RETURN TO EDEN:
AN EXAMINATION OF PERSONAL SALVATION IN MARTIN LUTHER'S
VON DER FREIHEIT EINES CHRISTENMENSCHEN

Jordan P. White

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2012

Committee:

Kristie Foell, Advisor
Theodore Rippey
ABSTRACT

Kristie Foell, Advisor

This thesis explores Martin Luther’s early thinking regarding soteriology. The main document examined is Luther’s 1520 treatise *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (VFC) in which, I argue, Luther makes the case for individual salvation as opposed to the standard communal salvation construct of Rome. To demonstrate the differences between VFC’s personal salvation model and Rome’s communal salvation model I explore the history of communal salvation through the development of Purgatory and show that Luther rejected and replaced this construct in 1520. Furthermore, I argue that the real break between the Protestant movement and the Roman Catholic Church is theological not institutional and is therefore most properly located in November of 1520 with the publication of VFC along with an accompanying forward to Pope Leo X. Finally this thesis shows how Luther’s major ideas, i.e. the movement away from scholastic theology, Luther’s concept of good works, his definition of justification, and the individual salvation model, were employed and discussed in the 20th century and how they are being employed and discussed in the 21st century. Special emphasis is given to the Wright/Piper debate on the meaning of justification and its examination of the Luther tradition.
Für Dieter und Ilse
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kristie Foell, my advisor, for her tireless effort to help me produce the best work possible, for her continuous encouragement, and for letting me take on such a project in the first place. I would also like to thank Dr. Ted Rippey for his efforts as second reader. His contributions improved this work. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues who have shared this journey with me. Your support and encouragement was and is appreciated.

I would like to give a special thanks to Dr. Beate Kohnert for her insights regarding the Wright/Piper debate and Martin Luther’s early theology. It has truly been a pleasure discussing those topics with you Beate, and I look forward to our future conversations. Finally I would like to thank P.C., Herr Pullen, and, of course, my family.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER I. COMMUNAL SALVATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. THE <em>ABLASSHANDEL</em></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AN INTRODUCTION TO PURGATORY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PURPOSE OF PURGATORY</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PIOUS THOUGHTS REGARDING PURGATORY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELEASE FROM PURGATORY AND THE <em>ABLASSHANDEL</em></td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAROLE: WHEN A COIN “IM KASTEN KLINGT”</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. THE 95 THESES</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUTHER REACTS</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROME RESPONDS</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUTHER’S FINAL ATTEMPT AT RECONCILIATION</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER II. A NEW THEOLOGY IS BORN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. INTRODUCTION TO LUTHER’S EARLY THEOLOGY</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>AN DEN CHRISTLICHEN ADEL DEUTSCHER NATION</em> (CAD)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>VON DER BABYLONISCHEN GEFANGENSCHAFT DER KIRCHE</em> (BGK)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. VFC: AN OVERVIEW</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A LETTER FOR LEO</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFC AND THE “INNER MAN”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE “OUTER MAN”</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER III. JUSTIFICATION IN VON DER FREIHEIT EINES CHRISTENMENSCHEN</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The objective of this writing is to demonstrate that Martin Luther is the father of the modern individual soteriological construct. Though Luther would most certainly reject the modern western individualization of so-called “personal faith” and “personal beliefs” so prevalent today, he along with John Calvin is nevertheless the foundation upon which such modern soteriology stands. Despite Calvin’s influence, this work will focus primarily on Luther, since Luther’s call for a personal relationship with Jesus predates Calvin’s. The “double predestination”—God’s alleged “election” of individuals to salvation and of those to be eternally damned without regard either way for any human will whatsoever—is most often attributed to Calvin today. As a matter of fact it is most often referred to as “Extreme Calvinism” in the U.S. and Canada. However, Luther’s double predestination doctrine both predates Calvin’s and is much more assertive in its claim. To come to such a conclusion as this, one which demands extreme individualization of salvation, requires one to have already had personal salvation in mind.

This paper will, then, examine the theology of personal salvation as presented in Martin Luther’s 1520 masterpiece Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen (VFC). This work, though raw and unrefined in its theology, lays the groundwork for the future doctrines of double predestination and the doctrine of “imputation” which is, seemingly, indispensable to Protestant theology. It is amazing to me to see that even the finest biographies and theological examinations of Luther and his work so consistently overlook VFC. Almost always given a mere 3-5 pages of coverage in these works, VFC’s finer points are nearly always overlooked. VFC’s claim that the church is composed of a priesthood of all believers seems to be the only
point of merit in the whole treatise. This is simply not so. VFC offers much more than this assertion, ground-breaking as it was and still is.

*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* tolls the medieval church’s theological death knell, not only with its claim that each Christian is a priest, but also in its declaration of a loving God who is reaching out in love to an otherwise helpless world through Jesus Christ. VFC does away with the “angry judge Jesus” and replaces Him with with a tender bridegroom who longs to rescue the individual! Furthermore, VFC redefines *Rechtfertigung*, *Gerechtigkeit*, and *Gnade* in a revolutionary way. Replacing the medieval demand of gradual personal perfection with the aid of a little kick-start from God, the *donum* superadditum, Luther instead declares that the individual convert is instantaneously made righteous. Rather than Christ expecting “good works” from the believer in exchange for forgiveness, VFC presents a Christ who gives righteousness to the believer at the moment of conversion.

Such a radical shift in thinking requires the redefining of “good works,” something VFC provides. True good works look nothing like the so-called “good works” common at the time. Instead of attempting to accrue sufficient merits to undo or negate sins committed, VFC’s good works are works done sacrificially for the sake of others with no regard to the self—and most certainly not to merit favor with God. To attempt to merit God’s favor is to doubt, and thus insult, God! VFC argues quite clearly that its theology is both biblical and undeniable. To reject the theology therein presented is to reject God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* is, I argue, the true moment in which Luther decisively broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and the most important of Luther’s writings in 1520. Luther’s apparent waffling on the point has led scholars to debate just when Luther really cut his movement off from the church based in Rome. Was it December of 1520
when he burned the letter announcing his excommunication to the world along with books of canon law in a pyre before his students very eyes? Or perhaps it was during the Leipzig Debate in 1519 when in responding to an accusation from his arch-enemy, Johann Eck, he declared himself to be in agreement with the heretic of the previous century, Jan Hus? Perhaps, some postulate, it was as late as 1521. This paper will demonstrate that VFC, when read in conjunction with the letter Luther included for pope Leo X when he sent the treatise to Rome, provides a clear, theological break with the Roman Catholic Church.

The attempt to determine when Luther truly and definitively severed his movement from the Catholic Church often focuses on questions of formality, of institutionalized ritual. The appropriate question, at least when speaking of Luther directly, must be of a theological nature. Luther was not attempting to reform an institution; he was trying to reform theology. This is an important distinction to make. Therefore, rather than looking for a formal declaration of institutional separation, we must instead look for a theological declaration which rejects and replaces the theology of the Roman Catholic Church. It is one thing to lodge a complaint about the status quo, it is another thing to toss it into the proverbial garbage can and put in its place a new theology. This is what *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* does. Therefore VFC is the “official” declaration not that Rome must make a few changes but that *it must repent and assume the new theology*, or perish under the wrath of God!

The theology which VFC seeks to replace is a theology of communal salvation. Communal salvation is nothing new to theological constructs which claim YHWH as their god. Thus it should be no surprise to find communal soteriological constructs within Christianity. The communal salvation of Luther’s time, however, is somewhat unprecedented in its extremes. Chapter 1 of this present work will show that the acceptance of the notion of Purgatory and the
wildly varying ideas of what it constituted and how one could hope to shorten one’s time there, or avoid the place altogether, had produced a system of communal salvation which demanded the interaction of the living, the dead, angels, Mother Mary, Jesus, and finally God the Father—often in that order—in order to attain to true salvation, that is to arrive in Heaven.

The *Ablashandel* (the selling of indulgences) lead by Johann Tetzel was the perfect culmination of the medieval, Roman Catholic, notions of communal salvation. By the authority of the papacy, Leo X declared that he had sufficient control over the merits of the church, in Heaven, Purgatory, and on earth, to shorten the time one must spend in Purgatory and even to release souls from the place instantaneously. Chapter 1 Part B shows that people at least believed that they could buy what amounted to divine permission slips to cover future and even pet sins. Luther reacted to this “erroneous” thinking with his famous *95 Theses*. Not realizing that he would start a theological firestorm, Luther anticipated an academic debate. He never got it. Instead, Luther found himself the unexpected leader of an unexpected movement.

In chapter 2, A New Theology is Born, I will examine Luther’s three major publications in 1520. A general overview will be provided for *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* (CAD), *Von der Babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche* (BGK), and *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*. Each work addresses different issues. CAD, in accordance with progressing nationalism, concerns itself with the foreignness of Rome and its exploitation of the German people. BGK attacks the Roman Catholic Church as an institution stripping it of much of its claim over the impartation of grace via sacraments and rituals. VFC, as we have seen, rewrites the books on theology, thus nullifying the real source of Rome’s power. Part B of chapter 2 will provide a thorough outline of VFC’s complete argument.
Chapter 3, Justification in *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, will explore Luther’s new, not yet fully defined, soteriology. The most probable reason why VFC’s individual salvation model is so commonly overlooked is because it lacks clarity on just exactly how this new means of justification really works. To familiarize the reader with the history of the doctrine of justification, this chapter will answer the question “What is justification” by examining the arguments of leading theologians past and present. Next it will examine justification in VFC. Due to the raw nature of VFC’s theology, it will be necessary to look at what it does not claim justification is in order to determine what it really does say on the topic. Luther’s “mature” theology concluded that justification was the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the individual believer. Not so VFC. Neither does VFC argue for theosis, though, since the 1970’s, arguments have been put forth that Luther argued for theosis. VFC most definitely rejects the doctrine most commonly accepted at the time, infusion.

In place of these notions, which many theologians even today seem to assume are the only three real possibilities, VFC argues simply for spiritual union with Christ. Though VFC takes the time to argue how this is theologically possible, it does not provide a clear answer as to how this actually takes place. In Part B of chapter 3, I will show that VFC is a call to return to the “originally intended” relationship between the individual and God. Righteousness in VFC is through faith and not through works. Good works, however, are not done away with. Instead, good works are redefined and repurposed. The objective no longer being to merit God’s favor, good works are now done in the same fashion as Adam’s good work in the Garden of Eden.

In chapter 4, Martin Luther in Current Theological Trends, I will explore how the arguments of VFC have developed over the course of the last 491 years. Good works in the anti-Nazi theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer will receive quick treatment followed by three examples of
theological discussion going on today which derive directly out of VFC’s argumentation. Part B of chapter 4 will concern itself with the Wright/Piper Debate, perhaps the most important theological discussion of our time. I will show that the very heart of VFC, justification, is still one of the hottest topics in Christian theology. Tens of thousands of pages have been written on the topic in recent years alone. John Piper, one of the best educated and most respected Protestant theologians of the day, stands firmly in Martin Luther’s “mature,” justification via imputation camp. Challenging Cambridge University trained former Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright’s argument for Covenantal theology as the appropriate exegesis of Paul’s writings, Piper shows that the seemingly inevitable logical outcome of VFC’s personal salvation model—imputation—is still alive and ready to fight to retain its central place in western Protestant theology. For his part, N.T. Wright responds powerfully, carrying forward into the 21st century the spirit of VFC by challenging the stranglehold tradition has on theology.

In the conclusion of this writing I will demonstrate that *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* is indeed the most significant of Luther’s 1520 writings and that its assertions provide a clear break with the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, I will show that the very questions which drove Luther to think his way through such material have developed and intensified in today’s theology. Questions of whether to include scholasticism in theology and to what extent western thinking has been “tainted” by scholasticism are central to the ground-breaking work of some of today’s brightest theologians. The question of God’s ontology, and by default man’s ontology, are being addressed in the top circles of today’s academic theology.

Furthermore, I will make clear that, though VFC’s theology lacks clarity regarding how righteousness is transferred from Christ to the individual convert, VFC does clearly define a new theology with which all Christian theologians past and present must reckon. VFC is unrefined in
certain respects, but it is not a rough draft sketched out over a few beers in the middle of the night. Additionally, while VFC leaves some finer points of “how exactly?” to be defined, it does provide many very clearly defined arguments. It is no strike against the work, revolutionary as it was, that Luther could not so early in his career give voice to each and every possible sub-point. This writing will show that Von der Friheit eines Christenmenschen is a revolutionary call to return to Eden, not through violence, not through nationalism, not through the Roman Catholic Church, but rather through a trusting faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ, the loving God of Christianity.
1517 was a momentous year for the western Church. Politics, greed and the desire to build the most marvelous basilica in all of history collided in Germany and stepped on the toes of an unimportant, bookish little monk, Doctor Martin Luder. Thoughts of Purgatory terrorized the masses and the church stood to profit from that. The soteriological construct of the age permitted Rome to interfere to much debated degrees with the goings on in Purgatory. Total salvation, arriving in the full presence of God and being able to remain there for eternity, required not just Jesus, or individual faithfulness, or even personal good works, but rather a whole series of interactions between Roman Catholics both living and dead, clerics, the hierarchy of Rome, . . . and, of course, God. Leo X promised to expedite the process through the sale of one of the most potent indulgences of all time. Martin Luther would react to the selling of indulgences (the Ablashandel) in Germany with the writing of his famous 95 Theses and the world would never forget his name. Johann Tetzel sold indulgences and preached release from Purgatory thanks to the power of Leo X, the pope in Rome. While there was indeed much controversy over this particular international “ministry” (I use the term loosely), the poor and the rich, the uneducated and the scholarly flocked to purchase indulgences to set free from the depths of Purgatory the spirits of loved ones. Before we can fully appreciate the Ablashandel, we need to examine Purgatory. Just what were the people trying to rescue loved ones from? Just what were they hoping to avoid themselves?
i - AN INTRODUCTION TO PURGATORY

In this chapter we will introduce Purgatory to reader, discuss the purpose of Purgatory in the Roman Catholic theology of Luther’s time, look at some of the visions and experiences of Purgatory claimed by saints, prior to the Ablasshandel, which were prevalent in Luther’s time, and examine the means by which one would have expected to be freed from Purgatory during that era. This will lead us into our next topic, the famous 95 Theses. The conflict resulting between Luther, other reformers of the day, and the Roman Catholic Church has been examined from various angles too numerous to count. That being said, the extreme importance of the debate regarding Purgatory and the significances of the theological positions of both parties require more attention than they have received. Purgatory was one of “the bitter disputes” between Roman Catholics and Protestants, with Luther referring to it as “the third place,” an “invented world,” a world “not mentioned in the Bible” (Le Goff 1981, p. 1).

The question of just what Purgatory meant to the people of Luther’s day must reflect on the origins of the doctrines of Purgatory within Christendom. Unfortunately, time and space forbid an in-depth examination of its origins. Nevertheless, it simply would not do to avoid the topic entirely, and, consequently, we will briefly look at some interesting points along Purgatory’s path of development. In order to fully appreciate how and why the Ablasshandel became the catalyst for Luther’s publications and development of his new theology, we must gain some insight into just what the Ablasshandel proposed to accomplish for the people, why the people were willing to fund such a “ministry,” and why it became such a heated debate among the future reformers and the old guard.

---

1 I here over generalize. It would be impossible to legitimately divide the combatants into two perfectly harmonious groups, but for the sake of convenience we will categorize them as those holding to standard Roman Catholic doctrine regarding Purgatory and those arguing against that position.

2 Le Goff’s book was original published in French under the title La naissance du Purgatoire.
St.s Ambrose (d. 397), Jerome (d. 420) and Augustine (d. 430) all postulated that those ultimately bound for Heaven may only be able to get there via ordeal, a thought which is indeed a proto-purgatorial construct; however, Le Goff asserts that St. Clement of Alexandria (d. prior to 215) and Origen (d. 253/54) the “inventors” of Purgatory (3, 52-3). All had varying notions of just what the ordeal one may have to endure might be and how it might function. The postulations of these saints gradually developed into the fully blossomed doctrine of “the Purgatory” in the 12th century (3). The concept of Purgatory requires, as Le Goff says, “the projection into the afterlife of a highly sophisticated legal and penal system” (5). Le Goff writes, “Broadly speaking, Purgatory developed as the place where venial sins might be expurgated—though in reality things were a bit more complicated” (5). However, the concept of a distasteful abode for the dead extends back into ancient Judaism. The Sheol of Judaism was a sad place, a disturbing place to be in, but, argues Le Goff, it was devoid of punishments (7). N.T. Wright, however, presents another possibility. In his tome The Resurrection Of the Son of God (2003) Wright points out the fluctuating perspective of the Jews during the Second Temple Period regarding the afterlife and, more specifically, resurrection. Referring to 2 Maccabees chapter 12, immediately following a battle lost by a Jewish military force, Wright states,

Judas Maccabaeus and his companions discover that those who had died in the battle against Gorgias’ troops had been wearing idolatrous tokens under their robes. This, Judas and the others concluded, was the reason they had been killed. Judas’ response was to praise the righteous judge for bringing this to light; to pray that the sin might be blotted out; and to take up a collection so that a sin offering could be made in Jerusalem. In doing this, comments the writer, Judas ‘acted

---

3 “Sheol, Abaddon, the Pit, the grave. The dark deep regions, the land of forgetfulness. These almost interchangeable terms denote a place of gloom and despair, a place where one can no longer enjoy life, and where the presence of YHWH himself is withdrawn” (Wright 2003, pp. 88-89).
very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection\footnote{2 Maccabees 12:43-45 “Und er tat gut und löblich daran, weil er an die Auferstehung dachte. Wenn er nicht erwartet hätte, dass die Gefallenen auferstehen würden, so wäre es überflüssig, ja töricht gewesen, für Tote zu bitten. Sodann aber bedachte er auch, dass denen, die als fromme Leute entschlafen, die herrlichste Gnadengabe bereitet ist; das ist ein frommer und heiliger Gedanke.” Thus we see that during the Second Temple period of Judaism, there was an expectation among some that the afterlife of a deceased individual could be improved by the prayers of the living righteous ones.} [ . . . ] This passage has, of course, been a happy hunting-ground for later theologians wondering about the validity or otherwise of praying for the dead . . . (pp. 152-3)

So, there is a continuity to be found here, namely the concern that the afterlife will include being consigned to a place one would rather not be, despite the apparent discrepancy between the older Jewish view of the afterlife and the view taken in 2 Maccabees which looks forward to the release from the abode of the dead by means of resurrection.

The cornerstone of Purgatory within the early Christian church and the church of the 12th century was 1 Corinthians 3:1-15:

\begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
&\ldots \, 13 \text{so wird eines jeglichen Werk offenbar werden: der Tag wird's klar machen.} \\
&Denn es wird durchs Feuer offenbar werden; und welcherlei eines jeglichen Werk sei, wird das Feuer bewähren. 14 \text{Wird jemandes Werk bleiben, das er darauf gebaut hat, so wird er Lohn empfangen.} 15 \text{Wird aber jemandes Werk verbrennen, so wird er Schaden leiden; er selbst aber wird selig werden, so doch durchs Feuer.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

However spurious “pro-purgation” conclusions about the true meaning of this passage may be, this text was used, quite often, as seen above, out of context to validate the notion that those who are saved must be saved by means of a consuming fire which will separate them from that which is not acceptable to God, thus preparing them to enter fully into God’s presence. Le Goff argues that Purgatory fully blossomed into the concept that Luther and his peers were familiar with in A.D. 1170 (135). I would argue that Purgatory was fully accepted as a Roman Catholic doctrine on All Saints’ Day in 1202, when Pope Innocent III (d. 1216) declared in his sermon during the
mass that there are three armies of the church: the Church Triumphant in Heaven, the Church Militant on earth, and the Church “abiding in Purgatory” (174-5). Since the pope was, according to Roman Catholic beliefs of the time, the vicar of Christ and the interpreter of sacred scripture for the Church, it seems most correct that, once a pope made such a declaration as Innocent III here made, the doctrine first received its true seal of approval, so to speak. Innocent III goes on to ask

Who indeed would not willingly praise the saints to the indivisible Trinity, when we believe that by the prayers and merits of the saints we too will one day be helped to reach their side? And who would not willingly pray to the indivisible Trinity for the dead, when he himself must die; who would not do in this life for another what he wishes to be done for him after his death? (174)

thus validating the notion that the living can produce actions which will have a positive effect on or for the dead who are to be found in Purgatory.

In Germany around 732, Pope Gregory III (d. 741) responded to St. Boniface (d. 755) regarding the Germans writing,

You also ask me if one can give offerings for the dead. Here is the position of the Holy Church: each person may make offerings for his own dead if they are genuine Christians, and the priest may celebrate their memory. And even though all of us are subject to sin, it is proper that the priest celebrate the memory and intercede on behalf of none but those who have died Catholics; for the impious, even if they were Christians, these actions will not be allowed. (102)

This is not evidence of belief in Purgatory per se, but it is proof of a long extant belief in the power of the prayers of the living to positively effect the dead. James 5:16 states, “Bekenne
einer dem andern seine Sünden und betet füreinander, daß ihr gesund werdet. Des Gerechten Gebet vermag viel, wenn es ernstlich ist.” Medieval Rome took this to mean that the living could pray on behalf of the Church Suffering and expect that the suffering be consequently alleviated somewhat—or entirely (Le Goff 1981, p. 11).

Since the church believed it had at least “partial jurisdiction” over all Christians, both dead and living, it made sense to assume that, at first, a righteous person could effect a positive change for a deceased relative and later that, if nothing else, Rome could (12). Purgatory became, writes Le Goff,

a marvelous instrument of power [for the Church]! The souls in Purgatory were considered to be members of the Church militant. Hence, the Church argued, it ought to have (partial) jurisdiction over them, even though God was nominally the sovereign judge in the other world. Purgatory brought to the Church not only new spiritual power but also, to put it bluntly, considerable profit. (12)

The “new place” became much more accepted during the fourteenth century, and some places experienced “a veritable floodtide of testamentary references to Purgatory” (356). The impact of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (1308-1321) must have played a crucial role in the development of 14th-century constructs of Purgatory, as evidenced by the striking similarities between Dante’s poetic construct and the visions of saints which will be shown below.

The devotion to the souls in Purgatory that we can see in the altarpieces and ex-votos shows that at some point these souls begin to acquire not only merit but also the power to transfer their merit to the living, to return service for service, to give assistance to men and women on earth. Thus the reversibility of merits, in doubt
in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and usually denied, eventually won a place
in doctrine. (356-7)

It is from a larger, overarching “floodtide” of visions and experiences of Purgatory which we
will draw excerpts of pious claims regarding Purgatory, in order to bolster our understanding of
just what the people of Luther’s time might have been anticipating immediately following death.

One may be left wondering just how applicable 12th through 15th century thoughts
regarding Purgatory might be different from those of 16th century believers—and rightly so.
This will be addressed in more detail in parts ii and iii of the present chapter. As Le Goff states,

From the end of the fourth to the middle of the twelfth century . . . society lived,
more or less (actually rather less than more), in accordance with an ideal, the City
of God. The essential thing was that the earthly, despite its imperfections, not
take a turn for the worse and drift toward evil and the Devil. The validity of the
model extended even beyond the twelfth century, and as long as the feudal world
of the powerful and the weak, the good and the wicked, the black and the white
continued to survive, Satan continued to launch violent and troubling
offensives.(209)

ii - THE PURPOSE OF PURGATORY

As stated above, an impressive list of church fathers retained doubts as to whether one
could enter fully into God’s presence immediately upon death, since all continue to sin—and sin
cannot stand before God. Le Goff states,

The ideas that living human beings formed about he other world were inspired, I
think, more by a need for justice than by a yearning for salvation, except perhaps
in brief periods of eschatological fervor. The other world was supposed to correct
the inequalities and injustices of this one. But this corrective and compensatory
function of the other world was not independent of terrestrial judicial realities.

(210)

In other words, Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory were set up to rectify what was unfair, improper and
unresolvable on earth, but, in order to retain control over this imagery, they were still largely
subject to the Roman Catholic Church. This was not a total handing over of the resolution and
restitution of and for wrongs to an outside being, namely God, but rather a system by which the
church could ensure that its ultimate objectives would be attained. As Le Goff writes, “the
Church continued to occupy center stage” (210). Thus, the average individual expected that
Purgatory would set things to rights, so to speak, and Rome expected that Purgatory would shore
up any loose ends with regard to its control over the Church as a whole.

The faithful could hope to alleviate the suffering of their loved ones and, we can
postulate, expect that those who had seemingly gotten away with evil in this life would end up
eating their just deserts. Nevertheless, Purgatory was solely the domain of angels and “the future
elect,” who anticipated entry into Heaven, or the full presence of God (6). The objective of
Purgatory is quite simple and yet quite complicated. That is, the notion that one must be
completely free of the sin which stains in order to be able to stand before God is quite simple to
understand, but it becomes confounding when one stops to consider just what that might require
(St Catherine of Genoa 1551, p. 23). In short, once one has been forgiven of one’s sins, one is
expected to tow the line and not sin anymore. To the extent that one does sin, one separates
one’s self from the saved, and for that matter from God, while still retaining one’s salvation—at

---

5 “The duration of punishment therefore depends not only on God’s mercy, symbolized by the zeal of the angels to snatch souls
away from the demons, but also on personal merits amassed over a lifetime and on suffrages undertaken by the Church at the
behest of friends and relatives of the deceased” (Le Goff 1981, p. 211).
6 The first printing of this revised translation was in 1996. It is based on the translation begun by Charlotte Balfour and
completed by Helen Douglas, which went to print in 1946. The original treatise was published in 1551 under the title Libro de la
vita mirabile et doctrina santa de la Beata Caterinetta de Genoa.
least within certain limits. Therefore, argue our upcoming visitors and visionaries of Purgatory, all sins committed after conversion (and prior to death) build up a kind of plaque on our souls which hinders us from sharing fully in the glory and presence of the elect (those Christians already fully in the presence of God) and, of course God. This plaque must be removed, before the soul can join the saved community in the presence of God.

By way of example, let us propose a completely hypothetical situation. Let us suppose that a man who is a true believer—Roman Catholic—commits adultery. To some extent he has harmed the community of the saved.\(^7\) He has definitely harmed (in the spiritual sense) the man or woman who engaged in the act with him. He has most definitely sinned against the teaching of the Church, the Bible, and ultimately of God. Since he has committed this sin, he has, in effect, separated himself to the degree of X from God and the Church. So long as he bears upon his soul the mark of this sin\(^8\) he cannot be fully united with the Church Triumphant, nor be fully in the presence of God. The means by which this stain of sin can be removed is punishment. Only by being punished for this sin can he enter into full union with the saved community.
Purgatory provides this service. Since he is separated by a degree of X, which may require, say, 1 million years of punishment to be expurgated, he must undergo the necessary punishment to remove this stain from his soul. If he has committed this sin multiple times, say 14 times, then he must endure 14 million years of Purgatory to cleanse his soul of these stains—which, of course, does not address any other stains from other sins.

While the degree of sin seems to have often been limited to venial sins (generally sins of omission, as opposed to mortal sins), the degree of punishment required for any given sin was never fully defined. Consequently there was great concern that one may indeed have to endure

\(^7\) 1 Corinthians 6
\(^8\) See references above and more detailed explanations in St. Catherine’s discourse below
millions upon millions of years of punishment in Purgatory—which could include any number of tortures ranging from ice to fire and everything in between (Schouppe 1893, p. 17). Of course, there were ways in which one could expurgate these sins while still alive, thus decreasing the amount of time punishment must be endured in Purgatory (St. Catherine of Genoa 1551, p. 17). It was also possible that those who were alive on the earth could pray for and give merits to those who were in Purgatory in order to lessen the amount of time spent in agony. However, St. Catherine of Genoa warns:

You have all taken shelter beneath hope in God’s mercy, which is, you say, very great, but you do not see that this great goodness of God will judge you for having gone against the will of so good a Lord. His goodness should compel you to do all His will, not give you hope in ill-doing, for His justice cannot fail, but in one way or another must be fully satisfied.

Cease to hug yourselves, saying: ‘I will confess my sins and then receive plenary indulgence, and at that moment I shall be purged of all my sins and thus shall be saved.’ Think of the confession and the contrition that are needed for that plenary indulgence, so rarely achieved that, if you knew, you would tremble in great fear, more sure that you would never win it than that you ever could. (79-80; italics in the original)

iii - PIOUS THOUGHTS REGARDING PURGATORY

Fr. F.X. Schouppe, S.J. writes in his Purgatory: Explained by the Lives and Legends of the Saints (1893) that “Particular Revelations”—of which there are two kinds, “visions and apparitions”—are the means by which pious saints have discovered various aspects of Purgatory (xxxv). Schouppe defines a vision as, “subjective lights, infused by God into the understanding
of His creatures, in order to discover to them his mysteries” (xxxv). Schouppe points out that this type of Particular Revelation generally occurs while the receiver is in a state of “ecstasy,” or in a trance, and cautions that this type of revelation “must not always be taken literally” (xxxv). Schouppe expects that much of the content of this type of revelation can be of a spiritual, and not literal, nature (xxxv). This type of Particular Revelation is then juxtaposed with a very literal type of revelation, namely that of the “apparition.” An apparition, Schouppe argues, is of the sort of experience the Apostles had with the resurrected Christ and cites Luke 24:37, in which Jesus physically manifested Himself and presented His (theoretically) healed wounds to His disciples for inspection as means of evidence (xxxvi). One who experiences this type of revelation may be physically transported into the spiritual realm, to another earthly location, or remain where he/she was but in the company of now tangible spiritual beings, i.e. angels, the deceased, and even Jesus (xxxvi-xxxviii).

By means of these Particular Revelations, Schouppe argues, Roman Catholic saints have learned much regarding Purgatory, and he concludes that these revelations serve as undeniable evidence in support of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. Although Schouppe wrote his book in the 1890’s, the opening pages of his work display official Canons and Decrees of the Roman Catholic church supporting the doctrines of Purgatory dating from 1547, 1551 and 1563 sessions of the Council of Trent (vi-viii). In keeping with Schouppe’s objective of validating these Decrees and Canons of the Counter-Reformation, he cites examples of Particular Revelations experienced by saints prior to and during the Counter-Reformation.9 Consequently, while the late date of his writing may indeed, and justifiably, cause one to question the

9 The Counter-Reformation Saint is an interesting topic. Peter Burke writes in his essay How to Become a Counter-Reformation Saint, “The last canonizations under the old regime were those of St Bruno (1514), St Francis de Paul (1519), St Benno and St Antonino of Florence (both 1523). There followed a hiatus of sixty-five years during which no more saints were canonized. It does not seem unreasonable to explain this hiatus in terms of a failure of nerve and to speak of a ‘crisis of canonization’ at a time when, as we have seen, the very idea of a saint was under fire. In Lutheran Saxony, the canonization of St Benno (a local worthy) was mockingly celebrated with a procession in which horses’ bones figured as relics” (Luebke 1999, pp. 131-2).
applicability of his work to an examination of the 16th century mindset concerning Purgatory, the stories he cites as evidence do indeed come from Luther’s time or earlier, and were indeed the very stories that were shared prior to and during the Reformation.

Schouppe defines the complete family of God as being composed of three separate categories within the one whole. That is, the church is to be found in three separate and simultaneous subcategories, yet all categories retain the status of “saved children of God.” These categories, again are: the Church Militant, the Church Suffering, and the Church Triumphant (3). The Church Militant is composed of those Christians who have not yet died and are, of course, still living on the earth. The Church Suffering comprises those Christians who have died and are in Purgatory. The Church Triumphant is, then, that segment of the church which has both passed from earthly life and has passed through (or been exempted from) Purgatory. These three subgroups within the whole are a family and can, desire to, and will interact with one another, in order to aid the church as a whole in achieving its objective, namely to be with God (3).

This interaction of the subcategories of the church is the basis of Particular Revelation in general and explains why it would be that deceased Christians, whether in or beyond Purgatory, as well as angels, and even Jesus would appear to living Christians at all. Schouppe claims that the responsibility of the Church Militant to pray for the Church Suffering, and to seek to aid the Church Triumphant is the reason for his having written the book in the first place (4). With Schouppe’s explanation of the reasons and intentions of his book, albeit 19th century intentions, in mind, let us look at the examples he provides as evidence for Purgatory, namely the lives and legends of the saints—stories of which Luther was himself aware.10

10 See Luther’s 95 Theses for his arguments regarding several pious stories of saints and their experiences with Purgatory which are not cited here.
Schouppe discusses St. Frances, “foundress of the Oblates,” (d. 1440) who took part in an apparition in which she was conducted to Hell and to Purgatory by a “celestial guide” (15-17). She was pleased to see that Purgatory (her guide informed her that it was also called the “sojourn of hope”) was not merely a place of torture (the sufferings therein were cruel), but rather that it was a place of comfort (16). Angels visited and ministered to the Church Suffering, much like they ministered to the suffering Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-44) and, “there reigned neither horror nor disorder, nor despair nor eternal darkness; there divine hope diffused its light” (15-16).

According to St. Frances, Purgatory is divided into three vertical compartments, with the lower portions containing those souls which are the farthest away from completing their allotted time in Purgatory (16). The amount of time spent in Purgatory required of the individuals there had to do with the extent to which the individuals had “defiled” themselves in their earthly lives (16). St. Frances was informed that each mortal sin requires seven years in Purgatory, but that, since mortal sins can vary in number of times committed and in the amount to which they defile an individual, the seven years of suffering in the flames is not necessarily set at a universal pain level (16). That is, one who continuously committed, say, adultery would experience a greater amount of pain within their allotted consecutive sentences than, say, someone who only committed adultery once and sought what Schouppe refers to as “sufficient expiation” of the sin while still alive on earth (16). St. Frances then describes having witnessed, while still in the lowest level of Purgatory, the descent of a priest she knew into the very depths of Purgatory, who, despite having “led an edifying life . . . had not always observed strict temperance, and had sought too eagerly the satisfactions of the table” (17). This priest’s face was covered by a veil.

11 Here we see the typical waffling concerning what types of sin Purgatory was able to address. Often limited to venial sins, St. Frances shows that mortal sins can also be purged there.
which hid “a stain,” presumably to alleviate some of his shame while in Purgatory (17). Upon venturing into the “intermediate Purgatory,” St. Frances discovered that it too was constructed of three levels (17). These levels were: a gigantic “dungeon of ice,” a “huge caldron of boiling oil and pitch,” and finally “a pond of liquid metal resembling molten gold or silver” (17).

Unfortunately, the “upper Purgatory” was not described by the saint.

Schouppe also shares the story of St. Lidwina of Schiedam (d. 1433) who was asked by her “angel guardian,” after being transported to Purgatory in a state of ecstasy, whether she would be willing to remain for some time in Purgatory, in order to alleviate the sufferings of those imprisoned there (23-25). St. Lidwina was, of course, quite willing and was then transported to a region of Purgatory so horrible that she felt sure she had actually been deported to Hell itself. She asked her guardian angel if she was now in Hell and was informed that she was still in Purgatory, but was in a region which “is bordering upon Hell.” She described a sub-region within this region in which the cries of the Church Suffering were so agonizing that she begged her angel guardian not to take her to that place. She soon discovered that she had been brought to Purgatory to aid a soul who was imprisoned in a well, the mouth of which was guarded by an angel (apparently whose only responsibility was to keep that soul in the well). It turned out that the soul in the well was one “dear” to her. She was able to grant the soul a momentary release from the confines of the well, which spouted excessive amounts of fire, once the lid was removed, but awoke from her ecstasy as a result of the horror of the sights and sounds before her. She then dedicated herself to praying for the soul and was later pleased to be informed by her angel guardian that the soul had been released from the well and had moved to “the ordinary Purgatory.” She was not, however, satisfied with this result and continued to apply her earned merits to the suffering soul until she witnessed that soul exiting Purgatory and
entering into the open gates of Heaven. Thus we see that her prayers must indeed have been quite effectual, since this particular soul spent significantly less that one human lifespan in Purgatory.

Before launching into a much more detailed review of pious expectations of Purgatory prior to and during the Reformation we will look at Schouppe’s account of St. Peter Damian (d. 1072) in some detail (379-81). While St. Peter Damian was in a state of ecstasy, not long after Roman lord John Patrizzi had died, he was transported to the Basilica of St. Cecilia, where he saw St.s Cecilia, Agnes, and Agatha, among others, and the Virgin Mary herself. A destitute woman wearing a robe given to her by John Patrizzi was visiting the basilica to pray for him. Mary appeared to the woman who beseeched her on Patrizzi’s behalf to free him from the tortures of Purgatory. Initially ignoring the woman, Mary responded to her third request and called Patrizzi’s soul up from the depths of Purgatory to stand before her in the basilica. He was in extreme agony and was wearing chains so immense that they were cutting into his body. Mary informed the woman begging for mercy for Patrizzi that, “The man for whom you pray is condemned for a long time to the most terrible suffering, on account of his numerous sins. But since he had two special virtues, mercy towards the poor and devotion for my altars, I will condescend to give him my assistance.” Of course, the crowd of saints erupted in ecstatic shouts of joy for the great mercy of the Queen of Heaven. Mary looked upon Patrizzi with mercy and ordered that his chains be replaced with a white robe and that he be an attendant to her heavenly throne. This order was “immediately executed” and St. Peter Damian’s apparition ended. St. Peter Damian became a lifelong advocate for the giving alms to the poor and for the veneration of Mother Mary, Queen of Heaven.
A much more detailed account of a saint’s experiences with Purgatory will help clarify what some Europeans expected to find on the other side during Luther’s lifetime. St. Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) wrote *Trattato del Purgatorio*, a description of the experience of, and reasons for Purgatory, after allegedly receiving numerous visions of Purgatory, combined with several experiences within Purgatory itself, while still embodied in her flesh (St. Catherine of Genoa 1551, pp. ii, 3, 6, 17). Her descriptions of Purgatory and of the souls which were to be found therein provide insight into pious thoughts regarding what a Roman Catholic in Luther’s time might have expected to experience in the immediate moments following death, as well as what one should anticipate experiencing for the unspecified length of time which would be required to return the soul to its “first state,” or the state of total harmony with God, unblemished by sin, original or intentional (63-4).

The souls in Purgatory “endure a pain so extreme that no tongue can be found to tell it” she claims, but also states, “I believe no happiness can be found worthy to be compared with that of a soul in Purgatory except that of the saints in Paradise” (24, 23). She explains that God desires to fully integrate Himself with the soul in Purgatory but cannot because “Sin’s rust is the hindrance” which must first be “burned away” before the soul is capable of being fully united with God (23). It is not God who torments the soul in Purgatory, but rather the lingering effects of sins committed during the souls corporeal life on earth which, not having been fully expunged during that life, continue to exist within the being as a form of not-yet-fully-dealt-with rebellion against God. And it seems that to St. Catherine everyone must endure some time in Purgatory, because, though one may indeed work toward improving one’s self by means of prayer, fasting, etc., “God’s works must be done by Him and not wrought chiefly by man” (67). St. Catherine argues that one is born under original sin (the sin of Adam and Eve, passed on to each successive

---

12 The modern English translation of this piece being used for this research is entitled *Fire of Love!: understanding purgatory.*
generation from its inception until Judgment Day) which is, in and of itself “a death”; however, this death is overcome in baptism (63). Unfortunately, mankind being by nature fallen, the baptized individual will indeed be drawn to sin and “thus [the soul] dies again” (63). This once baptized, twice dead soul is again raised by God via “another special grace”; however, the soul must return to its pre-Original-Sin-original-state before it can truly enter into God’s presence (63). That is, the individual soul must return to the state in which “The Soul” was created before sin existed—that is, its originally intended state! Interestingly St. Catherine’s argument also demands that each soul is, at the time of its creation, pure. This line of thinking flies in the face of the then commonly accepted teaching of the *donum superadditum* (superadded gift).13 It is, however, abundantly clear that all souls must return to the pre-sin state in which souls were intended to exist before they can enter into God’s true presence.14

The experience of pain in Purgatory is, according to St. Catherine, largely twofold: the emotional pain (which translates into physical pain) of not being able to be fully with God, and the purely physical pain of fire (59-60). Let us begin with the fire. The fire of Purgatory seems to be, in St. Catherine’s mind, a series of “rays” emitted from God Himself which draw the soul to Him, but which must necessarily purgate the soul being drawn, since any “stain of sin” will prevent the soul from enjoying full fellowship with God (23). This fire emitted from God is not emitted in hatred of the soul in question, but rather fully and completely out of love, since it is not possible for the soul to share in His glory unless it is purged of the hindering sin (17)! This fire, which is God’s love, cannot harm a sinless soul (60). Consequently, although God’s love will eternally continue to shine upon the soul, in the form of these “rays,” once the soul has been.

---

13 See Fesko 2008 p. 372. This argument is that mankind does not have an inherent apparatus for righteous conduct. Therefore, God “infused” man with some aspect of Himself in order to facilitate righteousness. Consequently, man is not capable of being righteous, even prior to the fall, without some type of indwelling of God.

14 “Unceasingly God draws the soul to Himself and breathes fire into it, never letting it go until He has led it to the state from which it came forth—that is, to the pure cleanliness in which it was created” (53).
purged of sin, it will only rejoice in the rays of God’s love. That is, the state being experienced in Purgatory can only be differentiated from the state of being in Heaven with God by 1) the sin which hinders the soul by means of causing it pain, and 2) the emotional pain of being, to some extent, in the presence of a perfect God while still in a state of imperfection.

This necessarily leads us to consider the emotional suffering the soul in Purgatory is said to be enduring. St. Catherine writes, “. . . the soul perceives the grievousness of being held back from seeing the divine light; the soul’s instinct, too, since it is drawn by that uniting look, craves to be unhindered” (54). The soul in Purgatory cannot be allowed to be fully aware of just how short it falls of the glory of God, says St. Catherine, because if it became aware of this “it would despair” (64). However, this ignorance is not total! According to St. Catherine, a soul in Purgatory can be differentiated from a soul in Hell by means of “will” (this is not the only means; naturally the life previously lived, the acceptance or denial of Christ, etc. serve as means of differentiation as well) (28). That is, the soul in Hell still wills to sin and rebel against God, whereas the soul in Purgatory has been removed of its independent will and wills only to be fully with God (83). The soul in Purgatory is aware that original sin and intentional sins committed during its corporeal life are preventing it from being fully in the presence of God, and furthermore, though the soul longs to be united with God, it is terrified at the prospect of entering into God’s full presence while still stained by sin and is thus grateful to be in Purgatory (49). The soul in Purgatory is no longer guilty of sin, its guilt having been paid in full upon death, but is rather “stained” by sin (32). The soul is aware that it must return to its originally-intended-state before it can be counted worthy to be accepted into God’s divine presence, and it is the

15 “The soul [once purged of sin] can suffer no more, for nothing is left in it to be burnt away. Were it held in the fire when it has thus been cleansed, it would feel no pain. Rather the fire of divine love would be to it like eternal life and in no way contrary to it” (60).
16 The argument seems to be that those who converted to Christianity surrendered their wills to God. Thus the will, dead while the convert still lived on earth, can only be manifested as the will of God.
chief desire of the soul to return to that state in the greatest haste possible, regardless of the necessary agonies required to do so (27, 55). In short, the soul suffers the emotional pain of knowing that it is wholly unworthy to be in the only place it truly wishes to be—the full presence of God. The soul is aware that it has made choices which are preventing it from entering into the presence of God, and this knowledge causes the soul to be in agony. Consequently, the soul in Purgatory experiences emotional agony, as a result of its unworthiness combined with what St. Catherine describes as a physical agony, as a result of the fire of God’s love burning away all vestiges of sin.

Two question yet remain: why do souls rejoice in their purgatorial sufferings, and what exactly is Purgatory? The soul in Purgatory rejoices because it sees itself being transformed into that which it was originally intended to be (27). St. Catherine says that immediately after departing the physical body in death, the soul chooses to enter into Purgatory:

Seeing in itself the impediment that can be taken away only by means of Purgatory, the soul casts itself therein swiftly and willingly. Were there not the ordinance it thus obeys, one suitable to rid it of its encumbrance, the soul would in that instant beget within itself a Hell worse than Purgatory, for it would see that because of that impediment it could not draw near to God, its end. So essential is God to the soul that, in comparison, Purgatory counts for nothing, even though it is like Hell . . . (45-46)

17 “Therefore when a soul has come near to the pure and clear state in which it was created, its beatific instinct asserts itself and grows unceasingly, so impetuously and with such fierce charity (drawing the soul to its last end) that any hindrance seems to this soul a thing past bearing” (27). This statement seems to indicate that the agonies endured in Purgatory are pro-rated. That is, the soul, upon entering, endures more physical than emotional pain, as more vestiges of sin are present to be burned away, and that, in the latter stages of Purgatory, it endures more emotional pain than physical pain, since much of the sin has been burned away, leaving the soul so much closer to its intended state but leaving it still not yet worthy to attain that chief goal of being in the presence of God.
St. Catherine goes on to say that the stained soul views Purgatory as a “mercy,” since it is aware that it is not worthy to stand before God (49). Consequently, the soul in Purgatory sees that it is being moved by the agonies of purgation toward its only hope and joy: the state of being fully in the presence of God. “So the souls in Purgatory enjoy the greatest happiness and endure the greatest pain; the one does not hinder the other” (68).

As for just what Purgatory is, according to St. Catherine, is rather complex. It appears to be the state of being partially in the presence of God while still stained by sin which hinders full integration with God, which includes a partial awareness of one’s unworthiness to be in the presence of God to any extent whatsoever. As stated above, the only difference St. Catherine shows between being in Purgatory and being in Paradise is that those who are in Paradise are no longer caused agony by the fire of God’s love which draws them to Him by means of rays emitted from His being. Those who are “in Paradise” have merely been removed of the stain of sin and the accompanying guilty conscience, and thus are no longer capable of suffering as a result of being in God’s presence, which enables them to draw as near to God as His love beckons them to.

When gold has been purified up to twenty-four carats, it can no longer be consumed by any fire; not the gold itself but only dross can be burnt away. Thus the divine fire works in the soul: God holds the soul in the fire until its every imperfection is burnt away and it is brought to perfection, as it were, to the purity of twenty-four carats—each soul, however, according to its own degree. When the soul has been purified it remains wholly in God, having nothing of the self in it; its being is in God, who has led this cleansed soul to Himself. The soul can suffer no more, for nothing is left in it to be burnt away. Were it held in the fire when it
has thus been cleansed, it would feel no pain. Rather the fire of divine love would be to it like eternal life and in no way contrary to it. (59-60)

Each of these accounts sets forth a different, quite frankly unique, Purgatory. St. Frances declares that mortal sins can be dealt with by enduring 7 years in Purgatory per sin, yet others claim that only venial sins can be addressed in Purgatory. St. Lidwina provides the hope that if a living future saint prays on your behalf, you might get out of Purgatory after spending only a short while there—good luck of course finding one of them! St. Peter Damian shows that the mercy of Mary, the Queen of Heaven, can get you out instantly, and that it would be good to have poverty-stricken believers praying on your behalf. St. Catherine, on the other hand, warns us clearly that we ought not expect much postmortem mercy. For St. Catherine it almost seems a Christian duty to burn in Purgatory. Despite the wild variance of these stories, they all have one expectation in common . . . namely that you had better straighten up your act before you die! It is little wonder that thoughts of Purgatory held many poor souls in terror. One could hope that the community of the saved would act on one’s behalf after death, but there was little hope that God would be merciful.

iv - RELEASE FROM PURGATORY AND THE ABLASSHANDEL

“If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged, either in this world or in Purgatory, before the gates of Heaven can be opened, let him be anathema.”

CANON XXX. Session VI. The Council of Trent. January 13, 1547 (Schouppe 1893, p. vi)

As we have read in the accounts of the pious above, the general expectation was that one would spend an unknown amount of time in Purgatory before being permitted to enter into Heaven, or the full presence of God. That certain indulgences prior to Tetzel’s famous

---

18 Pope John XXII during the “Babylonian Captivity” of the papacy (1305-1378) introduced a form of indulgence. “There were indulgences. These were originally remissions of penalties imposed for sin, in return for which relaxations the recipient made a
Ablashandel promised to remove in excess of 1.5 million years time in Purgatory,\textsuperscript{19} and that, as we shall see below, Tetzel’s Ablashandel promised to free even the worst sinner from the depths of Purgatory, makes it abundantly clear that the people of Luther’s era were terrified that upon death they might be tormented for significant periods of time.

The means of attaining release from Purgatory were extreme, and often out of the hands of the individual. One could, in this life, acquire merits, as demonstrated above, sufficient to decrease the amount of time spent in Purgatory; however, one had no real control over the actions of the Church Triumphant nor the Church Militant—unless one was a part of either group—theoretically. Therefore, once an individual passed on, there was no real certainty that members of either group would apply merits, prayers, supplications, etc. in his or her favor. Despite the uncertainty about what either segment of the Church \textit{would} do, there was no doubt about what each segment \textit{could} do. Salvation was institutional! The interaction of the saved community was a necessary factor in the soteriological construct of Rome.

Release from Purgatory was ultimately something which could only be hoped for. The hope that one could acquire sufficient merits in proportion to one’s failures, and that one’s loved ones would make supplications and offer prayers on behalf of their deceased, etc. The question was, simply put, what would be sufficient to placate the Almighty God?

God was portrayed now as the Father, now as the wielder of the thunder. He might be softened by the intercession of his kindlier Son, who again was delineated as an implacable judge unless mollified by his mother, who being a woman, was not above cheating alike God and the Devil on behalf of her

\textsuperscript{19} Frederick the Wise’s reliquary for instance (Marty 2004, p. 19).
suppliants; and if she were remote, one could enlist her mother, St. Anne.

(Bainton 1950, p. 19)

And here is the crux of the matter: it was not merely that one needed to know how to placate God the Father, if that was even possible, but also how to placate the various individuals who composed the limited hierarchy of Heaven. One could not expect to directly address the Father; however, one could work one’s way up the chain of command—or at least one hoped one could—in order to be released from Purgatory.

Leo X decided that he had sufficient control over the merits of the saints and the Church as a whole that he could afford to sell some in order to fund his building project, St. Peter’s Basilica (Rosendorfer 2007, pp. 242-43). “Denn die Kirche, das war der Trick, hat die Macht, die ‘zeitlichen Sündenstrafen’, d.h. die Zeit, die man dereinst im Fegefeuer sitzen muß, abzukürzen [. . .] Und das beste aller guten Werke, und relativ einfach für den Sünder, ist die Spende für die Kirche20 (242).

v - PAROLE: WHEN A COIN "IM KASTEN KLINGT"

“Es ist irrsinnig zu meinen, daß der päpstliche Ablaß mächtig genug sei, einen Menschen loszusprechen, auch wenn er - was ja unmöglich ist - der Gottesgebärerin Gewalt angetan hätte.”
- Luther’s 75th thesis

Johann Tetzel (d. 1519) was a Dominican monk who, after being caught in an affair with a married woman, was sentenced to death (Rosendorfer 2007, p. 243). Fortunately, Cardinal Albrecht, Bishop of Mainz—a man who owed pope Leo X an exorbitant sum of money as the price for his newly purchased title of Archbishop of Mainz (he had previously been named Archbishop of Magdeburg and retained both archdioceses)—came to Tetzel’s rescue (Rosendorfer 2007, pp. 243, 255-6, Dixon 2002, p. 22). Albrecht, however, hadn’t done this

---

20 Rosendorfer’s sarcasm is duly noted, as is his factual correctness.
merely out of the charity of his heart, nor in response to the mercy of Christ. Tetzel was the just
the type of preacher/salesman Albrecht needed to make the Ablashandel in Germany the
success it had to be in order for Albrecht to be able to pay his debt (29,000 Gulden)\textsuperscript{21} to Rome
Leben und seine Zeit, when, in discussing Tetzel’s add campaign, he writes, “Tetzel hat immer
aggressiver werdende Ablasswerbung auf die Spitze getrieben. Sein Ablass sei so wirksam, dass
er—einem ganz drastisch gesprochen—selbst einen Vergewaltiger der Gottesmutter und
Jungfrau Maria von seiner Missetat reinwaschen könne” (55). Yes, Tetzel was exactly the man
that Albrecht was looking for, and Albrecht had given him an offer he could not refuse.

Herbert Rosendorfer and C. Scott Dixon are at odds as to whether Tetzel used the slogan
“Wenn das Geld im Kasten klingt, die Seele in den Himmel springt.” Rosendorfer says this
slogan, “hieß ein ohne Zweifel schon kritisch gemeinter Spruch aus der Lutherzeit” (242). For
his part, Dixon suggests that this was indeed a slogan used by Tetzel (22). Considering the
slogan about being able to rescue someone who raped the Queen of Heaven, it seems probable
that Tetzel would have used a slogan like this. Luther was not the only one who had a problem
with the notion of buying forgiveness,\textsuperscript{22} theologians in Paris had already raised objections long
before Luther’s 95 Theses (Dixon 2002, p. 22). For his part, Luther proposes in his 36th thesis,
“Jeder Christ, der wirklich bereut, hat Anspruch auf völligen Erlaß von Strafe und Schuld, auch
ohne Ablaßbrief.” These are two examples of complaint against Tetzel’s Ablashandel based on
theological grounds; there were, of course, other types of complaints, i.e. the outright ban of the

\textsuperscript{21} According to article 10 of The Statement of Grievance Presented to the Diet of Worms in 1521, “Although the old regulations
placed a pallium fee of not more than ten thousand gulden upon the bishoprics of Mainz, Cologne, Salzburg, and others, the
pallium cannot now be fetched home for less than twenty thousand to twenty-four thousand gulden” (Strauss 1971, p. 55).

\textsuperscript{22} Article 22 of The Statement of Grievance Presented to the Diet of Worms in 1521 blasts the practice of selling of indulgences
to the “simple-minded folk” of Germany (Strauss 1971, p. 57). See also footnote 26 below. “The worst abuse, came to be the sale
of indulgences—writs given on the payment of money excusing the recipient from deeds of satisfaction or suffering in purgatory
upon repentance and confession of sins. While some indulgence preachers emphasized repentance and stirred the consciences of
sinners, all too many gave the impression that they were selling the forgiveness of sins for a price” (Spitz 1985, p. 61).
sale of Tetzel’s indulgences in the lands governed by Frederick the Wise (Dixon 2002, p. 22).

Frederick the Wise had his own indulgence which he was selling—a reliquary which he had build quite some time before Tetzel’s arrival and which housed a jar of Mother Mary’s breast milk, thousands of bones of saints, a branch of Moses’ burning bush, etc., etc. for which his constituents paid entrance fees in order to pray before these relics—the result of which was exactly 1,902,202 years and 270 days diminished from the amount of time the visitor would have had to spend in Purgatory . . . and that per visit (Marty 2004, pp. 18-19)! Notwithstanding the controversy, as far as the Vatican was concerned, wrote Myconius, an early historian of the Reformation, “even God himself could not have been welcomed and received more beautifully”\(^\text{23}\) than the Papal Bull which inaugurated Tetzel’s *Ablasshandel* (Dixon 2002, p. 22).

Residents of Wittenberg were, however, not dissuaded by Frederick the Wise’s banning of the *Ablasshandel* in his lands. If Tetzel could not come to them, they would simply walk the 18 miles to him and purchase the release of their loved ones from Purgatory (Marty 2004, p. 31). This was the sticking point for Luther. His congregants were purchasing indulgences from Rome which resulted in a two pronged affront to Luther. Firstly, the growing nationalism of the time,\(^\text{24}\) of which Luther was a part,\(^\text{25}\) caused Luther to become agitated at the thought that German funds—which could have been used to fund the German Church—were being sent off to Rome—a foreign place (Marty 2004, p. 29). Dieterich cites the second issue for Luther: his parishioners felt less need to come to confession since some had apparently purchased sufficient forgiveness\(^\text{26}\) so as to no longer warrant confession to the priest Luther (Dietrich 2008, p. 55).

---

\(^{23}\) Appreciation is, of course, given for the bias with which Myconius wrote.

\(^{24}\) Rosendorfer 2007 chapters 5 and 7, esp. pp. 258 and 270-273, see also Strauss 1971, pp. 52-63, esp. Article 7 p. 54.

\(^{25}\) For a thorough explanation of Luther’s proto-nationalist stance see Luther’s *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation* 1520.

\(^{26}\) While the main thrust of Tetzel’s *Ablasshandel* was indeed the release or souls from Purgatory, or at least the lessening of their sufferings, it is clear that Germans in Luther’s time at least believed that Rome was also selling forgiveness for sins not yet committed. Article 19 of The Statement of Grievance Presented to the Diet of Worms in 1521 states, “A rich man can, moreover, for a sum, obtain papal letters of indult, which entitle him to priestly absolution for any sin he might commit in the future,
Luther, however, doubted whether many of those who purchased indulgences would ever receive the benefit of the indulgence, since the indulgence only promised to remit the punishment for sin and could not remit the sin itself—which, according to Christian theology, is the very problem (Bagchi 1991, p. 36). In one fell swoop it seems Luther felt attacked as a German and as a priest. It is therefore little wonder that Luther reacted with his *95 Theses*.

It should not be doubted that Luther believed the existence of Purgatory in 1517 or for that matter through at least early 1519. Luther was convinced that Purgatory existed. Ewald Plass’ outstanding compilation of Luther’s statements regarding numerous topics, *What Luther Says: An Anthology* (a three volume work) shows in *Volume I ABSOLUTION to GIVING* that Luther states, “Holy Writ does not mention purgatory. It is rather a fabrication of the devil that the papists may have certain market places and money snares” to which Plass responds in his footnotes,

To many the Ninety-Five Theses stamp Luther as a Reformer. But when he posted them in 1517, he still held to many teachings of the Church of Rome which he later recognized and disavowed as unscriptural. Among these was the doctrine of purgatory. When in 1518 he further explained his fifteenth thesis, he remarked: ‘I am very certain that there is a purgatory’ [. . .] In the Leipzig debate of the following year purgatory was discussed at length . . . Luther there said he knew (*scio*) that there is a purgatory. The dispute was about the nature of the institution rather than its existence [. . .] But increasingly Luther could find no room for this figment in Scripture theology. By November 7, 1519, he had progressed enough to write Spalatin: ‘It is certain that no one is a heretic who does not believe that murder, for example or perjury” (Strauss 1971, p. 56). For more information on Luther’s nationalistic thinking see Ozment’s *A Mighty Fortress: A new History of the German People* (2004), esp. chapter 3 *Man and God: Germany in the Renaissance and Reformation.*
there is a purgatory’ . . . although he had still professed to believe in its existence in February of that year . . . (Plass 1959, pp. 387-88)

It would be delightful to have a Luther who instantly developed the Protestant theology he is now known for, and for the purposes of this examination of the theology of Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. However, in this instance Luther must disappoint—if indeed the very real and often self-contradictory Luther who emerges onto the world stage in 1517 can be called a disappointment. No, the real Luther is human, not a divine oracle and often holds views which are diametrically opposed to other views of his—and this makes him all the more interesting. Armed with this knowledge regarding the Ablashandel, we shall now take a look at Luther’s 95 Theses.

B. THE 95 THESSES


21. “Deshalb irren jene Ablaßprediger, die sagen, daß durch die Ablässe des Papstes der Mensch von jeder Strafe frei und los werde.”

Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, theses numbers 20 and 21

i - LUTHER REACTS

As we’ve seen above, the Ablashandel stepped on Luther’s toes because he felt that it took from Germany and gave to foreign Rome, and because he felt that it was detrimental to his parishioners’ spiritual well-being. Luther, being a priest, monk, theologian, and professor expected that he could engage in debate with other academicians and bring abuses to the attention of Albrecht the Bishop of Mainz (Marty 2004, p. 32). Luther mistakenly assumed that Albrecht was unaware of the claims of the Ablashandel preachers and wrongly anticipated
Albrecht would respond in anger against the methods of the *Ablass* preachers. In his naivete Luther sent a personal letter to Albrecht and inclosed a copy of the *95 Theses* for him to read (Hillerbrand 1971, p. 5). What Albrecht really did was send Luther’s letter and the copy of the *95 Theses* on to Rome so that Luther might be investigated by the Vatican (Bainton 1950, p. 68). Luther presented his *95 Theses* in Wittenberg, whether he nailed it to the castle door is in question,\(^{27}\) and expected it would initiate a debate among colleagues (Jung 2008, p. 28, Bainton 1950, p. 66). Luther had not anticipated that his theses would turn the theological world upside down; rather, he expected a normal academic debate to occur, and one which would not necessarily spread beyond the clerics (Marty 2004, pp. 32-33).

It is often assumed that Luther was quite brave in presenting his theses for debate. A recent film\(^ {28}\) shows Luther looking nervously over his shoulder as he dares to nail the *95 Theses* to the door. Reality seems to be quite different. “[Luther] believed he enjoyed the academic immunity of one who disputes a matter that the church had not yet defined” (Bagchi 1991, p. 31). Bagchi says of Luther’s opponents, however, that they assumed that indulgences were “part of the *regula fidei*” and that the practice therefore was “under the protection of the pope and . . . beyond theological discussion” (31). Had Luther realized just what he was getting himself into in 1517, I doubt he would have presented his theses. Luther was a reluctant revolutionary. Nevertheless, he was aware that his theses challenged Frederick the Wise’s own institutionalized sale of indulgences. “Luther hated the great relic collection and even greater indulgence it promised. He waited to post his famous Ninety-five Theses until Frederick had departed Wittenberg for the 1517 autumn hunt in Lochau, and then did so on the day of the collection’s highest veneration (All Saints’)” (Ozment 2004, p. 71). Luther appears to have been oblivious to

---

\(^{27}\) see also Dieterich 2008, pp. 53-54.
the fact that presenting such a topic for such a debate as he planned would result in a firestorm of accusations; however, Luther most certainly was aware of the modes and methods of interpretation within the academic and canonical doctrines and dogma of the mediaeval Holy Roman and Catholic Church. If Luther’s public defenses of his developing theological construct between 1519 and 1521 are any indicator, he would have been able to deliver a powerful argument in 1517 had he gotten his debate.

Luther’s own training at Erfurt was “via moderna, or nominalist school” (Spitz 1985, p. 88). Luther’s training would have exposed him to Platonic and Neoplatonic “strains” of Augustinian theology, the moderate realism of St. Thomas, the Nominalist view, etc. ad infinitum, ad nauseam (Bainton 1962, pp. 57-58). Yet Luther rejected this philosophical approach to knowing. Luther identified himself as a theologian and not as a philosopher (Spitz 1985, p. 85). Spitz adds, “Luther returned to the Bible, preeminently St. Paul, and preferred the early fathers, above all St. Augustine, to the scholastic doctors of the preceding three centuries . . . [Luther’s theology] was a theology of the Word, the Christ of the Scriptures” (86). “Luther was a biblical theologian . . . [which] signifies a radical break with the standard curriculum of scholastic theology and a reorientation of theology to the biblical text” (George 1988, pp. 56-57). It was this very rejection of scholastic theology that angered many and eventually turned some humanist supporters, i.e. Desiderius Erasmus, against Luther (Bagchi 1991, p. 32). Although Luther enjoyed St. Augustine’s writings he was quite willing to, and did indeed, break significantly away from Augustine’s more humanistic notion of “a progressive impartation of grace”—a doctrine which asserted gradual perfection of personal conduct as the

---

29 “[Nominalism] held that reality consists of unrelated particulars, related actually only by contiguity in place and time. Categories are mere names, nomina, hence the term Nominalism (Bainton 1962, p. 57).
30 Pelagianism is a theological construct developed from the teachings of Pelagius (d. 420/440)—a fair amount of which Pelagius himself would disagree with. Essentially Pelagianism is the theology that human nature is not tainted by original sin—the sin of Adam and Eve at the Fall of Man. Consequently, humans retain free will to the extent that they can choose to seek God and do good without the donum superadditum.
standard expectation of the Christian (George 1988, p. 74). Instead, Luther argued, we “are justified not because God is gradually making us righteous, but because we are declared righteous on the basis of Christ’s atoning sacrifice” (George 1988, p. 74; italics mine).

Something of Augustine’s which Luther, along with Zwingli, and later Calvin, resurrected was the “foursquare” stance against Pelagius’ “free will” doctrine, an idea which exalted “human free will at the expense of God’s free will” (George 1988, p. 74).32

Luther, however, retained “certain central positions with the humanists” (Spitz 1985, p. 91).

In his little Galatians commentary of 1519, Luther sounded out characteristically humanist themes: true erudition is found with teaching, word, and language; the Gospel builds the new person with divine erudition; freedom is the indispensable premise for human self-realization, including ethical duty; the believer, though still a sinner, is on the way to full freedom; the justified person is the fully human being, cheerful, at peace, proving good to be victorious over evil; he despises hell, death, and the devil; he is the true ethical personality being gifted with the Holy Spirit. Culture, peace, freedom, and practical ethical conduct make the reform of church and society possible. (Spitz 1985, p. 91)

The central point of break between Luther and the humanist approach to soteriology was that Luther was convinced of man’s complete inability to attain to the demands of the law. “Not only can natural man not keep the Law of God perfectly, but he is alienated from God, curved in upon himself (incurvatus in se), and totally unable to believe in Christ as Savior without the

---

31 Compare this understanding of “righteousness” in conjunction with “justification” with that of footnote 33.
32 In response to Pelagius’ teachings, St. Augustine’s later theology goes to extremes when it comes to “free will.” Augustine eventually developed a “Double Predestination” theology which argues that before the foundation of the world God had determined who would go to Hell and who would go to Heaven utterly independent of any human will whatsoever (Geisler 1999, p. 206-213).
intervention of the Holy Spirit” (Spitz 1985, p. 91). That is, the humanist objective of gradual movement toward perfection is, according to Luther, doomed to failure! Humanism’s foundation is faulty. Instead Luther began to argue for *sola fide* (faith alone) which “emphasizes the insignificance of reason and the primacy of revelation. More radically, it insists that man is saved or justified by faith alone [. . .] No man is saved by his own merit. Man has not merit. *Nothing he can do with his own strength and by the exercise of his own will brings him closer to God*” (Rice Jr., pp. 127-8; italics mine).

The 95 Theses produced two totally unexpected results: nobody in Wittenberg took up the debate (Marty 2004, p. 33), and the theses were somehow published and printed in Wittenberg and distributed such that within “a few weeks they were carried to all parts of Christendom and unleashed a storm of controversy that never abated” (Spitz 1997, p. 43).34

“Luther did not intend to have the theses spread among the people. The first printing was made by Johann Grünenberg in Wittenberg on a folio sheet for posting on the church door and for a few friends” (Spitz 1985, p. 78). That his theses were not intended for laity is made clear by the fact that they were printed in Latin (Bainton 1950, pp. 62, 67). Latin, however, presented no obstacle to Tetzel, Eck, Cajetan and others. Tetzel was infuriated by Luther and received his doctorate in order to be able to publish a response to Luther (Hillerbrand 1971, pp. 7-8, Bainton 1950, pp. 70-71). “Tetzel, playing copycat, came up with 106 forgettable theses defending the

---

33 I quote this for two reasons: 1) to show the traditional understanding of Luther’s meaning, and 2) to show the ages old confusion regarding ‘justification’ and ‘salvation’ which are here erroneously presented as synonymous. The close correlation between these two terms has resulted in mass confusion—and detrimental confusion at that! "This is a well-known problem in relation to ‘righteousness’ and ‘salvation,’ as frequently in Isaiah 40-55. The two sit side by side so often that people have often been tempted to say that ‘righteousness’ there means ‘salvation’. But that is misleading. Words cannot simply be telescoped into one another like that. Even when two different words denote the same thing, they will often connote different things [. . .] ‘righteousness’ does not mean the same thing as ‘salvation’ [. . .] the word ‘righteousness’ connotes the notion of God’s covenant faithfulness [. . .] and the word ‘salvation’ connotes the fact that his people were in trouble and needed rescuing” (Wright 2009, p. 71; italics original). This then being the case, one must determine that human righteousness is equivalent to “covenant faithfulness,” and if one is declared “righteous” then one is justified (Wright 2009, p. 66). Luther points out in VFC that faith in the atoning work of Christ is “covenant faithfulness” on the part of the Christian citing John 6:28f “Das ist das einzige göttliche Werk, daß ihr glaubt an den, den Gott gesandt hat, welchen Gott der Vater allein dazu verordnet hat” (Luther 1962, p. 128). More on this in chapter 4 Part B.

papacy and casting Luther as someone dangerous to the official church, which by now he was” (Marty 2004, p. 35).

ii - ROME RESPONDS

Eventually Rome had no choice but to respond to the 95 Theses. On November 9th, 1518 Leo X published *Cum Postquam*, a papal bull (official papal decree) which admitted that the pope could not empty out Purgatory, and that his only abilities with regard to forgiveness were: 1) that he could forgive any failure to adhere to a rule made by the church, and 2) that he could effectively pray on behalf of any Christian living or dead (Hillerbrand 1971, p. 7). This document, however, did not satisfy itself with clearing up any confusion about papal power which may have been caused by the preaching of the *Aballshandel*; rather Leo X sought to put a definitive end to the pesky German monk who had stirred this hornets nest to life. Yes, *Cum Postquam* found Luther guilty of heresy, and consequently Luther’s life, and even his very soul were now in jeopardy (Hillerbrand 1971, p. 7)!

*Cum Postquam* was a major victory and a major problem for Luther. On the one hand he had managed to receive papal validation of his claim that the pope cannot simply release whom he will from the clutches of Purgatory, on the other hand Albrecht’s having forwarded the 95 Theses and Luther’s letter on to Rome had brought Luther not into debate with local academicians and German theologians—the result Luther had anticipated—but rather directly into the sights of the most powerful man in the world, Pope Leo X—a man not at all pleased by Luther’s writings. By the time Leo X had conceded that he could not empty Purgatory of its convicts Luther was already too far gone to really be able to reconcile with the Roman Church. Luther, however, did not give up the attempt just yet.
iii - LUTHER’S FINAL ATTEMPT AT RECONCILIATION

Luther’s final attempt to make peace with Leo X, and thereby with the Holy Roman Catholic Church was made in November 1520 in the personal address of Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen (an examination of the mode and meaning of ‘justification’) which Luther personally sent to the pope. Luther included a personal letter to Leo X, backdated to the 6th of September.35 The more immediate results of the 95 Theses were a series of attacks and defenses made by Tetzel, Cajetan and Johann Eck which lead to further writings by Luther and to several public trials. Luther defended himself in Heidelberg early in 1518,36 was summoned to Rome for inquisition but refused to go and was convicted of heresy in absentia in the Summer of 1518, and Luther defended himself before Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in October of 1518. 1519 would not be much less quarrelsome for Luther. In January he was interviewed by papal chamberlain, Carl von Miltitz in Altenburg and agreed to apologize to the pope for his wordage. Finally Luther engaged Johann Eck in debate in Leipzig and felt that he had lost the debate.

During the Leipzig debate Eck “forced” Luther “to ally himself with a condemned heretic [Jan Hus (d. 1415)]37 and to repudiate the authority of general councils as well as that of the pope” (George 1988, p. 80). The debate was made into quite the spectacle. “Luther was the better Bible scholar, but Eck was the better church historian” (80). An eyewitness described the combatants thus: “[Luther] is learned and has the Scripture at his fingers’ ends. He knows Greek and Hebrew sufficiently to judge of the interpretations. A perfect forest of words and ideas stands at this command [ . . . ] [Eck’s] voice is thick and unpleasant. He is slower in memory and quicker in anger” (Bainton 1950, p. 99). Eck accused Luther of sharing the argument of

35 “Die im Oktober 1520 entstandene Schrif ist auf Miltitz’ Bitte vordatiert, weil sie die im August bereits getroffenen Vereinbarungen (s. Anm. 26, S. 120) erfülle und nicht der Eindruck entstehen sollte, sie sei auf Grund der Ende September bekannt gewordenen Bannandrohungsbulle geschrieben worden” editorial clarification (Luther 1962, p. 123).
36 See Dieterich 2008, pp. 57-65 for the dates and events here cited for 1518 and 1519.
37 Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 in Constance, not far from Leipzig, after being convicted of heresy (Bainton 1950, pp. 101-102).
John Wycliff (d. 1384) that it is not necessary to salvation to venerate the Roman Catholic Church “above all others,” and of “espousing the pestilent errors of [Jan] Hus, who claimed that Peter neither was nor is the head of the Holy Catholic Church,” to which Luther responded “I repulse the charge of Bohemianism” (101). However, during the course of the debate, Luther switched his position on Hus.

Luther reviewed the records from the council which had condemned Hus and realized that he indeed was in agreement with Hus (George 1988, p. 80). Upon returning from the break Luther declared “Ja, ich bin ein Hussite” (80)! Luther argued that it cannot be required of a Christian that he/she esteem the Roman Catholic Church as necessary to salvation since he knew of “innumerable Greeks [who] have been saved though they never heard this article” (Bainton 1950, p. 102). Luther argued that neither the pope nor councils had the authority to devise new articles of faith (102). Luther insisted that the records of the Council of Constance “did not say that all the articles of Hus were heretical. It said that ‘some were heretical, some erroneous, some blasphemous, some presumptuous, some seditious, and some offensive to pious ears respectively.’ You [Eck] should differentiate and tell us which were which” (102-103). Timothy George incorrectly argues that this is the moment in which Luther broke away from Rome. “Luther’s decisive break from the Church of Rome came not at the Diet of Worms (1521) when he declared his conscience captive to the Word of God, but two years earlier at the Leipzig Debate (July 1519)” (George 1988, p. 80). While Luther did admit that he was in line with Hus to a large extent, he denied that all of Hus’ arguments were heretical. Thus, to Luther, agreement with Hus was not indicative of heresy. Luther’s “decisive break” could not have pre-dated November 1520’s publication of Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. Luther personally sent a copy of this theological work to Leo X with a letter explaining that denial of VFC’s
content would constitute rejection of God. This is the moment where Luther, in his mind, permitted Rome to decisively break away from God. Afterward, believing that Rome had done just that, Luther publicly burned books of Canon Law and in 1521 began to refer to Rome as distinctly Antichrist (Spitz 1985, pp. 82-3).

The years 1517-1520 were formative years for Luther and for Protestant theology as a whole. In 1519 and 1520 Luther “experienced a burst of enormous creativity . . . [and] kept three printing presses busy and sent the first pages to them while he was still writing the last pages” (Spitz 1985, p. 81). After the debates, trials, attacks and probings of his early opponents Luther emerged in 1520 with an understanding of biblical justification that would rock the world—and this time he expected just that—and published a pivotal work which after more than 490 years remains so central to Christian thought and theology that today’s theological heavyweights John Piper and N.T. Wright have spent considerable time and ink debating the correctness of Luther’s explanation of justification in 300 plus page volumes with titles like What Paul Really Said (Wright 1997), to which Piper responded with The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright (2007), to which Wright responded with Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision (2009).

In 1520 Luther would produce three treatises which would challenge every aspect of Roman Catholic teaching. The first major work of the year, An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation would attack from a political perspective—Rome was not, after all, located in Germany. Next Luther turned out Von der babylonische Gefangenschaft der Kirche. Most scholars place

---

38 “It was Antichrist who, more than any other figure or even, heralded the imminence of the Apocalypse […] To speak of Antichrist [in the Reformation] was to speak of the Last Days” (Cunningham and Grell 2000, p. 4).
39 Piper explains in his work that he was not originally interested in responding to Wright but felt compelled to as a result of the increasing number of questions his congregants were bringing to him regarding the discrepancy between Piper’s and Wright’s teachings of justification—hence the decade long gap between Wright’s initial challenge to the traditional Protestant view of justification and Piper’s published response to it (Piper 2007, p. 10).
40 Wright and Piper’s debate will be examined in more detail in chapter 4.
the greatest significance on this piece because it undermines the Roman Catholic Church as the conduit of grace by denying five of the seven sacraments. Luther’s final major work in 1520, however, is yet more important. *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* explains grace, justification, and the relationship between the believer and the LORD God Almighty with a clarity hitherto unknown, and declares—quite dangerously—that *via a personal relationship with Jesus Christ one receives salvation, the priesthood, and the ability to interpret holy scripture*. 1520’s first work declares Rome to be the “other,” the “outsider,” “foreign.” The second treatise effectively neuters and declaws the Vatican. *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*, on the other hand, presents a unique soteriology, a soteriology which has *personal relationship* as its *modus operandi*. It calls the individual to run to the loving Christ, and does away with the angry judge before which the masses trembled in absolute terror. It calls the individual to return to his/her natural habitat—to return to Eden.
CHAPTER 2

A NEW THEOLOGY IS BORN

A - INTRODUCTION TO LUTHER’S EARLY THEOLOGY

“The leading principle of the Reformation is generally considered to be its doctrine of justification. While there is unquestionably much truth in this statement, it requires careful modification to do justice to the historical evidence. It is certainly true that the articulus iustificationis is the leading feature of the theology of Martin Luther. It was never, however, accepted within the more radical wing of the Reformation, which stressed the importance of obedience and discipleship, adopting doctrines of grace which stressed human responsibility and accountability towards God, rather than God’s transformation of the individual” (McGrath 1986, p. 208).

Justification became the hot topic for Martin Luther⁴¹ (one could argue that it had been so from his thunderstorm vow, and, since nothing happens in a vacuum, one could reasonably argue that this preoccupation must predate that night as well).

It is a historical truism to say that Martin Luther is the theologian of justification. No one before or since in the history of the church is so closely associated with the doctrine as he is: it dominated his own thinking, it decisively influenced the direction of his own life, and it stands at the theological heart of the great rupture in the Western church between Protestants and Catholics. In Luther’s hands, it was used not only to remake soteriology but to shatter received wisdom regarding, among other things, authority, the church, the sacraments, politics, labor,

⁴¹ “Let me say it once without equivocating: Luther’s point is that the response to the article of justification is critical and is that upon which the existence of the church depends while all others are secondary” (Iwand 1941, p. 15).
the relationship of masters and servants, and all manner of cultural
pursuits. (McCormack 2006, 73; italics mine)

The theme of just how one gets right with God was central to Luther’s objections to the
Ablashandel, resulting in his 95 Theses. Consequently, those who challenged Luther’s theses,
and thereby challenging his understanding of soteriology, forced Luther to seriously examine his
theology and to prepare himself to defend publicly and in writing those notions he had come to
be convinced of. Unlike the modern theologian, it rather seems that Luther did his thinking
publicly, that is with pen and paper, and, thus, the progression of his theological stances
throughout his life are clearly evident—and sometimes detrimental. The years 1516-1520 were
very important years for Luther’s theology. In 1520 Luther produced his first real attempt to
explain what Gerechtigkeit, Rechtfertigung, and Gnade truly meant and how God interacted with
mankind in light of this new understanding. Concerning Rechtfertigung “Luther believed that
he had recovered the original meaning of the Greek verb used by Paul in Romans. Augustine
and the scholastic tradition had interpreted it as ‘to make righteous,’ whereas Luther insisted on
its legal connotation ‘to declare righteous’” (George 1988, p. 70).

“Das Jahr 1520, häufig als ‘Schlüsseljahr’, ‘Wunderjahr’ oder ‘Epochenjahr’ der
Reformation bezeichnet, markiert mit drei zentralen Schriften die Grundpflöcke der
reformatorischen Theologie” (Dieterich 2008, p. 61). In 1520, after 3 years of defending himself
and his writings, Luther produced a triple-threat of publications which would end any hope of
reconciliation between the German faction and the church of Rome. After examining and
reexamining his position, Luther boldly published An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation
(CAD), Von der babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche (BGK), and finally Von der Freiheit
eines Christenmenschen (VFC). Veit-Jacobus Dieterich describes VFC as, “Prägnant formuliert
In order to fully appreciate just how far Luther went in publishing VFC, we should stop to consider 1520’s two previous works. CAD attacks the Roman Church from a political and nationalistic perspective. It focuses on what is good for Germany\textsuperscript{42} and casts an anti-Germany shadow over the Vatican. BGK attacks the Vatican, calling it Babylon—one could not hurl a greater insult at a church which claims to follow YHWH. BGK accuses the Vatican of imprisoning the true church, of being anti-Christ, and of being outside God’s favor! Finally, VFC rewrites the books on how one enters into and maintains a positive relationship with God. Thus in 1520 Luther attacked Rome as: 1) a foreign church opposed to Germany and its politics, 2) a false church, an anti-Christ institution which is exploiting the true Church, and 3) inept theologically and impotent with regard to assuring salvation, since it did not even comprehend the true meaning of justification. Thus the Holy Roman Catholic Church was, according to Luther, on the wrong side of politics, on the wrong side of God’s true church, and finally on those wrong sides because it was essentially clueless when it came to biblical theology. These three works would independently have caused waves, but placed in succession they caused a tsunami. Luther was not alone in condemning what Rome had developed into; Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli (d. 1527), author of \textit{The Prince}, is quoted as saying, “If Christianity had remained what its Founder made it things would have gone differently, and mankind would have been far happier, but there is no plainer proof that this religion is falling to pieces than the fact that the people who live nearest to Rome are the least pious of any” (Spitz 1985, p. 59).

\textsuperscript{42} Historical consideration for what would have constituted ‘Deutschland’ in 1520 is given; however, for the sake of convenience “Germany” will be used to describe the regions here discussed.
CAD addresses the burgeoning nationalistic tendencies, a topic rife in Luther’s work, opening with “Die Zeit des Schweigens ist vergangen und die Zeit zu reden ist kommen . . .” (Luther 1962, p. 9). Luther goes on to explain that many of Europe’s wars were really started by the papacy and that the pope could do it again if he felt so compelled (12). Luther then strikes out against the papacy altogether, calling it “erfunden,” and, citing 1 Pet. 2:9, demoted the pope to being nothing higher than any Christian (14-16). Luther goes on to suggest that it might be possible to fire the pope—he is, after all, merely “wie ein Amtmann” (16). Luther then challenges the German nobility declaring, “Denk doch bei dir selbst: sie müssen bekennen, daß fromme Christen unter uns sind, die den rechten Glauben, Geist, Verstand, Wort und Meinung Christi haben. Ja, warum sollte man denn derselben Wort und Verstand verwerfen und dem Papst folgen, der nicht Glauben noch Geist hat” (22)? No such nationalistic treatise would have been complete without discussing the Turks: “Die Kardinäle müssen die Güter haben, kein Türk hätte Welschland so können verderben und Gottes Dienst niederlegen” (29). Yes, “[der] Antichrist muß die Schätze der Erden heben, wie es prophezeit ist” (29).

Luther argues that the pope lives in such opulence and splendor that should even 99% of his income be removed from him, he would still live a life of grandeur and wealth—this being quite important since “jährlich mehr denn dreimalhunderttausend Gulden aus Deutschland gen Rom kommen, rein vergebens und umsonst, wofür wir nichts denn Spott und Schmach erlangen . . .” (30-31; italics mine). The nobility is, argues Luther, “verplichtet, solche Dieberei und Räuberei zu strafen” (32-33). The nobility should use its power to lessen papal taxes and control the abuses of Roman exploiters who trapes around in Germany (33-34). Greedy, destructive

---

43 “Ihr aber seid das auserwählte Geschlecht, das königliche Priestertum, das heilige Volk, das Volk des Eigentums, daß ihr verkündigen sollt die Tugenden des, der euch berufen hat von der Finsternis zu seinem wunderbaren Licht; 10die ihr weiland nicht ein Volk waret, nun aber Gottes Volk seid, und weiland nicht in Gnaden waret, nun aber in Gnaden seid.”
Rome was so terrible that Luther exclaimed, “Es wäre kein wunder, wenn Gott vom Himmel Schwefel und höllisches Feuer regnete und Rom in den Abgrund versenkte, wie er vorzeiten Sodom und Gomorra tat,” and then boldly accused, “O edle Fürsten und Herren, wie lang wollt ihr euer Land und Leute solchen reißenden Wölfen offen und frei lassen” (35)! Luther describes Rome as follows: “Da ist ein Kaufen, Verkaufen, Wechseln, Tauschen, Lärmen, Lügen, Trügen, Rauben, Stehlen, Prachten, Hurerei, Büberei, Gottesverachtung auf vielerlei Weise, daß es dem Antichrist nicht möglich ist, lästerlicher zu regieren” then asks “Ist das nicht ein Hurenhaus über alle Hurenhäuser” (40-41)?

CAD goes on to outline reform for Germany’s conduct with Rome. Germany should not accept bishops or cardinals sent from Rome, but rather should install Germans to those positions. Germany should severely limit the amount of money it sends to Rome, because Rome does not need the money and because Rome is doing evil with the money. Germany’s nobles should unite in a common cause against the abuses of the papacy and would be effective in doing so since the papacy had no real authority over the emperor, etc. In short, CAD blasts Rome as being something utterly other than what Germans thought it was, what it presented itself to be, and as something fully foreign to the average German. This Rome is Babylon, other, sinister and anti-German. With CAD Luther attacks the political control that Rome possesses and challenges Germany’s nobility to recognize its true power, Rome’s true position, and the authority Germany could and should be exercising over Rome.
Von der Babylonischen Gefangenschaft der Kirche, viewed by Luther’s contemporaries as the most radical of 1520’s publications, opens with a greeting for Hermann Tulich (Bainton 1950, p. 126). Luther expresses his gratitude for his opponents, who have forced him, over the course of the last few years, to hone his arguments and have thus enabled him to see truth more clearly. Luther expresses regret that he ever wrote his short defense of his 95 Theses, since, now that his opponents had pushed him so hard to reexamine his beliefs, he no longer believed that indulgences, which he now refers to as “Aberglauben,” have even one iota of veracity to them. They are “der römischen Tyrannei” and “nichts anderes als der reine Betrug der römischen Heuchler . . . durch welchen sie den Glauben an Gott ebenso wie den Besitz der Menschen zugrunde richten.” Eck and Emser have, Luther argues, attacked him so thoroughly on this point that it has now become clear that the papacy is Babylon! Their defenses of indulgences are the proof that Rome is a greedy whore.

Luther goes on to absolutely slaughter a friar from Cremona who wrote against Luther, but unlike Eck, Emser, and Sylvester, declined to attach his name to his work. Luther gloats that the friar knew he would receive what Eck has received and was thus too cowardly to give his name. These four, however, had all attacked Luther because of a teaching that Luther claims not to have taught: that the laity must receive both the bread and the wine during the eucharist. Luther charges the anonymous friar with being “driven by an angel of Satan” and claims that if this friar’s argumentation is taken seriously, then he is proof positive that the notion that the church is an “infallible foundation” is illogical and laughable. Regarding these four opponents

44 As reference for BGK I am citing both an abridged Kindle document in German and an unabridged English PDF retrieved from Concordia Theological Seminary’s site at the following address: http://www.lutherdansk.dk/Web-Babylonian%20Captivitate/Martin%20Luther.htm
45 Luther’s brutally mocking tone should not be overlooked.
Luther says that they are not worthy “to cross swords with Luther.” Thus Luther swears that he will no longer give them men the honor of being named in his works. They are beneath his dignity. “This I know is true” Luther writes “whenever I fought with filth, whether I was a Victor or was vanquished, I came away from the fight defiled.”

These fools were “celebrating a glorious victory over one of my so-called heresies,” Luther wrote “meanwhile I shall be devising a new one.” Luther then launches into what can be called nothing other than an all-out attack on the religion of Rome. “Grundsätzlich und als erstes muß ich verneinen, daß es sieben Sakramente gibt, und kann zur Zeit drei dafür setzen: die Taufe, die Buße, das Brot.”

With such a statement as the opener, the reader is assured that this little book is going to cause a firestorm. It would be a worthy effort to examine BGK in detail, the limits of this paper do not permit it. However, a quick overview of Luther’s arguments cannot be denied.

**THE EUCHARIST**

Concerning the eucharist, proponents of Rome’s version of the sacrament—laity could receive the bread only, transubstantiation was doctrine, multiple miracles simultaneously occurred, i.e. the re-sacrificing of Christ in Heaven, etc—was to be rejected! Rome had wrongly relied on the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John to determine that laity need not partake of the wine—those who put faith in Christ will never thirst again. When Christ made these remarks about the Bread of Life, the eucharist had not yet been established, argued Luther, and therefore, this scene from the life of Christ could not be taken as instruction regarding the methodology of the eucharist. Besides, Luther argues, as saints Augustine and Innocent set forth, even those who cannot take either part of the eucharist, i.e. children, and those whose health prevents, still take part in the body and blood of Christ through faith! Obviously, then, the requirements for taking

---

46 Later this would be demoted to two: eucharist and baptism.
the eucharist were not so stringent as the modern church argued . . . or, asked Luther, would you like to call Innocent and Augustine heretics?

If the laity were not intended to take part in both parts of the sacrament of eucharist, then why were they required to take full part in baptism, or in penance? If halfway was good enough, why not do all sacraments halfway, Luther challenged. St. Cyprian’s congregants eat the bread and drank the wine, he argued, and then challenged his opponents to call St. Cyprian a heretic.

Vorwärts, ihr Papstschmeichler! Erhebt euch wie ein Mann, gebt euch Mühe, verteidigt euch gegen den Vorwurf der Gott losigkeit, der Tyrannei, der Beleidigung des Evangeliums, der ungerechten Schmähung der Brüder, die ihr als Ketzer ausschreit—sie, die sich an die so offenbare und mächtige Schrift halten, im Gegensatz zu euren törichten Hirngespinsten . . . So komme ich zu dem Schluß: es ist gottlos und tyrannisch, den Laien das Abendmahl in beiderlei Gestalt zu verwehren . . . Das ist die erster Gefangenschaft dieses Sakraments. The second “Gefangenschaft” was, however, something quite different.

Transubstantiation was “die scholastische Theologie” of Rome and the antithesis of biblical theology, according to Luther. Luther’s demand that doctrine be located within and proved by the scriptures made such a view inevitable. That Luther was willing to take such a leap this early is quite impressive. The eucharist would be a recurring theme for Luther throughout his life, and it would cost him more than respect of his opponents. Luther bitterly battled Erasmus and Zwingli on this topic (Dieterich 2008, pp. 104-105). Luther so detested the scholastic theology that had dominated since the 12th century that he now refused to even refer to it as Christian.
Als ich danach sah, was für eine Kirche das ist, die solches bestimmt, nämlich die
thomistische, das heißt die des Aristoteles, da bin ich da bin ich beherzter
geworden . . . Denn was ohne Schriftgrundlage oder ohne erwiesene Offenbarung
gesagt wird, mag wohl als eine Meinung hingehen, muß aber nicht notwendig
geglaubt werden. Diese Meinung des Thomas aber ist ohne Schriftgrundlage wie
ohne Vernunftbegründung und so ungesichert, daß ich meine, er habe weder seine
Philosophie noch seine Dialektik verstanden.

That Jesus is really present in the bread and in the wine, however, should not be denied! That
Jesus is truly present during this sacrament, Luther claims, is standard biblical teaching; that
Jesus is transubstantiated in the bread and wine, and that He undergoes crucifixion again in
Heaven is, however, aristotelian thinking and not pauline truth!

Using Aristotle’s logic to determine the truth of the eucharist was a foolish proposition to
begin with. It was, Luther claimed, “Ein unglückseliger Bau auf einem unglückseligen
Fundament!” However, Luther would not hold it against anyone should they chose to believe
this nonsense. His only concern, he writes, is that doubters of transubstantiation be permitted to
gain peace of mind and not be pressed into guilty consciences for the sake of this unbiblical
nonsense. The church had, after all, existed for 12 hundred years without knowing anything of
transubstantiation, Luther exclaimed, and therefore, what neither the apostles nor the martyrs
believed the modern Christian cannot be bound to believe in either. Luther continues on in his
argument regarding the eucharist—indeed he makes far too much of it, obviously rubbing the
noses of his four opponents in it in page after page.
BAPTISM

Baptism was the next topic for Luther. Unbelievably, Luther argues that baptism was originally intended for children because adults would have produced standards and requirements for candidates to adhere to prior to permitting them the sacrament. This is, quite frankly, nothing less than the non-biblical, scholastic style theology that Luther despised in his opponents. The New Testament is loaded with examples of baptisms, none of which specifically cite an infant or small child as the one being baptized, and nearly all of which specify that the one being baptized was a believing adult! Luther’s reasoning for why Christ “intended” baptism for infants is nothing more than scholastic-type theology. Nowhere does Christ make any argument which could logically be construed as to mean that He has intended baptism for any age group at all. It is quite odd that Luther here departs from his own standard. I suspect that the value Luther placed on baptism (necessary for salvation) in conjunction with his rather telling defense of infant baptism in Das Große Katechismus explain Luther’s 180-degree turn on this point. If the church had been wrong for over 1,000 years, infant baptism was the Roman standard from AD 416, then the gates of Hell had indeed prevailed over the Kingdom of God.

Thus Luther argues, “wenigstens dieses einzige Sakrament in seiner Kirche ungeschmälert und unbeflecket durch Menschensatzungen erhalten hat und es für alle Völker und alle Stände der Menschen freigehalten hat.” Adults, however, have forgotten their baptisms, Luther decried. Yes, by vainly and foolishly placing man-devised means of salvation above the

47 “Hierbei ergibt sich nun eine Frage, mit welcher der Teufel durch seine Rotten die Welt verwirrt, von der Kindertaufe: ob sie auch glauben oder recht getauft werden? Dazu sagen wir in Kürze: wer einfältig ist, der schlage die Frage von sich und weise sie an die Gelehrten. Willst Du aber antworten, so antworte so: Daß die Kindertaufe Christus gefalle, beweist sich genugsam aus seinem eigenen Werk, nämlich daß Gott derer viele heilig macht und den Heiligen Geist gegeben hat, die so getauft sind, und daß heutigen Tages noch viele sind, an denen man sowohl der Lehre und des Lebens halber spürt, daß sie den Heiligen Geist haben. Das ist uns von Gottes Gnade auch gegeben, daß wir ja die Schrift auslegen und Christus erkennen können, was ohne den Heiligen Geist nicht geschehen kann. Wo aber Gott die Kindertaufe nicht annahme, würde er derer keinem den Heiligen Geist noch ein Stück davon geben; in Summa, es müßte so lange Zeit her bis auf diesen Tag kein Mensch auf Erden Christ sein” (Luther 1983, p. 73). Thus infant baptism must be legitimate, otherwise no one had been a true Christian for approximately 1,000 years, Luther argued.
baptism instituted by Christ, adults all but nullified their baptisms with their lack of faith in the truth and their incessant clinging to superstitions. Teachings like those of St. Jerome were at fault.

Zu dieser Auffassung hat ihnen eine gefährliche Rede des Hieronymus Anlaß gegeben, die entweder übel geredet oder übel verstanden worden ist, wo er die Buße das ‘zweite Brett nach dem Schiffbruch’ nennt, gerade als ob die Taufe nicht eine Buße wäre. Denn daher kommt’s, daß sie, wenn sie in Sündenfallen, an dem ersten Brett oder Schiff, als ob sie es verloren hätten, verzweifeln und anfangen, sich allein auf das andere Brett, nämlich die Buße, zu stützen und zu verlassen.

The papacy should have led the flock back to placing its trust in the ordinance of Christ, but instead led the flock further away. Citing Isa. 56:10f, Luther claimed that it was a terrible time to be called “Bischöfe.” The bishops of the day, according to Luther, didn’t have the slightest clue what they were to do and were unacceptably ignorant.

Luther explains that baptism without faith does not count. It is no baptism at all.


48 “10 Alle ihre Wächter sind blind, sie wissen nichts; stumme Hunde sind sie, die nicht strafen können, sind faul, liegen und schlafen gerne. 11 Es sind aber gierige Hunde, die nimmer satt werden können. Sie, die Hirten wissen keinen Verstand; ein jeglicher sieht auf seinen Weg, ein jeglicher geizt für sich in seinem Stande. 12 ‘Kommt her, laßt uns Wein holen und uns vollsaufen, und soll morgen sein wie heute und noch viel mehr.’”
As though realizing that his foes could destroy him on this stance, since he was a supporter of infant baptism, Luther then launches into another defense of infant baptism. Whereas an infant cannot be expected to bring faith to the baptismal font, those who bring the babe do so in faith and that faith is then somehow imputed to the child. Thus the child does indeed come to baptism in faith. Besides, Luther argues, we can’t say for sure whether Christ does not pour out faith into the heart of the infant in order to validate the sacrament. This final argument is weaker than his previous defense of the practice and is rather disappointing.

**Penance**

Next Luther tackled penance. Luther refers the reader to his previous works on the topic, thus demonstrating no significant change in his view of penance over the course of his trials and debates. Penance had, in Luther’s mind, become a tyranny, an exploitation of the fold of God by greedy Rome. Luther claimed that the sacrament of penance had really ceased to exist, since divine promise and faith were necessary precursors for a sacrament. Since the faith of the masses had been misdirected by Rome and to Rome, penance was now being directed toward Rome and in fear of earthly power; rather than being directed toward Christ in faith! Penance which hoped to receive its redemption from Rome was no penance at all!

Hüte dich also, auf deine Reue zu vertrauen oder die Sündenvergebung deinem Schmerz zuzuschreiben. Denn Gott sieht dich nicht deswegen an, sondern wegen deines Glaubens, durch den du seinen Drohungen und Verheißungen geglaubt hast, der einen solchen Schmerz überhaupt bewirkt hat. Und darum verdankt man nicht seiner Sorgfalt, mit der man seine Sünden aufzählt, sondern der Wahrheit Gottes und unserm Glauben, was Gutes in der Buße ist.

Luther warned.
Furthermore, whereas private confession was a positive thing, it was not necessary, since it could not be proven from scripture. Therefore, one need not feel compelled upon pain of sinning against Almighty God to go to confession, but neither need one feel compelled to abandon the practice altogether. However, the penances which are associated with confession be damned! Pilgrimages, what Luther viewed as worship of the saints, trust in works and ceremonies—these are all forms of idolatry which, Luther fumed, were taught and approved by wicked clergymen. Luther despised this type of penance calling it no penance at all. Citing 1 Kings 12:26ff Luther threatened Rome:

26Jerobeam aber gedachte in seinem Herzen: Das Königreich wird nun wieder zum Hause David fallen. 27Wenn dies Volk soll hinaufgehen, Opfer zu tun in des HERRN Hause zu Jerusalem, so wird sich das Herz dieses Volkes wenden zu ihrem Herrn Rehabeam, dem König Juda's, und sie werden mich erwürgen und wieder zu Rehabeam, dem König Juda's, fallen. 28Und der König hielt einen Rat und machte zwei goldenen Kälber und sprach zu ihnen: es ist euch zuviel, hinauf gen Jerusalem zu gehen; siehe, da sind deine Götter, Israel, die dich aus Ägyptenland geführt haben. 29Und er setzte eins zu Beth-El, und das andere tat er gen Dan. 30Und das geriet zur Sünde; denn das Volk ging hin vor das eine bis gen Dan. 31Er machte auch ein Haus der Höhen und machte Priester aus allem Volk, die nicht von den Kindern Levi waren. 32Und er machte ein Fest am fünfzehnten Tage des achten Monats wie das Fest in Juda und opferte auf dem Altar. So tat er zu Beth-El, daß man den Kälbern opferte, die er gemacht hatte, und stiftete zu Beth-El die Priester der Höhen, die er gemacht hatte, 33und opferte auf dem Altar, den er gemacht hatte zu Beth-El, am fünfzehnten Tage des achten
Monats, welchen er aus seinem Herzen erdacht hatte, und machte den Kindern Israel ein Fest und opferte auf dem Altar und räucherte.

Finally, Luther argued against the notion that one could only be forgiven for sins that one confessed. Luther had himself experience deep anguish in fear of this requirement. He had devoted himself, and poor von Staupits as well, to 6 hour long confessions in which he would psychoanalyze himself and pick apart his every action and thought (Marty 2004, pp. 14-15).

Luther settled the issue once and for all, when one goes to confession, Christ, seeing the heart of the individual, forgives even the hidden sins. Forgiveness does not come from within, neither does it come from the rebuke of a cleric but only from Christ the LORD and, therefore, one need not expurgate one’s every sin, neither is it necessary that the confessor be made aware of the confessee’s every sin. Christ alone forgives sin, and He is merciful and faithful to forgive.

CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is not a sacrament according to Luther:


In order to count as a sacrament, a rite or ritual must be verifiable in scripture as imparting some soteriological promise of God, Luther argued. “Dennoch können diese Dinge, weil sie nicht Gottes Verheißung haben, nicht Sakrament des Glaubens genannt werden.”
MARRIAGE

“Die Ehe wird nicht allein ohne jeden Schriftbeweis für ein Sakrament gehalten, sondern sie ist auch durch die gleichen überlieferungen, nach denen sie als ein Sakrament gerühmt wird, zum reinen Spott geworden . . .” Luther adds “a sacrament is a mystery, or secret thing, which is set forth in words and is received by the faith of the heart.”

Because marriage has always and everywhere been practiced, Luther writes, it cannot be considered a sacrament of the new covenant of Jesus Christ. Once again returning to the Bible as his definitive source, Luther claims that marriage is never depicted as a sacrament or mystery in the Bible and, therefore, does not qualify as such. Ephesians 5:25ff was the passage that the Roman church had used to argue its case:

25Ihr Männer, liebet eure Weiber, gleichwie Christus auch geliebt hat die Gemeinde und hat sich selbst für sie gegeben, 26auf daß er sie heiligte, und hat sie gereinigt durch das Wasserbad im Wort, 27auf daß er sie sich selbst darstellte als eine Gemeinde, die herrlich sei, die nicht habe einen Flecken oder Runzel oder des etwas, sondern daß sie heilig sei und unsträflich. 28Also sollen auch die Männer ihre Weiber lieben wie ihre eigenen Leiber. Wer sein Weib liebt, der liebt sich selbst. 29Denn niemand hat jemals sein eigen Fleisch gehaßt; sondern er nährt es und pflegt sein, gleichwie auch der Herr die Gemeinde. 30Denn wir sind die Glieder seines Leibes, von seinem Fleisch und von seinem Gebein. 31"Um deswillen wird ein Mensch verlassen Vater und Mutter und seinem Weibe anhangen, und werden die zwei ein Fleisch sein. 32Das Geheimnis ist groß; ich sage aber von Christo und der Gemeinde. 33Doch auch ihr, ja ein jeglicher habe lieb sein Weib als sich selbst; das Weib aber fürchte den Mann.
Luther argued that this passage does not address the union of man and wife as a “Geheimnis,” but rather that it refers to the unity of Christ and His believers as being of one body as being the mystery. Thus marriage cannot be a sacrament, since “a sacrament is a mystery.”

**ORDINATION**

Luther rejected ordination as a valid sacrament. Luther called it “lächerlich” to claim that something was a sacrament which cannot be proven to have even been instituted by God. Ordination had only become a sacrament by decree of the Roman church, and the church had no such authority to institute a sacrament. “Dieses Sakrament kennt die Kirche Christi nicht, es ist eine Erfindung der Kirche des Papstes. Denn es hat nicht nur an keiner Stelle eine Verheißung der Gnade, sondern das ganze Neue Testament erwähnt es auch mit keinem einzigen Wort.”

**EXTREME UNCTION**

The Roman church’s teaching of extreme unction was taken from James 5:14ff:

14ist jemand krank, der rufe zu sich die Ältesten von der Gemeinde, daß sie über ihm beten und salben ihn mit Öl in dem Namen des HERRN. 15Und das Gebet des Glaubens wird dem Kranken helfen, und der HERR wird ihn aufrichten; und so er hat Sünden getan, werden sie ihm vergeben sein. 16Bekenne einer dem andern seine Sünden und betet füreinander, daß ihr gesund werdet. Des Gerechten Gebet vermag viel, wenn es ernstlich ist. 17Elia war ein Mensch gleich wie wir; und er betete ein Gebet, daß es nicht regnen sollte, und es regnete nicht auf Erden drei Jahre und sechs Monate. 18Und er betete abermals, und der Himmel gab den Regen, und die Erde brachte ihre Frucht. 19Liebe Brüder, so jemand unter euch irren würde von der Wahrheit, und jemand bekehrte ihn, 20der soll wissen, daß,
wer den Sünder bekehrt hat von dem Irrtum seines Weges, der hat einer Seele vom Tode geholfen und wird bedecken die Menge der Sünden.

To which Luther responds, “Ich aber sage, ist irgendwo törichtes Zeug geredet worden, so ganz besonders hier.” Even if this spurious interpretation of James were correct, and Luther was most certain it was not, he would have rejected it, since even an Apostle of Christ has no right to introduce a sacrament. Christ alone has the authority to institute sacraments, not James, not Peter, not the Pope, not a council, not the whole of Christendom united!

**BGK’s CONCLUSION**

Luther concludes by assuring his readers that the loss of these four sacraments is really no loss at all, since these four sacraments were never really sacraments at all. The loss was strictly imaginary. Reliance on Christ and on the Bible are what a Christian needs, not the silly superstitions of the pope’s church. Thus Luther concluded his attack on the veracity of the church of Rome. This could only be followed by VFC’s utter dismissal of the Holy Roman Catholic Church’s soteriology.

**B. VFC: AN OVERVIEW**

**I - A LETTER FOR LEO**

Cardinal Albrecht might have sent a copy of the *95 Theses* to the pope, but Luther himself sent a copy of VFC to Leo X. Not only did he personally send a copy, he also addressed a sizable letter, *Ein Sendbrief an den Papst Leo X*, fully half the length of VFC, in which he sued for peace and reform for the final time. This was Luther’s last attempt at reconciliation with the papacy and with the church of Rome. The piece starts off rather self-deprecatingly, “In Gott allerheiligster Vater [. . .] hab ich doch meinen Sinn noch nie so von dir entfremdet, daß ich nicht aus allen meinen Kräften dir und deinen römischen Stuhl das Beste allzeit gewünscht und mit
fleißigem, herzlichem Gebet, so viel ich vermochte, bei Gott gesucht habe” (Luther 1962, pp. 110-111). Luther goes on to apologize for his “sträflich Wort” and informs Leo X that he views him as a Daniel in Babylon⁴⁹ (111). Luther admits that he has a “Balken” in his own eye and is thus not prepared to be the first to throw a stone at the adulteress (112).

Luther then begins to defend his use of words—he was, after all, simply imitating Christ who referred to his “Widersacher” as “Schlangenkinder, Gleisner, Blinde, des Teufels Kinder” (112). While his harsh words may have offended some, those who were offended were deserving of the offense—not to mention that people these days are just a bit too whiny when it comes to this kind of thing⁵⁰ (112).

It was not out of disrespect, or out of a desire to injure the Holy See that Luther began his work; rather, Luther saw himself as “verpflichtet” to serve all Christians—to serve meaning for Luther, as we shall soon see, to share the Word of God as taught in the Bible and not as taught in the

⁴⁹ “Ich hab dich genennet einen Daniel zu Babylon, und wie ich deine Unschuld so fleißig habe beschützt wider deinen Lästerer Sylvester, kann ein jeglicher, der es liest, überreichlich sich überzeugen.”

⁵⁰ “Aber zu unsern Zeiten sind unsere Ohren so sehr zart und weich geworden durch die Menge der schädlichen Schmeichler, daß wir, sobald wir nicht in allen Dingen gelobt werden, schreien, man sei bissig . . . Was soll aber das Salz, wenn es nicht scharf beißt?”
infernal scholastic teachings and doctrines! This was not Luther on the attack, but rather a humble monk adhering to his calling from God . . . the calling to restore the Bible’s sovereignty over the Church of God.

One must wonder whether Luther was truly as naive as he seemed in these early years, or if he was simply feigning such naivete as a cover should he at last brought to the stake as a heretic—indeed Luther’s Vorwort to Leo X was to be published with VFC for the general public. Luther daringly, or perhaps foolishly, informs Leo X that the “Römischen Hof” has become more shameful than Sodom, Gomorrah, or even Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, and essentially challenges the pope to deny it51 (113)! The throne of St. Peter has become a byword. “Und, so viel ich merk, so ist seiner Bosheit hinfort weder zu raten noch zu helfen” (113). The papacy was irredeemably corrupted and should be abandoned post haste! The true faith in Jesus Christ is destroyed by Rome, Luther argued.

Denn das ist dir selbst jedenfalls nicht verborgen, wie nun viel Jahre lang aus Rom in alle Welt nichts anderes denn Verderben des Leibs, der Seelen, der Güter, und aller bösen Dinge allerschädlichste Exempel gleichsam hineingeströmt und eingerissen sind. Welches alles öffentlich am Tag jedermann bewußt ist, wodurch die Römische Kirche, die vorzeiten die allerheiligste war, nun geworden ist eine Mordgruben über alle Mordgruben, ein Hurenhaus über alle Hurenhäuser, ein Haupt und Reich aller Sünde, des Todes und der Verdammnis, so daß man sich nicht gut denken kann, wie die Bosheit hier noch zunehmen könne, wenngleich der Antichrist selber käme. Indes sitzest du, Heiliger Vater Leo, wie ein Schaf unter den Wölfen und wie Daniel unter den Löwen und mit Ezechiel unter den Skorpionen. (114; italics mine)

51 “. . . du [Leo X] selbst noch jemand anders auf Erden anders bekennen kann . . .”
Luther encourages Leo X to abandon Rome and above all to abandon the papacy. “Es ist aus mit dem Römischen Stuhl, Gottes Zorn hat ihn überfallen ohn Aufhören” Luther warned (114).

Luther mourned for Leo X, claiming that Leo was worthy to have been pope in better times—times back when God’s favor was shining upon Rome (115).

In case Leo X had somehow forgotten that Luther was his friend and brother, Luther reminds Leo X that his harsh words for the throne of St. Peter aren’t directed at Leo personally. Quite the contrary! Luther claims, “ich auch gehoffet habe, ich würd’ bei dir Gnad und Dank verdienen” (116). No, Luther is not the enemy of Leo X; however, Luther knew who Leo’s enemies were! “Johann Eck, einen besonderen Feind Christi und der Wahrheit” took first place on that list (116-117).52 Luther was most certainly naive on this point. Eck and Leo X were friends and hunted wild boar together; as a matter of fact, Eck, as though in a scene straight out of Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell*, was on a boar hunt with Leo X as Luther’s fate, excommunication, was decided (Marty 2004, pp. 53-54). Leo X used imagery from the hunt with Eck in his excommunication bull for Luther. Luther was a wild boar tearing up the vineyard of God and had to be stopped (53-54)! Luther’s argument that Eck was just a self-serving “Schmeichler” who was seeking to be honored fell flat in Rome.

Eck’s position as papal enemy number 1 was followed closely by Cardinal Cajetan who was “unbescheiden und unrichtig, ja auch untreu” (Luther 1962, p. 117). Cajetan had not allowed Luther to keep silence. “In dessen Hand ich um deinetwillen alle meine Sache so gelegt habe, daß er Frieden gebieten sollte; ich wollte der Sachen ein End lassen sein und stille

---

52 As early as May of 1519 Luther showed animosity toward Eck in a personal letter to Frederick the Wise. Writing on the 13th of May, explaining that he had hoped to put an end to the dispute with Eck, Luther was in fact willing to stop discussing the matter altogether, but was not permitted. “Nun aber Doktor Eck in nicht abgesprochener Sache mich also angreift, daß, wie zu ersehen ist, er nicht nur meine, sondern der ganzen E.K.F.G. Universität zu Wittenberg Schande und Unehr sucht und es will tapferer Leute erachten, er sei zu dieser Sache gekauft worden, haben mich solche wetterwendischen, hinterlistigen Griffe nicht als gebührend erscheinen lassen, sie zu verachten, noch die Wahrheit in solchem Spott ersticken zu lassen. Dann sollte man mir gleich das Maul zubinden und einem jeglichen anderen auftun” (Zeller 1982, p. 168).
schweigen, wenn meine Widersacher auch still stünden, welches er leicht mit einem Wort hätte können ausrichten” (117). Consequently, everything that had happened between 1518 up to the writing of this letter to Leo X was fully Cajetan’s fault (118)! Since Cajetan would not let Luther remain silent, and since he would not silence Luther’s opponents, Luther had had no choice but to carry on and to defend himself. “Was sollt’ ich da weiter tun?” Luther asked (118). Cajetan could have put an end to the whole ordeal, but instead had made a big deal of it and left Luther with no choice but to persist.

Eck and Cajetan were not the only enemies Leo X needed to be cautious of. Leo X needed to concern himself with his “süßen Ohrensinger” (121). Yes these were real devils in disguise! The Ohrensinger would tell Leo X lies—lies like, “du seiest nicht ein bloßer Mensch, sondern vermischt mit Gott,” and “du seiest ein Herr der Welt,” and, of course, “du habest Gewalt im Himmel, in der Hölle und im Fegefeuer” (121). Furthermore, it is total nonsense, Luther argues, that people tell the pope that he alone has the authority to interpret scripture, or that he is the prince of the Church, or that he is the leader of church councils and of Christendom itself (121-122). Luther warns Leo X, “glaub nur niemand von denen, die dich erheben, sondern allein denen, die dich demütigen . . .” (122). Yes, this was real danger Luther wrote Leo X, “sie sind deine Feinde und suchen deine Seele zu verderben” (121). The pope was something special alright—he was the servant of all servants of God and the sooner he realized this, the sooner his soul would be out of jeopardy (121).

“Wenn denn ein Papst in Abwesenheit Christi, der nicht in seinem Herzen wohnet, regieret, ist derselbe nicht allzuwahrhaftig Christi Statthalter” (122)? Such a pope can only be, Luther argues, “ein Antichrist und Abgott” (122)! How much better it was, Luther reflected, when the Apostles simply viewed themselves as Christ’s servants and not as governors in His
absence. Luther suggests that Leo X, and all popes for that matter, memorize what St. Bernhard wrote regarding Pope Eugenius.

Ich tue es niemals in der Absicht, dich zu lehren, sondern aus lauterer treuer Sorge und Pflicht, die jedermann mit Recht zwingt, auch in sicheren Dingen für unseren Nächsten Sorge zu tragen, und läßt uns keine Rücksicht nehmen auf Würde oder Unwürde, so sehr nimmt sie des Nächsten Gefahr oder Vorteil wahr [. . .] Am End, auf daß ich nicht leer komme vor deine Heiligkeit, so bring ich mit mir ein Büchlein [VFC], unter deinem Namen ausgegangen, als eine guten Wunsch und Anfang des Friedens und guter Hoffnung, daraus deine Heiligkeit schmecken kann, mit was für Geschäften ich gerne wollt’ und auch fruchtbarlich könnte umgehn, wenn mir’s angesichts deiner unchristlichen Schmeichler möglich wäre.

(122-123)

Luther concludes his letter with a brief benediction for Leo X in the name of Christ and thus Luther concluded his final attempt to reconcile the German faction he was leading with the Vatican. That it failed should be no great surprise. The content of Luther’s letter to the pope alone would have sufficed to engender nothing but wrath from Rome, but that he also included VFC simply ensured that Leo X would excommunicate Luther. The doctrines which Luther espoused in VFC permitted no other option but to fight the scholastic theology of the last centuries. “Luther’s doctrine of justification fell like a bombshell on the theological landscape of medieval Catholicism. It shattered the entire theology of merits and indeed the sacramental-penitential basis of the church itself” (George 1988, p. 72).
VFC is broken into two basic, and rather unequal parts, “innerer Mensch” and “äußerer Mensch.” VFC is, essentially, a series of theses, 30 of them to be exact, which support the main thesis of the argument: “Ein Christenmensch ist ein freier Herr über alle Ding und niemand untertan. Ein Christenmensch ist ein dienstbarer Knecht aller Ding und jedermann untertan” (Luther 1962, p. 125). The inner man is covered in the first 18 theses, the 19th thesis serves as a kind of conclusion to the inner man and introduction to the outer man, and, naturally, theses 20-30 cover the outer man. Because all 30 theses support one another and, naturally, the thesis statement, the the main themes Luther developed in this piece, it is necessary to take a look at each thesis. \(^5^3\) Unfortunately, it is not possible to give as thorough an examination to each thesis as each deserves. Nevertheless, a quick overview of each thesis will be given. First let us look at the inner man.

Thesis 1 is that a Christian is both completely free and lord of all, and is fully enslaved to each person (125). \(^5^4\) Luther enjoyed paradoxes like this and used them often. Luther called Christians both righteous and sinner simultaneously (a distinctive break from the Augustinian view that believers gradually evolved from sinner to righteous as they struggled through this life). “Simul peccator et justus (‘at the same time sinner and righteous’) is one of a number of well-known oppositions in Luther’s theology. Others include law and gospel, faith and works, the hiddenness and revelation of God” (McCormack 2006, p. 75). Thesis 2 argues that it is possible to make this argument because man is comprised of two natures: the inner or spiritual man, and the outer or fleshly man (125). While it is nothing new to Christian theology that

\(^{53}\) It is beneficial, but can become cumbersome, to provide all the biblical references Luther makes. Therefore, except in instances where the full text is most pertinent to understanding the point being made, all such references will be provided as footnotes.

\(^{54}\) 1 Corinthians 9:19, Romans 13:8, Galatians 4:4
humans are composed of spirit and body, Luther argues that neither aspect really has control over the other.55

Thesis 3 states that that which the outer man experiences has no real power over the inner man (125-126). It does not matter if the body is in prison—the soul is still free in Christ! It does not matter if the body is undernourished—the soul gorges itself on the Word of God. The physical state of the human body has no control over, and is therefore not a determining factor of, the state of the human soul. Let what suffering may come come indeed. It does not matter at all. The soul has triumphed, in Christ, over the physical world! That which is outside, fleshly, of the world, physical, has not power over that which is spiritual. Therefore, a Christian is completely free and lord of all. Nothing has power over man’s soul save God! No torture can force a soul to recant. No physical need or desire, not even sin itself can bar the soul from Jesus Christ, and thus the world is powerless before the Christian. Liberating as this may be, Luther is quick to point out that the sword cuts in more than one direction: wearing priestly clothing is no help to the soul either (thesis 4). Any body can put on such garb . . . indeed many hypocrites do! Clothing, however, also has no power over the soul and should a corrupt soul place such garb on its body it would have no positive effect whatsoever (126).56

Luther is not, however, arguing that the soul cannot be effected by anything. The soul simply does not have to be effected by the physical world around it. Luther goes on, “Zum fünften hat die Seele keine ander Ding, weder im Himmel noch auf Erden, darin sie lebe, fromm,
frei und christlich sei, denn das heilige Evangelium, das Wort Gottes, von Christo gepredigt 57 (126-127). And, just in case his readers were not certain of just what the ‘word of God’ was, Luther states that the word of God is the gospel of Jesus Christ (127-128). 58 And since the only thing which truly matters to the soul is the gospel of Christ, the inevitable conclusion must be that faith is the only real ‘good work’ which can be done (128-129). 59 Luther cites the Gospel of John chapter 6 in which Jesus answers a crowd’s question, what must we do to do the works of God with, “Das ist das einzige göttliche Werk, daß ihr glaubt an den, den Gott gesandt hat, welchen Gott der Vater allein dazu verordnet hat” (128).

Yes, faith alone is required to make a person “fromm, frei und selig” (129). The Law of Moses (and I would argue Luther uses the Law of Moses as a metaphor for all spiritual law, i.e. Catholic doctrine, monastic rules, etc.) was not and is not able to perfect the soul, Luther argues. The only purpose Luther sees for the law is that it force the hearer of the law to despair of ever being able to attain to its standards and thus drives the hearer to seek mercy at the feet of Jesus. Thesis 9 argues that only a contrite heart can even find faith (129-130). Surprisingly Luther does not seek biblical support for this very biblical argument. 60 Luther’s translation of the Old Testament shows the believer hating the very pride which would, according to this thesis, hinder faith.

---

58 Hosea 13:9, Romans 1:17, 10:4.
59 John 6:28f, Mark 16:16, Isaiah 10:22, Romans 10:10
60 Psalms 51:17 “Die Opfer, die Gott gefallen, sind ein geängsteter Geist; ein geängstet und zerschlagen Herz wirst du, Gott, nicht verachten.” Luther’s 1545 Bible, not all of which was translated by Luther personally, translates Proverbs 8:13 as “Die Furcht des Herrn haßt das Arge, die Hoffart, den Hochmut und bösen Weg; und ich bin feind dem verkehrten Mund.” This translation, which argues that an appropriate fear of the LORD hates pride has been refuted and rejected. The English Standard Version translates this passage as, “The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.” The “I” here in question is the personification of wisdom. Wisdom, not the believer, hates pride and arrogance. Likewise,Die Bibel nach Martin Luther (1984) has rejected this early German translation of the passage and replaced it with, “Die Furcht des Herrn hasst das Arge; Hoffart und Hochmut, bösem Wandel und falschen Lippen bin ich Feind.” Again the “ich” in question is, “Ich, die Weisheit” (v. 12). Thus Luther’s 1545 translation has the believer hating pride and arrogance, whereas the modern translations have the personification of wisdom hating arrogance and pride.
Luther’s next thesis is one of three major points of interest concerning justification and will be examined in greater detail below. Theses 10-12 (130-133) taken together show that the believer is saved independent of the communal group and thus becomes a part of the community of the saved. In thesis 10 Luther declares believers free from the law and free from the requirements of good works unto salvation. “Wie das Wort ist, so wird auch die Seele durch ihn; gleichwie das Eisen wird glutrot wie das Feuer aus der Vereinigung mit dem Feuer.” Luther believed that, “durch den Glauben die Seele von dem Wort Gottes heilig, gerecht, wahrhaftig, friedsam, frei und aller Güte voll, ein wahrhaftiges Kind Gottes wird.”

Man is justified by faith! This is the breaking point in Luther’s theology. Here is where Luther finally, truly breaks away from the Church of Rome—let us not forget that Luther sent this along with his letter to Leo X as his final call for peace. Rome must acknowledge and accept justification by faith without works or Luther will have no part in it. “Das ist die christliche Freiheit, der bloße Glaube, der da macht, nicht daß wir müßig gehen oder übel tun können, sondern, daß wir keines Werks bedürfen, um Frommsein und Seligkeit zu erlangen.”

Luther has, since the 1970’s been accused of tapping into the theological notion of theosis or deification, a prominent teaching in the Roman Church of his time, with his imagery of fire and steel uniting. Augustine taught that one progressed toward perfection in this life and

---

61 John 1:12 “Er hat ihnen gegeben, daß sie können Gottes Kinder werden, alle, die in seinem Namen glauben.”

62 Theosis or Deification in Christian theology should not be confused with more radical teachings that one can become God, be absorbed into God or become a god. Such notions have always been around from ancient Hindu teachings of absorption into Brahma to 19th century Mormon teachings of exaltation. Theosis, in orthodox Christian teaching, is the teaching that one gradually loses the sin nature with which one is born, and that this sin nature is replaced with the divine nature. Thus one’s nature becomes exactly like Christ’s; however, one neither becomes Jesus, nor becomes His equal. One remains human but one is given a sinless, divine, nature. The teaching, much disputed from its inception, is derived from 2 Peter 1:3-4 which, speaking of Jesus, says, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.” Theosis was also known among the 15th and 16th century German mystics as Synteresis—though Synteresis is not equivalent to theosis. German mystics, whom Luther read, taught that believers would be absorbed into God. “In such a union [the final stage of synteresis] the self is submerged into God ‘like a drop of water in the deep sea. He has become much more one with [God] than the air is united with the brightness of the sun when it shines in broad daylight.’ To the extent that this process occurs in the human, one is justified: homo viator is transformed into homo deificatus” (George 1988, p. 67).
that one, ultimately, progressed toward justification. VFC rejects this notion outright!

“Augustine got nearer to the meaning of Paul than all the Schoolmen” Luther said, “In the beginning I devoured Augustine, but when the door into Paul swung open and I knew what justification by faith really was, then it was out with him” (George 1988, p. 68). Luther had concluded in 1518 that faith and faith alone justifies a man; however, it took another 2 years before he was able to fully embrace and defend the teaching (69).

Next Luther asks whether a human can know more about God’s demands than God Himself does. If people challenge the fact that justification is by faith without works then they behave, “als wollte sie es besser wissen denn er [Gott]” (Luther 1962, p. 131). To trust God—the original challenge to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden—is the only and greatest way to honor Him. On the other hand, “kann man Gott keine größere Unehre antun, als ihm nicht glauben, . . .” (131). Thus Luther signifies that he is done with the debates. This is not a lowly Wittenberg professor/monk suggesting a point for academic review and discussion; rather, Luther is here asserting justification by faith independent of works as a biblical fact which cannot be denied without insulting and dishonoring the Almighty God! The time for debate is past. Now it is time for the Roman Church to repent and dramatically shift directions or else suffer the consequences.

Thesis 12 provides striking insight into Luther’s maturing concept of soteriology. Luther takes the concept of the wedding contract and applies it to the individual conversion. It is not ‘faith’ as an independent concept which imparts salvation. Faith is merely the vehicle through which the individual makes first contact, and maintains contact, with Christ. Christ Himself is the force which justifies the individual. “Nicht allein gibt der Glaube soviel, daß die Seele, dem göttlichen Wort gleich, wird aller Gnaden voll, frei und selig, sondern vereinigt auch die Seele
mit Christo wie eine Braut mit ihrem Bräutigam. Aus welcher Ehe folget, wie Sankt Paulus\textsuperscript{63} sagt, daß Christus und die Seele ein Leib werden . . .” (132).

Imagery of a wedding with Christ is almost never used to depict the relationship of an individual with Christ. Nuns viewed themselves as married to Christ, and male clergy of all ranks viewed themselves as married to the church; however, even the nuns, it could be argued, did not view their relationship with Christ as an independent marriage, but rather as a communal experience by virtue of being a part of the community of nuns. Bride of Christ imagery is, therefore, almost exclusively reserved for the corporate, universal Church, and is never really applied to the individual. In thesis 12 of VFC Luther argues that the individual experiences this marriage contract imagery; that is “was Christus hat, das ist der gläubigen Seele Eigentum, was die Seele hat, wird Eigentum Christi” (132). Luther is most certainly aware that bride imagery is used for the community of the saved as a whole, the Church. Timothy George cites Luther referring to the Church as the bride of Christ: “Luther said that God does not want the world to know when He sleeps with His bride” (George 1988, p. 89). In VFC Luther plants the seed for what will develop into his “invisible” and “hidden” church teaching. Since “faith as the radical gift of God is not definable in external terms, the church too is not a physical assembly, but ‘as assembly of hearts in one faith’” (89). This thesis will receive more attention in the next chapter.

Consequently, Luther argues in thesis 13 that all righteousness and the fulfillment of the whole law resides in faith in the gospel of Christ (Luther 1962, pp. 133-134). Faith, Luther states, is living, whereas works are dead and can do nothing to help the soul. Again, not faith itself, but Christ who is contacted through faith has the power to make this happen. Christ, as the firstborn of God, has, according to Old Testament law, an automatic lordship over all his younger siblings (134). Jesus has the power of the patriarchal system at His command. Jesus is

\textsuperscript{63} Ephesians 5:30, 1 Corinthians 15:57
the pope of popes, the king of kings, the lord and king of all His siblings. Jesus’ role in the church is as the one true Pope, the true Lord, the true Priest, the true Son of God. One need only know one’s Old Testament to understand how it can be that Jesus has the authority to justify his siblings.

As the oldest child of God, and as the holder of the patriarchal keys, it is Jesus’ prerogative to share His power with whom He will. Consequently, all of those who are adopted by God as children of God are empowered by Christ to be Royal Priests of God (134-135).

Jesus Christ, argues Luther, has created a priesthood of all believers. Anyone who places faith in Christ, whether man, woman or child, whether poor or rich, whether weak or strong, whether educated or illiterate, whether of noble blood or of the dregs of society, is a royal priest, ordained by Christ the LORD. The universal priesthood of all believers would be a teaching that Luther would come to fear; people like Thomas Müntzer would make sure of that. However, this teaching would not be rejected by Luther. How could Luther reject something so plainly taught by Paul?

And if all believers be priests, then all believers have eternally more than any position or title which this earth offers (135-136). Thus it is much better to be the least Christian in all of Christendom than it is to be the king of the wealthiest nation. Such braggadocious claims are easily and often made by religious men; however, Luther was, in a way, put to the test with this claim. Luther stood to make a fortune from his September Testament—his translation of the New Testament into common German—alone, not to mention his numerous other tracts,

---

64 Romans 8:34
65 Interestingly citations are lacking.
67 1 Peter 2:9, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 3:21f
68 Psalms 145:19
pamphlets, and books which were printed and sold by the thousands (Dieterich 2008, pp. 61-63). Luther accepted a nice income for his work but often made no profit at all from the many printers who printed and sold copies of his works. Granted, there was no concept of author’s rights as we know them today, but, nevertheless, Luther appears to have made no attempt to profit from these printers and showed no ill-will toward them whatsoever. In short, Luther stood to become filthy rich from his writings, but did not interest himself with the notion. For Luther it rang true, it was better to be a Christian than to possess the world.

But, one would inevitably ask, if all believers are priests, then what are the ordained priests to be called? “Diener, Knecht, Schaffner” replies Luther (136-137). Clergy and laity are both priests. Clergy, however, have accepted a calling to serve the Church. Clergy are lowly servants. Thus Luther attacked the clergy once again. His attack as seen in BGK and CAD is here renewed in VFC. The clergy is not to be galavanting about with entourages, fancy clothing, jewels and gold, being venerated by the lowly laity. This is a total misunderstanding and compromising of the divine structure of the Church of Christ! The clergy should conduct itself as servant of all, as the least in importance, as the slave of the Church. 69

Thesis 18 is the final thesis which focuses solely on the inner man. It proposes that it is not sufficient to merely be convinced of the historicity of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection (137-138). Neither is it sufficient to be convinced that the gospels provide chronological information regarding the historic figure Jesus of Nazareth. No, the gospel of Christ must be taken to heart. It must be alive and real within the believer. Christ is not a mere historical figure like Julius Caesar, or Alexander the Great, no, Jesus Christ is the Victory of God! Thus a new expectation is placed on clergy: they must become preachers of the Word—preachers who declare the truth of God and who convince, convict, and convert the laity and the lost. Christ “soll und muß so

69 1 Corinthians 4:1
gepredigt sein, daß mir und dir der Glaube draus erwachse und erhalten werde” (137). This is the new duty of the clergy. They must present Christ convincingly to the world, so that the hearers can say with the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:55ff) “Wo ist nun, du Tod, dein Sieg? Wo ist nun Tod, dein Spieß? Dein Spieß ist die Sünde. Aber Gott sei Lob und Dank, der uns hat gegeben den Sieg durch Jesum Christum unsern Herrn. Und der Tod ist ersäuft in seinem Sieg usw”

iii - THE “OUTER MAN”

Next Luther addresses the ‘outer man’ and the reasons for “good works.” This section of VFC is significantly less detailed than the previous—perhaps because of his recent publication of a treatise on the subject of good works. Luther’s 1520 treatise entitled On Good Works argued that “good works necessarily flow out of a living faith but are a result of and not the basis for justification, which depends entirely on God’s grace” (Spitz 1985, p. 81). In VFC’s examination of good works Luther begins by stating that it is necessary to do good works, but that they are simply not necessary for salvation (Luther 1962, pp. 137-138). Since, Luther argues, humans are not merely composed of the inner man, but also have as equal part the outer man, it is not possible for humans to function independent of all others in the physical realm. Throughout his career Luther insisted that Christianity was communal and that there was no salvation outside of the church (George 1988, pp. 86-87). That being said, in 1520 Luther ceased to view the church in the manner of his contemporaries—a physical institution organized around a central geographic location—and began to view the true church as being of an “essentially spiritual, noninstitutional [sic] character” (87).
Each Christian remains “doch noch in diesem leiblichen Leben auf Erden und muß seinen eigenen Leib regieren und mit Leuten umgehen,” Luther states in thesis 20 \(^{70}\) (Luther 1962, p. 139). “Da heben nun die Werke an” (139). It is necessary that one not laze about until the Judgment Day. The ‘inner man’ is “mit Gott eins” but in the flesh (outer man) “Da findet [ein Christ] in seinem Fleisch einen widerspenstigen Willen, der will der Welt dienen und suchen, was ihn gelüstet” (139). Consequently, good works serve to tame the flesh, not to merit God’s favor. There is a very fine line here and the outsider may look in wondering what the difference between good works to merit God’s favor and good works to keep from displeasing God through sin might be. The answer lies in the mechanism of salvation. Is one justified because one believes in Christ (Luther), or is one justified because one’s works are just (Catholic)? For both Luther and his opponents it is imperative that a believer produce good works; however, what those good works mean to both sides is quite different. For Luther good works are evidence of justification, salvation, and a renewed mind in Christ. For Luther’s Catholic opponents good works are the evidence that one is being renewed in one’s mind, that one is being justified, and that one is becoming what God wants one to be. The difference is night and day! Luther argues that one is justified, saved, and renewed; whereas his Catholic opponents argue that one is becoming these things.\(^{71}\) This is why we must also reject the notion that VFC argues for the doctrine of theosis—the gradual, positive transformation of the individual!

Thus if good works are done with the intention of gaining merit in the eyes of God they cease to be good works at all (thesis 21)! “Aber dieselben Werke dürfen nicht geschehen in der

---

\(^{70}\) Romans 7:22f This is the main verse from which Luther derived his dual-nature-of-man theology, Galatians 5:24, 1 Corinthians 9:27.

\(^{71}\) Obviously one could haggle with this point and show differing stances among Luther’s opponents. I here represent the Luther’s understanding of the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings in his time. Whereas Luther taught that one is justified by faith, the Catholic Church taught that one would be gradually justified by means of purgation during life by means of good works and after life by means of Purgatory. Thus the question of works was not merely when does a believer become justified, but also what effect good works have on/or the believer.
Meinung, daß dadurch der Mensch fromm werde vor Gott” (139). The inner man has been given
the will of God, and therefore all good works should be done in order to subject the outer man to
the will of the inner man which is equivalent to subjecting the outer man to the will of God. Any
work which is done without faith in the justification of God through faith and not of works is
done in vain! Works without proper faith are pointless. Instead works should be done in the
manner which Adam and Eve did works prior to the fall: not to earn a salvation which is not
needed, nor to make up for a sin which is not held against the believer, but rather to keep
occupied and to honor God.

“Um dafür etliche Gleichnisse zu geben: Man soll die Werke eines Christenmenschen,
der durch seinen Glauben und aus lauter Gnade Gottes umsonst ist gerechtfertigt und selig
geworden, für nichts anders erachten denn wie die Werke Adams und Evas im Paradiese
gewesen sind” (140; italics mine).72 Thus true good works are not done to secure justification,
nor the grace of God, but rather are done as a result of being in a right relationship with God.
The Christianity which Luther here proposes is one which returns the believer, and thus
ultimately the whole host of the redeemed, to the Garden of Genesis. Luther calls for a return
mankind’s first home and state of being; he calls for a return to Eden.

Nun war Adam von Gott fromm und wohl geschaffen ohne Sünde, so daß er
durch sein Arbeiten und Hüten nicht fromm und gerechtfertigt zu werden
brauchte. Doch, auf daß er nicht müßig ginge, gab Gott ihm zu schaffen, das
Paradies zu pflanzen, bauen und bewahren . . . allein Gott zu gefallen [. . .] So
auch eines gläubigen Menschen Werk, welcher durch seinen Glauben ist
wiederum ins Paradies gesetzt und von neuem geschaffen, bedarf keiner Werke,
fromm zu werden, sondern auf daß er nicht müßig gehe und seinen Leib

72 Genesis 2:15
arbeitet lasse und bewahre, sind ihm solche freie Werke, allein Gott zu gefallen, 
befohlen. (141; italics mine)

Luther goes on to argue that it is impossible for works to make a person either good or 
bad (thesis 23).

Gute fromme Werke machen nimmermehr einen guten frommen Mann, sondern 
ein guter frommer Mann macht gute fromme Werke. Böse Werke machen 
nimmermehr einen bösen Mann, sondern ein böser Mann macht böse Werke. So 
daß allewege die Person muß zuvor gut und fromm sein vor allen guten Werken, 
und gute Werke folgen und ausgehen von der frommen guten Person. Gleichwie 
Christus sagt: ‘Ein böser Baum trägt keine gute Frucht. Ein guter Baum trägt 
keine böse Frucht.’73 Nun ist’s offenbar, daß die Früchte nicht tragen den Baum, 
ebenso wachsen auch die Bäume nicht auf den Früchten, sondern im Gegenteil: 
die Bäume tragen die Früchte und die Früchte wachsen auf den Bäumen [. . .] Ein 
gutes oder böses Haus macht keinen guten oder bösen Zimmermann, sondern ein 
guter oder böser Zimmermann macht ein böses oder gutes Haus. (pp. 141-142)

Quoting Sirach 10:14f, Luther writes, “Anfang aller Sünde ist, von Gott weichen und ihm 
nicht trauen” (143). Therefore, bad works (sin) aren’t what damns an individual. While St. Paul 
did argue that the inevitable result of sin is death, he did not say that the wages of sin is 
damnation.74 Rather, the sole cause for damnation is, according to Luther, doubt! It is not sin
“sondern der Unglaube, der die Person und den Baum böse [und verdammt] macht . . . ‘Aus 
ihren Früchten sollt ihr sie erkennen’”75 (143). Concerning those who attempt to earn salvation 
by means of works, Luther refers the reader to 2 Timothy 3:5ff “Sie haben einen Schein des

73 Matthew 7:18
74 Romans 6:23
75 Matthew 7:20
Frommseins, aber der Grund ist nicht da, gehen hin und lernen immer und immer, und kommen doch nimmer zur Erkenntnis des wahren Frommseins.” One can never be justified by works. The attempt to gain justification by means of works is the evidence of doubting God which proves that the individual is damned!  

Thus good works are often actually wolves in dressed as sheep (144)! They often attack the grace of God by posing as a means of attaining it without making use of the only means of attaining it . . . faith without works. “Drum werfen wir die guten Werke nicht um ihrer selbst willen, sondern um des bösen Zusatzes und falscher verkehrter Meinung willen, welche macht, daß sie [gute Werke] nur gut scheinen und sind doch nicht gut, betrügen sich und jedermann damit, gleichwie die reißenden Wölfe in Schafskleidern” (144). Luther demands that the law be taught so that sin can be acknowledged and that the sinner might “Reue haben und sich bekehren . . . und so wird der Mensch durch den Glauben an die göttlichen Worte gerechtfertigt und erhoben, der durch die Furcht vor Gottes Gebot gedemütiget und zur Selbsterkenntnis gekommen ist” (145).


76 See again theses 7, 9 and 11 of VFC.
77 Galatians 5:6
Luther calls on the reader to live like Christ who emptied Himself of His place and rights in order to take on the form of a slave for the sake of mankind. Thus it is proper imitation of Christ to serve, give, share, and be selfless.

The believer can empty her/his self out for the sake of her/his neighbor because the believer has all that she/he needs in her/his faith in Christ (146-147). The believer should follow St. Paul’s example and dedicate her/his self and her/his means to the cause of Christ for the benefit of others. Thus the believer can and should be like Christ to her/his neighbor. Because God has and is giving so much to the believer, the believer has an excess amount of goods whose sole purpose is to be shared with the believers neighbors in honor of Christ the giver!

Ei, so will ich solchem Vater, der mich mit seinen überschwenglichen Gütern so überschüttet hat, wiederum frei, fröhlich und umsonst tun, was ihm wohlgefällt, und gegen meinen Nächsten auch werden ein Christ, wie Christus mir geworden ist und nichts mehr tun, denn was ich nur sehe, daß ihm not, nützlich und seliglich sei, dieweil ich doch durch meinen Glauben alles Dinges in Christo genug habe . . .

Darum, wie uns Gott hat durch Christum umsonst geholfen, so sollen wir durch den Leib und seine Werke nichts anderes, denn dem Nächsten helfen. (147)

The Apostle Paul is not the only example on which Luther calls. Knowing his audience well, Luther cites the example of the Virgin Mary, who sacrificed her body—in quite a different fashion from Paul—for the cause of Christ and for the benefit others. Mary even followed purity laws, which Luther concluded she was not really subject to since she had not engaged in sex.

---

78 Galatians 2:20
79 cf Bonhoeffer (1937) esp. Teil II Der Leib Christi pp. 227-239.
So lesen wir Lukae 2 (22ff.), daß die Jungfrau Maria zur Kirchen ging nach den sechs Wochen und ließ sich reinigen nach dem Gesetz wie alle anderen Weiber, obgleich sie doch nicht gleich ihnen unrein war, noch schuldig derselben Reinigung, bedurfte ihrer auch nicht. Aber sie tat’s aus freier Liebe, daß sie die anderen Weiber nicht verachtete, sondern mit dem Haufen bliebe. Ebenso ließ Sankt Paul Sankt Timotheum beschneiden, nicht daß es not wäre, sondern damit er den schwachgläubigen Juden nicht Ursache gebe zu bösen Gedanken. (147-148)

Luther goes on to cite: Paul’s refusal to circumcise Titus when it was demanded for salvation’s sake, Christ’s paying of the temple tax, and Paul’s multiple calls for obedience to worldly governmental powers, i.e. Romans 13:1ff and Titus 3:1.

Of course, such an argument, that one should adhere to certain social expectations for the sake of the weak, could have been used against Luther—indeed such argumentation is widely used to cajole believers into submitting to traditions, dogmas, and expectations of groups. In order to provide greater clarity as to just what exactly this argument ought to mean to the reader, Luther clarifies for the reader just what this would look like in practice:

So sollten auch aller Priester, Klöster und Stifte Werke beschaffen sein, daß ein jeglicher seines Standes und Ordens Werk allein darum täte, den anderen zu willfahren und seinen Leib zu regieren, den anderen Exempel zu geben, auch so zu tun, als die auch ihre Leiber zwingen sollten; doch soll man sich allzeit vorsehen, daß man nicht wähne, dadurch fromm und selig zu werden, welches allein der Glaube wirken kann. (148)

---

80 Acts 16:3
81 Galatians 2:3
82 Matthew 17:24ff
Thus the Roman Church could not use this argument to compel the laity to adhere to the Vatican’s expectations, but rather the burden lay with Rome and its behavior. As a matter of fact, Luther contends, unless a good work is done in faith and for the benefit of another it is not a good work at all (thesis 29). “Denn welches Werk nicht dahin ausgerichtet ist, dem anderen zu dienen oder seinen Willen zu erleiden, sofern er nicht zwingt, wider Gott zu handeln, das ist kein gutes, christliches Werk” (149). Thus Rome could not make use of this argument to demand obedience from anyone, since that which Rome called good works were to be done for the sake of the self. The ultimate objective of Rome’s version of good works, according to Luther, was a self serving attempt to appease an angry God and thereby to assure eternal blessedness for the self and to limit the amount of suffering one would endure in Purgatory. These good works, being selfish in nature, cannot rightly be placed in the category of good works at all. Rome cannot use this argument against Luther, since Rome does not demand works which Luther acknowledges as good works.

Luther concludes VFC with his 30th thesis, “daß ein Christenmensch lebt nicht in sich selbst, sondern in Christo und seinem Nächsten, in Christo durch den Glauben, im Nächsten durch die Liebe” (150). The Christian life is not a life of self-service lived apart from the community. Luther would eventually reject monastic life altogether and call upon monks and nuns to leave monasteries and convents, marry and live lives which would be useful to their communities. However, in 1520 Luther had not yet come so far. We see here the seed of what was soon to come. Concerning the Christian life outlined in VFC, the return to Eden which Luther proposed with this document, he writes,

Durch den Glauben fähret er über sich in Gott, aus Gott fähret er wieder unter
sich durch die Liebe und bleibt doch immer in Gott und göttlicher Liebe,

83 1 Corinthians 13:5
gleichwei Christus sagt Johann. 1 (51): “Ihr werdet noch sehen den Himmel offenstehen und die Engel auf- und absteigen über den Sohn des Menschen.”

Siehe, das ist die rechte, geistliche, christliche Freiheit, die das Herz frei macht von allen Sünden, Gesetzen und Geboten, welche alle andere Freiheit übertrifft, wie der Himmel die Erde.

Welche Gott uns gebe recht zu verstehen und behalten.

AMEN (150)
CHAPTER 3

JUSTIFICATION IN VON DER FREIHEIT EINES CHRISTENMENSCHEN

A. VFC's SOTERIOLOGY

i - WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION?

It is necessary that we have a working definition of just what “justification” means. Unfortunately, attempting to define theological terms such as justification and salvation is about like trying to nail down jello—it almost seems as though there are as many definitions as there are theologians. Hence it will be necessary to look at what VFC argues concerning justification and, thus, what it argues justification is not. We will need to look at the prevailing understanding of justification in Luther’s time and his VFC argument against it in order to find our definition.

“The cornerstone of both Luther’s theological breakthrough and his subsequent controversy with the church of his day appears to have been his insight that humans cannot initiate the process of justification, and his conviction that the church of his day had, by affirming the direct opposite, fallen into the Pelagian error” (McGrath 1986, p. 224).

John Piper, a leading Lutheran theologian and Luther expert, explains Luther’s concept, arguing that,

. . . justification does not consist in the changes of the human heart in conversion [sanctification]. But it is the change that takes place in the relationship between the sinner and God at the moment of faith [. . .] God’s act of justification does not merely inform us that we have peace with God; it establishes peace with God.

84 Pelagius (d. ca. 420-440) argued that no special grace was necessary for a human to adhere perfectly to the law. One could, by one’s own means, attain to the standard of the law. Pelagius was declared a heretic in the Council of Carthage in 418. VFC’s 23rd thesis, that good works cannot make one good, directly refutes the Roman adherence to a Pelagian-esque teaching that one could initiate the mechanism of justification by means of earning merits via various good works.
The divine act of justification is constitutive of the event by which we obtain peace with God. (Piper 2007, pp. 97-98; italics original)

VFC argues right along these lines. Good works are done for the sake of others (theses 26-29) and never in the attempt to make oneself right with God:85

VFC argues right along these lines. Good works are done for the sake of others (theses 26-29) and never in the attempt to make oneself right with God:85

gleich wie ein geweihter Bischof: wenn der Kirchen weihet, firmelt oder sonst seines Amtes Werk übet, so machen ihn dieselben Werke nicht zu einem Bischof. Ja, wenn er nicht zuvor zum Bischof geweiht wäre, so tauchte derselben Werke keines und wäre eitel Narrenwerk. So wird ein Christ, der durch den Glauben geweiht ist und gute Werke tut, durch dieselben nicht besser oder mehr geweiht (welches nur des Glaubens Mehrung tut) zu einem Christen. Ja, wenn er nicht zuvor glaubte und ein Christ wäre, so gälten alle seine Werke nichts, sondern wären eitel närrische, sträfliche, verdammliche Sünden. (Luther 1962, p. 141)

By comparison, in response to the growing Protestant movement, the Roman Catholic Church declared:

If anyone says that after the reception of the grace of justification the guilt is so remitted and the debt of eternal punishment so blotted out to every repentant sinner, that no debt of temporal punishment remains to be discharged, either in this world or in Purgatory, before the gates of Heaven can be opened, let him be anathema.

CANON XXX. Session VI. The Council of Trent. January 13, 1547 (Schouppe 1893, p. vi)

Thus we see that the justification for which the Roman church argued was not a once-for-all declaration but rather an inauguration point from which the believer was expected to develop

85 “Aber dieselben Werke [the works which combat the desires of the flesh] dürfen nicht geschehen in der Meinung, daß dadurch der Mensch fromm werde vor Gott” (Luther 1962, p. 139).
his/her status with God by means of meritorious works. The Latin Vulgate translated Mark 1:14-15 as “Do penance (poenitentiam agite), for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

[however] Lorenzo Valla challenged the Vulgate translation of New Testament texts such as [Mark 1:14-15]. In this, he was followed by Desiderius Erasmus, whose Novum instrumentum omne (1516) reproduced Valla’s challenge [. . .] Erasmus translated the Greek imperative as poeniteat vos (be penitent) . . . further weakening the link between the inward attitude of repentance and the sacrament of penance. (McGrath 1985 p. 126)

Luther, having been exposed to Erasmus’ publication of the New Testament in the original Greek, translated this same passage as: “14Nachdem aber Johannes überantwortet war, kam Jesus nach Galiläa und predigte das Evangelium vom Reich Gottes 15und sprach: Die Zeit ist erfüllet, und das Reich Gottes ist herbeigekommen. Tut Buße88 und glaubt an das Evangelium” (Bainton 2010, pp. 111-112; italics mine)

However, Erasmus’ breakthrough came after Luther had already had an epiphany which was so profound that it took him several years to figure out what to do with it.89

Beim Bibelstudium erkennt [Luther], dass Gott zuallererst nicht ein strenger, strafender Richter, sondern ein gütiger, gnädiger Retter ist. Gottes Gerechtigkeit, von der Paulus in seinem Brief an die Römer spricht, ist als Rechtfertigung des Sünders aus seiner freien Gnade zu verstehen.

86 “Erasmus wollte auf den Urtext zurückgreifen und auf dieser Basis neu—und besser—übersetzen” (Jung 2008, p. 11).
87 With “to repent” being understood as equivalent to “change your mind” (McGrath 1986, p. 126).
88 “Buße tun” translates as “to repent,” whereas “Buße für etwas (Akk) tun” translates as “to do penance for something.”
89 Luther’s Turn erlebnis, as it is called, is dated by many researchers to 1514; however, there is neither certifiable evidence nor general consensus regarding the exact year (Jung 2008, p. 27). It can, however, be no later than 1516.
“Denn im Evangelium wird offenbart die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, welche kommt aus Glauben in Glauben; wie denn geschrieben steht: ‘Der Gerechte wird aus Glauben leben.’

Denn es ist hier kein Unterschied: sie sind allzumal Sünder und mangeln des Ruhmes, den sie bei Gott haben sollten, und werden ohne Verdienst gerecht aus seiner Gnade durch die Erlösung, die durch Christus Jesus geschehen ist.

So halten wir nun dafür, dass der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben” (Aus dem Brief des Apostels Paulus an die Römer, Röm 1,17; 3,23f. und 3,28). (Dieterich 2008, p. 47)

Thus Luther’s pre-VFC epiphany and the “justification” of VFC are inseparable from “righteousness.” In VFC, to be justified is to be declared once-for-all righteous, and righteousness is achieved through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

II - JUSTIFICATION IN LIGHT OF VFC’s 22ND THESIS

As shown in chapter PURGATORY, there has been some question as to just how and when a believer gets/becomes justified since, at latest, the time of St. Clement of Alexandria (d. prior to 215). Internal evidence in the Gospel of St. John (c. A.D. 80-90)\(^90\) shows that there was already a growing concern among the founding members of the movement that unorthodox teachings regarding justification were taking root and corrupting the faith of converts.\(^91\) The Roman Catholic view of salvation, during Luther’s time, was clearly of an Augustinian nature. J.V. Fesko argues that the Roman Catholic Church,

---

\(^90\) cf Blomberg (2001) esp. pp. 41-44.
\(^91\) cf Bauckham and Mosser 2008, esp. pp. 120-139. Great emphasis is given in the text that the writer is a witness of Jesus and has physically interacted with the Messiah, thus negating the claims of the Gnostics.
typically confuses the categories of justification and sanctification. This confusion is due to several factors, such as Augustine’s initial formulation of justification, namely that it included both the declarative and transformative, a formulation which was later reiterated in the Council of Trent . . . , [however,] justification cannot be a transformative process; it cannot include sanctification but is a once-for-all declaration of the sinner’s righteousness. (Fesko 2008, p. 372; italics mine)

Fesko writes regarding the modern Roman Catholic Church in defense of the modern Reformed Theology; however, this particular argument shows the Roman view during Luther’s lifetime and articulates perfectly the notion of justification for which Luther argued in VFC.

“The typical Reformed understanding [and the argumentation of VFC’s 22nd thesis] is that Adam was created upright, or righteous, and that God justified, or declared righteous, the initial creation as well as man in his declaration that everything was ‘very good’” (Fesko 2008, p. 371; italics mine). Luther argued in VFC that through faith a believer is instantaneously regenerated and returned to the original state of man, the state in which Adam and Eve first were (Genesis 1:31 “Und Gott sah alles an, was er gemacht hatte; und siehe da, es war sehr gut. Da ward aus Abend und Morgen der sechste Tag.” i.e. man was good, or just, and therefore justified, and without sin). Belief in Christ was equivalent to returning to Eden, Paradiese. Luther declares in VFC’s 22nd thesis, “Nun war Adam von Gott fromm und wohl geschaffen, ohne Sünde” and thus every believer took part in this original, pre-fall, condition by means of faith alone (Luther 1962, p. 141; italics mine). This argument flew in the face of medieval Roman Catholic theology which argued that Adam required the donum superadditum (superadded gift)

---

92 Sanctification: the transformation of the sinner into a holy person, set apart from evil.
93 Reformed Theology derives its basis from Calvin rather than Luther.
in order to provide him with the “capacity for righteousness” (Fesko 2008, p. 372). Fesko adds, “We see, then, from the outset, that man in his unfallen state required infused righteousness in the form of the *donum superadditum* (372; italics mine).

The Catholic argument for the necessity of the *donum superadditum* comes from the scholastic theology which Luther outright rejected. By 1518 Luther had developed “the theology of the cross as an explicit alternative to scholasticism” (Bagchi 1991, p. 35). This rejection of scholastic theology was instrumental to the production of VFC’s concepts of justification and salvation.

[In] September 1517, Luther had already convinced himself that scholastic theology, insofar as it accommodated itself to the methods of pagan philosophy, diverged radically from the church’s traditional sources of Holy Scripture, the ancient fathers, and canon law . . . The scholastic authorities were of such importance in the church, claimed Prierias, that if Luther denied them he would himself be denied and condemned. Tetzel’s threat was even more direct. The scholastic doctors were, he stated, numbered in their thousands, and many were to be accounted among the saints in heaven. *The last man to reject them was John Huss, and he ended his opposition at the stake.* (Bagchi 1991, pp. 32-33; italics mine)

Thus Luther’s non-scholastic view of justification did not require God to “infuse” the believer with righteousness, thus justifying him/her. This would later develop into the Lutheran doctrine of “imputation”—a central topic of the the Wright-Piper debate today—which McGrath

---

94 Luther’s rejection of the necessity of the *donum superadditum* falls in line with St. Augustine’s thinking. “According to Augustine, Adam’s unique mark had been an ‘ability not to sin’ (*posse non peccare*)” (Ozment 1980, 23). Hence, “In Paradise, man was a model of willed self-control” (26). Ozment argues that the *donum superadditum* introduced in the 12th century “assisted him [Adam], so long as he willed in accordance with it, to live an ordered life” (27).

95 Sylvester Prierias (d. 1523) was a dominican monk who was appointed Master of the Sacred Palace by Pope Julius II and who was an early opponent of Luther.
refers to as “Luther’s mature theology of justification” (McGrath 1986, p. 223). “Since the Colloquy of Regensburg, Reformed and Lutheran theologians have insisted upon the idea of imputed righteousness . . . verses infused righteousness” (Fesko 2008, p. 371). VFC denies the doctrine of “infused righteousness” but does not put forth the notion of “imputed righteousness.” Thus in the 1960’s some began to think that VFC argues for something similar to theosis.96

iii - UNION WITH CHRIST AND VFC’s 12TH THESIS

The raw newness of VFC’s theology shows up brilliantly in the 12th thesis which addresses union with Christ. It declares the union as truth, as real, as something spiritual, . . . as something personal, but it fails to provide a truly solid defense of the argument. The 12th thesis lacks the doctrine of imputation’s intangibility of received righteousness, though it paves the way for a full-on doctrine of imputation by its outright rejection of infusion.  M.A. Seifrid argues, “to insist that one define justification in terms of ‘the imputation of Christ’s righteousness,’ is to adopt a late-Reformational, Protestant understanding” (Husbands & Trier 2004; 137). The 12th thesis, exegeted through knowledge of the 22nd thesis, turns the Roman Catholic View of justification on its head by outright denying the doctrine of donum superadditum.

a. NOT IMPUTATION

The 12th thesis argues that “das arme, verachtete, böse Hürlein,” or the convert, receives the righteousness of Christ in an instantaneous and very real sense (Luther 1962, p. 133). This "Gerechtigkeit" of Christ which the convert receives cannot be viewed as true imputation because it is treated as real and actually possessed by the convert. The late-Reformation concept of imputation, in a perhaps over-simplified explanation, does not grant real ownership of Christ’s

---
96 “The ‘Finnish school’ reads VFC as presenting ‘the idea of a real, physical union with Christ.’ On this reading of Luther, there is a much greater degree of affinity between his theology of justification and the eastern notion of divinisation” (McGrath 1986, pp. 225-226). While I disagree with the Finish school’s interpretation of VFC’s 12th thesis as a literal union with Christ (see d. Union with Christ: II - Scriptural Basis), the seeming similarity VFC has with theosis, over against “infusion,” which is outright denied, or “imputation,” which is not presented at all, is deceptive. Theosis requires a progressive change for the better in the believer’s life and conduct. VFC makes no such argument.
righteousness to the convert; rather, it remains a sort of abstract, isn’t-it-nice-that-God-pretends-I-am-righteous teaching. Imputation in later Lutheran teaching is abstract, unreal, an attributing of Jesus Christ’s extra credit points to the students who failed the test completely. The convert never possesses any real, true righteousness and never can develop any righteous traits. Instead, God Pretends that the convert is righteous by imputing Christ’s extra merits of righteousness—an endless amount of which He apparently possesses—to the convert.97

Luther and Melanchthon debated justification in 1536, after Luther’s concept of imputation had developed into its “mature” state. “To insist that justification is not ‘liberation from sin’s mastery’ but a bare divine declaration [was], [for] Melanchthon, to relegate justification solely to the role of quieting the conscience” (Husbands & Trier 2004, p. 137). However, it would be disingenuous to state that Luther’s later concept of imputation was as solid, in Luther’s thinking, as modern adherents to the doctrine often assert—either outright or by ignoring Luther’s statements to the contrary. It seems as though Luther waffled on his view of justification in relation to Greek philosophy.

There is suggestion that Melanchthon had “concern that at times Luther’s statements on justification seemed to reflect an Augustinian position, according to which justification was understood in terms of the inward renewal of the human being” (Husbands & Trier 2004, p. 139). Again, Luther was no divine oracle of pure truth. It should come as no surprise that, striking out into new territory with every step, Luther would have “important changes of mind on [justification] and related issues” which prevent the modern investigator from easily and clearly

97 Note the similarity between late-Reformation imputation and Roman Catholic teaching regarding the extra merits of the Church Triumphant which could be used for the benefit of the Church Militant and the Church Suffering.
determine just how the “Luther canon” ought to be read and understood (McCormack 2006, p. 74).  

b. NOT INFUSION

Luther’s opponents were convinced of the scholastic teaching of the *donum superadditum*; however, as we’ve seen above, VFC’s 22nd thesis rejects the doctrine outright. Adam was created as a sinless and righteous being which was validated (Gen. 1:31) with God’s declaration (justification) that all that He had made, Adam and Eve included, was “sehr gut.” However, not only the starting point of “infusion” is rejected, but also the mechanism itself is rejected in the 12th thesis. Infusion demands that a believer gradually develop righteousness as a result of the infusion of the ability to do so by God. Infusion taught, in short, that one was enabled by God to develop righteous tendencies, and that one was, therefore, expected to become righteous in nature. Thus the grace of Jesus Christ began where the “naturally” (thanks to infusion) developed righteousness ended. Basically, the grace of Christ kicked in after one had done all that one could do to justify one’s self through one’s own righteousness as made possible by the *donum superadditum*.  

The 12th thesis of VFC makes it clear that one is righteous in the eyes of God, and does possess the righteousness of Christ fully and instantaneously at the moment of conversion. Thus the mechanism of infusion is as rejected in the 12th thesis as its starting point is in the 22nd. VFC’s 12th thesis presents the convert as owning the righteousness of Christ in the same fashion

---

98 I suspect that the new technology of printing played a role in Luther’s self-contradictions. Luther often put his foot in his mouth, so to speak, by overplaying his hand and/or overstating his argument, i.e. his agreement with Hus in the Leipzig debate. With the press’ ability to churn out pages without number at seemingly lightning speed, I propose that Luther did not feel the need to carefully select his words. Luther often added unnecessary side-notes, i.e. insults agains Eck and Cajetan in VFC’s Vorwort to Leo X. Tischreden, a collection of Luther’s sayings, shares significant similarities with Luther’s writing style. Again, Luther’s writings, unlike the writings of modern theologians, seems to have been a publication of his developing theological construct; hence the obvious progression of his thoughts and theology in his writings—and his habit of writing without first seriously considering possible unintended consequences, i.e. the issues that his “priesthood of all believers” teaching would produce within 5 years of its publication.

99 See McCormack 2006, pp. 80-88
that a bride owns the possessions of the groom. This was a literal, and immediate ownership which the convert could and should expect God the Father to validate! Thus the convert could boldly expect God to acknowledge his/her righteousness—that is, the convert should expect God to justify him/her at the moment of uniting with Christ, which is the very first moment of faith in Christ. This is neither the later doctrine of imputation nor the Catholic doctrine of infusion. This is real, present, and full ownership! And this type of ownership leads to another striking aspect of the 12th thesis.

**c - NOT THEOSIS PROPER**

Theosis is the doctrine that God and the soul of the believer unite to such a degree that the believer gradually adopts the will of God. Again, the believer does not become God, nor does the believer become a god, but rather the believer grows, by the power and influence of God, to be a “mature,” righteous-in-personal-conduct Christian. VFC, though sharing the assertion that the believer’s soul unites with Christ in a real and powerful way, never espouses the notion that Christians will ever truly behave righteously in this life. Though good works are endorsed they are not that to which the believer need strive. Good works will develop, VFC argues, but are not the make it or break it necessity that they are in the doctrine of theosis.

J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy edited an outstanding written debate on the modes and means of justification with the greatest number of adherents entitled *Justification: Five Views* (2011). Representing the deification, or theosis, perspective is Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, who responded to the other four proposals and provided an essay in defense of theosis entitled *Deification View* (219-243). Kärkkäinen admits that traditional Lutheran orthodoxy—not necessarily pertinent in 1520 or to VFC’s soteriology—rejects the doctrine of theosis, but, citing the Finnish School’s work in the late 1970’s, proposes that there is not such a sharp contrast as has heretofore been
claimed (219). He goes on to cite what he finds to be the main three reasons why traditional Lutheranism rejects the doctrine: 1) “it smacks of the ‘theology of glory,’” 2) it “seems to enforce the highly problematic view of human-divine synergy,” and 3) “it champions the idea of freedom of the will,” thus Kärkkäinen concludes that the Lutheran tradition finds the doctrine of theosis to be “almost blasphemous” (220).

Kärkkäinen argues that the official Lutheran doctrine of justification differs from Luther’s personal understanding of it stating, “for Luther the main idea of justification is Christ present in faith” which does not, he argues, permit a separation of justification and sanctification as he sees present in orthodox Lutheran doctrine. Kärkkäinen takes up the Finnish School’s argumentation of a “real-ontic” [literal] union with Christ stating that “Christ’s real presence in a believer is the leading motif in Luther’s soteriology” (223). Though the “substances” of Christ and the individual believer are not altered through this real-ontic union, there is, as Athanasius taught, a spiritual change in the believer, “a participation in the very ousia [being, essence] of God” (225). God, Kärkkäinen clarifies, does not cease to be God, nor does the believer cease to be anything other than human, but, rather than God merely having an “effect” on the believer, or the believer experiencing nothing more than something totally subjective, there is a literal, real-ontic presence of Christ within the being of the believer (225).

Kärkkäinen’s challenge to the Lutheran rejection of theosis is of interest and is worthy of consideration; however, his clarification of his position, the necessary outcome of his real-ontic interaction between Christ and the believer, shows that theosis is at odds with thesis 12 of VFC. The 12th thesis clearly addresses the relational aspect of the believer to Christ and not the substantial interaction between the two. VFC’s central premise is that the ‘inner’ man is spiritual, not bound to this earth or its ways, and that the ‘outer’ man is physical and not freed
from the world and its demands. It is the spiritual, dare I say abstract, reality in which the believer is united with Christ. The 12th thesis does not make a real-ontic declaration!

Hans Iwand argues, “the person who allows himself to be changed by the Word is of one will with God . . . the Word and the person of faith have become essentially the same and this conformity is the basis of all understanding and knowledge between God and man. For, like is recognized only by like” (Iwand 1941, p. 26). Here the Finnish School might cry out, ‘See, we told you so!’, but that would be to miss the point. Through the Word of God the listener/reader “sees himself as God sees him” thus as believers “we think of ourselves as God thinks of us. We thus become of one will with God” (28). Striking the heart of VFC’s dual-nature-of-man argument, Iwand writes that “our New-Being, Righteous-Existence, New-Life, our True-Being and Godly-Existence (deiformitas!) is never going to be present in us here on earth. It will not be ours in outward “appearance,” but only in faith, since it is real and present “outside of us,” namely, in Christ” (74).

Thus, the 12th thesis remains somewhat of a mystery. The raw, new, unrefined nature of it stands out as a diamond in the rough. It is the seed from which a number of theories would develop but it refuses to give up all its secrets. The 12th thesis argues for a real, legitimate union with Christ, but not a union in the physical sense. It is an actual union of the individual believer and savior—independent of the community of the saved—in the spiritual realm, the 5th dimension, which has very real and immediate consequences. The believer is instantaneously sanctified despite still being worldly, is immediately justified despite still being sinful, and is fully set free despite now being, as a result of this freedom, servant of all.
Historian Herbert Rosendorfer saw what many a theologian has apparently missed: Luther’s VFC teaches that the church is not the necessary instrument of salvation! Rosendorfer cites what he calls Luther’s two “Ohrfeige[n]” in Rome’s face, first “[die] Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben allein” and second “daß die ‘Freiheit des Christenmenschen’ darin bestehe, seinen eigenen, individuellen Weg zu Gott zu finden, daß es keiner geistlichen Anleitung oder gar Vorschriften bedürfe” (Rosendorfer 2002, p. 269). I argue that Luther overstated his case in the 12th thesis and that Rosendorfer, often guilty of the same, ignores this fact. “The fate of the Christian will also be the fate of the Church for the true Church will always be on earth a remnant, since the word of God is that which goes counter to all the desires of the natural man and those who receive it are bound to be stones rejected by the builders” (Bainton 1963, p. 24; italics mine). By 1525 Luther was extremely frustrated with the actions of the German populace in response to this concept and the “priesthood of all believers” teaching, which he viewed as complete misunderstandings of his intentions.

Luther did not intend to teach that one could be saved independent of the Church. Quite frankly, such a notion isn’t possible, since, upon conversion, one automatically becomes a part of the church. It would be like saying that one can pay one’s bills without permitting mathematics to have a part in the action. Conversion and church membership are not separable and Luther never attempted to separate them.100 Timothy George explains, “Far from being a champion of rugged individualism . . . Luther stressed the communal character of Christianity . . . he said that

100 “Weil der Glaube aber allein durchs Wort Gottes als leiblich hörbares Wort ins Leben gerufen wird, ist er stets sozial verfaßt; sowohl was seine Entstehung betrifft als auch was seine Konsequenzen angeht. Aus dieser Überlegung geht klar hervor, daß Glaubensgerechtigkeit gar nicht in dem Sinne individualistisch verstanden werden kann, wie es der moderne Begriff vom auf sich selbst bezogen, vereinzelten Subjekt nahezulegen scheint” (Korsch 1997, p. 103).
outside the church there was no salvation” (George 1988, pp. 86-87). The church, however, was not represented by the organization spawned by the papacy; rather, it had an “essentially spiritual, noninstitutional character” (87). “Just as we cannot give birth to ourselves, or baptize ourselves, so neither can we serve God alone. Here we touch on Luther’s other great definition of the church: *communio sanctorum*, a community of saints” (96).

In VFC’s *Vorwort* for Pope Leo X, Luther finally and fully rejects the papacy as an institution. Rome has become “Babylon,” and worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, Luther claims. The “Bosheit” of St. Peter’s throne (the symbol of the papacy as an institution) is, exclaims Luther, “hinfort weder zu raten noch zu helfen” (Luther 1962, p. 113). Indeed, the very wrath of God was falling on the papacy and on Rome, and His wrath neither would nor could be put to an end! The age of the papacy was over, Luther declared. VFC most definitely rejects the soteriology of Rome and replaces it with *the soteriology of independent salvation by means of an independent relationship with Christ*.

Communal salvation has been a part of the basic concept of YHWH religion since at least the time of the Babylonian captivity (587-538 BC), with the Jewish writings arguing that the concept dates to Abraham (1812 BC).¹⁰¹ Leviticus chapter 16 institutes, defines and describes the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) as being the one day in the year in which intentional sins can be blotted out. That is, the regular sacrifices which where to take place daily within the temple cult were ceremonial in nature and served to cover over unintentional, unplanned instances of human failure. They were not, however, effective against intentional sin. Only the Day of Atonement’s scapegoat offering removed the guilt of purposed sin from the community at large. The communal concept of salvation in the Old Testament is necessary to understanding much of the goings-on in it, i.e. why God punished the group as a whole for the sins of

---

¹⁰¹ The traditional Jewish dating for Abraham’s birth
individuals (Joshua 7 and the sin of Achan, 1 Chronicles 21 and the sin of David, etc.). Not only was God willing to punish Israel for the sins of its individuals, He was also willing to forgive Israel as a community on the Day of Atonement. Thus a Jew who died one week before the Day of Atonement died with sins still counted to his or her name. Interestingly, there is no evidence that this concerned anybody. The deceased individual was still a part of the community of the saved, Israel, and the community would be washed of all its sins on the Day of Atonement. There is a definite sense in the Old Testament that one is personally answerable for one’s personal sins, i.e. Jonah, Moses, and Aaron; however, there is a clear understanding that so long as one remains a part of the saved community, Israel, one’s sins will be taken care of on the Day of Atonement.

Roman Catholicism had adopted a form of communal salvation which it reiterated in the Council of Trent in response to the Protestant Movement: there is no justification outside of the Roman Catholic Church (Fesko 2008, pp. 382-386)! As Timothy George puts it, “The church had become an end unto itself. The Word had become captive to the whims of mere humans [. . .] Luther insisted that the gospel was constitutive for the church, not the church for the gospel” (George 1988, p. 88). According to Rome the pope could argue, as we saw in chapter 1, that he had authority to command people not only into damnation via excommunication, but also out of Purgatory and into the presence of God. The church had become the vehicle of salvation with Jesus playing a small role. There was no salvation outside of the Roman Church, an obviously

---

102 I would argue that a good understanding of the Bible’s emphasis on communal salvation would be helpful to the New Testament reader as well. Nothing happens in a vacuum. The extremes to which personal salvation has been taken, especially in extreme forms of Calvinism, in which God chose from eternity past all those who would be saved and those who would be damned for that salvation or damnation—utterly independent of any will on the part of the individuals—fails to comprehend the true meaning of otherwise clear statements, cf Romans 9. See chapter 4 of the present work for more insight into Covenantal Theology.

103 It should also be noted that the individual punishments for personal sin took the form of temporal punishments and not in eternal ones. Thus Moses and Aaron died for taking credit for God’s miracle and David’s family turned rebellious. Jonah was swallowed by a fish and later his shade was taken away. However, none of these individuals suffered under threat of eternal punishment. Communal salvation was thus effective even when the individual failed to meet the communal standard.
earthly institution, which, Luther among many others viewed as being antithetical to Christ’s Church. Jesus had given over the keys to Peter, Cajetan argued, and Peter had passed the keys on to the papacy (Bagchi 1991, p. 57). Jesus had, essentially, surrendered authority over salvation to the institution housed in Vatican City. Of the Roman church in Luther’s time Fesko writes, “the sole place of Christ in justification is obscured not only by the believer’s good works and the unbeliever’s good intentions, but also by the cult of Mary and the doctrine of purgatory, and with the doctrine of indulgences” (Fesko 2008, p. 380). This was a perverted form of communal salvation and Luther rejected it in VFC.

The 12th thesis argues, uniquely, that the individual convert is joined with Christ like a bride to a groom during the wedding ceremony at the moment of conversion. Bride of Christ imagery is nothing new to Christian theology and is prolific in the New Testament. Theologians often teach that the Bride of Christ is the Church. This is debatable. Jesus is often referred to as a groom,104 but when the bride finally appears she is the “new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven”105 and not the church at all. That Luther was aware of the common teaching that the church is the Bride of Christ is clear from his remarks, i.e. that the church is hidden because God doesn’t want the world watching when He copulates with His wife, which make the imagery of the 12th thesis all the more incendiary (George 1988, p. 89).

In co-opting the Bride of Christ imagery for individual conversion, justification, and sanctification Luther strikes at the very heart of Roman theology. The Roman Church is not the necessary instrument of soteriology. Christ operates independent of the papacy, independent of Rome, independent of the Catholic hierarchy. The sinner, then, has no need for the services of the clerics. This is not merely the death knell for the papacy, this is the death knell for

---

104 Matthew 9:15, John 3:29, etc.
105 Revelation 21:2-10
communal salvation as it was then understood and is *the birth of personal salvation by means of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ*! Interestingly, early in 1521, Albrecht Dürer, among numerous others, became convinced that the book of Revelation was, as a result of Luther’s works, about to break out in full fury. “The fact that Luther, God’s prophet, once more had made the unadulterated Gospel available to Man, could only mean that the Second Coming of Christ, and the end of the world, as indicated in the Book of Revelation, was near . . . (Cunningham & Grell 2000, p. 21).

II - LUTHER’S SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR THE ARGUMENT

Fesko, typically, argues that the church is the Bride of Christ in examining Ephesians 5’s comparison of the relationship of Christ to the Church and that of a husband to his wife writing, “Paul demonstrates the typological connection between Adam and Eve, the first husband and wife, and the last Adam and his bride, the church” (Fesko 2008, p. 270). This passage is the passage from which Luther derived his union-with-Christ theory of thesis 12. It is of significant enough importance to the argument to read the passage in full, as Luther translated it:

22Die Weiber seien untertan ihren Männern als dem HERRN. 23Denn der Mann ist des Weibes Haupt, gleichwie auch Christus das Haupt ist der Gemeinde, und er ist seines Leibes Heiland. 24Aber wie nun die Gemeinde ist Christo untertan, also auch die Weiber ihren Männern in allen Dingen. 25Ihr Männer, liebet eure Weiber, gleichwie Christus auch geliebt hat die Gemeinde und hat sich selbst für sie gegeben, 26auf daß er sie heiligte, und hat sie gereinigt durch das Wasserbad im Wort, 27auf daß er sie sich selbst darstellte als eine Gemeinde, die herrlich sei, die nicht habe einen Flecken oder Runzel oder des etwas, sondern daß sie heilig sei und unsträflich. 28Also sollen auch die Männer ihre Weiber lieben wie ihre
eigenen Leiber. Wer sein Weib liebt, der liebt sich selbst. 29 Denn niemand hat jemals sein eigen Fleisch gehasst; sondern er nährt es und pflegt sein, gleichwie auch der Herr die Gemeinde. 30 Denn wir sind die Glieder seines Leibes, von seinem Fleisch und von seinem Gebein. 31 Um deswillen wird ein Mensch verlassen Vater und Mutter und seinem Weibe anhangen, und werden die zwei ein Fleisch sein. 32 Das Geheimnis ist groß; ich sage aber von Christo und der Gemeinde. 33 Doch auch ihr, ja ein jeglicher habe lieb sein Weib als sich selbst; das Weib aber fürchte den Mann. (italics mine)

Thus we see that the argument being presented by St. Paul is not that the church is the Bride of Christ, as is given away in verses 32-33, but rather that the church is the body of Christ on earth! Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues, “Der Leib Christi ist seine Gemeinde. Jesus Christus ist Er selbst und seine Gemeinde zugleich (1. Kor. 12,12). Jesus Christus lebt seit Pfingsten auf Erden in der Gestalt seines Leibes, der Gemeinde. Hier ist sein Leib, der gekreuzigte und auferstandene, hier ist die angenommene Menschheit” (Bonhoeffer 1937, pp. 231-232). Rather than apply this passage to the community of the saved, Luther argues:

Nicht allein gibt der Glaube soviel, daß die Seele, dem göttlichen Wort gleich, wird aller Gnaden voll, frei und selig, sondern verinigt auch die Seele mit Christo wie eine Braut mit ihrem Bräutigam. Aus welcher Ehe folget, wie Sankt Paulus sagt, daß Christus und die Seele ein Leib werden; ebenso werden auch beider Güter, Geschick und Mißgeschick und alle Dinge gemainsam, so daß, was Christus hat, das ist der gläubigem Seele Eigentum, was die Seele hat, wird Eigentum Christi. (Luther 1962, p. 132; italics mine)
Thesis 12 is clearly using Bride of Christ imagery to explain individual conversion. Luther goes on that faith is the wedding ring which Jesus gives the individual, and that through this faith Jesus takes on the sins of the convert (132). The power of Christ’s righteousness is so great, Luther exclaims, that “die Sünden in ihm verschlungen und ersäuft werden” (132). Here we clearly see the foundation for the future argumentation for imputation; however, in VFC the imagery remains that of real righteousness—however, of a spiritual nature. Perfection and Whoredom marry and the works of Whoredom are destroyed by the works of Perfection. Here is true, literal co-ownership of the righteousness of Christ, but, unlike the argument of the Finnish School, there is no literal, physical union of Christ and the convert. It should be remembered that the transition from “inner” to “outer” man takes place in the 18th thesis, and, therefore, Luther is still definitively speaking of the “inner man.”

Part of what makes VFC so radical is that it is a shift from ontological to relational exegesis of Paul’s soteriology. “Mit dieser—allerdings nicht unproblematisch—Unterscheidung von ‘innerem’ und ‘äußerem’ Menschen will Luther aber weniger eine ‘Natur’ des Menschen charakterisieren als vielmehr seine Verhältnisse, Beziehungen, Rollen in unterschiedlichen Systemen, in seinem Dasein vor Gott und in seinem Auftrag in der Welt” (Dieterich 2008, pp. 64-65). The relationship with Christ is spiritual, as made clear by the argumentation regarding the inner, or spiritual man, who is neither positively nor negatively effected by physical interaction.106

McCormack refers to the justification in VFC as a “relational rather than substantial” change for the believer (McCormack 2006, p. 78). VFC’s theology of justification ought to be understood in terms of Paul’s and not in Augustine’s Neoplatonic anthropology, McGrath argues. Paul, according to Luther, separated the physical and the spiritual man, thus permitting

106 cf VFC’s 3-5 theses.
Luther’s conclusion that man is simultaneously a sinner and a saint (McGrath 1986, p. 226). Augustine did not permit such a separation and, therefore, demanded a total overhaul of the individual both spiritually and physically.

**III - WORLDLY INFLUENCE?**

Luther’s world was a changing world. The Renaissance was a time of significant change. Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494) produced a piece which expressed well the attitude of the times, *The Dignity of Man*, “in which he says that man is the modelor [sic] and sculptor of his own destiny” writes Bainton; this piece argues for “a new picture of man as the master of his fate” (Bainton 1962, p. 77). Bainton, however, argues that this type of thinking was nothing new, but rather that it was “essentially a version of Neoplatonic mysticism” of the kind found in St. Bonaventura’s (d. 1274) *Itinerary of the Soul to God* (78). The only difference between the two is that Pico della Mirandola drew not only from Christian mystics but also from ancient mystery religions (78). Pico della Mirandola’s piece argued that man was able to, in rather Pelagian fashion, “descend or ascend at will”—a thought not “characteristic of his age” (78).

One need not rely on writings alone to see a change in the way man was being viewed. The Europe of Luther’s day was “growing both in population and in the pursuits that enhance the quality of life—in exploration and trade, bureaucracy and technology, education and the arts” (Ozment 1980, pp. 190-191). Historians are realizing the importance of 16th-century European visual expression, writes Larry Silver, beyond “Italian ideal figures [and] Flemish verisimilitude” (Whitford 2008, p. 415). “Greater attention gets paid now to pictorial novelties other than paintings, especially printed books and independent prints” (415). The effect that Girolamo Savonarola (d. 1498) had on Sandro Botticelli’s (d. 1510) work is of great interest. Savonarola’s
preaching against the Renaissance’s incorporation of pagan themes, i.e. Michelangelo’s (d. 1564) incorporation of sibyls in the Sistine Chapel, Raphael Sanzio’s *Scuola di Atene*, c. 1510-1511, in the Apostolic Palace, and Botticelli’s *Nacita di Venere*, c. 1486, resulted in Botticelli’s refusal to continue using themes of Greek mythology in his work.\(^{107}\) Botticelli’s work prior to Savonarola’s explosion of popularity was rich, colorful, lively and intense, employing numerous Greek myths in his work—work which brought him the patronage of the de Medici family; however, once influenced by Savonarola, Botticelli’s work took a dramatic turn. He submitted a number of his own works to the fire—much of his work was spared such a fate as it was owned by his patrons—and began to exclusively use Christian imagery in his work—the result being a loss of the vibrance for which his work was known. Not only did Botticelli’s character choices change, the quality of his work in general changed—rich colors were replaced with earth tones, intensity in the composition was replaced with an expectation of intense devotion. The life went out of his work. Leo X’s family ruled Florenz at the time that Savonarola showed up (Jung 2008, pp. 85-86). Savonarola took over the city forcing Leo X, then a young and tonsured boy, to flee the city in disguise (86). The decadence against which Savonarola preached was the very decadence of Leo X’s family, the de Medici family.

\(^{107}\) I am indebted to Dr. Julie Schlarman of the University of South Dakota for these thoughts on Botticelli’s work which she shared with me in private conversation some years back.
B. THE RETURN TO EDEN

I - INTRODUCTION

It would be a worthwhile investigation to look into Luther’s metaphysical theories and influences at the time of VFC’s writing. The possibility that Luther’s human ontology transcends space and time into the 5th dimension—thus enabling the apparent dichotomy between the state of the convert before God and the physical state before the material world—seems quite possible, if not probable. “Faith is inward but it is directed to that which is outward. . . The inward and the outward are conjoined in the assurance of the Christian” (Bainton 1963, p. 25). VFC’s 10th thesis argues that the soul of the convert is united with Christ like steel, having become red hot in the furnace, is united with the fire which heats it. It is quite clear that the steel which has been altered represents the soul of the convert, whereas the fire, unaltered despite continued contact with the steel, and which is the initiator of the changes taking place stands for Christ. Examining Luther’s metaphysical theories in conjunction with his human ontology may provide some insight into the meaning of the union with Christ presented in 1520.

Miroslav Volf’s profound exploration of forgiveness and identity, Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation (1996), discusses Daniel Boyarin’s human ontological postulations resulting from pauline equality theology. Paul, Boyarin argues, falls back on platonic ontology, “dualism of the flesh and the spirit [sic], such that while the body is particular, marked through practice as Jew or Greek, and through anatomy as male or female, the spirit is universal [. . .] In the process of baptism in the spirit the marks of ethnos, gender and class are all erased in the ascension to the univocity and universality of human essence which is beyond and outside the body” (Volf 1996, 46).108 Unfortunately, the

---

limitations of this paper prohibit such an examination at this time. We must, therefore, content ourselves with an examination of the “real” changes Luther claims the convert experiences: 1) true, spiritual righteousness before God, 2) the reception of, what would later be called, a “calling,” 3) and the priesthood of all believers. These three changes in the convert constituted the new, personal relationship between God and the believer.

II - RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH FAITH

“Glaubensgerechtigkeit vermittelt sich durch das Wort Gottes” writes Dietrich Korsch (Korsch 1997, 103). Luther writes in VFC’s 10th thesis, “Wie das Wort ist, so wird auch die Seele durch ihn; gleichwie das Eisen wird glutrot wie das Feuer aus der Vereinigung mit dem Feuer” (Luther 1962, p. 131). Thus faith alone unites the believer with Christ; in Christ no sin has the power to stand between the believer and the Almighty God. Just as superheated steel remains steel, so the convert remains human; just as the steel has been altered due to contact with fire, so the soul has been altered through contact with Christ. The convert remains sinner but has now also become saint.

Good works themselves are not pertinent to salvation, and are not a part of righteousness in Luther’s paradigm. This is the essential break which Luther makes. It is altogether clear that works, in Luther’s soteriology, cannot affect salvation. This sentiment is echoed in the church buildings of hundreds of denominations across the entire globe today. There is, however, quite a bit more to VFC’s conclusion than merely that—if one can say “merely” in conjunction with such a radical teaching. No, Luther’s conclusion isn’t simply that we can’t earn our salvation by means of good works; rather, he concludes that good works are not a part of what “righteousness” is! A righteous person will inevitably produce good works, Luther argues, but a

---

109 Chapter 4, part A, section iii Scholasticism and Modern Exegesis examines the question of the ontology of God and of Jesus. The argument may prove useful in determining Paul’s, if not Luther’s, ontology of man.
Christian is not made righteous by good works, and therefore is not dependent upon good works to maintain her/his righteousness. “Righteousness” is faith in Christ, not the doing of any work (Luther 1962, pp. 133-34).

III - GOOD WORKS REMAIN

Luther was often accused of being antinomian (a term he himself coined) by his naysayers. Luther defined antinomianism as “anti-law” and that is just what Luther was accused of being. What his accusers meant, however, was not so much anti-law-of-Moses as anti-good-works. Luther was not against good works; Luther’s argument had to do with the attitude, the modus operandi of the doer of good works. As we saw above, Luther was convinced that good works would be performed by converts as a now-natural outflowing of God’s work within the individual. Luther initially viewed good works as a general category of work done by Christians for the benefit of others and not done to affect any grace from God. Later Luther would develop greater individuality in the doing of good works and reenforce the notion of a personal relationship with the Savior as what he called “a calling.”

Luther, apparently not quite ready to break with feudalism, replaced the hardline feudalistic notion that one was born into a social caste, if you will, and was thus expected by God to submit to that role, whether it be lowest of all or emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, with the ascending-the-social-latter enabling notion that one was “called” to whatever God felt compelled to call one to. This permitted the type of social status improvement that Luther and his father had enjoyed, but still kept people essentially in their “place.” It certainly was not so liberating as

---

110 Bainton writes, “Luther was himself so much a gothic figure that his faith may be called the last great flowering of the religion of the Middle Ages” (Bainton 1950, p. 6).

111 It seems that Luther’s father’s social-climbing, which enabled Luther to get the education he had needed to become Germany’s voice for religious change, colored Luther’s view and helped prevent him from taking a hardline feudalist stance on social class. Along with the society altering notions of the Renaissance and Humanism, Luther’s father had instilled in him the necessity for changing one’s stars and improving one’s social status. Luther’s father was an ambitious man who had improved his social standing and who expected young Martin to become a respected lawyer, thus further improving the family’s status (Marty 2004, pp. 1-5).
the modern idea of “calling,” often utterly disassociated from the Christian god altogether, which almost gives the individual the right to pursue any course in life, but certainly allows for a change in social status if called for by God. This notion further entrenched Protestantism in a personal-salvation model. Now God was “calling” each individual instead of “calling” social classes!

Good works eventually became associated not only with the general expectation of Christians, but also with the individual works of “calling” of the “called” individual. Again, these good works could not be said to evoke grace, but they were certainly the works of an individual and not of a corporate body. VFC, however, does not make it this far. In 1520 Luther had only gone so far as to declare that any work done with the intent of affecting grace was a damnable sin (Luther 1962, p. 133), and that good works were the works which helped others and did not serve to help oneself, i.e. affect God’s grace (145-46).

Thus good works remain a part of Luther’s expectation of the Christian life, but cease to be a part of the salvific-mechanism. Luther was not antinomian, but anti-good-works-to-earn-God’s-favor-and-or-to-merit-grace. Faith in Christ is righteousness, Luther argues, therefore, “werfen wir die guten Werke nicht um ihrer selbst willen, sondern um des bösen Zusatzes und falscher verkehrter Meinung willen, welche macht, daß sie nur gut scheinen und sind doch nicht gut, betrügen sich und jedermann damit, gleichwie die reißenden Wölfe in Schafskleidern” (144). In reality, Luther, using this definition of “good works,” could have accused his naysayers of the same. The works for which the Catholic opponents argued were not really good works at all—they merely appeared to be. Luther was not calling for an end to good works, but for the Church to start actually committing them!
[Luther’s] own experiences had turned him against the futility of monkish asceticism as well as the indecency of its hypocrisy. Thus he was ready enough to give voice to the prevalent anticlericalism of the day. Throughout, however, there was more than politics, prejudice or envy in the attack on the traditional Church which Luther developed under pressure of controversy, until he left little of it standing. If all men were “priests,” able to seek salvation without intercession, the priesthood were not only unnecessary but a hindrance, blurring or destroying the truth behind a magic mumbo-jumbo of ritual in order to preserve a privileged position. Luther therefore denounced the whole concept of a special priesthood, blamed it for keeping God’s message from the Christian people, and assigned to the clergy only the function of informing man of his way to God by preaching the Word. (Elton 1963, p. 18)

VFC argues that the duty of the clergy is to preach and to serve the priesthood, or the Christians (Luther 1962, pp. 136-37). Since every believer is a priest, it is not appropriate to call the preacher the priest; instead he should be called “Diener, Knecht, Schaffner” as per “die Heilige Schrift” (136). McGrath writes, “There is no fundamental distinction between clergy and laity” (McGrath 2007, p. 57; italics original). The objective of the preacher, now that he has been relieved of his false duties should be mainly to preach. “Aber [Jesus] soll und muß so gepredigt sein, daß mir und dir der Glaube draus erwachse und erhalten werde” (Luther 1962, p. 137). Yes, now the priest must assume a new role as preacher. This new role is more demanding than the previous. In his former role the priest merely tapped into the power of
Catholic tradition and ritual enabling quick and careless services (Jung 2008, p. 25), but now, the priest-turned-preacher was required to develop a sort of curriculum through which his congregants would hear that which could enable true faith. They pre-memorized liturgy was to go the way of the dodo and was to be replaced with actively studied out lectures, or sermons.

“Each congregation should be able to elect its own preachers and pastors and to de-select them if necessary. Once more, the fundamental theme is democratization—the elimination of any notion of a ‘spiritual elite’” (McGrath 2007, p. 57).

V - EDEN AT LAST!

VFC’s 22nd thesis argues that Christianity lived out in true faith is the return to Eden. Milton’s famous epic poem *Paradise Regained* focused on Christ’s entering Eden as the Second Adam after defeating Satan in spiritual combat while fasting in the desert:

580 So Satan fell; and straight a fiery globe

Of Angels on full sail of wing flew nigh,

Who on their plumy vans received him soft

From his uneasy station, and upbore,

As on a floating couch, through the blithe air;

Then, in a flowery valley, set him down

On a green bank, and set before him spread

A table of celestial food, divine

Ambrosial fruits fetched from the Tree of Life,

And from the Fount of Life ambrosial drink,

590 That soon refreshed him wearied, and repaired

What hunger, if aught hunger, had impaired,
Or thirst; and, as he fed, Angelic quires
Sung heavenly anthems of his victory
Over temptation and the Tempter proud . . . (Milton 1671, pp. 69-70)

For Luther, however, the return to Eden was not merely for Christ to experience this side of death, it was for each and every believer to make. No, one would not find ones self winged to worlds unknown on the pinions of angelic choirs, but one would be restored to the pre-fall state of righteous and justified Adam and Eve . . . the believer would, at last, find himself/herself at home before God, in his/her rightful place “fromm und wohl geschaffen ohne Sünde” (Luther 1962, pg. 140-41).

Luther’s reference to “Paradiese” was poetic, and not to be taken as a literal return to the physical, geographical cradle of life; however, this does not diminish the 22nd thesis’ intent. The 22nd thesis’ Eden is clearly understood as state of being as opposed to a geographic location. This is significant. The work of Christ for which Luther argued was a work which comes to the believer. No pilgrimage need be made; no relocation is necessary. The declaration that true faith is the modern equivalent of living in Eden devalues making a pilgrimage altogether. The ground upon which the believer stands becomes holy ground, and Christ becomes truly king of the world.

Rome, already referred to as Babylon, had become an unnecessary encumbrance in a world where the only truly important location is located in the non-geographical hearts and minds the followers of Christ. The rituals and rites of the Roman Catholic Church were, for Luther, mere inventions of man—things which could not avail him on judgment day.112 The

112 In An den Adel deutscher Nation, published earlier in 1520, Luther argued that the Roman Catholic Church had built three false theoretical walls around itself to defend against overthrow and what it called heresy. These walls were: 1) the claim that worldly government had no authority over the Church, 2) the claim that only the Pope could interpret the Bible, and 3) that only the Pope had the authority to call a council to order (Luther 1962, p 13). Speaking of these Luther writes, “Man hat`s erfunden,
distant and angry God before which Luther previously trembled had given way to the Christ who reaches out to the least and the lost with grace in mercy. Later in life when speaking of his pre-1520 understanding of God Luther said “that he feared hell somewhat; death, more; failure to please God the judge who made drastic demands, most; ‘I trembled’” (Marty 2004, p. 16).

Christ had come to the earth not to show the way, but rather to become the way to God. Man’s search for righteousness was not only over, but had not been necessary for some 1500 years. Salvation was not to be found in some primordial location, nor in the Holy Land, nor in the City of God. Salvation was brought to man by the grace of God through Christ; and man was restored to his original place, standing before God in innocence, love, worship . . . personal relationship.
CHAPTER 4

MARTIN LUTHER IN CURRENT THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

A. LUTHER IN MODERN THEOLOGY

I - DOUBLE PREDESTINATION

“. . . Martin Luther, the inaugurator of the [Reformation], was a figure like St. Augustine into whom all things flow and from whom all things go. One might use the figure of a bundle of varicolored threads drawn through a ring and twisted in passing so that every thread emerges but the pattern is changed. That is why Augustine can be regarded both as the epitome of classical and Christian antiquity and as the precursor of the Middle Ages. Luther similarly may be considered a medieval figure ushering in the modern age” (Bainton 1952, pp. 22-23).

As we have seen, Luther departed from scholastic theology, choosing instead to return to the primary text and attempt exegesis. Luther did not, however, abandon philosophy altogether. “In some respects he remained a disciple of the scholastic, William of Occam”\textsuperscript{113} (Bainton 1952, p. 23). Luther only temporarily escaped the writings of St. Augustine. After rejecting Augustine’s view of progression toward perfection, Luther would later find himself leading the argument to return to late-Augustinian “double predestination” as a means of defending his \textit{sola fide} theology. \textit{Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen} made it clear that a real, and \textit{spiritual} change resulted upon conversion which would eventually produce “good works,” but VFC did not clearly teach how. Luther would eventually settle upon the doctrine of “imputation” to explain how that change happened.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[113]{There was an “emergence within the church of a tendency to meet opponents with the dogmatic assertions of revelation and faith rather than with reasoned argument. Such a defensive posture was promoted especially, in Gilson’s [author of \textit{The Reformation in Germany} (1939)] view, by the Fransicans Duns Scotus and William of Ockham” (Ozment 1975, p. 3). This seems a tenuous theological position for the author the the methodological principle known as “Occam’s razor”; nevertheless, cognitive dissonance is typical in religion. Note that Ockham, Occam, and Hockham are all accepted spellings of the English friar’s (d. circa 1348) name.}
\end{footnotes}
Imputation, when thought out to its logical end, must require that the individual is literally incapable of doing any “good work.” That does not mean that a person cannot do anything that is good by the “world’s” standards. Of course even the most heinous people in history did some nice things. A serial killer might help an elderly person cross the street. A thief might stop to help someone who has just had a car accident. But these acts, though being good, are not good works. VFC defines “good works” as the works which result from spiritual union with Christ, not the acts generated out of the will of the individual. Thus it is impossible for someone who is not saved to do any “good work.”

On the surface such a conclusion may indeed seem harmless. Not so! Is it not a “good work” to turn to Christ? Is it not a “good work” to seek to turn one’s life over to God? Yes it is, Luther concluded. And if one cannot do a “good work” without first being saved, then one cannot seek salvation! However, many are indeed saved. How then can someone be saved if it is impossible to seek salvation? The rather dangerous answer—and the inevitable conclusion—is that God chose, utterly independent of any human will, who would be saved before He embarked upon creation. And if God chose who would be saved . . . then He must also have chosen who would be damned! Interestingly, in the Americas Jean Calvin (d. 1564) is known for double predestination and not Luther. Double predestination is known in the U.S. and Canada as “extreme Calvinism.”

Were it not for one significant blip in pre-Reformation history, there would have been no notable extreme Calvinism for the first fifteen hundred years of the church! This exception is found in the later writings of Augustine (354–430). As a result of his controversy with the Pelagians (who emphasized free will at the expense of grace), Augustine overreacted with an emphasis on grace at the
expense of free will. Likewise, in response to the Donatists, a schismatic group that had broken away from the Catholic Church, he overreacted by affirming that heretics could be coerced to believe against their free choice to confess the Catholic faith. The logic seemed irresistible: If the Church can coerce heretics to believe against their will, then why can’t God force sinners to believe against their will. (Geisler 1999, p. 207; italics original)

St. Augustine’s initial response against the Pelagians would, after A.D. 417, become even more extreme: His response became double predestination (207). Whereas VFC argues that clerics must now preach the Word in such a manner as to be convincing, Luther eventually argued that God, independent of the volition of the individual, would elect certain predestined persons to salvation. “Luther did not shrink from a doctrine of absolute, double predestination, although he admitted that ‘this is very strong wine, and solid food for the strong.’ He even restricted the scope of the atonement to the elect: ‘Christ did not die for all absolutely’ [. . .] ‘Let God be good,’ cried Erasmus the moralist. ‘Let God be God,’ replied Luther the theologian” (George 1988, p. 77; italics mine). Had Luther turned God into a monster? Some of Luther’s adherents were terrified.

Timothy George records a letter Luther wrote to Barbara Lisskirchen, an adherent who was quite concerned that she might not be one of the elect:

When such thoughts assail you, you should learn to ask yourself, ‘If you please, in which Commandment is it written that I should think about and deal with this

---

114 McGrath disagrees somewhat with Geisler’s conclusion. Not denying that Augustine addressed double predestination, McGrath writes, “Luther explicitly teaches a doctrine of double predestination, whereas Augustine was reluctant to acknowledge such a doctrine, no matter how logically appropriate it might appear” (McGrath 1986, p. 230). Either way, Augustine’s work lays the foundation for Luther’s double predestination theology.

115 „Aber [Jesus] soll und muß so gepredigt sein, daß mir und dir der Glaube draus erwachse und erhalten werde [. . .] Denn wo ein Herz so Christum höret, das muß fröhlich werden von ganzem Grund, Trost empfangen und Süßigkeit darin empfinden, Christus wiederum liebzuhaben” (Luther 1962, p. 137).
matter?’ When it appears that there is no such Commandment, learn to say ‘Be
gone, wretched devil! You are trying to make me worry about myself. But God
declares everywhere that I should let him care for me [. . .] Contemplate Christ
given for us. Then, God willing, you will feel better. (George 1988, pp. 78-79)

Rather patronizing words from the little German monk who worried his confessor, Johann von
Staupitz (d. 1524), with every last detail of possible shortcoming. “[Luther’s] weary mentor
berated Luther for making do at confession with what he called flummery and pseudo faults, as if
calling every fart a sin. Luther in turn averred that he was confessing not the usual monkish
transgressions about sexual temptations, but what he called knots, spiritually serious problems”
(Marty 2004, p. 15; italics mine).

Barbara Lisskirchen’s concern is not unique. Norman L. Geisler, Karl Barth, and R.C.
Sproul—all three popular theologians appealing to vastly different sectors of Christendom—have
dedicated hundreds of pages each to the topic for 20th and, now, 21st century readers. While
some argue the “beauty and simplicity” of the theology—most commonly addressed in Calvinist
circles under the acronym TULIP116—many today still feel the negative effects which such a
theology must produce. The Puritans taught that physical blessings were evidence of being one
of the “elect.” This type of thinking is prevalent in the U.S. and Canadian low church today.
Those who are financially solvent, in good health, and who are respected in the community must
be part of the elect, whereas those who suffer in these categories must be, at least to some extent,
in God’s disfavor.

---

116 T=Total Depravity: Man cannot do true good nor can man even seek God. U=Unconditional Election: God elects individuals
for salvation without regard to any effort or will on their part. L=Limited Atonement: Jesus did not die for the whole world, but
rather only for those who had been pre-selected for salvation. I=Irresistible Grace: When God elects someone to salvation, he/she
cannot resist and will be saved. P=Perseverence of the Saints: All “elect” persons will endure from the time of conversion until
their death—they cannot turn away from God. Obviously this acronym functions in English. Regardless, the “Five Points of
Calvinism” are taught worldwide today.
II - THE QUESTION OF “GOOD WORKS”: DO WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO DO ANYTHING?

“Be a sinner and sin mightily”—Letter from Luther to Melancthon (Plass 1950, p. 1310).

If people know anything that Luther said it is his call to sin and to do so boldly. Naturally, there is a context into which this excerpt must be returned. Writing to Melancthon, Luther states:

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true, not a pretended grace; if grace is true, then you must bear a true, not a pretended, sin. God does not save pretended sinners. Be a sinner and sin mightily (pecca fortiter); but trust more mightily and rejoice in Christ, who is the Victor over sin, death, and the world. We are bound to sin as long as we are here; this life is not the dwelling place of righteousness. But we look, says Peter, for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (Plass 1950, p. 1310)

Luther’s argument was, again, never that Christians should adopt an antinomian (lawless) attitude in life. VFC, rather than dismissing them, argues strongly for “good works.” The argument was not to reject “good works,” but rather to redefine them. Works done to achieve salvation are actually wolves dressed like sheep (Luther 1962, p. 144). They will destroy the one who does them. Far from endorsing sin and lawlessness, Luther writes, “We poor human beings are blinded and corrupted through sin to such a degree that we are unable sufficiently to comprehend our own trouble and defect; otherwise we would guard and protect ourselves far more carefully against sins (Plass 1950, p. 1294; italics mine).

The question of whether a Christian is bound to perform good works and the desire to redefine good works became points of major contention with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the
Nazi Party in Germany. Entangled in this firestorm one finds a number of unsung German heroes. During the Nazi era in Germany massive divisions within the German church exploded onto the scene. In the climate, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, probably the best known German anti-Nazi theologian entered his prime. The centuries-old wounds between Protestant and Catholic became nothing in the face of Nazi ideology mixed with Christianity. Leni Riefenstahl’s piece *Triumph des Willens* has numerous scenes which are quite telling: the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler, descends upon Nuremberg from the heavens, those German soldiers who died in the first World War are, in spirit, among those present at 1934 *Partietag*, and, rather implicitly shown, an image of the double towers of St. Sebald’s in Nuremberg freezes, and slowly dissolves into a scene of Hitler Youth encamped in the outskirts of the city. What room was there for a Jewish Jesus in an Aryan nation? The phrase “tausendjährige Reich,” also expressed in Riefenstahl’s movie, has itself Christian origins (Kinane and Ryan 2009, 181-185).

While usually translated quite literally as "thousand-year Reich" it really has its origins in Luther's German translation of the Hebrew "millennial kingdom." The Nazi use of the term comes initially from Catholic millennialism and especially the influence of the medieval millenarian Joachim of Fiore. Derek Hastings’ recent *Catholicism and the Roots of Nazism* (Oxford, 2010) points out


118 Here is a clear reference to the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ as King of the whole Earth! Revelation 20:1 “Und ich sah einen Engel vom Himmel fahren, der hatte den Schlüssel zum Abgrund und eine große Kette in seiner Hand. 2Und er griff den Drachen, die alte Schlange, welche ist der Teufel und Satan, und band ihn tausend Jahre und warf ihn in den Abgrund und verschloß ihn und versiegelte obendarauf, daß er nicht mehr verführen sollte die Heiden, bis daß vollendet würden tausend Jahre; und dann muß er los werden eine kleine Zeit. 4Und ich sah Stühle, und sie setzten sich darauf, und ihnen ward gegeben das Gericht; und die Seelen derer, die enthauptet sind um des Zeugnisses Jesu und um des Wortes Gottes willen, und die nicht angebetet hatten das Tier noch sein Bild und nicht genommen hatten sein Malzeichen an ihre Stirn und auf ihre Hand, diese lebten und regierten mit Christo tausend Jahre.” Note: Most English version require verses 1-6 to cover the material here covered in verses 1-4.
that early on Catholicism in Bavaria (Munich) played a significant role in the
formation of Nazi ideology and identity. (Redles)¹¹⁹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, much disturbed by the effect of Nazi ideology on the German church
responded powerfully with what would become his magnum opus, namely Nachfolge (1937).

“Unser Kampf heute geht um die teure Gnade” (Bonhoeffer 1937, p. 29; italics mine).

*Kampf* is a key word in Bonhoeffer’s work: *Kampf* between Christ and Antichrist (262), the false
heroic *Kampf* (203), the church’s *Kampf* (7, 29, 145, 278-9, 283-4). *Unser Kampf* . . . a not so
veiled response to *Mein Kampf*. Bonhoeffer was fond of turning Nazi catch-words on their
heads: *Führer* vs. *Verführer*,¹²⁰ *Lebensraum* for Christians and Christianity,¹²¹ and, of course the
word *Kamp*, which in 1937 Germany could not escape overtone’s of Hitler and the NSDAP.

Giving what he viewed as complacent-at-best Christians both barrels, Bonhoeffer’s *Vorwort*
opens:

> Es stellt sich in Zeiten der kirchlichen Erneuerung von selbst ein, daß uns die
> Heilige Schrift reicher wird. Hinter den notwendigen Tages- und Kampfparolen
der kirchlichen Auseinandersetzung regt sich ein stärkeres Suchen und Fragen
nach dem, um den es allein geht, nach Jesus selbst. Was hat Jesus uns sagen
wollen? Was will er heute von uns? Wie hiflt er uns dazu, heute *treue Christen*
zu sein? Nicht was dieser oder jener Mann der Kirche will, ist uns zuletzt wichtig,
sondern was Jesus will, wollen wir wissen. Sein eigenes Wort wollen wir hören,
wenn wir zur Predigt gehen. Daran liegt uns nicht nur um unsertwillen, sondern

¹¹⁹ For this information I am indebted to Dr. David Redles, professor of history at Cuyahoga Community College, who kindly
shared some of his expertise on the topic of Christian overtones in Nazi ideology with me in personal correspondence.
¹²¹ “Die Antwort des Neuen Testaments geht unzweideutig dahin, daß die Gemeinde nicht nur für ihren Gottesdienst und ihre
Ordnung, sondern auch für das tägliche Leben ihrer Glieder Raum auf Erden beansprucht. Es wird daher jetzt zu sprechen sein
von dem *Lebensraum* der sichtbaren Gemeinde” (Bonhoeffer 1937, p. 248; italics original).
Before the reader even gets to chapter 1, Bonhoeffer has made clear that there is a distinction between real Christians and that which was being passed off as Christianity at the time.

Wenn die Heilige Schrift von der Nachfolge Jesu spricht, so verkündigt sie damit die Befreiung des Menschen von allen Menschensatzungen, von allem, was drückt, was belastet, was Sorge und Gewissensqual macht. In der Nachfolge kommen die Menschen aus dem harten Joch ihrer eigenen Gesetze unter das sanfte Joch Jesu Christi [. . .] Wer ungeteilt dem Gebote Jesu folgt, wer das Joch Jesu ohne Widerstreben auf sich ruhen läßt, dem wird die Last leicht, die er zu tragen hat, der empfängt in dem sanftem Druck dieses Joches die Kraft, den rechten Weg ohne Ermatten zu gehen. Das Gebot Jesu is hart, unmenschlich hart, für den, der sich dagegen wehrt. Jesu Gebot ist sanft und nicht schwer für den, der sich willig darein ergibt. (23; italics mine)

Nachfolge is a call to action. Neither a call to military revolt, nor a call to violence, it is a call to lived-out, daily-expressed Christian living: forgiveness, inclusion, aiding the poor and the helpless, accepting the rejected—being Christ to a sick and dying world (227ff). Immediately prior to Nachfolge’s publication, Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde Seminary, the educational center

---

122 I do not wish to make it seem as though Bonhoeffer stood alone as “the theological hero” of the Third Reich. Bonhoeffer had supporters too numerous to address here and was only one of a number of German theologians who risked everything for the faith. Hans J. Iwand, Leiter of the Confessing Church’s Predigerseminars was subject to a Reichsredeverbot in 1936. Perhaps his best known treatise The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther (1941) argues strongly against the nazified Evangelische Kirche stating, “Luther is not the founder of a Christian movement or party, but the reformer of the church. His doctrines are not a denominational specialty, but are the common property of the church. Things have even gone so far that, in his essential teachings, Luther now stands just as opposed to today’s modern Protestantism as he stood against the scholastic-Catholic system centuries earlier. Whoever thinks that he can easily challenge Luther’s confession from the standpoint of heredity tends to overlook the fact that even we, in a church that descends from him, are called through this inheritance to change and to repentance” (Iwand 1941, p. 14).
of the Confessing Church (the splinter-group and head of the Protestant response to the nazification of the German Evangelische Kirche), was shut down by the state (Moses 2009, p. 134). *Nachfolge* is “the distillation of [Bonhoeffer’s] lectures at Finkenwalde” (134). John A. Moses writes, “In *The Cost of Discipleship* [*Nachfolge*] Bonhoeffer attacks the misuse by his contemporaries of the central issue of Luther’s theology, *justification*, to avail themselves of ‘cheap grace’” (135; italics mine).

Bonhoeffer challenges the notion that one can simply believe and allow that to suffice. Works are necessary acts in the Christian life—lest his readers forget that Luther struggled massively to do what is right before falling back on the grace of Christ in acceptance that perfection was not attainable. The struggle for perfection cannot be compared with the comfort of not even trying, Bonhoeffer argues.

Luther hatte gelehrt, daß der Mensch auch in seinen frömmsten Wegen und Werken vor Gott nicht bestehen kann, weil er im Grund immer sich selbst sucht. Er hatte in dieser Not die Gnade der freien und bedingungslosen Vergebung aller Sünden im Glauben ergriffen. Luther wußte dabei, daß ihm diese Gnade ein Leben gekostet hatte und noch täglich kostete; denn er war ja durch die Gnade nicht dispensiert von der Nachfolge, sondern erst recht in sie hineingestoßen. Wenn Luther von der Gnade sprach, so meinte er sein eigenes Leben immer mit, das durch die Gnade erst in den vollen Gehorsam Christi gestellt worden war. Er konnte gar nicht anders von der Gnade reden, als eben so. Daß die Gnade allein es tut, hatte Luther gesagt, und wörtlich so wiederholten es seine Schüler, mit dem einzigen Unterschied, daß sie sehr bald das ausließen und nicht mitdachten und sagten, was Luther immer selbstverständlich mitgedacht hatte, nämlich die
Nachfolge, ja, was er nicht mehr zu sagen brauchte, weil er ja immer selbst als einer redete, den die Gnade in die schwerste Nachfolge Jesu geführt hatte. Die Lehre der Schüler war also unanfechtbar von der Lehre Luthers her, und doch wurde diese Lehre das Ende und die Vernichtung der Reformation als der Offenbarung der teuren Gnade Gottes auf Erden. (Bonhoeffer 1937, p. 36)

Thus, in the face of a popular theology of nationalism blended with Christianity, Bonhoeffer declared in no uncertain terms that “good works” are the necessary result of a life truly dedicated to Christ—again not for salvation, but as the evidence that one is actually a Christian. It was not possible, in Bonhoeffer’s mind, to be a real Christian and be a faithful follower of Hitler.

**III - SCHOLASTICISM AND MODERN EXEGESIS**

“Although the Enlightenment began as, among other things, a critique of orthodox Christianity, it can function, and in many ways has functioned, as a means of recalling Christianity to genuine history, to its necessary roots. Much Christianity is afraid of history, frightened that if we really find out what happened in the first century our faith will collapse. But without historical enquiry there is no check on Christianity’s propensity to remake Jesus, never mind the Christian god, in its own image” (Wright 1992, p. 10).

Luther was a biblical theologian. This may mean simply that Luther was a professor of biblical, primarily Old Testament, exegesis at the University of Wittenberg. More largely, however, it signifies a radical break with the standard curriculum of scholastic theology and a reorientation of theology to the biblical text [. . .] What we have in mind is the campaign Luther waged against the scholastic theology of his day and his plans for a sweeping reform of the
university curriculum so that ‘the study of the Bible and the holy Fathers may at once be restored in all its purity.’ (George 1988, pp. 56-57)

N.T. Wright and Richard Bauckham, among others, question Luther’s success in breaking away from scholasticism. Did Luther go far enough? Was Luther fully aware of the effects Greek philosophy had had on “the holy Fathers”? As we have seen, Luther did indeed reject medieval scholasticism in favor of returning to the Bible and the early church fathers. However, we must ask ourselves if Luther’s objective of “restoring purity” to Christian theology could even be achieved by such means. That is, should one restrict one’s research to the Bible and the Anti-Nicene Fathers, one would necessarily have included too much, Bauckham argues! It is not possible for Christianity, itself a Jewish religion, to admit unto its ranks those who are not Jewish, i.e. the Anti-Nicene Fathers, and not thereby to, albeit inadvertently, admit foreign notions into its theology. Richard Bauckham, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, argues that western New Testament scholarship has not gone far enough with Luther’s call to be done with scholasticism, because it simply has not realized that it has been tainted by foreign ideas which would not have been validated by Jews in general, and especially during the Second Temple period, the period in which he argues the “highest Christology” was developed.

Discussions of high verses low Christology are common in academia today, and have been par for the course ever since the time of the writing of the New Testament. The First Council of Nicaea addressed the question of orthodox Christology in A.D. 325, finally settling

---

123 cf Freeman 2004 chapter 8 which discusses pre-Christian Ireland’s druids and pagan festivals which were absorbed into Ireland’s Christianity. The stories of pagan gods and goddesses were simply recycled into the legends of Catholic saints, i.e. St. Brigid and St. Brendan who possessed the powers and abilities of phased out Irish pagan deities. This is a microcosm of a much larger phenomenon in the christianization of Europe. Evidence of this is prevalent today, i.e. Austria’s Krampus, and Germany’s Faschingsdienstag.

124 “The earliest Christology was already the highest Christology. I call it a Christology of divine identity, proposing this as a way beyond the standard distinction between ‘functional’ and ‘ontic’ Christology” (Bauckham 2008, p. x).
for the doctrine of *homoiousianism*—the notion that Jesus and God were of similar, but not exactly the same *essence of being*. Thus Jesus was fully God and fully human throughout His entire earthly existence. The question being addressed was, quite simply, “at what point did Jesus become God?”—and here lies the *tainted* thinking. Would a Jew ask the question “At what time did God become God?” Definitely not, says Bauckham.

I take current scholarly discussion about the nature of Jewish monotheism in the Second Temple period and attempts to find Jewish precedents for early Christology as my starting points, and argue that recently popular trends to find a model for Christology in semi-divine intermediary figures in early Judaism are largely mistaken. Working with the key category of the *identity* of the God of Israel—which appropriately focuses on *who* God is rather than what divinity is—I show that early Judaism had clear and consistent ways of characterizing the unique identity of the one God and, thus, distinguishing the one God absolutely from all other reality. When New Testament Christology is read with this Jewish theological context in mind, it becomes clear that, from the earliest post-Easter beginnings of Christology onwards, early Christians included Jesus, precisely and unambiguously, within the unique identity of the one God of Israel. They did so by including Jesus in the unique, defining characteristics by which Jewish monotheism identified God as unique. (Bauckham 2008, p. ix; italics original)

Bauckham’s argument is mind-blowing in its simplicity: Jews did not ask what God *is*, but rather what God *does*! The entire question of low verses high Christology is based upon a notion foreign to the Biblical text and its culture, namely that, in order to be worshipped as God, Jesus’ *essence/being* must be shared by God. Bauckham’s argument that “the earliest
Christology was already the highest Christology" disregards the Greek, philosophical—foreign—question of whether the being of Christ was the same as, similar to, or utterly different from the being of God, and replaces it with the more culturally and textually relevant—Jewish—question of whether the acts of Christ were the same as, similar to, or utterly different from the acts of God.

Bauckham’s argument goes farther than Luther in rejecting scholasticism, and especially the Greek philosophical influence upon Christian thinking. Though his argument seems obvious, Bauckham’s thinking is quite radical. Only since the onset of the First Quest\textsuperscript{125} have biblical scholars really begun to challenge the mythologized Jesus of the heavily Greek-influenced notions of the post-Renaissance church.\textsuperscript{126} Luther’s rejection of philosophy as a means of determining eternal truth fell short; according to Bauckham, he simply did not go far enough. Now, in the 21st century, Bauckham and others are examining Greek notions which are so close to the roots of Christianity that they have hitherto been mistaken for the very roots themselves.

\textsuperscript{125} Defined by Albert Schweitzer (d. 1965) as an attempt begun in the 18th century as an attempt to rediscover the “historical Jesus.” We are, theologically speaking, currently in the “Third Quest” being headed up by such notables as N.T. Wright, Richard Bauckham, James D.G. Dunn, and E.P. Sanders, among many others.

\textsuperscript{126} It is particularly interesting how much influence the writings of Aristotle had on the Renaissance-era Roman Catholic Church. One need only look at the artwork which adorns Vatican City’s buildings to see the influence, i.e. Raphael’s The School of Athens c. 1511 in the Apostolic Palace which depicts Plato and Aristotle among many other notable Greek thinkers. For more information on the influence of Greek philosophy on Christendom see Rubenstein (2003).
IV - JUSTIFICATION: THE QUESTION OF LATE-LUTHERAN THEOLOGY AND
THE DOCTRINE OF IMPUTATION

“Denn ich schäme mich des Evangeliums nicht; denn es ist eine Kraft Gottes, die da selig macht alle, die daran glauben, die Juden vornehmlich und auch die Griechen. Sintemal darin offenbart wird die Gerechtgkeit, die vor Gott gilt, welche kommt aus Glauben in Glauben; wie denn geschrieben steht: ‘Der Gerechte wird seines Glaubens leben’”127 (Romans 1:16-17).

It is all too common for people to fail to recognize the great debates of their lifetime, and we who currently live are no exception. The great theological debate of the early 21st century went largely unnoticed by the world around it, but, for those who recognize it for what it truly is, a tremendous earthquake has shaken the very pillars of Protestantism and brought to light a new perspective, oddly enough, in a field of study that relishes Latin phrases, referred to as The New Perspective.128 This great debate was between two of the most respected Protestant theologians of the day, John Piper, PhD. defending the traditional Lutheran argumentation of imputation as the vehicle of justification, and N.T. Wright, D.D. standing firmly in the New Perspective posing the “new” idea of covenant as the vehicle of justification, thus negating the stranglehold the doctrine of imputation has had on western Protestant thinking for nearly 500 years.129

While Piper and Wright both conducted themselves admirably throughout the debate, both made the sincerity with which they hold their respective positions clear. “My conviction concerning N.T. Wright is not that he is under the curse of Galatians 1:8-9,130 but that his
portrayal of the gospel—and of the doctrine of justification in particular—is so disfigured that it becomes difficult to recognize as biblically faithful” (Piper 2007, p. 15). Piper goes on to argue that theology like Wright’s is dangerous because it will produce confusion among listeners and threatens to produce “the kind of preaching that will not announce clearly what makes the lordship of Christ good news for guilty sinners or show those who are overwhelmed with sin how they may stand righteous in the presence of God” (15). In true Martin Luther style Piper goes on to praise Wright for his learning, intelligence, and desire to bring to light solid exegesis of the Biblical text, but the specter of “the curse of Galatians 1:8-9” cannot but haunt the rest of his argument.

For his part Wright opens his response to Piper’s book with:

Imagine a friend coming to stay who, through some accident of education, had never been told that the earth goes round the sun. As part of a happy evening’s conversation, you take it upon yourself to explain how the planetary system works. Yes, from where we stand it does of course seem that the sun circles around us. But this is merely an effect of our perspective. [. . .] You get out the books, charts and diagrams, and even rearrange objects on the coffee table to make the point. Your friend alternates between incredulity, fascination, momentary alarm and puzzlement. [. . .] Very early in the morning, while it is still dark, there is a tap at the bedroom door. [. . .] He takes you up the hill to a point where the whole countryside is spread out before you, [. . .] He returns to the subject of the previous night. So many wise people of old have spoken of the earth as the solid-fixed point on which we stand. Didn’t one of the psalms say

have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”
something about the sun celebrating as it goes round and round, like a strong giant running a race? Yes, of course modern scientists are always coming up with fancy theories. They may have their place, but equally they may just be fads. Wouldn’t we do better to stick with the tried and tested wisdom of the ages? As he warms to his theme, so at last, out of the sea, there emerges the huge, dazzling, shining ball. You stand in silence, watching its majestic rise, [. . .] you wait with a sense of frustrated inevitability for the punch line. Here it comes. ‘Now, you see’—a gentle hand on the arm, he doesn’t want to make this too harsh—‘we have the evidence of our own eyes [. . .] All those wonderful theories and clever new ideas—they may have a lot to teach us, but ultimately they take us away from the truth. (Wright 2009, pp. 19-20)

Thus the positions of both debaters is clear: Piper’s concern is that, while Wright means well, he is tampering with the “true understanding” of the doctrine of justification—and is thereby teetering on the edge of damnation, whereas Wright’s concern is that Piper is refusing to see what is right under his nose just because seeing it would throw a monkey-wrench into the mechanics of his neatly laid out orthodoxy. In both instances the concerns threaten something terrible: to lose one’s salvation for a theory, or to fail to understand the Bible for preferring a traditional doctrinal stance. While admitting that “It is no final argument against what Wright says,” Piper nevertheless goes on to pose the argument, “[Wright] sees himself methodologically in the same role as Martin Luther—rediscovering what the New Testament originally meant over against fifteen centuries of misguided tradition” (Piper 2007, p. 61).

It will not do to simply show point for point how these two have battled it out—the reading would be long and tedious and most likely ineffectual. Therefore, it seems most
appropriate to show the basic argument each presents independent of the other’s views—to the extent possible—and provide commentary in the conclusion. Neither would it be useful to guide the reader through a play by play commentary on the exegesis of the Biblical texts that each man selects. Instead I will simply reference the passages they choose to examine and allow the reader, should he/she desire so, to read Piper and Wright’s books apart from this present work. I will start with Piper’s argument, because, with a few minor quirks, it is the basic, tried and true Protestant theology of the last 500 years. Much of the material may, therefore, look quite familiar. Then I will present Wright’s New Perspective on Paul and the meaning of justification, the majority of which I suspect will be somewhat new to the reader.

**B. THE WRIGHT/PIPER DEBATE**

**i - PIPER’S POSITION**

“For my father, the gospel of Christ included the news that there is a righteousness—a perfect obedience of Jesus Christ—that is offered freely to all through faith alone. And when faith is given, that righteousness is imputed to the believer once and for all. Together with the sin-forgiving blood of Jesus, this is our hope” (Piper 2007; p. 9).

The above quote is quite telling. Piper carries forward a *traditional* Protestant orthodoxy. That is no mark against him. There is “a righteousness” and that righteousness is the righteousness of Christ’s perfect obedience. Here in lieu Piper’s definition of righteousness we have its origin: it is only found in the perfect life of Jesus and, therefore, not found in the actions of believers. Furthermore, that righteousness can be *imputed* to people at the moment of conversion—note that the faith is “given” and not attained. Here we see Piper’s foundational theological basis for justification: 1) double-predestination is affirmed, since faith is given and not acquired, 2) we see that “mature” Lutheran teaching of imputation is demanded, 3) the early
Lutheran argumentation that one cannot really do righteous things—“good works”—unless one is saved is pushed further so that even believers cannot really do them, and Piper provides a clear argumentation that righteousness stands or falls on lifelong perfection in personal conduct—a feat impossible for any human, believer or not.

Because Piper’s argument is a defense of traditional Protestant orthodoxy, it is not necessary that we go to great lengths to define it. However, it is pertinent that we examine some of the major points. We shall start with righteousness. Piper begins his argument by informing the reader that he has written and published a more detailed exposé on the topic, namely The Justification of God (1993), suggesting specifically the chapters entitled “The Righteousness of God in the Old Testament,” “The Righteousness of God in Romans 3:1-8,” “The Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25-26,” and “The Rights and Purposes of God in Romans 9:19-23” (Piper 2007, p. 62). Piper then goes on to condense his arguments therefrom. He states that, “God’s righteousness impels him to be faithful to his covenant promises, to judge without partiality, to deal with sin ‘properly,’ and to stand up for those who are unjustly oppressed. But God’s love (hesed) and his faithfulness (emet) and his goodness (tov) could also be said to produce these actions,” going on to clarify that faithfulness, goodness, and love cannot be equated with righteousness (62-63).

While righteousness might indeed “impel” God to behave such, such behavior is not what comprises God’s righteousness. “Behind each of those actions is the assumption that there is something about God’s righteousness that explains why he acts as he does” (63). This is interesting. Piper’s conclusion is, I think, rather unique—and I would add odd. He argues that one could indeed simply state that “God’s righteousness consists in his unswerving commitment to do what is right,” but explains that such a stance is less “illuminating” than that which he has
reached, since it does not define what “right” is (63). Piper’s conclusion is that God’s righteousness—and thereby “righteousness” itself—is the doing of that which gives God the greatest honor. “What we find therefore in the Old Testament and in Paul is that God defines ‘right’ in terms of himself. There is no other standard to consult than his own infinitely worthy being. Thus, what is right, most ultimately, is what upholds the value and honor of God—what esteems and honors God’s glory” (64; italics original).

On the surface, such an argument may not seem odd (as I have called it) at all; however, the necessary implication of such an argument upon the modus operandi of imputation must give pause to the reader. One must take consideration of the Judgement Day in regard to questions of righteousness and how God will react to individuals on that day. Judgement Day is the ultimate day, the day of decision, of reward, and of punishment in Christian theology. If then a person is to be clearly and finally determined to be righteous or unrighteous it must take place in this “law-court” situation—such “law-court” imagery is used by both Piper and Wright. Piper, arguing that humans cannot attain to righteousness—since even one sin reduces the individual to the state of unrighteousness—and that Christ, the judge in the law-court scenario, is the only righteous one, concludes that it must be possible for the defendant to be judged as possessing the righteousness of the judge—Piper’s construct of imputation.

Such an argument is quite unique. While it is perfectly normal that a judge would deliver a verdict of “not guilty” or of “guilty,” it is unprecedented that a judge would find a defendant in possession of the judge’s own innocence. Defending this stance, Piper writes, “For both the defendant and the judge, righteousness is ‘an unwavering allegiance to treasure and uphold the glory of God.’ This is what makes God and humans ‘righteous.’ Therefore, it may turn out in this law-court that it is indeed conceivable for the Judge’s righteousness to be shared by the
defendant” (71). Thus the defendant is not righteous, but rather is dedicated to what is “right”—honoring the Judge—and is, therefore, determined to be in the right, co-owner of God’s own righteousness. *The defendant is not guilty by reason of having the judge’s own innocence.*

For Piper, working from the traditional conception of “righteousness,” even one sin defames the individual such that it would thereafter be impossible for that person to become righteous. Righteousness is bound up in the question “Have you ever sinned,” and, therefore, requires that in order that anyone be deemed righteous there must be an imputation of righteousness from God Himself. Since it is not possible for the individual to ever actually become righteous, *it has become God’s prerogative to pretend that Christians have.* This creates an interesting problem for Piper who also argues that God’s righteousness also prompts Him “to judge without partiality” (62). In place of the originally-expected, perfect obedience, God now looks for union with Christ “by faith alone” (165). We are, therefore, “counted as perfectly honoring and displaying the glory of God, which is the essence of God’s righteousness, and which is also a perfect fulfilling of the law. This is what God imputes to us and counts us as having because we are in Christ who perfectly honored God in his sinless life. It is not nonsense. It is true and precious beyond words” (165).

Piper’s argument is not terribly unique. He does have his peculiar definition of “righteousness” but on the whole he stands firmly in the Protestant tradition, and his definition of righteousness does nothing to harm that stance. His commitment to the traditional views espoused by Luther, Calvin, and those theologians who followed in their footsteps is evidenced by his own traditional orthodoxy, and his concern that Wright is threatening to undo the work of the reformers with his New Perspective challenge (not to mention the telling choice of his book’s
cover art—Luther himself dramatically declaring “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen!” at the Imperial Diet of Worms).

For Piper “righteousness consists most deeply in God’s unwavering allegiance to himself” (164). That which God now requires of the individual is the same. “Thus the moral righteousness [God] requires of us is the same—that we unwaveringly love and uphold the glory of God” (164). Perhaps above all, Piper wishes to defend imputation. “My ultimate reason for writing this book is to avert the double tragedy that will come where the obedience of Christ, imputed to us through faith alone, is denied or obscured” stating that “If we begin to deny or minimize the importance of the obedience of Christ, imputed to us through faith alone, our own works will begin to assume the role that should have been Christ’s” (187).

ii - WRIGHT’S POSITION

“What is at stake in the present debate is not simply the fine-tuning of theories about what precisely happens in justification [. . .] But the real point is, I believe, that the salvation of human beings, though of course extremely important for those human beings, is part of a larger purpose. God is rescuing us from the shipwreck of the world, not so that we can sit back and put our feet up in his company, but so that we can be part of his plan to remake the world. We are in orbit around God and his purposes, not the other way around. If the Reformation tradition had treated the Gospels as equally important to the Epistles, this mistake might never have happened” (Wright 2009, p. 24; emphases original).

The above quote drives at the Wright’s long battle against the continued determination to demand of the Bible that it conform to the orthodoxy which has developed around it (Wright 2009, p. 40). The insistence of good Protestants that the Bible must answer specific questions derived from orthodox theology, i.e. imputation, has led to mass confusion. Rather than asking
what Paul might have meant, what his ideal reader might have been expected to know, etc., Bible readers have—and do—demand of the text that it answer questions pertinent to the readers time, culture, and orthodox understanding (41-42).

If you read your own questions into the text, and try to get an answer from it, when the text itself is talking about something else, you run the risk not only of hearing only the echo of your own voice rather than the word of God but also of missing the key point that they text was actually eager to tell you, and which you have brushed aside in your relentless quest for your own meaning. (42; italics mine)

Wright shares a personal story about a congregant, who, the Sunday after Princess Diana’s tragic death, came to him in utter confusion (41-42). She had expected that the sermon would be about Diana; the speaking pastor, however, had decided to avoid the topic in his sermon. Later speaking to Wright, the congregant asked him to make sense of the sermon—how did what was said correlate with the events surrounding it? The answer was simple: the sermon had not addressed the tragedy at all. “The history of reading Paul is littered with similar mistakes” (42). The issue at hand for Wright is, quite simply, that people—even those who should know better, i.e. theologians—seem to have forgotten how to read the Bible. “For too long we have read Scripture with nineteenth-century eyes and sixteenth-century questions. It’s time to get back to reading with first-century eyes and twenty-first-century questions” (37).

For Wright it is no insult to the great reformers to press beyond their works into realms not unknown but rather perhaps forgotten—to push back not just beyond the medieval-orthodoxy, not just beyond the Nicene Fathers, not just beyond the Anti-Nicene Fathers, but all the way back to the writers of the New Testament themselves. Wright does not insist that the
reformers must be disregarded, but rather that our questions for the text, our reading of the text must mature beyond them if possible. He names what he views as “the problem” thus, “Again and again, when faced with both the new perspective and some of the other features of more recent Pauline scholarship, ‘conservative’ churches have reached not for Scripture but for tradition, as with Piper’s complaint that I am sweeping away fifteen hundred years of the church’s understanding” (44). No, Wright does not see himself as among the “stray lambs” who wander from the true, Protestant path, but rather as standing firmly within Protestantism as a whole, as he dares to do as Calvin and Luther did—“questioning all traditions in the light of Scripture” (29).

Seeing that Wright is no rebel, but rather a man concerned that current trends in biblical exegesis leave much to be desired, we will now take a look at the five major points of his argument: 1) The role does “Covenant” play in Paul’s writings, 2) Paul’s understanding of righteousness, 3) The law-court imagery in Paul’s writings, 4) Imputation in Paul’s writings, and finally 5) What justification is.

1) The Bible is rife with the discussion of covenant. This is no minor theme. Covenant, in Christian theology is often viewed as something for the Jews and is, thus, just as often merely given lip service in conjunction with the church. In a post-Holocaust era it is little wonder that we do not hear much talk about Christian covenant theology here in the west. St. Paul is quite often accused of being antisemitic—or at least the writings attributed to him are. After the horror of the Nazi answer to the “Jewish Question” it simply cannot sit well with many

---

131 Wright strongly disagrees with the traditional Protestant argument for imputation—see below—to which Piper responds, “If Wright is correct here, then the entire history of the discussion of justification for the last fifteen hundred years—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—has been misguided. Virtually everyone has been committing a ‘category mistake,’ and the entire debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants about imputing versus imparting divine righteousness ‘makes no sense at all.’ This is a remarkable claim to make about church history. But Wright is ready to play the man” (Piper 2007, p. 60).
132 It would be most appropriate at this time to make clear that Wright attributes the Epistles of Paul to Paul. cf Wright 1991 and Wright 1997.
westerners to take Paul at his word when he claims that now Christians—and not Jews—are the covenant holders with YHWH. Galatians 3:27 “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise” (italics mine). Current social-issues which inhibit the reader from understanding and accepting the true meaning of the text is, again, the very thing Wright is fighting against. Acknowledging this covenant theology in Paul’s writings is essential to understanding what he is driving at (Wright 2009, p. 35).

The question for Paul is, quite frankly, who is the real Israel?

Paul’s view of the cataclysmic irruption of God into the history of Israel and the world in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah was that this heart-stopping, show-stopping, chart-topping moment was, despite initial appearances, and certainly despite Paul’s own earlier expectations and initial understanding, the very thing for which the entire history of Israel from Abraham onward, the entire history of Israel under Torah from Moses onward and indeed the entire history of humanity from Adam onward, had been waiting. It is central to Paul, but almost entirely ignored in perspectives old, new and otherwise, that God had a single plan all along through which he intended to rescue the world and the human race, and that this single plan was centered upon the call of Israel, a call which Paul saw coming to fruition in Israel’s representative, the Messiah.

Read Paul like this, and you can keep all the jigsaw pieces on the table. (35)

Thus Galatians 3 and its claim that those who are in Christ are Israel—the true offspring of Abraham! This is not anti-semitism—just one more attack on the Jews from those darn
Christians—this is Christian covenantal theology as taught by Paul. Wright declares, “it is precisely the Jewish, messianic, covenantal, Abrahamic, history-of-Israel overtones that later theology has screened out, both in its reading of ‘Christ’ and in its reading of ‘justification’” (82; italics original).

In contrast with in vogue western Christianity, Paul’s covenant theology was not based on the individual. Paul’s hope was not necessarily the hope of the modern Christian. His hope was rooted in the covenantal promise of God to *corporate* Israel (57). "[T]he key question facing Judaism as a whole was not about individual salvation, but about God’s purposes for Israel and the world" (75-76; italics mine). Jesus did not come to save the individual, He came to save the world, the human race—*He came to redeem all of creation* (25). Furthermore, Paul’s covenant theology, argues Wright, is missed altogether by those who have expectations of living in some delightful, disembodied heaven somewhere beyond the blue (55). In his studies Wright realized “that most Jews of the time [the first century] were not sitting around discussing how to go to heaven, and swapping views on the finer points of synergism and sanctification” (55). The hope of Paul and his fellow Jews was not that they might go off to a better place. Their hope was that God would restore order to the world, redeem His people, and return His crippled creation to its former glory (57). This was to be a global—not otherworldly—renovation (65)!

2) Wright argues that Paul’s replacing of the word *covenant* with the word *righteousness* in his exegesis of Genesis 17:11 given in Romans 4:11 is evidence that *covenant* marks a clear distinction between various covenants God made with the Jews throughout the years between Moses and the coming of the Messiah and *the covenant* He made with Abraham concerning all the peoples of the earth (98). The Covenant is the covenant that God made with Abraham; the law and the covenants therein “is what God gave to Moses [. . .] but which cannot include

---

133 See the opening quote for chapter 4 part II above.
abolishing or tampering with ‘the covenant’” (97-98; italics mine). Righteousness therefore means to be in The Covenant (99)! “The exegetical contortions, distortions, omissions and confusions which litter the field of anti-covenantal Pauline exegesis are the direct result of dismembering the sacred texts to which, piously, the exegetes still appeal” (99).

Covenant, for Paul, is “clearly a shorthand” for “dealing-with-sin-and-rescuing-people-from-it, [and] bringing-Jews-and-Gentiles-together-into-a-single-family” (98-99). For Wright, any Christian theology, any soteriological construct, which fails to take seriously Paul’s covenantal theology is destined to miss much of what Paul really meant! The fulfillment of The Covenant between Abraham and YHWH “is the beginning of God’s promised new age, which now awaits fulfillment when victory is won over all enemies, including death itself, so that God is all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28), when creation itself is set free from its slavery to corruption and decay, and comes to share the liberty of the glory of God’s children (Romans 8:18-26)” (106).

Understanding Paul’s covenantal theology is the crucial step to understanding Paul’s righteousness. One cannot be righteous if one is outside of the covenant (62). Piper’s understanding of righteousness, that no sinner can actually become righteous, misunderstands the point altogether Wright argues. Righteousness does not inherently imply Sinlessness! Citing Deuteronomy 27-30 and Daniel 9:4, 11-14, Wright argues that “‘righteous acts’ [of God] here clearly does not mean ‘virtuous acts.’ It means ‘acts in fulfillment of God’s covenant promises’” (63). This is not to say that God has or will commit sin.

Whereas Piper insists that God’s righteousness is bound up in his concern for His own glory, Wright argues that God’s righteousness refers, biblically speaking, “to [His] fidelity to the norms he himself has set up, in other words, the covenant” (64). But what of human
righteousness? Human righteousness is shown, again, not in sinless personal conduct, but rather in being a part of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul’s argument in Romans 4, which is based upon the argument of Genesis 15 shows, Wright argues, that “Abrahams righteousness is his right standing within that covenant, and God’s righteousness is his unswerving commitment to be faithful to that covenant—including the promise (Romans 4:13) that Abraham would inherit the world” (66-67).

Covenant in Paul’s writings, argues Wright, is the only place where righteousness—at least for humans—can be found (98). “To highlight this element [covenantal righteousness] which Reformed theologians ought to welcome in its historic stress on the single plan of God (as opposed to having God change his mind in midstream), is to insist on the wholeness of [Paul’s] train of thought” (94). Jesus Christ’s mission was not an example of God backing out of a deal He had previously made with Abraham; rather it the inauguration of the new age, the final age, the age which would end in the victory over the enemies of those who are a part of The Covenant between YHWH and Abraham. According to Wright the covenant is, “Dealing with sin, saving humans from it, giving them grace, forgiveness, justification, glorification—all this was the purpose of the single covenant from the beginning, now fulfilled in Jesus Christ [. . .] the truth of which ‘imputed righteousness’ is a half-parody” (95; italics original).

3) Challenging the dogmatic clinging to “imputation,” Wright asks, “if ‘imputed righteousness’ is so utterly central, so nerve-janglingly vital, so standing-and-falling-church important as John Piper makes out, isn’t it strange that Paul never actually came straight out and said it? [. . .] when our tradition presses us to regard as central something which is seldom if ever actually said by Paul himself we are entitled . . . to raise an eyebrow and ask questions” (46). Wright argues that Piper is really pleading with his readers “Please do not be seduced, by N.T.
Wright or anyone else, into imagining that you need to read the New Testament within its first-century Jewish context” (47). Wright declares, “It is worrying to find Piper encouraging readers to go back, not to the first century, but to ‘the Christian renewal movements of sixteenth-century Europe’” (51). Wright argues that the Lutheran construct for “justification” and “imputation” are neither to be found in Paul’s writings nor in first-century Judaism (50).

By staying within the confines of sixteenth-century Protestant theology instead of pressing back to first-century, early church theology, through documents which have since come to light, i.e. the Dead Sea Scrolls, Wright states that Piper is turning a blind eye to the very illumination Piper claims to seek. Furthermore, Wright argues that Piper intentionally avoids interpreting certain of Paul’s writings, declaring, “You can tell a lot about a book on Paul by seeing which passages don’t appear in the index. John Piper, astonishingly, has no discussion of Romans 2:25-29 or Romans 10:6-9” (32). Concerning Romans 2:17-3:8, 3:21-4:25, and 9:30-10:13 Wrights adds, “Piper never deals with any of those great arguments, but contents himself with picking piecemeal at verses here and there. Almost anything can be proved that way” (49).

4) The only reason why imputation even became a necessary argument is because people have, since the time of St. Augustine, misunderstood the original, first-century meaning of “justify” (91). The original word dikaiōō (to justify) “does not denote an action which transforms someone so much as a declaration which grants them a status. It is the status of the person which is transformed by the action of ‘justification,’ not the character [as opposed to] Augustine’s interpretation of ‘justify’ as ‘make righteous’” (91; italics original). It is not to imputation that the believer should look, but rather to the law-court where the believer will be declared to be “in the right.”
“‘Righteousness,’ within the lawcourt [sic] setting—and this is something that no good Lutheran or Reformed theologian ought ever to object to—denotes the status that someone has when the court has found in their favor” (90). Thus to justify is “to find in favor of” a person; in the law-court the believer will be declared righteous “that is, ‘acquitted,’ ‘cleared,’ ‘vindicated,’ ‘justified’” (90). Wright states that Piper does not give due credit to the law-court imagery prevalent in Paul’s writings, calling Piper’s law-court “deeply unconvincing” (68). The defendant cannot be declared to have the right actions of the judge. Rather, the defendant can only be found to be in the right or not. It is not, then, that the Christian must be found to have the perfect, sinless life of Christ imputed to him/her, but rather that the Christian must be found to be within the Covenant between God and Abraham (68).

“Covenant and lawcourt [sic] language belong together” Wright insists (63). This is a fundamental reason why Piper’s law-court is rejected by Wright. “God’s righteousness, [Piper] claims, is God’s concern for God’s own glory,” but this says nothing of God’s concern for His plan, the only plan He has ever had—the Abrahamic Covenant! The fear, much evidenced in Luther’s life, of having to stand before God on Judgment Day has given way to the doctrine of imputation at the expense of Pauline law-court theology. God’s righteousness is not, in direct contradiction to Piper’s claim, directed toward Himself. “God’s concern for God’s glory is precisely rescued from the appearance of divine narcissism because God, not least God as Trinity, is always giving out, pouring out, lavishing generous love on undeserving people, undeserving Israel and an undeserving world” (70-71).

So, if God is love, and the Judgment Day still includes judging, what are we to make of that? “It isn’t that God basically wants to condemn and then finds a way to rescue some from that disaster. It is that God longs to bless, to bless lavishly, and so to rescue and bless those in
danger of tragedy—and therefore must curse everything that thwarts and destroys the blessing of his world and his people” (71; italics original). The believer has nothing to fear. The believer will be found in the right, subject to God’s “lavish” blessing on Judgment Day. Law-court theology is not a bad thing. The believer knows in advance that he must stand trial and that he will be found in the right—there is no doubt, the acquittal of all believers is imminent! “Jesus’ messiahship constitutes him as the judge on the last day”—and as Romans 8:31 states, “If God\textsuperscript{134} is for us, who can be against us” (107)?

5) So, returning to our main theme, what is “justification”? Wright declares unequivocally that righteousness and salvation are not the same thing (11)! The Protestant doctrine of imputation behaves as though they were “interchangeable [. . .] but this is clearly untrue to Scripture itself. Justification is the act of God by which people are ‘declared to be in the right’ before him” (11; italics mine). To justify is not to save—although the one does not happen without the other happening as well. Believers are, then, saved by being in the Abrahamic Covenant and therefore justified—declared to be in the right—as a result of being in that covenant.

The failure of exegetes to understand Paul’s use of justification produced the Latin un-equivalent iustitia, which led most exegetes, including Luther, down a false track (86-92). In turn iustitia progressed in meaning up to Luther’s time. Wright states, “iustitia carried its own meanings throughout the medieval period, massively conditioning the way Paul, and much besides, was understood, and setting up the questions Luther and the others were answering in a very particular way” (89). Justification, in first-century Judaism and therefore in Paul, was never about the individual, but rather was always about Israel—the corporate body of those under the

\textsuperscript{134} Following Bauckham’s argumentation for high Christology throughout the writings of the New Testament Wright declares, “[Jesus] is to be understood in the role regularly marked out, in the Greek Old Testament, as kyrios, which renders the reverent Hebrew adonai, which stands of course for YHWH (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8:6; Romans 10:13)” (Wright 2009, p. 103).
Abrahamic Covenant. Thus Wright asks, “are we sure we know what exactly we mean by ‘justification’ in the first place” (77)?

Arguing against Piper’s complaint that Wright is toppling fifteen-hundred years of church understanding, Wright states, “the church has indeed taken of at an oblique angle from what Paul had said, so that, yes, ever since the time of Augustine, the discussions about what has been called ‘justification’ have borne a tangled, but ultimately only tangential, relation to what Paul what talking about” (80; italics original).

What has happened in the history of the ‘doctrine of justification’ is rather as though someone, rightly convinced of the vital importance of the steering wheel for driving a car, were to refer to the car as ‘the wheel,’ so that people who had never seen a car would be deceived into thinking that he was talking about the steering wheel itself as the entire machine, and then were to imagine a gigantic steering wheel cunningly equipped with seats and a motor, but still really just a wheel. (87)

Thus the problem is that theologians since Augustine have been operating with wrong definitions—definitions derived not out of first-century Judaism, but rather out of later, non-Jewish thinking.

This is the trouble with the great tradition, from Augustine onward: not that it has not said many true and useful things, but that by using the word ‘justification’ as though it described the entire process from grace to glory it has given conscientious Pauline interpreters many sleepless nights trying to work out how what he actually says about justification can be made to cover this whole range without collapsing into nonsense or heresy or both. The answer is: get in the car,
start the engine, take hold of the steering wheel firmly, but be thankful that it is part of a much larger machine through which, working together as a whole, the journey can be undertaken. (102; italics original)

iii - THE WRIGHT/PIPER DEBATE IN OVERVIEW

Both Wright and Piper speak as well educated theologians and as deeply concerned pastors. Initiating the debate, Piper writes,

The Final Judgment feels too close for me to care much about scoring points in debate. Into my seventh decade, the clouds of time are clearing, and the prospect of wasting my remaining life on gamesmanship or one-upmanship is increasingly unthinkable. The ego-need to be right has lost its dominion, and the quiet desire to be a faithful steward of the grace of truth increases. N.T. Wright is about three years younger than I am, and I assume he feels the same. (Piper 2007, p. 13)

For his part, Wright calls his 252-page response to Piper an “initial response,” declaring with no uncertainty that his work on Paul and Covenantal Theology will continue as he works towards producing what promises to be a tome of some 600-plus pages on the topic. Wright states, “despite my initial reluctance to get drawn into the details of debate when I am really far too busy with other things [i.e. the afore mentioned book], I eventually decided that an initial response was called for” (Wrights 2009, p. 9).

The initial reluctance of both theologians to enter this great debate gave way to the greater concern of each: that the truth be set forth clearly. For Piper this means sticking with the “tried and true” Protestant theology of nearly 500 years; for Wright this means pushing forward with what he calls 21st-century questions, and pushing backward to First-century meanings. Piper’s position is unique in his “illumined” definition of righteousness: God’s concern for
God’s own glory. Also his imputation is somewhat unique, since it hinges on this definition. Wright, on the other hand, argues for covenantal theology, which has no use for the traditional doctrine of imputation—tweaked by Piper or not. Whereas Piper views the whole subject of salvation through the lens of sinless righteousness, Wright views the same through the lens of covenant. Both come to radically different definitions of this paper’s main topic *justification*.

Covenantal theology addresses the very serious question “Why did God decide to resolve the issue of sin through Jesus”? Was Judaism Plan A? Did Plan A fail? Is Jesus Plan B? Will Plan B fail too? There is a lack of continuity between Judaism and Christianity in the traditional Protestant model. What purpose did Judaism even serve since Jesus ended up having to clean it all up anyway? Covenantal theology does not get hung up by such questions precisely because it clearly demonstrates the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Calling covenant “shorthand,” Wright explains that covenant is the “plan-through-Israel-for-the-world, [the] reason-God-called-Abraham [. . .] [God’s] single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world” (Wright 2009, pp. 94-95). In Covenantal Theology Jesus is definitively Plan A. It was always God’s plan to rescue *the entire world, all of creation*, through Jesus Christ. Israel was intended to be an aid to that objective. Jerusalem was not intended to be a cultural island devoid of interaction with the known world, *Jerusalem was supposed to be God’s outpost, God’s launching point for His assault on the powers of evil which were controlling the world*. The various rebellions of the people aside, Israel achieved this objective in the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.
CONCLUSION

*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* is the most important treatise of 1520. With this piece Luther moved beyond politics, beyond challenging Catholic rituals, tradition, and hierarchy, and struck at the heart of the matter—biblical soteriology. VFC is Luther’s powerful statement that God is good, that God loves mankind, that God is reaching out in and through Jesus Christ to a broken world, not so that He can judge mankind and condemn us to Hell but in order to rescue us from evil. VFC implicitly does away with Purgatory, though Luther may have still retained some belief in the construct at the time of VFC’s writing. Purgatory, as we have seen can only survive in a medieval communal salvation construct in which Rome is the City of God. VFC rejects Rome as central to the faith and provides an alternative to that communal salvation construct—it provides the opportunity for the individual believer to enter into a positive relationship with the loving God.

Korsch, among others, correctly points out that Luther’s theology never permitted the total individualization of one’s own unique faith (Korsch 1997, p. 103). There is a significant difference between personal salvation and having one’s own unique faith. The point was not to do away with the church, but rather to reform it. VFC’s objective was to show the error of the Roman Catholic soteriology of the age which argued *facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*, which can be roughly translated as ‘God will not deny grace to those who do their best’” (McGrath 2007, p. 41). McGrath hits the nail on the head when he states, “Salvation had been institutionalized” in Luther’s time (21). It was the soteriology which demanded the hierarchy of Rome, the three armies of the church, and to a significant degree the motherly placation of the angry-judge Jesus by the Queen of Heaven, which Luther utterly does away with in VFC.
What need is there for the Ablasshandel when the believer is already justified, in the right, with Jesus and God the Father? Tetzel’s *Ablasshandel* served as the catalyst for Luther’s going public with his investigation into soteriology. The continued attacks by Eck, Cajetan, and others forced Luther to make a choice: either shut up or think aloud before all of western Christendom. VFC is not Luther’s final remark on the topic of justification. As we have seen he later concluded that imputation of righteousness was the biblically correct vehicle of becoming right before God in place of the long-standing Roman Catholic argument for infusion—the *donum superadditum*. VFC’s lack of clarity on how one comes to possess righteousness before God, settling for the assurance that Jesus has to power to grant it and that the believer will receive it through union with Christ, is a fine example of Luther thinking out loud.

It should not be assumed that we cannot take early Luther at his word. It was not that he was simply arguing for arguments sake, but rather that he was thinking his way through the Bible, and, not being an oracle but rather simply a man, his thoughts most definitely progressed throughout his life. It is because of Luther’s occasional waffling that researchers have come to different conclusions about when Luther really and definitively broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. Timothy George argues that the break came during the Leipzig Debate in 1519. Others, for obvious reasons, argue it was in December of 1520 when Luther and his students publicly burned Leo X’s letter of excommunication and the books of canon law. For my part I argue that the real break came in November of 1520 when Luther sent a copy of VFC with a personal letter to Leo X. The argument of VFC and the included letter is quite clear: repent of perish!

While Luther did draw clearer theological constructs as his theology “matured,” it should not be assumed that VFC does not make definitive statements. VFC redefines good works and
demands that the reader accept that definition. Roman Catholic good works are detrimental to the soul, they are evidence that one is at best ignorant or at worst willfully selfish, disobedient, and distrusting of Jesus Christ. VFC is clear that Rome is not a necessary instrument of salvation and that the era of the papacy is over. Yes, God is still wrathful in VFC, but now His wrath is directed at the institution not the individual! God wants to “unite” with the individual through Christ. Humans are corrupt, but that is merely the fleshly nature—the residue of the Fall of Man. Through Christ the individual can possess true righteousness before God. The status of the individual before God, not necessarily the conduct of the individual before the material world, is truly, thoroughly changed.

The rawness of VFC’s theology produced serious questions for serious theologians. Luther himself had to work out what VFC means theologically. The sudden rejection of scholastic theology was itself necessarily left gaping holes in theology. How to fill those holes without corrupting the basic outline proved nigh unto impossible. Luther, as we have seen, eventually fell back into Augustinian, scholastic, theology when it came to predestination. Augustine developed “a doctrine of supralapsarian predestination [double predestination], according to which God had determined the fate of every individual in eternity even before the world was created and Adam had fallen” (Ozment 1980, p. 29). Luther, to Erasmus’ dismay, returned to just this thinking. This was not to be Luther’s only lapse back into scholastic theology.

Richard Bauckham correctly argues that questions of God’s essence, being, nature, and the inherent question of how and to what extent Jesus shared such in common with Him are questions of a Greek philosophical—scholastic—nature. Luther does not seem to have realized this and thus spent his life working from what Bauckham argues are the wrong questions which
inevitably lead to false answers. Bauckham’s argument that the appropriate question—the first-century Jewish one—is not “of what is God composed” but rather “how does God conduct Himself” is taken up by N.T. Wright and others in today’s Third Quest to find the historical Jesus and the belief of the foundational church. It is interesting to see just how well VFC’s theology works within this paradigm. VFC’s argument focuses on what Jesus does and not on what the believer does. Using Bauckham’s argument there is no need for the believer to live in terror of the angry God VFC rejects. If Jesus does what God does, then, obviously God does what Jesus does. To see Christ is to see the Father.

The Third Quest is not limited to questions of Jesus’ ontology. N.T. Wright’s argument for Covenantal Theology, though heavily debated by Piper and others, is a breath of fresh air in a theological dungeon which has become musty and stale. The spirit of Luther lives on in the posing of new questions and the seeking of biblically correct answers to them. That Luther felt comfortable changing his opinions on certain matters as more light was shed on various topics helps provide a green light, so to speak, for modern theologians to address anew topics which are in need of dusting off. It is interesting (and somewhat Hegelian) that though Luther challenged tradition to the dismay of his contemporaries, he himself has become the very tradition which it is now not acceptable to challenge. Luther has along with Calvin become the standard against which western theology must be measured, as evidenced by the Wright/Piper Debate.

Justification is as hot a topic today as it was 491 years ago. It is a good thing that many modern theologians have not chosen to toss in the towel and hang on Luther’s every word. Works like VFC must be re-examined. Such works have had untold effect on modern western theology and have infiltrated eastern theology as well. One need only read Watchman Nee to see that 20th century China too was effected by Luther’s writings. This is, of course, not a bad thing.
But when we see that someone’s theology has had such a global effect—and near stranglehold on western Protestant thinking—it is incumbent upon modern theologians to review and question that theology. The Third Quest is a fine example of just that.

Again, to question Luther’s conclusions is not to attack his credibility, nor is to question his theology synonymous with rejecting Protestantism, or Jesus for that matter. Today’s most respected Protestant scholars are not sappers attempting to destabilize the fortress of Protestant truth, they are scholars sharing Luther’s objective of arriving at the Biblical truth. The very thing addressed in VFC is being addressed anew today: do we look to tradition or to the Bible for the definitive Christian truth? The answer among today’s finest scholar’s is the answer to which Luther himself came: the Bible is the source. Nevertheless, today’s work is being done standing on the shoulder of giants like Luther and Calvin, who, unlike the modern western theologian, were risking their very lives in issuing their challenge to tradition.

Reluctant revolutionary that he was, Luther knew that he was gambling with his very life in publishing Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen. The knowledge that Luther was essentially painting a target on his back by publishing such a revolutionary treatise makes VFC all the more intriguing and powerful. The question of whether the Reformation was essentially social reform or genuine religious fervor at its core is worthy of investigation, and many good scholars have dedicated their careers to just this question. As for Luther’s reasons, they seem quite clear. Luther was not most concerned with worldly change, but rather with eternal change. For Luther the Reformation was about the truth. VFC does not encourage civil disobedience, neither does it place serious demands for social reform. The objective of this treatise is to teach the individual to flee from the institutional, communal soteriological construct that Luther genuinely believed could only disappoint. VFC rejects the demands of what Luther found to be
an unbiblical God and encourages the individual to run to Christ in faith that His righteousness is all-sufficient in the face of the individuals failure. In VFC mankind can once again walk with God in the cool of the day without fear of being rejected and condemned. *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* is the call to come home to *Paradies*. It is the Return to Eden.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Triumph des Willens*, Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Universum Film AG. 1935. DVD.


READING LIST


Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972, Print.


