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# Eschatology and Fanaticism in the Reformation Era: Luther and the Anabaptists

Carter Lindberg

Eschatology<sup>1</sup> may, in reality, be the last word, but that has not precluded a seemingly everlasting discussion of it. Furthermore, it seems that recently everyone has something to say about it. Indeed, the millennium has been a growth industry not just for computer firms fixing their own self-made problems, but for the media and, of course, for academe. One entrepreneurial professor even got funding to set up a Center for Millennial Studies. Ironically, its future will now have to concentrate on the past! That, of course is the difference between futurology and the Advent gospel. "Briefly, the 'future' is a mere projection of the past. Advent, on the other hand, identifies what is coming in terms of the power of *potential over reality*, the future over the past. . . ."<sup>2</sup> We look to He who is to come. Here is Luther's map through this swamp: salvation is received, not achieved; God reaches us, we do not reach God. Thus Luther explains the petition, "Thy kingdom come." "What does this mean? Answer: To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us. How is this done? Answer: When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both here in time and hereafter forever."<sup>3</sup> In his explanation of the Lord's Prayer, Luther maintained the eschatological orientation of the petition, casting aside everything that could smack of achievement or merit.

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<sup>1</sup>Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, editors, *Last Things: Death and Apocalyptic in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 257 note 1: "Eschatology is a modern coinage apparently used by Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider in 1804; medieval thinkers spoke of *novissima* or *res novissimae*."

<sup>2</sup>Steven Paulson, "The Place of Eschatology in Modern Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (Autumn 1998): 333 with reference to Jürgen Moltmann's *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*.

<sup>3</sup>*Small Catechism* in Theodore Tappert, editor, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 346. One may also see the explanation in the *Large Catechism*, 426-428, and Albrecht Peters, *Kommentar zu Luthers Katechismen*. Band 3: *Das Vaterunser*, edited by Gottfried Seebass (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 70-87.

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What distinguishes Luther and the fanatics in their understandings of eschatology is their respective fundamental theological orientations toward justification. We will return to this point, but first we will briefly review the medieval context for the eschatological convictions of the Reformers.

### The Medieval Heritage<sup>4</sup>

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were heirs to vivid eschatological currents that crested in apocalyptic and chiliastic waves of lyrics, dramatic poetry, Antichrist plays, visionary literature, woodcuts, and revolutionary social-political prophecies. Architectural art over church portals and main altars portrayed Christ as an enthroned judge with a sword and a lily on opposite sides of His mouth. While the lily represented resurrection to heaven, the sword of judgment to eternal torment was more vivid in the minds of most people.<sup>5</sup> A sandstone relief of this common depiction of Christ in the Wittenberg parish churchyard so terrified Luther that he refused to look at it.

The best known of medieval eschatologists is probably the Calabrian Abbot, Joachim of Fiore (died 1202), who prophesied a future perfected age colored by revolutionary expectations. After the Age of the Father (the history of the Old Testament), followed by the Age of the Son (the history of the New Testament and the clerical church), there would be the Age of the Spirit and the *ecclesia spiritualis*. He calculated the second age would end around 1260 with a major persecution of the church, to be followed by the third age of spiritual bliss ideally expressed in the form of monasticism. Implicit here is the displacement of the clerical hierarchy. "The very expectation of a time when the ruling hierarchy would no longer exist was a basic challenge to the papacy. . . . The New Age of the

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<sup>4</sup>What follows is informed by the articles on eschatology and apocalyptic in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (TRE). TRE 3: "Apokalyptik: VI. Mittelalter (by Robert Konrad). VII. Reformation und Neuzeit (by Gottfried Seebass);" TRE 10: "Eschatologie: VI. Mittelalter (by Robert E. Lerner); VII. Reformation und Neuzeit (by Ulrich Asendorf)." One may also see Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1992), 1-17.

<sup>5</sup>Isaiah 49:2, "He made my mouth like a sharp sword." Revelation 1:16, "from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword."

Spirit will build upon new foundations and put an end to the rule of the successor to Peter!"<sup>6</sup>

The Spiritual Franciscans utilized Joachim's ideas in their controversies over the ideal of poverty. They conceived of themselves as the "vanguard of the third kingdom, the kingdom of the Spirit."<sup>7</sup> Social-revolutionary ideas came to the fore with the pseudo-Joachimite tract, *Super Hieremiam Prophetam* (end of thirteenth century), which criticized the papacy for resisting the coming thousand-year kingdom of peace. Two of the basic ideas of the *Super Hieremiam* are "a vehement anticlericalism and the steadfast conviction that the existing order in the Church and society will be overthrown by a radical revolution and that this order will be replaced by a kingdom of peace and justice. It is precisely these ideas which we find in Thomas Müntzer." Indeed, Müntzer "lauds the Calabrian abbot for his commentary on Jeremiah which he claims to know and to have read."<sup>8</sup>

The fourteenth century also expected the end of the world. The lay theologian Arnold of Villanova (*De adventu Antichristi*, circa 1288) expected the Antichrist to appear around 1378, a date that handily coincided with the Western Schism (1378-1415). The Franciscan Minorite, Jean de Roquetaillade, placed the start of the great persecution in the year 1365 and saw the father of the future Antichrist in Friedrich III of Sicily. Joachimite echoes are heard in the fantasies of renewal of the empire. The Spanish Dominican penitential preacher, Vincent Ferrar, wrote in 1402 to Pope Benedict XIII that the Antichrist would be born in 1403. Chiliasm became widespread in Europe through the Hussite movement that also propagated Wycliffite and Waldensian concepts of the Antichrist in the structure of the Roman church.<sup>9</sup> Hussite expectations of the end were

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<sup>6</sup>Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 58.

<sup>7</sup>Oberman, *Luther*, 59.

<sup>8</sup>E. M. V. M. Honée, "The Radical Reformer Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525): The Impact of Mystical and Apocalyptic Traditions on his Theological Thought" in Michael Wilks, editor, *Prophecy and Eschatology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 68. Honée refers to Marjorie Reeves' detailed description of this tract in her *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup>One may see Milan Opocenský, "Eschatology and Social Transformation: The Legacy of the First Reformation," *Brethren Life and Thought* 36 (Spring 1991): 92-101; Milic of Kromeriz (died 1374), *The Message for the Last Days. Three Essays from the Year 1367*, edited by Milan Opocenský and Jana Opocenská (Geneva: World Alliance of

chilastically expressed by the Taborites already in 1419. The old world was expected to end in 1419, and Christ would return in 1420.

By the second half of the fifteenth century the threat of the Turks increased eschatological anxiety. In the context of widespread insecurity, the old prophecies gained new attention in astrological forecasts as well as artistic productions. The most famous artistic depiction, but by no means the only one, is Dürer's *Apocalypse* series that appeared in 1498. "It is a dramatic sequence—oppressive, alarming in its reality, heralding disaster. . . . [Dürer] ventured to depict never seen, unimaginable things, events outside space and time, thunder and lightning, conflagrations and voices—the alleluias of the blessed and the despairing groans of the damned."<sup>10</sup>

In 1507 Josef Grünpeck published his *Neuen Auslegung der seltsamen Wunderzeichen* that included a woodcut depicting recently seen heavenly signs of the near end of the world. In the upper right of the picture a knight, the rider of the Apocalypse, leads an army flying over a walled city. Lances fly in all directions; a pillar topples from the upper left corner, and stones fly through the air; crosses, monstrances, flagellants' whips, as well as the instruments of Christ's passion, are also falling from the sky past the sun surrounded by rings. These signs of suffering and martyrdom accompany the vision of war breaking out in heaven. In the bottom half of the picture a flood endangers the city; a peasant hangs from a tree; a woman kills her suckling child so that it may not suffer the coming terror; and the bodies of suicides drape rocks. The picture leaves no doubt that the end is near.<sup>11</sup>

Such images of the collapse of the usual order of life increase in number around 1500. The anxieties and yearnings expressed in these images often focus on the clergy, the traditional supporters and defenders of order, who themselves turn out to be the source of disorder. Thus the clergy are

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Reformed Churches, 1998). The relationship of Taborite apocalypticism and Thomas Müntzer is examined by Reinhard Schwarz, *Die apokalyptische Theologie Thomas Müntzers und der Taboriten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977).

<sup>10</sup>Karl-Adolf Knappe, *Dürer: The Complete Engravings, Etchings, and Woodcuts* (Seacaucus, New Jersey: Wellfleet Press, n. d.), xxi.

<sup>11</sup>Han-Jürgen Goertz, *Antiklerikalismus und Reformation: Sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1995), 7. One may also see 'aul A. Russell, *Lay Theology in the Reformation: Popular Pamphleteers in Southwest Germany 1521-1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 47.

transformed into beasts and monsters. The pope appears as a monstrous multiple image: part ass, part whore, part scaly animal, part griffin. He is no longer the representative of Christ on earth, but rather the Antichrist who sits in the inner sanctum of Christendom. Later, the Cranach workshop will repeat these images in the woodcut series of the "Papal Ass of Rome"<sup>12</sup> and the *Passional Christi et Antichristi* series of woodcuts (1521). The Cranach woodcuts for Luther's Bible translations, especially the Apocalypse series, powerfully expressed his views of the papacy by placing the triple crown on the heads of the beast (Revelation 11; 16) and the harlot (Revelation 17).<sup>13</sup>

This is an appropriate place to pause for a brief reflection on the charge that scatology displaced eschatology in the old Luther. Referring to Luther's vehement anti-papal tract, *Against the Roman Papacy, Instituted by the Devil*,<sup>14</sup> Gordon Rupp remarked: "Somewhat reminiscent of Cochlaeus's attack on Luther in 1529, argument is swallowed up in scurrility, though in this case scatology takes the place of eschatology."<sup>15</sup> More recently Mark U. Edwards concluded: "The older Luther was a man who saw the world engaged in a metaphysical struggle between good and evil. He was a man gripped by apocalyptic hopes and fears; . . . So as his own death neared, bringing with it both promised relief and fear for the fate of the movement after his death, he became ever more pessimistic, praying not only for his own release but for the end of the

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<sup>12</sup>One may see WA 11:357.

<sup>13</sup>The protest of Duke George of Albertine Saxony led to the reduction of the triple crown to a single crown in Luther's "December Testament." But Duke George's court secretary, Jerome Emser, bought the woodcuts from Cranach for his own Bible intended to compete with Luther's; these woodcuts included other polemical scenes directed at the Roman Church. The woodcuts also influenced monumental frescoes in the Greek Orthodox monasteries of Athos, Greece—in a community that did not recognize the Apocalypse as canonical. Winfried Vogel, "The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther. Part II: Luther's Exposition of Daniel and Revelation," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25 (Summer 1987): 196-198.

<sup>14</sup>LW 41: 263-376; WA 54: 206-99.

<sup>15</sup>Gordon Rupp, "Luther Against 'The Turk, The Pope, And The Devil'" in Peter Newman Brooks, editor, *Seven-Headed Luther: Essays in Commemoration of a Quincentenary 1483-1983* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 270. Rupp adds: "The odd thing is that when Lukas Cranach drew a set of obscene illustrations to accompany the text, Luther was genuinely shocked, a spontaneous and almost old-maidish reaction, as we learn from his letters to intimate friends. But there it is, a repulsive document."

world."<sup>16</sup> Heiko Oberman, however, argues that Luther's language reflects neither the crudities of the time nor senility and the rantings of an aging, disappointed man, but is rather what a rhetorician may term "frank speech," that is, "exposure by confrontation." Luther's ferocious language "has the double purpose of unmasking the devil and shouting to God (*clamare, schreien*), so loud that he will intervene to skin the devil and expose him for all to see." Oberman asserts that "we will fail to grasp his [Luther's] self-understanding if we do not see him as emerging from the beginning of his public career onward as the apocalyptic prophet at the end of time, placed in the increasing power struggle between God and the devil."<sup>17</sup>

Oberman's argument is an important contribution to current debates on Reformation historiography, but it should not obscure the fact that all early Reformation preaching was imbued with eschatology. Bernd Moeller's examination of Reformation sermons claims they were "battle cries" in the widely perceived eschatological situation. In the presence of this sense of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, preachers depicted Roman opposition as anti-Christian. Moeller goes on to state that "Heiko Oberman's theory that Luther's eschatological orientation sets him apart from the rest of the Reformation finds no support in our texts, and so cannot be confirmed for this early period."<sup>18</sup>

Returning to images, a particularly impressive figure that developed during the Hussite revolt is a seven-headed beast with an enormous insect body embracing the dignitaries of the church, holding prisoner the pope, cardinals, and bishops. In another image this beast is shoved into the jaws of hell by a pious man. Here the pope is not the prisoner of the beast but rather is incorporated into the body of the beast—in a

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<sup>16</sup>Mark U. Edwards, *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics 1531-46* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 208. One may also see his chapter five: "Apocalyptic Expectations: The Scourge of God." For Edwards' discussion of *Against the Papacy at Rome*, one may see 182-200.

<sup>17</sup>Heiko A. Oberman, "Teufelsdreck: Eschatology and Scatology in the 'Old' Luther," in his *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 64-65. For further discussion of Luther's scatological language one may see Josef Schmidt, "Luther the Satirist: Strategies and Function of His Satire" in Gerhard Dünhaupt, editor, *The Martin Luther Quincentennial* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985), 32-47.

<sup>18</sup>Bernd Moeller, "What Was Preached in German Towns in the Early Reformation?" in Dixon, *The German Reformation*, 44.



Kafkaesque metamorphosis. The threatened change of the world is interpreted by the perverse change of the body.

Another aspect often present in these images is noteworthy. Women attack cardinals, bishops, priests, and monks, beating them with flails, pitchforks, and sticks; they throw water on them, and children throw stones at the clergy who are already on the ground. What kind of clergy are they who allow the weaker sex to beat them? In the words of Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1537: Everything has gotten out of hand. This is "the world turned upside down." In another of Grünpeck's tracts (*Ein spiegel der natürlichen himmlischen und prophetischen sehungen all trübsalen, angst und not*), published in 1508, there is an image of an upside-down church, resting on its steeple. The church contains peasants celebrating Mass at the altar; outside in the field, nobles and clergy are plowing. The order of estates is reversed when the church is upside down. The image is not a description of the present, but the terrifying vision of the future. But such pictures are ambivalent. On the one hand, they lament the relationships which could be destroyed, and on the other hand, they nourish the dream of retributive justice on earth.<sup>19</sup> The virulent anticlericalism of late medieval apocalypticism and chiliasm provided a potent brew for the *Schwärmer* of the sixteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

### Reformation

Even our brief comments illustrate the profound impact of the church's eschatology upon the people. To be sure, these images convey social and ecclesiastical criticism, but what gives them so much power is the encounter with the judging Christ, not only at death but also at the Last Day, perceived so imminent in the terrible signs and events of the times. Exactly this conception of judgment profoundly disturbed the thoughts and conscience of the Augustinian Eremite, Martin Luther. He confessed his fearful anxiety of the last judgment in his 1545 autobiographical reminiscence. The great decisive turn in his theology, the so-called

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<sup>19</sup>Goertz, *Antiklerikalismus*, 9-10.

<sup>20</sup>Klaassen, *Living at the End*, 17: "Joachim had made much of the fact that the spiritual men could be taught directly by God and would in fact flee from what was then regarded as knowledge. This note began to increase in volume, in considerable part because popular prophetism was profoundly anticlerical. It led ultimately to the conclusion that when simple people began to speak for themselves and provide their own answers to the questions of faith, the endtime had arrived."

"Tower Experience," occurred precisely in relation to the last judgment. His discovery of the gospel basically changed his view of Christ's return and the last judgment. He now understood Christ's return and judgment as the joyous redemption of Christ's believing community. He could now unreservedly long for and pray: "come, dear last day."<sup>21</sup> In Luther's theology, eschatology functions to proclaim the gospel in a new key; it is to "strengthen our faith and to awaken our hope for the blessed day of our salvation." His commentary on Daniel does not end in despair, but with joyful anticipation of the "promised and certain" future return of our Savior Jesus Christ as a "blessed and glad salvation from this vale of misery and woe."<sup>22</sup> This is pastoral care at its best!

Leading contemporary Luther scholars emphasize the inseparable and intimate connection of eschatology and justification in Luther's biography and theology.<sup>23</sup> "Since in Reformation thinking justification is the *unconditional* acceptance of the sinner, for Christ's sake and not because of any previous, present or future quality in his life and morals, and is always founded outside of us in God himself—since that is the case, justification acquires an eschatological meaning in the Reformation that is foreign to it in Catholic theology."<sup>24</sup>

In Luther's doctrine of justification, the concept of death and the last judgment are of fundamental significance. Justification is received here and now, but will receive its full realization in the moment of judgment

<sup>21</sup>Ole Modalsli, "Luther über die Letzten Dinge," in Helmar Junghans, editor, *Leben und Werk Martin Luthers von 1526 bis 1546*, 2 volumes (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 1: 331.

<sup>22</sup>Vogel, "Luther's Eschatological Theology," 188-189 with reference to WA DB 11/2: 50; 130.

<sup>23</sup>One may see George Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought" in his *Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church. Collected Essays*, edited by William R. Russell (Saint Paul: Luther Seminary, 1994), 37-47. Forell's essay provides a review of the literature on the topic up to the late 1960s. Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 345-356; Oberman, *Luther*, passim; Oswald Bayer, "Rupture of Times: Luther's Relevance for Today," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (Spring 1999): 34-50; Oswald Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 140-154; Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 36-48, 124-28.

<sup>24</sup>Berndt Hamm, "What Was the Reformation Doctrine of Justification?" in C. Scott Dixon, editor, *The German Reformation: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 73.

before the eternal God. "Luther's stance toward death and judgment is therefore the touchstone of his biography as well as his theology for the truth and genuineness of all statements. A theology which does not include this horizon of the end-time in its reflections, misses the truth of the gospel as well as also the reality of human existence."<sup>25</sup> In this light, Luther rethought the whole of theology. Luther did speak of the immortality of the soul, but not in the sense of Hellenists and scholastics. Rather, Luther's argument for the immortality of the soul is strictly theological: God is the God of the living. "When we are dead, we are nevertheless not dead to God. For he is not a God of the dead, but rather the God of Abraham, etc., who are living, as Mt. 22:32 says, they are not dead but live to me."<sup>26</sup> "He [God] speaks however only to men. Thus where and to whom God always speaks, be it in wrath or in grace, he is certainly immortal. The person of the speaking God and the Word make clear that we are such creations with whom God wills to speak into eternity and in an immortal manner."<sup>27</sup> Luther is convinced that because God has created persons and speaks with them, the relationship between God and persons never ends. In the center of Luther's thought stands the view that community with God and with Christ does not cease through death, not because the human soul has an eternal essence, but rather because God has created man and speaks with him.

Death and judgment are connected. Here, however, Luther parts with the tradition that expects the last judgment at the end of history. In *Anfechtungen* he had already experienced *Angst* and terror before the last judgment, but with the discovery of the gospel he can rejoice over the last judgment and pray: "Come, [dear last] judgment, Amen."<sup>28</sup> On the basis of John 3:18, "Whoever believes in him will not be judged," Luther was convinced that whoever believes in Christ already is delivered from judgment and need not fear the last judgment.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Luther often emphasized that all our earthly conceptions are inadequate in view of the situation after death. "Before God Adam is as

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<sup>25</sup>Lohse, *Luthers Theologie*, 346. The following discussion of Luther's view of personal death and the goal of history depends heavily upon Lohse, 346-356.

<sup>26</sup>WA 37: 149,19-21.

<sup>27</sup>WA 43: 481, 32-35.

<sup>28</sup>WA Br 9 Nr. 3512, 17.

<sup>29</sup>WA 47: 102, 19-33.

present as the last man."<sup>30</sup> Thus Luther speaks of the abolition of time not only in view of personal subjective awareness, but also in view of God's eternity. Space and time are our categories and world, and these categories are not valid in view of God's eternity. The last judgment is an event that, on the one hand, occurs at the end of time, and on the other hand, occurs for every individual already after his death.

Not only the individual, but also history as such, proceeds toward an end. The expectation of the end of history belongs essentially to the Christian faith since the early church. Eschatology thus is not individualistic—though it is certainly personal!—but relates to the kingdom of Christ, the "mystical body of Christ."<sup>31</sup>

This lengthy treatment of Luther's view of the individual's death is generated in response to the recent popular Luther biography by Richard Marius, which presents Luther as a "catastrophe in the history of Western civilization" because he was obsessed by the fear of death. Marius presents a Luther so preoccupied with the terror of death that when not immobilized by profound depression he projected his fear unto others (for example, the pope, scholastic theologians, the peasants, the Jews) in deadly rages. "Luther," Marius wrote, "was preoccupied with death, and still more with what came afterwards. Luther said that the souls of the dead sleep until the day of doom. A never-ending sleep was the ultimate horror, the ultimate sign of the wrath of God, and nothingness the ultimate terror."<sup>32</sup> Luther said just the opposite. Luther summarized his view of death in his lecture on Psalm 90: "The law says: 'In the midst of life we are surrounded by death,' but the gospel reverses this sentence: 'In the midst of death we are surrounded by life because we have the forgiveness of sins.'"<sup>33</sup> Were Luther so terrified of death, it would be strange for him to reverse the medieval *dies irae* to an invocation of the *liebe jüngsten Tag* – "come blessed Last Day."<sup>34</sup> For the Christian, death

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<sup>30</sup>WA 14: 70, 8-71, 5.

<sup>31</sup>One may see Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 510.

<sup>32</sup>Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 484-485. One may see the review in *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (Autumn 1999): 359-362.

<sup>33</sup>WA 40 III: 496, 4f: "Das ist vox legis: Mitten: Vox Euangelii: Media etc., quia remissionem peccatorum habemus."

<sup>34</sup>WA Br 9 Nr. 3512,17.

loses its terror and becomes "sleep" when received in faith; the last judgment loses its menace because it is the coming day of salvation based in justification. Thus with Simeon (Luke 2:29) Luther can petition to go forth in peace for his eyes have seen his salvation.<sup>35</sup>

Because Luther understands the justification of the sinner eschatologically-forensically in faith in Jesus Christ, he projects final salvation as always hidden in the life of the Christian and the church. "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there also is life and blessedness." Salvation is completely revealed in the eschatological future. In faith in God's promise the Christian anticipates eschatological salvation and passes through death to eternal life. All certainty about death depends upon God's word. Luther concentrates the conceptions of futuristic eschatology, which he shares with his time, theologically in the certainty that all who die in faith have their place in God's word and promise in Jesus Christ. They rest in Christ's bosom.<sup>36</sup>

We have seen that the later Middle Ages, as well as the early Reformation period, were partially characterized by an extraordinarily strong apocalypticism. Luther also shared, within limits, these apocalyptic convictions. It was above all Thomas Müntzer, along with various others of the "Left Wing" of the Reformation, in particular Melchior Hoffman and his followers in the city of Münster, who emphasized an apocalyptic chiliasm. As much as Luther continually referred to the imminent inbreaking of the end time, he still reckoned with a longer historical development: "I know full well that before me and after me the world remains and will remain."<sup>37</sup> Faith recognizes the signs of the time which are hidden from the world, but Luther did not accept calculations of its arrival.<sup>38</sup> Thus, for example, he rejected as lies and temptations the calculations of his student, Michael Stiefel, that Christ would return on October 19, 1533.<sup>39</sup> With the Augustinian tradition

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<sup>35</sup>Lohse, *Luthers Theologie*, 352 with references to WA 35: 439, 2 and AWA 4 (1985): 78:229-231.

<sup>36</sup>WA 30/1: 316, 19f; WA 17/2: 229, 28; WA 43: 481, 32-35; WA 31/1: 456, 8; WA 43: 361, 3.19; Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, "Luther II," TRE: 560.

<sup>37</sup>WA Br 1, Nr. 177, 21f.

<sup>38</sup>WA 17/1: 148, 13; 10/1/2: 93, 21-28.

<sup>39</sup>Stiefel's (also spelled Stifel and Styfel; died 1567) interpretations of Revelation and Daniel convinced him that Luther was God's avenging angel chosen to reveal the treacheries of the Antichrist. In his later years his numerical interests contributed

of the church, Luther rejected chiliasm.<sup>40</sup> He does not interpret Revelation 20 as eschatological but as church historical. In his *Supputatio annorum mundi*, he interpreted the 1000 years of Revelation 20:3-7 as the time from Christ to the eleventh century.<sup>41</sup> After this, Satan did his foul work, and the papacy (since Gregory VII) became possessed by the Antichrist, who rules by the sword.<sup>42</sup> In this time of affliction for the church and authorities, Luther awaits—without temporal calculation—for the return of Christ and the “dear last Day.”<sup>43</sup>

The appearance of the so-called *Schwärmer* strengthened Luther’s expectation of the end time that derived from his view of the papacy. The pope, according to Luther, does not accept Christ and His word. Luther is convinced that thereby the Antichrist himself is present in the church, as the Bible already prophesies. Already late medieval polemics against Rome often characterized the pope as the Antichrist, but Luther provides a new basis for this charge in claiming that the pope wills to stand above God’s word. Expectations of the end time were also stimulated by the danger of the Turks. In 1526 the Hungarian forces suffered disastrous defeat at Mohács, and in the fall of 1529 a Turkish ruler stood for the first time before Vienna. In the advance of the Turks, Luther saw a punishment of God, indeed a mobilization of Satan in the final conflict. Thus he could view the papacy and the Turks in common. “The pope is the spirit of the Antichrist, and the Turk is the flesh of the Antichrist. They assist each other in killing, the latter bodily with the sword, and the former by doctrine and spiritually.”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand Luther rejected the concept of a crusade against the Turks. It could be that the end of the world comes by the Turks, but then the end of the Turks would also occur. One should not seek God’s secret counsel, but should do what one is entrusted to do. When this occurs in faith, then one need not fear before

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to his works on mathematics in which he provided “original contributions relevant to the discovery of logarithms and the application of binomial coefficients.” Richard Ernest Walker, s.v. “Stifel, Michael” in Hans J. Hillerbrand, editor, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4:112-113.

<sup>40</sup>WA 41: 121, 13.

<sup>41</sup>WA 53: 22-184.

<sup>42</sup>WA 53: 152-154.

<sup>43</sup>Zur Mühlen, “Luther II,” 560. One may also see Vogel, “Luther’s Eschatological Theology,” 187-188.

<sup>44</sup>WA TR 1 Nr. 330.

the apocalyptic enemies – the pope and the Turk.<sup>45</sup> Thus Luther rejects speculation about the kind and manner of completion of history.

### Reformation: The "Fanatics"

As we have seen, Luther was well aware of the medieval apocalyptic traditions, and used them against the papacy, the Turks, and the *Schwärmer*.<sup>46</sup> The fanatics' pervasive apocalyptic and chiliastic convictions led them to view history more univocally as a fall than did Luther. Also their prime concern was not for the coming end and the union with Christ, but for the destruction of all sinners by God's judgment; above all the clergy of both the Roman and Reformation churches, as well as the princes. The representatives of such apocalyptic often identified themselves as figures of the final drama, co-consummators of the apocalyptic end time.<sup>47</sup> These convictions dominate the Zwickau Prophets, Thomas Müntzer, and his disciple, Hans Hut.

Melchior Hofman's apocalyptic conception, while not entirely independent of that of the Zwickau Prophets and Müntzer, had its own character. Initially a follower of Luther, he was nevertheless also imbued from the start with a medieval apocalypticism and spiritualism. He calculated the cataclysmic end of the world for 1533, to be followed by the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The mighty and the learned would be destroyed and the suffering poor in spirit would be saved. We need not trace the stages of his development that led to his incarceration in Strasbourg and influence upon the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster. However, that he was a precursor of the disaster in that city may be seen in his ideas that the godless must be destroyed before the last judgment, that Christ's Parousia will be preceded by a world-wide theocracy ruled by a new Solomon advised by his prophet Jonah, and that the "apostolic

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<sup>45</sup>One may see George W. Forell, "Luther and the War against the Turks" in his *Martin Luther*, 123-34, and Gregory Miller, *Holy War and Holy Terror: Views of Islam in German Pamphlet Literature 1520-1545*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 1994.

<sup>46</sup>One may see Gottfried Seebass, "Apokalyptik," TRE 3: 280.

<sup>47</sup>John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 231, 232: Luther "never claimed the Reformation as his own work and instead emphasized how he had been drawn unconsciously and helplessly into the matter." "He lacked the immediate self-awareness of the prophet and always wished to have his person disappear behind his work."

messengers" will be invulnerable and invincible.<sup>48</sup> In Luther's mind, however, fanatics such as Hoffman and his followers, the upheavals in the city of Münster, and the Peasants' War all stemmed from the Reformation's poster child of apocalyptic chiliasm — Thomas Müntzer.<sup>49</sup> Again, we need not detail the tumultuous course of Müntzer's career to its torturous end after the battle at Frankenhausen in 1525.<sup>50</sup> Rather, we can summarize his self-understanding by reference to his self-description as the sickle and hammer of God sent to prepare for the kingdom by destroying all the godless.<sup>51</sup>

In his *Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel* (1524), known as the "Sermon to the Princes," Müntzer proclaimed that "a godless man has no right to live." In the next breath, Müntzer sharply expressed the difference between his reform and Luther's: "But our scholars come and — in their godless, fraudulent way — understand Daniel to say that the Antichrist should be destroyed without human hands."<sup>52</sup> A year later he exhorted his followers to action in the Peasants' War:

Show no pity . . . Pay no attention to the cries of the godless. . . . Go to it, go to it, while the fire is hot! Don't let your sword grow cold,

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<sup>48</sup>Klaus Depperman, *Melchior Hoffman: Social Unrest and Apocalyptic Visions in the Age of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 384-390.

<sup>49</sup>One may see Gottfried Seebass, "Reich Gottes und Apokalyptik bei Thomas Müntzer," *Lutherjahrbuch* 58 (1991): 75-99.

<sup>50</sup>For the stories of Müntzer and the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster, see Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), chapters 6 and 8.

<sup>51</sup>James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1973), 81: "What gave such pertinence and urgency to the wielding of the Sword against the godless was Müntzer's certainty that he was living in the last days of the world and that his time would see the Church brought to a fulfillment even greater than the Church of the Apostles. The names he gave himself and Martin Luther were full of apocalyptic significance. Like Melchior Hoffman, he thought of himself as Elijah, the messenger of the Apocalypse, and two of his names for Luther ('the spiritless, soft-living flesh at Wittenberg [Jude Epistle]' and 'Virgin Martin, the chaste Babylonian woman [Rev. 18]' made his enemy into an apocalyptic villain whose coming had been foretold for the last days. Driven by the belief that he was the 'grace-filled servant of God' who must step forth to renew the Church by the bitter truth, he sought for signs from God in events around him. From 1521 on to the end of his life he lived in anticipation of a Judgment in which he would participate as leader of the transfigured latter-day Church."

<sup>52</sup>Peter Matheson, translator and editor, *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 248-250.



don't let it hang down limply! Hammer away ding-dong on the anvils of Nimrod [the princes], cast their tower to the ground! As long as they live it is impossible for you to rid yourselves of the fear of men. One cannot say anything to you about God as long as they rule over you. Go to it, go to it, while it is day! God goes before you; follow, follow!<sup>53</sup>

Müntzer understood himself to be the sickle with which Christ will complete the last judgment (Revelation 14:15: "And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice . . . 'Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.'") and the hammer that shatters the rock (Jeremiah 23:29: "Is not my Word like a fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that shatters the rock?"). The sickle is an ambivalent symbol that refers to death and the consequent new life. It recalls, on the one hand, the temporal limitations of all existence. On the other hand, the sickle creates room for new growth for it allows the roots and seeds to remain. Also the sickle of the waxing moon as the female counterpart to the sun might refer to fruitfulness, especially in relation to the mother Mary enthroned. The sickle thus belongs to the apocalyptic signs of finality and eternity as well as death and life. The symbol of the sickle underscores the necessity of a complete development of apocalyptic. Similar ambivalent connotations relate to the hammer. It is an instrument of powerful destruction and also of construction.<sup>54</sup>

The difference between Luther's and Müntzer's self-perceptions as reformers is illustrated by the artwork of their followers. A woodcut from the Cranach workshop shows God the Father sending one angel with a sickle to harvest the wheat and another angel with a knife to harvest the grapes. The apocalyptic event is presented through the angel as an invisible, spiritual event. This image of the angel as harvester corresponds with Luther's understanding of Scripture wherein the harvest, according to Daniel 8:25, will take place without "human hands."

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<sup>53</sup>Matheson, *Müntzer*, 141-142. In the last phase of the Peasants' War, Müntzer referred to himself as the "sword of Gideon" (Judges 6-9). The Münsterites also believed themselves called by their baptism (one may see Ezekiel 9:4-11) to be executioners of the godless. One may see Klaassen, *Living at the End*, 110-111.

<sup>54</sup>Dieter Fauth, "Apokalyptik in der frühen Reformation," *Entwurf 2* (September 1997): 49.

However, the Nuremberg Dürer student, Bartel Beham, one of the three so-called "godless painters" of Nuremberg, depicted the angel of Revelation 14:14-20, sent to earth to carry out the apocalyptic judgment of God, as a peasant in his woodcut for an edition of the New Testament of 1524. Thus he gave social concreteness to the image. In 1524, when Beham was creating his woodcut, Müntzer was also in the city. At the beginning of 1525, Beham was expelled from the city because he had read Müntzer's writings.<sup>55</sup> Already by 1521 Müntzer had connected apocalyptic and harvest symbolism from Revelation 14. He wrote to the Bohemians: "O ho, how ripe the rotten apples are! O ho, how rotten have the elect become! The time of harvest has come! That is why he himself [God] has hired me for his harvest. I have sharpened my sickle, . . . I call down curses on the unbelievers."<sup>56</sup> The work with the sickle is, according to Müntzer, to be realized in a two-fold way: Internally in studying "the living Word of God," as it works in one's soul, for example in dreams; externally, by fighting the enemies of God and destroying them. In fact, scythes and sickles were the weapons of the rebels. Like Müntzer, Beham grasped the entire Peasants' War as the apocalyptic work of God. Their views of apocalyptic coincided with the conviction that this was a "Holy War."<sup>57</sup> Beham and Dürer stood under the influence of Müntzer with regard to the Peasants' War, which he characterized as the apocalyptic end time event. Müntzer compared the present time to that of humankind before the flood. No one is prepared for the deluge to come for there is a little faith now as during the time of Noah. Dürer described and painted – in watercolor! – an apocalyptic dream he had five days after the battle of Königshofen/Franken (June 2, 1525):

In the year 1525, on the Wednesday night after Pentecost, I saw in my sleep this vision of great amounts of water that fell from heaven. The first deluge hit the earth about four miles from me with such dreadfulness, with a huge thunderous gush and drowned the whole countryside. I was so terrified that I awoke before the other water fell. And the water that fell there was so much. And some of it fell farther away, some nearer. And it rose so high that it appeared as in slow motion. But as the first water hit the ground came nearer it fell with such speed, with wind and roar that I was so terrified that my

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<sup>55</sup>Fauth, "Apokalyptik," 51.

<sup>56</sup>Matheson, *Müntzer*, 370-71.

<sup>57</sup>Fauth, "Apokalyptik," 51.

whole body was shaking as I awoke and for a long time I could not stop shivering with fear. But when I arose in the morning, I painted it as I had seen it. God changes all things for the best.<sup>58</sup>

Müntzer relied on Matthew 24:1-2, Daniel 7, and Revelation 6 as central apocalyptic biblical texts with their symbols and concepts of suffering, martyrdom, "high time," fire, sword, hammer, anvil, and throne. He expected his faithful to become God's martyrs. According to Revelation 20:4-6, the martyrs shall reign with Christ at the end of time in a thousand-year interim kingdom. In Revelation 7:9-14 they pray before the divine throne to which the counter image is the throne of the godless. The hammer ringing on the anvil of the smithy of a new "high time" in the figure of the legendary Israelite army leader Nimrod shall encourage the faithful by an apocalyptic scenario to change their religious and social situation as the oppressed. In these citations Müntzer fused biblical-apocalyptic symbols with biographical implications. The vocation of minter from which Müntzer's name derived was depicted in the sixteenth century with hammer and die. All told, Müntzer's correspondence shows how he applied apocalyptic biblical texts and symbols directly to his own life relations as well as to his followers. When Beham presented the peasant as the angel executing apocalyptic judgment upon the earth he reflected Müntzer's convictions.

### Conclusion

The fact that in Luther's eyes the world is old and close to its end did not prompt personal despair or a flight from social responsibility or social ethics. The relevance of Luther's eschatology to life in the world is that it frees discipleship and ethics from the contingencies of success. Christians are free to sin boldly because neither their futures nor that of the world are dependent upon the results of their actions. As Luther put it: a cow gives milk because that is what she is made for. This perspective calls into question Robin Barnes' conclusion in his study of Lutheran apocalypticism. Barnes claims that Lutheran apocalypticism

did tend to subordinate earthly hopes so thoroughly to the promise of the coming Kingdom that historical existence could be felt as a heavy and unwanted burden. . . . If the German idea of freedom has differed from that of other Western peoples, perhaps it may be

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<sup>58</sup>Fauth, "Apokalyptik," 51.

traced to a deep and ultimately gnostic revulsion against the reality of history itself, an impatient longing, often inspired but often misdirected for the Kingdom of God.<sup>59</sup>

To the contrary, it was the spirituality of both medieval monasticism and the *Schwärmer* that advocated ascetic rejection of the world. Such a distortion of eschatology is a "thanatos-centric theology" that denigrates the goodness of creation and relativizes earthly solidarity and mutual assistance.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to Müntzer, who refused to rejoice at the birth of his son, Luther understood the eschatological promise as the presupposition and motivation for the creation. Hence the famous line attributed to Luther: "If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." Although this is an apocryphal line, it colorfully sums up Luther's faith.<sup>61</sup> In 1525, Luther saw the Peasants' War as a sign of the imminent end of the world.

During this ending of days, Luther perceived God's creative will and sought 'to spite' the devil by marrying and having a family. Luther's decisions for his personal life were signs of his faith in God the Creator amid apocalyptic storm clouds. 'If I can manage it, before I die I will still marry my Katie to spite the devil. . . . I trust they [the peasants] will not steal my courage and [my] joy. . . . In a short while the true judge will come.'<sup>62</sup>

This brings us back to our opening point that for Luther, eschatology is inseparable from justification. As George Forell puts it: "Luther teaches us that justification by faith without this eschatological dimension is subjectivistic and individualistic self-hypnosis. Against all those

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<sup>59</sup>Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the German Reformation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 266. Barnes' argument goes back to Weber. One may see the rebuttal in Hans-Jürgen Prien, *Luthers Wirtschaftsethik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 88-89; and Carter Lindberg, *Beyond Charity: Reformation Initiatives for the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>60</sup>Petr Pokorný, *Die Zukunft des Glaubens. Sechs Kapitel über Eschatologie* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1992), 97.

<sup>61</sup>One may see Martin Schloemann, "Luthers Apfelbäumchen: Bemerkungen zu Optimismus und Pessimismus in christlichen Selbstverständnis," *Wuppertal Hochschulreden*, Band 7 (1976), 5-24. Schloemann remarks that this saying became popular after World War II.

<sup>62</sup>Bayer, "Rupture of Times," 39, with references to *WA* 18: 277, 35 and *LW* 49:111-12.

theological efforts in our time which attempt to reduce justification to an essentially psychological experience, Luther insists on an objective event at the end of history. . . ." Luther's hope for a real death and a real resurrection ushering in a new age "is not merely a psychological transaction within the mind of the believer or unbeliever, but it is an act of God involving not only the individual but also the individual's community and world. Luther reminds us of the reality of the future as the guarantee of our present experience." Forell continues, "eschatology without justification by faith is mere utopianism. For Luther, it is not history which is redemptive but the Christ who came in history. It is because of Christ's justifying deed that we may have hope. This is as valid against the *Schwärmer* in Luther's time as against those who today see the historical process itself as the agent of redemption."<sup>63</sup> Chiliastic convictions twist utopias into dystopias which enslave and terrify in order to liberate society. Thomas Müntzer and the prophets of the city of Münster are classic examples of enthusiastic engagement in revolutionary terrorism and apocalyptic crusade that "soured into a quasi-criminal struggle for survival and vengeance."<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Luther was not chiliastic, but rather opposed all attempts to bring in the kingdom of God.<sup>65</sup> His theology of the cross stood against the triumphalism of both the papacy and the *Schwärmer*. Indeed, Luther perceived the papacy and the *Schwärmer* as two sides of the same coin of confusion of law and gospel. They were, he said, like two wolves with their tails tied together. "The Anabaptists and sectarians were the new jurists and sophists who . . . effaced in a new way the distinction between the two Regimente. Lastly, the Anabaptists, Sacramentarians, and papists were alike in their abandonment of the gospel for their own special revelations."<sup>66</sup> They all

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<sup>63</sup>Forell, "Justification and Eschatology," 45-46.

<sup>64</sup>Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 197 and following.

<sup>65</sup>Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 511: "Early Lutheranism . . . unanimously and logically rejected every form of chiliasm—open and disguised, courageous and cowardly. Chiliasm would like to assure the halo for itself without paying the necessary theological price for it." One may see the Augsburg Confession, Article XVII; Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 38-39. One may see, however, Heiko Oberman's argument (*The Reformation: Roots and Ramifications* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 47-52) that Melancthon shifted Luther's eschatology toward the "hope for better times."

<sup>66</sup>Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, 250-51. On the papacy as "pure enthusiasm" one may see the Schmalkald Articles III: 8, 4-5; William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,

wanted to "Christianize" the social order, purifying it of those who were not elect in their eyes. For Luther, "the gospel's *primary* function is not—as assumed today, and was indeed the case in the City Reformation—to change *obvious* injustice by introducing social legislation to establish *biblical* justice, but to unmask *hidden* injustice, thus saving the souls of duped Christians and opening the eyes of the secular authorities for their mandate to establish *civil* justice."<sup>67</sup> When the gospel is made the blueprint for society it becomes a new, more oppressive, and terrifying law.

Finally, as Gerhard Forde has made so clear, theology is for proclamation.<sup>68</sup> Luther's eschatology is proclamation at its best. The return of Christ shall defeat the Antichrist. Luther's eschatology thus functions as pastoral care. Here he took over the early church's view of the consoling function of apocalyptic. In this sense the book of Revelation may be described as the gospel in another key. In his 1530 Preface to Revelation, Luther's fundamental perspective was based in justification and the certainty of salvation. "If only the word of the gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst. As we see here in this book, that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with his saints, and wins the final victory."<sup>69</sup> So also Luther ended his Preface to the Book of Daniel. "Whoever would read them [Daniel's visions and dreams] with profit must not depend entirely upon the histories or stick exclusively to history, but rather refresh and comfort his heart with the promised and certain advent of our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the blessed and joyful redemption from this vale of misery and wretchedness."<sup>70</sup> Thus in contrast to the medieval fear of the Judgment Day, "Dies irae, dies ille" (day of wrath, day of mourning), Luther prayed "Maranatha" — "come Lord Jesus." The "blessed Last Day" is God's work of deliverance.<sup>71</sup>

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1995), 92-93.

<sup>67</sup>Oberman, "Teufelsdreck," 62.

<sup>68</sup>One may see his *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>69</sup>LW 35:411.

<sup>70</sup>LW 35:316.

<sup>71</sup>One may see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 419-425; Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede*, 151-152; Vogel, "Luther's Eschatological Theology," 196.