

Research Note

Selection from Martin Luther, *Exposition of Isaiah 53* (1544), against Antinomianism¹

[Editor's note: In the latter years of his life, Martin Luther was concerned about how the moral law of God functions in the lives of believers. He was especially concerned with some who taught that the law is irrelevant for Christians as believers. Such teaching Luther called "antinomianism," an anti-law teaching. A leader of this teaching was Johannes Agricola (in German, Schnitter, ca. 1492–1566). He was born in Eisleben, studied in Leipzig, taught briefly in Braunschweig, then matriculated in Wittenberg in 1516, where he became an early disciple of Luther. He served as Luther's secretary during the Leipzig Disputation with Johann Eck in 1519. After receiving his master of arts degree in that year, Agricola began the study of theology while also serving as preacher and rector of the pedagogium. In 1525 he moved to Eisleben to become pastor and rector of that city's Latin school. He returned to Wittenberg in 1536 and substituted for Luther during the latter's absences from the city. His criticism of Melancthon's teaching on the use of the law in 1527 was a prelude to the Antinomian Controversy that he instigated in March 1537. In response to Agricola's false doctrine, Luther discussed the doctrine of the law in a series of disputations against antinomianism, beginning in December 1537.² In August 1539 Agricola left Wittenberg secretly and without the government's permission to take up the post of chaplain to Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg in Berlin and general superintendent of the Brandenburg church.³ There Agricola continued to be a source of doctrinal concern to Luther and his friends. Joachim Mörlin held a disputation to criticize Agricola's doctrine on September 10, 1540.⁴ On October 1, 1540, Melancthon wrote to Joachim II criticizing Agricola's doctrine and lifestyle.⁵ There would be no future reconciliation between Luther and Agricola. Still in 1544 in the lectures on Isaiah 53, a part of which is printed here, Luther found it needful to warn his students away from Agricola's doctrine.⁶

¹ Translated by Gert A. van den Brink from WA 40/3:726–727. Excerpt from *Luther's Works* Vol. 63 © 2024 Concordia Publishing House, www.cph.org. All rights reserved. To order this publication, please contact Concordia Publishing House, cph.org.

² Martin Luther, *The Antinomian Disputations* (1537–1540), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 73, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), 3–238; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 158, 161–164.

³ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 168.

⁴ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 168.

⁵ Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 169–170.

⁶ On Agricola and antinomianism, see Jeffrey G. Silcock and Christopher Boyd Brown, introduction to Luther, *Antinomian Disputations*, 3–43; repr. as "Introduction to Martin Luther, 'The Antinomian Disputations' (1537–1540)," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 3–4 (October

Luther's lectures on Isaiah 53 were delivered during Lent 1544.⁷ The lectures focus especially on the work of Christ to atone for the sins of mankind by means of his obedience and death. The present selection is from Luther's comments on Isaiah 53:8, "For He was cut off from the land of the living. Because of the transgressions of My people, a wound to them."⁸ Here Luther explains "He was cut off" as referring to Christ's ascension. Then "Because of the transgressions" is referred to the purpose (final cause) of Christ's kingdom, which is to judge the world and give the gift of the Holy Spirit. That is, for believers Christ not only pardons their sins but also imparts renewal through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This, then, leads Luther to speak against antinomianism, the idea that Christians no longer need to hear and learn the moral law of God. Not only did the antinomians of Luther's time deny the ongoing need to learn God's law, they also, according to Luther, denied that Christians can be, are, and must be renewed in heart, mind, and life after forgiveness. Against them Luther argues for the reality of God's healing work in the lives of believers. —Benjamin T. G. Mayes]

He Himself said that He was snatched away and set at the right hand of the Father and (as Peter puts it) "raised to the right hand of God," to sit there higher than the angels. "He poured out this gift" (Acts 2 [:33, 38]) when He was the eternal King and reigning over an infinite kingdom. Christ has died and risen, never to die again. But to what end? What is the final cause of His government? "Because of the transgression of My people, which was their wound." He sits in His kingdom, not idle, not for His own sake, but exalted to the right hand of God He judges the world and "pours out the gift of the Holy Spirit" [Acts 2:38]. "If I go away, I will send [the Spirit]; if I do not go away, He will not come to you," He says [John 16:7]. He has thus been snatched away and cut off from the earth to exercise the power and efficacy of His suffering: to free us, not only according to grace but also according to gift and the renewing of [our] nature, as is said, "You have ascended on high and received gifts for men" [Ps. 68:18; Eph. 4:8]. Thus He sits at the right hand of God, the eternal Father. And He has sent the Holy Spirit, that He might heal us not only by imputation in the forgiveness of sins granted because of His death but also that He might work in us and transfer us from sin to righteousness, heal body and soul, not only by sin being forgiven but also by it being completely purged and removed,

2020): 291–328. As chaplain to the elector of Brandenburg, Agricola later helped write the text of the Augsburg Interim in 1548. Robert Kolb and James Arne Nestingen, eds., *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 144–182.

⁷ Albert Freitag, introduction to *Enarratio 53. capituli Esaiae* ([1544] 1550), by Martin Luther, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, vol. 40/3 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930), 683.

⁸ This translation follows the wording of the Bible included in Luther's printed commentary on this passage.

so that we would serve God purely, without fear of all sins, with emotion and warm eagerness in all godliness and holiness of life. He was placed in another life to heal us from sins and from this transgression that was “our wound.” The devil has depraved our entire nature and flesh with a great and invincible poison. He has impaired and destroyed it with a severe wound, one that leads to sin and eternal death. But to destroy this wound with effectual medicine, God sent this gift, “which you see” [Acts 2:33], because of this transgression “which is the wound of My people.” John, therefore, says, “For this purpose the Son of God appeared, to destroy the works of the devil” [1 John 3:8], that is, sin, death, and hell. Indeed, this is how the relative terms⁹ should be understood, as it is often used elsewhere in the prophets as apposition. In the prophets, the relative word “who, which, that” is often omitted. So my explanation is simply as follows. If it is not the specific, proper [meaning], it is nevertheless true¹ in and of itself. God’s Son, the Lord and Savior, our Jesus Christ, not only merited forgiveness of sins through His suffering and merited reconciliation but also “the gift.” For not only was “grace given” through Christ but also “truth came about” (John 1 [:17]). In Christ, there is no pretense, as if only grace were obtained. No, sin is also being purged.

This text also does not argue in favor of the Antinomians.¹⁰ They downplay sin so much, as if it were nothing, because, after all, it is forgiven. “Shall we remain in sin because sin is forgiven and taken away, and we are under grace?” (Romans 6 [:1]). This would mean that we are under “grace” but without “truth,” which is pretense. Sin has not only been forgiven but is chased and taken away! Not only grace but also “the gift” is truth (Ephesians 4 [:7]). Why do you remain in sin? Or do you not know that Christ died and sin is forgiven? Therefore, you should not remain in hatred, in drunkenness, or in adultery. Christ suffered for the forgiveness of sin, not to give license to the flesh and lust, as the pope attributes to us this abominable blasphemy, as if we taught people to live carelessly, without Law, with license for all sins, thinking that the Law is not binding on us unto damnation. The ceremonies have been taken away, just as the moral law has been removed so that it may not torment our consciences—not simply,¹¹ but in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 5 [:6–

⁹ *particula relativa*; i.e., relative pronouns. In Isa. 53:8, there is no relative pronoun “which” or “which is” in the phrase “the transgressions of My people, a wound to them.” The two clauses are in apposition. Luther understands it as meaning “the transgressions of My people, [which is] their wound.” As a result, Luther explains that Christ’s work included addressing not only human transgression by the forgiveness of sins but also the sinful corruption of human nature by the sanctifying, renewing gift of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ On Luther’s battles against antinomianism, see the introduction by Jeffrey G. Silcock to *The Antinomian Disputations* (1537–40), LW 73:3–43.

¹¹ *non simpliciter*; i.e., not absolutely, not unconditionally.

8]), because “the old leaven must be purged out” so that we may be a new lump. It is being purged, put to death, and burned so that He might destroy the body of sin.

So it is a question about “truth,” that we would really be freed from sin and that sin would be abolished. Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and was cut off for our sake, not only that we may be sons in grace through the remission of sins but also that we, having received the Holy Spirit, would be purified “from day to day” [2 Cor. 4:16], until on the Last Day we become completely pure, without any remnants of sin troubling us and pulling us back. For look at how unsteady and impure we are. Often we slip; “sin constantly takes us captive and struggles against the law of our mind” [Rom. 7:23]. Christ is therefore obligated to give us a cure every day. He does so when He instructs us “to forgive seventy times seven times, as often as our brother offends us,” etc. (Matthew [18:22]).¹² Paul says that sin “struggles and fights against the law of the mind,” even though the sin was forgiven and is not imputed. So sin is “our wound”; it hangs on our necks. He wants to heal this too.

¹² Luther had: “Matthew 8.”