
THE
EMERGENCE
OF
EVANGELICALISM

EXPLORING
HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES

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8. THE EVANGELICAL CHARACTER OF MARTIN LUTHER'S FAITH

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Martin Luther was an evangelical. Although he was certainly the heir of a catholic tradition, what was new about his faith and the movement he initiated was his understanding of the gospel, the *Evangelium* in both of Luther's languages, German and Latin.¹ 'Evangelical' (German *evangelisch*; Latin *evangelicus*), therefore, is a term Luther employed positively to describe true Christianity;²

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1. Just how 'new' Luther's faith was is a matter for debate. As far as he was concerned, it was a return to the teachings of Paul and the New Testament; for his opponents it was a departure from what the church had always taught. In either case, however, what Luther taught about salvation marked a significant departure from contemporary scholastic theologians. See Heiko A. Oberman, "'*Iustitia Christi*" and "'*Iustitia Dei*": Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification', in his *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1986), pp. 104-125; Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 1-20; and the title essay in George Yule (ed.), *Luther: Theologian for Catholics and Protestants* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985), pp. 1-22.
 2. E.g. as early as the Leipzig Debate (1519), Luther said that among the articles of John Hus and the Bohemians, 'many were plainly most Christian and evangelical [*evangelicos*]', cited Otto Seitz (ed.), *Der authentische Text der Leipziger Disputation*

and very early it was associated with the Protestant Reformation as a whole.³ Of course, the mere label does not mean that evangelicals of the eighteenth century or of today, for that matter, have anything in common with Luther. But if we examine the content of Luther's faith, we shall soon see that there are important continuities between the beliefs of the Reformer and later evangelicals.

Footnote 2 (*Continued*)

(Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Son, 1903), p. 87. Similarly, in the Galatians lectures of the same year, Luther uses the expression 'evangelical truth' for Paul's message. In this chapter, citations of the original text of Luther's works are from the critical edition, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vols. 1– (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–) (hereafter cited as *WA*). The Galatians citation is *WA* 2:451.26. Unless otherwise noted, the English language Luther quotations in this chapter are from Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86) (hereafter cited as *LW*). Later in his career, in the Genesis lectures (1535–45), Luther still employs the Latin term positively as e.g. 'evangelical freedom' (*WA* 43:322.38, 323.21; and *WA* 44:178.18) and 'evangelical hymn' (*WA* 43:219.38). For Luther's use of the German term, see Ph. Dietz, *Wörterbuch zu Dr. Martin Luthers deutschen Schriften* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1961*), under 'Evangelisch'. In his New Testament (1522), Luther used *evangelisch* in 2 Tim. 4:5, 'Do the work of an evangelical preacher' (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Die Deutsche Bibel*, 12 vols. [Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1906–61], vol. 7, p. 280; hereafter *WADB*); and in his introduction to the New Testament, he complained that the book of James had 'no evangelical form' in it (*WADB* 6:10.34). The next year, when he began to publish the Old Testament, he described Genesis as 'an exceedingly evangelical book' (*WADB* 8:12.33).

3. Luther referred to the 'party of the gospel' among the Augustinians in a letter to John Lang in 1521 (*D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. [Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1930–85], vol. 2, p. 413.4–5). In sermons on the Gospel of John that Luther preached in the 1530s, he referred to his faction as those called 'evangelical' in contrast to the papists, but he was also highly critical of them (*WA* 46:656.6–10; see also *WA* 47:94.13–19, and 33:672.3–42); e.g. 'You merely cover and embellish yourselves with the name and title of church and Christians' (*LW* 23:419). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 13 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), under 'evangelical', Thomas More used 'evangelical' as a label for the Protestants William Tyndale and Robert Barnes, in 1532. In 1524, Erasmus wrote a letter to Gerard de la Roche in which he complained about two factions in the church, one of them the 'Lutheran faction'. Of these, Erasmus says

After all, Whitefield and Edwards saw themselves in fundamental agreement with Luther and sixteenth-century Protestants.⁴ And they were not wrong.

Of course, one must recognize at the outset that Luther was a sixteenth-century evangelical and not an eighteenth-century one; and thus there are important differences between him and those who came later. Indeed, even in his own times, Luther differed significantly from those whom we call 'Reformed'.⁵ But neither the differences then nor now should obscure the evangelical character of Luther's faith. For basic to Luther's understanding of Christianity were the following: (1) an exclusively biblical basis for the truths of Christianity; (2) the centrality of justification by grace through faith in the atoning work of Christ; (3) the need to oppose those errors in the church that militate against the truth of the gospel; (4) the agreement of this faith with the beliefs of the true church through the ages; and (5) the necessity of good works as the fruit of faith. Obviously, these characteristics are not precisely the same as those David Bebbington has used to describe the modern evangelical movement;⁶ but, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, there is certainly enough overlap between Luther and the subjects of Bebbington's study to justify employing the same 'evangelical' label.

that 'they boast they are now "evangelicals" (*Evangelicos*) although they are not at all', cited P. S. Allen (ed.), *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, 12 vols. (Oxford: In Typographeo Clarendoniano, 1906–58), vol. 5, p. 421.

4. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 421–422; and Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, 2 vols. (Westchester: Cornerstone, 1979), vol. 2, pp. 366, 563. John and Charles Wesley, of course, were both 'converted' in part by Luther's writings. See Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), pp. 95–97.
5. Hans J. Hillerbrand (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (hereafter *OER*), 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), under 'Protestantism: An Overview'. See also Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
6. At the outset of his work *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) Bebbington identifies four characteristics as the identifying marks of modern evangelicalism (p. 3): 'conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross'.

Statements of Luther's faith

Since Luther wrote so voluminously, it would not be difficult to discover quotations from his works that support each of the five characteristics mentioned above; and there are a host of secondary works that treat each of them as well.⁷ So the challenge is not to find them in Luther but to show that they were significant for Luther. To that end, this chapter examines specific works in which the Reformer himself identifies the essential teachings of Christianity, that is, in a very deliberate way, presents his own understanding of what it means to be a Christian. The following are four such statements of Luther's faith: Part 3 of his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), the Small Catechism (1529), the Marburg Articles (1529) and the Smalcald Articles (1537). In each of these, Luther was concerned with making a public record of what it meant to be a Christian. Although these works differ in circumstance and in detail, they nonetheless are in substantial agreement and together demonstrate that Luther was an evangelical.

The first two in the list, the 1528 *Confession*⁸ and the Marburg Articles,⁹ are mirror opposites of each other in terms of context while remarkably similar in terms of content. The first is Luther's final treatise in his argument with

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7. Two excellent surveys of Luther's theology in English are Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966); and Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999). Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 347–380, has compiled a topical bibliography. But see also Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 304–312, for a Luther bibliography, including online sources.
 8. The 1528 *Confession* can be found in *LW* 37:161–372 and *WA* 26:261–509. For the background to its composition and a summary of its contents, see Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985–93), vol. 2, pp. 314–324. The sixth International Congress for Luther Research (1983) organized a seminar on Luther's personal confession in his *Confession* of 1528. The *Lutherjahrbuch* 52 (1985), p. 296, gives a one-page summary of the seminar's activities.
 9. The Marburg Articles can be found in *LW* 38:85–89 and *WA* 30^{III}:160–171. The Weimar edition actually prints three versions, two based on manuscripts (German and Swiss) and one based on a printed version of the Swiss. Unless otherwise noted, references in this chapter are to the German version. For background to the articles, see Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 2, pp. 325–334; for background to the various versions, see 'Handschriften der "Artikel"', in *WA* 30^{III}:101–109.

Huldrych Zwingli over the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist;¹⁰ and, as a result of this argument, Luther pronounces a very harsh judgment against his fellow-evangelicals who disagree with his views on the Real Presence.¹¹ Moreover, he attaches a personal confession of faith in Part 3 of this work because he does not trust his opponents to describe his beliefs fairly especially after his death:

Lest any persons during my lifetime or after my death appeal to me or misuse my writings to confirm their error . . . I desire with this treatise to confess my faith before God and all the world, point by point. I am determined to abide by it until death and (so help me God!) in this faith to depart from this world and to appear before the judgment seat of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹²

The Marburg Articles, however, constitute a statement of faith that Luther wrote up at the Marburg Colloquy in order to demonstrate as much unity as possible with the very people he had denounced in the earlier work: Zwingli and his allies! Although the articles themselves acknowledge continuing disagreement over 'whether the true body and blood of Christ are bodily present'

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10. Zwingli (1484–1531) was the principal reformer of Zurich in the first years of the Reformation. For his basic biography, see G. R. Potter, *Zwingli* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); and for his theology, see W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). For the differences between Zwingli and Luther especially concerning the Eucharist, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is my Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran, 1977, rev. ed.).
11. E.g. 'I have declared that I write not against flesh and blood . . . but against the devil and his followers . . . Shall I now become so timid for the sake of these delicate, highly spiritual, profoundly holy fanatics, that I must avoid mentioning my enemy? I am quite willing to be called blasphemous and mad when I attack the devil pungently and pointedly in his messengers' (*LW* 37:270 [*WA* 26:402.8–14]).
12. *LW* 37:360 (*WA* 26:499.3–10). M. U. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, pp. 91–92, discusses the basis for Luther's fears in works by Martin Bucer and Leo Jud from 1526. Interestingly, in his answer to Luther's 1528 *Confession*, Zwingli used Luther's earlier writings to correct his later Christology. See his *Über D. Martin Luthers Buch, Bekenntnis genannt in Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*, ed. E. Egli et al., 14 vols., *Corpus reformatorum* edition (Berlin: C. A. Schwetschke & Son, 1905–), 6^{II}:136.11–137.6; 138.5–17; 144.4–31; 148.24–149.23.

in the Eucharist, they nevertheless express a remarkable degree of unity on basic Christian beliefs.¹³

The third of the documents, the Small Catechism,¹⁴ has an entirely different origin because Luther prepared it for the instruction of the young. Accordingly, he describes its contents as the basics of the faith, what everyone who calls himself a Christian must know. 'Those who are unwilling to learn the catechism', Luther writes, 'should be told that they deny Christ and are not Christians.' Using a form inherited from the medieval church, Luther joined his own explanations to three chief parts of Christian doctrine that were often part of medieval instructional manuals (Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer). He then added two more parts of doctrine (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) as well as a form of confession of sins, prayers and a 'Table of Duties' for the instruction of Christians in various walks of life. The result is a brief but comprehensive description of Christianity according to Martin Luther.¹⁵

The fourth document, the Smalcald Articles,¹⁶ is again a confession of faith – in some ways like Luther's statement of faith in the 1528 *Confession*,

13. LW 38:88 (WA 30^{III}:170.6–8).

14. The Small Catechism (cited hereafter as SC) belongs to the Lutheran Confessions as compiled in the *Book of Concord*. In this chapter, citations are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005). At the same time that Luther prepared the Small Catechism, he also published a significantly larger version for pastors, known as the Large Catechism (cited hereafter as LC). Because of its size as well as its more specialized intended audience, I have not analysed it in this chapter. However, from time to time I have found it useful for explicating something in the SC. I have checked all citations of both the Large and Small Catechisms against the critical edition of the *Book of Concord – Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986¹⁰). For background to the composition of the catechisms, see Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 2, pp. 273–280; and *OER*, under 'Catechisms'. See also M. Reu, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A History of Its Origin, Its Distribution and Its Use* (Chicago: Wartburg, 1929).

15. SC Preface 11.

16. Like the Small Catechism, the Smalcald [also spelled 'Schmalkald] Articles (cited as SA) are a part of the *Book of Concord*. William R. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament: The Schmalkald Articles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), offers a very fine analysis of this document. Russell's article in the *OER* under 'Schmalkald Articles' provides a useful introduction, as does Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 3, pp. 178–193.

although written in an entirely different context. The first three documents were all written within a relatively brief span of time in Luther's life, but the Reformer composed this one several years later. The Smalcald Articles, therefore, offer an opportunity to test the consistency of Luther's views over time. On the one hand, what Luther says about the composition of these articles is reminiscent of what he had said about Part 3 of his *Confession*, in that he wished to prevent people from misinterpreting his teachings after his death. Complaining of 'poisonous people' who 'want to dress up their poison with my labor' and so by Luther's name 'mislead the poor people', Luther presents the Smalcald Articles: 'If I die, those who are alive and those who come after me will have my testimony and confession . . . I have remained in this confession up to now, and by God's grace, I will remain in it.' On the other hand, Luther also intended these articles to serve a public purpose in that his prince and protector, Elector John Frederick of Saxony, requested them as a list of non-negotiables if the evangelicals ever decided to participate in the church council Pope Paul III had recently announced. For both reasons, as a theological testament and as a platform for discussions with Rome, Luther's Smalcald Articles offer insight into what Luther considered essential for the Christian faith.¹⁷

Biblical authority¹⁸

Although differing significantly from each other regarding the circumstances of their composition, the four documents under consideration here are remarkably similar in content. First, in each of the four documents, Luther presented his doctrine as the teaching of the Scriptures.¹⁹ Describing the

17. SA Preface 3–4. See also SA 3.15.3, and Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, pp. 18–19, 23–42.

18. This characteristic of Luther's faith corresponds very nicely to Bebbington's 'Biblicism', in his *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (pp. 12–14): 'The third main feature of Evangelicals, their devotion to the Bible, has been the result of their belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages.'

19. Richard P. Bucher, *The Ecumenical Luther: The Development and Use of His Doctrinal Hermeneutic* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), has summarized Luther's use of Scripture to prove doctrine this way (p. 28): 'A necessary doctrine of the Christian faith must be based on Scripture alone, the right Scripture, and the right Scripture rightly interpreted.'

content of his confession of faith in the earliest of the four, the 1528 *Confession*, Luther wrote, 'I have most diligently traced all these articles through the Scriptures, [and] have examined them again and again in the light thereof'; and at the very end, Luther summarized his confession with these words: 'This is my faith, for so all true Christians believe and so the Holy Scriptures teach us.' Likewise, in the last of the documents, the Smalcald Articles, Luther presented scriptural authority in the form of a rule: 'God's Word shall establish articles of faith and no-one else, not even an angel can do so.' Luther also viewed the traditional catechism as nothing but a summary of the Bible: 'For in these three parts [Ten Commandments, Creed and Lord's Prayer], everything that we have in the Scriptures is included in short, plain, and simple terms.' Of the four documents, only the Marburg Articles contain little explicit Scripture, but still the thirteenth article presents the Word of God as the church's standard: 'What is called tradition or human ordinances in spiritual or ecclesiastical matters, *provided they do not plainly contradict the word of God*, may be freely kept or abolished' (emphasis mine).²⁰

Beyond general statements of biblical authority, Luther fills these documents with references to the Scriptures in order to prove his doctrine, especially regarding topics he knows are controversial.²¹ Even in the Marburg Articles with its paucity of references, Article 8 invokes Romans 10 and Article 9 quotes God's command ('Go, baptize') from Matthew 28 and God's promise ('he who believes') from Mark 16.²² In contrast to the Marburg Articles, the Small Catechism is heavily biblical. Two of the traditional parts are biblical texts themselves. Luther also offers Bible passages to prove his statements about the meaning, benefit, power and significance of baptism, while his discussion of the sacrament of the altar is simply an explication of the instituting words of Jesus, recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul (1 Corinthians). The 'Table of Duties' in the Small Catechism consists of Bible passages attached to various vocations.²³

20. *LW* 37:360, 372 (*WA* 26:499.13-500.2; 509.19-20); *SA* 2.2.15; *LC* Short Preface 18; and *LW* 38:88 (*WA* 30^{III}:168.2-7).

21. E.g. in the Smalcald Articles, as Russell points out (*Luther's Theological Testament*, pp. 70-72), Luther does not use Scripture to prove his statements regarding the Trinity, which he knew his opponents accepted, but did use Bible passages to prove his doctrine of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ alone, because this was a matter of dispute.

22. *LW* 38:87 (*WA* 30^{III}:165.6, 12, 14).

23. *SC* 4.4, 8, 10, 14; 6.4-10; 9.1-15.

Luther's *Confession* of 1528 also contains many specific biblical references as proof of his doctrines. Sometimes the references point to a particular place in the Bible (e.g. Gen. 1; Rom. 3; 1 Tim. 4);²⁴ at other times they refer directly to the sacred penmen (e.g. 'St. Luke describes', or 'St. Paul says'); and sometimes they occur in combination (e.g. 'David says in Psalm 51').²⁵ Luther can also generalize about biblical teaching, such as his statement about the basic social structures established by God, namely church, family and government: 'These three religious institutions or orders are found in God's Word and commandment; and whatever is contained in God's Word must be holy, for God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it.' Beyond this generality and unlike the 'Table of Duties', Luther does not offer specific Bible passages in support of the three estates.²⁶ Luther also uses the Scriptures negatively to reject purgatory ('Nor have we anything in Scripture concerning purgatory. It too was certainly fabricated by goblins'); the invocation of saints ('Of the invocation of saints nothing is said in Scripture; therefore it is necessarily uncertain and not to be believed'); and monasticism ('I reject and condemn . . . all such things devised and instituted by men beyond and apart from Scripture').²⁷

The Smalcald Articles employ the Scriptures in a similar fashion. Once again Luther adduces particular passages to demonstrate his doctrine either by referring to a book and chapter (e.g. Rom. 3; John 1; Isa. 53) and/or by naming the source (e.g. 'St Paul says', 'St Peter says' and 'Christ declares').²⁸ He also uses the Scriptures in a more general way to reject a particular doctrine or practice (e.g. 'the Mass is dangerous, fabricated and invented without God's will and Word'). He does the same thing regarding private masses, pilgrimages, relics, the invocation of saints, the papacy, papal teachings, and external dress and ceremonies.²⁹

24. *LW* 37:361, 364 (*WA* 26:500.14; 504.22, 29).

25. *LW* 37:361, 363 (*WA* 26:501.3; 503.10, 12).

26. For Luther's theology of created 'orders', see Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 36–42.

27. *LW* 37:365, 369, 370, 363 (*WA* 26:505.7–10; 508.6–7, 15–16; 503.17–504.1).

Similarly, Luther asserts (*LW* 37:362 [*WA* 26:502.6–9]) that he can prove original sin 'from Scripture' but does not offer specific references.

28. SA 2.1.1, 2, 4, 5; 2.2.2.

29. SA 2.2.5. See also 2.2.8–9, 18, 22, 25; 2.4.1, 14; and 3.12.3. For Russell's discussion of Luther's use of Scripture in the SA, see his *Luther's Theological Testament*, pp. 70–72.

But in addition to the essential similarity of the Smalcald Articles to the previous documents in their approach to scriptural authority, there is a sharpening of Luther's reliance upon the Word on account of his rejection of those whom he calls 'enthusiasts': those who, Luther charges, 'boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word'.³⁰ For Luther, the Scriptures are important precisely because the Holy Spirit works through them. He identifies Thomas Müntzer³¹ as one of the 'enthusiasts' he has in mind but also charges the pope with the same vice since he too claims that 'whatever he decides and commands within his church is from the Spirit and is right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word'. Luther even identifies the primal sin as 'enthusiasm': 'The old devil and old serpent . . . turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts. He led them away from God's outward Word to spiritualizing and self-pride.'³²

Now, clearly Luther has in mind the oral proclamation of God's Word as well as the written Scriptures when he speaks of the external, objective Word of God; and an important part of Luther's approach to the Bible is that it needs to be preached.³³ For example, in his introduction to the New Testament

30. SA 3.8.3. Luther encountered 'enthusiasts' early in the Reformation in the so-called 'Zwickau Prophets', who had appeared in Wittenberg by the time Luther returned from the Wartburg in 1522. Luther rejected their claim to be speaking under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Not long before Luther composed the SA, other 'enthusiasts' had been ousted from their control of the city of Münster in which they had hoped to establish the 'Kingdom of God'. See Brecht, *Martin Luther*, vol. 2, pp. 34–38, and vol. 3, pp. 34–38. For Luther's theological concerns about the attitude of 'enthusiasts' toward the Scriptures, see Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 190–191.
31. Thomas Müntzer (d. 1525) was a one-time follower of Luther who relied on special revelations of the Spirit in addition to the Scriptures for guidance as a preacher of the end times. During the Peasants' War, he encouraged his followers to take up arms against ungodly authorities; but when they were defeated at Frankenhausen, Müntzer was captured and executed. For Luther, he remained a symbol of what enthusiasm could lead to. See *OER*, under 'Müntzer, Thomas'; and M. U. Edwards, *Luther and the False Brethren*, pp. 35–39, 66–70.
32. SA 3.8.3–5.
33. Though preaching is not singled out by Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, as one of his four characteristics of modern evangelicalism (pp. 2–3), he nonetheless entitled his first chapter 'Preaching the Gospel: The Nature of Evangelical Religion', and appropriately so, since, as he himself acknowledges (p. 5), 'preaching the gospel was [for evangelicals] the chief method of winning converts'.

that accompanied his translation of it into German, Luther first described the New Testament as 'a book in which are written the gospel and the promises of God, together with the history of those who believe and of those who do not believe them'. But as he elaborated on his explanation, he emphasized the oral character of the gospel; for example, 'this gospel of God or New Testament is a good story and report, sounded forth into all the world by the apostles' and 'Christ, before his death, commanded and ordained that his gospel be preached after his death in all the world.' The task of the church, then, is to *preach* the gospel.³⁴

But such preaching is not independent of the written Word. Although the apostles first preached the gospel and only later did some of them write the books of the New Testament, they did so in order to guarantee the authenticity of the gospel that was being preached. In a sermon published in 1522, Luther explained:

When heretics, false teachers, and all manner of errors arose in the place of pious preachers giving the flock of Christ poison as pasture, then every last thing that could and needed to be done, had to be attempted . . . they began to write in order to lead the flock of Christ as much as possible by Scripture into Scripture. They wanted to ensure that the sheep could feed themselves and hence protect themselves against the wolves.³⁵

So when Luther writes about the spoken Word, one needs to understand it as founded on the written Word, not as something new or extra. Luther provides examples of what he means in the Smalcald Articles. In referring to the spoken word that adults who are baptized 'must first have heard', he quotes a scriptural text: 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved' (Mark 16:16). So they hear what is in the Bible. Similarly, Cornelius 'heard' from the Jews about the coming Messiah, and he heard from Peter that the Messiah had now come. But in each instance, what Cornelius heard was what was already in the Scriptures or would be when the New Testament was finally written.³⁶

34. *LW* 35:358–359 (*WADB* 6:2.18–21; 4.3–5, 15–17). For the significance of preaching in Luther's thought, see Fred W. Meuser, 'Luther as Preacher of the Word of God', in McKim, *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, pp. 136–148. For the relationship between the spoken and the written Word, see Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 72–73.

35. *LW* 52:206 (*WA* 10¹:627.3–9).

36. SA 3.8.7–8.

Luther's point, then, in emphasizing the spoken Word is not to set it against the written Word but to stress that God wants his Word to be preached. People are to rely on God's objective revelation in the Scriptures or on the proclamation (something outside themselves) and not on their own thoughts and ideas, which they confuse with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Justification by faith³⁷

Of course, what Luther has especially in mind when he talks about the necessity of the Word is the gospel. For Luther, this is absolutely the heart and soul of the Scriptures, and so, in each of the four documents under consideration, the gospel is at the centre.³⁸ Indeed, in the Smalcald Articles, Luther identifies the gospel as the 'first and chief article'. About this article, he says, '*nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls*' (emphasis mine). So important is this article that Luther maintains that everything he teaches 'depends' on it, 'in opposition to the pope, the devil, and the whole world'. 'Therefore,' he concludes, 'we must be certain and not doubt this doctrine. Otherwise, all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all adversaries win the victory and the right over us.'³⁹

Luther specifies precisely what he means by the 'first and chief article'. Significantly, he bolsters every part of his description by direct references to the Bible. Therefore, the gospel that must be preached is the gospel the Scriptures teach. Biblical authority remains basic to Luther's understanding of the Christian religion.

But just what does Luther mean by the 'gospel'? Quite simply, the work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners in which people must trust for their salvation. Although Luther confesses the Trinity and the person of Christ,⁴⁰ when

37. With this characteristic, Luther lays the theological foundations for what Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, identifies as 'conversionism' (p. 5): 'The call to conversion has been the content of the gospel. Preachers urged their hearers to turn away from their sins in repentance and to Christ in faith.'

38. For the relationship of the gospel to the Scriptures in Luther's thought, see Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 74, 79–81. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, p. 258, calls justification 'the heart and soul' of Luther's theology.

39. SA 2.1.1, 5.

40. Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 179–200.

it comes to the 'chief article' in the Smalcald Articles, Luther focuses not on who Jesus is but on what he has done:

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:24–25).

He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6).

All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works or merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25).⁴¹

Since these statements are virtually quotations from the Bible, it would be difficult for any Christian to gainsay them. What is significant, however, is that Luther identifies them as the most important part of the entire Scriptures: Christ's death and resurrection on behalf of sinful humanity.⁴² Clearly, Christ's work is important to Luther on account of his sense of the significance of sin, and elsewhere in these articles he discusses the total depravity of man's nature.⁴³ But the remedy for sin is more significant yet. Likewise, it is not incidental to his theology that Jesus is both God and man, but the real importance of the incarnation is that it enabled 'our God and Lord' to rescue humanity from sin. The saving work of Jesus is at the heart of Luther's faith.⁴⁴

But there is one thing more: an answer to the question 'How does the sinner appropriate this work of Christ for himself?' So Luther continues:

41. SA 2.1.1–3. Of course, Luther's original biblical references include only book and chapter, since verse numbers had not yet been developed.

42. This emphasis in Luther dovetails very nicely with what Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, calls 'crucicentrism' in modern evangelicalism (pp. 14–17). The terminology 'theology of the cross' derives from Luther's own work and has been used by modern theologians to characterize Luther's theology. See e.g. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990). Although Bebbington indicates (p. 15) that 'the standard view of Evangelicals was that Christ died as a substitute for sinful mankind', Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 202–211, shows that Luther taught not only that Christ, by his suffering and death, assuaged the wrath of a righteous God but also that he overcame the powers of hell. In either case, however, Christ on the cross is a central element in Luther's soteriology.

43. See SA 3.1.1–10.

44. SA 1.4; 2.1. For the role of Christ in human salvation, see Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 223–228.

This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us. As St. Paul says:

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Romans 3:28)
That He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
(Romans 3:26)

One grasps the work of Christ solely by faith. Since Jesus has paid the complete penalty, there is nothing that humans can add to it. Therefore, Luther repudiates any personal contribution to salvation. It is all God's grace; it is all Christ's work; and therefore, it is all by faith. This too is a part of the chief article.⁴⁵

As one might expect, Luther confesses the same doctrine in each of the earlier confessions. In none of the others, however, does he call it the 'first and chief article'. Nonetheless, in each case, Luther describes it and indicates its importance. For example, in the Marburg Articles, already in the fourth article on original sin, Luther adds as an aside, 'And if Jesus Christ had not come to our aid by his death and life, we would have had to die eternally.' Then in Article 5, Luther affirms justification by faith:

We believe that we are saved from such sin and all other sins as well as from eternal death, if we believe in the same Son of God, Jesus Christ, who died for us, etc., and that apart from such faith we cannot free ourselves of any sin through any kind of works, station in life or [religious] order, etc.

In Article 7, Luther elaborates even more on the significance of faith:

Such faith is our righteousness before God, for the sake of which God reckons and regards us as righteous, godly, and holy apart from all works and merit, and through which he delivers us from sin, death, and hell, receives us by grace and saves us, for the sake of his Son, in whom we thus believe.⁴⁶

In the Small Catechism, Luther provides this eloquent description of the gospel as an explanation of the Second Article of the Creed:

45. SA 2.1.4–5. For the meaning of 'faith' in Luther's theology, see Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 200–203, 260–261.

46. LW 38:86 (WA 30^{III}:162.8–11, 14–163.5; 164.2–10).

[Jesus Christ] has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, so that I may be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns to all eternity.⁴⁷

Whereas the text of the Creed itself is simply a recitation of the work of Christ from his incarnation to his second coming, Luther's explanation emphasizes the saving significance of that work for 'me', the sinner.

The same idea is prominent in Luther's *Confession* of 1528. This entire confession is really an affirmation and expansion of the Creed. Instead of distinguishing text and explanation as in the Small Catechism, Luther integrates the two. So in confessing the work of Christ, Luther includes its saving significance: 'I believe also that this Son of God and of Mary, our Lord Jesus Christ, suffered for us poor sinners, was crucified, dead, and buried, in order that he might redeem us from sin, death, and the eternal wrath of God by his innocent blood' (emphasis mine). Similarly, Luther also affirms the vicarious atonement in his discussion of sin, 'All men . . . would necessarily be guilty of eternal death if Jesus Christ had not come to our aid and taken upon himself this guilt and sin as an innocent lamb, paid for us by his sufferings, and if he still did not intercede and plead for us.'⁴⁸

Although Luther does not include a separate statement regarding faith in his 1528 *Confession*, it is still explicitly present in his statement regarding the saints of the church who had become monks. 'Although many great saints have lived in them [monasteries]', Luther writes, 'and as the elect of God are misled by them even at this time, yet finally by faith in Jesus Christ [they] have been redeemed and have escaped' (emphasis mine). 'Faith alone' is also implicit in Luther's rejection of human ability to contribute to salvation: 'There is no power or ability, no cleverness or reason, with which we can prepare ourselves for righteousness and life or seek after it.' Once again, Luther rejects any human contribution to salvation, 'It is impossible that there should be more saviors, ways, or means to be saved than through the one righteousness which our Savior Jesus Christ is and has bestowed upon us.'⁴⁹

Therefore, in all four of Luther's creedal statements, we find the same basic doctrine of salvation. It begins with man's need, his inherent and inescapable

47. SC 2.2.

48. LW 37:362 (WA 26:501.18-502.2, 7-14).

49. LW 37:363-364 (WA 26:504.2-4; 503.2-4; 504.19-21).

sinfulness that renders him totally incapable of saving himself, as Luther writes in the Marburg Articles:

We believe that original sin is innate and inherited by us from Adam and is the kind of sin which condemns all men. And if Jesus Christ had not come to our aid . . . we would have had to die eternally as a result of it and could not have received God's kingdom and salvation.⁵⁰

But God has provided a way of salvation in his Son, Jesus, who died for man's sin in order to satisfy the wrath of God and thus rescue all people from the power of Satan and the destiny of hell. God offers this salvation to all who believe.

Obviously, Luther's view of salvation is rigorously monergistic. Man does nothing. God does it all. This suggests a doctrine of predestination. However, in spite of the fact that Luther held to predestination,⁵¹ that doctrine is not mentioned in any of the four documents under consideration here. Nevertheless, Luther is clear that salvation is entirely at God's initiative, for faith is purely the work of the Holy Spirit, as Luther attests in the Marburg Articles, 'Such faith is a gift of God which we cannot earn with any works or merit that precede, nor can we achieve it by our own strength, but the Holy Spirit gives and creates this faith in our hearts as it pleases him.'⁵² Similarly, in the Small Catechism, Luther confesses, 'I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith';⁵³ and in the 1528 *Confession*, Luther says:

Because this [saving] grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also, wholly

50. *LW* 38:86 (*WA* 30^{III}:162.4-12). See also *LW* 37:362-363 (*WA* 26:503.1-6); *SC* 2.2, 3; and *SA* 3.2-11.

51. In his preface to Romans that accompanied his 1522 New Testament (*LW* 35:378; *WADB* 7:22.26-29), Luther writes that '[Paul] teaches of God's eternal predestination [*Vorsehung*] – out of which originally proceeds who shall believe or not, who can or cannot get rid of sin – in order that our salvation may be taken entirely out of our hands and put in the hand of God alone'. Both Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 274-286, and Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 165-168, discuss this doctrine especially in relation to Luther's *Bondage of the Will*.

52. *LW* 38:86 (*WA* 30^{III}:163.6-13).

53. *SC* 2.3.

and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others, increase and extend it.⁵⁴

But there is an interesting shift in emphasis regarding the Holy Spirit between 1528 and 1537. Although the earlier confession connects the work of the Spirit to the means of grace, it also refers to the inner testimony of the Spirit; for example:

[The Holy Spirit] does this both inwardly and outwardly – inwardly by means of faith and other spiritual gifts, outwardly through the gospel, baptism, and the sacrament of the altar, through which . . . he comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation.

So the Spirit uses means, but we can also rely on his work within, 'This is our assurance if we feel this witness of the Spirit in our hearts that God wishes to be our Father, forgive our sin, and bestow everlasting life on us.'⁵⁵

However, reflecting his hostility to the enthusiasts, by the time Luther writes again about the Spirit in 1537, his emphasis is entirely on connecting the Spirit to the external Word:

In issues relating to the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one except through or with the preceding outward Word (Galatians 3:2, 5). This protects us from the enthusiasts (i.e., souls who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word). They judge Scripture or the spoken Word and explain and stretch it at their pleasure.

What Luther wants is just the opposite: the Word is to stand in judgment over the opinions of men, especially the enthusiasts. As he says, 'Whatever is praised as from the Spirit – without the Word and Sacraments – is the devil himself.'⁵⁶

54. LW 37:366 (WA 26:506.3–7).

55. LW 37:366 (WA 26:505.35–37; 506.7–12).

56. SA 3.8.3, 10. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 237–238, comments on Luther's shift in emphasis regarding the 'inner testimony' of the Spirit; but even in the early years, Lohse insists (p. 237), 'Luther never conceived the activity of the Spirit as independent of external means.' See also Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 35–42. Obviously, at this point, Luther's attitude contrasts with many later

This quotation, however, suggests another characteristic of Luther's soteriology that later evangelicals might find problematical, and this is his insistence on the sacraments as real means of grace. Nevertheless, Luther's treatment of the sacraments is entirely evangelical.⁵⁷ He rejects any idea that baptism or the Eucharist save apart from faith. Instead, like the word, they are means the Holy Spirit employs to create and nurture faith in the saving work of Christ. In his 1528 *Confession*, Luther affirms the sacraments as means, along with the gospel, by which the Holy Spirit 'comes to us and inculcates the sufferings of Christ for the benefit of our salvation'. Beyond that, Luther does not elaborate much in this confession about either sacrament. He affirms one baptism, presumably of infants, and rejects those who rebaptize; and regarding the Eucharist, he insists that 'the true body and blood of Christ are orally eaten and drunk in the bread and wine'.⁵⁸

The discussion of the sacraments in the Marburg Articles, that Luther signed along with Zwingli is more elaborate and even more evangelical. The two men affirmed that baptism 'is not merely an empty sign or watchword among Christians but, rather, a sign and work of God by which our faith grows and through which we are regenerated to [eternal] life'. Likewise, regarding the Eucharist, the two men explain that 'like the Word', it 'has been given and ordained by God Almighty in order that weak consciences may thereby be excited to faith by the Holy Spirit', even though they could not agree on

Footnote 56 (*Continued*)

evangelicals who, according to Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism* (p. 267), 'were not at all reluctant to rely on dreams, visions and special words of counsel from the Holy Spirit'. Nevertheless, Noll continues, 'these sources of divine knowledge were usually subordinated to broader understandings of the Bible'.

57. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 9–10, shows that baptismal regeneration was a perennial issue for evangelical Anglicans because the Prayer Book affirmed it, while evangelicals generally held to 'conversion' as the way in which a person becomes a Christian. Luther would definitely have sided with the Prayer Book champions. For Luther on the sacraments, see Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 345–403; and Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 298–313. An excellent and thorough treatment of Luther's theology of baptism that shows how it developed through the years is Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001).
58. *LW* 37:366–367 (*WA* 26:506.11–12, 21–23). It is worth remembering, of course, that Luther's brief statement here regarding the Real Presence comes at the end of a major work in which he has defended this doctrine against Zwingli and others.

whether the body and blood of Jesus were bodily present in the bread and wine.⁵⁹

Probably the best explanation of the two sacraments occurs in Luther's Small Catechism. For each of them, he offers a brief definition, grounded in the Word of God, and shows that at the heart of each is God's promise that is received by faith. For example, regarding baptism, after stating that it works forgiveness of sins, life and salvation, Luther asks, 'How can water do such great things?' His answer:

It is not the water indeed that does them, but the Word of God, which is in and with the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God, the water is simple water and no Baptism. But with the Word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit. As St. Paul says in Titus chapter three, 'He saves us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.'⁶⁰

Therefore, the strength of baptism is not in the outward element or in the ritual act but in the promises that God has attached to baptism for Christ's sake in the Scriptures, and it is on these promises that faith relies.

The same thing is true with respect to the Eucharist. Again, Luther affirms the benefits of the sacrament, 'forgiveness, life, and salvation', before raising the question 'How can bodily eating and drinking do such great things?' And again Luther explains that it is not the outward activity that accomplishes anything; it is the promise that God attaches to the sacrament, in this case, right in the words of institution, 'given . . . and shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins'. 'The person', Luther writes, 'who believes these words has what they say and express, namely the forgiveness of sins.' The essence of the gospel is God's promise that one receives by faith. For Luther, this is as true of the sacraments as it is of the Word itself.⁶¹

In comparison with the Small Catechism, Luther's discussion of the sacraments in the Smalcald Articles is limited, but it is still evangelical. In an article entitled 'The Gospel', Luther points out that God 'does not give us . . . aid against sin in only one way'. Instead, he 'is superabundantly generous in His

59. *LW* 38:87, 88 (*WA* 30^{III}:165.14-166.2, 170.1-5).

60. *SC* 4.9-10.

61. *SC* 6.7-8.

grace'; and so he comes to us first of all by the preaching of the forgiveness of sins but then also through baptism and the 'Sacrament of the Altar'. Beyond this general statement, Luther also insists regarding baptism that its power is in God's Word in the water and nowhere else and that children should be baptized, since they too have been redeemed by Christ. Regarding the Eucharist, Luther once more insists 'that the bread and wine in the Supper are Christ's true body and blood', while rejecting papal practice, communion in one kind and the papal doctrine of transubstantiation. Thus, Luther bases his doctrine of the sacraments on the Scriptures and regards it as integrally connected to the gospel of God's free grace in Christ.⁶²

Luther's polemics⁶³

Even a casual reading of Luther quickly reveals still another characteristic of his faith, namely a concern to identify what he does not believe as well as what he does. For Luther, confessing the faith includes also repudiating falsehood. For one thing, if the Scriptures establish doctrine, then what is unscriptural must not be taught. As noted above, Luther uses the Bible to reject a number of practices and beliefs of the late medieval church. But even more important to Luther than the scriptural principle is the evangelical principle, that is, using the gospel itself as a criterion of judgment. Since salvation is at stake, Luther decisively rejects any alternative to the gospel. While the truth of God saves, its opposite damns.⁶⁴

62. SA 3.4; 3.5.1-4; 3.6.1. See Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, pp. 99-111.

63. To a certain extent, Luther's polemics distinguish him from later evangelicals who often preferred to emphasize a common centre in the gospel, while ignoring certain doctrinal differences. E.g. Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, p. 162, points out that the Anglican Whitefield willingly preached from Independent and Baptist pulpits. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 65-66, locates such attitudes in the pragmatism of the eighteenth century. However, in their opposition to Roman Catholicism, many later evangelicals would be in complete agreement with Luther. See Bebbington, pp. 101-102, 133-134, 194. Moreover, as champions of truth, evangelicals sometimes debated among themselves about correct doctrine, e.g. the Arminians vs. the Calvinists. See Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, pp. 267-273; but even at this point, argues Bebbington, pp. 16-17, common agreement on the 'cruciality of the cross' helped to bring the sides together in the nineteenth century.

64. For the gospel as theological criterion of true and false doctrine, see Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 258-260; and Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, pp. 80-84,

This is evident already in 1528 and is even more prominent in the Smalcald Articles. The Small Catechism does not include Luther's rejections, probably because its intended audience was the young and uneducated. The Marburg Articles do not include many condemnations, but they do include a few. In Article 12, both 'papists' and 'Anabaptists' are condemned by name for rejecting temporal authority, 'secular laws, courts, and ordinances'. In three other articles, particular practices of the medieval church are condemned (monasticism, clerical celibacy and the mass as a meritorious work), but these condemnations occur only in the Swiss version of the original manuscripts. Luther certainly agreed with these additions and signed the Swiss version, but they are not present in the German version and were not a part of his original composition.⁶⁵

However, in his two personal testaments, Luther clearly uses the gospel as a criterion for evaluating doctrine and practice. In Part 3 of the 1528 *Confession*, Luther rejects and condemns 'all doctrines which glorify free will, as diametrically contrary to the help and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Similarly, Luther rejects monasticism because it teaches 'ways and work' by which 'men may seek and win salvation'. But this amounts to 'abominable blasphemy and denial of the unique aid and grace of our only Savior and Mediator, Jesus Christ'. Likewise, Luther condemns papal pardons and indulgences as something additional to the gospel and also for basing satisfaction for sins in the works of men, 'whereas only Christ can make and has made satisfaction for us'. Finally, since 'Christ alone should be invoked as our Mediator', Luther disavows the invocation of saints.⁶⁶

The Smalcald Articles are even clearer than the earlier *Confession* in using the gospel as a test for truth. Once Luther has established justification by faith as

who explains that Luther used it especially against the papal teachings regarding salvation. Hans-Werner Genischen, *We Condemn: How Luther and 16th-Century Lutheranism Condemned False Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), pp. 45–51, shows that however much Luther can acknowledge articles of faith that can be treated independently of justification by faith, they still have no independent validity. All Christian truth is directed toward human salvation.

65. *LW* 38:86, 88 (*WA* 30^{III}:167.5–10). For the differences between the two sets of articles, cf. *WA* 30^{III}:164.12 and 164.29–31; 168.11 and 168.26–27; and 169.9 and 169.26–29. See William R. Russell, 'Translator's Note', 'The Marburg Articles', in Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen (eds.), *Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 91–92.

66. *LW* 37:362–363, 364, 369, 370 (*WA* 26:502.14–503.1; 504.5–8; 507.33–34; 508.14–15).

the 'first and chief article', he proceeds to use it directly as a criterion for judging contemporary church practice. On eight separate occasions he rejects something explicitly because it conflicts with the 'chief article'. These include the sacrifice of the mass, purgatory, indulgences, invocation of saints, monasticism and the papacy.⁶⁷ For Luther, Christianity is all about Christ the Saviour. Any doctrine or practice that obscures this reality or turns one's attention toward someone or something else besides Christ is *ipso facto* non-Christian.

Unity with the early church⁶⁸

By means of his condemnations, Luther can also make another point, and that is that his evangelical faith is the faith of the true church through the ages but especially of the early church since he rejects the same heresies that the Fathers fought.⁶⁹ In his 1528 *Confession*, Luther makes it clear that he condemns the ancient heresies. Sometimes he is content to say that he rejects what 'certain heretics have taught'. But at other times he mentions the heretics by name: the Arians, Macedonians, Sabellians, Nestorians, Pelagians, Donatists and Novatians.⁷⁰

In the other documents, Luther does not mention these heretical groups, but does unite himself with the early church by laying a trinitarian and Christological foundation for his confession in each of the documents in spite of the fact that he did not see this as a point of difference between him and the papal church.⁷¹ Luther writes in the 1528 *Confession*:

67. SA 2.2.1, 7, 12, 24, 25; 2.3.2; 2.4.3; 3.14.1.

68. Although this was clearly something that concerned Luther more than later evangelicals, the latter accepted the traditional trinitarian and Christological doctrines as the basis for their doctrine of justification, as did Luther. See Noll, *Rise of Evangelicalism*, pp. 49, 151, 267.

69. Luther did not use the Church Fathers as a norm for doctrine and practice in addition to the Scriptures. They were, instead, a witness to scriptural truth; and if they slipped from the truth at times, Luther was willing to say so. See John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 162-181.

70. LW 37:361, 362, 363, 366, 368 (WA 26:300.13; 301.4-5, 13-14; 303.7; 306.20; 307.15).

71. The fact that Luther insists on mentioning these traditional doctrines when they were not a matter of dispute shows how important he thought they were.

First, I believe with my whole heart the sublime article of the majesty of God, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons, are by nature one true and genuine God . . . All this has been maintained up to this time both in the Roman Church and among Christian churches throughout the whole world.

Luther then adds a statement of traditional Christology, 'This man became true God, as one eternal, indivisible person, of God and man, so that Mary the holy Virgin is a real, true mother not only of the man Christ, but also of the Son of God.'⁷²

The Marburg Articles also begin with an affirmation of the Trinity 'exactly as was decided in the Council of Nicaea and as is sung and read in the Nicene Creed by the entire Christian church throughout the world'. Luther then confesses the incarnation and personal union ('this same Son of God and of Mary, undivided in person, Jesus Christ'). In the Smalcald Articles, Luther again begins with the Trinity and the person of Christ and refers to the 'Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds' in support. Here again, he maintains that 'concerning these articles there is no argument or dispute'.⁷³

Only in the Small Catechism does Luther avoid an explicit statement of traditional trinitarian doctrine. Nevertheless, in the Large Catechism Luther shows his trinitarian intentions in the Small Catechism, especially in his treatment of the Creed. As he says:

In the first place, the Creed has until now been divided into twelve articles . . . But to make the Creed most easily and clearly understood as it is to be taught to children, we shall briefly sum up the entire Creed in three chief articles, according to the three persons in the Godhead. Everything that we believe is related to these three persons . . . I believe in God the Father, who has created me; I believe in God the Son, who has redeemed me; I believe in the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies me. One God and one faith, but three persons.⁷⁴

Clearly, then, Luther understands himself as teaching nothing new. He stands with the early church in its doctrine of God and of Christ; and it is this God

See Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 207–210. Russell, *Luther's Theological Testament*, p. 59, describes this as 'the Catholic pillar of Luther's theology'.

72. *LW* 37:361–362 (*WA* 26:500.10–15; 501.10–14).

73. *LW* 38:85–86 (*WA* 30^{III}:160.14–17, 161.14–16); *SA* 1.1–4.

74. *LC* 2 Preface 5–7.

and Christ who have acted for man's salvation. The chief article rests upon the right understanding of the Trinity.

But what is especially noteworthy about Luther's trinitarian doctrine is how he relates this traditional teaching to the individual Christian. Already in the *Confession of 1528* Luther explains the work of the Trinity as it pertains to the believer:

These are the three persons and one God, who has given himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that he is and has. The Father gives himself to us, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall. Therefore the Son himself subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father . . .

But because this grace would benefit no one if it remained so profoundly hidden and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives himself to us also wholly and completely. He teaches us to understand this deed of Christ . . . helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage and impart it to others.⁷⁵

Then, in the *Small Catechism*, Luther transforms the Apostles' Creed from a general statement about God's activities into a personal statement of what God has done for the individual believer. Luther begins his explanation of the First Article (which deals with creation) this way: 'I believe that God has made *me* and all creatures. He has given *me* my body and soul, etc.' (emphasis mine). Similarly, the Second Article (about Christ and his work) becomes a statement of what he has done for 'me': 'He has redeemed *me*, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won *me* from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, etc.' (emphasis mine). And finally, in the Third Article (about the Holy Spirit) Luther confesses, 'The Holy Spirit has called *me* by the Gospel, enlightened *me* with His gifts, sanctified and kept *me* in the true faith' (emphasis mine).⁷⁶

In this way, Luther shows that his chief article not only rests upon the traditional doctrine of God but that it also transforms the way in which the traditional doctrine is understood, for Luther shifts the focus away from the three persons of the Trinity in themselves and toward each of the persons in relationship to the believer. Thus, the true God is also a gracious God, a giving and a forgiving God, to all the faithful.

75. *LW* 37:366 (*WA* 26:505.38-506.7).

76. *SC* 2.1-6.

Christian activism⁷⁷

The doctrine of justification by faith also had a powerful impact upon Luther's understanding of the Christian life. Not only did the chief article overthrow traditional piety (pilgrimages, monasticism, votive masses and other ecclesiastically approved rites and ceremonies), but it also became the foundation of Christian activity in the world and on behalf of the neighbour.⁷⁸ Article 10 of the Marburg Articles states, 'Such faith, through the working of the Holy Spirit, and by which we are reckoned and have become righteous and holy, performs good works through us, namely love toward the neighbor, prayer to God, and the suffering of persecution.'⁷⁹

In the Smalcald Articles, Luther makes it clear that saving faith and good works are two different things, and that the latter makes absolutely no contribution to salvation:

Such faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sins are followed by good works. What is still sinful or imperfect in them will not be counted as sin or defect, for Christ's sake . . .

Therefore, we cannot boast of many merits and works, if they are viewed apart from grace and mercy.

So Christ's work always comes first, and one grasps it solely by faith. But Luther adds, 'We say, besides, that if good works do not follow, the faith is false and not true.' In short, faith alone saves, but it is never alone. It inevitably produces good works.⁸⁰

But these works are not the works of the medieval church. Luther directs much of his polemic against false works primarily, it is true, because people believed they could contribute to salvation. Thus, he condemns not only the mass but trafficking in masses; not only purgatory but all the rites related to it;

77. Compared to later evangelicals, Luther's activism was quite conservative; nonetheless, the basis of evangelical activism (good works as a response to the gospel) was also basic to Luther's faith. See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 6, 10–12, 16, 22 et al.

78. See Althaus, *Ethics of Martin Luther*, pp. 3–24; and William H. Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 198–234, for the significance of justification in the sanctified life of a Christian.

79. *LW* 38:87 (*WA* 30^{III}:166.4–10).

80. For the 'necessity' of good works in Luther's theology, see Althaus, *Theology of Martin Luther*, pp. 245–250.

the cult of the saints, relics and pilgrimages; indulgences; clerical celibacy; and monasticism. He condemns the notion that true sanctity derives 'from albs, tonsures, long gowns, and other ceremonies' and describes the 'consecration of wax candles, palm branches, cakes, oats, spices, and such' as 'sheer mockery and fraud'.⁸¹

Besides, however, condemning the Roman church for investing such works with saving significance, Luther also rejects them in the Smalcald Articles for detracting from truly good works. For example, in rejecting pilgrimages, Luther points out:

So why do they leave behind their own callings, their parishes, their pastors, God's Word, their wives, their children, and such? These *are* ordained and commanded. Instead, they run after unnecessary, dangerous illusions of the devil.

Similarly, Luther condemns monasticism for detracting from the 'offices and callings ordained by God' and celibacy of the clergy for its denigrating God's institution of marriage.⁸²

In contrast to false works, Luther spends time describing truly good works in both the Small Catechism and his 1528 *Confession*. Luther makes two basic points: good works are those that God has established and are motivated by love. For example, in explaining each of the Ten Commandments in the catechism, Luther begins by saying, 'We should fear and love God so that . . .', and only then indicates what the specific requirement is, for example, 'help and befriend [our neighbour] in every bodily need' (Fifth Commandment) or 'help him to protect his property and business' (Seventh Commandment). For Luther, the motivation behind the work is as important as the work. Even unbelievers can do works that look 'good';⁸³ but the Christian does them for the love of God. As Luther says in the Large Catechism, 'But do good to all men. Help them and promote their interest – in every way and wherever you can – purely out of love for God and to please Him.'⁸⁴

81. SA 3.12.3; 3.15.5.

82. SA 2.2.18; 2.3.2; 3.11.1–3. See also the 1528 *Confession*, LW 37:371 (WA 26:509.1–8).

83. LW 37:365 (WA 26:505.20–21): 'Even the godless may have much about them that is holy without being saved thereby.' See Lazareth, *Christians in Society*, pp. 167–173, for Luther's positive evaluation of 'civil righteousness' for this life even though it is of no use at all in justification.

84. SC 1.10, 14; LC 1.328.

So the love of God leads to the love of neighbour that is to characterize the Christian life. Luther can describe this in general terms as 'the common order of Christian love . . . [which] serves every needy person in general with all kinds of benevolent deeds'. But he also understands that God has established human society and that Christians carry out their obligations of love very specifically through the created orders in which God has placed them. In his 1528 *Confession*, Luther identifies three such orders: church, family and civil government. Regarding the first, Luther says, 'All who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word are in a holy, proper, good and God-pleasing order and estate.' But Luther does not mean only the ordained clergy but also 'sextons and messengers or servants who serve such persons'. Likewise, with respect to the family, Luther includes fathers, mothers and children but also servants. This estate too is 'a holy order'. And finally, 'princes and lords, judges, civil officers, state officials, notaries, male and female servants and all who serve such persons, and further, all their obedient subjects – all are engaged in pure holiness and leading a holy life before God'.⁸⁵

What makes Luther so confident that works done by Christians in these circumstances are 'good' is the fact that these 'orders are found in God's Word and commandment'. Luther does not demonstrate this in his 1528 *Confession*, but does so in the Small Catechism, since the last part of this work is the 'Table of Duties', which he describes as 'certain passages of Scripture for various holy orders and positions, by which these people are to be admonished, as a special lesson, about their office and service'. Luther directs his first section of biblical admonitions to the ecclesiastical order: 'for bishops, pastors, and preachers'. The next section applies to the political order: 'concerning civil government'. The next several relate to marriage and the family: husbands, wives, parents, children, servants and labourers, masters and mistresses, young people and widows. Luther concludes the entire list with two Bible passages for 'all in common': 'The commandments . . . are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"' (Rom. 13:9) and 'First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for

85. *LW* 37:364–365 (*WA* 26:505.11–13; 504.31–35; 504.35–505.5; 505.5–7). According to Bernd Wannewetsch, 'Luther's Moral Theology', in McKim, *Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther*, p. 130, Luther 'conceived these estates as "con-creatures" of humankind . . . created together with man in order to provide the social spheres that are necessary for a flourishing and obedient life'. See also Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, pp. 322–324.

all people' (1 Tim. 2:1).⁸⁶ When Christians perform their works of love in accordance with God's Word, they can be certain they are pleasing him.

Conclusion

In Luther's concern for the obligations of love in daily life as well as in his emphasis on justification by faith in Christ, the German Reformer was stepping away from medieval Christianity and into modern Protestantism. In statements that Luther intended as general descriptions of what it means to be Christian, he articulated an evangelical faith: Bible-based, Christ-centred and active in love. To be sure, Luther was not a modern-day evangelical. He possessed, for example, no strong evangelistic commitment to convert the world;⁸⁷ and his sacramental theology distinguishes him from most evangelical leaders in the modern period. But at the heart of Luther's faith were basic convictions about a gracious God, a sinful humanity and a Saviour, Jesus Christ, who paid for sins and offers salvation to all who believe. You can't get more evangelical than that!

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86. *LW* 37:365 (*WA* 26:505.7-8); SC Table of Duties.

87. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 243-248, contends that the theology of Luther (and of Calvin) was 'fundamentally missionary' (p. 245) in nature, but unlike the Anabaptists, the magisterial Reformers 'could not conceive of a missionary outreach into countries in which there was no Protestant . . . government' (p. 246).