

Toward a Theology of Mercy: Winning Student Essays for 2008

Volume I

By Peter J. Brock &
Jason M. Gehrke



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– VOLUME I –

*Space to Be Secular: The Thought of Oswald Bayer
as Resource for the Church's Theology of Mercy*

by Peter J. Brock

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

by Jason M. Gehrke



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PREFACE

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has a history of sponsoring the “Toward a Theology of Mercy” essay contest at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. This writing contest was initiated by Rev. Matthew C. Harrison, executive director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, as a way to encourage students to contemplate the church’s corporate life of mercy and thereby stimulate them to think more deeply about the Lutheran theological foundations of this aspect of our life together in Christ Jesus. In this way, future pastors and deaconesses of the church will be better prepared to be compassionate servants well grounded in the confession of the Gospel, equipped for every good work.

The four essays in these two volumes were selected by a panel of judges from the Fort Wayne faculty. Each essayist explores a particular aspect of Lutheran thought and/or history that continues to enliven our contemporary witness and work. Peter J. Brock, a then second-year seminarian, draws on the rich work of the contemporary German Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer to show that the church’s life of mercy is given space to act in between the two eons, the old creation and the new creation. Then first-year seminarian Jason Gehrke examines Luther’s seminal treatise of 1520 on Christian freedom, demonstrating that justification by faith alone liberates the believer for a life of mercy in the world. Then deaconess intern Mary Moerbe uses Luther’s “theology of the cross” from the Heidelberg Thesis of 1518 to scrub Christian caregiving clean from every barnacle of the “theology of glory” so that works of mercy are freed from heroic claims of self-assertion and are allowed to remain acts of faltering humility in service of the suffering. Finally, this collection is rounded out by an essay on

C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Löhe written by then fourth-year seminarian Samuel P. Schuldheisz. Schuldheisz probes the writings of these two 19th century churchmen to gain clarity into the legacy that they have left us: faith receiving God's benefits in Christ and love active in the stewardship of mercy.

Those of us who teach here at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, are rightly proud of these four students and the work they have produced. In their essays we are confident that you will delight in the gifts of scholarship and evangelical clarity that they are even now bringing to the church. We pray that as you are edified by their essays, your own grasp of a truly Lutheran theology of mercy will be deepened and that you will be enlivened to be an instrument of that mercy in this dying world.

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SPACE TO BE SECULAR: THE THOUGHT OF OSWALD BAYER AS RESOURCE FOR THE CHURCH'S THEOLOGY OF MERCY

BY PETER J. BROCK

ABSTRACT

The theology of Oswald Bayer is foundational for the church's corporate life of mercy.¹ The place of the Christian in this life, Bayer argues, is between two eons: the old and the new. Baptism marks a sharp break in a person's life between the old world and the new, but it does not take him out of the old world. Thus, it remains for the church to understand how it is to relate to the old world. Bayer suggests this is understood through Baptism. Not only does the Gospel as communicated through Baptism create a new person and world from old ones, but the Gospel also finds the church in the "old" world and informs how the two are to relate. In this way, Bayer demonstrates the relevance of Luther's teaching for today, explicating the "science of conflict" that, for Bayer, is theology between the two eons. Life in the midst of this conflict is lived in response to a promise: God's "imperative of permission."² This promise creates room for the human freedom in which the church's corporate life of mercy finds expression. Moreover, it gives the church's life of mercy a definite shape and specific worldview, since a person who comprehends the world in this way — as a beggar who lives in response to what has been given — cannot help but be merciful. That is, one will find the merciful works of Christ in one's own life. This truth has far-reaching implications for understanding our humanity, the

¹ I do not give an exhaustive treatment of Oswald Bayer's thought in this essay. This would obviously require a much more significant work than the scope of the present essay permits. In addition to listing works cited, I have included in my bibliography the works of Bayer read in preparation for this piece and thus influential for its contents.

² Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, trans. Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

place of the Christian in the world and the continuous working of God in His creation. In short, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as communicated through performative statements as the incarnate Word is the necessary foundation and presupposition for theological ethics. This reality, of course, remains especially relevant in today's modern period and contains a much needed message for the ears of our church and society. Somewhere away from antinomianism and legalism, humans find space to act; for the church, works of mercy will occupy the center of this space. A sacramental understanding of the church's corporate life of mercy, therefore, follows on from Bayer's thought as it is in large part presupposed by it. Such an understanding provides a means by which the ethical implications of Bayer's thought might be explicated, not as a command to what should be the case, but rather as a means of understanding what is the case. Placed in the midst of creation, fellowship, human dignity and works of mercy are gifts, which in the first place are received. Then, as in the Sacraments, God uses ordinary elements — here, His faithful (though sinful) people — to create, sustain, preserve and protect His creation. In all this, Bayer's thought informs the theology and material substance of the church's corporate life of mercy as it is lived between the two eons.

I

Michael Mathias Precht's painting, "Martin Luther, Full of Figures Inside," hangs over the hearth of a fireplace in the library of Westfield House, the theological college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (ELCE) in Cambridge. The top corner reads, "*Martin Luther/ dort und hier / damals und heute*,"³ reminding those students studying before it that Luther's situation and work is and will remain relevant for us today. His context, his struggles and his thought provide a timely message of lasting significance that dare not be ignored by the seminarians, deaconess

³ "There and here / then and now."

students and undergraduates preparing to serve the church and the world with the Word of God.

In essays such as “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today”⁴ and “With Luther in the Present,”⁵ Oswald Bayer specifically demonstrates this relevancy in his treatment of Luther’s thinking and speaks to today’s cultural and political setting with much the same accuracy and expediency with which Luther spoke to his. That Bayer can so apply Luther today might be explained by noting that “the singular historical experiences moving Luther, impelling him from the inside, extend to a meaning reaching beyond their original situation.”⁶ Prechtl’s painting begins to explain how this is so. Though the painting depicts the historical facts of the Peasants’ War, Prechtl includes elements of the apocalyptic, which convey both Luther’s perception of the eschatological in-breaking of his own times as well as the enduring relevancy of such circumstances. Bayer, commenting on this painting, notes that Prechtl “has intensified the scene by projecting these figures into the mythological. One of the knights carrying a blood-smearred sword has a scaly body; Behemoth and Leviathan are recalled.”⁷

This is the setting in which the church finds itself. No different than in Luther’s day, we continue to live in the midst of conflict. The most obvious, perhaps, are the wars and in-fighting of nations and neighborhoods. So, too, is there conflict among competing traditions and viewpoints at all levels — family, congregation, social club, city, synod. Any example noted, however, merely names a symptom of a more fundamental condition: “This history of the world is marked by the war of all against all. All fight to live

⁴ Oswald Bayer, “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 35–50.

⁵ — “With Luther in the Present,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 1–16.

⁶ — “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*

or die in the struggles for mutual recognition.”⁸ Though the reality of conflict is certainly not to be praised — being, as it is, a consequence of the fall — neither should it be ignored, for such deliberate disregard will necessarily end in either hopeless despair or idolatry. For the church’s life of mercy to find relevant expression today, it must therefore first confess the existence of the “old world” as it is without being deceived by modernity’s lies of “love” and “toleration.”⁹ To ignore this realistic perspective is to forget the place of the church in this world and will result in either a pessimistic antinomianism or optimistic legalism. Bayer contends that:

This realistic perspective distinguishes Luther sharply from the harmlessness of modern theologians of love. The theologians of love transform the original Christian confession, God is love, into a principle of both knowledge and systematic construction in order to build an internally coherent dogmatic system. The price paid for this transformation is to render harmless the enemies referred to in the prayers of the Psalms, to let them fade into paper tigers. They are allowed to disappear through the effort of subsuming evil under a theory of love. Luther’s life and work, contrary to what modern theologians of love think,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Such words find an important place in the church’s theology of mercy, but with christological meaning and implication. Words are important, so much so, in fact, that the fourth evangelist, in agreement with Genesis’ creation account, proclaims that all that is was created through the Word, “What God says, God does. The reverse is also true. What God does, God says; His doing is not ambiguous. God’s work is God’s speech. God’s speech is no fleeting breath. It is a most effective breath that creates life that summons into life. It is the nature of God to create out of nothing, to be the Creator by the Word alone. This is not a speculative thought, for those who confess the one who creates out of nothing and gives life to the dead are those who have experienced the truth that God justifies the ungodly by his Word, creating a new self for the old Adamic self” (Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2003, 43). Bayer continues this thought by noting the emphasis Luther places on the written word and the even higher rating of the oral word, by which God creates faith. The word is a deed that does what it says, most notably when spoken by God Himself. For this reason, words must not be abandoned when their meaning is violently usurped by those who reject the inherent value of words that has been given with the fact that they are created by and respond to the bodily, living Word. To such words, it seems, we must cling and remain patiently diligent with an appropriate pedagogical application that may often include explanation and plain rejection (as here) of any deliberate and dangerous arrogation.

*is determined throughout by the trials and temptations (Anfechtungen) suffered at the hands of these enemies and by the fight against them.*¹⁰

To avoid either extremes of ignoring the conflict or making an idolatrous attempt at its eradication, a redirection of focus is needed.

According to Bayer, Luther's address to contemporary society "redirects our eyes to Christ crucified on the cross, who 'was assailed by the images of death, sin and hell just as we are.' Focusing on the crucified one, Luther encourages us to 'look at death while you are alive and see sin in light of grace and hell in the light of heaven.'"¹¹ And here, Bayer asserts, one finds Luther's relevance for today. The "rupture of the times," which for the church begins to explain, as will be shown below, the conflict in which it must engage, is not a rupture between two historical ages for Luther. Rather, "the rupture of the times between the new and the old eon has occurred once and for all on the cross of Jesus Christ," where the old world meets its end and the new world, the renewed creation, breaks in.¹² This, it must be deliberately acknowledged, is a conflict of times:

The crucial point of Luther's understanding of time consists of the folding into one another of pivotal events in time, it consists in an interweaving of times (Verschränkung der Zeiten). The last judgment, the consummation of the world, and the creation of the world are perceived simultaneously. The future of the world comes from God's present and presence. God's new creation establishes the old world as old and restores the original world. Salvation communicated in the present is seen in view of Christ on the cross. The salvation effected on the cross guarantees

¹⁰ Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 40.

¹² Ibid., 45.

*the coming consummation of the world. In between the times, the suffering and groaning of the creatures of the old world are experienced in painful contradiction to the creation originally created by the promise.*¹³

Prechtl's painting depicts not only this conflict, but quite literally at its center, the crucified Christ whose death marked the rupture and Christ's expression in words of promise.

Prechtl draws attention away from the fighting peasants that fill Luther's person and redirects one's focus toward the crucified Lord, from whose side flows a stream of blood that falls on an open Bible. Luther points to this word in the painting as if to say:

*And this is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive.*¹⁴

Bayer remarks that this Word from the cross, this testament, "bequeaths to our sinful time eternal life and it promises to us, through the forgiveness of our hellish history of life and world, eternal community with God."¹⁵ That is, this Word in its communicative judgment does what it says; it is a speech act.

II

For the Christian, Baptism is the place of this rupture, when God creates one to be His child through participation in the death and resurrection of His Son. The whole of the Christian life — and here included is the church's corporate life of mercy — proceeds

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, Lectures on Galatians—1535, vol. 26 of Luther's Works, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 387.

¹⁵ Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 40.

from and is lived within this Baptism.¹⁶ In the words of Bayer, it is life lived in “freedom in response” to God’s promise — “for human action does not start with itself; it draws its life from freedom that has already been given.”¹⁷ God’s continuous creative activity and His preservation and nourishing work in this creation, as it gives form and content to the church’s life of mercy, must be grounded in Bayer’s fundamental premise that “human freedom is the result of God’s promise: ‘I am your God. And therefore you are my people.’” This promise is delivered in Baptism and places the Christian in the rupture between the old and new worlds with Christ on the cross and gives this life its content by informing a perception of the world consistent with the “interweaving of times” and communicating the freedom and works that are in the first place received as gift and only then lived and given in response.

To begin to understand what this means for the church’s life of mercy, one must first consider Bayer’s thesis concerning this promise that claims, “Piety in action does not arise from the goodness of categorical imperative, but rather from that of categorical gift.”¹⁸ Citing Johann Georg Hamann, Bayer recalls the first and final command in the Bible, which says, “Eat!” and “Come all is ready!” These commands are not prohibition, but permission: “a promise that is absolutely and unconditionally valid for all. It grants room to move and live, room for work and for human fellowship.”¹⁹ This promise is a gift of space that permits our movement, our action. Our action then is a response to this Word, “discerning the gift and praising the Giver of all things good,” and this is called faith.

Bayer does not describe here an abstract faith or creative word. Rather, this understanding is rooted firmly in the Sacraments

¹⁶ Cf. Luther’s *Large Catechism*, “Fourth Part: Concerning Baptism.” — Baptism is the means by which God creates His church, His holy community that works together in responsive freedom.

¹⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 14.

of the Lord's Supper and Holy Baptism when God's incarnate Word is communicated "in its immediate relationship to God in a temporal and specific way ... It does not float in a vague inward realm, but rather is linked to a verbal and public consecration that can neither be acquired in an alternative way by logical process nor be traced back to a basically comprehensible anthropological structure."²⁰ The promise attached to these Sacraments is the forgiveness of sins, and from that forgiveness comes all other benefits as well — life, salvation and fellowship. The concrete form of this promise — especially notable in the Lord's Supper — is found in the world from the mouths of our neighbors, and Bayer notes this includes the physical activity of eating and drinking together. God is encountered in the midst of life, "not in some way that is separate from our daily bread."²¹

Given that theology accepts as its point of departure the Lord's Supper and the singular way we encounter Jesus there as Creator and creation together, we see that humanity's place does not lie between God and the world, but rather in the midst of the world. The words that God speaks to us — the words that make us into human beings — do not exist in a vacuum; they cannot do without mediation through the world, in the bread and the wine.²²

The joy that comes from this table fellowship creates community. More than that, community is created by God in the meal as in Baptism, the means by which God creates His church. Thus humans are first of all *fellow* beings who receive. The church

²⁰ Ibid., 7. Bayer: "What must be insisted upon against inward and invoked enthusiasm — in our day the 'inner word' is becoming the voice of reason or of our human 'nature', and is becoming what we ourselves can affirm — is the 'outward word' whereby Jesus Christ is encountered as a concrete and universal event. He is heard and tasted by our senses concretely in an indissoluble linking of the occasion and the Word, the Word and the body; this emerges with particular clarity in the Lord's Supper" (7).

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 184.

finds itself as a fellowship of receivers, needy ones and beggars. When showing mercy to the neighbor, therefore, it is not a condescension to those beneath oneself, but a confession that the helper, too, is helpless and needy, and therefore one who shares the others' circumstances as they suffer together, hope together and live together. The Word of promise, communicated in Baptism, is the space that frees one for this kind of action. Insofar as Christ is this "space" into which one is baptized, so far is God Himself serving His creation, showing mercy as One who also suffers, dies and rises to new life.²³ This response is not some abstract feeling or sentiment toward God. Nor is it an impractical acknowledgment of one's fellow human beings. Rather, this word of promise "is accompanied by a sense of wonder at the world that comes to meet us and is open to us through the generous gift of God, as we marvel at our fellow creatures, and especially our fellow human beings, whom we encounter as a gift."²⁴ Fellowship understood as given with God's imperative of permission includes a physical activity — eating and drinking — of many expressions, and with this Bayer understands that this promise of God "comes to us in the material shape of the world, through the words of our fellow human creatures."²⁵

This categorical gift, Bayer notes, is "more than simply a motivation for Christian living. It contains within itself certainty of a material and ethical kind."²⁶ It provides not only the world view from which a Christian's life is lived, but also its form and content. This, I think, could be called a sacramental worldview, for one who understands the creative action of God in both Baptism and the Lord's Supper as *creatio ex nihilo* will therefore, "discern their own fellow human beings simply as those who find themselves in the same situation. Thus the least of our brothers

²³ Cf. O. Bayer, "With Luther in the Present," 12.

²⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

and sisters (MATT. 25:40) will not just be *the others*, strangers, with whom we are called to show solidarity. Rather, from the very outset *we are those people*.” This, it must be understood, is how the Christian will learn to relate to the old world: by living in one’s Baptism, or at least being constantly returned by God to one’s Baptism. This, in fact, is where Baptism finds the Christian at the end of Luther’s catechism — in the world, in need of forgiveness.

Having received this forgiveness the Christian may be joyfully surprised to find the fruits of this gift in her life. In the third chapter of *Living By Faith*, “The Passive Righteousness of Faith,” Bayer notes that because faith is entirely the work of God, “we experience it in that we suffer it . . . The passive righteousness of faith takes place when justifying thinking (metaphysics) and justifying doing (morality), together with the unity of both that some seek, are all radically destroyed.”²⁷ God’s action of killing in order to raise is certainly not foreign to His historical dealings with His people. Throughout Israel’s history, God was persistent in His task of killing and raising. It was no different for His Son, the one Israel, upon whom God looked and declared (with a speech act), “I kill you and raise you.” IS. 53:10 records that “it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.” But this Law is certainly not the final word. In fact, Christ has been *raised* from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. And in Christ, God’s pronouncement to His people is the same: “I hereby kill you and raise you.” Through this Word, this Christ, “we receive the death and resurrection that marks [this] ‘Israel.’”²⁸ “For in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive . . . Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”²⁹ This action of killing and raising unto salvation is

²⁷ —*Living By Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 20–21.

²⁸ Timothy E. Saleska, “Pastors Who Play God,” *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 1 (2005): 24. See this article for a more exhaustive treatment of this idea.

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15:22–23.

accomplished in Baptism, when God chooses us and creates us as ones who belong to Christ.

In this death, our need “to gain recognition by what we can afford and accomplish” is destroyed.³⁰ So, too, is the “justifying thinking that tries to settle the conflict of justifications and to fashion a concept of the ‘unity’ of reality” destroyed: “the death of the old nature lies last but not least in the fact that the illusion of a totality of meaning, even if only hypothetical and anticipatory, has been overthrown.”³¹ Bayer does not exclude works from the new life, which is given and lived in response to this death. It is quite the opposite, in fact, because the freedom from justifying thinking and action that comes with the death of the old Adam grants space to live and to act — a space free from metaphysical pressure.

III

Returning for a moment to Luther’s “apocalyptic understanding of creation and history,” Bayer runs counter-cultural to Western modernity, importantly observing that Luther rejects the modern fallacy of progress:

In hindering the theme of modern progress, Luther’s understanding does not imply that the justified human person moves around in a circle and cannot walk with firm steps in a specific direction. The contrary is correct. In fact, progress is made in the relation between the new and the old person ... There is certainly progress, although not absolute, in the ethical domain and in the region of our works, of our cultural, social, and political activity. In its ethical sense, progress is relieved of metaphysical pressure to be considered in absolute terms. The kingdom of God is not earned through work for the kingdom of God; rather, the kingdom has already been prepared

³⁰ Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

(MATT. 25:34). *The idea of ethical progress freed from metaphysical weight is no longer an idea of salvation. The idea of progress loses the religious fascination that it exerted as a perverted idea of salvation. Last but not least, it loses its fanaticism in the political region. As ethical progress relieved of the quest for salvation, it is truly progress in a worldly sense. It does not walk in the name of the absolute and the total, but in small and nonetheless distinct steps.*³²

That this biblical worldview asserts itself against Western society's understanding of its culture and political institutions demonstrates from the outset that this theology and its necessary message to the world will engage in conflict. Bayer's thinking asserts that meaning is given to one's life, not earned or appropriated by oneself, one's alliances or one's place in society. While Luther's doctrine of the three estates articulates the "three basic forms of life that are God's disposition for humanity,"³³ even these institutions, sanctified though they may be, are not a path to salvation. Nor might one earn meaning or standing before God by a life lived within them. Such things are first of all granted, and then life in church, family and society is lived from what has been accomplished. There are at least two implications to this truth. The first concerns the works themselves, the acts of mercy that the Christian will find him or herself doing before they are even considered. The second implication concerns the individual's understanding of these works, how Christians perceive their place in the world and remember, as members of society, how to be secular. With those two considerations as a basis, one might then find a rather important insight into God's continuous, sacramental work of creation and preservation through the church's life of mercy.

³² —"Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," 43.

³³ Oswald Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 61.

In the first place, “the one who perceives his or her own life together with every life — as a categorical gift, thereby acknowledging the ‘out of nothingness’ of all creation, cannot help but be ‘merciful.’”³⁴ The result of this passive righteousness of faith is described by Luther in his Galatians commentary, “When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises.”³⁵ There is a crucial order to this, which Bayer, as noted throughout the foregoing, continues to press. Those works that respond to the categorical gift do not form or adorn one’s faith, but “faith forms and adorns love . . . Christ is my ‘form,’ which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall . . . ‘Christ,’ [Paul] says, ‘is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me. The life that I now live, He lives in me. Indeed, Christ Himself is the life that I now live. In this way, therefore, Christ and I are one.’”³⁶ The merciful works of the Christian are thus not their own, at least not according to the new man; they are the works of Christ and belong to the neighbor as works prepared beforehand for the Christian to do.

Bayer, too, taking Luther’s lead, understands the importance of Pauline thought for theological ethics. In a treatment of Romans 12, Bayer concludes that this text “emphasizes the importance of baptism — of walking in newness of life (**ROM. 6.4**) — for ethics, and beyond ethics, for the whole way we look at the world. The ultimate mercy of God, shown in the gift of the body of his Son on the cross, speaks to those baptized into his death about giving their own bodies and lives.”³⁷ This responsive giving occurs in the face of, against and despite the old world, as the baptized believers,

³⁴ —“Self Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings,” *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004): 279.

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians—1535*, vol. 26 of *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 161, 167.

³⁷ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 37.

new creatures who now have allegiance to the new age, are redirected away from the old and abide in the new. Of course, those whose faith has come by that creative word discussed above must continue to hear its message of promise and exhortation, for “it is just as vital for them, while on this earth, to show a consistent attitude to the old age and in the midst of this constantly to appropriate the new age that has broken in. Progress means constantly returning to your Baptism.”³⁸

This life-changing consistency takes place through “renewal of moral judgment.”³⁹ Bayer asserts that “the consequence and goal of the changed life is ‘discerning’ the will of God,” which “occurs only in conversation — and conflict — with what to human minds is simply ‘that which is good, acceptable, and perfect’ (cf. **PHIL. 4.8**).” Here one finds two means by which the Christian relates to the old world. The first is in “critical solidarity” with the old, non-Christian world. The second concerns that conversation and conflict over what is the good, which will bring us directly into the second implication noted above, regarding the Christian’s place and action in the world.

Bayer notes a similarity between the Christian and non-Christian world in the mutual concern over the question of conformity to the norms of the day. The Christian cannot easily decide between conformity and resistance by deferring to “the gospel of God’s mercy. The mercy of God is not only the purely formal motive for Christian action, as though such action had to go elsewhere to find solid criteria. These criteria for action emerge from responses to God’s actions that are straightforward enough to discover.”⁴⁰ Paul’s message directs Christians back to their Baptism, where they have been placed in that overlapping of ages, that situation of conflict — “the time where [Paul’s] exhortation is

³⁸ Ibid., 41.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

holding and keeping us is the time of baptism.”⁴¹ It is precisely in this situation that the renewed will is given shape and expression as it finds solidarity with its fellow humanity and the content of God’s mercy falls down from heaven in the person and life of the baptized believer. Baptism grants such freedom — “the freedom of that communicative judgment and evaluation (discerning) of which Paul speaks in **ROM. 12.2** — even when disagreements arise — which shapes the moral teaching of the early Church as it is received with critical openness.”⁴² Part of that moral teaching concerns the effect of the communicative judgment itself, which calls by promise not only me, but also my fellow creatures with me.

God’s speech act of promise to me calls me along with my fellow humanity and I do well to understand my place in the world in relation to those who God has also “called by name,”⁴³ receiving and addressing them as “the means that God uses to call us, the go-betweens he uses to provide everything ... Creation is not only God speaking to his creatures, but as an integral part of this it is also God speaking *by* or *through* his creatures.”⁴⁴ These are speech acts of God, by which He serves and preserves His creation through His creatures.

IV

Bayer’s comments on possessions and poverty elucidate how the Christian is to appropriate this knowledge discovery in one’s own life. In the Christian life of receiving and giving, the avaricious person lives unnaturally, “through which it becomes apparent that I shut myself off and live a life of ingratitude, since I fail to pass on to others some of what I have received. Thus I withdraw from the process of give and take, and cut myself off from the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 43.

⁴³ Is. 40:26. See O. Bayer, chapter 3, “Life in the Midst of Life that Loves Living,” in *Freedom in Response*.

⁴⁴ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 47.

process of communication which is life.”⁴⁵ This is a turning away from the Creator, the giver of all that one is and has, and in so doing, “I close myself off, closing my ears, heart and hands to my neighbour. That is the opposite of ‘having,’ without which there can be no human ‘being.’ ‘Having’ is to be understood from the standpoint of the Pauline question, ‘What do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 COR. 4.7).”⁴⁶ This thought is not unconnected to a sacramental understanding of the church’s theology of mercy.

Alexei Streltsov, in an article entitled “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions in Acts,” observes that Christ, “possessing everything, humbled himself and shared with us poor beggars all that he had and now invites us to his heavenly feast.”⁴⁷ With the cross at the center of the Christian life, one must not expect indulgence and hedonism to typify discipleship. After all, Jesus does indeed call the rich man to sell all he has and give it to the poor. Though one might argue that God does, in fact, create some of His children to do just this, He does not call all Christians to do the same. Rather, through Baptism into Jesus’ crucifixion, the Creator raises us to a life that is characterized by having but not trusting in possessions. Moreover, Bayer observes, “In the Gospel it is not the one with a lot of money and property who is called rich but only the one who relies on the money or property he or she has.”⁴⁸ Christians are thus enabled to be masks of God’s grace and favor to the world as He distributes His good gifts to all who have need.

Gilbert Meilaender explores this place of trust in possessing, commenting on C.S. Lewis’ *Perelandra* in his essay “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave.”⁴⁹ He refers to Ransom, the main character,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 134

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Alexei Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions in Acts,” *Logia* XVI, no. 2 (Eastertide 2007): 13.

⁴⁸ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, 134.

⁴⁹ Gilbert Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” in *Things That Count*, (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 194. The quotes here used are cited to Lewis’ novel, though the thought’s application is Meilaender’s.

who finds himself on a planet containing indescribable pleasures. One of these comes from a forest of “bubble trees” which, when their “shimmering globes” are touched, shower Ransom with “an ice-cold shower bath . . . and a soon-fading, delicious fragrance.”⁵⁰ Though Ransom is tempted to “plunge [himself] through the whole lot of them and to feel, all at once, that magical refreshment multiplied tenfold,” he is restrained by a feeling that this over-indulgence would somehow ruin the bubble trees’ pleasure. “This itch to have things over again,” he wonders, “as if life were a film that could be unrolled twice or even made to work backwards . . . was it possibly the root of all evil? No: of course the love of money was called that. But money itself — perhaps one valued it chiefly as a defence against chance, a security for being able to have things over again, a means of arresting the unrolling of the film.”⁵¹ Money, of course, is a possession itself, though perhaps better described (as Meilaender describes it) as possessions in the abstract. And Ransom’s feeling suggests the very danger in possessing — that one would trust in the Creator’s gifts rather than in the Creator Himself. Fallen man, always seeking autonomy and self-security, clings to money and his possessions in an effort to lay hold on a future he is unable to predict.

Though this may be the cultural norm and perhaps even the expectation, Meilaender concludes that, “followers of Jesus should have possessions without clinging to them *so that* they are always ready to give to those in need.”⁵² To borrow and rearrange words from an oft-quoted passage in **LUKE 12**, from whom much is required, much will be given. Streltsov insightfully notes that sacramental context of sharing possessions, saying, “Just as Christ gives His body and blood to the church in the Eucharist, so He

⁵⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1951), 43–44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵² Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 191.

gives the gifts of his creation *to the needy through the faithful*.⁵³ Having been given everything Christ is and has, we are also freed by His death on the cross to give all that He gives us to any who have need. This, Meilaender notes, is the one area a Christian is called to be decidedly immoderate.⁵⁴ Paul would seem to agree, he who was “poured out as a drink offering” in the service of God to His people.

Finally, Streltsov notes that far from an optional or unimportant aspect of the church’s life, “the passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, as well as the event of Pentecost, resulted in the fullness in the sharing of possessions . . .”⁵⁵ and for the church in Acts “it was not just a matter of fulfilling God’s commandment, but they viewed it as a part of the gospel in the wide sense.”⁵⁶ And this is how our Creator would have us understand the gifts with which He blesses us. Rather than possessions we may rely on or use to secure our own future, God provides that we may trust in Him from whom all blessings flow. Far from property, we selfishly hoard and accumulate that we may position ourselves above our friends and family, God blesses that we may freely give as we have freely received. It does indeed take a deed of God, the death of His Son and the performative speech act in Baptism, to free us from the bondage of sinful, self-seeking behavior and pride, but it is the prayer of the church that God may set our hearts to obey so that when we find we have received much, we may be all the more ready to give much.⁵⁷

Streltsov notes the “Lutheran church as such is not alien to the ideas of charity, almsgiving, sharing possessions, and the

⁵³ Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 17 (emphasis mine).

⁵⁴ Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 191.

⁵⁵ Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷ See Gilbert Meilaender, “Hearts Set to Obey,” in *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 37–55.

like.”⁵⁸ He describes how the Lutheran Church in Russia, rather than the much larger Russian Orthodox Church, began many organizations of mercy and care including schools for the deaf and blind as well as orphanages. This, however, was indicative of the Lutheran church in the 19th century and, Streltsov laments, is no longer the case. Though he does not argue for a return to the Early Church practice of holding everything in common as described in Acts, he does rightly argue that, “Today’s church needs to recover the true meaning of the sharing of possessions that is centered in Christ, the Gospel, the Sacraments, and the ministry.”⁵⁹ Meilaender seems to agree, writing that “If the church is to be an agent of reconciliation among all who are poor in spirit (even, if perhaps, rich in this world’s goods), its calling must be chiefly, though not exclusively, to speak the Good News of Christ and to let its faith be active in works of mercy.”⁶⁰ The church, therefore, must speak that Word of God, which kills the self-secure man that he may be raised to faith in Christ and made ever-ready to receive much from the hand of his Creator, in order that the neighbor, then, may receive through him blessings as if from Christ Himself.

What is said here only of possessions (for the sake of clarity and simplicity) can be said of the whole of the Christian life. The sacramental character of the Christian life as the new creation relates to the old world, “has as its presupposition and abiding implication that God and the human being are bound together in one ‘person,’ that is, that they come together in a communicative event that reaches the sinful human being in a human manner, ... rearranges, transposes, and radically transports them (COL. 1:13),

⁵⁸ Streltsov, “The Sacramental Character of Sharing Possessions,” 17.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁰ Meilaender, “To Throw Oneself Into the Wave,” 184.

and in this way determines and defines them anew.”⁶¹ This is what is meant above when Bayer speaks of Christ as “space” into which one is baptized:

Only because Jesus Christ is simultaneously God, only because God is this human being, can one speak of Jesus Christ as a ‘space,’ into which I am baptized, into which I enter in faith, in which I gain a share. In Christ, then, ‘God and human being do not stand as closed entities over against one another. They communicate with one another without restriction.’ This transposition of human existence into Jesus Christ takes place, ‘through the God who always speaks and promises concretely, who draws the trust unto himself which formerly was based on the self, and thus awakens faith as the consummation of absolute eccentricity.’⁶²

An important qualification must be made here. Bayer writes elsewhere that “the course of this world and that of their own lives are so concealed even from those who are justified by faith that they cannot conceive or experience the divine and the human concern for the world as a harmonious relationship. This ambiguity extends even to the works of the justified done in the new obedience.”⁶³

Rather than condemning the Christian to a life of inactivity or quietism, however, this truth frees the Christian to live and perform works of mercy spontaneously, as the need arises and is discerned. Concern over the “success” and permanency of active faith — love — does not plague the Christian’s action, for his or her justification has already been accomplished, and deeds are pure and joyous response. “They are not condemned to success.”

⁶¹ Oswald Bayer, “With Luther in the Present,” 12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12–13.

⁶³ *Living By Faith*, 38.

This, Bayer importantly notes, means that any progress is ethical progress freed from metaphysical pressure: “as ethical progress, progress divorced from the question of salvation is really secular progress. It is never absolute and total.”⁶⁴ This, let the reader understand, is where Luther finds relevance today especially for the church’s interaction with the world, its life of mercy. Luther’s “apocalyptic perception of the times” excludes, counter-culturally, both the modern legalism of progress and the postmodern antinomianism of “tolerance.” Against the former, Bayer writes human action is ambiguous; against the latter, he insists such works are not arbitrary.

V

If the relevance of Luther’s thought is lost, the church will lose “its worldliness and its realistic insight into the human heart with its wicked thoughts and inclinations.”⁶⁵ It will adopt uncritically the idolatrous (and often unconsidered!) presuppositions of modern ideology that seek to provide ultimate meaning to its culture and achieve absolute success for its society. It will forget that we live in between the overlapping ages, the rupture of which occurred on that historical cross of Jesus Christ, and thereby forget that “in between the times, the suffering and groaning of the creatures of the old world are experienced in painful contradiction to the creation originally created by the promise.”⁶⁶ The church, in short, will lose that all-important, incarnate Word that the world needs to hear *in order to remember how to be secular*.

Here the second means by which the Christian relates to the old world (through community building conversation over the good) combines with the second implication of the truth that meaning, dignity and salvation come first as a gift before one

⁶⁴ Ibid., 67

⁶⁵ Oswald Bayer, “Rupture of Times: Luther’s Relevance for Today,” 45.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

responds in love — that Christians must themselves remember how to be secular and remind the world of the same. Oliver O’Donovan, in his book *Common Objects of Love*, investigates this conversation and “the idea that moral reflection, the identification of objects of love, has effect in organized community.”⁶⁷ The effect is the creation of a people, an organized society, who, according to Augustine, are united by their agreement “to share the things they love.” O’Donovan warns, however, that “for Augustine the love that forms communities is undetermined with respect to its object, and so also undetermined with respect to its moral quality: ‘the better the things, the better the people; the worse the things, the worse their agreement to share them.’”⁶⁸

Communities mediate this love and knowledge with words that give the beloved goods cultural meaning with the aid of a “special kind of signification” — representation. The representative signs of a community provide coherence in tradition where communities find meaning. Modern political society, O’Donovan fears, has forgotten how to be secular in the face of plurality. It seeks to provide ultimate meaning to its own representations and traditions, and this is idolatry. In what O’Donovan calls a “universalizing thrust,” the publicity of Western society attempts to achieve absolute progress by introducing a “universal representation” it has created. “In this universalizing thrust we may observe how Western society has forgotten how to be secular. Secularity is a stance of patience in the face of plurality, made sense of by eschatological hope; forgetfulness of it is part and parcel with the forgetfulness of Christian suppositions about history.”⁶⁹ In Bayer’s thought, this plurality is called conflict and society’s forgetfulness includes a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the conflict of times and the resultant inappropriate engagement in the world as it is not.

⁶⁷ Oliver O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

O'Donovan calls for a believing patience sustained by Jesus Christ, the “double representative” — truly God and truly man — around whom the worshiping community is created and in whom eschatological hope is founded. Christian members of society, therefore, must remind themselves and the world how to be secular by way of word and example of believing patience. This, it seems, includes an active engagement in the dialogue of conflict without an idolatrous expectation or motivation of result. As the church receives ultimate meaning and hope from God alone, in whom it also awaits final salvation, its members relate to the world in patient faith active in love as the masks of God through whom and by whom He serves His creation.

In this conflict of times, the merciful actions of the Christian will be ambiguous but not arbitrary. Their meaning, however, comes not in their perceived success and failure, but rather in the reality of what is the case: They are the merciful works of God in Christ who, though rich, became poor, leaving His heavenly mansion to dwell among us where there was no place to lay His head. A new understanding of the conflicts one faces seems appropriate in view of this. The conflict is certainly not itself to be praised, but rather understood as the new creature finds a means by which to relate to the old world in Baptism. Living in response to the freedom of promise, the church may find space to discuss those controversial topics without either pessimistic despair or optimistic pride. Rather, the Christian has been granted space to be secular, to understand progress as secular and to live in Baptism, from the forgiveness of sins.

The content of this life is given in the incarnate Word of promise, which finds expression in the need of the neighbor — in the church, in the world, wherever the neighbor has need. Understanding that every man is a receiver, a beggar who can give only what he first has received, the church finds itself in solidarity with the old world and speaks to it the Word that has been given it to speak. This will not resolve the conflict until

Christ returns and all is made new, but it might just find ethical progress in a people freed from metaphysical concern. Bayer's call for a "renewal of moral judgment," therefore, finds appropriate space in this world as it is, in the rupture of times. This is a hopeful space, for it is Jesus Christ Himself, the kingdom of God. Students of the Word, therefore, do well to reconsider Pretchl's painting and, like Luther, engage in the conflict with a finger pointing to the open, active Word, understanding that meaning and salvation are given by a God who was, in fact, there when the earth's foundations were laid, when He said to the sea, "Thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed,"⁷⁰ and when He declared to His chosen, "I am your God. And therefore you are my people." This is the freedom of God's permissive promise there and here, then and now.

⁷⁰ Job 38:11.

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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, Luther preached a theology of mercy that looks solely to Christ, in the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*. 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.”¹

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

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

secular ethical systems tend to ignore, play down, or deny: sin.”² 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.*³

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.”⁴ 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.”⁵ 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

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.

neighbor. As Werner Elert explained Luther's teaching, "Where there is knowledge of sin, man's thinking ... is directed toward himself."⁶ 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 affect 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.⁷

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

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.*

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.'*⁸

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].*⁹

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. Conclisit 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.*

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."¹⁰ If the Christian, once 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."¹¹ 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.¹²

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:

¹⁰ NB: AE, vol. 31, 349 translates "*conclisit enim omnia sub incredulitate*," with "[God] has consigned all men to disobedience."

McGrath, *Justification by Faith*, 122.

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

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.*¹³

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."¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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

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.*

inner man.”¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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 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 pertains to the righteousness or liberty of the soul.*¹⁸

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.”¹⁹ Luther says the interior man can relate to God only through the Word; the exterior man needs the bodily world. Living by the Gospel,

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.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50. *Quid enim prodesse queat animae, si corpus bene habeat ... edat bibat agatque ut liberit, 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 servitutem.*

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

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.'*²⁰

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:

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.'*

*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].*²¹

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].”²² 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.”²³ Thus in his assertion of freedom and lordship, Luther confesses nothing else than the certainty of eternal 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

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.’*

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].’²⁴

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.”²⁵ 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.*”²⁶ Faith makes total conquest of the Law and works.

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.

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.*²⁷

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."²⁸ Faith simply relies on God's promise.

Luther's account of the virtue 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

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 contemunt me, erunt ignobiles.*

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.”²⁹ Faith is righteous not by virtue of its own, but only by the Word. Luther says:

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].*³⁰

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.”³¹ Sustained by the Gospel, the interior man expresses himself outwardly in free service to his neighbor.

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

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 uniat, immo penitus absorbeat, 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 “absorbeat,” 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 Jungel, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 63.

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."³² 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 firstfruits 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*)."³³ 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."³³

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

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.

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].*³⁴

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.³⁵ 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

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.

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

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.”³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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 everyone 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.*³⁸

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.

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 fluant ex uno in alium et communia fiant, 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.*

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].*³⁹

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*, 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."⁴⁰ But for Althaus, the

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.

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

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."⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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.*⁴³

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

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.*

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].⁴⁴

For Luther, justification is the pure opposite of the Law. It constitutes the Christian life not by empowering the Christian actually to 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

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'.*

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.’”⁴⁵ The Christian receives mercy from a living well of grace that knows no bounds; it ceases 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 and 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.”⁴⁶ 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

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

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*.

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.”⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ 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

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.*

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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