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There are a lot of quotes and stories attributed to Luther. Are they true? Or fake news?

LUTHER WITHOUT FAKE NEWS

by Jobst Schöne

Luther and “fake news”—how well do the two go together? A few decades ago (or even less) you could hardly find anyone in Germany or Europe who could tell you what “fake news” meant. Now this term has become quite familiar to us and a popular expression. And we found out that “fake news” is nothing new in history. The eighteenth-century German philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg said, “The greatest lie is truth moderately distorted,” and I think that’s precisely what fake news is all about. Fake news spreads as legends or speculations, often attached to prominent people, about whom telling stories is always quite entertaining or amusing, whether they are true or not. Luther is such a person. There exist numerous fake news stories about him. I will take up and examine a few of them. In the end this might destroy some illusions you may have. Reality will not always please us, but it’s always better to know the real facts instead of holding fast to fake news.

Being keen on finding the “true” Luther, you should go to Wittenberg and step into the former Augustinian monastery where he lived for most of his lifetime. Today you’ll find there a most interesting exhibition of authentic books, pictures, and all kinds of other relics left behind by this great reformer of the church. Having walked through all the rooms, rather exhausted by all you have seen, you will finally come to a room where paintings and sculptures of Luther are presented from all the five-hundred years after him, portraying Luther in very different ways. And soon you will learn that each epoch made up a different portrait of him. This fact tells you sometimes more about the respective epoch and its feelings than about Luther himself. What seemingly did not fit into the picture that people had of Luther was left out or eliminated. People invented in Luther what they wanted to see or want. In the end you can have all kinds of Luthers: a holy one; a heroic one; a romantic Luther; or a nationalistic one; liberator or revolutionary; a family man; statesmanlike; or a man in the street; elitist or popular; destroying the church

or saving the church; a socialist or even a Marxist—just the way you want him to be.

Luther indeed was somewhat inconsistent and can be understood and interpreted quite differently. He cannot defend himself against his interpreters anymore, except by his own works and writings, which reveal what is true and what is false. In fact you’ll find with him a personality of different characteristics: he can be a rude fellow (as most of his contemporaries were); he can be extremely tender and sensitive as well, a real pastor caring for one’s spiritual welfare or vehemently polemical; sometimes naive, sometimes calculating; of keen insight or remarkably short-sighted; courageous or timid—and always rooted in his own century, representing his epoch, but at the same time a genius and totally exceptional.

What he wrote and published often shows inconsistency, since his writings are casual work, induced on occasion. You’ll find with him entirely different statements on papacy and monasticism, on peasants and princes, on Jews and Muslims, concerning the “priesthood of all believers” (traditionally traced back to him, but strictly taken with limited justification), and bishops and clergy. Luther was indeed no systematician. No wonder that he has been interpreted so differently, not only by his contemporaries, but also in later times. Quite often have Protestant scholars attributed to him untenable thoughts and opinions. And Roman Catholic scholars had to walk a long way before they reached positions nowadays common in their circles. For instance the Jesuit, church historian, and Luther expert Peter Manns, who used to speak of Luther as of “a father in faith.”

Around this many-sided and sometimes inconsistent Luther, who you can’t always classify so easily, numerous legends and “fake news” have developed in the course of time. To some of them we shall now pay attention.

1) Was Luther a Runaway Monk? or What Happens When You Start Out in a Monastery?

Indeed, Luther was a runaway monk, for he finally left

the monastery. But when and why did he do so? In 1505 he joined the Augustinian Eremites at Erfurt, one of the strictest monasteries in this city. A few years later his order sent him to Wittenberg, a small city of some 2000 inhabitants by that time, much smaller than Erfurt. He was to fill the position of a professor at the recently founded university. In Wittenberg, Luther lived in the *Augusteum*, the newly built Augustinian monastery. And there he stayed—how long? In 1522 most of his fellow monks in this place gave themselves permission to leave—and their order did not intervene. Luther, however, remained in the monastery, along with just one other monk. He explicitly disapproved of the *tumultuous exodus* that had happened, writing *Non probo egressum istum tumultuosum*, a letter to Johann Lang in Erfurt in 1524. He put off the monk's cowl not before October 1524, being left alone in this cloister by that time. And from then on he dressed with the professors' robe.

In 1525 Luther married. This seems to be the ultimate end of his monastic career. But was it the end? By then, Luther had lived almost one-third of his life in a monastery, struggling with all the negative aspects of monastic life. And there were many. But he also took with him many practices and experiences which sank into his memory forever. To give some examples: Luther reconstructed the congregational worship service to be translated into the vernacular instead of Latin so that all could participate. Frequent Holy Communion, common in monasteries but not in normal parishes, became customary among the Lutherans, as did regular private confession and prayer, familiar to Luther from the monastery. The catechism replaced the monastic rule and had to be learned and repeatedly recited in the family, as Luther had experienced it as a monk, now making the family father

responsible like an abbot over the monks. So, when did he really leave the monastery? Technically in 1524. But somehow he remained there forever, bringing all the people around him into a kind of “monastery.” Luther tore down the walls surrounding the monastery, opened it, and made some kind of monastic lifestyle common among Christians.

2) Did Luther Nail His Ninety-five Theses to Wittenberg's Church Door? or What Really Happened on October 31, 1517?

But the Old Testament's ban on images had a different intention according to Luther, namely only to protect the people of Israel from idolatry common among their neighbors. Luther, following the tradition of the ancient church, considered this ban to be cancelled ever since God made himself visible by his son's incarnation: “Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) and “Whoever sees Me sees Him who sent Me” (JOHN 12:45), says our Lord. ... Simplicity and lack of art has never been a principle of Lutheran worship and Lutheran church buildings, but comes from Calvinism and the Enlightenment.

October 31, 1517 is generally considered to be the beginning of the Reformation. It's true: in this year Luther wrote his famous Ninety-five Theses against the indulgence business common in the Western church of that age. Luther wrote in Latin, since they were intended to be debated among Latin speaking scholars. They were quickly translated into German, and at lightning speed spread all over Germany, due to printers smelling the scent of a profitable business, more than due to Luther, who was quite surprised about what was happening.

But did he in fact nail his theses to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church? With a hammer in his hand? That's the general conviction, but unfortunately not fully provable. Nobody knows for sure how he handled it.

Luther himself never mentioned this event. We hear of it for the first time in 1540 (twenty-three years later) in a brief memo written into Luther's private copy of the New Testament, telling us that these theses had been affixed to Wittenberg's church doors (in the plural!) “on the eve of All-Saints-Day.” This memo was written by Georg Rörer, deacon at St. Mary's church in Wittenberg and a kind of secretary for Luther. And later on, Melancthon,

Luther's friend¹ and collaborator, also mentioned this, but not before 1548 (two years after Luther's death). Melancthon, however, had not been an eyewitness himself, since he came to Wittenberg in 1518. These are the only two existing references to the Ninety-five Theses on church doors. Professors can be mistaken after so many years, and deacons even more. So it remains uncertain whether the Ninety-five Theses have ever been affixed to that famous church door or not.

The fact is that this door had been used for academic announcements, but a professor would not have ever nailed them to the door. It would have been the janitor's job to do so, and not with a hammer and nails (that would have ruined the wooden door), but with sealing wax. Once more: there is no doubt whatsoever that Luther wrote the Ninety-five Theses. In question is only their nailing to the church door and the very date itself: was it on the evening of October 31 or in the morning of November 1 when the exhibition of the Prince Elector's collection of relics was opened for the public? Last year a German newspaper said: "If Luther has fixed his 95 Theses to the door in October 1517 or simply sent them as a letter to his Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz—this only knows the merciful God." So it is, indeed.

3) "Here I Stand; I Cannot Do Otherwise" or What In Fact Did Luther Say at the Diet of Worms?

In 1521, Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms to justify himself before the emperor and the princes and all the elite of the empire. His defiant words, refusing to revoke his writings and teachings, deeply sank into the collective memory of the Germans. But what did he really say? "My conscience is captured in God's Word. I cannot and I will not revoke, since it is uncertain and dangerous to act against conscience." This he said in Latin, for His Majesty didn't understand German, then repeated it in German for those who could understand. Thus, it is recorded reliably. The next words following this statement were lost in the tumult that immediately burst out. Peter Manns, an expert on Luther, says, "He does not become the defiant hero people prefer to see. He certainly never spoke the words 'Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.'"

¹ Timothy Wengert, "The Priesthood of All Believers and Other Pious Myths" in *Liturgical Institute Conference Proceedings*, 1–36 (Valparaiso University: Valparaiso, 2005), 2. "I looked for the friendship between Luther and Melancthon and discovered that they were colleagues not friends." Perhaps, the notion that Luther and Melancthon were friends is another example of "fake news."

They are legendary."² Today you find these words embroidered on socks and sold in Wittenberg. Perhaps Luther said something similar, but rather faintly, disheartened, intimidated, looking the coming danger in the face. If so, I think it would make him look even more sympathetic—more humane and a man like us.

All attempts to change his mind failed completely at the Diet of Worms. On his way back to Wittenberg, Luther was kidnapped by order of his prince elector, and brought to Wartburg castle to hide him and protect him for awhile.

4) The Inkpot at Wartburg Castle or Did Luther Ever Throw It at the devil?

There is traditional fake news about an inkpot Luther is said to have cast at the devil while he was translating the New Testament from the Greek into German. And though it is a nice popular legend, it is nothing but a legend, of no reality whatsoever. The story says Luther felt disturbed by the devil while he was working hard and threw his inkpot, leaving a remarkable inkblot on the wall. But that's all nonsense, though quite effective for tourism. Clever guides have for a long time renewed this inkblot when it was going to fade. But in the end they stopped. Luther, during the three hundred days he spent at the Wartburg, had better things to do than throwing inkpots.

5) Worshipping the Saints/Iconoclasm or What Was Luther's Position in These Matters?

On March 1, 1522, Luther left Wartburg castle and returned to Wittenberg, though his prince elector, who was concerned about Luther's safety, was quite upset about this decision. Luther decided to come back, to Wittenberg, because pure chaos had broken out while he was absent. The monks of his convent had left in droves; Karlstadt, Luther's colleague at the university, had started a furious iconoclasm in Wittenberg's churches and introduced new forms of worship which he considered "contemporary" and believed to be fitting for a new age. The students at the university rebelled and Karlstadt told them not to attend classes any more. To learn and to study wasn't necessary any more, he said; the Spirit would give all wisdom, coming down directly to their minds. The city council turned out to be absolutely helpless to master this situation. In short, everything was at sixes and sevens. All the troublemakers and revolutionaries referred to Luther,

² Peter Manns, *Martin Luther: An Illustrated Biography*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 82.

claiming that they did nothing but translate his ideas into action. Luther, however, was far away and couldn't stop this hustle and bustle before he came back to Wittenberg to see what had happened. And he performed a masterpiece of pastoral care, namely preaching for one week, just eight sermons (sermons, not more!) to clear up this confusion, reestablish order, and expel the troublemakers from the city.

Iconoclasm was certainly not Luther's affair. Instead, he was a close friend to Lucas Cranach, the most famous artist in Wittenberg. He held music in high esteem and wanted to save and preserve all art, decoration, paintings, sculptures, and any customs and traditions that did not contradict the Scriptures. Lutheran churches, therefore, kept all the art, vestments, and candles, even incense. The Divine Service was celebrated in its traditional form, except for the prayers and rituals contradictory to the biblical teachings.

The reformers in Switzerland, Zwingli and Calvin, had a totally different opinion. They regarded images and sculptures to be diabolic, degrading God's majesty to human level and contrary to God's command. But the Old Testament's ban on images had a different intention according to Luther, namely only to protect the people of Israel from idolatry common among their neighbors. Luther, following the tradition of the ancient church, considered this ban to be cancelled ever since God made himself visible by his son's incarnation: "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (JOHN 14:9) and "Whoever sees Me sees Him who sent Me" (JOHN 12:45), says our Lord. Therefore the bare, empty church buildings of the Calvinists, deprived of all pictures, differ in this respect from churches of Lutheran tradition. Simplicity and lack of art has never been a principle of Lutheran worship and Lutheran church buildings, but comes from Calvinism and the Enlightenment.

Let's go back to Luther: There is a lot of fallacy behind the idea that he banned the saints and their images from the churches. Luther protested against the role given to the saints at his time, namely that they were used as mediators, interceding for poor sinners or even transferring their "merits" to Christians living with a deficit of good works. As such, the saints superceded their rightful role as examples and models, and darkened the perfect, sufficient merit of Christ himself. Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise in the Gospel of St. Luke, illustrates his high esteem for her. Luther remained an admirer of the mother of God until the end of his life.

The prayerbook that he published in 1522 (followed by fifty-one editions until 1604) included the Ave Maria prayer in it, a prayer Luther had brought along from his years in the monastery. Forgetting all the saints? Doing away with images and decoration in the churches? Not Luther, who never approved of any iconoclasm.

6) The Schism of the Church in the Occident or Who Wanted It, Effected It, and Gave Rise to It?

Many believe that Luther split the church. But this is legendary and not quite true. In fact, Luther never intended to establish a new church, or a new confession besides the one that existed. He firmly objected to such an idea, regarding himself to be a member of the *one* holy church, which he confessed in the Creed, into which he was baptized, which ordained him to the priesthood, which called him to be a teacher of the church. He felt himself challenged to free this church from distortion in doctrine and practice. In 1522 he wrote:

At first, I ask you not to mention my name and not to be called "Lutheran," but simply Christians. Who is Luther? The doctrine isn't mine, nor have I been crucified for anybody. ... How could I, a poor stinking bag of maggots, ever give my unholy name to designate the children of Christ? Not so, dear friends, let us blot out such partial names and call ourselves Christians, having Christ's teaching. I am not and don't want to be anybody's master.³

Luther could not imagine a divided church, split up into churches in the plural. But this became the inevitable result of history, originating from the papal orientated bishops and clergy rejecting the necessary renewal of the church.

Confessional church bodies as we know them nowadays actually came into existence about 150 years after Luther. For over a century following Luther, the different groups in the one Western church, still called themselves "factions" or "parties," but not "churches." They developed into separate church bodies later on, as we have them today. From about 1650 on we had Lutheran churches, the Roman Catholic church, Anglican and Calvinistic churches (often called Reformed churches), Anabaptists,

³ Martin Luther, "A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to All Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion," vol. 45 in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 70. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

and many more, apart from each other.

To clear up another widespread misconception: the famous slogan of “the church is always to be reformed” (*ecclesia semper reformanda*) does not come from Luther, though many people believe so.⁴ Instead, it first appeared with the councils of the late Middle Ages striving for the church’s renewal. Later, this slogan became popular with Pietism in the seventeenth century, in particular among the Calvinists in the Netherlands, and finally in the twentieth century by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth from Switzerland. Luther never spoke that way nor could he see a characteristic mark of the church in such a permanent remodeling. He considered himself placed into the one, permanent church, the *perpetua mansura* of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, abiding with the ancient church and its apostolic origin.

7) The Priesthood of Believers or Has Luther demoted pope, bishops, and clergy?

It looks indeed as if Luther made pope, bishops, and clergy to shrink to the size of ordinary mortals like you and me, when putting an accent on the priesthood of all believers, which is generally taken as a distinguishing mark of the Lutherans. In 1520, Luther proclaimed, “Whosoever has crept out of baptism, can boast of being an ordained priest, bishop, pope.”⁵ This statement however has a continuation with it, which reads as follows: “though it doesn’t fit to everybody to hold such an office.” Which means not everybody is authorized to do what a priest, bishop, or even pope is supposed to do. What Luther denied is a *character indelebilis*, an everlasting inviolable stamping of one’s nature by holy ordination, lifting the ordained up above other Christians and bringing him nearer to God. To be baptized means to be near to God, to be his heir and child. You can’t get any closer to him than by faith and baptism. That’s Luther. On the other hand he doesn’t deny an office, a ministry, instituted by Christ, coming to us through the apostles. Priests and

⁴ See Werner Klän, “Reformation Then and Now: Ecclesia Semper Reformanda,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* (September 2016): 14. “Before we turn to what it might mean ‘the church is always to be reformed,’ we must note that this phrase was first used by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth in 1947. It can be shown that an early example is Jodocus van Lodenstein, who claims the ‘truth ... that also in the Church there is always much to reform.’ Another version of the term *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* (‘the reformed church [is] always to be reformed’) is widely used informally in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today as their motto.”

⁵ LW 44: 129.

bishops do have an office. They are not any higher than other Christians, but they have been entrusted with a special ministry for which they are authorized, appointed, and blessed.

When Luther, in 1520, accentuated the equality of all baptized, he had before him a fundamental distinction between clergy and laity, common in those days. The entire people of God making up the church had largely been forgotten. So Luther stood up for the right of a congregation to elect priests and bishops, who normally should receive their ordination from other already ordained ministers. To install pastors without that regular ordination should be left to cases of emergency (“Suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them”⁶), but it can’t be the rule and should not be the regular procedure. Instead, Luther describes a more theoretical than real solution for the problem of lacking pastors, a problem he had to face in 1522.

He later moved away from this position after he had learned what a tremendous misuse could come from neglecting holy ordination. To view the church as the people of God (not only the clergy) and the body of Christ in this world does not mean to equalize all Christians and make the church an amorphous entity of equal minded and equally authorized people, with the pastor just a functionary of the congregation. Instead there are offices, ministries, and scopes of duty in which specific persons are called, ordained, and authorized to work. That’s ordination. Whether or not traditional graduations and hierarchies should be preserved was for Luther a question of usefulness. But a holy office in the church and specific office holders was for him given by God and instituted by Christ.

Luther, being critical of the hierarchy in the church of his time, unwillingly paved the way for the priesthood of all believers later to be a mark of Lutheranism in terms of equal rights and equal abilities of all Christians to carry out this ministry. Luther himself never went that far. It became, however, a common opinion among the Pietists. What Luther had written in his early years should not be taken as his final word in this matter, but has to be seen in the context of the controversy of those days: To fight the misunderstanding of the holy ministry as giving power to the clergy over against the laity, instead of being service and duty.

⁶ LW 44: 128.

8) Luther: Sovereigns' Servant or a Revolutionary? or How historians in communist Germany had to change their minds

Luther's attitude towards the ruling classes of his time was somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand he considered princes and sovereigns to have their authority from God, to be "fathers of the fatherland," a God-given institution, and Christians therefore must obey them. To be fair, one has to keep in mind that democracy was more or less beyond peoples' imagination at this time, while the power of princes and other rulers was generally accepted without any objection. On the other hand Luther could take these rulers to task quite severely and reproach them concerning their behavior and actions. A clear separation between state and church and their representatives' respective power corresponded to Luther's theology, but could not generally be achieved. State and church were traditionally linked too closely with each other, the rulers having power not only in secular matters but over the church as well as its "first members" (*membra praecipua*), liable to protect and support the church. And no one in power was ready to surrender his control of church affairs in his respective territory.

In 1525, the Peasants' War broke out, caused by the miserable conditions under which they lived and their pitiless exploitation by the landlords. It soon came to violent uprisings, with castles and cloisters being burned down and destroyed. The suppressed peasants committed terrible acts of revenge out of pure despair. Total chaos was in view, having a kind of "ideological foundation" with it: Namely, the peasants referred to "the gospel" (or what they took for and believed to be the gospel) as making every human being equal, blessing the poor and promising freedom, to be realized right now in their precarious situation. This they believed to be the will of God.

Spokesman, leader, and commander of these uprising peasants was Thomas Muentzer, formerly a student of theology at Wittenberg, and a clergyman, but later on Luther's most embittered opponent, jeering at him as the "soft living flesh at Wittenberg," labeling him as the "sovereigns' slave." Luther, having admonished the peasants and landlords to make peace in his *Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia*, 1525,⁷ found himself fallen between two stools. People took offense at Luther's refusal to exclusively side with the peasants. A few months later he published another

pamphlet entitled *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*,⁸ taking thereby a totally one-sided position in favor of the landlords. He called upon a most brutal crushing of the peasants' revolt. And it happened: the peasants were defeated, almost slaughtered, and Muentzer was executed. In our present day view, Luther's one-sided judgement on the rebels leaves no room for it having been a painful mistake, as he later felt. In 1533, he wrote: "I (!) have killed myself all peasants in riot, their blood is on my neck. But I give it to our Lord God, he ordered me to speak in such a way."⁹ Such a statement reflects his conviction that there should be no mixing of state and church and their respective affairs, no appealing to the gospel when resorting to force. A gospel enforced by secular power is no gospel any more; instead, it will end up in terror.

For the Marxists and their interpretation of history, Thomas Muentzer, however, remained a hero, a revolutionary, a protector of the underprivileged and suppressed. In former East Germany, you will find still today in almost every town streets named after him. For decades he was considered in East Germany to be a forerunner of socialism. But in 1983 a special anniversary came up: Luther's 500th birthday. And the communist rulers, always in urgent need of foreign currency to keep alive their system of suppression, didn't want to irritate solvent visitors from abroad. Therefore the government prescribed a total turnaround to the historians' teaching and publishing in their country. From then on they had to describe Luther as "a progressive actor in the early bourgeois revolution." This turnaround was not easy and required a lot of flexibility. In the end you can see that being a slave to the rulers can have many faces.

9) Luther—An Anti-Semite? or Bad words, horrible suggestions, but little or no effects

Luther's opinion on the Jews has never been accentuated and discussed as much as in the last eighty years, in particular in Germany in the time of the Nazi regime. The Nazis used him to legitimize their own terrible racially based anti-Semitism. And nowadays he is accused and blamed for what he had written in his later years. In many cases these discussions take place without sufficient expertise and competence. First of all, we have to state: there exists no racial theory or racial discrimination whatsoever with

⁸ LW 46: 45–57.

⁹ From *Table Talk*, LW 54: 181.

⁷ LW 46: 5–45.

Luther, no racial theory characterizing anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Luther's opinion on the Jews is determined only by theology and piety. To be Jewish is for him a question of religion, not of race or ethnicity. Luther firmly believed that the Jews in his time would turn to Christ, being convinced of the gospel's irresistible contents, and would accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah, since the gospel had been freed from all infiltration and distortion. With this expectation and estimation—you may call it naive—Luther found himself in the end totally disappointed. Nothing happened. The Jews didn't move or stir a finger. In his early years (1523), Luther published a pamphlet entitled *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*,¹⁰ in which he spoke of the Jews in a very courteous, appreciative, and respectful manner, attributing solely to the Christians what had so far eroded the Christian-Jewish relationship. He called for an end of all persecution, excesses, professional bans, and segregation, altogether quite common then. "If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian."¹¹

Twenty years later he expressed himself entirely differently and published another pamphlet entitled *About Jews and Their Lies* (1543).¹² It is an unmerciful and intolerable document, full of hatred, in no way to be palliated. It is a terrible blot never to be excused. For Luther recommended all the measures that became a horrible practice in Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe in the twentieth century: Destruction of their synagogues and homes, expropriation, expulsion, forced labor to be imposed, prohibition of worship—he did not (not yet?) call for mass murder. This indicates a complete change of Luther's mIN And the reason for that seems to be found in rumors of which he had heard, namely the Jews beginning with mission work among Christians, misguiding them to circumcision and observation of Sabbath rules.

Jews, so Luther believed, had calumniated Christian belief, spreading lies about Christ and the Trinity ("polytheism") and St. Mary (to have been a prostitute). And for Luther you would become an accessory to that crime if you didn't resist such blasphemy. This may somewhat explain Luther's reaction, but doesn't excuse it. It is and will always be a terrible lapse in Luther, and we Lutherans

of today should not hesitate to admit it.

Luther's opinion wasn't unique at his time. For instance, the famous Erasmus of Rotterdam, generally taken as peaceful and gentle, wanted the Jews to be treated even worse. Germany's neighboring countries like France, Spain, and Bohemia had already expelled all Jews from their territory. To expel them became quite popular: by doing so, you could get rid of your creditors. But all of that doesn't excuse Luther. It should be noted that his 1543 pamphlet had almost no influence in Lutheran churches afterwards. His evil recommendations were hardly followed anywhere—until the Nazis took over.

10) The World—A Three Floor Building? or How To Overcome an Outdated Outlook on this World

In 1534 Luther had finished his translation of the Bible into German. The first complete edition put on the market had a woodcut on the front page showing God the Father as creator of the world and the earth as a disk surrounded by water on which Adam and Eve disported themselves along with different animals, with the sun, moon, and the stars all around. This composition followed a traditional pattern from long before Luther. It tells us how people in the sixteenth century (and before) envisioned heaven and earth. In Luther's time the famous astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) had just discovered that the sun didn't revolve around the earth, but the other way around. We don't know for sure how Luther felt about Copernicus and what he discovered. It seems as if he had rejected his ideas and stayed with the traditional view.¹³ But how should it have been otherwise, how should he get away from his contemporaries' conception? A person of the sixteenth century thought of the earth as a disk, of course, being in the center of all creation. He also understood all nature as created by God. His knowledge of the world came from what he can see with his own eyes, and from the Scriptures interpreting this creation as emerging from God. Traditionally this world was regarded to be like a three-floor building. On top you'll find God and heaven,

¹³ *Table Talk* records one conversation attributed to Luther about Copernicus dated June 4, 1539. LW 54, 359: "There was mention of a certain new astrologer who wanted to prove that the earth moves and not the sky, the sun, and the moon. This would be as if somebody were riding on a cart or in a ship and imagined that he was standing still while the earth and the trees were moving. [Luther remarked,] 'So it goes now. Whoever wants to be clever must agree with nothing that others esteem. He must do something of his own. This is what that fellow does who wishes to turn the whole of astronomy upside down. Even in these things that are thrown into disorder I believe the Holy Scriptures, for Joshua commanded the sun to stand still and not the earth [Josh. 10:12].'"

¹⁰ LW 45: 199–231.

¹¹ LW 45: 200.

¹² LW 47: 123–309.

in the middle the earth with the sky above, and under your feet (literally) the realm of evil, hell, and Satan. In this way Luther had learned to look at the world.

And now it comes to an ingenious step that Luther took, still linked to that medieval concept of old, but at the same time breaking it open and ready to overcome it. His theological opponents in Switzerland, Zwingli and Calvin, held fast to the three-story concept, strictly separating heaven and earth from each other, with the intention thereby to safeguard God's majesty and establish an infinite distance between God and his fallen creation.

Luther, on the other hand, focused on incarnation, i.e. God humiliating himself when becoming man in Christ—the infinite God making himself equal to his creatures out of pure love. Luther's great Christmas hymn speaks clearly: "The gift from God's eternal throne / Here clothed in our poor flesh and bone."¹⁴ And Luther comes to the conclusion: The right hand of God is simply everywhere, heaven not anymore a locality in a three-story setup where God is locked up, unable to be fully present in our midst. While Zwingli and Calvin thought that the finite can never become a vessel of the infinite, Luther was convinced that the contrary was true: *finitum capax infiniti*. For him all categories of space and time will fail when you try to describe God's ubiquity—you can indeed find him everywhere. But that's not mixing up the "everywhere" and the "nowhere," ending in a kind of unclear pantheism. Instead Luther makes a clear distinction between a general omnipresence "as such" and an omnipresence "for me," the latter one linked to God's word (where it is proclaimed and can be heard) and to the Sacraments being the "visible Word." Word and sacraments, however, can be found at concrete, definite places in which therefore God himself can be found.

Luther thereby overcomes this Middle Ages concept of the three stories or levels, separating God from his creation. He accentuates the biblical report on creation (adjusted by the the Holy Spirit to the limited comprehension of people from a period of no deeper insight in natural sciences). Insofar he puts all scientific questions and details in the background. "I believe," he teaches us,

that God has made *me* and all creatures; that He has given *me* my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. ... For all this it is my duty to

thank and to praise, serve and obey Him. (SC II)

That's the way in which he explains to us the Creed's First Article on creation, focusing on what God has done and is doing to me, a human being of today, leading us away from speculation about questions of minor importance.

11) Has Luther Been a Fighter for Freedom? or Has He Pulled Us Out of the Darkness of the Middle Ages?

Let's go back once more to the time before the Diet of Worms in 1521 and the time Luther spent afterwards in the Wartburg. In the year 1520 he had already published three famous pamphlets. Since the nineteenth century they have been regarded as his chief publications: *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*¹⁵; *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*¹⁶; and finally, *The Freedom of a Christian*.¹⁷ All three of these pamphlets have been taken as proof of Luther having broken with the church and the theology of the Middle Ages, presenting himself to be a freedom fighter.

This is certainly not altogether incorrect, but on the other hand, Luther shouldn't be overestimated in this respect. He had his roots in the Middle Ages' way of thinking and never lost them, but transcended them. In his lifetime the Western church had not yet decided on all theological questions and laid down respective decisions. Instead, what Luther was teaching was still "permitted," not condemned, at least tolerated, although not approved at all or desired by the pope and other authorities. His opponents falsely accused him of deviating from the faith; rather, he confessed it along with the ancient church.

The freedom for which Luther stood had a different meaning than what is understood today. Today, you frequently find Luther identified with ideas he had never thought of. For him freedom is not something we can achieve by our own efforts, nor a legal title we can claim. Instead, when he spoke of freedom, he found it based on God's action to free us from the powers of evil, from Satan, from our own ego, from sin and death, from being curved in to ourselves. For Luther, freedom means to be freed *from* something, and to be freed *to do* something. He put it into a classical formulation: "A Christian is a free man above all things and subject to no one—a Christian is

¹⁵ LW 47: 115–219.

¹⁶ LW 36: 12–127.

¹⁷ LW 31: 329–79.

¹⁴ "We Praise You, Jesus, at Your Birth," LSB 382, stanza 2. The hymn also can be found in LW 53: 240–42.

a subservient slave to all things and subject to everyone.” In this statement you find Luther’s understanding of freedom: it’s not autonomy, not self-determined, but a divine gift, a grace, and at the same time it calls for responsibility and service to your neighbor.

Did Luther regard the Middle Ages as dark as we have called it ever since the epoch of Enlightenment? Certainly not. A liberation, a freedom from darkness of the centuries before him would have been unintelligible for him. Fake news, therefore.

12) “And If Tomorrow Will Come the End of the World” or Would Luther Then Have Planted an Apple Tree?

It’s one of the most popular quotations from Luther, at least in Germany, this dictum which reads “If I would know that tomorrow will come the end of the world, I would still plant my little apple tree today.” It sounds so optimistic, so defiant, that these words are considered to come from Luther, confirming the picture one has made of him. But it is not that easy to trace back to the reformer. A Protestant bishop in Germany some time ago offered a considerable reward to him who could give proof of Luther’s authorship, but so far could never send that money to anyone.

Many apocryphal sayings of uncertain authorship exist. To give an example, the famous prayer, “Lord, make me a tool of your peace,” is often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. Francis died in the year 1226. The first traceable information about this prayer, however, is from 1912 (!), almost 700 years later and in the French language. From France it set off to England, from England it came to the European continent. Once located incorrectly in history, it will easily be located falsely forever. But it is nevertheless a wonderful prayer.

Let’s go back to Luther and his little apple tree. This dictum became popular and was frequently quoted in Germany after World War II, seemingly words of comfort and encouragement in a difficult situation. And even more in the 1950s. Prominent people often made use of it; for example, Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Federal President Gustav Heinemann, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Bishop Hans Lilje (1899–1977),¹⁸ the poet Gottfried Benn, even the prime minister of the East —“German Democratic Republic,” Otto Grotewohl (who declared it to be “an optimistic expression of the rising

bourgeoisie”) and finally Mrs. Margot Käßmann, this year’s “Luther representative” of the liberal state churches in Germany. Having all such people quoting this dictum as from Luther, hardly anyone had any doubts about his authorship. It gave some comfort in times of war and danger. The general public learned this apple tree phrase in the 1950s as an expression of hope for the future. The World Exhibition in Brussels, Belgium in 1958 had the entrance to the German showroom decorated with this dictum in four languages and explicitly ascribed to Luther. Planting trees in remembrance of Luther became popular and is still going on today. In the meantime you find a real small forest of Luther trees in Wittenberg.

There is, however, a remarkable difference between this dictum and the true Luther. First of all, this dictum doesn’t mention Christ at all, and therefore is not consistent with Luther’s way of thinking. And secondly Luther’s expectation of the world’s end has never been of resignation nor of any fatalism. He rather longed for that day with ardor to come as God’s day, revealing the kingdom of God, and freeing us from all evil. And that’s different from what this dictum seems to express. For Luther it wasn’t a fateful disaster that was to come, which one may brave or simply ignore, but the ardently expected hour of our redemption.

Now: where and why did this dictum of the little apple tree come into existence? Not with Luther. You can find it for the first time not before the year 1944 (!), quoted in a circular letter dated October 5, 1944. That’s far away from Luther. The ardor by which he waited for Christ to come, judging the living and the dead, doesn’t give way to any human activity, more or less ignoring the event which God is going to bring about, and which we should long for instead of letting it happen with stoic equanimity. If you like this dictum anyway, okay. But Luther—that’s clear—would not have planted an apple tree “if tomorrow will come the end of the world.”

Rev. Jobst Schöne is the Bishop Emeritus, Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK)

¹⁸ Hans Lilje was the President of the Lutheran World Federation from 1952–1957.

BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel

edited by Albert B. Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017)

by Matthew Richard

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID before that law and gospel are *not* a mixed drink; they are not a divine cocktail where law and gospel are rightly balanced, shaken together, and served in a coupe glass. Rather, law and gospel are like two different drinks that should not be mixed, but poured into separate shot glasses and served.

Considering this metaphor, I was pleased to read within the pages of the new book, *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*, that the twelve different authors (who are pastors and theologians from different Lutheran denominations and traditions) neither served up a mixed drink nor gave recipes to make a divine cocktail. But rather, the authors made the necessary distinction between God's two words of law and gospel.

The Necessary Distinction is an exploratory work published to be a basis for dialogue and study amongst individuals in the North American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church Canada, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, regarding law and gospel. Therefore, while I believe the authors have done an admirable job of distinguishing law and gospel, there is no room for debate and deliberation. Paraphrasing C.F.W. Walther from *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, understanding law and gospel is not an impossible task with the aid of the Holy Spirit, for children can learn this; however, it is the practical application and use of the doctrine that presents the greatest difficulty.¹ Yes, debate and deliberation should arise after reading this book, for its pages contain discussions of law and gospel in a number of applicable settings where much conversation is needed. More specifically, there is much beneficial and edifying law and gospel dialogue on the history of the LCMS, the liturgy, pastoral care, the Christian life, the penitential Psalms, missions, preaching, etc. I will offer a taste

of what is offered to whet your appetite for this scholarly reading:

- Early in the book, Mark Seifrid discusses the differences between Martin Luther and John Calvin regarding their conceptualization of the human being, especially the regenerate human being. He further makes note of Luther's chief view of the law (second use) and Calvin's chief view of the law (third use). But it is with the third use of the law that Seifrid does an excellent service to the reader. He shows how the different anthropological assumptions impact Luther and Calvin's understandings of the third use of the law, which consequently bring forth different definitions of the third use of the law for Lutherans and Calvinists. *Continuing the Conversation: Do the different understandings of the third use of the law lead to confusion in law and gospel conversations today? Has Calvin's anthropology bled into the Lutheran Church via Evangelicalism, since Evangelicalism has roots in the New England Puritans influenced by Calvin's theology?*
- In chapter three, William Cwirla maintains that the proper distinction between law and gospel is of utmost importance for pastors concerning the liturgy. If law and gospel are blurred, blended, or mixed in the liturgy, Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sinners is lost as the central focus. While this chapter is beneficial regarding law and gospel concerning the liturgy, I found myself drawn to the question of what happens to churches when the liturgy is adjusted for seeker sensitive reasons? Though Cwirla does not specifically address churches that change the liturgy for so-called contemporary mission reasons, his chapter forces us to reckon with the implications of altering the Divine Service. *Continuing the Conversation: If one changes the Divine Service, how*

¹ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 42–43.

does it impact law and gospel and consequentially, is the worshipper—who is a saint and sinner—still held in the dynamic tension of law and gospel?

- While it is easy to believe that more law is the antidote to individuals ensnared in antinomianism and more gospel is the antidote to people trapped in legalism, Larry Vogel points out that we must guard against becoming a Peter without Jesus or a David without Nathan. In other words, when we put antinomianism and legalism on a sliding scale, we can inadvertently apply law to the exclusion of the gospel toward antinomians or the gospel to the exclusion of the law toward legalists. However, Vogel points out the mistake of this thinking in his closing paragraph of the chapter titled, *Law and Gospel in the Christian Life*, saying, “The weapons of Christ ... never change—they are ever His Word of Law and Gospel.” [107] Indeed, law and gospel are the proper response to legalism and antinomianism. *Continuing the Conversation: Could it be that some of the law and gospel debates in our modern times are nothing more than individuals reacting to each other much like a pendulum swinging back and forth over a sliding scale, when in reality what is needed is not just more law or just more gospel, but ‘both’ law and gospel?*
- Stephen Hultgren offers an extensive essay on *The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the law*. While Hultgren is to be commended for his thoroughness, I humbly disagree with him in his interpretation of Romans chapter 7. Parting from Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, Hultgren understands Romans 7 as referring to the “person under the law before (or without) faith in Christ, but from the perspective of one who through faith in Christ has been delivered from that situation and is now able to see life under law in its true colors.”[222]. As a result of this exegetical move, Hultgren proceeds to talk about freedom and the third use of the law within this context. Due to the brevity of this review, permit me to say this: while I am certainly interested to hear more from Hultgren on the specific reasons why he arrived at his interpretation of Romans 7, I am glad that he did not spend too much time on his exegesis of Romans 7. His conciseness on the exegesis of Romans 7 allowed me the time to see things played out regarding freedom and the third use of the law. *Continuing the Conversation: If our understanding of Romans 7 impacts our view of the third use of the law, can people successfully debate the third use of the law without addressing the exegetical assumptions of Romans 7 first?*
- Along with the differences between Calvin and Luther regarding anthropology and the third use of the law, a subtle theme emerged in many chapters which pointed to the difference between Augustine and Luther regarding the Christian. Otherwise stated, when understanding the Christian as simultaneously saint and sinner (i.e., simul), several authors pointed to the importance and ramifications of Luther parting from Augustine’s ecumenical tradition of the Christian as *partim-partim*. As a result, the application of law and gospel will be different, depending on whether or not one embraces Augustine’s view of the *simul* or suspends this view in favor of a more *totus-totus* perspective. *Continuing the Conversation: Are some of the differences over the application of law and gospel in our modern day due to the disagreements between an Augustinian view of the simul (i.e., partim-partim) versus a Lutheran view (i.e., totus-totus)?*
- The term *contextualization* has been very popular within missiological language over the last several decades. In Chapter 12, Albert Collver III discusses the etymology of *contextualization*. In so doing, he asserts in the last chapter that, “Contextualization most helpfully or at its best is the proper distinction between law and gospel to a particular people group.” [308] While emergent church philosophy and sacramental entrepreneurship ideology is all the rave in missional talk today, it is very encouraging to read from Collver that some things never change—law as a point of contact in missions and the gospel as the absolving message. *Continuing the Conversation: What are the dangers of not understanding contextualization in terms of the proper distinction/application of law and gospel to particular people groups?*
- Finally, it is worth noting Roland Ziegler’s essay titled, *What Happens When the Third Use of the Law is Rejected?* So what happens? Ziegler posits that one does not automatically become a libertine. Ziegler supports his thesis through a brief survey of Werner

Elert, Steven Paulson, and Joseph Fletcher. He shows “that a denial of the third use of the law as it is commonly understood among Lutherans does not lead in itself to libertinism. Neither Elert nor Paulson is a libertine. They both believe that the Law continues to convict the Christian of his or her sin.” [329] Regarding Fletcher, though, his antinomianism is not merely tied up with a rejection of the third use of the law but rather with a refusal of the law altogether in exchange for a vacuous idea of love. You see, it seems—according to Ziegler—that antinomianism comes about from a *complete denial* of the law and/or replacing the law with an idea of love that is disconnected from the commandments altogether. *Continuing the Conversation: What criteria is needed to truly classify a person as an antinomian? Is Ziegler right that a denial of the third use of the law does not lead in itself to antinomianism?*

As you can see, this book contains a continuing conversation about law and gospel that is intended to cause all of us to dive deeper into the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. This book is a worthwhile discussion for our times with the goal of clearly proclaiming Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of our sins to a world that needs not a mixed drink; but rather, two distinct shots of law and gospel.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard is a pastor of Zion Lutheran Church of Gwinner, ND. He is also the author of a recent book, Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? 12 False Christs, published by Concordia Publishing House.