

# The Christian Life Justified: Luther's Theology of Mercy in the *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*

By Jason M. Gehrke

Rather than derive an ethical system from the Law of God, in the *Treatise on Christian Liberty* Luther preached a theology of mercy that looks solely to Christ. Because the sinner has no mercy to give, he always fails to love his neighbor, Luther says. But when the sinner is freed from the Law through the preaching of the Gospel, he becomes a new man, like unto the Incarnate Christ, who though Lord of all, showed mercy to sinners by making himself a servant of every man. By the Gospel, the Christian man is freed from the ordinary claims of distributive justice. He does not seek his due because the Word of God grants him that which is most needful; being justified, he is made the most dutiful servant of every man. According to Luther, the Christian man's service of mercy is not his own. Derived from the Gospel, it is a vicarious mercy given through the Word. Thus, Luther's theology of mercy preaches the Gospel of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone, apart from works of the Law. As Luther's treatise explains, the Law does not create or effect forgiveness and thereby mercy among men. Received by faith, God's Word of justification is the only source of blessing, a well of mercy — according to Luther “a living font [which] springs up unto life eternal.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Law in Luther's Theology of Mercy

Luther's theology of mercy begins with an acute recognition of man's total incapacity to do good apart from Christ. He does not resort to the Law for ethical precepts. Instead, Luther acknowledged the “determinative aspect of human nature which secular ethical systems tend to ignore, play down, or deny: sin.”<sup>2</sup> No external work or deed (*negotio et opus*) can change this condition. Man must become good before he can do any good work. Luther puts it this way:

These two sayings are surely true, ‘Good works do not make a man good, but a good man does good works; Evil works do not make a man evil, but an evil man does evil works.’ Thus, it is always needed that the material or substance be good before all good works; and all good works follow and issue forth from the good substance.<sup>3</sup>

Quoting Matthew 7, Luther drew his argument directly from Jesus, “A bad tree does not produce good fruit; a good tree does not produce bad fruit.”<sup>4</sup> The sinner cannot make himself to serve his neighbor because he cannot change what he is. “Good works are excluded . . . precisely because human nature (that is the moral self) is powerless to perform them.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, no man can perform works of mercy until he is set free from the Law; while a sinner, he can do no good thing.

In Luther's treatment, the Law actually prevents any truly merciful deed. It drives a sinner not outward, toward his neighbor, but ever deeper into his own self-interested efforts. For works done to satisfy the Law ultimately seek the good of the doer, not of the neighbor. As Werner Elert explained Luther's teaching, “Where

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1 Martin Luther, *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*, Weimar Edition vol. 7, 49-50.

2 **NB:** It is not my purpose to offer a comprehensive presentation of Luther's whole theology. Here, I wish only to delve into this *Treatise*, which seems remarkably neglected, submitting the findings as one helpful piece among Luther's vast corpus. For more on Luther's ethics one certainly must consider his later works, and important scholars of Luther such as Gustaf Wingren, Oswald Bayer, Eberhard Jungel et. al.

Alistair McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 122.

3 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 61. *Vera itaque sunt haec duo verba ‘Bona opera non faciunt bonum virum, sed bonus facit bona opera; Mala opera non faciunt malum virum, sed malus vir facit mala opera.’ Ita ut semper oporteat ipsam substantiam seu personam esse bonam ante omnia opera bona et opera bona sequi et provenire ex bona persona.*

4 **NB:** Luther uses *substantia* and *persona*, which translates *hypostasis*, the term used of the two natures in Christ in the Nicene Creed. This Christological tone becomes increasingly explicit later in the *Treatise*.

Ibid. *Sicut et Christus dicit ‘Mala arbor non facit bonos fructus, Bona arboron facit malos fructus’.*

5 Thomas M. McDonough, *The Law and the Gospel in Luther* (Oxford: University Press, 1963), 27.

there is knowledge of sin, man's thinking . . . is directed toward himself."<sup>6</sup> By the law, the sinner is bound to his own sin, held captive by his own need for life and salvation. This is the dreaded reality of life under the Law: With its true and holy accusations, the Law shackles a man in fruitless works of self-devotion. Each failed attempt compounds the very burden the sinner had tried to lift. The Law ultimately presses him to despair and cease his impotent efforts altogether. Pursued to its conclusion, a theology of mercy based upon the Law ends in the reckless embrace of self-serving labors — the antithesis of mercy's gifts.

Reading Luther it might be easy to conceive of the Law as bad and the Gospel as good — to consider the Law as contrary to the work of God. For Luther, however, this was not so. Instead, Luther believed God uses the Law as His instrument in driving the sinner to Himself. The Commandments increase sin only because they cannot effect what they demand:

The commandments teach indeed good things, but the things which are taught do not immediately come about. They show what we must do, but the virtue of doing they do not give. For this purpose they were appointed, to show man to himself so that through them he might recognize his own impotence to do good and despair of his own power.<sup>7</sup>

Far from opposing God's work in salvation, Luther says that it is actually God who condemns by the Law in order to press the sinner into an inescapable snare where he learns that all things are of God alone; the Law is not separate nor opposed to God's work in salvation. Luther writes,

When humiliated and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he discovers nothing in himself by which he can be justified and saved, this second part of Scripture comes forth, the Promises of God, which announce the glory of God and say, 'If you wish to fulfill the Law . . . believe in Christ, in whom is promised to you, grace, peace, liberty and all things; if you believe you will have, if you do not believe you will lack.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Luther teaches that the dreaded cycle of trial and failure is established by God to drive the sinner outside of himself and his own needs toward faith in Christ. God condemns by the Law in order to justify by the Gospel.

Recognizing God's gracious purpose in crushing with the Law, Luther argues that works done in service to the Law cannot improve a man's condition. Taught by Paul, Luther explains that righteousness comes not by works, but by faith alone,

Because God the Father has placed all things under faith so that whoever has this has all things, and whoever does not have it will have nothing. Likewise, He encloses all [sins] under unbelief that He might have mercy on all, as Romans 11 says. The promises of God give what the commandments demand and they fulfill what the Law bids, with the result that *all things are of God alone, both the commandments and the fulfillment of them. He Himself alone commands what alone He fulfills* [emphasis mine].<sup>9</sup>

Crushing with the Law, God tears down the idol of man's miserable deeds and replaces it with faith in His promise. In this way, God asserts Himself as the only true God. He alone commands, says Luther, He alone fulfills.

While he remains under the Law, a man has neither the will nor the capacity to be righteous and thus to love and serve his neighbor. "We are sinners," as McGrath notes, "and any ethical system that fails to take the sinfulness of humanity with full seriousness must have its right to call itself Christian challenged."<sup>10</sup> If the Christian, once

6 Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 34.

7 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 52. *Praecepta docent quidem bona, sed non statim fiunt quae docta sunt: ostendunt enim, quid facere nos oporteat, sed virtutem faciendi non donant. In hoc autem sunt ordinata, ut hominem sibi ipsi ostendant, per quae suam impotentiam ad bonum cognoscat et de suis viribus desperet.*

8 *Ibid.*, 53. . . . *tum vere humiliatus et in nihilum redactus coram oculis suis non invenit in seipso, quo justificetur et salvus fiat. Hic altera scripturae adest, Promissa dei, quae annunciant gloriam dei et dicunt, 'Si vis legem implere . . . Crede in Christum, in quo promittuntur tibi gratia, pax, libertas et omnia, si credis, habebis, si non credis, carebis'.*

9 *Ibid.*, 53. . . . *quia duos pater omnia in fide posuit, ut quisquis hanc habuerit omnia habeat, qui non habuerit nihil habeat. Concluit enim omnia sub incredulitate, ut omnium misereatur, Ro. 11. Sic promissa dei hoc donant, quod praecepta exigent, et implent quod lex iubet ut omnia sint solius dei, tam praecepta et plenitudo eorum. Ipse solus praecipit, solus quoque implet.*

10 **NB:** AE, vol. 31, 349 translates "*concluit enim omnia sub incredulitate,*" with "[God] has consigned all men to disobedience." McGrath, *Justification by faith*, 122.

freed, exchanges the Gospel for an ethical system based on the Law, he establishes once again both the Law and the idol of works in place of the God-man who is the only true source of mercy. To be justified by Christ and then to live by the Law is to deny the justification. This is a total repudiation of the Gospel. The Law must pass away so that the Christian man may live in Christ. Luther preached the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ alone as the sole foundation for a Christian life of mercy. “Justification,” for Luther, “establishes a relationship of servant-hood between the believer and any who cross his path. It is in other words, a socially transformative doctrine.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, in his “brief summa of the Christian life,” Luther teaches a service of mercy derived solely from the free justification of the sinner for Christ’s sake.<sup>12</sup>

### A Two-Fold Man

When the Gospel-proclamation sets man free from the Law, it creates a new man who mirrors the mystery of the incarnation. Luther opens *On Christian Liberty* with two seemingly contradictory propositions regarding the Christian man:

The Christian man, lord of all, is most free, subject to no one.

The Christian man, servant of all, is most dutiful, subject to everyone.<sup>13</sup>

Luther derived his theses directly from Paul’s description of Christ in Philippians 2. The Christian man lives as his Savior, Luther says, who “though Lord of all, being born from a woman was made under the Law, at once free and a servant (*simul liber et servus*), at once in the form of God and in the form of a man.”<sup>14</sup> This Pauline statement encompasses Luther’s entire portrait of the Christian life and divides the *On Christian Liberty* into two discussions of the “interior” and “exterior” man. The Christian man, insofar as he is interior, is lord of all. But when the interior man manifests his lordship outwardly, he acts as a completely free and therefore utterly dutiful servant of all. The person and work of Christ define him in every sphere of life.

At first glance, one might easily conceive Luther’s distinction in a platonic or dualistic sense, dividing the interior from the exterior man. But Luther was not using the classical anthropology, holding the soul as free because it is soul and the body a slave because it is body. He does not say that the Christian man has two natures, but that he “has [one] two-fold nature.”<sup>15</sup> Luther certainly used the parlance of 16th century theology, but his distinction does not promote any kind of liberation-through-inwardness. Luther is unique in this sense, “Just as he assigns human freedom (*libertas*), so also he assigns human bondage (*servitudo*) to the inner man.”<sup>16</sup> Luther himself makes the point, “Nothing external . . . possesses anything of moment either for producing Christian righteousness or liberty, just as neither its unrighteousness or servitude.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, Luther’s distinction was not one of ontology. He did not teach that two autonomous selves live in the justified man — one of body, the other soul. He was only explaining how the one justified man relates both inwardly and externally, and therefore depends on one thing inwardly, another according to his outer man. Luther says:

What is it able to profit the soul, if the body does well . . . if it eats, drinks and goes about free, since in these things even the most impious slaves of every wickedness may prosper? Again, how can any evil condition

11 Carl Trueman, *Simul Peccator et Justus: Martin Luther and Justification*, In. Bruce L. McCormack (ed), *Justification in Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2006), 95.

12 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 48. Introducing *de Libertate Christiana* to Leo X, Luther called the work a “*summa vitae Christiana . . . compendio congesta*.” It seems that Luther himself saw the treatise as a kind of ethical writing.

13 Ibid., 49. *Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus nulli subjectus; Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subjectus*.

14 Ibid., 50. *Sic et Christus, quanquam omnium dominus, factus tamen ex muliere, factus est sub lege, simul liber et servus, simul in forma dei et in forma servi*.

15 Ibid., 50. *Homo enim duplici constat natura, spirituli et corporali*.

16 Eberhard Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian: Luther’s Significance for Contemporary Theology* (trans) by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 58. Jungel discusses how certain scholars have found in Luther’s distinction an adherence to platonic dualism that might justify an accusation of Antinomianism. Although their arguments cannot be treated here comprehensively, it is important to clarify what Luther was saying for well-informed readers. See Jungel for a more comprehensive presentation of secondary scholarship on the issue.

17 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 50. *Et constat, nullam prorsus rerum externum . . . aliquid habere momenti ad iustitiam aut libertatem Christianam, sicut nec ad iniustitiam aut servitutem parandam*.

of the body, whether captivity or starvation or any other . . . hurt the soul, since even the most pious . . . consciences are vexed by these things? Neither of these circumstances pertain to the righteousness or liberty of the soul.<sup>18</sup>

With this logic, Luther proves his distinction in order to show how the interior man relates to God. As Eberhard Jungel explains, “The soul is human life in its relation to God, and as such desires to be distinguished from its relation to everything else.”<sup>19</sup> Luther says the interior man can relate to God only through the Word; the exterior man needs the bodily world. Living by the Gospel, the interior man is utterly free simply because no external thing can affect his relation to the Word.

Luther’s assertion elucidates his statements regarding good works and the good man. Just as the righteous and free man cannot be harmed or improved either by wrongs committed against him or favors done him in the body, so doing external works cannot make the sinful man free or good. The tree does not grow on the fruit, but the fruit on the tree; outward conditions do not make a man either good or evil. Far from platonic dualism, Luther ascribes utter liberty to the interior man only because the interior man lives on the Word of God alone:

One thing, and this alone, is required for life, righteousness, and Christian liberty. And this is the most-holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ. Just as Christ says in John 9 ‘I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me will never die;’ . . . and Matthew 4, ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word, which proceeds from the mouth of God.’<sup>20</sup>

Luther draws his anthropology from Scripture: In Christ’s distinction between *Word* and *bread* (Matthew 4), he finds both the distinction between interior and exterior man, and an identification of their respective needs. The exterior man may profit from bread; the interior man uses only the Gospel. As in Luther’s thought, the two-fold man and his needs are not *divided* but are certainly *distinguished* even in the mind of Christ. Drawing on John 9, he identified the *Evangelium Christi* with Christ himself. Because Christ works through the Gospel, Luther could say that it brings everything needful. Luther writes:

Having this Word [the interior man] is rich, lacking nothing, since it is a Word of life (*cum sit verbum vitae*), of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of virtue, of grace, of glory and every good *inestimably* [emphasis mine].<sup>21</sup>

Deriving his Lordship from the Gospel, the interior man is not *Dominus omnium* in a bodily sense as though free from political authority, a king commanding what he wills. Rather, he is a perfectly free lord of all precisely because he has, and cannot lose, the only thing that can do him good, the Word of God. By the Gospel alone, “the Christian man . . . is magnified above all things, so that by a *spiritual power* he is lord of all, with the result that nothing external in any way may do him harm, nay more, all things, subjected to him, *are compelled to serve for his salvation* [emphasis mine].”<sup>22</sup> The Christian man’s lordship is not of external things; it is a spiritual power received through the Word, by which God subjects all things to serve him eternally. Luther stood once again on firm exegetical ground, invoking Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 3, “All things work together for the good of the elect;” and again, “All things are yours, either death or life, whether things present or things to come, moreover you belong to Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Thus in his assertion of freedom and lordship, Luther confesses nothing else than the certainty of eternal

18 Ibid., 50. *Quid enim prodesse queat animae, si corpus bene habeat . . . edat bibat agatque ut libuerit, cum iis rebus floreat etiam impiissimi omnium scelerum servi? Rursus, quod obfuerit animae mala valetudo aut captivitas aut fames quodvis incommodum externum, cum iis rebus vexentur etiam piissimi puraque conscientia liberrimi? Neutra harum rerum pertingit ad animae sive libertatem sive servitatem.*

19 Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 58

20 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 50. *Una re eaque sola opus est ad vitam, iustitiam et libertatem Christianam. Ea est sacrosanctum verbum dei, Evangelium Christi, sicut dicit Joh. xi. ‘Ego sum resurrectio et vita, qui credit in me non morietur in aeternum’ . . . et Matt. iv ‘Non in solo pane vivit homo, sed in omni verbo, quod procedit ab ore dei.’*

21 Ibid., 51. *Habens autem verbum dives est, nullius egens, cum sit verbum vitae, veritatis, lucis, pacis, iustitiae, salutis, gaudii, libertatis, sapientiae, virtutis, gratiae, gloriae et omnis boni inaestimabiliter.*

22 Ibid., 57. *Christianus . . . magnificetur super omnia, ut spirituali potentia prorsus dominus sit, ita ut nulla omnino rerum possit ei quicquam nocere, immo omnia ei subiecta cogunter servire ad salutem.*

23 Ibid., 57. *Sic Paulus Rom. 8. dicit ‘Omnia cooperunter in bonum electis.’ Item 1 Cor. 3, ‘Omnia vestra, sive mors sive vita, sive instantia sive future, vos autem Christi.’*

life and of the Creator's sure protection unto that end. Neither revolutionary nor dualistic, it is simply an incisive explanation of Pauline doctrine. The Christian has the Word; he will live and God will make all things to serve his salvation.

Luther's exposition of the interior man's need for the Word leads simultaneously to his assertion that justification by works will drive a man to utter despair, and that a man is saved *sola fide*. Here again, Luther did not draw from his own mind, but found his teaching firmly rooted in Scripture. Having exulted in the Word (as seen above) Luther recalls that all its gifts come freely, when "one believes,"

For *faith alone* is a saving (*salutaris*) and effective (*efficax*) use of the Word of God, as Rom. 10 says, 'If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and *believe in your heart* that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved [emphasis mine].<sup>24</sup>

Because the Word alone can profit the soul, and because faith alone receives the Word, external works of righteousness are useless to the interior man. Performed under the Law, they actually damage the soul for whom only the Word gives life. Commanding self-justification through works sets an impossible task for the interior man because the soul cannot relate to God or itself except through the Word; and this it only grasps *per fidem*. The interior man does not live by eating bread with his mouth, but only by hearing the Word. Faith alone receives the Word and makes the soul righteous. "The Righteous man shall live by faith," Luther notes. "The Word of God is not able to be honored or taken up by means of any works, but by faith alone. Therefore, it is clear that the soul has need for the Word alone for life and righteousness, so that by faith alone and not by works is a man justified."<sup>25</sup> Works cannot help the interior man because works do not receive the Word. Thus, in Luther's thought, "Faith effects the *meaning* of the distinction between the inward and the outer man."<sup>26</sup> Faith makes total conquest of the Law and works.

According to Luther, the Word of God establishes by faith a reciprocity between God and the soul; faith denies itself and gives back to God what rightly belongs to Him. In return, God honors faith by giving to it every good thing. The Word makes the soul true, so that the interior man confesses that God is true in His condemnation of sin, and equally true when He promises mercy by the Gospel. Through the gift of faith, the sinful man abandons his Adamic lust to be God for himself and is made truly righteous precisely in confessing that God alone is true and righteous. God then honors faith with the declaration of righteousness to which faith clings. Luther says,

When God sees that truth is bestowed (*tribui*) to Himself, and that through the faith of our heart He is honored with such great honor . . . in return He Himself honors us, bestowing (*tribuens*) to us truth and righteousness on account of this faith. Faith thus makes true and righteous, returning to God what is His own; and therefore, in return, God gives back [to faith] the glory of our righteousness.<sup>27</sup>

For Luther, faith is not any kind of work or merit that earns salvation; it is the creation of God's Word through Law and Gospel, by which He drives a man to despair and cry out for the righteousness that only God can give. True to form, Luther holds closely to Scripture in this, noting 1 Kings 2, "Whoever honors me, him I will glorify; whoever slights me, they will be inglorious."<sup>28</sup> Faith simply relies on God's promise.

Luther's account of the *virtus* of faith should not be mistaken for any kind of latent anthropocentrism. By faith, the Christian man recognizes both the commandments and the promises, confesses God to be God, and despairs of his own works only because faith receives the Word. Faith keeps the First Commandment precisely because it admits that "all things are of God alone, both the commandments and the fulfillment of them."<sup>29</sup> Faith is righteous not by virtue of its own, but only by the Word. Luther says,

24 Ibid., 51. . . . *si crederit praedictioni. Fides enim sola est salutaris et efficax usus verbi dei, Ro. 10., 'Si confitearis ore tuo Ihesum esse dominum, et corde tuo credideris, quod deus illum suscitavit a mortuis, salvus eris.*

25 Ibid., 51. Luther quotes Paul, 'Justus ex fide sua vivet.' *Neque enim verbum dei operibus ullis, sed sola fide suscipi et coli potest. Ideo clarum est, ut solo verbo anima opus habet, ad vitam et iustitiam, ita sola fide et nullis operibus iustificatur.*

26 Eberhard Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 75.

27 Luther., *de Libertate Christiana*, 54. *Ubi autem deus videt, veritatem sibi tribui et fide cordis nostri se honorari tanto honore . . . Rursus et ipse nos honorat, tribuens et nobis veritatem et iustitiam propter hanc fidem. Fides enim facit veritatem et iustitiam, reddens deo suum, ideo rursus reddit deus iustitiae nostrae gloriam.*

28 Ibid., 53. *Quicumque honorificat me, glorificabo eum, Qui vero contemnunt me, erunt ignobiles.*

29 Ibid. *ut sint omnia solius dei, tam praecepta et plenitudo eorum.*

Since these promises of God are holy words, true, righteous, free, pacifying, and filled with total goodness, it happens that the soul is joined to these things; nay more, it is absorbed, so that it does not merely participate, but is soaked and inebriated with their every virtue . . . In this way, the soul, through faith alone . . . from the Word of God is justified, is sanctified, is made true, is pacified, is liberated, is filled and is truly made the child of God [emphasis mine].<sup>30</sup>

The same Word that vivifies the inner man drives him outward toward his neighbor. Luther never divided the bifold nature of the Christian. Having expounded the righteousness of faith that makes a Christian free from the Law and lord of all, Luther turned to the Christian's external life. "The inner man is the person turned inward by the accosting word, and in the event of this turning inward is turned away from the self. The inward man exists in that change from within toward the outside."<sup>31</sup> Sustained by the Gospel, the interior man expresses himself outwardly in free service to his neighbor.

### The Inner Man's Outward Life

Luther most fully developed the ethical implications of justification when he explained the external life of the Christian man — the outward expression of the man who is created anew by the Word of the Gospel. The Christian man's exterior life draws strength from the Word that is possessed inwardly by faith. "Luther makes clear that this invisible, spiritual freedom and lordship is not an entity unrelated to the visible world."<sup>32</sup> Thus, the inner man manifests his likeness to the Word that makes him a righteous creation of God. Driven outward by the Word, the Christian man goes forth in the first-fruits of the Spirit. "To this part pertains [Luther's second proposition]: the Christian man is a servant of all and subject to everyone." Incomplete until "the last day of the resurrection of the dead . . . with joy and thanks to God [the exterior man] serves his neighbor with unsubdued charity (*libera charitate*)."<sup>33</sup> The Christian man is united with himself in this life of free service. His external servitude directly expresses the interior liberty that is "created through faith and rejoices and is delighted on account of Christ."<sup>33</sup>

Luther's description pours the justified man into a Christological mold. His exposition of the *duplex natura* in the Christian man derives directly from Paul's description of Christ in Philippians 2. When Jesus takes away sin and imparts faith by the Gospel, the Christian man is created anew in His image. The Christian and Christ are grafted into one flesh by the "wedding ring of faith." The Christian man's external life expresses the *mera misericordia Dei*, which makes and animates his interior being. His lordship and liberty in the present life are manifest externally in the same paradoxical *libera charitas* that Christ rendered to the world: The Christian man is made a servant not by the Law, but by the Gospel received in faith. As Luther says,

Faith marries the soul with Christ as a bridegroom with a bride. And by this *sacramentum* . . . Christ and the soul are made *into one flesh* . . . All their possessions become common, both the good and the evil, so that whatever Christ has the believing soul is able to take as its own, and whatever the soul has Christ adopts as his very own . . . For if He is a bridegroom He must receive those things which are His bride's, and at the same time impart His own possessions to the bride [emphasis mine].<sup>34</sup>

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30 Ibid. *Cum haec promissa dei sint verba sancta, vera, iusta, libera, pacata et universa bonitate plena, fit ut anima, quae firma fide illis adheret, sic eis uniatur, immo penitus absorbeatur, ut non modo participet sed saturetur et inebrietur omni virtute eorum . . . Hoc modo anima per fidem solam, e operibus, e verbo dei iustificatur, sanctificatur, verificatur, pacificatur, liberatur et omni bono repletur vereque filia dei efficitur.*

NB: Even Luther's grammar reflects his passive understanding of faith's relation to the Word. Faith does not "participet" actively, but rather "absorbeatur", etc., passively. Luther uses language very precisely here, as throughout the entire treatise. His passive usage makes a theological assertion about the nature of faith and the work of God. It should not be overlooked or smoothed out in translation.

31 Eberhard Jungel. *The Freedom of a Christian*, 63.

32 Ibid., 73.

33 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 59-60. *Ad hanc partem pertinet [exterior homo], quod supra positum est, Christianum esse omnium servum et omnibus subiectum . . . enim interior homo conformis deo et ad imaginem dei creatus per fidem et gaudet et iucundatur propter Christum . . . ut gaudio et gratis deo serviat in libera charitate.*

NB: I translate *libera* with "unsubdued" above only to avoid the debauched connotation that "free love" bears in an American context. Ordinarily, "free" is a perfectly good rendering.

34 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 54-55. *Quo [connective qui=et ea] sacramento . . . Christus et anima efficiuntur una caro . . . et omnia eorum communia fieri tam bono quam mala, ut, quaecunque Christus habet, de iis tanquam suis praesumere . . . Et quaecunque animae sunt, ea sibi arroget Christus tanquam sua . . . oportet enim eum, si sponsus est, ea simul quae sponsa habet acceptare et ea quae sua sunt sponsae impartire.*

The Christian man is made one flesh in Christ by the “*annulum fidei*,” the wedding ring of faith that receives only the Word of forgiveness.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Luther personalized the biblical analogy, finding in marriage a legal metaphor. His expression of unity with Christ was not any kind of eroticism; the marriage is still affected by God’s Word. In Luther’s thought, the Christian’s unity with Christ is a legal relationship to which Christ joins himself as a bridegroom to his bride. The bride — the justified soul in this case — rightfully owns the mercy of Christ because Christ freely takes her sins as His own property. From this exchange, the Christian receives those goods that are offered to the neighbor. Therefore, the Christian life of servitude derives from Christ’s justification; it communicates only what it receives from the Lord.

Luther uses the legal metaphor of marriage in order to explain the Christological character of the justified man, which provides the form and substance of his life’s activity. Carl Trueman writes in a similar vein, saying that “[Luther’s] notion of union with Christ in *the Freedom of a Christian Man* gives a Christological, and therefore crucicentric, context for understanding what Luther means in terms of lordship, authority, and power.”<sup>36</sup> The Christian receives his motivation, even his very deeds themselves from the Gospel. Christ is the whole substance of his person. Because “[Christ] is the substance of [the Christian man’s] existence before God, what happened to Christ will also happen to [him]; [Christ] is the human being par excellence.”<sup>37</sup> It is not surprising in this light that the freedom of a Christian man is expressed outwardly in servitude, just as Christ displayed his Lordship by freely choosing the death of a slave. Luther is not making Christ into a new Law for the Christian so that he finds in the example of Christ a “second use of the Gospel.” His assertion is only that Christ’s gift of the Gospel is the substance of the Christian man’s service. Thus, Luther says,

The good things which we have from God flow from one onto another and become common, so that every-one puts on his neighbor and thus clothes himself in his neighbor, as if he himself were in [his neighbor’s] place. From Christ, who has put us on as if he were what we are, they have flowed and do flow onto us<sup>38</sup>

The Christian man’s good works derive from, and ultimately express the Gospel, because the Christian man only possesses what is received from Christ through the Gospel.

Always supplying the need now for the sake of life *then*, Christian mercy begins and ends with the Gospel of justification. Because the Christian man gives what he receives from Christ, his service cannot be one of Law or of his own works. He gives nothing else than what Jesus bestows in the Gospel. His work necessarily aims at the eternal good of the neighbor because what he gives is not his own; it is only what Christ has given. The Christian man acts, therefore, as Christ acted; he cannot separate his good deeds from the Gospel. As Luther says,

[Because the gifts of God] flow from us onto those who have need for them, I should lay before God my faith *for the covering over and interceding for the sins of my neighbor*, which I receive upon myself, so that *I labor and serve in them* as if they were properly my own: thus, Christ has done for us [emphasis mine].<sup>39</sup>

Luther’s focus on the Gospel makes justification not an excuse for doing nothing bodily or temporal, but rather, quite the opposite. Justification is most emphatically expressed through bodily, earthly, incarnated service, precisely because that is how Christ bestowed it — through his bodily death and resurrection. Any account of Luther’s ethics must hold this Christological model closely in view.

It seems that many worthy authors, while recognizing the importance of justification in Luther’s theology, have often failed to grasp its full implications. Paul Althaus, for example, begins his important work, *Luther’s Ethics*,

35 Ibid., 69. . . . *fit, ut talis persona peccata, mortem, infernum sponsae et propter annulum fidei sibi communia.*

36 Carl Trueman, *Simul Peccator et Justus*, 79. See note 11.

37 H.J. Iwand, “The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther,” *Lutheran Quarterly Review*, 21, No. 3 (2007), 445.

38 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 69. . . . *ut quae ex deo habemus bona fluunt ex uno in alium et communia fiunt, ut unus quisque proximum suum induat et erga eum sic sibi gerat, ac si ipse esset in loco illius. E Christo fluxerunt et fluunt in nos, qui nos sic induit et pro nobis egit, ac si ipse esset quod nos sumus.*

39 Ibid., *E nobis fluunt in eos, qui eis opus habent, adeo ut et fidem et iustitiam meam oportea coram deo poni pro tegendis et deprecandis proximi peccatis, quae super me accipiam, et ita in eis laborem et serviam, ac si mea propria essent: sic enim Christus nobis fecit.*

**NB:** Luther’s Christological paradigm of the Christian life shows through strongly in this paragraph. The “*Ex deo fluunt . . . E Christo fluunt . . . E Nobis fluunt. sicut Christus nobis fecit*” arrangement draws a syntactic parallel that more emphatically asserts Luther’s point. Again, the “*ac si ipse esset . . . ac si mea essent*” construction serves the same purpose. Luther is being very careful with his language and terms in this treatise, emphasizing the Christological character of his anthropology.

with the resounding statement that, “justification is both the presupposition and the source of the Christian life.” Certainly he affirms that in justification, “man’s relationship to the Law is basically changed.”<sup>40</sup> But for Althaus the change is one of man’s perspective. Whereas once man viewed the Law as a morbid, condemning thing, “Now man is able to love God’s law with his whole heart just as he loves God himself — for the content of the Law is the form and expression of the nature of God.”<sup>41</sup> Likewise, McGrath, who has written many good books promoting Luther’s understanding of justification, still conceives of the Christian life as one of obedience to the Law. For McGrath, “Justification brings about a new obedience — an obedience that would not be conceivable before our justification and that ultimately rests on the grace of God.”<sup>42</sup> In McGrath’s estimation, justification does not primarily set aside and set free from the Law, but rather empowers for a life of fulfilling the Law, aided by the grace of God.

For Luther, however, the form and expression of God’s nature is nothing else than the person of Jesus Christ. Luther surely does not deny the new obedience. Indeed, his writing does quite the opposite. Nonetheless, the language of obeying and fulfilling the Law does not primarily animate Luther’s exposition of the Christian life. Instead, Luther emphasizes the free service of the righteous man for whom there is no Law.

He says,

See (*ecce*) this is truly the Christian life, here truly faith is effective through love! That is, with joy and love [the Christian man] goes forth in the work of perfectly free servitude, in which he serves another willingly and graciously, satisfied abundantly with the wealth and richness of his own faith.<sup>43</sup>

For Luther, the gospel of justification does not produce good works by giving the sinner a new orientation toward the Law. The Law is not the “revelation of God’s nature.” God’s nature is revealed only through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ and the gospel of forgiveness. The Christian man responds to justification with service toward his neighbor precisely because he no longer thinks of the Law at all. The Christian man has no use for the Law because by faith he receives the abundant mercy of his Savior, which he shares *gratis et sponte*, without limit. Quoting Paul, Luther continually exclaims,

For the Christian man, his own faith is sufficient for all things. He will not have need for works in order to be justified. And if for works he has no need, neither for the law does he have any need: if he has no need for the Law, certainly he is free from the Law and it is true, ‘*the Law was not put down for the righteous.*’ (1 Tim 1:9) [emphasis mine].<sup>44</sup>

For Luther, justification is the pure opposite of the Law. It constitutes the Christian life not by empowering the Christian to actually fulfill the Law, but by freeing him from the Law (insofar as he is Christian) with its legal demands. Christ, having removed the Law by the Word of the Gospel replaces its impossible dictates with His own mercy, given without end (*abunde*).

Any veneration of the Law on account of faith is not faithful to Luther’s theology of justification, grace, Christian liberty, or mercy. For Luther, it is of the essence of faith to make free from the Law — that is, to justify, to remove the Law, and to set in its place the Word of the Gospel. When upheld in place of the Gospel, the Law is the power of sin, the enemy of faith; likewise, faith is death to the Law, the virtue of justification, righteousness and Christian liberty. For justification creates faith, removing any need for the Law to reveal righteousness or good works.

Therefore, a theology of mercy based upon the Law’s commands will always prove itself a theology of minimalism. The man who constructs an ethical system from the Law rather than simply receiving his good works from Christ, finally chooses the lesser over the greater: Mercy described by the Law will always be confined by it. Thus, for Luther, “Paul’s theology, with its announcement of the justification of the godless sets in the place of ‘ethics’ a doctrine of ‘charisms’.”<sup>45</sup> The Christian receives mercy from a living well of grace that knows no bounds; it ceases

40 Paul Althaus, *Luther’s Ethics*, (trans.) by Robert C. Schulz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 3.

41 *Ibid.*, 11-12.

42 McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, 117.

43 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana*, 64. *Ecce haec est vere Christiana vita, hic vere fides efficax est per dilectionem, hoc est, cum gaudio et dilectione prodit in opus servitutis liberrimae, qua alteri gratis et sponte servit, ipsa abunde satuta fidei suae plenitudine et opulentia.*

44 *Ibid.*, 53. *Homini Christiano suam fidem sufficere pro omnibus nec operibus ei opus fore, ut justificetur: quod si operibus non habet opus, nec lege opus habet: si lege non habet opus, certe liber est a lege, verumque est ‘iusto non est lex posita’.*

45 Roy A. Harrisville, “The Life and Work of Ernst Kasemann,” *Lutheran Quarterly Review* 21, No. 3 (2007), 311.

at nothing less than the neighbor's every need. By it, Christ makes a true servant — a man unfettered by the need to justify himself. The Christian man takes no respect of persons; he demands no gratitude for his effort. Living by the Gospel, the Christian man serves his neighbor with that same grace that is poured onto him through the Word of Christ. He gives only what is received; the Word leaves nothing but its own relentless service of mercy.

Clinging to the Word by faith, the Christian finally is freed from the task of self-justification. Freed by the mercy of God — the necessary element in any true work of mercy, the very thing the sinner could not earn by his own merit — the Christian is finally able to turn away from himself, toward the needs of his neighbor. Receiving his own liberty, the Christian relinquishes demands he might have made upon another man; he forgives sins committed against him. Showing the mercy of Christ, he even surpasses the Law's demands. Luther's much later explanation in the *Small Catechism* offers a prime example of this Christian service of mercy. More than simply abstain from murder, Luther says, the Christian man "helps and supports [his neighbor] in every physical need."<sup>46</sup> Being freed, the Christian man does not look to the Law as guide for *his own* works, but simply communicates *Christ's work*, which he receives from the Word by faith. As Luther says, "This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which causes not that we become lazy or live wickedly, but rather that no one at all has need of the Law for righteousness or salvation."<sup>47</sup> Faith receives Christ's mercy and brings it to bear in the life of one's neighbor.

## Conclusion

That men might obtain this mercy, Luther's "*summa* of the whole Christian life," calls for pure preaching of the Word. According to Luther, "Christ was not sent for any other *officium* than of the Word . . . and the Episcopal [offices] were called and instituted for nothing except the ministry of the Word."<sup>48</sup> The Christian man actually receives a visible and audible declaration of his own righteousness when the Gospel is rightly preached. Throughout the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*, Luther puts greatest emphasis on the need for true preaching. "To have preached Christ is to have nourished the soul, to have justified, and to have made free," Luther writes. Recognizing that "Christian ethics takes place beyond a tight scheme of 'is' and 'ought,' of fact and value, of 'description' and 'prescription,'" Luther did not set out any kind of ethical system for Christian living.<sup>49</sup> Instead, he begged only this, "that Christ be preached unto the end that faith in him be established — not that He simply may be Christ, but that he may be Christ for you and for me, so that what is said of Him may be worked in us."<sup>50</sup> Luther knew that the Law does not sanctify, but only the Gospel of Christ bestowed through preaching. This preaching will always include proclamation of the Law in order to drown the Old Adam. Yet Adam must not be confused with the Christian man who lives by faith; he must not be starved of the Word or there is no forgiveness and no mercy. Ultimately, Luther's theology of mercy calls for pure preaching of the Gospel of justification; the Christian life and every good depend upon it. Where there is this preaching, there is life, salvation, mercy, peace and every good thing.

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46 Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 10. Luther's theology in the *Small Catechism*, especially his presentation of the Ten Commandments certainly reflects his early thought in the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*.

47 Luther, *Tractatus de Libertate Christiana*, 53. *Atque haec est Christiana illa libertas, fides nostra, quae facit, ut ociosi simus aut male vivamus, sed ne cuiquam opus sit lege aut operibus ad iustitiam et salutem.*

48 Ibid., 51.— . . . *ut ps. 106 'Misit verbum suum sanavit eos' . . . Neque Christus ad aliud officium missus est quam verbi, Et Apostolicus, Episcopalis . . . non nisi in verbi ministerium vocatus et institutus est.*

49 Theo A. Boer, "Is Luther's Ethics Christian Ethics?," *Lutheran Quarterly Review*, No. 21 (2007), 404.

50 Luther, *de Libertate Christiana* 58. *Oportet autem, ut eo fine praedicetur, quo fides in eum promoveatur, ut non tantum sit Christus, sed tibi et mihi, et id in nobis operetur, quod de eo dicitur et quod vocatur.*