



Embracing the Cross

A Reformation in the Pastor's Study

Pastor Peter M. Prange

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Dedicated to my father, Pastor em. Victor Prange, whose 54 original volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works I inherited upon his retirement from fulltime pastoral ministry in 1998. Not only did he read all these Luther volumes from cover to cover—many of them more than once—but he also carefully annotated them for himself and future readers, making each volume exceedingly more valuable than a like-new, “used” copy. He took to heart the lament he heard during his vicar year from his future father-in-law, Pastor E. Arnold Sitz: “Our pastors don’t read enough Luther.” This essay is a fruit of his faithfulness, diligence, and thorough investigation in a pastor’s study and his encouragement to me through his example.



Monogrammist W. S. (after Albrecht Dürer), Martin Luther as St. Jerome in his Study (c.1546).
“O pope, while I was alive I was a pest to you; once I am dead I shall be your death.”

PREFACE

Let me begin by explaining that I stand before you on the shoulders of giants. So many of the ideas in this essay are not original with me. A host of historians and theologians have spent their entire professional lives examining the years leading up to the famous date normally given to the start of the Lutheran Reformation, October 31, 1517.¹ I spent snippets of recent months trying to do the same. This essay then is not so much an exercise in original thinking as it is sharing with you what I learned from others.

Second, please understand that when anyone explores the theology of Martin Luther, they are blessed (and cursed!) by the sheer amount of source material. Without fear of contradiction, I can state that no other historical figure has ever had as many of his thoughts and words scratched down on paper and saved for all posterity as Martin Luther. It is not even close.² Even Luther's random and mundane words have come down to us. Studying these primary sources is very much like drinking from a firehose, though more edifying.³ The main challenge for anyone stepping onto the "Luther stage" is to communicate to the audience in a relatively "short sermon" what Luther and others⁴ have said and written in many "bibles" over many centuries. What I present today merely scratches the surface of a theological goldmine worth exploring with great delight. To help facilitate that study, I have included copious footnotes and two appendices. If you are interested, I encourage you to read those later.

Finally, while it may seem from the subtitle that this is an essay written **to** pastors, in truth it is an essay written **about** pastors and the essential nature of their study to the reformation of the church. Since each one of us has at least one pastor, I encourage you to find ways to apply the ideas in this essay to your lives and theirs. For your own sake, encourage your pastor or pastors to do and to be what Christ Jesus has called them to do and to be so that we may all together embrace the cross altogether to Christ's eternal glory and to ours when he is revealed (1 Peter 1:7).

¹ Two of the best sources I used to navigate this labyrinth were the fourth volume of Jaroslav Pelikan's monumental history on the development of doctrine, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) and *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, Steven E. Ozment, ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971). Pelikan's volumes are especially helpful in a pastor's study because of his voluminous marginal references to primary and secondary sources that facilitate further study.

² The critical German edition of Luther's writings and sayings, the *Weimarer Ausgabe* (WA) [Weimar Edition], was compiled and edited over the course of more than 125 years and eventually included more than 80,000 pages bound in 121 volumes. The original American Edition of *Luther's Works*, published jointly by Concordia Publishing House and the Muhlenberg Press, spans 54 volumes. Concordia Publishing House is now in the process of publishing an additional 27 volumes.

³ It is small wonder that Luther drew a crowd when his penetrating insights into the holy Scriptures and all life were combined with a divine gift for language surpassed only by the likes of our Savior, the psalmist David, and the Apostle Paul. I am not afraid or ashamed to admit that more than once his evangelical words and insights put a lump in my throat and brought me to tears as I studied to prepare this essay.

⁴ It has been asserted that apart from Jesus no other person in history has been the subject of as many historical books and essays as Martin Luther. I have no difficulty believing it.

INTRODUCTION

It is safe to conclude that Martin Luther did not receive good pastoral care until he entered the monastery at Erfurt in 1505.⁵ He once recalled those trying days in a 1534 sermon. “I was never able to console myself regarding my baptism, but always thought: ‘Oh, when will you finally become pious enough and do enough to obtain a gracious God?’ Such thoughts drove me into the monastery.”⁶

Luther’s bad experience should not surprise us. The truth is very few pastors studied theology in pre-Reformation days. **“Only with the Reformation was the principle established that the study of theology should be a prerequisite for a spiritual vocation and that a pastor should be a learned theologian.”**⁷ In 1471 one Roman bishop stated

that men desiring the pastorate should be able to recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostle’s Creed; they had to know what the seven sacraments were and be sufficiently familiar with Latin to read the Mass. They were in any case to know more than the laity. These criteria for admission to the priesthood were so low-level that one need not have completed a course at a grammar school in order to fulfill them.⁸

Good, biblical preaching and teaching—the very heart of pastoral care—were a complete anomaly, and the truths of God’s Word were rarely applied in a pastoral way to hurting souls. “Late-medieval parish Catholicism was a religion of ritual and example,”⁹ while the “God-given task of the pastoral care and the cure of souls had been neglected and forsaken.”¹⁰ In many cases the priest was expected to do no more than “entertain” his congregation, especially through the celebration of the Mass.¹¹ Only with the advent of the Lutheran Reformation did a pastor’s “knowledge of Scripture and the ability to relate that knowledge to his parishioners” become his “principal obligation.”¹²

Yet even after the Lutheran Reformation began to prosper, Luther found conditions within Lutheran congregations “deplorable” and “wretched,” and he pointed the finger at the unstudied pastors. “Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers.”¹³ Too many of them were “shameful gluttons and servants of their bellies” who were “better suited to be swineherds and keepers of dogs than guardians of souls

⁵ For the pastoral care he received in the monastery see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation* (1483-1521), James Schaaf, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 67-69, 79-81. See also footnote 106.

⁶ WA 37.661

⁷ Bernd Moeller, “Piety in Germany Around 1500,” *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, Steven E. Ozment, ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 62. Emphasis added. Of course, the Lord Jesus had long before established that principle for his New Testament Church, and it was expressed very clearly by the Apostle Paul, “And the things you have heard me say is the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

⁸ Susan C. Karant-Nunn, “Luther’s Pastors: The Reformation in the Ernestine Countryside,” *Transactions* (American Philosophical Society, vol. 69, Part 8, 1979), 20.

⁹ C. Scott Dixon, *The Reformation and rural society: The parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528-1603* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 67.

¹⁰ Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 11.

¹¹ Luther later called these “the papal bag of tricks” and commented that “they are pure mockery and deception.” See SA III, XV, 4-5. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 326.

¹² Dixon, 68.

¹³ SC Preface, 1-2. Kolb-Wengert, 347.

and pastors.”¹⁴ Many did not know a thing about preaching and teaching the gospel. Others had learned their theology for the wrong reason. “Some do it out of their great learnedness,”¹⁵ Luther complained, more interested in being scholars than applying the truths of God’s Word in a pastoral way. They were *ashamed* of the gospel (Romans 1:16), neither understanding its power nor applying it faithfully. How could they, Luther wondered, “so flippantly despise such might, benefits, power, and fruit—especially we who want to be pastors and preachers? If so, we deserve not only to be given no food to eat, but also to have dogs set upon us and to be pelted with horse manure.”¹⁶ Luther still felt the painful effects of poor pastoral preparation and care in his youth. He was not about to keep quiet when he saw those same evils lurking within Lutheran congregations.


Where to begin? **Luther understood from experience that the reform of the church begins in the pastor’s study. Pastors need to wrestle with the Scriptures in a diligent, personal, and painful way.** But they also need to understand why that is so important. They do it for their flock. After all, how can a pastor skillfully apply the balm of Gilead to grieving souls if he has not first experienced how painful that grief is and how the gospel alone is the power of God that saves us from death and despair? And why should he study the Scriptures if he has no real intention of applying them evangelically? Simply put, **a pastor needs to embrace the cross especially for his flock.**

We all share a divine Pastor who did this, who first embraced the cross and now applies its saving power to our lives. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Christ’s under-shepherds are called to do the same. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). **If the shepherd refuses to embrace the cross, his sheep will suffer.**

A study of Luther’s early years of ministry demonstrates how the Lutheran Reformation began in a pastor’s study. It is where Luther first embraced the cross and applied its power through skillful pastoral care. So also reformation happens today only when pastors embrace the cross in their studies and faith-life and then faithfully apply its profound benefits to God’s people. **The cross is our theology, our great heritage from age to age and for all eternity.** Luther says it all in one sentence: “The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology.”¹⁷

PART ONE

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...”

artin Luther had recently begun his first teaching assignment, presumably at the behest of his mentor, Father Johann von Staupitz.¹⁸ He had departed the monastery in busy Erfurt and moved to a sleepy town with a new university, both named Wittenberg. He announced his late-1508 arrival in a brief letter the following March. “Now I am at Wittenberg by God’s command or permission. If you wish to know my condition, I am well, thank God, except that my studies are very severe.” Luther was lecturing on the philosophy of Aristotle. He

¹⁴ LC Preface, 1-2. Kolb-Wengert, 379.

¹⁵ LC Preface, 1. Kolb-Wengert, 379. A good comparison might be to those doctors who are brilliant but who have no bedside manner.

¹⁶ LC Preface, 13. Kolb-Wengert, 381.

¹⁷ WA 5:217. “*Crux Christi unica est eruditio verborum dei, Theologia syncerissima.*”

¹⁸ Johann von Staupitz (c.1460-1525) was appointed dean of the theological faculty at the new Wittenberg University in 1502. The next year he elected as vicar-general of the Observantine congregation of the Hermits of St. Augustine. He probably had his first contact with Luther in early 1506 during the latter’s preparation for the priesthood, and he would quickly have a major influence on Luther’s life and theology. See Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 70-71.

wanted a different assignment: theology. But not theology as normally practiced. “I mean that theology which searches out the meat of the nut, and the kernel of the grain and the marrow of the bones.” God had his reasons, though, Luther concluded. “God is God; man often, if not always, is at fault in his judgment. He is our God, he will sweetly govern us forever.”¹⁹

This brief letter offers two important insights into Luther’s 26-year-old soul. Already he was expressing the Scriptural truth that **God and his loving purposes for our lives are ordinarily hidden from our eyes**. Where we see a cross, there God is. Through experience Luther was already learning what he would much later declare in no uncertain terms: **“our theology is the theology of the cross.”**²⁰ Our judgment fails us; God’s judgment is always perfect. “He is our God; he will sweetly govern us forever,” even when—or especially when—we see nothing but a cross.

The other insight we gain is that already by 1509 Luther was identifying deficiencies within the medieval, scholastic²¹ theology Rome had taught him. The brittleness of the Roman penitential system was especially troubling to him.²² He described these nagging doubts as *Anfechtungen*, a sinner’s anxious contemplations, especially in the face of death within the context of eternity.²³ Such uncertainty drove him into his study. He was determined to pursue a “theology which searches out

¹⁹ Martin Luther to John Braun, March 17, 1509. Preserved Smith, ed., *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, Volume I (1507-1521)* (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1913), 24.

²⁰ WA 40III:193. Emphasis added. In 1540 Luther commented on Paul’s words to the new Christians in Asia Minor that are recorded in Acts 14:22 (“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”): “*Istam doctrinam valde bene scitis, quia nostra Theologia est Crucis Theologia*,” “This teaching is very well known, because our theology is the theology of the cross.” See Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology*, Timothy Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 33-56. Luther’s first recorded use of the term “the theology of the cross” is in the glosses of his 1517-1718 lectures on Hebrews when commenting on Hebrew 12:11 (“Here we find the theology of the cross.”). Examples of this central theme permeate his career, beginning already with his Psalms lectures in 1513-1515 (AE, vols. 10-11) and ending with his magnificent lectures on the book of Genesis (AE, vols. 1-8) that spanned from 1535-1545. His most direct treatment is in his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation (AE 31:40-41,53-55), but consider also his delightful insights into the faith-lives of Abraham (e.g., AE 4:92-96) and Jacob (e.g., AE 5:201-205) and how they were graciously instructed in the theology of the cross.

²¹ “Scholasticism was concerned with the rational justification of Christian belief and, in particular, with demonstrating the inherent rationality of theology. It is generally thought that this aspect of the movement is seen at its best in the later writings of Thomas Aquinas [1225-1274], especially the *Summa theologiae*. Even William of Ockham [c. 1287-1347], who emphasized the distinction between *ratio* [reason] and *fides* [faith], made extensive use of reason in matters of theology. In its earlier phase the movement made extensive use of Aristotelianism, and this trend can be seen clearly in the writing of Dominican theologians of the late thirteenth century” (Alister E. McGrath, “Scholasticism,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Vol. IV, Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996], 18). For a helpful summary of the main schools of medieval scholastic theology, see E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 162-174.

²² The first fatal misstep in the construction of this faulty, unscriptural system may have occurred when St. Jerome mistranslated the Greek word *metanoieite* (“repent”) into the Latin Vulgate *penitentiam agite* (“Do penance”) which, according to Jaroslav Pelikan, drove Rome’s penitential system “to concentrate on the preparation and the attitude of the penitent as he stood before the tribunal of divine justice,” (*Reformation*, 129) rather than on the promise of the free and full forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel. Pelikan provides a tidy summary of the development of Rome’s system and Luther’s reforming approach (128-138). See footnote 168 for biographical information on St. Jerome.

²³ Luther’s most vivid description of what he means by *Anfechtungen* is undoubtedly found in his exposition of the fifteen thesis of his Ninety-five Theses. See his *Explanations of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences* (AE 31:125-130).

the meat of the nut, and the kernel of the grain and the marrow of the bones.” **Through careful study he would discover the only source for such unfettered theology, the Holy Scriptures.**²⁴

What an example Luther is for each of us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1) and to act like the Bereans, who had the gall to examine “the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul [Christ’s hand-picked apostle!] said was true” (Acts 17:11). How much easier it would have been for him to go along with the crowd, fall back on the party line, follow the path of least resistance, keep his mouth shut, stay under the radar, and preserve his job. But his burgeoning study of the Scriptures was convincing him how necessary it was to embrace the cross by dedicating long hours to study. He asked the tough and penetrating questions, and, if necessary, he put those in authority on the spot by demanding a clear reply based only on God’s holy Word. Many took it for arrogance, but it was hardly that. It was a growing confidence, not in self, but in the singular truth of the divine Word, validated and emboldened through an embrace of the cross.²⁵

I didn’t learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials (*Anfechtungen*) were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice. This is what [so many] lack. They don’t have the right adversary, the devil. He would teach them well. None of the arts can be learned without practice (AE 54:50-51).

Luther would elsewhere explain that a pastor-theologian can only be made **oratio, meditatio, tentatio**—by prayer, by study, and by suffering—and he emphasized how important that final stage of development is. “This is the touchstone,” Luther explains, “which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom” (AE 34:285). Our Savior said, **“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”** That is to say, **a pastor’s taste for the sweet gospel is acquired through embracing the cross. It develops first in his study and then the hidden value of the cross is revealed ever more brightly through suffering.** “Already in his lectures on the Psalms (1513-15) Luther was referring to the importance of *tentatio* in providing theologians with a ‘broad’ education that expands their souls and enables them to understand Scripture and life itself properly. ...

²⁴ Heiko A. Oberman asserts: “Not merely the ‘young Luther,’ but the ‘youngest Luther,’ even *before* beginning his career as a professor, as a biblical exegete, and eventually as a Reformer, has on points [of theology]—which later prove to be cornerstones in the structure of his thought—become independent of the theological tradition in which he was reared” (“*Facientibus Quod in se est Deus non Denegat Gratiam*: Robert Holcot O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther’s Theology,” *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, Steven E. Ozment, ed. [Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971], 134. Emphasis original).

²⁵ In the introduction to his 1917 *Kirchengeschichte* (*Church History Textbook*), Professor John Ph. Koehler provides insight into the difference between brittle dogmatic arrogance and the supple certainty of faith. He also argues that Luther is a prime example of this confidence that is most often mistaken for arrogance: “The attitude of cocksureness which, on its own, has everything figured out and thus in its back pocket, is not the same as certainty of faith, neither in manner of utterance nor in matters touching reliability. Cocksureness on the one hand is selfish and loveless in its off-hand positivity, and on the other, lacks inner moral reserve, and in the face of surprise onslaught, it collapses internally. The certainty of faith, by contrast, is a rock-bound confidence which bases itself upon an alien message, and in fact, upon a message of alien grace, coupled with a modest recognition of its own deficiency, even in cognition and comprehension, and so, for all its confessionally faithful decisiveness, it remains open to discussion with other believing Christians. To a systematic temperament this conception appears to be paradoxical. And in a sense in fact it is paradoxical but so is human life in its entirety, also our Christian life down to its most intimate associations. Given the two-sidedness of our total being, comprising sin and grace, the divine and human, it could hardly be otherwise. So far as I know, it is Luther alone who actually possessed this cast of mind sufficiently to live and speak and act from it as if dipping from a fresh well of life, and this is the measure of his greatness” (*Faith-Life* 66, no. 1 [January/February, 1993]: II-III). We always do well to ponder the difference between the two approaches.

Christian theology was a kind of wisdom gained through agonizing struggle and wrestling with Scripture.”²⁶ Indeed, the young professor commented that “in tribulation one learns many things which he did not know before; many things he already knew in theory he grasps more firmly through experience. And he understands Holy Scripture better than he would without trials” (AE 10:49). **When shepherds embrace the cross, their sheep receive the benefit.**²⁷

LECTURES ON THE BOOK OF PSALMS (1513-1515)

By 1511 Luther had relocated to Wittenberg for good. He was soon compelled by Staupitz to pursue his doctorate in theology. He relished telling the story of giving his mentor fifteen reasons why it would be a mistake, including the likelihood of death. Staupitz responded wryly, “Do you not know that the Lord has a great deal of business to transact [in heaven] and needs the assistance of clever people? If you should die, you can be his counselor.” The old man won, and on October 18, 1512, the 29-year-old Augustinian monk was designated a “Doctor of Theology.”²⁸

Despite his new title, Doctor Luther still expressed serious reservations when he was asked to lecture on the Psalms beginning in 1513. He was not going to “promise [his students] something splendid.” Instead, he admitted “this burden presses down on my shoulders, a burden with which I have wrestled in vain for some time. ... I confess frankly that even to the present day I do not understand many psalms and, unless the Lord enlightens me through your help, as I trust He will, I shall not be able to interpret them.”²⁹ It seems Staupitz had once again nudged his young prodigy onto the field. “Compelled at last by my instructions,” Luther admitted, “I give in to it” (AE 10:8).³⁰ So began a 33-year career of teaching the Holy Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg.³¹

²⁶ Ronald Rittgers, “How Luther’s Engagement in Pastoral Care Shaped His Theology,” *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, L’ubomir Batka, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 469.

²⁷ For a discussion of the debate over dating Luther’s “reformation breakthrough,” see Appendix A.

²⁸ We are not entirely sure what happened next. Schwiebert and others suggest that he began lectures on Genesis on October 25, 1512 (196, 282). But it seems more likely that he did not start teaching until the middle of 1513 when he began lecturing on the Psalms. See Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 127, 129.

²⁹ For a summary discussion of Luther’s early hermeneutical approach, see Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 75-81. Luther here demonstrates the principle that “the exegesis of scripture was a public event—in other words, the individual’s personal exegesis of particular biblical passages was subject to the corporate exegesis of the church as a whole” (78).

³⁰ Staupitz likely assigned the Psalms to Luther, perhaps “with an eye to Luther’s own spiritual difficulties. In the Psalms, as in hardly any other Biblical book, the height and depth of the Christian warfare is expressed, but never without the assurance of the divine promises, and the hope of victory. It would be difficult to exaggerate what the Psalms came to mean to Luther throughout his life” (Rupp, 132).

³¹ Rupp tells us that Heinrich “Boehmer suggests that Luther began the course on 16th August 1513, on a Tuesday at 6 a.m., that he lectured twice a week, and that he finished with the Psalms on 20th October 1515” (130). Rupp also reports that “Luther was in the habit of leaving plenty of space at the end of his [printed] Psalms [lectures] for afterthoughts, and for references back at a later stage. No doubt many of his notes were in fact added [later] in this way. Dating the extracts is therefore a matter of delicacy and confusion. The handwriting which covers the pages is neat. As Boehmer says, it could hardly be smaller, so that the crowded pages, with underlinings, crossings out and the innumerable customary abbreviations present problems more intricate than the critical apparatus of the Weimar edition suggests” (131). Warren Quanbeck adds: “Paleographical study of Luther’s manuscript reveals that some of the earlier sections, including the *Praefatio* [preface], the exposition of Psalms 1 and 4, and parts of the *Vocabularium super psalmo primo* [the terminology of the first psalm], have been revised. The differences in paper, ink, and handwriting indicate that these

What did the young professor have to offer in these inaugural lectures? In so many ways he sounds like “old man Luther.” First, and most important, he expressed **what a complicated mess the scholastic theologians had made out of the teachings of Scripture because they had not taken the proper approach to God’s Word**. In too many cases they had forced the clear Word of God to fit their neatly reasoned systems of doctrine—like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole—“so that in many places the interpretations seem to require more interpretation than the [biblical] text itself” (AE 10:8). Already in his earliest lectures, Luther did not pull any punches, complaining about

some perverted people ... who in a similar way twist and pervert this word of the Holy Spirit. Their meditation is not on the law of the Lord, but rather, to the contrary, the law of the Lord is in their meditation (which is a horrible situation). They are the ones who twist the Scriptures to their own understanding and by their own fixed meditation compel the Scriptures to enter it and agree with it, when it ought to be the other way around (AE 10:18).

Luther pointed the finger especially at those who honored the logic of the Greek, pagan philosopher Aristotle over the Word of God. He bemoaned the fact that

because we have learned from Aristotle to argue about things verbosely and boldly, we think that the same verbosity and boldness should be transferred to divine matters. It is for this reason that I have a hatred for those bold opinions of the Thomists, Scotists, and [other scholastic schools of thought], for they so handle without fear the name of God [in their teaching] and extol it above the tongue [i.e., publicly] but put it down under the tongue [i.e., privately] (AE 10:322-323).³²

“More and more [Luther] developed a high regard for the specific way the Scripture and its authors spoke. He noted thereby that this was often significantly different from the formulations of the scholastic theologians.”³³ He quoted the fourth-century church father Hilary to demonstrate the proper approach to Scripture. “The best reader is the one who looks for the understanding of the words from the words themselves, rather than imposing his own understanding, and takes something out, rather than bringing something in, and does not force the words to seem to contain what he had assumed must be understood before reading” (AE 10:18). Luther then offered his own advice: **study the Scriptures humbly, slowly, and prayerfully**. This approach to Scripture is our theology, the theology of the cross.

See how much learning there is in this one verse [Psalm 1:2]! Therefore we must take the utmost care that we do not quickly believe our own idea and that we must expound Scripture in all humility and reverence, because Scripture is the stone of offense and rock of scandal for those who are in a hurry.

passages are not parts of the original lectures, but later insertions” (“Experience Transforms Exegesis,” *Luther Today* [Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1957], 53).

³² Luther also advised: “For in our time we must not think that everything someone understands in a subtle way even in the Scriptures or thinks up and finds in an extraordinary way is from God or pleasing to God. ... The devil now knows all mysteries, because they were revealed throughout the world, and he is more brilliant than we. Therefore, by God’s permission, he can suggest remarkable things to the mind for the purpose of seducing the proud” (AE 10:347-348).

³³ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 131. This is not to suggest that the hermeneutical principles Luther employed in his Psalms lectures were free from their own deficiencies or by any means fixed. Luther was “both deeply influenced by [medieval exegetical tradition] and also a creative force *within* it” (Erik Herrmann, “Luther’s Absorption of Medieval Biblical Interpretation,” *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, L’ubomir Batka, eds. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 72. Emphasis original). Professor Herrmann’s entire article (71-90) is a wonderful starting point for exploring the dynamic history of Luther’s hermeneutics, especially the development that took place during Luther’s earliest lectures. See also Warren Quanbeck, “Experience Transforms Exegesis,” *Luther Today* (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1957), 37-59.

But Scripture turns that rock into pools of water (cf. Ps. 114:8) for those who meditate on the law of the Lord. ... Since Holy Scripture is above us and deals with higher matters, it is water to which we do not go down (unless we descend to it in pride). But neither can we go up to it. ... It comes down to us and over us (AE 10:19-20).³⁴

Because the *sola Scriptura* principle of the theology of the cross was not observed within the Church of Rome—as is still the case in so much of the visible church today—false ideas gained momentum and eventually became official church teaching. True, the gospel of forgiveness could still be heard in whimpering tones, but it had been nearly suffocated by all the man-made, artificial distinctions of scholasticism, distinctions Luther learned during his days in Erfurt.

His professors there followed the lead of Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-1495), a German philosopher-theologian who had instructed some of them personally.³⁵ While he acknowledged that no sinner could be perfect and that all people are subject to the ruin of original sin at birth, **Biel asserted that God preserved a “spark” of spiritual life within each of us (the *synteresis*), which he expects us to utilize in order to demonstrate how seriously we want his forgiveness.** Biel insisted that our salvation is absolutely dependent on us doing everything we can within our natural spiritual powers. God would never deny his grace to sinners “who did whatever lay within their powers to do.”³⁶ God made the “first move” of salvation by preserving this remaining spark, but now the ball was in our court, so to speak, to do our very best before God would finally grant the reward of eternal life.³⁷

The rationale was simple: God’s forgiveness must have strings attached, otherwise sinful people would run wild. **Spiritual uncertainty was thought to be the cornerstone of the Christian life and good pastoral care.**³⁸ Like good ol’ Santa Claus, God promoted morality through uncertainty, so you

³⁴ Luther here describes the *ministerial* use (standing under) of the Scriptures expressed in the prayer, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9), as opposed to its *magisterial* use (standing over). I hope pastors especially see how this approach was echoed by our own Wauwatosa fathers a century ago. For instance, August Pieper reminded us of the profound difference between our brittle doctrinal systems and the ever-new and living Word of God. “Dogma is the word crystallized into an inflexible human form. It says so much and no more; it does not express the full content of Scripture. That is its essence. Scriptural truth is so living and refracting, so fresh and fluent, that one can turn it a thousand times, inspect it from a thousand sides, compare it with a thousand things, and apply it to a thousand situations, without its losing any content or power. It is like a nimble young giant, growing to every new situation, need, and danger. It is spirit and it is life, God’s life. God’s mind and life blood for the saving of lost sinners. It remains eternally young and eternally new and makes everything new and anew” (“Stoeckhardt’s Significance in the Lutheran Church of America,” James Langebartels, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997], 423). When we do not remember this principle, eventually our systems become the master of Scripture rather than, as Luther put it, “the other way around.” God grant that we continue to pray, “Speak, O Lord, for your servant is listening.”

³⁵ Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

³⁶ Biel’s infamous Latin phrase was “*facere quod in se est*.” “Doing one’s best was possible, Biel taught, because the *synteresis*, the highest power within the human creature that directs thought and action, retained a spark of goodness that directed the mind and will toward the good” (Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, 32). See also Pelikan, *Reformation*, 130, and McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 59-62, 85-87, 104-106, 110.

³⁷ This remains the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as can be seen from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Doubleday, 1994), ¶ 2010: “Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity [love], we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.”

³⁸ “It is here that we encounter a major difficulty in the soteriology of the *via moderna*: according to Gabriel Biel, the individual cannot know for certain whether he had done *quod in se est* [that which is in him]. In this, Biel faithfully reproduces the medieval theological tradition, which was unanimous concerning this point: man

better be good, for goodness' sake, otherwise you will end up with an eternal lump of coal. Most parishioners lived happily with this works-righteous teaching because it fit perfectly into the empty shell of corrupt human logic. Neither were there pangs of conscience. Most concluded they certainly met the goal of "good enough," especially when compared to others.

Luther himself was at first captivated by Biel's theology. "Gabriel wrote a book ... which I once thought was the best [on the subject]," he later admitted. "When I read it my heart bled" (AE 54:264). But the more he studied, the more unanswered questions Luther had, nagging questions that rankled his soul and drove his tender conscience toward despair. Try as he might to do what was in him to show God how desperately he desired forgiveness, Luther struggled impatiently with the realization that the good he wanted to do, he could not do, and the evil he did not want to do, this he kept on doing (Romans 7:19). He was indeed a wretched man (Romans 7:24). He later recalled, "After vigils, studies, fasts, prayers, and other difficult exercises with which as a monk I afflicted myself even to death, still that doubt remained in my mind, so that I thought: 'Who knows whether these are pleasing to God?'" (AE 12:371). "The doubt which Biel's system created in Luther regarding his own identity before God sparked his revolt against scholastic theology."³⁹

But Luther was not just impatient with his own sinfulness, he was impatient with others'. **He saw the church and its pastors working with a watered-down definition of righteousness that led to a shallow repentance and self-serving works of penance.**⁴⁰ Our synod's own Dr. Elmer Kiessling⁴¹ reports that Luther's sermons in these early years are "full of impatience with things as they are. The practice and theory of morality is confined too much to the surface of life [outward actions] to suit him. When he criticizes the clergy, especially the prelates and the monks, his criterion is not the monastic ideal but [actual] Christian virtue."⁴² For example, in his lectures on Psalm 1, he denounced those who bask in the glory of their own splendid works (the monastic ideal) instead of obeying the humble decrees of the Lord (Christian virtue). He points to the fateful example of King Saul, who offered a grand sacrifice to God rather than doing what the Lord had commanded (1 Samuel 15).

[God] does not care about our great works, because He Himself can do greater works. All He asks for is obedience. ... Many people imitate [Saul] and at times perform great and useful works according to their own ideas but meanwhile neglect to do anything lowly that is commanded. Yet in that lowliness the valuable obedience is hidden, just as the vilest kind of disobedience is concealed in that valuable usefulness. ... Thus the devil did with our first parents in Paradise, showing them that there was greater good in not obeying than in obeying [God's] commandment. ... [M]any still imitate them too much, especially the monks (AE 10:16-17,29).⁴³

Luther was gaining new insight into the true nature of human sinfulness and our imaginary "good works." Our sinful flesh normally puts on its best face, and our eyes deceive us. But God is not fooled. "Luther came to find the heart of sin in a restless egoism [self-centeredness] which moves in

simply cannot know with certainty whether he is worthy of hate or love by God" (McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 110).

³⁹ Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, 34.

⁴⁰ The kind of shallow, outward acts, for instance, that King David denounces in Psalm 51:16-17.

⁴¹ Elmer Kiessling (1895-1981) was a 1920 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. After serving as a pastor in Libertyville, Ill., for several years, he was called to serve as a professor of English at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis., in 1927, teaching there until his retirement in 1973. He received his doctorate from the University of Chicago in 1935 for his work exploring the early sermons of Martin Luther.

⁴² Elmer Kiessling, *The Early Sermons of Luther and their Relation to the Pre-Reformation Sermon* (New York: AMS Press, 1935), 77.

⁴³ Please note how Luther here enunciates two important features of our theology of the cross: the biblical doctrine of vocation and the *hidden* value of humble works of obedience (Mark 7:8-13).

the secret, hidden depths of the personality, masking itself under innumerable splendid disguises [self-chosen works], but which is wholly to be repudiated in [the] face of the judgment and the justice of God.”⁴⁴ Later in his *Smalcald Articles* (1536) Luther would describe it with surgical precision. **Sin is “such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures.”**⁴⁵

By 1513, Luther was “coming to the sweeping conclusion that the perfect and holy life of a monk was extremely questionable ... [as he] came nearer and nearer to an open breach with the prevailing theology of that time.”⁴⁶ More than that, he was beginning to understand on the basis of the Scriptures how **this kind of outwardly glorious “righteousness” was, in fact, counterproductive to the life of a faithful Christian.** Ironically, such “righteousness” makes people more ungodly not less.⁴⁷ Luther commented that

those who set up their own righteousness and excuse themselves for their sins (like Saul, like Adam and Eve) do not judge themselves or accuse themselves but think they are doing well and are pleased with themselves and love themselves and their own life in this world. “Therefore the ungodly will not rise in the judgment,” because [they] do not confess their wrong and do not accuse themselves. But as the righteous man is the first to accuse himself [Proverbs 18:17], so the ungodly man is the first to defend himself (AE 10:31).

Now Luther made a most shocking and radical discovery through his careful study of God’s Word, and it led him to a further understanding and embrace of the cross. **God’s Word actually reveals that sin is something we cannot escape, no matter how hard we try, because sin is more than what we sinners do. Sin is what we sinners are.**⁴⁸ Sinful human beings are not just a little or a lot broken; they are utterly broken and shall remain so by nature eternally apart from Christ.⁴⁹ An honest and open admission of our complete brokenness is our theology, the theology of the cross.

⁴⁴ Rupp, 141.

⁴⁵ SA III, I, 3. Kolb-Wengert, 311. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 131-133.

⁴⁷ Compare Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation (1518) Thesis 16 (AE 31:50). Years later one of the Luther’s Wittenberg colleagues and most ardent defenders, Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483-1565), was charged with taking Luther’s point here to an unbiblical extreme by stating in an unqualified way, “Good works are injurious to salvation.” Philipp Melancthon called it “filthy speech.” In his *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), Friedrich Bente states that Amsdorf appealed to Luther in order to defend his statement but that Luther “had spoken very guardedly and correctly in this matter ... [since] whenever Luther speaks of the injuriousness of good works, it is always ... viewing good works as entering the article of justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What vitiated the proposition as found in Amsdorf’s tract was the fact that he had omitted the modification added by Luther.” Based on later clarifications by Amsdorf, Bente concludes that he was not guilty of false doctrine but less than careful speech. “What Amsdorf wished to emphasize was not that good works are dangerous in themselves and as such, but in the article of salvation” (122-123). The *Epitome of the Formula of Concord* would later emphatically reject Amsdorf’s unqualified statement “as offensive and harmful to Christian discipline” (Ep IV, 17. Kolb-Wengert, 499). See also Robert Kolb, “‘Good works are detrimental to salvation’: Amsdorf’s use of Luther’s words in controversy,” *Luther’s Heirs Define His Legacy: Studies on Lutheran Confessionalization* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1996), 136-151.

⁴⁸ Sin is also what “God made him who had no sin [Jesus] to be ... for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

⁴⁹ Only through faith in Christ does he become “The LORD Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6) so that we are now, as Luther put it, *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and a sinner). By nature, however, the Christian remains a damned sinner and completely broken (*peccator in re*) until Jesus comes again with power “to transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). Until then

At first, this discovery must have rattled Luther. It would have left him feeling hopeless for salvation according to Roman theology. But as he turned this Scriptural truth over in his mind, he discovered that our absolute inability to overcome sin is exactly the point. It is not accidental; it is purposeful that “the whole world is a prisoner to sin” (Galatians 3:22) and that “God has bound everyone over to disobedience” (Romans 11:32). God created human beings in such a way that, should we once fall into sin, we would never be able to fix it. There were no loopholes, no mulligans, no self-help books. Indeed, the more we try to save ourselves and offer our “righteousness” to God, the deeper the hole becomes since “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). How bad is the situation? **Not even the saintliest saints among us can rightly comprehend the evil lurking within their own hearts (Romans 7:15,24) because our sin naturally blinds us to our sin,** a truly vicious cycle of deadly disease. We sinners can never understand how truly evil we are.

But God can, and he does. And then he graciously reveals to us his perfect judgment of us in his holy Word and at the cross.⁵⁰ But, as Luther pointed out, how puzzling that judgment is to our sinfully-twisted hearts and minds.⁵¹ “It condemns what men choose and chooses what men condemn. And this judgment has been shown us in the cross of Christ, for as He died and was made the rejected of the people, so we must bear a similar judgment with Him, be crucified and die spiritually” (AE 10:405). A simple and humble recognition of and concurrence with God’s perfect judgment standing over us sinners is our theology, the theology of the cross.

Luther’s discovery was profound and life-altering. Rather than *running* from God’s judgment of our evil and sin—thinking that we can somehow scale that mountain or outfox him—God urges us to *embrace* it. We should simply throw up our hands and acknowledge the truth of his holy Word that stands in judgment over us. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ... If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be liar and his word has no place in our lives” (1 John 1:8,10). In agreeing wholeheartedly with God’s judgment, we embrace the cross, crucifying our flesh. “In his first lectures on the Psalms, Luther repeatedly developed the fundamental thought that people are always captive to radical original sin,”⁵² and he shared that critical discovery with his students.

He who is not a sinner (that is, he who does not admit that he is a sinner) openly attempts to condemn God in His words, in which He bears witness that we are in sins. And such a person insists that Christ did not die for sins. Thus he passes judgment on God and tries to make Him a liar. ... The psalmist says: “Against Thee only have I sinned,” ... as if to say: “I am not talking about sins against the [outward] ceremonies of the Law. ... Rather, I am talking about those sins which the Law can in

Christians, “who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

⁵⁰ “You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” (Psalm 90:8). “What a wretched man I am! Who will save me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” (Psalm 130:3). “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12).

⁵¹ See McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 148-151.

⁵² Berndt Hamm, *The Early Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2014), 42, fn. 62. That the Church of Rome continues to teach and confess that sinful human beings still possess a measure of inborn spiritual freedom—and that they summarily reject what the Scriptures so clearly teach (Ephesians 2:1; Romans 8:6-8) and what confessional Lutherans confess—is made abundantly clear from their 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “[Original sin] is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted: it is wounded in the natural powers proper to it ... The first Protestant reformers, on the contrary, taught that original sin has radically perverted man and destroyed his freedom; they identified the sin inherited by each man with the tendency to evil (concupiscentia) which would be insurmountable” (§ 405-406).

no way remove, by no sacrifices, no washings or ceremonies. Therefore against Thee only have I sinned, because I am making confession about real sins, not shadowy ones. ... And to confess sins in such a way means to justify God and make Him the victor. ... Therefore God is not justified by anyone except the one who accuses and condemns and judges himself (AE 10:235-236).

What a transformation! **“As Luther had begun by striving to attain perfection, so now he strove to be a thorough sinner.”**⁵³ This is our theology, the theology of the cross. No longer would Luther attempt to outrun his sin in an effort to win the sprint to heaven. He would instead plead “no contest” and embrace his cross and his Christ. “This is a position maintained by no medieval theologian, whether scholastic or mystic, Dominican or Franciscan, Thomist or nominalist. ... Luther permits a foul and dirty bride to enter spiritual matrimony with Christ ... righteousness and iniquity intermingle and embrace. The man who is still *peccator in re* [a sinner in reality] becomes one with Christ.”⁵⁴ In a way that even his ancient spiritual mentor St. Augustine had not professed,⁵⁵ Luther now *objectified* and *radicalized* sin, removing all the tidy distinctions that the medieval church had attempted to make over the centuries since the days of the African doctor.

Luther began to give up trying to coordinate the established [medieval] forms of theology, piety, and pastoral care. ... He believed that he could no longer escape his crisis of conscience through an intensification of spiritual virtuosity or works of holiness. Luther then confessed that, with respect to God’s judgment, people have nothing to offer but sins and absolute unworthiness all their lives. This now became for him [not only] a subjective, prayerful confession [but] an objective statement of truth and doctrine. ... [The reformation of his thought and understanding] was therefore also a long process of change over time [*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*] and not a precise moment; it was a gradual process of learning to see things differently and not a break-through experience.⁵⁶

Luther was finished treating the symptoms of sin with Rome’s whiny moralism⁵⁷ and its showy, worldly sorrow that only “brings death” (Matthew 6:5-18; 2 Corinthians 7:10). He was ready for God to perform radical surgery on his cancerous soul. He wanted God to get at his disease, and he did it by embracing the cross. He now understood “the true nature of humility, which is the downgrading and contempt and complete condemnation of oneself.” But Luther wanted to be clear: “it is not the one who regards himself as humble that is righteous,⁵⁸ but the one who considers himself detestable and damnable in his own eyes ... he is righteous” (AE 10:406).

In the humility of confessing sins, people do not make themselves lower than they are but rather apply the truth of God’s judgment to themselves, realizing that as creatures and sinners they are truly nothing and can contribute absolutely nothing to their own salvation. With this, Luther set

⁵³ Rupp, 149. Emphasis added.

⁵⁴ Steven E. Ozment, “*Homo Viator: Luther and Late Medieval Theology*,” *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, Steven E. Ozment, ed. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 149,151.

⁵⁵ See footnote 128. “Although Augustine repudiated a selfish egoism which is a root of sin, he recognized a proper measure of self-love, which is indeed an integral part of his doctrine of salvation. ...[Adolf] Hamel suggests that while suffering and tribulation are regarded by Augustine as ills which posit a problem of theodicy [defending God’s perfect goodness in the face of evil], for Luther they are signs of grace which attest that the Christ really shares the ‘*via passionis*’ [the way of suffering]. And although during this period Luther’s doctrine of grace is far from being clarified, his new thought of ‘*Justitia*’ brings implications which move away from the Augustinian conception of grace infused within the soul” (Rupp, 141). See McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 133-136, concerning Luther’s further break from Augustine’s understanding of our natural sinful state in his 1515-1516 Romans lectures.

⁵⁶ Hamm, 42-44.

⁵⁷ Preachments against such moralism abound already in Luther’s first lectures on the Psalms.

⁵⁸ There is perhaps nothing more spiritually dangerous and pernicious than being proud of our humility.

aside the scholastic idea ... in which justified people might actively move into eternal life. The fires of *Anfechtung* had proven all the ideas and ambitions of finding a way of salvation by means of [his own righteousness] to be lies and illusions.⁵⁹

Later in his *Smalcald Articles*, Luther would make exactly the same point, demonstrating that **this new insight makes true and godly repentance very simple and straightforward. All the uncertainty has vanished.**

[True] repentance is not fragmentary or paltry ... nor is it uncertain ... It does not debate over what is sin or what is not sin. Instead, it simply lumps everything together and says, "Everything is pure sin with us. What would we want to spend so much time investigating, dissecting, or distinguishing?" ... All the popes, theologians, lawyers, and all human beings know nothing about this. Rather, it is a teaching from heaven, revealed through the gospel, which must be called heresy among the godless saints.⁶⁰

Luther had unearthed how the Roman penitential system mercilessly drove sinners into one of two ditches. For the small handful of people like him who were honestly striving to find a gracious God, it offered no consolation. They fell into despair. But for most others the problem "was not that it failed to [offer] solace, but that it succeeded too well." They tumbled headlong into self-righteousness. With an eye to future events in Luther's life, Gordon Rupp continues: "The complaint against 'false peace and security,' which is the climax of his famous Ninety-five Theses, echoes a constantly recurring complaint of his earlier lectures on the Psalms."⁶¹ **Godly repentance was absolutely essential in avoiding the ditches on either side and in leading God's people to place their faith in Jesus as the only Savior from sin.** "Faith is the shortcut by which one comes quickly to peace and salvation" (AE 11:48). Placing our faith in Christ crucified alone is our theology, the theology of the cross.

He judges and justifies the one who believes in Him. ... He shows us that all that is in us and in the world is abominable and damnable in God's sight. Thus whoever clings to Him by faith necessarily becomes vile and nothing, abominable and damnable, to himself. ... For to him who is unrighteous to himself and thus humble before God, God gives His grace. In this manner it is most often taken in the Scriptures. Thus righteousness ... is faith in Christ (AE 10:404).⁶²

But if even the saintliest and most spiritually-sensitive person, such as Brother Luther, is truly unable to comprehend the latent, cancerous evil lurking inside, what will prompt a person who is dead in sin to turn their attention to the gospel for salvation? Luther was discovering the answer. **God graciously opens a sinner's ears to hear his Word with attentive, humble faith by sending the cross.** Luther called it "God's strange work" (*opus alienum Dei*) on the basis of Isaiah 28:21, "The Lord will rise up ... to do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task." In his lecture notes (glosses) on Psalm 93, Luther asked in wonder, "What stranger [work] is there for a Savior than to destroy? And yet Christ does this to his own."⁶³ "Luther regards God himself as the source of *Anfechtung*: God assaults man in order to break him down and thus to justify him."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Hamm, 43.

⁶⁰ SA III, III, 36,41. Kolb-Wengert, 318.

⁶¹ Rupp, 115.

⁶² It is clear from a reading of Luther's earliest psalms lectures that he viewed true humility before God and true Christian faith as being inseparable, even one and the same thing. See McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 117,124.

⁶³ WA 3.246. "Quid enim a salvatore magis alienum, quam pendere? Et tamen sic facit Christus suis."

⁶⁴ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 151.

As sinners, we want a life with no crosses. We run from them when we first feel them. We attempt to cast them off as quickly as possible. Pastors are no different. But Jesus plainly said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). He gives painful crosses (“symptoms” we sinners can feel and see) so that we recognize something unseen is wrong (spiritual “cancer” inside). Only then will we seek out the Great Physician (Jesus) who gives perfect healing through his cross. Jesus gives us crosses *because* he loves us. “Thus an action which is alien to God’s nature (*opus alienum Dei*) results in an action which belongs to his very nature (*opus proprium Dei*): God makes a person a sinner in order that he may make him righteous.”⁶⁵

The humiliation of sinful man is not just something that separates us from God, but also something that brings us close to God, for in this strange way of humiliation and weakness God acts through the cross completely different than does the world. Luther is operating not only with an extremely severe doctrine of man, but one that accords with a conception he has gained from the cross of a God who is hidden from our eyes, and who acts weakly and foolishly, accepting those who are lowly and amount to nothing. This is the beginning of the theology of the cross, so important to Luther.⁶⁶

In these lectures Luther discussed the wonderment of this *opus alienum* in the earthly life of Jesus and then made application to our lives as God’s children.

[The Father] turns [His Son] over to every kind of suffering and death and trouble, and yet saves Him at the same time. And when He abandons Him the most, then He takes Him up the most. And when He condemns, He saves most of all. Thus He has carried out His wonderful plan (according to Isaiah 28:21), while His work is strange to it, that He might do His own work. ... [The psalmist teaches] that the persecutions of the saints are great, he wonders [i.e., he is surprised] that through them God saves [all] the more by the foolishness of the cross, and very many are offended at [Christ]. Therefore you see the sufferings and cross of Christ depicted everywhere, so that we are well able to say with St. Paul that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (AE 11:236).

Crosses come in all shapes and sizes, but narrow-minded sinners are not good at understanding them properly, often calling “evil” what God calls “good.” He alone knows what is truly good for us eternally,⁶⁷ and that is why he gives us crosses. In his 1518 Heidelberg Disputation (Thesis 21) Luther would himself provide insight for our twisted perspective.⁶⁸

He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore [that person] prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general,

⁶⁵ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 151, quoting a portion of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation (1518) Thesis 16.

⁶⁶ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 135.

⁶⁷ Consider, for instance, “What **good** is it for a man to gain the whole world [which is coming to nothing], yet forfeit his soul [forever]?” (Mark 8:36. Emphasis added). Simply put, we lack God’s eternal perspective on “all things” (Romans 8:28), so what seems evil to us God ultimately works for our *eternal* good. This is one of the things that makes God, God, his unique power to work good out of evil.

⁶⁸ McGrath points out how even the common English translations of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation Thesis 20 (“the manifest things of God”), including the one found in the *American Edition* (31:52), is “clearly unacceptable” because it misses the point. Luther here states that God reveals his “rearward parts” (*posteriora Dei*) to us “in suffering and the cross.” McGrath asserts: “Luther’s reference to the *posteriora Dei* serves to emphasize that, like Moses [Exodus 33:23], we can only see God from the rear: we are denied direct knowledge of God, or a vision of his face. The cross does indeed reveal God—but that revelation is of the *posteriora Dei*.” McGrath goes on to explain Luther’s ultimate point that “it is the task of the theologian to concern himself with God as he has chosen to reveal himself [“in suffering and the cross”], instead of constructing preconceived notions of God which ultimately must be destroyed” (*Theology of the Cross*, 149).

good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ” [Philippians 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of the deed good. God can only be found in suffering and the cross (AE 31:53).⁶⁹

Pastors especially need to learn this so that they can teach their sheep. **“Far from regarding suffering or evil as a nonsensical intrusion into the world ... the ‘theologian of the cross’ regards such suffering as his most precious treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves.”**⁷⁰

This humble submission to divinely-given crosses is our theology, the theology of the cross, and it is exactly why Luther was so fond of developing a theme first proposed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “the greatest temptation is to have no temptation.”⁷¹ The young Wittenberg lecturer offered one of his many observations on that topic as he commented on the Psalms.

[Spiritual] smugness is worse and more dreadful than all adversity. ... This is so because it makes people careless. “When they shall say, ‘peace and security,’ then shall sudden destruction come upon them” (1 Thess. 5:3). Nothing is safe where everything is safe, nothing so sick as when everything is healthy ... Thus the devil now fights the church with the greatest persecution, because he fights with no persecution, but rather with security and idleness. Therefore woe to us, who are so snatched away by present things and foolishly do not see the devil’s trap! (AE 10:361).⁷²

Luther came to understand how necessary and beneficial divinely-given crosses are especially for pastors because they point the shepherd’s eyes to the ultimate cross of forgiveness, comfort,

⁶⁹ It is important to keep in mind, however, that suffering in and of itself is not a cross since even unbelievers suffer. “Suffering becomes a cross not just because it is painful in itself but because it tempts the soul to turn away from Christ and his Word. [Even unbelievers] suffer sickness. But sickness becomes a cross when *self* uses it to cast doubt on the promises of God’s gracious presence. Death comes to all. It becomes a cross when *self* uses death to argue that we are alone in the world, that death ends all, and that we should therefore serve *self* while we still can. Personal struggle with a besetting sin is a cross when *self* uses the temptation as an excuse to despair of the mercy of God if we fall and an excuse for self-righteousness if we do not fall” (Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2008], 32. Emphasis original). Professor Deutschlander offers all kinds of helpful insights into the theology of the cross so that we can better identify our personal crosses and embrace them with joy.

⁷⁰ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 151. Emphasis added. Regardless of what our personal crosses may be, Jesus has many good reasons for them that we sinners will not immediately see. He wants our crosses to lead us to a deeper understanding of our own hidden sinfulness and our daily need for repentance (2 Peter 3:9-12), to demonstrate our never-ending need for a Savior (Psalm 32:3-7), and to keep us from becoming conceited (2 Corinthians 12:7). In the end we can have the assurance that the cross will produce “a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:7-12), even to the point that we are led to “delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). In his later *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther discusses at length the reasons why God graciously gives us crosses (AE 2:319-322). Consider also the explanation of Christian crosses provided in the 1528 Visitation Articles along with their guidance as to how Christians are to respond to these crosses (AE 40:287).

⁷¹ Quoted by Rupp, 115.

⁷² Luther observed this smugness in the practice of Roman penance: “We act like the foolish heir who knew only how to squander the magnificent estate left by his parents and did nothing to build it up but always carried away from the pile. So the popes and priests pour out the graces and indulgences amassed by the blood of Christ and the martyrs and left to us, and they do not think there is any need to build up this treasure, nor to acquire the remission of sins and the kingdom of heaven in any other way than by their merits. Yet no one can share in the public good unless he, too, makes his contribution” (AE 10:361).

and eternal life: the cross of Christ. “The cross of Christ is found everywhere in the Scriptures. ... Know therefore, that the Lord has [through the cross] made His Holy One wonderful, that He will hear me even when I have nothing beyond a cry” (AE 11:239). Our great heritage from age to age is our theology, and our theology is the theology of the cross. Shall pastors run? No. Embrace the cross.

Young Martin Luther was doing that very thing in a pastor’s study. *Oratio, meditatio, tentatio* is where the Reformation began. Was he completely out of the spiritual ditch Roman theology had dug for him by the end of his Psalms lectures in October 1515? Not completely.⁷³ But he was seeing the light of the gospel through his embrace of the cross. Indeed, the earliest Psalms lectures demonstrate an “historically observable connection between Luther’s early theology (hidden from the general public of his time) and his later published works of theology, which became the foundation for the evangelical church and its confessional identity.”⁷⁴ And how would Luther come to an even deeper understanding of our theology of the cross? He returned to his study because that is where the Reformation began.⁷⁵



“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure’” (Matthew 11:25-26). What is the point of Jesus’ prayer? Simple. The truths of the gospel are not revealed to just anyone, especially not to those who are spiritually smug, convinced in their hearts that they are “wise and learned” and in no need of further, serious learning. Of such people this same God says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (1 Corinthians 1:19).

What does the Lord bid us to be instead? Little children. And why? Because little children sit for their lessons. “Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus says, “and learn from me.” Already in his earliest lectures and writings Luther demonstrates what it means to take on that yoke, to embrace the cross, to learn from Jesus.

While we cannot say with absolute precision *when* the Lutheran Reformation began, we do know *where* it began. In a pastor’s study where the cross was embraced. “The truest way, then, to describe the beginning of the Reformation is to say that it originated in *a scholar’s insight*, born equally of spiritual struggle and hard intellectual labor.”⁷⁶ That is where reformation begins today, too, as our own Professor August Pieper⁷⁷ explained so eloquently almost a century ago.

In the parsonage, in the pastor’s study, in his little den are the sources of the church’s strength. If this little den becomes cold and empty, or if it is dedicated to the old Adam and the spirit of this

⁷³ A careful study of the printed material Luther prepared for these lectures suggests that he was still laboring under some of the faulty theological framework of his Roman upbringing. It should be noted, however, that “these documents are not Luther’s lectures, but simply the collection of lecture material, on the basis of which he dictated or lectured ..., [which demonstrates] how precarious it is to ask the questions whether or at what point Luther’s discovery about the justice of God emerged. In any case, such a discovery might not immediately intrude into such [printed] documents” (Rupp, 131).

⁷⁴ Hamm, 31.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of Luther’s lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans (1515-1516) and his further break from Rome’s scholastic theology toward the freedom of a Scriptural theology of the cross, see Appendix B.

⁷⁶ E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1956), 121. Emphasis original.

⁷⁷ August Pieper (1857-1946) graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1879 and served congregations in Kewaunee, Menomonie, and Milwaukee, Wis., before receiving a call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1902. He served there until his retirement in 1942.

world, the church's strength will evaporate, and the spirit of the world will overwhelm it. If, on the other hand, the Spirit's fire burns in the pastor's praying and studying, new streams of the Spirit will flow out daily to God's people.

But that is the great evil of the church in our day: we pastors and teachers of the church do not study enough, and we pray even less. We are so busy with ecclesiastical externals, and our spiritual life is all too sterile. ... We make external things the important thing and forcibly dry up our inner, spiritual life. The result is that we become more and more stunted as far as having the Holy Spirit is concerned, our religion eventually becomes a mere formality, and we drag the church down with us into this maelstrom.

When pastors and teachers have a sluggish nature, the whole life of the church and school becomes a dull outward habit without spirit or life. It accomplishes nothing and finally dies off completely. ... That is our evil, and its source lies in the study, in the pastor's little prayer cell, from which the Spirit has fled because we pray and study only in connection with our work and all too little for the sake of our own soul.

If a halt is to be called to the further ruin of the Lutheran church in our land and a new springtime of the Spirit is to burst upon it, there must first of all be a new Pentecost—in the pastor's study.⁷⁸

PART TWO

“... for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

What should a congregation look for in a pastor? I know that question is answered in many different ways. The answer given normally depends on the respondent, as well as on the local circumstances. I suppose any district president could rather quickly rattle off the top-five most requested characteristics congregations are looking for in a pastor. But whom should we ask to get the *best* answer to the question? May I humbly suggest that we turn our attention to the One who gives the gifts of pastors and teachers to his church in the first place? (Ephesians 4:11)

The Lord was not happy with the shepherds of his people in Jeremiah's day. He said, “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture! ... Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done” (Jeremiah 23:1-2). The Lord would come himself to “gather a remnant of my flock out of the countries,” his New Testament Church. He would “place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing” (Jeremiah 23:3-4).

What kind of characteristics would these shepherd-pastors have? The Lord tells us. “Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding” (3:15). What makes a good pastor according to the Lord of the Church? A pastor after his own heart, who leads his flock not only with knowledge but with understanding, someone who is able to “teach intelligently, realizing the needs of the situation, the difficulties to be expected, knowing and using the means [necessary] to overcome the obstacles and alleviate the needs”⁷⁹ because he has been there himself. What he once knew in theory, he now learns by experience. He embraces the cross.

It is beyond question that the Lutheran Reformation began in a pastor's study, as young Professor Luther came to a deeper understanding of the theology of the cross through prayer, study,

⁷⁸ August Pieper, “Anniversary Reflections,” R.E. Wehrwein, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 293-294.

⁷⁹ Theodore Laetsch, *Jeremiah 3:15* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), 54.

and suffering. **But his Reformation did not end there. Now these gospel truths needed to be applied faithfully and skillfully to all kinds of different people under all kinds of different circumstances.**

Luther will again serve as the model since he demonstrates that a pastor studies hard not only or even primarily for his own sake. He does it for the sake of those entrusted to his pastoral care, just as St. Paul pointed out to young Pastor Timothy. “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). It is one thing to have knowledge. Pastors must remember: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know” (1 Corinthians 8:2-3). Who is a shepherd after the Lord’s own heart? A shepherd with both knowledge and understanding.

A MASTER’S CLASS IN PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Woe to that congregation or member who is heard to say, “Why should we pay our pastor to study? That’s what the seminary was for!” As St. Paul once wrote the Corinthians, so also he writes to you, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Corinthians 9:6). If your expressed desire and goal is to have your pastor spend as little time as possible in his study, and if your congregation has resolved that the pennies are just too tight to help facilitate his continuing education, then know this: “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.” You may get yourselves a wham-bam pastor who is out there “hitting the pavement” every day and bringing in new folks hand-over-fist. You may have a financial bottom line that any congregation would envy. But in the end you will likely be spiritually poorer because you will not have a pastor who has taken the time or been given the encouragement to embrace the cross. He will not share the cross with you in all its richness and wonder. C.F.W. Walther⁸⁰ points out that the time pastors use to study—both privately and together—in order to consider

how the Word of God must be taught in the congregation and how they must apply that Word of God ...is not so much a benefit to the pastor as it is a benefit to the congregations. Those pastors who hole up by themselves and think they know all the answers will either not grow, preach themselves dry with sermons that become more and more shallow, or, because they don’t want to be preaching the same thing year after year, they let themselves be led astray by the devil into all kinds of errors, so that they think of false doctrine as a great treasure.⁸¹

Walther clearly agreed that a reformation begins in the pastor’s study. Woe to the person who continues to think otherwise.

On the other hand, woe to that pastor who has been graciously afforded the time and resources by his congregation to do that life-giving study but who, in the end, can hold forth more capably on the ins-and-outs of fantasy football than he can on the theology of the cross. Woe also to that pastor who spends hours in his study scouring the depths of doctrinal minutiae but then feels compelled like the Pharisees of old to use his expertise to chase down every whiff of heresy he might detect—especially on the Internet—rather than taking the time to apply with loving patience and humility the theology of the cross to his own life, to the lives of his haggard flock, and to the lives of those who

⁸⁰ C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887) was a founding father of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Synodical Conference and a longtime professor and president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He has been called “the American Luther” because of the influence he has had on confessional Lutherans throughout America and the world.

⁸¹ C.F.W. Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” *Essays for the Church*, Vol. II (1877-1886) (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 48. Emphasis original.

do not yet know the only Good Shepherd. Pastors must not become studied theologians who are more concerned about being *right* than being *evangelical*, that is, truly Lutheran. Every pastor here has been guilty of these sins and many more against his divine calling, but woe to the pastor who continues to do so.

Let me be clear: **pastors must study the gospel with passion and patience so that they can apply the gospel with passion and patience.** Let pastors follow the good model and advice of an old Lutheran pastor who described his late-in-life contemplation of St. Paul's use of the term "mystery" to describe our Savior and his work of salvation. He expressed his ongoing need to study that concept so he could better reveal the mystery of the cross to others.

In times past—when I had to permit myself to be called a doctor of Holy Scripture—I considered this a straightforward expression that I understood very well. But now that I, praise God, have again become a poor student of Holy Scripture and understand less and less as time goes on, I am beginning to look on these words with wonder. ... For no matter how brightly and clearly as the apostles preached about it—even with miracles—nevertheless it still remains hidden and secret to the very greatest and most clever people on earth, just as He says in Matthew 11: "You have hidden these things from the wise and clever, but have revealed them to the children." ...

This is the advice: Keep watch! Study! Attend to reading! [1 Timothy 4:13] Truly, you cannot read in Scripture too much, and what you do read you cannot read too well, and what you read well you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well. Take it from [old] Rupert, who knows from experience [*Experto crede Ruperto*].⁸² It is the devil, the world, and the flesh that are ranting and raging against us. Therefore, beloved lords and brothers, pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, and keep busy. Truly, at this evil, shameful time, it is no time for loafing, snoring, or sleeping. Use your gift, which has been entrusted to you [1 Timothy 4:14], and reveal the mystery of Christ (AE 60:283, 285).

You probably have guessed by now. That "old Lutheran pastor" was Pastor Luther, writing in 1543. **We may not normally think of Martin Luther as Pastor Luther, but in fact he was—"above all else—a pastor and shepherd of souls."**⁸³ We must remember that it was ultimately a pastoral concern that prompted him to post his Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517, as he later explained in detail.⁸⁴ But even before he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to a door on the Castle Church in

⁸² A rhyming Latin proverb.

⁸³ Theodore Tappert, ed., *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 13. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ "Now when many people from Wittenberg went to Jüterbock and Zerbst for indulgences, and I ... did not know what the indulgences were, as in fact no one knew, I began to preach very gently that one could probably do something better and more reliable than acquiring indulgences. I had also preached before in the same way against indulgences [on February 24, 1517] at the castle [church in Wittenberg (AE 51:26-31)] and had thus gained the disfavor of Duke Frederick [the Wise] because he was very fond of his religious foundation. Now I—to point out the true cause of the Lutheran rumpus—let everything take its course. However, I heard what dreadful and abominable articles [the indulgence salesman Johann] Tetzel was preaching ... He did an abominable amount of this, and it was all for the sake of money ... And because all the bishops and doctors were silent and no one wanted to bell the cat ... Luther became famous as a doctor, for at last someone had stood up to fight. I did not want the fame, because (as I have said) I did not myself know what the indulgences were, and the song might prove too high for my voice" (AE 41:231-232,234). Frederick the Wise (1463-1525) was Luther's Wittenberg prince, patron, and protector until his death in 1525. John Tetzel (1465-1519) was a gifted Dominican friar and preacher whose now-famous phrase about the benefit of purchasing indulgences was: "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." In a letter (May 30, 1518) to his spiritual mentor, Johann von Staupitz, Luther privately clarified the genesis of his involvement and asked him to help explain it to Pope Leo X: "Since I was not able to counteract the furor of these men, I determined modestly to

Wittenberg, Luther was a pastor.⁸⁵ In 1512 he was appointed as subprior of the Wittenberg monastery, making him what we might call today an assistant pastor to his fellow monks and adding the responsibilities of preaching.⁸⁶ In 1515 Staupitz nominated him for the role of district vicar⁸⁷ over nearly a dozen Augustinian monasteries in that part of Germany. Luther was elected to a three-year term,⁸⁸ and his pastoral duties expanded at least tenfold. In October 1516, he provided an inventory of his weekly calendar.

All day long I do almost nothing else than write letters ... I am a preacher at the monastery, I am a reader during mealtimes, I am asked daily to preach in the city church, I have to supervise the study [of novices and friars], I am a vicar (and that means I am eleven times prior), I am caretaker of the fish [pond] at Leitzkau, I represent the people of Herzberg at the court in Torgau, I lecture on Paul, and I am assembling [material for] a commentary on the Psalms. As I have already mentioned, the greater part of my time is filled with the job of letter writing. I hardly have any uninterrupted time to say the Hourly Prayers and celebrate [mass]. Besides all this there are my own struggles (*Anfechtungen*) with the flesh, the world, and the devil. See what a lazy man I am! (AE 48:27-28)⁸⁹

As we can plainly see, Luther paved the way for a reformation of the church not only through his faithful and tireless study but also through his faithful and tireless *application* of what he had learned in his study to the lives of sinners under his pastoral care. As essential as the former was, the latter made the real difference, with God's blessing, in the end. "Luther makes it clear that his spiritual counsel was not simply the application of external techniques. It was part and parcel of his

take issue with them and to pronounce their teachings as open to doubt. I relied on the judgment of all the doctors and of the whole church that it is better to perform the satisfactions than to have them remitted by buying indulgences. There is no one who has ever taught differently. This is why I entered the disputation ... Since these 'lovely' people cannot refute what I have said, they arm themselves with the greatest cunning and pretend that I violated papal authority by my theses. This is the reason, Reverend Father, why I now, unfortunately, step out into public view. I have always loved privacy and would much prefer to watch the splendid performance of the gifted people of our age than become a part of the show and be ridiculed. But I know that weeds are to be found among the useful greens, and white has to be interspersed with black for the sake of decor and beauty. And so I am asking you to receive this poor writing of mine and to forward it with whatever speed is available to you to our excellent Pope Leo X, so that it may serve me there as an advocate, so to speak, in the face of the contrivings of the evilminded" (AE 48:68-69).

⁸⁵ When Luther was first ordained as a priest in 1507 he became what he later called "a Mass priest." His chief responsibility was to perform the Roman sacrifice of the Mass both publicly and privately, but he was not yet a pastor. See Luther's account of his first celebration of the Mass (AE 54:156-157).

⁸⁶ Luther was appointed first to preach in the cloister chapel and later at the Wittenberg city church, retaining the latter appointment until death. Brecht seems to suggest that Luther's preaching responsibilities in the monastery began in 1512 (*Road to Reformation*, 150-151), Schwiebert already in 1511 (282). The city church preaching Schwiebert and Timothy Wengert ("Introducing the Pastoral Luther," *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, Timothy Wengert, ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009], 4) have beginning in 1514, but Brecht asserts an uncertain starting date.

⁸⁷ The rough equivalent of our circuit pastors.

⁸⁸ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 156. It is interesting to note that at the gathering where Luther was elected, he delivered a sharply-worded sermon against the gossip that was tripping up his fellow monks (Kiessling, 75-76). Luther's friend, Johannes Lang, sent a copy of the sermon to Mutianus Rufus the following day along with a letter. He wrote, "You ask about the sharp orator who yesterday inveighed against the morals of those brothers who pass for little saints. He is Dr. Martin, with whom I have lived intimately at Erfurt, and who formerly helped me not a little in good studies. Our [George] Spalatin venerates and consults him as Apollo" (Smith, 33). Apparently, Mutianus was not impressed and did not join the Reformation.

⁸⁹ Martin Luther to Johannes Lang, October 26, 1516.

theology.”⁹⁰ Indeed, “Luther’s new soteriology [doctrine of salvation] grew directly out of his concern for the care of souls.”⁹¹

Let us all recognize that in so many ways the Lutheran Reformation was a reform of the office of pastor, an attempt to return it to its New Testament roots, the public ministry of Jesus and his first apostles. Jesus had made the ministry of the gospel so simple yet so profound: “Preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in my name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to cling to my every word” (Luke 24:47; Matthew 28:19-20). Rome had made it so complex, yet so shallow. By both word and action, Luther demonstrated a deep resolve to return the shepherding office back to its apostolic roots through a careful study and proclamation of the cross.

In contrast to a scholastic search for the pure logical statement of the truth that could be objectively analyzed and proven, Luther’s theology of the cross sought ways to bring the seeming foolishness of the message of Christ’s death and resurrection to sinners (1 Cor. 1:18—2:16), so that they might be turned in repentance to the Crucified One. For this theology of the cross was not about suffering [for its own sake] but about the Word which comes from Christ’s cross to kill sinners as sinners and to bring them to new life in Christ. This rhythm of the dying and rising of daily repentance was to be accomplished through proper application and distinction of the law of God, which evaluates [and condemns] the sinner’s performance, and the gospel, which bestows forgiveness of sins and life upon the repentant sinner.⁹²

Please consider just one classic example of **Luther’s pastoral care**⁹³ that shows both his **diligent theological study and his personal experience as a sinner put into practice for the sake of another sinner**. On April 8, 1516, Pastor Luther penned a letter to a fellow monk and former colleague named George Spenlein. Clearly the two had engaged in theological conversations during their Wittenberg days. Now Luther was checking in, aware that his friend was having difficulties in his new surroundings. After addressing some minor business matters, Pastor Luther got down to real business.

Now I should like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness, is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ. For in our age the temptation to presumption besets many, especially those who try with all their might to be just and good without knowing the righteousness of God, which is most bountifully and freely given us in Christ. They try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. While you were here, you were one who held this opinion, or rather, error. So was I, and I am still fighting against the error without having conquered it as yet.

Therefore, my dear Friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.” Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account he descended from heaven, where he dwelt among the righteous, to dwell among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see his sweet consolation. For why was it necessary for him to die if we

⁹⁰ Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 16.

⁹¹ Rittgers, 462.

⁹² Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns Publishing Company, 2005), 3.

⁹³ For additional examples of Luther’s early pastoral care, see especially Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, and Smith, *Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters, Volume I (1507-1521)*, which is in the public domain and available free through Google Books.

can obtain a good conscience by our works and afflictions? Accordingly you will find peace only in him and only when you despair of yourself and your own works. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he has received you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours.

If you firmly believe this as you ought (and he is damned who does not believe it), receive your untaught and hitherto erring brothers, patiently help them, make their sins yours, and, if you have any goodness, let it be theirs. Thus the Apostle teaches, “Receive one another as Christ also received you to the glory of God.” And again, “Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, [did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped], but emptied himself,” etc. Even so, if you seem to yourself to be better than they are, do not count it as booty, as if it were yours alone, but humble yourself, forget what you are and be as one of them in order that you may help them.

Cursed is the righteousness of the man who is unwilling to assist others on the ground that they are worse than he is, and who thinks of fleeing from and forsaking those whom he ought now to be helping with patience, prayer, and example. This would be burying the Lord’s talent and not paying what is due. If you are a lily and a rose of Christ, therefore, know that you will live among thorns. Only see to it that you will not become a thorn as a result of impatience, rash judgment, or secret pride. The rule of Christ is in the midst of his enemies, as the Psalm puts it. Why, then, do you imagine that you are among friends? Pray, therefore, for whatever you lack, kneeling before the face of the Lord Jesus. He will teach you all things. Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, I ask you, would he have died or with whom would he ever have lived? Act accordingly, my dear Friar, and pray for me. The Lord be with you (AE 48:12-14).

This is our theology, and our theology is the theology of the cross. Consider what Luther teaches us about the pastoral and evangelical application of the theology of the cross in this one letter.

1. Luther utilizes a loving pastoral tone without mincing words

Notice how Luther’s loving concern for this monk is evident throughout. Too often when pastors proclaim the truth of the law, they do it in a way that does not express God’s heartfelt, loving intent of his law because they have not studied it adequately and applied it to their own lives sufficiently.

God gave us his law *because* he loves us with deep compassion (Mark 10:21) and wants to keep us safe from all earthly and eternal harm. He does not reveal his law to us for his own sake—to “protect” himself from our sin—but for our sake⁹⁴ and our neighbor’s sake. At its very heart the law of God is an expression of his love for us and for all people.

Pastors do well to remember God’s original intent of love and to understand that while sin frustrates God’s original intent of love, it does not change his original intent. After the fall, the law makes sinners “conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20) and properly brings remorse. It does this, however, not for its own sake but for the sake of the gospel (Matthew 18:15; 2 Corinthians 7:8-10). As pastors cultivate a deeper appreciation of God’s loving and saving intent in their own minds, it will lead them to understand better that their proclamation of the law also “must be done in love, and in such a way so that the other person can also perceive it.”⁹⁵ Luther models such an approach here.

Please note, though, that Pastor Luther pulls no punches when he unpacks the divine law for this man. Pastors must understand that there are two kinds of law-preaching, one of which lacks passion.

⁹⁴ Consider the analogy of a parent commanding their two-year-old, “Don’t walk in the street!” Why do they make and then reveal that law for the child? Not for their own sake, but because they love their child and they want their child to be safe from harm.

⁹⁵ John Ph. Koehler, “Legalism Among Us,” Philemon Hensel, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. II (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 240.

[The one] can be dogmatically completely correct, and yet the hearer is not brought to the point that he is shattered in his spirit. That may be because of his opposition. But this opposition is often encouraged by the fact that the preaching of the law is not a powerful *assertion of the sovereignty of God over men*, but a feeble arguing from which the hearer gets the feeling that its effect depends somewhat on his intellectual acceptance of it. ... We ought to *assert the rights of God and his law* ... so that no excuses are made, but everything that would rebel is chopped down with God's rights.⁹⁶

Luther here proclaims the full force of the law without apology, while admitting sympathetically that he is “still fighting the error without having conquered it yet.” True Christian love does not mean skirting the issue at hand but addressing it patiently, confidently, and directly on the basis of God's Word alone in a loving, sympathetic, pastoral tone.

2. Luther cuts self-righteous sinners off at every pass

Pastors show love to their flock by not allowing them any excuses or justifications for their sinful thoughts, words, and actions. More than once Luther encourages Spenlein not only to despair of *his sins*, but to despair of *himself*, to become “tired of [his] own righteousness,” and to recognize “the temptation to presumption [that] besets many, especially those who try with all their might to be just and good ... But this is impossible.” Our complete wretchedness before a holy God is an objective truth further demonstrated by our doomed attempts to justify ourselves, our words, and our actions. None of us can escape our sinfulness. The more we try, the deeper we fall into our depravity. Better simply to confess it.

As a related aside, recently there has been renewed emphasis in our circles on properly preaching and teaching what we confessional Lutherans call objective justification. Though the term itself is not utilized in Scripture or the Lutheran Confessions, we use it properly to teach with one phrase the profound truth we find in the Scriptures and our Confessions regarding the nature and universality of God's forgiveness from his perspective and therefore *in reality*.⁹⁷ Sinners are not just *potentially* forgiven by God in Christ. They *are* forgiven. Jesus “is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). All sinners are declared innocent freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24). The holy God is perfectly reconciled to all sinners in Christ. Sadly, too many sinners stubbornly refuse to reconcile themselves to God (2 Corinthians 5:20) and therefore do not benefit from his perfect forgiveness won by Christ and granted by him through the Means of Grace. The fault is *entirely* their own. This is our bold confession because the Scriptures clearly teach it.

What we perhaps fail to appreciate and confess clearly enough in our preaching and teaching is that **the truth of objective justification is spiritually and eternally valuable only if we faithfully proclaim its complementary truth, what we might properly call our objective, divinely-declared**

⁹⁶ John Ph. Koehler, “The Teaching of Scripture Regarding Hardening,” James Langebartels, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. II (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 226-227.

⁹⁷ Like the terms “Trinity” and “Triune,” we do not find the term “objective justification” used by the inspired writers of Scripture. However, we utilize these terms in a God-pleasing way to teach Scriptural truths that in reality reach beyond the range of corrupt human logic and language. As a result, special care is also required so that we do not misuse them and end up saying more or less than the Scriptures do themselves. Consider, for example, not only Luther's apparent uneasiness with the term *homoousius* (“of one substance”) in the Nicene Creed (AE 32:243) but also his later defense of its use (AE 41:81-84). Though not found in Scripture, the term was introduced to describe the divine and eternal nature of Jesus Christ and his relationship to God the Father against the Arian heretics who denied Jesus' divinity. It continues to be a useful term today.

sinfulness and condemnation (Romans 5:12,18a,19a; Galatians 3:22). Without properly proclaiming the absolute depravity of our human nature—and our need for true and godly repentance (2 Corinthians 5:20)—objective justification becomes nothing more than an abstract theological concept and very much open to misunderstanding, abuse, and even public ridicule. If objective justification is preached apart from godly repentance, it actually does more spiritual harm than good.⁹⁸ As is the case with so many Scriptural truths, we must hold these two teachings together and maintain the theological, paradoxical tension and distinction between them in order to be truly faithful to the truths of the Scripture.⁹⁹ Proclaiming God’s free and full forgiveness faithfully requires pastors to cut self-righteous sinners off at every pass and to bring them to confess both their sins and their sinfulness unequivocally (Luke 18:13; Psalm 130:1-3), lest they become a “brood of vipers.”

3. Luther illustrates with passion the profound richness and perfect fullness of the gospel

Are we surprised by the rich expressions of the gospel that Luther uses in this letter? If you know Luther at all, then there is no surprise here. How did he do it? How did he come to be such a master of preaching and illustrating the truths of the gospel? **Oratio, meditatio, tentatio**. Luther was not simply giving the company line when he wrote, “Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, ‘Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.’” Luther had come to understand the profound nature of this very simple yet painful transaction through a deep struggle with his own sin and by feeling the true and joyous relief of sins forgiven. Like Luther, pastors must continue to lead their own souls toward a deeper appreciation of their wretchedness (**oratio, meditatio, tentatio**) so that they can also have a deeper understanding of God’s faithful love and forgiveness. When that happens, they are able to illustrate the gospel richly for their sheep and apply it skillfully and **with passion (pathos=suffering)** in their preaching, teaching, and pastoral care with unfeigned, God-given emotion.¹⁰⁰ Pastors need to understand that there are two kinds of gospel-preaching, one of which lacks passion.

⁹⁸ Indeed, we run the risk Luther feared when he and Philipp Melanchthon prepared instructions for the 1528 visitation of Lutheran congregations in Saxony: “Many now talk only about the forgiveness of sins and say little or nothing about repentance. There neither is forgiveness of sins without repentance nor can forgiveness of sins be understood without repentance. It follows that if we preach the forgiveness of sins without repentance that the people imagine that they have already obtained the forgiveness of sins, becoming thereby secure and without compunction of conscience. This would be a greater error and sin than all the errors hitherto prevailing. Surely we need to be concerned lest, as Christ says in Matt. 12[:45] the last state becomes worse than the first. Therefore we have instructed and admonished pastors that it is their duty to preach the whole gospel and not one portion without the other ... [and] to exhort the people diligently and frequently to repent and grieve over their sins and to fear the judgment of God. Nor are they to neglect the greatest and most important element of repentance, for both John and Christ condemned the Pharisees more severely for their hypocritical holiness than for ordinary sins. The preachers are to condemn the gross sins of the common man, but more rigorously demand repentance where there is false holiness” (AE 40:274-275).

⁹⁹ Other examples of Scriptural paradoxes that must be maintained in order for them to remain true to Scripture include the divine and human natures in Christ and the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Supper under real bread and wine. Only in properly proclaiming the “both” of these logical paradoxes are we actually proclaiming the truth of Scripture. Luther teaches us that the same is true of universal condemnation and universal justification.

¹⁰⁰ The story is told of former Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor and scholar Siegbert Becker being spotted wiping away tears in a hallway after leading seminary seniors through the law and gospel truths of Romans 3 on the basis of Paul’s original Greek.

There is a way of presenting the gospel like a mathematical problem. By the dogmatic presentation of the doctrine of justification one makes it *plausible* for man that he has the forgiveness of sins. That can be dogmatically completely correct, but it *operates* falsely. It is not a *kerygma* [a proclamation] of the wonderfully free love of God which is applied to the astonished believing experience of the hearer, but an argumentative demonstration applied to the intellect.¹⁰¹

What is required for pastors to come to a deeper appreciation of the gospel? They need to stop running from crosses and to embrace them instead. Remember Luther's words:

I didn't learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials (*Anfechtungen*) were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice. This is what [so many] lack. They don't have the right adversary, the devil. He would teach them well. None of the arts can be learned without practice (AE 54:50-51).

4. Luther preaches provocatively against moralism

Luther was not above being provocative, especially when he was fighting the most pernicious foe of God's people, self-righteousness. He was in good company, of course, following in the footsteps of John the Baptizer (Matthew 3:7-10), Jesus (Matthew 23, et al.), St. Paul (Galatians 5:12, et al.), and other faithful preachers. As Luther pointed out in his Psalms lectures, "there are many such authoritative statements in the Gospel and the apostle's writings which appear to be urging us to sin, though they aim at nothing else but that we confess and acknowledge that we are sinners" (AE 10:235-236). Luther best-known and most-quoted provocation is when he offered some rather unconventional pastoral advice to his overly-prissy Wittenberg associate Phillip Melancthon¹⁰² in August 1521.

If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true and not a fictitious grace; if grace is true, you must bear a true and not a fictitious sin. God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world. As long as we are here [in this world] we have to sin. This life is not the dwelling place of righteousness. ... It is enough to know the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world. No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day. Do you think that the purchase price that was paid for the redemption of our sins by so great a Lamb is too small? Pray boldly—you too are a mighty sinner (AE 48:281-282).¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Koehler, "The Teaching of Scripture Regarding Hardening," 225.

¹⁰² Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) began serving as a professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg at age 21. In many ways he became Luther's right-hand man in the Lutheran Reformation. Ever the wordsmith, Melancthon attempted until his last days to present Christian doctrine in such a way that would satisfy the concerns of doctrinal combatants and bring about reconciliation in the visible church. In the end, Melancthon would surrender key biblical points for which Luther had himself struggled so long, especially with respect to the doctrines of the will and the Lord's Supper.

¹⁰³ It seems Melancthon was never quite able to embrace the messiness and "doubleness" of the Christian faith-life in the way Luther encouraged him to do. E. Harris Harbison comments on how Luther once remarked that he and Melancthon both appear in the book of Acts. "Melancthon is James, brother of the Lord, conservative, anxious to preserve the law. Luther is Peter, impatient with the law's burdens. Melancthon is a worrier, easily disturbed by the great currents of world affairs, while Luther says that great affairs don't bother him because he says to himself, 'This is beyond you, you cannot grasp it, so let it go.' He therefore frets about little things. Melancthon is too cautious, too tactful, too apt to see both sides of a question—and he works far too hard. Luther thinks it is better 'to speak and hit out like a boy'—and not to work all day Sunday like Melancthon. And yet he stoutly maintained that the results of Melancthon's grubbing and grinding were indispensable to the evangelical cause" (*The Christian Scholar*, 115-116). See also Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*:

We, of course, hear the same kind of sentiment expressed in Luther's letter to Spenlein. "Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners." Luther knew from experience how dangerous hypocritical holiness is, and his historic revelation about the nature of sin and true repentance serves both as an encouragement and warning to preachers and teachers today.

Luther encourages pastors to understand just how pernicious self-righteousness is, not only in their own hearts but in the hearts of their sheep. It may become necessary at times to speak in a provocative way in order to snap an overtly self-righteous person to attention and to help them understand that they are not God's greatest gift to the world. Jesus is. A pastor's motivation is love.

Luther's words also serve as a serious warning to avoid the insipid moralism that has run amok within the sanctuaries and classrooms of the church since the fall into sin and that so naturally seeps into pastors' and teachers' preaching and teaching. Pastors do their flocks a disservice when they spend too much time preaching and teaching about the sins they observe outside the walls of the church rather than skillfully pointing out their members' own poisonous self-righteousness.¹⁰⁴

5. Luther instructs sinners to practice godly patience toward other sinners

Luther's letter must have come as a surprise to Spenlein. He seems to have communicated to Luther his frustration with the spiritual situation in his new monastery. Perhaps he had sought the district vicar's advice on how best to crack the whip among his fellow monks. Perhaps he had asked Luther to crack the whip from his official position. Or maybe he was just blowing off some steam. Rather than giving in to his friend's self-righteous inclination, however, Luther had cracked the whip on *him* and provided him with a lesson in godly righteousness.

...receive your untaught and hitherto erring brothers, patiently help them, make their sins yours, and, if you have any goodness, let it be theirs. ... if you seem to yourself to be better than they are, do not count it as booty, as if it were yours alone, but humble yourself, forget what you are and be as one of them in order that you may help them. Cursed is the righteousness of the man who is unwilling to assist others on the ground that they are worse than he is, and who thinks of fleeing from and forsaking those whom he ought now to be helping with patience, prayer, and example. ... Pray, therefore, for whatever you lack, kneeling before the face of the Lord Jesus. He will teach you all things. Only keep your eyes fixed on what he has done for you and for all men in order that you

The Preservation of the Church (1532-1546), James Schaaf, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 209-210, and Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 145-151.

¹⁰⁴ We should study and then follow the truly evangelical model of preaching repentance made available, for example, in the Ash Wednesday sermon presented by Professor Ken Cherney at our seminary several years ago (video available at <https://vimeo.com/8869970>). Here the preacher follows the inspired model of the prophet Nathan by first "baiting" us into exposing our natural, self-righteous, moralism when he poses a most logical question about King David's adultery and murder: "How could he?" only to have him then turn the tables on us and say: "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 7:7), as Nathan famously did to David. The sermon calls us to recognize "the restless, ferocious evil" lurking within our hearts so that Professor Cherney can then pose the *real* question, yes, the "great, imponderable" question of that horrific biblical account: "How could He?" How could our holy, eternal Father sacrifice his one and only Son in order to freely forgive and save godless, wretched, worthless sinners like us? This sermon helps us to understand better what true and blind evil looks like, and that it especially rears its ugly head when we are quick to identify the sins of others but fail to recognize our own (Matthew 7:3-5). What makes Professor Cherney's sermon so powerful is not so much that it is inductive but that it is the product of a well-studied theologian-preacher who has come to know deeply the truths of the gospel *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*. I was blessed to observe his careful study and application of the gospel in a very firsthand way when I served as his vicar in 1996-1997.

may learn what you should do for others. If he had desired to live only among good people and to die only for his friends, for whom, I ask you, would he have died or with whom would he ever have lived?¹⁰⁵

As St. Paul reminded the Romans (15:1-3) and Galatians (6:2), Pastor Luther patiently reminds us that Christian love shows its most strongly not in doing positive good for our neighbor but in patiently suffering and enduring our neighbor's weakness (AE 77:299-300).

As pastors come to a deeper understanding of their sin and how patient our Savior has been with them, the Spirit will guide and empower them through his Word to demonstrate **patience (pathos=suffering)** toward those they are called to serve in love and to understand that sometimes there are no easy answers to knotty spiritual maladies. Luther once went so far as to assert that God "cures many of sin by sin, as poison is counteracted by poison."¹⁰⁶ Sometimes things need to get worse, spiritually speaking, before they get better. Patient suffering is often the best prescription.

What made Luther such a good pastor? It was not just his gift for words or his people skills. What made Luther's pastoral practice so wonderful is that it was informed and guided by words greater than his own, yes, by the Word that Luther had been poring over with diligence in his study. A Word he had come to love deeply **oratio, meditatio, tentatio** (through prayer, through study, through suffering) so that he was equipped for spiritual battle. Yes, Pastor Luther was able to help those who were suffering because he had suffered so much himself. In typical fashion, Luther once strongly asserted: "One does not become a theologian [simply] by understanding, reading, and speculating, but rather by living, dying, and being damned."¹⁰⁷ Luther knew what it meant to embrace the cross,

¹⁰⁵ Perhaps Luther would have Spemlein in mind when he commented that same year on Paul's instruction that we "ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1): "... if a priest does not wish to be a priest, because he cannot deal with evil people, it will be said to him: 'Master John, you stand and you are pleased with yourself; see to it that you do not fall and become more displeased with yourself than these people now are with you.' ... To such a person the answer is: Did you never make a stench in your mother's lap? Or is there no filth on any part of you now? Or doesn't any part of your body stink?" (AE 25:510-511).

¹⁰⁶ Luther offered this pastoral insight in a May 1517 letter to the provost of the Leitzkau monastery, George Mascov, who had been forced to deal with a public sin of one of his brother monks. Luther suggested a reason as to why God would allow such public scandal, suggesting that moralism is not God's answer to sin. "Who knows whether he was permitted to make the stench of his sin public because he could not cure it in secret, but only by public shame. God is wonderful in all his ways above the sons of men. He cures many of sin by sin, as poison is counteracted by poison. Wherefore be not afraid; it is the Lord who does this" (Smith, 59-60). Luther ardently believed that "for those in the kingdom of Christ who love Him, even what is sinful and weak in them must be good, and everything will serve for their good and improvement" (AE 77:350). Luther learned much of his patient pastoral care in the monastery through benefitting himself from the spiritual care of two men in particular, Johann von Staupitz and Johann Greffenstein. Much has been written about Luther's relationship with Father Staupitz, and yet Father Greffenstein (see AE 59:346, n. 21) seems to have had an equal if not more important impact on Luther's pastoral approach. "Luther always spoke about Johann Greffenstein, his novice master, with great respect. He characterized him as learned and pious, as a fine, old, good man who was a true Christian under the cowl. ... Luther learned from Greffenstein that there were difficult matters in the confessional that could not be solved with wisdom, law, or reason, but which one had to commend to divine goodness. Later as a confessor Luther was correspondingly liberal. Even his disputed confessional counsel on Landgrave Philip of Hesse's bigamy belongs to this category" (Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 61). For more on Luther's very liberal pastoral counsel with regard to Philip of Hesse—counsel he staunchly defended, even after it became a public scandal—see Tappert, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 288-291; James A. Faulkner, "Luther and the Bigamous Marriage of Philip of Hesse," *The American Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 1913): 206-231; and Brecht, *The Preservation of the Church*, 205-215.

¹⁰⁷ WA 5:163. *Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo, et speculando.*

and that made him equipped to teach and comfort others. So much of faithful pastoral ministry is about **passion** and **patience**. **Yes, it is about suffering.** Reformation begins with study and suffering, embracing the cross.

Does it all sound vaguely and splendidly familiar? It should.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope in you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

St. Paul, like Luther, had learned from experience what it meant to take the yoke of Jesus on and to learn from him in a patient way. After all, Jesus had said of him, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16). But Paul also observed the lovely result and saw how it benefitted God’s people to share the cross with others: “... for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). This is our theology, and our theology is the theology of the cross.



What should a congregation look for in a pastor? Has any congregation ever thought to ask for the following characteristics? We want a pastor who has suffered (Hebrew 2:18). We want a pastor who weeps openly (John 11:35; Luke 19:41; Hebrews 5:7). We want a pastor who has faced painful temptations (Matthew 4:1-11). We want a pastor who prays fervently (Luke 22:44). We want a pastor whose soul has been overwhelmed with guilt, even to the point of death (Psalm 38:4,8; Matthew 26:38). We want a pastor who knows compassion (Mark 6:34; Hebrews 4:15). We want a pastor whom many, if not most, will reject (Isaiah 53:3). We want a pastor who will carry his cross alongside us and bestow sufficient grace that empowers us to carry our own (2 Corinthians 12:9). We should all want a pastor like Jesus.

May it never happen, as one former professor says, that as the offering plate is being passed one Sunday after another shallow sermon, canned Bible study, or flash of pastoral impatience a parishioner drops in a note for the pastor that reads, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus” (John 12:21). May God’s people instead see a bit of Jesus in our pastors already—in their passionate preaching and teaching and their patient application of law and gospel—shepherds after Jesus’ own heart, who lead their flocks with knowledge and understanding, and whose theology is our theology, the theology of the cross. Pastors are called to embrace the cross in their studies and in their suffering so that they can shepherd the sheep to embrace the cross themselves. For this is most certainly true: “The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, it is our great heritage.

¹⁰⁸ WA 5:217. “*Crux Christi unica est eruditio verborum dei, Theologia syncerissima.*”

APPENDIX A

DATING LUTHER'S "REFORMATION BREAKTHROUGH"

The question is often raised: **when did Luther have his "reformation breakthrough" regarding "the righteousness of God"** and make his break with the works-righteous theology of Rome? **It is not a simple question to answer, even though Luther provided his own personal recollection as an old man in 1545. At first reading he seems to suggest his sudden insight came in 1519,** just before he began lecturing on the Psalms a second time. He wrote:

Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1[:17], "In it the righteousness of God is revealed," that had stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God," which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue [Ten Commandments], without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted (AE 34:336-337).

Then came a significant breakthrough.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us [declares us innocent] by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word "righteousness of God." Thus that place in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise (AE 34:337).

So far Luther's recollection.

Many historians see an apparent difficulty with Luther's report, suggesting that his chronology does not square with other literary evidence. Gordon Rupp asserts: "A superficial reading [of Luther's recollection] might suggest that he refers to the year 1519 ... But it can be demonstrated that Luther had developed his teaching on this subject in these terms, at least by the time of his lectures on Romans (1515-16)."¹⁰⁹ Berndt Hamm wholeheartedly agrees that there is an "historically observable connection between Luther's early theology (hidden from the general public of his time)

¹⁰⁹ Rupp, 123.

and his later published works of theology, which became the foundation for the evangelical church and its confessional identity.”¹¹⁰

Alister McGrath offers an **interesting grammatical observation** about Luther’s 1545 recollection that may help clarify the issue.¹¹¹ He points to **Luther’s rather curious “use of the so-called ‘double’ pluperfect tense** at the beginning of the text (*captus fueram* where *captus eram* would be expected)”¹¹² when Luther writes, “I had indeed been captivated [*captus fueram*] with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans. But up till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1 [:17], ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed’ that had stood in my way” (AE 34:336). McGrath argues that Luther’s choice of verb tense “indicates that the passage should be regarded as a digression from the main course of the narrative, so that an earlier period in Luther’s career is being referred to.”¹¹³ He argues that in 1545 **Luther was comparing the theological perspective he had gained before beginning his second series of lectures on the Psalms in 1519 to the theological perspective he had when he first lectured on the Psalms beginning in 1513.** During those intervening years (1513-1519) he had gradually come to understand what Paul meant by the “righteousness of God” in Romans 1.¹¹⁴ “The preface in no way demands us to conclude that Luther’s new theological insights took place in 1519, although it does clearly imply that they were *already complete* by that date, and that they are incorporated into the substance” of his 1519 Psalms lectures.¹¹⁵

Another significant question needs to be addressed about Luther’s recollection. **What is the historical antecedent of his writing, “But up till then ... [the proper understanding of Romans 1:17] stood in my way. ... I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted”?** Most historians have apparently understood Luther as referring back to the 1519 start of his second lectures of the Psalms. But there would seem to be another very good—even preferable—option, namely, Luther’s most immediate preceding comment about a time when he “was captivated by an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.” And when would that period in Luther’s life most likely have taken place? **It would seem most reasonable to conclude that it transpired as he arduously prepared to lecture on Paul’s letter to the Romans in 1515.** Richard Balge asserts, “It is certain that this crucial understanding was granted him before he wrote the lectures.”¹¹⁶ Luther himself tells us he felt *more confident* that he understood the righteousness of God properly “*after* I had lectured in the university on St. Paul’s epistles to the Romans [1515-1516], to the Galatians [1516-1517], and the one to the Hebrews [1517-1518].” After those lectures, Luther recalled, “I was more skillful,” suggesting that even *before* those lectures began, he was experimenting with a fresh insight into the righteousness of God. After making his way through

¹¹⁰ Hamm, 31.

¹¹¹ McGrath’s observation was apparently not original with him but with Ernst Stracke. See Rupp, 123.

¹¹² McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 144. Italics original and boldface added.

¹¹³ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 144.

¹¹⁴ Rupp asserts that Luther had an opportunity to consider an Augustinian definition of “the righteousness of God” (*iustitia Dei*) when he studied Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* and later lectured on them at Wittenberg in 1509. In that dogmatics textbook Lombard quotes Augustine’s “Concerning Spirit and Letter” in his treatment of the righteousness of God, where Augustine states: “... the justice of God (*Justitia Dei*) is that by which we are made just by his gift.” Lombard himself comments on Augustine’s text: “And this is called the Justice of God, not with which he is just, but because with it he makes us just” (124). It should be noted, however, that Augustine’s understanding of justification (made righteous) is still not identical to Paul’s biblical definition (declared righteous) and Luther’s mature understanding.

¹¹⁵ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 145. Emphasis original.

¹¹⁶ Richard Balge, “Martin Luther, Augustinian,” *Luther Lives* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1983), 12

those New Testament letters, his understanding was clarified and confirmed.¹¹⁷ Heinrich Boehmer contends:

As early as 1515, years before his breach with the old church, the monk Luther tells his pupils about conflicts, doubts and troubles of conscience now happily overcome. Early in 1516 he declares that once he knew nothing of the “righteousness of God,” but that now, though not without internal conflicts, he had come to understand clearly the meaning of this term in Scriptures. Almost at the same time he further confesses that he actually felt “seasick” whenever he heard anyone use the word “righteousness” in the strict sense of the law.¹¹⁸

Luther also tells us that after his initial breakthrough on this troubling question, “I read Augustine’s *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God’s righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us.” He read the African doctor’s treatise while preparing for his 1515-1516 lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans, and Augustine’s presentation indicated that Luther’s new insight was no radical innovation unknown to the Christian church. Beginning with the Romans lectures, “*On the Spirit and the Letter* is a major presence, and Luther continued to appeal to the work in the disputations of the following years and periodically thereafter” (AE 60:36).

But further study was needed. Luther acknowledged that Augustine “did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly” (AE 34:337) and that his earliest insights needed further clarification, especially gained from Paul, that we are justified (declared righteous) by faith alone for the sake of Jesus. In 1532 Luther qualified his indebtedness to Augustine.

Ever since I came to an understanding of Paul, I have not been able to think well of any doctor [of the church]. They have become of little value to me. At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine. But when the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine. There are only two notable assertions in all of Augustine. The first is that when sin is forgiven it does not cease to exist but ceases to damn and control us. The second is that the law is kept when that is forgiven which does not happen (AE 54:49).

During his monumental Genesis lectures (1535-1545), Luther would again qualify his agreement with and dependence upon Augustine and others, while also asserting there was no doctrinal difference.

After I know that we are justified by faith alone—for ... this has been abundantly proved and set forth in Holy Scripture—it pleases me very much that Augustine [and others] say the same thing, even though they do not stress the foundations so much and at times express themselves less properly. I do not charge that this is an error on their part. It is enough for me that they say the same thing, even though they say it less properly; and I am strengthened by their testimony (AE 3:194-195).

Some historians have maintained that it is possible to identify a definite, sudden breakthrough for Luther, a so-called *Turmerlebnis* (tower experience).¹¹⁹ **More recent historians have been slower**

¹¹⁷ See also Appendix B, pages 39-41 for a discussion of Luther’s theological maturation in regard to the doctrine of justification.

¹¹⁸ Heinrich Boehmer, *Luther in Light of Recent Research*, Carl Huth, Jr., trans. (New York: The Christian Herald, 1916), 119.

¹¹⁹ See Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 85-95, for a most extensive discussion of the challenges involved in dating Luther’s theological breakthrough. See McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 142-144, and Schwiebert, 285-289, for briefer summaries of the various dating theories. Brecht argues rather vehemently for an early 1518 breakthrough (*Road to Reformation*, 221-231), but a main premise of his argument is weak; see Appendix B, pages 39-41. See Lowell C. Green, “The Young and the Mature Luther,” *The Mature Luther* (Decorah, IA: Luther College Press,

to espouse that notion, even though Luther's 1545 recollection seems to suggest it at first blush. Robert Kolb argues that "it is better to speak of an evangelical maturation rather than a dramatic breakthrough."¹²⁰ Heiko Oberman concludes, "The complexity of Luther's thought makes for a plurality of levels on which his development took place,"¹²¹ and Berndt Hamm concurs, asserting that "Luther—according to his own testimony—often gained sudden insights of monumental importance that moved him deeply ... [and] that he did not cast his theological biography in light of one all-defining central change or conversion. He spoke of important clarifications."¹²² Alister McGrath agrees.

Although it is tempting to believe that Luther suffered a devastating moment of illumination, in which he suddenly became conscious of the *vera theologia* [true theology] and of his own divine mission to reform the church on its basis, all the evidence which we possess points to Luther's theological insights arising over a prolonged period at Wittenberg.¹²³

That said, McGrath later offers his own estimate on a crucial breakthrough, arguing a crucial discovery came when Luther began to appreciate fully on the basis of the Scriptures that

faith is understood to be a divine work within man, rather than a human work or activity in itself, unaided by grace—and *this* vital development took place at some point in 1515. Luther's theological breakthrough is indeed related to the realization that the righteousness which God requires of man is faith—but this fails to resolve his dilemma, *unless* that faith is recognized as originating from God, rather than from man. We therefore conclude that the theological breakthrough in relation to the 'righteousness of God' took place at some point in 1515, possibly having taken place during the final stages of the *Dictata* [Luther's first lectures on the book of Psalms].¹²⁴

Whatever the case may be, it seems reasonable to compare Luther's "reformation breakthrough" to the sight of a tower teetering back and forth until finally there was "a fundamental 'system-crashing' departure from medieval religiosity"¹²⁵ and the whole structure came tumbling down. **Luther's 1545 recollection may refer back to his earliest insights, or it may be a recollection of that one, last, good push, when it finally dawned on him just how thoroughly corrupt the Roman theological system is and how there is no sweeter message of the Scriptures than the righteousness of God.** That the tower was teetering for Luther already in 1513 is evident from his earliest Psalms lectures. Studying these lectures alongside his lectures on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews is much like watching a slow-motion replay of the tower buckling and falling. As Luther pursued his study of the Scriptures and found patristic support for his conclusions especially in the writings of St. Augustine, the tower's complete destruction simply became inevitable. By the time Luther began his second series of lectures on the Psalms in 1519, he could clearly and confidently see that the Roman tower had toppled under its own weight.

1959), 111-132, for a more convincing case for a later dating. Green argues that in his Romans lectures Luther presents justification "as a healing process that takes place within the man rather than a forensic act" (120). McGrath (*Theology of the Cross*, 133-136) offers a counterargument based especially on Luther's comments on Romans 4:7 (AE 25:274-275).

¹²⁰ Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, 42.

¹²¹ Oberman, 132.

¹²² Hamm, 28-29. Hamm appeals, for example, to Luther's statement, "I didn't learn my theology all at once" (AE 54:50).

¹²³ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 25.

¹²⁴ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 146. Emphasis original. See pages 128-136 for his full observation of this development. Rupp argues for a slightly earlier reorientation of Luther's thought in 1514 (137).

¹²⁵ Hamm, 31.

APPENDIX B

LECTURES ON THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS (1515-1516)

In his classic treatment of Luther's early theological development, entitled *The Righteousness of God*, Gordon Rupp compares Luther's first lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515) to his lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans (1515-1516). While the lectures on the Psalms contain "profound intuitions" and "memorable aphorisms," Rupp concludes that in general "the material is too complex and unwieldy" to gain a proper grasp of Luther's theological positions. "It is otherwise with the Epistle to the Romans," Rupp continues. "Here is a coherent, manageable theme treated by Luther at the exact and proper climacteric of his own spiritual development. ... These lectures are indispensable to an evaluation of Luther's development even though in them Luther's thought is still in movement (it never ceased), still immature."¹²⁶ Not to be overlooked is the fact that the coherence of Luther's presentation is undoubtedly a reflection of the very orderly presentation of law and gospel that St. Paul originally offered the Roman congregation. It is beyond question that Paul's systematic discussion of law and gospel contributed greatly to Luther's own theological reorientation. **While Luther's lectures on the Psalms provided ample primary source material¹²⁷ for his evolving theological perspective, Paul's letter to the Romans now offered a helpful filing system that sharpened both his understanding and his applications to the Christian faith-life.** What follows is meant to serve as nothing more than a brief summary of the ever-deepening theological insights that the young Wittenberg professor uncovered at this time in a pastor's study.

It is evident that Luther's theological acuity was sharpened immediately prior to his lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans through his study of St. Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings.¹²⁸ While "a broad medieval consensus held that Augustine in these works had articulated Christian theology in a distorted way, in an effort to counterbalance the [Pelagian] heresy he was opposing," (AE 60:37)¹²⁹—it even became a medieval axiom, "Augustine speaks exaggeratedly" (AE 60:38)—Luther embraced Augustine's view of sinful humanity wholeheartedly and discovered that St. Paul and the other inspired writers wrote about the nature of human sinfulness in even more absolute terms.¹³⁰ In many respects, this biblical insight was a final piece of the puzzle for Luther. **He soon came to understand clearly the false premise upon which the entire Roman theological system had been built, so-called free will.** The notion that God would never deny his grace to sinners "who did whatever lay within their powers to do"—this remaining "spark" (the *synteresis*) so emphasized by

¹²⁶ Rupp, 158.

¹²⁷ "The Weimar edition [of Luther's lectures on Romans] indicates at least sixteen hundred direct citations from the Bible, apart from the Epistle itself, an indication of the extent to which his mind was saturated in the Biblical material" (Rupp, 160).

¹²⁸ St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote extensively against the followers of a British monk named Pelagius (ca. 354-ca. 418), who maintained that human beings were capable of earning eternal salvation entirely by their own doing through a perfect observance of God's law. Especially important to Luther's development at this time was Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*, which helped confirm his emerging conclusions about the righteousness of God (AE 34:337). See also Luther's preface to a planned Wittenberg edition of Augustine's treatise that was never published during Luther's lifetime, along with the editorial notes (AE 60:35-44).

¹²⁹ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), for a helpful summary of the original Pelagian Controversy and the less than tidy theological aftermath (312-331).

¹³⁰ That even St. Augustine was willing to grant a measure of free will to sinful human beings, see Harry J. McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (New York: Newman Press & Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 63-110, 353.

the medieval scholastic theologian Gabriel Biel—had been the crux of the problem for the unwitting Luther all along.

Luther's rejection of Biel's central theological maxim happened only gradually and was generally divulged in ever-widening circles, as he sought confirmation of his new understanding from respected colleagues and friends.¹³¹ It should come as little surprise then when Elmer Kiessling reports that, in a sermon delivered on December 26, 1514 (WA, 1:30), Luther was still offering a public defense "in favor of the scholastic doctrine of the *synteresis*, the ineradicable divine spark of conscience within sinful man. ... Luther finds Scripture verses to prove it, too," including Isaiah 42:3.¹³² Here Luther apparently intimated that the "bruised reed" and "smoldering wick" represent unbelievers with their remaining spark. At the same time, Alister McGrath reports on marginal notes Luther made in a new edition of Biel's works published in 1514. Here it becomes "clear that he no longer accepts the basic presupposition of the soteriology of [Biel's theology]—that man can do *quod in se* [what is in you] without the assistance of special grace."¹³³ Luther offered comment on Biel's faulty assertion that human beings can love God above all things by their own unaided spiritual powers. He wrote: "As a result the will is neither sick, nor does it need the grace of God. All of this is based upon the stupid principle of free will—as if the free will could, by its own power, choose to follow opposite paths, when it is prone only to evil."¹³⁴

Though Luther was perhaps uneasy with Biel's understanding of the *synteresis* already by the end of 1514, he was not yet ready to disagree publicly. When he began lecturing on Romans in November 1515, however, he was prepared to go to battle. "Ever since 1515 both in the pulpit and in his lectures he continually criticized with steadily increasing frankness the abuses and evils in all fields of the religious activity of the church. However, nothing was heard of this outside of Wittenberg."¹³⁵

From 1516 on, Luther entered the public arena with his new theology. This meant that he presented insights gained from Paul and Augustine no longer merely to his students in the lecture hall but to a wider academic public. The impulse did not come from Luther himself but from the circle of his pupils: they wanted to bring out into the open what they had heard in Luther's lectures. Nevertheless, Luther is no doubt to be regarded as the actual intellectual instigator of these efforts.¹³⁶

Luther now redefined the *synteresis* to denote the natural knowledge of God and his law. He granted in Romans 1:20 that "this theological 'insight of the conscience' [*Syntheresis theologica*] is in all men and cannot be obscured," but the natural problem with this "theological insight" is that it is wholly corrupted by man's sinful nature. "This is where the error began and produced idolatry, for everyone wanted to subsume [the knowledge of God] according to his own interests" (AE 25:157-158). When he later commented on Romans 3:10, Luther pointed out how "we are so entirely inclined to evil that no portion which is inclined toward the good remains in us, as is clear in the *synteresis*" (AE 25:222). When commenting on Romans 4:7 Luther pulled no punches, setting his sights on Biel and the other scholastic theologians who made so much of the *synteresis*.

¹³¹ McGrath tells of how Luther's Wittenberg colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486-1541) was at first hostile to Luther's interpretation of Augustine's anthropology. After studying a new edition of Augustine's writings, however, Karlstadt became one of Luther's fiercest supporters and defenders (*Theology of the Cross*, 45-47). See also Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 168-170.

¹³² Kiessling, 73.

¹³³ McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 129. It is not clear, however, when Luther made these marginal notes.

¹³⁴ Quoted in McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 129.

¹³⁵ Boehmer, 120.

¹³⁶ Lohse, 97-98.

...it is plain insanity to say that man of his own powers can love God above all things and can perform the works of the Law according to the substance of the act, even if not according to the intention of Him who gave the commandment, because he is not in a state of grace. O fools, O pig-theologians (*Sawtheologen*)! By your reasoning grace was not necessary except because of some new demand above and beyond the Law. For if the Law can be fulfilled by our powers, as they say, then grace is not necessary for the fulfilling of the Law, but only for the fulfilling of some new exaction imposed by God above the Law. ... All these monstrosities have come from the fact that they did not know what sin is nor forgiveness. For they reduced sin to some very minute activity of the soul, and the same was true of righteousness. For they said that since the will has this *synteresis*, “it is inclined,” albeit weakly, “toward the good.” And this minute motion toward God (which man can perform by nature) they imagine an act of loving God above all things! But take a good look at man, entirely filled with evil lusts (notwithstanding that minute motion). The Law commands him to be empty, so that he may be taken completely into God. ... This life, then, is a life of being healed from sin, it is not a life of sinlessness, with the cure completed and perfect health attained. The church is the inn and the infirmary for those who are sick and in need of being made well. But heaven is the palace of the healthy and the righteous. ... [But] this insanity now rages everywhere in the pulpits of those who should be preaching the Word of God (AE 25:261-264).

By the time Luther came to Romans 8:3 he had abandoned the concept of the *synteresis* altogether because the Scriptures had convinced him that “every inclination of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). **Sinful human beings are naturally “curved in on themselves” (self-centered).** “The reason is that [human nature] knows nothing but its own good, or what is good and honorable and useful for itself, but not what is good for God and other people. ... And this is in agreement with Scripture, which describes man as so turned in on himself [*incurvatum in se*] that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself” (AE 25:345). Indeed, in earlier comments on Romans 5:4, **Luther pointed out how necessary it was for God to send sinners tribulation in order to help us understand how truly corrupt we are by nature.**

If God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved. The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them (as is evident in the case of legalists and hypocrites), indeed, it even uses God Himself to achieve these aims, but it also seems to be ignorant of this very fact, that in acting so iniquitously, so perversely, and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake. ... [Human nature] is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy (if a testing is kept from him) can understand it” (AE 25:291).

Luther’s growing confidence in his radical assertions about the sinful nature is observable as they gained steam from the work he was doing in his study and as he recognized the practical nature of those assertions in his own life. “All the saints have had this understanding of sin ... [and] have confessed that they were sinners, as is clear in the books of St. Augustine. Our theologians, however, have deflected the discussion of sin to the matter of good works only and have undertaken to teach only those things by which works might be safeguarded but not how through much agony men should humbly seek healing grace and confess themselves to be sinners.” The scholastics were not really interested in “declaring war on [sinners’] evil lusts” (AE 25:263). Luther now would, squaring his aim on another related yet faulty theological concept, so-called free will.¹³⁷

As he made his way through Romans, **Luther began to realize that any concession to human beings having free will in divine matters is spiritually poisonous.** When he read the scholastic

¹³⁷ In reading Luther’s lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans, one can certainly sense him sharpening his theological sword for the later clash he would have with Erasmus over the bondage of the will (AE 33).

theologians on the subject of free will, he could only come to one simple conclusion: “the fools do not realize that the will [of sinners], if it were permitted, would never do what the Law prescribes. For the will is hostile toward the good and prone to evil. This they certainly experience in their own lives, and yet they speak so impiously and sacrilegiously. For as long as the will is hostile toward the Law, it is turned away from the Law and thus does not fulfill it” (AE 25:266-267). Later on Luther would declare, “The free will without grace has absolutely no power to achieve righteousness, but of necessity it is in sin. Therefore blessed Augustine is correct in his book *Against Julian* when he calls it ‘a bound will rather than a free will’” (AE 25:375).¹³⁸ With the assistance of the African doctor, Luther had zeroed in on the crux of the issue.

The whole substance of this error is a Pelagian notion. For although there are now no Pelagians by profession and title, yet there are many people who in truth and in their thinking, although ignorantly, are Pelagians. For example, there are those who think that unless they attribute doing what is in their own power, before grace, to the freedom of the will, they are being forced by God to sin and thus of necessity must sin. And although it is extremely godless to have such an idea, they smugly and boldly think that because they form a good intention, they have infallibly obtained the infused grace of God. Then they go their way completely secure, completely certain that the good works they do please God, and thus they have no more fear or concerns about imploring the grace of God. For they have no fear that in this very action they might be doing evil but are certain that they are doing good (Is. 44:20). Why? Because they do not understand that God allows the ungodly to sin even in their good works. To be sure they are not then compelled to sin, but they do what they want to and according to their good intention. ... Hence it is most absurd and gives strong support to the error of Pelagius to use the commonly accepted statement: “God infallibly pours His grace into him who does what is within his power,” if we understand the expression, “to do what is within his power” to mean that he does something or can do something. For as a result of this the whole church has almost been overturned, obviously because of confidence in this statement. And in the meantime each smugly sins, since he at all times has in his free will the capability to do what is within his own power and therefore also grace (AE 25:496-497).

Luther observed that it was the supreme failure of the scholastic theologians to understand properly the true nature and implications of original sin, which is “a nausea toward the good, a loathing of light and wisdom, and a delight in error and darkness, a flight from and an abomination of all good works, a pursuit of evil” (AE 25:299).

For it is like a sick man whose mortal illness is not only the loss of health of one of his members, but it is, in addition to the lack of health in all his members, the weakness of all of his senses and powers, culminating even in his disdain for those things which are healthful and in his desire for those things which make him sick (AE 25:300).

At this point **Luther went so far as to argue that in his wisdom and according to his mercy God purposefully “leaves us in this sin,** in the tinder,¹³⁹ in our sinful lusts, in order that He may keep us in His fear and humility so that we may always flee to His grace, always in fear of sinning. ... By this most merciful counsel our most blessed God compels us to grow weary of this life and to hope for the future life, to a desire for His grace, to a hatred of sin, to repentance, etc.” (AE 25:268). In these

¹³⁸ Luther was careful here to make the same distinction later made in our Augsburg Confession (AC XVII; Kolb-Wengert, 51-53) to avoid the idea of fatalism: “To be sure [the will] is always free in a natural way, but only with respect to those things which are under its power and lower than itself, but not with respect to the things above it, since it is captive in sin and now cannot choose that which is good in God’s eyes” (AE 25:375).

¹³⁹ See AE 25:259, n. 7: “The scholastics used the term *fomes* (“tinder,” “spark”), especially in the combination *fomes concupiscentiae*, to designate man’s natural attraction toward evil.”

years of his theological reorientation, **Luther returned again and again to the need for true humility before God and how God graciously brings about such humility through sending trial and tribulation. It is in many respects the key concept of his thought at this time and one that he would continue to emphasize throughout his life.** “Luther continued to insist on a certain kind of humility that was not aware of its own lowliness, and on contrition and repentance once the sinner was convicted and humbled by the law.”¹⁴⁰

Some historians have argued that Luther’s strong emphasis on humility at this time indicates that he had yet not come to a clear understanding of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith and that he would not do so until at least 1518. “According to Ernst Bizer and Oswald Bayer, Luther arrived at a genuine Reformation theology when faith was no longer determined by humility but was reoriented toward God’s Word as promise.”¹⁴¹ What these and similar historians fail to appreciate, it seems, is that “Luther’s new idea of justification was not just the correlation of promise and faith, but the rich cluster of insights sparked by [his study and personal experiences].”¹⁴² As Luther himself put it, “What else does the whole Scripture teach but humility, in which we are subject not only to God but to every creature?” (AE 25:183). **True humility as described by Luther in his Romans lectures is nothing other than the honest recognition and sorrow over sin.** It is the first part of godly repentance.

In addition, these same historians make an attempt to explain away **Luther’s clear references in his Romans lectures to the second part of godly repentance. Christ is proclaimed as the sinner’s only righteousness, and Luther constantly encourages us sinners to put our faith in Christ alone for salvation.** Brecht bases his argument on an assessment of Luther’s mood. “For years Luther saw his divine mission as one of emphasizing man’s sinfulness. This makes his early theology so gloomy and serious that at first the bright tones of the Christian message do not even appear.”¹⁴³ Later he curiously states that before 1518 Luther “was not yet an ‘evangelical’”¹⁴⁴ because his call to humble contrition and to “hope for God’s mercy” includes no “good news.”¹⁴⁵ Afterwards, however, he concedes that already in his Psalms lectures Luther had demonstrated an understanding that righteousness “was granted by God to the unworthy,” and that in his lectures on Romans he “emphasizes principally the foolishness and weakness and the justifying activity of the merciful God. ... Luther indeed knows that it is divine mercy alone which does not reckon sin, but rather reckons righteousness.” Brecht then also admits, “Already at the end of the first lectures on the Psalms and then in the lectures on Romans, the thought was constantly recurring that Christ was made by God to be our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).” So what was the problem? Again, it seems to be Brecht’s assessment of Luther’s mood, arguing that “initially this was not a joyful recognition but a critical one, directed against human merits.”¹⁴⁶

One can hardly argue that Luther had said everything there is to say about justification in our common theological parlance by 1518.¹⁴⁷ Even if a person assumes that Luther’s breakthrough for properly understanding God’s righteousness took place in 1514 or 1515, that assumption “in no way militates against the fact that even in the following years Luther still made significant progress in his

¹⁴⁰ Scott Hendrix, “Luther,” *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, David C. Steinmetz, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44.

¹⁴¹ Hendrix, 44. See also Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 136, 222, 227-228.

¹⁴² Hendrix, 44-45.

¹⁴³ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 136.

¹⁴⁴ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 221.

¹⁴⁵ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 223.

¹⁴⁶ Brecht, *Road to Reformation*, 228.

¹⁴⁷ For an insightful discussion of the likely influence Philipp Melancthon had on the crystallization of Luther’s understanding of the doctrine of justification upon his 1518 arrival in Wittenberg, see Green, 123-129.

theology as a whole, as well as in his statements about God's righteousness and our justification. For the rest, we can observe progress respecting certain aspects of the doctrine of righteousness, even in the 1530s."¹⁴⁸ Indeed, Luther later recalled how "I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews" (AE 34:336), suggesting that his initial breakthrough came before these lectures (1513-1518) and that through them his insight was further clarified and confirmed.

Luther also suggests the reason for his lack of perfect clarity on justification in these earliest days, since his chief guide, St. Augustine, "did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly" (AE 34:337). A careful comparison of Luther's Romans lectures and Augustine's writings demonstrates that while Luther "still appealed to Augustine's authority and still accepted his 'makes righteous' [understanding of justification] ... [the Wittenberg professor] had said something that his teacher never did say, namely, 'by faith alone.'"¹⁴⁹ Simply put, an honest reading of Luther's Romans lectures should hardly leave the reader joyless. **If anything, one could argue that his presentation of the Christian faith-life here is in many ways far richer and more vivid than the often sterile presentation of forensic justification later offered by those claiming to be his disciples.** "It is evident that [in the Romans lectures] we are not concerned with some doctrinaire plan of salvation, but with the turning of living men to the living God."¹⁵⁰

These historians seem also to overlook the fact that in the years leading up to 1517 **Luther was attempting to disentangle himself from the false humility of the Roman penitential system and monastic life in order to lay hold of and to communicate to others what true humility and godly repentance are.** Considering the theological disposition of the Church of Rome, is it any wonder that he felt the need to spill so much ink in words directed against human merits?

Finally, **we must also keep in mind that Luther was attempting to use traditional theological vocabulary and modes of presentation.** He was trying to reform and reorient people's thinking with pastoral care rather than callously overturn centuries of thought through the introduction of a completely new theological vocabulary. As a result, we should expect to find him choosing his words carefully during these years in an attempt to reorient the theological landscape on the basis of God's Word. Even so, for the most part his efforts were not warmly received. In a letter written to George Spalatin¹⁵¹ on December 14, 1516, Luther lamented:

Don't you know that the more wholesome something is, the less it is popular and the less it gains ground? What is more wholesome than the gospel and Christ? Yet the people treat them lightly; for most people [the gospel and Christ] are a deadly fragrance, causing death, and only for a very few are they a fragrance of life, bringing life. ... The sheep always listen to every word of the shepherd. They resent and flee only from the word of strangers. Whatever you do, as long as it is good and [according to] the word of Christ, do not doubt that it will find acceptance and prove beneficial, but only in the case of a very few souls, because sheep are very seldom found in this kingdom of wolves (AE 48:35).

¹⁴⁸ Lohse, 94.

¹⁴⁹ Balge, 12.

¹⁵⁰ Rupp, 182.

¹⁵¹ George Spalatin (1484-1545) received a bachelor's degree from the University of Erfurt in 1499 and a master's degree from the University of Wittenberg in 1503. In 1508 he was first ordained and then recommended to Elector Frederick the Wise as a tutor for his nephew. In 1512 he took charge of the castle library in Wittenberg and eventually met the acquaintance of Martin Luther. The two became fast friends and frequent correspondents. In September 1516 Spalatin became Frederick's private secretary and in 1522 his court preacher. He served as chief intermediary between the elector and Luther until Frederick's death in 1525, when he became parish pastor in Altenburg. In 1528 he became superintendent of the district of Altenburg and continued to play a significant role in the spread of the Lutheran Reformation until his death.

In a letter written on February 8, 1517, Luther expressed the kind of pressure he was under to be a faithful, silent son of Rome, where the unspoken rule was that “one must be silent, not only as a five-year-old ... but also perpetually and to all eternity, as the dead.”

We are to believe everything, always obediently to listen and not even once, by way of a mild introduction, wrangle or mutter against Aristotle and the *Sentences*. What will they not believe who have taken for granted everything which Aristotle, this chief of all charlatans, insinuates and imposes on others, things which are so absurd that not even an ass or a stone could remain silent about them! ... He is the most subtle seducer of gifted people, so that if Aristotle had not been flesh, I would not hesitate to claim that he was really a devil. Part of my cross, indeed its heaviest portion, is that I have to see friars born with the highest gifts for fine studies spending their lives and wasting their energies in such play-acting; in addition universities do not cease burning and condemning good books but produce, or rather dream up, bad ones. ... All my files are filled with material against [the scholastics'] books, which I consider absolutely useless. All others could see that too, if they would not be bound by the eternal law of silence, as I have mentioned (AE 48:37-38).

As Robert Kolb points out, Luther's radical discoveries required him to “experiment with the language.”¹⁵² Once the die was cast, especially with the publication of his Ninety-five Theses, Luther began to speak and write with even greater boldness and freedom. But in the days leading up to late 1517, it is true, he emphasized the concept of humility since it was so familiar to the Roman community and might raise fewer red flags.

God's chief concern, according to Luther, is a pastoral one. He wants to prevent his people from falling into either of two ditches beside the spiritual road that leads to eternal life. Those ditches are spiritual smugness and spiritual faintheartedness, neither of which lead to true repentance (2 Corinthians 7:10). Until the end of his life Luther maintained that “nothing in the Holy Scriptures is so often described as the cause of pride and laid at the door of hypocrites and those who think themselves holy as this smugness, by which they cast aside the fear of God” (AE 25:269). On the other hand, “others are extremely fainthearted. They sin in a different way, for they are in a hurry to purge out the old leaven and gain perfect health. They would like to root out entirely their internal sin, but because they cannot do it but fall from time to time, they then become sad and downhearted and finally give up hope” (AE 25:269).

Thus, those at the right, having given up their fear of God, sin through their smugness, and those at the left, having turned from the grace of God, sin through their hopelessness, not understanding that this inner sin cannot be taken away in this life—which, however, is what they want. ... For both classes of people are ignorant of this [inborn] sin and do not pay it proper attention, but, as I have said, they believe that only actual sin needs to be purged in order that they may be entirely pure. ... Therefore the royal road and the way of peace in the Spirit is to know [inborn] sin and to hate it and thus to walk in the fear of God, so that He does not impute it to us and permit it to rule over us; and at the same time to pray for His mercy, that He might free us from it and not impute it to us. Fear excludes the way on the right, mercy the way on the left; the former takes away smugness, the latter hopelessness; the former removes self-satisfaction, the latter despair of God (AE 25:270).

Where alone is true spiritual health and salvation found? Only in Christ! “Therefore, I was correct when I said that all our good is outside of us, and this good is Christ, as the apostle says (1 Cor. 1:30): ‘God made Him our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.’ And none of these things are in us except through faith and hope in Him.” Indeed, “for the sake of Christ [sin] is covered and is not imputed to [sinners], so that they may declare that all their good is outside of them, in Christ, who yet through faith is also in them. ... We are His kingdom, but the beauty in us

¹⁵² Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*, 65.

is not ours but His, and with it He covers our ugliness” (AE 25:267). Luther could not be clearer: Christ is our only righteousness freely given (*sola gratia*) to repentant sinners only through God’s Word (*sola scriptura*) and received only by faith (*sola fide*). Commenting on Romans 4:7 Luther states:

Scripture uses the terms “righteousness” and “unrighteousness” very differently from the philosophers and lawyers. This is obvious, because they consider these things as a quality of the soul [that is, a person is made righteous by doing righteous things]. But the “righteousness” of Scripture depends upon the imputation of God more than on the essence of a thing itself. For he does not have righteousness who only has a quality, indeed, he is altogether a sinner and an unrighteous man; but he alone has righteousness whom God mercifully regards as righteous because of his confession of his own unrighteousness and because of his prayer for the righteousness of God and whom God wills to be considered righteous before Him. Therefore we are all born in iniquity, that is, in unrighteousness, and we die in it, and we are righteous only by the imputation of a merciful God through faith in His Word (AE 25:274-275).

Luther was concerned, however, that Christian faith be properly understood. When he later commented on Paul’s use of the phrases “through faith” and “through our Lord Jesus Christ” in Romans 5:2, **he warned his listeners about two common abuses of faith.** First, there are those who claim to have faith in Jesus but fail to recognize their real sinfulness. They ultimately place their confidence for salvation in themselves. Then there are those who claim to have faith in Jesus but show no evidence of their faith in the way they live. They refuse to take up the struggle against their sinful flesh, as Christians are called to do, and use faith as an excuse for carnal security. Both groups have missed the divine goal and purpose of Christian faith.

In a most useful manner the apostle joins together these two expressions, “through Christ” and “by faith” ... In the first place, the statement is directed against those who are so presumptuous as to believe that they can approach God without Christ, as if it were sufficient for them to have believed, as if thus by faith alone,¹⁵³ but not through Christ, but beside Christ, as if beyond Christ they no longer needed Him after accepting the grace of justification. ... But in our day the hypocrites and legalists swell up with horrifying pride and think that they are now saved and sufficiently righteous because they believe in Christ, but they are unwilling to be considered unrighteous or regarded as fools. And what is this except the rejection of Christ’s protection and a desire to approach God only from faith but not through Christ? Indeed, then there is not faith at all, but only the appearance. ... Therefore those who approach God through faith and not at the same time through Christ actually depart from Him. Second, the apostle is speaking against those who rely too heavily on Christ and not enough on faith, as if they were to be saved through Christ in such a way that they themselves had to do nothing and show no evidence of faith. These people have too much faith, or actually none at all. For this reason it is necessary to emphasize both points: “through faith” and “through Christ,” so that we do and suffer everything which we possibly can in faith in Christ. And yet in all of these activities we must confess that we are unprofitable servants, believing that only through Christ are we made worthy to approach God. For in all works of faith we must strive to make ourselves worthy of Christ and His righteousness as our protection and refuge (AE 25:286-287).

Luther’s understanding of Paul’s words offered a starkly realistic view of the hiddenness and paradox of the Christian faith-life rarely encountered in the public preaching and teaching of the church. Luther made clear that Christians should never be fooled into thinking that they can expect a kind of Christian renovation in this life where Christ’s righteousness would no longer be necessary for

¹⁵³ Luther and his followers described this kind of “faith” as “historical faith.” In other words, it is one thing to believe that God exists and that he works within human history. “Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). It is quite another thing to place your confidence in Christ Jesus alone, to hear his word and put it into practice (Luke 8:21). The latter is Christian faith; the former is not.

them, that they would become righteous in and of themselves. Not only is it not realistic, but such thinking militates against the very promises of the gospel given to us sinners in Christ. In truth, the more a Christian grows in maturity through the working of the Spirit, the more that Christian will grow to understand and appreciate his utter perversity and to declare with St. Paul, “What a wretched man I am!” (Romans 7:24).¹⁵⁴ Call it “gloomy,” if you will, but the biggest mistake Christians can make is to seek their own righteousness and to forfeit the perfect righteousness of Christ.

[A Christian] is at the same time both a sinner and a righteous man (*simul peccator et iustus*); a sinner in fact, but a righteous man by the sure imputation and promise of God that He will continue to deliver him from sin until He has completely cured him [in heaven]. And thus he is entirely healthy in hope, but in fact he is still a sinner; but he has a beginning of righteousness, so that he continues more and more always to seek it [Php. 3:12-14], yet he realizes that he is always unrighteous (AE 25:260).

This is how God works true and saving faith and leads sinners toward godly righteousness. **He purposefully leaves us in our sin in this life that we may hope alone in Christ Jesus for eternal life and live in him now through faith and by faith alone. True Christian faith and any good works that result cannot then be our own doing; they are alone the special work of the Holy Spirit.**

For if you believe that your sins are not taken away except by Him, you do well. But you must still add: That you do believe this; not that you could do this yourself, but the Spirit must cause you to believe this, “because through Him you are given the forgiveness of sins. This is the testimony which the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts, saying: ‘Your sins are forgiven you.’ For in this way the apostle believes that a man is justified by faith ... It is the same in regard to merits, if you believe that you cannot have them except through Him, it is not enough, until the Spirit of truth has produced the testimony that you have these merits through Him.” This happens when you believe that the works which you do are acceptable and pleasing to God, whatever they may finally turn out to be. But you have the confidence that they are pleasing to Him when you realize that through these works you are nothing in His sight, even though they are good and are done out of obedience even though you do no evil works. It is this humility and restraint regarding good works which makes them pleasing to God (AE 25:360).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ In March 1521, Luther would make exactly the same point in his *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, a response to Pope Leo X's papal bull *Exsurge Domine* by which Luther was excommunicated in 1520. There Luther wrote: “Let us understand this properly! A man cannot pray against sin and about sin, or have such a desire to be free from sin, unless he is already godly. Only the Spirit who has just begun his work and incipient grace are so constituted that they work against the sin which remains. He would like to be altogether godly, but cannot achieve this because of the resistance of the flesh. But those who have never begun to be godly do not struggle or lament or pray against their flesh and sin. They feel no resistance, but go on and follow where the flesh leads. St. Paul describes them in Eph. 4[:19], where he says that they have gone so far that ‘they have become callous and have given themselves to licentiousness, greed, etc.’ ... This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed” (AE 32:23-24). John Ph. Koehler addresses this same important topic in his “Sanctification Is Not Hurrah,” Albert Meier, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. II (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 393-416.

¹⁵⁵ Gordon Rupp comments: “It is one of the many merits of [Regin] Prenter’s ‘Spiritus Creator’ to show how rich is Luther’s doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit, and its place in the doctrine of justification, in preventing faith from becoming a mere ‘fides historica,’ [historical faith] and in preventing faith in Christ [from] becoming a mere dogmatic scheme, since the presence of the Holy Ghost makes justification the work of the living, personal God” (171).

There is indeed progress in a Christian's faith-life. "But this progress is not growth into a righteousness of one's own on the ground of which man stands 'coram Deo,' [in the presence of God] but a progress of faith and hope and love, a dwelling in the Righteousness of Christ, through faith, in the power of the Holy Ghost."¹⁵⁶

In summary, **Luther's coming to a complete biblical understanding of the bondage of the will—especially through his careful study of St. Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings before his lectures on Romans—was essential to his theological reorientation and an ever-deepening appreciation that our theology is the theology of the cross.**

In the convergence of Paul and the anti-Pelagian Augustine Luther first perceived with clarity the deep rift that stood between what he believed to be the correct understanding of the Scriptures and the scholastic theology in which he was trained. Not simply a matter of ancients versus moderns, Luther set Augustine against Aristotle, defining the problem as a fundamental incompatibility of theological method.¹⁵⁷

As Luther surrendered every notion of a sinner's ability to contribute toward the work of salvation, it also amplified the other biblical truths he had underscored in his lectures on the Psalms and drove home the fact that faith in Christ is completely a gift of God, worked by the Holy Spirit. We are saved by grace though faith alone, and even this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8,9).

An extremely significant byproduct of Luther's careful study of Paul's letter to the Romans—one that would also have a deep impact on all his later work—was that his hermeneutical approach to Scripture became much sharper. It was an approach that could only be confirmed through the Spirit's revelation of the mystery of salvation (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

As early as 1514 Luther's theological foundations were laid on Scripture alone. The significance of his new attitude was not at once fully apparent to him. A growing awareness of its implications appears in the later expositions of Psalms, and becomes clearer in the lectures on Romans. But only after the indulgence controversy and the Leipzig Disputation was he aware of the gulf that separated him from medieval Catholicism.¹⁵⁸

The fourfold method of biblical interpretation¹⁵⁹ he had inherited from the medieval church and employed in his lectures on the Psalms was replaced in his Romans lectures by the ministerial hermeneutical approach of Paul. He simply allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture with the cross of Christ taking center stage. "The text [of Romans] was expounded largely on the basis of the grammatical historical method, while the interpretation became almost entirely spiritual. Allegory left the Luther classroom, even though it remained with him for a while in the pulpit."¹⁶⁰ He saw more and more how philosophy had led him astray.

I owe to the Lord this duty of speaking out against philosophy and of persuading men to heed Holy Scripture. For perhaps if another man who has not seen these things, did this, he might be afraid or

¹⁵⁶ Rupp, 183.

¹⁵⁷ Herrmann, 79.

¹⁵⁸ Quanbeck, 58.

¹⁵⁹ "According to this four-fold structure, the Old Testament letter [*literal*] is fulfilled in Christ and the church (*allegory*), exhibited in the life of the present believer (*tropology*), and consummated in its fullness on the Last Day (*anagogy*). Thus, the movement from the literal sense of Scripture to his spiritual meaning mirrored the progression of salvation history from the Old to the New Testament, paralleling one's moral progress from the temporal, carnal life to the inner, spiritual, and heavenly virtues directed to eternal life" (Herrmann, 82).

¹⁶⁰ Schwiebert, 285.

he might not be believed. But I have been worn out by these [philosophical] studies for many years now, and having experienced and heard many things over and over again, I have come to see that it is the study of vanity and perdition. Therefore I warn you all as earnestly as I can that you finish these studies quickly and let it be your only concern not to establish and defend them and study errors to refute them. ... For it is high time that we undertake new studies and learn Jesus Christ, “and Him crucified” (AE 25:361).

Augustine was again central to Luther’s reorientation because of the African doctor’s emphasis on “the letter” (law) and “the spirit” (grace). What is particularly noteworthy, according to Erik Herrmann, is that “Augustine did not seem to have any inkling that his particular interpretation of letter and spirit had hermeneutical consequences at all. But in Luther’s hands Augustine’s distinction ... [was] transformed into a new basis for interpreting the Scriptures,” in which **the proper distinction and proclamation of law and gospel became “the recurring theme.”**¹⁶¹ Already by 1516 he was expressing with eloquence “that the preaching of the Gospel is something lovable and desirable for those who are under the Law. For the Law shows nothing but our sin, makes us guilty, and thus produces an anguished conscience; but the Gospel supplies a longed for remedy to people in anguish ... The Law oppresses the conscience with sins, but the Gospel frees the conscience and brings peace through faith in Christ” (AE 25:416).

Luther combined this newfound approach to Scripture with his sharp reasoning skills.¹⁶² As a result, **what we find in Luther is an ideal blend of exegetical and dogmatic aptitudes worthy of careful study and emulation**, an assertion that Professor John Ph. Koehler¹⁶³ made more than once.

Our theological students dare not be satisfied with acquiring a knowledge of dogmatics together with the practical skills in homiletics, catechetics, and pastoral theology. Exegesis and history have their proper place in the course of study and deserve to be pursued in a deeply imaginative and earnest manner. ... Exegetical work produces immediate benefits for both sermonizing and teaching in general. It leads the preacher deeper into Scripture and an understanding of God’s thoughts and their influence upon the heart of man, and makes him intellectually independent and not bound to commentaries and other aids. History not only gives all kinds of valuable information concerning practical questions but also trains to observe how minds work and to trace historical connections. By this, but even more by the method which is peculiar to history and exegesis, it develops a mental attitude which is of importance for effective practical life. While dogmatics promotes sharp thinking and by directing attention to the precise definition of theological concepts leads to a clear, unambiguous presentation, both historical branches train the mind to probe, to criticize, to be cautious in judgment. They promote modesty, gentleness, and patience in judgment and thus in the mental attitude supplement what dogmatical study has produced. ... They belong together. The exegete cannot get along without the dogmatical distinctions, nor the dogmatician without the exegetical proof. But I am under the impression that very rarely can one find the same person gifted

¹⁶¹ Herrmann, 84. Emphasis added.

¹⁶² See John Ph. Koehler, “The Analogy of Faith,” E.E. Sauer, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. I (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 247-250.

¹⁶³ John Ph. Koehler (1859-1951) graduated from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1880. After serving a pastorate in Two Rivers, Wis., he was called to serve as a professor at Northwestern College, Watertown, Wis., in 1888. In 1900 he accepted a call to serve as professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In 1930 he was forcibly retired due mainly to his association with pastors who had been suspended in the Protes’tant Controversy.

with both aptitudes in an outstanding manner. I find them both in Luther and would like to consider him both the greatest exegete and the greatest dogmatian.¹⁶⁴

That the theological tide had fundamentally turned for Luther by the end of his Romans lectures can be seen through the letters being sent by him and others in 1516 and 1517. Even before he had completed his lectures on Romans, one of his Wittenberg colleagues, Johannes Lang,¹⁶⁵ reported to Spalatin on March 10, 1516, about the kind of impact Luther was having on the university community. “Very many students are all excited and enthusiastic about the lectures on the Bible and the early Fathers, whereas the study of the scholastic doctors (as they are called) attract maybe two or three students.”¹⁶⁶ Shortly after the Romans lectures ended, Luther himself wrote to Spalatin on October 19, 1516, to express his disagreement with the understanding that the Dutch scholar Erasmus¹⁶⁷ had of the concept of righteousness.

What disturbs me about Erasmus, that most learned man, my Spalatin, is the following: in explaining the Apostle [Paul], he understands the righteousness which originates in “works” or in “the Law” or “our own righteousness” (the Apostle calls it that) as referring to those ceremonial and figurative observances [of the Old Testament]. Moreover he does not clearly state that in Romans, chapter 5, the Apostle is speaking of original sin, although he admits that there is such a thing. ... The “righteousness based upon the Law” or “upon deeds” is, therefore, in no way merely a matter of [religious] ceremonial but rather of the fulfilment of the entire Decalogue. Fulfilment without faith in Christ ... no more resembles righteousness than sorb apples resemble figs. For we are not, as Aristotle believes, made righteous by the doing of just deeds, unless we deceive ourselves; but rather—if I may say so—in becoming and being righteous people we do just deeds. First it is

¹⁶⁴ John Ph. Koehler, “The Importance of the Historical Disciplines for the American Lutheran Church of the Present,” Irwin J. Habeck, trans., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 437-438, 442.

¹⁶⁵ Johannes Lang (1488-1548) received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Erfurt in 1503. He entered the Augustinian monastery there around 1506, where he came under the influence of Luther. In 1508 Lang was ordained and was transferred along with Luther to the Wittenberg monastery in 1511. Lang received a master’s degree at the University of Wittenberg and lectured there until 1516, when he became the prior of the monastery in Erfurt. Though he became part of the Lutheran Reformation movement and signed the Smalcald Articles in 1537, he later parish career especially in Erfurt was rather undistinguished.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Kenneth Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 5. It is important to note that Luther’s colleague Karlstadt had not yet accepted Luther’s reading of Augustine when this report was made in March 1516. Karlstadt appears to have been won over to Luther’s understanding between January and April 1517. See McGrath, *Theology of the Cross*, 46.

¹⁶⁷ Desiderius Erasmus (c.1467-1536) was a Dutch humanist, reformer, and moralist who was at first somewhat sympathetic to Luther’s call for reform but who later publicly disassociated himself from Luther and his theological stance. Ordained as a priest in 1492, he is best known for his scholarship. Not only did he edit and translate numerous editions of ancient church fathers’ writings, but he also edited and published several editions of the Greek New Testament. The second edition (1519) served as the primary source for Luther’s translation of the New Testament into German. It also was the precursor to the text used for translating the King James Version, the so-called *textus receptus*. In 1524 Erasmus wrote *Concerning Free Will* in which he sharply criticized Luther’s public teaching on free will. Luther responded in 1525 with his famous *De servo arbitrio* (On the Bondage of the Will), in which he thanked Erasmus for publicly addressing what he believed to be the crux of the matter, Rome’s false teaching on the so-called free will. Luther wrote: “You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot [*iugulum*, jugular]; for which I sincerely thank you, since I am only too glad to give as much attention to this subject as time and leisure permit” (AE 33:294). A study of Luther’s lectures on Paul’s letter to the Romans (1515-1516) and his personal correspondence in 1516 and 1517 demonstrates how prepared the Wittenberg professor was to take up this debate with Erasmus in 1525.

necessary that the person be changed, then the deeds [will follow]. Abel pleases [God] before his gift does (AE 48:24-25).

Luther was quick to offer what he believed to be the remedy to Erasmus' misunderstanding.

Had Erasmus studied the books Augustine wrote against the Pelagians ... then perhaps he would not only correctly understand the Apostle, but he would also hold Augustine in higher esteem than he has so far done. I definitely do not hesitate to disagree with Erasmus on this point, because in Bible exegesis I esteem [St.] Jerome¹⁶⁸ in comparison to Augustine as little as Erasmus himself in all things prefers Jerome to Augustine. Devotion to my Order does not compel me to approve of the blessed Augustine; before I had stumbled upon his books I had no regard for him in the least (AE 48:24-25).

In March 1517, Luther did not hesitate to write candidly to Lang in order to warn him off from an uncritical admiration of Erasmus and his theological approach.

I am reading our Erasmus but daily I dislike him more and more. Although I pass judgment upon him reluctantly, nevertheless I do it to warn you not to read everything, or rather, not to accept it without scrutiny, for we live in perilous times. I see that not everyone is a truly wise Christian just because he knows Greek and Hebrew. St. Jerome with his five languages cannot be compared with Augustine, who knew only one language (AE 48:40).

Through his continued studies and public lectures¹⁶⁹ Luther was daily emboldened in his understanding and approach to the Scriptures, and the theological community in Wittenberg was thriving as a result. Luther wrote again to Lang on May 18, 1517, to report on the situation.

Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our University. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. It is amazing how the lectures on the *Sentences* are disdained. Indeed no one can expect to have any students if he does not want to teach this theology, that is, lecture on the Bible or on St. Augustine or another teacher of ecclesiastical eminence (AE 48:42).

The young Augustinian monk was truly accomplishing with God's blessing what he had set out to do just eight short years prior: to study theology, but not just any theology. "I mean that theology which searches out the meat of the nut, and the kernel of the grain and the marrow of the bones."¹⁷⁰ **Luther's reformation—if not the Lutheran Reformation—was in full swing. It had all begun in a pastor's study, and it was leading young Luther step-by-step more deeply into our theology. And our theology is the theology of the cross.**

¹⁶⁸ St. Jerome (AD 347-420) was a theologian, historian, and linguist best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin. It became the standard, common (Vulgate) version used within the Western Roman Church. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) made it the official Latin version of the Roman Church, and it remains the basis of the official Latin liturgy of Rome.

¹⁶⁹ Luther's lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans would soon be followed by lectures on the letter to the Galatians (1516-1517) and the Hebrews (1517-1518), both of which would provide further clarity to Luther's theological development.

¹⁷⁰ Martin Luther to John Braun, March 17, 1509 (Smith, 24).

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