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Table of Contents

Christology as Basis for Lutheran Theology Aaron M. Moldenhauer	3
Double Truth? Daniel Hofmann and the Discussion on the Relation of Theology and Philosophy Roland F. Ziegler	23
Illumination, Healing, and Redirection: A Lutheran Philosophy of Reason Angus Menuge	39
The Challenge of Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Word of God Jack D. Kilcrease	59
Luther on the Fulfillment of the Law: Five Theses for Contemporary Luther Studies Brian T. German	83
Fellowship in Its Necessary Context: The Doctrine of the Church and the Overseas Theses of 1961 Jonathan G. Lange	101
Praying the Psalms with Jesus and His Body Thomas M. Winger	119

Contraception: An Embryo’s Point of View	
Donna J. Harrison	137
Theological Observer	161
The History and Goal of the Concordia Commentary Series	
<i>Walter Arthur Maier II (June 14, 1925–October 24, 2019) in memoriam</i>	
“Claiming Christian Freedom to Discuss Abortion <i>Together</i> ”	
The Law is Good	
Book Reviews	181
Books Received	191

Luther on the Fulfillment of the Law: Five Theses for Contemporary Luther Studies

Brian T. German

I. Introduction

How does Luther speak of the fulfillment of the law in his exegetical writings? While it should be relatively uncontroversial that his view of the proper *function* of the law in a fallen world is to convict an individual of sin,¹ what did Luther have to say about the *essence* of the law, and how, moreover, does he speak about that essence being fulfilled?² We can gain a better understanding of Luther's view of the fulfillment of the law if we examine his lectures on the Old and New Testaments. While other works of Luther—his *Antinomian Disputations*, for example—are particularly germane to the topic at hand, his exegetical writings are especially important because they show us how he speaks of these matters in the midst of engaging biblical texts. By examining these exegetical writings, we gain a fuller picture of Luther on this “systematic” question.

Five aspects of the fulfillment of the law appear to be crucial to Luther's thinking. (1) The law is fulfilled in love, (2) the law is fulfilled by faith, (3) the law is fulfilled in the believer, (4) the believer loves the fulfilled law, and (5) the fulfilled

¹ See, for example, Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554): vol. 7, p. 257, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE. Martin Luther, D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), vol. 44, p. 489, 33–34 (hereafter WA). Similar examples abound: AE 19:100 (WA 19:247.23–26); AE 12:45 (WA 40/2:248.14–16); AE 26:310 (WA 40:482.12–14); AE 26:345 (WA 40:529.11–12); AE 21:354 (WA 7:600.19–21); AE 22:165 (WA 46:679.25–26).

² I am aware that the very distinction between the law's function and its essence is a contentious matter in Luther studies. For a recent point of entry into the discussion, see Nicholas Hopman, “Luther's *Antinomian Disputations* and *lex aeterna*,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 30.2 (2016): 152–180, and a critique of Hopman in Nathan Rinne, “Paradise Regained: Placing Nicholas Hopman's *Lex Aeterna* Back in Luther's Frame,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 82.1–2 (January/April 2018): 65–82, esp. 69. By “essence” here I have in mind simply a placeholder for those instances in Luther's exegetical writings where he defines the law apart from its accusing and condemning “proper function.” See further below.

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law exists in eternity. I refer to these five aspects throughout this study as five “theses” of Luther on the fulfillment of the law. The relevance of this research for contemporary Luther studies will be evident by comparing the five “theses” to a recent treatment of the law in Luther as given by Steven Paulson’s book *Luther’s Outlaw God*.³ In short, my argument is that Luther’s understanding of the fulfillment of the law depends entirely on the law’s essence being defined as the eternal will of God, but Paulson severely misrepresents Luther in how he handles this very understanding of the essence of the law.

II. The Law as the Eternal Will of God

The reformer leaves us with ample material across his exegetical writings that he understands the essence of the law as none other than the eternal will of God for human behavior and life.⁴ In his *Lectures on Genesis*, for example, Luther’s most basic, barebones definition for the law is “the will of God.”⁵ The same can be found repeatedly in his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*; the law, Luther says, is “the will of God.”⁶ In the same context, Luther again makes it clear that “God reveals His Law, by which He makes His will known to us,”⁷ and that the law is “all His will and counsel.”⁸ To include just one of several similar examples from his New Testament writings, Luther makes the following unambiguous statement about the essence of the law in his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*: “the Law serves to indicate the will of God.”⁹

But what about that freighted adjective “eternal” in this initial claim that Luther understands the essence of the law to be “the eternal will of God”? This important modifier also occurs quite frequently in Luther’s exegetical writings, but in various ways. In his *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), for example, Luther notes many times throughout his commentary on Psalm 19 that “the law commands firmly and forever (*inaeternum et stabiliter*).”¹⁰ In the same commentary, Luther says that the

³ Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God: Volume 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

⁴ In his *Preface to the Old Testament* (1523, 1545), AE 35:243–244, Luther distinguishes the moral law (“Ten Commandments”) as perpetual, from the temporary civil and ceremonial laws of ancient Israel. In our examination, we are focusing on the moral law, not the civil and ceremonial laws.

⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 3:319.

⁶ Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), AE 9:50.

⁷ AE 9:51.

⁸ AE 9:51.

⁹ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537–1540), AE 22:143.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Complete Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Cole (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1826), 419–420 (WA 5:560.39–40). Note that this is the first “419–420” in the book, as pages 261–308 have mistakenly been printed as 381–428, thus leaving duplicates of every page number within the range 381–428. All citations from this work in the upcoming discussion are in reference to the first occurrence of that respective

law is “enduring forever (*permanens in aeternum*),”¹¹ and that “the law, being fulfilled by love, is established forever” (*firmatur in aeternum*).¹² While these remarks come from the earlier years of his career (roughly 1521), in his *Lectures on Genesis*, near the end of his life, Luther similarly describes the law as “the eternal and immutable judgment of God.”¹³ But perhaps the best way to summarize what has been amassed thus far from Luther on the essence of the law comes from a sermon of his on Matthew 22:34–46, where he proclaims that the law is to be understood as “the eternal, immovable, and unchangeable will of God.”¹⁴

We are on solid ground, then, when claiming that Luther understands the essence of the law in his exegetical writings as the eternal will of God. True, Luther will occasionally give even greater precision to this definition, such as the will of God for “faith and love,” which is repeated continually in his *Preface to the Old Testament*,¹⁵ but the formulation “the eternal will of God” best encapsulates the statements provided above.¹⁶ And while it is also true, as Fagerberg points out, that Luther does not always use the term “law” in such discussions but will occasionally use “commandment” (*Gebot, mandatum, or praeceptum*) instead,¹⁷ the quotations given above often do use the term “law,” and they stem from both the earlier and later periods of Luther’s career, from both his Old and New Testament writings, and also from the pulpit.

Thesis 1: The Law Is Fulfilled in Love

For Luther, the law is fulfilled in love. This thesis is very nearly identical, of course, to Romans 13:10, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (πλήρωμα οὖν νόμου ἡ

page number in this particular volume of Luther’s work on the psalms. This same volume will be cited hereafter as “Cole 2.”

¹¹ Cole 2:422 (WA 5:562.36–37).

¹² Cole 2:419 (WA 5:560.31).

¹³ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 7:275.

¹⁴ Luther, *Church Postil V* (1544), AE 79:174–175.

¹⁵ See esp. AE 35:240–241.

¹⁶ Compare the language used in the Formula of Concord for the essence of the law: “his [God’s] divine, eternal will” (FC SD II 50; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 553); “the unchanging will of God” (FC SD VI 17; Kolb and Wengert, 590); “the eternal and unchanging will of God” (FC SD VI 3; Kolb and Wengert, 587). Fagerberg notes in his study of the Lutheran Confessions that “in the midst of these numerous and seemingly antithetical statements on the Law there is, nevertheless, an important and dominant point of view. The Law is, above all, God’s eternal will.” Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529–1537)*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 64. Using more classic terminology: “For the Confessions, then, there is no thought of a law other than the Moral Law” (73).

¹⁷ See Fagerberg, *Lutheran Confessions*, 80–81, 86.

ἀγάπη).¹⁸ While this verse from Romans can naturally be found cited and alluded to throughout the entire corpus of Luther's writings,¹⁹ the above thesis can be supported by examining places in Luther's exegetical writings where he amplifies the relationship between law and love beyond simply affirming his belief in the clear testimony of Romans 13:10.

In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther says quite plainly in his discussion of the separation between Abram and Lot (Genesis 13) that "the purpose of all laws is love."²⁰ This way of speaking also occurs in other Old Testament commentaries of his, such as the *Operationes in Psalmos*. On one occasion, Luther calls love "the lady friend (*amica*) of the law," because it "agrees in all things with the law."²¹ In another context, he says that love is "the essential meaning of the law,"²² and still in another that "all the commandments of the law depend on love."²³

Turning more specifically to the law's fulfillment in love, it should be no surprise, then, that Luther will at times in his exegetical writings simply equate the love of the law with the fulfillment of the law. This happens, for instance, in his discussion of Psalm 19, where he says unhesitatingly "the love of the law, or, the fulfilling of the law"²⁴; the two are virtually synonymous for him. Again, in his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, Luther contends that "If, however, the Law is loved in the heart, it is truly fulfilled. . . . it is satisfied and fulfilled if it is loved."²⁵ While such statements seem to depict the most common way that Luther expresses the relationship between love and the fulfillment of the law, at times he also includes the despicability of anything against God in his talk of the law's fulfillment, such as the following remark again from his commentary on Psalm 19: "the love of righteousness and the hatred of iniquity: that is, the fulfilment of all laws."²⁶

To summarize: while Luther can of course be found affirming his belief in Romans 13:10 in a myriad of places throughout his writings, this brief discussion amplifies that belief by highlighting some instances in his exegetical writings where he discusses the relationship between law and love a bit more elaborately. In short,

¹⁸ Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁹ Recall also that Luther lectured on the book of Romans in 1515–1516 (AE 25).

²⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 2:339. This conviction is repeated in analogous ways as he comments on the passage.

²¹ Cole 2:418 (WA 5:559.23).

²² Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:133–134.

²³ Luther, "Sermon on Matt. 22:37–39" (1522), AE 51:106. In Luther's *Preface to the Old Testament* there is a similar statement, which also includes faith: "For since all laws aim at faith and love, none of them can be valid, or be a law, if it conflicts with faith or love" (AE 35:240).

²⁴ Cole 2:408.

²⁵ Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), AE 9:278.

²⁶ Cole 2:423.

love for Luther is the very essence of the law, whose essence (as we saw above) is none other than the eternal will of God, whose essence (as we know from 1 John 4:8) is love.

Thesis 2: The Law Is Fulfilled by Faith

According to Luther, the law is also fulfilled by faith. We first examine some places where Luther speaks of the fulfillment of the law as stemming from *both* love and faith in the same breath.

In his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, for example, Luther writes that “the fulfilling of the Law is love from a good heart *and* from faith that is not feigned.”²⁷ Later in the same volume, he expresses the relationship between love and faith in relation to the fulfillment of the law in this way: “His commandment is fulfilled when the Word is in the heart, that is, when it is loved; and that happens through faith.”²⁸ Here the emphasis is on faith bringing about the kind of love that fulfills a commandment. Luther has different ways of expressing this too. In the *Operationes in Psalmos*, for example, he speaks of “the godliness of faith, by which alone the law is fulfilled and loved.”²⁹ Similarly, in his *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* he put it this way: “If I come to acknowledge and to love the Law, I fulfill the Law entirely, and that happens out of or through faith. Faith brings everything along with it.”³⁰ Whatever else can be said about the relationship between faith and love, therefore, when it comes to the fulfillment of the law, the two for Luther are inseparable.

Seemingly more frequent, however, is Luther’s emphasis on faith alone as that which fulfills the law. In his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, Luther states clearly that “through faith the commands of God are fulfilled.”³¹ In his *Operationes in Psalmos*, he likewise says that “it is faith alone that purifies the heart (Acts 15) and fulfills all the commandments of God.”³² Not surprisingly, these kinds of remarks typically occur in discussions about the relationship between faith and works, as in Luther’s commentary on Psalm 68. There he says that “faith, and not works, is the fulfillment of the Law.”³³ Again, in the same place, “the Law is fulfilled solely by faith.”³⁴

²⁷ Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), AE 9:70 (emphasis added).

²⁸ AE 9:279.

²⁹ Cole 2:427.

³⁰ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537–1540), AE 69:329.

³¹ Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), AE 9:87.

³² Cole 2:50.

³³ Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 68* (1521), AE 13:19.

³⁴ AE 13:20. This is also a theme in Luther’s “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans.” For example: “faith alone makes a person righteous and fulfils the law” (AE 35:368); “we fulfill it [the law] by faith” (369).

To summarize: while Luther at times speaks of both faith and love in relation to the fulfillment of the law, or that faith is the means whereby the law is both fulfilled and loved, in many places Luther strongly urges that faith alone fulfills the law. Intriguingly, in one place outside his exegetical writings he even speaks of faith as “the *fullness* of the law (*plenitudo legis*).”³⁵ In short, when it comes to the fulfillment of the law, Luther certainly also believed that it is fulfilled by faith.³⁶

Thesis 3: The Law Is Fulfilled in the Believer

According to Luther, the law is fulfilled in the believer. This thesis shifts the focus slightly from what happens within the believer (faith, love) to the more general claim that the law is indeed fulfilled *in the believer*. This conviction plays a major role in Luther’s understanding of the fulfillment of the law.

Luther’s *Antinomian Disputations* offer some helpful support for this thesis. In a defense of the division of Christian doctrine into law and gospel, Luther evokes Matthew 5:17 (“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them”) and chooses to paraphrase this well-known statement from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount as follows: “My office is not to eliminate the law but to fulfill it, and to fulfill it in such a way that those who believe that they are redeemed from the curse of the law because of this, my fulfillment of the law, might also know that *the law is now to be fulfilled by them*, especially since they have already received the first fruits of the Holy Spirit.”³⁷ Here it is clear that, for Luther, Christ’s fulfilling of the law *de facto* takes place in the believer. “It is necessary,” Luther says a bit later in the same disputations, “that both justification *and fulfillment* take place *in us*.”³⁸ Again, and even more succinctly, “Christ fulfilled the law. Therefore we too fulfill it.”³⁹

These remarks from Luther’s *Antinomian Disputations* provide a nice supplement to the many and various statements about the law being fulfilled in the believer across his exegetical writings. In his *Lectures on Isaiah*, for example, Luther contends that “the Law is fulfilled by Christ *and then also by us* who have been endowed by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰ Similarly, in his *Lectures on Deuteronomy*, “The

³⁵ Luther, *Against Latomus* (1521), AE 32:178 (emphasis added; WA 8:71.5).

³⁶ Compare here the language of Melancthon’s second edition of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (September 1531): “The fulfillment of the law is not accepted on its own account but on account of faith” (Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 145, text following Ap IV 159).

³⁷ Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus Est Aeternus: Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 45 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 175 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 301, 303.

⁴⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1528), AE 16:99 (emphasis added).

Gospel teaches from what source *you* receive the power to fulfill the Law.”⁴¹ Perhaps even more strikingly, in one place of the *Operationes in Psalmos* Luther says that “they [believers] accord with the law in all things (*legi per omnia conveniunt*).”⁴² The law gives a clear shape, in other words, to how believers live and move and have their being. In fact, in his *Lectures on Hebrews*, Luther goes so far as to say that “he [the believer] owes the Law nothing; but he keeps the Law, and *his life is the Law itself, living and fulfilled*.”⁴³

Especially noteworthy is the theme that recurs in Luther’s *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, that Christ enables this fulfillment of the law in the believer. When commenting on John 1:17, for example—“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”—Luther writes that “He [Christ] supplies grace and truth, and the means which enable me to keep the First, the Second, and the Third Commandment.”⁴⁴ Shortly after this, he says the same thing in another way: “God will lend His aid, so that you may begin to keep the Law through Christ, in whom you believe. And all this is effected through Christ’s grace and truth.”⁴⁵ Again, in the same context, Luther even offers up the following plea: “Oh, come, Lord Jesus Christ, help us and give us grace to enable us to fulfill the Law’s demands!”⁴⁶

To summarize: while Luther fittingly places all the focus on Christ as the one who fulfills the law,⁴⁷ this fulfillment must also incorporate those who believe that this fulfillment happened on their behalf. “This is the office of grace, whereby we know Christ, by whose righteousness, life, and strength we fulfill the law and overcome death and hell.”⁴⁸ Just as Luther often spoke emphatically of love or faith

⁴¹ Luther, *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), AE 9:179 (emphasis added).

⁴² Cole 2:420 (WA 5:560.40; emphasis added).

⁴³ Luther, *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517–1518), AE 29:193–194 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537–1540), AE 22:144.

⁴⁵ AE 22:146.

⁴⁶ AE 22:144. Other kindred examples could be added. “He [Christ] assists me in obeying the precepts of the Law” (Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* [1537–1540], AE 22:148); “Christ alone must endow me with the ability to keep it” (148). For one example stemming from a different chapter of John in the same sermon series, Luther says in his discussion of John 6 that “Christ must come to you before you can do the works of the Law. When Christ comes, then you will do what the Law prescribes and whatever else you are to do” (AE 23:151). Note also Luther’s remarks on Matthew 5:17 in his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (1532), where he writes that it is Christ’s “grace and Spirit [that] enable us to do and keep the Law’s demands” (AE 21:69).

⁴⁷ For more on the atoning work of Christ in Luther, see “Christ’s Work as Satisfaction to God” in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 202–208.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Preface to the Old Testament* (1545 [1523]), AE 35:245.

(or both) as the fulfillment of the law, so also is he adamant that this fulfillment takes place within the believer.⁴⁹

Thesis 4: The Believer Loves the Fulfilled Law

This fourth thesis may not come to the forefront of our minds when thinking about what the reformer had to say about the relationship between the believer and the law, but perhaps it should. Luther's exegetical writings offer several fascinating windows into his clear insistence that the believer loves the fulfilled law. Consider, for example, Luther's commentary on Psalm 19 in his *Operationes in Psalmos*. Here Luther has much to say about the transformation that takes place within the believer in relation to the law before and after conversion. "The law cannot delight us before it is fulfilled, but it must be afterwards."⁵⁰ How is it that such a transformation is accomplished? Luther further explains: "by the Spirit they [believers] come to love it."⁵¹ Yes, it is the Spirit, Luther says in several places, who enters and "fills us with the love of the law."⁵² In fact, with the Spirit, "the law is made innocent, faithful, right, elect, and in all respects amiable."⁵³ While many similar examples of this could be noted, the following is a poignant summary statement of the issue at hand from the perspective of the believer's will in relation to the law: "The will being now changed into another will, the man beholds the law of the Lord, and sees it to prohibit and command those same things which he, being now inflamed by the Spirit, desires and loves. Hence it comes to pass, that he cannot but love that law which answers to his own wishes in all things; nor can he help praising it."⁵⁴ The law for Luther continues to "prohibit and command" all the same, but the will of the believer has been drastically changed. Characteristically, he has an even more succinct way of saying it: "He that loves the law cannot praise it enough, so pleased is he with that which displeased him before."⁵⁵

Another treasure trove of material on the believer's love for the fulfilled law comes from Luther's celebrated "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans" from 1522 (revised in 1546). With resonances to his commentary on Psalm 19

⁴⁹ Compare again the language of Melancthon's second edition of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: "the very fulfillment of the law, which follows our renewal" (Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 145, text following AC IV 159), and Apology IV 46, "This faith is the true knowledge of Christ; it uses the benefits of Christ, it renews hearts, and it *precedes our fulfillment of the law*" (Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 127; emphasis added).

⁵⁰ Cole 2:417.

⁵¹ Cole 2:415.

⁵² Cole 2:416.

⁵³ Cole 2:425. "I have abundantly observed, therefore, that the law is the letter only, whether it be written, or whether it be spoken, or whether it be understood, until it be loved" (409).

⁵⁴ Cole 2:417.

⁵⁵ Cole 2:409.

about the role of the Spirit, Luther ties together the believer's correspondence to the law via the Spirit with the same believer's love of the law via the Spirit in this way: "But such a heart is given only by God's Spirit, who fashions a man after the law, so that he acquires a desire for the law in his heart, doing nothing henceforth out of fear and compulsion but out of a willing heart. The law is thus spiritual in that it will be loved and fulfilled with such a spiritual heart, and requires such a spirit."⁵⁶ Once again, it is the Spirit who not only "fashions a man after the law" but also stirs up in the believer a love of the same. Shortly thereafter, Luther reiterates this as follows: "To fulfill the law, however, is to do its works with pleasure and love, to live a godly and good life of one's own accord, without the compulsion of the law. This pleasure and love for the law is put into the heart by the Holy Spirit."⁵⁷ While here again it is the Spirit who is responsible for the believer's love of the law, Luther also had other, complementary ways of depicting the same reality. In one place, for instance, he simply says that "grace, however, makes the law dear to us; then sin is no longer present, and the law is no longer against us but *one with us*."⁵⁸

Perhaps a good way of summarizing what we have seen about the believer loving the fulfilled law can be found in Luther's *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*. Returning to his exposition of John 1:17 ("For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ"), Luther expressed how positive the relationship between a believer and the law could be: "Formerly I found that I had no delight in the Law. But now I discover that the Law is precious and good, that it was given to me for my life; and now it is pleasing to me. Formerly it told me what to do; now I am beginning to conform to its requests, so that now I praise, laud, and serve God."⁵⁹ In his *Lectures on Isaiah*, he goes even so far as to say that, with the Spirit, "the Law is no longer outrageous in its dictates but *an agreeable companion (iucundus socius)*. The Law itself indeed is not changed, but we are."⁶⁰

To summarize: Luther continually notes in his exegetical lectures that the law is hardly lovable before it is fulfilled, but he is equally insistent that the believer loves the law after it is fulfilled. This love of the fulfilled law by the believer is made possible, we saw again and again, by the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁶ Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans" (1546 [1522]), AE 35:367.

⁵⁷ AE 35:368.

⁵⁸ AE 35:376 (emphasis added). See also the subsequent paragraphs on the same page for more about taking pleasure in the law.

⁵⁹ Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537–1540), AE 22:144.

⁶⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1528), AE 16:99 (emphasis added; WA 31/2:69.26–27).

Thesis 5: The Fulfilled Law Exists in Eternity

Although the support for this fifth and final thesis stems from outside Luther's exegetical lectures, namely, his *Antinomian Disputations*, it seems prudent to include such a thesis here in this part of the study as it provides a more thorough picture of Luther's rich understanding of the fulfillment of the law. Moreover, this last thesis also plays a significant role in the next part of the study.

There are several places in Luther's *Antinomian Disputations* where he discusses the fulfilled law with reference to the life to come. A good place to start would be Luther's assertion that "in the future life we will be like the Fulfiller, Christ (1 John 3:2)."⁶¹ The fulfilled law, then, is not some sort of skin that Christ or believers shed at the consummation of all things. No, when it comes to the law beyond this life, Luther maintains that "we will render it [the law] in the superlative in heaven."⁶² Nor is it the case that God's eternal will as conveyed in the Ten Commandments, for example, will somehow come to a screeching halt. No, Luther clearly believes this revered set of commands will continue to give shape and form even in the heavenly places. He writes: "in the coming life things will be like what the Decalogue has been demanding here."⁶³ Nor is this existence of the fulfilled law in heaven some sort of spiritual idea only. On the contrary, Luther also maintains that the fulfilled law will be carried out by the heavenly saints in both body and soul: "In the future life, however, they will have the will to do the law not only in Spirit, but also in flesh."⁶⁴

In several other places of the same disputations, Luther portrays how the believer's love of the fulfilled law (as discussed in the previous thesis) will also continue into eternity. One image of what that love will look like is this: "In heaven it will not be necessary to admonish to love God. But then we will truly and perfectly do what Christ did here. At that time you will not say: 'I should love the Father,' but: 'I love the Father,' and 'as he has given me command, thus I do.'"⁶⁵ With that in mind, perhaps the best way to encapsulate Luther's view of the fulfilled law existing in eternity with reference to the saints would be the following: "In life eternal we finally will be *perfect and true doers of the law*."⁶⁶

To summarize: Luther's *Antinomian Disputations* reveal the reformer's firm belief that the fulfilled law not only gives shape to the heavenly life but will also one day be completely loved by all the saints in both body and soul. In short, these

⁶¹ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 73.

⁶² Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 63.

⁶³ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 129.

⁶⁴ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 59.

⁶⁵ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 61.

⁶⁶ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 185 (emphasis added).

disputations provide ample support for the claim that Luther also believed that the fulfilled law exists in eternity.

Summary of Theses

So far we have seen a series of non-negotiables in Luther when it comes to both the essence of the law and its fulfillment. First, Luther defines the essence of the law across his exegetical writings as the eternal will of God, and he spoke of this law being fulfilled in a number of ways. Chief among them was maintaining, right in step with Romans 13:10, that the law is fulfilled by love (Thesis 1). Luther was also quite comfortable declaring that the law is fulfilled by faith (Thesis 2), that this fulfillment takes place in the believer (Thesis 3), that the believer loves the fulfilled law (Thesis 4), and finally, that the fulfilled law carries on into eternity (Thesis 5). These findings do not imply or advocate any sort of reformulation to conventional understandings of Luther's view of justification or the atonement. While such topics are obviously closely related to the foregoing discussion, my concern throughout has been how Luther speaks of the fulfillment of the law in his exegetical lectures, and my argument here is simply that these theses capture central tenets in how he does that. We now take up Luther's definition of the essence of the law along with theses 3 and 5 and compare them with a recent publication of Luther on the law to see how they match up.

III. Paulson on the Law

Steven Paulson's *Luther's Outlaw God: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* is the first of three volumes exploring places in Luther's theology where God could be said to be an "outlaw." In this initial volume, Paulson sticks most closely to Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* in order to focus on key themes in this famous work where he sees God acting "apart from the law" as he bestows his means of grace. Thus, according to Paulson, Luther's God in *The Bondage of the Will* is one who elects individuals to salvation outside the law, forgives their sins outside the law, grants mercy upon them outside the law, and so on. In sum, Paulson argues, there is much more to Luther's God than just the law, and because of that, "Luther learned both how to flee from and flee to this one and the same outlaw God."⁶⁷

Paulson on the Law as the Eternal Will of God

It does not take long for readers of Paulson's book to realize that he has some serious objections to how one speaks of the eternal will of God. Most often this

⁶⁷ Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, xxxv.

comes by way of critique, rejecting propositions such as, “God’s will must certainly be the eternal, objective, unchanging, timeless law.”⁶⁸ In many places, such criticism is lodged to set up a sharp contrast between the will of God as found in his law as opposed to the will of God as revealed in his gospel,⁶⁹ while at other times it serves to place as much distance between God and the law as possible. For just one example of the latter, Paulson states repeatedly in various ways that “the law is not God’s heart. God lives *beyond* the law, *outside* law.”⁷⁰ In the same vein, Paulson contends that the very language of “will” in relation to God’s law is highly problematic. He explains: “the law by itself is not God’s order. God’s mind, will, essence, being, and becoming (or even what is beyond being) are merely human terms that end up operating in a truly odious way.”⁷¹

How, then, does Paulson account for the “eternal” in the understanding that the essence of the law is the eternal will of God? Quite simply—and surprisingly, to use his language—it goes away. Here is how that happens: “In Christ, the law was *historicized*, limited, confined, stopped, and silenced—which was a surprise even to the law, to say nothing of those under it. That law—which for all appearances and by all reason was eternally God’s will, mind, heart, and being—suddenly became subject to him and *even to the limits of time*.”⁷² The word “eternal” in “the eternal will of God” for Paulson appears to apply only until the advent of Christ, which historicizes the law. What was once eternal is now temporal, and this shocks everyone, including the law itself. In short, for Paulson, “the eternal law is brought to an end.”⁷³

Paulson on the Law Fulfilled in the Believer (Thesis 3)

Closely related to Paulson’s misgivings about the law as the eternal will of God are his many objections to the law being fulfilled in the believer, which was the third thesis (given above) for Luther’s view of the fulfillment of the law. In one place of *Luther’s Outlaw God*, Paulson broaches this issue much as we observed Luther doing, namely, by means of a contrast between what happens in an individual both before and after receiving God’s grace, but Paulson has much more to say in his

⁶⁸ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 198. This statement comes in a context describing the position of Erasmus: “Apart from preaching, this kind of disputation did only what Erasmus intended, which was to take up specific words in Scripture only to have a disputant supply the background *assumption* that God’s will must certainly be the eternal, objective, unchanging, timeless law—called ‘justice’” (emphasis added). For similar critiques of “the eternal law,” see page 148 (with a view toward Aquinas) and pages 192–194 (in further portrayal of Erasmus).

⁶⁹ For example: “his will is not law—it is something else” (Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 133).

⁷⁰ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 119 (emphasis added).

⁷¹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 48.

⁷² Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 27 (emphasis added).

⁷³ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 109.

account about what does *not* happen. He writes: “Only the promise frees, and when it frees it does not free into the blessed order of the law or a happy obedience *or anything like the fulfillment of the law in the sinner as God’s will.*”⁷⁴ Does reference to “the sinner” here leave open the possibility that Paulson would grant a fulfillment of the law in “the saint/believer”? We are not told. In several other places of the book, however, it becomes clear that Paulson is indeed speaking of the new person in Christ. Of the many examples of this that could be noted, consider only the following:

- “Luther’s Christian freedom then means the human is not being freed from hating the law into loving it [*Thesis 4!*], or from being accused by the law to being blessed by it. The Christian is being freed, necessarily, from the law *altogether*”⁷⁵
- “my future would be my will set free from all act—free to be—*without the ‘order of being’ stipulated by the law*”⁷⁶
- “a new life that does not depend either upon God’s particular choice of law *or even a hypothetical eternal law to give it purpose, order and meaning*”⁷⁷
- “a new life lived *entirely outside the law in any way*”⁷⁸

Once the human is freed, Paulson maintains, that individual is simply “free to be.” No order, no purpose, no meaning, and no shape is any longer available to the believer by means of the law, not even by recourse to a “hypothetical eternal law.”

Much as his approach to the law as the eternal will of God, Paulson often speaks of this issue—the law fulfilled in the believer—by means of critique. He is critical, for example, of the idea that “people become complete when they agree with God’s order of the eternal law.”⁷⁹ He is also critical of “participation in the eternal law as joyous obedience in God’s chosen order,”⁸⁰ and when “eternal law is thus taken as the thing of God in which humans participate.”⁸¹ No, according to Paulson, Luther envisioned something very different happening in the believer in relation to the law.

⁷⁴ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 186 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 73 (emphasis added). Regarding the believer’s love of the fulfilled law (*Thesis 4*), Paulson elsewhere writes: “Nor is freedom a joyful obedience to the law that no longer condemns” (72).

⁷⁶ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 156 (emphasis added).

⁷⁷ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 176 (emphasis added).

⁷⁸ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 198 (emphasis added).

⁷⁹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 148.

⁸⁰ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 153.

⁸¹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 206.

As he sees it: “But what did we get instead with Luther? We are thrown into *an illegal chaos with no law*.”⁸²

Paulson on the Fulfilled Law Existing in Eternity (Thesis 5)

Our final point of comparison is with Thesis 5, Luther’s contention that the fulfilled law exists in eternity. There, we recall, Luther said such things as “In the coming life things will be like what the Decalogue has been demanding here,”⁸³ and “In heaven it will not be necessary to admonish to love God. . . . At that time you will not say: ‘I should love the Father,’ but: ‘I love the Father,’ and ‘as he has given me command, thus I do.’”⁸⁴

In Paulson’s treatment of the matter, however, things are once again handled much differently. As is his custom, there is much in *Luther’s Outlaw God* that tackles this issue, too, by way of sneering critique. He is critical, for example, of the notion that Christians will “one day not only live in it [the law] but will love that law completely.”⁸⁵ In the same place, he is also critical of the view that Christians will at some point “be brought back to participate joyfully in it [the law].”⁸⁶ Paulson therefore dismisses the idea that the law will one day give shape to heavenly existence (as Luther believed it would), and that believers will one day love the law completely (as Luther believed they would). No, for Paulson, “this gospel power concerns the future in a way that does not simply dream of the hypothetical law initially, or even one future day, being fulfilled by all.”⁸⁷ Whereas Luther held that “in life eternal we [the saints] finally will be perfect and true doers of the law,”⁸⁸ Paulson says that “the law does indeed go silent, but not as affirmation of its practitioners or by eternal participation in it.”⁸⁹ Whereas Luther believed that “in the future life . . . they [the saints] will have the will to do the law not only in Spirit, but also in flesh,”⁹⁰ Paulson contends that “when the elect are raised, they are not raised back into a non-accusatory law.”⁹¹ And on it goes.

⁸² Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 185 (emphasis added).

⁸³ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 129.

⁸⁴ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 61.

⁸⁵ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 64.

⁸⁶ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 64.

⁸⁷ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 119.

⁸⁸ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 185.

⁸⁹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 24.

⁹⁰ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 59.

⁹¹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 186.

Summary of Paulson and the Law

After a brief comparison of our findings from Luther with Steven Paulson's *Luther's Outlaw God*, it appears that this latest work from Paulson is in many places deeply misleading and, in some places, entirely misrepresentative of the reformer. Paulson's emphasis that the law is not God's will ("his will is not law"⁹²), that the law is not fulfilled in the believer, and that the fulfilled law does not exist in eternity are all directly opposed to some of the most essential features of Luther's understanding of the fulfillment of the law.

In my judgment, Paulson's overarching goal in this book is to make Luther's view of the law as radical as possible (something eternal is surprisingly historicized, Luther throws us "into an illegal chaos,"⁹³ and so on), and one of the primary ways he attempts to do that is by making the law in Luther as *negative* as possible. In addition to what we observed above, consider also how Paulson speaks of the law in the garden of Eden. In his understanding, "All the law does is exactly what Adam and Eve found—it teaches the difference between good and evil by means of a threat."⁹⁴ Again, in another place: "The law from the beginning threatened all creatures; it never was God's plan, formally or otherwise, to perfect or complete creatures above or below the Garden of Eden."⁹⁵ For Paulson, then, *all* that the law does in Eden is threaten creatures—how dreadful! For Luther, however, the law "existed in Paradise in the positive."⁹⁶ Indeed, in his understanding, "When Adam was first created, the law was for him not only something possible, but even something enjoyable."⁹⁷ In fact, even the laws given much later through Moses, Luther believes, were placed "before our eyes so that we might be reminded of what we were before Adam's fall *and of what we shall be in Christ one day*."⁹⁸

Paulson's disparaging rendition of the law in Luther comes with a series of implications, and some of these also deserve mention here because they, too, conflict with our findings from Luther. Consider, for example, how Paulson speaks of the law in relation to the gospel. If these two are in any way taken to be teleologically related (i.e., that in the end they will cohere in some consummate way), this for Paulson is tantamount to the sin of scholasticism: "Scholastic teaching,

⁹² Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, 133.

⁹³ Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, 185.

⁹⁴ Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, 41 (emphasis added).

⁹⁵ Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, 215.

⁹⁶ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 63.

⁹⁷ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 47.

⁹⁸ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 189 (emphasis added). This is in addition to Luther's positive statements about the law in Eden in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554). See especially AE 1:103–104, where he speaks of God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as "the establishment of the church" (103).

which we always end up with when the gospel must be squared with the law.”⁹⁹ Luther, however, had no problem speaking of “the law of the Lord *as made lovely by the Gospel (lege domini per Euangelium facta amabili)*.”¹⁰⁰

Another implication surfaces in how Paulson handles the law in relation to forgiveness. In order to keep as much distance between these two as possible, Paulson argues that Luther’s God in *The Bondage of the Will* is not thinking anything whatsoever about the fulfillment of the law when he forgives sins. As he frames it: “God is the one who *opposes the law* with his new word that forgives *without any care about that very law*.”¹⁰¹ Again, in even more blatant terms, “He [God] disregards the law when he forgives sins.”¹⁰² There is a sense, of course, in which that may be true: forgiveness for Luther is certainly not earned by our works of the law. At the same time, however, Luther had no qualms about correlating forgiveness with the law, and he can even be found speaking of the matter in this way: “It is as if God said: ‘I am obliged to forgive them their sins if I want the law fulfilled by them.’”¹⁰³ This last statement, it must be noted, comes from the very same volume that Paulson professes to track most closely throughout his book: *The Bondage of the Will*.

One final and particularly striking implication of Paulson’s negative portrayal of the law in Luther is how he speaks of the law in relation to the person and work of Christ. While it is beyond the scope of this study to venture into debates about the atonement in Luther, we would be remiss not to mention that Paulson does not see the death of Christ as fulfilling any law. Neither, in his view, does it purge any sin, nor is it even necessary. He writes: “Christ’s suffering is then neither purgative nor an act of filling an unfulfilled law, but precisely *unnecessary*.”¹⁰⁴ At this point, we need only ask: where does Luther ever speak of the death of Christ in such terms?

A similar concern could be raised for the very title for Paulson’s book. Where does Luther use the language of “outlaw” (“*exlex*”) in *The Bondage of the Will*? Nowhere. Where does that word occur in all of his other writings? In the entire Weimar Edition—thousands and thousands of pages—only three places: once in reference to the pope,¹⁰⁵ once in reference to the Antichrist,¹⁰⁶ and only once

⁹⁹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 251.

¹⁰⁰ Cole 2:422 (emphasis added; WA 5:562.31–32).

¹⁰¹ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 41 (emphasis added).

¹⁰² Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 163.

¹⁰³ AE 33:218.

¹⁰⁴ Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 226 (emphasis original). For more on Paulson’s understanding of the cross in Luther, see especially his comments on pages 29, 30, 37, 39, and 163.

¹⁰⁵ WA 39/2:82.32–33.

¹⁰⁶ WA 26:18.17–20.

in reference to God.¹⁰⁷ In the last of these, Luther uses it in a sermon on Exodus 9 to emphasize the limitations of reason, and even then, he qualifies the term with “as someone has said” (“*wie man saget*”); it is not his way of speaking. Paulson, however, would have us believe that this “outlaw” God is some sort of key that unlocks Luther’s thinking on how God relates to the law. Francis Pieper noted long ago that “*exlex*” is not even ecclesial Latin,¹⁰⁸ but it now spearheads a three-volume work on the greatest reformer of the church who ever lived.

If the discrepancies between Paulson and Luther are explained simply by the former’s indulgence in rhetorical flourish (e.g., using terminology associated with the essence of the law to make riveting claims about the “proper function” of the law), he has done so to such an extent that the book’s helpfulness for understanding Luther has been severely compromised. It is my contention, therefore, that this latest work by Paulson, a self-professed advocate of “radical” Lutherans,¹⁰⁹ is to be read only with the most radical caution.

IV. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study has been to gain a better understanding of Luther’s view of the fulfillment of the law, especially as this can be gathered from his lectures on the Old and New Testaments. At times, I also drew on his *Antinomian Disputations* for a fuller picture of the topic at hand. On the basis of what has been surveyed, my argument is that Luther’s understanding of the fulfillment of the law—all five “theses” explored earlier—depends entirely on the essence of the law being defined as the eternal will of God for our behavior. To state this conclusion negatively, if the law is not in its essence God’s eternal will but construed as something else—whether that be “its condemning office”¹¹⁰ or any sort of “legal scheme,” “nasty tool,” or “disposable tool”¹¹¹—Luther’s understanding of the fulfillment of the law will suffer catastrophically.

¹⁰⁷ WA 16:142.13.

¹⁰⁸ *Christian Dogmatics: Volume I* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 457n96.

¹⁰⁹ See Paulson’s remarks in “The End of the Law and the Antinomians,” in *Handing over the Goods: Determined to Proclaim Nothing But Christ Jesus and Him Crucified: Essays in Honor of James Arne Nestingen*, ed. Scott L. Keith and Steven D. Paulson (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2018), 10.

¹¹⁰ As Hopman claims: “The essence of the law, for Luther, is its condemning office” (“Luther’s *Antinomian Disputations*,” 155).

¹¹¹ The language of “legal scheme” can be found in Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 2–5. The language of “nasty tool” can be found in Paulson, “End of the Law,” 5. The language of “disposable tool” can be found in Steven D. Paulson and Nicholas Hopman’s “Atonement” entry in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 51.

To be sure, there is infinitely more that could be said about the law in Luther than was tackled here, including several issues related to its fulfillment. But the five theses rehearsed in this study are offered as an earnest plea to contemporary Luther scholarship in its zeal to advance radical claims for the reformer that it not neglect the *weightier* matters of his thinking and writing about the law.

We close with a reminder that the five theses given in this study are fully in accordance with the scriptural witness. In brief, the law is fulfilled in love because God wills love eternally and is himself eternal love (1 John 4:8). The law is fulfilled in the believer now because “Whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). Finally, that same believer—on account of Christ’s work on the cross!—also fulfills the law into eternity because even if faith and hope one day pass away, love, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:8, never ends. Another way of saying all of this in one shot, I think, was found already in Psalm 119: “I incline my heart to perform your statutes, *forever*” (Ps 119:112, emphasis added).