

The Freedom of a Christian

and

Treatise on Good Works



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Preface

In language study one faces the choice between learning about a language versus directly learning a language. If I learn about a language, I learn about its grammar, vocabulary, and syntax and about how each of these things is used. When I'm done, however, there's no guarantee that I can use any of that to actually create and communicate my own meaning. If, however, I instead directly learn a language, when I'm done, I not only know about it, but I can actually use it to create and communicate my own meaning.

In carrying out my assignment, I had a decision to make. Should we learn about these treatises of Luther? Or should we learn them—directly? I opted for the latter, which means that by and large I will let Luther speak for himself, with lots of quotations.¹

We will follow what I will call the theological order of the treatises, not their chronological order. It's in his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian* that Luther presents the biblical, reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith. His treatise *On Good Works* speaks to the sanctified life of the believer that springs fundamentally from his justification through faith in Jesus.

An Open Letter to Pope Leo X and On Christian Freedom

Introduction

The Reformer dedicated this treatise—the last of his major treatises of 1520—to Pope Leo X “as a token of peace and good hope” and as an indication of the “studies I should prefer to be more profitably occupied” with.² It accompanied a letter Luther had written to Pope Leo at the request of the papal nuncio Karl von Miltitz who had been engaged for over a year in a kind of shuttle diplomacy with the goal of reconciling the Reformation and Rome.³

Luther wrote this treatise in October of 1520 and published it in November. After he had “deconstructed medieval understandings of being Christian,” Luther turned his attention to a positive presentation of the biblical doctrine of salvation.⁴ In this text Luther presents

¹ All citations from the works of Martin Luther are from Luther's Works. American Edition. 55 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86.

² Martin Luther, “An Open Letter to Pope Leo X, 1520,” AE 31:343

³ In his 2018 essay on *The Freedom of a Christian* written for the Bethany Reformation Lectures, Pastor James Langebartels presents a detailed account of Karl von Miltitz and his role in this part of Reformation history.

⁴ Robert Kolb, *Luther's Treatise on Christian Freedom and its Legacy* (Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2020), 18

justification through faith alone as complete and total *freedom*⁵ from the obligation of having to do works in order to earn salvation. This freedom releases the Christian for unencumbered service to others.

An Open Letter to Pope Leo X

Content

Luther's letter to Pope Leo contains thoughts about Leo's person, comments on the office of the papacy, a strong condemnation of the Roman curia, Luther's view of the conflict of the last eighteen months, and his terms of reconciliation.

With respect to Leo's person, Luther wrote, "I have never alienated myself from Your Blessedness to such an extent that I should not with all my heart wish you and your see every blessing, for which I have besought God with earnest prayers to the best of my ability. ... I have never thought ill of you personally."⁶

This didn't mean, however, that Luther hesitated to point out to Pope Leo ways in which his office should—and should not—be understood. He wrote,

Be not deceived by those who pretend that you are lord of the world, allow no one to be considered a Christian unless he accepts your authority, and prate that you have power over heaven, hell, and purgatory. ... They err who exalt you above a council and the church universal. They err who ascribe to you alone the right of interpreting Scripture. ... A man is a vicar only when his superior is absent. If the pope rules, while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what else is he but a vicar of Christ? What is the church under such a vicar but a mass of people without Christ? Indeed, what is such a vicar but an antichrist and an idol?⁷

Luther contended that to a large extent it had been the Roman Curia who had filled popes' heads with such flattery and falsehoods, and Luther is clear how he feels about it. "I have truly despised your see, the Roman Curia, which, however, neither you nor anyone else can deny is more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom ever was. ... It is so bad that even Antichrist himself, should he come, could think of nothing to add to its wickedness."⁸

At this point Luther provides his own view of the history which had brought them to this point. First, he recounts his debate with Johannes Eck in Leipzig in July of 1519. In Luther's opinion, "whatever wrong was done was Eck's fault. ... [He] revealed the shame of Rome to all the world." Regarding his appearance before Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg three months later,

⁵ For those who are interested in a brief overview of the development of the concept of freedom in Luther's theology in the decade prior to this treatise, I refer you to pages 22-25 in Kolb's book.

⁶ Martin Luther, AE 31:334-335.

⁷ Martin Luther, AE 31:341-342.

⁸ Martin Luther, AE 31:335-336.

the Reformer says. “All the blame is Cajetan’s, who did not permit me to keep silent, as I at that time most earnestly requested him to do.” For Luther, the bottom line was this, “Luther is not to blame.”⁹

The final section of Luther’s letter to Pope Leo contains his terms for the reconciliation of the Reformation and Rome. “Let no person imagine that I will recant unless he prefer to involve the whole question in even greater turmoil. Furthermore, I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound.”¹⁰

Purpose

At the request of Miltitz, Luther dated his letter September 6, 1520, predating the arrival of the papal bull *Exurge Domine* which Luther received on October 10th. Scholars debate why Luther did this as well as what he hoped to accomplish by his letter. Some see it as conciliatory while others maintain it’s about as conciliatory as “a knife in the ribs.”¹¹ We won’t settle the debate here.¹² There is a question whether the pope ever saw either Luther’s letter or the treatise which accompanied it.

The Freedom of a Christian

Introduction

With the opening words of *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther indicates that in writing about Christian freedom, he is really writing about faith in Jesus Christ. “Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing. . . . They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. . . . But he who has had even a faint taste of it can never write, speak, meditate, or hear enough concerning it.”¹³ Dr. Kolb observes that “the first half of the treatise focuses on faith more than on the liberating work of Christ that is the object of that faith.”¹⁴

⁹ Martin Luther, AE 31:338-340.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, AE 31:341.

¹¹ Quoted in Egil Grislis, *Martin Luther’s The Freedom of a Christian Revisited*, p. 96. Those interested in the debate regarding the letter’s purpose will find an overview in the essay by Egil Grislis “Martin Luther’s *The Freedom of a Christian Revisited*” as well as in the essay by Pastor James Langebartels.

¹² My personal opinion is that the letter should be taken at face value and that we should not try to read between the lines. Luther had agreed to write a conciliatory letter to Pope Leo. I don’t know why we have to find either feigned flattery or forthright falsehoods in what Luther says.

¹³ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” AE 31:343.

¹⁴ Kolb, p. 32

Two Propositions

Following his opening words about faith, Luther presents the two propositions for which his treatise is famous, propositions which Luther says “seem to contradict each other. ... A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”¹⁵ His scripture references are 1 Co 9:19¹⁶ and Ro 13:8.¹⁷ Any contradiction in these propositions, however, is only apparent. For the one whose heart God’s Holy Spirit fills with trust in Christ he also frees to serve others in works which flow from that faith.

Proposition 1: A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none

Luther begins the exposition of his first proposition with what he describes as “something more remote from our subject” namely, the twofold nature of people, their “spiritual” nature or “new man” and their “bodily” nature or “old man”¹⁸.¹⁹

“First,” Luther says, “let us consider the inner man to see how a righteous, free, and pious Christian, that is, a spiritual, new, and inner man, becomes what he is.” Luther’s answer is this: “It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom.”²⁰ Salvation is not by works.

Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone

So, if it is not works which produces Christian righteousness or freedom, what is it? Luther is unequivocal. “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God.”²¹ Christian righteousness or freedom is *sola scriptura*. Specifically, Luther is talking here about the good news of Jesus.

The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. ... Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God. ... The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore, it is clear that, as the soul

¹⁵ Martin Luther, AE 31:344.

¹⁶ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

¹⁷ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

¹⁸ In his essay on Luther’s treatise, *Befreit, um gebunden zu sein*, Kolb remarks that while Luther’s language reflects his “simul justus et peccator” of a later time, he here “falls into a lack of clarity” in that he does not in a systematic way (in this treatise) present the outer man as “the evil in the person” (p. 43). In his book on Luther’s treatise, he cautions the reader about “shifting definitions” and an “imprecise use of a number of theological terms.” (p. 40)

¹⁹ Martin Luther, AE 31:344.

²⁰ Martin Luther, AE 31:344.

²¹ Martin Luther, AE 31:345.

needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works.²²

Christian righteousness or freedom is *sola fide*. This saving faith teaches the one who has it that “all things in you are altogether blameworthy, sinful, and damnable,” so that then “you will know that you need Christ, who suffered and rose again for you so that, if you believe in him, you may through this faith become a new man in so far as your sins are forgiven and you are justified by the merits of another, namely, of Christ alone.”²³ Christian freedom is *solus Christus*. So Luther concludes, “Wherefore it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus. . . . No other work makes a Christian.”²⁴

One can't help but notice that Luther does not explain in detail how Christ liberates sinners. He is content at this point simply to state the fact that the sinner is free by the merits of Christ which become his own through faith created by the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Great Treasure of Faith

Luther then turns his attention to the great treasure of justifying faith in Jesus. “True faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison which brings with it complete salvation and saves man from every evil.” It “will fill believers with so great a righteousness that they will need nothing more to become righteous.”²⁵ Luther explains it this way:

If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace, righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things. That which was impossible for you to accomplish by trying to fulfill all the works of the law—many and useless as they all are—you shall accomplish quickly and easily through faith.²⁶

The heart of this section is what Luther calls faith's three “powers”²⁷ or benefits. He identifies the first power of faith this way:

²² Martin Luther, AE 31:345-346.

²³ Martin Luther, AE 31:346-347.

²⁴ Martin Luther, AE 31:347.

²⁵ Martin Luther, AE 31:347.

²⁶ Martin Luther, AE 31:348-349.

²⁷ In his book, Kolb comments on Luther's word choice, saying that “powers” is “actually the wrong word for what Luther wanted to convey at this point.” His explanation is that “the Wittenberg theologians were trying to appropriate medieval terminology and redefine it biblically whenever they could.” (p. 50) He references in particular Aristotle, whose “model for defining ‘virtue,’ literally the power to accomplish something, was expressed in terms of its form or design (*causa formalis*) and the material from which it is made (*causa materialis*). Thus, Luther's instructors had taught him that that faith, as the material of the human side of the relationship with God, had to be formed by love, human actions that fulfilled divine commands.” (p. 46)

A Christian has all that he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him; and if he has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, surely he is free from the law. ... This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man's righteousness and salvation.²⁸

The second power of faith is this, that faith "honors him whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard since it considers him truthful and trustworthy." Luther characterizes this as "the very highest worship of God." Then, "when ... God sees that we consider him truth and by the faith of our heart pay him the great honor which is due him, he does us that great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith. Faith works truth and righteousness by giving God what belongs to him."²⁹

The third "incomparable benefit" of faith is what we today call the "great exchange."

[Faith] unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. ... Christ and the soul become one flesh. ... Everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil. Accordingly, the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own. ... Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's, while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's.³⁰

Luther pictures this faith that comes between them as a "wedding ring."³¹

The Reformer concludes this section on the great treasure of faith by returning to the central point of his first proposition. "[Faith] alone can fulfill the law and justify without works. ... Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you will still not be righteous. ... This cannot be done by works but only by the faith of the heart. ... Therefore, faith alone is the righteousness of a Christian and the fulfilling of all the commandments."³²

Kings and Priests

Up to this point, Luther has focused on the first half of his first proposition: "A Christian is ... perfectly free." He will now conclude by focusing on the latter half: "lord of all, subject to none." He begins by saying that believers in Jesus are kings and describes their kingship in this way.

²⁸ Martin Luther, AE 31:349-350.

²⁹ Martin Luther, AE 31:350-351.

³⁰ Martin Luther, AE 31:350-351.

³¹ Martin Luther, AE 31:352.

³² Martin Luther, AE 31:352-353.

With respect to the kingship, every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things that, by virtue of a spiritual power, he is lord of all things without exception, so that nothing can do him any harm. As a matter of fact, all things are made subject to him and are compelled to serve him in obtaining salvation. ... There is nothing so good and nothing so evil but that it shall work together for good to me, if only I believe. Yes, since faith alone suffices for salvation, I need nothing except faith exercising the power and dominion of its own liberty.³³

Not only are believers kings, they are also priests who have been set free in Christ to come into God's presence, pray to him, and "do all things which we see done and foreshadowed in the outer and visible works of priests."³⁴

Preach the Gospel!

After a short aside in which he explains the distinction between the universal priesthood and the public ministry, Luther concludes his exposition of his first thesis by calling for the preaching of gospel for faith. As he does, he addresses many of the shortcomings of preaching in his day. "It is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice.³⁵ ... Far less is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers." Luther also rejects preaching which wants only to play on people's emotions, moving them "to sympathy with Christ" or "to anger against the Jews." Instead, Luther says that Christ ought

to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him. This is done when that Christian liberty which he bestows is rightly taught and we are told in what way we Christians are all kings and priests and therefore lords of all and may firmly believe that whatever we have done is pleasing and acceptable in the sight of God.³⁶

Proposition 2: A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all

Luther then begins his discussion of his second proposition: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." This proposition deals with the "outer man,"³⁷ Luther says, and speaks to this question, "If faith does all things and is alone sufficient unto righteousness, why then are good works commanded? We will take our ease and do no works and be content

³³ Martin Luther, AE 31:354-355.

³⁴ Martin Luther, AE 31:355.

³⁵ In his day, faith was understood to be simply the cognitive acceptance of something's facticity.

³⁶ Martin Luther, AE 31:357.

³⁷ See Kolb's comment about Luther's use of this term from footnote 18.

with faith.”³⁸ Luther’s opponents frequently charged that his teaching of justification by faith alone without works necessarily meant that he was opposed to good works. Luther will make clear that his opposition was not to works *per se* but to works *as a means of obtaining salvation*.

A Two-fold Need for Works

Therefore, Luther begins the exposition of his second thesis with a discussion of the purpose of works. If Christians were already now nothing but “wholly inner and perfectly spiritual men,” then this second proposition would not be necessary. But they are not. “As long as we live in the flesh we only begin to make some progress in that which shall be perfected in the future life.” So,

in this life [a Christian] must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure; here he must indeed take care to discipline his body by fastings, watchings, labors, and other reasonable discipline and to subject it to the Spirit so that it will obey and conform to the inner man and faith and not revolt against faith and hinder the inner man, as it is the nature of the body to do if it is not held in check.³⁹

To Control Oneself

The perfectly free lord of all who is subject to none does works not that he might thereby earn his salvation; he already has that through faith in Jesus and his redeeming work. Rather, as a believer in Jesus, he wants to control himself, to “reduce the body to subjection and purify it of evil lusts. . . . Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires that all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God.” Thus the Christian “does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things.”⁴⁰

Four Analogies

To illustrate the relationship between faith and works, Luther uses four different analogies. The first is that of Adam and Eve. “We should think of the works of a Christian who is justified and saved by faith because of the pure and free mercy of God, just as we would think of the works which Adam and Eve did in Paradise.” Though created righteous and without sin, God gave Adam and Eve work to do, “not to obtain righteousness,” but “only to please God.”⁴¹

³⁸ Martin Luther, AE 31:358.

³⁹ Martin Luther, AE 31:358-359.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, AE 31:359.

⁴¹ Martin Luther, AE 31:360.

Luther's last three examples—that of a bishop, a tree and its fruit, and a craftsman—all make basically the same point. First one is a bishop, then one can do a bishop's works. First a tree is good, then it produces good fruit. First a carpenter is good, then he can build a good house. The point is basically the same. "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works. Consequently, it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person."⁴² With that, Luther draws his conclusion.

Since, then, works justify no one, and a man must be righteous before he does a good work, it is very evident that it is faith alone which, because of the pure mercy of God through Christ and in his Word, worthily and sufficiently justifies and saves the person. A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely. He seeks neither benefit nor salvation since he already abounds in all things and is saved through the grace of God because in his faith he now seeks only to please God.

The *opinio legis* vs. Luther's Teaching

Human reason, however, sees works very differently. "It is indeed true that in the sight of men a man is made good or evil by his works." As a result, Luther says, many are deceived and teach that works justify, "without even mentioning faith." This is false. "If works are sought after as a means to righteousness, ... they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed; and this addition to them makes them no longer good but truly damnable works."⁴³

Thus Luther makes his teaching about good works abundantly clear. "We do not, therefore, reject good works; on the contrary, we cherish and teach them as much as possible. We do not condemn them for their own sake but on account of this godless addition to them and the perverse idea that righteousness is to be sought through them; for that makes them appear good outwardly, when in truth they are not good." Only faith in Jesus can overcome this perverse notion.⁴⁴

Law and Gospel Preaching

To this end Luther calls for preaching both law and gospel, repentance and faith.

We must bring forth the voice of the law that men may be made to fear and come to a knowledge of their sins and so be converted to repentance and a better life. But we must not stop with that,

⁴² Martin Luther, AE 31:361.

⁴³ Martin Luther, AE 31:362.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, AE 31:363.

for that would only amount to wounding and not binding up, smiting and not healing, killing and not making alive, leading down into hell and not bringing back again, humbling and not exalting. Therefore, we must also preach the word of grace and the promise of forgiveness by which faith is taught and aroused. Without this word of grace, the works of the law, contrition, penitence, and all the rest are done and taught in vain.⁴⁵

To Serve One's Neighbor

When Luther began his discussion of good works, he identified two purposes for them. The first was because the Christian “must control his own body.” The second is that the Christian “must ... have dealings with men.” Luther now takes up this second purpose. He says,

A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth; rather, he lives only for others and not for himself. ... This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need. ... This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love.⁴⁶

For Jesus' Sake

Luther takes his cue for this from Philippians 2 in which “the Apostle has prescribed this rule for the life of Christians, namely, that we should devote all our works to the welfare of others, since each has such abundant riches in his faith that all his other works and his whole life are a surplus with which he can by voluntary benevolence serve and do good to his neighbor.”

Luther cites the example of Christ's life as Paul portrayed it in Philippians 2:5-8.

Although Christ was filled with the form of God and rich in all good things, so that he needed no work and no suffering to make him righteous and saved (for he had all this eternally), yet ... he so lived, labored, worked, suffered, and died that he might be like other men and in fashion and in actions be nothing else than a man, just as if he had need of all these things and had nothing of the form of God. But he did all this for our sake, that he might serve us and that all things which he accomplished in this form of a servant might become ours.⁴⁷

Luther cannot speak of Christ as an example, however, without also proclaiming Christ as the Savior from sin.

Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches? I will therefore give myself as a Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me; I will do

⁴⁵ Martin Luther, AE 31:364.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, AE 31:365.

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, AE 31:365-366.

nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable, and salutary to my neighbor, since through faith I have an abundance of all good things in Christ.⁴⁸

Regardless Who It Is

A Christian gives himself as a Christ to his neighbor regardless who that neighbor is or isn't. The Christian "does not distinguish between friends and enemies or anticipate their thankfulness or unthankfulness."⁴⁹ This, says Luther, is the glory of the Christian life. The Christian is lord over all, yet serves all.

Four Examples

Luther provides four examples to illustrate the point he has just made. His first example is that of the Virgin Mary. Though not bound by the law of purification, "out of free and willing love," she submitted to it "that she might not offend or despise" other women. St. Paul circumcised Timothy "that he might not offend or despise the Jews who were weak in faith and could not yet grasp the liberty of faith," but refused to allow the circumcision of Titus because of their stubborn insistence that it "was necessary for righteousness." Luther's third example is that of Christ himself who paid the temple tax. "Christ here calls himself and those who are his children sons of the king, who need nothing; and yet he freely submits and pays the tribute." As his last example, Luther cites Paul in Romans 13. "Christians should be subject to the governing authorities and be ready to do every good work, not that they shall in this way be justified, since they already are righteous through faith, but that in the liberty of the Spirit they shall by so doing serve others and the authorities themselves and obey their will freely and out of love."⁵⁰

Conclusion

Luther then brings the exposition of his second proposition to a close. After calling on his readers to test what they are hearing from their pastors, encouraging them to grow in faith, and instructing them to give freely, he concludes, "a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, AE 31:367.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, AE 31:368.

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, AE 31:368-369.

⁵¹ Martin Luther, AE 31:371.

With that Luther has completed the explanation of his two propositions and the body of his treatise. “Enough now of freedom. As you see, it is a spiritual and true freedom and makes our hearts free from all sins, laws and commands, as Paul says, 1 Tim. 1[:9], “The law is not laid down for the just.” It is more excellent than all other liberty, which is external, as heaven is more excellent than earth. May Christ give us this liberty both to understand and to preserve. Amen.”⁵² Luther ended the German version of his treatise here.

Appendix: Misunderstandings of Christian Freedom and a Biblical Response

The Latin version, however, also contained a rather lengthy appendix. In it, Luther responds in greater detail to two specific groups who misunderstand the Bible’s teaching on Christian freedom.

Responding to the Weak and the Stubborn

The first group Luther refers to as “the simple-minded, ignorant men, weak in faith.” Of them he says, “There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them. They want to show that they are free men and Christians only by despising and finding fault with ceremonies, traditions, and human laws.” Luther calls for dealing with such people patiently. “These he must take care not to offend. He must yield to their weakness until they are more fully instructed. ... This is the command of love which would harm no one but would serve all men.”⁵³

The second group Luther refers to as “the unyielding, stubborn ceremonialists.” These are the people, “who rely for their salvation solely on their reverent observance of ceremonies.” Luther calls for resisting such people, doing “the very opposite,” and “offend[ing] them boldly.” He bases his approach toward both groups on Romans 14:3, “The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.”⁵⁴

The Value of Ceremonies

Having addressed these misunderstandings, Luther presents once again the biblical understanding of works and on that basis points out the value of ceremonies, in particular for the young. He says, “The inexperienced and perverse youth need to be restrained and trained by the iron bars of ceremonies lest their unchecked ardor rush headlong into vice after vice. ... They are

⁵² Martin Luther, AE 31:370-371.

⁵³ Martin Luther, AE 31:372-374.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, AE 31:372-373.

... to be taught that they have been so imprisoned in ceremonies ... that they might thus be kept from doing evil and might more easily be instructed to the righteousness of faith.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Luther ends the Appendix and the entire treatise with this plea:

Since human nature and natural reason, as it is called, are by nature superstitious and ready to imagine, when laws and works are prescribed, that righteousness must be obtained through laws and works; and further, since they are trained and confirmed in this opinion by the practice of all earthly lawgivers, it is impossible that they should of themselves escape from the slavery of works and come to a knowledge of the freedom of faith. Therefore, there is need of the prayer that the Lord may give us and make us *theodidaktoi*, that is, those taught by God [John 6:45], and himself, as he has promised, write his law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for us.⁵⁶

Treatise on Good Works⁵⁷

Introduction

Between the years 1515 and 1519, Luther had produced a large number of pastoral texts on a whole host of doctrinal topics for the benefit of the members of St. Mary’s in Wittenberg. At some point during those years, he had also promised that he would write about good works. It seems, however, Luther never got around to it.

In February of 1520, his good friend, Georg Spalatin, reminded him of his promise. What began as a short sermon meant for a congregation, however, grew by May of that year into a small book. As he neared completion, Luther told Spalatin that he considered it “the best of them all.”⁵⁸ The publication was well received, undergoing numerous printings, reprintings, and translations.⁵⁹

In this treatise, Luther addressed head on and at length the false understanding of good works in his day as well as the charge that salvation by grace alone through faith alone necessarily means that good works are unimportant.

⁵⁵ Martin Luther, AE 31: 375-376.

⁵⁶ Martin Luther, AE 31: 376-377.

⁵⁷ Normally, this treatise is not included with Luther’s 1520 Reformation writings. You will have to decide for yourself if it should be. I would like to hear the discussion. On the one hand, its main audience was different from the other three treatises. On the other hand, what Luther originally intended as a sermon for his congregation, written in German, quickly turned into a book which was widely read and was translated into Latin.

⁵⁸ I assume that with his “all,” Luther is referring to the other things he had written for St. Mary’s congregation. He can’t be referring to the three famous treatises of 1520 since they had not as yet been written. I suppose it’s also possible that he is referring to everything and anything he had written up to that point.

⁵⁹ Albrecht Beutel, Uta Wiggermann. *Reformatorsche Hauptschriften des Jahres 1520*. (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 2017) 23.

With that by way of a brief introduction, let's look at what Luther said in his much lesser known *Treatise on Good Works* from May of 1520.

Dedication & Purpose

Luther dedicated this treatise to Duke John, the brother and eventual successor of Elector Frederick. In it he explains why this topic is so important. "For the greatest question has been raised, the question of good works, where immeasurably more trickery and deception is practiced than anywhere else, and where the simple-minded man is so easily misled."⁶⁰ Reu offers the remark, "Never before had Luther expressed himself on the important question of good works in such a fundamental, thorough and profound way."⁶¹

There Are No Good Works Except Those God Has Commanded

Luther begins with his first main point, one he will repeat time and time again. "The first thing to know is that there are no good works except those works God has commanded. ... Accordingly, we have to learn to recognize good works from the commandments of God, and not from the appearance, size, or number of the works themselves, nor from the opinion of men or of human law or custom."⁶² With this, Luther departed radically from his church's definition of a good work and turned on its head what it meant for the laity of his day to live a godly life.

The First, Highest, and Most Precious of All Good Works — Faith in Christ

Luther follows this with the second main point that will dominate his text, one to which he will also return in nearly every commandment. "The first, highest, and most precious of all good works is faith in Christ, ... as it says in John 6. ... For in this work all good works exist, and from faith these works receive a borrowed goodness."⁶³ Reu remarks, "Over against the deep-rooted view that the works of love must bestow upon faith its form, its content and its worth before God, it must have appeared as the dawn of a new era (Galatians 3:22-25) when Luther in this treatise declared, and with victorious certainty carried out the thought, that it is true faith which invests the works, even the best and greatest of works, with their content and worth before God."⁶⁴ Luther concludes, "This is the reason that when I exalt faith and reject such works done without faith they accuse me of forbidding good works. The fact of the matter is that

⁶⁰ Martin Luther, "On Good Works, 1520" AE 44:21.

⁶¹ M. Reu, Introduction to: *A Treatise on Good Works*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/418/418-h/418-h.htm>. Accessed July 8, 2020.

⁶² Martin Luther, AE 44:23.

⁶³ Martin Luther, AE 44:23.

⁶⁴ Reu, p. 6

I want very much to teach the real good works which spring from faith.”⁶⁵ For Luther, faith is so much more than the cognitive acceptance of something’s facticity. It is essentially trust in God’s forgiving grace and free salvation which bestows the confidence that God is now perfectly and completely well-pleased with me for Jesus’ sake, a confidence which frees me to respond willingly, joyfully, and in limitless ways, with love toward him and others.

Defining Good Works

Having presented his two main theses, Luther offers two contrasting definitions of good works. First, that of Rome.

If you ask further whether they consider it a good work when a man works at his trade, walks, stands, eats, drinks, sleeps, and does all kinds of works for the nourishment of his body or for the common welfare, and whether they believe that God is well pleased with them, you will find that they say no, and that they define good works so narrowly that they are made to consist only of praying in church, fasting, and almsgiving.⁶⁶

For Luther, however, a good work is something very different. “God is served by all things that may be done, spoken, or thought in faith,” and adds, “Now see why I exalt faith so much, include all works under it, and reject all works which do not flow from it!”⁶⁷

Nor does faith make distinctions between the works it does,⁶⁸ “even if it were so small a thing as picking up a straw. . . . For the works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith, which is always the same and lives and works in each and every work without distinction, however numerous and varied these works always are.”⁶⁹ And so, says Luther, “a

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:23-24.

⁶⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:24.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:24-25.

⁶⁸ In his explanation to the second commandment, Luther will come back to this point but say, “Though I have said above, and it is true, that where faith is and does the work there is no difference between one work and another, it must be understood as true only in regard to works in contradistinction to faith and its works. There is a difference between works when they are compared with one another, and one work is greater than another.” (p. 39). In his analysis of Luther’s text, Dr. Gottfried Herrmann offers the following four groupings according to which Luther considers the 10 Commandments over the course of the entire treatise. “First grouping according to interdependence: 1 → 2-10. The first commandment establishes faith as the chief work which is the prerequisite for all other commandments. In comparison to the first commandment, all other commandments are equal. Second grouping according to content: 1-3 → 4-10. The first table governs our conduct toward God, the second table toward another person. Third grouping according to ranking among themselves: 1-3 → 4-10. To be sure, the first table is rated higher than the second. But with the second table, the fourth commandment has an elevated position. It provides a kind of counterpart to the elevated position of the first commandment in the first table. For in the fourth commandment one sees whether the first three commandments are understood and become real. Fourth grouping according to scope: 1-4 → 5-10. The works of the first four commandments happen in a person’s understanding; they are supposed to take a person’s spirit captive and prevent him from regarding himself as good. The rest of the commandments deal with a person’s desires and instincts. (Martin Luthers Schrift “Von den guten Werken,” pp. 11-12)

⁶⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:25-26.

Christian man who lives in this confidence toward God knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly, not that he may gather merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing these things.”⁷⁰

In concluding this opening section, Luther notes one thing in particular which provides fertile soil for what he calls “the greatest good work,” and that is “when everything goes wrong with ... life, or when God punishes the conscience not only with temporal sufferings but with death, hell, and sin, and at the same time refuses grace and mercy, as though he wanted to condemn and show his anger eternally.” It is then in particular that “they who in such suffering trust God and hold on to a good, firm confidence in him, who believe that he is well-pleased with them, ... [who] believe at such times that God is gracious and well-disposed toward us” it is that, Luther says, which “is the greatest work that may ever happen to and in a man.”⁷¹

With his overview of faith and its relationship to works complete, Luther now begins an in-depth discussion of the works God calls for in each of his commandments.⁷²

The Work of the First Commandment

The Heart of the First Commandment

Luther presents the heart of God’s First Commandment this way. “Since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust, and faith in me alone and in no one else. ... Look to him for all good, grace, and favor, whether in works or suffering, in life or death, in joy or sorrow.” This, Luther says, “is the true fulfilling of the first commandment.” Because it is the very first of God’s commandments, it is “the highest and the best, [the one] from which all others proceed, in which they exist and by which they are judged and assessed.” Repeatedly throughout this entire section, Luther will come back to the same point.

If righteousness consists of faith, it is clear that faith fulfils all commandments and makes all its works righteous, since no one is justified unless he does all the commandments of God. Or again, works can justify no man before God without faith. ... God has promised his grace freely, and he wills that we start by trusting that grace and perform all works in that grace, whatever those works may be.⁷³

⁷⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:27.

⁷¹ Martin Luther, AE 44:28-29.

⁷² It is perhaps interesting to note at the outset how much space Luther devotes to each one. Of the eighty-five pages this part of the treatise covers, fifty pages are devoted to the first table of the law (58%), almost half of which are spent on God’s third commandment. Of the remaining thirty-five pages, twenty are devoted to God’s fourth commandment (57%). Commandments five through ten get only a couple of pages each at the most.

⁷³ Martin Luther, AE 44:30-33.

After reviewing what people in his day considered fulfilling the first commandment, Luther then presents another refrain from this treatise. “Let him who wants to be holy and full of good works begin to exercise himself at all times in this faith in all his life and works. Let him learn to do and to leave undone all things in such continual faith.”⁷⁴

Why There are so Many Laws and Ceremonies

At this point Luther does what he will do often in this treatise; he poses a question he anticipates people asking—in this case, “if faith does everything through the first commandment, why then do we have so many laws of the church and of the state, and so many ceremonies of churches, monasteries, and holy places?”⁷⁵ His answer is that the world is full of all different kinds of people for whom laws and ceremonies serve very specific and necessary functions. Some need to be urged and safeguarded. Others need to be restrained. Still others need to be coaxed and enticed.⁷⁶ At the same time, Luther calls for bearing with those who are weak in their understanding until they have a chance to learn and believe the truth.

Certainty Despite Sin

Before moving on, Luther speaks to the consciences of those who look at their lives in the mirror of God’s first commandment and are troubled by what they see.

How can I be absolutely sure that all my works are pleasing to God, when at times I fall, talk, eat, drink, and sleep too much, or otherwise transgress in ways I cannot avoid? Answer: This question shows that you still regard faith as a work among other works and do not set it above all works. It is the highest work because it blots out these everyday sins and still stands fast by never doubting that God is so favorably disposed toward you that he overlooks such everyday failures and offenses. . . . See, it is by the mercy and grace of God and not by their own nature that works are without guilt and are forgiven. They are good because of faith, which abandons itself to this same mercy.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:33-34.

⁷⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:34.

⁷⁶ Here are Luther’s groupings and the way he sees laws and ceremonies serving each. First, there are the believers led by the new man “who need no law” (1 Ti 1:9). Secondly, there are those who “want to abuse this freedom, put false confidence in it, and [grow] lazy.” People like this, Luther says, “must be urged by laws and safeguarded by teaching and warning.” The third category are “wicked men, who are always ready to sin.” People like this “must be restrained like wild horses and dogs by spiritual and temporal laws.” Last of all are “those who are still lusty and childish in their understanding of such faith and the spiritual life.” They, Luther says, “must be coaxed like young children, enticed with external, definite concomitant adornment, with reading, praying, fasting, singing, churches, decorations, organs, and all those things commanded and observed in monasteries and churches, until such time as they too learn to know the teachings of faith.” AE 44:34-35.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:37-38.

Where Faith Comes From

In concluding his treatment of God's first commandment, Luther takes up one last question about the source of faith.

If you ask where faith and confidence may be found or whence they come, ... it does not come from your works or from your merits, but only from Jesus Christ, freely promised and freely given. ... Faith, therefore, does not originate in works; neither do works create faith, but faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ. ... We never read that the Holy Spirit was given to anybody because he had performed some works, but always when men have heard the gospel of Christ and the mercy of God.⁷⁸

On the Second Good Work

Luther begins his exposition of the work of God's second commandment this way, "After faith we can do no greater work than to praise, preach, sing, and in every way laud and magnify God's glory, honor, and name." According to Luther, the works of God's second commandment are the works of heaven itself! Therefore, there is no need to "make a distant pilgrimage or to seek holy places." For, he asks rhetorically, "what moment can pass in which we do not unceasingly receive God's blessings, or, on the other hand, suffer adversity? But what else are God's blessings and adversities than a constant urging and stirring up to praise, honor, and bless God, and to call upon him and his name?"⁷⁹

Three Specific Works

Luther then presents a number of specific works of God's second commandment. The first work is "to praise God in all his benefits," which, Luther says, are so innumerable that a believer's praise ought never end, and that if that were all a believer were to do, "his life on earth has certainly not been useless."⁸⁰

The second work Luther discusses at some length is this, "to be on one's guard, to flee from and to avoid all temporal honor and praise, and never to seek a name for oneself, or fame and a great reputation." Luther regards this as an exceedingly great sin, "more grievous in God's eyes than murder and adultery."⁸¹ Luther intends none of this to discount the importance of "a good name and reputation." He does, however, warn that "there must be great diligence and care

⁷⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:38-39.

⁷⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:39-41.

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:42.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, AE 44:42-43.

lest such a reputation puff up the heart and make a man self-satisfied.” To this end, Luther says, “God frequently permits a man to fall into or remain in grievous sin.”⁸²

The third work is “to call upon God’s name in every need.” To that end God “sends us much trouble, suffering, adversity, and even death as well.” This, then, God uses for one’s eternal good, “for through such works man perceives and learns what God’s name is, how powerful he is to help all those who call upon him, and how it is through this that confidence and faith increase mightily.” Luther even warns about a lack of trials. He then wonders aloud how God should react when we show more trust in self or Satan than in him, despite his many promises to help us!⁸³

Sin is another reason we have to call on God’s name. “For sin has hemmed us in with three kinds of powerful and mighty armies,” which Luther identifies as “our own flesh, . . . the world, [and] the wicked spirit.” Their unceasing attacks are opportunities to call upon God’s name for help in fighting against them and overcoming them. Sadly, Luther says, we are not as well acquainted with this power of God’s name because we have so rarely “seriously fought with sins.”⁸⁴

The Greatest and Most Difficult Work

After passing over a number of works people are already familiar with, Luther takes up what he describes as “the greatest and most difficult work of this commandment” namely, “to protect the holy name of God against all who misuse it in a spiritual manner, as well as to proclaim it far and wide to all men.” Luther calls on believers to do this no matter what the cost. “For the holy name of God, we must risk and give up all that we have and all that we can, and show by our deeds that we love God and his name, his honor and his praise, above all things, that we trust him above all else, and that we look to him for every good. By this we confess that we regard him as the highest good, for whose sake we renounce and give up all other possessions.”⁸⁵

Last Work

The last work Luther takes up is this, “to resist all false, seductive, erroneous, heretical doctrines and every misuse of spiritual power.” It’s hard for us to even imagine how Luther’s readers might have reacted to such words. For how could they, uneducated laity, even consider

⁸² Martin Luther, AE 44:44-45.

⁸³ Martin Luther, AE 44:46-48.

⁸⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:49.

⁸⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:49-52.

calling their spiritual leaders to account?! “It seems a serious and dangerous matter to resist them, for they assert that he who resists them resists God and all his saints, in whose place they sit and whose power they exercise.” But speak up they must, regardless of the cost. “It will cost blood, and those who enjoy the inheritance of the holy martyrs, the inheritance which was won with the blood of the martyrs, must in their turn take on the role of martyr.”⁸⁶

On the Third Commandment

Luther introduces God’s third commandment by speaking of its relationship to the first two. “The first commandment tells how our inmost heart should think about God; the second, how the words of our mouth should express this. The third tells us how we should relate ourselves to God in works.”⁸⁷

The First Works

The first works Luther will take up are “hearing mass, praying, and hearing a sermon on holy days.”⁸⁸

Concerning the mass, he says, “It is necessary that we attend with our hearts also; and we do attend when we exercise faith in our hearts. Here we must listen to the words of Christ when he institutes the mass.” To “attend with our hearts,” Luther says, means first that one comes with a heart that is “deeply troubled, ... longs for divine mercy and desires to be rid of his sins,” and then does not doubt that Christ’s word of forgiveness is true and regards Christ’s testament as sure and certain.⁸⁹

Next, Luther takes up the sermon. “The sermon ought to be nothing else than the proclamation of this testament,” and “where this is rightly preached, it must be diligently heard, grasped, retained, pondered often, and faith must be strengthened against every temptation of sin. ... This preaching should induce sinners to grieve over their sins and should kindle within them a longing for the treasure.”⁹⁰

The third work Luther discusses is prayer. Luther writes, “We should pray not as we do now, by turning over many pages and counting many beads, but by fixing our mind on some pressing need, desiring it with all earnestness, and thereby exercising faith and confidence

⁸⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:52-54.

⁸⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:54.

⁸⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:54.

⁸⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:55-56.

⁹⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:56-57.

toward God and not doubting that we shall be heard.” Regarding confidence in prayer, Luther has this memorable remark, “Those who do not believe that they will be heard sin against this commandment on the left side, and go far astray with their unbelief. But those who prescribe a limit to him sin on the right side and come too close to tempting God”⁹¹

Next, Luther takes up things that can make prayer challenging. Among them he includes God’s command to pray without ceasing, prayer that amounts to no more than “mumbling with the mouth,” Satan who “hinders men with all his powers” because he “knows well enough how powerful one man’s truly believing prayer is, how it hurts him and benefits all men,” and finally one’s own sense of unworthiness to pray.⁹²

Luther concludes his discussion of prayer by discussing its content. First there is one’s “own besetting need and trouble.” To help us see it, Luther advises using the 10 Commandments as a mirror.⁹³ Second, Luther says, “prayer is to be made for all the needs of all men, foe and friend alike, especially for those who live in the parish or the diocese.” This, Luther says, is why the church exists. “The church is called a house of prayer. ... Indeed, the Christian church on earth has no greater power or work against everything that may oppose it than such common prayer.”⁹⁴ Next, Luther calls for prayers for spiritual things in particular. “Open your eyes and look into your own life and into the life of all Christendom, particularly that of the spiritual estate. You will find how low faith, hope, love, obedience, chastity, and all virtue are, while all manner of heinous vice reigns supreme. You will find what a lack there is of good preachers and prelates.” According to Luther, Isaiah and Ezekiel⁹⁵ had prophesied this.

But it has all been foretold, that when God’s anger is greatest and Christendom suffers her greatest need, then petitioners and supplicants to God shall not be found. ... If the Turk destroys cities, country, and people, and lays waste the churches, we think a great injury has been done Christendom. Then we start complaining, and urge kings and princes to wage war. But when faith collapses, love grows cold, God’s word is neglected, and all manner of sin takes control, nobody thinks of fighting.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Martin Luther, AE 44:58-60.

⁹² Martin Luther, AE 44:61-62.

⁹³ Martin Luther, AE 44:62-64.

⁹⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:64-66.

⁹⁵ Luther’s references are to Isaiah 64:7, “Thou art angry with us, and unfortunately there is nobody who rises up and takes hold of thee” and Ezekiel 22:30-31, “I sought for a man among them, whether there be one who should make a hedge between us and stand against me and fend me off. But I have not found him. Therefore I have let my anger go against them, and have swallowed them up in the fire of my wrath.”

⁹⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:68-70.

Bodily and Spiritual Rest

At his point Luther takes up what he calls the “spiritual intention” of God’s third commandment—rest, which Luther says is “of two kinds, bodily and spiritual. . . . The bodily celebration or rest” Luther defines this way, “that we put aside the work of our hands and rest from our labor so that we may gather in church, see mass, hear God’s word, and offer common, single-minded prayer together.”⁹⁷

Since he had already discussed public worship at length, Luther quickly moves on to the topic of spiritual rest. “The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment is . . . that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers we do nothing of our own.” What this means practically speaking is that “if God is to live and work in [us], all [our] vice and wickedness must be choked and uprooted, so that in this event there is a rest from all our works, words, thoughts, and life, so that henceforth . . . it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives, works, and speaks in us.” It is here, Luther says, that “the strife between the spirit and the flesh begins.”⁹⁸

This struggle is accomplished in two ways, through our own effort and through the effort of others. With God’s help, “we must kill the flesh and subdue it with fastings, watchings, and labor.” In this context Luther speaks approvingly of these “solely to kill and subdue the pride and lust of the flesh.”⁹⁹ He then moves on to the efforts of others.

To destroy such works of ours as well as the old Adam in us, God overwhelms us with those things which move us to anger, with many sufferings which rouse us to impatience, and last of all, even with death and the abuse of the world. By means of these he seeks nothing else but to drive out of us anger, impatience, and unrest, and to perfect his own work in us, that is, his peace.¹⁰⁰

In this connection Luther points to Jesus who “lay [in the tomb] the entire day of rest free from all his works, and was the first to fulfil this commandment. Moreover, as Christ rose after his peace and rest, and now henceforth lives only in God and God in him, so we also shall be lifted up to God by the killing of our Adam, which is perfectly accomplished only through natural death and burial, that God may live and work in us forever.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:72.

⁹⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:72-73.

⁹⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:73-76.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:77-78.

¹⁰¹ Martin Luther, AE 44:78.

Conclusion to the Third Commandment and the First Table

With that, Luther brings his treatment of God's third commandment as well as the first table of the law to a close. He does so with a familiar thought. "But as has been said before, such works are to be done and such suffering endured in faith and in the sure confidence of God's favor, so that all works remain within the sphere of the first commandment and of faith, which exercises itself in these sufferings and grows strong."¹⁰²

The First Commandment of the Second Table of Moses

Luther begins his exposition of God's fourth commandment by saying that "after the excellent works of the first three commandments there are no better works than to obey and serve all those who are set in authority over us. This is why disobedience is a sin worse than murder, unchastity, theft, dishonesty, and all that goes with them." Luther organizes his treatment of this commandment around four works: "honoring our own father and mother, ... to honor and obey our spiritual mother, ... to obey temporal authority, ... and the obedience of servants and workers."¹⁰³

Our Own Father and Mother

The first work is that we should honor our own father and mother. This honoring does not consist in merely showing them all deference. It means that we obey them, have regard for what they do and what they say, esteem them highly, give way to them, and accept what they say. It means that we endure their treatment of us without complaint, so long as it is not contrary to the first three commandments, and, in addition, provide them with food, clothing, and shelter when they are in need.¹⁰⁴

For Luther, this is the meaning of "honor," which he says is "higher than mere love, and includes within it a kind of fear which unites with love and has such an effect upon a man that he fears offending them more than he fears the ensuing punishment."¹⁰⁵

As we all know, however, this is much easier said than done. Luther points out how children rebel against "the training and instruction of the Lord" they receive from their parents or how later in life they can neglect their parents because they are busy with children of their own.

There is, however, Luther says, another, even more dangerous kind of sin against this commandment. "That is when a child has its own way and the parents allow it to do so out of natural love." Luther condemns this sin in the harshest possible language. "What else is it but to

¹⁰² Martin Luther, AE 44:79.

¹⁰³ Martin Luther, AE 44:80-81.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:81.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:81.

sacrifice one's own child to an idol and burn it when parents train their children more in the love of the world than in the love of God, and let their children go their own way and get burned up in worldly pleasure, love, enjoyment, lust, goods, and honor, but let God's love and honor and the love of eternal blessings be extinguished in them?" Instead, Luther says to parents,

God makes a hospital of your own house. He sets you over [your children] as the hospital superintendent, to wait on them, to give them the food and drink of good words and works ... that they may learn to trust God, to believe in him, to fear him, and to set their whole hope upon him; ... that they may learn to despise temporal things, to bear misfortune without complaint, and neither fear death nor love this life.¹⁰⁶

Our Spiritual Mother

The second work Luther identifies is "to honor and obey our spiritual mother, the holy Christian church, and [its] spiritual authorities. ... We must honor, fear, and love the spiritual authorities as we do our natural parents, and yield to them in all things that are not contrary to the first three commandments."¹⁰⁷

Here, Luther speaks not so much to the "children" as he does to the spiritual authorities, about whom he says, "They behave toward their responsibilities like those mothers who forsake their children and run after their lovers. ... They do not preach, they do not teach, they do not restrain, they do not punish, and no spiritual government at all remains in Christendom. ... They misuse their power and take upon themselves alien and wicked works." Therefore, Luther says, "it is our solemn duty in the first place humbly to call upon God. ... In the second place it is our solemn duty to set our hand to the task and send those courtesans and those who held papal commissions on their way." In particular, Luther calls on the nobility to act.¹⁰⁸

Temporal Authority

The third work is "to obey the temporal authority," whose task it is "to protect its subjects and to punish theft, robbery, and adultery." Luther highlights two ways people sin against temporal authority. "First, [they sin] if they lie to the government, betray it, or are disloyal to it. ... Second, [they sin] when men speak evil of the government and curse it ... in public or in private."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:82-86.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:87.

¹⁰⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:87-90.

¹⁰⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:92.

Luther then reminds his readers that “whether it does right or wrong, [temporal power] cannot harm the soul, but only our body and our property—unless, of course, it should try openly to compel us to do wrong against God or men.” Therefore, Luther says, “we must resist the spiritual power when it does not do right, and not resist the temporal power even when it does wrong.”¹¹⁰

Luther concludes his discussion of temporal authority by taking self-centered rulers to task, asking for wise rulers who “pay more attention to the needs of those they rule than to their own will and pleasure,” and calling on temporal authority to correct a number of specific wrongs in his day: gluttony and drunkenness, the excessive cost of clothes, a practice he calls “the usurious buying of *tzingskauff*,”¹¹¹ squeezing every last cent out of the poor, and prostitution.¹¹²

Workers & Employers

The final work of God’s fourth commandment is “the obedience of servants and workers to their lords and ladies, masters and mistresses.” This part of society, Luther says, has enough to do if their hearts are simply set on gladly doing or leaving undone what they know pleases their masters and mistresses, and to do all this in the simplest faith.”¹¹³

Luther then turns his attention to the “masters and mistresses,” who, he says, “should not govern their servants, maids, and workers high-handedly. They should not scrutinize everything, but occasionally overlook some things and wink at their faults for the sake of peace,” even as they want their master in heaven to deal with them. And yet, “they should see to it that their servants do the right thing and learn to fear God.”¹¹⁴

At this point, Luther moves to warp speed as he spends just a few pages on each of the remaining commandments.

The Fifth Commandment

Two Kinds of Meekness

Luther summarizes God’s fifth commandment this way, “This commandment has one work which comprehends many others and excludes much wickedness. It is called meekness.”

¹¹⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:92.

¹¹¹ This means literally an “interest sale” and stems from a medieval practice whereby a feudal landlord turned over a piece of land as a fief in perpetuity in return for a specified annual return in the form of livestock or produce called a *Rente*.

¹¹² Martin Luther, AE 44:93-94.

¹¹³ Martin Luther, AE 44:98.

¹¹⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:98-99.

According to Luther, there are two kinds. “The first ... is the kind of meekness we practice toward our friends and those who are either useful to us and please us with goods, honor, and favor, or toward those who do us no harm in word or deed.”

That doesn’t always happen, however. “Discord and insult come your way to show you how much anger and wickedness are really in you and to warn you to strive for meekness and to drive out anger.” This leads Luther to speak of a second kind of meekness. It “is shown to opponents and enemies and does them no harm. It does not avenge itself, it does not curse or blaspheme, it speaks no evil of them and thinks no evil against them, even if they have taken away goods, honor, life, friends, and everything. In fact, where it can, this kind of meekness returns good for evil, speaks well, thinks the best of, and prays for those who do evil.”¹¹⁵

Such meekness does not mean, however, that one is “meek contrary to the honor and command of God. ... We must defend God’s honor and commandment, as well as prevent injury or injustice to our neighbor. The temporal authorities [have the responsibility of doing this] with the sword; the rest of us, by reproof and rebuke. But it is [to be done] with pity for those who have earned the punishment.”¹¹⁶

On the Sixth Commandment

Luther identifies the work of God’s sixth commandment as “purity or chastity.” Alas, Luther says, “the world is full of shameful works of unchastity, indecent words, stories, and ditties. ... It rages in all our members.”¹¹⁷

“The strongest defense,” Luther says, “is prayer and the word of God. When evil lust begins to stir, a man must flee to prayer, call upon God’s grace and help, read the gospel and meditate on it, and thereby behold the sufferings of Christ.”¹¹⁸ He also says, “A good strong faith is a great help, and more noticeably so than in almost any other work. ... He who lives chastely and looks to God for all grace takes pleasure in spiritual purity. Therefore, he may much more easily resist the impurity of the flesh.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:101-102.

¹¹⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:103.

¹¹⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:104.

¹¹⁸ Luther has some interesting Bible interpretation here. “Psalm 137[:9] says, “Blessed is he who seizes the young of Babylon and dashes them on the rock.” This means when the heart runs to the Lord Christ with its evil thoughts while they are still young and in their infancy. For Christ is a rock on which these thoughts are dashed to pieces and come to naught.” Martin Luther, AE 44:105.

¹¹⁹ Martin Luther, AE 44:104-105.

For the keeping of this commandment Luther also sees a role for “fasting, watching, labor,” not as ends in themselves, but as tools “to help to fulfil the works of this commandment and purify us more and more every day.” To this end,

every man must find out what is conducive to chastity in his case. How much of what and for what length of time, he must decide for himself and observe. If he cannot do this, then let him submit himself for a time to the control of somebody else, who will hold him to such a rule until he is strong enough to govern himself. This was the purpose for which the monasteries were established in former times, to teach young people discipline and purity.¹²⁰

Nonetheless, Luther warns that one will not find complete escape from the temptation to unchastity and says, “Real chastity is the kind which does battle with impurity, struggles against it, and unceasingly drives out all the poison injected by the flesh and the devil.”¹²¹

The Seventh Commandment

Selflessness Instead of Greed

The work of God’s seventh commandment Luther calls, “‘selflessness,’ a willingness to help and serve all men with one’s own means.” Such service “fights not only against theft and robbery, but against every kind of sharp practice which men perpetrate against each other in matters of worldly goods.”

Luther emphasizes especially the sin of greed. “See how greed has the upper hand in all business. ... [It] has a very pretty and attractive cover for its shame; it is called provision for the body and the needs of nature. Under this cover greed insatiably amasses unlimited wealth. As the wise man said, he who would keep himself pure in this respect must certainly do miracles¹²² or wondrous things in his life.”¹²³

Having said that, however, Luther can just hear the objections. “But some people will say, “Well then, just rely on that, do not be concerned, and see whether a roasted chicken will fly into your mouth!” I do not say that a man need not work and seek his livelihood. But I do say that he is not to be anxious, not covetous; he is not to despair that he is not going to have enough” but instead rely on God to provide all that he needs. “The Apostle calls no other sin

¹²⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:105.

¹²¹ Martin Luther, AE 44:106.

¹²² Luther’s reference here is to Ecclesiastes 31:8-9. “Happy is the rich man who is found without blemish, who has not run after gold, and has not set his confidence in the treasures of money. Who is he? We will praise him because he has performed a miracle in his life.”

¹²³ Martin Luther, AE 44:106-107.

idolatry except covetousness [Col. 3:5], because this sin shows most starkly that a man does not trust God for anything, but expects more benefit from his money than from God.”¹²⁴

The selflessness for which God’s seventh commandment calls “should extend even to enemies and opponents. ... If your enemy needs you and you do not help him when you can it is the same as if you had stolen what belonged to him, for you owe him your help.”¹²⁵

The Eighth Commandment

Telling the Truth

Luther introduces God’s eighth commandment this way. “This commandment seems insignificant, and yet it is so great that he who would rightly keep it must risk life and limb, property and reputation, friends and all that he has. And yet it includes no more than the work of that tiny member, the tongue, and in German is called “telling the truth,” which includes refuting lies when necessary.”¹²⁶

Luther divides the works of this commandment into two categories, “[works] which are done by speaking, and those which are done by keeping silence.” He illustrates with the example of a person who “has a poor case before the court and is determined to prove it and pursue it with false evidence, trap his neighbor with subtlety, produce everything that improves and furthers his own case, and withhold and discount everything that furthers the good cause of his neighbor.”¹²⁷

There is also “another kind of bearing witness to the truth,” one that is even greater than being truthful in court. “It concerns not temporal matters but the gospel and the truth of faith.” It happens too rarely, however. “There are few who stand by the divine truth and risk life and limb, goods and honor, and everything they have for it.” The reason is that “they have no faith in God and expect nothing good from him. For where there is such faith and confidence there is also a bold, defiant, fearless heart that risks all and stands by the truth, no matter what the cost.”¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Martin Luther, AE 44:108.

¹²⁵ Martin Luther, AE 44:109.

¹²⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:110.

¹²⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:111.

¹²⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:111-112.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments

The final two commandments Luther treats together on the basis of Romans 7:7.¹²⁹ About them, Luther says simply, “They forbid the sinful lusts of the flesh and the coveting of temporal goods. These evil desires . . . persist to the grave. And the strife in us against these desires goes on until death. . . . For,” Luther says, “original sin is born in us by nature: it may be checked, but it cannot be entirely uprooted except through death. It is for this reason death is both profitable and desirable. For this may God help us, Amen.”¹³⁰

With that, Luther concludes his *Treatise on Good Works*.

The Importance of the Essay Today with Concrete Examples of Usage and Application **General Thoughts Regarding the Use and Application of the Treatises in their Entirety**

In the final section of our essay, we will attempt to give some concrete suggestions as to how these two treatises might continue to find use and application today. We will begin by offering a couple of thoughts regarding the texts in their entirety. Then, we will offer what amounts to a random collection of thoughts that occurred to the author during the course of reading what Luther wrote in the hope that this will lead those who are listening to provide other suggestions of their own.

Understanding Freedom

Though not necessarily a watchword in Luther’s day, freedom is an especially important concept for Americans. We live in the “land of the free.” We set aside a day every year to remember and celebrate our freedom. But what is freedom for Americans? Freedom is the right to vote for that individual or party who best represents what I believe. Freedom is the ability to be unencumbered by debt and have the money to do what I want. Freedom is the right to worship according to the dictates of my conscience. Freedom is the right to say what I think, to feel what I feel, to be who I am without judgement. It’s the ability to be the equal of those around me, to move about as I choose, to make my own decisions, to live my life without encountering danger, hurdles and roadblocks at every turn. You no doubt noticed what all these have in common—I and me. For Americans, freedom is egocentric.

¹²⁹ “What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

¹³⁰ Martin Luther, AE 44:114.

In light of the events of the past few months, perhaps now would be a good time to lead God's people through a study of Luther's text *The Freedom of a Christian*. It seems to me that such a study would not only be timely but might also help correct common misunderstandings one often hears about what Christian freedom is, as well as provide ample opportunity for Christians to consider and discuss with one another how they might serve their neighbor—including those they don't agree with—to make our nation a healthier and safer place for everyone.

Christian freedom is first and foremost a proclamation of the saving gospel of Jesus; it is first and foremost Christo-centric. The most important freedom is not something I achieve by my own struggle and sacrifice. No, it's the freedom Jesus Christ achieved for me by his struggle and sacrifice. It is above all else the good news that through his atoning work, Jesus Christ has set me free from the guilt of my sin, free from the condemnation of God's law, free from the need to save myself by doing works of any kind. Christian freedom is first and foremost the good news that God has adopted me into his family through faith in Jesus, put his name on me, and said to me as he said to his own Son, "With you I am well pleased." Yet I think, when many Christians speak of Christian freedom, it's often primarily because they want to justify something they've done or plan to do. They want to communicate that they know that whatever it is they have in mind to do is a matter of adiaphora and therefore they have a right to do it and no one has a right to tell them they can't!!! This means, of course, that not only do such people completely skip over Luther's first thesis, they also completely misunderstand and abuse the second. A study of Luther's treatise would be time well spent.

For Catechism Instruction

I'd also like to offer a few general thoughts about the use and application of Luther's *Treatise on Good Works*. First, I'd like to suggest that a careful study of Luther's text—together with a careful study of his *Large Catechism*—might be a worthwhile use of a pastor's time as he prepares for catechism instruction. Both can help the pastor get to the heart of the commandments and understand them better.

For Sunday's Sermon

A second suggestion would be to think carefully about the way Luther handles his treatment of the commandments in his *Treatise on Good Works* and what that might mean for the application portions of Sunday's sermon. Luther devoted fifty-eight percent of his text to a discussion of the first table of the law. Regarding the second table, he devoted fifty-seven

percent of the pages to the fourth commandment. Commandments 5-10 got just four of eighty-five pages. Maybe he just got tired or writing. Or maybe he just ran short of time. Or maybe we could spend more time thinking about and applying the first table of the law to ourselves. What would the numbers say if we read through a year's worth of sermons and categorized our specific law preaching and specific applications by commandment?

A Random Collection of Thoughts Regarding The Use and Application of Both Treatises

Now for a fairly random collection of thoughts which I hope will help you generate your own.

Law and Gospel

Oh how the gospel predominates in Luther! Though his focus in the second treatise was on good works, Luther never failed to come back time and time again to the righteousness that the believer has through faith in Jesus. Thoughts like this occur repeatedly,

But if you ask where faith and confidence may be found or whence they come, it is certainly the most necessary thing to know. First, without any doubt it does not come from your works or from your merits, but only from Jesus Christ, freely promised and freely given. As St. Paul writes in Romans 5[:8], "God shows his love toward us as exceedingly sweet and kind in that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners." This is as if Paul said, "Ought this not give us a strong, invincible confidence in that before we prayed about it or cared about it, yes, while we still continually walked in sin, Christ died for our sins?" [Paul] goes on, "If then Christ has died for us while we were yet sinners, how much more shall we be saved through him, being justified by his blood. And if, while we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be preserved through his life" [Rom. 5:8–11].¹³¹

On the other hand, Luther was also not afraid to preach the law of God specifically and without fear. I wonder how many of us would say in a Sunday sermon, "parents cannot earn hell more easily than by neglecting their own children in their own home and by not teaching them the things spoken of above."¹³²

But while Luther certainly doesn't hesitate to thunder "thou shalt not," when one is finished with his *Treatise on Good Works*, one has the distinct feeling that Luther also spent a great deal of time focusing our attention on the "thou shalt." One definitely feels that he has been shown the way in which God's children walk for Jesus' sake.

¹³¹ Martin Luther, "On Good Works" AE 44:38.

¹³² Martin Luther, "On Good Works" AE 44:86. Luther's reference is to the works God requires in his first three commandments.

One is also stuck by the masterful way in which Luther communicates that in the life of a believer, God's 10 commandments, as well as the cross, are unspeakable blessings of God meant for our earthly welfare and eternal good. I struggle to find a single quote that illustrates this clearly. I think this is because it's more a sense you get as you make your way through his entire text, listening to him remind you time and time again that in all things, including trials and tribulations, God wants only to kill our old Adam so that our new man can arise and live before him.

Knowledge of Scripture

As you make your way through these texts, you can't help but be blown away by Luther's expansive knowledge of all of Scripture, especially the Old Testament—and he was just 37 at the time! It's mind boggling to me how often he quotes little known Old Testament passages, like Song of Songs 2:9, "*My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice,*" a section of Scripture which for Luther speaks of the hidden God. Kolb mentions in passing that Luther's nickname at the cloister in Erfurt was *Biblicus*, which he says meant something like "walking concordance." He also shares this observation from Eberhard Jüngel that "the New Testament is not merely *quoted*. By means of what is quoted—not the quotation!—Luther also constructs an argument" and concludes that Luther's "ability to weave together these citations into a message reveals both his command of Scripture and his theological creativity."¹³³

Memorable Writing

Another thought that occurred to me as I was making my way through these texts—especially *On Christian Freedom*—was the memorable way in which they were written. I think especially of the examples and illustrations he uses, along with Luther's sometimes colorful language.

Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, "If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his."¹³⁴

¹³³ Kolb, p. 28

¹³⁴ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of A Christian," AE 31:352

To read these texts is to be reminded of the importance of presenting God's truths simply, clearly, concretely.

Prayer

Reading Luther's text on good works also got me thinking about a few things regarding prayer. First, there was the reminder that this is a critical part of a pastor's work. Luther said, "The spiritual estate has been especially established for this work, as indeed in ancient times some fathers prayed day and night."¹³⁵ I have no doubt that we've all heard that famous Luther quote that the more he had to do, the more time he needed for prayer. I know that pastors pray a lot. But—and I can speak only for myself here—I wonder if much of it doesn't fall into the category of what I'll call "professional praying," i.e. reading or saying a prayer in worship or with a shut-in or before a meeting starts. I am not suggesting in the least that such prayers are somehow of a lesser quality or not really prayers. I'm just saying that as we have been encouraged over the years not just to read God's Word "professionally" in preparation for sermons and Bible class but also personally, and to apply it to ourselves, so Luther reminded me of the importance of praying not just "professionally" but also pastorally and personally. Just as it is important for a pastor—as part of his shepherding office—to study God's Word for the benefit of himself and those entrusted to his care, so it is important for a pastor—as part of his shepherding office—to be a man of prayer. Not just in worship. Not just at the bedside of a sick member. Not just before a meeting starts. But to prayer continually for himself and those entrusted to his spiritual care. Imagine starting each day with a meaningful chunk of time devoted to specific prayers connected to one's life and ministry.

Luther also got me thinking about something else in this regard—the importance of the general prayer in the worship service. He said, "This common prayer is precious and the most effective, and it is for the sake of this that we assemble ourselves together. The church is called a house of prayer because we are all there as a congregation and with one accord to bring our own needs as well as those of all men before God and to call upon him for mercy." How often is the general prayer little more than "the sermon with your eyes closed," as Professor Tiefel once described it in class? We serve God's people well when we help them understand how important their prayers for others are. God listens to these prayers, and he acts on them. When God's people join together in worship to talk to God about other people in their congregation,

¹³⁵ Martin Luther, "On Good Works," AE 44:61

community, and country, that is essential, vitally important work they are doing. So too when they beseech God on behalf of their government leaders. Luther said,

where such prayer does not take place in the mass, it would be better to omit the mass. By assembling together in a house of prayer we show that we ought to make common prayer and petition for the entire fellowship. What sense does it make for us to scatter those prayers and divide them up so that everyone prays only for himself, and nobody concerns himself with anybody else for another's need?¹³⁶

The Weak

Luther's reminder to be concerned chiefly for others is another useful application of his words today. Repeatedly one encounters in these texts Luther's concern for those weak in faith.

We must not despise these men of little faith who cling to their ceremonies and perform them as though they were lost souls. These men would gladly do right and learn something better, but they are as yet unable to grasp it all. ... They must be led back to faith again in a kindly manner and with gentle patience, just as a sick man is nursed. For the sake of their conscience they must be allowed for a while to go on clinging to some works and to perform them as necessary for salvation, as long as they grasp faith properly. Otherwise, if we try to tear them away too suddenly their weak consciences may be utterly shattered and confused, and consequently they end with neither faith nor works.¹³⁷

Recalibrating Life

Another thought that occurred to me as I was working through especially Luther's *Treatise on Good Works* is the same thought that I have from time to time about Sunday morning worship. It's not always about learning something new. It's about a weekly recalibration of my life. Back when I had an iPhone, I can remember opening the app and having to calibrate it by tilting the screen to roll the ball around the circle. That's how I felt about reading Luther's treatise. I hope I know the 10 Commandments and have a fairly good sense of what God is requiring and forbidding in each one. Nonetheless, as I made my way through Luther's text, I couldn't help but sense that Luther's words were helping me recalibrate my life, helping me to focus it more on my eternal relationship with him than on my earthly well-being. Once again, this isn't something where you can point to a single quotation; it's rather the cumulative effect of the entire text.

Vocation

Luther's *Treatise on Good Works* also lets one see Luther's doctrine of vocation in a concrete way. He repeatedly speaks to the believer not just as he or she does things in and for the

¹³⁶ Martin Luther, AE 44:65

¹³⁷ Martin Luther, AE 44:36-37

church, but at their place of employment, at home, as a spouse or parent, and as a neighbor and friend. While this is not something Luther addresses specifically or at any length, you will find thoughts like these scattered throughout, “at times in the privacy of his home a poor man, in whom nobody can see many great works, joyfully praises God when he fares well, or with entire confidence calls upon him when he is in adversity. He does a greater and more acceptable work by this than another who fasts and prays much, endows churches, makes pilgrimages, and burdens himself with great deeds in this place and that.”¹³⁸ As Reu aptly remarks, “not the abandoning of one’s earthly calling, but the faithful keeping of the Ten Commandments in the course of one’s calling, is the work God requires of us.”¹³⁹

Conclusion

As I conclude, I do have to admit to feeling a bit sheepish—like I copped out on my assignment. What I have put before today you doesn’t seem very scholarly to me. You didn’t find a lengthy, impressive bibliography at the end of the paper. Consequently, the pages aren’t filled with the insights of countless scholars about these treatises of Luther. I know I didn’t present anything new, but then again I don’t honestly think I’ve had a single original thought at any point in my life.

If it’s any consolation, I did read books and essays about Luther’s treatises, mainly about *The Freedom of a Christian* since there’s not much secondary literature about Luther’s treatise *On Good Works*. But when I had finished them (I’m thinking about two of them in particular), I couldn’t help but feel that despite their many erudite words, I didn’t really think I had gotten to know Luther’s treatises any better than I had by just reading the treatises themselves. And so I decided—for better or for worse—that the most profitable use of our time would be just to let you listen to Luther speak to you directly instead of listening to someone else lecture to you about him. I pray we will all remember what he said to us about Christian freedom and good works.

¹³⁸ Martin Luther, AE 44:41

¹³⁹ Reu, p. 6

Application to the World of Martin Luther¹⁴⁰

The Freedom of a Christian: Applications Luther Makes Himself

As we think back to the content of the treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, its application to the world of Martin Luther will be fairly obvious. With this treatise Luther was clearly teaching that salvation is not by works but through faith in Jesus Christ and that real good works flow from that faith in service to God and one's neighbor. He takes his church to task for "never teaching faith," for seeking "nothing but merits, rewards, and the things that are ours," for making Christ "a taskmaster far harsher than Moses."¹⁴¹ He rails against teaching salvation by "human laws and works"¹⁴² through which "numberless souls have been dragged down to hell."¹⁴³ Clearly Luther's heart ached for those who had suffered such spiritual abuse, while he had nothing but disgust for abusers of freedom who wanted to "turn it into an occasion for the flesh."¹⁴⁴

The Use of Luther's Treatise during Luther's Life

The treatise's application to the world of Luther's day can also be seen by looking at other events from Reformation history.¹⁴⁵ In the thirteen months that followed its publication, the German version went through thirteen printings in five different cities.¹⁴⁶ When Luther appeared at the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521, his opponents charged that "the common people were using his book, *The Freedom of a Christian*, to throw off the yoke, and to strengthen disobedience,"¹⁴⁷ and the text was therefore included among the books Luther was called on to recant.

It also seems that Luther very much had the thoughts of this treatise in mind in March of 1522 when he returned from the Wartburg in order personally to oppose Karlstadt and his radical reforms. In his eight *Invocavit* Sermons, Luther "reasserted his understanding of the Christian obligation to love the neighbor and the Christian's freedom from humanly imposed

¹⁴⁰ I had originally intended that this would be Part II of the essay. Time constraints, however, compelled me to move it to an appendix.

¹⁴¹ Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," AE 31:368-369.

¹⁴² Martin Luther, AE 31:356.

¹⁴³ Martin Luther, AE 31:375

¹⁴⁴ Martin Luther, AE 31:371-372

¹⁴⁵ For this, we turn to Dr. Robert Kolb and his recent book *Luther's Treatise on Christian Freedom and its Legacy* as well as his essay on the same topic. In his book he has a chapter entitled: "Luther's Most Beloved Writing? The Unfolding History of *On Christian Freedom*." What is presented here is drawn mainly from that source.

¹⁴⁶ Kolb, *Befreit um Gebunden zu sein*, p. 35.

¹⁴⁷ George Forell and Helmut Lehmann, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), AE 32:116.

regulations.”¹⁴⁸ In dealing with the people of Wittenberg, Luther distinguished between the weak and the stubborn, and urged his listeners “to rely on the faith and love that God’s Word works in human hearts rather than on what legal coercion forces upon them.”¹⁴⁹

When the Peasants’ War broke out in 1524, Luther’s enemies viewed it as the poisonous fruit of his teaching on Christian freedom and proof that they had been right at Worms. While Luther would not have agreed with that, of course, Kolb does say that Luther “perceived a serious threat to the freedom of all and the bodily welfare of peasants and nobles alike in the outbreak of peasant violence.”¹⁵⁰

Though Luther did not again treat the matter of Christian freedom so extensively, the content of both theses did specifically make its way into sermons and lectures on occasion.¹⁵¹ Kolb also remarks briefly that the content of Luther’s treatise played a role in the intra-Lutheran controversy concerning the necessity of good works following Luther’s death.¹⁵²

The Use of Luther’s Treatise after Luther’s Death

Kolb also details the almost immediate impact Luther’s treatise had on the first Lutheran dogmatics, Melancthon’s 1521 *Loci communes*. According to Kolb, Melancthon’s *Loci* “shaped presentations of the topic ... among Lutheran theologians for a century.” Interesting, however, is that “from his inner circle few of Luther’s supporters mentioned his *On Christian Freedom* in their recollections of the course of the Reformation.”¹⁵³

As Kolb traces the use of the treatise across the centuries, he notes that from 1550 through 1700, “*On Christian Freedom* seldom found its way into presentations of the reformer’s thinking.” He also notes that “the concept received relatively little attention in important works on biblical teaching in seventeenth-century Lutheran thought,” including most dogmatics texts. The only exception to this that Kolb notes is Ludwig von Seckendorf’s 1692 history of the Lutheran church.¹⁵⁴ Nor did this change much in the eighteenth century. During this time, the emphasis was on Luther’s personality and defiance of authority more than on his doctrine, and on freedom of conscience and intellectual freedom more than freedom from sin, death, and the

¹⁴⁸ Kolb, *Luther’s Treatise on Christian Freedom and its Legacy*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁹ Kolb, p. 93.

¹⁵⁰ Kolb, p. 94.

¹⁵¹ Kolb provides examples on pp. 95-96 of his book.

¹⁵² Kolb, p. 29.

¹⁵³ Kolb, p. 97-98.

¹⁵⁴ Kolb, p. 102-103.

devil and its consequent freedom to serve God and people. Among the English speakers of this century, the defiant monk at Worms was seen predominantly as the one who paved the way for political freedom.¹⁵⁵ In nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany, philosophers continued to present Luther as the forerunner of the secular, individual, modern man, one who was free to act according to the dictates of his own conscience. It wasn't until 1863 that the Reformation historian and Luther biographer Julius Köstlin highlighted the three "reformational writings" of 1520, among them *On Christian Freedom*, which he described as "the heart of [Luther's] entire teaching and the entire saving truth of God."¹⁵⁶ After World War I, the direct study of Luther's thought experienced a rebirth and as a result, some prominent misunderstandings received something of a correction, though even then most scholars rarely made extensive use of *On Christian Freedom* to do so.¹⁵⁷

In the years following World War II, a number of important Luther biographies appeared in English. Among them was the detailed work of Ernest Schwiebert published in 1950. One of the memorable features of this book is that Luther's treatise *On Christian Freedom* received more than a passing mention. This continued in Martin Brecht's three-volume biography in 1983. In like manner, the Luther scholar Walther von Löwenich (1903-1992) described the treatise as "one of the most precious gifts Luther has bequeathed to us." In his biography of the Reformer, Heinz Schilling said that *On Christian Freedom* "provided the systematic foundation of a new evangelical church, its core formed by the freedom of the Christian, not by papal primacy and the priestly administration of the sacraments."¹⁵⁸

Kolb concludes his survey of modern English biographies of Luther by saying that, "the neglect of this work that typified its reception and lack of use from the late sixteenth century into the late nineteenth century had largely disappeared. In the development, several quite accurate reflections of Luther's intention and a recognition of its significance as a work of great literary and theological stature have come to inform the appreciation and application of its insights by those who know the work."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Kolb, p. 103-106.

¹⁵⁶ In his essay, Pastor Langebartels provides an extensive catalog of quotations from Luther biographers from the mid-1800s though today which illustrates the important place more recent Luther scholarship gives to this treatise. You will find it on pp. 36-40.

¹⁵⁷ Kolb, p. 110-113.

¹⁵⁸ Kolb, p. 113-118.

¹⁵⁹ Kolb, p. 118-119.

Treatise on Good Works

Learning What a Good Work Was

It should be clear from the summary of Luther's Treatise on Good Works that the chief application Luther made to the world of his day was to correct his church's understanding of what a good work was. Repeatedly Luther lists and then dismisses most religious activities taught by his church, not necessarily because they were wrong or bad in and of themselves, but because they did not flow from faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ but were instead done with the goal of earning salvation. Luther said,

They have set faith not above but beside other virtues. They have made faith into a kind of work of its own, separated from all works of the other virtues. ... I have always praised faith and rejected all works which are done without such faith in this way in order to lead men from the false, pretentious, pharisaic good works done without faith, ... and to lead them to the right, true, genuine, real works of faith.¹⁶⁰

The American Edition's introduction to this text notes that "with this single treatise Luther obliterated the distinction between the 'religious' and the 'secular,' and altered the whole system of Christian ethics."¹⁶¹

The Need for Change

Luther made it clear in this treatise that Rome's doctrine needed to change. But he also made it clear that Rome's practices needed to change too. Here's one example.

Today nothing comes from Rome but a fair of spiritual wares which are bought and sold openly and shamelessly: indulgences, parishes, monasteries, bishoprics, deaneries, benefices, and everything else that was originally founded for the service of God throughout the world. ... Consequently, the people are neglected, and the word of God and God's name and honor perish and faith is destroyed.¹⁶²

Here is a second example. "Roman cunning has contrived a device so that before a council starts, kings and princes must take an oath to let the Romans remain just as they are and keep what they have gotten. In this way they have set up a barrier to shield themselves from any reformation, as well as to provide them with protection and freedom for all their knavery."¹⁶³ Not only did Rome need change, Sunday and other holy days did too.

It would be a good thing, therefore, if there were fewer saints' days, since in our times the works done on those days are for the greater part worse than those done on work days, what with idling about, gluttony, drunkenness, gambling, and other evil deeds. But worse than that, the mass and

¹⁶⁰ Martin Luther, "On Good Works," AE 44:26,29.

¹⁶¹ James Atkinson and Helmut Lehmann, ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) p. 20

¹⁶² Martin Luther, AE 44:89.

¹⁶³ Martin Luther, "On Good Works," AE 44:91.

the sermon are heard without edification, and the prayer is said without faith. It has almost gotten to the point where we think it is enough to watch the mass with our eyes, hear the preaching with our ears, and say the prayers with our mouths.¹⁶⁴

In fact, the entire spiritual estate needed radical change.

Today the spiritual authorities issue decrees, make dispensations, and take money. They pardon beyond what they have power to pardon. ... Greed sits in the saddle. What ought to be checked is actually taught. We see with our own eyes that the spiritual estate is more worldly in all points than the worldly estate itself. In the meantime, Christendom has to go to wrack and ruin. ... If a bishop would devotedly take care of all these demands, see to them, make visitations, and fulfil all his responsibilities in the way that he should, then even one single city would be too much for him. ... It should also be one of the tasks of the spiritual authorities to reduce the [number of] institutions, monasteries, and schools where they cannot be properly cared for. It is much better to have no monastery or institution than one in which an evil system rules and provokes God to anger all the more.¹⁶⁵

Clearly one can see that in this treatise, Luther is calling for sweeping changes in all aspects of church life in his day.

What is missing at this point is an overview of the influence and impact of this treatise from the time of its writing through the present day, like the one Dr. Kolb provided for Luther's treatise *On Christian Freedom*. It is missing because to the best of my knowledge, it doesn't exist. It doesn't exist because there doesn't seem to be a consensus among Luther scholars that his treatise *On Good Works* is of the same stature as the other three writings being considered during this Symposium.

But should it? Should *On Good Works* routinely be included among Luther's great treatises of 1520, his Reformation manifestos of sorts? Those who would argue that it shouldn't might say that the last 150 years are against it. They might further argue that the principle it presents—that real good works flow from faith—is a principle which Luther set down sufficiently in *On Christian Freedom*, albeit with less concreteness than it appears in this treatise. People with this opinion might also suggest that this text deals less with general guiding principles for the church at large and more with very specific applications, the kind a pastor would make as he tries to teach the members of his congregation what exactly each of God's 10 Commandments means for him or her in daily life.

On the other hand, it did take 300 years for Luther biographers to give Luther's treatise *On Christian Freedom* the status it currently enjoys. Maybe Luther scholars are coming to

¹⁶⁴ Martin Luther, "On Good Works," AE 44:55.

¹⁶⁵ Martin Luther, "On Good Works," AE 44:88-89.

realize that this treatise *On Good Works* provides a necessary expansion and application of Luther's second proposition in *On Christian Freedom*. After all, the treatise does answer head on the charge that Lutherans are against good works. And those who have studied the treatise more intently do point out that this is Luther's first intensive and expansive treatment of good works and that with one fell swoop the treatise completely changed the understanding of Christian ethics. That's not an insignificant contribution to Lutheran theology. Maybe every book on *Luthers reformatorische Hauptschriften* out to be immediately tossed aside if it doesn't contain an in-depth look at this text.

I can't help but think, though, that to try and trace the impact and influence of the contents of this treatise throughout the corpus of Luther's writing and then to show its influence in the subsequent history of the Lutheran church would be a daunting task.

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