

**“BREAKING FREE”: MARTIN LUTHER’S *BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY*
OF THE CHURCH IN CONTEXT**

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Introduction - *Jesu, Juve*

“Where faith dies and the word of faith is silent, there works and the prescribing of works immediately crowd into their place. By them we have been carried away out of our own land, as into a Babylonian captivity, and despoiled of all our precious possessions.”¹ Such was the state of captivity which Martin Luther attacks in his treatise, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. And *attack* he did. “This was Luther’s most radical criticism of the church so far, and would alienate some of his reform-minded supporters. This was because this treatise made clear that Luther was not in fact seeking changes to the existing church; he wanted a completely different one instead.”² Whether Luther purposefully desired a different church is the subject of debate, but at the very least he was laying the groundwork for a church free from papal tyranny. “This assault on Catholic teaching was more devastating than anything that had preceded it.”³ Because of this the *Babylonian Captivity* galvanized both Luther’s opponents and supporters. It became the central work for which Luther had to answer at the Diet of Worms in 1521.⁴

Martin Luther was not only a brilliant teacher, preacher, pastor, and expositor of Scripture. He was also a publishing genius who understood the value of mass communication. Luther had gone from being a nobody, who “in 1515 ... did not rate a mention in a list of the top one hundred professors of three rather obscure German universities,”⁵ to being Europe’s most published author in 1518 and 1519. By the end of 1520, “he was the most prolific living author since the invention of printing seventy years before.”⁶ The other great works of 1520⁷ under

¹ Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” *The Annotated Luther: Church and Sacraments*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), vol. 3, 49. Hereafter TAL. Cf. also *Luther’s Works*, LW 36:47.

² Martin Treu. “Disputations and the Main Writings of the Reformation,” *Martin Luther and the Reformation: Essays*, edited by Katrin Herbst (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2016), 98.

³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 105. The phrase “Catholic” teaching is admittedly anachronistic.

⁴ Erik Herrmann, “Introduction to *The Babylonian Captivity*,” TAL 3:11.

⁵ Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: How an Unheralded Monk Turned His Small Town into a Center of Publishing, Made Himself the Most Famous Man in Europe—and Started the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 104-105. The three universities were Leipzig, Wittenberg, and Frankfurt-an-der-Oder.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁷ These treatises have been called Luther’s “reformatory program.” See Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reform 1483-1521*. Translated by James Schaaf, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 349ff. Brecht’s three

consideration at this symposium were originally written in German. This was intentional and brought his writings to the German-speaking public and the nobility.⁸ The *Babylonian Captivity*, however, was a highly technical Latin treatise, and Luther's insights for publishing and promotion were at work with this too. This treatise was written in Latin for the clergy and the educated ecclesiastical elite. Simply put, **Luther addressed pastors dealing with people under their care.**

Something foundational for church ministry is at work in Luther's writing here. As the break with Rome became more apparent and inevitable, Luther had to define how Christian churches could operate apart from papal authority. A new way of doing "church" had to be delineated, and the bishops and church leaders had to be won over. There is a uniquely pastoral element to the organizational and theological applications of the *Babylonian Captivity*. Luther "exhibits a remarkable combination of detailed, penetrating biblical interpretation and pastoral sensitivity for the common person."⁹

Luther attacks the very heart of Roman power over Christendom, namely, the sacramental system. His thesis is that the faithful were trapped under the pope's tyranny, and God's gifts had been replaced by the traditions and laws of men. Rome was more concerned with power and prestige than they were with setting souls free. The Christian's life from cradle to grave was locked in this system of control and coercion. Luther wrote this *tour de force* to

volume set continues to be the best biography in English. Would Luther have considered it a "reformatory program"? That remains open to debate. Erling Teigen has noted that the three great Reformation treatises were not organized together in print until 1874. See Teigen, "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation: Luther and the Papacy," in *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* vol. 58, no. 1 (March 2018), 11.

⁸ The choice of language gives insight into the audience and Luther's intention. There is some debate about the original language of *The Freedom of the Christian* (German or Latin? Ask for Professor James Danell's answer). Amy Nelson Burnett notes: "The commonly accepted view is that at the time of the Reformation only 5 percent of the German population as a whole could read. Urban literacy rates were much higher, however, reaching perhaps as much as 30 percent of a city's inhabitants, and it is likely that most households had at least one person who was able to read." This also helps one understand passive or aural literacy, meaning the ability of a person to comprehend a text read aloud. Even if a person was unable to read a Reformation work himself, he could become acquainted with Reformation ideas rather easily through another who could read. A community would have a "functional social literacy" if one person could read aloud to the others. This all has an impact on *how* the Reformation was spread among the masses. "Writers and preachers chose language and rhetorical strategies appropriate for the immediate audience, and translators adapted their texts to suit their intended audience." (Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2019), 13.

⁹ Herrmann, TAL 3:10.

combat the abuses prevalent at every level of the church’s work and worship—nothing was spared from Luther’s scathing rebuke. This was deconstruction of the highest order.

The reaction against Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity* was vicious, but Roman theologians struggled to grasp Luther’s main emphases. Why? The Roman system had a relationship with God mediated by the sacramental structure of the church, almost like a pyramid a person would climb with the pope at the crest, granting access to God. Luther, in essence, flipped the whole superstructure upside-down and rejected the Roman claims as arbiters of grace.¹⁰ Robert Kolb writes, “Luther’s reorientation of the foundations of religious life, placing God’s Word and biblical teaching at its center or as its foundation, exercised a transforming impact on both public teaching and individual lives, on the understanding of the liturgy and other rituals, on the office of pastor. For Luther, everything began and begins with God talking, and he talks through human beings as the instruments of his grace in oral, written, and sacramental forms.”¹¹ The people of God were laboring in captivity, and Luther saw an opening for the promise of Christ to set souls free from bondage. The same promise in Word and Sacrament is ours today to address the “captivities” which we may find in our own midst. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Yet, if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed!

Part 1: The Historical Context and General Intellectual Climate

A. The Historical Context *en route* to writing the *Babylonian Captivity*

Luther’s relationship with Rome and his views of the papacy itself are essential for framing the historical context of this treatise. From the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* to 1520, Luther’s relationship with Rome fragmented and this resulted in new awakenings, so to speak.¹²

¹⁰ That is why in Rome’s view the most important of the seven sacraments and the one they were most upset at Luther for attacking was the sacrament of ordination—see **Part 3**.

¹¹ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: the Wittenberg School and its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 41.

¹² “Beginning with a letter of November 11, 1517, and continuing in twenty-seven more letters, Luther wrote his name in a way that shined a light on his new self-understanding, signing as ‘Martin Eleutherius’ (Martin the Liberated or Freed One).” (Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther*, 167). What was this “signature” all about? “Perhaps he wanted to demonstrate that he was now—after nailing the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg—a free man; he had liberated himself from the nonbiblical understanding of penance and had become a free man in Christ, no longer enslaved by human institutions (such as indulgences) but subject only to Christ. This supposition seems to be corroborated by the fact that Luther signed a letter to Lang (November 11, 1517; the covering letter for the *Ninety-five Theses*): ‘Friar Martin Eleutherius, or rather a slave and very much a captive.’” LW 48:55, note 12.

His recognition that Rome had failed to shepherd the sheep of Christ led to his full-frontal assault on the Roman system.¹³ As we trace the way Rome dealt with Luther through to its conclusion, i.e. the bull threatening excommunication in June 1520, one event is especially instructive: his meeting in Augsburg with Cardinal Tomasso de Vio Cajetan (1469-1534).

At the end of 1517 and into 1518, Luther's case moved slowly through the Roman Curia. The *causa Lutheri*, "the Luther affair," was first formally addressed in Rome in June 1518. The Dominican Sylvester Prierias (c.1456-1523) examined the *Ninety-five Theses* and boasted gleefully that it only took him three days to condemn Luther as a heretic. His conclusion was, "Whoever says that the Church of Rome may not do what it is actually doing in the matter of indulgences is a heretic."¹⁴ Luther was thus in danger of facing the Inquisition in Rome. The shrewd statesmanship of Frederick the Wise, however, arranged a meeting between the pope's representative and Luther at Augsburg in October 1518. There he met the vicar general of the Dominican order and a well-known Aquinas scholar, Cardinal Cajetan. Luther was unaware of how his case had progressed in Rome and even more ignorant that he had but two options when meeting with Cajetan: recant or face excommunication. "Luther brought to his interview with Cajetan utterly unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved by their discussion."¹⁵

Luther and Cajetan sparred over the authority of the church or pope over against the authority of Scripture alone. Yet, also decisive in their discussion was the way Luther described faith and the sacraments. Luther had quoted from Augustine, "When the Word is coupled with the element, it becomes a sacrament... not because it takes place, but because it is believed."¹⁶

¹³ There were signs of this pastoral dynamic and concern already in 1517. "The pope or the papacy is directly referenced in forty-four of the ninety-five theses" (Pettegree, 69). The Roman system's actual impact on souls was at the center of Luther's protest from the beginning.

¹⁴ Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. 1982. Translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 194.

¹⁵ Pettegree, 98. Although the triad of Dominicans (Tetzel, Prierias, and Cajetan) may lead to the tempting conclusion of a Dominican conspiracy, it should be noted that Prierias and Cajetan were far from friends. Prierias was at this time engaged in controversy with Cajetan and other "modern" Thomist scholars over the question of whether Aristotle taught the immortality of individual human souls. That being said, there was certainly tension between different monastic houses, but the opposition from the Curia towards Luther stemmed from his questioning of papal authority rather than some Dominican collusion. See Scott Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 46.

¹⁶ TAL 1:146; cf. also LW 31:274. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession makes the same point using this quote from Augustine: "Faith that uses the sacrament, and not the Sacrament, justifies." See Article XIII, para.23. *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 222.

Luther was testifying to the centrality of faith to receive the benefits of Christ in the sacraments. The latter portion of the axiom (*non sacramentum, sed fides sacramenti justificat*) was a major point of contention with the Cardinal. “Cajetan argued that an absolute certainty that one possessed grace could not be maintained, especially if the source of this certainty was something so facile and subjective as one’s faith. Such a view undermined the entire sacerdotal-sacramental system, and he said (presciently) that ‘this is to build another church!’ (*Hoc enim est novum Ecclesiam construere*).”¹⁷ Cajetan seemed to misunderstand Luther on this point. Luther was not celebrating the subjective, but rather stressing the importance of faith in the words and promises of Christ. (Later we shall see that “the correlative of faith and promise is the *leitmotif* that runs through the entire work”¹⁸ called *The Babylonian Captivity*.) Luther told Cajetan, “Nothing else is so highly praised in Scripture as faith... Without this faith it is impossible to have peace of conscience.”¹⁹ Luther pleaded to be heard, but there would be no debate. The face-to-face meetings were over.

At the advice of Frederick’s counselors Luther appealed “from the pope badly informed to the pope better informed.” During the middle of the night on October 20, 1518, a half-naked Luther was shuttled out of the locked city. In somewhat Pauline fashion, he fled by sneaking through the wall and was carried on horseback miles from the city. “When he finally dismounted, he could hardly walk.”²⁰ Luther’s physical exhaustion was a fitting companion to the spiritual disillusionment which now plagued him. “His meeting with Cajetan—the papal legate—began a process of disillusionment with the papacy that came to a conclusion in the early spring of 1520.”²¹ Luther still claimed adherence to the Roman church, but “this was a shattering encounter for Luther that stripped away much of his remaining faith in the church hierarchy.”²² Luther’s own summary of the meetings in Augsburg stated: “Dear reader, I declare before you

¹⁷ Erik Herrmann, “The *Babylonian Captivity* (1520).” *Lutheran Quarterly*, 34:1 (Spring 2020), 76. Hereafter LQ.

¹⁸ Herrmann, TAL 3:10.

¹⁹ Martin Luther, “The Proceedings at Augsburg,” TAL 1:146; cf. also LW 31:274.

²⁰ James Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 125.

²¹ Herrmann LQ, 77.

²² Pettegree, 98-99.

that I cherish and follow the church in all things. I resist only those who in the name of the Roman Church strive to erect a Babylon for us.”²³ Reflecting on the encounter years later in 1538 Luther said, “If the cardinal had acted more modestly in Augsburg and had accepted me as a suppliant, things would never have gone so far, for at that time I still knew little of the errors of the pope.”²⁴

When the pope received Cajetan’s report, he rejected any further appeal from Luther. The Wittenberg professor in turn appealed to a general council, one legal recourse he could take for his own sake and for the sake of the University of Wittenberg. Luther was no conciliarist; this appeal “became an increasingly important aspect of Luther’s gradual rejection of papal power.”²⁵

Over the next year (1519) Luther’s case within the curia waned and the pope was more focused on external matters, such as the election of a new emperor. Luther thus had some breathing room to aid souls in captivity. “It was in this period particularly that Luther developed his pastoral role with a series of short treatises on subjects of immediate concern to lay Christians.”²⁶ In 1519 Luther churned out sixteen new works, such as, *A Meditation on Christ’s Passion* and a work for Elector Frederick himself who was gravely ill, *Fourteen Consolations*.²⁷ He ended the year with writings pivotal for the *Babylonian Captivity*, namely, *The Sacrament of Penance*, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, and *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy*

²³ TAL 1:158; cf. also LW 31:285.

²⁴ Quoted in Hendrix, 44. Berndt Hamm makes a distinction between a single “Reformation breakthrough” for Luther (which Hamm is not really interested in finding) and “Reformation turns” (where one sees objective, historical, and theological signs of Luther’s break with the traditional medieval views of freedom and church authority). Luther discussions of *freedom* indicated significant “turns.” See Hamm 169-170, note 42.

²⁵ Pettegree, 99. “It is probably false to ask whether Luther thereby saw himself as a conciliarist, i.e. as one who advocated a council as the supreme authority in the church. Luther recognized that *the* authority in the church was that which correctly interpreted Scripture, and this is why he was now hoping in the council.” Brecht, 263. Luther also began at this time putting other feelings on paper. On December 18, 1518, he wrote Wenceslaus Link privately that he would send Link some thoughts about whether the true Antichrist predicted by Paul was reigning in the Roman curia. “I think,” Luther wrote, “I can demonstrate that today Rome is worse than the Turk.” He accused the bishops, and especially the pope, for sitting like Antichrists in the temple of God. This is the first time we know of Luther speaking in this way, though not in public and not unequivocally. See Hendrix, 75.

²⁶ Pettegree, 101.

²⁷ These two works are contained in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 42, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), as well as many others from the year 1519 such as *An Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer for Simple Laymen*, *A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage*, and *A Sermon on Preparing to Die*.

and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods.²⁸ He was working to set souls free from Roman tyranny.

Luther's twenty-eight total new works of 1520 made 1519 look like a warm-up.²⁹ Luther's rift with the papacy seemed to propel him toward more pastoral endeavors. "If we are seeking an explanation of why so many Germans were drawn to Luther, despite the wild, extravagant denunciations of the established church and the bitter, angry polemic against his critics, we have to recognize that this was not the Luther that many readers saw. Rather they embraced the patient, gentle expositor whose explorations of the Christian life offered them comfort and peace."³⁰ Soon, Luther's concern for souls and his tension with the Roman church would find their zenith in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.

B. The General Intellectual Climate behind Luther's Treatise

Two movements were swirling when Luther wrote his *Babylonian Captivity*. One was circling the drain, the other in a whirlwind of activity: scholasticism and humanism. Alister McGrath notes, "Scholasticism is probably one of the most despised intellectual movements in human history."³¹ The rediscovery of Aristotle led to the systematization of Christian theology and the use of his distinctions, flourishing in the period A.D. 1200-1500. "Scholasticism," "scholastics," and the "Middle Ages" were disparaging terms invented by humanists to demean the period between antiquity (the classical period) and modernity (the Renaissance). The term "scholasticism" does not refer to a *specific system of beliefs*, but to a *particular way of organizing theology* – a highly developed method of presenting material, making fine distinctions, and attempting to achieve a comprehensive view of theology."³² Scholasticism was

²⁸ For Luther's treatise on penance see LW 35:9-23; TAL 1:181-202. For the writing on baptism see LW 35:29-45; TAL 1:203-224. For the writing on Holy Communion see LW 35:45-74; TAL 1:225-256. Often entire pages or passages from these works were transferred wholesale to the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*.

²⁹ For example, *A Sermon on the Ban* (LW 39:3-22), *A Discussion on How Confession Should Be Made* (LW 39:23-48), *On the Papacy in Rome: Against the Most Celebrated Romanist in Leipzig* (LW 39:49-104), *A Treatise on the New Testament (that is, the Holy Mass)* (LW 35:75-112), etc. plus the major writings of 1520.

³⁰ Pettegree, 120.

³¹ And all WELS pastors, professors, and future pastors say, Amen! "The English word 'dunce' (fool) derives from the name of one of the greatest scholastic writers, Duns Scotus." Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. 2nd edition. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Company, 1993), 67.

³² *Ibid.*, 68. emphasis original.

not a monolithic structure. It was dominated by Realism (the two major schools of this philosophy were *Thomism* and *Scotism*) chiefly in the period A.D. 1200-1350 and then by Nominalism in the period A.D. 1350-1500. Nominalism, also known as the *via moderna*, dominated northern European universities, including Erfurt where Luther was trained. This “way” taught that “God will not deny his grace to anyone who does what lies within them (*facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*).”³³

Christian humanism was another undercurrent seeking renewal within the church at the time of Luther’s writing the *Babylonian Captivity*. This thought movement encouraged the use of ancient sources and the study of Scripture in the original languages. Erasmus of Rotterdam was the most famous scholar of his day, and his publication of the Greek New Testament in 1516 was a key piece to the puzzle which advanced humanist interests in service to the church. Erasmus was the chief representative of this informal movement, though he was by no means the only one engaged in its pursuit by 1520.

Since the *Babylonian Captivity* deals with the sacramental system, it is useful to know that Erasmus and Luther were the two thought leaders whose approaches would define the Reformation developments regarding the sacraments.³⁴ In 1503 Erasmus wrote his *Enchiridion of a Christian Soldier* as a moral exhortation to the Christian life, based on the implications of baptism.³⁵ He drew on the etymological origin of the word *sacramentum* as a sacred oath, especially one involving military service, to describe the Christian’s place in Christ’s army

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ See Amy Nelson Burnett, *Debating the Sacraments: Print and Authority in the Early Reformation* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2019). She examines Walther Koehler’s masterpiece *Zwingli and Luther: Their Conflict over the Supper According to its Political and Religious Connections* (Leipzig, 1924). Koehler treated everything in the debate over the sacraments as a battle between these two giants and the followers of their respective camps. Or as Koehler put it, “the satellites all revolve around the two suns” (quoted by Burnett, 5). As important and influential as the book is, it incorrectly frames the debate over the sacraments. Burnett calls this division “charming but mistaken” (Burnett, 17). Luther was clearly the leader in one camp—Zwingli hardly deserves to be placed on par with Luther. The other “sun,” as Burnett convincingly proves, was in fact Erasmus of Rotterdam, the great humanist whose theological and philological works provided the basis upon which the satellites such as Zwingli based their denial of Christ’s corporeal presence in the Supper. Such an arrangement by Koehler also misses the vital contributions of other reformers such as Oecolampadius, Urbanus Rhegius, and the Strasbourgers Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito among others.

³⁵ His choice of title is telling. An *enchiridion* was a short dagger which the prudent carried with them for self-defense. He was saying that this book was something a Christian should have handy in times of need, and that your salvation depended on your works in the face of Satan’s attacks. See Kittelson, 77-78. This *Enchiridion* enjoyed renewed attention with Erasmus’ fame as a Bible scholar. The publication of his Greek New Testament in 1516 led to the *Enchiridion* going through eight printings between 1515 and 1517. See Burnett, 58.

through baptism. He urged those who wished to live a Christian life to turn away from the visible and toward the invisible. Erasmus did not directly reject the scholastic descriptions of the sacraments, but instead marginalized them. He encouraged people to attend mass, but even more importantly to consider the inner disposition of their souls and focus on deeds of love.

“Erasmus’s discussion of the relationship between external rites and internal piety provided a mental framework that shaped how many of the intellectual elite in German-speaking Europe would understand Luther’s sacramental theology.”³⁶ Erasmus thus laid a foundation for a Bible humanism which applied the skills of philology and rhetoric to Scripture. His disciples would take his exegetical works and use them as a springboard for a more radical understanding of the sacraments. He, rather than Zwingli, was the root of the Sacramentarian Controversy among Protestants in the following years (A.D. 1524-1529).

Part 2: An Examination of Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*

At the end of the *Address to the Christian Nobility*, Luther had written: “I know another little song about Rome and the Romanists. If their ears are itching to hear it, I will sing that one to them, too—and pitch it in the highest key!”³⁷ This is Luther’s little song: *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae Praeludium D. Martini Lutheri*. “A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church by Dr. Martin Luther.” On October 3, 1520, Luther mentioned to Spalatin that the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* was posted in Leipzig. Ironically, in the same letter he announced the publication of this treatise on October 6, 1520. The pope sang, and Luther had his song too.

The observant reader might ask why he included “prelude” in the title. A prelude is a piece of music which precedes the main musical work. This prelude from Luther expects further battles with Rome on the issues under discussion. On a deeper level it is “the opening act to divine judgment, a preliminary glimpse of the Apocalypse on the Last Day, when the malignant oppression of the true Christians will be revealed abruptly by God’s universal reformation.”³⁸ Heiko Oberman contends that Luther’s apocalyptic viewpoint played a part in this prelude language and his general expectations: “The rediscovery and renewed preaching of the gospel as

³⁶ Burnett, 57. This would be a fascinating subject for further research and application in our midst today.

³⁷ TAL 1:465; cf. also LW 44:217.

³⁸ Heiko Oberman *The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications*. Translated by Andrew Collin Gow. (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 38.

a *praeludium* ... provokes Satan to a counter-offensive, it practically challenges him, and forces him – in the service of God – to step up his diabolical operations against the world. In this way the duration of his unchained freedom is shortened by God’s grace, and the Last Judgment is brought closer.”³⁹ Luther was keenly aware of the coming reaction of the old evil foe and anticipated Rome’s attempts to squash his protest.⁴⁰ He also knew that the only means by which to defeat these spiritual enemies was the Word of Christ.

To whom and for whom does Luther write this treatise? We have already noted that this treatise was written in Latin for the clergy and learned church leaders whom Luther hoped to persuade for the purposes of reform. He has a specifically pastoral purpose in writing. “This warning [prelude] is not directed at ‘Babylon’, the ruling Church, the papacy or the Curia, but rather is intended to summon, convert and gather in the faithful – who would otherwise remain in captivity, confused and misled in the absence of the Word of Truth and hopelessly weak without the sacraments instituted to impart comfort and strength.”⁴¹

Why does he call this a “Babylonian Captivity”? The scriptural imagery is powerful: just as God’s Old Testament people were hauled away into captivity by the Babylonians, so Christians have been carried away from Christ and his Word by the tyranny of the papacy. They were living in Babylon, a pagan nation which opposed the truth of the gospel. It’s hard to imagine a more scathing label! Similar language also appears in the book of Revelation where the whore of Babylon is filled with abominable things and afflicts the true believers. The whore of Babylon was often interpreted to be an eschatological picture of the Antichrist, i.e. the man of sin from 2 Thessalonians 2. Luther ties all these threads together in *The Babylonian Captivity*. But his theology is still not fully formed on this issue.⁴² If the pope is the very antichrist, what more needs to be said? What union can there be between Christ and Belial (2 Cor 6:15)? Based

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁰ Oberman notes, “*What will later need to be explained is not resistance and failure, but breakthrough and success.*” Emphasis original. *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴² This is one of those interesting debates in Luther studies, i.e. when did Luther label the pope as THE antichrist of Scripture unequivocally and publicly? Heinz Schilling quotes a letter Luther wrote to Johann Lang on August 18, 1520, while composing the *Babylonian Captivity*: “We here [in Wittenberg] are convinced that the papacy is the seat of the true and incarnate Antichrist, and we believe that for the sake of the salvation of souls we are permitted to do everything to counter its lies and deceptions.” See *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 142.

upon my research, it seems that Luther at this time positioned himself between Revelation 17 and Revelation 18. That is to say, he will identify the whore and the tyranny of her adulteries (Rev 17), but he is not yet calling to the elect: “Come out of her!” (Rev 18:4). Luther makes concessions and discusses under what circumstances he would continue to live under the pope’s authority.⁴³

That in no way diminishes the evil which Luther attacks. Luther knew this Babylonian tyranny firsthand and struggled himself to break free of it. He wrote, “So far, indeed, from learning Christ in them, you will lose even what you already know of him. I speak from experience. Let us rather hear Paul, that we may learn Jesus Christ and him crucified. He is the way, the life, and the truth; he is the ladder by which we come to the Father, as he says: “No one comes to the Father, but by me.”⁴⁴

Luther begins this work by taking aim at two Roman theologians,⁴⁵ but he does not want to waste his time on them. “Mere reading of them is ample confutation.”⁴⁶ His first few pages are filled with delicious irony directed at Rome and her defenders, such that “Erasmus was suspected in some quarters of being the author.”⁴⁷ From the opening pages, the reader senses something different about the tone of this work. This is certainly pitched in the “highest key” as Luther warned he would do. “For the first time in public, Luther documents the progress of his opposition to the papacy and his indebtedness to his opponents.”⁴⁸ He regrets publishing some of his early works because he was still clinging with mighty superstition to the tyranny of Rome. He thanks Prierias, Eck, Emser, and all the Roman flatterers for helping him learn better. He had reached a pivotal insight: “I now know for certain that the papacy is the kingdom of Babylon and the power of Nimrod, the mighty hunter.”⁴⁹ Roman tyranny was exercised chiefly through their

⁴³ Luther: “Let them lay aside their despotic demand, and we shall yield free obedience to their wishes, in order that we may live in peace with one another. It is a shameful and wicked slavery for a Christian, who is free, to be subject to any but heavenly and divine ordinances.” TAL 3:114. Cf. also LW 36:111.

⁴⁴ TAL 3:113. Cf. also LW 36:109.

⁴⁵ 1) Augustinus Alveld, a Franciscan professor at Leipzig who wrote a treatise against Luther’s discussion of communion in both kinds in June 1520; and 2) Isidoro Isolani, a Dominican from Milan who wrote *The Recantation of Martin Luther before the Holy See*.

⁴⁶ TAL 3:20. Cf. also LW 36:18.

⁴⁷ LW 36:7.

⁴⁸ Hendrix, 110.

⁴⁹ TAL 3:15. Cf. LW 36:12.

abuse of the sacraments and the invention of new laws for Christians, apart from faith and against the Scriptures. He will come back to this theme throughout the treatise.

- (For example, under baptism) Unless they will abolish their laws and ordinances, and restore to Christ's churches their liberty and have it taught among them, they are guilty of all the souls that perish under this miserable captivity, and the papacy is truly the kingdom of Babylon and of the very Antichrist. For who is "the man of sin" and "the son of perdition" [2 Thess 2:3] but he who with his doctrines and laws increases the sins and perdition of souls in the church, while sitting in the church as if he were God? All this the papal tyranny has fulfilled, and more than fulfilled, these many centuries. It has extinguished faith, obscured the sacraments and oppressed the gospel; but its own laws, which are not only impious and sacrilegious, but even barbarous and foolish, it has decreed and multiplied without end.⁵⁰
- (Under penance) *This Babylon of ours has so completely extinguished faith that it insolently denies its necessity in this sacrament.* Indeed, with the wickedness of Antichrist it brands it as heresy for anyone to assert that faith is necessary.⁵¹

The "Babylonian Captivity" is especially egregious in Luther's estimation for three reasons, which serve as recurring themes throughout:

- 1) First, they invent things (sacraments, vows, vestments, etc.) apart from Holy Scripture out of their own brains.
- 2) They suppress faith in favor of these man-made works, thus robbing souls of the comfort God himself wants them to have through the sacraments.
- 3) All this is done as necessary for salvation. Christians who are free from sin, death, and the power of the devil are robbed of that freedom. Justification is twisted: "Christian liberty has been suppressed through the blindness of human superstition."⁵² Sanctification is mangled: "I confidently cry: No law, whether of men or of angels, may rightfully be imposed upon Christians without their consent, for we are free of all laws."⁵³ Luther thus sets the stage for his next writing, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75. Cf. also LW 36:72-73. Luther addressed this rebuke to the pope and all his "papists" – a name he first used a few months earlier in the afterword to his critique of Prierias' *Epitome*, published on June 26, 1520. See Hendrix, 105.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 86-87. Emphasis original. Cf. also LW 36:83.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 104. Cf. also LW 36:100.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 75. Cf. also LW 36:72.

The Seven Sacraments Examined

The seven sacraments of the Roman church were and remain today Communion, Baptism, Penance, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, and Extreme Unction.⁵⁴ Luther examines all seven of them under the lens of Scripture, but over half of the writing is devoted to Holy Communion and Holy Baptism. Luther's central premise in this treatise is clear: "To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread. All three have been subjected to a miserable captivity by the Roman curia, and the church has been robbed of all her liberty. Yet, if I were to speak according to the usage of the Scriptures, I should have only one single sacrament, but with three sacramental signs."⁵⁵ By the end of the treatise Luther will set the number based on his definition to two sacraments, instituted by Christ and accompanied by a visible sign.⁵⁶

The Sacrament of Holy Communion

Luther starts with an exposition of Scripture to set forth his position on the Supper. He excludes the use of Scripture passages in this discussion which have nothing to do with the Sacrament, such as John 6 "since it does not refer to the sacrament in a single syllable."⁵⁷ (It is interesting to note how Roman theologians and later the Sacramentarians would both appeal to John 6 in debates over the Supper.) On the basis of the words of institution in the Gospels and in Paul, he outlines three captivities of the Sacrament: withholding the cup from the laity, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the mass as a sacrifice or good work to earn forgiveness.

In his polemic against **the first captivity**, Luther laments the tyranny of depriving God's people of the full Sacrament. Sometime during the High Middle Ages, the practice of withholding the cup from the laity became more commonplace and was enshrined as doctrine by

⁵⁴ Peter Lombard (1096-1160) had listed seven sacraments in his famous *Sentences* (4, d.2, c.1), but these were not made official church doctrine until the papal bull *Exalte Deo* at the Council of Florence in 1439. Cf. TAL 3:113, note 240.

⁵⁵ TAL 3:21. Cf. also LW 36:18.

⁵⁶ Luther concludes, "It has seemed proper to restrict the name of sacrament to those promises which have signs attached to them" (TAL 3:127). Luther may have brought the treatise to his printer in sections, and by the time he got to the end, he had sharpened his definition.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:21. Cf. also LW 36:19.

the Council of Constance in A.D.1415.⁵⁸ The Gospels and Paul record nothing to support withholding the cup: “Both attach the note of universality to the cup, not the bread, as though the Spirit foresaw this schism, by which some would be forbidden to partake of the cup, which Christ desired should be common to all.”⁵⁹ Luther has Scripture on his side and his argument is “irrefutable.” Papists argued that withholding the cup was “left to the decision of the church.” If it was the case that the church can withhold part of the Supper, then they would have the power to withhold the whole sacrament. “It is wicked and despotic to deny both kinds to the laity, and ... this is not within the power of any angel, much less any pope or council.”⁶⁰

In the face of tyranny and abuse, Luther urged caution and faith in God. He wrote,

The sacrament does not belong to the priests, but to everyone. The priests are not lords but servants whose duty is to administer both kinds to those who desire them. If they wrest this right from the laity and deny it to them by force, they are tyrants; but the laity are without fault, whether they lack one kind or both kinds. In the meantime they must be preserved by their faith and by their desire for the complete sacrament... Therefore I do not urge that both kinds be seized upon by force.⁶¹

Yet, Luther hopes for a swift end and even describes a way this could happen: “It would be a good thing, in my opinion, if this captivity were ended by the decree of a general council, our Christian liberty restored to us out of the hands of the Roman tyrant, and everyone left free to seek and receive this sacrament.”⁶²

Luther considered the **second captivity**, namely, transubstantiation “less grievous as far as the conscience is concerned.”⁶³ The Fourth Lateran Council in A.D. 1215 had stated, “[Christ’s] body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the appearance

⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) mentioned that there was lively debate in his day about whether both kinds were necessary. He wrote, “It is the custom of many churches for the body of Christ to be given to the communicant but not the blood. ... Therefore, it is a prudent custom in some churches for the blood not to be offered to the reception of the people, but to be received by the priest alone.” (*Summa Theologica* Part 3, Question 80, Article 12. Accessed at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aquinas/summa/sum532.htm>). It is impossible to say when the practice became universal or gained the force of law. What is clear, however, is that the practice had long been the standard by the time the Council of Constance in 1415 condemned Jan Huss for his use of both kinds.

⁵⁹ TAL 3:23. Cf. also LW 36:20.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 28. Cf. also LW 36:27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29. Cf. also LW 36:27. According to Erik Herrmann, Luther even reinstated the Sacrament in one kind after Karlstadt had introduced both kinds while Luther was away at the Wartburg.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 30. Cf. also LW 36:28.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

of bread and wine—the bread being transubstantiated into his body and the wine into his blood by divine power.”⁶⁴ This was the result of Aristotelian Thomism and completely unnecessary. Luther wrote, “The church kept the true faith for more than twelve hundred years, during which time the holy fathers never, at any time or place, mentioned this transubstantiation (an unnatural word and dream) until the pseudo philosophy of Aristotle began to make its inroads into the church in these last three hundred years.”⁶⁵ He mocks the reasoning of it all because Thomas Aquinas speaks of accidents and substance in a very different way than Aristotle. Aristotle did not think accidents could exist apart from their substance.⁶⁶

Instead, Luther explains that the words of Christ should be taken in their simple sense, just as they were delivered to his disciples. It does not matter if this is called Wycliffite, Hussite,⁶⁷ or heretical—it is scriptural. Jesus took bread which is his body, and he took wine which is his blood.⁶⁸ “Why could not Christ include his body in the substance of the bread just as well as in the accidents? In red-hot iron, for instance, the two substances, fire and iron, are so mingled that every part is both iron and fire. Why is it not even more possible that the body of Christ be contained in every part of the substance of the bread?”⁶⁹ In the end, we should put aside all curiosity about how this happens and cling simply to the words of Christ. “The Holy

⁶⁴ Quoted by Burnett, 51.

⁶⁵ TAL 3:33. Cf. also LW 36:31.

⁶⁶ According to Erik Herrmann, “Aquinas is aware of this difficulty; citing Aristotle, however, he appeals to divine providence to dispense with this logical problem. Nonetheless, this is exactly the problem for Luther: Why insist on using Aristotle as an aid to theology if one must dispense with it precisely in the moment of theological difficulty?” TAL 3:31-32, note 61.

⁶⁷ John Wycliffe (c.1328-1384) and John Huss (c.1372-1425) were both condemned by the Council of Constance for their teachings, including their teachings on Holy Communion.

⁶⁸ Amy Nelson Burnett has an interesting explanation of several terms that appear in the debate over Christ’s presence: “Sixteenth century theologians thought in Aristotelian terms, and they therefore understood *bodily* or *corporeal* presence as synonymous with *substantial* presence. In contrast to *substantial*, the adjective *real* was rarely used, and when it did occur it was often clarified by combining it with another term, whether “real and substantial,” which upheld the late medieval understanding, or “real and true,” which could be used in opposition to “substantial.” The phrase “real presence” did not become common until debates surrounding the Oxford Movement in England in the 1840s. While “real presence” might be appropriate for contemporary ecumenical debate, it is anachronistic and too ambiguous to describe the arguments used during the opening phase of the sixteenth-century controversy [with other Reformers in 1524].” Burnett, 20.

⁶⁹ TAL 3:35. Cf. also LW 36:32.

Spirit is greater than Aristotle.”⁷⁰ Transubstantiation may be believed as an opinion, but must not be forced upon the church as an article of faith, in Luther’s opinion.⁷¹ He would rather his simple view and transubstantiation both be permitted in the church. This is another indication that Luther was not attempting to build a new church *per se*, but his conclusions could leave no other options from a doctrinal perspective—Rome was not going to change her position.

The **third captivity** of the mass as a sacrifice is “by far the most wicked abuse of all.” This teaching turned the Lord’s Supper into a money-making scheme and big business for Rome. This impious traffic is the very thing that compelled Luther to write of the captivity of the church.⁷² It is

an abuse perhaps impossible to uproot, since through century-long custom and the common consent of men it has become so firmly entrenched that it would be necessary to abolish most of the books now in vogue, and to alter almost the entire external form of the churches and introduce, or rather reintroduce, totally different kinds of ceremonies. But my Christ lives, and we must be careful to give more heed to the Word of God than to all the thoughts of human beings and angels.⁷³

Luther returns again to the simple words of institution and from them expounds the whole meaning of the mass. “The Mass or Sacrament of the Altar is Christ’s testament, which he left behind him at his death to be distributed among his believers.”⁷⁴

Luther goes on to describe what a testament is, namely, a promise made by someone who is about to die. There is the “testator” who will die and the heir who is promised the inheritance. “These words signified that God would one day die... But God could not die unless God became human. Thus the incarnation and the death of Christ are both comprehended most concisely in this one word, ‘testament.’”⁷⁵ The substance of the sacrament is the promise and faith. “In no

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. also LW 36:34.

⁷¹ “Luther did not think the precise definition of how Christ was present was necessary. It was enough simply to believe Christ’s words, “this is my body”: not only was the body in the bread but also the bread was Christ’s body. Luther thus advocated the position condemned as remanence.” Burnett, 60.

⁷² TAL 3:52. Cf. also LW 36:49.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 38. Cf. also LW 36:36.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40. Cf. also LW 36:37.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41. Cf. also LW 36:38.

other way can a person come to God or deal with God than through faith.”⁷⁶ The Romanists turned the mass into a good work, an *opus operatum*,⁷⁷ which can merit benefits for those who do not commune (e.g. the dead). The common people have been robbed of the treasure of God’s forgiveness, life, and salvation. The Mass should also not be called a sacrifice, because Christ did not sacrifice himself at the Last Supper. He made a promise and attached it to a visible sign. Priests themselves need to be reminded: “Nothing else is needed for a worthy holding of Mass than a faith that relies confidently on this promise... Who would not shed tears of gladness, indeed, almost faint for joy in Christ, if he believed with unshaken faith that this inestimable promise of Christ belonged to him?”⁷⁸ Luther knew that of which he spoke!

Here again one sees Luther’s concern for the souls trapped in bondage. A wicked priest may administer and distribute God’s gifts in the Sacrament, just as well as a godly priest. But that is no reason to be wicked! “How many are there today who know that the Mass is the promise of Christ? ... What we deplore in this captivity is that nowadays they take every precaution that no layperson should hear these words of Christ, as if they were too sacred to be delivered to the common people... What more sinful idolatry can there be than to abuse God’s promises with perverse opinions and to neglect or extinguish faith in them?”⁷⁹ Souls should be directed to the promise of Christ: “The whole power of the Mass consists in the words of Christ, in which he testifies that forgiveness of sins is bestowed on all those who believe that his body is given and his blood poured out for them. This is why nothing is more important for those who go to hear Mass than to ponder these words diligently and in full faith. Unless they do this, all else that they do is in vain.”⁸⁰ The promise is attached to a visible sign: “He adds as a memorial sign

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. also LW 36:39. Later Luther writes, “God does not deal, nor has God ever dealt, with people otherwise than through a word of promise” (TAL 3:44).

⁷⁷ Translation: “A worked work.” Scholastics defined a sacrament as something which conveys grace to the recipient, apart from faith, unless the recipient places a spiritual impediment in the way.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43. Cf. also LW 36:40.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 44. Cf. also LW 36:41-42.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 46. Cf. also LW 36:43.

of such a great promise his own body and his own blood in the bread and wine.”⁸¹ Recognizing and believing these truths is the only way to receive blessings from the Mass.

A Current “Captivity” according to Luther?



Permit a brief pause for some introspection. Hermann Sasse once wrote, “Every disease of the Church becomes manifest at the Lord’s Table.”⁸² Luther’s words call on us to examine how we today might be captive to deceitful philosophies. He warned:

We must be particularly careful to put aside whatever has been added to its original simple institution by human zeal and devotion: such as vestments, ornaments, chants, prayers, organs, candles, and the whole pageantry of outward things. We must turn our eyes and hearts simply to the institution of Christ and this alone, and set nothing before us but the very word of Christ by which he instituted the sacrament, made it perfect, and committed it to us.⁸³

Luther condemned those outward works, which detracted from Christ’s promise. Five hundred years later, the accretions have been removed by the march of Lutheran history in subtle and not so subtle ways. Nearly gone is the “whole pageantry of outward things.” Success! Luther would be so proud! Think again.⁸⁴ “Human zeal and devotion” did not stop twisting the sacrament in 1520. Occasionally in a Lutheran congregation today, if there are multiple services in a given week, say during Holy Week, a Christian might think, “I had Communion yesterday; I don’t need to go today.” Or perhaps, as a congregation moves toward the historic practice of weekly communion, a pastor might hear a parishioner say that the Sacrament just “doesn’t seem as special.” I would venture a guess that sin *did occur* between those services offering the Supper. I would also dare to propose that the forgiveness of sins is *always* special. Could it be that a passing mention of Communion outside of catechetical instruction won’t cut it anymore (not that it ever did)? Could it be that we turn the Sacrament of the Altar into our offering to God rather

⁸¹ *Ibid.* The reader of this can imagine how Luther might be accused of impanation or consubstantiation based on a sentence like this; other more radical reformers could also use it a springboard for the belief that Luther favored their “representation” opinion of the Sacrament.

⁸² Hermann Sasse, *This is My Body: Luther’s Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1959), 3.

⁸³ TAL 3:39. Cf. also LW 36:36.

⁸⁴ N.B. Luther is not a radical Reformer! He wrote, “Not that anyone should revile the church universal for embellishing and amplifying the Mass with many additional rites and ceremonies.” TAL 3:54. Cf. also LW 36:52.

than his gift to us? Could it be that nothing is wrong with the Sacrament, but rather the fault lies with us? Luther would counsel all of us,

The safest course, therefore, will be to go to Mass in the same spirit in which you would go to hear any other promise of God, that is, prepared not to do or contribute much yourself, but to believe and accept all that is promised you there, or proclaimed as promises through the ministry of the priest. If you do not come in this spirit, beware of attending at all, for you will surely be going to your judgment.⁸⁵

With the Word and the promises of a crucified and risen Savior, Luther exposed a mindset which had engulfed the church of his day. No one saw through it quite like Luther did. We too must take every thought captive to Christ, and there, bound in faith, we find true freedom.

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

Next in the treatise, Luther thanked God that baptism itself as a rite had not been corrupted as the other sacraments had. That is to say, Rome had not yet found a way to exercise their greed and superstition on little children, who are the chief recipients of this sacrament. It's the adults who have the problems when it comes to baptism. "Satan, though he could not quench the power of baptism in little children, nevertheless succeeded in quenching it in all adults, so that now there are scarcely any who call to mind their own baptism, and still fewer who glory in it."⁸⁶ The root problem stemmed from Jerome (342-420), who termed penance "the second plank after shipwreck," meaning that baptism was the first plank (i.e. the ship) you cling to and it forgives all sin committed previously. But after you have sinned or fallen after baptism, you cannot cling to baptism, but must avail yourself of the second plank, i.e. penance.⁸⁷ The popes had failed to guide souls to the comfort of baptism and instead immersed people in a flood of works. This tyranny had given rise to vows, religious orders, monastic houses, pilgrimages, and indulgences. It is not surprising that one historian states, "Nowhere is [this Babylonian tyranny] more conspicuous than in the sacrament of baptism."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 46. Cf. also LW 36:43.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 60. Cf. also LW 36:58.

⁸⁷ This was also reinforced by the greatest scholastic textbook, Peter Lombard's *Sentences* 4, d.14, c.1: "As Jerome says, it is 'the second plank after shipwreck,' because if anyone has corrupted by sin the clothing of innocence which he received at baptism, he may repair it by the remedy of penance... Those who have fallen after baptism can be renewed by penance, but not by baptism."

⁸⁸ Hendrix, 110.

The first part of Baptism: The Divine Promise

Luther praises the divine promise of Mark 16:16 and continues: “When we rise from our sins or repent, we are merely returning to the power and the faith of baptism from which we fell, and finding our way back to the promise then made to us, which we deserted when we sinned. For the truth of the promise once made remains steadfast, always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.”⁸⁹ He points out that the only sin that can condemn is unbelief. Penance should simply be the return to this promise and the comfort God gives in baptism. Yet, the Roman tyranny continued and appalled Luther: “All the sacraments were instituted to nourish faith. Yet these godless men pass over it so completely as even to assert that a Christian dare not be certain of the forgiveness of sins or the grace of the sacraments.”⁹⁰

There was a disagreement over the formula used in baptism. Greeks would say, “May the servant of Christ be baptized,” while the Latins would say, “I baptize.” Luther makes it clear that either form is acceptable. The major point is that God is the one doing the baptizing through his representative.⁹¹ Why include this type of discussion? Luther is writing for the clergy and educated leaders whom he hopes to win over. This is practical *Seelsorger* advice from Luther.

The second part of Baptism: The Sign

The sign that accompanies the promise of God in baptism is the immersion in water. Luther stated that the Greek *baptizo* means, “I immerse,” and *baptisma* means “immersion.”⁹² He rejects the teaching that the sacraments confer grace intrinsically *ex opere operato* as the scholastics teach. The efficacy consists in faith which sees the sign and clings to the promise made by Christ. Luther contends this is the origin of the saying: “Not the sacrament, but the faith of the sacrament, justifies.”⁹³ He goes on, revealing a unique preference: “Baptism is a washing

⁸⁹ TAL 3:61. Cf. also LW 36:59.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 64. Cf. also LW 36:61.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 65-66. Cf. also LW 36:63.

⁹² Do not be surprised when Baptists use this passage against us Lutherans! The semantic definition of the Greek word, *baptizo*, was not in dispute in 1520. It should be noted that Luther chose to use the Latin verb “mergo” and the noun “mersio” which mean, respectively, “to dip in water, immerse” and “a dipping, immersion,” rather than using the more common Latin “immergo” and “immersio.” Philip Schaff translates this less common word combo as “a dipping”/ “to dip” each time it occurs. Later in this treatise, Luther will show a preference for immersing a child under the water—there he uses the verb *immergo* to describe the sacramental action.

⁹³ TAL 3:68. Cf. also LW 36:66.

away of sins, but the expression is too mild and weak to bring out the full significance of baptism.”⁹⁴ Luther prefers the picture of death and resurrection. The sign is a powerful picture of what God does in baptism: “When the minister immerses the child in the water it signifies death, and when he draws it forth again it signifies life.”⁹⁵ Luther is at his best in this section with some of his descriptions of vocation and the confidence we have as Christians. He writes,

The sooner we depart this life, the more speedily we fulfill our baptism; and the more cruelly we suffer, the more successfully do we conform to our baptism. Hence the church was at its best at the time when martyrs were being put to death every day and accounted as sheep for the slaughter, for then the power of baptism reigned supreme in the church, whereas today we have lost sight of this power amid the multitude of human works and doctrines. For our whole life should be baptism.⁹⁶

The pope has robbed Christians of their liberty by diminishing baptism. He has also made them captives with an endless parade of works and laws and ceremonies. The Roman church was more concerned with “ecclesiastical liberty”⁹⁷ rather than true liberty of souls. The pope’s disciples twist the meaning of Luke 10:16 (“he who hears you hears me”) to validate their perversions and demand obedience in all things.

What does Luther have to say about infant baptism? Luther does acknowledge that some might question how this emphasis on faith in the sacrament applies to infants:

In contradiction to what has been said, some might cite the baptism of infants who do not comprehend the promise of God and cannot have the faith of baptism; so that therefore either faith is not necessary or else infant baptism is without effect. Here I say what all say: Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible, the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by the pouring in of faith [*fides infusa*].⁹⁸

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71. Cf. also LW 36:68.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70. Cf. also LW 36:67-68.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72. Cf. also LW 36:69-70.

⁹⁷ Erik Herrmann notes: “As the church participated in the emerging feudal system as a landowner, the notion of “ecclesiastical liberty” had more to do with political and economic jurisdiction than liberty in a spiritual or theological sense.” The church was free to operate apart from secular control or coercion; it had privileges, and this was the “ecclesiastical liberty” which Luther mocks here. TAL 3:73, note 167.

⁹⁸ TAL 3:76. Cf. also LW 36:73.

Luther stresses here that a child is aided by others who care about him or her, and God still works the miracle of planting faith in the heart.⁹⁹

Finally, while praising baptism, Luther takes aim at the making of vows. His personal desire is that no vows would ever be taken and that all vows be abolished. A vow was a kind of law or requirement, and it was often viewed as meritorious for salvation. This is the natural result when the focus is put on what man does, rather than on what God promises. Everyone has the right to do something privately or of their own free choice, but monastic vows such as chastity, obedience, and poverty have no basis in Scripture and run directly counter to the Christian life as found in baptism. Luther admits he has some things to work out: “I am not fully clear in my own mind whether all the things that people vow nowadays come under the head of vows.”¹⁰⁰ Even still, the people of God must not be held in captivity to human laws and ordinances.



A Current “Captivity” according to Luther?

Luther lamented how the promise and power of baptism were neglected in his day. “This message should have been impressed upon the people untiringly, and this promise should have been dinned into their ears without ceasing. Their baptism should have been called to their minds again and again, and their faith constantly awakened and nourished.”¹⁰¹ Instead of holding before our people the gospel promises of baptism, do we din into their ears the need for more volunteers or the problems plaguing our congregation? Messaging matters whether it is 1520 or 2020. Luther was horrified that “there are

⁹⁹ Luther used the terms *fides aliena* and *fides infusa* differently than the scholastics, which caused some confusion. The scholastics taught that children were saved by *fides aliena*, “another’s faith,” because they obviously cannot have their own faith. Adults believed for the child and God counted this as good enough, according to scholastics. Luther instead taught that children benefit from the faith of others (*fides aliena*) in so far as parents or other Christian loved ones will bring them to the font and pray for them. Scholastics also taught that faith is acquired through the authorities of Scripture and tradition as they are heard and grasped by the human mind. This acquired faith, according to scholastics, must be turned into trust by infused faith (*fides infusa*), which is given by the Holy Spirit. Luther, however, taught that God infuses the gift of faith by the power of the Word at work in baptism. See Luther’s *Concerning Rebaptism: A Letter to Two Pastors* LW 40:225-62 for a fuller explanation of infant baptism.

¹⁰⁰ TAL 3:83; Luther will have more to say on vows in the next year while writing from the Wartburg, namely, in *On Monastic Vows*, LW 44:243-400.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 61. Cf. also LW 36:59.

scarcely any who call to mind their baptism and still fewer who glory in it.”¹⁰² Baptism was downplayed in favor of vows and man-made works. There was a contempt for the common Christian life. Could the same be said in our congregations? Do Christians today glory in their baptisms, or do they find more satisfaction in budgets, buildings, and boards? Have our MVOs¹⁰³ and VTOs¹⁰⁴ replaced a baptismal identity, or do they rightly enhance it? The temptation of the flesh to self-chosen works and an affinity for recognition did not disappear when we were ordained either. There was no indelible character impressed upon us. “We are all beggars—*hoc est verum*.”¹⁰⁵

Luther’s words warn us not to reduce the power of baptism to small and slender dimensions. “Our whole life should be baptism,” Luther said. That is, a dying and rising again in the freedom from sin, death, and the devil which Christ delivers to us in baptism. That freedom is primarily our justification through faith in Christ. We are free from all that condemns or coerces us. Shepherds have the duty and privilege to proclaim this doctrine and defend this liberty as Paul says: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1).

The Sacrament of Penance

The earlier debate over indulgences (e.g. the *Ninety-five Theses*) was a debate over the sacrament of penance and its accompanying practices in the life of the church. Luther has said plenty on this subject, but leave it to good Martin to say a little more. The true meaning and use of penance have been completely obliterated by the papacy. Christ ordained the ministry of those who should be the voice of God, assuring repentant sinners that if they are absolved in faith, they are truly absolved in heaven. Instead, the pope has usurped the power of the keys for himself and his own greedy ends. “The promise of penance... has been transformed into the most oppressive despotism, being used to establish a sovereignty which is more than merely temporal. Not content with these things, *this Babylon of ours has so completely extinguished faith* that it

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 60. Cf. also LW 36:58.

¹⁰³ “Mission, Vision, Objectives.” The old standard in congregational planning.

¹⁰⁴ “Vision Traction Organizer.” The current rage in congregational planning.

¹⁰⁵ This is a reference to the note found in Luther’s pocket upon his death. “This is true.” See Kittelson, 297.

insolently *denies its necessity in this sacrament*. Indeed, with the wickedness of Antichrist it brands it as heresy for anyone to assert that faith is necessary.”¹⁰⁶ Luther takes issue with all three parts of Rome’s definition of penance: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Each one has been perverted in its definition and practice.

Luther lamented the misplaced emphasis on contrition as something superior to faith. “Beware, then, of putting your trust in your own contrition and of ascribing the forgiveness of sins to your own remorse.”¹⁰⁷ The practice of confession is necessary and certainly commanded by God (cf. Matt 3:6). Even private confession is something Luther praised: “I am heartily in favor of it... I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences.”¹⁰⁸ One might think of the practice of confessing to a priest, but Luther primarily praises the way one Christian can confess and be absolved by another brother or sister. Luther also attacked the pope’s practice of “reserved cases,”¹⁰⁹ i.e. certain sins that only the pope could absolve and dictate satisfactions. The bull *Coena Domini* (first issued in A.D. 1364) was published yearly with a list of these sins, and bishops were robbed of the opportunity to show pastoral care to their flock. They had to wait for the pope to issue his absolution and directions. This was despotism and tyranny of consciences, brought about by foolish and blind shepherds. Instead, Luther called on them to “permit all brothers and sisters most freely to hear the confession of secret sins, so that the sinner may make his sins known to whomever he will and seek pardon and comfort, that is, the word of Christ, by the mouth of his neighbor.”¹¹⁰

Luther attacked the third part of the Roman definition of penance, satisfaction. This piece to the puzzle of penance was the final act which one would do before receiving the priest’s absolution. People thought that because they mumbled a few *Hail, Marys* or carried out the orders imposed by a priest, they were saved. Because of the false teaching and soul enslaving

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 86-87. Cf. also LW 36:83.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 88. Cf. also LW 36:85.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 89. Cf. also LW 36:86.

¹⁰⁹ This practice had started as parish priests looked to Rome for help with certain grave transgressions, such as violence done to clergy or the burning of church buildings.

¹¹⁰ TAL 3:91. Cf. also LW 36:88. One caveat about *The Annotated Luther* would be the decision to use gender neutral language pronouns in accord with contemporary sensibilities. I had to wonder if Luther specifically praised the chance to confess to “brothers and sisters” because the context does seem to favor a person confessing to the priest. In Latin Luther does, in fact, use the phrase *omnibus fratribus et sororibus*, “all brothers and sisters.”

arrogance, “the people never have the slightest understanding what satisfaction really is, namely, the renewal of one’s life.”¹¹¹ Priests leave no room for faith in Christ because they fill the sinner with so many works and satisfactions. Again, Luther appeals directly to the priests and bishops: “How shall [the common people] know better if they have not been taught otherwise? No thought is given here to the mortifying of the flesh, no value is attached to the example of Christ, who, when he absolved the woman caught in adultery, said: ‘Go, and do not sin again’ [John 8:11], thereby laying upon her the cross, that is, the mortifying of the flesh.”¹¹²

The Sacrament of Confirmation

Luther then moves on to the other “sacraments” and attempts some critique, lest he seems “to have rejected them without cause.” Luther doesn’t spend much time on them, and neither do many historians who summarize the *Babylonian Captivity*,¹¹³ but we want to pay attention to the pastoral care Luther exhibits in these matters despite his rejection of their ability to confer grace and forgiveness to souls.

The sacrament of confirmation was the rite in which the priest laid on hands and supposedly imparted to the individual (usually a young child) the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luther is rather amazed that they made a sacrament out of this. It appears that there are only random examples in Scripture of Jesus and of the apostles laying hands on someone. “But if everything the apostles did is a sacrament, why have they not rather made preaching a sacrament?”¹¹⁴ Luther’s light-hearted jabs get at the heart of his opposition to the sacramental system: “I do not say this because I condemn the seven sacraments, but because I deny that they can be proved from the Scriptures.”¹¹⁵ Luther was willing to honor confirmation as a church rite, but he could

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 92. Cf. also LW 36:89.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 93. Cf. also LW 36:90.

¹¹³ Such as Martin Brecht, 384; Scott Hendrix, 110-111; Philipp Schaff, 125. It is worth noting that Roland Bainton (105-108) spends more time than most examining Luther’s treatment of the entire sacramental system.

¹¹⁴ TAL 3:94. Cf. also LW 36:91.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 95. Cf. also LW 36:91.

not call it a sacrament. “To constitute a sacrament there must be above all things else a word of divine promise, by which faith may be exercised.”¹¹⁶

The Sacrament of Marriage

The sacrament of marriage follows next. There is no divinely instituted sign nor any promise of grace associated with marriage. There is no reason it should be called a sacrament. This is clear because marriage is not a uniquely Christian endeavor. “The marriages of the ancients were no less sacred than are ours, nor are those of unbelievers less true marriages than those of believers, and yet they are not regarded as sacraments.”¹¹⁷ The common reason marriage was listed as a sacrament was because the Vulgate translation of Ephesians 5:31-32 used the word *sacramentum*. “The two shall become one. This is a great *sacramentum*.” This shows how shallow and careless Rome was with the languages. Luther’s philology here must have certainly brought a smile to the face of his humanist readers. To treat Scripture in such a way was inexcusable: “We expose our faith to ridicule if we affirm that a certain thing is contained in the sacred Scriptures and in the articles of our faith, only to be refuted and shown that it is not contained in them; being ignorant of our own affairs, we become a stumbling block to our opponents and to the weak.”¹¹⁸

This portion of the treatise concerning marriage also has an interesting history. When Luther’s works were first collected and published in Wittenberg and Jena, the publishers deleted certain sections of Luther’s writing. The first deletion is from the section where Luther talks about “canonical impediments to marriage.” There Luther describes the fulfillment of the apostle’s warning in 1 Timothy 4:1-3, “In later times...there shall be those who forbid people to marry.” One popular book of casuistry listed eighteen impediments to marriage, and people were forbidden to marry for reasons not mentioned in Scripture. But money talks in the papal kingdom. “There is no impediment nowadays that may not be legalized through the intercession of mammon.”¹¹⁹ Luther does discuss some of the impediments and what a local priest or bishop

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. also LW 36:92.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96. Cf. also LW 36:92.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 100. Cf. also LW 36:96.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 101. Cf. also LW 36:97.

might do in such cases. Here we find a bevy of questions, such as, whether you can marry your godchild, or if a man can break a betrothal and marry a different woman, or what should a wife do if her husband is impotent and she finds she is unable to remain chaste. All these issues might seem out of place, unless one sees Luther approaching practical questions as a pastor speaking to pastors.¹²⁰ “I ask and urge all priests and friars when they encounter any impediment to marriage from which the pope can grant dispensation but which is not stated in the Scriptures, by all means to confirm all marriages that may have been contracted in any way contrary to the ecclesiastical or pontifical laws.”¹²¹

The Sacrament of Ordination

Luther did not reject or condemn ordination as a church ceremony, but rather he was opposed to “human fictions” which claim things are divinely instituted when they have no basis in Scripture. “We ought to see that every article of faith of which we boast is certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture. But we are utterly unable to do that in the case of the sacrament under consideration.”¹²² The papacy wanted the authority to claim that it could institute new teachings, since the church is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But this has it all backwards. “It is the promises of God that make the church, and not the church that makes the promises of God. For the Word of God is incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make, but only to be decreed, ordained, and made. For who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?”¹²³ Concerning this sacrament the church of Christ knows nothing at all.

Luther also attacks the distinction manufactured by Rome that priests and clergy were somehow “better” than your average Christian. This has implications for the ministry of the church. Luther wrote,

¹²⁰ “This matter troubles and distresses me, for there are daily cases, whether by the special malice of Satan or because of our neglect of the Word of God.” (TAL 3:110) Luther’s further comments here that he prefers bigamy to divorce, as the lesser of two evils, would come back to haunt him in the case of Landgrave Philip of Hesse. Philip’s secret bigamy years later was one of the Emperor’s pretenses for starting the Schmalkaldic War (A.D. 1546-1547). It is no wonder this section was deleted from Luther’s printed works in the sixteenth century.

¹²¹ TAL 3:102. Cf. also LW 36:98.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 111. Cf. also LW 36:107.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Let all, therefore, who know themselves to be Christian, be assured of this, that we are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and the sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of a superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself unless he is called.) And therefore this “sacrament” of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church. Furthermore, the priesthood is properly nothing but the ministry of the Word—the Word, I say; not the law, but the gospel.¹²⁴

Luther said he was almost (!) bursting with indignation at the way souls were trampled and the way the ministry of the Word was abused. The sacrament of ordination was the “admirable device for establishing all the horrible things that have been hitherto done in the church... Here Christian brotherhood has perished, here shepherds have been turned into wolves, servants into tyrants, churchmen into worse than worldlings.”¹²⁵

The Sacrament of Extreme Unction

This final sacrament was the last one a person would receive before death; it was a rite of anointing for the sick. The basis for this sacrament comes from a book of the Bible (James) that Luther states “has come to be regarded as authoritative,” yet he is still hedging his personal commitment: “I will say nothing of the fact that many assert with much probability that this epistle is not by James the apostle, and that it is not worthy of an apostolic spirit...”¹²⁶ Luther points out again how even when they want to point to Scripture for a sacramental basis, the papists do not follow what the text clearly teaches. “The apostle did not desire it to be an extreme unction or administered only to the dying, but he says expressly: ‘Is anyone sick?’ He does not say: ‘Is any one dying?’ ... The apostle’s words are clear enough, on which he as well as they rely; but they do not follow them.”¹²⁷ The text of James 5 also describes how the anointing and prayer go together, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person. This too is ignored, because

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119. Cf. also LW 36:116. C.F.W. Walther included this quote in his dogmatics textbook, which was an edition of Wilhelm Baier’s *Compendium* annotated with quotes from Lutherans. Walther quotes Chemnitz’s *Examination of the Council of Trent*, where he quotes Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity*. See C.F.W. Walther, “The Church’s Ministry” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, volume 107, no.1 (Winter 2010), translated by Benjamin P. Schaefer, 33-63.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 115. Cf. also LW 36:112.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121. Cf. also LW 36:118.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 122. Cf. also LW 36:119.

no one expects the person to get well—they only administer this anointing to those who won't get well! "If it were not so serious a matter, who could help laughing at this beautiful, apt, and sensible exposition of the apostle's words."¹²⁸

In summary, what can we say about extreme unction? Luther writes: "It was a rite of the early church, by which they worked miracles on the sick, and which has long since ceased."¹²⁹ "Still it was a good thing that this unction was made the extreme or 'last' unction, for thanks to that, it has been abused and distorted least of all the sacraments by tyranny and greed."¹³⁰ Luther wraps up with a final olive branch of sorts: "I conclude this prelude, and freely and gladly offer it to all pious souls who desire to know the genuine sense of the Scriptures and the proper use of the sacraments."¹³¹

Part 3: The Contemporary Reaction to Luther's writing

The initial reaction to Luther's writing was mixed. Erasmus, upon reading it, diagnosed Luther's case as "incurable" and feared that the progress made in reforming the church would come to nothing.¹³² Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558) had a reaction which is very entertaining in hindsight. After he first looked through a copy of the *Babylonian Captivity*, he exclaimed to his friends, "There have been many heretics since Christ's death, but no greater heretic has ever lived than the one who has written this book."¹³³ He then noted the many novel and heretical things he had seen on its pages. But not wanting to judge the work without a fair hearing, he went home and read it thoroughly. A few days later he met with his friends again and informed them: "What shall I say to you? The whole world lies in complete blindness, but this man alone

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 124. Cf. also LW 36:121.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 126. Cf. also LW 36:123.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 128. Cf. also LW 36:125.

¹³² Brecht, 385. Erasmus likely mentioned Luther in numerous letters, so it is possible that he approached the subject differently at various times. Erasmus did write on 14 May 1521 (Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church*, Vol. VII): "But, lo and behold! the burning of the Decretals, the *Babylonish Captivity*, those propositions of Luther, so much stronger than they need be, have made the evil, it seems, incurable."

¹³³ Quoted in Kurt Hendel. *Johannes Bugenhagen: Selected Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 16.

sees the truth.”¹³⁴ He and Luther corresponded back and forth, and by the spring of 1521 Bugenhagen had enrolled at the University of Wittenberg. He also began to give informal lectures to students, and in 1523 the evangelical congregation elected him pastor of St. Mary’s, the city church in Wittenberg. He remained a devoted friend and follower of Luther for the rest of his life.

The defenders of Rome during this period of history have come to be known as the “Catholic controversialists.” Luther touched a raw nerve with his treatise and Catholics responded by defending the Sacraments, especially the Mass. They lamented the “revolutionary social implications” of Luther’s writing because his doctrine of baptism “would make the common people think themselves free of sin and [his] eucharistic theology would have them dispense with the duty of obedience.”¹³⁵ They defended the doctrine of transubstantiation (a teaching Luther had not previously attacked) and the withholding of the cup from “country bumpkins” who might spill it. They were mortified that Luther treated faith as a gift rather than a virtue. They stressed the need to sacrifice Christ again, in accord with the Lord’s command “Do this as a memorial to me.” The mass was obviously something we do for God—just consider all the movements and the pageantry, they contended.¹³⁶ A Franciscan named Thomas Murner had as his chief complaint that “Luther had publicly discussed matters that were best not heard by the common people, in particular the question of universal priesthood.”¹³⁷ Murner also translated Luther’s work into German as “a means of publicizing Luther’s heresies, but his translation, which was printed five times in 1520, only helped to spread Luther’s ideas more broadly.”¹³⁸ Combine this with the fact that Luther’s *Babylonian Captivity* also went through six Latin printings in the last three months of 1520—this treatise was a publisher’s dream.

Even more noteworthy, however, was the horror with which they viewed Luther’s attack on the sacrament of ordination. The source of all the sacraments was, in their opinion, this sacrament, and so the source of all Luther’s errors was his denial of the sacrament of

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹³⁵ Bagchi, 123.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³⁸ Burnett, 61.

ordination.¹³⁹ The priest himself was the fulcrum point of the Roman system, which served as the meeting place for humans and God. Catholic writers argued that the main threat posed here by Luther was “the further diminution of priestly power and distinctiveness, for in denying the sacrificial nature of the mass, Luther was denying the de jure foundation of the priesthood itself.”¹⁴⁰ Luther was challenging not just the church in general, but the authority of a priest over his flock.

The most prominent Catholic who took issue with Luther’s writing was King Henry VIII of England (1491-1547). His Latin defense of the Roman sacraments appeared in July 1521. “At his own request, Henry VIII of England gained from the pope the title *Fidei Defensor*, ‘defender of the faith’, through his anti-Lutheran work *Assertio septem sacramentorum*, ‘I assert that there are seven sacraments’. This title... still appears on British coins in the abbreviated form *F.D.*”¹⁴¹ Pope Leo X also granted a ten year indulgence to anyone who read Henry’s book (though no sources I came across actually indicated if anyone read it).

In connection with Henry VIII, Luther’s use of the term *Schwaermer* marked an important milestone. Luther first used the term in print in his *German Response to Henry VIII*, written in July 1522, though not to describe the king. In that writing Luther condemned others “who boast of our name and introduce shameful things, step forth and preach only something new, so that others will speak about them.” Such people boasted and “raved” about holding mass in the evening, disregarding the command to fast beforehand, and in brief, “just as the papists fall all too much to the left side, the devil leads these too far to the right side.” Luther spoke only in general and does not seem to be too concerned by these fanatics, but “his criticism suggests a continuing debate that led the reformer to accuse some of legalism and spiritual arrogance.”¹⁴²

The objective evidence speaks for itself. “Up to 1525, nine Catholic titles against Luther were published on the mass, five on penance, three on sacraments in general, and a further

¹³⁹ Bagchi, 145.

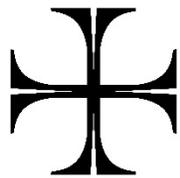
¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴¹ McGrath, 165.

¹⁴² Burnett, 83. All citations in this paragraph can be found here.

fourteen in answer to *The Babylonian Captivity*. The sacramental debate with Luther thus represented the largest single controversy of the Catholic literary campaign.”¹⁴³

It should be noted in closing this section that one does not find Luther’s fully formed theology on the sacraments in the *Babylonian Captivity*. He was rebuilding a broken sacramental system and, in a few years, a little more building would be necessary. Amy Burnett states, “Over the second half of the 1520s [Luther] moved away from the terminology of his earlier publications and introduced new formulations to explain his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. The differences between Luther’s earlier and later discussions of the sacrament would be significant for inner-Lutheran debates in the third quarter of the sixteenth century.”¹⁴⁴ Such discussions, however, go beyond the scope of this paper.



Part 4: Current “Captivities” according to Lutherans

The spirit of Antichrist

After 500 years WELS Lutherans are not oppressed by the dictates of the Papal See, and our church life is not dominated by the unbiblical sacramental system of Rome. Yet, “if you think you’re standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Cor 10:12). The Antichrist was correctly identified and opposed by Luther, but there is also a spirit of Antichrist which exists and endangers Lutherans. Professor J.P. Meyer pointed out this spirit, which threatens to take us captive. Meyer wrote,

There is the alluring appeal of the ways of the Antichrist. This appeal has so many features which especially attract pious, faithful Christians... It was precisely the serious Christians, people repelled by false teaching and worldly life, who were drawn in by, and adopted, the things mentioned [i.e. trusting Rome, following rigid traditions]. Even today it is often the most well-meaning Christians and pastors who adopt destructive methods borrowed from the Antichrist. It is not the sleepy congregations but precisely the ones which are zealous and active. It is precisely because of this seductive power that we must be doubly cautious and first examine all things in Christ’s Spirit, and then examine them again, and not permit ourselves to be duped by them.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴⁵ J.P. Meyer, *The Kingdom of Christ*, Translated and compiled by O.Marc Tanger, (No Publisher Listed, 2003), 63.

The spirit of Antichrist appeals to the eyes and finds its footing in our proclivity for traditions, institutions, and individuals as the security blanket for our souls. It treats efficiency like a spiritual gift. Organization, merger, and methods are the solution to all the church's ills. If the patient (i.e. the church) is sick, a remedy is called for from the depths of human ingenuity. This spirit shouts boastfully: "Look at us! We are big! We are successful! We are relevant!" Life under the cross is despised, and suffering is a sure sign of failure. "You must be doing something wrong—the church is dying! Wake up! You need to save it!" This truly is the spirit of Antichrist, supplanting the Savior with our own personal deeds. Yet, the Church shall never perish.¹⁴⁶ The body cannot be dead, while the Head still lives.¹⁴⁷ Luther held out Christ's promises to a world trapped in bondage. He took on the hierarchy, attacked false teaching, worked mightily. Like the saints before and since, he longed for a better country, a heavenly one. The world was not worthy of him nor of any of the rest. Still, despite Luther's best efforts, the spirit of Antichrist did not disappear after 1520. We do well to pause and ask, has such a spirit affected or infected us?

None of this is to dismiss the need for evaluation or adjustment in our ministry activities. The gospel deserves the best we can muster in thanks to our Lord. But how quickly the devil and our own deceitful hearts turn blessings into idols! How quickly works replace faith and the promise! Meyer states,

The warning for us [is] that we do not mix external elements into our understanding of Christ's kingdom, His church, or its ministry. Otherwise, no matter how we may commit ourselves to combating Rome, inwardly we provide firm footing for the Antichrist. We highly regard the theological works of our fathers as a magnificent gift of God to the church... Woe be to us if we take for granted that by their efforts pure doctrine has been forever tucked safely away—while we focus our attention elsewhere. If we do, then we are also on the road to traditionalism.¹⁴⁸

August Pieper once wrote, "We have now had the gospel in its truth and purity in great abundance and power for so long a time, and have accustomed ourselves to this blessing so thoroughly, *that we no longer regard it as something extraordinary*. This is already the first step

¹⁴⁶ It is true individual *visible* churches rise and fall; yet, the hordes of hell itself cannot overcome the Church, the Bride of Christ. This is a valuable distinction that can easily be forgotten amid the clamor and zeal for renewal.

¹⁴⁷ Jonathan Fisk, *Without Flesh: Why the Church Is Dying Even Though Jesus Is Still Alive*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 14.

¹⁴⁸ Meyer, 60.

toward despising it.”¹⁴⁹ The Roman See was once a bastion of orthodoxy—the Apostles’ Creed is called the *Roman Symbol* for a reason—but over time it claimed for itself prerogatives which belong to Christ and his gospel alone. Arrogance mixed with ignorance makes a deadly spiritual cocktail.

What is the remedy to such “captivity”? Luther wrote, “We should do nothing with greater zeal (indeed, it demands all our zeal) than to set before our eyes, meditate upon, and ponder these words, these promises of Christ... in order to exercise, nourish, increase, and strengthen our faith in them by this daily remembrance... This should be done by the preachers of the gospel.”¹⁵⁰ If our problems are spiritual and Christ’s kingdom is spiritual, then the only true remedies will be spiritual ones: a more fervent study of the Scriptures, a daily remembrance of baptism, a deeper appreciation for the Supper, and a faith which manifests itself in faithfulness in the ministry. Pieper wrote,

Therefore it should be the foremost concern of every pastor and public teacher in his ministry, to save himself first, and then those who hear him (1 Ti 4:16). I may have ever so high an office in the kingdom of God, the highest office is to care for my own soul. This office is included in every office in respect to others as the first and foremost element. Whoever is unfaithful in this, is also unfaithful in his ministrations to others.¹⁵¹

Pieper makes the point, as Luther does, that personal spiritual renewal is necessary in the church before all else. Or do we suppose that God wants unconverted, unspiritual servants in his kingdom?

The culture of secular humanism¹⁵²

The greatest “captivity” today might be the culture of secular humanism, which permeates our society and in turn the people of our churches. Humanism makes man the measure of all things, and its secular stance is decidedly anti-Christian. We can call this philosophy the dominant “church” of America. It has its own gurus and preachers. It observes certain religious

¹⁴⁹ August Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of the Church.” *The Wauwatosa Theology* volume 3, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1997), 302.

¹⁵⁰ TAL 3:44.

¹⁵¹ Pieper, 309.

¹⁵² This section contains thoughts gleaned from multiple Lutheran sources. Special thanks to conversations with Jonathan Hein, Daniel Deutschlander, and Robert Kolb (see Bibliography).

rituals, and everyone bows the knee. It has its own religious texts and dogmas. It excommunicates from the public sphere all who challenge its “orthodoxy.” And here we are—Bible-believing, confessional Lutherans. Lucky us!

At the start of his presentation for the WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, Pastor Jonathan Schroeder noted that Christians today have a lot more in common with the Judean exiles in Babylon that we might think.¹⁵³ Faith and religious belief exist today at the margins. In the center of public life today is this secular humanism, which glorifies diversity and tolerance, in which all religions are equally true (or to be more specific, equally irrelevant). Here in this new Babylon, sin is accepted on every side and in every form. Those who claim spiritual authority from on high are ignored, marginalized, or mocked. The individual rules the day, and his/her or zir/hir¹⁵⁴ choice of truth is as equally valid as any other individual’s. This secular humanism has its own “sacraments” which people participate in to prove their adherence to the faith. These “sacraments” are ways you prove your goodness to others, much like the system of the Roman church in Luther’s day. For example, consider the “sacrament” of safety, especially in light of Covid-19.¹⁵⁵ (**Side note:** I made it to page 35 before mentioning anything related to Coronavirus, lockdowns, or tyrannical orders—not bad considering my topic was all about *captivity*.) Many people seem to operate under the assumption that the highest form of devotion is to “be safe” and to “make sure others are safe.” To violate this ethic is to risk the wrath of other members of the community.

This all might sound rather obvious and nauseating, but we haven’t even scratched the surface of what afflicts our churches. What pastor would preach against sin, especially those culturally accepted sins, in a climate such as this? It would be nearly impossible for your church to reach the community, if “the truth got out” about what you believe. The last thing you want to do is alienate a “good” family in the church. It might be better to downplay the One who claims to be the Truth, the Way, and the Life, when everyone seems to have their lives figured out without Jesus’ help.

¹⁵³ Jonathan Schroeder, “Finding Our Voice” keynote. Accessed at <https://lutheranleadership.com/resources/>

¹⁵⁴ These are simply two examples of the multiplicity of gender-neutral pronouns available today.

¹⁵⁵ Jonathan Hein, email correspondence.

“O worthless religion of this age of ours, the most godless and thankless of all ages!”¹⁵⁶

A few years ago, Robert Kolb was talking with a graduate student at Concordia Seminary St. Louis about the difficulty of reaching out to people today and how the Sacraments were a hindrance to outreach. Kolb peppered the conversation with tropes that he had always taught, such as “the sacraments turn people off” and “we don’t want to put obstacles in the way of former Baptists and Methodists,” and so on. The student replied in the kindest way, “Professor, you’re really getting old.”¹⁵⁷ That student knew what you and I know too. People in this Babylon society are looking for the exact things the sacraments offer. We are born into an eternal community through baptism—think of those who are longing for connections, separated from family members because they took a job in a new state or have never experienced the compassion of real family. We are fed in Holy Communion with the Lord Jesus himself, and in the process our fellowship with one another deepens. By God’s grace, the Lord has provided exactly what they need through the promise in Word and Sacrament. There’s no need to search for gimmicks or to dream up new programs—the Lord himself has entrusted us with the tools to meet these sin-sick souls with salvation. God is a multi-media communicator, and he has so many ways to bring us the good news in oral, written, and sacramental forms. We need only to take up the sword of the Spirit, to trust the means the Lord has handed us. Prof. Daniel Deutschlander notes, “Our timidity, our lack of faith can only be cured by constant and ever more devoted use of that very gospel means of grace which overcomes our fear as well as the unbelief of those whom God will call and save by it.”¹⁵⁸ The captivities may have changed since the 16th century, but the solution remains the same—Jesus Christ and him crucified.

CONCLUSION

Luther worked diligently to dismantle the papal system which tyrannized souls from the cradle to the grave. His *Babylonian Captivity* was certainly a spiritual battle cry against the oppression he had experienced personally and watched almost daily in his ministry in Wittenberg. Yet, Luther took delight in the way God chose to deal with sinners through the

¹⁵⁶ TAL 3:45. Cf. also LW 36:43.

¹⁵⁷ Robert Kolb, “Interview with a Reformation Scholar” on June 8, 2020. Zoom interview recorded.

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Deutschlander, Email correspondence on June 9, 2020. Copy in possession of the author.

means of grace. In 1529 Luther wrote “A Brief Order for Confession” which presents a dialogue between a peasant and a priest. After receiving absolution, the peasant stresses his wish to receive Holy Communion. “Why do you desire to receive the sacrament?” the priest asks. “Because I desire to strengthen my soul with God’s word and sign and to receive grace,” the peasant replies. “But did you not just find forgiveness of sins in the absolution?” To this the peasant responds, “What difference does that make! I want to receive God’s sign with his Word. To receive God’s Word in many ways is so much better.”¹⁵⁹ This is what Luther was fighting for in the *Babylonian Captivity*. He was breaking free from a soul-destroying system, so that souls, like this simple peasant’s, like yours and mine, might enjoy the fullness of God’s salvation. We have much to learn from Luther, even 500 hundred years later, for the LORD is good and his mercy endures forever.

S.D.G.

¹⁵⁹ Martin Luther, “A Short Order of Confession Before the Priest for the Common Man, 1529.” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53. Translated by Paul Zeller Strodach, revised by Ulrich S. Leupold. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 118. Thanks to Robert Kolb for pointing this resource out.

APPENDIX

Some Highlights, Interesting Thoughts, or Areas for Future Study

Solid **hermeneutics** is a key underpinning of this entire treatise. False doctrine always results when the Word is perverted and suppressed. One must maintain the **clarity** of Scripture, a theme Luther comes back to again and again. The words of God “are to be retained in their simplest meaning as far as possible. Unless the context manifestly compels it, they are not to be understood apart from their grammatical and proper sense, lest we give our adversaries occasion to make a mockery of all the Scriptures.”¹⁶⁰

Luther cautioned against **allegory**, though his definition of “allegory” is not entirely clear: “I would not have a theologian devote himself to allegories until he has exhausted the legitimate and simple meaning of the Scripture; otherwise his theology will bring him into danger.”¹⁶¹

An interesting topic for further study would be the way Luther discusses **the signs (i.e. “sacraments”) of the Old Testament** in contrast to the sacraments, as we refer to them, in the New Testament. Luther wrote, “It is an error to hold that the sacraments of the New Law differ from those of the Old Law in the effectiveness of their signs. For in this respect they are the same. The same God who now saves us by baptism and the bread saved Abel by his sacrifice, Noah by the rainbow, Abraham by circumcision, and all the others by their respective signs.”¹⁶² Luther was attacking scholastic theology’s errors regarding faith and signs. Apart from the sign of circumcision, one wonders if Luther did not happen to say more than Scripture says about these Old Testament promises and the “effectiveness” of them for the believer.

The **authority** of the Word is another important feature of this treatise, connected intimately with faith. “Even though philosophy cannot grasp this, faith grasps it nonetheless. And the authority of God’s Word is greater than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it.”¹⁶³ Again: “Most of all we should guard against impairing the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Those things

¹⁶⁰ TAL 3:32-33. Cf. also LW 36:30.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 114. Cf. also LW 36:110.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 67. Cf. also LW 36:65.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 37. Cf. also LW 36:35.

which have been delivered to us by God in the sacred Scriptures must be sharply distinguished from those that have been invented by men in the church, no matter how eminent they may be for saintliness and scholarship.”¹⁶⁴ He also wrote, “We ought to see that every article of faith of which we boast is certain, pure, and based on clear passages of Scripture.”¹⁶⁵

Luther’s **pastoral patience** takes center stage. He did not advocate taking both kinds by force in the Sacrament. “We accommodate ourselves to their rites and ceremonies for the sake of peace; but we refuse to be bound by such things as if they were necessary for salvation, which they are not. Let them lay aside their despotic demand, and we shall yield free obedience to their wishes, in order that we may live in peace with one another. It is a shameful and wicked slavery for a Christian, who is free, to be subject to any but heavenly and divine ordinances.”¹⁶⁶ There are a few other opinions from Luther which might be worthy of further study. He praises the elevation of the host, as an example of the priest holding before our eyes the sign of God’s promise.¹⁶⁷ He also encourages the local priest to celebrate a private mass to commune himself and to make it clear that the Mass is not a sacrifice.¹⁶⁸ Luther even allows prayers for the dead and a fee to be given, as long as they are distinguished from the Mass itself. Luther’s conservative approach encourages a priest to say prayers for someone, but to partake of the Sacrament for yourself alone.¹⁶⁹ He encouraged the Mass to be spoken in the vernacular, “that faith may be more effectively awakened.”¹⁷⁰

The Pastor’s Calling – “A bishop who does not preach the gospel—what is he but an idol in the world [1 Cor. 8:4], who has nothing but the name and appearance of a bishop?”¹⁷¹ Luther also discusses what good preaching should be: “Popular sermons ought to be nothing else

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 100. Cf. also LW 36:96.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 111. Cf. also LW 36:107.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 114. Cf. also LW 36:111.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 56. Cf. also LW 36:53.

¹⁶⁸ His writing the following year will reject the practice of “private Masses” where the priest celebrates alone without a congregation. See *The Misuse of the Mass (1521)*, LW 36:127-230.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 57. Cf. also LW 36:54.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 56. Cf. also LW 36:54.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 95. Cf. also LW 36:91.

than expositions of the Mass, or explanations of the divine promise of this testament; this would be to teach the faith and truly to edify the church. But in our day the expounders of the Mass make mockery and jest with allegorical explanations of human ceremonies.”¹⁷²

Luther has some “encouragement” for young men considering the ministry: “Therefore my advice is: Begone, all of you that would live in safety; flee, young men, and do not enter upon this holy estate, unless you are determined to preach the gospel, and can believe that you are made not one whit better than the laity through this ‘sacrament’ of ordination!”¹⁷³

Luther also outlined his **law-gospel distinction**, a theme which will be more fully explained in the next treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*. “The whole Scripture is concerned with provoking us to faith; now driving us with commands and threats, now drawing us with promises and consolations. In fact, everything in Scripture is either a command or a promise. The commands humble the proud with their demands; the promises exalt the humble with their forgiveness.”¹⁷⁴

PRAYER: O God, Father of all good order, Author of the holy ministry, I implore you with sincere and humble prayers: maintain intact and incorrupt the governance of your church (which you have most wisely instituted in a way fitting for mortals) against the muttering of the world and Death! Grant your servants who are planting and watering an extremely fruitful increase! Grant also to me, your infirm and inept servant, a mouth of wisdom! Confer your sanctifying gifts! Impart a fearless spirit! Lavish prosperous successes upon the work! I implore you also that I may teach rightly according to the rule of your Word, dispense your sacraments properly, live piously, and learn how to depart peacefully from this life (just as from an inn – not as from a home) when you command. AMEN.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 58. Cf. also LW 36:56.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 118. Cf. also LW 36:115.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 127. Cf. also LW 36:124.

¹⁷⁵ Prayer by David Hollaz (1648-1713 A.D.) *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum* (Stockholm and Leipzig: Gottfried Kieseewetter, 1750), page 1352. Translation by the author.

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