



Justified for Good: Luther's Message for Late Modern Times

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A PLAY WITHOUT AN AUDIENCE?

Martin Luther belongs to another era. This fact to be sure is often obscured by our perfunctory appeals to Luther's authority, by the sheer volume of Luther-themed merchandise, and by the hagiographic and—playing on the theme of saint and sinner, one might even add—"peccatographic" tales that have made Luther into a household name. Yet, when we seriously attend to Luther's context from a sociopolitical, scientific, or even religious angle, when we consider the man himself, with his belief in witches and the devil who must be addressed and rebuked,¹

¹As an example of Luther's perception of the world, consider the following passage from the 1531/35 lectures on Galatians: "For it is undeniable that the devil lives, yes, rules, in all the world. Therefore witchcraft and sorcery are works of the devil, by which he not only injures people but sometimes, with God's permission, destroys them. But we are all subject to the devil, both according to our bodies and according to our material possessions. We are guests in the world, of which he is the ruler (John 16:11) and the god (2 Cor. 4:4). Therefore the bread we eat, the drinks we drink, the clothes we wear—in fact, the air and everything we live on in the flesh—are under his reign. Through his witches, therefore, he is able to do harm to children, to give them heart trouble, to blind them, to steal them, or even to remove a child completely and put himself into the cradle in place of the stolen child. I have heard that in Saxony there was such a boy. He was suckled by five women and still could not be satisfied. There are many similar instances." In *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 82 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) (hereafter cited as *LW*) 26:190.

As might be expected with a distance of five hundred years, there is much about Martin Luther and his theology that seems strange to the modern world. Yet these strange elements should not blind modern people to the fact that Luther still has a powerful message about God and humanity that can address even our jaded age.

and when we reflect on Luther's sharp-tongued knack for denouncing all and sundry,² then Luther begins to loom large in all his strangeness.

On top of it all, there is also the obvious. This year we commemorate half a millennium since this Augustinian friar and Bible professor nailed (or so the story goes) his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. The event certainly changed the landscape of Christendom. Its unintended aftershocks, some argue, are still felt in Western culture.³ Still, the passage of time alone makes it perfectly reasonable to ask: Does Luther have anything to say *to us*?

We would not of course be the first ones to ask this. But perhaps this year's Reformation anniversary at long last gives us an opportunity to put the question to rest. Even as we celebrate Luther's posture of protest, complete with a hammer poised to sound blows with far-reaching echoes, we, too, will run headlong into an ambiguity that came to plague Luther's reforming program as early as the first years after the indulgence controversy. The purpose of the Ninety-Five Theses was to make the gospel central to the church's mission and to spell out both institutional and ethical implications of this centrality. Once the Theses have made clear what the church's true treasure is, they seek to recall the church back to its divine mandate of gospel proclamation and the faithful back to providing for their families instead of feeling obligated to fritter away their meager resources on a dubious cause. The wave of enthusiastic reception that Luther's Theses garnered, followed by his spirited defense of Christian freedom, surely overwhelmed the reformer-to-be, intimating his unlikely fame as a prophet in his own lifetime. And yet, when brought to light, the gospel, as Luther articulated it, did not seem undisputedly or unfailingly compelling—and increasingly so. It rather quickly turned out that many “factious spirits” understood the gospel altogether differently, while the masses “free from papal coercion” felt no longer obligated to pay much attention and began freely to despise the gospel's means, Word and Sacrament. Even the clergy seemed to have lost their bearings.⁴ Given this state of affairs, a question inevitably presses itself forward: How much did Luther's fame have to do with what he actually had to say?

For us, there seems to remain not even a paltry trace of what originally was already fraught with ambiguity. Luther clearly belongs to another era. When he admonishes future pastors to address themselves to minds in “extreme despair,” when he insists his “theology pertains only to the consolation of the afflicted, miserable, and despairing,” to those who “droop and fall because they have broken

²For a theological interpretation of Luther's use of language, including his invective, see my article “Luther and His Opponents at the Threshold of Modernity,” *Lutheran Forum* 51:3 (Fall 2017) 11–17.

³Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁴Luther's simultaneous concern for the gospel and pastoral frustration with its handling come to the fore especially in the writings of the late 1520s and early 1530s. See, esp., Admonition Concerning the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Lord (1530), *LW* 38:91–137; Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony (1528), *LW* 40:263–320; and, of course, Luther's Preface to the Small Catechism (1529), in *The Book of Concord*, ed. R. Kolb and T. J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 347–351.

and crushed hearts”⁵—we may wonder if the show has not outlived its charms. Hearts crushed by despair? Aren’t Luther’s concerns, to use the Reformer’s own metaphor, a play without an audience (*vacuum theatrum*⁶) in our day—a curious idea that witnesses to bizarre and, frankly, morbid sensibilities that we have long outgrown, thank you very much? If so, then the current Reformation anniversary may be just the time to finally bury the dead and, for God’s sake, move on.

For Luther, theology is actually far less about our sensibilities, whether early or late modern. Preaching, teaching, the liturgy, the church, but also “shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property”—in a word, all those things a theologian may consider—have God at their center.

But perhaps precisely for God’s sake, we ought to stop and consider what Luther once said. Over against detractors, both old and more recent, Luther is not a theologian of mind-numbing introspection and morbid subjectivism. Neither is his understanding of faith alone, as a response to a despairing conscience, a perverse reinforcement of this self-focus. Faith is not a trick or illusion the mind performs over against the otherwise accessible reality, doing so with a true loss to habit re-formation and spiritual growth.⁷ When Luther insists that theology’s proper subject is “man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner,”⁸ this does not mean that theology finds its coordinates in human subjectivity or takes its orientation from human affections. For Luther, theology is actually far less about our sensibilities, whether early or late modern. Preaching, teaching, the liturgy, the church, but also “shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property”—in a word, all those things a theologian may consider—have God at their center.⁹ Theology concerns itself above all with God—God’s goodness and its lavish splendor, as exhibited and reinforced in God’s gracious justification of sinful humanity. And here’s the rub. “It is a great and difficult art,” Luther observes, “to fix our eyes only on the steadfast love of God and His abundant mercy.”¹⁰ A great and difficult art!

⁵Exposition of Psalm 51[:17] (1532); *LW* 12:404–405.

⁶*D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe, 39I:355; *Martin Luther’s Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. H. Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008) 244–245.

⁷This concern, long voiced by both sympathetic and unsympathetic opponents on the Roman-Catholic side, may be justified in relation to some theologians who later claimed Luther’s mantle, e.g., Rudolf Bultmann or Gerhard Ebeling. The charge, however, is decidedly unwarranted in relation to Luther’s own theology. See my article “Spirituality, Ontology, and the Church: A Response to Jared Wicks,” P. J. Malysz and D. R. Nelson, *Luther Refracted: The Reformer’s Ecumenical Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 21–44.

⁸*LW* 12:311 (Luther’s introductory comments on Psalm 51).

⁹The list comes from Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Creed, On Creation, in his *Small Catechism*; in *Book of Concord*, 354.

¹⁰*LW* 12:324 (Psalm 51:1).

When we look at Luther's program from this angle—that of maintaining a steady focus on the goodness of God—the difficulty may be just as serious in our day as it was in his. And Luther may yet have something to teach us.

FOR GOD'S SAKE

Five hundred years ago, a mention of God made Christians frantic and frenzied—so much so that with God in mind they paid little attention to God. They became wrapped up in themselves, preoccupied with their own performance before God, whom they judged to be extraordinarily judgmental. Famously, this is what Luther, reflecting from the vantage point of the mid-1540s, a year or so before his death, identified as the chief misperception in his early life as an Augustinian friar. The autobiographical account he gives in the Preface to his own Latin writings demonstrates how—based on an understanding of God's righteousness as active, distributive, and punitive—every thought about God cannot but devolve into a concern about one's self:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God...I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.¹¹

Luther's understanding of medieval theology that formed the background to the postures and practices he observed in himself, as well as others, is of course far more sophisticated than what we might gather from this passage. To wit, he draws important distinctions between the older schoolmen, with their emphasis on the primacy of grace, and the practically Pelagian theology of the late medieval *via moderna*, with its slogans "Do your best! (*Fac quod in te est!*)" and "To those who do their best God does not deny grace (*Facientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*)." But even with due recognition given to important differences, what concerns Luther in both the traditions is the vanishing focus on God and God's work and the resultant relentless preoccupation of the Christian with his or her self.¹² That Luther was not alone in exhibiting this preoccupation can be inferred, for example, from the popularity of indulgence letters. In *De servo arbitrio* (1525), Luther points to the spiritual damage wreaked by this self-concern, as he charges Erasmus with defending a theology that makes well-intentioned believers into "reckless workers (*temerarii operarii*)."¹³

¹¹LW 34:336–337.

¹²To Luther's critique of this ineluctable anthropological dimension of medieval theology, see my article "Luther's Trinitarian Hermeneutic of Freedom," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Martin Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), available online at <http://religion.oxfordre.com/page/martin-luther>. The article demonstrates that medieval theologies of grace constituted a series of attempted resolutions to the puzzle of conceptualizing divine and human agencies inherited from Augustine. For all their differences, Luther came to see these resolutions as unsuccessful and flawed, which led him to propose his own.

¹³The Bondage of the Will (1525), LW 33:34–35.

What Luther's charge implies is that Christians are led to pay insufficient attention to God and, more specifically, to consider the breadth and depth of Christ's atoning work as conveyed in the gospel proclamation (Eph 3:18). They fail to see that God's justice is rather "passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith," offering God's very self to us, his wisdom and his strength.¹⁴ He does so through the work of Christ, which becomes ours with all its benefits—"righteousness, life and salvation"¹⁵—"as if [we] had done it [ourselves], indeed as if [we] were Christ himself."¹⁶ In consequence of such inattention, a skewed understanding of God makes indulgences and all kinds of self-imposed tasks easier to grasp and rely on than trusting God to be truly good, even to the point of not sparing himself for the sinner's sake.

As far as our day goes, the underlying causes that prevent us from grasping God's goodness are altogether different. The problem, however, at bottom remains the same. What then contributes to it today? The central contributing factor, I believe, is that today nothing remains good for good. All appears restricted in its goodness by utility or fads. A state-of-the-art phone may be a godsend now, but tomorrow it will be only an ugly embarrassment. In our context, where not only things but also people are disposable and replaceable, often simply written off as collateral damage, God's goodness cannot but be a cipher, too.¹⁷

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If it stands for more than bland and blanket acceptance of all that a person's heart desires, if it means more than God in effect staying out of the way and being, as it were, present by his noninterference, if it is more—then God's goodness turns into a burden. It sounds incomprehensible at best that God should be good, that he is a giver of all that is good, and that what he gives is good. It sounds even more incomprehensible that all we have and at bottom are is first and foremost good because it has come from God's fatherly hand. God's generosity sounds like a liability and constraint. Why? Because it shows—and insists—that people, bodies, and

¹⁴LW 34:337.

¹⁵Preface to the New Testament (1522/46), LW 35:360.

¹⁶A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels (1521), LW 35:119. For Luther's trinitarian construal of God's self-giving, see also his personal confession in Confession Concerning Christ's Supper (1528), LW 37:366.

¹⁷To the disposability of fellow humans, see in particular the work of Zygmunt Bauman: *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004) and *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003).

things are not incidental or blank, subject to our use and abuse. It insists, contra a bastardized Cartesianism, that reality is not nothing unless and until we have made something of it or done something with it, bestowing truth upon its inner twilight.¹⁸ It insists, further, that we have no reason being ascetics who under the guise of kaleidoscopic variety only consume things, go through places, and, worse still, “do” other people—and in doing all this, find no lasting rest and form no attachments.¹⁹ In this context, God’s goodness, manifested in the gravity of daily life, calls us into a new relationship to the world and to ourselves. Now, because it does this, it appears to constrain and compel those who wish only, as it were, to hover above reality.

The message of the gospel—that by his own giving and self-giving God not only gives us gravity and makes sense of us but, above all, justifies the ungodly for good—is foolishness in the world of extreme makeovers and free-range desire. That we are God’s workmanship (Eph 2:10) in a world that is God’s own before all else is a tough pill to swallow. To echo Luther, fixing our eyes on God’s goodness remains a difficult art, a tall order, not to say an impossibility. The sinful heart rebels.

WORKS AND THE PERSON

What stands behind this incomprehension and rebellion? The late modern refusal of our comprehensive being-given seems to hold out a promise—the promise of a new creation. For Luther, any such immanent promise cannot but be illogical and false. As he pointed out, in his greater commentary on Galatians, a person who does not wish to receive from God, that is, “to be justified by a divine blessing and formed by God the Creator,” must inevitably be entangled in a contradiction. Such a person is “the material and the worker,” and in effect “creator and creature at the same time.”²⁰ The apparent promise thus shows itself to be a contradiction that distorts our entire being. This is no less true of us. Contrary to expectations, even when the sinner is finally left alone, wrapped up and cocooned in the sinner’s own self, and not even the sky is the limit any more, the depths of the sinful heart open onto no paradise vista of long-craved liberty. There is no human who does not wish for a place, a purpose, and some meaning in the world. And today we may actually be more anxious about it all than anything Luther himself witnessed. For even when turned in on the self, the sinner still longs for recognition, confirmation, acceptance, and justification. Even as self-makers, we wish for what we have made of ourselves and our world to be, as it were, given back to us and made real in the form of recognition and approval. We are at bottom, as

¹⁸Malysz, “Luther and His Opponents at the Threshold of Modernity,” 16–17.

¹⁹William T. Cavanaugh has analyzed late modern consumerism as a profoundly formative spiritual disposition that exhibits affinities with Christian asceticism but is in reality a deeply flawed parody of the latter. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 33–58.

²⁰LW 26:259.

Eberhard Jüngel has pointed out, beings oriented to recognition.²¹ Much as we resent and deny it, with our whole being we do nothing but confirm that it can only be given to ourselves.²²

But the world's justification always comes at a steep price. Where nothing is good for good, the cost of the world's approbation is constant alertness to all the recent fads and fleeting goods, the hot stuff of the day that, we hope, will make us desirable and worth other people's while. Making sure your phone is upgraded to the recent model is one of the least of modern worries. Making sure you know the right people, avoid the undesirables, and keep your network responsive is much harder work. The late medieval problem of securing God's mercy pales in comparison to the relentlessness of keeping fellow human beings attentive, engaged, and ready to bestow the much-craved thumbs up.

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Here Luther's insight is of abiding value. God's justification—unconditional and apart from works of the law—rather than placing a person under constraint, actually frees the person and declares that the person is *distinct* from his or her works. To put it differently, when it comes to divine justification, work and exertion do not make a person but rather the person—first firmly established through faith alone, willing to receive her self from God, to stake his being on God—is who then does works.²³ The person is and remains God's good work, in other words. What does this mean? Contrary to the résumé-like outlook of our day, people come before and are not reducible to their accomplishments or acquisitions. Before any accomplishments or sins are even taken into account, the sinner is,

²¹Eberhard Jüngel, "On Becoming Truly Human: The Significance of the Reformation Distinction Between Person and Works for the Self-Understanding of Modern Humanity," in *Essays II*, ed. J. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), esp. 219–222.

²²In this connection it may be worth quoting the science visionary and technology popularizer, Kevin Kelly, who, in face of technology's wresting away from us the last trenches of human uniqueness, hopes that perhaps artificial intelligence will disclose—and give—our selves to us. Kelly writes: "As we invent more species of AI we will be forced to surrender more of what is supposedly unique about humans. Each step of surrender—we are not the only mind that can play chess, fly a plane, make music, or invent a mathematical law—will be painful and sad. We'll spend the next three decades—indeed, perhaps the next century—in a permanent identity crisis, continually asking ourselves what humans are good for. If we aren't unique toolmakers, or artists, or moral ethicists, then what, if anything, makes us special? In the grandest irony of all, the greatest benefit of an everyday, utilitarian AI will not be increased productivity or an economics of abundance or a new way of doing science—although all those will happen. The greatest benefit of the arrival of artificial intelligence is that AIs will help define humanity. We need AIs to tell us who we are." Kevin Kelly, *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our World* (New York: Viking, 2016) 49.

²³LW 26:255–256.

above all and irrevocably, a beloved creature of God. God declares the sinner good and in good standing. Justification in this sense comes very close to its colloquial meaning; it means that we have been made sense of, given a place, and accorded significance—we belong. As God justifies sinners, he not only makes more of us than we could ever hope for. But he also makes us into much more: his beloved creatures on whom he bestows also temporal blessings. He does all this so that we would recognize his abiding goodness, a goodness that truly renews the face of the whole earth even beyond death. Not the restless world but God alone is the author of peace. He alone—in justifying us by grace—stills our restlessness.²⁴

GOD'S ONGOING WORK

Even as he insists on the abiding relevance of divine justification for our identity, Luther is equally adamant that divine goodness is no abstraction. He draws attention to God's ongoing public work for the sake of salvation. Luther realizes the goodness of God in the world is often obscured by the mystery of human and natural evil. He is aware the patience of God must often lead to human impatience and groaning. Like the author of the Book of Revelation, he knows that Christians are tempted to give up on the world, as if it were nothing but Satan's playground beyond redemption, and as if God resided only in some spirit dimension beyond it all. Luther also knows that Christians may eventually be tempted to give up on God, recognizing his good-naturedness in some abstract way but doubting whether God is actually good to them. The danger of excessive introspection is that it often suggests to us the apparent impotence or arbitrariness of God himself. When we are left to our own devices, God more frequently than not appears hidden (*Deus absconditus*).

Hence Luther insists that God not only bestows material blessings and continues to work through material means but also attests to himself and his good will through means which are established for this explicit purpose (*Deus revelatus et praedicatus*). Through them the benefits of Christ's cross are bestowed from generation to generation. Luther is adamant that in baptism it is God's hands that thrust you and me into the water. For Christ himself "is present at baptism and in baptism, in fact is himself the baptizer."²⁵ The significance of the act can hardly be overstated. In a gloss on Rom 6:4, in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther explicitly connects baptism to divine justification through the im-

²⁴Similarly to Luther's understanding of God's justice, Karl Barth provides an important corrective to overly legal (and legalistic) construals of divine justification. He notes the Old Testament precedent in the office of judges raised up by God primarily "to be helpers and saviors in the recurrent sufferings of the people at the hand of neighboring tribes." Thus, God as judge par excellence "is not simply or even primarily the One who pardons some (perhaps a few or perhaps none at all) and condemns the rest (perhaps many and perhaps all)—whose judgment therefore all have to fear. Basically and decisively... He is the One whose concern is for order and peace, who must uphold the right and prevent the wrong, so that His existence and coming and work is not in itself and as such a matter for fear, but something which indicates a favour, the existence of One who brings salvation." *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) 217.

²⁵Concerning Rebaptism (1528), *LW* 40:242.

age of resurrection into the new creation. He cautions that it is “indeed correct to say that baptism is a washing away of sins, but the expression is too mild and weak to bring out the full significance of baptism, which is rather a symbol of death and resurrection.” The death and resurrection, in turn, “should not be understood only allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection,” what “we call the new creation.”²⁶ In baptism, the old sinner died and was set aside by none other than God, and there God granted to us his irrevocable gift of a new person and new life, as well as a home in the world he is renewing at its very core.

Similarly, in the Lord’s Supper, God uses ordinary bread and wine to offer the body and blood of his Son to those gathered at the table. Importantly, as Luther points out also in *The Babylonian Captivity*, in the Supper it is not the case that bread and wine symbolize Christ’s body and blood. Rather, God offers the body and blood of Christ as abiding symbols of his good promise.²⁷ That is how gracious God is! If sinners find themselves questioning whether God’s favor extends to them, or even whether God is indeed a God of undeserved favor, Luther has this to say: Look at what God has done to you! Look at what God continues to do for the sake of the undeserving, the doubters, the weak-minded and weak-willed. Trust him! It is not about how you feel at this or that moment, but it is all about what God is up to—even now, for you and for me.

Through Word and Sacrament, God constantly reiterates and makes into reality the distinction between a person and the person’s works. He arrests our doubt, our spiraling into the self. He captivates us, and calls us out of ourselves. As he calls on us to take him at his Word, he inscribes us into the reality of his action, stretching as far back as the dealings with his people Israel and as far into the future as the liberation of creation from its bondage to decay (Rom 8:21).

THE PERSON AT WORK

In this distinction between what God has irrevocably made (of) me and what I have done and may yet do lies my freedom. Luther was above all a theologian of freedom, countering the sinner’s debilitating retreat into the self and proclaiming God’s many-splendored gifts. To be free is to be able to enjoy a new way of being and acting in the world.

When Luther considers divine self-giving as it pertains to the Holy Spirit, he emphasizes, first of all, that the Spirit enables believers “to understand this deed of Christ which has been manifested to us, helps us receive and preserve it, use it to our advantage.”²⁸ The Spirit’s help comes inwardly as well as outwardly, as we have noted, through Word and Sacrament. The believer’s act, which corresponds to the work of the Spirit, in Luther’s shockingly daring language is to become “a maker of

²⁶LW 36:68.

²⁷LW 36:40, 47.

²⁸LW 37:366.

God.”²⁹ Now, Luther is quick to explain that we do not “create [God’s] divine nature, for it is and remains eternally uncreated; rather, you are to make him God for you, so that he might also be for you a true God, as he is for himself a true God.” This is done, first, in acts of remembrance “by preaching, praising, honoring, listening, and giving thanks for the grace revealed in Christ.” The purpose of such acts is to confess “with heart and mouth, with ears and eyes, with body and soul that you have given nothing to God, nor are able to, but that *you have and receive each and every thing from him*, particularly eternal life and infinite righteousness in Christ.” The imagery is worth pausing over. In acts of worship—by taking God for who he is and embracing what he has done—believers confirm their new being by, first of all, orienting it to its giver. Believers manifest the gravity of their own being; and just so they exhibit the abiding goodness of God. They, as it were, render God actual in their own lives, or, as Luther puts it, justify him. That is, they declare God righteous and with their whole self show him to be the righteous God indeed.³⁰

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Furthermore, Luther also mentions, in passing, that the Spirit teaches believers “to impart [the deed of Christ] to others, increase and extend it.”³¹ As they depart from the altar, believers—in however halting a way—correspond in their everyday being and act, and so in a nonidentical, human way, to the Son’s movement toward the incarnation.³² Luther comments on the Christian’s existence: “I do indeed live in the flesh, but I do not live on the basis of my own self”; rather, “this life...is the life of Christ, the Son of God, whom the Christian possesses by faith.”³³ My life becomes “a mask of life (*larva vitae*)” hiding Christ, who lives in me.³⁴ This, as ought to be obvious by now, should not be taken in the sense that I have now become a mere human shell but, on the contrary, that my entire being has been given gravity and depth—a mooring—on account of Christ. And further, that I—precisely in my own context, that is, my particular situation and horizon-of-care—have now received a Christ-like shape and orientation. What follows

²⁹The remainder of this paragraph draws on *LW* 38:106–107.

³⁰For Luther’s language of believers justifying God, which Luther continued to use throughout his career, see, e.g., his early scholion to Psalm 51 (*LW* 10:235–243), his lectures on Romans (*LW* 25:205–206), and Galatians (*LW* 26:227–233).

³¹*LW* 37:366.

³²To the role of the Lord’s Supper in shaping the Christian life, see my article “Exchange and Ecstasy: Luther’s Eucharistic Theology in Light of Radical Orthodoxy’s Critique of Gift and Sacrifice,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63:3 (August 2007) 294–308.

³³*LW* 26:171–172.

³⁴*LW* 26:170.

from this is that the believer is able to share his or her righteousness with the neighbor, doing so by both bringing out the good and working for the good in the neighbor's life. Christians are also called to justify the neighbor. To state this less abstractly, they are called, in a human way, to bring the other out of nonexistence and offer him or her a place in their own world-of-care.³⁵

To apply all this to our late modern situation, a person who is no longer in thrall to the ever-changing goods (and gods!) of this world can now see circumstances for what they truly are: God's gifts. Clothing, a roof over one's head, a new phone, and even my embodied self with its vast array of features are not ballasts that we may one day find ourselves stuck with. They are not to keep us on our toes as a source of temptation or anxiety. They are means and opportunities through which creatures, created in the very image of the self-giving God, can act toward each other and the rest of creation the way God has indeed acted toward them.

My very self, redeemed and made lovable for good, together with all that I have, is a summons to make room in my world for the displaced, the undesirables, and those that otherwise "don't exist."

Luther's emphases both on the gravity of the divinely justified self and on the world-of-care that this self opens up onto can be viewed as a critical elaboration of what Bernard of Clairvaux identifies, far more succinctly even if less clearly, as the highest degree of love. This is not the love of God for God's sake, though in itself it certainly is laudable. Rather, in one's openness to the work of God and to becoming a conduit of God's work in one's own particular location, the person is called to "something which is indeed rare in this life" and "belongs to heavenly not to human love." The highest degree of love, for Bernard, is loving oneself for God's sake.³⁶ For Luther, that means acknowledging that God is good, tangibly good. Not merely in God's self, but in one's very own life.

What all this means is that I—yes, even I, with my embodied self and my particular location in the world—can precisely through those be a blessing to others. The core question of life is thus no longer, "By what means can I win the approbation of others and so be?" The question now is rather, "How can I serve others and do so with my whole being?"

My very self, redeemed and made lovable for good, together with all that I have, is a summons to make room in my world for the displaced, the undesirables, and those that otherwise "don't exist." Justified by God, I can now ask myself,

³⁵Luther speaks of "giving away one's righteousness" in service to a fellow sinner: "das groest [werck der liebe] ist das, wenn ich mein gerechtigkeit hyn gib und dienen lassz des nechsten sünde." Predigt am 3. Sonntag nach Trinitatis (1522), *Weimarer Ausgabe* 10III:217.

³⁶Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, X.27–XI.30; in *Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987) 195–197.

“What does my neighbor need? With all that God has provided, with all the goods in my life—who can I now be for my brother’s and sister’s sake?” In answering this question, I can be creative with all that God has given me. Because the Christian life has a Christ-like form³⁷ and is a life of freedom and direct responsibility for the other—a life of love, which does “much more than all the laws and teachings can demand”³⁸—the Christian life is governed not by strict legal precepts but by moral reasoning.³⁹ Christians are called to moral deliberation as a way of assuming responsibility for each other and the world in its variegated social, cultural, and political manifestations. Above all, as I share my righteousness with my neighbor, I can do so for the sake of Christ’s gospel, which grants this freedom to all of us, both here and as far as life everlasting.

The half-millennium since Luther’s protest may be a temptation to leave Luther behind, but Luther won’t be put to rest—not for good. What he has to teach us may seem like a message addressed to an old-fashioned mindset, but it is fundamentally a message about the goodness of God. This goodness is called into question today just as it was in Luther’s time. Yet only in this goodness can we find true dignity, a home larger than ourselves where we belong, as well as real freedom for the world’s sake. Luther’s still urgent message—even to reckless workers like us—is that God has made good on his word. This is indeed great news for us too! ⊕

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³⁷Luther draws here on Philippians 2. See in particular his *Freedom of a Christian* (1520) LW 31:366.

³⁸Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523), LW 45:88.

³⁹On the role of the law in the Christian life, as Luther articulates it, see my forthcoming article “Thinking through the Law with Martin Luther,” in Jonathan Linebaugh, *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).