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LUTHER AND THE LATIN LANGUAGE

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In the 16th century, Latin was the language of learning; and Luther was a learned man. This means that from little on up, Luther's formal schooling was all about Latin—its grammar and rhetoric and literature. It also means that Luther spoke Latin and wrote Latin, especially in connection with his vocation as a doctor of theology and lecturer in biblical exegesis at the University of Wittenberg.¹ Although Luther's mother tongue was German, he experienced some of the great moments of his life in Latin, for instance, his ordination, his first mass, and his promotion to the doctorate.² But among all the great moments of his life, none is better known or more significant than his great confession before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms. A detail that never seems to make it into Hollywood productions, on this momentous occasion, Luther spoke twice—German to begin with but then again in Latin.³

But Luther's influence resulted not simply from what he said, however dramatic, but also and probably more so, from what was printed, and none of his contemporaries employed the printing press to greater effect than Mar-

1. For Luther's education in Latin schools, see Marilyn J. Harran, *Martin Luther: Learning for Life* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 30-32, 38, 48-50, 51-52. She describes Luther's experiences at the University of Erfurt in Chapter 2, especially pp. 59-85.

2. For these events, see Heinrich Boehmer, *Martin Luther: Road to Reformation*, (New York: Living Age Books, 1946), 42-43, 86.

3. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, 1990, 1993) 3:459. For another reconstruction of Luther's confession at Worms, see Daniel Olivier, *The Trial of Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 166, who presents Luther as making just one presentation but still employing both languages.

tin Luther. In fact, one recent historian has suggested that “the early German Reformation might be characterized in terms of ‘justification by print alone.’”⁴ Practically speaking, the Reformation was more the creation of the printers than it was of Martin Luther.

In a well-known remark about the power of God’s Word, Luther explained how the Reformation had begun:

I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.⁵

But how did the Word do its work while Luther was drinking beer with his friends? By means of the printing press, over which Luther had very little control.

This was especially true in the case of *The 95 Theses*. As all good Lutherans “know,” the Reformation began when Martin Luther posted them on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg—in Latin, of course. But if you think about it for a moment, you realize that there must have been more to the story than that. For how did *The 95 Theses* get from the door of the church into the hands of anybody outside of Wittenberg whose population was only a few thousand? At first, Luther himself had circulated a few copies in manuscript to friends outside of Wittenberg, but then some of his readers, without his knowledge, had them printed in Leipzig, Nuremberg, and Basel. Originally written in Latin, they were also translated into German, printed, and distributed to an even wider audience. The result then was that within a few weeks they were all over Germany and beyond. What had begun as a dispute among a few theologians and church officials had become an international controversy on account of the printing press. One can safely say, therefore, that without the medium of print there would have been no Reformation.⁶

Although still very primitive by our standards, the printing industry really came of age in the Reformation. In the 1450’s, Johannes Gutenberg had set up the first printing press with moveable type in the city of Mainz, and his

4. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., *German Histories in the Age of Reformations* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 164.

5. AE 51:77.

6. Brecht, *Luther*, 1:204-205.

first publication was a Latin Bible. By the 16th century, Gutenberg's technology was spreading across the continent, so that by the time of the Reformation there were nearly 250 printing establishments in Europe, sixty of them in Germany alone.⁷ For the most part, these printers were energetic businessmen, who would print both sides of a controversy if they would both sell. But many of them were also intellectuals and interested in what they printed, and they discovered in Luther's works material that was worth reading but also publications that made money.

Luther quickly became a best-selling author, indeed, more than that, a best-selling phenomenon. In the first years of the Reformation, from 1518 to 1525, editions, i.e., printings and reprintings, of Luther's works numbered 1576 while his Catholic opponents numbered only 296.⁸ Luther also easily outpaced his fellow Evangelical authors during that same period. On the basis of vernacular editions alone, Luther's total (1465) is more than 11 times the next most popular author, Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (125). In fact, Luther's works (1465) outnumber the next seventeen authors on the list (807) by a ratio of almost two to one.⁹ Over the course of his lifetime, German publishers produced over 3 million copies of Luther's writings, not counting Luther's German Bible or parts thereof (about another half a million copies).¹⁰

Now, Luther himself did not profit monetarily from his publications. There was no such thing as copyright or any other legal protections for authors. Besides, from Luther's perspective, the point was not to make money at all but to let the Word work—as it did, by means of the printing press. No wonder then that Luther once said that "Printing is the latest of God's gifts and the greatest. Through printing God wills to make the cause of true religion known to the whole world even to the ends of the earth."¹¹

That's all well and good, of course. But for readers of this book, it is both obvious and disconcerting, I suspect, to realize from all the numbers and statistics that Luther's German publications far outnumbered his Latin ones. It is also true that Luther's decision to employ the vernacular was critical to the

7. Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *OER*, s.v. "Literacy" and "Printing."

8. Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), Tables 2 and 6, pp. 20 and 30.

9. Edwards, *Printing*, 26-27.

10. Brady, *German Histories*, 164-65; and Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 178.

11. As quoted in *OER*, s.v. "Printing."

success of his Reformation. Using Latin exclusively would simply not have permitted Luther to reach the large audience that he did, including the political leaders upon whom the success of his movement depended.¹² Indeed, a much greater reliance on Latin is sometimes cited as a reason for the failure of his Roman Catholic opponents more successfully to make their case against Luther.¹³ Nonetheless, a Lutheran Latinist need not lose heart, for one cannot dismiss Luther's Latin works as insignificant or unimportant. In fact, they are critical in demonstrating the course of Luther's theological development in the first place and document better than any other source the state of Luther's mature theology. His Latin works include some of the most important texts for both history and theology in the entire corpus of his writings.

But first a few numbers. Mark Edwards has counted 544 individual works (first editions), not including editions of the Bible, through the course of Luther's public career—1516-46. Of these, 130 were in Latin. That's about 24% or just under $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total—certainly not an insignificant number. However, these are just the works *published* during Luther's lifetime. What about the unpublished writings, sermons, lectures, letters, and table talk, that didn't make it into print until after Luther's death, much of it not until modern times? One way of getting a handle on all of Luther's works is by means of Kurt Aland's *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium*.¹⁴ The first part of this work is a listing of Luther's writings, more than 800 in all. By my count, around 240 of these works employ exclusively or, at least, extensively the Latin language. This is almost 30% of Aland's list.

Of course, the individual works vary greatly in significance. I suppose, for example, that no one is going to lose much sleep over being unfamiliar with Luther's letter to Gabriel Zwilling about looking for someone to make a mattress (only 9 lines in the Weimar edition).¹⁵ But there are others that nobody would want to miss. Consider, for example, *The 95 Theses* (#721)¹⁶ that supposedly began it all. In what language were they written? Latin, of

12. Edwards, 6-7. Bernhard Lohse compares and contrasts Luther's two languages in *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 99-101. For the Reformation and the vernacular, see James D. Tracy, *Europe's Reformations, 1450-1650* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 66-67.

13. E.g., Brady, *German Histories*, 166.

14. Kurt Aland, *Hilfsbuch zum Lutherstudium* (Bielefeld: Luther-Verlag, 1996).

15. WBr 4:4, 1-9. Cf. AE 49:142.

16. WA 1:233-38.

course. And similarly, *The Heidelberg Theses* (#276)¹⁷ from the following year that enunciate specifically and unambiguously themes in Luther's theology that remain integral to Lutheranism even to this very day—themes like “law and gospel” —were also written in Latin. Then, too, Luther's dismantling of the medieval sacramental system from his new, evangelical perspective, *The Babylonian Captivity* (#120),¹⁸ is also a Latin original. And what many consider Luther's greatest work—or at least very near the top of the list—his *Bondage of the Will* (#38)¹⁹—was also composed in Latin.

So there's no getting around it, Luther employed Latin in some of his most important works; and, in fact, it is the Latin works that provide us with the best or only entrée into his development from a medieval scholastic theologian into a proponent of a radical gospel, identified as justification by faith. So, for example, Bernhard Lohse begins the second part of his introduction to Luther's thought, viz., “Luther's Theology in Its *Historical* [emphasis mine] Development,” with three successive chapters treating evidence originally composed in Latin: Luther's marginal notes on Augustine (1509; WA 9:5-15, 16-23, 24-27) and Peter Lombard (1510-11; WA 9:29-94); the first set of lectures on Psalms (1513-15; WA 3:11-652, 4:1-462, 9:116-21, 55.1:1-119, 55.2:1-124, 31.1:464-80); and his early lectures on Paul (1515-18; Romans: WA 56:3-154, 157-528, Tafeln A-D; WA 57:5-127, 131-232, Tafeln A-D; Galatians: WA 57:5-49, 53-108, Tafel E; Hebrews: WA 57:3-91, 97-238, Tafeln F-H).²⁰ For his part, Oswald Bayer, for whom the concept of “promise” is critical in Luther's development since it alone offered an absolute assurance of salvation that was “the decisive point of contention” between Luther and Rome, locates the first appearance of this theme in another Latin work, *Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis conclusiones* (1518, Al and #137; WA 1:630-33).²¹

Both Bayer and Lohse also discuss the vexing question of when did Luther's theological “breakthrough” occur? Or to put it another way, when did Luther actually become a Lutheran? A key text in answering that question has always been Luther's preface to the first volume of the Wittenberg edition

17. WA 1:353-55.

18. *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae preludeum*, WA 6:497-573.

19. *De servo arbitrio*, WA 18:600-787.

20. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 45-84.

21. Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 49-50.

of his *Latin* writings from 1545. Just as an aside, it is somewhat ironic but pertinent to this paper that in his preface to his *German* works in the same edition from 6 years earlier, Luther had summarized the three rules for studying theology by means of three *Latin* terms, *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*.²² Obviously, there were certain instances in which the vernacular just couldn't cut it! But now back to the Reformer's preface to his *Latin* works. Here the Reformer reminisces about the course of the Reformation and discusses his so-called Tower Experience, i.e., his finally arriving at a new insight into Paul's theology that "the righteousness of God" from Romans 1:17 referred not to the fact that God is righteous and so punishes unrighteous sinners but rather to the righteousness revealed in the gospel whereby God in His mercy justifies sinners by faith. At this realization, Luther says, he felt as if he had been "altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."²³

Clearly, this was a moment of critical significance in the development of a specifically Lutheran theology. So when did it take place? Historians are at loggerheads regarding the answer to this question.²⁴ But for our purposes, it is worth noting that the interpretation of one key piece of evidence depends in part upon a point of *Latin* grammar. Luther writes:

*Interim eo anno iam redieram ad Psalterium denuo interpretandum, fretus eo, quod exercitior essem, postquam S. Pauli epistolas ad Romanos, ad Galatas, et eam, quae est ad Ebraeos, tractassem in scholis. Miro certe ardore captus fueram cognoscendi Pauli in epistola ad Rom., sed obstiterat hactenus non frigidus circum praecordia sanguis, sed unicum vocabulum quod est Cap. 1: Iustitia Dei revelatur in illo.*²⁵

22. AE 34:285. WA 50:659, 4.

23. AE 34:336-37.

24. For example, Martin Brecht, 1:225, says that the new discovery "could have been no sooner than the spring, and no later than the fall, of 1518" whereas Helmar Junghans, "Luther's Wittenberg," in *CCML*, 25, contends that "there is every reason to believe that this event occurred during his first lecture series on Psalms" (1513-15). Lohse, *Luther's Theology*, 85-88, has a nice introduction to the problem. See also the volume he edited, *Der Durchbruch der reformatorischen Erkenntnis bei Luther: Neuere Untersuchungen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1988).

25. WA 54:185, 12-17.

This rather odd construction, *captus fueram*—called a “double pluperfect” by the editors of Weimar version²⁶—may suggest that Luther was recounting something that took place prior to the events that he had just recounted in the pluperfect (*redieram* and *tractassem*). Then again, perhaps Luther meant *captus fueram* simply as a pluperfect but used the wrong form. This is not the place to try and sort this out, but my point is that any answer to the question regarding the timing of Luther’s “breakthrough” demands Latin. Translations just won’t do.

One of the points that is perhaps clear by now is that the bulk of Luther’s Latin works arose in a university context, where Luther regularly exercised his vocation as a doctor of theology by lecturing on the Scriptures—in Latin. Beginning in 1513 and concluding in 1545, just three months before his death, Luther lectured on both Old Testament (Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, and the Minor Prophets) and New Testament (Romans, Galatians, 1 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, and 1 John) books, unfortunately not having the opportunity to get to many of them. Of course, since it took Luther 10 years for Genesis alone, it’s not too surprising that he ran out of time!²⁷

Because Luther delivered them over the last years of his life, the Genesis lectures provide extensive evidence of his mature theology. An interesting example of this is his position on divine necessity. His comments on Genesis 26, for example, soften the position on divine necessity that he articulated so forcefully in *The Bondage of the Will*. In the earlier work, Luther had forced his readers to confront the hidden will of God, according to which God is entirely in charge of all things, including the eternal destiny of everyone:

The Diatribe [of Erasmus] is deceived in that it makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is, between the Word of God and Himself. God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word show us

26. “Doppelten Plusquamperfektum,” WA 54:185, n. 4. They are quoting Ernst Strakke, “Luthers grosses Selbstzeugnis 1545 über seine Entwicklung zum Reformator historisch-kritisch untersucht,” SVR 44 (1926), Heft 1, no. 140. A regular conjugation in the indicative passive would include *capior* (pres.), *captus sum* (perf.), and *captus eram* (plup.). See Henry John Roby, *A Grammar of the Latin Language from Plautus to Seutonius*, 2 vols., Legacy Reprint Series (London: Macmillan, 1876) 1:229, 231.

27. Peter Kawerau, *Luther: Leben, Schriften, Denken* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 1969), 55. With regard to 10 years for Genesis, Kawerau notes that these lectures were marked by extensive interruptions.

that He wills. Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is, in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will.²⁸

Luther, of course, emphasizes that we must be guided solely by God’s Word, since we can know nothing of God’s hidden will, but even so, there is something disturbing, even frightening in Luther’s portrayal of the sovereign God in this work.

But when Luther returns to the same themes in the Genesis lectures, his emphasis is different. Responding to any uncertainty regarding predestination that his earlier work may have provoked, Luther asserts the absolute reliability of the gospel:

Concerning God you must maintain with assurance and without any doubt that he is well disposed toward you on account of Christ and that you have been redeemed and sanctified through the precious blood of the Son of God. And in this way you will be sure of your predestination.²⁹

Much more so than in the earlier work, in these later lectures Luther orients his discussion of God’s sovereignty, including predestination, toward assurance of salvation.³⁰

Besides the biblical lectures, Luther’s university work also produced sets of theses for academic disputations that often addressed contemporary theological issues. After some years of neglect, the University of Wittenberg revived the practice in the 1530’s³¹ and Luther composed sets of theses that addressed questions such as faith and the law (WA 39.1:44-62), the nature of man (WA 39.1:175-80), justification (WA 39.1:82-126), the Trinity (WA 39.2:339-401), the Person of Christ (WA 39.2:93-121), and the church (WA 39.2:206-32). For the most part, these theses were not published during Luther’s lifetime, but on a wide variety of topics, therefore, they permit an assessment of how consistent the old Luther was with the young.

In addition to using Latin for the works that arose in connection with Luther’s academic activities—lectures and disputations—the classical lan-

28. J.I. Packer, and O.R. Johnston, trans., *Martin Luther on The Bondage of the Will* (n.p.: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 170; cf. WA 18:685, 25-29.

29. AE 5:49 (WA 43:462, 16-18, 22-25).

30. For Luther on “the bondage of the will,” see Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), especially ch. 1.

31. Lewis W. Spitz, “Introduction,” AE 34:xiii-xv.

guage is also an essential tool for gaining access to less formal and more pastoral activities, viz., his letters, his table talk, and even his preaching. Of course, Luther used German for many of his letters, but when he wrote to an educated person, even a close friend, he normally used Latin.³² In the three volumes (48-50) of the American Edition of Luther's works devoted to letters, 218 of them out of a total 325 were Latin originals.

Luther's table talk was also often recorded in Latin, even when he was speaking German. In fact, many of the selections are really in both languages. In the Weimar edition, only one out of 19 selections is exclusively in German, Aurifaber's version that was first published in 1566 and then frequently thereafter. The other versions were not printed until recent times and represent the records of those who actually sat with Luther and took notes. The editor of the American Edition volume suggests that Luther probably employed both languages with his tablemates but it is also true that students were more accustomed to taking notes in Latin than in German and had developed a kind of shorthand in the scholarly language that made notetaking easier than in the vernacular.³³

It was also students and assistants who recorded Luther's sermons, originally delivered in German but preserved again in Latin with a lot of German words and terms thrown in. Over 2000 of these sermon notes exist and they fill several volumes in the Weimar edition. Many have been translated into English and more are on their way but access to the original record of Luther's vernacular preaching requires Latin.³⁴

But then, again, does it really matter whether we study the Reformer by means of the original languages, German as well as Latin? For most purposes and for most people, I suppose that it does not. After all, a good translation gives its reader access to much of what an author intended, at least as far as intellectual content—style and rhetoric are always more difficult. But if you want to know simply what Luther thought about something, a translation will probably suffice. Even so, however, every translation represents choices, and each choice leaves something behind that only the original can convey.

In order to provide some sense of what this means, I looked at just a few pages of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, originally written in Latin but readily

32. Theodore G. Tappert, "Introduction," *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Vancouver, BC.: Regent College Publishing, 1960), 22.

33. Theodore G. Tappert, "Introduction," AE 54:xx-xxi.

34. John W. Doberstein, "Introduction," AE 51:xi-xxi, and Fred W. Meuser, "Luther as Preacher of the Word of God," in *CCML*, 136.

available in *two* modern English editions. Both of these are accurate reflections of the original, but they differ in many details. To begin with, Philip Watson, translator of the version in *Luther's Works*, says in his introduction that he has consistently rendered *arbitrium* as "choice" and *voluntas* as "will" (except in the title!).³⁵ This means, therefore, that in the first few pages, Luther mentions the subject matter of his treatise as "free choice." Packer and Johnston, translators of another modern version, prefer the more familiar, "free-will."³⁶

Another interesting example of translation nuances has to do with Luther's point against Erasmus about assertions. "Take away assertions," Luther wrote, "and you take away Christianity." This is the same in both versions, but there is certainly a shade of difference between "To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian *heart*" (P & J, 66) and "It is not the mark of a Christian *mind* to take no delight in assertions" (AE 33:19). In English "heart" or "mind" makes a difference. The Latin says, *Non est enim hoc Christiani pectoris* (WA 18:603, 10-11). Thus, "heart" seems a little more accurate especially since the activity referred to is "delight" (*delectari*).

Elsewhere, we read "dogmas that are vital" or "essential truths" for *necessariis* (AE 33:22; P & J, 68; WA 18:604, 28); "personal feelings" or "judgment" for *sensum* (AE 33:22; P & J, 69; WA 18:604, 35); "decrees of the church" or "church" for *Ecclesiae decretis* (AE 33:22; P & J, 69; WA 18:604, 37); and "all experience" or "sense" for *omni experientia* (AE 33:24; P & J, 70; WA 18:605, 34). Obviously, the variations are practically endless; and for the most part, don't matter—too much. But they do matter in conveying "a shade of meaning," and only by consulting the original Latin can one actually judge which translation got it right—or at least, righter than the other.

Luther once said regarding the biblical languages: "We will not long preserve the gospel without the languages" (AE 45:360). But the same is true of Luther himself: We will not long preserve the Reformer without the languages. Knowledge of the original Latin and German is necessary for direct access to Martin Luther. There really is no alternative. Even today—sermons, for example—a great deal of Luther remains untranslated; but even for those works that are in English, the translator may well have provided an accurate Luther but not an authentic one. Interpretation always takes place when

35. AE 33:xii.

36. Actually, Packer and Johnston have their own peculiarity in this matter as well, not "free will" but "free-will" set off in inverted commas, thus, 'free-will.' See Packer and Johnston, 62, 65, and *passim*. Also Watson, AE 33:15, 18.

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moving from one language to another. So the best scholarship demands making use of primary sources; and in Luther studies only the original Latin and German are primary. Every translation is at best only second-best.