther's understanding of sin in *The Bondage of the Will* is a traditional Augustinian argument about the extent and nature of sin and does not reflect an innovative position.⁶ Even as this is true, I will argue the text is important for it represents a central moment in the development of Luther's understanding of providence and God's activity in creation. In arguing about the nature of salvation and freedom, Luther develops a robust account of God's active presence in and through all. The vision of God's activity he develops in this polemical context, I argue, funds his future reflections on the goodness of creation and God's twofold rule.

The central picture of God's activity in *The Bondage of the Will*, is grounded in the concept of the promise we saw develop in relation to controversies concerning the Lord's Supper.⁷ In stating the nature of his response to Erasmus, Luther claims that the central question he will address concerns the limits and the powers of human ability in relation to grace. Unless we know the limits of human ability, he claims, we cannot be certain of what is required of us in regards to faith and

⁵ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 301-302.

⁶ "Luther's understanding of human sin was least innovative in his doctrine of the bondage of the will. On this subject, Luther stood in the Augustinian tradition." Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 58.

⁷ Hans Bornkamm notes that one of the major causes of delay in responding to Erasmus arose from the writing of *Against the Heavenly Prophets*. Hans Bornkamm, *Luther in Mid-Career 1521-1530*, 417-418.

human action.⁸ In order to do this, Luther examines the concept of the promise. This point is important in grasping the argument of the text: Luther is not primarily interested in providing a philosophical account of human freedom in relation to a form of determinism; rather, because the argument is grounded in the promise, the central question of the text concerns how human beings ultimately relate to God: on what grounds are we justified before God?⁹ In particular, Luther asks a transcendental question—what must be true about God if God’s promises are to be taken as truthful?

Luther’s central contention in *The Bondage of the Will* is that the God who promises must be fundamentally active and omnipotent. Luther develops this activity in two ways: first and primarily, if God promises to save is true, then God must be fully active in our salvation. If God’s promise declares that God will save us through no merit of our own, then God must be responsible for every aspect of our salvation. Luther develops this claim throughout this text: based on no merit of our own, God saves us; in Christ, God clothes himself to proclaim his Fatherly and loving will towards us;¹⁰ instead of holding us accountable for our sin, God imputes our sin to Christ and imputes Christ’s righteousness to us;¹¹ on the cross, Christ destroys sin, death, and the devil, liberating us

⁸ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming Revell, 2003), 78.

⁹ There is thus a real question if Erasmus and Luther are talking past each other. Erasmus was concerned in the first place with piety, understood as a matter of good conduct and of proper attitude toward the deity. To maintain the importance of good work, Erasmus thinks it is necessary to affirm free will in order to encourage the viator to strive for holiness. Luther, on the other hand, is concerned with God’s complete action in salvation and the human inability to contribute anything to this relationship. Some scholars, like Harry McSorley, argue that Erasmus failed to understand Luther’s concerns. See Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther’s Major Work, “The Bondage of the Will”* (New York: Newman Press, and Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 284. For the opposite opinion, that is, that Erasmus did in fact understand Luther, see B.A. Gerrish, “Piety, Theology, and the Lutheran Dogma: Erasmus’s Book on Free Will,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 25.

¹⁰ LW 24:64-66; WA 45:519-521.

¹¹ LW 31:351-352; WA 7:55.

from our bondage;¹² through the Holy Spirit, God gives us faith to believe in the merciful promise.¹³ Throughout the entire work of salvation, God neither acts in response to us nor depends on our merits: God gives grace freely, lovingly, and lavishly. Salvation does not depend upon us in any way, but God creates and saves out of sheer grace. Just as God creates the world *ex nihilo* and sustains it by no creaturely choice or merit, so too in salvation God creates and sustains what is pleasing to God through no preparation or merit of the saved individual.¹⁴

Second, Luther argues that if God makes promises, then God must be incessantly active in the providential governance of creation. For Luther, a necessary condition for trust in God's promises is knowledge of God's providential and immutable rule. He writes, "If, then, we are taught and believe that we ought to be ignorant of the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events, Christian faith is utterly destroyed, and the promises of God and the whole gospel fall to the ground completely; for the Christian's chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered or impeded."¹⁵ The fact that God makes a promise means that God effects everything in creation through an immutable and infallible will. God is not a passive observer of what happens, but foreknows and chooses all with divine necessity. Though events may appear contingent to us, there is no contingency in God, for God knows and effects all necessarily through God's will. Because God does all, we can trust God's promise to be true.

Luther provides three arguments for why the full providence of God is necessary for the promise. First, if God promises anything, we must be certain that God is able to perform what is promised, otherwise, we will regard God as untruthful. If God does not know and choose the

¹² LW 31:352; WA 7:55.

¹³ LW 26:374-389; WA 26:572-593.

¹⁴ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 268; WA 18:734.61.

¹⁵ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 84; WA 18:619.16-21.

future, we may regard God as well-intentioned and encouraging, but we cannot trust God to be the infallible creator of our salvation. That is, we will lack certainty that God's will is supremely and immutably effective and therefore we will not trust the promise. Thus, in order for us to have full confidence in God's promise, God must be incessantly active in creation.

Second, the promise always comes to us under contingent historical circumstances. The proclamation of the forgiveness of sins that we hear in the Word and Sacrament from our perspective may appear entirely contingent: had I been born into a different family, a different location, or gone to a different church, perhaps I would not have received the promise in baptism or the Eucharist. If I believe the promise is a historical contingency, dictated by random fate instead of a providential God, however, I will not trust the promise as being God's Word for me. In order to trust that the promise is actually *God's* promise, we must believe that God rules all of history necessarily and immutably.¹⁶ If God promises, and this promise is trustworthy, then God must be in charge of history and salvation.

Third, Luther argues for God's providence based upon the nature of the divine attributes. For Luther, because God is not a transient creature, God's nature remains unchanged from all eternity. As such, all of God's attributes are eternally unchanging—when any term such as “goodness” or “kindness” is predicated of God, it is ascribed immutably: God is immutably kind, just, and good. Because all of God's attributes are unchanging, Luther argues that this must also apply to God's will and knowledge. Whatever God foreknows, God wills. Luther writes, “If he wills what He foreknows, His will is eternal and changeless, because His nature is so. From which it follows, by resistless logic, that all we do, however it may appear to be done mutably and

¹⁶ Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 39. While historical contingency is not at the forefront of Luther's concern, he is concerned with the veracity of the promise in light of the terror of God's hiddenness.

contingently, is in reality done necessarily and immutably in respect of God's will."¹⁷ While history may appear contingent to us, Luther argues everything actually occurs by the divine will. Luther makes a strong claim for divine providence: "God's mercy alone works everything, and our will works nothing, but is rather the object of Divine working, else all will not be ascribed to God."¹⁸ Because God foreknows all, and because God wills all that God foreknows, everything that occurs takes place by God's will. When God promises, therefore, the same immutability that applies to God's mercy and justice applies to the promise.

For Luther, if God promises, and we are to trust these promises, then God must work everything in creation. While the claim that all occurs by the necessitating will of God appears to lead to a deterministic picture in which God controls human action or in which we are externally compelled to sin, Luther denies this consequence. Instead, Luther provides a complex picture about the nature of necessity and God's providential rule of creation. By tracing this argument, we will see what Luther means by claiming that God works all in all and thus arrive at his understanding of God's presence in creation.

In order to understand the implications of the necessitating foreknowledge of God, Luther argues we must first define precisely the term 'necessity.' The term itself is misleading and Luther laments having to use it, for it easily leads to the wrong impression about the debate over free will. When people hear the term necessity, Luther argues, they assume that human beings are under some external form of compulsion to sin or that God is required to act in a certain way. Yet, this form of necessity applies neither to human will nor to God's: humans are not externally forced to sin, but they happily and willingly chose sin; likewise God is under no external necessity in any action.¹⁹

¹⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 80; WA 18:615.29-33.

¹⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 79; WA 18:614.22-24.

¹⁹ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 81; WA 18:616 n1. This paragraph only appears in the 1567 Jena edition of Luther's works. "I could wish, indeed, that a better term was available for our discussion than the accepted one, *necessity*, which cannot accurately be used of either man's will or God's. Its meaning is

Necessity does not mean that the will is forced to sin under some external compulsion or against its own desires. Rather, by ‘necessity’ Luther intends to show that the fundamental principle of the will suffers from an incurvature that loves the self more than it loves God. When allowed to make a choice, the will always chooses sin. God does not force the will to sin; rather, the will always chooses sin on its own accord.

To describe this state of the will, Luther draws a distinction between necessity and compulsion. By necessity, Luther means that the will is in bondage to sin—while it can choose this or that action, it is always in bondage to sin and so it can only choose from sin. Its fundamental orientation is sin and thus all its actions are sinful. While we sin necessarily due to the will’s fundamental bondage to sin, a bondage from which we cannot willfully remove ourselves, we are under no *external* compulsion to sin. While the will cannot change its orientation towards God, it always happily and voluntarily sins on its own accord. Luther writes,

A man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it, like a thief or footpad being dragged off against his will to punishment; but he does it spontaneously and voluntarily. And this willingness or volition is something which he cannot in his own strength eliminate, restrain or alter. He goes on willing and desiring to do evil.²⁰

Luther refers to this form of necessity as the necessity of immutability. By this, he means that the will cannot change itself or give itself a different direction; rather, it is immutably geared toward sin. Thus, for Luther, there is no neutral will: the will is always either geared towards sin or toward grace. It is for this reason that he so strenuously objects to the language of ‘free will.’ For Luther, this term

too harsh, and foreign to the subject; for it suggests some sort of compulsion, and something that is against one’s will, which is no part of the view under debate. ‘The will, whether it be God’s or man’s, does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free.’”

²⁰ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 102; WA 18:634.21-25.

makes it appear as if there is a willing in the abstract (*absolutm velle*) that can choose good or evil from a neutral space; but this is exactly what the claim of bondage of will denies—our wills are always already geared towards evil.

While we have no ultimate freedom to determine the orientation of our will, Luther argues that we do have freedom over worldly concerns. While the will is in bondage to sin, the will is still a will—the human is not made into a beast through sin:

We may still in good faith teach people to use it to credit man with ‘free-will’ in respect, not of what is above him, but of what is below him. That is to say, man should realize that in regard to money and possession he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own ‘free-will’—though that very ‘free-will’ is overruled by the free-will of God alone, according to His own pleasure. However, with regard to God, and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he has no ‘free-will’ but is a captive, prisoner and bonds slave, either to the will or God or to the will of Satan.²¹

While Luther affirms that humans have a will, he denies that it is free to choose its fundamental orientation. For Luther, because we are born into sin, the will can always only reproduce its natural self-love and cannot choose to love God.

This argument frees Luther from a certain objection about God forcing the will to choose evil against the will’s own desire. The will chooses evil on its own and it is not compelled. This does not say, however, how God relates to the sinful will. In order to maintain consistency with relation to the promise, Luther committed himself to saying that God works all in all. Yet, if God works all in all, and the will chooses to sin, then it appears Luther must argue that God also works evil. That is, even if the will chooses evil on its own, is not God ultimately responsible if God works all in all? To respond to this argument, Luther delves into a description of God’s activity in creation,

²¹ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 107; WA 18:638.4-11.

particularly in relation to evil. Luther recognizes that this argument strays from the explicit word of God and depends heavily on reason. While this argument is highly speculative, Luther thinks this argument can alleviate these concerns. Luther's solution maintains that God works all in all, and that can be said to work evil in us, and yet denies that God creates or is responsible for evil.²²

According to Luther, in order to understand God's activity in creation in relation to evil, it is first necessary to understand the nature of God's omnipotence. God's omnipotence entails that God is all powerful, not only potentially, but more importantly, in all of creation. Luther describes God's omnipotence as an effective force that provides the impetus for all earthly action—without God, no creature can move or act.²³ When Luther claims that God works all in all, he means that God provides the life and movement of every living creature. God is that power which allows all other things to live, move, and have their being. God's effective power in creation is essential to who God is: God cannot suspend this action without ceasing to be God.²⁴

Every living creature is subject to God's effective power—there is no power outside of God by which creatures live and move. Since God moves all and works in all, God also moves and works in Satan and in the ungodly. Yet, while God's effective power enables Satan and the ungodly to act, they retain control over their respective wills. That is, the will is not completely overruled by God as if God were a puppeteer; rather, they retain their own desires and wants. Luther argues: “This will and nature of theirs, thus turned from God, cannot be *nothing*, nor are Satan and ungodly man *nothing*; nor have they a nature and will that is *nothing*, though they certainly have a nature that is

²² “We should in any case be content with the words of God, and simply believe what they say; for the works of God are wholly indescribable. However, to humor reason (that is, human folly), I do not mind aping its stupidity and foolishness and seeing if I can make any impression on it by my own broken words on the subject.” Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 203; WA 18:709.5-9.

²³ “Even reason and the Diatribe allow that God works all in all, and that without Him nothing is effected nor effective; for He is omnipotent, and effective action belongs to His omnipotence.” Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 203; WA 18:709.10-11.

²⁴ “God cannot suspend His omnipotence on account of man's perversion, and the ungodly man cannot alter his perversion.” Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 205; WA 18:710.6-7.

corrupt and turned from God.”²⁵ Because their respective wills are always turned away from God’s will and towards their own desires, when they are moved by God’s effective power, they act in accord with their nature, and thus produce evil. Luther writes,

Since God moves and works all in all, He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly. But He works according to what they are and what He finds them to be: which means, since they are evil and perverted themselves, that when they are impelled to action by this movement of Divine omnipotence they do only that which is perverted and evil.²⁶

Luther compares this situation to a horseman riding a horse which only has three good feet—no matter how skilled a rider, the impetus to act will cause the horse to go in circles. While God is good, and the power to move is good, when God’s effective power works in evil men, evil deeds result. It is important that God does not do evil or choose for evil to occur, for God is good and cannot do evil. Yet, through God’s effective power, God does not let evil actors rest. As a result of God’s empowering sinful creatures, evil occurs. “Hence it is that the ungodly man cannot but err and sin always, because under the impulse of Divine power he is not allowed to be idle, but wills, desires and acts according to his nature.”²⁷ In short, God’s omnipotence entails that God works all in all; the ungodly person is caught up in the movement of God; yet, because of his corruption, he cannot do anything but sin.

For Luther, God thus works evil, not by doing evil or causing evil; rather, God does so through the force of God’s omnipotence making evil wills active. Because the will is in bondage to its own self-love, when God empowers the will, it always only seeks its own good and glory. Luther stresses that God does not create evil in us, as if we were good or neutral wills and then God corrupts us; rather, because we are corrupt and opposed to God, our will chooses evil. Luther writes:

²⁵ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 204; WA 18:709.15-18.

²⁶ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 204; WA 18:709.21-26.

²⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 204; WA 18:709.34-36.

Let none think when God is said to harden or work evil in us (for hardening is working evil) that he does it by, as it were, creating fresh evil in us, as you might imagine an ill-disposed innkeeper, a bad man himself, pouring and mixing poison into a vessel that was not bad, while the vessel itself does nothing, but is merely the recipient, or passive vehicle, of the mixer's own ill-will. When men hear us say that God works both good and evil in us, and that we are subject to God's working by mere passive necessity, they seem to imagine a man who is in himself good, and not evil, having an evil work wrought in him by God; for they do not sufficiently bear in mind how incessantly active God is in all his creatures, allowing none of them to keep holiday. He who would understand these matters, however, should think thus: God works evil in us (that is, by means of us) not through God's own fault, but by reason of our own defect. We being evil by nature, and God being good, when He impels us to act by His own acting upon us according to the nature of His omnipotence, good though He is in Himself, He cannot but do evil by our evil instrumentality; although, according to His wisdom, He makes good use of this evil for His own glory and for our salvation.²⁸

For Luther, this account of God's activity in creation helps explain difficult Scriptural passages that claim God hardens the wicked. This question comes up in *The Bondage of the Will* in relation to the passages in Exodus where God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart. Erasmus attempted to explain these passages in terms of God's foreknowledge: God does not choose to harden Pharaoh's heart; rather, God foreknows that Pharaoh's heart will be hardened and thus can be said to harden Pharaoh's heart. For Luther, this interpretation is not warranted by the text. Instead, Luther draws a distinction between God's powers: God's effective action which is active throughout creation moves creatures, but it does not change their hearts to conform to God's will. This inner

²⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 206; WA 18:710.31-711.7.

transformation only occurs through the Holy Spirit, who presents an external Word to Christians and then effects an internal change. Because the Holy Spirit is necessary for an inner transformation, Luther argues that when God presents God's Word to a will that naturally is disposed towards evil, the will, by its own inborn corruption, naturally hates that Word. Unless the will is changed by the Holy Spirit, the sinful will will naturally continue to rely upon its own power and oppose the Word. Instead of finding the Word agreeable, the natural sinfulness will oppose the Word of God. The more the goodness of the Word is presented to the evil will, the more the will is hardened. Luther writes:

Thus God hardens Pharaoh: He presents to the ungodly, evil will of Pharaoh His own word and work, which Pharaoh's will hates, by reason of its own inbred fault and natural corruption. God does not alter that will within by His Spirit, but goes on presenting and bringing pressure bear; and Pharaoh, having in mind his own strength, wealth, and power, trusts to them by this same fault of his nature. So it comes to pass that, being inflated and uplifted by the idea of his own greatness, and growing vaingloriously scornful of lowly Moses and of the unostentatious word of God, he becomes hardened.²⁹

Thus God is active in all and all, in that God provides the life and energy by which Pharaoh lives and moves, yet God is not unrighteousness, in that Pharaoh chooses to oppose the word.

This account of God's activity, while showing how God can work all in all without God working evil, however, poses two central problems for faith. First, if God works all in all, and moves the ungodly and the ungodly thereby perform evil deeds, why does God not simply cease the movement of omnipotence? For Luther, the problem with this objection is that it wishes to strip God of God's power for the sake of the ungodly: "This is to desire that for the sake of the ungodly God should cease to be God; for you are desiring that His power and activity should cease—that is,

²⁹ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 207; WA 18:711.20-27.

that He should cease to be good, lest the ungodly should grow worse!”³⁰ Embedded in this claim is the fundamental affirmation of creation—even with the world evil as it is, God still affirms creation by keeping it in existence. While all flesh is fallen away from God, God continues to act in creation; to wish this to stop is to wish the non-existence of life, a claim fundamentally at odds with God as creator.

A second question then arises as to why does God not change all human hearts, or grant the Holy Spirit to all to change their will. To answer this objection, Luther draws a distinction between the revealed God and the hidden God.³¹ The revealed God is the God clothed in Christ who comes to us in Word and Sacrament and promises us salvation. In this Word, God has shown us all God wants us to know about Godself, namely that God is merciful and provides us with salvation through faith alone. Yet, on the basis of the aforementioned passages concerning God’s hardening, Luther argues that there is a hidden will in God. This will ordains who will and will not be recipients of mercy, it works death and sin, and wills many things not disclosed in Christ. Precisely because God has not revealed this will to us, but reserved it for God alone as the secret of God’s Divine Majesty, Luther argues that we should not inquire into it.³² Though we recognize that God has a hidden will through which God works all in all, God does not wish to be known on this basis. In faith, we must cling to the Word God clothes Godself in and leave the inscrutable will to God alone.

³⁰ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 208; WA 18:712.19-22.

³¹ There is a now extensive literature on the *deus absconditus* in Luther’s thought. See, for example, David Steinmetz, “Luther and the Hidden God,” in *Luther in Context*, 23-31; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, 207-218; B.A. Gerrish, “To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 51-68; Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 101-130; Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), 27-49; Walther Köhler, *Der verborgene Gott* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1946).

³² Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 170; WA 18:685.14-18. “Now God in His own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with Him, nor does He wish us to deal with Him. We have to do with Him as clothed and displayed in His Word, by which he presents Himself to us.”

For Luther, this question of the changing of hearts violates this distinction. Instead of clinging to the revealed God in Christ and ignoring the hidden God, the question of conversion deals with the inscrutable will and, on this basis, rejects the revealed will. The question of conversion ultimately centers on the divine hardening and condemnation, which are the very secrets of the divine Majesty. From that which should remain hidden, we should not object to the clothed God who reveals Godself as Savior and merciful. Instead of encountering God where God shows Godself to be loving, kind, and the savior, this objection looks past God's revelation and looks for God where God does not want to be known.³³

Finally, as mentioned before, Luther's arguments into God's effective action are highly speculative. While Luther thinks his arguments help clarify difficult Scriptural passages and explain God's involvement with evil, Luther also argues that the excessive focus on these passages misconstrues the aim and purpose of the Scriptural text. For Luther, Erasmus and all who argue against Scripture, "concern themselves with picking out a word, torturing it with their figures, and nailing it to the cross of their own chosen meaning, in utter disregard of the surrounding context, of what comes before and after, and of the author's aim and intention."³⁴ In this passage in particular, Luther argues that Erasmus worries too much about the hardening of Pharaoh and misses the thrust of the whole passage. For Luther, the Exodus text that describes the hardening of Pharaoh occurs in a passage spoken to the Israelites in a time of distress. The claim that God hardens Pharaoh is not first and foremost a claim about omnipotence as a speculative doctrine, but, like all theology, it is intended to be a source of comfort for the godly. It is intended as a way to comfort the Israelite slaves who were oppressed. Luther writes:

³³ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 201; WA 18:707.

³⁴ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 209; WA 18:713.3-7.

Moses' concern is to proclaim, not so much the villainy of Pharaoh as the veracity and mercy of God, lest the children of Israel should distrust the promises of God whereby He undertook to set them free. Since this was a tremendous task, He forewarns them of its difficulty, so that, knowing that it was all foretold and would be duly carried out by the executive action of Him Who had promised, they might not be shaken in their faith. It is as if He had said: "I will certainly deliver you, but you will find it hard to believe, because Pharaoh will so resist and delay the deliverance. But trust nevertheless; for by My operation all his delaying shall only result in My performing more and greater miracles to confirm you in your faith and to display My powers, so that henceforth you may have more faith in Me in all other matters."³⁵

For Luther, in other words, while it does say that God hardens Pharaoh and thus works evil, the point of this passage is to strengthen faith and give comfort to those who are oppressed.

What does this mean, but that all these things were said and done to strengthen faith and to comfort the weak, that henceforth they might without hesitation believe in God as true, faithful, mighty and merciful? It is as if He were speaking in the most soothing strains to little children, saying: "Do not be terrified at Pharaoh's stubbornness, for I work that very stubbornness Myself, and I Who deliver you have it under My control."³⁶

For Luther, then, the omnipresence of God in creation, properly understood, is a source of comfort to those who are distressed. Even in the face of grave and horrendous evil, the Christian can have comfort that evil is not the ultimate power in the universe. The claim that God works all in all ought not to function as an accusation against God; rather, Luther thinks that the passage is intended to be a comfort in times of distress.

³⁵ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 210; WA 18:713.25-34.

³⁶ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 211; WA 18:714.6-9.

The importance of this argument for our purposes is that Luther here presents a twofold account of God's activity. On the one hand, Luther argues, God is the creator who works in all in all through God's omnipotence. God here foreknows all and wills all, such that human will is always subject to God's effective action. This action in creation is all encompassing and not reducible to God's act in revelation or salvation. While both creation and salvation are grounded in God's overflowing goodness, God's work in creation is distinct from God's work in justifying human beings. God is active and present throughout creation, even in those who are evil. Luther writes,

What I assert and maintain is this: that where God works apart from the grace of His Spirit, he works all things in all men, even in the ungodly; for He alone moves, makes to act, and impels by the motion of His omnipotence, all those things which He alone created; they can neither avoid nor alter this movement, but necessarily follow and obey it, each thing according to the measure of its God-given power. Thus all things, even the ungodly, cooperate with God.³⁷

On the other hand, God is the Savior, who saves freely through Jesus Christ. God freely forgives and grants the Holy Spirit. These two actions are both fully God's and share a parallelism: just as God works all-in-all in creation, God works all in all in salvation. The chief distinction between the two realms is that in salvation, in God's proper kingdom, God grants Christ and gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this kingdom, Christians not only cooperate with God through God's effective action, but are made new creatures who do God's will.³⁸ God's activity, thus, is twofold: God is the Creator and God is the Savior, but the two positions are not simply reducible to each other.

Creation has its own integrity distinct from salvation.

³⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 267; WA 18:754.28-33.

³⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 267-268; WA 18:754.33-35. Luther writes, "When God acts by the Spirit of His grace in those whom He has justified, that is, in His own kingdom, He moves and carries them along in like manner; and they, being a new creation, follow and cooperate with Him, or rather, as Paul says, are made to act by Him."

The twofold account of God's activity entails that Christians lives in two realms, both ruled by God: the realm of creation and the realm of justification. These two realms have different ethical and theological dimensions. In the realm of creation, *corum mundo*, an individual has relative freedom to make choices, has reason to make decisions, and the ability to engage one's vocation. These activities, while relatively free, still depend upon the effective operation of God's omnipotence; yet God has created a good order and given these gifts to the person to live well in society, so the person has relative freedom. In the realm of salvation, *corum Deo*, the individual's will is completely bound by sin, reason is idolatrous and creates false gods, and one can do nothing towards grace.

Luther writes:

Man falls under two kingdoms. In the one, he is led by his own will and counsel, not by any precepts and commandments of God: that is, in the realm of things below him. Here he reigns and is lord, as being left in the hand of his own counsel. Not that God leaves him alone in the sense that He does not cooperate with him in all things; but in the sense that He has granted him a free use of things at his own will, and not hedged him in with any laws or commands. You could say by way of parallel that the gospel has left us in the hand of our own counsel, to use and have dominion over things as we will; whereas Moses and the Pope did not leave us to that counsel, but constrained us by laws and subjected rather to their will. In the other kingdom, however, man is not left in the hand of his own counsel, but is directed and led by the will and counsel of God. As in his own kingdom he is led by his own will, and not by the precepts of another, so in the kingdom of God he is led by the precepts of another, and not by his own will.³⁹

Thus, as a result of his reflection on the promise, Luther presents an account of God's relationship as twofold. In creation, God works all in all through God's omnipotence; in salvation,

³⁹ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 150-151; WA 18:672.7-13.

God rules through the Holy Spirit, and grants justification and forgiveness. The human being likewise lives in a twofold relation: before God, she or he is totally dependent upon grace and can make no action towards justification; before the neighbor, she or he has reason, will, and the capacity for moral action. This distinction between the two realms is a central feature of Luther's mature thought on creation. In and through it, Luther is able to affirm both the total corruption of sin and the affirmation of creation as a good gift of God.

II. Luther and Creation

This distinction, however, has been mischaracterized in contemporary theology and particularly in polemical engagements with Luther's thought. In this section, I will first examine two influential, though opposing, readings of Luther's understanding of the goods of creation: namely, those of Reinhold Niebuhr and Oswald Bayer. For Niebuhr, Luther's doctrine of sin so overwhelms the created order that Luther is left with a defeatist pessimism that fails to see the necessary moral distinctions in finite life. For Bayer, Luther's doctrine of justification leads to an affirmative ontology in which all of creation is swept up in God's redemptive activity. In both thinkers, Luther's understanding of sin and justification carry the weight for understanding Luther's views on creation. Based on the above distinction, however, I will argue that both are mistaken in grounding Luther's doctrine of creation in justification. The relative distinction of creation and justification is both exegetically correct and central to Luther's ability to affirm the goodness of created life without reducing everything to uniquely Christian claims concerning revelation.

(1) In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Reinhold Niebuhr provides a scathing critique of Luther's understanding of creation and the two realms. Drawing on Ernst Troeltsch's depiction of Luther, Niebuhr describes Luther's social ethics at best as quietistic, at worst, as utterly defeatist.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "It seems that Niebuhr's interpretation is still primarily determined by that of Ernst Troeltsch, who made the mistake of seeing the Reformation too much in the light of the spirit of modern (nineteenth-century) German Lutheranism. Thus it is understandable that he can attribute a 'cultural

Niebuhr's reading of Luther is deeply influential in the American reception of Luther's thought and contemporary ethicists often repeat Niebuhr's claims.⁴¹ Niebuhr, however, importantly ignores and misinterprets Luther's own doctrine.⁴² By engaging his criticisms here, and then by showing what he misses, the power and importance of the distinction between creation and justification will be made explicit. More specifically, by affirming creation as a separate sphere, Luther avoids charges that he reduces all human life to sin and moral action to a quietism. As we will see in the next section, Luther actually robustly affirms creation and the activity of humans in life.

While Niebuhr's analysis of Luther's theology and ethics is primarily critical,⁴³ he begins his reading by affirming aspects of Luther's thought that he finds appealing. On Niebuhr's reading, Luther's theology captures important aspects of the Biblical paradox regarding sin and grace. In particular, Niebuhr argues that Luther correctly structures his thought around the recognition that one cannot attain a final righteousness or peace through one's own moral effort and that the

defeatism' to Luther's Reformation as if it were true that Luther had hailed to articulate the ethical, and particularly the social-ethical, implications of his faith." Willhelm Pauck, *Heritage of the Reformation* (Boston: Beacon, 1950), 12.

⁴¹ For more on this point, see William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 25-30.

⁴² For more on this point, see Brent Sockness, "Luther's Two Kingdoms Revisited: A Response to Reinhold Niebuhr's Criticism of Luther," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 20: 1, 93-110. See also David Steinmetz, "Luther and the Two Kingdoms," in *Luther in Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Press, 2002) 112-125.

⁴³ Niebuhr's criticisms of Luther often take aim at the Lutheran tradition. Thus, when discussing problems in the Reformation train of thought, he will make a claim about Luther and then, as evidence, quote the constructive position of Emil Brunner or the Lutheran tradition. While he elides the distinctiveness of these positions, he warrants this move by claiming that these problems are grounded in Luther's own thought. For example, "The barren orthodoxy of seventeenth-century Lutheranism, in which the experience of 'justification by faith' denigrated into a 'righteousness of belief,' was not an inevitable, but nevertheless a natural, destruction of the moral content of the Christian life, for which there was a certain warrant in Luther's own thought." If one is aiming at historical accuracy, this seems like a dubious tactic. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation: II Human Destiny* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1943, 1949), 188.

pretention to finality and perfection in the church leads to pride and self-righteousness.⁴⁴ Niebuhr correctly notes that this account of grace does not neglect an account of ethics, as Luther's account of grace leads to a new life formed in 'love, joy, and peace.' In fact, Niebuhr argues that Luther displays a profound understanding of *agape*.⁴⁵

Despite these merits, Niebuhr finds much to fault in Luther's religious thought. Niebuhr charges that Luther displays "quietistic tendencies" in his religious ethics. More precisely, he claims that Luther's account of passivity before the divine leads to a social indifference. He writes, "Sometimes he lapses into mystic doctrines of passivity or combines quietism with a legalistic conception of the imputation of righteousness. "Without works" denigrates into "without action" in some of his strictures against the 'righteousness of works.'"⁴⁶ As evidence for this claim, Niebuhr quotes Luther's introduction to the 1535 Commentary on the Galatians:

He writes, "This most excellent righteousness of faith...which God through Christ imputeth to us without works, is neither political nor ceremonial, nor the righteousness of God's law, nor consisteth in works, but is clean contrary: that is to say, a *mere passive* righteousness...For in this we work nothing unto God, but only receive and suffer another to work in us, that is to say, God. Therefore it seemeth good to me to call this righteousness of faith, or Christian righteousness, the passive righteousness."

Niebuhr cites this passage as the full justification for his claim about Luther's quietism and then moves onto other arguments. Yet, this passage does not support Niebuhr's claims and it is almost wholly misplaced. In the passage, Luther describes God's free gift of justification. For Luther, *coram*

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 185.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 186-187. "Here Luther comprehends the whole beauty and power of Christian *agape*, particularly its transcendent freedom over all the prudential considerations of natural ethical attitudes." Again, "In picturing the possibilities of this love towards all Luther displays the most profound understanding of the meaning of Christian *agape*, particularly of its completely disinterested motive."

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 187-188.

deo, the human is justified solely by God's free mercy apart from human action; nevertheless, in the sentences preceding Niebuhr's citation, Luther explicitly declares the importance of political and ethical action for Christians. For Luther, there are many kinds of righteousness, all of which are God's gifts, yet he emphasizes that we must separate this action from that which determines our relationship to God.⁴⁷ Niebuhr however interprets the passivity or receptivity proper to the relationship *coram deo* and argues that Luther applies it to the relationship *coram hominibus*. This transference of the relationship before God to the human sphere completely misses Luther's understanding of the two realms of Christian existence.

Having claimed that Luther displays a fear of action and a propensity towards quietism due to his understanding of justification,⁴⁸ Niebuhr argues there is a greater weakness in Luther's understanding of the relationship of grace and law and particularly in his understanding of sanctification. Niebuhr argues that because Luther sees the conscience freed by grace, it no longer feels the impetus of moral obligation.⁴⁹ This critique is not simply a restatement of the fear of

⁴⁷ "Over and above all these there is the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, which is to be distinguished most carefully from all the others. For they are all contrary to this righteousness, both because they proceed from the laws of emperors, the traditions of the pope, and the commandments of God, and because they consist in our works and can be achieved by us with 'purely natural endowments' (*ex puris naturalibus*), as the scholastics teach, or from a gift from God. For these kinds of the righteousness of works, too, are gifts of God, as are all the things we have." LW 26:4; WA 40-I:40.28-41.10.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr includes another argument that deals primarily with Brunner. He argues that the Lutheran tradition displays a fear of action as action often tempts one to pride. His claim here is that because sin may taint human action, the Lutheran tradition may discourage moral action. He writes, "But if moral action is discouraged on that ground the Reformation theologian is in no better position than the monastic perfectionist who disavows particular moral and social responsibilities because of the taint of sin which attaches to them. Ideally the doctrine of justification by faith is a release of the soul into action; but it may be wrongly interpreted to encourage indolence." Since Niebuhr acknowledges that this is wrong interpretation of justification and as it doesn't deal with Luther *per se*, I need not comment here. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 188.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 188-189. He writes, "Luther's vision of the 'love, joy, and peace' which the redeemed soul has in Christ is of an ecstatic transcendence over all the contradictions of history, including the inner contradiction of the 'ought' the sense of moral obligation. Agape as the fulfillment of the law results in a complete disappearance of the sense of obligation to the law."

quietism, but he instead sees a new trouble, namely that the relationship of grace eliminates all the careful discriminations of justice which belong to the substance of historical life. Instead of seeing “that life represents an indeterminate series of possibilities, and therefore of obligation to fulfill them,”⁵⁰ Luther’s account of law and grace negates all sense of moral obligation.

Niebuhr locates the problem in Luther’s understanding of law. According to Niebuhr, Luther only sees the law negatively—the law is only used to show sin and create a sense of guilt. Once grace comes, Niebuhr argues that Luther claims the law is no longer in power. To justify this position, Niebuhr again quotes Luther’s Commentary on Galatians:

“For when Paul saith that we are delivered from the curse of the law by Christ, he speaketh of the whole law and principally of the moral law, which only accuseth, curseth, and condemneth the conscience, which the other two [judicial and ceremonial] do not.

Wherefore we say that the Moral Law or the Law of the Ten Commandments has no power to accuse or terrify the conscience in which Jesus Christ reigneth by his grace, for he hath abolished the power thereof.” Gal 2:21.⁵¹

Niebuhr buttresses this claim by footnoting a passage in which Luther describes the purpose of the law as revealing sin. For Niebuhr, the law normatively ought to encourage a sense of social obligation to wider circles of life and leave an uneasy conscience that continually strives for justice. On his read, however, Luther claims that the law has no more power to motivate the sinner in this way. He writes,

The conception of the relation of grace to law in Luther need not lead to antinomianism, as is sometimes charged; but it is indifferent to relative moral discriminations. It does not relax moral tension at the ultimate point of moral experience; for there it demands the love which

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 190.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 189 n.9.

is the fulfillment, and not the negation of law. But it relaxes the tension at all intermediate points and does not deal seriously with all the possible extensions of justice to which men ought to be driven by an uneasy conscience.⁵²

Without the power of the law and an uneasy conscience, the careful work of extending claims of justice disappears. By claiming the total aspect of grace, Niebuhr argues that the work of justice disappears.

Niebuhr, however, again confuses Luther's distinction between the realms of *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*. While Luther claims that the theological use of the law is to reveal sin, he also repeatedly stresses that it has a civil use, namely that the law is given to order society. In its civil use, the law is used to restrain transgression in order that the civil order may function. Luther does not deny that the law demands activity in the sphere of the world; rather, he denies that human action makes a claim upon God. Yet, Niebuhr here fails to recognize this distinction: he applies a category Luther's employs for theological ends to historical existence and levels a critique against it.

Niebuhr extends this critique concerning the relationship between law and grace from the complexities of moral motivation to the collective life of culture. For Niebuhr, if anything, the relation of grace and law become even more problematic here. Instead of merely the possibility of quietism, Niebuhr now describes the Reformation as defeatist, particularly because it is unable to understand the proximate problems of life.

Its understanding of the ultimate problem of historical existence seems to preclude any understanding of all the proximate problems. The Reformation understands that every possible extension of knowledge and wisdom falls short of the wisdom which knows God. It realizes that the 'world by its wisdom knew not God' and it rejoices in the grace, apprehended by faith, which overcomes the sinful ego-centricity of all human knowledge.

⁵² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 190.

But it has no interest in the infinite shades and varieties of the amalgam of truth and falsehood which constitutes the stuff of science and philosophy, and of all human striving after truth.⁵³

Niebuhr repeats this claim that Luther's thought leads to "cultural obscurantism by its indifference towards the relative distinctions of truth and falsehood which are so important in the history of culture."⁵⁴ Because society constantly organizes itself with a variety of structures and systems and because perfectly just social relations are never attained, one should never have an easy conscience concerning social life. The Kingdom of God's demand for perfect love impinges upon every social relationship as people live in society together. Yet, Niebuhr claims, this is precisely what Luther denies. To prove this point, Niebuhr quotes this passage from Galatians:

The way to discern the difference [between law and gospel] is to place the gospel in heaven and law on the earth; to call the righteousness of the gospel heavenly, and the righteousness of the law earthly and to put a great difference between [them] as God hath made between heaven and earth...Wherefore if the question be concerning the matter of faith and conscience let us utterly exclude the law and leave it on earth...Contrariwise in civil policy obedience to law must be severely required. There nothing *must be known* concerning the conscience, the Gospel, grace, remission of sins, heavenly righteousness or Christ himself; but Moses only with the law and works thereof.⁵⁵

Again, it is difficult to see how this passage supports Niebuhr's reading of Luther. Luther's point is that the law still dominates social relationships such that the freedom of the conscience granted in faith does not negate the need for moral demands in social relationships—that is, that one still must apply the law to social relationships in a similar fashion to the way Niebuhr advocates. Luther

⁵³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 191.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 191.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 192.

affirms the power of human reason for ordering social life and dealing with political affairs, which would allow for proximate distinctions; he just does not think that these orderings have soteriological effects. Yet, Niebuhr reads this passage differently.

Here we have the complete severance between the final experience of grace and all the proximate possibilities of liberty and justice, which must be achieved in history. The principle of separation leads to a denial that liberty can have any other meaning for the Christian than liberty from 'God's everlasting wrath. For Christ hath made us free not civilly nor carnally but divinely; that is to say our conscience is now made free and quiet, not fearing the wrath of God to come.'⁵⁶

Niebuhr's argument again requires overlooking the distinction that grounds Luther's division between the two realms. While Luther locates Christian freedom in the conscience before God, he does not deny the need for the Christian to constantly work for more just social relations. The freedom of the conscience does not entail an ethical quietism; rather, once freed from self-love, the conscience is free to love the neighbor for the neighbor's own good. Works of mercy flow from faith; faith does not lead to a passive indifference.

While Niebuhr recognizes that Luther has some sense of social obligation in terms of vocation and working to "the utmost of his power" to help his neighbor, he argues that Luther fails to seek to change social structures: "But evidently no obligation rests upon the Christian to change social structures so that they might conform more perfectly to the requirements of brotherhood."⁵⁷

As a purely historical claim, one may find this claim surprising—surely Luther has a hand in some of the largest changes in social structures in Western history. Yet, following Troeltsch, Niebuhr draws attention to Luther's involvement in the peasant's rebellion. He argues that the division between

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 193.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 193.

grace and law leads to a division between an inner, private morality and a public morality for social situations. This, Niebuhr argues, leads to a perverse social morality, that requires a perfectionist private ethic and a “realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic.”⁵⁸ Whereas the state is required to maintain order without “too scrupulous a regard for justice,”⁵⁹ the individual is called to suffer and not resist, such that the claims and counter-claims of justice are ignored. The consequence, Niebuhr argues, is that Luther endorses tyranny, as he refuses to acknowledge the propriety of resistance for the maintenance of political order. Niebuhr argues that the contemporary tyranny of Germany he experienced was due to Luther’s social pessimism and his insistence on Romans 13 as the basis for Christian political engagement.

Even without this, Niebuhr argues that the Lutheran political ethic is defeatist in social politics because of the distinction between the heavenly kingdom and the earthly one. This division, Niebuhr argues, destroys the tension of God’s demands upon the conscience and the possibility of justice in history. Because Luther sees all “historical achievements equally tainted with sin” he cannot see the distinction between different historical actions as having significance;⁶⁰ likewise, his insistence on Gospel perfectionism does not have room to make careful discernments of different historical actions. By overly emphasizing the tension in the religious sphere, Niebuhr argues that Luther erases the important moral tension which leads to better struggles for justice in the social sphere. The conviction that all actions are equally sinful and equally forgiven, leads to an indifference towards action and gives the conscience premature ease.

Finally, Niebuhr argues that Luther’s social ethics fails due to “its inability to define consistent criteria for the achievement of relative justice.”⁶¹ Niebuhr argues that despite the

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 194-195.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 195.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 195.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 197.

theological understanding of an ecstatic love that transcends the law, “it is forced, nevertheless, to find some standards of relative good and evil.”⁶² The problem with Luther, Niebuhr argues, is that his correct emphasis on sin and his rejection of the Catholic “confidence...in the untainted character of reason,” Luther relegates “natural law” and the “rational analysis of social obligations” to the background.⁶³ Instead, Luther has to fall back on the justice of a particular social community or the idea of orders of creation. For Niebuhr, neither of these establish a norm by which to judge that community. Again, however, Niebuhr fails to observe Luther’s distinction here. For Luther, as we have seen in earlier chapters, reason fails in all questions before the divine. Despite human pretension, reason could never have predicted that the almighty would come as a child. Yet, in his mature thought, Luther affirms the good of reason in the created order, describing it as “a kind of god appointed to administer those things in this life.”⁶⁴ While Luther does not think that human reason is untainted, he does believe that it is adequate for ordering social life. At the very least, Niebuhr here does not attend to the distinction that Luther himself draws.

Thus, Niebuhr argues that Luther’s understanding of sin ultimately leads to an inability to understand and see creation as a good. His thought is so overwhelmingly occupied by the question of justification, according to Niebuhr, that Luther negates the goods of the created order. Niebuhr’s argument, however, consistently overlooks and ignores the basic distinction between the two realms of Christian existence. Niebuhr assumes that the sharp dualisms between God and Satan or faith and sin that apply *coram Deo*, also apply to life *coram hominibus*, to the relationship between love and law or Christ and Caesar.⁶⁵ Yet Luther’s central point through the *Galatians Commentary* and his mature work is precisely to keep these realms distinct so as to not lead the problems Niebuhr raises.

⁶² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 197.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 197.

⁶⁴ LW 34:137; WA 39-I:175.

⁶⁵ Lazareth, *Christians in Society*, 26.

Niebuhr's criticisms, and the many criticisms that are aimed at Luther's social ethics, appear to be based on a misunderstanding of Luther's understanding of the relationship of creation and justification. The burden of the dissertation will be to show that if this distinction is properly understood, these criticism will not apply to Luther's thought.

(2) In response to these pervasive critiques of Luther, in the late 20th century, a number of scholars have emphasized a far more positive understanding of creation operative in Martin Luther's thought. Oswald Bayer is perhaps the most prominent in this line of scholarship. His own work emphasizes both historical and normative aspects of Luther's theology for contemporary questions, and particularly emphasizes the importance of Luther's theology of justification for creation. Yet, I will argue here, his presentation of Luther's understanding of the relationship between creation and justification is also misleading.

According to Bayer, Luther's understanding of creation arises from the heart and center of his theology, justification. Justification, Bayer argues, does not simply concern the forgiveness of sins, but it has importance for understanding all of theology, particularly creation. It not only concerns the existential depth of a person, but it also has cosmological and ontological breadth. Bayer argues:

Justification is not simply an isolated topic, next to which other topics can exist; it has essential importance and is connected with every topic. Justification does not just affect my individual life, not even just the history of the world, but impacts the history of nature as well; it affects all things. It is thus not sufficient to speak of the article of justification solely as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—as the article on which the *church* stands and falls.

Instead, the meaning of justification must be taken seriously in its breadth, with ramifications that have application for a theology of creation and for ontology.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 98.

As evidence for this claim, Bayer points to Luther's explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. While Bayer acknowledges that Luther does not explicitly use the term 'justification' until the second article, he notes that the central terms used to describe it already appear in the first article. In particular, in the final lines of the explanation of the article on creation, Luther proclaims that all the gifts of creation are given "purely because of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy without any of my merit and worthiness." As he includes both 'merit' and 'worthiness,' terms central to the dispute on justification, Bayer argues that justification is central to the doctrine of creation for Luther.⁶⁷

Since Luther applies the concept and specific terminology about justification to the article about creation, Bayer argues that the very nature of all creation is grounded in justification. Creation, like justification, is a categorical gift, given freely by God. For Bayer, justification is central for creation because justification shows that the nature of God for Luther is "categorically the one who gives. His giving nature defines the form that his actions take, as the one 'who justifies the ungodly' and who in the same way 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.' Creation and new creation are both categorical gift."⁶⁸ Just as God gives justification to the sinner freely, so too God creates freely, without any merit on the creature's part.

On Bayer's interpretation, the denial of merit in creation has ontological implications. At the most fundamental level, the ontological reality of all creatures is defined by justification. The basic nature of the creature is to be gifted. Bayer argues that, understood in its "full ontological breadth," being justified is

not something *in addition to* the human being, but in its own being, in the most fundamental sense of what faith is: to have it pointed out that life and what is necessary for life has been

⁶⁷ Ibid., 95-96.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 96.

given to me. Waiting for it, reaching out for it, that is faith; at the same time it describes my own existence, if it is true that this comes out of pure goodness and is guaranteed ever anew against any danger, purely because of mercy.⁶⁹

Everything in creation is born out of pure divine goodness, not due to any obligation. Drawing on the 1536 *Disputatio de homine*, Bayer argues that Luther offers a theological understanding of the human being: ‘*hominem iustificari fide. The human being is that being that is justified by faith alone, that is, by God alone.*’⁷⁰ Bayer insists that this definition does not simply apply to one who has fallen into sin, rather, “it is more accurate to observe that this thesis concurrently carries with it a meaning that goes to what is fundamental anthropologically and ontologically, since it states that the essence of a human, his actual *being*, is that he can be justified only by faith.”⁷¹

While locating justification at the center of ontology seems to imply that the human is saved by virtue of his or her nature, Bayer acknowledges that Luther does not have an automatic soteriology. While Bayer claims that it is appropriate to speak of the ontological *nature* of the human being as *justified*, he also argues that this creature is *unnaturally* affected by sin. Because we fall into sin, we cannot say that we are all saved.⁷² Yet, Bayer wavers on this point. While he acknowledges that Luther does not draw soteriological implications from an ontology of justification, Bayer himself appears to maintain it. To do so, he emphasizes justification by faith is in the first place a declaration about the faithfulness of God and not human faith.

But if every human being, and, at the same time, the entire world have been created by God’s Word and by faith, then “faith”—in the sense of the Hebrew word *emet* or *emunah*—can be understood only as the trustworthy nature of what is given and what reaches all

⁶⁹ Ibid., 100.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁷¹ Ibid., 100.

⁷² Ibid., 100.

creatures by God's Word of address and promise, and faith is thus the work of *God*...The Creator gives the creature who is addressed a trustworthy foundation through and with his Word, so that this person, out of God's faithfulness and faith, exists "in faithfulness and faith."⁷³

The creature, most fundamentally, is that being who exists by God's creative activity and is addressed by God's Word. As such, the ontology of justification entails that God lives in faithful relations with the creature, such that all creatures are saved.

The problem with Bayer's position is that in expanding the notion of justification, he also undermines its foundation. That is, Luther employs justification as a soteriological concept concerning the forgiveness of sins and God's free gift of salvation. If Bayer claims that justification is the ontological basis of all reality, and justification means salvation, then it does not appear that Bayer can escape the implications of an automatic soteriology. Yet, it is clear that Luther himself did not operate with such a notion: Luther's memorable lament in the *Bondage of the Will* concerning God's predestination provide ample evidence that he did not believe in universal salvation.⁷⁴ If so, it appears that Bayer's exegesis of Luther slips into eisegesis. On the other hand, if justification has ontological implications, but not everyone is saved, then it appears that the term justification is misapplied—in this case, there would be ontological justification, but it would not justify! If justification does not justify, it makes little sense to speak of justification as standing at the root of creation.

Nevertheless, Bayer's argument is rich in its implications, which he has masterfully explored in his own constructive ethical reflections. For Bayer, unlike for Niebuhr, because of the ontological affirmation at the basis of creation, Luther adopts a far more positive assessment of the goods of

⁷³ Ibid., 100-101.

⁷⁴ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 217; WA 18:719.4-15.

created life. Whereas Niebuhr sees Luther as offering a dark vision of human action (‘defeatist’; ‘quietist’) based on his pervasive doctrine of sin, Bayer offers a picture of Luther as one who rejoices in created goods and affirms the goodness of the created orders based on his doctrine of justification. Justification does not lead to quietism, but to a faith active in love that rejoices in the world God created and sustains, and always works for the neighbor’s good.⁷⁵

Interestingly, however, while they differ on the implications, both Niebuhr and Bayer locate Luther’s reflections on the importance of creation in the doctrine of justification. For Niebuhr, it is the negative implications of sin that determine Luther’s ethic; with Bayer, it arises from the ontology of justification. Yet, in making these claims, neither theologian gives proper weight to the distinction between the two realms. As we have seen, Niebuhr ignores this distinction almost entirely. Bayer’s position is more subtle: while he is right that Luther views creation in light of God’s good nature, he is wrong in locating the central category as justification. Rather, I will argue that the central category Luther employs is gift. In creation, God gives a multiplicity of gifts for the good of this world; in salvation, God gives the greatest gift of all, God’s favor and forgiveness. Both creation and justification are gifts freely given, but creation is decidedly not a matter of justification for Luther.⁷⁶

The distinction between the gifts of creation and justification can be seen in two places: first, in Luther’s discussion of God’s twofold rule; second, in Luther’s explicit discussion of God’s general gifts in creation. As we saw in the *Bondage of the Will*, Luther distinguishes God’s rule into two categories: God rules creation through God’s omnipotence and God rules the church through the

⁷⁵ See Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷⁶ Here I agree with Walther von Lowenich: “Das sola fide ist für Luther der articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae, das bedeutet aber für ihn nicht die Versklavung der Wirklichkeit des christlichen Lebens unter ein systematisches Prinzip.” (“That *sola fide* is the article by which the church stands or falls for Luther does not mean the enslavement of the reality of the Christian life under a systematic principle.”) *Duplex Iustitia: Luthers Stellung zu einer Unionsformel des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1972), 72.

Holy Spirit. It is important to see that this division is first and foremost a claim about God: Luther is not separating a secular sphere from a religious sphere; nor is Luther claiming that the world is ruled by Satan and totally evil and the Church is ruled by the Spirit and wholly good; rather, for Luther, God rules both creation and the church. Because God rules both, and here Bayer is correct, there is a basic similarity between creation and salvation: both our existence and our salvation are gifts freely given by God. Luther draws this parallel between salvation and creation:

Man, before he is created to be man, does and endeavors nothing toward his being made a creature, and when he is made and created he does and endeavors nothing towards his continuance as a creature; both his creation and his continuance come to pass by the sole will of the omnipotent power and goodness of God, Who creates and preserves us without ourselves...So, too, I say that man, before he is renewed into the new creation to the Spirit's kingdom, does and endeavors nothing to prepare himself for that new creation and kingdom, and when he is re-created he does and endeavors nothing towards his perseverance in that kingdom; but the Spirit alone works both blessings in us, regenerating us, and preserving us when regenerate, without ourselves.⁷⁷

This claim, and again Bayer is correct, is grounded in Luther's view that God is a categorical gift giver: in justification, God gives the free gift of salvation and overcomes sin, death, and the devil; in creation, God gives the joy of existence in many dimensions.

Against Bayer's reading however, Luther distinguishes creation and justification. In the above passage from the *Bondage of the Will*, for example, he argues that while everyone's life is ruled by God, not everyone is justified by the power of the Holy Spirit: "Yet God does not work in us without us; for He created and preserves us for this very purpose, that He might work in us and we might cooperate with Him, whether that occurs outside His kingdom, by His general omnipotence,

⁷⁷ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 268; WA 18:754.1-8.

or within His kingdom, by the special power of the Holy Spirit.”⁷⁸ In this passage, God’s general relationship to creation is separated from God’s special relationship to God’s kingdom. God rules both, but differently: in the one, God provides God’s effective power to allow them to live, move, and act; in the other, God rules through justification and the forgiveness of sins. Luther is careful to distinguish these two gifts: God gifts everyone existence, but only certain individuals receive the blessing of the Spirit. If Luther is careful to separate justification from creation, it is a mistake to attempt to make justification an ontological concept.

Nevertheless, while justification ought not to be understood ontologically, it does have important epistemological ramifications. The sheer graciousness of God in justification reveals the sheer graciousness of God in God’s creative acts towards us. God is the one who freely gives good gifts abundantly; the human being is the one who receives these gifts in creation and in salvation. While in the *Bondage of the Will*, Luther makes this separation between the two powers in order to interpret difficult Scriptural passages and to discuss God’s foreordaining will, in Luther’s mature thought, this doctrine of God’s omnipotence grounds a radical affirmation of created life. Because Christ reveals God to be the one who freely gives, and because God is seen to be active everywhere in the world, Luther describes all of creation under the category of the gift.⁷⁹

Luther most clearly develops this account of God and God’s gifts in his 1530 commentary on his most beloved Psalm, Psalm 118. Here, again, Luther separates creation from justification, and yet categorizes all creation under the category of gift. For Luther, the central theme of this Psalm is that God is the fount of all blessings, the one who always gives freely and abundantly. In explaining

⁷⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 268; WA 18:754.4-7.

⁷⁹ It is important to see that Luther’s category of gift has developed from earlier writings. Whereas in *Against Latomus*, Luther describes the gift in terms of sanctification as a partial gift that accompanies justification, in Luther’s mature thought all of creation as such is understood as a gift. The gift is not simply God’s action in sanctification, but it now instead covers all aspects of created life.

the first verse, “O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His steadfast love endures forever!” Luther argues that the Psalmist describes God as the one who gives good gifts to all people. God is the one who categorically gives and freely does good. Luther interprets the term ‘steadfast love’ to mean that God is nothing except “goodness in action.”⁸⁰ To understand God is to see that God gives good gifts continually and abundantly and is the one who always and everywhere does concrete acts of goodness. To describe the nature of God’s gift giving, Luther draws a distinction between the nature of God’s gift and human favor: whereas humans exist in relationships of reciprocity, in which one expects acknowledgment in return for good gifts, God gifts categorically, continually and abundantly: “God is good, but not a human being is good; from the very bottom of His heart He is inclined to help and do good continually...God abundantly and convincingly proves His friendly and gracious favor by His daily and everlasting goodness, as the psalmist writes: “His steadfast loves endures forever”; that is, He unceasingly showers the best upon us.”⁸¹ For Luther, therefore, creation is a gift grounded in the God who is the categorical gift giver

This emphasis on God as the gift-giver, however, is not, as in Bayer, an affirmation of justification as ontological reality. Luther argues that God gives gifts to the wicked and the good—to the unregenerate and the justified. God’s generosity is not influenced or stunted by human action: whereas human givers cease in the face of ingratitude, God continually gives gifts to the good and the evil. Luther writes,

God is such a gracious Lord, as this verse declares, that in spite of this ingratitude He does not cease doing good...His sun rises on both good and evil; His rain falls on the grateful and the ungrateful. He gives as much wealth, power, and as many children to scoundrels as He does to the saints, in fact, much more. He guards against war, pestilence, famine, and all the

⁸⁰ LW 14:50; WA 31-I:74:25-27.

⁸¹ LW 14:47; WA 31-I:69:24-30.

plagues of the devil. This is divine goodness, which never grows slack or weary in the face of wickedness.⁸²

While God gives gifts to both the wicked and the good, Luther does not attach soteriological implications to these gifts. The gifts are good because they are freely given by God for the integrity of life. Even though God gives these gifts freely, they do not transform the wicked or justify them.

For Luther, the category of gift is the central term in understanding God's relationship to creation. God gives a multiplicity of different gifts and these gifts are directly experienced in all facets of life. In all of these joys and structures of life, Luther detects the gifts of God. His understanding of God's gifts are comprehensive: our body, the cosmos, the forces that sustain life, our daily necessities, as well as the substance of human life (economy, home, marriage, land) are all gifts of God:

He is the Creator of our bodies and souls, our Protector by day and by night, and the Preserver of our lives. He causes the sun and the moon to shine on us, fire, air, water, and the heavens to serve us. He causes the earth to give food, fodder, wine, grain, clothes, wood, and all necessities. He provides us with gold and silver, house and home, wife and child, cattle, birds, and fish. In short, who can count it all? And all this is bountifully showered upon us every year, every day, every hour, and every minute. Who could measure even this one goodness of God, that He gives and preserves a healthy eye or hand?⁸³

For Luther, all of life is a gift freely given by God. Again, however, Luther does not associate these gifts with soteriology. The value and goodness of the gifts does not depend on their relation to Christ or to salvation—creation is a gift freely given, but it does not have soteriological implications.

⁸² LW 14:51; WA 31-I:76.36-77.7.

⁸³ LW 14:46-47; WA 31-I:69.31-70.5.

While Luther describes the general gifts of creation as good for everyone, he argues that the gifts of justification apply solely to the elect children of God. In his explication of Psalm 118:4 Luther clearly separates the two groups: “This fourth prayer of thanksgiving is for the true assembly, namely, for the elect children of God and all the saints on earth, the genuine Christians. For them this psalm was especially written, and of them it speaks to the very end. In the previous three groups...there are many who abuse it to satisfy avarice, pleasure, and honor.”⁸⁴ For Luther, the elect group of God receives a very different gift than those who simply receive the general gift of God: namely, the receive justification. “Now tell me, for what kind of gift may these people be expected to give thanks to God?...It must be something higher and nobler, far surpassing these gifts of our temporal and transient life...It is *comfort* and *help* in every kind of suffering, want, and trouble. This is nothing less than the beginning of everlasting life.”⁸⁵ This gift of eternal life and salvation, however, does not translate into worldly goods or the gifts of creation. While the world has the good general gifts of creation, they do not have the gift of justification. Luther writes, “In short, the blessing of the three groups is this temporal life and being; the blessing of the small group is everlasting life. Therein lies the real difference.”⁸⁶ Here we see Luther clearly separates justification from the gift of creation. Only the elect receive the good gift of justification, while the gifts of creation are for everyone. It is thus a mistake to locate justification at the root of creation, as this misrepresents Luther’s positions.

Thus, Luther’s account of creation is best understood with the category of gift. God is the good gift giver, creation and justification are both gifts from God, but there is a distinction between them. Creational gifts are good in and of themselves and are given to everyone, while justification is

⁸⁴ LW 14:56; WA 31-I:87.25-29.

⁸⁵ LW 14:57; WA 31-I:89.14-17; 90.1-5.

⁸⁶ LW 14:58; WA 31-I:91.17; 92:1-2.

given solely to the elect. While Bayer is correct in seeing God as the source of all good, he is mistaken in claiming an ontology of justification as a position Luther adopts.⁸⁷

III. Life as Gift: Two Realms of Existence

I have argued that due to the category of the promise, Luther draws a distinction between God's work in creation and in salvation. This division entails that while there is an epistemological priority to justification, justification does not have ontological breadth. Justification is a gift of salvation, while there are many gifts of creation available to all that do not depend upon justification. In this section, I will trace the implications of this distinction for understanding the nature of human life. Most basically, the distinction between two realms of God's reign entails that the central categories of human life must be evaluated in two ways: namely, as they stand before God (*coram Deo*) and as they stand before humanity (*coram hominibus*). These two relationships are not identical—what may be a great gift for things in creation also often fails when it is applied to the things of God. While we have examined these two categories before in relation to sin and grace, I will trace the implications for understanding the central categories of human life: reason, law, and vocation. While these will not provide a comprehensive picture of Luther's mature view of creation, they will serve two purposes: first, this section will show the radical creational affirmation present in Luther's thought. Against widespread misunderstandings of Luther's positions on these topics as exemplified by Reinhold Niebuhr, this section will show the way Luther both radically affirms the goodness of reason and the law, but also sees their goodness as limited to earthly affairs. Secondly, this section will develop the claim made in the last section in relation to Bayer that gift is the primary category for understanding creation. Life itself here is radically affirmed as gift—or, put otherwise, the

⁸⁷ Insofar as he is making a constructive argument, he may be right. All I am attempting to show here is that Luther separates justification from creation.

goodness of creation has its own integrity apart from soteriology and revelation. Luther's account here provides a vision of creation as good in its multiple dimensions.

(1) Reason⁸⁸

Luther's mature understanding of reason presupposes the distinction between the two realms. For Luther, reason is a great gift of God when it is used in the earthly sphere, but is "God's bitterest enemy"⁸⁹ when applied to questions of faith. In order to understand Luther's condemnation of reason *coram Deo* it is thus necessary to briefly return to Luther's mature view of idolatry. This will clarify precisely what Luther is condemning when he condemns reason. This denouncement of reason in theology, however, does not imperil the importance of employing reason for ordering life in line with the law of love or making rational decision *coram hominibus*. In light of the two realms of existence, therefore, Luther can both say that reason is the devil's whore and that it is a great gift of God for earthly life.⁹⁰

Luther's condemnation of reason is primarily aimed at the problem of idolatry. For Luther, before God, *coram Deo*, reason is idolatrous. In his late Genesis commentary, Luther argues that before the Fall, Adam had an enlightened reason, by which he had "a true knowledge of God, a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbor."⁹¹ After the Fall, however, he lost his ability to reason about God, such that "man wants and does none of the things God wants and commands. Likewise, we have no knowledge about what God is, what grace is, what righteousness is, and finally

⁸⁸ See Brian A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study of the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). Bernhard Lohse, *Ratio und fides: Eine Untersuchung über die ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), esp. 59-118; Hans Martin-Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 399-429.

⁸⁹ LW 26:229; WA 40-I:363:25.

⁹⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 158-162.

⁹¹ LW 1:63; WA 42:47.33-35. See also, Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 323-332.

what sin itself is.”⁹² This ignorance does not entail a total forgetfulness; rather, Luther argues, our reason now thinks about God idolatrously.

Idolatry, for Luther, is neither merely a misplaced veneration of images and ceremonies⁹³ nor a relic of ‘heathen religion;’ rather it characterizes our basic relationship to the world, God, morality, and religion under the reign of sin.⁹⁴ Like all sin, idolatry is subtle and deceptive: it does not announce itself as worship of a false God, but presents itself to reason as the true and salutary religion. The deceptive and attractive power of idolatry, in fact, stems from its rationality and its mimicry of true religion: the idolater, along with the true Christian, can discuss God’s grace, the work of Jesus as being necessary for salvation, and can even recommend apparently good religious acts, such as prayer, fasting, church attendance, the cowl, feeding the poor, etc.⁹⁵ The feature that distinguishes it from true worship, and the root and structure of its various manifestations, however, is justification by works, that is, the idolater always places trust in his own works to make him righteous⁹⁶ or, again, she always wants to add something to complete Christ’s saving work.⁹⁷ In adding to the Gospel, the idolater constantly strives to do God’s work: namely, she attempts to make herself righteous and to overcome sin.⁹⁸

This trust in one’s own righteousness is active and creative—the idolater constantly fashions rational ethical and religious systems and supposes God evaluates her based on how well she adheres

⁹² LW 1:141; WA 42:106.16-19.

⁹³ For an extensive discussion of the role of images in worship, see Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments” in *Luther’s Work: Church and Ministry II*, LW 40:73-223, esp. 84-101. For an enlightening discussion of these debates, see Carlos Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship: From Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 54-73.

⁹⁴ For a discussion on idolatry as our basic nature, see LW 17:1-136; WA 31-II:261-368.

⁹⁵ LW 26:49; WA 40:108.

⁹⁶ LW 17:23; WA 31-II:278.

⁹⁷ LW 26:49; WA 40:108.

⁹⁸ LW 26:396-398. See also Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1966), 105-129.

to them.⁹⁹ Ethically, these systems are composed of moral distinctions, rational hierarchies, and rules. For example, the idolater supposes that reason is higher and more meritorious than the lower appetites, that moral acts have more merit than immoral ones, and that a life devoted to religious observance is more valuable than secular life in the world. These rules are then invested with infinite significance in religion, such that the idolater believes God approves of her when she observes her ethical and religious rules, but condemns her when she fail to live up to the ideals.¹⁰⁰ God cares so much for our moral rectitude, the idolater thinks, that God sends Jesus as a lawgiver, judge and aid to help us on our quest for holiness.¹⁰¹ As a giver of helping grace, Jesus is necessary, but not sufficient, for our salvation.¹⁰²

For Luther, the idolater's God has two distinguishing features: first, this God is ultimately passive. In the idolater's scheme, God's relation to us is determined by our actions and our moral systems. This God does not save us, but at most aids us as we work toward righteousness;¹⁰³ this God does not teach us, but, by constructing moral systems and regulations, we teach God what is necessary for us to do;¹⁰⁴ this God does not mold or shape us, but is molded by our rules.¹⁰⁵ Explicating Isaiah 40:12, Luther expresses the theological dynamic of idolatry as an inversion of agency: "This is what it means to fashion God: He becomes the creature, and I the creator."¹⁰⁶ Second, this God stands against us as a merciless judge. For the idolater, because God is passive in relation to us, God has not yet decided on our fate and therefore must constantly be appeased with

⁹⁹ LW 17:108-109; WA 31-II:346.

¹⁰⁰ LW 17:108; WA 31-II:345-346.

¹⁰¹ LW 26:38; WA 40: 91-92.

¹⁰² LW 26:178; WA 40: 298-299.

¹⁰³ LW 17:20; WA 31-II:275-276.

¹⁰⁴ LW 17:19; WA 31-II:274.

¹⁰⁵ LW 17:17; WA 31-II:273.

¹⁰⁶ LW 17:17; WA 31-II:273.

our works. Instead of being a gracious giver, this God only rewards on the basis of our merits¹⁰⁷ and thus appears as a stingy debtor, who only gives to us what we deserve.¹⁰⁸

Corresponding to the passive God, the idolater paints himself as fundamentally active and free. The idolater believes that *his* actions and *his* rules determine how God responds to him.¹⁰⁹ Because God is a judge, however, the ascription of activity to the self entraps and binds. The idolater must constantly labor and toil under the moral and religious law in order to please and satisfy God. Because the law can never be fulfilled, the idolater lacks certainty that she is doing enough to appease God's judgment.¹¹⁰ By beginning with a free will in response to God, the idolater ends in bondage.¹¹¹

Because our reason is geared towards idolatry, in order to reveal Godself to us, God always appears under the opposite (*sub contrario*). Because of the entrenched pride and idolatry of human thought, whenever human reason thinks of God, it projects its own desires onto God. In order to reveal Godself, Luther argues, God cannot appear in God's glory and majesty, for this would merely confirm our projections of God; rather, God always appears under the contrary (*sub contrario*). God was born to a Virgin, lived as a Jewish peasant, was crucified, died, and buried, and comes to us today in water and the word. Reason could never have predicted that God would do this. Moreover, when reason hears that this is how God acts, reason thinks this all seems seem absurd and foolish.

¹⁰⁷ LW 17:26; WA 31-II.281.

¹⁰⁸ LW 26:124; WA 40:219.

¹⁰⁹ "Who is he who can control the Spirit of the Lord and determine what He should do?...So every self-righteous man is a master of the Holy Spirit, of the God of heaven and earth. He ascribes terminus and boundary to God...All the self-righteous are involved in this desire. They want to educate God, teach God. If He has forgotten anything, they are ready to remind Him of it...They desire rather to form, to choose, and to will, and they count the Divine Majesty for nothing." LW 17:18-19; WA 31-2:274.17-275.14.

¹¹⁰ LW 26:212; WA 40:342.

¹¹¹ Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2005), 49.

In order to be made known as God, Luther argues, God must destroy the pretense of reason in divine things in order for us to see that everything depends on God's free promise.¹¹²

Luther's invectives against reason as a whore, as the greatest enemy of faith, as that which must be destroyed by faith, etc. stem from the penchant of reason toward idolatry and its overlooking of the clothed God. Because of the noetic fall of reason, reason cannot know the will of God towards us; rather than looking to the place where God reveals God's love for us, reason constructs systems that try to encompass God. This does not mean that reason knows nothing about God—Luther repeatedly argues that reason can naturally know that there is a God;¹¹³ rather, he argues that reason cannot know the will of God. Precisely because reason has some idea about God, but it does not know God's will towards us, it creates idols—reason always tries to fill in the gap and creates new forms of worship.

Yet, Luther argues that in creation, reason is a great gift of God. Just as Luther argued in the *Bondage of the Will* that the will has no freedom before God, but can make choices concerning those

¹¹² “Thus when God proposes the doctrines of faith, He always proposes things that are simply impossible and absurd—if, that is, you want to follow the judgment of reason. It does indeed seem ridiculous and absurd to reason that in the Lord's Supper the body and the blood of Christ are presented, that Baptism is ‘the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit,’ that Christ the Son of God was conceived and carried in the womb of the Virgin, that He was born, that He suffered the most ignominious of deaths on the cross, that He was raised again, that He is now sitting at the right hand of the Father, and that He now has ‘authority in heaven and on earth.’ Paul calls the Gospel of Christ the crucified “the Word of the cross” and “the folly of preaching,” which the Jews regarded as offensive and the Greeks as a foolish doctrine. Reason judges this way about all the doctrines of the faith; for it does not understand that the supreme form of worship is to hear the voice of God and to believe, but it supposes that what it chooses on its own and what it does with a so-called good intention and from its own devotion is pleasing to God. When God speaks, reason, therefore regards His Word as heresy and as the word of the devil; for it seems so absurd. Such is the theology of all the sophists and of the sectarians, who measure the Word of God by reason. But faith slaughters reason and kills the beast that the whole world and all the creatures cannot kill.” LW 26:227-228; WA 40-I:361.19-362.11-14.

¹¹³ See, for example, “For to have a God is not alone a Mosaic law, but also a natural law, as St. Paul says in Romans 1:20, that the heathen know of the deity, that there is a God. This is also evidenced by the fact that they have set up gods and arranged forms of divine service, which would have been impossible if they had neither known or thought about God. For God has shown it to them in the things that have been made, etc.” LW 40:96-97; WA 18:80.18-26.

things under us, so too Luther argues that reason on earth is a great gift of God that helps us order our lives here on earth. Far from being condemned or impotent, Luther praises reason as being the highest good among all things and a kind of god that helps order created life. While impotent *coram Deo*, reason is a great gift on earth.

Luther most fully develops his account of the goods of reason in the 1536 *Disputation Concerning Man*. The opening theses describe reason in superlative terms:

4. And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine.
5. It is the inventor of all the art, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life.
6. By virtue of this fact it ought to be named the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things.
7. Holy Scripture also makes it lord over the earth, birds, fish and cattle, saying ‘Have dominion’
8. That is, that it is a sun and a kind of god appointed to administer these things in this life.
9. Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it.¹¹⁴

These theses present reason as a great good. In comparison with all other gifts of life, Luther claims that reason is almost something divine (4). The goodness of reason is due to the ways it distinguishes human beings from animals (6) allows humans to order and administer life (8), and allows for the development of academics, arts, law, and medicine. Even after the fall of Adam, even with the noetic fall of sin, reason still has an important role to play in creation (9).

¹¹⁴ LW 34:137; WA 39-I:175.9-21. It should be remembered that these theses were written for disputation.

These theses are particularly important as they show the problem with Niebuhr's argument against Luther. Whereas Niebuhr claimed that Luther's excessive concentration on sin led to defeatism that was unable to make relative determinations in history, Luther here claims that reason on earth is not solely determined by sin. Reason, even after the Fall, can still think rationally about how to order society justly in terms of the law, how to best administer medicine, and how to think philosophically. Whereas reason is impotent before God due to sin, on earth, reason is absolutely necessary for making laws and alleviating suffering through medicine. To claim that reason is so fallen so as to not grasp relative questions is to miss Luther's strong affirmation of the good of reason in life.

Thus, for Luther, the two realms of existence have the following implication: *coram Deo*, reason cannot grasp the things of God, but is stuck projecting its own desires onto the divine; *coram hominibus*, reason is a great gift of God to help us order our life. In using reason to order life, we employ a great gift of God that helps us determine the shape of human existence.

(2) Law

Just as the will and reason before God are condemned, but have their earthly function, so too the law spans two different relationships: before God, *coram Deo*, the law functions negatively, that is, it reveals and condemns sin; on earth, however, it is a great gift of God for ordering life. Like with reason, Luther often hurls strong condemnations against the law, associating it with the great enemies of human life, sin, death, and the devil. As we have seen, these condemnations have led commentators like Niebuhr to depict Luther as one who fails to grasp the necessity of the law for social order. According to Reinhardt Hütter and David Yeago respectively, a misunderstanding of these condemnations has also led to an antinomianism in contemporary Lutheran thought, in which

theologians treat the normative claims of the law as the problem.¹¹⁵ The freedom of a Christian is associated with a freedom from the moral content of the law. These implications, however, are mistaken. In this section, I wish to examine the law in its two dimensions, and argue that in both the law is good and normative for Luther. To discuss the law *coram Deo*, I will examine Luther's conflict with the Spiritualists in 1525. I will argue that for Luther, the proper use of the law concerns how the Holy Spirit uses the law on us. With this distinction of the Spirit's work, I will then be able to identify the theological grounding of Luther's larger theory of law. On earth, the law plays an important role too, for the law is God's good gift in ordering creation.¹¹⁶ This will again show the distinction between God's two realms of existence.

(i) *Law Coram Deo: Law, Gospel, and the Holy Spirit*¹¹⁷

The theological use of the law is grounded in Luther's understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. In his 1525 treatise, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, Luther claims that God deals with creatures both inwardly and outwardly. The relationship between the inward and the outward is fixed in a particular order: God first deals with us outwardly in the oral Word or material Sacrament; inwardly, God deals with us through the Holy Spirit who changes our heart and consoles our

¹¹⁵ See Reinhard Hütter, "The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God's Commandments," in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 31-54. David Yeago, "Martin Luther on Grace, Law, and Moral Life: Prolegomena to an Ecumenical Discussion of *Veritatis Splendor*," in *The Thomist*, 62 (1998), 163-191. David Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* II, 1 (Winter 1993), 37-49.

¹¹⁶ In a very important essay, "The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God's Commandments," Reinhard Hütter argues that Protestant theological ethics now suffers from a marked antinomianism. On his read, contemporary Protestant ethics displays a sheer indifference to God's commandments and sees them as unimportant for a substantive notion of Christian freedom. Hütter argues instead, "Christian freedom, the true freedom of the Christian moral agent, and thereby genuine human freedom, is fatally misconstrued in the absence of a serious consideration of God's commandments," 40. In this section, I agree with Hütter's insistence on the importance of Law for Luther's ethical vision.

¹¹⁷ This section was aided by Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit*, trans. John Jensen (Philadelphia; Muhlenberg Press, 1953).

conscience. Luther writes, “But whatever their measure, the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward.”¹¹⁸ The Spirit on this account always works through external means. The means are not sufficient, for the Spirit is always sovereign over the tools (one can hear the Word preached, for example, without the Spirit moving a person), yet for Luther the Spirit always only comes to us through external means.

The external means the Spirit works with are the law and Gospel. For Luther, the distinction between law and Gospel does not concern the *content* of the law, that is, the Gospel does not destroy the command to love God and love the neighbor, nor does it create a new law with new regulations—as we will see, Luther thinks that this is the mistake of the Spiritualists. Rather the distinction concerns the category of *usus* or to what ends we *apply* the law. Ebeling argues that for Luther the law is an existential category—we may say the animating problem or question is where do we find our identity.¹¹⁹ Is our ultimate identity, our standing *coram Deo*, based upon our creaturely actions and works? That is, do we use the law and do works for the glorification of the self to impress an indifferent deity? Or is the law used for the purpose of the Gospel, used by God to prepare us to hear and receive the Word?¹²⁰

For Luther, the proper use of the law is not a human use at all; rather, it is to allow the law to work on us. The law is a tool the Holy Spirit employs to prepare us for the life giving Word of the

¹¹⁸ LW 40:146; WA 18:136.10-15.

¹¹⁹ “Law for Luther is not a revealed statutory norm to which man then adopts this attitude or that, but law is for Luther an existentialist category which sums up the theological interpretation of man’s being as it in fact is.” Gerhard Ebeling, “On the Doctrine of the *Triplex Usus Legis* in the Theology of the Reformation,” in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1963), 75. See also, Hans Martin Barth, “Thus it is not a matter of the wording of the codified Ten Commandments or the many instructions contained in Sacred Scripture, but of the basic and overall situation of the human being, a person’s ultimate horizon of meaning and responsibility in the face of fellow human beings and God. Why is the human being in the world; what is she or he required to do?” *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 139.

¹²⁰ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator: Luther's Concept of the Holy Spirit*, 268.

Gospel. When the Holy Spirit wields the law, the law brings self-knowledge—a person is convicted of his or her sins, destroyed in his or her pride, and then left with a longing for the Gospel. The key point here is that the Spirit is sovereign in this account of law and Gospel: the Spirit terrifies through the law, the Spirit comforts with the Gospel, and, the Spirit makes us active in the world through indwelling us, both in mortifying the sinful flesh and in participating in our vocation of loving the neighbor. At no point is the law or Gospel a human work—the Spirit is active in preparing us, comforting us, and making us active.¹²¹

For Luther, the Spiritualists rearrange this order. On Luther’s interpretation, the Spiritualists claim that God comes inwardly first, so that there is a direct connection of the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. Through working directly on the inward human spirit, the Holy Spirit allows the believer to evaluate and judge all external works. The outward order, that is the primacy of the external Word and Sacrament, is subordinated to the inner spiritual order. This reversal, initially, does not appear to be particularly troubling—even the young Luther set forth a similar account of the spirit’s work in the Magnificat.¹²² Yet, in his mature thought, Luther condemns this reversal as a teaching of the devil and at the root of all the enthusiasts’ errors.

Luther’s concern here centers on the role of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in his own account the Spirit is agent, on this account, Luther argues that the Spirit is viewed as a reward for human effort. By rejecting the primacy of the external word, Carlstadt, for example, erects a series of practices, (practices of mortification of flesh, rejection of the material world, concentration, and self-abstraction), that prepare the human spirit to be able to receive the divine Spirit. The Spiritualists make these human practices a prerequisite for receiving the illumination of the Spirit—only through

¹²¹ LW 26:375; WA 40-I:572.20-23. In his commentary on Galatians 4:6, Luther writes, “This change and new judgment are not the work of human reason or power; they are the gifts and accomplishment of the Holy Spirit, who comes with the preached Word, purifies our hearts by faith, and produces spiritual motivation in us.”

¹²² Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*, 84.

putting to death all externals, can the inward spirit commune with the Divine. If mortification is a prerequisite for spirituality, Luther argues, salvation or spirituality becomes dependent upon human action. Instead of the mortification of the flesh and good works being an *effect* of justification whereby the Spirit works in us, human work is now a prerequisite for justification and the Spirit. Instead of the Spirit working on us in the law, we must make our own laws to mortify ourselves.¹²³ The Spirit is the result of human work—which, Luther thinks, reasserts the primacy of free will. The Spirit is no longer a free gift and an agent of grace, the one who works on us, but becomes a reward—by mortifying the flesh, we receive the Spirit as a prize.

This reversal leads to an abuse of the law and Gospel distinction. In the Galatians commentary, Luther identifies three misuses of the law: the first abuse of the law is to try to be justified by it; a second misuse is by those who excuse Christians from the content of the law, that is, they make Christian freedom into carnal license; and the third misuse belongs to those who do not see that the reign of the law is limited, that is, that the law is a means towards grace, and are thus crushed by despair. The enthusiast's reversal leads directly into the first two traps: because they seek the Spirit as a reward instead of seeing the Spirit as sheer gift of grace, they use the law as means to the Spirit. Instead of distinguishing the law and the Gospel, they make the Gospel into a new law and thus “the proclamation of salvation becomes a curse.”¹²⁴ This leads to a moral rigorism devoid of consolation and God's generosity.

The second trap occurs not because the enthusiasts fail to distinguish the law and Gospel, but because they distinguish it wrongly. As I argued above, the law and Gospel distinction does not negate the content of the law, but instead alters the use of the law. The enthusiasts (Muentzer and the Spiritualists) draw a distinction between the law and Gospel, but the distinction concerns the

¹²³ LW 40:147; WA 18:137.12-16.

¹²⁴ LW 27:35; WA 40-2:43.13-14.

content of the law: because the Spirit acts directly on our soul, the external means of the Spirit become superfluous and can be dispensed with. This means that the moral prescriptions of the law can be disregarded or judged through inward illumination—instead of leading to worldly denunciation and rigorism of the first mistake, this leads to carnal license to freely indulge one's own will. The abrogation of the reign of law in conscience instead becomes an abrogation of the law over the flesh. In both cases, the law and Gospel lose their respective theological orientation: in the first, the law goes from divine work on us to a human work towards the divine; in the second, the Gospel stops being the good news about our salvation by God and instead centers on the freedom of the lower desires.

For Luther, the distinguishing marks of the piety of the enthusiasts follow from this reversal: Christ is no longer seen as Savior and gift, but an example to be imitated; because the Spirit works on the spirit, the sacraments are signs of human devotion, instead of God's action on us. Baptism becomes a human declaration about a human decision, instead of a divine decision and declaration of God. Because of the denigration of the external world, the images in worship transform from an indifferent question into the center of idolatry. For Luther, the living God of faith has been replaced by a devotion to human action that views God as reward.

Luther's central problem with the Spiritualists thus centers on a reversal from a theocentric account of salvation, in which the Spirit works through external means, to an anthropocentric account in which humans are the center and actors in faith. This anthropocentrism of the Spiritualists is subtle. The Spiritualists always employ theological language and talk about Christ and the Spirit. Yet, Luther argues they never actually speak of God, but only their own works. The abrogation of the law by the Gospel is not one of content nor validity on earth; rather, the condemnation occurs when people misuse the law or interpret it wrongly. The strong

condemnation of the law only occurs when the law attempts to occupy a place to which it does not belong.

Luther's condemnation of the law must be read in this light. The law must be condemned strongly and distinguished from the Gospel not because its content is wrong, but rather because it tries to assert itself idolatrously. Just as reason in spiritual things leads to an idolatrous account of the self's power over God, the law in spiritual things attempts to usurp the role of Christ. Instead of allowing the Spirit to use the law to condemn human sin, humans try to use the law to justify themselves. This natural use of the law, however, is deeply mistaken: the law can only work wrath and reveal sin; it has no role in justification. In the *Second Disputation against the Antinomians*, he states this clearly: "1. The law is not only not necessary for justification, but plainly useless and utterly impossible. 2. Those, however, who serve the law in order to be justified, to them it also becomes a poison and plague concerning justification."¹²⁵ This theological misuse of the law must be strongly condemned, even as the law has a necessary role in revealing sin. That is to say, the law itself is good, precisely because the Holy Spirit uses it to show us the need for the Gospel; but if we try to use the law for ourselves, it requires the strictest condemnation.

(ii) Law in the World

For Luther, just as the law is good and necessary *coram Deo*, it is also good and necessary for life in this world. Most clearly, Luther argues that the law has the civil use of restraining evildoers and maintaining order.¹²⁶ Because the civil order requires peace, but there are people who create havoc, the law is necessary to stop and restrain evil action. In this, it performs a similar function to

¹²⁵ "1. Lex non solum est non necessaria ad iustificationem, sed plane inutilis et prorsus impossibilis. 2. Qui autem opinione iustificationis legem, servant, iis ipsa etiam venenum et pestis fit ad iustificationem." in Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations* ed. and trans. by Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 134-135.

¹²⁶ LW 26:274-275; WA 40:429-430.

the theological use, in that the law has a restraining and convicting character in both uses. Whereas the theological use of the law restrains our subtle and deceptive self-love, the civil use of the law constrains our outward behavior. These uses of the law, while described negatively, are not inherent to the law as such; rather, they result from the radical sin and estrangement present in human life.¹²⁷ The law is good, nevertheless, precisely because it restrains sin.

While certainly central to Luther's thought, this understanding of the uses of the law fails to capture the breadth of the understanding of the good of God's commandments for earthly life. For Luther, the commandments express God's intention for creation.¹²⁸ More exactly, God's commandments describe the essential features of the human being in her relationship to God and other creatures.¹²⁹ The law thus does not appear as a heteronomous command from outside of time, but it expresses as the essential nature of the creature, which stands opposed to human beings under the reign of sin. That is, for Luther, the law is theonomous: the explicit commands express the shape of human nature and attain their normative power here.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ See Reinhard Hütter, 182 n.16.

¹²⁸ Paul Althaus has argued that it is important to distinguish the law (*Gesetz*) from commands (*Gebot*). The law is that which is used to show, restrain, and condemn sin; the commandments are the goods that constitute genuine human freedom in life in communion with God. Whereas the law condemns sin, the commandments reveal God's created will for life. This distinction is helpful in that it accords with Luther's emphasis on law as a negative category whose proper use is for condemning sin. It, however, can be misleading in that the content of the condemning and restraining law is always the commandments (Ten Commandments; double love commandment). Althaus himself recognizes that Luther does not make this distinction. As such, I will use the terms interchangeably. However, it is important to see that the law's essential use is in revealing and condemning sin. See Paul Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, 271-273. For a critique of Althaus, see Eugene Klug, "Article III. The Righteousness of Faith before God," in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1978), 201-2.

¹²⁹ See David Yeago, "Martin Luther on Grace, Law, and Moral Life: Prolegomena to an Ecumenical Discussion of *Veritatis Splendor*," *The Thomist*, 62 (1998), 176-178.

¹³⁰ These categories are found in Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 83-86. They are helpful in understanding Luther's understanding of the nature of law and are hence deployed here.

Luther's understanding of the function of the law on earth is grounded in his affirmation of God the Creator. Because God creates the world through the Word, the Word of God does not stand in heteronomous relations to the world; rather the Word creates and structures existence. God's commandments express the very structure and order of creation. This theonomous relationship of command to the nature of human being occurs most clearly in Luther's 1522 "Estate of Marriage." In this treatise, Luther seeks to defend the goodness and gift of marriage against those who would detract from it.¹³¹ In the opening, Luther declares that God's creation of the two sexes leads to a basic biological division between male and female.¹³² In describing God's commandment, "Be fruitful and multiply," Luther argues that the nature of this command is not given over against our nature, but rather, the command is structured into existence. Our created desire for sexual relations is simply the manifestation of God's command spoken in creation. Luther writes:

For this word which God speaks, 'Be fruitful and multiply' is not a command. It is more than a command, namely, a divine ordinance [*wreck*], which it is not our prerogative to hinder or ignore. Rather, it is just as necessary as the fact that I am a man, and more necessary than sleeping and waking, eating and drinking, and emptying the bowels and bladder. It is a nature and disposition just as innate as the organs involved in it. Therefore, just as God does not command anyone to be a man or a woman but creates them the way they have to be, so he does not command them to multiply but creates them so they have to multiply... This is a matter of nature and not of choice.¹³³

¹³¹ LW 45:17-49; WA 10-II:275-304.

¹³² LW 45:17-18; WA 10-II:276.4-8. "But we are exactly as he created us: I am a man and you a woman. Moreover, he wills to have his excellent handiwork honored as his divine creation, and not despised. The man is not to despise or scoff at the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation that is well-pleasing unto God himself."

¹³³ LW 45:18; WA 10-II:276.21-31.

God's command does not stand over against our nature, as something opposed to who we are; rather, it is that which forms and structures our desires. To follow God's command, therefore, is also to live in line with our good, created nature.

For Luther, because the commands of God are theonomous, the Word is not simply that which is over against us, but it also that which created us and stands at the foundation of our being.¹³⁴ Practically, this entails that Luther endorses a theory of natural law.¹³⁵ Because the natural law is implanted in human hearts, it is naturally known to all people. The natural law provides in general outlines a picture of what we should or should not do and how we ought to live in the world. Luther writes, "There is no one who does not feel it. Everyone must acknowledge that what the natural law says is right and true...This light lives and shines in all human reason...For they carry along with them in the depth of their hearts a living book which could give them quite adequate

¹³⁴ Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C Schultz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2007).

¹³⁵ In 1953, Johannes Heckel published *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition on Law in the Theology of Martin Luther*, an impressive work that attempted to lay out Luther's understanding of the law systematically. Drawing on a great wealth of primary sources, Heckel presented a nuanced read of Luther's understanding of law, which he categorized into different types: divine natural law, divine positive law, substantive secular natural law, institutional secular natural law; written law, and the law of Christ. The nuances of these positions shed light onto the categories in Luther's thought; however, I do not follow Heckel here. Paul Althaus, for example, finds Heckel's account too heavily indebted to Barth—that is, Heckel translates the twofold rule of God into the twofold rule of Christ (147-148), in which Christ rules the church and Christ rules creation, such that Christ is the center of all. As such, he claims that the Christian is in no way directly subject to the temporal authority, but only submits out of love (156). Nevertheless, Heckel argues Luther only recognizes one true realm of Christ and thus appears close to Barth. Althaus also objects to the imposition of categories on Luther's thought—while the categories may shed light onto moves, they are foreign to Luther's text and obscure his arguments more than shed light on them. I agree with Althaus insofar as these categories do not appear to be present in Luther's own writings and therefore will stick to a more straightforward reading of Luther's understanding of the natural law. Johannes Heckel, *Lex Charitatis: A Juristic Disquisition on Law in the Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. Gottfried G. Krodel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010). See Paul Althaus, "Die beiden Regimente bei Luther. Bemerkungen zu Johannes Heckels 'Lex charitatis,'" *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 81 (1956), 129ff. Paul Althaus, "Luthers Lehre von den Reichen im Feuer der Kritik," *Luther Jahrbuch* 24 (1957), 40ff. For Heckel's response, see "In the Maze of Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Lex Charitatis*, 145-175.

instruction about what they ought to do and not to do, how they ought to judge, and what ought to be accepted and rejected.”¹³⁶ Luther’s affirmation here is again grounded in God’s creative action—because God creates, the natural law gives us adequate knowledge of how we should act in order to have peace in the world.

For Luther, the natural law is the foundation for all just laws. All positive laws, including religious laws, are to be judged on the basis of their adherence to the natural law. If a positive law disagrees with the natural law, it does not have binding authority on the conscience of the individual. This authority of the natural law over positive laws even applies to religious rules given in Scripture. In the 1525 sermon “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” Luther addresses claims made by some reformers such as Martin Bucer, about the contemporary validity of Old Testament laws. Bucer and a number of radical reformers sought to base contemporary political structures on explicit commands given in the Old Testament. Luther argues, however, that the law of Moses as such is no longer binding on Christians and has no pertinence to their life. Luther grounds this in a hermeneutical claim about the intended audience of the laws: when God gave the law to Moses, he gave it to the Israelites for their society alone. Because the law was given to Moses for the Israelite society, it has no more application for us. The Christian should not base his or her life on the explicit positive commands of Moses, even the Decalogue, because these laws were given for a specific community at a specific time. Instead, Luther argues, our moral systems should only be based on the natural law. If someone comes and argues for a certain legal position based on Moses, the Christian is to reply:

¹³⁶ “There is no one who does not feel it. Everyone must acknowledge that what the natural law says is right and true... This light lives and shines in all human reason. If men would only pay attention to it, they would have no need of other books or any other law. For they carry along with them in the depth of their hearts a living book which could give them quite adequate instruction about what they ought to do and not to do, how they ought to judge, and what ought to be accepted and rejected.” WA 17-2, 102. Quoted in Althaus, 26-27, n.12.

I am not concerned about what Moses commands....Nature also has these laws. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact....For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave the commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees with nature, etc. But the commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men by nature], the Gentiles do not hold.¹³⁷

In other words, the law of Moses does not have authority simply because it is written by Moses or given by God to the Israelites. Just as every country has its own interpretation of the law, the law of Moses is the *Sachenspiegel* of the Jews that orders their daily life. Just as what applies in France does not apply to Germany, so too Luther argues, what applies to the Ancient Israelites does not apply to today's culture.¹³⁸

Luther extends this denial of special positive laws even to the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. For Luther, the commandments Christ gives to us are not *new* moral instructions; rather, in creating the world, Christ gave us these laws as part of nature. The moral teachings of Christ are not something better than what we have through the law which is written into our hearts; rather they merely confirm it. Luther writes

For when He (Christ) created the world, He commanded and empowered man to rule physically over beasts, birds, and fish, to maintain home life, to rear children, to cultivate fields, to rule over lands and people, etc. It was not necessary for Christ to give instruction about this, for it was implanted in nature and written in their hearts. Furthermore, all books, with the exception of Holy Writ, are derived from that source and spring. Therefore Christ's

¹³⁷ LW 35:168; WA 16:379.5-6; 9-11; 380.7-11.

¹³⁸ LW 40:98; WA 18:81.14-17.

words and doctrine must not be interpreted as though He had wanted to teach and ordain anything in addition to this or institute anything better.¹³⁹

The natural law furnishes a relatively complete picture of moral injunctions which the Decalogue and Christ simply affirm and clarify.

Because of the fall into sin, however, the natural knowledge of the commands of God are now obscure. Satan and the fall of reason veil the law's natural clarity. In the *First Disputation against the Antinomians*, Luther writes, "To be sure, all men by nature have some knowledge of the law, yet it is very weak and obscured. Therefore it was, and always is, necessary to teach men this knowledge of the law."¹⁴⁰ As such, the law needs to be repeated and published. For Luther, the Decalogue performs precisely this function. Luther sees Moses's importance in terms of publicizing and making clear the natural law that otherwise could have been known through reason. Luther argues that both tables of the law could be known by nature—even if God never gave the law to Moses, the human mind naturally knows that it should worship God and love the neighbor.¹⁴¹ Yet, the law is clearly stated in the law of Moses.

While the Decalogue makes the natural law clear, it only has authority insofar as it agrees with the natural law. That is, the authority of Decalogue is not due its divine origin or its placement in Scripture; rather, the binding authority of all the commandments comes through their conformity to the natural law. The law has authority because it correctly expresses the normative natural

¹³⁹ LW 24:228; WA 45:669.23-30.

¹⁴⁰ "Habent quidem omnes homines naturaliter quendam congitionem legis, sed eam valde infirmam et obscuratam. Ideo necesse fuit et semper est trader hominibus illam legis notiam, ut cognoscant magnitudinem peccati sui, irae Deit etc." Martin Luther "First Disputation Against the Antinomians" in *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus*, 42-43.

¹⁴¹ In the Seventh Argument of the *First Disputation against the Antinomians*, Luther writes, "Nam si Deus nunquam tulisset legem per Mosen, tamen mens humana naturaliter habet hanc notitiam, Deum esse colendum, proximum diligendum." ("For if God had never given the law to Moses, the human mind would nevertheless would have had the idea that God is to be worshiped and the neighbor loved."), 60-61.

ordering of life. This conformity is necessary for the explicit commands of the law to attain authority on earth. If the law were heteronomous, or something that we did not naturally recognize as correct, it would never have authority on earth, even if it came from God. Luther's writes, "Were it not naturally written in the heart, one would have to teach and preach the law for a long time before it became the concern of conscience. The heart must also find and feel the law in itself. Otherwise it would be a matter of conscience for no one."¹⁴² The authority of the law is thus grounded in its theonomous nature—it only has authority insofar as it expresses a good normative order grounded in proper created relations.

For Luther, while the authority of any law is grounded in natural law, the content of the natural law is the law of love. That is, the natural law is identical with the law of love, the command to love our neighbor as ourselves.¹⁴³ For Luther, human beings naturally know that it is good to love the neighbor as oneself and to do to the neighbor as we want done to ourselves. As soon as we hear this moral principle articulated, Luther argues, we naturally know that it is correct: "They have it written in their hearts, of course, because by nature they judge that one should do to others what one wants done to oneself."¹⁴⁴ When we are confronted with a moral question, Luther argues, we can consult how we would wish to be treated, "And so you do not need any book to instruct and admonish you how you should love your neighbor, for you have the loveliest and best books about all laws right in your own heart. You do not need any professor to tell you about this matter; merely consult your own heart and it will give you abundant instruction that you should love your neighbor

¹⁴² LW 40:97; WA 18:80.35-38.

¹⁴³ LW 40:97; WA 18:80.29-34. "Also Christ himself (Matt. 7:12) includes all of the law and the prophets in this natural law, "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." Paul does the same thing in Rom 13:9, where he sums up the commandments of Moses in the love which also the natural law teaches in the words "Love your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁴⁴ LW 27:56; WA 40-II:71.23-26.

as you love yourself.”¹⁴⁵ Because it is written in our hearts, Christ is not a new moral teacher; again, like the Decalogue, he simply clarifies the law that structures creation:

The only example He sets up is ourselves, and He makes this as intimate as possible by applying it to our heart, our body and life, and all our members. No one has to travel far to get it, or devote much trouble or expense to it. The book is laid into your own bosom, and it is so clear that you do not need glasses to understand Moses and the Law. Thus you are your own Bible, your own teacher, your own theologian, your own preacher. The way He directs you, you only need one look at them to find out how the book pervades all your work and words and thoughts, your heart and body and soul. Just guide yourself by this, and you will be more wise and learned than all the skill and all the books of the lawyers.¹⁴⁶

While Luther emphasizes the goodness of the natural law as that which structures our existence, and argues that the law of love provides the norm of all ethical behavior, he maintains that concrete decision-making requires reason and prudence. The just decision will not arise simply through following legal books, but instead requires a free mind, normed by the law of love. In the 1523 *On Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, Luther argues that the wise rule does not need to consult the law as a manual of ethics, but they only need to consult the law of love and natural law.¹⁴⁷ Luther argues, to make correct moral decisions in the instance, we should not rely on slavish fidelity to a law book; rather, we must employ reason and prudence that attends to the particulars of the instance. He writes, “We should keep written laws subject to reason, from which

¹⁴⁵ LW 27:57-58; WA 40-II:72.23-27.

¹⁴⁶ LW 21:236-237; WA 32:495.18-28.

¹⁴⁷ “For when you judge according to love you will easily decide and adjust matters without any lawbooks. But when you ignore love and natural law you will never hit upon the solution that pleases God, though you may have devoured all the lawbooks and jurists. Instead, the more you depend on them, the further they will lead you astray. A good and just decision must not and cannot be pronounced out of books, but must come from a free mind, as though there were no books. Such a free decision is given, however, by love and by natural law, with which all reason is filled; out of the books comes extravagant and untenable judgments.” LW 45:128; WA 11:279.19-27.

they originally welled forth as from the spring of justice. We should not make the spring dependent on its rivulets, (or make reason captive to letters).”¹⁴⁸

Thus, for Luther, the natural law is identical with the law of love. Because it is God’s ordering of creation, it is good in its own sphere and it needs no improvement, neither from Moses nor Christ. He writes, “All by itself, the Law is so rich and perfect that no one need to add anything to it... Therefore, no one, not even Christ Himself, can improve upon the Law.”¹⁴⁹ The law’s content is good, holy, and beneficial for human life and it needs no further explication.

This understanding of the law and the commands of God shows the law to be an expression of God’s will for creation. Without sin, God’s command for creation would not have been experienced as condemning; rather, in obedience to God, we would have fulfilled the law’s command to love God and serve the neighbor. The law, instead of standing over against us, would have been the way we concretely expressed our communion with God. In Luther’s explication of Genesis 2, for example, God gives a command to Adam before the Fall to provide a way for Adam to express Adam’s already existent love for God. He writes,

And so when Adam had been created in such a way that he was, as it were, intoxicated with rejoicing toward God and was delighted also with all the other creatures, there is now created a new tree for the distinguishing of good and evil, so that Adam might have a definite way to express his worship and reverence toward God. After everything had been entrusted to him to make use of it according to his will, whether he wished to do so for necessity or for pleasure, God finally demands from Adam that at this tree of the knowledge of good and evil he demonstrate his reverence and obedience toward God and that he maintain this practice, as it were, of worshipping God by not eating anything from it.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ LW 45:129; WA 11:280.16-19.

¹⁴⁹ LW 21:69; WA 32:356.28-31.

¹⁵⁰ LW 1:94; WA 42:71.31-38.

The law here does not help Adam love God, nor does the law show sin; rather, the law exists for the worship of God. Describing this, David Yeago writes, “Here Luther is describing a function of divine law, divine commandment, which is neither correlative with sin nor antithetical to grace; indeed, it presupposes the presence of grace and not sin. The function of the divine commandment is, moreover, its original and proper function. The fundamental significance of the law is thus neither to enable human beings to attain righteousness nor to accuse their sin, but to give concrete, historical form to the ‘divine life’ of the human creature deified by grace...”¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, under the conditions of sin, the law functions as a condemning, accusing force. Because we are fundamentally estranged from God’s good intentions, the law stands over against us. This does not mean that the content of the law or the commands of the law are overcome through Christ’s work; rather, Christ alone fulfills the law and affirms its goodness. That is, the central problem is not that the law commands wrongly or that the law is heteronomous; rather the central human problem is sin and the human disjunction from the law’s good commands.

Thus, the law, as God’s creative will for creation, expresses the proper relationship between humanity and the divine—we are to love God above all else and serve the neighbor. This means that the law provides a good order for creaturely life. The life of faith, in which faith is active in love, is not a life in opposition to the law, but a life in which the new creature naturally lives in accordance with the law. In the *Second Disputation against the Antinomians*, Luther even claims that the law remains throughout eternity—under the conditions of sin, it first accuses us; in faith, when we are a new creature, we fulfill the law; in eternity it will remain fulfilled in us. He writes:

¹⁵¹ David Yeago, “Martin Luther on Grace, Law, and Moral Life: Prolegomena to an Ecumenical Discussion of *Veritatis Splendor*,” *The Thomist*, 62 (1998), 176-178. Quoted in Reinhard Hütter, “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 42-43.

45. For the law, as it was before Christ, certainly accused us; but under Christ, it is placated by the remission of sins; and then it is to be fulfilled in the Spirit.

46. Thus after Christ in the coming life, there it will remain as fulfilled, when that, what it meanwhile demands, is brought about—the new creature.

47. For never will the law be removed in eternity, but it will remain, either as to be fulfilled in those damned, or as fulfilled in those blessed.¹⁵²

Luther in fact describes eternal life where the Decalogue is eternally fulfilled. Because the law expresses God’s intention for created life, eternal life will be like what the Decalogue demands here, except good works will flow naturally.¹⁵³ The uses of the law end, while its content remains. Instead of being against us, however, it is now embodied and fulfilled.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² 45. Lex enim ut fuit ante Christum, nos quidem accusans, sub Christo autem per remissionem peccatorum placate, et deniceps spiritu implenda. 46. Ita post Christum in future vita manebit impleta facta tunc ipsa, quod interim exegit, creatura nova. 47. Quare lex nunquam in aeternum tollitur, sed manebit vel implenda in damnatis, vel impleta in beatis.” Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 42-43.

¹⁵³ “The Decalogue, however, is greater and better because it is written in the hearts and minds of all and will remain with us in the coming life. Yet not so circumcision, as baptism also will not remain, but only the Decalogue is eternal—as such, that is, not as law—because in the coming life things will be like what the Decalogue has been demanding here.” (“Decalogus autem ideo maior et praestantior est, quia est insculptus omnium cordibus et mentibus et nobiscum manebit etiam in future vita. Circumcisio autem non item, sicut nec baptismus manebit, sed solus decalogus est aeternus, ut res scilicet, non ut lex, quia in future vita erit id ipsum, quod hic exigebat.”) “First Disputation Against the Antinomians,” in Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, 126-129.

¹⁵⁴ This principle has important ramifications for debates concerning Luther’s understanding of the third use of the law. Ebeling has conclusively shown that Luther never uses the phrase *Triplex Usus Legis*. In the passages from the Antinomian disputations where the phrase appears he has shown both that the documents are dated long after the original debates or that the phrase is a later interpolation. In the one place where Luther does use the phrase from the Table Talk, it has a different meaning and context. For Ebeling, this is important because a third use of the law misunderstands the nature of law. For Luther, he claims, “by *lex* must always be understood the *lex non impleta*, and that means, the *lex accusans, reos agens, exactrix* and *efficax*.” (75). In other words, claiming a third use of the law both confuses the category of ‘use’ and of the nature of law under sin. See Gerhard Ebeling, “On the Doctrine of the *Triplex Usus Legis* in the Theology of the Reformation,” in *Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1963). This understanding of *lex* is supported by the above passage concerning the Decalogue. Luther writes “*Solus decalogus est aeternus, ut rest scilicet, non ut lex*”—the Decalogue will be eternal, but not as

This has at least two important implications for the argument of this dissertation: first, this understanding of the law shows the importance of maintaining a distinction between the two realms of God's rule for understanding Luther's mature thought on the goodness of creation. While Luther does emphasize that the law needs to be condemned when humans use it to justify themselves before God, on earth, the law is a great gift of created life. Instead of an antinomian rejection of law or a doctrine of sin that obscures the goodness of law, Luther calls for Christians to delight in the law of God.¹⁵⁵ This affirmation of the law counters popular readings of Luther, such as we saw in Niebuhr—Niebuhr's claim that Luther lacks a robust theory of law and is unable to make practical determinations for life in this world is without warrant. More importantly for Lutheran ethics, this affirmation shows the way the law remains effective and present in the life of the believer. God's will stands at the root of our created goodness and this will, from which we are now estranged, we will return to in the new creation.

Second, this understanding of the law shows Luther's understanding of the presence of God in creation. Luther affirms that God is deeply present in the created order—the infinite is immanently present in the finite (*finitum capax infiniti*). Because God works all in all, creation bears God's good gifts and, in its created goodness, bears God's imprint. Luther praises God's deep

Law, that is, it will not have its accusatory function. Nevertheless, I agree with Wilfried Joest that the Law retains an "exhortational office" (13); Christian freedom is not in opposition to the Law on this account; rather, Christian freedom is precisely that freedom to abide by the law without the fear or burden of saving oneself. To differentiate these exhortations, Joest recommends speaking of a *usus practicus evangelii*—"a practical use of the Gospel." See Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit: Das Problem des Tertius Usis Legis bei Luther und die neutestamentliche Paränese* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951), 195-197. For a short clear introduction to the debate see Michael Whiting, *Luther in English: The Influence of His Theology of Law and Gospel on Early English Evangelicals (1525-1535)* (Eugene: Pickwick Publishers, 2010), 17-41. For a very useful history of the debate in the 19th and 20th century, see Gerhard Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969).

¹⁵⁵ Gary Simpson, "Toward a Lutheran 'Delight in the Law of the Lord': Church and State within the Context of Civil Society," in *Church and State: Lutheran Perspectives*, ed. John Stumme and Robert Tuttle (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 20-50.

presence. For example, Luther can describe God as almost panentheistically present in the created order:

God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their parts and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all, but without His being encompassed and surrounded by it. He is at the same time outside and above all creatures. These are all exceedingly incomprehensible matters; yet they are articles of our faith and are attended clearly and mightily in Holy Writ...For how can reason tolerate it that the Divine majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, over a grain, through a grain, within and without, and that, although it is a single Majesty, it nevertheless is entirely in each grain separately, no matter how immeasurably numerous these grains may be?... His one divine essence can be in all creatures collectively and in each one individually more profoundly, more immanently, more present, than the creature is in itself; yet it can be encompassed nowhere and by no one. It encompasses all things and dwells in all, but not one thing encompasses it and dwells in it.¹⁵⁶

For Luther, God's presence is everywhere in creation, even if we do not experience it outside the promise. The emphasis of the law as God's good intention for creation, Luther sees the world as reflecting God's created will. Even though the world has fallen into sin, the basic creational framework remains: the world is good in creation.

This has important implications for life in the world. By granting creation relative independence from revelation, Luther unburdens the concept of the Word from having to supply all the commands and dictates for life in the world. Christians live in the world and have to participate in the ethical reasoning with non-Christians. A Christian as such does not know more or less about a

¹⁵⁶ WA 32:134.34-136.36. Quoted in Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 189.

particular issue simply by being a Christian—rather, they remain a human being who must employ reason normed by the law in love to engage in ethical and moral deliberation. The motivation of the Christian may be transformed from self-love to love of the neighbor, yet the ability to discuss moral principles on the basis of natural law is possible.

(3) Vocation

As we have seen, Luther strongly affirms the goodness of creation as God's good gift. God structures the world and imprints God's will into the order of creation. Because God is the Creator of all, the natural law is identical with Christ's proclamation of the law of love. As a norm, the law of love provides the basic formal principle that should inform all ethical relationships and is thus a wonderful gift for created life. Yet, even as the law is a gift, it lacks concreteness—that is, while it says that we ought to love our neighbor, it does not tell us how exactly to do so. For Luther, the substantive and material command occurs in one's station or vocation.¹⁵⁷ In performing one's vocation in line with the tasks and duties that attend such a position, one fulfills the command to love the neighbor. The notion of vocation and God's calling people into all forms of life affirms the equality of all Christians before God, affirms the whole of creation as a sphere of God's action, and sees the love for neighbor as the basis of social relationships.

Like the categories of reason and law, Luther's concept of vocation must be examined in the two relationships: *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*. More precisely, the concept of vocation is a consequence of Luther's doctrine of justification. Because the Christian is justified by a free act of grace *coram Deo*, there is a basic equality between all vocations *coram hominibus*. To see the relationship of justification to vocation, it is necessary to examine the polemical context against which Luther developed this concept.

¹⁵⁷ Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, 2nd ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1953), 49-65. Quoted in Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, 36.

According to Luther, his contemporary Catholic Church developed a two-tier morality that threatened both justification and creation. In confronting Christ's commands in the Sermon on the Mount, the medieval Church divided these teachings into two classes: first, there were explicit "commandments" given for all Christians to observe; second, there were "evangelical counsels" that were good advice for anyone who wanted to attain a higher perfection.¹⁵⁸ This led to a division between two types of Christians: the perfect who sought to uphold all the evangelical counsels, and the masses, who treated Christ's commandments in the Sermon on the Mount as optional.

For Luther, the picture was theologically dangerous in relation to the law, Gospel, and the goodness of creation. By making Christ's commandments optional, this understanding undermines the seriousness with which Christ commands all Christians equally. This easing of the law's demands, Luther argues, fails to take the law seriously. Instead of convicting people of their sin and their need for grace, the concept of evangelical counsel implied that the strenuous demands of the law were only for the few. The daily believer, while not perfect, was doing enough to earn merit. More perniciously, by claiming a higher perfection was possible for those who opted to follow the evangelical counsels, the Church implied that some Christians are more perfect than others. The danger with this conception, however, was that it assumed human action merits salvation and that different Christians stand in different relationship to the Word of God based on human action. Institutionally, this entailed a formal separation of the Church from life in the world. In search of a higher perfection, monks left the daily concerns of life behind to focus solely on their own spiritual

¹⁵⁸ "According to them, Christ does not intend everything He teaches in the fifth chapter to be regarded by His Christians as a command for them to observe; but He gave much of it merely as advice to those who want to become perfect, to be kept by anyone who pleases. This in spite of Christ's angry threat that no one will enter heaven who abolishes even one of the least of these commandments; and He explicitly calls them 'commandments.'" On this basis they have thought up the twelve 'evangelical counsels,' twelve bits of good advice in the Gospel, which may be kept by anyone who pleases if he want to attain a perfection higher and more perfect than that of other Christians." LW 21:3-4; WA 32:299.27-300.10.

purification. Luther argues that instead of being active in the world in love for neighbor, the monks sought a purity from worldly concerns and sought their own good over that of the neighbor. This ‘purity,’ however, denies the goodness of creation and the goodness and value of created life.

The most dangerous aspect of this understanding, however, was the way it imperiled the doctrine of justification. For Luther, the message of justification proclaims that salvation is grounded in the free gift of grace of Jesus Christ. Because justification is a free gift given by God, no human action earns God’s favor—before God, *coram Deo*, all humans stand in equal need of grace and forgiveness. As such, there is a fundamental equality between all Christians: because all require the same grace, all are equal recipients of the same baptism and the same salvation. Insofar as a person is a Christian, there is a fundamental equality. Luther writes: “In that which entitles us to the name “Christian” there is no inequality or discrimination among persons, but one is like the next—man or woman, young or old, learned or unlearned, noble or ignoble, prince or peasant, master or servant, major or minor saint. There is only one kind of Christ and one kind of faith. The sun in the heavens is the same toward everyone.”¹⁵⁹ The Christian as such is not made a Christian by her role or the masks she wears—there is a basic equality grounded in the Gospel and baptism as free gift. Because all share this inheritance, all are equal before God. In claiming that Christ’s commands are applied differently to different groups, however, the division between counsels and commands imperiled the message of justification. Instead of God saving freely, it implied that human merit earns spiritual rewards.

Luther’s concept of vocation was an attempt to rethink the significance of social life in light of the free gift of justification. Most basically, Luther argued that vocation was not limited to the religious or spiritual estate, but included everyone in society. That is, vocation refers to all the offices and roles one plays in life and to the various masks a person wears in public. As such, one person

¹⁵⁹ LW 21:286; WA 32:536.31-40.

can have multiple roles: wife, mother, child, ruler, teacher, pupil, etc. In every role, a person is called upon to serve God, to fulfill the law of the station, and thereby to love the neighbor. Insofar as God has called a person into these social roles, the particular role is a vocation or calling.

For Luther, there are three basic orders in which one lives out his or her vocation: the church (*ecclesiae*), which proclaims the Word of God to the whole creation, the household (*oeconomia*), which provides sustenance and nourishment, and the state (*politia*), which provides civil order.¹⁶⁰ God instituted the first two in creation and, after the Fall, instituted the government. For Luther, these institutions and orders are basic to earthly life and are they are the concrete ways God orders and operates in creation. Luther refers to these institutions as masks (*larvae*) through and by which God works in creation.¹⁶¹ Each order fulfills God's will by protecting and preserving life and, in the case of the church, orders human life towards God.

Vitor Westhelle argues that Luther's understanding of the station fundamentally transformed the concept of estate.¹⁶² Whereas the medieval concept of estates divided society into three classes, the clergy, the knights, and common labor, Luther understood the orders as that aspect of human society in which all persons participate, both actively and passively. For example, the Church as an estate is not simply the priest or those engaged in religious vocation, but includes all who worship and hear the word. Likewise, everyone participates in family life and lives as a citizen in the world.

For Luther, each order is attended with God's command and each order fulfills God's purpose. God's command here is not something that stands over against all creation, but again it is

¹⁶⁰ For the importance of the three orders see Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates," in *Lutheran Ethics*, 90-118. See also Steward W. Herman, "What Makes the Pope a Werewolf?" unpublished essay.

¹⁶¹ Vitor Westhelle, "The Word and the Mask: Revisiting the Two-Kingdoms Doctrine," in *The Gift of Grace*, 167-180.

¹⁶² Vitor Westhelle, "Power and Politics: Incursions in Luther's Theology," in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 284-300. Westhelle draws upon Ruth Mohl, *The Three Estates in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), 330.

the fundamental structure of creation. For example, Luther argues that the church is the basic order of all creation. In his lectures on Genesis, Luther claims that the placement of the tree of knowledge of Good and evil in the Garden of Eden was God's establishment of the church. Before God creates the other orders, God creates the church, the place where one is free to obey and trust God's word.¹⁶³ By establishing the church first, God shows that human beings are created for God, for an immortal and spiritual life, and not simply for this world.¹⁶⁴ Based on this initial creation, Luther argues that human beings are created religious beings and are made to naturally worship God. Even as we have spoiled this natural knowledge of God with sin, the basic structures of the human being retain their religious bent.¹⁶⁵ The current church and religion is not something that comes completely from outside; rather, it is fundamental to God's creation.

For Luther, the orders of creation, even under the conditions of sin, accomplish God's will on earth. For example, the church accomplishes God's work of denouncing sin and idolatry and of proclaiming the Gospel. Because God wants people to return to proper worship, God uses the church today to accomplish God's mission. Because God commands this task, when the preacher preaches the Word or baptizes, Luther argues that it is not the preacher acting, but God. Because God commands this action, the church and the minister are masks God wears to accomplish God's will in creation. Likewise, God uses marriage as a created means to accomplish God's desire for life on earth and the government as an earthly means of ordering society. Again, when a magistrate

¹⁶³ "Here we have the establishment of the church before there was any government of the home and of the state; for Eve was not yet created. Moreover, the church is established without walls and without any pomp, in a very spacious and very delightful place." LW 1:103; WA 42:79.3-7.

¹⁶⁴ "But the church was established first because God wants to show by this sign, as it were, that man was created for another purpose than the rest of living beings. Because the church is established by the Word of God, it is certain that man was created for an immortal and spiritual life, to which he would have been carried off or translated without death after living in Eden and on the rest of the earth without inconvenience as long as he wished." LW 1:104; WA 42:79.21-29.

¹⁶⁵ "Therefore although man lost his knowledge of God, nevertheless God wanted this command about sanctifying the Sabbath to remain in force." LW 1:80; WA 42:60.38-61.2.

administers justice or punishes criminals in line with the law, Luther argues it not the administrator acting, but God. God uses the government to keep order in society so that life can flourish. Because these orders of creation are instituted by God for the flourishing of life, the person who fulfills the role in line with the duties enacts God's will for creation. He writes:

So it is in secular affairs, too, as Solomon says: "Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king;" that is, everything that the government orders is right, and God confirms it. When it performs its office of judging criminals and punishing them, therefore, this is God's judgment, which He speaks up in heaven and which He wants to be carried out—the same action that is forbidden otherwise, apart from the office....When they keep within the limits of their office and do what the law demands, this is all God's business.¹⁶⁶

Note, Luther does not here give permission for the government to do whatever it wills. Rather, God's will is instituted when a ruler stays within the limits of the office. The orders and institutions are gifts of God to preserve life on earth and to help it flourish, and thus only insofar as a person properly uses the office is the action God's act. Luther's concept of vocation and station is thus deeply theocentric: God not only commands love, but in creation, provides the relationships, vocations, and stations through which one concretely loves the neighbor. God orders these relationships and they are all attended with God's Word. Because God orders them, when they are properly performed, God is active in creation.

Likewise, the affirmation of the orders of creation and vocation does not lead to a blanket endorsement of all power relations.¹⁶⁷ More specifically, those who occupy leadership roles are not

¹⁶⁶ LW 21:277-278; WA 32:529.27-40.

¹⁶⁷ The relationship between God's establishment of institutions and their relative character in history is a complex argument. Ernst Troeltsch argues that Luther's view is still caught in a medieval world view, Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). See also, Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown 1960) for an account of Luther's ambivalence towards institutions. Vitor Westhelle

free from critique. While the various stations of life are commanded by God, evil people can occupy the role and misuse them. For example, instead of avoiding war and seeking peace, a ruler can be excessively militant, use the military as a means to revenge his own personal vendettas, or abuse his power for personal gain. Instead of preaching the law and gospel, a preacher can avoid offending the congregation by only preaching the good news without condemnation or worse yet, use the church for political gain. In these instances, Luther argues, it is necessary to condemn the ruler and call out sin. While Luther sees anarchy as a greater evil than tyranny, and does not allow for revolution, he does believe that the preacher has a duty to condemn poor leadership. These indictments are not stifled by the notion of vocation; rather, the affirmation provides a basis for critique. By claiming that each station exists to serve the neighbor, Luther provides a normative account that can critique the ways leadership is enacted.

For Luther, all true vocations and stations have two aspects: first, they are attended with a word of God. A husband is commanded to love his wife, a servant is commanded to submit to authorities, a prince is commanded to rule justly, etc. The command of the Word of God does not provide detailed instructions on how to perform one's duty—as we saw, Luther believes reason is sufficient to manage earthly affairs and every station has its own internal duties and rules;¹⁶⁸ rather, the Word of God affirms the goodness of the position that might otherwise seem burdensome.¹⁶⁹ In

adopts a Lutheran liberationist perspective in addressing this question in “The Third Bank of the River”: Thought on Justification and Justice,” in *Justification and Justice*, ed. Viggo Mortensen (Geneva: LWF, 1992).

¹⁶⁸ “The Word of God is not here to teach a maid or a servant how to work in the household and to earn his bread, nor a burgermaster how to rule, nor a farmer how to plow or make hay. In brief, it neither gives nor shows temporal goods for the preservation of this life, for reason has already taught all this to everyone. But it is intended to teach how we are to come to that other life.” LW 21:9; WA 32:304.25-27.

¹⁶⁹ “Therefore though a common laborer, a shoemaker, or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, still he may sit at home and think: “My God has made me a man. He has given me my house, wife, and child and commanded me to love them and to support them with my work.” Note that he is pondering the Word of God in his heart; and

regards to vocation, the Word of God provides comfort and sustains a worker through miserable labor or from a desire to denigrate the goodness of created life. For example, while a manual laborer may feel that his work is devalued and unimportant, the Word of God affirms that through their work they are pleasing God and serving the neighbor. One does not have to do special religious actions to please God nor does one have to be in high esteem in the world; rather, through steadfastly doing one's duty in their position, one loves God and neighbor.

Second, vocations and stations serve one's neighbor in concrete ways.¹⁷⁰ Thus, a manual laborer in the field provides food for the neighbor, the cobbler makes shoes to help the neighbor, the prince provides wise rule, and parents raise children and instruct them. While certain activities that a government is required to do might appear antithetical to Christianity, such as the punishment of the wicked, Luther argues that they ultimately are good because they serve the neighbor and provide peace to the community. Because the vocation serves the neighbor, Luther affirms them as good.

Because every true vocation is equally attended with the word of God, Luther argues that they should be evaluated differently than in the eyes of the world. Most importantly, the earthly distinctions and hierarchies by which people rank and assume superiority over others are shown to be ultimately only appearances. Because all people are equal before God in justification, and because every station is commanded by the Word of God, all stations that are attended with the Word of God are equally valuable. Because God's Word attends these stations, and because these stations both actively aid the neighbor, the work of the servant is as valuable as the work of the prince.

though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God." LW 21:34; WA 32:325.36-326.3.

¹⁷⁰ "The kingdom of God requires you to do what you are commanded to do, to preach and to promote the Word of God, to serve your neighbor according to your calling, and to take whatever God gives you." LW 21:209; WA 32:472.3-5.

This ultimate equality, however, does not entail an erasure of distinctions or different roles for each person. In the sphere of the world, Luther argues, there will always be inequalities and distinction in line with a person's different roles. A cobbler will have different duties than a prince, just as a preacher's role is different than a member of the laity.¹⁷¹ The fundamental equality in the eyes of God does not change the duties incumbent upon the office. For example, although a parent and child are both equally saved by grace, it is incumbent upon the parent to raise the child, to correct her moral actions, and to raise her in the faith; the child, likewise, is called upon to honor and obey her mother and father. The role and office they occupy ought not to be reversed: the parent ought not to obey the child; the child is not charged with raising the parent. Likewise, a ruler needs to perform the duties and functions of a ruler, such as punishing criminals and protecting his citizens, while a servant or soldier ought to submit to the ruler in line with the Scriptural injunction to obey those in authority. While the servant and the ruler are ultimately equal before God, their respective office requires different actions.

For Luther, while these earthly distinctions have no ultimate significance, they nevertheless are instituted by God. The secular realm is not purely secular—rather, it is created by God for the preservation of life. The social divisions, while not of ultimate significance, are instituted by God.

God Himself has ordained and established this secular realm and its distinctions, and by His Word He has confirmed and commended them. For without them this life could not endure. We are all included in them; indeed, we were born into them even before we became

¹⁷¹ “A woman's task is different from a man's, a servant's from a master's, a preacher's from an ordinary citizen's, a child's from a father's, a pupil's or disciple's from a teacher's. Everyone of them has his own task or fruit. So throughout the outward sphere there are differences, while in the inward sphere they are all Christians and identical. There is only one Christian estate and only one natural condition of all men.” LW 21:286; WA 32:537.13-19.

Christians. Therefore we must also remain in them as long as we are on earth, but only according to our outward life and our physical existence.¹⁷²

Because God instituted these distinctions, Luther argues that the Christian stands in two relationships. Before God, all Christians are equal and all of Christ's commandments in the Sermon on the Mount apply to the person considered as an individual—here a person must turn the other cheek, refuse to judge others, and not punish others.¹⁷³ Yet, insofar as a Christian occupies an office, the Christian must do what is necessary in that office. Here, the ruler should not operate in line with the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount, but should do what his or her job requires of her.¹⁷⁴ The magistrate should rule with a view towards the common good and make sure that all goes well. The Christian as such does not have anything to contribute to the secular realm; rather, this is the sphere of reason, prudence, punishment, and concern for the neighbor. A Christian, however, may participate in the regimes, not insofar as he or she is a Christian, rather insofar as he or she lives on earth. Even as the explicit duties may conflict with Christ's commands, the orders are created by God and they serve the neighbor, and so the Christian can do her duty in them. Nevertheless, in his

¹⁷² LW 21:109; WA 32:390.13-18.

¹⁷³ “He is not tampering with the responsibility and authority of the government, but He is teaching His individual Christians how to live personally, apart from their official position and authority. They should not desire revenge at all. They should have the attitude that if someone hits them on one cheek, they are red, if need be, to turn the other cheek to him as well, restraining the vindictiveness not only of their fist but also of their heart, their thoughts, and all their powers as well.” LW 21:106; WA 32:387.36-388.4.

¹⁷⁴ “It is the duty and obligation of those who participate in this earthly regime to administer law and punishment, to maintain the distinctions that exist among ranks and persons, to manage and distribute property. This way everything will be in good shape, and everyone will know what he is to do and to have; no one will meddle in another man's office or pry into his affairs or take his property. That is what lawyers are for, to teach and manage such matters. But the Gospel does not trouble itself with these matters. It teaches about the right relation of the heart to God, while in all these other questions it should take care to stay pure and not to stumble into a false righteousness... He is telling them to live and behave before God and in the world with their heart dependent upon God and uninterested in things like secular rule or government, power or punishment, anger or revenge.” LW 21:108; WA 32:389.22-35.

or her own person, the Christian's heart should not be on power or politics, but only on the love of God.

For Luther, the notion of station affirms God's active presence in creation. God not only commands love, but in creation, provides the relationships, vocations, and stations through which one concretely loves the neighbor. God orders these relationships and they are all attended with God's Word. Because God orders them, when they are properly performed, God is active in creation. George Forell writes, "Luther's concept of the 'natural orders' was part of his belief that God has not only revealed Himself as the Savior of men in the person of His Son Jesus Christ but that He reveals Himself to all men as Creator and Lord of nature and history. The revelation in Christ does not destroy this general revelation of God's preserving will as it is expressed in the 'natural orders.'"¹⁷⁵ While one's station does not justify a person, these social arrangements are grounded in God's love for the created order.

This vision, moreover, sharply contrasts with the picture Niebuhr provides of Luther: whereas Niebuhr argues that Luther's doctrine of sin nullifies the ability to see earthly distinctions and to seek earthly justice, Luther's account provides a robust account of the goodness of creation, even as creation has been spoiled by sin. Luther's account is based upon a division between God's two ways of ruling creation: God rules on the left hand through created means by preserving creation and protecting life; God rules on the right hand through the spiritual kingdom of Christ. These two rules are both grounded in the gifts of God.

IV. The Vision of God's Goodness and Moral Life

In this chapter, I have argued that Luther affirms God's presence in and through creation. Because God is the creator of all that is, God's Word and gifts suffuse all of existence. While these gifts do not justify and can be misused, Luther argues that God is present throughout creation. In

¹⁷⁵ George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), 114.

this last section, I wish to explicate the implications of this argument for Luther's moral vision in terms of value, command, and vision.

Luther's picture of creation as a source of good entails a complex picture of value. For Luther, creation is suffused with many sources of good and value. Because God is the creator of all that is, creation has a multiplicity of gifts and sources of goodness: marriage, family, government, church, air, water, fields, animals, music, culture, reason, the law, etc. For Luther, justification is always the primary gift, for through it, God overcomes that which divides humanity from God, namely, sin, death, and the devil. Yet, God gives many other gifts that are not solely dependent upon Christian revelation: just as God makes the sun shine on the good and the wicked, so too God gives good gifts to everything in creation. God's presence and goodness is thus not experienced only in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, but can be experienced everywhere. All of creation, even in its fallen state, proclaims God's bountiful goodness. Even as we are undeserving, God gives freely and lovingly and this experience of goodness is daily available to all. For example, in his commentary on Matthew 6:26-27, Luther writes, "You see, He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men, and daily should emphasize this to our eyes and ears...In other words, we have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air."¹⁷⁶ God's goodness is present in creation and daily available to all. Even the wicked who know nothing of Christ, daily experience God's good gifts.

Because God's goodness is everywhere, Luther's understanding of the category of command and obedience take on a distinctive hue. For Luther, Christian ethics are performed in obedience to God's Word, yet the concept of God's Word must be properly understood. First, God's Word is not foreign or heteronomous to creation; rather, it structures and preserves the created order. In

¹⁷⁶ LW 21:197; WA 32:461-462.

obeying the command of God, one also accords with one's own-most nature: in other words, Luther's ethic is theonomous. Second, the Word not only demands obedience, but also provides consolation and encouragement. God's Word provides comfort and affirms those who in the eyes of the world appear less valuable. Luther often employs the category of 'obeying the Word of God,' not as an exhortation, but as consolation for the lowly and despised to remind them that they are doing valuable work for God. For Luther, when we act in line with the command given in creation, God delights in our work and takes pleasure in it, even if our actions are simply washing diapers.¹⁷⁷ Luther's concept of the Word is thus pastoral, as it allows creatures to please God through obedience to the Word in one's vocation.

Because of God's abiding presence, Luther's employs ethical categories beyond command and obedience. Most importantly, his theological ethics are structured by the categories of blindness and vision. Because God's goodness suffuses creation, one of the major and continual sins of creatures is blindness to the innumerable gifts God gives. Throughout his mature work, Luther decries the ingratitude that humans feel to God in spite of the many gifts that God gives us throughout creation and our lives. Instead of seeing these gifts, which we should be able to recognize, we ignore these goods and complain about what we do not have. Instead of gratitude, we covet and complain and fail to perceive the good gifts around them. Part of the work of justification, then, is providing a new vision to see the many and abundant gifts from the God who is the creator

¹⁷⁷ "What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, "O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight." LW 45:39-40; WA 10-II:295-296.

of all that is. The work of the law condemns the selfishness that is blind to all; in the word of the Gospel that announces God's love, we acquire a new vision of the many gifts of life. All of existence is marked by God; even as the world is enmeshed in sin, God still protects and preserves all of creation.

This incorporation of the category of vision and blindness indicates that Luther operates with a robust metaphysics of morals. In Luther, the self is enmeshed in a world with numerous values that has many claims to goodness. All of these gifts are grounded in God's gift giving and all aim to serve the neighbor. The Word that creates is the will that confers values. Creation is suffused with value. The task of the Christian life is not simply to obey commands, but also to see and rejoice in the good that creates and gifts all. The self is not simply a will that obeys or disobeys, but is a being enmeshed in existence saturated with value. In other words, for Luther, creation provides the context for ethical questioning and for the nature of the self.

This understanding of the relationship of self to value entails an affirmative relationship to human experience. For Luther, by contrast, experience is central to every aspect of Christianity. As we have seen, Luther repeatedly argues that experience makes the theologian: to truly understand Christianity, one must learn to feel it in one's heart.¹⁷⁸ In the *Commentary on Galatians*, he argues that it is not sufficient to understand the law/Gospel distinction theoretically; rather, one must learn to apply this distinction in the struggles of faith.¹⁷⁹ When Luther discusses hermeneutics, he argues that the external clarity of Scripture requires supplementation by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. To understand Scripture, one must receive the Spirit's testimony, which works through these external means to create faith. This experiential emphasis reaches its pinnacle in the category of

¹⁷⁸ "Sola experientia facit theologum" ("Only experience makes a theologian") LW 54:7; WA 1:16.13.

¹⁷⁹ "This is why I often say that so far as the words are concerned, this doctrine of faith is very easy, and everyone can easily understand the distinction between the Law and grace; but so far as practice, life, and application are concerned, it is the most difficult thing that there is." LW 26:144; WA 40:251.

faith. For Luther, faith is part of God's activity of saving us. In creating this faith, the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts to hear and receive the Word of God. Because faith is central, Luther's theology aims at fostering faith in the reader: he repeatedly calls on his readers to trust in God's promises, to render God God's due. For Luther, faith is assurance and must be experienced for oneself.

In this chapter, I have examined Luther's distinction between creation and salvation as the basic framework for understanding his creational vision. I have argued that this vision develops from a reflection on the promise and leads to a complex account of God's twofold reign and a nuanced account of Christian ethics and existence. For Luther, the goodness of creation is grounded in the God who gives freely and abundantly. In the next chapter, we will examine Luther's understanding of evil and how it relates to this robust creational affirmation.

Chapter 6/ Luther on Evil

This dissertation has pursued the question of how Luther maintains an affirmation of the goodness of creation and God in light of the depth of evil. In the last chapter, I argued that Luther operates with a robust affirmation of creation grounded in the distinction between a theological distinction between creation and justification. In this chapter, I explore the depth of evil in Luther's thought. While the first chapter examined Luther's early understanding of the depth of sin, drawing on the argument of the last chapter, I argue that Luther's mature understanding of the twofold reign of God allows Luther to provide a more complex account of evil that is not simply focused on sin, but also sees evil as tragedy, suffering, and the harsh experiences of life. Just as Luther assigns two kinds of gifts, justification, which is the gift of salvation, and the general gifts of creation, so too he accounts for two types of evil: before God, evil is conceptualized under the category sin; in the world, evil is tragedy, fate, persecution, death, the devil, and suffering. Like in the two kingdoms, these two levels of evil are hierarchical: spiritual evils, namely sin, are always the worst evil; yet, Luther does not reduce evil to the category of sin—life itself is full of tragedies, suffering, and frustrations that are also evil and pose deep theological questions.¹

In the second half of this chapter, I will turn to Luther's response to evil. I argue that it involves both an objective account, which concerns how God overcomes evil in Jesus Christ, and a subjective account of the nature of faith in light of evil. For Luther, both elements are necessary:

¹ In his article, "Grace, Doubt, and Evil: The Constructive Task of Reformation Theology," Ted Peters argues that Luther's insights into grace need to be extended to address the problem of evil, particularly as the concept of sin and salvation is not the pressing concern today as it was in the 16th century. By showing that Luther recognizes other forms of evil at work, this chapter shows that Luther is both aware of other forms of evil and seeks to offer pastoral care. The chapter thus contributes to Peter's project in two ways: first, it agrees with Peters that the task of Reformation Theology is to respond to contemporary concerns and second, it shows how Luther himself addressed these issues. See Ted Peters, "Grace, Doubt, and Evil: The Constructive Task of Reformation Theology," in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bo Holm, Ted Peters, Peter Widmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 307-325.

God overcomes evil in and through the cross; yet the benefits of Christ's work are only made available through faith, which recognizes the sufficiency of Christ's activity. This account of faith in the context of evil deepens and nuances the account of faith that we saw develop in chapter 2. This chapter will thus provide an answer to the question that began the dissertation by showing how in faith Luther maintains the goodness of God while recognizing a radical conception of evil.

I. The Nature of Evil

In this section, I will argue that Luther operates with a wide and complex concept of evil. In order to grasp the breadth of Luther's concept of evil, it is necessary to move away from Luther's more academic writings to his pastoral writings written for church members.² These texts will show that (a) Luther's concept of evil is grounded in experience and (b) his concept of evil is not simply 'sin,' but also includes elements of the tragedy, suffering, and unexplained evil (c) evil, sin, and suffering provide the proper context for theological questions. In so doing, this argument will show the limits of both Radical Lutheranism and the Finnish school of Luther studies. To see this, it will be helpful to briefly recall the picture of evil in both schools.

Radical Lutheranism as a normative theological program adopts a position of radical critique. Because the primary human problem is bondage to sin, they argue that the theologian and pastor must adopt a prophetic role of condemning sin in its various manifestations. The task is to preach justification, which means a death to the sinner and a rising to new life. On this view, the sinner is always bound in sin and self-love; before the comforting word of the Gospel can be heard, one must be condemned in his or her sin. As I have shown, this understanding of evil as sin captures Luther's early thought very well; in both of the early *Disputations* we examined, Luther launches a stringent

² For Luther's theology as pastoral care see Oswald Bayer, "Luther's Ethics as Pastoral Care," in *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, 119-37; Arthur H. Becker, "Luther as *Seelsorger*: The Unexamined Role," in *Interpreting Luther's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Edward C. Fendt*, Fred W. Meuser and Stanley D. Schneider, eds. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), 136-150.

critique against the depth and perversity of sin. Yet, while sin is always the primary category of evil for Luther, in this section I argue that there are other dimensions to evil. Luther does not limit the notion or experience of evil to sin; rather, he understands tragedy, despair, and suffering to also be component pieces of the experience of evil. In showing that Luther operates with a wider concept, the dissertation shows the limits to the project of Radical Lutheranism, particularly its pastoral applications. If evil is not simply sin, then one cannot simply offer prophetic criticisms. For those who suffer the various fates of existence, radical critique is neither the first nor the proper word to offer; rather, the theologian must offer consolation and comfort. By showing the expanded notion of evil, therefore, I show that radical critique cannot be the only position a theologian adopts.

This chapter also separates the project of the dissertation from the Finnish school. The Finnish school, as we have seen, heavily emphasizes the union of the believer with Christ in faith. Through the presence of Christ, the Finns emphasize the way that the believer is reformed and renewed and grows in sanctification towards union with God. The Finnish account of sin has two elements: first, Manama, like the Radical Lutherans, argues that God must do an alien work, to destroy the inherent self-love of the sinner; second, the Finns argue that Christ acts as leaven to bread and sin is gradually removed from the sinner. I earlier argued the Finns misconstrue the relationship of grace and gift in justification. Here, I offer a different critique, namely, that the Finnish account of moral progress abstracts Luther's theology from the basic framework of articulation. More precisely, for Luther, the major question of life is not moral progress, but sin, death, and the devil. The background against which Luther articulates his theology is not one that is neutral or easily conducive to ethical progress; rather the Christian is always beset by sin, death, and the devil. Instead of moral progress, Luther's moral vision is one of a persevering faith in the many times of trial and temptation. By construing everything as progression, the Finns miss the actual context of Luther's thought: the struggle against sin, death, and the devil.

In order to show the way the concept of evil functions in Luther's thought, we will first examine Luther's 1519 *Tessadaecas Consolatoria pro laborantibus et onerantis* (*Fourteen Consolations for those who Labor and are Heavy-laden*). This work outlines Luther's pastoral understanding on how to spiritually approach the nature of good and evil in existence.³ In this, and his pastoral writings more generally, Luther appears quite different than the sharp-tongued polemicist of his famed reformation treatises. Whereas the works we examined in earlier chapters were academic disputations that proffered sharp, incisive commentary in line with the conventions of the genre, Luther here appears as a gentle, consoling spiritual guide who seeks to provide comfort to those experiencing grief, despair, and suffering under the daily struggles of life.⁴ The genre shift is important theologically and particularly in regards to the concept of experience: whereas the disputations deal with questions of sin and grace abstractly, in writing in the genre of pastoral care, Luther displays sensitivity to the context of the listener. The Word of God does not simply come from outside, but responds to the situation of the struggling conscience.

For Luther, this genre of theological work is central to the theological task and is directly commanded by Scripture. Luther claims that the task of the theologian is identical with the task of the body of Christ, namely, to render service to those who suffer. He writes, "Our Lord and Savior Jesus has left us a commandment which applies equally to all Christians, namely, that we are to render humanitarian service, or rather (as Scripture calls them), the works of mercy to those who are afflicted and in a state of calamity, and that we are to visit the sick, try to free the captives, and do

³ For a history of this treatise see Jane E Strohl, "Luther's *Fourteen Consolations*" in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 310-324. See also Dennis Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Adviser: The Interface of Theology and Piety in Luther's Devotional Writings* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

⁴ For the importance of genre in understanding Luther's theology, see Christine Helmer, *The Trinity and Martin Luther: A Study of the Relationship between Genre, Language, and the Trinity in Luther's Works (1523-1546)* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1999).

similar things for our neighbors so that the evils of the present may be somewhat lessened.”⁵ To write theology properly, one must imitate Christ, who entered our suffering freely to save us, by seeking to care for the suffering soul who suffers from the evils present in experience. The work of theology is to comfort the soul in the same way Christ cared for us—the theological task is not simply to critique sin, but is inherently pastoral; to do theology one must attend to the listener’s position and offer them a word that speaks to their situation. Here, unlike in the disputations, Luther portrays theology as consolation and not in the first place critique—theology is properly caring for souls who suffer in the midst of life.

For Luther, the Scripture not only commands that the theologian work for the comfort of souls, but it itself provides consolation. Luther argues that the Holy Scriptures approach the question of consolation by showing that in this life, blessings and evil are wholly intermixed.⁶ As such, and seemingly drawing on the Stoic tradition, Luther argues that the task of theology is to reach a state of indifference towards things.⁷ Luther writes,

The Holy Scriptures approach the matter of comfort in a twofold manner, insofar as they present to our view both blessings and evils, wholesomely intermingled. This is in accord with the word of the Preacher, “In the day of evil be mindful of the good and in the day of the good be mindful of the evil” (Ecclus. 11:25). The Holy Spirit knows that a thing has only such value and meaning to a man as he assigns to it in his thoughts. Whatever he regards as trivial and of no value will affect him only slightly, whether it be love when it comes to him or pain when it goes away. Therefore, the Spirit tries with great effort to draw man away

⁵ LW 42:122; WA 6:104.20-24.

⁶ LW 42:124; WA 6:106.24-25.

⁷ For the impact of Cicero on Luther see Gary M. Simpson, “‘Putting on the Neighbor’: The Ciceronian Impulse in Luther’s Christian Approach to Practical Reason” in *The Devil’s Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 31-38.

from thinking about things and being affected by them. When he has accomplished this, then man is indifferent about things no matter what they may be.⁸

For Luther, the Spirit accomplishes this aim of making the person indifferent towards things through the Word of Scripture. In particular, Scriptures divert us from the thing that presently afflicts us to something not present: on the day of evil, Scripture calls us to be mindful to the good, and on the day of good, to be mindful of evil.

Jane Strohl argues that this programmatic statement, however, is somewhat misleading as Luther actually adopts two tactics in the work of consolation. First, he seeks to relativize the reader's suffering by reminding them that one's current ills could be much worse and thereby seeks to foster this Stoic indifference. Second, Strohl writes, "At significant points in the treatise Luther does not diminish suffering, but transfigures it, making of the very *malum a bonum* and generating not indifference, which neither seeks nor avoids, but a passion that actively rejoices in the burdens."⁹ In these instances, as we will see, Luther asks the reader to look beyond the present suffering to the ways God can even use the current experience of evil for God's own purposes.

To accomplish these aims, Luther adopts and modifies a then current cult of piety.¹⁰ In Germany at that time, a practice had developed in which a *viator* was called upon to contemplate fourteen saints, each depicted on an altar screen and each associated with the cure for a particular illness. Wishing to get away from the veneration of saints, Luther provided fourteen spiritual objects to contemplate in confronting and coping with one's present sufferings. The first seven mental images were devoted to the contemplation of evil; the last seven were contemplations of God's grace and gifts. By meditating on these goods and evils, Luther sought to strengthen faith in the midst of

⁸ LW 42:124; WA 6:106.24-32.

⁹ Strohl, "Luther's *Fourteen Consolations*," 313-314.

¹⁰ For more on this cult of piety, see Darrel W. Amundsen, "The Medieval Catholic Tradition," in *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Darrel W. Amundsen (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 65-107.

one's current sufferings, to make the troubles of the present lighter. Luther employs seven metaphors to describe evil: evil within us, evil before us, evil behind us, evil on the left hand, evil on the right hand, evil beneath us, and evil above us. For Luther each of these evils ought to be meditated upon—by contemplating the breadth and nature of evil, one can come to see either that one's current situation is not as intense as the current feeling of it or that God can use even this evil for good. In order to grasp the complexity of Luther's account of evil, we will examine each of these in varying depth.

Luther's first image of evil is the evil within us. For Luther, the evil within us is primarily sin. Instead of recognizing God as God, we attribute God's actions to ourselves. Luther argues that despite what we may feel or experience, the evil within us is by far the worst form of evil. He writes, "Whether man believes it or not, it is most certainly true that no torture can compare with the worst of all evils, namely, the evil within man himself. The evils within him are more numerous and far greater than any which he feels."¹¹ In ways we have seen, Luther argues that the person is naturally a liar, vain, and opposed to God.

Luther's understanding of sin as the greatest evil is grounded in his understanding of the ultimacy of God. For Luther, God is always the ultimate authority in the universe. Because God is supreme, God's evaluation has complete determining power over the self: God's grace saves absolutely and God's wrath damns absolutely.¹² Because God is righteous and judges human action justly, sin alone merits God's wrath and eternal damnation. Whereas other evils cause great suffering here, they do not merit God's wrath—quite the contrary, God always provides comfort to those who are downtrodden and oppressed. Sin alone produces a situation in which we actively put ourselves in opposition to God. To do evil is always worse than suffering evil, for the active

¹¹ LW 42:125; WA 6:107.6-10.

¹² See chapter 3 for more on this argument.

engagement with evil separates oneself from God—the evil one suffers is always less than that which one is responsible for.¹³ Because God is ultimate, and sin alone puts us at odds with that which is ultimate, sin is the most horrendous of evils.

For Luther, the depths of darkness in our hearts are so extreme that they cannot be contemplated or viewed by us. Sin is not simple or apparent, but is radical, deep, and horrific. Luther argues, in fact, one of God’s general provisions for creation is that God does not allow people to experience the depth of their own evils. If we experienced the true depth of our corruption and misery, we would certainly be overcome by sorrow and wish to die. The true depth of evil can only be known, but not fully experienced, by faith, in which God points out this horror.

While we never feel or experience the true depth of our misery, Luther argues that this knowledge is beneficial for facing our present sufferings. By knowing the depth of our sin, Luther argues we are more able to better confront other evils. He writes:

While you do not feel the true evils, be grateful that you do not, but keep the true evils in mind. The evil that you feel will then be less of a burden. It is therefore clear that in this life a man’s freedom from pain is always greater than his pain. This is not because his whole evil is not present, but because the goodness of God keeps it hidden so that he neither thinks of it nor feels it.¹⁴

For Luther, this knowledge of one’s own evil is not simply an abstract theological doctrine, but is, in fact, comforting in times of suffering. If we truly knew the evil within ourselves, we would not have any trouble facing the evils of the world. He writes, “Everyone who felt or firmly believed in the evil within himself would do the same. He would voluntarily invite all external evils, hold them to be mere child’s play, and would never be more sad than when he had no evils to bear.”¹⁵ The first

¹³ LW 42:125-126; WA 6:107.22-24.

¹⁴ LW 42:126; WA 6:107.28-35.

¹⁵ LW 42:126; WA 6:107.38-108.2.

consolation, then, comes from the knowledge of the depth of one's own evil and the ability to face all other evils.

While Luther emphasizes that this sin is too deep and too radical to fully experience, he argues that "it bears fruit which are clearly seen."¹⁶ The clearest sign of the evil within is the trembling conscience, in which a person loses faith and is no longer sure if God is truly gracious. This weakness is far worse than any physical weakness, since it is spiritual and concerns the entirety of the person. If one does not know that God is gracious, one will flee to idolatry, works, and attempts to please God. Beyond our conscience, the effects of sin are apparent in the misery, pain, and corruption of the world. Because sin is primary, the Radical Lutherans are correct in emphasizing the importance of exposing and damning sin.

Yet even this first category of evil, the evil within, is not simply concerned with sin. Rather, Luther also locates the daily disappointments with life and "all those tragic experiences" under this category.¹⁷ Here Luther expands the notion of evil beyond the category of sin to include the daily frustrations and disappointments of life. He claims that as creatures we are confronted with a spiritual sadness due to the disconnect between our internal wishes and the harsh course of reality. The ways our own plans are constantly frustrated by life is an internal evil with which humans have to cope. He writes

How many of our plans end in frustration! How many of our hopes are dashed! How many things do we see, how many do we hear that we do not like! And the very things that happen in accord with our wish also happen against our wish. Nothing is complete and perfect. Finally all these things are so much greater the higher one rises in station and rank. Such a person will of necessity be driven about by far more and greater billows, floods, and

¹⁶ LW 42:126-127; WA 6:108.8-9.

¹⁷ LW 42:127; WA 6:108.14.

tempests than others in a similar situation. Thus Psalm 104 says rightly, “In the sea of this world are small and large animals, creeping beings without number,” that is, an infinite number of trials. This is why Job calls the life of man ‘a trial.’¹⁸

This understanding of evil as the gap between our plans and the course of the world shows Luther’s experiential understanding of evil. The disappointments we feel in life are experienced as evil and therefore require a theological response.

In moving from the evil within to the evil before us, Luther further expands the notion of evil from one focused upon internal states to one that recognizes the tragedy of existence. Whereas sin was a theological concept and referred primarily to the human situation before God, this class of evil concerns life in this world. Just as the daily gifts of existence are good, but do not have salvific significance, so too the evils of this life are truly evil, although they do not merit the wrath of God. Nevertheless, these evils can provoke despair and suffering. Adopting a realistic notion of life, Luther describes this evil in terms of the sad fates one can suffer in this life. Most particularly, he argues that the future holds all kinds of evil that are numerous and varied. Because of the nature of life, we should assume that any evil that has occurred to anyone else may also happen to us.

No man is safe from the evils that befall any other, for what one has suffered another may also suffer. This applies to all the historic events and tragedies of all ages and to all the lamentations of the world. This applies also to the more than three hundred diseases which have been observed and with which the human body can be afflicted. And if there are that many diseases, how great do you think will be the number of the misfortunes that assail our possessions, our friends, and even our very mind, which, after all, is the main target of all evils and the one trusting place of sorrow and every ill? These evils increase in power and intensity as a man rises to higher dignity and rank. Since misery, shame, and indignity can

¹⁸ LW 42:127; WA 6:108.16-24.

suddenly overtake a man of such an exalted estate, he must at all times be in dread of these evils, for they all hang by but a slender thread, like the sword which the tyrant Dionysius suspended above the head of his guest at his table.¹⁹

Even as existence is a gift of God, after the Fall, it is rife with suffering, sorrow, and evil. Creation is broken and suffers the effects of sin. All of existence is marked by evil, tragedy, and sadness, even as it is fundamentally good. In a sermon from February 1, 1517, Luther is so bold as to declare, “Behold, then, what great miseries we are filled with...He who does not feel this is dead, and as I have said, he who really feels it is certainly one of the disciples who wakes Jesus and says “Save, Lord; we are perishing.”²⁰ For Luther, this experience of evil, sadness, and suffering is daily present and calls for a theological response that is neither a prophetic critique of sin nor an account of moral progress.²¹ For Luther, the evils of existence are truly evil and can cause immense suffering and thus require a profound structure of hope.

¹⁹ LW 42:128; WA 6:109.2-8.

²⁰ LW 51:25; WA 1.129.36-40.

²¹ Luther displays this sense of evil as an experienced reality and as a harsh tragedy in his pastoral letters. In these letters, Luther seeks to provide consolation to those who are grieving and provides pastoral words. Against the position of radical critique, Luther affirms the horror of evil, and yet offers Scripture and Christ as Words of hope. For example, in 1530, Luther wrote a letter to Conrad Cordatus, who lost a son. Luther was the child’s baptismal sponsor and in this letter he expresses his own grief at losing a daughter.

May Christ comfort you in this sorrow and affliction of yours. Who else can soothe such a grief? I can easily believe what you write, for I too have had experience of such a calamity, which comes to a father’s heart sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even to the marrow, etc. But you ought to remember that it is not to be marveled at if he, who is more truly and properly a father than you were, preferred for his own glory than your son—nay, rather his son—should be with him rather than with you, for he is safer there than here. But all this is vain, a story that falls on deaf ears, when your grief is so new. I therefore yield to your sorrow. Greater and better men than we are have given way to grief and are not blamed for it. Nevertheless, it is a good thing for you too to have had this kind of trial and to have tasted the power of conscience so that you may learn in your own experience what is that power of the Word and of faith which is proved in these agonies. You have not yet felt the thorn in the flesh and the buffeting of Satan’s messenger. What you have so far suffered you have suffered in glorious and trusting innocence—that is, with a good conscience. (60)

For Luther, the experience of grief in experience is harsh and he recognizes that words are vain in light of these evils. Yet, he still provides words of comfort and hope.

Luther's letter also display a pastoral sense that the theological task is never simple—one must find the proper word in the proper context. In 1532, Luther's student Ambrose Berndt lost his wife and child in childbirth and then lost another child shortly thereafter. In this letter again, Luther affirms the importance of grief and sorrow, yet also argues that we must not let grief or evil completely overwhelm all other considerations. He writes,

I am not so inhuman that I cannot appreciate how deeply the death of Margaret distresses you. For the great and godly affection which binds a husband to his wife is so strong that it cannot easily be shaken off, and this feeling of sorrow is not so displeasing to God, if only it be held in check, since it is an expression of what God has assuredly implanted in you. Nor would I account you a man, to say nothing of a good husband, if you could at once throw off your grief.

Nevertheless, my dear Ambrose, I allow your mourning only insofar as it is not contrary to the will of God. For it is necessary to put a limit to one's sorrow and grief. Wherefore you ought to reflect in this manner: You are at first wretched in this world because your wife and son have been taken away. No hurt so painful as this can befall a man in domestic life. It is especially so in your case because you had a wife who was furnished with such uncommon gifts, who was so accommodating to you in all respects, who was so modest and adorned with the best manners, and what is most important, who was able in an unusual degree to delight your heart and move your soul with pleasant and Christian conversation. And I know for certain that nothing makes you more wretched than the realization that she was a gentle spirit who was well-suited to your temperament.

On the other hand, you must also reflect on the fact that this very death of your wife ought to make you exceedingly happy before God inasmuch as she died in childbirth, that is, in the performance of her God-given duty and in the exercise of her proper calling. Moreover, she did this with a resolute spirit and firm faith in Christ...

You should give careful thought to these two things. If you compare physical with spiritual gifts, you will certainly come to the conclusion that spiritual gifts are greater than physical ones. Occupy yourself with these thoughts unceasingly and control your grief as much as you can. Comfort yourself with the Word of God, the pre-eminent consolation.
(63)

In a letter to Benedict Pauli, Luther offers similar advice:

The Scriptures do not prohibit mourning and grieving over deceased children. On the contrary, we have many examples of godly patriarchs and kings who mournfully bewailed the death of their sons. Nevertheless, there ought to be a certain moderation in our grief. Consequently you do well that you mourn for your son, but at the same time you ought to leave room for consolation. And this consolation is that the Lord gave you and now has taken away your son. You cannot withstand him, and so you ought rather to imitate Job, who, when he lost his goods and his children, said "Shall we receive good [at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil]?" He rightly contemplated both the good things which he had received from the Lord and the evil things which had happened to him. You should do likewise, and you will discover that you have received and have more and much greater good

things from the Lord than the evil you now experience. But at the present time your eyes are fixed only on the evil—that is, that your son died the kind of death he did when he plunged from the top of the house and was carried away lifeless—and accordingly you forget the great and most excellent goods and gifts of God, namely, that you have a knowledge of the Word, that you have Christ’s favor, and that you have a good conscience. These things are in and of themselves such a great treasure that they deservedly surpass all the other evils that can have [sic] befallen you. No one who has not experienced it can believe how great a cross it is to have a bad conscience.”

For Luther, existence poses deep problems, namely the evil experiences of life and death. Yet, Luther argues, God in God’s Word provides consolation to these situations. The consolation is not simply knowledge, nor does it deny the reality of evil, but it provides hope that God will triumph over these evils. In a letter to Queen Mary of Hungary, who had recently lost her husband, Luther outlines the theological source of comfort.

For though it is (and properly should be) a grave and bitter trial for Your Majesty to be left a widow so soon and to be deprived of your dear husband, still much consolation is to be found in Scriptures, and especially in the psalms, which abundantly point to the dear and gracious Father and Son in whom sure and everlasting life lies hidden. And certainly anyone to whom it is given to see in the Scriptures and to experience the Father’s love toward us can easily endure all the misfortune that may come upon him on this earth...No such calamity can overtake any human being as once overtook the Father himself when his beloved Son was rewarded for all his miracles and benefactions by being maligned, cursed, and finally subjected to the most shameful death on the cross. Everyone thinks that his own cross is the heaviest and takes it to heart more than the cross of Christ—even if he had endured ten crosses. This is so because we are not so patient as God is, and consequently a smaller cross is more painful to us than Christ’s cross. (57-58)

In 1528, Luther wrote a letter to a widow whose husband had attempted suicide. Again, he claims that he is moved to provide consolation in line with Christian love. In the opening of the letter he writes “Your son N has told me of the grief and misfortune that have befallen you in the death of your husband and I am moved by Christian love to write you this letter of consolation.” (59) For Luther, the grief of the widow is enough to provide spiritual consolation. For Luther, Christ provides the comfort and consolation in these situations: “It should comfort you to know that in the struggle which your husband was engaged, Christ finally won the victory. Besides, it should console you to know that when your husband died he was in his right mind and had Christian confidence in our Lord, which I was exceedingly glad to hear. Christ himself struggled like this in the Garden, yet he won the victory at last and was raised from the dead.”

Luther also sees suicide as the work of the devil and therefore not necessarily leading to damnation. Here he writes, “That your husband inflicted injury upon himself may be explained by the devil’s power over our members. He may have directed your husband’s hand, even against his will...How often the devil breaks arms, legs, backs and all members! He can be master of the body and its members against our will.” The consolation though is from Scripture. “You ought therefore to be content with God’s will and number yourself among those of whom Christ says “blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted...Suffering and misfortune must come if we are to be

In the next three classes of evil, the evil behind us, the evil beneath us, and the evil on our left hand, Luther continues to examine the way evil is experienced in life that provides the framework for the task of theology. In the evil behind us, Luther asks the reader to contemplate the evils experienced in one's past; in the evil beneath us, the evils of death and hell; and in the evil to our left hand, the evil of our enemies. Again, Luther draws upon the daily experience of evil in order to describe it. Yet, Luther changes his approach to the question of evil: whereas before he instructed the Christian to meditate on evils to lessen current suffering, in these evils he calls upon the Christian to contemplate the provisions of God within the current suffering. That is, when an evil befalls a person, Luther calls on the sufferer to contemplate not the evil in itself, but all the other evils God prevented from occurring. The Christian should contemplate God's providential care which both upholds the Christian in her struggles and also prevents greater evils from occurring. For example, when we think about the evils that have befallen us in our past, we should not simply focus on what has happened to us, but should also contemplate all the evils that God has prevented from occurring. The contemplation of evil should call to mind God's work against evil and offer hope.

This notion of God's active struggle against evil presents a picture of God actively engaged in the world. While in *The Bondage of the Will* Luther upholds a strong doctrine of providence by which God works all in all, in this earlier text, Luther depicts God's sovereignty in terms of a struggle against evil. While God always has the upper hand against evil, Luther depicts evil as a force that God actively engages and opposes. God's sovereignty is one that fights against the present evil and prevents greater calamities from occurring. He writes,

partakers of comfort." (59) All page numbers are from *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1960).

When none of these things happen to us it is because the preventing right hand of the Most High surrounds us on all sides with great might and like a wall (as is seen in the case of Job), so that Satan and the evils in their frustration can only be grievously vexed. From this we see how dearly we should love God whenever some evil afflicts us, for by that one evil our most loving Father would want us to see how many evils would threaten and attack us if he himself did not stand in the way.²²

Evil is precisely that which opposes life and opposes God's intentions. God's action is always opposing evil and holding it at bay. When we do suffer evil, this is God allowing a smaller evil to break through in order to call to mind all the evil that God is preventing. Despite the evil that we currently experience, Luther instructs that we should praise God as God limits and holds back greater evils.

While God works to prevent evil, when evil occurs, God can use these horrendous evils for good. For example, even though death is an evil that we naturally fear, Luther sees death itself as serving God's ends. Because sin is the worst offense and chief evil, death releases us from the sins we now commit and from those we would be tempted with in the future. Death is itself evil, but God also allows death to put an end to the evils of life and thus God uses the evil of death for good. Luther claims, "The man who does not prefer the evil of death to the evil of sin loves God his Father but little. God has ordained that this evil be brought to an end by death."²³

Evil, for Luther, thus is a complex notion: it opposes God's will, though God can use it for good; God allows small evils to harm us in order to help us recall God's provisions; evil can cause deep suffering in the midst of life. These various engagements and forms of evil show Luther's theology operating here in a pastoral register. The variety of positions he offers provides resources

²² LW 42:128; WA 6:109.16-21.

²³ LW 42:130; WA 6:110.24-27.

for someone to think in various ways about his or her struggles and to call on the goodness of God. These suggestions do not solve the problems, so much as provide resources for coping and rethinking the experience. Most importantly, however, these pastoral writings show Luther engaging evil as a spiritual counselor who seeks to console consciences and provide guidance in the midst of the struggles of daily life, and not simply as a critic of sin. While critique is necessary, the act of consolation is also pastorally and theologically central.

This pastoral task is reinforced in the sixth image of evil, the evil to our right hand. Here Luther enjoins the Christian to endure suffering as all the saints in the church have endured evil.²⁴ In this image of evil, Luther adds another dimension to evil: namely, that evil intensifies the more one has faith. For Luther, Christian faith does not help people avoid evil and suffering; rather, because those who have the Word will always be attacked by the devil, the Christian will suffer more in this life. Instead of progressing in righteousness in a straightforward manner as seems to be assumed in the Finnish school, on Luther's picture, one is constantly attacked by sin, death, and the devil. One of the aims of contemplating evil is to learn to endure this evil in faith, as all the saints have done. While Luther is normally cautious in regard to venerating the saints, he argues that if they do have a purpose for faith, it is to show us how to endure evil in a faithful manner. Those who pray to the saints to avoid evil completely misunderstand the function of saints in the life of faith: they teach us what should be borne with patience, but they do not help us escape from evil.²⁵ Evil and suffering will be constant features of our life, especially for the Christian. It is precisely for this reason why Luther recommends faith in the external word and the constant study of God's promises in the catechism—only by trusting in the promise given to us will we be able to endure the assaults of the devil.

²⁴ LW 42:135-137; WA 6:115.20-117.25.

²⁵ LW 42:138; WA 6:116.1-11.

Even as the Christian suffers in the midst of his or her friends, the Christian can find comfort in and through suffering. Luther argues that all suffering has either one of two causes: first, if we are in sin, our current suffering may be God's ways of chastening us to purify us from all unrighteousness. In this case, while the suffering itself may be harsh, Luther argues, we ought to rejoice that through our suffering we are being sanctified and free from our sin. The evil we suffer is not simply evil, but God's way of correcting from the greatest evil. Second, if our suffering is not due to our sin, we are suffering innocently and we therefore ought to rejoice as we will receive the comfort of God's care.²⁶ For Luther, in either case, our suffering should prompt us to self-examine and confess our sin, for once we confess we will suffer innocently.²⁷

In the *Fourteen Consolations*, Luther presents an account of evil as something that surrounds us and causes grave trouble. Luther depicts evil both as sin and as suffering, both the tragedies of life and as a result of being a Christian. In this text, the basis for the concept of evil, as we have seen, is both the theological concept of sin and the life in which we struggle. Luther does not develop his concept of evil simply from sin, but asks the Christian to meditate upon experience and the way they suffer in the midst of life. The purpose of this reflection is to lessen the current evil through focusing on the depth and breadth of evil. By realizing the depth and horror of evils, we can confront our current suffering faithfully. This does not mean, however, that Luther undermines our experience of evil. Rather, he argues that even as we can lessen these evils through thought and make their influence less vicious, these things do not cease being evil for us. "Yet these do not cease being evil just because they are less sharply felt by us."²⁸ Luther claims that our best defense is to

²⁶ "If you suffer because of your sins, then you ought to rejoice that you are being purged of your sins... Whenever you suffer, it is either because of your sins or your righteousness. Both kinds of suffering sanctify and save if you will but love them." LW 42:140; WA 6:117.9-11.

²⁷ We will examine the seventh image of evil, the contemplation of evil in the suffering of Christ, below. In this image, we see the overcoming of all evil and we will discuss it more below when we speak of the work of Christ below.

²⁸ LW 42:127; WA 6:108.25-28.

become familiar with our own evil, to know that our own evil far outstrips the evil we suffer, so that we will be able to despise them. Yet even here, the evils are still evil and will have to be endured.

In his more mature work, Luther retains an emphasis on evil as the framework for theological questioning and the background presupposed by his positive theological pronouncements. In these works, Luther's account of evil centers on the great enemies of all of life: sin, death, the devil, and the wrath of God. These classes of evil encompass the breadth and depth of evil: as actors, we produce sin that provokes the wrath of God; as patients, we suffer the persecutions of the devil and must face the horror of death. These evils seem to be irremovable structures of existence: despite the best effort, these evils cannot be overcome through human action or progress. As we will see in the next section, Luther describes Christ's work primarily in reference to these.

For Luther, death is an evil that threatens everyone. While death is certain, it poses an evil that is harsh and frightful for everyone who lives and contemplates it. The evil is so powerful that people will endure almost any other form of suffering in order to avoid it. "There is no one who would not choose to submit to all other evils if thereby he could avoid the evil of death. Even the saints dread it, and Christ submitted to it with trembling fear and bloody sweat."²⁹ Death is particularly frightful, as we always must face it alone. In the famous *Invocavit* Sermon of 1522, Luther writes, "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me."³⁰ The real horror of death, however, arises because death is not simply or primarily biological death; rather, it is weighted with theological and eschatological import. In particular,

²⁹ LW 42:129; WA 6:109.35-36.

³⁰ LW 51:70; WA. Br 8:51, 11-15, No. 3140.

Luther ties death together with the last judgment: as such, death is always accompanied by the law, sin, and wrath.³¹ In his commentary on Psalm 118:17, Luther writes that “Death does not come alone; it always brings sin and the law with it.”³² In light of the law, death appears as the wrath of God against our sin. Death was not a natural part of the created order—the very fact we fear it shows that we are created for living and not for death, and so our death appears as the repayment for one’s sins.³³ This fear produces existential anguish before the prospect of death. Death is the final place where we can lose trust in the promise, where the devil will attack us with our works, and where the wrath of God is felt. Death is a battle to be feared and wrestled with and it always structures our existence.³⁴

Yet, Luther argues, death is not the worst future evil. More than tragedy and death, Christians have to fear the safety and security of faith. For Luther, the path of faith is narrow and the devil opposes it at every step.³⁵ Drawing on 2 Corinthians 11:14, Luther argues that the devil appears as an angel of light, that is, the devil primarily is not a black devil encouraging gross evil, though the devil does that too.³⁶ Instead, the devil emphasizes things that appear to human reason to be good: righteousness, moral virtue, and the need to do the works of law. While apparently good, the devil puts them to the wrong use and accuses the conscience with them, thereby causing humans to lose faith in the promise of God and to resort to our own merits and works. This distorts the

³¹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, 325-326.

³² LW 14:83; WA Br 31:146.15-17.

³³ Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 382.

³⁴ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, 330.

³⁵ “The path is so very slippery and the foe is so very powerful, armed as he is with our own strength (that is, the aid given by our own flesh and all our evil desires), attended by the countless armies of the world, its pleasures and lusts on the right hand, its hardships and the evil intentions of men on the left. Besides all this, this foe is himself a master in the art of doing harm, of reducing and destroying us in a thousand different ways.” LW 42:129; WA 6:110.3-7.

³⁶ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* remains the greatest source on the function of the devil in Luther’s theology. For a dissenting opinion on the importance of his interpretation of the apocalyptic Luther, see Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Selbsteinschätzung*, in *Evangelium in der Geschichte Studien zu Luther und der Reformation* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 158-175.

perception of Christ: instead of Christ being seen as the one who is sheer gift for us, the devil presents an alien Christ who appears as judge, tempter, and accuser.³⁷ The particular work of the devil is thus one of moving vision: instead of focusing on the promises of God, the devil turns vision to the self and thereby causes despair. By focusing on ourselves and our own merit, we lose confidence in God and instead of life appearing as gift, all aspects of faith, God, Christ, and creation appear as enemy. In his commentary on Psalm 118, Luther writes, “The devil can attack the heart with such terror, death, and despair that a person avoids God, becomes God’s enemy, and commits blasphemy. As a result, the troubled conscience can think only to consider God, the devil, death, sin, and hell, and all creation as one, for it has all become a perpetual enemy.”³⁸ Importantly, the devil always attacks those who have the Word of God—once we have faith, the devil works to attack the conscience and accuse us. As long as one is in life, one is constantly assailed by the devil, who aims to have us lose the fundamental trust in God.

While the devil constantly threatens the believer with the loss of faith, the devil is always subordinate to God.³⁹ That is, while Luther will refer to the devil as the prince of this world, the devil’s authority is circumscribed by the power of God. The chief fear of Luther therefore centers on the question of God’s wrath in predestination. For Luther, as we have seen, God comes to humanity clothed in Christ. In this Word, God has shown us all God wants us to know about God, namely that God is merciful and provides us with salvation through faith alone. Yet, Luther argues

³⁷ LW 26:195; WA Dr 40-1: 320.31-33.

³⁸ LW 14:84; WA Br 31:147.6-11. *Luther’s Spirituality*, trans. Philip Krey and Peter Krey in *Luther’s Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 212.

³⁹ David Steinmetz’s writes: “Recent scholarship has shown a new curiosity about Luther’s preoccupation with the devil. It is true, of course that Luther has a great deal to say about the devil as the chief adversary of God. At times, Luther can sound almost dualistic, so graphically does he portray satanic opposition to God. Yet, as terrible as the devil is and as ferociously as he rages against the little flock of true believers, the fact remains that the devil is God’s creature and cannot act beyond the limits set for him by God...the last word in this as in all things belongs to God. For that reason, the central theological problem for Luther remains the problem of God.” David Steinmetz, “Luther and the Hidden God,” in *Luther in Context*, 31.

that there is also a hidden will of God that ordains who will and will not be recipients of God's mercy, it works death and sin, and wills many things not disclosed in Christ. This hidden will causes existential horror: while the devil always oppresses us, the wrath of God in predestination causes ultimate despair. In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther writes:

Doubtless it gives the greatest possible offence to common sense or natural reason, that God, Who is proclaimed as being full of mercy and goodness, and so on, should of His own mere will abandon, harden and damn men, as though He delighted in the sins and great eternal torments of such poor wretches. It seem an iniquitous, cruel, intolerable, thought to think of God; and it is this that has been a stumbling block to so many great men down the ages. And who would not stumble at it? I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man.⁴⁰

For Luther, the hidden will of God seems to contradict the revealed will: while in the revealed will, God deplores death and seeks to end sin and death, God in the revealed will works life, death, and all in all. This hidden God puts the question of faith against a terrifying background for it locates the problem of evil within God's very being. How can God condemn so many and still be good?

For Luther, I have argued, the question of evil is not simply reducible to sin. Evil has many manifestations, including tragedy, death, the devil, and the wrath of God.⁴¹ These multiple dimensions of evil provide the background for Luther's understanding of the nature of the Christian life. Even as the Christian is a sinner and produces evil, so too, she or he suffers from multiple assaults. This tragic and complicated background shows the Finnish school's interpretation of Luther and moral progress to be too simplistically construed. Even as Luther does have room for partial moral progress in life, the experience of faith appears to be one in which one struggles to

⁴⁰ Luther, *Bondage of the Will*, 217; WA 18:719.4-15.

⁴¹ For the tragic elements in Luther's thought, see Lois Malcolm, "The Power of the Cross: Interchange in Paul and Luther," in *The Gift of Grace*, 89-100.

believe and maintain faith in the promise more than a straightforward growth in righteousness. The chief dynamic and task of theology is the question of the goodness of God in light of evil.⁴²

Similarly, while sin is the chief and most awful evil and often requires radical critique, this texts shows that Luther often engaged in more pastoral approaches to evil. Theology for Luther is a matter of caring for consciences and for those affected by sin, suffering, and the devil. This entails that theology, in addition to its prophetic role, must also be a form of pastoral care. While sometimes this calls for a condemnation of sin, other times it calls for consolation and encouragement. Radical critique, while necessary, can never therefore become the sole approach to theological questioning for Luther.

II. Luther's Response to the Problem of Evil

So far, I have argued that Luther adopts a multifaceted account of the nature of evil: the evils of suffering from disease, shame, and death are evil just as the evils of faith, sin, death, and the devil. Luther's description of evils here are both theological and experiential. The category of evil is not simply sin, which one performs as an agent, but also that which one suffers in life. The experience of evil, and thus life itself, are part of theological reflection and pose problems to which theology responds. Because the central problem of existence is evil, the central problem of theology is a response to evil.

How then should theology respond? For Luther, as we saw in earlier chapters, theology always has two foci: theology must always deal with both the justifying God and the sinful human being.⁴³ Theology is never simply a description of God in abstraction; rather, theology must always

⁴² Here I agree with Oswald Bayer: "The dispute of justification reaches its climax in the theodicy lawsuit about God. Why do the just have to suffer? Why does God not resist evil? Why does God not intervene? Why does God seem not to care? Why does God evade us? 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 10.

⁴³ LW 12:311; WA 40-II:328.1. See also Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 29-43.

speak of God as the God who justifies us; likewise, theology is never simply a description of the human, but concerns the sinner who is redeemed by God and has faith in God's action. In approaching the central question of theology, evil, therefore, Luther adopts a twofold approach: first, Luther describes God's overcoming of evil on the cross, that is, God truly overcame evil in the person of Jesus Christ; second, Luther deals with the subjective response of the believer to the question of evil. For Luther, the account of faith we saw develop in previous chapters comes to fruition here: that is, despite appearances to the contrary, the Christian is called to cling to the promise in faith against all evil. Through this double movement, the Christian approaches the question of evil through a radical trust and hope in the faithfulness of God.

In this section, then, I will first examine Luther's description of Christ's work of overcoming evil in his 1531 *Lectures on Galatians*, particularly in reference to his commentary on Galatians 3:13. In order to show the centrality of this discussion of evil for Luther's mature work, I will then trace the implications of Christ's overcoming of evil for a number of Luther's central theological contentions. Finally, I will examine the individual's participation in the event of Christ's overcoming evil through faith in the promise.

(1) For Luther, the central event of the Christian faith is the cross, for on the cross Christ overcomes all evil.⁴⁴ To describe this, Luther provides a dynamic account of Christ adopting the evil that confronts human existence: sin, death, and the devil. In the incarnation, Christ did not merely become human, but took on the entirety of humanity's flesh. Because, as we have seen, Luther sees

⁴⁴ There is an abundance of literature on Luther's view of the cross. See Hans-Martin Barth, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 77-100; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 165-175; Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 110-130; Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1985); Daniel Olivier, *Luther's Faith: The Cause of the Gospel in the Church*, trans. John Tonkin (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977); Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015); Gene Edward Veith, *Spirituality of the Cross* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999); Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

evil affecting all spheres of existence, in taking on humanity's flesh, Christ takes all these evils onto himself. While Christ himself was sinless, he took the entirety of humanity's sin into his own person. Because Christ truly adopts this sin, Luther describes Christ as the greatest sinner in history. He writes,

He bore the person of a sinner and a thief—and not of one but of all sinners and thieves. For we are sinners and thieves, and therefore we are worthy of death and eternal damnation. But Christ took all our sins upon Himself and for them He died on the cross....Christ was to become the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer, etc. there has been anywhere in the world...He has and bears all the sins of all men in His body—not in the sense that He has committed them but in the sense that He took these sins, committed by us, upon His own body, in order to make satisfaction for them with His own blood.⁴⁵

For Luther, Christ's adopting of the flesh is comprehensive: Christ does not simply take our sin, but he takes the curse of the law, death, the wrath of God, the power of the devil, and all the evils of existence onto himself. While in his own person Christ is sinless, by this adoption, Christ takes the full guilt of the world upon himself and really becomes the worst sinner.

In adopting this evil, Christ unites two contraries. On the one hand, Christ bears the entire sins of the world, past, present, and future. By this adoption, Christ merits the full wrath of hell—sin not only seeks to damn him, but actually does so. On the other hand, in the same person, Christ is eternal and invincible righteousness.⁴⁶ In Christ the two greatest contraries converge: not simply the

⁴⁵ LW 26:277; WA 40-1:Dr 433.20-31.

⁴⁶ “Now let us see how two such extremely contrary things come together in this Person. Not only my sins and yours, but the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future, attack Him, try to damn Him, and do in fact damn Him. But because in the same Person, who is the highest, the greatest, and the only sinner, there is also eternal and invincible righteousness, therefore these two converge: the highest, the greatest, and the only sin; and the highest, the greatest, and the only righteousness.” LW 26:280-281; WA 40-1: Dr 438.31-439.13-15.

distinction between time and eternity, nor that between divine and creature, but also between the greatest sin and the greatest righteousness.

Luther describes this union of contraries in terms of strife and war.⁴⁷ When the two opposing forces meet, a battle ensues in which one of the powers must yield. Because sin and evil opposes God's righteousness, "the sin of the entire world attacks righteousness with the greatest possible impact and fury."⁴⁸ This sin is not an easy foe, but is "a powerful god who devours the whole human race,"⁴⁹ that attacks Christ and seeks to enslave and devour him, as it has devoured everyone else in its power.

Luther argues that precisely in working its worst on Christ, sin is overcome. In sin's rage to devour and consume, Luther argues that sin overlooks the fact that Christ is not simply a human being, but a person of invincible and eternal righteousness. In swallowing and opposing Christ, the one who is eternal and immortal, sin meets its end—instead of being victorious over Christ, sin is conquered and killed by this righteousness. Although sin is powerful, Christ's righteousness is still greater and overcomes evil through this death. Because all sin was on Christ, all sin is now overcome and Christ is the true ruler of life. Luther jubilantly declares, "Thus in Christ all sin is conquered, killed, and buried; and righteousness remains the victor and the ruler eternally."⁵⁰

This conquest of evil, however, is not limited to sin, but, for Luther, Christ takes on the full power of evil which opposes God's created intentions. First, Christ takes the full power of death

⁴⁷ See Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931). While Aulen's argument is valuable for highlighting a feature of Luther's understanding of the work of Christ, it is also limited. Like in many other areas, Luther employed various concepts to highlight the theological point. Ted Peters argues that Luther would employ the satisfaction model of atonement alongside the Christus Victor. Luther never saw Christ's work, nor theology as limited to a theory, but employed multiple perspectives to highlight the work of Christ. See Ted Peters, "Atonement in Anselm and Luther, second thoughts about Gustaf Aulen's Christus Victor" *Lutheran Quarterly*, 24 no 3 (Aug 1972), 301-314.

⁴⁸ LW 26:281; WA 40-I: Dr. 439.18-19.

⁴⁹ LW 26:281; WA 40-I: Dr. 439.21-23.

⁵⁰ LW 26:281; WA 40-I: Dr. 439.26-27.

into himself on the cross. Like with sin, Luther argues that death opposes the power of life with its full force, and like sin, death is defeated in this struggle. Just as sin is the evil which rules over the theological realm, death rules over life. Because Christ is the power of life, however, in taking death onto himself, Christ overcomes death. Luther writes, “Thus also death, which is the almighty empress of the entire world, killing kings, princes, and all men in general, clashes against life with full force and is about to conquer it and swallow it; and what it attempts, it accomplishes. But because life was immortal, it emerged victorious when it had conquered, conquering and killing death in turn.”⁵¹ For Luther, this means that Christ is not simply righteousness, but also the prince of life, who died. In his resurrection, Christ finally conquered death and is now alive and reigns. Just as the reign of sin is over, through Christ, “death is conquered and abolished in the whole world, so that now it is nothing but a picture of death. Now that its sting is lost, it can no longer harm believers in Christ, who has become the death of death, as Hosea sings: “O death, I shall be your death.””⁵²

Just as Christ takes on sin and death, he also takes on the devil on the cross. While Luther does not mention the devil in the passage from Galatians, he does portray Christ’s victory over the devil in a number of hymns. For example, in “Ein Feste Burg,” Luther describes the human situation as being oppressed by the devil: “The old evil foe/Sworn to work us woe/ With dread craft and might/ He arms himself to fight/ On earth he has no equal.” Because of Satan’s unequal power, human beings appear helpless before the power of evil: “No strength of ours can match his might!/ We would be lost, rejected.” Yet, Christ comes and defeats Satan: “But now a champion comes to fight, whom God himself elected. / Ask who this may be: Lord of hosts is he! Christ Jesus our Lord, God’s only Son, adored/ He holds the field victorious.”⁵³ Christ overcomes the devil on the cross.

⁵¹ LW 26:281; WA 40-I: Dr. 439.28-30.

⁵² LW 26:281; WA 40-I: Dr. 439.34-440.13-14.

⁵³ Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994), Hymn 228.

In “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,” Luther describes this victory in similarly powerful terms: “Our Savior Jesus, God’s own Son, here in our stead descended/ the knot of sin has been undone, the claim of death is ended/Christ has crushed the pow’r of hell; now there is naught but death’s gray shell/its sting is lost forever.”⁵⁴ On the cross, Christ adopts these great powers and takes them on himself.

Most importantly, Christ also takes on the greatest evil of all, the divine wrath.⁵⁵ The divine wrath is God’s righteous anger against sin. It is the greatest and most powerful evil, as God alone is sovereign and God’s determination is eternal and final. Luther argues that the divine wrath stands in conflict with the divine blessing, which is the eternal grace and mercy of God. God’s just evaluation of sin does oppose all evil and wish to condemn it. Luther allows the wrath a relative independence—the wrath in itself is not merciful, but is a strict and just repayment for sin. Even as this poses a provisional opposition between God’s grace and God’s mercy, however, Luther argues that mercy overcomes the wrath on the cross: just as Christ takes sin and death onto himself, so too he puts the divine curse on himself. Like sin clashing with righteousness and death clashing with life, Luther argues that the curse clashes with the blessing and wants to damn and annihilate it. Yet, the blessing ultimately is victorious over the curse,

For the blessing is divine and eternal, and therefore the curse must yield to it. For if the

blessing in Christ could be conquered, then God Himself would be conquered. But this is

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,” trans. composite, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis; Augsburg, 2006), Hymn 370.

⁵⁵ In “The Freedom of a Christian,” Luther also describes Christ’s confrontation with evil occurring in the descent into hell. Luther writes, “As a matter of fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own and as if he himself had sinned; he suffered, died, and descended into hell that he might overcome them all. Now since it was such a one who did this, and death and hell could not swallow him up, these were necessarily swallowed up by him in a mighty duel; for his righteousness is greater than the sins of all men, his life stronger than death, his salvation more invincible than hell.” (LW 31:352; WA 7:55.11-17). It is here that Luther uses the language of “swallowed up” that Aulen highlights in his *Christus Victor* model.

impossible. Therefore Christ, who is the divine Power, Righteousness, Blessing, Grace, and Life, conquers and destroys these monsters—sin, death, and the curse—without weapons or battle, in His own body and in Himself, as Paul enjoys saying: “He disarmed the principalities and powers, triumphing over them in Him.” Therefore they can no longer harm the believers.⁵⁶

In overcoming the curse of the wrath of God, Christ accomplishes the ultimate victory on which all else depends. Because God is the ultimate principle in all existence, if God is against us, then no amount of any other good could save; likewise, if God is for us, nothing else can harm us. Since God is for us, the law cannot accuse us, death cannot terrify us, and Satan cannot accuse us. While Luther fears sin, death, and the devil, the wrath of God is the chief problem of life; yet, in taking on the curse on the cross, Christ overcomes this to give humans a comprehensive and eternal freedom from evil. Luther praises this gift:

For who can express what a great gift it is for someone to be able to declare for certain that God neither is nor ever will be wrathful but will forever be a gracious and merciful Father for the sake of Christ? It surely is a great and incomprehensible freedom to have this Supreme Majesty kindly disposed toward us, protecting and helping us, and finally even setting us free physically in such a way that our body, which is sown in perishability, in dishonor, and in weakness is raised in imperishability, in honor, and in power. Therefore the freedom by which we are free of the wrath of God is greater than heaven and earth and all creation. From this there follows the other freedom, by which we are made safe and free through Christ from the Law, from sin, death, the power of the devil, hell, etc. For just as

⁵⁶ LW 26:281-282; WA 40-I: Dr 440.18-25.

the wrath of God cannot terrify us—since Christ has set us free from it—so the Law, sin, etc. cannot accuse and condemn us.⁵⁷

In overcoming the wrath of God, Christ wins the final victory for the Christian.

For Luther, the powerful forces of evil, those forces that oppose life, righteousness, and blessing, are totally adopted by Christ in Christ's own person. In this one person, evil was allowed to do its worst; yet also in this one person, the power of God overcame them. Luther writes,

The circumstance, "in Himself" makes the duel more amazing and outstanding; for it shows that such great things were to be achieved in the one and only Person of Christ—namely, that the curse, sin, and death were to be destroyed, and that the blessing, righteousness, and life were to replace them—and that through Him the whole creation was to be renewed. If you look at this Person, therefore, you see sin, death, the wrath of God, hell, the devil, and all evils conquered and put to death.⁵⁸

In dying, Christ defeats death; in becoming sin, Christ defeats sin; in becoming cursed, Christ defeats the curse, so that all may have life, righteousness, and blessing.

(2) This understanding of Christ overcoming evil is central to Luther's understanding of the nature of evil, the centrality of the doctrine of justification, the work and significance of Christ, and is the ultimate principle grounding his doctrine of the two kingdoms. First, Christ's overcoming evil shows both the power, depth, and nature of evil. The types of evil that Christ takes onto himself are evils that human beings cannot overcome by their own power.⁵⁹ They are the precise forces that create spiritual anxiety and discord in experience, that lead to the brokenness of existence, and that harm and destroy created life; yet creatures cannot cure these by effort or innovation. For Luther,

⁵⁷ LW 27:4; WA 40-II: Dr. 3.26-4.11-12.

⁵⁸ LW 26:282; WA 40-II: Dr. 440.26-35.

⁵⁹ Again, as he writes in "A Mighty Fortress," "No strength of ours can match his might!/We would be lost rejected."

the fact that Christ, the Son of God had to die on the cross reveals the real force of evil: if evil could be overcome by a lesser power, Christ's death was wholly unnecessary; because Christ, the Son of God had to die, evil is shown to be much greater and horrific than we could ever imagine. Evil is not only experienced as overwhelming, but it is in fact such, as no human effort could ever overcome sin, death, the devil, or the curse. Only God can confront the horrors of existence and overcome them. In his commentary on Galatians 5:1, he writes, "Not the emperor, not the angels of heaven, but Christ, the Son of God, through whom all things were created in heaven and earth, obtained it for us by His death, to set us free, not from physical and temporary slavery but from the spiritual and eternal slavery of those most cruel and invincible tyrants, the Law, sin, death, the devil, etc. and to reconcile us to God the Father."⁶⁰ Evil in itself is more powerful than human effort

Likewise, the centrality of justification in Christian faith is grounded in a serious wrestling with the problem of evil.⁶¹ The doctrine of justification recognizes both evil is something powerful, horrible, and it is that which humans could not overcome through their own effort. While impossible for humans to fully confront, however, evil has been fully overcome through the power and work of Christ. Precisely because the depth of evil could only be overcome by the Son of God, and not by any human effort, justification must be a free gift of grace given to us through Christ, and not the result of human action. If it is true that we abolish sin by the works of the Law, then Christ does not actually overcome the evils on the cross; rather, we do through our acts of love. Likewise, if Christ really does take away the sins of the world, then human effort does not take away sin. "For God had laid our sins, not upon us, but upon Christ, his Son. If they are taken away by Him, then they cannot be taken away by us."⁶² The reason Luther stresses the sheer graciousness of God in justification so heavily is precisely to magnify Christ's work as sufficient for salvation—

⁶⁰ LW 27:5; WA 40-II:Dr.5.13-16.

⁶¹ Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, 69-80.

⁶² LW 26:279-280; WA 40-I: Dr.437.10-14.

human effort need not add anything, precisely because Christ has already overcome evil. Justification is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls because evil in its many forms is the most pressing existential problem and this problem can only be overcome through God's work in Christ.

For Luther, Jesus' taking on of our sin and evil on the cross is also central to his repeated contentions that Christ must be understood as Savior and not as a new lawgiver.⁶³ Because evil is a comprehensive problem that affects every aspect of our life, Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil is not something that is incidental or easy; it is a gift beyond comparison. As such, Luther argues, Christ needs to be known as savior and gift first and foremost: Christ came into the world to redeem the world from evil. Christ's primary work is overcoming evil, saving us, and giving us a new gift. Christ is not primarily a moral teacher or the revealer, but the one who redeems us from evil. While Christ may also clarify the law and act as a teacher in life, this is not Christ's proper work. Christ does not abrogate the law or establish a new law; rather, Christ is savior who redeems people. Thus, Luther's affirmation of the natural law, at least in part, is grounded in his desire to keep the significance of the work of Christ as pure and gracious gift giver foremost. If Christ was also equally the lawgiver, the graciousness of the gift and the overcoming of evil, Luther fears, would become obscured.⁶⁴

The two kingdoms doctrine also results from this affirmation. The two kingdoms affirm a separation in the notion of power and responsibility. The right hand kingdom, where God does

⁶³ LW 26:142-147; WA 40-I:Dr.247-255.

⁶⁴ "Christ did not establish a new Law to follow the old Law of Moses but abrogated it and redeemed those who were being oppressed by it. Therefore it is a very wicked error when the monks and sophists portray Christ as a new lawgiver after Moses, not unlike the error of the Turks, who proclaim that their Mohammed is the new lawgiver after Christ. Those who portray Christ this way do Him a supreme injury. He did not come to abrogate the old Law with the purpose of establishing a new one; but, as Paul says here, He was sent into the world by the Father to redeem those who were being held captive under the Law. These words portray Christ truly and accurately. They do not ascribe to Him the work of establishing a new Law; they ascribe to Him the work of redeeming those who were under the Law." LW 26:367-368; WA 40-I:Dr.561.27-562.12-19.

God's proper work, is where God saves because humans cannot save themselves. Christ overcomes those evils that inhibit the flourishing of human life and that humans cannot overcome on their own: sin, death, the devil, and the curse. In the left hand kingdom, however, God deploys human reason, the law of love, and works of mercy to care for and preserve creation. Humans have power here, in cooperation with God, not to overcome all evil, but to make choices about things below them and to do works of mercy to alleviate suffering. They cannot use their reason or power against the greater forces of evil, however, for these forces outstrip human agency. Nevertheless, while only God can overcome the entrenched evils of sin, death, and the devil, human effort has a very important role in cooperating with God in creation and in maintaining just social relations. This also means, contrary to Niebuhr's argument, the realm is not completely immersed in evil, as God also creates and preserves the orders of creation and preservation. Despite the need for humans to be active in love and mercy, there are important and present forms of evil that human effort cannot overcome. For this, nothing less than the Son of God is necessary.

Finally, Luther's understanding of theology as an art that consoles consciences stems from this understanding of Christ's work.⁶⁵ Because Christ took evil upon himself on the cross, there is good news for all who suffer under the evils of our current life. At root, Luther argues, Christ shows that God is for us: instead of God being indifferent to evil, God is for us and actively engaged in overcoming evil. God has neither abandoned us to evil nor is punishing us out of spite; rather, the cross reveals that God is merciful and loving towards us. Luther writes,

When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him...By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, thus it is set free from death and from every evil. But

⁶⁵ Arthur H. Becker, "Luther as *Seelsorger*: The Unexamined Role," 136-150.

when sin and death have been abolished by this one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if it were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness. And if any remnants of sin were to remain, still for the sake of Christ, the shining Sun, God would not notice them.⁶⁶

Thus, for Luther, because Christ's taking on evil on the cross are at the heart and center of theology, theology itself always addresses the fundamental questions and problems of existence. Theology, at its core, is not simply cognitive or epistemological, but it is always also an activity of pastoral care that address the problems posed by existence. Theology proclaims that despite the evil we see, despite the sin we do, despite the death we rightly fear and dread, God is for us and God is supreme over all. Because God is for us, and nothing can change this evaluation, nothing else in existence can cause ultimate trouble for us.

(3) For Luther, this objective account of Christ's work in taking on evil also has subjective implications in the believer. Again, for Luther, the theological task is always concerned with fostering faith. Brian Gerrish notes, in Luther's religious thought, there is

a strict correlation of subject and object...The stamp of religious subjectivity is essential to the Protestant understanding of the gospel. Protestant grace comes as a word, a promise, a message—in fact, precisely as 'gospel'...What is disclosed in the word is the character of God as gracious; the essence of faith is the perception of God in this, God's true character, and a corresponding trust or confidence. In short, word and faith are correlative; in this sense, the objective and the subjective belong together. The one who believes, has.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ LW 26:280; WA 40-I:Dr.437.20-438.13-18.

⁶⁷ B.A. Gerrish, "Doctor Martin Luther: Subjectivity and Doctrine in Reformation" in *Continuing the Reformation: Essays on Modern Religious Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 48.

This general comment on the importance of the subjective in Luther's thought especially applies here. For Luther, it is not enough to know that Christ overcame the sins of the world, one must also know that Christ has overcome one's own sins.

For Luther, the central category in appropriating Christ's work is faith. In previous chapters, we have examined the development of Luther's concept of faith and showed the way that faith renders honor to God, by trusting that God's promise is in fact sufficient, that God is truthful when God declares God has done all for us.⁶⁸ The question of evil and Christ's overcoming of it nuances the category of faith in two ways. First, Luther argues that faith makes Christ's work present to the believer and unifies the believer to Christ's victory. Second, faith is called upon to confront issues where evil appears overwhelming, particularly with the question of divine wrath. Faith is thus seen as a hopeful trust in God, even in spite of God!

(a) First, Luther argues that faith makes Christ's work present to the believer and unifies the believer to Christ's victory. Drawing on Bernard of Clairvaux's *Song of Songs* commentary, Luther describes Christ's work for us in marriage metaphors.⁶⁹ Against the Finnish school, who depict this union in terms of an ontological union of being, Luther describes the union like a marriage. In "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther famously describes the "happy exchange" of faith in which Christ is united to us as a bridegroom to a bride.⁷⁰ As with all marriages, Luther argues, everything that each party brings to the marriage is now held in common.

Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own...Christ is full of grace, life,

⁶⁸ LW 31:351; WA 7:54.

⁶⁹ Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther: Stages in a Reformation Reorientation*, 199. For a comparison of Luther's use of this metaphor with late medieval authors, see Heiko Oberman, "The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era," in *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 18-38.

⁷⁰ While the "happy exchange" is a common term, Luther also refers to it "a blessed struggle and victory" LW 31:351; WA 7:25.34. For a history of this concept see Heiko Oberman, "The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era," in *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 18-38.

and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is the bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are his bride's and bestow upon her the things that are his.⁷¹

Through this union, Jesus took on our sin, our death, and our curse upon himself; likewise, we take on what was proper to him, righteousness, life, and blessing. In this exchange, the believing soul receives complete freedom from the evil that confronts him in life.⁷² Through faith the Christian is now completely free from the death, the law, the curse, and the divine wrath.⁷³ The victory of Easter belongs to us even now in faith.

For Luther, faith allows the evils of existence to be put in place. For Luther, Christ's work on the cross provides confidence in the face of all evils. While evils still cause suffering and pain in this life, the good news of the Gospel is that they have been overcome. Because Christ is life and righteousness, and we have been baptized into Christ's body, we now share in Christ's victory. Whenever we are confronted with evil, Luther charges us to hold the image of Christ before us and have faith that the promise too applies to us. The claims of the devil that cause questions, the death when we fear for our soul, no longer determine our life. Luther writes,

Therefore if sin makes you anxious, and if death terrifies you, just think that this is an empty specter and an illusion of the devil—which is what it surely is. For in fact there is no sin any longer, no curse, no death, and no devil, because Christ has conquered and abolished all these. Accordingly the victory of Christ is utterly certain; the defects lie not in the fact itself, which is completely true, but in our incredulity. It is difficult for reason to believe such

⁷¹ LW 31:351; WA 7:54.33-55.3.

⁷² LW 31:352; WA 7:55.17-20.

⁷³ LW 26:284; WA 40-I: Dr.443:23-24. "By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person. Clothed and dressed in this, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ himself voluntarily became a curse for us."

inestimable blessings...Now that Christ reigns, there is in fact no more sin, death, or curse—
this we confess every day in the Apostles' Creed.⁷⁴

Luther does not here deny that evil is experienced as evil; rather, he praises the good news that in Christ these evils are now subordinated and God reigns supreme over evil.

Thus, Christ's overcoming of evil does not entail that evil loses its pain or misery; rather, by calling to mind God's relationship to evil, evil loses its hopelessness.⁷⁵ Despite the tragedies that befall us, God reigns over evil and evil does not have the last word. This conclusion concerning evil losing its apparent finality can also be seen in Luther's discussion of the last image of evil, the evil above us, in the *Fourteen Consolations*. Here Luther calls the reader to contemplate the evil in the suffering of Christ. In this image, Luther argues that Christ's victory changes the nature of suffering: whereas before evil appeared to be final, Christ's passion can sweeten and transform evil into good:

There is nothing, not even death, that his passion cannot sweeten. Thus the bride says, 'His lips are lilies, letting sweet-smelling myrrh fall in drops.' What resemblance is there between lilies and lips, since lips are red and lilies white? It is said in a mystical sense, as if to say that Christ's words are clear and pure, without even a vestige of blood red bitterness or malice, but only sweetness and mildness. Yet into them he drops precious and chosen myrrh (that is, the most bitter death). These purest and sweetest lips have the power to make the bitterest death sweet and fair and bright and dear, for death (like precious myrrh) removes all of sin's corruptions at once. How does this come to pass? Surely, it comes to pass when you hear that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has by his most holy touch consecrated and hallowed all sufferings, even death itself, has blessed the curse, and has glorified shame and enriched

⁷⁴ LW 26:284-285; WA 40-I: Dr.444:19-32.

⁷⁵ Strohl, "Luther's *Fourteen Consolations*," 322.

poverty so that death is now a door to life, the curse a fount of blessing, and shame the mother of glory.⁷⁶

For Luther, by overcoming the power of death, Christ is now the victor and even evil can be used for Christ's purposes. "For if Christ by the touch of his most innocent flesh has hallowed all waters, yes, even all creation, through baptism, how much more has he by the same touch of his most innocent flesh and blood sanctified every form of death, all suffering and loss, every curse and shame for the baptism of the Spirit, or the baptism of blood!"⁷⁷ This sanctification of suffering changes the inner nature of suffering: whereas before suffering was simply suffering, it now has grace attached to it.

Thus the death of a Christian is now to be regarded as the bronze serpent of Moses, which in all respects has the appearance of a serpent, yet is completely without life, motion, venom, and sting. Though in the eyes of the unwise the righteous seem to die, they are at peace. In death we are like all other men: the outward mode of our dying is not unlike that of others, except the thing itself is different, since for us death is dead. In like manner, all our sufferings are like the sufferings of others, but only in appearance. In reality, our sufferings are the beginning of our freedom as our death is the beginning of life.⁷⁸

For example, death is no longer simply death, but it is also the end of sin. Because sin alone angers God, death need not be feared, but rather it frees us from this sinful flesh. Likewise, while we truly suffer, we can see suffering as a growth in righteousness. Thus, through faith and through Christ's victory on the cross, the Christian can have a different attitude towards suffering. While suffering is still evil, there is consolation in the word of God.

⁷⁶ LW 42:141; WA 6:117.36-118.12.

⁷⁷ LW 42:141; WA 6:118.16-20.

⁷⁸ LW 42:142; WA 6:118.25-30.

Through the marriage to Christ, the Christian shares in the victory over evil. While evil is still present, it has lost its power—it is no longer ultimate. The Christian is now free, not to avoid suffering, but to believe that evil does not have the final word. In the third verse of “A Mighty Fortress,” Luther describes the situation of the Christian thusly:

Though hordes of devils fill the land
All threat'ning to devour us
We tremble not, unmoved we stand
They cannot overpow'r us.
This world's prince may rage, in fierce war engage.
He is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.⁷⁹

The Christian still exists among devils; evil still haunts his existence, but through the Word of God, the Christian has faith that evil is no longer the ultimate nature of reality.

(b) The second way that the confrontation of evil nuances Luther's understanding of faith occurs with the question of God's righteousness in face of horrific evil. The greatest problem of evil for Luther occurs in the problem of predestination. Luther often refers to this as the darts of the devil and counsels Christians to avoid this doctrine at all costs. The particular problem stems from the division in the Godhead: in Christ, we see God as the one who is merciful, kind, and wants to give us blessing; yet, in light of Scriptural passages, Luther also argues that God condemns some. While Luther is reticent to discuss it, as he thinks God can only be known where God is clothed, the problem of predestination entails that God ultimately is wrathful towards some. The central question here is how can God be good if God appears to do evil?

⁷⁹ Luther, “A Mighty Fortress,” Hymn 228.

While Luther sought to avoid these questions, his confrontation with Erasmus on the freedom of the will posed these questions in such a way that he could not avoid them. By stressing the promise of God to the exclusion of free will, Erasmus argues, Luther makes God appear unjust and cruel. If God rules over all with an immutable will, then God is responsible not only for goodness and salvation, but also for hardening and condemnation. If God only predestines some people for salvation, then God also predestines the reprobate for damnation. A God who hardens and chooses certain people to go to hell, for Erasmus, is brutish, pitiless, and an unrighteous God. In order to grasp the function of faith in light of evil, we will first briefly examine Erasmus's arguments against Luther.

Erasmus recognizes that there are exegetical grounds for declaring God to work this way. In Exodus 9:12 and Romans 9:17, God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart;⁸⁰ in Malachi 1 and Romans 9:24, God is said to love Jacob, but hate Esau;⁸¹ from the Gospels, it appears that Judas is chosen to betray Jesus.⁸² Yet for Erasmus, these passages in themselves do not necessitate God's injustice; rather, like all Scripture, they require interpretation into *how* God works this hardening. Luther's position is so offensive because he claims God *chooses* to harden whom he hardens and *wills* to condemn whom he condemns. If God acts thusly, God appears supremely unjust: God would be like a king who lavishly equips one soldier for battle, and rewards him when he fights well, but gives another no aid and then unjustly condemns him to death for losing.⁸³ Similarly, if God is a promising God, but only saves some people, this God would be like a host who starves half of his guests, only to feed the other lavishly. In both cases, our reason is deeply offended, because both examples are

⁸⁰ Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, "On the Freedom of the Will: A Diatribe or Discourse" in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 64-66.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 69-70.

⁸² *Ibid*, 68-69.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 88.

clearly unjust. Yet, in claiming God controls all aspects of salvation, and thus cruelly and unfairly condemns some men to perdition, this is precisely how Luther portrays God. Erasmus writes, “It is difficult to explain how it can be a mark of his justice (for I will not speak of mercy) to hand over others to eternal torments in whom he has not deigned to work good works, when they themselves are incapable of doing good, since they have no free choice or, if they have, it can do nothing but sin.”⁸⁴ As the promise entails that God works all in all, Erasmus argues, Luther’s God is unjust and offensive.

For Erasmus, conversely, the only way to preserve God’s justice is through a defense of free will.⁸⁵ While it is true God hardens and condemns, he argues, it is not as if God chooses these people randomly or without reason. Rather, God’s condemning acts are always the just desserts for an evil will. God’s condemnation does not arise from God’s *will*, but God justly judges those who choose to oppose themselves to Him. While God foreknows that certain people will do this, God does not will it. Erasmus writes, “Thus those whom God hates or loves, he hates or loves for just reasons, and the hatred and the love are not more opposed to free choice than the hatred and love with which he pursues those who are to be born and those who are actually born. He hates the unborn because he surely knows that they will commit deeds worthy of hatred; he hates the born because they do commit deeds worthy of hatred.”⁸⁶ God’s judgment of us is based on God’s foreknowledge of how *we* choose to act.

For Erasmus, this understanding of God’s condemnation overcomes the problem of a promising God. Because God merely foreknows that some persons will choose evil, God is not responsible for their evil in any way. Because *they* choose evil on their own accord, God acts

⁸⁴ Ibid, 88.

⁸⁵ B.A. Gerrish, “Piety, Theology, and the Lutheran Dogma” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 11-26.

⁸⁶ Erasmus, 77.

righteously in condemning them. This righteous condemnation is precisely the appeal of free will: it preserves God's justice and righteousness against claims that make God appear to be the author of evil.⁸⁷ Because God does not choose who to condemn, but only foreknows who will reject Him through use of their free will, God responds justly.

For Luther, this solution to the problem of promising God is idolatrous.⁸⁸ By attributing anything at all to free will, even in the name of God's righteousness and justice, Erasmus erects an idol and blasphemes Christ's work. Instead of the living God who creates and saves from no merit on the creature's part, Erasmus's God passively responds to creaturely choices and punishes based on the rectitude of the will. Luther writes, "Nor can reason judge otherwise of God than Diatribe does here. For just as she herself snores away and despises divine realities, so she judges about God, as if he snored away and exercised no wisdom, will, or present power in electing, discerning, and inspiring, but had handed over to men the busy and burdensome task of accepting or rejecting his forbearance and his wrath."⁸⁹ For Luther, a God who responds to us and depends on our actions for ultimate decisions is an idol of our fashioning and no God at all. Similarly, if salvation and condemnation depend upon the will's choice, that is, if God responds to our free will in determining who is saved, then salvation depends upon us and not on the work of Christ. Even the smallest

⁸⁷ Ibid, 96. Erasmus writes, "Why, you will say, grant anything to free choice? In order to have something to impute justly to the wicked who have voluntarily come short of the grace of God, in order that the calumny of cruelty and injustice may be excluded from God, that despair may be kept away from us, that complacency may be excluded also, and that we may be incited to endeavor."

⁸⁸ There is an abundance of literature on Luther's debate with Erasmus. Especially helpful are B.A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God;" Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong? An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969); Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Egil Grisliis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God: The Problem of the *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De Servo Arbitrio*," *McCormick Quarterly* 21 (1967):81-94; Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method from Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Klaus Schwarzwäller, "The Bondage of the Free Human," in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Mac Kolden (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2004), 46-66.

⁸⁹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. Gordon Rupp and Philip S Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1969), 228; WA 18:706.23-28.

amount of free will replaces Christ as the center of salvation and destroys the Gospel. For Luther, Erasmus's positive theological statements, in fact, embody this denial. When Erasmus describes the truth of Christianity as entailing "that we should strive with all our might, have recourse to the remedy of penitence, and entreat by all means the mercy of the Lord, without which no human will or endeavor is effective; also, that no one should despair of the pardon a God who is most merciful," Luther correctly notes that Erasmus' account is "devoid of Christ, devoid of the Spirit, and colder than ice itself."⁹⁰ As Erasmus's own account of religion reveals, when we begin with free will, Christ is no longer savior, nor factors into an account of the Christian religion.

Erasmus's solution to the problem of a promising God thus produces a vicious dilemma. If Erasmus is correct, God's full activity in salvation entails that God is cruel and works evil. To uphold God's justice, however, entails making salvation and condemnation dependent upon our free will, which erects an idol and denies the sufficiency of Christ. It appears that either God saves us and is unjust or God is just but does not save us.

For Luther, although Erasmus's positive proposals are blasphemous, the problem he raises with God's eternal predestination is rationally and existentially troubling. Far from denying the problem, Luther's sees this threat as a great danger to faith: a God who damns man not only causes doubt in God's goodness, but also produces subjective uncertainty in regards to salvation. If God damns man by sheer will, how can I ever be subjectively certain that God has chosen me? Would it not be better never to have been born than to live with this uncertainty? As Erasmus correctly argued, predestination is a problem for the promising God.

Yet, Luther argues, this problem should neither have the final word in dictating our conception of God nor cause us to doubt God's goodness and mercy. In fact Luther maintains God's justice in light of God's apparent cruelty in predestination by drawing upon his understanding

⁹⁰ Ibid, 114; WA 18:611.5.

of faith in God's promise. Luther's argument is best read as taking place in three steps: first, Luther denies that we can know anything about the hidden God and thus should not inquire into it; second, because this God is hidden, we neither have sufficient evidence to judge God's righteousness nor are we ever in a position to do so. In fact, all appearances to the contrary, we have reason to believe in God's overwhelming goodness. Third, because the hidden God clothes Godself in salvation, such that it is the true God who makes the promise to us, we can be confident in the promise. Though Luther does not prove God is good in spite of condemning some, he provides sufficient evidence for us to trust in God's promises. This account thus nuances Luther's account of faith: faith here is a contrarational and apophatic trust.⁹¹

To address the problem of predestination, Luther draws upon the distinction between the revealed God and the hidden God that we discussed earlier. As we discussed in the last chapter, Luther argues that Erasmus's objections concerning predestination violate this distinction. Instead of clinging to the revealed God in Christ and ignoring the hidden God, Erasmus first concerns himself with the inscrutable will and on this basis rejects the revealed will. The injustices Erasmus rails against center on the divine hardening and condemnation, which are the very secret of the divine Majesty; on the basis of that which should remain hidden, Erasmus objects to the clothed God who reveals himself as savior. For Luther, this blasphemes God: instead of encountering God where God clothes himself for us, Erasmus rejects God's revelation and looks for God where God does not want to be known.

For Luther, the argument concerning the hidden God aims to restrict speculation into God's majesty and to encourage us to only seek God where God makes Godself known. It does not,

⁹¹ See Jacqueline A. Bussie, "Luther's Hope for the World: Responsible Christian Discourse Today" in *The Global Luther: A Theologian for Modern Times*, ed. Christine Helmer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2009), 122. Following Miguel de Unamuno, she defines contrarationality as "excruciating in its incongruity with the present reality."

however, answer the objection concerning God's justice. In addressing this problem, Luther does not attempt to rationalize God's predestining will—to do so would be to inquire into the divine majesty. Rather, Luther casts doubt on our ability to judge God's righteousness. For Luther, creatures, precisely because they are creatures, are in no position to judge the transcendent majesty of the Creator. Because God is God and superior to all creation, creatures do not have a standard or rule by which they can evaluate God. God's righteousness therefore cannot be held accountable to our perceptions of justice and injustice. Luther writes, "For if his righteousness were such that it could be judged to be righteous by human standards, it would clearly not be divine and would in no way differ from human righteousness. But since he is the one true God, and is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible."⁹² Erasmus, however, not only enquires into the hidden will, but acts as if he has an infallible standard of justice to which God must adhere. To make God adhere to our standards, again, is to fashion God into an idol.

Although we are in no position to judge God's righteousness, Luther contends that the Christian has sufficient grounds for trusting that God is, in fact, just. To develop this, Luther argues that there are three lights that the Christian operates with: the light of nature, the light of grace, and the light of glory. By the light of nature alone, God appears supremely unjust: while the wicked prosper, the righteous suffer. Were we to evaluate God by history alone, Luther argues, we would be led to deny the existence of God or declare God to be unjust, for all would appear to be blind chance.⁹³ In the light of grace, however, the apparent injustice of God is easily dealt with, for there is a life after this one in which all will be properly reconciled. This life is merely an anticipation of the life to come and so the apparent gains of the wicked are always only apparent. In the eschaton the

⁹² Luther, in Rupp and Watson, 330. WA 18:784.8-14

⁹³ Ibid, 330-331; WA 18:784.

righteous will be saved and the wicked punished.⁹⁴ While the light of grace solves the problem of the light of nature, it poses its own problem: namely, why are some damned, even as they do not commit sins worse than anyone else? For Luther, because we do not yet live in the light of glory, we do not yet know this answer. Yet, just as the light of grace revealed God as righteous over against the light of nature, so too, we have hope that in the light of glory we will know God's justice. Luther writes, "What do you think it will be like when the light of the Word and of faith comes to an end, and reality itself and the Divine Majesty are revealed in their own light? Do you not think that the light of glory will then with the greatest of ease be able to solve the problem that is insoluble in the light of the Word or of grace?"⁹⁵ If we have eschatological faith that God will appear righteous, then Erasmus's objections lose their force. Though we do not know yet how to reconcile God's choice to save some and condemn others, we trust that God is supremely just and will appear so in the end times.⁹⁶

While not disproving Erasmus's argument that God is unjust if God only saves some, Luther's argument casts doubt upon its theological strength. Because God has revealed Godself to

⁹⁴ Ibid, 330; WA 18:785.13-19. Jacqueline Bussie finds this argument to be pastorally insensitive and theologically inadequate. "Luther's snappy theodicy rings hollow in the bloody cave of modern atrocities. Set against our grisly mosaic, Luther's cavalier words of eschatological hope become cruel platitudes. How can Christians say that the matter of human suffering should be set aside, let alone *easily* settled?...I am not the first to shoot holes in this theodicy of eschatological retribution, holes that bleed quietism and opiates intoxicating us to accept the status quo...My colloquial translations reveal the pastoral failure of Luther's discourse. While such theodicies undoubtedly persist in the twenty-first century, they fail to satisfy the sufferer just as they failed to satisfy the likes of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalmist, to name only a few" 116-117. In response to this, it should be kept in mind that Luther is not offering a comprehensive theodicy; rather, he is trying to provide grounds for hope. The second light of the three lights is not offered as a new argument; rather, he is adopting common arguments to try and provide grounds for faith for people who appear to lack all hope. The point here is to provide hope that one day God will be seen to be righteous. Without attention to the use to which Luther is putting this argument, it is bound to appear insensitive; given the context as a stepping stone, however, this is the exact nature of hope that Bussie finds useful elsewhere in Luther's thought.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 331; WA 18:785.20-26.

⁹⁶ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 211-214.

be a good God, and left the hidden will undisclosed, because we are in no position to judge God with creaturely standards, and because we have reason to hope that the apparent injustice will be rectified in the eschaton, we ought not to declare the promising God unjust. For Luther, Erasmus's dilemma, namely that if God is a promising God, God is unjust, is insufficiently argued for: while God may appear unjust to us now, we are mere creatures with the full noetic effect of sins ruling our minds, and so we cannot judge God. Erasmus's problem with a promising God, then, seems to find a response based on eschatological hope in Luther.

Nevertheless, the problem of predestination is not solved by this response, for the hiddenness of God may still cause despair. If God predestines some but not others, how can we know that we are among the elect? If God has a hidden will that we have no access to, that on some level appears to conflict with the revealed will, how can we know that God will not ultimately damn me? The difficulty here is that even with the word of promise, we are not in a position in which we know God in God's entirety. God remains a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is numinous, terrifying, and tremendous and beyond our comprehension and control. Despite showing us the Father's mercy, Luther experiences the God who works all in all and is thus unfathomable. This acknowledgement sets the question of faith in the context of an underlying horror. The faith required of the believer requires a belief in spite of all appearances: one does not simply have to look past the apparent evil in nature and history, neither of which would show the goodness of God; rather one is called to believe against the hidden God and this tempers all aspects of faith. B.A. Gerrish writes, "We do not simply turn from the hidden God and then forget about him. The forbidding figure waits on the edge of faith and, for this reason, determines (in some measure) the

content of faith, which has the character of turning from the hidden God. The luminous object of faith is set against a dark, threatening background.”⁹⁷

In light of the threats of the hidden God who hardens and condemns, the God who appears unjust, Luther counsels believers to cling to the promise of the God clothed in Christ. Despite the apparent evil God works, the Christian has received the promise in the water and the Word. In the sacraments Christ really has declared himself to be for us: in baptism, God declares that we are God’s children; in the bread and wine, Christ comes to us. Despite the fear we may have, we are thus called to cling to the promise, not only against the devil, but against God! Luther thus tells us to turn away from the hidden God and stay with Christ.

Begin your search with Christ and stay with Him and cleave to Him, and if your own thoughts and reason, or another man’s, would lead you elsewhere, shut your eyes and say: I should and will know of no other God than Christ, my Lord...But if you abandon this clear prospect, and climb up into God’s Majesty on high, you must stumble, fear and fall because you have withdrawn yourself from God’s grace, and have dared to stare at the Majesty unveiled, which is too high and overpowering for you. For apart from Christ, Nature can neither perceive nor attain the grace and love of God, and apart from Him is nothing but wrath and condemnation.⁹⁸

Our anxieties only can be overcome through keeping our eyes fixed on Christ, who reveals God’s heart for us.⁹⁹

Faith thus takes a radical element: it is a hope against hope, a profound faith in which one does not know how or why God is good, but nevertheless trusts this to be so. This faith can never

⁹⁷ B.A. Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hidden God” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, 138.

⁹⁸ WA 28:101-102. Quoted in David Steinmetz, “Luther and the Hidden God,” in *Luther in Context*, 27.

⁹⁹ Gerrish, “To the Unknown God,” 138.

resolve into a system or a form of knowledge; rather, it must constantly return to the word of promise and struggle to see it as true. Faith always hopes and trusts, even amidst the dark horrors of life. In his 1532 *Commentary on Psalm 51*, he writes,

We have to learn that a Christian should walk in the midst of death...in the midst of the devil's teeth and of hell, and yet should keep the Word of grace....We believe that God is favorably disposed to us even when we seem to ourselves to be forsaken...¹⁰⁰ Hence it is a great power of the Holy Spirit to trust the grace of God and to hope that God is gracious and favorably disposed. Nor can this confidence be preserved without the most bitter struggles, aroused in our flesh by our daily occasions for trouble and sadness.¹⁰¹

Faith thus is a constant wrestling: Luther depicts the spiritual life as one attended with periods of great temptation and spiritual struggles (*Anfechtung*) in which believers are tempted to look away from the promise given in the Word and to peek into the hidden God. Faith, therefore, entails believing with certainty that God's Word is true even if the whole world, one's own heart, and even God contradicts the truth revealed in the Word.

This setting of faith against the background of the hidden God and the multiple forces of evil appears overwhelming for the life of faith. While we have the Word of promise in Christ, and even as we trust that Christ has overcome all evils on the cross, the horrors of life and the horror of the hidden will in predestination still threaten to overwhelm us and cause us to lose faith. In a very important passage in his latter commentary on Galatians 4:6, Luther argues that these spiritual crises of *Anfechtung* can in fact feel victorious. Despite our efforts to cling to the clothed Christ and to flee the hidden God, we can feel deep despair. This despair and doubt are part of the life of the Christian:

¹⁰⁰ LW 12:406; WA 40-II:460.

¹⁰¹ LW 12:376; WA 40-II:419-420.

We have nothing to strengthen and sustain us against these great and unbearable cries except the bare Word, which sets Christ forth as the Victor over sin, death, and every evil. But it is effort and labor to cling firmly to this in the midst of trial and conflict, when Christ does not become visible to any of our senses. We do not see Him, and in the trial our heart does not feel His presence and help. In fact, Christ appears to be wrathful with us and to be deserting us at such a time. Besides, in this trial a man feels the power of sin, the weakness of the flesh, and his doubt; he feels the fiery darts of the devil, the terrors of death, and the wrath and judgment of God. All these things issue powerful and horrible cries against us, so that there appears to be nothing left for us except despair and eternal death.¹⁰²

At this point, one would expect Luther to counsel clinging to the Word, and he does do this.

However, he recognizes that this can be quite difficult, if not impossible, in the face of evil. Evil can even overwhelm the explicit trust we have in Christ

In deep terrors and conflicts of conscience we do indeed take hold of Christ and believe that He is our Saviour. But then the Law terrifies us most, and sin disturbs us. In addition, the devil attacks us with all his stratagems and his fiery darts, trying with all his might to snatch Christ away from us and to rob us of all comfort. Then there is nothing to keep us from succumbing and despairing, for then we are the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick.¹⁰³

In these situations of grave despair, Luther finds comfort in the passage of Galatians 4:6. He argues that while we may not experience ourselves to have faith, in the deep struggles of faith, the Holy Spirit is sighing on our behalf. “But in the midst of these terrors of the Law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death, and roarings of the devil, Paul says, the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart:

“Abba! Father!”¹⁰⁴ This cry, Luther argues, is not something we even experience; rather, when we are

¹⁰² LW 26:380-381; WA 40-I:580.15-24.

¹⁰³ LW 26:381; WA 40-I:581.18-24.

¹⁰⁴ LW 26:381; WA 40-I:580.25-27.

broken and at our end, the Spirit sends prayers on our behalf to the Father. Because it is the Holy Spirit interceding for us, the Spirit's sigh overcomes the experienced despair and hopelessness. Luther writes, "And His cry vastly exceeds, and breaks through, the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death, and the devil. It penetrates the clouds and heaven, and it reaches all the way to the ears of God...He does not whisper and does not pray but cries very loudly: "Abba! Father!" and intercedes for us, in accordance with the will of God, with signs too deep for words."¹⁰⁵

For Luther, at the same time the Holy Spirit is interceding for us before the Father, the Spirit is also bearing witness to our spirit that we are God's loved children. Although we are terrified, the Spirit constantly consoles and seeks to give comfort in the midst of our despair. While this ministry of the Spirit occurs to our conscience, we ourselves may not even be aware of it:

But we are far from supposing that this sigh which we emit amid the terrors and in our weakness is a cry—so far indeed that we hardly understand that it is even a sigh. For so far as our own awareness is concerned, this faith of ours, which sighs to Christ in temptation, is very weak. That is why we do not hear this cry. We have only the Word. Within ourselves, however, there is the very opposite feeling. This faint sigh of ours does not seem to penetrate the clouds in such a way that it is the only thing to be heard by God and the angels in heaven. In fact, we suppose, especially as long as the trial continues, that the devil is roaring at us terribly, that heaven is bellowing, that the earth is quaking, that everything is about to collapse, that all the creatures are threatening us with evil, and that hell is opening up in order to swallow us. This feeling is in our hearts; we do not hear these terrible voices...¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ LW 26:381; WA 40-I:Dr.580.27-35.

¹⁰⁶ LW 26:382; WA 40-I:Dr.582. 20-25

For Luther, faith thus is not simply a matter of what we feel. While there is joy and comfort normally for faith, faith also confronts periods of intense trial and terror. Our hope, in these instances, is in the Word, which tells us that the Holy Spirit is with the afflicted. Even as we feel overcome and sorrowful, even as our faith gives way to despair, the Spirit continues to intercede for us.

Therefore we must not judge according to the feeling of our heart; we must judge according to the Word of God, which teaches that the Holy Spirit is granted to the afflicted, the terrified, and the despairing in such a way that He encourages and comforts them, so that they do not succumb in their trials and other evils but conquer them, though not without very great fear and effort.¹⁰⁷

Even in the dark night of faith, even as we do not experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit, Luther argues we can find comfort and faith in the Word which promises consolation beyond all appearances.¹⁰⁸

For Luther, the solution to the problem of evil thus has two aspects. First, by adopting our sin on the cross, Christ overcame sin, death, and the devil and now reigns victorious over them. Second, the Christian participates in this victory through faith, which weds the believer to Christ. While the Christian may still feel the terror of evil, the power of evil has been overcome. Yet, particularly in the *Bondage of the Will*, Luther recognizes that the horror and terror of evil can be overwhelming, particularly in relation to the wrath of God in predestination. In response to this,

¹⁰⁷ LW 26:383; WA 40-I:Dr.584.10-17.

¹⁰⁸ “The Reformers taught that we receive God’s salvation in Christ only when we are past the point of being able to do anything. At this point, the point at which we are unable to do anything for ourselves, the Holy Spirit works faith. This kind of faith, therefore, comes only at a specific time and place. This time and place at which we experience spiritual temptation is the time and place at which God wills to create the faith which is God’s own work.” Friedrich Mildenerger, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Erwin Lueker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 41.

faith takes a radical turn that trusts God's goodness even when this goodness cannot be explained. Faith thus is always also a radical hope—one that trusts that God is good, even when evil cannot be explained. Even when the feeling of faith fails, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. Thus, while evil may feel overwhelming, God's salvation is sufficient for the believer.

Conclusion

Through an examination of the development of Luther's thought, this dissertation argued that Luther's theology provides a framework for responding to Iris Murdoch's question: "How is one to connect the realism which must involve a clear-eyed contemplation of the misery and evil of the world with a sense of an uncorrupted good without the later idea becoming merely a consolatory dream? (I think this puts a central question in moral philosophy)."¹ The dissertation put forward a number of claims: (1) Luther's theology provides a useful framework for contemplating evil as his own account of evil is multifaceted. While he focuses on and emphasizes evil as sin, he also recognizes the tragic elements of existence and, in his reflections on the hiddenness of God outside of revelation, recognizes the ultimate inability of reason or theological reflection to contemplate or resolve the problem of evil. (2) Despite the limits of reason in the face of evil, Luther argues that the Christian message primarily concerns the overcoming of evil. This entails both an objective account of Christ's victory over evil on the cross and a subjective account of the ways faith receives this victory. Christ's victory on the cross entails the forgiveness of sins, but also takes on cosmic and ontological dimensions, as Christ overcomes the powers of sin, death, the devil, and the wrath of God. The subjective appropriation is not knowledge, but faith, trust, and hope in the promise. That is, while the Christian may not be able to specify how God is good in light of the horrors of predestination, one trusts that God will be shown to be good in the eschaton based on the revelation. (3) The sense of uncorrupted good is also multifaceted: on one level, it involves perception of the many gifts of existence grounded in the abounding goodness of God. On a more profound level, it engages the problem of evil and sees the promise of God's goodness through an eschatological hope that both recognizes the reality and horror of evil and the ultimate victory of God. (4) This engagement with the deep dimensions of good and evil, while based on an

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 59.

eschatological hope, does not negate the moral tasks of life in this world. For Luther, God's abiding presence in creation entails that God creates concrete structures and forms in which one exercises love for the neighbor. Moreover, Luther's distinction of grace and the gift supplies an account of moral progress and sanctification that endorse normative moral action for the life of faith.

The major claim from this examination is that the abiding importance of Luther is his serious engagement with the problem of evil that does not undermine the strong affirmation of the goodness of creation. In the conclusion, then, I wish to investigate the contemporary relevance of this claim. To do this, I will do two things; first, I want to locate how this thesis relates to the three major schools of Luther's thought that I engaged in the introduction and at various points in the dissertation. Second, I want to investigate the historical and hermeneutical difficulties with the appropriation of this theological picture.

(1) With Radical Lutheranism, the dissertation agrees that theology for Luther involves a radical critique of sin. The proper use of the law is to attack the individual who is incurved upon him- or herself and shock them into a recognition of their inability to fulfill the law's perfect demands. Because of the pervasiveness of sin, the radical critique of sin is always necessary for Christian theology. Likewise, with Radical Lutherans, the dissertation has affirmed that the Gospel should not become an object of speculation, but it must be delivered as good news that opens up a new relationship with the world—the gospel is for proclamation.

Against the more radical claims concerning theology being opposed to the good, beautiful, and right, however, the historical examination of this dissertation shows that Luther does not attack the good as such; instead, he attacks the use people make of good things. That is, Luther affirms the goodness of creation, the goodness of the orders, and the goodness of the law; sin arises not from the beautiful and good as such, but the way sinful individuals misuse and abuse these goods. Instead of treating them as creatures, sin occurs when they are treated as gods. The radical critique that is

wholly necessary is not directed against all of created life as such, but it is against the misuses and abuses that stem from inveterate self-love. This means that certain orders (church, family, government) ought not be critiqued to their root, nor should Lutheran theology always stand in a posture of radical defiance, but above and beyond and grounding this critique, there must be an equally radical affirmation of creation as a gift of God. Practically speaking, this means that the Christian can work and affirm the natural orders as ways to love and serve the neighbor; while many orders are deeply fallen and the abuses that stem from self-love corrupt creation, the basic relationship of the Christian to these orders is one of affirmation.

Moreover, by examining Luther's development of the nature of sanctification through the distinction of grace and gifts, the dissertation has shown the ways that Luther himself creates room for ethical reflection and moral progress. While Forde and Paulson worry that Christian ethics obscure the radical nature of sin and lessen the qualitative nature of the new life in Christ, the historical examination shows that it is precisely by examining and defending the radical nature of sin and tracing its implications that Luther develops an account of sanctification. In short, while the Radical Lutherans are right about the need for the critique of sin as a prerequisite for the preached word, this understanding of sin must also be balanced by an account of the goodness of creation and the importance of ethical life for Christians.

Finally, while the argument of the dissertation agrees with Radical Lutherans about the bondage of the will, it also shows that their account of evil requires supplementation. The problem theology address is not only sin, though this is the chief account of evil Luther employs; rather, for Luther, theology is the good news that God has overcome all evils. The posture of critique, then, must also be tempered by an awareness of tragedy and seek to console people with the good news of Jesus Christ's victory. While this often is an attack on sin, as sin is the chief evil for Luther, it may also require the theologian to offer consolation and comfort on the basis of the Word of God.

(2) In regards to the Finnish school, I have argued that they are correct in emphasizing the real presence of Christ in faith and the transformative power of Christ's presence in the life of the believer. In justifying the believer, God not only declares the person righteous but also gives the gifts of sanctification by which the person grows in holiness. They are also correct in critiquing the neo-Kantian presuppositions of much German Luther scholarship. Through the historical examination of Luther's thought, and particularly Luther's text *Against Latomus*, however, I have argued that they misconstrue the basis of justification. While Mannermaa and Peura argue that the gift is the basis upon which one is declared righteous, as one is on a progressive path toward being made holy in fact, Luther himself argues that gift is the effect of justification and not its cause. The historical argument highlights this priority: Luther first develops an account of the total aspect of grace on the basis of the external word of promise given in the sacrament of communion. Faith itself is always in relation to the external promise which provides certainty for faith. It is in attempting to account for the relationship between the complete certainty of faith and the partial aspect of grace that Luther develops the distinction of gift and favor. To emphasize that the gift is the basis for justification misprioritizes this relationship in justification.

Secondly, the account of evil this dissertation developed poses questions about the progressive account of sanctification that the Finnish school offers. The Finnish school's account of Luther is surprising free of the tensions in Luther's own thought concerning the power of sin, death, and the devil. The picture they present of Luther seems to assume a neutral background against which a person grows in faith and righteousness. Where Luther thought that the life of faith would be one in which the Gospel provoked the devil's rage, and thus faith would always be one of struggle to maintain faith in the promise due to external and internal opposition, the Finnish school abstracts Luther's account of justification from the setting in which he articulates it. While there may be moral progress, the emphasis in Luther's own thought is not on progressive reformation on the

self, but on maintaining faith in the promise in the face of sin, death, and the devil. By abstracting Luther's account of justification from the account of evil, the Finnish school misrepresent the central thrust and power of Luther's theology.

(3) With Oswald Bayer, the dissertation affirms Luther's emphasis on creation as a good gift of God. Against older readings of Luther that present him as nearly Manichean in his assessment of creation, this dissertation follows Bayer in affirming the goodness of creation. The dissertation adds to Bayer's project by showing the historical development of the way Luther develops his affirmation of created life. In showing the intellectual movements necessary to sustain this vision, however, this historical project also challenges Bayer's interpretation of the ontology of justification. With Bayer, the dissertation argued that the fundamental aspect of Luther's ontology is the account of God's free gift apart from merit; against Bayer, I argued that Luther resists identifying this gift with justification. Creation and justification are both grounded in the goodness of God, but this does not make them equivalent terms. For Luther, all creation is grounded in the abounding goodness of God, while justification refers to the forgiveness of sins and the subjective certainty of salvation present through Christ. This distinction is important to maintain for Luther to see how God operates in and through creation without thereby reducing everything to a unique account of Christian belief and practices. God is good to all, even to those who ultimately do not trust in God.

It is, however, one thing to say how this project differs from contemporary interpretations; it is another to show that this interpretation has contemporary relevance. While it may be the case that the historical approach adopted here deepens or challenges contemporary attempts to retrieve Luther's thought, I have not yet shown that this account itself has any contemporary relevance. It may be the case that the historical Luther developed his thought in ways different than, say, Radical Lutheranism presents justification, but this does not show that the interpretation I proffered has

contemporary purchase. In the last part, then, I want to examine both the challenges and promises of retrieving Luther in contemporary constructive work.

The major challenge for this project is the historical and intellectual difference between Luther's setting and our own. More particularly, many of the major intellectual categories with which Luther operates and assumes are often foreign to contemporary discourse. This gap is most clear in regards to the categories of evil Luther employs: sin, death, the devil, and the wrath of God. If these are not wholly absent from contemporary discourse, they are often presented in ways that undermine the richness in Luther's own thought. Sin and death, for example, still have contemporary purchase in theological circles, but in wider discourse they have taken on different forms. Jason Mahn has convincingly argued that the contemporary cultural discourse on sin normally falls into pious moralisms that fail to take seriously the nature and depth of evil. Instead of sin being the category in which we operate and think from, contemporary discourse portrays it as something that we can easily intellectually master, clarify, and opt out of. The breadth and richness of the doctrine of bondage and the noetic fall of reason in Luther is thereby excluded by a cheapening or simplifying of the category.² Likewise, with the category of death—where Luther saw death, sin, and the law as intimately related, contemporary discourse has separated biological death from the daily structures of meaning and particularly the categories of moral fault. The power of the category of death in Luther is thus far different than what is generally understood by the category today.

While there is a vestige of discourse on sin in contemporary thought, the central challenges of evil for Luther, the devil and the wrath of God, have been rendered moot in most contemporary theological and philosophical thought. While Luther has a refined sense of the devil's work as subtly creating doubt in the sufficiency of God's grace, the devil is rarely, if ever, taken as a serious force in contemporary theology. Demonology as a category in contemporary discourse is normally treated as

² Jason Mahn, *Fortunate Fallibility: Kierkegaard and the Power of Sin* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

a historical vestige and having little to do with contemporary post-industrial life. Likewise, Luther's understanding of the wrath of God as a serious problem which the conscience must face is absent from contemporary thought, liturgies, and the wider religious life in much of the Western world. As Forde argued, the God of degenerate pietism is presented as nice, affirming, and without seriousness. As many contemporary theologians have noted, the fear inspired by the wrath of God, the *Anfechtung* and trembling conscience, while not wholly absent from contemporary life, are not widespread cultural phenomenon. The attempt to revive the symbol of the wrath of God is particularly difficult as for Luther the wrath of God is an experienced power and presence and not a doctrine of intellectual speculation.

A similar problem besets Luther's notions of created goodness. Luther's account of law as God's law, for example, runs counter to many widespread understandings of it. Luther experiences and assumes the law is God's law and precisely as God's law, the law can reveal sin. Oswald Bayer argues, however, that in contemporary society the law is normally conceived in positivistic terms or as the categorical imperative. In either case, the law is not experienced as God's law, but as the law imposed from a human sovereign or given to oneself.³ The possibility of having encounters with the law that provoke existential reflections on sin, evil, and the self's relationship to God is hindered by the cultural assumptions about the nature and power of the law. These conceptual difficulties with the basic concepts of the law also spill over into other areas. In particular, Luther's affirmation of the orders of creation appears to lead to a conservative, reactionary attitude toward forms of social change. While Luther's affirmation of creation does not come at the cost of an account of the perverting effects of sin, the structure of his argument makes radical critique and questioning difficult. If, for example, Luther believes that heteronormative and patriarchal gender relations are

³ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

both God's will and are written into creation, it is difficult to see how Luther can accommodate important questions of justice relations raised by feminist and queer theologians.⁴ Or, again, Luther's account of station and role may provide an ultimate equality that undermines the theological basis of apparent social hierarchies, but it leaves in place the power relations in life that can lead to unjust exploitation. As Troeltsch argued, Luther's thought appears medieval in many of its assumptions.⁵ Luther's applicability to democratic social systems which operate with a different model of government, equality, and justice is not straightforward.

These concerns indicate that there is a historical gap between Luther's framework for thinking about God, creation, sin, and evil, and the contemporary situation in which we live and think. If Luther's thought is to be retrieved, it cannot merely be restated as such; rather it requires hermeneutical reinterpretations of the central categories of his thought. Much of the work in German Lutheran scholarship, particularly the work of Ebeling, Jüngel, and Bayer has concerned itself with this very question. To explore the hermeneutical structure of language, being, and the Word-event that calls forth faith would take the conclusion too far afield and require another dissertation. Instead, I will conclude with prospective thoughts on the nature and task of theology in light of the work on Luther. I offer three thoughts in conclusion.

(1) While the ways Luther categorizes evil are historically dated and may assume a different world picture, the experience of evil has not gone away. The power of evil is still present seemingly everywhere, even as this evil takes on new conceptual forms. This presence is well-known: due to extensions of human power, the environment is being exploited and destroyed at an accelerating and alarming rate; poverty, hunger, and lack of clean drinking water continue to plague millions of

⁴ For Luther's relationship to feminism see, Deanna Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Mary J. Streufert, *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2. Trans. O. Wyon (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961).

families across the globe; political and environmental factors have led to the current refugee crises, such as in Syria, where over 200,000 people have been killed in the last five years. In the US, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Laquan McDonald, and the shooting tragedy at Emanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina show racism continues to terrorize, oppress, and destroy black lives. The novels of Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Toni Morrison, and Roberto Bolaño depict the confusion, addictions, sadness, and crass dehumanization that is rampant in the contemporary world. These novelists and artists sense and depict a deep darkness in the structures of the world that leads to exploitation and death. Death and evil continues to haunt existence, in its many forms.

Given the abiding presence of evil, the theological task is not simply to dress these horrors in the theological categories that Luther employed. Rather, like Luther, the profound questions posed by sin and death, terror and racism, darkness and sorrow, ought to provide the context for theological reflection. The task for theology is not simply to respond to the intellectual challenges of modernity, nor is it simply to reform theology into a transformative praxis that aims to reform social orders, but instead it is to attend to evil in its many dimensions, both personal and structural, both suffered and produced, and offer the good news of the Gospel to them. This theological task is difficult: in his commentary on *The Magnificat*, Luther argues that the natural tendency of people is to turn away from and cower from evil and attempt to think about the pleasant things in life. This desire to flee and turn away from evil manifests itself in cultural forms that aim to distract, entertain, and pacify at the cost of a real engagement with sin, suffering, and evil. The theological task is then first to open people's eyes to systems of suffering that they would otherwise ignore. Luther's account on the multidimensionality of evil, including the profound recognition that sin does not occur 'out there,' but is actively and happily participated in by the soul curved in on itself, provides

the framework for theologians to think seriously about the horrors of evil as the structure of thought.

If sin and evil are taken as the context for theological reflection, then theology has a dual task: it must both reflect on the human experience of sin and suffering in order to show the need for redemption. This task, however, is always preliminary as theology must also proclaim the good news that evil does not have the final word, that the God who created a good world continues to love creation and fight against the many powers of evil. This means, with Luther, theology ought to take on a soteriological tone: if the problem Luther addresses is sin and evil, the good news must be cast as justification and salvation from all forms of evil. The theological task is thus aligned with the pastoral task: both aim at confronting evil and consoling those who suffer under the weight of sin. But, unlike some modern attempts to understand evil, Luther's reflections on predestination preclude the theologian from explaining evil. Theology, like the Christian life, is one of hope, a hope against appearance, a hope for a future in which God will be shown to be good. In other words, while the particular descriptions of evil have changed, the theological task of contemplating the reality of evil, while proclaiming the victory of God remains the same.

(2) The contemporary application of the goodness of the created orders requires a similar hermeneutic interpretation. The enduring features of Luther's thought, I argue, stem from the separation of creation and justification. Unlike, say Karl Barth, who sees all theology grounded in the revelation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ and develops his understanding of creation from there, Luther offers a relative distinction between creation and justification. Justification is not the ontological basis of reality; rather, the God who freely gives good gifts stands at the basis of all creation. This God is the source of both creation and justification, though it is important to keep these distinct, as creation itself does not justify, but is nevertheless the realm of God's good gifts.

Luther himself specifies the nature of these gifts in terms of the orders of creation: church, family, and, after the Fall, government.

The hermeneutical challenge here again stems from the specific developments of these concepts in Luther. For Luther, these orders of creation articulate God's abiding presence in creation as they are the concrete realm in which one performs the double love commandment: in the church, one worships and loves God; in the family, one loves one's spouse and children and honors the parents; the government provides justice and protects people from danger. The danger in affirming God's presence in creation, as Bonhoeffer recognized in the face of German nationalism, is to not identify any specific instantiation of an order with God's will. If the orders were identical with God's created intention, then there would be a realm separate from sin that was pure in and of itself. Instead of orders of creation, then, Bonhoeffer preferred to term them orders of preservation to remind Christians of their penultimate status as realms of God's will and the way the orders mitigate against sin. Although the orders are still from God, they are not perfectly embodied under a state of sin.⁶

A second concern, raised by more recent feminist and queer theologians, is the one stated above: namely, that these orders inscribe patriarchal and heteronormative orders into creation and thereby marginalize women and LGBTQ persons, who are instructed to live under male authority or marginalized from normative spheres. To respond to this question, the Lutheran theologian has two responses: first, an argument can be made from the nature of the orders. Luther articulates these orders as orders, not simply from a reading of Genesis, but also from the way they serve as the concrete arena for love and justice. As such, the normative power of any relationship stems from the ways that they embody love and strive for justice. A father is a good father when he raises his

⁶ Dieterich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, English Edition ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

children in the Gospel; a business person is good insofar as her work benefits the neighbor. As such, the constructive theologian could argue any relationship that embodies love and justice is an instance of God's abiding presence in creation. This differs from the historic Luther's insistence that a man cannot be without a woman and a woman a man, but retains the theological emphasis on God's presence wherever one loves and serves the neighbor. Wherever heterosexual gender relations in a marriage strive for equality or where there are same-sex couplings that embody love and justice, these relations can be seen as God's action, as they embody the love of God. God's presence in creation occurs at precisely those points where there are orders and structures that allow for neighbor love. As neighbor loves occurs in many different forms of relationship, the constructive theologian can argue that it can be embodied in many forms of romantic love.

Second, the constructive theologian could argue from Luther's understanding of the variation of governments and state laws. According to Luther, there is no one ideal government or legal system; rather, each state has its own code to preserve peace and maintain order in its own sphere. If this is the case, the constructive theologian can apply a similar argument to less patriarchal relations. Just as government can have different constitutions, so too gender relations can differ and still perform their function of maintaining a peaceful and loving home. This approach leaves the patriarchal aspects of Luther's thought behind, but leaves the emphasis on God's abiding presence in creation. Luther's own claim may resist this, however, as he sees patriarchal gender relations as embodying God's created will and does not see them as culturally specific.

(3) There are aspects of Luther's engagement with evil that can and must be rejected. In particular, Luther's serious engagement with the problem of evil led him to see any and all theological disagreements as works of the devil. This led him to demonize his opponents, view theological differences in apocalyptic terms, and treat outsiders as agents of the devil. While some of his sharper invectives are certainly a product of his intellectual milieu, the vilification of theological

opponents and especially his condemnation of Jews, Turks, papists, etc. should be roundly condemned.⁷

This condemnation, however, must be nuanced. There are at least two issues at stake in this aspect of Luther's thought. The first concerns the relationship between the truth of the Word of God and the structure of theology. Luther justifies his harsh invectives against his opponents by distinguishing between faith and love. Through an examination of Paul's harsh rhetoric in Galatians, Luther argues that in matters of life, the Christian must always be normed by love: when someone sins, one must forgive and treat the person with kindness and love. In all aspects of life, one must love the neighbor. Following Paul, however, Luther argues that in matters of truth and faith, one should not be so forgiving and lenient; instead one must insist on the truth of the Word of God and not budge an inch for any reason. His intransigence here was based on a vision of the Gospel as liberating and freeing for individuals: to deny any aspect of the Gospel was to disturb troubled consciences who needed consolation and comfort. Luther's harshest condemnations, then, were for those teachers who disagreed on matters of theology, particularly for teachers who threatened the good news of the pure graciousness of God. In so doing, they endangered the subjective certainty and comfort God gives through the Word. Luther's obdurate defense of truth was also always a defense of the good news of the Gospel for the good of the people.

The challenge in these pluralistic times is for those in the Lutheran tradition to engage in ecumenical and interreligious conversations with a firm grasp on the power of the Gospel as the good news in its freeing and liberating aspects, without allowing disagreements over this Gospel to break fellowship or love. While Lutheran theologians should worry about the tone of argument, the

⁷ Unsurprisingly, with perhaps the exception of some Confessional and Radical Lutherans, Luther scholars and theologians sympathetic to Luther are in wide agreement about the need to leave this aspect behind. See Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. Paul Hinklicky, *Luther and the Beloved Community: A Path for Christian Theology after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2010), 379-385.

concern for ecumenical relations should not come at the expense of the Gospel, if the Gospel is truly the good news of God. At the same time, if possible, Lutherans are challenged to find ways to defend the beauty, distinctiveness, and truth of the Gospel, without allowing the truth to sow seeds of discord. The sharp division between faith and love must both be upheld, for it is good news of God, and yet, faith must inspire love, even in the face of theological disagreement.

If the first concern is a more general challenge of pluralism for distinctive truth claims, the second challenge concerns the relationship of Luther's robust demonology to demonization. I argued above that the problem of evil has not gone away and that, in general, the structure of Luther's thought is salutary in thinking about evil and in understanding the theological task. The deeper problem, however, concerns the possibility of retrieving Luther's insights about evil, the truth of the Gospel, and the graciousness of God without resorting to demonization or an apocalyptic dualism. In Luther's case, the engagement with evil led him to operate with sharp divisions between God and the devil that allowed him to categorize friends and enemies as agents of one or the other. If Luther's great insight concerns the relationship of theology to the question of evil, then the question remains if it is possible to engage evil with resorting to this apocalyptic dualism.

Paul Hinlicky, who struggles with similar questions, provides a useful distinction for this problem. After arguing that Luther should not be treated as *the* infallible source for all theology, but as *a* teacher, Hinlicky notes Luther has two opposing strands operative in his apocalypticism: one strand is mediated and modified by the Christ's resurrection; the other is an "unmodified apocalyptic that despairs of the world God created and redeemed in Christ and is seeking for the reign by the Spirit through the gospel. Luther's sin here against peasant, pope, and Jew is the sin of despair of God, which as a result really does leave the world to the devil, as if Christ were not risen, but

effectively still in the tomb.”⁸ For Hinlicky, the theological task in the wake of Luther is to more consistently affirm the Christologically modified apocalyptic than Luther himself did—that is, we need to “execute the needed act of hermeneutical violence against this real, historical Luther”⁹ in order to not fall into the dualism that demonizes and sees theological opponents as enemies.

Hinlicky’s solution requires the theologian to think with and beyond Luther. Given the increasingly interconnected and globalized world, this ability to think about difference without demonizing opponents, but also without giving up substantive discussions of truth claims, is a central task of theological thought. Luther, I have argued, provides a theology grounded in Scripture that is experientially and existentially rich. It is precisely at the point of treatment of opponents, however, where one must think beyond Luther. While it is possible to argue that the robust affirmation of creation provides ample grounds for these new global realities, Luther does not draw this bridge. In fact, his harshest invectives against the Jews come late in his life. Nevertheless, Luther provides a rich theological vision of God’s goodness in a world shaped by evil; it is the theological task to take what is valuable in Luther and find ways to articulate it in our new globalized world.

⁸ Hinlicky, 385.

⁹ Hinlicky, 384.

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